



SUNLIGHT
POLICY CENTER
— OF NEW JERSEY —

RESEARCH REPORT

**NJEA LEADERSHIP BETRAYED TEACHERS
TWICE: THEY WASTED \$45 MILLION OF DUES
ON SPILLER'S FAILED RUN FOR GOVERNOR
AND DOOMED THE BEST CHANCE TO IMPROVE
TEACHERS' PENSIONS**

**NJEA Leadership Did the Exact Opposite of What Teachers
Wanted.**

April 17, 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"[NJEA] Executive Director Kevin Kelleher asked Deborah Cornavaca, NJEA's Director [of] Government Relations, Policy and Politics to share her campaign plan for Spiller for Governor and winning the Democratic Primary on June 10, 2025."

Minutes from NJEA Delegate Assembly, January 11, 2025¹

Deborah Cornavaca, Director of Government Relations, Policy and Politics, was tasked with developing the plan for NJEA President Sean Spiller's campaign for governor. Cornavaca's role confirms that, during Spiller's run, the NJEA effectively became one, big "Spiller for Governor" Super PAC. This makes sense given leadership's covert expenditure of an unprecedented \$45 million of dues on Spiller² -- by far the largest expenditure on a political campaign in NJEA history. Spiller's run was the NJEA's main priority. Period.

But Cornavaca's role also tells us what she, the Government Relations Division, and the NJEA were *not* doing: they were *not* prioritizing the NJEA's Pension Justice campaign. The Government Relations Division is tasked with supporting the NJEA's lobbying efforts in Trenton -- efforts like improving teachers' pensions -- not planning political campaigns, but Cornavaca's focus was on Spiller's campaign, not lobbying for pension improvements.

The Pension Justice campaign began in early 2024, but once Spiller announced his candidacy in June 2024, Spiller's run became the NJEA's priority. This can be seen not only in the \$45 million spent on Cornavaca's focus, but also in the NJEA's governance and communications with teachers: the activities of the NJEA's Delegate Assembly, the NJEA's monthly magazine for teachers, *NJEA Review*; and the NJEA's website. For all three, Spiller's run was overwhelmingly the priority over Pension Justice.

The strategic decision to prioritize Spiller's run would end up being a triple-disaster for NJEA members, who saw:

¹ New Jersey Education Association, "NJEA Delegate Assembly," *NJEA Review*, February 2026, p. 58.

² The NJEA spent a total of \$45 million of dues on Spiller's run: \$5 million to Protecting Our Democracy before he announced his candidacy, and \$40 million to Working New Jersey to outsource Spiller's primary campaign.

- \$45 million of their highest-in-the-nation dues wasted on Spiller's poor showing - - fifth out of six with a mere 10% of the vote.
- The NJEA's leadership, money, resources, and political infrastructure diverted away from the Pension Justice campaign for a critical 12-month period.
- The NJEA's political clout damaged right when it was needed to lobby for pensions.

When Pension Justice finally reclaimed leadership's focus in late fall 2025, NJEA-friendly Gov. Phil Murphy only had a few months left in office. The window for legislative action had been reduced to the lame duck session -- the brief period between an election and the seating of a new legislature -- when there is a great deal to do and very little time to do it. The main goal of the Pension Justice campaign was moving all members into Tier 1 pension plans, which was always going to be a heavy political lift. Unsurprisingly, the belated effort failed.

Even worse, the best chance for pension improvement was lost. Having experienced the NJEA spending \$40 million against her in the Democratic primary, incoming Gov. Mikie Sherrill appears to be less NJEA-friendly than Murphy. Tier 1 for Everyone looks doomed for the foreseeable future.

By prioritizing Spiller's run over pension improvement, NJEA leadership did the exact opposite of what teachers wanted. Leadership knew that teachers did not support Spiller's run, which is why they covertly sent \$40 million of dues to outsource his primary campaign to Super PAC Working New Jersey, which spent 99% of the money backing Spiller. The actual election results confirmed the lack of support from teachers. On the other hand, from internal surveys, leadership knew very well that pensions were teachers' top priority. So leadership betrayed their duty to look out for members' best interests twice.

What if leadership had prioritized pensions all the way?

- What if Deborah Cornavaca, her Government Relations team, and the rest of the organization had devoted all their time and effort to lobbying for pensions?
- What if motivated NJEA members had been organized in a long-term, sustained campaign to achieve something they very much wanted?
- What if the NJEA had dedicated \$45 million to persuading legislators to address the pensions during an election year?
- What if the NJEA had not weakened its clout right when it was needed?

Back in the real world of bad leadership decisions, Tier 1 for Everyone died with the end of the lame-duck session. Murphy is now gone. The NJEA's political clout is weakened. And nearly half of New Jersey teachers are stuck with inferior, inadequate Tier 5 pensions.

I. SPILLER'S RUN PRIORITIZED OVER PENSION JUSTICE CAMPAIGN⁴

This report deals with NJEA leadership's disastrous decision to prioritize then-President Sean Spiller's failed run for governor over its on-going "Pension Justice" campaign, the primary goal of which was to place all NJEA members in higher quality, Tier 1 pension plans.⁶ Once Spiller lost badly in the primary, leadership then refocused on the Pension Justice campaign -- which was renamed the "Tier 1 for Everyone" campaign -- but it was too late. The lame-duck legislative session ended and Gov. Phil Murphy vacated his office. The NJEA's campaign to improve members' pensions was dead.

