

THE DISTRICT DISPATCH

School News & Updates
for the School District 197
Community
Spring 2023

By the numbers



#1 in reading
in statewide testing out of
9 comparable districts*



#1 in science
in statewide testing out of
9 comparable districts*



#2 in math
in statewide testing out of
9 comparable districts*

*To evaluate progress, School District 197 compares its performance in annual statewide testing against nine “comparable” school districts, which are determined by comparable free and reduced lunch populations. The comparable school districts are Bloomington, Burnsville, Hopkins, Inver Grove Heights, Osseo, Roseville, South St. Paul, Spring Lake Park, and St. Louis Park.



Heritage E-STEM Magnet School students showcase science projects at their annual Science Night.

From the Superintendent

When I think about what makes me proud of our district, I always return to our strategic framework. In classrooms across our 10 schools and programs, you'll see our commitment to caring relationships, equitable practices, and high achievement for all in action every day.

Our commitment to caring relationships is grounded in the fact that we are a small community in a large metro area. Yet we are large enough to offer various opportunities for our students to meet their passions, interests, and needs. When we hold ourselves accountable for removing barriers and creating equitable systems and pair those efforts with caring relationships, high achievement for all is possible. And it shows in annual statewide test results—School District 197 continues to perform the best in reading and science out of 9 comparable districts.

I'm also proud that our district is leading the way in understanding the importance of skills beyond the strictly academic. We know a student's long-term success requires leadership, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence. We have and will continue to develop programming that equips students in all of those areas.

In this issue of District Dispatch, we're taking a closer look at the curriculum and programs that make our district unique and special. From our TriDistrict CAPS program to our elementary reading intervention program—we're proud of the innovative, evidence-based programming we're able to provide our students, so they are successful when they leave our school setting.

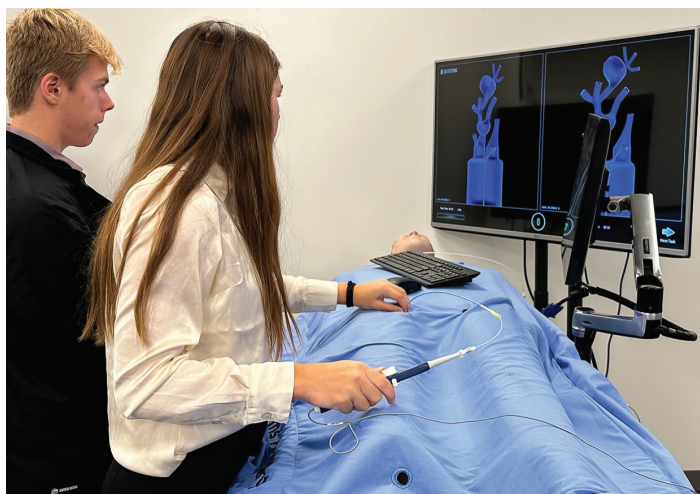
Thank you for your partnership as we nurture, inspire, and prepare every student in our district.

Peter Olson-Skog
Superintendent

Nurture. Inspire. Prepare. Together, we thrive.

Career Exploration + Professional Skill Development

Preparing students for the workplaces and careers of today and tomorrow



At Two Rivers High School, students are getting a head start on their career paths with hands-on, immersive learning experiences. Through the TriDistrict CAPS (Centers for Advanced Professional Studies), students gain exposure to different career fields and prepare for the workforce or college education—while still in high school.

A Collaborative Effort

TriDistrict CAPS is a program of the TriDistrict Career and College Readiness Initiative, a partnership between the school districts of South St. Paul, Inver Grove Heights, and School District 197. This collaborative partnership ensures juniors and seniors in the program graduate with a plan for their “next step” and have the knowledge, skills, and experiences to be successful wherever their chosen pathway takes them. Nearly 120 students are participating in internships across 40 local business partners this year.

“One of our main goals is to fast-forward kids into authentic experiences into what they might want to do in the future,”

says Ben Kusch, Director of TriDistrict CAPS. “It’s a place where students can work alongside employees of local businesses, dip their hands into whatever field they are interested in, and decide if they like that career.”

