

# NJPSA LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE

March 24, 2023

## Speaker Bios

### Special Messages



**Congresswoman  
Mikie Sherrill**

New Jersey's 11th Congressional District

After graduating from the United States Naval Academy in 1994, Congresswoman Sherrill spent almost 10 years on active duty in the United States Navy as a Sea King helicopter pilot. Congresswoman Sherrill also served as a Russian policy officer and worked on the implementation of our nuclear treaty obligations and oversaw the relationship between the U.S. Navy and Russian Federation Navy.

Congresswoman Sherrill attended law school after leaving the Navy. She worked as a lawyer and eventually joined the U.S. Attorney's Office in New Jersey. At the U.S. Attorney's office, she served as an Outreach and Re-entry Coordinator and an Assistant U.S. Attorney.

She was first elected to the House of Representatives in 2018 and is now serving her third term representing New Jersey's 11th Congressional District.

Congresswoman Sherrill sits on the House Armed Services Committee and the new House Select Committee on Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

She is also the mother of four kids.



**Assemblyman  
Craig J. Coughlin**

Speaker of the General Assembly

The Honorable Assembly Speaker Craig J. Coughlin was born Jan. 31, 1958 in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. He attended public schools in South Amboy going on to graduate summa cum laude from St. John's University in 1980 and then to earn his law degree from St. John's University School of Law in 1983.

Serving his seventh term in the General Assembly representing the 19th Legislative District, Coughlin in January of 2018 garnered the support of the Democratic caucus to become the chamber's 171st Speaker.

Speaker Coughlin's legislative career has focused on lifting up working and middle-class families and New Jerseyans, and he has led the way on smart investments into communities and the state's economy. Highlights of the Speaker's fourteen-year legislative tenure include successfully raising the state's minimum wage, sponsorship of four expansive anti-hunger bill packages, reforming the state's economic and business incentive programs principally through the Economic Recovery Act of 2020, expanding the state's micro brewing industry, implementing automatic voter registration, and modernizing the state's brownfield remediation process.

Advocating for taxpayers with the Middle-Class Tax

Rebate and boosts to school funding, sponsoring the New Jersey College Affordability Act, fighting for the Senior Freeze, restoration of the Homestead Rebate, improving the fairness of landlord-tenant relations, revitalizing the workforce through investments to childcare, and strengthening food security have been cornerstone achievements of Speaker Coughlin's policy agenda.

A long-time champion for food insecure communities, Speaker Coughlin spearheads an annual bowling fundraiser to benefit local food pantries in his district. In partnership with dozens of area businesses and organizations, the event has raised over \$300,000 since its inaugural year in 2010. The Speaker also

co-chairs the FeedNJ Campaign, launched at the height of the pandemic to connect local restaurants with soup kitchens feeding families.

Before running for the Assembly in 2009, Coughlin was a member of the South Amboy Board of Education, then served as a City Councilman for six years. Speaker Coughlin has served in various legal capacities including as a municipal court judge, prosecutor and public defender.

Coughlin is a partner in Woodbridge-based law firm, Rainone, Coughlin, Minchello LLC. He and his wife, Letitia, have three sons — Craig Jr., Vincent, and Nicholas.

## NJDOE Panel



**Angelica Allen-McMillan**  
Acting New Jersey Commissioner of Education

On October 20, 2020, Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan was nominated by Governor Phil Murphy to serve as Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Education.

Acting Commissioner Allen-McMillan is a proud product of a New Jersey public school education. She is also a passionate educator and an inspirational public speaker. "I understand and value the importance of strong relationships between people as a path to learning," said Acting Commissioner Allen-McMillan, "and I am deeply committed to the wellbeing of children both inside and outside of the classroom."

Acting Commissioner Allen-McMillan plans to utilize the lessons learned through her 25-year career in public education to lead a Department of Education that is quick to listen, precise in its execution, and ready to advance access to a high-quality education for all students. She began her career in education as a substitute teacher in Essex County and taught in East Orange Public Schools before she launched the Marion P. Thomas Charter School in Newark. She served as an assistant principal and principal in the South Orange-Maplewood School District, and as an assistant superintendent in both Irvington Public Schools and Newark Public Schools. Most

recently, Acting Commissioner Allen-McMillan served the New Jersey Department of Education as the Interim Executive County Superintendent for Morris County. She welcomes the opportunity to join an organization with the goal of strengthening teaching, leading, and learning in order to increase educational equity for New Jersey's 1.4 million students.

