

# **Blue Jersey: NJ's Most Powerful Special Interest, the NJEA, Spends 93% of Its PAC Money on Democrats**

**NJEA PAC Spending Provides a Roadmap for All of the NJEA's Political Spending Across the State**

**MICHAEL LILLEY**

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**SUNLIGHT**  
POLICY CENTER  
— OF NEW JERSEY —

## BLUE JERSEY

The results are in: according to filings with the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) over the past decade, 93% of the NJEA PACs' contributions went to Democrats. NJEA PAC is the New Jersey Education Association's Political Action Committee, which contributes money directly to candidates and political parties at every level of government. While no longer the main vehicle for the NJEA's political spending, NJEA PAC contributions provide a roadmap for how the NJEA's political influence and money are spread around New Jersey's political system, and what is clear is that they are used to elect Democrats.

Like any special interest, the NJEA has its own agenda and supports politicians that it knows will be friendly to its interests. But as a public union, the NJEA is also able to "elect its own bosses," whether on the school board, in the mayor's office or in the legislature. And where there are partisan elections, those politicians are Democrats.

But the NJEA is not an ordinary special interest. It is a taxpayer-funded special interest, with \$141 million of taxpayer dollars flowing automatically into its coffers every year via dues withheld from teachers' paychecks. With the 2013 creation of its Super PAC, Garden State Forward, the NJEA was able to tap into this massive revenue stream and spend unlimited amounts of money in support of its preferred candidates wherever and whenever it chose. Few other political players can compete on this slanted playing field. When the state's most powerful special interest overwhelmingly supports Democrats year after year, it should come as little surprise that New Jersey is a deep blue state and trending bluer.

### I. NJEA PAC Contributions Provide a Roadmap for NJEA Political Spending and Influence

In the modern era of New Jersey politics, Super PACs like Garden State Forward have become the preferred vehicle for political spending by deep-pocketed special interests like the NJEA. As a traditional PAC, NJEA PAC is funded by a separate, much smaller stream of dues and its contributions are highly regulated and transparent. On the other hand, Garden State Forward can raise and spend unlimited amounts of money, often without having to disclose where the money is raised or spent.

But NJEA PAC's spending is still important:

- **Direct donations are valuable.** NJEA PAC's direct donations are preferred by the recipients because they can spend the money as they choose. In many cases, particularly those in lower-budget, more local races like county, municipal or school board elections, these direct donations can give candidates a decided advantage.
- **NJEA PAC Money Means NJEA Endorsements.** NJEA PAC controls the NJEA endorsement process, and PAC money usually follows endorsements, along with other elements of NJEA support such as NJEA and NJEA-ally foot soldiers "volunteering" to

help staff campaigns and get out the vote. These in-kind contributions do not show up in ELEC reports, but they most certainly boost the candidate's campaign.

- **NJEA PAC Spending Is Transparent.** NJEA PAC's disclosure to the ELEC is excellent, so we know exactly where the money is going. On the other hand, Garden State Forward's disclosure to ELEC is very poor. We know surprisingly little about where those tens of millions of dollars are being spent. Even ELEC is forced to guess about Garden State Forward's spending.
- **Super PAC Dollars Follow NJEA PAC Dollars.** From what we know from the limited disclosure of Garden State Forward spending, NJEA PAC spending provides a roadmap for the more substantial Garden State Forward spending. This makes sense, as the NJEA would of course use its preferred spending vehicle when it was particularly interested in an election. In the thirteen instances where Garden State Forward actually disclosed the district where it was active, in all cases NJEA PAC was also active.<sup>1</sup> Sunlight believes that if Garden State Forward provided adequate disclosure for all its spending, ELEC filings would show that the tens of millions of Garden State Forward dollars invariably follow NJEA PAC dollars.

If NJEA PAC spending provides a clear roadmap for the NJEA's political spending and influence in New Jersey, then where does NJEA PAC spend its political dollars?

