



SUNLIGHT
POLICY CENTER
— OF NEW JERSEY —

“NJEА: NEW JERSEY’S POLITICAL MACHINE”

THE FIRST REPORT FROM
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NJEA: NEW JERSEY'S POLITICAL MACHINE

New Jersey faces some serious challenges. Our current status quo – with our pension crisis, high taxes, underperforming economy and outmigration of people and businesses – portends a grim future for the state and its citizens.

How did New Jersey get into this position?

New Jersey's status quo is largely the result of our special-interest dominated political system. The facts show that the most powerful special interest - the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) - has been the dominant force in New Jersey politics for over fifty years.¹ The NJEA built a system where property tax dollars are funneled directly into its coffers, and this automatic, annual flow of money allowed the NJEA to spend far more on politics than anyone else. This gave it unmatched political influence, which it used to further its own interests and block attempts at reform. New Jersey's status quo is the NJEA's status quo.

Yet most of the public is unaware of these facts. The main purpose of the Sunlight Policy Center of New Jersey (SPCNJ) is to shine a light on these facts and help New Jersey citizens understand where we are and how we got here. Only then can we identify solutions to help put New Jersey back on the path to future prosperity.

The Mission of the Modern NJEA Is Politics

The NJEA views the entire New Jersey public school system as driven by political decisions at both the state and local levels of government. The NJEA makes clear that this is the premise behind the its focus on politics:

“Face it, every decision – from pensions and privatization, to salaries and benefits – is a decision made by people who hold public office. The only way to influence these decisions is to elect candidates who support our public schools and our active and retired school employees.”²

Accordingly, when every decision having to do with the education system is political, the NJEA finds that political action gives the most value for the money. NJEA President Marie Blistan explains why political action has become the main mission of the NJEA:

¹ See Part II of the AEI series, “And You Will Pay,” for a detailed account of this dominance.

² New Jersey Education Association, “Support NJEA PAC’s 2018 endorsed candidates,” accessed February 20, 2019 at www.njea.org/support-njea-pacs-2018-endorsed-candidates/.

“There are few opportunities that have a greater impact than political action, and that is why we spend so much time educating our members about candidates and their positions and encouraging our members to become as involved as possible in the political process.”³

Thus, it comes as no surprise that the NJEA has become organization built for political action. Its mission statement makes this clear:

“The mission of the New Jersey Education Association is to advance and protect the rights, benefits and interests of members ...” – listed first, all of which are political goals, followed by - “... and promote a quality system of public education for all students.”

On the NJEA’s website, the backdrop for the mission statement is a large photograph of a political protest in front of the statehouse in Trenton in which hundreds of red-shirted NJEA members (the NJEA often has its members don red union shirts in its political campaigns) holding up signs. This provides an unmistakable political overtone for the words of the mission statement.⁴

Today’s NJEA is all politics, all the time. It deliberately changed its operating model from focusing on services to its members to focusing on political organizing. Indeed, local associations and their members are now viewed by NJEA staff as political organizing opportunities.⁵ Over 80 percent of teacher dues flow up to the NJEA to fund its political activities⁶ and the generous salaries of the political pros who run them. A close examination of the NJEA’s opaque financial disclosure reveals how little the public actually knows about how the NJEA spends those dues. Political organizers now dominate the Executive Office, and a close examination of the roles and activities of the headquarters staff reveals how thoroughly politics has infused the NJEA headquarters. From the top down, the modern NJEA is New Jersey’s taxpayer-funded political machine.

³ New Jersey Education Association, “Activism that matches our values,” NJEA Review 91, no. 3 (October 2017): 7.

⁴ New Jersey Education Association, “About,” “Mission,” <https://www.njea.org/about/mission/>. As for the red shirts, for example, NJEA members are currently participating in the NJEA’s #RedforEd campaign to support the passage of union-friendly legislation. “Red for Ed has become synonymous for respect for public education. Politicians know that when educators are wearing red, they are fully committed to stand up for themselves and the children they serve.” New Jersey Education Association, “We Wear #RedforEd Because...,” NJEA Review 92, no. 10 (May 2019): 58.

⁵ In a striking admission, head of Government Relations, Ginger Gold Schnitzer, noted that: “all of the work a local association undertakes is a form of organizing whether it is to bargain a contract, to enforce a contract, to provide professional development, or to ensure good education policy - particularly through elections and lobbying.” New Jersey Education Association, “NJEA higher education collective bargaining summit focuses on political action,” NJEA Review 91, no. 4 (November 2017): 15.

⁶ See Part I of the AEI series, “Follow the Money.”

