



SUNLIGHT
P O L I C Y C E N T E R
— OF NEW JERSEY —

RESEARCH REPORT

**TURMOIL AT THE NJEA FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: AN
UNPRECEDENTED LEADERSHIP CONTEST AMID A
SEVERE MEMBERSHIP DECLINE.**

Will Teachers Ever Be Told the Truth?

October 2, 2026

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Will Teachers Ever Be Told the Truth?

Introduction

“Between the crushing cost, climbing costs of health care and a tiered pension system that *severely undermines educator recruitment and retention*, our members and communities are suffering [emphasis added].”

— NJEA Vice President Petal Robertson and Secretary-Treasurer Tina Dare¹

That’s strong language from Vice President Robertson and Secretary-Treasurer Dare about recruitment and retention of “suffering” NJEA members, which has now become part an unprecedented contest for leadership of the NJEA. In the past, elected officers advanced automatically and unchallenged from lower office to higher office, but current President Steve Beatty is being challenged by his own Vice President and Secretary-Treasurer, who are running against him. Such leadership turmoil is hardly surprising, given recent NJEA history: the \$45 million Spiller scandal, the lawsuit and IRS complaints against the NJEA, the failure of the “Tier 1 for Everyone” pension campaign, and the apparent loss of political clout with Governor Sherrill. But, as Robertson and Dare highlighted, the leadership contest is also occurring against the backdrop of a severe decline in membership.

For nine years, the NJEA has displayed a membership number of 200,000 or more on its website, yet NJEA leadership has admitted to the legislature — but not to members — that membership is below 200,000. That the NJEA has refused to provide its actual membership for almost a decade is revealing in itself. Up until 2017, the NJEA provided a clear breakdown of the various membership categories on its website, but since it started losing members after the Supreme Court’s *Janus* decision in 2018, the NJEA simply claimed 203,520 members for four years and then 200,000 for another five years without any adjustment for real-world fluctuations. The hard data shows that these numbers are greatly overstated.

We can use simple math to back into a membership levels for each of the major membership categories — active teachers, active education support personnel (ESP), and retired educators — by looking at changes in dues revenues compared to changes in the amount of individual dues to arrive at the changes in membership levels. We can then use these to determine what the NJEA’s overall membership level is.

As shown in Appendix A, in 2017, the NJEA website claimed 203,520 members: 125,079 active teachers, 49,179 active ESP, and 28,180 retired teachers. Using the simple math above, we calculate that since 2017 active teacher members have declined -1.5% to 123,203, active ESP -20.4% to 39,146, and retirees -31.8% to 19,219. That makes for a total member decline of -20,870, which implies that in 2025, the NJEA had 182,650 members, a decline of -10.3%. That’s a long way from 200,000.

¹ As quoted from a campaign statement by *Politico*’s Matt Friedman in the September 3, 2026 [New Jersey Playbook](#).

This conclusion is supported by local association membership data. Thanks to Governor Phil Murphy, the Open Public Records Act (OPRA) was watered down and is no longer effective, but Sunlight has data from 2024 OPRA requests from a broad cross-section of 17 New Jersey school districts which showed a -9.3% decline in local union membership since 2017. This likely understates the overall decline because it only measures active members and does not account for the substantial decline in retired members.

This data is supported by current, more subjective indications of a membership decline:

- The unprecedented leadership contest and the Robertson and Dare statement specifically highlighting severe problems with membership recruitment and retention.
- The NJEA has proposed numerous and significant amendments to its bylaws governing the Membership Committee, including newly charging the committee with “advancing and sustaining the strength, growth, and engagement” of membership. There are also several specific duties assigned to the committee concerning membership recruitment, retention, and engagement at all levels of the NJEA. If not because of a membership problem, why are these amendments are being proposed now?
- A speaker at the May 2026 NJEA Delegate Assembly urged “immediate action” on “ESP dues and retention issues.”

That Sunlight must calculate membership levels and read the internal NJEA tea leaves underscores the fact that leadership is again deceiving its own members. Members have never been told the truth about the Spiller scandal, nor that over \$120 million of their dues have been spent on politics. Perhaps the leadership contest will result in some transparency, but Beatty and Robertson were both top officers during the Spiller scandal and neither of them have told members the truth about it to this day. We see no reason to believe they will tell the truth about the decline in membership either.

