Cybersecurity: Safe Learning Spaces
Strengthen Your School Board with MSBA's Electronic School Board Self-Evaluation
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors/Contributors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><strong>SAFE LEARNING SPACES</strong></td>
<td>Cybersecurity questions every school board should consider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mike Dronen, Executive Director of Technology at Minnetonka Public Schools, and Anthony Padnos, Executive Director of Technology at Osseo Area Schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><strong>STRENGTHEN YOUR SCHOOL BOARD WITH MSBA’S ELECTRONIC SCHOOL BOARD SELF-EVALUATION</strong></td>
<td>Gail Gilman, MSBA Director of Strategic Planning and Board Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><strong>NAVIGATING THE MULTICULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF EDUCATION</strong></td>
<td>Stanton Adams Consulting and the Diversity Institute can assist school districts with their journey into equity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cecilia Stanton Adams, CEO of Stanton Adams Consulting and The Diversity Institute</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td><strong>BUILDING SOMETHING NEW</strong></td>
<td>Dr. Thomas E. Bertrand takes the reins as first executive director of the Consortium of State School Boards Associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MSBA staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>STRAIGHT TALK</strong></td>
<td>Kirk Schneidawind, MSBA Executive Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td><strong>ASK MSBA</strong></td>
<td>Tiffany Gustin, MSBA Associate Director of Management and Insurance Trust Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td><strong>VENDOR DIRECTORY</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td><strong>LEGAL UPDATE</strong></td>
<td>Terence Morrow, MSBA Director of Legal and Policy Services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MSBA thanks Mankato East High School Art Teacher Lorrie Schroeder for sharing her students’ art in this issue.

COVER ART: Audrey S.

Contact MSBA’s Bruce Lombard at blombard@mnmsba.org if you’d like to see your students’ art displayed in a future MSBA Journal magazine.
I have always admired highly effective and successful businesses and organizations. The reasons for success may not always be obvious, but they are there. Whether it is Dairy Queen who has mastered the simple and delicious Dilly Bar or a worldwide Fortune 500 company like Caterpillar that builds earth-shaping behemoths, and more, they have a clear, purposeful, and inspirational vision that guides their work.

MSBA has embarked on a strategic reset. We began the process by seeking and gathering input from our members through a focus group model which included school board members, superintendents and our business/mission partners, individual meetings with the MSBA Board of Directors, listening sessions at our Leadership Conference and an online opportunity. The feedback was an essential element in the development of our strategic goals. One of the defining questions centered on the essential membership services that we provide. “If MSBA were to go away tomorrow, what would you miss most?” The responses to all the questions were helpful, but the response to this specific question helped sharpen our key strategic initiatives. We were able to distill the feedback into four big audacious goals.

For the next three years, MSBA’s strategic goals will focus on making our school boards and public schools better through board development, policy and legal guidance, advocacy, and building a systemic and comprehensive communication approach that supports and promotes our public schools and public education. If I were a veteran school board member familiar with what MSBA does to support our school boards, I would fairly ask, “How is this different than what you do for us today?” On the one hand, it confirms that we have been hitting the mark with respect to the needs and desires of our members, but we also know we want to shift our mindset to prepare our school boards for the current and future landscape in public education. Our school board leaders need to be prepared for today and tomorrow and we are inviting you to shift with us. As a result, we will build upon, enhance, and strengthen our core services that will be guided by our core values of local control, collaboration, equity and inclusion, trust, while also being future-focused.

Our vision, our new why, “Strong School Boards, Stronger Minnesota,” demonstrates that each of the 331 public school boards play an important and vital leadership role in the lives of our students, families, and communities. Each of our strategic goals will be focused on building stronger, high-performing school boards so they are able to create a culture of high expectations and deliverables for their families and communities.

As your MSBA puts our future-focused plan into action over the next three years, we will make it a priority to share our progress along the way. We know this work cannot be done in isolation. Your support and input will be important. While our purpose may not be about constructing the irresistible Dilly Bars or earth-moving machines, our purpose is clear and we aim to deliver.

