

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	NO
Cheniqua Johnson	X	
Pa Der Vang	X	

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	NO
Cheniqua Johnson	X	
Pa Der Vang	X	

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	NO
Cheniqua Johnson	X	
Pa Der Vang	X	

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

	YES	NO
Cheniqua Johnson	X	
Pa Der Vang	X	

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?**

Cheniqua Johnson am the product of public education – all through grade school and college, I attended a public institution and school. I truly believe that public education and the quality of public education is the “bread and butter” of our students present and future. In short, there’s simply no words to express the critical needs and the value of public education – it is essential.

Pa Der Vang My daughter is a junior at Johnson Highschool. I intentionally put my daughter in the St. Paul School Districts on the East Side because I wanted her to belong to a school where she could be surrounded by diverse students, staff, and educators, as well as be exposed to diverse views on the world. Public education is where ALL students get access to an education. We must provide the resources to make this free education the best education. Our city is every diversifying, and as new communities arrive in St. Paul, the student body will continue to change, and this is a great thing, this is the value of a public education for St. Paul and for my family. I plan to support St. Paul Public schools to ensure that we see diversity as a wonderful thing for everyone. Teachers need resources so that they can teach and support our students. We need to focus on community based education rather than profit driven education.

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?**

Cheniqua Johnson My connection to SPPS is directly connected to my passion for education. I have a background in education policy – specifically serving as the Education and Youth Outreach Coordinator for then Congressman Keith Ellison to serving as the Youth Program Liaison for the City of Saint Paul’s right track program, our youth – young leaders – and those who’s core job it is to educate them continue to have a solid space in my mind, heart, and leadership. I am getting to learn more about SPFE directly and as someone who will soon raise a family here in Saint Paul, SPFE is making decisions, advocating for changes, and protecting our schools that will soon impact my future kids and family directly.

Pa Der Vang My daughter is a junior at Johnson Highschool. I once tried to get College in the Schools at Washington and Johnson and St. Catherine University. I know many teachers and counselor who work at SPSS. I attended K-12 public schools

b. **What is your definition of a “public education champion”?**

Cheniqua Johnson A public education champion is a person, organization, group, etc. who is willing to fight for our public schools, educators, students, and public education at every level of government and structure. They fight for funding, political influence and power, and economic security of our public education as a whole.

Pa Der Vang A public education champion understands that public education is free education for all and it is connected to many services which provide a comprehensive learning experience for students. Public education must be high quality, where kids feel supported and teachers have all the resources they need to teach and support our kids. The public education champion advocates for resources to support teachers and students, and speaks up for public schools, and promotes the value of a public education.

c. Why are you seeking an endorsement from SPFE?

Cheniqua Johnson SPFE plays a vital role in our ward. Simply put, your members are members that directly impact, interact, advocate, and fight for our eastside families, students, and community. Housing, public safety, our schools, and our environment are my top issues and if elected to City Hall, I want to have SPFE at the Ward 7 decision-making table. Having your endorsement set the tone for our we move forward – together.

Pa Der Vang Because I want to be a part of improving public education by leverage resources and support for SPPS teachers and students and staff from the city and other government entities. I value diversity in our schools and I want our teachers to have everything they need to create the safe multifaceted learning environments that they set out to create when they started their career. I am an educator myself so I understand the needs of students and educators. More pay, good benefits, good working hours, and all the tools needed to be able to teach. I know resources are limited so I want to be that champion.

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

Cheniqua Johnson I intend to be a City Council member that is responsive, present, and approachable to all eastsiders and our city. SPFE has an open invitation. I look forward to developing a partnership that is real – honest – transparent and responsive. I will be involved in our schools, homes, and education based conversations at the City, State, and federal government. I expect and hope for a relationship with SPFE that allows room for us to work together and allows us to strengthen our schools – together.

Pa Der Vang I plan to meet regularly with SPFE and represent your voices and your needs on city council. When we disagree, what I will do is bring as much information as possible to you, but I will hear, believe you and your lived experiences, and represent your needs. When there aren't enough funds I will just have to simply be proactive to look for other resources to support teachers and students and our schools and I will have to ask you for space and time for me to do the work of finding additional funding and that might require legislative action which works slow but if we keep working together, we can do this. When we disagree, we will have to work together, I will have to ask you for help to lobby and advocate for resources as well. Our voices are stronger together.

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?**

Cheniqua Johnson As a City Council, we can impose the moratorium of charter schools in our city – I see that as a solid step towards being able to hold our charters accountable to our kids, educators, and community. Another thing we can do is work to ensure that we provide and advocate for a growing partnership with the City Council members, SPFE, and the School Board leaders – a relationship I would like to see tighten on day one. Beyond that, I would like to be a solid voice to continue to provide affordable housing, businesses, and tenant protects to ensure that our families are having to be displaced out of the city and district in places like Battle Creek, Dayton’s Bluff, Highwood Hills, and all of Ward 7 so that our kids can stay in our schools.

