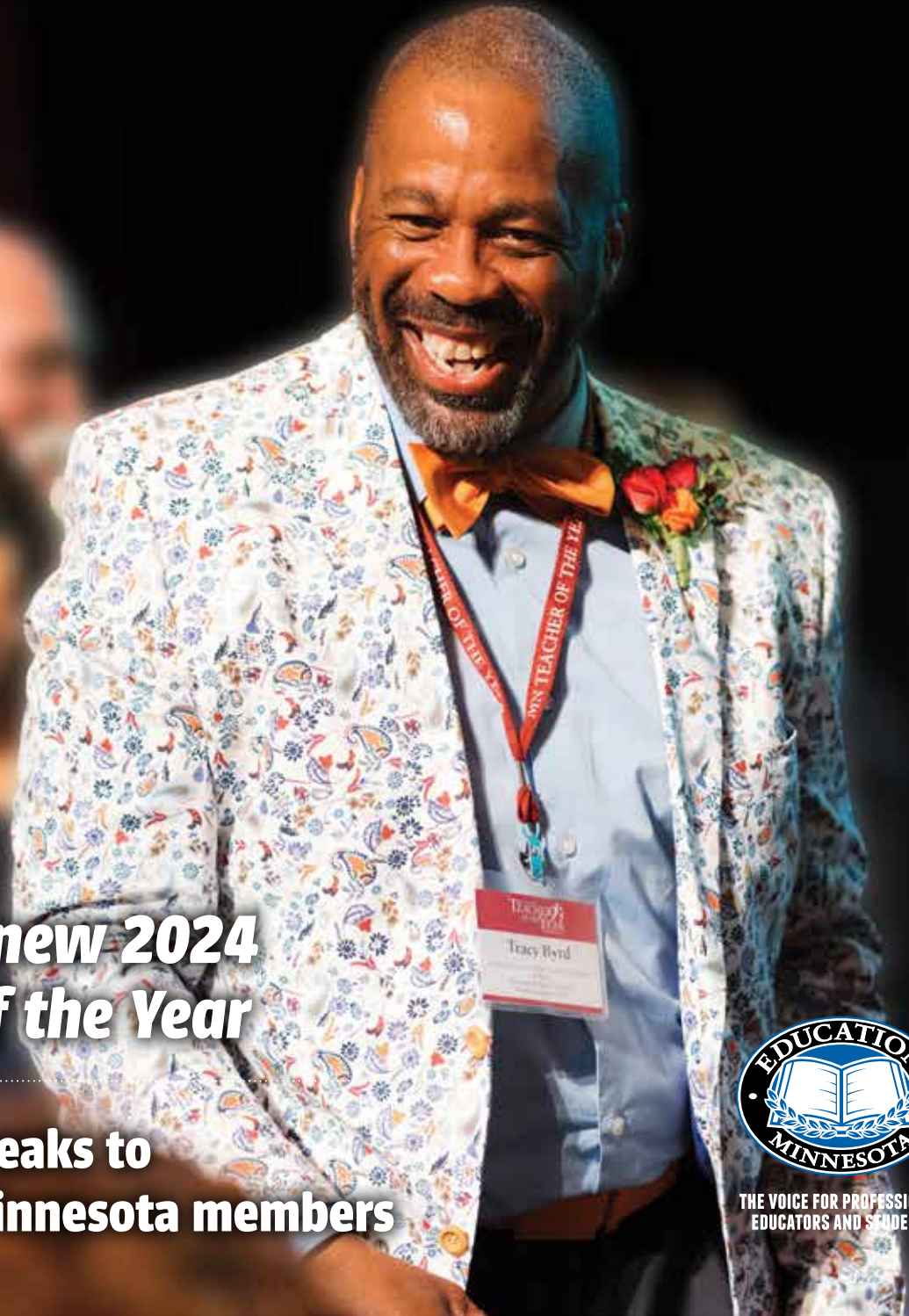


M I N N E S O T A

EDUCATOR

JUNE / JULY 2024



***Meet our new 2024
Teacher of the Year***

**First Lady speaks to
Education Minnesota members**



THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

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

As of Oct. 1, 2023, student loan borrowers have had student loan payments resume and interest is accruing again after a three-and-a-half year pause.

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

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

Income-driven repayment plan, or IDR, enrollment can be completed online here:

www.studentaid.gov/idr

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

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

meaonline.learnupon.com

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





**THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS**

June/July 2024 – Volume 26, No. 6

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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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Let's 'celebrate' educators a little less and care for them a little more

I may have surprised a few people at the annual Minnesota Teacher of the Year banquet when I said it was time to stop celebrating teachers and other educators.

After all, the Teacher of the Year program is all about praising teachers and teaching. It's why Education Minnesota is the main sponsor. On May 5, we honored 11 educators as finalists and named Tracy Byrd as the 2024 Minnesota Teacher of the Year.

In my remarks, I suggested that the morale and working conditions in Minnesota's schools demanded a change of focus. Minnesota should celebrate educators a little less and care for them more, I said. Those aren't the same things.

To celebrate teachers, we honor them publicly. To care for them, we show our concern privately. It's the difference between saying something and doing something.

Elected leaders and superintendents can cheer for teachers all year long without ever really asking how they're doing and listening—really listening—when they answer.

Because if we're listening to teachers—and education support professionals and our colleagues in higher education—we will hear that educators are not OK.

As I've traveled across the state with the officers of Education Minnesota, I've heard the cost of living has risen so much faster than salaries that many educators simply can't afford to continue working in schools and pay for food, transportation and housing.

A few years ago, a new teacher could make it work by cutting corners at the end of the month. Now every trip to the grocery store is proof that those days have passed. Many educators need a second job—or a new career.

Believe it or not, there was a time when affordable health insurance was a benefit of the job and attracted people to the profession. Not anymore. This year, greedy health insurance companies are raising rates by double-digit percentages in many districts and pricing teachers out of their careers.

When colleagues with families say they can't afford to take their kids to the doctor, and they can't afford for their families to get sick, something is very wrong.

Finally, the mental health crisis among students isn't just growing, it's changed.

