

MEA • voice

MESSA INSERT

Pages 15-18

BIG LEGISLATIVE WINS

Page 10



It's a New Day

**NEW MEA LEADERSHIP
BRINGS FRESH VISION
TO PROFESSION**

Letter to Members: It's a New Day

As your new MEA officers, we are proud to represent Michigan's educators, as we work together to continue to advocate for the educational tools all students need and the professional support all school employees deserve.

And now more than ever, we believe that our hard work and dedication over the past ten years has been successful as many of the harmful laws that were passed against educators have been overturned.

Our combined strength and our common belief in the power and passion of public education has made a difference for our students and our profession and for this we are proud!

Across the state we have seen wages increased and salary schedules restored. We have seen class sizes lowered and free breakfast and lunch programs expanded. We are seeing your hard work pay off as our members advocate for the resources that our students need to be excited and joyful learners.

And even though in many places the gains are great, we also know there are many challenges that lie ahead. We need to encourage more young people to go into education and revitalize our profession so we are able to proactively fill vacancies with people who value public education and make

us less vulnerable to outsourcing or voucher programs.

Together we will create an environment where every student and educator feels safe and supported so they can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally in an interdependent world.

We are excited about the future and know that together this year will be an amazing year filled with hope and rejuvenation. Your hard work has made a difference and we all will continue to work toward a common goal of providing a quality public education regardless of where a child lives as we believe it is the backbone of our democracy and essential to a strong economy.

MEA is committed to continue to advocate for our members as your working conditions are our students' learning conditions. Thank you for your hard work and dedication to our members and students. Thank you for choosing to be a part of this great union and a part of this period filled with hope and excitement for the future!

In Solidarity Always,

Chandra Madafferi, MEA President

Brett Smith, Vice President

Aaron Eling, Secretary-Treasurer

395

The number of a Senate Bill, introduced by former high school English teacher Sen. Dayna Polehanki (D-Livonia), to amend Michigan's teacher evaluation system. SB 395 is expected to get a hearing after the Legislature's summer recess, so stay tuned and be sure you've signed up to receive MEA's Capitol Comments newsletter at mea.org/signup.



2023 MEA Scholarship

The recipients of the 2023 MEA Scholarships were announced in June, with 42 exemplary public school students from across the state receiving awards to attend a Michigan public university this fall. Among the 422 applications submitted for scholarship awards this year, the MEA Scholarship Fund Trustees chose 23 new award recipients who will each receive \$1,400. In addition, 19 repeat winners who are already enrolled in college will receive \$700 each. Since 1997, the MEA Scholarship Fund has awarded over 800 scholarships totaling \$912,890 to graduates of Michigan public high schools. Go to mea.org/2023-mea-scholarships-awarded for more information.



MEA members worked in coalition with other labor unions throughout the spring and early summer to secure a big win with the passage of bills restoring educators' workplace rights which were taken away 12 years ago, page 10.

For more indepth story coverage with links and additional photos, visit mea.org/voice



20

On the cover: MEA's new officers — President Chandra Madafferri, Vice President Brett Smith, and Secretary-Treasurer Aaron Eling — with the MEA Board of Directors, page 8.

More bargaining wins, page 20.

Brunner award winner, page 26.

Impactful professor retires, page 28.

More inside: Aspiring + new educators, page 5. Paraeducators speak, page 14. MEA awards, page 19. Rochester hearing, page 23. Librarian honored, page 24. SVSU design prof, page 30.



26



28

MEA • VOICE

Interim Executive Director Earl Wiman
 Director of Public Affairs Doug Pratt
 Editor Brenda Ortega
 Staff Photographer Miriam Garcia
 Publications Specialist Shantell Crispin

The *MEA Voice* ISSN 1077-4564 is an official publication of the Michigan Education Association, 1216 Kendale Blvd., East Lansing, MI 48823. Opinions stated in the *MEA Voice* do not necessarily reflect the official position of the MEA unless so identified. Published by Michigan Education Association, Box 2573, East Lansing, MI 48826-2573. Periodicals postage paid at East Lansing and additional mailing offices. Payment of the active membership fee entitles a member to receive the *MEA Voice*. Of each annual fee whether for active or affiliate membership, \$12.93 is for a year's subscription. Frequency of issue is October, December, February, April and August.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to the *MEA Voice*, Box 2573, East Lansing, MI 48826-2573 or via email at webmaster@mea.org. Allow at least three weeks for change of address to take effect.

MEA Voice telephone: 517-332-6551 or 800-292-1934. Circulation this issue: 110,293.

ABOVE AND BEYOND



In a powerful speech at the MEA Summer Conference in July, Michigan House Speaker Joe Tate (D-Detroit) reflected on his own personal story — as the son of a teacher and a firefighter who died in the line of duty — to convey the importance of the education profession for students. “I wouldn’t be here if not for educators, especially my mom,” Tate said. “My dad would always say, ‘If something happens to me, make sure my kids get an education.’ It was powerful, especially in this role now. The noble work you all do means something. You drive our society.” As House Speaker, as an MSU football player and a Marine, Tate’s common thread remains that, “No person is an island — we don’t do this work by ourselves.” He added, “We’ve seen it in our society — how we’re interlinked and tied together. Know that you all have friends in Lansing — we aren’t islands, we are all on the same team and we’re all working towards the same goal.” Read more about the Summer Conference at mea.org/summer-conference-wrap-2023.



QUOTABLES

“I hope I can be like Miss Churches and follow my dreams.”

Ava, a fifth grader from the classroom of educator-turned-state-Rep. Jaime Churches, who visited the Michigan Capitol with her classmates at the end of last school year to see her former teacher working in her new role. Read the story at mea.org/students-visit-former-teacher.

ICYMI



Last spring Gov. Gretchen Whitmer signed landmark legislation affecting two important arenas: LGBTQ rights and gun safety. In the wake of deadly school shootings in Oxford and at Michigan State University, Whitmer signed into law broadly popular measures to require universal background checks for firearm purchases, mandate safe storage of firearms, and keep guns away from people deemed a risk to themselves or others. MEA’s Protect Our Schools Action Team continues its work of advocating for schools that are safe from gun violence. Go to mea.org/gunsafety for information. Earlier in the spring, Whitmer’s signature expanded the Elliot Larsen Civil Rights Act to protect LGBTQ+ people from discrimination in housing, employment, and education. This key law now enshrines an earlier Michigan Supreme Court decision to ensure students and educators do not face discrimination based on who they are and who they love — an essential change given divisive political rhetoric and laws aimed at the LGBTQ+ community.

On page 10, read about new laws restoring educators’ workplace rights signed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in July following months of advocacy by MEA and a coalition of labor unions.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

Program pairing retirees with student teachers is expanding

In the union, we often say that we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. Student teachers are no different. Retired MEA members (MEA-Retired) have partnered with Aspiring Educators of Michigan (AEM) and serve as mentors to AEM members who are undergoing the rigors of student teaching.

Any AEM member who is student teaching in a public school can access this great benefit. MEA-Retired members are matched by teaching discipline with student teachers to offer guidance in classroom management, instructional strategies, lesson planning, and even emotional support.

MEA-Retired mentors meet with student teachers in whatever way works best for the student teachers: phone, text, email, Zoom, etc.

“My mentor was helpful with questions that I did not want to ask my classroom teacher and always gave me good suggestions on so many things,” said Jay Fernelius, an Eastern Michigan University graduate who student taught at Elk Rapids High School and now teaches art in Alaska.

AEM member Inga Kamis, who student taught at both Morgan Elementary in Utica Community Schools and Pierce Middle School in Grosse Pointe Public Schools, said her mentor was wonderful and she would recommend the program to any student teacher.

“It was easy to communicate with my mentor usually through phone calls but also emails and some texts,” said Kamis, a Wayne State University graduate who is now beginning her first year teaching art at Lake Shore

High School. “I was able to test ideas with him before presenting to a class full of students. He had lots of very useful suggestions and help in dealing with challenging students.”

The program benefits both the mentor and mentee, said Mike Gillis, who mentored Fernelius and Kamis. A 32-year veteran of Troy Public Schools, Gillis joined the East Oakland County Chapter of MEA-Retired when he retired in 2009 and began mentoring in 2017.

“I really enjoy the ongoing personal connection to educators in the fine arts,” Gillis said. “Two of my most recent art mentees have gone on to be hired as full-time art teachers! I feel I made a positive difference.”

The mentoring committee, chaired by retired Waterford teacher Peg Schroder, each semester pairs mentors with mentees. While some MEA-Retired mentors aren't interested in serving every semester, others are disappointed if they are not paired with a student teacher, Schroder says.

“We are working to grow the program to engage more AEM members



and more MEA-Retired mentors and continue to support the professional excellence of all of our members,” Schroder said.

Any retired MEA member wishing to become a mentor should contact Lisa Fox at lfox@mea.org or call Fox at MEA 517-333-6264. ▼



Use this QR code to get a mentor for your student teaching.



Use this QR code to join AEM or renew your membership.