Kirk Schneidawind is the MSBA Executive Director. Direct questions to Kirk at kschneidawind@mnmsba.org.
Our Core Values:

- Trust
- Future-Focused
- DE&I
- Collaboration
- Local-Control

Strong School Boards
Stronger Minnesota
In an increasingly digital world, K-12 educational institutions embrace technology to enhance and accelerate learning. However, this digital transformation also exposes schools to potential cybersecurity threats. Public school boards must prioritize cybersecurity to protect sensitive data, maintain the integrity of educational systems, and ensure a safe physical and digital learning environment. This article explores some of the critical questions being asked in school districts across the country – providing reflections that every school board would do well to consider fostering a culture of digital security and safeguarding the future of education.

What is my role as a school board member?

As the governing body that sets the vision, establishes policy, supports the superintendency, and approves resources, school boards play a critical and proactive role in ensuring robust cybersecurity for their school districts. By establishing a culture centered around digital security, school boards foster a shared sense of responsibility among staff, students, and parents to practice information security in all aspects of school operations.

What is the role of the superintendent?

As the top executive of the school district responsible for execution of the board vision and policies, the superintendent plays a pivotal role in ensuring robust cybersecurity measures within the organization. They are responsible for establishing data protection and privacy procedures, regular security training for all employees and risk assessments. With a keen awareness of identified risks, the superintendent takes the lead in developing digital security policies and procedures in partnership with district administration, outlining best practices for data protection, network security, training, and incident response. School boards have the responsibility to recognize the significance of allocating sufficient financial and human resources for cybersecurity initiatives, ensuring that the district has the necessary tools, technologies, and expertise to effectively defend against cyber threats. This role of the school board sets the foundation for the entire organization, establishing safeguards around student data, the integrity of their school district, their district’s reputation, and works to reduce risks that threaten a safe and secure school community.

Safe Learning Spaces
Cybersecurity questions every school board should consider
By Mike Dronen, Executive Director of Technology at Minnetonka Public Schools, and Anthony Padrnos, Executive Director of Technology at Osseo Area Schools

Mike Dronen

Anthony Padrnos
allocates resources strategically to fortify cybersecurity defenses. They ensure the development of a digital security response plan, outlining protocols for incident handling and recovery. By fostering cross-departmental collaboration with technology professionals, the superintendent ensures implementation of cybersecurity measures. And critical: prioritizing a senior technology person at the administration or cabinet level allowing for valuable guidance in cybersecurity decision-making, safeguarding educational systems, and creating a secure digital learning environment for all. Several regional K-12 cybersecurity incidents in the last two years took place in districts where the most senior technology professional was not at an administrative or cabinet level.

What is the role of the technology department?

Digital security is everyone’s responsibility. No longer is it just a technology department issue. Digital security is the role of the entire organization to ensure comprehensive digital hygiene is practiced. Yet the school district’s technology department plays a vital role in leading a modern security program through the implementation of risk management, controls management, awareness training, and program compliance, implementing and insisting on best practices. An effective department works proactively to identify and mitigate risks identified during regular vulnerability assessments and control-reviews. Vigilance, situational awareness, and staying current with both the latest cybersecurity practices and threats, technology departments reduce the risk to a successful attack thus helping safeguard both digital and physical learning environments for students, staff, and the entire school community. Their expertise in implementing technical controls serves as a critical line of defense against cyber threats, and kinetic physical threats by bolstering the overall cybersecurity posture of the school district.

Is it inevitable that our district will get hit by a cyberattack?

Your district is being attacked, whether you are aware of it or not. The inevitability of a public school district experiencing a cyberattack has become a stark reality in today’s digital landscape. Education technology leaders now operate under the principle of “not if, but when” and “how bad could it be?” They recognize the constant threat of cyber threats lurking in the virtual world. While the occurrence of a cyberattack may be unavoidable, what truly matters is the school district’s preparation to defend against an attack and its response to an attack. There have been numerous incidents in Minnesota schools that have been identified and halted before any real impact occurred. How a district handles and mitigates the impact of a cyberattack is paramount in maintaining the trust and confidence of its community. More than ever in our challenging political information climate, a school district’s greatest capital lies in the faith that parents, students, and staff have in the institution’s ability to protect sensitive data and provide a secure learning environment. Being well-prepared, well-rehearsed, and nimble at the first indication of an incident – and then transparent in the aftermath of a significant incident – can determine the community’s perception and trust and reinforce the commitment to safeguarding the well-being and future of all stakeholders within the educational ecosystem.

