

The official member publication of North Dakota United



2027 Teacher of the Year Brian Schneider



IN THIS ISSUE:



**SCHMEICHEL
NAMED ND
HISTORY TOY**



**GEIERMANN
RETIRES AFTER
40 YEARS**



**SCHOLARSHIP
& GRANT
RECIPIENTS**



**HEALTH
INSURANCE
COSTS RISING**



03 04 05

News &
Notes

President's
Post —
Nick
Archuleta

Education
Perspectives
— Alicia
Bata

07 10 12

All That
YOU Can
Do With
NDU

Cover Story
— 2027
Teacher of
the Year

Feature
Article —
For the
Underdog

16 20 26

Member
Spotlight
— Big
Ideas

Scholarship
& Grants
Recipients
Announced

Health
Insurance
Costs Keep
Rising

28 29

NDU in
Action —
SLAS Was
a Blast

Foundation
License
Plates
Available

PRESIDENT
Nick Archuleta

**VICE PRESIDENT
OF EDUCATION**
Alicia Bata

**VICE PRESIDENT
OF PUBLIC
EMPLOYEES**
Gary Feist

NEA DIRECTOR
Kala Christensen

**EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR**
Chad Oban

EDITORIAL STAFF

Ryan Nagle
*Assistant Executive
Director/UV
Consulting Editor*

Kelly Hagen
*Communications
Director/UV Editor*

Sarah Keiser
*Special Projects
Coordinator/
UV Co-Editor*

Joel Crane
*Press Secretary/
UV Writer*

ADDRESS

ND United
301 N Fourth St
Bismarck, ND 58501

CONTACT US

(701)223-0450
comments@ndunited.org

United Voices is the official member publication of North Dakota United (NDU), an affiliate of the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers. It is published three times per year, in March, June and September, and sent electronically to members. A special issue, *Year in Review*, is printed and mailed to members in December.

News & Notes



Pledge to Vote and Support Measure 2 — The Universal School Meals Ballot Measure

North Dakota United members across the state work hard to make sure that our students, schools and communities have the resources we all need to thrive.

That's why we have supported universal school meals for all families in North Dakota through the last several legislative sessions and, ultimately, after the failure of those bills in the Legislature, why we supported bringing the issue directly to North Dakota citizens through the ballot initiative process.

In a time of growing financial challenges for working families, Measure 2 will provide real relief of approximately \$1000 per year per student for the families of every K-12 student. This is a fantastic way to support North Dakota families while improving educational outcomes for our students.

Here are two ways you can take action:

- 1) [Pledge to Vote Yes on Measure 2.](#) Here, in addition to pledging your vote for universal school meals, you can indicate other ways that you would like to support the campaign.
- 2) [Learn the key messages to share with friends and family who want to know more about Measure 2.](#)

Nominate a colleague for the NDU ESP of the Year award

Know an education support professional who goes above and beyond? Help them get the recognition they deserve! Education support professionals (ESPs) make a difference in young lives every day across North Dakota. The North Dakota United ESP of the Year award celebrates outstanding ESP members and the contributions they make to their schools, communities and professions.

Nominate a colleague whose dedication inspires you and whose work deserves the spotlight. Each year, the NDU ESP Advisory Board seeks a member who exemplifies the importance, value and quality of the work ESPs do. From paraprofessionals and education assistants to members working in secretarial, custodial, food service, maintenance and trades, transportation, groundskeeping, security, technology and health services, ESPs help our schools thrive. This award honors someone who brings that commitment to both their school and their community.

Nominations open Oct. 1, 2026, and close Dec. 1. Nominees must be NDU members to qualify. Think about the ESPs you work with, choose someone whose contributions stand out, and tell us what makes them exceptional. **Submit your nomination at:** <https://bit.ly/NDUespoy>.

United in Our Service

As the new school year begins, all of us at North Dakota United want to extend a warm welcome to our new and returning K-12 teachers, K-12 education support professionals, and higher education faculty and staff.

Whether this is your first year in education or your 30th, your decision to serve our students and communities is something worth celebrating.

For our teachers, you understand that great teaching and learning are predicated on great relationships. Those relationships and the work you do together have implications that extend far beyond your classroom. When you inspire curiosity, help students discover their strengths, and provide encouragement, you are doing more than just preparing them for the opportunities and challenges ahead. You are preparing them to shape the future of North Dakota.

But you're not doing it alone! I think that we can all agree that the work of professional classroom teachers would be infinitely more difficult — if not impossible — without the staunch support of our education support professionals. Our paraprofessionals, bus



By Nick Archuleta

ND United President

drivers, custodians, secretaries, food service workers, technology professionals and others play fundamental roles in our schools. They create safe, efficient, welcoming and supportive environments in which our kids learn and thrive. Our schools simply could not function without them.

And to our colleagues in higher education: Welcome back.

Faculty and staff at our colleges and universities educate and support the next generation, conduct research, and contribute enormously to the cultural and civic vitality of North Dakota. Your work also results in our university system being nothing less than a major economic engine that drives our state's economy and enhances ND's academic reputation.

I would be remiss to not recognize an equally important part of the ND United family: our non-education public employees.

Continued on page 6.

A Whole New World

“Check your pouches! Everyone has their passport?” That is my usual question after greeting my students and adult passengers each morning on our trips overseas.

I started leading student tours in November 1988. Little did I know how empowering these educational tours would become for hundreds of high school students and adult chaperones alike, and how many families would see the value of travel for their teenagers as they gained the opportunity to interact with people from other cultures.

My heart pumps faster, thinking of all the planning, scheduling, detailing and worrying I do to make sure things run like clockwork during the tours, and I find myself smiling as I fondly remember the questions, the wondering looks of amazement and discovery, the realization that what we have learned in class about certain countries and cultures really takes place, really exists. Even though my Spanish students are not as fluent as I would hope they would be, they certainly prove more adventurous than they believed they could be, as I witness them trying to understand menus, holding



By Alicia Bata

NDU Vice President of Education

short conversations with locals, reading signs and following maps, even transferring their Spanish knowledge to Portuguese, Italian and French.

