

MEA • VOICE

EVAL REFORMS PASS!

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TARGETED TEACHER
WINS SETTLEMENT

page 16

Award winner pays it forward

an inspiring story
of one educator's life
coming full circle

Letter to Members: a year to celebrate

As 2023 comes to a close, we have so much to celebrate as educators and believers in the promise of public education. Together with the friends of education we helped to elect, we've accomplished so much in Lansing for our students, our schools and our colleagues.

Record levels of funding for PK-12, community colleges and universities. Free breakfast and lunch for all students. Resources for student mental health support and school safety. Student loan forgiveness and pay increases for educators. Scholarships for educator recruitment and pay for student teachers. Additional funding for rural transportation.

We never stopped demanding fixes to the broken, one-size-fits-all teacher evaluation system, so punitive in nature. Now a new law passed this fall mandates locally-driven evaluation standards to help educators grow and develop their craft. (Read more on page 12.)

We pressed for our collective rights back and eliminated prohibited subjects of bargaining, so we can once again bargain on critical topics like teacher placement, evaluation, and support staff privatization — including restoring payroll deduction of dues and PAC contributions.

Lawmakers heard our pleas and increased school safety measures in the aftermath of Oxford and MSU, passing commonsense gun safety legislation on universal background checks, safe storage of firearms and extreme risk protection orders.

Leaders in Lansing phased out the unfair retirement tax and expanded tax relief for lower-wage workers, changed the default retirement option for new hires to the hybrid pension system, and repealed third-grade reading retention.

The list goes on, and there's more to do in 2024. We are grateful for the amazing work of MEA's members, leaders and staff to deliver these victories for our state and our profession.

Together we're strengthening our public schools to ensure a great education for every child, restoring respect for education professions so vital to our communities, and driving school innovations that nurture and develop our students who are the shining future of Michigan.

From all of us at MEA, Happy Holidays!

In Solidarity Always,

Chandra Madafferi, MEA President

Brett Smith, Vice President

Aaron Eling, Secretary-Treasurer



Chandra Madafferi,
MEA President



Brett Smith,
Vice President



Aaron Eling,
Secretary-Treasurer

81%

Proportion of educators who have experienced verbal outbursts by students that significantly disrupt learning, according to results of an MEA survey released in November. More than a quarter of respondents said they've been injured by a student. Read more at mea.org/student-behavior-findings.

MEA Scholarship: apply now!

The 2024 MEA Scholarship application form and eligibility requirements are available online at mea.org/mea-scholarship. The application deadline is Feb. 15, 2024. Eligible students include dependents of MEA and MEA-Retired members in good standing who attend or will attend a Michigan public college, university or vocational training institution. Last year, 23 new winners and 19 returning college students were awarded scholarships totaling \$45,500. For additional information, please contact MEA Human Resources at MEAScholarship@mea.org. ♥

QUOTABLES

“As history teachers, we have an immense responsibility to confront racism and call it what it is.”

Matt Vriesman, an East Kentwood High School history teacher quoted in *School Network News*, on why he uses primary sources to take students beyond textbooks. Named the 2023 Gilder Lehrman National History Teacher of the Year, Vriesman authors “Antiracist APUSH,” a blog used for AP lesson planning by educators nationwide.



MEA members stepped up to testify and lobby at the Capitol in the closing weeks of the legislative session to help pass much-needed reforms to the teacher evaluation system, page 12.

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



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On the cover: Notching two national awards in two years, MEA member Juwan Willis is an automotive instructor at Oakland Schools Technical Campus Northeast in Pontiac with an inspiring story. Cover story photos by Tom Gennara.

Slotkin for US Senate, page 18.

Saginaw leader, page 20.

Movement to learn, page 22.

More inside: Sculpture honors beloved actor and mentorship, page 4. Fun with AEM & MiNE, page 5. Teacher wins large settlement, page 16.



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MEA • VOICE

Interim Senior Executive Director Earl Wiman
Director of Communications and
Member Services Doug Pratt
Editor Brenda Ortega
Publications Specialist Shantell Crispin

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ABOVE & BEYOND

In October, an ambitious sculpture project was unveiled in rural northwest Michigan, titled “Mentorship can be life changing,” featuring two life-size bronze figures — each atop a round base made of concrete and granite — residing on a concrete pad in front of the Kaleva Norman Dickson School District campus in tiny Brethren, Michigan.

Don't miss the beautiful story behind the sculpture: how a teacher from Brethren once mentored acting great James Earl Jones to overcome a debilitating stutter, how a group of retired educators in the community raised more than \$100,000 to honor that legacy, and how the power of mentorship crosses through generations. Go to mea.org/educators-celebrate-mentors-and-jones.

MEA Awards deadline Dec. 31

Three statewide MEA awards are open for nominations through Dec. 31 — one to recognize a group or individual outside of MEA focused on human rights and two for educators demonstrating leadership in feminist and gender equity or educational excellence. The awards are the David McMahon Human Rights Award, the Maurine Wyatt Feminist and Gender Equity Award, and the Educational Excellence Award. Go to cill.mea.org/human-rights-and-excellence-awards for more information and the nomination form.

Nominations sought for ESP Caucus Board

Nominations are being accepted for several positions on the MEA ESP Caucus Executive Board. Open positions are as follows beginning Sept. 1, 2024:

PRESIDENT: 1 Position — Sept. 1, 2024 to Aug. 31, 2027

VICE-PRESIDENT: 1 Position — Sept. 1, 2024 to Aug. 31, 2027

SECRETARY: 1 Position — Sept. 1, 2024 to Aug. 31, 2027

AT-LARGE: 4 Positions — Sept. 1, 2024 to Aug. 31, 2027

DIRECTOR BY CLASSIFICATION

FOOD SERVICE: 1 Position — Sept. 1, 2024 to Aug. 31, 2027

MAINTENANCE: 1 Position — Immediate to Aug. 31, 2025

HIGHER EDUCATION: 1 Position — Sept. 1, 2024 to Aug. 31, 2027

Elections to the ESP Caucus Executive Board will take place during the MEA Representative Assembly on April 19-20, 2024. Information needed for each candidate includes: name, present occupation, home address, home and work telephone numbers, home email address, school district, name of nominee's local ESP association and written consent of the candidate running for office.

Candidates and nominators must be members in good standing of MEA/NEA. Information must be received no later than Feb. 20, 2024 and should be mailed to: Gezelle Oliver, MEA/ESP Department, PO Box 2573, 1216 Kendale Blvd., East Lansing, MI 48826-2573, or it can be sent via email to goliver@mea.org.

Additional nominations will be accepted from the floor at the MEA/ESP Caucus meeting on Friday, April 19, 2024. Candidates will be given up to three minutes to address delegates. Biographical sketches can be sent to Heather Traxler, MEA staff assistant to the ESP Caucus, at htraxler@mea.org. Questions about the elections should be directed to Jim Sparapani, ESP Caucus elections chair, at jsparapani@att.net.

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THE FUTURE IS NOW

Sometimes You Gotta Have Fun

Teaching is hard. Being a student is hard. It's important for mental and physical health to remember to still have fun, so we are highlighting fun activities enjoyed by Aspiring Educators of Michigan (AEM) and Michigan New Educators (MiNE) members across the state.