I've been in public education for a long time. I've never heard so many stories about educators being injured on the job as I have in the past year and a half.

There's a reason many local unions negotiated contracts this year that include new pools of paid days off for educators to recover from injuries and trauma.

It's no wonder reforming the pension system has become a top priority for thousands of educators and for Education Minnesota itself. No one can work in schools as long today as they did a generation ago. If you're doing it right in the 21st century, the job just takes too much out of you.

And yet we're still expected, and willing, to stand up for the vision of public education for all students that attracted so many of us to the profession in the first place.

In the face of a cynical, national movement to whitewash the curriculum, ban books and cut mental health services, educators stand for the freedoms of our students to learn, read, feel welcome and access mental health supports.

Yes, we have a lot on our plates.

While educators appreciate the social media celebrations, Friday pizza parties and official proclamations, what we really need are wages that support a family, better pensions, affordable health care and safer worksites.

Maybe this year will be the year Minnesotans show they really for their educators.

Together.



Twitter: @DeniseSpecht

Student loan payments have resumed. Our Degrees Not Debt team is here to help!

As of last fall, student loan payments have resumed for borrowers and interest is accruing again. Many borrowers will benefit from taking advantage of the newest income-driven repayment plan launched last year, called the SAVE plan. This plan provides affordable monthly payments based on 5% of discretionary income and limits interest accrual for those who make their payments each month. As of February, the plan provides forgiveness for borrowers who have at least 10 years of repayments and have an original balance of \$12,000 or less.

IDR enrollment can be completed online at www.studentaid.gov/idr.

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 to Sandra Opheim of Staples-Motley for being this issue's winning submission!

We love seeing all of the places where you are reading your Minnesota Educator. Email a photo of where you are reading your Minnesota Educator to educator@edmn.org or share it on social using #mneducator to be entered into a drawing to win a \$50 Target gift card. Submissions are due July 10.



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 just a lot of hard work, a lot of late nights and long hours. There are a lot of people in my major who are dropping out, switching majors or leaving the career entirely because once we get to this point, a lot of people can't handle the financial burden.

”

– Education Minnesota Aspiring Educators President Caitlin Efta in an April 30 StarTribune article titled “Bipartisan bill proposes student teacher stipends to combat teacher shortage in Minnesota.”

2024 Teacher of the Year Tracy Byrd aims to provide fair access to education

Minnesota's 2024 Teacher of the Year has walked a nontraditional path to the classroom. But ninth-grade English and Language Arts teacher Tracy Byrd wanted to provide the access to quality education that he found lacking in his own experience. "Growing up, I never had a teacher who looked like me," Byrd said. "I wanted to make sure that other students don't have that same problem."

Byrd teaches at Washburn High School in Minneapolis, which he also graduated from. He worked in the financial field until 2008, when he left to work in the Wayzata school district, starting out as a hall supervisor and a football and track-and-field coach. Through that work, Byrd decided he wanted to pursue a teaching degree so that he could be a resource to students who might not have as much support. "Providing equitable access to students within the classroom is the constant task in front of educators today—access to different professionals, perspectives, experiences, technology, individual instruction that enhances their ability to learn," Byrd said in materials submitted for the award. After working as a full-time ESP while also earning his bachelor's from Metropolitan State College in 2017, he decided to leave Wayzata and return to his alma mater, Washburn.

"The learning gap begins with access," Byrd said. "Once a student's needs are not met as well as another student's, the learning gap emerges." Byrd said it's important for educators to be intentional in ensuring all students have what they need to be successful. "If it's not addressed...by the time students enter their senior year of high school, those gaps become substantial."

Byrd's classroom policies are designed to meet students where they are while also pushing them to move forward. That begins with creating an environment that helps students to be prepared: in his classroom, Byrd keeps a supply of paper, pencils, backpacks and snacks, along with hats and gloves in the wintertime. "Think about Maslow's hierarchy of needs," he said. "Students can't learn until those basic needs are met."



2024 Teacher of the Year Tracy Byrd (left) with his father at the annual banquet to honor the finalists and awardees.

Byrd takes a flexible approach to assignments and due dates while maintaining high expectations. He gives them two opportunities to complete each assignment: a due date and a final deadline. If students submit the assignment by the due date, then he will provide feedback and give them the chance to revise it for a higher score. If they do not submit anything by the due date, students can still submit by the deadline—but they do not receive feedback and are not able to revise for a higher score. Byrd says that this method is effective because it gives students autonomy. He said, "On average, I have about 85% of my students using the submit and revise method regularly."

Katie Murphy-Olsen, an English as an additional language teacher at Minneapolis Edison High School, described Byrd as the "epitome of excellence and integrity in public education." In her nomination letter for Byrd, she spoke about his transformative impact on students: "From Socratic seminars to meaningful formative assignments to sharing personal stories to summative projects, Tracy's ninth graders begin their high school career as students and, if they accept his invitation to move towards academic excellence, enter tenth grade as scholars."

Tracy Byrd is the 60th honoree to be named Minnesota Teacher of the Year.

Ten others honored as Teacher of the Year finalists

Besides Byrd, 10 other teachers were also finalists for the 2024 Minnesota Teacher of the Year award. We asked them to share some reasons why they teach, which we have shared below.



"I teach because regardless of our adversities or our circumstances, every child deserves to find their voice, to create, to explore, and to find a path of resilience through education. I teach to heal not just myself, but the world around me."

Rachel Betterley, North Woods School, St. Louis County Schools, visual arts, 8-12



"I get to spend my day with 11- to 13-year-olds who approach life with fresh eyes and an amazing amount of spunk and quirkiness. I get to come alongside kids and be part of their journey."

Laura Jensen, Hopkins North Middle School, Hopkins Public Schools, reading, 7



"I teach to see that joy and spark that students get in their eyes when they finally understand a concept or a singing game or an instrument part. I feel most alive when I am working with my students and that is why I teach."

Rebecca Buck, Gideon Pond Elementary, Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School District, music, K-5



"I try really hard in my class to remind students that learning is fun because learning is also a lot of hard work. Before they leave my class, I want them to be better researchers, better writers, better collaborators, better communicators. It's not easy, but I love the challenge—it brings me back every day."

