

COMMUNITY Connections

Spring 2024



A newsletter for the communities of Stillwater Area Public Schools



Things Are Changing

We asked students, families and staff what they wanted from our schools. And it turns out, they just want more of the things that really matter. They want to belong. To be challenged. To have a voice. They want to know students in our schools will be well prepared for the future.

We are committed to creating a culture that supports all of our students and staff so that they can be their best. We want our entire community to “Expect More” from Stillwater Area Public Schools.

Focusing on what matters

This year we’ve been shifting our focus, realigning our resources and developing a clear plan to ensure the things you want are the things we’re providing. We’re raising our expectations, not by doing more things, but by doing a few fundamental things better. You can read more about our Pony Plan at stillwaterschools.org/strategicplan.

Our main priorities are:

- Literacy
- School Culture/Equity & Inclusion
- Social Emotional Learning & Mental Health

Investing in our priorities

District leaders are utilizing a new Priority-Based Budgeting (PBB) process to ensure money is being invested in areas that support the district’s strategic goals. PBB identifies the programs that offer the highest value and continues to provide funding for them, while fixing, replacing or eliminating programs or services that have shown a lesser return on investment.



Expanding access to books

Students across the district have checked out 15,000 more books so far this year than they did last year thanks to an increase in media center staffing.

With financial support from the technology levy approved by voters in 2021, all of our elementary schools’ media centers are staffed full-time - giving kids more opportunities to check out books. The district has also invested in a media specialist to support libraries at the middle schools and high school.

Providing students with more access to books is just one way the district is working to improve literacy scores and foster a love of reading.



Getting real about mental health

The number of young people experiencing mental health issues is climbing at alarming rates, not just nationally, but right here in Stillwater area schools. And it’s having a big impact on our students’ ability to learn and engage in class.

When emotions are big, learning is difficult. Mental health issues impact not just the individual students themselves, but sometimes, can impact the entire classroom.

That’s why district staff are working hard to better understand and identify mental health issues and normalize conversations about emotional wellness. They’re also learning to assess their students’ emotions throughout the year - watching to see if any kids are becoming more argumentative, withdrawn, fearful or impulsive. This is all in an attempt to identify emotional or behavioral issues early and ensure students receive the support they need.

More than
200 staff trained in
Mental Health 101

3,350 students
screened for
emotional/behavioral
concerns



Creating a kinder school district

Students across the school district are learning to feel more comfortable in their own skin while appreciating that not everyone looks, talks or thinks like them. Through intentional efforts, our teachers are helping students value and appreciate differences and cultivate empathy for others. It’s all a part of creating a safe and welcoming school community that promotes learning.

Students in our elementary and middle schools are participating in Kindness Retreats and engaging in discussions about anti-bullying, how to positively deal with unkind situations and find ways to make their school a more welcoming place.

At the high school, kids have the opportunity to attend an annual Voices of Change conference that allows them to talk openly about the challenges they face, or have faced - from racism to inequitable access to resources and activities. Students of different backgrounds, cultures, races, and religions meet in small and large groups to share ideas and develop solutions to address issues in their school.

Changing the way students learn to read

The way children are learning how to read is changing in our schools and across the state of Minnesota. Teachers are implementing new strategies based on the science of reading, which focuses on brain development and how students physically learn to read.

Over the past two years, more than 100 kindergarten and first grade teachers have had the opportunity to be trained in LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling). LETRS training delves into the fundamental components of reading instruction, covering topics such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension and language development.

Next year, all of our elementary teachers, special educators and other staff who support literacy will be trained in LETRS as part of the state’s new READ Act. The act, which is designed to ensure every Minnesota child is reading at or above grade level every year, requires that students be taught phonics and decoding and requires districts to purchase curriculum and train teachers in what’s known as “structured literacy.”

Want to learn more about how we’re teaching kids to read? Check out this video: stillwaterschools.org/literacy.



- We offer more for every child
- We equip kids to successfully navigate their future
- We inspire our students - and our staff - to be the best version of themselves
- We create a culture of belonging, where all are welcome, seen and heard
- We enthusiastically embrace our Pony Pride and contribute to the vitality of our community



A Legacy Of Excellence

There’s a reason our schools have a reputation for academic excellence and are recognized for world-class music, performing arts and athletic achievement. It’s because we are committed to giving students opportunities and supporting them with caring adults who help them be their best.



