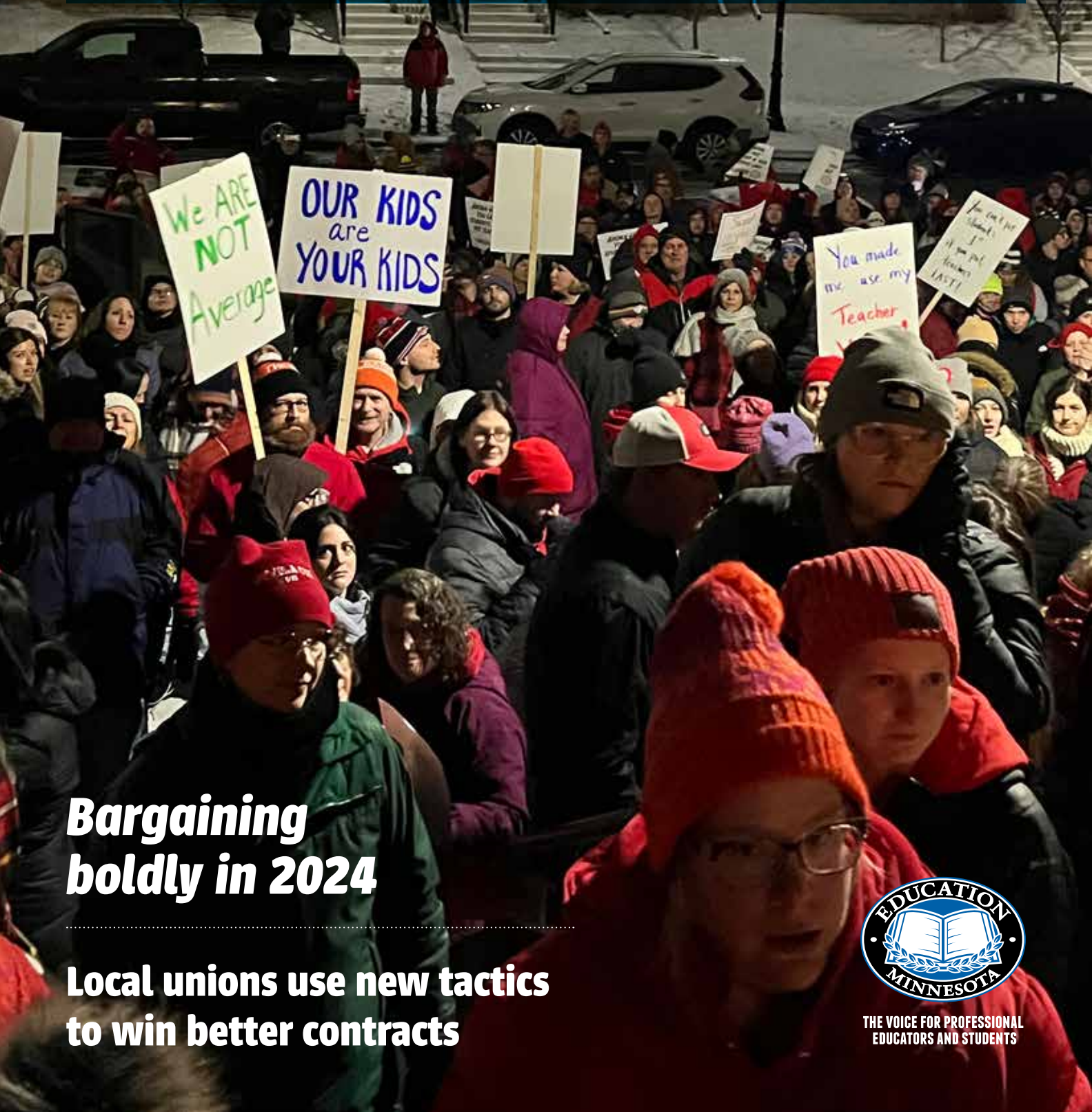


M I N N E S O T A

EDUCATOR

APRIL / MAY 2024



***Bargaining
boldly in 2024***

**Local unions use new tactics
to win better contracts**



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EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

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Note: The Minnesota Legislature passed a law this year requiring training for K-12 teachers about the "cultural heritage and contemporary contributions of American Indians, with particular emphasis on Minnesota Tribal Nations," in order to renew their licenses. Currently, Education Minnesota's Cultural Competency training meets the requirement for teachers renewing next year, but after that they need a specific training. Education Minnesota is currently in the beginning stages of creating a training for this new requirement and our union is working to get something available to members during the 2024-25 school year.



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**THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS**

April/May 2024 – Volume 26, No. 5

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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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Don't forget: Better contracts start with bigger state budgets

Local unions have been bargaining boldly for better contracts for more than 10 months, and in many places, educators are catching up after years of sacrificing and settling for less than they were worth.

As I write this, about 80% of Education Minnesota's teacher contracts have reached some kind of agreement. Average salary increases are almost double the historical average.

Thousands of educators, from pre-K to higher education, are getting the biggest raises in their careers. Education support professionals had access to unemployment insurance for the first time last summer.

While I'm proud of the progress, I'm not forgetting the past. Educators are still underpaid compared to similar professions. Health insurers take a larger bite from our paychecks every year. Impossible workloads are burning out too many colleagues.

But there has been enough success that we should refresh our memories about how we got here so we can keep the momentum for the next contract talks.

Gov. Tim Walz and the 2023 Legislature appropriated the largest increase in spending on public education in decades. That's because pro-education leaders controlled the House, Senate and governor's residence.

