

Alliance for Student Achievement

Representative Paul Thissen

Overview Statement:

Describe your vision and priorities for E-12 public education in Minnesota.

I was raised by two public school teachers. Their hard work and dedication to Minnesota's students have shaped my values as a legislator and as a candidate for governor. What they taught me is that education or any other issue cannot be viewed in a silo. The future success of our state is dependent on a healthy, well educated and safely housed population.

My vision is for an education system that meets the unique learning needs of every child in this state, that provides a strong foundation for every child to be a productive member of our community and (more importantly) an active citizen in the broadest sense, and that respects educators (and all involved in the public school system) as professionals.

As a legislator and the next governor of Minnesota I will make the following priorities in education:

1. Narrowing the achievement gap
2. Enacting predictable, sufficient and sustainable funding for education that isn't reliant on unsustainable property tax increases and provides equity to students and districts across Minnesota
3. Making good on our promise to include "E" in our public education system.

Briefly describe your experience on education issues.

I have three children in the Minneapolis Public Schools. I have direct experience and a direct stake in the success of the public schools.

I authored the Early Care and Learning Act which created a strong framework for improving our early childhood programs. We all know that early childhood care and education are necessary for students to achieve.

We know that it takes more than a classroom for kids to learn. That is why I have worked tirelessly to ensure teachers all across our state can live and retire with security. I am proud to have worked as the chief author and champion for legislation to secure the financial stability of the TRA and to resolve the long-standing inequity in benefits between pre-1989 hires and the 70% of active teachers hired later. This is one of the fundamental teacher retention tools we have – and we must honor it.

I worked hard on expanding health care to both Minnesota kids and their families and worked with Education Minnesota to make sure the statewide health insurance pool for

Alliance for Student Achievement

public school employees successfully found its way through the Health and Human Service Committee and ultimately to the House floor.

In my own community, I have worked with parents and teachers to preserve our public, community schools. And, I have publicly supported professional educators when they have come under attack from the current administration.

Funding:

In 2003, Governor Pawlenty appointed a task force to develop recommendations for reforming Minnesota's education funding system. Legislators and education organizations used the task force report to develop the "New Minnesota Miracle" proposal which includes automatic inflationary increases. Do you support this proposal? If not, what is your plan for reforming Minnesota's education funding system?

Yes. The New Minnesota Miracle is a pathway to sustainable, sufficient, predictable and equitable funding for our schools. But it is not enough to pay lip service to this proposal because it will take money. I am serious about addressing the challenges presented by our budget deficit: we need to consider a broad restructuring of our tax system and a governor who knows and has the passion to reduce health care costs as part of our state budget by paying smarter for health care. I will be that governor.

Do you support funding for all-day, every day kindergarten and expanding high quality early childhood learning opportunities in our public schools?

Yes.

Tax Policy:

How would you reform state tax policy to stabilize Minnesota's fiscal system and ensure that our E-12 education system has the financial resources necessary to provide students with access to high-quality education programs without reliance on referendum levies?

Currently, there is too much reliance on local property taxes to fund our schools and insufficient state commitment. We must change that.

We also must have a vigorous discussion of what constitutes sufficient funding. We cannot aim for funding to support a minimum level of success for our students and schools. Our standard should include sufficient funding to attract talented faculty and to allow those educators the time to build close, individual relationships with their students. A successful school should have flexible academic environments that serve a diversity of learning styles. Rigorous math, reading and writing curriculum are essential but not enough. We need foreign languages, visual arts and music courses, technology and science labs. And we need to make sure schools are safe and have school nurses and counselors to keep kids healthy.

Alliance for Student Achievement

We need to restore structural balance to the state budget. We will not be able to meet our goals of equitable, sustainable and predictable funding for our schools without dedicating additional money to education. Otherwise, we will continue the unproductive fights we have seen between regions and between programs. I am committed to making sure we have sufficient funding for our schools. Part of that is a willingness to raise state taxes in a progressive way. In order to free up funds in our state for our priorities, including education, we must get health care costs under control. They are eating up not only families and business budgets but also the state budget. Finally, the state must do what it can to reinvigorate the economy and create jobs.

Standards/Testing:

Should high stakes tests be used to determine whether or not Minnesota students are granted a diploma?

Minnesota schools and students should be judged on much more than test scores. Minnesota tests should evaluate growth, starting with where the student is. Testing should identify where students need assistance to improve and used as a basis for focusing additional resources to close gaps rather than as punishment for failure. The intense focus on the high school exit exam has taken our focus off the more important effort which is aligning senior year curriculum to prepare students for two- and four-year post-secondary institutions. We should build a system around the notion of E-16.

What changes would you recommend to the current standards and testing requirements in Minnesota?

See above answer.

In addition, we must understand that there are students who, due to unique needs or challenges (like special needs) will never meet the established standards. We must have an appreciation for the unique needs of students and meet them where they are and not make them failures.

Achievement Gap/Reform Initiatives:

Please describe your initiatives to “reform” education and/or to narrow the achievement gap. Please describe how you would fund these initiatives.

We cannot address the growing achievement gap with a quick fix. The causes of the gap are multiple and complex and the solutions must be comprehensive. Among other things:

Investment in early care and learning, including parent education, is critical. Libraries, after-school and summer school programs must be funded and widely available since

Alliance for Student Achievement

we know that the achievement gap grows exponentially when kids are out of the school building. We need kids to be connected with adults who care about them, will engage them and will hold them accountable.

During school, we should employ technology and other tools more effectively to focus on the individual growth of students and identify the students who are not keeping up. We need the resources to provide intensive assistance to those students to catch them up. We should give educators financial and other incentives (including lower class sizes) to work with students and in schools where the achievement gap is most serious.

Finally we must address inequality more broadly. We must keep kids healthy, well fed and in stable housing if we are going to close the gap.