

2020 CEA Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

Name: **Michele Zommer**

Party: **Democrat**

District: **House 69**

Past and/or current elected offices held: **none**

A. COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

1. Collective Bargaining: The right to be a union member is a fundamental employment protection under state and federal laws. America's labor unions have led the fight for working families, winning protections such as the 8-hour work day and the 40-hour work week, overtime rights, and access to health care and retirement security. Today, the fight continues to retain these vital rights and to ensure safe and healthy workplaces. Following the 2018 Supreme Court decision in the case of Janus v. AFSCME, Connecticut must be a leader in protecting union rights. For teachers, collective bargaining allows their voices, ideas and advocacy for students to be heard without fear of reprisal.

CEA Position: CEA opposes any legislative proposals to weaken or eliminate collective bargaining rights for teachers and all other public employees. I will oppose any legislation weakening collective bargaining for teachers, including proposals to limit bargaining on salary, benefits, or conditions of employment currently permitted under law.

Agree with CEA's Position Oppose CEA's Position

I will oppose any legislation weakening collective bargaining or the unions representing employees.

I will support legislation that grants unions the right to identify new members and meet with union members at their worksites.

B. EDUCATION FUNDING & EQUITY

2. Education Cost Sharing (ECS) Grants: A Connecticut Supreme Court decision, Horton v. Meskill, requires the state to equalize funding for school districts based on each district's ability to pay. The appropriate funding of education for all districts is essential to a well-prepared and growing workforce in Connecticut. For Connecticut to honor its obligation to all children and truly enhance its economic competitiveness, it must meet its financial commitment to fund schools equitably and appropriately. This commitment is even more important as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, which magnified inequities in resources across school districts. The deficiencies

that exist in funding resources to address student trauma and promote social-emotional learning are even more strained due to the crisis. Inequities in access to technology and remote learning tools continue to persist, negatively impacting children in every district in the state. These needs intensify during economic downturns requiring schools to expand services for students.

CEA Position: ECS funding must be given a high priority, even in difficult budget years. Cuts in educational funding harm children, negatively impact teaching and learning, and increase local property taxes. I will not support any reductions in the state's commitment to ECS funding and will work to enhance funding of school districts wherever possible.

Agree with CEA's Position Oppose CEA's Position

I will co-sponsor legislation that protects and enhances education funding.

I will vote against a budget that hurts our children by cutting ECS funding.

3. Smart Fiscal Policy: CEA believes that the state's current system of taxation, especially the state's over-reliance on local property taxation to fund our local schools, lacks fairness, increases income inequality, and fails to provide adequate resources for critical services. Year after year, the state faces projected budget deficits and municipalities face uncertainty as to how much support they will receive for public education in the form of ECS and other educational grants. Connecticut's tax system must be reformed to meet the current and future needs of the state, and to create a dedicated revenue stream to fund public schools.

CEA Position: CEA supports a more reliable, non-regressive tax system that includes a statewide revenue stream specifically dedicated to fund public schools. I support tax reform that will enhance critical services for our state and dedicate revenues for ECS and other educational programs.

Agree with CEA's Position Oppose CEA's Position

I will co-sponsor legislation to reform our tax system to enhance critical services and dedicate statewide revenues for public schools.

4. Protecting Municipal Contributions for Education: Property tax caps that penalize municipalities for supporting their schools beyond the "minimum" requirements result in depleting school resources, punishing students, and usurping municipal control. Different municipalities have different needs as to their schools—some need more resources—and punishing cities and towns for investing more than the minimum into their schools is a terrible policy that hurts children. It does not make sense to withhold state aid merely because a town chooses to responsibly fund its schools.

CEA Position: CEA opposes policies, including misguided property tax caps that discourage or penalize municipalities from investing in education. I will oppose policies that penalize towns for investing more funding in their local schools.

Agree with CEA's Position [] Oppose CEA's Position

[] I will oppose legislation exploring or establishing property tax caps.

