

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: *

Vin Gopal

Office Sought: *

☐ NJ General Assembly

☒ NJ State Senate

☐ Other:

Party: *

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

Legislative District #: *

11 ▼

Campaign Email Address: *

info@njld11.com

Campaign Phone Number: *

732-508-9376

Campaign Website:

www.njld11.com

Campaign Mailing Address:

PO BOX 579, Oakhurst, NJ 07755

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?

The requirements of working in the education system today look incredibly different than previous generations. Educators, principals, and supervisors are required to not only execute lesson plans and oversee schools, but also serve as counselors, referees, and unfortunately, be ready to put their lives on the line for their students. In the Senate, I will fight for funds needed to make sure schools are functioning with proper security equipment, while also making sure that the state and school districts adequately provide help needed for our administrators, teachers, and students regarding their mental health needs. I am proud to have delivered historic funding for mental health programs in our schools, which will make sure there is adequate staffing of programs so kids can get the help they need. Our community expects our administrators and educators to prepare our children for the future, and it is only right we provide them the resources they need to do that job. I was also proud to support a broad gun control package earlier this session, and will continue to back efforts to keep guns out of New Jersey schools.

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?

I am proud to have led the charge for funding School-Based Youth Services Programs in this year's state budget. We delivered the largest investment in state history – over \$40,000,000 in funding. I will always advocate for continued funding for these programs. Creating reliable funding streams for student mental health services will remain my top priority when re-elected to the Senate. I was happy to see my bill S2416/A3334, which requires Medicaid reimbursements for certain student mental health services, signed into law this summer, but I realize there is more work to be done. I have been a persistent advocate for revising the state's school funding formula, and I firmly believe the revised formula needs to factor student mental health funding into each district's adequacy budget.

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?

Staff shortages have been increasing across the board, with Covid-19 only exacerbating the crisis. We need to make sure schools are properly equipped with enough staff to provide the quality of education New Jersey is known for. We must find ways to attract more teachers and retain those already in our classrooms. I support increasing wages and creating new incentives like loan forgiveness to retain the best talent, while making it easier for those who have met requirements to join the profession. I have introduced several bills that would provide assistance to individuals looking to become teachers, including 2350, which would establish a "Grow Your Own Teacher" loan redemption program; S3891, which would create a Teacher Certification Reimbursement Fund to assist teachers with the costs of becoming certified; and S3941, which was signed into law this summer and will waive certification and credentialing fees for teachers for one year. I also support efforts to encourage teaching candidates to remain in the pipeline, such as by offering credit options for Education Support Professionals (ESPs) and providing payment for student-teachers.

I also believe the current political climate is discouraging to many state residents who may consider becoming teachers. In the New Jersey State Legislature, some lawmakers have introduced legislation that would put cameras in classrooms and allow parents to take action against teachers if they do not agree with the subject matter in the curriculum. As long as I am chair of the Senate Education Committee, I will make sure these bills are never posted, and the Legislature focuses on efforts to recruit and retain teachers in the state.

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/re-elected, 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?

As chair of the Senate Education Committee, I posted S715/A1992, which established a commission to study the effects of social media usage on adolescents and was recently signed into law. The insights that the Commission produces will be valuable in shaping further legislation to protect the welfare of students. I will continue to work closely with both education stakeholders and law enforcement on identifying situations where they require social media companies to work with them. I support initiating a comprehensive review of the Uniform State Memorandum of Agreement Between Education and Law Enforcement Officials in order to begin identifying those situations and facilitate closer cooperation between schools and law enforcement in keeping our students safe.

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?

To the credit of our administrators and educators, New Jersey has the best schools in the country, something I am incredibly proud of as the Chairman of the Senate Education Committee. While there are benefits to standardized testing, such as assessing new curriculums or certain specialized topics, testing that cannot offer special needs accommodations or proves especially disruptive should not be the standard we set for graduation requirements. A teacher's responsibility should be to prepare them for adulthood, not prepare them solely for a test.

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?

I have always worked closely with stakeholders from across the education system to address concerns and make sure the legislature is responsive to the unique needs of each school and school district. Earlier this year, I worked with stakeholders across the state to deliver over \$102 million in additional funding for school districts across the state. Even with this funding, though, too many school districts are losing the resources they need, so we need to reassess the school funding formula to make sure every school and student has adequate funding. The current formula, which was passed in 2008, does not take into account the added costs districts are responsible for and as a result the “adequacy budgets” it calculates are not adequate for many school districts. The formula needs to take into account the new and rising costs districts are contending with.

I also believe the state can assume responsibility for some of the rising costs New Jersey’s school districts are facing. For instance, for the past several sessions I have pushed the state to fund 100% of districts’ extraordinary special education costs and have explored adjusting the extraordinary special education thresholds to provide districts with more assistance.

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:

I believe New Jersey's funding formula needs to be thoroughly revised and discussions about cap flexibility should be included in that revision effort. However, if the Legislature declines to undertake a full review of the formula, I will support more cap flexibility for school districts for essential services like student mental health and school safety.

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?

The school funding formula needs to be reassessed to make sure it is fair for all districts in New Jersey. Just last year, I sponsored the bill that created a task force to reevaluate the school funding formula. In addition to the \$102 million in aid restoration I mentioned previously, I pushed the state to establish Stabilization Aid to help districts that were experiencing budget cuts due to declining enrollment.

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. As the Chair of the Senate Education Committee, I will make sure no legislation is passed that would infringe on students' rights to read and learn. Partnership between state and local officials, BOE members, teachers, and administrators is crucial to making sure the public is not being misled in regard to books being taught in schools, and to prevent any potential retaliation on our teachers for any authorized books they are teaching in the classroom.

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?

I am honored to be Chair of the Senate Education Committee. I am proud of the work we did to secure funding for School-Based Youth Services Programs and the over \$102 million in funding I secured for schools across the state earlier this year. I know that a bi-partisan solution needs to be found so that our kids and their education don't suffer. I am the most bi-partisan Senator in the state and know that with my running mates, Dr. Margie Donlon and Luanne Peterpaul in the Assembly, we will be a team that reaches across the aisle to get results for our schools and students.

.....



NJPSA
NEW JERSEY PRINCIPALS
AND SUPERVISORS ASSOCIATION

This form was created inside of NJPSA/FEA.

Google Forms