

2022 EDUCATION MINNESOTA  
AUDITOR CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

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**Please return completed questionnaire to the Education Minnesota  
staff member you received it from. Thank you!**

## 2022 EDUCATION MINNESOTA ELECTION QUESTIONNAIRE

**LEADERSHIP: As State Auditor, it will be your job to demonstrate leadership on issues that are important to working families, educators and students. What leadership qualities do you possess that make you uniquely qualified to be the State Auditor?**

My leadership experience has taught me that a good leader is focused, bold, transparent, reflective and enthusiastic. Before becoming Minnesota's 19th State Auditor, I was the president of my local teachers union, Anoka-Hennepin Education Minnesota, and was the Secretary-Treasurer of the Minnesota AFL-CIO. I led these organizations during some of their most turbulent times.

As a local president, we faced a difficult economy, an unsupportive governor and the largest lawsuit regarding LGBTQ+ student bullying in U.S. history. As a secretary-treasurer, we were facing large-scale attacks on the very existence of unions. Both of these experiences called for making difficult decisions, taking risks, admitting mistakes, sharing credit for wins and building creative solutions.

These experiences, and the subsequent leadership qualities I developed from them, made me uniquely qualified to serve as State Auditor during a difficult time for our state. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, I was able to move the OSA forward by: expanding oversight by taking on new audit work, connecting the office's work to Minnesotans with modernized communications and activating the office by advancing reform in areas like criminal asset forfeiture, pensions and local control.

Minnesota's State Auditor must be able to articulate why clean government is important to all of us: whether it be to a public that demands honest and transparent use of their tax dollars, local officials striving to solve local issues with their neighbors, or lawmakers whose policies affect us close to home. I'm proud of the work we've been able to accomplish and I'm excited to continue demonstrating leadership on issues that are important to working families, educators and students.

**Throughout the campaign, what do you foresee as the key issues regarding this race?**

My Republican opponent has made clear that he intends on bringing issues unrelated to the State Auditor's office into the race. Since he announced his candidacy, he has made claims about the Southwest Light Rail project and Feeding Our Futures investigation that show he doesn't understand even the most basic roles of the office. He's also made clear that he wants to undermine decisions that local communities make that are antithetical to his own political agenda and biases, rather supporting constituents freedom to make decisions in their own communities.

**What is your vision for Minnesota? As State Auditor, what will be your top priorities in financial oversight over the next four years?**

I believe truth can turn values into reality. Today, our best progress is coming from strong local values. When we match those values with truths, our values become reality. What is the role of the auditor in that progress? Provide the truth that Minnesotans can use close to home to make their ideas become real. As State Auditor, I'll continue to provide:

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**Quality:** The auditor sets the standard for truth in city, town and county financial information. There are people in the legislature who are working to lower the standards of local audits to obscure the value of local initiatives. I will continue Minnesota's tradition of high quality government by protecting the standards of transparency and honesty in our governmental information. Well run local governments are able to keep resources close to home where they can do the most good.

**Clarity:** Information is only as valuable as it is understandable. During my first term, a major priority of my office has been making the information as understandable, accessible and usable as possible. That's why I revamped our Communications department, spearheaded our State of Main Street tour and implemented a financial tool that allows for county's to compare to neighboring ones.

**Focus:** Minnesotans trust information that is clearly matched to its purpose. Often, as auditor, I'm at tables to make decisions beyond the specific scope of my office. My power at those tables is in being a trusted source of concrete, unbiased context and information. I will continue to leverage the respect I have earned as an honest broker, bridge builder and policy innovator to illuminate our path to making our values real.

### **The State Auditor has financial oversight responsibilities over counties, cities, service co-ops and school districts. What are your plans if elected regarding these entities?**

Our local government entities need an auditor who understands how the pandemic and other forces have changed their roles in our communities. Local government took on a larger role in responding to economic crises during COVID-19. Their work arguably saved Minnesota out of economic freefall.

