

2023 SPFE Public City Council Candidate Questionnaire

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? Yes**

2. Despite recent increases, public education statewide is severely underfunded, and has not kept pace with inflation. Currently, the DFL holds the House, the Senate, and the Governor's office, and has proposed a massive increase in education spending, including indexing education funding to inflation.
 - a. **Will you endorse, support, and campaign on fully funding our public schools? Yes**

3. **Do you support a moratorium on all new charter schools opening in St. Paul as well as a moratorium on any expansions of charter schools already in St. Paul? Yes**

4. **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 the value of public education for you and for the city of Saint Paul?

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.

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?

After working as a classroom teacher, I organized with SPFE to pass the 2012 referendum. I was proud to be endorsed by SPFE during my elections in 2018 and 2019. As a resident and person, I plan to build my life in Saint Paul and hope to send my kids, should I have them, to SPPS schools.

During my time on the council, I've stood shoulder-to-shoulder with SPFE through tremendous challenges. This has included an historic strike in 2020 during which I stood publicly with SPFE educators to demand the schools our city deserves. It included navigating unprecedented challenges and strains on our educators and families as we adapted to COVID. And it included standing with SPFE again recently as they worked to avert a strike and win a contract that better reflects what our kids and educators need today. I am running for re-election to keep being a strong partner at the City for SPFE and SPPS.

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

A public education champion fights for public 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?

SPFE plays a pivotal role in the lives of every Saint Paul family and is the largest public sector union in our city along with AFSCME who represents our city workers. Every elected official in our community should want to co-govern with the people who make our city happen and educate our children. Even though the city council may not officially oversee SPPS, I have been able to use my platform, relationships and convening power to elevate SPFE's needs throughout Saint 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 am proud to have stood with SPFE during my first full term on the council, and I want to earn their endorsement to continue that partnership moving forward.

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

During these past five years, I have continually been one phone call away from SPFE to coordinate on everything we care about. Coming into a likely historic election, I am so excited about all the issues that we could collaborate on together.

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 working out our differences by communicating directly and honestly to understand each other's interests in each situation. 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. 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 a second term on the Council.

3. The rampant growth of charter schools in the city of Saint Paul has caused great harm to our public schools and our communities. Per the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) the [number of charter school programs has grown to 81](#) in just the city of Saint Paul. This rise has led to the [resegregation of schools and communities](#), and includes a Saint Paul charter school that has been [under investigation since 2019](#) for investment practices.

a. Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) recently made the decision to close or combine several schools due to declining enrollment. Out of control growth of charter schools has led to the disastrous result of more "seats" available than there are school-age children in the city. Unlike charter schools, SPPS must be available to serve all children. What is the role of the City Council in supporting SPPS?

Within its direct powers, the City Council can support SPPS by using its zoning & development authority to grow the tax base of the city and increase desperately needed public school funding, minimize the proliferation of charters where able, and run strong programs and city services out of school that families depend on like partnerships with Parks and Rec, community safety programs, safer streets and library options. Families are far more likely to come to SPPS if Saint Paul in general is a great place for them to live.

Through its more indirect and relational powers, the City can hold SPPS accountable to a clear plan for boosting enrollment and supporting educators and families that builds the kind of sustainable public schools that we deserve in our city. I was very engaged during the Envision SPPS process because it directly impacted families in my ward, and am extremely concerned about SPPS's future plans and lessons learned. I plan to stay engaged as a Councilmember with SPFE.

b. Saint Paul Public Schools provides more than classroom education for students and families. Robust, well-funded public schools help to create stable communities, increased property values, and play a vital role in

desegregating our city. What specific steps will you, as a member of the City Council take to slow charter school growth AND support enrollment in SPPS?

As a Councilmember, I can and do vote against conduit bonds that the HRA makes available to charters who are using the city as a pass-through to finance charter expansion. I spoke in the previous question about running strong city programs and services as well as a development vision that supports school funding and a caring and comprehensive ecosystem for SPPS families. I think Councilmembers can and should use their platforms to champion SPPS vocally, both through regular public expressions of support that ensure confidence in our public schools, and through relationships with our state delegation to hold them accountable to fully funding SPPS.

- c. Will you advocate and support a comprehensive study on the impact of charters schools in our communities (including segregation, tax base, land use, and neighborhood impact) and steps to address the harms done by unchecked charter school growth? Who would you partner with for this study? Who would you include as stakeholders?**

Yes, I would advocate for a comprehensive study on the impact of charter schools in our communities. I think that it is critical we understand the harms done by rapid growth. In doing this study, we should be partnering and securing a seat for SPFE leaders, educators, students, and families at the table. I would be interested in asking for a highly respected public research institution's support on an effort like this to ensure we have the strongest possible data and that there is community engagement as well as economic impact research.

4. The COVID pandemic will have a long-term impact on the city of Saint Paul. In addition to loss of life, many of our social safety nets were brought to the breaking point. Many people, especially our students, are still dealing with the after-effects, including disrupted learning, mental health crises, and financial losses. Essential workers, once lauded by lawmakers for staffing our hospitals, keeping our schools going, our cities running, and our grocery stores open are now facing criticism for rising costs – while corporations made some of the highest profits ever seen.

