

Recommending Candidates

Editor's Note: This series explains the NEA-NH Government Relations (GR) Committee Presidential candidate recommendation process used during the 2016 Campaign.

The recommendation process used by NEA-New Hampshire has been in place for many years and has been used countless times to make recommendations in the past for federal, state and local offices. The Government Relations (GR) Committee is responsible for producing these recommendations and forwarding them to the Executive Board for approval and action. This process is not new and was not modified in any way for this election cycle.

The GR Committee is a standing committee of the Executive Board, consisting of 15 to 20 members. Voting committee members include teachers, education support professionals and retired members appointed by the NEA-NH president and approved by the Executive Board. The nomination and approval process of Committee members takes place prior to June, traditionally well ahead of presidential candidate announcements. NEA-NH staff members also attend GR Committee meetings but cannot vote on GR matters.



Face-to-face meetings allow the Committee to listen to the candidate's responses, ask follow-up questions, and experience in-person how committed the candidate is to our issues.

The GR Committee conducts candidate interviews, evaluates candidate's positions in regard to education policy and forwards any recommendations to the Executive Board. It is up to the Executive Board to accept any recommendation and then act upon it, by announcing the recommendation, rejecting the recommendation, or voting to do nothing with the recommendation.

The NEA-New Hampshire Executive Board consists of NEA-NH members who have been directly elected by members in their region. Teachers, education support professionals and retired members are fully represented on the Board. Leadership positions, including president, vice-president, and secretary/treasurer, are directly elected by NEA-NH members, and are not appointed by the Executive Board. NEA-NH president, vice-president and treasurer are also considered to be Executive Board members.



Candidates also get a chance to hear about our issues, what matters most to our members, and what NH educators are looking for in a President.

The recommendation process we use is in place to take advantage of New Hampshire's unique position as first-in-the-nation primary holder. This position allows New Hampshire citizens early access to candidates, and our organization a chance to communicate to those candidates our position on matters important to our members. NEA-NH is the largest association of public employees in the state. Our recommendation does indeed have worth to a candidate, but more importantly, our ability to sit with each candidate, ask questions and report back to our members is even more valuable. We believe this process allows us to look beyond stump speeches and commercials, and more deeply into the candidate's position on our issues.

The process is not a popularity contest, or a method designed to survey our members to find who a majority of them support. It is designed to find out, face-to-face, where candidates stand on our issues, and then recommend to our members the candidate who the Committee believes would best serve our students, our members and public education. The Committee does not look at issues beyond public education and public sector collective bargaining rights.

Once the GR Committee has been installed, the process of candidate recommendations begins. As candidates announce their intention to seek office, the GR Committee reaches out to them. The Committee set a July 31st deadline to have all interviews completed.

In early May, a letter was sent via regular mail and email to New Hampshire Democratic Party (NHDP) Chairman Raymond Buckley and NHGOP Chairwoman Jennifer Horn informing them that that NEA-NH would be beginning its interview process for any candidate that would like to be considered for our endorsement. Due to the ever-changing field of candidates, both Chairs were asked to please forward our invitation to any interested candidate and contact us if they were interested.

NEA-NH was informed by the NHDP that Secretary Clinton, Governor O'Malley, Senator Sanders, and Governor Chafee were interested and provided contact information for their campaigns. All four campaigns were emailed invitations outlining our process and our July 31st deadline. All four campaigns expressed interest and said they would be in touch going forward.

We received no response from the NHGOP. Some members have asked why the Committee only interviewed Democratic candidates this year. The answer is very simple; no Republican candidate accepted our offer to be interviewed. Without an interview, the Committee very rarely recommends a candidate. NEA-NH did not reject Republican candidates this year, Republican candidates rejected NEA-NH.

NEA-NH President Scott McGilvray, Executive Director Rick Trombly, Communications Director George Strout, worked with GR Chair Bonnie Doherty and Jake Sweeney from NEA to develop a list of 8 questions that would be asked of each candidate. These questions were not provided to the candidate beforehand, but each candidate was informed of the number of questions. They were also provided with a short bio of each GR Board member.

At the beginning of each interview, candidates were provided an opportunity to make an opening statement. Each candidate was then asked the same eight questions by Bonnie Doherty, after which there was an opportunity for follow-up questions from other board members. Candidates finished the interview with a closing statement. Each interview lasts approximately an hour. Following the interview, each candidate was provided a copy of the questions asked in writing in case they wanted to elaborate on any issue or correct anything they may have said.

