

2020 SPFE Public Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

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

- I. 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?**

Yes

- II. 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?**

Yes

- III. SPFE members already participate in rigorous educator evaluations and 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?**

Yes

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

Yes

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

1. What is your personal experience with public education as a student, or parent? How has public education benefited you personally?

SPPS saved my life. At the age of eight, I attended school for the first time. A teacher saw that I was in danger and set in motion a chain of events that took me out of an abusive home and put me into the foster care system. I experienced firsthand the transformative impact educators can have on their students.

That's why I became a teacher. Teaching was the greatest honor of my life, but at the end of the school year, one of my students fell victim to gun violence. The response from the district was a complete lack of support for my students and their families. I felt powerless in facing such intractable challenges and I left to fight for systems change as part of the Obama team.

Today, I lead Foster Advocates where I advocate with fosters and I am plotting my return to the classroom.

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?

My wife, Mercedes, is a SPFE steward and kindergarten teacher at The Heights Community School. Through her I am able to volunteer with field trips and come in to help read books during reading time. I also look forward to the start of the school year when I get to see her classroom come together and build her classroom furniture.

Through my work as the Executive Director of Foster Advocates I am working on legislation important to the foster care community. Much of that work sits at the intersection of children's services and education. Schools are where 80% of child protection referrals are made and is often our first service to our most vulnerable children. I consult with Education Minnesota, SPPS, counties, and cities about the impacts of particular bill on foster care communities.

I also serve on the St. Paul Children's Collaborative where I work in partnership with SPPS.

b. How would you define "public education champion"?

A public education champion is someone who fights unflinchingly for the rights and wellbeing of students, teachers, educational aides, our union, and our public schools. That means ensuring that teachers and educational aides earn strong wages that allow them to raise families, in the places they teach. That also means investing in our schools to meet the needs of all of our students.

c. How would you describe your current relationship with SPFE member leaders?

My wife, Mercedes, is a teacher in the district and a steward with SPFE. The well-being of my family is contingent on the system doing right by St. Paul public school teachers.

d. Why are you seeking an endorsement from SPFE?

I am seeking the endorsement of SPFE, because I know that the only way to have a truly just and equitable education system is to work in partnership with all of our most critical stakeholders to improve how we serve our students and the dedicated staff that serve them. SPFE is at the vanguard of that fight and I hope to work alongside our union to build a system that enables students and teachers alike to thrive.

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

It looks like being in community. That means that if I, as a legislator, ever come to a different position than SPFE, it is only after having listened to your perspective and reflected on it. It means that the way I vote will never come as a surprise, because even when we disagree I will look you in the eye and be candid.

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?

I've learned that teachers around the country are at a breaking point. More importantly, I have been reminded of the power of working people when they organize and demand better conditions for themselves and for their communities.

b. CTU (Chicago Teacher Union) 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?

I can use my position to ensure that educators never need to strike, in the first place, by securing funding for adequate support staff and increased teacher pay. Furthermore, I can work to alleviate the other economic pressures working families confront at all times, but especially while on strike, by fighting for affordable healthcare and child care.

c. Across the country, educators have been willing to strike so they can bargain for the things they know their students need. While no one wants a strike, sometimes this drastic step is necessary. How will you support

Minnesota educators that avail themselves of this tactic? Under what circumstances would you support the hiring of replacement workers?

When teacher's strike they are not doing it alone. They are doing it with their students, families, and community interests in mind. I will always fight to protect unions' ability to strike. If SPFE strikes I will join my wife on the picket line to fight for our union and the protections it provides to educators, students, and families.

There is no replacement for an educator who has built a relationship with a student. I would not support the hiring of replacement workers for educators on strike. I would instead try to work with the district to find a solution to get educators what they need to return to the classroom.

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.
 - 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?**

Families in HD 67A are struggling. Almost 40% of families in the district are already paying over a third of their income on their mortgage or rent.¹ The overwhelming cost of housing prohibits these families' mobility. The state must invest resources in affordable house and ensure that those resources are spread equitably, in order to ensure that our neighborhoods and by extension our schools are integrated.

- b. **Our students of color deserve educators that look like them. While tiered licensure provides pathways to bring People of Color into relationship with students, it also prevents many from accessing the benefits and important worker protections of union membership. What are your ideas for expanding protections for these educators?**

When I resigned from the Department of Education after the Obama term I knew I wanted to return to the classroom. Even when folks were saying I was crazy to be leaving DC to "just" teach, I knew teaching was the greatest good I could do. To be able to teach in a community that saved me and where students looked like me would be no greater honor. I was incredibly disappointed when I was told by SPPS that despite my experience teaching, a Master's in Secondary Education, and my five-year license from Maryland didn't make me qualified. I would still like to return to the classroom.

