

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?**
 - i. **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?**
 - a. **Yes, as part of a land-use study (see 3c below)**
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?
 - a. Public education is at the root of our democracy. Our ability to create a more equitable future, in which St. Paul residents of all backgrounds, races and cultures are able to thrive, understand one another and participate in our democracy, depends entirely on the success of our public education system. Our public schools and our City are based on the same premise - that we all have something to offer and that we do better when we're together.

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?**
 - i. After graduating from college, I taught middle school science as a Teach for America corps member in Baton Rouge, LA. During that time, as a member of the East Baton Rouge Federation of Teachers, I helped organize a union action against my principal's unfair labor practices. The action resulted in my termination from my school in my second year. My husband is currently an English teacher at Rogers High School. I've worked closely with SPPS faculty and staff through my work for West Siders for Strong Schools, advocating for additional resources and support for Humboldt, Cherokee and Riverview schools. I am also working closely with Superintendent Gothard, school board members and SPPS faculty and staff on an effort to ensure that all St. Paul families have access to high-quality, affordable early learning.

 - b. **What is your definition of a "public education champion"?**
 - i. A public education champion is someone who believes deeply that we are all inextricably bound to one another and that our society is stronger when we have a shared foundation of knowledge and experiences and an appreciation of our differences. A public education champion promotes those beliefs through public statements and advocacy for our schools, by donating time and money to public education, and in private conversations with those who may not understand the value of our public schools.

 - c. **Why are you seeking an endorsement from SPFE?**
 - i. I ran for office because I believe the city needs to play a bigger role in the well-being of its children and young people. Our job is not only to build roads, maintain sewer lines, trim trees and approve zoning changes - it's to recognize how our decisions about land use, affordable housing, policing, parks and rec and library programming can either harm or support our children and to be constantly striving, in partnership with our schools and our educators, to do better for our kids. I share SPFE's beliefs that our persistent achievement and opportunity gaps exist because our systems are not built the right way - and that our systems can change. An endorsement from SPFE would be an honor because it would affirm my commitment to public education and to our working families.

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

- i. I look forward to continuing to work with SPFE through regular meetings to understand SPFE's priorities and how I can be supportive. Throughout my first term, I stayed in touch with Denise Rodriguez and then Nick Faber on issues from preK to PILOT payments, and in my second term I've enjoyed the chance to work with Lynne Bolton on the City Council's Early Learning Legislative Advisory Committee. When we disagree, I will be honest about the reasons why I believe what I do and I will commit to keeping the lines of communication open. I believe that respectful, empathetic disagreement can lead to greater mutual understanding - and better public policy - than consistently being in lock step with one another.

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, 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?**

I'm very concerned about declining enrollment at SPPS and other public school systems, and I believe the City Council has a duty to support St. Paul Public Schools. This is one of the reasons why I'm championing a citywide early learning initiative. I believe such an initiative will build better connections between family child care/child care centers and SPPS kindergarten classrooms, increasing enrollment and ensuring students enter kindergarten ready to learn, which will improve the classroom environment, ease the burden on teachers, and improve student achievement and perceptions of our public schools. I also believe the City should partner exclusively with SPPS on district-wide initiatives for school safety, youth employment, mental health and more. SPPS is our system of public education and should be our partner in these initiatives; charter schools are experiments and should be treated that way.

- 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?**

See above.

- 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?

I am concerned about the way charter schools drain funds from public schools, about their ability to continue operating despite failing to meet the goals outlined in their charter, and the fact that charter schools often take over formerly tax-producing industrial buildings or open in areas with zoning that is incompatible with the safety of students. I would support a study of charter schools and other tax-exempt uses to determine the impact on our community. Such a study would also be the only legal way for us to impose up to a one-year moratorium on charter school creation or expansion. The University of Minnesota, the Citizens League and the Ramsey County assessor's office would be a strong partner in this research effort and it would be critical to include SPPS parents, students, teachers and school leaders as stakeholders.

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 recently launched a digital equity workgroup to focus on exactly these disparities, which were always problematic but were made especially evident during the COVID pandemic. With virtual learning and employment here to stay, the need to ensure access to high-speed Internet is more important than ever. The work group recently reported its initial findings to the Council, which highlighted the importance of seeing the problem not just as one of wires but also of people. We may need to expand broadband coverage, but if people can't afford reliable cell service or can't understand the information on their bill, it won't be effective. I look forward to continuing to hear from this workgroup on specific steps the City can take to close the digital divide.

- 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?**

Since the COVID pandemic, the City Council has improved its understanding of and relationship with the City-County Public Health Department. Dept Director Sara Hollie now regularly briefs the Council on emerging infections diseases and allows us to get the information we need to share with our constituents and help them stay safe. I'm hopeful that this newly improved connection will help us be more prepared for the next crisis. We have also learned what front-line workers need to be successful during a public health emergency - including flexibility in scheduling, access to PPE and the chance to give feedback and be responded to promptly as circumstances change. These lessons learned will be useful in the

event that we need to mobilize in the face of another public health emergency and keep our workers safe and supported while doing so.

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?

