



Learning In A Pandemic

A Report to the Shareholders of Stillwater Area Public Schools



Stillwater
AREA PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Dear Shareholders,

Schools look very different this year than in previous years. Our students are learning both at home and in the classroom, and their smiling faces are often covered behind cloth masks. Our teachers, counselors and administrators are working harder than ever before to engage kids and keep them learning. More custodians are at work in our schools to keep them clean. Our nutrition services staff are serving up meals to go. And our school nurses and health staff are spending long hours tracing contacts in an attempt to slow the spread of COVID-19.

And yet, for all that is different, the most important parts of school remain unchanged. Each day - whether in person or online - our students are being greeted by teachers and staff who care deeply about them. They have access to high-quality instruction and they're taking part in fun and engaging lessons and activities. Despite the challenges of educating kids during a pandemic, our teachers are still teaching and our students are still learning!

The creation of something brand-new rarely comes quickly or without missteps, and our venture into pandemic learning has been no different. There have been some big challenges along the way and times when we have had to hope for the best during some very complex circumstances.

Throughout this process, the amount of grace, understanding and support that our community has exhibited has been nothing short of amazing. Once again, the people of this Valley have come together to care for our kids and the adults who serve them.

We're very proud to release this year's shareholders' report, which celebrates the many people in our community who have come alongside us to support students in our schools. Through unique partnerships, individual efforts and large-scale initiatives, these people continue to make a positive difference in the lives of our students.

On behalf of the entire Stillwater Area Public Schools' staff, I thank you for your partnership and support.

Malinda Lansfeldt
Superintendent Malinda Lansfeldt

TABLE of CONTENTS

3

It Takes Commitment

4-5

It Takes Flexibility

6-7

It Takes Compassion

8-9

It Takes An Investment

10-11

It Takes A Valley



It Takes **COMMITMENT**

Portrait of a Stillwater Student: Behind the Masks

Don't let the masks or computer screens fool you. Just because our classrooms look differently this year doesn't mean quality learning isn't still happening. We are as committed as ever to ensuring our students continue to learn and grow during the pandemic.

- We're still providing the same content to our students; our teachers are just finding new ways to deliver it.
- We're still committed to our strategic plan; if anything, the pandemic has prepared our students for the real world better than any classroom experience could have.

stillwaterschools.org/our-district/strategic-plan

The Portrait of A Graduate In Action

As part of our strategic plan, we've worked with the community to develop a portrait of what we want and expect of our graduates. This year, the five attributes we've identified seem more relevant than ever:



Collaborator: Students are connecting in new ways with teachers and classmates.



Critical Thinker: Students are processing change and thinking deeply as they adapt and adjust.



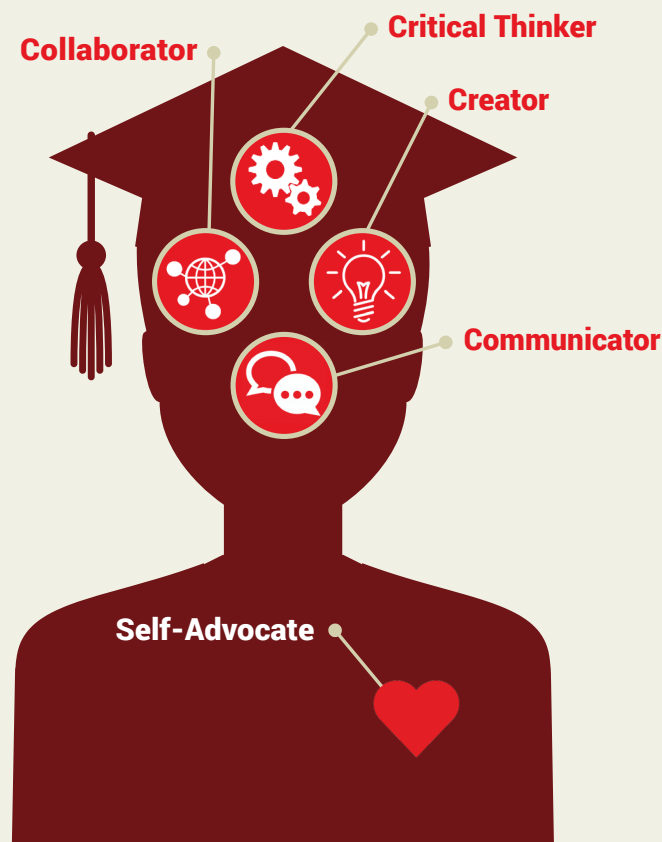
Creator: Students are finding creative ways to stay engaged with one another and with school.