Connect with AEM:
[instagram.com/aspiringedofmichigan](https://www.instagram.com/aspiringedofmichigan)
twitter.com/AspiringEdOfMI
[facebook.com/aspiringedofmichigan](https://www.facebook.com/aspiringedofmichigan)



Connect with MiNE:
[instagram.com/mineweducators](https://www.instagram.com/mineweducators)
twitter.com/mineweducators
[facebook.com/mineweducators](https://www.facebook.com/mineweducators)
[soundcloud](https://www.soundcloud.com/mineweducators)

Supplemental plans provide peace of mind in fight against cancer

When it was time for Patricia Blevins to renew her Essentials by MESSA health plan, she pored over all her options and came across something intriguing and new: MESSA's supplemental plans.

"I signed up for it because it was a really good deal," said Blevins, a pre-school teacher for more than 40 years at Perry Early Learning Center in Ypsilanti Community Schools. "I just saw that it was a new benefit that was being offered and I thought well, maybe this is something worth doing, not thinking in a million years I was going to be using it."

To help provide financial relief during tough times, MESSA offers supplemental accident, critical illness and hospital indemnity plans to complement MESSA's medical coverage. The supplemental plans pay out cash benefits to members for covered illnesses or injuries. Members can choose one plan or bundle all three for the ultimate protection.

Blevins signed up for all three plans, despite her good health at the time.

Well, fast forward about a year and the unexpected happened: Blevins, 62, was diagnosed with cancer. After her diagnosis, Blevins called MESSA to explore her options. Her physician wasn't very experienced in her treatment, and she knew that Mayo Clinic had providers with expertise in her exact procedure. She asked about receiving treatment at Mayo Clinic and found out that it's an in-network facility. In less than a week, she was in Rochester, Minn., going through a series of evaluations and focused on getting healthy. She spent 10 days at Mayo Clinic after her initial surgery.

After several tests, treatments, surgeries and hospital stays, medical bills and other personal expenses stacked up quickly. Blevins found herself in need of a financial safety net.

While her MESSA health plan covered 80% of her medical bills, additional medical cost along with airfare, hotel and food expenses began to add up. That's where the supplemental plan kicked in, paying her \$10,000 from her critical illness plan



and about \$2,000 from the hospital indemnity plan. It was money back in her pocket when she needed it most to help offset her expenses.

"That was a major godsend for me," Blevins said. "I could focus on getting treatment instead of worrying about how I'm possibly going to pay for any of this. When I signed up for it, I had no idea I had any health issues to address."

The last thing anyone wants to worry about when they're fighting for their life is how to cover all the extra expenses. Blevins said MESSA's supplemental plans gave her the peace of mind she needed on her journey to recovery. She said she has spoken to her union about her experience with the supplemental plans.

"I don't think there's an insurance that can beat MESSA because MESSA really cares about their members," Blevins said. "Whenever I needed a place to go for resources, MESSA was really good about it. I appreciate that MESSA had this available for their members." ▼

How to get MESSA's supplemental benefits:

- **Negotiated supplemental benefits:** Your bargaining unit can negotiate with your employer to provide all employees in your group with an employer-paid bundle consisting of accident, critical illness and hospital indemnity coverage. This can be a particularly attractive option for groups with higher-deductible medical plans.
- **Optional supplemental benefits:** If your employer provides MESSA's optional benefits, you can choose from an accident plan, a critical illness plan, a hospital indemnity plan, or a bundle of all three and pay via payroll deduction.

To learn more visit messa.org/supplemental or call your MESSA field representative at 800-292-4910.



New MEA officers promise hopeful change: ‘We need to find joy again’

By **Brenda Ortega**
MEA Voice Editor

As **Chandra Madafferi** begins her tenure as president of MEA, anyone wondering what she will prioritize in the new role can look to her stewardship of the Local Presidents’ Academy (LPA) to understand what she values most in leadership.

Systems thinking. Empathic listening. Transformative change.

A longtime teacher and union leader in Novi Community Schools, Madafferi served as MEA vice president for six years, beginning in 2017, until delegates to the MEA Representative Assembly (RA) elected her to the highest office in April.

She assumed her new three-year post in July, alongside running mate Brett Smith as vice president — a Linden teacher who formerly served as secretary-treasurer — and Grand Haven teacher Aaron Eling as secretary-treasurer.

With responsibility for the long-running LPA as vice president, Madafferi revamped it into a dynamic three-year program offering inspiration, training, resources and support for newly elected and longtime leaders alike who want to become the best version of themselves.

“Working with amazing people, we focused not just on the tasks involved with being local president, but we focused on leadership and culture change and systems change,” Madafferi said in an interview after her election.

“We divided it up; on one side, we focused on teaching those tasks every president needs to know. On the next side, we talked about *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. We talked about why people do things, reflected on how systems operate. We asked: How do we build relationships? How can we be proactive?”

Each year a new cohort of leaders embark on the Presidents’ Academy journey together, undertaking book studies, training sessions, engagement activities, roundtable discussions, and networking — all of which are embedded within the MEA Summer and Winter conferences. Travel expenses are included.

Those who complete the academy routinely need no prompting to tout its powerful influence in their lives. Participants are often unreserved in their praise — for one example, Nikki Clear, whose story is on page 26 of this issue.

A bus driver in Stockbridge Community Schools for four years, Clear became president of her support staff unit just more than one year ago and accomplished so much that by June she received one of MEA’s top honors: the Leon A. Brunner Award.

“The Presidents’ Academy is what set everything off,” Clear said. “It’s just been a wealth of information and networking and connecting. I learned why the union needs to be a united family and what we do for each other and how, being united, we can get things done.”

Clear’s LPA mentor, Gypsia Flath — starting her fifth year as president of the paraeducators union in Escanaba



Chandra Madafferi

— is one of many academy graduates who return to guide others coming up.

The program “gives those that are new leaders the confidence, knowledge and connections to make some real positive actions in our buildings, schools, and community,” Flath said. “Quite frankly I wouldn’t have ever been in the position to mentor Nikki had I not been in the academy myself.”

In her speech delivered before the RA vote in April, Madafferi announced her intention to extend the Presidents’ Academy to all interested local elected leaders — not only presidents — as part of her goal for local units to “build their bench” by nurturing new talent and greater involvement.

“In this role I have been challenging our leaders to improve negative



MEA President Chandra Madafferi delivers a message of hope to members at the MEA Summer Conference.

culture, stand up to bullies, build relationships and inspire others to become members of our amazing union,” she said in her remarks, adding later: “Strong locals are the lifeblood of a strong MEA.”

Madafferi’s campaign for president focused on her pledge to rebuild the profession through bargaining better wages and working conditions for all public school employees and delivering top-quality professional development to MEA members.

“The union bargains wages and benefits so people choose to go into education, and once they’re in the door the MEA is growing services that will support them from aspiring to retiring,” Madafferi said in an interview.

She pointed to her work over the past five years in developing a new department — MEA’s Center for Leadership & Learning (CLL) — as a template for future growth.

Under her leadership, the CLL expanded services to aspiring educators through a rebranded Aspiring Educators of Michigan (AEM) and

created Michigan New Educators (MiNE) — a networking and services hub for early career educators.

Created in 2018, the Center was uniquely positioned to deliver much-needed resources when the pandemic struck and educators had no time to plan how to shift instruction to accommodate virtual learning.

A series of high-quality peer-to-peer webinars were assembled quickly, featuring MEA member-experts in education technology and online learning. The timely CLL trainings helped thousands of Michigan educators — and tens of thousands across the U.S. in a partnership with NEA — pivot effectively in a hurry.

That model — of union members who are teacher-leaders supporting other union members with fresh, relevant, tested professional development — will grow under Madafferi’s leadership, she says. In addition, MEA staff-led trainings, book studies and roundtable discussions will continue.

And another CLL model developed in the last several years will continue

to expand, which gives MEA members access to learning and best practices through partnerships with universities and other education organizations.

“The increase in professional development through partnerships with universities and education associations — in addition to those with our staff — has improved member engagement and given our members another direct benefit of belonging,” Madafferi said.

“It fills a vital role for both MEA and our members: We need to be leaders in education innovation, as we prepare our students for a technological world and jobs that have not yet been invented.”

That sentiment lies at the center of Madafferi’s vision for the future. Her overarching commitment is to rebuild the education professions to strengthen public education and position MEA as a leader in the field.

“As educators we need to find joy in our hearts again, so when kids say they want to be an educator you will say, ‘You’d be great,’ instead of talking them out of it,” Madafferi said in her victory speech after the election. “We are going to raise up a new generation of educators in this state.”

Madafferi first joined MEA as a student at Central Michigan University and was prompted to run for local president in Novi when the so-called “Right-to-Work” bill was jammed through the Legislature and signed into law by then-Gov. Rick Snyder in 2012.

“I stood on the Capitol lawn with many of you and thousands of our union brothers and sisters demanding our elected leaders protect the rights to organize and collectively bargain,” Madafferi said to RA delegates in April. “I wrestled with unfair evaluations based on student data and bargained contracts under these

laws. Like you, I never stopped fighting for our profession and students.”