Jason Jirsa, Washburn High School, Minneapolis Public Schools, social studies, 9-12



"I get to build real relationships with my students and help them build their self-esteem and gain confidence, to help them feel appreciated, seen and heard. I have the privilege to celebrate their accomplishments and identities every day."

Susanne Collins, Edgerton Elementary School, Roseville Area Schools, 6



"I often think of the world as a giant puzzle: we each have a piece and each of those pieces is unique. With those pieces, we can create something more beautiful and powerful than anything we can create on our own. I teach because I want every person to know their unique selves matter."

Michelle Morse-Wendt, Turtle Lake Elementary School, Mounds View Public Schools, 4



"I love hearing from my past students about how they're doing in their life and how they're successful. My students bring me hope and joy for the future—they are going to be the change. They help me grow and be a better person and a teacher."

Sarah Dallum, Valley View Elementary School, Bloomington Public Schools, 5



"When I see the light bulb go off and students understand, make connections, take what they've learned and apply it...it gives me the fulfillment of seeing the next generation of students become something great."

Jamie Williams, Capitol Hill Gifted and Talented Magnet School, Saint Paul Public Schools, U.S. history, 7



"My students are brilliant, kind, thoughtful and funny. Helping them grow into adults—the next generation who's going to change the world—is the greatest privilege."

Marie Hansen, Burnsville High School, Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School District, AVID/English, 10-11



"My teaching philosophy is based off of forming lifelong partnerships in and out of the classroom. I love that I am able to see my students grow and learn and play as they become active members of society. I get to help set the foundation of their educational journey."

Ellen Wu, Alice Smith Elementary, Hopkins Public Schools, kindergarten



First Lady Dr. Jill Biden visits Minnesota to launch “Educators for Biden” campaign

Fellow educator and First Lady of the United States, Dr. Jill Biden, led a rally to formally launch the “Educators for Biden” campaign with Education Minnesota. Dr. Biden, along with Education Minnesota President Denise Specht, NEA President Becky Pringle and AFT President Randi Weingarten, spoke to members about the historic public education investments the Biden administration has made.

The National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers were among President Joe Biden's earliest and strongest supporters in 2020, and the Educators for Biden campaign aims to mobilize that support once again for his reelection—starting in Minnesota.

Minnesota educators recently demonstrated firsthand how to use their political power to create change. In 2022, educators and community supporters of public education elected a pro-public education trifecta; as a result, last year our state leaders passed landmark

legislation that includes historic financial investments into public education, 12 weeks of paid family medical leave, important steps forward on pension reform and paid training for education support professionals. Now, state and national leaders are hoping to build on that momentum to reelect pro-public education and labor candidates in November.

The First Lady's speech highlighted her personal connection as an educator and union member, as well as the Biden administration's priorities for public education. Dr. Biden spoke about the difficulty of teaching during the pandemic and praised educators for stepping up in the face of unprecedented challenges: “Your efforts were extraordinary, but they weren't surprising, because teaching is a calling and all of you answered that call. You deserve a president who recognizes your service.”

Education Minnesota President Denise Specht spoke about the shared values of our organization and the Biden administration: “We are a state of educators who

are ready to fight for the promise of public education for all students, from their first day in preschool to their last day of college.”

NEA President Becky Pringle highlighted the contrast between the former president and the current one. “We can’t forget what happened under that president,” she said. “But we also can’t forget all that’s happened under this one. President Biden and Vice President Harris are the strongest champions of public education, of educators, and of the labor movement that we have ever seen in the White House.”

AFT President Randi Weingarten echoed this sentiment and reiterated the president’s support for labor unions, describing how he is the first president in history to walk a picket line with striking workers. “We have a President and a First Lady who not only share these aspirations, but work every day to make them a reality,” Weingarten said.

The Biden administration’s historic investments into students and educators include granting over \$1 billion in debt relief and dramatically expanding Public Service Loan Forgiveness, or PSLF, to ease the crushing burden of student loan debt; passing the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act to ensure safer schools for educators and taking executive action to expand background checks for weapons purchases; dramatically increasing funding for mental health counselors; and providing funds for universal school meals.

Education Minnesota-Osseo President Ternisha Burroughs shared how she has benefited from the Biden administration’s student debt relief programs. A math teacher, Burroughs tried for 15 years to receive loan forgiveness; however, because of the red tape and technical requirements imposed by prior administrations, she was never successful in her application. Under the Biden Administration’s expanded eligibility guidelines for PSLF, Burroughs was finally able to have all her debt forgiven last summer.

Burroughs said she is supporting President Biden because “every teacher and every public servant has it better off under Joe Biden.” This sentiment was shared by Education Minnesota Aspiring Educators President Caitlin Efta. “It was wonderful to meet our First Lady,”

Efta said. “I had the opportunity to talk to her about the paid student teaching bill EMAE is working to pass. She was really engaged in the issue—asking to learn more and offering her support—and it meant a lot to speak with a leader whose actions align with their words.”

The First Lady concluded her remarks by encouraging educators to “vote like democracy is on the line—because it is.”

There are several offices on the ballot for the Nov. 5 election, including the president, one of Minnesota’s U.S. senators, all of Minnesota’s delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives and all of Minnesota’s state House members. To learn more and stay up to date on the latest election information, visit www.edmnvotes.org.



Education Minnesota members hold signs at the “Educators for Biden” campaign event.



Delegates chart course for union work at 2024 Representative Convention

Education Minnesota hosted its annual Representative Convention on April 19 and 20 in Bloomington. Delegates from locals across the state met to discuss agenda items that will guide the union's work for the upcoming year.

The 500 delegates convened and passed action items, had robust debate, heard from state and national speakers and honored Education Minnesota award recipients.