They were in those positions because tens of thousands of union members turned out to volunteer and vote in 2022. The "trifecta" wouldn't have happened without labor, and Education Minnesota is the largest union in the state.

When those leaders took office, they turned their values into budgets. You don't have to agree with everything they did, said, or did not do, to acknowledge their extraordinary commitment to students and educators.

The wins at the bargaining tables in 2023-2024 flowed from the wins at the ballot boxes in 2022. Our ability to negotiate even better contracts and secure more pension investments in 2025 will depend on our election success this fall.

But I still hear from leaders who say they are of the contracts they negotiated this cycle—but wish our union would get out of electoral politics.

Another dangerous narrative I've heard recently was summed up by an old friend who sent me a text: "I think our union has lost its way and we're spending too much time on the students of Minnesota."

I disagree. As our members have repeatedly said, there is no clear line between advocating for students and educators. We need worksites in which students and educators can both thrive.

Fixing the staffing shortage through better pay, pensions and health care is a top priority right now because members said a well-supported, stable and diverse staff is a prerequisite for providing the high-quality education students deserve.

Improving the learning conditions of students benefits the whole school community. When kids are fed and supported, the benefits ripple through a building. Addressing problems with student discipline helps everyone.

This intersection of interests is common among unions of caregivers. There's a reason the Minnesota Nurses Association chose "Patients. Not Profits," as its tagline and has made giving nurses a meaningful voice in staffing levels in hospitals a priority.

Is fighting for better quality health care for everyone a patient issue or a nurse issue? Are smaller class sizes and students' freedom to read educator issues or student issues?

When students win, we win, too. When our friends in elected office do something popular, it makes them better advocates for the rest of our shared agendas.

In the past year, educators have made progress backfilling decades of insufficient state funding for public education and pensions, but it's not enough. We have more elections to win in 2024 and contracts to sign in 2025.

We will keep going forward and we will get there ... Together.



Twitter: @DeniseSpecht

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

As of last fall, student loan borrowers have had student loan payments resume and interest is accruing again. 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% of family income and limits interest accrual for those who make their payments each month. IDR enrollment can be completed online at 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 loan forgiveness rules is on our MEA Online professional development platform.

As always, our Degrees Not Debt staff team is here to help, so please reach out to dnd@edmn.org with any questions.

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, Dawn Sorenson of Minnetonka, 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 May 9. 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 really makes it hard for me to know when is it a good time to retire, because I don't know, what am I going to do? I have to come up with something to make up that difference in income. All I've done is teach my entire life.

”

– Nicollet teacher Tom Murphy in a Mankato Free Press article from Feb. 20 titled “Local teachers push for improved pension benefits.” Murphy talked to the reporter about the impacts of the penalty of reduced benefits for retiring before a certain age after teachers have dedicated their lives to the classroom and have personally contributed to their pension.

Local unions try new member engagement tactics during tough bargaining rounds

More Education Minnesota locals across the state have been taking action around demanding 2023-25 contracts that respect and honor their work than in any other bargaining round in recent history.

With the historic investments from the Legislature and the educator shortage affecting nine out of 10 Minnesota schools, local unions have been bargaining more boldly and trying new tactics around organizing and communicating within their locals and worksites to engage members.

Leaders from Anoka Hennepin Education Minnesota and Education Minnesota, Hermantown shared their “why” around increased member action around bargaining with the Minnesota Educator.

Anoka Hennepin Education Minnesota

Anoka Hennepin Education Minnesota had two goals going into negotiations, said John Wolhaupter, the union's lead negotiator.

The first goal was to recruit and retain a highly qualified education workforce, and the second was to create an environment of welcoming, healthy and supportive schools and programs throughout the district.

“Each of these goals had several more specific goals nested within it,” he said. “Our work as a team tied back to the two goals as we met with members and designed proposals. The first goal in particular tied back to a question on our negotiations survey that

showed 12% of our members were actively looking at careers outside education. Having this information and these goals gave the team and members a way to communicate what we were trying to accomplish at the bargaining table.”

The negotiations team in AHEM started intentionally planning for this bargaining round right after the last one to not only prepare as a team, but to start working with all of their members around being an active part of the process.

“We met as a team regularly during the 2022-23 school year to plan, gather information from members and to start developing proposals we wanted to make,” Wolhaupter said. “Prior to the start of bargaining, we started having weekly informational pieces in our local newsletter. Early in the process, these articles highlighted different areas of the contract, especially those that were not well understood by members or were areas of focus for the upcoming round of bargaining.”

The team also made the intentional choice to communicate as much as possible with members and bring them along throughout the entire bargaining process.

More than 1,500 Anoka Hennepin Education Minnesota members rallied outside a January school board meeting as their negotiations team had just started mediation.





Anoka Hennepin Education Minnesota lead negotiator John Wolhaupter was interviewed by Fox 9 TV during a January school board meeting rally. The local was moving their negotiations to the public and invited the media to pay attention and learn about their contract asks.

"As we started meeting with the district in the summer, a few members attended sessions as observers. We also shared the specific contract language proposals that both sides made with members," Wolhaupter said. "When the school year started, we had several sessions with the district during the day when members could not attend, so when we started discussing financial offers in more depth, we shifted to evening sessions and invited members. By this time, the various proposals made by the district had energized members and we had tremendous turnout at these open bargaining sessions."

As time went on, the negotiations team knew they needed to escalate their organizing and communications. The local was close to authorizing a strike vote but reached an agreement in mediation right before that authorization was scheduled to take place.

