

Five Questions With: Patrick Crowley, National Education Association of Rhode Island assistant executive director

By

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Patrick Crowley / PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

1. Before COVID-19, what was the most pressing labor issue for teachers? It was the state takeover of Providence public schools and what that might hold for districts across the entire state. Before the crisis, many teachers were concerned Rhode Islanders did not appreciate how hard it is to be an educator. Teachers felt like they were blamed for how our economy fails to address the growing gaps between rich and poor people.

2. After COVID-19, has that changed? It's changed dramatically. With so many people required to stay home and take an active part in the education of their own children, there is a newfound respect for what teachers do every day. Rhode Islanders began to have an appreciation for the profound role educators play in the lives of students. With the introduction of distance learning, educators created a completely new education delivery system overnight and so far, the results are remarkable.

3. Have teachers been getting enough support for distance learning? Yes. It hasn't been perfect, but when problems are identified, they are addressed, and Gov. [Gina M.] Raimondo and her team deserve a lot of credit for that. It's been inspiring watching the professional-development programs of the two teachers' unions, the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and

Health Care Professionals and National Education Association Rhode Island, turn on a dime and offer innovative distance-learning training for teachers across the state.

4. What does NEARI think about Gov. Raimondo's plan to reopen public schools on Aug. 31? Any immediate concerns? NEARI is supportive of a statewide unified calendar for all public school districts. For this upcoming school year, it gives the entire state a starting date and serves as a goal to which we can aspire. The last few months have taught us that should we need to engage in distance learning ... in the 2020-2021 school year, we have the ability to do so with much greater efficiency.

5. What do you see as the most important thing that has to happen before schools can reopen safely? The primary directive has to be about student safety. ... Keeping the students healthy is the only decision that really matters when it comes to opening schools again. To do this correctly, every school worker – teachers, classroom assistants, school nurses, custodians, secretaries, bus drivers – along with students, parents and administrators, [needs] to have a voice in what that future looks like.