Teachers are professionals and we should treat them as such. Ensuring the ability to join our union and the protections it provides is a must. That is why I support the Increase Teachers of Color Act and moving away from the tiered system.

¹ Minnesota Compass.

5. At a time when our country and our state are facing many challenges – workers struggling with stagnant wages, People of Color facing increased instances of race-based discrimination, communities being devastated by gun violence, and an upcoming census to name just a few examples – SPFE believes that bold steps and leadership are required to create a more just and secure society. It is no longer enough to “take the right votes”.

a. **Aside from increased education funding, what one piece of legislation will you bring forward to improve the lives of working families? How will this improve the lives of our students?**

Inequitable funding results from many different policies, but the most impactful one is the concentration of low-income or government-sponsored housing that reduces communities' fiscal capacity.

The problem was further exacerbated by the housing collapse and its uneven recovery, which discriminated against the poor and specific ethnic and racial groups. This caused further harm because the controlling municipalities needed high property taxes to offset the lack of revenue, often disincentivizing home ownership and forcing out middle- and high-income earners.

There's a resulting policy of indifference that causes discriminatory practices in vulnerable communities, as well as a political incentive to not spend tax dollars based on need. It is what prevents good schools from existing in poor communities, feeding the cycle of poverty. Everything starts with home and addressing disparities in ownership, affordable rent, and housing segregation would be a legislative priority.

b. **What past work (either at the legislature or your capacity as a private citizen) would you point to as bold leadership? How has this work positively impacted public education?**

After being unable to teach my goal was not to create an organization, but instead to support whomever was engaged in policy and advocacy work with foster communities. When I discovered there was no such operator in Minnesota, I knew I needed to create one. I founded Foster Advocates in June of 2018 and serve as its Executive Director, where I manage a \$200,000 budget and two staff.

We partner with advocacy organizations that have intersecting interests with child welfare. As well as, partnering with organizing communities that have been impacted by foster care and leverage the collective power of our organized former foster recipients to support legislation like renewing the Foster Care Transportation Pilot and have nearly passed our Keeping Foster Students in Schools Act, which provides education stability for students involved in foster care.

c. How are you creating pathways for young and emerging political leaders?

I founded Foster Advocates, because I believe that those closest to a problem are the closest to solving them. We work to organize and develop the leadership of former foster youth to conduct advocacy, policy, and research to improve outcomes for our community. We are launching the Foster Advocacy Fellowship in the next few weeks to train the next generation of foster care impacted leaders. I know I cannot be effective going to the Capitol alone, and I want to build the bench for young people and emerging leaders to learn of their power. It will be a paid opportunity for our community to explore their agency, learn about root cause analysis, selective storytelling, and unpack their relationship to power.

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

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

Taken in its most well intentioned way, the education reform movement is about bringing market solutions in an attempt to improve education systems. However, this is an idea that has missed the mark. Schools are not markets; efforts to treat them as such are undermining the very communities they claim to serve. Instead of working alongside allies in the education and labor space to create change, many reformers have made alliances with corporations and billionaires who are using their efforts to undermine public education in the name of false progress in test scores.

Weakening teacher preparation does not create better outcomes. Segregating students does not create better outcomes. Having schools unaccountable to the public does not create better outcomes. These efforts to “disrupt” education have only hurt our communities. We should abandon them as failed ideas.

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

Minnesota started the charter school movement and its charter schools differ from traditional public schools in significant ways. The most significant is their accountability system is with an authorizer, which can range from a private company, nonprofit, or an institute of higher learning. Unlike public schools which have a publicly elected school board, charters have their own boards similar to nonprofit organizations.

Additionally, charters in nature are independent and are granted autonomy to hire staff, fundraise, create curriculum, and have budgets free of the regulations under which district schools operate. Also, charter schools in Minnesota do not provide protections to their staff as they are not unionized (with the exception of one school).

- 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?**

I support a moratorium. However, I would also like to see a process for closing down charter schools that are not serving our students well and reviewing the authorizers. The churn and burn style to staffing educators has damaging short-term and long-term effects on our educator workforce. I have also witnessed deeply troubling and unethical actions from charter systems that are considered some of the best in Minnesota. I want the days of Minnesota's wild west approach to charter regulation to end.

