



Minnesota Legislature passes sweeping education bill: 6 ways it will impact state's schools



More than \$2 billion in new spending. Updated graduation requirements. Mandates on how schools teach children to read.

The Legislature has sent a sweeping education bill to Gov. Tim Walz that partially delivers on a raft of promises DFLers made on the campaign trail as they sought to take control of state government.

Ahead of the House vote Tuesday, the chair of the Education Finance Committee, Cheryl Youakim, DFL-Hopkins, said that the legislation will "ensure that the learning environments in our schools serve all of our students and that our teachers, principals and administrators have the tools to meet our students where they're at."

Republicans lauded provisions requiring high schoolers to pass a civics class to graduate and revamping the way children learn to read. But they also took issue with the legislation, arguing that despite a record funding boost, the cash has too many strings attached.

"This bill puts mandates over money. It puts mandates over students and it takes away local control," Rep. Jeff Backer, R-Browns Valley, said during the House debate. The House passed the bill on a party-line vote, while one Republican joined Senate Democrats in passing the bill around 5 a.m. Wednesday.

Here are some top provisions in the education bill that will become law when Walz signs it as expected, plus one that already made headlines this year.

More money

Superintendents and school boards have long lamented the growing gap between what it costs to provide state and federally mandated special education and English language services and the funding provided.



Lawmakers this year pledged to cover half the shortfall in special education and about \$80 million for English language learner programs over the next two years. All told, Minnesota schools will see \$2.2 billion more over the next two years after legislators struck a deal that increases funding by 4% in fiscal year 2024 and a 2% boost the following year with subsequent increases tied to the rate of inflation.

Legislators also set aside \$120 million over two years for a new mandate requiring districts to pay unemployment insurance to hourly employees who don't work during the summer.

"It's the biggest historic investment in education above base that we've ever done," Youakim said.

Total K-12 education spending — \$23.2 billion in the next two years — is nearly a third of the state budget.

Reading reform

Nearly half of Minnesota's public school students can't read at the appropriate grade level, according to the latest state testing data. The Read Act, included in the education bill, requires districts to adopt a local literacy plan from among three programs approved by the state Department of Education. Until now, districts were on their own in developing their approach to reading.

The bill provides \$35 million for districts to train their teachers in those programs, as well as another \$35 million to reimburse schools for materials bought since 2021 that don't meet the state's criteria.

The revamp will put a greater emphasis on phonics, vocabulary and phonemic awareness — or how words are made up of a series of sounds — as some curriculum vendors and reading programs that came into fashion in the mid-1990s have come under intense scrutiny.

This centralized approach marks a shift for Minnesota, which comes on the heels of at least 31 other states mandating schools to adopt "evidence-based" instruction on the topic. Ohio and Oregon lawmakers are considering versions of the legislation Minnesota passed.

Free menstrual products

Schools will be required to stock bathrooms with pads, tampons and other menstrual products to curb what Rep. Sandra Feist, DFL-New Brighton, calls "period poverty." She asked lawmakers to earmark \$2 per pupil, about \$2 million per year, for the measure.

Feist began working on the legislation two years ago when a freshman at Hopkins High School told her about classmates who routinely stayed home when they're running low on pads and tampons. That student, [Elif Ozturk](#), is now a junior and testified in support of the provision.

"We cannot learn when we are leaking," Ozturk said.

Active shooter drills

The Legislature effectively banned Minnesota schools from simulating active shooter situations on their campuses during class, barring officials from conducting those exercises if more than half of the enrolled students are in the building.

Sen. Erin Maye Quade, DFL-Apple Valley, credited that provision in the education bill in part to the demonstrations teen activists mounted last year in the aftermath of the shooting at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas, that killed 19 children and two teachers.



Districts are still required to conduct school lockout drills, but must give families at least 24 hours' notice when possible and have teachers host a cooling down conversation afterward. The legislation also requires schools to provide students with one hour of violence prevention training per year. The Minnesota Department of Education must also establish a statewide model for those drills by July 1, 2024.

New course requirements

Minnesota's high school class of 2028 will need to pass courses in government and citizenship and personal finance before they're eligible for a diploma. Rep. Hodan Hassan, the Minneapolis Democrat who sponsored the legislation, said only 7% of the state's high school students choose to take a personal finance class. Rep. Dean Urdahl, R-Grove City, lamented to a House education panel that more Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 can name a judge on "American Idol" than name either of the state's U.S. senators.

"We've been in a civic slide to failure for 50 years," he said.

The education bill also requires school districts to develop an ethnic studies curriculum and allow students to take a course on the topic to satisfy their social studies requirement.

Free school meals

Democrats pushed through as a standalone education bill a measure Rep. Sydney Jordan, DFL-Minneapolis, has been working on for the last four years. Starting this fall, every student enrolled in a Minnesota school that participates in the national School Breakfast Program will receive free breakfast and lunch.

Parents previously had to prove eligibility by filling out an income form. And this school year, the state began automatically enrolling students whose families qualified for Medicaid.

"This just makes sense," Walz said during a signing ceremony at Webster Elementary in northeast Minneapolis.

"This is the assurance that no one falls through the cracks because a busy parent didn't fill out a form."

The estimated cost of the free school meals program is about \$200 million a year.

<https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-legislature-passes-sweeping-education-bill-read-act-free-school-meals-funding-boost/600275618/?refresh=true>