

Sarah Kruger

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 ensuring that it is tied to inflation.

Yes No

SPED cross subsidy: The state must 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: Continue providing 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

Taxes/revenue

2. 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

3. 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?

Returning to the pre-1999 Minnesota income tax structure would net approximately \$1 billion in additional State revenue. In the 1990s, there were far more income tax brackets than the four we currently have listed. This reduction in income classification has cost the State considerable revenue. Further, a significant decrease in tax expenditures and an enhancement of the corporate franchise tax, if truly progressive, should provide enough income to fully fund public education in the State. I support a constitutional amendment for a dedicated fund for public education, like we have for the arts and some environmental programs. This would provide a stable level of revenue and potentially could be applied to capital improvements for technology and building maintenance, enhancing school districts' abilities to offer competitive academic programs that attract and retain students.

Higher education

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

Yes No

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

Yes No

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

I will work to retain and expand the North Star Promise to provide free public university education, increasing the threshold from a combined household AGI of \$80k to \$100k and indexed to inflation. There should also be federal and state support for means-tested debt relief. The State has a moral imperative to mitigate future debt; the cost of education has far outpaced students' ability to pay. Moreover, the State has an economic interest in getting young people fully engaged in the economy without the weight of crippling debt.

7. 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

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

In order for Minnesota to recruit and retain educators, we must pay educators based on a professional pay scale, with a starting minimum salary of at least \$60k or \$25/hr. In my opinion, this is a minimum threshold from which we can start to pay educators a living wage. In some communities in Greater Minnesota, \$60k may be a competitive salary. However, the State must recognize and adjust for the fact that the cost of living varies and is significantly higher in the seven-county Metro area or larger communities in Greater Minnesota. And though we have seen disinflation in recent months, deflation hasn't occurred and basic necessities such as food and doctor's office visits are significantly more expensive than they were pre-pandemic. Educator salaries need to be adjusted for inflation and market factors, or we will not be able to attract newcomers to the field nor retain seasoned professionals.

On a positive note, last year in the Legislature, we had a major win with pre-school educators finally being recognized as teachers, and the stability and salary gains that went along with this significant change. I also believe that we need to push for a funding model that would allow for paid student teaching as a way to help retain student enrollment numbers in education programs.

Teacher licensure

9. 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

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

I strongly oppose standardized testing as a means of determining a student's level of knowledge on a subject or their overall academic aptitude. Standardized testing has been repeatedly shown to have inherent biases, favoring the socio-economic, racial, and cultural background of those who designed the testing. This form of testing does not take into account diverse ways of thinking nor comprehensive problem-solving skills. We should be measuring the successes of an educator and their students based on values that matter. And when a student does not meet the expected score on a standardized test, it's the test that's the problem, not the student. Further, students face a great deal of pressure to succeed, and the mental health repercussions from a feeling of failure caused by standardized testing can be quite severe.

We need to trust educators to use educator-devised testing that reflects the learning that is taking place in their classrooms. The supposed purpose of standardized testing is to measure mastery of subject matters and to determine the ability to advance academically. Standardized testing accomplishes neither of these purposes. Many higher ed institutions are therefore moving away

from using standardized testing as a screening mechanism for enrollment. There is evidence-based recognition that standardized testing is a model that hurts students rather than helps them to succeed.

Honesty in Education

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

We must protect the sanctity of curriculum. In conversations with educators, they express feeling that far too often, educators are the last asked and the least respected voices when it comes to decision-making around the teaching and learning in their classrooms. While community input is critical and democratic, the community should not be determining the content of the curriculum being taught. I recognize that parental choice needs to exist; however, there are cases currently being heard in State courts on this issue, and there is no clear case law regulating the matter. A parent may have a right to opt out of some content or activities for their child, but in no way should their individual preferences impact the learning of other students. We must have strong freedom to teach policies that protect our educators' abilities to do their jobs.

I recognize that educators are individuals with their own preferences and biases. It is incumbent upon school leadership to provide guidance for educators while promoting free speech and diversity of thought. Teachers are not computers designed to generate predetermined AI content. A crucial role of an educator is to promote diversity of thought and to encourage and cultivate critical thinking skills. A respect for differences is how children learn to have empathy toward others.

Public schools provide students with an opportunity to learn how to hold respectful discourse and value diverse opinions. The central tenets of democracy, like freedom of speech, are viciously under attack, and it is in public education where our fundamental rights must be vigilantly upheld.

12. 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?

