

MEA • VOICE

INSPIRING STORIES OF
ORGANIZING
inside this issue

flint [flɪnt] noun

a hard stone that
produces a spark
when struck
by steel;
unyielding



GAME ON

For Our Students

As we were about to send this edition to print, President Joe Biden ended his re-election bid. By the time you see this magazine we'll know more, but two things are certain.

First, Joe Biden deserves our thanks as educators and union members for his tireless efforts for students and workers alike. Record federal funding for schools through the American Rescue Plan. An educator as Secretary of Education. Billions in student loan forgiveness for educators. Free school meals — because we know hungry kids can't learn. All thanks to Biden's leadership.

Second, the stakes are still high this fall and there's more work to be done. It's time to get in the game for our students — because our work will ensure they receive the great public education they deserve.

From the White House and the U.S. Capitol to the State House and local school boards, the future of public education is on the ballot. The future of adequate, equitable funding for education is on the ballot. Our momentum as a state and nation are on the ballot.

We should celebrate wins, like the recent budget victory that gives 100,000 school employees across Michigan 3% of their salaries back. Many hardworking educators have sacrificed from their wages for over a decade to help pay off debt on the state's school retiree health care plan, which is now fully funded.

Combined with a reduction in districts' retirement payroll taxes, schools can invest more in students and staff. (Learn more at [MEA.org/legislation](https://www.mea.org/legislation).)

Next, let's work to make these changes permanent and re-invest in student mental health and safety. Let's work on health insurance costs and pension restoration.

This issue shows how working together leads to great things. To keep winning, we need every MEA team member playing their part. This fall and all school year, it's Game On for Our Students.

In Solidarity Always,
Chandra Madafferi
Brett Smith
Aaron Eling



Chandra Madafferi,
MEA President & CEO



Brett Smith,
Vice President



Aaron Eling,
Secretary-Treasurer



Check out the new **MEAVotes.org**

- Find MEA recommended candidates on the ballot where you live.
- Give to MEA-PAC or volunteer to help elect friends of public education.
- Apply to vote from home and learn about new early voting options.
- Stay up-to-date on MEA's legislative priorities and successes, including how you can raise your voice for a great public education.
- Make your voting plan!



Art show grows

This year's 60th Annual MEA/MAEA Art Purchase Exhibition featured a streamlined digital submission process which drew a record 108 entries and 85 pieces accepted into the show. Read the touching story of the art teacher who won Best in Show on page 28.

(Juror's Choice Award pictured: Bethany Goforth, Mackinac Morning, Acrylics).

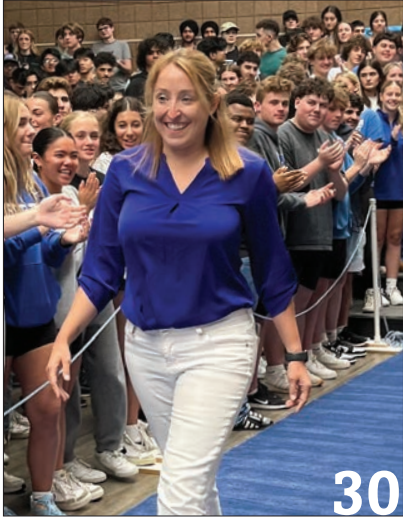


Organizing builds membership, strengthens bonds, and powers action. Throughout this issue of *MEA Voice*, where you see the organizing banner you will find stories of building forces and tapping collective strength.

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



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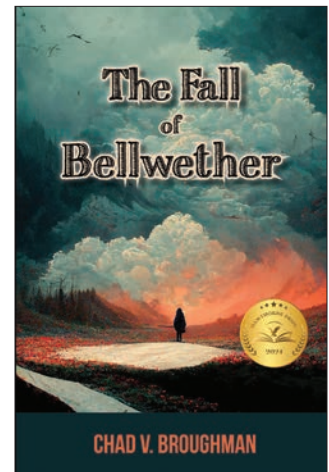
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Interim Senior Executive Director Earl Wiman
 Director of Communications and Public Engagement Doug Pratt
 Editor Brenda Ortega
 Publications Specialist ... Shantell Crispin

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Above and Beyond

MEA member Chad V. Broughman worked in early morning hours for 12 years to complete his work of historical fiction, *The Fall of Bellwether*, and he pushed past challenges to get it published. But he still finds it hard to talk about himself in pitching the book to readers. This spring the 25-year English teacher from Harbor Springs stood before 75 people at his book launch, “when suddenly I started talking about the pursuit of dreams, and the discussion became so much easier. I never knew so many people have put their dreams on a shelf.” A few years ago, Broughman had stopped looking for a publisher for his manuscript when a mentor asked him to send it out one more time. “It sounds cliched, but it actually happened: I sent it out one more time, to the First Novel Prize out of London, and it made the top five from thousands of submissions.” The near-miss spurred him on to find his match with indie publisher Anamcara Press. Set in a post-Civil War fictional Michigan town between Marquette and the Keweenaw, his story follows five intertwined characters connected by the novel’s “original sin”: townsfolk hanged two women for a crime they didn’t commit. A reviewer compared it to *Cold Mountain*, a 1997 novel later adapted for film, and Broughman sees parallels in the brutality “but also the mercy. Amongst the brutal things that happen, hope floats up in this book.” Now at work on a second novel, he still enjoys talking of dreams in promotional appearances. “Maybe in the end this is about me telling people, ‘Knock it off. Don’t make excuses. Get your dream down off the shelf.’”



QUOTABLES

“Free school meals save parents \$850 per year per kid and valuable time every morning. When students are fed, they can focus better in class. Let’s keep working together to feed our kids and ensure every family has the support they need to thrive.”

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer on securing funding in the state education budget to continue providing universal free school meals to Michigan’s 1.4 million public school students in the next school year.



ICYMI

A middle school social studies teacher from Rochester and one of his former students worked together to research a Michigan man killed on the beaches of Normandy, France during the Allied Forces’ D-Day invasion 80 years ago. MEA member Matt Cottone, who teaches world history at Van Hoosen Middle School, and Ian Smith — now a junior at Adams High School — pieced together the story of U.S. Navy seaman Auvergne Breault, an Upper Peninsula native who made the ultimate sacrifice for his country at age 20 on June 6, 1944. Cottone and Smith traveled to Normandy this summer as one of 15 teacher-student teams nationwide chosen for the Albert H. Normandy Institute fellowship through George Washington University. They delivered a eulogy for Breault, which will be enshrined in the Normandy American Cemetery archives. “All of the work throughout the year of this fellowship felt worth it when we saw his name on the memorial wall,” Cottone said. “With sand from Omaha beach, Ian wiped the etched letters of his name to give it the sandy golden glow it deserved, as is customary.” Once stateside again, the pair hand-delivered a copy of the eulogy to Breault’s nieces in Escanaba. Sharing the experience with a former student made it extra special, Cottone said, adding the events have left “an indelible impact on both of our lives.” Read more about how teacher and student tracked down Breault’s story at mea.org/rochester-d-day-project.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

Let's bridge the generations

MEA members build the future of public education and our union, but at times generational differences get in the way. Members from MEA's early-career ranks of MiNE (Michigan New Educators) have ideas for bridging the divide.

Studies show that Millennials (born 1981–1996) and Gen Z (born 1997–2012) are activists interested in union membership and making the world a better place.

+ Remember positives

Aspiring and early career educators understand trauma, social and racial inequities, and a political landscape that often vilifies educators and public education, yet they chose to enter the profession. They want to hear positive messages from veterans.

“Early career educators have been seeing and hearing stories of those leaving the profession due to how much it has changed for them for a variety of different reasons. It has been really tough coming into the profession with what seems like so many teachers who are not happy or fulfilled enough.” — Meghan Beauchamp

+ Know differences

College tuition and fees have increased more than 200% from previous generations, saddling newer educators with higher student loan debt while facing higher costs of living, more out-of-pocket medical care and insurance, and disappearing pension and retirement health care.

Michigan ranks 41st in the nation for starting teacher pay. Both MEA and NEA are advocating to improve these problems, but meanwhile newer educators want more veteran colleagues to remember they no longer have benefits that offset low pay levels.

“Being a teacher is tough, we all know that. But the benefits for working in education used to be good, which is why people put up with being paid less than other professionals. Salaries have not kept up with the changes to the benefits that originally kept teachers in the profession.” — Erinn Parker

+ Find solutions

As we work toward making improvements in salaries, benefits, and working conditions of all members, MiNE asks that we offer them one thing everyone wants: respect.



