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EDUCATOR

APRIL / MAY 2026



2026 Political Conference brings educators and candidates together

*As ICE presence increases,
Minnesota educators mobilize
to protect students and families*



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**THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS**

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Table of contents

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE: Spiraling health care costs, a real solution, and critics with little to offer.

page 2

Collective voice

page 3

2026 Political Conference brings educators and candidates together.

pages 4-6

Education Minnesota task force to focus on recommendations for ESP pension improvements.

page 7

Educators speak out in D.C., St. Paul about impact of ICE presence on students, families, communities.

pages 8-9

30 semifinalists advance towards 2026 Teacher of the Year.

page 10

As fear grips schools, Minnesota educators mobilize to protect students and families.

pages 11-14

Education Minnesota election candidate statements.

pages 15-17

LEGAL BRIEF: Education Minnesota's lawsuit against the Dept. of Homeland Security: What we're seeking and what's next.

pages 18-19

Spiraling health care costs, a real solution, and critics with little to offer

We're making progress on the health insurance affordability crisis, even as more stories of educators wronged by a broken system keep coming in every day.

Our bipartisan plan to create a single insurance pool of all public E-12 school employees received its first hearing in the state Legislature at the end of February. Several educators shared their stories; our elected allies made their case; and the opposition lined up.

Lawmakers heard from educators struggling with spiraling health insurance costs, with no end in sight. Aaron Wilke, a 30-year teacher from Kasson-Mantorville, said teachers on the family plan in his district were paying about \$36,000 a year.

It's not just Kasson-Mantorville. Educators throughout Minnesota are wondering: How do we control costs and still afford to see the doctor? How about in five years?

Under our plan, insurance companies would negotiate prices against a pool of 100,000 educators and their families, not one district at a time. The huge pool would spread the risk of big claims that have been catastrophic for small- and mid-sized districts.

We're still gathering some facts, including how much districts are paying for insurance and how many educators aren't being covered. The data will help the state estimate the cost for creating the Educator Group Insurance Pool, or EGIP. Under our plan, the state will pay the difference between what districts pay now and any new costs, including providing health insurance to more employees.

The legislative process has also revealed the critics. I was disappointed to hear a representative of the Minnesota School Boards Association testify against the bill. He didn't offer a realistic solution but complained about a loss of local control and griped about "mandates."

Let's be honest: There's been no local control of health insurance costs for many years. The greedy, sprawling American health insurance industry has the power. If local districts could control costs, they would have already done so.

The Minnesota Association of School Administrators, which represents superintendents, offered a more nuanced criticism. Its representative agreed costs were rising unsustainably in many districts, and it was only a matter of time for the rest—but he suggested

a reinsurance plan for school districts that would cover the cost of the most expensive claims while preserving local authority. The state has a similar program that pays insurance companies to lower premiums on Minnesotans who buy individual plans.

To be fair, a reinsurance program could reduce price volatility, but EGIP does that and more. It fixes the power imbalance when negotiating with insurers and increases democratic accountability by making the insurance decisions easier to watch.

But it's a political nonstarter. There's simply no way Minnesota lawmakers will create another program to send tens of millions of dollars to an insurance industry known for outrageous salaries and bureaucratic cruelty in denying and delaying claims.

What I've learned so far is that no one denies that health insurance companies are squeezing school budgets and making health care unaffordable for educators, but only Education Minnesota has a real plan for controlling costs.

Those costs are a runaway train coming straight at all of us, but some administrators and school board members are scared stiff in the headlight. My hope is that they'll shake it off and join us in finding a solution before the current system hurts even more students, educators and their families.

In unity,



Monica Byron,
Education Minnesota President



Monica Byron



Congratulations to Christy Runnells of Pine Island Education Association 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!

Christy says, "My son beat me to 'reading' this month's issue! Starting the Educator life young!"





Educators in the news

"I have been teaching in the Columbia Heights Schools for 33 years, and in my 33 years, I have never experienced any disruption or danger to students like the current ICE occupation in Minnesota. Students and families look to their teachers for answers. Children ask, 'Can they take us?' and we don't know what to tell them."

Columbia Heights teacher Peg Nelson in a Jan. 27 KARE11 article titled, "Minnesota schools report rising student anxiety amid immigration enforcement crackdown."

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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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2026 Political Conference brings educators and candidates together

Over 500 educators attended Education Minnesota's Political Conference, which took place on the last weekend of January in Bloomington.

The conference, which occurs every other year and traditionally marks the start of campaign season, provided members with the opportunity to hear from elected officials and candidates, learn more about Education Minnesota's 2026 election work and build skills to engage their colleagues in the electoral process.

