

# MINNESOTA EDUCATOR

DECEMBER 2023 / JANUARY 2024

**Meet our 2023-24 ESP  
of the Year: Darci Brown  
from St. Francis**

**Pension advocacy work begins  
ahead of legislative session**



THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL  
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

# ***Student loan payments have resumed. Our Degrees Not Debt team can help!***

As of Oct. 1, student loan borrowers have had student loan payments resume and interest is accruing again after a three-and-a-half year pause.

Many borrowers will benefit from taking advantage of the newest income-driven repayment plan launched this summer, called the SAVE plan.

The SAVE plan is designed to provide affordable monthly payments based on 5 percent of family income and limits interest accrual for those who make their payments each month.

IDR enrollment can be completed online here:

***[www.studentaid.gov/idr](http://www.studentaid.gov/idr)***

Every borrower pursuing Public Service Loan Forgiveness must make payments on an income-driven plan until they reach 120 payments. The most recent webinar on all updates to loan forgiveness rules is on our MEA Online professional development platform.

Members can log in and find the class by searching the catalog for Degrees Not Debt webinar at:

***[meaonline.learnupon.com](http://meaonline.learnupon.com)***

***As always, our Degrees Not Debt staff team is here to help,  
so please reach out to [dnd@edmn.org](mailto:dnd@edmn.org) with any questions.***





THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL  
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

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#### To reach the publication for queries, story or commentary ideas:

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Mail: Minnesota Educator  
41 Sherburne Ave.  
St. Paul, MN 55103

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The Minnesota Educator is published for members to share news about education issues and training opportunities for educators as well as union and political news that affects public education in Minnesota.

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Editor: **Kieren Steinhoff**

Art Director: **Eric Widi**



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## Better contracts are worth the fight – We are worth more!

Educators across Minnesota are coming together to demand better contracts for the learning conditions of their students and working conditions for themselves.

I wish I could report negotiations were easier after the historic investments in public education by the 2023 Legislature. With a few exceptions—including Aitkin, Grand Meadow, Mounds View, Randolph and Walker—the offers at the table have been underwhelming and occasionally insulting.

As I write this, less than one-third of our teacher locals have settled their contracts. That's below the historical average. The average salary increases right now are 4.55% in 2023-24 and 3.3% in 2024-25. That's better than past years. However, it lags inflation. In many places, salary increases of that size won't even pay for spiraling health insurance costs.

Educators are growing extremely frustrated by low-ball offers, the pace of settlements and tone of talks. The public is noticing, with recent high-profile actions in Anoka Hennepin, Eastern Carver County, Minneapolis, Minnetonka, Prior Lake-Savage, Rochester, and by the Minnesota State College Faculty and University Education Association.

The precise reasons for the mismatch between expectations and offers are unique to each local, but there are some common themes emerging. Sometimes it's as simple as old habits are hard to break.

Bosses have come to the table for years with a narrative about scarcity and underfunding. While that's largely true, the narrative has also been an effective tactic for keeping down compensation. But this year the money is coming and, with inflation now built into the K-12 funding formula, there's more security about the future.

In other cases, it looks like superintendents are overwhelmed, or acting overwhelmed, by implementing expansions to the civic safety net, including paid family leave and unemployment insurance for education support professionals. Instead of drawing up reasonable plans, they're clutching the purse strings tighter. Sometimes this has been done under cover of dubious, doomsday financial projections with improbable assumptions about reversing enrollment trends, exploding expenses and unrealistic staffing levels.

It's not surprising educators are getting louder. The Legislature decided to tackle the school staffing crisis through appropriations to the general funds of school districts and college systems instead of following our union's

recommendation of earmarking money directly for educator compensation. As we predicted, this decision created the conditions for conflict. To get paid what we're worth, we said, educators would need to use all of our collective action tools—just as has been done by workers at airlines, automakers and movie studios.

At the state level, we're assisting locals on the ground and through statewide communications. Many Minnesotans have already seen the first two inspirational digital ads in which educators and parents make the case that "Educators are worth more!" The ads are available on our new microsite [SupportMNEducators.org](https://SupportMNEducators.org) and Education Minnesota's YouTube channel.

We are also using our platform to argue that improving educator compensation is one of the best ways to fix the staffing crisis, which our polling has shown is a top priority for Minnesotans. It can't be said enough: Fully staffing our worksites with professional educators and mental health teams will make classrooms and campuses safer, improve absenteeism, reduce burnout, attract new educators and improve student outcomes.

The winter bargaining sessions could be difficult and escalating tactics are inevitable at many worksites, but I know we can succeed—but only if we support each other, work in union, and use our collective voice to say from one end of the state to the other: We are worth more!

Together,



Twitter: @DeniseSpecht



Denise Specht

## New ads supporting educators debut

Education Minnesota has launched a new set of digital ads to support bargaining efforts across the state. This campaign is titled "Educators Are Worth More!" and is designed to create strong bonds with the community by showing how educators go above and beyond for students every day, and are worth strong contract settlements.

The campaign will feature inspirational video stories of members working with students and parents, as well as facts about the educator pay gap and more. Viewers who click on the ads will be directed to [www.SupportMNEducators.org](http://www.SupportMNEducators.org), which contains facts about the need to raise educator compensation (salaries, health care and retirement benefits) and asks parents and communities to join us in this effort.

Make sure to share these ads when you see them!

## Getting social!

Educators use social media as a way to connect with their communities, colleagues and the world. We will feature posts from Education Minnesota members and locals each issue! Make sure to follow Education Minnesota on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and Pinterest!



## Where are you reading your Minnesota Educator?

**Congratulations, Tracy Lermom of Houston, for being this issue's winning submission!**

We love seeing all of the places where you are reading your Minnesota Educator!

