

MEA voice

*Get inspired
& involved*

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*Local union's
dramatic win*

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THE
NORTH
FACE



If shoes could talk

Letter to members: Celebrating excellence

Reading the cover story about this year's NEA Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence winner prompts two thoughts:

First — *East Jordan's Matt Hamilton is a truly exceptional educator.*

And — *every student, no matter where they live, deserves a Matt Hamilton in their life.*

Matt's work both in and outside of the classroom is more than worthy of the prestigious acknowledgment he received from NEA. He is an amazing teacher who nurtures young people's talents and confidence, providing them with valuable tools to face the world and become productive members of society.

Read more about his unforgettable work with students in the "Shoe Club" and beyond on page 8.

But we know Matt isn't alone.

Educators like Matt Hamilton work in public schools across Michigan, constantly inspiring students, parents and their communities to create a brighter future.

We need to publicly celebrate our successes, reminding everyone that great things happen every day for students in public schools. MEA is committed to lifting up these stories, as you'll see in the four standout

educators honored with our statewide Excellence & Human Rights awards on pages 12 and 13.

By celebrating each other and our passion for student learning, we can recruit the next generation of exceptional educators to join our ranks in Michigan.

Too many schools continue to struggle with a shortage of qualified educators, especially in rural and urban areas. As local, state and federal policymakers examine various education proposals, they must prioritize educator retention.

The recipe for attracting and retaining great educators isn't complicated — as Michigan Teacher of the Year Kelley Cusmano has championed during her tenure this past year (see page 14). To get and keep the best and brightest working in our kids' schools, elected leaders must dramatically increase educator compensation, listen to the voices of frontline school employees when crafting education policies, and respect educators for the professionals they are.

Fixing Michigan's educator shortage is not only possible — it's essential for our children's future. That starts by honoring all of the Matt Hamiltons who dedicate their professional lives and devote their many talents to educating our students. ▼



QUOTABLES

"I have no doubt that many former East Jordan students would mention Matt Hamilton if asked, 'Who has made the biggest impact on your life?'"

Ted Sherman, local business owner and school board president in East Jordan Public Schools, on the influence of MEA member Matt Hamilton, whose Shoe Club has taught young people to believe in themselves and care for others.



Chandra Madafferi,
MEA President & CEO



Brett Smith,
Vice President



Aaron Eling,
Secretary-Treasurer



MEA member Matt Hamilton, a middle school social studies teacher best known for the student-led Shoe Club he advises, has won NEA's Award for Teaching Excellence, page 8.



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



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On the cover: East Jordan's Matt Hamilton poses with shoes to remind students everyone has a story and not all challenges can be seen. Photo by Miriam Garcia.

Teacher retention, page 14.

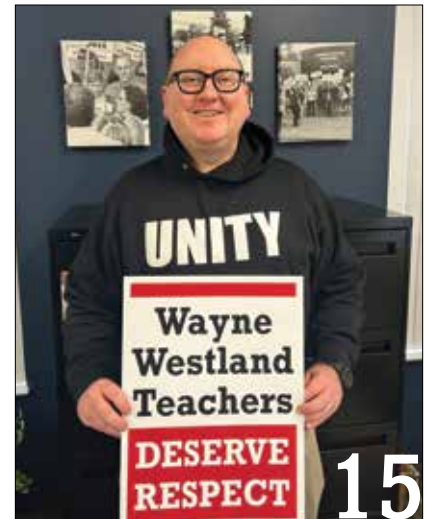
W-WEA crisis win, page 15.

Pontiac partners, page 18.

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MEA VOICE

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photo courtesy of Erin Wilkinson, Saugatuck Douglas Area Indivisibles

QUOTABLES

“If you want to see retired teachers speaking up, let me tell you!”

Retired Zeeland educator Jo Bird, president of Lakeshore MEA-Retired, on members turning out again and again to pressure their Congressman, Bill Huizenga, to hold a Town Hall.

Read more about member activism on page 22.

ICYMI: Educators define issues

During a long career — first in the U.S. Army and now as a teacher in the career and technical education (CTE) field — **MEA member Mike Cook** has always used education and training to build a versatile resume. This year Cook began creating a new CTE program in Redford Union Schools to teach young people skills needed to work in high-paying, in-demand IT careers.

But he’s worried dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education will destroy his fledgling program. “A whole lot of programs are run by the Department of Education that are very important,” Cook said. “If the department goes away and that federal funding is cut, the states will be left to fill in as best they can — and they will have tough choices to make. They’ll have to decide what’s more important between things like reading programs, school lunches and CTE. How do you choose?”

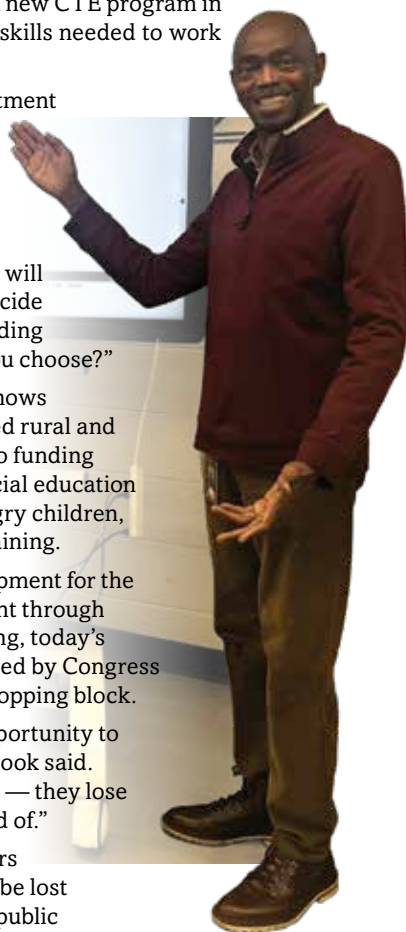
At stake is access to opportunity, and polling shows Americans are strongly opposed. Cash-strapped rural and urban districts would be hardest hit by losses to funding that helps states lower class sizes, provide special education services to students with disabilities, feed hungry children, and lower the cost of college and vocational training.

The Redford Union school district bought equipment for the new IT program, then planned to receive a grant through the Education Department’s Perkins Act funding, today’s version of a Vocational Education Act first passed by Congress in 1917. That program and others are on the chopping block.

“When you lose CTE programs, you lose the opportunity to train students in a skill they can use forever,” Cook said. “But the local area and local businesses lose too — they lose skilled workers which they’re in desperate need of.”

You can help! MEA is looking for more educators like Mike Cook who can speak about what will be lost in their schools if federal funding dedicated to public education gets cut, redirected, or shifted toward voucher programs and private school tuition schemes.

If you have a story or want to get involved, contact MEA Voice Editor Brenda Ortega at bortega@mea.org.



QUOTABLES

“We will use all the tools at our disposal — congressional action, legal action, and collective action — to stop the politicians and billionaires who want to defund our public schools.”

NEA President Becky Pringle, calling on members to get involved in pushing back against the Trump administration’s attacks on public education. NEA is signed on to two federal lawsuits: one challenging the executive order aiming to eliminate the U.S. Department of Education and another seeking to invalidate unlawful attacks on education equity.

