199 REPORTER

INVER GROVE HEIGHTS SCHOOLS | SPRING 2026

Superintendent Bernhardson Announces Retirement



I am writing to share that I have made the decision to retire as Superintendent on June 30, 2026. It has been an extraordinary honor to serve the Inver Grove Heights community since July 2014. I have strived to uphold our mission — Inspire. Innovate. Excel. A Community Commitment. — and to help realize the aspirations of this amazing school district. I am truly humbled by the trust you have placed in me.

Inver Grove Heights Schools and the community represent a remarkable variety of people, ideas, and commitments. I am deeply grateful to the many colleagues, mentors, staff members, families, and community partners who have supported me throughout this journey. Their dedication, leadership, and unwavering commitment to public education have played a significant role in the success of our students, staff, and schools.

In the months ahead, I remain committed to serving our school district community and ensuring a smooth and successful leadership transition.

Together,
Dave



Dave Bernhardson
Superintendent

ISD 199 Launches Search for Next Superintendent

For 12 years, Superintendent Dave Bernhardson has led by example. He has worked hard to make everyone feel like they belong, build positive relationships within the school district and around the community, and advocate for the tools and supports classrooms need to engage students in learning. Now, Inver Grove Heights Schools (ISD 199) will begin the search for the next superintendent to advance that work into the future. The selected candidate will start as ISD 199 Superintendent on July 1, 2026.

In December, the Inver Grove Heights School Board requested proposals from experienced search firms that have recently led comparable superintendent searches in local school districts. After reviewing proposals, selected search firms were invited to present at a special school board session on January 12.

The presentations were followed by a board vote. Members voted to approve the Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA) as its chosen firm. A local organization, MSBA has an established partnership with ISD 199. In addition, they were the most fiscally responsible choice for the district's needs and they have an extensive knowledge of Minnesota law that will help ISD 199 properly navigate its superintendent search.

Since January, MSBA has been partnering with the ISD 199 School Board to engage staff, families, and community members in identifying the key qualities and priorities for the district's next superintendent.

Visit *isd199.org/suptsearch* for the search timeline, details, and updates.

199 REPORTER

Inver Grove Heights Schools

2990 80th Street East
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The 199 Reporter is a quarterly publication that is mailed to every household in School District 199 to keep all of our community members informed about district news.

If you have questions about this publication, please contact:

Katie Sheridan
Communications Manager
SheridanK@isd199.org

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FORUMS

Residents are invited to attend school board listening sessions. These sessions are an informal meeting where members of the ISD 199 School Board hear questions, comments, and concerns from residents. Sign up at *isd199.org/board*.

Inver Grove Heights Schools does not discriminate in employment or in any of its programs and activities, including vocational opportunities, on the basis of race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, status with regard to public assistance, familial status, membership or activity in a commission, disability, sexual orientation, or age. Inver Grove Heights Schools provides equal access to designated youth groups. Student-related inquiries about non-discrimination policies should be sent to Abel Riodique at 2990 80th Street East in Inver Grove Heights, RiodiqueA@isd199.org, or 651-306-7828. More information is available at www.isd199.org/nondiscrimination.

Community Leaders Donate to Industrial Tech



Hosts of this winter's Lighting Simley Island event donated funds back to Simley High School after Industrial Tech students created a lighted arch for the event. Rob Reitberger of Hometown Meats, Dakota County Commissioner Joe Atkins, and Peter Gaarder of the Moose Lodge presented the class with a check ahead of Winter Break.

"If we had gotten that lighted arch anywhere else, it would have cost us thousands of dollars," Commissioner Atkins said. "But you all did a beautiful job and saved us money." He explained that the check for $500, plus a $250 donation from B52's, were meant to cover the costs of the fixture's build so no money would come from the high school.

"Our school district's mission is 'Inspire. Innovate. Excel. A Community Commitment.' and you guys really innovated on this project," Inver Grove Heights Schools Superintendent Dave Bernhardson said. "But you also followed through on the 'Community Commitment' aspect, which is so important."

Industrial Tech students designed, built, and installed a lighted arch on the Simley Island Bridge as part of the Lighting Simley Island event. They worked out their design's specifications to build an affordable, durable fixture. Mr. Reitberger and Commissioner Atkins helped get the fixture in place for the November 28 lighting ceremony. The experience gave students a hands-on understanding of whether a career in industrial tech or engineering might be a good fit for them. Now, donated funds will go back to the program so students can do more hands-on projects.

