

MEA • VOICE

MESSA Insert
Inside!

**WE CAN
DO THIS!**

Election 2026

**REMEMBERING
HISTORY TO AVOID
REPEATING**

Page 22

LETTER TO MEMBERS

New Year, Renewed Optimism, Continued Progress

In recent years, we’ve accomplished great things for our students and members — from free meals and increased school funding to restored labor rights and greater educator voice in policy.

We’re proud of those gains, achieved on the heels of a dark time for public education and unions. *(Read more about that recent history in our look back on pages 20-28 of this Voice issue.)*

Those victories made it difficult to accept Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s veto of legislation to address rising out-of-pocket insurance costs for school and other public employees.

Hours after allies in the state Senate won a case before the Michigan Supreme Court to get nine long-stalled bills presented to the governor, the veto was sudden and shocking to labor groups and lawmakers.

But we must direct our anger and grief toward action.

The fact is most of the gains we’ve made came during the two-year period when Michigan elected a pro-education majority in Lansing. To protect

our progress and advance the promise of public education, we must recommit to electing new friends to another “trifecta” this fall.

To lower health care expenses for public employees, we must elect state senators and representatives who will pass that bill in January — and a governor who will sign it into law.

By organizing our members and our communities, we can elect leaders dedicated to solving real issues facing our schools, from early childhood through higher education. *(Read more about how our members can lead this charge in this issue’s cover story on pages 8-11.)*

The public is with us. Recent polling shows 73% of voters, with majorities across every party, say Michigan educators do not have the support they need to help every student succeed.

Together, we can and will achieve what’s needed for students and educators alike — starting with victory in this fall’s critical election.

In Solidarity Always,



Chandra Madaffer
MEA President & CEO



Robert L. Callender
Vice President



Aaron Eling
Secretary-Treasurer



QUOTABLES

“Karen fights every day for our staff and students.”

Felicia Naimark, secretary treasurer of United Teachers of Flint, who presented MEA’s Paul Blewett Friend of Education Award to UTF President Karen Christian (pictured) in April. Christian led the unit through multiple crises to a celebrated contract.

Read more on page 29.

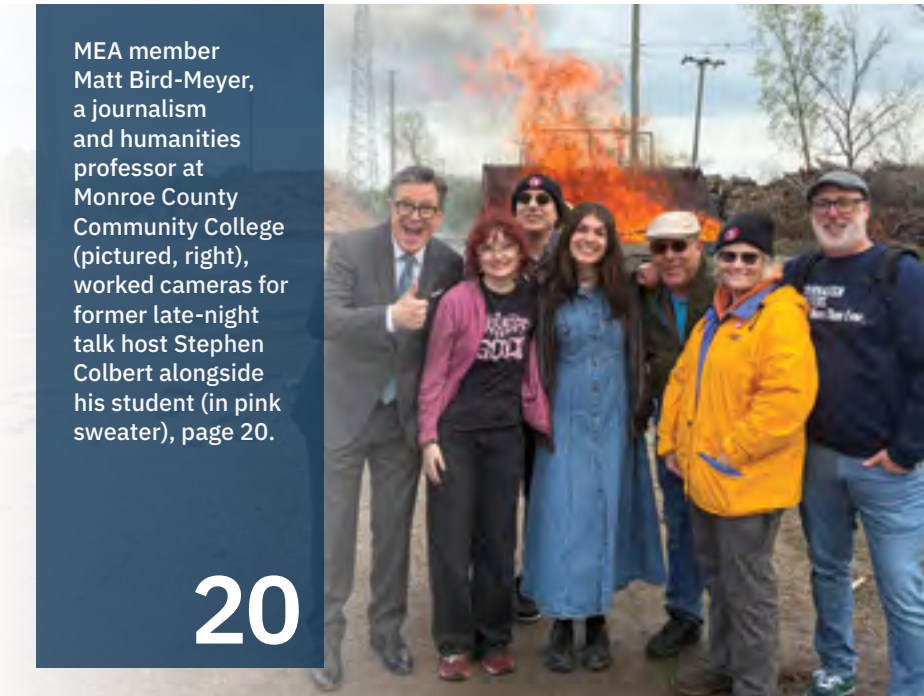
New MEA VP

Bob Callender began serving as vice president of the Michigan Education Association in July after more than two decades of union leadership and advocacy.

Over 26 years in Warren Consolidated Schools, Callender taught mostly high school chemistry and served as local president for the past 10 years, leading negotiations, representing members, implementing member engagement systems — and maintaining 99% active membership in one of MEA’s largest locals.

He began union service as a building representative in his first year of teaching and expanded to executive board member, PAC chair, crisis chair, bargaining team member and vice president. At the state level, he has served on the MEA Board of Directors, the Staff Retirement Board, and the MESSA Board.

Callender is committed to strengthening local associations, supporting members across every career stage, and ensuring MEA remains focused on delivering outstanding service and advocacy for educators throughout Michigan.



MEA member Matt Bird-Meyer, a journalism and humanities professor at Monroe County Community College (pictured, right), worked cameras for former late-night talk host Stephen Colbert alongside his student (in pink sweater), page 20.

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ON THE COVER: Amanda Walker, a teacher in Bay City, led an organizing effort to elect MEA’s recommended candidate in a special election for state Senate in May, pages 8-11. Photography by Miriam Garcia.

‘Special’ Teacher of the Year, page 12.

‘Mover’ librarian, page 14.

Elections matter, page 22.

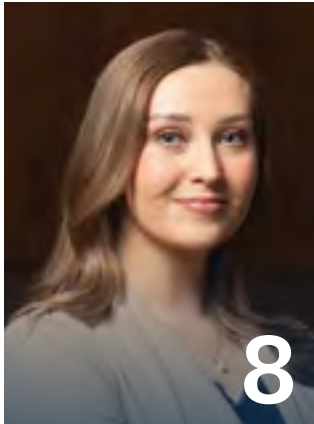
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For more in-depth story coverage with links and additional photos, visit mea.org/voice

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Special Report: Remembering history

Greta Brock comes from a family of educators and has spent 29 years working with special education students in Boyne City, where she is local union president. Nearing the end of her career, she wants newer educators to know the importance of elections.

Brock is part of a generation of teachers, now retiring or getting close, whose careers split into two distinct eras: before and after the tenure of Gov. Rick Snyder, who held office from 2011-19.

“For some younger people, it’s now been long enough ago that they don’t remember what happened with Snyder,” said Brock, who has served for 12 years on the MEA Board of Directors.

Huge budget cuts. Financial losses. Punitive evaluations tied to high-stakes testing. Attacks on collective bargaining and job protections. Privatization of support staff. Educators felt devalued and demoralized, spurring an educator shortage.

“Nobody was listening to teachers,” agreed Kelly Eddy, a 30-year social studies teacher and union president in Livonia. “It just felt like we couldn’t win, so a lot of people left.”

Since then, hard-won election victories by pro-public education candidates led to reversals of some of the most harmful Snyder-era policies, and school funding increased every year

since Gov. Gretchen Whitmer took office, Eddy said. But much work remains to be done.

“I worry our young people think it’s always going to keep improving — and it can, but we have to vote and put the right people in office.”

Read more in our special report on pages 22-28.



MEA communications awards

MEA’s communications staff took home several national awards for writing, design and digital entries, competing against other large-state affiliates at the State Education Association Communicators conference in June.

Campaigns: Digital Organizing — *Award of Excellence* / Michigan ESP Bill of Rights

Video: Short Form — *Award of Distinction* / Michigan ESP Bill of Rights: “One Job Should Be Enough”

Design: Graphic Element — *Award of Distinction* / Michigan ESP Bill of Rights

Design: Visual Storytelling — *Award of Distinction* / MEA Voice, “Veteran of combat and classroom earns rare recognition”

Design: Graphic Element — *Award of Excellence* / We Love Public Education

Writing: Feature Story — *Award of Excellence* / MEA Voice, “Veteran of combat and classroom earns rare recognition”

Writing: News Story — *Award of Excellence* / MEA Voice, “Educators prepare for literacy changes”

Writing: Commemoration/Tribute — *Award of Excellence* / MEA Voice, “Michigan educator known for ‘Shoe Club’ wins NEA Award for Teaching Excellence”

Writing: Opinion/Editorial — *Award of Distinction* / MEA Voice, “Hard history teaches if we listen”

QUOTABLES

“My office will not stand by while the (U.S.) Department of Education illegally shuts the door on Michigan students or jeopardizes the well-being of our communities.”

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, on a lawsuit jointly filed with Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and AGs or governors in 25 states, challenging a new USDOE rule that unlawfully limits access to federal student loans for students pursuing professional degrees in high-demand fields such as nursing and education.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

Conference draws aspiring educators

A few months before graduating from a class of 30 students in a small Lenawee County school district, high school senior **Rebecca Cox** spoke before hundreds of statewide peers gathered in Detroit for the MEA-sponsored Educators Rising Michigan conference.