On Friday night, attendees heard from Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison. Attorney General Ellison thanked educators for the work they do and spoke about ICE presence in the state, outlining the actions his office has taken to protect Minnesota schools and communities, including several lawsuits against the federal government. "It doesn't matter whether you teach history or civics...no matter what you teach, by your example, you teach our kids good citizenship," he said.

He ended his remarks by encouraging participants to mobilize their communities to vote to send a message about what we value as a state. "Pledge to show the highest turnout we've ever seen to send the message that Minnesota is free, sovereign and ready to stand up for every Minnesotan—no exceptions."

Gov. Walz then addressed participants, thanking educators for their commitment to their students and communities, especially during the federal occupation. "I don't know how to express the gratitude I have for Minnesotans...people who don't want any credit other than to serve this country, to serve democracy and to serve humanity," he said. He encouraged members to remain politically engaged and keep up the pressure to protect programs like Paid Family Medical Leave and universal school meals.

The evening concluded with a Senate candidate forum. Rep. Angie Craig and Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan, who are both running for U.S. Senate, answered questions from members on a range of issues including ICE activity's impact in schools, special education, higher education and health care.

Saturday's workshops included an overview of the Local Election Assistance Program (LEAP), volunteer recruitment, effective messaging for elections and then targeted trainings for Worksite Action Leaders and Get Out the Vote Leaders. The LEAP program is how the Education Minnesota PAC supports affiliates who wish to get involved in their local elections, such as levy referenda or school board. The roles are slightly different, but both WALs and GOTV leaders are member volunteers whose goal

is to increase political participation and voter turnout to strengthen their local affiliate's political power.

Over lunch, attendees participated in a conversation with Sen. Amy Klobuchar, who announced her candidacy for governor a few days before the conference. Members shared stories from their classrooms and then Sen. Klobuchar was invited to address the group and talk about her campaign.

Roseville teacher Job Nyangacha shared a story of conversations he's had with students in his fifth-grade classroom, where he asked them what they would want elected officials to know about how ICE's presence has made them feel. Responses included, "I don't know why this is happening," and "hate can't take out love, but love takes out hate. So use more love." He praised educators that have "gone above and beyond" for their students and emphasized the need for ICE to leave the state so that students can learn and feel safe.

Margaret Citta, a West St. Paul high school counselor and a parent, spoke about Minnesota's paid family leave law, sharing her experiences with pregnancy and maternity leave before the law's implementation. She spoke about her first pregnancy, in which the baby was stillborn and she had to return to work a week postpartum, in order



Attorney General Keith Ellison speaks to attendees on Friday night.

to preserve her sick days for future pregnancies. "Despite being careful with my sick days and spacing my children three years apart, I only took eight and nine weeks with my two living children. Minnesota Paid Family and Medical Leave gives all Minnesotans, educators included, the time they need to properly heal and return to work ready to focus on work," she said.

Osseo ESP president Michelle Dennard spoke about ESP wages, describing how many of her workdays start at 3:50 a.m. because she goes to her second job before school starts in the mornings—something she has done for 22 years, because her

ESP salary alone is not enough to provide for her family. "My story is not an anomaly. It is the lived reality of far too many ESPs in Minnesota," she said. "Many hourly employees receive government assistance because they cannot make ends meet on their salaries. Many ESPs are on state insurance because they cannot afford district insurance while also paying their bills. And many ESPs work longer than they'd like to because they do not receive a pension that will support them in retirement."

John Wolhaupter, president of Anoka Hennepin Education Minnesota, spoke about how skyrocketing health care costs

have wreaked havoc on AHM educators, costing many members hundreds of extra dollars per paycheck and making premiums unaffordable for many members as well. He described how the local prepared to go on strike over the astronomical health care increases and how the strike was narrowly averted hours before it was scheduled to begin. "While we were able to negotiate increased contributions to health insurance costs in our contract this time, that path is not sustainable. We can't be on the verge of striking every two years. That is not fair to educators. That is not fair to the students and communities we serve," he said.

Sen. Klobuchar then spoke briefly to attendees about her campaign and indicated her plans to pursue the Education Minnesota PAC's endorsement process, which has specific requirements for gubernatorial candidates to ensure they get as much face-to-face interaction with our members as possible before receiving our PAC's endorsement.

To help members better understand which candidates we believe will further our organizational goals, Education Minnesota endorses in several political races. Federal endorsements are made through the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers' PACs, with the Education Minnesota PAC serving in an advisory capacity, providing recommendations to the national affiliates after member engagement events.

Education Minnesota's PAC oversees the screening and endorsement process for state-level political candidates, including governor, other constitutional officers and state Legislature. For gubernatorial candidates, each individual seeking the organization's endorsement must visit with educators inside a public school, have face-to-face conversations with educators about issues facing working families, and answer survey questions submitted by classroom educators.

