

Julia Kicker | 2025 Board Candidate

NOVEMBER 26, 2024

Julia Kicker | Menahga

Experience with Current School/District: I have lived in the Menahga School District for 26 years and am a school board member, currently running for a third term. I am an active member of the City of Menahga and Menahga school. I coordinate the “Get Hooked on Fishing Not on Drugs” program for Menahga’s 4th grade class, a role I have passionately held for 22 years. I also serve on the Board of Directors for Sourcewell, bringing valuable insights back to our school and community.

Experience in Education Sector:

- Menahga School Board
- Menahga City Council
- Sourcewell Board of Directors

Experience in Rural Sector: Serving on these boards has provided a solid foundation in rural development. I have focused on bringing additional academic choices for our students, researching community needs for stable industries, housing, and childcare, and being part of a group bringing mental health resources to our community. I am committed to our community’s future, watching our students and community thrive.

Other Relevant Experience: Raised in a home where my parents did foster care for 35 years, my husband and I have continued this legacy for over 20 years, adopting 10 children. This experience has given me compassion and understanding of the challenges people face and the importance of helping everyone feel they belong.

Why MREA? I have lived in rural Minnesota most of my life, witnessing the achievements of our students and the evolution of our schools. I want to continue being part of this process, offering the same opportunities to all rural schools. MREA truly has the best interest of all rural students, and I would be honored to influence decision-making that impacts all rural students and schools.

What Excites You About MREA’s Work? MREA’s work is truly about and for us. While statewide conferences often focus on larger districts, MREA ensures rural schools are represented. I am excited to bring our needs to lawmakers and advocate for better education and financial support in rural Minnesota.

Challenges for MREA in the Next 4 Years:

1. Funding.
2. Keeping government and larger school agendas out of our buildings.

Opportunities for MREA in the Next 4 Years:

1. Growing career and workforce development opportunities for rural schools.
2. Advocating for funding related to mandated legislation.

Expertise and Skills to Strengthen MREA's Ability to Deliver on Its Mission:

- Human Resources
- Event Planning
- Public Policy/Advocacy
- Accounting

Additional Skills and Expertise: I bring open and honest dialogue, enthusiasm, dedication, leadership, and heart to everything I do. I have managed and participated in numerous nonprofit and for-profit events. I would be honored if you put your trust in me.

Jenna Fromm | 2025 Board Candidate

NOVEMBER 26, 2024

Jenna Fromm | Pine City

Experience with Current School/District: I live in Pine City, MN. Three of my children have graduated, and one is set to graduate this year. Due to their rural education, they have participated in arts and athletics, and three have graduated from university. I have enjoyed the best of rural education for my children.

Experience in Education Sector: I have attended hundreds of school board meetings for various rural school districts throughout Minnesota over the past nine years. Observing the different leadership styles and power balances between administration and board members has been intriguing. Public involvement and education tensions have given me a front-row seat to well-handled heated moments and standoffs. Effective leadership requires finding common ground, common goals, and unity of purpose to do the best for our students.

Experience in Rural Sector: This year, I participated in the Chamber of Commerce Program, Leadership MN. We explored each region of Minnesota, examining the industry and careers available. From taconite mining, forestry, and paper mills in the Iron Range to Taylor Corp with printing and Cambria in solid surface manufacturing, I have seen the pathways our rural students can embark on for their careers.

Other Relevant Experience: Growing up in a small town and attending a local K-12 school shaped my early years. Recognizing the unique opportunities small schools provide, my family and I moved to a rural community when my children reached school age. Over the years, I have been a coach, teacher, and bus driver, gaining firsthand insight into the challenges and opportunities of rural education.

As the CEO of a student transportation company for the past nine years, I have served 28 school districts across Minnesota—mostly rural. I understand the critical role transportation plays in ensuring equal access to education. My diverse background—experiencing rural education, working in various school roles, and leading a company supporting rural education—equips me with a unique perspective.

Why MREA? I have a unique perspective on rural education that spans Minnesota. Our company serves 28 school districts, with 27 being MREA members. I want to share the rural business perspective and prepare our students for jobs post-graduation. We have developed a diesel tech training program for high school students, offering a great opportunity for rural students to explore a career in their area.

What Excites You About MREA's Work? I love MREA's communications, legislative updates, and advocacy for rural Minnesota, which is sorely needed in an environment unfairly focused on the metro area. I want to influence policies to benefit all of Minnesota.

Challenges for MREA in the Next 4 Years:

1. Equity in funding for rural schools.
2. Moratorium on mandates.

Opportunities for MREA in the Next 4 Years:

1. To be heard and share stories of rural education benefits.
2. Emphasize the importance of equity for all communities.

Expertise and Skills to Strengthen MREA's Ability to Deliver on Its Mission:

- Strategic Planning
- Public Policy/Advocacy
- Public Speaking

Additional Skills and Expertise: In my business group, we have presenters and speakers eight times a year. Matching MREA's needs with what these professionals can bring may be beneficial.

Melissa Sparks | 2025 Board Candidate

NOVEMBER 26, 2024

Melissa Sparks | Henning

Experience with Current School/District: I am starting my 4th year as Superintendent with the Henning Public School district.

Experience in Education Sector: I actively serve on several local and regional boards:

- Lakes Country Service Cooperative Advisory Council
- Region 6A MSHSL Committee
- Freshwater Education District

Experience in Rural Sector: I serve on the Landmark Center Board in Henning as secretary. The Landmark Center supports the arts in our rural community by hosting workshops and bringing in artists. I am also an active member of the Henning Lions Club, supporting the community and school district through various projects and fundraisers, and I sit on the local Henning Advisory Committee for Astera Health.

