

MINNESOTA

EDUCATOR

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2026

**Health insurance costs
top list of concerns in
latest member poll**

**Health insurance
reporting bill passes as
legislative session ends**



THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

Are you within the first five years of your education career? Are you interested in strengthening your own resilience and professional voice alongside other early career educator members in Minnesota?

Here's what some past participants had to say about the program:

Apply now for the BRAVE program!

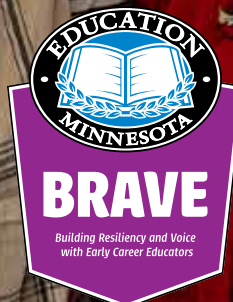
This FREE professional development program provides participants with support, mentorship and opportunities to explore using their voices as a tool for advocacy and change and discovering their own resilience within. This five-session, cohort-based program provides early career educators with time and safe space to connect with newer colleagues across the state who are facing similar challenges in their own districts.

"In a small district with little social and collaborative support, this was the highlight of every month for me."

"Please keep doing this! We have such little support. This was very helpful!"

"Being with all these teachers from the state and sharing their stories was an effective way to build resilience."

**Applications are open now for the 2026-27 cohort!
For more information, please visit edmn.me/brave**





**THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS**

August/September 2026 – Volume 29, No. 1

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For general inquiries and business at the state headquarters:

Phone: 800-652-9073 or 651-227-9541
For information about union activities, work and
resources, go to www.educationminnesota.org.

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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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Photo credits:

Cover - Sarah Cooke

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Every student. Every public school. Just one vote.

Republican and Democratic legislators have joined together to put on the ballot this fall an amendment to increase funding for every student, in every public school. But it's up to us, the educators, to pass it into law.

The amendment would increase payments to public schools from the Permanent School Fund without raising taxes on anyone. Since the state's founding in 1858, the fund has grown to \$2.3 billion through timber sales, mineral leases and investment returns, but the constitution limits how much of that growth schools can receive each year.

The change would pay out more money while responsibly managing the fund for future generations. It won't fix all the financial challenges facing schools, but it will provide millions of dollars in new money for public education, reflecting something Minnesotans already know: every student, in every classroom, deserves the chance to graduate and pursue their dreams.

Right now, the constitution only permits the fund's interest and dividends to go to schools each year, near 2% to 2.5% of its value, or \$58 million last year. The amendment would raise that to 4.5% of the fund's three-year average value, the rate a bipartisan task force recommended after studying university endowments. It is projected to increase school payments by 40%.

The House passed this without a single dissenting vote, and the Senate passed it as well. That bipartisan spirit extends beyond the Legislature: Education Minnesota stands with the Minnesota School Boards Association, the Minnesota Association of School Administrators, the Association of Metropolitan School Districts, the Minnesota Rural Education Association and other groups representing school boards and administrators. This group does not always speak with one voice, but this issue is unifying and simple: more money for classrooms, no cost to taxpayers.

But we can't oversell the benefits. Minnesota's main funding formula already provides about \$7,480 per student. If this amendment happened last year, the change would have added roughly \$28 more per student across the state's 850,000 public school students. That's

real money, but less than 1% of per-pupil spending.

This amendment won't close the special education funding gap districts have carried, nor offset potential federal cuts to education, nor stop spiraling health care costs. Many districts will still need local levies

this fall. But the amendment will create a modest, dependable increase in school funding that our schools need.

A statewide poll of 600 likely voters, conducted in late June by Voss Research and Strategy, found two-thirds of Minnesotans support the amendment, 66% yes to 22% no. The same research found public-school educators are among the most trusted voices on this question, ahead of any elected official or organization.

I ask every member to vote yes, and to have that conversation. Then remember the ballot's mechanics: under Minnesota law, skipping this question counts as a no vote. Read to the bottom, flip the ballot, and fill in the circle. Flip and fill.

Consider what follows this election when the Legislature returns in 2027. The legislators can see a big win as a mandate that Minnesotans want to increase school funding. A loss says the voters had the chance to invest more in their schools, and said no. Our opponents would repeat that for years.

We do not often get the chance to increase school funding without asking anyone to pay more or see this much agreement across party lines. This November, we have both. Vote yes on the constitutional amendment.

In unity,



Monica Byron,
Education Minnesota President



Monica Byron



Congratulations to Alli Horejsi of Triton Education Minnesota 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!

Filling Babe in on all the union news while camping in Brainerd!

Educators in the news

"I love what I do as a counselor...I don't want to leave this district. They've embraced us. They love us, and we love them. It would be heart wrenching to make that decision to leave, but us wanting to stay [is]not enough. We have to see some changes happen for us to be able to stay."

- Waseca school counselor Brianna Lawrence in a May 24 MPR article titled, "School workers pass first goal post toward health insurance reform in final day of legislative session."

Getting social!

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

-  facebook.com/educationminnesota
-  [@educationminnesota](https://www.instagram.com/educationminnesota)
-  [@educationMN](https://twitter.com/educationMN)
-  [@educationminnesota](https://www.tiktok.com/@educationminnesota)

Connect with your local!