Learning By Doing

TriDistrict CAPS offers students four courses in Healthcare, Transportation and Skilled Trades, Business and Entrepreneurship, and Information Technology/Computer Science.

Once students select their interest area, they spend their first semester at a program business partner’s work site, immersed in that environment. During their second semester, students put lessons learned from their first semester into practice in an internship. The internship experience aims to provide students with the opportunity to gain real-world, hands-on work experience in professional work environments that relate to their academic and career interests.

Intentional Experiences

There are seven programs like the TriDistrict CAPS program in Minnesota and 95 across the world. What makes our program unique is the in-depth partner engagement, career exploration opportunities, and interdisciplinary classroom experience—all while earning high school and college credit.

Ben says anyone can participate as long as they are on the path to graduating from high school. “There are no academic or GPA requirements,” Ben shared. “The ideal candidate is curious, motivated, and wants to be a positive part of the school and global community.”

Interested in Learning More?

Contact TriDistrict CAPS Program Director, Ben Kusch, at bkusch@tridistrictce.org with any questions.

Exploring and Discovering: Student Feature

Deciding what to do after high school can be a challenging decision. Diane Cruz Mejia, a Two Rivers High School senior, knew college was an option—but hadn’t narrowed in on any clear-cut interests or career path.

After a semester in the TriDistrict CAPS program, her pathway after high school became clearer. “I chose the Business and Entrepreneurship pathway because I wanted to see what it was about,” Diane shared. “From there, communications and marketing stood out to me as something I was interested in.”

A field trip to Haworth Media & Marketing in Downtown Minneapolis solidified her decision. “Learning about the different roles and opportunities in a marketing agency was motivating,” Diane shared. “There’s never a shortage of problems to solve, and that’s exciting.”

Now, Diane is completing her internship for the TriDistrict CAPS program—promoting the program to students for next year. From there, Diane is heading to the University of Northwestern, St. Paul, in the fall.



Finding the Thrill of the Skill

Helping students improve their reading skill

Experts tell us a child's ability to read at grade level by third grade is one of the greatest predictors of future success because this is when they transition from learning to read to reading to learn. That's why our commitment to reading is stated in our strategic framework. We work hard to ensure every learner meets or exceeds the development milestones in literacy achievement throughout their journey in School District 197.

Our reading intervention program plays a big role in this work. The program exists in all grade levels but is most prominent in elementary schools to provide targeted support to students struggling with reading, so they can catch up to their peers and succeed academically.



Cracking the Code

Somerset Elementary Reading Interventionist Ellen Pommer sees the results of the intervention program every day. After regular screenings, flagged students are paired with Ellen to get a jump-

start on their reading. And this year, they already see a handful of students successfully exiting the intervention program.

"Our early intervention program includes consistent programming with direct, explicit instruction," shares Ellen. "And we're finding that it works; kids love it. They know what's coming, and it meets their needs right where they are. The bonus is that the program aligns with the curriculum in the classroom. Hence, students make connections to what they're already doing in class."

For Ellen, the key is helping students crack the code of reading. "Once kids get it, they have significantly fewer barriers to learning. We know that early reading success predicts future academic success," shares Ellen. "And learning to read well in elementary school protects students' dignity when they are older. They can show up to middle school confident and ready to learn."



Scaling Access to High-Quality Science Education

Critical thinking, problem-solving, and hands-on learning

In every classroom in our elementary schools, students are taking on the roles of scientists and engineers to figure out real-world phenomena. This year, with the help of science specialists at every school, we are scaling access to high-quality science education for all of our youngest learners. While there were already science specialists at our three magnet elementary schools, adding specialists at Somerset Elementary and Mendota Elementary is a way to guarantee a baseline of science time across all schools.

Why Focus on Science

Early science education equips students with fundamental problem-solving skills, encourages curiosity, and fosters critical thinking. Kim Benton, a Garlough Environmental Magnet School science teacher, shares that science education is essential because it explains how the world works. "Science allows students to observe, ask questions, test ideas out, and prove the validity of our assumptions," Kim says.

