

2019 SPFE Public City Council Candidate Questionnaire

Council member Mitra Nelson has already been endorsed by SPFE.

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
Mitra Nelson	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 as endorse, support, and campaign on increasing revenue that will go directly to public education funding?**

CANDIDATE	YES	NO
Mitra Nelson	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
Mitra Nelson	X	

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

CANDIDATE	YES	NO
Mitra Nelson	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?

MITRA NELSON: Public education is the heart of our communities and our democracy. In order for Saint Paul to realize its potential as a city, we need government partners at all levels who will work for students and families to get the high-quality public education they deserve. Residents make the choice to move to and stay in the city of Saint Paul in large part based on our school system, and the future of our city therefore depends on the investments we make in our public schools. The right to an outstanding public education is also fundamentally a social justice and human rights issue. I will do everything in my power as a Councilmember to support outstanding public education for all.

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?**

MITRA NELSON: After working several years as a classroom teacher, I moved to St Paul to work for SPFE and help pass the 2012 referendum. That experience serves as the foundation of my community involvement in St Paul and still guides my work to this day. I was also proud to be endorsed by SPFE during my special election campaign last year. After being endorsed by SPFE in my 2018 special election I used my platform as Ward 4 City Councilwoman to wholeheartedly and openly campaign for the 2018 referendum. I plan to build my life in Saint Paul and hope to send my kids, should I have them, to SPPS schools for their K-12 education.

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

MITRA NELSON: A public education champion fights for education opportunities for all at every turn. They partner across all levels of government to ensure our public educators and students receive the support they need. They stand shoulder to shoulder with educators and the families they serve to carry a message of education for all to the broader community and build political power toward that end. They fight for economic and social justice both within and outside of schools, because schools are interconnected with so many other systems that families and kids are experiencing. A public education champion fundamentally believes in the central value of great public education for all regardless of background or circumstance and works to support that aim.

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

MITRA NELSON: SPFE plays a pivotal role in the lives of every St. Paul family. Even though the city council may not officially oversee SPPS operations, I’m proud to use my platform and convening power to elevate the needs and goals of SPFE throughout St. Paul as well as tackling the challenges families face outside of school. The best way for us to make impactful change is by working together and building power at all levels of government. I would be proud to stand with SPFE and continue that work moving forward as I run for a full term.

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

MITRA NELSON: In my first year in office I have reached out to SPFE to better understand and explore ways we can work on shared issues, such as researching the role of conduit bonds in financing charter schools that impact our school district, or working to better understand and urgently address student homelessness. I feel so excited for all the issues that we could collaborate on together in ways that would be new for both City Council and SPFE. I value the ideas and opinions of SPFE members as people working daily with our youngest residents, and I'm proud to be one phone call away from SPFE members and staff at any time (in both directions). I aim to keep up that level of accessibility and regular communication in my first full term.

I understand that disagreements can and do happen, especially when you are trying desperately to address structural challenges and barriers that have been in place for generations. I think being a good partner means, at every turn possible, working out our differences by communicating directly and honestly to understand each other's interests in each situation and how best to meet them. I value SPFE's clear communication on positions it takes for city issues because it helps me better understand their point of view, values and interests. As an organizer, I understand the value of face to face conversations, building power together, and viewing the long-term battle alongside the shorter-term ones. Disagreement when done in view of both long and short term movement goals can be healthy and necessary. I hope to continue deepening this partnership in my first full term on City Council.

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?**

MITRA NELSON: The Red for Ed Movement has shown me that when teachers unite and we fight, we win. In states like Minnesota, our unions have fought long and hard to build power and public support, and when other organized labor stands alongside teachers, our strength is multiplied. Recent examples of Red for Ed across the country have only reinforced my belief that we need a strong, unified public presence that gives more residents in our community the chance to join in the fight alongside us. Red for Ed has also illuminated how the general public increasingly greatly supports what should be basic improvements to education and the teaching profession, including increased teacher pay and funding more school services that help all students learn.