6th grade students named national finalists in STEM competition

Students in Corrie Christiansen’s science class at Stillwater Middle School are one of ten national finalists in the Samsung Solve for Tomorrow STEM competition. The title earned them \$50,000 in prizes on top of \$12,000 earned for the Minnesota state championship. Their project centers on helping reduce the impact of light pollution on nighttime bird migration in the St. Croix Valley. The 11- and 12-year-olds will pitch their idea in Washington, D.C. next month for a chance to be named one of three National Winners who will each receive a \$100,000 prize package.

A Culture Of Belonging

For our students to reach their full potential, they need to feel connected and safe. We are committed to creating a district where everyone is welcome. Everyone belongs. All voices are heard, differences are embraced and every person is treated with dignity and respect.



A cheer squad designed for all Ponies!

The high school’s new adapted cheer squad is building strong crowd participation at Pony competitions this year, and giving voice to students who aren’t typically heard. You’ll find this group of unique cheerleaders on the sidelines at adapted sports competitions, including adapted soccer, adopted floor hockey and the Unified Basketball team.

The squad is an offshoot of the high school’s TRUST Club, a group of students with and without disabilities who get together throughout the year for special events and fun activities that foster inclusivity and celebrate school spirit.

The adapted cheer squad offers an alternative for students who might not be able to participate in traditional activities. It is also a fun way to bring teens of all abilities together. The cheer squad’s presence on the sidelines inspires the entire school community to celebrate individual differences and embrace the potential within each person.



Breaking down language and cultural barriers

Understanding how to navigate our schools can be complicated - especially if no one in the building speaks your language or understands your culture. For hundreds of families in our district, supporting their students’ education has gotten a bit easier this year thanks to several new Student, Family & Community Engagement Specialists.

The specialists are working as a link between families and staff at Oak-Land Middle School, Brookview Elementary, Lake Elmo Elementary and Stillwater Area High School. The specialists serve the Latino/Hispanic and East African communities.

As engagement specialists, they’re not only helping families understand school culture, they also help teachers and support staff understand the culture and experiences of students and their families. While communicating in the families preferred language, they can answer questions about enrollment and conferences, guardian/teacher meetings and other school concerns. They help break down language and cultural barriers and build positive relationships with families and school staff.



Middle school student wins state gifted and talented award

Sienna Granquist was presented with the 2023 Star of the North Award by the Minnesota Educators of the Gifted and Talented. The award recognizes a Minnesota 5-8 grade student who has outstanding accomplishment in one or more of the following areas: academic, visual or performing arts, and leadership.

SAHS students recognized for their essays on personal success

Stillwater Area High School students Matthew Felty and Brendyn Van Houten were recently recognized as finalists in the Best Prep Student Spotlight competition. The students earned the recognition by responding to a prompt to share thoughts on how pillars of success will be key to their personal success.



Rob Bach recognized as best principal in the state

Stillwater Area High School principal Rob Bach has been named 2024 Minnesota High School Principal of the Year. He was chosen by the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals out of more than 1,200 high school principals in the state. Bach is now one of just 50 educators nationwide in the running for National High School Principal of the Year.

Students showcase their business acumen

The Business Professionals of America (BPA) club at Stillwater Area High School had a strong showing in the State Leadership Conference. Five members medaled in the top-10 with two students, Riddhi Singhvi and Coolsjes Singhvi, advancing to the National Leadership Conference in Chicago.



Finding a place to belong

In a high school of about 2,600 students and middle schools of about 1,000, it’s incredibly important that students have a place to connect and belong. That’s the magic of the more than 50 different clubs and affinity groups that exist at SAHS, and dozens more that exist at our two middle schools. Affinity groups are even being offered at many of our elementary



schools as a way to build connections and support students. Whether it’s a group of students who share common beliefs or political ideologies, come from similar cultures or backgrounds, or just enjoy the same TV show or game, these clubs offer a space where students can truly be themselves without judgment.

Find a full list of clubs on goponies.org.



Room To Grow

In November 2023, voters approved a \$175 million bond to provide more learning spaces for our growing enrollment, replace aging facilities and improve school safety and security.

Design phase is underway for new learning spaces

Teachers, school support staff, administrators and parents have been meeting with architects for several months to start designing new elementary schools in Bayport and Lake Elmo. Design teams will also be coming together this spring to start planning for remodeled spaces at both Oak-Land Middle School and Stillwater Area High School. Once designs are complete, the projects go out for bid. Bids will be awarded, permits obtained and site work will begin.

