

CONNECTIONS

News from the Association of Metropolitan School Districts

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Number 11

Building Bridges Behind the Scenes: Citizens in Our Schools Program Explores the Inner Workings of Eden Prairie Schools

September 11, 2026

Board of Directors

Meeting

7 a.m. - 9 a.m.

Quora Education Center
NE Metro 916
Little Canada

September 25, 2026

**Executive/Legislative
Committee Meeting**

7:30 a.m. - 9 a.m.

Anderson Center
Bethel University
Arden Hills

October 2, 2026

Board of Directors

Meeting

7 a.m. - 9 a.m.

Quora Education Center
NE Metro 916
Little Canada

November 10, 2026

Annual Conference

7:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.

Minneapolis Marriott
Northwest

For more information:
[2026 Conference](#)

In the kitchen at Eden Prairie High School (EPHS), two dozen community members watched as Food Services staff baked cookies for students to enjoy the next day. Aparna Agrawal served herself a popular school meal. She hadn't realized so much of the food her students were served wasn't store-bought but made by staff in that very kitchen — and neither did many of the other participants in the first cohort of Citizens in Our Schools.

Just a few months before, 25 members of the Eden Prairie Schools community gathered for the first time to begin a journey that would take them behind the scenes of the district. Over the course of seven months, Citizens in Our Schools participants experienced the inner workings of everything from curriculum to facilities to communications in three-hour sessions. Cohort members rode a middle school bus route with students, sat in on classroom lessons and balanced the district budget with Monopoly money.



"Having one student already in the school district and three more who will join, my wife and I realized that our children lead different lives that we don't know about for eight hours every day," reflected cohort member Alex Borden. "Being able to experience just a little bit of what they experience has been priceless."

A joint effort between the district's Community Engagement and Marketing &

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This month's newsletter highlights the Permanent School Fund Constitutional Amendment and the AMSD member districts with referendum questions on the November ballot. In addition, many districts have important school board races. I want to remind AMSD members that the [2026 Education Issues Guide](#) provides a helpful resource to engage in the electoral process. Please share this valuable guide with your colleagues, parents, and community members to help them make informed decisions in this important election!

From the AMSD Chair, Alison Sherman, Stillwater Board Member

Deepening Community Engagement

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Communications teams, Citizens in Our Schools was first imagined by Superintendent Dr. Josh Swanson as a school district version of the citizens' academies offered by the City of Eden Prairie and its police department. Director of Marketing & Customer Experience Grace Becker, APR had the perfect partner in Molly Malone ('03), director of community engagement & alumni relations, to bring it to life.

Thirty seven people applied for the 25-person cohort, which kicked off its first session with a districtwide scavenger hunt. Along the way, principals welcomed the group as the first of more than 30 Eden Prairie Schools staff members that would connect with participants throughout the experience.

Offering experiences, instead of just presentations, was central to the success of the program. This approach tied back to the district's Strategic Plan and the importance of authentic and personalized learning. "We know kids learn best with hands-on, real-world learning experiences, and that's true of adults also," said Becker. "So we wanted to have people on their feet, involved in learning."

Because the Citizens in Our Schools cohort members came from different backgrounds, had students of different ages and were involved in different ways with the district and the community, it created opportunities for participants to hear questions and understand decisions from different viewpoints. Having a representative cohort that reflected the community was crucial.

"I love moments where I can learn from other people and take their perspective and go, 'Yeah, I wasn't thinking of that,'" said cohort member Anna Oksnevad, who has two children in Eden Prairie Schools as well as a soon-to-be PreK student.



Driving those relationships and "aha" moments were key to Malone's goal of deepening community engagement. "I was really interested in getting to know folks and hopefully inspiring them to continue to engage with us after the program was over," she said. Throughout the program and since its conclusion, cohort members have attended events, trained to become Community Resource Navigators for the district and signed up as volunteers. "We got to know people from different sectors of the community and not only offered a really valuable lifelong learning opportunity for them but also connected them with the district."

At the final Citizens in Our Schools session, Oksnevad and fellow participant David Magare presented about the program at the evening's School Board meeting. Then, Board members recognized the cohort in a mini "graduation" before participants gathered together one last time to share a word for how they were feeling at the end of the program. Some memorable adjectives? "Inspired." "Grateful." "Proud." "Connected."

Agrawal thought back to how the experience impacted her sense of involvement. "Sometimes we ignore when we get notifications to participate in decision making," she said of previous districtwide community engagement opportunities. "But this experience highlighted for me that we should participate in it. It's our voice."

Having grown close throughout the year, cohort members wanted to stay engaged with each other, too. As they trickled from the room that night, many exchanged handshakes, LinkedIn handles and phone numbers. "I feel like that sense of belonging is something we saw at the end," said Malone, "and I'm really proud of it."