In conclusion

A word of hope. While no one can say they are completely immune to a significant cyber incident, it is critical to understand that the work of information/cybersecurity is ultimately about risk management. Each organization – its administration and school board – need to answer the question, “How much risk are we willing to take?” With comprehensive risk assessments, a maturing risk management practice and agreement, and support to work toward an acceptable risk tolerance level along with adherence to the established set of information security best practices, risk of a significant incident can be greatly reduced.

The digital age offers vast opportunities for K-12 education, but it also brings significant cybersecurity challenges. Public school boards play a crucial role in supporting the protection of their district, students, and staff from cyber threats. By fostering a culture of digital security that prioritizes data protection and privacy, ensuring adequate resources for cyber security, and implementing robust policies and procedures, school boards can support a more safe and secure environment for learning. Collaboration with technology professionals and regular training ensures that schools stay prepared to face the evolving cybersecurity landscape, empowering students to learn and thrive in a digitally connected world. It’s what our children deserve.

Additional resources:


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Mike Dronen is the Executive Director of Technology at Minnetonka Public Schools, and Anthony Padrnos is the Executive Director of Technology at Osseo Area Schools. Direct questions to them at mike.dronen@minnetonkaschools.org and padrnosa@district279.org, respectively.
Strengthen Your School Board with MSBA’s Electronic School Board Self-Evaluation

By Gail Gilman, MSBA Director of Strategic Planning and Board Leadership

Research shows that high-functioning school boards have a positive impact on student learning and development. MSBA strives to provide exceptional services to boards, with the goal of strengthening school board governance practices. To that purpose, since 2017 MSBA has been offering an electronic School Board Self-Evaluation to provide data to boards that guides goal setting for continual improvement.

The School Board Self-Evaluation results reflect the collective responses of the school board-superintendent team (elected board members and superintendent), building a profile of your board’s work based on the five “Standards for School Board Leadership” (Conduct and Ethics, Vision, Structure, Accountability, Advocacy and Communication) — standards that are proven to support student achievement. The board standards will:

• Provide guidelines for responsible school district governance.
• Set and communicate high expectations for student learning with clear goals and plans for meeting those expectations.
• Create conditions district-wide for student and staff success.
• Hold school district accountable for meeting student learning expectations.
• Engage the local community and represent the values and expectations they hold for their schools.
If your district would like to take the School Board Self-Evaluation, a survey link will be sent to your school board chair and/or superintendent.

The School Board Self-Evaluation survey contains 71 questions and takes just 20 to 25 minutes to complete. The self-evaluation surveys are anonymous and targeted to your individual board. As soon as all members of your team have taken the survey, you will be contacted with the summary results within a couple of business days. The survey and basic report are provided as a benefit of your MSBA membership — at no cost to your district.

If your school board would like to dig deeper into the self-evaluation and data, MSBA provides an opportunity to review and discuss your survey data during an in-service.

Contact MSBA’s Gail Gilman, Director of Strategic Planning and Board Leadership at 507-934-8130 or email at ggilman@mnmsba.org for the cost associated with this board in-service and to arrange a date for an MSBA staff member to facilitate.

Grace G.

CJ O.

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Navigating the Multicultural Landscape of Education

Stanton Adams Consulting and the Diversity Institute can assist school districts with their journey into equity

By Cecilia Stanton Adams, CEO of Stanton Adams Consulting and The Diversity Institute

Editor’s Note

You asked. We answered. MSBA has sought out experts in the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) field to provide expertise and guidance to our members.

MSBA’s DEI providers are Kinect Education Group, the YWCA Minneapolis, and Stanton Adams Consulting and the Diversity Institute.

MSBA understands that each school district is unique and may have already started work around DEI or needs help getting started — or is somewhere in-between. MSBA invites your school leaders to reach out to these organizations to find the best fit for your school district.

This edition of the Journal will focus on Stanton Adams Consulting and the Diversity Institute. The July-August 2023 issue took a closer look at the Kinect Education Group. The November-December 2023 magazine will spotlight the YWCA Minneapolis.

Visit https://mnmsba.org/msba-services/student-success-for-all to access resources from these three providers.

Have you, as an educator or administrator, ever grappled with meeting the varied needs of your multicultural student body amidst scarce resources, intricate laws, and a multitude of competing demands?

