

MEA • Voice

HOLLAND HIGH SCHOOL

**MESSA guide
pullout center**



**We welcome
new educators**

Letter to Members: Happy new year

August means new beginnings and the chance to reach and teach a new group of students. The start of a school year brings out a level of excitement in educators like no other time.

That feeling is one of the greatest aspects of our shared profession — and it's on us to make sure the next generation of educators is encouraged to join our ranks and feel that passion for helping every student succeed.

This issue of *MEA Voice* highlights the many ways we're working together to encourage the best and brightest to dedicate their career to helping Michigan students. From high school teacher cadet courses to grow-your-own programs to train new teachers, amazing work is happening to bring new, diverse, talented educators to schools statewide.

MEA is proud to be part of that effort, from our involvement with the new Educators Rising organization, to our continued commitment to the Aspiring Educators of Michigan and our college teacher-prep students, to helping all educators refine their craft through our Center for Leadership & Learning.



Of course, we face challenges in education, especially connected to uncertain political times and efforts to demonize educators and the promise of public schools. But for every challenge, there's an opportunity that comes when the light bulb blinks on for a student who grasps a concept for the first time, or a student shares the difference you've made in their education and their life.

It's on us as educators and MEA members to share those bright spots, both with incoming educators and our communities at large. Because our hometown schools are the center of our communities. Because every student, no matter where they live, deserves the opportunity to succeed in a great public school.

Because above all else: **We Love Public Education. ♥**



*Chandra Madafferi,
MEA President & CEO*



*Brett Smith,
Vice President*



*Aaron Eling,
Secretary-Treasurer*

QUOTABLES

“Now we just need to get the word out that this opportunity is available statewide for prospective educators in our rural regions.”

MEA member Kathryn Dirkin, a faculty member at Central Michigan University and director of Partnerships and Programming at MiCAREER Resource Hub, a new initiative offering no-cost credentialing to current and prospective rural educators.

Read more on page 28.

QUOTABLES

“This is breathtaking — I never in my life thought I'd be standing up in front of colleagues in the numbers that are here today receiving a great award like this is.”

MEA member Roy Freeman, a custodian in Dowagiac, MEA board member, and chair of the Education Support Professionals Caucus, on receiving the Paul Blewett Friend of Education Award at the MEA Representative Assembly in June.

Read the full story at mea.org/Freeman-wins-blewett.



Michigan's only **Registered Apprenticeship Program** for educators is operating in Saginaw Public Schools — a partnership that MEA leaders and staff helped to negotiate — one of many initiatives over the past few years to address the educator shortage, page 26.



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



12

On the cover: Holland High School alum Liebbe Martinez and teacher Sarah Le Febre discuss Future Educator class where students interested in education careers gain exposure. Photo by Miriam Garcia, page 20.

Alternative MTOY, page 12.

CMU MiCAREER hub, page 28.

ESP leader honored, page 30.

More inside: Bill of Rights, page 7. Legislative updates, page 8. New LearnCenter and website, page 10. Reading PD, page 11. MESSA guide, page 15. Para-to-teacher, page 24.



30



28

MEA Voice

Senior Executive Director	Erik Edoff
Director of Communications and Public Engagement	Doug Pratt
Editor	Brenda Ortega
Publications Specialist	Shantell Crispin

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

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to the *MEA Voice*, Box 2573, East Lansing, MI 48826-2573 or via email at webmaster@mea.org. Allow at least three weeks for change of address to take effect. *MEA Voice* telephone: 517-332-6551 or 800-292-1934. Circulation this issue: 112,446



Collective Action on the Ave

About 1,000 people turned out to line five miles of Woodward Avenue between Interstate 696 and 16 Mile Road at a huge Day of Action last spring, organized by more than a dozen MEA units from coordinating councils 7-A and 7-B in Oakland County.

Car horns honked and blared in support of protesters calling attention to Republican plans to shut

down the U.S. Department of Education. The event drew educators from numerous districts in Oakland and Macomb counties, joined by parents and other friends of public education.

MEA member Alyssa Reese, a school social worker in Ferndale, said she drew energy from the spectacle. “Lots of honks, lots of waves, lots of double thumbs-up. A lot of back windows down with kids waving to us from their car seats, and that’s been really endearing.”

The high school students she serves watch the news and often come to her with worries about what they see, which motivated her to join the action, Reese said. “I’m going to do everything I can to make sure that our kids feel like they can grow up safe and be themselves and learn authentically.”

Find updates on political and legislative issues on pages 10-11.



Above and Beyond

The February cover story from *MEA Voice*, “Mr. Smith’s Dream Center,” won a national award from State Education Association Communicators (SEAComm) this spring. If you didn’t have time when it published to sit with this uplifting piece on Grand Rapids art teacher Stephen Smith, read it now at mea.org/mr-smith-dream. If you’re in need of inspiration in troubled times, Smith’s story of resilience and hope delivers.

ICYMI: School violence task force

A new MEA task force will examine ways to address increasing workplace violence against educators and advocate for policies, legislation and resources to ensure classroom safety for school employees and students alike. Formation of the task force was approved this spring by the MEA Representative Assembly (RA) — the union’s governing body made up of delegates from across the state — from a proposal by an early career educator from the Upper Peninsula.

Erinn Parker, an eighth-year teacher and president of the Stephenson Education Association in Menominee County, said workplace violence is an increasing concern she’s heard repeatedly expressed since becoming an RA delegate three years ago. Parker also is a teacher-leader in MiNE — MEA’s program for new educators — and heard the same issues discussed at a classroom management training she led last year for early career educators.

“Overall there’s a lot of hitting and kicking, biting, throwing of items, classrooms being destroyed, especially in the younger grades. It disrupts the learning environment, and it creates the question in your mind of whether you will be safe — for students, too, not just educators.”

The high school social studies teacher said she was “awestruck” to see her idea win passage from hundreds of elected delegates who conduct the union’s business at the annual two-day MEA RA. “It’s amazing, and I don’t want it to stop here.”



THE FUTURE IS NOW

SPECIAL REPORT: Educator recruitment



Landen Robinson (pictured above, right) is a rising sophomore in the College of Education at Wayne State University, but he first fell in love with teaching in high school.

Robinson spent two years in a Teacher Cadet program at Lakeview High School in St. Clair Shores, part of the district's Career and Technical Education (CTE) offerings. "It was my favorite part of high school," he said.

The exploratory program gave Robinson broad exposure to the profession, observing a mentor teacher, assisting students in small groups and one-on-one, developing lesson plans, and eventually delivering a lesson he made.

"I got to jump in and teach, and I loved doing it. It's very cool to have a chance to see the inside before you jump into a profession."

In addition, Robinson joined the Next Gen Teachers Program

— a collaboration between MEA and Wayne State to bring together high schoolers interested in teaching for a two-week summer residency. Robinson participated for two years and served as a resident assistant this summer.

Now he's taking on a leadership position as president of Wayne State's

chapter of Aspiring Educators of Michigan (AEM) — the student arm of MEA — and paying it forward. "This will be about getting a community together and doing good for each other and the community."

For our aspiring and early career educators, MEA offers communities for connecting and specialized leadership and learning opportunities. Follow Aspiring Educators of Michigan and Michigan New Educators on the platforms below to learn how to be a part of it.

From student teaching stipends and future educator scholarships to student loan repayments and Grow Your Own programs, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and the Legislature have ramped up efforts in recent years to rebuild the new teacher pipeline — work that MEA members, leaders and staff have advocated, implemented and supplemented.

Progress has been made in addressing the state's educator shortages, but ongoing focus is required on both recruitment and retention to keep moving in the right direction. ▼

Read more in our Special Report on pages 19-28.



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



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

Hinge Health provides virtual physical therapy to get you moving



Rich VanderKlok is Jayne's husband. He is the EA President at Jenison Public Schools. He is also on the MEA Board and MESSA Board.

Ben VanderKlok is her son. He is a senior at CMU

Chloe VanderKlok is her daughter. She is a sophomore at WMU

Hinge Health helps you recover from injuries, improve your mobility and strength, and alleviate pelvic pain and discomfort. All MESSA members and covered dependents 18 and older are eligible.

When you enroll with Hinge Health, you get:

- A care plan for your daily activities and long-term goals that changes as you get stronger.
- 15-minute physical therapy sessions you can do anytime, anywhere.
- One-on-one support from a physical therapist.

After a few sessions, you get a free phone stand, exercise bands and a yoga mat in the mail.

To learn more, visit messa.org/HingeHealth.

When Jayne VanderKlok began teaching online courses a few years ago at Kenowa Hills Public Schools

she started noticing some painful discomfort in her hip from all the sitting during the long workday.

As time went on, the pain gradually grew worse, spreading to her neck and shoulders. That all changed in January when VanderKlok began using the free MESSA benefit called Hinge Health, a digital clinic that gives you access to personalized physical therapy programs to help overcome joint pain. Using the Hinge Health app, you can have a physical therapy session anytime in the comfort of your home.

"The pain in my hip was significant enough that I would wake up several times in the night because of it," said VanderKlok, a MESSA member for 31 years. "I was taking Tylenol every night before bed, in addition to using topical rubs to deal with the discomfort. On days I had to travel long distances in a car or plane, I would sometimes experience numbness in my right leg. Now, my hip pain has significantly been reduced and I am getting much better sleep at night."

Before using Hinge Health, VanderKlok wanted to make an appointment with her doctor to discuss her pain but was not thrilled with the thought of trying to fit physical therapy into her busy schedule.

