

MINNESOTA EDUCATOR

FEBRUARY / MARCH 2024



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**Legislative agenda focuses on
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EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS**

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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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When teachers are chanting, you know it's time to act

The stories on the picket lines and sidewalk rallies have been the same whether I was in Anoka, Bemidji, Chisholm, or a dozen school districts in between the last few weeks. Educators said they were hurting, but they were standing up and demanding better for themselves and their students.

As we stood together in snow and subzero windchills, educators shared the same anxieties that showed up in our union's polling. (See page 9) Their jobs are burning them out. They don't feel safe at work. Their paychecks don't go far enough. There aren't enough adults in the building. The health insurance companies keep gouging them. They won't make it to the normal retirement age for their pensions.

Those concerns shaped our union's agenda for the 2024 session of the Minnesota Legislature, which starts in February. Our policy and budget solutions, if passed, will bring relief to educators and better results for students, helping Minnesota resolve the staffing shortage affecting nearly 90 percent of school districts.

We have proposals for higher pay, pension reform and more affordable health care for all kinds of educators. Everyone who dedicates their careers to helping others should be able to raise families, get treatment when they need it and retire without penalties at a reasonable age.

We will pursue those policies and more to make workloads sustainable, class sizes manageable, and ensure educators and students feel safe at school, both physically and mentally.

At the same time, we will continue advocating for more just and equitable schools and campuses, including by recruiting and retaining more educators of color and defending our students' freedom to read age-appropriate books and learn an honest history of America, both the good and the bad.

Read more about our legislative agenda and how to get involved on page 4 and on our website.

We have a daunting list of challenges in our worksites and an uphill struggle at the Legislature, but every session is an opportunity to innovate and to correct the mistakes of the past.

As I write this, more than half of Education Minnesota's E-12 locals are working with expired contracts. They are fighting for raises many legislators intended for them to receive when they passed a multi-billion-dollar new investment in education in 2023.

Our union cautioned legislators at the time that sending the money to school boards instead of earmarking it for compensation would ignite the conflicts we're now seeing at bargaining tables across the state. They didn't listen then. Now they may.

Of course, there will be critics who claim our legislative agenda is too ambitious. They'll say the 2024 session will focus on policy, not money, so don't bother. Election year politics will gridlock the House, the pundits will write.

To them I say: Too bad. When you find angry educators chanting at an outdoor rally in January, you know the situation is too serious to delay.

Our union will continue pushing district-by-district for the contracts educators and their families deserve, contracts that will attract next generations of educators and slowly fill the open jobs.

And we will continue encouraging our legislators to take up the issues that educators care about but cannot be fixed through collective bargaining - with pension reform in the top tier of that list.

Unfortunately, nothing is easy in collective bargaining or politics, but I never doubt the tenacity of educators working for their students, their families and their own retirements.

Together.



Twitter: @DeniseSpecht



Denise Specht

Take NEA and Education Minnesota classes on MEA Online

Our MEA Online has teamed up with the National Education Association to provide a multitude of online courses for Education Minnesota members.

If you haven't done so already, existing users will need to go to <https://meaonline.learnapon.com/users/password/new> and follow the prompts to reset your password. To access the NEA portal for new classes, log in with your new password, go to portal switch button at the top of the page and click "PEP – Professional Excellence Portal." Members will have to take the very short mandatory welcome to NEA training before seeing the full free catalog of courses.

All of the information to access the platform and courses will be available on the Education Minnesota and MEA Online websites.

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, Rachel Spessard of Eden Prairie, 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 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 March 7. 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!

“

It's a huge relief to say as a classroom teacher that I can get 50 free books into my classrooms for my students, that's just awesome!

”

– Seepha Vang, an educator in St. Paul, in a WCCO TV story on Dec. 16, “St. Paul Educators Union gives away 40,000 free books to kids and teachers.” Vang was one of many who attended the event hosted by the St. Paul Federation of Educators and American Federation of Teachers. AFT's “Reading Opens the World” initiative has now distributed 2 million free books in just the past two years.

Legislative agenda focuses on pensions, pay, health care

Minnesota's legislative session starts Feb. 12 for the second year of the legislative biennium with the pro-public education and pro-union majorities.

The governor and Legislature set the state's two-year budget in the 2023 session, but may consider other additions or revisions in the 2024 session as well as policy proposals.

Education Minnesota's legislative agenda includes the top priorities of supporting educators with professional pay, pensions and health care. A recent member poll informed what issues educators wanted to see addressed. Read more about the poll on page 9.

From the statewide shortage of teachers, licensed school staff, substitutes and education support professionals to burnout among state college faculty, it's clear Minnesota must improve the financial well-being of its educators to address the labor crunch in public education. Nine out of 10 schools in Minnesota are significantly affected by the educator shortage, which harms students of color, students with disabilities and students from rural areas the most.