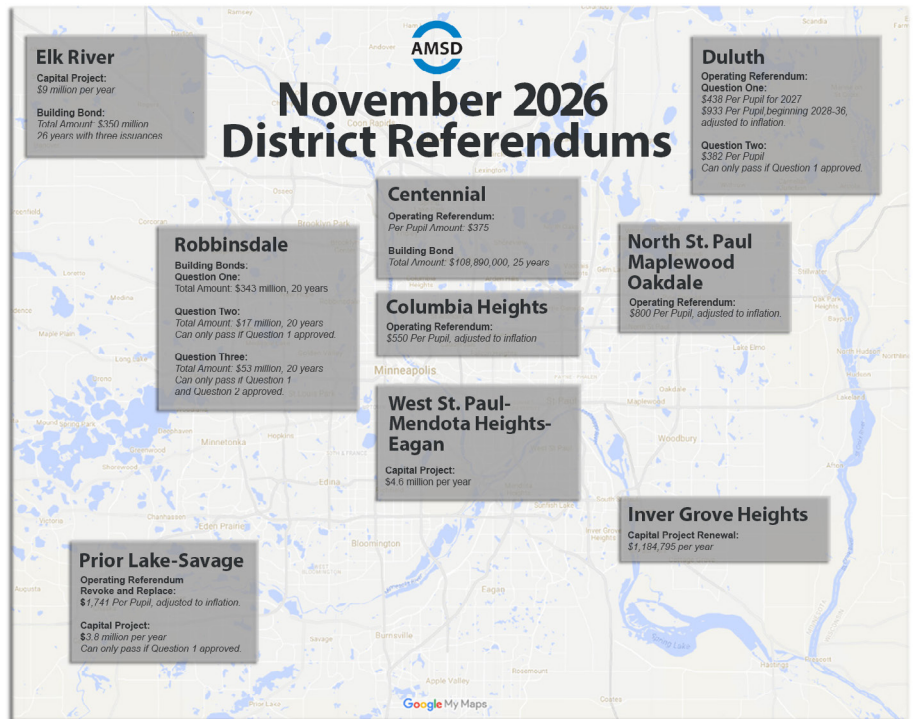
This month's member feature was submitted by Meghan White, Communications Coordinator, Eden Prairie Schools.

Nine AMSD Districts on the November Ballot with Referendums

Nine AMSD school districts will have a total of 15 referendum questions on the ballot on Nov. 3 — speaking to the growing financial challenges Minnesota school districts face as costs continue to outpace funding provided by the state.

The 2026 fall referendums come on the heels of a survey of AMSD member school districts earlier this year projecting a [combined budget shortfall of more than \\$223 million for 2026-27](#), driven by rising operational costs, a reduction in compensatory revenue and special education transportation reimbursement, and new state programs and requirements that are not fully funded.

More than two thirds of AMSD districts surveyed in spring 2026 projected shortfalls including Duluth Public Schools, estimating a \$4 million deficit, and North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale, which projected a \$5 million shortfall. Because school districts are required by state law to operate with balanced budgets, painful budget cuts had to be adopted.



North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale and Duluth are among the five districts with six operating referendum questions on the November ballot. Four districts are seeking capital project levies (one of which is a renewal), and three districts are seeking to approve five bond questions.

A [chart on the AMSD website](#) outlines the AMSD member district referendum questions and includes links to the school district websites where detailed information about the referendum questions can be found. Voters are encouraged to contact their local school officials if they have questions about their school district's referendum.

Why referendums are necessary

The most important source of financial support for school districts comes through the General Education Program. There are several components to the General Education Program with the vast majority provided from basic revenue — often referred to as the basic formula. Basic revenue accounted for about 67.5 percent of general education revenue in FY26 and is used to pay for employee salaries and benefits, supplies, and other operational costs. The basic formula has been [badly eroded by inflation](#) over the last two decades. It would be \$1,474 per pupil higher today if it had simply kept pace with inflation since 2003.

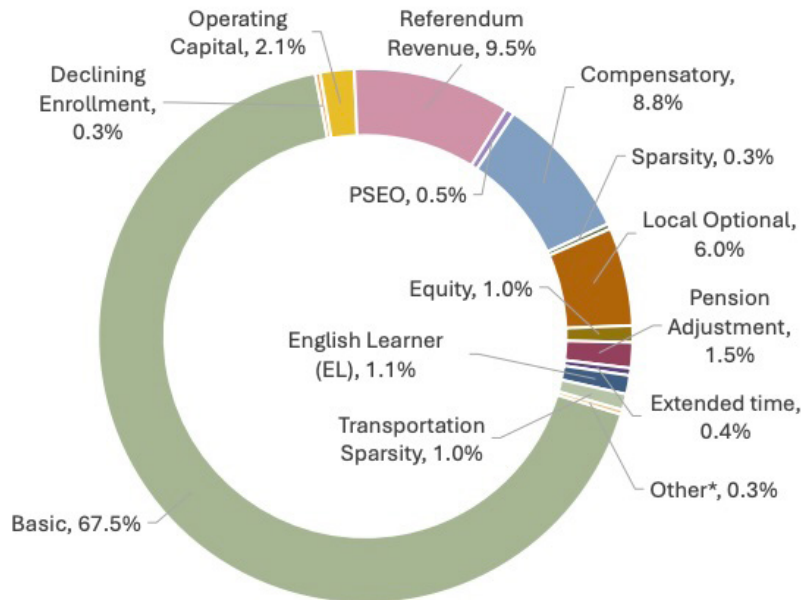
The federal government provides a very modest share of education funding and even that level could drop following adoption of the federal budget this fall. Falling federal revenue and state funding that fails to keep pace with rising costs elevates the importance of local operating referendums in providing the resources school districts need to serve their students.