Other Relevant Experience: I am in my 30th year in education, having spent my entire career in rural Minnesota. Before becoming Superintendent in Henning, I worked in the MACCRAY School District for 26 years, where I led the initiative to implement a 4-day school week, providing greater flexibility for the district.

Why MREA? I deeply believe in MREA's mission. In 2021, I was honored to be elected to the MREA board, representing the South Central Zone. However, I had to step down when I accepted the Superintendent position in Henning, located in the North Central Zone. Despite this, my passion for serving and representing rural educators in Greater Minnesota has never wavered. MREA truly represents who we are, and together, we can advocate for a better education system for our rural students. I am eager to be a strong advocate for rural schools by serving on the MREA board once again.

What Excites You About MREA's Work? What excites me most about MREA's work is that it's truly about us and for us. While statewide conferences provide valuable insights, the information often focuses on larger school districts, leaving rural schools underrepresented. As an MREA board member, I am eager to bring our thoughts, ideas, and needs to lawmakers, the legislature, the Minnesota Department of Education, and other organizations. It's essential that we advocate for better education and financial support in rural Minnesota, and I am excited to champion great opportunities for our rural school districts.

Challenges for MREA in the Next 4 Years:

1. Maintaining school facilities. Many districts struggle with necessary maintenance, and passing referendums for improvements is difficult. We need to collaborate with the legislature to make them aware of our needs and push for policy changes to better support rural schools.
2. Teacher retention. This issue affects the entire state but is often more pronounced in rural Minnesota. We need to focus on retaining and recruiting teachers, emphasizing the benefits of rural education for educators and the positive impact on students.

Opportunities for MREA in the Next 4 Years:

1. Foster collaboration between neighboring schools to expand opportunities for students. We should explore creative solutions that allow schools to work together to offer more electives and specialized programs, advocating for state funding to support these opportunities.
2. Reinforce the message of 'You Matter'—letting our rural educators and students know they are valued. MREA can create initiatives that uplift and support educators and students, reminding them of their importance to the future of education in Minnesota.

Expertise and Skills to Strengthen MREA's Ability to Deliver on Its Mission:

- Public Policy/Advocacy
- Information Technology
- Public Speaking
- Event Planning
- Marketing

Aaron Sinclair | 2025 Board Candidate

NOVEMBER 26, 2024

Aaron Sinclair | Little Falls

Experience with Current School/District: As the Director of School Leadership for Sourcewell, I lead program development and educational leadership supports for Region V school districts. My role involves building connections with leaders, developing educational programming, and fostering continuous improvement processes.

Experience in Education Sector: I have over 15 years of experience in driving innovation and solving complex problems across diverse sectors. My previous roles include serving as superintendent in the Sauk Rapids-Rice School District and assistant superintendent in Brainerd and Little Falls. This experience has allowed me to work with various school boards across multiple communities.

Experience in Rural Sector: I am deeply committed to rural education in the 5-county area of Region 5. I have served on several boards, including:

- Central Minnesota United Way: Partner for Student Success Advisory Board Member (2019-2021)
- Benton Economic Partnership Board Member (2019-2021)
- Sauk Rapids Rotary (2019-2021)
- St. Mary's Church Religious Education Board Member (2017-2018)
- Purple Carrot Market Food Co-op Board of Directors (2016-2018)

Other Relevant Experience: In my current role, I frequently engage with educational leaders throughout central Minnesota. I have facilitated summits to bridge the gap between K-12 educators and industry leaders and led extensive community engagement processes. I have also successfully passed multiple bond issues in different school districts. I am honored to have been selected for the Minnesota Young American Leaders Program and awarded 2022 Change-Management District Leader of the Year.

Why MREA? I am committed to advancing rural communities, and serving with MREA aligns perfectly with my professional expertise and personal values. Rural schools are community hubs that foster social cohesion, economic resilience, and long-term sustainability. MREA's mission to advocate for rural schools resonates with my belief that education is a cornerstone for vibrant communities.

What Excites You About MREA's Work? The opportunity to collaborate with diverse education leaders and policymakers to address the unique needs of rural schools excites me. I am eager to elevate the concerns and aspirations of rural educators and students, advocate for equitable funding, and support teacher retention. MREA's mission to empower rural schools is inspiring, and I am eager to contribute to this impactful work.

Challenges for MREA in the Next 4 Years:

1. Addressing funding inequities for rural schools, ensuring they receive equitable resources.
2. Teacher recruitment and retention, making rural districts more attractive to educators.

These challenges highlight critical areas where MREA's advocacy and leadership will be vital in securing a stable and thriving future for rural education.

Opportunities for MREA in the Next 4 Years:

1. **Advocating for Rural-Focused Education Policy:** MREA can influence state and national education policy to address the unique needs of rural schools. Engaging in legislative advocacy can help secure policies that address funding disparities, support small schools, and promote rural-specific solutions for transportation, staffing, and student services.
2. **Strengthening Community Partnerships for Holistic Student Support:** MREA can foster partnerships between schools, local businesses, and community organizations. These partnerships can provide students with mentorship, internships, and real-world learning opportunities, while also addressing broader issues like mental health, food insecurity, and career readiness.

Expertise and Skills to Strengthen MREA's Mission:

- Human Resources
- Marketing
- Public Speaking
- Strategic Planning