The NJEA's Recent Reorganization: Political Operatives Take Over the Executive Office

The NJEA's transformation into a political organizing machine made a profound shift in 2013. Previously, political organizing was the province of UniServ,⁷ but in 2013, the entire UniServ Headquarters was moved to the Executive Office, along with its the personnel, positions and funding.

A look at the current staffing of the executive office reveals the totality of this transformation. A full half of the twelve positions are for political organizers that moved from UniServ Headquarters to the Executive Office in 2013.⁸ The NJEA's top three executives also come from the ranks of political organizers: the executive director was formerly an organizer in the Communications Division, the NJEA assistant executive director was formerly an assistant director of UniServ, and the associate director comes from a community organizing background.⁹ That makes three quarters of the current executive office staff that are political organizers.

But even seemingly non-political positions in the Executive Office apparently play political roles. The current human resources manager was part of the three-person NJEA team (along with Communications and Government Relations associate directors) that ran the NJEA's \$4.8 million independent expenditure campaign in the 2017 fight against Senator Sweeney in Legislative District 3.¹⁰ This adds a whole new meaning to the term "human resources."

⁷ UniServ, short for "United Services," is the cadre of trained field representatives who serve as the vital link between the NJEA and its hundreds of county and local affiliates. UniServ's most important role is as political organizers who advise local associations on collective bargaining and other activities, and mobilize the legions of members who serve as the muscle behind the NJEA's political operations. See Part I of the AEI series, "Follow the Money," for a full description of UniServ's activities.

⁸ These include a field representative for education support professionals, two for leadership training, one for membership and organizational development, and two organizing specialists. See, New Jersey Education Association, "NJEA Staff," NJEA Review 86, no. 1 (September 2012): 6; and New Jersey Education Association, "NJEA Staff," NJEA Review 87, no. 1 (September 2013): 6.

⁹ Edward Richardson was formerly head of human resources and an associate director in the Communications Division for organizing and coalition building. See, New Jersey Education Association, "NJEA Staff," NJEA Review 78, no. 1 (September 2004): 59. Richardson's predecessor, Vince Giordano, who oversaw the insertion of UniServ Headquarters into the Executive Office, was the former director of UniServ. NJEA assistant executive director, Steven Swetsky, was UniServ assistant director for the South Region. See, New Jersey Education Association, "NJEA Staff," NJEA Review 86, no. 1 (September 2012): 6. NJEA associate director Gary Melton's professional experience includes "community organizing around education, social justice and political issues." New Jersey Education Association, "Staff News," NJEA Review 91, no. 7 (February 2018): 47.

¹⁰ The independent expenditure team included Matthew DiRado, human resources manager on the Executive Office staff, Mike Giglio, Government Relations associate director, and Christy Kanaby, Communications associate director. New Jersey Education Association, "NJEA Delegate Assembly, Minutes of November 11, 2017," NJEA Review 91, no. 8 (March 2018): 52.

In fact, given that virtually everything the NJEA undertakes has a political angle, it is perhaps unsurprising that much of the NJEA headquarters staff appears to be engaged in political activity:

- Both the Communications and Government Relations Divisions heavily engage in political activity.¹¹
- Even the seemingly non-political Research and Economic Services Division gets involved in politics. The current director of research is also currently interim director of Government Relations – a rather curious overlap of duties.¹²
- Likewise, as Research Division staff advise local associations in their collective bargaining negotiations – a prominent example of political activity at the local level - it is predictable that the Research Division would have a strong connection to UniServ.¹³ The previous long-time head of the Research Division was before that a UniServ assistant director, and three current associate directors are former UniServ field representatives.¹⁴
- The NJEA associate director for Professional Development testified along with other NJEA leaders at the state Board of Education in favor of amending the regulations governing the PARCC tests.¹⁵ While this might appear to be a reasonable task for the position, the fact is that state education policy is a political issue and the state’s adoption of PARCC was a political decision. Indeed, the NJEA is running a campaign to lobby the legislature on this exact issue.¹⁶ The associate director’s testimony was thus aimed at influencing a political process.¹⁷

¹¹ See Part I of the AEI series, “Follow the Money.”

¹² Kevin Kelleher. See, New Jersey Education Association, “NJEA Staff,” NJEA Review 92, no. 9 (April 2019): 6.

¹³ For example: “Working closely with NJEA field representatives [UniServ or Executive Office organizers] and Research Division staff, more than 100 local associations have bargaining language providing Chapter 78 relief for their members.” Kathryn Coulibaly, “NJEA: A year of progress,” NJEA Review 91, no. 11 (June 2018): 21.