This endorsement process is nonpartisan—candidates from both parties are welcome to seek our endorsement, and the PAC has historically endorsed both Democratic and Republican candidates. Education Minnesota's goal is to build power through electing candidates who will

support and strengthen public education and labor unions.

Natasha Dockter, Minneapolis social studies teacher and vice chair of the Education Minnesota PAC, explained to attendees on Friday night the importance of building political power: "Teaching is an inherently political act... the decisions that elected leaders make directly impact what happens within our schools, to our students and to us as working people."

To accomplish that goal, every step of our endorsement process is driven by educators to ensure that our members' voices are heard and reflected throughout the campaign season. As Election Day gets closer, information about federal, state and local endorsed candidates will be on our campaign website at edmnvotes.org.



Attendees participate in a workshop about the LEAP program led by Education Minnesota staff.

Education Minnesota task force to focus on recommendations for ESP pension improvements

During the 2025 legislative session, Education Minnesota members successfully advocated for much-needed pension improvements for teachers, creating an enhanced career rule for teachers who are at least 60 years of age and have at least 30 years of service in public schools.

However, these pension improvements only applied to teachers who are eligible for a pension through TRA—which does not include education support professionals, who have historically been underpaid and remain some of the lowest-paid public school employees in Minnesota.

As a result, many ESPs extend their careers because they cannot afford to retire. Osseo ESP president Michelle Dennard highlighted this problem in her remarks during the governor's forum at the 2026 Political Conference (for more on the political conference, see pgs. 4-6). "Many support staff work multiple jobs...And many ESPs work longer than they'd like to because they do not receive a pension that will support them in retirement," she said. "We hear a lot about how valued we are, and yet our pay [and benefits] often do not reflect that."

To address this problem, Education Minnesota has established a new task force to examine ESP pensions and develop recommendations to improve them. The ESP Pension Advocacy Group, made up of five ESPs and Secretary-Treasurer Ryan Fiereck, will meet regularly, working in union to develop and recommend an action plan for advocacy and improvements for the Public Employee Retirement Association (PERA), the organization that oversees ESP pensions.

This ad-hoc task force was created at the direction of the Education Minnesota president and reports to the Education Minnesota Governing Board. The committee has a term of one year but may be extended as work continues.



Education Minnesota's legislative agenda has long focused on ending the educator shortage by making improvements to pay, pensions and health care, and we are committed to ensuring these improvements reach all educators, no matter their role in our public schools. We will provide updates on the group's recommendations and next steps as they become available.

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Several Minnesotans, including Education Minnesota members and leaders, met with Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer on Feb. 13.

Educators speak out in D.C., St. Paul about impact of ICE presence on students, families, communities

Throughout the winter, educators across Minnesota have felt the impact of Operation Metro Surge as the Department of Homeland Security sent upwards of 3,000 Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) agents to Minnesota, allegedly to detain individuals who were in the country illegally and had committed dangerous crimes. However, ICE and CPB agents targeted a much wider demographic, detaining natural-born citizens, immigrants in good legal standing, and constitutional legal observers alike. Because the Trump administration rolled back the longstanding “sensitive locations” policy in 2025, these agents were able to target schools, hospitals, churches, daycare centers and more.

As a result, attendance in many school districts plummeted. Districts and schools scrambled to create protocols in the event that ICE agents showed up at their schools. And many educators went above and beyond to ensure their students were safe (for more information, see pgs. 11-14).

Over the course of a couple of weeks in February, educators also shared these stories with elected officials, urging them to pass legislation to keep our students and communities safe.

On Feb. 12, more than 60 Minnesotans took to Capitol Hill to demand that lawmakers take action to get ICE

out of Minnesota, vote no on any additional funding for ICE or CBP, and pursue real accountability for the terror that ICE had inflicted on Minnesotans over the past several weeks. Three local teachers—Mandi Jung and Quentin Wathum-Ocama of St. Paul, and Peg Nelson of Columbia Heights—joined Education Minnesota officers Monica Byron, Marty Fridgen and Ryan Fiereck to advocate for protecting our schools and students from continued ICE operations.

As part of this day of action, the group held a national press conference on Capitol Hill, which was attended by over 100 supporters and members of the press. Following the press conference, this delegation spent the day visiting and sharing their stories with national leaders, including Sens. Amy Klobuchar, Tina Smith, Bernie Sanders and Minority Leader Chuck Schumer. Nelson, one of the speakers featured at the press conference, shared harrowing stories from educators in the Columbia Heights district.