Early career educators pictured, L-R: Angela Chen, Audra DeRidder, Tharan Suvarna, Padric Bolen, Allison O’Connell. Follow Michigan New Educators (MiNE) on Facebook and Instagram @mineweducators.

“One struggle for early career educators is finding a space for their voices to be heard. While early career educators respect and learn from veteran teachers, they also need to be included in the conversation. Although they may not have years of experience, they bring passion and energy to their involvement, whether in their local union or school community. As our current leaders will eventually retire, it is essential to prepare younger educators to step into leadership roles at local and state levels.” — Allison O’Connell

The fight to walk again

School social worker beats paralysis with MESSA's help, own stubbornness



When Ellen Mazique-Sydloski stepped out of the University of Michigan Hospital in June 2021, she hoped the spinal surgery to correct her scoliosis would relieve the chronic pain she had long experienced.

Instead, Mazique-Sydloski, who also has brittle bone disease, found herself on a strenuous six-month journey of delirium, excruciating pain, and wondering whether she'd ever walk again. For a while, befuddled doctors didn't know why she couldn't walk weeks after the surgery.

Months after her first surgery, Mazique-Sydloski, 54, was rushed to U-M Hospital for emergency surgery where doctors discovered a fracture and an abscess at the base of her neck. They cleared the infectious fluid from her spinal cord and placed plates in her spine.

When she woke, she was paralyzed from the waist down.

"I had no feeling, no movement," said Mazique-Sydloski, a social worker at Barry Intermediate School District. "I had delirium and was placed on suicide watch. They were worried (the infection) may have gone to my brain. When I came to, I had to learn to live life as a paraplegic."

Told she might not walk again, Mazique-Sydloski didn't accept that and knew she was in for the fight of her life.

Wearing a body brace and making no progress while toggling in and out of ill-equipped nursing homes and rehab centers, Mazique-Sydloski made quite possibly the most important phone call of her life to MESSA's Medical Case Management Program (MCM).

The MCM program provides MESSA members and covered dependents who have serious illnesses or injuries with advocacy and personal support from a registered nurse. The eight staff nurses work directly with about 200 members every year.

"My first thought was we've got to get her out of there," said Mary Kay Erickson, MESSA's nurse coordinator for MCM and a registered nurse

herself. "She was just laying around, and they didn't know what to do with her. Her physical function was in a further decline."

With MCM's help, Mazique-Sydloski found Special Tree Rehabilitation, a Romulus-based facility with an inpatient neurological unit. She met the center's patient criteria and MCM approved the request for treatment.

"To have MESSA fight for the specialized treatment, I would never be here," Mazique-Sydloski said. "If I was still in that rehab home, I wouldn't be where I am right now. I wouldn't be working again. I wouldn't be walking."

Months after intensive treatment and demanding exercises, Mazique-Sydloski walked out of Special Tree.

"All of my doctors thought I would never walk again," said Mazique-Sydloski, who gets around with the help of her cane and walker. "I have definitely beat the odds. I nearly died in August (2021). I am able to live and enjoy my family.

"MESSA's made a difference in my life since this injury because I wouldn't be here." ▾

Watch Ellen's story



messa.org/hereforyou



K-zoo support staff fight exclusion

Stories by Brenda Ortega, MEA Voice Editor



L-R Kevin Fannin, Mrs. Prevo, Shona Espinoza and Joanna Miller want recognition that support staff contribute to students' wellness and success.

School support staff in Kalamazoo have taken to heart a familiar union saying: Don't mourn, organize.

When the district's new superintendent offered educator bonuses to teachers and paraeducators — excluding school office personnel, bus drivers, campus security staff and other employees — the Kalamazoo Support Professionals (KSP) unit fought back.

Superintendent Darrin Slade told them they were denied bonuses because they're not "educators."

We dissent, they responded. They spoke out persistently at school board meetings, earned press and social media attention, and turned out community support.

Read their powerful stories at mea.org/ksp-challenge-exclusion.

Sadly KSP lost their battle for bonuses, but they won't be silenced. "Sometimes organizing means regrouping and coming back stronger," said KSP Vice President Shona Espinoza.

➡ MEA member Kevin Fannin has worked in campus security over 30 years for the district. Walk the halls of Milwood Middle School with him, and see how beloved he is by staff and students alike.

"I go through this building with 800 kids, and I meet every last one. I know their names; I get to know them and what they like. I communicate all day every day so I can build that rapport."

➡ Mrs. Prevo is an MEA member lead administrative secretary whom even adults call Mrs. Prevo. She documented "constant interaction" with students ranging from late arrivals to illness, injury, disruptions, medication dispensing, homework help, and conflict resolution.

"How can someone say we're not educators? I challenge every administrator to walk in our shoes for two weeks... We do important jobs, and it is challenging on a daily basis to do what we do."

➡ KSP President Joanna Miller got training on how to drive a bus, but

colleagues taught her to manage a mobile classroom of 65 middle schoolers or 40 elementary students she's responsible for delivering to school safe and ready to learn.

"I'm following IEPs (Individualized Education Programs) and directions from teachers and paras about how to manage behaviors for my students who have autism and their safety plan for how they're supposed to take care of things on the bus. I report back and coordinate with folks on behavior plans."

➡ KSP Vice President Shona Espinoza recently moved her family for the third time in 18 months due to rent increases. As a para, her job category was originally included in the bonus plan, but she fought for recognition of others because leaving them out is "a slap in the face."

"It devalues who we are and what we do for these kids but also for this district. We all educate these kids in our own way, in different ways. There's always a teachable moment. Kids are always learning." ▼

In win, Flint teachers ‘breathe easier’

In January when seven school board members of Flint Community Schools voted down a settlement agreement between the district and its teachers, their move sparked a crisis which spun into a dramatic three-month showdown culminating in a huge win for United Teachers of Flint.

But the historic victory was actually 10 years in the making.

The conflict that erupted with the board’s bizarre Jan. 12 vote began brewing back in 2014 when Flint teachers accepted double-digit concessions to help pull the district out of deficit spending. For a decade since, frustrations mounted over continuous salary step freezes.

“Our people had enough, and they were done,” said UTF President Karen Christian, a sixth-grade teacher determined to free educators trapped on steps since she first won election in the concessionary contract’s wake. “I vowed long ago I wouldn’t leave until it was finished.”

The 33-year veteran achieved her goal this spring after weathering

enormous challenges — from large-scale disasters such as the Flint water crisis and the global pandemic to personal battles against breast cancer and a 2020 bout with COVID that landed her in a hospital intensive care unit.

“It’s a cliché, but I know every teacher in this district on a first-name basis; we’ve been together my entire career, and we really, truly are a family,” she said. “I just knew I couldn’t stop until every single one of them was fully restored — back to where they rightfully belonged.”

Among other improvements, the agreement approved by the board following weeks of tumult makes whole all teachers still moving through the pay scale, advancing them to the step on the salary schedule reflecting their years of service — retroactive to the beginning of last school year.

For many the raise was significant, and for others life-changing. The largest annual pay increase one member received after moving up multiple steps was \$28,000. Those already

at the top — including Christian — made one retroactive step in May and will take a final one in August.

Negotiated as a grievance settlement, the deal also allows the district to lure experienced applicants by offering higher pay to start. At a joint press conference, both sides celebrated its potential to boost the district by retaining Flint’s teachers and attracting new and veteran talent.

Third-year Superintendent Kevelin Jones said, “The teachers’ union and the administration have a level of trust to know that when we sit down together we’re all trying to do what’s best for our scholars. We’re going to keep building on that trust to move this district forward.”

Christian credited Jones that employees felt safe speaking out. “It was important that teachers felt listened to as they shared stories of trauma they’ve been through and their students have been through. It made a difference that allowed us to get back to the table and reach this agreement.”



United Teachers of Flint Vice President Trishanda Williams, left, and President Karen Christian led efforts to end a painful 10-year chapter in the proud history of Flint Community Schools.





L-R: Williams and others picketed at school board meetings for weeks. UTF member Krissy Gatz shared her story with a TV news reporter. Flint alum and MEA staffer Qiana Harden spoke to the board about teachers' influence on young lives.

Christian casts a long shadow in Flint. She attended district schools, where both of her parents were teachers and her mother was a union activist. She remembers walking picket lines in the 1980s alongside her mom and dad. Her three grown children are Flint graduates.

It's been painful to watch caring educators leave the district, she said: "You feel bad because they really didn't want to go, but they had to fend for their families. Now we have this deal for all the teachers who stayed. But mostly it's for Flint kids. They deserve the best."

