

MINNESOTA

EDUCATOR

FEBRUARY / MARCH 2026



**2026 legislative
agenda continues
focus on pay,
pensions,
health care**

**Solidarity Day of Action provides
support for unsettled locals**

Health care costs strain contract negotiations

**Solidarity
Season!**



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THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

February/March 2026 – Volume 28, No. 4

The Minnesota Educator publishes every other month. It is one of the union's print and digital publications to educate, inform and organize the community of members. The Educator is reported, edited and designed by union staff members. The magazine is printed by union workers at Arandell Printing in Menominee Falls, Wis. Find copies of the Educator online at www.educationminnesota.org. Go to the News menu, then Minnesota Educator.

**To reach the publication for queries,
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**Minnesota Educator
(ISSN 1521-9062) is a bimonthly publication.**

Periodicals are postage-paid at St. Paul, Minnesota, and additional offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to Minnesota Educator, 41 Sherburne Ave., St. Paul, MN 55103-2196.

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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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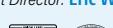


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One battle after another: Educator unionism in 2026

Federal agents equipped for war are roaming the streets of the Twin Cities as I write this, and many educators and students are staying home for fear of abductions and violence. Yet a hundred miles away, Minnesota educators are anxious that their salaries won't sustain their families, and that the health insurance companies are pricing them out of their careers.

2026 is already shaping up like one battle after another for our union as we use our collective power to improve the lives of our educators and students, no matter where they live. We will resist authoritarian tactics in the streets, and we'll push for better pay, pensions and health care at the Legislature and the ballot box.

No educator I know wanted to continue the chaos and assaults on public education that we endured in 2025, but here we are. Federal prosecutors are investigating the governor and mayor of Minneapolis for calling for peaceful resistance to ICE. Several districts have switched to hybrid learning to protect children from their federal government. A members' infant was strapped in their car seat when they were nearly killed by federal officers with chemical munitions.

Acceptance isn't an option, as Martin Luther King Jr. once said: "The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people."

So we're working with parents to protect school buildings and support members of our school communities who are fearful or traumatized. We're clear and public about our demands for federal agents to stay away from schools. We're working across the union movement to peacefully resist and get back to normal.

But our union knows that is not enough. Educators were losing ground on compensation, especially health care, well before the federal incursion. And without changes, our profession will become even less financially viable as the cost of living increases.

When the Legislature comes back in February, we're prepared to make the case for our solution to the health insurance affordability crisis. A single, statewide pool of every school staff member will control costs for

educators. When we unite our purchasing power, insurance companies can't divide up our employers and charge whatever they want.

At the same time, we will be pushing for changes to the tax code to raise revenue and give the state government the resources necessary to raise pay, improve pensions and lower health care costs.

I know some educators worry that talking about raising taxes is too controversial for our union to touch. I strongly disagree and don't intend to comply with the wealthy corporations, and the politicians they pay for, who want us to be silent and scared.

For too long in America, they've convinced working people that demanding that the rich pay what they truly owe back to society is too risky. They're hoping we'll stay quiet while they hoard their wealth, and we struggle to raise our families.

Instead, we will be advocates for public education in 2026. We will defend against school vouchers, whitewashed history lessons, and blaming and shaming certain students for how they look or identify. This, too, has become our responsibility.

As educators who work in union, we depend on each other in difficult times, and these times are as challenging as anyone can remember. So, let's start 2026 with a pledge: This year we support each other. This year, we find our courage through solidarity. This year, we overcome...and win.

In unity,



Monica Byron,
Education Minnesota President



Monica Byron



Congratulations to Barbara Beystrom, retired member from Robbinsdale, 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 Visa gift card and be featured in the next issue of the Minnesota Educator. Happy reading!

Beystrom reads her Educator while waiting for aerial yoga class to start.

Educators in the news

“The daycare staff member who was taken is not a headline or a statistic. They are someone who greeted my kids by name, who wiped tears, tied shoes and helped create the stable environment every child deserves. When ICE removes someone like that, they don’t just target an individual—they destabilize families, workplaces and entire neighborhoods.”

Eastern Carver County teacher and Minneapolis parent Tim Bergslien in a Jan. 9 Minnesota Star Tribune op-ed titled, “Opinion | When ICE comes for our kids’ caregivers, no one is safe.”

Getting social!

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

- [!\[\]\(c44db1e92ba1244b2894d325c806ff8a_img.jpg\) \[facebook.com/educationminnesota\]\(https://www.facebook.com/educationminnesota\)](https://www.facebook.com/educationminnesota)
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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 Chaska Education Association on Facebook:

- [!\[\]\(5d60fe8e38bc12bfb78103fc624e324c_img.jpg\) Search Facebook for: Chaska Education Association](https://www.facebook.com/ChaskaEducationAssociation)

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

Where required, members will be electing election district governing board representatives and state-credentialed delegates to the 2026 NEA Representative Assembly, which will be held July 3-7 in Denver. Election district-level elections will be conducted during a 15-day window (weekdays only) beginning Feb. 16 and ending March 6.

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.

Plans are underway for the 2026 Education Minnesota Representative Convention, which will take place April 24-25 at the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel 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 for Education Minnesota's Representative Convention on April 24-25, 2026 at the Doubletree by Hilton Hotel Bloomington-Minneapolis South. 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 20 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.