Pension Justice campaign. The NJEA's Pension Justice campaign ran from March 2024 to January 2026, culminating in the lame-duck legislative session at the end of Gov. Murphy's second term.⁷ The NJEA had long decried the pension reforms instituted by the 2011 Chapter 78 law,⁸ in particular the placing of newly hired employees in inferior Tier 5 pension plans. The Pension Justice campaign sought to reverse several of the Chapter 78 reforms before the end of [NJEA-friendly](#) Gov. Phil Murphy's second term, including ending the penalties for a break in service⁹ and, most importantly, placing all teachers and support personnel in Tier 1 pensions. With almost half of all current teachers and 30,000 support personnel in Tier 5 plans, "Tier 1 for Everyone" was the heaviest lift, given the substantial additional cost for New Jersey's perennially strained budgets.¹⁰

Enter Sean Spiller and his vanity run for governor. Three months into the Pension Justice campaign, NJEA President Sean Spiller declared his candidacy for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination. During the May 18, 2024 Delegate Assembly meeting, Secretary-Treasurer Petal Robertson announced the transfer of \$40 million "to cover independent expenditures related to the election campaign."¹¹ Although well disguised with generic terms, that \$40 million was to intended to outsource Spiller's

⁴ The NJEA's campaign to improve pensions was initially called the "Pension Justice" campaign. In October 2025, the name was changed to "Tier 1 for Everyone."

⁶ See Appendix C for a summary of the pension tiers.

⁷ The first official mention of the Pension Justice campaign was by NJEA Executive Director Kevin Kelleher at that March 9, 2024 Delegate Assembly. See Appendix B. March 9, 2024 was also the first date that the Pension Justice was mentioned in the Action Center section of the NJEA website. See Appendix D.

⁸ Chapter 78 (P.L. 2011, c. 78) was passed by the legislature and signed into law by Gov. Chris Christie in 2011. Newly hired, full-time teachers and education support personnel (nurses, bus drivers, etc.) were placed in inferior Tier 5 pensions, among other reforms. For a full explanation of Chapter 78, see the Division of Pensions and Benefits [website](#).

⁹ If a teacher had a more-than- two-year break in service, she would automatically be moved to a Tier 5 pension upon her return. That was expanded to more-than-10 years by a 2025 law.

¹⁰ The NJEA claims that it would cost the state an additional \$436 million a year to move every employee into Tier 1. That would be in addition to the \$7 billion the state contributes to the pension system annually. New Jersey Education Association, "Tier 1 for Everyone" advertisement, *NJEA Review*, October 2025, p. 59.

¹¹ New Jersey Education Association, "NJEA Delegate Assembly," minutes for May 18, 2024, *NJEA Review*, January 2026, p. 59.

primary run to the Super PAC Working New Jersey.¹² For the 12 months from June 2024 -- when Spiller announced -- to June 10, 2025 -- the day of Spiller's fifth-place finish in the primary election -- the NJEA's priority shifted from Pension Justice to Spiller for Governor.

At \$45 million, Spiller's run was the biggest political priority in NJEA history. In total, NJEA leadership covertly diverted \$45 million of teachers' highest-in-the-nation dues to back Spiller's run.¹³ This was by far the most money ever spent in a gubernatorial primary in New Jersey history, amounting to an astounding \$502 per vote for the fifth-place Spiller. It was also by far the most money ever spent by the NJEA on any political campaign. When it comes to identifying the NJEA's priorities at the time, the money speaks for itself: Spiller's run was the biggest political priority in the history of the NJEA.¹⁴

Top leadership dedicated to Spiller's run. It stands to reason that President Spiller's priority was the time-consuming task of running for governor, which surely impacted the functioning of top leadership. But this shift in priorities can also be seen in the January 11, 2025 Delegate Assembly meeting:

Executive Director Kevin Kelleher asked Deborah Cornavaca, NJEA's Director [of] Government Relations, Policy and Politics to share her campaign plan for Spiller for Governor and winning the Democratic Primary on June 10, 2025.¹⁵

So now we know that Deborah Cornavaca, the NJEA's Director of Government Relations, Policy and Politics, was responsible for the Spiller's campaign plan. It's likely that at least some -- if not all -- of the Government Relations Division (GRD) was supporting their boss and engaged in the effort as well. But that's not what the Government Relations GRD is tasked to do. According to the NJEA [website](#), the GRD:

... coordinates NJEA's legislative activities and political campaigns and is responsible for the monitoring functions of government departments, bureaus, and agencies.

The description shows that the GRD was designed to support lobbying efforts in Trenton -- efforts like improving teachers' pensions. There is no mention of planning political campaigns, but that was Cornavaca's focus. Cornavaca's role further confirms that,

¹² As a Super PAC, Working New Jersey could spend unlimited amounts of money on independent expenditures to back Spiller. See Sunlight's report "[A Final Analysis of Sean Spiller's \\$45 Million Run for Governor: Non-Disclosure, Questionable Spending, and No Accountability](#)" for a full discussion of Working New Jersey and the spending behind Spiller's run.

¹³ The NJEA spent a total of \$45 million of dues backing Spiller's run for governor: \$5 million sent to Spiller's Super PAC, Protecting Our Democracy, before he announced his candidacy; and \$40 million sent to Super PAC Working New Jersey to effectively outsource Spiller's primary campaign. Ibid.

¹⁴ It was over twice as much as the next-biggest: the \$20 million spent backing Gov. Murphy. Ibid.

¹⁵ New Jersey Education Association, "NJEA Delegate Assembly," *NJEA Review*, February 2026, p. 58.

during Spiller's run, the NJEA really did become one, big "[Spiller for Governor](#)" [Super PAC](#). Pension Justice took a back seat.

Delegate Assembly: Spiller wins 6-0. We analyzed the activities of the Delegate Assembly as shown in the Delegate Assembly minutes going back to March 2024. There were five assemblies during Spiller's run and a total of eight during the span of the Pension Justice campaign.

As shown in Table 1, the Pension Justice campaign was mentioned for the first time by NJEA Executive Director Kevin Kelleher in the March 9, 2024 Delegate Assembly. It was not mentioned again until the September 6, 2025 assembly, when Spiller was no longer president and had lost in the June primary. In other words, the Pension Justice campaign was not mentioned once in the six assemblies that met during that 18-month time-period, which included the five during Spiller's run. Zero.