At the completion of the round of interviews, the Committee meets to discuss the results, apply their evaluation criteria, and determine if they can recommend a candidate. There is much discussion and open debate and a final vote is only taken when the Committee agrees that they have exhausted their discussions. The questions asked of the candidates and the evaluation criteria will be covered in the next installments.

The Committee's decision is not made public until presented to the Executive Board. The Executive Board acknowledges receipt of the Committee's decision then decides how to act on it. They can accept the decision and make it public immediately, opt to delay publication of the recommendation, reject the decision, or choose to do nothing.

The Process of Evaluation

NEA-NH President Scott McGilvray, Executive Director Rick Trombly, Communications Director George Strout, worked with GR Chair Bonnie Doherty and Jake Sweeney from NEA to develop a list of 8 questions that would be asked of each candidate. These questions were not provided to the candidate beforehand, but each candidate was informed of the number of questions. Here are the questions each candidate was asked:

- 1. Teachers' voices have been replaced by special-interest donors and for-profit corporations in the conversation about what works best in classrooms. How will your administration involve educators in the development and integration of education policy?**
- 2. NEA-New Hampshire believes the chances children have for success should not depend on winning a charter lottery, affording private school, or living in the right zip code. Secretary Clinton, you have called for more support of public schools, including universal preschool, higher teacher salaries, and updated school facilities, and say such improvements are possible. How would you make this happen?**
- 3. Each year, the Federal Government fails in its promise to fully fund Special Education. Where does this funding fit into your administration's budget priorities?**
- 4. New Hampshire is the first state in the nation to pilot a program with the Federal Government that reduces the amount of standardized testing in favor of more locally produced and managed assessments that will be integrated into a student's day-to-day work. What role do you believe standardized testing should play in the education of our youth?**
- 5. There is general agreement that higher standards produces higher results. Some running for President once supported Common Core and have now backed away from that position. What is your position on Common Core and what, if anything, would you propose to change or improve these standards?**
- 6. Even with good grades and transcripts, many deserving students cannot afford a college education. Besides lower interest rates and college loan restructuring, what would your administration propose to address the affordability of higher education?**
- 7. Do you support workers' rights, especially public education employees, to collectively bargain as a path to stabilize the middle class in this country? What will you do to counteract current attacks on workers' rights to bargain?**
- 8. How will you win this election?**

At the beginning of each interview, candidates were provided an opportunity to make an opening statement. Each candidate was then asked the same eight questions by Bonnie Doherty, after which there was an opportunity for follow-up questions from other Committee members. Candidates finished the interview with a closing statement. Each interview lasts approximately an hour. Following the interview, each candidate was provided a copy of the questions asked in writing in case they wanted to elaborate on any issue or correct anything they may have said.

At the completion of the round of interviews, the Committee meets to discuss the results, apply their evaluation criteria, and determine if they can recommend a candidate. There is much discussion and open debate and a final vote is taken only when the Committee agrees that they have exhausted their discussions.

In evaluating each candidate, the Committee reviews their responses and their voting record. The committee is looking for past support of public education funding and policies, support of collective bargaining rights, and protection of retirement security for educators.

The Committee reviews the candidate's proposed new policies and solutions, not just in terms of their agreement with our positions, but also their likelihood of successful passage and implementation. The right words without a feasible implementation plan is a hollow promise in the eyes of the committee.

Lastly, the Committee assesses each candidate's electability. Winning a presidential campaign takes a great deal of resources, organization and support, and the Committee evaluates each candidate's campaign for strength and longevity.

In many cases, the president and governor serve as a "goalkeeper" for educators and students, working to balance, and veto if necessary, the products of less-friendly legislatures and Congress. Electability becomes critical in cases such as these, since having no one in the executive office to protect the interests of public education and educators would be devastating.

The Timeline

The interview with Secretary Clinton took place on June 15 at the Puritan Back Room in Manchester at 4:30 pm, prior to the Manchester Democrats Flag Day Dinner. The interview with Governor O'Malley took place on July 8 at 3:00 pm. Governor Chafee came in on June 30 at 3:00 pm, and Senator Sanders was interviewed on August 1 at 11:00 am. All interviews, other than Secretary Clinton's, took place at the NEA-NH offices in Concord.

The Committee's decision is not made public until presented to the Executive Board. The Executive Board acknowledges receipt of the Committee's decision then decides how to act on it. They can accept the decision and make it public immediately, opt to delay publication of the recommendation, reject the decision, or choose to do nothing.