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

Follow Education Minnesota Inver Grove Heights on Instagram:

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

Follow Education Minnesota Edina on Facebook:

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Health insurance costs top list of member concerns in new Education Minnesota poll

Members expressed support for Education Minnesota's response to Operation Metro Surge

Skyrocketing healthcare costs are top of mind for most members, according to a recent poll conducted by Education Minnesota. The union regularly commissions polling to provide members with an opportunity to share their thoughts on which issues are most important and their feelings on recent union activities. This poll surveyed over 4,000 members from late April to early May.

In the poll, over 80% of respondents said that they were very concerned about the cost of healthcare. This is a 12-point increase in the percentage of respondents who are very concerned about healthcare costs since last year. An additional 14% said they were somewhat concerned about healthcare costs, and only 6% of members said they were not concerned at all.

Similarly, 91% of members said that ensuring every educator has access to affordable healthcare is a top or high priority that the union should focus on.

This drastic uptick and increased intensity of concern follows years of skyrocketing premiums, where many educators are facing double-digit increases. For many locals, hard-fought raises are eaten up by increasing costs for health insurance. In a previous poll, half of respondents said that they had put off a doctor's appointment because they could not afford it. Over the most recent bargaining cycle, several locals—including Anoka Hennepin Education Minnesota, the largest E-12 local in the state—nearly went on strike because of unaffordable healthcare costs.

The intense concerns about health insurance are also reflected in member engagement over the most recent legislative session. Our Healthcare Day of Action last March had the highest number of attendees of any Education Minnesota lobby day, along with a record

Key numbers:

- 94%** *Concerned about the cost of healthcare.*
- 91%** *Cite affordable healthcare as top priority.*
- 72%** *Concerned about educator burnout.*

number of legislator meetings. These meetings were integral in passing our reporting bill that will lay the foundation for EGIP next year (for more information on EGIP and the reporting bill, see page 7).

Affordability anxieties were also reflected in the second highest issue of concern—educator burnout, which 72% of respondents said they were very concerned about. Members overwhelmingly said that the drivers of burnout were demands on their time and capacity. Respondents also mentioned student behavior and lack of support from the community, parents and administrators as drivers of burnout.

One respondent described the demands on their time and lack of support as “asking for champagne results on a beer budget.”

Members also voiced concerns about pay and pensions—65% said that pay is a high or top priority for the union, and 62% said the same for pension improvements. When asked about policies that the union should prioritize, 84% mentioned increasing teacher salaries, the second highest issue behind healthcare.

“Nearly three-quarters of members said that Education Minnesota was a strong support during a difficult time.”

Other issues members said the union should prioritize include:

- Providing educators a safe place to work and students a safe place to learn (80%).
- Reducing the educator shortage (69%).
- Continue working to reduce penalties for early retirement (68%).

Views on Education Minnesota and union activity.

The poll also showed strong member support for the organization's response to the federal ICE occupation last winter. Nearly 70% of respondents said that Education Minnesota's public stance opposing immigration enforcement on school grounds made them view the organization more favorably and 71% said that Education Minnesota was a strong support for members during a difficult time.

Additionally, poll responses demonstrated how widespread the impacts were—nearly three in four

members said they were impacted either directly or indirectly by Operation Metro Surge, with most of the impacts taking place in the Twin Cities. Members were also very involved in community responses to the occupation. Over 40% of participants took action in response to Operation Metro Surge, such as boycotting a business, donating money to a local organization or signing a petition.

Two thirds of members rated Education Minnesota's job performance positively, and nearly three quarters of participants view their local affiliate favorably. A majority of members said Education Minnesota is effective at advocating for better pay, pensions and health insurance for educators

Education Minnesota will continue to advocate for higher pay, more affordable healthcare, stronger pensions and safe schools for both students and educators. We will have many opportunities coming up for members to get involved with advocacy around these issues. For more information, go to educationminnesota.org.

Retiring educators can maximize their union experience with Education Minnesota Retired Continuous Membership

Written by Wes Tessman, Education Minnesota Retired president. Edited by Heaven Keane.

Did you know that membership in Education Minnesota doesn't end when we leave the classroom? Educators who have moved into retirement are eligible to join Education Minnesota Retired. The benefits of staying involved will enrich your years of retirement, keeping you informed and engaged about issues that affect retirees and provide opportunities to make your voice heard on pensions, healthcare and Social Security. Plus, members who decide to substitute teach after retirement are still covered under the same liability insurance policy as when they were an active educator.

Education Minnesota Retired members also retain full access to NEA Member Benefits and AFT+ Member Benefits—that includes your insurance policies, exclusive travel discounts, shopping perks and the NEA Vacations program.

Joining Education Minnesota Retired is easier than ever with continuous membership! This program, established in 2015, allows current Education Minnesota members to sign up to join EM Retired the year they plan to retire

so that their membership seamlessly transitions from Education Minnesota to EM Retired.

