

2019 SPFE Public City Council Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate David Rosenfeld declined to participate in the SPFE endorsement process.

Please limit the following questions to a yes or no response.

1. The Saint Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) believes parents, educators, community members, and students should be at the center of decision making around educational policy. However, increasingly out of state millionaires with a vested interest in pursuing a corporate education reform agenda have poured money into political races with the goal of removing local voices from discussions about our children’s education.

- a. **Will you and your campaign reject contributions and independent expenditures from wealthy donors who live outside our community and from market-based education reform organizations?**

CANDIDATE	YES	NO
Chris Tolbert	X	

2. Despite recent increases, public education statewide is severely underfunded, and has not kept pace with inflation. Communities have increasingly been called on to make up the lack of funding by passing levies that increase property taxes for home owners, while wealthy corporations continue to receive tax cuts – allowing them to benefit from our communities without contributing to them.

- a. **Will you endorse, support, and campaign on increasing revenue that will go directly to public education funding?**

CANDIDATE	YES	NO
Chris Tolbert	X	

3. SPFE members have indicated that they do not want to participate in Q-Comp (Quality Compensation). The core components of Q-Comp include: performance pay and salary schedule reform, teacher evaluation, and job-embedded professional development. Each Q-Comp plan must include all of the core components. The implementation of Q-Comp requires performance pay to be based on standardized test scores. This funding is dependent on action by the state legislature.

- a. **Would you support moving the funding and capacity put into Tim Pawlenty’s failed teacher merit pay scheme commonly called q-comp, into equitable funding for all Minnesota districts general budget?**

CANDIDATE	YES	NO
Chris Tolbert	X	

4. **Do you support collective bargaining for public sector unions and will you fight to protect them?**

CANDIDATE	YES	NO
Chris Tolbert	X	

Please limit your response to 150 words or fewer for each part of the questions below.

1. What is the value of public education for you and for the city of Saint Paul?

CHRIS TOLBERT: Public education is the foundation of our community, and every community. A good public education allows young individuals the opportunity to learn and grow in a supportive environment. A quality public education will ensure our children have the skills they need to succeed in not only the workforce, but as leaders throughout our community. Investing in our public schools is investing in the future of St. Paul.

2. An endorsement from SPFE is only given to candidates that show they are a champion for public education. We do not endorse in all races.

- a. **What are your direct connections to SPPS, SPFE, and/or public education?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: I am a proud graduate of Saint Paul Public Schools. I attended SPPS from kindergarten through my senior year at Central. Additionally, I attended Discovery Club after school, and community education classes through SPPS. The entirety of my youth was shaped through experiences and lessons learned at St. Paul Public Schools. I feel extremely fortunate to have grown up in the St. Paul Public Schools system and I'm extremely proud of the education I received.

- b. **What is your definition of a "public education champion"?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: A public education champion is one who not only attended public schools and can personally attest to their value, but one who consistently puts public education first and foremost in their policy decisions and funding support. I consider myself a public education champion because I have a record of making public education a priority and as a City Council member I have been involved in St. Paul Public Schools by visiting open houses and being Principal for a Day.

- c. **Why are you seeking an endorsement from SPFE?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: As someone who has personal experience in SPPS, and who has consistently championed the importance of public education, my values and priorities are closely aligned with SPFE. I believe that our partnership, through an endorsement, is an endorsement that I would not take lightly. It would also help to continue to foster a great relationship with SPPS and SPFE.

- d. **How do you envision working in partnership with SPFE? What does that look like when we disagree?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: A partnership is one in which values and priorities align, and both partners work together at achieving those goals. While there may be disagreements, at the end of the day, when the fundamental goals are the same, those disagreements become minor to the work in achieving the mutually desirable outcome

3. Over the past year, educators across the country have gone on strike. Just one year ago, SPFE narrowly avoided a strike by reaching a last-minute contract with the district.

a. What have you learned from the Red for Ed Movement?

