

Lac qui Parle Valley Schools (LQPV) to Offer Unique Opportunity for Students



Lac qui Parle Valley Schools #2853

Lac qui Parle Valley (LQPV) Schools is embarking on an exciting and meaningful initiative that will provide students with a hands-on, career-focused learning experience during the 2026–2027 school year. Through a collaborative effort involving local, regional, and state partners, LQPV students will have the unique opportunity to build a house from the ground up—an experience that blends technical skill development, community engagement, and real-world application.

At the center of this initiative is newly hired Industrial Technology teacher Tom Walsh, who will lead students through the construction process. Under his guidance,

students will gain valuable experience in carpentry, construction management, teamwork, and problem-solving. This type of experiential learning not only strengthens technical competencies but also helps students explore potential career pathways in the trades—an area of growing demand across Minnesota and the nation.

The foundation of this project was made possible through the efforts of LQPV Counselor Paul Lowry, who successfully secured a \$100,000 grant from the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency. This critical funding serves as a cornerstone for the project, ensuring that students have the resources necessary to engage in a high-quality building experience.

In addition to this funding, LQPV is

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Agriculture Program at Park Rapids Schools named Outstanding Middle/Secondary Ag Ed Program by NAEF!



Park Rapids Ag Education has been named the Region III Outstanding Middle/High School Ag Program by the National Association of Agricultural Educators! As a region winner, this means that our program is one of only six outstanding programs across the nation!

The Park Rapids Agricultural Education Program was re-established in 2019, after a 30-year hiatus, by Stephen Funk, who completed program approval and re-chartered the Park Rapids FFA Chapter. Stephen was joined by teachers, Amber Seibert in 2020, and Ashley Schmitz in 2022. Allison Offerdahl, a graduate of Park Rapids Area Schools and one of our FFA alumni, replaced Ashley Schmitz in the fall of 2025.

Going from no program to hiring a second teacher in less than a year demonstrated the interest of the students and the need to add more offerings and expand our space. In the community listening sessions leading up to a referendum, the things that we teach in our courses were exactly what the voters and taxpayers wanted to see more of. This resulted in a referendum, which failed the previous two times, passing by a wide margin in 2021.

We have gone from one small classroom to three classrooms, a welding shop, a full industrial kitchen, a teacher's office, and a workspace for our officers. We are still in the process of securing funds to continue to enhance our facilities and equipment. We hope to add a greenhouse and outdoor learning labs in the future!

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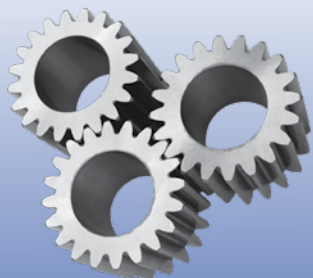
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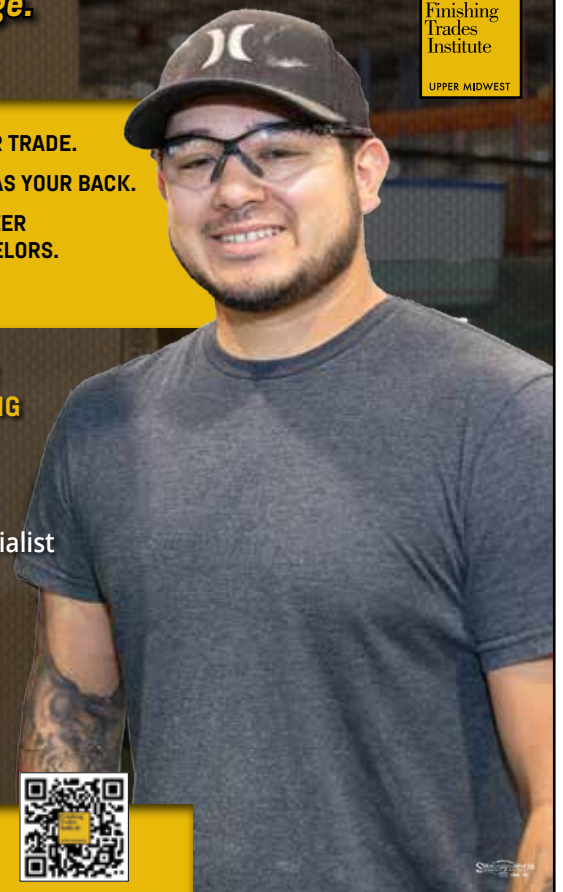
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Housing Challenge Funds for Schools Program Now Accepting Proposals



This is a fantastic opportunity for Minnesota public schools to apply for funds to create or expand programs where students build homes for low- and moderate-income Minnesotans. A number of schools have already received state funds from last year's round of grants. A new request for proposals from the Minnesota Housing Agency now opens this to more district, alternative and charter public schools.

"Developers across the state have been clear that building more homes also means building a stronger, skilled labor pipeline. The Housing Challenge Funds for Schools program supports affordable housing while investing in students who will help lead Minnesota's housing industry for years to come."

- Kayla Schuchman, assistant commissioner of Minnesota Housing

In 2023 high school students, working with Catalyst for Systems Change (CSC), successfully proposed a Minnesota state legislative change allowing public districts and charter schools to access Minnesota Housing Agency funding.

In 2024, legislation enabled expanding the eligible uses of the Economic Development and Housing Challenge (EDHC) program to include grants for school districts, charter schools and certain cooperative units.

The Minnesota Housing Agency request for proposals (RFP) is found here: <https://tinyurl.com/k86tec7u> Here's a link to a May 4, 3 p.m. free Zoom meeting where the

RFP will be discussed: <https://tinyurl.com/ysc6rymn>

Minnesota Housing Awards \$560K to School-Led Projects Blending Trades Training and Affordable Housing

Last summer, Minnesota Housing awarded more than \$560,000 to six school-led housing projects that are creating or preserving affordable homeownership opportunities across Greater Minnesota. The grants are part of the Housing Challenge Funds for Schools program.

The selected projects, in Beltrami, Goodhue, Sherburne, Wright, Nicollet, Lac qui Parle, Swift and Chippewa counties, are to result in the construction or rehabilitation of single-family homes. All six initiatives are being led by school districts partnering with local nonprofits, Habitat for Humanity affiliates, and technical colleges.

When the original grants were awarded, Jennifer Ho, commissioner of Minnesota Housing, said, "I've traveled across the state and heard firsthand from developers who are struggling to find skilled labor. These projects do more than create affordable homes, they build the workforce our communities need."

Licensed instructors and experienced nonprofit partners are providing oversight, tools, and support throughout the process. Projects will serve households earning at or below 80-115% of area median income (AMI), with all homes located in designated workforce housing communities.

"These are viable career pathways and my goal here is to provide real-world, hands-

on experiences where our students can learn a variety of skills to be successful in a career in construction or at least knowing things about homeownership and maintenance," said Tony Hommes, Construction Trades Instructor at ISD 31.

Awarded districts include:

- **Bemidji Area Schools** — \$99,750 — In partnership with Headwaters Housing Development Corporation and NTC <https://www.isd31.net>
- **Goodhue Public Schools** — \$99,030 — Collaborating with Goodhue County Habitat for Humanity <https://www.goodhue.k12.mn.us>
- **ISD 728 Elk River** — \$99,999 — Partnering with Central Minnesota Habitat for Humanity <https://www.isd728.org>
- **Saint Peter Public Schools** — \$99,999 — Continuing a long-standing partnership with Habitat for Humanity of South Central Minnesota <https://www.stpetersschools.org>
- **Kenyon-Wanamingo Schools** — \$61,690 - Advancing student-led homebuilding in partnership with Goodhue County Habitat for Humanity <https://www.kw.k12.mn.us>
- **Lac qui Parle Valley School District** — \$99,999 — Launching a home rehabilitation project with support from Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership <https://www.lqpv.org>

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actively pursuing further financial support, including a LYFT grant that could contribute an additional \$15,000. The district has also received a strong commitment from the Southwest Initiative Foundation (SWIF), which has pledged \$100,000 toward the project. SWIF serves 18 counties and two Native nations in rural southwest Minnesota, and its investment highlights the broader regional importance of workforce development initiatives like this one.

The success of the project also depends heavily on strong community partnerships. LQPV is working closely with the city of Madison, Minnesota, including City Administrator Val Halvorson, to identify and secure a final site where the completed home will be placed. While construction will take place on-site at LQPV High School, the finished home will ultimately be transported to Madison, further strengthening ties between the school district and the local community.

A key logistical partner in this effort is a modular home building company in Montevideo, Minnesota. The company is providing specialized trailers that will allow sections of the home to be built at the school and then transported safely to the final site. This partnership not only supports the technical needs of the project but also exposes students to industry-standard practices in modular and transportable construction.

Local businesses are also stepping up to support the effort. A nearby lumber company located in Madison, has pledged an in-kind donation valued at \$12,500 in materials and discounted supplies. Contributions like this help stretch project funds further while reinforcing the importance of local investment in education and workforce development.

Additional support is being provided by the Madison Economic Development Authority (EDA), which continues to explore ways to assist the project. Their involvement

underscores the economic development potential of initiatives that prepare students for in-demand careers while also addressing community housing needs.

This ambitious project has been brought together through the leadership of Scott Sawatzky, LQPV's 5-12 Principal. Through collaboration with multiple organizations, Sawatzky has helped create an opportunity that benefits not only students but also the broader community. By aligning education with workforce needs and community development, this initiative serves as a model for how schools can play a vital role beyond the classroom.

Importantly, this marks the first time in many years that LQPV has been able to offer students such a comprehensive, hands-on construction experience. The project represents a renewed commitment to career and technical education, ensuring that students have access to diverse learning opportunities

that prepare them for life after graduation—whether that path leads directly into the workforce, technical training, or further education.

As the 2026-2027 school year approaches, excitement continues to build around what promises to be a transformative experience for LQPV students. Through strong partnerships, dedicated leadership, and meaningful investment, this house-building project stands as a powerful example of what can be achieved when schools and communities work together with a shared vision for the future.

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Building Futures: How Habitat Partnerships Are Transforming Student Learning in Minnesota



Central Minnesota Habitat for Humanity

Across Minnesota, partnerships between schools and community organizations are creating meaningful, hands-on learning experiences for students. One standout example is the collaboration between school districts and Central Minnesota Habitat for Humanity (CMHFH), where students gain real-world construction skills while contributing to projects that make a lasting difference in their communities. Through both established (Sartell-St Stephen High School) and emerging programs (Elk River High School), these partnerships are helping build not only homes, but futures.

In addition to its work with Sartell and Elk River, CMHFH has maintained a strong 11-year partnership with St. Cloud Tech High School. This long-standing relationship has helped connect students with hands-on construction experience, industry knowledge, and career pathways in the trades, further supporting workforce development efforts across the region, all while helping to serve underrepresented students in the construction industry.

