

Sharing stories and information that connect our families, schools and communities.

Be seen. Be heard. Be bold.



ERHS Students Work to Close the Gap Through a New Student-led Club

The achievement gap is a growing problem across the country. Four East Ridge High School (ERHS) seniors are stepping up to make sure every student in their school, regardless of race, ethnicity or background has access to a vital resource to help them succeed in school; their peers.

Close the Gap is in its second year at ERHS. It is the brainchild of Rahnon Chowdhury, Aman Lulseged, Santiago Palma and Felipe Patino, four seniors who aim to help close the achievement gap for black, indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) students.

"Seeing the statistics and seeing minority students not performing at the same rate as non-BIPOC students made me wonder what I can do to

make an impact. My mission is to do what I can to help close the gap as an individual," says Aman.

"We know the achievement gap is a real thing, but it's also a sensitive topic to a lot of people. We want to face this problem head-on and find a way to help," says Santiago.

The club is student-led and offers peer-to-peer tutoring by and for BIPOC students. "Tutoring helps me learn the concept. If I can explain something to someone that means I know it and am proficient and can help someone else learn it too," says Rahnon.

The four co-founders of the club have worked hard to market the club not only to students but to teachers and staff as well. "Last year, we presented

SoWashCo Educators Acknowledged in Recognition Awards page 2

Literacy Resources and Book Recommendations page 4

Next Steps for Bond Projects page 6

Register Now for Spring and Summer Community Education Classespage 7

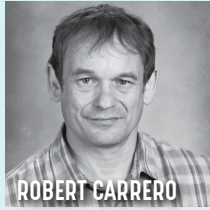
Transportation Opt-In Information.....page 7

Apply for Summer Jobs page 8

to East Ridge teachers and staff and after that, we saw teachers referring students to join our club," says Felipe.

Close the Gap club has more than 150 active members. Students are able to drop in whenever they need help with a particular course or topic or even to get ready for big tests.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



ROBERT CARRERO



PAUL PRESSNALL

2024 Minnesota TEACHER of the YEAR 60th Anniversary

TEACHER OF THE YEAR
SEMI-FINALISTS



STACY PALEEN



ELIZABETH STUEVE

Four SoWashCo Schools Educators are Semi-Finalists for Teacher of the Year

Congratulations to our SoWashCo Schools 2024 Minnesota Teacher of the Year Candidates!

- **Robert Carrero**, Park High School – Developmental Cognitive Disability and Center Based Program Teacher
- **Stacy Paleen**, Park High School – French and Math Teacher
- **Paul Pressnall**, Park High School– English Teacher
- **Elizabeth Stueve**, Valley Crossing Elementary – Kindergarten/Grade 1 Teacher

There are 159 semi-finalists. Finalists for Teacher of the year will be announced in March and the winner will be selected in May. Good luck to our educators!

Literacy is Everywhere

Reading is at the core of our work and together, parents, families and community members need to create opportunities for kids to have daily experiences reading, writing, listening and speaking. Mike Schmoker, an educational researcher, wrote “If we care about kids – and about equity – we owe every student daily opportunities to read, discuss and write about generous amounts of fiction and non-fiction across all disciplines.”

As we look at the performance of our students overall, 55% of our students were considered to be at a proficient reading level on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) in 2023. While this is just one measure used, the rate of proficiency is concerning and something that we must all work toward improving. While schools play a critical role, the early development of oral language skills at home, and in the community, promotes future success in reading and writing.

The mission of South Washington County Schools (SoWashCo Schools) is to educate students for success.

Success has a lot of different meanings. In SoWashCo Schools, one measure of success is having every child reading at or above grade level by the end of each school year. The Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act, known as the READ Act, is a new law that came out of the 2023 legislative session. As part of this legislation, our staff will be receiving extensive training in an approach known as structured literacy. This training is required for all staff and will be implemented over the 2024-25 school year. The training days will be reflected in our 2024-25 school year calendar.

