

Association of Metropolitan School Districts

2021 Legislative Platform

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, provide resources to close opportunity gaps and accelerate growth for students of color, and ensure taxpayer equity. 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;
- Mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by allowing school districts to use the greater of the 2019 or 2020 pupil counts for general education and compensatory funding;
- Allowing locally-elected school boards to renew an existing operating or capital projects referendum.

Close Opportunity Gaps

We must personalize education by addressing the needs of each learner to ensure they can realize their full potential. The Governor and Legislature can address disparities in educational outcomes 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;
- 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;
- Removing the per pupil limit on the Long-Term Facilities Revenue program so every school district can maintain safe learning environments.

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.