

# 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: \*

Verlina Reynolds-Jackson

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?**

If elected to the State Legislature, I am committed to addressing school safety and security comprehensively. This includes not only upgrading the physical structures and equipment in our schools but also implementing measures to safeguard our students from the threat of gun violence and other potential risks. The safety and security of our students are non-negotiable priorities. I stand with education officials, parents, and our community in ensuring that every child can learn and thrive in an environment that is free from fear and danger. Together, we can make our schools safer and more secure for our future generations.

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## 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?**

Addressing the mental health needs of our students is a pressing concern that requires our utmost attention and support. School leaders, educators, and mental health professionals have been working tirelessly to provide essential services to our students. The pandemic has only exacerbated these needs, making it crucial for us to prioritize, support, and fund student mental health issues in our schools. As a state legislator, I am fully committed to these efforts. I will prioritize student mental health by advocating for adequate funding and resources to ensure that our schools can provide the necessary support and services.

## 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?**

Fully staffing our schools with well-qualified and prepared teachers and education service professionals is a paramount concern, and I share the commitment of NJPSA members to address this issue. The challenges we've faced, exacerbated by the pandemic, require innovative solutions and a multi-faceted approach. I am also sponsoring the following bills in support of addressing staff shortages:

\*A1820 - Directs DOE to conduct study on feasibility of using and expanding virtual learning in school districts with teacher shortages.

\*S2563 - Makes certain changes to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics educator grant program.

\*A5416 - Requires State Board of Education to authorize alternate route to expedite teacher certification of persons employed as paraprofessionals in school districts.

## 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 well-being and safety of our students are paramount, both in the physical and online spaces they occupy. The recent Surgeon General's report underscores the urgent need for comprehensive legislation to protect our students in the digital age. If reelected, I will work closely with NJPSA to develop legislation aimed at safeguarding the online safety, privacy, and welfare of our students. Together, we will prioritize their well-being and ensure they can navigate the digital world with confidence and security.

## 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?**

I firmly believe that it is time to shift our focus from high stakes testing to a more holistic evaluation approach in education. High-stakes testing has often overshadowed the true purpose of learning, limited our understanding of students' abilities, and stifled their overall development. A holistic evaluation method considers the multifaceted aspects of a student's growth and progress. It recognizes that education encompasses more than just test scores, placing value on creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, collaboration, and social-emotional development. By embracing a broader perspective, we can better nurture students' talents and equip them with the skills necessary to thrive in an ever-changing world.

I am proud to sponsor the following bills in support of testing reform:

A4639 - Eliminates high school graduation proficiency test.

A4727 - Requires Commissioner of Education to receive approval from State Board of Education prior to imposing new standardized assessment requirement on public schools.

## 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?**

As a legislator and a member of the Assembly Budget Committee, I am acutely aware of the tough budgetary pressures that many school districts in New Jersey are facing. The combination of inflation, staff shortages, and increased costs associated with COVID-19 has placed an immense strain on our educational institutions. I am committed to supporting these districts and finding viable solutions to ensure that our students receive the quality education they deserve.

This includes investments in mental health support, learning recovery programs, and infrastructure improvements to ensure safe and healthy learning environments. I am ready to work with the Governor, fellow legislators, and the necessary stakeholders to ensure that our districts and our students have access to a high-quality education, regardless of the challenges they face. By prioritizing funding, fostering innovation, and providing flexibility, we can navigate these tough budgetary pressures and set our schools and students on a path to success.

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### 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: .....

### 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?

Engaging the community in discussions about the importance of education funding and the impact on our schools is crucial. Increasing public awareness and building public support for education funding initiatives is key to success. As a member of the Assembly Budget Committee, I am committed to making sure that every voice is represented at the table and that we get to an equitable solution that best serves the needs of our students.

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## 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?**

I share the commitment to protecting a student's right to read and learn according to New Jersey's student learning standards (NJSLs) and oppose any legislation designed to infringe on those rights. Our student learning standards are designed to promote critical thinking and the analysis of multiple resources, essential skills for lifelong learning. This is why I am a proud co-sponsor of A-5734 which prohibits public libraries and public schools from banning or restricting access to certain books. As a state leader, I can assist educators in communicating this message to parents and community stakeholders by:

- \*Community Dialogues: Facilitating open dialogues with parents and community members to address concerns and discuss the benefits of diverse and inclusive curricula. These discussions can help bridge understanding and build consensus.
- \*Legislative Advocacy: Opposing any legislation that seeks to limit or restrict access to books and materials aligned with NJSLs. I will work to protect educators' ability to provide a rich curriculum that fosters critical thinking.
- \*Promoting Inclusivity: Emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and representation in curricula to reflect the diverse experiences of all students.

## 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?

Not at this time. ....



**NJPSA**  
NEW JERSEY PRINCIPALS  
AND SUPERVISORS ASSOCIATION

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