Signing up for continuous membership takes two minutes and can be done online!

You may qualify for continuous membership as a member of Education Minnesota Retired at no additional cost to you if you:

- Are 55 years of age or older.
- Retired after Sept. 1, 2015.
- Have been a member for at least 10 years.
- Were an active member in good standing at the time of retirement.
- Qualify for a public pension.

Education Minnesota Retired is excited to welcome you to the world of retirement and to wish you well on your new journey! We invite you to stay connected and join our efforts to support our kids, strengthen our public schools and improve our pensions.

Learn more at educationminnesotaretired.org.

Education Minnesota wins NEA Human and Civil Rights Award for defending students and families during ICE surge

At the 2026 National Education Association Representative Assembly, the NEA presented Education Minnesota with the President's Award for Human and Civil Rights for its work defending students and families during Operation Metro Surge. This award is given on a special case-by-case basis to an individual or organization that promotes racial and social justice and advocates for marginalized communities. According to NEA, Education Minnesota was selected for actions that included organizing safety patrols near schools; providing transportation, food and clothing to affected families; expanding virtual learning for students unable to attend in person; and leading a federal lawsuit against

the U.S. Department of Homeland Security seeking to block immigration enforcement at or near public schools.

"This award belongs to every Education Minnesota member who stood with immigrant and BIPOC students and families when it mattered most," said Monica Byron, president of Education Minnesota. "When federal agents came into our communities, our members organized, they showed up and they refused to look away. That is what educators do. That is what this union does." NEA President Becky Pringle presented the award to President Byron during the NEA Human and Civil Rights Awards dinner in Denver on July 3.

EGIP reporting bill passes as legislative session ends

This bill lays the groundwork for EGIP's potential passage next year.

The 2026 legislative session ended in May. Despite a divided Legislature and a non-budget year, educators were able to secure important wins—including passage of a reporting bill that plays a crucial role in moving our healthcare proposal forward next session.

Below, we have put together a legislative summary that includes more details on the reporting bill, along with other legislation that impacts educators.

Education Minnesota priorities: Pay, pensions and healthcare

Educator Group Insurance Program (EGIP)

Currently, more than 500 school districts and charter schools negotiate their own insurance coverage with health insurers, resulting in small, volatile insurance pools. Education Minnesota supports creating a single, statewide insurance pool of school employees, which would be large enough to absorb expensive claims and have more bargaining power against the insurance companies.

On the final day of session, legislators voted to fund the first comprehensive study of the spiraling health insurance costs of Minnesota school districts. This will allow the Legislature to understand the full scope of the problem and more accurately project EGIP's price tag in future sessions.

St. Paul pension funding

St. Paul educators secured a major pension win this session when legislators appropriated \$3.4 million to lower contribution rates for current Saint Paul Public Schools teachers, meaning more money in each paycheck.

Education funding

Constitutional amendment

The Legislature decided to send a constitutional amendment to the voters in November that, if passed, will increase revenue for public schools by increasing

the annual draw from the Permanent School Fund—an account funded by timber sales and mining royalties that dates back to the state's founding.

Education Minnesota encourages all members to vote yes on this amendment in November.

Compensatory aid

State legislators also approved spending an additional \$10 million on compensatory aid, which supports schools with students from low-income families. This money will be vital as Minnesota schools brace for hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts from the state and federal governments in the next two years.

Voucher program rejected

The governor refused to join President Donald Trump's new national school voucher program, which would reduce the amount of money available for public schools that serve every student.

Seasonal recreational tax base replacement aid

The Legislature passed a bipartisan bill that will allow property tax revenue from seasonal and recreational properties to remain in the region rather than go to the statewide general fund, which will help lower the property tax burden for homeowners in cabin-country areas on voter-approved operating levies.

School safety

ICE out of Minnesota schools

The Minnesota Senate passed a bill that would have limited immigration enforcement in schools and other sensitive areas, but it died in the House. The bill was supported by Education Minnesota.

For a more in-depth explanation of these policies, check out our legislative wrap-up webinar at edmn.me/26sessionwebinar or email our lobby team at lobbyteam@edmn.org.

Political Action Committee Refund Request

Thousands of members of Education Minnesota choose to contribute to the union's political action committee.

The PAC is one of our main tools to bring educators' voices to the policy debate by electing people who will listen. Those PAC dollars go back to local unions to help them win school board and levy elections, as well as support pro-public education candidates at the local and state levels.

In accordance with Education Minnesota Bylaw Article 2, Section 3, Subd. b, I hereby request the following:

_____ Please refund to me my \$30 PAC assessment that would otherwise be contributed to the general account of Education Minnesota Political Action Committee for the 2026-27 academic year.

Non-U.S. citizens should request this refund.