CHRIS TOLBERT: As a national movement, Red for Ed has galvanized those of us who believe in increased funding for public education. I've been able to see firsthand the impact and influence of bringing the voices of educators directly to the table, to ensure that we're learning directly from them their experiences and needs in and outside of the classroom.

b. UTLA (United Teachers of Los Angeles) recently ended their strike. In addition to much-needed pay increases, the challenges facing their students are similar to the students of SPPS. How can you use your position to support educators, parents and students in addressing these concerns?

CHRIS TOLBERT: I have been able to attend the PTA meetings of nearly every public school in my Ward over the course of my last term, and listening to educators, parents, and students who have attended these meetings has given me the ability to bring their voices to the table when policymakers are discussing topics that affect them. As a City Councilmember I can continue to bring their voices to the table when we are discussing City matters that influence and affect the school district and individual schools within my Ward.

4. Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) has a diverse student population, with over 75% of students identifying as People of Color. Parents and educators agree that in order for students to be successful, we must have culturally competent curricula and educators that reflect the diversity of our city. At the same time, data shows that our city and our schools are becoming more segregated.

a. Segregation and poverty are harmful to all of us, especially our students and their families. How will you work to integrate our city and our schools?

CHRIS TOLBERT: Public education can be one of the most powerful tools in desegregating our communities, while also ensuring that all individuals have access to opportunity. We can help support desegregation by encouraging and helping all families to attend public schools, and not self-select out of our public educational system, and we can also encourage increased funding for transportation to help families attending public schools in areas less segregated.

5. Research shows the importance of stimulation starting at birth. We know students are more successful in school when they have access to high-quality early childhood education. All students should have access to these programs, whether through our public school systems or accredited independent providers.

a. How will you partner with SPFE to ensure all families have access to quality Pre-K and early learning programs in our city?

CHRIS TOLBERT: SPFE and SPPS have been leaders in the state of Minnesota on access to quality pre-k, and I will continue to support this leadership as we work to increase opportunities for families in our communities. We have started through access to ECFE, and continued our quality early childhood education through pre-k in our public schools in St. Paul. By partnering together for increased funding, we can reduce

the wait list for pre-k in SPPS and give more students access to those opportunities while continuing to prioritize families in poverty.

- b. New research shows that many Minnesotans live in childcare deserts, without adequate access to childcare options for their children. How will you use your role to provide additional options early learning options for parents?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: Through the Parks and Rec Department's Recreation for Preschoolers, Saint Paul has strived to help SPPS in providing quality learning options for children before they begin kindergarten, and when parents are still struggling to provide quality childcare. As an elected official, I will continue to advocate for increased access to quality childcare and early childhood education for all children.

6. The current federal Secretary of Education is well-known for her support of "disrupting" public education through "school choice" in the form of online learning, charter schools, and vouchers.

- a. What is your understanding of how education reform policies impact public education?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: Often times 'reform' is used as a mechanism to undermine funding for public education. As an elected official I know how to carefully scrutinize proposals and work to ensure they support our values and priorities.

- b. What is your understanding of how charter schools differ from local public schools?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: Charter schools are independent of oversight and accountability from our public elected School Board. Additionally, charter schools in Minnesota receive public funds and often cap their enrollment, which means that frequently parents have to go through a 'lottery' based system for enrollment

- c. Will you support a moratorium on new charter schools and charter school expansions so that a comprehensive study can be done on the impact of charters schools in our communities (including segregation, tax base, land use, and neighborhood impact)? Who would you partner with for this study? Who would you include as stakeholders?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: I do not know the legality of a moratorium; however, I believe that charter school and the affect on the community here have not been fully studied and need to be. A few council members and I along with school board members have discussed the best thing to do with this.

7. SPPS and the City of Saint Paul presently do business with institutions that engage in practices that destabilize our community through predatory lending practices, investing in private prisons, and corporate tax avoidance. These practices have led to economic injustice and racial discrimination in our city.

- a. How will you use your role to make sure that the largest corporations in Saint Paul pay their fair share?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: While I've been a City Councilmember, the City of Saint Paul completed a study of a PILOT Program (payment in lieu of taxes) in our community, to make up for the lost revenue after the City lost a court case over the right of way fees that were being assessed on non-profit institutions in our community. I supported the completion of this study, to examine ways to incentivize these non-profits to pay for services that the City cannot legally require of them without a change to our state constitution.

