



April 13, 2021

Representative Rena Moran, Ways and Means Committee Chair
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Dear Chair Moran,

I am writing this letter today to provide my support for HF 1065, the House Education Budget and Policy omnibus bill. This is an extremely strong bill that will serve our students, families, educators, schools, and communities well for years to come.

The \$725 million included in HF 1065 makes important investments in our public education system and creates transformational policy for all of our students, those of all races, ethnicities, religions, economic statuses, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, and ZIP codes. So many of the proposals support the whole child and all of the needs that they have in order to reach their full academic potential. The need for these proposals is even more urgent as we engage in recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am grateful to see the investments in many of the funding formulas that the Governor proposed. The 2% increase each year in the biennium, and the additional 0.5% per year in the tails, will provide critical funding for districts to give our students the programming and supports and retain the staff they need to recover from the pandemic. I was also appreciate that the formula was linked to inflation. This will allow our education funding to adapt to our state's changing economy and meet the needs of students and families for years to come.

I am happy to see a serious investment in buying down the special education cross subsidy as the Governor proposed because we always need to support our students who receive special education services. As these costs grow, we must continue to provide our students with the supports that they deserve.

The Governor, Lt. Governor, and my MDE team have heard from the community about the investments needed to improve English Learner (EL) programming to better serve our EL students. The funding in this bill to buy down the EL cross-subsidy is one way we have heard will help close crucial opportunity gaps for these students. Another way in which this bill provides for our families for whom English is not their primary language is the inclusion of an investment in public engagement and translation specialists within the Department, as well as funding for translation services for our school districts and charter schools. This is critical to enhancing family engagement to better meet the needs of our students, and demonstrates our respect for the value of their first languages.

We know that student movement during the pandemic will negatively impact compensatory revenue availability for next year. This funding is fundamental in providing targeted programming for our historically underserved students. I want to thank the House for digging deep and making investments in compensatory revenue.

Finally, without this bill, funding for 4,000 voluntary prekindergarten slots would expire this year. These seats provide access to high quality learning opportunities for some of our most historically underserved early learners.

All of these investments will improve programming and academic opportunities for our students and provide supports for our staff and schools; however, the investment in our schools, academic supports, and opportunities for our students does not stop with these formulas. We must look beyond the formulas to expand access, participation, and representation for our students if we expect to have different outcomes.

I'm extremely pleased to see that funding was included to expand rigorous coursework opportunities for our Black, Indigenous, and students of color (BIPOC) and students in greater Minnesota. We know that when students have access to courses like CTE, AP, IB, and concurrent enrollment achievement increases. The funding in this bill will increase access to these courses and improve the quality of these programs.

More and more we know that putting the child first, also requires us to provide supports that meet our students where they are and values who they are. That is why I am thankful to see this bill place a focus on equity. It includes many important provisions which support all students, but include critical and much needed changes to ensure that our Black, brown and Indigenous students and students who also receive special education services are treated equitably in a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment.

I fully support the inclusion of ethnic studies in our state's academic standards. As the Governor has said, our students should see themselves in what they learn, and our classroom content should reflect the contributions of the diverse communities that make up our great state. That starts with our academic standards, and this bill provides the necessary funding for staff at MDE to implement those standards.

The inclusion of Indigenous Education for All is another crucial proposal that I am thrilled to see included in this bill. This provision provides funding and policies to create programming, staff, and resources to support all students' ability to learn about the cultural heritage and historical and current contributions of Minnesota's Tribal Nations.

I am pleased to see the range of strong investments and policies that support our American Indian students and their unique cultural identity, which is paramount to culturally-inclusive schools. The additional investment and programmatic changes to the Minnesota Indian Teacher Training Program will increase teacher diversity by increasing access for teacher candidates. We also greatly appreciate the ongoing funding for Tribal Relations Training for our school leaders. These trainings have been of great value for state employees, and our school leaders have been asking to receive this training. We believe they will find the same value in this training as our state employees.

Funding for data analytics at the Department will allow our Office of American Indian Education to use the more accurate state counts of American Indian students to be more strategic, build capacity, and better support our American Indian student population as a whole.

Finally, we strongly believe the policies around prohibiting demeaning mascots, allowing cultural regalia at graduation ceremonies, allowing schools to share educational data with Tribal Nations, and improving processes for parent committees will greatly enhance the teaching and learning environment for our American Indian students.

I want to thank Chair Richardson for setting the strong expectation around prohibiting suspensions for our Kindergarten through 3 grade students. We know that our BIPOC students and students receiving special education services are disproportionately represented in our statewide discipline data, and non-exclusionary discipline approaches will help to support the prohibition of suspensions. That is why we also appreciate seeing the Governor's comprehensive non-exclusionary policy package as well as funding to assist in their implementation. In order for our students to succeed academically, they need to be in the classroom.

All of our students will also greatly benefit from the investments in multi-tiered systems of supports, which will provide grants to districts to implement various models that tailor individualized academic and behavioral supports for students. The pandemic has also accelerated a mental health crisis for our student budget. The funding in this bill for student support personnel, like counselors, nurses, and school psychologists, is critical to addressing mental health and behavioral needs in schools. I am also thankful to see robust policies that support social-emotional learning, restorative practices, and reducing restrictive procedures. These are all fundamental, evidence based strategies and practices to support student well-being and provide education for the whole child.

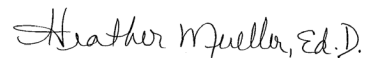
The investment this bill makes in full-service community schools will be critical for recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic for some of our most historically underserved students and families. It is about time we make a permanent investment in this model. HF 1065 also proposes a range of important investments and policies in teacher diversity, training, and quality that I am happy to see. Investments in Grow Your Own initiatives and enhanced pathways have proven to diversify the teacher workforce.

This bill includes the important funding for anti-bias and anti-racism training and professional development on trauma-informed practices. This work, run out of our new Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Center will equip school leaders, teachers, and school staff with the tools and skills to combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial equity pandemic. I appreciate the inclusion of several provisions that support the work of the Department, including language that provides relief to districts and schools on implementing standards but allows the Department to continue our standards review and revision work and school support. This importantly allows our social studies standards review committee, the most diverse in Minnesota's history, to continue their work.

Finally, we appreciate the value this bill places on the work that the Department does for our students, educators, schools, and communities. The programs we create, the support we provide, the systems, and the structures are all meant to ensure that our students, each and every one, has access, participates, is represented, is valued, seen and heard, and has options in their lives. We also work to ensure that libraries are available and provide access to each and every community member with resources and services that create opportunities for learning and support literacy and education. The operating adjustment in future years will allow us to maintain current levels of service and the legal funds will cover legal costs due to large lawsuits that significantly impact MDE's ability to support students, educators, and schools.

I would like to thank you, Chair Moran, and the members of this committee, for your careful consideration of this robust package. I believe that we will be able to work together in a bipartisan, bicameral manner to ensure that Minnesota's education system not only re-emerges from this pandemic, but sets our students up for success and achievement for years to come.

Sincerely,



Heather Mueller, Ed.D.

Commissioner of Education

c: Members of the Ways and Means Committee
Representative Jim Davnie
Representative Ruth Richardson