Association of Metropolitan School Districts

2 Pine Tree Drive, Suite 380, Arden Hills, MN 55112 • 612-430-7750 • www.amsd.org

May 27, 2026

To: AMSD Board of Directors

From: Scott Croonquist

RE: Annual Report

The 2026 legislative session presented significant challenges for public education advocacy. AMSD worked to ensure the needs of our member districts remained in front of state policymakers amid political volatility and significant fiscal pressures. Over the past year we experienced political violence, including the assassination of former House Speaker Melissa Hortman and her husband, Mark, and the shooting of Sen. John Hoffman and his wife, Yvette; a tragic school shooting; and prolonged and violent federal immigration enforcement actions that seriously impacted students, staff, families, and communities. It was heartbreaking, but also inspiring, to witness AMSD superintendents, school board members, district staff, teachers, and parents come together to protect their students and communities.

The emotion and tension from those tragedies carried into the start of the 2026 legislative session. New security measures, including weapons screening, were implemented at the Capitol and the Minnesota Senate Building. While the need for the enhanced security was clear, it made for a challenging environment to connect with legislators and legislative staff.

As if those challenges weren't enough, the state budget outlook provided another obstacle to securing supplemental funding. The February State Budget and Economic forecast showed a balance of $3.7 billion for the 26-27 biennium. However, it also projected that spending would sharply outpace revenue through FY29 creating a significant structural imbalance and leaving just a $377 million balance at the end of the 28-29 biennium.

Even before the release of the forecast, legislators were sounding a very cautious tone about new spending. The Governor, who announced he would not seek a third term, made it clear that he wanted to stabilize the budget to protect the new programs he and legislative Democrats enacted during the 23-24 biennium from future cuts. That goal was evident when he released his supplemental budget recommendations. Not only did he propose no supplemental funding for education, but he also proposed an additional $50 million cut to special education on top of the $250 million cut that was approved last session. Furthermore, he proposed to clarify that the Blue Ribbon Commission on Special Education had to identify actual reductions and not shift state special education aid expenditures to the general fund.

The Governor's budget proposal is always the first to be released and sets a bar for the House and Senate. This year the Governor set a very low bar with his proposed cut of $50 million. Meanwhile, we had released the results of our annual budget survey which showed AMSD members faced a combined $223 million in budget shortfalls. This helped lawmakers understand the real-world consequences of underfunded mandates and escalating operational costs. The survey results played a significant role in legislators quickly dismissing the Governor's proposed cut and curtailing new mandates. However, the political dynamics made it an uphill climb to secure supplemental funding.

The most evenly divided Legislature in state history meant that no bill could move forward without bipartisan support. The House continued to operate under the power-sharing agreement that was reached last year. Rep. Lisa Demuth continued to serve as speaker, but she also announced that she would be a candidate for governor. Seven House Members announced that they would run for the Senate, and 11 legislators announced campaigns for another office including two other House Members running for Governor. In addition, by the end of the session, 25 legislators had announced that they will retire at the end of the current term.

The combination of these factors led to a minimal funding increase for education. A very scaled down compensatory hold harmless, grants for anonymous threat reporting systems, and one-time funding for school-linked behavioral health grants and mobile crisis service grants were adopted in the closing days of the session. Perhaps the highlight of the session, and an AMSD legislative platform priority, was the approval of legislation placing a constitutional amendment on the ballot to increase disbursements from the Permanent School Fund. If approved in November, it will provide additional funding starting in the 2027-28 school year.

Despite the significant political and fiscal uncertainty, AMSD remained a consistent advocate for our member school districts throughout the session. By maintaining strong legislative relationships, coordinating advocacy efforts with partner organizations, and elevating the financial realities facing our schools, we helped ensure that education remained a topic of leadership discussions to the very end of the session. As our districts continue to navigate ongoing fiscal pressure, AMSD's leadership and advocacy will be essential in the year ahead.

Below is a recap of AMSD activities and events from the past year.

Legislative Platform

Preparation for the 2026 legislative session began last August when we conducted our annual survey of AMSD board members and district staff to identify funding and policy priorities. The survey noted that the 2026 session would focus on policy issues and a bonding bill as the biennial budget was adopted in the 2025 session. A total of 27 responses were received. The AMSD Legislative Committee reviewed the survey results and worked to develop the platform over the next few months. The committee settled on a legislative platform that outlined immediate and ongoing priorities. The platform was approved by the board of directors during the December meeting.

