

# Why a \$2.2 billion state funding hike isn't enough for some school leaders

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Minnesota school leaders cheered last month when top DFL lawmakers announced plans to increase biennial spending on education by \$2.2 billion in their next budget.

But the mood among superintendents and school board members has soured in the weeks since as they've calculated the potential costs of a range of progressive policy changes intended to benefit school employees.

"A lot of folks had high hopes that with the united government in place, we'd get some things done at the Legislature this year," Stillwater Area Superintendent Michael Funk told his board late last month as the Legislature's omnibus education bills were being published. "Unfortunately, I think this is potentially one of the most damaging sessions I've seen since I've been a superintendent."

The Minnesota School Boards Association last week urged members to speak out against a House provision that would force districts to negotiate class sizes and staffing ratios with teachers unions. The group warned it would "bankrupt school districts by requiring hiring of additional staff and the need to create additional classroom space for smaller classes."

The House and Senate also want to remove statutory language that makes nonlicensed school workers ineligible for unemployment benefits during the summer. Democratic-Farmer-Labor leaders initially said the state would pay for it, but the education bills contain no money for the mandate.

Separate from the education bills, school leaders are watching a paid family and medical leave proposal that would impose new costs on all employers.

Scott Croonquist, executive director of the Association of Metropolitan School Districts, said his members don't mind that policy, but they'd rather the state pay for it.

"If you start to add on these new mandates, then pretty soon we're going to have school districts that are continuing to face budget challenges, even in this time when we have a record budget surplus at the state level," he said.

In a letter to lawmakers, Rochester School Board members last week said those three proposals — along with others that are not expected to become law, such as higher employer health insurance contributions and a \$25 minimum wage for school workers — would cost the district roughly twice as much money as the House and Senate have offered in new revenue.

"The funding, while significant and historic, is not sufficient to pay for the costs," said Sen. Carla Nelson, R-Rochester.