

NSTU Guide to Political Engagement 2021

A Guide to support NSTU members in the 2021 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 on 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, 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 be 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.
- If possible with social distancing, it's appropriate to approach the candidate at community events where it's evident they want to be seen in public.

- 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. However, do not send questions via these methods to personal accounts.
- 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 NSTU messages:

- The NSTU has worked hard to restore a more 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.
- While the final report from the Commission on Inclusive Education provided a clear roadmap to ensuring the unique needs of all students are met, there is still more work to be done. This election the NSTU and its members want to see a commitment to improving our inclusive education model that includes measurable benchmarks for success.
- 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.
- In recent years and especially during the pandemic, teachers are being asked to do more and more, while they are being given less time to complete tasks outside of the classroom. School-based cuts due to the elimination of unassigned instructional time (UIT) and enrollment changes have greatly diminished the level of support for students at many schools. More focus and a clear plan are required to ensure that proper levels of support for students are available at all schools in every corner of the province.
- The pandemic has highlighted the impact of overcrowded classrooms, poor ventilation and a lack of handwashing stations on the health and wellbeing of students and teachers. Similarly, in recent years, there have been multiple discoveries of unsafe drinking water at school buildings, which have yet to be properly addressed. Action is required to ensure the buildings that house our schools are healthy and safe.
- With more resistant variants of COVID-19 being discovered regularly and the inability for children under 12 to get vaccinated, schools remain vulnerable to the spread of the virus. Many provinces have already released updated back-to-school plans and have invested money to ensure that schools can open safely in September. Nova Scotia needs a clear, transparent plan for a safe September, released as soon as possible so families know what to expect.
- Since the last provincial election, Nova Scotia English school boards have been eliminated. In the past, parents/guardians knew they could call on their local school board representative when they had a question, but since the passage of Bill 72 a lot of parents/guardians don't know where to turn. This has only created extra confusion in our system and greater anxiety. Action is needed to restore transparency and accountability to Nova Scotia's public school system.
- It's critical that all segments of society work together to end systemic racism and our public education system is no exception. We need concrete action to dismantle the structures of systemic racism and its impacts on students, teachers and their communities.

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 steps do you think are required to increase transparency and accountability in our education system following the elimination of English school boards?
3. What is your party's plan to ensure schools are safe for students, teachers and staff as we continue to grapple with the current pandemic and beyond?
4. What is your commitment to improving and enhancing Nova Scotia's inclusive education model?
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. What steps are you willing to take to dismantle and address systemic racism inside our public education system?
7. What is your plan to ensure that teachers are provided with enough time and resources to support students?