



SPFE Local 28
Candidates for President, Secretary, Executive Board Members
& Saint Paul Regional Labor Federation Delegates

Prompts for Candidates:

Which activities have you participated in as a member of SPFE?

Why are you running for a SPFE leadership role?

SPFE has been working with intentionality to examine and break down racial barriers in our union. From your perspective, what is most needed for SPFE to continue and deepen this commitment to equity?

Candidate for President:

Leah VanDassor - ELA Teacher, Highland Park Middle School (currently on release to work as a liaison with the district around COVID-related issues)



This past year has been a tough one for all of us. Educators are both burned out and demoralized. Yet, we keep showing up. As your new president, I promise I'll keep showing up to work with and for you. I'll keep showing up to fight the good fight for you and our students. I'll keep showing up against injustices to our Black and Brown students and their families who are, too often, left out of conversations. But I can't do it alone. Your ideas, insights, and lived experiences are all needed for any leader to do an effective job. Our systemic equity work through, and in, SPFE was in its infancy when COVID hit and there

is much more to be done. We need to keep expanding Restorative Practices. We need more mental health supports for our students- especially in the aftermath of this trauma we've all experienced. We need to compensate the expertise of our multilingual educators, most notably our ESPs, who are needed more now than ever and deserve to be rewarded for their capabilities. And that is just the beginning.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, CAT team, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward, SPFE Officer, Executive Board Member, Bargaining Team Member, Attended bargaining sessions, TIGER team, PIC/LMC member, SPFE Committee Work

If we're going to continue changing our institution, we need to keep having open, transparent conversations member to member. We need to continue to reach out to our members of color and listen to them so we can learn what needs to be done. As a white woman, I will not pretend to know any of the answers, but I am open and motivated to learn. Additionally, in my interactions with other white members, it will be crucial to have the difficult, yet important conversations to help move all of us toward more equitable racial outcomes.

Candidate for Secretary:



Robyn Asher - Science Teacher, Como Sr

As current SPFE Secretary, the last two years have been a huge learning experience. SPFE is strong. My goal is to grow our strength. Support for educators, organizing around shared issues, and keeping everyone involved in the running of OUR union are all very important to me.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Strike Captain, CAT team, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward, SPFE Officer, Executive Board Member, Attended

bargaining sessions, PIC/LMC member, SPFE Committee Work

Communication with members about opportunities for engaging in the union needs to be a priority. Listening to members with concerns about racial equity and supporting them in communicating those ideas.

Empowering all of our members; EAs, SCSPs, as well as educators to have access to leadership roles by making the SPFE office a welcoming and friendly place.

Candidates for the Executive Board of SPFE: (9 open spots)



Jennifer Davis - Parent and Family Educator, ECFE (multiple sites)

As an educator for early childhood and family education, I see how ECFE is uniquely positioned to bridge and support children and families in their school journeys. My personal focus remains supporting parents in early literacy, emergent English and

fundamentals of reading in multiple codes. St. Paul Federation of Educators must be raising the expectations –of ourselves, school leadership and elected officials – if we have any hope of unclogging the school-to-prison pipeline.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Attend Monthly membership meetings, PIC/LMC member

If the commitment is deep enough, equity work should speak for itself. A district-wide focus on reteaching and relearning how to read with the science of reading might be a good place to start.



Shantella Barnes - Educational Assistant, Journeys

I am running to make sure the voices of every ethnicity is represented. Not only that but there are plenty of teachers on the board and

as a Para Educator we need to be represented and not falling by the wayside. I believe it is important to keep ourselves educated in what our Union is doing for us. And there's no better way to do that then to be a part of the change.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Strike Captain, Steward, Executive Board Member, PIC/LMC member, Employee Review Committee
Continue to educate individuals of the purpose the Union is there for.



Diedra W. Carlson - Teacher, JJ Hill Montessori

Activist Stacy Abrams said, "I like to solve problems. I know it is a skill set, but it's also an obligation. I grew up with parents who believe that you don't simply complain: you try to find solutions and fix what's in front of you."