If so, rest assured that you are not alone in this struggle. I am the CEO of Stanton Adams Consulting and the Diversity Institute based in Minneapolis. With more than 20 years as a strategic Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) expert, I’ve been fortunate to contribute to organizational transformations within various sectors, including educational institutions. In 2010, I co-founded the Diversity Institute with my wife, Malissa Adams, aiming to fill the gap in research, coaching, and training in the DEI arena. The intersection of a growth mindset, an eye for the future, and a holistic model that incorporates families, communities, and the wider world fuels our DEI efforts.

Embracing diversity in the education sector has always held a special place in my heart. I believe that a multicultural student body isn’t a challenge, but a tremendous opportunity. We at the Diversity Institute have developed tailored programs to support school districts in their mission to provide a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment for all students and staff.
A critical part of our strategy involves coaching administrators, teachers, school board leaders, and other dedicated individuals at the frontlines of creating inclusive environments. It’s a fact that “Chief Diversity Officers” have one of the toughest jobs, especially in a world where DEI is rapidly evolving. Through mentorship, we ensure these gifted leaders have the requisite skills, knowledge, and intercultural competency to effectively manage DEI work and define strategic priorities to drive change.

Our offerings extend beyond coaching to engaging keynote presentations that inspire teachers, school board members, and students alike. We craft these keynotes to foster brave spaces for open dialogue, facilitating meaningful conversations that pinpoint and address issues. Each keynote ends with a clarion call-to-action, empowering teams to move forward and effect change.

So, how have we made a difference? In our collaborations with educational institutions, we’ve made strides in implementing sustainable DEI practices. Through faculty development training, we’ve empowered teachers to design and deliver inclusive curriculums that address students’ needs. We’ve engaged in systematic assessments of learning communities to understand their demographic makeup and utilized this data to co-develop strategic plans that cater to diverse student backgrounds.

Our workshops, designed to engage teachers, aim to enhance their ability to create culturally relevant lesson plans. Recognizing that students’ performances are directly tied to their backgrounds and available resources, we’ve guided institutions in understanding the root causes of plagiarism, absenteeism, and suspension rates, particularly as these relate to race, class, and gender.

The Diversity Institute
The Diversity Institute was established in 2010 in response to the pressing need for effective Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) research, coaching, and training. Our mission has always been to ignite transformational change within organizations by fostering leadership development and promoting equity and access.

By combining data-driven insights and personalized strategies, we’ve been able to successfully guide numerous educational institutions, government agencies, and organizations on their journey to create inclusive environments.

We conduct comprehensive assessments of current DEI practices and then, based on these assessments, partner with teachers, staff, and administrators to design strategic, sustainable programs that lead to inclusive, safe, and supportive environments for all students and staff.

Our work extends to coaching and supporting equity leaders within your district, providing them with the coaching and mentorship they need to enhance their DEI skills and navigate the often-complex landscape of change. We firmly believe in the power of growth and learning at all levels and aim to foster an environment where every individual feels empowered to contribute towards building a more inclusive community.

The catalyst for my journey into Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) was my time at Lehigh University. As a graduate student in an environment where many students came from affluent backgrounds and private schools, the contrast to my own upbringing was clear. These experiences made me acutely aware of the unique hurdles faced by students of color and those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Recognizing that fitting into and flourishing in an unfamiliar academic culture can be challenging, I decided to devote my graduate research to understanding unconscious bias and stereotyping.

My opportunity to put what I was learning into practice came when I was invited to serve as the lead consultant on a project focused on increasing the retention of students of color and those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Recognizing that fitting into and flourishing in an unfamiliar academic culture can be challenging, I decided to devote my graduate research to understanding unconscious bias and stereotyping.

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faculty to students, has the potential to learn, evolve, and contribute to a more inclusive environment.

This collaboration extended beyond the university, involving three partner public high schools and several community organizations. Together, we designed the Summer Excel Program, a bridge program for thirty selected students. The program included classroom instruction, mentorship, team-building exercises, and staff training, encapsulating a holistic approach to nurturing an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

The success of the Summer Excel Program became a testament to our collective work. Not only did the Summer Excel students outperform their peers, but the retention rate for participants increased by 30% compared to those who did not participate. This project and personal experience serve as just one example of how a growth mindset, coupled with a holistic approach, can create meaningful change in the educational landscape.

As you navigate the richly diverse landscape of K-12 education, we at Stanton Adams Consulting and the Diversity Institute invite you to embark on this journey with us. Together, we can make education a celebration of diversity, a nurturing ground for inclusion, and a launchpad for every student’s success.

