



SUNLIGHT
POLICY CENTER
— OF NEW JERSEY —

ISSUE UPDATE

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AGAINST THE VAST MAJORITY OF NJ CITIZENS AND PARENTS, SAYS MONMOUTH POLL

September 26, 2023

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AGAINST THE VAST MAJORITY OF NJ CITIZENS AND PARENTS, SAYS MONMOUTH POLL

“When asked a straightforward question about parental notification, the vast majority of New Jerseyans, including Democrats, say schools should be required to notify parents if their child has requested to be identified as transgender.”

-- Patrick Murray, Director of Monmouth polling to the [New Jersey Globe](#)

“[L]eadership by professional practitioners is how we will ... implement **progressive** policies.”

-- Joint [statement](#) by NJEA officers Spiller, Beatty, and Robertson

New Jersey teachers want to teach, not play politics. NJEA leadership is pushing them to play politics – in opposition to the vast majority of New Jersey citizens and parents.

For over a year, NJEA leadership has pushed teachers to become actively involved in the “culture wars” that have been raging in school districts across the state. The NJEA has dedicated headquarters staff, built a website, provided political training, and sent teams of personnel to prod teachers to insert themselves into contentious, local school board politics. A 2022 NJEA-sponsored training course for teachers said it all: “Teaching Is Political: Advocating and Organizing for Social Change.” And it’s not just words: in Hanover Township, the NJEA is attacking the school board and urging teachers to join in.

Thanks to a recent Monmouth poll, we now know how deeply unpopular several of these NJEA-promoted policies are, which we will label as “progressive” because that is how NJEA leadership characterizes them (see above). As the pollster Murray notes, the vast majority of New Jersey citizens and parents disagree with them. Yet NJEA leadership wants teachers to stand in opposition to the vast majority of citizens and parents.

Meanwhile, many teachers are struggling with their own post-pandemic realities. They are stressed and stretched with too many responsibilities and not enough support. They are dealing with students who are far below grade-level in reading and math. They are coping with a dramatic increase in student misbehavior, violence and threats to teachers, all of which makes teaching more difficult. They are leaving the profession in droves, worsening a teacher shortage. Where is the NJEA on rectifying learning loss? Where is the NJEA on helping teachers deal with widespread student misbehavior? Where is the NJEA on helping teachers teach?

Nowhere.

The fact is that the NJEA has neither proposed nor initiated any program to address these serious problems. Rather than help teachers teach, NJEA leadership wants them to add to their already heavy burden by becoming local political activists -- for deeply unpopular policies. Even worse, the NJEA is giving teachers erroneous guidance on federal law that may risk legal consequences.

Sunlight is not judging these “progressive” policies. We are asking whether it is in the best interests of teachers to be thrust into local culture wars, especially when they are already stretched thin by their daily teaching responsibilities.

As with excessive pay for NJEA leadership and funding NJEA President Sean Spiller’s personal political career, New Jersey teachers’ highest-in-the-nation dues are once again paying for leadership actions that do not appear to be in their best interests. What a raw deal.

NJEA Aggressively Engages in Culture Wars and Pushes Teachers to be Warriors

Before we delve into the Monmouth polling data, we wanted to document how the NJEA has aggressively engaged in the culture wars for over a year, strongly advocating for “progressive” policies and denigrating the parent groups who oppose them as right-wing extremists and fringe hate groups. The Monmouth poll leaves no doubt that these policies are deeply unpopular and that the opposition is in fact the vast majority of New Jersey citizens and parents.

In 2022, in an effort to counter the parent groups that had disrupted the NJEA-dominated status quo at school boards across the state, the NJEA launched a campaign to push local associations and teachers to elect NJEA-friendly school boards. To support the campaign, the NJEA created its [Center for Honesty in Education](#) (CHE), comprised of NJEA staff from UniServ, Government Relations, Communications, Organizational Development, Legal Services, Professional Development, and Institutional Issues departments. The CHE staff was available to assist with campaign planning, budgeting, financial support, training, tactical assistance, voter databases, and communications strategies. As Sunlight previously [reported](#), the NJEA also sent out teams of CHE personnel across the state to prod local associations into action.