➔ **The crisis campaign** waged by UTF centered Flint's young people. The school district had seen an exodus of educators as surrounding districts began offering steps to experienced new hires amid the teacher shortage. Openings in Flint went largely unfilled, and less qualified substitutes stepped in.

"Flint students are in crisis," Christian told board members at a packed meeting on Valentine's Day. "The crisis that they're in is trying to learn in overcrowded classrooms. The crisis they're in is not having certified teachers in every classroom."

Union bonds were strengthened as crisis actions escalated from issuing

press releases to filing an Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) charge, picketing and testifying at school board meetings, eliciting union support from across the state, posting multiple billboards across town, pulling off a mass sickout, and unanimously authorizing a strike.

The unit's membership grew from 60 to 85% in those weeks, a point Christian emphasized during public testimony. "Do you see all of us here? We're all united. We want to be treated like professionals... and we want to be able to retire with dignity."

UTF Vice President Trishanda Williams, a Flint schools alumna and 22-year veteran who teaches marketing and Intro to Engineering Design at the high school, summed up the message in an interview: "Teachers are the heartbeat of our schools. Without them you have no district."

Like others, Williams has foregone higher pay elsewhere out of deep commitment to Flint's community and children. The stories educators told were heartbreaking, she said.

"We've had teachers working two jobs and still spending paychecks to provide what's needed — whether that's school supplies, food, clothing, personal items. People lined up to tell their stories and essentially what

they said was we make sacrifices and the district has benefited. We do it because we want the children to have all that we had growing up."

MEA President Chandra Madafferri noted the disparity in resources between high-poverty districts and wealthier ones when she testified at a late February board meeting. She pinned Flint's plight on failed state policies from a dozen years ago which starved schools of resources.

The depth of the crisis is not your fault, Madafferri told board members, but "if you choose to hold the line, you're still losing great educators. And the students lose... I'm asking you again to please honor the agreement that was made in good faith by your educators and your administrators."

➔ **The settlement deal** grew out of pay and workload grievances filed by UTF last year, said MEA UniServ Director Bruce Jordan, a former Flint teacher who was laid off amid district budget cuts in 2013 before taking over the staff job serving the unit.

"We leveraged a bunch of things like elementary planning periods which they don't provide to the contractual extent they're supposed to," Jordan said. "They were also hiring in people above others who were frozen. Those



Week after week, UTF members such as 26-year veteran Dena Ashworth (left) showed up and shared powerful testimony on the effects of years of pay cuts and freezes — low morale, educator losses, unfilled jobs, and personal struggles.

grievances were already scheduled for arbitration, and they were slam dunks.

“This agreement settled all of those grievances,” he explained, noting that Christian’s mother trained him up in the union — as she did others — when both worked at Northern High School. “And now Karen and I have been singularly focused on this issue for 10 years, and we finally are able to breathe.”

An earlier settlement hammered out last fall first raised hopes, then crushed them. That deal — very similar to the one approved recently — was mediated by the Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC) in talks between the union and district administration, including board members.

The union’s membership approved the original tentative agreement in November, but weeks later the school board took its highly unusual January vote to back out of those agreed-upon terms.

With that move, a fundamental shift occurred within United Teachers of Flint. Years of pent-up frustration became palpable indignation as educators and their supporters filled the auditorium at board meetings for

weeks, chanting “Shame” and “We are done.”

➔ **It wasn’t easy** for people to speak up publicly, Christian said. “A lot of times we want to keep our trauma buried to ourselves. But for those teachers that bared their personal stories, they felt this was the moment.”

MEA member Krissy Gatz, an elementary teacher in the district for 31 years, came to tears telling the board she didn’t know if she could stay and worried who would be left. The 19% pay cut teachers accepted in 2014 plus step freezes since have “cost me a great deal,” she said.

Asked to elaborate after the meeting by a television news reporter, Gatz hesitated before acknowledging on camera, “Remembering this is painful. I lost my house.”

After losing one-fifth of her income, she couldn’t keep up with bills, she said. “There were times when I couldn’t afford food. Being proud... I would give my dogs to my family and lie, ‘I have a teacher meeting this weekend; could you take my dogs? So then my dogs would have food.’”

Gatz has been living with her brother as she rebuilds, she said. She stayed in the district, “because I love Flint;

I am Flint. I’m a Flint kid, and I had Flint teachers who loved me. It’s my turn to love Flint kids, but I need to love me and my family as well.”

Teachers who left the district also wrote letters or returned to talk about why — such as Nadia Rodriguez, who worked in the Montessori program at Durant-Tuuri-Mott Elementary.

“You all know my story,” she told the board. “I’ve always been proud to have been a product of the Flint Community Schools. It was my dream to be a part of the staff, build relationships with students in my community, and to be the support they need to achieve their dreams.”

Rodriguez quit last year because multiple teaching positions went unfilled in her building while basic material and building needs went unaddressed and grievances ignored, she said: “You left me and many others just like me no choice but to seek employment elsewhere.”

MEA member Dena Ashworth testified she was the only certified math teacher left at the grades 7-12 building where she works, Accelerated Learning Academy. “I’ve given my life to Flint Community Schools and the children,” she said in a voice crackling with emotion.



UTF member Sherry Mockles says the agreement raised teacher pay and hopes for the future. Photo of President Karen Christian announcing a strike authorization on March 13 is reprinted with permission, © 2024 MLive Media Group.

“I’ve given you my love through the children. If I left this building, you would have no one certified to teach them math. Give us our steps. We are the reason this district is still here.”

Listening to Ashworth in the audience, Qiana Harden wept. A lifelong Flint resident, a product of Flint schools, and the field assistant in MEA’s Flint office for 18 years, Harden was moved by the speakers’ bravery and love.

At the next board meeting, Harden felt “compelled” to join others from the community speaking to the board. She’s never forgotten her teachers, she testified, naming and describing several without whom, “I would not be standing before you today.” Yet they have faced “deplorable” conditions, she added.

“Teachers have such an impact and influence on a kid’s life — even 40-plus years later... I keep thinking, what about the kids? The students. How can the board of education be looking out for the best interests of the students when you are not looking out for the teachers?”

➔ **A turning point** came on March 13, weeks into the standoff. That morning 119 teachers called in sick, canceling school, and later in the day

— two hours ahead of a school board meeting — the union held a press conference to announce a strike had been authorized by a near-unanimous vote.

In a room filled with UTF members and news media, Christian calmly but firmly delivered the message: “We must act for the sake of our students. We must act for the sake of our schools. We must act for the sake of our community. The time is now.”

The union had already put up billboards across town. Vice President Trishanda Williams said the same message echoed in every action: “What are you doing to increase salaries to retain and attract people? Without teachers, you don’t have a district.”

Meanwhile, a post critical of the teachers’ sickout on the school district’s Facebook page got backlash as hundreds of comments lit up with support for the educators. “Six-hundred or so comments on that post, and they were all positive for the teachers,” Williams said. “That felt good.”

Soon negotiation dates were scheduled, and hours of bargaining led to a tentative agreement within two weeks, which was easily ratified.

Ironically on the same day, March 13, a little-noticed University of Michigan study published in the journal *Science Advances* shed some light on the suffering and struggle of children amid the Flint water crisis over the same 10 years as Flint teachers labored for concessionary pay.

The study found math achievement decreased and special needs classifications increased after the state switched the city’s drinking water supply in 2014 without ensuring the proper controls were in place to prevent lead contamination — leading to a federal disaster declaration for the city.

But while the UM study found “substantial negative effects” among Flint students, those changes occurred both among children who lived in homes with lead pipes and those without — suggesting more encompassing potential causes in addition to lead ingestion.

In other words, the water crisis affected all Flint children — not only those who experienced elevated lead exposure — just as the COVID-19 pandemic affected all children even if they didn’t contract the virus and more so in already stressed, high-poverty areas, the study said.

“We must act for the sake of our students. We must act for the sake of our schools. We must act for the sake of our community. The time is now.”

“Our results point toward the broad negative effects of the (water) crisis on children and suggest that existing estimates may substantially underestimate the overall societal cost of the crisis,” the study’s authors concluded.

The Flint water crisis is why teachers accepted a 19% pay cut back then — to avoid a threatened state takeover of schools by emergency managers charged with slashing budgets, a favorite policy move of Gov. Rick Snyder and the Republican-controlled state legislature with calamitous results for Flint and other majority-Black cities.

➔ **Hope is alive** in Flint schools because of the settlement agreement, says Sherry Mockles, a long-time teacher and MEA member who had been “brokenhearted” over the past decade’s loss of veteran educators and dearth of enthusiastic newcomers replacing them.

