

MEA voice

Make Time

Love

mindfulness



**Students
need us
now as
ever**

We must unite as educators

Michigan educators, no matter our political beliefs as individual citizens, are united by our shared devotion to our students and our commitment to providing them with the education they need to learn, grow and thrive.

Regardless of the results of any single election, the educators who comprise the Michigan Education Association will continue working tirelessly to lift up the education profession and ensure our members are treated with the dignity and respect they have earned as professionals.

After all, we believe that every student — regardless of their ZIP code or family income — deserves to have great educators working in their schools so they can reach their full potential.

Our passion for education is unwavering, and our work will never end.

We also know that mainstream Michiganders from all walks of life support their local schools, and they value, respect and trust educators. Everyday citizens' strong support for their public schools was demonstrated in this election through the results of education-specific races and proposals.

For example, over 75% of MEA's recommended candidates for local school boards were successful in their

races in this past election, including high-profile wins in Rochester, Utica, Chippewa Valley, Grosse Pointe and elsewhere.

In addition, voters passed 62% of the school bond proposals appearing on ballots across the state. Voters also elected MEA-recommended candidates to the University of Michigan and Michigan State University boards, and chose Congresswoman Elissa Slotkin — a true champion of education — as Michigan's next U.S. senator.

Looking ahead, we've seen a lot of media coverage since the election about the role of the U.S. Department of Education, which provides critical services for Michigan schools, especially when it comes to supporting students with special needs and kids attending rural and urban school districts.

We are ready to work with lawmakers from both parties, other education advocates, community organizations, business leaders and everyday families to protect the Department of Education and ensure it can continue fulfilling its mission of helping every student achieve.

We've been down this road before — and we've won. In the early 1980s, some Washington politicians attempted to eliminate the Department of Education. However,

they were forced to back down, thanks to the efforts of MEA members and educators across the country, who worked with lawmakers in both parties to protect the department and the services it provides to students, parents and educators. Congressional Democrats and Republicans alike agreed that the Department of Education played a critical role in supporting students and schools in their own communities.

We came together then, and we will come together again.

The road ahead is filled with tough challenges, but it's also full of amazing opportunities. To successfully overcome any upcoming challenges and take advantage of new opportunities, we need to work side-by-side as educators and union members. We must unite like never before for the sake of our students, families, profession and one another.

We will persevere and we will keep moving forward, no matter the obstacles. As educators and as Michiganders, that's what we do best.

In Solidarity Always,
Chandra Madafferi
Brett Smith
Aaron Eling



*Chandra Madafferi,
 MEA President & CEO*



*Brett Smith,
 Vice President*



*Aaron Eling,
 Secretary-Treasurer*



MEA member Ron Furgeson cheers the end of privatized custodians and classroom aides in Petoskey schools, both now union jobs, as “the biggest thing that’s happened here since I’ve been an employee,” page 18.

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



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On the cover: The *MEA Voice* masthead adopts a green ribbon, symbol of mental health awareness, to recognize work of educators such as West Bloomfield’s Jennifer Sepetys. Cover photo by Miriam Garcia.

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Forgotten benefit, page 22.

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MEA VOICE

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

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to the *MEA Voice*, Box 2573, East Lansing, MI 48826-2573 or via email at webmaster@mea.org. Allow at least three weeks for change of address to take effect. *MEA Voice* telephone: 517-332-6551 or 800-292-1934. Circulation this issue: 111,299



QUOTABLES

“We have a very diverse population, and I like that because I can scaffold and structure and diversify my curriculum to meet the needs of all of those students.”

John Kim, an MEA-member manufacturing and engineering teacher at Ypsilanti Community High School, the only Michigan educator selected as one of 25 finalists nationwide to receive a \$50,000 award in the 2024 Harbor Freight Tools for Schools Prize for Teaching Excellence. Kim has only been teaching for five years after he took on a second career following the sale of a vehicle manufacturing company he owned in 2018.

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:

AT-LARGE:

2 Positions – Sept. 1, 2025 to Aug. 31, 2028

DIRECTOR OF MINORITY CONCERNS

1 Position – Sept. 1, 2025 to Aug. 31, 2028

DIRECTOR BY CLASSIFICATION

CUSTODIAN:

1 Position – Sept. 1, 2025 to Aug. 31, 2028

FOOD SERVICE:

1 Position – Sept. 1, 2025 to Aug. 31, 2028

MAINTENANCE:

1 Position – Sept. 1, 2025 to Aug. 31, 2028

PARAPROFESSIONAL:

1 Position – Sept. 1, 2025 to Aug. 31, 2028

TRANSPORTATION:

1 Position – Immediate to Aug. 31, 2026

Elections to the ESP Caucus Executive Board will take place during the MEA Spring Representative Assembly on May 9-10, 2025.

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. To receive delegate mailing labels, information must be received no later than March 10, 2025. Mail to: Gezelle Oliver, MEA/ESP Department, PO Box 2573, 1216 Kendale Blvd., East Lansing, MI 48826-2573, or email to goliver@mea.org.

Additional nominations will be accepted from the floor at the MEA/ESP Caucus meeting on Friday, May 9, 2025. 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, via htraxler@mea.org. She will send them collectively to all ESP RA Delegates in good standing.

Direct election questions to Jim Sparapani, ESP Caucus Elections Chairperson, at 906-779-1984 or via email to jsparapani@att.net.

ICYMI

While the Nov. 5 national election was decided by a slim margin, it’s important to note Michigan voters followed educator recommendations on 75% of K-12 races.

One case in point is the successful effort to elect a slate of four candidates to the Grosse Pointe Public Schools Board of Education. The four candidates backed by the local union’s Screening & Recommendations Committee won their seats with broad support garnered through grassroots efforts among parents and the wider community.

The four winning candidates campaigned on finding unity and common ground to upend a contentious conservative board majority that took control in 2022. The Grosse Pointe Education Association offered the following factors that contributed to their success:

- Conducting our Screening and Recommendation early — before the filing deadline. This allowed our endorsed candidates to “get to work” and get their names out there.
- Requiring that the candidates ran as a slate.
- Our members who volunteered to drop literature and canvass for our endorsed candidates.
- Our members who signed up to work the polls on Election Day.
- Our communication with candidates throughout the process encouraging them and attending their events.
- Texting friends and family our recommendations.

“The above played a big role in the outcome along with the fact that our candidates worked hard, ran a clean campaign and did so with integrity,” the GPEA said in a statement. “We are proud to have endorsed Clint Derringer, Laura Hull, Tim Klepp and Colleen Worden.”

THE FUTURE IS NOW

MI Evaluations are new

After many years under a punitive teacher evaluation system, Michigan educators got back the right to bargain the subject in 2024. MEA staff and union bargaining teams have worked tirelessly to negotiate local improvements and ensure districts are following the new law.

Read your collective bargaining agreement for specifics of your district's evaluation system, but here are general aspects of the new law and tips to ensure the process helps improve your craft.



“The new law is a game-changer. Finally, the evaluation system requires true collaboration. The first years of teaching can be a time of growth and improvement, but true growth is impossible if the system is unfair, too subjective, or the teacher is not an active participant in the system.”

Skye Kapinus Vaden, MiNE Coordinator and Lansing School District teacher



“As a third-year teacher, I’m excited about the opportunity to earn the protection of tenure after four years. This is an important milestone for early career educators and may help retain teachers who might otherwise be tempted to jump districts in those first years.”