If we take time now to learn from that work, shore up gaps in implementation, and preserve the infrastructure built over the past two years, we will be better prepared to handle future economic challenges. As auditor, our office has already begun analyzing where local entities were successful and where they can improve to provide guidance on building local systems we can use in future responses.

### **How else can the State Auditor use the office to support public education in Minnesota?**

Our students deserve schools with community engagement. Effective oversight increases engagement by building trust between community members and their education institutions. Increased transparency helps community members understand their education institutions in a way that can lead to new ideas and solutions to support students.

Specifically, I am working to increase the expertise in our office to examine and analyze school finance. We have won changes to how our office interacts with school districts (particularly in how we charge for our services) at the legislature that will help us build a team in the future.

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**FUNDING OF PUBLIC EDUCATION: What is your philosophy on the funding of public education? Specifically, who is responsible for public education funding, what is an appropriate level of funding for public education, and how do you see yourself providing leadership on this issue?**

Our state's commitment to a free and fair education is one of the most important pillars of our democracy. For that education to be truly free, funding levels need to be:

- Adequate to give the students the access to educators, materials, and time to be successful.
- Predictable to use the funds most efficiently.
- Sustainable so districts can make long term plans.

For education to be truly fair, funding needs to ensure that students get what they need no matter their zip code. That does not mean funding is exactly equal, in fact that would be unfair, but equitable based on need.

Our state and federal government have clear requirements to provide this funding, as auditor I can help highlight the realities of fulfilling that commitment.

**What is the proper level of fund balance for Minnesota school districts?**

The Office of the State Auditor has a clear position on fund balances for cities, towns, and counties because they rely so heavily on property taxes that are collected twice yearly. That standard is those entities should have five months of operating revenue in reserve at the point of the their end of the year audit. We state that that standard is too high for school districts as their funding is more predictable and based on a larger variety of funding streams.

Personally, I believe that while the public wants schools to be a lot of things, they don't want them to be banks. As a result, it is important that school districts maintain the lowest reserves needed to reduce reasonable financial risks. While there is room for debate over where an unrestricted fund balance should be between 5% and 10%, another area for analysis is easier to quantify. Districts need to be monitored for the proper use of dedicated fund balances. Standards are clearer about what can be considered restricted and revenue can be freed up when districts misuse these classifications.

**HIGHER EDUCATION: Minnesota has a strong tradition of keeping college education affordable and accessible. However, funding for Minnesota's public colleges and universities has lagged in recent years, increasing the burden on parents and students through higher tuition. Rather than shifting more and more of the burden to students, the state should return to supporting higher education through more direct appropriation.**

**What level of funding do you think is appropriate for higher education?**

Ideally, higher education would be funded to the free and fair standard. But until that point, at minimum, the state should keep their stated commitment of funding 67% of the cost of a public post secondary education.

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**VOUCHERS, TAX CREDITS AND TAX DEDUCTIONS:** Proposals such as tax credits, tax deductions and vouchers divert public tax dollars to private and religious schools and education programs.

Do you support public money going directly to fund private and religious schools and education programs through vouchers or voucher-like programs? \_\_\_\_\_ YES        x   NO

**CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS AND OPPORTUNITY GAPS:** Over the past decade, there has been much discussion of the need to close gaps for students. Changes have been made in areas that include establishing academic standards, reducing class sizes, increasing student testing, comparing school district finances to student achievement, etc. How would you address the issue of the achievement and opportunity gaps during your term in office? What do you see as the causes of these gaps and how can we prevent them in the future?

My opportunity to close gaps comes in understanding and highlighting how disparity shows up in local government data. Too often, those in roles like mine convince themselves they don't need to consider racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, and the like because they work with hard numbers. The opposite is true - data has been misused to discriminate since numbers were invented and everyone needs to be vigilant in keeping data fair and accurate.