In July, Aspiring Educator leaders from college campuses throughout Michigan came together at the MEA Headquarters in East Lansing to enjoy a day of networking and learning. While the focus was on leadership training for these chapter and state leaders, the day also featured a number of "Minute-to-Win-It" style events.

Wayne State University was the overall victor and earned both bragging rights and the ability to keep Ollie the AEM Owl until next year's Leadership Training Day.

MiNE members also took time to network and have fun.

Kent City Community Schools hosted an amazing MiNE event for Early Career Educators at Cedar Springs Brewery. Members took part in a teacher edition of "What Do You Meme?" And all were rolling in laughter! Teachers were tasked with creating captions for a variety of pictures.

MiNE Representative Allison O'Connell led this wonderful offering.

Another fun event was held for six locals (Freeland EA, Saginaw EA, Saginaw Township EA and OP, Essexville Hampton EA and Carrollton EA) who came together to host a MiNE event before the Bored Teachers Comedy Tour in Saginaw.

The 2023 Bored Teachers tour, called "We Can't Make This Stuff



Up," featured a group of educators and former educators whose funny videos about the profession grew in popularity via social media during the pandemic. Various performers rotated through the tour season.

The Saginaw MiNE pre-show event hosted more than 80 members who enjoyed great food, refreshments, and company. In addition to great member turnout, MEA Secretary-Treasurer Aaron Eling, MESSA Representative RaShaaun Watson, UniServ Director Jean Weiss, and local leaders from each unit came to mingle.

Be sure to follow AEM and MiNE on social media to stay up on our latest offerings! And this winter break



and into the new year, remember to spend time with people you enjoy and do fun things that make you smile and laugh.

Happy new year! ♥



Connect with AEM:

[instagram.com/aspiringedofmichigan](https://www.instagram.com/aspiringedofmichigan)

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Connect with MiNE:

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[soundcloud](https://www.soundcloud.com/mineweducators)



The doctor is *always in*

Get the care you need with MESSA's virtual options

Starting Jan. 1, MESSA is offering a new service to access a large telehealth network of providers for 24/7 urgent care, mental health care, virtual primary care and chronic care management programs.

MESSA is collaborating with Teladoc Health to provide members these services on the Teladoc app and web portal.

"Teladoc is an option for MESSA members looking for convenient, accessible healthcare," said MESSA Member Services Director Karen Schulz. "Members will have access to a network of high-quality health care providers, ensuring they receive professional and reliable medical advice and treatment."

The new services include:

- **Teladoc 24/7 Care:** This is a virtual urgent care option for colds, sore throats, strep throat and other minor illnesses or injuries. No appointment is needed and the average wait time is 10 minutes.
- **Teladoc Mental Health:** Connect with a licensed therapist or U.S. board-certified psychiatrist for concerns such as grief, anxiety and depression. These visits require an appointment; evening and weekend appointments are available.
- **Teladoc Virtual Primary Care:** This new service allows members and covered dependents 18 and older to visit virtually with a U.S. board-certified primary care provider.
- **Teladoc Chronic Condition Management:** Qualified members and dependents can get support with diabetes management, diabetes prevention and weight loss, and hypertension management programs.

For more information, visit messa.org/Teladoc, or contact your local field representative at 800-292-4910 or call our Member Service Center at 800-336-0013. ▼

How much will Teladoc Health visits cost?

Teladoc 24/7 Care visits are subject to a \$65 charge before meeting the deductible for all plans. The amount can vary by provider and service type for all other visit types.

Once you meet the deductible, you'll pay the following set of copayments for visits and coinsurance for services:

- **Teladoc 24/7 Care:** \$10 copay for Balance+ and Essentials by MESSA; \$20 copay for Choices; and no copay for ABC plans, but coinsurance may apply.
- **Teladoc Mental Health:** \$10 copay for Balance+ and Essentials by MESSA; \$20 copay for Choices; and no copay for ABC plans, but coinsurance may apply.
- **Teladoc Primary Care:** \$25 copay for Balance+ and Essentials by MESSA; \$20 copay for Choices; and no copay for ABC plans, but coinsurance may apply.
- **Teladoc Chronic Condition Management:** These programs are free for qualifying MESSA members and covered dependents.

Award winner changes lives and longs to thank educator who saved him long ago

By Brenda Ortega, MEA Voice Editor

Juwan Willis is a man on more than one mission.

The primary pursuit that occupies the MEA member's days is his goal to build the best high school automotive program in the nation at Oakland Schools Technical Campus Northeast (OSTC-NE) in Pontiac, where he aspires to do life-changing work as an educator. He is already far along the way.

Willis has won two national awards in an 11-month span. Last year in November, he was named the Byrl Shoemaker Instructor of the Year by the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) Education Foundation for his work guiding and motivating students to high achievement.

Then in October, Willis was named a \$100,000 Grand Prize Winner of the Harbor Freight Tools for Schools 2023 Prize for Teaching Excellence. Of that award, \$70,000 goes to his program and \$30,000 goes to him.

He is not comfortable with the accolades, but the General Motors Certified World-Class Technician with 32 years of industry experience — including managing an auto dealership service department — hopes the attention will help to further his students and the program he's built since 2012.



Award-winning educator Juwan Willis has expanded programming and secured grants to give students more opportunities to be successful.

A former high school dropout and lifelong Flint resident, Willis could make \$50,000 more annually starting tomorrow if he returned to work in the field, but he said in a wide-ranging interview, “All I care about at this stage of my life is my desire to pay it forward.”

Therein lies the second mission that animates his 50-year-old spirit.

Willis dreams to find the Flint educator whose persistence lifted him from a traumatic upbringing, marked by poverty and his mother's severe mental illness, toward the security of job skills and income needed to take

guardianship of three younger siblings and eventually raise his own six children.

His longing to show the unknown teacher or guidance counselor that her labor of love was not in vain — and to thank her for sticking with him even when he considered her an “arch nemesis” — returns often amid conversation about his life and work.

“I have spent years trying to find her to say thank you to her or her family because this was 34 years ago now,” Willis said. “I cannot remember her name because I did not understand what she was doing at the time, but she got me to muddle through, get my



Qualified students from Oakland County receive their own toolbox, valued at \$5,000, to start their careers – thanks to a grant Willis authored.

(diploma), start college and pursue automotive. She said she could show me how to pay for college, and she was true to her word.”

If not for her Willis believes he would be dead, or in prison alongside his childhood best friend. “I don’t know how I could ever express my gratitude, but I would like the opportunity. And if she’s no longer here, I just feel like her family should know because I can’t be the only one.”

He wants to say that her relentless effort had ripple effects that will continue for generations. For example, his stability gave his younger sisters a lifeline to become nurses. A daughter is pursuing a PhD in psychology. Another daughter was in Madrid this fall on a study abroad program.

Then there are his students. Two who are part of a post-secondary opportunity that Willis designed and is piloting have surpassed all expectations — including their own — by embracing the program’s motto: “You’ve got to do more to get more.”

They achieved master- and world-class technician status at a very young age, and both now mentor younger people coming up through the program to believe they can also accomplish what many said couldn’t be done without many more years of experience.

Devin Bailey, a 23-year-old graduate from Avondale High School, never dreamed he would make a six-figure income at his age, but he’s already earned ASE Master Technician and GM World-Class status with 14 certifications.

Bailey recently bought his first home — with guidance from Willis on mortgages, money management and building credit. “He’s basically been that father figure I didn’t have growing up,” Bailey said in a phone interview.

