



COMMUNITYConnections

A newsletter for the stakeholders of Stillwater Area Public Schools

FALL 2022



Feeling that Pony Pride!

Community celebrates Homecoming 2022

Thousands of Ponies past, present and future came together to celebrate during homecoming festivities this fall. Local businesses had messages of Pony Pride painted on their windows. Two local senior citizens were crowned senior royalty along with the high school's homecoming court. Hundreds of students were recognized for academic achievement. Student athletes competed before cheering fans. And a huge crowd gathered for the Pony Homecoming Carnival.

"The pride our community has for its students and its schools is overwhelming," said Dr. Mike Funk, the district's new superintendent. "It is something special!"





Investing in academic achievement

For the first time in more than a decade, the school district is reinvesting in academic achievement in a significant way. The recently approved operating and technology levies are helping to stabilize the district's budget, and are also freeing up dollars to begin building back some of what was lost in years of budget cutting.

Voters were told that the first priority for any new revenue available to our schools would be to improve academic achievement. Through the resourceful use of levy dollars, state funding, and local and federal grants, district leaders are delivering on that promise.

In the coming year, we're supporting quality learning for our students by:

- Improving the curriculum review process to ensure students have up-to-date textbooks. In the past we've had to go without materials necessary to meet current academic standards.

- Resuming ongoing professional development, which had been significantly reduced in previous years. This ensures teachers receive the training they need to implement curriculum and keep up-to-date in the best practices for classrooms.
- Rebuilding the Teaching & Learning department, which was decimated by previous rounds of budget cuts. We now have curriculum and instruction experts in place to support teachers, lead professional development, and guide the curriculum review process.

We're providing more academic support for kids needing extra help by:

- Ensuring teachers have the instructional materials needed to accelerate learning.
- Employing staff to support academic engagement and student conferencing.
- Offering multiple levels of intervention programming and individualized tutoring.

We're supporting the emotional and mental health of our students by:

- Providing school social workers to assist students and families.
- Partnering with community organizations to ensure a mental health therapist is available in all of our buildings.
- Employing a safe and supportive school specialist to promote social and emotional learning and mental health district-wide.

Great News!
Thanks to an increasing tax base and growth in housing, you will likely see a decrease in your school taxes next year.
Learn more at
stillwaterschools.org/finance



Test scores improve in Stillwater, despite the effects of COVID

Students in the district showed improvement on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) this year despite the significant disruptions COVID has had on teaching and learning.

"These scores show the resiliency of our students and dedication of our staff," said Dr. Caleb Drexler Booth, director of teaching and learning. "After so many disruptions, and despite so many ongoing challenges, we all came back to school last year ready to learn."

The percentage of Stillwater area students proficient on the exams increased from 2021 to 2022 in all areas - reading, math and science. Though numbers remain below pre-pandemic levels for students across the state, Stillwater students continued to perform significantly above the state average, as they have in previous years.

The MCA tests measure students' progress toward state academic standards in science, mathematics and reading as required by federal guidelines. The tests were not administered in 2020 at the start of the pandemic, but were given again in the spring of 2021 and 2022.

Learn more about the MCAs at
stillwaterschools.org/assessment

Room for improvement, a plan for change

School board members had the opportunity to review recent results from a variety of assessments given to students, and they explored where students were making growth and where they were missing targets. They also learned how previous budget cuts - including delays to curriculum purchases and professional development and cuts to staffing - have impacted student performance. The board will dig deeper into what's being done to address learning gaps and improve student achievement in the coming months. They will also work with district leaders to use all of this information to identify priorities and set goals for the future.



Want students to read well? Invest in teachers

The district is amping up its efforts to teach students to become strong readers, and it starts with our teachers. This year the district is offering a variety of professional development opportunities for our elementary teachers to dig deeper into the science of reading to become literacy and language experts. Several cohorts of teachers and administrators are taking part in Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training. This is an intense program that gives teachers the skills they need to teach language and literacy to every student, even those with reading challenges like dyslexia. All of the district's grade K-3 teachers are also receiving training throughout the year to effectively implement the reading and writing curriculum and better support students as they develop their literacy skills.



Students named National Merit Semifinalists

Stillwater Area High School seniors Jocelyn McBride and Eva Stafne have been named semifinalists in the National Merit Scholarship Program. They are among just 16,000 students from across the country to receive the honor.