“Many families are afraid to send their children to school. One day last month, 200 of our 570 students were absent from our school. On average, we have 130 students absent each day because they are afraid to come to school,” she said. “As educators, for the sake of our children, we need ICE to stay away from our schools and out of Minnesota. If they do

truly leave Minnesota, no child in America should go through what Columbia Heights and other schools in Minnesota had to endure. ICE needs to stay away from schools everywhere.”

The next week, when the Minnesota Legislature gaveled in for the 2026 session, dozens of educators from across the state testified to both legislative chambers about the impacts of ICE presence. On Wednesday, Feb. 18, the Senate Education Finance Committee held a hearing for a “status report on Minnesota schools,” where six Education Minnesota members shared stories about how their classrooms have changed due to Operation Metro Surge.

Jung, a teacher in St. Paul, shared a story of a student who was detained by ICE: “Benito and his cousin were walking home from the store in early December when they were stopped by masked men and put in a vehicle. The men asked for their papers; Benito, being 12, did not have any papers. He gave them his school ID—a meaningless piece of laminated paper with his smiling face and family name. They let him go. They kept his school ID.”

On Thursday, Feb. 19, the House Education Finance Committee held a hearing specifically on the impact of Operation Metro Surge on schools. 2024 Minnesota Teacher of the Year Tracy Byrd shared stories from several of his students, who expressed fear and dismay over how much the occupation has impacted their learning. One student, identified only by their initials, told Byrd that “school should be a safe place, not somewhere you have to fear being taken away from your family.”

On Wednesday, Feb. 25, the Senate Education Policy Committee heard two bills regarding immigration enforcement in schools. The first, S.F. 3611, would prohibit federal immigration enforcement from entering a school site without a judicial warrant. The second, S.F. 3803, would prevent the state from denying public education to children based on immigration status. Both of these bills aim to restore previously held federal policies.

Columbia Heights social studies teacher Kristen Sinicariello spoke about the changes in her school



since the federal occupation began. “Any time there is ICE presence near our school, it causes a direct disruption to learning and safety...In January, an ICE SUV pulled into the loading dock of my school. My students huddled around, watching from windows as administrators spoke with the agents. Eventually they left, but by that time the videos had been posted online, [leaving] students scared and confused.” She shared stories of ICE agents pulling students over and staking out bus stops and busy thoroughfares so that students had to walk past the agents to get home.

As this goes to print, both of those bills are working their way through the Legislature. We will continue to provide updates on these and other education-related proposals. The most up-to-date information will be available in our Capitol Connection newsletter, which goes out to all members once a week while the Legislature is in session.

30 semifinalists advance toward 2026 Teacher of the Year

The 2026 Teacher of the Year nomination process, which began in November, continues to move forward as the candidate field narrows to 30 candidates. Once nominations closed in the fall, nominees were invited to submit a portfolio. An independent selection panel of 22 community leaders then reviewed the portfolios and selected the semifinalists. This year, 128 candidates submitted portfolios.

This year's semifinalists include 14 candidates from the Twin Cities Metro Area, eight candidates from suburban Minnesota and eight candidates from Greater Minnesota.

Education Minnesota organizes and underwrites the Teacher of the Year program.

Semifinalists for 2026 Minnesota Teacher of the Year are listed alphabetically by last name below, including the district and school:

- **Rajaa Ali**, Rochester Public Schools, Robert Gage Elementary School
- **Brittany Bancroft**, Hopkins Public Schools, Meadowbrook Elementary
- **Devon Bowker**, St. Cloud Area School District, Apollo High School
- **Jessica Brent**, Eden Prairie Schools, Eden Prairie High School and Eden Prairie Online
- **Sophia Butler**, Minneapolis Public Schools, South High School
- **Cruz Conejo Cervantes**, Hopkins Public Schools, Hopkins North Middle School
- **Jennifer Danielson**, Roseville Area Schools, Roseville Area High School
- **David Davis**, St. Louis Park Public School District, Park Spanish Immersion Elementary
- **Shannon Dodson**, West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Area Schools, Somerset Elementary School
- **Eric Erickson**, Saint Paul Public Schools, Como Park Senior High School
- **Michael Herdan**, Osseo Area Schools, Maple Grove Middle School
- **Paige Janorschke**, St. Cloud Area School District, Lincoln Elementary School
- **Alli Kildahl**, Saint Paul Public Schools, Battle Creek Middle School
- **Lauren Koller**, Eden Prairie Schools, Central Middle School
- **Jim Lane**, Mahtomedi Public Schools, Mahtomedi High School
- **Scott Lauinger**, Roseville Area Schools, Roseville Area Middle School
- **Hilary Moorlach**, Lakeville Public School District, Cherry View Elementary
- **Amy Phung**, Hopkins Public Schools, Meadowbrook Elementary
- **Isaiah Pritzl**, Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan District, Eagan High School
- **Ricardo Rivera**, Bloomington Public Schools, Kennedy Senior High School
- **Bryon Rogers**, Chisago Lakes School District, Chisago Lakes High School
- **Thomas Rosengren**, Atwater-Cosmos-Grove City School District, Atwater-Cosmos-Grove City 5-12 Secondary School
- **Autumn Schacht**, Hopkins Public Schools, Glen Lake Elementary
- **Karl Schroeder**, Hopkins Public Schools, Hopkins High School
- **Colleen Tentis**, Kasson-Mantorville Schools, Kasson-Mantorville Elementary School
- **Sher Unruh-Friesen**, Hopkins Public Schools, Glen Lake Elementary
- **Maria Villavicencio**, Eden Prairie Schools, Eden Lake Elementary School
- **Hannah Walker**, Minneapolis Public Schools, Andersen United Community School
- **Josh Weckman**, Roseau Community School District, Roseau High School
- **Jinnea Zenzen**, Grand Rapids Area Schools, Grand Rapids Senior High School

