FALL 2026

ADVOCATE

AN INDIANA STATE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION PUBLICATION

THE POWER OF US

USE YOUR VOICE. MAKE YOUR VOTE COUNT. | PAGE 14

DISCOVER THE PEOPLE, PASSIONS AND STORIES THAT MAKE ISTA STRONGER. | PAGE 10

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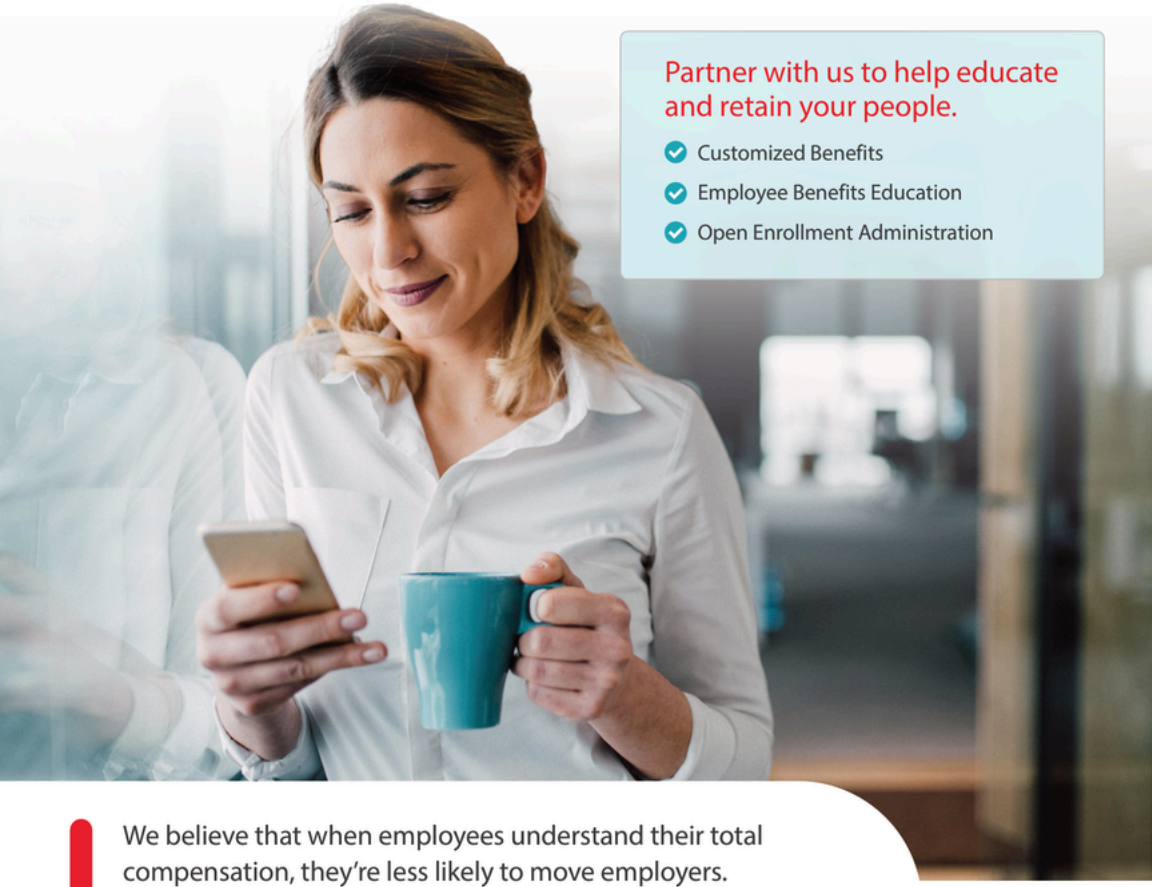

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IN THIS ISSUE

FEATURE

Learn what's ahead in the 2027 legislative session, including ISTA's priorities, key issues and what educators can expect.

Page 13

PERSPECTIVES

Explore tips for navigating negotiations and best wishes to every local working to secure a strong contract for its members.

Page 5

OUR RIGHTS

Learn how to read a contract bargaining agreement (CBA).

Page 6

OUR ADVOCACY

Read how you can continue to support your students who may be affected by ICE.

Page 8

OUR MEMBERS

Discover the passions, talents and "second jobs" that keep ISTA members inspired beyond the classroom.