The negotiations team started hosting weekly Zoom webinars where they could share out the most recent information and have members be able to ask questions, especially as it related to tactics such as "work to rule," or working just their contracted hours, and what a strike could look like.

Having a separate Local Contract Action Team who were organizing events like school board rallies and organizing members in buildings was key to the local's success in engaging with members, said Wolhaupter.

"Having a separate group taking on these responsibilities allowed the bargaining team to focus on the work that needed to be done at the bargaining table," he said. "We were more successful in communicating with members and getting people out to events by having people with

direct information about what was going on at each building."

Members worked hard to build communication structures in their buildings. Each of the 53 sites had a building representative, an organizing committee representative, a strike captain, a communications captain and one strike leader for every 10 members.

The organizing committee met weekly during December and January to determine if the local was ready to move forward based on participation in structure tests, such as attending informational picketing with the community, attending rallies, signing petitions and taking a strike pledge.

"Members feel more connected to and aware of the work that is being done on their behalf. Through this round of bargaining, we have established structures that will be helpful as we continue to address member needs," said Wolhaupter. "All that member organizing and activism resulted in a contract that made significant improvements in compensation and benefits. We still have a lot of work to do in future rounds of bargaining, but this contract includes significant achievements that will have a positive effect on members' work experience for years to come."

The contract includes salary increases of 5% in 2023 and 3% in 2024; health insurance district contribution increases for both single and family of 5% in 2023 and 5% for single and 10% for family in 2024; condensing the salary schedule, including bringing up the starting salary to \$50,000; and adding Early Childhood Family Education teachers onto the K-12 teacher salary schedule.

Wolhaupter said the local also plans to continue their transparent communication during future bargaining cycles.

"Being transparent with members and sharing as much information as possible throughout the process is an important step forward," he said. "Members are much more invested in the process and the outcome when they can see the work that is being done on their behalf. Ultimately, the work is being done for the members, so giving them as much access to what is going on is a way to bring their power to the bargaining table with us."

Education Minnesota – Hermantown

The Hermantown local union consists of both teachers and education support professionals, but while the ESP unit was having a better experience at the table, the teachers were not and they knew they needed to start engaging members, said Katie Marciniak, local union president.

“Our local has been fairly sedentary and with the unique combination of the fund balance and legislative increases, we had to strike while the iron was hot,” she said. “Knowledge is power, and once people understood the financial position our district was in, they were fit to be tied. Our job was to channel those feelings in a productive way and we did that by changing our approach to bargaining.”

The local put out the information that the district was sitting on nearly \$7 million in unallocated funds and started an open communication system of sharing out negotiations updates.

“We were extremely open; sending video updates to members after nearly each meeting then engaging members to host informational pickets which in turn engaged the community in attending and speaking out at board meetings,” said Marciniak.

Hermantown used funds from Education Minnesota’s relational organizing grant and organizing for settlement grant programs to help support their efforts, including creating—and paying stipends for—an organizing committee. The committee includes four lead roles with at least six additional building representatives sharing the load.

“In my 10 years here, I’ve never seen much more than the executive board and negotiators involved in union action,” said Marciniak.

The response from members was enthusiastic, said Marciniak, and the local made sure they were documenting what was working and why.

“We began data tracking attendance and making specific requests of members; using the strength of who was showing up and having one-on-one conversations with the less engaged,” she said.

Member engagement around negotiations grew rapidly.



Education Minnesota, Hermantown members had shirts made regarding their unsettled contract and wore them to events to help spread the word about the need for more community engagement in their bargaining fight.

“Teacher attendance at board meetings rose to 25% in early December then nearly 40% in late December. When calculating both in-person and online engagement during negotiations, teacher attendance/engagement increased by 69%. In regard to other activities, 81.2% of teachers responded to contract negotiations surveys; 71.8% of teachers attended our “Slice and Strike Q&A” pizza buffet on Jan. 15; and 77% were wearing their button saying the number of days without a contract on a daily basis,” said Marciniak.

The local used the Remind app during negotiations meetings to send updates and seek real-time input from members.

The teacher group’s biggest negotiations asks were around health insurance contributions. They secured an increase in the district’s contribution to the family premium, from 35% to 65%. Their contract also includes salary increases of 6% in 2023 and 3% in 2024 and a reduction in the number of salary steps.

Hermantown hopes to continue the momentum they built for future negotiations rounds and all union activities. They recently received Education Minnesota’s We Are One Solidarity Award in recognition of their efforts.

“We hope our local continues to stay engaged in future rounds and beyond,” said Marciniak. “The work never stops, really, and the more you can share the load and tap into people’s strengths and interests, the less cumbersome and overwhelming the work becomes.”

ESPs tout benefits of unemployment insurance; GOP legislators are skeptical

Minnesota’s new law giving education support professionals access to unemployment benefits in the summer provided an economic safety net that kept more of them in the profession this school year.

ESP members and parents testified about the benefits of the new program at a March 13 legislative hearing, where state officials released data showing it also cost a lot less than districts said it would.

Just under 18,000 ESPs received UI benefits last summer at a cost of about \$40 million, according to figures from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. School districts were almost fully reimbursed for those costs by the state.

The 2023 Legislature set aside \$135 million to fund the UI program through June 2027, and there are talks at the Capitol about extending that funding stream into future years, so districts aren’t footing the bill.

Unfortunately, leaders in many districts have used the potential cost of programs like UI and paid leave as an excuse for not settling fair contracts with teacher and ESP bargaining units.

For ESPs like Zumbrota-Mazepa paraprofessional Courtney Hammes, the extra bit of money she received from UI this past summer was a game changer.