"In addition to teaching full time, I'm the president of my local teachers' union," VanderKlok said. "I have two college-aged children and I also try to help my mom as much as I can. With all of those demands, I didn't think that fitting in-person physical therapy into an already full schedule was going to work for me."

When VanderKlok learned about Hinge Health and its virtual physical therapy sessions from her MESSA field representative, Renee Szurna, her ears perked up. Weeks after performing the exercises five times a week at home, VanderKlok's pain reduced significantly.

"It's super convenient because it fits into my schedule," VanderKlok said. "My son, who is in college, also signed up for Hinge Health. He has struggled with knee pain since he played football and wrestled in high school. The program is good for his schedule as well." ♥

Support staff Bill of Rights unveiled

A new statewide **Bill of Rights** campaign aimed at improving the wages, benefits and working conditions of school support staff was rolled out recently at the annual MEA conference for Education Support Professionals (ESP).

Modeled after similar campaigns launched in other states, including Maryland, Illinois and Massachusetts, the Michigan ESP Bill of Rights calls for six broad reforms to recognize and value the crucial role that school support staff play in ensuring a quality education for every student.

“One job should be enough,” said Roy Freeman, a long-time custodian from Dowagiac and MEA ESP Caucus president. “We shouldn’t have individuals that have to go out and work two and three jobs just to survive.”



Freeman shared the story of a school employee in Michigan who had to take on a third job to afford health insurance for her family after her husband became seriously ill.

“That should never happen,” he said. “Anybody that works in education deserves to have health care benefits from day one.”

About 70% of education support professionals — which includes bus drivers, paraeducators, secretaries, custodians, food service workers, assistants and more — live in the communities where they work, Freeman said.

“We know not only the students but the parents, and we make those connections. We take care of the buildings; we bring the kids to school and feed them; we make sure they get the care and mentoring that they need. Without us, there is no education.”

The sought-after reforms were developed over the past year in meetings and surveys of school support staff across Michigan, said Jennifer Shelito, an IT Department secretary in Tuscola Intermediate School District and at-large director on the MEA ESP Caucus.

“We presented at conferences; we had 10 campaign captains that did 13 in-person events across the state, and over 1,200 ESP members answered a survey online,” Shelito said. “Now we need leaders and members to take this back to their locals and help educate all of Michigan ESP on our Bill of Rights.”

THE MICHIGAN ESP BILL OF RIGHTS

ONE JOB SHOULD BE ENOUGH

Education Support Professionals (ESPs) play a critical role in our local public schools. Employers and elected officials must recognize the vital contributions ESps make to student success by ensuring we are treated with the respect and dignity we have earned.

ESPs are equal partners in all aspects of public education, and we deserve rESpect. After all — one job should be enough.



Michigan Education Support Professionals are calling for the following reforms:

- 1** **A thriving wage that can support a middle-class family**, so we can put food on the table, shop at our local small businesses and save for our children's future.
- 2** **Good healthcare and leave benefits**, including full-family health, dental and vision coverage; time off for illness, parental needs and personal days; disability and life insurance; and unemployment benefits for 10- and 11-month employees.
- 3** **Stronger workplace safety standards** with clear safety protocols; appropriate supplies; zero exposure to hazardous materials; safety maintained equipment; a workplace free of physical, verbal or emotional abuse; and whistleblower protections.
- 4** **A secure and dignified retirement** with post-retirement insurance benefits; all years of service counted toward pension benefits; and a payout of all accumulated leave days to a 403(b) or 401(k) account upon retirement.
- 5** **Professional development and advancement opportunities**, including regular training, onboarding assistance and the opportunity to earn continuing education credits.
- 6** **A secure job we can count on** with a reasonable assurance of employment; a shorter and fairer probationary period; and protections against job privatization.

The input was analyzed and developed into six reforms needed to better support workers and address staffing shortages:

- **A thriving wage**
- **Full benefits**
- **Workplace safety**
- **Secure retirement**
- **Advancement opportunities**
- **Job security**

“ESP have never, in my knowledge, taken on something this big to be recognized and to earn what they need and get the respect they deserve,” Freeman told conference goers. “Be proud of yourselves, and let’s get everybody we can to sign for support of the Bill of Rights. We will make this happen.” ▼

Learn more at [MEA.org/ESP-bill-of-rights](https://mea.org/ESP-bill-of-rights).

Updates on shifting landscapes



Legislative and political landscapes in Michigan and Washington, D.C. are changing every day, and this magazine takes a few weeks to print and arrive to you, so timely updates are challenging. In general we can say this:

At the federal level, U.S. Education Secretary Linda McMahon is cutting funding for public schools, while trying to shut down the education department, all with the same goal as Betsy DeVos from the first Trump administration: shifting public dollars to private schools.

At the state level, various issues remain unresolved between the Republican-controlled House and Senate Democrats.

At MEA, we know cuts will harm kids in every community, but especially our most vulnerable students and those in rural and urban schools. Stay tuned. Get involved. Talk with others you know. We must share what's happening in our schools and classrooms.

Contact *MEA Voice* Editor Brenda Ortega at bortega@mea.org to report how cuts and changes are affecting your staff and students, so we can go beyond numbers and tell the human story.

Suit helps unfreeze federal funds

updates at mea.org/protect

Nearly a month late, the Trump administration abruptly unfroze \$5 billion withheld from states by the U.S. Department of Education.

Pushes for the funding, due to school districts by July 1, came from constituent calls to Congress and a lawsuit filed by Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel and 21 other states. It's a good reminder: When we fight back against bad policies, we can win.

Various timelines for reconciliation bill

updates at mea.org/protect

HR 1, the so-called "One Big Beautiful Bill" passed by Congress in July, will have devastating impacts on health coverage and costs, food security, college affordability and more — all to give tax breaks to the ultra-wealthy.

From cuts to Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to new student loan hoops and voucher schemes, education will bear big blows as the law's various provisions take effect in coming years — largely after the next election.

State budget negotiations ongoing

updates at mea.org/legislation

At press time, the Michigan Legislature had not passed an education budget for 2025-26. While it's important to pass a budget as soon as possible to make decisions for the coming year, MEA has urged lawmakers to negotiate and get this budget right for students and educators.

Proposals to leave available school revenues on the state's balance sheet or divert those funds to other projects threaten to shortchange education from preschool through higher education.

Still waiting on insurance fix

updates at mea.org/fixhealthcare

House Bill 6058, which addressed skyrocketing out-of-pocket health insurance costs for school employees, passed in December. But since January House Speaker Matt Hall (R-Richmond) has kept the bill from going to Gov. Gretchen Whitmer for signature.

The state Senate sued Hall for refusing to follow the Michigan Constitution, and oral arguments will happen soon. MEA surveyed members' experiences amid the long wait for HB 6058 to become law; stay tuned.

Federal voucher scheme passes

The nation's first federal school voucher scheme was tucked inside the tax cuts and spending plan that Republicans in Congress passed and President Donald Trump signed into law on July 4.

Last-minute changes require states to opt-in to participation — which

“This bill will devastate our schools and communities — all to finance massive tax breaks for the ultra-wealthy,” NEA President Becky Pringle said after the measure passed the Senate.

Beginning in 2027, the plan grants a dollar-for-dollar tax credit up to \$1,700 for people who donate to voucher

that's in the state budget — not just public education but health care, housing, safe water, transportation; all of it,” said Marisol Garcia, president of the Arizona Education Association.

The evidence is overwhelming in states where universal vouchers have been enacted:

- ▶ Vouchers drain funds from public schools, harm student achievement, and lack any oversight or accountability.
- ▶ By a 3-to-1 margin, tax credits and vouchers go to wealthy families whose children already attend private schools.
- ▶ Rural schools face the biggest pressures from vouchers because they generate less local revenue and rely more on state and federal funds.



adds even more significance to 2026 mid-term elections and sets up battles between public education advocates and billionaire donors like Betsy DeVos who want to privatize our schools.

While not as widely publicized as huge cuts to health care and food assistance for millions of Americans, the voucher scheme in Trump's so-called “One Big Beautiful Bill” creates no cap on public tax dollars that can be siphoned away to private schools.

The scheme is modeled after one that DeVos pushed but failed to pass in Michigan in 2023. As was true in the DeVos plan, rural areas stand to lose the most from federal vouchers and resulting funding decreases.

granting organizations — more generous than any other credit in the tax code. Voucher granting organizations pass the money to eligible families for private school tuition.

Eligible families can make up to 300% of their area's median gross income — a large pool of potential recipients. The plan could drain \$30-50 billion from the federal education budget.

Similar schemes — deceptively marketed as scholarships for disadvantaged students — have proliferated in Republican-controlled states, including Arizona where universal vouchers blew a \$1 billion hole in the state's general fund.

“If other states want to follow Arizona, be prepared to cut everything

In Oklahoma, which became the latest state to enact universal vouchers in 2023, educators and parents worry about what's to come. Vouchers are not popular, Erika Wright, founder and leader of the Oklahoma Rural Schools Coalition, told *NEA Today*.

“I'm a registered Republican and I've spent hours knocking on doors and talking to Republican families. They do not support vouchers. But when it comes to electing our leaders and lawmakers, larger national narratives override their concerns about what is happening to our public schools.” ▼

Tim Walker, senior writer and editor at NEA Today, contributed to this report.

— MEA — CENTER FOR Leadership & Learning

*A paraeducator wants
to grow in the role.*

*A veteran high
school teacher seeks
targeted professional
development.*

*A school counselor
aspires to strengthen
supports for a diverse
student population.*

**Where can
educators turn to
fulfill their desire
to learn, lead
and be valued?**

New MEA LearnCenter launches

The MEA LearnCenter is a new online learning platform launched this year to meet those challenges. Designed with input from MEA members across roles, geographies, and experiences, the LearnCenter animates four key principles: Connect, Learn, Share, Lead.

“The LearnCenter is built not only to provide learning but to deepen engagement, spark leadership, and build power through professional growth,” said MEA UniServ Consultant Chad Williams, who helped to develop the platform.

School employees from every job category are reporting increased levels of stress and dissatisfaction alongside a lack of relevant, accessible professional learning.

At the MEA LearnCenter, members can chart their own path through self-paced micro-credentials, live webinars, issue-based cohorts, and customizable dashboards. They can also contribute content, mentor others, and design regional events.

Traditional PD often treats educators as recipients of information.

The LearnCenter values them as sources of knowledge and experience, reflecting our shared belief that every educator has both the right and responsibility to lead.

From a custodian in the Upper Peninsula pursuing advancement, to a teacher-leader facilitating book studies, to a local president hosting a SCECH-approved training on trauma-informed practices, the MEA LearnCenter offers members the tools and agency to make desired career growth into reality.

“A union that cultivates leaders is a union that wins, not just at the bargaining table, but in the board room, legislature, and public square,” Williams said. “When members grow, the union grows.”

This new benefit of membership is brought to you by the MEA Center for Leadership & Learning. Be sure to check out their new website at ccl.mea.org, where you can access the new LearnCenter along with information on upcoming conferences and offerings! ♥



MEA
LEARNCENTER

new & improved website

CLL.MEA.org

Reading starts with oral language

Oral language is the heart of literacy and learning. It's fundamental to a child's educational journey, serving as the foundation for reading, comprehension, communication, and social interaction. Students need to understand and be understood to thrive.

Yet despite the significant attention given to phonics and literacy more generally, oral language often remains overlooked and is not prioritized in classrooms.

Critically, oral language skills are essential in learning to read. The Simple View of Reading states that you need two skills to understand what you're reading: decoding and language comprehension. Decoding is crucial, but it won't get you very far without a solid grasp of language. You can know how to pronounce every word, but if you don't understand the meaning of what you're reading, the whole point is lost.

It's also important to recognize that reading comprehension is a product of decoding and language comprehension. If a student is weak in one area,

for example language comprehension, their overall reading comprehension will be diminished, even if they are strong in the other skill.

However, there is research that takes the Simple View of Reading model further, showing that language underpins the whole process of learning to read. Oral language is essential not only for reading comprehension, as shown by the Simple View of Reading, but also for the development of foundational decoding skills — phoneme awareness and letter knowledge.

This expanded model comes from a long-term research study that followed three groups of students from ages 3 to 8 years, including those with a preschool language delay, those with a dyslexic family member, and a control group. The study found that language skills at 3.5 years strongly predict students' pre-reading skills at school entry, which in turn predict how well they can read words at the end of their first year in school.

In other words, early language skills, before a child has even started to



Dr Charles Hulme, CEO & Founder of OxEd & Assessment, Emeritus Professor of Psychology and Education, University of Oxford

learn to read, strongly relate to how well they will learn to read words once they enter school. Furthermore, these early language skills also strongly relate to the children's understanding of what they read at age 8.

Looking at each group aged 8 in more detail, 7% of the control group had reading difficulties, which is about what we would expect in the general population, and 26% of those with a dyslexic family member had reading difficulties. But, perhaps most surprisingly, 66% of children with poor language skills at 3.5 years had poor reading skills at age 8.

The average reading score for Michigan students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress decreased over the past 25 years and lags the national average. Addressing delayed language development offers a science-backed key to make a real difference in children's reading skills — and their lives.♥

Join our free OxEd course

MEA is collaborating with OxEd & Assessment to provide our members with exclusive world-class training and mentoring in the science of reading and literacy, built on decades of research by Dr. Charles Hulme and others, at no cost!

This comprehensive course will explore the importance of oral language, decoding and decoding difficulties, reading comprehension difficulties, and putting the science into practice. Delivered online, it will count towards 15-20 hours of continuing education credits.

Watch your email for AT THE CENTER updates from the MEA Center for Leadership & Learning to learn how you can register for the course — or find the latest at CLL.MEA.org.

Alternative educator is new Michigan

*By Brenda Ortega
MEA Voice Editor*

When MEA member Corey Rosser first sought a teaching job after college 20 years ago, the landscape was competitive and his only offer came from a school that didn't fit the dream he'd once imagined.

"I was going to teach AP (Advanced Placement) classes and coach varsity basketball and win like 100 district championships, and they were going to build a statue of me outside a gym somewhere," he quipped.

Rosser accepted the position as behavior specialist in a brand new alternative education program in Genesee County's rural North Branch Area Schools — housed back then in a former supply closet at the high school.

The next year he became one of two teachers in the program, but he admits his early performance wouldn't earn him any honorary statues: "Honestly, I wasn't good at it. I didn't think I was going to stay in alternative ed; I didn't understand it."

Today Rosser not only remains as a teacher at Quest Alternative High School, he's served as program coordinator for more than a decade. What helped him stay were mentors he credits by name who modeled what works with students who struggle to succeed in traditional school settings.

"Once I shifted from a mentality of 'They made decisions that put them in this spot,' to 'Here's where we are; move forward,' that changed my whole relationship with students. But I had people model that to me every day. Without them I probably wouldn't have lasted in education at all."

Now he will be a model for others. In May, at a surprise ceremony attended by Quest students, Rosser was named the 2025-26 Michigan Teacher of the



MEA member Corey Rosser was named the 2025-26 Michigan Teacher of the Year at a ceremony in May attended by his students.

Year by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE).

In a short acceptance speech, Rosser thanked colleagues, school administrators and board members for their strong commitment to keeping an alternative high school within the district. Quest is now housed in its own building, a former elementary school.

"I really do mean it," he said afterward. "I don't know if people think I'm giving them lip service, but there's no alternative in Michigan that's supported as well as we are."

Having a dedicated building allowed Quest to develop its own identity, which has been a big part of its success, Rosser said. The school has its own

mascot, school colors, traditions such as Homecoming — and even a sports league made up of alternative schools.

"We're very blessed to have the strong support of our community, and that's really what it's all about is connecting kids to the community."

Rosser also credited the nearly 600 young people who've attended the alternative school over the past 20 years for making it into "a special place to learn and a special place to teach."

He's learned the most from students, he said: "Like any young adult, they just want respect. They want to be noticed and acknowledged, and they want the good things they do to stand out."

Not every school district has an alternative school, yet North Branch has maintained or increased support through enrollment dips and competition from lesser-quality for-profit online schools, Rosser said.

High-quality alternative schools bring opportunity for students and communities alike, he points out. Not only do alternative programs increase graduation rates for at-risk students by 16%, but young people served by them often stay local and choose careers in skilled trades.

"They're the ones you're most likely to see running a concrete company or a roofing company in your town a few years down the road, so it's hugely valuable to invest in them," Rosser said.

When his son broke an arm two years ago, Rosser took him to the hospital and encountered a former student of his working as a nurse in the emergency room. Getting his car serviced, he might find a Quest graduate is the mechanic.

One of his favorite parts of teaching there is welcoming back Quest alumni

n Teacher of the Year



Rosser poses in a computer lab at Quest, which is housed in a former elementary building and has its own school colors and traditions.

come here, whatever baggage they have, they're able to leave it behind them and start over.

"None of our kids are judged about things they did before. They've got a chance to reinvent themselves, and it's not lost on them. They see the opportunity, and they seize it."

Junior Nicholas Kloss echoed Scalf's sentiments. Kloss said he was failing nearly every class before switching to Quest, where he is now an all-A student and credits one-on-one attention and listening from Rosser for helping to build his confidence.

"He's always there," Kloss said. "I get more time if I need him to walk me through something, and then having the smaller classes helps me because I can get all anxious around a bunch of people. I know I can trust him — he makes me feel smart, and that lets me do better."

In his turn as Michigan Teacher of the Year, Rosser plans to promote the importance and best practices of alternative education with the help of Scalf, his co-teacher. The two make a great team by filling each other's gaps, he said.

"If we can help others by sharing out how we make a difference with students that are at-risk, then that's what we want to do."

Rosser has never taught anywhere else, and "There has never been a day that Quest has existed that I haven't worked here. I can't even imagine doing something else." ♥

to share experiences and advice for current students.

"A lot of times you'll see someone who's skeptical of alternative ed until their child or niece or nephew ends up needing it for any one of a hundred reasons, and in that way they see the value in it. You literally see the value everywhere you look in the community."

Principal Doug Lindsay said Rosser is deeply involved in the school and district, going without a planning period to serve as program coordinator and coaching basketball and baseball in addition to his role as the local union's chief negotiator.

"The success of Corey's students is a testament to the relationships he has with them," Lindsay said. "His

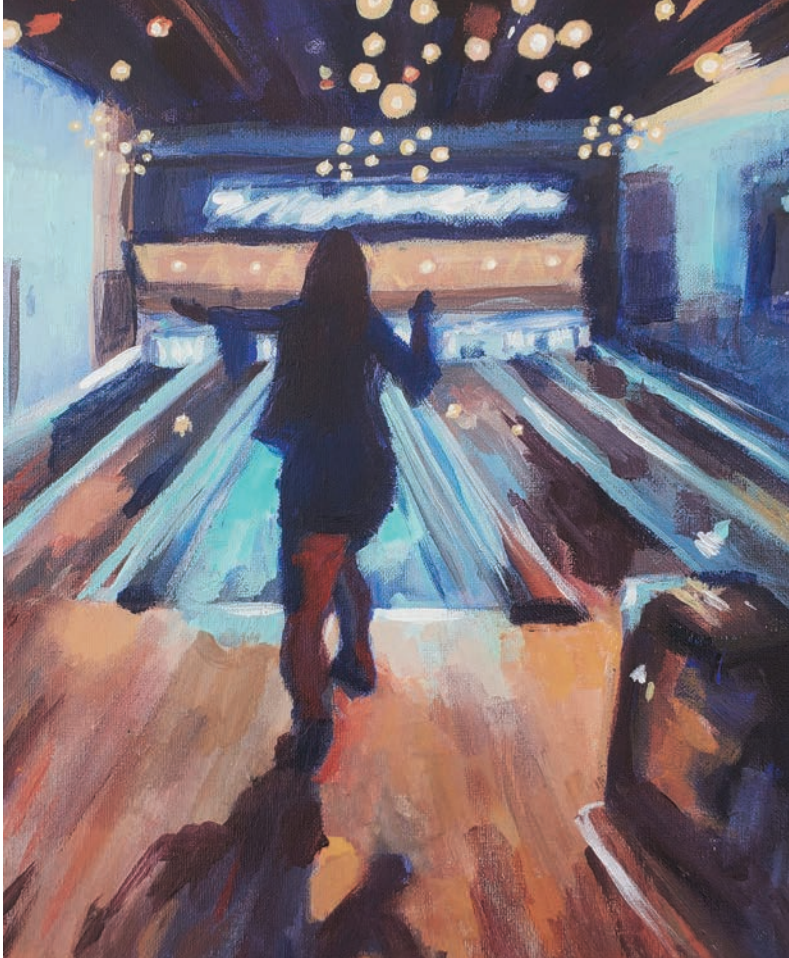
approach of truly getting to know them on an individual basis, understanding their goals and the challenges they have faced, is crucial to the program."

MEA member Dave Scalf, who splits Quest teaching duties with Rosser and a half-time special education teacher, describes Rosser as "selfless."

"He never comments on the hours he puts in or how many times he's put Quest first," Scalf said. "Even when he won the award (for Regional Teacher of the Year), he phrased it to the students as 'Look at this cool opportunity that Quest has earned.'"

The school had 42 students last year. What makes it special, according to Scalf: "It's a clean slate, a fresh start. For whatever reason, when our kids

Art teacher wins Best in Show



MEA member Gabby Marderosian set a goal for 2025 to collect rejection slips as a means of pushing herself to complete personal art projects amid the demands of working as a traveling elementary art teacher in Farmington Public Schools.

“It’s a fun way of making yourself put yourself out there and not being afraid of getting rejected,” she said.

However, in her first-of-the-year submission to a juried art exhibition, Marderosian said she was “humbled, surprised and delighted” to win Best in Show in the 61st Annual MEA/MAEA Art Purchase Exhibition for a painting in acrylic titled “Strike in Nashville.”

A fifth-year educator who earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Michigan State University in 2016, Marderosian said she hoped to tell a story with the piece and capture the nostalgic feeling of memory.

The painting uses a post-impressionist style to depict a fun outing to the bowling alley with friends and family in the moment of her sister rolling a strike.

“I was playing a lot with color and lighting and the contrast in warm versus cool colors,” she said. “There was a teal neon sign that lit the bowling alley in an interesting way with the reds of the lanes. Normally lighting is more on the warm side and shadows are cool, so it was interesting that the neon light was cool and the shadows were on the warmer side.”

Marderosian initially worked in the non-profit sector after college, which included school programs where she discovered her joy in teaching and decided to get certified. In Farmington, she does cross-curricular art lessons in all of the elementary schools.

Her goal is to build children’s joy and confidence through strong supports and clear expectations. “I want them to feel like there are no mistakes and nothing to be embarrassed about — just opportunities for growth and problem-solving and thinking outside the box.”

Juror Mirvia Sol Eckert, a Puerto Rican painter and full-time artist in Indianapolis, said she selected “Strike in Nashville” as Best in Show because of its composition, contrast in colors, and dramatic storytelling. ♥

Reception wraps MEA exhibition

A first-of-its-kind artists’ reception capped off this year’s 61st MEA/MAEA Art Acquisitions Purchase Exhibition at MEA Headquarters in East Lansing.

The reception concluded the three-week juried exhibition in June, featuring nearly 70 pieces of art selected from more than 170 submissions in a wide variety of media, including painting, drawing, photography, ceramics, glass, fibers and more.

“It was wonderful to celebrate the incredible talents of MEA members with a mix of socializing, snacks and drinks, along with a culminating awards ceremony,” said Heidi Posh, a Livonia art teacher who serves as co-chair of the MEA Art Acquisitions Committee.

In addition to Best in Show, awards categories included Honorable Mention, Juror’s Choice, MAEA Purchase, and MEA Purchase. View this year’s show at mea.org/art-2025. ♥



MESSA®

Field representatives

Here for you!

Field Representatives and their Jurisdictions:

- 1** Heather Scott: St. Clair, Macomb
- 2** Mark Middlewood: Monroe, Wayne, Washtenaw, Jackson, Calhoun, Kalamazoo, Cass, Berrien
- 3** Andrew Lavendusky: Livingston, Ingham, Eaton, Barry, Allegan
- 4** Monica McKay: Monroe, Wayne, Washtenaw, Jackson, Calhoun, Kalamazoo, Cass, Berrien
- 5** Julie Berryman: Monroe, Wayne, Washtenaw, Jackson, Calhoun, Kalamazoo, Cass, Berrien
- 6** Tara Wilbur: Monroe, Wayne, Washtenaw, Jackson, Calhoun, Kalamazoo, Cass, Berrien
- 7** Jim Gleason: Monroe, Wayne, Washtenaw, Jackson, Calhoun, Kalamazoo, Cass, Berrien
- 8** Kirk Ozanich: Huron, Sanilac, Tuscola, Lapeer, Genesee, Shiawassee, Clinton, Ionia, Kent, Muskegon, Oceana, Newaygo, Mason, Lake, Osceola, Clare, Gladwin, Arenac, Bay
- 9** Rahshaan Watson: Cheboygan, Presque Isle, Montmorency, Alpena, Oscoda, Crawford, Roscommon, Ogemaw, Iosco
- 10** Reneé Szurna: Van Buren, Kalamazoo, Cass, Berrien
- 11** Connie High: Van Buren, Kalamazoo, Cass, Berrien
- 12** Viola Collin: Leelanau, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Manistee, Wexford, Missaukee, Kalkaska, Antrim, Charlevoix, Emmet, Cheboygan, Presque Isle, Montmorency, Alpena, Oscoda, Crawford, Roscommon, Ogemaw, Iosco
- 13** Jake Louks: Luce, Chippewa, Mackinac
- 14** RaeAnn Loy: Ontonagon, Houghton, Keweenaw, Baraga, Marquette, Iron, Dickinson, Delta, Schoolcraft, Alger, Menominee
- 15** Matt Zimmerman: Luce, Chippewa, Mackinac
- 16** Abby Zarimba: Luce, Chippewa, Mackinac

Call **800-292-4910, ext. 7817** to connect with your MESSA field representative.

By educators. For educators.

MESSA provides our members with the greatest choice of doctors and access to expert medical care from the best hospitals, including the University of Michigan Health System, Mayo Clinic and Cleveland Clinic.

- As a nonprofit, our members' funds are used to pay medical bills and administer benefits. Not a penny goes to shareholder profits, CEO bonuses or insurance agent commissions.
- MESSA benefit packages are flexible and offer options to meet the needs of each employee group.
- MESSA's local field representatives provide personal service to members and employers. They can consult with groups during the collective bargaining process, speak to employee groups and provide detailed analyses to help members make the best choices.

We've got your back.



messa.org/HereForYou

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

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



Christopher Thoms

Teacher

Bothwell Middle School

“MESSA is compassionate. When we think about health care in the United States, we don’t have a single-payer option. There’s all of these corporations, essentially. And totally for real, MESSA doesn’t feel like that. It feels like they support public educators and I don’t feel like you can get that from other health care corporations.”



Erin Monk

Spanish Teacher

Byron Center Public Schools

“MESSA has always been there for me. It’s all I’ve ever known. I’ve had MESSA ever since I started my career 20 years ago and it’s been a constant. It’s been peace of mind to know that I have great coverage that’s going to take care of me so that I can do the best job possible for my students.”



Stefanie Benson

Teacher

Bay City Public Schools

“When I got married, a year later my husband was diagnosed with cancer. So, it was one of those moments where I didn’t have to worry about the quality of insurance I had because of all the tests he had to go through, all of the appointments and treatments, I knew MESSA was behind us.”



Joey Chase

Teacher

Tecumseh Middle School

“MESSA is accessible. I’m very good friends with our field representative. I’ve spent a lot of time with her at our coordinating council meetings. I have her personal cell phone number and I’m able to talk to her whenever I’m having any member issues. It’s nice for her to be a phone call away and say, ‘Hey, I have no idea what I’m doing here. Can you help me out?’ and she’s always there to help me.”

MESSA has benefits and resources to support your mental health at every stage of life.



Traditional office visits

MESSA provides excellent coverage for mental health services. For questions about your benefits or to find an in-network provider, call **800-336-0013**. You can also use MESSA's Find Care tool by visiting **messa.org/FindCare**.

Teladoc Mental Health

Download the Teladoc Health app and connect with a licensed therapist or board-certified psychiatrist to get treatment for grief, anxiety, depression and more. Appointments are required and are available in the evenings and weekends. Call **800-835-2362** for more information or visit **messa.org/Teladoc**.

AbleTo

This benefit is an eight-week virtual therapy program for members and covered dependents who are 18 and older. Your licensed therapist will create a personalized program to best support your needs. Learn more at **AbleTo.com/MESSA**.

MyStressTools

This digital toolkit provides stress management and wellness resources. First, take a confidential "Stress Profiler" quiz to identify your stress and anxiety. Then, you'll receive strategies and resources tailored for you — at no cost for MESSA members. Learn more at **messa.org/MyStressTools**.

MEA welcomes new educators

This special report features MEA members combating Michigan's educator shortage.

*Stories by Brenda Ortega,
MEA Voice Editor*

In early 2020, MEA stood as one of the first organizations to recognize a gathering crisis and raise alarm bells about the urgency of a growing educator shortage. Ever since then, our members, leaders and staff have been at the forefront of solving it.

At that time, newly released federal data showed a precipitous 70% decline in enrollment in teacher preparation programs in the state from 2008-2017 — second only to Oklahoma — just as a veteran educator workforce would begin to retire in large numbers.

Something had to give. With partners in the state Legislature and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer over the past few years, MEA joined in advocating for and implementing wide-ranging efforts to turn those numbers around.

From a total of \$0 allocated in the state's education budget to address the teacher shortage in 2020, more than \$1 billion has since been spent to recruit, train, and certify educators who will be the driving force in building Michigan's future.

In addition, MEA undertook its own new initiatives while also bolstering longstanding union programs such as Aspiring Educators of Michigan (AEM), which operates student MEA chapters on numerous college and university campuses across the state.

In one new partnership, MEA and Wayne State University launched a residency program for high school students interested in careers in education, funded by a NEA Great Public Schools grant.

In the Next Gen Teachers program, each summer for the past four years, a few dozen rising seniors from diverse backgrounds spent two weeks living on campus, attending workshops, visiting museums and other attractions in Detroit, and developing lesson plans.

MEA also partnered with Educators Rising, a national non-profit offering resources to nurture middle and high school students interested in becoming educators. For the past two years, MEA has sponsored and organized the state Ed Rising Conference in the spring.

The Ed Rising Conference allows young people from high school cadet and explore classes or middle school clubs to attend professional development sessions and participate in a variety of competitions — with top finishers moving on to the national conference.

“Nothing could be more important than ensuring every student in every classroom in Michigan has access to high-quality educators who reflect the diversity of our state,” said Annette Christiansen, the MEA UniServ consultant who leads the work.

Many indicators are improving, according to data from the state and Michigan State University's Education Policy Innovation Collaborative. Initial certifications have risen 71% since 2016, and teachers entering the profession have outnumbered those leaving for the last three years.

But much work is left to be done. Shortages remain, and rural school districts are especially vulnerable. Special education teacher shortages continue to be widespread. Turnover statewide remains above pre-pandemic levels, and newer educators leave at the highest rates.

Educator recruitment and retention will be critically important for years to come, but a new Republican majority in the state House has not as yet shown interest. MEA members will need to stay engaged and raise their voices.

“Many of Michigan's current educator workforce initiatives aim to address these challenges but need more time to achieve their intended outcomes,” according to the annual Michigan Teacher Shortage Study: 2025 Report by MSU-EPIC. ▼

State initiatives 2021-2025

Special education tuition
reimbursement

Scholarships to
future educators

Stipends for student
teachers

Student
loan
repayments

Grow Your Own —
students

Grow Your Own —
support staff

Expedited out-of-state
reciprocity

Registered Apprenticeship
program

MI-CAREER rural
credentialing hub

‘Doing what’s right for High schoolers explore

MEA member Sarah Le Febre realized last spring she didn’t know how many years she’d accumulated in her teaching career or what time counted toward retirement from her early experience as a long-term substitute or years of coaching soccer and cheerleading.

“I had to call the 1-800 number to get into my ORS (Office of Retirement Services) account, and you know what? I will complete 30 years in one year from now. I was genuinely shocked. I mean — I hadn’t really been counting, but long story short: I can retire after next year.”

Le Febre remembers starting out in her career, meeting a few veteran educators who were “grumpy,” and hoping she wouldn’t become that way. She hasn’t.

“The beauty of what I’m doing right now and the love I have for my school

“Teaching this Future Educator course has breathed new life into my career and given me more reasons to love the profession,” Le Febre said.

She recruits students who reflect the diverse demographic makeup of the district. The hope is if they leave to become educators, they’ll return home to become master teachers, she said. “They know us, they love us, and we love them back. We want to nurture that relationship and keep them here.”

Not all of them will choose a career in education. “I think it’s important to note that, because it’s an exploratory program. Kids can go into it and confirm their interest, or they can say, ‘Yeah, teaching’s not for me.’ And either way we’ve done our job.”

Le Febre’s philosophy of teaching the class is to show students parts of the profession that otherwise remain hidden to them. “We pull back the veil

Just that one example led to a rich discussion on topics ranging from the new cell phone policy to relationship building, rules enforcement, and discipline.

“I wanted them to understand how teachers have to navigate school policies in relation to their own philosophies of education, and how students sometimes respond to how we deal with it. There were a lot of things we could unpack in that case.”

From the start, students enjoyed the class and wanted to continue beyond one semester, so a second semester option was added for those who wanted to take Future Educator 2. Both split students’ time between class with Le Febre and placement in an elementary school classroom.

Regular class time is spent covering a wide swath of educational jargon and teaching approaches and debriefing students’ questions and experiences

‘Teaching this Future Educator course has breathed new life into my career and given me more reasons to love the profession’

district and my students is that I could retire next year, but I won’t.”

She’s busy introducing the next generation of potential educators to the world’s noblest profession. A long-time English teacher at Holland High School (HHS), Le Febre launched a new Future Educator course three years ago with grant funding from the Michigan Department of Education.

The program in Holland is among a wave that has spread across the state since 2020 to grow and diversify the teaching ranks in Michigan. Hundreds of school districts have received \$10,000 EXPLORE grants to start up classes and clubs in middle and high schools.

so they can see the secrets of the teaching staff, and they love it. They feel so privy and honored, and they handle it very respectfully.”

For example, last year she shared her experience adapting to a strict new school policy on student cell phone use which conflicted with her own classroom philosophy and habits. Early on she wasn’t applying rules as outlined, giving multiple warnings instead of one before confiscating phones.

Then a student who had a phone taken away after numerous warnings complained to administration of inconsistent enforcement and “targeting” by Le Febre, which she said, “was partly true. I was being inconsistent with the rule, but I was not targeting anyone.”

in their placements. Students prepare an extensive capstone project with a goal of delivering a real-world lesson, but that is not required.

“Truth be told, what we offer in this program is very much college-level, and these kids are not in college yet. But all of them by first semester are working with kids one-on-one and in small groups.”

Le Febre related the story of a student from the class who had gotten to know and bonded with an autistic youngster in her placement. One day when a substitute teacher struggled with the child’s behavior, the future educator knew what to do and say to turn around the situation.

r the next generation' re education careers

“She got on her hands and knees under a table with this child, and she knew what questions to ask about things he enjoyed to get him out of his spiral. The sub was so grateful that a future educator was in the room that day.”

Among many things HHS graduate Liebbe Martinez learned from completing three semesters of the Future Educator class (including an independent study) is that teaching is hard and educators are under-appreciated for the amazing work they do.

“A lot of teachers are very good at masking the hard days and almost putting on a performance so students don’t see it,” Martinez said. “Sarah pulled the curtain back to show us what it’s like to be a teacher — the good, bad, ugly and the very best moments of it, which we really appreciated.”

Le Febre turned difficulties into learning opportunities. “She was always willing to be real and vulnerable with us. Even on bad days, she would be like, ‘You know what? It’s been a hard day, but here we are together and let’s turn it around.’”

Martinez plans to become a special education teacher for students who are deaf and hard of hearing. She just finished her first year of college and will transfer this fall to Baylor University in Texas.

Martinez knew what she wanted to be since her first day of preschool, where the teacher was patient and made learning fun. “The way she ran the class was hands-on and interactive, and that’s what really drew me in.”

Martinez fell in love with American Sign Language from classes in school, and she combined two passions with a Future Educator placement in a classroom for deaf and hard of hearing students.



(L-R) Holland High School grad Liebbe Martinez, Principal Andrea Mehall, and teacher Sarah Le Febre joined Michigan State Superintendent Michael Rice last year to speak at a national meeting of the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Since then, she has spent time in summers assisting at a school for deaf children in Jamaica and volunteering at the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program housed in Holland Public Schools and operated by Ottawa Intermediate School District.

She said she’s drawn to the toughest students displaying the most severe behaviors, although it can be draining, because she likes “getting down on their level” to learn who they are and let them know they’re safe and loved before trying to teach them anything.

“It’s amazing to see them learn and grow and how language and communication can transform their whole lives.”

A year ago, Martinez and Le Febre traveled with HHS Principal Andrea Mehall — at the invitation of Michigan State Superintendent Michael Rice — to speak about the Future Educator

program at a national meeting of the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Recently elected to be president of the Holland Education Association, Le Febre said she insisted on Mehall participating on the panel. The principal’s vision and determination brought the class into being, and her continuing support makes it a success.

“I still love what I do, and I’m grateful to share that message with my future educators,” Le Febre said. “If you’re in it because you care about doing what’s right for the next generation, teaching is really wonderful.”

“And if you work in a place where your district administration and building administration make you feel like you’re all on the same team, which is exactly what we have here at Holland Public Schools, I don’t know why I would retire. I feel like I could hang in there for a very long time.” ♥

'If you love this, do it'

MEA member Aric Foster got bitten by the teaching bug as a teenager working as a Taekwondo instructor. Specifically he recalls showing a skinny kid named Tyler a new kick, then watching him deploy it at a tournament to win an award.

Foster remembers the confidence on Tyler's face, the mom's joyful reaction in the stands, his own satisfaction and thinking, *I want that feeling for the rest of my life. I want to be an instrument in helping kids achieve success and feel good about themselves.*

Now a veteran English teacher at Macomb County's Armada High School, Foster taught a student with a similar origin story in his Teacher Cadet class for the past two years. Melina Accardo, who graduated in June, found her calling instructing youngsters in karate.

"I remember a class where I was assisting kids with their technique, and it was flowing so nicely," Accardo said. "The kids were listening and following instructions, and they were getting it. That feeling was amazing, and it just filled me and made me warm inside."

Accardo earned a black belt at age 14 and began teaching at her karate studio at 15, explaining moves by breaking them into parts and engaging kids through games.

Teacher Cadet class took her deeper into the skill set. She and other cadets spent time each week observing, assisting and practicing strategies at elementary classrooms with mentor teachers.

"I figured I would go into the teacher cadet program and see if it's something I'd like to continue pursuing. I did it my junior and senior year, and I love it so much — I'm going to keep doing it."

Foster is a National Board Certified Teacher who structures the class around core practices.

"A lot of the high school students that come into Teacher Cadet think teaching is explaining stuff, so when I show up with core teaching practices — and we work with six primarily — I ask them, 'How many of these are explaining stuff?' They go, 'Oh lord, it's only one.'

"I say, 'Let's pretend these six things are everything a teacher needs to know. One-sixth of teaching is explaining stuff.'"

In addition to explaining and modeling content, core practices include building relationships; choosing texts and tasks for a learning goal; eliciting and interpreting student thinking; formative assessment; and leading group discussion. Each is defined by different aspects of mastery.

"I show them all the magic that's happening that they didn't even know was happening."

'If you love this, do it'

Teacher Cadet became part of Armada's Career and Technical Education (CTE) program two years ago, though it's been around much longer. Foster's goal is to either fortify students' passion for teaching or develop their transferable skills for any career.

"I tell them, 'I'm not going to convince you to be a teacher; my role is to show you what it is so you can make an informed decision. When the year is done, if you love this, do it. But if you don't love it, don't do it, because



Teacher Aric Foster and aspiring educator Melina Accardo of Armada High School share similar career origin stories.

there's a lot outside of the magic from bell to bell with kids."

He takes students on four field trips, including the MEA-sponsored Ed Rising Conference where they access professional development, competitions, and the chance to interact with many others from across the state. "I think my students love that one the most," he said.

Accardo appreciated the realistic exposure she got in the program. She will enter Oakland University this fall as a sophomore from dual enrollment and summer credits earned at Macomb Community College. Last spring, she was named Armada's CTE Student of the Year.

"Foster wrote me a nice letter to let me know I deserved the award and I was going to be a great teacher, and that really warmed my heart," Accardo said. "We all have our moments of doubt, but it's nice to have somebody who's always there to back me up." ♥

‘There are great rewards’

When high schooler Rebecca Cox realized she wanted to be an art teacher, she wondered if she had what it takes, so she signed up for the Education Careers program at the Lenawee Intermediate School District (LISD) Tech Center.

“I knew I really liked the art part — I just needed to see if I would be good at the teacher part, and I wanted to learn the aspects that you don’t know about what it means to be a teacher.”

She got some insights as a first-year student at her county’s hub for Career and Technical Education (CTE). The program showed her hidden parts of the profession such as differentiating lessons for students with disabilities and connecting with students who’ve experienced trauma.

And she got some answers about herself in the form of two unrelated events that made her eager to return for year two as a senior this fall.



Aspiring educators Rebecca Cox (right) and Makayla Nieman competed in the children’s book category at Ed Rising.

First, some of the youngsters in her elementary school placement who were the hardest to reach and connect with were the ones who ran up on the last day for the biggest end-of-school hugs.

Second, she and a friend competed at the MEA-sponsored Ed Rising Conference at Wayne State University, won a state title, and got to travel to Orlando, Florida, for the national conference in June. Cox and senior Makayla Nieman competed in the children’s book category.

“It was nerve-wracking but very exciting and such an amazing experience,” Cox said.

MEA member Jody Hillard, the instructor for the Education Careers program, admits her photos became

‘There are great rewards’

a little blurry when 10 of her students appeared on stage to claim state titles at the Michigan Ed Rising Conference in March.

“I was like a proud mom, crying and running down the aisle screaming.”

Hillard herself is a product of the LISD-Tech Center program and spent 14 years as a preschool and kindergarten teacher after earning a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education from Siena Heights University. She took over four years ago from the instructor she had as a teen.

When MEA partnered with Ed Rising to start a Michigan affiliate of the national organization, Hillard served on the advisory committee that helped to organize the two annual statewide conferences held so far. More than 500 students attended in 2025.

Conference goers attend high-quality breakout sessions on topics of interest just as professional educators do, and they can choose to compete in one of several categories including lesson planning, interactive bulletin board, public speaking, and ethical dilemma.

“I think it’s important for young people to be exposed to leadership



Jody Hillard

roles and have the opportunity for networking with others who share their passion for education,” Hillard said. “It’s great to see so many potential educators in one positive space — they just love it.”

Hillard’s goal is to show students challenges and struggles of the profession but always to balance that with rewards. “As exhausting as it can be — because we do get a lot piled upon us — there are great rewards, because you actually get to see the impact you’re having on lives.”

For Cox, who will graduate from a class of 25 at Morenci High School, it was empowering to compete at state and national conferences among aspiring educators from all over. She was chosen to serve on the National Ed Rising Student Panel advising on next year’s conference.

Cox and Nieman wrote and illustrated a children’s book, *My Mighty Maple*, about a girl who tells her fears to a tree. “At the end of the story she’s learned she’s capable of doing things she thinks are hard, and she can’t stop herself from worrying but she can overcome her worries,” Cox said.

The duo presented the book to a panel of judges at competition, but first they got a stamp of approval from second graders in their careers placement. “We had these little kids telling us, ‘Oh, you made that? It’s really good.’ And they reassured us that, Yes — we can do this.” ♥

In para-to-teacher project

In June of 2021, MEA member Justin Harper and two co-founders formally launched a free program for youth in the Ypsilanti-Ann Arbor area, focusing on sports as a tool for teaching kids about health and nutrition along with problem-solving and leadership.

Back then Harper was working as a 15-year paraeducator in Ann Arbor Public Schools, supporting both general education and special needs students. He enjoyed the added chance to give kids fun activities wrapped in lessons on values such as community, respect, trust and perseverance.

“I absolutely love sports, but sports is just a hook,” he said. “We really want to teach them about life.”

Begun in response to COVID, the youth wellness program known as Community Leadership Revolution (CLR) Academy continues to offer weekly activities at various sites in the area year-round — even inspiring a duplicate program in Seattle.

A local municipality recognized the powerful impact CLR was making in the community and offered funding to sustain and grow the program. But here’s the topper: Through this same time period, Harper took on another huge commitment that would test his own perseverance.

He joined a cohort of paraeducators who signed on to complete bachelor’s degrees with certification to teach special education — while continuing to work his full-time classroom job.

Over more than three years Harper took night classes alongside other paraeducators in a Grow Your Own project between the Washtenaw Intermediate School District and Eastern Michigan University. Participants worked with

mentors and the promise of a teaching job in their home districts.

“After working in schools for so long, I knew this was the direction I needed to go — it felt like a clear part of my purpose and who I was meant to be,” Harper said, adding he had taken classes here and there for years, on and off as finances allowed, in pursuit of a degree.

The partnership between Washtenaw ISD and EMU is one of many across Michigan awarded state grants to offer existing school employees or other community members a no-cost route to initial or additional teacher certifications in high-need areas.

In the WISD program with EMU, now in its fourth cohort, all participants are seeking special education endorsements — a critical need in districts everywhere.

Special education teacher shortages are “pervasive across Michigan,” according to the annual “Michigan Teacher Shortage Study: 2025 Report” by the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at Michigan State University.

School districts in the study reported higher vacancy rates for special education teachers than any other type of teaching position, with many districts reporting more than 10% of their special education positions vacant. Other areas of high need include math, science and world languages.

“Declines in initial certification for special education teachers persisted longer than those in other subject areas, and, as a result, the incoming supply of special education teachers has not been able to meet the demand,” the report concluded.



Justin Harper earned a degree and certification through a partnership between Eastern Michigan University and Washtenaw ISD.

Local teacher shortages exist in different parts of the state across all grades and subject areas, with high-poverty urban districts and rural schools facing the most acute shortages, according to the report.

In one response, over the past three fiscal years, the state Legislature and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer allocated \$175 million for Future Proud Michigan Educator Grow Your Own staff grants — which to date are helping more than

, classroom aides level up



In June, Harper finished his first full year as a special education teacher at Slauson Middle School in Ann Arbor.

160 school districts to address their specific staffing shortages.

“These programs are relatively recent and early in their development and implementation,” the MSU-EPIC report said. “It will take time for these efforts to translate into meaningful changes in the state’s educator data.”

Each awarded district — or consortium of districts working together — administers its own free Grow Your

Own opportunity in partnership with one or more state-approved educator preparation providers such as universities and colleges or alternative route providers.

An early adopter of the grow-your-own model, the Washtenaw ISD-EMU partnership has now graduated more than 50 special education teachers, and the vast majority of those are settled into their new roles.

In June, Harper finished his first full year as a seventh-grade resource teacher at Slauson Middle School in Ann Arbor after completing his preparation program in December 2023.

“It was a great first year,” he said, though admitting the newness of being a lead teacher with his own caseload of students also was “nerve-wracking,” because “I’m the type of person that puts a lot of pressure on myself to do my best.”

He has wonderful support and mentoring to be successful, Harper added. “You’re always learning and growing in this profession, and that’s what I appreciate most about it. I love to learn. I love being able to improve myself.”

His biggest first-year challenge was one faced by educators across the country: absenteeism. Too many students are missing too many days, making it hard for them to return and feel comfortable in school.

“I try to work with the parents to give them support and resources where I can, or be an ear if necessary, but sometimes there’s more going on,” Harper said. “We don’t have all the control of dynamics that are going on outside of school.”

The best part of his new job was also the best part of his old one: building relationships with students, getting to

know their individual needs, and showing them how to be the best person they can be. He learned how to reach kids over the years as a paraeducator.

“I meet them where they are because that opens up a doorway of hope,” he said. “I try to give them support to build them as human beings — to develop character, integrity, discipline, leadership, the things that are going to make them successful in academics and in life.”

It’s work he also continues outside of school in his role as director of CLR Academy, which he still operates with co-founders and sponsors Jamall Buford, program director of Washtenaw My Brother’s Keeper; and Bilal Saeed, co-owner of Association Football Club (AFC) Ann Arbor.

In retrospect, the four years he spent helping to build and run the academy while working full-time and taking classes at night turned out to be a winning combination, Harper said. Each role helped him learn and improve upon his performance in the others.

Even with costs covered for getting a degree and certification, achieving his goal of becoming a teacher took all of the life skills he teaches to young people: discipline, hard work, persistence. It was all worth it, he says.

“I’m very happy. This is what I’m supposed to be doing, and I want to change the world.”

Funding for the program’s future remain unclear. If decisions were up to Harper, many more school employees would get the same chance he did.

“I don’t know if there’s enough words to really express how much it means for me. I feel so blessed and inspired to actually be able to be living my dream right now.” ♥

Saginaw apprentices



From many years of working with children, Elaine Hunt has figured out a lot. For example, she discovered early on that young people do better when parents and educators work together.

“I believe that if you can build a relationship with the parents, then the relationship you have with the student is stronger because you are a team,” Hunt said.

Working over decades in daycare, preschool and summer school settings in Saginaw, Hunt has learned to connect with parents by focusing conversations on strengths and positives.

“If you talk to them in a way that is not judgmental, they’ll see you on the street years later and remember you before the kids do,” she said.

In addition, Hunt has found what happens to a dream deferred — to borrow a phrase from the Langston Hughes poem: It waits in hope. At age 55, she finally is following her long-held dream.

Despite some fear and doubt, Hunt is attending Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU) to complete a

degree she started long ago to become a certified teacher. It’s a vision of herself she first dreamed as a babysitting teenager but thought perhaps had passed her by.

“I was thinking it’s too late to go back to school because it’s almost time to retire. But it never left, that wanting to teach. Sometimes we put our dreams on hold to move on in life, but our dreams never leave us; they await an opportunity.”

Three years ago, opportunity arrived in the form of a Registered Apprenticeship (RA) program jointly administered between Saginaw Public Schools, the Michigan Department of Labor, the Saginaw Intermediate School District and the Saginaw Education Association (SEA).

While the state Labor department oversees other registered apprenticeship programs — known as the “earn-and-learn” model of workforce development — most offer pathways to positions in skilled trades, construction or manufacturing.

The Saginaw program is the only registered apprenticeship in the state for developing educators. Other partners

include the Michigan Department of Education and Michigan Works.

Apprentices work in classrooms as paraeducators, with mentor-teacher advising, while taking college courses at Delta College and SVSU. Participants need no college credits to apply, and the district pays for coursework by leveraging federal, state and local grants and programs.

The union and school district negotiated terms of the program, first announced in 2022, including participants’ pay, mentor teachers’ pay and responsibilities, competencies within domains required to demonstrate professional mastery, and rubrics for evaluation.

Developing the agreement was time-consuming because of being the first, said MEA Executive Director Jean Weiss, who serves the Saginaw unit. “We had nobody else to turn to because no one in education was doing something like this.”

SEA President Andrea Rethman — a 36-year educator in the district who took over leadership of her local at the onset of COVID — said she waded into the complex task because she saw great potential in the district being able to fill vacancies with teachers who are already deeply invested.

“These are people who’ve got experience in the classroom, they’re amazing with the children, and with some help getting their degree and certification they will go on to make a huge difference in the community,” Rethman said.

Apprentices earn pay raises as they complete trainings and achieve competencies under a four-level schedule negotiated by the union.

hip a first-of-its-kind

Associate teachers Jennette Hoffman (opposite page) and Elaine Hunt (right) are pursuing teacher certification at Delta College and Saginaw Valley State University in a Registered Apprenticeship Program in Saginaw schools.



Competencies involve a wide range of tasks, such as creating bulletin boards, leading parent conferences, and using technology in lesson plans.

For participant Jennette Hoffman, who began the program in November of 2023, achieving competencies outlined in Level 1 brought a \$5 an hour pay increase. She anticipates moving up another level next school year.

“Not living paycheck to paycheck as much has relieved some stress and tension in my life,” Hoffman said.

A 10-year employee of the district, Hoffman has been in an hourly role as an associate teacher in a Pre-K classroom for five years after previously serving as a kindergarten aide. “I wanted to be a teacher since I was a little kid,” she said.

After graduating high school in 2000, Hoffman earned an associate’s degree at Delta and began work on a bachelor’s degree at Ferris State University but left for financial reasons. She recently had her remaining student loan debt forgiven for completing 10 years of public service.

The apprenticeship program has made it possible to juggle responsibilities of a full-time job and family while completing coursework — some

online and some in-person. She’s allowed to take time off from work for classes only offered during the day.

“It’s been good not to have to stress about how to pay for it; you can just go to class and concentrate on your studies,” Hoffman said.

Depending on credits earned previously, apprentices complete coursework equivalent to two years at Delta and finish the bachelor’s degree at SVSU, said MEA member Colleen D’Arcy, a professor of Teacher Education and acting assistant dean of SVSU’s College of Education.

“We try to meet their needs on an individual basis,” D’Arcy said. “We have a strong partnership between Delta and Saginaw Valley, so there’s a smooth hand-off that happens among our admissions crew and advising folks.”

No one has yet graduated from the program, expected to take four to six years. It could be adapted for high school students coming from dual enrollment or middle college programs.

Hoffman plans to complete a degree and certification in PK-3 with an early childhood endorsement within the

next 18 months. Then she becomes eligible for a teaching spot at step one of the SEA contract, which also covers preschool teachers.

She looks forward to stepping onto the teachers’ pay schedule and continuing meaningful work. She especially enjoys connecting with introverted students, like herself, who can get overlooked.

“I love building bonds with all kids, and I want to be there for the quiet ones who just need a little extra push from someone who cares.”

For Elaine Hunt, who also started college long ago but left when her daughter was born, the apprenticeship is a second chance. She began the program with an associate’s degree and has only a few classes left to finish.

She’s figured out how to push past doubt and fit in with younger classmates, relying on years of hands-on experience helping children learn according to their needs and interests.

“Deep down, I’m a teacher,” Hunt said. “But having that degree, that certificate, will just stamp it. I’ll finally get to finish what I always wanted to do.” ♥

Rural hub offers free credentials

Like its name, the MiCAREER Resource Hub offers simplicity on the surface and complexity underneath.

For current and prospective educators who want to teach or change roles to fill a vacancy in rural schools, it's simple: The resource hub promises a personalized pathway to no-cost credentialing with individual supports and credits granted for prior related experiences.

Behind the scenes, the project led by Central Michigan University (CMU) is an innovative and ambitious effort to streamline and coordinate credentialing across five major universities to address the needs of rural school districts experiencing educator shortages in Michigan.

The acronym stands for Michigan Consortium for Addressing Rural Education Expansion and Retention. Partnering teacher-prep institutions are Saginaw Valley State University, Michigan State University, Northern Michigan University, and Eastern Michigan University.

"This is a unique collaboration to bring together all of the players involved and think very differently about how to solve this persistent problem of educator shortages in rural communities across our state," said Dr. Kathryn Dirkin, an MEA member and CMU faculty member who is MiCAREER's director of Partnerships and Programming.

On the K-12 side, project partners serving in an advisory capacity include at least four northern Michigan intermediate school districts and more than 50 local school districts. Rural school districts comprise 65% of the state's school districts and serve 31% of Michigan students.

Funded with a four-year \$15 million state grant, the **MiCAREER Resource Hub** is a no-cost credentialing body geared to help three distinct groups of people in Michigan's rural areas who don't have easy access to a teacher preparation institution:

- prospective educators who almost completed a teacher prep program
- staff on temporary teaching certifications already working in schools
- veteran teachers who want to add credentials to fill a needed new role

Part of the MiCAREER mission is to shorten people's credentialing pathway while still meeting standards for preparation, Dirkin said. Participants complete a pre-assessment that evaluates school and work experience for credit before an individualized completion plan is developed.

Classes are free for participants and offered online around a schedule that allows them to balance existing work and personal obligations, Dirkin said. Participants are assigned a mentor and have a single point of entry for receiving help with issues or questions.

