

2019 CEA Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate: **Josh Balter**

Party: **Democrat**

District: **99th Assembly District**

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

Occupation: **Attorney**

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. 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.

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 work force 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. The state failed to do this in FY2018 when ECS funding was reduced in the bi-partisan budget by \$31.4 million (1.6%) and cut by an additional \$57 million (2.9%) by the Governor. Though ECS funding was returned to near 2017 levels for FY2019, the many years of underfunding continue to negatively impact districts around the state.

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

Smart Tax 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. 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, progressive tax system that includes a dedicated 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

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 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

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. 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 students. 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

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 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

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 school in districts serving a high number of students facing significant socio-economic needs

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 with if EL students are given the necessary level of resources to become fluent English speakers. 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. This threshold is far too narrow. We have many schools where multiple students have different dominant languages, yet they do not qualify for state bilingual funds. 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 expand eligibility for bilingual funding.

Agree with CEA's Position

Oppose CEA's Position

I will co-sponsor legislation expanding eligibility for bilingual funding

Classroom Safety

There is a crisis in many schools across Connecticut related to teacher and student safety. Increasingly, incidents of aggressive student behavior in classrooms, including behavior of K-3 students are endangering the health and safety of children, teachers, and other staff. It is imperative that we ensure that teachers and students go to schools that are safe from physical harm, conducive to learning, and with sufficient funding to enable students to receive the supports and resources that they need.

CEA Position: State law must include minimum staffing ratios for social workers and other certified staff such as school counselors and trained behavior intervention specialists. State law must also require districts to have clear school and classroom safety protocol including allowing a teacher to remove a disruptive student from his/her classroom and maintaining space within the school where the student can obtain the necessary supports. Because of the unique role of teachers to serve in place of parents as protectors of all students during the school day, teachers who suffer injury due to an unsafe working environment should also be allowed to recover lost wages, expenses, and other damages not otherwise covered by workers compensation in cases where they have repeatedly warned their district of the dangerous situation and no remedial action

Agree with CEA's Position

Oppose CEA's Position

I will co-sponsor legislation that protects teachers and students from physical harm and ensures that students receive the supports and resources that they need

Teacher Certification and Quality

Connecticut students benefit from teachers who come to the classroom with knowledge of their content, pedagogy, teaching methods, and sufficient practical clinical experience in the classroom to start their careers successfully. Teacher certification ensures that teachers enter the classroom with this preparation, thereby making greater gains with students and narrowing the achievement gap. Teacher certification has also been positively associated with higher student achievement in math and science, as well as with greater teacher retention in schools. Conversely, teachers without certification were

shown to have a negative effect on student achievement, in particular with English Learners, slowing their progress by 2-3 months per year as compared to fully-certified teachers. Groups such as Teach for America (TFA), Relay, and certain charter school management organizations like Achievement First seek to bypass rigorous and accredited teacher preparation programs, and circumvent teacher certification protections to recruit lower-wage recent college graduates as classroom teachers. Others seek to weaken certification in order to increase the number of teachers in shortage areas or who are of color. The result of their efforts has been to increase the number of inexperienced, insufficiently trained, and uncertified teachers into public schools, particularly those serving lower-income communities. This creates two tiers of teachers; one prepared and the other underprepared.

CEA Position: CEA supports rigorous teacher education programs with effective clinical training as preparation for a career as a professional classroom teacher and believes that laws requiring proper teacher certification are necessary and vital to ensuring that schools are staffed with effective, responsible, and devoted teachers. CEA also believes that lowering certifications standards to address teacher shortages is misguided, and that there are more positive approaches to ensure quantity while ensuring quality

Agree with CEA's Position

Oppose CEA's Position

I will oppose legislation weakening certification standards or creating two-tiers of teacher quality

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. 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

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.

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.

Agree with CEA's Position

Oppose CEA's Position

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

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

Additional Comments

I have been and always will be a friend to unions. My mother, a RN, was a union member and leader in AFT in NYC, my step-father and mother-in-law were union members, my grandfather helped bring the Teamsters in the Bridge Operators. Our teachers are the backbone of our education system and therefore are the backbone of our society and our economy. We must do everything possible to protect them, respect them, and enable them to succeed. Thank you for considering endorsement of my campaign for the 99th State Representative seat.