Email a photo to [educator@edmn.org](mailto:educator@edmn.org) or share it on social media using #mneducator of where you are reading your Minnesota Educator to be entered into a drawing to win a \$50 Target gift card! Submissions are due Jan. 3. Happy reading!



## Educators in the news!

Education Minnesota members are often interviewed in their local newspapers or TV stations. We will feature a quote each issue!

“

***These kids have to learn so that history doesn't repeat itself. They have to learn about these events so that they can recognize potential signs of a repeat.***

”

– Heather Loeschke, a civics and history teacher at Cannon Falls High School, in a WCCO-TV Nov. 9 article, "Cannon Falls teacher travels to Holocaust history sites to bear witness for her students." Loeschke traveled to Europe last summer and took her notes, pictures and experiences and put them into a presentation, which she says the students can't get enough of.

## Brown's bus full of compassion, fun, care for all who ride

When the bus doors open on a sunny St. Francis morning, Darci Brown's smile is really what can brighten a students' day.

"Being the first trusting adult they see every day and the last trusting adult they see when they go home, it does make a big impact on them," Brown said. "I talk to them a lot about what's going on in their school day. I can notice right away if they're having an off morning or something is wrong, and I try to engage with them and see if there's anything I can do to help."

Brown's commitment to not only the physical safety of getting students to and from school, but her care for the whole student is why she was named the 2023-24 Education Minnesota Education Support Professional of the Year in October.

The award recognizing a bus driver as an educator is very important to Brown.

"Bus drivers are not heard," she said. "We have a lot to say but nobody's listening sometimes. So, to win this award, it's really for all the bus drivers, not only in St. Francis but across the state of Minnesota. There's a lot of Darci's in our state, it's not just me. I hope this motivates them to get involved. We can do it too, we're finally being heard."

Brown has been a bus driver for St. Francis Public Schools for seven years. She is just the second bus driver to win this award that honors Education Minnesota ESP members who go above and beyond for students.

The parents of her students know how important she is to their education experience and even life outside of school.

"I have seen students go to her for advice, to vent, a hug or just to say hi. I have also seen students that have graduated and come running to her for a hug and a quick chat," said Nicole Sjolseth, a parent who wrote a nomination letter for Brown for the ESP of the Year award. "In third grade, my son made the wrestling state tournament in Grand Rapids. Darci and her family drove to Grand Rapids to watch him wrestle in his first state tournament. She even had the best shirt made for the tournament."



*Education Minnesota St. Francis member Darci Brown became only the second bus driver to ever win Education Minnesota's ESP of the Year award.*

Brown knows how important her role is, not just for students but for the whole community.

"With our district being rather rural, our bus routes are much longer than other districts," she said. "Some of my students are on my bus for an hour or more. This has allowed me to really get to know them and I feel like they get to know myself as well."

"My office is not stationary. My office travels everyday into multiple neighborhoods, I pass many businesses and you get to know different parts of your community and the people in it. You get to know the lady that walks her dog every day and you occasionally have a brief conversation with them. They recognize you when you see them at the local grocery store or Kwik Trip and they stop and say hello. They learn to identify bus drivers as people and as community members, not just someone they don't want to get stuck behind when they are in a hurry."

That community connection drivers intrinsically have with the community helped Brown and her fellow transportation union members when they were in a difficult contract fight with the district last spring.

"When our work group was asking for community involvement when our contract was coming to a possibility of a strike, our community showed up,"





Darci Brown is intentional in creating a welcoming space for students on her bus, including decorating for holidays, coloring contests and honoring a student each week as the "Student of the Bus."

she said. "This comes from relationships. This comes from that wave, that smile, that nice gesture."

During that negotiations process, which went to mediation and was a day short of the unit taking a strike vote before an agreement was made, Brown was at the center of the work as a negotiator and leader.

"When I was asked to be a negotiator for my group, I went in with very little knowledge of what it all entailed and what my exact role was," Brown said. "As the process went on, I realized within my work group how little hope they had. That was my first goal—to build trust in our union and in myself. To provide the hope that was lacking. I am a very outspoken person and I'm not afraid to be in uncomfortable situations, ask the hard questions. But to also help people understand that I am not the union, we are the union, and this will be a fight that we all have to stand in solidarity."

Going through that contract fight brought Brown and all of her fellow drivers much closer as colleagues and union members.

"We grew a sense of a family, hope and knew whatever happened, we were in this together until the end," she said. "Knowing that we were able to avoid a strike and accomplish what we did within our contract gave myself so much encouragement and I felt empowered that this is something I was meant to do—help people."

Her colleagues are the first to say that without Brown, their unit wouldn't have the success in getting a fair contract.

"She worked hand-in-hand with the union and the bus drivers to organize and rally to show the district we were united in support of a good and working wage contract," said David Schwab, a fellow driver in a nomination letter. "This is how she cares for her fellow drivers and wants the best for them."

While in their contract fight, the transportation unit teamed up to work with the office professionals' unit, also in negotiations and also under the Education Minnesota St. Francis union umbrella.

"Darci is a true leader, a supporter, a kind soul and fighter for what is right," said Andrea Powers, the office professional lead negotiator in a nomination letter. "She led her work group through grueling negotiations, and she never left my side throughout mine. She is there for every student on her bus, every Education Minnesota member at St. Francis Area Schools, and all her colleagues. She makes us all feel welcome, all feel safe and where everyone belongs."

"A fun fact about Darci Brown is that her American Indian Tribal name is 'Ogemaquay,' which means 'strong women, leader' that couldn't be any more fitting."

## Eight other ESPs recognized as ESP of the Year finalists, semifinalists

Besides Brown, four other education support professionals from across the state were honored as Education Minnesota 2023-24 ESP of the Year finalists. For the first time, Education Minnesota also recognized four ESPs as semifinalists.

