
WEJA School Committee Policy Questionnaire

The Worcester Education Justice Alliance (WEJA) is a group of students, parents, teachers, school staff, and community members standing together to fight for education justice in Worcester. We are a chapter of the Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance (MEJA) and a member of the Fund Our Future coalition advocating for policy at the state level to fully fund public schools.

<http://worcesteredjustice.org/>

<https://massedjustice.org/>

Please answer each question by selecting either yes or no. You may use the comments section to explain your reasoning for your selection below each question.

Name *

Tracy O'Connell Novick

Questions related to curriculum

1) Would you vote in favor of a comprehensive age appropriate sexual education curriculum as was advocated by the Worcester Impact of Sexual Health (WISH) taskforce (<https://www.wishtaskforce.org/sexual-education/recommended-curricula/>) like the Making Proud Choices? (<https://www.etr.org/ebi/programs/making-proud-choices/>)

Yes

No

1) Explanation of response (optional)

We are in the midst of a public health crisis in Worcester due to our continuing to not implement comprehensive health education. It has been clearly and repeatedly demonstrated across the country that the most effective means of not only lessening the rates of teen pregnancy and STDs, but also postponing sexual activity is comprehensive sexual education.

2) Would you advocate for the elimination of the MCAS as a high school exit exam?

Yes

No

2) Explanation of response (optional)

This is a "yes if": yes if, and only if, we implement something that is acceptable under ESSA by the federal Department of Education. I'm not willing to sacrifice millions of dollars in federal aid to make a point. Such discussions are possible, but they would need to be had.

3) Would you advocate for the elimination of high stakes standardized tests, like the MCAS, to evaluate school performance?

Yes

No

3) Explanation of response (optional)

This one really depends on what's going in as a replacement. Are we using something that legitimately does not leave children out, as was absolutely done prior?

4) Do you believe that teachers should be required to follow the state curriculum frameworks to ensure that all students are learning the same curriculum across the state (as opposed to giving school sites and teachers more flexibility to teach the topics and content that they believe most important)?

Yes

No

4) Explanation of response (optional)

Let's first note that "standards" and "curriculum" are not the same thing, so I'm concerned about this question's direction. Standards are what is taught; curriculum is when and how. Curriculum is and remains a local decision.

We're seeing what happens when "flexibility" comes to health education in Worcester now; no, I don't want to see that in English, history (which has had an excellent recent revamp of standards that really encompass so much more than what is being done in Worcester!), and the like. There are things that every child in Massachusetts should know, and that does need to be determined somewhere. I attend the meetings at which that happens. Given the exhaustive process (currently going on with arts education) that involves hundreds of practitioners (including many many classroom teachers) and a significant public comment period, I'm comfortable with it.

Questions Related to Funding

5) Do you support the Promise Act and would you advocate for its passage with the state legislature?

Yes

No

5) Explanation of response (optional)

as I have for years. One of my concerns is the lack of meaningful advocacy by the Worcester School Committee beyond the chair of Finance and the mayor.

6) State spending requirements enable local communities to spend more than the minimum required by the Chapter 70 Foundation formula. Since most local communities do spend more than required to address the educational needs of their students, on average, local communities spend over 25% above their required allocation. Worcester typically funds right at the minimum required by the Chapter 70 Foundation formula (give or take roughly 1%). If you were elected to school committee would you advocate for the city to spend 10% or more above the required foundation formula even if that means the city would have to secure additional revenue?

Yes

No

6) Explanation of response (optional)

My first involvement with school advocacy dates back to 2008, when we pushed for 2% over foundation. That has yet to happen. I think 10% is...a reach, but I will also say that we don't pay enough attention to this when we elect City Councilors.

7) Facing fiscal shortfalls as a result of the Great Recession, in 2010, the City of Worcester became one of the few municipalities in the state that began taking a 3% indirect of the state and federal grants that pass through City Hall. This amounts to over a million dollars that is designed to cover the costs of developing and administering the grants (which in Worcester are all handled by the school department). Would you, if elected to the school committee, advocate for City of Worcester to continue to take this 3% indirect?

Yes

No

7) Explanation of response (optional)

"continue to advocate"? Or would I fight to change it?

Developing the grants is handled by the school department; administering the grants does have some degree of municipal involvement, given that the schools don't write their own checks, for example. I was on the Committee during the period in which we fought about this, and it would be easy to give a "no" answer on this. I will say, though, after myriads of years in which this was one of the only audit findings, I genuinely do not believe this to be the biggest issue with WPS use of grants right now. I'm much more concerned with School Committee oversight on actual spending.

Questions related to Staffing and Leadership

8) Would you support merit pay or bonuses for teachers who are considered highly effective in producing strong education outcomes (based on measured test score improvements) for students?

Yes

No

8) Explanation of response (optional)

Because there is no way of doing this that works

9) Would you support hiring bonuses or stipends for certified bilingual teachers in our Worcester Public Schools?