On the other hand, Spiller's campaign was mentioned six times during his run, twice by President Spiller, twice by Vice President Beatty, once by Secretary-Treasurer Robertson, and once by Government Relations co-head Deborah Cornavaca. Keeping score, that's Spiller 6, Pension Justice 0. We also believe it's likely Spiller's run was mentioned in the May 17, 2025 assembly, so it could even be 7-0. (See Appendix B)

Table 1.

Delegate Assembly Minutes	Spiller for Governor	Pension Justice
March 9, 2024	-	1
May 18, 2024	-	ZERO
September 7, 2024*	1	ZERO
November 9, 2024*	1	ZERO
January 11, 2025*	3	ZERO
March 29, 2025*	1	ZERO
May 17, 2025*	Likely	ZERO
September 6, 2025	-	2
TOTAL during Run	6+	ZERO
# of DAs during run	5	5
Average per DA	1.2+	0.0

*Denotes DA during Spiller's run. Source: Delegate Assembly minutes in *NJEA Review*.

NJEA Review: 45-4 in favor of Spiller during his run. Sunlight analyzed every issue of *NJEA Review*¹⁷ during the Pension Justice campaign: March 2024 to January 2026. As shown in Table 2, Spiller's campaign was featured or mentioned 45 times in the 10 issues published during his run, Pension Justice only 4 -- over 10x more for Spiller. In fact, over all the 19 issues that were published during the Pension Justice

¹⁷ *NJEA Review* is published during the school year -- September through June -- every year. It is published on the NJEA's [website](#) and there are [archives](#) of past issues.

campaign, Pension Justice was only featured 14 times. That's less than once an issue. In 12 of the 19 issues, the pension campaign was not mentioned at all. (See Appendix A)

Table 2.

NJEA Review	Spiller for Governor	Pension Justice
March 2024	-	ZERO
April 2024	-	ZERO
May 2024	-	ZERO
June 2024	-	1
September 2024*	3	ZERO
October 2024*	4	ZERO
November 2024*	3	1
December 2024*	3	ZERO
January 2025*	4	1
February 2025*	5	2
March 2025*	6	ZERO
April 2025*	4	ZERO
May 2025*	4	ZERO
June 2025*	9	ZERO
September 2025	-	ZERO
October 2025	-	3
November 2025	-	2
December 2025	-	1
January 2026	-	3
TOTAL during run	45	4
# of issues during run	10	10
Average per issue	4.5	0.4

*Denotes issue during Spiller's run. Source: *NJEA Reviews* February 2024 - January 2026.

NJEA website: Spiller dominates. Sunlight used the [Wayback Machine](#) to analyze the NJEA website during this time-period. While the use of the Wayback machine does provides snapshots of past websites, there are gaps in the coverage. That said, we do have some revealing snapshots, and these confirm the overall pattern of Spiller's campaign becoming the NJEA's main priority during the time Spiller was running, with the Pension Justice campaign taking a back seat.

As can be seen on the NJEA [website](#), the viewer first encounters a large picture that takes up the whole top of the webpage. Right below the top picture is a section that is divided into three prominent, stand-alone sub-sections with distinctive coloring and photos, which provide links to prioritized NJEA campaigns or issues. Scrolling down through two more sections, the viewer arrives at the Action Center section, which

contains brief word descriptions of whatever political initiatives require member action. As would be expected, there's a hierarchy of presentation starting at the top, which naturally reveals the NJEA's priorities.

Here is a timeline of the respective placements of the Pension Justice and Spiller for Governor campaigns on the website (see Appendix D for screenshots):

March 9, 2024: The first appearance of the Pension Justice campaign as one of three action items in the Action Center section down towards the middle of the webpage.

September 2, 2024: Spiller announced in June 2024, so this coincided with the beginning of the 2024-25 school year after the summer break when *NJEA Review* is not published. A large picture of Spiller announcing his run occupies the entire top of the webpage. The Pension Justice campaign remains in the Action Center down below.

October 2, 2024: Spiller for Governor gains its own sub-section as one of the three stand-alone sub-sections just below the photo spread at the top of the webpage. The Pension Justice campaign remains in the Action Center down below. This juxtaposition remains in place for the rest of 2024.

January 7, 2025: The Pension Justice campaign finally gets its own stand-alone subsection next to the Spiller for Governor sub-section. This juxtaposition remains through the primary election in June, after which the Spiller sub-section is removed. The Pension Justice campaign becomes the Tier 1 for Everyone campaign in October 2025, three months before Murphy's term ends.

January 2, 2026: Tier 1 for Everyone finally gets the top photo spot only days before the lame duck session ends.

From examining the website, it is clear that Spiller for Governor was a higher priority than the Pension Justice campaign during the time of Spiller's run. Spiller for Governor got the top photo spot right at the beginning of his push to mobilize teachers behind his campaign. Immediately thereafter, the Spiller campaign got a prominent, stand-alone sub-section. All during this time, the Pension Justice campaign was relegated to a line-item in the Action Center well down the webpage. It was only in January 2025 -- almost a year after it started -- that the Pension Justice campaign got its own stand-alone sub-section, and not until January 2026 that it got the top photo. That meant eight months of relative obscurity, four months of which saw Spiller for Governor take clear precedence over Pension Justice.

II. THE NJEA'S POLITICAL CLOUT WAS WEAKENED RIGHT WHEN IT WAS NEEDED FOR THE PENSION JUSTICE CAMPAIGN

Not only did NJEA leadership prioritize Spiller's run over the Pension Justice campaign in about every way imaginable, but the way in which Spiller ran and lost diminished the NJEA's (theretofore considerable) political clout right when it was needed to push for Pension Justice on a much-shortened timeline.

Diminished political influence after Spiller's run. In the aftermath of the profligate waste of \$45 million on Spiller's failed run, *Politico* observed that "some in Trenton are starting to *question the union's political prowess*" (Emphasis added). The article quoted Sen. Gopal:

... I think the strength of the NJEA will be questioned after these election results. How does it not?

