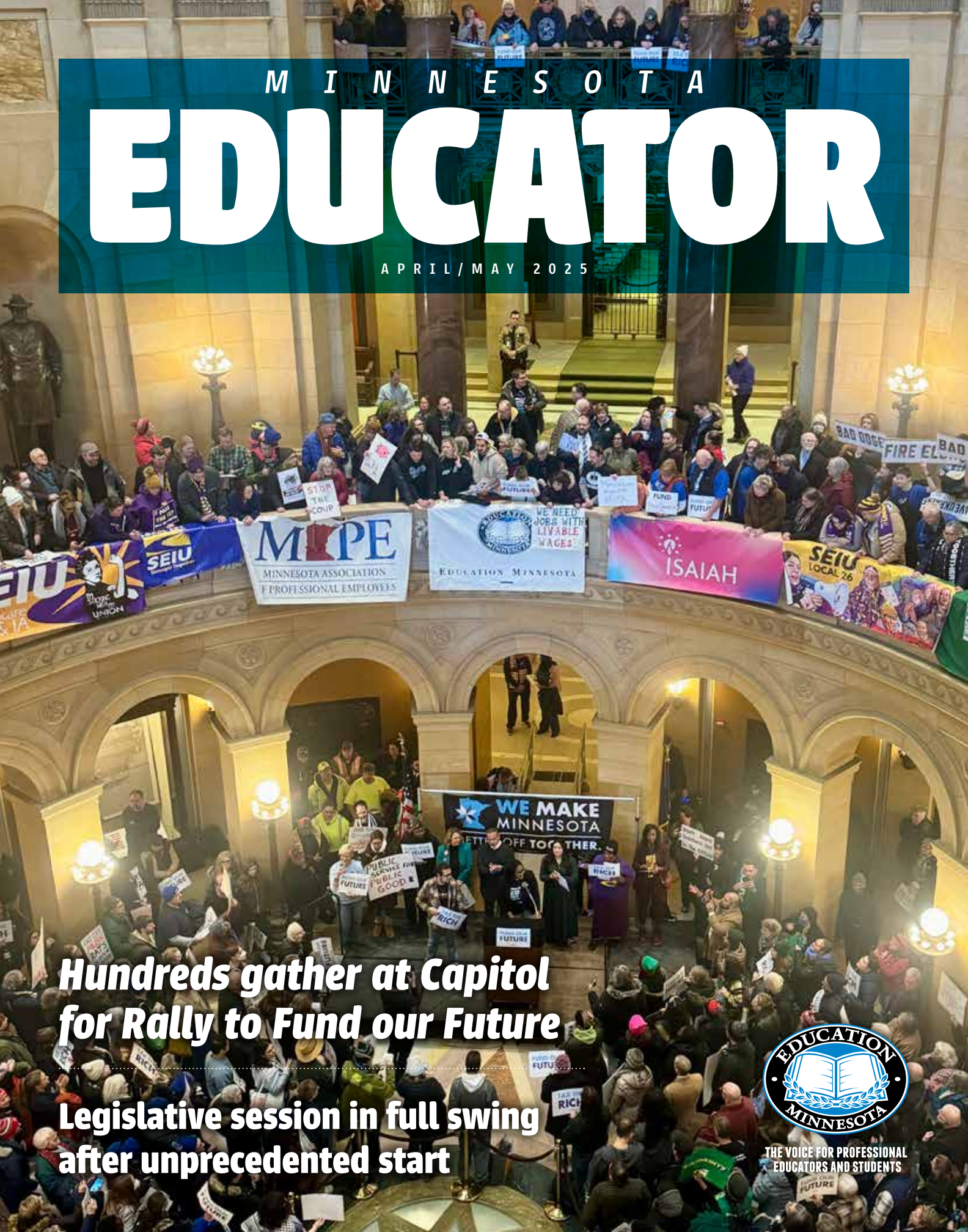


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EDUCATOR

APRIL / MAY 2025



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for Rally to Fund our Future**

**Legislative session in full swing
after unprecedented start**



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**THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS**

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Cover and rally photo credits: *We Make Minnesota*:

No matter the challenges, we will not surrender our priorities or our values

A hundred minutes was a long time to listen President Donald Trump when he was spreading lies about public schools, especially when those lies will be used to harm the educators and students Education Minnesota stands for.

I sat in the gallery of the great hall of the U.S. House of Representatives as the president addressed Congress on March 4 as a guest of Rep. Angie Craig, who wanted to signal her support for public education.

The president bragged about removing whatever he's calling "critical race theory" and "indoctrination" from schools. He engaged in his familiar and ignorant transphobia. He repeated his claim that surgical procedures were performed on children in schools.

Hearing such cruel fictions said in a room so rich with American history was infuriating. In that ornate room, progressive lawmakers ended slavery, gave women the vote, passed the GI bill, enshrined voting rights and guaranteed a free education to students with disabilities. They paid to defeat fascism in Europe and sent Americans to the moon.

Now we have elected leaders planning to disband the U.S. Department of Education. They're threatening more than \$530 million in federal funding for E-12 students in Minnesota, and more than \$25 billion for Minnesota college students, every year.

They will try to do it behind a pack of lies designed to inspire disgust and distrust with public education because, as educators, we believe every student should have the freedom to feel safe and welcome in their school, no matter their race or ZIP code, religion or background, transgender or not.

The majority party in the House has already approved budgets so large they would slash Title I, special education and food programs, which would ripple through every E-12 school in the state. A big enough cut to Pell Grants for students with exceptional needs could jeopardize the existence of some two-year colleges.