“But I’m so excited for what’s going to happen now,” Mockles said in an interview.

A former middle and high school social studies teacher who now serves as an instructional technology coach in the district, Mockles said Flint has a proud tradition of excellence still reverberating in the community despite losses of students, teachers and programs across decades.

“I’d put our Flint students and teachers up against any district in the state,” she said.

Yet when she hired into Flint in the mid-1990s, the district had 30,000 students. Now it has 3,000 — the result of manufacturing job losses, charter school proliferation, and “the domino effect” of budget cuts leading to more student losses.

Over the past few years, the district combined federal COVID-relief money and private foundation grants to make \$100 million in renovations to several schools with hope to build a badly needed new high school in the near future.

Next the district is planning what to do with vacant buildings and property, which became a point of contention in the battle over restoring teachers’ steps, the superintendent said, adding that this summer an aggressive enrollment campaign would seek to “bring our Flint scholars home.”

In addition to building renovations, state and federal COVID funds have been leveraged to make Flint a two-to-one technology district in which students have one device at school and one at home, Mockles said. Her job is to help educators use tech to expand and deepen student learning.

“No amount of technology, no amount of new buildings will save us if we can’t keep the staff we have and get new talent coming through our doors, but I’m really hopeful now it’s going to happen,” Mockles added.

For her part, Dena Ashworth plans to stay. After testifying she was the only certified math teacher left in her building, the 26-year veteran jumped from step nine to 15 and saw a five-figure increase in pay through the settlement — a sweeping life change that left her feeling “excited, relieved, valued.”

“I can breathe a little easier, maybe get some better food on the table, go on a vacation, fix some things around the house,” Ashworth said. “Our leaders rocked this. I can’t thank Karen Christian and Bruce Jordan enough; they brought us together, and it was beautiful.”

Christian also plans to stay a few more years and then retire with the hope this superintendent — her 24th in 33 years — can continue to lead the district toward a brighter day. The two sides will bargain a new contract in 2025.

Christian just got elected to another two years as president. She finishes 10 years on cancer medication in November. She’s four years out from a near-death experience with COVID that put everything in perspective.

“I finally feel like it’s OK for me to retire and think about other things I want to do in my life,” Christian said. “I know I’ll be leaving this in good hands.” ▼

Evert unions jointly oppose attacks

For two decades Valerie Hopkins has faced challenges and celebrated joys of teaching early elementary school in Evert Public Schools northwest of Mt. Pleasant. Four years ago she became president of her local union to make things right for members frozen on steps.

She never imagined the courage and grit she would need to summon serving as a voice for teachers and other school employees who suddenly found themselves working in fear from intimidation by two school board members wielding power to advance personal agendas.

But she dug deep and found her strength. “I’ve always tried to let my members know I’m taking their concerns seriously and I’m not going to let people get away with harassment and abuse just because they’re powerful,” Hopkins said.

The board members, Treasurer Eric Schmidt and Trustee Mark Moody, have used their positions to publicly accuse, disparage, and demean teachers, support staff, athletic coaches, and administrators and to access staff evaluation files and grading data.

The harassment, which included wholly unsubstantiated claims of theft and sexual misconduct against two school employees, continued through the 2022-23 school year until Hopkins decided to take a public stand one year ago. To do so she had to face her own fears.

“It’s been very stressful and disheartening; every night I went home and thought about it. It’s hard when you know you’re doing the right thing, but the loudest people are the ones giving the wrong message.”

The two school board members are prominent in the community. Schmidt owns a local business and

a printing company where he produces a pamphlet called Talk of the Town sometimes used to promote his words and actions.

Staff morale had plummeted, and teachers were leaving for other districts or considering it. A letter written with MEA support was read aloud by Hopkins at the August 2023 Board meeting, demanding an investigation and detailing how the board members’ actions violated school board policy.

“During the past school year, we have had to live under the constant eye of these two board members and their tactics that cause us to feel intimidated and unsafe, always waiting to find out if we were next on the list to endure their public scrutiny,” she read from her statement.

“Teachers and staff cannot endure another year of an emotionally taxing environment that is taking its toll on great educators who love their jobs and just want to come in each day and teach.”

Early last fall when newly appointed MEA UniServ Director Ryan Grinnell began work alongside Hopkins, the membership was ready to rally around their leader now taking heat from the two men. Grinnell and Hopkins also enlisted help from the support personnel and transportation units.

Executive boards from all three unions voted to issue a joint statement to the school board in October, which led to an investigation. In a hearing last February, the two officials were found guilty of more than a dozen counts each of violating the school board’s code of ethics.

Last spring the board majority issued a Public Resolution of Censure against the pair, which doesn’t guarantee a stop to the behavior but sends



Award-winning teacher Valerie Hopkins spoke out and worked with other staff unions to address damaging behavior by two school board members in Evert.

notice, “They can’t act as a board of one,” Hopkins said.

“I’ve had community members that I rarely talk to coming out of the bleachers and telling me to keep going, that I’m doing the right thing, and that’s something on the bad days that helps me push through.”

Grinnell said the unions will turn up the heat if harassing behavior continues this school year by reporting every instance to the board in expectation of “progressive discipline.”

“This is a story of the power of concerted effort at overcoming fear and attempted division to influence even your elected officials,” Grinnell said. “Staff and students both deserve a safe and healthy school environment where teaching and learning can happen.” ▼

Award-winning Farmington leader shares his ‘why’ — and how

A few years into his role as president of the Farmington Education Association (FEA), Chris DeYonke was marking member information in a spreadsheet when he stumbled across a finding: New hires who joined the union remained in the district more often than those who didn't join.

DeYonke gathered all of the data, and the difference was striking. “When the district hired someone and they didn't join the union, there was only a 50% chance that they would stay in the district the following year, vs. the new hires who joined the union: We had a 90% retention rate.”

That impressive track record was no fluke, he said, but reflected a planned and concerted effort to bolster membership by listening and delivering. “I feel like we've created something where people believe belonging is valuable and they appreciate being part of something bigger.”

For his strong local leadership beginning in COVID's first year, DeYonke was honored with MEA's Paul Blewett Friend of Education Award in April. The honor comes with a monetary award endowed through the trust

of Blewett, a longtime educator and leader from Region 17 in the U.P.

Working closely with FEA officers and especially with current Vice President Mamie Giller — who was membership chair at the time he was elected in 2020 — DeYonke has presided over a rise in local membership from around 550 to 640 today, an increase from 77% to 91%.

From the start, DeYonke and Giller worked to develop plans for signing up new hires but also to attract opt-outs and bring back former members with lapsed memberships.

“The two of them really took the reins,” said Lori Tunick, the MEA Executive Director who supports the unit. “They went out, no holds barred, and talked to people — encouraging them to join and figuring out how to get them signed up.

“It didn't happen overnight, but we created a system to begin to build up membership and we brought in training for everyone, including (building) reps,” Tunick said.

A high school special education teacher, DeYonke first meets with newly hired educators at the district's annual orientation and begins by

telling the story of his “why” — why he got involved with the union, why he served on the bargaining team since 2012, why he ran for president.

“I also tell them my children live here and go to our schools here and how I use that as motivation. I know the better working conditions that we can secure for teachers will create better teaching and learning conditions for my children.”

Both of his parents were teachers who met on the job in Dearborn. His father was local vice president and chief negotiator, a role that meant he often was “doing union work while everyone else was on vacation,” DeYonke said.

His dad sometimes left extra early in the morning for meetings with district officials. His parents attended union events and conferences together. And he enjoyed a middle-class upbringing alongside two brothers.

“From a young age I was able to see what a career could be in public education and also to understand the importance of a union and what it could do for members,” he said.

Today DeYonke and wife Christina Fernandez — a fellow Farmington special education teacher — are parents to seven children, living out their dream of having a large family, he said. His belief in the importance of family inspired him to take on the extra work of union leadership.

“Our love of children has always been at the forefront of our marriage, but over the 2010s our ability to care for our children was significantly compromised by the changes in education and salary freezes flowing out of decisions being made in Lansing.”

He still gets emotional recalling the “seminal moment” that spurred him to join the FEA bargaining team a dozen years ago. “I had a meeting with my





(L-R) Chris DeYonke received MEA’s 2024 Paul Blewett Friend of Education award, pictured with MEA President and CEO Chandra Madafferi and Vice President Brett Smith. DeYonke and wife Christina Fernandez pose with six of their seven children. (Opposite page) FEA VP Mamie Giller, DeYonke, and building rep Rosheen Hunter at a district career fair.

son’s chemistry teacher who was a coworker. We were in the midst of all these freezes, and she relayed to me —” he said, pausing to gather himself. “She relayed to me that her husband was concerned about them having children, because she wasn’t making any money and her salary was continually frozen; and as a father of seven that bothered me deeply. That really started my union activism.”