Last month, in her first speech as president before members at the MEA Summer Conference, Madaffer offered hope after those years of struggle when bargaining rights were taken away and educators faced pay cuts and freezes, along with a punitive and unfair new teacher evaluation system.

MEA members didn’t give up — they dug in and did the work of organizing and advocating, she told the crowd at Saginaw Valley State University. “We held each other’s hands — we had to think it would get better — because we loved our profession and we were going to fight for it. And what did we do? We elected friends of public education, from the top to the bottom!”

The new majority in the Legislature is passing important new legislation — such as a package of bills restoring educators’ right to bargain over placement, discipline, evaluation and the privatization of services (related story on page 10) — so it is time to celebrate, rejuvenate, and get to work, she said.

Praising another in a string of historic state education budgets signed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in July — which delivers record per-pupil funding, additional spending for special education and at-risk students, money for student mental health services, plus free breakfast and lunch for every student — Madaffer promised to be “your public school ambassador, pushing, encouraging and cheering,” because “it is our job to reignite the next generation of educators,” she added.

Looking forward, she wants to improve diversity in the state’s teaching ranks by assisting students of color and those from under-represented groups to find pathways into education careers, and she plans

to continue the work of improving equity and opportunity for every child in the state.

Along with nurturing relationships with allies and elected officials who support public education, she and newly seated MEA Vice President Brett Smith promised to make de-privatization of support staff positions a priority in their administration.

Smith said in his election speech last April, “I really caught the union bug when, among other things, Linden privatized the bus drivers and custodians. Those members were the backbone of the community. Bus drivers and custodians helped raise my children and the students I worked with every day.”

In addition, Smith said in an interview, he plans to be a voice for members and share their stories with lawmakers in Lansing and Washington, D.C. “Educators want to feel valued for their expertise and what they bring to the job, and for too long they’ve had others — outside of the profession — defining who they are and what they should be doing,” Smith said.

For his part, new Secretary-Treasurer Aaron Eling will focus on delivering more resources to differentiate trainings on the local treasurers’ role, organize and engage members, and increase professional development — especially new educator and future educator programming.

“As a professional labor organization it is crucial that we evolve to meet the changing needs of our members,” Eling said.

For Madaffer, that kind of responsive leadership requires working in the trenches alongside members, leaders and staff.

“With a social justice heart, a business and service mindset, along with the strength of our union as our shield, I will continue to keep our



Brett Smith



Aaron Eling

association and profession powerful and influential for generations to come,” she said. ▼

Read a related story — about MEA President Chandra Madaffer’s work to lift the voices of Michigan’s paraeducators — on page 14.



State lawmakers restore

Back in 2015, state Rep. Matt Koleszar (D-Plymouth) was a teacher and union leader in Airport Community Schools feeling the strain of a salary freeze and paying out of pocket for increased health care premiums when the district's contract with teachers expired without agreement on a new one.

The financial hit strained his resources — and his patience. It was the moment he first thought of running for state office.

Clearly a law passed in 2011 by the GOP-controlled Legislature and signed by Gov. Rick Snyder punished only one party to school contract negotiations and tilted the bargaining table in favor of school administrators.

“For a dozen years now, school employees have felt the pressure to either settle a contract or bear that burden of wage and salary freezes while paying health care increases until a successor agreement is reached,” Koleszar said. “It was a punitive law that advantaged one side, and it needed to go.”

Now Koleszar is celebrating the reversal of that unfair law — alongside other historic changes — from his current vantage point as chair of the House Education Committee, and “It is truly a surreal moment for me,” he said.

In a long-sought win for Michigan's school employees, the state Legislature passed a package of bills restoring workplace rights to educators, which MEA members fought hard to advance via emails and phone calls to lawmakers, testimony before House and Senate Labor committees, and several in-person lobby days at the Capitol.

The labor rights package — signed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer — included **House Bill 4044**, sponsored by Koleszar, eliminating penalties on public school employees when a contract expires.

It also features **HB 4354** — sponsored by another former educator, Rep. Regina Weiss (D-Oak Park) — eliminating prohibited subjects of bargaining which were enacted to silence educator voice on topics ranging from teacher placement, layoff and recall, evaluation, and discipline.

HB 4356 — sponsored by Rep. Brenda Carter (D-Pontiac) — restores the right to bargain over privatization of support staff, and **HB 4233** — sponsored by former MEA member Rep. Jaime Churches (D-Grosse Ile) — allows union members to bargain to have dues deducted from paychecks.

First elected in 2018, Koleszar won again last fall when Democrats took control with slim majorities in both chambers for the first time in 40 years. He and another former classroom teacher, Sen. Dayna Polehanki (D-Livonia), now chair the House and Senate Education committees respectively.

Polehanki tweeted after the Senate's evening vote: “Hey Michigan Teachers! Some of you remember the Pre-Snyder years when you could: *Have your union dues deducted from your paycheck/ *Negotiate your contracts without having your wages and benefits frozen/ *Collectively bargain without ‘prohibited subjects’

“The new #MajorityForThePeople just gave it all back to you. Have a relaxing summer!” ♡

‘It really was collective bargaining that helped get us to this point.’

Watching elected leaders listen and respond to concerns of school employees by restoring their workplace rights is extremely satisfying following so many years of attacks on public education, said Rick Meeth, president of the Bay City Education Association.

After testifying before both the House and Senate Labor committees and returning two more times to participate in union lobby days at the Capitol, Meeth said he felt “relief” at hearing the package of bills had passed the Senate on the final day of session, June 28, after getting House approval earlier in June.

“I’ve seen the impact that the 2012 repeal of collective bargaining rights has had on my membership, the devastating effect it has had on teachers, and how the resulting educator



Rick Meeth

re school employees' workplace rights

Stories by Brenda Ortega and Zach Crim, MEA Public Affairs

ective action that is huge win'

shortage has impacted kids — our students,” Meeth said. “I always say what’s best for kids is what’s best for teachers, because teachers are what’s best for kids.”

He has seen support staff harmed most by the law penalizing employees for an expired contract, Meeth added, because they are least able to shoulder the costs.

Combined with a prohibition on bargaining over privatization, the threat of financial penalties for an expired contract often forced support staff units to settle undesirable contracts, creating hardship for individuals and making it difficult to attract and retain employees.

“I am extremely proud to be a member of organized labor in the state of Michigan,” Meeth said, “not only MEA but the trades, UAW, SEIU. All of the unions worked together on this. We had tremendous support from AFL-CIO, tremendous support from UAW, and we had the expertise of MEA staff that worked around the clock to get these bills over the finish line.”

MEA member Angela Chen persisted in lobbying for the bills on multiple fronts over many weeks, contacting lawmakers, participating in an in-person lobby day, writing



MEA member Angela Chen (right) speaks with state reps. Natalie Price (D-Berkley) and Regina Weiss (D-Oak Park) at a union lobby day.

thank you cards, and encouraging education friends and colleagues to get involved from Hamtramck where she lives and Waterford where she works.

“It really was collective action on all of our members’ parts that helped get us to this huge win,” said Chen, who started her career working at a charter school where it was a “constant battle” to get the support and supplies she needed and to prevent more extra duties from being added to her workload.

Chen said the once-prohibited subject she now looks forward to local union leaders being able to bargain is teacher evaluation, because the current system is senseless and unfair.

“The fact that we can now advocate to be evaluated fairly is a huge thing for me,” Chen said. “I’m an art teacher, and this past year 40% of

my evaluation was based off of an [English Language Arts] score for my whole school, rather than what I teach and what I have my license in.”

The win makes her feel hopeful about the future, she said. “I feel like we can accomplish so much more and we can make public education the undeniable right that it is and have the opportunity to provide quality education for all students,” she said.

Going forward, it’s important for MEA members and others who value public education to stay engaged, she added.

“It’s important to engage in discourse and stay in contact with your lawmakers so they can hear your voice, and it’s also important to go out and vote, because this wouldn’t have happened if we didn’t elect these lawmakers into the positions they’re in now.” ▼

MEA members on why they lobby

Five years ago when Nadia Rodriguez took a teaching job in Flint Community Schools, she knew world-changing history — the Flint Sit-Down Strike of 1936-7 — had played out on hallowed ground across the street from her K-3 Montessori classroom at Durant Tuuri Mott Elementary.

A Flint native who grew up in the city’s public schools, Rodriguez immediately joined her local union after having spent the first several



I came because they’re outsourcing all of our jobs as custodial and maintenance. And not only are our buildings suffering, but so are the kids and staff members because the buildings aren’t being maintained or cleaned properly. There is no sense of pride in the work, especially on the outsourced company’s part. I want to see the bill passed that gives us a say when they want to replace us with contractors.

**Brad Besser, maintenance
Davison Community Schools**

years of her career at a non-union private school where teachers were loaded with unpaid extra duties and she saw an aide get fired after becoming pregnant.

But Rodriguez was soon dismayed to learn collective bargaining rights that decades ago so many risked everything to fight for had been stripped away from educators in Michigan under former Gov. Rick Snyder and unified Republican control of the Legislature in 2011-12.