Communicator: Students are learning to communicate in a variety of ways and across a multitude of platforms.



Self-Advocate: Students are becoming more independent and flexible, and learning to ask for help when needed.



It Takes **FLEXIBILITY**

Evolution of Learning In a Pandemic

When Governor Walz closed down all Minnesota schools in March 2020, our teachers and administrators had just days to design a completely new education system. All learning was moved online and teachers had to recreate their lessons for a virtual platform. District staff scrambled to find devices for kids without access. Families had to figure out how to balance work, school and life from the confines of their living rooms and kitchens. The first few weeks of distance learning were messy, to say the least. But our teachers learned a lot, and by the time a new year began in August, things looked significantly different.

Our New Normal: Learning On The Dial

When school began again this fall, it wasn't just students who were expected to learn. Teachers across the district have embarked on an entirely new way of educating students. They've had to redesign the way they deliver instruction, adjust to new safety protocols and for many, figure out how to be in two places at once - teaching students both in-person and virtually.

The district's goal was to get students back in school learning alongside their classmates in the safest way possible. The On The Dial Learning model was created to do just that. It includes three modes: In-Person, Hybrid and Distance.

Students began the year in a Hybrid Learning mode, which had them attending school in-person two days a week and learning from home three days a week. Only half of the students were in the school at any time, which allowed for better physical distancing. By Thanksgiving, students moved into Distance Learning, receiving all of their instruction virtually. In February and March the district began to slowly roll out an In-Person Learning model with all students in school together every day.

"I think the reality of what goes into the pivot of an A, B and a C model may be lost on many," said Crista Walsh, a district parent. "I know how much the teachers miss the kids and how hard they are all working to create those relationships and make those personal connections. This is all new for everyone and we're all in this together."

Learn more about the On The Dial Learning Models online at hub.stillwaterschools.org.



Pandemic Timeline

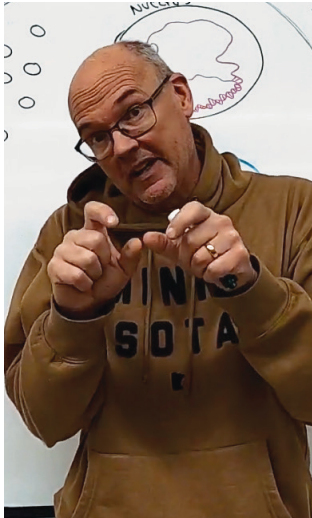
- **March 18, 2020** - Governor Walz mandates closing of all Minnesota schools
- **March 30, 2020** - Begin Distance Learning through end of school year
- **Sept 8, 2020** - Begin new school year in Hybrid Learning
- **Nov 16, 2020** - Grades 6-12 move to Distance Learning
- **Nov 30, 2020** - Grades preK-5 move to Distance Learning
- **Jan 6, 2021** - PreK returns to school
- **Jan 27, 2021** - Grades K-2 move to In Person Learning
- **Feb 10, 2021** - Grades 3-5 move to In Person Learning
- **March 1, 2021** - Grades 6-8 move to In Person Learning
- **March 8, 2021** - Grades 9-12 move to In Person Learning

In Their Words

"This district has knocked it out of the park, in every single way. Nothing is perfect right now for anyone, anywhere. This is hard for everyone, and we as families only understand a fraction of the challenges you have and are facing. But you have risen to the challenge in impressive and truly incredible ways. There is so much to be proud of!"

– Comment posted on [Facebook.com/Stillwater834](https://www.facebook.com/Stillwater834)

A New Reality: Learning From Home



A Teacher Perspective:

Most students sign up for Andy Weaver's biology courses because of the reputation they have for being a little messy, a little goofy, and a whole lot of fun. Andy's courses usually include hours outside setting live traps and banding animals, caring for baby falcons or raising tiny trout. So when his courses moved to an entirely online environment, not even Mr. Weaver himself knew quite what to expect.

"It's been quite the learning experience," said Andy Weaver. "Taking a hands-on, field study course and moving it online felt nearly impossible when I started planning for it this summer."