This year's ESP of the Year program had a record number of 63 nominations and nine candidate submissions. Nominations for the next year's award recognition will open this spring.

All current Education Minnesota ESPs who have been members for three years as of Aug. 31 of the award year are eligible. Individuals can be nominated by anyone associated with Minnesota schools.

While ESP job categories often vary from district to district, some examples can include paraprofessional/education assistant, secretarial/clerical, custodial, food service, maintenance and trades, transportation, grounds keeping, security, technology services, health services and others.

The winner receives a \$1,200 honorarium and their choice of a Chromebook, iPad or other tablet, plus an expense-paid trip to the NEA Education Support Professional National Conference.

Education Minnesota has honored ESPs with this statewide award since 2007.

### The 2023-24 ESP of the Year finalists were:

- Laura Denney, a special education intensive education support professional at Elton Hills Elementary in Rochester.
- Shawn Perez, a resource room paraprofessional at Watertown-Mayer High School in Watertown-Mayer.
- Amanda Phenix, a special education support professional at Waconia Middle School in Waconia.
- Dante Pirtle, an education assistant at Henry High School in Minneapolis.



The 2023-24 ESP of the Year finalists were recognized at an award celebration Oct. 28 at Education Minnesota headquarters. The finalists are (from left) Dante Pirtle, Amanda Phenix, Shawn Perez and Laura Denney.

### 2023-24 ESP of the Year semifinalists were:

- Aria Campbell, a school success program assistant at Transition Plus in Minneapolis.
- Angela Duske, a special education paraprofessional at Watertown-Mayer Elementary School in Watertown-Mayer.
- Kelli Hanson, a paraprofessional at Baxter Elementary in Brainerd.
- Jason Norden, an education assistant at Edison High School in Minneapolis.



The 2023-24 ESP of the Year semifinalists were also recognized at an award celebration Oct. 28 at Education Minnesota headquarters. The semifinalists who were able to attend are (from left) Angela Duske and Kelli Hanson. Unable to attend were Aria Campbell and Jason Norden.



## ESPs find support in new unemployment insurance access

This year, Minnesota became the first state in the country to make school hourly workers eligible for unemployment insurance in the summer months.

The Minnesota Legislature passed the bill last spring and it became a reality for paraprofessionals, clerical, nutrition services, transportation, custodial and other non-instructional employees across the state last summer.

Education Minnesota supported many education support professionals through the process of applying for UI and heard from many who received it about the positive impact it had on their lives.

### The following are testimonials from ESP members impacted by the new access to UI:

"The ability to collect unemployment benefits this year was particularly timely for myself and my family. I normally work our summer credit recovery program, but this year there was not a need for an ESP, so I did not have my normal summer employment. My son-in-law has been dealing with an autoimmune disease for the past two years and has not been able to work. They have two little boys, so I was able to help them out watching kids and helping with household chores to make life a little easier for my daughter. Without the unemployment insurance, I would not have been able to be as available for them. Our car insurance always comes due in July, which makes things a little tight without my regular income. I normally only have two to four weeks of summer program, but it helps to cover the increased bills and insurance during the summer, even if our budget is a little tighter. This year I could help out without worrying about how we were going to pay bills without having the summer program."

— Michelle Lancaster, Education Minnesota-Buffalo Educational Support Professionals

"This summer was the first summer I had the opportunity to collect unemployment. This summer was also the first summer I felt like I got the mental break I feel I needed. Instead of working three jobs this summer, I was able to work just

one. The unemployment was such a huge help. It was amazing. This is also the first time ever I felt recharged after summer and not completely exhausted. I hope they continue this opportunity for paras for years to come because it is such a huge need. Also new this year, there wasn't a turnover of staff. Everyone returned. In 12 years, that has never happened. I know because I'm a mentor every year. Talking with other paras of all kinds this summer, there was one message: we are all so very thankful for this extra additional opportunity. This will also open other opportunities for the district as well. We should now be able to go to nine months of pay instead of 12, which in the past we have been told will save on payroll labor and lots of confusion. Unemployment is such a huge asset to the paraprofessionals. I sure hope this continues."

— Courtney Hammes,

Education Minnesota Zumbrota-Mazeppa ESP



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## Educators working to support school board, levy elections see mostly success this fall

Local unions who got involved in recommending school board candidates and helping to pass levy referendums saw a majority of success across the state this fall—a major win, especially in many districts who faced well-funded, anti-union candidates.

Local unions of Education Minnesota endorsed 53 school board candidates and 45 of them won, or 85 percent. Union-endorsed slates of candidates swept the open seats in six highly contested suburban districts: Bloomington, Fridley, Minnetonka, Mounds View, Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan and Roseville. Union-supported candidates also won special elections in Chisago Lakes, Columbia Heights and Stillwater.

“The national movement to restrict what books students can read, what they can learn about history, and whether they can be their authentic selves in

class was on the ballot this year,” said Denise Specht, the president of Education Minnesota in a press release after Election Day, Nov. 7. “Minnesotans rejected it. Instead, they voted for candidates who pledged to offer schools where all students and educators feel welcome and supported.

“There was an unprecedented amount of engagement and funding by state and national anti-union groups in these local elections. I think every educator hopes those groups will look at these results and start putting their money elsewhere so we can get back to focusing on our students and the working conditions in our schools. Clearly, the politics of dog whistles and division has no place in Minnesota’s classrooms.”

Education Minnesota also supported 38 local unions of educators in campaigns to raise revenue through local levy referendums. Of those districts, voters approved at least one question in 60 percent of the locals.

“This was a difficult year to pass levy referendums, especially in Greater Minnesota,” Specht said. “The districts that failed to pass their referendums will face tough decisions about their budgets, which could affect the quality of education their students receive.”