Brittany Perreault, MiNE Coordinator and Farmington Public Schools teacher

EVALUATION TOOL

MDE recommends five evaluation tools, but districts can choose an appropriate alternative. Tools outline categories, components, or domains of teaching and related skills such as professionalism, instruction, classroom environment, and content knowledge/planning.

DO ►

Get familiar with your district's tool. Understand how to demonstrate effectiveness, ask questions, attend trainings. Your rating of effective, developing, or needing support is determined by a cut score; find out the cut scores that have been determined in your district.

GOALS

The evaluation system requires two types of goals: performance and student growth. The student growth goal can be measured via assessment or mastery of a key student learning objective.

DO ►

Determine your performance goal collaboratively. If you are a first-year probationary teacher or a teacher who has earned a “needs improvement” rating, your performance goal should be based on your Individualized Development Plan (IDP); request appropriate support and training — including assignment of a mentor — to achieve your performance goal.

OBSERVATIONS

The law requires a minimum of two evaluations at least 15 minutes long, with at least one scheduled in advance, and written feedback within 30 days of the observation. Your negotiated evaluation system may have additional rules.

DO ►

Check your evaluation system's guidelines and timelines and monitor your evaluator's adherence. Make notes after an observation, check feedback you receive for errors, and discuss concerns. Provide evidence from your practice within domains not demonstrated in observations.



Follow @mineweducators
on Instagram, X and Facebook

Go to mea.org/mi-new-evaluations to read more about evaluation ratings and exemptions under the new law.

Don't let winter freeze your workout routine

MESSA offers exercising and body movement tips for winter fitness



Scan the QR code and watch Rhonda Jones demonstrate exercises you can do inside your home.



“In a group exercise, you can't just walk out,” Jones said. “Your friends are going to look at you like, ‘Where are you going?’ They're going to hold you accountable, and your own pride is not going to let you leave that class until you're finished.”

If you're willing to brave the outdoors, you're in luck because exercising in a colder environment requires more energy to warm your body, which burns more calories, Jones said. Ice skating, skiing and sledding (not so much the downhill ride, but that walk uphill can be a beast) are just some of the many activities you can do to strengthen your muscles, your core and your lungs.

“If you've ever put on some boots and run through the snow, that's a workout in itself,” Jones said. “All of those winter activities are good for the body and fun for the whole family.”

Let's say you don't want to leave the house — at all. There's plenty for you to do at home to maintain good body movement. Set a timer and walk up and down the stairs for 45-second intervals. Instead of laying on the couch, anchor your feet under it and do sit ups. And don't forget about old reliable calisthenics.

There's a plethora of exercise routines you can find and choose from through various apps, social media channels or YouTube. The resources are boundless. But if you're ever stuck, rely on the basics.

“Walk,” Jones said. “If nothing else, walk around the house, walk around the block. Keep your body moving.” ♥

The days are shorter, the nights are longer and the temperatures are plunging, which makes it challenging to exercise this time of year.

But don't let Old Man Winter stop you.

Almost half of Americans delay physical exercise in the winter, using poor weather as an excuse to stay indoors, according to the Journal of Sport and Health Science. Rhonda Jones, MESSA's health promotion consultant, has a cure for that.

Phone a friend.

“Grab a buddy and make sure they hold you accountable,” Jones said. “Winter is challenging and a social support system is real. You make sure you have people in your circle that are going to help you when you are less than motivated because it's going to happen. It happens to the best of us.”

Working out with a friend helps you push through strenuous workouts faster and easier in the darker, colder months. You can also motivate each other to attend indoor group exercise sessions, such as Zumba, Pilates or yoga, Jones said.

Fitness challenges

MESSA Wellness has 30-day fitness challenges that are quick and perfect for home. You can strengthen your core, tighten your gut and glutes or tone your upper body with push-ups. MESSA can help you build your own workout, too. For more information, visit messa.org/wellness.

Worried about student wellness, veteran educator takes action



By Brenda Ortega
ME A Voice Editor

As a young person right out of college, MEA member Jennifer Sepetys had all she'd imagined for herself, living in Chicago with a friend and working successfully in advertising sales. But something was missing.

She decided to do volunteer work tutoring kids at Cabrini-Green, a public housing project in the city. The educators in her family — her mom and grandparents — had always pushed her to join the family profession, but being young and stubborn she'd gone her own way, Sepetys said.

"I did tutoring for a year and loved it. I realized I loved it more than my regular job, and that's when I decided I wanted to go back to school to become a teacher."

Now she tells that story to students in her Positive Psychology class at West Bloomfield High School as part of a unit that asks them to challenge their thinking on what makes people happy: Is it money and things or relationships and experiences?

"I didn't understand some of these concepts until I was an adult, and I tell them that," Sepetys said. "We look at the research and go through a lot of examples so it's not just an adult saying

'This is what you should think.' It's 'Here are the studies and what do you think?'

"I'll tell them, 'I'm sharing this with you now so you can really think about it before you spend \$300 on that new pair of Nikes or before you have to choose between buying that new purse and taking a trip to the UP with your friends.'"

The 20-week Positive Psychology class is a newer addition to elective offerings at WBHS which Sepetys built and launched in 2021 after the COVID-19 crisis brought student mental health struggles urgently to the fore.

Similar to a "happiness class" that became the most popular course



“For this generation, we don’t sugarcoat anything. Often times we’re all going through pretty much the same stuff, and we see it on TikTok or Instagram or Snapchat. I found it really inspiring that by the end of the semester (in Positive Psychology) we were all kind of looking forward to this class, to these activities, these daily meditations, these projects, because we knew it would uplift us.”

Jacob Jackson, 2024 WBHS graduate

ever taught at Yale University in 2018, Sepetys’ Positive Psychology class teaches students the behaviors and habits of body and mind that can positively affect physical and mental health.

She explains in class to students: “I’m going to give you some tools to help each other and to help yourself, but you are in charge of what you do with it. And if these things aren’t working for you — if you’re really struggling — please let me know; let someone know. Don’t keep it to yourself.”

WHY

An 18-year teacher and chair of the high school social studies department, Sepetys is best known for a difficult course she teaches in history of genocide — which she infuses with empathy

for victims; hope for understanding and prevention; and respect for survivors who found a way to go on living.

In 2020 she saw first-hand the gravity of a growing youth mental health problem in the U.S. amid the global pandemic when educators and students had to shift quickly to teaching and learning in a virtual environment.

She used a Google form to communicate with students and check attendance while building rapport and engagement. There she gathered feedback on lessons and work-in-progress and checked on students’ emotional state with questions or a five-point wellness rating scale.

“I was surprised and kind of shocked by the responses I was getting and how many of them on the survey were giving themselves really low scores.”

Sepetys told students she would be checking back with anyone who marked a low rating, and she pledged to read everything students wrote in the check-ins. “I would reply back so they would know someone was listening,” she said.

Some conversations involved light-hearted joking or centered around a new puppy or favorite music. But in the one-on-one safe space she created, many students felt comfortable opening up to share their serious struggles, she said.

“I was reaching out to students and referring people to the counselor, and this became such a huge part of my teaching job beyond the curriculum. I realized it was something that was missing for kids, and they needed more than one person could do.”



“I do think we could have a lot more focus put on to mental health resources at school, because it’s always the last thing mentioned when they tell us about policies and rules. Also I wish we had a more tolerant atmosphere. The mindset at our school and probably lots of schools across the nation is like ‘We have to be oriented on taking care of students’ mental health so they can do work.’ I think mental health care should have a more empathetic approach — to make sure the person is all right, not just enough to get them back to work.”