The biggest challenge, he says, is trying to keep students engaged in the subject of biology while watching their teacher do all of the fun stuff on a video. Andy spends most of his days lugging gear into the Environmental Learning Center behind the high school and filming himself on a GoPro Camera. He captures video of himself engaging in various activities, then returns to his classroom to edit it all into segments for his students to watch online. He says nature TV shows like "Alone" have inspired him.

"If someone can survive for 100 days in the woods all alone and film it all for us to watch, I should be able to make a video to teach my students," he said.

A Student Perspective:

For Milan Jostes, a senior at Stillwater Area High School, the flexibility of online learning has helped him keep up with his school work all while training for the United States Speedskating Championship. Jostes has been able to take his learning with him on the road this year as he's trained for and competed in both the US Junior Championships and the US Championships in Salt Lake City.

Jostes is one of about 1,200 students across the district learning in a completely online environment this year. The majority of families choosing online learning cited health and safety concerns as their main reason, but many also say they appreciate the flexibility it offers their families. Some students who are self-directed, motivated and independent have found they thrive in an online space.

District staff are working to develop online options for families, even beyond the pandemic.

"COVID is giving us the freedom to experiment and adapt to find even more ways to support our kids," said Dr. Jennifer Cherry, assistant superintendent.

25%

*of students in the district
have chosen online learning
this year*.*

**The state required school districts to
provide a fully online option to
any student who chooses it
during the 2020-2021
school year.*



The Cost of COVID

COVID-19 relief packages from the federal and state government helps, but doesn't solve funding woes resulting from the pandemic

The district received approximately \$2 million in one-time COVID relief funding this year.

The funds have been used to purchase things like cleaning supplies, personal protective equipment, Chromebooks and internet Hotspots for students to support at-home learning. It's also helping pay for additional teachers, custodians and support staff that have been hired for one year only to support both On The Dial and 100% Online learning.

Despite the additional funds, Stillwater (like district's across the state) anticipates it will have to deficit spend this year and dip into its fund balance to help cover the added costs of operating during a pandemic.

Did You Know?

The biggest ongoing financial challenge of the pandemic is the loss of more than 270 students and nearly \$3 million in funding.

It Takes **COMPASSION**

Staff go to great lengths to connect with students

It's not always easy to engage a student in learning when they're in the classroom (remember that one kid that always fell asleep in class?) So imagine how much more difficult it is to get students to show up to learn virtually, from their bedroom or living room.



Teachers, school counselors and administrators are working harder than ever to ensure students are showing up to learn. While the majority of students consistently log on for distance learning, there are some students who don't. Staff have made phone calls at all hours of the day, sent extra emails, and even visited students and families at their homes, all in an effort to connect and engage with all kids and reach the hard to reach.

"We are continuously sending emails, posting messages in Schoology, making phone calls to parents," said Emily May, a Stillwater Middle School counselor. "Sometimes a different person calling, or a different time of day or a different phone number and you get lucky and you're able to reach someone and get that connection back. We're learning how to connect with students and families in a different way"

But simply getting a student to tune into an online class isn't enough. Teachers are going to great lengths to ensure kids are actively participating in their learning on the other side of the screen as well. Kindergarten teachers are hosting dance parties. Middle school teachers are conducting virtual dissections. And high school teachers have created small groups where students are using Snapchat or group texts to talk about the books they're reading or work together to solve a math equation.

"Our teachers' efforts to reach and connect with our students even in distance learning has been nothing short of awesome," said Rob Bach, Stillwater Area High School principal. "I think our teachers have internalized the idea of connection with students above and beyond the content that they are responsible for."

Going beyond reading and writing to address mental health

Ask a doctor, teacher, parent or student what their top concern is for children in the pandemic and you'll likely hear about students' emotional wellness and mental health. It's no secret that COVID-19 has resulted in isolation and contributed to anxiety and depression in kids and adults alike. But one good side effect, according to some Stillwater teachers, is that mental health stigma is declining and conversation is increasing. Across the district, students and teachers are getting real about mental health and honestly talking about its impact.

"Students are more openly discussing mental health and I'm really glad to see that," said Claire Henning, a high school English teacher. "Some students are willing to be more open. They see me at home. In my sweatshirt. Holding up my puppy and they see 'this is a real person here.' There is a person-to-person connection [in virtual learning] that you don't see in our school building otherwise. It's been very humanizing."