Page 10

ORGANIZING IN ACTION

Prepare for Election Day with everything you need to know about what's on the ballot, key dates and how you can get involved.

Page 14

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Meet the Good Teaching Conference keynote speaker and register to attend this year's event.

Page 16

OUR ASSOCIATION

Explore ISTA's latest grant and scholarship opportunities, and find out how to apply.

Pages 19

OUR ASSOCIATION

Welcome the newest members of the ISTA field staff team, and learn how they'll support educators across Indiana.

Pages 20

EXTRA CREDIT

Savor members' favorite holiday recipes, and discover new dishes to bring to your table.

Page 22

We'd love to hear from you!

Are you passionate about defending public education, advocating for equitable schools, building strong locals, protecting our future, culturally responsive teaching or new education trends? Email us at communications@ista-in.org to contribute to The *Advocate*.

The *Advocate* is the official quarterly publication of the Indiana State Teachers Association, the state level of the United Education Profession. The content of the Association's publications will be consistent with its mission, strategic objectives and policies.

ADVOCATE

Fall 2026:
Vol. 9, Issue 4

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PURPOSE, MISSION AND GOALS

PURPOSE
To advocate for and advance the interests of Indiana's students, educators and public schools.

MISSION
The Indiana State Teachers Association is a professional association organized to sustain quality public education, improve students' educational opportunities and advance the professional status of educators.

GOALS
- Unify our voices — we are stronger together.
- Provide economic security and professional working conditions for educators.
- Create a premier public education system that serves all kids regardless of ZIP code, culture or ability.
- Fight for racial and social justice.

Jennifer Smith-Margraf, ISTA President

It's the time of year for marching bands, carving pumpkins and making Thanksgiving plans. It's also the time of year to be sure that you and all of your friends and family have made your plans to vote. It's critical that we have all members engaged across the state, supporting candidates for office that support public education and backing referenda that support our public schools.

ISTA members statewide are hard at work to ensure that we are electing pro-public education candidates. If you haven't connected in with our election work yet, make sure to reach out to your local leadership or local ISTA staff using your personal devices, email and WiFi outside of school hours to learn how you can get involved. Already know a great candidate in your area? Reach out to their campaign directly to volunteer. Telling your story to voters through phone calls, text messages and going door to door is what will make a difference for your colleagues and your students this election cycle.

The ISTA Good Teaching Conference is just around the corner. This is always a great opportunity to network with fellow educators and add tools to your professional toolbox. I hope to see you there learning, growing and renewing with your ISTA friends from across the state. I also hope that you make plans to rest and reinvigorate over your fall break by making time to enjoy something that is just for you.

In solidarity,

Jennifer Smith-Margraf

Jennifer Smith-Margraf
ISTA President

BARGAINING TIPS: KNOW YOUR POWER

A strong contract starts with preparation, communication and solidarity. Whether your local is heading to the bargaining table or already in negotiations, every member has a role to play in securing a fair contract.

Know what matters. Understand your current contract, the issues your local is bringing to the table and the priorities identified by members. When everyone understands the goals, it's easier to stay united.

Stay informed. Pay attention to updates from your bargaining team and local leaders. Reliable information helps prevent rumors from taking over and keeps members connected to the process.

Show up and speak up. Bargaining is about more than what happens at the negotiating table. Member participation, visibility and support can demonstrate the strength behind your bargaining team.

Stay united. Negotiations can take time, and not every proposal will be resolved quickly. Continue supporting one another and trust the process.

Remember your collective power. A strong contract benefits educators, education support professionals and the students and communities they serve.

Good luck to every local heading into negotiations! **Here's to strong solidarity, meaningful progress and securing a contract that reflects the priorities of your members.**

WHY CONTRACT LANGUAGE MATTERS: HOW TO READ A CBA

Your collective bargaining agreement (CBA) is more than a document filled with legal language and fine print. **It is the agreement that outlines the rights, responsibilities, working conditions and benefits negotiated on behalf of members.** Knowing how to read and understand your CBA can help you recognize what you are entitled to — and what your local has negotiated to protect.

Start with the basics. Before diving into individual articles, become familiar with how your CBA is organized. Look for the table of contents, article headings, definitions and any appendices or side agreements. Pay attention to the contract's effective dates so you know which provisions currently apply.

