



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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**EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADER DaNEIL SIRJORD RECOGNIZED**  
**The Minnesota Association for Family and Early Education (MNAFEE) presents**  
**the Award in Honor of Lois Engstrom, Founder Figure in**  
**Minnesota's Early Childhood Professional Field**

St. Cloud, Minnesota, April 10, 2025 - **DaNeil Sirjord Early Childhood Director for Independent School District 2142 - St. Louis County Schools, was honored with the MNAFEE Lois Engstrom Leadership Award for 2025.**



Ms. Sirjord began her career in education in 1989 in church basements and fire halls as the director of a parent cooperative nursery school, as a substitute teacher, then moving into Early Childhood as a preschool teacher, and also as an ECFE and learning readiness teacher. She was determined to bring quality early education to her region of the state. Thirty one years ago she became the Early Childhood Director for St. Louis County Schools. St. Louis County School District is a bit smaller than the state of Connecticut and borders nineteen other school districts in northeastern Minnesota.

As Early Childhood Director for the St. Louis County Schools, Ms. Sirjord dedicated her career to advancing early childhood and family education with a vision and purpose that is responsive to family and community needs. Ms. Sirjord says she sees her key role as that of supporting the parent educators, early childhood educators, and preschool teachers as they do their day to day work of advocating for and supporting families.

Her beliefs carry through into action. She believes that Early Childhood Family Education is the beginning of the educational relationship a school district has with families and as such, districts that prioritize ECFE and other early learning opportunities will have stable enrollments, involved parents, and children will thrive. Ms. Sirjord put that belief into action by providing data, telling the story, and sharing pictures with the school board to help them understand, support, and invest in early childhood programs.

Her advocacy and leadership extend beyond the district's early childhood programs. She is recognized as a leader at the regional and state level as evidenced by the mentorship she offers, the innovative approach to problem solving, being a step ahead of others, as well as through her work with organizations. She is a trusted leader in the special education cooperative and a guiding resource for principals throughout the district. One of Ms. Sirjord's administrative colleagues says she's often turned to her for guidance. She says this is due to Ms. Sirjord's "unique ability to align programming with best practices while maintaining a clear and unwavering compass pointed toward what is developmentally appropriate for children".

Ms. Sirjord served on the Minnesota Association for Family and Early Education (MNAFEE) Board for many years where she advocated for programs in rural Minnesota and the children and families attending them. Ms. Sirjord exemplifies everything that Lois Engstrom valued and is eminently qualified to receive this award in her memory. Ms. Sirjord was recognized at the MNAFEE Annual Conference on April 10, 2025 in St. Cloud.

**About MNAFEE:** The Minnesota Association for Family and Early Education (MNAFEE) is a non-profit association promoting parent education, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), and early childhood programming in public schools.

**About the Lois Engstrom Leadership Award:** Lois Engstrom was instrumental in the design, development and statewide expansion of the public school Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) program for all families with children from birth to kindergarten and their parents. She provided wise and inspirational leadership for this and other family and early learning initiatives including School Readiness over 25 years in her position at the Minnesota Department of Education. After retirement she shepherded founding of the Minnesota Association for Family and Early Education (MNAFEE) and helped build it into the organization it is today.

The Winner of the Lois Engstrom Leadership Award:

- Is a current or past member of MNAFEE
- Has five or more years of demonstrating strong leadership in the field of family and early education, particularly as it pertains to parent education, Early Childhood Family Education and/or early childhood programming in public schools in Minnesota
- Shows a career-long commitment to the field of family and early education, particularly as it pertains to parent education, Early Childhood Family Education and/or early childhood programming in public schools
- Has made a significant impact on the lives of young children, parents and/or families, and/or professionals in the field.
- Has had a statewide impact through their efforts to improve the lives of children, parents and/or families, and/or professionals in the field.