5. Privatization of Public Schools: CEA believes that public dollars should support public schools. No public money should be diverted to privately operated schools through public tax credits for individuals or businesses, or through vouchers, direct payments, money-follows-the-child schemes, or any other means. Public money should also not fund "charter management organizations" (CMOs), which are private operators of chains of charter schools. The state's growing expenditures in support of the expansion of CMO-run schools is troubling and sets up a costly parallel system of schooling that diverts funding from traditional schools. In addition, CMO-run schools present serious issues of transparency and a lack of properly certified educators. Proposals to further divert funding by way of schemes like "education savings accounts" (ESAs) or vouchers that redirect tax dollars to fund elite or religious private schools would do further harm. Some proposals do this through a personal income tax-credit; others by directly funding debit cards to be used as a voucher. Proposals that divert funding from neighborhood public schools ultimately short-change students in schools already starved for adequate resources.

CEA Position: CEA opposes legislation that diverts funding and resources from traditional public schools, and opposes the continued expansion of CMO operated schools at the expense of public school. I will oppose any funding that diverts funding away from traditional public schools or expands charter schools at the expense of public school students.

[] Agree with CEA's Position [] Oppose CEA's Position

I will publicly oppose legislation or budgets expanding CMO-run charter schools at the expense of traditional public schools.

6. Opponents to Public Education: Over the past decade or so, extremely well-funded organizations seeking to undermine various aspects of public education have proliferated. There are groups like ConnCAN, 50CAN, Families for Excellent Schools, Achievement First, Democrats for Education Reform, and others that promote an overreliance on standardized testing and the expansion of privately operated schools (including CMO-run charter schools) at the expense of local public schools. Some like the Yankee Institute threaten to undermine the teaching profession by seeking to do away with fair retirement plans, collective bargaining, and public employee unions altogether. Others like the American Legislative Exchange Council (aka ALEC), the State Policy Network, Americans for Prosperity, and the Walton Family Foundation want to do all of the above. Together, the direction advocated by these organizations dilute resources available for public schools, weaken teacher advocacy for students' needs, and narrow the opportunities available to all children to learn.

CEA Position: CEA believes that the organizations noted above pose a threat to public employee unions and the core mission of our public schools to provide fair and equitable opportunities for all children to maximize their learning.

Agree with CEA's Position Oppose CEA's Position

I will oppose efforts by such organizations to privatize education, undermine the teaching profession, or divert funding away from public school districts.

C. EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

7. Economic Inequality: Income inequality persists across the nation, with disparity in Connecticut being incredibly stark. Inequality in Connecticut and throughout the country has only continued to grow during the COVID-19 crisis and has created even more disparity between those with and those without resources. Many jobs were suspended during the crisis while workers in many essential occupations faced health risks resulting in debilitating illness and even death. Additionally, unequal access to distance learning opportunities as a result of quarantine has deepened inequality far more for students living in poverty.

CEA Position: CEA supports progressive efforts to address growing income inequality in Connecticut and the corresponding diminishment of educational opportunities that go along with it.

Agree with CEA's Position Oppose CEA's Position

8. Community Schools: Schools are showing great success in the areas where comprehensive community schools strategies are implemented. We believe a comprehensive community school to be one that engages educators and parents in solving challenges faced by students. They engage stakeholders to determine the unique needs of students and work to leverage the community resources available to meet them. True community schools become hubs of educational, recreational, cultural, health, and civic partnerships. They optimize conditions for learning and strengthen the communities around them. In such schools, there is a designated resource coordinator who continually works with parents, community partners, and school personnel to map resources in a community and build long-term partnerships with providers, charities, and other partners like local businesses. Comprehensive community schools are showing great success meeting the needs of students facing the most significant socio-economic needs.

CEA Position: CEA supports policies and funding that enable the development of comprehensive community schools. I will support legislation funding the development of community schools.

Agree with CEA's Position Oppose CEA's Position

I will co-sponsor legislation providing seed funding for the development of community schools in districts serving a high number of students facing significant socio-economic needs.