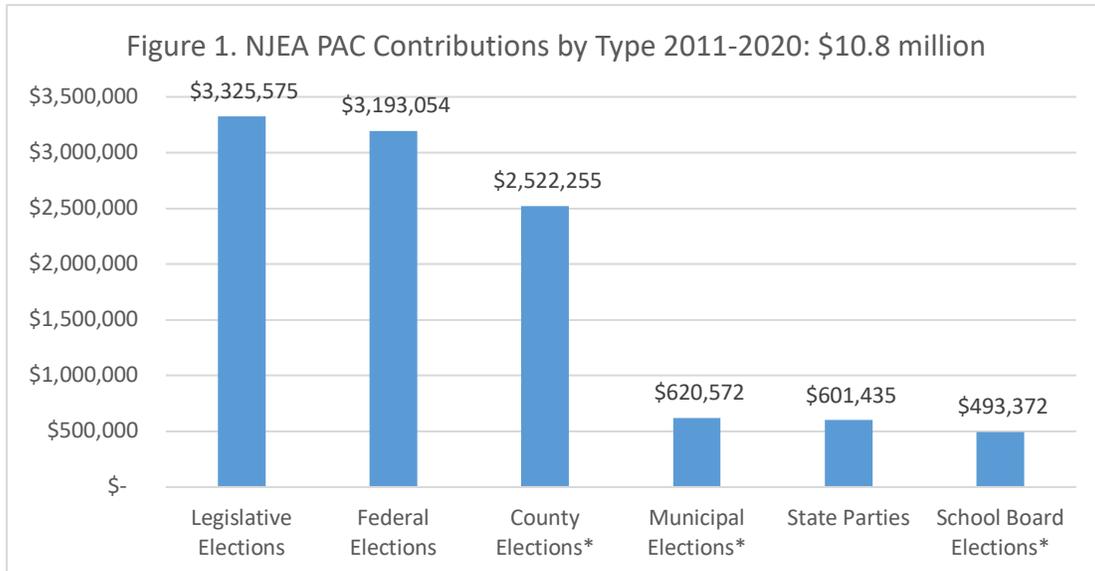
## **II. NJEA PAC Money Flows to Political Campaigns at Every Level of Government**

NJEA PAC's political spending penetrates every level of government: federal, state-level party committees, legislative districts, counties, dozens of municipalities and scores of school boards. As shown in Figure 1, all told, NJEA PAC spent \$10.8 million from 2011 to 2020, or about \$1.1 million a year.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>2</sup> All contribution data for NJEA PAC comes from the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission website, <https://www.elec.nj.gov>.



\* Includes spending that cannot be attributed to a political party.

### NJEA PAC Spending for State-Level Office

**Federal Elections.** Of \$10.8 million spent overall, \$3.2 million went to candidates for federal office. This money is sent to the NJEA’s parent, the National Education Association (NEA), which makes the contributions. The NJEA provides recommendations to the NEA for which New Jersey federal candidates should be supported. In 2020, all thirteen of the NJEA’s endorsements were Democrats.<sup>3</sup> Historically, the NEA has given about 94% of its contributions to Democrats,<sup>4</sup> so while we do not have the actual breakdown, it is reasonable to assume that roughly 94% of this money, or \$3,001,470 was spent on Democratic candidates.

**State Legislative Elections.** Of course, one of the NJEA’s main focuses is the state legislature. As seen in Figure 2, from 2011 to 2020, NJEA PAC spent \$3.3 million on legislative elections. Of this, \$2.9 million, or 88%, went to Democratic candidates.

<sup>3</sup> New Jersey Education Association, “NJEA PAC Announces 2020 Endorsements,” *njea.org*, July 31, 2020, accessed September 21, 2021, <https://www.njea.org/njea-pac-announces-2020-endorsements/>

<sup>4</sup> Open Secrets, “Teachers Unions,” *opensecrets.org*, accessed September 21, 2021, <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/indus.php?ind=I1300>

