

# 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.

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

### **Stabilize Funding**

A School Finance Working Group, convened last year by the Minnesota Department of Education, drafted a comprehensive set of recommendations that would stabilize the education funding system and ensure taxpayer equity. The recommendations would reduce reliance on state aid and on the operating referendum by establishing an equalized local levy and recognizing cost differentials related to geographic location and district size. The current budget environment will require that the recommendations be phased in over time. The Governor and Legislators should adopt a schedule to phase in the recommendations to stabilize funding for schools.

To provide stability in the short-term, the Governor and Legislature should:

- Increase the basic formula allowance by 2 percent per year;
- Mitigate 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;
- Allow locally-elected school boards to renew an existing operating referendum.

### **Close Opportunity Gaps**

The AMSD Board of Directors urges the Governor and Legislature to close opportunity gaps and accelerate growth for students of color and other historically underserved students. To ensure each learner can realize their full potential, the Governor and Legislature should:

- Increase special education and English learner funding to eliminate the funding shortfalls in these programs which causes school districts to redirect general education funding;
- Create incentives and alternatives to attract, develop and retain teachers, particularly teachers of color and teachers in shortage areas;
- Maintain multiple pathways to licensure in the tiered licensing system;
- Increase access to school-based pre-kindergarten programs;

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

### **Ensure Safe Schools**

To protect public assets and ensure safe and secure learning environments for students and staff, state policymakers should:

- Increase 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 which have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Remove the per pupil limit on the Long-Term Facilities Revenue program so every school district can maintain safe learning environments;
- Expand 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. To eliminate these disparities, the Governor and Legislature should:

- Include increased equalization of the operating referendum, local optional and debt service levies in the Omnibus Tax Bill;
- Oppose 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. To support local control and encourage innovation, the Governor and Legislature should:

- Oppose any new unfunded mandates;
- Establish a pilot project to allow approved school districts to replace the high school MCA exams with a nationally-recognized college entrance exam;
- Expand 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;
- Repeal 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;
- Postpone the standards revision schedule to provide budgetary relief to school districts;
- Streamline the process for school districts to be approved for online learning instruction;
- Allow locally-elected school boards to establish the school calendar that best meets the needs of their students, staff and community.