When he ran for president in October 2020, it was the first contested FEA election in a few decades. About 400 members voted, and afterward the leaders wanted to seize on that momentum, said Giller, who lost in a run-off to DeYonke and stayed on as membership chair.

“We got to work and never looked back,” Giller said.

Now vice president, Giller said she and DeYonke make a good team because they’ve built trust and respect for each other. They compare notes every morning when DeYonke is dropping off his first grader in her classroom. She’s learned good leadership starts with listening.

“Chris is good at knowing his members,” Giller said. “He’s able to get out to buildings, so he’s really visible and approachable. Then he listens

to feedback and tries to tackle those concerns.”

DeYonke and Giller have also focused on empowering officers and building reps to have one-on-one conversations with people who were disengaged from the union, including former members.

Their approach was two-fold: to find out why individuals didn’t want to join and to make the case that now was the time — amid pre-vaccine COVID — when the union needed strength in numbers.

“We conveyed that we needed to be united in what we asked for from the district to be able to take care of everyone,” DeYonke said. “We said this was a new beginning and if they had any specific instance or issue that had turned them off from the union to come back and give us a try.”

If prospective members’ complaints could be addressed, they worked on it. If the issue was around a past-due balance, they explained the Commitment to Membership program through which they brought several members back into good standing.

New members immediately received communications from building reps and leaders. For those

very resistant to joining, Giller — now vice president who was membership chair at the time — would ask only for information to understand why, she said.

“Every time I would send out a new email I would say, ‘These are the things the union has done for you in the last weeks or months.’ And we would circle back to talk with individuals.”

All of the organizing helped FEA speak with a strong voice during COVID, and last year the union team negotiated its best contract in 40 years, reworking the salary schedule, restoring members frozen on steps in past years, and securing pay for mentors guiding early career educators.

One service that DeYonke provides for members in good standing has proven to be especially meaningful and popular. He sits down with members planning to take a medical or parental leave and helps them navigate confusing rules and forms.

Social events are another value of membership, DeYonke added. As a result, “People feel a sense of belonging and pride,” he said. “There’s security in knowing you have people supporting you, encouraging you, and looking out for you.” ▼

Rochester unions seek positive change in

For MEA member Linda Key and others in Rochester, local school board meetings have become “frustrating and exhausting” since 2022 when two candidates endorsed by the far-right political group Moms for Liberty were elected to the board.

Now the seat occupied by one of those two trustees — Andrew Weaver, who won a partial-term two years ago — is up for election on Nov. 5 along with four other spots on the board.

Despite her fatigue, or because of it, Key is working to elect candidates that are positive, supportive of public schools, and willing to engage in learning and dialogue. She leads one of three local unions — the office personnel unit — that jointly screened and recommended candidates.

“I feel very strongly that there are trustees on the current school board who do not represent the best

interests of the district,” Key said. “My philosophy is that if I want to put forth solid candidates for the community’s consideration, I have to be willing to roll up my sleeves and be part of the process.”

Rochester’s local unions are among many engaging in school board races in 2024, given big stakes for students and educators. Historically, nearly 75% of MEA-recommended school board candidates win — thanks to advocacy by local teachers and support staff.

Members from the three educator unions interviewed candidates and recommended five — one newcomer and four incumbents. The five recommended candidates are now running as a slate: Barb Annes, Michelle Bueltel, Julie Alspach, Jayson Blake, and Richard Kaczanowski.

“We have five seats open and five great candidates. The one candidate who would be new to the board (Kaczanowski) was a parent and now is a grandparent of kids in the district; he wants to work collaboratively; he wants to learn; he wants inclusivity — everything for the betterment of the district.”

Kaczanowski is a U.S. Army veteran whose career in public service included work on child welfare and public health. “And the first thing he said that got my attention is how tired he is of hearing about how bad our district is. Constantly tearing it down doesn’t solve any problems.”

Last year Key suffered harm when Weaver — newly seated in January — spread misleading information about a November 2022 school field trip on social media and FOX News, which caused a deluge of vile and threatening phone calls to Hart Middle School where Key is the principal’s secretary.

The school district was forced to hire additional security for the building, and employees suffered health effects from the ongoing trauma.

Key and three others filed complaints against Weaver and testified at a school board hearing a year ago, which led to his censure by the board. Speaking out was difficult, but the public needed to see what was happening and the toll it takes on school employees, she said.

“I’m a wife, a mother, a sister. My own children went to the school I work at. They graduated from Rochester Community Schools, which I’m proud of. This district helped to make them into the men that they are.

“It was shocking to me that anyone would call a school and speak such absolute filth and make us feel unsafe. What I don’t want is for people to just throw up their hands and say, ‘Well, this is what it is, and this is the way things are going now; this is the future.’ No. We can do something about it.”

The goal was not to seek candidates who agree with educators on every issue but to find those who can listen to multiple viewpoints and draw on reliably sourced information to make reasoned decisions in the best interests of students, staff, families and the community, Key said.

The two board members elected in 2022 have routinely opposed the district and other board members and used procedures and complaints to drag out meetings for hours, said Liz Schroeck, president of the union representing teachers and other certificated staff in Rochester.

“They have ground things to a halt where nothing is ever good enough,” said Schroeck, a longtime third-grade teacher in the district who is now an interventionist for K-8 students who need extra help.

Last school year an organized campaign brought union members from every building to visit school board meetings on a rotating basis to witness the negativity for themselves. Even at a dead-of-summer board

Rochester’s local unions are among many engaging in school board races in 2024, given big stakes for students and educators. Historically, nearly 75% of MEA-recommended school board candidates win — thanks to advocacy by local teachers and support staff.

n picking strong school board slate

meeting in July, 60 members showed up to maintain their presence.

“If you don’t see their tactics in action, it’s hard to know how disruptive it is, so that really raised awareness among our members,” Schroeck said. “Even sitting in the audience for one meeting is enough for people to say, ‘This can’t continue. Do you have yard signs? Will you have flyers? Let’s do this.’”

“They’re definitely motivated, so we also talk about how to donate to MEA-PAC and the importance of that.”



“They’re definitely motivated, so we also talk about how to donate to MEA-PAC and the importance of that.”

MEA dues dollars can’t be used contributed toward political candidates. Only voluntary contributions to MEA-PAC can be used for that purpose, and a portion of those dollars flow back to local units to spend on local races.

Two years ago the Rochester employee unions recommended candidates for three open seats on the school board after not getting involved in elections previously. But the effort was hampered by waiting to start after the late-July filing deadline for school board races, Schroeck said.

By the time recommendations were made and communicated to members, school was starting. This year the three union groups agreed to screen early and publicize widely that they would be starting the process in May for interested candidates to file in time.

The earlier start has provided more adequate time to work, said Tracie Guilmet-Hickner, a 17-year paraeducator and president of the paraeducators union who also participated in the candidates screening and recommendation process in 2022.

“By bringing together a group of paras, teachers and secretaries, we

were able to ask really good questions that let us see the candidates’ views on public schools and understand how their values would align with school employees,” she said.

Guilmet-Hickner loves working one-on-one with kids to help them with individual needs. Paraeducators play an important role, she said, and being part of a joint screening and recommendation process makes them feel valued and respected.

“The next step is sharing out volunteer opportunities from the campaigns of candidates we’re recommending so our paras can choose how to get involved, have their voices heard, and help make their workplace better.”

Voters want to hear from school employees about which school board candidates are best suited to the role, added Linda Key, the secretary from Hart Middle School.

“We don’t have to accept that this is where we are now — it really doesn’t have to be this way. If we can get the word out that we have great candidates to support, then we can do this. We can make positive change happen.” ▼

(Top) Rochester EA President Liz Schroeck (seated, right) poses with past REA presidents Doug Hill and Cathy Perini-Korreck. (Below, left) Tracie Guilmet-Hickner, president of the paraeducators union, and Linda Key (below, right), president of the office personnel association, worked with REA to recommend candidates.

MEA higher-ed in national spotlight:

‘The stage is set for Michigan to lead, so let’s go’

There’s a saying going around the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE): “Michigan is in the house.”

That’s because two longtime MEA leaders are transitioning into the top two roles at the national council representing higher education members of NEA.

Alec Thomson from Schoolcraft College in Livonia is the incoming president of NCHE (often pronounced knee-chee) and Marcia Mackey from Central Michigan University will be vice president of the national council beginning Sept. 1.