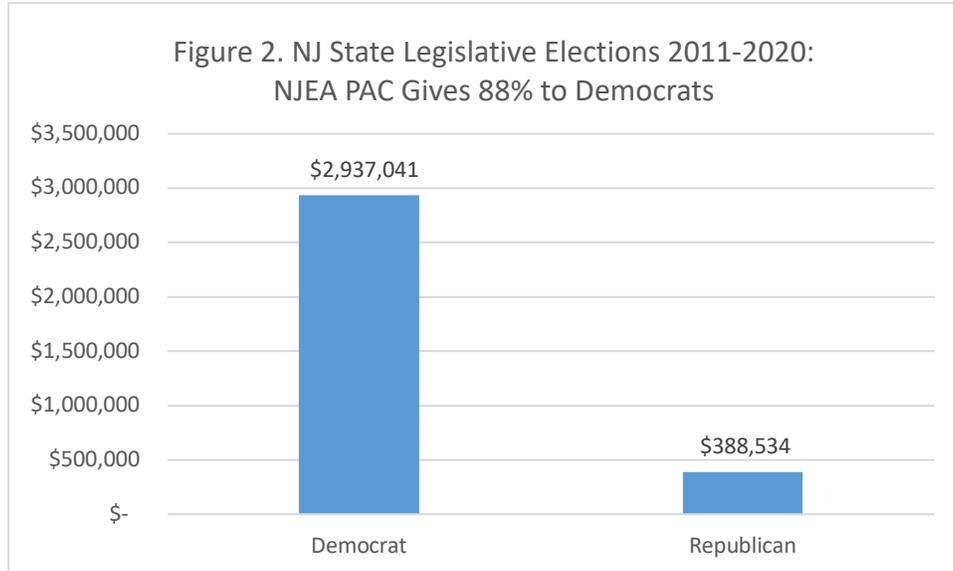


Table 1 presents the top ten recipients of NJEA PAC contributions. All are Democrats.

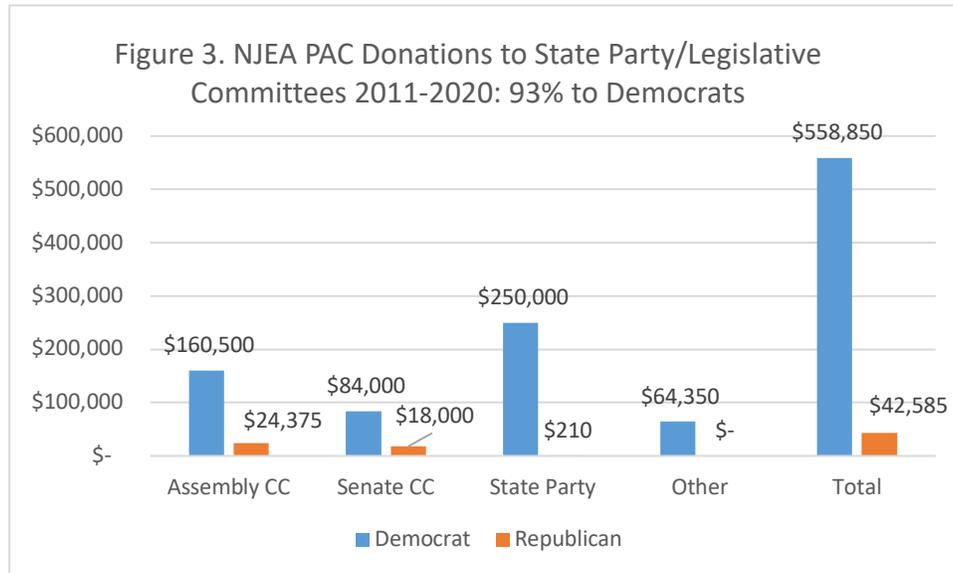
Table 1. Top Legislative Recipients of NJEA PAC Money 2022-2020

Total Donations 2011-2020	District	Amount
ASM Dan Benson (D)	LD14	\$76,550
ASM Mila Jasey (D)	LD27	\$74,700
ASM Gary Schaer (D)	LD36	\$70,500
ASM Benjie Wimberley (D)	LD35	\$68,150
ASM John McKeon (D)	LD27	\$63,600
Sen Pat Diegnan (D)	LD18	\$63,450
ASM Wayne DeAngelo (D)	LD14	\$58,100
Sen Nick Sacco (D)	LD32	\$47,350
Sen Joe Lagana (D)	LD38	\$45,450
ASM Angelica Jimenez (D)	LD32	\$40,700

ASM Betty Lou DeCroce was the top Republican recipient at \$39,800. Described as a “work with the Democrats” politician, DeCroce recently co-sponsored healthcare legislation sought by the NJEA. DeCroce was defeated in the 2021 Republican primary despite an unprecedented \$198,000 independent expenditure by Garden State Forward.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Sunlight Policy Center of New Jersey, “Because It Can, NJEA Spends \$198,000 in Support of Republican Betty Lou DeCroce,” *sunlightpolicynj.org*, June 17, 2021, <https://sunlightpolicynj.org/because-it-can-the-njea-spends-198000-in-support-of-republican-betty-lou-decroce/>