An aspiring art teacher, Cox (pictured, right) had been picked to serve as a Michigan delegate to the national conference between winning consecutive state titles and competing at the national level.

“I chose to say ‘Yes’ to an opportunity that was given to me a year ago — an opportunity that has led me to meet new people and have new experiences,” she told the crowd at the spring conference held at Wayne State University. “This role has changed my life, and it can yours too.”

The goal of the Educators Rising Michigan conference, now starting its fourth year, is to value and empower students who are considering classroom careers, said MEA Organizer Annette Christiansen, who leads the state affiliate in Michigan.

“When participants look around and see adults who believe in them and the profession, we hope they’ll realize that we can all work together to ensure public education is strong and excellent for both students and educators,” Christiansen said.

The conference offers middle and high school students learning sessions taught by professionals and advocates on topics such as building relationships with students, coping with stress, choosing a college, and civic engagement.

In addition, students can compete in various presentation and teaching categories, including public speaking, interactive bulletin boards, children’s literature, lesson planning, and more — all judged by volunteer professionals and retirees.

Last spring, the number of students competing nearly doubled to 243 compared to 128 in 2025. More than 500 students attended the conference.

Madison Hatcher, a high school junior in the Teacher Cadet program in the



Taylor School District (left, pictured with teacher Heather Roberts), took a first-place award in the children’s literature category for the picture book she wrote, illustrated and presented before judges — *Atlas Finds her Calm*.

In addition to the Teacher Cadet class, Hatcher enjoys working with youngsters at an afterschool program better than a previous job in retail that left her stressed at the end of a shift.

“I don’t get that feeling of being drained when I come home from working with kids. My thought is I want to work more with these kids; I wish I was with them all day. That’s definitely a big motivator for me.”

The day ended with a moving speech from MEA member Corey Rosser, the 2025-26 Michigan Teacher of the Year, who has worked at Quest Alternative High School in Genesee County’s North Branch Area School District for 22 years.

Rosser encouraged the aspiring educators to strive for greatness despite challenges.

When you fail, don’t point the finger of blame, he advised. Learn, adapt, and improve. “You’re not going into teaching because it’s easy. You’re going into teaching because within you lies the ability to change lives.” ■



MESSA Wellness tools help school employees build healthier habits

A new school year is around the corner. With the impending everyday rush, your own wellness might become an afterthought.

August National Wellness Month and a good reminder — or an elbow nudge — to pause and take care of yourself.

MESSA offers wellness resources designed with Michigan public school employees in mind, including fitness challenges, Wellness Wednesdays and the MESSA Worksite Wellness Program. Whether you're already a MESSA member or you're learning more about what MESSA offers, these tools reflect our belief that the people who care for Michigan's students deserve care, too.

Wellness is multidimensional, it includes physical, emotional and environmental health. Knowing where to start can feel overwhelming, but MESSA Health Promotion Consultant Rhonda Jones has practical strategies to help.

- Move your body daily. Go for a 20-minute walk, a bike ride or work in your garden. Choose an activity you enjoy. You'll be more engaged and likely to stick with it.

- Prioritize sleep. Proper sleep is the foundation of wellness — it fuels energy, mental clarity and a strong immune system. Try to keep a consistent bedtime and wake time, even on weekends.
- Focus on nutrition. Eat fewer processed foods, stay hydrated and add more nutrient dense foods to your meals. Good nutrition can help maintain good nerve and brain health, which supports mental health and well-being.
- Invest in connection. Join a healthy cooking class or consider joining a group fitness class. Both can help improve physical health while creating opportunities to connect with others in your community.

"Wellness is not just the absence of illness or disease, but a state of physical, mental and social well-being," Jones said. "It's more than just not catching a cold. Optimal wellness affects everything from our energy and productivity to how we manage and spend money."

Putting wellness to work

Jones regularly hosts virtual MESSA worksite wellness conferences where members can learn about fitness, good eating habits and meditation practices. She also helps members start worksite wellness programs, which promote activities to reduce health risks and improve healthy behavior.

"Public health officials are always telling us to eat healthy, exercise and manage stress, but most adults are at work eight to 12 hours a day," Jones said. "Where do you find time? So, the solution for most adults is creating opportunities for awareness, education and health behavior modeling and practice during the workday."

MESSA Wellness

Find fitness challenges, Wellness Pros information, worksite wellness support and more at messa.org/wellness.



Latest News from Lansing

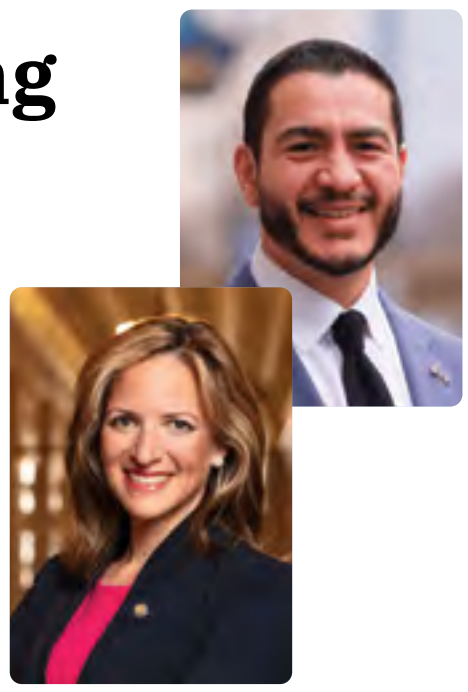
Benson & El-Sayed recommended for Governor & U.S. Senate

Jocelyn Benson and Abdul El-Sayed won their Aug. 4 primary elections for governor and U.S. Senate, respectively. Both were confirmed as MEA's recommended candidates for the November general election the following day based on strong interviews with MEA's Statewide Screening & Recommendation Committee earlier in 2026.

MEA supports candidates based on their stances on education and labor

issues — and these two candidates are dedicated to ensuring that every Michigan student receives a world-class public education and that every educator has the support and respect needed to do their job.

Visit meavotes.org to help elect these and other pro-education candidates.



We won't give up

In the wake of the veto of House Bill 6058 — legislation that would have addressed rising health care costs for educators and other public employees — MEA and allies have vowed to continue advocating to address this critical issue.

The bill and eight others were withheld from the governor for 18 months by House Speaker Matt Hall (R-Richmond Township). Before the veto, Senate Democrats won a ruling from the Michigan Supreme Court to have the bills transmitted as required in the state Constitution.

In late July, Democratic lawmakers reintroduced and committed to passing the bills. Jocelyn Benson, MEA's recommended gubernatorial candidate, said as governor she would sign the bills into law, "and I'll take on anyone, no matter how rich or powerful, who stands in the way."

Read more and take action at mea.org/fixhealthcare.

Good investments, troubling trends

The 2026-27 state education budget passed on July 3 with modest increases — \$250 (to \$10,300) per student for the foundation allowance and 1% for community colleges and higher education.

It includes weighted funding to ensure students with additional needs have funding to match, and weights increase by 20% next year.

Funding continues for educator compensation increases (\$150 million in "271" bonus money), free school meals, extra transportation funding for large geographic districts, student teacher stipends and future educator scholarships. Funding was approved for literacy programs, declining enrollment, post-secondary scholarships and more.

Find more analysis — including district-by-district impacts, district requirements to receive safety funding, and the disturbing trend of using School Aid Funding for other purposes — at mea.org/legislation.

'Science of Reading' K-5 training

As part of the early July budget compromise, bills passed mandating science of reading training for K-5 educators over the next five years (HB 5697), and a corresponding inclusion of those concepts in teacher preparation programs (HB 5646).

Changes to the bill in the state Senate make the training subject to local bargaining and require the Michigan Department of Education to exempt non-reading teachers, select at least two vendors, and collaborate with statewide associations, such as MEA, on implementation.

While this legislation likely needs continued modification and funding in coming years, it improves upon a version passed by the House.

Stay tuned to mea.org/legislation for details.

ELECTION 2026

We can do this!

Working together, we can help elect candidates who believe in public education

*By Brenda Ortega
MEA Voice Editor*

When MEA member Amanda Walker took a lead role organizing Saginaw-Midland-Bay City educators to vote in a spring special election for a vacant state senate seat, the goal was to energize everyone — but especially members who had been politically disengaged.

Walker and the team exceeded their own expectations.

“It was amazing to see people who were getting involved for the first time, who saw that it was valuable and necessary, who were willing to put in the work,” said Walker, a third-grade teacher in Bay City who starts her 13th year in the classroom this fall.