Understaffing accelerates burnout, low pay forces educators to work multiple jobs, and spiraling health insurance costs encourage educators to work sick. Add in broken pension plans, and it's no wonder educators are reluctantly leaving their students for higher wages outside public education.

Educators are worth more—and you know it. That's why this session, your union is supporting package of bills designed to recruit the next generation of passionate and knowledgeable educators, and retain the best group of education professionals.

Together, these proposals are a responsible reaction to the staffing crisis. Our students, and educators, have waited long enough.

Education Minnesota's legislative agenda was crafted by educators from across the state and informs the union's work at the Capitol. The agenda includes:

Educator Pay

Minnesota teachers in E-12 schools make 28% less on average compared to other workers in Minnesota with the same education level. Hourly school workers only

make minimum wage in many areas, and often don't make enough to cover their health insurance costs. The state of Minnesota should make direct investments in the compensation of its educators. Our union supports legislation that:

- Raises wages for all teachers, commensurate with other professions with similar educational requirements, and raise starting wages to a minimum of \$60,000 annually.
- Establishes a minimum wage for hourly school workers of \$25 an hour.
- Supports higher compensation for the faculty in the state's college and universities, including wages and expanding the right of dependent tuition waivers to state universities.

Educator Pensions

Educator pensions are not the recruitment and retention tool they were created to be. Our teachers' top priority is reforming their pension plan. With some of the highest educator contribution levels to their own pensions compared to other states, direct state investment is required. We support legislation that:

- Reduces penalties and increases flexibility for educator retirement, so educators can choose when they're ready to retire without losing a significant amount of their pension benefit.
- Supports improving the retirement plans for higher education faculty, including better pensions and increasing the Supplemental Retirement Plan statutory maximum.

Educator Health Care

Health insurance costs for educators have soared in the past decade, and in many areas are rising faster than negotiated salary and wage increases. The state needs to invest in educator health plans, including the Public Employees Insurance Program, or PEIP. Many educators who leave the classroom cite health care costs as a reason to change industries. To address

the staffing crisis, Minnesota must provide affordable, reliable health insurance to these essential workers. We support legislation that:

- Reduces the exorbitant cost of health insurance for educators through strengthening PEIP and supporting policies that make health insurance more affordable for all Minnesotans.

Ending the educator shortage

Our state needs to end the educator shortage with professional pay, pensions and health care for all school workers. We must also work together to reduce educator burnout. We can do this by:

- Ensuring educators are safe at work mentally and physically.
- Fully staffing mental and physical health teams by hiring more licensed school counselors, social workers, psychologists, nurses and other support professionals.
- Reducing class sizes and/or improving educator-to-student ratios in public schools and reducing special education teacher caseloads so that our students can benefit from one-on-one support.
- Offering paid student teaching to all teacher candidates and reducing educator student debt.
- Supporting the freedom to teach an honest history of the United States and to make available age-appropriate, thought-provoking books in school libraries to counter the national movement to whitewash history, ban books and restrict our students' freedom to read.
- Providing all students with access to professional media specialists who can teach the differences between reliable information and misinformation and disinformation flooding social media.
- Increasing "prep time" for effective lessons for all teachers.
- Providing dedicated due process time to special education teachers to meet students' needs and to hold meetings with families and manage caseload sizes.
- Bringing Minnesota into compliance with federal law by requiring all special education teachers to have

training in meeting the needs of students with IEPs before entering the classroom.

- Fully funding services for all members of the school community, including E-12 students in special education and English language learners.
- Increasing the per-pupil funding formula to compensate for past underfunding and historic inflation.
- Funding a total of 18 hours of paid training for all paraprofessionals who work directly with students.
- Supporting specific policies to attract and retain teachers of color, and work toward creating school climates that reflect the diversity of Minnesota.
- Increasing access to college by renewing the state of Minnesota's commitment to public higher education by returning to statutory levels of funding for state colleges and universities.
- Supporting changes to PELRA to clarify that higher education personnel who regularly teach students should be classified with faculty bargaining units and not with professional and administrative staff.
- Creating a universal child care and early learning program, using mixed delivery, where low-income families pay nothing, and no family pays more than 7% of family income.

Who decides what is on Education Minnesota's legislative agenda?

Education Minnesota members from around the state who serve on the Legislative Action Committee have been working with staff to develop the union's legislative agenda. This is a starting document, but this agenda is the union's baseline of priorities and goals for this session.

The agenda is also approved by the educators from across the state who have been elected to the Education Minnesota Governing Board.

Learn more about our legislative work and how you can get involved in pushing for the passage of these issues and more at www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/at-the-legislature.

Aspiring educators fight for support this legislative session

Education Minnesota Aspiring Educators, the union of more than 3,000 future teachers across the state, are raising their voice for student teacher support at the Capitol this year.

