

M I N N E S O T A

EDUCATOR

F E B R U A R Y / M A R C H 2 0 2 5

***2025 legislative agenda
continues focus on pay,
pensions, health care to
solve educator shortage***

**What to know about
voucher programs**



THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

MEMBERS WANT TO KNOW

403(b) Basics

RETIREMENT ACCOUNT BREAKDOWN

403(B) BASICS



403(B)

- ⊕ **Who:** Public/nonprofit employees
- ⊕ **Type:** Tax-advantaged plan
- ⊕ **Contributions:** Pre-tax/Roth
- ⊕ **Growth:** Tax-deferred
- ⊕ **Match:** Employer (varies)



WHY?

- ⊕ **Tax Benefits:** Reduce taxable income
- ⊕ **Employer Match:** Grow savings faster
- ⊕ **Deferred Growth:** Earnings grow tax-free
- ⊕ **Easy Contributions:** Automatic payroll deductions
- ⊕ **Retirement Security:** Plan for a stable future



Navigating Your Financial Future

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**THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS**

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

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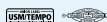


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Progress is possible through collective bargaining

January 16, 2025

I've never met a public school educator who wanted more chaos in their life—but here we are.

As I write this, the Minnesota House is in disarray. The Republican caucus is grabbing for power in ways the state Supreme Court is unlikely to accept, and the entire DFL caucus is refusing to set foot in the Capitol for fear of legitimizing the other party's actions.

While the courts sort it out, Donald Trump will be president in a week and bring with him a sinister agenda for public education, vulnerable students and labor unions. Will a razor-thin anti-school majority in Congress pass his bills? No one knows.

It's a mess. Making any sweeping predictions or promises about the next six months is pointless, but I can say two things about how our union will operate in this cloud of uncertainty.

We will not waver in our commitment to improving the pay, pensions and health care of our members through the legislative process, although the chances are low of achieving the big changes we need this year.

We will continue our full support of locals using collective bargaining to improve their compensation and working conditions. We have better odds of solving local issues because our success depends more on organizing ourselves than on partisan maneuvers in St. Paul and Washington, D.C.

As I've traveled the state with the other officers of Education Minnesota, I've come to believe that small workplace threats and frustrations are burning out educators almost as fast as anxiety about pay, retirement and the cost of health insurance.

For example, I recently learned about a district that no longer employs custodians to clean the classrooms. That has become another "duty as assigned" to the licensed teaching staff. It may be a coincidence that absences due to illness have soared, but I doubt it.

In another district, I heard from special education teachers about a software program that uses AI to reduce the time it takes to complete their paperwork. However, the cost almost always falls on the employees, who either pay for it themselves or spend their time applying for a grant.



Denise Specht


Finally, there's an issue I've been hearing about for a year. Too many students who are not potty trained are showing up for kindergarten. No one wants to teach a class of more than 20 five-year-olds, especially when several have full diapers. Administrators must respond.

These are examples of problems collective bargaining can solve, even if the Legislature and Congress fail to fund public schools as they should. We only need to organize our power and prioritize our goals to win changes that improve lives.

To be clear, there will be more money coming to districts this year, no matter what the bosses say. The 2023 Legislature guaranteed inflationary increases in per-pupil funding every year and locked in more money for unfunded special education costs through 2027.

While I know it's hard to engage right now, progress is possible when we make our voices heard at the Capitol and in Congress and we lean on each other to bargain boldly for the best contracts possible. I still believe we will succeed ...

Together,

 @DeniseSpecht



Congratulations to Mika Pedro of South Washington County for being this month's contest winner!

We love seeing all the places you read your Minnesota Educator. Send a photo of where you're reading your Educator to educator@edmn.org to be entered into a drawing! Please include your name, your district or local and a one-sentence description of where you are reading.

The winner will receive a \$50 Target gift card and be featured in the next issue of the Minnesota Educator. Happy reading!

Mika Pedro reads her Educator while enjoying the snowfall and beautiful sunset in Woodbury.





Educators in the news

“We worked so hard, that negotiating team, to put that language on the book so that underrepresented members could be safe from layoffs. Frankly, we have been so proud to work shoulder-to-shoulder with the school district to defend that language from attacks by national groups like Judicial Watch.”

MFT President Marcia Howard in a January Star Tribune article titled, “Minneapolis taxpayer’s lawsuit over policy protecting minority teachers is dismissed.”

Getting social!


Stay connected with Education Minnesota by following us on our social media channels!

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-  [@educationMN](https://twitter.com/educationMN)
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Connect with your local!

Each issue, we will select a couple of local unions' social media pages to highlight. Make sure to give them a follow to stay up to date on what's happening at the local level.

Follow Dakota County United Educators on Instagram:

 [@dakotacountyunitededucators](https://www.instagram.com/dakotacountyunitededucators)

Follow Elk River Education Association on Twitter (X):

 [@EREA728](https://twitter.com/EREA728)

2025 legislative agenda continues focus on pay, pensions, health care to solve educator shortage

As a new legislative session begins, the Legislature will need to pass a budget and take up policy proposals. This session presents unique challenges because the Minnesota House is tied. As we go to print, the chamber has yet to solidify a power-sharing agreement, and between the House and Senate, there will also be at least two special elections and litigation over which party will control which body.

Regardless of where we're from, what we look like, or what ZIP code we call home, we all worry about whether our public schools are providing a safe and successful learning environment during these difficult times. That's why Education Minnesota's legislative agenda focuses on ways to tackle the most significant challenge facing public schools: the educator staffing crisis.

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

Understaffing results in significant workload increases for the teachers that do remain. Low pay forces educators to work multiple jobs, and spiraling health insurance costs make health care increasingly unaffordable and inaccessible. All of these factors accelerate educator burnout. Add in a broken pension system, and it's no surprise that so many educators are reluctantly leaving their students for higher wages outside of public education.