Adeline Daag, *WBHS sophomore*

Teenagers’ mental health issues had escalated to crisis levels before COVID-19 arrived on the scene, but the pandemic worsened the situation. Rates of youth suicide peaked in 2018 and again in 2021 with Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ students at greatest risk.

In 2019, 37% of students overall experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and by 2021 that figure rose to 42%, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The latest numbers show a slight decrease to 40% in 2023 — still disturbingly high.

“It’s an ongoing issue,” Sepetys said.

HOW

In the pandemic’s early days, grappling with how to address student needs in her classes, Sepetys decided to pursue advanced degrees at Oakland University. She has since completed an Educational Specialist (EdS) degree and is working on a doctorate (PhD) in Educational Leadership.

Her worries about students converged with the fact her own two children were becoming independent, she said. She had the time to go back to school and wanted to focus deep learning on student mental health and how educators and schools could address it.

School counselors were swamped by demands of responding to students in crisis — unsurprising given Michigan’s second-worst-in-the-nation average of 671 students-per-counselor in 2020. That number improved to 598:1 by 2023, still far from the recommended level of 250 students-per-counselor.

In her early research, Sepetys looked into Expanded School Mental Health (ESMH), a framework that combines in-school professionals, such as social workers and psychologists, with external community partners to offer prevention, intervention, treatment and case management services for young people.

She found scattered school districts in the U.S. with established ESMH programs, but costs were high. Since then,

many schools across Michigan have expanded rosters of mental health professionals using targeted federal and state funding delivered by President Joe Biden and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer.

“I wrote my first big paper on Expanded School Mental Health as a potential solution, and then realizing it’s expensive I thought, Well now what? What can I do as one person that can help students?”

Sepetys soon came across positive psychology — a field of study that took on new prominence a few years after she completed her undergraduate degree in psychology at University of Michigan in 1994.

She remembered having seen a newspaper article about the hugely popular course on happiness at Yale, which she went back and re-read, “and it just hit me,” Sepetys said.

In *The New York Times* article from 2018, “Yale’s Most Popular Class Ever: Happiness,” Dr. Laurie Santos said she created the course to address “the mental health crises we’re seeing at places like Yale.”

Santos said at the time, “Scientists didn’t realize this in the same way 10 years ago, that our intuitions about what will make us happy — like winning the lottery and getting a good grade — are totally wrong.”

Santos now offers the class online for free with self-paced versions for adults and teens at drlauriesantos.com. In addition, her website includes a Teacher Hub with a virtual community and free high school curriculum that can be adapted for a one-week unit or one-semester class.

In her continuing research, Sepetys also came across Martin Seligman, considered the father of positive psychology. After taking his free class on Coursera and being sold, Sepetys turned to getting a new elective added to the WBHS master schedule.

“I don’t want to see another student thinking about taking their own life because they didn’t know what they could do to understand and manage their sadness, or because

they didn’t know how to ask for support or where to go for help.”

She gathered online resources from college instructors and professors — “anything I could get my hands on — and I created a course,” Sepetys said. “I had to present course information and student data before our curriculum council; they approved the course, and I’ve been teaching it now for a few years.”

WHAT

The class begins with a unit on stress and anxiety to help students identify personal triggers and recognize they’re not alone in facing tough issues. In the first week, after they write down stressors, Sepetys has them share some anonymously on a sticky note.

She mixes responses from different classes on sheets of butcher paper and hangs them in class for students to walk and peruse.



“Everyone hides their mental health all the time, and that goes back to social media which puts people into boxes and divides everything up. Where we used to be proud as an American society that we worked together, now people are isolating themselves with technology to where we’re increasingly more divided. I think positive psychology is a very crucial step in getting to a solution and improving mental health among our youth and even our adults, too. Students need to learn how to be better to themselves and realize there’s a big world out there, and you don’t have to waste your life online.”

Ryan Sparago, 2023 WBHS graduate

“That exercise is a powerful one, because they see that everybody has something going on and it’s best to be kind as they’re walking through the hallways not knowing what other people are dealing with,” Sepetys said.

She’s careful to let students know she is a mandatory reporter and to repeat more than once that if they share with her information about being harmed or harming themselves she is obligated to alert someone else to ensure they’re safe.

Sepetys forwards serious concerns to counselors every year, especially after the class completes the Iceberg Activity which asks students to identify parts of their selves which they present outwardly and other parts or problems they keep hidden.

She believes students write things down knowing they’ll be called in to the

counselor as “kind of a way for them to call out for help when they don’t know how else to do it. They’ll write something really small in the bottom of their iceberg, because I let them know I read everything they write.

“I’m giving them a way to reach out early on — to know I’m listening and reading whatever thoughts they share.”

After the short opening unit, the class moves on to its purpose: “I say, ‘All right, we’re going to work on feeling better. Now that we all know we’re dealing with so much, let’s figure out what we need to do. How can we help ourselves and each other?’”

A unit on mindfulness and meditation gives students tools to be present in the moment through various breathing strategies, visualization, and writing in a gratitude journal, all of which is challenging at first but becomes easier as these practices continue throughout the semester.

Every class begins with quiet breathing and reflection, and three times a week students write down three to six things for which they’re grateful. Practicing gratitude through journaling helps individuals shift away from daily dwelling on negative emotions or experiences.

“We write some together at first, and we go through a lot of different examples, so students understand it can be something small — something as simple as ‘I can breathe,’ or ‘I woke up this morning.’”

The class studies PERMA, the acronym for building blocks of well-being identified by Seligman: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. Other units look at things we think will make us happy but don’t, and how to set goals and implement strategies to achieve them.

As student awareness expands, one of the hardest issues to confront can be their use of cell phones and other unhealthy habits, Sepetys said. In class they look up data on their phones to know how many hours they’re

spending on it, and the answer is often shocking and frightening, she added.

“For some it’s like 15 hours a day or more! I’m like, ‘When are you sleeping?’”

A grant helped Sepetys buy fidgets which she places at every table grouping, and students use those to practice interacting without a phone to fall back on when they’re uncomfortable. “They understand it’s an addiction, and they can see that when they’re struggling to not pick up the phone.”

Sepetys believes the class is making a difference based on feedback that includes final papers where students discuss learning and takeaways; student interviews she conducted for a qualitative analysis course; and anecdotal reports from class alumni who report they still are using what they learned.

“A lot of them say the mindfulness was a big one because of all the stuff going on in the world. Just to be able to close their eyes and experience quiet and stillness without falling asleep is a gift. That and knowing the importance of relationships is huge for them.”

WHO

Jordan Bailey is a former student from the class who agreed mindfulness has been her biggest takeaway now that she’s a freshman at Oakland University. Bailey graduated from WBHS after taking positive psychology as a senior, and she said mindful practices help her alleviate anxiety.

“I’m sort of a quiet person, and now that I’m in college it’s helped me feel more comfortable being social or talking with someone I don’t know,” she said.

A dance major who dreams of a career as a dancer, choreographer and creative director, Bailey said she regularly practices mindfulness and breathing strategies she learned — the triangle, star and square methods — to help her focus on what she’s doing, whether it’s walking to class or dancing.

The breathing strategies also worked as an intervention when

she experienced an anxiety attack from being overly self-critical in a ballet class where she fell into comparing herself to others.

“I noticed myself not breathing, and I noticed myself having an anxiety attack, and then I remembered to breathe properly and bring my mind back to my breathing, and it really helped me calm down my body,” Bailey said.