Pa Der Vang City Council is in the position to support residents in sending their kids to St. Paul Public schools/ This requires that city council members be a champion for public schools where there is quality education, ensuring that students get nutritious meals, free transportation, sports, and extracurricular activities. City council members must advocate for support for all students, especially students who might struggle in the school setting, and provide funding for needed services to support families to send their kids to school, as well as funding to support teachers so that they can do the job of teaching and supporting kids and not face burnout. We are in the position to provide the needed resources to all families so that choosing a St. Paul Public school makes sense to them.

- 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?**

Cheniqua Johnson I intend on specifically having an active role in the City’s HRA committee which I believe directly has decisions over charter school growth or expansion. I am also going to work directly with our community to continue to advocate for education and school funding at all levels of government including our city’s budget as well.

Pa Der Vang I would support a moratorium on charter schools.

I would call for a study on charter schools to demonstrate student achievement and those schools who fail must agree to an intervention plan.

I would encourage families to attend their neighborhood schools as much as possible.

I would advocate for more culturally specific services and language support so that new immigrants and non English speaking families feel supported by our public school system

- 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?**

Cheniqua Johnson Yes, I would advocate for this. Data is key in moving forward. I would partner with you all at SPFE on this work and the families directly impacted by this work. I would love to see educators, families, students, SPFE, and our local leaders at the table for this discussion and believe we are the stakeholders and partners needed to lead this work.

Pa Der Vang Yes. I would advocate for and support a comprehensive study on the impact of charter schools in our communities. I would include MDE and other organizations invested in improving education for our students. I would include families, students, teachers, and SPFE in this endeavor. I've already seen several studies done by different organizations that show that charter schools exacerbate segregation and student achievement scores seem to be lower in many charter schools. In addition, I am concerned about the hiring practices of teachers in charter schools where many teachers aren't qualified to teach the subject they are teaching. (for example, I know an art major who was hired to teach math at a charter school). In addition, these alternative routes to a teaching certification are concerning to me

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?**

Cheniqua Johnson I intend to continue to support and advocate for tech centers, nonprofit locations, and further funding towards ensuring that our students have access to high-speed internet. I intend to ensure that our libraries, rec centers, and schools in community have the funding and resources need to provide this resource. I truly think in Ward 7, we should lean further into the potential partnerships with businesses, nonprofits, philanthropic partners, and 3M about what the future of this could look like. This will take partners from many sectors to accomplish. I plan on operating in the intersection.

Pa Der Vang I would be an advocate for city wide free WIFI for all. Access to reliable internet should be a right for all and continued funding for tablets for all students. Economic barriers pose a threat to our students and their learning as we have seen during the COVID pandemic. We would need to hold a contract with a provider which would remove the exploitation of internet providers and the harms done to our families who simply cannot afford to pay the amounts needed for reliable internet at home.

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?

Cheniqua Johnson If we learned anything from 2020, we should have learned that anything is possible! We remain in a pandemic – housing, racism, structural poverty, etc. are all global pandemics. I believe that our City must continue to invest in our essential workers, protect our families from growing health and housing displacement, along with work to better our City services to more adequately address the need. Crisis prevention is something to plan for. I will work to ensure that our public sector workers have equitable pay and wages – I am a support of prevailing wage, equitable pay, and direct investment in the health of our kids, family, and neighbors. Ramsey County oversees our city's public health department as well – I look forward to leveraging and building the relationships I currently have at Ramsey County and plan to have an active role in this discussion moving forward.

Pa Der Vang We have seen that we needed to be flexible with students, teachers, and staff during the COVID pandemic. This includes being flexible when students could not attend class, when employees needed to care for their own children while working remotely, the burn out associated with this situation, and the resources teachers and students needed in order to be successful in a remote learning situation. We were forced to manage and face the economic, cultural, and language gaps and inequities that already existed before the pandemic. I intend to continue working through a lens of social justice and name the disparities and inequities that face our communities. I intend to advocate for resources to support our students, teachers, and staff to engage in work and learning everyday so that when we are faced with another pandemic, we already addressed the discrepancies and inequities that exist.

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?**

Cheniqua Johnson Yes, I will encourage our city and City Council to revisit the use of PILOTs. I think a percentage to be dedicated to funding SPPS would actually be a good thing and would support this. As a Councilmember, I will work to be a voice for this. I look forward to raising this in my first year as a council member. I can't promise immediate action from the Council, but I look forward to posing the question.

Pa Der Vang Yes! I was on the 2017 PILOT Study with the Citizens League. I am ready to do this work. It is an injustice that large nonprofits such as hospital, universities, and churches are not paying their fair share since they are the largest users of city services. I will advocate that the City Council engage our nonprofits and ask them to pay their PILOT requests. I will advocate that a percentage of PILOTs be directed to SPPS.