Keep up on the latest news and events at mea.org/protect and nea.org/protect.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

Growing Libraries with Representation



AEM President Aryana Jharia poses with student winners of the contest, who each received a gift card and book.



(L-R) Mason Middle School AP Mary Hilker-Loch, teachers Laura Lewis and Cindy McCormick, AEM member Lilly Kyro.

The Aspiring Educators of Michigan (AEM) wrapped up their latest reading/writing competition with an awards ceremony for students who were asked to analyze which voices were missing from their school's book collections.

The "Growing Libraries with Representation" project, funded by a CREATE grant from NEA, asked secondary students in Mason to survey their classroom and school libraries. Students then wrote essays identifying books that could help diversify offerings at their school.

The contest followed AEM programs in previous years which also valued literature as window, mirror, and sliding door. That concept — familiar to many educators — explains the importance of diverse perspectives in literature as a way for readers to gain knowledge, understanding and empathy.

AEM President Aryana Jharia, an aspiring secondary ELA teacher from Eastern Michigan University, is passionate about bringing diverse books to students. Having spent her own money to begin a classroom library, she said it's unfair to ask teachers to fill this need alone.

"Michigan is diverse, and representation matters," Jharia said, encouraging other districts to ask students what books they want in their schools. "The

first step is evaluating where we have these gaps (in diverse literature) and taking the steps to fill those gaps."

Teachers Laura Lewis and Cindy McCormick and their students at Mason Middle School won the contest. Each teacher received a \$150 gift card and a variety of books based on the expressed interests of their students.

Lewis and McCormick encouraged students to participate in the contest because they are reading Eliza Wiemer's novel, *The Assignment*, in which kids advocating for themselves is an important theme. The contest also gave students a chance to write for a real audience, they said.

Five student winners each received a \$30 gift card and a book. All of the prizes were purchased at Mason's local bookstore Vault Deli and Bestsellers on Jefferson Street.

Lilly Kyro, AEM member and Michigan State University student, is currently in a placement at an elementary school in Mason where she is working with second graders who look for diverse characters like themselves in books they read at school.

"I'm excited these students will eventually come to Mason Middle School and see more books where they are represented, thanks to this contest," Kyro said.

It was a challenge to select the five student winners. The AEM members who selected them are Kenzie Atkins, GVSU; Alyssa Stevenson, CMU; Anna Theune, GVSU; Linsley Springer, GVSU; and Jenna Decker, SVSU.

Mason Middle School Principal Ted Berryhill and Assistant Principal Mary Hilker-Loch were on hand for the awards ceremony. Hilker-Loch said she appreciated the project for giving students an opportunity to choose books that make a difference for themselves and others.

Also in attendance was Janet Alleman, an instructional coach and mentor in the district, who praised McCormick and Lewis for their work in the classroom and in an after-school book club.

The longtime educator said giving students greater choices in school empowers them and makes learning more joyful. "Students want voice, status, and for us to serve as coaches and mentors, not preachers," Alleman said. ♥



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MESSA plans help relieve back, neck pain

Take a peek inside MESSA member Amanda Walker's third-grade classroom.

Her day includes helping students reach for books, writing math problems on the board, walking around the classroom, and bending down to give hugs. It amounts to a lot of standing, walking, bending and stretching throughout the day.

All that movement can be challenging for Walker, who has degenerative disc disease. This condition causes the discs in her spine to bulge and press on nerves, leading to numbness in her arms and hands that can last for hours or weeks.

Walker credits her MESSA health plan with helping her manage her symptoms, as it covers chiropractic and massage therapy treatments. All MESSA health plans cover chiropractic and massage therapy treatments; some restrictions apply.


"It's been very helpful in dealing with that disorder," said Walker, who teaches at Bay City Public Schools. "One option was to get steroid injections into my spine, which sounds very terrifying. But luckily, I didn't have to do that because I have preventive care and that's keeping me from needing to do something more invasive."

When it comes to musculoskeletal-related conditions, Walker is not alone. Last year, more than 46% of MESSA members filed claims for musculoskeletal-related conditions, making it the most common health issue among members. Musculoskeletal ailments are common among teachers worldwide, with 80% having some form of associated condition, according to the National Institutes of Health.

While some may view massage as a luxury, for people with degenerative disc disease, cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy and many others dealing with illness or injury, it's a quality-of-life issue. Knowing that your health plan covers massage therapy and chiropractic care provides both financial relief and peace of mind.

Becky Wilkins, a teacher at Saginaw Public Schools, says of all the benefits she receives through her MESSA health plan, she loves her chiropractic and massage therapy treatments the most.

"Teaching is very demanding," Wilkins said. "You're on your feet a lot, so the chiropractic care is exceptional. I also can get massage therapy to help with some of those muscles that are a little tense. You know, teaching is pretty stressful, and that helps relax me. And it makes a difference in my life at home as well because I'm healthier."

The details of chiropractic and massage therapy coverage vary depending on which MESSA plan you have. To learn the details of your specific MESSA plan, log into your MyMESSA member account at messa.org. 



Amanda Walker
MESSA member



Becky Wilkins
MESSA member

Tuition-free community college changes lives

By Chris Curtis

Like most professors, I've accumulated small gifts from students over my career: a Sigmund Freud pencil sketch, copies of *Psychology for Dummies* and *The Journal of Irreproducible Results*, a collection of Peanuts cartoons titled *Way Beyond Therapy*.

I teach psychology, if you haven't guessed, yet my most prized memento is the Delta College-themed water bottle sitting on my desk. I owe it to the Michigan Reconnect Program.

For almost 25 years, I carried around an increasingly dented green water bottle which elicited many comments, including one from Kyle Hanshaw, a Michigan Reconnect student who said, "I bet that bottle has a few stories to tell." Kyle has a powerful story of his own.

During class, he sat in the front row near the door, in case he needed to step out for a call from family or work. Not that Kyle isn't devoted to his studies, but as an older, non-traditional student, and as a parent, his life commitments occasionally require immediate attention.

Kyle is raising a family with his wife and working as a recovery coach at an addiction center, while taking courses at Delta. It's a busy schedule for an accomplished student — one who has overcome so much to get here.

Earlier in his life, like many in our communities, Kyle struggled with addiction. As often happens, some bad choices followed as did run-ins with the law. Academic studies were not at the top of Kyle's mind for more than a few years.

However, as he recovered from addiction, Kyle's focus returned — a focus on his new family, on helping others, on improving himself.

The Michigan Reconnect Program allows students like Kyle to attend Delta College and other Michigan community colleges tuition-free, clearing an obstacle so they can take steps toward a better career — careers that require education, training, and credentials beyond high school.

Careers like the one he's pursuing: social work. Kyle had stepped away from a career path earlier; now he is reconnected and moving to join an in-demand profession that is experiencing shortages.

Kyle's life experiences, worn in the sleeve of tattoos on his arms and heard in the keen observations of his questions, have already taken him part of the way to reconnecting with his academic potential in social work.

Now the Michigan Reconnect Program provides Kyle the opportunity to leverage his drive and dedication to improve his life, and to help others.

