

# Eric Olson – MN House District 11B

## Education Minnesota candidate questionnaire

### Education funding

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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.*

Yes    No

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

Yes    No

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

Yes    No

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

Yes    No

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

Yes    No

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

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.*

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.*

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.*

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.*

Yes  No

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

Yes  No

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

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.*

Yes  No

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

Yes  No

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

Yes  No

## **Education Support Professionals**

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

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?

Yes  No

## Taxes/revenue

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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?

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?

**I believe that revision of the tax code along the lines described should be the primary mechanism for raising revenue because it allows for the broadest and most equitable sharing of the funding burden. With that said, I am not averse to other methods of raising revenue. In particular, I believe it is worth investigating sponsorship mechanisms to raise additional revenue from corporations. Education is clearly of benefit to Minnesota's employers and allowing them to contribute to improved areas of education directly relevant to their business might encourage engagement as well as targeting improvement to areas of need without sapping the fundamental base resources. As a simple example, I could envision contributions from a company like 3M to a statewide pool of funds for equipping science laboratories.**

## Higher education

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

Yes  No **This is a maybe. I do not support this across the board, but in a targeted fashion.**

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

Yes  No

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

**I do not believe that general debt forgiveness is the best use of limited funding. In order to be sustainable, I believe that debt reduction should be focused to encourage student participation in high demand areas where the overall socioeconomic benefit will compensate for the cost of**

education. For example, I believe that financial incentives should be targeted to need and increased for high demand programs (e.g. nursing or machining) and that these incentives should be tuned to state employment forecasting. A large portion of these resources should likely be directed to the community and technical college system. As an example, the state Legislature has already provided \$2500 scholarships for high demand programs in this system and that is a start, but I would like to see that program renewed and expanded. Ideally, the amount would be increased to cover the full cost of attendance. I would also like to see the prerequisites for participation loosened. For example, I'd like to see coverage for other critical fields and I'd like to see the Minnesota residency requirement dropped to attract outside workers to these fields in Minnesota. That program also allows corporate matching funds to be employed and I would like to see that approach used more broadly.

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?

Yes    No

## High-quality professional educators

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

The most straightforward approach to this is simply funding. Better funding leads to more competitive salaries, which in turn recruits more and stronger candidates and greater program success, which in turn leads to lower burn out and better retention. Beyond this, there are two possible approaches. First, we can attempt to increase the non-financial drivers of job satisfaction. As a former teacher, I believe that a very significant part of the reason that teachers go into and remain in the field is the satisfaction of helping students to learn at the direct, personal level. I believe that an increase in teacher classroom control through a lower emphasis on standardized testing should help. Second, we can attempt to enlarge the pool of candidates at the educational end. I would lean toward recruitment incentives for education students tied to commitments to teach in high-demand fields and schools experiencing difficulty in recruitment.

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

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

Yes    No   Fundamentally, yes, but I would like to see the specific changes.

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   My inclination here is to allow for flexibility and say No, but this is an area where I would need to do much more research before taking a position.

## Standardized testing

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

I have professional experience teaching in a standardized test driven education system (the UK system is used in Zimbabwe) and grading standardized tests in Minnesota. Based on this, I generally feel that their use should be strictly limited. Classroom level assessments of student performance are generally more accurate and reflective of student achievement. Learning (and teaching) to a defined set of facts is of lower educational value than adaptability and problem

solving. Similarly, in-class assessment by teacher mentors and principals is generally a more effective mechanism for teacher evaluation.

With that said, well written standardized tests can offer a comparative guide to how well a curriculum is working to achieve specific aims. Lower general scores in a specific sub-field can help curriculum designers to continuously improve materials. Successful approaches can then be modeled for teachers to improve individual performance. Highly aberrant scores should be triggers for deeper evaluation of students/teachers/schools, but only triggers for that rather than acting as an evaluation in themselves.

## Honesty in Education

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

Generally, I believe that the less legislative interference in the classroom itself, the better. Curriculum content and structure should be left to the professionals doing the work every day. The role of the legislature should be to handle funding and higher level standards such as licensure that are largely discussed elsewhere. Recapping major points from elsewhere, I believe that we over test, over standardize, and under fund. Equitable funding for schools in lower tax base areas needs to be emphasized and under (or un-) funded mandates should be removed.

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?

