

**2024 Candidate endorsement questionnaire : Entry #
1612**

Page

Candidate endorsement questionnaire - St Cloud office

Candidate name

Sonja Buckmeier

Election district

30A

Party endorsement

DFL

Email

sonja@buckmeier4mn.com

Phone

6128402973

Educator Pay

1. ESP living wage: Will you support legislation to ensure that all education support professionals earn a living wage of at least \$25 an hour?

Yes

2. Due to significantly below-market compensation for teachers, most school districts in Minnesota are having difficulty filling teaching jobs, and state colleges report a continued decline in the number of graduates from teacher preparation programs. Would you support creating a minimum salary for all licensed Minnesota teachers of \$60,000 a year and an \$80,000 minimum salary for licensed teachers with 10 years of experience and a master's degree?

Yes

Pensions

3. Will you support increasing state funding to ensure the financial sustainability of public pension funds?

Yes

4. Will you support exploring the necessary benefit improvements in order to provide educators with a secure retirement, including reducing early retirement penalties, lowering the normal age of retirement and a career threshold that will help recruit and retain educators?

Yes

5. How will you support efforts to lower inequitable penalties in the Teachers Retirement Association in order to expand retirement options?

As a strong supporter of public education, I recognize the vital role that teachers play in shaping our communities' future. Ensuring they have equitable and secure retirement options is essential for their well-being and for attracting and retaining talented

**2024 Candidate endorsement questionnaire : Entry #
1612**

educators. To support efforts to lower inequitable penalties in the Teachers Retirement Association (TRA) and expand retirement options, I would propose advocating for legislative reforms to amend policies that disproportionately penalize teachers based on years of service or retirement age. This includes addressing disparities affecting those who retire early due to health or personal reasons. Additionally, I will promote initiatives that provide teachers with comprehensive retirement planning resources, helping them make informed decisions about their retirement.

I will also advocate for increased TRA funding to ensure its sustainability and reduce financial burdens on teachers, exploring responsible investments and additional state contributions. Engaging with teachers, unions, and other stakeholders, I will work collaboratively to develop fair and effective solutions. A comprehensive review of current penalty structures will identify and rectify systemic biases, considering reductions or eliminations of penalties for early retirement, especially for those with long service. Lastly, I will champion more flexible retirement options within the TRA, allowing teachers to choose paths that best align with their personal and professional goals without facing undue penalties. By taking these steps, I am committed to ensuring that our teachers can retire with the dignity and security they deserve after dedicating their careers to educating our children.

Health care

6. Do you support educators having access to a mandatory statewide health insurance pool, just like other state workers?

Yes

7. 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

8. All Minnesotans deserve access to affordable health care and publicly managed plans like MN Care and Medicare are some of the most efficient plans out there. The legislature is currently seeking a federal waiver to expand MN Care to more residents. Do you support expanding all public health care programs to include more working people?

Yes

Education funding

9a. Reverse Minnesota's perpetual underfunding of education by significantly increasing the per-pupil funding formula.

Yes

9b. SPED cross subsidy: The state must fully fund special education costs instead of relying on school districts to pay for them.

Yes

9c. EL cross subsidy: Fully fund the costs districts pay to provide quality English learner programs and instruction.

Yes

9d. Lower class sizes: Lower class sizes so teachers can give students more of the individual attention they need and deserve.

Yes

9e. Full-service community schools: Expand access to full-service community schools across the state.

Yes

**2024 Candidate endorsement questionnaire : Entry #
1612**

9f. 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

9g. Student support: Continue providing additional resources for school districts to hire more student support staff, including counselors, social workers, psychologists, nurses and other job classifications.

Yes

9h. 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

9i. Professional development: Provide professional development to all staff around cultural competency and trauma-responsive classrooms with aims of closing the discipline disparity gap.

Yes

9j. Education debt relief: Provide debt relief to retain teachers so they can afford to stay in the classroom.

Yes

Taxes/revenue

10. 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

11. 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?

No

12. Fully funded schools require adequate and stable revenues. Will you oppose tax cuts and carve outs that lower tax collections or narrow the tax base?

Yes

13. A balanced tax code draws revenue from a mix of income, sales, and property taxes. Will you support policies that maintain both adequate funding and a sustainable balance between revenue sources?

Yes

Higher education

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

**2024 Candidate endorsement questionnaire : Entry #
1612**

Yes

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

Yes

16. Do you support DEI efforts on our college campuses and universities?

Yes

17. What would you do, as a state legislator, to help with the cost of higher education?

As a state legislator, I am committed to making higher education more accessible and affordable for all students. To address rising costs, I will advocate for increased state funding for public universities and colleges, reducing the financial burden on students and families. Expanding state-funded scholarship and grant programs, particularly for low- and middle-income students, will help more students afford college without excessive debt.