“Instead of working three jobs this summer, I was able to work just one,” she said in her testimony. “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. In my district this year there wasn’t a turnover of staff. Everyone returned. In 12 years, that has never happened.”

Michelle Lancaster, a paraprofessional at Buffalo High School, had time this summer to help her daughter and son-in-law, who has an autoimmune disorder and is unable 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,” she said. “Without the unemployment insurance, I would not have been able to be as available for them.”

Several Republican legislators spoke in opposition of the UI program during the March 13 hearing, calling the testimony by ESPs and parents a “premature victory lap.” They say the money would be better spent on other efforts.

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Public employees in Minnesota now enjoy new protection for “concerted activities”

In 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), a central piece of New Deal legislation. Prior to passage in the early 20th century and the Great Depression years, harsh economic and social conditions and the de facto illegal status of unions led to labor militancy and innovative organization across the country. In partnership with a pro-worker administration and Congress, the NLRA provided uniform federal labor policy with institutionalized reform from a National Labor Relations Board that would adjudicate disputes and form policy responsive to the political status of the nation.

The law has been characterized as one of the most radical pieces of legislation ever passed in the United States. It contains collective rather than individual rights—a unique distinction in American law. The primary collective right is in what’s known as “Section 7” of the Act, guaranteeing employees “the right to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection.” Workers and unions have been filing unfair labor practice charges against employers for violating Section 7 rights since 1935, and the National Labor Relations Board and reviewing courts in that time have fleshed out what exactly the broad language in Section 7 entails.

But the NLRA does not apply to public sector workers, so it does not cover most Education Minnesota members. In Minnesota, the Public Employment Labor Relations Act (PELRA) governs workers in the public schools. And until recently, there was no Section 7 in PELRA, leaving public sector unions on uneasy footing when considering collective action to achieve their strategic goals.

The last time the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party enjoyed a trifecta in state government in 2012, the Minnesota legislature added a Section 7 provision to PELRA as well as other reforms. PELRA’s concerted activity provision mirrors that in the NLRA, giving workers the right to engage in concerted activities for

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

collective bargaining or other mutual aid and protection. However, since its passage, the Legislature routinely conditioned the law’s effectuation upon the funding and operation of the Public Employment Relations Board (PERB)—our state-level labor board that adjudicates disputes under PELRA. So even after it became law, for about a decade of divided state government, PELRA’s Section 7 right was not effective for most of that time. That changed again when the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party again gained full control of state government in 2022. The historic trifecta funded the PERB and PELRA’s Section 7 became enforceable – the light turned green on protected collective action with a legal remedy. Yet, although the law around Section 7 in the private sector had been well developed since 1935, it was still not entirely clear what protections that broad language would provide in Minnesota’s public spheres with their unique working and operational conditions.

We aren’t entirely without a guide for the kind of rights this law provides. The PERB and Minnesota courts look to NLRA precedent for guidance, especially where the laws have similar language, which is precisely the case for Section 7 rights. The NLRA precedent provides clear examples. The law is simple: It seeks to protect workers who act together—not individually—to improve their lot in work and life. This policy recognized the power of spontaneous worker organization and sought to protect it broadly.

One classic Section 7 case is *NLRB v. Washington Aluminum Co.*, involving a company that operated an aluminum fabrication facility in Baltimore, Maryland. There was no union in the shop—Section 7 rights apply to all workers in the NLRA and PELRA regardless

of whether there is a union that represents the workers. One evening the night watchman was unable to start the gas furnace, which served as the shop's primary source of heat, on a particularly cold day. Employees complained but the heat did not go on. All of the employees left work in protest and the company fired them all. Their case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court and Justice Hugo Black found that the activity was protected by the broad language of Section 7.* Washington Aluminum Co. is just one case of thousands that have given meaning to the right to engage in protected concerted activities for collective bargaining or mutual aid and protection. Some other examples of protected activities include:

- Handing out flyers to co-workers or the public about organizing a union or supporting collective bargaining.
- Picketing outside an employer's property.
- Wearing union buttons, T-shirts or other insignia in the workplace.
- Coordinated bargaining with other unions.
- Equal standing with management for union stewards.
- Union representation in disciplinary meetings.
- Employee rights to discuss with co-workers and the public wages, investigations, and other terms and conditions of employment.
- Prohibitions of employers from misclassifying employees as independent contractors.
- Prohibitions of employers from polling employees on union support or surveilling their Section 7 activities.
- Engaging in certain political protest affecting workers.

Many of these rights are fair game in the PELRA context, yet we do not have clear precedent from the PERB and Minnesota courts. Since the law went into effect in the summer of 2023, the difficult bargaining of the 2023-2025 cycle has produced situations where local unions have escalated their activities and come up against school district interference.

The Bemidji Education Association has a pending unfair labor practice charge that will test the application of PELRA's new Section 7. In Bemidji, teachers engaged in peaceful handbilling and informational picketing activities to get public support for their collective bargaining goals. They did these things during non-working time in a variety of non-working areas on

school district property such as sidewalks adjoining buildings and building entryways. School district administration directed employees and the local union in writing to cease and desist from engaging in those activities. Engaging the public during school events and student events are superior methods of success for the union's organizing purposes. Yet, the district's orders chilled employees' exercise of their protected rights. With the contract still expired and the parties still far apart in bargaining, the union filed an unfair labor practice charge to be able to resume their actions without interference or fear of discipline. In the charge, the union argues that employers cannot interfere with off-duty employees' right to access an employer's property to engage in protected concerted activities. Although a Beltrami County judge initially granted a temporary restraining order for the pending unfair labor practice, the judge ultimately refused to issue the order, and the charge remains pending with the PERB, a state agency with a three-member board (one member from labor, one member from management, and one neutral) appointed by the governor. On March 19, the PERB found merit to the association's charge and issued a complaint ordering a hearing. A decision from the PERB is imminent, which will help establish the foundation of public sector labor rights for years to come.