The article goes on to quote a former high-level NJEA official, who said that the millions spent "didn't seem like a good investment" and could impact its ability to advocate for teachers in Trenton:

The NJEA leadership's credibility I believe has been diminished as it relates to going into the Statehouse and fighting for issues for the association.

The Rebovich Institute's Micah Rasmussen told *NJSpotlight News*:

I don't think there is any evidence I can find that it led to a bigger discussion on the plight of teachers. It didn't lead to, I think, an improved climate for teachers.

\$40 million spent against Sherrill did not create goodwill. It also stands to reason that, by covertly tapping into the \$130-million pool of regular dues to spend an unprecedented \$40 million in the Democratic primary, NJEA leadership created tensions with the other Democratic candidates, including the eventual winner, Sherrill. Newark Mayor and gubernatorial candidate Ras Baraka captured this sentiment (per *New Jersey Monitor*):

You can't not raise your own money and then have a \$35 million piggy bank ... and don't believe it will have an impact on these elections ...

Case-in-point: NJEA was not consulted on the new commissioner of education. It certainly appears that Gov. Sherrill views the NJEA -- and its political clout -- differently from the NJEA's good pal Murphy. The *New Jersey Globe* reported that Sherrill did not consult the NJEA on her pick of Lily Laux as education commissioner:

Sherrill's pick of Laux came *without consulting the New Jersey Education Association*, the state's largest public employee union. The union endorsed

Sherrill in September after previously spending roughly \$40 million to nominate their own candidate, former Montclair Mayor Sean Spiller, the NJEA president. [Emphasis added.]

This stands in stark contrast with the NJEA's apparent veto power under Gov. Murphy.¹⁸

NJEA does not even bring up Tier 1 for Everyone in interview with Sherrill. Tellingly, in a long, October 2025 interview with Sherrill after the NJEA endorsed her, the NJEA did not even bring up the Tier 1 for Everyone campaign.¹⁹ That seems like an indication that the NJEA knew the dim prospects for Tier 1 for Everyone under Sherrill, which further suggests that the NJEA's belated lobbying surge and petition were more performative rather than a serious effort to get legislation passed.

III. PENSION JUSTICE CAMPAIGN DOOMED

So it was with weakened political clout that the Pension Justice campaign was pushed until the last few months of the NJEA-friendly Murphy's final term. Incredibly, the NJEA did not even make the most of the short time it had to campaign for pension improvements.

Pension Justice campaign was not a priority even in September 2025. The September 2025 issue of *NJEA Review* was the first issue published under the newly elected president, Steve Beatty. Yet, in a lengthy interview with Beatty to introduce him to members, he did not even mention the Pension Justice campaign. Nor did he mention the campaign in his first President's Message to members.²¹ That the NJEA's new president did not mention Pension Justice at all speaks volumes about what the NJEA's priorities were and were not.

In fact, the Pension Justice campaign was mentioned only once in the entire September 2025 issue at the end of an article about the NJEA's legislative victories:

NJEA is also *ramping up* the efforts to achieve a Tier 1 pension for every public-school employee ...*Stay tuned to see how you can do your part.* [Emphasis added.]²²

¹⁸ See the plight of Paula White, Murphy's choice for Assistant Commissioner of Education in Tom Moran, "[Hired, then fired, hours later. Under Murphy, teachers union gets veto power](#)," NJ.com, February 21, 2018.

¹⁹ The interview addressed full pension payments and break-in-service bill but not Tier 1 for Everyone. Aiat Oraby, "Mikie Sherrill's Commitment: Secure pensions, respect for educators, thriving schools," *NJEA Review*, October 2025, p. 18.

²¹ Steve Beatty, President's Message, *NJEA Review*, September 2025, p.7.

²² Marybeth Beichert, "The NJEA Report: Member engagement leads to legislative wins," *NJEA Review*, September 2025, p.18.

Which is to say that, as of September 2025 -- three months after Spiller lost -- NJEA leadership was only just "ramping up" the campaign and still had not figured out the roles that members would play, which is the foundation of any member-driven political effort. The Pension Justice campaign was neither Beatty's nor the NJEA's top priority in September, which reduced the campaign to a mere three months before the end of Murphy's term.

The Tier 1 for Everyone campaign finally starts in October. The NJEA did not get the campaign going in earnest until October 1, 2025, when the NJEA announced its "[Tier 1 for Everyone](#)" campaign,²³ which aimed to move almost half of all teachers as well as 30,000 support personnel to Tier 1 pensions. The NJEA launched a major lobbying effort based on a petition drive with the goal of collecting 100,000 member signatures to deliver them to the Statehouse "to show legislators that Tier 1 for Everyone is a top priority of NJEA members."²⁴

Despite the late, October start, the NJEA hoped to get the legislation passed when the legislature reconvened in November after the general election:

Now is the time we must ... get these bills passed through the Assembly and the Senate and signed by Gov. Murphy ... when the Legislature reconvenes in November.²⁵

Unsurprisingly, with reduced clout and such a short time-line, that effort failed. NJEA leadership was then forced to push the timeline to the lame-duck legislative session at the very end of Murphy's term in January 2026:

"... the next few months are a crucial opportunity for members to organize to get these bills passed by the legislature and signed by Gov. Phil Murphy during the lame duck session ..."²⁶

This was not a recipe for success and the NJEA knew it.

The NJEA knew the truncated timeline was unlikely to succeed. Being one of the most politically active organizations in New Jersey, the NJEA is well practiced when it comes to organizing lobbying campaigns to pass major legislation. In seeking Tier 1 for Everyone, the NJEA was indeed looking to get a major piece of legislation passed.

²³ The NJEA achieved some minor pension successes, including the "break-in-service" legislation, but the main goal of expanding Tier 1 remained. Hence, the change in the name of the campaign from "Pension Justice" to "Tier 1 for Everyone."

²⁴ Steve Beatty, Petal Robertson, and Tina Dare, "Huge pension win for NJEA members," NJEA website, October 1, 2025, <https://www.njea.org/huge-pension-justice-win-for-njea-members/>.

