

M I N N E S O T A

EDUCATOR

JUNE / JULY 2026

A photograph of a man with glasses and a beard, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and blue tie. He is smiling broadly and holding a red rose. He is surrounded by other people, including a woman with blonde hair on the left and a woman with brown hair in a floral dress on the right.

**Music teacher
David Davis is 2026
Minnesota Teacher
of the Year**

***At Representative Convention,
delegates chart course for
union work***



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EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS**



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THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

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

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This year tested us, and we showed the world what we're made of

This was the most difficult year for Minnesota educators since the pandemic. It showed what educators are made of and renewed my faith that, collectively, we have what it takes to overcome the challenges facing our profession.

We began in the shadow of violence. In June, a gunman dressed as a police officer assassinated House Speaker Emerita Melissa Hortman and her husband, Mark, in their Brooklyn Park home. He also went to the home of a state senator and his wife and shot them. Thankfully, they survived.

Less than three months later, on the first week of school, a 23-year-old gunman opened fire at Annunciation Catholic School in Minneapolis. Two children, both under 10, were killed. Twenty-eight others were wounded. The shooter left behind writings soaked in violent, nihilistic ideology.

Then came Operation Metro Surge. Through the late fall and winter, armed federal agents worked near schools and bus stops. A 5-year-old child was used as bait to detain his father. At Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis, agents arrested an educator, shoved staff and fired pepper spray at students. Thousands of families kept their children home. Education Minnesota filed a federal lawsuit in February to restore the 30-year-old protections that had kept schools mostly off-limits to immigration enforcement. We lost the first round, but the lawsuit continues.

At the federal level, the Trump administration withheld more than \$2 billion in congressionally appropriated education grants, attached political conditions to school funding, fired 90 percent of the Department of Education's civil rights staff and signed a national school voucher bill into law. After everything educators had been through, in May, the people charged with leading American education marked Teacher Appreciation Week with a contemptuous SpongeBob cartoon. You just know it was posted with a smirk.

Educators deserve better. Many go to work even though they feel unsafe. For some, it is the fear of gun violence, a fear that lingered this year in a way it hadn't before. For others, it is the daily reality of students whose mental health needs go unmet until they boil over, or the anxiety that some of our students may surf the same message boards the Annunciation shooter did.

Through all of it, educators faced spiraling health insurance premiums that consumed wage increases and left them struggling to afford basic care for their families. One school counselor in Greater Minnesota told legislators this year that she and her husband, also an educator, prepared for eight years to start their family, but the moment that baby arrives, their monthly premium will more than double to \$1,464 — with a new \$7,000 deductible.

Wanting to stay in education, she said, is no longer enough. We need a system that makes it possible.

She's right. That's why Education Minnesota is pushing for the Educator Group Insurance Program, which would pool coverage statewide and give school employees the negotiating power they've never had. As I write this, the Legislature is poised to pass a comprehensive study of district insurance costs, a necessary step toward creating the pool in 2027.

We're up to the challenges ahead, as the whole world saw in January. When those sworn to protect became the threat, we turned school hallways into supply closets, rode buses with frightened students, stood watch at school entrances and spoke out when silence was safer. When families were afraid, educators showed up. When democracy needed defending, educators were there.

We do it because it's who we are. Our work is measured in the successful lives of millions of Minnesotans. Please never forget that.

Enjoy a short break, educators. You've earned it. Then get ready to change our world.

In unity,



Monica Byron,
Education Minnesota President



Monica Byron



Congratulations to Leah VanDassor of the St. Paul Federation of Educators 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!

Leah reads her Educator at Death Valley National Park. She says, "It's a hot place to read!"





Educators in the news

"If you're a secretary or a paraprofessional at Kasson-Mantorville, right now, your premiums are likely going to be more than \$2,000 a month instead of the \$1,200 a month that our teachers see. [EGIP] would have everybody with the same premiums and the same benefit – whether you're a superintendent, a custodian, a teacher or a bus driver."

Kasson-Mantorville middle school social studies teacher and union leader Aaron Wilke in an Apr. 22 MPR article titled, "Minnesota educators fight for a way to lower skyrocketing health insurance costs."

Getting social!


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

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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.

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 [@edmn_invergroveheights1718](https://www.instagram.com/edmn_invergroveheights1718)

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2026 Teacher of the Year David Davis centers student voices in music class

For many years, 2026 Teacher of the Year David Davis didn't want to become a teacher.

A saxophonist who received his undergraduate degree in saxophone performance, he planned to make a living through performing. "As you can probably expect, there was a teacher in my life that completely changed my way of thinking," he told KARE 11 News. That teacher encouraged Davis to take a pedagogy course — and that course changed Davis's entire perspective on teaching. While he was initially resistant because of the stereotype that teaching music was for those who couldn't make it as performers, Davis says that learning the science of teaching made him realize it's what he wanted to do.

But it's the way he teaches that really sets him apart.

As a music teacher at Park Spanish Immersion school in St. Louis Park, Davis ensures his students have ownership over their learning. "The education system today favors standardization and compliance," he said in materials submitted for the award. "But it doesn't have to be this way. Teachers and students alike deserve an education system that trusts our inherent brilliance, creativity and intrinsic motivation." Davis, who grew up in a parochial school environment that was very focused on compliance, initially believed that good teaching meant perfectionism and precision.

However, as an early career teacher, he soon saw that those methods failed to keep students engaged. He began to examine his own assumptions and realized that the top-down approach he had grown up with was not the answer; rather, an approach that involves students in the process and honors their inherent knowledge was the key to capturing students' attention.

