
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 *

Cara Berg Powers

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)

I have been proud to advocate for years for the Healthy Youth Act, which would ensure that any district that implements a Sexual Health curriculum must ensure that it is age-appropriate, medically accurate, evidence-based and LGBTQ inclusive. I am committed to ensuring that my daughter and every other Worcester Public School student has access to the information they deserve to make healthy choices for themselves with safety and dignity.

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

Yes

No

2) Explanation of response (optional)

I have been advocating for the elimination of the MCAS since it was introduced, when I was in high school myself. At the time, many of us said what we know to be true now- that high stakes standardized testing narrows the curriculum, burdens districts with costs, takes too many teaching decisions away from teachers, and creates inequitable barriers to education. We can set high expectations and strong measurement tools for our students and teachers without regressive tests that widen the opportunity gap.

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)

In a recent T&G article about the failures of high stakes standardized testing (which I was also interviewed in), Max Page, Vice President of the MTA said, "(Success on the test) is so clearly correlated to the wealth of the families in the community." It is dangerous to use a test that so clearly perpetuates the racial and economic disparities we aim to dismantle to measure the quality of education that children are receiving. As a result, schools that provide tremendous academic and social emotional supports to children facing a wide range of systemic failures are penalized for serving the exact students we claim to be centering.

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)

I need to better understand what about the frameworks is a barrier to teachers in having the flexibility to teach culturally and linguistically sustaining material, engaging topics, and what they as educators know the students need and deserve. I have certainly seen, as a parent to Worcester Public Schools students, an alarmingly prescriptive approach- with friends of my daughter at different schools around the city receiving identical worksheets for school and homework. As an educator, I have been concerned at what seems like an increasingly developmentally inappropriate curriculum for our littlest learners. I look forward to learning more from students and teachers about how we can support a more inclusive, engaging, and critical pedagogy rooted curriculum.

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)

In addition to being to multiple actions and hearings for the Promise Act, I have also, as part of my work, been supporting students in creating media messages to advocate for the passage.

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)

I am already advocating for this. In my Sociology of Education course, my students research the impacts of how much schools give above their minimum and some of the outcomes- access to arts, student to teacher ratios, diversity of staff and teachers, among others. As I have been campaigning, I have been talking to City Council candidates about how they will commit to the city paying their fair share to ensure that one of our most important municipal functions- educating our children and young people- has the resources we need to do what we know works.

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)

If I understand this correctly, the city is taking money intended for the school side as an administration fee that it does not do the administration work to necessitate. If that is correct, than I would advocate for that 3% being put back into the school side.

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)

As previously discussed, high stakes standardized tests are a poor measure of almost anything except for family wealth. Merit pay is connected to increases in pay inequity along race and gender lines.

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

Yes

No

9) Explanation of response (optional)

I need to learn more about this. It seems like this, paired with creating more of a pipeline from our own community into these roles, could be effective in meeting the needs of our 59% of students that have a first language other than English.

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

Yes

No

10) Explanation of response (optional)

I would like to hear more about what this would look like and who is thinking about it. I do think that we know from research that being one or one of few teachers of color, especially women of color teachers in a school produces additional workload that is often uncompensated. It would make sense to support that labor formally.

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)

Some of my best friends that I grew up with here in Worcester are teachers, and having grown up with similar backgrounds and experiences to some of their students, have an opportunity to connect with them on a different level. In addition to supporting students authentically, investing in our own community members to increase access to better paying jobs seems like a great way to increase the opportunities our local community has to be part of the "Worcester Renaissance" as housing and other costs go up.

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

Yes

No

12) Explanation of response (optional)

I support this hire as the beginning of an office of equity and opportunity. I met earlier this year with Dr. Colin Rose, who has a similar role in Boston, and was really impressed and excited by the work he is doing in his office, and the model that he and Hayden Frederick-Clarke have been using of Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining practices. I had the opportunity to long-term sub in the classroom next to Frederick-Clarke at Diploma Plus, a long time ago now, and I saw first hand some of the practices that the office is able to support schools in building. In addition, I learned about a program designed to support 9th grade students, designed by this office, being piloted in a few different schools, including by my friend Eugene Roundtree, Headmaster at the Snowden International School. The impacts the office is seeing are rooted in a plan for opportunity and there is a live tracker you can see at any time for those goals. This kind of investment and accountability is something our students, teachers, and families deserve.

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)

As a veteran youth worker, I have been working with adolescents in and out of school time for nearly 15 years. We've known for a long, long time that the hours we run secondary school are not conducive to healthy sleep and overall wellness. I think it's important that any large structural change like this be done thoughtfully and with full community engagement. As we saw in Boston, unilateral changes, even when intending to create a positive outcome like this, can be incredibly disruptive without community support.

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)

There are a number of districts across the country that have been working to create inclusive and equitable dress codes that do not have the deep connections that ours does to a history of gendered and racial bias. We can do this, and if we care about equity, we should.

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)

We can and should have a culture of transformative justice in our schools. Schools are places of learning and growth, and we can use accountability as an opportunity to support youth in their development or we can remove them from the learning environment all together. With the right resources, and community support, we can create school communities where we don't have to choose between Teachers being able to do their job and students being fully supported. Those are the school communities our teachers and students deserve.

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

Yes

No

16) Explanation of response (optional)

YES. Again, I fully believe that we can find alternatives for our littlest learners that ensure teachers can do their job while also providing children with the out of classroom supports they need to overcome any challenges that are interfering with their learning. I also believe that we need to look very seriously at our curriculum for our littlest learners to evaluate whether or not our expectations for their engagement and behavior are developmentally appropriate. I have heard too many stories of kids as young as kindergarten being sent to the office for not being able to sit still on a rug. And at the same time, the pressure we're putting on teachers to meet arbitrary reading and math objectives with kids who should be learning mostly through play exacerbates these kind of challenges.

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

Yes

No

17) Explanation of response (optional)

We have seen that having police in schools as a national policy, increases the likelihood of issues that were once handled in principal offices being handled in court rooms and judges chambers. Retired Juvenile Court Judge Leslie Harris said exactly that about how he got involved in Restorative Justice.

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

Yes

No

18) Explanation of response (optional)

I have been working with teens in restorative justice programming, including circle keeping, for almost 15 years. I look forward to thinking about how we can incorporate a transformative justice lens and extend into our earliest grades.

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)

Authentically community supported initiatives should have the full hearing of decision makers.

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

Yes

No

21) Explanation of response (optional)

Charter schools as a system in our state take away from the common good through inequitable funding practices.

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)

As in charters, this perpetuates inequity.

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)

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)

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)

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)

I have worked with Teens Leading the Way on this and enthusiastically support.

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)

I would champion this.

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