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?**

Cheniqua Johnson I support and will continue to advocate for many different forms of development because I think as a City – but more specifically, eastside needs to grow our tax base. Simply put, developments not catering to our tax base because of TIF will be a little less of a priority for me at the beginning of my tenure, if elected, because I would like to see tax paying development.

Pa Der Vang I would include public school buildings as part of the public infrastructure that can be funded by TIF.

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?**

Cheniqua Johnson I am extending an open invitation to students, educators, and SPFE members that would like to have a conversation. After the murder at Harding High School, I attempted to come to the school and was completely disappointed to find only a few elected leaders present and speaking with community. This cannot continue. I am working to earn the support of our school board candidates and to build a solid foundation and relationship with them moving forward. In addition, I will be completing this screening, being authentic and transparent and sharing as much information as possible with you all when directly making decisions that impact you and our kids. I will share information with SPFE, parents, and students directly and will host many town halls throughout my tenure – this includes public safety in our schools which will most likely be one of my first few town hall topics

Pa Der Vang I would create my own advisory board of SPFE members, teachers, parents and students. I would work on building that relationship and trust so that information is transparent and communication is regular and frequent. I would use the information shared by teachers, parents, and students to inform my decisions at city council and vote to support the needs of our public schools.

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?**

Cheniqua Johnson In Ward 7, our schools are pivotal examples of partnership. Highwood in particular is going to continue to be a school that requires city and school partnerships because I too want to ensure that any school that community wants to remain open gets the resources and enrollment numbers needed to do so.

Pa Der Vang First, I will create an advisory board that consists of teachers, parents and students to generate ideas on how this would look like for them. Here are just some ideas but there will be more in the future as I talk with SPFE, teachers, parents, and students.

- Support community centers that are directly linked to public schools in each neighborhood so that families see these centers as a natural connection with the school it is tied to.
- Ask the district councils in my ward to do outreach to public schools in their areas where they can work with families and students to be a direct link and line of communication and support to and with the public schools.
- Build relationships between the public schools and city libraries to share resources and programming
- Encourage the city to hold events such as celebrations, meetings and forums in neighborhood schools for many reasons: this brings families into the schools, the city goes to where the families are, and this builds relationships between the city and SPPS.

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?**

Cheniqua Johnson It means everything to me. This work only works when people are center. I am running for Saint Paul City Council to ensure that our community is centered first, and that co-governance continues to grow in how our leaders lead

Pa Der Vang I've always been invested in this model: where residents, organizations, workers, and government officials work together to come up with solutions, rather than having government officials just simply make decisions and then later inform the people who are affected. People centered democracy is where the needs of the people come first, they get to participate in the decision making process, information is transparent, regular vocabulary is used in policy making, the people who will be most affected by the policies that are being discussed are at the decision making table. It's important for residents' voices and needs to be heard and acted upon.

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

Cheniqua Johnson I will work with as many people as possible. I am a firm supporter of labor and our unions, our families, our communities of color, our social justice organizations and community leaders. I specifically will look to all constituents of Ward 7 for guidance as I am running to ensure our community's voice is heard.

Pa Der Vang I will meet with SPFE, teachers, students, staff.

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

Cheniqua Johnson I will bring back Saint Paul City Council Ward 7 Town Halls to which I will invite City leaders, other Council members, and community leaders – the voices of these town halls will be community members. I will intentionally work to make sure that our community leads in all forms of my decision making and even in my staff selection. I support investment directly in our organizations doing the work.

Pa Der Vang I intend to have regular roundtables with educators to talk about concerns and needs so that I will vote at city hall based on the needs of our educators and SPFE. My role is to represent your voice.

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

Cheniqua Johnson I will remember – facts are facts – data is data – and impact is impact. Whether we like it or not, our community's voice may not always agree – but work must continue to get done or we all suffer. I am a public servant. End of day, I will vote and advocate with our community

Pa Der Vang That is called differentiation and boundaries. I teach it, and I live it. And also, my life has been dedicated to working on behalf of our communities, pursuing social justice and equality for all, so it seems that my personal feelings are centered on pursuing public good. I'm not profit driven, I'm not a capitalist, and I've lived a life of altruism.

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?

Cheniqua Johnson I am proud to be the only union endorsed candidate in this race so far. I will fight to oppose right to work in totality. I will work to be a large supporter of SPFE, labor, and community. I think folks can be encouraged to be a part of a union simply by continuing to meet you, hear about all that you do, and get a solid Council member that they trust to put in a good word – I plan to do that and will do that if elected.

Pa Der Vang I believe in the power of unions to advocate for better pay, safe and supportive work environments, and strong benefits for workers. I will always advocate for collective bargaining and be on the side of workers. I will encourage workers to be a part of a union by being a voice that speaks on behalf of unions and encouraging workers to join this collective voice to advocate for worker rights. I've been at the SPFE strikes, I know teachers, I am a teacher, and I believe in the power of the collective voice.