



State Representative Erin Murphy

Fund schools fairly, support education innovation, create single-payer healthcare system

A Civic Caucus Gubernatorial Candidate Interview
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Present

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Summary

State Rep. Erin Murphy (DFL-Saint Paul), candidate for Minnesota governor, stresses strong public schools and a single-payer health care system as major items on her agenda.

Schools. Murphy would like to see a school-funding system that no longer relies on property taxes. But she recognizes that might not be possible right now because of the current tight state budget. She says people across the state are acutely aware of the inequity among our public schools, depending on whether a school district has the tax base or a voter base that is willing to raise money to support its schools.

But she thinks there has to be a wider focus on education in the Legislature, beyond just funding for the school-aid formula. She says the Legislature also must focus on supporting education innovation by taking the lead from communities, educators and parents around the state who are generating new ideas and solutions. Murphy wants to be sure that our kids have the opportunity to find their passion and their path in the schools. She believes we must put vocational education back in the high schools.

Health care. Murphy proposes using MinnesotaCare as the framework to provide a single-payer health care system in the state. Anybody who wants to buy into the program would be allowed to do so, she says. She wants to remove health plans--which she says have become "care deniers"--from the center of the system and allow the state to contract directly with providers: hospitals, doctors and nurses. She says the state's purchasing power can drive down health care costs and make the market more competitive.

Other issues. Murphy supports using the gas tax or other user fees to provide dedicated funding for transportation. She believes inadequate leadership and planning have led to many instances where the Legislature has violated the state Constitutional requirement that bills be restricted to a single subject. She says as governor, she won't sign bills unless they've been on the desks of legislators for at least 24 hours prior to a vote to prevent people from pushing things through in large bills at the end of the legislative session.

She believes we must tackle the issues of racial disparities and structural racism because it's a moral imperative and because equity is critical to building the economy of our future. She says homelessness and housing are workplace issues that are at a crisis level.

Biography

Minnesota State Representative Erin Murphy (DFL-Saint Paul) is a candidate for governor of Minnesota. She was first elected to the Legislature in 2006 and has served in the House ever since. She is a member of the following House committees: Health and Human Services Finance (DFL lead); Health and Human Services Reform; Rules and Legislative Administration; and Ways and Means. She served as Minnesota House Majority Leader from 2013 to 2015. She announced her candidacy for governor in November 2016.

Murphy is a former executive director of the Minnesota Nurses Association and also worked for the organization as a lobbyist and organizer. She previously worked in state government as legislative director for former Minnesota Attorney General Hubert H. Humphrey, III, and as community relations director for the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning. She started her career as a nurse in Marshfield, Wisconsin, and later worked as a surgical nurse on a transplant team at the University of Minnesota Medical Center.

Murphy grew up in Janesville, Wisconsin, and received her B.S. in nursing in 1984 from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. She earned her M.A. in organizational leadership in health care at the College of St. Catherine in 2005. She also attended the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota from 2005 to 2006 as a policy fellow.

Background

Continuing its focus on Minnesota's competitiveness, since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On November 27, 2016, the Caucus issued a report based on that review, [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#). In October 2017, the Civic Caucus began a series of interviews with major, announced candidates for the office of governor of Minnesota. The interviews are centered on what can be done to keep Minnesota and its people competitive in a number of realms. This interview with State Representative Erin Murphy is the fifth in that series.

Discussion

1. Opening Remarks.

The issue of the competitiveness of Minnesota and our people is at the heart of the matter of the election. Gubernatorial candidate Erin Murphy, a DFL legislator from Saint Paul, made that remark and said each facet of our competitiveness is an opportunity to set our course as Minnesotans. She believes there is a sense in Minnesota that we take on tough issues and get things done.

Murphy said her main agenda items are strong public schools and a single-payer health care system.

2. K-12 education.

Are there alternative ways of funding K-12 public education? An interviewer asked that question and commented, "Now we have 'haves' and 'have-nots.'" Murphy said there were commitments made on public school funding in the early 2000s that we haven't ever fulfilled. In her travels to schools across the state, she said, people are acutely aware of the inequity of our public schools, depending on where you live.

Murphy would like to see a school-funding system that no longer relied on property taxes. "But I have to consider that ideal, within the context of the current state budget, which is going to be tight," she said.

