

CONNECTIAMS DNS

News from the Association of Metropolitan School Districts

March 2026
Volume 23
Number 6

A Bright Idea: Improving Energy Efficiency

March 6, 2026

Board of Directors Meeting

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

March 27, 2026

Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting

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

April 10, 2026

Board of Directors Meeting

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

April 13, 2026

AMSD/MASA Region 9 Day at the Capitol

[LINK: View Details for Day at the Capitol](#)

"100% clean energy by 2030."

That was the request made more than six years ago, when three Irondale High School students were among a student, teacher and parent group that visited a School Board meeting of Mounds View Public Schools.

Since that time, the District has taken several steps towards that goal.

And the state is taking notice.

"Mounds View Public Schools is a leader in modeling the innovative use of renewable energy in Minnesota schools," says Pete Wyckoff, Deputy Commissioner of the Division of Energy Resources at the Minnesota Department of Commerce. "Their work sets a strong example, and I'm hopeful more school districts will follow."

Here are just five examples of energy efficiency efforts in action across the District.

#1 Energy audit

Mounds View has conducted an energy audit of schools to identify opportunities for energy savings. The District partnered with SitelogIQ, a national provider of building improvement programs with a focus on energy efficiency and sustainability. This includes:

- An energy consumption analysis for gas, water and electricity over the past 36 months.
- Recommended priorities for energy savings.
- Facility management software for tracking energy use, maintenance projects and monitoring the age and updates completed to existing equipment.

Based on the findings, the District entered an energy contract that guarantees energy savings based on upgrades to lighting systems.

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The recently released state budget forecast, projecting a \$3.7 billion surplus for the 26-27 biennium, presents a timely opportunity for state policymakers to assist our school districts in addressing significant budget challenges next year. As noted in the research article in this issue, AMSD member districts are projecting combined budget shortfalls of more than \$223 million for the 2026-27 school year. With committee deadlines fast approaching, I urge AMSD members to continue to advocate for our [legislative priorities](#). Your voice makes a difference.

From the AMSD Vice Chair, Alison Sherman, Stillwater Board Member



Mounds View's Solar Panels Generate Savings, Offset Pollution

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#2 Solar schools

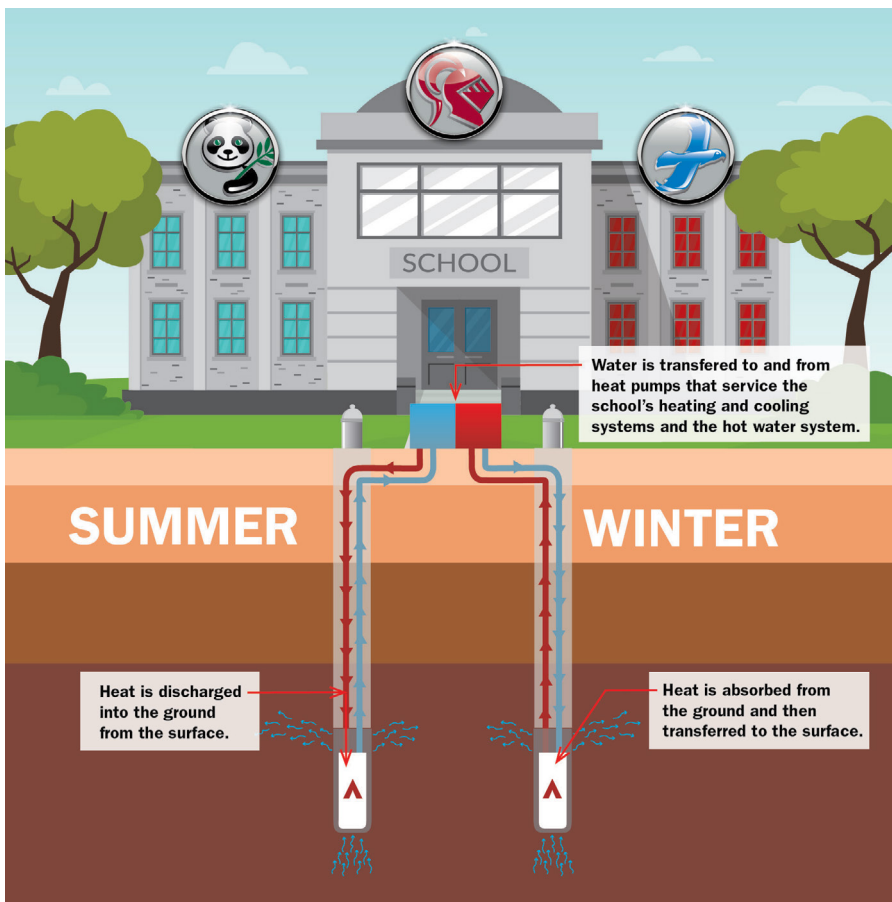
Mounds View Public Schools rooftops are doing the job of a small forest — every single year.

Thanks to a grant from the Minnesota Department of Commerce, the District was among the first school districts in the state to install solar panels. Today, all 13 school buildings have rooftop solar arrays installed. Projected savings could be over \$2 million in electricity costs over the next 25 years thanks to power purchase agreements and below-market-rate electricity costs.



The solar array atop Bel Air Elementary School.

Combined, the schools' panels offset more than 1 million pounds of carbon pollution annually. That's like taking 100 gas-powered cars off the road. Or producing enough clean energy to power an entire neighborhood — without pollution. You'd need roughly 7,500 mature trees working for an entire year to absorb that much carbon.