When Kyle shared his perspective on addiction and brain chemistry, I knew he had the time at home to focus on course materials. When he laughed that a class video on perceptual



Chris Curtis is an award-winning professor of psychology and former president of the faculty association at Delta College in the Great Lakes Bay Region.

illusions was a dinner-table topic of conversation, I knew he had the time to be present with his family and model what a successful student looks like to his son.

At the end of the semester as I walked down the hall from my last session, I heard a student say, "I know you can afford your own water bottle, but I thought you might like a new one."

Thank you, Michigan Reconnect, for making college affordable to students like Kyle. ♥

MICHIGAN RECONNECT

Launched in 2021 under the leadership of Sen. Sarah Anthony (D-Lansing), Michigan Reconnect allows students to attend community college tuition-free or at a discount — part of Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's goal to increase the percentage of Michigan adults with post-secondary education to 60% by 2030.

To be eligible, applicants must:

- ▶ Be at least 25 years old
- ▶ Have lived in Michigan for a year or more
- ▶ Have a high school diploma, equivalency, or certificate
- ▶ Have not yet completed a college degree

Learn more at michigan.gov/reconnect.

Michigan educator known for his work with students wins NEA Award for Teaching



Matt Hamilton

started the Shoe Club in 2008 to build students' empathy, self-confidence, and leadership skills.

It was mid-August, the dog days of last summer, and MEA member Matt Hamilton looked like a mayor on parade walking down Main Street in East Jordan, a small town along the Jordan River in northern Michigan's Charlevoix County where he teaches middle school social studies.

The veteran educator exchanged warm greetings, smiles and waves with passers-by as he made his way toward a local eatery for lunch. Like many teachers Hamilton is well-known in his community, but he is especially prominent and beloved for a student-led program he manages known as Shoe Club.

"You can't go anywhere without someone wanting to give him a hug," said Nathan Fleshman, president of the East Jordan Education Association, who joined him for lunch that day.

Local business owner Ted Sherman, the school board's president, agrees that Hamilton's influence can literally be seen: "It is most meaningful to me to witness former students — many years removed from being a student of his — seek him out to say hello, catch up and genuinely be happy to see him.

"I have no doubt that many former East Jordan students would mention Matt Hamilton if asked, 'Who has made the biggest impact on your life?'"

Hamilton's lunch route through downtown passed another visual reminder of his influential work: 100-year-old GAR Park, named for a Civil War veterans group, Grand Army of the Republic.

n for 'Shoe Club'

ching Excellence

By Brenda Ortega
and Heather Palo
MEA Staff



Shoe Club students this year launched a podcast, *If Shoes Could Talk: Icons of Success on Failure*, where they interview notable people such as (left) mathematician Vint Cerf, inventor of the internet, and (right) Civil Rights icon Bernard Lafayette, Selma Voting Rights campaign organizer.

Students in the Shoe Club raised the enormous sum of \$130,000 to enhance the 0.2-acre mini park with a pavilion, landscaping, fencing, a military relic, signage and sidewalks.

Dedicated in a ceremony just a few months earlier, the park improvements were part of the club's Honor and Service Project in which middle schoolers also interviewed area veterans to produce videos, publish a book, and plan a school-wide Veteran's Day assembly as tribute.

"The park upgrades were an aspect of the project, but we knew we wanted to get the veterans involved," Hamilton said. "The Shoe Club is not a fundraising club. It's about leadership, and life skills, and inspiring others."

Nearly five dozen local veterans answered a written survey for the Honor and Service Project, and 30 of them joined students for in-person interviews. For the book, *Stories of Service*, club members wrote each

veteran's story along with essays about what they learned from the experience.

At the student-planned school assembly, two veterans and several students spoke. A student sang the national anthem, and the school's band played, joined by a military color guard. The assembly was "super powerful and emotional," Hamilton said.

"Teachers were crying; kids were crying — and again, it was all student-led, student-organized."

Honor and Service was not the first ambitious project completed by the Shoe Club, but it prompted Fleshman — the local union leader and a science teacher at East Jordan High School — to nominate Hamilton for the statewide MEA Educational Excellence Award, he said.

"Seeing rooms of middle school students having frank, vulnerable and mature conversations with veterans — with little to no adult intervention — has been truly awe-inspiring,"

Fleshman wrote in the nomination. "Feeling the passion in how students talk about these projects has brought tears to my eyes."

In Shoe Club, middle school members and high school mentors are encouraged to value themselves and others; find inspiration to dream big; and learn empathy, life skills and leadership as they plan and carry out community service initiatives.

The club's centerpiece is the Shoe Museum: a collection of more than 200 shoes gathered from both East Jordan schoolkids and notable people who have made a positive impact on the world, including athletes, scientists, entertainers, inventors, artists, explorers and leaders.

Earlier in that August day, the club had accepted a new pair of shoes for the collection. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer had stopped by Hamilton's classroom to donate snakeskin-patterned heels, share a framed proclamation



(Left) Gov. Gretchen Whitmer donated shoes and met with students last summer. (Center) Student Ryan McVannel stands by Shaquille O'Neal's size 22 shoe. (Right) Hamilton and NEA Foundation officials at the Excellence in Education Awards Gala.

recognizing the club, and talk with club members in the midst of summer break.

Whitmer told reporters covering the visit, "When you see what [Hamilton] is doing here, and you hear the stories and the conversations around values and leadership, I think it's really a cool way to draw in young people. It's really an inspiration."

Whitmer's schedule didn't allow her to stay for lunch and a stroll through downtown, but hosting the governor at East Jordan Middle School was "an absolute honor," Hamilton said afterward.

"She's a very busy person, traveling all over the state; it meant a lot to me that she came and supported my students and celebrated the work they've done in the community."

Hamilton became a local celebrity long ago, but last spring the spotlight widened to draw attention from Whitmer and beyond when he won the statewide 2024 MEA Educational Excellence award from Freshman's nomination. From there, MEA put Hamilton forward for national recognition.

Now he's added a brilliant new chapter to his inspiring story: Hamilton received the 2025 NEA Member Benefits Award for Teaching Excellence, becoming the first educator from Michigan to win one of the profession's highest honors.

He was selected from among five finalists for the prestigious recognition, which was bestowed on Feb.

13 at the NEA Foundation Salute to Excellence in Education Gala in Washington D.C. The award comes with a \$25,000 prize.

"I'm deeply humbled and extremely honored to receive this award," Hamilton said in his acceptance speech. "I'm incredibly grateful to be in this room and in the presence of so many extraordinary educators from across our great country, each with our own impact, our own stories, and our own missions.

"This room is filled with some of the best human beings on this planet."

Hamilton started the Shoe Club in 2008 — five years into his teaching career — after a motivational speaker at a school assembly used shoes as a device to tell stories of young people who appeared well on the outside but struggled with unknown challenges.

When his own students then began opening up to Hamilton about their problems, he was inspired to launch a club where they could learn their value, build self confidence, and develop into leaders.

He would require students who wanted to join to read a couple of books on those subjects, write a paper, and submit 10 life goals. Initially he hoped three to five kids would sign up, but 27 joined right away and he knew he was on to something.

Students can donate a shoe to the museum after completing the steps for becoming members.

"The lessons I've learned through the Shoe Club are lessons for all of us as educators," he said in his acceptance speech. "Every student in our classroom matters. Every student has a story, and every student needs to know they are valuable.

"When we teach from that place of love and purpose, we don't just change lives, we impact communities and futures."

Shoes collected by the club — from icons such as Michael Jordan, Dolly Parton, Jane Goodall, Bruce Springsteen, Ruby Bridges and her teacher, Barbara Henry — are more than artifacts, Hamilton told the crowd.

"They're stories of perseverance, grit and generosity, and they remind us that success is a journey of effort, growth and purpose."

Over the years, Shoe Club members have completed numerous challenging projects. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, they raised \$75,000 to complete a solar array at the middle-high school and later pulled together \$70,000 to improve a school garden with fencing, a hoop house and shed.

In his speech, Hamilton credited an "incredible support system" that allows him to accomplish all he does, which includes his family, students, colleagues, community and union. Of his students, he said, "They have no idea how much they inspire me every single day."

He also called out educators he had growing up in his nearby hometown



(Left) Hamilton's colleagues back home were thrilled by his win and welcomed him back to school with a red carpet. (Right) Hanging behind the desk in his classroom is Hamilton's most prized shoe, donated by the parents of a former student.

of Cadillac for shaping him into the person he is today.

Hamilton concluded his speech with hopeful advice: "To all my fellow educators: Dream big alongside your students. Don't be afraid to take risks, and let's continue to make a difference one student, one story, and one shoe at a time. I'm honored to be here, proud to work in the best profession in the world."

His colleagues back home were thrilled by Hamilton's win. Many watched the Friday night awards ceremony on live stream, and he returned to school the next week to find a "red carpet" laid from the school's entrance to his classroom decorated with balloons and streamers.

Beyond the Shoe Club, Hamilton teaches video production and seventh-grade history where he brings lessons to life with outside speakers, Virtual Reality goggles, and "fake field trips" — dramatic stories he tells with the lights off in which he populates the world of the past with his students.

Every year by Thanksgiving he gives every student a nickname. One boy is "Sock" because he's a thinker who does well in class discussions held in

the Socratic method. A boy who likes fishing is named "Jitterbug" after a lure. A Taylor Swift fan whose name starts with K becomes "K-Swizzle."

He's been told that fifth and sixth graders look forward to getting their nicknames in seventh grade: "It becomes a big deal, but it's really just building relationships and letting kids know they matter and they're unique and special," he said after winning the MEA award last year.

Hamilton believes his willingness to jump in and try new things has been key to his success, so one of his big goals is to teach students not to view failure in a negative light — to show failure is natural and can teach us how to achieve our dreams.

In keeping with that philosophy, the Shoe Club this year started a new podcast — *If Shoes Could Talk: Icons of Success on Failure* — and landed some big names for interviews, including autism activist and author Temple Grandin, auto-racing champ Mario Andretti, and Civil Rights leader Bernard Lafayette.

It's been a year of exciting news for Hamilton and his students.

But going back to that beautiful August day last summer, as he stood behind his classroom desk following the hubbub of a visit from the governor, the 23-year educator found himself in a contemplative mood. In the quiet he revealed what really matters and keeps him going.

On the wall behind his desk hangs one shoe, paired with a framed photo and the goals of a former student, Danielle. "If there was a fire in the school and I could only grab one shoe, it would be this shoe," he said, his voice becoming heavy with emotion.

Danielle joined the Shoe Club as an eighth grader in 2008, immediately setting to work on the requirement to write down her 10 life goals. Tragically, she lost her life later that night in a four-wheeler accident.

"Danielle's shoe is the best gift that has ever been given to me, symbolizing how precious time is. We don't have much time — that's why we work hard. We don't know how much time we have on this Earth."

Perhaps someday Hamilton will be asked to add his shoes to the collection — and what a story they will tell. ♥

The 2025 MEA Awards for

Congratulations to these four outstanding MEA members who were honored at the MEA Winter Conference in February.

Instructional Excellence Award

A 10-year paraeducator in Reed City and vice president of her local union, Nicki Strach has worked to implement innovative literacy programs while making sure everyone — regardless of behavioral or academic challenges — feels understood, valued and nurtured.

“Every year my students amaze me with the progress that they make to become better readers, especially with some of the little blocks that we know all of these kids face,” Strach said. “The best part of my job is the relationships I have formed with them, and I will cherish that forever.”

For Strach, a student she taught her first year perhaps made the biggest impact on her career. The student moved to the Reed City district as an upper elementary student, but was only reading at kindergarten level.

“We worked together in a small group for 30 minutes a day, four days a week on decoding, phonics skills and sight words,” Strach recalled. “In just five months they jumped from a level 1 to a level 12. What impressed me the most was the drive and persistence they had to keep trying and wanting to learn.”



Nicki Strach



Jamie Hitt

Instructional Excellence for Diverse Learners Award

A mid-career math teacher at Lakeview High School in St. Clair Shores, Jamie Hitt co-created and leads the school’s peer-to-peer program — an elective course that brings together general education students and students with special needs to build leadership, empathy and collaboration.

Winning a statewide award of excellence brought out many feelings, she said in her acceptance speech: “Excitement, pure joy, disbelief — and it wouldn’t be complete without a little bit of imposter syndrome as well... I would like to thank my students, past and present. You continue to inspire me, make me laugh, and encourage me to be my favorite version of myself every single day.”

Hitt said she’s witnessed both students with special needs and general education students improve their grades and school attendance through her program.

“Several of our students have taken peer-to-peer to a whole new level, and they have extended their friendships to welcome each other into their friend groups, attend school dances and sporting events together,” Hitt said. “Additionally, quite a few of our former peer-to-peer students keep in touch after high school graduation.”

Human Rights & Excellence

Distinguished Servant of Public Education Award

A 40-year educator, Brenda Massie has worked for 20 years in Ludington schools where she teaches fifth and sixth grade, supervises the Safety Patrol program, and leads after-school math programs — all in addition to serving as the local union's chief negotiator and grievance chair since 2010.

"My first job is to teach and develop the students sitting in front of me each day," Massie said. "I truly believe if I didn't give that piece 100% of my effort, I shouldn't be taking on any extra duties."

Massie, along with former superintendent Jason Kennedy, played a pivotal role in her district securing much-needed federal aid during the COVID-19 pandemic to serve Ludington students and families. She also worked with Kennedy to negotiate contracts that helped retain and attract staff to serve the Ludington school community.

"I'm just really humbled to stand here when I know that everyone in this room is a servant," Massie said in her acceptance speech. "You wouldn't be in this profession — you wouldn't do all you do — if you didn't have a servant's heart. And so I thank all of you for all the service you give."



Brenda Massie



Kaitie Paynich

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Champion Award

Spanish teacher Kaitie Paynich has helped students at Portage Northern High School feel safe and nurtured through her efforts to strengthen the school's Gay-Straight Alliance club and create a gender-affirming closet and free store open to all.

"It was a two-year-long project, but DEI in reality is daily work and we all know that," Paynich said in her acceptance speech. "It's daily work to ensure that our students know that they matter and they know that they belong in our classrooms and in our schools."

Paynich, one of two queer educators in her building, was chosen to lead the program when it re-started in 2016. Under her leadership, the school's Gay-Straight Alliance has prioritized student safety through small acts like providing staff members with "Safe Space" signs in multiple languages and educating staff on terminology used in the LGBTQ+ community.

Paynich and her students applied for and received a \$10,000 It Gets Better Grant to implement a gender-affirming closet in their school.

"Due to pressure from my school and district administration, the students and I worked to transform the original idea into something even more powerful," she explained. "We now have a Free Store for the entire community."

Teacher of the Year talks educator retention



Important work has been done in Michigan to attract new teachers into the profession, but without a similarly urgent focus on keeping great educators in classrooms, “all we have is a revolving door,” says Michigan Teacher of the Year (MTOY) Kelley Cusmano.

From the start of her tenure as a voice for the state’s educators this school year, the Rochester High School teacher has used her MTOY platform to elevate discussion of how to stop the flow of people prematurely leaving the world’s most important profession.

Topping her list of what needs to change is the narrative around educators, Cusmano said in an interview. Partly released by her district from day-to-day teaching duties, she has been visiting schools across the state.

Her biggest takeaway: “Michigan teachers are some of the most talented humans I’ve ever had the privilege of knowing. I knew we had good teachers, but going around the state I realized they’re everywhere — everywhere! From the UP all the way down to Buchanan.”

Yet the dominant message heard by most Americans is how educators are failing. “Everywhere I’ve gone, I talked with people about this rhetoric of failure and how detrimental and disheartening that can be. Teachers are working their absolute tails off to ensure that kids are valued and respected, only to have us be devalued

and disrespected in the national conversation.”

She wants educators to tell their own story — in settings outside of school buildings and hours, such as businesses and civic organizations — and raise their expert voices wherever folks congregate and talk of kids, schools and education.

“We should be there explaining what actually is happening, because we’ve allowed other forces to drive a narrative that isn’t really true.”

She knows it’s not easy. “I get it — my classroom is my favorite place on earth, but we can’t stay in our comfort zone with the door closed. I think every single space should include a teacher voice.”

Another fix Cusmano advocates: better training for school administrators. A supportive principal has been key to her survival and success, but not all are equipped for such challenging, multifaceted roles.

Higher compensation would also stem the flow of experienced professionals out of classrooms. “We need to create conditions where teachers feel valued, empowered, and sustained. The profession is so important, but teachers won’t stay if they can’t sustain themselves in a career.”

Cusmano and her identical twin grew up in Jackson County spending time in their mother’s kindergarten classroom in a rural public district. Both sisters became educators: Cusmano teaches

English and leadership in Rochester, and Sarah Giddings leads an alternative high school in Washtenaw County.

Cusmano believes every school should have a leadership class like one she loves teaching, where students learn skills that can’t be measured on a bubble test: how to listen, think critically, question or disagree respectfully, plan and manage a multi-step project.

She pays attention to standardized test scores but doesn’t make them her goal.

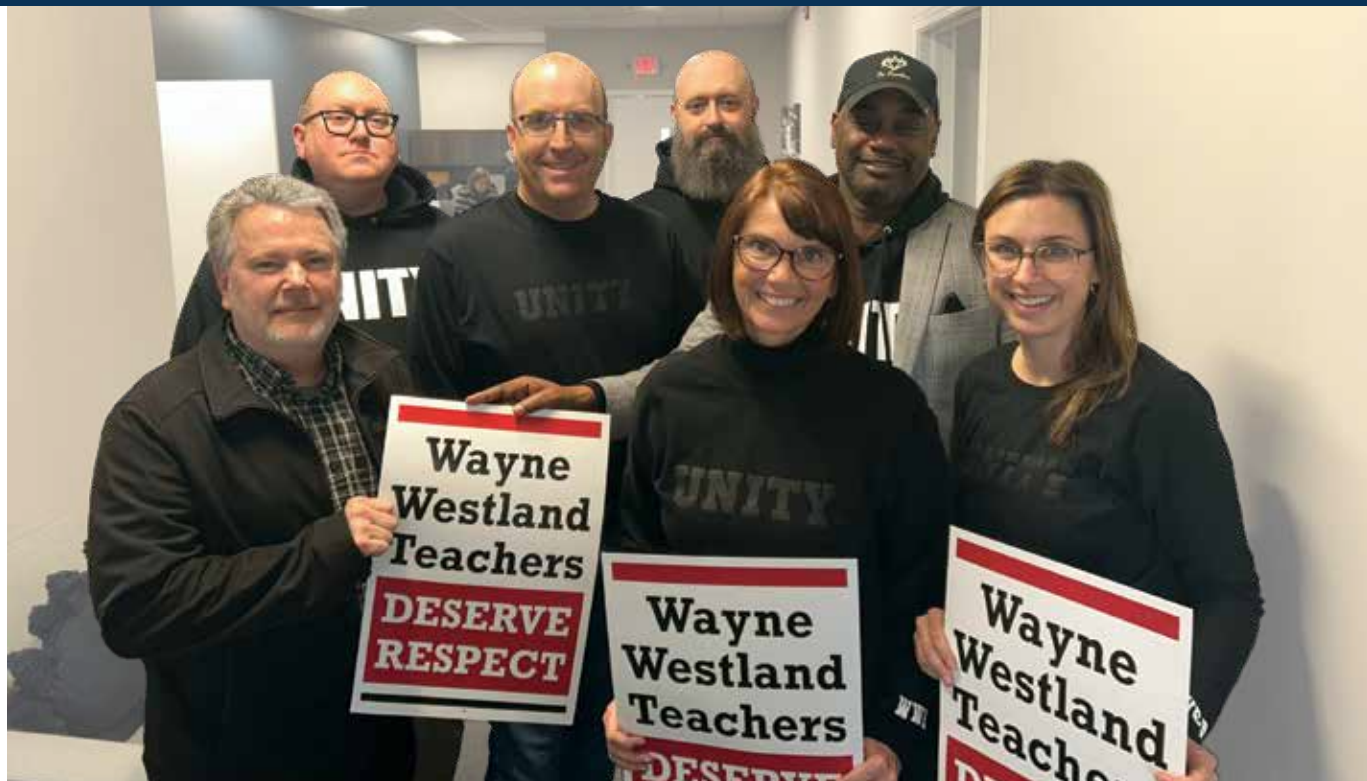
“When I put on my English-teacher brain, this is what I know: I know I’m teaching humans, that humans are imperfect, that society will always have huge questions, that my job is teaching students how to think and grapple with those. I’ll defend that to my dying day.”

She loves discovering what makes young people tick and how to hook each student in learning — a point of connection across diverse schools and educators she’s visited. “Wherever you go, kids are kids; they all want to be respected, they all want to be encouraged, they all want to be successful.”

The same can be said of those teaching them. ▼

Kelley Cusmano is the 2024-25 Michigan Teacher of the Year. In February, the Michigan Department of Education announced the 10 Regional Teachers of the Year who are finalists for the 2025-26 MTOY to be announced in May.

W-WEA win took twists and turns



*By Brenda Ortega
MEA Voice Editor*

If you follow the news, you might recall a huge budget crisis that burst on the scene in the Wayne-Westland School District as winter holidays approached 18 months ago, suddenly prompting threats to privatize busing and lay off dozens of employees.

You may remember the local union mobilizing resistance to shut down both the outsourcing and most cuts to the workforce, despite the district's dire warnings of a \$30 million budget shortfall.

After that you possibly saw an occasional news report in April as teacher contract talks began, in June as the district discussed budget-cutting and applied for a state loan, or in August as the school board considered closing an elementary school and parted ways with the superintendent.

There's a chance you caught wind of contract negotiations moving to

state mediation last November. But you would have had to dig deeply to find the saga's dramatic conclusion in January — even though it represented a stunning reversal of fortunes.

After turning down repeated concessionary offers from administration, the Wayne-Westland Education Association (W-WEA) won steps and salary schedule increases of 12% over three years — and more.

The district paid back the loan, and its fund balance after the contract took effect stood at \$24 million.

You might've wondered how the district's financial picture changed drastically in such a short time. But you wouldn't have found the answer — that the district never had a deficit in the first place.

Until now, the story has not been told of how the union won big in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, an incredible tale of union expertise, connection, and relentlessness.

“Everybody came together, because that's what you do in Wayne-Westland,” said Tonya Karpinski, the MEA executive director who serves the unit. “It's in the union culture that's been established.”

W-WEA President Steve Conn agreed: “Here we have true solidarity and a union coalition where everybody has each other's backs.”

As soon as the crisis began in late fall of 2023, the unit's experienced bargaining team questioned the district's budget numbers and outlined a plan of action. Step one: Stop privatization. Step two: Stop layoffs. Step three: Figure out finances to prepare for bargaining.

STEP ONE

In 2008, when the last teacher strike in Michigan happened in Wayne-Westland schools, aides, custodians, secretaries and others from



W-WEA bargaining team (L-R): Chris Kozaczynski, Kevin Marchi, Tonya Karpinski, Carl Lowe, Erica Maus, Timothy Sullivan. Not pictured: Steve Conn (for Conn photo, see previous page and Table of Contents, page 3).

support staff units refused to cross the picket line. Now teachers and other certificated staff stood alongside transportation employees.

Drivers met with Karpinski and Conn who urged them not to leave for other districts, which would have made privatization inevitable. “My job was to rally the troops,” Conn said.

“When the bus drivers were asking, ‘Should we retire? How are we going to buy presents for Christmas?’ I was there to say, ‘We will show up for you.’ And we did — 100%. We rallied around them, and it was a beautiful thing.”

In addition to its own members, the W-WEA called upon other unions that November and December, especially the United Auto Workers. School employees from Wayne-Westland had recently stood on local picket lines during the UAW’s historic strike in September and October.

“Local 900 is a UAW assembly plant that was part of the rolling strike that happened through that summer, and W-WEA was assigned a gate to picket every Friday,” Conn said. “They knew

we had their back, so when we started picketing school board meetings, 100-plus UAW members showed up. You don’t see it much anymore, but we have a true union coalition.”

Hundreds of community members began turning out for meetings, which moved to the high school auditorium, and the pressure ratcheted up quickly, Karpinski said.

Talk of privatization had begun not long after a shocking financial audit was shared at a sparsely attended October school board meeting indicating the district’s fund balance had fallen from 24% the previous year to 6% without warning.

At meeting’s end, the board president mentioned outsourcing transportation, but no vote was taken. The next day, when the superintendent and human resources director called to say they planned to seek bids for the job, Karpinski warned: “Don’t do this. This will not be good for either of you.”

It wasn’t a threat, she said, but advice for district newcomers she perceived as not understanding the community:

“I was telling them what I was going to have to do: I was going to have to mobilize.”

Weeks later on Dec. 8, amid a community firestorm, the school board voted NO on busing privatization, 5-2.

STEP TWO

A key to the W-WEA’s power is the loyalty and responsiveness of members. Despite so-called right-to-work and other union-busting state laws passed by a Republican-controlled Legislature and governor in 2012, the unit’s membership has never fallen below 90%.

“When we say, ‘We need you to picket,’ they picket,” Karpinski said. “When we say, ‘Wear red,’ they wear red. When we say, ‘Show up to the board meeting,’ they show up.”

The union’s goal was to address the financial problem in bargaining, not in panicked cuts and layoffs by the board. To win, the message had to be clear and the membership had to be unified, said Chris Kozaczynski, a second-grade teacher who’s been on the bargaining team for 18 years.

“Our members trust us at this point,” he said. “You build that over time.”

The message hammered on how the district went from a healthy fund balance to a deficit in a year’s time without officials realizing what was happening, that clear answers were needed so solutions could be developed, that staff — and the students they serve — should not pay the price.

Every week, 500-600 people turned out at board meetings. Back in October, the bargaining team had expected the district’s audit to show a general fund balance well above 15%, the threshold for members to receive a 1% bonus in the last year of a three-year contract.

Instead the union found itself offering board members a stopgap to avoid cuts: use \$26 million of unspent federal COVID-19 relief dollars to fill the hole

and buy time. The alternative gave board members a handhold to grasp, said Timothy Sullivan, a 17-year bargainer and fourth-grade teacher.

“Sometimes we assume the school board is knowledgeable about the district’s finances, but you find out really quickly they’re not,” said Sullivan, one of a few team members who’s become expert at combing through budget line items and financial reports. “The COVID money helped them see a way through this.”

Amid the uproar, two school board members resigned; replacements were appointed; a new board president was chosen; and a new board majority began questioning decisions that led to the crisis.

District officials sent pink slips in early December as notification of a plan to lay off 39 employees including teachers, secretaries, social workers and custodians. But on the eve of winter break, Dec. 21, the school board voted NO on proposed staff cuts by a unanimous 7-0 vote.

STEP THREE

Two truths centered the bargaining team: School audits are only as accurate as the numbers provided by the district, and Wayne-Westland schools should have been in a strong financial position.

“We started looking at revenue, and they planned on getting \$125 million that year but they actually got \$133 million,” Sullivan said. “They got significantly more money than they planned on getting, partially because the state increased revenue.”

On the other side of the ledger, spending totals appeared out of whack, he said: “For total expenditures, they planned on about 120 (million), and they spent just over 148 — so \$27 million more than what they originally planned. Isn’t that amazing?”

The union raised red flags, said Kevin Marchi, a high school Spanish teacher

and the bargaining team’s longest serving member at 20 years. “It’s a puzzle where you have to put pieces together to solve it.”

The team’s history helped them find discrepancies, added Kozaczynski: “Based on what we’ve seen in previous years, we asked questions. If they didn’t have an answer, we started digging.”

Given more data, the group found accounting errors such as double-counted charges and math miscalculations, even as district leaders blamed the troubles on teacher salaries. Despite the team’s reassurances, rank-and-file members worried they had caused the district’s woes.

“These people are dedicated to Wayne-Westland, so they’re upset and asking, ‘Could I have caused this?’” Marchi said.

The previous contract had ended years of educator pay freezes by bringing individuals up to the salary schedule step reflecting their years of service, resulting in large raises for some. The move stemmed an outflow of teachers to other districts; it didn’t cause the crisis, Sullivan said.

Now the crisis was spurring historic numbers of retirements from educators worried about possibly reduced compensation for pension calculations or loss of contractual payouts for unused vacation days, including the W-WEA’s own longtime president, Don Harris.

“The big thing that frustrates me is how often unions are perceived in a negative connotation by people who think we’re trying to get as much as we can,” Sullivan said. “Our goal is to protect the district. It doesn’t benefit me or a bus driver or any employee for the district to go bankrupt.”

By June, the union had calculated a \$32 million general fund balance but couldn’t convince the district its \$9 million balance was wrong. Officials took a \$30 million state loan and talked of closing a school.

The union had to prove the facts, said Carl Lowe, a middle school teacher who says he’s the bargaining team “baby” as a member for just four years. “That’s when the fourth-grade teacher came out; Tim started teaching math with beautiful colored charts and highlights.”

By August, the superintendent resigned. In September a new finance manager confirmed the \$32 million fund balance. The union suggested how to pay back the loan without getting hit on interest.

IN THE END

With district spending no longer in the red, the W-WEA had members wear black “Unity” shirts to school and adopted the AC/DC song “Back in Black” as their theme. The bargain wasn’t done.

Karpinski said, “I always tell my members we can prove they have the ability to pay, but it still comes down to willingness to pay. We didn’t take the district’s final offer. We had to do a lot more picketing and a lot more board meetings.”

In January, the mediated settlement won ratification by members in a historic 99.9% vote of approval.

Through the long process, the bargaining team’s close-knit bonds became tighter, evidenced by the jokes and laughter when the group is together. Many are proud Wayne-Westland alumni, and that’s also what makes the work of negotiating contracts a joy, they said.

“These aren’t just numbers we’re looking at; it’s people’s lives,” Sullivan said. “We all want to ensure we take care of the students by taking care of the employees, because they’re the people working with those kids. The biggest thing is you want to leave something positive behind.”

Marchi agreed: “This is our legacy, helping people and ensuring the district remains strong and stable.” ▼

Pontiac unions join forces in crisis

By Brenda Ortega
MEA Voice Editor

Teacher Candice Ridley first noticed the organizing talents of paraeducator Fred McFadden several years ago while taking part in collective action during a staff convocation to start a new school year in the Pontiac School District where both work.

In the audience, Ridley and other staff members remained silent through administrators' speeches to show solidarity and send a message to school board members about concerns going unaddressed despite sacrifices employees had made to help shore up the district.

The superintendent ended her talk by chastising staff for the protest, so when McFadden — a local union leader — took the stage, he abandoned plans to stay silent and instead spoke out.

“Fred gave such a rousing speech, that’s when we all came to life and started cheering and clapping,” Ridley said. “I liked how he talked; I liked how he acted; I liked what he was saying. I knew I could learn a lot from him.”

McFadden remembers. When the district’s top leader blamed staff, “I looked at the other (unit) presidents, and I said, ‘I know we said when we get on stage

we were not going to say a word — and I know my grandmother would come out of heaven and pop me on my head to tell me, *you better respond to that.*”

Over the next few years, as Ridley took on a union role as minority rep on the executive board of the Pontiac Education Association (PEA), she got to know McFadden, president of the Pontiac Paraeducators Association since 2012.

When she became PEA president in 2023, “we joined forces immediately,” Ridley said. “We realized we needed to support each other. We have the two biggest units in our district, so it makes sense for us to work together instead of working as separate entities.”

Their partnership solidified at a key time as the central Oakland County district has faced a simmering crisis this school year. Educators in Ridley’s unit have been working without a contract since the last agreement expired June 30. District officials didn’t even begin negotiations until July.

Then tensions dialed up in recent weeks after Ridley and McFadden attended a late February school board retreat where a draft plan to reorganize the district was discussed, which laid out a quick timeline for approval and implementation.

Titled “Pontiac Schools Reimagined,” the unreleased plan was developed without input from the staff or community, she said. Ridley took photos of slides being presented and emailed information to members.

The plan calls for closing one school and two district facilities, restructuring elementaries to cluster students into buildings by grades, and relocating two honors programs now housed together, the K-5 International Language Academy (ILA) and 7-12 International Technology Academy (ITA).

“These are sweeping changes being proposed that would fundamentally reshape our district without proper transparency or stakeholder involvement,” Ridley said. “We had little time to respond.”

Soon the plan and its timeline were shared on the union’s social media with a call for school employees and community members to attend the March 3 school board meeting. Local news outlets were alerted, and more than 100 people turned out.

Interim Superintendent Kimberly Leverette told news reporters the union leaders were giving out “misinformation” but later called the plan a “well-researched possible way to structure our district in a way that will be





(Above) Candice Ridley and Fred McFadden, presidents of the Pontiac Education and Paraprofessionals associations, are collaborating to build strength.

(Opposite page) More than 100 people turned out to the March 3 Pontiac school board meeting, including MEA President Chandra Madafferi (third from left).

fiscally responsible, given the uncertain funding and educational climate.”

Ridley said she simply shared slides from the retreat. “They wanted to vote on it March 17 and wait till March 31st to say anything to the public. I reported out to my membership what was going on. It was a two-day retreat, and I gave updates, and they accused me of sending out misinformation.

“How is it misinformation when I’m quoting what’s on your slides?”

The unions are questioning district spending on upper management while teachers and other certificated staff are working without a contract. In addition to Leverette, the previous superintendent went on paid administrative leave in January 2024 and returned as “superintendent emeritus” in 2025.

The two superintendents along with two additional management consultants are being paid more than \$600,000 from this year’s budget — “and then they cry poverty,” Ridley said.

In addition, a major concern is the background of one of the high-paid consultants advising the board: Donald Weatherspoon previously worked as an emergency manager appointed by Gov. Rick Snyder to oversee financially troubled school districts.

Weatherspoon was the emergency manager who transitioned Muskegon Heights Public Schools into the nation’s first fully privatized school system in 2012, turning over the keys to a for-profit school management company which has since changed several times again.

He later took over the Highland Park School District — already privatized under a previous emergency manager — and closed the only high school, leaving those students to travel miles into neighboring districts for education. He also worked in Benton Harbor and Pontiac as a consent agreement consultant with less sweeping powers to make changes.

Described as “the legend” in an interview with the National Charter Schools Institute, Weatherspoon was listed as a presenter at a 2019 conference of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies for a session titled “Charters as change agents, forces for quality, and catalysts for excellence.”

Meanwhile, many residents in a number of mostly Black communities where public schools were closed or privatized now wish they’d fought harder to protect what they had, McFadden said, adding he doesn’t want Pontiac to suffer the same fate.

