

Support Minnesota Educators, Students and Schools

2024 Education Minnesota Legislative Agenda

*Address the Educator Shortage to
Support Minnesota Students*

Updated 2/27/24

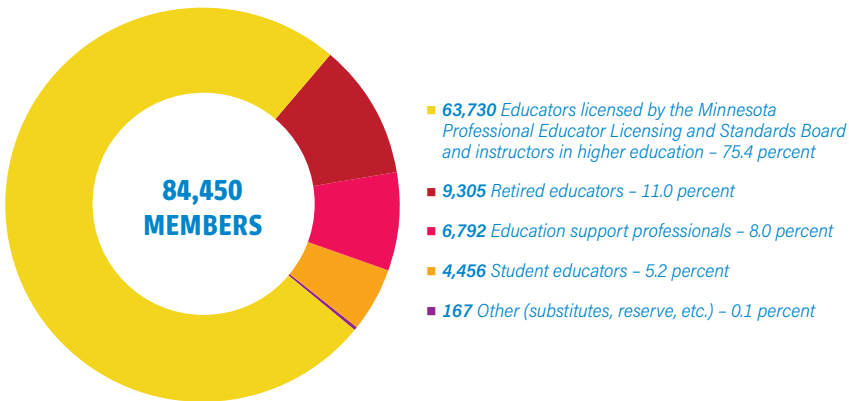


**THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS**

Education Minnesota is the leading advocate for public education in Minnesota. We are a union of more than 84,000 educators—the largest union in the state.

Our members work in pre-K-12 schools and higher education institutions statewide. They include:

- Teachers.
- Licensed Staff – school counselors, social workers, nurses, psychologists, literacy specialists, media specialists, cultural family advocates and more.
- Education Support Professionals – hourly school workers including paraprofessionals, bus drivers, nutritional workers, custodians and more.
- Faculty at several university campuses, community and technical colleges.
- College students preparing for an education career.
- Retired educators who have devoted their lives to students.



Education Minnesota gives voice to the issues that affect educators and their students. We make sure our members' voices are heard anywhere decisions get made that affect public education—whether it's at the state Capitol, in Washington, D.C., or with local school administrators.

Education Minnesota was formed in 1998 when the Minnesota Education Association and the Minnesota Federation of Teachers merged. MEA, originally called the Minnesota State Teachers Association, started in 1861. MFT began as the Grade Teachers Organization in 1898.

As a democratic union, our members elect leaders, vote on action items and form committees to set organizational priorities. Our work is by educators, for educators.

We know that by working with educators, state legislators can make Minnesota public education the best in the country. This booklet was created to highlight our priorities for the 2024 legislative session as well as provide some context on our union and the issues facing Minnesota educators today.

Educator shortage

Minnesota educators have been working in an educator shortage for years, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic but continuing to worsen year after year. The 2023 report from the Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board stated that nine out of 10 schools in Minnesota are significantly affected by the educator shortage, and are unable to fill essential open positions. This affects Minnesota students' outcomes, and harms students of color, students with disabilities and students in rural areas the most.

The educator shortage gets more costly every year, both in terms of solutions and potential harm to our students and public education. We're asking every elected official at the Capitol to consider what they can do to turn this tide. When other sectors struggle to find workers, they increase pay and benefits and improve working conditions to make their careers more attractive.

Educating today is harder than it ever has been. Students have more complex needs, schools are understaffed and educators are working around the clock to set their students up for success. Every open position and every huge class roster is a disservice to our students and increases burnout for educators. Our educators love their jobs and they want to do the challenging and rewarding work of helping every Minnesota student to succeed, but they need more support from the state to do it.

We're grateful for the historic investment from the Minnesota Legislature for public education in 2023. That investment goes a long way to addressing underfunding issues from the past few decades. Unfortunately, in many districts across the state the budget increases are not making it to classrooms and our students and educators who need investments are still struggling. It's time to consider stronger legislation from the state that directs districts to invest in solutions to these problems.

A student without a math teacher won't become an engineer. A student without an English teacher won't become an author. A student without a school counselor won't be set up for college. A student without the one-on-one help from an ESP could fall through the cracks. Together, we need to do everything possible to recruit and retain educators in Minnesota schools.