Current WBHS sophomore Adeline Daag took the class last year as a freshman. Daag said in an interview she misses having positive psychology to start the school day, but she still uses the gratitude journal and mindfulness practices she learned.

“Keeping a gratitude journal helps remind you there’s a little bit of good in every day even if it’s a hard one,” she said. “It’s a very helpful coping mechanism that teaches you not to narrow in on something small and negative that happened to you.”

Daag described mindfulness as “being completely present in the moment” by giving attention to physical senses — “letting yourself be absorbed by the nuances in music you’re hearing or focusing on the textures and flavors of what you’re eating, even if it’s something you don’t like.

“Once you learn how easy it is to do, you can do it anytime and anywhere — and that’s a good takeaway that a lot of students will have with them for life.”

It’s been a couple years since Ryan Sparago took the class just before he graduated in 2023. Now a sophomore business student at Bowling Green State University, Sparago said he believes the mental health crisis is so urgent that the class should be required in high school.

The takeaways he carried into college are the importance of being kind to others and grateful for small things in life. “In my opinion, social media has become one of our biggest problems in terms of the toxicity and anger and bitterness that we see everywhere,” Sparago said.

“We have to do and be better. For that reason I try to be

grateful for what I have and just keep being nice to people.”

Another student who’s now a freshman in college, Jacob Jackson, said what he learned in Sepetys’ class helped him adjust in his first year at Grand Valley State University.

The class helped him learn to talk to others without hiding behind a phone if a moment got awkward. “The way we were all kind of nice to each other in that class made it feel like a community,” he said.

A psychology major who aspires to be a child therapist, Jackson also actively incorporates into his life the idea that money and things don’t make people happy as he once believed.

“I remind myself some random thing I’m about to buy in Target won’t satisfy me, so I try to focus on experiences I want to have. I’ve been going to concerts more, trying new things, and that helps a lot.”

Perhaps the most important lesson from Sepetys that he’s applied at college was to reach out for help when he found himself struggling at first. Now he’s made friends, joined clubs, and found his place.

“In class we had discussions about how sometimes men find it hard to speak up about this stuff, but she made it a safe space for everyone to talk about problems and what can help. I think it did open up a comfort level to be able to say what’s really going on.”

WHEN

There is no time to lose in addressing teen well-being, Sepetys said: “I just hope that mental health services continue to be funded in our schools, because it’s incredibly important and it affects everything.”

Named a Region 9 Teacher of the Year by the Michigan Department of Education in 2022, Sepetys presented her findings on student mental health and the positive psychology class to the State Board of Education that year.



“Social media can have a big influence on our youth, especially how it pressures teenagers to try to live up to the standards of what they see on social media — even though we know it’s fake. I feel that schools in general could do a better job of looking after their students and connecting with them. When teachers show they truly care about me, even outside of the classroom, that impacts me in a positive way. When I feel like I have a community, that helps my mental health.”

Jordan Bailey, 2024 WBHS graduate

What makes her happy is hearing students say the class helped. “I want them to walk out with at least one strategy they can use to help them make a decision or feel better about themselves and what they can do in the world.

“The students know I’m right there with them, facing challenges like we all do and trying to learn — What can I do when I feel sad, and how can I make others feel better? I love what I’m doing, and I love learning, and I hope they’ll find something that they love too.”

Helping the helpers

Counselor's initiative brings mental health care to colleagues

MEA member Becky Halamka started out as a physical education teacher, but she became a high school counselor after being profoundly affected by a student suicide. "It was very clear to me in that moment that I wanted to provide mental health support for others," she said.

state grant through this school year. The initiative is delivering mental health and wellness support to district educators, free of charge.

Her goal is to help staff members manage burnout and personal stress while acknowledging their secondary

Though the new services did not launch until this school year, the district called on Halamka's expertise early last summer to help an educator in crisis who needed support quickly. Halamka met with the staff member for six weeks and found success using goal-oriented therapy.

Negaunee Superintendent Dan Skewis said the hope is that a small investment in Halamka's counseling services can help to prevent staff burnout in a profession that can be a grind.

"Districts have done a nice job making sure their students are taken care of, but oftentimes staff is overlooked," Skewis said. "I don't see this being a one and done type of situation; our hope is to develop a long-term relationship with Superior Educator Wellness Services."

Lakeview Elementary Principal Heather Holman said Halamka is deeply invested in the community and possesses knowledge of classroom demands that make her capable of offering specialized care for those who work in education. Knowing the services are available to anyone in need is a "huge relief," Holman said.

"This is the first opportunity where there is acknowledgment that although a healthy diet, exercise and meditation are all important ways to care for your mental health, things like trauma fatigue require more specialized support that will now be available."

MEA member Allyson Solander, a Negaunee kindergarten teacher, applauded Halamka for her efforts. Educators who achieve a better work-life balance and know how to manage emotional challenges can create a more nurturing environment for students, Solander said.

"Districts have done a nice job making sure their students are taken care of, but oftentimes staff is overlooked."

Negaunee Public Schools Superintendent Dan Skewis

"I could have benefited from it myself. It was a very tragic time and just being able to process it with someone and be able to return to the building for students would have been very helpful."

Now she's extending her support to educators in her Upper Peninsula district, Negaunee Public Schools, in recognition of the heavy load they bear in caring for kids and absorbing secondary trauma from struggles their students are facing.

"Secondary trauma is there for educators, and I don't think people acknowledge that enough," Halamka said. "You can only hear so many sad stories before you start to feel fatigued and it starts to wear on you. Teachers carry such a heavy burden."

This fall Halamka launched Superior Educator Wellness Services, a counseling service tailored to the unique needs of educators and funded by a

trauma so it doesn't go unhealed.

"Educators have very high expectations of themselves and can have a difficult time if they don't meet their own expectations," Halamka said. "I can help them set realistic goals and expectations and give themselves grace if they don't meet them."

Assisting adults on staff also helps kids, she noted. "The behaviors of children are different and deep. If teachers do not feel support, it can be difficult to address those behaviors. It can feel like you are climbing uphill."

It's easy to forget that educators have personal stressors, Halamka said, recalling times in her own life when she struggled — amid her husband's deployment, the loss of a family member, returning from maternity leave — while still needing to be resilient for students.



Becky Halamka is using a small grant to bring specialized counseling services to educators.

She hopes the district's decision to prioritize mental health supports for educators and nurture a culture of well-being and growth will set a precedent for others across the state.

"Our district implements Capturing Kids' Hearts and does all that we can to uplift students and show that they are loved and supported," Solander said. "With Becky's vision, we will be able to support our teachers in the same way.

"We are beyond lucky to have Becky — she makes a difference daily in



Superior Educator Wellness Services offers a welcoming environment for Negaunee schools staff to access expert help with secondary trauma and develop skills and habits to prevent burnout.

the lives of our students, educators, and staff."

MEA member Taylor Maki, a special education teacher, agreed Halamka's services will produce benefits all around. "Staff improving their mental health can help students regulate and manage their mental health," Maki said.

Halamka said her ultimate goal is to expand her services beyond her immediate community. Her aspirations include creating a team of counselors with backgrounds in education

who have a deeper understanding of the current challenges educators face.

"I really feel passionate about supporting educators in the Upper Peninsula. We are a unique population in a rural area that may not have as many resources as in other areas, but I also know this specific resource often isn't available in more populated areas of Michigan.

