

## **2022 CEA Legislative Candidate Questionnaire**

NAME: **Jennifer Leeper**

PARTY: **Democrat**

DISTRICT: **House 132**

PAST AND/OR CURRENT ELECTED OFFICES HELD: **State Rep. 132 and Fairfield BOE member**

CEA MEMBER?: **No**

### **A. COLLECTIVE BARGAINING**

#### **1. Collective Bargaining**

**Background:** 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 workday 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.

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

#### **Legislative Commitment:**

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

### **B. EDUCATION FUNDING & EQUITY**

#### **2. Education Cost Sharing (ECS) Grants**

**Background:** 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. Adequate education funding for all districts is essential to a well-prepared and growing workforce in Connecticut. For Connecticut to honor its obligations to children and enhance its economic competitiveness, it must meet its financial commitment to fund schools equitably and appropriately. This commitment is even more important because 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 exacerbated due to the pandemic. 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 the highest priority, even in difficult budget years. Cuts in educational funding harm children, negatively impact teaching and learning, and can 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

#### **Legislative Commitments**

☒ 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**

**Background:** CEA believes that the state's current system of taxation, especially the state's over-reliance on local property taxes 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 the level of 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, sustainable revenue stream to fund public education.

**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

#### **Legislative Commitment**

☒ 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

**Background:** 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 an ill-conceived 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

#### Legislative Commitment

☒ I will oppose legislation exploring or establishing property tax caps.

#### 5. Privatization of Public Schools

**Background:** 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 be used to fund charter management organizations (CMOs), which are privately owned 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 that are 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 education. 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

#### Legislative Commitment

☒ I will publicly oppose legislation and/or budgets that expand or increase the number of CMO-run charter schools at the expense of traditional public schools.

## **6. Opponents to Public Education**

**Background:** In recent years, 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 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

## **Legislative Commitment**

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

## **7. Support for English Learners**

**Background:** 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 adequate resources and personalized attention necessary to become fluent English speakers quickly. Connecticut 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. Several schools throughout the state enroll students with multiple dominant languages but 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

### **Legislative Commitment**

☒ I will co-sponsor legislation to increase funding and expand eligibility for the bilingual education grant and innovative programs like dual language programs.

## **C. SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL COMMUNITIES**

### **8. School Indoor Air Quality**

**Background:** Unhealthy air and a lack of adequate heating, ventilation and air conditioning service is a growing problem across Connecticut school districts. According to the CT Dept. of Administrative Services (DAS), about 1/5 of Connecticut school buildings have reported indoor air quality (IAQ) problems. Unhealthy classroom environments can have a profound impact on students' health, wellbeing, and educational achievement. Legislation passed in 2022 requires routine school IAQ assessments and establishes a grant program under DAS to fund necessary school HVAC repairs but failed to establish enforceable indoor temperature and humidity standards or emergency school closure criteria, in the event that a building fails to comply with minimum indoor air quality standards for an extended period of time.

**CEA Position:** Enforceable indoor temperature and humidity standards consistent with national OSHA and ASHRAE standards are needed to adequately evaluate school HVAC systems, identify potential school IAQ problems and recommend necessary corrective actions. I will support legislative and administrative efforts to establish strong IAQ standards for Connecticut public school buildings and a long-term funding stream for HVAC upgrades.

☒ Agree with CEA's Position   ☐ Oppose CEA's Position

### **Legislative Commitment**

☒ I will co-sponsor legislation establishing a long term funding stream for school HVAC upgrades.

### **9. Successful Schools**

**Background:** 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 support 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 create successful schools by:

- Increasing the Kindergarten Start Age
- Ensuring Universal Preschool
- Reducing Testing
- Reducing Class Sizes, especially in Alliance Districts
- Securing prep time as self-directed planning time
- Reducing Excessive Special Education Caseload and establishing acceptable counselor, social worker, and other certified staff ratios
- Promote Comprehensive Community School Pilot Programs
- Supporting a Landmark Investment in Public Education to Fund these initiatives

☒ Agree with CEA's Position   ☐ Oppose CEA's Position

### **Legislative Commitment**

☒ 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 Successful School Communities initiative.