THE TIME IS NOW FOR:
A LIVING WAGE

REFUSE TO PAY FOR
ESPs
CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL TOYS!

What is a union and why do they matter?

Unions have something for everyone. Unions allow workers to leverage their economic value to stand up for themselves and their colleagues in hiring and employment decisions. It is a way of participating in the labor market as a group, in the same way that purchasing associations help to manage their own market participation. Unions are a basic, time-tested way of helping workers participate in the market economy.

For those who prefer to see traditional markets disrupted, unions can do that, too. There is decades of research that show that in more heavily unionized states, workers overall tend to have higher wages and more dependable benefits. This is an important counterweight to the house always winning, which is exemplified in overall wage stagnation over the last thirty years. In the face of skyrocketing economic inequality in the United States, unions help to provide a bulwark against the consolidation of capital that often leaves the most vulnerable workers behind and struggling for their entire working lives to catch up.

Unions also create an important hub for social and political organization. Most of us spend about half of our waking hours at work. Unions provide an outlet for advancing social and political goals with co-workers with whom you share a workplace and a commitment to the work that you perform together.

In Minnesota, public employee unions are governed by the Public Employee Labor Relations Act, which outlines mandatory subjects of bargaining and an exclusive representative's right to meet with members.

Unions are at their most popular right now, as the public reckons with mass income inequality in the U.S. Safeguarding workers means helping to protect a central form of organized advocacy for the working class. Every employee should have the ability to join a union.

2024 Education Minnesota Legislative Agenda

Our top priorities are supporting educators with professional pay, pensions and health care.

Students learn best when they can develop a trusting relationship with their educators, but what happens when there aren't enough educators?

From the statewide shortage of teachers, licensed school staff, substitutes and education support professionals to burnout among state college faculty, it's clear Minnesota must improve the financial well-being of its educators to address the labor crunch in public education. Nine out of 10 schools in Minnesota are significantly affected by the educator shortage, which harms students of color, students with disabilities and students from rural areas the most.

Understaffing accelerates burnout, low pay forces educators to work multiple jobs, and spiraling health insurance costs encourage educators to work sick. Add in broken pension plans, and it's no wonder educators are reluctantly leaving their students for higher wages outside public education.

Educators are worth more—and they know it. That's why Education Minnesota, a union of more than 84,000 educators in E-12 and higher education, supports a package of bills designed to recruit the next generation of passionate and knowledgeable educators, and retain the best group of education professionals in America.

To offer our students the highest-quality education, employers must pay their educators fairly from day one through retirement, show them the respect they deserve and reduce burnout. Together, these proposals are a responsible reaction to the staffing crisis. Our students, and educators, have waited long enough.

Educator Pay

Minnesota teachers in E-12 schools make 28% less on average compared to other workers in Minnesota with the same education level. Hourly school workers only make minimum wage in many areas, and often don't make enough to cover their health insurance costs. The state of Minnesota should make **direct investments in the compensation of its educators**. Our union supports legislation that:

- Raises wages for all teachers, commensurate with other professions with similar educational requirements, and raise starting wages to a minimum of \$60,000 annually.
- Establishes a minimum wage for hourly school workers of \$25 an hour.
- Supports higher compensation for the faculty in the state's college and universities, including wages and expanding the right of dependent tuition waivers to state universities.

Educator Pensions

Educator pensions are not the **recruitment and retention tool they were created to be**. Our teachers' top priority is reforming their pension plan. With some of the highest educator contribution levels to their own pensions compared to other states, direct state investment is required. We support legislation that:

- Reduces penalties and increases flexibility for educator retirement, so educators can choose when they're ready to retire without losing a significant amount of their pension benefit.
- Supports improving the retirement plans for higher education faculty, including better pensions and increasing the Supplemental Retirement Plan statutory maximum.

