2026 MCEA

Awards & Recognition

Honoring Excellence in Leadership, Connection, Innovation, and Lifelong Learning

MCEA
MINNESOTA
COMMUNITY EDUCATION
ASSOCIATION

Message from the MCEA President



Annette Sallman
2026 MCEA President
Stillwater Area
Public Schools

To our exceptional 2026 MCEA Award Recipients, warm congratulations to each of you!

This year's honorees exemplify the true spirit of community education, building bridges, opening doors, and fostering places where people of all ages can learn and belong. Beyond the titles and certificates, these awards recognize the passion each of you brings to your work every single day, the creative solutions you craft behind the scenes, and the genuine care you show for the people in your community.

Your dedication creates a ripple effect that extends far beyond individual programs, enriching lives and strengthening neighborhoods across Minnesota. Thank you for leading with purpose, inspiring those around you, and setting a standard of excellence for our entire association.

Message from the MCEA Executive Director

To our 2026 MCEA award honorees: thank you.

Across Minnesota, you create opportunities for people to learn, connect, and belong. You see what your communities need, bring people together, and find ways to make a difference. Your work takes creativity and persistence, and it leaves a lasting mark on the people you serve.

The stories in this booklet celebrate outstanding educators, partners, and programs. Each story is different, but all reflect the care and commitment that make community education strong.

On behalf of MCEA, congratulations. We are proud to recognize you and grateful for all you do for your communities and for community education across our state.



Matt Dickhausen
MCEA Executive Director

MCEA Fall Conference
October 21-23, 2026
Mayo Civic Center, Rochester, MN

From Nest to Network
Where Community Takes Flight

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Celebrating Excellence in Community Education

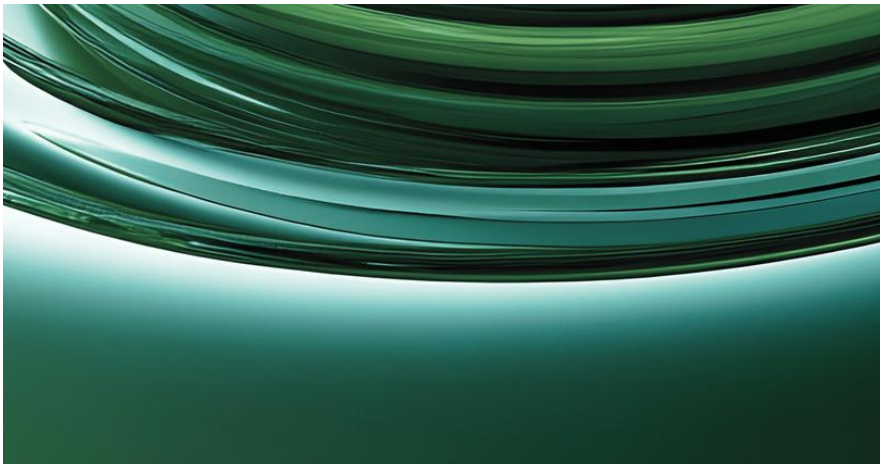
Each year, MCEA honors the individuals and programs that make Community Education in Minnesota truly exceptional. Through statewide and regional nominations, these awards celebrate those who lead with heart, innovate with purpose, and bring people together through learning and connection.

The honorees featured in these pages represent the best of what Community Education stands for: inclusion, collaboration, and a shared belief in lifelong learning. Their work strengthens communities across Minnesota and inspires others to continue making a difference.



Outstanding Community Education Project Awards

The MCEA Outstanding Community Education Project Awards honor districts across Minnesota for creative, impactful initiatives that exemplify the very best of community education. Each recipient showcases how local vision and teamwork strengthen connection, expand access, and enrich learning for Minnesotans of all ages — creating a lasting impact in their communities.