It's no exaggeration to say every educator, at every level, in Minnesota would feel the effects of the budget

cuts already approved by the U.S. House to pay for more tax cuts for billionaires. Those cuts could erase the gains Minnesota educators have made in the past four years.

So, what do we do? We keep pushing for the economic freedom of all educators, especially around pay, pensions and health care. We fight at the Legislature for more revenue. We fight at the bargaining table. We fight at the ballot box for pro-education leaders and referendums.

We will keep making the case, with increasing volume and frequency, that educators deserve better than we have. The status quo of unfair pensions, insufficient pay and spiraling health insurance costs is not acceptable.

And we will also reject the notion that our union of more than 84,000 educators can only do one thing at a time. Every educator can multitask. So can our union.


We can improve our compensation and still resist cuts to Social Security and Medicaid. We can bargain for safer schools and fight back against the erosion of our basic American freedoms—to vote in fair, secure elections, to breathe clean air, to live healthier lives, and others.

When I left the Capitol late that night, I felt clarity. Even with all the challenges, our union must not surrender our priorities or our values.

We must not bargain against ourselves. We will keep our faith in each other, in what we can do when we are unified, and in the endearing support Minnesotans have had for their schools—no matter what roadblocks are thrown in front of us.

Together,



 @DeniseSpecht



Denise Specht



Congratulations to Grant Novacinski of Sauk Rapids 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!

Grant Novacinski reads his Minnesota Educator while ice fishing!





Educators in the news

“My deepest joy is to help make songs that help create that emotional infrastructure where we feel that this is a place we can be ourselves and learn.”

Bloomington music teacher Jeff Zupner in a January WCCO (CBS News) segment titled, “Twin Cities music teacher recognized for inclusivity efforts.”

Getting social!


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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 Education Minnesota Wrenshall on Facebook:

-  facebook.com/edmnwrenshall

Follow Duluth Federation of Teachers on Instagram:

-  [@dftlocal692](https://instagram.com/dftlocal692)

Action Leader program empowers members to advocate for pensions and health care improvements

Last fall, Education Minnesota again conducted its Worksite Action Leader program, which used relational organizing at targeted worksites to increase voter turnout in the November 2024 elections. The program was incredibly effective, increasing voter turnout by double digits.

To build on the success of the WAL program, we are starting something similar for this legislative session. The Action Leader program will create a network of engaged advocates on two of our three top legislative issues (pensions and health care) who will use relational organizing to mobilize members. The goal is to use this robust organizing network to successfully pass our proposed legislation by educating members about the issues, our proposed policies and ways they can take action.

For this legislative session, there are two Action Leader programs: one focused on pension advocacy, the other focused on health care advocacy. Action Leaders have the option to choose one issue or work on both. There are currently 225 action leaders representing 162 locals.

Action Leaders work with the Pension Advocacy Group, the Health Care Task Force and Education Minnesota staff to undergo training and learn best practices for relational organizing. Once they've completed training, action leaders begin working to mobilize members in their districts to contact their legislators and share their stories on pensions and health care.

Mark Domeier is an English teacher and health care Action Leader in New Richland-Hartland-Ellendale-Geneva. After serving on his local's health care team for many years, becoming an action leader on health care seemed like a logical fit for him, so when his local president asked if he would be interested, he accepted.

Domeier said the Action Leader program hopes to strengthen members' voices by working collectively with other educators across the state. "The idea of the program is to bolster solidarity by getting our members

involved and then working with people all across the state," he said. "Instead of each of us fighting our little fires, we can work together to find solutions on a grander scale."

This process begins with talking to members about legislative priorities and ensuring they understand what Education Minnesota's proposals are and why members support those proposals.

Domeier said the personal relationship aspect makes it easier to talk about the issues. "The benefit is that, especially in a small district, you know everyone," he said. "It's much easier to reach out [to someone you know] and say 'Hey, can you explain this a little bit more?'" This approach also works in large districts, where action leaders' focus may be their building, instead of the entire district.

Action Leaders have leeway to organize in ways that work best for their community. In NRHEG, Domeier said the first step is an email campaign to legislators. "We make the template and then as the Action Leader, I go around to everyone and ask them to send it to their elected officials," said Domeier. He says the benefit to this approach is twofold: One, lawmakers pay closer attention when many constituents are discussing the same problem; and two, it provides an avenue for members to make their voices heard and take action beyond the negotiating table.

For Pension Action Leaders, early organizing efforts have included targeted communications to the TRA Board of Trustees. The TRA held a meeting on March 5 to determine their position on pension benefit improvements for this legislative session. Ahead of that meeting, PALs mobilized Education Minnesota members to contact TRA board members and ask them to support Education Minnesota's 60/30 proposal.

To learn more about the Action Leader program and if your local union has any Action Leaders, talk to your field staff or local president.

Hundreds gather in St. Paul for Rally to Fund our Future

On Feb. 18, several hundred educators, state workers, nurses, home health and child care workers, service employees and other labor union members gathered in the Capitol Rotunda for a rally around raising revenue. The rally was organized by We Make Minnesota, a labor-grassroots coalition advocating for a strong and equitable state budget, of which Education Minnesota is a member.

Corporate profits are at record highs, but the amount they pay in taxes is at record lows. At the federal level, the corporate tax rate is currently 21%—but many large companies pay significantly less than that. From 2018 to 2022, the Institute on Taxation and Economic policy examined 342 large public companies and found that 142 of them paid less than half of the federal tax rate. Due to tax credits and other tax breaks, mega corporations such as Tesla have paid zero federal income taxes since 2022.

