



# Lori Swanson, Minnesota Attorney General

Intervene early with at-risk children, fix school-district disparities, extend medical-provider tax

A Minnesota Gubernatorial Candidate Interview

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## Present

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## Summary

Gubernatorial candidate and Minnesota Attorney General Lori Swanson says she is concerned over the current climate of gridlock and partisanship and wants to bring Minnesotans together to get things done across a host of issues. She believes we must target interventions for at-risk children before the age of four, increase the number of school counselors per student, stop the slippage to greater disparities in resources among school districts and extend the medical-provider tax beyond 2019.

The interview took place on July 25, 2018.

Gubernatorial candidate and Minnesota Attorney General Lori Swanson says she was motivated to join the governor's race because of her concern over the current climate of gridlock and partisanship. She says she wants to bring Minnesotans together to get things done across a host of issues. She calls herself a problem solver and says her experience and skill in negotiation and compromise are important qualities for a governor to have.

In the field of education, Swanson says it is critical to target interventions for at-risk children at a very young age, certainly before age four. She says she would propose a "moon shot" to address the mental health and opioid crises, which are impacting children. Swanson says she believes four-year college is not the path for all students. Because of the shortage of workers to fill many good jobs, she

says the key is to match postsecondary programs and the needs of employers with students. She says she would establish a coordinating body in the governor's office to take on this matching function.

Swanson says she would target education funds specifically to increase the number of counselors per student in schools. She potentially would support year-round school for at-risk students and for students who are immigrants or English-language learners. She says we've been slipping back to greater disparities in resources among school districts ever since the 1971 Minnesota Miracle legislation reduced those disparities and we need to address that issue.

In the area of transportation, Swanson notes that the gas tax does not generate the same level of funding for transportation needs as it once did and says she would attempt to get more federal funds for transportation funding.

In health care, Swanson says the medical-provider tax that supports MinnesotaCare must be extended past 2019. She says that, if elected, she would put in place a program modeled after those in Oregon and Washington, which use each state's purchasing power to get significant discounts on prescription drugs.

## Biography

Minnesota gubernatorial candidate Lori Swanson is Minnesota's 29th Attorney General and the first female to serve in that role. She was elected Attorney General in 2006 and re-elected in 2010 and 2014.

Swanson has been an advocate for Minnesota citizens in areas like consumer protection, predatory lending, health care, utility rate hikes, telecommunications, public safety and protecting senior citizens from financial fraud.

From 2003 to 2006, Swanson served as Solicitor General for the State of Minnesota. From 1999 to 2002, she served as Deputy Attorney General. Prior to that, Swanson was an attorney in private practice. In 2004, she was appointed to the Consumer Advisory Council of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors in Washington, D.C., was elevated to vice chair of the council in 2005 and was appointed as chair in 2006.

Swanson graduated magna cum laude from William Mitchell College of Law and with distinction from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, whose School of Journalism gave her its Distinguished Service Award in 2014.

## 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 have centered on what can be done to keep Minnesota and its people competitive in a number of realms. This interview with Minnesota Attorney General Lori Swanson is the 10th in that series.

## Discussion

### Opening Remarks

**Concern over the current climate of gridlock and partisanship motivated Minnesota Attorney General Lori Swanson to enter the race for governor.** Swanson said she wants to bring Minnesotans together and get things done across a host of issues. She sees a lack of listening, lack of care for the plight of others and a lack of civility and trust. Swanson said she wants to restore these. She said she is a problem solver and sees her experience and skill in negotiation and compromise as important qualities for a governor to have.

Swanson pledged that in her first year as governor, she would meet and break bread with all 201 legislators, both Republicans and Democrats, and get to know and understand them. She believes people run for office because they care about issues in their community, but that gridlock often sets in after elections. She wants to break through the partisan gridlock to get things done for people.

Quoting from a 1949 National Geographic magazine featuring a 30-page spread on Minnesota, Swanson said Minnesota's best asset "is between the ears of its children."