I strongly support the idea of PILOTs. The City commissioned a study of PILOTs in 2017, but due to mayoral transition at just that time, the study's recommendations were not immediately followed up on. Although PILOTs do not provide reliable revenue (because they are, by necessity, voluntary), and as such can not be counted on in an annual budget process, I believe they are still worth pursuing to alleviate our property tax burden and to give our tax-exempt entities a chance to pay their fair share. Many constituents have also asked about PILOTs as a basic issue of fairness - wanting to know that all city entities are contributing makes property tax increases feel more reasonable. It makes sense to me that a portion of the PILOT payment would go to SPPS; I would support this initiative.

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?

I believe TIF should only be used for projects that create a public good that is advantageous to all the taxing jurisdictions. For example, the City's primary use of TIF in recent years has been to create affordable housing which means families can remain stably housed, benefiting our schools and all our community institutions. We have also limited TIF to 10% of our taxable value citywide to prevent overreliance on this funding stream, and I support that cap.

6. 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?

I believe the City has a serious stake in the wellbeing of its public schools and its children. One of the reasons I ran for office was because I wanted to bring that vision, and my background in education, to City Hall. Hearing from my constituents, especially those working and learning in our schools, is invaluable to me. I have worked closely with SPPS students on policy change, including with Youth Power students at St. Paul Youth Services to advise me on a revision to our Youth Fund ordinance. I make it a priority to be accessible to parents, teachers and students through my regular Community Conversations, in-person meetings and social media, and I will continue to maintain good working relationships with SPPS staff and faculty and SPFE members. I'm also planning to use my campaign as a vehicle to engage young people in the political process. In addition to a full-time field director, I've hired a youth engagement coordinator who will be charged with registering high school and college students to vote and engaging them in the DFL caucus and convention process and in the campaigns this year.

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?

Anywhere young people spend time - whether that's in a St. Paul park or recreation center, a library or a school building - should be a focus of our investment and an opportunity for collaboration. I'm grateful that we've taken some steps in this direction via the Library GO program, which gives all SPPS students a St. Paul library card, the Right Track youth jobs program which partners with high schools to engage students, and with the coordination our teams have shown during crisis, such as providing programming during COVID and communicating more purposefully about school safety in the wake of the recent tragic incidents. I believe there's much more room for making sure all city and SPPS buildings are fully utilized and that we share resources and programming whenever possible. I also think the City can help ensure young people are engaged in the programming on offer, by the City, SPPS and community partners. I'm working with Sprockets on a first-ever citywide Summer Choice Fair which will help young people and their families learn about and sign up for youth camps, events, activities and jobs for this summer.

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?

To me, co-governance and people-centered democracy mean that elected officials constantly keep in mind whom they are there to serve, that they work together with their constituents to solve issues, and that they do not see their election certificates as licenses to act independently of their constituents for the majority of their term and only become accountable again at re-election time.

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

I work closely with many groups to stay grounded in the needs of my community - including my five District Councils, three business associations, community advocacy groups like St. Paul STRONG and more. I've built a diverse coalition of supporters during my time in office, people

who care about St. Paul and want it to be its best irrespective of politics, and I often confer with them on the needs of their neighborhoods. I make a particular effort to reach people where they're at by hosting Cookies with the Councilmember events in laundromats, public housing, homeless shelters and other community spaces.

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

Besides building the above-mentioned relationships necessary to stay in close communication with the communities I serve, I also always strive to make government as transparent as possible so that people can easily participate in and navigate the process. The first resolution I passed shortly after taking office in 2016 changed our voting procedure at the Council table. We now vote by saying "aye" and "nay" instead of the previous procedure in which our names were read off in a confusing and lightning-fast roll call while everyone sat silently and somehow still voted "yes". This brings us into alignment with the method of voting familiar to most people and makes it easier for people to follow our meetings. I'm proud of my success in working with Ramsey County to change the murals in our Council Chambers to better reflect who St. Paul is today. I'm currently working with YouthLens360, a BIPOC, youth-oriented media company, on a video to help people learn about how Council meetings work, how to understand our agendas, give testimony at public hearings and more.

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

I believe it's the responsibility of every elected official to put the public good above one's own personal preferences. That's why we're in office and why we make the personal sacrifices we do to be here. That said, the problem I encounter more frequently is that both my personal feelings and my constituents' opinions are divided on an issue, and the ultimate public good is unclear. In those cases, I do my best to gather as much information as I can, to think through my options as clearly as I can and to make the best decision for the greatest number of people as possible.

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?

As a former union member married to a union member, I feel strongly about the need to protect workers' rights to organize and bargain collectively. I believe the greatest threat to our nation is the spiraling inequality we're seeing, largely due to a decrease in labor's power in the last several decades. I will uphold our City's prevailing wage and labor compliance laws and seek to add additional "teeth" to those laws so that contractors who attempt to skirt the rules are held accountable. I will meet with SPFE and other unions to understand their concerns and do whatever is within my power to help resolve them. By using my public voice to support workers' rights, including to amplify their voices during a strike, I hope to show others that being part of a union is honorable, desirable and a way not only to improve one's own working conditions but to uphold our democracy.