A parent of three, Acting Commissioner Allen-McMillan has also served on the Montclair Board of Education, where she focused her expertise in the area of special education. She also volunteered as a PTA Executive Board member while her children were in elementary school, coordinating fundraising efforts and promoting parental involvement in all facets of school.

Acting Commissioner Allen-McMillan holds a bachelor's degree in industrial and labor relations from Cornell University, and she earned a master's in educational administration, as well as a doctorate in education, leadership, management and policy, from Seton Hall University.

She has served as trustee for the County College of Morris and as a board of education member of the Morris County School of Technology. She has received numerous awards and has been featured in many publications ranging from local news outlets to U.S. News & World Report. She continues to be involved with her alma mater, such as assisting with alumni relations and serving on the Cornell University Library Advisory Council. One of her greatest joys

professionally was serving as a mentor for aspiring administrators through New Jersey Leaders to Leaders, the state-approved comprehensive mentoring and induction program for new school administrators. She will serve as Acting Commissioner pending confirmation by the State Senate.



## Cary Booker

Assistant Commissioner, Division of Early Childhood Education

Cary A. Booker is the Assistant Commissioner for the Division of Early Childhood Services at the New Jersey Department of Education. The division includes the Office of Preschool Education and the Office of K-3 Education. The Division also houses the federal Head Start program and the Governor's Council for Young Children. In this position, Mr. Booker oversees the priorities of Governor Murphy and Acting Commissioner Angelica Allen-McMillan, Ed.D., in supervising the birth through 3rd grade education initiatives that include the expansion of New Jersey's nationally recognized high quality preschool program.

Working collaboratively within the New Jersey Department of Education and other state agencies, the Division of Early Childhood Services manages the social, emotional, physical, and academic development of New Jersey's youngest learners. The division also provides leadership, resources, and professional development to support high quality educational curricula.

Before joining the New Jersey Department of Education, Mr. Booker served as a Senior Policy Advisor in the Office of the Governor, and during his career has served in other senior-level positions at various institutions. Mr. Booker served as Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and director of The Academic Foundations Center/ Educational Opportunity Fund Program at Rutgers University, Newark, Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs at LeMoyne-Owen College in Memphis, Tennessee, and Vice President of Omni Schools, also in Memphis.

Mr. Booker completed his doctoral coursework in social psychology at The University of Texas at Austin and earned a Bachelor of Arts from Amherst College in Massachusetts.



## Kathleen Ehling, Esq.

Assistant Commissioner, Division of Educational Services

Kathleen Ehling, Esq., is the Assistant Commissioner for the Division of Educational Services with the New Jersey Department of Education. She has been with the Department for over 18 years. In her role as Assistant Commissioner she oversees the Offices of Special Education, Supplemental Educational Programs, Fiscal and Data Services, Student Support Services, Performance Management and the Marie H. Katzenbach School for the Deaf. Kathleen is also the State Director for the Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Programs. As the Assistant Commissioner, Kathleen is responsible for overseeing implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the New Jersey Tiered Systems of Support and the development and release of the annual School Performance Reports.

Kathleen has served in various positions throughout her tenure with the Department including as the Director of the Office of Fiscal and Data Services. In this role she oversaw the administration of over \$4 billion in federal and state grant funds for the Department. Prior to this role, Kathleen served as the Manager of the Bureau of Governance and Fiscal Support, Office of Special Education Policy and Procedure within the New Jersey Department of Education. In this capacity, she oversaw the implementation of administrative policy for the office, including development of regulations, model IEPs and the Parental Rights in Special Education booklet. In addition, she also oversaw the dispute resolution system, the complaint investigation process, the approval and monitoring of approved private schools for students with disabilities and clinics and agencies, the SEMI program, and the IDEA Part B grant process. Prior to assuming the role of Manager, Kathleen worked as a Special Assistant to the Director of the Office of Special Education Programs, a Complaint Investigator and Mediator with the Office of Special Education. Kathleen began her career in education as a fifth grade teacher in the West Windsor-Plainsboro School District where she was the recipient of a Geraldine Dodge Foundation Teachers in the Rainforest grant. She holds a Master of Arts in Teaching degree from The College of New Jersey and a law degree from Rutgers, Camden. She and her husband, John, have been married for 14 years and have one child, John Patrick. Kathleen enjoys spending her free time at the Jersey shore.



