



## SSP junior accepted into prestigious scholars program for high-achieving, underrepresented students

As many South St. Paul Public Schools (SSPPS) students engage in activities away from school during the summer, one SSP junior is undertaking an intensive six-week, college-preparatory summer academy at Amherst College in Boston to help her plan for her future. Earlier this spring, Jenaye Vergin learned that she was one of a select group of students from across the nation accepted into the prestigious SCS Noonan Scholars Program. The mission of SCS Noonan Scholars is to help high-achieving, low-income, underrepresented students get into and graduate from top colleges equipped to achieve their full career potential.



"This is an amazing opportunity for a student like me," Vergin said. "I want to go to the best colleges, ivy-league if possible, but as a low income and minority student, it seems nearly impossible. But looking at the benefits of the program and how it provides me the personal assistance, learning and access, I knew that this program would be the key to my dreams."

According to its website, the SCS Noonan Scholars Program believes that "there should be more high-achieving, underrepresented students graduating from top colleges equipped to achieve their full potential in their chosen career." Many of the country's highest achieving low-income students of color struggle as they transition from high school to college, and many are often first-generation students who have overcome significant challenges. "These scholars are in the best position to have meaningful careers as leaders in the most prominent business and civic institutions across the country."

Vergin believes that she was selected for the program not only because of her commitment to academics — she takes a full IB course load while also earning her associate's degree via online college classes — but also because of her investment and engagement in the community. Among her many extra-curricular activities, Vergin is a leader of SSP Secondary's Black Pride Organization (BPO), the founder of the Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA), and attends Comunidad de Latinos Unidos (CDLU) and Women's Society meetings when she can. She also serves on the Youth Executive Board for Equity Alliance, is involved in the college preparatory program Upward Bound, and numerous other groups.

"All of this I do to contribute to my community and create more opportunities for underrepresented students, along with educating and making our community a more inclusive place for people to come to; something I hope to improve upon with this program," said Vergin. "By preparing myself for higher education with this program and learning from other minorities across the U.S., I hope to use this new knowledge to help me be a better leader here in South Saint Paul."

The SCS Noonan Scholar program stays with students for six years, starting in the spring of their junior year, throughout college, and up until the student secures a professional career. It provides each scholar with personal guidance and opportunities to help them select the best fit and get into high-tier universities, assistance with financial planning, and preparation for life after college. Vergin currently plans to study political science and economics and further her passion for advocacy and leadership.

"I am extremely excited to branch out beyond Minnesota and take steps toward my future and success," Vergin said. "I hope my experience inspires my other peers who struggle to strive for something bigger. All it takes is an enormous amount of hard work."

## Student Leadership Groups

South St. Paul Secondary currently hosts five student affinity groups: Comunidad de Latinos Unidos (CDLU), Black Pride Organization (BPO), Women's Society, Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA) and the Native Youth Leadership Council (NYLC), operated in partnership with Equity Alliance member districts.

The term "affinity group" identifies a group of people linked by a common interest or purpose (e.g., race, gender, religion or special interest). SSP affinity groups provide a safe environment in which member who share a specific identity can come together for building community, empowerment and positive self-awareness.



Native Youth Leadership Council (NYLC)



Black Pride Organization (BPO)

#SSPpride



Comunidad de Latinos Unidos (CDLU)



Women's Society



Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA)



## Davis named 2019 Minnesota Teacher of the Year

In May, **Jessica Davis**, math teacher at South St. Paul Secondary, was the 2019 Minnesota Teacher of the Year. Davis is the 55th recipient of the prestigious award, and the first from South St. Paul Public Schools.

“Being named the Minnesota Teacher of the Year has made me feel validated,” said Davis. “The support that I received from my colleagues, the district and the greater South St. Paul community has been overwhelming, and I am humbled to be amongst such compassionate, caring, principled and reflective engaging people.”