Bemidji is not alone in their escalated activities to show they are worth more than what is currently on the bargaining table. Locals in Waconia, Elk River and elsewhere are coming up against the same employer interference, restraint and coercion in response to educator collective action. PELRA's Section 7 and a functioning PERB gives us a clear path to fight back, but this law admittedly needs to develop by locals bringing charges. If you or your union are acting together to make things better and you experience any pushback, please contact your local union leadership or Education Minnesota Field Staff for advice on a potential unfair labor practice charge.

**Please note that any work stoppage that does not comply with the unique requirements of PELRA could be deemed an illegal strike, carrying significant consequences, including termination of participating employees and decertification of your union for two years!*



Raise your voice!

Education Minnesota members from around the state have been engaging in political action in their locals and intermediate organizations and at the Capitol. Locals have been having meetings with legislators in their districts and Education Minnesota also hosted its 2024 Political Conference in February which included members telling stories to reinforce our legislative asks to Gov. Tim Walz and House Speaker Rep. Melissa Hortman. Read more about the conference and how to get involved in the work on pages 14-15.

The 2024 legislative session has kicked off with press conferences around important bills such as increasing school counselors to meet recommended ratios and support for aspiring educators as they currently have to pay tuition while student teaching, which limits their ability to work while in school.

At Education Minnesota's 2017 Political Conference, then-governor candidate Walz was asked this question—what would you say to a colleague who says “I’m just not that into politics.” He said he would tell them, “Too bad, because politics is into you!”

“Educators cannot sit out of the political process. Everything we do in education is impacted by elected officials on school boards, state legislatures, state offices, U.S. Congress and all the way up to president,” said Vice President Monica Byron at the political conference.

Find ways to engage with your legislators and get involved with the 2024 campaign at www.educationminnesota.org.



Members of Education Minnesota's Aspiring Educators union met with Sen. Steve Cwodzinski, a retired teacher, about better supports for student teachers to better recruit young people into the profession.



South Washington County teacher Ona Wilcox shared why she is committed to electing a pro-public education and pro-union Minnesota House this fall. The investments made in 2023 by this Legislature is helping Wilcox's district, including increased funding for mental health staff.



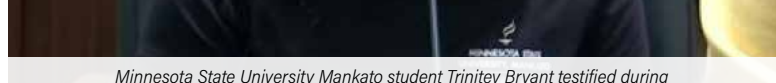
Minnesota State University Mankato student Trinitie Bryant testified during a hearing on SF 3804, a bill that would waive a student teachers' tuition during the semester they are working full time in a classroom.



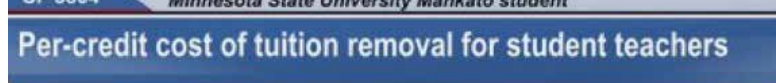
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Members from the Rochester area met with Sen. Liz Bolden while at the Capitol to push for important pension reform. (PHOTO CREDIT, John Vossen)



Members of the Minnesota Valley UniServ intermediate organization met with District 18 Reps. Jeff Brand and Luke Frederick and Sen. Nick Frentz. They discussed pensions, mental health, educator pay, mental health, class sizes and much more.



Mankato teacher and union leader Linda Howe-Wensel stood on stage at Education Minnesota's pension rally with Mankato-area Sen. Nick Frentz, who is the vice chair of the Legislative Commission on Pensions and Retirement.



Mounds View Education Association President Stacy Vanderport shared why her local has been involved in school board elections in the past, including in 2023. She encouraged all local unions to get involved in their local elections because of the direct impact on working and learning conditions.



Leaders from the Minnesota School Counselor Association joined bill author Rep. Kaela Berg and Roseville student Lilah Heiny at a news conference to highlight a proposal to address unmet mental health needs in schools due to some of the worst student-to-counselor ratios in the country.



Hundreds of educators packed the Capitol Rotunda Feb. 29 to push for improvements to the Teachers Retirement Association pension system.



Hundreds of educators packed the Capitol to demand pension reform be on the agenda of the Legislature this session. Photo by Ellen Perrault.

Pension bills move through Legislature

The 2024 session of the Minnesota Legislature has begun and multiple bills to support educator pensions are moving through the process. As of press time, no bill had been heard in committee this year, but multiple bills had been introduced.

The Minnesota Legislature runs on a two-year bill cycle, including a "budget" and "policy" session. Bills from last year that did not pass or were not delete-all amended are still alive for the 2024 session.

Bills from last year still alive:

HF2222/SF1938

This bill contains the large, overall recommendations from the first Pension Advisory Group, including a Normal Retirement Age of 62 or 35 years of service, COVID service credit for the 2020, 2021 and 2022 school years, and a change to a variable 1-3% COLA, tied to inflation. This is still a long-term goal, but it's

unlikely for the state budget to cover it this year. It was heard by the Legislative Commission on Pensions and Retirement.

HF3294/SF3314

This bill contains a Normal Retirement Age of 64. The bill as introduced was heard by the Legislative Commission on Pensions and Retirement. A modified version of this bill was passed as part of the taxes conference committee and will continue to be discussed this year.