²⁵ Marybeth Beichert, Sarah Favringer, and Michael Flynn "The fight for retirement dignity" *NJEA Review*, October 2025, p.22.

²⁶ Take Action: Pension Justice for Everyone: "Tier 1 for Everyone is everyone's fight," NJEA website, <https://www.njea.org/tier1/>.

NJEA leadership knew full well that such campaigns require a full, multi-year, organizational commitment, especially as leadership also knew that the NJEA's clout had been damaged.

In a retrospective piece discussing the failure of the Tier 1 for Everyone campaign, the NJEA acknowledged as much: "... the fact that [the legislation] didn't move goes to show that passing legislation takes time and immense pressure." More specifically:

There are multiple steps for a bill to go through and ... passing legislation ... can be a long, slow-moving and contentious process. [Past successful pension legislation] took *several years* of educating legislators and the public and organizing our members ... It will be no different for Tier 1 for Everyone legislation. [Emphasis added.]²⁷

But that is not what the NJEA did with Tier 1 for Everyone. For 12 months in the middle of the Pension Justice campaign, the NJEA's main effort was Spiller's run. It was only in the late fall of 2025 that the NJEA went all-in for Pension Justice.

Lame duck fail. On December 4, led by President Beatty, Vice President Robertson, and Secretary-Treasurer Tina Dare, the NJEA delivered a petition signed by 112,000 members to the Statehouse with great fanfare.²⁸ This provided great optics to present to members but no results. The lame duck session came and went without passing the pension bills. When it was clear that the NJEA's main legislative goal was thwarted -- moving all members to Tier 1 pensions -- the NJEA reduced the ask to the 30,000 support personnel, but even this lesser goal was thwarted. So NJEA leadership came up with nothing for "Tier 1 for Everyone" during the lame-duck session.

Looking forward, little hope for Tier 1 for Everyone. Given the failure of its lame-duck push and its diminished influence with Gov. Sherrill, it appears that the NJEA knows there is now little hope for pension improvement. Tellingly, the NJEA did not even mention Tier 1 for Everyone in a February 2026 *NJEA Review* article on what NJEA members should expect from the new Sherrill administration. The article mentioned Sherrills' pledge to make the full, required pension contributions and the break-in-service bill, but not Tier 1 for Everyone,²⁹ which implies that the NJEA has no expectation of enacting Tier 1 for Everyone under Sherrill -- despite (performatively) telling members otherwise.³⁰

²⁷ Marybeth Beichert, "Patience and perseverance will bring pension justice," NJEA website, February 27, 2026 <https://www.njea.org/patience-and-perseverance-will-bring-pension-justice/>.

²⁸ See the January 2026 issue of *NJEA Review*.

²⁹ Aaron McClendon, "What to expect from Gov. Mikie Sherrill," *NJEA Review*, January 2026, p. 26.

³⁰ See, e.g., Marybeth Beichert, "Patience and perseverance will bring pension justice," NJEA website, February 27, 2026 <https://www.njea.org/patience-and-perseverance-will-bring-pension-justice/>.

IV. NJEA LEADERSHIP BETRAYED THEIR DUTY TO MEMBERS TWICE BY DOING THE EXACT OPPOSITE OF WHAT MEMBERS WANTED

Pensions were the number one issue for members. Members cared a great deal about their pensions and made this very clear to leadership, so leadership was well aware of this. In the first *NJEA Review* (September 2025) of new President Steve Beatty's term, an interview with Beatty revealed that he knew pensions (and benefits) were his membership's top priority:

"[NJEA President] Beatty knows from conversations with members and surveys conducted by NJEA that pensions and health benefits are the number one issue for all members ..."³¹

NJEA internal survey reveals the truth. During the Tier 1 for Everyone campaign, the NJEA reported on an internal survey that showed members saw improving pensions as essential for the health of the teaching profession:

"95% of educators surveyed agree that improving pension benefits would help address educators burnout and the desire to leave the profession ... [A]n inferior pension system is an impediment to ensuring that New Jersey retains access to the best professional educators ..."³²

Not only that, but pensions were so important to them that members said they would be willing to volunteer to take action in support of pensions:

The overwhelming majority of those polled believe equal pension benefits are vital for the profession, and they are willing to take action to ensure pensions are fully funded and fair.³³

They were true to their word: 50,000 members signed up to be pension advocates during the Pension Justice campaign,³⁴ and 112,000 signed the petition calling for Tier 1 for Everyone delivered to the Statehouse on December 4, 2025.

On the other hand, members did not care about -- or support -- Spiller's run.³⁵ NJEA leadership knew that teachers did not support Spiller's run because they allocated \$40 million of dues to outsource Spiller's primary run to Super PAC Working New Jersey, which spent 99% of the money backing Spiller. Notably, Working New

³¹ Patrick Rumaker, "A strong union of engaged members - Solidarity Forever! Meet NJEA President Steve Beatty, *NJEA Review*, September, 2025, p. 27.

³² New Jersey Education Association, "Tier 1 for Everyone," *NJEA Review*, October 2025, p. 59.

³³ Marybeth Beichert, Sarah Favringer, and Michael Flynn "The fight for retirement dignity," *NJEA Review*, October 2025, p.22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ This is a summary of Sunlight's comprehensive report on Spiller's run: "[NJEA Leadership Wasted \\$45 Million of Dues on NJEA President Sean Spiller's Vanity Run for governor and Hid the Truth from Teachers.](#)" Please see this report for full sources and footnotes.

Jersey and the NJEA spent \$10.1 million to get out the vote for Spiller -- because NJEA members did not volunteer in sufficient numbers (see below).³⁶

The election results proved leadership was right. In a post-election report, *Politico* quoted a former high-level NJEA:

If you were to ask [teachers] 'Is this how you want your monies used' — for a sitting president to spend millions of dollars to run for governor — they would say no. And how do I think they would say no? *The numbers that did not vote for him on election day is proof.*³⁷ [Emphasis added].