“I’ve been a president a long time, and I know Dr. Weatherspoon,” McFadden said. “I know his history. We are trying to get answers from the board to three questions: Why did you bring Dr. Weatherspoon in? Did you know him before you brought him in? Did you vet him?”

The district’s enrollment and finances have begun to stabilize in recent years, but Ridley and McFadden realize challenges remain that must be addressed. What they want from the district is transparency and collaboration.

So far they believe they’ve been able to slow down the process. At the March 3 school board meeting, a flyer was released announcing dates and locations for community listening sessions over several weeks, and the March 17 meeting came and went without a vote on the draft plan.

Parents and staff alike are worried about unpopular proposals in the plan which could lead families to leave the district and undo years of work to get Pontiac schools on stronger footing, Ridley said.

“Our parents are passionate about their schools; they have the power, and they’re exercising it by calling and emailing and coming to board meetings. They’re showing up to say, ‘We are paying attention. Don’t do this. Schools are the backbone of the community.’”

It’s also why the coming together of union members is so important right now, McFadden said: “This may be David vs. Goliath, but they can’t operate without us. No more division. No more letting them pit one against the other. If we work together, we can all win.” ♡

Candidates for MEA Elections

Delegates to the 2025 MEA Representative Assembly (RA) on May 9-10 will elect one member to represent Michigan on the NEA Board of Directors.

One member has declared candidacy for NEA state director. *MEA Voice* magazine publishes biographies and

statements of candidates for statewide positions announced in advance of the annual RA where the election will be held.

Below is the biography and statement provided by the candidate. Information provided is not edited by *MEA Voice* staff and is printed as

submitted. Biographies and statements that exceed maximum allowed word counts are printed to the end of the last sentence that falls within the maximum limit.

The MEA RA is the primary policy-making body of the Association. ▼



Wendy Winston has been a teacher and union activist for over 20 years. Winston has served as Chair of the NEA Local President Release Time Grant Committee and Chair of the MEA Democratic Educators Caucus. Wendy Winston serves in roles in her local and region including association representative, region vice president, and coordinating council PAC chair. Winston was a Biden delegate at the 2020 and 2024 Democratic National Conventions. Wendy currently holds a position on Michigan's STEM advisory council and was a regional semi-finalist for 2020 Michigan Teacher of the Year.

Candidate for NEA Director Wendy Winston

As I complete my first term as a member of the NEA Board of Directors, I am asking for your vote to continue this work in a second term. Raised in a union household in West Michigan, I learned the importance of empathy and inclusion, and the power of solidarity and these ideas drive my work in the classroom and in our union.

Early in my career, I compared inequitable conditions found within and across districts. Teaching math and science in underfunded districts like Flint Community Schools and Grand Rapids Public Schools led me to get involved in the union. I will keep fighting until every child has access to an excellent education and appropriate resources regardless of their zip code. My energy toward education justice resulted in recognition as an NEA Top Political Activist.

Membership in the MEA has allowed me to educate community members and elected officials about current issues in education. During my 24 years in education, I campaigned to improve working conditions for colleagues and educational experiences for students. I speak out at board

meetings and rallies and encourage others to do the same. Organizing members to show up and speak out is one of the most rewarding and inspiring parts of my advocacy. I have proudly organized successful solidarity pickets to show support for union siblings, Babies over Billionaires townhall, and the Grand Rapids "Shine the Light" Rally to draw attention to the MEA 3% case.

To continue improving our education system, we need to work together toward the goal of electing friends of public education. I have canvassed and phone banked for political candidates and important issues. I work to build and maintain relationships with sitting elected officials. I'm honored to serve as the Chair of the Educators Caucus to Michigan's Democratic Party, local PAC chair, and a former MEA political action leader.

I plan to continue fighting for improved working conditions for educators and just learning environments for students. I ask for your vote and would be incredibly proud to continue serving as your NEA Director. ▼

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MESSA understands it's important for you to connect with students. Every day, you greet them with friendly smiles when they board the bus. You show them patience and care in the cafeteria. You work diligently at every stage of their education — from teaching the alphabet to guiding them through algebraic expressions. You are preparing them for the future, which is no small task. It's a big challenge.

That's why we want to provide peace of mind when you connect with MESSA. Life can be tough, and our goal is to ease the burden of navigating complex health care. When you call MESSA, you'll talk with a friendly and knowledgeable member service specialist who can assist with information about benefits, address a concern

about medical bills and much more. You can connect with our Member Service Center at 800-336-0013, or via live chat through your MyMESSA member account or the MESSA app.

Additionally, we have 16 local field representatives who are experts in health benefits and passionate about supporting our members. Our field representatives can consult with groups during the collective bargaining process, attend association meetings, explain MESSA plan options, and present information to employee groups to help members make the best choices. You can find your local field representative at messa.org/field or call at 800-292-4910, ext. 7817.

Remember, at MESSA, we are here for you. ♥



*By Ross Wilson,
MESSA Executive Director*



Lansing union is 'LSEA Safe'

In a time of heightened anxieties, the Lansing Schools Education Association is reminding young people: educators can be relied upon to protect, nurture and teach them.

As part of the "LSEA Safe" campaign, the union's board adopted a position statement and distributed free green t-shirts to members who want to participate by wearing the shirts to school once a week.

"LSEA Members provide a safe, nurturing, rigorous learning environment that is welcoming to all students," the statement reads. "Regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, political ideology, or one's personal belief system, we welcome all students and their families."

Member Regina Bluemlein started her career 20 years ago teaching history and English. She now teaches English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) at Everett High School.

"I'm seeing the fear factor firsthand, so having the shirt, wearing it collectively as a staff, then having a few students ask, 'What does it mean?' — it gave me an aspect of empowerment when I had few other places to look for it."

The LSEA Safe campaign appeals to members with various political views, Bluemlein added. "The message is truly bipartisan — that we as teachers are a safe place and we're here to help you learn; that if you're in distress for any reason, you can trust us. You can come to us. It's our job to be there for all." ♥



Read the full story at mea.org/lsea-safe.

Our students need you



“Sometimes you have to stand for something bigger than you. I’m here for the kids. I’m here to do whatever I can to make a difference.”

MEA member Alexandra McCloskey, a first-year teacher in Farmington, protesting at an overpass spanning Interstate 696.

Threats to eliminate the U.S. Department of Education mean millions of our nation’s most vulnerable students are at risk — especially children from lower-income communities, young people from marginalized populations, and students with learning challenges and disabilities.

“It’s dangerous, reckless, and unacceptable,” says Michigan Attorney

General Dana Nessel, one of 21 Democratic state attorneys who filed suit with MEA support to challenge unconstitutional dismantling of the Education Department.

Our strength lies in Americans’ love for their neighborhood schools. We have numbers on our side, and educators are trusted voices!

MEA members across Michigan have been part of local efforts to push back on federal attacks on public education. Get involved with your local union as we join forces together — it’s going to take every one of us doing all we can to win this fight!

Then stay tuned at mea.org/protect and nea.org/protect. **v**



“Public schools are the beating heart of our communities. I don’t even want to think about a world without them.”

Cathy Murray, president of the Port Huron Education Association, on a march through downtown that drew more than 100 educators and allies.



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