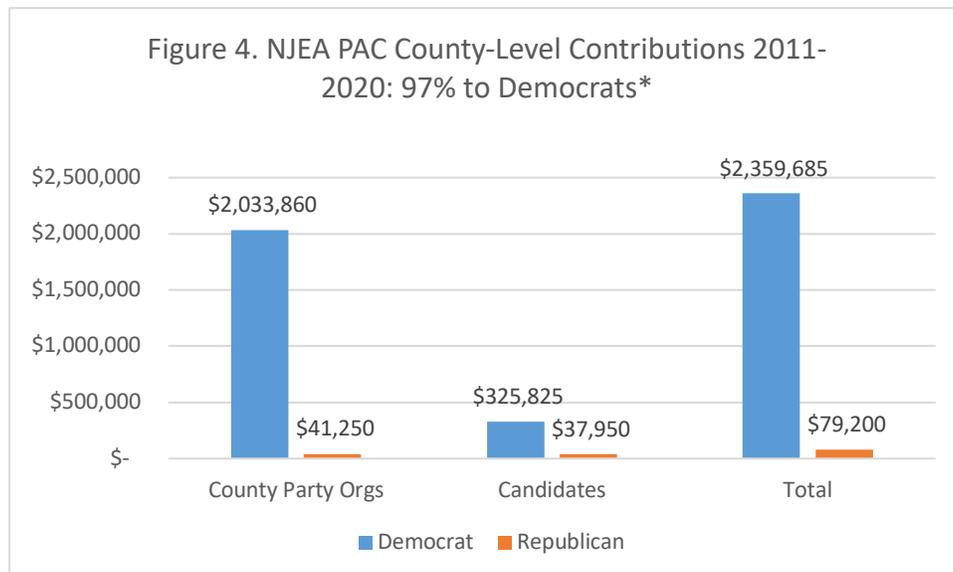
**State Parties and Party Legislative Committees.** As shown in Figure 3, NJEA PAC’s spending in favor of Democrats was even more pronounced with state parties and legislative campaign committees. \$558,850 of the \$601,435, or 93%, was contributed to Democrats.



All told, of the total of \$7.1 million NJEA PAC spent on campaigns for state-level office, \$6.5 million, or 91%, went to Democrats.

### County Elections

NJEA PAC’s preference for Democrats was particularly pronounced at the county level, which includes both county party organizations and candidates for county-level office. County-level elections are lower-budget than state-level elections, so the \$2.1 million spent from 2011 to 2020 likely had a substantial impact. These contributions to county party organizations can of course be spent anywhere in the county or the state, including municipal and school board elections. As seen in Figure 4, over 96% of the NJEA’s political spending went to Democrats. Of note, \$37,000 of the \$41,250 contributed to Republican county organizations went to Gloucester County in 2017 when the NJEA was supporting Republican Fran Grenier’s bid against Senate President Steve Sweeney, which was more of an effort to unseat the Democrat Sweeney than elect a Republican.



\* The total amount differs from Figure 1 because some NJEA PAC contributions could not be attributed to a political party.

Table 2 shows the top five counties for NJEA PAC political spending, including both county parties and candidates. Note that all five of these counties are Democrat-controlled counties.

Table 2. Top Counties for NJEA PAC Contributions 2011-2020

County	Amount
Bergen County	\$346,090
Passaic County	\$308,025
Essex County	\$223,925
Middlesex County	\$204,600
Union County	\$175,000

Table 3 shows the top five county candidates (including a three-way tie for 5<sup>th</sup>) for receiving NJEA PAC contributions. All are Democrats. All are currently serving as County Commissioners except James Tedesco, who is the Bergen County Executive. Top recipient Cassandra Lazzara was a career educator and NJEA member, who describes herself as a “strong advocate for public education.”<sup>6</sup> Number two, Brendan Gill, runs New Direction New Jersey, the pro-Murphy Super PAC largely funded by the NJEA.

