

NJPSA Questionnaire for NJ Legislative Candidates of the 2023 GENERAL ELECTION

Thank you for your dedication to public service and for your interest in what is on the minds of the members of the NJ Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA).

NJPSA represents over 7,000 active school leaders in New Jersey's public schools. Our members serve in the positions of principal, assistant principal, director, and supervisor. We are dedicated to providing a high quality education to every student in New Jersey schools.

The following questionnaire is designed for you to share your perspectives on issues of concern to the NJPSA membership. NJPSA will publish your responses on our special NJPSA Election Center website in October to inform our members in their Election 2023 decision-making process.

Thank you for taking the time to share your perspectives with us!

Candidate's Name: *

Margie Donlon

Office Sought: *

☒ NJ General Assembly

☐ NJ State Senate

☐ Other:

Party: *

- ☒ Democrat
- ☐ Republican
- ☐ Independant
- ☐ Other:

Legislative District #: *

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Safe Schools

School principals and supervisors are directly responsible for creating a safe, secure, and supportive learning environment for our students. A student's feeling of safety and security is at risk where school buildings are not up to health and safety standards, where the risk of gun violence can threaten our schools, and where school buildings are not fully equipped with current security staffing and equipment.

If elected to the State Legislature, what will you do to address school safety and security in the broadest sense, not only to upgrade the physical structures and equipment in our schools, but also to safeguard our students from the threat of gun violence or other threats to their safety?

As an appointee of Governor Murphy's Covid-19 task force, I saw firsthand how crushing Covid-19 was for our community, especially to our educators and students. They had to completely change the way they taught, incorporating virtual learning and dealing with extended absences due to sickness, all without extra consideration for their needs. Add to that, the ever-growing epidemic of shootings in our schools, and the increase of mental health crises amongst students, educators and administrators are forced to be more than simply teachers. In the Assembly, I will fight to make sure their needs are prioritized and ensure that there are proper funds and support staff for mental healthcare programs. I will also be a leader in the legislature on creating common sense gun reform legislation to make sure those who shouldn't have firearms are not able to hurt our kids.

Student Mental Health

Even before the pandemic, school leaders grew concerned with the rising mental health needs of students. Post-pandemic, students have returned to school with a broad range of needs including mental wellness and academic needs. A recent CDC study found that the number of young adults with depression more than *doubled* from 2011 to 2021. School leaders and their staff do all they can to provide appropriate student support, but the inconsistent range of services and current case overload on service providers, mental health professionals, and outside mental health services is a great barrier. This school year, the Murphy Administration is launching a new network system called NJ4S to provide preventative and referral service options for schools. This, as yet untried, system is designed to replace the highly effective School-Based Youth Services Program, which provides direct funding to some school districts to offer mental health and related services directly in school.

As a state legislator, how will you prioritize, support, and fund student mental health issues in our schools? Will you advocate for continued funding for existing School-Based Youth Services programs in next year's budget discussions, as well as expansion for these tried-and-true SBYS programs?

As a mom and a doctor, I see the impacts of the mental health crisis every day and in Trenton I will prioritize mental healthcare funding for our community, especially our kids. I am proud to be running with Senator Vin Gopal, who has been a leader on this issue. He secured over \$40 million in historic mental healthcare funding for our state in this year's budget. Furthermore, he recently had a bill (S2416) signed into law that requires Medicaid reimbursements for certain student mental health services which will help so many students get the help they need.

Staffing Shortages/Educator Pipeline

One of the top concerns of NJPSA members is fully staffing their schools in all school roles, including teachers. Once again, the pandemic exacerbated a rising problem in our schools - the dwindling number of young people entering the education profession as teachers, counselors, and other critical school staffing positions. The State Legislature has been working to address barriers to the teaching profession within the licensing code and teacher preparation system.

If elected/reelected, what new ideas will you bring to this issue to ensure that our schools are fully staffed with well-qualified and prepared teachers and education service professionals?

Retaining top teachers in the state should be a high priority for leaders in New Jersey. Currently, the shortage of educators is consistent across grades and subjects, hurting the quality of education our students are receiving. We must proactively find ways to not only attract new teachers to the state but also make sure veteran teachers stay. I support increasing wages, creating more incentives for out-of-state talent, and removing undue burdens from the certification processes. I will mirror the efforts my running mate Senator Gopal has taken to help those looking to join the profession, like when he sponsored pieces of legislation that would help with things like loan forgiveness for educators (S2350) and costs associated with becoming credentialed (S3891). We must make sure we have high retention rates in order to achieve the New Jersey standard of excellence for which we are known for. We also must make sure that our teachers are able to focus on what they do best. They should not have to worry about the legislature forcing cameras into classrooms or allowing parents to take action against teachers personally if they disagree with what is being taught, which has been proposed by extremists in the legislature.

Social Media Impacts on Students

The U.S. Surgeon General recently reported on the “profound risk of harm” that social media poses to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents. Recent tragedies in New Jersey, including the suicide of several young students, amplifies this danger. Social media frequently plays a persistent, negative role in bullying incidents both at and away from school. Principals face impenetrable roadblocks placed by social media companies in addressing these issues.

If elected/reelected, how will you work with NJPSA to develop legislation that protects the online safety, privacy, and welfare of our students; requires social media companies to develop safer products for student use; and requires social media companies to work with schools and law enforcement in cases where students are harmed by social media use?

The legislation that my running mate, Senator Gopal, created (S715) and which was recently signed into law is a great start on protecting kids online. This legislation will fund a study to examine the impact of social media usage on adolescents, which will inform legislators moving forward, so we can figure out the best course of action. It is important to work with law enforcement and stakeholders to review the Uniform State Memorandum of Agreement Between Education and Law Enforcement Officials, so that we can collaborate effectively to find a solution.