Despite all this, educators continue to work hard every day. Educators are worth more—and they know it. That's why Education Minnesota's 84,000 members support a package of bills designed to recruit the next

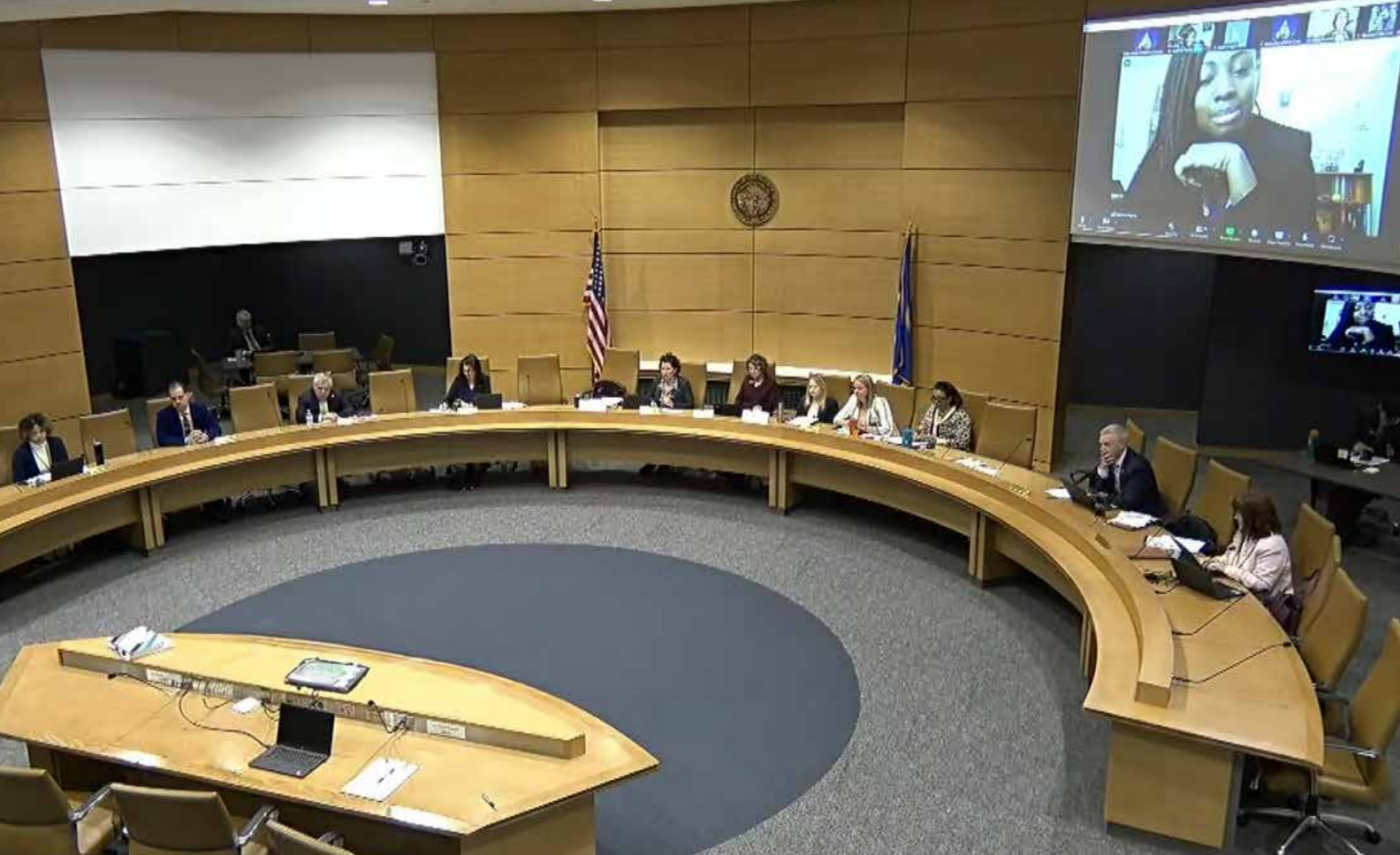
generation of passionate and knowledgeable educators and retain the best group of education professionals in America.

During the 2023 legislative session, our members successfully advocated for public education advancements—including pension improvements, unemployment insurance for hourly workers, Paid Family Medical Leave for educators and compensation for READ Act training. For the 2025 session, not only will we push for continued improvements to these programs, we will also fiercely defend our victories from 2023.

We will push for continued improvements to these programs and will fiercely defend our victories from 2023.

This year we expect big changes and challenges to public education from Washington, D.C. Our union will resist any attempts to reduce revenue, divert taxpayer dollars from public schools, or cut funding on any of the hard-won advancements our members have made in the past. We will seek replacement funding for federal budget cuts, if necessary.

To offer our students the highest-quality education, employers must pay their educators fairly from day one through retirement, show them the respect they deserve and reduce burnout. Our legislative agenda features proposals that, when implemented together, present an important and achievable solution to the staffing crisis. Our students and educators have waited long enough. Education Minnesota's legislative agenda is created by members from across the state, reflects the priorities of our members and informs the union's work at the Capitol.



Education Minnesota Governing Board member Jasman Myers testifies virtually at a legislative hearing

The legislative agenda includes:

Educator pay

Minnesota teachers in E-12 schools make 28% less, on average, than other workers in Minnesota with the same education level. Wages for hourly school workers are even worse—many often only make minimum wage, and in locals that have negotiated better pay, those pay increases are eaten up by health insurance costs (for more information on this, see pgs. 9-10). It is imperative that the state of Minnesota make direct investments in the compensation of its educators. Our union supports legislation that:

- Raises wages for all teachers, commensurate with other professions with similar educational requirements, and raises starting wages to a minimum of \$60,000 annually.
- Establishes a minimum wage for hourly school workers of \$25 an hour and a minimum annual salary.