While multi-billion-dollar corporations pay nothing in income taxes, everyday Minnesotans pay their fair share, even when struggling to make ends meet. Despite Minnesota's strong investments into public education over the past couple years, the system remains underfunded, and the resulting teacher shortage has hit nearly nine in 10 Minnesota school districts.

Education Minnesota's legislative agenda presents a plan to tackle the educator shortage by improving pay, pensions and health care—but those improvements will require more revenue. That's why hundreds of our members gathered at the Capitol to demand that the very wealthy and large corporations pay what they truly owe in taxes.

2022 Teacher of the Year Sarah Lancaster spoke to the crowd, highlighting the benefits that would come from tax equity. "By taxing those who are most able to pay, we reduce the burden on those who are most vulnerable," she said. Lancaster, who teaches in Onamia, described how rural communities often bear the brunt of tax inequality. "I think about my students in Mille Lacs County—they are not rich. They need all the resources they can get," she said. "As an individual



2022 Teacher of the Year Sarah Lancaster speaks to the rally crowd.

with multiple degrees in higher education and over a decade of experience in the classroom, one burden I should not face is financial insecurity—but we do. It affects my ability to be present for my students or to stay in the profession at all."

Lancaster emphasized that educators across Minnesota face these same struggles and shared how tax equity would benefit all teachers by addressing the educator shortage. "We must improve the pay, the pensions and the health care of those educating our future. If every Minnesota teacher received care for mental health, for medical health, a living wage and a secure pension, it would be a sea change for public education. When we are supported, we can provide the support and security our students need."

Ahead of the rally, several Education Minnesota members testified at hearings and attended lobby days at the Capitol. In total, our members attended 44 meetings with lawmakers on Feb. 18, speaking with them about the need to improve pay, strengthen pensions and reduce health care costs.



Education Minnesota members and allies attended the Rally to Fund our Future in the state Capitol Rotunda.



Education Minnesota members Kari Peterson and Christine Bistodeau hold pension reform signs at the rally.



Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison speaks to the crowd.



Attendees packed the Capitol Rotunda.

Legislative session in full swing after unprecedented start

The 2025-26 legislative session is fully underway after a rocky start due to unexpected vacancies in both chambers, a tie in the House and a one-seat DFL majority in the Senate. We have broken down everything that's happened in the Legislature this session, along with how it has impacted our proposed bills.



Rep. Dan Wolgamott sponsored Education Minnesota's pension bill.

The Minnesota House of Representatives

Because the November election resulted in a tied House—67 Republicans and 67 Democrats—the two parties first negotiated a power-sharing agreement in December. But in January, DFL Representative-elect Curtis Johnson resigned after a judge found that he did not live in the district, giving Republicans a temporary one-seat majority until the seat can be filled by a special election, which was scheduled for March 11.

Citing this temporary majority, Republicans walked back the power-sharing agreement and argued that they deserved full control of the chamber for the entire session. They also indicated that they would refuse to seat DFL Rep. Brad Tabke, who won his election by 14 votes.

There must be a quorum of at least 68 representatives present for the legislative session to officially begin. To stop Republicans from overriding the will of the voters by unseating Rep. Tabke, DFL members prevented a quorum by spending the first few weeks working in their districts instead of at the Capitol in St. Paul.

While the DFL members were working in their districts, Republican members ignored Secretary of State Steve

Simon's declaration that there was not a quorum and elected a Speaker, established committees and held hearings. However, after a court challenge, a judge ruled that any actions taking by Republicans during that time were invalid because a quorum was never reached, therefore the House was never formally organized.

After several weeks of negotiations, Republican Leader Lisa Demuth and DFL Leader Melissa Hortman reached a power-sharing deal in early February, outlined below:

- Allows Rep. Demuth to be Speaker for two years.
- Requires the committees be co-chaired by both parties and requires bills to have bipartisan support to leave a committee.
- Guarantees that Rep. Tabke will be seated.
- Allows for the creation of an Oversight Committee with a Republican majority.
- Specifies that no legislation can pass the chamber without 68 votes, which means any bill that passes the House must have bipartisan support.

The HD-54A election

Rep. Brad Tabke's election was contested because 20 mail-in ballots were lost; however, six of those voters whose ballots were lost testified under oath that they voted for Tabke, meaning that even if those ballots were found, there was not enough support for challenger Aaron Paul to change the results. This decision was confirmed in a recount and upheld by a judge in early January.

Despite the fact that Rep. Tabke had clearly won his race, Republicans in the House said that they would not seat him, which would force the seat to a special election and override the will of the voters in 54A.



Members of Minneapolis Federation of Teachers with Sen. Doron Clark at an MFT lobby day.

Minnesota Senate

The DFL currently holds the Minnesota Senate with a 34-33 majority. However, the Senate went to a temporary tie after the passing of Sen. Kari Dziedzic in December. The Senate operated under a power-sharing agreement while the parties were tied, but Democrats regained control after Sen. Doron Clark won a special election for Sen. Dziedzic's seat.

What this means for our legislative priorities

This is a much tougher legislative environment than last session. Because the House started late, there is a significant backlog of bills that need to be filed, including our proposals around our top legislative priorities of pay and health care. Additionally, the current legislative makeup and the power-sharing agreement mean that legislation will need bipartisan support to pass the House.

