



# Sixtimes

The Official Newsletter of Special School District No. 6



## SSPcares campaign focuses on critical skills to building community and student success

On the first Friday of the 2019-20 school year, the district left a chalkboard outside South St. Paul schools with one simple question...

**What are your HOPES for the school year?**



What resulted were similar messages and sentiments from both students and staff. The majority of staff responses spoke to a hope that students feel cared for, loved and supported. The students hoped for making friends, having fun, learning new skills and feeling connected.

South St. Paul Public Schools (SSPPS) strives to be that safe, welcoming caring space that students and staff hope for, a place where all students have the supports they need to be prepared for their next step.

"While we recognize that we have work to do to help ensure a safe and supportive learning community for all students," said Superintendent Dave Webb, "we remain committed to giving students the best academic experience, while also addressing their diverse social and emotional needs."

This fall the district launched a campaign called #SSPcares with the purpose of demonstrating compassion and empathy at all levels of the organization. "It is our district hope that all members of the SSPPS community — students, staff, families and community members — feel that they are part of a caring learning organization," said Susan Brott, director of communications and facilitator of the SSPcares campaign. "Whether it is through social media, news stories, school events and activities, or simple messages of kindness, we hope the SSPcares campaign encourages everyone in South St. Paul to pause and reflect on how we treat one another and how all voices are respected and valued."



**#SSPcares** is about all of us committing to values that uphold that hope and feeling, as identified in our district's core values:

### COMPASSION

Be kind, fair and just toward all people because of who we are

### INTEGRITY

Do the right thing even when no one is watching, and keep our promises

### EQUITY

Provide equal access to opportunities in academics, student services and activities

### RESILIENCE

Be able to bounce back from challenges and disappointments with confidence and hope

### EXCELLENCE

Strive for the/our best in all we do with high expectations for all

### RESPECT

Honor our similarities and differences in our assumptions, inquiries, words and actions

Throughout the 2019-20 school year the district will be holding events, social media campaigns and other opportunities for all members of the SSP Schools community to show each other how much they care about each other and their commitment to the success of each and every SSPPS student.

Read more about the SSPcares campaign, watch the video at [sspps.org/sspcares](https://sspps.org/sspcares), or join the conversation at **#SSPcares**.



**STAY CONNECTED!**

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# FINANCIAL UPDATES

## District financial audit shows strong fiscal stewardship despite funding challenges

South St. Paul Public Schools received a positive report on its annual financial audit, which was presented to and approved by the School Board in November. Auditors issued an “unmodified opinion” on the district’s financial statements for the 2018-19 school year, which means no corrections were needed and all accounting is in order.

“We appreciate the auditor’s evaluation of our finances and are pleased it affirms our commitment to sound fiscal policies and practices,” said Aaron Bushberger, director of finance. “A clean audit of our financial statements is an indication of fiscal transparency, an important promise we have made with our community.”

## District’s credit rating remains stable, provides positive outlook for financing of new facility

Standard & Poor’s (S & P) Financial Service recently affirmed its AA- underlying and A+ unenhanced rating to South St. Paul Public Schools (SSPPS) for the

**S&P Global**  
Ratings

district’s financing to secure the purchase and renovation of the River Heights Professional Building. The certificates of participation (COPs) will be included in the district’s lease levy, which supports facilities use and maintenance for educational purposes. The positive credit rating keeps South St. Paul Public Schools in the top third of all Minnesota school districts rated by S & P. In its report, S & P cited the district’s support of residents, strong financial reserves, and conservative budgeting practices as key credit strengths.

The stable credit rating will help SSPPS manage the cost of purchasing and renovating the facilities by allowing the district to obtain lower interest rates when it borrows money, as in the case of the lease payments it will make for the River Heights building purchase (see story at right).

## School Board approves annual tax levy, includes smaller increase than originally projected

At its meeting on Monday, December 9, the South St. Paul School Board approved the 2019 payable 2020 tax levy as presented. In September, the Board approved a preliminary levy at the maximum to allow flexibility as it refined its budget and received updated data from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE). However, over the last few months the district was able to reduce the overall increase from the preliminary amount and in turn help ease the burden on property owners.

South St. Paul Public Schools (SSPPS) homeowners will see a 5.83 percent increase on their 2019 Payable 2020 property tax levy, which is considerably less than the increase preliminarily approved by the board in September. While half of the increase is the due to a combination of annual cost increases and new payments for the purchase of the River Heights Professional Building, the other half of the levy increase is the result of rising property values in the community.