Today Bailey is mentoring his third student from the program, and one

he helped — Kenyon Knight — is among the first or second youngest ever to become an ASE Master Technician at age 18 years and nine months.

Two years later Knight is 20, working with Bailey at Matick Buick GMC in Southfield, and also mentoring others. He admits to not listening to Willis at first, years ago. He thought he would learn enough to do oil changes and move on, but Willis saw potential and urged him forward, Knight said.

“I failed three ASE tests pretty badly before he started giving me practice tests and test guides and coaching me, and pretty soon I started picking them off — passing them one by one — and he pushed me more and more. He believed in me and never gave up; he kept pushing me and helping me.”

Knight credits Willis for how far he’s come: He earns six figures doing bumper-to-bumper service and repair, while living with his parents and saving for the future. “Willis always says, ‘You deserve the credit; you did the work.’ But I’m very thankful to him and all my mentors.”

Willis coaches many students in the program’s professional track to ASE Independent Technician status after high school. But working post-graduation with Knight and Bailey is part of a plan he has developed since 2016 to offer a technical early college option, known as the Master Automotive Service Technology (MAST) track.

MAST is an advanced program to offer students a post-secondary curriculum, a concentration on gaining professional certifications, paid career and internship opportunities, industry sponsorship, and college credits toward a two-year degree. Knight earned an Associate’s degree in MAST.

The pandemic slowed the program’s growth, but this year eight new students are enrolled in the first

year of the three-year MAST program. Not all are certain to finish. The demanding program requires time, dedication and hard work, Willis said. It adds summer coursework and experiences.

However, he ensures everyone has every opportunity by getting students from under-resourced backgrounds their own 48-inch tool box filled with tools and valued at \$5,000 — which otherwise can be a barrier to entry into the profession.

To date, 45 tool boxes have been funded by the Margaret Dunning Foundation in Plymouth via a grant Willis authored, and they are distributed to qualified students in programs across the entire Oakland County service area, not just to Willis’ students at the Technical Campus Northeast.

Students earn the toolboxes to embark on internships and work experiences, and they keep them as they go off to begin careers. “Once they earn the key, there are no take-backs,” Willis said, adding the Dunning Foundation has also contributed to his MAST start-up, thanks to grant-writing help from his colleagues.

With the toolbox, students can earn up to \$23,000 during a year of internships and work experience in 11th and 12th grades.

Willis won’t advance those who aren’t demonstrating the necessary work ethic or skills growth, and he will pull a student from an internship or work placement if he gets a complaint from a shop manager or mentor.

“Some people want the moon but they’re not willing to walk to the corner,” Willis said. “I’m transparent with them; the world can be theirs, but they have to reach out and grab it. At times getting fired or demoted is the reality check they need. I’d rather it happen during high school so they can reset and come back.”

He always gives them a chance to rebound. “I’m a high school dropout. If somebody freeze-framed me at 16, where would I be? So I always tell them, ‘Yesterday was yesterday. Today is today. What are you going to do today to create the tomorrow that you want?’”

Willis experienced what he calls his own tough career “growth moment” as a young adult working in the service department at Al Serra Auto Plaza in Grand Blanc nearly 25 years ago. He had hired in under the elder Serra and transitioned to management by the son, Joe Serra, after the father’s death.

“Joe was very personal,” Willis said. “He used to throw picnics, take everybody out on their birthday to a restaurant across the street. But I had a chip on my shoulder.”

The only Black technician in the competitive shop, Willis was among the best certified and top earners when a new supervisor began to question his competence. He attributed the reason why to racism. When the manager told him to do something illogical, Willis launched a verbal assault, he says.

“I was extremely unprofessional. I yelled. I cursed. I said F-bomb you. You are a stupid idiot that doesn’t have common sense.”

Later he appealed to Joe Serra, and met with him to complain about the manager’s animus. “He stopped me and said, ‘But why did you act like that?’ My excuse was ‘He made me.’ And that’s the only time I’ve ever been cussed out by a multi-millionaire.”

Willis left without a job that day, believing he was unfairly blamed for the larger climate problem in the shop. Five years later, in a parenting moment, he heard himself telling his son not to be goaded by his sister into reactive behavior that will get him into trouble instead of her. An epiphany happened.



With his experience and expertise, Willis develops rapport with young people and builds their “career-ready” skills, Principal Paul Galbenski says.

“I finally came to a full understanding of what happened. I was good marketing for (Joe Serra). I was a high wage-earner. He had invested in me, but I had done something in front of everybody that he couldn’t support.”

Willis shares the story and its epilogue with students in a PowerPoint introduction each year: how he rose to management at another dealership but then got the urge to teach and loved it after trying a temp job. How he hired into this Tech Campus in Pontiac which now feels like family.

How Joe Serra soon bought out a local dealership where Willis places interns, so he reached out to reconnect and ensure a continued strong partnership. “I think we’ve had nine students that graduated within the last five years at that dealership, so my story with Joe Serra came full circle.”

He holds frank classroom discussions on race, setting out clear expectations for respect and safety. He builds cohesion with t-shirts every student receives, printed with a flashy logo of a fist holding a tool,

plus the “Do more to get more” motto and “OSTC-NE Automotive Co-Ed Fraternity.”

He believes part of the race divide in America comes from lack of exposure. “I was an inner-city kid out of Flint, and a lack of understanding about my culture applied to my co-workers, but I didn’t have experience with people from higher wealth either.

“Now I’m here and getting students from Rochester schools which are between 1 to 3% Black and from Pontiac next door which is between 1 to 3% white. I explain that some of these biases we have is because we haven’t learned anything different.”

Students may find themselves in a workplace where they’re the only person of their race, ethnicity, gender or age, and he tells them: Lean into it. Be your best, and own your status.

Willis heaps praise on a mentor who has helped him grow and learn as an educator. His principal at the Tech Campus, Paul Galbenski, in 2012 was named Michigan Teacher of the Year

and remains the only Career and Technical Education (CTE) teacher to be awarded the honor.

The two became close working late into evenings with conversation in the empty building. Galbenski is a former longtime high school basketball coach — a role in which he also earned many honors — and “He’s a bullet-point guy, which is very contrary to me,” Willis said, laughing.

“I’ll get going talking about 18 different things. I’m a reach-for-the-stars guy, because I figure if you land on the moon you’re still getting paid better. But reaching for the stars is usually doing something that hasn’t been done. Paul gets me back to — Hold on. Step one; what are you going to do first?”

Willis was among his first hires when he was a new principal, Galbenski said in an interview. As a career changer, Willis articulated a vision from the outset and every year has reflected and provided more opportunities for students, Galbenski said.

“The proof is in the pudding. Now he’s been at this for X number of years, and those alum keep coming back that are now master techs and assisting with new techs. He’s instilled a pay-it-forward mentality, which is the type of support system that makes programs successful.”

With his life experience and industry expertise, Willis develops excellent rapport with young people and builds their “career-ready” skills of problem-solving, collaboration, communication and personal management, Galbenski added. “He’s very thoughtful in knowing how to move a young person from point A to point B if he can get them to trust the process.”

An inspiring “idea man,” Willis sometimes needs help with structuring and organizing a plan, Galbenski said. “I’m a teacher and coach at heart.

