

# CONNECTIONS



News from the Association of Metropolitan School Districts

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Number 4

## Mahtomedi Public Schools Takes Swift Action on READ Act

### January 26, 2024 Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting

7:30 a.m. - 9 a.m.  
Anderson Center  
Bethel University  
Arden Hills

### February 2, 2024 Legislative Session Preview

7:30 a.m. - 9:45 a.m.  
Quora Education Center  
NE Metro 916  
Little Canada

### February 23, 2024 Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting

7:30 a.m. - 9 a.m.  
Anderson Center  
Bethel University  
Arden Hills

### March 1, 2024 Board of Directors Meeting

7 a.m. - 9 a.m.  
Quora Education Center  
NE Metro 916  
Little Canada

When the Minnesota Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act was signed into law on May 24, 2023, Mahtomedi Public Schools was already underway with a multifaceted approach to strengthen literacy programming. Alongside a strong professional development initiative, the district's newly developed [strategic plan](#) in the spring of 2023 provided a base for continued development in the area of literacy. Thanks to strong partnerships with staff, families, and community members, Mahtomedi is using the READ Act as a catalyst for new literacy initiatives and comprehensive reform.

Before the new legislation was signed into law, Mahtomedi Public Schools launched its journey with the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) professional development coursework at Wildwood Elementary School (Grades K-2). LETRS, one of the three State-approved professional development programs approved programs, deepens a teacher's understanding of how a child's brain learns how to read and helps teachers learn research-based strategies to provide explicit and systematic instruction in reading skills that are essential for all students and particularly important for students with reading difficulties and characteristics of dyslexia.



Learn more about LETRS in this [overview video](#) made by Mahtomedi Public Schools in partnership with the Center for Effective School Operations (CESO).

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Happy New Year! It is hard to believe that the 2024 legislative session convenes in just over a month. I am looking forward to sharing our [legislative priorities](#) with legislators at AMSD's annual Session Preview program on **Friday, Feb. 2**. The program will include remarks from Education Commissioner Willie Jett and a legislative panel discussion. As a reminder, please reach out to your local legislators to invite them to this event. The session preview will be a hybrid event with the option to attend in person at the Quora Education Center or to participate virtually. Further details are available [here](#). I look forward to seeing you on Feb. 2!

*From the AMSD Chair, Marcus Hill, West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Board Member*



# Accelerated Action Catalyst for New Literacy Initiatives

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Mahtomedi Public Schools has put considerable time and resources toward LETRS training. The LETRS programming was made possible because of an initial investment in 2018 by the Mahtomedi Area Education Foundation (MAEF). This initial investment helped support two teachers, Judy Livingston and Lindsey Scanlon, who advocated to become LETRS facilitators.



*LETRS Facilitators Judy Livingston and Lindsey Scanlon were recognized by the Mahtomedi School Board in 2023 for their outstanding leadership at Mahtomedi Public Schools.*

During the 2023-24 school year, kindergarten through second-grade teachers at Wildwood Elementary School are using their increased understanding of research-based literacy instruction to make shifts in their instruction. Teachers redesigned their daily schedule to allow for more time for explicit instruction and are implementing new systematic and explicit decoding and spelling instruction. Teachers also monitor student progress weekly and use that information to guide small-group instruction. To reinforce the daily phonics instruction, the district's education foundation donated \$70,000, which allowed the district to purchase 6,178 decodable books. Decodable books are important because they allow students many opportunities to practice the phonics skills they are being taught daily.

Teachers at O.H. Anderson (OHA) Elementary School are part of the second wave of educators participating in LETRS training in Mahtomedi Public Schools. Unlike their primary counterparts, who began with Volume 1, and whose content focuses on phonics and phonemic awareness, the grades 3-5 teachers at OHA are beginning with Volume 2, which focuses more on vocabulary, comprehension, and writing disciplines of literacy. Knowing that both decoding and language comprehension are vital, the district believed it was essential to have teachers begin with the content that was the highest leverage as their starting point. Mahtomedi's professional development plan is a multi-year plan layering learning with implementation being mindful of educators' capacity and the capacity the district and State has to offer training.



*Ms. Deanna Laue is pictured in front of her sound wall in her classroom at Wildwood Elementary School. Sound walls and decodable books are components of the LETRS implementation happening at the school.*

Literacy improvements at the early elementary have not been the only area of focus in Mahtomedi.

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# Legislative Support Needed for LETRS Implementation

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Ashley Putney, special education teacher at Mahtomedi High School, leads her students through phonics, comprehension, and fluency instruction, as well as executive function skills. Foundational literacy skill instruction at a high school level is uncommon, and Ms. Putney has worked with colleagues to develop a program that meets the needs of adolescent readers who continue to need foundational skill support. This work has included vetting the very few resources and strategies that are designed for students in grades 9-12, working with administrators to change scheduling practices, implementing the use of diagnostic assessments, and creating local progress monitoring probes for her students. This explicit reading instruction is set up to engage students in their learning and help them build the skills that will help them succeed in their other classes in high school and in life.

Over the last year, the district has made it a priority to listen and partner with families who have children with dyslexia. This partnership has grown new ways to learn together. The district has held family informational sessions on what the district provides, as well as partnering with outside speakers to share experiences and best practices. Having these conversations also highlighted the need to develop new training materials and support for staff to know how to have conversations with families about the characteristics of dyslexia and the tools to respond.

