

Jen McEwen

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?

The current way of funding education and raising revenue is regressive and inequitable. I wholeheartedly support raising revenue by taxing the wealthiest Minnesotans and largest corporations. Progressive tax reform is long overdue. Those who have gained the most from our system need to pay their fair share.

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?

As a public-interest lawyer, I and my like-minded colleagues understand the burden of carrying tens of thousands of dollars in crushing student loan debt-- a home mortgage's worth every month-- with the hope that one day, perhaps approaching retirement, you may either miraculously pay it off or have it forgiven. We have seen now that the federal government can freeze payments for over two years. It's time to forgive all student debt and reform our education system so students going forward won't have to deal with this burden.

I support tuition-free public education pre-K through higher education. Minnesota should lead the way in this area, as New York and Tennessee have. Minnesota can start right now through student loan forgiveness programs and allocating full funding for our public universities, community colleges and trades training programs. We can and should provide tuition-free public education, available to all, regardless of income.

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, I would only support licensure legislation that maintains the requirement for applicants to have completed an accredited teacher-preparation program. Second, I would support legislation that strengthens our teachers' unions and membership—to ensure teachers are paid well, receive high-quality health insurance, and a fully-solvent pension and benefits. Finally, I support the full funding of legislation such as the Increase Teachers of Color Act.

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?

Testing is not teaching. There is an over-reliance on standardized test scores—from elementary school to college exams. These tests are known to have racial and economic biases that privilege some students while simultaneously disadvantaging the students who could most benefit from public education. I would advise caution in the reliance of standardized test scores, especially in isolation, to make individual or system-level decisions.

Honesty in Education

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

We should make sure that our curriculum standards are created by professional educators, and that our teachers are respected as professionals and protected from politically-motivated interference. Elected officials should lead by example, modeling respect for teachers and the professionals in our schools– and publicly, forcefully rejecting politically-motivated campaigns like the one we have seen over “critical race theory.”

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?

Absolutely! Our education system should be where we learn how to think critically and engage productively and thoughtfully with our world– the good and bad, the challenging, the happy and the sad. This is the work of education– to prepare us to live and work together in democracy, to improve our world together, and to learn and grow. We must not give in to calls for censorship that would make our education system a place where our teachers are not allowed to teach fully, and our students are prevented from learning about and engaging with their world and our history.

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?

X 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?

X 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?

X 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 come from a proud union family, and was raised on union values. My father was a union steward for the Duluth Federation of Teachers, and I walked the picket line with my mother, a nurse, at St. Mary's hospital as a child. I am proud to have a 100% voting record with the AFL-CIO. I always look for ways to support workers and work in coalition with organized labor, and I will continue to do so. I am also proud to be the DFL-lead on the Senate Labor & Industry Committee, where I am in regular contact with allies in Labor and the trades, and work with them to fight for workers and advance their interests. It is vital that we support and strengthen union membership while we foster leadership in the next generation of union members, including protecting collective bargaining, increasing safety and working conditions, and bringing unions to every workplace. Every worker deserves a union.

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?

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?

I believe healthcare should be a right. I am proud to be a founding member and co-chair of the legislature's new Minnesota Health Plan Caucus, which advocates for universal public health care coverage for all Minnesotans regardless of employment status. The United States is the only country in the world amongst our peer nations that does not guarantee healthcare as a right to its citizens. Our private healthcare system holds us back, and it produces cruel, inhumane results. It is unacceptable that in our nation -- the wealthiest nation to ever exist -- many people go without needed health care due to cost, are forced to choose between necessary healthcare and basic necessities, and find themselves in financial ruin upon receiving a serious health diagnosis. Our country was already in the midst of a health care crisis prior to the pandemic. I will continue to lead on this issue and fight for the adoption of the Minnesota Health Plan.

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?

Yes, I have visited our public schools a number times over the past year. My children attend Ordean Middle School and East High School in Duluth, and my spouse is a public school teacher at Duluth East High School. Over the past year, I presented as a speaker for my spouse's law classes, and I have attended my children's conferences and open house events. This past Spring, I went on a tour of our Duluth Public Head Start programs that are administered with the Duluth Public Schools. My father is a retired Duluth public school teacher who over the course of his career taught at Lincoln Park Middle School, Woodland Middle School and Ordean Middle School. I am also a graduate of Duluth public schools, as were my parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, etc. My father was a union steward and my spouse is a DFT representative on the Duluth Central Labor Body. Over the course of my life, and continuing into today, I have had a front-row seat into understanding the trials and tribulations, as well as the joys and accomplishments of our public school teachers and students.

In Duluth, our public schools form the backbone of our community and have been the gold standard for education. We need to insure that this continues and is enhanced—that our public schools are generously funded, that our teachers and school staff are respected as professionals and paid accordingly, that our class sizes are reduced to improve both the work environment for staff and the learning environment for students, that our facilities and technologies are top-notch, and our offerings and curriculum are enhanced to meet the needs of all students.

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 keep up with public education issues through ongoing and active discussion with my family– my spouse, kids, and father, and through my ongoing meetings and updates with Education Minnesota/the Duluth Federation of Teachers.

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 a state senator, I have actively sought out Education Minnesota’s counsel and expertise, and will continue to do so. I will work collaboratively and actively to fight for public education, whether that’s through joining Minneapolis educators on the picket line, through our ongoing legislative efforts, or through showing up reliably for forums and meetings to hear directly from educators in my district and around the state. It hasn’t happened that I have ever found myself disagreeing with Education Minnesota, and I don’t foresee that happening, but if it were to happen, I would certainly let leadership know where I stand privately and why, so there would be no surprises and we could work it out as best we can, collaboratively, and in allyship.

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

As a state senator representing Duluth, I prioritize the needs of the Duluth Federation of Teachers and the Duluth Public Schools. I have seen the financial stresses that come from the siphoning of resources from our public schools to fund private/charter schools within our district boundaries. Our public school system should be the gold standard. I am committed to prioritizing public education pre-K through college.