Fifteen percent of Education Minnesota’s Political Action Committee funding goes directly to local elections, a percentage that continues to grow as more and more locals get involved in school board races and levy and bond referendums.

The PAC makes funds available to locals for campaigns. To be eligible, at least 90 percent of a local’s members must be contributing to the PAC. Qualifying locals are eligible to receive between \$7 to \$8 per member with some matching local funds. All locals, regardless of size, are eligible for a minimum of \$850 per fiscal year.

Go to [www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/edmnvotes/local-elections](http://www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/edmnvotes/local-elections) to learn more if your local is planning any referendum or school board elections in the future.



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320-245-2648



## Minnesota educator pensions: The movement for change

Educators from Education Minnesota are in multiple pension systems: Teachers' Retirement Association (TRA), St. Paul Teachers' Retirement Fund Association (STPRFA), Public Employees Retirement Association (PERA) and MSRS (Minnesota State Retirement System).

- PERA or Public Employees Retirement Association is a set of five defined-benefit pension plans. Non-licensed employees of public school districts fall under the General Plan.
- TRA or Teachers' Retirement Association is a defined-benefit pension plan for most Minnesota public education teachers, licensed school staff and some administrators.
- STPRFA or St. Paul Teachers' Retirement Fund Association is a defined-benefit pension plan for anyone employed in a St. Paul Public Schools' position which requires a teacher's license.
- MSRS-CERP is a defined-benefit pension plan that covers certain correctional officers and other specified Department of Corrections and Human Services employees, including some teachers, who spend at least 75% of their time directly responsible for inmate or patient care.

### What are some of the biggest issues around pensions right now?

There are many different layers to pensions and retirement benefits, especially as it relates to the different pension systems and where educators are in their career.

The Rule of 90 was established for many public workers, but only for those who began teaching before July 1, 1989. Currently, non-Rule of 90 workers (Tier 2 workers) have to work until 66 or forfeit a significant amount of their pension benefit to penalties if retiring before that age.

Each plan has a Normal Retirement Age and reductions or penalties if you retire before that age. NRA is the age that when someone reaches it, they are eligible to receive a full, unreduced benefit. When someone retires before the set NRA, their pension amount has a "penalty" for that early retirement. Everyone's NRA and penalty amount is dependent on which plan you are

in. NRA is not reflective of when participants actually retire, other paths to an unreduced benefit or when an individual is supposed to or should expect to retire. If the NRA were to lower, typically the penalties would change at ages below it as well.

In 2023, the Minnesota Legislature lowered the NRA by one year for TRA and STPRFA members to 65 starting in 2025, which in turn also shifts the penalties for retiring at ages below 65.

There are many more important components to creating fair pension systems in Minnesota, including making sure employee contributions don't increase and that the State Board of Investment continues to grow the pension assets. Education Minnesota continues to advocate for all of the issues surrounding pensions with the Legislature and all pension boards.

### Who makes the decisions on pension plan reforms?

The board of trustees overseeing each pension plan system is often the beginning or end of any plan discussion. The board makes decisions on administration of the plans, hires the executive director and sets other policies that aren't in state statute. These boards, their staff and their executive directors are influential when decisions or changes are being considered at the Legislature as well. These boards are made up of a mix of elected pension plan members and appointees from certain groups or government agencies.

### What is the Legislative Commission on Pensions and Retirement (LCPR)?

In Minnesota, many decisions on pension improvements have to be made through legislative action.

The LCPR is a joint legislative commission, with both Senators and Representatives, that discusses, considers and recommends pension legislation. The LCPR is the cornerstone for pension discussions, and members are looked to by the full Legislature for recommendations.

***Education Minnesota is actively working with all of the pension boards and the LCPR to achieve fair pension reform for all our members!***



## Who is the Education Minnesota Pension Advocacy Group?

Education Minnesota's 2023-24 Pension Advocacy Group is made up of 26 members. There are two TRA Tier 2 teachers from each of Education Minnesota's election districts, as well as three Education Minnesota Governing Board members, two Education Minnesota Retired members, Education Minnesota Vice President Monica Byron and Secretary-Treasurer Rodney Rowe.

As of press time, the PAG has met for a combined 26 hours. Their meetings have focused on learning the ins and outs of the pensions and potential improvement options. They are planning local and statewide organizing actions, setting priorities and taking action on the needed legislative change. They continue to meet with members in their election districts and are meeting with TRA and legislators.

### What's the plan for the next session?

After costing options from TRA come back, the PAG will work with Education Minnesota staff to build a bill that will bring forward equitable improvements for members.

The PAG's priority is to reduce penalties and lower the Normal Retirement Age. The PAG knows that they need a proposal that will benefit all of our members, reward long-career teachers, be in coordination with TRA, advocate for the largest amount of money possible and not raise educators' contributions.

### What has happened so far this fall?

The PAG has helped coordinate meetings with the LCPR in Duluth and for members to attend the TRA Board meetings.

The PAG also had a table at the MEA conference talking about pensions and answering members' questions. Many PAG members held events in their areas, especially during workshops weeks and had tables at Intermediate Organization Fall Drive-In events.

On Oct. 30, the LCPR held a listening session in Duluth that was attended by more than 100 educators. It was a listening session on all pension plans, but more than 85% of testifiers were educators on TRA improvements. Those that spoke sent a message to legislators that we need to invest in pensions to lower penalties and have our retirement fund act as the recruitment and retention tool it was created to be. The livestream of the hearing is available on the Education Minnesota Pension Advocacy Network Facebook group.

In early November, the PAG also sent a letter to TRA, asking them to cost out different options for pension improvements. The letter included possible solutions and asked that the costing be done before the legislative session begins in February.