I am running for an SPFE leadership role because I, like Stacy Abrams, am a problem-solver, and I like solving problems. Stacy Abrams is also correct; the ability to problem-solve is an obligation. As a Black woman educator in a White-dominated profession, I am essentially problem-solving for myself and, by default, others' every day. As a by-product of being a Black woman educator problem solver, I am relentless, persistent, and clever. These are skills and attributes I will bring to the Executive Board for SPFE.



Jenny Konkel - EA/Intervener, Focus Beyond

I am running for SPFE Executive Board to raise awareness of the needs and concerns of EAs and SCSPs.

I want to bring a new voice to the table and I'm not afraid to ask questions. I have experience in many age ranges and schools across the district and can use this to help others think about things in a new way.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward

I think it is extremely important to listen to our members and truly hear what they have to say. We need to get new people involved and hear their story and share their experiences.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Strike Captain, CAT team, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward, Executive Board Member, SPFE Committee Work, COPE

The importance of any antiracism work is a continuous self-reflection of the individual body's response to race and racism. Our body's reaction to an environment tells our story of who we indeed are. The second is being honest with ourselves about how our bodies are feeling when discussing race. If the finger is pointing outward and we aren't naming the racism within ourselves, intentionality is doomed and will cause harm. The work of antiracism must be in the head, the heart, and hands, mindfully understanding the need for all three to work together to reach out to members not seen at union meetings, end racist practices, abolish racist policies and procedures. But first, the work begins with self.



Janet Nelson - Educational Assistant, Hamline ECFE

I want to be an advocate for the Early Childhood Program (ECFE) and also to be a strong voice for Educational Assistants. ECFE is an important program for SPPS because it is the place where

families start their journey with our school district. With a strong Early Childhood Program, children will join our schools with social skills and other skills needed to succeed in school. Parents will be able to navigate our schools easier. I want to make sure that our district knows who we are and what we do.. Members who work for this program need to have a voice at the bargaining table and when decisions are made. Our program is unique and because of this we encounter many issues which need to be addressed. I have worked for this program for a long time and I have the time and motivation to take up this role so we can have a stronger program.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward, Executive Board Member, Attended bargaining sessions, PIC/LMC member

It is quite important to have at least one Educational Assistant in each and every school being nominated to be a steward. Sometimes teachers do not seem to understand what Educational Assistant's jobs are. Educational Assistants need to work together with



Peggy Cobbins - Educational Assistant/Job Coach, Focus Beyond/STEPS

Being in a leadership role is very important. It is a way to become a member of an

organization or group for the common good. Being a part of a leadership team helps people grow. To build each other up as well as build relationships. Each person brings their own experience, cultural values, concerns and perspectives, so as we are making decisions collectively we have everyone's best interest at heart. I like meeting and working with different people because we learn from each new idea, new thoughts we bond, we share and we lift each other up, and we build strong relationships and are stronger together.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward, SPFE Affinity Group, Executive Board Member

Continue the equity work, we have come a long way but we haven't begun to unpack the layers of racism in this country. especially when so many killings have occurred in 2020 alone.

Where do we start any and everywhere we see an opportunity, there are so many avenues that we can show and implement meaningful discussions, as well as practices inclusion in the workplace. Start with diverse representation in our class

teachers to help build a stronger union. Since there are more teachers than Educational Assistants, it would be helpful to come up with a system that creates a spot for them so they are not voted out by the teachers. When members come to meetings and they do not feel like their issues or programs matter, then they will stop participating. Education about our union is needed because some members do not understand what the union is all about.

room. In the workplace everyone has fair treatment. Real work brings about real change.



