

Steeped in Tea Party values

Back for her seventh term, Erickson aims to improve schools

By **Kris Berggren**

If the fifth-floor office of Rep. Sondra Erickson (R-Princeton) doesn't quite look like that of a new House member, it's because she's not precisely "new."



Rep. Sondra Erickson

Just a day after the Legislature convened, Erickson's well-appointed office already featured a wall full of neatly arranged photos and artwork, and a guest book to be signed, in contrast to many newcomers' bare walls and spare desktop accessories.

Erickson served 11 years before losing in 2008 to DFL Rep. Gail Kulick Jackson by 89 votes. Erickson ran again in 2010 at the urging of Republicans in her district, including Tea Party activists.

"Their principles were my principles," Erickson said. "Smaller government, lower taxes, individual responsibility."

She beat Kulick-Jackson by 11 percent. The pair has met in each of the past four elections, with Erickson winning three times.

Erickson's head start in office décor is matched by the experience she brings to her new role as chairwoman of the House Education Reform Committee. That includes decades of public school teaching experience in traditional and alternative settings, service on House education committees in previous sessions and nearly five years as a member of the Board of Teaching.

Key session priorities include reforming teacher preparation, evaluation and tenure.

"I do not, as a professional teacher, believe in perpetual tenure," Erickson said. Instead, she believes teachers would benefit from periodic reviews, support for learning to

DISTRICT 16A

Population (2009 est.): 44,271

Largest City: Princeton

Counties: Benton, Mille Lacs, Morrison, Sherburne

Top Concerns: Schools, teacher preparation, tenure reform

become more effective and for moving out of the teaching profession if they fail to do so.

"If you improve teaching, you improve learning," Erickson said.

She admires former Washington, D.C. schools chancellor Michelle Rhee, whose reforms, including a new teacher evaluation system and layoffs of teachers considered ineffective, ushered in rising student test scores and enrollment.

Erickson does not favor mandates such as No Child Left Behind that she says hamper local control of education decisions, but said that if there is a mandate, it should be fully funded.