Davis believes learning should be relational, not transactional, and so he invites students to help him create the curriculum. Each fall, he distributes a survey to students to learn what they care about; he then uses that survey in building portions of his curriculum to ensure he includes things they are interested in.

Lessons in Davis's classroom include units such as Kinder Connect, a multi-week music unit that allows students to share their culture by selecting a song that is meaningful to their identity, home or culture. Working with their families, Davis designs a short lesson around each song and then invites students to co-teach that lesson alongside him when it's time to present their song. "Kinder Connect engages students of all backgrounds and abilities by intentionally shifting who holds knowledge and positioning every child as an authentic teacher," Davis said in award materials. "Because all students are musical and should not be limited by

disability, language or traditional measures of skill, this shared power structure creates access for students whose cultural knowledge is often invisible in school spaces." Similarly, the "Elder's Wisdom, Children's Song" event requires fourth graders to interview community elders and write an original song based on what they learned in that interview. Students then invite those elders to an event where the students perform the songs they wrote.

Older students get to participate in "Garagebands," in which fifth graders build reflection skills through forming a band, writing songs, creating rubrics and assessing themselves. Fifth graders Evelyn and Skylar Penna described their experience in Davis's class in a recommendation letter submitted for the award: "Sr. Davis is a good teacher because he is nice, thoughtful, a good communicator and he wants to hear what we have to say...Right now, we are working on making a garage band with people in our class, and we get to perform the music we make when we are done. Sr. Davis tells us that we are all musicians and encourages us to express ourselves," they said.

Through each of these programs, students have opportunities to take ownership over their work by co-creating rules and expectations. "I see the teacher not as the sole authority in the room," Davis said

in award materials, “but as the lead learner who creates conditions for student brilliance to emerge.”

In addition to implementing students’ cultural backgrounds into music class, Davis also brings in other subjects. He recently completed LETRS training, learning more about the science of reading and how the brain learns language so that he can adapt his music curriculum. “His cross-disciplinary and research-informed approach is remarkable,” said Dr. Corey Maslowski, principal of Park Spanish Immersion. “[Davis] collaborates across grade levels and teams, creatively integrating a variety of content to help students find success.”

Colleagues and community members praise Davis’s “systems-level approach” — working to improve the landscape of education as a whole — and his commitment to equity and justice. David is a part of the district’s Music Curriculum Design Team, which seeks to transform E-12 music education. In 2023, he was both a GRAMMY Music Educator Award semifinalist and a Yamaha “40 under 40” Music Educator of Excellence. From 2023-25, he was also a member of the Minnesota Department of Education’s Culturally Responsive Art Education Cohort. He is an Education Minnesota Racial Equity Advocate and a board member of the Minnesota Music Education Association.

2019 Teacher of the Year
Jessica Davis (no relation)



From left: Minnesota Commissioner of Education Willie Jett, David Davis, Education Minnesota President Monica Byron.

described Davis’s impact: “[He] is, quite literally, a monument to change in both mindset and practice...David’s journey affirms that educators can evolve, deepen and broaden their lens — and that such evolution powerfully expands the opportunities and belonging that students experience in his classroom.”

Parents also commend his commitment to inclusion. Each morning, Davis stands outside at drop-off and welcomes students with a speaker playing a different style of music, along with a sign that explains each day’s “Genre of the Day.” Dr. Jasmine Kar Tang, a PSI parent, shared how Davis used the morning tradition to help her daughter feel seen and included. Ahead of Lunar New Year, the family asked him to incorporate Chinese lion dancing as a genre. He compiled a list of songs and asked for feedback from the family. The following year, he proactively

asked Tang what he could do to celebrate Lunar New Year. When Tang’s daughter came home the day before Lunar New Year, she told her mom it felt like a festival. “I find David’s Genre of the Day activity to be a meaningful gesture of his devotion to music education and to supporting students,” Tang said.

Davis was announced as the 2026 Teacher of the Year at an awards banquet on May 3. As he accepted the award, he shared these words: “The growth of young people and the evolution of our education system...doesn’t happen alone — it happens collectively. And when we have courage and plant seeds of change, of love and care, we can grow the kind of future our children deserve.”

Ten others honored as finalists for 2026 Teacher of the Year

Besides David Davis, 10 others were selected as finalists. We asked them to share reasons why they teach, which we have included below.



"I teach because my students are capable of such remarkable things. I have no doubt they are going to make this world a much brighter place for all of us."

Devin Bowker, biology teacher, St. Cloud Area School District



"[Teaching] is what I'm meant to do. I take a lot of pride in the fact that I can be one of the people to have a positive impact and make a difference in my students' lives."

Isaiah Pritzl, English language arts and AVID teacher, Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan District



"Before students can learn, they need to know if they are safe, if they matter, if they belong. I teach to make sure that they never have to wonder."

Shannon Dodson, fourth-grade teacher, West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan School District



"Every student deserves to feel like they belong and to be reminded each day how valuable they are. I teach because even when my students don't see it, I do."

Ricardo Rivera, career and technical education, engineering, manufacturing and skilled trades, Bloomington Public Schools



"Teaching isn't always about helping or watching kids grow, it's about helping them see who they're becoming and the impact that they can make on this world."

Paige Janorschke, fourth-grade teacher, St. Cloud Area School District



"If my students leave my classroom knowing they matter, knowing they belong, and that they have the power to care for one another, then I know I've done the most important work a Minnesota educator can do."

Thomas Rosengren, sixth-grade teacher, Atwater-Cosmos-Grove City School District



"Once I have [a] safe classroom space for my students, I can teach them about decolonization and community values. With that, they can do whatever they want — including envision a better world."

