

CONNECTIONS

News from the Association of Metropolitan School Districts

May 2026
Volume 23
Number 8

Changing for Good in Stillwater Area Public Schools

May 15, 2026
Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting
7:30 a.m. - 9 a.m.
Anderson Center
Bethel University
Arden Hills

May 29, 2026
Board of Directors Meeting
7 a.m. - 9 a.m.
Quora Education Center
NE Metro 916
Little Canada

June 12, 2026
Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting
7:30 a.m. - 9 a.m.
Anderson Center
Bethel University
Arden Hills

July 31, 2026
Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting
7:30 a.m. - 9 a.m.
Anderson Center
Bethel University
Arden Hills

Educating and caring for students is at the heart of what we do. So when district leaders in Stillwater Area Public Schools noticed a rising trend in mental health issues among students, they took action. At the start of the 2025-26 school year, Stillwater schools implemented a series of districtwide changes focused on improving emotional wellbeing and academic outcomes for all 8,300 of its students.



Ninth graders connect with each other in person (without screens) on the first day of school at Stillwater Area High School.

Implementing a Phone-Free School Day

All Stillwater schools (preK-12+) are phone and device free from the first bell until the last bell. Students who choose to bring devices to school are provided a safe place to secure them. If staff see a student using a device, it is taken away and a parent or guardian must come to the school to retrieve the device.

Previously, teachers spent valuable class time collecting phones each period. Students often entered the room distracted by their phones — quickly checking updates or sending messages before turning it over. And as soon as class was over, they were back on the phone to catch up on whatever they missed during class.

Based on data indicating our students were increasingly anxious, depressed and distracted, the board felt a clean break from phones would allow them to be more present and engaged in their learning. It was a belief shared by our community. The district gathered input through surveys, community discussions, and an online ThoughtExchange. Ultimately, the community agreed students shouldn't use their phones during school and shared concern

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With just days remaining in the 2026 legislative session, we need AMSD members to contact the Governor, legislative leaders, and your local legislators to urge them to support supplemental funding for our schools. Urge them to support **at least** the modest level of funding approved by the Senate. You can find more information in this month's newsletter. Contact information for the Governor and legislative leaders can be found [here](#) and your local legislators [here](#). Time is of the essence. Please send an email or make a phone call today to advocate for our students and our schools. Thank you!

From the AMSD Chair, Alison Sherman, Stillwater Board Member

Creating Healthier, More Engaging Learning Environments

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about the impact of social media and phone use on students' mental health. Families did raise concerns about safety for students if they didn't have access to a phone in the event of an emergency. Knowing this, school officials were intentional in working with families on alternative ways to communicate with students.

Adjusting School Start Times

Another way to address students' overall wellbeing was to align our school hours with decades of research about adolescent sleep cycles. The idea of a later start time for high school students had been a topic of conversation in the district for many years. But because of the geographic size of the district, transportation is a major logistical challenge and significantly impacts what can be done with start times. To adjust high school times meant flipping elementary and secondary schools — with our littlest learners starting school early and coming home early and our secondary students getting an extra hour of sleep.

Despite the logistical challenges, the school board made student health a priority. They worked along with the community to address concerns with childcare for elementary students and activities and work schedules of older students. The board also provided 18 months of lead time to the change to give families the time they would need to adjust to the new school hours.

Redesigning the Academic Calendar

The most unique change was to our academic calendar. For more than 10 years, the district started the school year a week before Labor Day without an intentional reason for the earlier start. This year, the school year began an extra week earlier in August — about 2 weeks before Labor Day — in order to align with natural breaks throughout the year. Students now have time off at the end of each quarter, and semester one ends prior to winter break. More like a traditional college calendar, this allows students and staff time to relax and regroup before starting new coursework. As an added benefit, the calendar also provides additional time for students to learn content before the spring testing window.

Early results

At the end of the school year, staff will study student data related to things like achievement, attendance, and discipline to determine the impact of these changes on student outcomes. Early indicators, however, are promising. In January, 77 percent of high school students surveyed rated the new calendar positively. Teachers are also sharing that students are more engaged in classes and behavioral issues are down, likely as a result of phone-free schools and later start times.

Stillwater Area Public Schools will continue working with our community to ensure these efforts create healthier, more engaging learning environments, and fulfill our mission to “inspire curiosity and a love of learning in every child.”



