September 2026 Newsletter

Dear friends of private and independent education,

A rousing WELCOME BACK to the 2026-27 school year. We hope the new year is off to a smooth and rewarding start.

Registration for the **2026 School Leadership Conference** continues through September 22. Always wanted to come to the conference, but just hasn't worked out? Take advantage of special pricing for first-time attendees! Can't attend this year? Consider sending another member of your leadership or administrative team. The conference is full of valuable opportunities to gain new ideas, connect with fellow school leaders, and bring back insights that can benefit your entire school community. We hope you will join us on the shores of Bay Lake.

The start of the school year is a great time to invite your local elected officials to visit your school. A visit to your school builds strong relationships and highlights the important role private education plays in the local community. These relationships are vital when issues arise that impact your school. In addition, your local advocacy helps amplify the advocacy efforts of MINNDEPENDENT at the state capitol. If you need a helping hand or ideas, please let me know.

Be sure to watch the MINNDEPENDENT website throughout the year for professional development opportunities for you and your staff.

Thank you for your support of private and independent education.



Tim Benz
President

ASK THE PRESIDENT

Have a question for Tim? Interested in a presentation for a board or staff meeting about the state of nonpublic education in Minnesota? Want Tim's take on the Vikings playoff chances this year? Click the link below.

Ask Tim

Social Media & Advertising

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. Non-member schools can post a listing for $65.

READ MORE

[Donate today](#) to empower the mission of MINNDEPENDENT.

MINNDEPENDENT 50th Anniversary Factoid

Did you know.....

The first School Head Retreat, hosted by MISF, took place on October 10-11, 2006 at Cragun's Resort in Brainerd. Dr. John Engstrom (Minnehaha Academy) led the planning committee for the event which brought together nineteen member school heads to the inaugural gathering. The event was rebranded as the School Leadership Conference in 2015, to recognize leadership takes many forms in our diverse network of schools. Today, the **MINNDEPENDENT School Leadership Conference** remains the premier annual gathering of private and independent school leaders in Minnesota.



Renew Today. Stay Connected. Amplify Your Voice.

Membership renewal is underway. Invoices were emailed to all members on July 1. Thanks to those who have already renewed! If you haven't received your invoice, **contact our office**, we're happy to help.

Together, we create a strong, mission-driven community committed to advancing high-quality education, ensuring every member school has a voice, and providing school leaders, educators, and students with the resources they need to thrive. The past two legislative sessions have demonstrated the power of our collective advocacy. **The 2027 legislative session will bring new opportunities and new challenges.** MINNDEPENDENT will remain vigilant in advocating for your interests, protecting your school's autonomy, and ensuring you have the flexibility and resources to fulfill your unique mission.

Thank you for your continued partnership and trust in MINNDEPENDENT. Your membership makes our work possible.

Know a school that would benefit from joining our community? We'd love an introduction. Invite them to connect with us and discover the value of MINNDEPENDENT membership.

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We know you're driven by mission and purpose, and at Opus, so are we.

We empower your mission through the buildings we deliver. Our purpose is to create meaningful spaces where people and communities can achieve their goals and truly thrive. In that spirit, we're pleased to introduce our team of industry-leading real estate design and construction professionals, with experience in the educational and institutional sectors.

We'd love the opportunity to learn about your organization's goals, share more about what we do and how we do it, and discuss how we can deliver value for you.

We look forward to meeting you at the Minndependent 2026 School Leadership Conference.

Let's Connect!



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School Leadership Conference

September 28-30, Ruttger's Bay Lake Resort - Deerwood, MN



The MINNDEPENDENT School Leadership Conference is the premier gathering of private and independent school leaders across Minnesota. Whether you are a new school leader hoping to expand your network or a seasoned veteran looking for fresh new ideas, this is the conference for you. Need to recharge after the first month of school? This conference is the place for you.

Connect with fellow leaders for an energizing conference of networking plus presentations from experts in the areas of AI, Leadership, and School/Employment Law. All this, plus a bit of fun on the shores of Bay Lake.

