

April 21, 2022

Members of the House Ways and Means Committee:

I want to offer my support for HF4300 and the crucial investments it makes in our students, families, educators, communities, and schools. This budget supports evidence-based strategies that first, and foremost, centers students. With the addition of early education items from HF4735, the House's education omnibus bill covers many of the identified needs of our education system including the areas of early education, mental health, educator supports, student academics, behavioral, and social-emotional needs, and structural supports. I applaud the House for providing such a robust target for education. This truly meets the historic opportunity we have in front of us to rise to the challenges we have endemic to our education system from causes due to, and existing before, the COVID-19 pandemic. I also encourage the House to make a few additions to match the Governor and Lieutenant Governor's proposals.

The House has rightly recognized that all of the investments in the bill are enhanced with a strong commitment to high quality early education. I am pleased to see the adoption of the Governor's targeted and comprehensive prekindergarten proposal to reach over 23,000 4-year-olds with full day opportunities through a mixed-delivery system. Additionally, the investment in Pathway I early learning scholarships will provide parents the portability they are seeking to access high quality early education opportunities in a variety of settings. Minnesotans with these early childhood investments have more successful academic, behavioral, and life trajectories.

The bill also includes a range of student supports that puts academics across the grade spectrum at the forefront and meets the student's individual needs. I am extremely appreciative that Chair Davnie has included funding and policy for the Governor's BOLD literacy plan, which bridges the knowing and doing gap by providing systemic supports in a variety of ways to ensure that what teachers are learning is being implemented with high fidelity in classrooms resulting in student success. I am also pleased to see funding for increased access to rigorous coursework for students, especially those in Greater Minnesota and students of color and American Indian students. Career and college readiness greatly relies on access and experience with this type of coursework, and the statistics show that not all students have equal access. These targeted programs are further reinforced by a strong commitment to a multi-tiered system of support, which supports the individual academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of the student. Additionally, this bill provides an ongoing increase to American Indian education aid bringing much needed support to dedicated programming for our most underserved students in the state. This helps to increase the effectiveness of the American Indian Education policy package proposed by Chair Richardson, the Governor, and the Lieutenant Governor, including embedding Indigenous Education for All in our academic standards. I do encourage the House to

consider making investments in innovative competency-based education opportunities, which allows students to succeed in settings and structures that best suit them.

We know that academic success requires further support for the whole child. It is essential that this bill invests in programs that meet students where they and their family are. That is why I am so happy to see this bill invests in wrap around services from full-service community schools, culturally-specific learning opportunities, and after school programs.

An area where I see an opportunity to improve upon the work in this bill is in its nutrition investment. While I appreciate Chair Davnie's funding for increased participation in the Community Eligibility Provision, this is far short of the Governor and Lieutenant Governor's proposal for universal meals. The research shows that children who have consistent access to healthy and nutritious meals at school focus more, perform and behave better, and are simply healthier. I strongly encourage the House to increase its investment to meet this need, and I commit to working with Chair Davnie and others on this.

While students receiving special education services have been identified as needing additional services to support them for a variety of reasons, they are first, and foremost, general education students. This means that they not only deserve appropriate funding for their general education, but they also deserve dedicated funding to meet their identified special needs. We have consistently heard from our school partners that the state should step-up where the federal government has let us down and commit more funds to reduce the special education cross subsidy. This bill makes a significant dent in the cross subsidy. I also appreciate the dedicated investment for schools serving students in the highest needs setting.

Likewise, programming for our students learning English has consistently been underfunded despite being the fastest growing student population. Multilingual learners are general education students first as well and they deserve appropriate funding for not only their general education experience, but also for targeted programming for the acquisition of academic listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. This bill boldly seeks to eliminate this underfunding in the next few years.

We have heard from almost every partner and corner of the state, including this committee, that the mental health of our students and educators must be a priority for the state in the wake of the pandemic, and, frankly, challenges that exist regardless of the pandemic. I applaud your investments in several proactive, systemic mental health solutions including funding to increase student support personnel in our schools, to develop a mental health workforce pipeline, to support mental health innovation grants for intermediate districts, and for dedicated staff at the department. We know that students who receive appropriate mental health supports have improved academic achievement, are more likely to graduate, and are more likely to attend and successfully complete college or enter into the workforce. An area for opportunity to expand here is including school-linked behavioral health grants and school based mental health screening so that we comprehensively address students' needs.

As I have said before, to have a sustainable, engaged, representative and passionate educator workforce, the state must continue our investment in educator success. Thank you for continuing the momentum created by last session's investment in our teachers of color and American Indian teachers

by more than meeting the demand for Grow Your Own programs that outstripped last year's appropriation. While this bill truly recognizes the needs of the educator workforce as a whole with investments in education support professionals and aspiring teacher retention grants, I believe the House would also benefit from matching the Governor's investment in career educator pathways to provide more avenues for high school students to get exposure to the teaching profession.

Again, I truly appreciate the hard, thoughtful, and reflective work put into this representative budget. I look forward to working with the Chairs as we move forward on these proposals with this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change the trajectory of Minnesota's students' lives for the better.

Sincerely,



Heather Mueller, Ed.D.
Commissioner