“Growing up in Flint, we know this history, so to work in a building where we can look out the windows and it’s literally overlooking Chevy in the Hole — home of the original sit-down strike — and we don’t have these rights anymore? It’s a hard pill to swallow,” Rodriguez said.

In May, Rodriguez was among more than 100 union members and leaders from a broad coalition of labor organizations who traveled to the Capitol to join forces in lobbying lawmakers to pass a package of bills restoring educators’ workplace rights. More multi-union lobby days followed.

“I’m here fighting for change because we shouldn’t constantly be asked to do more with less, whether it be the resources we need to teach or the paycheck we need to pay bills and put food on the table.”

The bills, which eventually passed the Legislature and were signed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer this summer, bring back bargaining rights first granted in 1964 under PERA, the Public Employment Relations



Nothing good in education has ever been done without the initiative and support of teachers. And yet for a time now teachers have been framed as the enemies of public education. Of course the exact opposite is true.

To have prohibited topics that can’t be discussed in bargaining is a real infringement on basic rights — basic rights to free speech, basic rights to collective bargaining. To say there are things we can’t talk about with administration is really damaging and it’s put us in a spot where teachers are leaving the profession.

The very people who stand in the best position to improve education in this state have been silenced. And we have to fix that.

**Mark Pontoni, teacher
East Lansing Public Schools**

Act which guaranteed public employees’ rights to organize and collectively bargain.

“I attended the (MEA) Winter Conference in Detroit this year, and it really hit home that the Legislature

ed for change

‘This is the way we can make change for our students’



**Nadia Rodriguez, teacher
Flint Community Schools**

is where you make policy and this is really the only way we can make actual change for our students,” she said.

Since joining the union, Rodriguez has become the local PAC chair, keeping members informed in the political realm, conducting fundraisers for the Political Action Committee fund (since dues dollars can’t be used for political purposes), and helping to screen and recommend local candidates for office.

Rodriguez’s mother worked for many years as a school social worker in Flint, but now social worker positions are privatized and online there. And despite her teaching experience, the divorced mother of two has remained frozen on the first step of her district’s salary schedule — making less than \$40,000 per year.

Rodriguez could leave Flint and make thousands more dollars per year working elsewhere, but she doesn’t want to leave behind the children and community she loves.

She wants to give her students the kind of wonderful school experience she had growing up in Flint. And with

new leadership in Lansing making important changes and investments to rebuild public education, she sees an opportunity for such positive change to happen.

“I love kids, I love learning, and I owe a lot of my passion and drive

to the educators I had growing up,” she said. “I want these kids to have that passion. I want them to know we’re not just doing this because you have to — it’s because the more you know, the more access you have to the world.” ▼



In the district where I work, we have a lot of brand new teachers who are interviewing for specific positions, and then they’re being placed in different positions. And sometimes the timing of that means they don’t have an option to look elsewhere, or they already signed a contract so they feel obligated to stay even though that is not what they intended to do for that school year.

Right now, the local association has no ability to discuss that at all, and they should be able to. Each local district should be able to bargain over how teacher placement should work. That local control piece is really important, and I think that every district bargaining team and local association bargaining team can determine what’s going to work for their students, for their families, for their employees, and for their buildings.

**Wendy Winston, teacher
Grand Rapids Public Schools**

Special ed paraeducators share challenges and needs

MEA member Darrin Watkins has been a paraeducator in Pontiac for longer than he can remember — somewhere around 30 years — and he has a few ideas about how special education could be restructured and resourced to improve services and keep people in the field.

Watkins was among 30 special education paras from across the state who participated in a summer focus group led by MEA President Chandra Madafferi as part of her work on the Optimise Task Force — a statewide group organized by the Michigan Department of Education to address special education staffing shortages and improve the talent pipeline.

At the meeting — held at MEA headquarters in East Lansing as part of the ESP Statewide Conference in June — Watkins and a small group of colleagues had identified challenges they faced and needs they experienced on the job, and he was reporting out their conclusions.

“So I’ve broken our answers down to five categories, and the top one for my group was money, money, money, more money, and more money,” he said. “The next one is training, mentorship and more education. We need [professional development] that is specific for paras.

“I know in my district we’ll have 20 paras sitting in a PD that has nothing to do with paraeducators or special education, and that’s just a slap in the face,” Watkins said.

The focus group was one of several that Madafferi is conducting alongside Dr. Peggy Yates, an associate professor and director of Special



Darrin Watkins of Pontiac, left, and Amber White of Reed City discuss what paraeducators need to be successful and stay in the job.

Education Preparation at Alma College. The two will present their findings to the larger task force later this year.

In discussions during the four-hour session, participants consistently identified low pay, lack of training, no preparation time, and little understanding of the importance of their role as challenges that lead to high turnover in the profession.

In addition, they said, paras are excluded from meetings and other communications about students or even from knowing about students’ Individualized Education Plans, which detail mandated accommodations.

“Treat our job as a career,” said Amber White, a paraeducator in Reed City and vice president of her local union. “I’m in my tenth year; I subbed for two years before that. I have no desire to go into the teaching field — I want to stay a para. But I want to be respected as that para.”

Training is needed to teach paraeducators not only how to better care for and educate students with special needs but also how to de-escalate behaviors among students with trauma in their backgrounds or emotional impairments to avoid injuries in the classroom, the participants said.

“Just like in nursing,” Madafferi summarized, “where the RN nurse works closely with the LPN nurse and they rely on each other — our teachers and paraeducators work closely together, and they each need the pay and training and respect they receive to reflect that. We need to think of our profession as a whole.”

The Optimise Task Force, made up of representatives from numerous education stakeholder groups, is expected next year to recommend rule changes and legislative remedies among other proposals in a multi-year action plan to attract, prepare, and retain qualified personnel for children with disabilities. **▼**



You have questions, MESSA has answers



This is Sam.

Sam found a suspicious spot on his cheek and wants to get it checked by a dermatologist, but he has no idea how to find one. It's hard to find time during the day to call MESSA for help, so Sam opens his MESSA app and connects with a member service specialist using MESSA's live chat.

The member service specialist responds to Sam right away and tells him he can visit messa.org/FindCare to find options for an in-network dermatologist. Sam loves this because he can browse providers and look up reviews.



This is Jennifer.

Jennifer recently had some bloodwork done to make sure her thyroid is doing its job. When Jennifer checks her explanation of benefits, she notices a charge for the labs. However, when she had similar blood work done six months ago, her insurance fully covered the costs. She calls the MESSA Member Service Center at 1-800-336-0013 for an explanation.

The member service specialist explains that Jennifer's recent blood work was ordered to help her doctor diagnose her condition and that's why she had to pay an out-of-pocket expense. However, the blood work six months ago was preventive, so that was fully covered.



This is Carrie.

Her son's pediatrician suggested that Carrie have him evaluated for autism. She does not know where to start or what her insurance will cover. She logs into her MyMESSA account and sends a secure message with lots of questions, ranging from "How do I find an evaluation center?" to "What does my MESSA plan cover?"

A MESSA member service specialist responds with detailed information to Carrie's message. The specialist provides a list of approved autism evaluation centers to help Carrie move in the right direction and lets her know what her plan covers. Carrie is relieved that she got what she needs to get her son the right care.

**In whatever way you need it, we're happy to help.
MESSA is here for you:**

Member Service Center: 800-336-0013 MESSA field representatives: 800-292-4910

The people and stories in this ad are fictional. They are used to describe situations and solutions for MESSA members.



The MESSA. Difference:

By and for educators

- MESSA provides our members with the greatest choice of doctors and access to expert medical care from the best hospitals, including the University of Michigan Health System, Mayo Clinic and Cleveland Clinic.
- As a nonprofit, all of our members' funds are used to pay medical bills and administer benefits. Not a penny goes to shareholder profits, CEO bonuses or insurance agent commissions.
- MESSA is driving innovation and is providing education employees with more affordable options.
- MESSA benefit packages are flexible and offer options to meet the needs of each employee group.
- MESSA's local field representatives provide personal service to members and employers. Field representatives can consult with groups during the collective bargaining process, speak to employee groups and provide detailed analysis to help members make the best choices.



“When I was diagnosed with a rare blood cancer last year, my family and I felt very overwhelmed. Our MESSA case manager helped us navigate the complexities of the health care system to ensure that I received the very best care. When you are experiencing a serious illness, it makes all the difference that you don't have to worry whether your treatments will be covered. MESSA gave us peace of mind and let us focus on healing.”

— **Eric Whitney, deputy superintendent for talent development and management, West Bloomfield School District**

Interested in getting MESSA for your district? Call your local MESSA field representative at 800-292-4910.

*MESSA health plans are underwritten by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan and 4Ever Life.



We've got your back

“For me, MESSA is peace of mind when we travel. A real person is on the phone when I have questions.



Outstanding coverage.

No-hassle care for my kids who are away at college. MESSA takes care of the people who matter most to me — my family. Not stressing about my health insurance helps me put my energy into my work with kids, my relationships and my community — MESSA makes that possible.”