A major function of CHE was to encourage and enable teachers to inform on parents who were speaking up at school board meetings. CHE staff could then monitor the parents and prioritize their efforts to counteract them. A primer for organizing teachers into local CHE teams directs these would-be teacher-informers to: “Take note of speakers during public comment portions ... ,” and “Inform your local association leadership of the need to organize against threats to the union as they emerge.” The CHE webpage provides a handy “reporting tool” that enables teachers to inform on parents.

All teachers are expected to be involved in the campaign. A CHE “Campaign Support Playbook” (with Saul Alinsky’s “Rules for Radicals” helpfully embedded) makes clear: “Involvement in a BOE election is the responsibility of the entire membership, not just the representatives or executives.”

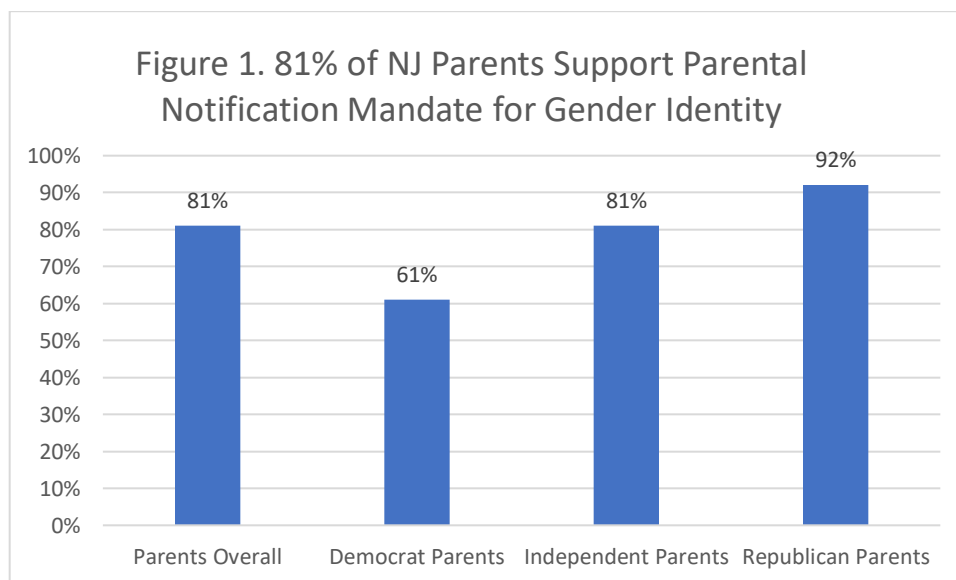
True to Alinsky’s rules, the NJEA has sought to demonize the opposition. In a summer of 2022 [video ad](#), the NJEA characterized parents speaking up at school board meetings as “extremists ... attacking our schools” using black and white pictures of angry parents.

Similarly, a current CHE [advisory](#) maintains the same tone, describing parents this way: “At school board meetings ... fringe-right radicals ... partisan hate groups ... under the guise of ‘parental rights’...” Parent groups such as NJ Fresh Faced Schools and Team Protect Your Children are labeled “hate groups.”

But, as we now know, the opposition to the NJEA’s “progressive” policy agenda is not fringe or extremist or right-wing, it’s the vast majority of New Jersey citizens and parents from across the political spectrum. On the contrary, the polling data shows it is the NJEA’s “progressive” agenda that is fringe and extremist.

Monmouth Poll: Overwhelming Support for Mandatory Parental Notification

The data is unequivocal: According to an August, 2023 Monmouth [poll](#), New Jerseyans overwhelmingly (77% overall) support mandating that schools notify parents if their children seek to identify as a different gender. As shown in Figure 1, for parents, the numbers are even higher and cut across partisan affiliation: 61% of Democrat parents, 81% of independent parents and 92% of Republican parents support a parental notification mandate.



Source: Monmouth University Polling Institute

NJEA Advises Teachers that They *Must Not* Notify Parents

Heading into the 2023 school year, CHE provided teachers with a “[Back to School Checklist](#)” to serve as a “guide for K-12 educators” so they can “work with your colleagues to advocate for changes to policies and practices that ... create safe, welcoming, and inclusive schools ...”