It is my expectation that professional educators will present material that is accurate and honest in all subjects. As stated above, I believe that curriculum content decisions should not be the role of the legislature. Thus, all statements beyond the basic expectations should be taken as personal philosophy rather than intention to legislate. With my background in history, I am inclined to treat all accounts, whether modern or historical as biased by the perspective of the viewer. Only by attempting to view events from multiple perspectives is it possible to triangulate and evaluate the accuracy of a narrative. Thus, I believe that diversity of perspective in presentation is the best way to achieve accuracy. This, of course, applies not only to race, but religion, gender, ethnicity, and all experiences that make up the complexity of human nature. Specific to race and ethnicity, I believe it is clear that non-European perspectives have long been underrepresented in our educational systems and that affirmative action to redress that imbalance is important.

There is a second part to your question that I think is worth specific commentary. I believe that the ability to incorporate different perspectives and to actively try alternative approaches and solutions is the heart of why our federal democratic system is the best and most resilient form of government. Accordingly, I believe that it is important to learn from both our mistakes and our successes. Excluding mistakes from the discussion often condemns us to repeat the failures of the past. However, excluding successes from the discussion also prevents us from moving ahead.

## Time to Teach

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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

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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?

**The most important part of supporting unions is listening to their members and representatives in a partnership to better the field. Because the remainder of this document covers support of education, I presume that this question intends to get at the role of unions and collective bargaining more generally. In the modern economy, there is a great deal of pressure toward automation and centralization. That leads to an increasing concentration of wealth and economic power in fewer hands. The rights of union organization and collective bargaining are the most effective**

counterbalance that we have to those trends. Thus, I believe it is important to strengthen those rights wherever possible and intend to vote accordingly as a legislator.

## Working families

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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?

Yes  No

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

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?

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?

Health care is not an area of deep expertise for me and as a first term legislator, I do not expect to directly propose legislation in this area. Fundamentally, I believe that quality health care is a human right and I hope to be part of providing a solution. My ideal solution would shift care from an insurance model to a single payer system. That alone would increase the share of industry dollars actually delivered to actual health care and would improve the financial condition of actual health care providers. I would also support a shift away from a fee for service model to a staffing as infrastructure model for general medical practice. I have seen this model in operation in receiving medical care in several countries (for example, the U.K. and Canada) during my career working on the road so I am confident that we could make this work. However, these are major changes that would need to be transitioned in. That means we would need provisional action to address current problems. I think we can take more immediate actions by increasing the access to public payers within the existing Affordable Care Act/MNSure model. It is worth a note that I currently have my health insurance through MNSure.

## Privatization

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

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?

Yes  No

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

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

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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?

**I have not been able to arrange a specifically targeted visit during the last year. I did reach out to attempt to schedule a formal visit through the local union head in Pine City, but did not receive a response. With that said, I do have direct experience as a classroom teacher at the secondary and post-secondary levels and I do remain in touch with active teachers. My last visit to Pine City High School was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

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?

**There are two parts of becoming informed. First is awareness of issues as they arise. Here, I rely primarily on communication (in person and electronically) with my friends and supporters who are teachers and school administrators. I hope that Education Minnesota will formally join that group through the endorsement process. To a lesser degree, I rely on standard media (typically, the Minneapolis Star-Tribune and the local newspapers within my district). Of course, issue awareness is only the beginning of being informed. Once I am aware of an issue that I believe warrants action,**

I will research it directly using web search of reputable sources (generally newspapers for time sensitive matters and professional journals or the web sites of organizations directly involved). I tend to be a very deliberative person in part because of my science background and believe that it is much more important to complete research before taking positions even at the expense of less timely response to issues that may be trending.

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

As the representative of the people actually doing educational work in Minnesota, I hope that Education Minnesota will proactively make me aware of key issues through feeds and direct communication. On the research end, I would continue to look to Education Minnesota for detailed sources explaining the issues and justifying its positions. Additionally, I would hope that Education Minnesota would provide connections to subject matter experts for questions on issues that I become aware of through other channels.

Should I come to take a position that disagrees with one taken by Education Minnesota, I hope that the organization would already be aware of it through questions that I ask in the research process (see the response to the previous question).

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

This is a question that is very difficult to answer in a vacuum. Every issue needs to be considered on its own merits. As philosophically inclined to support for both education and unions as I am, I am certain that there will be areas where my position may differ. As mentioned above, I am not quick to take formal positions without research and I hope that Education Minnesota would be involved in the research process and would thus be aware of all my positions that relate to education. Where positions are largely unrelated to education, it will be my inclination to rely on subject matter experts in the primary field.