

MEA • VOICE



New notification:

**No smartphone
use in class**

LETTER TO MEMBERS

Freedom from cell phones



Gov. Gretchen Whitmer signed bipartisan legislation in February restricting smartphone use among students during instructional time — proof that lawmakers can make good things happen when they set aside partisanship and work together toward a goal.

Research shows the deep connection between teens' mental health struggles and social media use. In a world of distractions, where self-worth can seem regulated by social media algorithms, this law moves Michigan students and classrooms forward.

To address these concerns and more, the bipartisan package of bills requires school districts to adopt cell phone policies that, at a minimum, bar students from using wireless communication devices on school grounds during instructional time.

In this issue, learn more about this new law, how districts can enact further limitations, what allowable exceptions are included, and what educators need to keep in mind as new cell phone rules are implemented this fall.

State leaders should build on this momentum and identify other ways to safeguard student mental health and safety online, like the “Kids Over Clicks” legislation introduced by Senate Democrats in December:

The Michigan Kids Code would enact “safety by design” and “privacy by default” rules designed to protect children from harmful content, online scams and targeted ads.

The Stop Addictive Feeds Exploitation (SAFE) for Kids Act would prohibit social media companies from using content-feed algorithms for minors.

The Leading Ethical AI Development (LEAD) for Kids Act would help restrict children's access to potentially dangerous AI chatbots.

Along with the new smartphone law, these bills can improve children's mental health, protect them from online exploitation and help them better focus on their studies. These are issues every Michigan educator and school is facing, and that's why MEA is committed to advocating for the passage of these common-sense protections for our kids. **V**

Quotables

“Educators, parents, and community leaders will continue to organize, mobilize, and take action to protect our students and their futures.”

NEA President Becky Pringle, speaking after the U.S. Department of Education conceded the end of a directive barring diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in schools and universities — the result of a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of NEA and others.



MARK IT

MEA Scholarship Golf Outing

June 22

The 24th Annual MEA Scholarship Golf Outing is set for noon on June 22 at Centennial Acres Golf Course in Sunfield. The event raises money for the MEA Scholarship Fund. Register at mea.org/golf.



Chandra Madafferi
MEA President & CEO



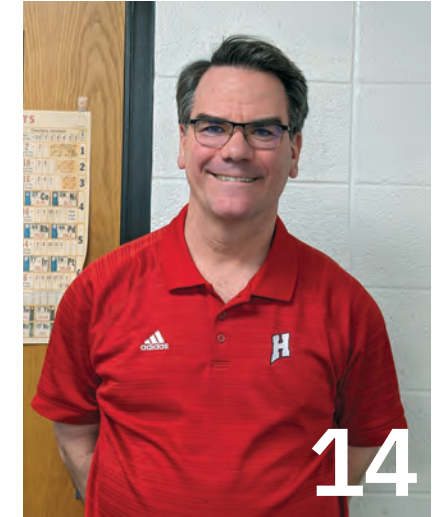
Brett Smith
Vice President



Aaron Eling
Secretary-Treasurer



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



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At the MEA Winter Conference, educators heard from four gubernatorial candidates: two Democrats, one Republican, and an independent. Read more about the forum, and meet MEA award winners announced at the conference, on pages 12-13.

On the cover: A new law limits students' use of wireless devices at school. See how such a policy is already playing out in one Oakland County district. Photo by Miriam Garcia, story on pages 7-9.

Leg councils, page 14.

MAHE summit, page 16.

'Oscar' winner, page 22.

More inside: New aspiring-ed chapter forms at NMU, page 5. Facts v Fallacy, part three: school policy, page 14. Smith reflects on officer tenure, page 17. MEA Elections, page 19.



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MEA VOICE

Senior Executive Director
Erik Edoff

Director of Communications
and Public Engagement
Doug Pratt

Editor
Brenda Ortega

Publications
Specialist
Shantell Coats

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: 114,592.

“These aren’t miracles, they’re marathons”

Michelle Richard, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s senior literacy advisor, recently answered a series of questions to help MEA members better understand Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s “Every Child Reads” proposals to address student literacy — and the essential role educators play at every grade level in that work.

Check out these highlights and read the full Q&A with Richard at mea.org/literacy-advisor-Q-A.



On making the biggest impact

“We know more than ever about how kids learn to read. These strategies are well-established, but the challenge is staying the course. In Michigan, we tend to get impatient, and we try a new strategy every few years in hopes of faster outcomes. As a parent, I get it. I’m impatient when it comes to my kids too. But getting the biggest gains comes from implementing effective, research-based practices and sticking with them.”

Connecting educators with more supports

“We know that when educators are supported, kids thrive. That’s why this plan focuses on connecting you with the knowledge, support, and tools you need to be a great reading teacher. We’ve already started training teachers in LETRS, helping districts adopt proven curriculums, and hiring coaches to partner with you to grow as a professional.”

How every educator can help improve literacy

“Literacy is lifelong, and it’s not confined to ELA classrooms. Being a strong reader, writer, and communicator is a goal in 3rd grade, 7th grade, 12th grade, and beyond. Yes, we focus on the fundamentals of being a strong reader in the early grades, but there is no point in a person’s education where they stop learning to be a more effective reader, writer, or communicator.”

On other states’ progress and sustaining political will

“Simply put, these aren’t miracles, they’re marathons — the result of years of hard work and commitment to the plan. We know we must sustain this work long-term, and we’re proud to work with state department leaders (like new State Superintendent Dr. Glenn Maleyko), legislators, administrators, and educators like you to make that happen.”

Quotables

“The evidence demonstrates a pattern of decision-making that has destabilized our schools, demoralized our educators, and jeopardized the educational outcomes of Pontiac students.”

Resolution of No Confidence, jointly passed by a 98.7% vote of the Pontiac Education Association and the Pontiac ParaInstructors Association, outlining leadership failures by the superintendent and five school board members. Pontiac teachers have been working without a contract since the start of the school year.



ICYMI:

Member lives Olympic dream

MEA member Jake Davis, a chemistry teacher at Lincoln Park High School, achieved a long-held Olympic dream in February — but he didn’t compete at the Games in Milan. He officiated.

“It’s been a long process, a lot of commitment and sacrifices to be at the top for sure,” he says.

Davis began officiating hockey at age 13 and worked his way up from grassroots to national and international leagues. He was selected for the Olympics last July and stayed in shape officiating NCAA and semi-pro games while teaching full-time.

Nowadays students — and family — are his priority. He first became a substitute teacher as a flexible job that fit around his referee schedule. He found he loved it and pursued a career. There is overlap between the two, he says.

“Patience is huge,” said Davis. “I’ve learned to be a calming presence.”

Read about his dream-come-true at mea.org/olympic-hockey.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

AEM Continues to Grow!

This year, we welcome another new chapter to the Aspiring Educators of Michigan (AEM) family, continuing growth in the number of students who are furthering their commitment to future careers in education through membership in MEA and NEA.