— **Lesley Addison,**
guidance counselor,
Marquette Area Public Schools

“I want to give a big shout out to Member Services, who not only quickly obtained a prior authorization for my



son's prescription, but then

called the pharmacy to push it through so he did not have to call his physician for a new prescription. It was another awesome encounter with Member Services.”

— **Meli Zikakis,** office assistant,
Birmingham Public Schools



“MESSA matters to me because MESSA is family. I can count on MESSA field reps to answer my questions, calm my fears, explain things and allow my fellow teachers and I the peace of mind in knowing we are in competent and caring hands. Every interaction I have ever had with MESSA has been impressive!”

— **Carrie Ledet,** musical instructor,
West Ottawa Middle School

support through some of life's biggest transitions

Through MESSA, you have access to Ovia Health™, a benefit that offers support for reproductive health, starting a family, having a healthy pregnancy, balancing life as a parent and managing menopause.

With each Ovia Health app, you have access to:

- Daily personalized articles & tips to help you achieve your goals
- Unlimited in-app messaging with our team of health coaches, including registered nurses and certified nurse-midwives
- Instant analysis & feedback on your health data

Get started with Ovia Health!

1. Download the app that's right for you
2. Select "I have Ovia Health as a benefit" during signup
3. Enter "MESSA" as your health plan
4. Explore Ovia Health!

Already have an Ovia Health app on your phone?

1. Open the "more" menu
2. Tap "My healthcare info"
3. Enter "MESSA" as your health plan



Support for reproductive health, fertility and menopause



Ongoing support for your healthiest, happiest pregnancy



Your go-to resource for parenting support



For more information, visit messa.org/ovia.

ES | Ovia Apps are available in Spanish

Voice's Ortega named Editor of the Year in communicators competition

For the first time in the award's history, the editor of *MEA Voice* magazine has been honored as the Editor of the Year among all the NEA state affiliates.

Brenda Ortega was recognized with the honor in June at the State Education Affiliate Communicators (SEAComm) conference, where members of the MEA Public Affairs team also took home prizes for excellent communications work over the past year.

An accomplished journalist with stops at the Associated Press and as an education reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, Ortega earned her master's degree in education and began a second career as a high school English teacher. After award-winning work in Jackson County classrooms, she joined the MEA staff in 2016, combining her passions for telling stories and educating students into her role as MEA's editor.

"With Brenda, we get the best of both worlds — an incomparable storyteller with a keen sense of what our members are feeling," said MEA Public Affairs Director Doug Pratt in his nomination of Ortega. "Brenda has a skill in finding the member stories that dovetail with the key issues at play in schools today — from book banning to LGBTQ+ rights to school safety.

"She can tell the tough stories to draw your tears — as she did covering the aftermaths of school shootings in Oxford and at MSU within a year and a half of each other — and the softer stories that inspire action and greatness."



MEA Voice Editor Brenda Ortega, pictured here interviewing members on a picket line, was honored as the 2023 SEAComm Editor of the Year

In a video honoring Ortega at the June ceremony in Chicago, MEA President Paula Herbart praised her work "lifting up every educator's voice — not just teachers in the classroom but also our education support professionals and higher education members. She tries to ensure that every voice is part of the conversation. That she is telling stories that are meaningful to our members and to our students who we serve."

MEA was also awarded with Best in Show for Writing, competing against every other state affiliates' entries in the annual awards contest for news stories, features, advocacy, opinion/editorials and more.

Another video recognizing the team's work noted that the judged consistently offered perfect scores for the writing submitted, including:

- Ortega's coverage of the Oxford school shooting;
- Her feature story about the role educators played in Anthony Ianni's journey to becoming the

first Division I college basketball player on the autism spectrum and earning a college degree;

- Her series of stories about MEA members' advocacy around student mental health challenges;
- And team member Zach Crim's op-ed with MEA member Jaime Churches on how her students inspired her (ultimately successful) run for the state Legislature.

Aside from winning individual awards for these stories, MEA Public Affairs staff also won for excellent visual communications work. Miriam Garcia won an award of distinction for Photography for her coverage of a spring gun safety rally with Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and former Congresswoman Gabby Giffords. And Rachel Beyer took home an award of distinction for her graphic design work on the MEA Membership Roadmap. ♡

To view the awards videos and winning work, go to mea.org/seacommawards.

Strong contracts emerge in efforts

‘The pendulum is finally

Last year Angie Pullen began her fourth term as president of a local unit of paraeducators and administrative assistants in Cadillac and saw the fruition of 10 years of effort in the form of a powerful new contract.

For the first time, Pullen’s bargaining team joined forces with the local teacher’s union — with both negotiating new contracts — and in solidarity won members a \$4.75 an hour raise over four years, starting with \$3 this year. The total amounted to an average member pay increase of 36 percent.

“I’ve been a part of three negotiations, and on this — my fourth — we went in with the ammunition to say, ‘Listen: we’re tired of giving up to get something; we’ve given up for years, and there’s nothing else to give up. We want to get now.’”

In addition to the sizable pay increase, the group won improvements to dental and vision benefits, increased longevity payments, and a signing bonus for everyone.

The unit had only seen pay increase by a total of 11% in the previous 10 years, and by last spring the district was sitting on a 28% fund balance, said MEA UniServ Director Kari Guy.

“We’ve had people working two and three jobs, and others were leaving for surrounding districts that were paying more — paras who were trained reading specialists had left the district — and we told the superintendent, ‘You are contributing to this.’ We really held our ground,” Guy said.

The settlement for Cadillac paras and secretaries led a spring and summer wave of strong contracts

in the wake of several years of strong funding for public education under the leadership of Gov. Gretchen Whitmer.

School support staff are key to success in any district, but their pay in Cadillac did not reflect their importance, said Pullen, a 22-year veteran paraeducator who runs a student success center at the middle school.

“I told the board and superintendent if we don’t start feeling appreciated our people will continue moving to other schools as they already have in the past two years,” Pullen said.

The bargaining team used data from MEA’s Cost Alignment Calculator showing wages in the district trending downward over time and comparing current rates to neighboring districts to make their case that a substantial raise was needed, Pullen said.

To hammer it home, members of her unit joined together with the teachers in a mutual assistance pact — a best practice that is growing across the state. Together the Cadillac teachers and support staff ordered “unity” t-shirts and are acting jointly in support of each other.

Dana Jobin, president of the teachers’ union, gathered 80 letters from teachers and support staff backing the settlement and put copies in binders for each school board member as the contract made its way toward approval.

More than 100 people packed the board room in June when the

contract was adopted, and many people spoke in favor of it, including parents and business leaders.

“Now I have a unit that feels valued, and it’s taken time,” Pullen said. “Over the last two years, between monthly meetings with the superintendent and connecting with the school board, communication has played a big part in getting here. I’m grateful and thankful I could be a part of it.”

It’s also taken time for promises to be fulfilled in Battle Creek Public Schools, but “in one fell swoop,” a contract reopener in May moved teachers from the lowest paid in Calhoun County to among the highest, said



to attract, retain educators *swinging back*

Anthony Pennock, Battle Creek Education Association president.

The average increase that Battle Creek teachers will see reflected in paychecks this school year is a whopping \$11,400, Pennock said. “The reaction has been complete shock and disbelief. I’ve had teachers say they were thinking about retiring and now they decided to hold off for a couple years.”

After years of declining enrollments, last year the central city district experienced an uptick in student counts — even as unfilled teacher positions throughout the year ballooned to 50, nearly

20% of the district’s 270 full-time teaching positions.

Six years ago the district embarked on a transformative rebranding effort to become a truly restorative justice-focused, trauma-informed community school district with financial assistance from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

The new pay structure will build on that work to further Battle Creek’s goal to be a destination district by attracting more job applicants, in addition to students.

“We had a promise from the district that said ‘give us a chance to turn around enrollment and get our financial house in order, and teachers will be the first to get the benefits of that,’” Pennock said.

Now he promises to continue working hand-in-hand with support staff unions to ensure custodians, drivers, secretaries, paras, food service workers — all school employees — will share in promised financial rewards following years of sacrifice and hard work, Pennock said.

“This is the power of a collective actually coming together and lifting our voices to make sure our stories are told at that table,” he said. “It’s a very proud moment.”

In Cadillac, the president of the teacher’s union — Dana Jobin, left — and support staff president Angie Pullen have joined forces in mutual support.

In Chippewa Valley a contract reopener also paid dividends for teachers — but in a district already among the better-paying ones in the region. “This is a district that is very stable, where the school board values educators and wants to retain the great staff they have,” said MEA Executive Director Timm Couto.

The new agreement delivers a 6% on-schedule pay hike over the next two years, plus steps and added off-schedule payments, concluding in 2025-26 with a step and 3% off-schedule payment — for a total increase of 17% over three years, said Chippewa Valley Education Association President Cara Konicek.

On the support staff side, the northern metro Detroit district also has used steady increases in per-pupil funding from the state to shore up pay for custodial, maintenance, food service and transportation employees — with drivers set to receive on average a 21% increase this year.

“This is pushing us up to where we should have been for years now, and it’s a very good thing,” Konicek said. “We are grateful to the school board for placing this value on retaining their people.”