In this effort I want to partner with our unions, community organizations, as well as advocacy groups. This impacts all of our communities and I would want to see a robust effort to include every resident as we all have a stake in our schools.

- 7. The state of Minnesota presently does 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 Minnesota pay their fair share?**

As a legislator, I would refuse to vote for any tax bill that allowed corporations to avoid taxes by hiding earnings overseas. I would advocate for progressive income taxation, rather than relying on regressive sales taxes that fall disproportionately on the backs of working 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 state of Minnesota from institutions that participate in predatory lending?**

Yes. I will also fight to ensure that the state retirement system is only contracting with and investing in ethical financial institutions. I also think it's important to ensure that all employees of the state are aware of the options they have to invest in indices that reflect their values, such as not investing in oil companies, industries that are benefitting from ICE detention, and corporations that are undermining public education.

- 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?**

Yes and I was not exaggerating when I said SPPS saved my life. As a result, I am passionate about education - and about improving education systems - because every student deserves to have the opportunities I went on to have. It shouldn't come down to just one teacher saving a child; we need all adults and systems working together to make sure that every kid gets what they need and deserve. This means correcting for the racial injustices of the past and present. It means providing schools and communities that have been historically disenfranchised more resources to ensure school staffing that reflects our students and funding to remedy the difference in communities fiscal capacity. It also means fighting against segregation and increasing funding for integration efforts like the Achievement and Integration Program.

8. The legislature increased E-12 funding by \$543 million dollars last year, which included \$90 million to address the special education shortfall, and an increase of 2% to formula. Yet education funding hasn't kept up with inflation since 2003. Consistent underfunding by the state has mean that local school districts must ask local taxpayers to increase their education levies.
 - a. **It will take an additional investment of \$4.3 billion over the next two years to say that we are fully funding public education. How will you be a leader in securing this funding?**

I would use my voice as a former teacher and lift up the voices of my teacher constituents, to tell the story of what happens when we fail to fully fund education. Truly effective change only happens at the State Capitol, when we mobilize around the stories of working people.

- b. **Everyone says they want to fully fund public education. Doing so would require new taxes, and it would only be fair for those to come from corporations and the wealthiest Minnesotans that currently don't pay their fair share. How will you support the move to a more fair tax structure in Minnesota in order to fully fund public education?**

The state legislature must do a complete audit of all existing tax breaks. If they do not demonstrate a meaningful impact on racial and environmental justice, they should be eliminated and the resulting revenue should be directed towards public education.

- c. **Using property taxes as a stopgap measure to fund public education is unsustainable. How will you bring urban and rural legislators together to end this practice and fully fund public education statewide?**

As someone who spent part of his childhood on the Eastside of Saint Paul and part of it in rural Ada, Minnesota, I will speak firsthand to the impact of regressive school funding. I will use those shared experiences with both my rural and urban legislators as a rallying point for enacting change.

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?

My campaign is rooted in the idea that policies should be made by the people those policies affect. To me co-governance means valuing the insights people have into their own lived experiences and into the systems that are oppressing them. It also means being in constant relationship with my community. We cannot serve people we do not know. This will mean that constituency engagement does not stop after the campaign ends.

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

With any given policy, I will seek out the guidance of those affected, especially those who historically have not been given a seat at the table. In the case of education policy, I will seek out the perspective of teachers, educational aides, students, and their families. I also look to organizational partners that I work in allyship with such as Education Minnesota, Minnesota Alliance with Youth, and the Coalition of Asian American Leaders to name a few.

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

At the state capitol, the biggest barrier to transparency is process. I will remain in constant contact with my constituents and allies, even in the waning days of session when the process gets dizzying, to ensure that they have every opportunity to hold myself and colleagues at the Capitol accountable.

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

I know that if I am elected, I will be sent to the state legislature as a public servant. That seat belongs to the people of House District 67A. I will ground myself in remembering that fact and being able to articulate how everything I do as a legislator will improve the lives of my constituents.

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?

I have been a proud member of both the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' International Union (BCTGM) and the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU). I have seen the consequences of breaking solidarity first hand and the protections organized labor provides. I will always fight to preserve the collective bargaining rights of our unions. We are surrounded by "right to work" states and have had a front row seat to what weakening unions rights do to drive down wages for all workers. I will not allow that to happen in Minnesota.

I will also push our federal legislators to fight restrictions on workers' right to organize by the National Labor Relations Board. I will also use my platform to encourage others to join and support our unions. Sharing my own experiences and the legacy of my parents' stories as members of the Teamsters and the American Postal Workers Union.