Licensed media specialists are a must-have for school libraries

Written by Marie Hydukovich, former media specialist and current fifth grade teacher. Edited by Heaven Keane.

It is no secret that schools are light on money. Never has a school district said "Hey, you know what? We're good, here's your tax refund." I don't have sources, but I'm guessing that's never happened. In the face of these pervasive budgetary shortfalls accompanied by ever-increasing pressure to raise test scores, one of the first positions too often targeted is that of the school library media specialist.

This is a mistake.

Decades of educational research show that eliminating or weakening school library programs has clear, measurable and negative effects on student achievement. Numerous statewide impact studies—often referred to collectively as the "Lance studies"—demonstrate that schools with well-staffed, professionally led library programs consistently outperform schools without them, even when controlling for socioeconomic status, school size and per-pupil spending. In one of the earliest and largest analyses, Lance, Welborn and Hamilton-Pennell (1993) found that students in schools with certified librarians scored significantly higher on standardized reading assessments than those in schools lacking such staffing.

A high-functioning library media center, staffed with a licensed library media specialist, is an absolute necessity when the goal is an increase in literacy rates and a narrowing of gaps amongst populations. The presence of a certified library media specialist is not an optional "extra"—it is an essential part of a high-functioning school. Decades of research consistently reinforce the truth that strong school library programs, led by credentialed professionals, directly support student achievement, equity of access and the development of lifelong learners.

While media specialists are considered a luxury, schools are consistently adding more non-student-facing administrative or coaching roles. Librarians, or

media specialists, are far from being a quiet custodian of books. Hiring a library media specialist means bringing in instructional support, a technology integrator and a highly trained teacher, all in one. The school library media specialist is an instructional partner, a literacy leader and a guide for students navigating an increasingly complex information landscape.

Over the past two decades, numerous large-scale studies—from states such as Colorado, Pennsylvania and our own Minnesota—show a clear link between professionally staffed school libraries and higher student achievement. As one study observed, "students at schools with better-funded library media centers tend to achieve higher average reading scores, whether their schools and communities are rich or poor" (Lance, Welborn, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993, as cited in ALA, n.d.).

When schools employ certified library media specialists, students score better on reading and writing assessments. If literacy is the goal, librarians are a necessity. Yet Minnesota is overwhelmingly underserving students in this way. According to Wilder Research (2022), "while 81% of schools report having a library media center, nearly half lack a licensed media specialist managing their library."

Library media specialists collaborate with classroom teachers to design instruction that integrates reading strategies, research skills and critical thinking. Media specialists help students learn how to ask good questions, locate credible sources, synthesize information and match students to books, which often turns them into readers. The skills taught by a librarian transfer across every subject area.

Students who have access to quality library programs read more often and with greater variety. Students discover the joy of reading as well as access to the legitimate informational sources that deepen their understanding of the world. Library media specialists are the only licensed teaching professionals trained

to curate collections. They are vital to guiding collection development. Without them, it is impossible to maintain current, diverse, responsive collections that both reflect students' identities and provide "windows" into worlds beyond their own.

Information literacy is inseparable from digital literacy. Media specialists are experts in both. Librarians ensure that every student has access to credible databases, age-appropriate books and reliable internet connections. Librarians teach students how to identify misinformation, avoid plagiarism and understand intellectual property. Removing media specialists widens academic gaps. Without librarians, many students are left on their own in an increasingly complex information environment. Meanwhile, those in families with more access to resources benefit from educated adults, private tutors, community courses and programming designed for them.

Beyond curating collections, media specialists provide equitable access to materials. Librarians have long been defenders of the freedom to read and explore ideas. These tenets are central to both education and democracy. Book challenges and censorship are rising. A certified professional library media specialist is trained and ready to serve as a defender of students' rights to learn and think critically. Librarians often defuse book challenges before they escalate, allowing schools to meet the needs of all students while still respecting a parent's right to guide their own child's reading.

Investing in quality library programs is an investment in long-term student success. The skills students gain—information literacy, media analysis, independent learning—are precisely those demanded by colleges and employers.

Schools do not question the need for math teachers or reading specialists because we recognize that they provide fundamental support for learning. Schools do not allow principals to write IEPs without a special

education license, because they aren't trained. The same must be true for school libraries. Only media specialists are licensed to curate collections and order materials. A librarian's work touches every grade level and subject. A library media specialist advances literacy, critical thinking, equity and inclusion. The library media specialist serves every single student in a school. The school library is the only classroom open to everyone, every day.

When schools view library media specialists as optional, they signal that access to information, diverse perspectives and guidance in navigating the modern knowledge economy are optional. They are not.

School library media specialists are not a luxury. They are a necessity central to building equitable, informed and thriving school communities.

