

NSTU Guide to Political Engagement 2024



A Guide to support NSTU members in the 2024 Nova Scotia Provincial Election

How do I get involved?

Each and every election is litigated over a variety of issues, but as teachers we owe it to each other and our students to ensure that quality public education is on the agenda. By relying on your professional judgement there are a number of ways you can get involved and have your voice heard over the coming weeks.

Obviously, the most important thing you can do is vote. But there are benefits to also volunteering your time to support a candidate. The Nova Scotia Teachers Union is non-partisan, but we encourage members to get involved in the political process on a personal level. Fostering stronger relationships with elected officials of all political stripes gives members a window into the decision-making process.

Ways you can participate in this election:

1. Get involved in a local campaign for the best candidate for education:
 - Volunteer your time to canvas, make phone calls, assemble and install signs, etc.
 - Agree to take a sign for your preferred candidate.
 - Donate money to a candidate or a party.
 - Join a political party.
2. Have your voice heard about public education:
 - Stay engaged on social media, share stories that help frame the discussion.
 - Speak about the issues important to you with friends and family. You are an expert in education and your voice matters.
 - Write letters to your local newspaper expressing your own perspective and the need for positive reform.
 - Provide your own personal perspective on Facebook, X (Twitter) and Instagram. That said, please keep in mind that it would be inappropriate to reference specific details about your students, classroom or school.
 - Share a video, a photo or a graphic highlighting your education concerns.
 - Use appropriate hashtags on social media #nspoli.
3. Ask questions and dig for relevant facts:
 - Write or email the candidates in your area. Ask them questions relevant to your community and your classroom
 - Ask to meet with your MLA and the other candidates.
 - Similarly, prepare questions that you can ask if your local candidates arrive on your doorstep.
 - Follow your local candidates on social media. Stay abreast of what they are saying and sharing. If you disagree or have a question, feel free to express yourself in a respectful manner. Avoid getting into political disputes with partisans on-line.
 - Be mindful of the source of information on-line. Artificial news is pervasive so be wary of sources you are not familiar with.
 - The provincial NSTU will post information about how you can reach out to your local candidates on our Facebook page and other official channels.
 - Watch for candidate debates and forums, either on-line or in-person. If given the opportunity, try and ask a question.

Meeting your MLA or Candidate:

During the election campaign there will be numerous occasions for you to meet the candidates. It's important that you are prepared to ask the right questions. It's also good that you vary your questions. As a teacher and NSTU member, education is your priority, but if you focus all your attention on a single issue, the candidate will have a tendency to fall back on their talking points. By mixing up your questions you can get a better sense of what the candidate is really thinking. Remember, you should treat each interaction like a test, and your job is to assess the candidate on key questions that relate to education and your community. If candidates are asked questions about public education as they go door-to-door, it can influence the campaign.

Some tips:

- Be respectful.
- Work your questions into a conversation.
- Do not approach the candidates at the grocery store, church, a doctor's office, or when they are going about their personal business.
- The best way to talk to a candidate is to call their campaign office and ask for a meeting or a return call.
- If the candidates provide options to contact them via email, direct message, FB Messenger or text

message on their official campaign accounts, don't hesitate to do so.

- If you have already decided who you will vote for, and that person arrives on your doorstep, do not take up much of their time. Tell them they have your support and encourage them to move along. Candidates have a lot of doors to knock on during a campaign, and some people will try and intentionally waste their valuable time by engaging them in a lengthy conversation at the doorstep.
- If a campaign volunteer arrives at your doorstep, feel free to ask them questions, but if you don't like the answers, request that the candidate contact you directly. If you are too combative with the volunteer, it's unlikely they will pass along your request.

Key Messages:

- The NSTU works hard to maintain a constructive relationship with Government. While we won't always agree, it's crucial that Government be willing to collaborate with teachers, in order to address the key issues impacting public education.
- There have been some positive developments in recent years. The NSTU negotiated a free and fair collective agreement with the Province in 2024. Students are more engaged following the adoption of a new cell phone policy in schools. And some investments have been made to curb school violence. However, our public schools are still facing major challenges, and Government needs to be more willing to address them.
- In the spring of 2024 Nova Scotia's Auditor General (AG) completed an in-depth audit of school violence. In her final report, AG Kim Adair found that school violence has "severe and lasting consequences on the mental health, well-being, and education of children." She also determined that "current policies have significant weaknesses to address increasing school violence."
- In order to combat school violence, it is critical that Government invests in the appropriate resources to keep our schools safe. While some incremental steps have been taken, ultimately we need smaller class sizes and a province-wide strategy to combat school violence.
- Nova Scotia is dealing with a deepening teacher shortage. As a result, it's often the most vulnerable students that lose the support they need when teachers are asked to fill the gaps in an overstrained system. Nova Scotia needs a plan to address the teacher retention and recruitment crisis that focuses on improving teacher workloads and preventing burnout.
- As Nova Scotia's population continues to grow, our classrooms have become more crowded and complicated. The result is there are less resources to ensure that every student gets the support they need. Reducing class sizes is crucial to ensuring that every student has access to a safe and healthy learning environment.
- Studies have shown that child poverty has a profound impact on the ability of children to learn. Unfortunately, in recent years Nova Scotia consistently has one of the highest rates of child poverty in Canada. Teachers are doing all they can to support children in need, and fill the gaps, but more action is required. The NSTU wants to see a concrete plan to address the high rates of child poverty in Nova Scotia.
- Schools are more complicated than they've ever been. To ensure the inclusive education model is successful, a focus needs to be placed on hiring more guidance counsellors and educational specialists like school psychologists, speech language pathologists and social workers. Ensuring that proper mental health supports are available at our schools needs to be a priority.
- The Nova Scotia Teachers Union believes strongly that every student deserves an inclusive learning environment where they can feel safe expressing their true selves. In recent years other provinces have adopted policies that many experts warn these could place 2SLGBTQ+ students at risk of harm. The NSTU is appreciative that this is not currently the case in Nova Scotia. We hope this remains the case regardless of which party forms Government.

Key questions to ask candidates:

1. What do you think is the most significant challenge facing our public school system right now, and how would you address it?
2. What is your party prepared to do to eliminate the chronic teacher shortage impacting our schools? Are you committed to making Nova Scotia the most competitive province in Canada when it comes to attracting teachers?
3. What is your party's plan for reducing school violence? Are you prepared to make needed investments to ensure that every student and teacher has a safe learning environment?
4. What is your plan to ensure that appropriate mental health supports are available at Nova Scotia schools?
5. Do you think our province is doing enough to address high levels of child poverty across Nova Scotia? What is your party's plan to reduce child poverty levels in Nova Scotia?
6. Will you ensure that the rights of students are protected, so every child can feel safe expressing their true selves at school?
7. What is your plan to ensure that teachers are provided with enough time and resources to support students?