"The goal is to help people who work in our schools, and that will ultimately help our kids." ▾

Lawmakers add funding for mental health, educators

State lawmakers approved a supplemental education budget this fall providing \$125 million in additional funding for school safety and student mental health, and passed legislation permanently ending the state's 3% tax on public school employees.

MEA President and CEO Chandra Madafferi applauded state Rep. Matt Koleszar and his Democratic colleagues for passing House Bill 5803 and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer for signing the measure providing

permanent financial relief to teachers and school support staff.

The changes eliminate the 3% retiree health insurance contributions imposed on more than 100,000 veteran educators over a decade ago by the Snyder administration. The legislation also reduces retirement payroll taxes for school districts by 5.75%, freeing up more funding for the classroom.

In addition, the House and Senate prioritized student mental health

and safety by passing HB 5503, a supplemental school funding bill that amounts to more than \$100 per pupil for districts to invest in these critical priorities. Reps. Regina Weiss and Angela Witwer championed this vital legislation.

"This legislation will help ensure our local schools have the resources they need to provide students with a safe, nurturing learning environment," Madafferi said.

It's our time to carry water



*By Deborah Robertson
and Kiarra Whitelow*

Harper Woods School District

If the opposite of divided is unified, then labor unions have a lot of work to do in the wake of the presidential election. Please understand, we are not here to cast blame or minimize disappointment at the outcome. We simply refuse to give in to sadness or bitterness.

As local presidents of two units representing certificated and support staff in Harper Woods, we clearly see challenges that lie ahead. But we are students of labor history. We know worker rights and protections now held dear were not freely given but fought for and won by our ancestors.

We recognize great opportunities unfolding which all of us are called to take up as our work.

Going forward those opposed to the incoming administration's moves will include the majority of Americans who believe in similar ideals — of personal freedoms and democracy, of caring for

the vulnerable, of valuing educators and public education as a foundation of society.

The other side can divide us along lines of class; race or ethnicity; religious affiliation; gender or sexual identity; nationality or immigration status — and thus conquer us. Or we can recognize our common humanity and do what needs doing right now.

Despite differences, we can agree. Hungry children need nutrition; those with disabilities need services; struggling families need assistance; our retired and elderly deserve security and dignity; every person needs health care. All of this and more is under threat.

We have to start locally — first internally and then turning outward to allies in our communities.

Begin by asking what you can do to get more involved in your local. Too many see their union as a genie or Santa Claus there to magically solve problems or gift them rights. We need education. Talk to non-members about joining, why unions exist, and what collective action can do.

Let's tap energy that our youth are bringing — see organizing of Starbucks stores in 40 states; Amazon workers whose suit led to a recent federal ruling barring “captive-audience” meetings by union-busting employers; and Detroit-area Corewell Health nurses voting overwhelmingly to join a union.

Then help your local association build ties with individuals and organizations in your community. Create partnerships. Go to events representing the union. Volunteer and turn out for other organizations in ways that make sense where you live, as you will in turn ask others to show up for you.

Stronger locals build our capacity for action statewide, and we have important mid-term elections in two years to

focus on electing good people to our state government.

MEA is building coalitions at the state level, and other state affiliates and NEA are working nationally. It's going to take collective strength, but we've been here before and won. In 1966, for example, NEA added power by merging with a historically Black teachers' union, the American Teachers Association.

And in the dark days of forced racial segregation and Jim Crow, iconic United Auto Workers leader Walter Reuther joined the power of labor with the Civil Rights Movement. Organizing victories that resulted benefited poor and disenfranchised folks from every demographic. We are stronger together.

In 1968 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a now-famous speech, “I've been to the Mountaintop,” to Black sanitation workers in Memphis on strike for fair pay and safe working conditions. He said: “I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!”

The next day he was assassinated on the balcony of his hotel room to searing shock and grief across the globe. Yet the work of Dr. King and all who came before him never stopped. Despite pain and fear, others picked up a bucket and carried that water. Now it's our turn. Together in solidarity. ♥

Deborah Robertson is president of the Harper Woods Education Association and Kiarra Whitelow is president of AFSCME Local 1228. They are the first mother-daughter duo to graduate together from Wayne State University's Labor School, completing both beginning and advanced certificates.

Teamwork lifts student achievement, earns school National Blue Ribbon

Any successful basketball team is made up of players motivated to come to practice every day, set new goals, and achieve personal bests. Getting students excited about coming to school and learning is no different, the staff at Hughes Elementary School in Marshall has found.

In 2012 the state flagged Hughes as a Focus School for the gap between its highest- and lowest-achieving students. The school has since lost the label and continued improving through building-wide data analysis and conferencing by teams of teachers, support staff, interventionists and classroom assistants.

The result: double-digit increases in M-STEP scores for a school where 52% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch and 68% are at-risk. Hughes Elementary was named a 2024 National Blue Ribbon School in the “Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing Schools” category.

“As a basketball coach you always want your kids to come to practice and practice how you want them to play in the game,” said Lance Hawblitz, a fourth-grade teacher at Hughes, former high school basketball coach and co-president of his local union.

“When it comes to these online assessments, we want them to take those tests and try as hard as they can. They have the mentality that, ‘This is my opportunity to show how much I’ve learned this year.’”

In 2024, average reading proficiency for the school’s students in grades 3-5 increased from 48% in 2018 to 66%, far exceeding the average 49% reading proficiency for a school with similar demographics and the 46% statewide average.

Average math proficiency for Hughes students in grades 3-5 improved from 38% in 2018 to 71% this year, easily

outpacing the average math proficiency of 45% for a school with similar demographics and the statewide 34% average.

The school has adopted new curricula, materials, and strategies. Students get many opportunities to express themselves through writing, and the whole child is valued with a balanced education that includes physical education, art, social-emotional learning, music and technology.

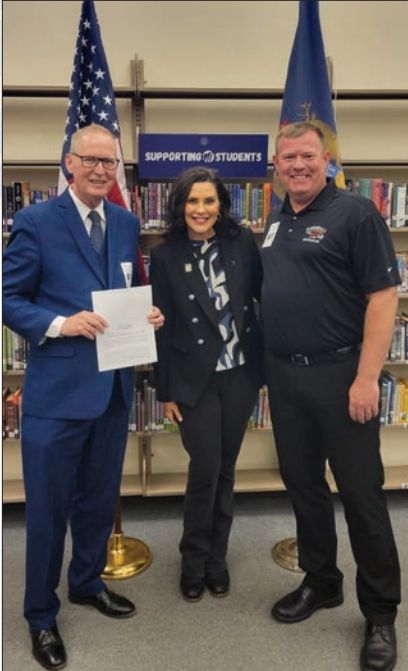
Teachers credit “spiraling” of concepts, in which lessons are retaught and revisited as students are asked to synthesize learning, for improving student mastery in core subjects. Other shifts have been as simple as reading high-interest books as a class, or taping multiplication tables to desks so students can focus on more complex concepts.

“We don’t get hung up on one multiplication fact when we’re trying to bust out a multi-step problem,” explained Colleen Williams, who teaches fifth-grade math and fourth-grade social studies at Hughes. “I think it makes them feel a little more positive and optimistic about these big math problems we’re doing.”

Everyone works together toward a common goal, Hawblitz said: “It comes from the entire Hughes staff. They come here and they want to help our students learn and grow, not just as learners, but as people as well.”