Learning and High Stakes Testing

NJPSA believes that student assessment is an integral part of the instructional process that is inextricably linked to a viable curriculum and strong instructional practice. Constructive and well-designed assessments provide on-going, actionable, and timely information to students, parents, and educators concerning what students know, understand, and can do in relation to our learning standards. Currently, New Jersey students are assessed in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science via standardized tests according to federal and state requirements during their elementary, middle and high school careers.

NJPSA believes that New Jersey must streamline its testing requirements to avoid over-testing, duplicative testing, and tests that students do not consider relevant to their futures, especially at the high school level.

What role do you believe standardized testing should play in a student's academic life? How would you assist educators in streamlining current requirements and eliminating unnecessary testing?

Even after having to adapt to the Covid-19 need for remote learning, New Jersey still has ranked in the top ten states for education, due to the hard work of our educators and administrators. Covid-19 proved there is no 'one way' to teach, as all students' needs are different, and I mirror that opinion on standardized testing. While I support testing, I do not believe that test results should be the measure of a teacher's success or should be so standardized that it cannot be adapted for the needs of students. I think conversations between educators and legislators need to happen to distinguish what tests are actually needed to ensure students' success, and which tests are unnecessary burdens.

Learning and High Stakes Testing

Will you vote in support of [S-3308/A-4639](#), legislation that would eliminate New Jersey's high school graduation exit test, a requirement that serves as a potential barrier to graduation for many students?

- ☒ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know/prefer not to say
- ☐ Other:

School Funding

New Jersey schools are reliant on state, federal, and local funding to support our programs and services. Many districts are facing higher costs to operate, staffing shortages with negative fiscal impacts, health care cost increases, and new costs resulting from health and safety needs post-pandemic. Federal funding has assisted districts in meeting some of these challenges, but those funds must be used by 2024. Additionally, some districts have faced significant additional cuts in state funding due to changes in the law which redistributed state aid (S-2).

How will you work with NJPSA and other education stakeholders to address these funding concerns moving forward?

A huge part of the problem is that municipalities with a lower enrollment for their districts were forced to make up the funding with higher property taxes. Solutions like the regionalization incentive plan that my running mate Senator Gopal introduced earlier this year is a good start. This legislation would offer financial incentives for consolidation to smaller districts at risk of losing funding and offer an alternative to tax hikes. I also applaud Senator Gopal's efforts to secure over \$102 million in additional funding to make up losses from S2, but we need to find a permanent solution and re-evaluate the S2 formula as a whole. The state has the ability to take on some of the costs that are occurring, and I would support exploring options for the state to absorb costs to lessen the burden on individual districts.

School Funding

Would you vote to eliminate or modify the 2% tax levy cap on school budgets in certain situations?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know/prefer not to say
- ☒ Other:

Depending on if the legislature approves or declines to do a full S2 review, I would be open to supporting cap flexibility for essential services for school districts, although I believe S2 needs to be updated, and with that, the cap flexibility should be part of that re-evaluation.

School Funding

How would you work to address the funding needs of the S-2 districts since the fiscal world has significantly changed since that legislation was enacted in 2018?

Each school district has its own challenges and needs and therefore requires flexibility to make fiscal decisions. I believe school funding formulas need to be worked on to ensure proper fairness throughout the state and I know this will take bi-partisan cooperation from the state legislators so that we can find a common-sense solution to help every school district in the state. I applaud my running mate Senator Gopal for quickly jumping into action to find a solution to the funding shortage, but we still need to figure out a permanent solution.

The Right to Read – Book Bans

NJPSA is proud of New Jersey's strong student learning standards which have been highly rated across the country. A key component of all our learning standards is the goal of developing critical thinking and the analysis of multiple resources. Our members work hard to support student learning by working with our teachers to provide a rich curriculum aligned to these standards and the use of high-quality books and materials as support. We also partner with our parents to be part of their child's learning process. NJPSA is concerned about the rising incidence of demands to ban certain books from school libraries and the curriculum. While parents can surely direct the reading choices of their children, they should not be able to direct what resources and books are available to other students.

Will you commit to protecting a student's right to read and learn according to New Jersey's student learning standards (NJSLS) by opposing any legislation designed to infringe on those student rights? As a state leader, how can you assist educators in communicating this message to parents and community stakeholders?

Yes, I will commit to protecting a student's right to read and learn, according to the NJSLS. Protecting our teachers from retaliation and discrimination due to what they teach in the classrooms is important, which will take cooperation from local officials and administrators to ensure that parents, while certainly being able to have a say in what their kids personally read, cannot impart their feelings and beliefs onto others and disrupt other students.

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Pension Funding

In recent years, New Jersey has honored its obligations to make the full actuarially required annual payment to the Teachers Pension and Annuity Fund (TPAF) and Public Employees Retirement System (PERS) under a schedule or repayment established by state law.

Will you continue to honor this obligation moving forward and fight to ensure that the public pension system for school employees is fully funded in next year's State Budget Process?

- ☒ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know/prefer not to say
- ☐ Other:

The End.

Thank you for sharing your perspectives with NJPSA members statewide!

Is there anything else that you would like our members to know about you or your candidacy?

As Deputy Mayor of Ocean Township, I work with both Republicans and Democrats every day, as our council is non-partisan. Being able to cross the aisle whenever possible or needed is crucial to finding success for our students, especially as each municipality has different needs and problems that transcend political lines. Our team knows how to get results in a bi-partisan way, and, as a Doctor who has always loved to learn and grew up believing in following facts and science, I want to make sure schools have proper funding and staff to educate our students.

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NEW JERSEY PRINCIPALS
AND SUPERVISORS ASSOCIATION

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