Alli Kildahl, social studies teacher, Saint Paul Public Schools



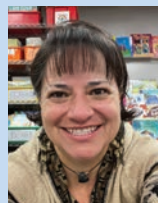
"Students with significant disabilities deserve to have someone who takes the time to get to know them and then uses what they can naturally do as the foundation for their learning and their connection to the world."

Sher Unruh-Friesen, special education teacher, Hopkins Public Schools



"I get the honor of teaching them something new and seeing them at the very beginning of their educational journey. I find it a privilege that parents trust me, year after year, to help teach their children."

Amy Phung, kindergarten teacher, Hopkins Public Schools



"Every person deserves the opportunity to be seen, to be heard, and to belong. I teach through a lens of equity because every voice and perspective in this world matters."

Maria Villavicencio, third-grade teacher, Eden Prairie Schools

At Representative Convention, delegates chart course for union work

Over 500 delegates met at the DoubleTree hotel in Bloomington to discuss union business and set Education Minnesota's organizational priorities for the next year.

On April 24-25, over 500 delegates met in Bloomington for the annual Education Minnesota Representative Convention. The RC is the union's highest governing body; members convene to discuss changes to the organization's constitution and bylaws, along with action items that will guide the work of the union over the next year.

This year, delegates heard 14 action items. Eleven passed, two failed and one was sent to the Legislative Action Committee for review. The approved action items direct Education Minnesota to:

- Post an update on the Education Minnesota website of which action items were passed at the 2026 RC by March 1, 2027.
- Create a committee to research and develop support for locals as they follow state recommendations to separate union communications from their employers' systems.
- Reinstate the teacher Pension Advisory Group (PAG).
- Campaign for statewide, stable health insurance for all school employees.
- Establish a statewide ESP conference to provide meaningful opportunities for professional development, leadership training and collaboration among ESPs.
- Continue the task force's investigation of investment of pension money into companies that violate human rights, civil liberties, and more.
- Create a Pension Advisory Group for ESPs.

- Empower locals to support other locals during negotiations through sharing information, showing up to contract-related events for locals in their area and reporting settlement data to Education Minnesota.
- Use its resources and power to defend the democratic process and the results of the 2026 general election.
- Actively oppose any recommendations or policies resulting from the Blue Ribbon Commission on Special Education that reduce special education funding, increase the special education cross-subsidy or shift financial burdens onto local school districts and communities; advocate for full and sustainable funding to ensure students with disabilities receive legally required services.
- Convene a special education network of rank-and-file teacher and ESP members to provide guidance and feedback on the challenges special educators face, particularly related to funding cuts and shortfalls.

Action items are directives to Education Minnesota that require a specific action and generally expire at the next



Delegates conduct business at the 2026 Representative Convention.

Representative Convention, unless they are renewed by a new action item.

In addition to these action items, delegates approved two amendments to our constitution and bylaws. The first amendment adds an “apprentice” membership category, to account for teacher apprenticeship program participants. The second amendment updates the way dues are assessed to account for members who take paid leave through the Paid Family and Medical Leave Act.

RC delegates also elected governing board members for the at-large districts, as well as NEA directors. The full list of governing board members is available in the member portal of our website.

Delegates and attendees heard from several guest speakers, including NEA President Becky Pringle, AFT President Randi Weingarten and Minnesota AFL-CIO President Bernie Burnham. All three speakers applauded educators’ advocacy and efforts for their communities last winter, and expressed the importance of electing pro-public education and pro-labor majorities this fall. On Saturday afternoon, Gov. Tim Walz spoke briefly to attendees and received a map signed by members



President Byron speaks to delegates at the Representative Convention.

as a thank-you gift for the pro-public education work he has done as governor.

Education Minnesota honored several awardees, including the ESP of the Year and the recipients of the Peterson-Schaubach Leadership Award, the Human Rights Award, and the We Are One Solidarity Award.



Becker Education Association leadership accepts their award from Education Minnesota officers.

Ridgewater College sociology instructor Dr. Ronald Ferguson receives Human Rights Award

Education Minnesota's Human Rights Award is awarded annually to an Education Minnesota member who has done outstanding work to protect the human and civil rights of students. Recipients must meet one or more of the following criteria through work, contributions or programs:

- Contribute to the field of human rights, either through a special project, direct services or their life's work and role.
- Inspire direct action in the cause of human and civil rights.
- Demonstrate a personal commitment to the promotion and protection of human and civil rights through curriculum and instruction.
- Initiate or engage in activities that positively impact the educational, social, economic or political life of the community.
- Display creativity, determination and perseverance in achieving human and civil rights goals.

This year's recipient is Dr. Ronald Ferguson, a sociology instructor at Ridgewater College in Willmar. Dr. Ferguson, who originally hails from the U.S. Virgin Islands, ensures that his students feel welcome and that they know that their culture — and every culture



From left: Secretary-Treasurer Ryan Fiereck, Dr. Ronald Ferguson, President Monica Byron and Vice President Marty Fridgen.

— matters. His multicultural club gives a space and a voice for students to fully express themselves and understand their shared humanity. Each fall, the students he advises host a “Taste of Culture” event, where students are invited to share their culture through food. “We don’t only acknowledge—we really want to learn from and celebrate [our cultures],” Ferguson said. “The multicultural club allows that...and for many students in the club, they found a place of belonging.”

Becker Education Association receives We Are One Solidarity Award

The We Are One Solidarity Award is given annually to an Education Minnesota local union or group of active members demonstrating outstanding or significant leadership.

Becker Education Association won the We Are One Solidarity Award for their efforts fighting back against a challenge to their exclusive representation status. Last year, a group calling itself the Becker Association of Professional Educators filed a petition with the BMS to take over as the exclusive representative for teachers in Becker.