- a. One of the biggest challenges our community faces is the lack of access to reliable, high-speed internet and devices – this existing challenge was exacerbated during COVID. What steps can the City Council take to make free, high-speed internet available across the city?**

The City of Saint Paul is engaged in a digital equity stakeholder group process that includes the county, schools and internet providers to map where the gaps are in access and explore using American Rescue Plan Funds to make significant infrastructure investments that guarantee internet for all. I am very interested in this topic and supportive of the workgroup's efforts to expand free, high-speed internet available citywide.

- b. It is possible that we will experience another pandemic. What actions can the City Council take now, to prepare for that possibility? How will you protect and support the public sector workers that keep our city functioning during a public health crisis?**

I would want to start with the many remarkable leaders of AFSCME who kept our city together during nearly three years now of pandemic interruptions and unbelievable community need. I value their lessons learned and care about partnering with them closely to ensure workers have what they need and that families can be more effectively served. I would like to seek the same input of SPFE educators who educated our children through incredibly challenging circumstances and are seeing firsthand every day the needs of our educators and families in and beyond the pandemic. I would want to form a plan based on the input of our frontline workers so that we can be resilient.

I have learned a great deal about Ramsey County Public Health in this process as well as the State Health Department. We need to ensure these entities are fully funded and that they are held accountable to the type of varied community engagement that reaches people most impacted by economic/racial disparities in health and all areas of life.

5. Saint Paul, like many cities, is struggling to balance the increased needs of community against increasingly tight budgets. The solution has often been increases in property taxes and fees. Mayor Carter is currently [seeking a sales tax increase](#) to help cover the cost of necessary improvements to our roads and parks. While Saint Paul residents are often willing to take on the additional financial burden to care for our city, many are at the financial breaking point, this system is ultimately unsustainable, and has the most damaging financial impact on our citizens that can least afford it.

- a. **Wealthy corporations saw some of their largest profits during the pandemic, while our residents struggled financially. Will you encourage the City Council to revisit the use of PILOTs (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) to ease the tax burden on our residents? Will you support a percentage of a PILOTs to be dedicated to funding SPPS? What steps will you take as a City Council member to pursue PILOTs?**

We absolutely need to revisit PILOTs for our large private institutions like colleges/universities and other organizations that are tax exempt. I would support a percentage of PILOT to SPPS. I would be excited to convene a new Council in 2024 that is ready to take this challenge on.

- b. **TIF districts are used by the city to spur development. TIF districts also result in less funding for SPPS and the city. It is also often unclear on how some projects meet the “But for” test. What are your ideas on how the use of TIF can be restructured to minimize the financial impact on our school district and community, and still support growth?**

We should clarify how the “but for” test works and increase transparency to the public about the process and decision-making under state law and applicable city rules. In the part of the city I represent, there are planned developments that will rely on TIF and we should ensure they clearly and transparently meet the “but for” test, generate significant revenues longitudinally and have broad required community benefits beyond tax base to help SPPS families. We should embrace a mix of development that doesn't depend on TIF, ensuring it is most of the development across the city, and raise more funds from the state to subsidize developments at a range of affordability levels so that TIF is not as needed.

6. Traditionally the city of Saint Paul and SPFS 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?**

I have worked hard to include SPFE in conversations where they may not have been present or invited in the past. In the past, I have 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 have worked hard to take on student homelessness and housing instability in our community and I have sought at every opportunity to bring SPFE members and families' voices in those conversations.

I have relationships with SPFE members in my district as well as across our community, and regularly turn to them and the SPFE staff for advice on our work. I am eager to help shape the work and direction of a council that is more representative of our Saint Paul — and I want SPFE to be playing a strong role in guiding our collective work.

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

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. After school and before school programming, social workers, and similar services, and other initiatives could all be done in partnership across public agencies.

We are currently undergoing a very serious partnership conversation following the devastating shooting of a student by a rec center employee at Oxford Rec Center. My constituents use Jimmy Lee/Oxford and I am one degree of connection away from the victim and their family through numerous community relationships, making this a situation that hit home very hard and that I felt frankly just gutted by. In the aftermath, we pulled together city and school district leadership as well as staff at both Central and Oxford to have candid conversations about what needs to change and institute immediate actions. We re-opened Oxford last month thanks to these intensive conversations. I will support proactive planning at sites around the city to make sure all of our kids are safe, 24-7, period.

7. 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?**

I first 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 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 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?

When looking for guidance, I find myself reaching out to partners in labor unions, social justice organizations, and other community experts. Sometimes that means a quick message or call, other times it means lengthy conversations and meetings. After my first full term, I feel clear on my compass and cabinet, and I know that SPFE is a central part of it.

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

We have to change the way we do community engagement and make decisions. Community needs a prominent and permanent seat at every 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 lived experiences we need to learn from. We pay specific attention to racial and economic diversity as much as we can in the spaces we are convening, and make extra efforts to reach folks who are too often under-represented at the community meetings. I support district council reform and funding increases tied to representation requirements. Making decisions with communities is a central value of mine and a critical aspect of ensuring that the council is delivering for every individual in our Saint Paul.

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

So many of the issues that come before the council have a direct impact of the residents and families of our community. In many cases, public good is so closely aligned with my personal feels 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 the 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 and 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.

8. 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?

In our Saint Paul, anyone who chooses to be in a union should be able to, which is why I will continue to 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, minimum wage, and labor peace — by leading a strong enforcement conversations. I will support SPFE and organized labor as they continue to work towards important gains, and seek and share Ward 4 resident input to strengthen the process. 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.