A Five-Year Success Story in Sartell

Over the past five years, the Sartell program has grown into a model of sustained success, showing how consistent collaboration can have a lasting impact on student learning. What began as a hands-on opportunity has evolved into a comprehensive experience that builds technical skills, confidence, and career readiness.

Students in the Sartell partnership have developed a wide range of construction skills, from basic tool use and safety prac-

tices to more advanced framing, finishing, and project coordination. As the program has matured, so have the students' abilities, with many gaining enough experience to contribute confidently to real-world building projects alongside professionals.

Just as important has been the strength of the partnership itself. Over the years, Central Minnesota Habitat for Humanity, educators, and the school district have built strong working relationships. That consistency has allowed for better planning, deeper curriculum integration, and a shared understanding of expectations and outcomes.

Teachers have been able to align classroom instruction with on-site experience, creating a seamless connection between theory and practice.

"The growth we've seen over the past five years has been incredible," said Chad Bouley, Central MN Habitat Executive Director. "Students are not only learning construction skills, they're gaining confidence, learning how to work as a team, and seeing firsthand the impact they can have in their community."

The benefits have been significant. Educators report increased

student engagement, especially among those who thrive in hands-on learning environments. In addition to technical abilities, students develop essential soft skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. For the school district, the program offers a valuable way to prepare students for careers in the trades, an area of growing demand.

"This program gives students an opportunity you just can't replicate in a traditional classroom," said Joe Schulte, teacher at Sartell High School. "They take ownership of their work, they see the results of their effort every day, and they begin to understand the value of skilled trades in a very real way. All great benefits, but just as importantly, they realize the need for teamwork and experience what it means to contribute to something bigger than themselves."

From CMHFH's perspective, the partnership has been equally rewarding. Working with students brings energy and enthusiasm to each build while helping cultivate the next generation of skilled workers and community-minded individuals.

Looking Ahead: Elk River's First-Year Vision

Building on the success in Sartell, a new partnership is taking shape in Elk River, with an exciting first year ahead for students, educators, and Central Minnesota Habitat for Humanity.

The Elk River program will focus on laying a strong foundation—both literally and educationally. Early on, students will be introduced to core construction concepts, safety protocols, and the fundamentals of

working on a build site. As the year progresses, they will move into more hands-on activities guided by educators and industry professionals.

Collaboration will be a key part of the Elk River program. CMHFH will work closely with teachers to ensure learning objectives align with classroom instruction while also bringing in construction professionals to provide mentorship and real-world insight. This exposure helps students understand not only how to build, but why certain techniques and standards matter in the industry.

"We're excited to bring this opportunity to Elk River and build something meaningful from the ground up," said Amy Lord of Elk River. "It's about giving students real experiences, connecting them with professionals, and helping them discover skills and career paths they may not have considered before."

Throughout the first year, students will take part in a variety of construction tasks, steadily building both confidence and skills. The program is designed to be progressive, allowing students to see tangible results from their work while developing a deeper appreciation for the building process.

The expected outcomes are both practical and personal. Students will leave the program with foundational construction skills, a stronger understanding of possible career paths, and the satisfaction of contributing to something meaningful in their community. For educators, the partnership offers a dynamic way to strengthen technical education while deepening connections between schools and the community.

Looking ahead, CMHFH is also exploring future partnerships with additional high schools across its four-county service area. These efforts aim to expand opportunities for students, strengthen local workforce development, and continue building meaningful connections between education and community impact.

To learn more regarding:

- Partnership Approach
- Logistics
- Tech College Partnerships
- Documents (contracts/insurance)

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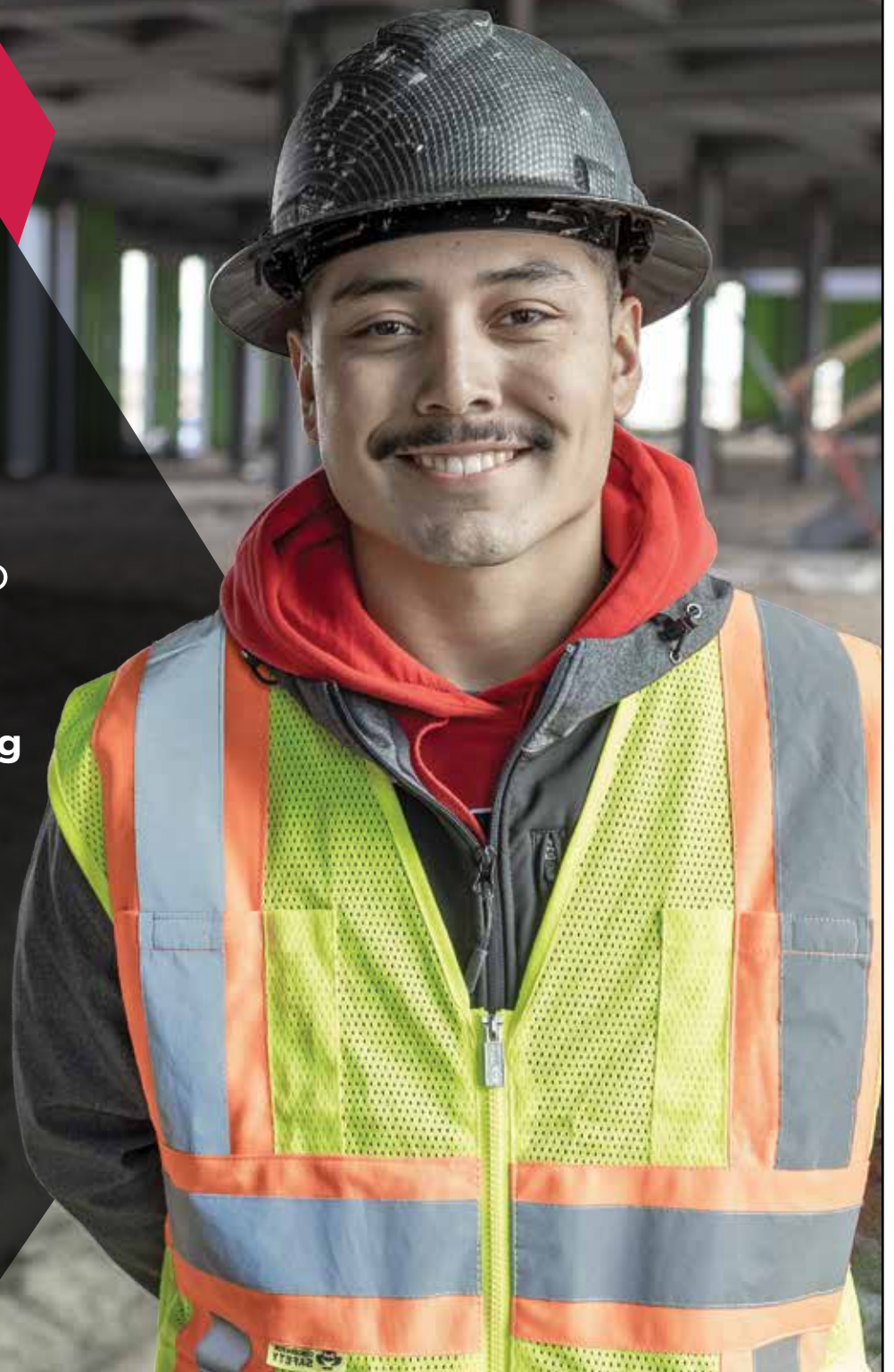
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Why HVAC, Plumbing, and Mechanical Trades Are Excellent Career Choices for Minnesota Students



In an era of skyrocketing college tuition and a national skills gap in essential industries, parents, teachers, and students alike should take a fresh look at the mechanical trades. Careers in heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC), plumbing, pipefitting, and related mechanical fields offer high demand, competitive pay, hands-on satisfaction, and a clear path to success—often without the burden of student debt. For Minnesota families, these trades are particularly vital given our state’s extreme weather and growing infrastructure needs.

Strong Job Security in a Growing Field — The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects that employment for heating, air conditioning, and refrigeration mechanics and installers will grow 8% from 2024 to 2034—much faster than the average for all occupations—with about 40,100 openings projected each year. Plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters are expected to see 4% growth, about as fast as average. These projections stem from new construction, the need to retrofit older buildings for energy efficiency, and the ongoing demand for maintenance and repair in residential and commercial settings.

In Minnesota, the demand is even more pronounced. Harsh winters require robust heating systems, while summers demand reliable cooling. Population growth in the Twin Cities metro area and across the state fuels new building projects. The result? A consistent need for skilled tradespeople who can’t be easily replaced by automation or offshoring.

Competitive Pay and Financial Stability — Forget the outdated notion that trades mean modest earnings. Nationally, the median annual wage for HVAC technicians is approximately \$59,810, while plumbers and pipefitters earn a median of \$62,970 (BLS 2024 data).

In Minnesota, these figures are often higher due to local demand and cost of living. Experienced HVAC professionals in the state can earn around \$66,000 or more annually, with plumbers seeing mean wages approaching or exceeding \$79,000. With overtime, certifications, specialization (such as in green technologies or commercial systems), and especially business ownership, many tradespeople comfortably reach six-figure incomes. Crucially, these careers allow workers to earn while they learn through apprenticeships, avoiding the average \$30,000+ in student debt faced by many college graduates. Many apprentices start with competitive wages and benefits, progressing rapidly as they gain experience and licensure.

A Structured Path: Apprenticeships and Training — One of the biggest advantages is the apprenticeship model. Typically lasting 4-5 years, apprentices combine on-the-job training with classroom instruction, earning a paycheck from day one. Upon completion, graduates become licensed journeymen with excellent earning potential and job mobility. Students can also start with diploma or certificate programs at excellent local institutions like Hennepin Technical College, Dunwoody College of Technology, Minneapolis College, St. Cloud Technical College, and others. These programs provide foundational skills that pair perfectly with apprenticeships.

Rewarding Work with Modern Appeal — Trades work is far from “dirty jobs” of the past. Today’s HVAC and plumbing professionals use advanced diagnostics, computer controls, smart home technology, and sustainable systems like geothermal and high-efficiency boilers. They solve real problems daily, ensuring clean water, comfortable environments, and energy savings that benefit the planet.

The work offers variety—no two days are the same—mixing installation, repair, customer interaction, and troubleshooting. Many find deep satisfaction in tangible accomplishments and helping families and businesses, with the ability to point to projects decades later and say, “I built that!” Additionally, these trades open doors to entrepreneurship. Many successful contractors started as apprentices and now run thriving businesses, creating jobs and contributing to their communities.