This is all coaching. It's all mentoring. That's how I led basketball teams for 21 years—it's about maximizing the talent you have on your team."

Willis discovered since arriving at the Tech Campus that he is autistic. Before that, "I didn't know all of my idiosyncrasies could be labeled," he said.

His daughter the psychology major shared information after he recognized himself in the struggles of various students identified as autistic and found himself offering those students advice based on his own experiences.

It's another life story he shares in the introductory PowerPoint with students. The "soft diagnosis" doesn't change anything, just explains his quirks and coping strategies. For example, he wears his keys, wallet and other pocket items in the same place every day or else he feels "crooked."

A fan of science fiction, including Star Wars and Star Trek, Willis uses that and a fascination with anime and animation to escape from stress, dating back to his troubled childhood. He loves Superman, because he says, "Superman's restraint is the only reason Batman has ever got the best of him."

He also doesn't shy away from discussing his difficult youth as he gets to know students.

The eldest of six siblings, including a disabled younger brother who required total care, Willis didn't meet his father until age 29. When his mother's mental illness required her to stay in a psychiatric hospital for weeks or months at a time, the children moved in temporarily with their grandmother — a powerful family matriarch.

Her youngest son, Willis' uncle, was also a strong influence. "I call him Uncle Daddy because he filled

that role, and I picked up a lot of his habits."

As a young child, Willis enjoyed attending the school by his grandmother's house. But when his mother transferred him to a new building, he was bullied for the next few years. By middle school, he was skipping, and by high school he dropped out.

His mother taught him to drive at age 12, and at 14 Willis used the car to operate 10 newspaper routes with his siblings. He split the earnings with his mother and learned to fix the vehicle with how-to guides and parts from the auto store.

Then a house fire forced the family into low-income housing, which he compared to "fencing us in like a bunch of animals." There he reconnected with friends from his first elementary school who were engaged in illegal activities.

But Willis had a car — if not a driver's license — and decided to work at McDonald's where he could also get free meals. His competitive nature kicked in, he says: "More hours meant more money and bigger meals. I was always willing to work harder if I could see a way to get something I wanted."

That would lead to his first encounter with the mystery woman at Mott Adult High School. Willis showed up at age 16 to re-enroll at the alternative school so he could apply for a waiver allowing him to work 40 hours per week at McDonald's.

She began checking in with him at work, and Willis feared she would cost him his job. She learned his backstory

and encouraged him to pursue training in the automotive field. "She kept coming to check on me, coming to check on me. And I went from 'I can't stand this woman' to 'Where's she at?'"

She had him visit Genesee Career Institute and later helped him navigate the financial aid system to begin courses at Mott Community College. He used that training to get entry-level jobs, earn money, support his family, and pay for more training to advance.

Willis supported 11 people at the time he was fired from the Al Serra dealership in his late 20s, including his mother and younger siblings, his wife and six children. Willis cared for his disabled brother until his death at age 41 a few years ago. He still helps his mother, now in assisted living.

It's why his thoughts keep turning back to the teacher or counselor from the school who helped him find his way. "Were it not for this woman reaching me, I would not be where I am today. I raised all of these people, and I don't have to be money-motivated anymore."

He regularly gets job offers from shop managers hoping to lure him with money, but that isn't what he wants, he said.

"A lot of those jobs are attractive, but I literally pass on making \$50,000 more because I wouldn't be able to accomplish my goal—which is to be a truly unforgettable educator that helps change somebody's life, like what this woman did for me." ▾

Congrats!

Two MEA-member skilled trades instructors are \$50,000 Finalists in the Harbor Freight Tools for Schools 2023 Prize for Teaching Excellence — page 21.

Educators celebrate long-sought improved broken teacher evaluation system

“Wonderful news!”

“Here’s why we work hard to elect legislators who support public education.”

“Elections matter!”

“Let’s keep going!”

Hundreds of similar comments and shares on MEA’s social media echoed in celebration after the Michigan Legislature approved changes to the state’s broken teacher evaluation system starting next school year. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer recently signed the bills into law.

MEA members have pushed for the changes over several years through lobbying lawmakers, doing on-the-ground work to elect legislators who support public education, and raising funds for political campaigns. The bills were also supported by the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals.

Lisa Sutton, president of the Kalkaska Education Association east of Traverse City, said her members are pleased the legislation ends use of statewide standardized test scores to rate teachers — a purpose for which assessments such as the M-STEP and SAT were never intended to be used.

Because the new law also restores aspects of evaluation as a subject of

collective bargaining, educators are ensured a voice in how their districts’ systems will operate and what are the best local tools to fairly measure student growth or performance on student learning objectives.

“This is one of the things our dues dollars pay for — making sure that we, the trained professionals who actually understand education and know our students, have a say in how we do our jobs and what is considered good teaching,” Sutton said. “The current system is a ‘gotcha’ system, and it’s driving people out of the profession.”

The current educator evaluation system was enacted as part of changes made under Gov. Rick Snyder in 2011 to weaken teacher tenure and make it easier to fire teachers. That system added student standardized test scores into teacher ratings and removed rights of appeal and due process.

Rep. Matt Koleszar (D-Plymouth), a former teacher and chair of the House

Education Committee, agreed with Sutton that for both students and educators the system has amounted to “a failed experiment in a one-size-fits-all approach.”

In a House floor speech Koleszar delivered urging passage of the bills, he argued many other factors outside of teacher quality influence student standardized test scores — and punishing educators for those results doesn’t help kids.

“We can’t rely on a cookie-cutter standardized test taking a snapshot of one moment in time, a moment when a child’s parents are going through a divorce, or they’re hungry because their pantry at home is empty, or sad because their girlfriend dumped them,” he said in the speech.

“Students are human, and humans are complex. Teaching is about so much more than filling in a bubble on a single day.”

The new system will reduce the percentage of a teacher’s score based on student growth or learning objectives to 20% from the current 40% without requiring state testing data be used. How and what goals are measured will be locally bargained.

Other provisions reduce ratings categories from four to three: effective, developing and needs support; require observations for at least 15 minutes with timely written feedback; and allow effective teachers to be evaluated triannually or biannually (subject to bargaining).

Many members are glad to see “highly effective” removed as a rating category, said MEA Local 1 President

ements to

By Brenda Ortega, MEA Voice Editor

Heather Schulz, a Lakeview teacher who leads the Multi-Association Bargaining Organization representing thousands of educators in Macomb, Wayne and St. Clair counties.

The label has been highly subjective in its application, Schulz said, with some districts assigning it to every teacher who was effective and others rarely assigning it at all.

“Soon it will be: if you’re doing a good job, you’re doing a good job — as it should be,” Schulz said. “And people are also happy that evaluators will have to do rater reliability training, because the variation in scoring and interpretation has been extreme, depending on the administrator doing it.”

High-stakes evaluations have driven professionals out of districts that have a higher percentage of high-need students, said Matt Marlow, president of the Grand Rapids Education Association, where 115 teaching positions remained open as the Thanksgiving holiday approached.

“This current evaluation system has demoralized people who are doing great work that isn’t necessarily going to be reflected in test scores or even in the little boxes that the evaluator is supposed to be checking when they’re in your room for 10 or 15 minutes,” Marlow said.

