



MINNDEPENDENT

December 2025 Newsletter

Dear friends of private and independent education,

A special welcome to the newest member of the MINNDEPENDENT team, Jennifer Renstrom. Jennifer comes to MINNDEPENDENT with extensive administrative, office management and special events experience. She has a strong passion for private and independent education and previously served at Annunciation Catholic School for nearly a decade. Jennifer will succeed Michele Skare, who will retire on December 19 after 15 years of dedicated service to MISF/MINNDEPENDENT.

Member retention is a key metric MINNDEPENDENT tracks with great pride. We believe it reflects an active and engaged membership and indicates we are delivering on our mission pillars of quality programming, partnerships and public policy. We are thrilled with this year's retention rate of 96.2%, slightly above our five year average of 95%. In addition, we welcomed 9 new member schools, bringing our total membership to an all-time high of 185 schools.

I've had the opportunity to join several gatherings of private and independent administrators and leaders in recent weeks. These convenings are ideal to share what's happening in the broader private and independent school community, provide updates on legislative efforts and relay the benefits of being a member. If you would find these topics beneficial to your administrators, [please let me know](#), I'd enjoy joining an upcoming gathering.

The nomination process for the 2026 Private and Independent Education Awards will open in January, so start thinking about the people in your community who deserve recognition. If you'd like to check out the 2025 slate of award winners and view their videos check out our [Education Awards](#) page.

I invite you to include MINNDEPENDENT in your year-end giving plans. Your gift extends to a network of 185 member schools with valuable resources and benefits. In addition, your gift empowers a strong and unified voice that successfully defended a proposal to eliminate essential services for nonpublic students and families – including busing, nursing, counseling and learning materials. The majority of our budget is driven by philanthropy, sponsorship

ASK THE PRESIDENT

Have a question about issues like school transportation, Title funds, current legislation, etc.? Want Tim's take on the Vikings season? Ask the President! Click the button below.

[Ask Tim](#)

MINNDEPENDENT has negotiated a discounted rate for member schools interested in participating in the [#SocialSchool4EDU](#) Membership Program

[READ MORE](#)

MINNDEPENDENT Jobs Board

Member schools can post job listings for free.

[READ MORE](#)

Hats & Mittens is a nonprofit committed to providing hats and mittens for local children in need. Learn more and get involved!

and grants. This is intentional as we strive to keep membership affordable for schools to connect and benefit from all the resources MINNDEPENDENT has to offer. [Give today](#) and ensure MINNDEPENDENT remains a robust voice for private and independent education in Minnesota!

We wish you all a joyful and peaceful holiday season and a prosperous new year. Thank you for your support of Minnesota's private and independent schools.



Tim Benz, President

[READ MORE](#)

Share your school's news!

Whether it's a noteworthy student achievement, a remarkable teacher initiative, or a collective success that deserves recognition, we want to share it! Drop us line below.

[EMAIL US](#)

The MINNDEPENDENT Newsletter is sponsored by



Your School is a Gift to Your Community and Thrivent!

Thank you for your commitment to the next generation as you work to form the minds and hearts of your students and their parents.

As a reminder, Thrivent clients (many of the parents and staff at your schools) **have 2 Thrivent Action Team seed money projects every year to use.** Thrivent members receive \$250 of seed money for projects called Thrivent Action Teams twice a year to be used as:

- Service Activities
- Fundraisers
- Educational Events



Learn more [Thrivent Action Teams](#)

Each kit includes:

- A \$250 Community Impact Card. Think of it as seed money to jumpstart your project.
- Up to 25 T-shirts, and more

We are here for you...reach out with questions...**Merry Christmas to you and your families.**



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2026 STEM Grant Program

MINNDEPENDENT is excited to announce the launch of our **2026 STEM Grant Program**, designed to empower your school's STEM initiatives and foster innovation. We offer four distinct grant opportunities to support your specific needs:

Innovation Grants (up to \$5,000): Fund innovative STEM projects that align with your school's goals.

Starter Grants (up to \$1,500): Launch new STEM programs or initiatives.

Sustainability Grants (up to 20% of the original

grant, not to exceed \$1,000): Provide supplemental funding for previously funded STEM projects.