In the “Confidentiality” section, the checklist includes a check box for “Our school, district, or organization has a policy that explicitly asserts the confidentiality of information pertaining to a student’s ... sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression that should include:”

- “Educators and staff are aware that under FERPA they *must* protect the confidentiality of students related to their gender identity ... and show great caution not to share [it] without that student’s permission, **even to the student’s parent or guardian.**” [Emphasis added].
- A “requirement that staff not ‘out’ youth or disclose their identities to others, **including the youth’s parents/guardians**, without the youth’s written consent.”

NJEA’s Erroneous Guidance on FERPA Risks Legal Consequences

FERPA is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, a federal law passed in 1974. The NJEA’s telling a teacher that she “*must*” keep such information from parents directly contradicts what FERPA actually says. According to US Department of Education [guidance](#): FERPA protects student education records from improper disclosure, but those records can be disclosed to parents without their child’s consent: “FERPA permits ... a school to disclose personally identifiable information from an eligible student’s education records, *without consent, to the parents of the eligible student* [emphasis added].”

And at least one expert believes that such erroneous guidance may put schools at risk of legal consequences. Robert Pondiscio of the American Enterprise Institute [states](#): “... keeping such information from parents almost certainly violates FERPA, which *gives parents virtually unlimited rights to review their child’s school records* [emphasis added]. By circumventing this law in spirit ... schools ... risk legal consequences.” And this is no idle threat: There are currently 20 active court challenges to policies blocking parental notification.

Words Turn into Action: NJEA Pushes Teachers to Take Sides in Hanover Township

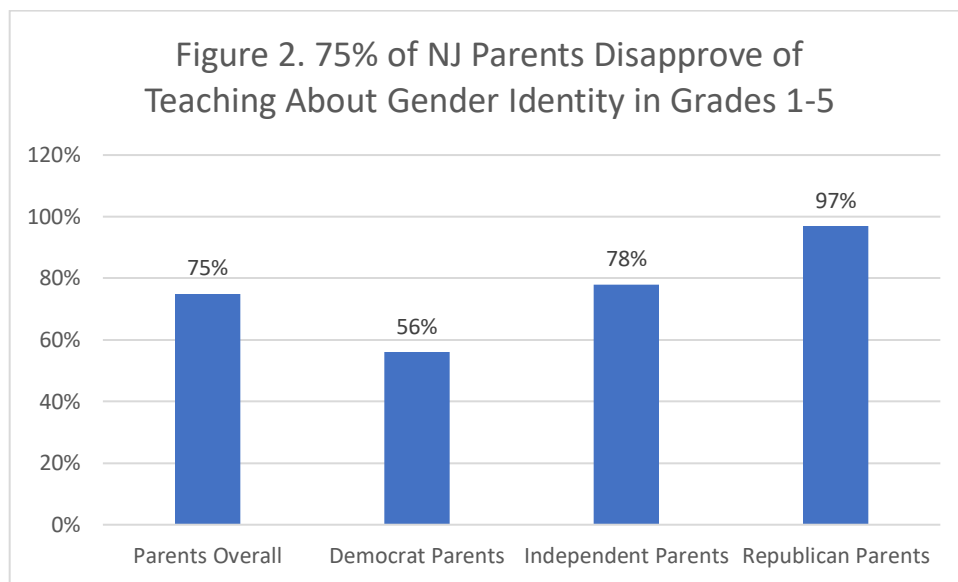
In Hanover Township, the NJEA has [turned its words into action](#). The Attorney General sued the school board over its mandatory parental notification policy, and the NJEA and

is actively pushing teachers to take sides in the controversy. NJEA leadership has openly attacked the school board and urged Hanover teachers to sign a public petition in support of the state’s lawsuit and against the school board. Teachers are now caught between their union and the district.

The facts are clear: when it comes to parental notification, the NJEA is pushing teachers to oppose the vast majority of New Jersey citizens and parents, and the NJEA’s FERPA guidance is erroneous and could risk legal consequences.