“In districts with more at-risk students, teachers say to themselves, *Gee — do I want to risk my evaluation working in a district with more challenges and less resources?*”

“That fallout has hurt public education, so yes — these changes are good. Having teacher input is good. Making evaluations less punitive is good. Giving people the support they need to do their jobs and develop into the best teachers they can be is good.”

Shifting from a punitive approach to a focus on developing educators throughout their careers is central to reforms in the bills sponsored by Sen. Dayna Polehanki (D-Livonia), a former teacher and chair of the Senate Education Committee, and Sen. Kristen McDonald Rivet (D-Bay City).

After the House vote approving the bills, Polehanki tweeted, “Oh my stars — we did it! #TeamTeacher”

MEA members stepped up to push hard for the changes in the closing weeks of the legislative session, offering testimony in hearings on the bills and through in-person lobby days.

MEA member Ryan Ridenour, a high school social studies teacher in West Bloomfield, was one of several educators who testified before the Senate Education Committee in October to stress with lawmakers that educator burnout is at an all-time high and morale is low across the state.

“I hope you understand the gravity of the situation and the opportunity that’s available to you today,” Ridenour told lawmakers. “Districts across the state are hemorrhaging staff, and you can do something to stop the bleeding.”

At the same hearing, MEA member Megan Ake — a high school English



Heather Schulz



Matt Marlow



Lisa Sutton

teacher in Fenton — told lawmakers the over-emphasis on test scores in the current evaluation system doesn't value the essence of the profession, which is a human endeavor.

"It's a hyper focus on the numbers, the data, the percentages. It turns teaching — which is this organic, relationship-oriented art — into a numbers game," she told lawmakers.

MEA member Leah Porter, a Holt third-grade teacher and 2021-22 Michigan Teacher of the Year, also testified, saying educators have been asked to do more and more in recent years, while the "out-of-touch" evaluation system added "tremendous stress and disconnect from the urgent needs of the classroom."

Porter called the legislative fixes "an affirmation to teachers across the state that the legislators in Lansing empathize with the complexity of the current education landscape and want to build systems that will benefit students and provide teachers the opportunity to learn and develop in a way that will continue to develop their practice."



John Pakledinaz

Later that month, recently retired Farwell science teacher John Pakledinaz showed up in Lansing for an MEA Lobby Day to speak directly with lawmakers because the current system is "punitive and excessive," and he worries about the future if society continues to treat its educators this way.

"I know this is one of the things that needed to change if we want to continue attracting quality young people to the profession," the former local union president said. "Evaluations should be useful, not punitive."

Now it's important for educators to stay engaged in the policy debate, he added. "The importance of educators being involved in PAC drives and being involved in electing educators to be some of the people making decisions is critical.

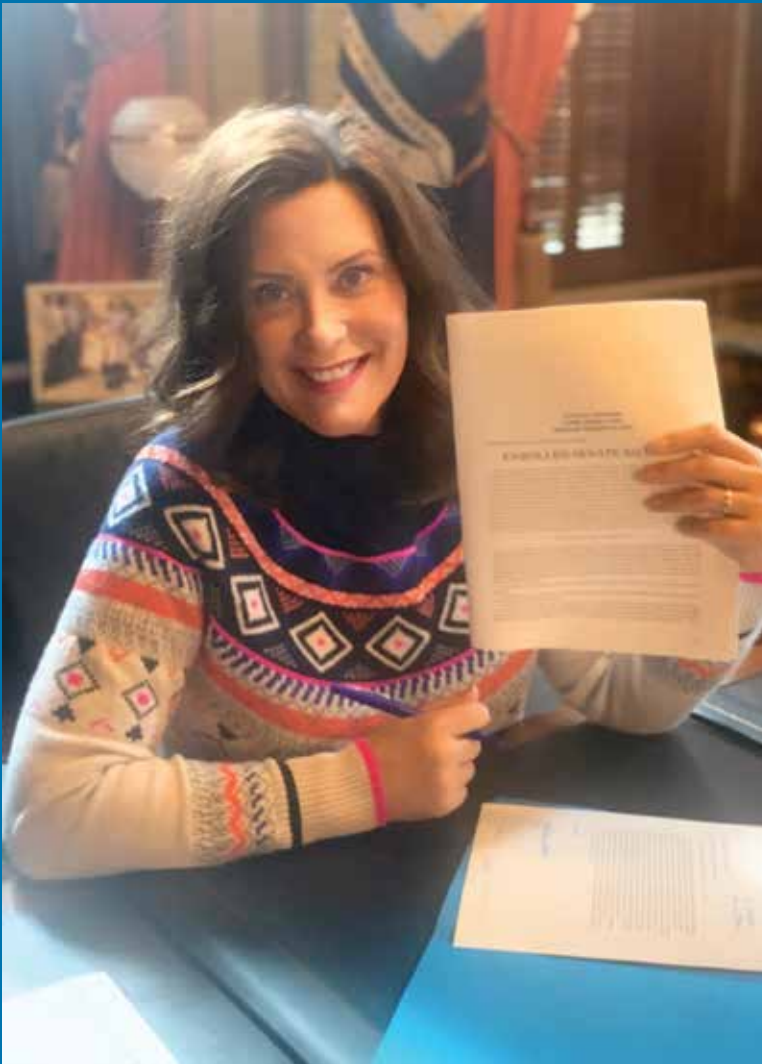
"And if they don't believe that, all they have to do is look at the first year of this legislative session — all the things that have been done to turn back 12 years of destructive education policies are huge. We can't afford not to be involved in politics, because that's where rules are made." ▼

Keep the momentum going — Give to MEA-PAC

Wins for educators and students were plentiful in 2023. A record state education budget. Universal free student meals. Expanded bargaining rights. Enhanced school safety measures. Tax relief for retirees and lower-wage workers. The list is long and growing.

Keep the momentum going into 2024 by making a contribution to MEA-PAC. Your support will go to elect more friends of public education, from your local school board to the State Capitol to Washington, D.C. Make a one-time or recurring monthly contribution at MEAVotes.org — or contribute through your local by asking for an envelope.

Key evaluation reforms in new law



“Today’s bills take important steps to further cut unnecessary red tape and reduce government bureaucracy in schools to ensure that educators can spend more time teaching students the fundamentals they need to succeed.”

— Gov. Gretchen Whitmer

(photo courtesy of the Office of the Governor)

Under the new educator evaluation law signed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in November, the following changes will take effect for the 2024-25 school year:

- ✓ Make teacher evaluations subject to collective bargaining.
- ✓ Remove punitive aspects of the evaluation system to focus on professional development.
- ✓ Change from four rating categories to three: “effective,” “developing,” and “needing support” — a change to reduce competition and increase collaboration between teachers.
- ✓ Require an observation be at least 15 minutes (making observations more meaningful) and require written feedback within 30 days of an observation.
- ✓ Provide effective teachers with biennial or triennial evaluations (subject to bargaining).
- ✓ Require feedback concerning an evaluation be provided, in writing, to the teacher being evaluated. If no written evaluation is provided, the teacher shall be deemed effective.
- ✓ Require all evaluators engage in regular training to reduce individual bias.
- ✓ Change the probationary period for a teacher from five to four school years, when they have been rated as effective on 3 consecutive year-end performance evaluations.
- ✓ Change the student growth requirement to 20% of the evaluation rating, remove the requirement that state M-STEP data be included in evaluations, and require decisions about the use of particular growth assessments or student learning objectives be collectively bargained.
- ✓ Provide a mechanism for teachers to challenge a flawed evaluation system, including binding arbitration through the American Arbitration Association after two consecutive needs support ratings.
- ✓ Extend the testing window (required by the third grade reading law) for kindergarten students from the first 30 days to the first 90 days of the school year. ▼

Unfairly targeted, educator wins large settlement

Growing up in the mid-Michigan town of Ithaca, Bethany Fletcher enjoyed small-town life and learning from great teachers in close-knit schools. She dreamed of becoming an educator and returning to work and raise a family in her hometown — and that wish came true.