On Nov. 8, Education Minnesota Pension Advocacy Group members Joe Wollersheim, Todd Richter, Marty Fridgen, Dan Foss and Jeanne Brown-Kruesel spoke at the TRA meeting during the public comment period, sharing the need for pension reform with the board. After their testimony and the submission of the letter, the TRA Board decided to call a special meeting on Dec. 13 to decide costing direction, a month earlier than they had originally planned.



*Educators met with LCPR members at a listening session in Duluth, where many spoke about the importance of pension reform action at the Legislature.*



*Members of the Education Minnesota Pension Advocacy Group spoke at the last TRA board meeting in November.*



More than 100 educators attended the LCPR listening session in Duluth, along with Education Minnesota staff.

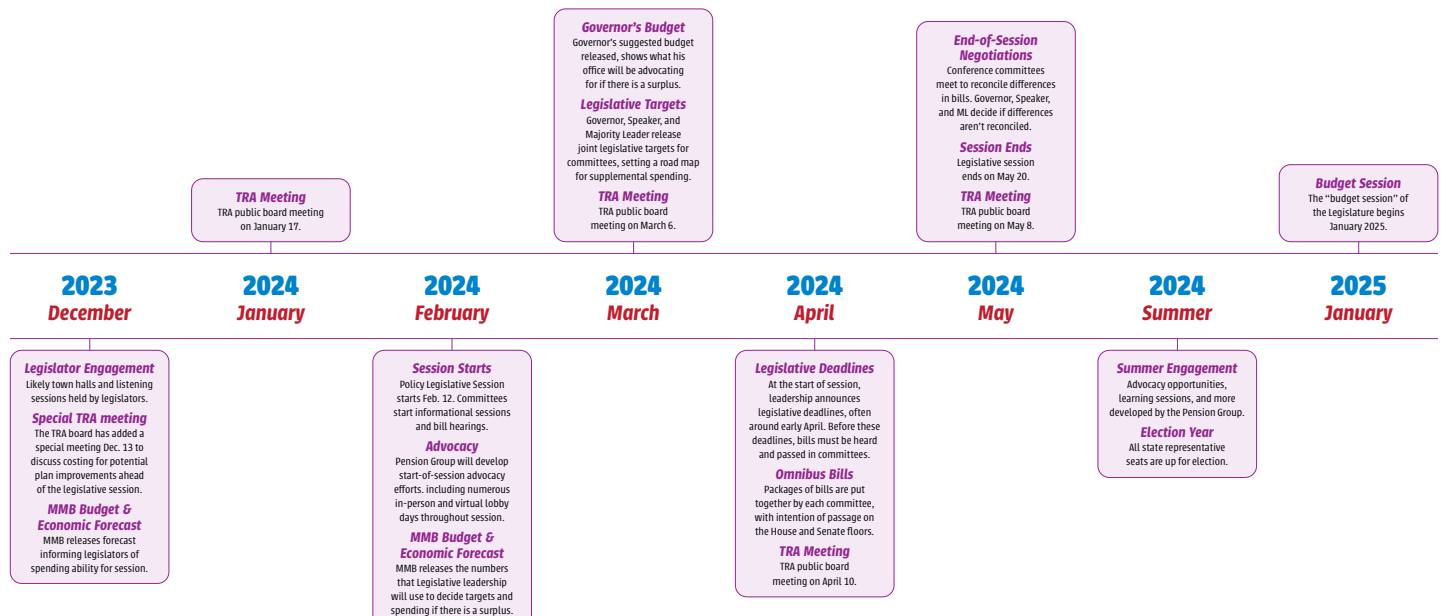


Pension Advocacy Group members joined Education Minnesota staff at the MEA conference to talk about how members can get involved.



Pension Advocacy Group members spoke to the TRA board at their November meeting asking for important pension reform costing ahead of the legislative session.

## Timeline for Pension Advocacy (TRA and Minnesota Legislature)



## Join the fight for respectable retirements for all educators

### Pension Rally: Educators Rally for Respectable Retirement

The first pension rally of the 2024 legislative session is planned for Thursday, Feb. 29 from 3:45-4:45 p.m. at the Minnesota State Capitol Rotunda.

We need state investment in our worker pension fund so our dedicated essential workers can retire when they are ready without losing a significant amount of their pension benefit. Educators and supporters need to show up to let legislators know that we're looking for fair pension reform this session and beyond.

Ask your Education Minnesota field staff for information on mileage, parking and sub costs that may be available for attending, as well as recruitment flyers that can be shared at worksites and local union meetings.

### Email legislators using new template

Education Minnesota has created a new email template for members to use, asking Gov. Tim Walz, Speaker Rep. Melissa Hortman and Majority Leader Sen. Kari Dziedzic to make room in the 2024 supplemental budget for teacher pensions.

Find the new template and send the email at [www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/at-the-legislature/pensions](http://www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/at-the-legislature/pensions).

### Pension Advocacy Network Facebook page

All Education Minnesota members who are interested in educator pension advocacy are invited join our Facebook group. This is a place where members can connect, have productive conversations about pension solutions and have staff answer questions. Find the group by searching "Education Minnesota Pension Advocacy Network" and ask to join. You will have to answer a few membership questions and membership will be verified to remain in the group.



## RESPECTABLE RETIREMENT FOR ALL EDUCATORS

### Pension Update emails continue

Members can sign up to receive any updates on pension-related work in the Pension Update emails. If you are not registered for the emails, go to [www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/at-the-legislature/pensions](http://www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/at-the-legislature/pensions).

### Local pension organizing

Many incredible educators have begun organizing Pension Action Leaders (PALs) in their locals. To achieve the investment we need for pension improvements, all educators need to stand together and invite our colleagues into this work.

Education Minnesota has an updated 10-minute meeting document that members can access from the Pension Update emails or by asking your field staff.