SAFE SCHOOLS AND STRONG COMMUNITIES CLASS SERIES AND PUBLIC PANEL

Minneapolis Public Schools

The Southwest Minneapolis Area Team of youth and adult sites went into action in the aftermath of the Annunciation school shooting, which is in their neighborhoods. The team focused on educating the community and connecting them with existing resources through a series of free classes focused on safety and well-being, including “Be SMART. Keeping Communities Safe From Gun Violence,” “Nervous System Basics & Cultivating Calm,” “Is My Child Being Radicalized” and “I Am Safe. Portable Mind-Body Coping Skills for Mental Health.”

The series culminated with a school safety panel that brought together key voices dedicated to school safety and community resilience. The panel was kicked off by three City Council members and moderated by longtime Twin Cities journalist Karla Hult. Panelists included Dr. James Densley, co-founder of The Violence Project; Leah Kaiser, an involved Annunciation parent and Behavioral Health Director for Hennepin County; Kristen Neville, Annunciation Light Alliance Co-Chair; Hennepin County Sheriff Dawanna Witt; and Tony Montalto, President of Stand with Parkland. They discussed practical, collaborative approaches to keeping schools safe and supporting the communities around them.

The classes and panel were made possible through donations from the annual Trucksploration Big Rig Vehicle Fair and grant funding.

The project was the team’s way of showing the Annunciation community that, although they are not technically part of Minneapolis Public Schools, they were grieving with them and there to offer support. It also brought the surrounding community together to provide resources during a time of need.
Roughly six months after the tragedy, the panel offered a next step in advocating for safe schools and strong communities by connecting Annunciation parents, health professionals, law enforcement and politicians.





4TH GRADE WATER SAFETY

Mankato Area Public Schools

Mankato Community Education and Mankato Area Public Schools (MAPS) are currently in the fourth year of a vital collaborative initiative dedicated to student safety called “4th Grade Water Safety.” This program was established as an annual district-wide field trip in response to the tragic drowning of a young MAPS student in 2021. In the wake of this tragedy the MAPS School District and Community Education developed a water safety experience for all fourth-grade students. The initiative integrates classroom activities led by teachers and dry-land exercises facilitated by physical education staff, culminating in an in-water experience where students practice essential safety skills. Each year, more than 500 fourth-grade students across 10 MAPS elementary schools complete this training in late spring, equipping them with life-saving knowledge just prior to the summer season.

This initiative exemplifies a robust partnership between the School District and Community Education. Orchestrating this program requires months of meticulous planning and consistent communication among key stakeholders, including Community Education Recreation Specialist Tia Dupont, building principals, fourth-grade educators, and physical education staff across all ten elementary schools.



By hosting the experience during the school day at no cost to families, we ensure that equitable access to vital water safety instruction remains a cornerstone of the program.



C-I SCHOOLS: ALL THINGS MIDDLE SCHOOL

Cambridge-Isanti Schools

Under Melissa Lupinek's leadership, Cambridge-Isanti Community Education has developed a flexible, affordable, and student-informed model of year-round middle school programming. What began in summer 2022 with grant funding from the Minnesota Department of Education has grown into a sustainable partnership among Community Education, the district's two middle schools, licensed educators, student support staff, volunteers, families, and district departments.

Between July 2022 and May 2026, more than 600 students participated in middle school programming. During the most recent school year, more than 15 programs were offered, with more than one-third representing new opportunities. Programming ranges from individual activities and field trips to clubs, recreation, theatre, enrichment, and six-week camp-style experiences.



Student voice is central to the program. Students provide input through conversations and surveys, and their ideas directly guide decisions about clubs, field trips, and new offerings. One of the most meaningful examples is the annual student-led Thanksgiving feast, which has grown into a highly anticipated district tradition. Students help plan the meal, prepare the food, organize the experience, and serve families and staff before Thanksgiving break.

The program is also designed to remove barriers to participation. Community Education partners with the Transportation Department when students need to move between buildings, creates alternative opportunities when facility space is limited, and leverages multiple funding sources, school resources, staff expertise, and volunteers to keep costs affordable for families.