Who decides Education Minnesota's legislative agenda?

Education Minnesota members from around the state who serve on the Legislative Action Committee have been working with staff to develop the union's legislative agenda. This document is the baseline for our legislative priorities. It is also approved by members across the state that serve on the Education Minnesota Governing Board.

For more information about our members' legislative priorities, see pgs. 11-12. To learn more about how you can get involved in advocating for these issues at educationminnesota.org/advocacy/at-the-legislature.

- Supports higher compensation for the faculty in the state's colleges and universities, including wages and expanding the right of dependent tuition waivers to state universities.

Educator pensions

Educator pensions are not the recruitment and retention tool they were created to be. A top priority for teachers is reforming their pension plans. Compared to other states, Minnesota educators have some of the highest contributions to their own pensions. Direct state investment is required to meaningfully reform pensions. We support legislation that:

- Creates an unreduced career rule of 60 years of age and 30 years of service, rewarding decades of public service with a fair retirement benefit that will help retain mid-career educators.
- Reduces penalties and increases flexibility for educator retirement, so educators can choose when they're ready to retire without losing a significant amount of their pension benefit.
- Removes the delay on cost-of-living adjustments for Tier 2 educators who retire before their Normal Retirement Age and immediately increases COLAs for retirees from 1.2% to 1.5%.
- Supports improving the retirement plans for higher education faculty, including better pensions and increasing the Supplemental Retirement Plan statutory maximum.

Educator health care

Health insurance costs for educators have soared in the past decade, and in many areas are rising faster than negotiated salary and wage increases. The state needs to invest in educator health plans, including creating a mandatory statewide health insurance pool for all school district employees. Many educators who leave the classroom cite health care costs as their reason for changing industries. To address the staffing crisis, Minnesota must provide affordable, reliable health insurance to these essential workers. We support legislation that creates a large pool to:

- Maximize the value of cost sharing to reduce premium increases from year to year.
- Reduce unpredictability by ensuring better coverage and maximizing bargaining power with health insurance carriers regarding coverage and benefits.
- Lessen the administrative burden at the local level and remove unnecessary and costly broker fees.

Our top priority is ending the educator shortage by improving pay, pensions and health care for all school workers. Another important component of ending the staffing shortage is reducing burnout. We can do this by implementing the following:

Education Minnesota's pension proposal

A top priority for teachers is reforming their pension plans. **To do so, the union has proposed legislation to create an unreduced career rule of 60 years of age and 30 years of service.** We pushed for similar legislation during the 2023 and 2024 legislative sessions. We were successful in passing a law that lowers the normal retirement age from 66 to 65, which improves the benefit formula and shifts all penalties down a year. This was the first positive improvement to a public pension plan in many years and amounts to millions of dollars invested in public educators.

We will continue to push for an unreduced 60/30 career rule to ensure that all educators can retire with a pension that reflects their hard work. To learn more about how you can get involved in our pension advocacy, go to educationminnesota.org/advocacy/at-the-legislature/pensions.

- Ensuring educators are mentally and physically safe at work.
- Fully staffing mental and physical health teams by hiring more licensed school counselors, social workers, psychologists, nurses and other support professionals.
- Reducing class sizes and improving educator-to-student ratios in public schools and reducing special education teacher caseloads so that our students can benefit from one-on-one support.
- Offering paid student teaching to all teacher candidates, expanding registered teacher apprenticeship programs and reducing educator student debt.
- Supporting the freedom to teach an honest history of the United States and to make available age-appropriate, thought-provoking books in school libraries to counter the national movement to whitewash history, ban books and restrict our students' freedom to read.
- Providing all students with access to professional media specialists who can teach the differences between reliable information and the misinformation and disinformation flooding social media.
- Ensuring all educators have proper time in their duty day and proper compensation to meet READ Act requirements.
- Increasing duty-free preparation time for effective lessons for all teachers.
- Providing dedicated due process time to special education teachers to meet students' needs and to hold meetings with students' families and manage caseload sizes.
- Fully funding services for all members of the school community, including E-12 students in special education and English language learners.
- Increasing the per-pupil funding formula to compensate for past underfunding and historic inflation.
- Funding a total of 18 hours of paid training for all paraprofessionals who work directly with students.
- Supporting specific policies to retain and attract educators of color and work towards creating school climates that reflect the diversity of Minnesota.
- Increasing access to college by renewing the state of Minnesota's commitment to public higher education by returning to statutory levels of funding for state colleges and universities.
- Support students with behavioral challenges and disrupted learning in a fair and equitable manner.
- Creating a universal childcare and early learning program, using mixed delivery, where low-income families pay nothing and no family pays more than 7% of family income.

Ways to advocate for public education this legislative session

With close margins in the House and Senate, it is vitally important that elected officials hear from educators about the issues that are important to them. Educators are the most effective advocates for public schools!

Whether you have five minutes or five hours, there are plenty of ways to engage with your elected officials this legislative session:

Read the Capitol Connection newsletter

Capitol Connection, a weekly newsletter sent during the legislative session, keeps members up to date on what's happening at the Legislature. Capitol Connection summarizes each week's education-related legislative activity and provides information about upcoming proposals and issues. Capitol Connection also provides members with information about hearings and activities that members can get involved with at the Legislature. If you are a member and you are not receiving Capitol Connection during session, please contact webmaster@edmn.org and put Capitol Connection in the subject line.