## **Christopher C. Irving, Ed. D.**

Assistant Commissioner, Division of  
Field and Support Services

Christopher C. Irving, Ed. D. is the proud grandson of Jamaican immigrants Vian and Ceceilyn Miller and the son of the Rev. H. Jocelyn and Herman Irving. Dr. Irving was born and raised in the city of Paterson and is a product of the Paterson Public School system. Dr. Irving holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Ramapo College of New Jersey. After completing his Master's degree in Public Policy and International Affairs from William Paterson University, Dr. Irving started a consulting firm called the Ceceilyn Miller Institute for Leadership and Diversity in America (CMI), based out of Bloomfield, New Jersey. CMI has become one of America's most innovative leadership and diversity training organizations in education. In April 2010, Dr. Irving was elected to Paterson School Board (NJ), serving a three-year term, and was re-elected in April 2013 and November 2016; during his tenure on the Board, he served as Board President for four years, leading the transition of Paterson to regain local control. One of his most significant life accomplishments was the completion of his doctoral research and obtaining his Doctoral Degree in K-12 Administration from Seton Hall University in July of 2016. In December of 2017, Dr. Irving was appointed to the role of Executive County Superintendent of Schools for the County of Passaic for the New Jersey Department of Education. In May of 2018, Dr. Irving was selected to serve as the Superintendent for Teaneck Public Schools, where he was responsible for the day-to-day operations of the school system. Dr. Irving was the first African American to serve in this role of Superintendent and ended his tenure in Teaneck in July of 2022. In November 2020, Dr. Irving was appointed as Commissioner of the Middle States Association Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools for his first three-year term. Currently, Dr. Irving serves as the Assistant Commissioner of Field Support and Services for the New Jersey Department of Education. Reporting to the Commissioner of Education, this role supports the local districts through the county office of education and educational departments committed to advancing teaching and learning. Dr. Irving is the proud father of his son Christopher C. Irving II, the brightest light in his life.



## **Dr. Jorden Schiff**

Assistant Commissioner, Division of  
Teaching and Learning Services

Jorden Schiff, Ed.D. joined the Department of Education after serving as an educator in New Jersey schools for over 30 years. Dr. Schiff was originally appointed in July of 2021 as Assistant Commissioner for the Division of Field Support and Services where he supervised the 21 County Offices and the Offices of Fiscal Accountability and Compliance, Recruitment, Preparation, and Certification, Charter and Renaissance Schools, and the Office of Comprehensive Support. Recently, Dr. Schiff was asked by the Commissioner to lead the Division of Teaching and Learning Services where he currently oversees the Offices of Standards, Assessment, Innovation, Educator Effectiveness, and Career Readiness (CTE). Dr. Schiff has a broad range of educational experience including service as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent and superintendent in seven public school districts and a private school. Dr. Schiff has also held various leadership positions at the county and state levels, including Chairman of the Somerset County School Security Task Force, Chairman of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators' Legislative Committee, Vice President of the Somerset County Superintendents Roundtable, and President of the Garden State Coalition of Schools. Dr. Schiff has testified in front of various legislative committees on topics affecting the quality of education for the students in New Jersey. He has also presented many times at state and national conferences to build leadership capacity of school, district, and board personnel. Dr. Schiff has been recognized for his contributions to the field of education, including being awarded the Somerset County Superintendent of the Year 2015-2016, CoSN Volunteer Hall of Fame Inductee, and Golden Apple Award recipient. Dr. Schiff holds multiple degrees from Rutgers University including a Bachelor's Degree in Economics, a Master's Degree in Elementary and Early Childhood Education, and a Doctoral Degree in Administration and Supervision of Education. He and his wife, Debby, have been married for over 25 years and have three adult children.

# Legislative Panel



## Senator Patrick Diegnan (D-18)

Chairman of Senate Transportation

Senator Patrick Diegnan represents the 18th Legislative District in Middlesex County. Born in South Plainfield, NJ, as the youngest of seven children, he worked his way through Seton Hall University and Seton Hall Law School to become an attorney in private practice.

Senator Diegnan was first elected to the General Assembly in 2002, serving seven consecutive terms (2002-2016) and holding the leadership positions of Deputy Speaker (2008-16) and Parliamentarian (2006-2016). As Chairman of the Assembly Education Committee, Diegnan sponsored significant legislation impacting our schools including the TEACH NJ Act involving revisions to the evaluation and tenure process, and school security legislation.