Students are meeting with staff one-on-one, having conversations with peers in small groups, and even attending special informational sessions to openly discuss their own emotional well-being. Families, too, have been more willing to reach out to district staff to share concerns and ask for help.

"We're in their living rooms or across the kitchen table from them everyday," said Tara Tuchel, a speech/language pathologist in the Early Childhood program. "We've created these really personal connections not just with the kids, but with their entire family. I know families better than I ever have and understand the challenges and struggles they have. Whenever I can, I try to offer support and help them find resources."



Concerned About Your Child?

Visit our website at stillwaterschools.org/services/mental-health for lists of local resources, crisis phone numbers, and school district support staff.

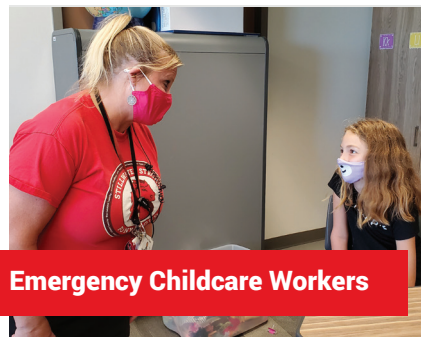
Heroes Of The Pandemic

Everyone in our district - from our childcare workers and custodians to our teachers and principals - have had to completely redefine their jobs this year. They've had to take on new responsibilities, learn new skills, and adapt and adjust to new rules and expectations. Here's just a very small sample of what they've been asked to do. Yet, they've done it all with a smile; often putting their own needs aside to ensure the needs of their students were being met. Thank you to our Stillwater Area Superheroes!



Custodians

Took on additional cleaning and sanitizing duties to keep our schools safe, and helped stage classrooms and common spaces to ensure physical distancing.



Emergency Childcare Workers

Provided free emergency childcare to essential workers throughout the year, serving on the front lines at the height of the pandemic.



Health Services Staff

Worked nights and weekends to trace individuals exposed to COVID and helped families, students and staff navigate quarantines, testing and other COVID-related issues.



Nutrition Services Staff

Distributed free meals to kids both at school and at home, serving from the back of buses and on tables outside school buildings. They even filled in as custodians and childcare workers to help meet needs districtwide.



Paras and Teachers

Developed creative new ways to engage students whether learning online or in school. Made extra phone calls, sent extra email and even visited students at home to ensure they were learning.



Support Staff and Administrators

Kept our schools operating while constantly adjusting to new guidelines and recommendations from the state and federal government



“After COVID-19 shutdown schools, meals were delivered to families in need via school bus. My daughter and I saw the bus up the street. One of the women delivering meals saw us and yelled, “Do you need a meal?” She didn’t know exactly how old my daughter was, whether she attended Oak-Land, or even whether she was part of District 834. She just saw a kid who might be in need. I’ve reflected on that often. And when I do, I also think about what Mr. Rogers always said, “Look for the helpers.” They are certainly out there. And they are the best of us.”

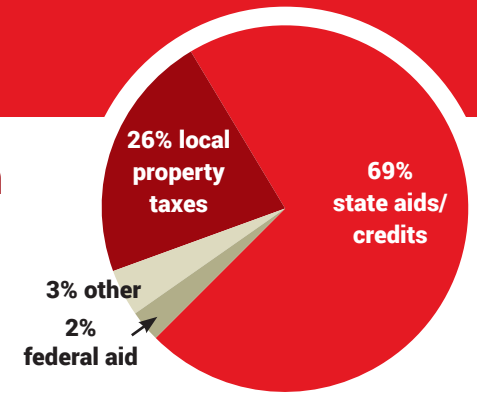
— David LaVaque,
Oak-Land Middle School parent