### Education

**Noting the significant number of at-risk children, an interviewer asked how Swanson would make the education system responsive, readying these children to enter the workforce and civic life.** Swanson cited the work of Art Rolnick, senior fellow at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, in the area of early child education. He makes the point that 80 percent of brain development occurs before the age of three. Swanson said it is critical to target interventions while children are very young, certainly before age four. She said early intervention in the lives of at-risk children can put them on a more sure footing for their K-12 education.

Swanson also noted that the impacts of the mental health and drug crises are seen in the schools and that kids have a hard time learning when they don't have familial support. Much like Vice President Joe Biden did a "moon shot" on cancer, she said, her administration wants to do a "moon shot" to address mental health and the opioid crises.

**What about providing support and incentives for alternatives to the college path, such as vocational-technical education?** An interviewer asked that question and Swanson responded that she has two papers on this on her website. She believes four-year college is not the path for all. In addition, she said there is a shortage of workers to fill many good jobs. The key is to match programs and the needs of employers with students, so as to train students for the jobs of tomorrow.

Because there is no central coordinating body to take on this task, Swanson would establish one in the governor's office to report to her and perform this coordinating function. She said there is a shortage of skilled workers in fields like health care, construction trades and information technology. Technical education can provide a path for students to graduate with a ready job, while simultaneously helping to address the worker shortage and promote economic development.

**An interviewer asked whether Swanson would restructure Minnesota State (formerly MnSCU, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities).** Swanson responded by noting the benefit of obtaining college credits in high school through the Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program and the important role community colleges can play in giving students a good start for a reasonable cost. She said it is important to support community colleges and said the governor's job is to create conditions where Minnesotans can thrive.

**If a group of teachers were given the autonomy to spend the state and local revenue given to a school for its students, what would they do differently and what might change?** An interviewer asked that question and also observed that software companies seek to market devices and programs to schools, but alternatively, they could go around the school and market directly to families privately. Indeed, if public education doesn't open to technology, the industry will go around schools, the interviewer said. He asked Swanson for her reaction. Swanson said there is always room for concern when private profit motivations come into the mix.

**Broadly, what would you do to make schools better?** An interviewer asked that question and Swanson said it goes back to the early years. So many students face true challenges at home, whether they are highly mobile or mental health issues are involved. Children need to be put on a strong footing early in life, she said.

**What actionable steps would you advance as governor to increase educator voice and to empower teachers as professionals?** An interviewer asked that question and explained that the question came from the director of strategy at the National Education Association (NEA). Swanson said it is key to support teachers and to ensure they are treated with civility and respect. Another factor, she said, is Minnesota's low school counselor-to-student ratio, one counselor for every 723 students, placing Minnesota fourth from the bottom among states. She noted this is especially a problem with the current number of mental health issues. Swanson would target funds specifically for more counselors.

**Would you support year-round school for at-risk students?** An interviewer asked this question and Swanson responded that potentially she would support year-round school for at-risk students and also for new immigrants and English-language learners.

**Do the disparities in funding between public schools that are well resourced and those that are under-resourced affect the achievement gap?** An interviewer asked that question and asked how Swanson would address this. Swanson responded that the 1971 Minnesota Miracle got it right and we have been slipping back ever since. The Minnesota Miracle was comprehensive legislation that increased the role of the state in funding K-12 education and reduced funding disparities by reducing

school districts' reliance on local property taxes. There is a need to return to a sense of shared responsibility, she said. When asked about charter schools, Swanson noted that they work for some, but need to be held accountable, particularly where for-profit companies are involved.

**What can be done about unfunded mandates in education—special programs with detailed rules that must be followed, but which are not funded and thus shift the burden to local school districts?** An interviewer asked that question and Swanson responded that there is a need for honest budgeting. She said Governor Mark Dayton has restarted this. She has been in the attorney general's office for 12 years now and said she has had a significant opportunity to see government do things right and also to see it not do things right.