Through this work, Cambridge-Isanti has created a year-round system of support that gives middle school students voice, choice, trusted relationships, and meaningful ways to belong while helping them explore new interests and strengthen their connection to school and community.



GFW COMMUNITY BUS

GFW Public Schools

The "Community Bus" project transformed a standard school bus into a mobile hub of support for the GFW community. Through the collaboration of students, staff, and community partners, and with the support of grant funding and local donations, the bus is stocked with essential items such as personal care and hygiene products, household and cleaning supplies, clothing, shoes, and bedding. By bringing these resources directly to families, the bus removes barriers and ensures that support is accessible to all students, staff, and community members —at no cost—extending the reach and impact of GFW Public Schools beyond the school day.

Unlike traditional programs that require families to come to the school, the Community Bus takes support into the community. By identifying local needs and responding with practical resources, the project helps remove barriers and make support more accessible. It brings together students, staff, and community partners in a hands-on, collaborative effort that extends the reach of GFW Public Schools beyond the school day while turning a standard school bus into a flexible tool for community support and engagement.









EARLY CHILDHOOD SCREENING COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Shakopee Public Schools

Pearson Early Learning Center partners with the Scott County Readmobile to provide mobile Early Childhood Screening opportunities at a variety of locations and times throughout the summer. Screening sites include townhomes, apartments, mobile home communities throughout Shakopee, and the district's Welcome Center, making the state-mandated screening more accessible to families.

The partnership uses a shared staffing model. Scott County staff drive the Readmobile, offer county resources, and provide a free book to each student. Shakopee Public Schools provides screening staff, Cultural Family Liaisons who speak a variety of languages, screening materials, and marketing support.

The partnership removes barriers for families by offering a drop-in model at convenient locations throughout the district. Early Childhood Screening is typically completed by appointment at a school location, while this project allows families to have their children screened close to home and without an appointment.







YOUTH SUMMER THEATER CAMP

Elk River Area Schools

ISD 728 Community Education's Summer Theater Program is an inclusive performing arts initiative that gives students and community members meaningful opportunities to learn, create, and connect through theater. Supported by a grant from the Central Minnesota Arts Board, the 2025 production of The Addams Family Young@Part® expanded access to acting, technical theater, stage management, and production while reducing participation costs for families by more than $100 per student.

Built around the theme of "Radical Belonging," the program features a no-cut audition policy, ensuring that every student who wants to participate has a place in the production. Participants can explore acting, technical theater, stage management, scenic construction, lighting, sound, and production while learning from professional theater educators and using industry-standard technology.



The program is also intergenerational and community-centered. Elementary, middle school, and high school students collaborate on a shared production, while adults with disabilities participate as members of the technical crew through the HOPE Community Props Practicum. Seniors are also invited to attend performances free of charge, helping strengthen connections across the community.



By combining affordable access, professional instruction, multiple pathways for participation, and strong community partnerships, the Summer Theater Program creates an educational experience that emphasizes lifelong learning, leadership development, artistic excellence, accessibility, and community belonging. Participants gain technical skills, confidence, and meaningful relationships while helping build a stronger, more connected community through the arts.



HOOKED ON BOOKS, AND THE ARTS TOO

Eastern Carver County Schools

For more than 20 years, Hooked on Books...and the Arts Too! has stood as an outstanding example of what Community Education can achieve when collaboration, creativity, and purpose come together. Under the leadership and coordination of Melissa Hansen, Director of Marketing and Communications, this event has grown into a beloved community tradition that celebrates literacy, the arts, and lifelong learning for all ages. It offers hands-on activities, literacy-focused programming, and experiences that appeal to children, families, and adults alike while remaining accessible, engaging, and community-centered.

Each year, the program brings a professional author to every third-grader across the district, leading up to the large Saturday event for all literacy enthusiasts. Partnerships span the entire community, bringing together district school leaders, businesses, local organizations, community volunteers, local theater, dance studios, musicians, and mixed media artists to provide high-quality literacy and arts experiences for all. The event utilizes a variety of resources, from school facilities to donations and community sponsorships. These varied funding sources have helped sustain the event's high quality for 20 years without passing the cost on to families or partners.