Sources:

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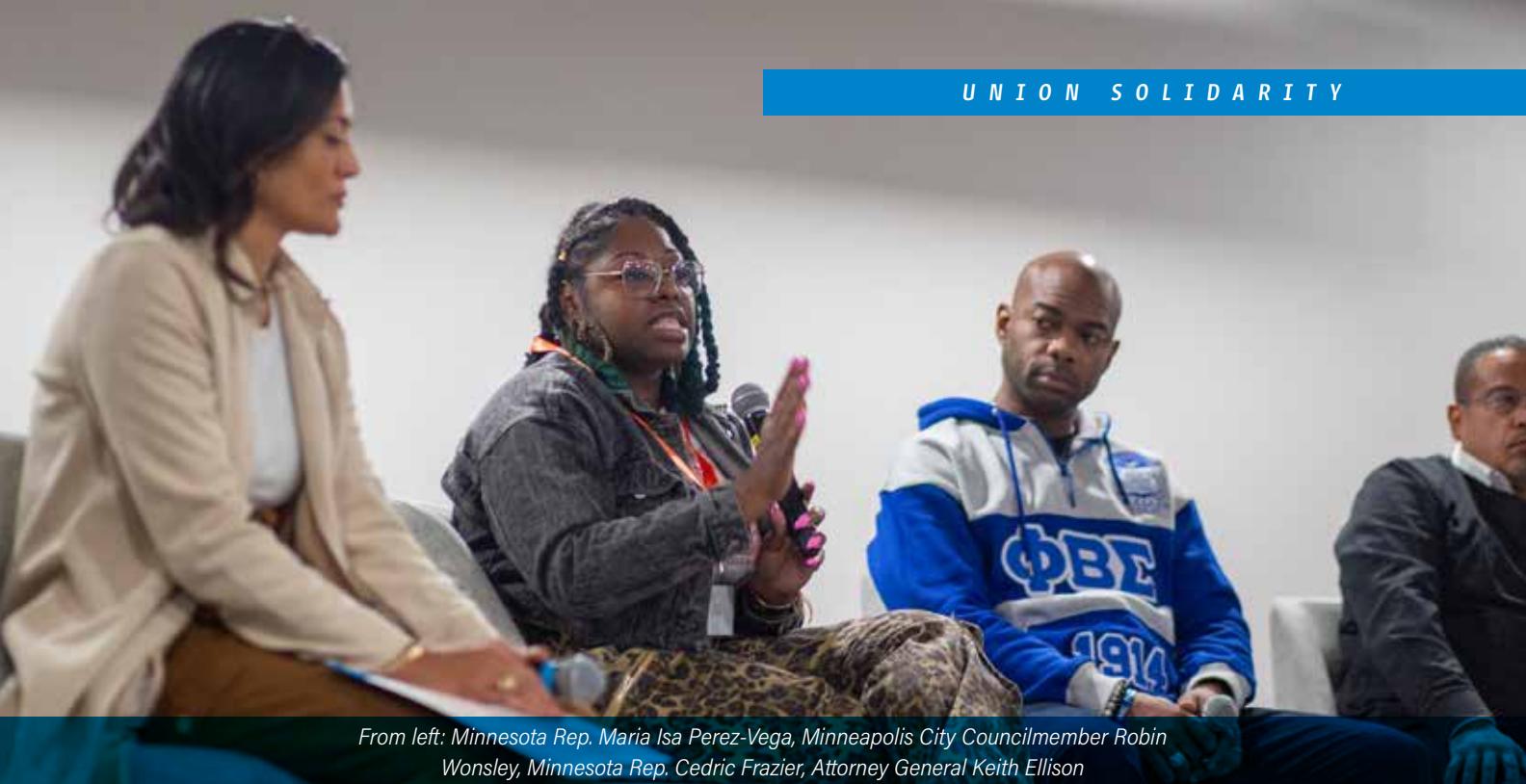
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From left: Minnesota Rep. Maria Isa Perez-Vega, Minneapolis City Councilmember Robin Wonsley, Minnesota Rep. Cedric Frazier, Attorney General Keith Ellison

BIPOC Summit provides support and empowerment to BIPOC members

On Dec. 12-13, BIPOC members of Education Minnesota gathered in Bloomington for the BIPOC summit. This summit brings together members of color to uplift the strength and solidarity of BIPOC members.

This year's theme was "rooted and rising: honoring history and shaping our future." Nicole Lawson, chair of Education Minnesota's Ethnic Minority Affairs Committee, and Jasman Myers, Education Minnesota governing board member, share their experience at the summit below:

Nicole: "I was so excited by the number of members who attended the BIPOC Summit. It was clear that people had come to learn and simply be in the company of other like-minded individuals. My hope was that everyone who attended left with their buckets full—full of hope, renewed energy and a continued commitment to doing the important work that education requires.

On Friday, President Byron opened the summit and gave a beautiful tribute to the late Ternesha Burroughs, Education Minnesota–Osseo President. Providing an

opportunity to collectively grieve while honoring her life and legacy was deeply healing. Several people shared what she meant to them and how her legacy continues to live on in those of us who knew her."

Jasman: "Education Minnesota members enjoyed affirming conversations over a beautifully curated dinner before being embraced by The Boyz powwow drum group, based out of the Twin Cities. The welcoming rhythms were soul-stirring and a powerful lead up to honoring Ternesha. For many guests, the insight gained through the celebration of her life truly shaped their perspective on dedicated union leadership, and the voices of Ternesha's family, friends and colleagues set the tone for an impactful conference.

Performer Eshay Brantley's spoken word encompassed the internal struggle of Black womanhood with an uplifting call-and-response narrative that spoke to the audience and shifted the collective energy. After sharing tears and laughter, the social gathering at the end of the night was a joyous expression of life that allowed us

to build connections with fellow members across the state.

Over breakfast on Saturday morning, participants were formally welcomed back by Education Minnesota staff and the member advisory team. With breath and reverence, we acknowledged and honored the land and labor of our BIPOC ancestors. Afterwards, the Ananya Dance Theatre social justice choreography broke the ice and engaged the audience in dance."