Monmouth Poll: Parents Overwhelmingly Oppose Teaching Gender Identity in Grades 1-5

Parental notification is not the only policy where the NJEA stands – and wants to push teachers to act – in opposition to the vast majority of New Jersey parents. As seen in Figure 2, the Monmouth poll showed that 75% of New Jersey parents oppose teaching about gender identity in grades 1-5, including strong majorities across the political spectrum.



Source: Monmouth University Polling Institute

The NJEA Trains Teachers to Advocate for Teaching Gender Identity in Grades 1-5

But teaching about gender identity to grades 1-5 is precisely what the NJEA’s 2022 [Summer Collaborative](#) called for. Its “Teaching Is Political: Advocating and Organizing for Social Change” training course for teachers was taught by the [Radical Pedagogy Institute](#) (RPI).

The RPI training program provided teachers with the political organizing and advocacy tools to fight for radical education policies in their school communities. The ultimate focus was on the students: the goal for these trained teacher-activists was to “impact the

educational outcomes of PK-12 [pre-kindergarten to 12th grade] students and pre-service teachers [who teach future elementary school teachers].” RPI’s recommended [curriculum](#) for the “Early Elementary” (grades 1-3) level includes transgender and other controversial themes.

The NJEA’s current posture on this issue remains the same. The “Back to School Checklist” includes a check box for “Staff use LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum for *elementary* and secondary-level youth [emphasis added].”

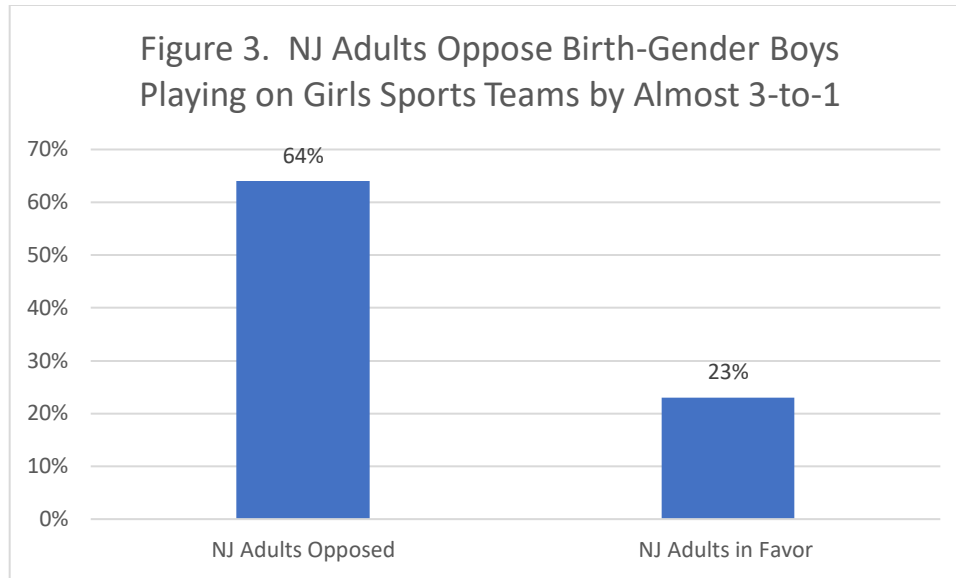
The NJEA’s “Rainbow Connection” webpage provides teachers with such a curriculum, with a LGBTQIA+ [bibliography](#) by age grouping. For “Grades Pre-K – 6, that is, *pre-kindergarten* to 6th grade, the NJEA recommends books containing:

- Celebrating LGBT families as part of “teach[ing] young children the alphabet;”
- Two gay rabbits and a “message of tolerance and advocacy” in a “charming children’s book;”
- “explains the basics of reproduction and introduces the topic of ... artificial insemination;”
- Four-year-old cross-dressing;
- A 3rd grade transgender child; and
- This “brightly illustrated children’s book provides a straightforward introduction to gender for anyone aged 4+.”

Here again, the NJEA is actively pushing teachers to do what the vast majority of New Jersey parents oppose.

