



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

## ISSUE UPDATE

**NEW JERSEY TEACHERS WANT TO TEACH, NOT  
PLAY POLITICS**

**SO THE NJEA OUTSOURCES GOTV AND FORCES TEACHERS  
TO PAY FOR IT**

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## **NEW JERSEY TEACHERS WANT TO TEACH, NOT PLAY POLITICS**

### **So the NJEA Outsources GOTV and Forces Teachers to Pay for It**

#### Introduction

New Jersey teachers want to teach, not play politics.

It hasn't always been this way. In the past, the NJEA was a powerhouse when it came to mobilizing its members to help get out the vote (GOTV) for endorsed candidates. In 1995, NJEA President Dennis Testa said: "Our dollar contribution isn't the deciding factor. We provide phone banks and phone calls and people who are willing to go door-to-door across the state."<sup>1</sup>

But that was then. Now, few active teachers are interested in funding the NJEA's political activities or participating in GOTV efforts. Over the past decade, donations to the NJEA's traditional political action committee (PAC) plummeted by -28%. *Only two active teachers contributed to NJEA PAC in 2022: 99.9% of NJEA PAC contributions came from retired teachers.*

As a result, the NJEA now outsources a large amount of its GOTV efforts to outside vendors. Since 2013, the NJEA has spent at least \$981,287 for paid canvassers, phone banks and other GOTV services, often from entities outside the state. The largest vendor, New Jersey Working Families Alliance, is a virtual organization with no employees and serves as a conduit for payments to a Brooklyn, NY-based for-profit corporation. The NJEA's GOTV efforts are increasingly being conducted by paid political operatives from outside New Jersey.

Accordingly, the NJEA's main political spending arm has become its Super PAC, Garden State Forward, which spent over \$52 million from 2012 to 2020 -- almost 6x the \$9 million spent by NJEA PAC. Teachers must opt into funding NJEA PAC, so they have a choice. But they do not have a choice when it comes to the \$52 million spent by Garden State Forward. NJEA leadership simply appropriates teachers' regular dues and spends them how and where it sees fit. This is particularly unfair because active teachers have made it pretty clear they do not want to fund NJEA political action.

By their actions, teachers have shown they do not want to play politics. But the NJEA leadership is determined to keep its political machine alive and dominant, regardless how teachers feel about it. As a result, the NJEA's political machine is increasingly less reflective of teachers' priorities and more reflective of leadership's own agenda. All paid for by teachers' highest-in-the-nation dues.

Does NJEA political action really express the will of teachers anymore?

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Reisner, "Political Donations Target Status Quo," *Record*, December 31, 1995.

## Teachers Increasingly Not Interested in Politics

**Poor Teacher Participation Across the State.** During the 2022 election season, Sunlight received on-the-ground confirmation that the NJEA is having difficulty getting its members involved in political campaigns. As part of the NJEA's 2022 [statewide campaign](#) against parents running for school board, the NJEA sent out staff to meet with local associations to prod them into identifying and supporting union-friendly candidates. But it turns out that teachers weren't enthused about engaging in local political battles.

In Ocean Township, in a September emergency meeting of the Township of Ocean Education Association (TOEA), TOEA leadership remarked that "[generally speaking, our participation numbers are poor and more people need to get involved.](#)" They noted that only 22 out of 200 TOEA members even bothered to respond to a survey seeking more active participation in TOEA training and activities.

A similar message was heard in a recording of a meeting between NJEA staff and another local association in the northern part of the state (whose identity cannot be revealed). A member of the local voices her concern about the viability of the local supporting school board candidates:

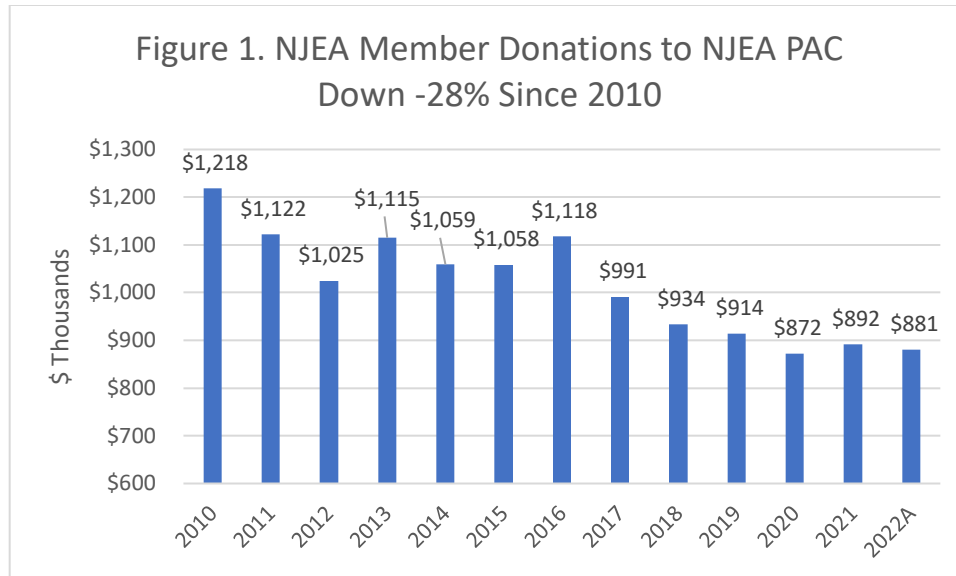
"[W]e are not an association where we have active participants and that is my biggest concern ... People here don't want to get involved. They want to complain about things, but they aren't willing to do anything about it ... It's always the same people trying to rally the troops to do things."

The NJEA staff member sympathizes and notes that non-participation in local political activity is widespread:

"I share your concerns. I wish I had the magic bullet or remedy to get more people involved ... For those of you listening ... you have to get more involved if you want to maintain the status quo ... [T]his is not just here in \_\_\_ Township, it's not just here in \_\_\_ County, *it's all over our state* ..." [Emphasis added.]

**Contributions to NJEA PAC Plummet.** This non-participation by members in political activities can be shown empirically. NJEA PAC provides an excellent barometer of members' willingness to engage in political activity. When a member is willing to commit dollars, it stands to reason that member is more willing to participate in electioneering as well. The key element of a traditional PAC is that it must be funded by a separate dues stream that members must opt into. The PAC dues are over and above regular dues, require a concerted effort on the part of the member, and explicitly fund political activity.

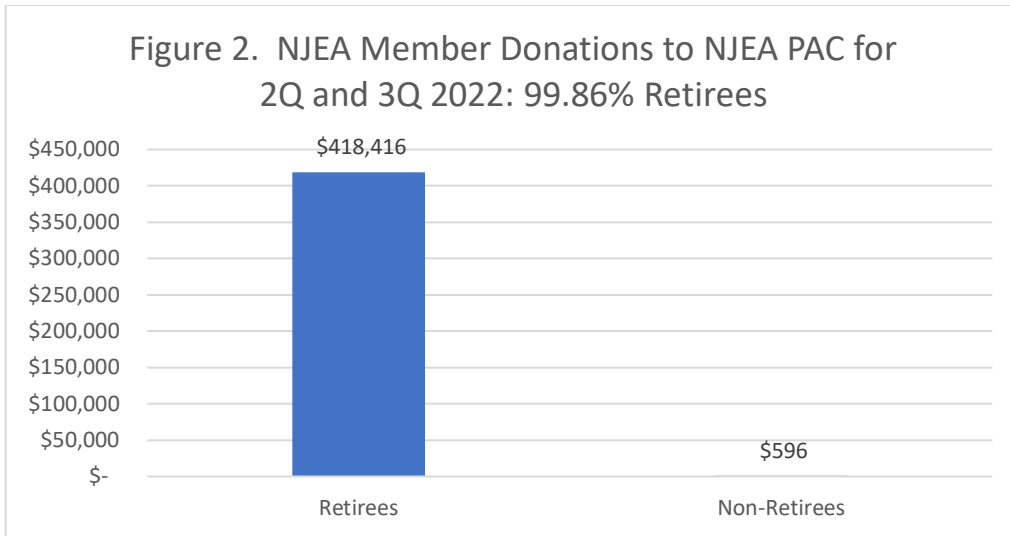
As can be seen in Figure 1, the amount of money flowing into the NJEA traditional PAC has plummeted since its high-water mark of \$1.218 million in 2010 to \$881,000 in 2022, a decline of -27.7%.



