

2018 SPFT Public Candidate Questionnaire: State Auditor

Please limit the following questions to a yes or no response.

1. The Saint Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT) believes parents, educators, community members, and students should be at the center of decision making around educational policy. However, increasingly out of state millionaires with a vested interest in pursuing a corporate education reform agenda have poured money into political races with the goal of removing local voices from discussions about our children's education.
 - a. **Will you and your campaign reject contributions and independent expenditures from wealthy donors who live outside our community and from market-based education reform organizations?** Yes (as a statewide candidate, I understand the community to be Minnesota and my family)

2. Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) is currently facing a budget shortfall. This is a major obstacle in closing the racial equity gap through expanding programs like restorative practices in our schools. In addition to identifying additional funding sources, SPFT believes we must ask for support from residents for our public schools in the form of a funding referendum increase in 2018.
 - a. **Will you as endorse, support, and campaign for this referendum increase to benefit our public schools?** Yes.

3. The Twin Cities has been named one of the best places to live in the country, yet many of our residents - particularly in communities of color - struggle to make ends meet, often working two or more jobs and struggling with few or no benefits. Many labor and community organizations have championed a \$15 minimum wage and earned safe and sick time, issues that affect Saint Paul staff, parents, and community members.
 - a. **Will you and your campaign support and endorse a \$15 minimum wage, rejecting carve-outs and tip penalties, and earned safe and sick time for all workers?** Yes

4. **Do you support collective bargaining for public sector unions and will you fight to protect them?** Yes

Please limit your response to 150 words or fewer for each part of the questions below.

1. ***What is the value of public education for you and for the city of Saint Paul?***

Julie Blaha: Saint Paul, and all of Minnesota, depends on its students to create the future of our communities. A strong public education prepares students for the successful, healthy, empowered lives they deserve.

2. *SPPS has a diverse student population, with over 75% of students identifying as People of Color. Parents and educators agree that in order for students to be successful, we must have culturally competent curricula and educators that reflect the diversity of our city. At the same time, data shows that our city and our schools are becoming more segregated.*

a. ***Segregation and poverty are harmful to all of us, especially our students and their families. How will you work to integrate our city and our schools?***

Julie Blaha: The auditor can support solutions to our opportunity gaps in Minnesota by providing clear, accessible information about disparities in our state. That information has to be nuanced, wide, and in context. I have seen first-hand that data about race, gender, orientation, and economic status can make progress. By viewing disparities through a local lens, we can add the power of local creativity as we work to end pervasive inequities. Attention to indicators like reliance on fines or asset forfeiture, disaggregating expenditures by demographics, and comparing equity outcomes to expenditures could help shed light on the path to closing gaps.

3. *Research shows the importance of stimulation starting at birth. Quality daycare and pre-school programs staffed by trained educators are critical to helping children to be ready for school.*

a. ***How will you partner with SPFT to ensure all families have access to quality Pre-K and early learning programs in our city?***

Julie Blaha: An auditor can amplify the message that early learning yields great returns for the entire community. By ensuring that data about early learning successes is widely available, we can effectively make the case that access to

Pre-K and early learning programs are one of the best investments a community can make.

- b. New research shows that many Minnesotans live in childcare deserts, without adequate access to childcare options for their children. How will you use your role to provide additional options early learning options for parents?***

Julie Blaha: I would be interested in partnering with the Department of Education, counties, and other childcare experts to explore this issue further. By combining our data in an accessible way, we could illustrate the magnitude and geography of the issue of childcare shortages in Minnesota. That understanding could be leveraged to target solutions where they are needed most.

- 4. Across the Twin Cities, more and more students are choosing to “opt-out” of standardized testing. Recent reporting by MPR, MinnPost and the Saint Paul Pioneer Press suggests that testing is costly, time consuming, and does not provide useful information for educators.***

- a. What is the appropriate use of data from standardized tests and interim assessments? What changes would you recommend? Please comment on the use of standardized tests and interim assessments in high stakes decisions such as school closure and staffing.***

Julie Blaha: Standardized tests are designed to compare large groups of students to other similar, large groups of students. Because these tests are only valid for this purpose, the data is best used to assess broad based policy decisions like large scale curriculum and pedagogical approaches, broad effects of differences in out of school experiences, etc. These tests are not valid for fine grain decisions like school closures, staffing, individual student placement in programs or grade level advancement. Because of their limited use and high cost in terms of financial, staff labor, and time away from learning, standardized tests should be used sparingly. We should not test every student every few months when we can get the same quality of information from smaller samples of students every few years.

- b. How will you support parents and educators in the “opt-out” movement?***

Julie Blaha: In an auditor's role, I would support parents and educators by advocating for fewer standardized tests of fewer students. I would work to be the trusted messenger around effective use of data to illustrate the reasonableness of opting out.