BEA members said that the widespread organizational support they received confirmed that Education Minnesota was the right choice. Kindergarten teacher Melissa Dumonceaux said, “To see other groups support us really affirmed that yes, Education Minnesota has a strong group of educators who care about other districts and teachers.”

“It’s not just the idea that we’re stronger together, it’s that we are better together,” said co-President Lauren Pauley. More information is available on our website at educationminnesota.org.

Ternesha Burroughs honored posthumously with Peterson-Schaubach Outstanding Leadership Award

The late Ternesha Burroughs, former president of Education Minnesota – Osseo, received the Peterson-Schaubach Outstanding Leadership Award. This award is given annually to an Education Minnesota leader (local or state) who has made outstanding contributions to Education Minnesota or its locals through demonstration of Education Minnesota's Statements of Principle. It is our organization's highest honor.

"I think one of the things she's going to be remembered for is being a fierce advocate, and very steadfast in her belief in our union," said Kelly Wilson, president of Education Minnesota – Osseo Retired. In addition to serving as president of her union, Burroughs also served as chair of the Education Minnesota PAC.

Union colleagues and coworkers praised Burroughs' honesty and leadership style, which they described as approachable but also straightforward. "She was going to give it to you straight, but you knew it came from the heart," said Monica Byron, president of Education Minnesota.

Work colleagues said they will miss Burroughs' laughter and her willingness to fight for the things she valued. "Ternesha was a loyal friend, and she was the best mom...she followed her heart," said Oak View Elementary School teacher Melody Hahn-Merges.

Burroughs' award was accepted by her family and her nominators, Education Minnesota – Osseo ESP President Michelle Dennard and White Bear Lake President Tiffany Dittrich.



Ternesha's family and loved ones accept the award on her behalf, along with her nominators, colleagues and Education Minnesota officers.

NEA report shows that Minnesota has the largest teacher pay gap in the region

While rankings hold steady at 15th for teacher pay and 17th for ESP pay, Minnesota falls short in starting salaries and ESP pay

NEA's annual Educator Pay in America report, released in April, tracks the state of teacher and education support professional pay at the state and national level. The report shows Minnesota's average teacher salaries for the 2024-25 school year were \$76,234 and K-12 ESP salaries were \$37,085.

While we rank towards the top compared to other states – 15th and 17th in the nation, respectively – Minnesota has the largest teacher wage gap in the region at 69 cents on the dollar. The teacher wage gap is the difference between teacher salaries and those of professionals in other industries with similar education and experience. Our teacher wage gap is larger than any of the surrounding states and on par with Alabama (69c), Arizona (67c), Oregon (71c) and Virginia (68c).

Furthermore, both starting teacher salaries in Minnesota and average ESP salaries are still not high enough to provide a living wage. According to the report, a living wage in Minnesota is \$68,701, but starting teacher salaries average around \$46,000 and K-12 ESP wages average about \$37,000. Educator wages have also not kept up with inflation. Despite on-paper increases, when adjusting for inflation, teachers still earn about 5% less than they did 10 years ago.

The decrease in real wage growth and significant wage gap are part of what is driving the educator shortage, along with out-of-control healthcare and childcare costs, unaffordable housing, and continuing inflation.

In public higher education, Minnesota faculty at four-year institutions earned an average of \$108,503 and faculty at two-year institutions earned an average of \$84,443. This puts Minnesota at 17th and 15th, respectively. Higher education ESPs made an average of \$49,134 annually.

The union difference

The report also showed how strong unions positively impact educator pay. In states with collective bargaining, teachers make 24% more and ESPs make nearly 13% more than in states without any collective bargaining laws.

Education Minnesota's members have led the charge on increasing pay for both classroom teachers and ESPs. Our legislative agenda calls for a starting wage of \$60,000 for teachers with a bachelor's degree and \$80,000 for those with a master's degree, along with raises across the board commensurate with experience and pay in similar professions. Additionally, it calls for a \$25/hour wage for hourly workers and a minimum hourly salary.

Members have advocated for these pay increases through emails, phone calls and in-person meetings with their elected officials during a lobby day. If you have not yet reached out to your elected officials about increasing pay, you can do so at edmn.me/educatorpay.

To read the full Educator Pay in America report, please visit neatoday.org/educatorpay.

How Minnesota compares nationally:

\$76,234

MINNESOTA AVERAGE SALARY

\$74,495

NATIONAL AVERAGE SALARY

\$37,085

MINNESOTA ESP AVERAGE SALARY

\$36,360

NATIONAL ESP AVERAGE SALARY

Nominate a deserving colleague for ESP of the Year

Nominations open June 1

Do you know an ESP who deserves to be recognized for their exemplary work? Nominate them for Education Minnesota's 2026-27 Education Support Professional of the Year Award!

Since 2007, the ESP of the Year program has recognized outstanding professional and union work by education support professionals across Minnesota. Nominees can be in any ESP job category, including paraprofessional, secretarial or clerical, custodial, food service, maintenance, trades, transportation, groundskeeping, security, technology services, health services and more.

Any current Education Minnesota ESP members whose membership started on or before Aug. 31, 2023, are eligible! Members in ESP chapters who have joined Education Minnesota within the past three years are eligible, so long as the nominee has at least three years of union membership by the Aug. 31 deadline.

The ESP of the Year represents Minnesota ESPs throughout the profession and connects with their communities as an ambassador of the program. The Education Minnesota ESP of the Year will receive a \$1,200 honorarium and their choice of either a Chromebook, iPad or other tablet.