She noted the new high school in Alexandria, which the community was able to build after passing a referendum, and said the school is doing "model work." She compared that school to Cook County's one, big high school that is in need of support and help. "That is the case for many schools, both in the metro area and in Greater Minnesota, that don't have the tax base or a voter base that is willing to raise money to support their schools," she said.

Promising that public education will be a priority for her, Murphy said, "We have to catch up with our funding of schools."

It's hard for the Legislature to encourage education innovation. Murphy said the focus at the Legislature is "funding, funding, funding." She said the first priority at the Legislature is always funding for the school aid formula, since districts want that.

"We are sometimes losing the ability to also address ideas that come forward from educators and parents," she said. Those ideas include home visiting and full-service community schools, where kids and families come together, especially in districts where a lot of kids have needs not being met by their families. "At the Capitol, the conversation is largely about money."

But some communities are finding ways to innovate. "Although the Capitol conversation has become a lot about money, I see communities, educators, parents and leaders in communities operating in a different way," Murphy said. "I think we have to take our lead from them. I have seen communities take the question of what we can do to make our kids ready and find a solution and build it. They then come to us and say, 'Help us now fund it.'"

She said solutions are being expressed in different parts of the state already. "We're behind in the State Capitol," she said. "I want to make sure as the state's governor that I am reflecting, driving and supporting the changes I'm seeing in the school districts across the state of Minnesota." Murphy said we want to be sure that our kids have the opportunity to find their passion and their path in the schools.

We should invest more in early learning and preschool across the state. Murphy said the data are clear about the benefits of investing in early education.

3. Health Care.

Murphy helped secure the passage of MinnesotaCare when she was at the Minnesota Nurses Association. Enacted in 1992, MinnesotaCare is a health care program for Minnesotans with low incomes. Enrollees get health care services through a health plan. They can choose their health plan from those serving MinnesotaCare enrollees in their county. The program is funded by a state tax on Minnesota hospitals and health care providers, Basic Health Program funding through the Affordable Care Act, and enrollee premiums and cost sharing.

Murphy said she believes anyone working full-time should be able to have health insurance. She pointed out that the provider tax, which provides the state funding for the program, is set to sunset in 2019. "We led the nation with MinnesotaCare," she said.

Minnesota should use MinnesotaCare as a framework to provide a single-payer health care system. Murphy said doing that would improve the state's competitiveness. "MinnesotaCare is a tested and trusted 25-year-old program," she said. "We should allow anybody who wants to buy into the program to do so."

She said she wants to build the infrastructure to allow us to contract directly with our providers--our hospital systems, our nurses and our doctors. "Health plans aren't serving in the role they once saw for themselves, being care managers," Murphy said. "Instead they've often become care deniers or care arbiters." And, she said, our population is aging, with increasing chronic health care needs. "The lack of security around health care is top on the minds of people," she said. "Minnesotans are really, really worried about health care right now."

We should use the power of the state's purchasing to drive down health care costs and make the market more competitive. "Contracting is the critical change piece," Murphy said. "We need to put the providers back in charge again. And we absolutely have an opportunity to improve value and outcomes for people when we are driving a better deal with providers. Direct contracting is about taking the distorting center point--the health plans--out of that and setting more expectations on the providers."

"We spend a lot of our health care dollars caring for people with chronic conditions, people who are aging and people with disabilities," she continued. "Let us figure out how we do that job and do it well, because I think we'll get a better deal for people. And that's what I want: a healthy population."

Murphy said there is much that we can do to improve people's health outside of the health care delivery system by working on the social determinants of health, such as housing.

4. Transportation.

Transportation is central to the competitiveness of Minnesota, especially with millennials. Murphy made that remark in response to an interviewer's question about financing transportation, including transit. "We're congested," she said. "We've fallen behind in transportation. When my kids decide where they want to live, they don't want to have to be solely reliant on a car."

We should not pay for transportation out of the state's general fund. Instead, Murphy said, we should be using the gas tax or basing user fees on vehicle weights to make sure we capture user fees from electric vehicles. "I'm going to fight for dedicated funding for transportation, because it matters to our future," she said.

We need transit in the metro area and in Greater Minnesota. Murphy made that remark and said we have a long way to go to make transit usable in the Twin Cities and in Minnesota generally. She said transit is also a Greater Minnesota issue, especially due to the aging population in many sparsely populated areas of the state.

