Minnesota Elementary School
Principals' Association

Minnesota School of Excellence

Program Guidelines

The Minnesota School of Excellence Program promotes excellence through a rigorous evaluation process that showcases dynamic schools meeting the evolving needs of today's students.

Revised June 2025

Table of Contents

Minnesota School of Excellence Program Overview

- Six Standards of Excellence
- Who should apply?

Application Process and Timeline

- Letter of Intent
- Application Part 1
- Application Part 2
- Submitting Your Application
- Frequently Asked Questions and Contact Info
- Ethical Use of AI

Minnesota School of Excellence Program Overview

What is the Minnesota School of Excellence program?

The Minnesota School of Excellence (MN SOE) program promotes excellence through a rigorous evaluation process that showcases dynamic schools meeting the evolving needs of today's students.

The MN SOE program engages schools in purposeful conversations, leading to meaningful action. The program, supported by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), assesses six national standards for quality elementary and middle-level schools. These standards are based on the NAESP document *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do* in correlation with MESPA guidelines. The national standards were created in partnership with Collaborative Communications Group, with national research and development made possible by the LAB at Brown University, Principals Leadership Network, and funded by the Office of Education Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.

The MN SOE program has grown from the 1984 work of the MESPA Task Force on Standards and Assessment. To continue reflecting current issues in education, the program was updated in 1992, 1998, 2005, 2010, and again in 2012. Also in 2010, the program was peer-reviewed by the University of MN Ed.PA doctoral students. The result is the current three-part MN SOE process that validates school communities dedicated to continual improvement. Through the program, elementary and middle-level school principals, staff, and school community members demonstrate, as a team, the desire to improve the quality of education by:

- Completing a school community self-study (application Part 1).
- Developing a plan to build on evident strengths and address areas needing improvement.
- Assessing ongoing results from implementing the plan.

Excellence is a process. Everything done in an effective school community focuses on ensuring the learning of adults and students. The MN SOE program supports this focus by combining the findings of current research on effective schooling with the practical on-site experience of working principals and education staff.

Six Minnesota School of Excellence standards

The Minnesota SOE program assesses six standards for quality elementary and middle-level school communities. Research has shown that if these six standards are evident in a school, best practices are being followed.

1. **Learning-Centered:** Balance management and leadership roles to lead schools in ways that place student and adult learning at the center.
2. **Diverse Communities:** Set high expectations and standards for the academic, social, emotional, and physical development of all students in an environment that acknowledges, fosters, and celebrates diversity.
3. **School Culture**: Demand content and instruction that ensure student achievement.

4. **Quality Instruction**: Create a culture of continuous learning for adults, tied to student learning and other school goals.
5. **Knowledge and Data**: Manage knowledge and data to inform decisions and measure the progress of student, adult, and school performance.
6. **Community Engagement**: Actively engage the community to create shared responsibility for student performance and development.

Who should apply for MN SOE Validation?

Any school led by an active-level MESPA principal can apply and have the potential to receive the seven-year validation. This is a continuous learning process. Any school community that has embraced and incorporated the Minnesota School of Excellence process has demonstrated the successful desire to create a community-wide, continuously growing learning environment.

Seven-year limit

Once a school has received Minnesota School of Excellence validation, the validation remains in effect for seven (7) years. After that time has passed, MESPA encourages school communities to reinitiate the process of self-study and submit a new application.

Application Process and Timeline

Schools typically take 1 or 2 years to complete the SOE validation process. Discuss the requirements with your school community to determine your desired timeline.

November 1 – Submit a letter of intent via an email to mespa@mespa.net or through the simple google form. Select a one-or two-year process to complete Part 1 and 2 of application
June 1 – Submit SOE Application
Mid-June – SOE Committee meets to review applications. You will either be notified of your validation or be required to submit revisions/clarifications.
September – SOE Validations announced, schools begin planning their celebrations
February – Principals receive plaque at The MESPYs (the Institute Awards Banquet)
September – June – School Celebrations can take place at any time but typically occur in early spring. Please notify MESPA of your celebration date. A MESPA representative will attend your celebration to present your plaque and give brief remarks.