We are asking families, grandparents and community members to join us in supporting the kids in our communities. This can be done by having a conversation, reading to kids and looking at books and other printed materials together. Please listen to what kids are reading and then ask them questions. Literacy is part of everything we do and needs to extend to all parts of our days.

Families, grandparents and community members can help by:

- Reading books together
- Having children read to others (family members, pets, stuffed animals)



Nataliya Dorweiler Named Woodbury Teacher of the Year

Nataliya Dorweiler, an English language (EL) teacher at Lake Middle School, was named Woodbury Chamber of Commerce's 2023 Educator of the Year.

Ms. Dorweiler grew up in Ukraine and says she always knew she wanted to be a teacher.

“Everyone around me would often say “she will be a teacher someday,”” Dorweiler said. “I can remember from a young age lining up my dolls and stuffed animals and teaching them or reading to them.”

Ms. Dorweiler is a strong advocate for those she works with and goes above and beyond in every way for her students who are new to the country.

- Spending time talking to your child, and children in the community, to help develop their verbal skills
- Visiting the library together and picking out books to bring home
- Visiting a bookstore and checking out the wonderful books
- Baking or cooking together
- Drawing a picture and labeling the parts
- Encouraging children to write their own short story that can be read together
- Making observations in the community around names of places and similarities/differences that are observed



Educating students for success means that we are all committed to making sure students are literate and have the reading, writing, listening and speaking skills to be successful in our communities and in life.

Thank you for your partnership,

Julie Nielsen
Julie Nielsen,
Superintendent



Read to Me at Woodbury Elementary

A group of dedicated students at Woodbury Middle School (WMS) have taken on the role of mentors through a new reading program at Woodbury Elementary School (WES).

Rebecca Crislip, School Counselor at WMS, has partnered with Julie Olson, Academic Coach at WES and Amy Fisher, Reading Specialist at WES, to create a unique opportunity for middle school students to mentor kindergarten students. "Read to Me" is a program designed to promote enthusiasm around literacy for young learners. The middle school readers are vetted through an application process to participate in the program.

"Our students have to show a lot of initiative to be considered to become a Read to Me mentor; they undergo an interview and application process, and if accepted, they are responsible for managing their class time and are required to complete training," Crislip said.

The training the middle school mentors receive focuses on the literacy targets of their young mentees. Reading targets for kindergarten students cover the basics of reading like turning pages, understanding the structure of a story (beginning, middle and end) and engaging with the book.

Fifty-five WMS students have become Read to Me mentors. Each mentor is paired with a kindergarten student at WES. The mentors visit their reading partner once a week for a half hour of one-on-one reading time. Kindergarten students are excited to engage with middle school students as their older peers.

Eighth-grader Henry Sayers said, "I like showing them that reading can be fun and us being older kids they look up to helps them engage with the books."

Having focused one-on-one time reading with a peer allows young readers to engage with books in a more immersive way than standard group read-alouds allow for. Kindergarten students are invited to point out words they know or act out sentences. Having the space to interact with books on a more personal level inspires excitement around reading for kindergarten students. The mentors' top priorities are to actively engage their kindergartners in the reading, support them in making connections between what is on the page and their own lives, and encourage conversation about what is happening in the books.

"I know that reading with middle schoolers helps us be smarter because sometimes they read to me, but now sometimes I read to them," said kindergartner Annabella Potter.

By dedicating their time and passion for reading, these mentors help younger students develop essential literacy skills and inspire a lifelong love for reading.



Creating a Space for Belonging

Ona Wilcox, a fourth-grade teacher at Pine Hill Elementary, saw a need within her school community and took action. Wilcox created "Belonging," an after-school book club for elementary-age girls of African and African American descent.

The after-school program aims to create an empowering space where young girls can cultivate confidence, celebrate their identity, and build a foundation for future success. Black girls, like many other marginalized groups, face unique challenges that can impact their self-esteem and overall well-being.