Look for the language that affects your day-to-day work. CBAs commonly address areas such as wages, hours, planning time, leave, class size, evaluations, transfers, discipline, professional development and grievance procedures. You may not need to memorize every provision, but knowing where to find key information can make a difference when questions arise.

Read the words carefully. Contract language matters. Words such as shall, may, must and will can carry different meanings. Pay attention to who is responsible for an action, when it must happen and whether the language establishes a requirement, a right or an option.

Check for exceptions. Some provisions include conditions, timelines or exceptions that change how the language applies. A section may also refer you to another article or provision, so follow those references before drawing conclusions.

Know the grievance process. Your CBA should explain what happens when a member believes the agreement has been violated. Take note of filing deadlines, required steps and who can assist you. Waiting too long to address a potential violation could affect your ability to pursue it.

Most importantly, you do not have to interpret your CBA alone. Your local leaders, bargaining team and ISTA staff can help members understand contract language and determine how it applies to a specific situation.

Your contract represents what members collectively negotiated. Read it. Know it. Use it. Understanding your CBA is one more way to know your rights and strengthen your voice in the workplace.

LEARN MORE

View the NEA website to learn more about contract bargaining.

BEYOND THE FEAR:
A Teacher's Role in Uncertain Times

ROWENA MENDOZA

Rowena Mendoza is a member of Evansville TA. She is a classroom teacher at Plaza Park Middle School.

A few years ago, I felt a profound shift in my classroom.

At the time, I was teaching at a Title I school where multilingual learners represented approximately 45% of our K–8 population. When ICE raids began creating fear and uncertainty in our community, I witnessed something that has stayed with me: a place that had always represented safety for my students suddenly became a place where some of them felt afraid.

Questions began appearing at my desk and in quiet hallway conversations:

"Will they come here?"

"Am I safe here?"

"Are my parents safe at work?"

"What happens if they take my family while I'm at school?"

Those questions were difficult to hear — and even more difficult to answer. As a teacher, I wanted to reassure my students that everything would be okay. But I could not make promises about circumstances beyond my control.

What I could guarantee was that **I would be there for them.**

I could listen. I could care. I could make my classroom a place where they felt seen, valued and respected.

I remind my students that the circumstances surrounding them are not their fault. They are not defined by a status, label or the circumstances of their family. They are children first. They are loved. They matter. They have dreams and the ability to achieve them.

The strongest support we provide during a crisis begins long before the crisis occurs. Trust must be built with students and families before they need us most. I make a point of learning who my students are beyond their grades — what makes them happy, what interests them and what helps them when they are overwhelmed or struggling.

That knowledge matters when a child begins carrying something into the classroom that is much bigger than school.

A student who normally participates may become quiet. A child who consistently completes work may struggle to focus. Someone may become withdrawn, distracted or unusually anxious. As educators, we must resist immediately labeling these behaviors as defiance, laziness or a lack of motivation.

Sometimes a child isn't refusing to learn. Sometimes they are trying to survive something we cannot see.

That does not mean abandoning academic expectations. We can be compassionate while continuing to believe in a student's ability to succeed. Support may mean providing additional time, making space for a conversation, breaking an assignment into manageable pieces or connecting a student with additional resources.

I cannot control what happens outside my classroom. But I can control what happens when a student walks through my door.

I can provide consistency when other parts of their lives feel uncertain. I can continue to teach, challenge, encourage and remind them of their potential.

And sometimes, the most important thing I can give a child is a few hours where they don't have to carry the weight of the world.
I hope they are welcome by a teacher who sees more than their fear — a teacher who sees their potential and reminds them:

"You are not alone. You belong here. You matter. And we are going to keep moving forward together."

Beyond the Classroom: Meet Our Members

Every educator brings a unique story to the classroom. Their experiences, passions and lives outside of school help shape the educators — and advocates — they become.

Meet two ISTA members whose experiences beyond the classroom have helped shape the way they approach their work with students and colleagues.

LAVINA BEGLE

Southeast Dubois CTA/Forest Park Jr./Sr. HS

For Lavina Begle, some of the most valuable lessons of her career began long before she stepped into a classroom.

At just 14 years old, Lavina started working at Holiday World in Plymouth Rock Cafe when it first opened. What began as a teenage summer job turned into a 20-season journey that gave her opportunities to grow as a leader, build relationships and develop skills that would eventually support her career as an educator.

