

2018 SPFT Public Candidate Questionnaire – Ramsey Co Commissioner

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.**

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?*

Trista MatasCastillo: Many of my goals as Ramsey County Commissioner fit with the goals of quality public education. We have the opportunity to close the achievement gap in education and give every child in Saint Paul the best opportunities for their future. As Ramsey County Commissioner, I hope to make county services more equitable, provide quality affordable housing, and provide the support network needed by too many of our students, so when they go to school, they can focus on learning and growing. It is the responsibility of the whole community to support education. As a mother, I know first hand how vital public education is, and I want to see all children in Saint Paul have positive outcomes from their education.

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?*

Trista MatasCastillo: The diversity in cultures and in languages of the students in SPPS is one of our greatest assets. But too often, we treat diversity like a problem that needs to be solved, by making education one size fits all and by offering school choices that benefit the most privileged and harm the most vulnerable. We need to embrace the diversity of our students as well as expand the educational options already available in our district. We need to provide support for our students living in poverty, and we need to support their families in getting out of poverty, which will benefit our community as well as our students' education.

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?***

Trista MatasCastillo: Our district is the most diverse in the county. To bring prosperity to our neighborhoods, we need to focus resources on those who need it most, including people of color, English language learners, and those in poverty. Safe, affordable housing and access to public transport are just the first steps to helping our children succeed in schools. Furthermore, I believe that libraries are a perfect place to provide community assistance, educate parents about needed resources, and support education in an environment that is free and accessible to everyone. As we know, the achievement gap starts before kindergarten, so finding ways to bring all children early childhood education are vital and I will support efforts to do so.

- 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?***

Trista MatasCastillo: Education should happen everywhere in the community, not just at home and not just at daycare. Libraries are another vital source of learning opportunities, but we can and should get creative and find ways to integrate learning opportunities into all kinds of services. What options are available at county parks? How can we incorporate learning into our healthcare services? And of course, how can we make quality child care more accessible for families? If we look outside the box, we can find answers to these questions.

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.***

Trista MatasCastillo: To the extent that we use standardized tests in our education system, they should be one of many factors used by teachers and staff to evaluate student performance and growth. In a community with students who

come from such a wide array of background, a single metric and test is an especially poor indicator of how students are performing and how well teachers are preparing and educating them. Test scores alone should not dictate staffing decisions and school closures.

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

Trista MatasCastillo: When parents and educators feel their voices are not being heard, it is well within their right to take action and elevate their concerns. When they choose to “opt-out” it’s because their voices are not being heard by decision makers. Though the county board does not oversee the school system, I would proudly work as a partner with teachers and parents to elevate their concerns and add visibility with other elected officials and in the media.

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?

Trista MatasCastillo: I am proud of the work that SPPS does for not just school age children, but students of all ages. There are many things new immigrants to our city need to learn when they make this their home, not just in terms of language but help with job applications, housing, and healthcare. As a county, we provide many of these services and are therefore in a unique position to support learning at all stages of life and for all learning needs.

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

Trista MatasCastillo: As the wife of an immigrant, I’ve seen how difficult the current climate is for immigrants and refugees. It is tragic that any student might fear for themselves or their family, but I know that is all too common right now. Schools, along with other public spaces, should be a safe haven where students can grow and thrive. I am proud that Saint Paul is a sanctuary city, and I will work to ensure that we continue to resist policies that tear families apart.

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?

Trista MatasCastillo: In relation to our schools specifically, we need to push large corporations to support our education system. That may mean they provide direct financial support, or it may mean they support programs, scholarships, and training programs that support students, teachers, and families. I would be proud to stand side by side with school, city, and county allies and have a comprehensive conversation about how to get as much support for our schools as we possibly can.

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?

Trista MatasCastillo: Changing schools in the middle of the school year is very disruptive to learning, and having to change schools because of foreclosure is an even greater upheaval for students to bear. Students cannot learn effectively when they are losing their home and their school at the same time. I support community outreach and education about predatory lending practices to prevent them, but we must also acknowledge that poverty and systematic racism are major contributing factors to families being drawn to these practices. We cannot solve the problems around predatory lending without acknowledging the inequalities that allow them to thrive.

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?

Trista MatasCastillo: 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?

Trista MatasCastillo: Yes. This looks like officials at the city, school, and county level having an honest conversation about the level of investment we need and a real discussion about the fairest ways to raise the revenue necessary to make those investments. In our district of Ramsey County in particular, our commissioner has focused on how to hold the line on investments as a way to save people a few dollars here and few dollars there. In a county with such deep inequity and dramatic disparities, I think now is the time to think bigger. We need to invest in the services that can help close the gap and give everyone a fair shot.

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?***

Trista MatasCastillo: Teachers are a vital asset in our community, and they have a lasting impact on our students. With a district as diverse as ours, we need to ensure that we are hiring teachers that reflect that diversity. Every student should feel represented at their school, and teachers of color offer a unique perspective that all students will benefit from. We need to listen to their expertise as educators to best represent their students.

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?***

Trista MatasCastillo: Some of the motivation for education reform comes from outside forces that are working to dismantle our public education system. Other

motivation comes from parents who feel desperate for new options for their children. As a mother of five boys, I will always stand up and fight the former and relate to the latter. As a strong public education advocate, I would push for the investments and innovation necessary in our public schools to provide the options - in the district itself - that parents may otherwise look for elsewhere.

b. Do you support teacher licensure, and why?

Trista MatasCastillo: Yes. Minnesota is a leader in education thanks in large part to our high standards. We need teachers who are qualified and well trained.

c. How will you work to protect public education?

Trista MatasCastillo: As County Commissioner, I will always advocate for public education. As I work to strengthen our community through better transportation and housing, the schools will be my partner in connecting to the community and advocating for all. We all have a vision of our community being one where our neighbors prosper, and that goal cannot be reached if we don't have each other's backs.

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

Trista MatasCastillo: As a mother who has had to utilize county services, and as a county employee, I understand the pressure public sector workers are under. I've seen first hand how services suffer when they're contracted out to an outside firm. I recently experienced services from a contracted worker as I had to appear in family court to gain guardianship for my special needs child. My assigned social worker had no training to ability to navigate the court system and was so intimidated by the judge that she was in tears. This was a case of formality and no negative consequences yet my social worker failed me. If I had been someone who myself was afraid, confused or had my own barriers this would have been a crisis. Yet as I spoke to the social work I found that she wasn't earning a prevailing wage, had no experience and no training from the agency in which she was hired. This simply cannot happen. As Commissioner, I will use my personal story to show elected officials and community residents that our decisions about workers and their rights have a real impact on people's lives.