

TO: Members
House Education Finance Committee

FROM: Brad Lundell
Executive Director, Schools for Equity in Education

RE: Support for HF 292

Schools for Equity in Education (SEE) strongly supports HF 292, Representative Cedrick Frazier’s bill that would allow school districts to renew expiring referendum levies by school board action.

SEE has supported this effort over the past decade and thanks Representative Frazier for bringing this bill forward during the 2021 legislative session. In more than 85 referendum renewal campaigns over the past five years, all were approved by the local voters. Yet, state law requires school districts to expend considerable effort and expense on these levy campaigns. It can be argued that requiring districts to resubmit ballot questions on levy renewals to the voters promotes necessary discussion between the district and the community, but discussions over school levies take place during the truth-in-taxation process where the nature and amounts of the levies allowed are laid out for the public. There is nothing in this legislation that would allow school districts to circumvent the original levy amount or term of the levy approved by the community for the levy being renewed. Further, this is permissive language, and nothing would prevent a school district from returning to the voters if they believed that to be the preferred route on a renewal question.

School board members are elected officials and, as such, are well-equipped to understand and meet the needs of the school districts they represent. This legislation simply provides them with a commonsense tool to ensure financial stability.

The organization thanks Representative Frazier for introducing this bill and thanks this committee for giving it consideration. If you have any questions regarding SEE’s position on this and other issues, do not hesitate to contact me at brad.lundell@schoolsforequity.org or (651) 647-6251/(612) 220-7459.

SEE Districts

- Albany
- Albert Lea
- Annandale
- Anoka-Hennepin
 - Austin
 - Belle Plaine
 - Big Lake
 - Braham
- Buffalo-Hanover-Montrose
 - Byron
- Cambridge-Isanti
 - Cannon Falls
 - Centennial
- Chisago Lakes
- Dassel-Cokato
 - Delano
 - East Central
 - Faribault
 - Forest Lake
 - Fridley
 - Hastings
- Hinckley-Finlayson
- Howard Lake-Waverly-Winsted
 - Hutchinson
 - Jordan
- Kasson-Mantorville
 - Kimball
 - Lake City
 - Litchfield
 - Maple Lake
 - Medford
 - Melrose
 - Milaca
 - Monticello
 - Mora
- New London-Spicer
 - New Prague
 - North Branch
 - Northfield
 - Owatonna
 - Paynesville
 - Pine Island
 - Princeton
- Prior Lake-Savage
 - Rockford
 - Rocori
 - Roseau
- Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan
 - Royalton
 - Rush City
- Sartell-St. Stephen
 - St. Francis
- St. Michael-Albertville
 - Stewartville
 - Stillwater
 - Waconia
- Associate Members
 - Resource Training and Solutions
- St. Croix River Education District
- SW Metro Intermediate District



February 10, 2021

Dear Members of the House Education Finance Committee:

Thank you for your work to assist school districts with fiscal issues during this unprecedented time. While it is important to increase school districts' flexibility to make local fiscal decisions, we urge you to be cautious in adopting measures that would curtail the rights of taxpayers to provide input on local property tax matters.

The Minnesota Business Partnership and the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce have strong concerns with HF 292, which are outlined below.

The school referendum process creates an opportunity for school boards and their citizens to have a conversation about strategic direction and funding for the district. Referenda renewals are an important part of the process – renewals are an opportunity for the school board to evaluate the results of the original referenda and ask voters to affirm continuation of course or forge a new direction and meet emerging needs.

For example, referendums are requested for strategies such as reducing class sizes, providing early education services, implementing new curriculum and new technology, and compensating for declining student enrollment. In each case, school boards can describe what they are currently doing, what they would like to do, and how the new funding will make a difference for students. Citizens can ask about the strategic direction their schools want to take, how additional funding will be used, and expected results. These are critical discussions for schools and their communities to have.

Further, the bill shifts decisions on renewal of a property tax to a hearing process, which changes the dynamic of these local conversations by giving the board – and not citizens – the final say in whether a referendum levy should be continued or changed. The proposed hearing process does not allow for robust discussion on the proposed renewal in the way that the current voter-approval process does.

For these reasons, we respectfully ask that you continue to work on HF 292 to ensure that taxpayer rights to engage on local taxation issues are preserved. It is important that voters have the opportunity to engage in robust conversations about the use of property tax dollars and that significant taxation issues be decided by Minnesota voters at the polls.

Sincerely,

Amy Walstien
Education and Workforce Development Director
Minnesota Business Partnership

Lauryn Schothorst
Director, Education and Workforce Development Policy
Minnesota Chamber of Commerce