Attend rallies and take actions

Throughout the legislative session, Education Minnesota and ally organizations will plan rallies to mobilize members on important education policies. We also keep the advocacy section of the website up to date with ways to contact your elected officials



Education Minnesota members attend a rally for pension reform at the state Capitol. Photo credit: Ellen Perrault.

about education policies. Attend a rally, sign a petition, send emails or make phone calls to lawmakers about the issues that are important to you. Follow our social media pages and check out the "Take Action" section of our website to learn more about ways you can get involved: educationminnesota.org/advocacy/at-the-legislature/#take-action.

Talk with lawmakers at a lobby day

As educators, we know the importance of building relationships, and lobby days provide the perfect opportunity to build relationships with your lawmakers. Grab some members of your local and schedule a lobby day to share your stories and talk with your elected officials about the issues that are most important to your students, school and community. Lobby days can be scheduled through union or IO leadership and Education Minnesota staff.

Attend an in-district meeting

Legislators often schedule constituent meetings in their districts. Check out their schedule and attend a district meeting, if they have one scheduled. You can also invite them to visit your district, school or classroom so that they can see and hear firsthand what is happening in our public schools. The more we can make our

experiences and stories real to them, the more likely lawmakers are to prioritize public education issues. You can reach out to your Education Minnesota field staff if you want to schedule a formal meeting with your elected officials.

Advocate for your students and colleagues by testifying at a hearing

Proposed legislation is thoroughly discussed in committee hearings before it makes its way to the House or Senate floor. Committees also provide time during hearings to seek public input on bills, which gives educators an opportunity to share their story and how proposed bills will impact their communities and classrooms. If you are interested in testifying on a proposed piece of legislation, reach out to our lobby team at lobbyteam@edmn.org. Unsure of what to say? No problem! Lobby team staff will work with you and help you prepare remarks.

Our union's biggest strength is that we have the power to raise our voices collectively and push for change. When each one of us gets involved in advocacy for our students, colleagues and communities, we can push major changes to pay, pensions and health care and create the public schools our students deserve.

Push for statewide mandatory health insurance pool aims to bring down skyrocketing costs

As we enter a new bargaining cycle and legislative session, one issue that is sure to dominate these conversations is health care costs.

Health insurance premiums are skyrocketing across the country, often outpacing wage growth. According to the National Council on Teacher Quality¹, while the overall cost of living in the United States has increased by 17% since 2018, the cost of health insurance premiums has increased by 45%.

Minnesota educators are feeling the squeeze as well. Public school employees are paying more of their paychecks toward health insurance premiums, and school districts are paying larger portions of their budgets toward health insurance costs. Currently, school districts across the state pay over \$1.5 billion dollars in health insurance—not including employee contributions or cost-sharing measures such as high-deductible plans. The cost that educators pay out of pocket for premiums can be more than \$9,000 a year for single plans and more than \$34,000 a year for family plans.

“Outside of salaries, health insurance is the biggest cost to a school district,” said Dale Anderson, president of the Shakopee Education Association. “All of us feel completely incapable of figuring out how to address this.”

Minnesota implemented the Public Employees Insurance Program (PEIP) to try to provide affordable and accessible health insurance to certain public employees. In theory, PEIP provides school districts, townships or municipalities the chance to bolster their insurance options by pooling with other public employee groups for health insurance.

However, PEIP is only as strong as the number of public employees who participate. Participation in PEIP is optional, and as premiums have gone up throughout the health insurance industry, participation has decreased. Consequently, plans offered through the program have become increasingly unaffordable for educators.

Some districts have turned to a self-funded approach to try and bring down costs. Self-funded districts handle their health insurance themselves, collecting money and hiring a third-party administrator to pay out to a provider.

Shakopee Education Association switched to self-funded around 2011, said Anderson. “It forced us to learn more about insurance and what kinds of things drive insurance costs,” he said. But self-funding presents its own challenges, such as a limited participant pool and increases in costs of protective measures such as stop-loss insurance, which protects members whose costs go over the allotted amount in the plan.

“We have members that are working two or three jobs just to cover living expenses and health insurance.” - Angela Forland, Kingsland Public Schools

Other districts are too small to move away from PEIP. Angela Forland, a teacher in Kingsland Public Schools, said that her district tried to leave PEIP but because of their size, they couldn’t get a bid on their own. Teachers in Kingsland currently pay \$1,000 a month towards health insurance premiums—in addition to a portion paid by the school district.

“Our premiums are so high compared to what the district can afford to contribute per member, we have members that are working two or three jobs just to cover living expenses and health insurance,” Forland said. “We have members who take the family insurance and then they basically don’t get a paycheck, they just work for the insurance.”

This situation is common, especially among smaller districts. Jerry Brooks works two jobs in the Fairmont Area School District. Brooks said he took the second job to help cover health care costs.

"If you're the sole breadwinner of your family, in many cases it becomes unsustainable to provide for a family on your net paycheck after health insurance," he said.

"We negotiated one of the largest raises we've ever received, and almost all of it is going towards health insurance," Brooks continued. In Fairmont, where all public school employees pay into the same plan, premiums for family plans run upwards of \$1,000 a month.

But whether districts participate in PEIP or self-fund, benefits have gone down even as costs continue to increase. "We recently cut our most expensive plan and switched a couple of our plans to narrow-network to cut costs, but the narrow network requires you to stay within that network," said Anderson. "It's essentially changing the quality of the benefit by saying you have to stay within this system."

Even within districts, different employee groups can have different health insurance policies. In Kingsland, for example, the teachers receive insurance through PEIP, but secretaries, paraprofessionals and administrators have insurance through Southeast Co-op. As a result, Minnesota's system is incredibly inefficient, which drives up costs.

Kate Schmidt, president of Dakota County United Educators, says spiraling health insurance premiums are a significant retainment issue. "People go into teaching knowing they aren't going to make a lot of money, but they'll have a good pension, good insurance and will be taken care of...if we want to retain people in this profession, we can't take away their pay and their health care."