Educator Health Care

Health insurance costs for educators have soared in the past decade, and in many areas are **rising faster than negotiated salary and wage increases**. The state needs to invest in educator health plans, including the Public Employees Insurance Program, or PEIP. Many educators who leave the classroom cite health care costs as a reason to change industries. To address the staffing crisis, Minnesota must provide affordable, reliable health insurance to these essential workers. We support legislation that:

- Reduces the exorbitant cost of health insurance for educators through strengthening PEIP and supporting policies that make health insurance more affordable for all Minnesotans.

Our top priority is ending the educator shortage with professional pay, pensions and health care for all school workers.

We must also work together to reduce educator burnout. We can do this by:

- Ensuring educators are safe at work mentally and physically.

- Fully staffing **mental and physical health teams** by hiring more licensed school counselors, social workers, psychologists, nurses and other support professionals.
- Reducing class sizes and/or improving educator-to-student ratios in public schools and reducing special education teacher caseloads so that our students can benefit from 1-on-1 support.
- Offering **paid student teaching** to all teacher candidates and reducing educator student debt.
- Supporting the **freedom to teach an honest history** of the United States and to make available age-appropriate, thought-provoking books in school libraries to counter the national movement to whitewash history, ban books and restrict our students' freedom to read.
- Providing all students with access to **professional media specialists** who can teach the differences between reliable information and misinformation and disinformation flooding social media.
- Increasing **"prep time"** for effective lessons for all teachers.
- Providing dedicated **due process time** to special education teachers to meet students' needs and to hold meetings with families and manage caseload sizes.
- Bringing Minnesota into compliance with federal law by requiring all **special education teachers to have training** in meeting the needs of students with IEPs before entering the classroom.
- Fully funding services for all members of the school community, including **E-12 students in special education and English language learners**.
- Increasing the per-pupil funding formula to compensate for past underfunding and historic inflation.
- Funding a total of **18 hours of paid training** for all paraprofessionals who work directly with students.
- Supporting specific policies to **attract and retain teachers of color**, and work toward creating school climates that reflect the diversity of Minnesota.
- Increasing **access to college** by renewing the state of Minnesota's commitment to public higher education by returning to statutory levels of funding for state colleges and universities.

- Supporting changes to PELRA to clarify that higher education personnel who regularly teach students should be classified with faculty bargaining units and not with professional and administrative staff.
- Creating a **universal child care and early learning program**, using mixed delivery, where low-income families pay nothing, and no family pays more than 7% of family income.

The term “educators” includes all school workers. Education Minnesota represents and advocates for teachers, education support professionals, school nurses, school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, school media specialists, cultural family advocates, higher education faculty and other licensed school staff.

A selection of these bills will be highlighted in the following pages.

Fair pay for teachers

What it is

Teachers in Minnesota make 28% less than workers in other sectors with the same level of education. Many have considered the essential, challenging and rewarding career of teaching, and turn away due to the economic cost for them and their families. Our bill sets a statewide minimum teaching salary of \$60,000, while also giving raises to teachers currently in the classroom. Starting salaries for educators in many districts across the state can be lower than \$40,000.

Why it matters

Like any other sector that's struggling with a worker shortage, Minnesota needs to consider increasing pay and benefits, attracting more qualified individuals to work in our schools and filling positions districts are struggling to fill. The struggle to fill these vacancies becomes worse each year, and the educator shortage will cost us a lot more in the long run.

Who it benefits

Current teachers, future teachers and anyone attending public schools. Any investment in fair pay and benefits helps our students and communities have the public education they deserve.

Fair pay for ESPs

What it is

Setting a \$25/hr minimum wage for education support professionals in our schools, such as paraprofessionals, bus drivers, cafeteria workers and other unlicensed and essential school staff.

Why it matters

ESPs do essential work in our schools. They are often the first adults students interact with in the morning and the last adults they see before they get home. Most of these workers are from systemically underinvested, diverse populations. Having a fully-staffed ESP team means more one-on-one help for students, less burnt-out teachers and less problems in school buildings.

Who it benefits

Hourly school workers. Any investment in fair pay that supports fully-staffed school teams helps our students and communities have the public education they deserve.