Students are encouraged to show up to Belonging as their genuine selves and to share their stories. Students read a book together, accompanied by an affirmation for each month's reading. The books the students read are written by authors of color and cover social topics these young girls face.

"My favorite book we read was "My Skin is Beautiful," because it inspires me to love my own skin," said first-grader Elizabeth Fomukong.

Belonging has expanded beyond Pine Hill and added new social clubs at three other SoWashCo elementary schools, Crestview, Cottage Grove and Nuevas Fronteras Spanish Immersion. Between all four schools, there are more than 70 student members.

Learn more, find student book recommendations and watch a video about this project at sowashco.org/news.



WHS Students Continue to Grow ASL Translation Project

Woodbury High School (WHS) fourth-year American Sign Language (ASL) students recently visited 13 SoWashCo elementary schools to read books with them.

The high school students used ASL to translate children's books centered around being deaf or hard of hearing. They then brought those books to SoWashCo elementary schools and presented them to younger students along with teaching some basic ASL. Each translated book has a QR code inside that elementary students can scan, watch the video, and learn some of the signs.

The WHS student-created ASL-translated books are now available for elementary students to check out at some of our school media centers. You can learn more and watch a video about this inspirational project at sowashco.org.

ASL Book List

- Ranvir Cannot Hear
- Super Kena
- Emma Every Day Roller Skating Worries
- Moses Goes to School
- My Deaf Friend Can Do Anything You Can Do!

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

"We see a lot of students drop in the weeks leading up to the ACT. It's a great resource to prepare and hopefully help students get a good score," said Santiago.

As for the future of the club, the co-founders say they are looking at different ways to pass the torch at their school, but they also want to see this club grow and be implemented in other schools across the state as well.

"One of the most important things is putting the idea out there," says Aman, "We're a club right now and we do tutoring but the main thing we want to spread is the idea of the club; student-led tutoring and student success as well as not being scared to talk about the achievement gap and do something about it."

"The idea of student tutors isn't new, but we showed it was possible," says Felipe. Learn more and watch a video about Close the Gap at sowashco.org.

Finding Community Through Food

Adult English Language Learners in the Great Rivers program are creating an International cookbook. The project brings together students from three English as a Second Language (ESL) classes with a wide range of ages and home countries. The goal of the project is to build community and confidence.

Great Rivers Adult Education Consortium has served students from 59 countries, speaking 37 languages. Students learn more than English in ESL classes. Classes are also a way for students to connect and find community. Before entering the program, students often feel isolated and uncomfortable interacting in public. "Class is emotionally uplifting," describes Melissa Mahoney, an English teacher with Great Rivers. "There is a lot of laughter and the students are very supportive of each other."

For the project, groups were organized by home country/region. They discussed their native cuisines and past experiences preparing and eating food with friends and family. "Food is a fun and social way to experience other cultures. Everyone has some level of expertise to share," said Katie Olives, an English teacher with Great Rivers. After the group decided what recipes people might



want, they began translating the ingredients and steps and converting the measurements from the metric system to the imperial system. "The language was a challenge for us, sometimes we didn't get the correct word or form to express the steps. In our countries, we use some expressions that don't make sense here," said Francisca Alvarez, an advanced ESL student from Chile.

Olives and Mahoney plan to continue the project next year and hope to make the cookbook available to the SoWashCo Schools community. "The most important thing I learned was how incredible our culinary legacy is. We are a big group with people from many different countries and all of us have amazing dishes to share," said Alvarez.

FINDING A JUST RIGHT BOOK

A "Just Right" book or text refers to content students can both decode (read the words) and comprehend (understand the meaning). Choosing a book that is "just right" can help your student build confidence and fluency.



Books should be challenging enough that students learn some new vocabulary and grow their skills.

- Books that are too easy can lead to boredom.
- Books that are too difficult can lead to frustration if the student needs help comprehending the text.