Education Minnesota also encourages members passionate about this work to start making PALs in your locals.

If you're already doing this work or would like to do this work, please fill out the Pension Organizing Pledge at [www.edmn.me/PensionOrganizingPledge](http://www.edmn.me/PensionOrganizingPledge).

***Find all of the flyers, handouts, email templates and everything you need to know about Education Minnesota's pension advocacy work at [www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/at-the-legislature/pensions](http://www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/at-the-legislature/pensions).***





# NEA Member Exclusive

## A Trusted and Valuable Benefit

As an NEA member, did you know you receive \$1,000 of term life insurance at **no cost** to you? You're already enrolled in the NEA® Complimentary Life Insurance Plan, but it's a good time to make sure you've selected a beneficiary.

When you do, you can have some peace of mind that your loved ones will receive their benefit in a time of need. This unique benefit helps ensure educators like you have additional coverage beyond what may be provided through your district. It's just one of the many ways your union membership works hard for you.

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[neamb.com/mycomp](https://neamb.com/mycomp) for a  
quick and easy path to update  
your beneficiary information.**



## DCUE's Schmidt a champion of unions for educators, students

Kate Schmidt, the president of the Dakota County United Educators local union, was given Education Minnesota's highest honor this year, the Peterson-Schaubach Outstanding Leadership Award.

The Peterson-Schaubach Outstanding Leadership Award is given annually to an Education Minnesota leader (local or state) who has made outstanding contributions to Education Minnesota or its locals through demonstration of Education Minnesota's Statements of Principle.

Schmidt is from a family of educators and union members, but her very first union experience was walking on the strike lines with her own teachers in St. Cloud as a kid.

"My friends and I would take donuts to the picket line and hang out with our teachers and support them," she said. "In seventh grade going to the picket line, I didn't think I was going to be a union president someday, but it was my union that got me involved right away as a new teacher and offered me leadership, training and experiences that allowed me to continue to grow and continue to make an impact on public education in Minnesota."

Schmidt has been president of DCUE, the union of teachers and nurses in the Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan school district, for almost a decade. During that time, her focus on intentional internal organizing as well

as continuing an open and supportive relationship with the district has made their union strong.

"It's how she interacts with members and really strives to find solutions to solve problems to make it so that everyone is able to focus on our ultimate goal, which is the education of students here in District 196," said Lia Ess, a DCUE member and negotiator.

"I think Kate's legacy is going to be that she's making 196 better," said Ryan Roseen, DCUE's second vice president who also sits on the Education Minnesota Governing Board with Schmidt. "She has an excellent rapport with the district office. One of our strengths here is that District 196 and DCUE get along so well. A lot of that is because of Kate."

Building up the strength of DCUE and its membership is also something Schmidt does well.

"It's not just an email sent out to the whole group, it's a personal email, a phone call. Sometimes it's that second or third call, where she says, 'I really feel like you would be a fit for this,'" said Ess. "And then supporting the person as they're trying out new roles or new activities."



*DCUE's Kate Schmidt has a long legacy of state, local and national union leadership. She is pictured here speaking to union members and elected officials about the importance of collective bargaining in 2019.*

# 23 PETERSON-SCHAUBACH AWARD

Kate Schmidt  
Dakota County United Educators



*Kate Schmidt, president of the Dakota County United Educators, received Education Minnesota's highest honor, the Peterson-Schaubach Outstanding Leadership Award. She is pictured here with the Education Minnesota officer team at the awards ceremony at Summer Seminar this August.*

Schmidt is a tireless advocate for her members, but tries to make sure she is passing on the lessons of advocacy as well.

"She'll advocate for you, but she really encourages you to advocate for yourself and helps you through that," said Kathryn Anderberg, a DCUE member who taught with Schmidt when she was in the classroom. "I feel like that personally really affected me and helped me in my journey as a teacher."

Colleagues say as great of a union leader as Schmidt is now, she was also an amazing teacher when she was in the classroom. Her love for students and advocating for what they need remains at the center of her work.

"Right now, her role in the leadership of our union is so much needed," said Tom Snyder, a DCUE executive

board member and lead negotiator. "But it's never about Kate, it's about the union and it's really about the kids."

Schmidt doesn't just work tirelessly for the members of DCUE and students in 196, she serves on the Education Minnesota Governing Board, and has gone to multiple national union conferences, events and has opportunities to lead at the national level. She testifies at the Legislature every year and is involved in local, state and national politics as it relates to getting educators and students what they need.

Schmidt says her advocacy and work isn't done yet.

"There's more work to be done," she said. "I think we're in a fight for our lives for public education right now, and I can't walk away from that. I have to continue the fight."



## Human Rights Award winners create welcoming learning spaces at Lakeville South

Two Lakeville educators, Leah Hood and Devin Hanson, were named Education Minnesota's 2023 Human Rights Award recipients for their work fighting for and fighting with students to make sure they are seen, heard and valued.

"Mr. Hanson and Ms. Hood, they do a really great job of showing up and helping people to discover who you are and what you do at Lakeville South," said Devin, a student at Lakeville South High School last spring, in a video interview.

Education Minnesota's annual Human Rights Award recognizes an educator, local union or group of educators who has worked to protect educators' and students' human rights.

Hanson is an art teacher, who was also asked by Black student leaders like Devin to be the staff support for the Black Student Union.

Hood is a social studies teacher and mock trial coach who makes sure students know she is an ally and safe space for anyone who needs it.

"If they were only learning curriculum in their classes, (students) might not have that same kind of joy or light that comes to their face, but I can tell that (Ms. Hood) has done something special for them, and same for Mr. Hanson," said Roshelle Roth, a Lakeville South English teacher.

"I think both of them give voice to our marginalized students in many ways," said Rachel Malloy, a Lakeville South social studies teacher. "But I think it's really important for all of our kids to see advocacy and to see that all voices matter."