Unless they are forced to. Regardless of who wins the election, we hope NJEA members will use the opportunity to ask questions, seek the truth, and hold their leadership accountable for their many deceptions.

I. The Data Shows a Decline in Membership of -10.3% to 182,650

The numbers don't lie. We have hard data from the NJEA's own budget summaries that show the NJEA has suffered a severe decline in membership, just as Robertson and Dare state above.

Each year, the NJEA publishes an annual budget summary in its monthly magazine for teachers, *NJEA Review*, which provide dues revenues for its main membership categories: active teachers, active education support personnel (ESP), and retired educators.² The NJEA also publishes the amount of dues paid annually by each member of these groups. Because we know two variables (dues revenues and the amount of individual dues), we can derive changes in the third variable: membership levels.

With this in mind, Sunlight analyzed all the summary budgets going back to FY2017. The NJEA's fiscal year ends on August 31, so FY2017 (ending August 31, 2017) was also the last full

² The three categories calculated made up 202,438 out of the NJEA's reported total membership of 203,520, or 99.5% of total membership, according to the NJEA website on August 23, 2017, accessed via Wayback Machine on September 16, 2026. See Appendix A for screenshot.

fiscal year prior to the Supreme Court’s 2018 Janus decision, so it is the appropriate starting point for an analysis of the change in membership levels since Janus.

Active teachers. As shown in Table 1, annual dues for full-time, active teachers have increased from \$866 in FY2017 to \$1,082 in FY2025, or a 24.9% increase. During the same period, dues revenues from active teachers increased from \$97.3 million to \$120.2 million, or a 23.5% increase. This implies a membership decline of -1.5% for active teachers.³

Table 1

Active Teachers (FTE)	FY2017	FY2025	% Change
Amount of Annual Dues*	\$ 866	\$ 1,082	24.9%
Dues Revenues (000s)	\$ 97,329	\$ 120,156	23.5%
Implied Membership Loss			-1.5%

*Full-time teacher dues. Part-time dues are lower. Sources: NJEA Review and Sunlight’s calculations.

Active ESP. In Table 2, we do the same analysis for active ESP. The amount of dues increased 22.6% while dues revenues increased by 2.3%, which implies a substantial membership loss of -20.4%.⁴

Table 2

Active ESPs (FTE)	FY2017	FY2025	% Change
Amount of Annual Dues	\$ 424	\$ 520	22.6%
Dues Revenues (000s)	\$ 15,730	\$ 16,090	2.3%
Implied Membership Loss			-20.4%

*Full-time ESP dues. Part-time dues are lower. Sources: NJEA Review and Sunlight’s calculations.

Retired educators. In Table 3, we do the same analysis for retired educators and find that the amount of annual dues increased 20.3%, while dues revenues declined -11.5%, implying another substantial membership decline of -31.8%.⁵

³ Dues revenue from active teachers lumps together both full-time and part-time teachers, while the amount of annual dues is for full-time teachers only. Thus the implied -1.5% decline in membership is for full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers. Since part-time teachers pay lower dues, the -1.5% FTE measure likely *understates* the actual membership loss.

⁴ As with full-time teachers, this likely *understates* the actual ESP membership loss because there were likely some part-time ESP who left the NJEA, who paid lower dues than full-time ESP.

⁵ This likely *understates* the actual membership loss because it’s likely some of the retired people who left the NJEA were retired ESP, who paid lower annual dues than retired teachers.

Table 3

Retired	FY2017	FY2025	% Change
Amount of Annual Dues*	\$ 79	\$ 95	20.3%
Dues Revenues (000s)	\$ 748	\$ 662	-11.5%
Implied Membership Loss			-31.8%

*Retired teacher dues. Retired ESP dues are lower. Sources: NJEA Review and Sunlight's calculations.

Total membership decline of -10.3% from FY2017-2025. Combining the three above measurements allows for an estimate of the total decline in membership. Up until 2017, the NJEA published its membership levels by category, so we know that the NJEA claimed 203,520 members, with 125,079 active teachers, 49,179 active ESP, and 28,180 retired educators (see footnote 5). As shown in Table 4, if we use those numbers as the starting point and apply our implied losses for each category, we can estimate the membership loss: -1,876 active teachers, -10,033 active ESP, and -8,961 retired, for a total loss of -20,870 members. That would put total NJEA membership as of August 31, 2025 at 182,650 -- a decline of -10.3% and a lot lower than the 200,000 claimed on the NJEA website in 2025 as well as now.

