

Minnesota Association of School Administrators

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News Release

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Sandra Lewandowski Receives MASA Polaris Leadership Award

(St. Paul, MN) – The Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA) has named Sandra Lewandowski, Retired Superintendent of Intermediate School District 287, the recipient of the 2022 MASA Polaris Leadership Award. Lewandowski will be honored for her exemplary school leadership and a lifetime of achievement in education and the wider community at a statewide recognition ceremony at the 2022 MASA Fall Conference, October 2-4.

Polaris, the “North Star,” themes this award because, just as exemplary administrators serve as definitive leaders, Polaris is constant and unmoving in the sky. A navigator’s benchmark, the star marks “true north,” the fundamental direction that defines east, west, and south. With this award, Lewandowski is recognized for qualities such as professional courage, creation of a legacy of excellent leadership, fostering innovation, contribution through example and mentoring, exemplary conduct reflecting integrity and bearing emulation, and significant tenure in each position supporting district vision and affecting positive change.

“Superintendent Lewandowski is a courageous leader who has continuously shown that she is not afraid of making the hard decisions for the students in her district,” said Dr. Deb Henton, Executive Director of MASA. “Sandra has a proven track record as a champion for equity for her students and families inside and outside of the classroom. I cannot think of a more deserving educational leader for this year’s MASA Polaris Leadership Award.”

Lewandowski has 50 years of experience in education administration and teaching. She dedicated 44 of the 50 years in service to the students and families of Intermediate School District 287. She served as Superintendent for the past 17 years and retired after the 2021-22 school year. Prior to the Superintendency, Lewandowski was an Assistant Superintendent, Director of Special Education, Strategic Planning Facilitator, and Lead Teacher.

Lewandowski is lauded for her legislative advocacy around mental health and racial equity, the implementation of trauma-sensitive and healing-centered school practices, employee well-being initiatives, and innovative instruction for special education students. She gained legislative support for the Minnesota Department of Human Services and the Minnesota Department of Education to work together to support innovative mental health grants. The grant has funded the nation’s first therapeutic teaching model, where educators and therapists from the Wilder H. Amhurst Foundation support students with the most complex needs to heal and learn in the district’s classrooms.

Lewandowski reached out to the nation’s leading experts on childhood trauma to better understand the impact of complex trauma and race-related trauma on her students. Through her efforts, Intermediate District 287 became Minnesota’s first trauma-sensitive and healing-centered school district.

Lewandowski made the controversial decision to replace all school resource officers with safety coaches trained in relationship-building, de-escalation, and mental health and trauma. As a result, arrests, citations, and incidents in the district with police involvement significantly decreased.

Lewandowski speaks openly and passionately about gun violence, immigration and raids, and race

relations in the surrounding communities and schools. She acknowledges that as a white woman in a position of power, she has an obligation to use her voice to advance racial equity and bring light to issues that impact students and families. Lewandowski does not care to be popular or well-liked, she chooses to stand on the right side of history.

Under Lewandowski's tenure, the district has received numerous awards, including Amazon's "City on a Cloud" Innovation Challenge, Cultural Jambalaya Partner of the Year, Star Tribune Top 100 Workplace Award for Large Businesses, and the Minnesota Construction Choice Award for the North Education Center. In addition, she was the recipient of the 2020 MASA Kay E. Jacob's Memorial Award and the 2015 Minnesota Superintendent of the Year Award.

Lewandowski earned a Superintendent Licensure, Education Specialist degree in Educational Administration, and bachelor's degree with honors from the University of Minnesota.

MASA is grateful to [Ehlers](#) for their ongoing support of the Polaris Award. Ehlers is an independent municipal financial advisory company that has served public sector clients since 1955.

MASA is a professional organization of Minnesota's school leaders, including superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors of special education, and other central office administrators, as well as state department administrators, college, and university professors, and other educators throughout Minnesota dedicated to educational leadership for students.

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