I will also promote community colleges and vocational training as affordable pathways to high-demand careers, and advocate for tuition-free or debt-free college initiatives for public institutions. Addressing non-tuition costs, such as textbooks, housing, and childcare, is crucial. Expanding dual enrollment and early college programs will allow high school students to earn college credits at little or no cost. Ensuring transparency in college costs and promoting financial literacy will help students make informed decisions. I aim to make higher education more affordable and accessible, helping students achieve their academic and career goals without being burdened by excessive debt.

18. The North Star Promise is expected to result in an increase in enrollment on our campuses. Many of these students are projected to be disproportionately first-generation students and students from historically underserved communities. As a legislator, what would you do to ensure these students had the support they needed to be successful?

As a legislator, I will ensure first-generation and historically underserved students have the support needed to succeed with the expected increase in enrollment from the North Star Promise. I will advocate for enhanced academic support services, comprehensive orientation programs, and readily available mental health resources. Expanding financial aid, creating emergency assistance funds, and providing accessible technology will address financial and logistical challenges. Additionally, promoting cultural competency training, peer support networks, and career services will create an inclusive and supportive campus environment. By engaging families and continuously evaluating support programs, we can adapt strategies to meet the evolving needs of these students and help them thrive in higher education.

19. There are efforts to expand the North Star Promise to Minnesota's private colleges and universities. This would dramatically increase the amount of public money going to private institutions. Do you support the expansion of the North Star Promise to include private colleges and universities?

Yes

High-quality professional educators

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

As a state legislator, I will focus on several key strategies to recruit and retain high-quality educators in our classrooms. This includes advocating for competitive salaries and comprehensive benefits to ensure fair compensation, supporting ongoing professional development, and implementing mentorship programs to help new teachers acclimate and succeed. Additionally, I will promote policies that establish standard class sizes, provide adequate resources, and expand student loan forgiveness programs to reduce financial burdens.

2024 Candidate endorsement questionnaire : Entry # 1612

To address teacher burnout, I will advocate for measures that provide adequate planning time, mental health support, and work-life balance initiatives. Creating clear pathways for career advancement and fostering strong partnerships between schools, parents, and the community are also essential. By implementing these strategies, we can create an environment where high-quality educators feel valued and supported, ultimately benefiting our students and the educational community.

Standardized testing

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

Standardized test scores can be valuable for making informed decisions in education when used alongside other measures. At the individual level, they can help identify students needing additional support, inform placement in appropriate programs, and track student progress over time. At the system level, test scores can guide curriculum evaluation and development, resource allocation, policy formulation, accountability, and program effectiveness.

However, it's essential to use a holistic approach, considering multiple measures of student performance, and to be mindful of potential biases and contextual factors. By thoughtfully integrating standardized test data with other information, we can enhance educational outcomes while ensuring fairness and equity for all students.

Honesty in Education

22. Most educators believe students should have access to a wide range of age-appropriate books that include relatable characters and situations that reflect the diversity of Minnesota families. However, certain politicians and big money groups are trying to remove books from school libraries across America, particularly books with LGBTQ+ characters or those that deal with racism in America. How should Minnesota protect its students' freedom to read?

Minnesota should protect its students' freedom to read by supporting the state's ban on banning books, which prohibits public and school libraries from removing books based solely on their viewpoints and protects library employees from disciplinary actions for complying with these rules. This law ensures that library materials are reviewed under specific guidelines to maintain a diverse and inclusive collection, defending intellectual freedom and ensuring students have access to a wide range of materials. Promoting awareness of the importance of diverse literature and investing in professional development for educators will foster an inclusive environment. Also, providing legal support to schools facing challenges will help uphold students' rights to access a broad array of reading materials. By adopting these measures, Minnesota can ensure its school libraries remain reflective of the diversity of its families.

23. Education Minnesota believes all students should have the freedom to feel safe and welcome in their public school, no matter what they look like, where they're from, how they pray, transgender or not. Do you agree?

Yes

24. Students bring many needs into their public schools, but our union believes they all deserve the freedom to grow with the help of support for their mental health and with lessons in how to recognize and control their emotions, which is sometimes called social-emotional learning. Do you support increasing support for students' mental and emotional health in public schools?

Yes

Time to Teach

MoveDuplicate Settings Delete 25. 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

**2024 Candidate endorsement questionnaire : Entry #
1612**

26. 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

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

Yes

School safety

28. Creating incentives for school administrators to enforce districts' codes of conduct without bias and/or creating accountability measures for those who don't?

Yes

29. Increase reporting and transparency in worksite safety when reporting physical injuries and emotional trauma in the workplace?