Education Funding: A State and Local Partnership

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**Note: Fiscal Year 2026, or "FY 2026" is the 2025-2026 school year.*

Figure 1: General Education Program Components (FY 2026)



**Other includes Transition Aid, Small Schools, Gifted & Talented, and various other adjustments.*

Source: [Financing Education In Minnesota 2025-2026, Minnesota House Fiscal Analysis](#)

Education funding in Minnesota has long been a State and local partnership. As illustrated in the graph to the left, two key local levies—voter-approved referendum revenue (9.5 percent) and local optional revenue (6 percent)—provide more than 15 percent of general education revenue. Some school districts receive more than 20 percent of their general education revenue from these sources. Local optional revenue, like the basic formula, has lost considerable ground to inflation since it went into effect in 2014. If it had simply kept pace with inflation since 2014, it would be \$260 per pupil higher today.

Four of the AMSD districts going to voters this fall are seeking Capital Projects referendums, which are most commonly used to ensure safe and secure school

buildings and to provide the technology students need to succeed in our digital economy. The State does not provide a dedicated funding stream for technology, leaving school districts dependent on local capital project levies.

Major building projects are also funded primarily at the local level, and three districts are going to their local voters for building bonds to address facilities needs. The State provides limited funding for deferred maintenance and equipment purchases but new construction, additions to existing buildings, and major renovations are financed by the sale of bonds following the approval of a bond referendum by the voters.

By law each district going out for a referendum is required to provide detailed information about the referendum and project, as well as provide an estimate of costs and the impact on homeowners in the district. The ballot language for the 2026 election is available on the [MN Secretary of State's website](#). Voters can access their sample ballots by entering their address and zip code. Voters are also encouraged to visit their school district website for more specific details and information about their proposed referendums.

AMSD Members Join Legislators, Educators, Students and Parents to Launch ‘Vote Yes’ Campaign for Permanent School Fund Constitutional Amendment

November ballot measure would increase funding for schools — but voters need to “Vote Yes” for the amendment to pass

North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale Supt. Christine Tucci Osorio and Inver Grove Heights Board Member Liz Niemioja joined a group of bipartisan legislators, including Sen. Mary Kunesh (DFL-New Brighton) and Rep. Spencer Igo (R-Grand Rapids), along with students, educators, parents and others on Sept. 1 at the State Capitol, to officially launch the campaign urging Minnesotans to “Vote Yes” on the Permanent School Fund Constitutional amendment on Nov. 3.



Passage of the amendment would modernize the distribution formula from the Permanent School Fund that consists of proceeds of timber sales, mineral leases and investment returns from Minnesota’s estimated 2.5 million acres of public trust land. Under the current constitutional language, only interest and dividends can be distributed from the fund. In recent years, this has resulted in distributions of about 2.5 percent of the fund’s value, even as the fund has averaged 8 percent in annual investment returns over the last decade.

Under the proposed amendment to modernize the Constitutional language, all public schools would receive 4.5 percent of the fund’s value annually (about an additional \$33 per student) based on a three-year rolling average of the fund while still preserving the principal.

Supt. Tucci Osorio spoke in support of the amendment but stressed that it does not reduce the importance of school referendums. Referendums continue to play an integral role in providing the resources our students need to be successful.

The push for the amendment follows recommendations from a 2024 task force commissioned by the Legislature that studied the Permanent School Fund. Voters will see this question on their ballot:

“Shall the Minnesota Constitution be amended to increase the funding going to all school districts from the permanent school fund, which is a fund that supports school districts without raising individual income or property taxes, effective July 1, 2027?”

Importantly, voters must vote “yes” on the amendment or it counts as a no vote. The Minnesota Constitution requires a majority of all people voting in the election to vote yes for a question to pass. Information about the ballot question is available using the links below:

- [LINK: View the Press Conference](#)
- [AMSD WEBSITE: https://www.amsd.org/psf/](https://www.amsd.org/psf/)
- [MSBA Website and Toolkits: https://mnmsba.org/advocacy/permanent-school-fund/](https://mnmsba.org/advocacy/permanent-school-fund/)
- [Minnesota Permanent School Fund Information Site](#)

Resources and information to help advocate for the statewide effort are available using the links below.

- <https://voteyesmnstudents.org/>
- [Facebook page](#)
- [Instagram page](#)