Nicole: "The dancers did a phenomenal job leading us in movement and self-expression—another opportunity to release things we had been carrying.

After a brief pause, we attended various sessions. One session I attended, led by Danielle Houser, focused on healing from colonization. Before diving into the session, she encouraged us not to focus on the person beside us, but instead to take the time to focus inward and ask ourselves what we individually needed to release and let go. Through breathwork, we experienced a sense of freedom as we released cares, situations, people and work, taking a moment to focus solely on ourselves.

Danielle also spent time discussing the characteristics of white supremacy culture and its impact on BIPOC communities. We explored ideas such as perfectionism, the belief that there is only one "right" way to do something, individualism, either/or thinking and objectivity—the denial of values and lived experiences. It was a profound opportunity to sit in community, challenge my own conditioning, and engage in healing.

I am so grateful for each and every presenter—this summit was truly transformational.

We concluded the Summit with a panel featuring Attorney General Keith Ellison and a host of legislators. We could have listened to them for hours. They provided powerful insight into what is currently happening in our world and what we, as educators, can do. On the Attorney General's website, there is a list of actionable ideas; one that stood out to me was the importance of educating and connecting with our families."

Jasman: "Members felt safe and shared their initial hesitation to commute to union-led events due to the recent uptick in ICE enforcement in Minnesota. The on-site rapid response team's presence operated like a halo protecting the essence of solidarity and unionism"

Nicole: "All in all, this Summit was a wonderful way to detox, connect, and heal in community.

My final parting charge to the group was this:

Rooted in them, rising together—we carry on, unstoppable, filled with hope, brimming with joy, and the unwavering expectation of a brighter tomorrow. May we continue to remember, resist, and reimagine. And may we never forget: the future of education is being shaped by us, here and now. 'We are rooted. We are rising. And together, we are unstoppable.'



2026 Legislative agenda focuses on health care cost reduction, pay increases, pension improvements

Educators are the foundation of our public schools, and those educators need to be focused, healthy and present for our students to learn. But right now, certain health insurance companies are gouging educators and the school districts that employ them. Too often, Minnesota educators are working sick, or are sick with worry about their finances, because their health care costs are out of control.

Last summer, a poll of Education Minnesota members found that health insurance costs were their top concern. Nine in 10 said every educator should have affordable, high-quality health insurance, but half of participants said their insurance was not affordable, and 49% said they had put off medical care because it was too expensive. Worries about pay and pensions were not far behind. Working conditions that were burning out staff rounded out the top tier of issues.

These issues are driving the prolonged educator shortage in Minnesota. More than 80% of Minnesota school districts report a significant shortage of teachers and substitutes. Understaffing results in significant workload increases, which accelerates burnout. Low pay adds stress by forcing educators to work second and third jobs. Although we made meaningful progress on teacher pensions in the 2025 legislative session, educators still need more flexibility to retire with dignity after giving their working lives to Minnesota's students.

Educators are on the job and doing their best in every community and ZIP code in Minnesota, but they need more financial support from the state. That is why Education Minnesota supports a package of bills designed to recruit the next generation of educators and keep Minnesota's current educators healthy and in the classroom.

In 2026, our union will work toward a solution to the health care affordability crisis by working to create an insurance pool of every school staff member in the state and empowering them to use their collective negotiating power with the insurance companies



Education Minnesota members and elected officials speak at a press conference for paid family and medical leave.

to control costs. We will also work to alleviate the staffing shortage by raising pay, improving pensions, funding higher education, and improving working conditions to alleviate burnout and boost retention.

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 improve working conditions to reduce burnout. Together, these proposals are an important, achievable solution to the staffing crisis. Our students and educators have waited long enough.

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, modeled after the state employee pool. 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 administrative burden at the local level to increase transparency and remove unnecessary and costly broker fees.

Educator Pay

Minnesota teachers in E-12 schools make 31% less on average than other workers in Minnesota with the same education level. Hourly school workers only make minimum wage in many areas and often do not make enough to cover their health insurance costs. The state of Minnesota should make direct investments in the compensation of its educators. Our union supports legislation that:

- Raises wages for all teachers, commensurate with other professions with similar educational requirements, and raise starting wages to a minimum of \$60,000 annually for teachers with a bachelor's degree and \$80,000 for teachers with a master's degree.
- Establishes a minimum wage for hourly school workers of \$25 an hour and a minimum annual salary.
- 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 no longer the recruitment and retention tool they were created to be. A top priority for teachers is reforming their pension plan. With some of the highest educator contribution levels to their own pensions compared to other states, direct state investment is required. We support legislation that:

- Achieves 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 are ready to retire without losing a significant amount of their pension benefit.
- Removes the delay on cost-of-living adjustments for educators who retire before their Normal Retirement Age and immediately increase COLAs for retirees.
- Ensures a living wage in retirement for education support professionals.
- Improves the retirement plans for higher education faculty, including better pensions and increasing the Supplemental Retirement Plan statutory maximum.

Our top priority is ending the educator shortage with professional pay, pensions and health care for all school workers. More than 38% of licensed teachers are not working in our schools.