It Takes an INVESTMENT



Where our money comes from

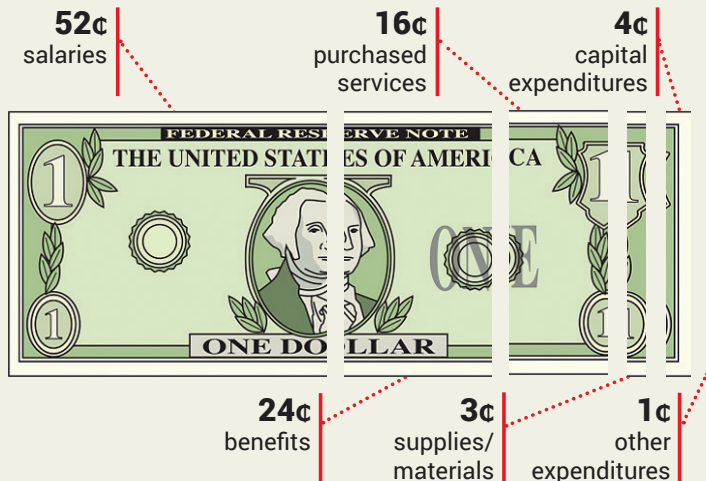
In Minnesota, public schools are largely financed by the state. During the 2019-2020 school year Stillwater schools received 68 percent of its general fund revenue from state aid and credits. Local property owners also contribute to schools through local levies.



17 years in a row! The district has received the Certificate of Excellence in Financial Reporting from the Association of School Business Officials every year since 2004.

Where a dollar goes

We're committed to investing our limited resources in ways that benefit all of our students. As a service organization, the majority of money from our general fund is spent on people. We invest in outstanding employees who are focused on helping our students succeed.



76% of our general fund is invested in quality staff
All data included on pages 10 and 11 is based on audited 2019-2020 financials. More information is available at stillwaterschools.org/our-district/budget-finance.

A History of Community Support

Taxpayers in the Stillwater Area Public School District have a history of supporting our students and our schools through voter-approved operating referendums.

Nearly all Minnesota districts have local operating levies in place. With more than a quarter of our funding coming from local property taxes, our district (like others around the state) depends on this local support to operate schools and maintain educational programs for students.

by **2021** Renew 2013 operating levy

2015 Approved \$97.5 million bond for new construction and building improvements

2013 Renewed \$11 million operating levy (originally approved in 2007), and added a \$5.2 million operating levy to address budget shortfalls and support a portion of the Bridge to Excellence plan.

Time to Reinvest

Time is running out on the district's existing operating levy. The current operating levy, which generates about \$12 million in annual funding, will expire next year. If a new levy is not approved by November 2021, the district will be out that money and would face significant budget cuts for the 2021-2022 school year and beyond.

What The Expiring Levy Pays For?

The current levy has helped to stabilize funding for the past 8 years, allowing us to maintain many of our programs and staff. We've also used levy dollars to create several new opportunities for our students - from language immersion to 6th and 9th grade orientation programs.

But A Straight Levy Renewal Isn't Enough

Even with our current levy in place, the district has had to make budget cuts in 3 of the last 8 years - totaling \$7 million. That's because we rely on state funding to pay our bills, but that funding hasn't kept pace with inflation. The difference between the state's annual formula allowance and the inflation adjusted formula allowance is more than \$500 per student - the equivalent of nearly \$4 million in lost revenue to our schools. (see chart at right).



So what do we do?

To ward off future budget cuts, and continue to provide the support our students need, the school board may choose to ask voters to provide additional revenue to help make up the funding gap. In addition to a levy renewal, the board could take advantage of one or both of the following options to increase revenue:

Increase the operating levy

We are currently receiving \$530 per student less than the cap allowed by the state, which means the district could ask for as much as \$5 million in additional revenue as part of an operating levy.

Approve a capital projects levy for technology

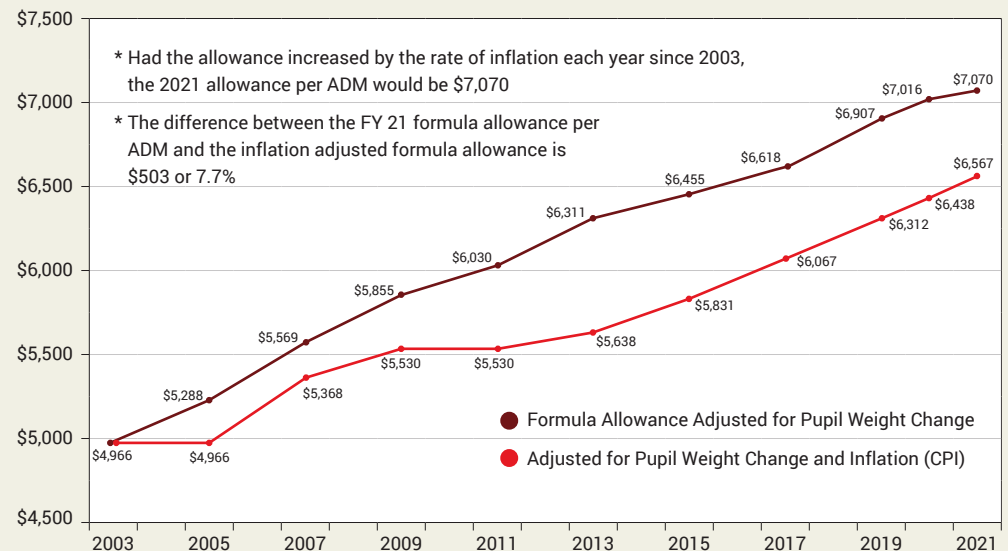
We are one of only a handful of districts in the metro without a dedicated source of funding for technology. A tech levy would provide dedicated funds for devices, infrastructure and even technology staffing - freeing up about \$2.8 million in our general fund to reinvest in programs for our students.