Construction on all of the projects is expected to start about this time next year and the new buildings will open for fall 2026.



District purchases property for new schools

The school district now owns a 47-acre site on the corner of Lake Elmo Avenue and 10th St. N., in Lake Elmo. Officials closed on the sale of the property in March after receiving approvals from Lake Elmo city officials to rezone the property and hook up to city water and sewer. The property will be home to the new Lake Elmo Elementary School.

District officials expect to finalize the purchase of a 10 acre parcel of land on 5th Avenue North in Bayport later this spring. This site will be home to a new school that would replace the current Andersen Elementary. The site is adjacent to Barker's Alps Park and the district has signed an agreement with the city of Bayport for use of the park's ballfields and green spaces.

District officials have not yet determined plans for the current Andersen and Lake Elmo buildings once the new schools have opened.

Community Pride

Retired chemist brings a positive reaction to the classroom!



As a retired 3M polymer chemist, Todd Williams regularly volunteers with Shelly Holmberg's high school chemistry students. Through his work with the American Chemical Society, he tutors students and assists with demonstrations to encourage future scientists.



Stillwater alum's PALS program connects cops and kids

Stillwater Police officer Stephen Papke (Class of 2007) returns to his former elementary school several times each month as part of Police at Local Schools - a program he founded. Papke and his coworkers are looking to build positive relationships between law enforcement and students. They are now regulars at Rutherford, Stonebridge and Lily Lake elementary schools eating lunch, playing at recess and attending concerts.

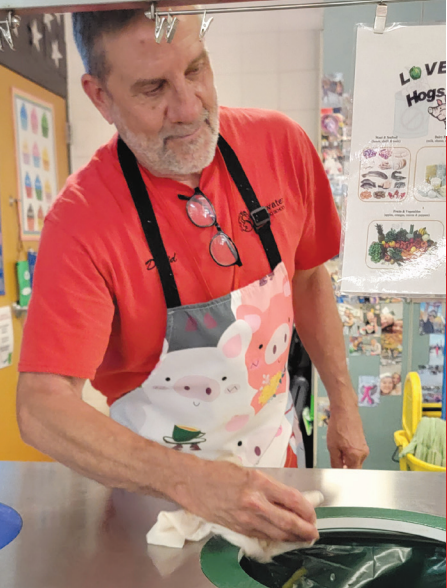


Building readers, building relationships

In a partnership with the Stillwater Sunrise Rotary Literacy Project, young readers are visited by Volunteers for Elementary School Literacy (VESL). These VESL volunteers support teachers as they help students learn to read by focusing on fluency and phonetics. In addition to building relationships with students through reading and one-on-one attention to ensure they are reading at grade level, VESL volunteers provide media center support in elementary schools.

From lunch trays to pig buffets

Stillwater schools has been awarded a \$69,000 grant from Washington County to help fight food waste. Since 2007, food scraps have been collected from our cafeterias and sent to Barthold's Farms, where it's cooked and fed to more than 2,000 pigs. Last fiscal year alone, we diverted 3,603 barrels of leftovers from landfills to feed our hog friends. This win-win helps the environment and saves the district money on disposal costs, landfill fees and taxes.



It Takes A Valley

Every day our students and staff benefit from the tremendous support of our Pony community. Generations of local organizations and individuals have rallied behind our kids to make this a great place to learn and grow. Through voter support of bond and levy referendums, fan support at school events and athletic contests, and generous donations of time and talent this community supports our schools. Thank you!



Independent School District 834
1875 South Greeley Street
Stillwater, Minnesota 55082

Non-Profit Org
U.S. Postage
PAID
Stillwater, MN
Permit No. 192

ECRWSS
POSTAL PATRON

CONNECT WITH YOUR LOCAL SCHOOLS



See a Show



Go to a Sporting Event



Enjoy a Concert

Visit our Pony Fan Hub for a calendar of high school sporting events, concerts and shows
goponies.org/fan-hub

Buy tickets online at ***stillwaterschools.org/tickets***

Get A Free Senior Citizen Pass

Community members age 62+ can enjoy complimentary admission to many high school events. Pick up a pass in-person at the Central Services Building, 1875 South Greeley Street in Stillwater or call 651-351-8340 to request a pass by mail.

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

Learn more about Stillwater Area Public Schools

stillwaterschools.org | 651-351-8340



Stillwater834



StillwaterSchools834



Pony Voices Podcast