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Senator Tina Smith Receives AESA Congressional Service Award Following Minnesota Service Cooperatives Nomination

National recognition highlights the partnerships that helped build the Minnesota STEM Ecosystem

ROCHESTER, Minn. — U.S. Senator Tina Smith has received the 2026 Congressional Service Award from the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA). Southeast Service Cooperative (SSC) nominated Smith on behalf of the Minnesota Service Cooperatives (MSC) and the Minnesota STEM Ecosystem in recognition of her support for education, workforce development and regional partnerships.

Central to the nomination was Smith's support for 2022 Congressionally Directed Spending awarded to Ignite Afterschool. Ignite helped launch the Minnesota STEM Ecosystem with SSC, the Minnesota Service Cooperatives and other partners, bringing together organizations working in STEM education and workforce development across the state.

"The Minnesota Service Cooperatives have been convening and coordinating multi-sector partnerships since our inception," said Anne Kilzer, executive director of the Minnesota Service Cooperatives. "Senator Smith recognized that an investment in our network is an investment in lasting, systemic improvement. When we strengthen the capacity of those who support schools and communities, the impact reaches far beyond any one program or district—it touches students and communities across the entire state."

Minnesota's nine regional Service Cooperatives helped build a statewide network with local connections. They work with schools, employers, higher education and community organizations to share resources and expand opportunities for students and educators. SSC serves as the Minnesota STEM Ecosystem's fiscal and operational host.

The Ecosystem now involves more than 50 learning partners across Minnesota. Its work includes educator externships, STEM lending libraries, robotics and drone programming, career exploration and professional development connecting educators with emerging technologies and workforce needs. State investment has helped the work continue and grow beyond the initial federal funding.

"Senator Smith saw the potential in our regional network model and invested in a way that allowed us to operationalize partnership, not just fund a single program," said Sarah Ness, SSC director of development.

“Senator Smith’s investment demonstrates what strategic public investment can accomplish,” said Emily Saed, director of the Minnesota STEM Ecosystem. “Minnesota then invested in expanding that work, and today, organizations across sectors and regions are leveraging that infrastructure to create opportunities that no single organization could build alone.”

Smith’s nomination also recognized her broader support for career and technical education and workforce preparation. She received the award at AESA’s Advocacy in Action Conference in Washington, D.C., on September 24.

About the Minnesota Service Cooperatives

The Minnesota Service Cooperatives are nine regional organizations that work with schools, local governments, businesses and community partners across Minnesota. They connect statewide initiatives with local needs and opportunities.

About Southeast Service Cooperative

Southeast Service Cooperative works with schools, local governments and community partners across southeast Minnesota. SSC is a founding partner and the fiscal and operational host of the Minnesota STEM Ecosystem.

About the Minnesota STEM Ecosystem

The Minnesota STEM Ecosystem connects K–12 education, higher education, out-of-school learning, industry and community partners to expand STEM learning and strengthen connections to Minnesota’s workforce.

About AESA

The Association of Educational Service Agencies represents educational service agencies and regional educational organizations across the United States. Its Congressional Service Award recognizes members of Congress for meritorious support of federal education legislation and educational service agencies.

Media Contact

Sarah Ness, Director of Development
Southeast Service Cooperative
507-517-4559
sness@ssc.coop