Education Minnesota's Pension Advisory Group has been working for the past several months discussing priorities and options for legislative action. The penalty reduction bill that has House and Senate authors is a result of their work. Both of the authors, Rep. Dan Wolgamott from St. Cloud and Sen. Heather Gustafson from Vadnais Heights, spoke at the Feb. 29 pension rally at the Capitol.



What the pension penalty reduction bill addresses

Current teachers, regardless of how long they've worked, face over-penalization of their retirement benefits before age 62.

This bill lowers penalties in the TRA Tier 2 pension plan, dropping penalties to 3% between ages 58-63. This is a targeted approach to restore some equity between Tier 1 and Tier 2, allowing educators the flexibility to retire early if they need to without losing a significant amount of their pension. A Tier 2 member retiring at age 58 after 2025 would lose 17% less to penalties if this bill passes, compared how the plan works now with NRA 65. This targeted approach allows us to address this problem effectively with less state investment needed, reflecting the budget this policy session. This is a step in the right direction that we can do this year, while the work continues in the future.

Educators who have worked decades in service to our state deserve a pension benefit that takes care of them in retirement. More than half of all licensed teachers in Minnesota have left the profession, and many mid-career teachers and licensed staff concerned about this issue are considering leaving for the private sector to build a retirement plan. If we want to combat the educator shortage, we need legislators to consider improving benefits, like pensions.

Learn more about the pension reduction bill by watching the "Teacher Pension Penalty Reduction Bill: All-Member Meeting" on MEA Online.

Action items

This legislative session, we'll continue to post our growing list of resources at the end of each Pension Update. As you communicate about pension advocacy in your workplace, please share these resources with members who wish to get engaged.

- Use our easy action forms to reach out to legislators and ask for support of important pension bills!
- Sign up for the Pension Updates e-newsletter.
- Sign up to be a Pension Action Leader and we'll contact you about action items and advocacy to your state legislators. We need a PAL in every local and legislative district!
- Use our easy action form to contact legislative leadership asking for their support of state investment for pension improvements.
- Join the members-only Pension Advocacy Network private Facebook group, which is the best place to get updates, stay involved and ask questions.
- Watch our Pension 101 and Informational Update sessions on MEA Online.
- We encourage all members to make an appointment with TRA to discuss what your benefit currently looks like and what options you have.
- Request a stack of pension postcards from your field staff for your local. These postcards can act as a great tool for members to write to their legislators.

Sign up for these actions and learn more at edmn.me/pensions or by scanning this QR code!



Political conference kicks off 2024 election work

More than 500 Education Minnesota members attended the 2024 Political Conference Feb. 2-3 at the Radisson Blu Mall of America. The conference included a meeting with Gov. Tim Walz and House Speaker Rep. Melissa Hortman, as well as classes about election issues such as pay, pensions and health care and how to run for office.

“Our voices are elevated and heard when we join together as Education Minnesota,” said Vice President Monica Byron at the conference. “Through our democracy, and especially our union, we have the collective power to vote for public education so we can keep our collective bargaining rights, win full funding for our schools, strong retirements and much more. But we need educators like you at the forefront of this statewide movement for generational change — both in our workplaces and our communities.”

The member-led Education Minnesota Political Action Committee has laid out two goals for the 2024 election—to maintain our pro-educator and pro-labor majority in the Minnesota House of Representatives and to take the fight local and elect more pro-educator school board members who will defend our students’ freedom to learn, and our educators’ right to a fair contract.

“With the (House) majority, we can achieve better pay, fair pensions, affordable health care and sustainable working conditions. The Minnesota Senate and governor are not on the ballot this year, so the Minnesota House is the front line,” said PAC Chair and Education Minnesota Osseo President Ternesha Burroughs. “We face unprecedented, coordinated campaigns by extreme bigots and the billionaire class who are trying to take over our school boards and ban books. With more extreme school board members, our negotiations are harder and more taxing than ever. We need to organize, and fight back.”

The 2024 campaign is themed as “We’re Worth More: Pay, Pensions, Health Care” and the conference focused on achieving the support educators need on these important issues.

During the public meeting with Walz and Hortman, members from across the state were able to share their

stories about how legislative action—and in-action—affects them and their students.

Education Minnesota 2023-24 Education Support Professional of the Year Darci Brown, a bus driver from St. Francis, shared why ESPs like her deserve more respect and higher wages, something her local unit of drivers almost went on strike for last spring. She asked lawmakers for a minimum starting salary of \$25 an hour for all ESPs.

2023 Minnesota Teacher of the Year Michael Houston from St. Paul shared that while the Legislature made historic investments in schools last year, many educators are not seeing that money trickle down to them and asked that increased, dedicated funding for students and staff be prioritized.

Two members—St. Francis teacher and union leader Ryan Fiereck and aspiring educator Mellisa Larson—spoke about the need for pension reform as both a recruitment and retention tool for educators, as nine out of 10 districts now face an educator shortage.

Plainview-Elgin-Millville teacher Angie Matiash shared her health care story, including her family plan increasing more than \$6,000 per year in the last two years. She asked for support from lawmakers to make insurance affordable for all educators and all Minnesotans.

Cannon Falls teacher Cal Vande Hoef shared a story of why educator pay needs to be increased, including a minimum starting salary of \$60,000 for teachers. He shared that he is paid about \$10,000 less a year than nearby districts, who also get paid too little.

Walz and Hortman responded with commitments to support the asks and continue to work with educators to get real solutions to help educators, students and schools.

Other sessions of the conference included member speakers on why taking action around electing

pro-educator candidates at the state and local level is so important.