Stillwater Area High School students dive into a science lesson, showing the kind of focus and back-and-forth that's happening more often in phone-free classrooms.

This month's member feature was submitted by Carissa Keister, Chief of Staff, Stillwater Area Public Schools.

Education Funding Hangs in the Balance in Final Days of Session

With the 2026 legislative session quickly winding down, the Minnesota Senate has passed two bills that would provide modest supplemental funding to help school districts mitigate looming budget shortfalls. The Senate's Omnibus Supplemental Finance bill includes one-time compensatory aid while another bill would provide one-time school safety aid. The school safety bill also includes several gun control measures including secure gun storage requirements on school property.

While the funding in the Senate bills is modest, it significantly outpaces the proposals from the Governor and House. The Governor proposed an additional cut of \$50 million in special education funding on top of the \$250 million cut approved last session. The House budget resolution does not include any supplemental funding for education and the House has not advanced school safety or gun control legislation. AMSD is urging the Governor and House to approve **at least** the level of funding passed by the Senate.



Rep. Cheryl Youakim (DFL-Hopkins) speaks to a group of students at the Minnesota State Capitol during the AMSD/MASA Region 9 Day at the Capitol. Rep. Youakim is co-chair of the House Education Finance Committee.



Sen. Julia Coleman (R-Waconia) meets with Minnetonka Public Schools Supt. David Law and Nadia Akhtar during the AMSD/MASA Region 9 Day at the Capitol. Sen. Coleman is the ranking minority member of the Senate Education Policy Committee.

Below is an overview of the two Senate bills that have passed, as well as the pending Permanent School Fund bill.

Gun Safety / School Safety Bill. [SF4067](#) (Mohamed) provides comprehensive gun violence prevention legislation as well as school safety omnibus funding, but as of this writing the fate of this bill remains uncertain as it heads to the Minnesota House. In its current form, the bill passed the Senate on a 34-33 party line vote, and would:

- Include an assault weapons ban at the point of sale statewide.
- Ban high-capacity magazines (over 17 rounds).
- Create restrictions on "ghost guns."
- Provide \$19 million for one time school safety aid in FY27 school districts, charter schools, intermediate districts and Tribal contract schools.
- Provide \$1 million to the Dept. of Public Safety for Nonpublic School Safety Grants.
- Provide \$2.7 million for one-time school-linked behavioral health grants.

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AMSD Urging Governor, House to Approve Supplemental Funding

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- Expand definition of gun-free school zones to include Minnesota High School League-sponsored activities as well as other circumstances, as well as provide additional language on safe storage requirements.
- Provide some funding to MDE to assist and encourage districts to implement a local anonymous threat reporting system with certain universal requirements.
- [LINK: Gun Safety/School Safety Spreadsheet](#)
- [LINK: View a full bill summary](#)

Senate Omnibus Supplemental Finance Bill. [SF4059](#) (Marty) provides one-time compensatory aid to soften the impact of the change in how the state identifies students eligible for additional support. The bill would:

- Provide one-time compensatory hold harmless aid of \$25.489 million (at least 77.46 percent of the compensatory revenue for the site in FY26, after adjustment for any decline in total enrollment).
- Require law enforcement to notify a licensing board when a teacher is charged with certain crimes, requires the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to develop training for mandatory reporters. The bill would also clarify that alleged maltreatment may be investigated even if it occurred more than three years before a maltreatment report and would also establish a felony offense of grooming.
- Allow a school district to use operating capital revenue to pay utility service costs.
- Require the Legislative Budget Office (LBO) to annually survey school districts and charter schools on certain information relating to the school's group health insurance plans.
- Exclude tests administered in the 2025-26 school year from the calculation of literacy aid in FY27, FY28, and FY29.
- [LINK: View the bill summary](#)
- [LINK: View a spreadsheet of the funding breakdown](#)
- [LINK: View district runs for compensatory aid](#)

Permanent School Fund. On Monday, May 4, the House of Representatives unanimously passed HF3900. This bill, highlighted in last month's [newsletter](#), would allow Minnesotans to vote on a constitutional amendment to increase distributions from the Permanent School Fund beginning in the 2027-28 school year. The bill is scheduled for a Senate floor vote on May 7.

- [LINK: AMSD School Districts Projecting More Than \\$223 Million in Shortfalls for 2026-27](#)