The election results confirm this former-NJEA official's conclusion: teachers did not support Spiller's candidacy:

- *They didn't contribute money.* Only 44 active teachers contributed \$200 or more, only 0.03% of the NJEA's 117,000 teachers, totaling a mere \$17,518, or 5% of the \$313,752 total raised from such contributors
- *They didn't volunteer to get out the vote (GOTV).* The NJEA stated that members who worked on the campaign "did so on a voluntary basis,"³⁸ but the NJEA spent an astounding \$10.1 million³⁹ for *paid* GOTV in what was "the biggest GOTV operation ... in the Democratic primary," according to *Politico*.
- *They didn't even vote for him.* The NJEA claims 200,000 members. Spiller received 89,457 votes. If every one of those votes was a NJEA member, 45% of NJEA members would have voted for Spiller. But of course we know that every one of those votes was not a NJEA member, so it's certain that a large majority of members did NOT vote for Spiller, just as the former-NJEA official observed above.

Compare the above numbers to the 50,000 members who volunteered to be pension advocates and the 112,000 who signed the Tier 1 for Everyone petition.

By doing the opposite of what members wanted, leadership betrayed their duty twice. The facts show that, by prioritizing Spiller over pensions, NJEA leadership

³⁶ Spiller's own campaign provided the remaining 1%. \$40 million was sent to Working New Jersey to effectively outsource Spiller's primary campaign. Another \$5 million had previously been sent to Spiller's Super PAC Protecting Our Democracy, bringing the total expenditure to \$45 million. See Sunlight's report "[A Final Analysis of Sean Spiller's \\$45 Million Run for Governor: Non-Disclosure, Questionable Spending, and No Accountability](#)" for a full discussion of Working New Jersey's expenditures supporting Spiller's run.

³⁷ Daniel Han and Madison Fernandez, "[A \\$40 million flameout in New Jersey's race for governor puts scrutiny on teachers union,](#)" *Politico*, June 29, 2025.

³⁸ Hannah Gross, "[Teachers union stands by splashing out over \\$40M on Spiller's bid for governor,](#)" *NJSpotlight News*, June 12, 2025.

³⁹ Mostly via Working New Jersey. Sunlight's report "[NJEA Leadership Wasted \\$45 Million of Dues on NJEA President Sean Spiller's Vanity Run for governor and Hid the Truth from Teachers](#)" shows a total \$10.1 million sent to AP Consulting for GOTV in support of Spiller.

deliberately did the exact opposite of what their members wanted. They also betrayed their duty to look out for members' best interests twice: wasting \$45 million of members' highest-in-the-nation dues on Spiller's failed run; and dooming the best chance to improve members' pensions.

CONCLUSION: WHAT IF ... ?

NJEA leadership betrayed members by doing the opposite of what they wanted. The failure of the Pension Justice campaign was entirely predictable, and NJEA leadership should have known it. They did know moving all members to Tier 1 pensions would be a heavy lift for a state with perennial budget deficits that was already spending \$7 billion a year on pensions. They did know getting such consequential legislation passed required a sustained, long-term effort that mobilized the entire organization. Yet, for 12 months in the middle of the Pension Justice campaign, leadership turned the NJEA into a de facto "Spiller for Governor" Super PAC. The Pension Justice campaign was shunted aside and wasn't prioritized until the late fall of 2025, with only a few months left in Murphy's final term. By that time, the NJEA's political clout had been weakened, its resources expended, and time was too short.

Members wanted pension improvements. Leadership knew this. Yet leadership made the decision to waste \$45 million of members' dues on Spiller's long-shot and ultimately failed candidacy, which members did not support. In the end, NJEA leadership knowingly betrayed their own members twice by doing the exact opposite of what members wanted.

What if? This leads to many "what ifs":

- What if leadership had prioritized pensions all the way?
- What if Deborah Cornavaca, her Government Relations team, and the rest of the organization had devoted all their time and effort to lobbying for pensions?
- What if motivated NJEA members had been organized in a long-term, sustained campaign to achieve something they very much wanted?
- What if the NJEA had dedicated \$45 million to persuading legislators to address the pensions during an election year?
- What if the NJEA had not weakened its clout right when it was needed?

Back in the real world of bad leadership decisions, Tier 1 for Everyone died with the end of the lame-duck session. Murphy is now gone. The NJEA's political clout is weakened. And half of New Jersey teachers are stuck with inferior, inadequate Tier 5 pensions.

APPENDIX A

Below is Sunlight's analysis of the NJEA's monthly magazine for teachers, *NJEA Review*, which is published each school year from September to June. Spiller announced his candidacy in June 2024, so the first *NJEA Review* after he announced was September 2024. The lame duck session ended on January 12, 2026, so the last *NJEA Review* before the end of the session was January 2026.

February 2024

Pension Justice: ZERO

March 2024

Pension Justice: ZERO

April 2024

Pension Justice: ZERO

May 2024

Pension Justice: ZERO

June 2024

Pension Justice: 1. "Final Exam" article on Tier 5 calling for pension advocates with a QR code to sign up.

September 2024

Spiller: 1. "Officers Online" Facebook post by Secretary-Treasurer Robertson with pro-Spiller pictures from Summer Leadership Conference. 2. "Advocate" article on NJEA endorsement of Spiller with QR code for campaign website.

Pension Justice: ZERO

October 2024

Spiller: 1. Picture of Delegate Assembly meeting with members in "Spiller for Governor" t-shirts. 2. President's Message touts NJEA endorsement of Spiller. 3. "Officers Online" Facebook post by Robertson with picture of members in "Spiller for Governor" t-shirts. 4. "Final Exam" article "Spiller for Statehouse" with picture and QR code.

Pension Justice: ZERO

November 2024

Spiller: 1. "Officers Online" Spiller Facebook post on National Education Association support for his run for governor. 2. "Spiller for Governor" ad aimed at Education Support Professionals (ESPs). 3. "Final Exam" article on Spiller with QR code.