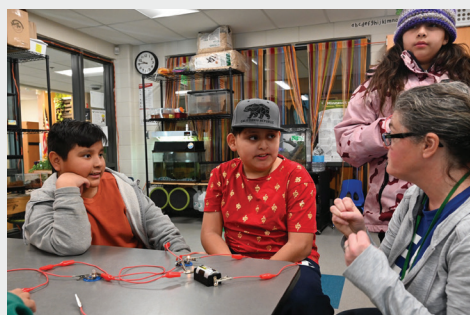
As the district's environmental magnet school, students at Garlough make connections to the outside world through science every day. "Students are encouraged to say 'I notice. I wonder. It reminds me of.' every day. That's science—constantly connecting with our surroundings."

What Science Looks Like in the Classroom

Each grade level completes four different units a year. Earlier this year, first graders learned about plant structures and their functions. At the end of the project, they designed and built solar "flowers" to mimic how plants get energy from the sun. Their solar stand accomplished the function of absorbing the light from the sun like the leaves of a plant, and the strong frame mimics the strong stem of a plant.

Katie Holten is the new Science Specialist at Mendota Elementary. Her favorite unit she has taught so far this year is the third-grade study of space. "I made a scale model of the solar system for the students to interact with. Students

learn about the size, distance, and planets in our solar system by seeing the model unspool down one of the hallways at Mendota. This helps make the learning fun and helps students begin to grasp the vastness of our place in space."



Closing the Rigorous Coursework Gap

Supporting college and career readiness for all students

At Two Rivers High School, more than 30 rigorous courses provide students with college-credit-bearing opportunities. In addition, a handful of courses provide industry-recognized certificates, on-the-job training, and internships. We're continually working on expanding these offerings and aligning them with career pathways. Still, despite these opportunities, gaps remain, and barriers exist to accessing these advanced courses.

Our Black, Latino, Native American, and multiracial students are disproportionately underrepresented in advanced courses at the high school level. As a result, students—particularly our students of color—are not accessing a full range of college and career opportunities that can provide them with a future that leads to the ongoing benefits of gainful employment.

Expansion of Rigorous Coursework Grant

With the help of a new grant awarded by the Minnesota Department of Education, the Expansion of Rigorous Course Opportunities and Support Grant, we're working to close the rigorous coursework gap and support college and career readiness for all students. The grant will fill gaps in what advanced courses we offer, how we offer them, and how we ensure the success of students who enroll.

Our ultimate goal is for the number of students of color enrolled in rigorous courses to mirror the demographic representation of Two Rivers High School. This year, we have more students of color in our rigorous courses than we've ever had—38%. Throughout the two-year grant, we anticipate that more than 300 students will receive direct benefits from erasing the gaps in programming and providing enhanced and personalized service for students.

Here's a snapshot of how we're doing it:

- **Added an Information Technology/Computer Science course to TriDistrict CAPS.** Students learn through firsthand experience in a real technology department, housed at Two Rivers. So far this school year, students have repaired 20+ Chromebooks and have gained valuable work experience to build their resumes.



- **Created a new staff position, College and Career Specialist,** whose primary focus will be supporting staff and students in these new or altered classes.
- **Added more time during the school day for AP Human Geography and AP Biology** which are the entry paths to advanced courses in those two departments. More time for the course allows for the development of solid relationships, more time to learn content, and more structures put in place for students as they transition to high school.
- **Developed a new Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) Certificate Course,** which provides the training required for basic entry into healthcare as a nursing assistant or home health aide. This course will carry with it the opportunity to earn their CNA certificate as well as five college credits.
- **Added student tutors.** Addition of student teaching assistants (upper-level students) support the double-period blocked course with a focus on working with small groups of students.

"When we launched this work, we believed it would significantly benefit more of our students," says Peter Mau, Assistant Superintendent. "Now nearly one year later, we can quantifiably see those differences in our students' outcomes."