After a full day of discussion and debate, delegates approved action items to have Education Minnesota:

- Work through the Pension Advocacy Group, or PAG, to encourage members' participation in the pension movement by identifying and training members as Pension Advocacy Leaders, or PALs, to organize locals across the state to advocate for improved pensions during the 2024 election cycle and the 2025 budget discussion.
- Promote and support locals to designate a member who will lead and coordinate pension reform actions for their local during the school year as a "Pension Reform Specialist."
- Focus on the educator health care crisis by organizing and advocating for a statewide mandatory educator health insurance pool in the 2025 legislative session.
- Affirm and support resolutions made by the national AFL-CIO, NEA, and AFT calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.
- Put work and funding into the member-led Political Action Committee 2024 to organize members at work to vote for pro-education legislative candidates, as well as encouraging locals to build power through school board elections and endorsements.
- Form an ad hoc committee to evaluate the option for sliding scale membership dues for educators within their first five years of teaching who would like to join Education Minnesota but are experiencing financial hardship.

Action items are specific directives to Education Minnesota that require a specific action. They generally expire at the next Representative Convention.

There were no board positions up for election this year, but Education Minnesota did honor several awardees, including ESP of the Year Darci Brown, Human Rights Award winner Zak Amin, Peterson-Schaubach Leadership Award winner Tracy Detloff, and We Are One Award winner Hermantown Local 1096.

The Peterson-Schaubach Leadership Award honors a leader who has made outstanding contributions to Education Minnesota or its locals. This year's recipient helped create Education Minnesota's Degrees, Not Debt program to educate members on navigating student loan forgiveness.

The Human Rights Award honors a member who uses their advocacy to advance human and civil rights. This year's winner established a Kurdish heritage class to teach Kurdish-American students about Kurdish language and culture.

The We Are One Solidarity Award is given annually to an Education Minnesota local union or group of active members demonstrating outstanding or significant union leadership. This year's recipient was Education Minnesota, Hermantown Local 1096 for exceptional advocacy and engagement around bargaining to negotiate a strong contract for their members.



New London-Spicer educator Tracy Detloff wins Education Minnesota's Peterson-Schaubach Leadership Award

Minnesota currently ranks fifth in the nation for student loan debt, with an average debt load of \$30,894 for state college students. While there are programs available for educators to receive debt relief, the ever-changing requirements have historically been difficult to navigate.

After seeing a union brochure at her school about loan forgiveness programs, New London-Spicer special education teacher Tracy Detloff began the intense process of navigating the programs. After a few tries, she was approved and her student debt was forgiven. She then realized that there were others in her district who may not know that they could benefit from the program.

She began leading workshops to present information about the loan forgiveness process to other members of her local and in Central Lakes. "An Education Minnesota staff person called me and asked me what I knew about these programs," said Detloff. "They came to my work, and I gave them all the information on the different types of loan forgiveness for teachers in Minnesota. From there, Education Minnesota went on to create Degrees, Not Debt." This national recognized program is one of Education Minnesota's most popular programs and has helped many members receive student debt relief.

Detloff characterizes her leadership style as focusing on support and empowerment. "I think a good leader is a supporter of everybody," Detloff said. "I used to always do things for people but now I realize somebody who is a good leader will show you how to do it for yourself."



Tracy Detloff, New London-Spicer, poses with the Peterson-Schaubach Leadership Award with Education Minnesota Secretary-Treasurer Rodney Rowe, left, and Vice President Monica Byron, right, at the 2024 Education Minnesota Representative Convention.

Detloff's coworkers describe her as a passionate, caring leader with the ability to bring people together. "Tracy has a very positive leadership style," said Chad Schmiesling, a math teacher at New London-Spicer High School. "She's very helpful and she communicates very well. She's passionate about the union...naturally, people gravitate towards that."

Kelly Johnson, KCEO facilitator for New London-Spicer Schools, agreed. "When she serves the staff here, the larger region of the CLU, and the broader membership of Education Minnesota, she serves with her heart," Johnson said.

Because of her leadership on student loan debt relief, along with her leadership in Central Lakes United and in her local, Detloff received the 2024 Education Minnesota Peterson-Schaubach Leadership Award, which recognizes leaders for outstanding contributions to our organization, its locals and the core purpose of our union.

Moorhead teacher Zak Amin wins Education Minnesota's 2024 Human Rights Award

The Moorhead school district is home to a large Kurdish-speaking population—other than English, it is the most common language in the district and is spoken in the homes of 239 families. But Moorhead High School ESL (English as a second language) teacher Zak Amin noticed that there was a cultural divide between parents and children. “The parents were speaking Kurdish, but the children were speaking English. They understood each other, but there was a big gap,” Amin said.

To help bridge that gap, Amin created a Kurdish heritage and culture class that launched last fall. Amin, who has worked as a liaison to Kurdish families, says that one of his goals is to help the parents become more Americanized while helping the kids develop a sense of pride in their Kurdish heritage so that the parents and children can bond. In addition to teaching Kurdish in Moorhead schools during the day, he teaches English to many of his students' parents at night.

The community response to the class has been overwhelmingly positive. Students say it's helped them connect with their culture and develop their identity. “I think it's pretty cool. It gives us an opportunity to represent ourselves and embrace who we are,” said one Moorhead student. “Some of us weren't born in Kurdistan—some of us were born here. This class gives us the opportunity to learn our history, language and culture.”



Zak Amin, Moorhead, poses with the Human Rights Award with Education Minnesota Secretary-Treasurer Rodney Rowe, left, and Vice President Monica Byron, right, at the 2024 Education Minnesota Representative Convention.

Another student spoke about how the class has strengthened her relationship with her parents and her Kurdish language skills. “My parents are so impressed because I'm speaking to them in Kurdish, I'm telling them about history I've learned, about songs I've learned—and they're so happy that I'm connecting with my culture.”

Amin says his goal is to make Kurdish a world language one day. “Even if I cannot do it,” he said, “I would do my best to help whoever takes that responsibility.”

For his work establishing this class to help create a safe and equitable learning environment for Moorhead students, Amin was honored with the Education Minnesota Human Rights Award at the 2024 Representative Convention.

Minnesota ranks 15th in teacher pay, 19th in ESP pay, NEA report says

Although Minnesota has made strides to increase educator pay—with successful union work driving much of these increases—teacher and ESP pay are still struggling to keep up with inflation and private sector salaries.