As fear grips schools, Minnesota educators mobilize to protect students and families

Written by Mary Ellen Flannery, NEA Today senior writer and editor. This story originally appeared in NEA Today on Jan. 25, 2026. This version edited by Heaven Keane.

The sun is setting and the temperature is dropping to -22 when Minneapolis-area teachers Naomi Stenson and Lorna Plana lift the hatch on Plana's minivan and load it with supplies for families and children afraid to leave their homes.

Roseville teachers Lorna Plana (left) and Naomi Stenson (right) have been delivering donated supplies to families that are afraid to leave their homes.

Rolling past homes still decked in Christmas lights, on eerily empty streets, the best friends deliver water, bags of groceries and much more, all donated by educators and parents in their community. “It could be toilet paper, deodorant, cleaning supplies,” says Plana. “Or care bags of Play-Doh, art supplies, books, puzzles and games—because the kids need something to play with—and of course, we take work from teachers to continue students’ learning at home.”

Since early January, when U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement sent 2,000 agents to Minneapolis and St. Paul—a number that increased by another 1,000 in mid-January and expanded ICE’s presence to the Twin Cities suburbs—immigrant families have been hiding in their homes, too scared to go to the grocery store or send their children to the school bus stop. Whether Native or newcomer, for Black, brown and Indigenous people in these school communities, including U.S. citizens, any trip outside of the home means risking harassment, assault, arrest and detention by federal agents.

Children should be in schools learning, not hiding in fear from masked government agents, Minnesota educators say. The sight of another vacant desk, or an empty square on the kindergarten reading rug, is breaking their hearts. It is also galvanizing them. While Minnesota educators are sad and scared, they’re also determined. And they’re

doing what NEA members do: getting organized, standing in solidarity with parents and making sure their children have what they need. Schools already are the hubs of communities. Now they’re also the grocery stores, laundromats and even the banks, in some cases. “Teachers and school staff are the ones who have trust with families. So many people want to help, but right now, we are the people who can do this,” says Plana, as she turns her minivan down another vacant street. We’re not superheroes, adds Stenson. “We’re all just regular people...doing small things,” she says. “But those small things can add up.”

‘I’m so proud of my union’

On Saturday, Jan. 24, federal agents shot and killed 37-year-old intensive-care nurse Alex Pretti as he filmed them outside a donut shop in Minneapolis. In early January, an ICE agent shot and killed Minneapolis mother Renee Good after she dropped off her 6-year-old at school. On Jan. 20, 5-year-old Liam Ramos was used as “bait” by ICE agents to lure his family members out of their home; he was held in a federal detention center in Texas until Feb. 1, a move that counters all child-protective protocols. The kindergartner is one of four students in Columbia Heights apprehended that week by ICE agents who have been roaming neighborhoods, circling schools and following the district’s yellow school buses, school officials said.

This trauma is why NEA President Becky Pringle has demanded ICE immediately end its occupation of the Twin Cities and elsewhere—and keep their agents out of our schools, hospitals and places of worship. “Federal terror has no place in public education or in a democracy,” she says.



SPFE educator and parent Jill Moe stands outside on safety patrol, watching for potential ICE activity.

It's also why union members are fighting back. Every day, as "these acts [by ICE agents] grow more heinous," notes a St. Paul pre-kindergarten teacher, the response by educators and parents to ICE also grows. "As things have gotten worse, as they've gotten more horrific and traumatic, the community response also has been more powerful and uplifting."

"I am so proud of my union right now," says Jenny Konkel, an educational assistant in a transitional program for 18- to 22-year-olds and secretary of the St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE). "I see all of these people coming together at the last minute, fighting for our students... it's amazing."