¹⁴ Richard Gray. See, e.g., New Jersey Education Association, “NJEA Staff,” NJEA Review 79, no. 1 (September 2005): 6; and New Jersey Education Association, “NJEA Staff,” NJEA Review 80, no. 1 (September 2006): 6. Jim Jameson, Denise Policastro and Julie Plotkin were all UniServ field representatives. See, e.g., New Jersey Education Association, “NJEA Staff,” NJEA Review 86, no. 1 (September 2012): 6, and New Jersey Education Association, “NJEA Staff,” NJEA Review 87, no. 1 (September 2013): 6.

¹⁵ New Jersey Education Association, “NJEA Report, NJEA commends proposed changes to testing,” NJEA Review 92, no. 1 (September 2018): 18.

¹⁶ New Jersey Education Association, “Tell your legislators to suspend New Jersey’s high school exit testing requirements,” NJEA Review 92, no. 7 (February 2019): 15.

¹⁷ See footnote 5 where the head of Government Relations mentions professional development as a political organizing opportunity. Likewise, in 2017, the Freehold Boro Education Association worked with a UniServ field rep who “brought in organizing specialists on health and safety, professional development, communications, and research.” Kathryn Coulibaly, “The faces of inadequate school funding,” NJEA Review 91, no. 7 (February 2018): 25.

The end result is that political operations dominate the NJEA's Executive Office and headquarters staff, and political organizing is now the NJEA's core mission.

The NJEA's Recent Reorganization: Spending Teachers' Dues for Political Power

The NJEA's revenues are primarily teachers' dues, so the shift to a politics-dominated, organizing model meant that these dues would be increasingly spent on politics.

Thus, along with the reorganization of the Executive Office, there was a re-ordering of the NJEA's budgets as well. In the NJEA's 2014 budget, the UniServ Headquarters section was changed to the Executive Organizational Development section. This accompanied the move of political organizers from UniServ to the Executive Office in 2013. From 2014-2017, a total of \$30.3 million was spent for Executive Organizational Development.¹⁸

Surreptitious Political Spending and Inadequate Disclosure. The shift of funds to the executive office was fairly transparent. Other NJEA political spending is far less transparent and deserves public scrutiny. One notable example is the NJEA's clandestine funding of the independent expenditure group New Direction New Jersey (NDNJ), which supports Governor Murphy's agenda. NDNJ does not disclose its donors, which has generated public controversy and resulted in legislation requiring disclosure (supported by ELEC's Jeff Brindle) that was conditionally vetoed by the governor. NJEA Executive Director Richardson made a report to the NJEA Delegate Assembly concerning the NJEA's "participation in an independent expenditure issue advocacy effort to support the governor's policy agenda." Note well that the name of the group is not mentioned. The Delegate Assembly authorized the transfer of \$1.6 million to Cost Center 0471 "Organizational Projects" to supplement the \$900,000 that was already there "for spending, as needed, on independent expenditures that advocates in support of the governor's agenda."¹⁹ Cost Center 0471 "Organizational Projects" sat in the "Governance" section of the NJEA budget prior to 2015. It has no clear political identifier (unless "organizational" is code for political spending), yet it is most certainly money spent on politics. That means at least \$2.5 million of NJEA political spending was surreptitiously

¹⁸ 2014-2017 annual budgets as published in the NJEA Review. This amount was not included in the political spending numbers for the AEI "Follow the Money" report, which means that these numbers were understated by \$30 million.

¹⁹ New Jersey Education Association, "NJEA Delegate Assembly, Minutes of January 20, 2018," NJEA Review 92, no. 5 (December 2018): 49.

dedicated to NDNJ. We do not know the full extent of the NJEA's funding of NDNJ. Perhaps some intrepid news reporter could ask the NJEA.

The NJEA budgets reveal that "Organizational Projects" is not some minor cost center of no consequence. From 2013-2017, the NJEA spent \$50.2 million – over \$10 million per year – on "Organizational Projects."²⁰ Was this all political spending? If so, even the SPCNJ's much-higher-than-reported estimates of the NJEA's total political spending might be woefully inadequate.