As has been our practice for many years, the legislative committee developed a streamlined version of the platform a few months into the session to reflect the February State Budget Forecast and the political environment at the Capitol. The board of directors approved the

2026 Legislative Priorities at the April meeting to provide a focus for members attending our Day at the Capitol event on April 13.

Legislative Session Preview

Nearly 200 education leaders— superintendents, school board members and district staff — along with some two dozen state legislators, and Minnesota Department of Education Commissioner Willie Jett, turned out for the 2026 Session Preview, which annually highlights the AMSD legislative platform and key education issues for the upcoming legislative session.

The preview was held at Northeast Intermediate School District 916's Quora Education Center and featured three AMSD superintendents — Dr. Lisa Sayles-Adams of Minneapolis Public Schools, Dr. Jeffrey Holmberg of Centennial School District and Dr. Kent Pekel of Rochester Public Schools — presenting key 2026 priorities outlined in the 2026 Legislative Platform.

Supt. Sayles-Adams highlighted special education funding and urged legislators to stabilize special education aid by repealing the contingent $250 million cut to special education cross-subsidy reduction aid scheduled for the 2028–29 biennium. She thanked legislators for their recent investments to increase cross-subsidy reduction aid and noted that backing off that commitment would have negative repercussions on school district budgets.

Supt. Holmberg thanked legislators for linking the education formula to inflation, but also asked legislators to reduce mandates, restore local control, and fully fund existing requirements including unemployment for hourly workers and the Paid Leave program.

Supt. Pekel rounded out the presentation providing an update on the Compensatory Revenue Task Force and the complexities task force members are wrestling with as they work to develop recommendations to stabilize funding to serve all students in need of additional support. He stressed the need to extend hold-harmless funding for another year until the task force finalizes its recommendations. He also outlined ways the Legislature could strengthen the Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program to ensure rigor and preparation for success after high school.

Minnesota Education Commissioner Willie Jett addressed the gathering and thanked everyone for their work in support of our students during this challenging time. He stressed the importance of keeping students at the center of our work and that it is imperative for school leaders, educators, parents, and policymakers to work together.

The preview concluded with a legislative panel discussion that featured Rep. Patricia Mueller Rep. Sydney Jordan, Sen. Steve Cwodzinski and Sen. Jim Abeler — all leaders on the House and Senate Education Policy Committees. The legislators each outlined some of their education priorities for the 2026 session and reflected on AMSD's priorities.

AMSD Day at the Capitol

About 175 AMSD members turned out for AMSD's Day at the Capitol on Monday, April 13. We again partnered with MASA Region 9 to host the event. AMSD annually hosts the Day at the Capitol to provide an opportunity for our members to collectively advocate for our legislative priorities. AMSD Consultants Kris Amundson and Lori Grivna and MASA Lobbyist Valerie Dosland provided a session overview to kick off the day. They were followed by Rep. Cheryl Youakim, Rep. Ben Bakeberg, Sen. Mary Kunesh, and Sen. Michael Kreun who

shared an update on key issues and legislation. From there, AMSD members attended committee hearings and met with their local legislators to advocate for our collective priorities.

Board of Directors Meetings

The monthly AMSD Board of Directors meetings provide an opportunity for members to connect socially and professionally. We heard from a variety of guest speakers and heard presentations from AMSD members over the past year:

- Last August, in addition to electing new officers and committee members, we heard a presentation from Jose Perez, Julian Spencer, and Haben Ghebregergish from Good Trouble, a youth advocacy and research organization.
- In September, we heard from Peter Leatherman from the Morris Leatherman Company who shared an informative overview of their most recent polling data. Peter and Dr. Bill Morris have graciously shared polling data with AMSD Board Members for many years at our September board meeting. In addition, Perpich Center Executive Director Allegra Smisek shared an overview of the Perpich Center including the professional development opportunities available to school districts.
- We heard an informative overview of Minnesota's changing demographics from Minnesota State Demographer Susan Brower at the October board meeting.
- In November, our guest speakers were Rep. Nathan Coulter and Rep. Andrew Myers who offered a preview of the 2026 session and shared their advice about the most effective ways to communicate with legislators. In addition, the board adopted updates to several position papers and AMSD Consultants Kris Amundson and Lori Grivna gave a presentation on effective legislative advocacy. AMSD Communications Director Troy Melhus also provided an overview of the AMSD website.
- The board adopted the 2026 legislative platform as well as updates to additional position papers at the December meeting. We also heard a presentation on the work of the MN P-20 Education Partnership from MN P-20 Executive Director Josiah Litant. Josiah also provided an update on the Dual Enrollment Project. Board members also heard an informative presentation about Stillwater Schools' journey to phone free schools from Supt. Mike Funk, Chief of Staff Carissa Keister, and Stillwater High School Principal Rob Bach.
- At the January meeting, the board approved updates to the remaining position papers and heard from two sets of guest speakers. First, Minnetonka High School Students Dani Berg, Isabel Chen, Jack Errington, and Sadie Stowers presented their research and proposed education funding reform proposal. They were followed by Dr. Lana Peterson, Dr. Seyma Birinci, and Dr. Tai Do from the Minnesota Department of Education who shared an overview of the results of the Minnesota Student Survey.
- We used the February meeting for our annual Session Preview program which is summarized above.
- We had a very full agenda for the March meeting. MDE Director of School Finance Cathy Erickson provided an overview of Compensatory Revenue and the changes to the formula following the adoption of the Universal School Meals legislation. We also heard a presentation from Jimmy Adams, executive director of the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, who provided an overview of the Educator Identification Clearinghouse. Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board Chair Lucy Payne and Executive Director Yelena Bailey closed the meeting with an update on the work of PELSB.