Source: Election Law Enforcement Commission Forms R-3 2010-2022 (2022 data annualized from 3Q).

**Active teachers are not contributing to NJEA PAC.** Even more revealing is the fact that 99.86% of the 2022 contributions to NJEA PAC came from retired members. Only two active teachers contributed to NJEA PAC in 2022.

We know this because the NJEA surprisingly revealed all the NJEA PAC donors below \$300 for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> quarters of 2022. These smaller donors make up the vast majority of total donors. Usually, NJEA PAC aggregates these smaller donors and lists only those donors over \$300. For the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> quarters, there were approximately 500 retired donors and only two active teachers (one from Passaic and one from Stanhope) and two NJEA staff members (Steve Swetsky and Mayrose Wegman). The retired members gave \$314,609 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter and \$103,807 in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter, for a total of \$418,416. The two teachers donated a total of \$274 and the two NJEA staff donated \$322. As shown in Figure 2, the retired members accounted for 99.86% of NJEA PAC donations.

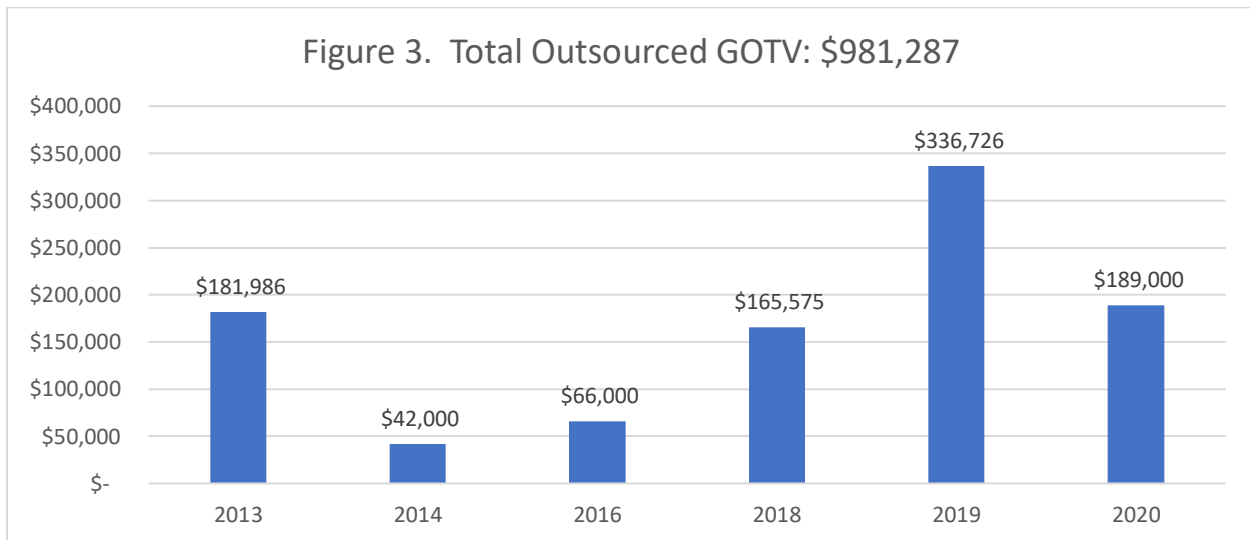


Source: Election Law Enforcement Commission Forms R-3 for 2Q and 3Q 2022.

NJEA PAC contributions provide a useful barometer for teacher engagement in politics and put data behind the anecdotes of teacher apathy above. The data shows that NJEA PAC is almost entirely sustained by retired teachers, whose interest also appears to be dwindling, as shown in Figure 1.

### The NJEA Outsources Its GOTV Efforts

Another indication of the waning participation of teachers is the outsourcing of the NJEA's GOTV efforts to outside vendors. Thus rather than reflecting the interest and activism of teachers, the NJEA's GOTV efforts increasingly reflect NJEA leadership's desire to remain relevant in New Jersey politics. As seen in Figure 3, the NJEA has spent \$981,287 since 2013 on outsourced GOTV.



Source: Garden State Forward ELEC Forms R-3, 2013-2020.

These various vendors are listed in Table 1 below. These vendors all provide paid workers for the various tasks associated with GOTV, including canvassing (door-knocking and speaking with voters), phone calls/banks and texting – all tasks previously undertaken by NJEA members.