The school board is expected to make a decision on levy priorities in the coming months.

For more information visit stillwaterschools.org/community/referendum

General Education Formula Allowance, 2003-2021

Adjusted for Pupil Weight Change and Inflation (CPI)



Source: MDE June 2020 Inflation Estimates

IT TAKES A VALLEY

The Stillwater Area Public Schools' community shows up for its kids time and time again. During this season of COVID-19, our residents and local businesses have once again poured love and care on our students, staff and families proving that it really does take a VALLEY to do this important work. Our community partners support kids and staff in a variety of ways -from providing funding and volunteers to offering unique learning experiences. Thank you, Pony community, for all you do!

Community comes together to care for kids

Our community continues to support our students, teachers and staff! Residents have donated school supplies, hand-made face masks and more to keep our students safely learning this year.

Elementary schools received 200 "Busy kits" filled with coloring books, crayons, construction paper and fidget toys. Supplies for the kits were donated by Community Thread and the United Way of Washington County-East. The kits help entertain students exhibiting signs of illness while they wait for a family member to pick them up from school.



Community recognizes teachers for all the "extras" this year

Teachers across the district were greeted back to school this fall with hand-written notes of encouragement and packs of Extra chewing gum. The small gifts were donated by members of Shepherd of the Valley Church in Afton as a show of appreciation for all that they are doing to educate and care for our students.

"It means so much to hear the kind words and be thought of during the start of a new school year - especially this year because it is so different!" said Christi Wallace, an Afton-Lakeland teacher. "It makes me feel appreciated and supported by our community!"

Local doctors share advice with teachers and staff

As staff prepared to return to work this fall they had more than the usual first day of school jitters. For many, coming back to school during a pandemic brought about an entirely new set of worries related to their own personal health and safety. So when local health experts from Lakeview Hospital asked how they could help a new partnership was formed!

Volunteer doctors from Lakeview Health met with staff to help them prepare for work in a COVID world. During several "Ask a Doctor" online forums the doctors shared information about the virus and also provided advice on how teachers and other staff can keep themselves safe while working with students. School employees were able to ask questions and engage in discussion with the doctors in a personal and welcoming space.

"The information they shared was very helpful," said one staff member. "They offered some really good ideas and tips and made me feel much more comfortable about returning to work."



Books for kids

Students who chose 100% Online Learning this year received a special gift from the Partnership Plan. As part of its Big Impact Grant, the local education foundation provided funds for each elementary school to purchase books to send home to online students.

In following years, these books will be available at the building level to loan to classrooms in need of books for students.

"Thank you to the Partnership Plan board members for their generous support of literacy in our schools," said Karen Latterell, the district's literacy specialist. "They have done, and continue to do great things for our district!"

Our Community Partners

Some of our partners include: 3M • Andersen Windows • Associated Eye Clinic • Canvas Health • Century College • Northeast Metro 916 • Community Thread • Dia Sorin • Family Means • Greater Stillwater Area Chamber of Commerce • Huntington Learning Center • Islam Resource Center • Kraus-Anderson • Lakeview Hospital • NAPAC • Shepherd of the Valley Church • St. Croix Valley Rec Center • Stillwater Noon Rotary • Stillwater Sunrise Rotary • StoryArk • The Partnership Plan • Twin Cities Orthopedic • United Way Washington County East • Valley Outreach • Washington County • Watermark Church • Woodbury Area Chamber of Commerce • Youth Advantage • Youth Service Bureau • Zephyr Theater

A family that learns together

When Patrick Noland tuned into 5th hour each day during distance learning, he saw an extra smiling face looking back at him from across the screen. Sitting in the background, just over the shoulder of one of his students, was a loving grandmother. Judee Frank, otherwise known as Charlie's Nana, was always quick to lend a hand when needed to ensure Charlie's success in school.