- 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?**

MITRA NELSON: As a visible and vocal champion for public education, I will use my position to add visibility and weight to the needs of our students, families, and educators, and amplify teacher voice however I can. In my first year so far on the City Council, I have worked to take clear and firm public stances that push the conversation on issues like police funding, minimum wage, homelessness, zoning reform and more. I am willing to continue taking clear stances and using my convening power to bring

groups of people together for improving the learning and working conditions of SPPS educators and students in and outside of school.

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?**

MITRA NELSON: The diversity of our community is one of its greatest assets, and our schools should reflect and celebrate that. I am very interested in learning from and becoming more involved with the Select SPPS initiative to continue boosting enrollment, educating families on their choices within SPPS and helping carry the message of integrated schools as a strength and point of pride. I am proud to regularly campaign for funding referendums that help improve language access and other services that better integrate schools for all students and their diverse needs. I know that SPFE will continue to lead efforts on teacher diversity so that students can see themselves in the educators they spend their days with, and I am excited to be part of those discussions and support.

As a City Councilor, I have also taken on the work of housing justice as a central issue for our city to address if we want to truly integrate our community. History shows us that segregation has roots in racist housing policy like redlining, chronic divestment and mortgage discrimination that have shaped our communities for the worse. As a Councilmember, I seek to undo this by actively pursuing citywide housing policy that addresses our affordable housing crisis, allows neighborhoods to become more integrated through a mix of available housing across the city, holds landlords and realtors accountable who engage in discriminatory practices, increases our density so that more resources can be shared with SPPS through the increased tax base, and working for every SPPS student to be stably housed and succeed in and outside of school.

I will also continue advocating for city services and programs to be as clearly connected to SPPS as possible, including accessible transit, completion of the Safe Routes to School Plan, access to parks and extracurricular programs for youth and more, so that SPPS students do not experience city services inequitably. The expansion of safe public transit, parks and more invaluable city resources like these can help break down the barriers between neighborhoods and build a sense of interconnectedness that previously was not felt. I hope to be a leader on the Council for these issues.

As a woman of color who grew up in one of the only families of color in an all-white neighborhood and almost all-white school, I have personally felt the sting of racial isolation in my lifetime as a Minnesotan. I am passionate about and dedicated to creating a city that works for all of us on the Council.

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?

MITRA NELSON: Since joining the City Council I have been invited to become a leading member of the Saint Paul 3K steering committee. I would like to work with SPFE this year on bringing their input and ideas to this effort in significant and meaningful ways as we explore the design of possible city-wide early learning programs. I believe SPFE member and organizational input is essential to design a system that is equitable, sustainable and aligned with SPPS. As that process moves forward, I'll continue to be a strong voice to ensure everyone has access to high quality early learning in our city.

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?

MITRA NELSON: Childcare is one of the leading costs of living in Minnesota households alongside safe and affordable housing. I will advocate for the expansion of Promise Neighborhood-style programs that help create high-quality and affordable childcare zones across Saint Paul for all; support and uphold city-level policies like earned sick and safe time and paid family/parental leave which are part of the set of policies that families need to fully care for their children; and work with SPFE, the 3K steering committee, Dr. Corrie at the agency of Planning and Economic Development and other partners to explore how we can better support high-quality community-based childcare programs as a part of our city's local economy.

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?

MITRA NELSON: I want to continue to using my position on the Council to champion broadly supported improvements to public education that our community and SPFE want and need, and to oppose unsuccessful/harmful reforms that I personally experienced as a former teacher of three years and organizer in a range of spaces within and beyond education and ed reform.

“Reforms” that I do not support include for-profit online schools, vouchers, mass charterization with very little community input which was characteristic of the school system I taught in in New Orleans, charter expansion in general, eliminating tenure and eliminating collective bargaining for public school teachers. There are changes that do need to be made both in and outside of our public education system to address racial opportunity gaps and more. Unions, civil rights groups, and public school students/families hold agreements in many areas on what those changes are, such as relieving the burdens of excessive high-stakes standardized testing while maintaining reasonable teacher-driven assessments, increasing the diversity of the teaching workforce through adjusted pathways that support current emerging educators of color in attaining full training and licensure, and increasing equitable funding for our schools. SPFE, Education Minnesota and other unions statewide have been vocal in pushing for equity-based reforms, and

collective bargaining is among the strongest tools we have for them to continue to do so and make sure we pass reforms that don't harm students or teachers. I hope to be a voice for these solutions on the Council where appropriate and to continue working closely with SPPS educators and SPFE to support these and other community-driven goals.