The longevity of the project is a testament to its success. For 20 years, the event has continued to evolve in response to changing community interests while staying grounded in its mission of fostering a love of reading, creativity, and shared learning.





PONIES CARE MAKE A DIFFERENCE DAY WITH WASHINGTON COUNTY

Stillwater Area Public Schools

In March and April 2026, Stillwater Community Education Enrichment Coordinator Jennifer Andress planned and facilitated Ponies Care: Make a Difference Day, an innovative service-learning initiative that engaged 47 youth in grades 6–9. Recognizing a critical need for youth civic engagement and mental health awareness, Jennifer partnered with the Washington County Mental Health and Substance Use Outreach Team. The initiative was made possible through strong collaboration between Stillwater Community Education and Washington County Adult Services, with additional support from community funders and partners.

Participants learned about local foster care and substance abuse challenges from staff who certify foster homes and place children in foster care. Students translated their learning into direct community action by creating 80 resource bags, 200 kindness rocks, and 30 hand-tied fleece blankets for local foster children. The project merged student enrichment with vital county-wide support systems, while participants also reported increased confidence, a sense of purpose, and stronger peer-to-peer connections.

The impact extended beyond the event itself. Inspired by the experience, one participant replicated the project within their local Girl Scout troop, independently organizing the creation of additional blankets and supply bags for foster youth that were then distributed within the county. This demonstrated the project's ability to inspire long-term, student-led civic leadership.









TINSEL, TREATS AND GIVING

Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School District

Tinsel, Treats & Giving is a collaborative community event led by Burnsville Community Education, the Burnsville Police Department, the City of Burnsville, Burnsville Savage Lions Club and local community partners. The event brings together families from across the community for a free evening of holiday activities, including photos with Santa, cookie decorating, crafts, face painting, and culturally inclusive experiences. In addition to celebrating the holiday season, the event provides essential resources such as food assistance, winter clothing, and holiday gifts to families experiencing financial hardship.

Tinsel, Treats & Giving reflects the diversity of the Burnsville community and helps ensure families from all backgrounds feel welcomed, valued, and connected. Through strong partnerships and a shared commitment to serving others, the event has become a meaningful tradition that positively impacts hundreds of Burnsville families each year.

The project exemplifies the mission of Community Education by building partnerships, strengthening relationships, and connecting families with resources and programs that support lifelong learning and well-being.







BREAKFAST AND BINGO

Mounds View Public Schools

The Breakfast & Bingo program, offered through Mounds View Community Education in partnership with the City of New Brighton, has become a valued gathering that fosters connection, friendship, and community among older adults (50+). Each month, 100–125 participants ages 50+ from Arden Hills, Mounds View, New Brighton, North Oaks, Shoreview, and Vadnais Heights come together to enjoy a light breakfast, play bingo, and build meaningful social connections in a welcoming environment.

More than just an enrichment activity, Breakfast & Bingo helps reduce social isolation and fosters a sense of belonging for older adults by providing regular opportunities to connect with others in a welcoming community setting. Thanks to the generous support of local businesses and community sponsors, we are able to keep the program accessible and affordable at just $5 per person. Businesses can support the program through coffee and donut sponsorships or by donating gift cards, products, meal vouchers, and service certificates for bingo prizes. These contributions help offset program costs, enhance the participant experience, and strengthen connections between older adults and local businesses, creating lasting benefits for the entire community.



By combining engaging activities, community partnerships, and opportunities for social interaction, Breakfast & Bingo has become a highly successful program that enhances the well-being of older adults and exemplifies the positive impact of collaborative community programming.