“It’s a Michigan moment that has grown organically by people participating and encouraging others to step up and get involved over years,” Thomson said. “That’s what we should be as Michigan — we should be a state that has strong union leadership and representatives and policies and programs.”

Thomson is a professor of history and political science who found his career path in a teaching assistantship as a graduate student at Wayne State University. It’s also where he started union activism early as part of the original committee that organized WSU graduate students 30 years ago.

Mackey is a professor of sport management and aquatics who always wanted to be a teacher and has taught at Temple University in addition to holding numerous aquatic posts in various parts of the world. Her union journey began at CMU as a department representative in 1992.

Mackey has been president of MEA’s Michigan Association of Higher Education (MAHE pronounced mah-hee) since 2020, and Thomson is MAHE past president. Both have also been visible and active at the national level via the NEA Higher Education



Marcia Mackey of Central Michigan University and Alec Thomson of Schoolcraft College will take on national roles as they assume offices as vice president and president of the National Council for Higher Education on Sept. 1.

Conference and NCHE for a decade or more.

“It doesn’t matter what hat you wear in higher ed, we’re stronger together,” Mackey said. “You could be considered (support staff) on one campus and considered faculty on another campus. We are all higher ed. We are all one together, and we’re a force to reckon with.”

The pair has a number of priorities they want to pursue as they move into three-year terms at NCHE. Overarching for Thomson is a goal to improve communication in both directions, informing members of

what’s happening at NEA and gathering input in return.

“We want to know what people are thinking, what their issues are and how we can advocate for those things,” Thomson said. “And vice versa to say back to them that you are the beneficiary of being part of a large labor union. How do you connect those larger efforts to what you’re doing locally?”

As the lines separating K-12 schools and higher education continue to blur — as dual credit, dual enrollment, and middle college programs continue to spread and evolve — the

conversation becomes about K-16 systems, “and we should be a part of that conversation,” he said.

“For me it’s figuring out how best to make a helpful noise within NEA. I want to be putting that into the room every time, which means you have to be willing to show up, to be a participant and a good partner — not just when you see tangible benefits but because it’s good for the organization.”

Student loan debt and the work that NEA members have done to advance the cause of loan forgiveness continues to be an important issue, Thomson said.

“But we’re also fighting on the other side of that one,” he added, “which is to secure and stabilize funding for higher education where we return to understanding it as a societal good and an important societal priority.”

Mackey agreed and specified her interest in addressing loan inequities for students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) who pay higher interest rates and graduate with higher debt even though HBCUs cost less to attend.

She also will continue advocating for Congress to pass a comprehensive reauthorization of the 1965 landmark Higher Education Act, last reauthorized in 2008, to improve college affordability, better diversify college teaching ranks, and open doors of opportunity to more young people.

In addition, Mackey said she will continue her involvement with the NEA gun violence prevention task force, and she sees a need for ongoing dialogue around artificial intelligence in the realm of higher education.

“There’s still so much work to do in many areas, but the AI stuff is just exploding and I think we will be having amazing conversations in reference to it across the board in higher ed — not just with faculty but staff and everybody.”

Asked to recall their progression to national union leadership, both Mackey and Thomson spoke of mentors and friends by name — many now retired or passed on — who encouraged them to apply their interests and talents at the local, regional and state level.

Thomson’s initiation to unionism came as a young and idealistic graduate student on the organizing committee executing a card-signing campaign of his fellows at WSU three decades ago.

“One of the great things I realized in hindsight was a card-signing campaign meant that we basically went out to every place on campus and knocked on people’s doors and visited them in every lab and department,” Thomson said. “I saw every aspect of campus that I never would’ve seen otherwise.”

His world view expanded with every step: at Schoolcraft when he joined committees of the local union before becoming a board member and president for 11 years; as he began attending state-level MAHE meetings and eventually rose to president; and when he first navigated NCHE and NEA to now.

“When you first move out to the state and national level, you start to see your issues are not that unique, and you begin to understand the problems going on in Alpena sound a lot like the issues at Oakland Community College, just like they are at Jackson College,” Thomson said.

“Then you really start to get plugged into the entire union organization, where you can make a connection to what you’re seeing and doing with broader political issues, and you realize you’re part of something bigger.”

As Thomson creates pathways to hear about members’ concerns, he will look for avenues to engage them in political action, he said. But he also will need to figure out “how to meet members where they are,” he added.

The largest growth in NEA members from colleges and universities is in new organizing happening among graduate students, contingent faculty, and tenure-system faculty such as the effort under way at Michigan State University.

“We’re seeing a resurgence of people turning to unions as an outlet to address injustices, just as I did so many years ago organizing graduate students,” he said. “For a time there was a sort of decline era in terms of unions and power, and it feels good to be on the other side by a little bit.”

For Mackey the union became her family when she took on her first role more than 30 years ago, and she discovered her place as a delegate at representative assemblies (RAs) — which govern MEA and NEA — and a committee member organizing around human and civil rights and women’s issues.

“I found my people, and I liked them; they were passionate about social justice and they always stood up for what was right,” she said. “I never looked back, and I’ve loved every minute.”

Thomson and Mackey will travel to Washington, D.C. a few times a year as part of their leadership of NCHE. Their transition into the new roles began after the conclusion of the NEA RA in Philadelphia in July.

The two leaders recognize they are now the old-timers encouraging others to step up and keep going, and Michigan is once again a state that others in the labor movement are looking to for inspiration, Thomson said.

“It’s pretty exciting as a leader to look out and see a strong cohort of people from your state that you’ve been actively working with for years. I think the stage is set for Michigan to lead in a way that’s not unique to this moment — to once again show there is a good path forward, so let’s go.” ♡



Erik Edoff named MEA Senior Executive Director

Following a national search, MEA selected Erik Edoff — who currently serves as Superintendent of L’Anse Creuse Public Schools — for its top staff position. As senior executive director, Edoff will provide executive leadership for MEA, MESSA and MEA Financial Services.

“Erik has proven himself over 25 years in public education as a steadfast supporter of both student learning conditions and educator working conditions, making him an ideal choice to be our new senior executive director,” said MEA President and CEO Chandra Madafferi. “We are excited for him to join the MEA family and work together for the public education that every student needs, surrounded by caring and qualified educators to help them achieve success.”

A former teacher, MEA member, and administrator, Edoff has spent his entire career in L’Anse Creuse — the last seven years as superintendent — ensuring students get a great public education by working with educators, families and community leaders alike.

“Bringing people together around the common goal of preparing our youth for success in life, work and our democracy has been the passion of my career,” Edoff said. “This new role at MEA is an exciting new chapter for me, especially as a former MEA member and the son of an educator who was active in efforts to collectively bargain and secure rights for her profession.”

Edoff’s tenure in L’Anse Creuse was defined by his collaborative work with local educators and their unions, said Kathy Parmentier, local president of the L’Anse Creuse Education Association.

“Erik’s ability to foster positive labor relations and collaborate effectively with all stakeholders, including union representatives, has been instrumental in driving positive change and achieving our district’s goals,” Parmentier said.

“In L’Anse Creuse, there are many diverse viewpoints,” Parmentier added. “No matter where someone came from in their worldview on public education or labor issues, Erik respected opinions and brought people together to make decisions. That talent will be a major asset for MEA.”

MEA/NEA Local 1 Executive Director Mara Wirtz — who represents MEA’s local associations in L’Anse Creuse — has known and worked with Edoff since his days as an MEA member.

“Erik values a high-quality public education for all students and believes that the working conditions of all education professionals promote that high-quality public education,” Wirtz said. “He has protected and advocated for the rights of educators, and he respects and supports the collective bargaining process and unions’ rights to protect and advocate for their members.”

Those strong union values were what made Edoff the clear choice for the job, said Percy Brown, an Ann Arbor paraeducator and the senior member of the MEA Board of Directors.

“His dedication to public education and union values is demonstrably clear, as is his body of work across political aisles to garner support for great public schools for every student and school employee,” said Brown, who served on the hiring committee for the position.

Alongside his superintendent position, Edoff has served as president of the K-12 Alliance for Michigan and the Macomb Association of School Administrators. He is a member of both the Institute for Educational Innovation and the Educational Research and Development Institute. Edoff earned his B.A. in Biology and Political Science from Kalamazoo College; an M.A. in Educational Administration and Leadership from Michigan State University; and an Ed.S. in Educational Leadership from Oakland University. Edoff and his wife — who is also an educator and MEA member of 26 years — live in Metro Detroit with their three children.