We must also work together to increase retention and reduce educator burnout. We can do this by:

- Ensuring educators are safe at work, both mentally and physically.
- Fully staffing mental and physical health teams by hiring more licensed school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, school nurses and other support professionals.
- Reducing class sizes, improving educator-to-student ratios in public schools and reducing special education teacher caseloads so that our students can benefit from 1-on-1 support.
- Supporting positions from the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers that call for a ban on high-capacity magazines and assault-style rifles.
- Supporting the freedom to teach an honest history of the United States and to make age-appropriate, thought-provoking books available in school libraries to counter the national movement to whitewash history, ban books and restrict students' freedom to read.

- Providing all students with access to professional media specialists who can teach the differences between reliable information and misinformation/disinformation flooding social media.
- Increasing duty-free “preparation time” for effective lessons for all teachers.
- Providing dedicated time to special education teachers so they can meet students’ needs and hold meetings with families.
- Funding a total of 18 hours of paid training for all paraprofessionals who work directly with students.

Supporting specific policies to attract and retain teachers of color and working to create 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.

- Creating a universal child care and early learning program, using mixed delivery, where low-income families pay nothing, and no family pays more than 7% of family income.

Our full legislative agenda is available on our website: educationminnesota.org/advocacy/at-the-legislature/#fighting-for

The term “educators” includes all school workers. Education Minnesota represents and advocates for teachers, education support professionals, school nurses, school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, school media specialists, cultural family advocates, higher education faculty and other licensed school staff.

Ways to advocate for public education this legislative session

As we head into a new legislative session and an election year, 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 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.



Members meet with state Sen. Doron Clark at a Lobby Day



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 the Education Minnesota 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.

“We’re at a breaking point”: Rapidly increasing health insurance costs put stress on negotiations

As health care costs continue their exponential climb, this issue has emerged as one of the top priorities of Education Minnesota members, according to a recent poll conducted by the union.

Now, as locals bargain new contracts, members are feeling the effects of those skyrocketing health insurance costs at the negotiating table. The Minnesota Educator spoke with four locals from across the state to understand the breadth of the problem and its impact on contract negotiations. What we found is that while the details of negotiations look different for each one, the underlying issue remains the same: health insurance costs are increasing at an unsustainable rate.

Rate increases by district

Over the past year, many locals have seen double-digit premium increases on their health insurance. Some examples include:

- South Washington County - 23%
- Anoka Hennepin - 22%
- Austin - 24%
- Dakota County United Educators - 18%
- New Ulm - 24% (54% increase last year)
- New London-Spicer - 39%
- Eastern Carver County - 20%
- International Falls - 20%
- Kingsland - 20%
- Albany - 20%
- Lyle - 59%
- Watertown 37%
- Dover-Eyota - 29%
- Nicollet - 20%
- Hayfield - 20%

“Even at the top of our salary schedule, a single parent can qualify for MNSure.”
— Anoka Hennepin Education Minnesota

Anoka Hennepin Education Minnesota is the largest local in the state. Representing more than 3,000 educators, it covers a wide swath of the north metro.



AHEM President John Wolhaupter said that health insurance costs have been a big part of negotiations for the past couple bargaining cycles. He said AHEM was prepared to focus this round of negotiations on salary improvements but had to change their plan when they saw their premium increases.

Wolhaupter said that the dramatic increase in cost also forced AHEM members to make tough decisions about coverage—people switching to plans with higher deductibles and lower coverage, switching from family coverage to single coverage, moving their dependents off AHEM insurance and on to programs



like MNsure—to try and save money. “[This especially impacts] single parents,” Wolhaupter said, “Even at the top of our salary schedule, if you’re a single parent, you can qualify based on the unaffordability of our health insurance.”

With so many people switching out of the plan, the pool of insured individuals is weakened, driving up costs long-term and exacerbating the problem. During the eight months that AHEM members were working without a contract, they felt the full impact of increases—up to \$400 a paycheck—with no raise. The astronomical cost of health insurance was a major reason why 98.5% of AHEM membership voted to authorize a strike, which was set to begin on Jan. 8. However, on Jan. 7, the local and the district were able to reach a tentative agreement. As this issue goes to print, that agreement has not yet been ratified.

“We are going to lose our small rural districts.” — Lyle

Lyle is a small district in southeastern Minnesota, near the Iowa border. The local affiliate has around 30-35 members and is facing a 59% increase in their health insurance costs this year. Educators who take family insurance pay upwards of \$1,000 a month for health insurance, even with the district contributing \$2,700 towards costs as well.

Agriculture teacher Jym Hansen says that Lyle educators are sacrificing pay gains for health insurance. “The district doesn’t want to...freeze pay,” he said. “But they can’t pay us what they want to because of insurance costs.”

He says the frustrating part about this situation is that district leadership and the local affiliate are on the same side. Hansen says he’s pushing members to get involved in advocacy at the state level because the system needs to change for the district to receive relief from crushing health care costs. He is also a Health Care Action Leader—a member whose role



is to mobilize colleagues in their district to advocate for Education Minnesota’s Educator Group Insurance Plan, which would implement one large pool for public school employees.

“There are no good outcomes here—we’re just trying to find the least bad outcome for our employees,” Hansen said. “If we do not get these health care costs under control, we are going to lose our small rural districts.” Lyle has already lost many veteran teachers because their families can’t afford health insurance on their teaching salary. That lack of affordability, combined with the other stresses of teaching, is driving educators out of the classroom. “There is not much more stress this system can take,” he said. “We’re at a breaking point—and something has to change.”