Matt Shimon - Kindergarten Teacher, Bruce Vento

To obtain a leadership role within SPFE that will allow me to share the perspectives I have learned from my various roles as an educator and from the various people with whom I have had the

privilege to work.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Strike Captain, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward, COPE Continued pressure to have our members, especially our white members, examine, reexamine, and reflect upon the role of whiteness and white power structures in our professional and personal lives and how those structures adversely impact society as a whole.



Seepha Vang - Bilingual TOSA, ESTEM

The 21st century education requires forward thinking, actions, and the needs to have multiple and different perspectives in our union so it can truly reflect the needs of the

diversity of the teachers. I want to be the missing and different voice at the table.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Attend Monthly membership meetings, SPFE Affinity Group, Executive Board Member, Attended bargaining sessions, TIGER team, SPFE Committee Work, COPE

Equitable education should be the main focus and attention now. The pandemic resulted in distance learning has created greater disparities for students and families of color. Therefore, it's important to intentionally examine the institutional racism and barriers at all levels of the educational system which resulted in social and academic inequalities.



Julia Shepard - English Teacher, Harding High School

I have been an active and vocal educator at Harding High School and as a member of SPFE for nearly 25 years, and I represent the voices and needs of our families and the educators of St. Paul with

confidence and strength. As a triple stakeholder, educator, parent of SPPS students and resident of St. Paul, I am deeply invested in making sure we continue to fight for the schools our students deserve.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward, Executive Board Member, SPFE Committee Work

SPFE has made some noteworthy progress in its commitment to racial equity, but our work is far from over. In addition to honest reflection, we need to continue to examine and improve on our hiring practices. Furthermore, we could continue to grow a diverse group of educators by encouraging our own young people to see themselves as future members of SPFE; towards that end, we should expand our current involvement in the Future Educators of America Clubs in our high schools. Finally, continuing a commitment reach out to our families, particularly those who have been under represented, is critical to breaking down the racial barriers in our community, our schools, and our union.



Erica Schatzlein - EL Teacher, Nokomis North

I have acted in various roles within SPFE the last 8 years, and I want to continue to serve our members; being an Executive Board member is one way I can do this. I

believe SPFE makes positive change in our district and our profession as educators, and I want to be a part of that work. As a previous EBoard member, bargaining team member, and SPFE officer, I believe I have knowledge of our history that can help us move forward intentionally, build on successful past practices and avoid repeating previous mistakes.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Attend Monthly membership meetings, SPFE Officer, Executive Board Member, Bargaining Team Member, Attended bargaining sessions, TIGER team, PIC/LMC member

When making decisions, we need to ask: Does this lead our union down the path toward racial equity and away from white supremacy? Are we doing what needs to be done to create positive change, or are we simply doing what is usually done? We need to find more ways to amplify the voices of our educators of color, particularly our EAs and SCSPs. Additionally, I believe bringing in outside experts to help us learn and deepen our examination of institutional practices has been very effective at SPFE and should continue, including organizations like Race Forward and Restorative Practice circle keepers.



Lindsay Walker - Elementary Art Specialist, Benjamin E Mays IB World School

I believe in the power of our union and feel that everything we have collectively been through over the past year has only helped to build our strength. As an Elementary Art

Specialist, I know how it feels to be in a position where you are essential to the daily functioning of a building but often feel as if you have no voice with our District. Each of our content areas and roles are critical to the whole education of our students. On our Executive Board, I will serve as a resource, a voice, and an advocate for ALL



Stephanie Schwartz-Johnson - TOSA/Learning Lead, Highwood Hills Elementary

First and foremost, I am honored to have had the opportunity to serve as an educator in St. Paul Public Schools since 1997. I am also proud of my time spent as a

member, steward, and union leader of the St. Paul Federation of Educators. As a current member of the SPFE Executive Board, I am committed to a partnership between SPPS and SPFE that provides our students with schools and educational opportunities where they are able to

members and bring all members' voices to the District to create necessary changes that impact us as Educators and create the schools that our students deserve.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Strike Captain, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward, Attended bargaining sessions, PIC/LMC member, Participated in In-Person Learning MOU Bargaining Team