TRA pension improvements

Educator pensions are not the recruitment and retention tool they were created to be. Current teachers, regardless of how long they've worked, face over-penalization of their retirement benefits before age 62, as the "Rule of 90" was only set in time for a group of past teachers. Our teachers' top priority is reforming their pension plan to restore flexibility and financial wellbeing to educators who may need to retire before 62. With some of the highest educator contribution levels to their own pensions compared to other states, direct state investment is required.

In Minnesota, we value our educators and a career of caring for Minnesota's children should allow them a flexible benefit to spend time with their own families and enjoy retirement.

What it is

Educators support lowering penalties in the TRA Tier 2 pension plan, dropping the penalties per year to 3% between ages 58-62. This addresses the largest flaw in the pension, where the current 7% penalties restrict flexibility to educators who may need to draw their benefit before age 62. Lowering the Normal Retirement Age to 64 would also be a step in the right direction and a benefit increase to all active educators.

Why it matters

Educators who have worked decades in service to our state deserve a pension benefit that takes care of them in retirement. More than half of all licensed teachers in Minnesota have left the profession, and many mid-career teachers and licensed staff concerned about this issue are considering leaving to work in the private sector to build a better retirement plan. If we want to combat the educator shortage, we need legislators to improve benefits like pensions.

Who it benefits

Current teachers, school mental health professionals, other licensed staff, administrators and superintendents. District budgets are also going to be tighter if years go by without improvements, as educators who would like to retire are also at the top of the pay scale. Any investment in fair pay and benefits helps our students and communities have the public education they deserve.





EDUCATION MINNESOTA ASPIRING EDUCATORS

Student teacher tuition waiver

Enrollment in teaching programs at higher education institutions across the state is half of what they were a decade ago. Amid a school staffing crisis, educators and college students are advocating for new and innovative ways to recruit more young people into the teaching profession.

Student teaching is the most important experience in teacher preparation programs. Student teachers plan lessons, grade papers and strategize to meet the needs of the students in their classroom. College students in these programs have to give up the part-time or full-time jobs they work to make ends meet during the mandatory student teaching semester. They also have to pay full tuition for this semester, even though few of them take other classes during that time.

What it is

Our bill waives tuition for college students during their mandatory student teaching semester. Few students take other classes during this time, and work full-time assisting teachers, helping students and serving as another adult in the room during the educator shortage. Most future teachers face significant education debt when they graduate, and this is one way to address worries around paying student loans as they start their teaching career.

Why it matters

We need to attract more young people into the teaching profession. Educators say it just doesn't make sense that students have to pay tuition to work full-time in our schools.

Who it benefits

Future teachers studying education in public colleges and universities, and higher education institutions, which have seen drastic decreases in their education program enrollment over the years.

Student teacher pay

Stipend programs reduce financial barriers and go a long way to make preparation more affordable for aspiring educators. Student teachers serve as another adult to assist with classroom management, give one-on-one student support and help decrease burnout and workload of teachers. These students want to do everything they can to be the best teacher they can be, but they're left with the question, "If I can't afford to live, how can I be a teacher?"

As of now, the Office of Higher Education has a student-teacher stipend program that caters to specific shortage areas and lacks applicants and reach. Our bill expands eligibility to all aspiring educators—every subject area is a shortage area currently in Minnesota—while setting a standard stipend that amounts to \$15 an hour, addressing the increased cost of living during college students' mandatory teaching.

Why it matters

We need to attract more young people into the teaching profession, for the stability and success of our public schools. The cost of the student teaching semester can be a barrier for low-income teacher candidates entering the field, but it is a research-driven practice to meet our students' needs. In Minnesota, we value peoples' work and we should work to make sure these dedicated future teachers are compensated for their time serving students.

Who it benefits

Future teachers studying education, and higher education institutions who have seen drastic decreases in their education program enrollment over the years.