**I hope that the community of South St. Paul and the teachers within our district see this as a recognition for their work as well.**

*- Jessica Davis*

## 2019 Silver Apple Award Recipients

Congratulations to the 2019 South St. Paul Educational Foundation's (SSPEF) Roxanne Bliss Silver Apple Award recipients — **Jessica Splittstoesser**, Lincoln Center first grade teacher nominated by her student Calisi, and **Colleen Volkmann**, Kaposia preschool teacher nominated by her student Garrett.

South St. Paul (SSP) graduate Don Bliss, Class of 1950, established the Silver Apple Award in honor of his wife, Roxanne Waldhauser Bliss, SSP Class of 1951. The award was created to encourage students to appreciate educators or support staff who are especially important to them. Annually in February, SSPPS students are encouraged to nominate a teacher or other employee who makes a significant difference in their lives. Awards are announced and presented in May. Each recipient receives a silver apple commemorating the award as well as a cash stipend.

More information available at [sspef.org](http://sspef.org).



**She is nice. She always says 'I love you.' She also says 'I want you all to be safe.' I miss her if she is gone. She is the best teacher.**

*- Calisi*



**She is teaching me a lot. She cares about me, tells me when I am doing good, and gives hugs and thumbs up when I am doing my job.**

*- Garrett*

# Redesigning the student experience by focusing on the needs of the whole child



The demands of our ever-changing world require a different approach to education than what many of us grew up with. While some of us were able to navigate and find success in that model, many others were not. It has often been said that organizations and systems get the exact outcomes for which they are designed. Unfortunately, our education system was designed for a different time. This concept is not new. For years we have heard the cry to change “how we do school,” but large systems are slow to change. I am proud to say that in South St. Paul we are making strides in redesigning our schools so that we can more fully prepare our students for college, career and citizenship.

Research, practice and common sense confirm that when we take a more holistic approach to education (i.e., a whole-child approach), we are developing and preparing students for current challenges and future opportunities. By addressing students' comprehensive needs through the shared responsibility of students, families, schools and communities, we will see different outcomes that better meet the diverse needs of every student, regardless of their background.

Here in South St. Paul, we believe in this whole-child approach to learning, of promoting wellness while also improving the academic, physical and social-emotional health of each and every student. In order to do so, however, we have to make it a priority in our budget, relooking at how we use our financial, human and training resources. We have taken small steps over the last few years to increase our support on the mental health needs for our kids, including an ongoing partnership with Dakota County that provides mental health support staff at each of our schools. We also have sought ways to improve the physical health of students, understanding that if kids are hungry, they cannot learn. For example, we provide free breakfast to any student that needs it so they can start their day off with a healthy body and mind.

But we can and must do more if we are going to truly support the needs of students, and in turn, see academic growth and learner success. I am pleased that through our budgeting process we were able to begin to redesign and align our resources for 2019-20 to meet better the needs of the whole child. These plans not only echo the recommendations of educational experts, but they also support what we have been hearing from SSP staff and families about what they want to see in our schools.

SSP Schools was the first IB World Schools District in Minnesota. But being first to the table does not necessarily mean you are the best. We believe that in taking a whole-child approach to learning allows us to design the best system that truly prepares students for their next step in a rapidly changing future.

*Dr. Dave Webb*  
Superintendent of Schools







## Comprehensive arts education partnership to help increase access and opportunity to student programming

South St. Paul Public Schools (SSPPS) is one of eight Minnesota school districts chosen as recipients of the 2019-2021 Comprehensive Arts Planning Program provided by the Perpich Center for Arts Education. Minnesota's Comprehensive Arts Planning Program (CAPP) provides assistance to selected public school districts as they design three-year, strategic plans for K-12 arts education programs. CAPP provides financial and technical assistance to support the strategic planning process through workshops, site visits, leadership development, and resource materials.

"We are excited about the opportunity to partner with community and school stakeholders in developing a comprehensive plan for arts education for all of our students," said Superintendent Dave Webb. "The technical assistance and guidance of Perpich Center leadership will help us fulfill our vision of preparing every child for their next step, and uphold our commitment to educating the whole child as part of our district-wide International Baccalaureate (IB) programming."