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

# Running the bases gets you better solutions



As superintendent I am faced with numerous decisions every day. Some of the worst decisions I have made over the years are the ones I made alone, whereas my best decisions always include input from others. I find relying on the collective wisdom and power of others helps to address these challenges and find more successful solutions. This collective approach is how we operate inside South St. Paul Public Schools (SSPPS).

Recently, it dawned on me that the process we use to help reach sound district decisions is also useful for families and other community teams. And so, I share with you the research-based tips and strategies we use in SSPPS with the hope that you find it helpful to not only make decisions but also to help build relationships and trust.

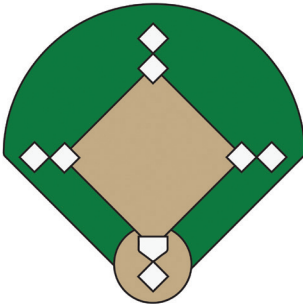
First, it is important to truly name and describe the problem you are trying to solve. What is the issue? Who is involved? What do you hope to achieve with this decision? Often we find ourselves working on solutions to a problem that has not been clearly defined. It is important not to fall victim to the old adage of a “solution in search of a problem.”

Once you’ve defined your problem it is time to find at least one other person to help you and to adhere to agreed-upon ground rules. In SSPPS, we strive to:

- **Avoid put-downs** - Work to stay solution-oriented and avoid being critical of others or their ideas. Be open to new perspectives.
- **Be fully present** - Make every effort to stay in the conversation as you try to address this problem proactively. Work to actively listen to others before answering with your own ideas.

Next, take the time to “run the bases” before arriving at a solution:

- **1<sup>st</sup> base — Get the facts.** Take time to ask, “Do we have all of the information about this problem?” If you don’t, go get it. Talk to those with the information to make sure you and your team/family are fully informed.
- **2<sup>nd</sup> base — Solicit reactions.** Ask yourselves, “Do we have all the reactions and feedback from our team/family on this problem?” This question allows for everyone to provide their own insights and feedback, providing additional information critical to team decision-making.
- **3<sup>rd</sup> base – Brainstorm.** Here is where you and your team should identify all possible options. Ideally, it works best if you can visually list the options, but verbally naming the ideas also works.
- **Homeplate – Identify the solution.** Now it is time to narrow your list of ideas one at a time, eliminating ideas that won’t serve you well based on the information and reactions gathered. What’s left will be the best idea for you and your team/family.



By moving and solving problems together, your team/family will slowly build more trust with each other, and, in turn, strengthen their relationships. Given the challenges we are facing today, which seem to be getting harder and more complex, I find myself relying on this method more and more. I hope you find it helpful too as we work together to ensure all of our students are ready for their next step.

*Dave Webb*

*Dr. Dave Webb*  
*Superintendent of Schools*

## New facility to provide better learning environment for Community Learning Center and Adult Basic Education

Starting in Fall 2020, the Community Learning Center (CLC) and Adult Basic Education (ABE) will have a new place to call home thanks to a recently approved purchase agreement for the River Heights Professional Building at 710 19th Avenue North.

“The purchase of the River Heights Building provides a more appropriate educational facility for the CLC and ABE programs,” said SSP Superintendent Dave Webb. “Both programs are growing in enrollment and are currently housed in facilities that were not designed as learning spaces.”

The CLC provides an alternative high school learning experience via a traditional school day program, an after school flex program for students needing to make up credits, and an online program. The current spaces inside Woog Arena limit the program’s ability to meet growing demand. In addition, the new facility will allow the CLC and ABE programs to have safety and security measures that better align with district standards and other school sites.

Aaron Bushberger, director of finance, said the lease for purchase agreement of the River Heights Building allows the district to uphold its 2013 promise to the community of reducing rental costs in favor of district-owned facilities. “For nearly 30 years, we have rented space for the CLC,” he said. “Like choosing to take out a mortgage to buy a home instead of renting, the purchase agreement allows the district to own the building at the conclusion of the lease. The district is building equity and making a prudent financial investment on behalf of district taxpayers.”

Bushberger added that the funds being used to purchase the building can only be used for the purchase, rental and maintenance of facilities. It cannot be used for general fund expenditures such as salaries and benefits, or new staff positions and programs.