Hansen said that surrounding locals have attempted to create a regional version of EGIP in the past, but they were not able to get the program up and running. Consequently, he is encouraging colleagues to turn their focus toward the Legislature to advocate for EGIP.

“We have to get the Legislature to take this seriously,” he said. “We need to push for EGIP, but we also need to push for more oversight on hospitals and health insurance companies.”

“I just would like to see something more affordable.” — New London-Spicer

New London-Spicer is a small district in central Minnesota, about 90 miles west of the Twin Cities. Erin Schoumaker, negotiations team member for Education Minnesota New London-Spicer, said that health insurance costs tend to be the second most important concern, following pay. In recent years, premiums have increased significantly—in 2025, they saw a 39% spike. As a result, the district has bounced between health insurance carriers. “We’ve been jumping around to wherever we can find the best rate,” Schoumaker said.



She said that their negotiations team decided to focus on a salary increase so that they can better afford the increased premiums, but they are still requesting an increased contribution from the district towards health insurance. "We talked it over and decided that focusing on a salary increase that can better allow members to cover health care costs made the most sense," she said.

Schoumaker said that several members have had to leave the profession because of the cost of health insurance, particularly for employees who take family insurance. "They literally wouldn't get a paycheck," she said.

"I just would like to see something more affordable," she said.

“Everyone understands the system is broken.” – Chaska

Chaska, situated in the southwest metro, has about 700 active members. Sarah Rother, vice president of the Chaska Education Association, said that one struggle they're facing is that claims have increased as members have aged and needed to use their health care benefits more frequently.

Like in Lyle, Chaska local leaders and district leaders are on the same side of the issue. Rother, who has been on the bargaining team for over a decade, explained, "We're all in agreement that we have to do something [to bring down the cost and increase the quality] of insurance." Rother said that the negotiation team's focus has been to try and minimize the loss in pay due to increasing health insurance costs. Despite a strong and collaborative team at the negotiating table, Rother described a feeling of helplessness because there does not seem to be a solution. "Everyone understands the



system is fundamentally broken," she said, "but [what can the 11 of us in this room] do about it?"

Rother said they have been encouraging members to turn their frustration into advocacy by sharing their stories with elected officials. "The system is so broken that we have to leverage political action and have our voices heard in a bigger way," she said. "Directing their anger at [district leaders who are on our side] won't help."

Members' concerns and priorities regarding health care have changed as costs have increased. Like most locals, CEA distributes a survey to members ahead of each bargaining round. "It used to be that on the survey, people would say that they're willing to pay more for top-quality insurance," said Rother. "But now people are saying, 'just give me basic insurance. I'll take less coverage, just don't charge me more.'"

She said that while people aren't leaving the district purely because of health insurance costs, it's definitely a major factor when Chaska educators are considering a career change. "I think the number one driving factor is burnout, but part of what causes burnout is stressing over health care costs or foregoing care because you cannot afford it," Rother said.

She explained that many members in the local recognize that many of their cost concerns would be alleviated by a much larger pool, which is EGIP's primary goal.

Conclusion

Spiraling health care costs are causing strain at the bargaining table, exacerbating burnout and contributing to educators' decisions to leave the classroom. As we outlined in our legislative agenda, we believe that the most effective way to bring down health care costs for educators is through passage of our one large pool plan (EGIP), bringing every public school employee in Minnesota into one insurance pool.

For ways to get involved in advocacy, check out the "At the Legislature" section of our website, www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/at-the-legislature/#legislative-action.

ESP Bill of Rights aims to improve pay and working conditions

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 K-12 ESP salary was \$35,938 for the 2023-24 fiscal year.

For over a decade, Education Minnesota has put forth an ESP Bill of Rights that proposes policies to improve pay, health care and working conditions for ESPs. We have successfully passed pieces of the ESP Bill of Rights, such as unemployment insurance for hourly workers, guaranteed pay for e-learning and snow days, and paid training for paraprofessionals.

In 2025, we successfully fought off attempts to repeal unemployment insurance, ensuring that our hardworking hourly workers continue to have access to this important resource.

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.
- 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.

ESP Bill of Rights

Already passed:

- Unemployment Insurance for hourly school workers.
- Guaranteed pay for E-learning days or snow days.
- 16 hours of paid training for instructional paraprofessionals.
- A guaranteed spot on the training committee at the district level.

Working on:

- Access to affordable and high-quality health care.
- 18 hours of paid training for all ESPs.
- Improving ESP pensions.

Health care

Education Minnesota is leading the fight to ensure access to affordable and high-quality health care for ESPs through the creation of one large health insurance pool for all school district employees. Called the Educator Group Insurance Program, the pool would be a huge step forward in addressing the crisis ESPs experience when trying to access health care.

