

Association of Metropolitan School Districts

2021 Legislative Platform

DRAFT

Minnesota's future prosperity and ability to compete successfully in the global economy is directly tied to our ability to graduate each and every student from high school ready for college or career. We are currently falling far short of that imperative. Minnesota has significant racial and socioeconomic disparities in educational outcomes. State policymakers must address the historical inequities that have led to unacceptable opportunity and achievement gaps. All students, and all Minnesotans, will benefit when we ensure that each and every student has access to an equitable and excellent education.

A School Finance Working Group, convened last year by the Minnesota Department of Education, examined the current funding streams and drafted a comprehensive set of recommendations that would stabilize the funding system, ensure taxpayer equity, and provide resources to accelerate growth for students of color and other underserved student groups. The current budget environment will require that the recommendations be phased in over time. The proposals should be implemented in a manner that prioritizes equity, funds state mandates, and provides stability.

The AMSD Board of Directors has identified a series of recommendations to stabilize school budgets and ensure equitable academic outcomes – high levels of achievement – for each and every student.

Stabilize Funding

The current funding system does not provide consistent and reliable funding for our schools. It is critical that the Governor and Legislature stabilize the funding system by:

- Increasing the basic formula allowance by 2 percent per year and index the formula to inflation;
- Increasing special education funding to eliminate the state portion of the cross-subsidy;
- Holding school districts harmless from declining enrollment and other impacts related to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Allowing locally-elected school boards to renew an existing operating or capital projects referendum.

Close the Achievement Gap

We must strengthen and increase support for historically underserved students to ensure each student can realize their full potential. The Governor and Legislature can address disparities and meet the needs of underserved students by:

- Increasing funding for the English learner program to eliminate the cross-subsidy;
- Creating incentives and alternatives to attract, develop and retain teachers, particularly teachers of color and teachers in shortage areas;
- Maintaining multiple pathways to licensure in the tiered licensing system;
- Increasing access to school-based pre-kindergarten programs;

- Ensuring all students have access to reliable internet service and devices to engage in distance learning.

Ensure Safe Schools

State policymakers should preserve public assets and ensure safe and secure learning environments for students and staff by:

- Increasing the Safe Schools Levy to allow school districts and intermediate school districts to hire additional support staff to address the growing mental health needs of our students. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, our students were facing growing mental health needs and that has compounded during the current crisis;
- Removing the per pupil limit and expanding the allowable uses of Long-Term Facilities Maintenance Revenue to allow school districts and intermediate school districts to enhance safety through security modifications to buildings, including remodeling and additions to existing space.

Enhance Taxpayer Equity

Property tax levies play a critical role in funding education programs and facilities. However, these levies have widely varying impacts on local property taxpayers depending on the property wealth of the school district. The Governor and Legislature should address these disparities in the Omnibus Tax Bill by:

- Increasing equalization of the operating referendum, local optional and debt service levies to reduce taxpayer and education funding disparities;
- Opposing taxpayer subsidies of private education through vouchers, tax credits or scholarships.

Unleash Creativity by Enhancing Local Control and Reducing Mandates

One size fits all mandates stifle innovation and creativity. The Governor and Legislature should support local control and encourage innovation by:

- Opposing any new unfunded mandates;
- Establishing a pilot project to allow approved school districts to replace the high school MCA exams with a nationally-recognized college entrance exam;
- Expanding the innovation zone law to allow school districts to try new instructional models, personalize student learning and increase collaboration with post-secondary institutions, nonprofit organizations and businesses;
- Repealing the requirement that school districts publish minutes and budget information in the newspaper and instead allow this information to be posted on the district website;
- Postponing the standards revision schedule to provide budgetary relief to school districts;
- Streamlining the process for school districts to be approved for online learning instruction;
- Allowing locally-elected school boards to establish the school calendar that best meets the needs of their students, staff and community.