A report recently released by the National Education Association (NEA) on educator pay shows that Minnesota ranked 15th in teacher pay and 19th in education support professional (ESP) pay. For the 2022-23 fiscal year, the average teacher salary was \$70,005 and the average ESP salary was \$34,289. For starting teacher salaries, our state ranked 25th in the nation, with an average of \$43,181.

An almost 4% increase in salaries from 2021-22 to 2022-23 brought Minnesota above the national average of \$69,544. Our state has also seen a sizeable jump in average teacher salary over the past several years: in 2019, the average teacher salary was \$61,362. These increases are largely due to the work our members have done to build solidarity and collective power through their union. NEA's report found that in states with collective bargaining, both teacher and ESP pay are significantly higher than in states where collective bargaining is banned.

These gains are important, but Minnesota's educator pay is not yet high enough to combat the educator shortage and rising inflation. While educator pay has increased, it has not outpaced inflation. According to the Economic Policy Institute, a one-parent and one-child family must make \$63,957 to earn a living wage in Minnesota. This means starting teacher salaries are around \$20,000 per year below the threshold for a living wage.

Furthermore, the teacher pay gap was 72 cents on the dollar for the 2022-23 fiscal year. That means that, on average, Minnesota teachers make only 72 cents for every dollar made by a private-sector professional with similar experience and education. This gap limits the ability of districts to attract and retain educators. Our

state continues to struggle with an educator shortage. According to the 2023 Supply and Demand Report, 84% of school districts are impacted by the shortage. One third of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years, and the number of first-year educators has decreased every year since 2017.*

Education Minnesota is leading the movement for fair educator pay. We have assisted locals on the ground by providing support through the bargaining process; we have spearheaded statewide communications such as digital ads and a microsite that highlights how lagging educator pay contributes to the teacher shortage (which you can check out at supportmneducators.org).

Legislatively, we have called for an across-the-board salary increase for all teachers, raising the starting salary to \$60,000 and establishing a minimum wage of \$25/hour for all public school employees.

Because of the efforts of Education Minnesota members and allies to elect a pro-public education trifecta, the 2023 state budget included historic public education investments, such as 12 weeks of paid family leave and more funding for districts to increase educator pay. However, against Education Minnesota's recommendation, much of that money was sent into district's general funds instead of being specifically earmarked for educator pay increases, so many locals have had to negotiate for those funds at the bargaining table.

As we move forward into the 2024 election season, Education Minnesota members have the opportunity to continue building upon the legislative progress made in 2023 by supporting and working with leaders who recognize that educators are worth more and will take steps to increase educator pay.

**Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board 2023 Biennial Minnesota Teacher Supply and Demand Report, <https://mn.gov/pelsb/board/reports/>*

Local ESP chapters make gains at the bargaining table

After historic investments by the Legislature during the 2023 session, Education Minnesota advised local unions to build momentum as they headed into contract negotiations. Under the unifying campaign, “We’re Worth More,” we encouraged members to bargain boldly—and our ESP locals rose to the challenge.

In the middle of a continued educator shortage that is impacting education positions from certified teachers to paraprofessionals to bus drivers and everyone in between, local education support professional chapters across the state have come together and successfully secured significant wins for their local members. Some examples are shared below:

New Richland-Hartland-Ellendale-Geneva

Through years of building capacity and strategic organizing, the ESP chapter of New Richland-Hartland-Ellendale-Geneva (NRHEG) was able to secure a contract that makes them more equitable with other hourly workers in the district. Their contract doubles the number of paid holidays—they now have six paid holidays instead of three. This contract also includes a \$1.20/hour pay increase each year.

NRHEG ESP local leader Jennifer Classon spoke about how union training, specifically the Collective Bargaining and Organizing Conference (CBOC), helped their members become stronger negotiators. She shared how the local had ideas for what they wanted out of a contract but were not sure how to approach bargaining. “Knowing what we wanted was one thing ... how to get there was another,” she said. “Then the opportunity came for our negotiating team to attend the CBOC. We learned so much ... our takeaway was to go big; so that’s what we decided to do.”

Classon spoke about how member engagement and solidarity led to their success. “To be a successful negotiating team, (we must) be a united front, go after what we deserve, and never give up.”

East Grand Forks

East Grand Forks bus drivers secured a strong contract that has a total package value of 21%. Their agreement includes:

- A \$2.50/hour pay increase in year one and a \$1.50/hour increase in year two.
- \$100 increase each year for their HRA contributions.
- Additional \$20/week for perfect attendance, with a carve-out protecting employees who need to be gone for a health condition requiring regular doctor visits.
- Access to retirement benefits during their second year of employment.
- \$500 recruitment bonus for employees who bring in new bus drivers.

Ogilvie

Ogilvie ESPs negotiated a contract that improves wages and working conditions. In addition to a 6.4% wage increase in year one and a 4.8% increase in year two, they won:

- Higher pay increases for top salary steps, where most people are hired.
- A 49% insurance increase for nine-month employees and a 19% increase for 12-month employees.
- The district now covers the cost of the ParaPro assessment.
- Increase to boiler license and night shift pay.
- Mandatory participation in the district insurance committee.
- Dedicated time to review a student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP), including any mid-year changes, prior to working with the student.
- Juneteenth as a paid holiday.

While pay and contracts for Minnesota ESPs still have a long way to go, local affiliates have worked hard and stood in solidarity with each other to advocate for the gains they deserve. By continuing to work together, we can continue to create more equitable contracts for every public school employee.

2024 legislative session updates and progress report

As this issue goes to publication, state legislators are putting the final touches on the 2024 supplemental budget.

State budgets are set in odd years, with even years being focused more on policy and small surplus investment. Before the legislative session ends on May 20, legislators will try to pass a modest budget, investing one-time money into education, pensions, health care, labor, transportation and more while also focusing on making needed policy-only changes in state law. Due to a “structural imbalance” in the state budget, legislative leaders settled on a modest budget to allow for stable state funding in future years.

Education Minnesota advocated for issues to support the day-to-day work and financial well-being of our members, achieving important one-time funding for growing issues and moving conversations forward that will support large, systemic change next year.

Minnesota is in an exacerbated educator shortage: 9 out of 10 schools can't find enough educators to fill existing open and essential positions. We believe the answer to this is simple—better pay, better pensions and better health care.