Monmouth Poll: A Large Majority Oppose Birth-Gender Boys Playing on Girls Sports Teams

When it comes to sports, where the predominant concern is allowing birth-gender males to play on girls sports teams, the poll showed 64% of New Jerseyans opposed to such a policy versus 23% in support – almost 3-to-1 against – as shown in Figure 3.



Source: Monmouth University Polling Institute

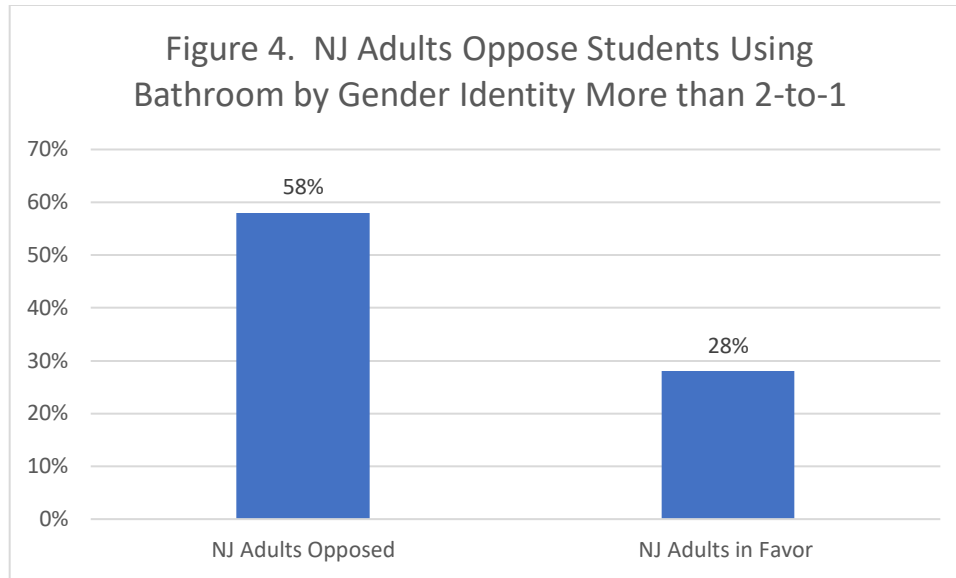
NJEA Pushes for Gender Identity to Determine Sport Participation

The NJEA’s “Back to School Checklist” also addresses sports participation. One of the check boxes is for a policy that allows transgender students to “be treated consistent with their gender identity in all activities and school/organization-sponsored events” That includes sports.

When it comes to sports teams, the NJEA is pushing teachers to oppose a large majority of New Jersey citizens.

Monmouth Poll: A Large Majority Oppose Bathroom Use by Gender Identity

The NJEA urges the same teacher advocacy for bathroom and locker room access, once again in opposition to a large majority of New Jerseyans. As shown in Figure 4, the poll revealed that New Jerseyans opposed allowing transgender students to use the bathroom according to their gender identity 58%-28% -- more than 2-to-1.



Source: Monmouth University Polling Institute

NJEA Calls for Bathroom Use According to Gender Identity

The “Back to School Checklist” has a check box calling for a policy that allows transgender students “equal access to facilities (restrooms, locker rooms, etc.) that align with their gender identity ...”

The NEA speaks out on this issue as well. In its Resource Library on its website, NEA provides teachers with a [case study](#) that showcases how NEA-sponsored LGBTQ training for teachers helps ensure “access to restrooms and lockers rooms consistent with a student’s gender identity.” The message to teachers is clear: bathroom use by gender identity is to be encouraged.

Both the NJEA and NEA stand in opposition to a large majority as to bathroom use.

Post-Pandemic, Teachers Are Stretched and Stressed in their Daily Teaching Duties. Where is the NJEA?

“Teachers are not doing well.” That’s the conclusion of a 2023 annual teacher [survey](#) by Voices from the Classroom. The study adds: “Their ever-increasing range of responsibilities has left teachers burned out, reconsidering the profession and warning teenagers in their lives to steer clear of education as a career path.” No wonder there’s a teacher shortage.

According to the survey, 87% of teachers say they have too many responsibilities to be effective educators. They say that they are expected to tackle learning gaps and address students’ mental health struggles, and that their roles have expanded and are no longer sustainable.