The winner will also serve as Minnesota's nominee for NEA's ESP of the Year program and will receive an expense-paid trip to the NEA Education Support Professional National Conference in March.

Candidates are judged based on five criteria:

1. **Professional practice**
2. **Advocacy and association**
3. **Community engagement**
4. **Personal achievement**
5. **Enhancement of ESP image**

Nominations will remain open until September. Once the nomination window closes, Education Minnesota will review all nominees and ensure that they meet the eligibility requirements. We will then contact eligible nominees and ask if they wish to continue as a candidate for ESP of the Year. Once Education Minnesota has identified which nominees wish to continue as candidates, we review the nomination materials and narrow the candidates down to five finalists. The finalists are then notified of their status and scheduled for interviews with the Selection Committee, which is comprised of the Education Minnesota Vice President, Executive Director, the most recent ESP of the Year awardee, a member of the Education Minnesota Governing Board and a representative of another education stakeholder organization.

After the interview process, the Selection Committee makes its recommendation for ESP of the Year to the president of Education Minnesota.

This year, ESP of the Year will be held on Friday, Oct. 23 and Saturday, Oct. 24. We are adding new elements to the program this year, including training workshops and a mixer on Friday evening. Finalist interviews will be conducted on Saturday morning. Both finalists and semifinalists will be honored and the winner will be announced at a banquet on Saturday afternoon.

To learn more about the program and to submit your ESP of the Year nominations, go to educationminnesota.org/news/awards-and-honors/esp-of-the-year

Successful students need strong libraries

By Karen Rubado, Education Minnesota governing board member and president of Education Minnesota Pequot Lakes. Edited by Heaven Keane.

School libraries are disappearing. I think for me and for so many other teachers, this is among the biggest heartbreaks of our careers. Some have closed. Many others are still physically there, but with a dwindling collection of books and without a licensed school media specialist. These formerly vibrant, happy spaces in our schools now feel utilitarian and emptier.

Several myths about regarding libraries:

“Kids don’t check out books anymore.” This is a common argument for not funding a school library, and it is not true. I have many, many sixth graders who are hungry for their next good read. They just aren’t able to find it in our library because very little money has been allocated to buying books to fill the shelves. So now they just don’t bother going to the library at all.

“Anyone can help kids check out books.” If you think that’s all a librarian does, you’re wrong. Before my school’s librarian was reassigned to a classroom teaching job, she was our partner in reading and writing instruction and the bridge between a kid who maybe wanted to read and a kid who actually did. Now that she’s no longer working in that role, our reading test scores have gone down.

Not one English teacher in our district is shocked about that.

We’re wringing our hands over the sharp increase in mental health needs in our students, while at the same

time refusing to support the one place where many kids found peace, where they could find characters with lives and struggles like theirs and plot lines and worlds that allowed them to dream, and where there was a person who could guide them in ways a classroom teacher simply can’t.

We make sure our musicians, our artists, our athletes and our engineers find homes within our school walls and we ensure there are adults who can nurture those interests. But readers? Not anymore.

The Information and Tech Educators of Minnesota, a division of the Minnesota Library Association, is working hard to advocate that schools not only have libraries, but that every library has a licensed media specialist. It’s important that they aren’t doing that work alone. If we care about our school libraries, we should join them. If you’re interested in learning more about this work, scan the QR code below.



Racial Equity Advocate helps delay Bemidji school closure

Written by Jamie Copenace (Bois Fort Ojibwe), educator and union member. Edited by Heaven Keane.

About 227 miles north of our state capital, located between the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, White Earth Ojibwe, and Red Lake Ojibwe Nations, lies the city of Bemidji, Minnesota—a place my Ojibwe parents chose to live and raise my sisters and me. We grew up and attended schools in the Bemidji Public School District from kindergarten to twelfth grade; our mother was hired in the late 1980s as a schoolteacher in the district shortly after completing her post-secondary education.

American Indian students comprise 26.4% of students enrolled at Bemidji Public School District for 2026—1,221 out of 4,633. White students comprise 67.2%, or 3,114, of enrollment.

In 2017, the Minnesota Department of Human Rights (MDHR) determined that schools statewide were suspending and expelling Black, Indigenous, other students of color and students with disabilities at rates much higher than their representation in the overall student population. Under the Minnesota Human Rights Act, all students in Minnesota are entitled to an education free from discrimination. Because of this, MDHR established three-year legal agreements with 41 school districts and charter schools, overseeing their efforts to reduce disparities in discipline related to race and disability. Bemidji Public Schools was one of the 41 districts, with American Indian students accounting for about 40% of suspensions and expulsions despite making up only 16% of the student body at the time.

In an effort to reduce disparities, Bemidji Public Schools hired an American Indian Culture and Curriculum Specialist in the spring of 2018 to work with educators by providing culturally relevant professional development and insight to culturally inclusive practices to support Indigenous learners in the classroom.

After about a decade in the classroom teaching in area tribal schools, I entered ISD 31 as a classroom teacher for two years before transitioning to the



A bulletin board that hangs in J.W. Smith Elementary. The school has focused heavily on Ojibwe language and culture studies.

American Indian Culture and Curriculum Specialist role. As a parent of students attending Bemidji public schools, I currently serve as a vice chair of our Local Indian Education Committee, more commonly referred to as an AIPAC (American Indian Parent Advisory Committee) by the Minnesota Department of Education. The committees are composed primarily of Native parents, guardians and community members, and they advise on programming and hold annual, legally mandated votes on district compliance regarding student needs, as outlined in Sec. 124D.78 MN Statutes. [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]

In September of 2025, I was checking my emails when I saw one from Education Minnesota that piqued my interest. It was a call for applications to the Racial Equity Advocate program under the Minnesota Educator Academy's Facing Inequalities and Racism in Education (FIRE) program, which aims to disrupt systemic racism and racial inequities in Minnesota's education system. Part of the application was to write your story as it pertained to the topic of racism and racial inequalities.

