

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: *

Gerry Scharfenberger

Office Sought: *

☒ NJ General Assembly

☐ NJ State Senate

☐ Other:

Party: *

☐ Democrat

☒ Republican

☐ Independant

☐ Other:

Legislative District #: *

13

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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?

The most important thing that legislators can do is to ensure that every school district in the state is adequately funded to allow viable, effective security measures to be taken. Every year, I have the opportunity to visit schools throughout the district. There are some that have extremely robust levels of security, while others are not as well prepared to various degrees. Having sufficient funding, secure infrastructure and experienced security personnel - often retired law enforcement, are key to a safe, secure school environment. Class 3 special police officers would add an immediate response capability to the threat of gun violence.

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?

This is one of my top priorities, in fact, as a member of the Assembly Budget Committee, my three "budget asks" for this year's budget funded mental health programs and teen suicide prevention 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/relected, 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?

As someone who has taught at the college level for over 25 years and worked with many students who majored in Education, I fully understand the critical importance of maintaining a healthy pipeline of future teachers. I feel we have to be creative with attracting qualified teaching prospects from within and outside of New Jersey. Things like license reciprocity, and incentives to attract and retain teachers.

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/relected, 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?

I agree 100% that social media has, in many respects, had a negative influence on students and the learning process overall. At best, it distracts from and interferes with learning on a day to day basis. At worst, it dangerously exacerbates students at risk with social, mental and behavioral issues. I would be happy to work with NJPSA to develop, support and promote legislation to address this growing problem.

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 believe that we need some way to measure student progress and aptitude, however, it should not dominate class time and attention. There has to be a happy medium between making sure that student learning is progressing accordingly, without sacrificing the attention to core academic pursuits.

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: As in the previous question, I would support A 4639 if a viable alternative is in place

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?

Simply put, we need a complete overhaul of the funding formula as it currently stands. Some school districts had to endure massive cuts, while others saw significant increases in state funding. Statutory obligations and state mandates do not allow for cuts by local districts when state funding is cut except to limited areas which may adversely impact the quality of education.

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: While everything should be examined when evaluating school funding, eliminating the 2% cap at this point in time, when inflation has caused food, energy, utility, clothing and costs for just about everything else to skyrocket, would have a devastating impact on the middle class, who are struggling to make ends meet as it is.

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?

As previously stated, long term we need an overhaul to the S2 funding formula. Short term, we can use existing surplus to make affected districts whole.

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 have been very concerned and distressed about the banning of books over the years, many of which are classics of American, English and World literature. This does a great disservice to our children's education and deprives them of access to our rich literary legacy. I do support allowing age appropriate books in school libraries.

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 an educator, I know and value the importance of a solid, well-rounded education so our students can compete in an increasingly competitive global economy.