Minnesota PHCC: A Valuable Resource for Students and Families — The Minnesota Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors Association (MN PHCC) is a key ally for anyone exploring these careers. As the state chapter of the national PHCC, they advance the industry through education, networking, and advocacy while protecting public health and the environment.

Parents and teachers: Contact MN PHCC at mnpfcc.com, by phone at 612-590-8038, or email michelled@mnpfcc.com to connect with member contractors for job shadowing, internship or apprenticeship information, or even classroom speakers. MN PHCC supports continuing education and apprenticeship training, including as a partner for the PHCC Academy® online courses that can fulfill related technical instruction requirements in Minnesota. A standout opportunity is the PHCC Educational Foundation scholarship program. Open to Min-

nesota students, it offers awards ranging from \$1,500 to \$10,000 (most around \$3,000) to plumbing and HVAC apprentices working for PHCC member contractors, trade school students in relevant programs, and college students in related majors like mechanical engineering or construction management. For 2026, they plan 75 awards totaling \$180,000. Applications are due May 1, 2026—visit phccfoundation.org/scholarship-program/ or phccareers.com for details.

Encouraging the Next Generation — As educators and parents, we owe it to students to present all viable paths to a successful future—not just the traditional four-year degree. The mechanical trades build practical skills, work ethic, problem-solving abilities, and financial independence. For students who enjoy working with their hands, technology, and people, these careers can be incredibly fulfilling. Encourage exploration: Visit a local technical college, talk to a tradesperson, or reach out to MN PHCC. With a shortage of skilled workers, now is the perfect time for Minnesota’s young people to consider HVAC, plumbing, and the mechanical trades. They aren’t just jobs—they’re careers that build homes, comfort, and a strong future. For more information and resources, start at mnpfcc.com or phccareers.com. **Reach out today to bring these opportunities into your classroom or family conversations.**



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Goodhue County Habitat for Humanity High School Home Construction

Bob Hawley, Executive Director
Goodhue County Habitat for
Humanity

Students in two Goodhue County, Minnesota schools are gaining valuable home construction knowledge and are filling a critical need for their communities. Both Goodhue High School and Kenyon-Wanamingo High School are finishing their second year collaborating with Goodhue County Habitat for Humanity (GCHFH) to construct affordable workforce homes for Habitat families with their high school home construction classes.

Goodhue High School students constructed their first home on a GCHFH site in Goodhue during the '24-'25 school year. This year the class constructed a home on a site secured by the Goodhue school district. This second home will be moved to a GCHFH site in Lake City, MN in mid-May where GCHFH volunteers will have constructed the basement and will add a garage and porch.

Kenyon-Wanamingo High School students constructed their two homes on a GCHFH sites in Kenyon with the assistance of Rochester Build Crew volunteers. These homes included garages and porches. The first home in the '24-'25 school year was a home with a basement. This year's home was a three-bedroom slab-on-grade.

GCHFH serves as the General Contractor for the construction of the homes, providing house plans, construction financing, sub-contractor engagement and coordination, and construction oversight. The schools need to provide a construction class instructor and tools for the students. If needed, GCHFH loans tools to the schools.

The Goodhue High School instructor for both years was Mike Harvey. Goodhue had six students the first year and eight the second year. The students worked every school day for 90 minutes, beginning at 8:15 AM. The Kenyon-Wanamingo High School instructor for both years was Doug Thompson. Kenyon-Wanamingo had twenty-two students the first



year and eighteen the second year. The class was divided into two overlapping sessions beginning at 12:15 PM each school day. GCHFH construction manager Bob Bidon worked between both sites on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Habitat utilizes volunteers to construct homes for families selected to become homeowners. The families purchase the homes and provide sweat equity as they work with Habitat staff and volunteers to construct their own home. The homes are designed to accommodate families as they age with kitchen, living room, bedroom, bathroom and laundry on the main floor. Each has an attached single-car garage.

GCHFH plans to increase home production in Goodhue County. The school home construction classes help Habitat fill the volunteer needs for increasing production. Additional volunteers are needed to complete the homes in both districts.

Students working on GCHFH sites help set the forms and pour the concrete footings, set ICF (Insulated Concrete Form) blocks for the founda-

tion and filled the blocks with concrete from a pumper truck, capped the basement with floor joists and plywood, constructed wood interior and exterior walls, set roof trusses and capped the roof with plywood, installed windows and doors, insulated walls, painted and sided the exterior, installed exterior and interior trim, installed flooring and much more.

The school districts supply tools and equipment for the home construction classes, including scaffolding. The schools provided safety training. GCHFH utilizes local contractors for more technical needs, such as HVAC, electrical, plumbing, excavating and roofing. As much as possible, the students witnessed and learned about these trades in addition to carpentry and house construction techniques.

These collaborations are strongly supported by the respective communities. Additionally, GCHFH and the school districts work together to seek funding that is mutually beneficial for the program. Initially, both schools applied for and received funding from TBG Education

Foundation, established by the Builder's Group in 2015 to encourage students to pursue careers in Minnesota's construction industry. These funds were used to acquire tools and scaffolding.

In collaborations with GCHFH, the districts also applied for and received Minnesota Housing challenge grants, awarded to the districts for funding additional tools, and a tool trailer in Goodhue. The funding also covers the cost of technical subcontractor work on the homes for GCHFH, as well as for the moving cost for the Goodhue house. This funding opportunity was made possible by 2024 legislation expanding the eligible uses of the Economic Development and Housing Challenge program to include grants for school districts, charter schools, and certain cooperative units. Grant opportunities of this type can be monitored on the Minnesota Housing website or by requesting to be placed on the Minnesota Housing email list.

Goodhue Schools, Kenyon-Wanamingo Schools and Goodhue County Habitat for Humanity understand the value their collaboration brings to all involved. Students gain strong, useful knowledge and experience. Schools are not only providing the students this wonderful opportunity but are benefiting their greater communities with affordable homes. GCHFH is satisfying its mission of building homes, hope and community, and nurturing the very important culture of volunteerism. It is a 'win' for all.

[Goodhue County Habitat for Humanity](http://www.goodhue.k12.mn.us)

goodhue.k12.mn.us



www.kw.k12.mn.us



A Tradition of Building Homes for Over 30 Years: Bemidji High School's Construction Program

Bemidji Area Schools, District 31

For more than three decades, students from Bemidji High School (BHS) have been doing more than learning from textbooks—they've been building homes. Measuring in at 1,834 square feet, a recent student-built home features four bedrooms and two bathrooms. It marks another successful project through a unique partnership that began over 30 years ago between BHS and the Headwaters Regional Development Commission (HRDC).

Each year, nearly 200 students engage in different phases of the construction process. From framing and siding to insulation, paint-



ing, and cabinetry, students are immersed in every step of building a home—aside from a few major installations like concrete, well, and septic systems. In recent years, the program has expanded through a collaboration with a nearby technical college, allowing their students to install plumbing, electrical, and HVAC systems, further enriching the hands-on learning experience for all.

Building Lasting Partnerships

This program wouldn't exist without the continued support of HRDC. The partnership

Continued on Page 14

Building Bridges to the Future of Trades

Project Build Minnesota's Construction Teachers Conference Returns in April 2026

In April 2026, Project Build Minnesota (PBM) will once again host the Minnesota Construction Teachers Conference (MCTC)—a dynamic two-day experience designed to empower educators and strengthen Minnesota's future workforce.

Since its launch in 2021, the conference has brought together construction educators and industry professionals with a shared goal: to position the skilled trades as a viable and rewarding "career of choice" for students. Through hands-on learning, real-world exposure, and meaningful connections, MCTC equips educators with the tools they need to inspire the next generation.

Why This Conference Matters

Across Minnesota, construction and CTE programs often face challenges accessing up-to-date curriculum, modern equipment, and strong industry partnerships. MCTC addresses these gaps by convening secondary and post-secondary educators, administrators, and industry leaders in one place.

Attendees gain:

- Exposure to residential, commercial, and industrial construction practices

- Insights into emerging technologies and safety training
- Opportunities to tour an active commercial job site
- Valuable continuing education credits
- Direct connections to industry professionals and resources

The result? Educators leave better equipped to connect students with real career pathways in the trades.

New in 2026: PBM Membership Launch

This year marks an exciting milestone as Project Build Minnesota transitions into a membership-based organization.

Educators, industry partners, and supporters are invited to join a growing network committed to workforce development. Membership will offer:

- Access to exclusive resources and industry insights
- Ongoing professional development opportunities
- Expanded networking with educators and construction professionals

As part of this launch, **all construction teachers who register for the 2026 conference will receive a complimentary one-year membership.**



Looking Ahead

More than just a conference, MCTC is a strategic investment in Minnesota's workforce. By connecting educators with industry mentors, tools, and training, PBM continues to close the skilled labor gap and elevate the future of the trades. This event would not be possible without generous sponsorship. Our sponsors allow us to offer this two-day train-

ing for an approachable cost. If you would like to learn more about sponsorship opportunities with Project Build MN, please [visit our website](#) or email us at info@projectbuildmn.org. Project Build MN is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

APRIL 30 – MAY 1, 2026

MINNESOTA CONSTRUCTION TEACHER CONFERENCE

The Minnesota Construction Teacher Conference engages Career and Technical Education (CTE) educators of the construction trades in cutting-edge professional development supported by the industry

This year, it will be hosted at The Builders Group (2919 Eagandale Blvd STE 100, Eagan, MN 55121)



- NETWORKING
- PROGRAM SHARING
- TRAIN-THE-TRAINER
- JOB SITE TOUR
- WORK-BASED LEARNING INITIATIVES



projectbuildmn.org



Measuring Success In Homes, Futures



Spring Lake Park Schools

“What’s your measurement?” calls Construction Trades teacher Scott Wicklund, his voice carrying across the high school parking lot turned construction site. Above him, a group of students pause to answer, tape measures in hand and nail guns at the ready. Together, they work to finish the final wall of the two-story house before winter weather moves in.

Despite the push to get the siding and the roof completed before the weather turns, the atmosphere is anything but tense. There are smiles, fist bumps and easy chatter as students learn by doing - building skills, confidence and a house all at once.

Now in its third year, the Construction Trades program has hit its stride. With a seasoned teacher, strong community and industry partnerships and students eager to learn, the program is laying a solid foundation for success in the trades.

“It’s fun because we’re literally building a program,” says Scott. “I like to say we’re building an airplane while flying, and it just works. These kids are gaining real skills and the ability to walk onto a job site ready to succeed. Each year, we’re learning more. Improving more.”

Building for a purpose

This year’s build is more than just a hands-on project — it’s for a great cause. The program is partnering once again with Elevate Hope House, an organization that provides housing and support for women with children facing homelessness or housing insecurity. Students are learning essential technical and soft skills while helping create a home for those in need.