With the help of this Perpich Professional Development (PPD) program, school districts form a CAPP committee of district and community stakeholders (arts specialists,

administrators, parents, teachers, community members, and students) with an active and wide-ranging interest in the arts and arts education. This CAPP committee has the responsibility to create a comprehensive arts education plan approved by the local school board, the district and the community. They will also ensure alignment with the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in the Arts.

According to Chad Schmidt, SSPPS director of learning, district arts education teachers and IB Curriculum Coordinators will review the current arts education standards and revise curriculum during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years. CAPP will help the district provide educators with professional learning opportunities needed to incorporate the new standards, which the state requires to be fully implemented during the 2021-22 school year.

"With the new Minnesota State Standards approaching, we will be able to appropriately plan for arts education in each school and grade level, forming a clear scope and sequence for our students," said Schmidt. "In addition, we look forward to guiding and supporting students' development of IB Learner Profile characteristics such as being open-minded and reflective, as well as being a thinker, communicator and risk-taker through their interactions and experiences in the arts."

READ MORE at [sspps.org](https://sspps.org).

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## Safe Routes to School grant to improve walking and biking paths for South St. Paul students

South St. Paul Public Schools (SSPPS) students walking and biking to school next year will have some extra support to help make that journey safer thanks to a \$98,600 grant from the Minnesota Department of Transportation's (MnDOT) Safe Routes to School program (SRTS). SSPPS is one of six school districts awarded the SRTS grant this year, out of a total application pool of 12 districts. Safe Routes to School is an international program focused on increasing physical activity, improving health, and reducing traffic congestion around schools by making it safer and easier for students to walk and bike to school.

"Increasing the safety of children walking and biking not only improves health, but school attendance and academic achievement as well," said Dave Cowan, MnDOT Safe Routes coordinator. "Many school districts have a strong desire to support Safe Routes strategies, but limited staff time and resources are challenges. A local coordinator can transform school culture around walking and biking, ensuring more students arrive to school focused and ready to learn."

Such is the case for SSPPS, which will use the grant to hire a part-time district coordinator for the next three years who will work with school staff to implement the district's SRTS plan, developed in 2018. The plan articulates activities in key focus areas — education, engagement, enforcement and engineering — that align with the district's vision to make walking and biking to and around school a safe, comfortable and fun activity for all students and families. This vision is included in each of the district's school SRTS plans and includes a focus on equity considerations to ensure that walking and biking to school is safe, comfortable and convenient for every student, regardless of identity or ability.



"We are thrilled that this grant will help us expand on recent safety efforts and encourage more participation of students walking and biking to school," said Connie Garling-Squire, director of equity and early learning, and district facilitator of the grant application. "As a district, we are always looking for partners and opportunities that help us remove barriers and provide support to our students and families so that they can focus on learning. The SRTS grant is just one more way we can build on these efforts and help improve student health."

Garling-Squire noted the plan will strengthen existing programs, such as parent/school communication, student safety patrols, and the summer safety fair, as well as help implement new programs designed to increase walking and biking participation and safety, such as a bicycle rodeo, a new safety campaign, and walking school buses. In addition, the district plans to engage the larger South St. Paul community in efforts to increase safety, including a community-wide safety campaign, automated speed enforcement around Kaposia Education Center, and infrastructure improvements completed by the City, County and SSPPS to improve walking and biking pathways.

READ MORE at [sspps.org](https://sspps.org).





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**IB LEARNER PROFILE**

As an International Baccalaureate (IB) World Schools District, South St. Paul students and teachers focus on what it means to be a community of learners. Through the IB Learner Profile, our students and staff use a common language to describe and identify behaviors of successful learners.

South St. Paul students strive to be Inquirers, Knowledgeable, Thinkers, Communicators, Principled, Open-Minded, Caring, Risk-Takers, Balanced and Reflective.