Throughout high school, Lavina worked summers and falls in the Foods Department before moving into management after graduation. As a Food and Beverage Seasonal Manager, she was responsible for more than 500 employees and the day-to-day operations of the park's restaurants — a role that taught her plenty about communication, organization, problem-solving and perhaps most importantly, working with people.

But her favorite memories weren't necessarily the ones that came with a management title.

Lavina built friendships with her coworkers and enjoyed spending time with them outside of work, whether it was weekly volleyball and basketball games or heading to Denny's together after a shift. Those relationships became an important part of her Holiday World experience.

Now, as she finishes her 20th season, Lavina has stepped away from management and returned to working in the kitchen. She enjoys preparing food, getting to know her coworkers and simply being part of the team.

And while her role has changed over the years, she still sees the connection between those experiences and her work as a teacher.

GREGG TAYLOR

North Lawrence EA/Career Center

Before Gregg Taylor became a criminal justice teacher, he spent more than 26 years serving as a law enforcement officer. Today, at 63, he brings that experience into the classroom at North Lawrence Career Center, where he teaches the next generation of students interested in criminal justice.

But there is another side to Gregg that students and colleagues know well: his deep love of the outdoors.

For the past 50 years, Gregg has been an avid hunter, fisherman and outdoor enthusiast. Spring turkey hunting is his biggest passion, but he's just as happy chasing smallmouth bass and trout with a fly rod, practicing traditional archery with his longbow or spending a day shooting sporting clays.

His connection to the outdoors goes beyond recreation. Gregg is also a certified Indiana Hunter Education Instructor, sharing his knowledge and helping others develop the skills and responsibility that come with enjoying Indiana's natural resources.

For Gregg, the draw of the outdoors is simple. The beauty and serenity of the great outdoors are what keep him coming back for more.

Our members are more than their job titles.

They are coaches, artists, parents, volunteers, community leaders, adventurers, lifelong learners and so much more. Those experiences make our members who they are — and make Indiana's public educators stronger.

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2027 LEGISLATIVE PREVIEW: ADDRESSING PUBLIC SCHOOL FUNDING

The 2027 legislative session is approaching, and lawmakers will return to the Statehouse in January to write Indiana's next two-year state budget. Budget-writing years are known as "long sessions" because they typically last about four months, compared with roughly three months in nonbudget years. The decisions lawmakers make will directly affect Indiana's public schools and the people who work in them.

ISTA's top priorities will be public school funding and educator pay. On both measures, Indiana continues to trail much of the country. The state ranks 38th nationally in average teacher salary and 40th in per-student spending. Among Indiana's neighboring states and Wisconsin, only Kentucky ranks lower in average teacher salary, and none spends less per student.

The Next Level Teacher Compensation Commission, created in 2019 by then-Gov. Eric Holcomb, found that Indiana had fallen behind after years in which other priorities took precedence over teacher compensation. Lawmakers have approved meaningful funding increases in some budget cycles since then, but that commitment has not been consistent. Other states have continued investing, too.

The 2027 session gives lawmakers another opportunity to address these longstanding challenges. ISTA members will have an important role in that effort. Throughout the session, members will be asked to contact legislators and share firsthand accounts of how funding decisions affect their students, schools and communities.

Other issues expected to shape ISTA's advocacy include protecting the property tax revenue that supports public schools, adequately funding special education, strengthening workplace rights for teachers and education support professionals, providing cost-of-living adjustments for retired educators, promoting the safe and responsible use of artificial intelligence in schools and improving work-based learning programs.

Coming This Fall: ISTA's 2027 Legislative Priorities
ISTA will release its full legislative priorities later this fall. Watch for more information about the issues we'll take to the Statehouse and how members can get involved.

PUBLIC EDUCATION IS ON THE **BALLOT** THIS FALL

THE GENERAL ELECTION IS ON NOV. 3. HERE'S WHAT ISTA MEMBERS NEED TO KNOW.

The election this fall will shape decisions that reach directly into Indiana's public schools. Voters will choose members of Congress and the Indiana General Assembly, along with local officials and school board members. In many communities, school funding referenda will also be on the ballot. And for the first time, Indiana school board races will be partisan.

ISTA members know the impact that elected officials have on our students and schools. We see it every day. The people elected this year will have a say in school funding, educator pay, collective bargaining, student supports and the day-to-day conditions in our schools. That's why ISTA's message this election season is simple: public education is on the ballot.

