

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?

A fully funded public education creates a pathway to end poverty. Regardless of a child's background, a fully funded public education enables them to be college-ready and provides many vocational options. St. Paul is home to many students, which is why I believe the more we invest in our youth, the entire community benefits. As a daughter of refugees, public education was my only hope to get my family out of systemic poverty. Public education is a source of hope for many, and more than ever, we need to partner up to fully fund our public education and ensure that all schools are safe and racially equitable. Our vision for students must expand to further fight for free college tuition so that our young generations are not burdened by a lifetime of debt.

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?**

From birth to adulthood, I have always been surrounded by caring educators, mentors, and community leaders in public education. My late sister in law Marny Xiong is one of them. She served as Chairwoman of the Saint Paul School Board. My values around public education were shaped by my lived experiences and from the stories that I have heard, and I have carried them with me to City Hall, community conversations, and picket lines. I continue staying in touch with SPFE members, many of whom I have visited the classrooms of, and staff members!

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

A public education champion is a leader who will defend public education in both public policies and actions. It is someone who will fight for fully funded public schools, the right to collective bargaining, and more investments/policies that ensures students, families, and educators in our public schools thrive.

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

As a city council member, I have valued SPFE's partnership as we build an equitable city together. I want to continue this path toward a thriving eastside where schools are a community hub, families are flourishing, students are challenged with a rigorous education, and educators are respected and valued. In addition, I seek endorsements from bold, progressive organizations, and SPFE has been an unwavering voice for progressive change.

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

I want to continue having a collaborative partnership with SPFE and ensuring we're at the decision-making table, especially for issues we care deeply about. We all have a stake in ensuring that we build the best city for all people to live in. There may be times of disagreement on how we get to our collective outcome desire, however I am a person who seeks to learn and understand. In circumstances where we disagree, I will reach out to better understand perspectives that are different from mine.

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?**

This is one of the many reasons why I do not support the privatization of education nor do I support charter schools. We need to fully invest in our public schools that open their doors to all students across race, class, gender, age, and disability. The City Council can play a role in supporting SPPS by being a staunch advocate opposing all requests for charter school conduit bonds and expansions, which is exactly what I have done since day 1 of being on the Council. I'm so proud that Councilmember Jalali and I are a voting block on this.

- 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?**

I play a role in this in all aspects of my life, not only as a Councilmember. In addition to opposing all requests for charter school conduit bonds and expansions, I make sure my stance is known to elected officials and candidates who run for office and ask them to join me in opposing these too. I educate families and even my own relatives about the benefits and

importance of public education and recruit them to enroll their children into 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 like to partner with SPPS, SPFE, and public education champions on this. The stakeholders who we should prioritize are our students, families, and educators, especially those from marginalized backgrounds.

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?**

Updating infrastructure would make it possible to install and update broadband. Unfortunately, in the City of St. Paul we have streets, water, and sewer lines that have not been updated in over 100 years. As city council member I will advocate for broadband infrastructure to be included in road reconstruction plans. At the state level, I will advocate for local government aid to include tablets and laptops to be included. Our state has persevered during difficult times and learned the importance of maintaining a continuity plan to avoid having our children fall behind.

- 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?**

The most important ways to prepare for another pandemic and protect public sector workers is to:

-make sure that we're proactive by always maintaining work environments that are safe and dignified

-accommodating of drastic life changes by allowing folks to work from home if possible and providing paid pandemic leave immediately

-being flexible with our dollars so that we can make swift decisions during a state of emergency to prioritize workers and residents.

I fully support all of these.

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?**

Yes to both questions. It isn't sustainable for us to impose more levies on residents to keep the city running and maintaining services. Many large corporations experienced a windfall and even record profits during the pandemic, so PILOT would address services, schools, and maintenance of infrastructure. Much of the land use in St. Paul comes from corporations that have benefited from being located here. I'd like to connect with Saint Paul's Director of Planning and Economic Development, Nicolle Goodman, to see what the status of the PILOT initiative is in our city and to ramp up that work again.

- 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?**

A couple of ways to address this inequity is to shorten the timeline for developers to pay the captured tax capacity. I also believe the city needs to be very selective in what we use TIF for. We should prioritize using it for deeply affordable housing at the 30% AML level.

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 voices 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 visit SPPS schools to speak to students almost every other month because of my close working relationships with educators. Those visits are valuable and insightful to me because I make time to hear from educators, students, and families about their concerns and vision for the community. SPFE is at the top of my list of community stakeholders, and it's because of the inherent belief I have that our city systems and public school systems are interconnected. Strong schools build strong cities and vice versa. I will continue to stay in close touch with SPFE staff members, parents, and students by making visits, reaching out as needed, and sending out communication from my office to the public community.

- 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?**

We must continue partnering on:

- attainable, safe, and healthy housing, which plays an integral role in child development and learning
- creating a more walkable and bike-friendly infrastructure close to public schools would provide multi-modal transportation options for working families.
- promoting a safe environment for students, such as ensuring public facilities like schools, recreation centers and libraries are welcome to all, adequate staffed, abundant in afterschool programming, and well-resourced

I would like to partner with SPFE and the community on hosting roundtable discussions, hosting forums and panels, and having regular communication with each other.

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 ongoing, open communication.

- a. **What do the terms co-governance and people-centered democracy mean to you?**

Co-governance is being in deep relationship with stakeholders, inviting them to be a part of decision-making table instead of status quo of power, which is people making their own decisions about communities. It is about consistent and regular communication with stakeholders instead of only going to them when it's needed to check off a box. We hold each other accountable for making sure that all voices are considered before making a decision.

People centered democracy is about being in relationship with people in community across all identities and centering the voices of people in all that we do. I am here to open doors for the community so that changes that are needed in the community can happen. I serve the people. I bring along people to find solutions. This requires me to be vulnerable and reach deep into communities who have been silenced from democracy to uplift their stories and bring them along too.

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

I have and will seek guidance and knowledge from all groups of people, especially those who are relevant to the issue at hand and are from marginalized communities. Cultural community leaders, elders, LGBTQ+ people, Black, Brown, Indigenous people, students and youth, parents, educators, labor unions, District Councils, different entities of government, elected leaders, organizations, businesses, and community members, are all community stakeholders that guide and inform my decisions.

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

I am always an organizer at heart and value working collectively with others. I did not run for office to do this work alone. I did it to bring others with me in decision-making. This is why I always form coalitions, join coalitions, and create spaces for people to be in community with each other. I will always commit to doing this. I will hold other Councilmembers and our staff accountable to this too.

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

Before I took office, there had been a lack of investment in Ward 6. Within my first term, we have achieved deeply affordable housing for current developments and developments slated for the future. We have increased the minimum wage. We had active community engagement around rent stabilization, and city investment to enforce earned sick and safe time, to name a few policies. All of these issues are personal to me but also serve a public good. Every policy that I pursue as a city council member centers the community, especially those who are hurt most by our systems. That mission and value is and will always be at the root of my work.

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 member of the MN Newspaper & Communications Guild, Local 37002 and as a former union steward, I understand that for us to protect the rights of workers in public sector jobs, we need to create healthier, positive, productive workplaces and have systems in place that allow employees to use their voice and to not be afraid to speak up. I support unions because it promotes economic justice for all and dismantles classism/corporate greed. As a city council member, I have supported and respected negotiated collective bargaining agreements. When union members report problematic behavior from city labor relations staff at the negotiation table, I question our city labor relations staff and work to address and correct the issue. All this is to level the playing field in the workplace and dismantle harmful power structures. I have always encouraged workers to join a union if they choose to.