Edoff’s work as MEA senior executive director will begin on Sept. 1, taking over for Dr. Earl Wiman, who has served as an interim in that capacity for the past two years. ▾



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.

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MATH TEACHER
MCBAIN HIGH SCHOOL

“When we started having kids, by having the security and having really great insurance, my wife was able to be a stay-at-home mom. We feel like the only reason that she was able to stay at home is because we didn’t have to worry about the health care or paying extra to get her the benefits we needed to raise the family.”



Kristen Wilcox,
MATH TEACHER
LAPEER HIGH SCHOOL

“I’ve had MESSA for 25 years. I love, love, love my MESSA because anywhere I go when I pull that card out, everything is covered. I had a daughter who was born premature and I remember the nurse taking my insurance card from me and she says, ‘Oh, you’re fine. No worries. Everything will be covered.’”



Kathren O’Brien,
TEACHER
SARAH BANKS MIDDLE SCHOOL

“I have bargained over the years to keep MESSA. It has been excellent coverage for me and my family for over 25 years. It is wonderful to have the option to pick our own doctors and know that they will accept our insurance. The coverage is great. Whether we’ve been in the ER with soccer injuries as my kids were growing up or when I had to have some surgery and get it all approved, MESSA made the process seamless.”



Barb Smith,
MIDDLE SCHOOL SCIENCE TEACHER
EAST CHINA SCHOOL DISTRICT

“I love my MESSA because I have no worries whenever I go to the doctor or go to get prescriptions. I know it’s either fully covered or I have to pay very little.”

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UP connectivity aided by ARP

In the best of times, Michigan's rural public-school districts face major hurdles in accessing reliable internet service to provide instructional technology that helps students succeed in remote parts of the state.

This is particularly true in the Eastern Upper Peninsula Intermediate School District (EUPISD), where educators realized early on during the COVID-19 pandemic that a community-wide plan of action was needed to serve the district's more than 6,100 students in grades K-12, college students, and early education students in Head Start.

Jason Kronemeyer, a veteran EUPISD employee of 25 years, and his colleagues learned federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds could be applied toward broadband connectivity.

Fortunately, Kronemeyer had previously envisioned the formation of the EUPConnect Collaborative and was able to quickly call on community partners to help. After doing the math, he realized partners would need to commit an amount equal to 3% of their federal ESSER funding to help ensure students — along with the district's roughly 53,000 residents, have access to reliable internet service.

"COVID-19 made people realize how important connectivity is, and the American Rescue Plan funds made this connectivity leadership project possible," said Kronemeyer, the EUPISD Director of Technology. "The more rural you are, the more partnerships you need. Working together helps ensure that service providers have what they need to keep costs under control."

Soon all 19 school districts in the Eastern Upper Peninsula, three regional hospitals, Bay Mills Community College, and 60% of municipal governments were on board with the plan. Funding to meet the connectivity demands of 60-70%



of the 36,000 viable service locations was in place as of December 2023 with a goal of funding committed to serve 100% of 911 service addresses by 2025.

"American Rescue Plan funds were critical in getting the project started because without them, it would have been difficult to move things forward if you were spending all of your time fundraising," Kronemeyer said. "It was essential that school boards endorse this regional effort, as greater support increases the likelihood that needs will be satisfied."

The project is advancing successfully and with less than a year remaining to be fully funded, schools and communities in the Eastern Upper Peninsula are close to ensuring full connectivity throughout the consortium.

Once all 911 service locations are allocated funding, the collaborative expects the internet service

providers and other infrastructure partners will be able to complete the construction and provision service by the end of 2026.

The collaborative is now focusing on digital literacy programming throughout the region to maximize the benefits that digital connectivity can provide.

"The possibilities are endless if all of the families in the community have connectivity," said Jaime Clark, Moran Township Education Association president, teacher, and Technology Director. "Having broadband available to students will be a game changer.

"In addition, many teachers live in rural areas and have limited connectivity. Programs can be offered to parents and community members and there will be many more resources for parents to reference when working on things with their students." ▼

Federal funding for this and other innovative projects developed amid the pandemic was made possible by President Joe Biden's American Rescue Plan COVID-19 relief fund. Read more stories of the many ways districts used this funding to help schools and educators better serve students at mea.org/arp.

Plymouth union offers Pint-Sized PD



In the past two years, Christine Rushlow surveyed members of the Plymouth Canton Education Association (PCEA) with two questions: what problems are you confronting in your school role, and what expertise do you offer which could help others address issues?

As the PCEA vice president for elementary, Rushlow has led a popular two-year local initiative to bring more meaningful professional development to members while offering social and professional opportunities for connection that strengthen union and collegial bonds.

Known as Pint-Sized PD, the NEA grant-funded program delivers tailor-made one-hour training sessions led by members at a locally owned brewery in downtown Plymouth.

“After COVID, our members needed more in-person opportunities to learn and network and have conversations with people outside of their buildings,” Rushlow said. “We recognized the importance of keeping members engaged and showing them we’re here to support each other.”

In the member surveys, the two issues that emerged as top interests for learning sessions were student aggression/behavior and preparing for retirement. Other topics included equitable grading practices, engaging reluctant learners, avoiding power struggles, contract highlights, and freelancing.

Rushlow aligned desired topics and PCEA members’ expertise to create several sessions per year. Organizers worked with Chad Williams in MEA’s Center for Leadership & Learning to award participants State Continuing Education Clock Hours (SCECHs) toward certificate renewal where applicable. Presenters were paid a small stipend for their time.

“Interactive events were offered almost every month and provided a variety of useful training which not only increased skill sets and enhanced connection across the district but also highlighted and grew members’ expertise and leadership skills,” Rushlow said.

In the program’s first year, 220 people signed up for retirement sessions, so trainings were split in two

— one for those within three years of retirement and another for members with more time left to work and save. Even so, some sessions had to be moved to MEA offices and offered twice.

Sessions on classroom management and behavioral supports and strategies have also been popular, she said. “What came clear is how important it is for us to do everything we can to support the teachers we have because districts everywhere are feeling impacts of the educator shortage.”

In the first year, a PCEA member who is a board-certified behavior analyst shared classroom management tips and tricks, and the next year she added power struggles and de-escalation strategies.

“Both sessions were well attended and well-received, but I feel like we’re just at the tip of the iceberg on what needs to be addressed,” Rushlow said.

Pint-Sized PD supplements and informs other union work being done to address concerns — shared by educators nationwide — about violence in the classroom. For



Christine Rushlow, vice president of the Plymouth Canton Education Association (pictured above, left), is the force behind Pint-Sized PD, member-led training on requested topics delivered monthly at a downtown brewery (above). A popular session on retirement planning was moved to the MEA field office and offered twice (opposite page).

example, a meeting in the spring brought together union leaders and administrators for discussion, she added.

“In education across the board, we’re seeing more student aggression at younger and younger levels, and we have state law at the elementary level dictating what happens next. At our meeting we came to consensus that the district would benefit from better defined protocols and processes.”

The PD program grew out of a pre-COVID opportunity through NEA, which PCEA utilized, aimed at early career educators. In that offering, early career educators were offered a curriculum, a virtual coach, and a virtual cohort of others interested in related problems of practice in early career teaching.

“That ended up being a great experience for our teachers, especially once COVID hit, because they knew how to use zoom and were familiar with accessing materials online,” Rushlow said. “But as local unions took it over and we came out of COVID, the program morphed. People needed in-person contact.

“We hired 100 teachers during those virtual years, and they were craving contact across buildings and grade levels.”

The NEA grant covers light food such as pizza and a round of drinks. Sessions are held at Bearded Lamb Brewing Company, which is co-owned by a member who offers discounted space.

“I’ve learned from NEA about the importance of supporting our local community and keeping our money in as many local businesses as we can, which helps create a positive image of PCEA and the businesses alike,” Rushlow said.

Learning materials are shared and uploaded to an NEA database of member-developed resources addressing challenges of classroom practice.

Across the Plymouth Canton district, educators are using a curriculum that teaches students strategies for emotional regulation and social connection, and it’s helpful when everyone is using the same language to reinforce ideas at every level and building.

Similarly, educators who interact in trainings see how their work flows from and builds on the work of others, Rushlow said. “We have 1,000 members. You can imagine how powerful it is to see our staff networking and growing their understanding of the impact we all have across grade levels.”

Rushlow presented on the program at the MEA Summer Conference alongside MEA UniServ Director Seth Furlow who serves the Plymouth Canton unit. Additional funding is being sought to continue the program, but leaders hope to keep it going even if the NEA grant goes away.

