

Ben DeNucci – SD7

Education Minnesota candidate questionnaire

Education funding

1. Education Minnesota believes the solution to closing the state's racial opportunity gaps must include fully and equitably funding public education, from preschool to postsecondary institutions. There's widespread agreement the full-funding agenda will require several billion dollars in new education investments. Please indicate your support or opposition to the following components of our full-funding agenda.

Inflation: Reverse Minnesota's perpetual underfunding of education by significantly increasing the per-pupil funding formula and tying it to inflation.

X Yes No

SPED cross subsidy: Fully fund its portion of special education costs instead of relying on school districts to pay for them.

X Yes No

EL cross subsidy: Fully fund the costs districts pay to provide quality English learner programs and instruction.

X Yes No

Lower class sizes: Lower class sizes so teachers can give students more of the individual attention they need and deserve.

X Yes No

Full-service community schools: Expand access to full-service community schools across the state.

X Yes No

Universal pre-K: Provide universal pre-K taught by licensed teachers, so all children are ready for kindergarten.

X Yes No



Teachers of color: Fund programs to increase the number of teachers of color significantly so teachers providing instruction better reflect the students in our classrooms.

X Yes No

Student support: Provide additional resources for school districts to hire more student support staff, including counselors, social workers, psychologists, licensed school nurses and other job classifications.

X Yes No

TDE/Q Comp: Fully fund the 2011 Teacher Development and Evaluation law, an unfunded state mandate, to ensure teacher quality and lift the cap on the Q Comp program.

X Yes No

Professional development: Provide professional development to all staff around cultural competency and trauma-responsive classrooms with aims of closing the discipline disparity gap.

X Yes No

ESP living wage: Ensure all education support professionals earn a living wage of at least \$25 an hour.

X Yes No

Teacher compensation and benefits: Increase teacher compensation to provide competitive salaries and benefits to recruit and retain teachers.

X Yes No

Health care for all school employees: Make health insurance more affordable, fair and predictable for educators and school employees so they stay in the profession.

X Yes No

Education debt relief: Provide debt relief to retain teachers so they can afford to stay in the classroom.

X Yes No

Higher education: Renew Minnesota's commitment to invest in the state's future by fully funding public higher education in Minnesota.

X Yes No

Education Support Professionals

2. Do you support ESPs being able to access unemployment insurance in the summers, when they are not guaranteed work?

X Yes No

3. Will you support dedicated, paid training each year for education support professionals to get the training they need that is specific to their work and students' needs?

X Yes No

Taxes/revenue

4. Would you commit to raising revenue to ensure the wealthiest corporations and richest households pay what they truly owe in taxes so every student, no matter what they look like or where they live, can attend a fully funded public school that prepares them to pursue their dreams?

X Yes No

5. Education Minnesota believes in restoring fairness to the state tax code by raising revenue from the very wealthiest corporations and richest households and reducing the reliance on local levies to fund schools. Considering your own experience and expertise, are there other progressive, equitable ways to raise state revenue that you would recommend the union consider supporting?

Minnesota is in a unique position with our unprecedented \$9 billion surplus. It is unacceptable that the legislature adjourned without dedicating a significant portion of this to education. If elected, I will work to dedicate the surplus to increase student support services, educational service provider wages, and to increase the special education cross subsidy and per-pupil funding average. I also support legislation to ensure a portion of any future surplus dollars go straight to education, so this resource is less at the mercy of partisan whims and posturing.

I am a proponent of legalizing cannabis – with stringent safeguards to ensure community safety – and I will work to pass a legalization plan that dedicates cannabis taxation revenue to education.

The Iron Range tax base is different from much of the rest of the state. Mine land is not taxed ad valorem. We must continue using the taconite production tax in lieu of property taxes because of our lower property values on the Range and the inequality inherent in funding education through an individual community's wealth. As a state senator, I will work with the IRRRB to take a more active role in funding education, and to expand the accounts the IRRRB has authority to tap for education and school infrastructure improvements.

Higher education

6. Do you support increasing the state's direct investment in public higher education to significantly reduce institutions' reliance on tuition?

X Yes No

7. Will you support investments in capital bonding projects that preserve buildings, remodel classrooms and keep our technology assets current?

X Yes No

8. What would you do, as a state legislator, to help with education debt?

My approach to education debt is to treat both the symptom and the root cause. As state financial support for our colleges and universities continues to dwindle, tuition and other costs only go up. I will fight for more adequate higher education funding in the legislature, particularly for community colleges and two-year degree programs that can set our students up for success by graduating with no or extremely low debt.

Rural areas face unique challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers. Expanding the Minnesota Teacher Shortage Loan Repayment Program to cover a significantly larger portion of debt is one idea to both attract more teachers and in turn ease education debt burdens.