First time on a plane? Check. First time out of the United States? Check. First time away from home and family for a couple of daring weeks in a new place? Check. First time across the ocean? Check.

So many of them have told me through the years that I inspired their love of travel and opened their eyes to cultural customs different from their own. One student told me about the trip: “it opened my eyes to the lives of people in other countries. It’s interesting to know how people live differently compared to North Dakota; for example, how late in the morning they started the workday or how much later they stayed out at night — entirely different lifestyles than what I see at home.” I truly believe travelers come back with a broader sense of

Continued on next page.

United in Our Service

Continued from page 4

Every day, year-round, public employees are doing the work that keeps North Dakota moving. They maintain our roads and highways, care for vulnerable North Dakotans, administer vital programs, and keep state, county and municipal governments functioning. Much of this work happens quietly and, too often, without the recognition it deserves. But it matters deeply to all of us.

From the classroom to the highway, from the college campus to the county courthouse, public

service professionals positively impact the lives of our friends and neighbors every single day.

So, as we begin a new academic year, let's celebrate by recognizing the value of every public service profession and remember that our greatest strength comes from working together. Whether you are educating our future or providing the vital public services that North Dakotans have come to expect and deserve, please know that all of us at ND United appreciate your dedicated service and your membership in NDU!

A Whole New World

Continued from previous page

what being a citizen of the world means, of how we all contribute to a mosaic of multicultural experiences around the globe.

"Octopus, anyone?" I laugh as I recall one of my students asking her classmates to try the unique dish in front of them. For the record, she disliked seafood before we went and after taking a cooking class in Madrid, paella became her favorite dish during our European tour last June!

I cannot deny it: I am filled with pride and satisfaction knowing that every traveler I have taken overseas has come back with a new piece of knowledge: whether it was the difference in the way other cultures greet and interact with one another, the way people prepare and serve food, or the

attitudes that make us feel welcome far away from home.

I often hear "I didn't know ..." or "I couldn't believe ..." after trips. It makes me wonder about all of the memories they have made and all of the stories they will tell long after their return home. There is something special about opening their eyes to understanding that in this diverse world there is tremendous value in connecting with others, in becoming aware of various customs, in learning from one another, and in realizing that our way is not the only way to do things.

The value of travel is best summed up with a quote by St. Augustine: "The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page."

With NDU, YOU Are Supported

Most days, you may not need to think about the support that comes with your North Dakota United membership. But when a question arises at work — or when a routine concern becomes something more serious — it helps to know you have someone in your corner.

Your local association and NDU staff can help you understand your rights, navigate workplace policies and agreements, and determine what steps to take next. And when a situation requires legal assistance, members have access to experienced legal support for employment-related matters.

Whatever the issue, you don't have to figure it out by yourself. [Your membership means help is there when you need it.](#)

Questions & Concerns

Not every workplace concern becomes a grievance or legal matter. Sometimes you simply need to talk with someone who understands your professional world. **We're always there for you, when you need us!**



Workplace Meetings

Called into a meeting with your administrator or supervisor? Have questions about an evaluation, workload, schedule or improvement plan? **You don't have to navigate those conversations alone. Call on us!**



Conflict Resolution

A letter of reprimand, workplace complaint or investigation can quickly become serious. Even when an allegation stems from a misunderstanding, **having the support of your union throughout the process matters.**



Legal Support

When appropriate, NDU staff can connect members with legal counsel and help guide them through the process. **Access to this employment-related legal support is a benefit of membership.**



Invest in YOU with NDU!

NDU Professional Development

You have enough demands on your time. Professional development should help you grow — not add another obstacle to your schedule.

That's why North Dakota United offers member-driven learning opportunities designed to fit your professional goals, interests and schedule. Whether you want to strengthen your skills, explore a new topic or earn continuing-education credit, your union can help you take that next step.

Here are a few ways to make the most of this benefit:

- **Book Studies:** Six-week courses with reading, discussion and reflection.
- **Podcast PD:** Choose from seven education-related podcasts. Listen to seven episodes and write a reflection paper on each to earn credit.
- **Disability Rights and Inclusion Independent Study:** Build your understanding of disability rights, accessibility and inclusive practices.

Visit courses.ndunited.org to explore the complete course catalog and register.

DID YOU KNOW?

With support from the NDU Foundation, professional development course registration is free for ND United members. In 2025 alone, our members saved **\$142,500** in course fees!

Your membership can also help open doors financially. The [NDU Foundation offers scholarships and grants](#) supporting continued education, professional growth, workplace innovation and learning opportunities for students. Scholarships are available to ND United members — including Student-NDU and NDU-Retired members — and members' dependents. Scholarship applications will be open from Dec. 1, 2026, through March 31, 2027. Grant applications open each year on Sept. 1 and are reviewed quarterly.

YOU Can Do More with NDU!

Your NDU membership offers benefits that extend beyond the workplace — from added protection and legal resources to financial savings and support when you need it. And by joining with thousands of fellow educators and public employees across North Dakota, your membership gives you a stronger voice on the issues that affect your work and your community.



Professional Liability Insurance

Protection for eligible employment-related claims.



Attorney Referral Program

Access to participating attorneys for personal, non-employment legal matters.



Disaster Relief

Assistance when personal materials are damaged by qualifying natural disasters.



Life Insurance

Complimentary coverage included with membership.



Member Discounts

Savings on shopping, travel, insurance and more.



A Stronger Voice

Opportunities to shape NDU priorities and advocate with fellow educators and public employees.