Across the state in Kentwood, southeast of Grand Rapids, the same factors drove talks that produced average salary increases of 6.5% in the first year, 4% in the second year, and 3.5% in the third year of a new contract, said Kentwood Education Association President Mariterese Jenkins.

One of the largest and most diverse districts in the state with 17 buildings and 80 languages spoken, Kentwood



will offer a starting salary of \$50,000 and a top step for those with master's degrees at \$103,000, beginning in 2025, as part of the three-year deal.

The wins — combined with improvements in professional development and planning time, among others — came on the heels of a three-year effort to strengthen the local union.

In the months before the pandemic, Jenkins began working as a local member ambassador to help build membership and solidify bonds within the association and across the divide with management. She became president 18 months ago.

Building relationships with administration improved collaboration going into formal talks this spring, Jenkins said: “Both sides knew our greatest asset is our staff, so we wanted to work with the district to retain our current teachers and attract new ones by showing them they are valued.”

In addition to salary, improvements to ancillary benefits drew positive reactions from members, who recognize increases in vision and dental benefits mean “more money in people’s pockets,” she added.

“Now is an exciting time in education with all of the things happening at the state level,” Jenkins said. “To be a part of helping to advocate for members is quite energizing for me.”

State-level changes translated to contract wins also in the smallest districts, agreed Nathan Fleshman, co-president of the East Jordan Education Association. The two-building district south of Charlevoix in northwest Michigan will increase teacher pay by 6%-3%-3% with steps in all three years of a new contract.



Co-President Nathan Fleshman helped bargain a strong contract in East Jordan.

“We are seeing financial movement because of the work we did to achieve the gains we made in Lansing — electing the right people to office who support public education,” said Fleshman, who will start his fifth year teaching secondary science in the small-town district after six years downstate.

In addition to language fixes tightening up discipline procedures, members were most excited about the salary hikes combined with improvements to vision and dental benefits — which are now competitive with those offered in surrounding districts, including Charlevoix and Boyne City.

The goal was to make the close-knit community a destination district for teachers — not just a career stopover, Fleshman said. “People want to work in a place where they’re treated with dignity, where they’re respected and they’re valued.”

Improving members’ quality of life — and thereby keeping educators in the community — was also the goal of a three-year deal in Novi, which bumps starting pay from about \$43,000 to \$52,000 in year one and \$56,500 in year two, according to

Heather Burnside, president of the Novi Education Association.

With an all-new management team sitting across the table — including a new superintendent and three new assistant superintendents — a scheduled contract reopener one year ago produced a disappointing 2% raise, Burnside said.

In anticipation of negotiating a new contract this summer, the union president and superintendent conducted a listening tour at all of the district’s 10 school buildings. “With that, when we finally did get to the table this spring, the administrators had a good idea of what we wanted,” Burnside said.

The result was a reduction in the 28-step salary schedule to 17 steps in the first year and 15 in the second, with enough money added to ensure members at the lower and middle rungs will receive raises this year of 8-10%, and those at the top will see a 2% bump, Burnside said.

“This is going to go a long way to make people feel valued and hopefully keep them around for longer,” she said.

With trigger language likely to create healthy increases in the next two years, along with a restructuring and sizable improvement to Schedule B pay, plus a pre-Labor Day start in 2024 which allows for a fall break in the calendar, members are excited to see the shifts happening in the district, Burnside added.

“There is definitely some light at the end of the tunnel now with the changes legislatively that have happened,” she said. “It’s looking like the pendulum is finally swinging back.” ▼

Members testify against board member: ‘They never backed down’

Three secretaries and a band director in Rochester found closure in testifying against a school board trustee whose social media post and television appearances sparked threatening phone calls to Hart Middle School.

With the help of their union, the educators bravely shared their experiences in an unusual open forum to hold school board member Andrew Weaver accountable and to inspire others to stand up against mistreatment — even when the source is someone powerful, said MEA UniServ Director Deb Lotan.

“They never backed down,” Lotan said. “They got to speak publicly about what they had to endure as a result of Andrew Weaver’s actions — and that is what they needed to happen so they could move on.”

A huge crowd at the hearing offered encouragement after the four women spoke of trauma they experienced when threatening phone calls from across the country flooded the school in response to Weaver’s insinuations about a sixth-grade field trip.

Last November, music teacher Amy Rever-Oberle had taken 180 sixth graders and chaperones to see the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and have pre-arranged lunch at a pizza place in Greektown. As expected the group was relocated to overflow seating, but unbeknownst to Rever-Oberle that area was a bar and nightclub with some poles.

With the group’s food arriving, Rever-Oberle got everyone fed and back on buses ahead of schedule. But a photo of a few students playing on a pole would later appear on social media — with faces partially obscured — and on national news, including numerous right-wing sites.

“Mr. Weaver’s post included the statement ‘where they tried out some pole dancing,’” Rever-Oberle testified at the hearing in June. “That was putting an adult interpretation on what the kids were doing... and that particular phrase was repeated over and over again in news stories that I saw all over

the place — ‘school kids try out pole dancing’ — as though that had been the point or intent of the trip itself.”

Weaver never spoke to the teacher or administrators before appearing on local news and the national talk show “FOX & Friends” in January as he took a partial-term seat on the board. The school hired extra security in response to threats.

Rever-Oberle said her vilification for a brief mishap at the end of an otherwise enriching field trip has given her and others pause about taking students on outings.

The middle school counseling secretary, Anne Maloney, was in her third day on the job and said she felt unsafe when she and others began fielding obscene phone calls including threats of imminent harm.

“I was threatened and talked at length with my husband about quitting my job just a few days after I started,” Maloney said. “I’m talking about something that happened months ago because our community must learn from this. I now get vulgar voicemails from parents who don’t like that their student was mistakenly marked absent in a class. Let that sink in.”

Principal’s secretary Linda Key testified that her daily pride in doing good work for 10 years has been replaced by discomfort and anxiety. “As a member of this community, board trustee, and adult who should know better, Mr. Weaver has an obligation to seek facts first before seeking the limelight and opportunities which support his mission to always look for the worst in everything in this district.”

After a four-hour hearing, the board censured Weaver for posts and interviews “to further public speculation, hearsay, and factual inaccuracies,” ordering him to apologize and remove posts. Weaver has refused to comply.

Regardless, Lotan said, “these women stood up to him, and what got them through that hearing was the huge amount of support from everybody in the audience wearing green. It was a sea of green, and the board meted out the harshest sentence they could, so it wasn’t in vain.” ▼



Lowell art teacher's paintings



When MEA member Sarah Ellis learned she had several months to create five works of art on a theme of “inspiration,” she chose to honor her school district’s media specialist — Christine Beachler — who has faced ongoing harassment while staunchly defending students’ access to books over three years.

The question was how to convey all she knew, believed and felt about the work of her Lowell Area Schools colleague and fellow MEA member?

“I wanted to dedicate a series of paintings to Christine because she’s a rock star — she’s withstood unrelenting attacks with incredible poise and just continued to uphold what we all believe in and the freedoms we value,” Ellis said. “And it got me thinking: what would that look like?”

“How do I get across what’s happening related to books, and what that means for our larger society, while also showing in some slight way the battle behind the scenes of fighting for our freedom of information and our democracy?”

The five related oil paintings on canvas that resulted are beautifully moody and contemplative works,

featuring stacks of books arranged in various configurations and populated with miniature people painted from tiny faceless figurines used to decorate model train sets of the 1950s.

“I ordered a bunch of the plastic train figurines thinking they would create a sort of stifled nod to the McCarthyism of that era,” Ellis said.

The work was featured in a show at Lowell Arts alongside the work of three fellow art teachers at Lowell High School and others.

Her personal favorite, titled “Deep Dive,” shows a woman in orange standing on the precarious edge of a messy stack of books — one leg slightly bent as if she might leap off. Another features a book standing spine up with a woman sitting atop it and turned away from a second figure below.

“That’s called ‘What Binds Us,’ and that one — to me — signifies not working with each other, turning away from one another and turning away from facts,” Ellis said.

One of the paintings includes no people. Titled “All Books Aren’t Blue,” the piece is an homage to a frequently banned book that survived a

challenge in Lowell last year, *All Boys Aren’t Blue* by George M. Johnson, a memoir about growing up Black and queer.

“The very top book (in the painting) gives the illusion of the cover from *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, and having the shadow on either side be in blue is a nod to that as well, with composition and placement of things to make it interesting.”

Ellis wanted to recognize the work of the Lowell district’s only certified librarian — and treasurer of her local union — but also to acknowledge her colleague’s humanity in the face of personal attacks.

“Christine upholds such an amazing standard for what education and educators can do in the face of adversity, but she’s human and she hurts,” Ellis said.

The inspiration for it all — Beachler — said she found Ellis’s work of tribute deeply moving.

“Sarah is just very thoughtful and inspiring, and when I saw her artwork it made me realize if I didn’t have support from wonderful people like her, I don’t know how I could have kept going,” Beachler said.

honor school librarian's courage

The past few years have been increasingly difficult as a small group of people have used bullying and harassment to try to remove books they find objectionable from school libraries, she said. Beachler has faced a barrage of terrible name-calling at board meetings and online.