Pay

Identified as the top issue in our member poll, the movement for fair educator pay is growing. This year, our members advocated for statewide solutions, especially in the face of modest contract settlements after the historic education budget from 2023. With teachers making 28% less than other workers in Minnesota and ESPs making less than a living wage in many areas, the state needs to take action to raise pay to recruit and retain a strong educator workforce.

Senate File 5470 would raise pay for every educator, while setting a minimum starting salary of \$60,000 for teachers and a minimum wage of \$25/hour for ESPs. It also includes inflation adjustments every four years, so educators would not need to fight for raises that just keep up with inflation. This is the start of a movement for systemic change for the future of public education in Minnesota.

Pensions

The movement for pension improvements is alive and growing. Thousands of members raised their voices to legislators this year for urgent pension investment. With a tight supplemental budget in mind, Education Minnesota's Pension Advisory Group brought forward a bill idea to mitigate the extreme over-penalization of Tier 2 Teachers Retirement Association (TRA) members before the “cross-over” point at age 63. At age 63, Tier 2 and Tier 1 payments become equal.

Legislative leadership reached an agreement on a modest \$500 million supplemental budget for all funding areas, with almost no ongoing funding. In a rare move, the speaker, majority leader and governor included a line in the budget marked just for educator pensions. The \$31 million, one-time target, though it's a large portion of the overall budget compared to any other year, was not enough to make the systemic, long-term change educators need for a fair and sustainable retirement.

This year's supplemental pension bill passed the Legislature and was signed into law by the governor. More than \$28 million of the \$31 million target went to TRA, allowing the scheduled lowering of the retirement age in 2025 to move to this summer. This ensures that the thousands of teachers retiring this summer aren't left out of the NRA 65 improvement. More than \$1.5 million was dedicated to St. Paul teachers to mitigate the scheduled employee contribution increase, so instead of jumping from 7.75% of their paycheck to 9%, they'll experience a more stable increase of 0.25% per year until 2026. Nearly \$1.5 million went toward the IRAP change for college faculty.

Though it's not the huge step that we want, the changes passed this session clearly indicate that we've made waves at the Legislature, and legislators know that they can't leave session without investment in educator pensions. The movement is growing, with

more members involved than ever, and now we turn to planning for the 2025 legislative session where conversations around revenue for larger systemic changes are possible.

Health Care

With double-digit health care increases for educators in many parts of the state, affordable and accessible health care is a growing issue among members.

This year, a policy-only bill to stabilize the Public Employee Insurance Plan (PEIP) passed out of the Legislature with bipartisan support and was signed by the governor on May 3. Stabilizing PEIP with more sustainable, evidence-based pool processes will lower costs and lead the way towards a larger, statewide health care plan for educators, taking educators out of the volatile for-profit health care industry decisions. The commerce committee also adopted important transparency items requiring health insurance bids through the Public Employee Insurance Plan to include information about agent and brokerage fees, and how this affects the premium. This is a big step forward for transparency in health care costs.

Also up for consideration this year is a tax transparency bill that would build greater accountability for corporations, including large health care companies. Large corporations and billionaires need to pay their fair share to the state if we want to see the broad systemic investment educators and students need.

Other Issues

At time of print, a pilot program for student teacher pay was considered by the education finance conference committee. This bill uses \$7 million of one-time money towards paying student teachers for their full-time work in public schools, testing it at the largest education programs across the state that have experienced enrollment decline. More than 4,000 aspiring educators are members of Education Minnesota and have been leading this charge to provide support for one of the largest barriers to graduating—the unpaid, full-time work in schools on top of tuition payments. This is a great way to support bringing more young

people into this essential profession and could help address the educator shortage.

READ Act stipends are still in play that would allocate one-time money towards paid professional development hours for educators. About 35,000 teachers are required to receive professional development through the READ Act. Education Minnesota is fighting to ensure these teachers receive compensation for their work meeting our kids' needs.

The education finance conference committee is also considering the creation of an Educator Compensation Working Group, which would likely support our efforts towards pay, pensions and health care.

Thank you to every educator who took time this session to raise their voice at the Capitol, attend rallies, meet with legislators and more. Because of the work and advocacy of membership, the Legislature moved many issues forward in a tight budget session and is ready to go to work on larger changes next year. Thank you!



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The rise of book bans throughout the U.S. and Minnesota's legislative response

According to the American Library Association, 2023 saw the greatest number of attempted book bans in public libraries and schools in the United States since the ALA began keeping records 20 years ago. The ALA documented 4,240 unique book titles that were either removed or restricted beyond the age intended by the publisher, a 92 percent increase over the previous year. The ALA also noted that 47 percent of books banned or challenged feature the voices of LGBTQ+ people and people of color.

While individuals and organizations challenging large numbers of books at a time drove the 2023 surge in book bans, state legislatures and school boards have also played a significant role. As discussed below, most of these efforts have been met with litigation.

Florida, Iowa, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas and Utah are among the states to have enacted content-based restrictions on books in public schools. In perhaps the most well-known example, Florida's "Don't Say Gay or Trans" law, passed in 2022, prohibits "classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity" for students in kindergarten through third grade. The law prompted widespread confusion and concern from educators, librarians and civil rights groups that previously approved children's books featuring LGBTQ+ characters could violate the new law. Publishers and civil rights groups sued the state, and a recent settlement significantly narrowed the law to make clear that the law does not prohibit references to LGBTQ+ families in books, does not prohibit anti-bullying curriculum, and does not apply to school libraries.

In 2023, Iowa passed a law similar to Florida's but extending to grade six, and explicitly prohibiting any books containing reference to sex acts other than those in the Bible in all public schools for students grades K-12. The law prompted the removal of hundreds of books from school libraries and classrooms and was also challenged in court. Penguin Books, several well-known authors, and the Iowa State Education

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

Association are among plaintiffs suing the state. In December 2023, a district court judge temporarily blocked both provisions of the law, finding that they were unconstitutionally vague and overbroad in violation of the First Amendment. The court also agreed with the plaintiffs that many age-appropriate and celebrated literary works include content that would arguably violate the law. The case is now on appeal.