The NJEA knows full well about these major issues affecting New Jersey teachers. NJEA President Spiller has acknowledged the damage caused by pandemic school closures, stating in a *Star-Ledger* [op-ed](#): “students suffered academically as well as emotionally ... We have plenty of work to do.” But what has the NJEA actually done to address these urgent issues?

Nothing.

Learning Loss Is Real and Is Making Teaching Harder

It is well known that New Jersey students suffered severe learning loss as a result of school closures during the pandemic. The results on the New Jersey Student Learning Assessments showed that post-pandemic, 51% of New Jersey students were below grade level in English and 65% were below grade level in math. According to JerseyCan, in districts like Camden, Newark and Asbury Park, fewer than one-in-five 3rd graders are reading at grade level. Remember the old adage: 3rd-graders learn to read so that 4th-graders can read to learn. What will next year’s 4th-grade teachers confront?

The above case illustrates how learning shortfalls will have negative consequences for large numbers of teachers because a student who is not at grade level in his current grade, and is then promoted to the next grade, will not be prepared for the topics taught in the next grade. In this way, large numbers of teachers will be forced to deal with the consequences of learning loss for years to come. And unless these shortfalls are rectified, the learning loss will compound, leaving subsequent teachers to deal with a worsening problem.

But getting these kids back to grade level will take a lot of work by teachers and lots of support. A [study](#) by Learning Heroes concluded: “... no teacher can get 70% of a class up to grade level without broad level support, including a public acknowledgment that there’s a problem which the teachers did not create but they are meant to solve.” Where is the NJEA, the union of the teachers, on this urgent issue?

Nowhere.

We recently searched the NJEA website for “learning loss” to see what the NJEA has to say about the issue and how it affected teachers. The top [article](#) (dated February 13, 2023) had this to say: Learning loss is a “buzz-phrase” not an actual condition. The NJEA sees the “usual suspects” (whoever they are) offering “simple solutions” to “this simple phrase [learning loss].” These “simple” solutions include extended school years, tutoring programs, and mandated professional development for accelerated learning, which all seem rather sensible.

Rather than address learning loss now and head-on with the “simple” solutions mentioned above, the NJEA calls on New Jerseyans to “reimagine and recreate schools that take on all the challenges and inequities that the pandemic exposed ...” The solution is to rebuild the school system to encourage “collaboration” and “collective understanding.” Rather than urgency, we should “take a breath, look at what the

research ... tells us ... and then move ahead.” There is nothing about immediately addressing this urgent problem.

This casual disregard of learning loss and the challenges it presents to students and teachers is a continuation of the NJEA’s previous stance. Recall that the NJEA [testified](#) to the state legislature about the “narrative of learning loss,” as if learning loss were some sort of story-line rather than the actual condition of students coming out of the pandemic.

The governor initiated his failed Partnership for Student Success tutor program, education non-profit [JerseyCAN](#) created an effective accelerated learning program, and a public/private partnership created the New Jersey Tutoring Corps, but the NJEA has proposed nothing, initiated nothing and created nothing. Nothing.

Student Misbehavior and Violence Are Making Teaching Harder

As acknowledged by NJEA President Spiller, New Jersey students suffered both academically and emotionally from pandemic school closures. Unfortunately, that emotional damage has led to a dramatic increase in student misbehavior, including violence towards each other and teachers.

In an August 2023 [report](#), NJ.com’s Tina Kelley catalogued the widespread behavioral problems in New Jersey schools:

- “dramatic increase in student misbehavior;”
- “large increase in students caught with weapons in school;”
- “Incidents of all types of unruliness among students, including smoking, mouthing off to a teacher, or tripping a kid on the playground are increasingly common;”
- “We’ve had upticks in every category of disciplinary situations,” according to the Garden State Coalition of 100 New Jersey school districts.

Unsurprisingly, this widespread student misbehavior has harmed the learning environment and made teaching more difficult. Again Kelly: educators see the widespread misbehavior as “detrimental to teaching and learning,” and quotes the President of the Perth Amboy Federation of Teachers: “Some of the kids are terrified of other kids and feel they’re interfering with their learning.”