Our future teachers face enormous hardships making end's meet while in their teacher preparation programs. Many work extra jobs to pay for tuition, room and board. This is only made worse when they take on the necessary and challenging role as a student teacher. These student teachers don't get to choose where they get placed, and some in rural areas are placed up to 60 minutes away from their homes. This puts a larger burden on students to cover essential food and gas costs, while they're serving as an extra adult in schools during the educator shortage.

Aspiring Educator members will be asking legislators to take action to combat the educator shortage by making teacher preparation programs more attractive. They're asking for a fair stipend for the hours worked in schools, expanding an already existing Student Teacher Grant program within the Office of Higher Education that lacks applicants and effectiveness. They're also asking for tuition to be waived during the semester they're completing their student teaching hours, as most students don't step foot on college campuses during that time.

EMAE would love to see current and retired educators show up in solidarity for them at their Lobby Day and Rally, details below. If you'd like to send a message of support for our Aspiring Educators, please email paystudentteachersmn@gmail.com.

CALLING ALL ASPIRING EDUCATORS!

Save the date: Feb. 22, 8 a.m.-5 p.m.
Meet your legislators and advocate for student teacher support at the Minnesota Capitol.

Feb. 24, 3:30-5 p.m.
Rally event to raise our voice together.

We're standing together to advocate for the financial support student teachers need, encouraging more students to go into education and alleviating the financial burden on future teachers.



Follow the Aspiring Educators Facebook page for more information!



DEVYN TRIEBENBACH



UMD Aspiring Ed

Having paid student teaching "would allow me to fully invest my time and energy into something that requires it. Having to work, go to school, and then find time in the classroom feels impossible. We as a state are doing a tremendous disservice not only to our student teachers, but our current students as well."



How to stay informed, get involved this legislative session

With pro-public education and pro-union majorities in both the Senate and House, educators need to be involved with the legislative process now more than ever before and have the opportunity to be heard. We can win what we, our students and our schools need if we hold elected officials accountable. Educators are the most effective advocates for public schools!

Share your story at a lobby day

Local union and intermediate organization lobby days can be in person or virtual and scheduled through your union and IO leadership and Education Minnesota staff. The most effective advocates for public schools in Minnesota are the front-line educators who guide our students toward successful lives every day, which is why Education Minnesota has made it easier than ever for members to participate in lobby days.

Raise your voice by testifying at a hearing

Committee hearings are a focal point of the legislative process at the Capitol and give educators the chance to share their stories and make their voices heard. Contact Education Minnesota's lobby team at lobbyteam@edmn.org if you're interested in testifying. The team can help you prepare your remarks and make sure you are where you need to be.

Meet with legislators when they are back in their district

If your legislators are back in their district and if they are having any public meetings, attend one! Invite your local legislator to your school, campuses and classroom. The more they can see and hear about what is going

on in their local schools, the more likely they might be to fight for what you need. If locals or members want to schedule a formal meeting with the legislator, contact your Education Minnesota field staff.

Read the Capitol Connection e-newsletter

Every week during the legislative session, Education Minnesota sends an e-newsletter called Capitol Connection to all members. Capitol Connection summarizes the most recent actions affecting public education at the Legislature, and looks ahead to upcoming issues, hearings and activities. If you're a member and haven't begun receiving the Capitol Connection when session starts, contact webmaster@edmn.org and put Capitol Connection in the subject line.

Attend rallies, take actions

Education Minnesota and our allies often hold rallies and ask members to take action during the legislative session. A rally for pension reform is already planned for Feb. 29. Education Minnesota also has campaigns to have members email their legislators on important issues during session. Watch Education Minnesota's social media pages and the weekly Capitol Connection e-newsletter for more information on any in-person or digital actions or events taking place during session.

Special education teacher Jasman Myers testified virtually in front of the Senate Education Finance Committee during the 2023 session, speaking to the need for support for due process time for special educators.





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Burnout, staff shortages, pay, pensions, health insurance are top concerns for Education Minnesota members, poll says

Demoralizing working conditions, compensation that is failing to sustain educators' families, and retirement anxiety were near universal concerns in a new poll of Education Minnesota members commissioned by the union.

The poll found burnout, educator shortages and personal financial issues, including pay, pensions and health insurance, were top concerns among members. While not among the top-tier issues, workplace safety was close behind.

The pollsters also found strong support for the union and its advocacy for the rights and benefits of members and for fully funding public schools. About eight in 10 members credited the union with passage of important education laws in the 2023 session of the Legislature.

However, just over 10 percent of members frequently considered dropping their membership. The most common reason was leaving the profession, which could be another symptom of the widespread concerns about burnout and compensation.

LRP, a nationally-recognized polling firm, surveyed 9,295 union members by telephone and email from Sept. 19-Oct. 8, 2023. The data were weighted slightly by gender, region, age, membership type and years worked to reflect attributes of Education Minnesota membership. The margin of error was plus or minus 1 percentage point.

What issues do members care about?

The pollsters asked educators about their workplace concerns and how intensely they felt those concerns. Working conditions that burned out educators was the most important issue with 80 percent of members saying they were very concerned.