**ALL OF THE FOLLOWING FIELDS ARE
REQUIRED. PLEASE PRINT LEGIBLY.**

Name: _____

Email address: _____

Address: _____

City, State, ZIP: _____

Local/Affiliate: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

A request for refund of the Education Minnesota Political Action Committee assessment will not affect membership rights or benefits. Retired, reserve, substitute and student members are not assessed, thus do not qualify for the refund.

DEADLINE FOR REFUNDS:

Refund requests MUST be received by Education Minnesota:

- 1) By Oct. 31 for continuing members; or
- 2) Within 30 days of signing a membership application for new members.

**Checks will not be mailed until
the end of November, after all
forms have been processed.**

ORIGINAL SIGNATURE NEEDED.

Return this form to:
Education Minnesota Accounting Department
Attn: Refund Request
41 Sherburne Ave.
St. Paul, MN 55103-2196

Education Minnesota Foundation for Excellence in Teaching and Learning Refund Request

Contributions to this foundation will provide financial support for innovative programs initiated by Education Minnesota members, locals and affiliates that promote educational access for learners and excellence in teaching. Grants also support professional development for education support professionals and higher education faculty.

In accordance with Education Minnesota Bylaw Article 2, Section 3, Subd. c, I hereby request the following:

_____ Please refund to me my \$5 foundation assessment that would otherwise be contributed to the Education Minnesota Foundation for Excellence in Teaching and Learning for the 2026-27 academic year.

**ALL OF THE FOLLOWING FIELDS ARE
REQUIRED. PLEASE PRINT LEGIBLY.**

Name: _____

Email address: _____

Address: _____

City, State, ZIP: _____

Local/Affiliate: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

A request for refund of the Education Minnesota Foundation for Excellence in Teaching and Learning assessment will not affect Education Minnesota membership rights or benefits, however, it will make you ineligible to receive a grant from this foundation during this academic year. Retired, reserve, substitute and student members are not assessed, and thus do not qualify for the refund.

DEADLINE FOR REFUNDS:

Refund requests must be received by the Education Minnesota Foundation for Excellence in Teaching and Learning:

- 1) By Oct. 31 for continuing members; or
- 2) Within 30 days of signing a membership application for new members.

**Checks will not be mailed until
the end of November, after all
forms have been processed.**

ORIGINAL SIGNATURE NEEDED.

Return this form to:
Education Minnesota Accounting Department
Attn: Refund Request
41 Sherburne Ave.
St. Paul, MN 55103-2196



Taiko Drumming and Joyful Resistance session from TaikoArts Midwest.



Jimmie Heags conducts a restorative chat session titled "Grounded Under Pressure."

2026 Uplifting Voices conference bolsters racial and social justice work

Planned in collaboration with members of our Racial Equity Advocate program and Education Minnesota staff, Uplifting Voices is a conference aimed at creating an experience centered on challenging and disrupting systems of whiteness and white supremacy. The conference was held on June 25 in St. Paul.

This year's event centered on four core values—joy, healing, community and strength. This iteration of Uplifting Voices also had a different vibe than the conference has in the past. Based on feedback from our member planning team, and especially after the rough year our community has had, we wanted to create unique opportunities for attendees to learn, engage and connect through incredible dance and music performances, healing-centered experiences, community storytelling and moments that help us reclaim the joy we so deeply deserve.

In addition to offering sessions centered on racial and social justice, the event featured an exhibit hall showcasing BIPOC and other underrepresented-owned and operated businesses from around the state.

Thank you to everyone who attended and made this event a success!



Members of the planning team. From left: Ellen Olsen, Liz Ortiz-Perez, Susan Providence, Christine Castillo, Claire Torrey, Adeyoola Ajayi and Tavarra Price.



A session conducted by Angie Yanez titled "Circle as a Way of Healing."

Members, including Education Minnesota Governing Board Member Jasman Myers, waiting for the opening ceremony to start.



Members attend a workshop on storytelling by Danielle Daniel.



Changes coming to ESP of the Year program

There's still time to nominate a deserving colleague!

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

Now in its 19th year, 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.

This year, the ESP of the Year program will be held on Friday, Oct. 23 and Saturday, Oct. 24. On Friday, semifinalists and finalists will participate in workshops on topics such as effective advocacy and media training. Finalist interviews will be conducted on Saturday morning, and then both finalists and semifinalists will be honored at a banquet on Saturday afternoon, where the recipient will be announced as well.

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:

Professional practice

This category looks at worksite responsibilities and personal achievements the nominee has made in their field. It examines how the nominee has demonstrated leadership, creativity and innovation at the worksite, along with how the candidate's professional growth has positively impacted the school, students and community.

Advocacy and association

This category considers how the candidate serves in the day-to-day education process as an advocate for members, the profession and public education, along with how the candidate's involvement with Education Minnesota contributes to their professional success.

Community engagement

In this category, the selection committee reviews the candidate's involvement in promoting public education in the community.

Personal achievement

This category examines how involvement in Education Minnesota activities enables the nominee to meet their own personal goals.

Enhancement of ESP image

This category looks at how the candidate's activities enhance the image of education support professionals at their worksite, in the union and in the community.

