

CONNECTIAMS^{DS}NS

News from the Association of Metropolitan School Districts

October 2025

Volume 23

Number 1

Experiential Learning Personalizes Education for Minnetonka Students

October 31, 2025 Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting

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

Anderson Center
Bethel University
Arden Hills

November 7, 2025 Board of Directors Meeting

7 a.m. - 9 a.m.

Quora Education Center
NE Metro 916
Little Canada

November 11, 2025 Annual Conference

7:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.
Minneapolis Marriott
Northwest

Register here:

[2025 Conference](#)

November 21, 2025 Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting

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

Anderson Center
Bethel University
Arden Hills



Preschoolers participate in daily discovery walks as part of the Nature Adventure class. The walks provide rich opportunities for students to experience the curricular topics they are exploring, from colors and shapes to life cycles.



"Discovery!" The call echoed through the wood, repeated and answered by a chorus of tiny voices: "Discovery!" "Discovery!"

A preschooler gestured excitedly to an upturned log on the side of the walking trail. At first, the discovery was not easily visible, but as the teacher and rest of the class approached (and then crouched, as needed, to the perfect three-foot-high vantage point that four-year-olds hold effortlessly), it came into view—two June bugs. A hush came over the group as they watched. Then, a river of questions began to flow. "Are they burying themselves?" "Are they making a home in the log?" "Why are they called June bugs?"

Each of the questions, and the well of curiosity they represent, provides a bridge for teacher Kendra Johnson to connect what students are experiencing to curriculum topics and skills. Because of that, announcing when there is a "discovery!"—like the June bugs—is an integral part of "Nature Adventure," the class for four-year-olds that Johnson teaches at [Minnetonka Preschool](#).

"When I find something, I announce that I have a discovery, and students come over to see what it is. I also encourage the students to share when they have one," said Johnson. "Some of the best things we've found have been from preschoolers—a family of mice living in a log, mushrooms, ants and eggs, a baby bunny, and so much more!"

Now in its fourth year, the preschool class takes place three afternoons each week in the Minnetonka

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Registration is now open for the annual AMSD/BrightWorks conference on Nov. 11. The theme of the conference is *Sharper Focus, Stronger Outcomes*. The keynote address will be delivered by internationally renowned education researcher Dr. Dylan Wiliam. The agenda also includes compelling breakout sessions from AMSD members and a timely presentation by Dr. Alyssa Parr and Dr. Mengchen Su from the University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement who will examine mental health challenges among K-12 students. Further details, including registration information, can be found [here](#). I hope to see you there!

From the AMSD Chair, Jim DeMay, Mounds View Board Member

Experiential Learning: Where the Lesson Meets Real Life

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Community Education Outdoor Learning Center (OLC). Weather permitting, students stay outside for the entire three-hour class period, moving between the OLC, the playground and the nature trails that wind through the Deephaven woods along the shore of Lake Minnetonka.

"The materials in these areas are different from what would be used in a traditional classroom, but children are still learning the same essential skills," Johnson explained. This encompasses authentic literacy and math skills to fine motor skills to how to interact with their peers and solve problems. "Instead of reading about life cycles in a book first, we might find ants and eggs and discover this naturally. We can then read books to expand this knowledge in a way in which students are leading their learning and inquiring about the things they find."

Experiential learning is not limited to one class, one age level or one subject area. Across the school district, Minnetonka Public Schools' students engage with their learning in hands-on ways, guided and supported by expert educators who are skilled in helping them to draw the connections between their experiences and the curricular goals they represent.

"When we say something is 'experiential learning,' we mean that it is where the lesson meets real life," said Minnetonka Schools Superintendent David Law. "Students connect what they learn in the classroom with real-world contexts, whether that is through a research project, a field trip, a visit with an industry professional, or working collaboratively with community leaders to address a challenge related to an academic subject area. It is a key component of how our District provides an engaging and personalized educational journey for each student."

This shows up in many forms and is offered both within specific programs—such as the [District's K-12 Language Immersion](#) program (offered in Spanish and Mandarin Chinese), Minnetonka High School's [VANTAGE Advanced Professional Studies](#) program, [MOMENTUM Design and Skilled Trades](#) program, and the [Minnetonka Research](#) program, among others—and as an integrated extension of core curriculum.