Letter of Intent – Due November 1

Submit a letter of intent (via Google Form, email to mespa@mespa.net or mailed to the MESPA Office), indicating you are interested in pursuing the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA) Minnesota School of Excellence process, as well as your anticipated timeline for completion. Below is a sample letter of intent:

To: mespa@mespa.net
Re: Minnesota School of Excellence Program

This letter confirms the intent of our school community to implement a process of school improvement guided by the Minnesota School of Excellence Application (Parts 1 and 2). I have reviewed the process with my superintendent and/or Board of Education, teaching staff, and parent group. We plan to submit our SOE application by June 1, 2026.

Sincerely,
Principal name _____
School district _____
School name _____
School address _____
School telephone _____
E-mail _____

Application – Part 1 (Due June 1, with Part 2 of Application)

All application materials can be found at www.mespa.net/soe.

The self-study (part 1 of the application), is a team effort to be conducted by members of your school community. It asks you to assess the strengths of your school community in terms of the six MESPA standards for effective elementary and middle level schools.

Each of the six School of Excellence standards contains several strategies. Within each strategy, you are asked to consider indicators of that strategy and rank on a scale of 1 to 5 how evident each indicator is in your school community.

a. For each standard, indicate the total number of respondents (participating in that standard of the self-study). ***NOTE****: You do not have to distribute every standard to all stakeholder groups. Some sections may not be applicable to all groups – such as a parent group or community group.*

b. For each indicator within each strategy, indicate the **percent of respondents** that ranked that indicator 1-5 (see Figure 1 below).

c. Include a description of your self-study methodology in Part 2 of the application. The self-study can be administered in any way that suits your school community. Some examples include:

   i. Distribute physical copies of the survey
   ii. Distribute digital copies of the survey though Google Forms (please contact MESPA for a digital copy of the survey)
   iii. Conduct a focus-session and use poster boards to collect survey results

Figure 1: Example of completed strategy 2A, in Part 1 (self-study) of MN School of Excellence application.

• Use this table to assess the standard of leadership in your school community. • Key indicators of school community leadership are grouped under four strategies to develop and hone effective leadership. • For each indicator, indicate the *percent of respondents* who selected each ranking: 5-1 or N, 5 indicating *Outstanding* and N indicating *No Basis for Judgment*.	Outstanding	Average		Below Average		No Basis for Judgment
	5	4	3	2	1	N
TOTAL RESPONDENTS FOR STANDARD 2: 115						
2A. Build consensus on a vision that reflects the core values of the school community.						
Everyone describes the school as a learning community that continuously examines the alignment of teaching and administrative practices with the school's vision, mission and core beliefs.	40	30	15	15	0	0
Elements of the vision are evident in the daily language, decisions and ethical actions of almost all engaged stakeholders.	72	14	14	0	0	0

Application – Part 2 (due June 1 with part 1)

All application materials can be found at www.mespa.net/soe.

Part 2 of the Application is your opportunity to build on strengths and plan for improvement in your school community. Excellence is a process. Let the self-study guide your growth. Show concretely, using brief narratives (200-800 words for each benchmark), examples of:

- Results demonstrated from building on the strengths evident in your self-study (indicators ranked 4 or 5);
- Plans for improvement to address areas that were not as strong (indicators ranked 1 or 2); and
- Results from or progress towards the implementation of your plans.

Note: Standard 5, Knowledge and Data, is based on student and staff performance with data from sources such as MCA data, NWEA data, district data, or other local assessments. The data you include should be data that is meaningful to your school community, ties in to your other school goals, and is used by your school to assess your own growth. In the application, attach documentation that supports your objectives in responding to areas from the self-study. Using multiple sources of data, including the Minnesota Department of Education Website, illustrate your plans with concise, specific data examples.

Submitting Your Application (Due June 1)

Once you have completed Part 1 and 2 of the application, submit an electronic copy (including data tables) to MESPA, along with a $100 application fee. You may also send a paper copy if you desire, but a digital copy is required.