We have work to do in creating a transit system that provides transportation for low-income people to get to their jobs. Murphy said that is especially true if someone is traversing the metro area. She recalled a legislative hearing where people in the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP)--mostly women--talked about how long it took on transit for them to get from point A to point B, with their children in tow, to try to meet the work requirements of the program. "It was clear to me that we had set in policy a set of circumstances that were almost impossible for them to meet," Murphy said.

She said we have made it hard for people to get up the economic ladder without falling back and transportation is a part of that. "If we want people to get from point A to point B in a reliable way, we have more work to do," she said.

5. Higher education.

Are we doing enough with technical education? An interviewer asked that question and Murphy said the community colleges, which she called "a real deal for people," offer courses in skilled trades that are full of kids. But the colleges need better connections with employers, she said. And she believes we must put vocational education courses back in the high schools.

6. Minnesota's public-policy process.

Many legislative bills have way too many provisions. Murphy said there are many instances where the Legislature has violated the state Constitutional requirement that bills be restricted to a single subject. "There are bills with way too many provisions, especially in the last three years, because of inadequate leadership and planning," she said.

As governor, Murphy won't sign bills unless they've been on the desks of legislators for at least 24 hours prior to a vote. Minnesotans need a chance to review legislation, she said. "In the last three years, there have been glaring examples of pushing through things at the end of the legislative session," she said. "We have to push back and use the power of this office."

Murphy noted that former Governor Tim Pawlenty was very clear about what he would or wouldn't sign into law. "He worked from the beginning of the session, setting the tone," she said. "He was giving us a signal that we chose to follow or not to follow. I'm going to be that, as well. I'm going to bring the power of Minnesotans--their voices--into the Capitol again. When I'm elected governor, I will continue to spend my time with Minnesotans to get their support to move the agenda I think is important for the people of Minnesota."

Minnesotans are hungry for a kind of politics that puts them at the center of the debate. Murphy made that statement and said, "It's not about beating the other side, taking the other side down or positioning ourselves to win the next year's election. Instead, it's about how we build our future together."

"Inside the Capitol, it's divided and ornery and hot," she continued. "Outside of the Capitol, Minnesotans are working hard every day to support their families and build their communities. They are hopeful and optimistic about that and I am meeting them there with ideas and solutions. Our kind of government is built on the fact that we don't all agree. Instead of using power in the short term to shove something through, spending the time investing in building support for the ideas that will build our future is worth it."

7. Minnesota's workforce.

What should the governor do about a problem the state seems to be ignoring: a shortage of workers for the jobs that are out there? An interviewer asked that question and Murphy said it's an urgent problem and we're already facing workforce shortages. When the interviewer asked what Murphy would do to get a process going to work on the problem, she said, "It's in part an attitude, followed by a process. We need to make sure Minnesota is a place where people want to come and live--young people, people from different parts of the country, people from different parts of the world."

We must tackle the issues of racial disparities and structural racism. Murphy made that remark and said we must rectify the gaps in health care and outcomes, education and outcomes, incarceration rates and earning for people of color. She said that it's a moral imperative and that equity is critical to building the economy of our future. "Further, it's an issue close to the hearts of Minnesota's next generation of leaders," she said.

In a recent meeting with high school Democrats in Alexandria, Murphy said the students would want, if they were governor, to tackle the issues of climate change, education, race, disparities and equality. "Young people want a kind of politics that will build a future for them," she said.

Homelessness and housing is a workforce issue, especially in Greater Minnesota. Murphy made that comment and said, "It's impacting our competitiveness. Housing has reached a crisis level for people and for this campaign." She said the public sector, the nonprofit sector and the financing sector must build out affordable and workplace housing.

8. The corrections system.

There is much more we should be doing inside the walls of our correctional facilities to make sure prisoners are returned to society with their full rights and with their full capacity. Murphy made that remark and said we need to make sure people in prisons are being treated if they have chemical dependency or health care issues. We should also offer vocational training in prisons and restore prisoners' voting rights.

9. The urban/rural divide in Minnesota.

Minnesotans, wherever they are, want to make sure they have a governor who will fight for them. Murphy gave that response to an interviewer's question about how to improve the urban/rural divide in the state. "The issues across the state of Minnesota are different depending on where you are," she said. "I think

the urban/rural divide is really a discussion about class and opportunity. People are working hard and see Minnesota doing well. But they're not sure they're going to get ahead in this economy.

"I'm going to continue to show up and make sure Minnesotans understand that their fight is my fight. If part of Minnesota is falling behind, we're all falling behind. We're going to build a future that includes all of us."