9. Some college campuses have no counselors, while others have a ratio of 1:11,000 students. Will you support each Minnesota State campus having at least one counselor so students have access to mental health and academic support services?

X Yes No

High-quality professional educators

10. What will you do to help recruit and retain high-quality educators in our classrooms?

We need to continue to fund Grow Your Own programs and make sure that communities in Greater Minnesota are included. It is important to include economic and regional diversity along with racial diversity. As a legislator I will explore cooperative Grow Your Own programing for districts that are too small to “have their own” and make sure that grants are accessible for people willing to commit to ten years of service.

The best way to keep teachers in the profession is to pay them for the work that they do, make sure they have the benefit packages they deserve, and keep the state retirement system healthy including the expansion of the “Rule of 90” to existing and future teachers.

11. Do you support changes to current law to include our fully licensed Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) and Adult Basic Education (ABE) teachers in the continuing contract law?

Yes No

Teacher licensure

12. Do you support changes to state law to allow Tier 1 teachers to join the teacher bargaining unit?

Yes No

13. Do you support deleting the option in Tier 3 that allows a person to receive a full professional license without completing a teacher preparation program?

Yes No

Standardized testing

14. What individual or system-level decisions in education do you believe are appropriate to make based on standardized test scores?

Standardized tests should never be used to label our schools or our children as underperforming or failing. The best use of results is to look for areas of success that can be replicated in schools with similar students and resources. If a school is “struggling” on a given measure we need to use that data to provide additional targeted resources to provide students support.

Honesty in Education

15. What can you do to protect teachers in the classroom and ensure that they have the freedom to teach?

We need to make sure that we support academic freedom laws for teachers and make sure that our tenure laws remain strong and intact so that teachers are able to teach without hesitation. I oppose dangerous legislation like the “Parent’s Bill of Rights” that interferes with and undermines teachers and the quality education they provide.

16. Do you agree that Minnesotan students deserve an honest and accurate education about race that enables them to learn from the mistakes of our past so they can create a better future for all Minnesotans? Why or why not?

Yes. We only hurt our children by shielding them from the past. The process for the adoption of academic standards in Minnesota is clear and written in statute. I support this process and I believe that by listening to what the experts – teachers – believe Minnesota students ought to learn is how we build a solid foundation for our children to succeed in life.

Time to Teach

17. The planning and differentiating that teachers do daily needs more time. Most after school “prep” is filled with meetings. The current statute falls short of the time needed for preparing lessons. Will you support adjusting this statute to increase prep time?

Yes No

18. Will you support legislation that protects an educator’s prep time so it can’t be used for meetings or having to sub for colleagues?

Yes No

19. Do you support paid, dedicated time outside of student contact time for special education teachers to complete their paperwork and required meetings?

Yes No

Union Rights

20. Do you support collective bargaining rights?

Yes No

21. Will you oppose any legislation or constitutional amendments that would weaken collective bargaining rights, the right to organize, the right to strike, automatic payment of union dues, union access and activities at worksites or other anti-union policies backed by anti-worker groups?

Yes No

22. Do you support teacher tenure and due process rights so the experts who work the most with students have the support to stand up for them?

Yes No

23. How will you support unions as a state legislator?

One of my three core issues on this campaign is supporting unions and expanding collective bargaining rights. I fundamentally believe this is important because being pro-union is pro-jobs.

In 2020, the Challenge Incarceration Program at Togo faced sudden closure. When I heard the news, I got in my car and drove straight to the facility. I sat down with the director and talked about what we could do. We started a letter writing campaign addressing the governor's office and our representatives. We started a phone tree, calling senators and representatives. Finally, we organized a rally where all of our legislators, the commissioner of the Department of Corrections, a congressman, and unions spoke. The rally, televised by the media, was an overwhelming success. At the end of the day, the legislature passed a supplemental budget that kept the facility open and those jobs here on the Range.

This is the kind of energy I will bring to supporting unions every day as a legislator. I am a strong proponent of attaching Project Labor Agreements to any state-funded projects. I will work to fully fund the Public Employment Relations Board, vote to ratify fair contracts, protect public pension funds, and support collective bargaining in non-unionized sectors. Above all, I will always stand with the men and women in the labor movement any time an action is necessary – you will see me on the picket line.

Working families

24. Do you support the current language that allows educator locals to unilaterally seek a bid and join the Public Employee Insurance Program (PEIP) as the insurance provider for local bargaining units?

Yes No

25. Will you support continuing defined-benefits retirement systems for public employees?

X Yes No

26. Will you support providing the necessary state funding to ensure financial sustainability of public pension funds?

X Yes No

27. Will you support exploring new systems for providing educators with a secure retirement, including exploring early retirement options that might help recruit and retain educators?