Table 1. Vendors for NJEA’s Outsourced GOTV 2013-2020

GOTV VENDORS	Dates	Amount	Description
NJ Working Families	2019-20	\$ 339,000	GOTV/Field/Phone calls/Texts
Parano & Associates	2018-19	\$ 319,346	GOTV/Field/Canvassing
Tyson Organization	2013-14, 2016, 2018	\$ 149,272	Telephone Calls
Field Strategies	2013	\$ 139,600	Consulting/Field
Stones Phones	2013	\$ 29,954	Telephone Calls/Bank
Digital Turf	2013	\$ 4,115	Telephone Calls
<b>TOTAL</b>		\$ 981,287	

Source: Garden State Forward ELEC Forms R-3, 2013-2020.

**Most Vendors from Outside New Jersey.** Note that of the four major vendors, only one is a New Jersey-based firm, Parano & Associates. Below are descriptions of these firms:

- [Parano & Associates](#). On the employment app [Handshake](#), Parano & Associates is described as a political consulting firm that “specializes in campaign field work” – that is, GOTV. Per the [Bergen Record](#), Parano was a one-stop-GOTV-shop for gubernatorial candidate Phil Murphy in 2017. Murphy “assembled his own political machine” by hiring Parano to “build a statewide field operation,” with paid canvassers conducting a “door-knocking campaign.” Parano’s [Twitter page](#) shows multiple pictures of Parano canvassers door-knocking and speaking with voters. This appears to be precisely the same kind of work Parano did for the NJEA.
- [Field Strategies](#) is a national firm that provides “election day operations, voter registration and persuasion and base turnout” services with a roster of 200-plus professional political organizers. The Field Strategies [model](#) include paid canvassers knocking on doors and speaking with voters. Again, this appears to be precisely what Field Strategies did for the NJEA.
- [Tyson Organization](#) is a national firm that produces “strategic voter contact solutions for campaigns in all 50 states.” Including “designing, targeting and executing phone programs. Exactly what they did for the NJEA.

**The Real NJ Working Families Operates Out of Brooklyn, NY.** Finally, there is the NJEA's close ally, New Jersey [Working Families Alliance](#) (NJ Working Families). As shown in Table 1 above, for the 2019 and 2020 election cycles, the NJEA outsourced a large chunk of its GOTV efforts to NJ Working Families. But NJ Working Families is a virtual organization with no employees. According to its 2019 IRS Form 990:

This organization did not have its own employees in 2019. All staff were hired by Community Labor Administrative Services, Inc., which administered the payroll for the organization using a payroll company. All employees are reported on Community Labor Administrative Services, Inc.

So, according to the IRS filing, even the executive director of NJ Working Families, Sue Altman, is employed by CLAS. Indeed, she has a [workingfamilies.org email address](#), which is a New York entity based in Brooklyn, not a New Jersey one.

When it undertakes GOTV for the NJEA, NJ Working Families outsources the work to a corporation named Community Labor Administrative Services, Inc. (CLAS). CLAS is a for-profit subsidiary of Working Families Organization, Inc., a non-profit located in Brooklyn, NY.<sup>2</sup> CLAS provides a similar [suite of GOTV services](#) to many Working Families Organization state affiliates, including those from New Jersey, [New York and Connecticut](#) as well as for the [national Working Families Party](#). Such services include the provision of paid canvassers, digital ads, and texting – all forms of GOTV.

The NJEA has very close ties to NJ Working Families. Current NJEA Director of Government Relations for Policy and Politics, Deborah Cornavaca, was once head of legislative affairs for NJ Working Families. NJ Working Families has long been a recipient of NJEA largesse, garnering \$855,000 in NJEA donations from 2012-2019 (excluding 2018). NJ Working Families has also participated in [numerous political coalitions](#) with the NJEA. But since 2019, NJ Working Families has become a key provider of GOTV services to the NJEA.

So, the NJEA is outsourcing most of its GOTV efforts to non-New Jersey entities. Sunlight is left to speculate on whether the paid GOTV workers are even New Jersey residents. If not, then there are professional political operatives coming into New Jersey from out of state to perform GOTV for the NJEA. That would be very far indeed from the days when New Jersey teachers did the NJEA's GOTV work.