- During the April meeting, the Board approved Board its 2026 Legislative Priorities to guide our advocacy efforts over the final weeks of the session. We also welcomed Rep. Bianca Virnig and Rep. Wayne Johnson who provided a legislative update and took questions from board members. In addition, MSBA Executive Director Kirk Schneidawind and Director of Communications and Member Engagement Erica Allenburg provided an overview of Minnesota Kids Rise.
- On May 2 we heard an informative presentation from Andrew Krech and Sara Bruggeman from the MN State Board of Investment who provided an overview of the Permanent School Fund Task Force and the proposed amendment to the State Constitution that would increase disbursements to school districts. Following their presentation, we welcomed Rep. Bryan Lawrence and Rep. Kari Rehrauer who provided an update on the status of key issues at the Capitol.
- At the May 29 meeting we are hearing from Adosh Unni and Cathy Erickson from MDE who will share an overview of the education related legislation approved in the 2026 session, and MSBA Deputy Executive Director Gary Lee who will provide an overview of the potential impact of the proposed Educator Group Insurance Program.

Superintendent Zoom Meetings

We continued to support regular AMSD superintendent Zoom meetings. The meetings are regularly attended and valued by our superintendents. Thanks to Osseo Supt. Kim Hiel for facilitating the superintendent Zoom meetings over the last year.

The meetings started during the pandemic and provided a venue for the superintendents to share information, discuss challenges and opportunities, and strategize solutions while supporting each other. The meetings were so beneficial that they continued after the pandemic and were particularly helpful during Operation Metro Surge.

As our member districts experienced the impact of federal immigration enforcement actions, AMSD superintendents initiated a collaborative effort to send a letter to Minnesota's congressional delegation and state leaders urging the restoration of federal guidelines that limited immigration enforcement activities at protected/sensitive locations including schools, hospitals, and places of worship. The letter focused on the importance of protecting students and maintaining safe, stable learning environments while respecting federal law. Schools had been designated sensitive locations with strict limits around immigration enforcement activities since 1993, but that guidance was rescinded in early 2025. The letter stressed that enforcement activity at or near schools had disrupted learning, caused student distress, and increased absenteeism.

Another valuable opportunity was led by AMSD Superintendents Renee Corneille, Peter Olson-Skog, and Zena Stenvik who organized a presentation on the Dignity Index. The Dignity Index is led by Tami Pyfer (Project UNITE), who is widely recognized for her work helping communities reduce division and strengthen civic discourse. Tami is the co-creator of the Dignity Index, a practical, research-informed tool that helps leaders assess and elevate the tone of public dialogue, shifting communication away from contempt and toward dignity. The presentation was open to all AMSD members and was held following our February 6 Session Preview. It focused on promoting strong public service and fostering healthy civic discourse and provided practical insights to encourage productive dialogue across political, ideological, and community differences. The presentation materials can be found here

Annual Conference

We had over 160 attendees at the annual AMSD/BrightWorks Policy Conference in November for a great day of learning. The keynote speaker was Dr. Dylan Wiliam, an international education expert whose research includes the efficacy of assessments in schools, as well as the professional development of teachers. Dr. Wiliam spoke about the need to prepare young people for a world we cannot imagine where students will need higher levels of achievement. He stressed the importance of focusing on investments with the greatest benefit for students. He believes the available evidence suggests that this is helping teachers develop their practice of classroom formative assessment, which is not only the most cost-effective way to improve student achievement, but is also a key element in promoting equity in education.