Cecilia Stanton Adams is the CEO of Stanton Adams Consulting and The Diversity Institute. Direct questions to Cecilia at cstanton@stantonadams.com. Visit https://www.stantonadams.com to learn more about Stanton Adams Consulting and The Diversity Institute.

Kinect Education Group

Kinect Education Group is a women-owned and Black-owned diversity education organization that focuses on helping P-20 institutions learn more about how to create an inclusive learning environment. Their unique approach focuses on the critical diversity needs of educational institutions and presents opportunities to achieve belonging and inclusion. The changing demographics of our school systems makes creating a safe place for all students to learn a necessity rather than a nicety.

Kinect Education Group works with all members of the school community. From the playing field to the board room, you’ll find that we know how to help everyone learn about belonging and inclusion. Kinect Education Group has provided training for school boards, teachers, administrators, and students from coast to coast. They also provide critical problem-solving and intervention services. If you are faced with a trying situation that evokes an emotional response from your school community, turn to Kinect Education Group to help you work through the strategies that will make your district stronger.

Many districts use Kinect Education Group for customized training. Their three-step process involves diagnosing your needs, implementing transformational educational programs, and providing an ongoing prescription for continued growth and development. Connect with Kinect Education Group to experience the difference.

Visit https://www.kinecteducationgroup.com to learn more about the Kinect Education Group.

YWCA Minneapolis

YWCA Minneapolis helps organizations of all kinds — business, government, and nonprofit — transform performance through the power of inclusion. Inclusivity is the bedrock of any successful workplace, and is a guiding principle that nurtures understanding, opportunity, and harmony between employees. By appreciating the differences and commonalities of its people, your team can create a more productive, innovative, and positive work environment that drives better business results.

The YWCA Minneapolis’ Inc.lude™ Diversity and Inclusion Consulting empowers your organization to build more inclusive and productive workplaces for all your employees. Through diversity, equity, and inclusion training programs, the YWCA Minneapolis will work with you to help improve employee dynamics — delivering improvements to your bottom line in the process. Making a Difference.

Together, you and your YWCA Minneapolis diversity and inclusion consultant can craft a custom solution to achieve your organization’s diversity and inclusion goals, whether those include simple assessments or the development of new inclusivity initiatives.

Visit https://www.ywcampls.org to learn more about YWCA Minneapolis.
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Achieving Our Clients’ Goals Since 1947
The Consortium of State School Boards Association (COSSBA) was founded in 2021 by a group of state school boards associations – including the Minnesota School Boards Associations – that broke off from the National School Boards Association (NSBA).

During a meeting in January 2023, the COSSBA Board of Directors named Dr. Thomas E. Bertrand as its first executive director. He assumed his new position with COSSBA on July 1, 2023.

Bertrand had been serving as the executive director of the Illinois Association of School Boards (IASB) since 2018. Before his time with IASB, Bertrand worked in education for more than 30 years — as a teacher, coach, principal, and superintendent. The Illinois Association of School Administrators named Bertrand Illinois’ Superintendent of the Year in 2015. He also worked as an adjunct professor at Eastern Illinois University and Illinois State University.

In the following interview, Bertrand lists COSSBA’s goals and core values, reveals what makes COSSBA different from NSBA, and lays out what makes him qualified for this new position.

MSBA: What are the primary goals and objectives of the Consortium of State School Boards Associations?

DR. THOMAS E. BERTRAND: COSSBA is a nonpartisan, national alliance of state school boards associations that is dedicated to sharing resources and information to assist state organizations focused on supporting local school board members. We know that strong, effective school board associations produce excellence in local school boards, which produces positive outcomes for students and their families.

Every activity, service, and resource of COSSBA will reflect the Association’s Core Values. The Association is committed to being:

• focused on and responsive to the members – the state school boards associations.
• transparent and efficient in operations.
• reflective and relevant.
• representative and accountable.
• unified whenever possible.

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In the following interview, Bertrand lists COSSBA’s goals and core values, reveals what makes COSSBA different from NSBA, and lays out what makes him qualified for this new position.
What sets COSSBA apart from the National School Boards Association?

BERTRAND: The Core Values are the foundation upon which the Association is built and are embedded in the bylaws. The governance structure is unique, representative, and transparent. A rotation ensures that every state association will have the opportunity to serve on the COSSBA Board of Directors and in leadership.