"Minnetonka's signature programs are experiences that enrich our students' academic journeys," said Dr. Amy LaDue, Associate Superintendent for Minnetonka Schools. "Each one offers engaging pathways that empower students to pursue learning and skill development according to their individual interests, plans and passions. These courses connect students with opportunities and inspire future goals, creating possibilities."

Registration for the Nature Adventure preschool class has consistently filled up within minutes of opening. Across the District, the Language Immersion program is growing, and at the High School, the VANTAGE, MOMENTUM and Minnetonka Research programs continually expand their offerings to engage an ever-widening array of both student interests and industry needs, so that graduates will be prepared to make an impact in the dynamic world they will enter.

"When students can make that connection and truly understand how a concept like civics or physics fits into and impacts their lives—when they can see how knowledge is a key that opens a door, or propels an idea—that's when the magic happens," Superintendent Law said. "We see excitement build and engagement bloom."

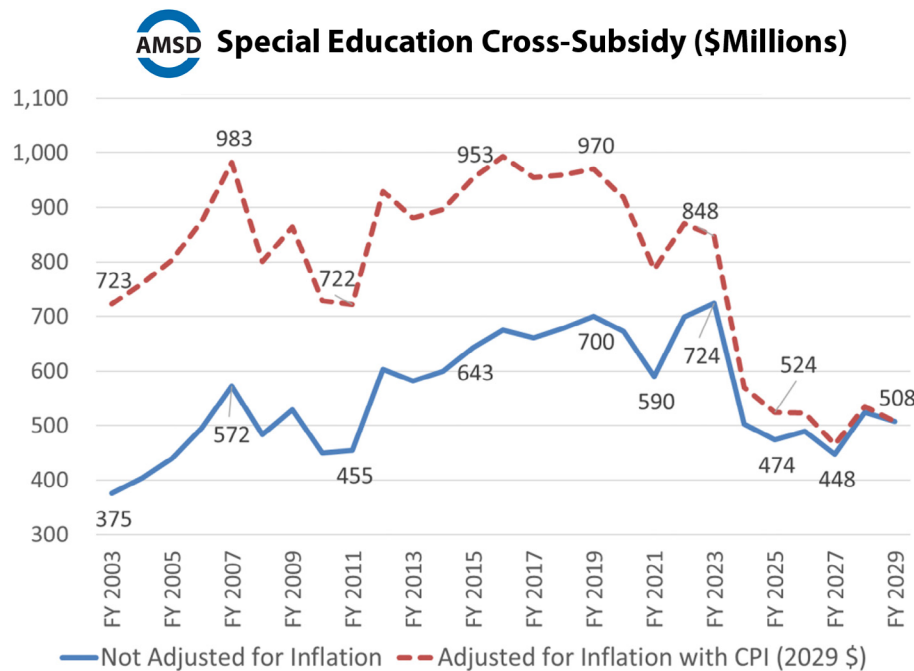
Learn more about Minnetonka Schools and its focus on experiential learning at www.minnetonkaschools.org

This month's member feature was submitted by Mary Cornelius, Communications Specialist, Minnetonka Public Schools.

Despite Progress, Special Education Cross-Subsidy Continues to Strain School District Budgets

The 2023 Legislature made significant progress toward addressing the overwhelming special education shortfalls faced by school districts. Specifically, the 2023 Education Bill increased special education cross-subsidy reduction aid from 6.43 percent to 44 percent for FY24, FY25, and FY26 and further increased cross-subsidy reduction aid to 50 percent beginning in FY27.

The recently released [FY24 Special Education Cross-Subsidies report](#) shows the impact of the investments included in the 2023 education bill. The Minnesota Department of Education is required to annually submit a cross-subsidy report to the legislative committees having jurisdiction over K-12 Education. The report shows the total statewide cross-subsidy, as well as the amount each district is subsidizing special education costs with general education revenue.



Source: Minnesota Department of Education, July 2025

As the graph shows, following the passage of the 2023 education bill, the FY24 cross-subsidy declined from \$724.4 million to \$502.6 million. Specifically for AMSD districts, the FY24 cross-subsidy is a combined \$368.2 million — making up nearly 75 percent of the state's total. The total cross-subsidy is projected to further decrease to \$474.1 million in FY25 before climbing to nearly \$490 million in FY26, but then drop to \$448.1 million in FY27 when cross-subsidy reduction aid increases to 50 percent.