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 their recommendation for ESP of the Year to the president of Education Minnesota.



2025-26 ESP of the Year Monica Eggert receives her honorarium and iPad from Education Minnesota Vice President Marty Fridgen.

To learn more about the program and to submit your ESP of the Year nominations, go to edmn.me/espofyear.

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Navigating recent student loan repayment changes

Written by Degrees Not Debt team members Bridget Moore and Andrea Cecconi. Edited by Heaven Keane.

July 1, 2026, marked big changes for borrowers with federally held student loans, limiting repayment options and causing millions of people to see significant increases in their monthly payments. The Saving on a Valuable Education (SAVE) plan, enacted by the Biden administration, was eliminated by the U.S. Court of Appeals earlier this year, leaving borrowers in limbo as they try to find affordable repayment options.

Borrowers who were previously enrolled in SAVE and have not enrolled in a new repayment plan should expect to receive communication from both their student loan servicer and the Department of Education (ED) about updating their plan. Borrowers who do not choose a new repayment plan will be automatically placed in the new Tiered Standard repayment plan, which is **not** a qualifying repayment plan for Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF). There is significant justified confusion about what steps borrowers need to take and which plans are available. Here is what else you need to know about your repayment options and the landscape around student loans this summer:

For borrowers seeking PSLF

There are four Income Driven Repayment plans available if you do not have new loans after July 1, 2026: Income Based Repayment, Pay as You Earn, Income Contingent Repayment, and the new Repayment Assistance Plan. All four plans qualify as eligible repayment plans for PSLF. Borrowers who enroll in ICR or PAYE can remain in that plan until July 1, 2028, when they will sunset. Borrowers will then have to move into IBR or RAP for the duration of their repayment period. However, if at any point, a switch is made to the just-launched RAP; borrowers are prohibited from re-enrolling in IBR, ICR or PAYE. For borrowers with new loans after July 1, 2026, RAP is the only IDR plan available.

Education Minnesota's Degrees Not Debt team supports members struggling with student loan debt by providing training resources and connecting members to resources they can trust. The team regularly hosts webinars to help members navigate the student loan repayment landscape and provides updates on important changes that impact borrowers. Those webinars are available anytime on MEA Online.

For borrowers who are not seeking PSLF

In addition to the IDR plans, you also have access to the 10-year Standard, Extended Repayment, Graduated Repayment, and the new Tiered Standard plan. These plans are a fixed amount over a period of time depending on your loan balance. Again, if any new loans are disbursed after July 1, 2026, only the Tiered Standard plan is available.

For Parent PLUS borrowers

If these loans are already part of a Direct Consolidation Loan, you can retain access to PSLF, but only if no new loans are taken out after July 1, 2026. Parent PLUS borrowers must enroll in the ICR plan and make at least one payment; borrowers then have the options of switching to the IBR plan if that monthly payment amount is lower. If these loans are not consolidated, then you can only make payments on one of the standard plans outlined in the previous paragraph.

Our recommendation is to log into your studentaid.gov account and use the repayment calculator to compare plans and get estimates on your monthly repayment amount.

Other key changes as of July 1, 2026

- The Grad PLUS loan program is ending for anyone starting graduate school after this date. Borrowers will remain eligible for other Direct Loans with new lending caps.
- New caps on federal student loans have been implemented:
 - *\$100,000 aggregate lifetime borrowing limit for borrowers in graduate programs.*
 - *\$257,500 total over the lifetime of a borrower; new guidance as of April 17 includes loans taken out prior to July 1, 2026, retroactively applying this rule to existing borrowers.*
 - *Parent PLUS loans will be capped at \$20,000 per student per year.*
 - *PP loans will be subject to a \$65,000 lifetime limit per dependent student.*
- A new rule allows borrowers who use auto-pay to make their loan payments to have their interest rate cut by 1% through June 30, 2028.

The legal landscape remains active when it comes to rules implemented by the Trump administration. On June 30, 2026, the U.S. District Court of Massachusetts struck down a rule promulgated by the Administration that would have limited employee eligibility for PLSF. In March 2025, President Trump issued an executive order to exclude employees of public organizations that conduct “illegal activities” from the PSLF program; this order would have given discretion to ED in determining eligibility exceeding its legal authority. The ruling that this rule is “arbitrary and capricious” sets up additional court battles but gives borrowers clarity about their ability to pursue PSLF under federal law.

Limitations on borrowing for graduate degrees remain under a stay by the courts that continue to rule that the Trump Administration’s rules exceed statutory authority. At the time of this writing, the courts have forced the administration to maintain a broader list of professional degrees and therefore higher borrowing limits than first published. Education is still not included in this list, but professional degrees in nursing, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech and language pathology and school psychology remain subject to limits closer to the actual costs of programs.

We will continue to provide updates as more information becomes available. Please contact the Degrees Not Debt team for assistance in navigating this and any other student loan forgiveness challenges at DND@edmn.org.

Additional resources

- Repayment calculator:
www.studentaid.gov/repayment-calculator
- Information on the new Tiered Standard Plan: www.studentaid.gov/manage-loans/repayment/plans
- Guidance on professional degrees as of July 2026:
www.edmn.me/profdegreeelist726

PAC dues support local election assistance

The Education Minnesota Political Action Committee is funded by \$30 donations from members, separate from dues, and goes towards building political power through supporting pro-public education, pro-labor candidates and elected officials at all levels of government. The PAC is one of the union's most powerful tools to bring educator voices into state and local politics.

Nowhere is this more important than at the local level—particularly in school board races and levy referenda. We elect our bosses when we vote for school board, and who sits on the school board impacts everything from salary, to budget, to length of the school year, benefits, pensions, testing and more.

For several years now, state and national anti-public education groups have targeted Minnesota's school districts in an attempt to weaken public education. The candidates that these groups recruit run on platforms seeking to limit students' freedom to learn, whitewash history, prevent certain students from feeling safe and welcome in their classrooms and weaken unions.

These anti-public education groups are funded by billionaires with near-limitless financial resources and a deep desire to sabotage public education so that they can privatize it and profit. While we do not have their bottomless financial resources, we do have the collective power of our union and public trust in educators. It is up to us to use every tool at our disposal to fight back against these attacks on our public schools and elect school board members who will support students and educators.

Your PAC donations help make that happen.

Last cycle, Education Minnesota endorsed candidates won in 44 of 47 school board races—or 94% of the time. Similarly, we had a record number of successes on levy referenda, with the highest passage rate since 2019. These successes were only possible because of PAC donations.

What does the PAC Board do?

The PAC Board is made up of volunteer members from across the state and includes a member from each of the union election districts. These members discuss and determine the campaign plan for each election, including the endorsement process, how PAC dollars will be spent and the support that will be provided to local elections and referendums.

The PAC Board determines how the endorsement process will work. Currently, the process requires candidates to fill out a questionnaire and meet with educators from their area for an interview. Those educators recommend a candidate for endorsement, which is then approved by the PAC Board.

How are PAC dollars spent?

A significant portion of the budget goes to member organizing and support for local elections, such as school board races and referenda.

PAC funding for school board and referenda includes direct mail sent to voters in the district, stipends for phone bank coordinators and additional funds for food and incidentals incurred by members while doing campaign work.

This year, we have a record number of referenda campaigns for tax levies to support local school districts. The PAC is assisting 41 locals this election season with levy referenda. Local levies provide another way for communities to come together to support their school districts directly, so our members have a vested interest in seeing these levies pass.

The support the PAC provides includes identifying likely voters in a local, creating and mailing postcards to encourage voters to support the referendum and training volunteers on phone banking and voter outreach.

A robust voter outreach program is key to effectively fighting back against anti-public education groups, and when Education Minnesota endorses, candidates win. When locals use PAC funds to make endorsements and carry out a strong voter outreach plan, the candidates we support win more than 75 percent of the time.

Why is voter outreach so important?

Politics impacts so much of our members' daily lives. When pro-public education, pro-labor elected officials are in power, public-school employees can focus on what they do best—educating—instead of worrying about whether extremist, anti-public education leaders will try to slash their funding and stall contract negotiations.

What does politics have to do with my classroom?

Who makes the decisions on these important issues?

Your salary	School board, union
School budget	School board
Class size/workload	School board, state Legislature, governor
Length of school year	School board, state Legislature, governor
Health benefits	School board, union
Due process	School board, state Legislature, governor
Retirement benefits	School board, state Legislature, governor
Testing	Federal, state, school board
Hiring practices	School board, state Legislature, governor
Teaching credentials	Federal, state, governor
Standards	State board, state, federal
Unemployment compensation	Federal, state, governor
Textbooks	State, school board
Negotiated contracts in higher education	State Legislature, local union, governor
Higher education credentialing	Governor
Campus repairs and upgrades	State Legislature

If local unions get involved in school board elections, we can ensure that our schools are represented by individuals who share our goal of providing the public schools that Minnesota students and educators deserve.

Learn more at edmnvotes.org.

Education Minnesota PAC endorses candidates in upcoming races

Over the past several weeks, Education Minnesota members across the state have participated in candidate screenings at the local and statewide levels. The Education Minnesota Political Action Committee, made up of members from across the state, have recommended the following candidates for election as of July 15. Some candidate screenings are still ongoing, and we will continue to release endorsements throughout the campaign season. Education Minnesota members are marked with an asterisk.

Make sure to check out edmnvotes.org for updates!

Governor

Amy Klobuchar

Attorney General

Keith Ellison

Secretary of State

Steve Simon

Minnesota House races

1A: Leanna Sandahl	16A: David J Torgelson	40B: David Gottfried	53A: Mary Frances Clardy*
1B: Jennifer Compeau	16B: Julie Henslin	41A: Cole Birkeland	53B: Rick Hansen
2A: Reed J. Olson	18A: Leah Hanson	41B: Jen Fox	54A: Brad Tabke
2B: Emily Thabes	18B: Luke Frederick	44A: Peter M Fischer	55A: Jessica Hanson
3A: Aaron Kania	21A: L.S. "Rusty" Nelson*	45A: Tracey Breazeale	55B: Hunter Cantrell
4A: Erika Yoney	21B: Jon Wilson*	45B: Patty Acomb	56A: Robert Bierman
4B: Thaddeus Laugisch	22A: Sonja L. Denn	46A: Larry Kraft	56B: John Huot
6B: Nicky Hardy	22B: Mary Nesgoda	46B: Cheryl Youakim	57A: JD Delgado
7A: Erin McCabe Ningen	23B: Christoph Dundas*	48A: Joe Brothers	57B: Brian Cohn
7B: Dan Horoshak	31A: Brian Walker	48B: Lucille "Lucy" Rehm	59B: Esther Agbaje
8A: Peter Johnson	31B: Jen Bloomquist	49A: Alex Falconer	60A: Sydney Jordan
8B: Liish Kozlowski	32B: Matt Norris	49B: Carlie Kotyza-Witthuhn	60B: Mohamud Noor
10B: Jeff Larson	33B: Josiah Hill*	50A: Julie Greene	61A: Katie Jones
11A: Chris Swanson*	35A: Zack Stephenson	50B: Steve Elkins	62A: Aisha Gomez
11B: Jack L'Heureux	35B: Kari Rehrauer	51A: Michael Howard	62B: Anquam Mahamoud
14A: Abdi Daisane	36A: Jim DeMay	51B: Nathan Coulter	63A: Samantha Sencer-Mura
14B: Zachary "Zach" Dorholt	39A: Aaron Klemz	52A: Christos Roy Jensen	
15B: Lydell Sik	40A: Aisha Elmquist	52B: Bianca Virnig	

Minnesota Senate races

1: Bjorn Solberg	14: Aric Putnam	39: Mary K Kunesch	56: Erin Maye Quade
2: Dan R. Rogers*	16: Kathy Jorgenson	44: Sam Rosemark	57: Steven Schroer
3: Grant Hauschild	18: Nick Frentz	45: Ann Johnson Stewart	59: Bobby Joe Champion
4: Rob Kupec	22: Marisa Ulmen	48: Dan Kessler	60: Doron Clark
7: Kim (Kotonias) McLaughlin	23: Angie Hanson*	49: Krish Subrahmanian	61: Scott Dibble
8: Jen McEwen	24: Simon Glaser*	51: Simon Trautmann Cordova	62: Omar Fateh
11: Mary Carlson	34: John Hoffman	52: Liz Reyer	
12: Kari Dorry*	35: Angela Nelson	53: Paul Cumings	

Competency-based credentialing for paraprofessionals and ESPs

Written by Justin Killian

Over the past two legislative sessions, Education Minnesota has advocated for and won changes to state law that will protect the ability of instructional paraprofessionals in Special Education and Title I to stay in their positions. The new legislation provides a competency-based alternative to standardized tests as a means of demonstrating their qualifications. This article summarizes the history of those efforts and offers practical guidance to members who wish to demonstrate their qualifications through a competency-based assessment.

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

In 2001, the U.S. federal government passed the No Child Left Behind Act which greatly increased government scrutiny of local education agencies and imposed higher accountability measures tied to testing. Among the many changes, the new law required all non-licensed instructional aides working in Title 1 Part A schools and programs or with students in special education to achieve a credentialing standard known as “highly qualified.” These educators could meet the standard through two years or more of college education or by passing a state and local assessment. LEAs were instructed that compliance with this law is tied directly to funding streams from both the federal and state governments.

The “highly qualified” standard was eventually removed from federal statute with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. This new federal law eliminated the term “highly qualified” from statute, and it placed standard-setting in the hands of state education agencies and local districts. However, the federal government also insisted state agencies maintain the rigorous standards of credentialing in place before the enactment of ESSA. Thus, although the phrase “highly qualified” was removed from federal

statute, the credentialing parameters set by NCLB remained mostly unchanged.

ESSA granted greater flexibility to state agencies, but Minnesota and many other states decided to simply retain the mandates that were established in NCLB. Since 2016, the Minnesota Department of Education has maintained that a Title 1, Part A instructional paraprofessional or a paraprofessional working in a special education setting must carry on the following credentials: (1) two years of college credits from an accredited institution of higher education, (2) an associate's degree or higher from a U.S.-based institution of higher learning, or (3) a passing score on an approved academic assessment. ESSA authorized states and LEAs to develop local, rigorous assessments, but MDE maintained that the only two assessments recognized by the state would be the Parapro and the Paraeducator.

In 2023, MDE was notified of compliance issues tied to licensing teachers working in special education settings. As a result, the state agency performed a comprehensive review of all federal regulations and the potential ramifications for failing to comply with the law. MDE explicitly identified the credentialing

of non-licensed instructional staff as a compliance requirement that could result in financial penalties if problems were found during an audit.

Districts reacted to this news with panic and urgency and immediately put pressure on paraprofessionals and ESPs to prove compliance with the law. Federal law is clear that only paraprofessionals serving in instructional roles are required to meet the credentialing standards, but some Minnesota districts overcorrected by maintaining all non-licensed educators needed to meet these requirements. This resulted in bus aides, lunch aides, community liaisons, paras offering translation services and clerical support staff all being required to take standardized tests to return to school or risk losing their jobs. In addition, these educators were being asked to meet these requirements on their own time, and some districts required employees to personally pay the exorbitant cost of registering for exams.

A coalition of partner organizations led by Education Minnesota, the Service Employees International Union Local 284, and the Minnesota Association of Special Education Administrators engaged in rigorous negotiations with MDE to offer better guidance to districts and improve the local and state assessment options to meet the federal standards. This work led to the passage of a competency-based assessment option for special education paras, which was passed in 2025. The same coalition successfully lobbied to have the state Legislature extend this same competency-based assessment to Title 1, Part A paras in 2026.

Why did Minnesota need a new assessment?

As mentioned above, Minnesota offered only two assessment options for non-licensed staff to comply with the federal standards before 2025. These included the Parapro exam, owned by Education Testing Services, or the ParaEducator exam. Both standardized tests are only offered in English and come with high enrollment fees and additional charges for educators needing to re-take an exam. In addition, the historical testing results for these exams showed a dramatic

racial bias in the passage rates, an unfortunate reality previously ignored by MDE. Finally, Minnesota's score requirements for both exams far exceeded the threshold set by other states.

Many paraprofessionals speak multiple languages, and English is not the primary language for many of our strongest paraeducators. These credentialing tests require individuals to solve complex Algebra II equations or compose essays analyzing the legal reasoning of major U.S. Supreme Court decisions. The tests, in short, judge test-takers on skill sets that rarely apply to their actual job requirements and roles.

Paraprofessionals and ESPs that had been working in public schools for more than 20 years were finding themselves unable to achieve a passing score, and neither the state agency nor districts proactively offered to explore the creation of the "local assessment" option allowed in federal law. Also, neither testing agency offered to translate their exams into other languages, nor would they have a substantive conversation about the obvious racial bias seen in the scoring data.

SEIU, Education Minnesota and MASE joined forces to pressure the state agency to add a competency-based assessment to allow non-licensed staff to comply with federal law by providing evidence from work experiences and completed trainings to show they meet the thresholds outlined in statute. The coalition wanted an assessment that honored the work, experience and immense knowledge base paras and ESPs bring to work each day.

What are the credentialing requirements?

The federal requirements for non-licensed, instructional support staff in special education are clarified in 34 CFR 300.156 and the requirements for Title 1, Part A support staff are found in 34 CFR 200.58. The language used for the two groups is very similar but not identical. However, the U.S. Department of Education requires both groups of non-licensed support staff in these roles to: (1) show completion of two years of college credit, (2) provide a transcript for an achieved associate's degree or higher, or (3) achieve a passing score on a state approved or local assessment. MDE still accepts scores

on the ParaPro, the ParaPathways or the ParaEducator. In addition, non-licensed support staff can now work with their administrator to complete a “competency rubric” which requires verification that an educator has mastered seven competencies and 21 sub-competencies through work experience or previous training. This option is modeled after licensure-by-portfolio for teachers and allows these vital educators to receive credit for their hard work and previous training experiences. Administrators merely complete the state rubric and place the evidence in the personnel file of the paraprofessional. The seven competencies and 21 sub-competencies are listed at the end of this article.

Important Reminders

There is still a lot of confusion about these requirements, and this first year of implementation could present unforeseen complications. First, it is recommended that all members who are being asked to meet these credentialing requirements verify through local Education Minnesota field staff that they need to comply with this law. Many districts are still requiring individuals who are not subject to these standards to comply with these thresholds.

Second, members should inform district leaders of their right to the competency-based approach to credentialing and ask for guidance on how to submit evidence. Districts might not proactively

offer this option, so it is incumbent upon members to assert their statutory right to the competency rubric. Members should contact their field staff if they encounter resistance to this request.

Finally, watch for important guidance from MDE that should hit the desks of districts in August 2026. MDE has been directed to have a system in place before the start of the 2026-27 academic year, and many partner organizations are eagerly awaiting that guidance. Also, members should remind districts that Minnesota law (Section 121A.642) requires them to provide eight hours of paid professional development to all non-licensed staff. Those training hours, the cost of which is reimbursed to the district by the state, can be used to help non-licensed staff achieve compliance with the federal and state laws.

The full list of competencies, along with the requirement that districts make the grid available to Special Education and Title I paraprofessionals as an alternative to the approved standardized tests, can be found at Minnesota Statutes, Section 121A.642: <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/121a.642>.



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