THE DRIFTLESS DRIFTERS HIKING CLUB

La Crescent-Hokah Public Schools

The Driftless Drifters Hiking Club began in 2021 as a way to provide a COVID-safe opportunity for people to stay active and reconnect. The idea came from an Advisory Council member and her husband, who were inspired by a similar program near their winter home in Arizona. The club's first summer season included nine members and grew to 121 annual members for the 2025–26 school year.

The club is operated by a group of volunteer leaders who send weekly emails to registered members with details about upcoming hikes, including meeting points for carpooling, descriptions of the terrain, and information about local flora and fauna.

While the physical location changes each week, the group and shared activity remain consistent. Over time, the Driftless Drifters Hiking Club has become a "Third Place" for its members, providing a regular opportunity for physical activity, connection, and strong social relationships.







EARLY CHILDHOOD SCREENING VIDEO

Eastern Carver County Schools

The Eastern Carver County Schools Community Education Marketing & Communications Team created an innovative Early Childhood Screening video designed to educate families about the screening process and reduce anxiety for both children and parents. The video helps families understand that screening is not a test, but rather a friendly opportunity to check on a child's development and ensure they are ready for future learning success.

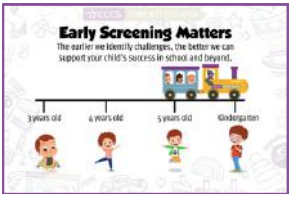
Featuring Skylar the StormHawk, the Community Education mascot, the video introduces families to the screening experience before they arrive. By showing the process in a fun, welcoming, and age-appropriate way, the video helps children feel more comfortable and confident during their appointment while building a positive connection to Community Education from an early age.

This project was a collaborative effort among Community Education staff, screening specialists, the Achievement & Inclusion Department, and the Marketing & Communications team. Staff members provided expertise on the screening process, ensuring accuracy and relevance, while the Achievement & Inclusion team reviewed imagery and messaging to help ensure the video reflected the diversity of our community and created a welcoming experience for all families. The Marketing & Communications team then translated this information into a family-friendly format that was engaging, accessible, and easy to understand.

The use of video, animation, and a recognizable mascot creates an engaging experience specifically designed for young children and their families. By allowing families to see what will happen before they arrive, the video helps reduce anxiety and increase comfort.

The project also demonstrates how Community Education can leverage internal talent and creativity to solve a common challenge. By producing the entire project in-house, the team created a sustainable resource that can be used for years to come while showcasing the innovation, collaboration, and family-centered approach that defines Community Education.





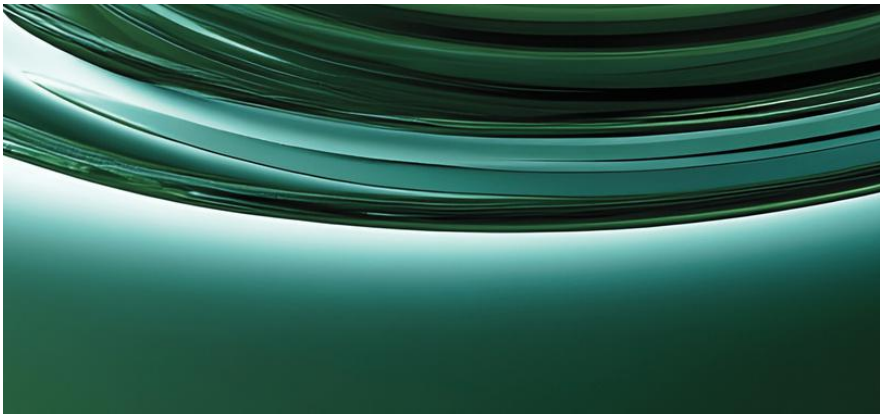




Community Education Partner of the Year Award

The MCEA Partner of the Year Award recognizes an individual or organization whose leadership, generosity, and partnership have strengthened Community Education across Minnesota. This award honors those who give of their time, talents, and resources to enrich lives, expand access, and build stronger communities.

Recipients embody the spirit of lifelong learning and collaboration. Their efforts create opportunities for others, foster inclusion, and demonstrate the power of partnership in action.