**Membership is about more than the benefits you receive.
It's also about the power we build, together.**

Through ND United, educators and public employees help shape priorities and advocate for strong public schools and services, fair compensation and better working conditions. Whether you contact a legislator, respond to an action alert or share your experience, **your voice carries farther when thousands of NDU members speak together.**

READY TO GET INVOLVED?

Your voice makes a difference.

Learn more about [NDU's advocacy priorities](#), find ways to take action and discover how you can make your voice heard.





Four of a Kind

Teacher of the Year, finalists are NDU members

By Kelly Hagen

NDU Communications Director

At an event held in the state Capitol on the afternoon of Thursday, Sept. 24, a large crowd of educators, leaders, supporters and former honorees gathered to celebrate four outstanding finalists for North Dakota's highest teaching honor. All four were members of North Dakota United.

By the end of the ceremony, one of them — Napoleon agricultural education teacher Brian Schneider — had a new title: 2027 North Dakota Teacher of the Year.

State Superintendent Levi Bachmeier opened this year's ceremony with remarks about the varied backgrounds, subject areas, philosophies and accomplishments of each finalist before summing up the shared values that brought them all to that moment.

"Every one of them shares the same belief at the core of their work that every student deserves to be known, to be challenged, and to be believed in," Bachmeier said.

When the big moment arrived, Bachmeier described Schneider as "someone who has spent four decades proving that a single teacher in a single small town can change the trajectory of generation after generation of students" before announcing him as the 2027 honoree.

Schneider has spent 40 years in education, including 35 years teaching agricultural education at Napoleon Public School. His FFA program has earned 151 state individual and team championships and three national championships, but Bachmeier said Schneider's impact is measured by more than trophies. He pointed to the

relationships Schneider has built with generations of students and his commitment to helping them believe in themselves.

“It is truly going to be an honor to represent the teachers in our state who show up every day with a passion for helping students learn, grow and become successful adults in our society,” Schneider said.

Schneider used his remarks to recognize his fellow finalists and educators across the state, as well as his colleagues in agricultural education and career and technical education. He also thanked the Napoleon school district, his colleagues, family and students for supporting him throughout his career.

Gov. Kelly Armstrong also recognized Schneider’s ability to see students as individuals, noting that every student enters the classroom with different strengths, challenges and goals. That individual attention, Armstrong said, has helped Schneider earn the respect of his students while preparing them for life and careers beyond high school.

NDU President Nick Archuleta echoed Bachmeier’s observation that, despite teaching different subjects and serving students in different ways, the four finalists share a common purpose.

“You have four outstanding teachers, four distinct leaders, four different areas of expertise, but there is a common thread that unites all four of them ... and that is their belief in their students,” Archuleta said.

Joining Schneider as this year’s finalists were:

Dustin Moe teaches band, choir and general music at Washburn Public School, where he has taught since 2010.



Moe

Jennifer Nokes is a special education strategist serving K–5 students at Roosevelt Elementary School in Dickinson.



Nokes

Teresa Olson teaches family and consumer sciences, with a focus on child care and development, at the James Valley Career and Technology Center in Jamestown.



Olson

For all the accolades that accompanied his selection, Schneider ended his remarks by tracing his career back to an educator who first saw something in him.

He credited his own teacher, Wade Anderson, with encouraging him as a high school senior to pursue agricultural education — a suggestion Schneider admitted he didn’t understand at the time.

Decades later, standing at the Capitol as North Dakota’s Teacher of the Year, Schneider reflected on what Anderson had seen in him.

“He obviously saw something that I didn’t,” Schneider said, “and here we are today.”



For the Underdog

Geiermann retires after nearly 40 years of service

By Kelly Hagen

NDU Communications Director

Mike Geiermann has known for a long time who he is — and who he hoped to be.

“There were two things I always wanted to be,” Geiermann said. “I always wanted to be a teacher, and I always wanted to be a lawyer.”

Now, after nearly 40 years of working alongside and representing the educators and public employees of North Dakota United and its predecessor organizations, Geiermann can look back on a career in which he found a way to bring those two ambitions together.

At first, the path seemed destined to lead into a classroom rather than a courtroom. Geiermann graduated from the University of

North Dakota in 1981 with a degree in education. But law school eventually won out, and after earning his law degree from UND and passing the bar, he began his legal career in public service.

“I was originally employed by the Attorney General’s office for two and a half years,” Geiermann said, representing several state agencies. “But the big state agency that I represented was the Department of Public Instruction.”

Then, in 1987, the two paths Geiermann had imagined for himself began to converge.

He joined the Chapman Law Firm, which had represented the North Dakota Education Association for years. From the beginning, representing NDEA members would be a central part of his work.

“When I was hired by the Chapman Law Firm, my job was to take care of the NDEA,” he said. “They wanted to plug me immediately into working with teachers, which I was very excited about.”

For the next six years, Geiermann handled many of NDEA’s major cases. When he left Chapman in 1993 to become a partner at what was then the Ralston Law Firm, NDEA remained his client — a relationship that continued through the organization’s 2013 merger with the North Dakota Public Employees Association to form North Dakota United.

Even after closing his private practice in August 2022, Geiermann stayed on as NDU’s general counsel. He finally retired July 31, bringing to a close a relationship that had spanned nearly four decades.

“So, I had just started my 40th year of representing teachers and then subsequently public employees,” Geiermann said. “And I’ve done it, you know, basically my entire legal career.”

Looking back on his legal career — and nearly 40 years spent representing NDEA and NDU members — Geiermann says motivation often mattered as much as the law itself.

“I always wanted to represent the underdog,” he said. “I always wanted to help people that couldn’t help themselves. I couldn’t stand bullies.”

That did not mean every difficult situation had a legal solution. Geiermann remembers hundreds of conversations with members who came to him after something had gone wrong at work, sometimes unaware of what protections were — or were not

“I always wanted to represent the underdog. I always wanted to help people that couldn’t help themselves. I couldn’t stand bullies.”

*Mike Geiermann,
longtime NDEA/NDU
legal counsel*

— available under the law or their contracts.