“Those endorsements were also key to rallying support from friendly organizations, some of which don’t normally work in local races. For them, looking up union endorsements on the MVEA or Education Minnesota website was the way to mobilize their members for our candidates,” said Mounds View Education Association President Stacy Vanderport, who shared her local’s story of endorsing candidates against a well-funded slate who were sharing anti-equity and anti-teacher messaging last fall. Her local won all of the seats to keep a board in place that is supportive of educators and students’ freedom to learn.

South Washington County teacher Ona Wilcox also spoke about her “why” for getting involved with elections.

“At my school—I watch our two mental health professionals try to do their best for nearly 600 students. Because of their high caseloads, they often have to prioritize students in crisis. This leaves hundreds of students in need—students who often slip through the cracks until they too suffer a crisis. That’s a terrible system,” Wilcox said. “Last year, the trifecta was able to pass dedicated funding for more school counselors, chemical dependency counselors, nurses, social workers and psychologists. This amounts to at least \$40,000 in additional funding for smaller districts each year—and can mean substantially more money for large districts like mine.”

Conference attendees committed to working in their buildings and campuses and worksites to engage with their colleagues about the election work.

More than 500 educators attended the 2024 Political Conference to learn how to engage with their colleagues around protecting the pro-educator, pro-union Minnesota House majority and get involved in local elections this fall.



Get involved in your local!

Education Minnesota is looking for worksite action leaders in each worksite and local across the state!

Worksite action leaders:

- Attend an in-person or virtual 60-minute Worksite Action Leader training.
- Host at least one nonpartisan voter engagement activity in your building. WALs will be reimbursed \$1.75/member for the costs of your activity.
- Share our 2024 Voter Guide and non-voter education materials with members in your building.
- Worksite Action Leaders who complete a training and submit a plan will receive a \$25 gift card after the campaign.
- Conduct one-on-one conversations with targeted voters in your building.
- Stay in contact with your local union’s GOTV leader and your assigned political organizer.

If you’re interested, go to www.edmnvotes.org or speak to your local union president!

NEW local funding support for school board, referendum work

Education Minnesota’s Political Action Committee makes funds available to locals for use in campaigns. To be eligible, at least 90% of a local’s members must be contributing to the Education Minnesota PAC. Qualifying locals are eligible for reimbursement for up to two mailings for referendum campaigns and four mailings for school board campaigns to be sent to the targeted voter universe. Locals also qualify for up to \$2 per member for other qualifying expenses. Mailers must be printed and mailed by Education Minnesota.

Education Minnesota is now paying two \$400 stipends per local to members to fill Campaign Coordinator(s) positions for local elections. Coordinators will be approved for locals that run an approved phone bank program. No phoning, no coordinator(s).

Local presidents can get more information from Education Minnesota staff about this funding program.



Educators of color gather for change at EMAC Summit

One hundred educators of color came together in mid-February at the Heritage Center in Brooklyn Park to learn about the past, present and future of educators and students of color. Educators discussed the change needed to provide an equitable public education system for all students.

The second annual Education Minnesota Ethnic Minority Affairs Committee Summit included conversations on dismantling white supremacy in education, supporting education support professionals, decolonizing mental health, centering students' multilingual identities in learning spaces, fostering inclusivity for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) union members and more. National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers guests joined to give keynote speeches and lead many breakout sessions, including AFT Secretary-Treasurer Fedrick Ingram.

Speakers highlighted the needs of educators and students of color in Minnesota. As the student population becomes more diverse, they said the state

needs to strongly support educators of color who reflect the identity and learning needs of the student body. Though Minnesota excels in educational outcomes for students, students of color have faced some of the worst educational disparities in the nation for decades. Minnesota can do more for its students of color, the speakers said, and that starts with hearing, organizing and supporting educators of color.

Ligaya Domingo, keynote speaker and racial justice and education director for SEIU Healthcare 1199NW, said: "A big part of change is actually centering the voices of impacted people of color, and bringing people together to speak about their experience. This is an incredible space. I think it's amazing that the union has

put resources into a convening like this. Things like this will help people have the energy to keep going, to bring them out of the isolation in their classrooms and into a collective experience. People are telling me about their experiences, some of them being the only educator of color in their buildings, and how they want to just give up – but being able to connect with people in this space is what's keeping them going. I think it's well worth the investment and resources to be able to have people connect on their experiences. People get so in their silo about the thing that they're doing every day, and so, to be able to pop out of that in a reflective space and see 'oh, I'm not the only one who's feeling this or experiencing this' is powerful."

Hosting the summit required the work of many educators, including members Kimberly Colbert and Cassandra Sheppard, educators of color who led breakout sessions, and educators of color who serve on EMAC, not to mention the hard-working staff of color who support all of them.



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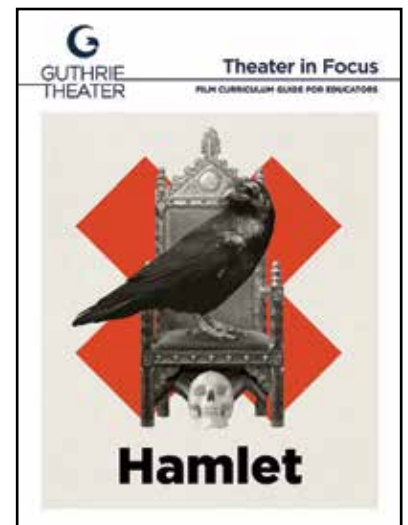
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Member honor roll

Congratulations to the Education Minnesota members who have been honored for their work in the last year.