A similar opacity clouds another substantial line-item in the NJEA's annual budgets. We know from the NJEA Delegate Assembly minutes that in 2003, \$300,000 was transferred to Cost Center 0470 – then named "Organization Concerns" (again under the "Governance" section of the budget) - in order to "fund a statewide rally."²¹ In 2011, \$1 million was moved to the same Cost Center 0470 – now named "Special Activities" – "to fund county/local public media and related organizing projects..."²² Later in the same Delegate Assembly session, another \$10 million was transferred to Special Activities cost center 0470 (with an additional \$10 million to be added later if needed) to "fund organizing and communication activities around legislative initiatives against public education and NJEA members."²³ Cost center 0470's current label is "Organizational Activities" under the "Governance" section of the budget. Once again, there are no identifiers to indicate that this line-item includes obviously political spending. From 2003-2017, the NJEA spent a total of \$41.5 million on cost center 0470, or about \$2.7 million per year.²⁴

This surreptitious political spending reveals the inadequacy of the NJEA's overall financial disclosure. There are no "Organizational Projects" or "Organizational Activities" line-items in the NJEA's audited financial statements. There is an "Organizational Services" line-item in the audited financial statements but we do not know if that covers the same expenditures as "Organizational Projects" or "Organizational Activities" in the annual budgets. Likewise, there is no "Organizational Services" line-item in the NJEA's annual budgets. Again, this is not some

²⁰ NJEA 2013-2017 annual budgets as published in NJEA Review. The amount for 2014 was "budgeted" and not the actual amount spent, which was unavailable for that year. All other years are actual amounts spent.

²¹ New Jersey Education Association, "NJEA Delegate Assembly, Minutes of March 22, 2003," NJEA Review 77, no. 1 (September 2003): 66.

²² New Jersey Education Association, "NJEA Delegate Assembly, Minutes of March 19, 2011," NJEA Review 85, no. 3 (October 2011).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ NJEA 2013-2017 annual budgets as published in NJEA Review. The amounts for 2009 and 2014 were "budgeted" and not the actual amounts spent, which was unavailable for those years. All other years are actual amounts spent.

inconsequential line-item: from 2009-2018, the NJEA spend \$65.5 million on “Organizational Services” – or over \$6.5 million per year.²⁵

The bottom line is that there have been tens of millions of dollars that appear to be political spending that are neither clearly labeled as such nor transparently accounted for.²⁶

Political Activities Portrayed in Non-Political Ways. There are many examples of seemingly non-political programs that are at root political efforts.

The Pride in Public Education campaign (PRIDE) is depicted as benign community outreach, with lots of pictures of smiling parents and children. Yet, the NJEA was very clear that the original purpose of PRIDE was to win more local elections. Today, 87% of PRIDE dues go to the NJEA, not the local associations that are putting on these community events. In fact, most of PRIDE spending is on NJEA-cut TV ads that are considered grassroots issue advocacy, a form of political lobbying.²⁷

Similarly, the NJEA leadership conferences held annually in the winter and summer are at root political exercises. The conferences are aimed at developing local association leaders, but the NJEA’s take on what constitutes “leadership” appears to have a decidedly political nature. The Government Relations Division described them this way: “If you are interested in running for office or learning the nuts and bolts of political organizing, the following programs might interest you: NJEA [Jack Bertolino] Summer Leadership Conference; NJEA Winter Leadership Conference” and three programs that help members run for office, including the NJEA Political Leadership Academy.²⁸ The NJEA makes clear that the summer conference is “dedicated to developing association advocate representatives” and offers 37 workshops “that equip members to become stronger association advocates.”²⁹

Then there is the Summer Fellows Program (SFP), which sounds like an academic research program. The SFP was started in 2016 when the NJEA was mounting a massive campaign to support the passage of a constitutional

²⁵ NJEA 2009-2018 audited financial statements as published the NJEA Review.

²⁶ This does not include \$3.8 million spent on “NJEA Organization Project” in 2013-14. New Jersey Education Association, “Independent Auditor’s Report,” NJEA Review 88, no. 10 (May 2015): 53.

²⁷ For a fuller description of PRIDE, see Part I of the AEI series, “Follow the Money.”

²⁸ New Jersey Education Association, “Political Action Guide 2019,” <https://actioncenter.njea.org>, p. 2. The NJEA Political Leadership Academy is run by Government Relations and trains members to run for office.

²⁹ Fittingly, the conferences are funded under the Executive Organizational Development section of the budget, which is a hub for the funding of political organizing (and before 2013 was the UniServ Headquarters section). New Jersey Education Association, “2018 Jack Bertolino Summer Leadership Conference,” NJEA Review 91, no. 9 (April 2018): 36.

amendment on pension funding. Described as a “bold and unprecedented move to organize members” in the political fight, the 300 Fellows organized and mobilized members and allies as part of a statewide campaign that turned 45,000 members into political activists engaged in “swift and direct member action.”³⁰

The NJEA sees even such seemingly non-political local association concerns as health and safety, professional development, communication and research as organizing opportunities. Indeed, the NJEA has organizing specialists for these areas who go out into the field and organize around these issues.³¹

There are many other examples of the NJEA’s masking political activity as something non-political. The point is that, like the surreptitious spending, the characterization that the NJEA presents to the public or its own members does not capture the reality. And the reality is almost always political.