As a reflective thinker and person, I sat with this idea for a few days before making the decision to go for it. Just the thought of making it to the cohort to meet with a community of like-minded, anti-racist educators was empowering to me. One of the prompts to address in our essay was a challenge we face when it comes

to this topic. I chose to divulge my quiet nature that makes me less likely to speak up; if chosen for the cohort, that would be something I'd like to focus on. Off the submission went, as I told myself that even if I wasn't chosen, it felt nice to write and get those thoughts and ideas out. Towards the end of October, I received an email inviting me to the 2025-2026 Racial Equity Advocates Cohort.

The following month we had our first cohort meeting. I wasn't sure what to expect, but we started off in a circle building our community, our safe space. Our January meeting was held online for safety reasons as Operation Metro Surge ravaged the Twin Cities, and the effects were felt up north in the confines of my home. I remember feeling alone. Then one of our cohort members said something that struck a chord, "We have been through this before and survived. Now we are experiencing it in real time." It was an acknowledgment of historical truths of marginalized people that often are not treated as real.

At our next meeting, we were back in person. I had something weighing heavily on my mind, as our community had found out that our school board had voted to close one of our five K-3 schools in order to balance a \$3 million deficit. J.W. Smith Elementary, the school selected for closure, has a student population that is 70.8% American Indian, or 167 of 236 students. The reasons given for the closure were the age of the building and the declining birth rates at the local hospital whose data is used for district enrollment projection.

In the past few years, there have been positive changes and a concentrated effort to teach Ojibwe language and culture at J.W. Smith, with a wild rice finishing day camp in the fall consisting of learning stations for students that provide language and cultural teachings. The past few springs, the same was done for maple sugaring season. The school also hired an Ojibwe principal, who has been very supportive of the language and cultural efforts.

The announcement to close the school felt precipitous, and this time I wasn't alone in how I was feeling. People in our community started organizing. They put the

pressure on by contacting lawmakers, lawyers and our city council. At one of the public Q&A sessions, our AIPAC chair spoke against the decision due to no consultation with the Native community. For the final public forum before the vote, I was asked to deliver our chair's written words to our school board, as she was unable to make it to the meeting. It was the day before the meeting, so I didn't have much time to prepare—but I had enough.

The night of the meeting, the list of people waiting to speak was long. I had three minutes to speak. I mentally prepared by doing the deep breathing exercises we had done in our REA circle. I remembered the energy shared in circle about organizing and taking a stand. I remembered a Nigerian teaching I heard as I made my affirmation board: "one stick is easy to break but a group of sticks is unbreakable."

It was the right combination of confidence and fierceness I needed, and I knew I had to deliver it in a way that would be impactful. My voice read the lines, slow and steady. I stood there alone, but the group seated behind me stood with me, and I was reminded of a scene from "Reservation Dogs" where Willie Jack is told she carries the strength of her ancestors. As I read the list of numbered demands to the board—written in English—I spoke them in Ojibwe. Five years ago, I could not have seen myself doing this; I am naturally quiet and prefer to lay low. I credit the REA Cohort for giving me the tools and strength to speak up and advocate when something does not feel right. Standing as both a parent and an educator, I am reminded that we are responsible not just for witnessing these moments, but for responding to them with honesty, accountability, and action.

Sources:

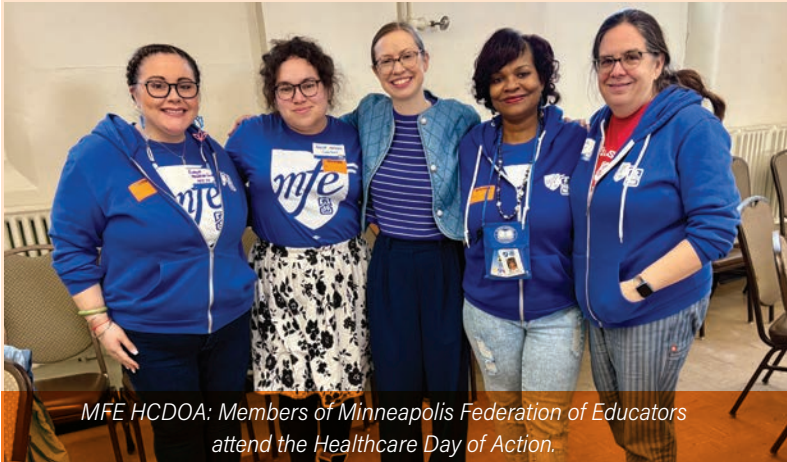
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Over 160 educators lobby lawmakers at Healthcare Day of Action



MFE HCDOA: Members of Minneapolis Federation of Educators attend the Healthcare Day of Action.

On March 16, over 160 educators met at Education Minnesota headquarters in St. Paul to organize and advocate for our health insurance plan.

Education Minnesota's health insurance plan, which would create one large pool for all public school employees, was introduced at the start of session and is moving its way through the Legislature.

The Day of Action began with an overview of Education Minnesota's proposal and lobbying training led by staff lobbyists. Members then dispersed to meet in small groups with their elected officials and share their healthcare stories. Throughout the day, there were over 100 meetings between Education Minnesota members and elected officials.

Education Minnesota also hosted a press conference about our proposal for the Educator Group Insurance Program. Speakers included Education Minnesota president Monica Byron, science teacher Amanda Kottke, Education Minnesota–Osseo ESP president Michelle Dennard, Anoka Hennepin Education Minnesota president John Wolhaupter, and Senators Mary Kunesch (DFL-New Brighton) and Liz Reyer (DFL-Eagan).