Attendees will earn 6.75 CEUs

There is still time to register!

Registration closes Wednesday, September 22 at 5pm

Returning Attendee Registration

1 Night: $370
2 Nights: $480
Conference Day Only: $135

Special pricing for first-time attendees

1 Night: $370
2 Nights: $370
(two nights for the price of one!)
Conference Day Only: $135

Overnight stay pricing includes resort fees, materials, and meals.
Conference Day Only pricing includes materials + meals.

Check with your LEA about using Title Funds for your registration.

REGISTER TODAY!

What You'll Experience

Legislative Update:
2026 Programs and Policies Affecting Nonpublic Schools
Tim Benz, President, MINNDEPENDENT

SESSION 1:
Private School Legal Checkup: New Developments and Recurring Risks
Sam Nelson, Attorney and Owner, Nelson Law, PLLC

SESSION 2:
Reimagining Enrollment: Data-Driven Strategies for Sustainable Growth

Rachael Cramond, Sr. Director of Customer Experience & Christy Frost, Director of Customer & Product Marketing, VenturEd Solutions

SESSION 3:
Thriving in School Leadership: Protecting Your Well-Being While Leading Others
Dr. Jules Nolan, CEO and President, LP, Psy.D., NCSP & Elizabeth Carver, Vice President and Chief of Operations, MSW, LICSW, Phoenix School Counseling

SESSION 4:
Implementation and Governance Strategies for AI in Education
Bob Thompson, President, and Mike Blanchard, Vice President of IT, Canopy IT Solutions

SESSION 5:
The Human Side of Leadership
Paul Meunier, President & CEO, Youth Intervention Programs Association (YIPA)

Meet our presenters, explore session topics, and view the conference agenda on the SCHOOL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE WEBPAGE.

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THE STEM SCOOP

MINNESOTA
Agriculture in the Classroom

FREE Resources for K-6 Educators

The AgMag meets Minnesota standards and helps students understand where the food, fiber, and fuel they use in everyday life come from.

LEARN MORE

Virtual FIELD TRIPS



LEARN MORE

Agricultural Literacy Curriculum Matrix

The **National Agriculture Literacy Curriculum Matrix** is a free database of standards-based lesson plans and resources for K-12 educators that use agriculture as a lens for teaching science, social studies, career and technical education, and nutrition.

Search by Grade Levels, Standards, Topics, Courses, and Teaching Strategies.

LEARN MORE

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA | CFANS
COLLEGE OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL AND NATURAL RESOURCE SCIENCES

Paid Professional Development for MN High School Educators

Ways of Knowing in the Forest
October 15, 2026 - Cloquet Forestry Center, Cloquet, MN
A forest can tell many stories depending on the questions we ask. Throughout this immersive experience at the Cloquet Forestry Center (CFC), you'll return to the same forest site multiple times, exploring it through various perspectives and ways of knowing. Along the way, you'll learn about ongoing research and land stewardship in forest ecology that blends Indigenous and western practices in fire regime restoration while experiencing classroom-ready activities that use outdoor learning to spark curiosity, encourage careful observation, and help students to investigate forests and the natural world through multiple perspectives.

Note: Lodging is available at the CFC for participants arriving the night before for $50 (limited to participants only).

Download a flyer for more information

ZOOMS STEM Design Challenge
The Zooms STEM Design Challenge presented by Flint Hills Resources offers students a chance to develop a solution to a "real" problem faced by Zookeepers and staff at the Minnesota Zoo. From designing an enrichment to building a model of a renovated animal exhibit, the problem will challenge students to use their science and math knowledge, creativity, problem-solving, and research skills during the engineering design process in order to best solve the problem and present a solution. Selected students are invited to showcase their design challenge solution in the ZOOMS Design Exhibition in March at the Minnesota Zoo.

LEARN MORE

Start the school year with a free Girls Who Code Club!