Note: Remember to obtain the required signatures from your school community to verify your application process.

E-mail: mespa@mespa.net

Optional: Mail to
Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association
1970 Oakcrest Ave, Suite 204
Roseville, MN 55113

Frequently Asked Questions

What does a completed application look like?
Schools must submit a digital copy of their applications. Schools may choose to additionally submit a paper copy of their applications, but a paper copy is not required. Every application is different reflecting the unique composition of each school community. Electronic copies of the *blank* Minnesota SOE application (Part 1, self-study; Part 2, building on strengths and planning for improvement) may be found on the MESPA Web site at www.mespa.net/soe. For access to digital Google Forms versions of Part 1, contact the MESPA office at mespa@mespa.net or 952.297.8670.

Please include in your completed application:

- the completed six-page checklist from the Minnesota School of Excellence Self-Study (application Part 1)
- the completed plan for building on strengths and planning for improvement (application Part 2)
- data printouts from applicable data sources such as the Minnesota Department of Education Web site or local assessment data to support answers in standard 5 (Knowledge and Data)
- a page of signatures from your school community verifying the application
- Optional: Up to 5 pages of appendices including photos, graphics, or other supporting materials. These are not required but can be provided to support your application if desired.

In Part 2 of the application, do we have to address all indicators within each standard?
Yes. You may choose to focus more on some areas than others, but please include brief examples (200-800 words) of how you plan to continue to build on all areas of strengths and create an improvement plan for all low-scored areas.

Can we include additional materials with our application?
Yes. However, these materials are optional and do not have bearing on a school's validation. The MN School of Excellence Committee may not have time to view materials that are not part of the self-study or strength/improvement plan.

Who should we contact if we have questions?
If you have any questions, please contact:

- Trisha Mariotti, MN SOE Chair: 218-847-1106; tmariotti@detlakes.k12.mn.us
- Simone LaBonté, MESPA Communication and Awards Manager: 952.297.8672; simone@mespa.net
- Or your division's School of Excellence Committee Representative. You can find all SOE representatives at www.mespa.net/directory (select School of Excellence under the committee column).

Ethical Use of AI

The Minnesota School of Excellence Committee recognizes that artificial intelligence (AI) tools are increasingly part of the professional tools available to school leaders and educators. Applicants may use AI tools in a limited way to support the preparation of a School of Excellence application when their use maintains the authenticity, accuracy, and integrity of the School of Excellence process.

The School of Excellence designation is grounded in authentic school-community self-study, analysis of stakeholder feedback and data, reflection on areas of strength and growth, and the development and implementation of meaningful improvement plans. AI should support this work not replace it.

Appropriate uses of AI may include organizing or summarizing information already developed by the school team; assisting with grammar, clarity, formatting, or editing; helping identify patterns within school-provided data or stakeholder feedback; and supporting the organization of evidence and narratives.

AI should not be used to generate or fabricate evidence, data, stakeholder feedback, programs, practices, outcomes, or examples that do not accurately represent the school; create substantive responses in place of the collaborative reflection expected of the school community; or present AI-generated assumptions or interpretations as verified facts.

Schools remain responsible for the accuracy and authenticity of all information submitted in their application, regardless of the tools used in its preparation. Applicants should carefully review AI-assisted content for accuracy, context, bias, confidentiality, and alignment with the actual experiences and evidence of their school community. Personally identifiable, confidential, or otherwise protected student or staff information should not be entered into AI systems unless their use is authorized and consistent with applicable district policies and data-privacy requirements.

The Committee does not evaluate an application based on whether AI tools were used. Rather, reviewers consider whether the application provides an honest, evidence-based, and sufficiently detailed representation of the school's practices, accomplishments, areas for growth, and improvement efforts.

Ultimately, AI may assist schools in **telling their story, but it should not create the story being told.** The reflection, evidence, decisions, and commitment to continuous improvement represented in a School of Excellence application must remain the authentic work of the school community.