Semifinalists must have an outstanding academic record throughout high school, be endorsed and recommended by a high school official, write an essay, and earn either an SAT or ACT score that confirms their earlier performance on the qualifying test.

The two will go on to compete for 7,250 scholarships worth nearly \$28 million dollars next spring.

A community working together

Community gives district high marks, cites areas for improvement

More than 1,000 parents, staff, students and community members shared their honest opinions about our schools as part of a recent market research project. The goal was to gather feedback to help school leaders understand the perceptions people have of the district and gain insights as to why families make the educational choices they do.

Respondents had the opportunity to share their thoughts about our schools, identify strengths and weaknesses, and rate how well the district stacks up to its competition.

Overview of Findings

Teachers and staff were recognized throughout the study for their care and concern of students. Respondents also recognized the district for the availability of support and services for students, and cited the strong sense of Pony Pride within the district. When comparing Stillwater schools to other schools in the area, respondents viewed the district as the best overall option for families. The district also ranked best for its tailored educational opportunities, as well as its arts, clubs and athletic opportunities. Of the concerns raised in the study, many were linked to the pandemic and its lingering effect on students. Respondents expressed concerns about academic performance, behavioral disruptions and staffing shortages. There were also concerns about past decisions and a perceived lack of transparency.

District administrators are reviewing all of the data within the report and will be using the information to determine how best to meet the needs of students and families now and into the future.