Girls Who Code Clubs are free, flexible programs for students in grades 3–12. Clubs can run after school, during free periods, or as part of an existing STEM or CS class, and no computer science experience is needed to lead. Once your Club has three or more members, you'll receive Girls Who Code swag for students and access to a $250 Clubs Fund to purchase supplies through an Amazon voucher.

Submit the Club application at **girlswhocode.com/clubsapply** by September 15th for a chance to win a $150 gift card! ***See official rules***. Remember to choose MINNDEPENDENT as your Community Partner on the application.

Questions about how to get started?
Register for our Back-to-school webinar on September 16th! All registrants will receive the recording.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY

Advanced AI Strategies for School Leaders

WEBINAR
Tuesday, October 27, 2026

10:00am - 11:15 am

This hands-on session gives private and independent school leaders practical ways to use AI in their daily work and guide responsible adoption across their schools. Participants learn to analyze school data while protecting student privacy, draft policies and procedures, and build AI workflows for operations, enrollment, human resources, and communication. They also learn how to help faculty identify useful AI applications across roles and subject areas. Participants leave with ready-to-use prompts, live examples, and a resource library they can use and share with their teams.

William Grube is the founder of Gruvy Education. *Through Gruvy Education, he partners with over 300 schools and several state-level organizations to provide AI training. He equips educators with the skills and knowledge to use AI effectively in their specific roles.*



COST
MINNDEPENDENT Members: FREE
Non-members: $75
(check with your LEA about paying with Title Funds)

REGISTRATION NOW OPEN!

FREE WEBINAR for School Leaders, Guidance Counselors and Parents

Please share with your school community

4 Strategies for a Smarter College Search

ZOOM WEBINAR
Wednesday, October 7, 2026
7:30 pm

The college search continues to become more complex, making it harder for families to identify right fit schools. Challenges include:

- Admission trends have changed around how colleges admit students
- Testing - some require it now and some don't - what path makes sense?
- The number of schools on the “more selective” list continues to grow and not just in the elite category
- Substantial changes to the FAFSA and financial aid may make college more expensive

Join us to learn how these changes may impact your family, and new strategies to consider giving your student the best opportunity to be admitted and maximize scholarships and financial aid.

Cozy Wittman – Education and Partnerships
College Inside Track

Cozy Wittman leads the education and partnerships for College Inside Track, an organization that helps families navigate the college process and ensure they get the best price at the schools they are considering. She is considered a national subject-matter expert on late-stage college planning and educates parents, school counselors and financial professionals around

the country on strategies they can use. In addition to being a featured speaker at conferences and high schools, Cozy is a mom of 5 kids with very different goals for college, so she is no stranger to the college search.



If you are the parent of a high school student in grades 9-11, this is incredibly important info you will not want to miss.

REGISTRATION IS REQUIRED! After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the meeting.

REGISTER HERE!



Hats & Mittens, established in 1996 by Rebecca Jorgenson Sundquist, is a nonprofit committed to providing hats and mittens for local children in need. Over the years, as demand has increased, the organization has focused exclusively on offering warmth to the community while inspiring future generations through a children's philanthropy curriculum created in partnership with Doing Good Together.

**This program, tailored for Pre-K through Middle School,
helps young people discover the joy and importance of giving back.**

Below are testimonials from the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, which has successfully implemented the curriculum at several locations:

- "This program helped me to realize that even though I may not have as much as others, I can still be an advocate for others in our community" - MPRB Participant
- "The curriculum makes the program a breeze - easy to convey themes, while keeping youth interested with hands-on projects and meaningful discussions. The hats were a favorite." - MPRB Staff

**For more information, contact rebecca@hatsandmittens.org
or visit https://hatsandmittens.org/**

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Back to School Supplies
Funded by Thrivent Action Teams

This September, help teachers and school staff stretch their classroom budgets by tapping into Thrivent's generosity programs. Thrivent clients, including parents, grandparents, colleagues and friends of your school, are eligible to lead two Thrivent Action Teams each year, receiving $250 in seed money and resources to bring people together around a cause they care about. Consider using an Action Team to create a classroom supply drive for tissues, books, paper, markers, pens, crayons, and other needed items—so teachers can focus on students, not out-of-pocket expenses.