Beachler's work was featured last year in part three of our five-part series, *Freedom to Read*, on rising book bans in Michigan and across the country at mea.org/freedomtoread.

She has been verbally accosted at the grocery store and even at a family picnic in the park in her small town east of Grand Rapids. A certified media specialist for 23 years, Beachler just completed her 35th year in education and needed to take time off from work due to stress this year.

"It's something I never thought I would have to endure being a school librarian," she said. "Most days I know I'm doing the right thing and doing my job to the best of my ability, and I have great support from my administration and from our staff and our community. But there are some days where I just fall apart and cry."

Last year two books were formally challenged. Beachler followed her profession's best practices, long-standing board policy, and the law in determining the outcome for *All Boys Aren't Blue* and *the sun and her flowers*.

Two separate committees of seven people, including a parent, student, teachers and administrators, read and discussed the books before voting 6-1 and 7-0 to keep them on the shelves. Both decisions were reviewed by the school board and upheld in votes of 7-0 and 6-1.



Christine Beachler, left, and Sarah Ellis

In one case, the complainant filed a police report against the school board claiming district officials were distributing pornography. The same people use derogatory insults and personal smears against Beachler and other school officials at meetings and on social media.

"I'm not really sure what more we can do," she said. "We already offer every single parent the ability to choose every book for their own child, and that's not enough; they want to choose the books for everybody's children even though the other parents don't want that."

Last November, Beachler was honored by the Michigan Association of School Librarians with the Roger Ashley Freedom to Read Award for her exemplary support for First Amendment rights.

Beachler said Ellis's artwork similarly "hit my heart very hard."

"That's what life is, I guess, trudging through the trials and tribulations of parts of your journey and having people to be there for you when you need them. I mean — what else is

there? It's how you deal with those parts of your life that give it meaning."

For her part, Ellis hoped to honor not only Beachler's courage but her determination. For example, after the district used \$100,000 in federal funding to update library collections in all six schools, Beachler won a \$60,000 state grant to staff extended hours — even through summer for high schoolers.

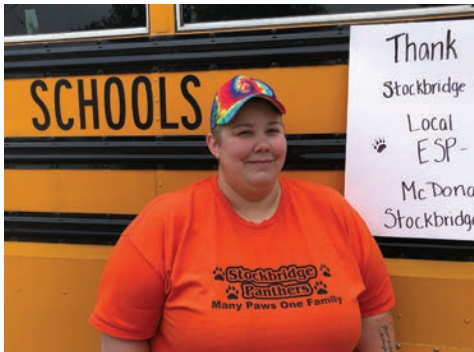
"She's making things available for students and families, ordering things for everybody and anybody, and generally doing her job very well," Ellis said. "She's got her game on with all of these policies and procedures in place to uphold our ideals, and she holds everything together."

Soon some of the works made in her honor will grace the high school library's walls. After visiting the exhibit with Ellis in June, Beachler secretly returned to the gallery and bought two of the paintings.

"They're beautiful pieces, and they mean the world to me," Beachler said. "I'm so happy that I'll be able to look out there and see them, and they can keep me going." ▼

New president wins Brunner award

Her unit was on the verge of decertification from MEA a little over one year ago when Nikki Clear took over as president of her local union representing transportation employees, food service workers, paraeducators, and secretaries. Now she's won MEA's Leon A. Brunner Award.



A bus driver for four years in Stockbridge Community Schools, Clear jokes that she didn't know what she was getting into when she volunteered for the role. But she understood one glaring truth: she had to raise membership — then hovering around 20% — and hopefully lift morale and engagement.

She had less than a month to sign up enough people to save the unit, so she started with talking to folks in transportation who knew her best. They all joined. Then all the food service employees followed suit. And most of the secretaries and paras signed up, too.

Her membership percentage rocketed past 80%, a success she attributes to two factors.

To begin with, "I'm a big pain in the butt," she says. "I said to them, 'If you want change, let's do this. But we've got to do it together.' They all know me; they know I won't quit until I get the job done."

Secondly, Stockbridge is a small town. "And when I say small town, I mean I'm related somehow — by marriage at least — to three-quarters of the town."

Quick with a smile and funny quip, she added, "My step-mom is one of the drivers. My cousin is another bus driver, and they said, 'We'll sign back up, but if you don't do right, we'll just whoop you out back.' And I'm like, 'Dang — I won't blame you.'"

With that immediate task successfully completed, Clear dove into the challenge before her with a desire to learn. She joined MEA's Local Presidents Academy where new leaders explore the demands, challenges and tools of the role. She was assigned a mentor.

Clear attended the MEA Summer and Winter conferences. MEA Representative Assembly. Political Action Council, Coordinating Council, and Region 8 meetings. She is local PAC chair and a member of NEA's LGBTQ Caucus.

Everywhere she goes, she makes more connections.

Meanwhile, the bargaining team she led negotiated a strong contract with the biggest pay raises her members had seen in years. They won seven new paid holidays. This summer the team came back for language changes needed to better support members.

Education support professionals (ESP) do important work as part of a team of educators, she said — likening school to a truck with four tires. "One of those tires is the teachers, and the other three are your support staff," she said. "If any one tire's flat, you're not moving."

Her unwavering belief in and support for her members sets her apart, according to a joint Brunner Award nomination letter signed by three of those people — Jodie Jacobs, a food and nutrition employee and local ambassador, along with Brittany Monette and Debbie Fendelet, both from transportation.

"She has the compassion and drive to make us and everything better in our working family environment, and we are a family, thanks to her," the nomination letter said. "She has fought for fair wages and better treatment and acknowledgment of the staff."

"She believes that happy, healthy employees bring positive structure to our students and everyone is an influence to these young minds."

Clear is also taking that message to the community by creating opportunities for members of her local to get involved together in events around Stockbridge. She began in June with Day in the Village, a Father's Day weekend tradition in town.

On short notice Clear pulled together a booth in the town square with kids' games and donated prize giveaways from local businesses and MEA, and despite little warning she had members from various job categories step up to help in their matching orange Stockbridge Panthers t-shirts.

In the school support staff's corner of the action, kids competed in watermelon-eating contests, shimmied under an inflatable limbo stick, tossed balls into cups, and played cornhole.

"They could take tours on the bus, and I made sure to take the keys out," Clear quipped as the event was

winding down. “It’s been amazing, and it was all last-minute. We’re just getting out into the community a lot more — wait until next year.”

But Clear isn’t waiting. She already has plans for a haunted school bus at the Fall Harvest Festival, and she’s challenged the local teachers’ union to compete in float-building at Homecoming and light-pole decorating in the community’s Light Festival benefiting charities.

In a short time, Clear’s enthusiasm and hard work has connected people from different jobs and buildings who didn’t even know each other existed before, said MEA member Kim Machette, the head cook at the high school who turned out with her dog to help at Day in the Village.

“Now we are a closer-knit group because of Nikki’s efforts,” said Machette, who has worked in the district and belonged to the union for 19 years. “We’re more integrated, and that makes it harder to say, ‘Oh, it’s just a job. I’m going to leave.’ It creates more of a family-like atmosphere.

“And then when we do things like this,” she added, waving her arm at kids and parents enjoying themselves at the festival, “it lets the community know the support staff is involved and we are a vital part of the school district.”

In addition to community building and outreach, Clear and her union ambassador — Jodie Jacobs — will soon be connecting members with a new mentoring program they applied for and were selected by NEA to test pilot in the 2023-24 school year.

Clear and Jacobs were part of a three-district team of ESP leaders — from Stockbridge, Pontiac and Escanaba — who wrote the plan, attended trainings, and will be rolling out the program to better train and support some new hires in their districts starting this fall. The hope is to extend it statewide after that.



Members of the Stockbridge support staff unit, led by Nikki Clear (pictured on opposite page and second-from-right above), ran a booth at Day in the Village.

It all comes down to doing what’s best for the kids, and that means hiring, training and retaining great people, she says: “Happy staff — happy students — happy admin.”

Clear says she loves helping kids start and end their days on a positive note as a driver. She gets to know students so she can spot when things aren’t going well and what they might need.

She cuts water bottles in half and Velcros them to the dashboard to add dirt and plant seeds that kids can watch grow. For March is Reading Month, she hands out books she’s collected — one a week per student — along with bookmarks and key tags.

“We’re like The Magic School Bus, always doing fun things,” Clear said.

Nikki’s motivation and drive are remarkable, says her MEA-assigned leadership mentor — Gypsie Flath, an 11-year paraeducator and four-year president of her local union in Escanaba. “She has accomplished in one year what took me four,” Flath said.

“I want to make it very clear, that we can give anyone all the information to be successful,” Flath added. “However, it is up to the mentee to turn the information into action. Nikki and her team ran like their pants were on fire!”

In June, Clear attended her first ESP Statewide Conference and there she received the Leon A. Brunner Award, which recognizes support staff members for dedication to their union, advocating for ESP member issues, and promotion of ESP careers.