There is a plethora of research documenting the racist historical trajectory of education in our country. I believe that an interdisciplinary approach that targets race inequity is not a radicalized form of education nor is it indoctrination into liberal ideology. Germany had a similar educational shift post-WWII, Spain post-Franco dictatorship, Mexico post-revolution through the "la raza" movement, and there are many more examples throughout the world. By way of illustration, in the 1960s, Germany's Cultural Ministry required educators to teach about the Nazi Party and also the tenants of democracy in an attempt to fight future anti-Semitic and anti-democratic movements. I would venture to bet that most Americans would agree with that national educational platform. However, our nation is struggling in its own ability to clearly recognize the vestiges of slavery for Black Americans, the history of genocide of Native Americans, and the repercussions of civil rights abuses of Latino Americans, to name a few. And for these reasons, our public schools need to be spaces in which we're having these difficult, reflective conversations. Antiracist pedagogy both identifies our nation's history of oppression and also teaches students the value of engaging in social activism so that we don't repeat history.

Time to Teach

13. 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

14. 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

15. 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

16. Do you support collective bargaining rights?

Yes No

17. 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

18. 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

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

As a legislator, I will have an open-door policy with labor. Labor interests align with the best interests of our communities. What’s good for labor is good for our communities. My goal for HD26A is to promote policies that support working families, enabling them to thrive. I will oppose any effort to weaken the Public Employee Labor Relation Act; it is the foundation for public collective bargaining in Minnesota. When your members are on the picket line, I will be there with them.

Working families

20. 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

21. Will you support continuing defined-benefits retirement systems for public employees?

Yes No

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

Yes No

23. Will you support exploring new systems for providing educators with a secure retirement, including reducing early retirement penalties that will help recruit and retain educators?

Yes No

24. 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 firmly believe that access to health care is a human right and that no one should be denied access to quality health care due to a cost-prohibitive system. The ideal option for educators would be to have statewide health insurance. But at a minimum, we need to allocate more State funding for school districts to contribute to health insurance and increase transparent competition between PEIP, MHC, Health Partners, etc., in the plans that are offered.

There are health insurance disparities among educators across Minnesota. One-third of EdMN utilizes PEIP; two-thirds do not. PEIP saw dramatic increases in the cost of health insurance for educators last year. WAPS experienced a 10% increase, while Lake City and Wabasha experienced a 32% increase. This volatile system of two-year contracts is not an adequate nor stable system that individuals and their families can rely on. Further, changing from a two-year HITA cycle to a four-year HITA cycle would alleviate some of this volatility.

Privatization

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

Yes No

26. 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

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

Yes No

28. 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

29. 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'd like to share my most recent visit to an area public school for a non-celebratory function (though I do enjoy attending the concerts and fundraisers for my friends' families with school-aged kids). In February, I visited the Lewiston-Altura High School and met with Superintendent Gwen Carman and Principal Cory Hanson to gain a better understanding of the challenges the school district is facing. I had planned to also meet with Matthew Wilmes, vocal music educator and an area leader for their Local. Unfortunately, Matthew was sick that day and I have reached out to reschedule a time to meet.

In my meeting at the Lewiston-Altura High School, we discussed issues ranging from MDE mandates with little-to-no advanced guidance, PSEO failure rates versus concurrent enrollment, licensure requirements, as well as their last operating levy and failed building bond referendum. The conversation around PSEO was particularly insightful, given the ramifications that the program has on the number of electives and higher-level courses offered in a high school when students are taking those classes at local universities and colleges.

The issue of the Lewiston-Altura School District and Winona Area Public School Districts' recent failed referendums highlights the catastrophic problems facing our area school districts. We know there is a growing gap in referendum results between school districts in Greater Minnesota and those in suburban and urban communities. Further, our funding model for public education exasperates this inequity with each failed levy. I firmly believe that the quality of education students receive and the environment in which they learn shouldn't be dependent upon their communities' willingness or ability to increase taxes. The data clearly shows that this model results in students living in certain ZIP codes receiving a vastly different education experience than their counterparts in other communities. And we so glaringly see this in our Greater Minnesota public

schools. As a legislator, I will be a tireless advocate to reform this model. It's not working currently, hasn't worked in the past, and continues to worsen as we move into the future. Our Legislature needs to look that reality in the face and realize that an inherently broken model cannot be fixed.

Our students and educators deserve a fully-funded system. Investing in public education positively impacts every aspect and every member of society. Minnesota's future depends on fully funding public education.