Mahtomedi Public Schools is committed to proactively supporting the implementation of practices aligned with the Science of Reading. Last year, a district-level Science of Reading committee was established that will oversee and guide the system-wide work that needs to be done to support shifts in literacy instruction. The group has used the district's strategic plan components to establish a district vision and roadmap for literacy improvement. In addition, both elementary schools have established building-level implementation teams that will oversee and support the daily work that comes with changing schedules, different assessments, and new curriculum resources. Superintendent Barb Duffrin shared, "We are grateful for our partnership with staff, families, and the community. With the literacy programs and initiatives we have implemented in the last year and our strong strategic plan, we are committed to ensuring all students can unlock their potential for academic success and thrive today and in their future."

## **Legislative Call to Action**

The READ Act spells out the need for a comprehensive approach to literacy improvement - one that Mahtomedi Public Schools is not alone in having recognized. The level of specificity in the law and the continued refinement from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) have helped districts refine their comprehensive plans. Among the challenges for Mahtomedi and districts around the state is balancing the heavy lift of the professional development with the day-to-day expectations of full-time classroom educators. Mahtomedi has committed to providing meaningful professional development aligned with adult learning theory that aligns with the fidelity of the LETRS program. This comes with challenges that call for legislative support: we need additional professional development time added to our calendar to ensure that our teachers have adequate time for both the asynchronous and synchronous learning experiences. Additional time will also be wisely spent on the practical application of learning in real time. We need additional funding for literacy coaches; meaningful coaching experiences will ensure our educators will integrate their new learning in their classroom contexts and they will gain valuable insights from the actionable feedback gained from their coaching sessions.

*This month's member feature was submitted by Alice Seuffert, Director of Communications, Mahtomedi Public Schools.*



# KnowledgeWorks Report Outlines Strategies for Moving Student-Centered Learning Forward

For years, leaders from Association of Metropolitan School Districts (AMSD) member districts have advocated for state policies that support student-centered learning environments.

In keeping with its mission — **to advocate for member school districts so they can lead the transformation of public education** — AMSD continues to research and support state policy to do just that.

In spring 2023, AMSD, in part with a grant from the Minneapolis Foundation, commissioned the national education nonprofit [KnowledgeWorks](#) to help research current Minnesota law and policy — and then identify, through a statewide survey of education stakeholders, how the state could more effectively support student-centered learning in state law and policy.

KnowledgeWorks began the project by conducting a statewide survey of classroom teachers, school and district leaders, and community members, along with researching Minnesota’s K-12 policies. The group then, with AMSD, held several focus groups through the summer and fall of 2023 to further explore what policies educators felt could further personalize learning and improve competency-based learning environments for students.



*Students at South Washington County Schools' East Ridge High School receiving personalized instruction. (Photo courtesy South Washington Schools)*

The data collected identified three key areas where stakeholders felt state policy could better support student-centered learning opportunities:

- **Fostering a culture of innovation** — build on existing structures to foster a stronger culture of innovation that bolsters personalized and competency-based learning.
- **Creating comprehensive supports for educators and leaders** — integrate customized learning opportunities oriented around personalization into pre-service teaching programs and professional development offerings.
- **Rethinking K-12 assessments** — create opportunities for local communities to explore innovative assessment approaches by creating a pilot program and banks of model performance tasks and engage stakeholders to leverage existing opportunities and create new ones.

KnowledgeWorks then crafted specific recommendations for AMSD and state policymakers to further consider in 2024 and beyond.

## *Culture of Innovation*

Minnesota has several existing laws and policy structures that can allow schools and districts to implement student-centered practices already. [Education Evolving's guide on the topic](#) provides an overview of the currently available flexibilities. KnowledgeWorks recommends that Minnesota could craft a statewide vision for personalizing learning, as well as develop clearer policy language and guidance around how schools and districts can leverage existing structures to create innovative school structures.

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# It's Time to Prioritize Student-Centered Learning

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The state also could create new structures to provide direct support to districts that want to deepen student-centered learning.

## *Comprehensive support for educators and leaders*

Minnesota currently offers opportunities for educators to engage in areas essential to creating personalized learning environments, such as culturally responsive practices and instruction. As a next step, KnowledgeWorks sees an opportunity for Minnesota to build on its existing opportunities for educators to create personalized learning environments by integrating similar opportunities into pre-service and professional development offerings. The state could also consider how existing networks and resources could be retooled to incorporate elements of personalization.

## *Student-centered approaches to K-12 assessment*

Minnesota has previously undertaken meaningful work to reimagine the state's assessment system, notably through a 2017 state working group on rethinking the state's K-12 tests that included AMSD membership. As a next step, the state could reexamine these recommendations and consider how to put them into action. The state could also create resources like pilot programs or banks of model performance tasks to support locally driven assessment innovation.

Support for innovation and student-centered learning opportunities have long been a hallmark of AMSD districts. [AMSD's 2024 Legislative Platform](#) urges state lawmakers to increase student-centered learning opportunities by creating alternative pathways to graduation and allowing students to earn credit for learning wherever it occurs. The platform also urges state policymakers to use the flexibility allowed under the ESSA to reduce the number of required standardized tests so school districts can offer assessments that more accurately measure growth, proficiency, and college or career readiness.

As state education leaders and legislators consider funding and policy initiatives for Minnesota's current and future students, AMSD hopes this research can help guide the development of student-centered learning environments to better serve all students for generations to come.

[LINK: View the full report](#)



*A student at South Washington County Schools' East Ridge High School receives personalized instruction.  
(Photo courtesy South Washington Schools)*