Education Minnesota's proposal: statewide mandatory insurance pool

At the 2024 Representative Convention, members approved an action item that directs the organization to "address the health care crisis by developing, organizing and advocating for the successful passage of a statewide mandatory educator health insurance pool in the 2025 legislative session and beyond, if necessary." This measure is included in Education

Benefits of a larger pool include:

- Increased purchasing power.
- Efficiency in management.
- Increased stability, because the risk is spread out over a larger group.
- No need for brokers, which cost districts millions of dollars per year.
- Uses fewer district resources by eliminating the need for district RFPs and other processes.
- More predictability, because a large pool with reserves can smooth out year to year changes.

Minnesota's 2025 legislative agenda (for more information, see pg. 4).

The proposed statewide pool would include all public school employees. Moving all school employees into one large state-run insurance pool would give the state leverage and management efficiency to reduce costs, maintain strong health insurance coverage and free up district-level resources from navigating health insurance. It would take out millions of dollars of waste and stabilize insurance for school districts of every size and in every region of the state.

Restoring the promise of a good health care plan would mark a big step forward in solving the educator shortage in our state by creating a powerful recruitment and retention tool for employers.

We can move this policy forward if we work together. Check out pg. 8 for a list of ways to get involved in legislative advocacy. You can also reach out to your Education Minnesota field staff, or if you have questions, contact our lobby team by sending an email to lobbyteam@edmn.org.

¹ *National Council on Teacher Quality, Affording to stay healthy: The cost of health insurance for teachers. Jan. 11, 2024.*

2024 member polling shows pay, pensions, health care top concerns for educators, Worksite Action Leader program highly effective

In 2024, Education Minnesota conducted multiple polls of members to elicit feedback on our work and learn about which issues are most pressing for our members. Over the summer, Education Minnesota conducted a phone survey of active members about their opinions and interests. This poll surveyed 18,916 members, asking about their top concerns and feelings about the value of membership.

The most pressing concerns of educators were salary and benefits, pensions, health care and mental health. Coincidentally, those priorities align with the public's most popular solutions for the educator shortage, which were health care, pay, school safety and pensions, according to a poll of Minnesota voters in July 2024.

Worksite Action Leader program results

In November, we conducted a second member poll that asked about our get-out-the-vote efforts. LRP, a nationally recognized polling firm, surveyed 8,580 Education Minnesota members online between Nov. 6 and Nov. 13. To accurately reflect the makeup of Education Minnesota membership, the sample was weighted slightly by membership type, gender, region, age and years worked. The margin of error for this poll is plus or minus 1.1 percentage point.

This year, Education Minnesota led a robust Worksite Action Leader (WAL) program to encourage members to vote in the election. This program was incredibly effective: Contacting members at their workplace yielded a 13-point net increase for Presidential vote and a 16-point net increase for state House vote. The success of the WAL program demonstrates the power of relational organizing, and we plan to build on that progress with our Health Care Action Leader and Pension Action Leader programs (for more information on these programs, talk to your local leadership).

Opinions toward our union

In both polls, a majority of members had a positive view of Education Minnesota. In the November poll conducted by LRP, 64% of respondents said that Education Minnesota did an excellent or good job of representing educators in the state.

ESP members' approval of Education Minnesota has steadily improved over the past few years, going from 63% of respondents in August 2021 saying that we did an excellent or good job of representing educators to 67% in November 2024.

Top concerns of Education Minnesota members, ranked

18,916

MEMBERS POLLED

1

SALARY AND BENEFITS

2

PENSION REFORM

3

HEALTH CARE/ MENTAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

Opportunities: Attend the 2025 Minnesota Association of Family and Consumer Sciences Annual State Conference

The Minnesota Association of Family and Consumer Sciences is hosting their annual state conference on Feb. 23-24 in Hastings. MAFCS has helped us at the State Fair as a subject area group for several years.

More information is available on their website. For additional details or to register, go to www.mnafcs.com.

ESP Bill of Rights seeks to expand 2023 legislative gains

Every public education employee deserves the same things: to be paid a living wage, access to affordable health care, respect for their role in providing care for our students and safe working conditions. From custodial staff to bus drivers, food workers, paraprofessionals and more, ESPs in every role are the glue that keeps public schools together. Teachers can't do their work without the critical support ESPs provide.

Unfortunately, many ESPs in Minnesota do not make a living wage and do not have access to affordable health care. For example, the average ESP salary was \$34,289 for the 2022-23 fiscal year.

For many years now, Education Minnesota has put forth an ESP Bill of Rights that proposes policies to improve pay, health care and working conditions for ESPs. During the 2023 legislative session, the Legislature passed some of the policies that we have been advocating for in this bill, such as unemployment insurance for hourly workers and paid training for paraprofessionals.

Passing the unemployment insurance provision made Minnesota the first state in the country to make school hourly workers eligible for unemployment insurance during summer break. Unemployment insurance also offers a partial benefit for individuals working at jobs where they make less than they usually do.

This policy has had a significant positive impact on hourly employees, allowing them down time to spend with family, a chance to properly rest and recharge instead of working multiple jobs through the summer.

Courtney Hammes, a member of Education Minnesota Zumbrota-Mazeppa ESPs, said it not only allowed her to take a real break for the first time, but it also helped significantly with ESP retention.

"This summer was the first summer I had the opportunity to collect unemployment," she said.

"This summer was also the first summer I felt like I got the mental break I feel I needed. Instead of working three jobs this summer, I was able to work just one. The unemployment was such a huge help. It was amazing. This is also the first time ever I felt recharged after summer and not completely exhausted. I hope they continue this opportunity for paras for years to come because it is such a huge need. Also new this year, there wasn't a turnover of staff. Everyone returned. In 12 years, that has never happened. I know because I'm a mentor every year. Talking with other paras of all kinds this summer, there was one message: We are all so very thankful for this extra additional opportunity*."