Following closely behind, were: **Low pay (71 percent very concerned), educator shortages (70 percent), pensions (67 percent), and high health care costs (64 percent.)**

When asked specifically what members want Education Minnesota to prioritize, the issues that stood out were:

- Increasing salaries (59 percent top priority, 89 percent top or high priority).
- Providing affordable health insurance (53 percent top priority, 86 percent top or high priority)
- Reducing penalties and lowering the retirement age for a pension (52 percent top priority, 77 percent top or high priority).
- Providing a safe place to work and learn and reducing the educator shortage were also priorities.

Workplace safety was a second-tier issue for members, but just barely. Nearly six of 10 members said they were somewhat or very concerned about safety in their workplace, with the most concern in the Twin Cities (34 very concerned), among Black educators (53 percent very concerned), Latinx (38 percent very concerned) and education support professionals (38 percent very concerned.)

The top resource educators said was important for safety was school administrators who support educators (89 percent very important, 97 percent important), followed by mental health counselors who can respond to students in crisis (77 percent very important, 94 percent important). School resource officers were the least important resource on the list for educators, although 72 percent said they were still important.

Educator burnout

More than nine of 10 Education Minnesota members were concerned about burnout and nearly all of them were "very concerned," making addressing the cluster of issues around working conditions a top priority for Minnesota educators.

Ninety-four percent of educators said burnout affects their workplace and nearly three-quarters of them said it affected them "a lot."

Digging a little deeper into the issue, the pollsters identified key workplace issues that were exhausting educators physically and emotionally: Demands of the job, negative interactions with parents and

students, problems with school administrators, and low compensation.

Among the demands of the job category, educators noted as problems: Workloads and caseloads, class sizes, understaffing, lack of respect, lack of prep time and the stress of finding the right work-life balance.

Within the category of students and parents, educators cited: Student misbehavior and discipline, unsupportive parents, and the demanding mental health and learning needs of students.

Management was also a problem for many educators, with a quarter of them saying their administration is not supportive or they lack resources, while a smaller number also mentioned requirements from the state or management that creates additional work.

Nearly one in five educators said low pay drives burnout.

Pensions and retirement

In addition to being a top concern, a plurality of members (45 percent) said they are not satisfied by the retirement benefits they receive, compared to 43 percent who were satisfied. A quarter said they were not at all satisfied.

Around a quarter of members said they are not likely to continue working as an educator until they are eligible to retire, and a similar number were not confident that they will continue working in education.

Opinions toward our union

A majority of members (62 percent) said Education Minnesota did an excellent or good job at representing educators in the state. ESPs and Black members were especially supportive, with more than 70 percent for both groups saying their union did a good or excellent job.

Nearly six in 10 members overall said they never considered discontinuing their membership in the past year. However, the low morale and job frustration found in other polls was also reflected in the Education Minnesota poll. Fourteen percent of the members said they frequently considered dropping their membership. The most common reason cited was a desire to leave the profession.

When asked about whether it was more important for their union to advocate for member rights and benefits, or for increasing state education funding, the members said both were important. However, 90 percent of members said advocating for member rights and benefits was very important. Slightly fewer, 82 percent, said lobbying for education funding was very important.

A majority of members say most of the legislative accomplishments Education Minnesota fought for in the last year had a positive impact on their lives. The top effects chosen by members were: guaranteed