Their efforts helped MEA’s recommended candidate Chedrick Greene — a Marine combat veteran and Saginaw fire captain — secure a massive 20-point Democratic victory in a purple district that Kamala Harris won by less than one point in the 2024 presidential race.

Greene’s election filled a seat vacated by Kristen McDonald-Rivet when she became a U.S. Congresswoman and returned Democrats to a 20-18 majority in the state Senate. Greene is now seeking a full term in the position this fall.

After winning a race viewed as a Midwestern bellwether, Greene said, “We delivered this decisive victory by listening and speaking to the things keeping everyday people up at night — worries about affordability, safety, and freedom.”

But for Walker, who serves as vice president of her Bay City union, what felt like the biggest win of all was educators turning out for campaign events and volunteer shifts — some multiple times — because they’re recognizing the gravity of this historical moment and quietly stepping up.

“Educators really care about the work they do, and they really care about students, and they know the harmful effects of all of the anti-public education rhetoric and legislation we’ve been watching.”

In recent years, she said, educators have seen accelerating attacks on public education as far-right groups target school board meetings and elections, voucher schemes proliferate nationwide, and the Trump administration dismantles the federal Department of Education.

“I do think there’s been a concerted effort to dismantle public education by defunding, by diverting funds to private schools, by tearing down teachers and accusing them of all sorts of nonsense. People see it, and they feel it, and they don’t like it.

“They want to do something because they know the work they do is meaningful and valuable and they want to preserve that.”

Veteran school employees have seen the difference elections can make — shown in recent funding and policy improvements

made after we helped to elect a pro-public education governor and Legislature. *(Read more of that story in our special report on pages 22-28.)*

“Decisions at the local level, in Lansing, or at the federal level all impact what we do in the classroom, if kids are getting fed or not, if we have quality books and curriculum, if working conditions are good.

“Teaching opened my eyes to how personal politics can be when you live it every single day.”

Education experts

With just eight weeks to build momentum in a tightly competitive district, Walker assembled an organizing team of five other educators: Anne Holey and Carissa Lough from Bay City, Ana Geib and Sarah Valley from Midland, and Crystal Swanson from Saginaw.

They started by surveying MEA members in their locals to gauge current political awareness and involvement, along with ways in which people might be willing to join the effort. Survey respondents said they didn’t want to door-knock but preferred gatherings in-person.

“A lot of responses on the survey were people saying, ‘I don’t know enough to get involved,’” Walker said. “So the question was how do we make it accessible and comfortable for people of all levels to expand their advocacy work?”

The highest-rated campaign activity from the survey was a candidate meet-and-greet, so the organizers quickly put one together and held conversations to encourage attendance. Their message was simple, Walker said.

“What we talked about a lot is you don’t need to be an expert in everything politics and policy. You’re an expert in your classroom, and you’re an expert on your students. You’re an expert in your building, and you’re an expert on your experiences as an educator.

“We are the education experts. But if we don’t have a seat at the table to talk about those issues, then our interests won’t be represented.”

At a meet-and-greet early in the campaign, candidate Chedrick Greene listened to educators’ experiences, needs and concerns.

With the help of MEA Political Organizer Jessica Lumbreras, the team used polling data to choose a meeting location where they hoped to raise voter turnout and awareness of Greene, then used digital tools to track signups and send event reminders.

The meet-and-greet was held at a brewery in Saginaw. A member new to political activism opened the event by sharing her story, followed by brief remarks from Greene, but mostly the candidate sat with people and listened to their concerns, needs and ideas.

“That was the best part — just him sitting at tables and talking to people,” Walker said, “because what we wanted our members to say is this is what we’re dealing with, and this is what we do that’s really great, and this is what we need to make our work even better.”

For Greene, born and raised in Saginaw, those kinds of conversations were the best part of campaigning. He talked about his background and values — 27 years in the Saginaw fire department, 30 years in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves, two-time Iraq War veteran.

A lifelong believer in the power of public education to expand opportunities, he had been honored to receive the MEA recommendation from a local screening committee of members who interviewed candidates. Now he wanted to listen.



“Besides me introducing myself, I wanted to hear from everyday people who make our communities strong, the workers that are doing everything and still can’t get ahead,” he said. “I asked them to give me their thoughts on what they want in an elected leader.”

“I asked, ‘What concerns you? What are you looking for?’ And all I did was listen.”

After that success, the team responded to survey requests to tie volunteer work

Finally, member-volunteers made hundreds of phone calls and sent thousands of texts and emails to voters from a phone banking event combined with mutual aid — participants brought personal hygiene items to be donated to the Saginaw Veterans Administration hospital.

Educators who showed up became empowered to communicate with people they knew about why the election mattered and Greene was the right choice —



“Craftivism” combined work and fun, such as painting potted plants and postcard writing (left). People crave real-life connection (below).

Make a difference

The organizing effort was hard work and a team product, Walker stressed.

“My group was amazing, and they did so much good work that I hope people feel inspired by it. You don’t need to be the smartest political person in the world to do something like this. It can be replicated in other places.”

Just as teaching third grade lets her make a positive difference in the lives of children and families every day, becoming an activist for the profession satisfies a desire to make the world a better place for young people to inhabit.

“I love teaching third graders because I get little kids and help them become big kids,” she said. “It’s a year where they go from being concrete thinkers to abstract thinkers. A whole new world opens up to them, and it’s an honor to be the person who helps them navigate that period.”

“The job has meaning, and I have to have that in my life. And I think I engage in political action for the same reason — I have to do something that makes a difference.”

In the first few years of her career in Bay City Public Schools, where she grew up, Walker did not join the union. She didn’t know much about unions or workers’ rights, but she listened to more experienced colleagues who were not only members but engaged and active.

“They were telling me all about what the union does and what it can do for me and what it does for us collectively, and I’m like ‘This is my thing. Why didn’t I join right away?’”

Ever since then, she has made up for lost time, serving in various roles in her local union and recently getting elected to a seat on the MEA Board of Directors.

“If I had to come up with a take-away from my story, it’s that you can get involved no matter what — and now is always a good time to do it.” ■

for every policy and dollar that helps hardworking men and women build better lives in Bay, Midland, and Saginaw counties and sets our kids up for brighter futures.”

It’s important to recognize the exponential effects of joining one voice with many and building out from there, said Lumbreras, the MEA political organizer. “Educators sometimes forget how much they’re valued and respected in the middle of all the noise,” she added.

“More than ever before, in this time of billionaire dark money and AI deepfakes, people are looking to trusted voices to get information and to build up their real-life understanding, connections and community.”

“Educators sometimes forget how much they’re valued and respected in the middle of all the noise.”

with something fun and crafty by planning a postcards and potted-plant-painting event. “I thought it was a little different, but the room was packed and people really liked it,” Walker said.

Everyone went home with a potted plant they decorated, and some won prize drawings based on how many postcards they hand-wrote encouraging fellow MEA members to show up to the polls on May 5, vote for Greene, and talk to friends and family about the election.

Next the team organized turnout for a rally with Greene and guest Gov. Whitmer, and Walker was gratified by the result: “It was really cool, because MEA had the most people in attendance at the rally among the many different labor groups that were there.”

a tool called “relational organizing” that builds power from collective strength.

“We got responses back from teachers that were like, ‘I’ve never voted; what do I need to know?’” Walker said. “Or they said, ‘Can you help me find my polling location?’ On election day, I loved getting texts saying, ‘I voted today!’ Oh my gosh, I felt like a proud mom.”

After winning by such an impressive margin, Greene said: “I’m excited to go to Lansing to fight



Connected by policy

MEA member Amanda Walker first got to know newly elected state Sen. Chedrick Greene (D-Saginaw) before he was a candidate for the 35th-District seat in a special election in May.

A teacher in Bay City, Walker and Greene — a fire captain in Saginaw — both participated in a one-year, multi-partisan public policy program at Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU) that trains citizens from the Great Lakes Bay region to be effective change agents.

“Our group had been meeting once a month for about six months when he announced his candidacy, and I knew he was a great person who cares a lot,” Walker said. “He’s knowledgeable, he listens, and he strongly supports educators.”

After a panel of local educators screened candidates and recommended Greene, Walker led an organizing effort to turn out the education vote.

Walker and Greene were part of the 2025 cohort of SVSU’s Henry Marsh Institute for Public Policy, which led to many discussions about community advocacy, Greene said. “It meant a lot to have her, someone I consider a friend, to step up and say, ‘I’m behind you.’” ■



SPECIAL EDUCATOR IS MICHIGAN'S TOP TEACHER

By Brenda Ortega
MEA Voice Editor



A diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) explained why MEA member **Erik Meerschaert** couldn't read in second grade. Now the Lake Orion special education teacher points to his neurological difference as a power that has shaped his success.