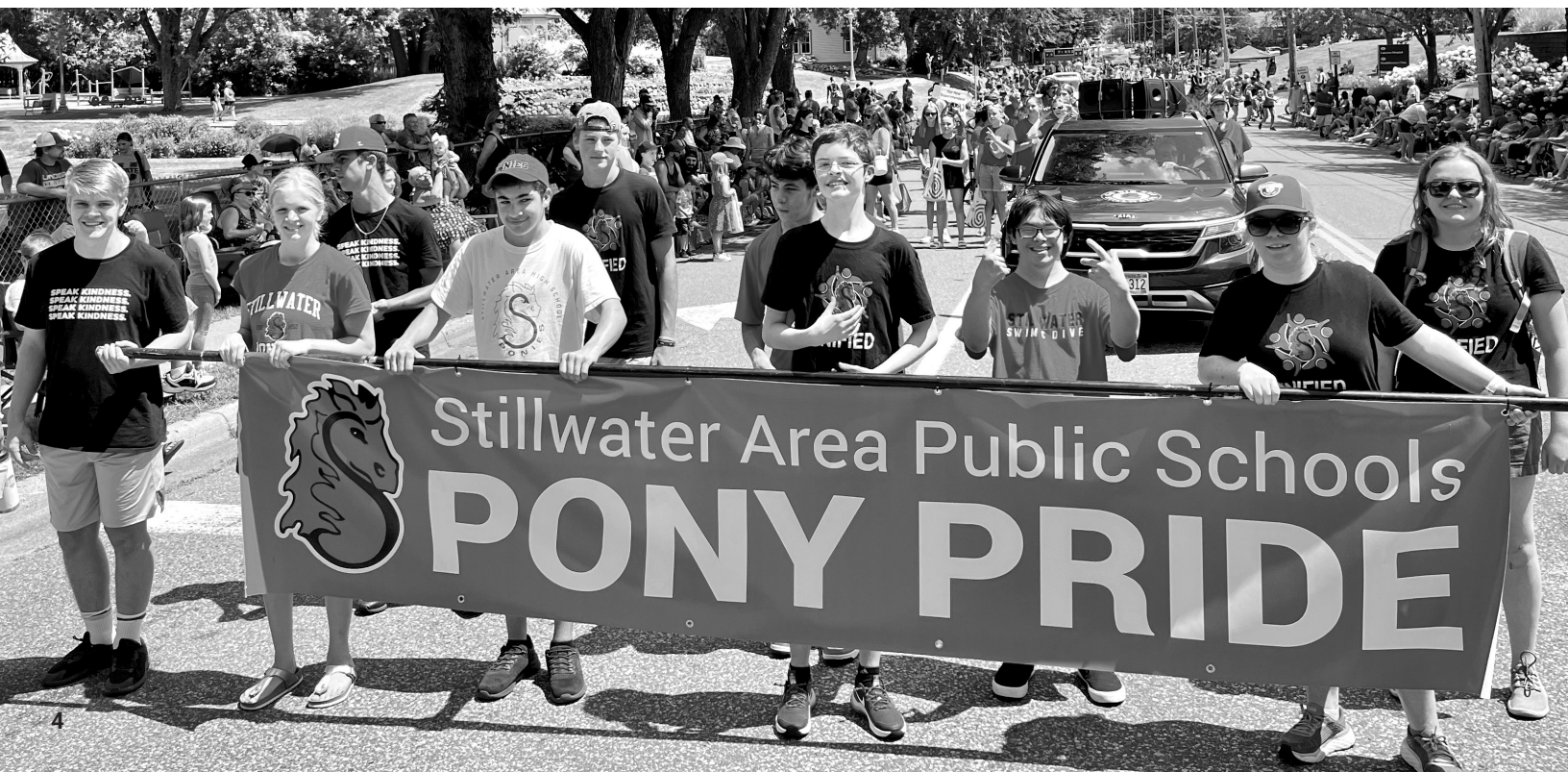


Volunteers needed! Make a difference in the lives of kids

Our schools are open for volunteers and we need your help. Stock bookshelves in our elementary media centers and read with kids, or wash dishes and serve food in our cafeterias. Specific classrooms also have needs for volunteers.

Want to work with older students? We need guest speakers and business partners to support career exploration opportunities through our Pathways program at the high school.

Visit stillwaterschools.org/volunteer to learn how you can help care for our kids!





Creating safe and welcoming schools

Relationships are the key

Every morning, students in elementary classrooms across the district start the day by greeting one another by name. They take part in team building activities or play games that encourage cooperation.

In our middle schools and the high school, too, community building is an integral part of the day. Middle school students take part in advisory classes where they focus on getting to know one another and engaging with each other in fun ways. And at the high school, 9th and 10th grade students are intentionally grouped into small learning communities to better connect with a core group of teachers and classmates.

It's not by accident that the district focuses so much on relationships. Research shows that positive relationships help to prevent school violence. According to the Minnesota School Safety Center, the better support there is for students, and the more communication between students, educators and families, the more likely it is that kids in crisis get the help they need before violence occurs. **Learn more at stillwaterschools.org/SEL.**

Keeping students safe at school

School safety was a top concern as students returned to school. Kids cannot learn if they do not feel safe, and our staff is committed to ensuring buildings remain safe and welcoming places for all students.

School district leaders have been working closely with Washington County Emergency Response and local first responders for the past several years. Together they review school emergency plans, train staff, practice safety drills with students, and increase security in buildings.

Safety is not just about building security and emergency protocols. It's also about school climate and personal relationships. District staff are working at all levels to continuously improve facilities and update safety plans, as well as support students' mental health and emotional well-being.

Here's what the district is doing to enhance school safety:

- Implementing Standard Response Protocols - a simple, easy-to-understand plan that provides clear actions for students and staff to take in an emergency. It's used by districts across the country and was developed by educators, emergency responders and safety experts based on best practices.
- Training administrators and staff to identify and respond to concerning behaviors.
- Encouraging students, staff and families to report concerns directly to principals or through the See Something, Say Something link on the district website.
- Teaching a variety of prevention programs at all grade levels. Programs are designed to build community, help students feel connected to one another and to teachers, reduce bullying behaviors and more.



Learn more about the district's Emergency Response Plan at stillwaterschools.org/safety.



Good News!

Stay up-to-date by following *Stillwater834* on Facebook and Instagram.

Taking her sport to new heights

Sophomore Maya Kelly has become the youngest documented female to dive from the 20 meter platform. She recently finished in 2nd place in her age level at the U.S. National High Diving Championship, which qualified her to represent Team USA at the World Junior Diving Championships.

30 years of top honors for FFA

The Stillwater FFA Chapter earned a Blue Ribbon at Minnesota State Fair. Members took top honors in the Landscape Design and Construction Competition for their Minnesota butterfly garden display. This is the 30th time in 33 years that the Stillwater FFA has won a Blue Ribbon in the event.

Student journalists recognized again

The Pony Express has been awarded the George H. Gallup award, which is the highest award granted to high school media. Only 9 school publications in the nation qualified for this award, and Stillwater is the only school in the state to place at this level. This is the third time the Pony Express has achieved this award.