AUSTIN ASPIRES

ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBER, AUSTIN PUBLIC SCHOOLS COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Austin Aspires is a trusted and deeply engaged partner of Austin Public Schools Community Education, consistently stepping in where families and programs need support most. Their partnership is practical, consistent, and deeply connected to the needs of Austin families.

From supporting Early Childhood Screening and providing Kindergarten Readiness bags to helping families find preschool and childcare openings, Austin Aspires works alongside Community Education to remove barriers and connect families with opportunities. Their support also extends into School Age Child Care, where they helped provide on-site summer tutoring, and into broader Community Education leadership through Executive Director Michelle Baker's active service on the Advisory Council and Local Community Education Review.

What sets Austin Aspires apart is the way they show up as a true partner: listening, collaborating, sharing resources, and helping turn identified needs into meaningful action. Their ongoing investment in children, families, and Community Education strengthens connections across the Austin community and reflects the very best of what a community partnership can be.

AUSTIN aspires

educational excellence from cradle to career

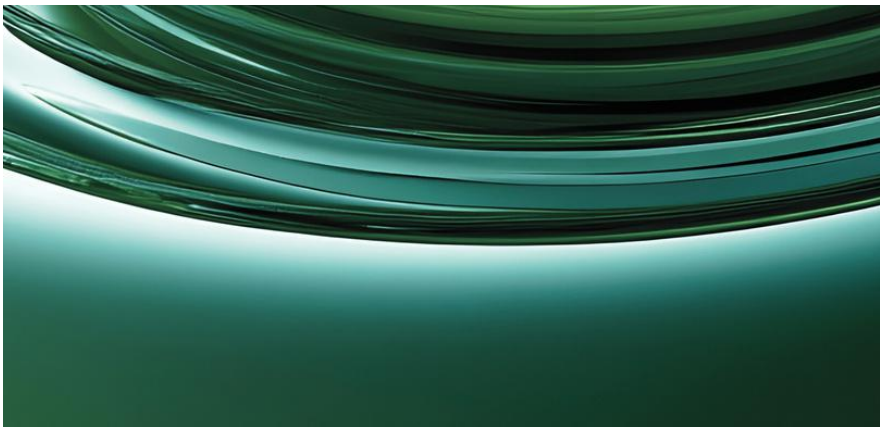


Michelle Baker
Executive Director
Austin Aspires



Supportive Administrator of the Year

The MCEA Supportive Administrator of the Year Award recognizes an educational leader who champions the mission of Community Education through advocacy, collaboration, and vision. This award honors a leader whose commitment ensures that lifelong learning thrives within their district and community, strengthening connections between schools, families, and the broader community.





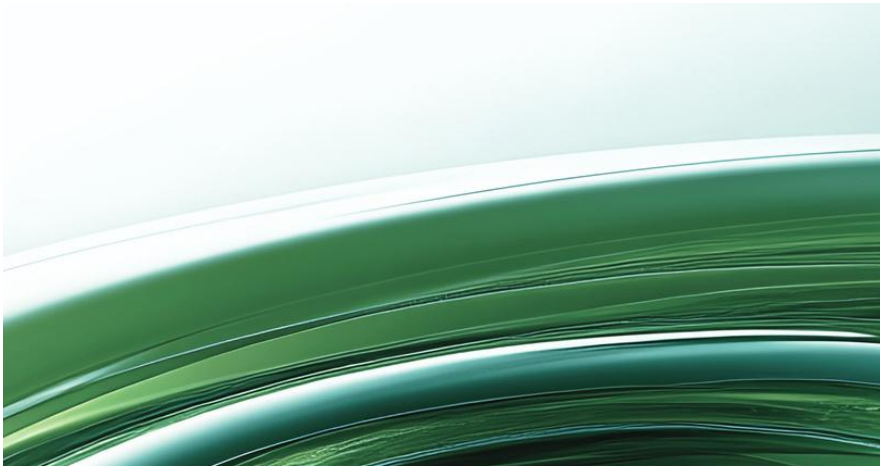
ALICE SEUFFERT

DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS
MAHTOMEDI PUBLIC SCHOOLS

For the past five years, Mahtomedi Public Schools Director of Communications Alice Seuffert has been a trusted mentor, strategic partner, and advocate for Community Education. She has helped bridge the gap between Community Education and the broader district, strengthening its voice, aligning its work with district priorities, and helping ensure its programs are understood as an important part of the district's mission.

