

# 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: \*

Mike Torrissi Jr

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?**

I believe it is the state's job to help fund School Resource Officers for districts and to provide road maps for local police departments to coordinate with schools on emergency plans.

## 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 state legislator, my top priority is always the well-being and success of our students. I have supported and will continue to support legislation aimed at increasing the number of counselors in schools, increasing incentives for people to become school counselors, teaching trauma lessons in school, and generally providing an accepting atmosphere for students and teachers to have support structures when feeling overwhelmed.

## 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?**

There are several tools we can use. I support the creation of educator grants to help pay for the secondary education teachers need to complete. I support loan forgiveness programs for teachers. I support sick leave to allow teachers who are burnt out time to recover, which will, in turn, help retain them. I support collective bargaining to allow for teachers and ESPS to negotiate fair wages, health care, and benefits. Finally, I think we need to honor public contracts so ESPS keep their jobs for the entirety of the contract.

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## 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?**

I am working on social media legislation that other states have passed to require parental consent for children under 18 to join. Additionally, it's crucial for students to strike a balance between their online and offline lives. Parents and educators should play an active role in guiding students to use social media responsibly and prioritize their academic and personal well-being.

If re-elected, I believe it's essential to collaborate with NJPSA to develop legislation that prioritizes the online safety, privacy, and welfare of our students. We should also encourage social media companies to take a more responsible role by developing safer products for student use and cooperating with schools and law enforcement to address any instances where students are harmed by social media use.

**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?**

Standardized testing should be used as a measurement to gauge where students are excelling and where they need help. It can be used as a tool to gather more information and help shape future curriculum. However, it should not be used as a pass/fail device that supersedes the overall portfolio that students create after years of schooling. It should also not be used to evaluate the day-in and day-out jobs that teachers do. I support eliminating standardized testing as an exit exam but believe it has a place in making sure we have sufficient data into what our students need.

## 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 believe the 2-percent cap has been a good tool in keeping property tax increases at bay in a state that leads the nation in property taxes. We should encourage regionalization through incentives like increased school funding for districts that commit to regionalization studies. We also need to make sure to fully fund schools every year so no district falls further behind. We also need to restudy the school funding formula, most urgently its constant underfunding of special education costs and transportation - two astronomical costs that need to be supported more by state funding.

## 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?

See the above answer.

## 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 believe that parents have the right to bring or read any book in their private homes. I also think parents should know what is being read in schools. I support any book with a literary purpose, regardless of if some might find it offensive. We must teach children how far we've come as a society and not shield them from the horrors of the past. However, there must always be a line when discussing material found in a shared space. I do not support any pornographic material in public school libraries or books that depict pornographic events. School is not the place for this.

## 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?

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**NJPSA**  
NEW JERSEY PRINCIPALS  
AND SUPERVISORS ASSOCIATION

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