Fully staff mental and physical health teams

What it is

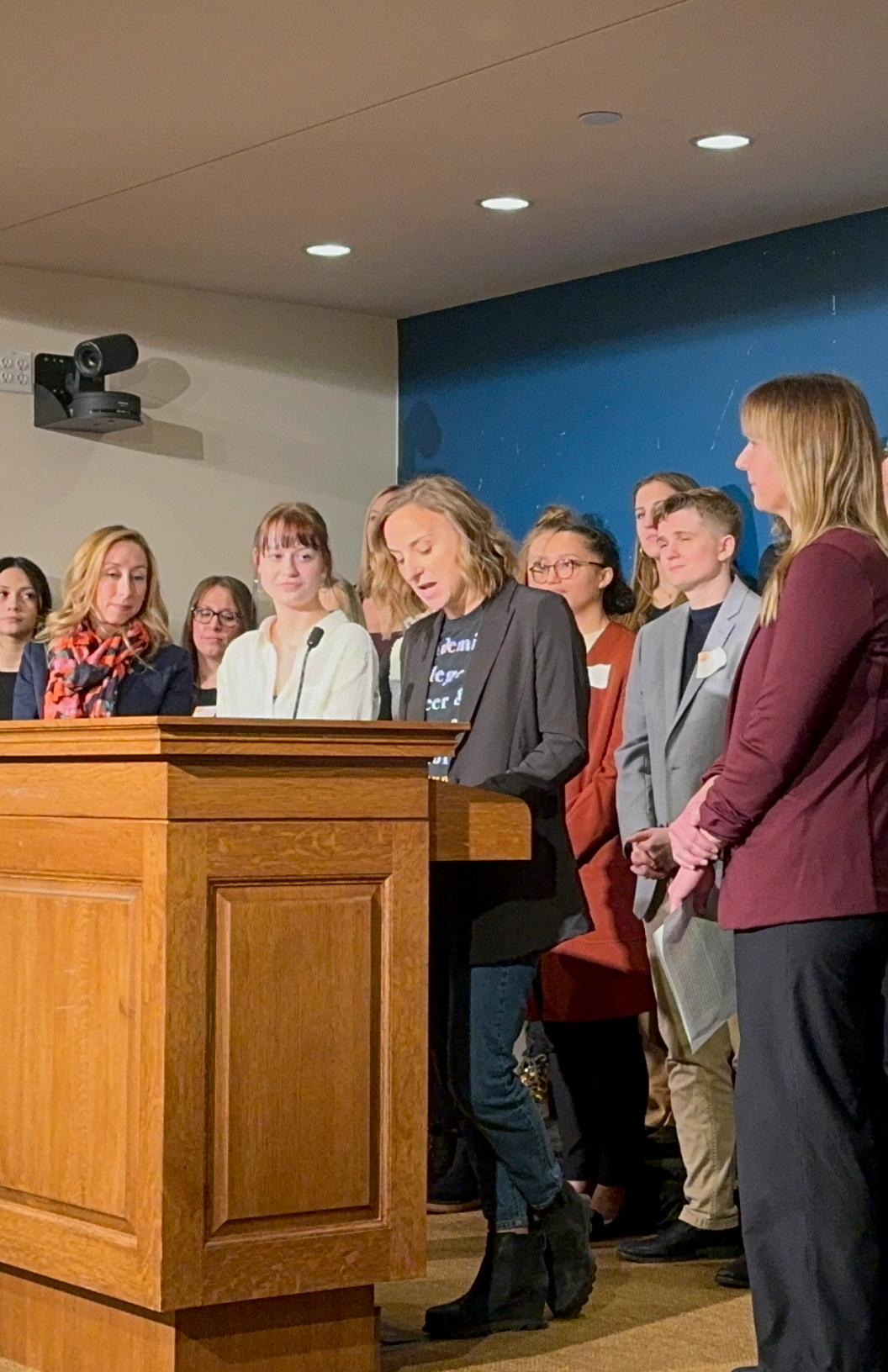
Our students deserve fully-staffed mental health and counseling services in our schools. Building on the incredible investment made for student mental health last year, which invested over \$100 million in school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists and school nurses, our members are advocating for a policy change to set a standard caseload for these essential workers, ensuring that every student can get the help they need. Education Minnesota is working towards meeting these goals by ensuring Student Support Aid is used at schools, and starting the conversation about a recommended school counselor ratio of 1 to every 250 students. Currently, Minnesota's student-to-counselor ratio is more than double the recommended ratio with 1 counselor for every 544 students, with many young students having no access to a school counselor. This puts us as the 48th worst among states in the U.S. for our ratio—only better than Arizona and Michigan.

