



**For Immediate Release**

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**Media Contact:**

Ryan Jarvi  
Director of Communication  
Northwest Education Services  
231.922.6242 | [rjarvi@NorthwestEd.org](mailto:rjarvi@NorthwestEd.org)

## Transitioning Students to Independence

### *North Ed Employee Recognized with Statewide Award*

**TRAVERSE CITY, Mich.** – Living in Seattle as a young college graduate, Mimi Kinney wasn't satisfied with the career path she had taken, so she began searching the newspaper want ads for a different job.

A position with United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) – a health nonprofit that supports children and adults with cerebral palsy and other disabilities – caught her eye. While attending Traverse City Central High School a few years earlier, she served as a volunteer with Special Olympics, but her experience working with individuals with disabilities was limited. Regardless, she applied for the job and was asked to interview with a panel of five individuals, including one of UCP's customers.

After a couple of warm-up questions, the UCP customer – who could not speak – began pointing at a tray that was attached to his wheelchair.

“At the time, I had no idea what was important about his tray, but I knew that he was trying to communicate with me,” Mimi said. She stood up, walked to his side and the customer showed her the questions he was asking by using a Picture Exchange Communication System, a tool that helps people communicate without speech.

“The next day, I was offered the position,” Mimi said. “The director told me that there were several others who had the ‘right’ degree and more experience, but not one of them got off their chair to learn what the customer needed or was trying to convey. Moral of this story – get off the chair!”

Flash forward over 30 years, through a career in education – 27 years at Northwest Education Services (North Ed), with the last 13 serving as transition coordinator, and Mimi has had thousands of interactions with students who have disabilities.

On a Thursday in late February, she was out of her chair again, and stood on stage in a room at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel in Grand Rapids that was full of Mimi's peers. They had gathered as part of the 85<sup>th</sup> annual [Michigan Council for Exceptional Children](#) (MCEC) Conference,

where Mimi was recognized as the 2025 recipient of the Dr. Dawn Gallup Honor – an experience she describes as “humbling.”

“Mimi’s unwavering commitment to supporting students with transition and employability skills is truly inspiring,” said Kristen Deering, a special education supervisor who oversees North Ed’s [Transition Services](#) program. “Mimi has made such a meaningful impact on so many lives over the years, and this recognition is a testament to her dedication and passion for helping students succeed.”

The Dr. Dawn Gallup Honor can be given to an individual, group, business, agency or community, and while Mimi is this year’s sole recipient, she’s quick to acknowledge the team effort and thanked the students who have inspired her, the colleagues and business partners who have collaborated with her, and the administrators who have supported her.

“This award validates the enormous effort ‘we’ put into this important work,” she said. “Our commitment, as a Transition team and community, is to raise up the often-underestimated population we serve and teach them to maximize their independence.”

In her role as transition coordinator for North Ed, Mimi supports dozens of schools and programs by helping students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) prepare for a transition toward self-sufficiency in life after school. That could include connecting students and families to partner agencies or local employers, providing critical support to get them career ready or helping them gain valuable independent living skills. In addition to monitoring for compliance with Secondary Transition, a requirement in IEPs, Mimi works with nearly 80 teachers across the five-county region to support Transition needs and implement best practices for students. In her tenure with North Ed, she has had a hand in several initiatives, including:

- Growing North Ed’s work-based learning services and independent student job placements.
- Developing the Adult Community Education (ACE) program.
- Designing the Community Connection program, a short-term “adulting 101” class for high school seniors with IEPs.
- Operating Paperworks Studio, a student-run enterprise that was in operation for almost 20 years creating handmade paper and cards.
- Establishing an annual district-wide process to review around 1,200 students with individual school teams to identify opportunities for growth in the Transition arena. The process has been considered best practice and widely replicated throughout Michigan.
- Leading collaborative efforts with local, regional and state agencies to maximize services offered in the five-county area.

That body of work has led to students becoming valued members of their communities and contributing to a more diverse talent pool for regional employers. It also supports an enlightened community by dispelling myths around the perceived limitations individuals with disabilities may have.

“The pleasure of witnessing a student advocate for themselves, be hired in a job they love, be accepted into the college or program they have always dreamed of, get their driver’s license or handle their own finances is an absolute joy,” Mimi said. “Identifying, creating and supporting

quality opportunities for students, to gain knowledge and skills needed for adult life, is my daily challenge that brings with it immeasurable satisfaction.”

Transition services are mandated in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and are required to be “a coordinated set of activities” designed to help students with disabilities prepare for life after school. Through partnerships with community agencies and local businesses, North Ed connects students and their families to these critical services to support their transition to independence, a process Mimi has taken seriously since her experience with United Cerebral Palsy.

“Since that first job with UCP – working to promote independence, inclusion and access for individuals with disabilities – this is the only career I have had or wanted to have,” Mimi said. “My promise, to those I serve, is to always get off the chair.”

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**See Photos Below:**



Mimi Kinney poses for a photo at Northwest Education Services Life Skills Center. Kinney, who serves as North Ed's transition coordinator, was the recipient of the 2025 Dr. Dawn Gallup Honor awarded by the Michigan Council for Exceptional Children.



Mimi Kinney, left, accepts the Dr. Dawn Gallup Honor during the 85th annual Michigan Council for Exceptional Children Conference, held Feb. 26-28 in Grand Rapids. Presenting the award is Precios Armstrong, special education director at East Lansing Public Schools and president of the MCEC Board of Directors.