

CATHY WURZER: And Governor Tim Walz unveils a piece of his new two-year budget today where he'll focus on kids, families, and education. Walz, a former teacher who was endorsed by the state's largest teacher's union for re-election, said during his inaugural address that he'll propose the largest investment in public education in Minnesota history. He also suggested more money for free school lunches, mental health services, special education, and teacher recruitment and training.

The governor's ideas dovetail with those of the DFL-controlled legislature. Today, lawmakers unveiled proposals to fully fund English language learner, and special education programs, and to provide free meals and menstrual products to students. DFL State Senator Steve Cwodzinski of Eden Prairie is here with us to talk about several bills that are up for consideration. He represents the West Metro area and chairs the Education Policy Committee. Mr. Chair, welcome.

STEVE CWODZINSKI: Thank you, Cathy, for having me. Appreciate it.

CATHY WURZER: Glad to have you here. So over the course of many years covering the legislature, I cannot count the sessions where supporters say Minnesota needs to fully fund education. School districts are always asking for more money. What does it mean to fully fund education? What does it look like?

STEVE CWODZINSKI: Oh, that looks very complicated. But to answer the question, I think what most of us would agree to that are in the weeds here at the legislature and the governor's mansion-- in 2003, we peaked at funding for education. And because of inflation being so high since 2003, we've never reached those funding levels that we had in 2003.

And most of the ideas that are currently floating around the legislature in some way, shape, or form want to return indexed for inflation what that number was in 2003, and then from there on out, index it for inflation. Our English language learners and our special ed students, we haven't kept up with funding that was guaranteed to us from the federal government. So that's one part of the supplemental bill.

And then there's a host of other things like transportation. So if you talk to the schools in greater Minnesota, their transportation needs just haven't been kept because of gas prices, and increasing number of miles they're putting on, and anyways. But to fully fund education-- in a perfect world, every student is self actualized based on their pre-K-12 experience.

CATHY WURZER: Now what are we talking in terms of cost? We're talking about a pretty hefty price tag.

STEVE CWODZINSKI: Yeah. The supplemental budget that my co-chair on education finance introduced, I think, is around \$500 million. That's one-time money. We had last week in the Education Finance Committee, we had 33 students testify. And in my six years in the Minnesota Senate-- and, Cathy, as I think you know, I taught for 33 years, I had 12,000 kids-- in my first six years in the Senate, I don't think we had 33 students testifying in those fully six years. And so to have 33 come in and tell us how they're doing in a post-COVID educational setting was a real eye-opener for all of us.

CATHY When you mentioned, of course, that the English language learner programs, special ed programs really haven't
WURZER: been funded by the federal government, what's your argument to folks who say, why should the state pick it up at this point?

STEVE Yeah. And I think when Governor Walz, as a fellow educator, a fellow social studies teacher, I think what his
CWODZINSKI: dream, and hope, and that he talked about at the inaugural address, and I'm fully on board, is I'd like to see a state where, and back to your question about when will we be fully funded, I think we'll be fully funded when young families starting out in other parts of the country look at Minnesota as a place to raise their families because we believe in educating the entire child-- and not just their academic needs, but their physical, and social, and emotional needs as well. And maybe that's when we'll know we're fully funded is when people with, like I said, young families start moving to Minnesota, because we're a state that gets it right.

CATHY So, again, your argument for folks-- why should the state pick up the cost of some of the stuff that the feds want
WURZER: us to do?

STEVE It's a fair question. I mean it. The federal government, just to get in the weeds a little bit, promised us 40% of
CWODZINSKI: special ed funding. And currently, we're getting 17% from the federal government.

So our special ed teachers, they just need assistance. And we'd love it if the federal government stepped in and followed through on that commitment. But they haven't. And I don't in the near future if they're even looking at it.

So somebody has to say, enough is enough, to the federal government. And we're going to help out as best we can. The special ed teachers right now, and I know everybody in the state knows we've got a recruitment and retention problem, but we also have a morale problem. And the special ed teachers in this state fully know we need to come out and give them the hand that they need.

CATHY I was trying to remember last year's debate over some of this, and I recall there was talk about free school
WURZER: lunches and pretty much what has been on the table right now. And if I'm recalling correctly, there were some critics of last year's bill who said it imposed too many mandates on school districts. And that's just going to cost too much. What about the mandate part of that concern?

STEVE As a teacher, as I said, for 33 years, most classroom teachers don't like that word, mandate. But nonetheless,
CWODZINSKI: there's a difference between an unfunded mandate and a funded mandate. And what we're going to try to do this year at the legislature is make sure if we mandate something upon the schools, we'll back that up with proper funding.

CATHY Now, I remember a proposal carried over from last year would pay for menstrual products for students. And this
WURZER: has come from a push by students. Have you ever seen a student-led proposal gain traction in this way before?

STEVE OK, music to my ears, Cathy. So thank you for that question. How a bill becomes a law 101. About four years
CWODZINSKI: ago, a bunch of young students, college age and high school age, approached me to introduce this bill. And it was a real eye-opener.

And I'm a father of a daughter. I'm married to a woman. I'm a son of a woman. And I had no idea the stories that I've been hearing ever since then.

And just a quick anecdote-- I was at the high school I taught at for 33 years, and a secretary called out to me, I was walking down the hall, and just asked me how are things going, and what am I working on, and I told her I'm working on this menstrual equity bill. And she said, oh my god, yesterday a kid came into her office and asked if she could borrow her sweater so she could tie it around her waist and cover her-- well, OK.

CATHY It's OK.

WURZER:

STEVE Thank you. Anyways, I'm just hearing anecdote, after anecdote, after anecdote from young women and older
CWODZINSKI: women that have these experiences. And so it's going to be about \$1.8 million to \$2 million. But our students, and we provide toilet paper, and hand towels, and soap. I just can't imagine that in 2023 we don't provide menstrual products.

So I think that's something that I'm pretty passionate about. And it's being pushed by a bunch of young women that feel it's a call to action. And I hope they take this learning experience that everybody can make a difference. And certainly, those women, and they know who they are out there, certainly are making a difference. I hope to get that passed this session.

CATHY So before you go, then, when all is said and done and the smoke clears, how much do you think the state is going
WURZER: to spend on education this year with everything in the pot?

STEVE Wow. God. It's hard to say. I know the governor is going to throw out some numbers today we hope to hear. But I
CWODZINSKI: think my dream, and in a perfect world of funding, is that we go back to that 2003 level. And right now, we're about \$6,800 on the funding formula. And we'd be at over just over \$8,000 if we had kept up with inflation since 2003. So I think that's about \$1.5 billion would be just wonderful, and then indexed for inflation from there on out.

CATHY All right. Senator, it's been a pleasure. Thank you so much.

WURZER:

STEVE Thank you, Cathy, and enjoy the rest of your week.

CWODZINSKI:

CATHY You too. Steve Cwodzinski is a DFL Senator representing Eden Prairie and Minnetonka. He's the Chair of the
WURZER: Education Policy Committee.