The NJEA’s Recent Reorganization: All Politics, All the Time

The SFP was also meant to be the vanguard in the NJEA’s transformation to a thoroughly political organization. The NJEA told SFP participants that the NJEA was “shifting its style of unionism from the existing ‘services model’ to an ‘organizing model.’”³² This shift to an organizing model was part of the NJEA’s vision for its future as a political organizing machine: “We need to take New Jersey back, and we can only do that with engaged, informed, involved members who see NJEA not merely as a service provider, but as an opportunity to organize.” And: “Democracy is about learning the process by which decisions are made and organizing with like-minded people and organizations to shape those decisions.” We do not despair when we lose a political contest, “we organize.”³³

In this new world of all politics, all the time, the NJEA goes so far as to say that for all its educator members: “Grassroots politics is not just an option, it’s our obligation.”³⁴ Or, as the NJEA’s 2018 Political Action Guide put it:

³⁰ Katie Quinn, “NJEA Summer Fellows Program Boosts Member-Driven Advocacy,” NJEA Review 90, no. 3 (November 2016): 24-26, <https://www.njea.org/njea-summer-fellows-program-boosts-member-driven-advocacy/>.

³¹ See footnote 17 for examples of NJEA organizing specialists for health and safety, professional development, communications, and research.

³² Ibid.

³³ The Advocate, “Interested in Running for Office?,” New Jersey Education Association, March 1, 2017, <https://www.njea.org/interested-in-running-for-office/>.

³⁴ New Jersey Education Association, “NJEA Government Relations: Election Connection,” www.njea.org/campaigns-and-elections.

“NJEA members know that as educators and citizens, it is our responsibility to engage in political action.”³⁵

The NJEA has become a political operation from top to bottom. All politics, all the time.

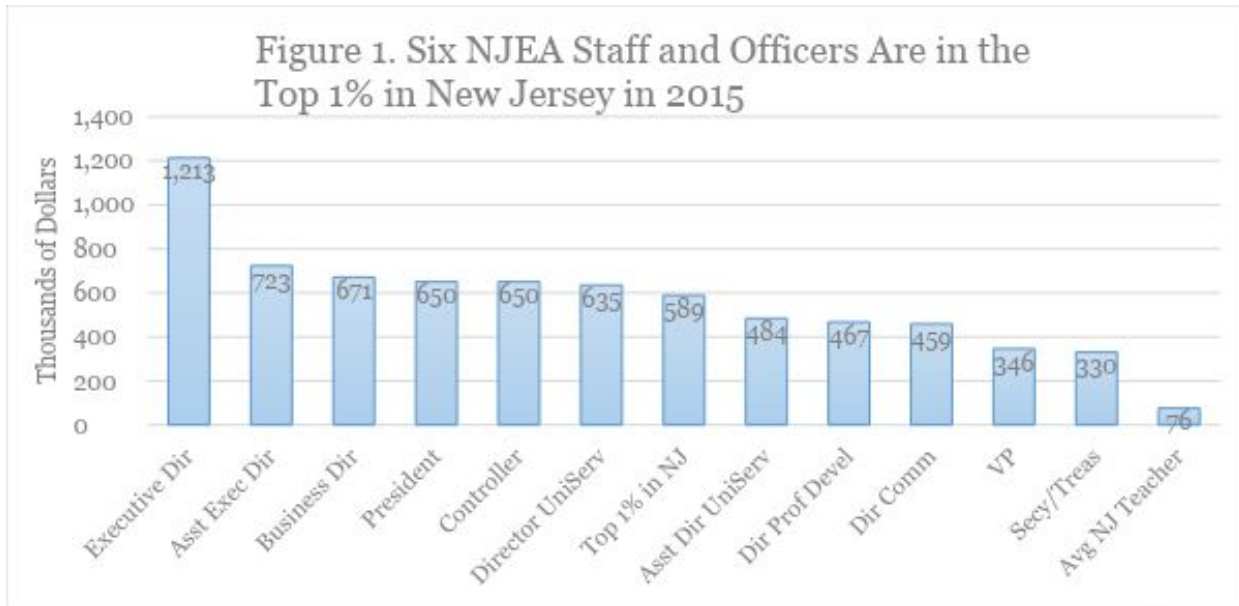
The NJEA’s Recent Reorganization: The Political Operators Pay Themselves Very Well