Once complete, the new house will feature five to six bedrooms, three to four bathrooms, and a full basement. This is the most ambitious build yet.

“Last year’s house was a single level, so we’re upping our game,” says Scott. “It’s working out well and we’re figuring it out as we go. Elevate Hope House is an awesome organi-

zation, and we want to do the best possible job for them.”

Before starting on the home, students tackled a warm-up project: building a garage to house materials. The shed protects supplies from the elements and has already improved efficiency on the job site.

“With the garage, we can build more structures and bigger, more complex structures,” he says.

For senior Parker Sullivan, that first project was eye-opening.

“It’s super cool to start a project from nothing and see it turn into something,” says Parker. “At first it was just materials on the ground, and then two weeks later we had a finished garage. It’s an amazing experience to be part of the build and see the end result.”

Building Skills and Confidence

From the very first week, Construction Trades students learn by doing. Safety comes first, and before long, they’re practicing with nail guns and heading out to the job site to start real construction work.

“Teaching on the go is the way I want to teach and the way I think these students learn best,” says Scott. “I want students to lose the fear of trying to build or fix things. Getting them on the site with tools in their hands and freedom to try is the best place to start.”

Parker enjoys the hands-on, fast-paced learning that comes with being on the job site.

“A lot of what we’re learning is how to use tools the right way and apply proper building techniques,” he says. “Before this course, I didn’t know what house wrap was called or what the numbers on a speed square meant - now I do. Getting to apply what we learn in real time on real projects has been a different but cool type of learning.”

For junior Owen Sayler, who took the Intro to Trades course last year, putting those skills into practice on the house build has been a great way to take his learning to the next level.

“We basically do everything needed to build a house besides a few things like electrical and plumbing,” says Owen. “From top to bottom, we’re doing the work, and it’s been pretty fun. Framing has been my favorite part because it’s really hands-on and focused.”

Senior Hannah Miller shares that same enthusiasm. After taking a welding course, she knew this class would be a good fit.

“I didn’t have any experience with this type of learning before, but I know I like hands-on work which is why I wanted to take this class,” she says.

“Even if I don’t end up in the trades, I’ve learned skills that will help in any job like working well with others, meeting deadlines and contributing to a good work environment. . . . I’ll always carry those skills with me.”

—Senior Parker Sullivan

Scott says safety remains the top priority. In three years, the worst injury has been a splinter. Safety is something he takes pride in.

“To be successful in the trades, you have to be safe and dependable,” he says. “We go slow in the beginning to build good habits, and that mindset sticks even when the pace picks up.”

Alongside technical skills, students also develop soft skills that make workers stand out: work ethic, reliability, communication and teamwork.

After graduation, Parker plans to become either a plumber or a pilot. These are two very different paths, but both strengthened by the skills he’s building.

“Even if I don’t end up in the trades, I’ve learned skills that will help in any job like working well with others, meeting deadlines and contributing to a good work environment,” says Parker. “I’ll always carry those skills with me.”

Whether students go on to careers in construction or choose a different path, Scott sees value in taking these courses.

“For those going into the trades, they’ll have the skills and confidence to get to work right away,” he says. “And for those who don’t, they still gain practical life skills - how to make basic repairs, ask smart questions or understand what good work looks like.”

Building the Program’s Future

Strong community and industry support continues to drive the program’s growth. Donated materials, visits from trades professionals and real job site experiences all contribute to its success.

“There is so much support for what we’re doing because there’s clearly a need for good people in the trades,” says Scott. “I feel like we’re just scratching the surface of this program’s potential.”

Keeping up with trends is also key.

Building a house from scratch in a parking lot - or even on a housing site - isn’t typical today. Many parts are built in factories and

trucked to the site.

“What we’re doing is referred to as ‘stick building’ says Scott. “But companies keep telling me to keep teaching how I’m teaching because the skills are invaluable and will transfer to any job site. Doing it this way slows down the work and helps students really understand the process. The basics matter and it’s working so we’re going to continue.”

Owen is looking toward a career in welding, pipefitting or carpentry.

“I always figured I’d go into welding, but this course made me realize there are

other trades I might be interested in,” he says.

Hannah sees herself going into welding or mechanics after graduation.

“I’m learning a lot that will prepare me for either of those fields,” she says.

For Parker, it’s the community that makes this program stand out.

“I’ve made so many new friends,” he says. “The community this class brings is super fun. The teacher is great. The learning is great. It’s just a good environment to be in.”

Scott credits the program’s job-site approach for building not just skills, but relationships and teamwork that will set students up for success in their futures.

“The teamwork and time and energy it takes to build these projects adds to the rapport among our students and creates community,” he says. “I don’t treat them like students; I treat them like adults and that pays dividends in the way they work together and the effort they give towards these projects. I see this approach work in the way this program has grown and how students leave ready to tackle whatever they do next.”





Students Learn Hands-On Skills in New Construction Course at Westonka High School



Becca Neuger
Westonka Public Schools

Students are gaining real-world experience in the skilled trades through a new construction course at Westonka High School.

During the first semester of Construction I, student work crews are building two playhouses from the ground up, developing industry-relevant skills including framing, installing trusses, roofing, leveling, running plumbing lines, setting windows, and apply-

ing Tyvek® weather barriers. The project emphasizes precision, safety, teamwork, and problem-solving while exposing students to authentic construction practices.

WHS sophomores Gabe Lundgren and Remington Nelson enrolled in Construction I after completing Woods I last year. In addition to technical construction skills, both students say the course has strengthened their teamwork, communication, and problem-solving abilities.

“This course is way more complicated than Woods,” Nelson said. “We’re not just doing the building, we’re doing all the math, too. Last year everything was squared and exact. Now we’re working with decimals, fractions, and angles.”

Nelson described a real-world challenge their crew encountered when the playhouse structure, though measured correctly, still needed to be shortened by three inches on both ends to fit through a garage door — an experience that reinforced the importance of adaptability in construction.

Nelson said that Construction I offers a welcome change from traditional high school classes. “In most classes, you’re sitting, reading, and writing. In this class, you’re up and moving. It’s loud, you’re working with your friends, and it feels like real work,” Nelson said.

Both students also said the course has changed how they view the trades and that they would now consider a career in a skilled trade. Lundgren shared that he appreciates the physical nature of the work and likes the idea of a job that doesn’t involve sitting behind a desk all day. However, he would encourage students to consider taking the course even if they aren’t sure it fits their future plans. “It’s just good stuff to know,” Lundgren said.

Construction I reflects Westonka’s commitment to career and technical education and preparing students for future opportunities. As the high school redesign continues,



the course will eventually move into a new space. Additional vocational courses will be added next year, including nursing and machining/manufacturing, further expanding hands-on, career-focused learning options for students.

westonka.k12.mn.us



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St Cloud State University

Scholarships for students:

The program is offering five \$1,000 scholarships each year for students attending St. Cloud State University majoring in Construction Management, Technology Education or Manufacturing Engineering Technology. To apply, scan the QR code.



ACE CNC Training

Would you like to teach entry-level CNC machining? Are you looking for a challenging project that prepares students for a manufacturing career? Do you want to teach machining but don't have access to CNC mills? St. Cloud State University will be offering another ACE training bootcamp July 27–31, 2026.

After successful completion of the training, instructors will have access to Haas and Forest Scientific CNC mills in their own schools. The TEC Network of SCSU will deliver portable CNC mills to school shops and labs for several weeks' use by students



and teachers. Materials, tools and supplies are all provided by the TEC Network as part of the ACE project. No cost to the school or teacher.

Implementing the ACE program in your school will teach your students how to create NC code to machine five parts. Students will create G and M code from predesigned parts in Fusion 360. From there, students will learn the operation of Haas or Forest Scientific CNC mills. Upon completion, the parts can be assembled to produce an air-operated motor, similar to the internals of any air-operated tool. It's a real project with real working parts that can be completed at the high school level successfully.

Teachers looking at implementation in their classes should plan on two to three weeks of Fusion 360 training in the classroom, followed by two to three weeks of operating the CNC mills in the lab. Machines are 208-240 V, single or three phase and will require a compressed air supply.

TEC Network

The TEC Network (Technology, Engineering & Careers) is all about building partnerships with school and businesses around the state. Each school selected to be a part of the Technology Network will engage in:

- 1. Equipment access** — nearly \$2 million in equipment
- 2. Professional development** — summer workshops and online courses
- 3. Program review** — Enhance your program
- 4. Advisory board support** — learn how we can support your connections to businesses
- 5. Program enhancement plan** — district will determine items needed

Mike from Maple River noted:

“Our local Perkins consortium used funds for the next 5 years to help join the SCSU TEC program. This has been the best thing to ever happen to our program. I always tell local community members it is like joining a blockbuster for shop equipment. The TEC program has allowed our students to experience a CNC router, virtual welder, virtual painter, and later this year and CNC plasma cutter. My first 10 years of teaching no students were able to experience this technology.”

Technical Careers for Today and Tomorrow

Undergraduate Programs:

- Construction Management
- Technology Education
- Technology Management
- Manufacturing Engineering Technology

Graduate Programs:

- Technology Education
- Career and Technical Education (CTE)
- Work Based Learning

For additional information:

- SCSU-Construction Management: CM@stcloudstate.edu
- SCSU-Technology Education: TechEd@stcloudstate.edu
- SCSU-Manufacturing Engineering Technology: MFET@stcloudstate.edu
- SCSU-Career & Technical Education: CTE@stcloudstate.edu
- SCSU-Work Based Learning: WBL@stcloudstate.edu

Kurt Helgeson, krhelgeson@stcloudstate.edu, 320-308-3127

Bemidji High School's Construction Program Continued from Page 10



was originally launched in 1994 when former BHS teacher Ron LeClaire, with help from former HRDC Executive Director Tim Flathers and Habitat for Humanity, secured the initial grant funding. Since then, students have built over 60 homes in the Bemidji area—each one providing new educational opportunities and a tangible impact on the community.

Each year features a new house plan to broaden the range of student experiences. Locations are carefully selected within 10 minutes of the school to allow students to easily rotate

between classes. They spend about 60 minutes on-site, after which the next group of students picks up where the last left off, creating a continuous, collaborative workflow.

Focused on Real-World Experience

The primary mission of the BHS Construction Program is to prepare students for success—whether they enter the trades or simply learn valuable life

skills. Not every student will pursue a career in construction, but all gain practical experience and exposure to career possibilities they may not have previously considered.

“There are so many potential careers in construction that students don't know exist. We aim to not only teach them how to build, but to show them that there are high-paying, meaningful jobs in the trades,” one instructor shared. Over the past seven years, the program's scope has grown to include deeper involvement with technical training, thanks to the partnership with the technical college. Impressively,

several former BHS students who participated in the program are now continuing their construction education at the college level.