# New curriculum helps students understand and talk about math in fun and exciting ways

This fall, South St. Paul Public Schools (SSPPS) are exploring math concepts in fun new ways thanks in part to a new elementary math curriculum adopted by the School Board in May. The new *Math Expressions* curriculum materials are based on strategies and research funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) that have been proven to be effective in raising student achievement. The strategies and instructional materials of *Math Expressions* focus on helping children make sense of math by exploring, discussing and demonstrating their understanding of key concepts.

“We know that a strong foundation in mathematical concepts and critical thinking are important to student success later in their educational journey and in life,” said Dr. Chad Schmidt, director of learning. “The new materials will help students gain these essential skills by assisting teachers and support staff in fully implementing the SSPPS math expectations and guidelines that were developed during the curriculum review process.”

That process began in February 2018 with a 20-member committee of district teachers, specialists and administrators. The group spent several months reviewing best practices in elementary math as well as looking deeply at student data to assess the academic needs of SSP students. Then the team moved to a review of available instructional materials and assessed their alignment with the district’s International Baccalaureate’s (IB) Primary Years Program (PYP).

“*Math Expressions* aligns seamlessly with the Approaches to Teaching of the IB Primary Years Program,” said Ryan Higbea, IB-PYP Curriculum Coordinator at Kaposia Education Center and co-faciliator of the math curriculum review committee. “Central tenants of the PYP – learner agency, inquiry, concept-based instruction, assessment-informed learning and teaching – are also core components of the *Math Expressions* instructional materials.”

“Students are sharing with each other about what they learn and they are able to show me that they truly understand a concept and how it relates to other topics we are learning in kindergarten.”

Among the new materials are “Math Talks” in which students use mathematical concepts and words in a variety of fun activities to better understand how the concepts may be used in the real world. The talks seem to already be making a difference across the district.

“The new curriculum materials and the Math Talks activities are helping to build community in our classroom,” said Lincoln Center kindergarten teacher Kristen Spanjers. “Students are sharing with each other about what they learn and they are able to show me that they truly understand a concept and how it relates to other topics we are learning.”

“The Math Talks aspect is wonderful,” said Kaposia kindergarten teacher Katie Linscheid. “The curriculum gives the students a chance to talk with each other using mathematical vocabulary and this helps the students understand the math concepts.”

At the older grades, teachers are finding the materials to be robust and connected across the curriculum. “Students continue to build on common vocabulary, routines and procedures that they learn in previous grades, building a strong foundation and understanding of key mathematical concepts that they can take with them to middle and high school,” said Kaposia fifth grade teacher Camie Johnson.

The new curricular materials are closely aligned to state standards, which helps to connect what is learned in the elementary to content students will experience at SSP Secondary.

“Core lessons, paired with various differentiated materials, equip teachers with materials that all learners can access,” Higbea said. “These new curricular materials, which are closely aligned to Minnesota’s Academic Standards in Mathematics, will prepare all SSP elementary students for their next step.”



## Board approves flexible learning/e-learning days plan in case of emergency school closing

During the 2018-19 school year, South St. Paul Public Schools (SSPPS) experienced seven emergency closings, six due to extreme weather. These lost days represented approximately four percent of the school year for SSPPS students, presenting a significant interruption to their learning. In addition, the school cancellations required the district to make up lost days in order to preserve state funding, as some grade levels dipped below state-mandated contact hours.

To help prevent this from happening in the future, the district developed a Flexible Learning/E-Learning Days plan to help provide for continuity of learning for all K-12 students on days when school is closed. The components of the plan meet state requirements allowing districts to count up to five weather closing days as school days for funding purposes for grades 6-12. The SSP School Board approved the plan on Aug. 26.

“We heard from many district teachers last year that a day of lost learning requires makeup not only of the missed content, but also requires considerable time to re-engage with students. It is about lost learning time and momentum,” said Paul Brashear, director of technology. “A flexible learning days plan will help us keep the continuity of learning flowing between our teachers and students, even when the weather forces us to cancel school.”

Read more about the Flexible Learning/E-Learning Days Plan at [sspps.org/flexlearningplan](https://sspps.org/flexlearningplan).

Flexible Learning Plan

What do students do?

What do parents/families do?

What do employees do?



# District tackles food security issues so that students can focus on learning

“We know, that for many of our families in South St. Paul that qualify for free and reduced-price (FRP) meals, breakfast and lunch at school are the only predictable daily, nutritious meals children may regularly have access to,” said Connie Garling-Squire, district director of equity and early learning. “When basic survival needs are not met, food security concerns can be extremely traumatic for a family and can feel like an insurmountable barrier to allowing school and learning to be the most important thing in a child’s life.”