Through SPFE, union members, parents and neighbors are activating safety patrols on the streets around schools during drop-off and dismissal; raising funds; coordinating donation drives for food, diapers and more; dropping off clean laundry; walking dogs; and removing bags of kitchen garbage from homes where the moms and dads are too afraid to wheel a bin to the curb.

Thousands of people have reached out to SPFE to ask how to help. In mid-January, union leaders and staff trained 400 people—in just two days—to serve as school patrol volunteers. The union also has coordinated workshops for immigrant parents on how to complete the legal paperwork they need to keep their children safe, in case the parents are detained or deported.

"This isn't the work that we went to school for, but these students are like our kids. We love them and want to take care of them in any way we can," says Konkel. "If they need food, we're going to feed them. If they need clean laundry, we'll find a way to get it to them. This is the work in our hearts."

Educators on Safety Patrols

On a January afternoon, the "feels-like" temperature is negative 30 degrees. And still, St. Paul educator and parent Jill Moe gets out of her car, dons a yellow safety vest with a big red heart on the back, and stands on a frigid West Side street corner with a plastic red whistle tucked into a pants pocket.

Moe, an educational assistant in St. Paul's Early Childhood and Family Education Program for babies



Educators and parents around the Twin Cities and metro areas have donated products and resources for immigrant families afraid to leave their homes.

and toddlers, has been a member of SPFE's coordinated safety patrols for the past few weeks. "I'm watching, looking for cars that might be ICE," she says. If she sees one—and she hasn't yet—she will blow three short blasts on her whistle, alerting the nearby school's principal to get students into a safe location.

One block away is parent Alex Schluender, who coordinates this school's patrol. "It was easy to stand up a parent patrol here. We put out a call and got 50 people out... not just parents, but neighbors who just want to help," he says.

Inside the ring formed by school patrol officers like Moe and Schluender is science teacher Megan Hall, working bus duty near the school's front entrance. She and her colleagues also have whistles and specific protocols to protect students from a possible ICE operation.

"It's absurd. It's so strange. When I first started teaching, we had fire drills and tornado drills. Then, unfortunately, we started to have to develop safety drills in case of an active shooter in the school or neighborhood," says Hall. "Now, we have to develop safety protocols in case our own government shows up to hurt or kidnap our students? I never dreamed I would have to do something like this.

"Of course, I will. I love my kids. I will be here for them."

The World is Watching

The Twin Cities educator unions in Minneapolis and St. Paul have strong community relationships, which deepened after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 and through the battle for racial and social justice in their neighborhoods. They are also part of a rich network of labor unions in the area.



St. Paul science teacher Megan Hall.

On the morning of Jan. 23, educators met at the local carpenters' union to make art and drop off donations for families. Piles of canned vegetables and stacks of Pampers filled dozens of collapsible tables. One St. Paul school counselor, an immigrant himself, brought his 8-year-old son, who carried a package of art markers for the children who can't get out.

They were thanked by Education Minnesota president Monica Byron, who told them: "When educators stand together and refuse to let the fear and chaos happening around this country come into our schools, we need to be proud... You are part of a profession that shows up for people. You are part of a union that has your back. You are making a difference, and you are exactly what our students and communities need right now."

Later, these teachers, counselors, administrators and educational assistants would join an estimated 50,000 marchers in the streets of Minneapolis, braving the coldest day of the year to demand that ICE leave Minnesota and stop terrorizing their neighbors. "My students are terrified...They're trying to learn and instead they're wondering, 'Is it safe to be here? Am I going to be kidnapped? Am I going to be targeted for the color of my skin? Am I going to be coming to campus someday and end up in detention in a country I've never been to?' Nobody can learn under conditions like that," said a local faculty member, a sign in hand. "It's not right. None of this is right."

These Minnesota educators know the world is watching them. They also know that when ICE leaves the Twin Cities, they likely will occupy another community. They have a message for educators in those places.

Reach out to parents and other like-minded organizations now. Ask parents what they're going to need and figure out how to set up systems to help. Other parents will want to help you. Just ask them, says Stenson, who single-handedly started her delivery system with a single Facebook post that "skyrocketed," she says.

"Get organized," says the St. Paul pre-kindergarten teacher. And stick together, says Konkel. "Solidarity is an amazing thing."

Photo credits: Jenn Ackerman, Ackerman + Gruber 2026

Education Minnesota candidate election statements

At the 2026 Representative Convention, delegates will elect governing board members for several positions. All candidates had the opportunity to submit a statement and/or photograph. These statements and photos appear here in the Minnesota Educator and on the Education Minnesota website. Candidates are listed in random order.