Why it matters

Our students' mental and physical health needs are more complex today than they ever have been before. When schools don't have properly staffed teams, our classroom teachers and ESPs struggle—and sometimes fail—to meet their needs.

Who it benefits

The over 800,000 students in public schools in Minnesota and the educators who work with them.



Educator health care

Education Minnesota supports investing in educator health care plans, including the Public Employees Insurance Program, or PEIP. Many educators who leave the classroom cite health care costs as one of the reasons why. To address the school staffing crisis, Minnesota must provide affordable, reliable health insurance to these essential workers.

Why it matters

Health insurance costs for educators have soared in the past decade, and in many areas **are rising faster than negotiated salary and wage increases**.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, premiums for family coverage nationally increased by 20% over the past five years, and by 43% over the past 10 years. Nationwide, health care costs are expected to rise by 5-6% in 2023, and an additional 7-8% in 2024. Given the lack of regulation at the federal level, we can expect these costs to continue to grow at astronomical rates.

No one should be forced to choose between health care and putting food on the table or a roof over their heads. We need to take care of our educators so they can care for Minnesota students.

Who it benefits

Educators in Minnesota and their families; the schools, students and communities who rely on their educators

Special education due process paperwork time

What it is

Some local unions have protections for special education teachers to have dedicated “due process time” for special education paperwork; the vast majority do not. Education Minnesota supports requiring schools to provide due process time to all special education teachers, and increasing the special education cross-subsidy formula to fund this requirement.

Why it matters

According to a survey from Education Minnesota, the average special education teacher spends 20 hours of unpaid time working on special education paperwork outside of school. Education Minnesota also supports paperwork reduction. Minnesota has some paperwork requirements that exceed federal requirements. However, multiple conversations with family advocates and special education teachers over the past decade have failed to yield significant solutions for educators and students.

The Legislature and the Minnesota Department of Education have set the standards for working with students with IEPs, and our members strive to meet them. To meet students’ needs, our members need dedicated time to meet with families, to edit and update IEPs and to document interventions.

Special education fields are the highest teacher shortage areas across the state. The Legislature needs to improve working conditions to retain and recruit teachers into this field.

Who it benefits

Students with Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) and their families; special education teachers who devote countless unpaid hours to meet students’ needs.

Prep time for teachers

What it is

Minnesota statute outlines a minimum amount of “preparatory,” also known as prep time, in statute. This is also known as a planning period. This allows teachers to draft lesson plans, grade assignments, and meet with students during the normal school day. This proposal would expand the amount of prep time a teacher has in recognition that teaching today is more complex than it has ever been.

Why it matters

Many teachers are teaching in multiple modes – asynchronous, online and in-person. They are also expected to teach individualized lessons to all the students in their class, which typically includes multiple home languages and an average of 15% of students on IEPs. With the teacher shortage, many classrooms have more students than ever. Differentiated instruction for a class of 30+ students takes more planning time than smaller classes require.

Paid training for ESPs

What it is

This bill would expand the current eight hours of paid training for education support professionals, or ESPs, to 18 hours. This recognizes that the standard workday for an ESP is six hours, so the change would create three full days of training before the school year. This bill would also add an ESP to the professional development committee at schools to ensure that essential workers are heard in the process.

Why it matters

ESPs deserve job-specific training. Many ESPs are involved with medically complex students or with assisting with instruction. Working without training is a disservice to our students. Professional development also serves to retain these essential workers, as many without training experience difficulties that lead to them leaving their careers altogether.

Freedom to teach an honest history

What it is

Education Minnesota supports students' right to learn an accurate and honest history of our nation, both the good and the bad, so they can learn from our mistakes and create a better future for all Minnesotans. This includes ensuring media literacy for our students and expanding media library specialists, expanding ethnic studies, preventing book bans and protecting a teacher's right to create the standards-aligned curriculum, based on their professional training and experience.