The dues formula for member associations is simple and transparent and reflects COSSBA’s commitment to return on the investment by the state associations.

The Association’s approach to federal advocacy reflects a commitment to a focused, limited agenda that unifies the membership.

Early in the planning stage of the Association, the governing body expressed a strong commitment to supporting boards facing the most challenging of environments.

COSSBA’s Urban Board Alliance (UBA) program offers support and learning opportunities to all school boards at no additional cost. The UBA Advisors removed the barrier of member dues and committed to welcoming all school boards by opening all UBA events to any school board member.

COSSBA is also committed to operating efficiently and to responsibly managing its resources.

MSBA: What will you be bringing to the table as the first executive director of COSSBA?

BERTRAND: Prior to coming to the Illinois Association of School Boards (IASB) in 2018, I served 33 years in K-12 public education. I served as a school administrator for 28 years at various levels and superintendent of schools for 16 years. I served at three different universities as an adjunct professor to aspiring school principals and superintendents. I also obtained certification as a leadership coach which has served me well in my role as Executive Director in Illinois. My experience at IASB, my involvement in the planning and launch of COSSBA, and my working relationship with the executive directors of the state associations will serve me well in this new role.

Starting a new national organization is a rare opportunity. I am excited to have this opportunity to do that and to continue to serve as an advocate for public education. The success of the COSSBA UBA Symposium in September, Leadership Conference in January, and inaugural conference and UBA Day in March demonstrate that the Association is off to a terrific start with quality, timely programming for school board members and state associations. I am looking forward to leading this effort.

Visit https://www.cossba.org to learn more about COSSBA.
Houston was the first in his family to graduate from college, earning a bachelor’s degree from Concordia University, St. Paul, and a master’s degree from Hamline University. In addition to teaching at Harding, Houston also works as adjunct professor at Concordia, teaching math classes to prospective elementary teachers.

Houston’s 19-year career at Harding includes 18 years as a football coach – 10 of which he was head coach. At Harding, Houston is the mathematics department chair, a learning team facilitator and union steward.

“Michael is passionate about his students and works tirelessly to engage them in the study of mathematics,” wrote Kimberley Nichols, a Gordon Parks High School math teacher who previously worked with Houston at Harding and served with him on the SPPS district mathematics team.

“His ability to engage all students, particularly students of color, is exceptional; partly due to his lived experiences as a teacher of color and to his determination to help all students achieve success. He meets students where they are, and inspires them to learn deeply. His passion and dedication to equity and culturally responsive instruction has made a tremendous difference in the lives of the students he works with every single day.”

Houston says his teaching philosophy “has always been centered upon creating classroom community. In the wake of the pandemic and the ongoing trauma our Harding students have endured, my goal every day is to make sure they have fun in their learning and know they are loved.”

In the following interview with MSBA, Houston touts his school community, reveals what he does to make math more relevant to his students, and shares what he does to create a “classroom community.”

**MSBA: Congratulations on earning the Minnesota Teacher of the Year Award. What does this award mean to you?**

**MICHAEL HOUSTON:** To be named 2023 Minnesota Teacher of the Year is a tremendous honor and privilege personally, but it’s also a recognition that I share with the students and staff in the Harding community.

Over the last couple of years, St. Paul Public Schools and particularly East St. Paul has received a great deal of negative press. I want this award to help shed light on the many positive things going on in our community. Harding students are some of the most diverse, personable, and thoughtful young people I’ve encountered. There isn’t a day that goes by where I don’t share a laugh with my students – or learn something interesting about their culture or personally about their lives.

In addition to the amazing students the Harding community has, we also have the most dedicated and committed staff. As classroom teachers we do our best to serve our students...
by wearing many hats including educators, coaches, mentors, parents, and, at times, therapists. Daily, the staff goes beyond capacity to meet our students’ needs. I couldn’t be more proud to serve our students and work with such an incredible staff.

**MSBA: What’s your secret for getting students to learn math?**

**HOUSTON:** I don’t really have a secret for getting students to learn math. However, what has helped increase engagement is making mathematics relevant. Since distance learning due to COVID, I have aimed to implement a lot of personal finance themes within Algebra 2 concepts. Some units I have covered include taxes, retirement through sequences, investing through exponential functions, programming through quadratics, and entrepreneurship through quadratics.