SPFE must continue to listen to our members of Color, our families of Color, and our students of Color; we must elevate their voices and continue to use our collective power to fight for the vision that our community members of Color bring to SPPS and SPFE. We must continue to constantly seek multiple perspectives, to ask questions, and to take action to hold systems of power accountable. The education system at its core is a racist one that systematically places barriers in front of our members and students of Color. We must continue to identify these barriers and work together, taking action to tear them down - redesigning the system as we go in order to remove them permanently for now and in the future.

thrive and grow.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Strike Captain, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward, Executive Board Member, SPFE Committee Work

It is critical that SPFE is committed to advocating for the equity work that needs to be done on behalf of all stakeholders. We need to intentionally create space that invites and values all voices and provides members with the resources they need to effectively serve their students and families. Finally, we need to be willing to engage in conversations that will bring about the necessary changes we need in our schools and community.



Brian Hodge-Rice - Third Grade Teacher, Adams Spanish Immersion

My name is Brian Hodge-Rice, a third grade teacher at Adams Spanish Immersion, executive board member, area strike captain,

and current bargaining team member for the in-person memorandum of agreement (MOA). This election I am running for re-election to serve on our SPFE Executive Board. I believe our board has done great work over these last two years. We have updated policies and procedures within SPFE to be more equitable for all members; approved our first strike since 1946 – winning big for our students, schools, and members; spoke out against the systemic racism in our communities and continue fighting for real change; and relentlessly advocated for the safety of our students, members, and St. Paul community during the current pandemic.

I am fired up to fiercely advocate for you on our Executive Board!

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Strike Captain, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward, Executive Board Member, Bargaining Team Member, Attended bargaining sessions, SPFE Committee Work

I am deeply committed to examining and breaking down racial barriers in our union and in our school system as a



Lya Jordan - EA2/ASL Interpreter, Four Seasons A+ Elementary

Too often the focus of the district, and sometimes the union, revolve around Teachers/Licensed Staff, and ESPs end up being left out of

the conversation. With my perspective as an ASL Interpreter and EA working in the SPED and DHH departments, I am running for a SPFE leadership role to make sure all ESP voices and perspectives are included and heard. I believe having a wide variety of perspectives at the table is important in order to make changes that benefit all members of SPFE.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Strike Captain, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward

It is important to make sure as many different perspectives as possible are represented at the table, and allow those most greatly affected by the racial barriers to lead the discussion on how we can break them down.

whole. During my first term on the Executive Board, we have updated policies and procedures to be more equitable for all members, spoken out against systemic and structural racism, and advocated for racial equity within SPFS.

However, there is still much work to be done and room to learn and grow. The knowledge and know-how are right here within SPFE and our St. Paul community. We must continue to listen, lift up, and support the changemakers on the front lines of our union who lead every day in their buildings and our community.



Elysia Peitzman - EL Teacher,
Battle Creek Elementary School

I believe that our union has the power to make sweeping changes for students and for the teaching profession. Too often, that power goes untapped. It is time for union leaders

who will step up and take bold, anti-racist action that supports educators, students and families. I want to be a part of the Executive Board to ensure our union is centering the needs of our most underserved colleagues and community members, especially in these difficult times. I listen to the needs of my fellow educators and want to ensure their voices are heard and actually represented in all decision-making processes. I want to be on the Executive Board to help support the meaningful and vital work of teachers, both new and seasoned.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Bargaining Team Member, PIC/LMC member

It is my belief that we need to ensure all voices are represented and at the table with the opportunity and platform to speak on issues that are meaningful to them. Sometimes, our union has not modeled the type of inclusivity we strive to facilitate in our classrooms. SPFE should be a place that embraces multiple perspectives. In addition to ensuring that we reflect our community in our representation, I believe it is important to center decisions and actions around what this means for a more equitable education system. Furthermore, when making decisions it is vital to ask ourselves "How does this support anti-racism and equity for our members, students and community?" and "Are those affected by this decision/discussion here at the table?" We need to ensure SPFE provides space for open and honest