Community Partnership Grants (We Share Solar):

Support hands-on solar education and service-learning for students in grades 7-12 in partnership with We Share Solar.

Take this opportunity to advance STEM learning at your school and inspire the next generation of innovators!



Current Grant Cycle Now Open

Submit your Letter of Interest by January 13, 2026 (6:00 p.m.)

See the Impact of Prior STEM Grants

"The MINNDEPENDENT STEM Grant Program was a huge help in reviving our school's robotics program. Through this project, students not only developed their technical STEM skills in designing, building, and programming robots, but they also enhanced their presentation and collaboration skills." **Nativity of Our Lord Catholic School (St. Paul)**

"We were able to set up an area for assembly of aircraft components. This has given us the first steps towards adding vocational options in our school. This grant extends our aviation classes (also supported by MINNDEPENDENT) from flight- related careers in aviation to aircraft maintenance careers. Some of our students had never seen a rivet gun nor assembled components from drawings." **Gene Poole, United Christian Academy (Bloomington)**



Ready to take the next step?

Express Your Interest: Must submit a Letter of Interest (LOI) to be eligible to submit a grant application.

- [PDF - Reference Form](#)
- [Link to complete and submit Letter of Interest in Survey Monkey](#)
- **Deadline - Tuesday, Jan. 13, 2026, by 6 pm**

Apply for a Grant: If your LOI is approved, you'll be invited to submit a full grant application.

- [PDF - Reference Form \(all grant types\)](#)
- [Link to complete and submit an application in Survey Monkey](#)
- **Deadline - Tuesday, Feb. 10, 2026, by 6 pm**

Visit our STEM Grant Resource Page to LEARN MORE

STEM GRANT RESOURCE PAGE

Key Resources:

- [STEM Grant Program Calendar](#)
- [STEM Grant Program Applicant Guide](#)
- [Academic Standards and Other STEM Resources](#)
- [Resources for Inclusive STEM Learning](#)
- [Community Partnership Grant \(We Share Solar\) Program Overview](#)
- [Project Descriptions of STEM Grant Awarded Last Six Years](#)

Unlock new possibilities, inspire students, and shape the future of STEM education at your school.

MINNDEPENDENT's STEM Program: How to Write a Winning STEM Grant Proposal & Intro to Community Partnerships

In this session, new and experienced grant writers will gain tips for writing stronger MINNDEPENDENT STEM Grant applications and learn about what our STEM Advisory Committee looks for when reviewing grant proposals and making funding recommendations.



Beth Murphy Ph.D.
STEM Program Manager

**RECORDED
WEBINAR**

QUESTIONS

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY

Social Media Success in Private & Independent Schools: The Latest Trends & Time Saving Tricks

WEBINAR
Thursday, January 15, 2026

10:00-11:30 am

Your school is amazing, and the world needs to see the amazing transformations taking place with your students and staff! Andrea Gribble, the proud owner of [#SocialSchool4EDU](#) and the author of "Social Media for Schools," will dissect the latest trends and engagement techniques that are currently making waves.

By the end of this session, you'll walk away with practical and actionable ideas to increase your content and amplify your outreach, celebrating your students and staff with an even wider audience! Don't miss out on this opportunity to supercharge your social media strategy.

Andrea Gribble is on a mission to make every school's story shine. As founder of [#SocialSchool4EDU](#), she helps schools and districts celebrate students and staff while connecting with their communities through social media. She's the author of *Social Media for Schools: Proven Storytelling Strategies & Ideas for Celebrating Your Students & Staff – While Keeping Your Sanity* and host of the weekly podcast *Mastering Social Media for Schools*.



Cost:

MINNDEPENDENT Members: FREE

Nonmembers: \$100

(check with your LEA about paying with Title Funds)

[**CLICK HERE TO REGISTER**](#)

**Small School Leaders Virtual Conference February 3-6,
2026**

Hello School Leaders, Educators, and Administrative Staff,

Great news! MINNDEPENDENT has secured an **Association Ticket for the 2026 Small School Leaders Virtual Conference**, providing **FREE access to all member schools** to this exceptional professional development opportunity!