An MEA member over the past 13 years, Fletcher was teaching seventh- and eighth-grade history at the junior-senior high school in Ithaca, 25 miles south of Mt. Pleasant, where she also coached the middle school cross country team. She and her husband have three young children.

School felt like home and family: colleagues were once her teachers, and she used to babysit for the principal's kids. "This was 100% my dream job, and I thought I would be there forever," Fletcher said.

She consistently earned the highest ratings on her evaluations and stepped up to leadership roles. She served on the school improvement team, wrote presentations on school improvement plans, mentored new teachers, and volunteered to be middle school representative on the faculty council.

When she started to be mistreated at work, Fletcher didn't know her rights and the law. But she maintained teaching excellence while documenting what was happening — and for that she's grateful.

"I have no idea how I managed any of it, but I would say to anyone facing harassment as I was: your best protection is to report everything. Then keep track of every email and text. Record every instance you might need to reference in the future. Maybe you won't need it, but if you do — it's there."

Fletcher needed it. Last spring the district tried to fire her after what she termed a years-long "cycle of toxicity and harassment." She fought the district's tenure charges with MEA legal representation and won the largest sum awarded in a union-led settlement in more than 20 years.

Beyond that, she also regained strength from a low point when she didn't know how to go on, Fletcher said: "What happened to me was unimaginable. It's hard to put into words the damage that was done."

Her concern was first raised in 2021 after she told the principal a coach had made a vulgar sexual comment to her at a golf-outing fundraiser, and no discipline occurred. Soon another coach texted offensive sexual remarks to her and another female staff member, and again no serious repercussions followed her reporting.

In the wake of those reports, Fletcher said she sensed a negative new dynamic between her and an administrator who was a former long-time coach whose success in athletics was celebrated in the town.

From that point the sexual harassment moved on to multiple instances of students making inappropriate comments to her and receiving little or no punishment from administration, including one boy who mimicked a viral trend from social media by asking Fletcher about her genitalia during class.

Last school year, a group of students claimed Fletcher had exposed herself in class. She was disciplined before the students came forward to admit it never happened. The discipline was rescinded.

Then in May, two girls who had a friend's cell phone alleged that

Fletcher had sent an inappropriate photo of herself to a male student in a social media platform that deletes shared images after a time.

The next day, without warning, Fletcher was escorted to the superintendent's office, told of the allegation, informed it had been investigated, placed on paid administrative leave, and ordered to leave the building. In shock, she quoted a favorite saying of the principal on her way out that day, she said.

"I said, 'What's right is right. What's wrong is wrong.' I did not do this."

The district based its actions on the students' claims and drawings that administrators asked them to make of the supposed photo, said MEA UniServ Director Lisa Robbins. Fletcher was not interviewed, and neither her phone nor the student's phone was examined despite her offer, Robbins said.

When the district soon began to seek tenure charges, Fletcher was "extremely fragile," Robbins said. "I don't know how else to describe it. She couldn't even drive herself to the office to discuss the case."

After two years of dealing with sexual harassment, and then facing dismissal, Fletcher had reached a breaking point and didn't want to work at the district anymore. But she wasn't willing to acknowledge misconduct that didn't happen.

Meanwhile, the district refused to negotiate a settlement despite their only evidence being "stick-figure sketches" from students, Robbins said. "I repeatedly tried to warn them they didn't have a case."

The problem is school administrators have been emboldened by

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changes to teacher tenure law made in 2011 under Gov. Rick Snyder, which lowered the bar for firing teachers from requiring “just cause” to allowing decisions that are merely “not arbitrary and capricious,” said MEA Attorney Doug Wilcox.

Wilcox advised Fletcher to appeal the district’s tenure charges. That is when Erin Hopper Donahue, an attorney with the White Schneider firm, was contracted by MEA to handle the case. That moment is also when Fletcher said she hit bottom.

“I hate saying this part out loud,” she said in a voice shaking with emotion. “When I first met with Erin, I had decided if I didn’t think she believed me, I didn’t want to be alive anymore. Because I couldn’t imagine my life without being part of that community.”

Instead, in telling her story and documenting details with a binder of evidence Hopper Donahue asked her to compile, Fletcher got reassured what happened to her was wrong. She had experienced sexual harassment. The district should have conducted a Title IX investigation long ago.

“I learned Title IX is supposed to protect not only students, but also educators, from sexual harassment. And for the first time I thought, *Gosh — maybe it’ll be OK.*”

Hopper Donahue filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) charging sex discrimination and retaliation. In July, trial began on the district’s tenure charges with the district presenting its case on the first day of what should have been a three-day hearing.

It quickly became clear from an official’s testimony that investigatory



MEA member Bethany Fletcher says legal help from the union brought a settlement in her tenure case and “gave me my life back.”

notes had been withheld which should have been turned over to Hopper Donahue as requested during the discovery phase. On those grounds, the lawyer got the case thrown out on the first day — an exceedingly rare event, she said.

By then she’d seen the district’s case and cross-examined student witnesses who said they saw a photo of Fletcher but couldn’t produce a copy despite knowing how to screen-shot, photograph or save an image.

Armed with strong evidence the district failed to protect Fletcher from ongoing harassment, plus lack of facts from a most cursory investigation of student claims, Hopper Donahue delivered a long speech to the school board as it considered the superintendent’s request to refile charges in closed session.

On that night in August, the board listened and reversed course — agreeing to give Fletcher a large monetary settlement and positive recommendation. She agreed to resign and drop the EEOC complaint.

“This case just shows how emboldened school districts have become to go after teachers whenever they want to,” Hopper Donahue said. “Bethany’s children may be too young to understand, but she set a lesson for them to see what happens when you stand up for yourself.”

Fletcher says she didn’t do it alone: “If not for MEA, I would not be here today. They collectively gave me my life back.”

She believes the students who falsely accused her didn’t mean it to go that far and the school board assumed the district had real evidence. She advises educators to join the union and advocate for each other. “You don’t realize how powerful it is to have union support in a crisis until it happens to you.”

Now a few months out from the turmoil, Fletcher still doesn’t know if she will return to teaching. “When people ask what I’m going to do with my life, I say ‘I don’t know; it’s a surprise.’ But thankfully I have options today where I didn’t see that I had options before.” ♡

Educators boost Slotkin in campaign event for U.S. Senate bid



U.S. Rep. Elissa Slotkin said she received her proudest endorsement when MEA announced its recommendation of the third-term 7th District congresswoman in her bid for the U.S. Senate. Educators are mission-oriented people, and she feels kinship, she said at an event in Macomb County this fall.

A Holly native who grew up working on the family farm, Slotkin is a national security expert and former analyst who completed three tours alongside the military in Iraq and later served in the White House, Pentagon and State Department.