Candidates for NEA Director



Shantella Barnes

St. Paul

No statement submitted



Anne Marie Martin

Osseo

Being a World Language teacher, I have a unique skill set that allows me to work easily with people from different backgrounds, abilities, cultures, languages, and opinions. As your NEA director, I will use my skills to amplify your voice in the fight for our profession.



John (Vince) Wagner

Rochester Education Association

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

Candidates for Governing Board At-Large Zone 1

No photo submitted

Crystal Purdie

Deer River Education Association

No statement submitted

No photo submitted

Aaron Riehle

Education Minnesota-Grand Rapids, Local No. 1314

No statement submitted

Candidate for Governing Board At-Large Zone 2



Chad Benesh (elected)

Cook County Education Association

I believe that our union is the force that can make the world a better place. This starts with taking care of membership by improving pay, benefits, and working conditions. But it doesn't stop there. As the saying goes, our power comes with responsibility.

Candidates for Governing Board At-Large Zone 3



David Leom

Milaca Education Association

If elected, I will back efforts to allocate money which: 1) Make significant improvements for pensions of current teachers 2) Improve COLAs for retired teachers, 3) Form a mandatory statewide health insurance pool for teachers and 4) Increase starting wages for teachers statewide to \$60,000 minimum.

No photo submitted

Matthew Meagher

Minnewaska Teachers' Association

No statement submitted

Candidates for Governing Board At-Large Zone 4



Tammy Knapper

Education Minnesota-Willmar

Running for reelection to Education Minnesota's Governing Board. Serving since 2021, I represent Zone 4 districts and focus on member organizing, strong locals, fair pay, secure healthcare and pensions, professional respect, and racial and social justice.



Melissa Snobl

Canby Education Association

I'm running to refocus our union on what matters most to educators: strong contracts, fair wages, affordable insurance, secure pensions, and safe working conditions. I believe our union should unite members around labor priorities and advocate for educators' professional needs.

Candidate for Governing Board At-Large Zone 5

No photo submitted

Michelle Gottberg (elected)

United South Central-Educational Support Professionals

No statement submitted

Candidate for Governing Board At-Large Zone 6

No photo submitted

Jessie Holm (elected)

Education Minnesota-Hastings

No statement submitted

Candidate for Governing Board At-Large Zone 7

No photo submitted

Tiffany Dittrich (elected)

Education Minnesota-Hastings

No statement submitted

Candidates for Governing Board At-Large Zone 8



Michael Houston

St. Paul

Michael Houston is a Saint Paul math teacher with 22 years' experience and one year on the Education Minnesota Governing Board, seeking reelection. A union steward and SPFE Executive Board member, he advocates for equitable funding, fair pensions, teacher retention, and equity statewide.

No photo submitted

John Wolhaupter

Anoka Hennepin

No statement submitted

Candidates for At-Large ESP



Michelle Dennard (elected)

Education Minnesota Osseo Educational Support Professionals

AS A CURRENT GOVERNING BOARD ESP AT-LARGE, I HAVE SHOWN UP AND DONE THE WORK—AND I WILL CONTINUE TO FIGHT FOR ALL EDUCATORS BY ELEVATING OUR VOICES AND ENSURING EVERY VOICE IS HEARD, RESPECTED, AND VALUED IN EVERY DECISION.



Geneva Dorsey (elected)

Minneapolis Federation of Teachers and ESP

Candidates for At-Large Higher Ed/Statewide Affiliate

No photo submitted

Marty Scofield (elected)

State Residential Schools Education Association

No statement submitted

Education Minnesota’s lawsuit against the Dept. of Homeland Security: What we’re seeking and what’s next

Written by David Aron, General Counsel

On Feb. 4, Education Minnesota, along with the Fridley and Duluth Public Schools, filed a class action lawsuit in U.S. District Court seeking to block the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) from conducting immigration enforcement activity on or near public schools, arguing that recent federal actions have disrupted education, endangered students and driven families away from classrooms.

A policy change with devastating impacts on Minnesota educators and students

The lawsuit challenges a shift in federal immigration policy that removed long-standing protections limiting enforcement activity in “sensitive locations,” such as schools, hospitals and places of worship, which had been in place since 1993 but was rescinded in a one-page memorandum issued on the current administration’s first day in office. Since that change in federal policy, federal agents have carried out enforcement operations in and around school zones across Minnesota, triggering fear among students and families and forcing districts to close schools, cancel activities or shift to remote learning.

In a press conference announcing the lawsuit, Education Minnesota President Monica Byron stated, “Students can’t learn, and educators can’t teach, when there are armed, masked federal agents stationed within view of classroom windows, sometimes for days on end.”