More than 600 student receive academic letters

Academic letters were recently awarded to 615 students who earned a 3.75 grade point average and above during the 2021-22 school year. 296 of those students earned a weighted 4.0.

Pony alum among fastest in world

Former Pony runner Ana Weaver (Class of 2021) finished 8th in the world in the 5000 meters at the U20 World Track and Field Championships in Cali, Columbia over the summer.

Stories from around the district



SAHS Teacher Selected as Educator of Distinction

Stillwater Area High School teacher Ben Straka has been selected as a Claes Nobel Educator of Distinction. Straka, who teaches astronomy and biology, was recognized by The National Society of High School Scholars for his outstanding dedication and commitment to excellence in education. The award is named after the society's founder Claes Nobel, whose family started the Nobel Prize awards.

Student share their unique stories

Several Stillwater area students, including a number of teens from the local Somali community, took part in StoryArk camps over the summer. During the camps, middle school and high school students from around the area shared their unique voices by writing and producing original podcasts, short films, and graphic novels. You can watch the highlight reel and listen to their podcasts online at storyark.org/camp-kikiwakkah.

Making playgrounds more fun for everyone

Playgrounds across the district are becoming even more fun places to play for all students thanks to the addition of inclusive communication boards. Now, non-verbal students will be able to tell their classmates and teachers exactly how they'd like to play. The first board was recently installed at the Early Childhood Family Center, and all elementary playgrounds will be receiving signs in the coming weeks. Signs are being paid for through a Whitson Foundation Endowment Grant.





Learning for life

Two sisters cook up a recipe for success

Inspiration can strike at any moment. Just ask Eva Stafne, a 3 sport athlete and high-achieving student who is a senior at the high school. While browsing through Facebook Marketplace last spring, she came across a vintage 1960s Winnebago camper for sale – and in that moment the vision for Roxy's Waffles food truck was born.



Eva and her sister, Miranda, who is a freshman at SAHS, got the okay from their parents to buy the Winnebago. Together, they pooled their savings from summer jobs and babysitting to fund the renovation from vintage camper to industrial food truck. They developed a business plan and found investors (their mom and step-dad), who matched their initial investment.

Over the summer Miranda, whose middle name Roxanne, influenced the company's name, perfected the waffle recipe and designed the menu while Eva did all of the demo and renovation of the trailer. Eva researched the health and safety requirements for food trucks and scoured the internet for deals on equipment. She gutted the trailer, selling anything of value to help fund the renovations. Her grandfather helped her with the electrical work, and she watched YouTube videos to learn how to do all the required plumbing. They passed their health inspection and are open for business. One of their first appearances was at the Pony Homecoming Carnival in September.

The pair have an ambitious plan to pay off their investment in the food truck, and hopefully turn a profit, over the next five years. But making money is only part of the strategy. The food truck is also providing them with real-world experiences and most importantly, it's giving them quality time together.

ECRWSS
POSTAL PATRON

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

Welcome Dr. Funk

New superintendent is ready to lead

A new face greeted Stillwater Area Public Schools' staff and students as they returned to school this fall. The district's new superintendent, Dr. Mike Funk, began work this summer and is spending his first few months on the job getting to know the community.

Dr. Funk has more than 17 years of superintendent experience and 30 years of leadership in the Army National Guard. Most recently he served as the superintendent of Albert Lea Schools. His 3 core leadership beliefs are: expect the best; do the right thing; and do what is best for kids. Dr. Funk appreciates Stillwater's proud tradition and reputation for having very good schools. But he has also publicly expressed his desire to work with people throughout the district to take it to the next level.

"I want us to be great for our staff, our students, and our wider communities," he said. "Excellence is not easy, but it is a tremendous feeling when you have achieved it."

Working with the community to develop a strategic plan is one of his main goals for the coming year. A strategic plan would help outline district priorities and define a path to create excellent schools. Other goals for the district include stabilizing the organization and putting trust back into the district.



Listen to
our first-ever podcast
to meet Dr. Funk,
hear his thoughts on the future
of Stillwater schools and even
learn a few secrets about him
from his family members!

Find it on
[stillwaterschools.org/
podcast.](http://stillwaterschools.org/podcast)



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