Fortunately, our pension bill was filed and formally introduced on Feb. 27. Sponsored by Rep. Dan Wolgamott in the House and Sen. Heather Gustafson in the Senate, our bill (HF 1582, SF 2000) proposes an unreduced career rule of 60 years of age and 30 years of service.

Our legislative priorities remain unchanged, and we will continue to advocate fiercely for improvements

to pay, pensions and health care. Our union's strongest resource is you—our members. When you share your stories by testifying at a hearing, attending a lobby day or legislative dinner, or inviting your elected officials to visit your local or school, it increases the chances that our bills move through the Legislature and become law. Building relationships with lawmakers is one of the most effective advocacy tools we have. If you have questions about how to get involved or specific policies, contact our lobby team at lobbyteam@edmn.org. If you want to organize a lobby day or invite a legislator to visit your local, contact your field staff.

State Rep. Dan Wolgamott formally files Education Minnesota's pension bill.



How these Minnesota educators are navigating cultural appropriation in the classroom

Educators can help students engage with diversity thoughtfully, avoiding stereotypes and promoting empathy, by fostering understanding and respect for cultural traditions.

By Brenda Alvarez, NEA Today Senior Writer

Over 350 languages are spoken in homes across the U.S., reflecting the rich cultural tapestry in today's public schools. As classrooms become more diverse, the need for educators to create inclusive environments that honor and mirror the backgrounds of their students while fostering mutual understanding and respect has never been more pressing. The key to this is distinguishing between cultural appropriation and appreciation.

Appropriation vs. appreciation: what's the difference?

Cultural appropriation happens when elements of someone else's culture are taken and used in a way that strips away their original meaning or disrespects their importance. It can often lead to the exploitation of other cultures. Appreciation, on the other hand, means someone takes the time to understand and honor the culture, often involving collaboration with people from that background.

Take, for example, Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead. This is a holiday that celebrates life, death, and family. It's observed in Mexico and other places, including the United States. If people are interested in celebrating this day, it's not simply a matter of painting a sugar skull or dressing up as a Catrina, a central symbol of the holiday. Instead, they should learn about its significance as a day to honor loved ones who have passed away and consider creating an ofrenda (offering) with real understanding of its symbolism.

And so, how does this filter down into classrooms?

Recognizing the line between respect and harm

"Stereotypes are still present in classrooms," says Tucker Quetone, a retired English teacher and now a Native American liaison for Rochester Public Schools. "I see

it in textbooks, on school walls, and even in grade school activities like coloring pages," adding that this perpetuates outdated and harmful ideas.

He's seen, for example, the misuse of sacred traditions, such as an educator asking students to pick their "spirit animal" or leading an activity where students create dreamcatchers or Southwestern sand paintings. Using "spirit animal" casually, for example, is often considered cultural appropriation because it trivializes its deep spiritual significance in Indigenous culture—where animals serve as sacred spiritual guides tied to specific tribes and traditions.

"Teachers need to understand that these items have deep cultural and ceremonial significance. Making dreamcatchers in class can trivialize their meaning," he explains. "Sand paintings, for instance, are very sacred and have to do with ceremonies. Even drumming—you need to be careful because tribes have certain protocols on who can drum."

Celebrating culture thoughtfully

When it comes to cultural appreciation, Quetone shares an example from his time in Rochester.

"We focused on traditional values of local tribes like the Ojibwe, Anishinaabe and Dakota, such as honesty, respect and courage. These values were tied to icons—like a turtle or eagle—and [exhibited] on posters in English and the Native languages. This approach celebrated the culture without crossing boundaries," he explains.

To avoid classroom practices that perpetuate stereotypes or strip traditions of their deeper meaning, his advice is to start local.

"Engage with Native students and their families or consult nearby tribes to determine what is appropriate to share in the classroom," he advises.

For Quetone, another critical element to celebrating Indigenous culture is to focus on Native people who are still here, practicing their language, culture, and traditions.

"We're a part of the modern world," he says. "We want to be part of the curriculum, but we want that to be done in a respectful way—not just historically."

Going beyond the basics

Cassandra Sheppard, a social studies teacher who teaches critical ethnic studies in St. Paul, explores cultural appreciation in various ways and throughout the year.

She recalls a classroom discussion focused on culture and power, where a famous singer wore traditional Hmong jewelry with a revealing outfit, sparking conversation about cultural appropriation.

The students debated whether it was done out of ignorance or intentionally without respect for the culture's origins. This led to discussions about solidarity and how students can stand with communities facing such issues.

"I always remind [students]: 'It's a big deal to do stuff for us but not without us,'" says Sheppard.

Sheppard adds another layer to this topic by emphasizing the importance of creating a sense of community in classrooms.

"Having kids not feel like they have to be the sole voice for their culture is huge," she says, explaining that "when we talk about different aspects of culture, especially cultural stereotypes, I ask, 'Have you ever heard this before in your life?' Some students have, and some haven't, and this opens up authentic discussions without making blanket statements."

The goal for students is for them leave her classroom with some critical consciousness.

"I want them to be able to assess the world and...make it a better place for themselves, their families, and their community," she says.

Building inclusive classrooms

For Kimberly Colbert, a high school English and Ethnic Studies teaching in St. Paul, a key point is the prioritization of cultural literacy among educators.

"There's a level of literacy nowadays that educators should have if they want to avoid teaching something that feels stereotypical or feels like appropriation," Colbert says.

As a Black and Asian educator with 30 years of teaching experience, she underscores that instead of relying on outdated classics just because they've always been taught, teachers should instead look for diverse narratives that resonate with today's students.