Attendance in several Minnesota school districts dropped sharply in early January amid Operation Metro Surge, with some districts reporting attendance declines of nearly one-third within weeks. In some districts, large portions of multilingual student populations were absent, while others reported attendance falling below half. Education Minnesota and the other plaintiffs in the lawsuit argue that the threat of enforcement near

schools has created a chilling effect that extends beyond immigrant families, affecting entire school communities, undermining access to education and interfering with the ability of our members to perform their jobs safely and without fear.

Challenging “arbitrary and capricious” actions by the federal government

Both legal claims in the lawsuit allege violations of a federal law called the Administrative Procedures Act (“APA”). The first count of the complaint alleges that the abrupt repeal of the Sensitive Locations Policy was arbitrary and capricious in violation of the APA because the Administration did not appear to examine any data or provide a reasoned explanation for repealing a policy that had been in effect for over 30 years, including during the first Trump administration. The second count alleges that the repeal of the sensitive locations policy violated procedural requirements of the APA, which require the government to provide prior notice and an opportunity for the public and individuals affected by proposed changes to weigh in with written comments before they take effect. Neither of these occurred in the administration’s rush to repeal the Sensitive Locations Policy on its very first day in office.

Education Minnesota and the two plaintiffs in this case are seeking a court order that would declare the January 2025 rescission of the sensitive locations policy invalid, reinstate the policy, and permanently enjoin the administration from rescinding it in the future without following the requirements in the APA. June Hoidal, of Zimmerman Reed LLP, and one of the attorneys representing Education Minnesota in this case, stated, “When arbitrary federal action interferes with public education, courts have the authority to step in and prevent further harm. That intervention is necessary here.”

Emergency motion seeking an immediate halt in ICE activity on or near schools

On Feb. 23, Education Minnesota, Fridley Public Schools and Duluth Public Schools filed a motion for emergency relief, asking the court to enjoin DHS from repealing the sensitive locations policy temporarily as the case proceeds. Even though the Administration has announced the end of Operation Metro Surge, the plaintiffs' motion alleges that the harm and uncertainty flowing from the repeal of the sensitive locations policy continues.

Fridley Public Schools alone has had to un-enroll at least 20 students due to prolonged absences tied to fear of immigration enforcement, likely costing the district thousands of dollars in state funding. Both Fridley and Duluth have diverted staff time, expanded remote learning, and spent significant funds to respond to enforcement activity and reassure families. DHS failed to justify its sudden policy reversal, ignored reliance interests built on the policy after having it in place for over three decades, and disregarded the predictable harm to children's access to education.

A hearing on the emergency motion is scheduled for April 8, 2026. The court will hopefully rule within several weeks as to whether to grant the motion and temporarily block the administration from further enforcement activity on or near schools, or to deny the motion. Even if the preliminary motion is denied, there is still the possibility of a court finding that the department acted unlawfully in repealing the sensitive locations policy and ordering that it be reinstated.

What's at stake

Even though Operation Metro Surge has officially ended, there remain as many as 500 active ICE and Border Patrol Agents in Minnesota. There remains widespread confusion and fear among all education stakeholders—students, parents, educators, and

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

administrators—about the circumstances under which immigration enforcement activity may occur on or near school grounds, and how school districts should respond. This session, the Minnesota Legislature has already heard several bills regulating school responses to immigration enforcement activities, and protection for sensitive locations are a topic of debate in Congress as well. Given all of this confusion and uncertainty, a decision in this case could have an impact well beyond Minnesota.

Education Minnesota, along with Fridley and Duluth Public Schools have been fortunate to be represented entirely pro bono by the law firms of Zimmerman Reed LLP, Nilan Johnson Lewis PA, The Law Office of Kevin C. Riach, and Democracy Forward, a national legal organization focused on defending the rule of law.

The following quote from one of our attorneys aptly sums up what this case reveals about the importance of schools and educators in turbulent times, and why Education Minnesota felt compelled to be part of this lawsuit: "In the midst of uncertainty, Minnesota's educators are showing up as heroes—offering academic and emotional support, and a sense of belonging that every child deserves. But let's be clear: they should never have to shoulder this burden," said Kathleen Curtis with Nilan Johnson Lewis. "Immigration enforcement operations should not be happening near schools, and we are asking the Court to restore the policy that has long ensured these spaces remain safe for students."

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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*

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MEMBERS WANT TO KNOW

Free member benefits

FREE BENEFITS? YES PLEASE!

As a member of Education Minnesota, you 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 – neamb.com

- 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 – aft.org/member-benefits

- Scroll halfway down the page where 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**)



UnionPLUS -unionplus.org

- fill in your last name, email address and password
- 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

**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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