- b. Predatory lending practices increase foreclosure rates, destabilizing families. Will you join with SPFE in calling on banks to refrain from foreclosing on homes of school age students during the school year? What steps will you take to separate the city of Saint Paul from institutions that participate in predatory lending?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: The City recently formed an Office of Financial Empowerment, which will work on means of financially empowering our residents, and particularly our residents who currently lack access to traditional banking methods and instead rely on predatory lending institutions.

- c. Will you commit to working with SPFE to seek the revenue we need to have racially equitable schools? What does this look like to you?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: Part of the need for an increase in state funding of our public schools is to be able to focus on important priorities, such as creating racially equitable schools. As I discussed above, I would continue our work with partners to advocate for increased state funding for our public schools.

8. Traditionally the city of Saint Paul and SPPS have had an arms' length relationship. Each has their own budget, and sphere of influence. However, the actions a city takes impacts the daily lives of students and educators, and the desire to be near quality, local, public schools is often a primary factor in how families decide where to live.
 - a. How will you seek out educator and student voice in your decision-making process? What steps will you take to invite SPFE in as a stakeholder? How will you share information with SPFE, parents and students?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: As a former St. Paul Public School student, and a kid born and raised in St. Paul, I'm acutely aware of the relationship between the City and District, and where that relationship can improve. One example I've spoken with many parents with at PTA meetings this year is the change in the school start time. I've been vocal at City Council policy session in my questioning of our City departments and what they've been doing to ensure our City services align with the new start times, to ensure we're all best serving families in our community.

- b. Where do you see opportunities for city and the school district to partner? How will you invite input from SPFE, parents and students on what those partnerships look like?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: I believe there are some great opportunities for the two entities to partner to improve families lives throughout our communities. One specific example of where the City and District already partner is a program I helped begin called Right

Track. The Right Track program provides our students with professional paid internships. Along with the work experience, and resume building, the students also receive training to prepare them for the workforce. This is a program housed within our Parks and Rec Department and I've been proud to support its funding since I helped with its inception.

9. In 2018, SPFE joined our institutional partners in calling for elected officials to engage in co-governance and people-centered democracy. As a practice, this means engaging with your partners in all areas of public work, a willingness to be held accountable to promises, and on-going, open communication.

- a. **What do the terms co-governance and people-centered democracy mean to you?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: I believe in including all voices at the table when decisions are made, and ensuring that traditionally underrepresented people have access to power and decision making – this is what I view as co-governance and people-centered democracy.

- b. **What groups and individuals will you look to for guidance?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: With my background in public education, I think of the leadership of Principal Mary Mackbee as someone who provided guidance throughout my time as a student at Central High School and whose leadership and wisdom I've continued to rely upon in my time as a City Councilmember. My many SPFS teachers and coaches, Discovery Club employees, and school volunteers also were formative in my childhood and there are many I still look to for guidance to this day.

- c. **What steps will you take to make sure decisions are made with communities, instead of for communities?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: I will continue to work to ensure that all members of our community, not just in my Ward, but throughout our City have access to policymakers and are involved in the decision making process. I've prioritized ensuring that our many Board and Commissions are representative of our diverse population, and neighborhood organizations are inclusive of all community members and have open access to my office for any support I can provide

- d. **How will you separate your accountability to the public good you're your personal feelings?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: Throughout my eight years on the City Council I've worked hard to fairly represent the Ward in which I was elected to office. Having been raised in the City, I'm familiar with many neighbors and know their kids and grandkids. Having that personal connection throughout the community means I have a deeper understanding of their opinions and how to best serve their public good.

10. **What specific steps will you take to protect the right of workers – especially public sector workers – to bargain collectively? How will you encourage all workers to be part of a union, should they choose to?**

CHRIS TOLBERT: As a union employee, I have fought strongly to protect the rights of workers. As a City Councilmember, I've fought strongly to expand those rights and enshrine them in law. I was the lead on the Earned Sick and Safe Time ordinance, and most recently was the lead on increasing the minimum wage. Those two sets of expansions for workers rights and protections will make a very real difference in the lives of our neighbors and union brothers and sisters.