"Charlie was making leaps and bounds academically, socially and emotionally, and he hadn't always had success in school in the past," said Noland, a Project Lead The Way teacher at Oak-Land Middle School. "That is because of Nana. She is putting 5 days a week in with Charlie, putting her life on hold for 6 months to be with him every day in that chair."

The Wiese family, like so many others, have gone to great lengths to ensure their children can keep learning during this turbulent school year. Many caregivers have had to quit their jobs or reduce their hours, hire tutors or nannies, or rely on friends and family members to help support their kids through hybrid and distance learning. They've become teachers and classroom supervisors, helping to balance learning with all the other household activities and job responsibilities on their plate.

"Distance learning has challenged us in ways we never expected, but for me it's been a blessing in disguise because of this time with Charlie," said Nana Frank.

The opportunity to connect with Charlie and Nana virtually has been powerful for Noland as well. In a typical classroom environment, Charlie would compete with dozens of other students for Noland's attention. Online, as students work independently and in small groups, Noland has had more time to work directly with Charlie. He's been able to watch him solve problems on a shared computer screen and see him thinking through the assignments. And he's gotten to know both Charlie and his grandmother and forge a deeper connection.

"It's clear that Nana, Charlie and I were all in it together," said Noland. "It's brought a sense of connection and normalcy to a non-normal situation. It's been a really cool experience."



All hands on deck!

When high numbers of teachers, paras and other staff are out of school due to COVID quarantines, substitutes are often in short supply. Thankfully our amazing administrators are always willing to step in and help wherever they can! Matt Kraft, an assistant principal at Stillwater Area High School, spent several days this fall filling in as a kindergarten teacher at Stonebridge Elementary School. He joked that the students are smaller, but otherwise not really all that different than his high schoolers!

Pony Success Stories from 2019-2020

- 656 SAHS students earned a 3.75 grade point average and above. 137 of those students earned a perfect unweighted GPA of 4.0.
- One student was named a 2020 National Merit Scholarship Finalists. The student was among just 15,000 seniors in the nation to earn the recognition.
- In the COVID shortened 2019-2020 sports season, the high school mountain bike team won its third straight state championship, the wrestling team placed second at state with four individual state champions, while state individual titles were also won in boys diving and girls cross country.
- The Pony Express newspaper earned the International First Place ranking from the Quill and Scroll Journalism Society - one of only 23 high schools in the country.
- The Kabekonian yearbook earned All-State Gold honors from the Minnesota High School Press Association. Two students earned first place awards in the Stylus Literary Magazine.
- The high school's speech and debate team ranked among the top 10 percent of schools nationwide, with one student earning academic all-american and all-state honors.
- A student was named a finalist in the Technical Theatre Excellence program, sponsored by the Hennepin Theatre Trust.



Independent School District 834
1875 South Greeley Street
Stillwater, MN 55082

Non-Profit
U.S. Postage
PAID
Stillwater, MN
#192

ECRWSS
POSTAL PATRON

18 Communities. One District. Thank you for your support!

It Takes A Valley!

Even on the best of our days, our schools rely on many people coming together to support our students. A year into a global pandemic, it's become even more clear that we are all in this together.

It's been a year unlike any other, but our commitment to students has not wavered. Check out the stories inside this report for more examples of how we are all working together as a community for our kids.

Si usted tiene alguna pregunta acerca de esta hoja informativa, pro favor llame a la oficina de su escuela para hablar con un interprete.

INNOVATION IN ACTION

Taking the classroom on the road

When schools closed down and students moved into distance learning this winter, teachers and paraprofessionals in the Transitions program took to the road. They worked with other staff in the district to create a mobile classroom out of a small school bus. Members of the district's technology team equipped the bus with internet hotspots, while staff from the grounds crew constructed desks and learning spaces.

The mobile classroom was able to travel to driveways or parking lots across the district to safely meet with students and support their learning.



651-351-8340 | stillwaterschools.org