Strength in Community Support

The program thrives thanks to a wide network of community partners—from local lumber yards and cabinet manufacturers to excavators, trade unions, and parents. Many former students, now working professionals in the trades, have returned to support the program that helped shape their careers.

In 2024, BHS received a \$25,000 grant from a global HVAC and plumbing supplier, in partnership with Exploring the Trades, to build a skills lab that expands student training in HVAC systems. Additionally, through HRDC's guidance, the school applied for and was awarded a Minnesota Housing grant to support the 2025–26 home build. These funds will go toward purchasing building materials and tools to further enhance the student learning experience.

As workforce conversations across the country increasingly emphasize the value of trades, this program stands out as a proven model for how education, community, and industry partnerships can converge to empower the next generation.

Advice for Schools Looking to Start a Similar Program

The success of the BHS Construction Program is deeply rooted in the expertise of its educators and the strength of its partnerships. For schools looking to start or expand their own student construction programs, the message is clear:

“You need an instructor with extensive knowledge of home construction—someone who understands the field and can lead students safely and effectively. Just as important is building a strong network of community and industry partners who can provide materials, mentorship, and support.”

Ultimately, students need ownership of the experience. While some choose specific tasks that interest them, all are encouraged to engage in every phase of the build. The result is a sense of pride and confidence that carries well beyond graduation.



Congratulations to Hailey Jensen of Osakis Public Schools on Being Named the 2025 MAAE Teacher Turn the Key Award Winner



courses, partnerships, funding, and community involvement. I developed a strategic plan by asking, “What do our people want?” Since then, the program has grown in a variety of areas. The course offerings have doubled, venturing into advanced-level, partial art credit, concurrent courses, and additional electives. The department has also doubled its program’s rosters to see approximately 210 unduplicated students annually.

I have prioritized outside funding and secured approximately \$30,000 in grant funding, transforming the curriculum with industry-grade equipment and resources. We also expanded from a one-person department to a two-person department because of the high demand and desire for agriculture education. The additional instructor has enabled us to offer advanced-level courses, partial art credits, and concurrent classes, providing students with more diverse and impactful learning opportunities.

Today, the agriculture education program reflects the needs and passions of the Osakis community. Classes such as Large Animal Science, Small Animal Science, Veterinary Science, Agriculture Business, Welding 1-3, Plasma Table Creations, and Women’s Welding connect students with real-world applications and community partnerships. Students engage



Osakis is a small, rural community of approximately 2,000 people located 15 minutes outside of Alexandria, Minnesota. Since my first day in Osakis, the consistent support for the agriculture education program has been unwavering, reflecting the community’s deep commitment to agriculture and education.

As a single-person department, I was given the opportunity to create a vision for the agriculture education program, focusing on

in hands-on learning by fulfilling manufacturing orders, honing skills like communication and critical thinking while contributing to local businesses. The program’s growth has extended to FFA membership, and our chapter has gained recognition at the local, regional, state, and national levels through service-learning projects.

I use a variety of modes of instruction throughout my courses, but project-based learn-

ing and hands-on learning are the most frequent in my classroom. After recently completing my final action research project for my Master’s Degree on the impact project-based learning has on student engagement, the data shows that this is the preferred method of learning for my students. I’ve found that the majority of my

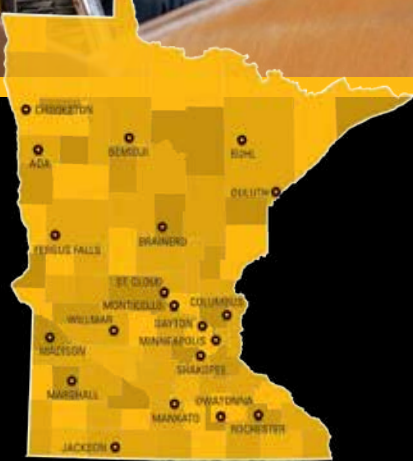
Continued on Page 20



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EOE DISABILITY/VETS



Agriculture Program at Park Rapids Schools named Outstanding Middle/Secondary Ag Ed Program by NAEF! Continued from Page 1



Courses currently offered in the Park Rapids Agriculture program include:

- **Animal Systems:** Companion Animal Care, Animal Science, Veterinary Science
- **Plant Systems:** Horticulture, Turfgrass Management, Landscape Design
- **Agribusiness Systems:** Agribusiness and Economics, Ag Occupations (Work-Based Learning)
- **Natural Resource Systems:** Forestry, Minnesota Outdoors, Wildlife Management
- **Food Products and Processing Systems:** Nutrition in the Kitchen, Food Science, World Foods
- **Power, Structural, and Technical Systems:** Basic Plumbing and Electrical Wiring, Intro to Metals
- **Cluster Skills:** Life Skills 101, Junior Capstone, Senior Capstone, Intro to AFNR
- **Multiple Pathways:** 7th Grade Introduction to Agriculture, 7th Grade STEM, 8th Grade Manufacturing/Transportation

Park Rapids students experience the classroom in far more ways than worksheets and textbooks. We utilize the surrounding area as often as we can to help students engage with the material in a meaningful way. Some examples include:

- For MN Outdoors, students take a canoe trip on the Crow Wing River to test their outdoor skills, observe wildlife, and to develop an appreciation for our natural resources.
- In Forestry, students travel the school grounds on multiple occasions doing a compass course, navigating GPS waypoints, cruising timber, taking increment borer samples, and learning identifica-

tion with real specimens.

- In Landscape Design, students have done landscaping projects to help beautify the school.
- For Turfgrass Management, students gain real experience caring for our baseball and softball diamonds.
- In World Foods, students research about the agriculture and cultural identity of countries around the world. After teaching the rest of the class about their selected country, they will prepare a meal from that country to attempt to gain a better understanding.
- In both Veterinary Science and Animal Science, students have the opportunity to dissect piglets and do the occasional livestock necropsy when opportunities arise.

All three teachers in the program are also FFA advisors. Since the re-chartering in 2019, Park Rapids has an affiliated membership structure in FFA, which means that all students enrolled in an agriculture class in grades 7-12 are automatically FFA members. Our students have completed hundreds of community service hours and spent thousands of hours on their work-based learning projects and have seen great success in FFA. Our chapter ranked Silver in both 2023 and 2024 and received a Gold ranking in 2025 and 2026 on the National Chapter Award Application. Our program is young, but has seen immense growth and success since 2019.

Park Rapids was a pilot program for the Agricultural Diversity and Leadership/Technical Skill Challenge (ADLTS) grant from 2020 - 2024. This allowed us to expand to affiliate membership and paid for a chapter subscription to the Agricultural Experience Tracker (AET). Every student enrolled in an Ag Class at Park Rapids Area Schools uses the AET to create and keep records for their SAE or their Work-Based Learn-

ing project (for students who don't have strictly ag-related projects). Since 2019, students have tracked over 17,000 hours in their work-based learning projects. Implementing Work-Based Learning has helped to pave the way for our FFA members to complete their degrees and applications and has helped all of our students learn to evaluate and document their skill development. Every student has the opportunity to receive recognition for their work through their degrees, applications and certifications.

We have developed strong relationships with a variety of businesses in our community. Our members have benefited from the depth of knowledge and support that our community has to offer, and we are extremely thankful for the ways in which the Park Rapids Area community has stepped up to help our students learn the skills they need to be successful with their contests.

In Junior Capstone and Senior Capstone, students are presented with the opportunity to prepare for life after high school through a variety of lessons. These courses were created as companion courses, to provide the opportunity for all students, not just Ag students, to prepare for the next steps in their journey after high school. Students complete personality surveys, career exploration surveys, navigate the college application process, learn how to apply for financial aid, complete their FAFSA applications, conduct job shadows and career interviews, write resumes and cover letters, complete scholarship applications, practice their interview skills, create a budget, as well as hear from numerous

guest speakers from colleges, universities, and careers in the agriculture industry.

All teachers associated with Park Rapids Ag Education are considered mentors and leaders among their respective cohorts and strive to support each other and other ag teachers in whatever ways they can. We don't seek the spotlight for ourselves, but the publicity that we have done and the involvement that we have seen from our students has not gone unnoticed by our community. Each year, the Park Rapids Rotary Club gives out the Hewitt Family Youth Service Award to an individual who has "made Park Rapids a better place for children." In 2024, the advisors of the Park Rapids FFA Chapter were recognized as the recipients of the Hewitt Family Youth Service Award. This award was completely unexpected and unlooked-for. Above all else, as teachers, we strive to make our classrooms, our program, and our community a better place for all children. This type of award is given in recognition of a lifetime or career of service to students, and to be recognized at this level after only five years in our community was extremely humbling and gratifying. This award shows not only the work we have done to coach and guide our students, but also the work that our students have put in to put our program on the map.

Congratulations and way to go!

parkrapids.k12.mn.us



Agriculture Grants

Federal Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education (CTE) Act of 2018 (Perkins V)

Perkins V improves and expands services for students enrolled in CTE programs. It provides an increased focus on the academic achievement of CTE students, strengthening the connections between secondary and postsecondary education, and improving state and local accountability. Allocation procedures vary, but agriculture programs can often access between \$1,000 to several thousands of dollars per year for innovative equipment, work-based learning opportunities, teacher recruitment efforts, career exploration, and local needs assessment.

<https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/cte/perk>

MAELC Strategic Initiative Grants

The Minnesota Agricultural Education Leadership Council (MAELC)

Strategic Initiative Grants fund projects supporting Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources (AFNR) education. These grants focus on improving programs, expanding access to under-represented students, and teacher professional development. Applications are accepted from primary, secondary, and postsecondary educators, with an average award of approximately \$7,200. <https://mn.gov/maelc/grants.html>

FFA Grants

Minnesota FFA grants and scholarships offer over \$2 million annually to students and chapters for projects, SAEs, and education. Key opportunities include the Minnesota FFA Foundation Legacy Club Grant (up to \$1,500) and national grants for service-learning (\$3,000) or SAE growth (\$1,000). Applications generally target chapter development, community engagement, and individual student advancement.

<https://www.mnffa.org/grants-scholarships>

Pamela Koenen Wins NAAE Teacher Mentor Award



Pamela Koenen, agricultural educator at Alden-Conger Public School District in Alden, Minnesota is one of six agricultural educators nationwide who received the 2025 National Association of Agricultural Educators' Teacher Mentor Award. The award was presented during the 2025 NAAE Convention, December 8-12, in Nashville. The NAAE Teacher Mentor Award

is presented to an NAAE member who has excelled in preparing beginning agricultural educators into the profession by offering advice and guiding them to their own professional strengths.