“We have trends going on in the world right now and in our state that make you all particularly important and make the relationship between educators and their lawmakers particularly important,” she told MEA members and leaders who gathered at an Oct. 27 event in Sterling Heights to cheer her selection by our union’s Statewide Screening & Recommendations Committee.

First, she noted, the post-pandemic era presents overlapping

issues playing out in the public education arena: “learning loss, behavior issues in schools, mental health issues in schools, the lack of support, the lack of staffing... and lack of civility issues.”

Slotkin also pointed to “the incredible, once-in-a-generation moment” the labor movement is experiencing — with resurgent organizing and job actions across the country.

“There is something going around where people have caught the bug that when you collectively bargain as a group, you get more than when you go in by yourself,” she said. “It’s not a radical concept, but it’s nice to see it in vogue.”

In addition, rapid shifts in technology are driving discussions around how to prepare students for a future world we can’t envision. “Those are three major trends that you all are at the center of, and again — it makes me extremely proud to be involved with you and to take your counsel,” Slotkin said.

With its endorsement this fall, MEA became the 17th labor union — and

largest public employee union to date — to support Slotkin in the race to replace retiring U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow in 2024.

The recommendation was made by a diverse committee of MEA members from across the state, including teachers, education support professionals, higher education faculty and staff, school retirees and aspiring educators.

Since her election to Congress in 2018, Slotkin has advocated for increased federal funding for critical education programs like Title I and Title II and has supported legislation to fully fund special education.

In response to questions, she outlined support for no-debt education and training for aspiring educators and improved education funding formulas to better promote equity in high-poverty areas.

Ensuring more folks can reach and stay in the middle class tops her list of priorities. That requires policies to create jobs with dignity and tackle disproportionate costs of health care, prescription drugs, housing, post-secondary education and child care, she said.

Another goal: Slotkin wants to make more products in the U.S. — “certain critical items,” such as emergency public health supplies; microchips for computers, cars and devices; and pharmaceuticals.

And she wants to focus on addressing what is truly harming our kids, Slotkin said, noting: “This is the one that I know you feel and are quite literally on the front lines of... The number-one killer of children under



As MEA's recommended candidate for U.S. Senate, Congresswoman Elissa Slotkin met with members and leaders at an event in Macomb County this fall.

21 is gun violence in our communities, in our schools, by suicide and by accident.”

Slotkin is the first member of Congress to have two school shootings in her district, in Oxford in 2021 and last February at Michigan State University. After the tragedy at Oxford High School, she introduced legislation to require safe storage of firearms in homes with children and won bipartisan passage in the House.

She also supported commonsense gun laws requiring universal background checks and extreme risk protection orders.

“I have seen terrible things. I did three tours in Iraq alongside the military. I carried a Glock and an M4 semi-automatic, and I thank God every day that I did to protect myself. But I have never seen something worse than the experience of a school shooting and what it does to that community and that school.”

Decrying the politicization of issues surrounding guns and safety, she added to applause, “I grew up with guns; I’m sure many people in this room did, but you can be a responsible gun owner and care about the safety of children.”

In addition, she said, climate change is happening. Diseases of

despair — mental illness and drug addiction — are truly harming our children, and educators are on the receiving end of those stresses. The mental health system needs revamping. We need more professionals to work with kids in schools.

“I want to focus on those issues, not the non-real issues,” Slotkin said to growing applause as she listed non-threats to children which have been whipped into false controversies by well-funded far-right groups.

“You know what’s not a threat to our children? Books. Books are not a threat to our kids. Ideas and access to ideas are not threats to our children, nor is teaching Black history. And neither is being a welcoming, inclusive community.”

Her final reason for running, she reminded those in attendance, involves “more style than substance,” yet it matters: if elected, the 47-year-old will be the youngest Democratic woman in the Senate. “And while it’s not just an age thing, I do think the place could use a bit of new energy,” she said.

Slotkin wants to bring forward her experience in strategic planning to stop playing “shallow defense” and instead legislate affirmatively to protect our democracy and our rights.

“That is why I care about what you all do, because you hold up our state,” she said. “It all comes down to our education system.”

Antonella Piccirilli, president of the paraeducators union in Utica Community Schools, said Slotkin’s message resonated. Schools across the state are facing the same struggles, and Slotkin’s no-nonsense approach is a breath of fresh air, Piccirilli said.

“She’s committed to doing whatever she can do at the federal level to make sure we’re equipped and supported, and that’s what I need to hear. We need it — we truly do.”

Kristi Craig, president of the Howell Education Association, said she already recognized Slotkin’s superior abilities even before attending the campaign event. A 25-year history teacher in Howell, Craig lives in the 7th House District which the congresswoman currently represents.

“I think it’s her military experience, but from what I’ve seen with Elissa Slotkin she has the ability to zoom in on what the mission is and then figure out a plan of what to do and who can do it,” Craig said. “She’s the kind of leader who gets the job done.” ▼

Educator honored as leader

This fall MEA member Arshen Baldwin was honored by the NAACP Saginaw Branch with its 2023 Young Professionals Award for leadership in her community — nearly 20 years after she took one of the hardest routes toward becoming a teacher.

Baldwin started out as an untrained substitute in a classroom where her predecessor walked away, unable to manage student behaviors.

“At first I was covering for the day, and the administrator noticed I had a good command of the classroom, so she asked me back,” Baldwin said. “I felt like I could give those kids what was given to me, and I ended up finishing the year there. I was able to build relationships in a short time.”

She had recently graduated from Central Michigan University with a bachelor’s degree in exercise physiology, having planned to become a physical therapist. Then she married, started a family and began substitute teaching in Saginaw where she was raised by her grandmother since the age of nine.

Just second in her family to go to college, Baldwin said working with young people fit her values: “I’m a very strong believer that education is the ticket out of poverty.”

She eventually earned two master’s degrees while working and raising two sons, and started at Saginaw Public Schools in 2011 as a special education teacher. The next year she took a role helping at-risk students complete credit recovery and career education in one new alternative program.

Baldwin defined the job, building relationships so students felt valued and wanted to come to school — even opening the building for Saturday

help if needed. “My oldest students are now in their mid- to late-20s, and I still have great relationships with them to this day,” she said.

Three years ago she became a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) specialist at Arthur Hill High School, delivering Tier 1 teaching tools for use with all students, monitoring academic and behavioral data to support interventionists, and aiding educators in addressing individual student needs.

“Sometimes a teacher will say, ‘I’m teaching this lesson and attempting to differentiate, and these students are still failing my assessment.’ And I may provide different strategies for reteaching or look at different ways to assess understanding — whatever is needed.”

Baldwin serves as a district trainer and leader in restorative practices, such as how to operate whole-class circles to build relationships or restorative circles to resolve conflict. Preventing and solving problems between a student and teacher or between students keeps kids in school and learning.

In addition, she teaches a Community Culture & Change course to aspiring educators at Saginaw Valley State University where she earned a degree. “We look at diversity, equity and inclusion to ensure lessons are multicultural in nature and include diverse perspectives no matter the content being taught.”

She serves on the board of trustees at Delta College where she’s been part of hiring a new president and launching a new dual-enrollment partnership with Saginaw schools so high school juniors and seniors can choose a pathway to graduate with up to one year of college credits.