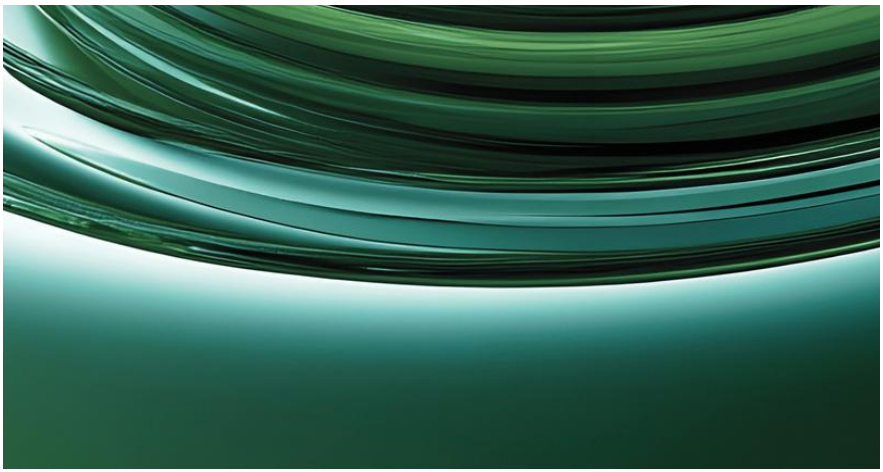
Alice's support goes far beyond offering advice. She works alongside Community Education staff to build systems, shape new opportunities, and respond to community needs. Her partnership has helped strengthen communications, guide programming, support the Community Education Advisory Council, and bring initiatives to life.

Beyond Mahtomedi, Alice shares her expertise with Community Education professionals across Minnesota through conference presentations and professional development. Her mentorship, hands-on advocacy, and genuine investment in Community Education demonstrate what strong district-level partnership can look like.



Regional Community Educators of Excellence

The MCEA Regional Community Educators of Excellence Awards celebrate professionals across Minnesota who exemplify leadership, inclusion, and innovation in lifelong learning. These honorees represent the best of community education — creating opportunities, building partnerships, and inspiring growth in the communities they serve.





Region 1

AMY WARD

Rochester Public Schools

Amy Ward brings positive energy, reliability, and a collaborative spirit to every responsibility she accepts. She is deeply committed to representation and cultural responsiveness in Early Childhood and parent education. Amy has been an important leader within MCEA, including her work planning and organizing the 2026 MCEA Fall Conference. Her willingness to step forward and contribute reflects the service, leadership, and commitment at the heart of Community Education.

Region 2

CINDY CABALLERO

New London-Spicer Schools

Cindy Caballero leads with compassion, consistency, and genuine care for the children, families, and colleagues around her. Her steady, positive presence helps others feel safe, supported, and valued, while her honest communication and can-do attitude build trust. Cindy approaches challenges with kindness and creativity, never losing sight of the joy and belonging children need to thrive. Her dedication reflects a deep commitment to serving families and strengthening her community.





Region 3

LINDSAY RICHINS

Minnetonka Public Schools

Lindsay Richins brings steadfast advocacy and statewide leadership to Adults with Disabilities programming across Minnesota. Through her service as CEND Chairperson, MCEA presentations, and collaborative work on the Adults with Disabilities Best Practices Guide, she has helped strengthen programs and support Community Education professionals statewide. Lindsay leads with clarity, compassion, and humility while elevating the voices and needs of adults with disabilities.



