

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: *

Brandon Umba

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?

School safety starts by fostering a culture of respect for your peers within the school. I will promote schools that work hard towards that mission and create a good environment within their walls.

As a legislator, I can help by sponsoring legislation to provide more funding for security initiatives within school districts. For example, some of my districts are in towns without local police departments and struggle to find a School Resource Officer. The legislature needs to come up with creative funding solutions to help these districts be competitive with attracting an officer when other districts can partner with local police forces.

I will also fight to break down barriers to becoming a school counselor, as we have the most stringent training hour requirements in the nation. We need to attract more people to this profession to help with our childrens' mental health needs.

Lastly, we need to make sure each school district is working with their local police department and the State Police to implement a state-approved crisis plan.

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 was one of a dozen or so legislators who sent a letter to the Governor urging that he continue to fund existing School-Based Youth Services when the announcement was made to de-fund them in favor of regional hubs. I will continue to fight for this funding in next year's budget.

I will also fight to get more counselors in schools by passing bills that enter NJ into a nationwide Counseling Compact and adopting standards that more closely align with the nation. Doing so will open up a large pool of candidates, especially minority candidates who face barriers of having to complete 4,500 hours of unpaid supervision training hours. Most people cannot dedicate that much time without getting paid. The majority of the nation only requires 1,500 training hours for counselors. We should not have standards 3-times as stringent.

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?

Most of my time in the legislature has been dedicated to trying to solve the teacher shortage issue. I've introduced or sponsored bills to end edTPA, to end the residency requirement, to enhance teacher grant and loan programs, to allow teachers to obtain certificates through affidavits that they've completed all steps necessary because they often wait months for DOE approval, and more.

I will continue to work with my peers in the Education Committee, mainly Chairwoman Lampitt, to develop and pass legislation to help with this issue. I have also used all of my time speaking on the Assembly floor in favor of passing these pieces of legislation, and I am constantly in the ear of Speaker Coughlin.

Many of my fellow legislators know me as the guy who speaks on education funding and staffing issues every chance I get.

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?

I am 100 percent behind you on this issue. The legislature just passed a bill to study the impact of social media on students, but I do not think that goes far enough. I think we all know the extreme negative impact it is having. My running mate, Assemblyman Torrissi, is working on social media legislation that other states have passed to require parental consent for children under 18 to join, which I am excited to see when finished. I also support schools that ban phones in classrooms.

We cannot continue to accept a world where students are distracted 24/7, and worse, bullying each other online. Social media was created to be addictive. We are failing as parents and lawmakers if we continue to allow that addiction to infiltrate our children.

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 can be beneficial in gauging where a student is excelling or needs more help, but ultimately we are over standardized testing our students. They are being standardized tested on subjects they have yet to be taught or fully understand, which wastes those students' time, and our teachers shouldn't be evaluated based on those results. Our students are diverse in many ways, and standardized testing doesn't measure aspects such as a student's creativity. In March, the State Assembly passed legislation, which I support, that would eliminate the high school graduate exit testing because it didn't accurately represent student learning or career and college readiness. Students are still two years behind because of the COVID-19 pandemic. We need to adequately address the learning loss crises in our state and nation and not do more standardized tests.

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 will continue to support increases in school funding to get all of our schools to an adequate level. I have been strongly advocating for the last two years for a pause in S2 for losing districts. I was proud that advocacy led to some relief with the state returning 66 percent of cuts back to districts this year.

I also have written to the Governor support letters for all my districts applying for stabilization aid to get passed the funding cuts.

However, the bottom line is we need to update the School Funding Formula. I will continue to advocate for that until it happens. Schools are short changed on special education funding and transportation funding to untenable levels. Until we update the formula, I fear that will continue.

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 answer above

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 anyone has the right to read any book in their private home. I also think parents should have knowledge of what is being read in schools. I support any book with a literary purpose, regardless of if some might find it offensive. It is important we teach children how far we've come as a society and not shield them from the horrors of the past. However, there always has to be a line when we're talking about material found in a shared space, especially a space for children. 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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