Another dynamic has taken hold of the NJEA as it shifted to a political organizing model: the political operators who have taken over the NJEA headquarters pay themselves exceedingly well. The latest tax returns available (2015) show truly jaw-dropping compensation numbers that put six of the NJEA professional staff and officers into the top one percent of NJ earners (a \$589,000 threshold).³⁶ The top political pro, the executive director, made a whopping \$1.2 million, almost doubling the top elected officer, the president, at \$650,000. Remarkably, even the number two political operator, the assistant executive director, out-earned the president at \$723,000. As seen below in Figure 1, five of the NJEA’s six one-percenters are from the professional staff, including one from UniServ, and only one an elected NJEA officer. The other two elected officers, the vice president and secretary-treasurer, come in far down the pay scale from the professional staffers. Note also that the average compensation for these one-percenters was \$757,000, well into the top one percent and about 10 times what the average New Jersey teacher makes (\$76,000).³⁷

³⁵ New Jersey Education Association, “2018 Political Action Guide,” www.njea.org/get-2018-political-action-guide/.

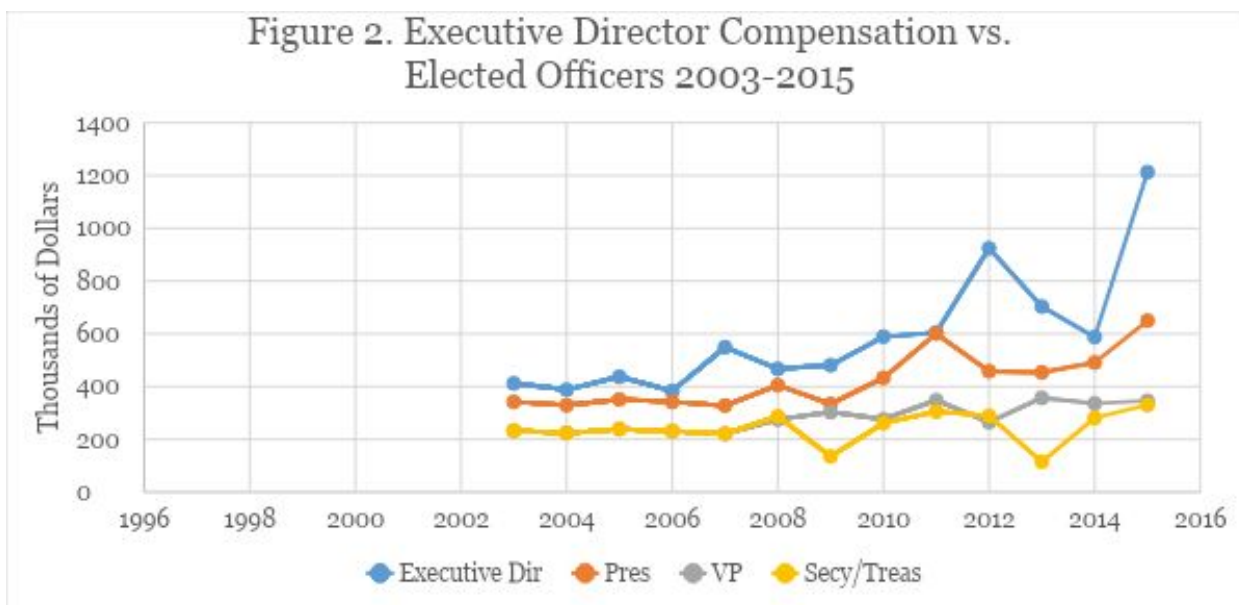
³⁶ One-percenter figure from Estelle Sommeiller and Mark Price, “The new gilded age,” Economic Policy Institute, July 19, 2018.

³⁷ Erin Petenko, “The average teacher pay in all 50 states, ranked,” NJ.com, May 2018, https://www.nj.com/news/2018/05/the_average_teacher_pay_in_nj_and_every_other_stat.html.



Sources: New Jersey Education Association, IRS Form 990 “Parent” filing, Economic Policy Institute, NJ.com.