Twelve Michigan schools were named National Blue Ribbon Schools, and Pellston Elementary School in Emmet County’s Pellston Public Schools similarly earned an award as an “Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing School.” ♡

For a full list of current National Blue Ribbon Schools visit nationalblueribbonschools.ed.gov.



L-R state Rep. Jim Haadsma, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, and Marshall teacher Lance Hawblitz celebrate the National Blue Ribbon School award won by Hughes Elementary.

New spelling app promises more student learning, less educator work

> Ed-tech entrepreneur is veteran Utica elementary teacher <

This year MEA member Jonathan Marceau is watching the dream he shepherded to reality take on a life of its own out in the world.

A veteran elementary teacher in Utica Community Schools, Marceau launched his award-winning app — Spelling Safari — in mid-August from an idea that has stayed with him ever since his student teaching 20 years ago.

Described as a “curriculum reinvention and software solution providing elementary students with fun and adaptive learning,” Spelling Safari won the second annual Michigan EdTech Innovation Contest in 2023, which MEA helps to sponsor.

The traditional method of teaching spelling by giving every child in

He first became interested in personalized learning in 2004, while student teaching in Ann Arbor, when his supervising teacher gave more advanced spellers different lists from others in class, and they quizzed each other to develop their own unique spelling lists by skipping words they already knew.

The next fall, in his first year teaching in Utica, Marceau pulled together multiple word lists and devised a paper-pencil system for students to quiz each other and build personalized spelling lists from words they missed — a system he refined over a decade to positive effect, he said.

“I regularly saw that students were advancing more than a grade level even with all the flaws of a paper-pen-

Dozens of practice activities are built into the program, and children see and hear their spelling words being pronounced correctly and used in sentences written at their level. The safari theme engages kids by gamifying the experience: as they achieve, students advance to the next “animal camp.”

Youngsters like to track their own growth via progress displays, because human beings enjoy taking on meaningful challenges that stretch them to learn within their zone of proximal development, which is the beauty of adaptive, personalized learning, Marceau said.

“The whole system gives students instantaneous feedback. When they miss a word in the pretest, which we call the quiz, it tells them right away and



a class the same spelling list every week doesn’t work to fully develop students’ skills and confidence, Marceau said. “It has a lot of missed learning opportunities.”

Above-level learners get bored. Below-level learners get frustrated. And words that are missed by some students on culminating tests simply disappear the next week as a new spelling list is presented.

“If the words on a generic list are out of students’ reach, they’re not picking up much because they’re not going to come across those words in their leveled reading and writing either,” Marceau said.

cil system — the kids quizzing each other, mispronouncing words, that sort of thing. I always wanted to turn it into a computerized system and make it even better, but I hesitated to go all-in.

“I dabbled with it here and there, but coming out of the pandemic in the fall of 2021 I said to myself, ‘I can’t go my whole life without taking this leap.’”

The result is an app designed primarily for desktop computers, laptops and tablets, which starts with a diagnostic assessment to identify students’ level. Then learners cycle through an adaptive process of pretest-practice-test, and any missed words from the test reappear in the following cycle’s list.

shows them the correct spelling side by side with their spelling. In the practice activities, it gives them feedback. The test at the end is graded instantly.

“Instantaneous feedback is a best practice for learning, and that’s embedded here.”

Last school year Spelling Safari was piloted in 10 classrooms with 200-plus students. Marceau was a piloting teacher and admitted, “It was exciting to see the students enjoying it. I had a lot of feedback that they liked it more than paper-pencil versions and they liked having their own list of words.”

Even more exciting was the progress piloting students made: an average of



SPELLING SAFARI

Jonathan Marceau designed an award-winning spelling app now available for classroom use nationwide.

- personalized
- adaptive
- gamified
- multi-sensory
- automated
- proven
- foundational

one-fourth of a grade level every six weeks — about a 50% increase over traditional methods. The program’s adaptive word lists more than double kids’ exposure to new words and more than triple the amount of words learned.

“The benefit is pretty tremendous on the learning side, and then with our automated system we pledge to save teachers 100 hours a year in not having to prep, give assessments, grade,” Marceau said.

What Spelling Safari offers over competitors is the extensive size of included word lists, which Marceau hand-developed over years in the classroom, drawn from multiple elementary curricula. Lower elementary lists are organized by spelling patterns, so students learn those by discovery.

“I’ve spent my career trying to do my very best for children in the classroom, so this is giving me a possibility of reaching even more students beyond my classroom and building and district, and that means a lot to me,” Marceau said.

“Spelling is still a foundational piece of learning to read and write, and I think reading and writing will be more important than ever in an age of AI we have coming up. Those are large language models, and you have to be able to fluently use language in order to use those tools effectively.”

The 20-year veteran has always been active in his local union, the Utica Education Association, serving on the

board in addition to crisis and bargaining committees. This year he’s taken a leave of absence from teaching to focus on getting his tech project off the ground.

“It’s thrilling and it’s terrifying,” he said of his leap of faith. “I have zero income right now; I had to figure out my health insurance; I’m living on whatever savings I have; I’ve poured a bunch of my own money and investor money from friends and family into this, so there’s a lot riding on it, right?”

“One of the surprising things to me is I’ve spent 20 years in the classroom, and one of the main roles of that is helping kids manage their emotions, and now I’m having to manage my own emotions. There are incredible highs, and then there’re lows. I hear entrepreneurs talking about this all the time.”

In the short time Spelling Safari has been on the market, response has been strong between subscription sales and free trials, he said. A one-year classroom subscription costs \$100, below competitors’ pricing, and Marceau has goals to expand the app by adding mini-lessons.

“All of the competitors I know of have essentially taken traditional spelling and put it online. Mine is the only one that individualizes lists for students based on their level,” he said.

Marceau won \$10,000 in startup cash, plus design support and legal consultation, in winning the Michigan EdTech Innovation Contest 18 months ago, a

competition operated via partnership by Michigan Virtual, Michigan State’s Burgess Institute for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Spartan Innovations (a subsidiary of MSU Research Foundation), and Michigan Small Business Development Council.

By the time he won, Spelling Safari had already been in development with the help of Ann Arbor tech consultant and co-founder Jonn Behrman and software development company Fanzoo Technology. The biggest prize he got from his first-place selection was a boost in confidence, he said.

“It confirmed that ‘Hey, I’ve got something here.’ If a panel of judges from the business sector think this is a good idea and a good business approach, then it tells me this is something solid.”

The hardest part of launching the business four months ago was assigning any price for educators, he said. “I don’t love the idea of selling to elementary teachers because I don’t think they should have to pay for things, but I hope they will find other possibilities to pick up the tab.”

Marceau suggests approaching a principal or PTA group, making a wish list for parent donations, or asking a parent to gather donations for a subscription. “I’ve tried to keep the cost pretty reasonable and give teachers something back that money can’t buy: time saved all year long.” [▼](#)

Aides, custodians join Petoskey union

When Ron Furgeson first joined Petoskey Schools as a custodian nearly 30 years ago, he subbed on nights for nearly a year before a longtime employee retired and he took that coveted permanent spot — allowing him to leave his factory job for a full-time role that felt more meaningful.

At the time district custodians earned good pay, benefits and retirement, and a friend told him subbing could get his foot in the door, Furgeson said.

“I liked the idea of working in Petoskey schools; it’s where I went to school, and I thought it’d be a great place to make a career and be part of something good.”

It’s been wonderful, he said, especially since he shifted schools to replace a retiring 42-year veteran at Lincoln Elementary in 2010. “I enjoy the kids, and I have a great relationship with the teachers, and we have fun. I don’t think I could have ever done anything that would be more rewarding.

