



Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association

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Paynesville Area Elementary Named a 2025–26 Minnesota School of Excellence

Award celebrates school's culture of collaboration and community engagement

(Roseville, MN, September 2, 2025) — Paynesville Area Elementary School has been named a 2025-26 Minnesota School of Excellence, an honor awarded by the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA). This status is given to a select group of Minnesota schools that sustained a one-to-two-year commitment of research and self-reflection to improve their schools. Their peer-reviewed application is centered around six standards of effective schools. Paynesville Area Elementary is a school where teamwork fuels success.

"We are honored to be named a Minnesota School of Excellence," Principal Cassie Akerson shared. "We chose to participate in this process as a way to celebrate our strengths and continue building strong systems that help our students grow. This process allowed us to focus on excellence as an opportunity for continual growth and transformation, rather than an end result. This recognition reflects the dedication of our staff, the hard work of our students, and the support of our families. Our school is strengthened by a strong community, and in return, we work to build a school where students learn, grow, and succeed. Paynesville Area Schools has something special to offer students in rural

Minnesota, and this honor shows the power of our community and school working together. We are proud to be Bulldogs! ”

“At Paynesville Area Schools, we believe that learning doesn’t stop at the edge of our district boundaries — and neither should collaboration,” they shared in their application. “One of the most powerful ways we grow as educators is by connecting with others, learning from their experiences, and sharing our own.”

Building a Culture of Collaboration

Since 2019, Paynesville educators have been leading the way in regional collaboration efforts through LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) training. This kind of training is mandatory for all teachers by the 2026-27 school year. Early participants not only deepened their understanding of the science of reading but also built lasting professional relationships with colleagues in other districts — relationships that have strengthened evidence-based literacy practices and aligned work with the state’s READ Act.

Inside the school, collaboration is woven into the daily schedule. The master schedule intentionally creates common prep time for grade-level teams, enabling focused, data-driven meetings with classroom teachers, interventionists, specialists, and administrators. Paraprofessionals also meet regularly with case managers and leadership, ensuring every team member’s voice is heard.

The school’s PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) team and Bulldog Spotlight program celebrate students who are “Mindful, Respectful, and Connected,” reinforcing shared values across the building. A newly adopted social-emotional learning framework, grounded in the Character Strong curriculum, is taught through a collaborative model that builds teacher confidence and consistency.

Strong Family and Community Connections

Paynesville Area Elementary also stands out for its high level of family engagement. Almost all families attend the Back-to-School Meet & Greet each August, and parent-teacher conferences regularly exceed a 95% attendance rate.

Events such as annual music programs for grades 1–5, popular family activities during “I Love to Read” to include Mystery Readers , and the third grade’s living wax museum bring families into the building and showcase student talents. Parents and special guests are

welcome to join students for lunch, volunteer in classrooms, and serve on leadership committees such as the District Advisory Committee and Title I meetings.

Partnerships extend beyond the building, too — including the Catholic Charities Foster Grandparent Program, which places trusted adult volunteers in classrooms for daily support and encouragement.

MESPA Executive Director Michelle Krell praised the school's achievement, saying, "Paynesville Area Elementary has built a culture where every adult — from teachers to support staff — works together to support every student. Their intentional approach to collaboration and community engagement is a model for schools across Minnesota."

About the MN School of Excellence Program

The Minnesota School of Excellence program is grounded in research, based on six standards of effective schools. It's a one- to two- year-long journey of reflection, learning, and goal-setting. Each application is peer reviewed. The Minnesota School of Excellence program emphasizes that excellence is not an end goal—it's a process. It's built day by day, decision by decision, through reflection, responsiveness, and a shared belief that growth is always possible.

Congratulations to Paynesville Area Elementary School for this extraordinary achievement.