Colbert also emphasizes the need to frame historical narratives in empowering ways.

In her African American literature class, for example, students read excerpts from "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave," as well as Colson Whitehead's "Underground Railroad." She organizes the readings under themes, such as Black strength, Black creativity, and Black ingenuity. This approach counters the narrative of perpetual oppression and instead celebrates resilience, she says.

This article first appeared in NEA Today and is available at nea.org/nea-today.

Understanding the distinction between cultural appreciation and appropriation helps students respect other cultures' history, traditions, and significance. Aaron Dorsey from the NEA's Center for Racial and Social Justice emphasizes that approaching cultures with curiosity and care fosters an environment where diversity is celebrated. For example, instead of wearing a sacred Indigenous headdress as a costume, a student might honor the culture by studying its stories or supporting Indigenous art.

Learning about cultural appropriation helps students understand the harm caused by misrepresentation and exploitation, fostering empathy for marginalized cultures. For instance, understanding the significance of Black hairstyles like cornrows helps students recognize the pain caused when such styles are dismissed as "unprofessional" but praised as "trendy" when adopted by others.

Distinguishing between appropriation and appreciation encourages critical thinking about actions and choices, questioning how behavior affects others and whether it is exploitative or respectful.

Meet the 2025 Teacher of the Year semifinalists

The 2025 Teacher of the Year nomination process is progressing, with 31 semifinalists selected from an initial pool of 142 candidates. Nominations began in November, followed by portfolio submissions from nominees. A panel of 21 community leaders reviewed these portfolios to choose the semifinalists. The panel will now re-evaluate the semifinalists' portfolios and video submissions to select about 10 finalists. The current Minnesota Teacher of the Year, Tracy Byrd, will announce the winner on May 4 at the Saint Paul RiverCentre.

Education Minnesota organizes and underwrites the Teacher of the Year program, which includes teachers from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade, Early Childhood Family Education, and Adult Basic Education, from both public and private schools. The program is also supported by Education Minnesota ESI, Educators Lifetime Solutions, EFS Advisors, Harvard Club of Minnesota Foundation, SMART Technologies, and Expedition Credit Union.

The semifinalists for the 2025 Minnesota Teacher of the Year are listed alphabetically by last name, along with their respective districts and schools.

- **Stacy Bartlett**, Stillwater Area Public Schools, Stillwater Area High School
- **Garrett Bruce**, Robbinsdale Area Public Schools, Robbinsdale Cooper High School
- **Katelyn Bruce**, Minneapolis Public Schools, Lake Harriet Lower Campus
- **Jodi Carufel**, Bloomington Public Schools, Olson Middle School
- **Ryan Collins**, Mahtomedi Public Schools, Mahtomedi Middle School
- **Ben Cuevas-Rengstorf**, Minneapolis Public Schools, Roosevelt High School
- **Christoph Dundas**, Austin Public Schools, Austin High School
- **Laura Eid**, Eden Prairie Schools, Central Middle School
- **Ted Erickson**, Anoka-Hennepin School District, Blaine High School
- **Megan Frantzen**, South St. Paul Public Schools, Kaposia Education Center
- **Ted Gehring**, St. Francis Area Schools, St. Francis Middle School
- **Jonathan Gilmer**, Lakeville Public School District, Lakeville South High School
- **Megan Hill**, Minnetonka Public Schools, Groveland Elementary
- **John Horton**, Saint Paul Public Schools, J.J. Hill Montessori
- **Amanda Jagdeo**, Saint Paul Public Schools, Hamline Elementary School
- **Travis Koupal**, Minneapolis Public Schools, Justice Page Middle School
- **Zoe Kourajian**, Mounds View Public Schools, Edgewood Middle School
- **Tim Larson**, Medford Public Schools, Medford High School
- **Criselda Martinez**, Rochester Public Schools, Riverside Elementary
- **Katherine Norrie**, Northfield Public Schools, Northfield High School
- **Michael Okwabi**, Eden Prairie Schools, Eden Prairie High School
- **Soren Olesen**, Roseau Community School District, Roseau High School
- **Sean Padden**, Roseville Area Schools, Roseville Area Middle School
- **Araceli Pastrana**, Eden Prairie Schools, Eagle Heights Spanish Immersion
- **Michelle Rada**, Eden Prairie Schools, Eden Prairie High School
- **Marcela Roos**, Eden Prairie Schools, Eagle Heights Spanish Immersion
- **Morgan Steele**, Richfield Public Schools, Richfield High School
- **Andrew Sundberg**, Grygla Public School
- **Averi M. Turner**, Roseville Area Schools, Emmet D. Williams Elementary
- **Kong Vang**, Saint Paul Public Schools, Washington Technology Magnet School
- **Linda Wallenberg**, Eden Prairie Schools, Eden Prairie High School

Volunteer at the Minnesota State Fair

The registration window to volunteer at the State Fair opens soon.

Each year, Education Minnesota member volunteers and staff produce personalized calendars for fairgoers in the Education Building during the State Fair. This is a wonderful opportunity to talk about public education and share your story with attendees.

Shift duties include taking pictures and printing calendars for attendees, managing the "Thank a Teacher" notecards and acting as an Education Minnesota ambassador for fairgoers. In 2024, members produced more than 13,000 calendars.

In addition to the calendar, the booth also features

a curriculum area or program each day. Past participants include Minnesota Teacher of the Year, School Nurse Organization of Minnesota and more.