**Arshen Baldwin and sons
Lionel (left) and Michael**

And she’s an organizer for One Week One Street, a nonprofit that revitalizes a street in east Saginaw every third week in June. “We do landscaping, build porches, wash and paint houses, clean out yards. We’ve put in a community park and done community gardens. We plan a year in advance for this week, and we work hard those five days.”

Baldwin credits good time management and “a very strong village of family and friends” with helping her do so much and instill the same respect for education and community involvement in her two sons, now a freshman at University of Michigan and a junior in high school.

She was humbled to be recognized by an organization as iconic as the Saginaw NAACP, she said. “I don’t do it for recognition, but I’m grateful to be acknowledged by them. It tells me I need to keep going on to see where I can continue to make an impact.” ▼

Happy Holidays to you

This holiday season, we at MESSA want to take the time to remind each and every public school employee how valuable you are to our children and our communities.

MESSA is a nonprofit organization created and led by education employees that provides quality health benefits to MEA members and their families because our mission is to make a positive impact on your lives.

Your job is not easy. It's time consuming, stressful and demanding. You grade papers, produce fun school plays, make sure our kids are safely on the bus and keep the building clean. When our kids need a hug, you're there to hug them. When

they need encouragement, you encourage them.

We rely on you to prepare our kids today so they can be successful tomorrow. That's why we believe you deserve exceptional health benefits that you can rely on. You deserve unmatched personal service that helps you navigate the complex world of health care.

So, when you are celebrating the holidays with family and friends, enjoy all the traditions and camaraderie this season offers. And we hope you remember that MESSA is grateful to you for everything you do to care for our children, schools and communities. ♥



*By Ross Wilson,
MESSA Executive Director*



Michigan Tools for Schools Finalists

Two MEA member skilled trades instructors were among 20 finalists nationwide to win \$50,000 in cash prizes in the Harbor Freight Tools for Schools 2023 Prize for Teaching Excellence.

Jeff Webb, an advanced manufacturing teacher at the Southern Michigan Center for Science and Industry in Hudson Schools, was named a finalist for the fifth year in a row. Formerly a middle school science teacher, Webb took on the role of teaching everything mechatronics five years ago.

David Barresi, a carpentry teacher for 40 years, was awarded the finalist prize for his work teaching woodworking at Frankfort High School where his students have won

numerous state- and national-level woodworking competitions.

"My greatest joy is to help a student discover their own innate

abilities and creativity," Barresi says. "Students need alternative ways to learn through hands-on experiences found in project-based learning." ♥

An advertisement for Central Michigan University's School Counseling program. It features a photo of a man in a yellow polo shirt sitting at a desk with a laptop and a coffee cup. The text reads: "OBTAIN YOUR MASTERS IN SCHOOL COUNSELING. Play a vital role advocating for youth. CACREP Accredited. Full or part-time, online. Next Cohort begins Fall 2024." At the bottom, it says "LEARN MORE & APPLY" with the URL "ehs.cmich.edu/counseling" and the Central Michigan University logo.

Opal Wong left the classroom in 1994 after 37 years in East Lansing schools, but the MEA-Retired educator and certified Brain Gym instructor never stopped using movement to teach children. Now 90, she shares how knowing the brain-body connection can help educators help young people.



Did you always want to be a teacher? I never wanted to be a teacher; I thought I would be a social worker. But I always loved learning and still do. My mother said, “Be curious.” My dad said, “You never stop learning.” Coming from my background — three sisters were born in China, and I was the first of four children born here. Growing up with a non-English speaking family, just like immigrants now, we all have that dream of America. We worked in our family’s laundry business and worked hard in school. We did our homework, but also play was important. I just loved school and the kind people there. So when I became a teacher, it was like going to heaven.

Why did you start using purposeful movement in your teaching? I’ve always been aware of the mind-body-brain connection. I’ve been so lucky in my life to learn from wonderful teachers all over the world. The pathways that connect our body and brain are always sending electrical energy back and forth across the nervous system. We can help that by hydrating — because water conducts energy — and breathing to increase oxygen. And we know specific movements to do with our body that can stimulate, unblock or calm parts of the brain. The first level of the brain is about staying safe; it’s a survival thing. If you can get past that, you can move on to higher levels. The ultimate learning state is relaxed and alert, and we can help children find it.

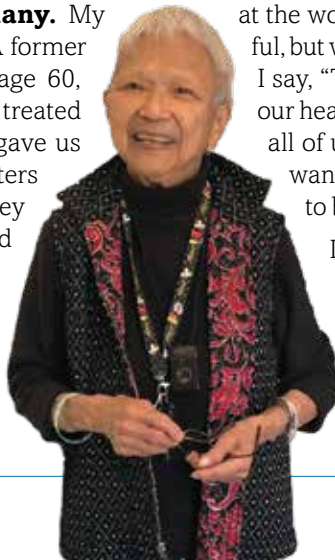
If an educator wants to try what you do — what’s a good starting point? I talk about the 26 moves in Brain Gym; these are simple moves for calming and focusing. I use them myself. There are different ones— Lazy 8, for example, helps kids who struggle to read. But to get started, try P.A.C.E. [Positive, Active, Clear and Energetic — a four-step Brain Gym warm-up — search for videos and directions]. Do it every day. It works and takes less than four minutes. I always start with telling my students, “take a drink of water,” because water is so important. The next step is brain buttons to stimulate oxygen flow — one hand on your stomach, one hand on your chest right under the sternum, and lightly massage — breathing in, letting go, three times. Then switch hands. The next one is cross-overs to get both sides of the brain working together. The last one is hook-ups, and doing these brings a sense of safety and calm to the body. Kids love to do these moves.

Over six decades, I’m sure you’ve helped so many. My gosh, there’s so many. A former student just retired at age 60, and she said to me, “You treated us as real people. You gave us choices.” I still get letters thanking me for what they remember, that I believed in them. When I retired, I went back to volunteer. I said, “Give me the ones that are giving you the

most trouble.” I worked one-on-one, usually for half an hour. I would always say, “What do you need to accomplish today?” so we could be sure to get that done. But we started with water and movements. After they learned the moves, I’d say pick two and do them. I let them choose. If they make a decision and do something purposeful, then when they go back they have an intention. They would tell me, “When I do this, I can think better.” I would say, “You are so smart; I like you because you make me look good,” and we would laugh together. Then the teacher would tell me, “When you’re not here, they still do the moves.”

You retired 30 years ago. What keeps you going at this work? I take this as a gift to be able to help children—I think it kept me young. I like being part of a community of children and their parents. The thing is I’ve had a wonderful life, and I hold on to gratitude. I’m very optimistic; I know that. I’ve always been told that’s just who I am. I know it’s hard to look at the world today and be grateful, but we have to be. Every day I say, “Thank you.” I believe in our hearts all of us want peace, all of us want safety, all of us want love, and all of us want to be the best we can be. ♥

If you would like to learn more about Opal’s tips, email *MEA Voice* Editor Brenda Ortega at bortega@mea.org.





We have you covered

These are difficult times! The cost of everything, including your insurance premiums, seem to be going up. Be assured at MEA Financial Services, we are here to help you navigate these challenging times. Contact a MEA Financial Services Representative to make sure you are properly insured and taking advantage of all eligible discounts. Log on to www.meafs.com or, call us toll-free at 1-800-292-1950. Remember at MEA Financial Services we have you covered!

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- **Home Owners Insurance**

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- **Commercial Insurance and Bonds**



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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.