X Yes No

28. What legislation could you introduce or support that would reduce the cost of health insurance to school districts? Where do you stand on health care for all?

All teachers and their families – all Minnesotans – deserve high quality health care. At the same time, school districts should not have to be in the health care business and their budgets should not be held hostage by variable insurance costs. This is an unnecessary burden on administrators and budget predictability, and is one of many reasons why I support moving to a MinnesotaCare for all type of system.

Privatization

29. Do you oppose state tax credits for private K-12 education tuition and expenses?

X Yes No

30. Will you support policy changes that will ensure a stronger accountability system with necessary oversight and reporting to ensure quality management and instructional practices in charter schools?

X Yes No

31. Will you support a moratorium on new charter schools until such changes are made?

X Yes No

32. Minnesota students, from different places and of different races, deserve well-resourced, welcoming schools. These needs are urgent and can't wait decades for lawyers and courts to force it to happen.

Do you oppose efforts that would delete constitutional mandates for using taxation to fund public education funding and for providing equal access to public schools to all students?

Yes No

Do you also oppose these same efforts that would enshrine standardized testing – with all its racial, cultural and economic biases – into the Minnesota Constitution?

Yes No

Your role as a legislator

33. Have you visited a public school in your district in the past year? If so, which one? What were your observations from your visit? How will that experience inform your work as a legislator? If not, when did you last visit a school? Would you like us to help arrange a visit?

Over the past year I have visited Grand Rapids East Elementary, Nashwauk High School, Keewatin Elementary, South Ridge, Cook County Elementary, and Minnesota North College Hibbing Campus. I am also familiar with King Elementary in Deer River and Mountain Iron-Buhl High School from tours in previous years.

At Keewatin Elementary I have seen students being assessed in desks in the hallways. Teachers work out of closets or crammed into outdated spaces. These are unacceptable conditions. We need modern learning environments to support and retain teachers and facilitate positive outcomes for students.

One of my proudest accomplishments is my work on the Nashwauk-Keewatin school referendum project team to replace the oldest school in the state. I used my relationships with Range legislators, commissioners, the IRRRB, and developed a new relationship with the Grand Rapids School District for a joint powers agreement. I coordinated meetings with United States Steel in Nashwauk and secured a donation of a 40-acre parcel for the school site. When the referendum passed with an overwhelming majority – unlocking additional necessary IRRRB funds – I knew I had done my job.

I am a proponent of the full-service community school model. I believe it is an effective model for rural areas. The work Eveleth-Gilbert and Virginia school districts did to merge into Rock Ridge and establish a career academy school is innovative. As a state senator, I will strongly advocate for full service community schools. I want people to move to the Iron Range because of our reputation for unmatched education.

Additionally, the Minnesota North College Hibbing Campus is doing great work training students in the trades. We need young people to connect with employment in good-paying union jobs locally to keep our communities strong. I support bringing labor into the classroom through programs like 218TRADES.

I am always happy to have help arranging school visits. One of my goals is to visit every school and teacher Local in SD7 over the duration of the campaign.

34. What have you done to become informed on issues relating to public education? What organizations and individuals do you go to for your information?

I prefer to collect my information on public education straight from the source; teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators who work in schools in the area I represent. Education Minnesota is the first organization I turn to. People like Paul Winkelaar and Evan Sandstede are important advisors. I have close relationships with school board members on the Range, such as Lisa Peratalo, Nashwauk-Keewatin School Board Chair. It is my goal both during this campaign and after my election to visit every teacher Local in the district to provide availability and receive feedback from teachers themselves.

35. How do you envision working with Education Minnesota if you are elected/re-elected? If you disagree with us on an issue, how will you communicate that?

I will engage with Education Minnesota and its members as a valuable co-governing partner. It is my commitment that I will not wait for Education Minnesota to come to me; I will be a frequent visitor to SD7 schools and with the teacher Locals who serve our students on the Range.

The bottom line is I will be transparent and direct. If I were to take a position that went against Education Minnesota priorities – which is not something I expect to occur with any regularity – I would reach out to EdMinn leadership first, both as a courtesy and to ensure that I have the most pertinent information before casting a vote.

36. If elected/re-elected, how will you balance competing priorities that might exist between Education Minnesota and other education groups?

I consider it a personal strength that I listen to everyone; I'm not about staking out partisan positions. I am inclined to always work for a deal with those across the aisle or with differing views, but I will never compromise my values. At the end of the day I am an ardent supporter of public schools. The right to a quality public education is fundamental. I will not sacrifice our students and public school teachers for any other priority.