“I’ve had hundreds of those conversations with teachers — lots of Kleenex, lots of tears,” he said. “Sometimes there’s simply nothing that can be done, and they need to hear that.”

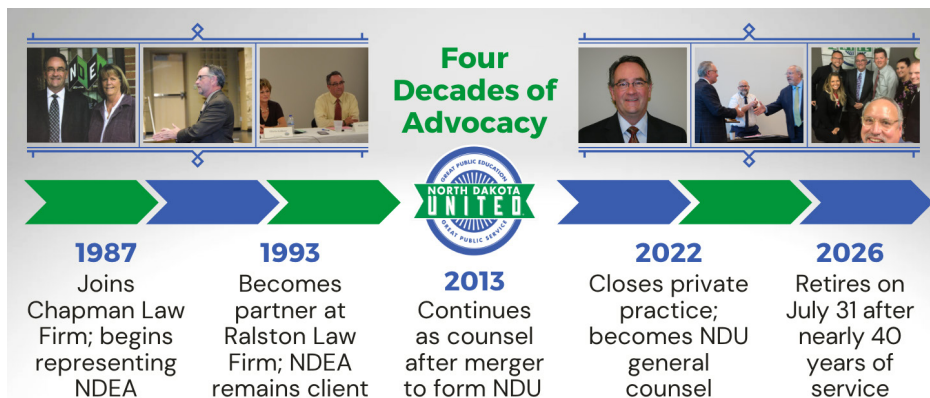
But when members had been unfairly treated and the facts and law were on their side, Geiermann was ready to fight for them.

“These people just want to be treated with respect,” he said. “The one thing I found over the years is that when we had legal issues, a lot of it boiled down to that: They wanted to be respected by their administrators and their school boards.”

One case that has stayed with him involved Fargo teacher Jeannie Hart, who was nearing retirement when she was sued for roughly \$12 million after a student was seriously injured in an after-school incident. Hart neither organized nor knew was going to happen.

“We went through two jury trials, two appeals to the Supreme Court, before it was all said and done

Continued on next page.



Continued from previous page.

and resolved,” Geiermann said. Hart initially received a favorable jury verdict, but that judgment was reversed on appeal. She later settled before a second trial involving the school district.

The case stretched across years and into Hart’s retirement. Geiermann said that without the legal representation provided through her NDEA membership, the cost of defending herself could have consumed much of what she had spent her career saving.

“Had she not been a member, she probably would have had to take her retirement and give it to a lawyer for five years,” he said. “But because she was a member of NDEA at the time, she got the benefit of legal services.”

Of all the cases he handled over four decades, Hart’s remains the one Geiermann remembers with the most pride.

“When I look back at the almost 40 years that I represented teachers, it’s my proudest moment,” he said.

NDU President Nick Archuleta said Geiermann’s value to members extended well beyond his knowledge of the law. Just

knowing that someone with his experience was standing behind them gave members confidence when difficult situations arose.

“Mike brought first to NDEA and then NDU a sense of security,” Archuleta said. “His interactions with our members gave them confidence knowing that Mike, an expert in education law, was going to ensure that they were treated fairly and with dignity.”

Geiermann’s judgment also carried weight outside the courtroom. Because his word was respected by people on all sides of an issue, Archuleta said, sometimes the possibility of legal action was enough to prevent a bad decision from going any further.

“It is his constancy and abilities over the course of his career that defines Mike’s impact on our organization,” Archuleta said.

That sense of security, Geiermann said, begins with membership.

“In my opinion, membership in NDU is priceless,” he said. “We will ensure that the process gets followed, and that’s hugely important.”

Membership cannot guarantee the outcome of every workplace dispute, but it does mean

members do not have to navigate difficult situations alone. It gives them access to people who understand their contracts, their legal rights and the processes designed to protect both.

And, Geiermann cautioned, that protection has to be in place before trouble begins.

“You can’t buy insurance when the house is on fire,” he said.

As Geiermann steps away after nearly 40 years of representing educators and public employees, that work is continuing under attorney Kylie Oversen.

“Mike has been an incredible mentor to me even before I officially stepped into this role,” Oversen said.



Oversen

Oversen was selected earlier this year to take over NDU’s legal work, and Geiermann has spent the months since helping make the transition as seamless as possible. She said he has made himself available whenever questions arose, walking her through complicated legal issues, explaining the history behind labor disputes in North Dakota and offering guidance on individual cases.

“Mike is known, and has proven himself, as a tenacious, dedicated advocate for our members,” Oversen said.

Oversen’s own story has some echoes of Geiermann’s. Like him, she grew up in North Dakota in a family that valued work, public service and education.

“I am the daughter and granddaughter of working people,” Oversen said. “My

Grandpa Don was a Teamster. My Grandpa Erwin was a longtime custodian at my hometown public school.”

Growing up in Killdeer, earning her law degree from UND and later serving in the North Dakota House of Representatives all helped shape the perspective she brings to the role. Just as important, Oversen said, has been Geiermann’s guidance as she prepares to “dive in head first.”

“Mike continues to be a resource for me as I learn the ropes so that, hopefully, members don’t have any lapse in high-quality legal services,” she said. “Importantly, I hope members keep in mind that our field staff are a truly valuable resource to them. Their knowledge and advocacy skills have been such an asset to me in my first months on the job.”

Geiermann, for his part, has every confidence in his successor.

“Kylie is a very fine, capable lawyer who has been fighting for people that can’t fight for themselves,” he said. “So, she fits perfectly into this job.”

Retirement will surely give Geiermann more time for family and friends, following his beloved UND hockey team and getting outdoors during hunting season. But after nearly 40 years representing educators and public employees, he hopes the lasting measure of his career will be the people he stood beside and the principles he defended.