ISTA has brought its election information together at ista-in.org/election-resources. Members can use the page to find voting information, election resources and important deadlines and sign up for election reminders. For candidate recommendations and local referendum positions, visit the Indiana Voter Guide at ipace-in.org/vote. I-PACE recommendations are based on candidate questionnaires, interviews and decisions made by local ISTA members.

Voting isn't the only way to get involved in the election. Talk with colleagues about the election, volunteer through your local association or LPAC and help support educator-recommended candidates and school referenda in your community. Your ISTA field organizer can also connect you with opportunities to get involved in election work in your area.

There's a lot at stake for public education this fall. Before you vote, check out ISTA's election resources and I-PACE recommendations and talk with your colleagues about what's on the ballot in your community.

MAKE A PLAN

Get the information you need to vote this fall at **ista-in.org/election-resources** and explore I-PACE recommendations and local referendum information at **ipace-in.org/vote**. Share these resources with a colleague and make your plan to vote.

GENERAL ELECTION: KEY DATES AHEAD

Early voting is underway across Indiana.

Oct. 22: Deadline to request absentee ballot by mail.

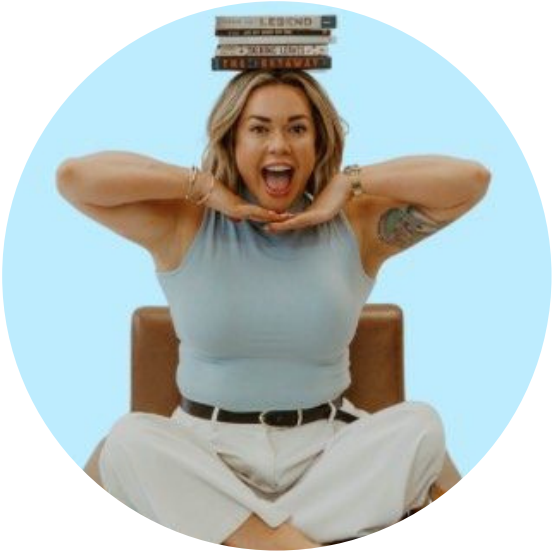
Oct. 24 and **31:** Saturday early voting.

Nov. 2: Deadline to vote early in person.

Nov. 3: General Election Day. Polls are open.

Meet Our 2026 Good Teaching Conference Keynote Speaker

Good teaching is always evolving and the Good Teaching Conference is the place to find fresh ideas, practical strategies and inspiration to take back to your classroom or school.



Meet Our Keynote Speaker:
Anna Kowal

We're excited to welcome Anna Kowal as this year's keynote speaker.

As an educator and thought leader, Kowal brings a fresh perspective and a wealth of experience to the conversations around teaching and learning. Her keynote will provide an opportunity to step back, reflect on the work we do every day and consider new ways to make an impact with students and colleagues.

Anna Kowal is a middle school reading teacher who thinks she has the best job ever! When she's not reading with her students, you can find her hiking with her two dogs, hanging with friends/family or making goofy content for teachers. She serves as a content creator with Bored Teachers, a popular entertainment and media platform created for educators to find humor, community and relief from the daily stress and exhaustion of the teaching profession.

Agenda

Nov. 13 - 14 | Intech

Day One:
Check in for the conference around 6 p.m. ET, then choose the breakout sessions you'd like to attend throughout the evening. The day will wrap up with a reception and social gathering exclusively for aspiring educators.

Day Two:
Begin the day with a keynote address from Anna Kowal, followed by a full day of engaging, informative breakout sessions designed to support student learning and professional growth. Be sure to visit ReSupply throughout the day to explore the resources and materials available for educators to take back to their classrooms.

REGISTER TODAY

Visit the Good Teaching Conference webpage to review the full conference agenda and secure your spot.

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ISTA OPEN GRANT AND SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

ISTA and the ISTA Foundation strive to recognize, honor and fund members and future educators to continue high-quality, public education in Indiana. The following are open grant and scholarship opportunities.

Professional Development Grant

This grant is open to local associations and District Councils to provide professional development to their members. For the purposes of this grant, professional development is any program or process that results in developing the skills of educators, increases student learning or improves school or classroom quality. The grant provides a disbursement of $1 for every member in the local association or District Council, whichever applies. Annual funding for this grant is limited. Grant applications are accepted on a rolling basis.