Contact us today to explore ways to bring Thrivent generosity programs to your school.



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MNSAA

MINNESOTA NONPUBLIC SCHOOL ACCREDITING ASSOCIATION

2026-2027

PRESENTS

Open to all School Leaders and Leadership Teams in MN!



Continuous Improvement for School Leadrship

with

Ted Neitzke

"Ted has changed the way I lead. His practical tools have brought clarity and effective processes to our school, and his positive approach has been a tremendous encouragement to me personally."

- Ben Sartori, St. Michael Catholic School

*Join us for a powerful in-person 4-part series designed to **ignite momentum, build shared purpose**, and **embed your strategic plan into the heart of your school culture.** Ted Neitzke will lead us in creating a shared language and introducing practical, mission-driven strategies that turn your strategic goals into meaningful, everyday actions within your school.*

MINNDEPDENDENT is the event sponsor, so all MNSAA and MINNDEPENDENT members receive a reduced rate!

Early Bird Registration Ends Today!

Four dynamic, in-person sessions:

- Friday, October 30, 2026: 9am-3pm
- Thursday, December 10, 2026: 9am-3pm
- Thursday, January 14, 2027 - VIRTUAL: 1 hour
- Thursday, March 11, 2027: 9am-3pm

- Friday, April 2, 2027: 9am-3pm

Location:

St. Hubert Catholic School
8201 Main St., Chanhassen, MN

Who should attend?

School leaders and leadership teams committed to shaping a vibrant future for their school.

What is included?

- Materials for all sessions
- Continental breakfast, lunch & refreshments
- CEUs

Registration fees:

MNSSA and/or MINNDEPENDENT Members: $825

Non-members: $1,000

- ☑ Schools may use Title dollars
- ☑ CEUs will be available and BOSA hours pending approval
- ☑ Open to all educators in Minnesota! No membership required

Session Descriptions **Register Here**

MINNDEPENDENT
Preferred Partner Spotlight

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Russ Zellmer

President
russ@langerconstruction.com
651-457-5993

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LANGER CONSTRUCTION
Since 1946

Josh Schultz

Vice President
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Master Planning, Feasibility Study, Budgeting, & Construction Management Since 1946



- Marketing Flyer
- Link to video

Learn More About Langer Construction

Meet Our Preferred Partners for 2025-2026

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.

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Empowering Teachers, Engaging Administrators & Equipping Leaders

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Member School News

Back to School 2026!

Top Row: Trinity School at River Ridge, All Saints Academy, Legacy Christian Academy

Middle Row: Saint Thomas Academy, Smith Jewish Academy, Pacelli Catholic Schools

Bottom Row: Crown of Life Lutheran School, Martin Luther High School, Divine Mercy Catholic School





















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 a line below.

EMAIL US

DO YOU FOLLOW US?

Be sure to follow us on social media! That way we can tag your school when posting about activities, grants or award recipients, or other news that includes your school. Share and share alike!

Ways to support MINNDEPENDENT

There are many ways to support MINNDEPENDENT. Please consider assisting with one of the following:

- Empower our work with schools by supporting our annual fund
- **Sponsor a MINNDEPENDENT conference or event**
- Simply click on the donate button

DONATE

To learn more about serving as a MINNDEPENDENT partner, please contact Lisa Vosbeek, MINNDEPENDENT Director of Development and Programs, at **lvosbeek@minndependent.org**

Important Dates to Remember

September 28-30, 2026
School Leadership Conference
Ruttger's Bay Lake Resort

October 7, 2026
7:30pm
4 Strategies for a Smarter College Search
Presented by Cozy Wittman, Education and Partnerships
College Inside Track
FREE WEBINAR! Please share with your school community.

October 27, 2026
10:00am - 11:15am
Webinar: Advanced AI Strategies for School Leaders
Presented by William Grube, Founder of ***Gruvy Education***
Members: FREE Non-Members: $75

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