Conference Dates:

- February 3–6, 2026

This four-day virtual conference is designed for small schools, but the content is highly relevant and valuable for schools of all sizes. Whether your team focuses on enrollment, development, leadership, communications, or student retention, you'll find sessions that offer practical, actionable strategies.

Why Attend?

- ✓ Connect with private and independent school leaders and staff across the country
- ✓ Learn from seasoned professionals and industry experts
- ✓ Gain strategies you can implement immediately to support your school's success

Topics include:

- Marketing & Enrollment
- Development & Fundraising
- School Leadership
- Student Retention

Your **MINNDEPENDENT Association Ticket** allows your entire school community, administrators, teachers, advancement teams, board members, and admissions staff to participate in all sessions at **no cost**.

[VIEW FULL SCHEDULE PDF](#)

IMPORTANT: Register Now to Secure Your Access!

To ensure access, **each staff member** from your school who plans to attend must register individually using the link below.

Registration is quick, easy, and FREE. Please **SHARE the link** below with your admin team, staff, and board members.

Registration Deadline:

- January 30, 2026

Event Details:

- **Session Times:** One-hour sessions are available from 8:00 AM EST to 5:00 PM EST each day of the conference.
- **Format:** Attend the sessions that interest you most.

Registration Notes:

- When prompted, list **MINNDEPENDENT** as the Organization/Association that provided your ticket.

Benefits of Early Registration:

- Access to the conference portal to attend live sessions and recordings
- Valuable resource materials
- Important updates and reminders

REGISTER TODAY

STEM SCOOP

ENGINEERING FOR EDUCATORS GRADUATE CERTIFICATE

"The Engineering for Educators Certificate had an immediate impact in my classroom, boosted student creativity, and raised standards across our school's STEM program."

Learning Benefit :

- ✓ Immediate classroom-ready strategies.
- ✓ Four courses (12 credits) in STEM engineering.
- ✓ Exclusive faculty coaching when you enroll with two or more educators from your school.

Grants available: up to full \$4,800 tuition

Learn More



Through a competitive grant opportunity, **educators may receive full funding support to cover the entire cost of the program.** The program is open to all teachers with grant funding for 12 educators. Inspire the next generation of STEM students and apply today.

Minnesota STEM Curriculum

[Bridge UP! Curriculum](#)

MnDOT's Bridge UP! curriculum provides free classroom resources for teachers using bridge design and construction principles as the foundation for learning.

[Cedar Creek Education Digital Library](#)

Library of mostly K-2 ecology activities from Cedar Creek Ecosystem Reserve in northern Minnesota.

[Chemistry Outreach](#)

Chemistry Outreach is a University of Minnesota program that does chemistry demonstrations and discusses chemistry careers in local schools and at larger events.

[Hamline University's Center for Global Environmental Education](#)

Discover K-12 online resources including engaging videos and interactive modules about storm drain education, the Mississippi Rivers, Lake Superior and more!

[Living River Online](#)

This online program demonstrates how organisms live within an ecosystem. Three interactive stations feature exciting videos and fun learning modules about floodplains, mussels, pike and the Mississippi River! The course explores different ways to look at the

[Minnesota Agriculture in the Classroom Virtual Field Trips](#)

Virtual field trips to numerous Minnesota farms representing a diverse array of agriculture. Includes distance learning, in person, and connected curriculum.

[Energy Trailer, Minnesota State Energy Center of Excellence](#)

The Mobile Energy Classroom Trailer is a resource for teachers who would like to use tools and equipment to engage their classes deeply in energy generation, efficiency, and exploration labs. These are meant to be hands on opportunities to help meet classroom needs. Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, Agriculture, Career and Technical Education teachers are welcome to request the trailer.

[Minnesota Zoo's Educator Resources](#)

A wide array of activities, resources, and curriculum to support schools and youth groups. Explore Moose Mission, a new educational platform to learn about the science of moose in Minnesota.

[MnDOT's STEM Education and Outreach](#)

MnDOT has created new ways to help students explore STEM topics in the real world! Activities are free and easy to download or schedule.

[No Boundaries to the Boundary Waters](#)

An educational program of Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness designed to bring the ecology and wonder of the Boundary Waters into classrooms across Minnesota. Free units are provided, including teacher resources.