With predictable impacts on teachers. Kelly reports:

- Several examples of violence or threats of violence against teachers;
- This deterioration has “contributed to teachers burning out or quitting – during a staff shortage – and has made it harder for students to recover academically.”
- Jeanne Del Colle of the College of New Jersey described the impact on teachers: “Our educators are exhausted ... They resign, they retire, they give up teaching.”

Where is the NJEA on this urgent issue?

Nowhere.

Again, a search of the NJEA website produced no indications of a current initiative to help teachers with student misbehavior and violence.

Our search did turn up an example of an extensive NJEA [campaign](#) to address violence in schools that was threatening school staff: “10 steps to reduce violence,” ***dated October 5, 2010!***

This was a full-fledged NJEA campaign that called for political-style organizing among NJEA locals and members because it could not be left to the school district or Department of Education:

“Organizing is necessary to address school violence because nothing else works, especially relying solely on school districts or government agencies to do the right thing.

And NJEA headquarters was there to help with a webpage, resources, and staff:

“Make eliminating school violence a priority and commit to organizing members and allies to pressure district administration for real improvements. Enlist the assistance of the UniServ [NJEA] representative...”

The locals were to reach out to the community to build support for the campaign:

“Local associations can reach out to potential allies and ask them to support their campaign against school violence. Allies can include parents, community organizations, religious and civil rights leaders, and local politicians. The media can help associations publicize their case and possibly shame the district into taking control measures.”

It’s abundantly clear that the NJEA knows very well how to address student misbehavior and violence towards teachers and was willing to mobilize locals and members in a full-fledged campaign to do so – in 2010. Where is the NJEA’s resolve now?

Pushing stressed and stretched teachers to fight the culture wars.

Conclusion: Is the Use of Teachers’ Dues to Fight the Culture Wars in the Best Interests of Teachers?

All of the NJEA’s efforts to advocate for unpopular, “progressive” education policies and to push teachers to fight in local culture wars are paid for by New Jersey teachers’ highest-in-the-nation dues. As with [excessive pay](#) for NJEA leadership and the [funding](#) of NJEA President Spiller’s personal political career, Sunlight questions whether NJEA leadership’s uses of teachers’ dues are really in teachers’ best interests. How does

“implementing progressive policies” (in the words of NJEA leadership) against the will of the vast majority of New Jerseyans benefit teachers?

It doesn't and it hurts teachers. Rather than battle parents in culture wars, now is the time for teachers to be working with parents to overcome the many post-COVID challenges. As education expert [Robin Lake](#) of the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) states of the current situation: “There has never been a more vital time to get school systems and parents on the same page.” Opposing the vast majority of parents works against this and hurts teachers.

Teachers are stressed and stretched thin. They told the [Voices from the Classroom survey](#) their solution: “First and foremost, it means easing some of these growing pressures and responsibilities and increasing the amount of time in the day dedicated to teachers’ core responsibilities.” But becoming a local activist for unpopular “progressive” policies burdens teachers with additional pressures and responsibilities and does nothing to support teachers’ core teaching responsibilities. This hurts teachers.

As NJEA President Spiller recognized, teachers are dealing with negative consequences of children suffering academically and emotionally. Learning loss makes teachers’ jobs harder. Increased student misbehavior makes teachers’ jobs harder. Yet, NJEA leadership has nothing to offer then it comes to addressing these urgent problems. This hurts teachers.

As this report has shown, NJEA leadership has chosen to push teachers to become warriors in the culture wars, to take sides in contentious local political battles. But educators know better. They know the toll these culture wars have taken on schools and teachers. As a recent [report](#) from CRPE and RAND found: half of school system leaders say that current disagreements over issues related to the culture wars are “disrupting schooling” and “interfering with their ability to educate students ...” But NJEA leadership wants to add fuel to the fire by getting teachers more involved in these issues. This hurts teachers.

Why is the NJEA, a union that supposedly exists to represent teachers, not looking out for teachers’ best interests? Why is NJEA leadership prioritizing unpopular, “progressive” politics over helping teachers teach? And why are teachers being forced to pay for all of this?

What a raw deal.