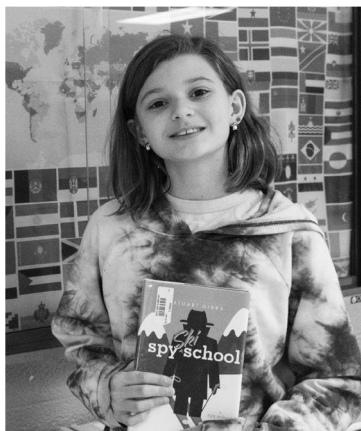
Students enjoy books and texts they choose.

- Be sure to ask your student what kind of characters, genre and themes they enjoy most.

Visit sowashco.org/literacy for more literacy stories and resources including book lists.

SoWashCo Voices

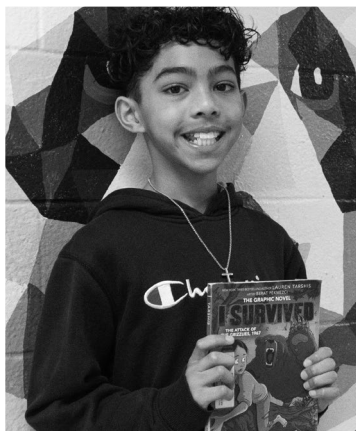
STUDENT RECOMMENDATIONS



What is your favorite type of book to read?

"I like to read mystery because they are fun to solve."

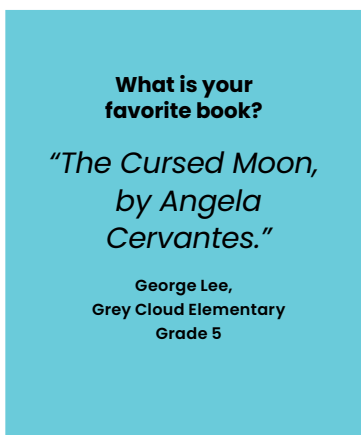
Alice Raiter,
Royal Oaks Elementary
Grade 5



What is your favorite book?

"I Survived, because I don't know when the event happens."

Tyson Jackson,
Pullman Elementary
Grade 5



What is your favorite book?

"The Cursed Moon, by Angela Cervantes."

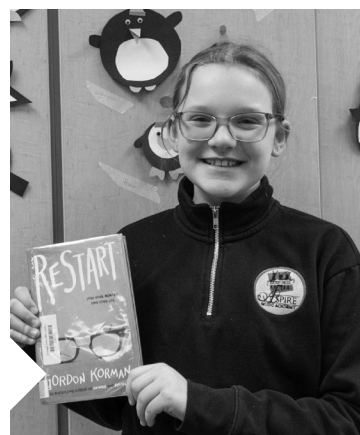
George Lee,
Grey Cloud Elementary
Grade 5



Who's your favorite author?

"George Korman, because his books are so good!"

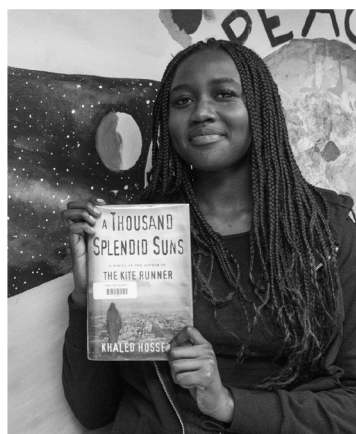
Quinn Lehman,
Cottage Grove Elementary
Grade 5



Who's your favorite author?

"Jon Scieszka, the author of the Guys Read series."

Henry Cross,
Armstrong Elementary
Grade 5



What's your favorite book?