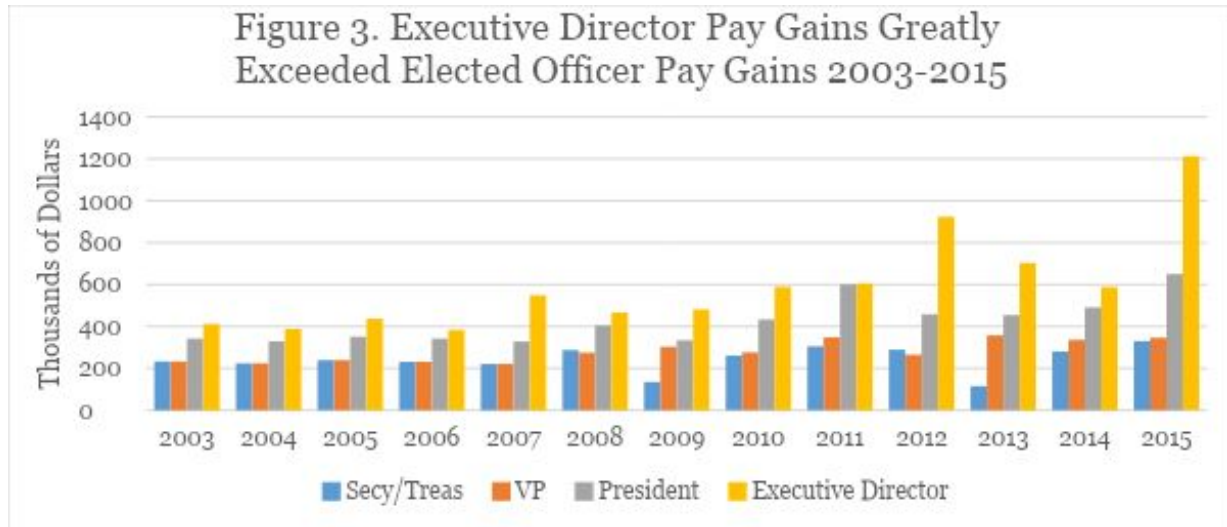
But it was not always this way. A look at the pay of the top professional staffer, the executive director, against the pay of the top three elected officers, the president, vice president and secretary-treasurer, reveals how the pay differential has grown in the past sixteen years (Figure 2).



Source: New Jersey Education Association, IRS Form 990 “Parent” filings 2003-2015.

As Figure 2 shows, in 2003 and 2004, the top professional staffer, the executive director, made only 19 percent more than the top elected officer,

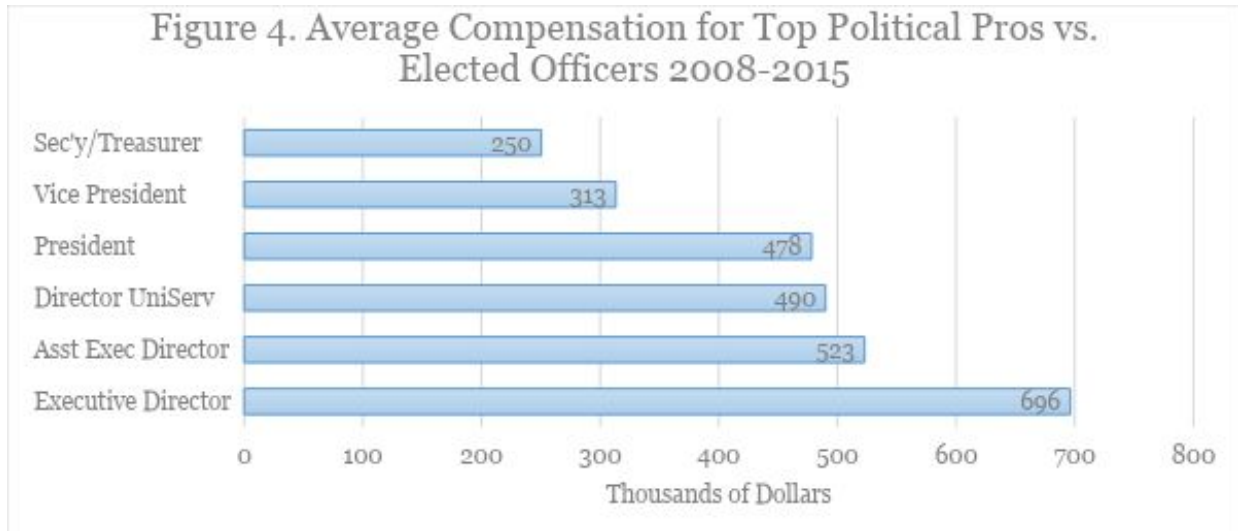
the president. But in the modern, post-reorganization NJEA of 2014 and 2015, the executive director out-earned the president by 58 percent. Put another way, in 2003 and 2004, the executive director's compensation was half of the three elected officers combined. In 2014 and 2015, the executive director's compensation was three-quarters (74 percent) that of the three elected officers combined (Figure 3).³⁸