“I always advocated for what I thought was right. ... I was dedicated to what I thought was right. I was dedicated to the union concept,” Geiermann said. “People do better when they stand together. And I think that’s how I’d like to be remembered.”



Schmeichel named ND History Teacher of the Year

By Joel Crane

NDU Press Secretary

On the upper floor of Legacy High School in Bismarck, students file into Landen Schmeichel's classroom on the third day of school for the new year.

I am excited to have been invited to his room, which is filled with symbols of big ideas from American history, to observe a U.S. History class.

Behind Mr. Schmeichel's desk, there sit several totems of American freedom: a bronze bust of Abraham Lincoln accompanied by a Lego set of the White House and a copy of the U.S. Constitution. Under the clock by the door, a portrait of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, perhaps a reminder of what students can do for their country. A large portrait of Frederick Douglass, prominently positioned at the



whiteboard next to the room's brightest lamp, to my mind a representation of the visionary abolitionist's bright ideas that would influence a nation.

As the students settle in, surrounded by larger-than-life figures whose big ideas changed the world, Mr. Schmeichel introduces students to the pedagogical core of his approach to U.S. History: a lecture about what history is. Not just names and dates to be memorized, but rather a collection of big ideas that animated those recognizable names on those famous dates.



“History is less about memorizing important dates and people, and more about understanding how facts can create cogent arguments,” Schmeichel said. “The better our arguments are, the more we can realize success; the more we can learn from one another about how those historical experiences inform the way we are today. It helps us to be more caring, more competent and to have better thriving communities.”

All of that begins with students engaging with primary sources: the speeches, letters, private diaries, public interviews, tweets and other documents that have shaped American history for the past 250 years.

“When Frederick Douglass, the child of his enslaver and his mom who was enslaved, says that ‘America is fundamentally good,’ when he champions the American Constitution as a ‘glorious liberty document,’ yet he says America is also one of the most hypocritical nations in the history of humankind, that’s not Landen Schmeichel insisting



that Frederick Douglass is right or wrong, that’s Landen Schmeichel engaging students with the arguments of the past. I’m asking them questions about their thoughts, their reactions and their connections to what Frederick Douglass had to say in 1852,” he said.

That philosophy is, in part, one of the things that earned Schmeichel the 2025 Gilder Lehrman North Dakota History Teacher of the Year, a coveted award in the world of social studies education,

Continued on next page.

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Continued from previous page.

which comes with a cash prize, classroom resources for students and graduate-level coursework provided by Gettysburg College, which can be used as professional development credits toward licensure renewal.

“I was really honored and privileged to receive that award. But it all comes back to students,” he said. “How do we deliver experiences for learners in our classrooms that don’t just equip them to be good workers, but make them into citizens that are going to contribute to their community and their country?”

North Dakota History Teacher of the Year — that’s a big deal, a once-in-a-career type of award. But the 2025–26 school year was a big one for Schmeichel, and as such, ND History Teacher of the Year was not the only major award he received. He was also recognized as the Bismarck Mandan Chamber of Commerce Secondary Teacher of the Year, one of five educators from elementary to college-level between the two cities to receive such an award, and one that represented a full-circle moment in his career.

“When I started out in education, I was an instructional aide at Wachter Middle School,” Schmeichel said. “A teacher I worked closely with, Jeramie Schafer, won that award that year. And I remember thinking, ‘When I become a teacher, I’m going to seek out teachers who win that award and learn from them.’ So, to receive that award was not only surprising, humbling, amazing — it just took me back to where I started in education and wanting to be the teacher that delivered for every student.”



“History is less about memorizing important dates and people, and more about understanding how facts can create cogent arguments.”

*Landen Schmeichel,
history teacher at Legacy
High School in Bismarck*

For Schmeichel, that *every student* bit is really important. He is a fierce public-school advocate. He believes in adequately funding public schools and providing great public education for all students.

That passion for public education is due, in part, to his unique educational experience in childhood. He struggled academically in early elementary school. At that point, his parents decided to homeschool him.

“The experience that I had [in public education] wasn’t working,” he said. “My advocacy for public education really stems from my mom’s insistence that my education challenged me, and

that brought me to a level that she believed I could be at. But it's now my insistence that every person deserves a shot, every person deserves a chance. I believe that students who are like me, who came from a background where resources were generally there, they matter. But students who don't come from that background, they matter too."

Part of that mission of strengthening public schools is advocacy on behalf of his fellow educators. A former Student-NDU president and government relations chair for the Bismarck Education Association, in 2025, he led Bismarck Education Association's negotiations team. Together, they delivered wins for their colleagues around the district.

"I was amazed at the process of receiving feedback from my colleagues, writing goals based on that feedback that would allow us to equip educators with what they need," Schmeichel said. "Serving on that team eclipsed all my other experiences in [local unions I had been a part of]."

Some of those wins included clearing up contract language and securing raises with no additional insurance monies needed, despite a meager increase for K-12 education from the state Legislature. Despite the wins, he knows something needs to change at the state level if public

education in North Dakota can continue to thrive.

"Funding public education is about ensuring that our communities have enough support to give educators what they need in order to support long-term human flourishing," he said.

△△△

Back in his classroom on the third day of school, Schmeichel's introduction to big ideas is a hit. It generates insightful conversations among students about what patriotism means. After comparing lecture notes, everyone packs up for their second period class. As they exit, the 2025 North Dakota History Teacher of the Year stands at the door and delivers fist bumps and high fives, thanks them for their attention, and wishes them a good day.

One can't help but reflect on what Mr. Schmeichel just spent the hour doing. Today, he presented his students with the tools for success, which they will use to strengthen their communities with civic engagement, and which will ultimately lead to a stronger nation.

As I shake his hand and leave the third-floor classroom, I glance up at JFK and can't help but think to myself, "Landen Schmeichel doesn't have to wonder what he can do for his country. He's already doing it."

[Click here](#) or scan this QR code to watch Landen Schmeichel bring his approach to teaching history to life.