Our bill also received a hearing from the Senate Education Finance Committee. In addition to speaking at the press conference, Kottke and Wolhaupter testified at this hearing as well.

In the afternoon, elected officials attended a panel to hear member stories and share their plans to pass our EGIP bill. The panel included Sens. Ann Johnson Stewart and Erin Murphy, along with Reps. Zack Stephenson, Matt Norris, Sydney Jordan, Dave Pinto, Peter Johnson, Liz Lee, Emma Greenman, Liz Reyer, Cheryl Youakim and Larry Kraft.

Our members' advocacy on this topic has been incredibly effective—our bill has strong bipartisan support, with over 35 sponsors in the House and five in the Senate. Several elected officials signed on after hearing stories from our members about their struggle with healthcare access.

Since this is not a budget year, we do not expect this bill to pass this session. However, we are hoping to pass a reporting bill that would require districts to disclose to the state what their current healthcare costs are. This bill will allow us to get an idea of the full scope of the problem so that we can understand the full extent of how EGIP will benefit educators.

A full legislative wrap-up will be available in the next issue. In the meantime, check out our Capitol Connections newsletter, our social media channels and our website for updates and information on the status of the bill and how to get involved.



EdMN members HCDOA: Lobby Day attendees hold signs showing how much their insurance premiums have increased.



West St. Paul Federation of Teachers wins No Kings rally contest

On March 28, Education Minnesota encouraged members to attend the No Kings rally to stand up for our students, profession and communities by rejecting an agenda built for billionaires and large corporations instead of working people. We mailed customizable signs to locals who signed up and hosted a contest for locals who organized their members to attend the rally, featuring the winning local's photos on our social media, our newsletters and in the Educator.

Vice President-elect Kristi Cooper, who led WSPFT's rally organization efforts, said that she wanted to encourage attendance because of the impact politics have on the classroom. "Politics touch every part of our job as teachers, so [you have to] get involved in it," she said. After seeing the impacts of Operation Metro Surge, along with the federal government's targeting of public education and environmental protections, she wanted to do something to speak out for her students and community. Cooper said that she thought others may be feeling the same way, so she decided to organize. "I think a lot of people are hitting that tipping point, where they're like, 'I have to do something.'"

WSPFT had about 40 attendees at the rally.



“See you in court!” NEA and AFT litigation update

By Emma Blaczyk and John Hulet, Education Minnesota law clerks

Since returning to office in January of 2025, the Trump Administration has issued a flurry of executive orders and directives that attempt to dramatically reshape the federal government. The NEA and AFT have been hard at work challenging executive actions that violate federal law, attempt to undermine public education and weaken collective bargaining. Below, we have provided a roundup of the critical lawsuits the NEA and AFT and partner organizations have filed to protect the rights of our members, students and the rule of law.

Anti-DEI guidance and federal funding cuts

American Federation of Teachers et al v. U.S. Dept. of Education

The U.S. Department of Education issued a February 2025 Dear Colleague letter that threatened to revoke federal funding for any school or college that engaged in certain DEI efforts. This letter also demanded local districts certify their compliance with the letter. Further, the department set up a portal for the public to report educators for teaching “divisive ideologies and indoctrination.”

The letter unsettled educators and prompted many to delete educational programming that might conflict with the department’s vague guidance. In response, the AFT and the NEA challenged enforcement of the letter and the portal. In April 2025, three federal courts granted relief, arguing that the DOE does not have authority to reach into state or local curricular and instructional matters, and it may not silence viewpoints that it disfavors. In early 2026, the DOE abandoned its appeal, solidifying that the department cannot enforce the letter against any school district or college.

American Federation of Teachers et al v. U.S. Dept. of Justice et al.

In March of 2025, four federal agencies announced the cancellation of \$400 million in funding

to Columbia University over what the administration described as “continued inaction in the face of persistent harassment of Jewish students.” Columbia yielded to many of the administration’s demands, but AAUP and AFT sued later in the month, arguing the administration’s funding cuts and demands constituted efforts to overpower Columbia’s academic autonomy and to enforce speech restrictions – damaging vital scientific research. Unfortunately, the federal judge dismissed the lawsuit, arguing AFT and AAUP did not demonstrate their members experienced harm. AFT and AAUP filed an appeal, which is ongoing.

Defense of the U.S. Department of Education

Coalition v. Trump Administration

Created by Congress in 1979, the U.S. Department of Education performs a variety of functions that affect the work and lives of millions of students and educators. In March of 2025, the Trump Administration issued an executive order attempting to initiate the dismantling of the Department. These efforts included significant staff reductions, the termination of contracts and grants and the movement of crucial programs to other agencies. Soon after, a coalition of advocacy organizations, including the NEA and AFT, sued the administration over its attempts to eliminate the Department without Congressional action. After winning several early injunctions in district court, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed and allowed these efforts to proceed while the case continues.

Student debt and loan repayment

American Federation of Teachers v. U.S. Department of Education

Established by the U.S. DOE over 30 years ago, the federal Income-Driven Repayment (IDR) program was a lifeline to millions of borrowers, as it allowed borrowers to adjust their loan payments to be affordable based on their family size and income. However, shortly after taking office, the Trump Administration removed

the IDR application from the department's website and halted processing of all new applications. On March 18, 2025, AFT sued to correct this violation and reinstate the program. As of Oct. 17, 2025, the parties in the lawsuit have agreed to a joint status report in which the Trump Administration agreed to resume processing applications as required by law while the lawsuit continues. This agreement also saved many borrowers who experienced processing delays from adverse consequences resulting from recent federal tax law changes.