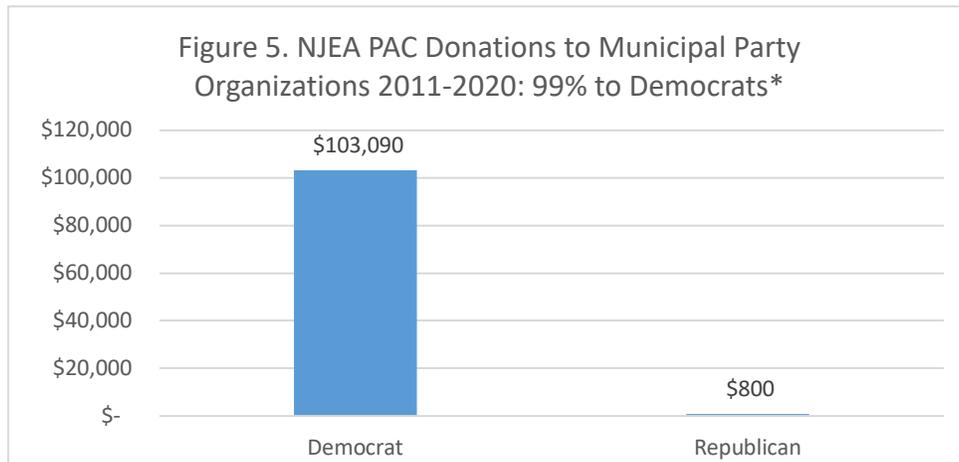
<sup>6</sup> Passaic County, New Jersey, “Meet Your County Commissioners,” *passaiccountynj.org*, accessed October 4, 2021, [https://www.passaiccountynj.org/government/elected\\_and\\_appointed\\_officials/passaic\\_county\\_board\\_of\\_chosen\\_freeholders/members.php#County\\_Commissioner\\_Lazzara](https://www.passaiccountynj.org/government/elected_and_appointed_officials/passaic_county_board_of_chosen_freeholders/members.php#County_Commissioner_Lazzara).

Table 3. Top County Candidates for NJEA PAC Contributions 2011-2020

Candidate	County	Amount
Cassandra Lazzara (D)	Passaic	\$35,800
Brendan Gill (D)	Essex	\$19,500
James Tedesco (D)	Bergen	\$15,400
Joan Voss (D)	Bergen	\$11,495
Mary Amoroso (D)	Bergen	\$9,200
Germaine Ortiz (D)	Bergen	\$9,200
Thomas Sullivan (D)	Bergen	\$9,200

Municipal Elections

NJEA PAC’s bias towards Democrats was most pronounced at the municipal party level. Sunlight was not able to determine the political party of municipal candidates, many of whom run in (nominally) non-partisan elections, and so these contributions were not included in Figure 5. However, contributions to municipal parties likely give a sense of how NJEA PAC’s overall municipal contributions are oriented. Municipal elections, particularly in smaller towns, tend have smaller budgets, and a little money often goes a long way. As shown in Figure 5, NJEA PAC gave 99% of its municipal party donations to Democrats.



\*The total amount differs from Figure 1 because contributions to municipal candidates could not be attributed to a political party.

**The NJEA Rigs the System.** Table 4 includes both donations to municipal party organizations as well as to candidates, and as can be seen, three of the top five municipalities for NJEA PAC spending were towns where the mayor appoints the school board. The conflict of interest here is plain for all to see: a mayor elected with help from the NJEA then appoints the school board, which negotiates contracts with the NJEA’s local affiliate. This can be seen as shrewd political spending by the NJEA but it also brings into question the integrity of the political system. Indeed, who represents the interests of ordinary citizens and taxpayers at the bargaining table?

Of particular note is the outsized spending in Montclair. Of course, the mayor of Montclair happens to be the current president of the NJEA, Sean Spiller. Prior to being NJEA president and mayor, Spiller was an NJEA officer and town councilman, so much of NJEA PAC's spending was in support of Spiller and his slates. The conflict of interest here is massive, and indeed a Superior Court judge removed Councilman Spiller from the Montclair Board of School Estimates because of it.

Table 4. Top Municipalities for NJEA PAC Spending 2011-2020

Municipality	Amount
Montclair (mayor-appointed BOE)	\$85,000
Newark	\$58,572
East Orange (mayor-appointed BOE)	\$56,650
Jersey City	\$49,425
Trenton (mayor-appointed BOE)	\$46,800

### School Board Elections

At the most local level, the school board level, NJEA spent a total of \$493,327 from 2011 to 2020. That is \$49,000 per year, which is a substantial sum considering that these elections are typically very small budget affairs. These are non-partisan elections, so the contributions cannot be attributed to a particular political party. But many of the 1,560 graduates from the NJEA's Political Leadership Academy, which trains NJEA members to run for office, run for school board seats, so this spending very much expands the NJEA's political influence. And this is just NJEA-level money: local associations likely play an active role as well. Table 5 shows the top five school districts for NJEA PAC spending.