Conference attendees also had the opportunity to choose from a variety of compelling breakout sessions offered by leaders from our member school districts.

In the closing presentation, Dr. Alyssa Parr and Dr. Mengchen Su from the University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Educational examined mental health challenges among K12 students.

- LINK: View the conference website at www.amsd.org/conference

AMSD Election Guide

We will continue our practice of developing an Election Guide for use by AMSD members this summer. The guide includes information about education funding and policy issues as well as tips on holding effective candidate forums and sample questions to ask legislative candidates. The guide has been very well received and used extensively by AMSD members in previous years. It is also an effective tool to educate legislative candidates and the public about the impact of the new expectations and requirements that have been placed on schools in recent years and why school districts continue to face budget challenges.

It is critical that AMSD members engage with legislative candidates and find out where they stand on important issues during the coming election. We will have a new Governor and many new legislators when the 2027 session convenes. The new state policymakers will be charged with adopting a biennial budget, addressing the recommendations from the Blue Ribbon Commission on Special Education and the Compensatory Revenue Task Force, and identifying funding to cover the cost of unemployment for hourly school workers among many other important issues.

Minnesota Kids Rise

AMSD is collaborating with the Minnesota School Boards Association, Minnesota Association of School Administrators, Minnesota School Public Relations Association, Minnesota's State Education Cooperatives, Minnesota Parent Teachers Association, and others on an exciting new initiative: **Minnesota Kids Rise.**

Minnesota Kids Rise is a statewide effort designed to provide positive messaging about Minnesota's public schools. The initiative will highlight the outstanding work happening in classrooms and communities across the state and help ensure that Minnesotans hear a

clear, consistent message about the value and impact of public education. Further details will be coming soon along with the launch of the website and toolkits. The public launch of the campaign will be during the MN State Fair.

Member Services

Every year we distribute a survey to AMSD board members and district staff to gather input about the services we offer to determine what is valuable and identify areas where we could improve. Last year's survey results provided excellent feedback:

- Our weekly email updates are highly valued by our members. The weekly updates are meant to inform our members about activity at the Capitol as well as updates from state agencies including the Department of Education, Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, Labor and Industry, Minnesota Management and Budget and others.
- The updates generally provide a summary along with links to legislation, bill summaries, research, presentations, and other resources. We also use the weekly updates to deliver legislative alerts and calls to action. Calls to action were distributed in April and May and the response of AMSD members contributed to securing at least some supplemental funding.
- The Connections Newsletter continues to be a great tool and is regularly read by members. We use the newsletter to share success stories in our member school districts, highlight new research, and advocate for AMSD's legislative priorities. The newsletter is distributed in electronic format to all AMSD school board members, superintendents, district staff, legislators, legislative staff, and members of the media.
- AMSD members indicated that they find the website helpful in tracking legislation and providing resources to assist their advocacy efforts. The website was refreshed two years ago to make it more mobile and member friendly and now includes a searchable database of local legislators by district. Members indicated they appreciate the tools on the advocacy page including the bill tracker, position papers, and links to pertinent education bills, summaries, and spreadsheets.
- We have 14 position papers that are updated annually by the legislative committee and approved by the board of directors. Members indicated they find the papers very helpful in their advocacy efforts and access them regularly on the website. Some suggestions were offered related to the layout of the papers and potential new topics.
- The survey showed that members do not regularly use social media to track legislative activity or communicate about legislative issues. We have found the same to be true for legislators making it a lower priority than it was in the past.

Voice For Metro and Regional Center Schools

AMSD is the voice for metropolitan and regional center school districts. AMSD has been the leading voice on a wide variety of issues important to our member districts. In recent years AMSD members led the way in successfully advocating for legislation to allow school boards to renew an existing referendum, link the formula to inflation, address the special education and English learner cross-subsidies, and diversify the educator workforce. AMSD also successfully advocated for the enactment of the local optional revenue program, allowing referendum questions to increase by the rate of inflation, and establishing the pension adjustment mechanism in the funding formula to make sure the cost of increased employer

contributions is funded. AMSD members clearly play a leading role in shaping state education policy and building support for public education among policymakers and the public.

Finally, a big thank you to the AMSD Team of Office Manager Kimberly Jansa, Communications Director Troy Melhus, and Legislative Consultants Kris Amundson and Lori Grivna for their work over the past year. They do a tremendous job serving and supporting AMSD members and it is privilege to work with them.