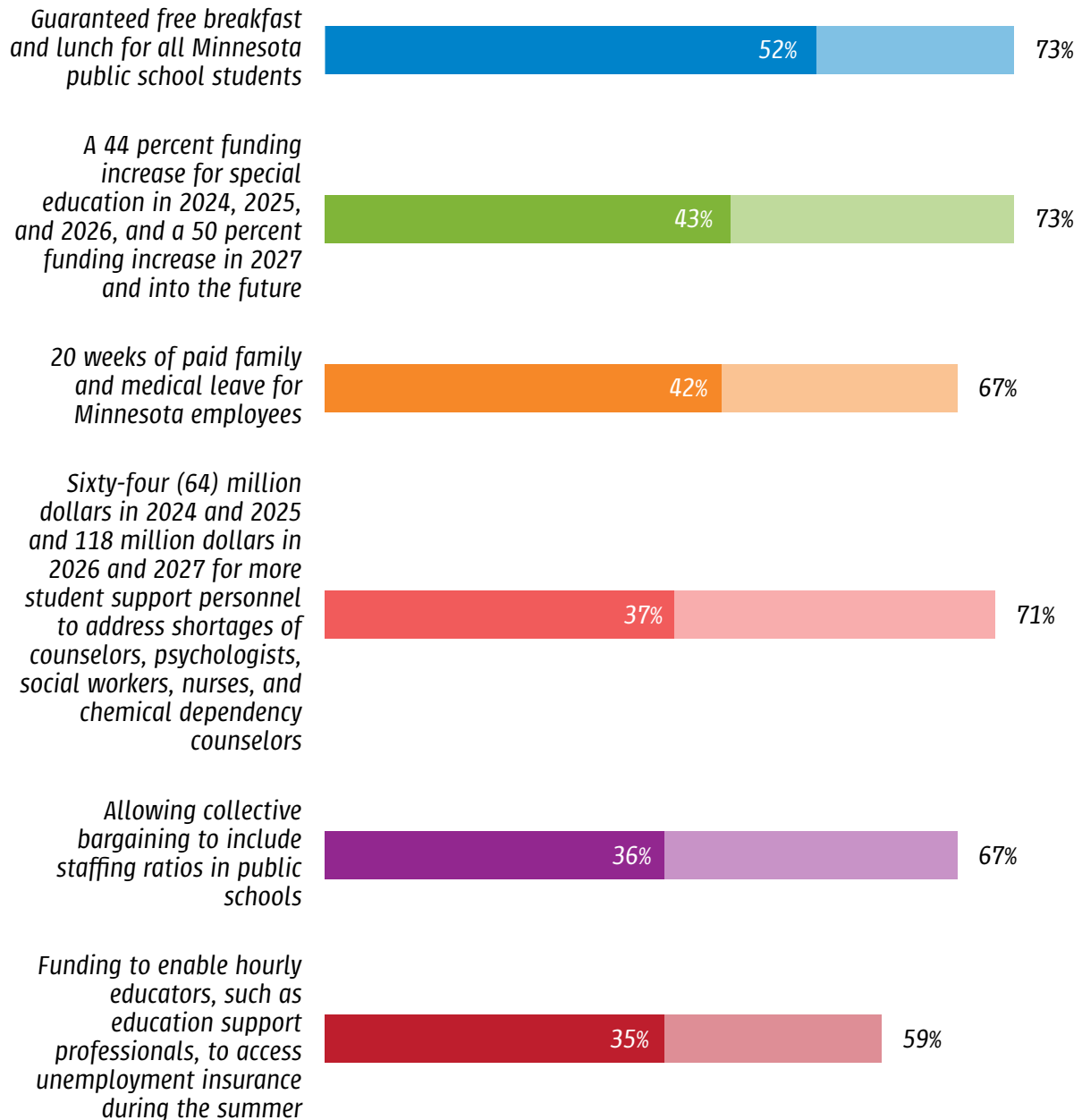
How concerned are you about each of the following?



breakfast and lunch for students (52 percent very positive, 73 percent positive), a funding increase for special education (43 percent very positive, 73 percent positive), and 20 weeks of paid family and medical leave (42 percent very positive, 67 percent positive).

After hearing the list of accomplishments, 78 percent of members give Education Minnesota credit for helping get legislative wins passed.

How much of a positive impact did the following 2023 legislative accomplishments Education Minnesota fought for have on your life?



Hermantown



Bemidji



Solidarity season!

Nearly 60 local unions from across the state participated in Education Minnesota's first-ever "We're Worth More" Wednesday. The union asked members to wear "red for ed" or their local union colors and shirts on Jan. 17 to support every unsettled local's efforts to win the contracts they and their students deserve!

See more of the photos uniting us all in our union on our front cover and on Education Minnesota's Facebook page!



ISD 287



Lake City paras



Hopkins

East Grand Forks transportation staff get needed support in latest contract

The members of the Education Minnesota: East Grand Forks Education Support Professionals who work as bus drivers for the school district were able to secure large salary increases in their latest contract to help support their current and future employees.

The union's priorities going into bargaining were to address the needs of all drivers in order to retain their staff.

"When we bargain, our testimony and passion come from the drivers. We want to relay the benefits of both sides of the table," said Bryan Olson, the local union president and a member of the bargaining team.

Olson said before negotiations, the team went around and listened to the members on what to bring to the table. The union has 11 members, and Olson said they work collaboratively to bring issues to the table the membership wants to see addressed.

Thankfully, Olson said, the district was eager to address the issues of the drivers.

"I was really surprised," he said. "I thought the tone was a spirit of cooperation to meet all the transportation needs. That was really positive."

The union settled a contract that met a lot of the needs of their members.

Included in the contract is:

- A 17% wage increase over the two-year contract.
- A 10% increase for members' HRAs.
- A 60% increase in weekly bonuses.
- Starting the 403(b) match after year one of employment.
- A 33% increase in wages for weekend activity trips.
- A \$500 bonus for recruiting new drivers.
- Restructured longevity pay to get long-time drivers paid sooner.

Members were very happy with the contract.

"They were more eager to step in and help out with shortages, take trips they normally wouldn't take, and were very excited to feel respected for the services they provide," said Olson.

Olson said he has also seen morale and the feeling of respect from their employer increase.

"Dignity was restored, and we felt more a part of the system," he said.

The Grand Forks ESPs not only feel good about their current contract, but found some lessons they will take into future bargaining rounds.