“When we launched this work, we believed it would significantly benefit more of our students.**”**

— Peter Mau, Assistant Superintendent



New Program Trains Students to Become Nursing Assistants

Two Rivers students are helping fill a workforce gap

Through the Expansion of Rigorous Course Opportunities and Support Grant, Two Rivers High School now offers a Certified Nursing Assistance Program right at the high school. Students can become fully certified as entry-level nursing assistants in just one semester at no cost.

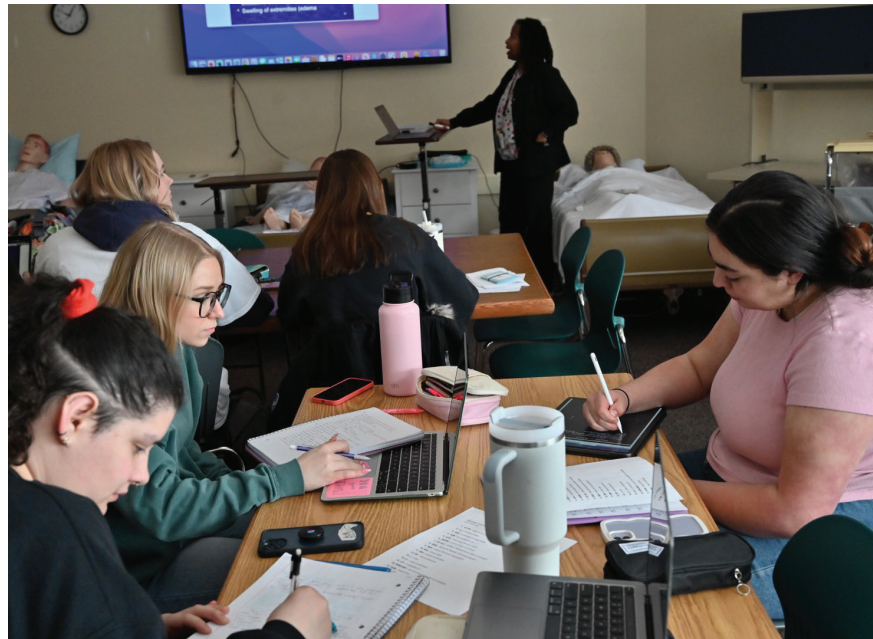


The program is made possible through our partnership with Inver Hills Community College. Registered Nurse and Inver Hills Instructor LaDonna White visits our students weekly to teach the course. The program features a project-based learning curriculum that allows students to gain a broad understanding of patient care and nursing and prepare them for a

meaningful career in acute care, long-term care, or home healthcare setting. The course is concurrently enrolled with Inver Hills Community College, and students who complete the course will be eligible for five college credits.

“ *I have sought to be an inspiration and a role model for those who thought they couldn't achieve. My job was to let them know that if they had the desire, I was there to help them make their achievement possible.* **”**

— LaDonna White



This work not only breaks down financial barriers to postsecondary education—connecting more students with the skills they need to start a career—but also bolsters our workforce pipeline and supports the state's healthcare industry. According to data from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, nursing assistants are the sixth-highest in-demand job in the state. The pandemic has only exacerbated this need. The current number of students pursuing a certified nursing assistant credential is not expected to meet the demand.

“By the time students enrolled in this program walk out of this high school, they can have a job with a starting pay of \$18-\$20 per hour,” Ben Geiger, College and Career Specialist, says. This program is also good for the community because it fills a workforce gap.”

This year, 17 students are enrolled. They do coursework at the high school, then take the certification exam at Inver Hills. Once they pass the certification, they can enter the workforce.





WEB Leaders Help New Friendly Hills Students with Transition

Middle school orientation, transition, and mentoring program

WEB, which stands for “Where Everybody Belongs,” is a nationally recognized middle school orientation, transition, and mentoring program. WEB involves eighth-grade students trained as leaders and mentors to help welcome and develop positive friendships with our new fifth-grade students.

As students start the school year, WEB Leaders are at the forefront of the welcoming committee, ensuring all students feel a sense of belonging. This mentoring relationship includes helping younger students learn skills that will help them be successful in their new environment. “Watching the WEB Leaders help the fifth graders during orientation

is just the best,” says Shannon Guscetti, who leads the WEB Leaders at Friendly Hills. “The fifth graders come in nervous, but by the time they leave, everyone is energized, and you can tell they feel like they are already part of the Friendly Hills community!”