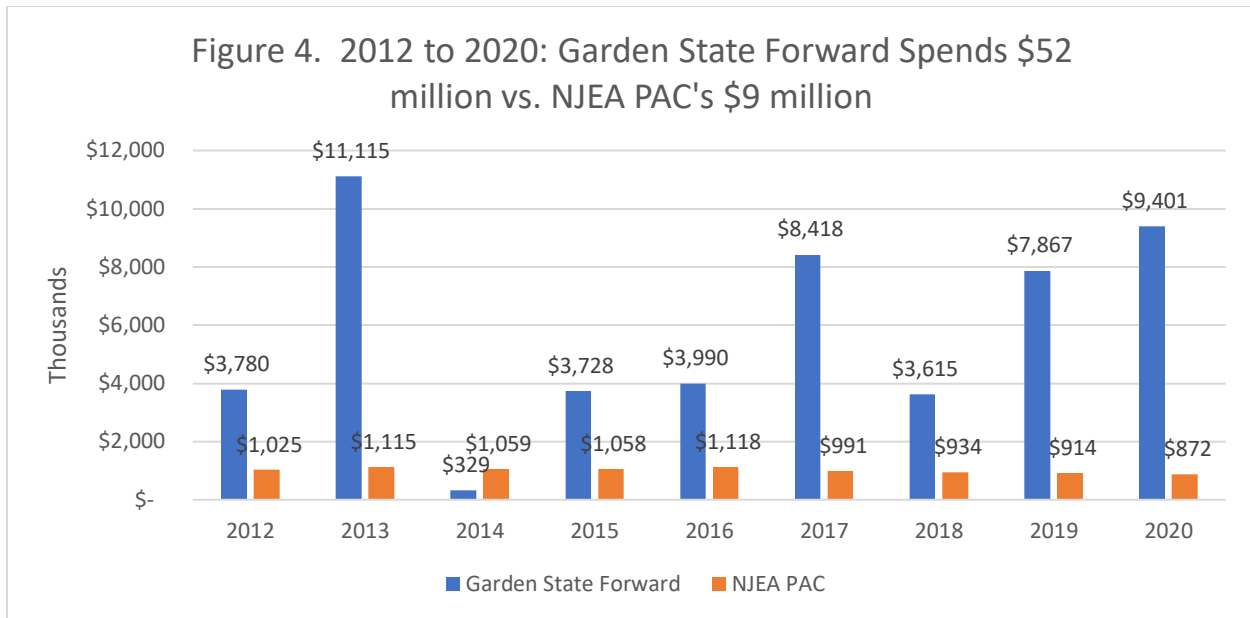
### With Less Teacher Participation, Garden State Forward Is the NJEA's Main Funding Vehicle

With teachers' dwindling funding for NJEA PAC and their reluctance to participate in GOTV efforts, the NJEA's Super PAC, Garden State Forward has become the main vehicle for NJEA political spending. As seen in Figure 4, since its inception in 2012,

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<sup>2</sup> CLAS and Working Families Organization, Inc. shared the same offices and many of the same officers. See <https://opengovus.com/washington-corporation/603270535> and <https://opengovus.com/washington-corporation/604463333>.

Garden State Forward has spent \$52.2 million, or almost 6x the \$9.1 million spent by NJEA PAC.



Source: Election Law Enforcement Commission Forms IND and R-3, 2012-2020.

**Teachers Forced to Fund Politics, Even If They Don't Want to.** Through their actions, teachers have made quite clear that they want to teach, not play politics. With contributions to NJEA PAC requiring teacher opt-ins, the decline in contributions serves as an excellent barometer of a decline in teachers' interest in politics, as does waning teacher participation in GOTV. But importantly, Garden State Forward is funded by teachers' highest-in-the-nation regular dues. Teachers do not have a real choice about paying these dues and have little say in how they are spent. NJEA leadership can simply appropriate their dues and spend them however they choose, regardless of teachers' lack of desire to play politics.

### Conclusion

Once again, New Jersey teachers are getting a raw deal from the NJEA. They may not want to play politics, but NJEA leadership does, and leadership is perfectly content to force teachers to pay for it. The result is a NJEA political machine that is increasingly detached from New Jersey teachers and forced to outsource its GOTV efforts to often out-of-state vendors.

**Does NJEA political action really express the will of teachers anymore?**