\$85,000

AWARDED

60

RECIPIENTS

Looking to Tomorrow

Scholarships and grants from NDU Foundation help our members and dependents pursue their goals

By Sarah Keiser

Special Projects Coordinator

The North Dakota United Foundation is proud to announce the distribution of \$85,000 in scholarships and grants to dozens of deserving educators, public servants and students this year. Each recipient received an award ranging from \$200 to \$5,000.

“These grants and scholarships are an investment in the future of North Dakota,” said Brenda Seehafer, chair of the ND United Foundation. “We are looking to tomorrow by supporting these recipients’ professional and educational goals.”

Congratulations to this year’s recipients:

Regan Aasand, of Halstad, Minn., received a Ron & Ann Anstrom Scholarship and a Horace Mann ND Agents Graduate Education Scholarship for her graduate English education degree at



Aasand

Valley City State University.

Alette Adrian, of Binfond, received a Thomas & Garnet Wurst Scholarship.

Carter Adrian, of Binfond, received a Thomas & Garnet



A. Adrian

Wurst Scholarship.

Hannah Auka, of Mylo, is the recipient of a Mary Cripps Special Education Scholarship and a Bill Oban Special Education Scholarship for her undergraduate degree in special education from Minot State University.

Aiza Bacalso, an educator in Solen, received a Dr. Joanne Pearson Fine Arts Grant for supplies for a photography class.

Doneya Birdine, of Mandan, an undergraduate communication sciences and disorders major at the University of Mary, received an NDU Foundation Ethnic Minority Scholarship.

Nikki Bristow, of Williston, received an NDU Member/Dependent Scholarship for her biochemistry & molecular biology and comprehensive science education degrees at North Dakota State University.

Abigail Delorme, of St. John, an undergraduate psychology major at Valley City State University, received an NDU Foundation Ethnic Minority Scholarship.

Addyson Doane, of Ashley, received a Harris & Arlyce Widmer Family Business Education Scholarship for FBLA-related activities.

Karady Evans, of New England, an undergraduate elementary education major at Black Hills



C. Adrian



Bacalso

State University, received an NDU Education Scholarship.

Braeton Erhardt, of Center, received a Ron & Ann Anstrom Scholarship for her Master of Math Education with a concentration in Teaching & Technology degree at Valley City State University.

McKenna Ernst, of Dickinson, received an NDU Member/Dependent Scholarship and a Harris & Arlyce Widmer Family Business Education Scholarship for her business marketing degree at North Dakota State University.

Myah Fitzsimonds, of West Fargo, received a Cindy & Gary Rath Education Scholarship for her undergraduate secondary science education degree at Mayville State University.

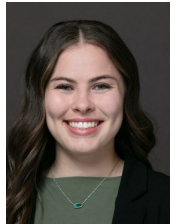
Olivia Fossen, of Lakota, an undergraduate elementary education major at the University of North Dakota, received an NDU Foundation Ethnic Minority Scholarship.



Evans



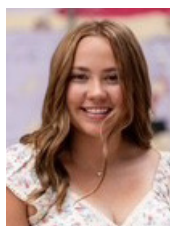
Erhardt



Ernst



Fitzsimonds



Fossen

NDU & YOU

Daniel Franco, of Minot, has been awarded a Harris & Arlyce Widmer Family Business Education Scholarship for FBLA-related activities.

Alliana Freund, of Cando, an undergraduate education major at Valley City State University, received an NDU Education Scholarship.



Freund

Faith Frisch, of Grand Forks, received a Cindy & Gary Rath Education Scholarship for her undergraduate early childhood education degree at Mayville State University.

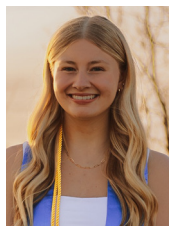
Bennett Graff, of Mandan, received an NDU Member/Dependent Scholarship for his engineering degree at the University of Alabama.



Graff

Karsyn Halvorson, of Glenfield, received a Thomas & Garnet Wurst Scholarship.

Jennifer Hanson, of Mandan, received a Harris & Arlyce Widmer Family Business Education Scholarship for her undergraduate marketing degree at North Dakota State University.



Halvorson

Carter Hass, of Valley City, received a Betty Lu Lenthe Speech Education Grant to attend the



Hanson

2026 National Speech and Debate Tournament.

Gabrielle Helfrich, of West Fargo, received a Halstenson Family Music Scholarship and a Horace Mann ND Agents Graduate Education Scholarship for her graduate music education degree at American Band College.



Helfrich

Heather Hintz, a middle school educator in Bismarck, received an NDU Workplace Innovation Grant for decorations and furniture for her team area.



Hintz

Isaac Homuth, of West Fargo, received a Halstenson Family Music Scholarship and a Horace Mann ND Agents Graduate Education Scholarship for his graduate Instrumental music education/conducting (Band) degree at American Band College.



Homuth

Krista Hulderman, of West Fargo, received a Betty Lu Lenthe Speech Education Grant for students from Sheyenne High School to attend the 2026 National Speech and Debate Tournament.



Johnson

Kelsey Johnson, of Kensal, received a Thomas & Garnet Wurst Scholarship.

Cassidy Johnson, of Ray, received a Ted Meckle Memorial Scholarship.

Stefanie Keidel, of Mandan, received a Mary Cripps Special Education Scholarship, a Horace Mann ND Agents Graduate Education Scholarship, and a Bill Oban Special Education Scholarship for her graduate degree in special education from Minot State University.



Keidel

Malory Kemp, of Cavalier, received an NDU Member/Dependent Scholarship for her civil engineering degree at South Dakota State University.

Jessica Kesler, of Minot, received a Horace Mann ND Agents Graduate Education Scholarship for her master's degree in education in curriculum and instruction from the University of Jamestown.



