

Zack Stephenson – 35A

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: The state must also 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, 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?

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?

I believe that middle and working class Minnesotans are already paying their fair share in taxes, but that the wealthiest Minnesotans and large corporations should contribute more. In addition to a progressive income tax, I support looking at ways that the extremely wealthy make the most of their income: capital gains.

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?

In 2021, I worked with Education Minnesota to pass the Student Borrowers Bill of Rights into law in Minnesota. This bill, of which I was the chief author, creates protections for borrowers from the worst abuses of the student loan servicing industry. This is particularly important for educators, who have been disproportionately impacted by the problems with the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program.

In 2022, I co-authored a bill with Rep. Kaohly Her to dramatically expand our tax credit program for student loan borrowers. While this bill did not become law, I will continue to push for it.

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?

There is not one simple answer to this question. Multiple things need to be done, ranging from increased compensation, to smaller class sizes, to a safer workplace. Most of all, teachers need to be valued as the professionals that they are. Furthermore, more work needs to be done to recruit teachers of color into the profession so that our teacher population is as diverse as our student population.

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 test scores are just one piece of information. No individual or system-level decisions should be made on such narrow grounds. Instead, test scores need to be viewed in context with our data in order to make reasoned decisions.

Honesty in Education

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

At the Legislature, I have consistently opposed efforts to micromanage teachers. Legislators should not be making decisions about lesson plans— that is for teachers to do.

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?

I support students learning the history of our state and nation, from the good to the bad to the ugly. Race has been a key component of our history and cannot be avoided in the classroom. I believe in the old adage that those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it.

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 support the right of all workers to organize and bargain collectively. I'll work to expand and strengthen PELRA and oppose the use of professional employees in unclassified service. Additionally, I feel unions should have the same ability as other organizations to engage in the political process.

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?

An increasing driver of health care costs is the high cost of prescription drugs. I have carried several pieces of legislation designed to drive down this cost. Most notably, I chief authored a bill to make price gouging of prescription drugs illegal.

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?

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I have visited schools less frequently these last two years, but I speak frequently with teachers in my district about how things are going.

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?

In addition to Education Minnesota, I receive guidance from the many educators in my life, including my wife Austin, as well as the people I've come to know at the Minnesota Department of Education.

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'm committed to keeping a consistent and open dialogue with Education Minnesota and educators. If I have disagreements, I would maintain a good-faith approach by recognizing our alignment on the bigger picture and working through our differences in conversation, rather than in public.

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

Frankly, when it comes to understanding the priorities of our education system, I place the greatest value in the insights of the educators and support staff that are working with students every day. I welcome the input of all stakeholders, but my own principles regarding education align most closely with Education Minnesota's statement of principles, and I believe they are the strongest advocates for an equitable, sustainable public school system.