Known for his shining positivity and leadership in providing inclusive opportunities for all students, Meerschaert is the 2026-27 Michigan Teacher of the Year (MTOY).

"As you can see, I'm always moving," he said of his high energy while sitting for an interview. "How it was described to me back then is that I didn't have engine coolant, so my engine was always running but I was thinking about everything other than what I was supposed to be focusing on."

His teacher recognized the problem, alerted his parents, and helped him overcome reading challenges along with an outside tutor. Now that experience helps him understand and relate to his students, who are cognitively impaired.

"I've been in that spot that so many of our students are in, where you're expected to know how to do something, and you just don't know how, and then you end up trying to find different ways to hide," he said.

"It allows me to be as positive as possible with all of the students, no matter what kind of situation we're in. And taking the time to focus on those positives — rather than the hardships — really helps."

A 17-year special educator who joined Lake Orion Community Schools seven years ago, Meerschaert is known and loved building-wide for bringing different groups of people together in numerous ways across the school year, Principal Daniel Haas said.

"He's a culture maker; he's magic. I want to underscore how many phenomenal educators are out there in the state of Michigan, and Mr. M is just a no-brainer for this (MTOY) honor. He's one of these beautiful people that, for him, the reward is the work."

Meerschaert teaches the school's highest-need students, most of whom are severely autistic. He also coaches Unified Sports teams in varsity basketball and soccer, plus a Unified Robotics team, all of which bring together students with and without disabilities for league competition.

Last fall he launched a girls' varsity flag football team, which he coaches, plus he helps to advise the peer-to-peer Sources of Strength student mental

health program. In his classroom, he also hosts general education students who sign up to work with his students in adapted electives.

"Out of that group, we're able to see many who have decided they want to pursue a job in special education," he said.

His greatest joy is bringing people together for opportunities that might not otherwise be available because it builds understanding, connection and community when students of different backgrounds and abilities interact.

Unified athletes not only come together in practices and games but in the school's hallways and lunchroom, he said. "Being able to socialize and communicate and understand people who are different than yourself is one of those true life skills for all of our students."

Since launching the basketball program in his first year in the district, the number of Unified partner athletes has grown from eight to 45.

"Our students here have really bought into the idea behind Unified sports, which is to practice inclusion in a way that is not always tied to academics but goes more importantly to the social piece of the equation, which is so meaningful to everyone involved."

He loves creating conditions to spur growth, independence and well-being in his students, and witnessing that change over time "fuels my fire and is kind of my passion here," he added.

Meerschaert comes from a family of educators. His grandfather was a science teacher in Berkley for almost 30 years, and his mother worked in a center-based program at the

Macomb Intermediate School District as an occupational therapist.

After graduating from high school, he worked as a substitute paraeducator at the ISD, which he enjoyed. In his first year at Western Michigan University, Meerschaert pursued secondary English Language Arts, influenced by a beloved Troy high school teacher.

He changed his focus after realizing, "Special education was still calling my name, and it is an area that needs more people."

Indeed, having a special education teacher selected as Michigan Teacher of the Year is significant as severe shortages persist in classrooms across the state and nation, Superintendent Heidi Mercer said.

"The work that they do — not only during the school day but beyond, and not only with our students but with families — is incredible," Mercer said. "There is such a shortage, and we need people like Erik. His passion, his dedication, his love for students is amazing."

He advises aspiring and early career educators to spend lots of time in classrooms and develop ways to stay connected with the passion that originally brought them to the profession, even on the hard days or during hard times.

Meerschaert is admired by students throughout the high school because they see his commitment in action every day, said Lake Orion Education Association President Lucy Logsdon, a math teacher at the high school.

"One example is in March every year, we have a Unified basketball game that's played at a pep assembly and all the students watch it, and kids from the other school district come and cheer on their team," Logsdon said. "It's one of the most positive events that we have here."

Positivity is the cornerstone of his teaching approach, Meerschaert said. He believes in celebrating all sorts of successes — large and small, inside and outside the classroom — and approaching challenges with a sense of calm and patience.

"I'm a firm believer that the use of positivity can go a long way in helping motivate a student or an athlete to do things that they didn't think were possible before."

He looks forward to bringing that philosophy to his tenure as Michigan

Teacher of the Year, highlighting the wonderful work and success stories of special educators across the state that too often go overlooked, he said.

As teacher of the year, Meerschaert will represent Michigan and sit as a non-voting member of the State Board of Education, acting as a liaison between educators and policymakers.

Now his own son is talking about joining the family profession. "If there's anything that I can do to help further the field of education over my time as the Michigan Teacher of the Year, then I'm going to try my best," he said.

"Teaching is a hard job, but it is the most rewarding thing that anybody can do. It's definitely one of the most rewarding things that I've done in my life." ■



"I'm a firm believer that the use of positivity can go a long way in helping motivate a student or an athlete to do things that they didn't think were possible before."

Librarian co-builds movement for ‘Young Teen Lit’ category

In true librarian fashion, MEA member Christina Chatel had a nagging question and set about digging for an answer: *“Where are the books written with the 13- to 15-year-old in mind?”*

As a middle school library media specialist in Troy, Chatel reads several dozen books a year and talks with hundreds of young people to learn their reading interests and tastes.

Lately she noticed an accelerating trend: Students were coming into the library looking for shorter, edgier, faster-moving books with appealing covers that don’t look childish. “I started getting frustrated, not having a lot of options that were appealing to kids.

“Post-pandemic, it seemed like middle schoolers’ tastes had changed — or maybe they were more vocal about what they wanted.”

In summer 2024, Chatel wrote an open letter to book publishers which was posted on *Teen Librarian Toolbox* and took off on social media with more than 100,000 views and hundreds of likes, comments and shares.

In it, she urged publishers to produce books around 150-200 pages long with action and provocative themes, featuring diverse characters in eighth to tenth grade.

Right now, she says, “Every book has an 11- or 12-year-old character in middle grade, and then there’s no other age until they get characters that are 17 or 18 — it’s crazy!”

Soon Chatel learned a Georgia school librarian, Marcia Kochel, was advocating the same thing. The pair joined

forces and created a name for the book category they want: Young Teen Lit.

They developed six criteria to distinguish their category from current ones that skew too young or too old — middle grade and young adult. “Young Teen” bridged the gap.

“Our first criteria says that these books should be edgy and complex. We are not looking for high-low titles. We are not ‘clean teen.’ We think our middle schoolers can handle tough topics, and that’s what hooks them. But we want it to be developmentally appropriate.”

Next came a logo, website and social media to promote the idea along with existing books the two librarians consider examples and good reads. “We hope our army will buy these books, and that will show publishers there is a market; we desperately want to buy these books.”

Chatel and Kochel have built a following at youngteenlit.com and Instagram [@young_teenlit](https://www.instagram.com/young_teenlit). In May, they were named 2026 Movers & Shakers by the venerable *Library Journal*.

Chatel has worked at Boulan Park and Smith middle schools for 13 years. For a decade before that, she was a high school English teacher in the district while earning a master’s degree in Library Science and school media specialist certification.



Find Christina Chatel on IG @young_teenlit.

She calls it “the best job in the world,” sparking kids’ love of books; boosting skills in reading, information gathering and source citation; and developing digital literacy and citizenship.

Chatel is president-elect of the Michigan Association of School Librarians (MASL) and was named the 2025 School Librarian of the Year, among other awards and honors.

She and Kochel are trying to get major bookstores, such as Barnes & Noble, to create a Young Teen Lit section to better serve young readers. They lead the [#YoungTeenLit](https://www.instagram.com/young_teenlit) movement “on our own dime and our own time, so it’s definitely a passion project,” Chatel said.

“We’ve heard from teachers, from parents, from booksellers who all feel the same way. Now there’s some substance behind our movement, and I feel like we’re finally starting to get somewhere.” ■



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Fraser educator wins MEA Art Show

A compelling charcoal drawing titled “Eyedentity,” selected as Best in Show at this year’s 62nd MEA/MAEA Art Acquisitions Purchase Exhibition, was inspired by a Social Security application, says the Fraser art teacher who won the top award.

MEA member Andrew Monroe said he created the artwork after filling out a form to get his newborn baby a Social Security card more than 20 years ago. Although his son is biracial, the form required one selection from a list of racial categories as identification, Monroe said.

“I was blown away — even in 2005 — that the federal government still had such an antiquated idea of racial identity,” Monroe said. “In my personal work, I want to communicate things that conceptually have meaning. I would consider my artwork like social realism, drawing attention to issues of identity.”

The winning piece considers “assigned identities and what box we are put into, but also the connotations of those and how we’re viewed by others. Then there’s the personal identities within us that have nothing to do with what we look like or our name, skin color, religion — any of that.

