

Education Minnesota

Educators: It's time to drop the lights on this circus

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ST. PAUL, Minn. May 24, 2017 – The special session of the 2017 Legislature has turned into a circus without a ringmaster and the bills that come out of it will be deeply flawed or explicitly hostile to the interests of Minnesota children and their families, Education Minnesota said Wednesday morning.

“We cannot accept the long-term harm to the students of Minnesota and their families that will be caused by the bills moving through the chambers and are asking Gov. Mark Dayton to publicly declare them all dead on arrival and reset the process,” said Denise Specht, president of Education Minnesota. “It’s time to drop the lights on this circus for a while.”

“The Legislature is poised to send the governor a package of bills that would widen achievement gaps, lower the quality of teaching in Minnesota schools, discriminate against immigrants and make life harder for working people,” Specht said. “Minnesotans need time to digest that and decide if it’s really worth it just so one party can pass out the largest tax cut in nearly 20 years.”

“The bills moving in the Legislature mirror the politics of President Donald Trump and Betsy DeVos,” Specht said. “If you marched for women, or rallied for science, or were outraged by the cruelty of Trumpcare – you need to pay attention to St. Paul and get involved.”

Specht also made specific comments Wednesday morning about provisions in the education bill, which passed the Minnesota House but had not yet reached the Senate.

Licensure:

Under the new system for teacher licensure proposed in the education bill, people with no formal training in education will be able to spend a career in the classroom. Further, the bill creates a separate standard for rural schools and schools with high levels of racial diversity than for mostly white suburban schools.

“The high standards behind a Minnesota teaching license define us as professionals. When you cheapen the value of that license, you devalue each of us and the work we do for students in every community in Minnesota,” Specht said. “Right now, it feels like the Legislature just took those hard-earned licenses off the classroom wall and spit on them. We won’t forget this.”

Funding:

The session began with a \$1.6 billion surplus and finished with an only inflationary increase in the main education formula, which won’t make up for losses in previous years, and there is no additional money to pay for the exploding costs of special education. Further, significant cuts at local districts may be necessary because of the enormous reductions in President Trump’s new budget.

“Local taxpayers will be on the hook for the shocking cuts in Trump’s budget – including reductions to career and technical education, special education and after-school programs,” Specht said. “It is like a super-sized version of the Legislature’s agenda. The schools and services everyday families need are going to take a beating so the politicians can pass out more tax breaks to people and corporations who don’t really need them.”

Teacher shortage:

The teacher shortage in Minnesota has been well documented. Too few young people are choosing to go into teaching and too many fully trained teachers are leaving the profession before retirement. The problem is approaching a crisis in some districts, but rather than address the problems the Legislature probably made them worse.

“Minnesota teachers are exhausted. They are stretched too thin by the lack of counselors and other support staff, demoralized by excessive testing, going broke paying their student loans and aggravated by redundant paperwork,” Specht said. “So what did the legislative leaders do? They threatened to increase the teacher’s cost of health insurance, ignored their pension issues and tried to siphon off state funding to a voucher program. Is it any wonder teachers are quitting?”

Due process protections:

Minnesota educators have had the option of negotiating with their administrators for a local system of layoffs for many years. If the two sides failed to create a local system, the default policy in state statute is based on seniority and licensure area. The 2017 education bill removes the default language and directs districts to negotiate all local policies.

“There’s nothing in this bill preventing districts from carrying existing policies forward, and we expect most districts will do so,” Specht said. “The more concerning aspect of the law is the way it targets a policy designed to protect teachers from arbitrary and discriminatory layoffs. We expect similar attacks until school boards are able to get rid of any educator brave enough to speak up for what students need, because those students never need new loopholes in the tax code, or lower wages and less sick leave for their parents, or to lose their health insurance, or any other part of an agenda that puts corporate interests first.”

About Education Minnesota

Education Minnesota is the voice for professional educators and students. Education Minnesota’s members include teachers and education support professionals in Minnesota’s public school districts, faculty members at Minnesota’s community and technical colleges and University of Minnesota campuses in Duluth and Crookston, retired educators and student teachers. Education Minnesota is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association and AFL-CIO.

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