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

MITRA NELSON: While local public schools are required to serve all students, charter schools do not face the same level of requirement and regulation - especially as it relates to special education and other core services. Reporting, funding and oversight for local public schools is also much more transparent. Because charters operate independently and separately from our local public schools, it's much more difficult to know how and where it would be possible to implement systems changes that could improve opportunities and educational experiences for students in our community. Charter schools in Minnesota are also under an entirely different accountability structure when it comes to audits from their authorizers, which they are allowed to choose on their own. These are serious points of concern for discussion in our education ecosystem. I will keep working with SPFE to prioritize and redirect resources back to SPPS.

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?**

MITRA NELSON: Recent conversations at the Council level have shown that there is a clear city-wide concern about the way private, non-profit institutions and their further expansion are impacting our community. I would absolutely support a comprehensive study of this issue that involves numerous partners and stakeholders, including local nonprofits with policy expertise, business and tax experts, local families, city staff, representatives from SPFE, and others.

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?**

MITRA NELSON: The strongest strategy we can have is to approach the issue from a number of angles. I will partner with our Minnesota and Saint Paul legislative delegation to take on the complicated series of tax breaks corporations benefit from that should be redirected back to our communities. I will work with community partners including SPFE, my Council colleagues, and Mayor Carter's administration to raise business items that are points of concern from a corporate accountability standpoint and work to ensure our city lives its values in these transactions. I will advocate for direct financial support from our largest private employers to other community-based initiatives like the Midway Community Benefits Fund, an initiative I have taken on since joining the Council that aims to target

resources to equitable development and placemaking around the stadium site. As a City Councilor I will also seek to broaden the conversation and bring more allies and voices to the table. Housing advocates can push for corporations to support housing projects that benefit our students and families. Transportation advocates can push for corporations to support safe routes to schools projects to make our neighborhoods more walkable and safe. Trades and labor unions can push for corporations to support training programs for middle and high schoolers. I have years of experience working with partners at all levels of government to bring solutions to the table and I will be proud to bring that experience to the city council and fight for our students and families.

- 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?**

MITRA NELSON: Housing stability can be one of the single greatest factors that impact student success. I will absolutely join with SPFE in calling for foreclosure reforms that can support students and families and to refrain from foreclosing on homes of school age students during the school year. As a City Councilor, I will also push for the city to leverage its own financial assets as tools to push for better lending practices for all customers from our lenders and others. I was proud to vote for the creation of the Office of Financial Empowerment which would seek to create free financial services through the City of Saint Paul to better protect vulnerable residents from predatory lending and better access fair housing. I will keep looking for ways at the City to advance this work.

- 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?**

MITRA NELSON: Yes. I was proud to lead the work to pass the 2012 referendum and I was thrilled to support last fall's referendum campaign again as a newly elected Councilmember. In my Council role, I hope to grow the amount of revenues available through pursuing policies that invest in increasing our housing/density and transit (which in turn can fuel greater density) and will strive at all times to look at city policy-making through a school equity lens. I believe we should consider the role of TIF carefully in development and its impacts on school revenue from future tax base and I will push for it to be used sparingly and strategically as a development tool. I believe private sector partners have a role to play in supporting the schools that educate their future workforce, and I would advocate for education-specific tax measures and philanthropic funds from Saint Paul's largest employers to help fill critical resource gaps in SPPS. I will join SPFE and the Minnesota/Saint Paul legislative delegation in advocacy at other levels of government that resource our schools with more equity.

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?**

MITRA NELSON: In my first year on the council, I have worked hard to, and benefit greatly from, including SPFE in conversations where they may not have been present or invited in the past. As a new City Councilmember, I found it very helpful to be able to directly reach out to SPFE to discuss the issue of conduit bonds and the city's role in those financial arrangements. I am working to take on student homelessness and housing instability in our community and I believe SPFE members need to be squarely in those conversations. I would like to start 2019 and each year of my full term with a visioning session with SPFE to help them help me set a municipal policy agenda informed by SPFE members, parents and students. One-off policy issues have shown me the value of proactive collaboration and I hope to continue that work in a full term.