“Our individual identity is more of who we are and who we decide to be versus what we’re told about who we are and who we’re assigned to be.”

Frank Juárez, the award-winning Wisconsin artist, art educator, and art curator who juried this year’s exhibition, said he chose “Eyedentity” for the top

honor because the provocative imagery and the subject’s powerful gaze prompt reflection about identity and humanity.

“This charcoal drawing is a reminder that we still have a lot of work to do as a society to not judge a book by its cover and to continue to be empathetic, understanding, and hopeful for a better tomorrow,” Juárez said.

Pieces selected for the show feature a variety of processes, genres and subject matter. A reception and awards ceremony was held in July at MEA Headquarters.

An organizing committee of member-educators volunteer to plan the show each year. “We commend all artists for their creativity, dedication, and vision,” the committee said. “Your work continues to inspire and elevate the role of the arts in education.”

This was the first year entering for Monroe, the Best in Show winner, who’s been teaching art for 20 years — currently at three elementary schools in Fraser. He aspired to teach art ever since he experienced a life-changing art educator as a third grader in Charlotte Public Schools.

“When Mr. Jury came in on his little art cart fresh out of Michigan State University, my whole world changed. I wasn’t very good at math or anything like that, but I was really good at art, and he recognized that in me and



A charcoal drawing by MEA member Andrew Monroe won Best in Show at this year’s MEA/MAEA Art Acquisitions Purchase Exhibition.

encouraged me, and I just knew that was my calling.”

Monroe’s teaching philosophy is all about process — focusing on getting to know students and using humor to build rapport. He rewards effort and creativity over finished products.

“Everybody is born with the capacity to create art in some way. Of course, there are different levels of that, and my job isn’t to try to force people to love art. But I want to provide an experience that people enjoy, not just in the creation of things, but our experience together.”

Monroe holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in fine arts from Eastern Michigan University with K-12 art teaching certification.

View the online gallery of art and other award winners at mea.org/art. ■

‘Professor’ worked Colbert show ‘Only in Monroe’



Never as a journalist in metropolitan Kansas City, nor an assistant professor at a mid-size public university in Missouri, did MEA member **Matt Bird-Meyer** get a kiss from comedian and late-night talk host Stephen Colbert.

Bird-Meyer notched that unbelievable experience after becoming a professor of journalism and humanities at Monroe County Community College (MCCC) in the southeast corner of Michigan.

He served as a camera operator in Colbert’s uproarious guest hosting of a local community-access show, “Only in Monroe,” which first aired on the day following the final episode of “Late Night with Stephen Colbert” on CBS in May.

“It’s been an excruciating 23 hours without being on TV,” Colbert quipped to open the show that featured Monroe-specific jokes and bits, plus Michigan-native celebrities. “I’m grateful to be able to be here on Monroe Community Media before they also get acquired by Paramount.”

‘Colbert just kissed me. Oh my god.’

Dubbed “The Professor” in the episode — since viewed by millions — Bird-Meyer (mostly) stayed off camera, stage-right of the Emmy-winning comedian, including for the kiss that came after Colbert and the show’s two regular hosts ingested vodka shots and helium.

“He planted one; he absolutely did,” Bird-Meyer confirmed. “He came over and I just blacked out. I’m like, what is happening? Sure enough. And then after the show was done, I texted my wife, ‘Colbert just kissed me. Oh my god.’”

A few times, as Colbert improvised, Bird-Meyer appeared in view for a second or two. “I was wearing a flat cap and blue sweatshirt, and briefly I was on camera stifling a laugh. I became a doorman, which was totally unplanned. I didn’t even know when to open the door.”

Bird-Meyer got invited for the gig because he regularly uses the studio at Monroe Community Media (MCM) to teach video production to his journalism students. The nonprofit, housed at City Hall, provides media education and services in the county.

Creative Director Genevieve Benson, just 18 months into a role at MCM after finishing a fine arts degree at The City University of New York, said she wanted Bird-Meyer and a student to help make the show in keeping with the organization’s mission.

“Our role is to teach educators like Matt, and also community members, how to use the space so they can create their own shows and media,” Benson said.

The Colbert surprise was top-secret, so Bird-Meyer offered 10 advanced students a chance to participate in a “really cool project.” From three who volunteered, Maggie Robinson — editor of *The Agora*, the student newspaper that Bird-Meyer advises — drew the short straw.

Robinson “freaked out” when given a non-disclosure agreement to sign with the project’s details, Bird-Meyer said, adding he was also grateful and honored to be invited as an educator.

“I bring students into the studio and give them hands-on experience using the cameras, the switcher, the soundboard, mics — all of that stuff. But here’s a professional, commercial show with a full crew coming in. Here’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

Bird-Meyer never could have predicted it. After writing and editing at newspapers around Kansas City, earning advanced degrees and breaking into state university ranks, he came to MCCC for the strong union contract — salary, benefits, guaranteed working conditions.

Now he and his student were two of four camera operators, including an MCM staffer and another contracted by Colbert’s show. Late Show Director Yvonne De Mare and Emmy-winning Technical Director Karen Obel Cape patiently guided the process, Bird-Meyer said.

“I can’t say enough about Yvonne and Karen in the control room. They were so professional and they were so willing to help and teach. And Maggie — my student — was soaking it all in, learning new things, making friends with the crew.”

Stars are born

This wasn’t the first time Colbert guest hosted “Only in Monroe.” He also borrowed the mic in 2015, just before launching on CBS, so it was fitting to return for the Late Show’s ending.

“It’s been 11 years since the last time we sat down together; what did you do?” Colbert asked original hosts Michelle Baumann and Miss America 1988, Kaye Lani Rae Rafko-Wilson, both nurses in the community who recently relaunched “Only in Monroe” after a hiatus.

They talked grandchildren and discussed health struggles in helium-altered voices, downed shots and compared Bigfoot mating calls, then phoned Colbert’s replacement in the 11:30 p.m. time slot on CBS — Byron Allen — to ask about guest hosting his new show.

Actor and Chelsea resident Jeff Daniels appeared and made his favorite sandwich of peanut butter, potato chips and barbecue sauce. Choking and mumbling through a dry mouthful, Colbert joked, “The one thing I would’ve changed — I would’ve had a drink of any kind here. I’m on the edge of panic.”

Bird-Meyer’s job was to keep his camera trained on Colbert’s musical sidekick/straight-man, Jack White, the Detroit-born Hall-of-Fame frontman of The White Stripes. But during rehearsal of a “community calendar” segment, the professor got an idea and pitched it.

He asked if it would be funny for the professor to correct Colbert and Daniels on their pronunciation of a word, he said, “And Colbert is like, ‘You could try.’” Bird-Meyer screwed up his courage to do it but lost his nerve when the time came.

That’s when Colbert turned and asked, cameras rolling, “Now, Professor — you had something you wanted to add here?”

He obliged, Colbert snapped back, and “It was awesome,” Bird-Meyer said.

Beyond the laughs, Colbert’s return to Monroe was meaningful. His show’s cancellation is widely seen as appeasing



President Donald Trump — upset by the comedian’s jokes — to win federal approval of a merger by CBS parent company Paramount.

“People are discontented with these enormous media conglomerates controlling all of the content,” said Benson, MCM creative director. “That’s why it was so awesome that Stephen came to this public access center.”

“It was his way of doubling down to say — not only am I going to go off with a bang, but I’m also going to go to this local community station that is the antithesis to CBS.”

Benson took a star turn on the show as an unscripted comic player in several bits, called away from her office — where she was working on a budget — to walk into scenes in progress.

“I couldn’t watch it while it was unfolding, which actually helped because I was so confused every time I entered the room,” she said, laughing.

At one point, handed two chili dogs from competing restaurants for Colbert and White to taste-test, Benson quickly forgot which was which. “They told me right before I entered the room. They were like,

From left: Stephen Colbert, Maggie Robinson, former MCCC Agora editor; Jerry Gysin, MCM radio operations manager; Genevieve Benson, MCM creative director; Brian Burchette, MCM media coordinator; Karin Koek, MCM finance and development coordinator; and Matthew Bird-Meyer. (Photo courtesy of Matt Bird-Meyer)

this is Vince’s; this is Monroe Original. But I have the memory of a goldfish!”

Bird-Meyer and Benson said Colbert was kind off-camera, joking like an old friend, showing photos of a French fry topped with ketchup to ask if it looked like comedian Conan O’Brien.

What is painful are the 200+ crew out of work for no good reason, they agreed.

“It was breaking my heart talking to them, and they’re saying, ‘Hardly any of us know what we’re going to do,’” Bird-Meyer said.