9. Support for English Learners: The population of students whose dominant language is not English is approaching 1 in 10 students in Connecticut. Currently, Connecticut has among the worst education outcomes in the U.S. for English Learners. Other states with a larger population of English Learners (EL) have had success educating these students. Connecticut can make great progress if EL students are given the necessary level of resources to become fluent English speakers quickly. One obstacle is our state's limitation that only provides bilingual education funds to schools that have 20 or more students speaking the same non-English language in the same school building. This threshold is far too narrow. We have many schools throughout the state where multiple students have different dominant languages, yet they do not qualify for funding from the state's bilingual education grant. Teachers in these schools need more assistance and resources to help EL students succeed.

CEA Position: CEA supports proposals to expand bilingual funding to more schools. I will support proposals that both increase funding for the bilingual education grant and expand eligibility to more schools.

Agree with CEA's Position [] Oppose CEA's Position

[] I will co-sponsor legislation to increase funding and expand eligibility for the bilingual education grant.

D. THE TEACHING PROFESSION & WORKING CONDITIONS

10. Safe & Compassionate Learning Environments: Connecticut, as well as many states across the country, is experiencing a crisis in education. This crisis is driven by a growing number of our youngest students who have experienced traumatic adverse childhood experiences. Our members see it in their classrooms, most disturbingly in the earliest grades. They see it in students' inability to regulate their stresses and emotions. They see it in aggressive, disruptive, and even violent outbursts that have been causing significant physical and emotional harm to those around them – students, teachers, and others in the school community. Violent student outbursts are cries for help. Yet our teachers do not have the support or resources to address the needs of students, who, by no fault of their own, are experiencing trauma. There are insufficient resources to help respond to incidents, and little to no resources going to prevention. Additionally, schools do not implement potential solutions (such as trauma-informed instruction, restorative practices, etc.) with consistency or fidelity. As a result, teachers are (often) left unsupported when a child cries out. Classrooms get cleared, learning for all students is disrupted, and the disruptive child receives little or no supports and cycles back into the classroom with their underlying condition left unaddressed. It is imperative that we support our students and our educators by addressing policies and practices that exacerbate trauma.

CEA Position: CEA supports implementing policies and practices that address and prevent trauma such as:

- Increasing the Kindergarten Start Age
- Ensuring Universal Preschool
- Promoting Acceptable Counselor, Social Worker, and School Psychologist Staff Ratios
- Reducing Testing
- Reducing Class Sizes, especially in Alliance Districts
- Reducing Excessive Special Education Caseload
- Promoting Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Incorporating SEL into the Common Core for Grades K-2 and the curriculum for all students
- Targeting Resources for Students who Exhibit Trauma-related Needs
- Expand Teacher Input on School Climate Committees
- Promote a Social and Emotional Learning Pilot by Reducing High-Stress Testing and Incorporating SEL into School-wide goals
- Promote Comprehensive Community School Pilot Programs
- Supporting a Landmark Investment in Public Education to Fund these initiatives

(For additional information on these topics, please [CLICK HERE](#))

Agree with CEA's Position Oppose CEA's Position

I will co-sponsor legislation that seeks to provide a comprehensive approach to address student trauma and promote social emotional learning that includes policies, practices and funding as outlined in CEA's proposed Safe and Compassionate Learning Environments initiative.

11. Minority Teacher Recruitment: Connecticut needs to increase the diversity of its teaching force because all students benefit when the faculty in their schools resemble the diversity of our society. Additionally, children of color show stronger educational outcomes when their teachers share their ethnic or racial composition. Programs that address barriers to entering paths toward certification (like biased testing and high tuition costs) have shown success increasing the number of minority candidates. So too, have programs that provide aspiring teachers career counseling, mentoring support, and strong clinical experiences. Furthermore, targeted financial assistance that can help offset costs of tuition, lost wages, and unpaid student teaching experiences is instrumental. And, a statewide program to recruit teachers of color must also recognize that promoting the conditions in schools that can increase retention and address legacies of institutional bias are critical to a long-standing solution.