Hood and Hanson said they hope to create learning spaces where all students feel welcome and supported in little ways—like Hood wearing pins on her lanyard that have sayings of support for LGBTQ+ students and more—and big ways—like Hanson helping students organize and put on a large global culture night to highlight the beautiful diversity and voices found in their school.

*Human Rights, continued on page 20*



*Lakeville South High School teachers Devin Hanson (2nd from left) and Leah Hood (2nd from right) are the recipients of Education Minnesota's 2023 Human Rights Award. Pictured here with Education Minnesota officers this summer.*

## Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, ESPs celebrated with solidarity award for unity shown during 2022 strike

The Minneapolis Federation of Teachers and Education Support Professionals were honored this year for the unity they showed during their 2022 strike with the We Are One Solidarity Award.

The We Are One Solidarity Award is given annually to an Education Minnesota local union or active member demonstrating outstanding or significant leadership in any of the following ways:

- Developing and implementing an organizing campaign.
- Expanding relationships with other unions and the AFL-CIO.
- Developing and implementing a member engagement campaign.
- Working collectively for the common good.
- Protecting or advocating for workers' rights.
- Extending the benefits of a union by organizing the unorganized.

"The conditions were such that we had no other choice but to do what was best for our students," said MFT Teacher Chapter President Greta Callahan, reflecting on the strike. "And after trying every other option that existed, we knew, and when I say we, I mean 5,000 of us strong knew that was the action we had to take in order to give them the schools they deserved."

The MFT teacher and ESP chapters were on strike for a total of 14 days in March 2022.

The 2021-23 contract that came out of that action included significant wage increases for ESPs and nation-leading protections for teachers from underrepresented communities, including exemptions from the excess and layoff process and more. In addition to improving students' learning conditions by adding more counselors, social workers, nurses and specialists, this strike also helped set the conditions for significant change within MPS and how it approaches its work.

The increase in pay for ESPs – the cornerstone ask in negotiations for both units – included hourly pay raises from \$1.92 an hour over two years to \$6.98 an hour over two years.



ESP chapter president Catina Taylor and teacher chapter president Greta Callahan (3rd and 4th from left) accepted the We Are One solidarity award on behalf of the thousands of Minneapolis educators who went on strike for the schools their students deserved in 2022.

"I personally heard from teachers that said, I am on the line for my ESPs and I'm out here so that you guys can get paid a decent, livable wage," said MFT ESP Chapter President Catina Taylor.

While the two chapters have two separate contracts, MFT knew they would be stronger together and that the fight for ESPs would in turn help support the teacher chapter members as well.

"It has allowed an openness between chapters," said Marcia Howard, MFT teacher chapter first vice president, currently serving as acting president. "We're actually attempting to go beyond where we were before."

Both units saw membership rise in anticipation of the strike. The ESP chapter saw more than 200 new members sign up so they could participate in the vote and strike.

"This is a statement from thousands and thousands of educators supporting over 30,000 students that it doesn't have to be this way, and we're going to do something about it," said Callahan, the night of the vote announcement.

The unions have now seen activism and involvement increase in the year since the strike.

"We have people working here all summer doing this," said Callahan. "We have more stewards than every

*We Are One, continued on page 20*

## Filing for state-credential delegate selection for 2024 NEA RA closes Dec. 8 for active members, Feb. 15 for aspiring educators

Join your Minnesota colleagues and thousands of other educators from around the country, at the National Education Association Representative Assembly in July. The National Education Association Representative Assembly, the major decision-making body for the NEA, is scheduled for July 3-7, 2024, in Philadelphia.

All active Education Minnesota members are eligible to run to be a state-credentialed delegate for the NEA RA. The filing period closes Dec. 8. Forms are also available to complete and submit electronically on the Education Minnesota website.

Each summer, approximately 6,000 educators meet to debate the vital issues that impact American public education and set National Education Association policy and activities for the year ahead. These delegates represent the 3 million members of the NEA.

Elections will take place on a date to be determined in February, if necessary.

Nominations for state-credentialed aspiring educator delegates close Feb. 15. Elections will take place on a date to be determined in April, if necessary.

### Funding information for state-credentialed delegates

To receive funding, state-credentialed delegates must be in attendance for the entire Representative Assembly, beginning with the first caucus meeting through adjournment the night of July 7. State-credentialed delegates are expected to attend all caucus meetings and to be on the convention floor for all proceedings.

Funding includes: Airfare—travel arrangements to be made through the designated travel agent and direct-billed to Education Minnesota (alternative transportation will be reimbursed up to a predetermined amount); the cost of a double-occupancy room at the delegation hotel (to be direct-billed) for an authorized number of nights; and reimbursement for meals and other convention-related expenses (with original itemized receipts). Substitute costs for state delegates working in year-round school settings will be covered as

outlined in the Education Minnesota Financial Policy for Governance and Members.

Mileage to and from the airport is reimbursable at 20 cents a mile, along with the cost of airport parking.

No funding is available for Category 2 delegates, those who are retired or inactive members.

### Funding information for small locals

A funding program is available to help locals with 150 or fewer members send a delegate to the NEA Representative Assembly or the American Federation of Teachers Convention. Local presidents will receive information. If you have any questions around the small local grant program, please contact Vice President Monica Byron at [monica.byron@edmn.org](mailto:monica.byron@edmn.org).



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## Filing Form for NEA RA State-Credentialed Delegate

This form must be filed with the Elections Committee of Education Minnesota. Please print clearly.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby submit my name for state credentials to the NEA RA to be held July 3-7, 2024 in Philadelphia.