Pension Justice: "Speak Out" article on Pension Justice with link to website on p. 48.

December 2024

Spiller: 1. Full "Spiller for Governor" ad with picture and QR code. 2. Multiple pictures of members in "Spiller for Governor" t-shirts at the NJEA convention. 3. "Final Exam" "Spiller for Governor" ad with picture.

Pension Justice: ZERO

January 2025

Spiller: 1. "Officers Online" Facebook post on support for his run at the Democratic Governors Association meeting. 2. President's Message urging members to support Spiller. 3. "Spiller for Governor" ad with picture and QR code. 4. Large article supporting Spiller's run with QR codes.

Pension Justice: Related article on pensions mentions Pension Justice campaign with QR code.

February 2025

Spiller: 1. President's Message mentions Spiller for Governor. 2. "Officers Online" Facebook post by Robertson on All-Presidents Meeting mentions Spiller for Governor. 3. "Spiller for Governor" ad tying in pensions with picture, QR code for Spiller campaign (not pensions). 4. Article on NJEA Minority Leadership Committee supporting Spiller's run with picture of members in "Spiller for Governor" t-shirts. 5. Article on Spiller's run with picture and QR codes.

Pension Justice: 1. "Officers Online" Facebook post by Robertson on All Presidents Meeting mentions Pension Justice. 2. "NJEA Report" article on pension bills being introduced in legislature (right above the ad linking Spiller's run to pensions).

March 2025

Spiller: 1. Spiller on the cover of the magazine. 2. Pictures of members in "Spiller for Governor" t-shirts at Winter Leadership Conference. 3. President's Message all about Spiller's run. 4. "Officers Online" Facebook post by Spiller on his run. 5. Full-page picture of members in "Spiller for Governor" t-shirts at NJEA convention. 6. Four-page article about Spiller and his family with pictures.

Pension Justice: ZERO

April 2025

Spiller: 1. Pictures of "Spiller for Governor" bus tour with members in t-shirts. 2. President's Message all about Spiller's run. 3. "The Advocate" ad for "Spiller for Governor" phone bank with QR code. 4. "Spiller for Governor" ad with picture and QR code.

Pension Justice: ZERO

May 2025

Spiller: 1. President's Message weaves in "Spiller for Governor." 2. "The Advocate" ad for "Spiller for Governor" phone bank with QR code. 3. "Spiller for Governor" ad with picture. 4. Article on "Make a plan to vote for Sean Spiller."

Pension Justice: ZERO

June 2025 (Primary on June 10, so this was the last issue before Spiller lost.)

Spiller: 1. Full-page ad with picture and QR code. 2. Picture of Spiller with members in "Spiller for Governor" t-shirts. 3. President's Message all about Spiller's run. 4. "Officers Online" Facebook post by Spiller on his run. 5. Article on newly elected officers mentions Spiller's run. 6. Full-page "Spiller for Governor" ad with pictures and QR codes. 7. "Spiller for Governor" ad with QR codes. 8. "Final Exam" article on the need for NJEA political power mentions NJEA endorsement of Spiller. 9. On the same page as the Final Exam article is a "Spiller for Governor" ad with picture and QR codes.

Pension Justice: ZERO

September 2025 (first issue with new President Beatty)

Pension Justice: ZERO. No mention of Pension Justice in President's message. No mention of Pension Justice in article on legislative actions. No mention in article on political involvement by members.

October 2025

Tier 1 for Everyone (first mention of new name): 1. New Tier 1 for Everyone campaign mentioned in President's Message. ("Officers Online" Facebook post by Robertson mentions break-in-service bill but not Tier 1 for Everyone. Interview with Gov. Sherrill does not mention Tier 1 for Everyone). 2. First article on Tier 1 for Everyone campaign. First mention of website dedicated to Tier 1 for Everyone. 3. Tier 1 for Everyone ad with QR code to sign petition.

November 2025

Tier 1 for Everyone: 1. President's message mentioned Tier 1 for Everyone campaign. 2. Article on lame duck and break-in-service bill mentions Tier 1 for Everyone.

December 2025

Tier 1 for Everyone: 1. Small ad for Tier 1 for Everyone petition with QR code.

January 2026 (last issue before lame duck ends)

Tier 1 for Everyone: 1. Picture of NJEA leadership delivering petitions to the legislature on December 4 lobby day. 2. Tier 1 for Everyone mentioned in President's Message. 3. "Officers Online" Facebook post on Tier 1 for Everyone lobby day by all three elected officers.

APPENDIX B

Below is the analysis of the Delegate Assembly minutes as presented in *NJEA Review*. For many years, the NJEA did not provide minutes until well after the assemblies took place, in some cases for as long as two years. NJEA leadership recently began to correct that and has published numerous back-dated minutes in the past several issues of *NJEA Review*.

January 6, 2024 DA minutes in New Jersey Education Association, "Governance," "NJEA Delegate Assembly," *NJEA Review*, December 2025, p. 54.

Pension Justice: zero

March 9, 2024 DA minutes in New Jersey Education Association, "Governance," "NJEA Delegate Assembly," *NJEA Review*, December 2025, p. 57.

Pension Justice: 1. Executive Director Kevin Kelleher presentation on pension reform for Tiers 1 and 5 and DCRP.

May 18, 2024 DA minutes in New Jersey Education Association, "Governance," "NJEA Delegate Assembly," *NJEA Review*, January 2026, p. 58.

Pension Justice: zero

September 7, 2024 DA minutes in New Jersey Education Association, "Governance," "NJEA Delegate Assembly," *NJEA Review*, January 2026, p. 61. First DA after Spiller announced his candidacy for governor on June 14, 2024.

Spiller: 1. Secretary-Treasurer Robertson discusses Spiller meet and greet.

Pension Justice: zero

November 9, 2024 DA minutes in New Jersey Education Association, "Governance," "NJEA Delegate Assembly," *NJEA Review*, February 2026, p. 56.