[STARBASE Minnesota](#) STEM Unit and Kits for Schools

Free Destination Mars kits and curriculum.

[Young Naturalists](#)

Minnesota Conservation Volunteer magazine's Young Naturalists series is designed to engage students with a wide variety of nonfiction topics on natural science and outdoor life.

The Minnesota Aspirations in Computing (MnAiC) Program has created the opportunity for students to engage with technology professionals to explore this career field via guided informational interviews. **The brief interviews can occur between the months of December 2025 through March 2026.** In doing so, they will receive a

Technology Exploration Award (great for their resume) and become eligible for numerous cash prizes.



Please encourage high school students with tech curiosity, interests, and aspirations to [visit this webpage](#) to learn more about this incredible career exploration experience. They'll discover that eligibility for award recognition and prizes can be achieved with a minimum of five documented informational interviews.

[Here is the link](#) (Passcode: l0Z=1xF=) to a recent Technology Exploration Award (TEA) webinar, should they wish to view a presentation describing TEA and how easy it is for them to participate.



MNSAA

MINNESOTA NONPUBLIC SCHOOL ACCREDITING ASSOCIATION



**Wednesday,
December
17, 2025**



**Presentation
begins at 1:00**

FREE School Safety Mapping for MN Schools

Informational Webinar

*Critical Response Group (CRG), in partnership with Greater-Minnesota and metro 911 Boards, was contracted to deliver digital, up-to-date critical incident maps for K–12 schools across six of the state’s seven regions. This project is fully funded by the state legislature and is **FREE** for eligible schools. This contract represents one of the most advanced indoor mapping efforts in the country, built on accuracy, speed, and true system-level interoperability. The purpose of this contract is to provide accurate and accessible mapping data for schools and public safety agencies, as well as upgrade current school mapping data into the most advanced next generation 911 format.*

- Presentation, followed by time for Q&A
- Led by Joseph Hanson
- While pre-registration is not required, we encourage you to sign up to help us plan accordingly.
- No charge for MNSAA and MINNDEPENDENT schools

Click here to register: [Registration](#)



Changes to workplace laws take effect Jan. 1, 2026

Minimum wage

Minnesota's [minimum wage](#) will increase to \$11.41 an hour. The training wage for workers under 20 during their first 90 days will be \$9.31 an hour.

Breaks law

New meal and rest break requirements also take effect. Most employees must be allowed to receive a paid 15-minute break every four consecutive hours worked and an unpaid 30-minute meal break when working six or more consecutive hours. Learn more at dli.mn.gov/breaks.

Paid Leave

Minnesota Paid Leave also begins Jan. 1, 2026, providing paid, job-protected

time off to care for oneself or a family member. While the Department of Employment and Economic Development will administer the Paid Leave program, the Department of Labor and Industry will oversee and enforce Paid Leave job protections. Employers may not retaliate, deny reinstatement or discontinue health insurance. Job protection details are available at dli.mn.gov/paid-leave-protections.

MINNDEPENDENT Preferred Partner Spotlight



ESCALE
Strategic Coaching • Leadership Execution



Casey Breen

Lead Coach

cbreen@escaleadvisors.com

612-518-2620

At Escale, we help high-growth school leaders overcome overwhelm and uncertainty by using a proven system for sustainable scaling. Through private or group coaching, we support leadership teams in executing strategic growth without sacrificing time or well-being.

Preferred Partnership Program

This exclusive program recognizes the top 30% of our partners who have demonstrated a strong commitment to our mission and member schools. By partnering with Preferred Partners, schools can access a comprehensive ecosystem of trusted resources to provide the best possible products and services to their communities.





Important Dates to Remember

- **January 13, 2026: STEM Grant LOIs due by 6pm**
- **January 15, 2026: Social Media Success webinar with Andrea Gribble**
- **February 10, 2026: Final STEM Grant applications due by 6pm**
- **April 26, 2026: Private and Independent Education Awards**
- **August 12, 2026: STEM Education Conference**
- **September 28-30, 2026: School Leadership Conference**

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For Private & Independent Schools



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