Thank you to donors Mr. Reitberger and Hometown Meats, Commissioner Atkins, Mr. Gaarder and the Moose Lodge, and B52's for supporting immersive career exploration at Simley!

The Olympics Come to Hilltop & Pine Bend



Hilltop Elementary School and Pine Bend Elementary School got students in the spirit of the Olympic games with themed activities. Hilltop's "I Love to Read" Month challenged students to Read for the GOLD while Pine Bend staff competed in mini games for the glory of their class. Each class picked a country to represent, and the schools held opening ceremonies to present the flags.

Hilltop's "I Love to Read" Month encouraged students to complete different challenges – like reading poetry, creating their own comic book, reading with a friend, or listening to a book – to discover how fun reading can be. Families tracked challenges over the month while students also participated in spirit days, like Words on Your Shirt Day and a Book Character Day when students dressed as their favorite book character and paraded around the school to show others their favorite book.

At Pine Bend, a student ran a loop around the gym before lighting the "Olympic flame" with a crafted torch to start their games. Students cheered for their teacher as staff members faced off in mini games. Staff did relay challenges as well as silly challenges like tossing as many cheese puffs as possible onto a shaving cream-covered shower cap on their coworkers' head. The games highlighted the camaraderie amongst staff and created positive memories for students.

Three Simley Teachers Win Inclusive Educator Awards



Simley High School Math and Computer Science Teacher Gretchen Birkholz, Science Teacher Nora Austin, and Social Studies Teacher Rick Tavernier were selected for the 2025-2026 Inclusive Educator Award. Their Intermediate School District 917 colleagues nominated them for their exceptional efforts to support the inclusion of unique learners at Simley.

Inver Grove Heights Schools (ISD 199) is one of District 917's nine member districts. Students in member districts receive expanded special education services, alternative learning programming, and career and technical education that schools may not be able to provide individually. Ms. Birkholz, Ms. Austin, and Mr. Tavernier use District 917's services to ensure that students get what they need to do their best at school.

Ms. Birkholz's nominator described her as enthusiastic, compassionate and committed, a teacher who makes her classroom a welcoming and accessible space where all students feel like they belong.

"Ms. Birkholz is an exceptional educator who demonstrates inclusion in every aspect of her work," the nominator wrote. "She doesn't just support students academically. She builds genuine relationships, learns about their interests, and finds ways to connect with them personally."

The District 917 staff member who nominated Ms. Austin commended her for adapting to student needs and breaking down any possible barriers every day since the first day of school.

"Every day, Ms. Austin seemingly looks at the lesson through the eyes of her student and adjusts accordingly, checking in with the student and with me," the District 917 nominator said.

Another nominator agreed, writing, "From the very beginning of the school year, Ms. Austin took the initiative to meet with me and review each student's accommodations to ensure that they had full access to learning in the general education classroom. Her dedication, consistency, and genuine care for her students sets her apart."

District 917 staff members nominated Mr. Tavernier for seamlessly weaving accommodations into his teaching. One nominator celebrated how Mr. Tavernier treats all students, including those with disabilities, with dignity, providing support without lowering his expectations for them.

"Mr. Tavernier's willingness to adapt, his creative problem-solving, and his respect for every learner's unique needs make him an outstanding example of an inclusive educator," another nominator wrote. "He approaches accessibility as a natural part of teaching, not as an added task."

District 917 created the Inclusive Educator Award as part of December's Inclusive Schools Week. The week highlights and celebrates the progress that schools have made in implementing inclusive practices to ensure a quality education for an increasingly diverse student population. District 917 staff nominate staff from their nine member districts to acknowledge the incredible work of educators.

Inclusive Educator Award winners were recognized at a District 917 School Board meeting, and District 917 staff presented awards to this year's winners at Simley.

Congratulations to Ms. Birkholz, Ms, Austin, and Mr. Tavernier!

SALEM HILLS & ATHENEUM SERVICE LEARNING



Salem Hills Elementary School and Atheneum Gifted Magnet Program 4th graders organized a garage sale to raise funds for local non-profit Neighbors Inc. Salem Hills and Atheneum provide service learning opportunities for students as part of the Ashoka Changemaker School program. Students are empowered to be changemakers, working on solutions to real-world problems to change the world for the good of all.