One health care pool for all school district employees would:

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

As the Legislature returns this month, it's important that educators make their voices heard on all of these issues. When we stand in solidarity for better pay and working conditions for all school employees, we can create the public schools our students deserve. *For more ways to get involved this legislative session, see page 12.*



Education Minnesota members show support for unsettled locals in Bargaining Solidarity Day of Action

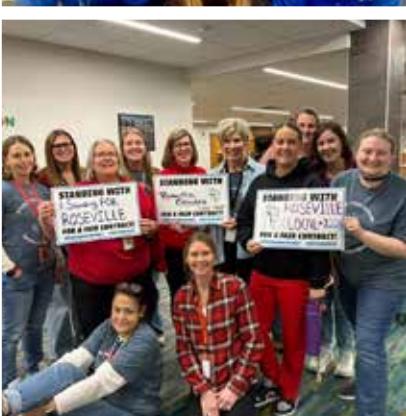
With bargaining season in full swing, several locals have not yet settled new contracts. Many of these locals have been in negotiations for several months and have been organizing their members to advocate for fair contracts.

To show support for our locals that have been in protracted bargaining, Education Minnesota hosted a Bargaining Solidarity Day of Action on Jan. 8. We invited members from locals who are either not in negotiations or who have already settled their contracts to stand in solidarity and support with those in negotiations through social media posts.

The event was a big success, with hundreds of pictures pouring in from all over the state and upwards of 65 locals participating. We have included several pictures below. (The full spread of pictures is featured on the cover of this issue.)

Thank you to everyone who participated!

Editor's note: Since bargaining is a very fluid process, some of the locals receiving support on our Solidarity Day of Action have since settled their contracts or reached a tentative agreement.





Public education wins big in school board, levy elections

Education Minnesota's political action committee—funded by \$30 member contributions, separate from dues—is one of the union's most powerful tools to bring educator voices into state and local politics. The PAC uses these contributions to build political power through supporting pro-public education, pro-labor candidates and elected officials at the state and local level.

In recent years, the PAC has bolstered its support in local elections, specifically for school board and levy campaigns. PAC contributions provide targeted locals with stipends and resources to support their endorsed candidates through direct mail, phone banking and other forms of voter outreach.

This increase in support resulted in some of our most successful win rates in recent years. In 2025, Education Minnesota members endorsed candidates in 47 school board races. Of those 47, 44 of our endorsed candidates won—a win rate of 94%. In one Anoka-Hennepin school board race, our endorsed candidate, Jeff Simon, won by 87 votes.

Education Minnesota members saw similar success rates in many levy referenda. Of the 51 referenda campaigns that the PAC assisted with, 39 passed their levy, resulting in a 76% win rate—our highest success in levy passage since 2019. In many districts, including Annandale, Crosby-Ironton, Wheaton and Farmington,

levy referenda finally passed after several failed attempts.

These successful election results make it clear that Minnesota voters value public education and the candidates who support it. They demonstrate the power of solidarity—all of these races would not have been won without both the PAC contributions from members across the state and the hard work of member volunteers to make calls, knock doors and connect with their communities about the value of pro-public education leaders.

Education Minnesota looks forward to bringing this momentum into the 2026 election season. To stay up to date on election information, visit edmnvotes.org.

Minnesota paid leave law: What educators need to know

Written by Paula Johnston

On Jan. 1, 2026, the Minnesota Paid Family Medical Leave Act came into effect, providing valuable leave time benefits to employees who work in the state. The law provides partial wage replacement for family medical leave and bonding time after the birth or adoption of a child, for safety issues such as sexual assault or stalking, and leave when a family member in the military is deployed. For many workers, this will be the first opportunity to take leave with at least partial pay and without the risk of losing their jobs. It is, quite simply, a game-changer for many workers.

Covered employment

The law covers nearly all employees in the state, including educators. An employee must have earned at least 5.3% of the statewide average annual wage (currently about \$3,900.00) to be eligible. This amount can come from one job or be combined from multiple jobs. Nearly all employers are covered regardless of their size, including school districts, colleges and universities. The law defines "covered employment" as an employee's entire employment during a calendar year if 50% or more of the work during the calendar year is performed in Minnesota. For example, if an employee lives in Wisconsin and works at a school in the Stillwater school district, that employee would be covered by the PFML. Employment may also be covered by the law if 50% of the work is not performed in Minnesota, so long as some of the employment is in Minnesota and the employee's residence is in Minnesota for 50% or more of the calendar year.

Wage replacement

Employees will receive up to 90% of their wages when taking paid leave. The current maximum weekly benefit is \$1,423. Wage replacement benefits are based on a sliding scale, with the lowest paid employees receiving the highest percentage benefit. Employees can determine the amount of wage replacement benefits they would receive using the calculator on

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

the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry's paid leave website (pl.mn.gov).

Job protections

The statute also provides job protection to employees who apply for and use leave if they have worked for the employer for at least 90 days. An employee who takes paid leave must be returned to the same position or an equivalent position at the end of the leave. An equivalent position is one with the same pay, benefits and working conditions. The employee does not lose seniority while on paid leave. All employees, regardless of how long they have worked for an employer, are protected from retaliation and interference while applying for and using paid leave.

Application process

Applying for Minnesota paid leave is much different than applying for other statutory leaves. Wage replacement benefits will be paid directly by the State of Minnesota through direct deposit or a prepaid debit card. Employees apply directly to the state rather than requesting the leave from the employer. Employees can apply online at pl.mn.gov, by phone at 651-556-7777 or toll-free at 844-556-0444. To be approved for paid leave, you must experience a qualifying event and have your need for leave certified by a professional, such as a health care provider. Certification forms can be found on the website pl.mn.gov. Some leaves, such as safety leaves, require separate documentation. The employer cannot deny paid leave under the law. However, employees must follow their employer's regular notice requirements when taking leave. Employees should let their employers know that they will be taking at least

30 days in advance for a planned leave, and as soon as possible for an unplanned leave.