Region 4

LISA RAHN

Shakopee Public Schools

Lisa Rahn brings more than 25 years of Community Education experience and a deep commitment to equity, inclusion, and statewide leadership. Through her work with RALLI, equity initiatives, and the MCEA Board, she has consistently advocated for more welcoming and accessible programs. Lisa generously shares her expertise, speaks up for perspectives that may be missing, and leads with humility and a willingness to keep learning.

Region 5

SUSIE EVANS

South Washington County Schools

Susie Evans brings more than 25 years of leadership, advocacy, and commitment to adult education. She continually looks for ways to improve programs, build partnerships, and expand opportunities for learners while also advocating for adult education statewide. Her vision, persistence, and genuine belief in the potential of adult learners have strengthened programs, created career pathways, and expanded access to adult literacy and education across Minnesota.





Region 6

TIFFANY WEEKS

Anoka-Hennepin Schools

Tiffany Weeks brings more than 25 years of passion, leadership, and hands-on commitment to school-age care. She leads a program across 24 schools while still making time to connect directly with staff and students, stepping in wherever support is needed. Tiffany is constantly looking for ways to strengthen systems, simplify processes, and help her team grow. Her creativity, knowledge, and ability to keep a large program moving with shared purpose have helped take school-age care to the next level.

2026 MCEA
Statewide Community Educator of Excellence

Region 7
RACHEL AMDAHL
Bemidji Area Schools



Rachel Amdahl is a generous colleague and collaborative leader whose impact reaches far beyond her own district. She shares ideas freely, helps fellow directors work through challenges, and offers thoughtful guidance when someone is looking for ways to strengthen a program. Rachel is willing to step outside her comfort zone, take on unfamiliar challenges, and lend a hand wherever it is needed, always leading with humility, professionalism, and a genuine desire to see others succeed.

Her innovative thinking and willingness to support colleagues have strengthened individual programs and Community Education throughout Region 7. Rachel does not lead for recognition; she leads by showing up, sharing what she knows, listening carefully, and helping others move their work forward. That spirit of service has made her a trusted resource and colleague throughout the region.

That same commitment has shaped her statewide leadership within MCEA. Through her service on the MCEA Board and as MCEA President, along with active involvement on the PDMS and Marketing Committees, Rachel has accepted difficult responsibilities, brought people together around shared goals, and consistently invested in the success of others. Her everyday acts of service and commitment to the field have strengthened Community Education throughout Region 7 and across Minnesota.

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Region 8

ROXY OLSEN-HURST

Proctor & Hermantown Schools

Roxy Olsen Hurst brings more than 20 years of experience, energy, and dedication to Community Education. She is known for turning ideas into action, building partnerships, and creating opportunities that help children and families feel connected and supported. Roxy's leadership has strengthened Early Learning in Proctor and Hermantown while also fostering a positive, collaborative culture where staff feel valued. Her creativity, compassion, and commitment to serving others have made a lasting impact across both communities.

Region 9

CELEST STANG

St. Cloud Area Schools

Celest Stang is known for servant leadership, unwavering positivity, and a deep commitment to the people she serves. She leads with humility, patience, and integrity, investing in staff and students while helping those around her grow and succeed. No matter how challenging the circumstances, Celest brings a steady, encouraging presence and a willingness to step in wherever needed. She has dedicated countless early mornings, late evenings, and everything in between to ensure programs run smoothly and the people she serves feel supported.



Thank You for Celebrating Excellence in Community Education

Each year, the Minnesota Community Education Association proudly recognizes the people and programs that bring lifelong learning to life across our state. Their leadership, creativity, and compassion strengthen Minnesota communities and remind us of the power of connection through education.

Together, we continue to build spaces where everyone can learn, grow, and belong. Thank you to every educator, partner, and advocate who helps make Community Education a cornerstone of vibrant, inclusive communities.


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Support. Connect. Grow.
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