The annual garage sale is an opportunity for 4th graders to raise funds for a cause that is important to them. Students brought their own toys and books to sell as well as snacks. They practiced their math and marketing skills during the garage sale, which was open to the whole school. Everything was priced at $1 or less so students could use change to participate and help 4th graders donate to a worthy cause.

The $1,320 raised at the garage sale will go to Neighbors Inc. to provide emergency assistance and supportive assistance programs to community members in Dakota County and surrounding communities. Great job, students!

Simley Business Students Open School Store



Simley High School students worked together to open a new school store, the Spartan SWAG Shack. They held a ribbon cutting and soft launch this December. The student-run store offers SWAG – Spirit Wear And Goodies – such as hoodies, winter hats, pop and other drinks, and more before school, at the end of the school day, and at school events and games.

Near the end of the 2024-2025 school year, Simley senior Emma T. completed a grant writing project about a school store at Simley for her Research and Writing class. She followed up her project idea with an email to the principal. Principal Carrie Gillund connected her with new Simley business teacher Craig Spreiter, and the work began.

Mr. Spreiter teamed up with Emma to understand her vision and move it forward, founding a DECA chapter at Simley. DECA is a non-profit organization that facilitates hands-on learning opportunities in marketing, finance, hospitality, and management for high school and college students. Simley students joined their school's chapter and jumped into planning the school store.

They held surveys to find out what students and staff wanted in a school store, they ordered inventory and created budgets, and they assigned members to different roles like treasurer and social media management. In about two months, they had prepared the school store space, organized their operations, and were ready to launch.

Click here to watch the ribbon cutting ceremony, and follow @spartanswagshack on Instagram for store hours and updates. Great job, students!

ISD 199 Continues Safety Improvements & Protocols



This winter, ISD 199 installed entryway security systems at all of its buildings. The systems are another way the district is enhancing student, staff, and school safety as part of its voter-approved 2024 referendum promise. In addition to the new security systems and protocols, ISD 199 maintains multi-layered safety and security protocols that cover the school day, before and after school, and transportation. Staff are trained to follow district protocols to keep everyone in the buildings safe.

Building Safety & Visitors

Safety protocols include controlled access to buildings. Doors are locked during the day, and visitors must sign in through our visitor management system in the front office before entering the main school building. The visitor system runs a background check, provides a visitor badge, notifies staff of their visitor's arrival, and tracks visitor check-in/check-out so staff know who is in the building at all times. No one may enter without valid identification, including outside agencies which are also required to provide valid legal documentation. Administrators are trained to handle validating any legal documentation. The newly installed entryway security systems further secure student spaces.

Emergency Services Partnership

The school district has a close working relationship with the Inver Grove Heights Police Department (IGHPD). District staff routinely meet with the police department in order to proactively address any safety issues. ISD 199 School Resource Officers (SROs), Officer Ericka Eid and Officer Nathan Taarud, are also part of the IGHPD. They are on site to help buildings quickly and professionally handle any safety issues that may arise.

Laws & Policies

Both district policies and state and federal laws help ensure the safety of students and their rights. Our district has policies governing everything from visitor procedures to the educational data and interview of students. In addition to our policies, there are strict legal requirements that must be met before an outside agency may interact with a student or staff member or access their data.

The district's goal is to make sure all students feel safe and supported at school so that they can stay focused on learning. Thank you to the ISD 199 community for its trust and partnership in making our schools safe and welcoming.

New Law & Limited Qualified Candidates Lead to Service Disruptions

Inver Grove Heights Schools (ISD 199), like many school districts, is currently experiencing disruptions in school services. This is a widespread issue that can be traced back to two contributing factors: a high number of staff leaves and a lack of available, qualified candidates for coverage.

Extended leave requests for ISD 199 staff have now quadrupled from last school year's total extended leaves, with daily leave requests increasing as well. School districts are required to implement the Minnesota Paid Leave law, which expands the definition of who qualifies for paid leave and leave duration. However, the law does not provide additional funding for school districts to get coverage for services that students, staff, and families rely on. The result of the unfunded Minnesota Paid Leave law is fewer staff covering more responsibilities of staff on state-allowed leave and specialized positions going uncovered due to a lack of qualified or available substitute candidates.

ISD 199 looks for coverage as soon as it is notified of a leave because surrounding school districts are competing for the same positions. Unfortunately, ISD 199 is typically looking for coverage in fields with existing shortages. The district has engaged with multiple external staffing services and advertised its positions, but postings frequently go months without qualified, reliable applicants.