Over her 37-year career, Koenen has mentored eight student teachers, dozens of early-career educators, and countless others through Minnesota's Teacher Induction Program and the U of M's mentorship initiative. She creates a safe, honest, and reflective space for mentees to grow, modeling effective instruction, co-teaching strategies, and professional balance.

A lifelong advocate for agricultural education, Koenen has played a key role in shaping state mentoring programs and leads by example through her involvement in professional organizations. Whether sharing curriculum resources, coaching award applicants, or supporting early-career educators, she embodies mentorship as both a professional responsibility and a personal calling.

Source: Alden-Conger FFA
www.facebook.com/p/Alden-Conger-FFA-100064706195231

Pam kindly shared some examples of what she does as a Teacher-Mentor:

Interview day for state degrees and proficiencies is an opportunity for student teachers to be on the other side of the interview table.

To prepare student teachers for interviewing, I review the application with them explaining the required elements on each page and with each type of application. If possible, the student teachers assist in an area where they have experience. They are then paired with another team of teachers from the regions. This allows them to gain insight and knowledge from other advisors.

To get them more actively involved in the process, I provide them with suggested questions to ask the interviewees. This gets student teachers actively involved in the interview process and to not just be observers.

Student teachers know that I am always available as a resource. This year, I was contacted by two former student teachers regarding state degrees and proficiencies. One has questions about how to complete a section of the state degree application. The other asked if I would

read two proficiency applications for his students who would be advancing to state judging.

Prior to and during regional FFA events, instructors have questions about how the day will operate, prepping teams for a CDE, or curriculum for a new class they are proposing. When directed to me, I answer honestly and accurately. As competitive as we often are as FFA advisors, we also have a deep seeded desire to see our fellow instructors succeed. I readily share CDE study materials and curriculum with anyone (in this state and other states) who asks. This sharing of resources goes both ways. If I see or hear of something that another instructor is doing, I will ask questions and for more information about the project or resource. Helping each other to become more competent and knowledgeable instructors directly benefits our students and enhances our profession.

Congratulations Pam!

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A new class at AFSA is the crowning achievement for many 11th–12th grade students, specifically students wanting to dive deeper into the world of agriculture and grow their skills. Ms. Warner's Agricultural Capstone class allows students to design and develop their own individual project that they will work on throughout the trimester.

"I noticed that a lot of students were completing all of the available classes for their career pathways within two years of their high school career. I wanted to provide a time and space for students to take all that they have been learning and create their own project, or learn a skill they haven't had a chance to. To help them grow and explore their passions in relation to agriculture." Ms. Kyra Warner, AFSA High School Agriculture teacher and FFA Advisor. Let's take a closer look at a few of the capstone projects.

You can typically find Mason in the AFSA shop or greenhouse, fixing anything that needs fixing. This soon-to-be AFSA grad is always ready to help, and his capstone project showcases this characteristic well. Following in the footsteps of a family member who recently passed away, Mason decided to take his skills and help the animals.

His shelter for stray cats has become a passion project. Wanting to make sure the stray cats have shelter, food and water, especially on the below-zero nights, Mason has designed and built a home that will fulfill those needs. He even added some special features, including a heated floor and bowl. Also, the roof can slide off to help with cleaning. This house

may be little, but many of the same skills needed to build a human-sized house were used to build this one. From building walls to installing shingles, Mason has learned a ton of skills he can use throughout his life.

A gift of furniture got Alistar's capstone project started. Alistar, a senior at AFSA, hates to see old furniture painted. He would rather put in the hours restoring a piece of furniture to reveal the true beauty of the wood than to see it covered up. When his uncle, who works in construction, gifted him an antique side table, the thought of restoration was foremost on his mind.

Alistar learned some of his restoration techniques in woodworking class at school. Along the way, he has found that in woodworking, being

resourceful and flexible takes you far. Trial and error and patience get you the best results.

Knowing that the first step in any project is safety, Alistar begins on his current project by carefully removing paint samples to test, not once, but twice, and in many spots to make sure he is not exposing himself or others to the dangers of lead. Once clear of that worry, Alistar moves to researching the piece, finding it to be a French Provincial style side table built by Weiman in the 1950s–1970s. Mixing together glue and sawdust, the corners and slide rails are like new. Using furniture stripper, sanders, and sandpaper, Alistar carefully removes paint, bringing out the original grain of the wood.

Each step in the process of restoration has given Alistar skills that he will continue to build with each future project. So, the next time you are in a thrift store, keep an eye out, you may just see Alistar walking through the store looking at furniture and picturing the beauty of his next project.

Now picture this: it's Minnesota State Fair time, and you are walking into the CHS Miracle of Birth Center. It's hot, it's crowded, BUT there are baby animals, so life is good! Lily, a senior at AFSA, was part of the poultry crew at last year's fair. Her time at the Miracle of Birth Center ignited her passion for her capstone project . . . hatching eggs!

Lily loves working with animals, and her experience at the fair led her to enjoy working with poultry. She knew how to care for chicks outside of the egg but wanted to learn about caring for them before they were hatched. The learning began with 12 chicken eggs and 12 duck eggs. While doing the research, she learned that chickens take 21 days to hatch,

while ducks take 28 days. With the different incubation times, she puts the chicken eggs in one incubator and the duck eggs in another. Lily checks in on the eggs every day, making sure they are safe and developing, and that the temperature and humidity are in check.

Candling eggs was a new experience for Lily. Once a week, she carefully places each egg in the light, checking for veins and signs of movement. Eggs with no growth are removed otherwise, they may burst from gases building up. About 14 days in, she still has 12 chicken eggs but is down to 6 duck eggs. As the big date gets closer, it is just about time for lock down. This is the time when Lily will raise the humidity levels and lock down the incubators. More waiting. Once the chicks hatch, they will be kept at school for about a week before being rehomed to a local farm.

From the experience of the CHS Miracle of Birth Center to the hatching of the eggs, Lily's project has made her realize that taking things slow gets better results and that a hobby farm may just be in her future.

The capstone class has indeed provided a time and space for students to take what they have been learning, create their own projects, and build on their knowledge with a ton of new skills. These projects have led them to the realization that being patient, resourceful, and open to learning will lead them to where



they want to go. Who knows what's next for these three seniors? The sky is definitely not the limit.

afsahighschool.com



Dirty Cars are Headed to AFSA and Coming Out Clean!



Owen Wu-O'Brien, AFSA Student

AFSA Auto is a school-based enterprise that specializes in detailing cars. AFSA Auto was started by a group of high school students as a way to raise money for their FFA activities and Agriculture classes within the school.

The business officially launched in February of 2026. However, planning stages for AFSA Auto started months before with four students that thought a detailing business would be an amazing opportunity.

These founding members brought the idea to the school board and from there the business took off. AFSA Auto has grown from 5 to over 10 dedicated, hardworking student-employees. Take it from James, a staff member of AFSA Auto, "It started out as a learning experience to improve my skills, but I didn't think it would be as popular as it is now".

Students involved with AFSA Auto say that the school-based program encourages them to get good grades and pushes them to work hard. "AFSA Auto has given me motivation to stay on top of my schoolwork and has helped me balance my time with work outside of school," said Natalie.

AFSA Auto prioritizes quality over quantity, making sure your car comes out looking like new. The students have served over 43 customers so far, having raised over \$2,000. With a variety of detailing packages available, and exterior washes coming soon, that number is sure to quickly climb.

If you are interested in being an AFSA Auto customer please go to www.afsak12.com to reserve a spot today.



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Blooming Heights Edible Schoolyard and Outdoor Classroom

Columbia Heights Public Schools

Blooming Heights is a Columbia Heights Public Schools program that uses school garden and nutrition programming to facilitate equitable experiences that engage all the senses, while building the skills and knowledge necessary for cultivating a healthy life and planet.

The Blooming Heights Edible Schoolyard is located behind the Columbia Heights District Center, between the High School and the Family Center, 1440 49th Ave. NE, Columbia Heights. Blooming Heights is within short walking distance from Highland and Valley View elementary schools and Columbia Academy.

We have both ground level garden beds and a number of raised beds for vegetables, fruits, flowers and herbs. In addition to the wide variety of annual vegetables we also grow many perennial fruits: raspberries, strawber-



ries, hardy kiwi, juneberries, honeyberries, gooseberries and currants. There is a small orchard with apple, pear, cherry and plum trees, as well as a pergola with hardy grapevines. We also maintain a pollinator garden filled with native wildflowers and tend a small rain garden.

Programming at Blooming Heights includes learners from all ages from the Early Childhood Family Education program to stu-



dents in grades K-12 and extending into adult enrichment classes. Students in our district start seeds in early spring using grow labs in their classrooms and transplant the seedlings outdoors before the end of the school year.

Student involvement is integral to the upkeep of the garden and they help with planting, weeding, watering, and harvesting. During the summer, our High School Summer Assis-

tants take most of the responsibility for tending the garden. In addition to planting, watering and weeding, and they harvest fruits and vegetables for weekly cooking lessons. Any produce that is not used for cooking is preserved for use by the Family and Consumer Science (FACS) classes during the school year or donated to the local food shelf.

The intentionality of the Blooming Heights mission and guiding principles have allowed the program to refine its assessments to align with these values and to measure program outcomes more deliberately. Blooming Heights stands out as an example of the kind of innovative programming made possible with the support of administrators, teachers, families, students and School Board members.

colheights.k12.mn.us



Hailey Jensen Named the 2025 MAAE Teacher Turn the Key Award Winner!

Continued from Page 15



show examples of the ultrasounds and pieces of this curriculum in my additional resource in my application. This interactive series of tasks kept students excited and invested while fostering critical thinking and accuracy. Similarly, during our animal nutrition unit, students analyzed dog food labels, graded them based on nutritional value, and used their newfound knowledge to design, budget, and market their own dog treats. The project became a class favorite, eventually baking the treats and hosting a taste test judged by local canine celebrities.

Hands-on learning is an essential component of my instructional approach, enriching students' understanding of complex concepts through tactile and practical experiences. In my Introduction to Agriculture class, students manage hydroponic systems as part of a plant science unit, taking responsibility for growing lettuce from seed to harvest. Through this process, they learn about germination, growing media, and hydroponic principles while creating promotional materials to educate others. For students pursuing careers in welding, I developed a project to address a key industry skill gap: blueprint reading. Students create models using simple materials, interpret blueprints as work orders, and bring those plans to life in the shop, preparing them for real-world applications. Additionally, during our poultry unit, students incubate and hatch chicks, exploring concepts such as life cycles and nutrition.

students learn best by interacting or using their hands. While collecting my data throughout the semester, I discovered my students are 10 times more likely to engage in a lesson if I teach using project-based learning versus traditional lecture-based learning.