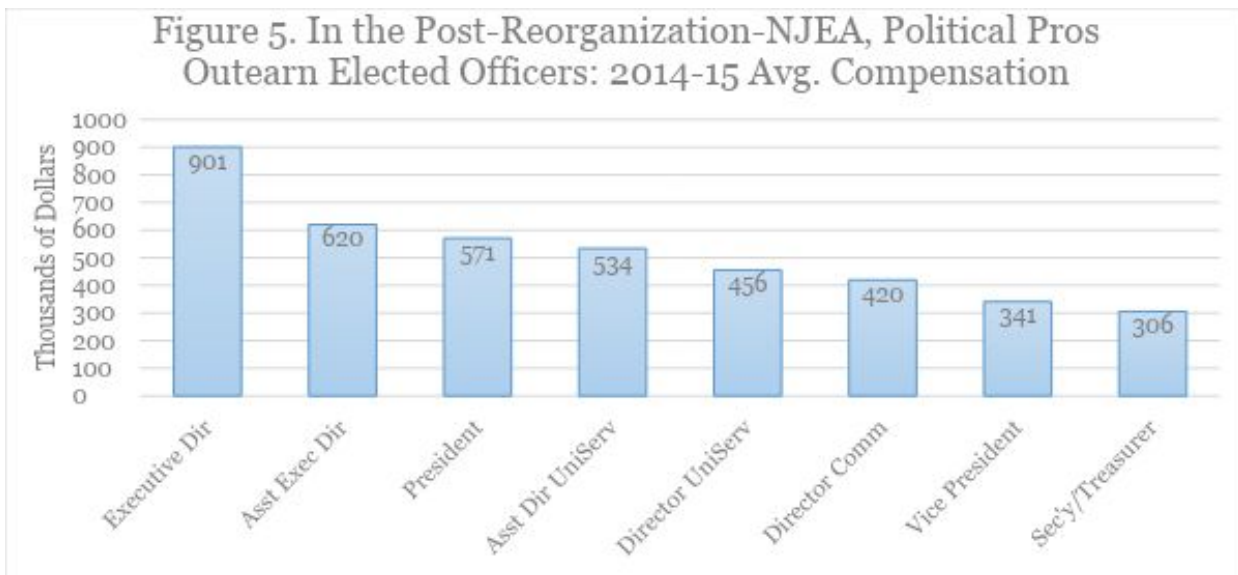
Source: New Jersey Education Association, IRS Form 990 “Parent” filings 2003-2015.

Not only has the executive director’s pay far outstripped that of the elected officers, but other political pros in the executive office and at UniServ also out-earn the elected officers. From 2008-2015, both the assistant executive director and the director of UniServ on average earned more than the top elected officer, the president (Figure 4).

³⁸ New Jersey Education Association, IRS Form 990 “Parent” filings 2003, 2004, 2014, 2015.



Source: New Jersey Education Association, IRS Form 990 “Parent” filings 2008-2015. This take-over by the political pros really manifests itself in the post-reorganization NJEA of 2014-2015. Five of the eight most highly compensated NJEA leaders are political professionals: the executive director, the assistant executive director, the director of UniServ, an assistant director of UniServ and the director of communications. Note that the two highest of these eight are political pros, and the two lowest are elected officers (Figure 5).



Source: New Jersey Education Association, IRS Form 990 “Parent” filings 2008-2015.

The significant pay differential between the political pros and the elected officers tells you all you need to know about the real power at the modern NJEA.

Teacher Dues Fund the Political Machine

As mentioned above, the average New Jersey teacher makes about \$76,000 per year. That teacher is currently paying \$928 per year in dues – up a substantial 9.7 percent since 2014, the year after the NJEA’s political re-organization.³⁹ Of those dues, 83 percent goes up to the state-level NJEA. When it comes to the flow of money, the local associations are apparently a mere after-thought, even though it is they who do most of the work of representing the teachers. As has been shown, the state-level NJEA has now become a thoroughly political organization, with the political pros running the show from the Executive Office. They pay themselves exceptionally well, and far better than the union’s elected officers, who are elected by the dues-paying teachers.

One wonders how teachers would react if they knew that most of their hard-earned \$928 are being spent on politics and political pros up at the NJEA, and that their dues have created six one-percenters who make ten times what they do. Or that their dues are secretly funding a shadowy and controversial political group. Or that their leaders chose to spend \$4.8 million of their dues in a failed attempt to unseat the senate president in 2017. Or that, thanks to these same political operators and their influence over lawmakers, they are being subtly coerced to join, fund, remain in the union that spends their money so profligately.⁴⁰

One of these days, someone should ask them.

³⁹ Laura Waters, “A Peek into NJEA’s Finances: Teachers and Staff May Not Like What They See,” NJ Left Behind, February 2, 2019.

⁴⁰ As will be discussed in a later SPCNJ report, the 2018 Workplace Democracy Enhancement Act subtly coerces teachers to join and remain in the union, replacing the implicit coercion of agency fees, which were ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2018.