

Mary Kunesh, Senate District 39

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.

Yes No

SPED cross subsidy: The state must also 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, 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

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

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?

One thing I hear a lot from municipalities and school districts is the cry for local control so one way to add to education funding would be to give local entities progressive tax options. Very few states allow their cities, counties, and other local jurisdictions to choose *any* progressive revenue sources so most of these jurisdictions can only choose between regressive property taxes, sales taxes, and fines and fees.

One option could be to expand local control and allow municipalities to build their own progressive revenue options such as local income taxes that could be structured as "surtaxes" that easily works within the state income tax structure. Offering revenue collection options would empower residents and local officials to choose policies that reduce inequalities in their own local communities as well as at the state level.

Higher education

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

Yes No

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?

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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

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

First, we must lift up the role of teachers and return the high level of respect and appreciation for educators and their support staff. For too long educators have become the blame for what ails our country and that must change.

I'd work to bring teachers more support in the classroom with well-trained paraprofessionals to assist in the classroom. I'd look for ways to build opportunities for leadership roles that allow teachers to have a decision-making role in their schools, enticing them to stay in the classroom and affirm new teachers with mentors and support systems.

In all six years as a state representative, I have carried and championed the Increase Teachers of Color and Indigenous bill. We know that when kids see and work with educators that look like them, have common language and life experiences, the overall experience increases for everyone. While we get bits and pieces of it passed, it is imperative that the full, comprehensive bill be passed and funded to realize the full positive effects for the education system and students.

I will look to reduce financial barriers towards becoming a teacher, including student loan forgiveness and increased compensation, removing barriers to becoming a teacher through grow-your-own programs, and better equip school administrators to create positive and productive building climates.

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 testing requirements are designed to hold teachers, students, and schools accountable for academic achievement and to incentivize improvement. They are used to provide a benchmark for assessing problems and measuring progress, highlighting areas for improvement, but even after assessments, many schools do not have resources to meet the needs of struggling students.

Successful usage of test scores ought to be used to plan individual instructional interventions, develop daily instructional strategies, and identify professional development gaps that guide PD goals. And we legislators need to ensure funding is available to build positive, productive instruction programs.

Based on my experience, I have come to the conclusion that standardized tests are not the path to improved student performance and are not predictors of future success and I absolutely do not support standardized test scores as metrics for teacher/school evaluations.

Honesty in Education

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

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?

We make sure - legislatively - that Minnesota has established policies and protections in place to support freedom to teach in schools. We do this by not allowing tight restrictions like “Parents Bill of Rights”, ensuring the rights of our LGBTQ+ students are protected, and censorship is not allowed in teaching materials and resources.

Yes, I 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. Our students, educators, and communities must understand the experiences and stories of all Americans. If we want our students - and state - to realize full potential — of who we say we are and what we claim to be — we have to tell everyone’s histories accurately and fully. Our curriculums have been whitewashed for far too long.

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?

I will continue to work with labor leaders and legislators to protect and expand collective bargaining. All working people in Minnesota deserve the support that I received as an Education MN union member.

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?

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?

We must protect and strengthen MinnesotaCare and fight for a single-payer health care system that makes dental, vision, and mental health services available to all Minnesotans.

It is also past time to reign in pharmaceutical greed and pass policies that guarantee life-saving drugs are accessible and affordable for everyone who needs them.

Privatization

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

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've visited schools in St. Anthony village, New Brighton and Columbia Heights, and alternative schools. I have also participated in numerous Zoom classrooms – Robbinsdale and St. Paul.

I found the teachers and students engaging, well versed in our conversations, excellent questions, and personally rewarding. These conversations and visits help me understand the struggles of the pandemic, provide an opportunity to assess the attitudes of staff and students, and enforce my goal to fully fund our education system.

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 go to a number of professional journals dedicated to education, professional online resources and legislative support through the Council of State government and the National version when I'm looking for information on a variety of education related issues.. My best go-to for boots on the ground feedback are education professionals that I've built relationships with over my years of teaching that includes staff, teachers, admin and superintendents.

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?

Over the past six years I have been proud to work with Education Minnesota on common issues through our unique lens and skills. I have looked to EdMN for understanding and clarity on issues knowing that their comprehensive equity stance comes from experts and real lived experience of those affected, and plan to continue this relationship.

The issues we've faced in the past couple of years around us are ever changing and I look forward to partnering with EdMN's capacity to build a just state where all students and educators thrive. I'm excited to engage with all of you and your allies to govern together – from co-creating a policy agenda to implementing a plan to move it forward. While there may come a time where we fail to find total agreement on issues, I hope that I can count on EdMN to trust me, share their concerns, and allow me to make tough decisions knowing that my intentions are always for the best of our students and state.

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

One of the biggest challenges in the legislature is balancing competing priorities with a lot of interested entities. Sometimes hard choices need to be made; sometimes it's tough finding agreement and compromises. I have had my best success by building trusting relationships, aligning resources, goal setting and looking to the future. Communication is the key, discussing details and deadlines with stakeholders to come up with a positive, workable situation that makes a positive impact for Minnesota.