My enthusiasm for teaching is contagious. If I'm excited about what we're learning, my students are too! Every lesson I teach begins with, "How is this going to connect to your life?" and that's where the magic happens. I see my students giving their best effort because they understand that this is real-life stuff we're diving into.

In my Small Animal Science course, for example, students dove into a canine reproduction unit by studying anatomy, ultrasounds, and gestation timelines to predict the number and birthdate of puppies for our class dog, Paula. I

The project is a highlight for my students because they share what they have learned with our elementary students using our "Traveling Chicken Cart" and leading a lesson for those students. These interactive teaching strategies not only make learning memorable, but also empower students to take ownership of their education, ensuring they leave my classroom with confidence, curiosity, and practical skills.

To provide students with additional hands-on experiences, I have continuously expanded summer agricultural opportunities. Students engage in experiential learning at the Douglas County Fair, working in the FFA barn to teach youth about agricultural products and livestock through interactive activities. Increased participation at the Minnesota State Fair has also been a priority, where students serve as "barnies" in the CHS Miracle of Birth Center, gaining first-hand experience in animal reproduction while educating fairgoers. Additionally, students enrolled in my Summer Ag Class complete their own SAE and internship experiences, engaging directly with industry professionals and strengthening their practical skills.

Leading a group of 34 Osakis travelers on an agricultural exploration of Ireland was an unforgettable and transformative experience. Over the course of 10 days, students engaged in hands-on learning, guided by Irish farmers who shared their expertise in livestock production, crop cultivation, and aquaculture, including strawberries and oyster farming. Students didn't just observe agricultural practices; they participated in them. One particularly impactful experience was visiting a working dairy farm, where students had the opportunity to milk cows, analyze feeding programs, and learn about the differences between Irish and American dairy operations. Seeing firsthand how Irish

farmers maximize efficiency while maintaining sustainability practices broadened students' understanding of global agriculture. Additionally, while visiting an oyster farm on the coast, students harvested and processed oysters, learning about its many uses and complicated harvest. These experiences provided a deeper appreciation for agriculture beyond the United States and helped students make connections between different agricultural industries. Both students and chaperones alike agreed: this was a life-changing journey that expanded their perspectives on the diverse and innovative world of agriculture.

At the heart of my teaching philosophy is a deep commitment to student growth both academically and personally. I strive to create a classroom that fosters connection, engagement, and real-world learning, where students feel supported, challenged, and inspired. Whether through project-based instruction, hands-on experiences, leadership development, or community partnerships, my goal is to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to thrive. Seeing students take ownership of their learning, push beyond their perceived limits, and discover their passions is what makes teaching so rewarding. I am proud of the impact I have made in Osakis, and I look forward to continuing to cultivate meaningful experiences that empower students to succeed in agriculture and beyond.

Congratulations Hailey!

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Ten Educators are 2026 Minnesota Teacher of the Year finalists



Devon Bowker



David Davis



Shannon Dodson



Paige Janorschke



Alli Kildahl

The 2026 Minnesota Teacher of the Year will be chosen from a group of 10 teachers who have been named finalists in the program. An independent selection panel of 22 leaders in the areas of education, business, government and nonprofits selected the finalists from a group of 30 semifinalists. There were 128 candidates for this program year.

The selection panel meets again May 2 to conduct individual interviews with each of the 10 finalists and to cast votes for the 2026 Minnesota Teacher of the Year. For a look at how the selection process works, go to educationminnesota.org/news/awards-and-honors/teacher-of-the-year.

The 2026 Minnesota Teacher of the Year, Linda Wallenberg of Eden Prairie High School in Eden Prairie, will announce this year's honoree at a banquet at the Saint Paul River-Centre May 3.

The 2026 Minnesota Teacher of the Year finalists (listed alphabetically, with school, district, subject and grade[s] taught) are:



- **Devon Bowker**, *Apollo High School*, St. Cloud Area School District, biology, 10-12
- **David Davis**, *Park Spanish Immersion Elementary*, St. Louis Park Public School District, music, K-5

- **Shannon Dodson**, *Somerset Elementary School*, West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Area Schools, fourth grade
- **Paige Janorschke**, *Lincoln Elementary School*, St. Cloud Area School District, fourth grade

- **Alli Kildahl**, *Battle Creek Middle School*, Saint Paul Public Schools, social studies, 6-8
- **Amy Phung**, *Meadowbrook Elementary*, Hopkins Public Schools, kindergarten
- **Isaiah Pritzl**, *Eagan High School*, Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan District, English language arts ELA and AVID, 9 & 12
- **Ricardo Rivera**, *Kennedy Senior High*, Bloomington Public Schools, career and technical education, engineering, manufacturing, and skilled trades, 6-12
- **Sher Unruh-Friesen**, *Glen Lake Elementary*, Hopkins Public Schools, special education, K-6
- **Maria Villavicencio**, *Eden Lake Elementary*, Eden Prairie Schools, third grade

Courtesy of a press release from Education Minnesota



Amy Phung



Isaiah Pritzl



Ricardo Rivera



Sher Unruh-Friesen



Maria Villavicencio



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Hamline University congratulates alumnae nominated for 2026 Minnesota Teacher of the Year

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Linda “Wally” Wallenberg is One of Five Finalists for National Teacher of the Year!



Eden Prairie Schools

Linda Wallenberg, the 2025 Minnesota Teacher of the Year, has been named one of five finalists for the 2026 National Teacher of the Year! Because she is the first-ever Minnesota Teacher of the Year from Eden Prairie, this is also the very first time we have ever had

a national finalist.

Wallenberg — known affectionately as “Wally” by her students — has taught English at Eden Prairie High School for nearly 50 years. Her selection as a national finalist highlights Minnesota’s long and distinguished history in the National Teacher of the Year program. Minnesota is tied for third nationally in the number of National Teachers of the Year produced, with four — a reflection of the state’s enduring commitment to excellence in teaching and learning.

“This is a moment of tremendous pride for Minnesota and for Linda,” said Dr. Heather Campbell and Jennifer Niemi, co-chairs of the Minnesota Teacher of the Year Program, in a joint statement. “Linda represents the very best of our profession — deep expertise, unwavering commitment to students and a belief that teaching is ultimately about helping young people discover who they are and who they can become. To see her recognized on the national stage is both fitting and inspiring.”

For decades, Wally has inspired countless students to follow their dreams, and many to become teachers themselves. “As educators,

we know what magic in a classroom looks like. Students come alive, ideas flow and the energy is palpable,” said Dr. Jaysen Anderson, principal at Eden Prairie High School. “That happens in ‘Wally’s’ class every day. After half a century of teaching, she continuously shows up with the same enthusiasm and excitement as year one. There’s a reason her students remember her for a lifetime. What’s even more extraordinary is how she remembers nearly every one of the thousands of learners she has connected with — her endless collection of photos of students long since graduated is a living testimonial of her belief of ‘one student at a time; one comma at a time.’”

“In every lesson she leads, in every student she supports, in every colleague she champions, she reminds us of what exceptional education looks like,” said Superintendent Dr. Josh Swanson. “We could not be prouder and more excited that people across America will get to see the spark she ignites through her passion for education and her devotion to raising our next generation to be innovative creators, critical thinkers, strong collaborators and unparalleled communicators.”

The National Teacher of the Year finalists were selected from a cohort of Teachers of the Year from all 50 states, U.S. extra-state territories, the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense Education Activity. From that group, the National Teacher of the Year is chosen by an independent selection committee, comprised of representatives of national K-12 education organizations. Each finalist advanced to the final round of interviews in Washington, D.C., in early March. The 2026 National Teacher of the Year will be announced later in the spring.

You’ve made us so proud, Wally. Eagle Nation is rooting for you!

www.edenpr.org



Dr. Lisa Sayles-Adams Named 2026 Minnesota Superintendent of the Year



The Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA) has named Dr. Lisa Sayles-Adams, Superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS), the 2026 Minnesota Superintendent of the Year.

“We are honored to recognize Dr. Lisa Sayles-Adams as the 2026 Minnesota Superintendent of the Year,” said MASA Executive Director Dr. Deb Henton. “Dr. Sayles-Adams is working to rebuild trust and stability in one of Minnesota’s largest and most diverse districts. Her vision and commitment to literacy

and community engagement are transforming MPS and setting a new standard for educational leadership.”

Rebuilding Trust and Stability in Minneapolis Public Schools

Since being appointed superintendent in 2024, Dr. Sayles-Adams has led MPS through a period of positive change marked by enrollment growth, renewed public confidence, and improved academic outcomes. During her first 100 days, she focused on listening and learning – visiting more than 50 schools and hosting seven community listening sessions. This outreach built a foundation of trust and a shared vision that continues to guide Dr. Sayles-Adams’ collaboration with the school board, staff, and community.

Dr. Sayles-Adams’ collaborative approach has engaged thousands of stakeholders in shaping the district’s future. Between December 2024 and March 2025, a district-wide caregiver survey drew more than 7,100 responses – representing 35 percent of MPS families – and guided decisions on academics, school climate, mental-health supports, and other programming. This process reflects Dr. Sayles-Adams’ belief that inclusive engagement builds lasting trust. The collective vision that emerged is guiding efforts to return Minneapolis Public Schools to a destination district.

Advancing Literacy Through Systemwide Alignment

To ensure every student receives the early literacy instruction they deserve, Dr. Sayles-Adams ushered in the districtwide implementation of the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) Foundational Skills Curriculum. This move consolidated many disparate reading programs into one evidence-based, science-of-reading-aligned curriculum across all 44 elementary schools. The system’s powerful progress-monitoring platform provides teachers with “just-in-time” data every five days, allowing them to adjust instruction immediately based on student performance.

By pairing this initiative with intensive professional development and frequent progress monitoring, Minneapolis Public Schools achieved rapid results: in one Northside school, the percentage of kindergarten students from low-income households on track for grade-level reading rose from 15% to 45% in a single year.

Community-Driven Leadership and Fiscal Stewardship

Dr. Sayles-Adams’ tenure is defined by her belief that transparency and accountability strengthen public education. Under her leadership, MPS has utilized priority-based

budgeting, a clear and accessible process that aligns financial decisions with the district’s strategic plan and school board priorities.

Through regular appearances on community radio stations, a multi-channel digital media strategy, and the MPS Voices podcast, Dr. Sayles-Adams and MPS connect directly with families to share updates and address community questions. The district’s “We Are MPS” media campaign has helped rebuild public trust and reclaim its narrative by highlighting the many successes of students and staff.

In 2024, Dr. Sayles-Adams’ efforts contributed to the successful passage of an increase to the district’s technology levy, which freed general education funds and improved the district’s long-term financial outlook. Simultaneously, MPS achieved its lowest licensed staff vacancy rate in nearly a decade (1.27%), ensuring consistent, high-quality instruction for students.