"A Thousand Splendid Suns, by Khaled Hosseini"

Abijedo Omot,
Park High School
Grade 12

STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS

"A Different Pond" by Bao Phi and illustrated by Thi Bui

- James Magee, Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

"Clark the Shark" by Bruce Hale and illustrated by Guy Francis

- Courtney Braatz, Early Childhood Family Education Teacher

"Gilmore Girls: At Home in Stars Hollow" by Micol Ostow and illustrated by Cecilia Messina

- Katie Schwartz, School Board Chair

"Officer Buckle and Gloria" written and illustrated by Peggy Rathmann

- Arthur Williams, Director of Teaching and Learning - Elementary

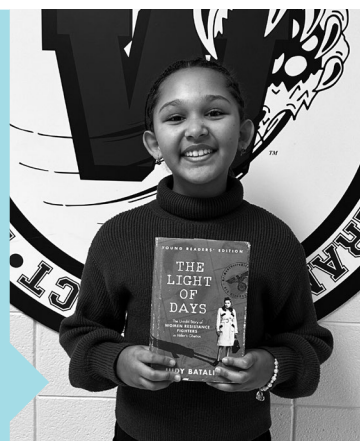
"The Bear Town Series" by Fredrik Backman

- Sarah Sorenson Wagner, Principal - Woodbury High School

Who's your favorite author?

"Judy Batalion, the author of The Light of Days."

Eva Muchungu,
Woodbury Middle School
Grade 7



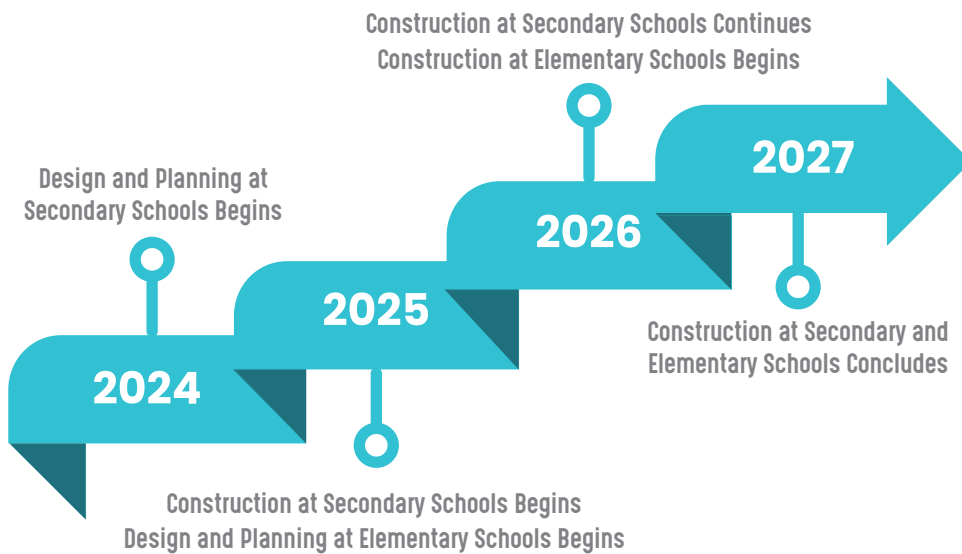


Securing Our Future.

Supporting Our Students.

Thank You Voters

We are grateful for the community's support in our recent bond and levy election.



Construction Plan Phasing

- Recently began the design and planning process for 15 construction projects across the district.
- The highest priority items in the bond election will be the first to start the design process – addressing safety and security and overcrowding in our secondary schools.
- This spring, and continuing for the next year, architects are meeting with groups of staff to gather input, feedback and start the design work for additions and renovations at Cottage Grove, Lake, Oltman and Woodbury middle schools, as well as East Ridge, Park and Woodbury high schools.
- In January 2025, design and planning work will begin for our elementary school construction projects at Bailey, Crestview, Grey Cloud, Hillside, Pine Hill, Pullman, Red Rock and Royal Oaks elementary schools.
- After the design phase is completed for each project, construction permits for the work will be secured and the request for proposals (RFP) bidding process for the construction will begin.
- SoWashCo Schools hopes to have the first construction projects completed by Fall 2026 and all the construction projects done by Fall 2027.

Learn more at sowashco.org/construction.