Yes

No

9) Explanation of response (optional)

This one is way to complicated for a 'yes/no'; in general, I'm not thrilled about hiring bonuses, and I am fairly certain that it is not money that is keeping us from hiring bilingual teachers. I agree that they are badly needed.

10) Do you support utilizing 'diversity bonuses' in order to recruit more teachers of color in Worcester?

Yes

No

10) Explanation of response (optional)

Likewise, this is too complicated for a 'yes/no' answer. In general, bonuses are not a great means of attracting, let alone retaining, teachers of any sort. With teachers of color, we know that the pipeline (including perspectives students in K-12 have on public schools), higher education, testing, and retention are significant issues. I'd rather we spend time, and yes, money, on those.

11) Do you support 'Grow Your Own' programs that recruit teacher candidates from non-traditional populations (e.g., high school students, paraprofessionals, and after-school program staff) who are more likely to reflect local diversity and more likely to continue to teach in their communities?

Yes

No

11) Explanation of response (optional)

Absolutely, and this is one of the ways in which there is actual success in diversifying the workforce.

12) Do you support the hiring of the Associate Superintendent for Diversity and Inclusion?

Yes

No

12) Explanation of response (optional)

I'd want to look at the description of the position, but this is closer to what is needed in terms of the oversight needed, which goes well beyond hiring.

Questions related to student discipline and student life

13) Would you advocate for secondary schools to begin later in the morning to allow adolescents to sleep later?

Yes

No

13) Explanation of response (optional)

And I have. I'd also note that our current bussing contract is one of the barriers of this happening.

14) Do you support the continuation of the current WPS policy that bans "hats, bandanas, scarves or sweatbands," as well as "outerwear" and "droopy pants." See the full dress code in the 2019 handbook.

<https://worcesterschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2018-19-English-with-updated-links.pdf>

Yes

No

14) Explanation of response (optional)

Our dress code in general is overdue for an entire redraft. We don't have enough students and parents involved.

15) Would you support a moratorium on suspensions and expulsions that are not directly associated with violence or drugs or issues of direct safety for the educational communities?

Yes

No

15) Explanation of response (optional)

(though you know that we don't expel anymore?)

Note that this will require greater resources to find productive ways of engaging and re-engaging students, as I noted before the Joint Committee on Education when they were engaged in deliberating revisions to Ch. 222.

16) Would you support a ban on all suspensions in grades pre-K through 3rd grade?

Yes

No

16) Explanation of response (optional)

(your question needs two options here: yes)

17) Do you support continuing to hire and station police officers in schools?

Yes

No

17) Explanation of response (optional)

As my record clearly demonstrates; I've been a consistent voice on this.

18) Do you support the creation of restorative justice programs in the schools?

Yes

No

18) Explanation of response (optional)

It does take more than creation, however; without significant leadership support, such programs fail. There also needs to be staff buy-in.

19) Would you support an amendment to the Community Based Juvenile Justice Program

(<https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleII/Chapter12/section32>) that would require the notification of parents by the school district of all youth in the Worcester Public Schools who are identified by the district attorney's office as a juvenile "most likely to pose a threat to their community?"

Yes

No

19) Explanation of response (optional)

Questions related to school choice

20) Do you support the creation of additional innovation schools in Worcester?

Yes

No

20) Explanation of response (optional)

That entirely depends on what they are, if they're truly "innovative," how they're funded, if they truly serve a needy population, and can be created without further perpetrating inequities in the system. I have found Somerville's recent refusal of an innovation school instructive.

21) Are you in favor of supporting the creation of additional charter schools in Worcester?

Yes

No

21) Explanation of response (optional)

22) Are you in favor of supporting vouchers for low-income students to be able to attend schools of choice, including public schools, charter schools or private schools?

Yes

No

22) Explanation of response (optional)

Vouchers don't work: they don't cover full cost, and they further perpetrate inequities.

Questions related to community voice and accountability

23) Will you demand that the Worcester Public Schools ensure that school site councils are established and active in every single school in order to develop the school improvement/accountability plan, develop site specific goals and review the school site budget as stipulated by state and federal law? (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/advisory/schoolcouncils/>)

Yes

No

23) Explanation of response (optional)

More than demand: I would make it a superintendent goal and hold the superintendent accountable for doing so.

24) Will you ensure that parents (and students in high schools) are part of the hiring committee for faculty and administration?

Yes

No

24) Explanation of response (optional)

"ensure" is tough here, as the superintendent does the hiring of principals, and principals do the hiring of teachers. This being part of the superintendent's family and community involvement goal is something that can be done.

25) Will you make sure that all data that the school district collects and all research that is completed by outside researchers in the Worcester Public Schools is made available to the public?

Yes

No

25) Explanation of response (optional)

This would be a FERPA violation. The district cannot share all data collected.

26) Would you vote in favor of allowing 16 and 17 year-olds to vote in local elections?

Yes

No

26) Explanation of response (optional)

27) Would you support the creation of an online (and phoned) anonymous bias incident reporting and investigating process for incidents that occur in the Worcester Public Schools?

Yes

No

27) Explanation of response (optional)

We should also re examine how other reports are compiled.

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