In August 2023, the Clyde-Savannah School District in upstate New York removed five books from the school library after a minister with no children in the district challenged them. After New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) challenged that action with the state commissioner of education, the district rescinded its ban, prompting the minister and a local Moms for Liberty chapter to appeal the school board's decision to the commissioner. In a written opinion issued just last month, the state commissioner rejected the book challenge, finding that the objections were not limited to concerns about their age appropriateness, but rather motivated by disagreements with the authors' personal and political views. The commissioner relied heavily on Board of Educ., Island Trees UFSD No. 26 v. Pico, a 1982 decision from the U.S. Supreme Court holding that local school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books.

A 40-year-old court decision stemming from an attempted film ban in the Forest Lake School District is frequently being cited in current litigation. In Pratt v. ISD No. 831, Forest Lake (1982), three students sued the district over its effort to prevent a teacher from showing

“Each of these rulings has shown that while book bans have become increasingly attractive to some school board members and lawmakers, courts have been skeptical of their constitutionality.”

the movie “the Lottery” because of political and religious themes parents and board members found offensive. The U.S. Court of Appeals Eighth Circuit held that the school board’s action, although purportedly due to graphic violence in the film, was motivated primarily by ideological concerns. The court reasoned, “What is at stake is the right to receive information and to be exposed to controversial ideas—a fundamental First Amendment right. If these films can be banned by those opposed to their ideological theme, then a precedent is set for the removal of any such work.”

Each of these rulings has shown that while book bans have become increasingly attractive to some school board members and lawmakers, courts have been skeptical of their constitutionality. In addition to opposition from courts, a number of states are beginning to intervene to prohibit school districts and libraries from banning books based on the book’s viewpoint or ideology. Illinois, Washington and Maryland have all recently passed “Freedom to Read” laws—which take aim at book bans—and similar bills have been introduced in California, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Kansas, Massachusetts, Missouri, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Vermont.

As of the time of this printing, Minnesota’s proposed prohibition on book bans has been included in both the house and senate education omnibus bills— meaning

it is very likely to become law this year. The bill states that a public library, including libraries and media centers within public schools, “must not ban, remove, or otherwise restrict access to a book or other material based solely on its viewpoint or the message, ideas or opinions it conveys.” The proposed law does not prohibit public libraries from removing or restricting books over “legitimate pedagogical concerns, including but not limited to the appropriateness of potentially sensitive topics for the library’s intended audience...” among other reasons. Finally, the law requires all libraries to adopt a policy with procedures for selecting books, reviewing challenges and reconsidering materials. Echoing concerns of many members about the rise of book bans or book ban efforts, Education Minnesota has supported this legislation.

As a note of caution, even with legislation prohibiting book bans, K-12 educators do not have a First Amendment right to select classroom content without district oversight. For classroom instruction, educators will still need to work through the curriculum review process set by their district’s or charter school’s advisory committee and site team, as required by state law. Nevertheless, if passed, Minnesota’s prohibition on book bans will make it much more difficult for community or school board members to ban certain books from school libraries based on disagreement with the ideas expressed within them.

Education Minnesota Aspiring Educators advocate for paid student teaching

Education Minnesota Aspiring Educators (EMAE) have been advocating for policies that will help reduce the teacher shortage by attracting more students into the education field. Since the number of students entering an education program has decreased steadily since 2017, attracting more students to these programs is essential for ensuring that all Minnesota students have access to high-quality educators.

One hurdle to pursuing an education degree is student teaching. Currently, students are required to complete 12 weeks or more of unpaid student teaching—for many would-be educators, this is a significant financial barrier because they cannot afford to work full time without compensation.

EMAE has focused on key legislative policies throughout this session that, if implemented, will help attract and retain education majors by easing these financial burdens. They started the legislative year with two main proposals that would provide compensation to Aspiring Educators during required student teaching semesters:

- H.F. 3802/S.F. 3370 would provide funds for public school districts who host student teachers so that the districts can pay student teachers a stipend. The stipend would be provided twice during the semester—at the beginning and at the end—to help student teachers pay bills while completing mandatory teaching hours.
- H.F. 4006/S.F. 3804 would waive tuition for student teachers at public institutions in undergraduate programs during a student teaching semester.

Because this year is not a budget year, legislators are passing a tight supplemental budget with mostly one-time money. For systemic change bills such as the ones listed above, there needs to be ongoing investment—money dedicated year-after-year in legislation.

In response to the tight budget released in March, EMAE has worked with legislators to build a lower-cost student teacher pay “pilot program” that fits within this year’s budget. Pilot programs are a useful tool to try



out an idea and gauge the impact while considering the expansion of the program in a future budget session.

The pilot program bill directs money to certain colleges and universities to pay their student teachers a living wage during the 2024-2025 school year. Based on program size, enrollment decline, financial need and diversity, legislators chose the following institutions to include in the pilot program:

- St. Cloud State University
- Bemidji State University
- Minnesota State University, Mankato
- Winona State University
- Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College
- University of Minnesota – Duluth
- University of Minnesota – Crookston

The bill itself, the institutions selected or other details could change as the House and Senate work out differences in conference committee. The last day of the 2024 legislative session is May 20.

Part-time field program allows for next step in union advocacy

Applications for Education Minnesota's part-time field staff program are now open.

The program serves as a step for members to increase their union activism by taking on a part-time Education Minnesota staff role. Part-time staff continue their current employment while participating in this program.

The work assignment starts on Sept. 1 and consists of about 300 hours of Education Minnesota employment per year. Participants are assigned to a field office near their current residence.

Program participants learn about how to support locals and members, and they are paid for their work alongside a current field staff who serves as a mentor. They work with local unions and help them with bargaining, member rights issues and more.

The field program is the largest portion of Education Minnesota's work and this program is an avenue to bring new perspectives to field work. The inclusion of new, different and diverse voices helps to strengthen the field program, as different experiences and perspectives build a stronger field team.