“The coolest thing for me every day is I get to go there and take care of that building and make sure my customers — the kids and staff — have everything they need.”

Each morning, Furgeson stands at his school’s entryway greeting students by name. At lunch, he sings for birthday kids and compares hunting and fishing stories with others. He knows for some youngsters, the safety and connection they feel at school is the best part of their day.

“I’ve got a million dad jokes, so I bring a little bit of a lighter side to whatever’s going on. They call me Mr. Ron, and you know — the elementary kids still think the custodian’s a cool guy.”

Then things changed midway through Furgeson’s career. About 17 years ago, custodial services in Petoskey were privatized and long-time union-represented custodians began to be replaced as they left with non-union hires employed by Edustaff, a contracted third-party company.



Ron Furgeson enjoys a lunchtime chat with third-grader Emma. Working as a custodian in Petoskey schools has been a rewarding career for 28 years — thanks to union pay and benefits, he says.

Employees like Furgeson retained union-negotiated pay and benefits, but over years as changeover happened to lesser-compensated third-party hires, negative effects played out. Instead of being sought-after, custodial jobs became hard to fill. Turnover is high, and “rooms don’t get cleaned,” Furgeson said.

At one point this fall, only three union custodians remained out of 12 total in the district. A full crew would be at least 20 full-time custodians for days and nights, but applicants are scarce and new hires often leave within days or weeks for employers that pay more and offer other benefits.

“It’s gone down the tank to the point where we constantly have overtime and people working extra shifts,” Furgeson said. “There’s guys that’ll do it — they need the money — but it’s just a paycheck; there’s no good thing at the end of the road for them.”

However, improvement is on the way.

In a hopeful change that Furgeson and others advocated and Superintendent Jeffrey Leslie embraced, beginning Jan. 1 all existing custodians will transition back to direct employment by the district and union representation by the Petoskey Educational Support Professionals Association (PESPA).

“It was a bit of a struggle, but we got it done and it’s the biggest thing that’s happened here since I’ve been an employee,” Furgeson said. “This success story of coming back to where we started means we’re going to take care of people and make this a job that’s worth having again.”

That’s not all. In addition to custodians returning to direct-hire unionized positions, dozens of classroom aides also were restored as district employees after a decade of privatization — beginning at the start of this school year — and now they’ve joined PESPA for the first time ever.

Upon their return to direct hire, the aides got a pay bump and single-person health insurance only — better than before but not the deal that unionized secretaries or custodians had from their PESPA collective bargaining agreement.

The aides held a meeting to discuss unionizing, said MEA UniServ Director Adam Bedwin, who serves Petoskey units. “We had a veteran aide there who told the group, ‘We tried to organize 20 years ago but decided not to; then we lost our retirement and insurance.’

“That one line changed the entire tone of the room,” Bedwin said.

The group began gathering authorization cards for a potential union election, and once they had more than enough at nearly 60% they approached the district about accreting to the unit through voluntary recognition in lieu of an election via the Michigan Employment Relations Commission.

The district consented and plans were ironed out in letters of agreement, which brought the PESPA unit’s membership count from 13 to 80.

For Bedwin, two things are clear from his perch in Petoskey: “Unions do important work getting everyone a voice in their workplace, and as a result district leaders are realizing that privatization is not in their long-term best interest.”

As with the losses of good custodians, during the years that classroom aide positions were devalued and contracted out — causing frequent turnover and unfilled positions — students paid the highest price, said PESPA President Ashley Maginnis, the main office secretary at Ottawa Elementary School.

Aides in Petoskey work one-on-one and in small groups with some of the most vulnerable students, those in special education or who need extra help in reading and math, Maginnis said. It’s hard for those children to lose adults they counted on.

“It’s heartbreaking when you see a student that has a connection to an aide and that person has to quit in the



(Left) School secretary Ashley Maginnis has a smile for students who enter the office. (Right) Maginnis is president and Ron Furgeson is vice president of a support staff unit that is adding aides and returning custodians to membership.

middle of the year because they can’t make it financially. We’ve had aide positions posted year-round because we can’t get people to apply.”

She doesn’t blame anyone for leaving, Maginnis said. In fact, it’s why she stepped up to be president of the dwindling unit last September: “I wanted to advocate for people who are helping raise the next generation of kids but getting paid less than people working at Subway.”

Her own mother has worked as a special education aide at Maginnis’ school for 28 years and retained single-person insurance and the state defined-benefit retirement plan despite new hires being privatized for a while, she said.

Both mother and daughter work multiple jobs to make ends meet. Maginnis works winter weekends at the local ski resort and also cleans houses while juggling a blended family that includes six children ranging in age from 7 to 16.

“The pay has gotten better, but it’s still not great,” though because of the union she has family insurance plus paid vacation, holidays and retirement, she added.

Living in a small town and being office secretary in the school where

she grew up isn’t unlike being the mom of a large family, Maginnis said. She gets to know all of the school’s 250 kids and families, “every mom, dad, uncle and cousin.”

She loves making sure kids see a smiling face when they walk into the office. “I can’t imagine working anywhere else and enjoying it as much,” Maginnis said, yet joy doesn’t pay bills and talk has continued for years of de-privatizing and unionizing aides and custodians to stabilize the workforce.

The successful organizing effort is good news for the district, she noted: “If you can hire people and get them to stay, there’s consistency for the kids.”

Even more, it’s good for the aides who do so much and have gotten too little in return over the past many years, Maginnis concluded.

“They deserve it. They’re in the trenches with the kids day in and day out, working hard just like the teachers, but definitely under-appreciated for all they do. I just want them to have pay and benefits to let them know they’re valued for the jobs they do every day.” ♡

At The Center

MEAC
CENTER FOR Leadership & Learning



Book study explores teaching ‘when the world is on fire’

Mici Bos and David Rudzinski are MEA members from different sides of the state, but both are career changers who chose to become educators from deep self awareness and commitment—and both recently completed a virtual MEA book study on *Teaching When the World is on Fire*.

Edited by acclaimed education researcher and MacArthur Fellowship recipient Lisa Delpit, the book is a collection of essays by educators on how modern-day politics permeates classrooms with advice for colleagues looking to help students understand the world around them.

Delpit has said of the book’s purpose: “School is the place for young people to be able to look at their world... If we can’t connect to it in some way, children, like adults, just refuse to engage.”

Bos is a paraeducator in her first year as a reading interventionist working with small groups of elementary students in rural Greenville schools northeast of Grand Rapids. She is in her fifth year as an educator after quitting a 30-year purchasing career in manufacturing.

A foster parent for 10 years, Bos said, “I’ve always had a love for children

and seeing them succeed, so it’s been rewarding to watch the ‘aha’ moments when they remember to use something they learned.”

Rudzinski is a sixth-grade teacher in his 20th year working in the state’s second-largest school district, Macomb County’s Utica Community Schools, after a long career in restaurant management. He wanted a role where he could make a greater difference in the world, he said.

“Growing up I had several teachers who provided a stable home base for me when my home life wasn’t always so smooth. I was always that kid eager to help out my teachers before and after school, too!”

Bos attended the five-week book study because the book’s title interested her and the meetings were conveniently held in evenings, she said. Her biggest takeaway was a greater awareness of cultural differences and the need to understand and respect them.

“I wanted to hear what Michigan teachers are seeing because I’m in a little bitty town, and that can be a whole different world from the bigger cities,” she said. “It was interesting

to read the essays and then have a discussion from all the different perspectives.”