Volunteers receive a free ticket for admission to the State Fair, an Education Minnesota T-shirt and will be reimbursed for mileage. Volunteers will also be reimbursed for parking, bus fare or rideshare costs up to \$20 (with original receipts). Shifts are three hours.

To sign up, please visit educationminnesota.org/events/annual-events/state-fair-booth.



Attend the 2025 Education Minnesota Summer Leadership Seminar

Join us Aug. 5-6 at the River's Edge Convention Center in St. Cloud for our Summer Leadership Seminar! This event, held every other summer in odd-numbered years, is a fresh spin on our former Summer Seminar.

This updated workshop emphasizes relationship-building and shared experiences in a cohort structure to build leadership skills. Participants are welcome

to attend individually or as a team with other members of their local.

Make sure to check out our website for updates. Information about the Summer Leadership Seminar is available at educationminnesota.org/events/annual-events/summer-seminar.

Robbinsdale Equity Allies provide culturally responsive support to students and staff

For Aiysha Mustapha, equity work comes naturally. After growing up in a New Jersey neighborhood that was only 6% White, she attended high school at a boarding school in Connecticut where most students were White. "I've been doing this for most of my life," she said, "I can honestly say I live the work." Mustapha is a School Climate and Culture Specialist for Robbinsdale Area Public Schools, a position she has held since 2023. Before that, she spent several years as a Family and Community Engagement Specialist with the district.

Both Mustapha's current role and former role are funded through the Achievement and Integration for Minnesota program, which is designed to "pursue racial and economic integration, increase student achievement, create equitable educational opportunities and reduce economic disparities based on students' diverse racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds," according to the 2013 state statute that established the program.

As a School Climate and Culture specialist, Mustapha works as a consultant with the admin team and the MTSS Committee to ensure that a school's policies are equitable. She also provides support for students and staff—especially staff of color—ensuring they have support spaces. "Because of implicit bias, I am sometimes presented with some difficult conversations and situations," Mustapha said. One of her responsibilities is to ensure that behavioral and academic interventions are applied with race, sex, gender, disability and socio-economic factors in mind. Oftentimes, this looks like conversations about discipline: Does this disciplinary action make sense for what the student has done? Is this approach most effective for this student?

School Climate and Culture Specialists provide cultural context to students and staff. "I do a lot of bringing perspective and cultural pieces that people may not

have thought of," she said. For example, a student whose parents are recent immigrants may not watch the local news—so while it may seem obvious that they've heard about a specific event, that may not always be the case. In another instance, the district pitched the idea of moving to twice-monthly paychecks instead of the current biweekly system. Equity Allies pushed back, explaining to the district that what may seem like a simple change to them would have a significant impact on ESPs who work multiple jobs and have to balance multiple pay schedules.

Another aspect of this work is providing culturally responsive support. That can include educating students about the cultural and historical context of words they're using. "A lot of these kids have heard specific words used casually [or in music] but they don't understand where those words come from," Mustapha said. "And so I open that up and we have a conversation about the history of those words and why they mean what they mean." She says these conversations help the students better understand rules around usage of certain language and terms. Culturally responsive support and education also incorporates celebrating cultural months and important holidays, which Mustapha works with the school to organize. "Right now, my office has a medicine wheel and LED lights in Native colors. I have flags and then I have some surprise decorations for the students for Ramadan."

Mustapha stresses that the benefit to this work is that it brings perspective and insight that people otherwise might not have, which helps build a stronger community. "Everyone's idea of building community isn't the same," she said. "This work requires us to bridge those different ideas and provide perspectives."

"Ultimately, it's about making sure that everyone feels a sense of belonging," she said.

Workers' Compensation covers an employee voluntarily engaged in an after-school activity

The Minnesota Workers' Compensation Court of Appeals (WCCA) recently upheld a judge's decision to provide workers' compensation coverage to a teacher for an injury received in an after-school basketball game. The school district tried to argue that this activity fell under an exclusion from coverage, as a wellness/recreational activity. The administration at the school site, however, promoted teacher involvement in these types of activities to build community and strengthen relationships. In siding with the teacher, the WCCA determined that this activity was for the benefit of the students, not for the benefit of the teacher, and should be covered. Education Minnesota participated in the briefing of the arguments as an amicus curiae (friend of the court) and advocated for this result. Jerry Sisk of Mottaz & Sisk Injury Law represented the teacher and handles many educator workers' compensation cases through referrals from Education Minnesota.

As Jerry notes, this decision "significantly strengthens protection for educators who engage with students beyond traditional classroom instruction. The Court recognized that relationship-building activities—including sports, clubs, and informal interactions—are integral to modern teaching duties, not merely recreational activities." We are very pleased with the Court's decision, and although we understand that unfortunately the school district is appealing again, we are hopeful that the Minnesota Supreme Court

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

will defer to the WCCA and uphold this appropriate decision.

Workers' compensation is a no-fault system that is created to provide a base level of benefits to injured employees and a limit to liability for employers. The employee does not have to prove that the employer acted badly, and similarly, the employer cannot use an employee's alleged negligence or wrongdoing as an excuse not to provide benefits.

Educators who experience a work-related injury should first determine if they need to seek medical treatment. The next step is to report it to their employer as soon as possible and preferably in writing. This should be done within four days to receive maximum benefits, but in some circumstances one can have up to 180 days to report. The employer will then file a "first report of injury" with its insurer. A report should be made regardless of whether or not the educator needs medical attention. If educators do seek medical treatment, they should notify the physician's office that

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they are seeking care for a work-related injury and the bills should be sent to the employer. Employees retain the right to choose their own doctors for treatment.