"We're going to stay positive, keep an open mind and rely on Education Minnesota to help us get the wins we need," Olson said. "Your issues need solutions that give benefits to both sides. Use your field staff for getting all the right information to be successful."

"Dignity was restored, and we felt more a part of the system."

Bryan Olson, the Education Minnesota: East Grand Forks Education Support Professionals local president, about how members felt after bargaining major improvements in their latest contract.

Roseville union leadership program centers teacher voice in district with support from national union

Education Minnesota-Roseville is the only local in the state to participate in the American Federation of Teachers' Teacher Leader Program, which aims to bring teacher voice to district decisions on what is needed to help educators and students succeed.

The goal of this program is to empower teachers to be more active in the policy and "behind-the-scenes" workings of education. The program culmination is an action research project related to education policy reform. The group meets once a month for six hours on Saturdays.

"Participants report feeling connected to the district through conversations with school board members and other district leaders. This is a place for real conversation for positive change, even if change doesn't happen immediately. Our union negotiators also use the research from the teachers in the program for contract negotiations," said Jodi Kyllonen, who previously took part in the program and is now in her third year as facilitator.

AFT provides funding so that each teacher receives a \$1,500 stipend upon successful completion of the program.

"Being an activist since high school myself, I jumped at the chance to make change where I work," said Shelly

Chermack, a math teacher at Roseville Area High School who also works with credit recovery and the district's Project Hope program. "The stipend was an incentive, too. This is a lot of what we do already with no additional pay."

All locals in Minnesota are eligible to participate in the program as members of the AFT. AFT has an application to apply to the Teacher Leader Program, asking about size of district, what benefits your district would gain from being part of the program and how you are going to recruit members.

In May, the group presents their issue and research to the district and the union shares it out on their website.

Topics from last year's program included rethinking sheltered content instruction, educator support staff shortages, exploring implications of educator emotional and mental health, digital literacy and 21st Century skills development at Roseville Area High School, a look at the teacher retention program, workload considerations



This year's Education Minnesota-Roseville Teacher Leader Program cohort met Saturday, Jan. 13, for one of their monthly meetings and dove into research on topics they hope to address within their district, centering educator voices.

in early childhood special education, the benefits of implementing the pyramid behavior model with fidelity and the importance of purposeful academic calendars.

The participants find topics to focus on, something they want to see addressed or improved. They then look at finding data within their district or nationally to support their topic and inform their findings. Supporting documents might include surveying colleagues or finding published research. Part of the programming also includes inviting leaders in education from the community to join the group meeting for about an hour for a conversation about their role in education.

"This program gives staff members a 'seat at the table' in making decisions within the district. Being proactive for positive change rather than just reactive or frustrated/complaining," said Kyllonen.

The camaraderie between colleagues from across the district and the additional connection to their union are important pieces to Kyllonen.

"I did a different class with the union, the early career seminar, and really enjoyed that and wanted to see what else I could participate in," said Lucy Mehlan, a science teacher at Roseville Area Middle School.

Making change in the place she works was also important for Mehlan.

"I'm a science teacher, so I like research, but I was especially interested when I heard I would be talking to higher-ups," she said. "I want to make Roseville Schools a better place."

Through the AFT Teacher Leaders Program, local affiliates have:

- Established relationships among teachers and policymakers, community organizations and community leaders.
- Developed an informed teacher voice to participate in both the local and national dialogue on education.
- Established a vehicle for positive messaging about public schools and their unions.
- Created a pipeline for future school and union leaders.

Participating teachers develop expertise in:

- Building a collaborative culture.
- Accessing, using and presenting relevant research that connects policy with practice.
- Becoming advocates for teachers, students and their families, and for public education.
- Understanding policy issues and making recommendations to and through their unions.

In Roseville, a handful of past participants have stayed connected with the program and now participate in a special cohort with AFT at the national level.

"It's all about keeping people involved," said Kyllonen. "I hope we keep getting new cohorts of teacher who want to join the program and seek out positive change within the district. I hope alumni from the program go on to be leaders in their building, more active in the union and also even at the state level!"



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Fergus Falls' Prairie Science Class allows students to experience outdoor education in rare partnership with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



"All you need is a door" is the motto of the Prairie Science Class, a partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Prairie Wetlands Learning Center and Fergus Falls Public Schools.

The class is an internationally-recognized partnership, which aims to use the Prairie Wetlands Ecosystem daily to engage fourth- and fifth-grade students in science, applied math, critical thinking, problem solving and writing through real world, field-based learning experiences.

The partnership and program were developed by a coalition of local citizens and educators and is taught by Fergus Falls teachers with support from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff. It is only one of two places in the country with type of partnership.

"Students call this a 'whole new world of education,'" said Mona Davis, a Prairie Science Class.