These are important gains, but ESPs still deserve more. Education Minnesota supports the following legislative proposals to improve pay, benefits and working conditions for ESPs:

- Require school districts and charter schools to pay their ESPs at least \$25/hour. Every public school employee should be free to spend time with their families without having to work two or three extra jobs to survive.
- Ensure high quality, affordable health care for ESPs by establishing a mandatory statewide health insurance pool for educators.
- Protect workers from wage theft and crack down on employers who circumvent wage and benefits standards and laws, overtime payment, etc.
- Establish reporting and transparency requirements to identify issues of concern for ESPs on the worksite, such as staffing levels, pay scale, safety, fair scheduling and more.

**This quote first appeared in the Dec./Jan. 2024 issue.*

Upcoming elections for Education Minnesota Governing Board Election District, NEA RA State-Credentialed Delegate positions

Members will be electing election district governing board representatives and state-credentialed delegates to the NEA Representative Assembly, which will be held July 2-6 in Portland. Election district-level elections will be conducted during a 15-day window (weekdays only) beginning Feb. 10 and ending Feb. 28. Several election districts had fewer candidates than available seats and those members were elected by acclamation.

All candidates had the opportunity to submit a statement and/or photograph. These statements and photos appear on the Education Minnesota website. Members

may view the statements online by going to www.educationminnesota.org, signing into the member portal and then clicking on the "Elections" tab. Printed voters guides will also be available for members in election districts where elections will be held.

Education Minnesota members should also watch for elections taking place in their local union for members wishing to serve as delegates to the Education Minnesota Representative Convention. More information is included below.

Delegate selection underway for Representative Convention

Plans are underway for the 2025 Education Minnesota Representative Convention, which will take place April 25-26 at the DoubleTree by Hilton Bloomington - Minneapolis South.

Representative Convention Delegate Elections Notice

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

Each local is allotted a certain number of delegates based on the number of members in the local. Any active Education Minnesota member may run to be a delegate. Delegate elections will take place within locals. Local union presidents or their designees will provide you with specific dates for nominations and voting.

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

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

March 21 is the deadline for local presidents to inform Education Minnesota of those who will be delegates and alternates to the RC. The number of delegates allocated to each local and statewide affiliate is determined by the number of members and can be found in the Representative Convention section of our website in the Delegate Allocation Report. Delegates are chosen by open nominations and secret ballot. Interested members should contact their local president for details on how to participate.

For this event, Education Minnesota provides one standard hotel room for one night for each local sending at least one delegate and one round-trip mileage reimbursement. Local presidents have details on the financial arrangements and hotel reservations. Delegates and alternates must be elected by their local affiliate. Learn more about the RC and elections in the member portal of www.educationminnesota.org.

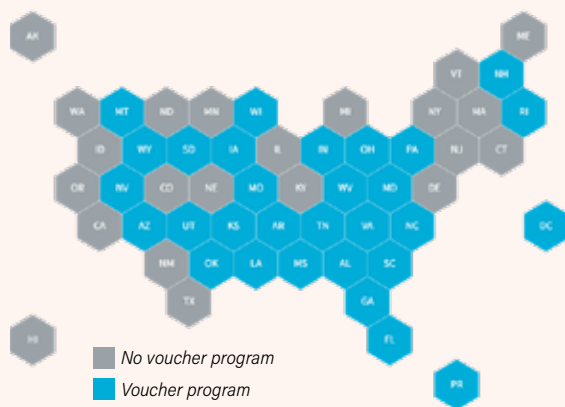
A federal voucher program may be coming. Here's what you need to know

As this issue heads to print before the inauguration, we do not yet know which policies the incoming administration will successfully pass. However, they have strongly indicated that one of their primary policy goals is to implement a national voucher program.

As of early 2024, 28 states and DC have some form of voucher program. Despite how widespread voucher programs are, they are unpopular with the public and detrimental to student success. Even in deep-red states like Kentucky, Tennessee and Nebraska, vouchers have been rejected by voters. In 2024, every single county in Kentucky voted against a ballot measure that would implement vouchers.

When the public knows a program is a voucher program, they don't support it.

States with one or more voucher program



Source: Education Week, "Which states have private school choice?" Jan. 31, 2024

What exactly is a voucher?

Vouchers are programs that send public tax dollars to private schools. They are often referred to by other names, such as "education tax credits," "education scholarships," "education trust funds," "opportunity scholarships" and others. No matter what the program's name is, if it siphons public money and sends it to private

educational institutions, then it is a voucher program. Supporters use these different names to obscure these programs from the public, because vouchers are deeply unpopular.

It's most helpful to use the term vouchers when referring to any of these programs. Calling them scholarships or tax credits softens their impact and makes them seem less detrimental than they are.

The impact of vouchers

Vouchers cause significant negative impacts on student achievement.

Evidence that vouchers do not drastically improve academic outcomes dates all the way back to 1991, a couple years after Milwaukee established the first modern voucher program.¹ Since that first program, research across the country has shown that beyond showing significant improvements, voucher programs actually have negative impacts on academic outcomes.

"Learning loss by voucher users is on par with learning loss from major disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina and the COVID-19 pandemic."

More recent data from the 2010s shows that test scores for students who use voucher programs to leave public schools have dropped significantly—learning loss by voucher users is on par with learning loss from major disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina and the COVID-19 pandemic. Josh Cowen, a professor of education policy at Michigan State University who has spent decades researching voucher programs, describes the impact as "catastrophic academic harm."³

Vouchers decimate state budgets

Even when implemented with income restrictions, voucher programs inevitably balloon into significant budgetary drains. For example, in 2022 Arizona enacted one of the most sweeping voucher programs in the

Types of voucher programs



Education Savings Accounts

These programs directly provide money to parents, set up in a savings account or trust, which the parents can access to pay for private school tuition, homeschooling materials, education therapy services, curriculum materials and more. There is often little oversight on how this money is spent, and audits have found² that many of the funds are not used for education-related expenses.