Even if a work-related incident does not result in the receipt of either paid medical expenses or wage replacement benefits, it is important to report it so data can be collected regarding workplace safety. The workplace safety committee can review this data to determine if changes need to be made in order to better protect the workers.

If the employee’s workplace injury results in lost work time, that time may be compensable. After a worker is out of work for more than three days, wage replacement benefits begin. However, if the injury lasts for ten days, the first three days also become compensable retroactively. For injuries that occur after October 1, 2024, the maximum weekly wage replacement is \$1,481.76. Minnesota law allows employers to agree that workers can use their accumulated sick leave to cover the difference, up to 100% of wages. This can be frustrating for educators injured on the job, when they have to use their own sick leave to maintain full wages. Improved benefits can be negotiated into collective bargaining agreements to help alleviate this hardship. Education Minnesota also supports statutory changes to workers’ compensation that acknowledge the unique safety issues educators encounter.

Educators who have a workers’ compensation claim should contact their Education Minnesota Field Staff for any assistance needed in establishing coverage, supplementing benefits, or requesting accommodations. Workers should also remember that unless the employer

is paying at least a portion of their wages, the employee will not automatically earn pension credit for the time they are receiving wage replacement benefits. These workers are eligible for a medical leave that would allow them to make pension contributions, if that is financially beneficial for them. All of these components add to the difficulty educators experience when working to recover from a workplace injury. Education Minnesota staff are available to assist in this process as questions and concerns arise.

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What to know about the Paid Family and Medical Leave Act

The 2023 Paid Family and Medical Leave Act provides paid time off when a serious condition prevents you from working, when you need time to care for a family member or a new child, for certain military-related events or for certain personal safety issues. Currently, the program is set to take effect on Jan. 1, 2026. While there are Republican-led efforts to delay and repeal the implementation of PFML, they are unlikely to become law.

We have compiled a list of some of the most frequently asked questions to help local affiliates prepare for the implementation of PFML. If you have additional questions, please reach out to your field staff.

How will this program work?

The law establishes a family and medical insurance account modeled after the state's unemployment insurance fund. It will be managed by a new Family and Medical Benefits Insurance Division within the Department of Employment and Economic Development.

You will need to notify your employer at least 30 days before you plan to take leave, if the event is foreseeable. You will need to experience a qualifying event (an event that makes you eligible for leave) of at least seven calendar days and will need to apply to the paid leave program for the leave. You or your family member's medical professional will provide certification of the reason for leave.

What's considered a "qualifying event" for PFML?

The most common PFML-eligible situations will likely be bonding time around a child's birth, adoption or foster care arrangement. With a few exceptions, PFML must be used within the first 12 months after that event.

Caregiving leave could apply to a family member's serious physical or mental illness, an injury that leads to inpatient care or incapacity, a need for recurring treatment or a stretch of recovery. Similar parameters apply to the employee's own medical situation,

including pregnancy or health complications. Leave could also stem from a family member's military deployment or a need to reconnect with someone coming back from active-duty service. The leave may also surround an instance of domestic abuse or sexual assault to the employee or a family member in cases where the employee needs a longer stretch of time away from work.

How is the PFML program paid for? Do I have to contribute to this program to receive benefits?

The initial down payment for the PFML program was made from the 2023 budget surplus. Eventually, the ongoing costs will be split among employers and workers.

The payroll tax (or "premium") will be increased annually, based on actuarial data. The full premium rate is expected to be 0.88%, with a 1.2% cap on total contributions. There are exceptions to lower the cost for employers with fewer than 30 workers. There is also money allocated to help employers hire temporary staff or pay costs associated with employees on leave.

Minnesota workers will contribute to part of the Paid Leave program through shared premiums that will be automatically deducted from your paycheck. The law allows workers and employers to split the premium share up to 50%, but this is eligible for negotiation between an employer and union. For example, if the premium is set at 0.88%, under a 50% split, employees would pay about 0.44% of their wages through automatic payroll deduction to support the program.

Who will be eligible for Paid Leave benefits? Are school districts required to participate?

Most Minnesota employees will become eligible to take paid leave after they have earned about \$3,500 in wages within the state over a period of a year.

All public employers, including school districts, must participate and may not opt out of this program in favor

of a comparable private option. Any school district with fewer than 30 total workers on their payroll will be eligible for a lower payroll tax.

Can my employer deny a request for PFML? Is there an appeal process in the event leave is denied?

Employers do not approve or deny PFML; a leave request under the PFML program is approved by the state agency that reviews claims (DEED). Employees and employers can submit information on eligibility to DEED, which will also establish an appeal process in the event that leave is denied.

How many weeks could somebody be away from their job each year? Once I take leave, when can I take it again?

Family leave and medical leave can be taken on their own up to a maximum of 12 weeks; a combination of family leave and medical leave is allowable up to 20 weeks. Individuals cannot take 20 weeks of only medical leave or 20 weeks of only family leave.

A benefit year is the 12-month period that starts when an individual first takes paid leave; it cannot be taken again until the anniversary of their first usage.

Leave does not have to be taken consecutively. A person who needs to be away for regular health care treatments could work out a schedule where they take leave days here and there for a stretch of time. Applications for leave, along with some kind of certification of the qualifying event, will be submitted through a state-developed system managed by DEED.

Is Paid Leave the same thing as FMLA?