**MSBA: You said your teaching philosophy is “centered upon creating classroom community.” What methods or practices do you use to create a classroom community?**

**HOUSTON:** When I think back to my favorite teachers, one of the common qualities that they shared was creating classroom community. A strong classroom community is modeled by making sure that all students – from the most vocal to the most quiet – feel welcome and have a sense of belonging.

I try to make all students feel welcome in a variety of the following ways: greeting them every day by name; getting to know about students’ personal lives; reciprocating and sharing information about my life; and at times having side conversations about current events or whatever is relevant.

All students should feel like contributors to the classroom community and have a voice to do so. This allows me to gain trust with my students which grants me the opportunity to teach them mathematical content.

**MSBA: What can school board members and superintendents do to help teachers?**

**HOUSTON:** Simply put, school board members and superintendents can help teachers by giving us a voice, respecting us, and celebrating the work we do to serve our students.

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Finding an answer to someone’s question. Also, creating something new.

What were the last books you read?
“High Conflict” by Amanda Ripley and a Virgil Flowers book by John Sanford.

What’s your favorite film of all time?

What’s an essential part of your daily routine?
Touching base with my spouse – especially when we are going in different directions on some days.

What is your bucket list?
Buy an Indian Motorcycle, restore a Cadillac I have, and travel to Alaska.

What song would you say best sums you up?
“Here Comes the Sun” by The Beatles.

What skill would you most like to learn?
How to fly an airplane.

What makes you the most proud?
My family and my children’s families.

What was one new experience you’ve tried that was completely unknown or uncomfortable to you at the time you tried it?
Playing baseball for the first time in a 50s league – I was “way out of my league.”

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During the 2023 legislative session, Minnesota became the fourth state to offer universal free meals for all students. The law was effective July 1, 2023; as the 2023-2024 school year begins, your MSBA staff has received many questions related to this change.

QUESTION: How does the program work?

ANSWER: The Minnesota Department of Education’s Food and Nutrition Services staff administer the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Child Nutrition Programs including the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. Through these programs, federal funding reimburses school districts on a per meal basis for all meals, based on student eligibility. The state also provides a per meal reimbursement.

Let’s look at lunches …

Before the law took effect, federal reimbursement covered most of the lunch cost for students who qualified for free meals. Federal reimbursement for reduced-price lunches was slightly less, which left the student’s family responsible to pay 40 cents per lunch. However, the state of Minnesota reimbursed an additional 40 cents for each reduced-price lunch, so students whose income qualified them for reduced-price meals also received free lunches. For students who did not qualify for free or reduced-price meals, the federal government still provided a small reimbursement, as did the state. Families were responsible for paying most of the lunch cost. The following chart shows a breakdown of the lunch reimbursements, along with the share paid by the student’s family. (Note: The amount of the federal reimbursement paid differs slightly in some school districts.)

Under the new law, the state will increase its reimbursement amount to cover the amount currently paid by students’ families to allow all students to receive free lunches.

As shown in the graphs, the reimbursements paid for students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches will not change.
However, there will be a significant increase in the amount the state reimburses for paid lunches.

**QUESTION:** Are meals for staff also free under this law?

**ANSWER:** No. Teachers, staff, and other adults will continue to pay for their meals. The federal government does not provide any reimbursement for adult meals. Further, it requires adult meals be priced high enough to cover the cost of the meal and annually establishes minimum pricing levels.

**QUESTION:** Do families still need to complete the Application for Educational Benefits?

**ANSWER:** Yes! The federal government will continue to reimburse meals eaten by students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals. To maximize federal reimbursement, it is important for the students whose families qualify for free and reduced-price meals to complete the form to determine eligibility. In addition, other programs use this data to calculate funding support.

**QUESTION:** Can students choose to have a second carton of milk, a second meal, or one or more ala carte items for free under this law?

**ANSWER:** No. Additional cartons of milk or juice, second meals, and ala carte items are not reimbursable. To be reimbursed, meals must meet the nutritional guidelines established by the federal government.

**QUESTION:** Our school district has a significant balance in our food service fund (fund 2). Can we transfer money out of food service?

**ANSWER:** No. While statute requires a fund transfer be made from the general fund to the food service fund if a deficit is present for two consecutive years, transfers cannot be made from the food service account to another fund.