Tuition Tax Credits

Tax credit programs allow individuals and corporations to make donations to foundations that turn them into vouchers for private schools. Donors receive dollar-for-dollar tax credits for money donated. Supporters argue that this is not a voucher because it doesn't "directly" take money from public schools, but tax credits reduce the amount of state or federal revenue available for programs such as public education.

country, allowing all parents access to the program, regardless of income. As a result, a program that was projected to cost \$65 million a year now costs the state upwards of \$350 million a year, and Arizona is currently facing a \$1.4 billion budget shortfall—much of which is driven directly by their voucher program.⁴

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, similar results have been found in Indiana, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Ohio and Wisconsin. In each of these states, spending on voucher programs more than doubled between 2008 and 2019.

Vouchers do not provide “choice” for most families

While their proponents argue that vouchers increase options available to parents, that is quite frequently not the case. Vouchers do not provide choice for:

- Lower-income families who cannot make up the difference between what vouchers cover and what tuition costs,

- Rural families who do not have access to private schools that are covered by vouchers,
- Working families who do not have transportation available to get their children to and from school,
- Special education students, who can be denied admission to private schools or denied access to supports that public schools are legally required to provide.

Voucher programs harm special education, rural students and students of color the most

Private schools can deny students for any reason or no reason at all. Unlike public schools, which are required to accept all students, private schools get to pick and choose the students they admit. For special education students, data has shown that private schools will often admit them but then discourage them from returning, since retention data is not as heavily tracked as recruitment data.

Furthermore, the money that is diverted from state budgets for private schools disproportionately impacts

low-income and rural students. Students from wealthier areas that are more densely populated will not feel the effects of budget cuts as severely as those in communities that have less resources to begin with. In red states like Kentucky and Texas, some of the biggest opponents of vouchers are rural communities who will see no benefits from vouchers while suffering immensely from the loss of revenue caused by these programs.

The biggest beneficiaries of voucher programs are wealthy families who have never sent their children to public school

Proponents of vouchers argue that they increase opportunities for students of color and students from low-income families.

However, the people who use vouchers the most are families that were already sending their children to private school. In Indiana in 2017, over half of voucher recipients had never attended private schools and 60% of recipients were White suburban families.⁵ In Florida in 2023, 69% of recipients were already attending private schools and 44% of recipients have household incomes of \$120,000 or more.⁶ Finally, in Arizona, 80% of voucher applicants in 2022 did not attend a public school – which means the vast majority of applicants were already sending their students to private school.

Private schools and voucher programs often have little financial oversight and accountability measures, which attracts amateurs and grifters

While many people envision voucher programs as a mechanism for lower-income parents to send their children to high-performing private schools, that is not what usually happens.

Private schools are not required to publicly disclose their budgets the same way public schools are. Their financial decisions are also not regulated as robustly as those of public schools. Because private schools have

so much financial leeway, voucher programs provide a strategic opening for grifters looking to make money. All too often, the types of schools that take advantage of voucher programs are not affiliated with a larger institution. They tend to be hastily established and poorly run. In Milwaukee, which has had a voucher program for over 30 years, 41% of schools that received a voucher between 1991 and 2016 eventually failed and closed their doors.

The history of voucher programs

Segregationist goals have been a fundamental component of voucher programs for over 70 years. Vouchers first emerged in Prince Edward County, VA, in the aftermath of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling that required schools to desegregate. To avoid integration, the Prince Edward County school board abolished their public education system and set up a series of payments to White families, who simultaneously began raising funds to operate private schools for White students.

These efforts were bolstered by the work of economist Milton Friedman, an economist who championed free markets and opposed government interference. Friedman's work "The Role of Government in Education" outlined what would become the modern voucher movement and provided a framework for segregationists to advocate for racist goals by obscuring it as a free-market economic issue.

In the years following the *Brown* ruling, private schools (known colloquially as "segregation academies") popped up across the country, often with accompanying voucher programs.⁷

The evidence on vouchers is overwhelming: they lead to terrible academic outcomes, result in segregated schools and benefit wealthy families while hurting the most vulnerable Minnesotans. Whether a federal voucher program becomes law or not, it is important to urge our elected officials to fully fund public schools

How to talk about vouchers

Whether or not a federal voucher program is implemented, vouchers will become part of the conversation around public education over the next few years. Below are some talking points that you can use in your conversations about voucher programs.

1. Voters reject vouchers whenever they can, including in states like Kentucky and Tennessee.
2. Instead of sending money to private schools, we should focus on public schools – which 90% of students attend.
 - a. An overwhelming majority of students attend public schools nationally and in Minnesota. According to state statistics, 90% of students attended public school for the 2022-2023 school year.⁸
3. Public schools serve all students, while private schools can cherry-pick their students and discriminate against students of different faiths, students with disabilities and students of color.
4. Vouchers only provide “choice” to private and religious schools, not families.
5. Vouchers reduce transparency and accountability of public funds.
 - a. When taxpayer dollars go to private schools, those taxpayers have no idea how those dollars are being spent because private schools don’t have to disclose their budgets.
6. The best way to improve academic outcomes and support students is to fully fund public schools.
 - a. With more funding, support and resources, public schools can meet the needs of Minnesota students and ensure that every child can be successful.

and provide the resources, support and revenue for every school to meet the needs of their students and ensure that every student can be successful, both in the classroom and beyond.