No. PFML is a paid leave program run by the State of Minnesota that entails both wage loss benefits for a covered leave, as well as job protection at the end of a qualifying leave. The federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 is unpaid, job-protected leave. FMLA and PFML can run concurrently, but an individual would not be able to “stack” or use PFML and FMLA consecutively.

How can I coordinate leave with a member of my family?

Paid Family and Medical Leave will be available on an individual and not family basis. For example, two caregivers of the same child who work for the same employer could take leave at the same time for the same reason. A collective bargaining agreement could, however, place limitations on contractual leave benefits for either “topping up” pay to full wage replacement or using leave concurrently.

How would PFML work when I work for two different employers?

The wage replacement rate will be calculated by DEED based on wage rates from different employers. Employees will be able to appeal the wage replacement rate determination if it appears to be inaccurate.

More information will be shared from the agency as it becomes available.

How is the level of pay I receive on my leave determined?

Our interpretation at this time is that all earnings reported to the state through the wage detail report will be used to determine the replacement wage. DEED’s process will account for wages as they are paid rather than possible future wages. Pay from an extracurricular coaching job held at the time of one’s leave that is included in a paycheck, for example, would be included in the calculation of earnings. An extracurricular coaching role that is not being paid at the time of leave would not be used as a projection of future income and therefore not used in determining one’s pay while on leave.

Education Minnesota candidates' election statements

At the 2025 Representative Convention, delegates will elect the next leaders for Education Minnesota. Positions to be filled are: president, vice president, secretary-treasurer and NEA Director (two positions).

All candidates had the opportunity to submit a statement and/or photograph. These statements and photos appear here in the Minnesota Educator and on the Education Minnesota website. Members may view the statements online by going to www.educationminnesota.org, signing in to the member portal and then clicking on the Elections tab under Governance.

Candidates are listed in random order.

Candidate for president

Monica Byron (elected, per Education Minnesota bylaw article VII, section 5.)

Education Richfield

Candidates for vice president



Marty Fridgen

Marty Fridgen

United Teachers of South Washington County

By working in union at the local, state, and national levels, I know what it means to be accountable to members. I have the determination and track record to improve working conditions and bring economic security including better pensions, pay, and healthcare for all of our members.



Paul Peterson

Paul Peterson

Education Minnesota-International Falls Local No. 331

Change can be difficult but it can be good and powerful. I would like our state union to refocus on labor (pensions, pay, and health insurance). There are organizations that can advocate for other issues in education close to your heart, join and donate. Labor is the focus of my candidacy.



William Schwandt

William Schwandt

Bloomington Federation of Paraprofessionals

I want to continue to advance the priorities of improved pay, pensions and health care for all educators. I believe in the power of one to one conversations and that every member should be heard. It is time to defend education and unions and I am ready to lead our members in this fight.

Candidates for secretary-treasurer



Ryan Fiereck

Ryan Fiereck

Education Minnesota St. Francis, Local 1977

St. Francis #1977 President. ESP and Teacher President. Former Vice President Education Minnesota. Current Executive Committee & Budget and Finance Committee member of the Governing Board. Pension Advocate Statewide Chair. Business and Computer Technology Teacher. Professional Development Leader.



Michael Larson

Michael Larson

Dakota County United Educators

I am Mike Larson and I want to be your next EDMN Secretary-Treasurer. My experience as a local treasurer and negotiator has given me a voice that wants to fight for you! We are facing many financial battles and I believe a clear vision and strong leaders will create a bright future for all teachers.



Heather Mathews

Heather Mathews

Dakota County United Educators

I respectfully ask for your vote. I will work tirelessly to support all members, expand membership, and lobby for improvements in our careers, including equitable pensions, I am committed to preserving the integrity of our organization, through careful fiscal responsibility and transparency.

Candidates for NEA Director, Position 1



Jasman Myers

Jasman Myers (elected, per Education Minnesota bylaw article VII, section 5.)

North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale Education Association

Representation matters. As your NEA Director, I've worked to ensure fair workplaces and inclusive classrooms. Re-electing me means entrusting a proven leader who believes in the power to transform education. I will amplify our voices, advocate collective priorities, and reflect fairness and justice.

Candidates for NEA Director, Position 2



Aaron Donais

Aaron Donais

Education Minnesota-St. Louis County Local 1406

I will work hard to ensure all locals' voices are heard, especially in our small and disenfranchised communities. We need to leverage strong organizing and fight for equitable school funding. These efforts uplift all members in our important work and ensure we can earn a good, dependable living.



John (Vince) Wagner

John (Vince) Wagner

Rochester Education Association

If elected to serve as your NEA Director, I commit to the following five principles. 1) Member advocacy, 2) Speaking with one voice for Minnesota educators, 3) Honoring the teaching profession, 4) Supporting ESPs – one job should be enough, and 5) Working to correct inequities in the NEA.



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TRA Board elections open!

The Minnesota Teachers Retirement Association Board

The Minnesota Teachers Retirement Association active members will soon elect two representatives for the Board of Trustees. Two members will be elected for four-year terms which begin on July 1, 2025. Seven candidates are running for the open spots, six of whom are Education Minnesota members. These six candidates were invited to fill out a questionnaire from Education Minnesota. We have used their responses to put together a digital voter guide for the TRA elections, which you can find on our website at educationminnesota.org/advocacy/at-the-legislature/pensions/

Information on the candidates and election will also be shared on Education Minnesota's social media channels. Voting will be open mid-March through April 25. Voting information will go to active members from the Minnesota TRA. More information is available at minnesotatra.org.