More broadly, I'm working hard everyday to breakdown traditional barriers that between both government and residents, and also between different layers and entities of government. My former work as a congressional staffer showed me very early on that no single office can do anything on their own. My new city council office has already been recognized for our extensive community outreach efforts and our energetic passion for bringing new energy to old problems. I will continue to push the envelope in terms of creative engagement that turns government inside out and brings multiple partners to the table and I welcome SPFE's ideas

- 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?**

MITRA NELSON: Right in my own Ward, there are great examples of how to collaborate in a real concrete way at Hamline Elementary. By placing city and school services at the same site, we can help make things easier on our students and their families. I would to build on that example, and the new investments made in libraries, rec centers, and parks in the 2019 budget, by finding more opportunities to share limited resources and create a larger impact. After school and before school programming, social workers and similar services, and other initiatives could all be done in partnership across public agencies.

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?**

MITRA NELSON: I ran for office because I continued to see people talking about renters, about people of color, and about young people. But they were never actually talking to us. Co-governance and people-centered democracy means giving the people with lived experience more direct influence over our political systems. It means listening to the individual story from a resident in the community just as much as the technical advice from staff. It means thinking more like an organizer and less like an academic. I value mutuality, honesty, ongoing relationships and the central goal at the heart of all of these as building power with and for underrepresented people and causes. I hope to continue raising the bar for how this looks on our City Council.

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

MITRA NELSON: I frequently reach out to my partners in labor unions, social justice organizations, and other community experts to weigh in and give me advice. Sometimes that means a quick text message or email, sometimes it means a lengthy phone call, and other times it means several in person meetings. Not every interest group is a fully formed organization and that means doing meetings in public housing high-rises, with assorted groups of residents and out in the city wherever possible. I feel clear on my compass and cabinet, and I know SPFE is part of it.

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

MITRA NELSON: We have to change the way we do community engagement and make decisions. My top goal as a City Councilmember is to make sure community has a seat at the table. We hold our Ward office to an extremely high bar in terms of being present in our neighborhoods. We push our city staff to consider and reconsider who they are designing policy and programs for. We do as much direct outreach as possible with the people who have had the lived experiences we need to learn from. I support district council reform and funding increases tied to representation requirements. I'm co-chairing the 2020 census effort for Ramsey County to make sure everyone is counted, that billions of dollars of federal investment continue to reach our communities and that all the policy made based on census data accurately reflects community need. Making decisions with communities is a central value of mine and I am hungry for partners and collaborators toward that end.

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

MITRA NELSON: So many of the issues that come before the council have a direct impact on the residents and families of our community. In many cases, public good is so closely aligned with my personal feelings that decision-making can be simple. In more complex or technical situations, I make sure to take the time to connect a human story to the decision before us. Who will be impacted by this decision? Who benefits most when we make this change? Who helped shape the process that led us to this decision in the first place? Those are the kinds of questions I ask myself to ensure we are centering the discussion around those who have traditionally been left behind. I also believe that serving in public office is fundamentally about much more than yourself - you can't take disagreements or criticism personally, and you can't make public decisions based on personal emotions or preferences either. I am a human being and I experience emotion - and I think that is a strength! In addition to this, though, my guiding questions are outlined here to help ensure I make decisions with the public interest in mind.

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?

MITRA NELSON: As a City Councilor, I will be a vocal champion for our public workers. I will fight and oppose right to work in all its forms, defend the gains that organized labor won at the city like earned sick and safe time and minimum wage including leading a

strong enforcement conversation, support SPFE as it works toward important gains in ongoing negotiations and agreements, share Ward 4 resident input with school board members that will strengthen SPFE's position in this process, among others. SPFE, Education Minnesota and other unions statewide have been vocal in pushing for equity-based reforms and policies that uplift families, and collective bargaining is among the strongest tools we have for them to continue to do so.