“It’s a tragedy the Late Show was canceled,” Benson added. “All of those folks are so talented, and we loved working with them. It’s such a diverse crew, and so many women in powerful positions. I’m hoping there’s work out there for them, and if not, then they can work with us.” ■

ELECTIONS MATTER

Stories by Brenda Ortega, MEA Voice Editor

Remember history to avoid repeating

MEA-Retired member **Jo Bird** started her teaching career in Zeeland in 1974, formally retired in 2006, and subbed for a dozen more years before finally leaving the classroom. But she never stopped being an activist.

Over decades, Bird has devoted her time and energy to many causes, through good times and bad times, despite wins or losses — no issue more than public education.

Her faith in God and human decency keeps her going, she says: “I still believe more people in this country are decent human beings than aren’t. But no matter what — I know the difference between right and wrong, and I’ll never stop fighting for what’s right.”

The struggle to protect and strengthen public schools doesn’t begin or end with one political leader or election but must be sustained, she says. Bird ramped up her advocacy in the early 1990s when Republican Gov. John Engler enacted laws to push charter schools and privatization.

Later Gov. Rick Snyder sped up Engler’s anti-union, anti-public schools agenda after winning the 2010 election, part of a Republican sweep across many states that netted the GOP six additional governorships and flipped 17 legislative chambers nationwide.

One part of the GOP plan across the country involved redrawing state voting maps, based on the 2010 U.S. Census, to advantage Republicans in future state elections.

So-called “gerrymandering” of maps in Michigan resulted in the 2012 election for the state House of Representatives in which Democrats won 54% of the total vote — compared to 46% for Republicans — yet Republicans won 59 seats to Democrats’ 51.

A similar result occurred in 2016, with a nearly even statewide vote total (49.2%–49.13%) leading to a 16-seat advantage for Republicans.

Ultimately in 2018, voter frustration in Michigan led to passage of a groundbreaking statewide ballot measure creating an independent citizens’ panel to draw non-partisan maps. *(Read more about what happened after that change was implemented on page 9.)*

But by then, much damage had been done to the state’s public schools. Snyder presided over massive education funding cuts, attacks on unions’ collective bargaining rights, financial losses for educators — including changes to retirement and health care — and more.

“Everything was about money with Snyder, nothing about people,” said Bird, who served for 25 years as chair of her local union’s Political Action Committee (PAC) and remains president of her Ottawa County MEA-Retired chapter. “Things are better now under Gov. Whitmer.”

The Snyder years gutted morale among educators, says MEA member **Tim Sullivan**, a 25-year fourth-grade teacher in the Wayne-Westland School District who retired in June. *(Read more about Sullivan’s story on the next page.)*

Last year, local union leaders in Wayne County surveyed educators in eight school districts to see what they recalled about Snyder’s tenure. “Many of them talked about feeling like they were the enemy,” Sullivan said, “like the state turned on them.” But a third or more of survey respondents were newer educators who didn’t remember those hard times at all, so Sullivan and other delegates to the 2025 MEA Representative Assembly passed a motion requiring MEA to inform members of that history and the importance of elections.

“Our early-career educators need to understand; what they thought was good can go bad real fast.” ■



Education: ‘a right of Democracy’

Thirty years ago, MEA member **Carl Lowe** was a decorated Division I college athlete with a pre-law degree when he chose to become a history teacher.

Lowe drew inspiration from Richard Gordon, a history teacher and track coach at John Glenn High School in Wayne-Westland where he was a star athlete and returned to teach. Lowe remembers as a youth asking Gordon, why teach a boring subject about old dead people?

“Coach said, ‘If you can teach history, you can teach yourself to go anywhere in the world, be successful, and in so doing know how to treat people the way they should be treated.’”

A two-time All-American track athlete and Hall of Fame inductee at Eastern Michigan University, Lowe leads the district’s National History Day program where students design historical

research projects for local, regional, state and national competitions.

In January, Lowe was awarded by the Michigan Reading Association for building literacy “not as an isolated skill, but as the essential gateway through which students engage with the world.”

But in 2011, a shift in state policies and rhetoric began to drive pay cuts and demoralization for school employees, which deepened his union involvement. Educators began to have “the feeling of always swimming but you cannot get to the top,” he said.

The union offered emergency assistance, connection, and advocacy. Now a building rep and bargaining team member, Lowe said a contract win in 2019, restoring teachers to salary-schedule steps

reflecting years of service, helped to stem a flood of educators leaving the district.

Yet he routinely fields calls from young educators thinking of changing careers and has seen 10 go in recent years. Pay and benefits still have not kept pace with growing demands, he said.

“Education is a necessity — it’s a right of American democracy — and our society needs to go back to where we act like it is.” ■



(Photo of Carl Lowe and students at competition in Maryland courtesy of Raphael Talisman, National History Day)

Educators took cuts personally

To educate younger MEA members, veteran Wayne-Westland teacher **Tim Sullivan** made a video of news clips from 2011 when Gov. Rick Snyder and a Republican-controlled Legislature cut \$1 billion out of the state education budget.

“They talked about the cuts as ‘shared sacrifice,’ but then they also gave businesses a \$1.4 billion tax break,” Sullivan said. “They filled the (budget) hole on the backs of public employees in terms of salaries, pensions and health care — nothing about the sacrifice was shared.”

In following years, new laws stripped educators of collective bargaining rights, and the state used controversial Emergency Manager laws to threaten and take over financially distressed districts.

In Wayne-Westland schools, where Sullivan grew up and returned to teach, the union took a 5% pay cut and four-year pay freeze to avoid imposition of an emergency manager as the district absorbed a crushing \$470 per-pupil loss in funding.

An 18-year bargaining team member, Sullivan said, “Not only did I take that pay cut; my wife works in the same district, so we got hit twice. And we had two children, (ages) four and one at the time. We thought we had these good salaries, and we would continue working up the ladder.”

Now Sullivan can’t look away as Snyder spends millions of his personal fortune on the 2026 election to promote his ideas for “fixing” what he calls “failing” public schools. “There’s this odd obsession I have with Snyder, because what he did was so personal to me.”

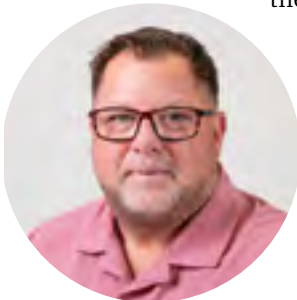


The 25-year fourth-grade teacher retired in June, in part due to a Snyder-era law forcing educators to shoulder ever-increasing health care costs. He warns younger educators: “Just because it’s in the contract doesn’t mean that’s guaranteed.”

“It’s important for our members to vote, and choose candidates who support public education.” ■



Voting beats big money



MEA member **Chuck Alberts** remembers Dec. 11, 2012, when the Michigan Legislature rammed through passage of union-busting bills to weaken organized labor’s collective power.

Back then Alberts was a new vice president of the Lansing Schools Education Association (LSEA), standing among thousands of protesters who filled the Capitol and the lawn outside as horse-mounted state police patrolled with batons and deployed pepper spray.

Gov. Rick Snyder signed so-called “right-to-work” bills on the day they passed, after saying he would not. “His word meant nothing. What he said wasn’t on his agenda was the agenda.”

Now LSEA president, Alberts reminds members that Michigan’s wealthy DeVos family was pulling strings behind the scenes as a major donor for Snyder and other Republicans. “We’re talking history, but it’s still connected today because Snyder is still piping money in; his voice is being listened to because he has the dollars. And the DeVoses are still major players.”

Privatization and profit are the goals of many billionaire political donors. For example, during the Snyder administration, the DeVoses pushed expansion of for-profit charter schools in Michigan.

“Our success depends on our solidarity and political action. We can’t take anything for granted because when we do — big money wins.”

In addition, after public schools took a \$470 per-pupil funding cut, districts were offered money back if they outsourced support staff jobs, such as food service, custodial, and transportation.

It began with vilifying educators, Alberts said.

“The administration portrayed educators as lazy, greedy and responsible for the state’s problems.”

Job protections and collective bargaining rights were stripped away; teacher evaluation got tied to standardized test scores; and a culture of fear pervaded the profession. Paradoxically, however, the union strengthened because members saw its importance, Alberts concluded.

“Our success depends on our solidarity and political action. We can’t take anything for granted because when we do — big money wins.” ■



“If you didn’t have your bus drivers, your secretaries, your paraprofessionals or associate teachers, you couldn’t run these classrooms. But we still get overlooked.”

SHANEE ELERSON has been a preschool associate teacher for 12 years in an Oak Park Great Start Readiness Program, helping youngsters learn through a play-based curriculum.

School support staff continue to do vital work without the pay, benefits and working conditions they deserve, so Elerson joined MEA’s ESP Bill of Rights campaign to fight for change.”

“The education system that I see is a microcosm of everything that’s wrong with America right now. We don’t take care of our people who do the work.”