Swanson said Minnesota is a state that gets a low percentage returned from federal tax dollars sent to Washington, D.C. She wants to explore how to improve this—for example, by seeking more federal research dollars for the medical-device industry and for clean energy. She said she is skilled as a negotiator and an advocate and would use the governor's bully pulpit. She has done this, for example, by joining one other state attorney general in suing over President Donald Trump's travel ban. She felt this was important and said she also was standing up for Minnesota values.

## **Pensions**

**Passage of a bill in the 2018 legislative session helped stabilize pensions for Minnesota's public employees.** An interviewer made that observation, but noted that at the same time, the bill left significant structural issues in place, essentially "kicking the can down the road." The interviewer asked Swanson how she would address this to provide a more permanent fix. Swanson said she is running to be a problem solver. She gave as an example her work on the contract dispute between Children's Minnesota Hospital and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota. She said she called the decision-makers together and worked until a resolution was reached and said she would bring the same approach to the governor's office.

## **Transportation**

**Minnesota's transportation challenges include deteriorating infrastructure and increasing congestion.** An interviewer made that statement and asked Swanson whether she thinks transportation funding should come from the state's general fund or from user fees. Swanson noted that the gas tax does not generate the same level of funding that it once did. She said the gas-tax rate has not increased, plus the larger numbers of fuel-efficient, hybrid and electric vehicles have reduced gas usage per mile driven. Swanson said she would explore all possibilities to get federal dollars to help with transportation funding. She also emphasized the importance of getting stakeholders together to reach a long-term sustainable plan for both roads and transit, in both Greater Minnesota and the metropolitan area.

**Heavy vehicles, such as trucks, place significant wear-and-tear on roads and bridges.** An interviewer made that statement and asked whether Swanson would consider something like a weight-distance tax. On the transit side, the interviewer asked whether she would consider having transit users pay the full cost of transit, with vouchers given to subsidize transit for those of lower income. Swanson acknowledged the importance of providing for an adequate transportation system and bringing people together to find long-term solutions.

## **Health Care**

**Minnesota's medical-provider tax supporting MinnesotaCare is slated to expire at the end of 2019.** An interviewer noted that and said many Minnesotans rely on MinnesotaCare, along with MNsure and Medical Assistance. Federal dollars have been cut and costs keep growing. The interviewer asked what Swanson's plan is to get control of the costs and whether MinnesotaCare will continue to be part of the system.

Swanson said she is in favor of allowing people to buy into MinnesotaCare. She pointed out this is a 25-year-old bipartisan program started under Governor Arne Carlson. She noted that federal tax dollars help to fund MinnesotaCare today, but funding is subject to the vagaries of the federal administration. She currently has a lawsuit pending against the federal government to preserve MinnesotaCare funding. She noted that the Health Care Access Fund, which is partially funded with the medical-provider tax, helps support Minnesota health care safety-net programs. She pointed out the the 2019 sunsetting of the medical-provider tax was agreed to in 2011 as part of the negotiations to end the government shutdown. She said the sunset will need to be revisited.

To tackle the high cost of prescription drugs, Swanson said that, if elected, she would put in place a program similar to what is being done in the states of Oregon and Washington. There the state's bulk purchasing power is used to get individual residents significant discounts of 30 to 80 percent on prescription drugs. She said people can take advantage of the discounts when obtaining their own medications.

## **Sports Gambling**

**A recent United States Supreme Court case struck down a federal law banning sports gambling, which opens the door to states to legalize it.** An interviewer made that remark and asked whether Swanson would sign such a bill. Swanson said she is familiar with the case but has not yet fully analyzed it.

## **Information Sources**

**An interviewer asked Swanson how she gets the information on which she relies.** Swanson said she hires good people and makes it a point to find experts. There are over 7,000 open files in a year in the office of the Attorney General and she has significant experience in finding, recruiting and relying on experts and good people. She noted that, as governor, she would not just rely on people to submit their resumes to important government positions. Rather, she said, she would actively recruit the best and brightest to help the state.