The school district has protocols in place to support students, staff, and families as much as possible when there are coverage gaps, but ISD 199 recognizes the strain it puts on the entire school system. Thank you to staff for their dedication and flexibility in navigating these challenging situations. The school district will continue to explore all available avenues to improve substitute coverage, but some vacancies may persist due to current conditions.

Hilltop Teachers Bring Learning to Life With Native Artifacts



Hilltop Elementary School teachers brought learning to life for their second graders after their unit about the American West. Throughout the unit, students learned how the American West changed over time. Students did extensive learning about Native life and the importance of the buffalo. As they wrapped up the unit, they got to experience some Native artifacts up close, thanks to the Science Museum of Minnesota's Lending Library!

Students rotated through stations, exploring different artifacts. They saw and touched a buffalo skull, held a cow horn, and felt a bear fur. Students asked questions about the unusual shape of the buffalo skull, the weight of the cow horn, and the different textures of the bear fur. They also learned about jingle dress dancing and tried a traditional sidestep with guidance from jingle dress dancer Maria-Louisa.

ISD 199 BRIDGING BAND CONCERT



Bands across Inver Grove Heights Schools (ISD 199) joined together for a 5th-grade, 8th-grade, and high school Bridging Concert. Each band performed with their class to demonstrate what they have learned this year before everyone joined in on the school song.

The night started with a few songs from Simley High School's saxophone quartet. They showcased the talent that got them invited to play at the Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA) Conference in January. Fifth graders from Hilltop, Pine Bend, and Salem Hills elementary schools and the Atheneum Gifted Magnet Program followed, each playing a couple of versions of "Hot Cross Buns" with their school band. The songs showcased the skills they've learned in their first year of band. Inver Grove Heights Middle School 8th graders played "The Dragon" by Rob Grice and "Fireball" by Brian Beck. The Simley Wind Ensemble wrapped up individual class performances with "Second Suite in F, Mvt. 1" by Gustav Holst and music from the children's movie "The Incredibles" by Michael Giacchino. At the end of the concert, the audience and other bands clapped and sang along while the Simley Wind Ensemble played their school song.

The concert was a great opportunity for students to collaborate and learn from each other. It taught older students leadership as they modeled concert etiquette for the younger students. It also gave younger students an idea of what opportunities they will have in the future if they continue in the band program. Those who attended also saw how students progress in the district's band program over time.

Thank you to everyone who attended the concert and to everyone who helps support ISD 199's award-winning band program and its outstanding students.

ISD 199 Student Advisory Council Adds Perspective to Superintendent Search



The Inver Grove Heights Schools (ISD 199) Student Advisory Council met for the second time this school year to learn about the district's search for its next superintendent and provide input. The council is made up of select students from all ISD 199 buildings in grades 4, 7, and 11 and led by ISD 199 Superintendent Dave Bernhardson. Council members learn leadership skills they can bring back to their own schools next year as 5th, 8th, and 12th graders.

Students learned that, after 12 years leading ISD 199, Superintendent Bernhardson will retire on June 30, 2026. The group talked about what a superintendent does before talking in their school groups about what they like about their school, what they like about Inver Grove Heights, and what qualities they believe the next superintendent should have. They also talked about what they would do to improve the school district.

The Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA), the search firm that the ISD 199 School Board chose to assist with the search, led the discussion and gathered notes. A summary of notes from the ISD 199 Student Advisory Council meeting, notes from other focus groups, and the results of the Superintendent Search Survey will be provided to the ISD 199 School Board as it moves forward in selecting the district's next superintendent.

Great job to council members for making student voices heard! Anyone interested in the Superintendent Search can find more information at *isd199.org/suptsearch*.

Nearly 40 Simley Students Earn AP Scholar Awards

Simley High School students earned AP Scholar Awards for their outstanding performance on their Advanced Placement (AP) exams at the end of the 2024-2025 school year. AP classes challenge students with college-level coursework and provide an opportunity to earn college credit before graduation. Exams are scored on a 0-5 scale, which can qualify students for college credit. Each year, students are recognized for earning scores of 3 or higher on multiple AP exams. The 39 Simley award winners were recognized in three categories.

AP Scholar Award: Earned scores of 3 or higher on three or more AP exams.