However, legislation approved in the 2025 legislative session will likely result in the cross-subsidy rising significantly again. The 2025 education bill created a Blue-Ribbon Commission on Special Education charged with identifying \$250 million in cost savings in the 2028-29 biennium. If the commission fails to identify \$250 million in savings, the cross-subsidy reimbursement percentage will be reduced proportionately to reach the \$250 million target. In addition, special education transportation aid was cut in the 2025 education bill. The bill lowered the reimbursement of special education pupil transportation expenditures from 100 percent of eligible costs to 95 percent of eligible costs for FY26 and to 90 percent of eligible costs for FY27 and later.

Insufficient special education funding has a tremendous financial impact on AMSD member school districts, ranging from \$628 per pupil in outer-ring metro suburbs to more than \$1,240 per pupil in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

Further complicating the challenge for school districts is the issue of "tuition billing," whereby a serving school district or charter school is allowed to bill back significant portions of special education costs to a student's resident school district. For charter schools, the average per pupil cross-subsidy for charter schools is just \$255. In FY24-25, AMSD districts spent more than \$76.4 million of their general education

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Blue-Ribbon Commission Charged with Identifying \$250 Million in Savings

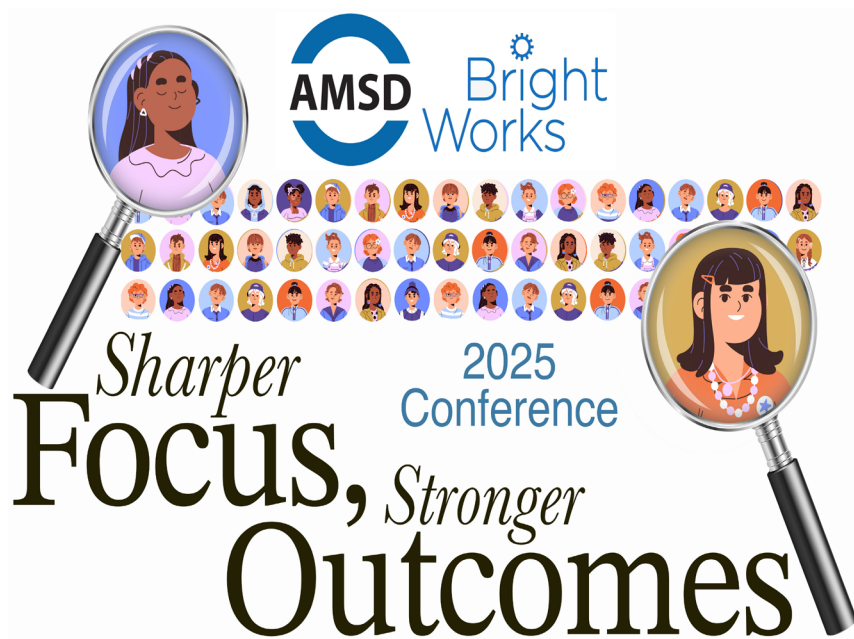
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revenue on special education costs for resident students attending charter schools.

AMSD members are hopeful the Blue-Ribbon Commission on Special Education will examine this and other important issues. The Commission will hold its first meeting on Oct. 8. Several appointees to the commission represent AMSD districts, including Anoka-Hennepin Supt. Cory McIntyre; John Carlson, Chief Administrator, Rochester Public Schools; Saint Paul Public Schools Supt. Stacie Stanley; and Intermediate District 287 Supt. Marcy Doud.

- [LINK: View the FY24 Special Education Cross-Subsidy Report](#)
- [LINK: View the AMSD FY24 Special Education Cross Subsidies](#)

Annual AMSD/BrightWorks Conference



Registration is open for: “Sharper Focus, Stronger Outcomes,” a conference co-sponsored by AMSD and BrightWorks on Tuesday, Nov. 11. The keynote speaker will be **Dr. Dylan Wiliam**, an international education expert. Dr. Wiliam stresses that we need to prepare young people for a world we cannot imagine and that students will need higher levels of achievement. To attain that goal, we need to ensure that investments focus on the things with the greatest benefit for students. Right now, 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.

In addition, **Dr. Alyssa Parr** and **Dr. Mengchen Su** from the University of Minnesota’s Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement will examine mental health challenges among K-12 students. Their presentation will cover (a) the current state of student mental health, (b) strategies for building comprehensive school mental health systems, and (c) next steps in a [statewide study](#) informing improvements in the availability, accessibility, and effectiveness of mental health care provided through schools.

- [LINK: Registration is now open](#)
- [LINK: View the Conference Webpage](#)