## **10. Teacher Recruitment & Diversity**

**Background:** The number of people entering the teaching profession is declining at a time when the numbers leaving are increasing. Connecticut needs to pursue innovative ways to attract and retain teachers. At the same time, schools need to continually ensure that their faculties resemble the diversity of our society. Additionally, children of color show stronger educational outcomes when their teachers share their ethnic or racial background. Programs that address barriers to entering paths toward certification (like biased testing and high tuition costs) have shown success increasing the number and diversity of 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 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 teacher recruitment programs that promote diversity by addressing 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. Some proposals to recruit a greater number of diverse teachers seek to lower expectations and standards for certification – policies that ultimately result in less experienced and prepared people teaching in the least wealthy communities. CEA believes that innovative policies and incentives can improve recruitment, workplace culture, and retention while maintaining high professional standards.

☒ Agree with CEA's Position   ☐ Oppose CEA's Position

### **Legislative Commitment**

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

**11. Honesty in Education:** Will you oppose all proposals that would censor teachers from teaching about inclusion, diversity, and equity?

☒ YES   ☐ NO

## **E. TEACHER'S RETIREMENT & HEALTH CARE**

### **12. Defined Benefit Pension Plan**

**Background:** 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 recent years 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

### **Legislative Commitments**

☒ 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. Years of Service for Retirement**

**Background:** Connecticut requires teachers to teach 35 years in order to reach normal retirement – tied for the longest required service with three other states. 46 other states, including Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York require 30 years or less. This requirement serves as a disincentive for teachers to enter or remain in the profession. CEA supported legislation that passed in 2022 establishing a task force to explore incentives to recruit and retain educators, including measures related to teachers' pensions such as bonus service credits.

**CEA POSTION:** CEA is advocating a reduction in the years of service required for normal retirement. We are also advocating bonus service credit for the sacrifices teachers made working in schools through COVID-19 and for teachers in financially distressed districts.

☒ Agree with CEA's Position   ☐ Oppose CEA's Position

### **Legislative Commitments**

☒ I will co-sponsor legislation reducing the years of service required for normal retirement.

☒ I will co-sponsor legislation providing for bonus service credit for the sacrifices teachers made working in schools through COVID-19 and for teachers in financially distressed districts.



#### **14. Retired Teachers' Health Insurance Fund**

**Background:** 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

#### **Legislative Commitment**

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

#### **15. TRB Independence**

**Background:** Since its establishment in 1917, the Connecticut Teachers' Retirement Board (TRB) has been an independent state agency. Today, over 100 years later, the TRB services over 51,000 active members and over 38,000 retired members and is responsible for not only paying out monthly retirement benefits but also administering a very complex retired teachers' health insurance fund. Although consistently understaffed for decades, the dedicated and trained TRB staff has been successful in ensuring that pension and health benefits are processed in a timely manner. There have been attempts to merge the TRB into another agency such as the Comptroller's Office which manages the State Employees' Retirement System, an entirely separate and distinct retirement system. But it is clear that it is in the best interest of active and retired teachers for the TRB to act independently and continue to focus exclusively on the pension and health benefits for teachers.

**CEA Position:** CEA opposes any efforts to eliminate the independence of the Teachers' Retirement Board (TRB) including any effort to merge that agency with another state agency.

☒ Agree with CEA's Position   ☐ Oppose CEA's Position

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

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

I have spent my professional career working in education from a school administrator to SDE to the Fairfield Board of Education. I am the most passionate champion of high-quality education and it has been my pleasure to serve on the Legislature's Education Committee and continue to fight for students and teachers. I hope to have the opportunity to continue this work, with your partnership.