Many districts in rural areas are susceptible to severe teacher shortages due to their smaller size and a limited supply of new teachers and credentialing institutions in their local area, according to the Michigan Teacher Shortage Study: 2025 Report by MSU's Education Policy Innovation Collaborative.



Dr. Kathryn Dirkin, director of Partnerships and Programming at CMU's MiCAREER hub.

The study found rural districts were more likely to experience high turnover and vacancy rates and often relied heavily on under-credentialed teachers.

"Strategies to combat teacher shortages should target the specific communities and specialization areas that are most in need of teachers," the report concluded.

CMU projects the MiCAREER Resource Hub will support hundreds of educators and thousands of students in its first few years with expectation for continued growth. The project was serving its first cohort not long after receiving the grant from the Michigan Department of Education last year.

"Supporting districts means supporting educators and children," Dirkin said. "This is mission-driven work that really matters to the future of our state. Now we just need to get the word out that this opportunity is available statewide for prospective educators in our rural regions." ▼

MESSA expands affordable health plan options with new ABC 2.5

For more than six decades, MESSA has set the bar by providing high-quality health plans to those of you who dedicate your lives to supporting our children and caring for our schools. Along the way, we've evolved to offer new plans and products to meet your needs.

As we look ahead to 2026, we're excited to introduce a new health plan: ABC 2.5.

ABC 2.5 is our newest addition to the ABC portfolio of high-deductible plans that include a health savings account. Its deductible fits right between ABC 2 and ABC 3, which may provide you savings on premium — the amount you pay toward your health plan. Like our popular ABC 1 plan, ABC 2.5's deductible is tied to the IRS index that regulates annual increases.

ABC 2.5 will be available as an option during this year's open enrollment, subject to your bargained benefits, with coverage beginning Jan. 1, 2026. To learn more about ABC 2.5, connect with your local MESSA field representative at (800) 242-4910, ext. 7817.

At MESSA, we're proud to offer the best health plans available, along with personal service that is second to none. We do it to provide the security and peace of mind you need and deserve. We've been doing it for over 60 years, and it's what we'll keep doing for years to come. ♥



*By Ross Wilson,
MESSA Executive Director*



Summer Conference in photos — Check out what you missed!

MEA members gathered for MEA's first-ever hybrid Summer Conference on July 15-17 at MEA headquarters and online. Attendees got great professional development on sessions ranging from bargaining better contracts to engaging in political action to improving student literacy. Whether you attended or just want to see what you missed, check out this photo album from the event on MEA's Flickr page.



BACK TO SCHOOL
with new MEA gear



mea.org/merchandise

SHAPE FUTURES



Earn your M.A. in School Counseling or expand your career with a **Post-Graduate Certificate in School Counseling**

- » Full or part-time, online
- » Next cohort begins January 2025 for the M.A. Counseling
- » Post graduate certificate program begins every fall semester

Visit bit.ly/counseling-grad-certificate

Disclaimer: Licensure requirements vary by state. Prospective students should verify requirements with their state's Department of Education.

LEARN MORE & APPLY
ehs.cmich.edu/counseling



Senior leader wins Brunner Award

Over a 45-year career as a paraeducator in Ann Arbor Public Schools and a union leader in Michigan, MEA member Percy Brown has traveled the country teaching others in his role how to build strength and respect for school support staff and the important work they do.

An early advocate of union mentoring and professional development targeting the specific needs of paraeducators and other non-certificated school employees, Brown has charted a forward course for Education Support Professionals (ESP) since 1981.

He recommends a three-pronged approach to improving wages and working conditions for members: making job descriptions accurately reflect action-oriented roles, tying targeted training to tasks in job descriptions, and ensuring evaluations allow for demonstration of results and advancement.

“Those parts connect together in a triangle, and by focusing on all three it allows for ESPs to show the value of what they do in the schools and for students,” said Brown, who works as a community liaison/assistant at Ann Arbor’s Pioneer High School.

This spring Brown won the Leon A. Brunner Award for his lengthy service to fellow ESP members in numerous elected and appointed union leadership positions — currently as senior member of the MEA Board of Directors and president and chief negotiator of the Ann Arbor Paraeducators unit (AAEA-P).

Beyond formal titles, Brown is a walking history book of MEA, said AAEA-P Vice President Crystal Kinard in a letter of support for Brown’s nomination for the statewide award.

“When in doubt, everyone looks to Percy for the answers,” Kinard wrote. “He is very low-key but will speak up when needed. Percy is very active and respected on the local, state and national level and very deserving of this award.”

Brown practices what he preaches in contract bargaining, said Wendy Blackman, a preschool paraeducator and union building rep, who wrote a letter of support for his nomination.

“Under Percy Brown’s leadership, the AAEA-P has a contract... which honors longevity with annual stipends and increased payout of unused sick time; rewards higher education with degree stipends; supports paraeducators and their families with access to healthcare and paid sick days for self or close family members; encourages professional growth by advocating for paid student teaching opportunities for AAEA-P members.”

In addition, Blackman wrote, “Brown oversees our Paraeducator Common Sick Bank which provides access to additional time off for paraeducators facing difficult personal or medical situations for themselves or family members, which allows staff to maintain benefits during unpaid FMLA time.”

At this summer’s MEA ESP Conference, where the Brunner Award was announced, a hush fell over the crowded room as Brown delivered a characteristically soft-spoken acceptance speech, giving credit to MEA staff and ESP colleagues who work with him to bargain local contracts.

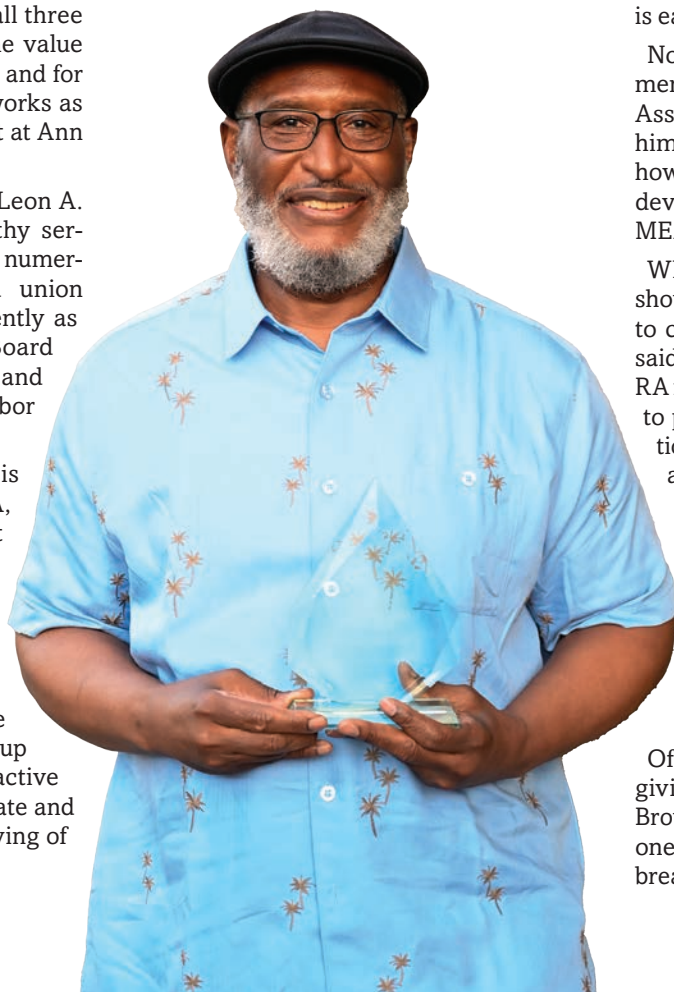
“I like to give credit where credit is due because no one can do it all,” Brown said. “I’ve always been one that believed in inviting everyone to the table, and I’m always willing to help. That’s what I do; I came from that kind of environment. My main motto is each one reach one teach one.”

Nancy Fields, a teacher and member of the Ann Arbor Education Association (AAEA) who nominated him for the award, gave examples of how Brown’s mentorship helped her develop as an AAEA delegate to the MEA Representative Assembly.

When she was a beginner, Brown showed her the ropes and stood back to cheer on her contributions, Fields said. Years later, when she stood at the RA microphone trying to urge changes to problematic language in a resolution, Fields lost her way mid-point — and Brown immediately stepped in to help.

“Percy Brown is like your big brother that always has your back,” Fields said, calling the recognition “overdue” for his long history of contributions to the Ann Arbor and Michigan ESP communities.

Of his reputation for generously giving of his time and good advice, Brown said, “It’s like in football. We are one unit, one chain. When one chain breaks, we all fall.” ♥



We are here for you.



JOIN THE TEAM

If you are an MEA member at or near retirement age, we have an opportunity just for you. Become an **MEA Financial Services Representative** and:

- Enjoy a flexible work week
- Enhance your retirement income
- Receive full training and licensing support

Yes, we are here for you. Connect with the educational community while helping your colleagues with their financial needs and goals.

Join a winning team with over 50 years of service to the educational community.

For more information on becoming an MEA Financial Services Representative, call **Jason T. Diotte (517) 337-5427**, or email JDiotte@mea.org.

We are here for you.

Call us today!



mea
Financial
Services

Build, Grow, Manage.

www.meafs.com (800) 292-1950



MESSA[®]

Makes The Difference

At MESSA, we aim to make a
difference for you and your family,
just like you make a difference in
our schools and communities.

See how we've made a difference in the lives of
members like you at messa.org/HereForYou.

Call us at **800-336-0013**.
We're happy to help.