By ensuring that I am providing full context for my data - for instance, reminding people just how large a share of the Minnesota population Hennepin County is every time I share county numbers - I can help Minnesotans use data in a productive way. Also, being aware of discrimination issues when asked to investigate or examine finances, I have been able to avoid the manipulation of the work of the OSA.

**RETIREMENT:** Education Minnesota supports defined-benefit retirement systems for public employees and opposes efforts to move public employee pensions to defined-contribution plans. Do you agree or disagree with our position and why?

I absolutely agree with that statement. Employees already accept a degree of risk when they agree to delay compensation. The move from a defined benefit plan to a defined contribution plan shifts an unreasonable amount of risk to the employee.

**Because you will likely serve on the board of the Public Employees Retirement Association, what are your observations of the practices of that fund?**

I believe PERA's investment values and strategies are sound, but the board needs to be vigilant that the broad needs of the members are considered. I have had to push back when fund managers are too narrowly focused on short term trends or actuarial specifics to ensure we consider the full effect of our decisions on retirees.

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**STATE BOARD OF INVESTMENT:** As State Auditor, you would serve on the State Board of Investment. What will be your role and your priorities while serving on this board? Do you support efforts to encourage the board to make socially responsible investments?

I am proud of my work to move the SBI to study, quantify, and explicitly consider diversity, equity, inclusion, and climate change in our investment decisions. Because of my, and Governor Walz's, Secretary of State Simon's, and Attorney General Ellison's efforts, the SBI is a national leader in socially responsible investing. We have not only made it a priority, we have taken concrete steps to bake responsible investing into our day to day processes. As a result, we will not only see social benefits, but the evidence is clear that it will benefit our returns as well.

### **WORKING WITH EDUCATION MINNESOTA AND OTHER UNIONS**

**PELRA:** Since its inception in 1971, the Public Employment Labor Relations Act has provided an orderly and constructive means of negotiating contracts between public employees and their employers. Minnesota statutes ensure that public employees receive fair treatment.

Do you support maintaining the right to strike at the termination of the master contract?  YES  NO

Will you oppose new legislation that weakens teachers' due process or collectively bargained seniority?  YES  NO

Do you support any changes to the current collective bargaining process? If so, what changes do you support? I would like to see the return of a financial penalty for not being settled by a specific deadline.  YES  NO

**HEALTH INSURANCE:** One of the problems facing school districts and unions is the rising cost of health insurance. What strategies would you suggest to deal with this problem?

This is an area where I have appreciated Education Minnesota's leadership. I have been a long time supporter of statewide health insurance options for educators. Ultimately, a national public option is a strategy the whole country needs.

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**In 2005, the State Auditor released a report regarding some inappropriate practices of the Service Co-ops while providing health insurance to school district employees. Will you commit to revisiting the report and following up on the problems identified?**

Currently, the staffing level of the OSA is about 40% lower than it was at the time that report was released. Before making this commitment, I would like to discuss if it is still the level of priority it was at that point.

**Do you support the right of educators to unilaterally join PEIP? And, would you support additional incentives to join PEIP, to ensure it remains a stable and solvent option for school districts? Yes**

**WORKING FAMILIES:** What will be your top three campaign priorities that will assist working families, and why?

My top priorities are all related to protecting local control: ensuring local government data is fairly represented, ensuring local voices are part of funding discussions, and ensuring those in government keep their promises to their residents. Together, those actions build trust and efficiency so local Minnesotans stay engaged and supportive of their cities, towns, counties, and school districts.

**DEMOCRACY:**

**Do you trust that the results of the 2020 election are accurate? Why?**

Yes - I work closely with county auditors and I know the quality and honesty of their work.

**Do you pledge to accept the results of the 2022 election? Under what circumstances, if any, would you work to overturn the election results?**

Yes- luckily we have Steve Simon as our Secretary of State so I can't see any likely circumstances where I would seek to overturn results.