In 2016, Diegnan was sworn in as State Senator to fill the vacancy left by the confirmation of Senator Peter Barnes as a Superior Court Judge. Currently, Senator Diegnan serves as Chair of the Senate Transportation Committee and is a member of the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee.

The greatest joy in Senator Diegnan's life is his family. He and his wife Anita have been married for 46 years, and have two children and four grandchildren.



## Senator Vin Gopal (D-11)

Chairman Senate Education Committee, Vice-Chair, State Government, Wagering, Tourism and Historic Preservation Committee

State Senator Vin Gopal was elected in 2017 and re-elected in 2021. He has sponsored dozens of pieces of legislation that have become law. Senator Gopal has championed legislation to provide aid for education and local businesses; he has provided property tax rebates for taxpayers, seniors and veterans; made life more affordable for seniors; make mental health services more accessible, improved public safety and teared down barriers to employment and services for members of the disabilities community.

Senator Gopal currently chairs the Senate Education Committee and serves as Senate Majority Conference Leader. He also is Vice-Chair of the State Government, Wagering, Tourism & Historic Preservation Committee. In his 30s, Senator Gopal is currently the youngest member of the NJ State Senate and the first South-Asian American to be elected to the Senate in New Jersey history.

A dedicated volunteer who works with many nonprofit organizations to assist people in need, Senator Gopal is also the Founder and President of the Vin Gopal Civic Association, a 501c(3) organization dedicated to helping Monmouth County charities and individuals in need. His community contributions as a volunteer include serving as a past Board of Trustees Member of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Monmouth County, and he served for many years as a volunteer first responder and EMT. He is also a former Adjunct Professor at Monmouth University and is currently the co-chair of the Monmouth University School of Civil Discourse.

An entrepreneur, Senator Gopal has started and built several businesses and is currently a business consultant and coach. Senator Gopal has served on the Board of Directors for the Northern Monmouth County Chamber of Commerce, and as President of the Hazlet Township Business Owners Association. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, he created a districtwide organization of business, community, church, and nonprofits leaders to address the challenges of the coronavirus to the local economy.

Born in Neptune Township and raised in Monmouth County, Senator Gopal holds a Masters in Public Administration from Rutgers University and a bachelor's degree from Pennsylvania State University.



## **Assemblywoman Mila M. Jasey (D- 27)**

Chair of Assembly Higher Education and Vice-Chair of Assembly Education Committees

Assemblywoman Mila M. Jasey, who was first elected in 2007, is a Deputy Speaker currently serving her seventh term representing 14 towns in Essex & Morris Counties. She is Chair of the Higher Education Committee, Vice-Chair of Education, Co-Chair of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools, and a member of Aging & Senior Services. She previously served as Vice-Chair and member of the Housing & Community Development Committee, where she was lead sponsor of more than one half dozen measures protecting tenants, homeowners facing foreclosure and a landmark Land Banking Bill, all signed into law. Prior to joining the Assembly, Ms. Jasey was a Member of the South Orange/Maplewood Board of Education for three terms, including two years as President. She also served as a member of the PTA and HSA for many years, including President for two years.

During the Assemblywoman's tenure, dozens of bills which she has been a prime sponsor have been signed into law by four governors. She has sponsored measures addressing the prevention and treatment of traumatic brain injury, the State's anti-bullying law, an act promoting organ donation, dyslexia screening, post-partum depression awareness, iSTEAM initiatives and K-12 education, pre-school expansion, gun safety, homelessness prevention and elimination of human trafficking. She has also sponsored higher education accessibility and affordability laws, enhanced protections for LBGTQ+ students, open space and sustainable energy measures, women's health, affordable housing and the Complete Count Commission.

Her efforts have been recognized by the N.J. School Boards Association, the NJEA, Garden State Equality, the NJ State Library Association, the NJ Brain Injury Association, the Friends of Public Education, the Council of County Colleges, the Mental Health Association of Essex & Morris Counties, and the NJ Women's Network in Higher Education.

She is a long-standing member of the Columbia High School Achieve Foundation, the South Orange/Maplewood Community Coalition on Race, LaLeche League, Nurture NJ, dedicated to reducing maternal and infant mortality and ensuring equitable care among women and children of all races and ethnicities, the League of Women Voters, Emerge NJ, PAM'S List, the NAACP

and the NJ Legislative Black Caucus.

The Assemblywoman is a fellow of the Hunt Institute, an organization bringing together people that help build and nurture visionary leadership and mobilize strategic action for greater equity and educational outcomes and student success.