**QUESTION:** Can we use food service funds to remodel the kitchen to accommodate the anticipated increase in the number of meals served?

**ANSWER:** No. Federal law prohibits the use of food service funds to add to the permanent value of the building. Therefore, facility improvements (remediating, repairing, rearranging, or remodeling) are not an allowable use of food service funds. However, certain food service equipment can be purchased with food service funds.

MS 124D.111, Subd. 3 outlines the allowable uses of food service funds. The statute states, “the costs of processing applications, accounting for meals, preparing and serving food, providing kitchen custodial services, and other expenses involving the preparing of meals or the kitchen section of the lunchroom may be charged to the food service fund.” The statute further states “the costs of lunchroom supervision, lunchroom custodial services, lunchroom utilities, and other administrative costs of the food service program must be charged to the general fund.” An exception to include these costs in the food service fund exists if a surplus exists for three consecutive years.

Contact your MSBA staff if you have additional questions. You can also refer to the Minnesota Department of Education’s website at https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/FNS/SNP/free for additional information on the program.

Tiffany Gustin is the MSBA Associate Director of Management and Insurance Trust Services. Direct questions to Tiffany at tgustin@mnsmba.org.
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What We Did Together This Summer: New Laws, the Breadth/Specificity Spectrum, and Legislative Intent

By Terence Morrow, MSBA Director of Legal and Policy Services

“Historic” — virtually every discussion of the new Minnesota K-12 education laws and funding passed in 2023 includes this word. Not surprisingly, historic legislation led to intensive work by school boards and administrators over the summer to understand the new laws and to prepare to implement them across timelines that were both optimistic and, at times, frustrating. As Minnesota state agencies and departments were tasked with creating the programs, services, and trainings that support the new laws, they too were challenged to provide answers to school districts concerned about implementation and compliance.

The scope of the changes to Minnesota’s K-12 education landscape would have been daunting on its own. However, the situation became complicated by vagaries inherent in the very nature of crafting state laws. Laws must be written broadly enough to cover the range of situations that legislators seek to address. At the same time, laws must provide sufficient specificity and clarity for the public and for those who are responsible for ensuring that their organizations are following the law (including school board members, administrators, and staff). The resulting tension between broadly written laws and the need for specificity — the breadth/specificity spectrum — must be recognized and addressed by lawmakers if new laws are to be followed. The challenges associated with the breadth/specificity spectrum for those charged with implementing new laws often raise questions regarding definitions. Not every term in a new law can be defined. With that said, however, legislators may assume that their understanding of a term is shared with those who must follow the law.

An example can be found in Minnesota’s new law regarding opiate antagonists, such as Narcan, that can reverse an overdose. The new law states: “a school district or charter school must maintain a supply of opiate antagonists … at each school site …. Each school building must have at least two doses of a nasal opiate antagonist available on site.”

Almost immediately, school administrators asked fundamental definitional questions: what is a “school site” and a “school building.” Both terms may seem clear on the surface, but this is not the case for those who must follow the law. For example, schools inquired whether a maintenance shop without students was a “school building” or whether athletic fields or ice sheets (sometimes not geographically connected with school class buildings) were “school sites.”

In addition to specificity questions related to new laws, school boards and administrators sometimes struggle to figure out the legislative intent underlying new legislation. The unspoken belief is that they will be able to implement laws if they knew the goals that lawmakers were trying to accomplish.

An example arose this summer as Minnesota schools worked to implement a new and immediately effective law: schools “may not designate a student’s home address, telephone
number, email address, or other personal contact information as directory information.” Over the summer, schools across the state received data requests asking for parent home addresses, which many schools designate as directory information in part because parents often seek to reach out to other parents. Recognizing that “parent home address” is often the same as “student home address,” it became unclear this summer whether schools should provide the parent home addresses in light of the new law. Whether they provided the parent home addresses upon request or not, schools feared, they might be subject to legal liability.

Minnesota’s schools and school boards are committed to implementing new laws affecting K-12 education. They continue to be ready to work with Minnesota’s lawmakers and rulemaking agencies and departments to reduce the issues arising from the breadth/specificity spectrum, the lack of clarity regarding legislative intent, and other concerns that can impede accurate and effective implementation and compliance.

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I-State Truck Centers .......................................... Page 22
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Knutson Construction .......................................... Page 33
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Minnesota Propane Association ............................. Page 9
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