Who would’ve thought just starting out last year she would be receiving a prestigious award, Clear said in her acceptance speech, crediting the learning and connections she’s made through the Presidents Academy and MEA conferences.

“One thing I’ve learned has been: We all have a voice,” she said, challenging attendees to bring one new member to the conference next year. “I figure if we all work together, we’re going to keep growing and growing and have a bigger voice, and then imagine what we can do.” ▼

Kellogg professor dedicates 50 years to Battle Creek students



Ronald Smith, photo by Simon A. Thalmann/Kellogg Community College.

MEA member Ronald Smith could have been a science professor at a big, prestigious four-year university, but he chose to spend his 50-year career teaching students at Kellogg Community College in Battle Creek — and that has made all the difference, he says.

Smith retired from his post teaching physical sciences last spring and in June was recognized by the Battle Creek City Commission “for his dedication and service to our community and Kellogg Community College... since 1973.”

With Bachelor and Master of Science degrees in Physics from Indiana State University, Smith could have become a tenured professor at a top university, said his daughter, Charisse Mitchell, CEO of the YWCA West Central Michigan in Grand Rapids.

But that wasn't where his core values led him, Mitchell said. Instead of a doctorate, he pursued his secondary education certification and eventually taught all kinds of people — from gifted middle schoolers to incarcerated adults, freshman

non-science majors, and future career scientists.

“There is a very specific community of students that mean something to him, and he dedicated 50 years of his life to students in Battle Creek because he believed in their potential,” Mitchell said. “He believed education should be open to everyone. And he lived it.”

Smith has taught three generations of students astronomy, physics, physical science, geography and environmental science. He also co-directed an Outdoor Adventure Program that took college students on a six-credit two-week backpacking trip in a National Park — for many their first out-of-state travel.

“This was sleeping on the ground, carrying all their gear, cooking their own food, no shower for two weeks — they would study science and learn much about who they are,” Smith said of the annual summer outing he conducted for more than 30 years.

Getting to know his students was the best part of working at a community college and the reason why he stayed, Smith said. “Instead of large lecture halls, I had small cohorts of

maybe 24, 30 students, so I knew my kids — not only as a student but as a person. I knew what they couldn't understand and how to help them. I knew their ills, and when I saw a need I could respond to it.”

Smith grew up poor in the small community of Jeffersonville, Ind., where “everyone was family,” in a loving home that included his four siblings, parents and grandparents, plus an aunt, uncle and two cousins.

His father sparked his interest in science by always encouraging him to ask why and seek answers. Smith's great love is for astronomy and the mysteries of the universe.

Having endured struggles as a Black man pursuing a science degree in the 1960s, Smith became active in a Black educators' caucus of MEA and NEA from the late 1970s through the mid 90s, filling a larger need to “help students at other schools by helping the teachers who were struggling with representation and employment opportunities.”

Smith encouraged others to join the union to take advantage of trainings, resources and networking opportunities that would build strength. Now his granddaughter recently graduated from University of Michigan and is following in his footsteps — she will teach math in Redford starting this fall.

“She understands it may be rough going at first but so worthwhile,” Smith said. “Teaching is a commitment. You're committed to helping students make their lives into something positive. That's the light you want to have for them, and if they don't see the light — tell them to open the door, come in, and let's talk.” ▼

Protect yourself, your community with vaccinations

No one wants to be reminded that summer break's almost over, but we know that you want to stay healthy and keep your family protected when the school bell rings again.

So, this is a friendly nudge to put your MESSA health plan to good use and schedule an appointment with your health care provider or pharmacy to get up to date vaccinations for you and your loved ones. When you get vaccinated, you protect yourself, your family, your co-workers, students and your community against serious illnesses.

Vaccines save lives. They provide protection against infectious diseases, and they can lessen the severity of

an illness. In fact, the World Health Organization estimates that immunization currently prevents 3.5 to 5 million deaths every year from diseases like diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis.

At MESSA, we care. That's why we fully cover routine vaccines and immunizations for members and covered dependents, including COVID-19, influenza, pneumonia; tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis (Tdap); tetanus and diphtheria (Td); measles, mumps and rubella (MMR); and zoster (shingles).

If you or your dependents are behind on any these, there's no time like the present to get caught up. MESSA has you covered. ♥



*By Ross Wilson,
MESSA Executive Director*



What's Dyslexia?

**Do you want to increase your knowledge in recognizing
and treating literacy disorders, including dyslexia?**

- This Structured Language and Literacy Intervention Certificate is designed for the working professional.
- The only IDA-accredited program in the state of Michigan
- The practicum requirement can be completed at your own site or at CMU
- 6 courses for a total of 18 credit hours
- Contact: Katie.Squires@cmich.edu

For more information,
scan the code.



Educators, SLPs, Social Workers
& Psychologists are encouraged to apply!
ASHA CEUs are available to SLPs
for select courses.



MEA member J. Blake Johnson

received MEA's Distinguished Servant of Public Education Award for the Cardinal Solutions program he founded at Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU) in 2013, which allows students to do design work for local nonprofits and businesses before graduation.

What art and design work did you do before becoming a professor?

I went to ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, California, and in my second job out of college I worked for an agency that designed amusement parks. That's how I also got Disney on the resume, NBC, Sony. A lot of big names — I got lucky. Then my wife and I moved to Portland, Oregon, and I found a job at an agency designing for point-of-purchase display, and we did work for Microsoft, Xbox, Nike, SKECHERS. So I got all kinds of crazy opportunities.

How did you end up teaching at SVSU?

The job in Portland was an exciting time, but it was also consuming. I would just live at the office. And my wife said, "You always wanted to go back to college and be an educator. Why don't you do it now?" I'm glad I did — I got into the MFA program at University of Idaho. It's a three-year program that gives you the opportunity to teach as instructor of record for those three years. So you're teaching from day one. It's trial by fire, but I

survived and I thought, *OK — I like this. I can do this.* Then I got this job at SVSU in 2007 and for me it was coming back. I was raised in Michigan as a kid, although I've lived all over. Since then I've had two experiences teaching overseas in exchange with SVSU — in Japan in 2013 and in China in 2016.

Describe Cardinal Solutions — do students experience what it's like to work for a client?

Absolutely. We will have, for example, a student who's a photographer and another student who is in marketing, and another student who's design. And together that team works to support whatever their goal for the client is, and they work together to solve real problems. And there's not more than one of each — that is, one student per major per team. It's a heavy load, but real responsibility creates real work experience that just prepares them. That's why, in the end, I would love to have a Solutions program at every single university — or maybe even high schools if they feel that's part of their gig.

Do the clients pay for the work?

Yes, and some of that comes back to the students in the form of a scholarship. We tried doing things for free. Surprisingly, that doesn't work very well because, without a buy-in, the client's not really engaged. And so we started charging. I don't think it's an outrageous fee: 15 weeks of work for \$600. The university handles the contracts and the money. I'm not trying to pay people, and I'm not trying to run a business. What I'm trying to do is give students real-life opportunities and the chance to earn a scholarship and serve the community. So that seems a fair price to me, and it seems to be working well.

What's a driving message you have for students when they go forth into careers?

I tell them the kind of job you want as a designer is one where you're trusted. And you can only have that kind of job if you can write well, because you have to explain your ideas to both the client and the art director and the owner — both in written and verbal. So I make sure they stand up; we have critiques; they have to present. When they write summaries of assignments, they learn how to put design ideas into their own words. It's very important to me. **v**

Check out an example of a Solutions project by visiting the Saginaw Township Fire Department's social media. The year-long firefighter recruitment campaign developed by a five-student team includes online graphics, videos, print materials and an online recruitment form.



Market uncertainty...

...could lead to opportunities.

The current rising interest rate environment is the perfect time for you to experience the value of your Financial Services Representative. Reach out and review the cost efficiency of your current investments. This may be the ideal time to refine your investment strategy.

MEA Financial Services Representatives are available to assist you and help with your changing needs. We can't predict the future, but we can help you prepare for it. Call 1 (800) 292-1950 or log on at meafs.com to find your representative.



mea
Financial
Services

www.meafs.com (800) 292-1950

Securities are offered through Paradigm Equities, Inc. a wholly owned subsidiary of MEA Financial Services. Paradigm Equities, Inc., member FINRA/SIPC, 1216 Kendale Blvd., East Lansing, MI 48823. Investment Advice offered through Fairway Investment Group, LLC – a registered Investment Advisor. Fairway Investment Group, LLC is a wholly owned subsidiary of MEA Financial Services.

You deserve **THE BEST**



Every high five, every warm smile, every encouraging word brings peace of mind to the kids you care for every day.

We know it's stressful and challenging at times. Here's what MESSA provides to give you some peace of mind, too:

- Access to the best doctors and hospitals in the nation.
- Free worksite wellness programs to support your physical and mental health.
- Comprehensive mental health benefits for you and your covered dependents.
- Personal support from MESSA's Member Services specialists and your local field representative, who can help you navigate the complex world of health care.

Learn about these and other member-exclusive programs at [messa.org](https://www.messa.org) or call us at **800-336-0013**.

We're here to help.