#3 Geothermal energy

Removing oil tanks in the process, Mounds View Public Schools is tapping the earth's natural temperature as a giant heating and cooling system for three schools. Irondale High School and Highview Middle School recently installed geothermal systems, and Pinewood Elementary School will complete its conversion this summer.

Geothermal replaces furnaces and air conditioners with a system that uses the constant temperature underground to keep buildings warm in winter and cool in summer. Underground wells tap the warm temperature of the earth to heat water inside the wells. The energy is then transferred to the school to supplement its existing heating and cooling systems.

The District anticipates operational savings of \$165,000 every year for the three schools. Mounds View Public Schools is the only metro district outside of St. Paul Public Schools with geothermal systems.

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Mounds View a State Leader Using Renewable Energy

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#4 LED lighting

Brighter (and cleaner) lights are coming to schools this year, thanks to a new state law dubbed “Minnesota’s Clean Lighting Bill.” The bill bans the sale of most fluorescent bulbs effective 2026 due to their mercury content. This forces a shift to LEDs for replacements and new installations in schools and other buildings for energy efficiency and health — with utilities offering incentives to help schools and businesses make the switch.

In response, the District is converting all outdated, energy inefficient light to LED lighting. Once the installation is paid off, the project is expected to save Mounds View Public Schools approximately \$400,000 per year in utility costs.

#5 Electric buses

Mounds View’s primary transportation partner, Northstar Bus Lines/American Student Transportation, currently has one of the largest electric school bus fleets in Minnesota — and Mounds View Public Schools students will soon be riding half of them.

Thanks in part to a grant from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, three new electric buses will transport students to and from school. It’s part of a pilot program created to support cleaner vehicle technology, reduce air pollution impact on students and communities and test the feasibility of electric vehicle technology in student transportation.



The three electric buses serving Mounds View Public Schools are charged overnight at the Northstar Bus Lines terminal in Maple Grove. Because they’re much quieter than their diesel counterparts, the buses play light music when traveling less than 15 miles-per-hour to alert nearby motorists, bikers and pedestrians.



GreenStep Schools

Mounds View Public Schools has applied to participate in the Minnesota GreenStep Schools program. The program is a free, voluntary, statewide best practices framework, community of practice and recognition program for public and private K-12 schools and districts. Members share a goal to reduce environmental impact and costs, to improve the health and well-being of students and staff and to provide effective environmental and sustainability education.

This month’s member feature was submitted by Colin Sokolowski, Executive Director of Public Relations, Mounds View Public Schools.

Survey Shows AMSD School Districts Face More Than \$223 Million in Budget Shortfalls

Most AMSD Districts Face Budget Challenges for 2026-27 School Year

AMSD member school districts are facing a combined shortfall of more than \$223 million for the 2026-27 school year in the wake of escalating operational costs, a reduction in compensatory funding and special education transportation reimbursement, and for some, unexpected costs related to federal immigration enforcement actions.

In addition to inflationary pressures, school districts are feeling the impact of new programs and requirements adopted in recent years. AMSD Vice Chair and Stillwater School Board Member Alison Sherman cites increasing substitute teacher costs as a significant factor in Stillwater's projected \$5 million shortfall.

"While Stillwater Area Public Schools support policies that benefit employees and families, mandates such as Minnesota Paid Leave are examples of well-intended but unfunded requirements that create significant financial strain for school districts. We are preparing for several hundred thousand dollars in new annual substitute and related costs," noted Sherman.

In addition, many districts report increased costs tied to recent federal immigration enforcement activity. These include expanded transportation routes and bus stops, additional office and safety personnel, increased online learning expenses, and heightened demand for student mental health supports. Several districts also anticipate a reduction in revenue due to lower enrollment (ADM) and many reported significant losses in food service revenue, due to online learning and students not purchasing a la carte items during lunch.

The shortfall estimates are based on a survey of AMSD member districts conducted at the end of February. Member districts were asked to project the gap between their anticipated revenue and expenditures for the 2026-27 school year assuming the statutory inflationary increase in the basic formula and no additional funding or cuts from current law. It is important to note that the formula makes up 55-60 percent of a school district's general education revenue. As a result, an inflationary adjustment to the formula does not translate into an equivalent increase in overall district funding.

The survey shows that AMSD members project shortfalls totaling \$223,197,443. Most districts are anticipating even larger shortfalls in FY28 and FY29, as state law requires a cut in special education funding of \$250 million for the 2028-29 biennium. A Blue Ribbon Commission, established in the 2024 session, has been tasked with identifying specific cuts.

A stronger than expected February State Budget and Economic forecast, which projects a FY26-27 balance of \$3.7 billion and a FY28-29 balance of \$377 million, provides an opportunity for the Governor and Legislators to mitigate the budget shortfalls facing school districts. AMSD and its more than 50 member districts are urging the Governor and Legislators to extend the hold harmless for compensatory funding, increase safe schools funding, and repeal the \$250 million cut to special education in the 28-29 biennium. The [AMSD Legislative Platform](#) also calls on state policymakers to fully fund existing statutory requirements including unemployment for hourly workers and the Paid Leave program.

Without legislative action this session, many locally elected school boards will be forced to make significant reductions to staffing and student programming to balance their budgets.

- [LINK: View a full list of AMSD District Shortfalls](#)