“This series has been wildly successful, and it would not have been possible without Christine’s focused leadership,” Furlow said. “She demonstrates how far one determined leader can move a local forward by marshaling the expertise and strength that already exists within our membership.” ▼

Self portrait wins art exhibition

The self-portrait in colored-pencil that MEA member Amber Thompson entered into this year's 60th Annual MEA-MAEA Art Purchase Exhibition had very special meaning to her, but she didn't expect it to win Best in Show.

News that her piece, "Grow Where Planted," was selected for the exhibition's top prize in April left the Otisville middle and high school art teacher speechless, she said.

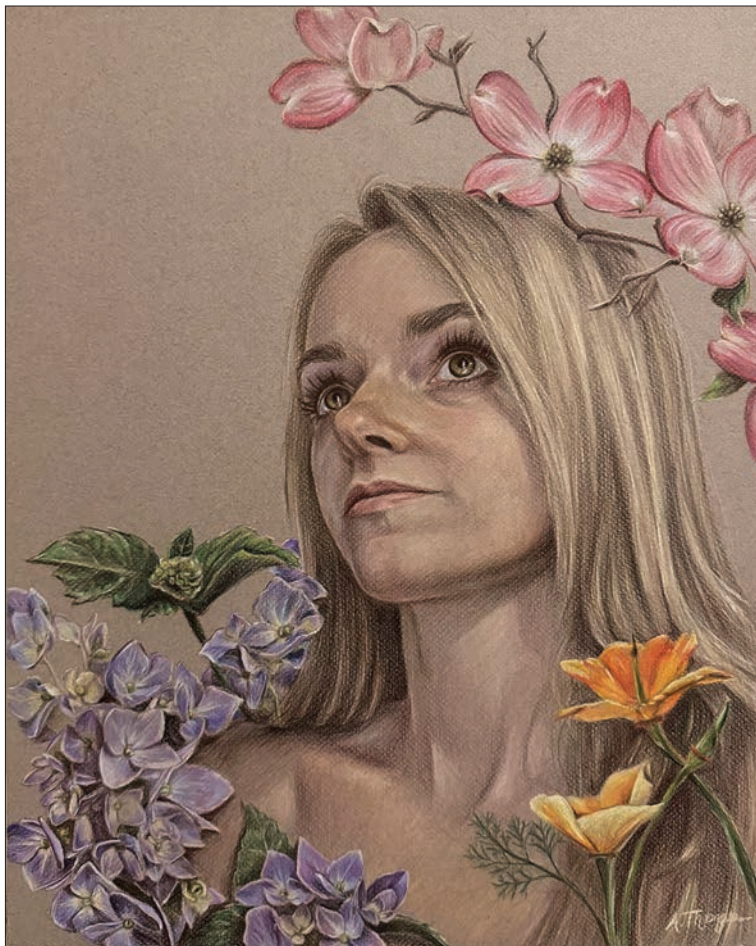
"When I got the email, I was shocked," Thompson said. "My family was with me, and they thought something was wrong because I couldn't speak for a bit. I just felt very thankful that it kind of confirmed my work and that I really am able to do this."

She always loved drawing and art class, but 11 years into a teaching career she had strayed from producing much of her own work because of classroom demands.

"You just get so busy that you don't do a lot for yourself, especially those first few years," Thompson said. "As I've grown into teaching, I wanted to show my students that I'm a teacher and I'm also a specialist in this work outside of school, and you can make a career out of this."

A graduate of Lapeer Community Schools and Kendall College of Art and Design, she became an educator because art teachers in her youth encouraged her development, helped her discover who she was, and reached out when she needed connection.

"I still remember once when my eighth-grade art teacher knew I was going through a hard time with something going on in my family, and she stuck a little card in my backpack



when I wasn't looking. It's those personal connections you develop with teachers that get to see another side of you."

She produced the winning artwork after receiving the emotional news that her husband — a career U.S. Marine — was being reposted later this year.

"I'm a military spouse, so my husband's career dictates where we live and I wanted to create a piece to show where my mind was at that time," she said. "We are going to be moving fairly soon again."

Her husband's career has taken them to North Carolina, California and Michigan — and next, their family of four will locate to Hawaii. In the art piece, Thompson framed her contemplative face with flowers native to the places they've already lived.

"I was surrounding myself with that idea of 'grow where you're planted,' thinking how I might not be somewhere for a very long time — it's usually four- to five-year periods — but I can make the best out of the time that I'm somewhere: creating a

home, working on my career, building friendships."

In June Thompson completed her fourth year of teaching beginning to advanced general art, ceramics and art history at Genesee County's Lakeville Community Schools — mostly at the high school level.

She doesn't see herself ever leaving the classroom, she said. "Teaching is where my heart is."

That feeling came clear when she saw a work of art displayed at the MEA-MAEA exhibition and noticed it was created by a beloved elementary art teacher of hers from Lapeer. "I said, 'Oh my goodness — it's Mrs. Fernandez!' That was a full-circle moment for me."

This year's juried exhibition featured a streamlined digital submission process which drew a record 108 entries and 85 pieces accepted into the show, said MEA members Dan Slagter and Heidi Posh, who co-chaired the Art Acquisitions Committee.

View the digital gallery at mea.org/art. 

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*By Ross Wilson,
MESSA Executive Director*



MEA Communications Wins Big at 2024 SEAComm Awards

The MEA Communications & Public Engagement team brought home eight national awards in June at the 2024 State Education Association Communicators (SEAComm) Awards in Philadelphia recognizing communications excellence among NEA state affiliates nationwide.

Honors included Best in Show for publications (writing and design) and a first-time win for *MEA Voice* in the magazine category.

GOVERNMENT/POLITICAL AFFAIRS CAMPAIGN

Award of Distinction: PACtober 2023 Campaign

COMMEMORATION/TRIBUTE

Award of Distinction: Lowell art teacher's paintings honor school librarian's courage

PUBLICATIONS—MAGAZINE

Award of Excellence: *MEA Voice*

VIDEO—INTERNAL (SHORT)

Award of Distinction: MEA Ignite

WRITING—FEATURE STORY

Awards of Excellence: Award winner changes lives and longs to thank educator who saved him long ago

WRITING—NEWS STORY

Award of Excellence: Small district, big battle: Educators and community push back against extreme school board

WRITING—OPINION/ EDITORIAL WRITING

Award of Excellence: Despite book bans and smear campaigns, I count my blessings

BEST IN SHOW—PUBLICATIONS

Michigan Education Association

Rochester educator plans to use her ‘really loud voice’

Surrounded by over 1,600 students, family members, colleagues, and supporters, Rochester High School teacher Kelley Cusmano was presented with Michigan’s Teacher of the Year award for 2024 by State Superintendent Michael Rice.

Cusmano, a 19-year veteran, is an English teacher, MEA member, and the student council advisor at Rochester High School.

“I am not the best teacher in Michigan,” Cusmano told the crowd in her acceptance speech at the surprise assembly in May, “but I have a really loud voice.”

Cusmano plans to use her voice to lift the profession. “I want to amplify the work that all teachers are doing. The profession is made to be people-serving, so we don’t advocate for

ourselves, and we don’t champion ourselves like we should. I think we need to reclaim the narrative that we haven’t had for so long.”

Cece Crandall, a student council member, shared her appreciation for Cusmano: “She has poured her heart and soul into student council, and I’m so glad I got to be a part of it. I’m so glad that she’s up on the stage because she 100% deserves it for everything she’s done for all of us.”

Jessica Gupta of the Rochester Public Schools Board of Education also attended and celebrated Cusmano, noting her son was fortunate to have her as a teacher. “She brings that right balance of connection and pushing

Rochester High School teacher Kelley Cusmano was named Michigan Teacher of the Year (above) at a school assembly in May. Afterward, Cusmano posed with members of the RHS Student Council (below).



students to do their best, while allowing their creativity to grow.”

As Teacher of the Year, Cusmano will travel the state helping to improve public education, attend monthly State Board of Education meetings as a non-voting member to present on issues facing teachers across the state, and will also be Michigan’s candidate for National Teacher of the Year.

In an email interview with *Bridge Michigan* after the school year ended, Cusmano said she would advocate for increased funding for schools and for state policies to retain teachers already working in classrooms.

“I feel like Michigan has added many policies directed at teacher recruitment, but there has not been a lot of work at the state level for retaining the teachers we have,” she said.

Cusmano expressed concern of an impending “mass exodus” of educators due to increased demands and pressures. “We need to ensure that the collective wisdom of that group is not lost and is valued in the workforce,” she told *Bridge*. ▽



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