Yes

Union Rights

30. The ability of workers to come together in union and bargain collectively has been vital for reducing wage gaps by gender, building the middle class, and limiting wealth inequality in Minnesota. Do you support expanding and strengthening workers' rights to join a union and bargain collectively?

Yes

31. 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

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

As a state legislator, I will support unions by advocating for legislation that upholds and strengthens collective bargaining rights, ensuring workers have a strong voice in negotiating wages, benefits, and working conditions. I will promote policies that provide fair wages, comprehensive healthcare benefits, and secure retirement plans, while also championing strict workplace safety standards to protect workers' well-being.

Additionally, I will oppose any legislation aimed at weakening unions and support measures to enhance union membership and participation. By fostering labor-management collaboration, protecting workers against retaliation, and investing in workforce development through education and training programs, I will help create a fair and just labor market in Minnesota. Ensuring the enforcement of fair labor practices and holding employers accountable for violations will further contribute to a strong and effective union presence, safeguarding workers' rights.

Privatization

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

Yes

**2024 Candidate endorsement questionnaire : Entry #
1612**

34. 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

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

Yes

Your role as a legislator

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 high school, middle school, and community education buildings within the past year. During these visits, I was impressed by the well-maintained facilities, which reflect the dedication of our staff and community. However, I also observed challenges with class sizes and staffing ratios that can impact the quality of education and individual attention each student receives.

These experiences have reinforced my belief that schools are the heart of a community. As a legislator, I will make education one of my top priorities. I am committed to advocating for an increase in per-pupil funding to ensure every student has access to the resources and support they need to succeed. By doing so, we can create a stronger, more equitable educational system that benefits all students and helps all communities thrive.

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

To become informed on issues relating to public education, I have actively engaged with various aspects of our school district and the broader educational community. Over the past 20 years, I have been an active member of our school district, volunteering in classrooms, working as a short-call substitute for two years, serving as PTO treasurer for multiple years, participating on district bond and levy committees, and attending legislative visits at the capitol. I am also on the St. Michael Legislative Action Team and have participated in the Schools for Equity in Education (SEE now SAFF- Schools Advocating for Fair Funding) day at the capitol and their monthly meetings. Additionally, I regularly attend or watch local school board meetings to stay updated on current issues and decisions affecting our schools.

My main sources of information are the teachers, staff, and school board, as their firsthand experiences and insights are invaluable. By maintaining open lines of communication with these key stakeholders, I ensure that my understanding of public education issues is grounded in the realities faced by those directly involved in our schools. This comprehensive approach allows me to advocate for policies that benefit our students and the educational community.

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?

As a new candidate for public office, I envision working with Education Minnesota as a collaborative partnership focused on enhancing the quality of education in our state. This partnership would provide opportunities to learn more about the diverse facets of education, from classroom experiences to policy impacts, and to collaborate on initiatives that support teachers, students, and the broader educational community. By working together, we can further improve upon the high-quality education Minnesota is known for and address any challenges that arise.

If elected, I would actively engage with Education Minnesota through regular meetings and direct communication with their leadership and members. This ongoing dialogue would keep me informed about their priorities, concerns, and suggestions. By building strong relationships and fostering mutual respect, I believe we can work together effectively to achieve our shared goals.

**2024 Candidate endorsement questionnaire : Entry #
1612**

In situations where I might disagree with Education Minnesota on an issue, I would approach the matter with a commitment to open and honest communication. I would seek to understand their perspective fully, providing the opportunity for a respectful exchange of views. By discussing the reasons behind our differing opinions, we can explore potential compromises and seek common ground that aligns with the best interests of students, teachers, and the community. My goal would always be to find solutions that reflect our shared commitment to providing a high-quality education for all students in Minnesota.

Overall, my approach would be characterized by transparency, collaboration, and a steadfast dedication to improving our educational system. By working closely with Education Minnesota, I am confident we can address both current and future challenges, ensuring that our schools continue to provide exceptional educational opportunities for every student.

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

If elected, I will balance competing priorities between Education Minnesota and other education groups by fostering a collaborative and inclusive approach to policymaking. I will regularly engage with representatives from all education groups to understand their perspectives and ensure all voices are heard. Using data-driven decision-making, I will develop policies based on evidence and best practices, identifying common goals like improving student outcomes, supporting teachers, and enhancing educational equity.

To build trust and understanding, I will maintain transparency in the decision-making process and communicate the rationale behind policies. By creating advisory committees with diverse representation and being open to compromise, I will develop balanced policies that reflect the needs of all stakeholders. My focus will be on long-term, sustainable solutions that address the root causes of educational issues, ensuring the best interests of students, teachers, and the broader educational community are prioritized.