- Hailey Berglund
- Ricardo Diaz Meza
- Emerson Hocking
- Douglas Johnson
- Brandon Kruse
- Lilah Moen
- Kieran Mountain
- Gaverett Peterson
- Addison Pieczka
- Gavin Shier
- Leah Thoemke
- William Tong
- Ethan Tuione
- Cailyn Voss

AP Scholar with Honor Award: Earned an average score of 3.25 or higher on all exams taken and earned scores of 3 or higher on four or more of those AP exams.

- Niklas Abrahamson
- Alexandra Cobb
- Zoe Diaz
- Mari Early
- Anabelle Hagel
- Ashley Lynner
- Nathan Price
- Robert Pruden
- Gavin Vraa
- Cole Wanek
- Myles Woltman

AP Scholar with Distinction Award: Earned an average score of 3.5 on all AP exams taken and earned scores of 3 or higher on five or more of those exams.

- Riley Anich
- Nolan Barber
- O'Reilly Bernardy
- Erick Das
- Cadence Dolphy
- Alan Franklin
- Lourdes Greenlaw
- Thomas Hartlaub
- Everett Kehl
- Tiffany Nguyen
- Charles Scopatz
- John Scopatz
- Lorien Stiffler
- Eli Wells

In addition to high participation in rigorous concurrent enrollment courses, about half of Simley's students took at least one AP course during the 2024-2025 school year. Simley is proud to have so many students participating in AP and other college-level courses. Nearly 1,200 students have earned AP Scholar awards for their outstanding work since 2019. Great job to the students who challenged themselves with multiple AP classes and those who scored highly on their exams!

All Conference Bands

Congratulations to the 17 Simley High School students who were selected for this year's Metro East All Conference Honors Band and Jazz Band! Every year, the top student musicians from the Metro East Conference are selected for a two-day event and a performance at the Metro East All Conference Music Festival. Students worked with renowned clinicians to rehearse and learn a variety of advanced repertoire ahead of their performance in Mahtomedi this January.

Justin Artema
Diego Ayala Sanchez
Thomas Carroll Forsberg
Thomas Hartlaub
Poppy Komatsu
Evan Meyer
Katelyn Museus
Archer Ness
Ava Osland
Lauren Oswald
Noah Pierson
Lisseth Pimentel
Rafael Romero
Anna Steahl
Sophie Steahl
Kat Stammler
Emma Turbett

Congratulations to all of the student musicians who earned this honor!

IGHMS READBowl



Inver Grove Heights Middle School held a READBowl to challenge students to read more. Over one month, students kept track of their reading minutes. All of the grades and staff, combined, read more than 330,000 minutes, and 7th grade read the most with 126,000 minutes!

Students who read the most in their grade got to choose a brand-new book. Congratulations to 6th graders Ava N. and Jonathon C. B., 7th graders Jessica I. and Jemma A., and 8th graders Esmeralda M. F. and Vee L.!

Simley Theatre's "Leading Ladies" Awarded



Simley High School's fall play, "Leading Ladies," ended its run with multiple awards. The production's stage manager earned the Simley Theatre 2025 Ghost Light Award and the production and its cast earned six Spotlight Education honors.

Simley Theatre's Ghost Light Award recognizes outstanding work and exemplary dedication to a theatre production. This year's award winner, Thomas Carroll Forsberg, earned the award for his professionalism, commitment, and artistic excellence as the production's stage manager. He was recognized as contributing to the success of the performances and elevating the production as a whole.

After an evaluator from the Hennepin Arts Spotlight Education program attended one of their performances, Simley Theatre's "Leading Ladies" received six Spotlight Education honors. The program evaluates and celebrates high school theatre across Minnesota, developing creative and innovative leaders through arts education, workshops, and production assessments.