The Assemblywoman will be awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Bloomfield College on May 15, 2023.

The Assemblywoman is a former public health nurse who provided comprehensive services and preventative care to individuals and families in underserved communities; she has been recognized for her work and her legislative initiatives by the NJ State Nurses Association.

Assemblywoman Jasey received her B.A. from Barnard College, Columbia University, and her master's degree from Pace University School of Nursing. Mila is married to Neil N. Jasey, and they are the parents of three adult children and seven grandchildren.



## **Assemblyman Erik Simonsen (R-1)**

Member of Assembly Education Committee and Joint Committee on the Public Schools

Erik Simonsen was sworn in as an assemblyman in January 2020. Assemblyman Simonsen is a member of the Assembly Education Committee, the Assembly State and Local Government Committee, the Assembly Community and Development Affairs Committee, and the Joint Committee on the Public Schools.

A life-long resident of Lower Township, he previously served as councilman from 2013 to 2016 and mayor from 2017 to 2019. Simonsen graduated from the College of New Jersey with a degree in fine arts. After earning a degree in special education from Rutgers University, he attended the University of Scranton where he received a master's in educational administration. He is the athletic director of Lower Cape May Regional High School.

Simonsen has a diverse background beyond elected office. He is a singer, songwriter and front man of the band Twelve:01. Over the years, he has performed with: They Might Be Giants, Nils Lofgren of The E Street Band, Edwin McCain, Jewel, and many more national artists. Simonsen and his wife, Anna, have two daughters.



## Senator Sam Thompson (D-12)

Member of Senate Education, Budget and Appropriations, and Joint Committee on the Public Schools

Senator Samuel D. Thompson has served in the New Jersey Senate since January 2012, representing the 12th Legislative district, which includes parts of Burlington, Middlesex, Monmouth and Ocean counties.

Prior to redistricting in 2011, he served in the General Assembly from 1998, representing the 13th district. He currently resides in Old Bridge Township, New Jersey and is married to the former Jacqueline P. Haycock. In addition to serving on the Senate Education Committee, the Senator serves on the Joint Committee on the Public Schools, the Budget and Appropriations Committee, and the Joint Committee on Housing Affordability.

Senator Thompson was born in Mobile, Alabama and attended public schools in Alabama, Louisiana, and Arkansas. He reached the rank of Specialist Third Class while serving in the U.S. Army from 1955 through 1957. He received a B.S. in 1960 from the University of Arkansas – Little Rock in chemistry and mathematics and was awarded a Ph.D. in 1965 from Louisiana State University in physical chemistry. The Senator worked as a research chemist at duPont and J.P. Stevens and Company and was employed by the New Jersey Department of Health from 1972-1994 as a Research Scientist and director of Clinical Laboratory Improvement service. He served on the US Armed Forces Epidemiological Board from 1983-1990. He

was appointed by Governor Whitman to serve on the Governor’s Education Task Force in 1994 as Co-Chair. He served on the NJ Turnpike Authority from 1994-1997 as Director of Planning, Analysis, Government Relations and subsequently as communications. Thompson has served on the New Jersey Advisory Council on Elder Care since 1998, the Continuing Care Advisory Council from 1998-2002 and on the New Jersey State Council for Adult Literacy Services from 2000-2002. Having honorably served his constituents for twenty-five years, Senator Thompson recently announced that he will be retiring from the Legislature at the end of his current term.



## Moderator: John Mooney

Education Writer, Chief Executive Officer and Founding Editor for NJ Spotlight

Before founding NJ Spotlight in 2009, John Mooney covered education in New Jersey for 15 years as a reporter for The Newark Star-Ledger and The Bergen Record and as a contributing writer for The New York Times. He has won numerous state and national awards, including honors from the Education Writers Association and the American Society of News Editors. John also has spoken at conferences and other events regarding school issues facing New Jersey and the role of education journalism. He lives in Montclair, N.J.

# Budgets, Education and Politics



## Dr. Benjamin Dworkin

Director of Rowan Institute for Public Policy and Citizenship

As one of New Jersey’s most astute and widely quoted political analysts, he serves as a non-partisan commentator on political developments for media in New Jersey and nationally.

In addition to the phenomenal work he does with students at Rowan, Dr. Dworkin has appeared on numerous network and cable news shows, and is frequently quoted by all of New Jersey’s major newspapers and radio stations, as well as The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, The Chicago Tribune, and The Los Angeles Times.