2023 Rural Educators of Excellence

Every year, the Minnesota Rural Education Association honors educators from across the state with their Educators of Excellence Awards. Honored in 2023 were:

South Central

- Carin Hagemeyer, Belgrade-Brooten-Elrosa

South

- Kristin Doeden, Worthington

North Central

- Angie Hurtig, Bertha-Hewitt

North

- Melissa Oberg, Cook County

2023 Council on Economic Education Educators of the Year

Each year, the Minnesota Council on Economic Education honors Minnesota educators who effectively teach economic and personal finance principles using innovative, culturally responsive and creative teaching practices. The awards honor teachers who incorporate exemplary teaching techniques that improve the economic and personal finance understanding of their students, both in and out of the classroom.

Elementary Educator of the Year

- Katie June Calvert, St. Francis

High School Educator of the Year

- Joel Coleman, Minnetonka

Art Educators of Minnesota 2023 awards

Art Educator of the Year

- John Tinsley, Roseville

Rookie Art Educator of the Year

- Kate Trosen, Bemidji

Elementary Art Educator of the Year

- Kristen Dollman Stoll, St. Cloud

High School Art Educator of the Year

- Tara Hager, Hawley

2023 Presidential Award Minnesota State Finalists

The Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching is the nation's highest honor for U.S. K-12 science, technology, engineering, mathematics and/or computer science teachers. The award is administered by the National Science Foundation on behalf of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. The state finalists are selected by a Minnesota committee and then their applications move on to the national review.

Science finalists

- Laine Bristow, Hiawatha Academies
- Jill Jensen, Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan
- Beth Robelia, St. Paul

Math finalist

- Alexis Wolf, North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale

2023 Science Teachers of the Year

Minnesota Science Teacher Association Science Teaching Awardee (Elementary)

- Josh Leonard, St. Paul

Minnesota Science Teacher Association Science Teaching Awardee (Secondary)

- Debra Las, Rochester

2023 Agriculture Educators of the Year

Every year, the Minnesota Association of Agricultural Educators recognizes individuals and programs.

Outstanding Ag Ed Teacher

- Eric Sawatzke, West Central Area High School

Outstanding Early Career Teacher

- Victoria Barka, Kerkhoven-Murdock-Sunberg

Teacher Turn the Key

- Harley Braun, St. Paul

Outstanding Teacher Mentor

- TJ Brown, South Central College

2023-24 Social Studies Teachers of the Year

Each year, the Minnesota Council for the Social Studies honors three Teachers of the Year at the annual awards dinner. These three teachers, representing Elementary, Middle School, High School, and Lifetime Achievement, are nominated by colleagues, supervisors, parents and students.

2023 Middle

- Maranda Cameron, Elk River

2023 High

- Christopher Griggs, Edina

2024 Middle

- Autumn Heitzman, St. Cloud

2024 High

- Aaron Johnson, Sauk Rapids-Rice

2024 Minnesota State Board of Trustees Awards for Excellence

The Board of Trustees Awards for Excellence acknowledge and provide system-wide recognition for consistently superior commitment to student learning and to encourage the ongoing pursuit of excellence at the colleges and universities of Minnesota State.

Educator of the Year

- Kendra-Ann Seenandan-Sookdeo, Minneapolis College

Outstanding Educators

- Sharon Bergen, Dakota County Technical College
- Garrett Byrne, Saint Paul College
- Cathy Crea, Century College
- Don Drummond, Minnesota State Community and Technical College
- Anna Francisco, Minnesota North College
- Amy Gonyea, Saint Paul College
- Jane Greathouse, South Central College
- Luke Green, St. Cloud Technical and Community College
- Jody Hibma, Minnesota State Community and Technical College

- Theresa Hill, Rochester Community and Technical College
- Paul Howlett, Hennepin Technical College
- Neil Johnston, Century College
- Susan Kasahara, Normandale Community College
- Vicki Kintop, Riverland Community College
- Elizabeth Micheel, Minnesota State College Southeast
- Ryan Miller, Minnesota North College
- Siau Yean Montgomery, Northwest Technical College
- Carrie Naughton, Inver Hills Community College
- Paige Riehl, Anoka-Ramsey Community College
- Jacqueline Semaan, Lake Superior College
- Molly Skjei, Normandale Community College
- Heidi Tarus, Minnesota West Community and Technical College
- Mike Tieleman, Anoka Technical College
- Ruth Wollersheim, Century College



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MEMBERS WANT TO KNOW

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- Lost your health insurance? No worries, we're here to help!
- Interested in Education MN ESI group Medicare plans? Let's explore together!

Looking for more resources? Join one of our upcoming monthly events. Our seminars are offered in person or via webinar. Contact Sandra Juetten for more details.



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THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
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Final opportunity for 2023-24 Education Minnesota Foundation grants!

The Education Minnesota Foundation for Excellence in Teaching and Learning has multiple grants available this year. For details about the grants and how to apply, go to www.edmnfoundation.org. There's a grant waiting for you!

Professional Development Grants for teachers, ESPs and higher education faculty

Awarded twice a year, ESPs and teachers may request up to \$1,500, and higher education faculty may request up to \$3,000 to take the lead in acquiring and sharing new skills and knowledge. A Professional Development Grant can also be used for groups to either attend professional development or be trained at their worksite. Deadline: April 5

Second-Year Classroom Grants

Previous classroom-focused grant recipients may request up to \$3,000 to expand on their original objectives, and who have the potential to realize additional goals based on the learning and outcomes of their first grant. Deadline: April 5

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