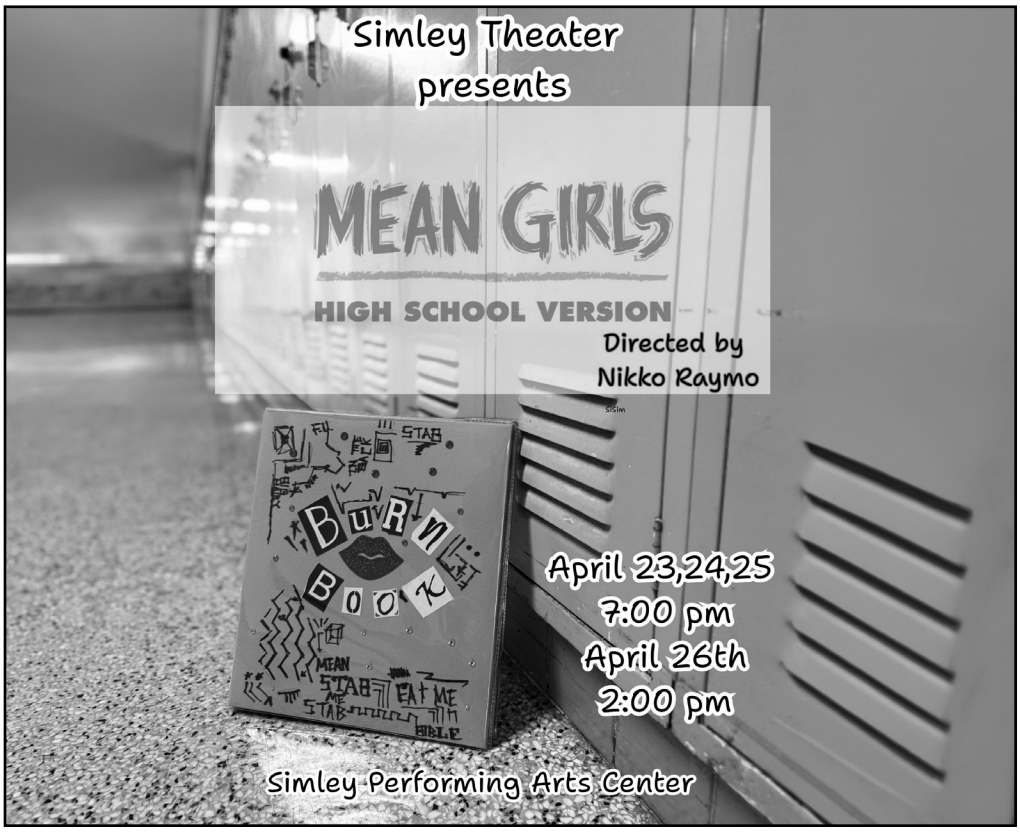
Three actors received individual honorable mentions while the ensemble was honored for their overall acting:

- Honorable Mention in a Leading Role: Justin Artema and Charles Scopatz
- Honorable Mention in a Supporting Role: Nadia Van Leer
- Honorable Mention in Ensemble Acting

Two of the actors received Evaluator Shout-Outs, which recognize those who caught the attention of the evaluator:

- Evaluator Shout-Out: Livianna McDonald and Archer Ness

Congratulations to honorees and the entire cast and crew of "Leading Ladies"!



FAST FACTS • • • • • • • • • • • • INSPIRE. INNOVATE. EXCEL.

Stay informed of the current issues, challenges, and changes facing the Inver Grove Heights School District.

#1. UNFUNDED REQUIREMENTS

Unfunded and underfunded mandates are Federal and State requirements that come with little to no additional funding to cover their costs. School districts must use our own limited general education fund to cover the costs of these mandates, leaving fewer dollars for the fund's original purpose: addressing the specific needs of our ISD 199 students. These requirements also leave fewer options to contain costs, forcing the district to choose between eliminating essential student services or reducing staff, which affects class sizes.

#2. MINNESOTA PAID LEAVE

School districts are required to implement the Minnesota Paid Leave Law with no additional funding. The new law expands the definition of who qualifies for paid leave and their leave duration. The law has already resulted in extended leaves of absence quadrupling with no funding to support the increase.

Before the Minnesota Paid Leave Law, ISD 199 had 17 extended leaves of absence during the entirety of the 2024-2025 school year. We are up to 69 requests with three months of the school year left. When an employee goes on leave, the district usually pays for their benefits as well as a long-term substitute to fill the position. Maternity and medical leaves are expected, but the increase in costs for leaves under the new law is exponential.

We recognize the importance of mandates like these, but they must be funded. Unfunded and significantly underfunded mandates strain the school district's ability to fulfill the mandates while serving students.

#3. LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

ISD 199 advocates for State legislation that will help Minnesota school districts serve students and use education funding effectively. We stay in contact with our district's local representatives to provide them with a district perspective when relevant bills arise. We also put together and deliver a list of legislative priorities each school year that representatives can use to advocate on the district's behalf. The most recent priorities include resisting any new unfunded mandates, fully funding existing mandates, and expanding the allowable use of restricted funds for things like security updates.

• SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH UPDATES: ISD199.ORG/SUPTSEARCH •

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2990 80th St. E.
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