Qualifying events

A qualifying event can be the employee's own serious health condition or a family member's serious health condition; the need to bond with a child after birth, adoption or foster placement; the need to support a family member called to active duty in the military; or for personal safety issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking for the employee or a family member. Up to 12 weeks of paid medical leave can be taken for a qualifying event. If an employee qualifies for both medical and family leave in the same year, they may take up to 20 weeks of paid leave combined. A serious health condition is a physical or mental illness, injury, impairment or condition that prevents someone from working for at least seven days. These seven days do not need to be consecutive (for example, someone with episodic migraines whose condition prevents them from working for seven days over a period of several months). It must include inpatient care (an overnight stay in a hospital, hospice or residential medical care facility) or continuing treatment by a healthcare provider. This may be related to pregnancy, a chronic health condition, a permanent or long-term condition, a condition that requires multiple treatments or an event that requires follow-up visits. Despite the seven-day requirement to qualify as a serious health condition, there is no waiting period when it comes to wage replacement benefits. Benefits are paid retroactively to the first day of missed work.

Leave to care for family members

The law has an expansive definition of "family member," which can include any of the following:

- Spouses or domestic partners.
- Children (including biological, adopted, step, or foster children, children of a domestic partner, or children to whom the applicant stands in loco parentis, is a legal guardian, or is a de facto custodian).
- Parents (including biological, adoptive, de facto custodian, or foster parent, stepparent, or legal guardian of an applicant or the applicant's spouse,

or an individual who stood in loco parentis to an applicant when the applicant was a child).

- Siblings.
- Grandchildren/grandparents.
- Sons- or daughters-in-law.
- A person who has a personal relationship with the applicant that creates an expectation and reliance for care (without compensation), even if they do not live together.

Appeals

If an employee's application for paid leave is denied, the employee can appeal that determination. An administrative law judge will decide the appeal, much like the system for unemployment appeals. If the employee disagrees with the judge's decision about their appeal, they may be able to file a Request for Reconsideration. If they disagree with the outcome of a Request for Reconsideration, they may be able to appeal to the Minnesota Court of Appeals. A Paid Leave Appeals Form can be found on the Minnesota paid leave website (pl.mn.gov). It can be submitted through the website or sent by mail to the address provided on the website.

Supplementing with other paid contractual leave

You may be eligible to use your accrued contractual sick leave, PTO, or vacation to "top off" your paid leave benefits to equal your regular weekly salary. You should check your contract language to see if those benefits are available to you. The decision to pursue arbitration for a top off denial rests with your local union, so be sure to consult with it in advance if you want to try to use contractual leave to round out your full salary.

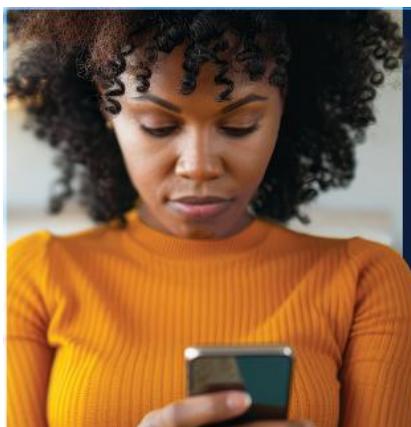
Conclusion

Minnesota paid leave will allow tens of thousands of workers to take time they desperately need to care for themselves and their families. If you have questions about paid leave policies, please talk to your local union or reach out to your field staff. We will continue to provide guidance and updates as they become available.

MEMBERS WANT TO KNOW

Securus ID's Data Broker Removal Tool

As a member of Education Minnesota, you have access to member benefits offered by both national unions for which we are affiliated—American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA). Given the extraordinary circumstances we are living in right now, Education Minnesota ESI wants you to know about a resource available to you from the AFT.



Free Trauma Counseling Program
for AFT members facing personal or workplace trauma.



Convenient & Confidential
Video or phone sessions in secure, private therapy rooms



Specialized Treatment
Expert trauma counseling from licensed therapists

Members can claim this free benefit within one years of the incident occurring. Covered incidents include the following:

At Work: Bullied, harassed or threatened; traumatized by witnessing a violent incident; secondary trauma, infection by a contagious disease.

Anywhere: Aggravated assault, domestic violence, sexual assault, acts of terror, major disaster, mass shooting.

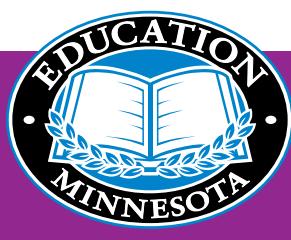


Scan the QR code or call 202-393-8643 to learn more about the free trauma counseling program.



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esi.educationminnesota.org esi@edmn.org

Paid for by ESI, not by dues. ESI is self-supporting; revenues provide benefits, service and consumer education for members. What do YOU want to know? Send questions to esi@edmn.org.



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MEA Online

Get the professional development you need from the comfort of your home or classroom through trainings on our online learning platform MEA Online!

Improve your professional practice, earn CEU credits for relicensure or build your union understanding and power.

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

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

Courses are updated and added regularly. There are currently over 40 courses available, including all relicensure trainings!

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

A few of the classes offered by NEA include:

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

**Scan
here to access
MEA Online**