Table 4

Implied Membership Loss	FY2017	Implied % Loss	Implied Member Loss	FY2025
Active Teachers (FTE)	125,079	-1.5%	(1,876)	123,203
Active ESPs (FTE)	49,179	-20.4%	(10,033)	39,146
Retired Educators	28,180	-31.8%	(8,961)	19,219
TOTAL*	203,520	-10.3%	(20,870)	182,650

*FY2017 total includes 1,082 student and other members, whose membership levels are not included. Sources: NJEA Review, Wayback Machine and Sunlight's calculations (see footnote 2).

OPRA is now dead but previously showed a -9.3% decline. Sadly, one of Governor Phil Murphy's many poor legacies was the erosion of New Jersey's public records law, the Open Public Records Act (OPRA). OPRA no longer provides consistent access to public records and there appear to be no penalties associated with ignoring OPRA requests. As a result, Sunlight can no longer analyze school district union membership numbers to help determine the decline in NJEA membership.

That said, Sunlight's last OPRA analysis of a broad cross-section of 17 school districts showed a -9.3% decline in membership from FY2017-24. This number understates the actual decline because it does not account for retired members, who, as can be seen in Table 3 above, have declined -31.8% since FY2017. These numbers support Sunlight's determination of a -10.3% decline from FY2017-25.

II. Other Indications of a Membership Problem

NJEA leadership contest exposes concerns about membership. While NJEA leadership refuses to disclose the actual membership level, there have been numerous, more subjective indications of a membership problem. Most recently, there has been an unprecedented contest for leadership of the NJEA. Normally, the NJEA's elected officers are promoted in lock-step via uncontested elections. After the president serves two two-year terms, the vice president moves up and the secretary-treasurer becomes the vice president, and so on. The only contested election has been for secretary-treasurer.

In 2026, that changed. This is hardly surprising, given the turmoil of recent NJEA history: the \$45 million [Spiller scandal](#), the [lawsuit](#) and IRS [complaints](#) against the NJEA, the [failure of the "Tier 1 for Everyone"](#) pension campaign, and the apparent [loss of political clout](#) with Governor Sherrill.

As revealed in Politico's September 3, 2026 [New Jersey Playbook](#), reporter Matt Friedman was able to ferret out the surprising news: current President Steve Beatty is not running on a re-election slate with current Vice President Petal Robertson or Secretary-Treasurer Tina Dare, who are running against Beatty on a different slate.⁶ As shown above, Friedman quotes Robertson and Dare as stating that current NJEA members are "suffering" because of problems like a tiered pension system, which "*severely undermines educator recruitment and retention* [emphasis added]." That's strong language from Robertson and Dare, which clearly points to a severe membership problem at the NJEA.

NJEA bylaw amendments aimed at boosting membership. Further bolstering the impression of a membership problem are the recently proposed NJEA bylaw amendments as presented in the September 2026 issue of *NJEA Review*.⁷ The proposed amendments add to the overall charge to the Membership Committee in order to align it with the "current membership landscape [emphases added]:"

[The Membership Committee] shall be responsible for *advancing and sustaining the strength, growth, and engagement of the Association's membership*.

The proposed amendments also add specific duties for the Membership Committee to boost recruitment and retention across all membership categories, among them:

- Recruitment and Retention Strategy: "*Implement dynamic recruitment strategies, emphasizing member value and collective strength, while actively working to retain and engage members long-term.*"
- Membership Growth: "*Collect, analyze, and utilize membership data to project trends, identify opportunities for growth, and develop targeted strategies to expand the membership base across all categories of membership.*"
- Collaborative Support for Local Membership Leaders: Coordinate with county and local membership chairpersons, *offering resources and guidance to help them implement effective strategies for member engagement and retention.*

⁶ Beatty is running with Angela DeLuccia for vice president and Joe Toma for secretary-treasurer.

⁷ The September 2026 *NJEA Review* is accessible on the NJEA [website](#). See page 9 for the proposed bylaw amendments.

- Membership Engagement: “Cultivate and sustain a cohesive membership base, ensuring active participation and engagement across all NJEA, NJAEA [students aspiring to be teachers], and NJREA [retired] members.”