The more than 200 students who participate in the program spend half the day at the Prairie Science

Class and half the day at Cleveland Elementary School. Teachers work together and split up the curriculum. Often, Prairie Science teachers work on science, reading, English language arts and art, while their partner teachers work on math, social studies, health and some reading as well.

"Our district really supports this and supports us," said Davis. "We take our curriculum and standards, map it out and find where they fit in across a year. We find books that both match our curriculum and what we do out here."

Each teacher at the Prairie Science Class teaches multiple sections. All fourth- and fifth-grade students are guaranteed a spot at Prairie for one year if they would like one.

"We go outside on a daily basis," said Davis. "They use appropriate outdoor gear for any season. We have extra winter gear. We wrote three grants to recently get ski shoes and have water equipment."

Students also have access to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff twice a month and have access to everything at the center, which is also open to other schools to visit in addition to the public.

"Students can find something out here that they are passionate about," said Davis. "It may be poems, art, photography, some get into birds or just write constantly." Every day, students monitor the weather. They look at moon phases and the times of days. Whether it be in science, language arts or art, students are always journaling.

"I can get kids to write more here than anywhere else in my career," said Davis, who taught for 16 years before moving to Prairie Learning Center.

Studies include weather patterns, plants and life cycles, nature's process for animals – predators and prey. They go outside every day to talk about the wetlands, animals and plants. Teachers discuss migrating birds and get into what is in the water. There are three bluebird houses where students can see them have eggs and babies.

The Learning Center also includes a greenhouse, which was donated by nonprofits. In the greenhouse, students watch plants start at seeds and journal about their growth. They then see them planted outside and learn about the soil, life cycle and pollinators.

"We all knew this would be different," said Davis. "It's like nothing we studied in how to be a teacher, and I learn every day with the kids. But I was in my 16th year of teaching and something was missing. My son went through the program, and I just knew this was what I wanted to do.



Students journal every day at Prairie Science Class and take home full books at the end of the year.

"We think we need to have the answers, but this place has thought me that to ask questions more than have answers. There are many times I tell the students, 'I don't know, what do you think?' And that's really powerful."

The program is more than 20 years old and was the brainchild of a teacher named Dave Ellis.

"Even before this education center was here, he would come over here with his students," said Davis. "He just had a feeling this would be good for kids."

It took about 10 to 12 years for it to become what it is today.

"We have been told by middle and high school science and language arts teachers that they know which kids are Prairie Science kids," said Davis.

We're all curious, said Davis, and the benefit of the Prairie Science Class is you can let them explore.

"A lot of students talk about how this is a peaceful place for them," she said.

At the end of the year, students write reflections on the program and celebrate the special place where they have had the opportunity to learn and grow.

Davis said the teachers at Prairie Science use a quote from Rachel Carlson, which says, "Every child needs the company of at least one adult who will share with them the mysteries and the wonders of the world we live in."

Fergus Falls Prairie Science Class students follow a plants lifecycle, from seed to fully grown, thanks to a greenhouse donated by local nonprofits.



Earned sick, safe time law now effective for all workers

On Jan. 1, Minnesota's new Earned Sick and Safe Time (ESST) law became effective. This law is a huge step forward for a significant number of workers who did not previously have access to sick leave. For these individuals, being sick or having to take care of someone who was sick meant losing a day's pay at best and losing a job at worst. For 30 years, American workers have primarily had the benefit of laws that protect the right to unpaid leave in the event of serious illness.

The ESST provision that is most important for workers who did not previously receive sick leave is the requirement that employers provide workers with a minimum of 48 hours of sick and safe leave. This can make all the difference for a parent of small children, or someone acting as their parent's primary caregiver. Importantly, ESST also permits employees to accrue at least 80 hours of sick leave.

For employees covered by a collective bargaining agreement, it is likely that they already receive at least 48 hours of sick leave per year. However, ESST also permits employees to use leave for a wider variety of uses. In addition to caring for oneself, the leave may be used for:

- A family member's mental or physical illness, treatment or preventive care;
- Absence due to domestic abuse, sexual assault or stalking of the employee or a family member;
- Closure of the employee's workplace due to weather or public emergency, or closure of a family member's school or care facility due to weather or public emergency; and
- When determined by a health authority or health care professional that the employee or a family member is at risk of infecting others with a communicable disease.

This Legal Briefs column, written by Education Minnesota attorneys, is one of an occasional series on legal developments that affect educators.

Additionally, while sick leave was traditionally for self-care, and FMLA permitted leave for a narrow set of family members, ESST may be used to care for many more relatives, including:

- Their child, including foster child, adult child, legal ward, child for whom the employee is the legal guardian or child to whom the employee stands or stood in loco parentis (in place of a parent);
- Their spouse or registered domestic partner;
- Their sibling, stepsibling or foster sibling;
- Their biological, adoptive or foster parent, stepparent or a person who stood in loco parentis (in place of a parent) when the employee was a minor child;
- Their grandchild, foster grandchild or step-grandchild;
- Their grandparent or step-grandparent;
- A child of a sibling of the employee;
- A sibling of the parents of the employee;
- A child-in-law or sibling-in-law;
- Any of the family members of an employee's spouse or registered domestic partner;
- Any other individual related by blood or whose close association with the employee is the equivalent of a family relationship; and
- Up to one individual annually designated by the employee.