Retired Chapter Grant

The ISTA-Retired is committed to supporting local retired chapters throughout the state. Retired Chapter Grants up to $500 may be submitted to help establish a new retired chapter, assist a struggling chapter or increase a retired chapter's membership. The application deadline is Oct. 31.

Ann Wilkins Legacy Scholarship

The Ann Wilkins Legacy Scholarship is designed to increase the pipeline of well-qualified Black, Indigenous or Educators of color in Indiana. The scholarship was named for Ann Wilkins, a former Indianapolis Public Schools teacher, Indianapolis Education Association President and ISTA UniServ Director. The Ann Wilkins Legacy Scholarship awards $1,000 per semester for up to two semesters for any BIPOC undergraduate or graduate student who is in a full-time practicum experience pursing licensure in education in any one of the Indiana Approved Educator Preparation Programs.
Nomination deadline is Nov. 15 for spring semester applicants.

ISTA Foundation National Board Certification Scholarship

This scholarship is open to ISTA members who are candidates for National Board Certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The ISTA Foundation accepts and reviews applications on a rolling basis beginning Sept. 1 until funds have been exhausted.

APPLY TODAY

Review the criteria for these grants and scholarships by visiting the scholarships and awards webpage: www. ista-in.org/scholarships-awards.

JOINING THE MOVEMENT: MEET ISTA'S NEWEST STAFF MEMBERS

ISTA is proud to welcome several new staff members to our team! From longtime educators and union leaders to experienced organizers and passionate advocates, each brings unique experience and a shared commitment to supporting public education and the educators who make a difference in the lives of Indiana students every day.

Get to know some of the newest faces at ISTA:

LORI ORTEGA, FIELD DIRECTOR OF ORGANIZING

With more than 25 years of union staff experience, Lori Ortega brings a wealth of organizing and leadership experience to ISTA. Her career has included work with AFSCME International and leading local, state and national electoral and legislative campaigns across the country.

As Western Region Director for the National AFL-CIO, Lori managed staff and led union initiatives across 13 states. She has also spent the past 12 years within the NEA family, serving as an organizer, UniServ Director and executive director before joining ISTA.

Lori has held many titles throughout her career, but there is one she values most: **organizer**. She is excited to bring that passion and experience to her work with ISTA.

TAYNA ROSER, UNISERV DIRECTOR, AREA 12-01

After 29 years of teaching and coaching at Crawford County High School, Tanya Roser is beginning a new chapter with ISTA. Tanya joined the ISTA staff on Jun. 2, as the UniServ Director for Area 12-01. As a longtime educator, she understands the important work happening in Indiana schools every day and is looking forward to advocating for and supporting the educators who make it possible.

"I am most looking forward to advocating for and supporting public educators so they can focus on the vital work of educating Indiana's children," Tanya said.

Tanya is also the proud parent of three adult children: Josie, Conner and Jace.

CALLI GARRETT, TERM FIELD ORGANIZER

For the past 10 years, Calli Garrett has been an educator in southeastern Indiana, teaching middle school social studies in Jennings County. She also spent eight years serving as vice president of the Jennings County Classroom Teachers Association.

Calli joined ISTA in June and has already enjoyed connecting with members about the elections and legislation that will shape their schools and communities.

“Helping educators feel empowered to use their ‘teacher voice’ has been my greatest joy,” Calli said. “I look forward to continuing that work during this important election and legislative year.”

KALEY TABOR, UNISERV ASSISTANT

Kaley Tabor joined ISTA about four months ago after previously working at Roche Diagnostics. She brings a passion for mission-driven work and is excited to put that passion into action by supporting public education and protecting educator rights.

“Working at ISTA allows me to turn that passion into action,” Kaley said. “I am excited to contribute to such an impactful cause.”

ANITA RHODES, MRC ASSOCIATE

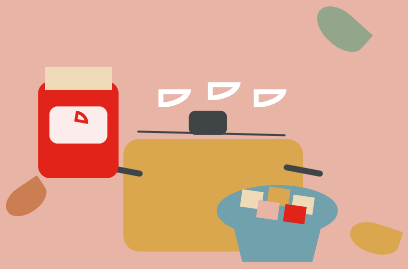
For Anita Rhodes, joining the ISTA staff feels a little like coming home.