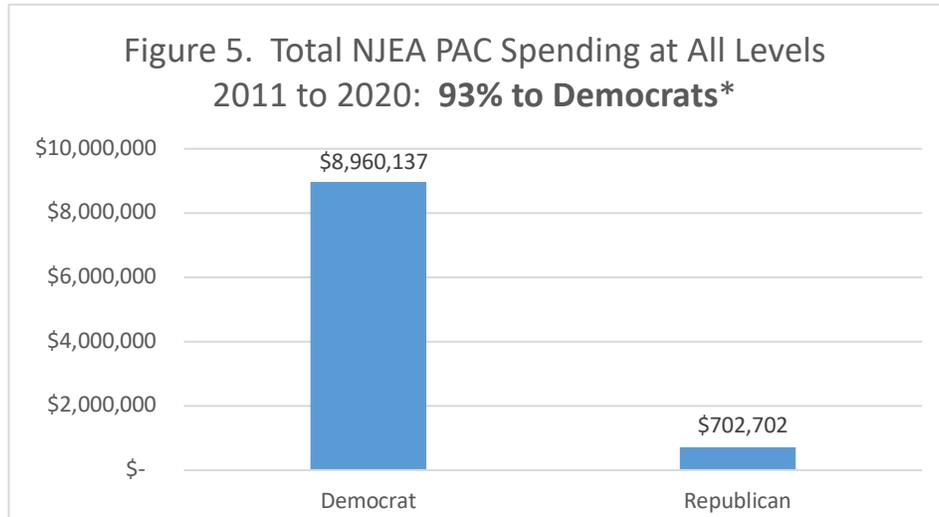
Table 5. Top Five School Districts

District	Amount
Jersey City	\$174,300
Elizabeth	\$50,400
Camden	\$36,600
Edison	\$31,800
Belleville	\$22,600

Table 5 reveals how the NJEA can swoop in at the school board level and dominate particular elections. Jersey City is of course the NJEA's largest local affiliate, and the NJEA has consistently been active there over nine years. Edison's \$31,800 was for a single election in 2017. Both Camden and Elizabeth were over two elections, so the NJEA spent \$18,000 and \$25,000 per election in those towns, respectively. Belleville is a relatively small town (35,000), so the \$4,400 per election over five elections must be seen in that context. In each case, these are significant sums of money for school board elections and likely give the NJEA's favored candidates a decided monetary advantage.

## Conclusion: NJEA PAC Is All-In for the Democrats

Figure 5 says it all. Adding up all the various levels of elections and attributing political contributions to political parties where possible, our research finds that 93% of NJEA PAC's contributions from 2011 to 2020 went to Democrats, almost 14x the 7% to Republicans. This was most pronounced at the county and municipal level, where almost all the contributions went to Democrats.



\*The total amount differs from Graph 1 because some county-level spending and contributions to municipal candidates could not be attributed to a political party, and school board elections are non-partisan.

While relatively small in total amount, NJEA PAC's spending provides a clear roadmap of how the NJEA's influence and money pervade at all levels of state politics. When the state's taxpayer-funded and most powerful special interest spends 93% of its PAC dollars on one party, and when additional money and support follows that spending, it should come as little surprise that that party dominates state politics.

Welcome to Blue Jersey.

## APPENDIX 1

Candidate (District)	Year	NJEA PAC Spending	Super PAC Spending
Fran Grenier/anti-Steve Sweeney (LD3)	2017	\$16,400	\$317,800
Jersey City (Board of Education)	2016	\$49,200	\$277,610
Betty Lou DeCroce (LD26)	2021	\$5,000	\$198,000
Robert Gordon (LD38)	2011	\$13,200	\$95,336
Connie Wagner (LD38)	2011	\$13,200	\$95,336
Cassandra Lazzara (LD40)	2011	\$16,400	\$49,708
Dan Benson (LD14)	2011	\$16,400	\$38,741
Linda Greenstein (LD14)	2011	\$16,400	\$38,741
Wayne DeAngelo (LD14)	2011	\$16,400	\$38,741
Maureen Vella (LD 16)	2011	\$4,500	\$19,216
Marie Corfield (LD16)	2011	\$16,400	\$19,216
Joe Camarota (LD16)	2011	\$4,500	\$19,216
Sean Spiller (Montclair Municipal)	2016	\$5,050	\$16,800

Source: Election Law Enforcement Commission