Park High School

User Groups have held several meetings to identify and discuss:

- Kitchen and cafeteria needs
- Priorities of locations for services in the front entryway
- Space needs for Science, Art, Business, Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) and Robotics
- Beginning conversations about improving traffic flow

East Ridge High School

User Groups have held several meetings to identify and discuss:

- Functionality of pod layouts
- Space needs for Science, Art, Business, Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) and Robotics
- Space needs for online learners
- Kitchen and cafeteria needs

Woodbury High School

User Groups began meeting in mid-February to identify and discuss:

- The scope and schedule for the project
- The proximity and space needs for administrative and support services
- Ideas for the design of the cafeteria/commons area to best support students
- Priorities of the media center renovation

Oltman Middle School

User Groups began meeting in mid-January to identify and discuss:

- The scope and schedule for the project
- Priorities of the classroom addition for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM)
- Special Education space
- Support staff space
- Kitchen and cafeteria space needs and flow

Woodbury Middle School

User Groups began meeting in mid-February to identify and discuss:

- The scope and schedule for the project
- The proximity and space needs for administrative and support services in the main office area
- Possible location of a third music space
- Ideas for a multipurpose space located in the former pool area that could meet various needs both during the school day and beyond.

Cottage Grove Middle School

User Groups will begin meeting in April.

Opt-in for 2024-25 Transportation



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South Washington County Schools (SoWashCo Schools) will continue the opt-in transportation system to help ensure the most efficient routing for general education students eligible to ride a school bus. **The opt-in form will be sent to eligible families in March.**

Things to know about Opt-In Transportation

- You will need to complete a form for each child.
- Families that **do not complete the form for each child will be opted out** of transportation services for the 2024-25 school year.
- Non-busing zone distances of 1 mile for elementary school students, 1.5 miles for middle school students and 2 miles for high school students are subject to change.

Visit sowashco.org/transportation to learn more about our transportation services or if you are interested in becoming a bus driver or bus assistant.



Stay Active this Spring and Summer

SoWashCo Community Education offers activities and classes for community members of all ages. Look for our spring and summer catalog, which arrived in mailboxes in early March or view the catalog online at comm.ed.sowashco.org. Be active, be inspired and be engaged through community education!

Browse the latest classes and register online at sowashco.ce.eleyo.com.



Enroll in Kindergarten

Children who are five years old on or before Sept. 1 are eligible to start kindergarten in the 2024-25 school year.

If your child is entering kindergarten or is new to the district submit an enrollment application at sowashco.org/enroll

Si necesita un intérprete, llame al Danilo McCarthy. 651-425-7209.

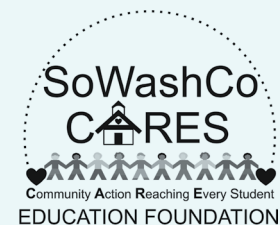
Early Childhood Screening is Recommended at Age 3

Early Childhood Screening is a free and simple check of how your child is growing and developing. Screening is recommended at age 3 and is required by the State of Minnesota for any child entering kindergarten in a public school.

Why screen at age 3?

- Find out how your child is growing and developing
- Have more time to provide support if needed
- Get connected to early education programs and resources
- Take care of it before Kindergarten begins

If your child has not yet been screened and is between the ages of 3 and 5, please call the Early Learning office to schedule an appointment at 651-425-6175 or visit sowashco.org/screening.



SoWashCo CARES Awards \$10,000 in Classroom Grants

SoWashCo CARES Education Foundation is the community-led, non-profit that supports the SoWashCo Schools community. SoWashCo CARES provides support in four focus areas: Basic Needs, Access to Opportunities, Staff Appreciation and Community Building.

SoWashCo CARES introduced their mini-grant program to support classroom needs brought forth by SoWashCo Schools staff. \$10,000 in funding was set aside for the 2023-24 school year. This fall SoWashCo CARES awarded five grants for a total of \$4100. A second round of grants is in the process of being reviewed for approval.

Thank you SoWashCo CARES for helping to build a community that cares.

Learn more at sowashcocares.org.

Learn more at sowashco.org | 7



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