The Future Educators of Northern Michigan University (FENMU) has joined chapters from 17 other colleges and universities to help members access professional development, leadership opportunities, fun social gatherings, and career connections.

FENMU member Petra Frazier illustrates the circle of life that many young people undergo in pursuing the profession: “I want to continue the legacy of awesome female social studies educators like the teachers I had in high school” Frazier says.

Educator recruitment in Michigan is paying off, but staffing shortages persist, most acutely affecting rural and urban areas, charter schools, high-poverty communities, and students of color. A new study from Michigan State University reports an increase in newly certified teachers but ongoing high turnover.

Many NMU graduates go on to fill teaching jobs in the Upper Peninsula, so connecting them with the union and professional advocacy early in their careers is essential.

MEA’s advocacy has resulted in recent legislative wins securing student-teacher stipends, state grants to offset the cost of becoming a teacher, the return of collective bargaining rights, improved teacher evaluation,



and a better default retirement option for new hires.

FENMU member Emma Moser — now an AEM rep — was instrumental in creating the new chapter after attending Labor Day Fest in Negaunee where she met MEA UniServ Director Bill Milligan, who introduced her to AEM State Organizer Annette Christiansen.

“I’ve always been passionate about public education and unions,” said Moser, who plans to become a secondary English teacher. “I’ll be a third-generation teacher and union member, following in the footsteps of my mom and grandpa... I couldn’t be more grateful to be a part of bringing Aspiring Ed to Northern.”

The NMU students have engaged with statewide AEM members, hosted events, and connected with leaders from the Marquette Education Association who will offer professional learning on classroom management and parent communication.

FENMU President Summer Morrison, an aspiring chemistry teacher, said her goal is to provide informative and enjoyable events for NMU students.

“I am very passionate about education, and I think it is important that pre-service teachers connect to form a wide support web,” Morrison said.

AEM membership is increasing, with overall one-year growth of 38% in 2024-25 and 49% so far in 2025-26, helped by programming such as Next Gen, a summer residency program for aspiring educators, and Educators Rising, a program for middle and high school students.

MEA co-hosts an annual Educators Rising conference and competition with Wayne State University, most recently on March 16. MEA has nearly 3,000 current EA members who were previously student members.

The excitement for public education and union membership is strong among our AEM members. All of us can help to nurture the next generation! **V**



MESSA makes the difference for Elliott

In a matter of days, MESSA member April Geyer saw her 2½-year-old son change from a healthy, playful toddler to a child on life support — and it all started with strep throat.

“MESSA was my safety net,” said April, a special education teacher at Oasis High School in Mount Pleasant. “I didn’t have a single concern in the world when it came to my insurance. I knew everything would be taken care of.”

In February 2025, Elliott developed a fever that wouldn’t break. He was diagnosed with strep throat and prescribed antibiotics, but his condition worsened.

April and her husband, Todd Geyer, rushed Elliott to the emergency room in Midland. His breathing was labored. His hands were cold. He was unresponsive.

“He was progressively drifting further away,” April said.

Elliott was taken to the pediatric intensive care unit at Hurley Children’s Hospital in Flint, where he was diagnosed with toxic shock syndrome. His organs began to fail and he was placed on life support.

Elliott was transported to the University of Michigan Health C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital in Ann Arbor. There, he was diagnosed with Kawasaki disease, likely triggered by the infections that had ravaged his young body, which caused a coronary artery aneurysm. When April asked for a prognosis, doctors didn’t have any answers.

“That’s when the weight of this hit me,” April said. “It was like I was picked out of my normal life and put into this strange place and the entire world stopped.”

April and Todd’s focus was on saving Elliott’s life.

“MESSA was a lifesaver,” Todd said. “Thinking about how much everything was going to cost, they definitely had our back.”

The Geyers stayed in Ann Arbor the entire 32 days Elliott was in the hospital. Todd, 40, stayed in a nearby hospital room, while April, 38, slept in Elliott’s room. She clung to the blipping rhythm of Elliott’s heart monitor — a steady beep, beep, beep that let her know Elliott was alive.

Slowly, Elliott achieved small victories. After eight days, he was removed

from life support. His fever broke and he was moved out of ICU. He wiggled his toes and feet.

One day, a nurse started to remove the heart monitor — another victory. But April insisted on keeping it connected.

“I needed to know that he was OK,” she said.

Then came a moment when Todd repeated a line from Elliott’s favorite TV show and he looked at his dad and smiled — that’s when they knew Elliott was going to be OK.

“There were tears of joy for sure,” Todd said.

After four months of rehabilitation, Elliott learned to walk again and sharpened his motor skills. A year later, he’s running, playing and back to his cheerful self. April credits patient care and MESSA for his recovery.

“We would’ve been devastated financially if we didn’t have MESSA,” she said. “Just knowing that I had MESSA, I knew I was covered. We were good and I didn’t have to worry a bit about financial stress.” ▾

Learn more about MESSA benefits. Visit messa.org/welcome

How one district *shut down* cell phones in class

By Brenda Ortega
MEA Voice Editor

Last school year, MEA member Vanessa Wentzloff felt genuine appreciation at seeing her students pass paper notes to each other in class.

The high school science teacher first saw the behavior after her Oakland County school district — Avondale — instituted a strict new technology policy banning students' use of cell phones and other outside devices during school instructional time.

After 10 years of teaching at the school, Wentzloff recognized it would take a while for everyone to adjust to big changes that started in the fall of 2024.

"Kids are really bad at being bored, because they're used to whipping out their phone," she said. "So when we first banned phones, the kids were passing each other notes, and I was like — OK, this is old-school; that's fine."

A small district of 3,800 students, Avondale is one case study for what others across Michigan can expect when a new state law goes into effect this fall, prohibiting use of smartphones and other wireless communication devices on school grounds during instructional time.

Now in its second year at Avondale High School, the policy has resulted in significant improvements, Wentzloff and other educators agreed. Students are more engaged in class, more social and interactive, and more willing to persevere on assignments.

Although passing and lunch times are not included in the high school ban, "I feel like the kids are less on their phones even during passing time now," Wentzloff said. "They just don't have it out during class, so as they're walking out maybe they check it, but they'll put it away."

"Even our first homecoming assembly after our phone ban was the most engaged I've seen students in an assembly in my entire career here."

Life is better

The ban on devices at the district's middle school is more strict, encompassing the entire school day. When they arrive in the morning, younger students place phones in locked Yondr pouches, which they carry with them and unlock as they leave for the day.

Life is markedly better since cell phones went away, said MEA member Kristen Little, a 28-year classroom veteran who works as a math and reading interventionist at the middle school.

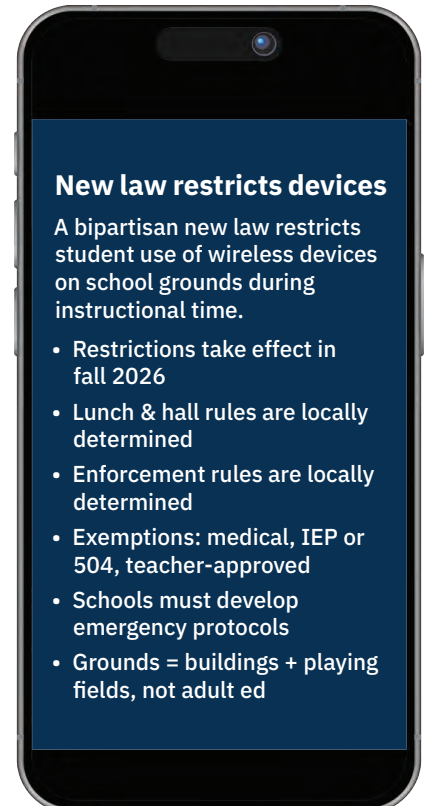
"It's really been life-changing, to be honest. It has made everything so much easier. Students are more engaged in their academics and the lessons being taught throughout the day. They're socializing in the hallways, laughing and talking with each other. I think it has so many benefits for students."

Nearly 40 states in the U.S. have adopted laws regulating student cell phone use in schools. Not much research exists on effects so far, but a

working paper issued by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) in October reported positive findings.

Researchers found a reduction in student unexcused absences and improvement in student test scores in the second year after cell phones were restricted in Florida schools.

Those benefits came after a short-term rise in student suspensions, especially among Black students, which dissipated after the first year, according to the NBER paper.



New this fall: no wireless devices during instructional time.



The middle school policy in Avondale, which started a year before the high school ban, has reduced discipline issues and cyberbullying, Superintendent James Schwarz told *M-Live* in January.

Incidents of fighting went from 22 in fall of 2022, before the ban, down to seven the next year when the policy began, according to the district. Phone violations decreased from 124 to 61.

“In addition, the ban has increased students’ socialization skills and ability to interact verbally with confidence,” Schwarz said.

Over nearly three decades, Little had watched middle school culture change for the worse as cell phones became ubiquitous. Students texted each other all day. Social media distracted. Peer pressure intensified. Conflicts escalated.

“It was just very intrusive of lessons and learning and student engagement,” Little said. “Snapchat was a problem,

Instagram, all those social media apps caused so many issues.”

Cell phone use can have profound implications for mental health, studies have found. Constant notifications can lead to compulsive use. Social media platforms, designed to be addictive, distort self-image and feed feelings of worthlessness.



Little

“Studies have shown a correlation between heavy social media use and depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidal ideation,” according to the Columbia University Department of Psychiatry.

Now with the middle school ban in its third year, becoming the norm, students are more active in class and completing more assignments, Little said. They are more likely to talk with others outside of usual cliques, and overall mental health seems to be improved, she added.

“We can’t control what they’re doing at home, but I think there’s so much pressure for middle school students specifically from social media. When that is put away from 7:45 to 2:45, I think it lightens kids loads.”

No staff complaints

When Erica Burmann began teaching 13 years ago, cell phones were not a major issue. A fifth-grade teacher in the gifted

and talented program, Burmann is president of the local union and says staff are not complaining about the ban.

Universal staff support is crucial to the success of any restrictive cell phone policy, Burmann stressed, adding full staff buy-in is more likely if administrative follow-through is prioritized.

In Avondale, if teachers see a student using a cell phone during class, the phone is confiscated, the office calls home, and a parent must retrieve it. Security staff members are available to come quickly and remove any student who refuses to hand over a device.

Students who leave to use the bathroom are required to put phones in a basket on the teacher’s desk, which has led to fewer and shorter exits from class.

Because devices at the high school are not locked or routinely removed from students’ possession, enforcement requires a period of consistent adult behavior for students to accept and adapt to the change, Burmann said. The benefits are worth the initial struggle, she said.

“Kids are more present and engaged. When they’re finished with a task, they’re not just jumping on a phone — they’re maybe engaged in another thinking task or something the teacher set up.”

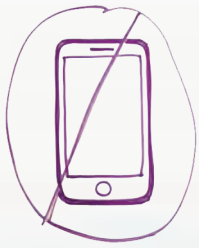
An emerging issue is students’ use of smartwatches, which might need to be added to the list of banned devices that already includes external laptops and tablets, Burmann added.

She advises educators in Michigan who will implement new policies in coming months: “It’s going to take time. It’s going to take consistency. It’s going to take parent education, because we know parents themselves push back on cell phone policies, right?”

Recent surveys indicate growing public support for school cell phone restrictions, although parents express



Full staff buy-in and administrative support are key to success, says Erica Burmann, union president.



No Cell Phones!
(it's the law!)



concern over losing contact with their child in emergencies.

Michigan's new law requires school districts to develop protocols for how cell phones can be used in lockdowns or other threatening situations. In Avondale, middle school teachers have a go-bag for emergencies that includes scissors to open phone pouches if needed.

Students are safer in an emergency following instructions, not texting or going online, those interviewed agreed. In the case of an active shooter, lights and sounds from phones increase risk.

Mixed student feelings

Asked to write down words to describe their reactions to the policy, seniors in Wentzloff's elective science classes gave mostly negative responses: angry, sad, bored. Questioned individually, most gave nuanced answers.

One senior admitted without her phone in one class she talked to people she would not have approached otherwise: "They're actually cool and funny and they keep me interested, so I don't even think about my phone."

Another said ultimately the ban is a "good thing" that has led to more human interaction even though students can find ways around it. "When kids are on their phone so much, it takes away from what they're supposed to be doing," she said.

One talkative senior said he believes he's more involved in class but should be able to use a device when needed, while another complained he can't

effectively use free time as a dual-enrolled student.

"I have two hours here that I'm scheduled to have a study block so I can work on my college stuff, but I can't work on my college stuff because of the personal device policy."

MEA member Rebecca Siwicki instituted a ban on cell phones in her high school business classes before the new policy took effect. Having a school-wide policy helps, she said.

Students in career courses receive employability grades, so she teaches them to develop the discipline to stay off phones when required — as an employer might demand at a job.

"We had to really commit as a staff that we were all in," she said. "Because if I'm doing it and the teacher down the hall isn't, then I'm the bad guy."

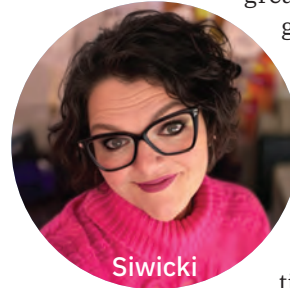
The new state law allows for teacher-approved use of devices for instructional purposes, among other exceptions for medical needs or special education plans.

Some teachers are more disadvantaged than others by a cell phone ban, such as those teaching photography or graphic design, and districts might need to help educators redesign

Kids are more engaged without phones in class, says high school teacher Vanessa Wentzloff.

lessons or purchase needed equipment to move beyond phones, she said, adding the effort is worth it.

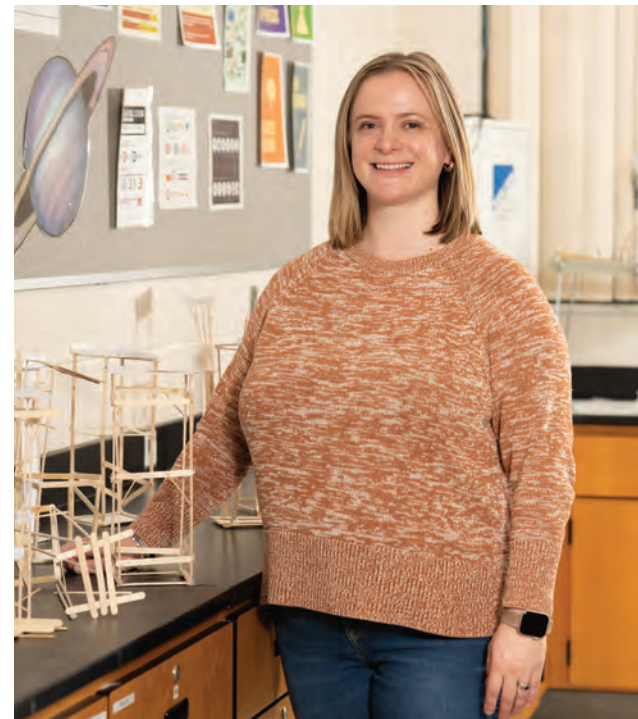
After a varied career in real estate and technology, Siwicki transitioned to teaching several years ago and found great rewards in



Siwicki

guiding young people. She wants kids to realize ditching the phone improves focus, connection, and cognitive endurance.

"They think when they get online, they're letting their mind wander," Siwicki said. "They don't realize they're literally being led; their mind is on a leash. I don't want every organic experience they have to come through a screen, and nowadays that's a real danger." **V**



Facts v Fallacy

PART III: School Policy

By *Brenda Ortega*
MEA Voice Editor

Support over blame

MEA member Danielle Cover has seen the difference it makes for students when state leaders listen to educators and deliver resources that schools need, rather than issuing unfunded mandates and setting up systems of punishment based on standardized test scores.

A 19-year educator, Cover teaches first grade in Ferndale and recently witnessed dramatic improvements — in her classroom and districtwide — as the state funded high-quality literacy training along with reading coaches and interventionists.

“My students’ success or failure should not be used to score political points,” Cover said. “It should be a driving force for policymakers to ask, ‘What can we do to make it better?’ And ask the people who it affects every day.”

In Ferndale, shifts made over four years helped the district to buck statewide trends in third-grade reading on the 2025 M-STEP, surpassing the state average and jumping more than 11 percentage points in third-grade proficiency from pre-pandemic levels.

Cover credits key supports put in place since 2020, under Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s leadership, with offering both means and methods for schools to beef up early literacy approaches. Those include funding for LETRS, a training for educators on the science of reading.

She is one of 12,000 Michigan teachers who have completed Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and

Spelling (LETRS) or are working toward completion at no cost since 2021.

Ferndale and other districts have also leveraged state funding to purchase research-aligned elementary curricula and materials.

LETRS explores the latest research into how children learn to read and best practices for teaching. Some districts used state grants or federal COVID-relief dollars to pay educators for extra time required to complete the course — up to 160 hours over two years.

“Out of all the professional development I’ve ever received, this introduction to the science of reading was the most beneficial,” Cover said — while adding the course was a “huge lift,” and all educators should be paid for spending many nights and weekends completing it.

She praised bipartisan literacy and dyslexia laws, passed in 2024 by a Democratic-led Legislature, which take effect in 2027. But many schools remain short of needed literacy and mental health supports, she added.

“If more legislators came to classrooms willing to listen, I promise — we have solutions. It starts with investing in the dedicated professionals doing the complex work of teaching young people how to read and write, building a foundation of literacy for the future.”

Learn from mistakes

In this election year, too many candidates will push a message that calls for market-based “competition” favoring consequences over supports:

school choice, charter schools, and test-and-punish accountability.

Ironically those have been the most consistently pursued state education policies for the past 35 years.

Cutting funding while expanding for-profit charter schools and cycling through numerous accountability systems for public school districts all have destabilized the state’s education system since the early 1990s, says MEA Labor Economist Tanner Delpier.

“We should learn from that instead of doubling down on failed policies,” Delpier said.

Yet big donors, such as Betsy DeVos, have vowed to use their money and influence to center November’s General Election on the so-called “failure” of public education — as voters decide on the next governor and control of the state Legislature.

One example is former Gov. Rick Snyder calling the performance of Michigan schools and educators “an outrage” last spring as he rolled out his plan to spend millions of dollars targeting and promoting political candidates — despite it being his own policies that created many of the problems.

Ignoring a decades-long assault on school budgets, critics argue schools need reform over funding. They claim recent efforts to rebuild education funding prove money doesn’t make a

“My students’ success or failure should not be used to score political points.”

—Ferndale teacher Danielle Cover

difference — even though inflation-adjusted spending remains far below previous levels.

They say educators, including school administrators, need more high-stakes standardized testing to force better student outcomes.

“We’re seeing increased emphasis on school accountability even though

included AYP; Beating the Odds; top-to-bottom and achievement gap rankings; focus, priority and reward designations; multiple iterations of teacher evaluation; the accountability scorecard; A-F grading; and the Michigan School Index system.

“We can’t forget emergency management and the Education Achievement

some majority Black school districts and privatized others.

At the same time, state assessments required to measure public school performance have continually shifted the ground under educators’ feet: MEAP, M-STEP, ACT, SAT, Michigan Merit exam, BPA, Work Keys, PSAT, benchmark assessments.

“Schools need to have enough resources to be able to serve the needs of a diverse population of students, and they require stable policy environments to be effective.” —Tanner Delpier, MEA Economist

these systems have been a primary focus of policymakers for quite a while and despite the fact that past accountability policies failed to raise literacy scores in any meaningful way here in Michigan,” Delpier said.

A respected expert on school finance with a doctorate in education policy, Delpier points out the names and acronyms by which accountability has been known at the federal level: No Child Left Behind, ESEA, ESSA.

State-level systems have

Authority,” Delpier said, referring to laws used by the state to assume control of high-poverty local school districts or funnel students from Detroit schools designated low-performing to state-run EAA schools with no local accountability.

The EAA was a key part of Snyder’s school reform agenda initiated in 2011, which he tried to expand statewide, but the district was shut down in 2017 after poor performance and financial mismanagement led to federal lawsuits.

Snyder’s other reform — emergency managers — closed

Constant change — called “policy churn” — and underfunded mandates make it harder for school districts to effectively utilize scarce resources, Delpier said. An example is the Read by Grade 3 law, passed by a Republican-controlled Legislature and later amended when Democrats took control in 2022.

The third-grade retention requirement included in the original law was removed in 2023 because it didn’t show results improving student literacy. Aside from failing to provide additional resources to struggling readers, the approach was expensive and redundant.

“You’re essentially adding an entire extra year of schooling for a particular group of students without changing the approach,” Delpier said.

Research proves there are better long-term strategies that require sustained investment — such as smaller K-3 class sizes, targeted interventions for at-risk students, and wraparound services to support young people and families.

“Schools need to have enough resources to be able to serve the needs of a diverse population of students, and they require stable policy environments to be effective,” he concluded. **V**



Winter Conference brings energy



More than 1,000 MEA members converged on the Renaissance Center in Detroit in February to learn, network and organize for the critical work ahead that will shape the future for educators, students, our state and nation.

The MEA Winter Conference is our biggest event of the year, and both presenters and attendees brought big energy. Sessions on union bargaining, communications, organizing and lobbying ran alongside professional learning.

Educators at the conference also got a glimpse at four candidates running to succeed Gov.

Gretchen Whitmer, including two Democrats, one Republican, and an independent.

Moderated by Michigan Public radio host Zoe Clark, the livestreamed forum featured Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, former state Attorney General Mike Cox, Genesee County Sheriff Chris Swanson, and former

Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan.

“It was really cool,” said JJ Lockwood, president of the Plymouth-Canton Education Association. “I brought some people with me (to the conference) this time that have never been to anything like this, so it’s really nice to see something like that go down live for them.”

A 20-year educator, Lockwood said in this key election year he wants to hear detailed plans from candidates on how they will ensure adequate and stable school funding.

“There’s a lot of things we need to be able to do in schools to support kids, and we can’t do that when we don’t know what that funding source is going to look like from year to year to year,” Lockwood said.

Read more and watch the forum at mea.org/candidates-forum-at-conference.

Human Rights & Excellence Awards presented at MEA Winter Conference

**2026 MEA Educational
Excellence Award:
Daniel Clason**

**2026 MEA David
McMahon Human
Rights Award:
Kathy Kosobud**

**2026 MEA Maurine
Wyatt Feminist and
Gender Equity Award:
Wendy Winston**

**2026 MEA Gerry Crane
Human and Civil
Rights Award:
Frank Burger**

Learn more about these
and other MEA awards:
mea.org/awards



Daniel Clason drew inspiration from a Mississippi blues museum for the centerpiece of his project-based approach to teaching history: traveling trunks filled with American Revolution artifacts created by eighth graders as hands-on learning tools for fifth graders.

Clason is the recipient of the 2026 MEA Educational Excellence Award for his instructional leadership and creativity as a teacher at Clarkston Junior High. Other projects he helps to run include Constitution Fashion Shows and Civil War Town Hall debates.

“He leads his department, gives everything he has for his students, and works hard for our local,” said nominator Beth Rogers, a fifth-grade teacher in the district and president of the local union. “We are beyond blessed to have him here in Clarkston.”

In his acceptance speech, Clason said public education is his greatest passion. “I would urge anyone who is seeking excellence to remember that the only real excellence there is to pursue in this field is for students, for our future, for our democracy, for all of those things.”

Kathy Kosobud initially set out toward a career in theater design, but she shifted to education after college and applied her skill in manual arts to pre-vocational settings for children with disabilities, spending many years as a special education teacher in Ann Arbor.

Following a long career advocating for fairness and creating access to opportunities for marginalized children, after earning a doctorate and becoming a national board certified teacher and consultant, Kosobud turned to political action in retirement.

For lifelong commitment, Kosobud received MEA’s 2026 David McMahon Human Rights Award. Starting with a letter to the editor as a high schooler in 1968, up to recent work supporting transgender youth, she never wavered, said nominator Barb Schram, president of MEA-Retired.

Kosobud said she will continue helping to fight discrimination and get out the vote. “I’m humbled to be given this award,” she said in her acceptance speech. “It’s a reminder that retirement is another opportunity to help support the public and public education today.”

Wendy Winston worked to resolve a pay disparity when she discovered a male and female teacher with identical resumes being paid differently. She cites the example to say why the intersectional fight for gender equity and human rights must go on.

In accepting MEA’s 2026 Maurine Wyatt Feminist and Gender Equity Award, Winston called on education professionals to unite and fight collectively for students and the profession. “No one is showing up to save us. We are the saviors of our democracy.”

A 20-year math teacher in Grand Rapids, Winston’s long resume includes advocating for students as chair of Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s MI-STEM Advisory Council and serving in numerous union roles, including her local’s executive board, Region 9 vice president, MEA PAC leader, and NEA director, among others.

“Wendy is a relentless advocate whose efforts ensure the voices of teachers, students, and communities are heard at every level — from the classroom to the halls of Congress,” said nominator Jeff Pietrowski, a teacher in Grandville.

Frank Burger, a longtime advocate for the rights and safety of LGBTQ+ staff and students, became the first recipient of MEA’s new Gerry Crane Human and Civil Rights Award, named after a west Michigan teacher whose tragic story inspired others to action.

“Students, staff and community members have all benefited from activities and speakers he organized and his sharing of knowledge on how to best provide education, awareness and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people,” nominator Sandra Canood said.

Burger credited his family, his union, and school administration for supporting his advocacy in the face of increasing attacks on the LGBTQ+ community. He also cited Crane, a gay educator who was bullied out of his job as a music teacher in 1996 and died a year later.

“His story is what inspires me to do the work that I do, because I don’t want anybody to feel unsafe in school, whether it’s our students or our members,” Burger said in his acceptance speech. “We will never be erased, ever.”

Connecting educators & lawmakers

As a 27-year paraeducator at Jenison Public Schools, MEA member Diana Madden never imagined she would sit down to dinner with the chairwoman of the state House Education and Workforce Committee to discuss her work.

But when she was invited, Madden went out of curiosity. “They wanted a paraeducator’s voice in the process. I wondered what it would be like, but I wasn’t sure what I would say.”

A building rep for her support staff union, Madden was the only paraeducator among six educators and two MEA staff members who met with Rep. Nancy DeBoer (R-Holland) and her husband Jim DeBoer — both educators — for a meal and conversation in October.

A smaller group, including Madden, met with the lawmaker again in March.

Madden discussed concerns around disruptive student behavior and school violence shared by members in her unit. “There’s not resources available to help those students, and oftentimes it’s the teachers that have to stop their teaching to address those behaviors,” she pointed out.

Educators from the Holland region are reconstituting a small group of members who meet with lawmakers informally to build relationships and elevate voices from the field when school-related policy is developed, said MEA UniServ Director Clint Waller.

Personal connections matter, Waller said: “Keeping the lines of communication open is critical, even if you’re talking to somebody that doesn’t agree with you on anything, because we all live in bubbles. We have to bridge those gaps.”

Similar legislative councils operate across the state. The goal of leg-council dinners between a small group of educators and one lawmaker is not to

debate issues or argue about policy proposals.

“The only goal of the leg-council dinner is to make the legislator want to meet again, which creates opportunity for continuous dialogue to happen,” said MEA Lobbyist David Michelson, who trains new councils and attends the first dinner to make introductions.

Ground rules include no arguing, no agenda, and everyone arrives and leaves together. At the Holland dinners, members discussed student mental health, reduced kindergarten readiness, staffing shortages, and how support staff bear the brunt of school violence.

MEA member Carl Van Faasen attended as a 34-year science teacher at Holland High School because he believes in the opportunities public schools create for children and communities.

A lifelong Holland resident and district alum whose parents had education roles before him — dad was a school board member and mom was a school secretary — Van Faasen has been involved in union leadership and legislative councils on and off for years.

“A lot of people get intimidated thinking, ‘Hey, if I don’t know the details of every bill in Lansing, am I even going to have a good conversation?’ But the object is just to talk about what’s going on — in education and in your school and your classroom.”

Participants described the dinners with DeBoer as relaxed and the former Holland mayor and her husband — an



Erika Dvorak



Julie Kovacs

L-R Holland teacher Carl Van Faasen, Jenison para Diana Madden, MEA UD Clint Waller, Rep. Nancy DeBoer, and Hudsonville teacher Michael Anderson at a leg council dinner.



MEA-Retired member — as interested in what they had to say.

Van Faasen says he likes to begin by focusing on common ground or a positive legislative action. In October, he began by thanking DeBoer for helping to pass a positive state budget after a difficult process. In March, it was the new cell phone ban.

The legislative council plans to continue dining with DeBoer periodically to keep conversation going, he said.

“Once you build trust, then when an issue comes up, you have a relationship. You have the ability to reach out and say, ‘This is how it’s playing out in the trenches,’ or ‘This is how that proposed bill would affect our classrooms.’ It’s really important for us to tell our stories.”

Van Faasen and another council member — Julie Kovacs, a veteran teacher in West Ottawa — had met with DeBoer before October and exchanged phone numbers for ongoing dialogue, he said. DeBoer took over as chair of the House education committee a year ago.

Kovacs, who teaches elementary language arts, became an educator in the footsteps of her mother, a retired special education teacher. After 29 years in the field, Kovacs worries about several issues she sees contributing to educator shortages.

Difficult student behaviors, long hours spent on standardized testing, political attacks on teachers. If tough working conditions continue to drive people out of the profession, educator recruitment efforts won’t make a difference, she said.

That’s why she joined the leg council. Knowing how much the work of legislators shapes the daily lives of educa-

tors, Kovacs appreciates the chance to develop a relationship and become a trusted voice with her representative.

“One thing I’ve noticed is that everybody seems to know somebody who’s a teacher, which is a great place to start making connections,” Kovacs said. “The informal setting is nice. It reminds you that people are people and that we can always find things to talk about together.”

Another member of the council, MEA member Erika Dvorak, brings a different perspective as a nine-year middle school counselor in West Ottawa who came to the profession from awareness

that student success requires team effort focused on the whole child.

“There’s more that goes on for kids than being in the classroom learning content and curriculum. There’s a lot of social-emotional growth, support, and development that happens while they’re at school,” said Dvorak, who serves as MEA-PAC chair in her local union.

“It’s really important for us to tell our stories.”

Carl Van Faasen, 34-year science teacher in Holland, on the reason to form legislative councils to meet with local lawmakers.

Michigan has the second-worst student-to-counselor ratio in the nation at 573-to-1, and Dvorak can translate the numbers into realities on the ground: Without enough counselors, career exploration programs and proactive mental health supports fall by the wayside.

It’s all about ensuring educator voices inform school policy. “I want to make sure that the kids in our state are getting what they need to be good stewards and good citizens for the rest of their lives.” **V**

To inquire about starting or joining a legislative council in your area, contact your local MEA field office.

Higher Ed leaders share at summit



Villarreal

MEA member Jamin Villarreal recently found himself among other higher education leaders at a summit organized by MEA's Michigan Association of Higher Education (MAHE) to discuss common issues across the state's colleges and universities.

Villarreal had been inactive in his support staff union at Michigan State University until two years ago when he attended a union event. "I was starting to feel the fire inside of me... where I need to do something," he said of his decision to get more involved.

An administrative business analyst at MSU, Villarreal later accepted an appointment to a vacated seat on the executive board of his union, MSU-APA (Administrative Professionals Association) — a position he's now running to retain in unit elections.

"Now I feel like doors are opening left and right for me to be able to make greater change and more change than I could on just an individual or one-on-one basis with people," he said.

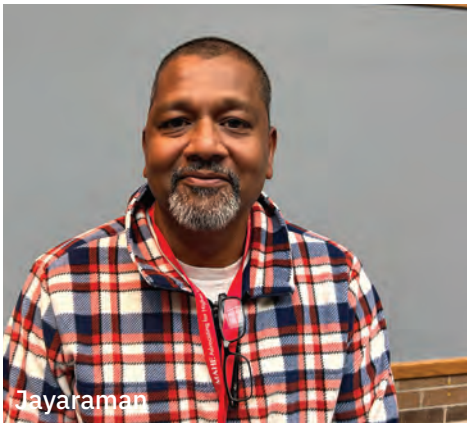
At the town hall, held at MEA headquarters in East Lansing, longtime and emerging higher education leaders discussed issues such as immigration enforcement, bargaining, efforts to help more students attend college, cuts to federal research funding, and attacks on academic freedom.

"It's such a great encouragement when you come to events like this, where they keep you uplifted and keep you motivated," Villarreal said.

Cynthia Thomas, a communications professor and part-time advisor at Lansing Community College, said she has felt disheartened talking to students of color who fear coming to campus and being arrested by federal immigration agents based on their appearance or spoken language.



Thomas



Jayaraman



Martin

"I knew it would be a really good share-out in terms of what others are going through and hearing from a lot of union brethren about what they're thinking or doing to help," Thomas said.

Arthur Martin, an associate professor of biology at Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU), attended a similar MAHE event a year ago and returned to see "how conversations continued to play out."

A member of the union bargaining team at SVSU, Martin has been preparing for negotiations, and the town hall offered extended conversation with colleagues from other places.

"We were talking to somebody who finished a bargaining cycle recently, so we were getting ideas like where'd they land, how did they get there, where are their issues compared to ours and how they dealt with them differently."

Getting together in person helps leaders build camaraderie and relationships that can extend beyond the one-day event, Martin said. "There's so much to learn about, and we're all kind of dealing with the same things."

Being part of a union means the heavy load is lifted by many people, agreed Roop Jayaraman, a tenured associate professor in exercise science at Central Michigan University who joined the MAHE board of directors two years ago.

Jayaraman enjoys being part of a larger, collective conversation, "to give a voice to the little guy that maybe gets drowned out or feels all alone."

Stepping up to a MAHE leadership role has been a time commitment, but building connections and strengthening ties has shown him the benefits of having union colleagues and resources to lean on, Jayaraman said.

"My biggest takeaway is we're all in this together." **V**

Smith reflects on officer tenure



After nearly two decades as a teacher, Brett Smith left his fifth-grade classroom in Linden in 2017 for a new challenge as an MEA officer. Nine years later, he leaves office as MEA vice president this summer proud of the relationships and accomplishments that marked his tenure.

“Interacting with members, leaders and staff from MEA, MESSA and MEA Financial Services has been the most meaningful part of this job,” said Smith, who is not running for re-election at this April’s MEA Representative Assembly. “From working on our budget to local governance to elections, every time I find it’s the people that make MEA special.”

In his first six years as secretary-treasurer, Smith focused on navigating MEA’s financial side, including modernizing membership policies and eliminating budget deficits. He is particularly proud of work to lower dues for low-wage

earners and stabilize — and eventually grow — membership.

“We put the voice and experience of our members at the heart of decisions, which is not only financially wise, but also our imperative as a union,” Smith said.

Smith also represented MEA in a variety of coalitions, ranging from improving special education to emphasizing the importance of recess. Recently, he’s been among the founding members of Michigan Climate Jobs, a new initiative promoting school energy efficiency.

“We can help districts save money, students experience new technologies and career opportunities, and support quality work done by union tradespeople — that’s a win-win-win.”

Working together with individuals and groups to get results has always been key.

“In Flint, we have a strong history and tradition of standing united for students and working families,” Smith said. “Being part of a union is about solidarity,

not just among us as school employees, but with the broader labor movement. It’s simple: we’re stronger together.”

That’s true in the political arena as well, where Smith emphasized member PAC giving and engagement, along with serving in leadership roles with the Michigan Democratic Party and the Democratic National Committee.

“We may not always like it, but every education decision is a political one, because it’s made by elected leaders,” Smith said. “With members at all points on the political spectrum, we can find common ground standing up for pro-public education and pro-labor candidates.”

In reflecting on his time as an officer, Smith says his motivation has always been that “I love what I do.”

“It’s not work if you love what you do. And I know I’m not alone, because I see the amazing things that dedicated educators — and the MEA leaders and staff who serve them — do every day for Michigan students.” **V**



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Candidates for MEA Elections

Candidates for MEA offices submit biographies and campaign statements, which are printed verbatim. Elections are held at the MEA Representative Assembly in April.



Chandra Madafferi

Candidate for MEA President & CEO

Chandra Madafferi has proudly served as MEA President & CEO for the past three years and began her membership at Central Michigan University as a student member more than twenty-five years ago. Elected MEA vice president in 2017, she has held leadership roles at the local, regional, and state levels. She earned a master's degree in education from the University of Michigan–Dearborn and is a Fellow in MSU's Education Leadership Policy Program. Chandra taught in Novi Community Schools and served for 15 years as an administrator for Bloomfield SCAMP, a summer program supporting individuals with disabilities.

Over the past three years, Chandra Madafferi has led the Michigan Education Association with a focus on strengthening leadership, improving systems, and positioning the organization for long-term success. Chandra believes MEA has kept its promises and made meaningful progress in improving member service by prioritizing systems improvements and working to elevate the education profession to help attract a new generation of educators who will prepare our students for the future.

Working alongside her fellow officers and leaders, Chandra guided the hiring of a new Senior Executive Director, whose leadership is strengthening relationships with staff, improving organizational effectiveness, and reinforcing MEA's reputation as a trusted and forward-thinking voice in education. She has prioritized systems improvements and partnership expansion to better support members and strengthen MEA's influence.

Chandra played a key role in launching the Center for Leadership and Learning as the author of the proposal that brought the original concept to the MEA Board of Directors. This initiative has created new opportunities for leaders across the state to access high-quality professional development, utilizing partnerships, experts, our talented staff and amazing members. She is grateful for the dedicated staff within the Center and excited to see continued growth and expanded opportunities for members.

Chandra also reimaged the Presidents' Academy, shifting focus from primarily skill-based task training toward leadership development grounded in self-reflection and systems thinking. Her work has helped grow leaders who build relationships within their locals to better connect with administrators, community members, and fellow union members in a proactive and problem-solving approach that shifts the mindset from "us versus

them" to "we," working together for the benefit of our students and members.

Chandra is seeking reelection to further build on this progress – strengthening leadership at every level, expanding opportunities for members, and ensuring MEA remains strong, sustainable, and prepared to lead in a rapidly changing educational and political landscape. She stands firmly for members' rights while working toward thoughtful solutions that protect both our schools and our profession.

As a systems thinker and natural collaborator, Chandra uses data to drive change, ensure accountability, and improve transparency – solving issues before they become problems. Leading from within, she listens to members and works side-by-side with leaders and staff to move important work forward.

Chandra is thankful for the many years of service of Vice President Brett Smith and supports his candidacy for NEA Secretary-Treasurer. She is also excited to run alongside Bob Callender, whose experience, governance knowledge, and leadership will help strengthen MEA and support the continued evolution of leadership development, including expanding the Presidents' Academy and building the next generation of union leaders.

She is proud of what she has accomplished as vice president and president and remains deeply grateful to those who placed their faith in her leadership. With more than twenty years of experience at the local and state levels, Chandra brings the knowledge, vision, and commitment to make the benefits of membership more visible while continuing to improve services for members.

Guided by empathy and integrity, a business and service mindset, and the strength of the union as a shield, Chandra Madafferi is committed to ensuring the association and profession remain strong, influential, and positioned to serve members and students for generations to come.



Robert Callender

Candidate for MEA Vice President

Bob Callender has dedicated his career to strengthening public education, advancing union activism, and delivering meaningful results for his local membership. He has worked for Warren Consolidated Schools for twenty-six years and has served as President of the Warren Education Association for the past ten years. Bob holds a Master of Public Administration from the University of Michigan–Flint, a Master of Arts in Teaching from Marygrove College, and a Bachelor of Science in Education from Wayne State University. A lifelong Warren resident, Bob lives with his wife, Jessica, and their two children, both of whom attend Warren Consolidated Schools.



Aaron Eling

Candidate for MEA Secretary-Treasurer

Aaron Eling serves as MEA Secretary-Treasurer and is seeking re-election. In this role, he has worked to modernize financial systems, strengthen transparency, and expand support for local leaders across the state. Aaron represents MEA on the Michigan Climate Jobs Coalition and serves on the Statewide AI Steering Committee. He is a participant in the Advanced Education Policy Leadership Program and has advocated for educators at both the state and national levels. A member of Region 9, Aaron is committed to responsible stewardship, organizational stability, and ensuring that MEA's resources reflect member priorities.

Bob Callender is ready to serve as our next MEA Vice President. Throughout his career with Warren Consolidated Schools, Bob has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to union advocacy while developing practical leadership experience at every level of the MEA.