30. 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 have been surrounded by educators my entire life. I come from a family in which we have all worked as educators at some point in our careers. While in graduate school, I taught a master's-level course in government studies. My father was an adjunct faculty member at Winona State University. My mother spent a substantial portion of her career as a full-time faculty member at Winona State University and St. Cloud State University. My brother was a teaching assistant at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee and an adjunct faculty member at the University of Iowa. And my sister was a middle and high school science teacher for the Chicago Public School system. I was raised to highly value and respect the field of education, and my family's experiences have greatly informed how I relate to the issues facing public education. I want to focus briefly on my sister's experience as a single mom working as a public school teacher. It was my sister's dream to teach high school science. She was passionate and driven to be an educator. However, given the salary limitations, workload and unpaid overtime, lack of resources to address student mental health needs, and the increasing out-of-pocket expenses to equip her classroom with the materials needed to teach courses like chemistry, she was financially forced to leave the field of education. As a single parent, she could not afford to be a teacher. That is the depressing reality of so many inspired educators who end up leaving public education. Sharing that lived experience with my sister deepens my commitment to making sure other talented professionals are not faced with a similar dilemma, ultimately abandoning their dreams of being educators.

To become informed on issues, you've got to do your homework and listen to the people who are doing the job day in and day out. For me, that means having a solid grasp on the basic three-legged stool—educator pay, pensions, and health insurance—as a starting point. I'm particularly interested in issues surrounding pension funding with increasing the supplemental retirement plan and the statutory maximum. There is a different three-legged stool that I think is equally important yet often does not receive the same amount of attention: healthy workplace culture, professional development opportunities, and mentorship programs. The former allows educators to enter into and stay in their profession. The latter enables educators to advance and thrive. For example, roughly a decade ago, it was common to allocate two percent of a school district's budget to educator-controlled professional development. Nowadays, these funds are often the first to be cut when developing an annual budget. The READ Act presents a perfect opportunity to reinstate this practice.

I feel fortunate to be able to learn from experts from EdMN like Sara Gjerdrum, Linda Pfeilsticker, and Rep. Cedrick Frazier. I also feel fortunate to have the support and brain trust of active and retired public school educators in the district like Laura Nusbaum, Laura Armstrong, and John Harper, to name a few. When I ran for State Senate in 2020, I was honored to have

received EdMN's endorsement and went on a listening tour of educators across the district. This video is a recap of that: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVM7F_Zx5MY&t=2s . I look forward to placing front and center the voices of educators in this campaign as well.

31. 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?

I am the first to know that I don't have all the answers, and it is the experts who do. I firmly believe that strong leadership is not based on an individual but on the counsel they seek. In disagreements, what is usually lacking is an adequate understanding of the facts. If I am in disagreement on an issue, I try to hear the other side's perspective and understand the analysis they're using to reach their conclusion. Conflict arises when we feel we have to prove our point rather than seek to understand. At the end of the day, if an agreement cannot be reached on a particular issue, there needs to be trust and openness to continue working together collaboratively.

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

The breadth of education systems in Minnesota has resulted in a number of different groups competing for State support. First, public dollars should be prioritized for public school systems. But even within the public system, there are political divides between the traditional independent school districts and the public charter schools. I understand the pedagogic choices that have led to the creation of some charter schools (such as the Montessori model), but charters cannot erode traditional public school funding. The funding formula for traditional public schools should aim for excellence in education at all levels.

When it comes to public versus private schools, I firmly believe in a clear separation between church and state. There are some who believe public dollars should be available to assist those attending private pre-k –12 schools through vouchers and private colleges through the MN State Grant Program. In no way do I support this shift of dollars to private and non-secular schools.

Competing priorities are normal, but that does not mean that common ground cannot be found. For example, building support for the U of M and the MinnState system and improvements in the state per pupil aid can go hand in hand.

I think it's important we also analyze the bigger picture of balancing competing interests with other agencies that serve many of the same populations public schools serve. One of the biggest competitors for public education funding is State spending on Health and Human Services. For FY 2006-07, Health and Human Services was about 26 percent of the general fund; K-12 funding was about 42 percent. Today, based on the February 2024 forecast data, Health and Human Services is nearly 30 percent of the state general fund and K-12 funding dropped to 34.7 percent. Higher education saw its share of the general fund drop by about three percent. It's important to keep in mind that Health and Human Services are providing resources that greatly benefit students and their families. However, funding these primary services should not be pitted against each other for State dollars in the manner they are. We should strengthen partnerships and expand collaboration between public education and Health and Human Services where our common interests intersect in order to effectively increase and leverage funding efforts. This will allow us to collaboratively capture a larger share of the general fund, and by the revenue enhancements noted earlier, we can increase the size of the general fund.