LETITIA SIMMONS teaches English in Ann Arbor, where members have been fighting for a fair contract since the last agreement expired on Dec. 31. Simmons began her career under Gov. Rick Snyder and sees ongoing effects from that era’s deliberate devaluing of educators.

In April, Ann Arbor teachers rejected a settlement offer and turned out hundreds for a rally. “That gave us such life. It’s the most power we’ve amassed since I’ve been in the district.”

“Every secretary and custodian we have is from a third-party (employer), so they’re no longer local people who are dedicated to our community.

Someone from another place comes in, stays for a year or two, and moves on.”



KENDRA RODRIGUEZ, library paraeducator and union president in Capac, is a captain in MEA’s ESP Bill of Rights campaign to fight for a return of pay and benefits all education support professionals deserve for their work assisting high-need students and keeping schools operating.

Educators leave, students lose

Just nine years into a second career as a technology teacher in Pontiac, **Candice Ridley** is union president and senior staffer in her building. Anti-educator policies drove out veterans.



Ridley explains how students pay the price when educators leave. Staffing shortages eliminate classes in the arts and world languages. Under-qualified teachers get assigned to math and science courses. Extra-curricular programs go away.

Data shows Michigan also experienced a nation-leading 70% plunge in the number of aspiring educators enrolling in teacher preparation programs during Gov. Rick Snyder’s tenure — from a peak in 2010 to a trough in 2017. The numbers are now starting to recover.

“The point of education is not just to teach information but to broaden horizons, to expand minds. If you want a healthy school system, you need educators who aren’t skipping doctor visits and having to work second jobs on their evenings and weekends.”

Teachers in Pontiac recently approved a new contract after a two-year struggle. But a big frustration remains for Ridley when she hears politicians blame educators for problems that are systemic. She urges MEA members to get as politically engaged as possible.

“Look at our world. Are you happy with how our world is functioning? One of the ways we can change that is with our vote.” ■

Share your stories now

As a 27-year history teacher, **Ryan Furkas** knows the importance of documenting the past while those who lived it are still around to tell the story.



People lost homes. The district laid off 35 employees over two years, causing class sizes to skyrocket. Student programs were cut. Morale suffered.

Now that his daughter is becoming a teacher, Furkas feels urgency to share what life was like before the Snyder administration destabilized the system. Otherwise, newer educators “don’t know what they never had.”

In Southgate, the Downriver community where Furkas has worked for 27 years — including 15 years as union president — the district was plunged into debt when the Republican-controlled Legislature and governor cut \$470 in per-pupil funding.

In a dark time, the union agreed to “immense sacrifice” to save the district from state takeover.

Salary givebacks and step freezes cost some educators \$43,000 over five years.

A high school coach of football, basketball, baseball and tennis, Furkas and his wife — also a teacher in the district — tightened their belts and took extra jobs. “It hurt,” he said.

On the bright side, the crisis unified and rallied the community around its schools. Voters have since passed bond measures and a sinking fund to bring the district back to financial health.

But without stable benefits, such as paid health insurance and pension, the profession hasn’t been restored. “As a history teacher, I know history repeats itself — but not if people learn from it. Our young educators need to know what happened, so they don’t have to go through it again.” ■

THE SNYDER/ DeVOS PLAYBOOK

- ▶ Slashed education funding, incentivized outsourcing school jobs
- ▶ Expanded for-profit charter schools; 1-in-3 close within five years
- ▶ Forced educators to pay ongoing health-care cost increases
- ▶ Replaced pension with 401k-style retirement plan
- ▶ Removed rights to bargain key working conditions
- ▶ Tied teacher evaluation to standardized test scores
- ▶ Changed tenure to make it easier to fire educators
- ▶ Penalized unions if a contract expired with no successor
- ▶ Passed so-called “right-to-work” laws that aimed to bust unions
- ▶ Used emergency managers to take over districts, canceling contracts
- ▶ Created a scandal-plagued state “authority” to run 15 Detroit schools

The Comeback: HARD WON NOT DONE

By the time MEA member **Nathan Fleshman** began teaching in 2013, the “social contract” that he believed in growing up — ensuring educators could rely on stable pay, benefits and retirement — had been broken.



Fortunately for Fleshman, a science teacher and union president in East Jordan, some of what was lost has been won back, giving him hope to be able to stay in the profession he loves.

“Teachers want to make the world a little bit better, a little bit at a time,” he said. “The demoralization comes in when policies are enacted that limit our ability to help. We’ve seen that sometimes the answer is as easy as voting for the right people, who’ll let us do our jobs.”

School funding increased every year during two terms of Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, and local unions secured salary improvements. Pay for student teachers, fellowships for aspiring educators, and grow-your-own programs have begun to shore up the educator pipeline.

But modest gains in school employees’ pay have been eaten up by faster-rising costs of living, such as explosive housing prices in his northern Michigan community, Fleshman said.

Since Gov. Rick Snyder left office in 2019, legislative fixes have been key:

Collective bargaining rights for public employees — stripped away under Snyder and a Republican-controlled Legislature — were restored in 2023 after Democrats won slim majorities in both chambers.

Negotiating clear rules for evaluation, placement, discipline, layoff and recall ensures fairness and reduces friction, Fleshman said: “Bringing transparency to these processes helps administration, too, because everyone knows what to expect.”

Yet it can be difficult to dislodge the mindset of top-down control among school administrators, says **Kelly Pearson**, a 27-year first-grade teacher in Clawson serving as interim union president.



In early 2024, Pearson’s local was among the first in the state to restore topics to the teachers’ contract which had been previously barred from negotiation tables for a dozen years. She

soon stepped down as president to allow younger leadership to take over.

Then the new president left for a district offering pay based on full years of service. The teacher had been frozen on a low salary rung for years and wasn’t made completely whole in Clawson.

As interim president, Pearson filed grievances related to layoffs and involuntary transfers that didn’t follow the restored contract provisions. She reminds members, “We have the talent

and we have the power — if we’re unified and not afraid to speak up.”

Collective action is how educators improve learning conditions for students, agreed **Ryan Ridenour**, a 13-year social studies teacher and union president in West Bloomfield.

For example, a long MEA campaign and pro-public education Legislature in 2023 fixed the arbitrary teacher evaluation system adopted under Snyder in 2015 — which had created a climate of competition and fear — to make it less punitive, more developmental, and bargainable.



“I saw firsthand, when those prohibited topics were established, what it’s like when the state of Michigan goes through your contract with a red pen and just crosses things out.”

Like Nathan Fleshman, Ridenour straddles a generational divide. He knows both the harms done in the recent past and how repairs made since then have improved daily life for educators.

He understands, “If we don’t get the right people elected in November, that eight years of progress could just be completely reversed.” ■



Learn more and
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POLITICS IS FOR PEOPLE

At 34, MEA member **Clara Martinez** has an eclectic resume: Dance director, social worker, union activist, Lansing City councilwoman. Her story counters cynicism: “I think of politics as an invitation for you to be part of the conversation,” she says.

Martinez was drawn to teach dance at a public high school by her parents — both professors and union members — who taught her the meaning of life is to value humanity.

After earning a fine arts degree, Martinez was teaching grant-funded dance lessons in high-need schools and wondered, “How can I make dance accessible for as many people as possible?”

She took over the Everett High School Dance Program in 2017, then got more involved in the Lansing Schools Education Association (LSEA), becoming an LSEA board member and delegate to the MEA and NEA Representative Assemblies.

In 2024, Martinez was on a school trip with a group of dancers when they learned students had been killed in a shooting back home. She decided to run for Lansing City Council; took an NEA training called See

Educators Run; and won a city council seat in 2025.

“When I knocked on people’s doors and I said, ‘I’m running to have safe and healthy neighborhoods, strong city services and opportunities for our kids,’ I found those are universal things that, fundamentally, we all believe in.”

Frustration over systems failing our children is a good reason to engage in politics — not turn away, Martinez says. “There’s no avoiding politics; the personal is political. Feeling like the system isn’t working is a perfect reason to get involved.” ■

“Today’s political attacks on higher education cover a wide range of topics.”

Alec Thomson, a political science professor at Schoolcraft College in Livonia, says Gov. Rick Snyder shifted costs for higher education onto students and families. But as president of NEA’s National Council for Higher Education, he warns of greater threats to research funding and academic freedom faced by colleges and universities today.

“The reality is many politicians want to reduce and control higher education. They do not see it as a public good. The coming election is critical because the Democratic majority that has led us back from Snyder is fragile.” ■



“I could get married on Saturday, but I could get fired from my job on Monday for just being gay.”

That was the stark reality before June of 2023, says **Frank Burger**, the immediate past union president in Flint’s Carman-Ainsworth schools — until the state Legislature and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer extended discrimination protections in the Elliot-Larsen Civil Rights Act to LGBTQ+ people in Michigan.