Bob's leadership journey began in his first year of teaching when he stepped forward as a building representative. He then advanced through his local association, serving as an executive board member, crisis chair, PAC chair, and bargaining team member for more than 20 years. He later served six years as local vice president, followed by more than a decade as full-release President and Chief Negotiator. In these roles, Bob successfully represented members, navigated complex challenges, and led high-stakes negotiations with professionalism, credibility, and integrity.

At the state level, Bob has broadened his governance experience through service on the MEA Board of Directors, the Staff Retirement Board, and the MESSA Board. He has also contributed to key organizational initiatives through participation on local affiliate committees, the Local Presidents Academy, and dues restructuring efforts. His breadth of experience — spanning classroom, local, and statewide leadership

I am running for re-election as MEA Secretary-Treasurer because this work does not reset every three years, it is continuously growing and evolving.

Over the past three years, I have worked to modernize MEA's financial systems, improve transparency, and expand resources that support local leaders and members across the state. My focus has been simple: ensure that our budgeting reflects our values.

The role of Secretary-Treasurer is about more than numbers. It is about stewardship. Every decision made in this office impacts members in every region, every local, and every classroom. I have taken that responsibility seriously, working to ensure that dues dollars are managed responsibly and aligned with our long-term sustainability.

In addition to the traditional responsibilities of the office, I have represented

— positions him as a thoughtful, experienced, and highly effective candidate for MEA Vice President.

Bob champions a “locals-first” service model for MEA. He is committed to strengthening Presidents Academy programs, building full-capacity locals, and ensuring leaders have the tools and support needed to succeed. Bob believes in clear communication, consistent expectations, and meaningful accountability so that members' needs are met. His leadership philosophy is shaped by his own experience as a local leader, where he understands firsthand that union resources must be focused on serving members. Under his leadership, the Warren Education Association has maintained over 99% active membership, with approximately 880 members in good standing throughout his presidency.

An experienced leader, collaborative team builder, and strategic thinker, Bob Callender is prepared to serve as the next MEA Vice President. He believes deeply in our union and in all members — support professionals, teachers, itinerant staff, higher education faculty, new educators, veterans, and retirees alike. With your support, Bob will provide the leadership and direction needed for MEA's next chapter.

MEA in broader leadership spaces. I serve on the Statewide AI Steering Committee, helping shape how artificial intelligence is introduced into Michigan schools in ways that protect students and educators. I represent MEA on the Michigan Climate Jobs Coalition, strengthening partnerships between labor and education. I have also brought MEA's voice into policy discussions through the Advanced Education Policy Leadership Program.

Consistency matters in a role that touches every part of our union. Trust is built over time. Institutional knowledge strengthens decision-making. Stability allows us to plan strategically rather than reactively.

MEA deserves a Secretary-Treasurer who understands our systems, knows our members, and leads with experience and clarity. I would be honored to continue serving in this role.



Heather Schulz

Candidate for NEA Director

Heather Schulz is a middle school science teacher in Lakeview Public Schools in St. Clair Shores, currently in her 29th year in the classroom. She has been an active union leader for the majority of her career, dedicating her time and voice to advancing the profession and supporting her colleagues.

Heather currently serves as President of Local 1 and the 6E Coordinating Council, as a member of the MEA Board of Directors representing Region 6, and as one of the Directors on the NEA Board. She is seeking re-election to the NEA Board of Directors.

As an NEA Director, I have spent the past three years amplifying the voices of Michigan educators and students. In my role as an advocate and lobbyist, I have been proud to support key initiatives including the ESP Bill of Rights, academic freedom in higher education, full funding of IDEA, and the repeal of GPO and WEP.

I currently have the opportunity to serve on two committees whose work directly impacts MEA members. Through my service on the NEA Legislative Committee, I help elevate

the perspectives and priorities of MEA members as legislative goals and programs are established. In addition, as the NEA Representative Assembly undergoes transformation, I am able to bring forward MEA member ideas through my participation on the task force guiding that work.

Strong, steady leadership and consistent advocacy are essential on the NEA Board of Directors. I would be honored to continue serving on behalf of all educators and students as a member of the Michigan NEA Director team.

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MESSA Wellness is packed with helpful tips, exercise programs and nutritional programs to get you off to a fresh start. Visit messa.org/wellness for inspiration. ✓



Ross Wilson
MESSA Executive Director





Rural educator wins elite award

MEA member Stephanie Johnson chose a career in her last year of high school. She found her path in senior English class.

Johnson always loved school, and that year she enjoyed puzzling out phrasing and vocabulary by Shakespeare and Chaucer to piece together meaning. Sometimes she walked a struggling classmate through it — and found she loved that, too.

“That was my first experience with the lightbulb moment, watching somebody get it and seeing it click, and it was such a wonderful feeling,” she said.

Now 10 years into a role teaching middle school English Language Arts in Osceola County’s Pine River Area Schools, Johnson was “completely shocked” to win the Milken Educator Award, dubbed “the Oscars of teaching.”

Educators are not formally nominated for the national award and don’t know they’re being considered until the announcement at a surprise school assembly. The honor comes with an unrestricted \$25,000 cash prize.

Johnson was selected for her creative and student-centered approach, said Milken Educator Awards Vice President

Jennifer Fuller, who presented the award in February.

“Her innovative curriculum, focus on data, and involvement in school leadership advance excellence and inspire students to take charge of their learning,” Fuller said.

Engaging middle-grade students can take extra effort, because it’s a time of social and personal change, Johnson said in an interview. She works to ensure lessons are relevant, and students have ownership in learning.

She described a Holocaust unit in her seventh-grade ELA class in which students learn background knowledge, choose related novels to read in mixed-ability book clubs, meet a descendant of a survivor, and visit the Zekelman Holocaust Center in Farmington Hills.

“It’s incredibly relevant because we can talk about things we see in the world today, things that maybe reflect stereotypes or prejudice and echo what we’ve been learning about. Most of my students, when they come back later, say to me, ‘That was the best thing we did in seventh grade.’”

Other examples of how she hooks students include mock trials of characters in stories and multimedia projects.

Johnson also teaches intervention classes to build students’ skills in reading informational texts — the result of studying data to identify needs with the ELA team.

She finds high-interest readings tied to student learning in science and social studies, and from there, “If I’m excited, the kids get excited.”

Johnson loves working in the small town where her husband was raised and her kids go to school. She grew up in Hillsdale County and earned degrees from Saginaw Valley State University.

She now joins a national network of Milken educators empowered to broaden their impact on the profession. She is using her cash prize to endow a scholarship fund for aspiring educators.

The Milken & Johnson Future Educators Scholarship has been set up through the Fremont Area Community Foundation to support Osceola County high school graduates pursuing a degree in elementary or secondary education.

Anyone can donate to help build the fund by going to mea.org/johnson-milken-award.

“It feels like a gift but also a responsibility, and I feel very strongly pulled to do something that’s going to benefit others,” she said. “I’m really hoping now that I have a platform that maybe I can put some good out in the world and make some positive change.” **V**

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