Spiller: 1. President Spiller discusses "NJEA members on the Ballot" and "Post [federal] election Political and Policy Strategy." Given that this DA was after the federal election and there were no NJEA members on the federal election ballot and Spiller was on the gubernatorial primary ballot at the time, we believe it's reasonable to assume Spiller included his own gubernatorial candidacy in his speech. Moreover, Vice President Beatty was not present and his report was not summarized in the minutes.

Pension Justice: zero

January 11, 2025 DA minutes in New Jersey Education Association, "Governance," "NJEA Delegate Assembly," *NJEA Review*, February 2026, p. 57.

Spiller: 1. President Spiller discusses Spiller for Governor. 2. Vice President Beatty discusses member ID calls for Spiller for Governor. 3. Government Relations head Deborah Cornavaca discusses her campaign plan for Spiller for Governor.

Pension Justice: zero

March 29, 2025 DA minutes in New Jersey Education Association, "Governance," "NJEA Delegate Assembly," *NJEA Review*, April 2026, p. 50.

Spiller: 1. Vice President Beatty discusses member organizing for Spiller for Governor.

Pension Justice: zero

May 17, 2025 DA minutes in New Jersey Education Association, "Governance," "NJEA Delegate Assembly," *NJEA Review*, November 2025, p. 46.

Spiller: 1. President Spiller "[e]ncouraged members to stay engaged in local and state elections." Given that Spiller was three weeks away from the election and his campaign was in full gear, it seems highly likely that he referenced his own run for governor. 2. Vice President Beatty also encouraged delegates to stay active in local and state-level political efforts. We will call this a "likely."

Pension Justice: zero

September 6, 2025 DA minutes in New Jersey Education Association, "Governance," "NJEA Delegate Assembly," *NJEA Review*, March 2026, p. 54. First DA where Spiller was no longer president or a gubernatorial candidate.

Pension Justice: 1. President Beatty discusses Tier 1 for Everyone campaign. 2. Secretary-Treasurer Dare discusses Tier 1 for Everyone campaign.

APPENDIX C

Below are the various tiers of the Teachers Pension and Annuity Fund.

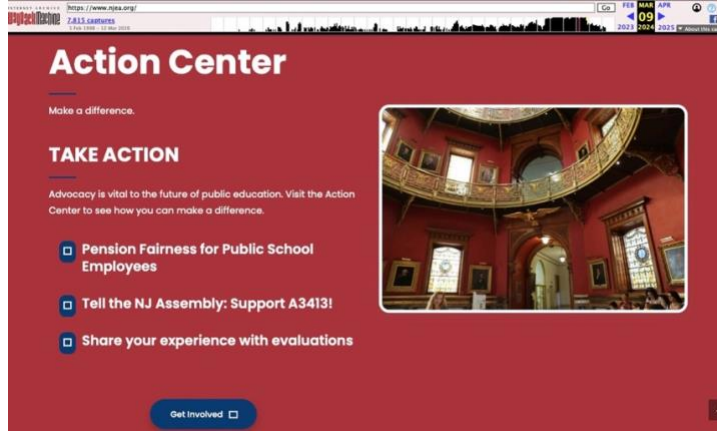
BENEFIT	TIER 1 <i>Hired prior to July 1, 2007</i>	TIER 2 <i>Hired prior to Nov. 2, 2008</i>	TIER 3 <i>Hired prior to May 21, 2010</i>	TIER 4 <i>Hired prior to June 28, 2011</i>	TIER 5 <i>Hired after June 28, 2011</i>
Enrollment	TPAF - \$500 salary PERS - \$1,500 salary	TPAF - \$500 salary PERS - \$1,500 salary	Based on an increasing salary (\$9,600 for 2025)	Need to work minimum 32 hours	Need to work minimum 32 hours
Normal Retirement Age	60 Years Old	60 Years Old	62 Years Old	62 Years Old	65 Years Old
Final Average Salary	Average of highest three years	Average of highest three years	Average of highest three years	Average of highest five years	Average of highest five years
Formula	Years of Service/55 X Final Average Salary	Years of Service/55 X Final Average Salary	Years of Service/55 X Final Average Salary	Years of Service/60 X Final Average Salary	Years of Service/60 X Final Average Salary
Early retirement Penalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must have 25 years of service • 3% per year under age 55, no penalty between 55-60 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must have 25 years of service • 3% per year under age 55, 1% per year between 55-60 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must have 25 years of service • 3% per year under age 55, 1% per year between 55-62 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must have 25 years of service • 3% per year under age 55, 1% per year between 55-62 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must have 30 years of service • 3% per year under age 65

Source: Marybeth Beichert, Sarah Favringer, and Michael Flynn "The fight for retirement dignity," *NJEA Review*, October 2025, p.22.

APPENDIX D

Below are screenshots of the NJEA website as captured by the Wayback Machine.

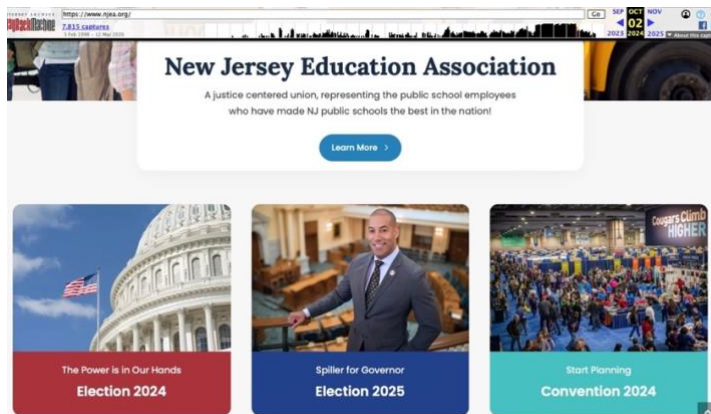
NJEA website, March 9, 2024:



NJEA website September 2, 2024:



NJEA website October 2, 2024:



NJEA website January 7, 2025:

