

CRISIS TIMELINE

From Surreal Spring to Stressed Summer: A Timeline of Tumult and Togetherness

March 12

The state ordered the closure of all preK-12 schools—public, private and boarding—beginning Monday, March 16, through Sunday, April 5, to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus.

QUOTABLE

Herbart wrote to members:

“We were pleased to hear Gov. Whitmer’s call for employees to be paid during this closure, and we’re working with school districts and the Legislature to make sure that happens.”

March 13

On this Friday the 13th, school employees in buildings that remained open said goodbye to students not knowing it would be the last in-person day of the school year. No one yet understood that “remote learning” would become the mode of operation through June. Soon, however, educators from every job classification would step up to act as emotional and physical first responders in communities, bridging the divide between the everyday life of before and the new normal of social distancing, home isolation, and economic shutdown in the COVID-19 era. This day—described as strange, sad and surreal by many—started us down the path to where we find ourselves today.



March 14

MEA President Paula Herbart sent a Saturday morning email communication to members to address concerns and outline the union’s immediate priorities.

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) got immediate permission from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for schools to continue providing meals to 750,000 Michigan children who depend on eating breakfast and lunch at school.

March 16

Just a couple of days after Whitmer’s school closure announcement, free meal programs were launched across the state in school districts of all sizes.

READ LATER

The effort to distribute breakfasts and lunches to any household with children under 18 in the 604-square-mile Alpena Public Schools was dubbed “the largest meals on wheels.” In East Lansing, an increasing number of meals went to families at sites across the city without questions of financial need or school of choice, said ELEA president Tim Akers in March. Some families who couldn’t get to a pickup site received home delivery by school employees. Read more at mea.org/serve-through-crisis.



QUOTABLE

“I’ve had them from preschool to middle school, so for a lot of years I get to know the families and watch the children grow. They’re my kids, and I miss them. It’s been wonderful to have them draw pictures and give me cards and write ‘thank you’ in chalk on the ground.”

MEA member Liz Breen (right), a 22-year bus driver in Monroe County’s Jefferson School District, who has been delivering meals across her route and beyond with help from bus aides Sherri Herrera and Tracey Rodey.



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Holt High School biology teacher Lisa Weise helped spark a statewide movement by public educators to equip Michigan’s front line health care workers with protective equipment. Weise’s sister-in-law, a nurse at a metro Detroit hospital, initially asked if Weise’s robotics team could design a face shield to protect those treating infected patients. “As we were talking, it occurred to me another need was for goggles, and I thought, ‘I already have those,’” said Weise, an MEA member and 2004 Michigan Science Teacher of the Year. Weise obtained 100 pairs of goggles from her classroom. Then she started the process of tapping about 600 other First Robotics teams across Michigan to contribute to the cause. Ben Shoemaker, an MEA member and robotics coach in Mason Public Schools, was one of the first to answer the call. Shoemaker, who has access to 3D printers he brought home prior to the statewide closure of school buildings, used the machinery to print face shields for health care workers. “First Robotics is a big problem-solving organization,” the 18-year science and technology teacher said. “It’s an open network for people to communicate, and we always do, so it was natural for people to want to work together and solve problems.”

March 23

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer jumped on a tele-town hall with leaders and members from MEA, AFT Michigan, and AFSCME minutes after announcing her “Stay Home, Stay Safe” order for all Michiganders to remain in their homes except to conduct essential business.

QUOTABLE

Whitmer told members assembled on the call:

“There’s no community that has been greater in its support or more encouraging or stepped up to meet more needs than the education community, and that’s why I wanted to be here to thank you, to share with you the thought process on why these actions are so important now, and just to tell you how much I appreciate you.”

March 31

MEA President Paula Herbart joined a virtual Education Town Hall hosted by state Rep. Darrin Camilleri (D-Brownstown) and Rep. Abdullah Hammoud (D-Dearborn) to continue advocating for school funding, paying all school employees through the end of the school year, granting full retirement credit for the year, waiving seat time and standardized testing requirements, ensuring graduation and advancement of students, altering teacher evaluations, extending certification deadlines and more.

TIMELINE

READ LATER

The global COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the poverty and systemic inequities responsible for achievement gaps in school performance. In many ways, the public health crisis has worsened the problems. In poor and rural regions of the state, the disparity between technology haves and have-nots has complicated the task of providing remote learning for students. Read about remote learning inequities at mea.org/serve-through-crisis/#Commitment.

QUOTABLE

“This epidemic is going to expose the major issues of funding to schools that many have continuously ignored for years.”

MEA member Jessyca Mathews, a Flint-area teacher and social justice activist.



April 2

Whitmer signed an executive order closing schools for the remainder of the year and ensuring all school employees would get paid, plus requiring districts to create remote learning plans in consultation with bargaining units.

QUOTABLE

Following the announcement and press conference, Whitmer immediately joined another tele-town hall with MEA members and leaders, saying:

“I know this is hard, and there’s going to be a lot of questions—what does this look like? How does this work?—but I know that we can navigate this. It’s going to have to be driven by our experts on the front lines, and that’s all of you, and that’s our local leadership.”



April 9

MDE released its “Learning at a Distance Guidelines.” Largely written by the 10 Michigan Regional Teachers of the Year, the guidelines follow five humane and hopeful principles and offer high-quality options and resources for developing a plan for remote instruction under trying conditions. Find the document at tinyurl.com/remoteguidelines.

April 15

“Just did a live STEM session on Zoom with thirty-some third and fourth graders. We explored the pond at my house. Signing off was like having to get in the van to go home on the last morning of summer camp. I didn’t quite realize the depth of how much I’m missing these kids.”

Tweet by MEA member Andy Losik, a teacher in Allegan County’s Hamilton Community Schools, after sparking his elementary students’ enthusiasm with an assignment.

READ NOW

In his first engagement with students under his district’s newly formulated remote learning plan, STEM educator Andy Losik assigned students to find their house on Google Maps and create a drawing of their property. Once complete, the drawings would be used to walk the property to look for and document evidence of wildlife living there. “We met on Zoom. I walked around my property and I showed them my pond, and we looked at different areas where we expect the tadpoles are going to start growing and looking for minnows and things like that,” said Losik, the 2009 Michigan Technology Teacher of the Year. Using technology to encourage students to explore and create taps into natural curiosity, he says. Connect with him on Twitter for ideas and inspiration at [@mrlosik](https://twitter.com/mrlosik).



QUOTABLE

“I don’t think everybody realized before all of the things that we do for students throughout their day. It’s been important to keep students connected with the understanding that all of the people who care about you are still here. Our librarian is here for you. The principal is here for you. The teachers and paras—all of the adults who care for you—we’re all still here; it’s just a little bit different right now. That provides a sense of stability and comfort.”

MEA member Kelly Connell, a paraeducator in a high-needs special education classroom in Lakeview Public Schools in St. Clair Shores.



April 18

MEA’s top three officers, President Paula Herbart, Vice President Chandra Madafferi, and Secretary Treasurer Brett Smith, all won re-election to second three-year terms at MEA’s first-ever virtual Representative Assembly (RA), the annual meeting of MEA’s highest governing body.

QUOTABLE

Normally an all-day affair that determines policy matters for the year, this year’s abbreviated RA continued in August. The April meeting featured special guest Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, who addressed delegates with her thanks and encouragement. Elections matter, MEA President Paula Herbart said in her address:

“I’m pleased we advocated for and got the commitment to continue paying all school employees for the balance of this school year... It’s safe to say the outcome would have been different with Bill Schuette as governor.”



READ NOW

Like some other MEA members, Patrick Lothrop is playing a dual role in the pandemic. He’s a part-time medical technologist at Beaumont Hospital running tests on lab specimens from COVID-19 patients and others, and he’s a full-time educator in Lapeer who teaches middle schoolers in hands-on STEM classes such as Medical Detectives. “There’s been a push in the last couple years to say, ‘We don’t need teachers; we can do this all online,’” he says. “I say no. Kids need human contact, and they want the chance to do science and engineering directly.” *Read the story about Lothrop and other members who straddle the worlds of health and education on page 30.*

May 4

READ NOW

Teachers at Avondale Academy, a 117-student alternative school in the Detroit suburbs, will be replaced by an educational software program after the Avondale Board of Education voted to restructure the school despite opposition. *Read the story on page 25.*



READ LATER

MEA member Ashley Calhoun was worried about the ongoing effects of school closures on students and families in Homer, so she took action in the spirit of Albus Dumbledore—beloved headmaster of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the seven-book Harry Potter series she loves. Dumbledore tells students in Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire: “We are only as strong as we are united, weak as we are divided.” Calhoun—who played Quidditch at Central Michigan University and competed in the 2014 and 2016 Quidditch World Cup—magically turned her front porch into a giving space. Read more at mea.org/harry-potter-inspired-teacher.

TIMELINE

May 5

Following on the heels of major wins for local school funding in March, local elections saw nearly all funding measures pass amid huge absentee voter turnout. Of 36 local school millage and bond votes on the ballot Tuesday, only two lost. The biggest win of the day was the overwhelming renewal of the Kalamazoo regional enhancement millage, continuing an additional \$12.5 million per year for districts in the area.

READ LATER

Through one art project, MEA member Julie Durocher found a way both to alleviate stress for those quarantining at home and to help homeless people who lack a safe place to hunker down amid the global coronavirus pandemic. Durocher lined up visual artists in Jackson County—where she is a professional artist and elementary art teacher—who would contribute original work for a downloadable Quarantine Coloring Book benefiting the Jackson Interfaith Shelter. “It was interesting and fun to see what different artists came up with,” Durocher said. “I’m so happy that people are willing to share and give to make this time better for everyone.” Read the full story at mea.org/art-during-quarantine.



QUOTABLE

As an elementary school speech and language pathologist in South Lyon, MEA member Katie Bell has found creative ways to do individual lessons, large-group interventions, and meetings for Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), while providing comparable materials for families without digital access. It hasn’t been easy, but she said:

“It is really joyous for me sometimes. The kids log on and get everything situated—and remember, these are little kids—and then they see you. And they get a big smile on their face. You have to make it really fun, but they love the interaction, and I’m loving it, too. I get off of there and think, ‘oh my gosh; that was the best part of my week.’”



May 13

NEA President Lily Eskelsen García was joined by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer on a national conference call to action where thousands of NEA members were urged to lobby Congress to send money to states for public education needs.



QUOTABLE

“We want the same consideration that Congress gave to businesses—where they said, ‘We wouldn’t want entire communities of businesses to go under’—we want that same consideration for our public schools.”

NEA President Lily Eskelsen García on the need for Congress to pass a second COVID-19 stimulus package



READ LATER

“It’s been very different; we were part of the decision-making process,” said MEA member Robin Shipkosky, a math professor at Southwestern Michigan College, of union involvement in developing plans for responding to the pandemic. Shipkosky led efforts to organize a faculty union at the college in 2015. *Read more about union work at higher education institutions in Michigan on page 26.*

May 15

State officials estimate huge pandemic-driven shortfalls in next year’s budget without assistance from the federal government—at a time when schools are facing unprecedented challenges.



READ NOW

Morgan Raether teaches secondary English in the UP's Houghton County, but she joined a collaborative effort to bring books to younger kids via radio this spring. "Even though it was more geared toward elementary-aged students, and I teach high school, it's important to do whatever you can for all kids right now as a teacher," she said. Raether recorded the story, *Who Did Patrick's Homework?* on her phone and emailed it to FM 97.7 to air during a daily story-time. The station also archived recordings of educators reading stories from across Copper Country Intermediate School District for a "COVID-19 Kids Page." Raether—who is English department chair and local union vice president (soon-to-be president)—has been teaching for six years and typically uses a lot of technology in her classroom. But getting kids connected with devices and hotspots has been a challenge for her district, and she misses daily interactions with kids that are the best part of teaching. During remote learning, she set up digital "office hours" to tutor students and gauge their wellness for possible referrals to the school psychologist. Being part of a union meant she had a voice in talks about working conditions, Raether said, noting she has an autoimmune disease that makes her susceptible to COVID-19. ***Read about the union's role in advocating for members on page 24.***

May 18

Heavy rains in rural regions north of Midland would eventually lead to the catastrophic collapse of Edenville and Sanford dams—which drained Wixom and Sanford lakes and unleashed a torrent of water on communities downstream. Several dozen MEA members harmed by the 500-year flood event received help from \$20,000 in donations to an MEA relief fund.

May 25

The brutal videotaped police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked nationwide protests. Activists called for all Americans to decry the longstanding disproportionate use of police violence against Black people and other people of color as a means of oppression.

READ NOW

Surreal. Overwhelming. Indescribable. Talk to MEA members in Midland, Saginaw, and surrounding counties, and you'll hear those words used repeatedly to try to convey the effects of a 500-year flood event in May which displaced thousands of people and cut a wide swath of destruction through the huge mid-Michigan river valley. They use those same words again to describe the help that arrived from their union and school families—roving work crews, meal deliveries, donations of supplies. "It's indescribable because you just feel it in your heart," said MEA member Jill Bischer, a speech and language pathologist in Midland schools who evacuated her home of 26 years shortly before floodwaters broke two area dams. "You try to thank people, but words aren't enough. Hugs aren't enough." ***Read the story starting on page 28.***



May 29

Thousands of members attended a virtual MEA [#RedForEd](#) rally, where they heard from U.S. Sen. Gary Peters and State Rep. Sheryl Kennedy about the need for federal help for school funding.

QUOTABLE

Sen. Peters told rallygoers:

"I'm going to be working in a bipartisan way, reaching across the aisle to my colleagues in the Senate to say we need to take action—and we need to move quickly. People need to know there will be resources available to have a strong and vibrant education system as children head back in the fall."

Read more about Peters on page 22.

TIMELINE



READ LATER

Bill Boerman, an MEA member in Holland, started an ambitious greenhouse project last year to teach his middle school students about engineering, design, gardening, and nutrition. Now the project is supplying fresh produce to an area food bank. “I never would have envisioned operating a greenhouse in the middle of a pandemic, but God works in funny ways,” he said. For more of the story, go to mea.org/greenhouse-feeds-community.



June 1

MEA issued a statement of solidarity with Black Lives Matters protesters and all involved in fighting systemic racism.



READ NOW

Educators nationwide and across Michigan joined protests, rallies, book clubs, and webinars to engage with the issue of racial injustice in America—and that is important for students to see, says MEA member Aretha Bradley. As a Black woman, she had been aware of the Black Lives Matter movement for many years, but recent events compelled her to learn more and take action. A speech and language pathologist in Southfield Public Schools, Bradley attended a rally in Flint and connected more deeply with the Black Lives Matter message. “I think we all witnessed what happened in Minnesota, and it has awakened us as humans,” she said. *Read the story beginning on page 17.*



June 3

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer announced a 25-member Return to School Advisory Council of educators and health experts to identify critical issues that must be addressed, inform the process of returning to school, and ensure a smooth and safe transition back to school.

June 4

MEA released a major statewide survey of more than 15,000 member educators—conducted May 14-22—with findings related to COVID-19’s impact on public education. Health and safety remained at front of mind for educators. One-third said COVID-19 has made them think about leaving the profession or retiring earlier than planned, with 8% saying they were doing so.

QUOTABLE

Lansing Waverly’s Barb Knighton—who was named the national Social Studies Teacher of the Year in 2013—was considering her options this summer for retiring earlier than planned.

“It’s not something I want to do,” the MEA member told the Lansing State Journal, “but it’s something I’m considering more than I ever would have imagined I would.”



June 26

MEA laid out detailed priorities for a safe return to learning, informed by member survey data, which included three key priorities that must be fully addressed for a safe return to school—including investments in equipment and technology to keep students, families, and educators safe; increased investments in staffing and supports to ensure attention for mental and physical health; and focus on the greater financial needs in urban, rural, and high-poverty school districts.

June 29

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and legislative leaders announced a deal to address the Fiscal Year 2020 budget shortfall in part by allocating funds from the federal CARES Act sent to Michigan earlier this year. The deal did nothing to close budget shortfalls expected for next year.

June 30

School districts were required to develop a range of plans for returning students to learning opportunities in the fall, based on the COVID-19 threat level that their particular region is facing at a given time, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said in releasing her MI Safe Schools Return to Learning Roadmap.



July 7

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel announced a lawsuit has been filed challenging a rule issued by U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos which rerouted millions of dollars in federal COVID-19 relief money to private schools.

QUOTABLE

AG Nessel told reporters:

“Secretary DeVos has decided to use this public health crisis as another opportunity to advance her personal privatization agenda. Instead of sending relief money to the students most in need as required under the CARES Act, she has abused the Department of Education’s rulemaking power to redirect money to private schools.”

July 10

President Donald Trump tweeted, **“SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!”** and U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos echoed that dangerous and simplistic message, telling governors: **“School[s] must reopen, they must be fully operational.”**

READ LATER

“So what is the union doing for you? What the union always does, which is representing your voice, your communication, your feelings about your own situation and about the kids. We make it a better place for everybody. The union can’t prevent a worldwide pandemic; let’s get real. But what the union can do is help us through it, and we certainly have been doing that on overdrive since March 13, when we had about seven hours to pack up everything and leave the school.”

Dave Gott, president of the local union in Haslett and a 24-year educator and band director. Read the full story of how the union has worked to lift educator voices in planning for a safe return to learning at mea.org/safety-at-forefront.



July 26

As local leaders worked with districts to negotiate a safe start to the school year, the MEA Board of Directors approved a document outlining **MEA’s Five Standards That Must be Met for a Safe Return to School**. In part the document states that MEA believes the “strongly recommended” practices for Phase 4 in the MI Safe Schools Roadmap must be in place.

QUOTABLE

MEA President Paula Herbart:

“If—after going through proper channels within our union—a local makes the difficult decision to withhold services because it isn’t safe to return, MEA will be there with those members, demanding that employers make the health and safety of our students and our members the top priority.”