Kesler

Jozie Kiecker, of Edgeley, an undergraduate elementary education & special education major at Northern State University, received a Mary Cripps Special Education Scholarship, an NDU Education Scholarship and a Bill Oban Special Education Scholarship.



Kiecker

Emily Kittelson, of Hillsboro, received a Robert & Janet Lorch Family Education Scholarship.

Olivia Klamann, of West Fargo, received an NDU Member/Dependent Scholarship for her Bachelor of Science in nursing at the University of North Dakota.



Kittelson

Deserae Kukowski, of Newburg, received a Joseph A. Westby Leadership Award for her master's degree in educational leadership at Minnesota State University Moorhead.



Klamann

Heidi Livingston, of LaMoure, received a Horace Mann ND Agents Graduate Education Scholarship for her master's degree in education teaching and technology mathematics education from Valley City State University.



Kukowski

Tyson Leshuk, of Hillsboro, received a Robert & Janet Lorch Family Education Scholarship.

Summer Meyer, of Cedar River Township, an undergraduate elementary education major at Bismarck State College, received an NDU Education Scholarship.



Leshuk

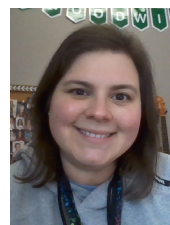
NDU & YOU

Annie Michels, of Dickinson, received a Bill Oban Special Education Scholarship for her graduate degree in special education from Valley City State University.



Michels

Meagan Monreal, of Northwood, received a Betty Lu Lenthe Speech Education Grant to purchase appropriate speeches, scripts and performance materials for the Hatton-Northwood speech team.



Monreal

Signe Nagle, of Fargo, received an NDU Member/Dependent Scholarship for her political science and history degree at Columbia University.



Nagle

Drake Nostrum, of Fargo, received an NDU Member/Dependent Scholarship and a Harris & Arlyce Widmer Family Business Education Scholarship for his accounting degree at North Dakota State University.



Nostrum

Taylor Peterson, of Bismarck, is the recipient of a Bill Oban Special Education Scholarship for her



Peterson

undergraduate degree in special education from the University of Mary.

Hannah Pilon, of Fargo, received a Cindy & Gary Rath Education Scholarship for her undergraduate education degree at Mayville State University.



Pilon

Avery Prokop, of Bismarck, an undergraduate school psychology major at North Dakota State University, received an NDU Education Scholarship.



Prokop

Hannah Sagvold, an educator in Lisbon, received an NDU Workplace Innovation Grant for The Bronco Barn, a school-based enterprise that provides hands-on experience for high school students in retail operations, customer service and entrepreneurship.



Sagvold

Avery St. Germaine, of Rolla, an undergraduate communication sciences and disorders major at the University of North Dakota, received an NDU Foundation Ethnic Minority Scholarship.

Brenda Seehafer, of Rolla, received a Howard Loftesnes Memorial Education Scholarship for her reading literacy specialist coursework.

Allison Slominski, of Grand Forks, received a Howard Loftesnes Memorial Education Scholarship for her Reading Education and Instructional Coaching Certificate from the University of North Dakota.



Slominski

Payton Sorum, of McHenry, received a Thomas & Garnet Wurst Scholarship.

Landon Sundeen, of Lakota, received a Harris & Arlyce Widmer Family Business Education Scholarship for his undergraduate finance degree at the University of North Dakota.

Brayden Sutherland, of Enderlin, received an NDU Education Scholarship for his undergraduate degree in elementary education from the University of Jamestown.



Sutherland

Megan Swenson, of Minot, an undergraduate business education major at Minot State University, received an NDU Education Scholarship.

Brennin Thuesen, of Ray, received a Ted Meckle Memorial Scholarship.

Cooper Timm, of Kensal, received a Thomas & Garnet Wurst Scholarship.

Greg Vettel, of Minot, received a Horace Mann ND Agents Graduate Education

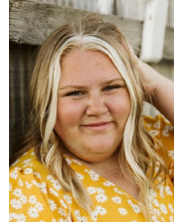


Vettel

Scholarship for his visual arts MFA from the University of North Dakota.

Jameson Wald, of Linton, received a Harris & Arlyce Widmer Family Business Education Scholarship for FBLA-related activities.

Emma Welch, of Bowman, an undergraduate elementary education major at Dickinson State University, received a Fern Pokorny Education Scholarship and a Les Snively Memorial Education Scholarship.



Welch

Julianna Wolff, of Wishek, received a Halstenson Family Music Scholarship and a Horace Mann ND Agents Graduate Education Scholarship for her graduate elementary music degree at North Dakota State University.

Rikky Wyatt, of Gladstone, an undergraduate elementary education major at Dickinson State University, received an NDU Education Scholarship, a Fern Pokorny Education Scholarship, and a Les Snively Memorial Education Scholarship.

Gerilynn Yazzie, of Bismarck, received an NDU Education Scholarship for her undergraduate degree in elementary education from United Tribes Technical College.



Yazzie

For more information about the NDU Foundation, visit our website at www.ndunited.org/foundation.

Rising Costs of Coverage

Review of 16 school districts finds health insurance costs consuming millions of dollars as premiums keep rising.

By Sarah Keiser

Special Projects Coordinator

Health insurance has become one of the fastest-growing expenses for public school districts across the United States, including North Dakota. As districts invest in classroom instruction, student support services, employee salaries, technology and facilities, rising health insurance costs are consuming an increasingly large share of school budgets.

North Dakota United became increasingly aware of rising costs through contract negotiations, local leadership meetings and discussions with members and partners.

To better understand the scope of the issue, NDU submitted open records requests to 16 school districts: Bismarck, Devils Lake, Dickinson, Drayton, Fargo, Grafton, Grand Forks, Jamestown, Kindred, Mandan, Minot, Nedrose, Richland, Watford City, West Fargo and Williston.