5. *Saint Paul is home to diverse communities, including many newcomers to the United States. Public schools play a large role in helping newcomers feel welcome in their new city, while still valuing and retaining strong cultural ties.*

a. ***How will you use your position to prioritize support for English Learners, especially for newcomers and their families?***

Julie Blaha: I believe that our immigrant communities are integral to the fabric of our state. I also believe that there is a great deal of misinformation about immigrant families and communities floating around. As auditor, I will work to provide accurate, accessible reports that state and local governments can rely on to make sensible, data-driven decisions. I believe good, clear data will shine a light on the value that immigrant communities are bringing to Minnesota.

b. ***How will you work to protect immigrant and refugee students and their families in the face of a hostile federal government?***

Julie Blaha: I support separation ordinances to ensure that local government is not taking on the role of enforcing federal immigration laws. Not only do these ordinances result in better relationships between law enforcement and our communities that lead to better policing and help keep immigrant families safe and intact, but they also make financial sense. Local governments are not resourced adequately to take on additional roles. If they are tasked with enforcing federal laws, they will not only have to shortchange their primary work but they will not have the resources to do it efficiently, incurring even more unnecessary costs. I am interested in highlighting the inefficiencies of tasking local law enforcement with federal duties.

6. *SPPS and the City of Saint Paul presently do business with institutions that engage in practices that destabilize our community through predatory lending practices, investing in private prisons, and corporate tax avoidance. Additionally, TIF Districts (Tax Increment Financing) have been created in a way that disproportionately enrich corporations and big banks. Additionally, approximately 30% of properties, including many of the most valuable pieces of land in the city, pay no taxes to the city of Saint Paul, placing a heavy burden on our families.*

These practices have led to economic injustice and racial discrimination in our city.

- a. ***How will you use your role to make sure that the largest corporations in Saint Paul pay their fair share?***

Julie Blaha: The auditor can highlight the impact of losing tax revenue at the county, city, town, and school level. By supporting community activists with the data they need to show the magnitude of the issue and its direct impact on people's lives, we can help make the case for the urgency and opportunity in addressing this issue.

- b. ***Predatory lending practices increase foreclosure rates, destabilizing families. Will you join with SPFT in calling on banks to refrain from foreclosing on homes of school age students during the school year? What steps will you take to separate the city of Saint Paul from institutions that participate in predatory lending?***

Julie Blaha: Limiting foreclosures to outside the school year is a creative approach to help our students that I can support. The auditor can play a role both in separating Saint Paul from predatory lenders on the board of investment and in her role overseeing pension funds. Where possible, we should seek out ethical investments and divest from these kinds of bad actors.

- c. ***Will you work with SPFT to ask Saint Paul's wealthiest non-profits to pay their fair share and institute a Payment In Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) program that benefits our public schools?***

Julie Blaha: Yes.

- d. ***Will you commit to working with SPFT to seek the revenue we need to have racially equitable schools? What does this look like to you?***

Julie Blaha: Yes. As auditor, I would like to be a partner in your work to highlight concerns about using Tax Increment Finance districts to support already wealthy companies. It is time we take a close look at whether these districts are truly bringing more resources to the community or merely diverting them to a few large corporate interests.

7. *Educators want to do their best and have many great ideas and solutions for ensuring all students can be successful, but their voices are often not listened to.*

a. ***What are your ideas to help educators, in partnership with parents and community, have a voice in education policy so that their professional expertise and deep knowledge of each student can best benefit our public schools?***

Julie Blaha: One role of the auditor is to ensure the wealth of data about local resources is accessible to all Minnesotans. Not only does this information need to be available to those seeking to improve their communities through policy, but it also needs to be understandable and usable. I will use my skills as an educator to ensure that good, clear information is in the hands of those closest to the issue and amplify the truth of what is happening in our schools and communities.

8. *The current Secretary of Education is well-known for her support of “disrupting” public education through “school choice” in the form of online learning, charter schools, vouchers, and alternative licensure.*

a. ***What is your understanding of how education reform policies affect public education?***

Julie Blaha: While we can all agree that schools can always improve and we should continually strive to improve our students learning environments, corporate education reform policies are more about improving corporate bottom lines than improving students’ lives. We need to be vigilant in assessing any public education policy to ensure it is focused on the public good, not a few individuals’ profit.

b. ***Do you support changes to teacher licensure, and why?***

Julie Blaha: Our students deserve well qualified, well prepared, and well resourced educators. Robust licensure standards are essential to ensuring the professionals who create the learning environments for our students are up to the task. This work is too important to trust to someone who has not been well trained and well vetted.

c. ***How will you work to protect public education?***

Julie Blaha: The auditor can shine a light on the importance of the **public** component of public education. By focusing on the places where public and private worlds meet up in education, the auditor can ensure that the focus stays on the public good, and is not overtaken by profit motives. This office has the best opportunity to ensure that our tax dollars for education are focused on education, not corporate profit.

9. ***What specific steps will you take to protect the right of workers – especially public sector workers – to bargain collectively?***

Julie Blaha: As auditor, my experience as a labor leader in a constitutional office will help not only highlight the value of unions, but also allows us another perspective on supporting working Minnesotans. From my new view as auditor, I would seek to find additional ways of supporting collective bargaining by sharing information about the benefit of good contracts to the whole communities and modeling how to work with the union members in my own office.