Immigration enforcement and safety

Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN) v. Noem and Fridley et al. v. Mullin

After Education Minnesota's lawsuit regarding ICE activity during Operation Metro Surge, NEA and AFT filed a similar lawsuit in Oregon, along with a worker's rights organization called Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN). A court heard oral arguments in that case in late April, and the parties are awaiting a decision. A Minnesota district court denied a similar request in Education Minnesota's lawsuit, but the case has not been dismissed as of this writing.

Federal labor rights and employee protections

FEA v. Trump

The NEA, through its affiliate the Federal Education Association, is representing teachers employed by the U.S. Department of Defense in a lawsuit attempting to restore collective bargaining rights to over 950,000 federal employees. These rights were undermined by an executive order issued in March of 2025, purporting to re-categorize a number of federal agencies as part of "national security" and therefore exempt from a federal collective bargaining law.

The lawsuit argues that the order violated the First Amendment rights of federal workers, enabling retaliation and facilitating mass layoffs for the purpose of weakening political opposition. The unions further assert that the order did not follow proper procedures for suspending the collective bargaining rights of federal employees.

AFSCME and AFGE v. Trump

On Aug. 27, 2025, President Trump expanded the March 2025 order to include several new federal agencies, including the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) which operates Voice of America. The next day, USAGM cancelled its collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) with the unions representing these federal workers. However, a preliminary injunction went into effect on November 14, 2025, ordering the CBAs to be reinstated as the lawsuit continues.

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

NEA/AFT v. Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS)

Soon after President Trump's return to office, Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) worked quickly to enact dramatic layoffs at numerous federal agencies, including the FMCS, which is an independent government agency that provides mediation services to employees at both the state and national level. On March 14, 2025, President Trump signed an order that dramatically reduced FMCS' workforce: all of the FMCS' field offices closed, the mediation workforce was reduced to five, and nine percent of the staff were placed on leave. On April 14, 2025, several unions sued, arguing that these reductions are illegal. On Dec. 30, 2025, the Southern District of New York agreed and granted the union's requests that the reduction in workforce be reversed.

Conclusion

The lawsuits filed by our national unions are an important check on this administration's efforts to weaken the professional workforce that powers the federal government. While it is not the only tool, litigation has played an important role in stopping this administration from implementing unlawful executive orders that would harm educators, workers and students.

Year-Round Organizing (YRO) program: Building member-led power in ESP locals

What is YRO?

The Year-Round Organizing (YRO) program develops ESP members into organizers within their own local. Participants (member organizers) receive training, coaching and a \$500/month stipend to spend less than 5 hours per week building organizing capacity — not just doing tasks.

The goal of the program is to grow leadership and engagement across the local so the union is stronger, more connected and more effective over time.

What do Member Organizers actually do?

Member Organizers engage in relational, people-centered work that focuses on:

- Having 1:1 organizing conversations with coworkers.
- Identifying and developing new leaders.
- Building or strengthening organizing committees.
- Increasing member engagement and participation.
- Supporting local priorities and campaigns.

What makes this different?

Most unions rely on a small group of leaders to carry the work, but YRO works to build distributed leadership. This means more people are involved and work is shared across the local. As a result, the union is less dependent on just a few individuals and organizing becomes an ongoing activity, not something that's only done during crises.

Time & compensation

- Less than 5 hours per week.
- \$500/month stipend.
- Ongoing training and coaching are provided.



• Who is a good fit?

Strong candidates are:

- Curious about their coworkers and willing to listen.
- Reliable and able to follow through.
- Open to learning (no prior experience needed).
- Comfortable reaching out and talking to people.
- Not currently serving as president, VP, treasurer, or lead negotiator.

Why it matters

Stronger unions are built through relationships. YRO helps locals move from:

- Low engagement → active participation.
- Burnout in leadership → shared responsibility.
- Reactive problem-solving → proactive organizing.

Interested? Scan the QR code to learn more and apply:



Free Benefits? Yes Please!

As a member of Education Minnesota, you also have access to free member benefits from the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and Union Plus! Member benefits are designed to support you in every aspect of your life. Follow the steps below to get started!



NEA Member Benefits

- Click on "Sign In" and click on the prompt for creating a new account.
- Page 1: First Name, Last Name, personal email address, password
- Page 2: Address and Date of Birth –NEA uses this to verify membership
- You will receive an email asking you to verify your email address.

AFT Member Benefits

- Scroll halfway down the page here it says "MEMBERS ONLY" –
- Create or log in to your AFT account – Click GO.
- Select "Create an AFT Account"
- Enter "MN" + member number* (ex MN0009872948)
- Local union number "0" + local number (ex 04746)
- fill in your last name, email address and password.



Union Plus

- Select Log In / Sign up on the top right corner of the website
- Select AFT as your union – this is important!
- Fill in the remaining information – Name, email, zip code, password

More Benefits

- Scroll through the webpage and select which benefit you want to learn more about

**Your member number can be found on the mailing label of the Minnesota Educator magazine. Contact ESI@edmn.org for help finding your member number or local.*



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THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
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Member volunteers needed for the 2026 Education Minnesota State Fair Booth!

Volunteers will receive:

A ticket to the Minnesota State Fair

A T-shirt to wear during your 3-hour shift.

Mileage + \$25 for parking*

Cold drinks during your shift

**Parking and mileage available only to members who complete an expense form.*

**Please sign up at www.edmn.me/statefair
or with the QR code below:**



**Questions? Please email the Education Minnesota
State Fair Team at statefair@edmn.org.**



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