Jean Walker - Math Teacher,
Highland Park Middle School

I have been a math teacher and steward for so many years that I feel I have earned every grey hair I have. Being logic based I tend to look at both

sides before acting and have had to use this many times when working with our members and administration. I know I could bring a logical point of view to the team. I have worked to promote growth of and unify unions across the community in the Regional Labor federation and would like to continue that work. I now feel as though I would like to step up and take on the role of being on the executive board to make sure the union's pathway continues to strive to better our working conditions, schools, and communities.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward, Attended bargaining sessions, St. Paul Regional Labor Federation Representative

We as a union need to be inclusive and open to listening to what all people are saying. We need to be aware of issues in schools and in our communities that we can support to help our students, families and members. We should not profess to know what is right for others, instead we should include the voices of those who frequently don't get asked their opinions. Continuing to promote and work to strengthen the membership from within, making sure we have a strong union that stands up for good choices and encouraging the growth of the lesser heard voices.

conversations/dialogues; not to check it off a list, but to engage with it and most importantly use it to help us move forward into anti-racist action.



Denise Young - 5th Grade Teacher, Capitol Hill Elementary

There's a saying that with great power comes great responsibility. Well, I'm changing that to with great change comes great responsibility. We are at a

defining moment in American history for our country and our beloved Twin Cities. This moment is shaping all of systems including the educational system. This is the time to make important improvements in St. Paul Public Schools. As teachers we know what works and doesn't work. The past year has laid bare the weaknesses and strengths in our school system during distance learning. I have served on bargaining team, executive board and various committees. My commitment to you is in improving work conditions for all SPFE members, learning conditions for our students, and moving our union forward to address momentous changes. We need to own our future.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, CAT team, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward, SPFE Affinity Group, Executive Board Member, Bargaining Team Member, Attended bargaining sessions, TIGER team, SPFE Committee Work, COPE.

As someone who has worked on the executive board to intentionally bring change by helping to hire staff of color and two organizers of color in the past three years, I feel that we need to continue examining the ways that our union unintentionally puts up barriers. We need to continue to examine our systems and make all our members feel welcomed. We should persist with the affinity group work we started as well as involve our indigenous members and members of color in the process as to how they need to be supported.

Candidates for the St. Paul Regional Labor Federation: (11 spots - Write Ins Allowed)



Sue Snyder -Sign Language (ASL) InterpreterHumboldt High School

I believe we are stronger when we collaborate and work with the greater labor movement. The RLF is a place to interface with other

labor unions and groups. I look forward to learning how to support other unions and how they can support SPFE.

Participated in the 2020 SPFE strike, Attend Monthly membership meetings, Steward, SPFE Officer, Executive Board Member, Bargaining Team Member, Attended bargaining sessions

Make changes in SPFE systems. SPFE, like our schools, are build on whiteness and quite honestly, perpetuate whiteness. We need to dismantle this. I am just learning about how seeped in whiteness we are. I have seen how running a meeting can run over BIPOC members and new members. Changing meeting formats can help. Sharing information with members. The officers and board have a lot of information that does not make it to rank and file members. Prioritizing more members of color and a communication strategy around that is a nice start. There is information from our state and national affiliates that stops at SPFE. Sharing opportunities for training and encouraging BIPOC members to participate is a way to develop new leaders. Listening to and soliciting feedback from our BIPOC members in an authentic way, as opposed to a token way, is a good start.



Jean Walker

(See bio for Executive Board)



Diedra W. Carlson - Teacher, JJ Hill

(See bio for Executive Board)



Jennifer Davis

(See bio for Executive Board)



Leah VanDassor

(See bio for President)



Janet Nelson - Educational Assistant, Hamline ECFE



Peggy Cobbins - Educational Assistant/Job Coach, Focus Beyond/STEPS