¹ Cowen, Josh. *The Privateers: How billionaires created a culture war and sold school vouchers*. 2024

² AZcentral.com, “Parents spent \$700k in school voucher money on beauty supplies, apparel; attempted cash withdrawals”

³ Cowen, Josh. *School vouchers: there is no upside*. Albert Shanker Institute, 2023. <https://www.shankerinstitute.org/blog/school-vouchers-there-no-upside>

⁴ ProPublica, “School vouchers were supposed to save taxpayer money. Instead, they blew a massive hole in Arizona’s budget.” <https://www.splcenter.org/fiscal-consequences-private-school-vouchers>

⁵ NPR, *The promise and peril of school vouchers*.

⁶ Central Florida Public Media, *Florida Policy Institute asked for school voucher data. Here’s what Step Up for Students provided*.

⁷ Center for American Progress, “The Racist Origins of Private School Vouchers”

⁸ Minnesota Department of Education, “Minnesota Education Statistics Summary”

How educators can prepare for the new administration's immigration agenda

By David Aron, General Counsel

As a presidential candidate, Donald Trump promised “mass deportations” of undocumented immigrants. Following his election, many educators and administrators who work with undocumented students and students with undocumented parents have been concerned about the extent to which immigration enforcement will occur in school buildings, and what educators and their communities can do to prepare.

Sensitive Locations Policy

At the time of this printing, we have few details about the administration's immigration enforcement plans, including how or where a mass deportation program would be carried out. Since 2011, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has observed a “sensitive locations policy” that strongly discourages agents from raids or apprehensions at schools, hospitals, or places of worship. The purpose behind this policy is to avoid deterring people from seeking education, healthcare, or religious participation for fear of detention or deportation. The sensitive locations policy also recognizes that immigration raids at these locations have the potential to be traumatic for others in these settings, not just those who may be targeted. Nevertheless, following the election, sources close to Trump have revealed that he intends to end or modify the sensitive locations policy.

If the sensitive locations policy is terminated and immigration raids or investigations begin to occur at schools, there may be a large public reaction, and educators may be encouraged to share their views. If you are also a parent or a resident of a school community where this activity is occurring, you have a First Amendment right to express your views publicly as a citizen, as does your local union. You should make clear, however, that you are speaking as a parent or resident, not on behalf of the school district, and you should never share data that could identify any students or divulge their immigration status.

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

Data Privacy

The prospect of immigration raids or investigations at E-12 schools and higher education campuses raises a host of questions for educators and school administrators. Top among these is whether educators will be required to disclose information to ICE agents about their students' or their families' immigration status.

“Educators should not provide information to ICE or any branch of law enforcement without a directive by their school administration to do so...because this data is protected under federal and state privacy laws.”

While schools and educators would face legal consequences for obstructing ICE apprehension efforts, this does not mean educators will be required to disclose any information they have about students' immigration status. In fact, educators should not provide

information to ICE or any branch of law enforcement without a directive by their school administration to do so. This is because this data is protected under federal and state data privacy laws—Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act (MGDPA).

Both of these laws prohibit the release of any nonpublic data by public school employees about students' immigration status without a warrant. In addition, many school administrators have been advised that absent a criminal warrant signed by a judge for information regarding suspected criminal activity by a student—conduct other than being in the country without authorization—they do not have to provide information to ICE and can request that any apprehensions occur off school premises.

Sanctuary Districts and Alternatives

During the first Trump administration, some districts with significant numbers of undocumented students or students in mixed status families declared themselves “sanctuary districts.” The term “sanctuary” in this context is a bit of a misnomer, as schools cannot legally provide absolute protection to students from immigration enforcement activities by the federal government. In addition, new declarations of “sanctuary status” by a school may result in political blowback or even attempts by the administration to withhold federal funding. It is not necessary to rescind these policies, but these may be reasons for districts not to use the sanctuary label for the first time.

Regardless of the sanctuary title, all school districts should have clear procedures in place for protecting student data, including not collecting any data about students' immigration status, and clear communication to staff about what to do if ICE or law enforcement make any immigration-related inquiries. Basic compliance

measures will help ensure that everyone is on the same page should ICE agents seek information from school staff. This is perfectly legal and legitimate conduct for school employees.

Supporting Students and Their Families

One of the most important things educators and school administrators can do for students facing uncertainty over immigration matters is to create support systems for students and their families. Educators should not provide legal advice to students or their families, but they can provide legal information from trusted sources—like this “know your rights” guide from AFT¹—on their constitutional rights in the event of detention or questioning by authorities. In addition, schools should all have a crisis response plan for ensuring that students have a trusted adult—preferably designated by the parents through a delegation of parental authority (“DOPA”) form²—to care for them in the event their parents or guardians are detained by immigration authorities. Educators should not provide individual financial support or housing to students or families in the event of immigration detention, but they can and should work with administration to help ensure that students' and families' basic needs are met.

Finally, educators can help students facing uncertainty by being a stable, caring presence in their lives and creating a classroom and school environment that welcomes everyone. While educators should avoid directly asking students personal information related to their or their families' immigration status, they can and should create a school environment that signals that all students, even those without legal status, are valued members of their school communities. This includes highlighting immigrant voices in the arts and literature and promptly addressing any discriminatory rhetoric in the school that creates a hostile learning environment for students.

“One of the most important things educators can do for students facing uncertainty over immigration matters is to create support systems for students and their families.”

Since the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark Plyler v. Doe decision in 1982, all public schools in the United States have been required to provide a free public education for students regardless of immigration status. Educators play a crucial role in ensuring that students are not only able to attend public schools, but that they feel safe and welcome there regardless of the political climate.

¹ <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/2025/kyrdocforfamiliesstudents.pdf>

² <https://www.lawhelpmn.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/Delegation%20of%20Parental%20Authority%20form.pdf>

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