OR

I, \_\_\_\_\_, wish to nominate \_\_\_\_\_ for state credentials to the NEA RA to be held July 3-7, 2024 in Philadelphia. I further certify that the nominee is eligible for state credentials as a delegate from:

☐ **Active Member – Election District:** \_\_\_\_\_ (K-12; statewide affiliates; and school-related personnel)

☐ **Category 2** (inactive NEA life member and not an Education Minnesota Retired member)

### Please complete the following information:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Local: \_\_\_\_\_

Home address: \_\_\_\_\_ City/State/ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

Home phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Cell phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Work phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Work email: \_\_\_\_\_ Personal email: \_\_\_\_\_

**Do not submit before filing period begins on Nov. 6. Deadline is 11:59 p.m. Dec. 8, 2023.**

Scan and email completed form to [elections.committee@edmn.org](mailto:elections.committee@edmn.org), submit by mail to: Elections Committee, Education Minnesota, 41 Sherburne Ave., St. Paul, MN 55103 or by fax to: 651-767-1266. If you do not receive confirmation of receipt within seven days after submitting, inquire by email to [elections.committee@edmn.org](mailto:elections.committee@edmn.org).

Note: Candidates may submit a photo and statement for inclusion on the Education Minnesota website. The photo and statement must be submitted using the online submission form at [www.educationminnesota.org](http://www.educationminnesota.org) by Dec. 15, 2023.

(For official use only)

This filing form was received on \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_. Membership was verified on \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_.

## Filing Form for NEA RA State-Credentialed Delegate: Aspiring Educator

This form must be filed with the Elections Committee of Education Minnesota. Please print clearly.

I hereby submit my name for state credentials to the NEA RA to be held July 3-7, 2024 in Philadelphia.

I further certify that the nominee is eligible for state credentials as a delegate from:

### Aspiring Educator

(must be an Education Minnesota Aspiring Educator member)

### Please complete the following information:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ College: \_\_\_\_\_

School address: \_\_\_\_\_ City/State/ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

Home phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Cell phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Work phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Work email: \_\_\_\_\_ Personal email: \_\_\_\_\_

Summer address: \_\_\_\_\_ City/State/ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

**Do not submit before filing period begins on Nov. 6. Deadline is 11:59 p.m. Feb. 15, 2024.**

Scan and email completed form to [elections.committee@edmn.org](mailto:elections.committee@edmn.org), submit by mail to: Elections Committee, Education Minnesota, 41 Sherburne Ave., St. Paul, MN 55103 or by fax to: 651-767-1266. If you do not receive confirmation of receipt within seven days after submitting, inquire by email to [elections.committee@edmn.org](mailto:elections.committee@edmn.org).

Note: Candidates may submit a photo and statement for inclusion on the Education Minnesota website. The photo and statement must be submitted using the online submission form at [www.educationminnesota.org](http://www.educationminnesota.org) by Feb. 22, 2024.

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This filing form was received on \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_. Membership was verified on \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_.

*Human Rights, continued from page 16*

"Ms. Hood's classroom feels so safe because she's always so welcoming," said Elsie, a student at Lakeville South High School last spring. "Whenever she sees anything that's slightly discriminatory or even the hint of somebody leaning toward more hatred in their language, she immediately shuts it down. And instead of just shutting it down and leaving it at that, she begins a conversation as to why."

Hood said as a social studies teacher, she knows she has an opportunity to make students aware of the world around them—past and present.

"Making them aware of the real history, and hard history, is an important first step in trying to secure human rights for all of my students and all people around the world," she said.

Hood said she isn't afraid to take the risk of being honest with her students and is grateful for a supportive school administration team and the backing of her union. And her students tell her how grateful they are for the subjects she covers.

Hood and Hanson both are intentional about making sure students are not being overlooked and never hesitate to use their voices to stand up and speak for them, or to help them speak out.

The students at Lakeville South have a respect for Hood and Hanson because they know they have their back, said colleagues.

Hanson's advocacy stretches from advocating for students and who they are, but as a teacher, he provides the tools students need in their every day lives to express themselves.

"Mr. Hanson definitely creates and fosters a safe spot, so kids can come in and their academics can really shine through, and they can soar as students," said Nick Fox, Lakeville South dean of students.

Hanson said it all comes down to relationships and respect when it comes to having the trust of all students and seeing them for who they are and how they come into his classroom.

"Those relationships are key to knowing how to identify what your students need and how to build them up individually, depending on what they are striving for," he said.

Colleagues have seen students gravitate toward Hanson's classes.

"I have a student that he has and is maybe kind of disconnected from school but has found his niche in his art classes," said Malloy. "I think he genuinely saves lives of kids."

*We Are One, continued from page 17*

before. We have a 45-person bargaining team. People are activated and they see the power of collective action."

The solidarity built in the union before, during and after the strike has also had an impact on labor around the state. MFT has also supported other workers taking collective action or going on strike in the time since they were out on the line, continuing to raise awareness of the labor movement in the Twin Cities.

"Taking a stand to help push our education system to be better, it's not an easy path," said Greg Nammacher, a Minneapolis parent and SEIU Local 26 president. "That strike, it didn't solve every dynamic that is out there. But it did plant a flag that teachers and parents together, when they are in motion, are the only force that can actually start to fix some of these dynamics."

Callahan says that while every union doesn't need to go on strike, every union should be ready if they need to in the future.

"It is one of the most important tools we have as labor to use," she said. "It is the reason why you have a prep. It is the reason why you have a lunch. It is the reason why we have all of the laws we do, because people took that action to withhold their work at some point. It is one of the most important tools that we have as a union, and we are so lucky to live in a state where we can do it legally. It is imperative that you flex that muscle and, if nothing else, that you are ready to do it if you have to, because otherwise, we will continue with the dismantling of public education. And our students are the ones who suffer, which in turn our entire state suffers."

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# ESI





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