CEA Position: CEA supports minority teacher recruitment programs that address obstacles to entry into education preparation programs, include resources to offset the costs of training, and provide mentorship and guidance to help each candidate earn their certification. These certifications do not need to be lowered in order to address minority teacher shortages as doing so only increases the number of inexperienced, insufficiently trained, and uncertified teachers in public schools. CEA also believes that programs must also address workplace culture and retention.

Agree with CEA's Position Oppose CEA's Position

I will co-sponsor legislation calling for innovative ways to increase the number of teachers of color entering and graduating from rigorous teacher preparation programs, and pursuing a successful career in teaching.

E. TEACHER'S RETIREMENT & HEALTH CARE

12. Defined Benefit Pension Plan: Increasingly, states have considered replacing traditional pension plans with defined contribution (401k-type) plans. Research indicates this is a flawed approach. Defined benefit pensions (DBs) have proven to be more cost-efficient than defined contribution accounts (DCs) due to higher investment returns and longevity risk pooling. When states look at shifting from a DB pension to DC accounts, such a shift does not close funding shortfalls and, in fact, can increase a state's retirement costs by requiring the state to operate multiple plans at that same. Moreover, it is cost-efficient for teachers to remain outside of social security since boards of education would be required to pay the employer contribution if teachers were included in social security.

In recent years, the state legislature has also considered whether the state should pay for DB pensions for Connecticut's educators. Repeated proposals in 2017 and 2018 included shifting the cost of these plans from the state to municipalities in a move that would impact school budgets, the resources available for teaching and learning, and result in higher property taxes for our residents. These proposals would do nothing more than put a target on educators' backs across the state and create further unfunded mandates for our towns and their residents.

CEA Position: Defined benefit pension plans should continue to be offered to all public employees. CEA opposes any weakening of the current defined benefit plan, including instituting any new tiers or including teachers in social security. In addition, CEA opposes any proposals to shift the cost of educators' pension plans from the state to municipalities.

Agree with CEA's Position Oppose CEA's Position

I will oppose legislation that would weaken the benefit structure for public school teachers.

I will oppose legislation that would shift the state's responsibility for teacher retirement to the municipalities.

13. Retired Teachers' Health Insurance Fund: In 1989, the General Assembly established a Retired Teachers' Health Insurance Fund to partially subsidize health insurance for retired teachers and their spouses. Current law requires that active teachers contribute 1.25% of their salaries to this fund and the state and those retirees on Medicare contribute 33% of the cost of the STRB's health program to the health fund. For retirees and spouses under age 65, the

retiree is paying virtually the full cost of the insurance. Over the past decade, the state has reduced its share from 33% to as low as 12%. This has resulted in millions of dollars of lost revenue to the health fund. Consequently, plans available to retirees were recently significantly altered, and the long-term solvency of the Retired Teachers' Health Insurance fund remains at risk.

CEA Position: CEA believes that the State should meet its statutory responsibility and annually contribute its 33% share of funding to the Retired Teachers' Health Insurance Fund to ensure its long-term solvency.

Agree with CEA's Position Oppose CEA's Position

I will oppose proposals that do not fully fund the state's share of the Retired Teachers' Health Insurance Fund.

COMMENTS

Please use the space below to provide any comments or explanations from your questionnaire responses.

I'm a first-time candidate for the General Assembly Dist. 69, seeking election to an open seat. The CEA has an opportunity to support a Democrat who will fight hard for education. (Art O'Neil held this seat for 34 years.) My opponent is aligned with the far right wing of the Republican party. Many of your positions are aligned with my own, and I would add, my daughter and son-in-law, both of whom are teachers in Weston Public Schools. I am unfamiliar with some of the issues you discussed here (community schools, for one.) I'm confused about your opposition to magnet schools. But I echo your staunch advocacy to improve/protect school funding and to continue enhancing the learning environments in our schools. I'm unclear on the relationship of the healthcare funding to the insolvent pension fund which was rescued in 2019, but overall, I believe the state should honor commitments it made under the law. Education is one of CT's proudest accomplishments and as a legislator, I aim to focus the state on recognizing that and protecting it.