To help address this concern, South St. Paul Public Schools (SSPPS) provides a variety of opportunities for students and families to access healthy meal options at little to no cost. The district’s nutrition services program oversees the meal programs for SSPPS, where nearly half of district students qualify for free and reduced-price meals.

“We know that for some of our students coming to school on a Monday morning, the last meal they may have had was lunch at school the Friday before,” Garling-Squire said. “If a child is hungry, they cannot learn. Our partnerships with federal, state and local government programs and nonprofit organizations helps us address food security issues. By helping to eliminate barriers to learning, including hunger, we are better able to help our students thrive and be successful.”



**FREE Breakfast  
FOR ALL STUDENTS**



**Free & Reduced-  
Price Lunch  
FOR QUALIFYING FAMILIES**



**FREE Monthly Food  
Distribution  
FOR ALL SSPPS FAMILIES**

Learn more about school nutrition programs and how the district is addressing food security issues at [sspps.org/nutritionservices](https://sspps.org/nutritionservices).



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The SSP student affinity groups and their staff advisors were recently honored with a Cultural Jambalaya Diversity Award. The award recognizes individuals or groups that make a positive difference in Minnesota by advancing multiculturalism in their community.

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

## You’re never too old to learn!

Adult Basic Education (ABE) is one of several programs offered by South St. Paul Community Education. ABE provides adults in Northern Dakota County with free educational opportunities to acquire and improve literacy skills in order to become self-sufficient, proud employees, family members, and citizens.

Six Times talked with two current ABE students who are also working parents with students attending South St. Paul schools.



Isaura Velez-Hernandez waits for the school bus to pick up her daughters before attending ABE classes.

### Why did you choose to enroll in the district’s ABE and English Learner (EL) classes?

**ISAURA VELEZ-HERNANDEZ:** I am working to speak English better. I was in the Family Learning Center for several years, but now my kids are older, so they recommended I continue learning English here.

**ANTONIA LOPEZ:** I know that having a better education means that I can get a better job and be a good mother for my kids. Our kids are watching and learning from us, and by doing this I can show them there are no limits to getting an education. I am working to get my GED and then hope to go on for my two-year college degree.

### What do you enjoy about the South St. Paul ABE classes?

**VELEZ-HERNANDEZ:** The teacher is very good. She helps me when I cannot understand. I also like my fellow students, they are good partners. It is a good environment and I feel supported.

**LOPEZ:** I love the classes. The teachers are so helpful and they let us learn individually. I love that we have our own space to learn because sometimes at home it is just so busy with the kids. Access to the internet is challenging at home, which is where we practice our math and reading. This class is my own time, it is just about me.

### What is it like being in school at the same time as your children?

**VELEZ-HERNANDEZ:** Very good. Sometimes on Mondays I think “I don’t want to go to school today.” But then my baby girl tells me I have to go to school just like her.

**LOPEZ:** With my oldest daughter, who is in eighth grade, I help her with her homework, and sometimes she helps me.

### What do your children think about you taking classes and going to school?

**VELEZ-HERNANDEZ:** They like that I am learning English. At night when I am at home, my older daughter tells me to speak English. She says “you can do it.” They make it fun.

**LOPEZ:** My kids love that I am in school. My younger children know that I am attending school, and they talk about how much they enjoy their school experience (grade four and preschool).

### What would you say to other adults in South St. Paul who are thinking about taking ABE and EL classes?

**VELEZ-HERNANDEZ:** I’d tell them to do it. When I look back at how much I’ve learned, I say “oof, how I’ve advanced!” I would tell others that I was in the same place they are now. But you can make progress. I feel more confident speaking English now, especially when I go to the store. I just keep trying and practicing and every day it gets better.

**LOPEZ:** I would tell everyone to go to school! More people need to know about this opportunity. I know some parents that don’t speak English or are afraid to go to school, but I tell them they need to be there for their kids. The children are watching and learning from them. They need to help them with homework, attend teacher conferences, talk with teachers. You just need to find the time, at least one day a week. It will change your life!

It has been really important for me and my kids. They see that I am doing something and I am giving them a good example to attend school.



Antonia Lopez is a working mom during the day and a student at the ABE center in the evening.