The “monumental victory” — 40 years in the making — is especially significant given ongoing political attacks against transgender people, said Burger, this year’s inaugural recipient of MEA’s Gerry Crane Human and Civil Rights Award.

Since a 2015 U.S. Supreme Court ruling legalized gay marriage, union contracts ensure LGBTQ+ educators can access benefits such as spousal health insurance and family leave, Burger said, but more work remains to guarantee marriage equality in Michigan.

“These are benefits that our straight counterparts took for granted for many years, which in the past my relationship was not afforded within the collective bargaining agreement.” ■

“The secretaries being asked to do more and more should see their paychecks reflect the professionalism with which our administrators expect us to act. That’s who we are – we’re professionals.”

Melissa Kolf, union president and main office secretary at Clawson High School, notes her just-graduated-from-college son makes higher pay. In fact, Kolf could not afford to stay if not for her husband’s income and benefits.



Meanwhile, she’s managing a complex and essential job that involves problem-solving; emotional support for students, families and staff; and front-line security. Schools need adequate funding to fairly compensate all who contribute to educating children, she says. ■

“Let’s make charter schools accountable, the same as public schools.”



Jayne Niemann is president-elect of the Grand Rapids Education Association who helped to bargain a strong contract through a contentious two-year effort that won retroactive salary increases and restored contract language.

A 30-year educator, Niemann said an inequity remaining from the Snyder years is the uneven playing field between public schools and for-profit charters, competing for a declining number of students. Michigan leads the nation in state-funded for-profit schools.

“It’s not fair if a charter school doesn’t provide transportation, if it isn’t held to the same standards as a public school that services all students who come through the door – with IEPs, language barriers, poverty – we educate everyone.” ■

CONTINUING A LIFE’S WORK

MEA-Retired member **Dr. Cleorah Scruggs-DeBose** has been promoting the importance of diversity in education since her early days as a Flint teacher in 1970 – and she’s certainly not stopping now. “The movement for justice is a life’s work, so I’m not done yet,” she says.



Despite political attacks against diversity, equity and inclusion, Scruggs-DeBose continues her activism and leads the non-profit National Multicultural Diversity Day & Institute (NMDI) which organizes annual cultural celebrations in Flint.

Children build self-esteem and understanding when they see diverse cultures represented in classrooms, she says. “It challenges the myths and stereotypes that sometimes people hear and believe.”

This summer as an elected delegate to the NEA Representative Assembly in Denver, she introduced a measure urging support of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 after a U.S. Supreme Court ruling gutted key provisions of the landmark civil rights legislation.

“The movement for justice is a life’s work, so I’m not done yet.”

“Nobody’s free until everybody’s free,” she said, quoting famed civil and voting rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer.

In 1993, Scruggs-DeBose persuaded thousands of delegates at the NEA RA to adopt every third Monday in October as National Multicultural Diversity Day – which remains on the calendar more than 30 years later.

She shares motivation to keep going in the work by routinely sprinkling her dialogue with quotes from human rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (“The time is always right to do what is right.”)

But her own words, drawn from 50 years of experience and struggle, also serve to inspire.

“We don’t need anybody to get discouraged, even though that’s the easiest thing to do. We need everybody to keep your spirits high, stay engaged, keep striving and doing. Don’t stop in the middle of the tunnel; keep going to the light.

“We’ve come a long way, but we still have a long way to go.” ■



Helping you stay healthy for the year ahead

Summer may be winding down, but for school employees, a new school year is just around the corner. Soon, classrooms, hallways and cafeterias will be filled with students ready to learn. Before the first bell rings, there’s one simple step you can take to protect yourself and those around you: get up to date on your vaccinations.

All MESSA health plans fully cover vaccines and immunizations including COVID-19, flu and pneumonia; tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis (Tdap); tetanus and diphtheria (Td); measles, mumps and rubella (MMR); and zoster (shingles). Check with your healthcare provider to see if you are up to date on your vaccines. If not, MESSA makes it easy to get caught up at no cost to you.

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The start of a new school year brings enough demands without worrying about preventable illnesses. Whether you’re a teacher, bus driver, paraeducator, custodian, food service worker or administrator, MESSA is committed to helping you stay healthy and focused on what matters most: supporting Michigan students.

If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to call MESSA’s Member Service Center at 800-336-0013. Remember, MESSA has you covered.



Ross Wilson
MESSA Executive Director



Flint MEA leader honored for success in tough battle

When **Karen Christian** was growing up in Flint, both of her parents were public school teachers and leaders in United Teachers of Flint (UTF) who taught her the importance of unions.

After a dozen years as UTF president – having led the unit through multiple crises to a celebrated contract – Christian was honored with MEA’s Paul Blewett Friend of Education Award at the MEA Representative Assembly in April, as her mother proudly looked on.

Christian’s biggest local win came in 2024 amid a crisis that escalated after a bargained contract agreement was later rejected by the school board. Teachers had expected to be made whole following double-digit salary concessions and step freezes over a decade.

UTF members took voluntary pay cuts of 19% in 2014 to keep the district afloat with the promise of future restoration.

Soon after, Christian was first elected president vowing to lead a turnaround, but for years the district maintained step freezes that drove away staff.

The winning crisis effort involved weeks of informational picketing, long lines of members testifying at board meetings, rallying the community, and a climactic day when 119 teachers called in sick and forced the district to close.

In accepting the honor, which comes with a monetary award endowed through the trust of Blewett – a longtime educator and leader from the Upper Peninsula – Christian thanked the many people at the RA who showed up to picket in support of Flint teachers.

She’s proud that members of UTF found their voice when it mattered, she said. “They didn’t realize the power they had



Karen Christian (right) and mom, Johnnie Sue Petrich.

in this community; it took a long time for us to build that power.”

Christian credited her mom for setting her and her siblings on the right path: “My mom made it very clear to us every single day when we left home – don’t forget who you are, who you represent, and why you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing.” ■

‘School of Rock’ benefits cancer research

MEA member **Brian Dalton** sums up all he’s learned about life — and teaching middle school kids — in a project he worked on from January to June that culminated in a sold-out public performance at *The Roxy* Rochester.

Preparations inside his classroom at West Middle School in Rochester Community Schools looked like a scene from the movie *School of Rock*. As in the iconic 2003 comedy, starring Jack Black as a frustrated rock-er-turned-substitute teacher, the 28-year educator and more than 30 students who signed on as musicians, singers, producers and roadies rocked a one-show performance at the downtown Rochester venue.

Unlike the film, however, Dalton wasn’t trying to one-up his former bandmates in a Battle of the Bands competition. Instead, the musical concert featuring a student-chosen song playlist benefited pediatric cancer research through the St. Baldrick’s Foundation.

“The idea was just to see if I could get my kids to help someone other than themselves, and it took off from there,” Dalton said. “As I’ve gone through my years of teaching, for me it’s all about what is going to be most impactful, and I guarantee this is what they will remember.”

A self-taught musician, Dalton first led group of students in a benefit concert last year called Melody of Hope, which

raised \$5,000 for St. Baldrick’s. Melody of Hope II added \$8,000.

“It came to me last year... I said, ‘You know what? We’re going to raise money and awareness for kids with cancer.’ I said, ‘We’re going to put on a rock show.’”

Students spent lunchtime in his classroom to rehearse songs for the set, which revolved around sustaining hope through difficult times, such as “Don’t Stop Believin’”; “Here Comes the Sun”; and “Times Like These.”

Student performers sang and played guitars, drums, violins, string bass and brass instruments. Dalton also was joined by teacher friends with whom he regularly performs as a group called Lessons in Rock: MEA members Brian Trudeau, Justin Carmichael and Keenan Thomason.

All the while he’s teaching young people a recipe for resilience he found after losing his own mother to cancer in his eighth-grade year after a six-year battle. Hard times and failures will come, he tells his students. The question is how will you respond?

Be kind. Find a purpose. Help others. “Great things always start from something small,” he advises. “Start with you and let it spread.”



Dalton arranged music for the show, while students helped create video backdrops and shared hosting duties. The evening also featured a touching surprise for a special student at the school who dreams of being a pilot: flight lessons.

A former endurance athlete, Dalton’s joy in teaching life skills such as motivation, persistence, and empathy both drew him to the profession as a young adult and keeps him in the classroom.

“When I’m talking to the kids, I tell them, ‘I love looking at the finish line, and my finish line for you is not the end of this school year. It’s years down the road, what kind of man or woman you’ve become. Hopefully something I did impacted that development.’”

“I may never even know what impact I had, but that’s how I look at my job. That’s my finish line.” ■



Brian Dalton (third from left), friends and students rocked a fundraiser in June.

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