This aspect of the law is more reflective of a wide variety of family structures and care obligations.

ESST is now the law, whether Education Minnesota locals are still bargaining or not. Happily, several locals and districts have been able to incorporate the requirements of the new law in their contracts or in memoranda of understanding with a minimum amount of fuss and/or muss.

In the districts in which the new law has been more controversial, we have seen a few types of problems:

Existential consternation

In a few districts, employers have expressed concerns about writ large ESST. A handful of district negotiators have suggested that employees will use ESST to take care of pets. It really cannot be overstressed that this sort of rhetoric is neither accurate nor helpful, and it is okay to say that out loud in bargaining.

On the other hand, employers may be legitimately worried about the ability to find substitutes for missing employees. This is understandable, but since employees were already able to use sick leave—including for the care of relatives—prior to ESST, it is a fairly marginal concern.

Concern about whether this statute creates a new entitlement

Initially, there have been also concerns about whether this created an obligation to provide sick leave in addition to what unions and employers had agreed to in their collective bargaining agreements. The Department of Labor and Industry has made clear that this is not the case. The implication of this for bargaining is straightforward; it would be inappropriate to cost ESST as a separate item during the parties' collective bargaining.

Concern about how ESST “fits” with existing sick leave policies and contract language

This concern has had more grounding. The ESST statute is prescriptive about the manner in which employees may receive the time. It can either be given to employees as one single grant of time at the beginning of a 12-month period, or it may be accrued. Where there has been more flexibility is in the accrual methods, because employers are permitted to advance sick leave or allow employees to accrue it more quickly than the statutory minimum of one hour for every thirty hours that an employee works. Given this, it should be possible to administer sick leave accrual with little change going forward.

“ESST is now the law, whether Education Minnesota locals are still bargaining or not.”

Since the Legislature adopted the ESST law, Education Minnesota has produced reference information about the law, as well as bargaining guidance for locals. Because this law impacts the way that members may be able to take existing, accrued sick leave, we continue to recommend that locals and districts either fold ESST discussions into bargaining or adopt a standalone memorandum of understanding reflecting how the law will relate to contractual sick leave benefits.

Members can access bargaining guidance at the Education Minnesota website. Furthermore, we continue to encourage local leaders to contact field staff at Education Minnesota. Our field staff, negotiations department and legal department will continue to answer those questions that may be tailored to a local's individual circumstances.

In addition to this guidance, the Department of Labor and Industry has posted a question and answer document that can be found here: <https://www.dli.mn.gov/sick-leave>. Staff at the department continue to update that document as questions arise.

— Meg Luger, staff attorney



Delegate selection underway for Representative Convention

Plans are underway for the 2024 Education Minnesota Representative Convention, taking place April 19-20 at the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Bloomington - Minneapolis South.

Represent your colleagues on issues that affect all educators by seeking a post as a delegate or alternate.

The Representative Convention is our highest governing body, with more than 600 elected delegates meeting annually to set policy for the union. The convention will begin at 7 p.m. Friday and end Saturday when all business of the convention has concluded.

Major business for delegates includes acting on changes to the union's constitution and bylaws and considering any action items or proposed amendments to the legislative positions and the statements of principle.

March 15 is the deadline for local presidents to inform Education Minnesota of those who will be delegates and alternates to the RC. The number of delegates allocated to each local and statewide affiliate is determined by the number of members and can be found in the Representative Convention section of our website in the Delegate Allocation Report. Delegates are chosen by open nominations and secret ballot. Interested members should contact their local president for details on how to participate.

For this event, Education Minnesota provides one standard hotel room for one night for each local sending at least one delegate and one round-trip mileage reimbursement. Local presidents have details on the financial arrangements and hotel reservations.

Learn more about the RC and elections in the member portal of www.educationminnesota.org.

Upcoming NEA RA State-Credentialed Delegate elections in locals with contested races

Education Minnesota members should also watch for local elections taking place in their local union and zone for members wanting to be delegates to the NEA's Representative Assembly.

Members will be electing election district state-credentialed delegates to the NEA Representative Assembly, which will be held July 3-7, in Philadelphia. Election district-level elections will be conducted during a 15-day window (weekdays only) beginning Feb. 19 and ending March 8. Many election districts

had fewer candidates than available delegate seats and those members were elected by acclamation.

All candidates had the opportunity to submit a statement and/or photograph. These statements and photos appear on the Education Minnesota website. Members may view the statements online by going to www.educationminnesota.org, signing into the member portal and then clicking on the Elections tab. Printed voters guides will also be available for members in election districts where elections will be held.

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