Anita previously worked at ISTA as a mail room associate before moving into the role of front desk receptionist and switchboard operator. Now, she is excited to begin a new chapter as an MRC Associate, serving Areas 11-01, 11-02, 12-01 and 12-02.

“I am looking forward to a great year and many more to come!” Anita said.

EXTRA CREDIT

COZY MEALS
TO WARM YOU UP
THIS FALL



CHEESY POTATO SOUP

Lavina Begle - Southeast Dubois CTA / Forest Park Jr./Sr. HS

ITEMS NEEDED

- 1 can of chicken broth
- 1 can of water
- 2 TBSP dried Minced Onion or ½ cup of onions
- 2 TBSP Minced Garlic
- 6 large potatoes-peeled and diced
- 1 can cream of mushroom soup
- 10 strips of Bacon-crumbled
- 2 cups of WHOLE milk
- 16 oz cut Velveeta Cheese- cut up/diced
- ½ cup of Celery-finely chopped
- ½ cup of carrots-finely chopped
- 2-3 TBSP of Butter
- 2-3 TBSP of flour
- Salt -flavor to your taste

DIRECTIONS

Sauté celery, carrots, onion, and garlic with butter in your pot. Make a roux by sprinkling the flour over the vegetables and butter. Stir until coated and then slowly whisk in chicken broth, water and milk. Cook celery and carrots for a while and then add potatoes to simmer. Add salt to taste. Next, add cream of mushroom soup and diced cheese. Let it thicken and add bacon crumbles. If you need to thin out your mixture, add more milk.

OPTIONAL Add two cups of shredded chicken. You can also add one package of cream cheese instead of Velveeta.

OAT SNACK MIX

Amy Mitchell - Northeast Dubois CTA / Northeast Dubois Jr./Sr. HS

ITEMS NEEDED

- 1/2 C margarine
- 1/3 C honey
- 1/4 C brown sugar, packed
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 3 C Quaker Oat squares
- 1 1/2 C old-fashioned oats
- 1 C pecans
- 1 C dried cranberries

DIRECTIONS

In a microwave-safe bowl, combine the first 5 ingredients; heat until the butter is melted. Stir until sugar is dissolved. In a large bowl, combine the cereal, oats and nuts. Drizzle with the liquid mixture and mix well. Place it on a parchment-lined baking sheet (15x10x1 preferred). Bake at 275 for 45 minutes, stirring every 15 minutes. When finished baking, stir in dried cranberries. Let cool and store in an airtight container for up to one month.

YIELDS SIX CUPS You can stir in chocolate-covered raisins or nuts when completely cooled if you want a bit of chocolate treat in the mix.

“TEACHING IS MY JAM”
BARS

Beth Felts - North Lawrence EA / NLLC - Early Journeys

INGREDIENTS

- 1 1/2 cups of all-purpose flour
- 1 1/2 cups rolled oats
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup unsalted butter
- 1/2 cup vegetable shortening
- 2/3 cup packed light brown sugar
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 large egg white
- 1/2 cup jam or preserves - whatever flavor you wish! (I prefer Maman blueberry!)

HINT If you accidentally overcook it, add it to ice cream or yogurt! You may wish to double the recipe, because it disappears quickly!

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Position the rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 350°. Butter and flour a 9X13 in baking pan.
2. Next, mix the flour, oats, cinnamon, and salt in a big bowl. Beat butter, shortening, brown sugar, and white sugar in a bowl with an electric mixer at medium speed until thick and creamy, about three minutes. Most of the sugar should be dissolved when you’re done.
3. Next, beat in one large egg white. Important: Do not use the whole egg or it will make the bars too cake-like. Pour the flour and oat mixture into the wet mix and beat it at low speed until there are no pockets of white flour. Don’t overbeat! You can stretch the gluten and turn the dough tough. Less is more!
4. Press about 2/3 of the dough into the prepared pan. Drop it in clumps and use your fingertips to press the dough evenly across the bottom of the pan.
5. Spread 1/2 cup of jam across the dough. Then sprinkle the remaining bits and pieces of dough over the jam and press it down lightly to create a fairly uniform layer on top. Bake until lightly browned and set and the jam is barely bubbling - about 45 minutes. Cool the pan on a wire rack for 15 minutes before cutting into squares. Set these on a wire rack to cool completely to room temperature. Then, enjoy!

LESS IS MORE! You can stretch the gluten and turn the dough tough.

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