

Legislative Guiding Principles 2023-24

Elevating Educator Voices in the Policymaking Process

Educators are in the best position to advocate for their students and school communities at both the local and state level. Research shows that educator engagement has a direct and positive impact on student achievement and creates a better learning environment for students. However, educators face barriers participating in the policymaking process, especially when meetings take place during the contractual school day. DSEA will advocate for public meetings related to education to take place at times convenient for educators whenever possible and continue to include virtual participation options.

DSEA will continue to advocate for the union and its members to be formally represented on state and local decision-making entities and work to intentionally engage members to take active roles in the policymaking process.

Competitive Compensation and Benefits to Recruit and Retain Educators

Amid a statewide teacher shortage, Delaware is competing with neighboring states to recruit educators, while seeing educators exit the profession altogether. To compete with states like Maryland, which will increase starting salaries to \$60,000 by FY 2027, districts must offer strong educator salaries. DSEA will advocate for competitive starting salaries for educators statewide and work towards building a compensation system that incentivizes growth and retention and accounts for the additional responsibilities and leadership roles many educators perform. DSEA will also work to promote policies that remove barriers and provide financial incentives for education support professionals who want to transition to classroom teacher and specialist roles.

In addition to compensation, DSEA will advocate for competitive benefits for educators, including adequate and appropriate leave and strong healthcare benefits for active and retired members. Educators across the state are still dealing with the impact of COVID-19, and for the safety of students and staff, have taken additional sick days to prevent the spread of COVID. DSEA will advocate for policies that provide appropriate leave for educators and address the impacts of the pandemic.

DSEA will also fight to ensure that health benefits for both active and retired members remain both competitive and financially sustainable.

Finally, Delaware educators across the state are saddled with student debt and face financial barriers pursuing the higher education opportunities that enable them to increase their earning potential. DSEA supports loan forgiveness programs that help alleviate the burden of student loan debt for Delaware educators. Additionally, DSEA will work with partners to advocate for the expansion of tuition assistance programs that provide opportunities for all educators to attain additional credentials and advance in their careers.

Supporting Student Learning and Development Through Robust Support Services

Research demonstrates that a student's ability to succeed in the classroom is directly connected to their physical, social, and emotional well-being. DSEA will continue to fight for increased wraparound services in school settings to connect students and families to the health and social services that promote classroom success. These services include robust early intervention services, including lead and

developmental screenings, mental health and counseling services, access to critical healthcare services through school-based health centers, and access to nutritious school meals.

DSEA will also advocate for social-emotional learning in schools so that students are equipped with the tools and skills needed to thrive in school and in their communities.

The physical conditions of school buildings and classrooms also directly impact student learning and educator working conditions. DSEA will continue to advocate for stronger building maintenance standards for schools, including improved air quality and ventilation systems and lead-free drinking water, and for accountability and oversight to ensure adherence to those standards.

Improving Working Conditions for Educators

Educators' working conditions are students' learning conditions; when educators are not provided with the support to do their jobs effectively, student outcomes suffer. DSEA will advocate for the funding and policy changes needed to ensure appropriate class sizes and adequate planning time for educators. Recognizing the additional responsibilities educators and specialists serving special education students take on, DSEA will advocate for manageable caseloads and the supports needed to promote true inclusion in Delaware classrooms.

Both students and educators deserve to go to school without fearing for their physical safety. DSEA will also advocate for policies that promote safer learning environments for students and educators.

Targeted and Sustained Funding for Public Schools

As Delaware continues to fulfill the obligations of the settlement agreement on the landmark education funding lawsuit, *Delawareans for Educational Opportunity & the NAACP Delaware State Conference vs. State of Delaware*, DSEA will remain actively engaged in conversations related to school funding changes. The organization will fight to preserve a funding structure that minimizes political influence while advocating for changes that support student need, reduce class sizes, and address local wealth disparities.

Recognizing the additional supports certain students require to maximize their classroom potential, DSEA remains committed to advocating for additional, sustained funding for multilingual learners and low-income students and full funding of IDEA by the federal government. DSEA will advocate for funding to provide appropriate instructional materials and support services that match the learning needs of all students.

Promoting Equitable Access to Early Childhood Education and Supports

Investing in high-quality early childhood programs pays dividends both for Delaware children and the DSEA members who rely on those programs to care for their children. Access to high quality early childhood education results in improved student outcomes, translates to higher lifetime earnings, and helps break down opportunity gaps.

DSEA believes that all children, regardless of their family income, should have access to high-quality early childhood programs, including voluntary free, publicly funded prekindergarten programs with appropriate class sizes and classroom supports. DSEA will also advocate for early childhood programs

and supports that meet the physical, social, mental, and emotional health and nutritional needs of children and families.

DSEA will advocate to protect developmentally-appropriate curriculum and play for students, especially in grades PK-3. The research is clear on the value of play and its critical role in fostering child development and building relationships.

Decoupling Educator Accountability Systems and Standardized Test Scores

Educator evaluations will never be fair, valid or reliable when driven by test scores. DSEA believes that educator evaluations should be decoupled from test scores and instead should be centered on promoting high-quality instruction and providing support that fosters educator growth. Evaluation systems should be mutually designed and include active involvement from local affiliates and educators.

Fighting to Protect the Right to Representation

The right to organize and join a union is, for most employees, a fundamental employment protection under federal and state labor laws. America's labor unions have led the fight for working families, winning protections such as the 8-hour day and the 40-hour week, overtime rights, and access to health care and retirement security. DSEA will continue to fight for due process and the collective bargaining rights of our members and actively oppose any efforts intended to weaken the right to organize.

Safeguarding the Equal Protection Rights of Educators and Students

DSEA will advocate for policies and practices that eliminate barriers preventing historically marginalized people, adult and juvenile, from exercising rights enjoyed by others.

DSEA believes all persons should be guaranteed a safe and inclusive environment within the public education system. DSEA will advocate to eliminate public policies and practices that discriminate against marginalized groups, including women and people of color, in society and perpetuate stereotypes and biases about these groups.

All persons, especially persons from marginalized groups should have equal opportunity for employment, promotion, compensation and leadership. DSEA will advocate for policies at all levels that ensure marginalized groups have equal access to elected and appointed leadership positions. DSEA also recognizes the additional burdens educators caring for children and other dependents face in the workplace and will actively work to promote policies that address those challenges.

DSEA believes that, for students who are struggling with their sexual orientation or gender identity, every school district and educational institution should provide appropriate support services and programs, including gender-affirming care. DSEA believes that therapies designed to alter a student's orientation or identity are harmful to the emotional development of LGBTQ+ students.