Rudzinski said he joined the book study because educators have navigated so many challenges over the past several years: “We had to essentially assemble a plane mid-air in order to meet the needs of our students in 2020, but to be honest, that assembly has never quite stopped.”

His biggest takeaway was a sense of community, he said. As a delegate to the NEA Representative Assembly, Rudzinski has talked with educators from districts big and small across the country and has concluded, “We are truly teaching while the world is on fire.”

“One thing remains, though—we cannot give up. As educators, we’ve been through tough times before, and I can honestly say right now in this moment, our students need us to provide a safe space for them more than ever.”

Watch your email for regular AT THE CENTER e-newsletters featuring the latest SCECH-eligible course offerings and book studies from MEA’s Center for Leadership & Learning. ♡

Nominate a colleague ▶ There’s not much time left to put forth a colleague for one of four MEA awards accepting nominations through Dec. 31. To learn more about the honors to be presented at February’s MEA Winter Conference in Detroit, go to mea.org/awards-grants and click on Human Rights and Educational Excellence Awards. There you can find detailed information along with a fillable nomination form.

SAVE THE DATE ▶ Looking for inspiration, networking, training to be a more effective classroom practitioner and leader? Plan now to join us for MEA’s biggest event of the year, the MEA Winter Conference, Feb. 5-7 in Detroit!

We are grateful for you

As we enter the holiday season, we at MESSA want to thank you for all you do to nurture young minds, create safe environments and inspire the next generation.

Our public schools are the backbone of our communities, and at the heart of every school are the hardworking people who dedicate their lives to our children.

At the heart of it all, is you.

Thank you for choosing MESSA. While you celebrate the holidays with your family, remember we are grateful that you trust us to care for you and your loved ones. We work hard to earn your trust and to provide the service and support you need when it comes to navigating the complex world of health care.

MESSA's mission is to ensure that our members can focus on what you do best — supporting our students — without having to worry about your health care coverage. We hope that knowing you and your family are protected by that MESSA card in your wallet provides you with peace of mind.

To all of you who work tirelessly to make a difference in the lives of children, we say thank you. Thank you for your dedication, for choosing MESSA, and for the incredible impact you have on so many lives. Your work is invaluable, and we are proud to stand by your side, providing the care and protection you deserve.

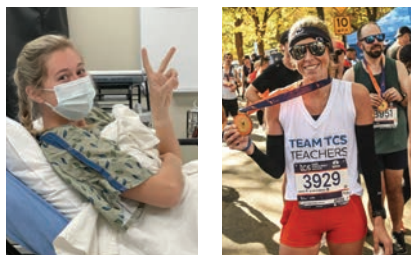
Happy holidays to you and your family. ♥



By Ross Wilson,
MESSA Executive Director



For this teacher, math+marathons=life lessons



MEA member Raychel Figurski uses humor and encouragement to help her Hudsonville math students learn to trust that hard work pays off — a philosophy she lives as a distance runner pursuing her goal of completing the world's six major marathons despite big obstacles in her path.

"I keep reminding them, 'If we put in the work; we get where we want

to be,'" Figurski said. "For me it's just positivity and encouragement and slow progress. But then as the year goes on, their confidence grows and they start to see, 'Oh, I can do this. I can do hard things.'"

In November she also took on a hard thing: running the New York City Marathon after undergoing bilateral hip surgeries and a knee surgery in a space of nine months during the 2022-23 school year. She was one of 50 teachers nationwide selected for entry by TCS, the marathon's title sponsor.

But Figurski didn't get her dream finish. Between mile 14 and 15, she was hobbled by a strained hamstring.

"The first thing I thought was, *Oh no! I'm going to have to drop out;*

I can't even run normal — I won't make it another 10-and-a-half or 11 miles with a pulled hamstring. I was coming down this hill and about to turn into Manhattan.

"The next thing I thought was, No! You have to finish this. You told your students you can do hard things if you're willing to put in the work, even if you're dealt bad cards. So I kind of hobbled and walked a lot and it wasn't pretty, but I got to the finish line." ♥

Read the full story of Figurski's love of teaching, challenges she's faced, marathons she's completed, and a surprise visitor after her return from New York who helped her put the disappointment in perspective. Go to mea.org/marathoner-teaches-life-lessons.

Remember this benefit of membership

*By Kandy Slack
MSU-APA Membership Chair*

As membership chair of my local MEA unit at Michigan State University, I love talking with new employees about the value of belonging — and I make sure to include a benefit of membership that is sometimes overlooked: the MEA Scholarship.

Since 1997 the MEA Scholarship Fund has distributed \$955,000 in post-secondary scholarships to eligible dependents of MEA members. These awards can be renewed for multiple years, and every dollar adds up when it comes to paying for college.

My own child, Ren, is an MEA Scholarship recipient for the third time this year, so this subject touches me personally — and deeply. Higher education helped me find a post-divorce foothold when I needed to provide for me and my then two-year-old, and the union has shown me the power of community.

Years ago I didn't know how I would manage as a single mom with no college degree and a low-paying retail job with no benefits. But I followed my interests toward technology and into a full-time, 18-week IT training program

at Grand Rapids Community College and becoming CompTIA A+ certified.

What I learned got me into technical support roles at Comcast and later a public school district. I worked full-time while raising Ren and taking classes part-time at Kellogg Community College toward degrees in computer networking and computer engineering technology and earning Microsoft Certified IT Professional (MCITP) certification.

I couldn't have done it without my family's help, but I finished at KCC and worked my way to technical support jobs at MSU starting a decade ago — first at the Facility for Rare Isotope Beams and later at the Clinical and Translational Sciences Department.

Working in support of global science and research fed my inner science geek. Earning good pay and benefits fed my family. Eventually buying a house on my own fed my sense of accomplishment.

I've always shared my love of STEM with Ren and taught them to follow their interests, which in high school included band, track, cross country, reading, and learning about science.

For college, Ren found a fit in the Honors program at Saginaw Valley

State University. Now a third-year SVSU student majoring in Ecology, Evolution and Organismal Biology, Ren hopes to become a science professor — and the MEA Scholarship helped launch that journey.

I've also taught Ren about the difference unions make for hard-working people like my father, a tool and die maker, and my mother, a rural postal carrier. That's why I've always been active in the MSU Administrative Professionals Association (MSU-APA).

I've been union rep, board member, MEA/NEA delegate, and now membership chair. Our contract covers 3,000 employees across 350 job classifications at MSU campuses in East Lansing, Grand Rapids, Flint and Detroit. Each month I meet with 25-75 new hires, whom I urge to join MSU-APA.

We discuss the contract, their probationary period, Weingarten rights, and the power of our collective voice which has secured us benefits such as fully funded health care and paid parental leave. I share MEA and NEA member benefits and discounts, and I talk about the MEA Scholarship.

The application is now open at mea.org/mea-scholarship, and the deadline to apply is Feb. 10, 2025. If you're a golfer, sign up (after Jan. 2) for the Scholarship Fund's annual golf-outing fundraiser on June 16, 2025, at mea.org/golfouting or email meascholarship@mea.org with questions or to make a tax-deductible gift.

Helping young people access high-quality education through our collective action and ongoing advocacy is in our DNA as members and leaders of MEA and NEA! ♥



MEA Scholarship recipient Ren Short (left) and mom Kandy Slack remind members to check if college-age dependents are eligible to apply at mea.org/mea-scholarship.

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