A Legacy of Service and Equity-Driven Leadership

Dr. Sayles-Adams brings nearly 30 years of experience as a teacher, principal, and district leader. She began her career in Minneapolis Public Schools, later serving as

Continued on Page 26



Anoka-Hennepin Assistant Principal Nicki Magaard Wins National Award



The Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA) is proud to announce that Nicki Magaard, Assistant Principal at Wilson Elementary School in Anoka-Hennepin Schools, has been named Minnesota's recipient of the National Outstanding Assistant Principal Award, presented by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP).

Magaard, now in her fourth year as assistant principal at Wilson Elementary, is widely celebrated for her transformational leadership, strategic systems thinking, and deeply human-centered approach to supporting students, staff, and families.

"Nicki's leadership embodies the powerful impact an assistant principal can have on a school community," said Michelle Krell, MESPA Executive Director. "Her work not only strengthens instructional practices and student outcomes, but also builds a culture where staff feel empowered, students feel seen, and families feel deeply connected to their school. MESPA is honored to recognize her extraordinary contributions to the profession."

A Leader Who Elevates Collective Efficacy and Student Achievement

One of Magaard's most significant accomplishments has been leading Wilson Elementary's Collective Efficacy Cycles, a research-based, collaborative model inspired by John Hattie's work, designed to accelerate student learning and strengthen professional practice. These cycles have resulted in measurable and impressive gains, particularly in reading fluency and writing proficiency.

Magaard's intentional focus on staff voice, systems refinement, and celebration created a building-wide culture of high expectations and continuous improvement. She also led the development of Wilson's "Level Up" recognition theme to ensure staff accomplishments were acknowledged and amplified, fostering positivity and connection schoolwide.

Championing Whole-Child Support and Positive School Culture

Magaard's leadership in schoolwide behavior systems has also been transformative. She developed a tiered behavior matrix, clarifying expectations and strengthening consistent support for students. She revamped Wilson's behavior committee into a Behavior Implementation Team, focused on implementing evidence-based strategies with fidelity and reducing student referrals.

Recognizing the need for a more effective skill-building space, she helped design and launch the GROW Zone (Greatness Requires Ongoing Work)—a behavior triage and intervention center ensuring students receive targeted support while maximizing time in the classroom.

Her work also includes expanding SEL programming, such as:

- A thriving Check In/Check Out mentoring program with 21 staff volunteers supporting 23 students
- Building-wide regulation stations with calming and movement activities
- A Whirlwind of Wow positive referral system reinforcing expectations and strengthening home-school partnerships through personal phone calls home

Innovator Beyond Her School's Walls

Magaard's leadership extends across the district. She identified the need for robust collaboration among assistant principals and created a districtwide Professional Learning Community (PLC) for elementary assistant principals in Anoka-Hennepin. This monthly PLC—built on survey data, shared leadership, and structured professional development—now serves as a key district investment in growing and supporting future principals.

A Well-Deserved Honor

Magaard was recognized by MESPA at the Mespys Awards Banquet on February 5th. She will also represent Minnesota in the NAESP National Outstanding Assistant Principal celebration in July in Orlando, Florida. Her accomplishments exemplify the excellence, innovation, and heart that define outstanding educational leadership.

Courtesy of the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association

wilson.ahschools.us



Dr. Rhoda Mhiripiri-Reed Receives Kay E. Jacobs Memorial Award



The Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA) has named Dr. Rhoda Mhiripiri-Reed, Superintendent of Hopkins Public Schools, as the recipient of the 2026 Kay E. Jacobs Memorial Award. The award is presented annually to a female administrator who has demonstrated exceptional leadership, a strong commitment to students, and active involvement in MASA. Dr. Mhiripiri-Reed was honored during the 2026 MASA Spring Conference, held March 19-20, 2026.

Dr. Mhiripiri-Reed has served as Superintendent of Hopkins Public Schools for nine

years, leading a large, diverse district through periods of positive change, growth and even disruption. Her leadership is grounded in coherence, belonging, and consistency, ensuring that strategy, instruction, operations, and culture are aligned to best meet the needs of students and staff. Under her leadership, Hopkins Public Schools launched its Vision 2031 strategic plan, advanced a rigorous and inclusive instructional framework, expanded immersion and innovative programming, and successfully passed two major bond referendums that strengthened school safety and facilities.

A defining aspect of Dr. Mhiripiri-Reed's leadership is her deep commitment to mentorship and leadership development. She has intentionally invested in developing principals, district leaders, aspiring superintendents and sitting superintendents through coaching, modeling, and shared problem-solving. By fostering environments where leaders can reflect honestly, learn from challenges, and grow professionally, she has helped cultivate a strong pipeline of educational leaders within and beyond her district.

Beyond her district, Dr. Mhiripiri-Reed has been actively engaged in MASA and statewide leadership efforts. She served on the AMSD Executive/Legislative Committee, as Region 9 Superintendent Representative to the MASA

Board of Directors, and currently as a Coach for the MASA Aspiring Superintendents Academy.

Dr. Mhiripiri-Reed's commitment to service extends into the broader community through additional board service (Black Men Teach, Education Evolving, St. David's, and VocalEssence) and partnerships that strengthen relationships between schools, families, and civic organizations. She believes strong school districts are built on a shared commitment for all students to reach success, transparent communication, and creating future-forward, resilient schools and school leaders.

Prior to the superintendency, Dr. Mhiripiri-Reed held senior leadership roles in several large school districts across the country. She served as Associate Superintendent for Monterey Peninsula Unified School District in California, where she supported district turnaround efforts, strengthened instructional infrastructure, and built leadership capacity in schools serving low-income student populations. She also served as Director of Leadership Development for District of Columbia Public Schools, where she designed and led principal preparation and leadership development for principals of 100+ schools.

Earlier in her career, Dr. Mhiripiri-Reed served as Principal of Champlin Park High School in Anoka-Hennepin Schools and

Assistant Principal at Kennedy High School in Bloomington Public Schools. She began her administrative career in Saint Paul Public Schools, serving as a teacher and administrative intern at Highland Park Junior High. Across these various roles, Dr. Mhiripiri-Reed's work has focused on listening to students, building equity-driven structures and systems, and developing effective teachers and school leaders as key levers toward academic excellence.

The Kay E. Jacobs Memorial Award was established in 1983 in honor of Kay E. Jacobs, an outstanding young administrator of many achievements who died in a car accident in 1979. At the time of her death, Ms. Jacobs was the assistant superintendent for the Mahtomedi Schools and had been selected through a national screening process to participate in the Superintendents' Work Conference at Teachers College, Columbia University. The award recognizes women administrators who exemplify leadership, service, and professional involvement early in their careers, as Kay Jacobs did.

Courtesy of The Minnesota Association of School Administrators

hopkinsschools.org



Three Minnesota Principals Named Finalists for the National Distinguished Principal Award



Three outstanding Minnesota elementary school leaders have been named finalists for the National Distinguished Principal Award presented by the National Association for Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA). This award recognizes exceptional leadership, commitment to student success, and lasting impact on school communities. The finalists are:

- **Derek Bell**, Principal of Sweeney Elementary in Shakopee Public Schools
- **Mary Holmberg**, Principal of Richmond Elementary and John Clark Elementary in the ROCORI School District
- **Denise Schnabel**, Principal of Ramsey Elementary in the Anoka-Hennepin School District

Each finalist demonstrates a deep commitment to academic excellence, inclusive school culture, and collaborative leadership.

Derek Bell, Principal of Sweeney Elementary, Shakopee Public Schools

Derek Bell was selected as a finalist for his intentional focus on student well-being and proactive systems of support. Under his leadership, Sweeney Elementary has strengthened its culture and climate through innovative approaches such as the creation of a Student Advocate role and the expansion of relationship-based behavioral supports. Bell's work emphasizes trust, collaboration, and shared ownership, resulting in improved student engagement, reduced behavior referrals, and a

more inclusive learning environment for students, staff, and families.

sweeney.shakopee.k12.mn.us

Mary Holmberg, Principal of Richmond Elementary and John Clark Elementary, ROCORI School District

Mary Holmberg was named a finalist for her strong instructional leadership and ability to align systems across the two schools she leads. Holmberg has led sustained academic growth through a data-driven MTSS framework, earning Richmond Elementary national recognition for student achievement. Her leadership is also marked by intentional family and community engagement, cultivating partnerships that foster student belonging, staff collaboration, and a shared sense of pride across both school communities.

www.rocori.k12.mn.us

Denise Schnabel, Principal of Ramsey Elementary, Anoka-Hennepin Schools

Denise Schnabel was selected as a finalist for her transformative leadership and commitment to equity and whole-child support. Schnabel has led large, diverse school communities through periods of significant change by strengthening instructional practices, expanding social-emotional

learning systems, and ensuring students' basic needs are met through strong community partnerships. Her work centers on empowering staff, building trust, and creating structures that support both academic growth and student well-being.

ramsey.ahschools.us

"These three finalists exemplify what it means to lead with purpose, courage, and heart," said Michelle Krell, Executive Director. "Each of them has created learning environments where students are supported academically, socially, and emotionally, and where staff and families feel valued as true partners. Their leadership reflects the very best of our profession, and we are proud to celebrate their impact on students and school communities across Minnesota."

The National Distinguished Principal Award honors principals who set high standards for instruction, foster collaborative school cultures, and make a lasting difference in the lives of children. The final step of the application process is the interview by a panel of their peers representing all twelve regions of Minnesota. One finalist will be selected to represent Minnesota at the national level in October, 2026.

Courtesy of the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association

Sayles-Adams 2026 Minnesota Superintendent of the Year Continued from Page 24

a principal in Clayton County, Georgia, and Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS). She then held assistant superintendent roles first at SPPS and later in North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale before becoming superintendent of Eastern Carver County Schools. She became superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools in February 2024.

Dr. Sayles-Adams' honors include the MASA Kay E. Jacobs Memorial Award (2023), Minnesota School Public Relations Association Champion of Communications Award (2023), and Rotary Club of St. Paul Education Forward Awards (2017 & 2018).

Her statewide and national service includes leadership roles with the American Association of School Administrators, Council of Great City Schools, Minnesota Association

of School Administrators Board of Directors, Association of Metropolitan School Districts, Generation Next (Co-Chair), Achieve Twin Cities, and the Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board.

"It is a honor to receive this award, and I am humbled by the recognition," shared Dr. Sayles-Adams. "I have the best job and it is a privilege to work in partnership with brilliant and committed colleagues to support our students and staff each and every day."

Courtesy of The Minnesota Association of School Administrators

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