Applicants should have the following knowledge, skills and abilities:

- High degree of motivation, integrity, and leadership.
- Demonstrate an understanding of organizing, collective bargaining, member rights, member promotion, education issues, legislative and political action.
- Ability to write and speak effectively.
- Ability to analyze and use research data.
- Ability to work long hours and meet deadlines.
- Ability to apply anti-racist principles in a variety of ways.
- Work cooperatively with Education Minnesota leaders and staff.
- Commitment to and knowledge of Education Minnesota goals and issues.

- Availability for assignments after normal work hours, such as evenings and weekends.

The union encourages all members, and especially members of color, to apply.

Applications will remain open until filled. Scan the QR code below to access the application.



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ESP of the Year nominations open soon

Nominations for the next Education Minnesota Education Support Professional of the Year are opening soon!

Since 2007, the ESP of the Year program has honored exemplary professional and union work by an Education Minnesota member in any ESP job category, including paraprofessional/education assistant, secretarial/clerical, custodial, food service, maintenance and trades, transportation, groundskeeping, security, technology services, health services and others.

The ESP of the Year represents peers throughout the profession, connects to communities as an ambassador and is Minnesota's nominee for the National Education Association's ESP of the Year award. The winner

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

All Education Minnesota ESPs who have been members for at least three years as of August 31, 2024, are eligible. Individuals can be nominated by anyone associated with Minnesota schools.

Details about how to nominate a candidate will be provided soon. To learn more about the program, go to www.educationminnesota.org/news/awards-and-honors/esp-of-the-year.



Sign up for the Education Minnesota booth at the Minnesota State Fair

Shift signups are open for the 2024 Minnesota State Fair! Join us from Thursday, Aug. 22 through Monday, Sept. 2 at our booth in the Education Building. Each year, Education Minnesota members and staff volunteer to produce personalized photo calendars for visitors. The booth also features a different education group each day that showcases their curriculum area or program.

Volunteer shifts are three hours long and run from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Responsibilities include taking digital photos

and acting as Education Minnesota ambassadors to fairgoers and attendees. Volunteers will receive an admission ticket and an Education Minnesota State Fair T-shirt. Members will also receive reimbursement for mileage, as well as parking, bus or rideshare for up to \$20/car (original receipts are required).

Spots are filling up fast, so sign up today!

For more information and to sign up, please visit www.educationminnesota.org/events/annual-events/state-fair-booth.

MEMBERS WANT TO KNOW

Health insurance options through ESI

All educators deserve the ability to retire with financial security.

Among the many benefits of being an Education Minnesota member is access to financial seminars to help you achieve this goal. Education Minnesota ESI is hosting a number of "When Can I Afford to Retire?" seminars both online and in-person this summer.

Regardless of how long you have been an educator, attending this seminar will help you understand how your pension, Social Security and other savings, such as a 403(b), all contribute to your financial and retirement plans.

Date	Time	Location
Tuesday, June 11 (TRA members)	Registration at 9:30 a.m. Seminar starts at 10 a.m.	Holiday Inn Detroit Lakes - Lakefront 1155 Highway 10 East, Detroit Lakes, MN 56501
Wednesday, June 12 (TRA members)	10 - 11 a.m.	Virtual A Zoom link will be emailed the day before the seminar.
Thursday, June 13 (TRA members)	Registration at 9:30 a.m. Seminar starts at 10 a.m.	Education Minnesota Southwest Metro Office 7242 Metro Blvd., Suite 200, Edina, MN 55439
Thursday, June 20 (TRA members)	Registration at 9:30 a.m. Seminar starts at 10 a.m.	Education Minnesota Woodbury office 2042 Wooddale Drive, Suite 100, Woodbury, MN 55125
Monday, June 24 (PERA members)	10 - 11 a.m.	Virtual A Zoom link will be emailed the day before the seminar.
Tuesday, June 25 (TRA members)	Registration at 9:30 a.m. Seminar starts at 10 a.m.	Rochester International Event Center 7333 Airport View Drive SW, Rochester, MN 55902
Tuesday, July 9 (TRA members)	Registration at 9:30 a.m. Seminar starts at 10 a.m.	Pier B Resort Hotel 800 W Railroad St., Duluth, MN 55802
Thursday, July 11 (TRA members)	Registration at 9:30 a.m. Seminar starts at 10 a.m.	Education Minnesota New Brighton Office 900 Long Lake Road, Suite 110, New Brighton, MN
Tuesday, July 16 (TRA members)	Registration at 9:30 a.m. Seminar starts at 10 a.m.	Education Minnesota Mankato Office 1961 Premier Drive, Sakatah Trail Room, Mankato, MN 56001
Wednesday, July 17 (TRA and PERA members)	Registration at 9:30 a.m. Seminar starts at 10 a.m.	Minnesota Landscape Arboretum 3675 Arboretum Drive, Chaska, MN 55318
Tuesday, July 23 (TRA members)	Registration at 9:30 a.m. Seminar starts at 10 a.m.	Best Western Plus Willmar 2100 Highway 12 East, Willmar, MN 56201
Thursday, July 25 (TRA members)	9 - 10:00 a.m.	Virtual A Zoom link will be emailed the day before the seminar.
Thursday, July 25 (PERA members)	10:30 - 11:30 a.m.	Virtual A Zoom link will be emailed the day before the seminar.

Scan the QR code or
contact Deb Skog at
deborah.skog@edmn.org
to register



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All MEA Online courses are done asynchronously, at every individual's own pace. The site also saves your progress, and automatically awards CEUs to your account and to your email upon each course completion.

The best part? These courses are FREE to active Education Minnesota members.

Courses are updated and added regularly. There are currently over 40 courses available, including all relicensure trainings! The reading training for relicensure is newly updated as of spring 2024.

Scan here to access MEA Online:



Another benefit of having an MEA Online account is access to online courses provided by NEA. To access both MEA Online and NEA's PEP, please go to the PEP registration page and register with the same email and password you use to access MEA Online.

A few of the classes offered by NEA include:

- *Put on Your Own Oxygen Mask First: Cultivating Healing and Wellbeing through Social Awareness*
- *Classroom Management: Positive Response to Challenging Behaviors*
- *SEL: Relationship Skills*
- *Remote Learning: Equity Challenges and Opportunities*
- *Bully Prevention: School Connectedness*