Information Requested From School Districts

- Summary of benefits and coverage
- District spending on employee health insurance
- Insurance as a percentage of total expenditures
- Employee premiums for available plans
- Premium and plan changes from 2021–26

BY THE NUMBERS

16

school districts surveyed

\$7.54M

average district budget for employee health insurance

8.55%

average share of total district expenditures

25.6%

average premium increase from 2021–26

District Spending on Employee Health Insurance

Employee health insurance budgets averaged **\$7.54 million** across the 16 districts surveyed. West Fargo and Bismarck reported the highest expenditures at more than \$24 million and \$22 million, respectively. Fargo Public Schools exceeded its approved health insurance budget by approximately \$500,000.

Only four districts budgeted less than **\$1 million** for employee health insurance: Drayton, Grafton, Nedrose and Richland.

Employee health insurance accounted for an average of **8.55%** of total district expenditure. Four districts reported spending more than 10% of their total budgets on employee health insurance:

- Dickinson: 12.6%
- Minot: 11.4%
- Bismarck: 10.9%
- Watford City: 10.64%

Premium Increases, 2021–26

Employee premiums increased an average of 25.6% between 2021 and 2026 across the districts surveyed. Kindred Public School District was unable to provide historical premium data for the analysis.

Employee Premium Costs

Employee costs varied significantly because most districts offer multiple plan options and coverage levels. While single coverage is relatively affordable in many districts, costs increase substantially for employees covering spouses and dependents.

Richland employees pay approximately \$12,800 annually for family coverage, while costs in Watford City exceed \$16,000 per year. Even in West Fargo, educators contribute roughly \$6,000 annually toward family premiums.

FIVE YEARS OF RISING COSTS

+48.7%

Drayton

+47.7%

Dickinson

+32.7%

Devils Lake

+17.4%

Nedrose

Impact on School Districts and Employees

As districts allocate more resources to health insurance, fewer funds may be available for hiring teachers, updating curriculum, improving facilities, expanding student programs or investing in instructional materials and technology.

Employees feel those costs directly. Higher premiums, deductibles and out-of-pocket expenses reduce the value of salary increases and can make careers in public education less financially attractive. With ongoing teacher and staff shortages, competitive benefits remain an important tool for recruiting and retaining qualified employees.

Continued increases in costs, coupled with declining benefits or higher employee contributions, may make it more difficult for districts to attract and retain experienced educators and support staff.

School district health insurance costs are more than a budgetary concern — they are an educational issue. Rising costs force districts to make tradeoffs that affect staffing, classroom resources and student services.

Addressing these challenges will require long-term solutions, including consideration of state-level support and broader strategies to control health care costs. Without sustainable approaches, health insurance expenses will continue to compete with the core mission of public education.

THE COST OF FAMILY PLANS

\$13,000+

Annual employee cost for family coverage in Grafton

\$6,600

Family-plan deductible

≈ \$47,000

Average annual salary in Grafton

West Fargo — July 23-24, WF High School



Bismarck — July 20-21, Horizon Middle School



SLAS 2026 was a Blast

North Dakota United members from across the state gathered in Bismarck and West Fargo for our Summer Leadership and Advocacy Summit to build their skills, strengthen relationships with fellow leaders, and continue building the power we need to strengthen our public schools and services.

The summit addressed many key competencies for union leaders, including social emotional intelligence, governance and leadership, strategy & fiscal health, communication, leading our professions, political advocacy and organizing.

Members also participated in phone banks to voters about the universal school meals ballot measure.

SLAS has become a crucial training for local leaders looking to strengthen their unions and build relationships with fellow leaders across the state. If you haven't attended one yet, we will be holding another again in the Summer of 2027. Stay tuned for more information in Spring 2027!

DRIVE YOUR PRIDE

SUPPORT THE NDU FOUNDATION
WITH A LICENSE PLATE



The ND Department of Transportation will begin issuing NDU Foundation license plates with proceeds benefitting the NDU Foundation.

NDU Foundation plates start at \$25 annually.

The NDU Foundation provides opportunities for educators, public servants, and college students to enhance their knowledge, develop new skills, and advance their professional and academic goals.

To get your plate contact Sarah Keiser at 701.223.0450 or sarah.keiser@ndunited.org

Everyone has a story...



Know a member whose story ought to be told? Help us spotlight the people making a difference in our schools and communities — including YOU!

Send your story ideas and news tips to: kelly.hagen@ndunited.org



Shop, Dine & Save

The NEA Shop & Dine
Program works harder
for your budget

- Get up to **50% off** at hundreds of local restaurants
- Earn up to **10% cash back** when shopping online and in-store
- Earn **\$1,000 Savings Dollars** for gift cards when you enroll and use it across NEA Travel and Shop and Dine products



*Experience a
better discount
program!*

nea Member
Benefits

Life insurance is for *real* life.



September is **Life Insurance Awareness Month**, a good reminder that real life is worth protecting.

Life insurance is about more than planning for the unexpected. It can help provide financial security for the people you love and protect what you're building together.

Horace Mann, our long-time corporate partner has life insurance policies that are designed with educators in mind, including special rates exclusively for those in education.

Real life deserves real protection. Start with an [online quote](#) or call 866-505-9685 to explore your options today.

Horace Mann Life Insurance Company underwrites Horace Mann life insurance products.

For more information, email your inquiry to association.relations@horacemann.com.

Securities offered through Horace Mann Investors, Inc. Member FINRA

1 Horace Mann Plaza | Springfield, IL 62715-0001 | 217-789-2500 | horacemann.com

EML-00325 (Aug. 26)

North Dakota United
301 N Fourth St
Bismarck, ND 58501-4020

Let's Get
Social!



Instagram
[@northdakotaunited](#)

Threads
[@northdakotaunited](#)

BlueSky
[@ndunited](#)

Facebook
[@ndunited](#)

YouTube
[@nodakunited](#)

Twitter/X
[@ndunited](#)