This support is critical because research shows that a positive first-year experience in middle school helps to increase students’ chances of success in the following years. “WEB also acts as an anti-bullying program by empowering student leaders to recognize negative behaviors, intervene, and report to help create a safe and welcoming school,” Shannon shared.

Battle of the Books Returns at Heritage E-STEM Magnet

Students celebrate the love of reading and have fun along the way

For more than 10 years, students at Heritage E-STEM Magnet have been celebrating the love of reading through a friendly competition called Battle of the Books. Battle of the Books is a reading incentive program for students in fifth through eighth grades. Students read books and come together, usually in groups, to demonstrate their abilities and to test their knowledge of the books they have read.

This year, more than 50 teams of students read books and battled to answer questions about the reading. Thirty-five teams advanced through the first round and moved on to BOB Finals. Congratulations to all teams who participated in BOB this year!



Warrior Profile



Molly Engle

**School District 197 Administrative Specialist and
Two Rivers head Varsity Dance Team Coach**

Head Varsity Dance Coach Molly Engle has led and developed the high school's competitive dance program for nearly two decades to earn the Metro East Conference championship title 15 times and State tournament advancement 15 times—and counting.

Building and Growing the Program

Early on, Molly recognized feeder programs were equally important to growing a successful athletic team, so she formed the B-squad team to teach athletes basic dance team techniques. Fast forward to 2022—and around 40 to 50 students in grades 7 through 12 are on the Two Rivers Dance Team, and Molly brings another new team to fruition—the Two Rivers Middle School Dance Team with the goal of reaching our younger students and meeting the demands of the evolving sport. The non-competitive middle school team proved very popular with a successful inaugural year. Come this fall, close to 70 students will participate in the 2023-2024 season—one of the largest ever.

From the dance floor and at the District Office, Molly supports families and staff in her administrative role in the Special Services Department. Besides supporting special education enrollments and juggling administrative tasks, she enjoys helping families and staff “figure things out.”

More Than a Competition

Molly knows that instilling lifelong lessons, confidence, and good habits will have a lasting impact on these student-athletes. Two Rivers senior and dance team senior leader Lauren Walsh agrees, “Coach Molly has guided me to be the best dancer and person I can be. The dance team has shaped me to grow as a woman and has given me confidence.” When asked what her advice to younger dancers would be, Lauren answered: “It will be over in the blink of an eye—enjoy it!”

Molly shares her aspirations for the program and the students: “My hope for the future of this program is that [the dancers] continue to grow and improve not only as athletes but as good stewards of our community.”



“My hope for the future of this program is that [the dancers] continue to grow and improve not only as athletes but as good stewards of our community.”

— Molly Engle

Photo credit: Rouse Productions



West St. Paul + Mendota Heights + Eagan Area

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Work With Us

Join Our Team! Make a Difference.

At School District 197, we offer many challenging careers with opportunities for growth and advancement. We offer competitive pay and benefits, a variety of flexible work schedules, and an exciting work atmosphere where you can make a difference! Whether you're seeking a full-time or part-time job, exploring a new career direction, looking to inspire students' learning, or searching for work with a purpose, we may have an opportunity for you! We look forward to connecting with you.



Scan the QR Code to learn more and apply online.

Join Our School Age Care Team! Summer Positions Now Available

If you enjoy children, School District 197 School Age Care program is a great place to work.

- Earn a \$500 signing incentive.
- NEW! Free childcare (up to two children) to employees while they are working; some conditions apply.
- Earn up to \$17.92 an hour based on a qualifying stipend.
- Enjoy your evenings and weekends off.



School Year

We have positions available before and after school in our K-8 buildings. Flexible hours from 6:30-8:45 am and 2-6 pm, Monday-Friday.

Now Hiring for Summer!

Shifts are available between 6:30 am-6 pm Monday-Friday.

For more information, contact Lisa Grathen at lisa.grathen@isd197.org