Why it matters

All students deserve the freedom to learn an honest history of our nation, but certain politicians and some national big-money groups are trying to turn Minnesotans against their educators, deny educators the resources they need to support every student and ban accurate, age-appropriate lessons about the role of racism, gender and civil rights in America.

Taking steps to protect teachers' freedom to teach and students' freedom to learn will allow our society to continue to progress. Having outside groups influence what can and cannot be taught to all students, while disregarding expert advice, is detrimental to public education as a whole for future generations.

Reduce class sizes

Minnesota is one of only 14 states in the country that doesn't have any class size limits or standards, even for our earliest learners. Last year, Education Minnesota successfully passed language allowing local unions to negotiate staffing ratios. This was a step in the right direction but Minnesota can do more to support students.

Education Minnesota supports clear, transparent standards for class sizes and student-to-teacher ratios no larger than:

1. For kindergarten through grade 3, a class size of 17 to 1;
2. For grades 4 to 9, a class size of 21 to 1; and
3. For grades 10 to 12, a class size of 23 to 1.

Why it matters

Increased class sizes are a main factor in students and educators having a much different experience than those in past decades. Smaller class sizes are supported by research to improve outcomes for students. Early literacy instruction improves with 18 students or fewer in grades K-3, especially for BIPOC students and students from low-income homes. Lower class sizes increase the availability of 1-on-1 educator support. It ensures that no student falls through the cracks.

Many teachers are teaching in multiple modes—asynchronous, online, and in-person. They are also expected to provide differentiated instruction to students in their classrooms, which typically includes multiple home languages and an average of 15% of students on an Individualized Education Program, or IEP.

Reducing class sizes will benefit students and improve academic and social-emotional achievement.

Special education teacher licensure

Federal law, overseen by the Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education, has two requirements for teachers in special education:

1. Teachers are appropriately and adequately prepared and trained, including those personnel who have the content knowledge and skills to serve children with disabilities.

or

2. Receives high-quality professional development to have a positive impact on the classroom, both before and while teaching, and serves as a teacher for less than three years.

Minnesota has a very permissive teacher licensing law that allows anyone with a bachelor's degree to hold a Tier 1 license in any discipline, including special education. This means someone with a communications degree can be a special education teacher, without assistance. With waivers for shortage areas, there is no time limit on Tier 1 licenses.

Education Minnesota supports—at a minimum—bringing Minnesota into compliance with federal law by requiring all special education teachers to have training in meeting the needs of students with IEPs before entering the classroom

Why it matters

Every day our members tell us about students in special education not having their needs met. By not meeting our students' needs, we are failing a generation of students, and endangering federal special education funding. Many Tier 1 and Tier 2 special education teachers receive no training in writing an IEP, which is a legal document between the school and the student's family. This leads to Tier 1 and Tier 2 special education teachers being the most disciplined licensure field by the Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, or PELSB.

Who it affects

The 153,612 students receiving special education services; Tier 1 and 2 special education teachers who are in the licensure field most likely to be disciplined by PELSB; Tier 3 and Tier 4 special education teachers who often have to fulfill the paperwork required of fellow teachers who remain untrained on the creation of a legal document.

Our ask to legislators

As a union of over 84,000 Minnesota educators and the largest union in our state, we ask that legislators support and consider all pro-educator, pro-student and pro-public education legislation. We all want our state to have the best public education in the country, and hearing from educators and students is necessary to move our state in that direction.

We encourage all legislators to:

- Contact us to answer questions, collaborate with us and find solutions for Minnesota education together.
- Prioritize meeting with their local educators to hear their priorities, concerns, stories and solutions. Education Minnesota staff can also support legislators in contacting their local educators. Please reach out to us for more information.
- Engage in local educator events, including rallies and negotiation support.
- Visit your local schools, sit in on a class and experience Minnesota education!

Contact us

Thank you for your attention and consideration of Education Minnesota's legislative agenda, as well as for your dedicated service to our state. Our staff are always available to you, and please don't hesitate to contact us.

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*Education Minnesota is an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers,
the National Education Association and AFL-CIO.*

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