These proposed bylaw amendments are consistent with the Robertson and Dare statement as well as the data presented. If not because of a membership problem, why are these amendments being proposed now?

Speaker at Delegate Assembly urges action over loss of ESP members. A non-delegate speaker at the May 16, 2026 NJEA Delegate Assembly:⁸

... urged NJEA to *take immediate action on ESP dues and retention issues*, citing privatization, low wages and job losses facing Education Support Professionals [emphasis added].

As Table 2 above shows, ESP membership has declined by -20.4% from FY2017-25. Apparently, that is continuing into 2026.

Conclusion: NJEA Leadership Is Deceiving Members Again

All these signs point to a severe membership problem for the NJEA. The data shows the NJEA has been losing members since the Supreme Court’s *Janus* decision in 2018. As with the Spiller scandal and the use of teachers’ regular dues for political spending, NJEA leadership has hidden the truth about membership loss from rank-and-file members because they want to project the image of an powerful, unified union.

As shown in Appendix A, the NJEA website — its primary interface with its members — displayed a total membership number of 203,520 from August 2017 all the way until mid-October 2021 — with the exact same numbers for active teachers (125,079), ESP (49,179), and retired educators (28,180). These are clearly not accurate numbers, yet the NJEA left them uncorrected for over four years.

Then in late October 2021, the NJEA website reverted to its claim of 200,000 members, which stands on the website to this day. This number is lower — reflecting the loss of members — but clearly not accurate either, as Sunlight’s analyses show. Even NJEA leadership has publicly acknowledged that membership was below 200,000 — in testimony to the legislature but not to its own members — while leaving the website’s inaccurate 200,000 number unchanged for five years. Such duplicity speaks for itself.

That Sunlight must calculate membership levels and read the internal NJEA tea leaves underscores the fact that leadership is again deceiving its own members — in this case for almost a decade. Perhaps the leadership fight will result in some transparency, but Beatty and Robertson were both top officers during the Spiller scandal and neither of them have told members the truth about it to this day. We see no reason to believe they will tell the truth about the decline in membership either.

Unless they are forced to. Regardless of who wins the election, we hope NJEA members will use the opportunity to ask questions, seek the truth, and hold their leadership accountable for their many deceptions.

⁸ See the October 2026 issue of *NJEA Review*, which is available on the NJEA website, pp. 58-9.

APPENDIX A

Below is a screenshot taken of the Wayback Machine search of the NJEA website for August 23, 2017. Sunlight conducted the search on September 16, 2026.

Wayback Machine: <https://www.njea.org/about/press-room/> 97 captures 22 Jun 2017 - 22 Jun 2024

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Fact Sheet

MEMBERSHIP
Teachers (125,079) and ESP (49,179); retired educators (28,180); student members (1059); and general and subscribing members (23) for a total of 203,520 members.

OFFICES
A headquarters building at 180 W. State St. in Trenton, New Jersey, and 22 regional offices throughout the state.

ORGANIZATION
The staff is organized into seven divisions: Business, Communications, Executive Office, Government Relations, Professional Development, Research and Economic Services, and UniServ.

GOVERNANCE
NJEA policy is made by an elected Delegate Assembly of 125 members.

Officers

PRESIDENT
 Wendell Steinhauer, a mathematics teacher in Riverside (Burlington Co.)

VICE PRESIDENT
 Marie Blistan, a special education teacher in Washington Township (Gloucester Co.)

SECRETARY-TREASURER
 Sean M. Spiller, a high school science teacher in Wayne (Passaic Co.)

Below is a screenshot taken of the Wayback Machine search of the NJEA website for October 20, 2021. Sunlight conducted the search on September 22, 2026.

Wayback Machine: <https://www.njea.org/about/press-room/> 97 captures 22 Jun 2017 - 22 Jun 2024

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GOVERNANCE
NJEA policy is made by an elected Delegate Assembly of 125 members. Policy is implemented by a 40-member Executive Committee elected by the counties, by higher education members, and by professional non-classroom personnel. Policy recommendations come from NJEA's 40 standing and special committees.

NJEA DUES

Officers

PRESIDENT
 Sean M. Spiller, a high school science teacher in the Wayne public schools.

VICE PRESIDENT
 Steve Beatty, a high school social studies teacher in the Bridgewater-Raritan school district

SECRETARY-TREASURER
 Petal Robertson, a high school English teacher in the Montclair School District.

Contacts

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