

# THE DISTRICT DISPATCH

School News & Updates  
for the School District 197  
Community

**Summer 2024**



*Moreland Arts and Health Sciences Magnet School students, staff, and community members celebrate the school's new mural on the last day of school.*

## WHAT'S INSIDE

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Celebrating the Class of 2024

Honoring District Retirees

Confluence Literary & Arts  
Publication

A Look at Moreland's New Mural  
And More!

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**Why are you receiving this publication?** You live within our school district boundaries and/or have a student enrolled in our schools! As a taxpayer and/or a district family, we want to keep you informed about our schools and the impact your support has on creating a successful educational environment. Thank you for being an integral part of our community's success.

## From the Superintendent

I hope you're having a great summer. This time of year is perfect for reflection, looking ahead, and planning for ways to better support our students, staff, and families. One of our strengths in School District 197 is our strong sense of community. A strong school community creates a win-win situation for everyone involved—it fosters a positive learning environment, builds connections across differences, and creates a shared journey of growth.

In this issue of the District Dispatch, we have several examples of just how important a strong school community is. In our alum feature, you'll see the lasting impact of a connected community and how it extends far beyond the classroom walls. You'll meet a remarkable group of retirees and learn how decades of working with students and families can create exceptional educational outcomes. You'll also see what's possible when a community rallies together to show pride in their school (hint: take a look at the picture above!).

We are grateful for your active participation in our community—your partnership is essential to our collective success. I look forward to seeing you and your families out and about this summer. If you see me or a school board member at a community event, please say hello! Otherwise, I look forward to seeing you in the fall.

Peter Olson-Skog, Superintendent

**Nurture. Inspire. Prepare. Together, we thrive.**





# DISTRICT HIGHLIGHTS

## Shining a light on the incredible achievements of our students, staff, and schools!

### Two Rivers High School Earns Top 5% Ranking

Two Rivers has again secured a spot on this year's U.S. News & World Report's Best High Schools list. Out of 896 high schools in Minnesota, Two Rivers ranked in the top 5% based on test scores, access to and participation in college-level learning, and more. Even more exciting, this year's ranking is an improvement from last year's top 10% spot!

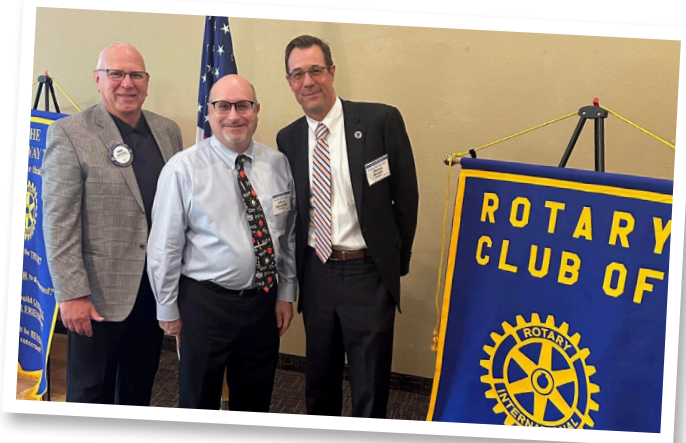


### Congratulations Parent Academy Graduates

We recently celebrated the incredible achievements of our District parents and caregivers at the annual Parent Academy graduation! Parent Academy is a six-week course for School District 197 parents and caregivers designed to connect them to their child's school, post-secondary resources, and other parents in the school community.

### Pilot Knob Teacher Awarded Teacher of the Year

Mr. Oppenheim, a beloved educator at Pilot Knob, has received the Eagan Rotary Club Teacher of the Year award! Mr. Oppenheim has been teaching for 30+ years, and his students appreciate him for his humor, puppetry, ukulele skills, and his love of all things Snoopy. Congratulations, Mr. Oppenheim!



### Mendota Elementary Honors Mary Jo Skemp

Mendota Elementary dedicated a new outdoor space in memory of beloved former teacher Mary Jo Skemp. The space, featuring a pergola, seating area, and garden, allows students to relax, read, and enjoy nature while reflecting on Mary Jo's lasting impact. Thanks to Anna Thul, Deb Krohn, Mary Gilsdorf, and Steve Goldade for their dedication to making this special tribute a reality.



## Two Rivers Receives Digital Wellbeing Award

Two Rivers High School has received the Commitment to Digital Wellbeing Excellence Award from LiveMore ScreenLess. This award honors the Two Rivers administration and faculty for leading the school community to foster a school environment that elevates balanced, intentional, and responsible use of technology.



## Celebrating Creativity at Odyssey of the Mind

Students from Heritage E-Stem Magnet School, Friendly Hills Middle School, and Garlough Environmental Magnet School brought their creativity and teamwork to the Minnesota Odyssey of the Mind HQ State Tournament, hosted at Garlough. This competition celebrates wild ideas, brainstorming solutions, and turning imagination into reality. Students tackled challenges that involved everything from rubber band-powered vehicles to inventing new musical instruments!



## Welcoming New School Board Leadership

At the January 8 school board meeting, four new and returning board members were sworn in: Tim Aune, Morgan Steele, Byron Schwab (returning), and Randi Walz. Sarah Larsen was elected Chair, Jon Vaupel was elected Vice Chair, and Byron Schwab was elected Treasurer. The school board at this year's Two Rivers graduation ceremony is pictured here.



## Somerset Celebrates 35 Years of Intergenerational Friendships

For 35 years, Somerset Elementary School has been running its SPIFF Program—Special Pals Involved in Fun Friendships. This intergenerational program pairs second graders with older adults in the community for fun get-togethers, including reading, art projects, and learning activities. Started by former Somerset second-grade teacher Alex Messicci in 1989, SPIFF continues to connect generations and strengthen the community. Special thanks to all the pals involved!







# Congratulations

## Two Rivers High School Class of 2024!

We are thrilled to celebrate the outstanding achievements of the Class of 2024!  
More than 300 students recently completed their journey at Two Rivers High School,  
and we are incredibly proud of each and every one of them. Here's to their bright futures!





# Graduate Features

Meet four new graduates who excelled in academics, arts, athletics, and fostering a positive school community while at Two Rivers.

## What is your favorite memory from Two Rivers?

Having the opportunity to create a mental health mural on the school walls. I was able to be fully creative with the mural and it will now be a part of School District 197 forever.

## Which staff member made a lasting impact on you?

Ms. Henry has given me confidence that I can be a teacher that will change future generations. She's become my inspiration for how I want to influence students' lives.

**What extracurricular activities were most meaningful to you?** Student Council has taught me so much. I've tried very hard to be a successful president to everyone involved. I devoted a lot of my senior year trying to improve the school.

**What would you like to share with your teachers?** I'm grateful for the opportunities that every teacher I've had has given me. You all have changed the way I will go about life after high school. You are changing students' lives every day and I hope you all feel appreciated!



Grace Pierce



Samuel Dereje

## Which staff member made a lasting impact on you?

Mrs. Ryan has been the biggest support for me. She supported me when I was getting used to being in the United States for the first time. She motivated me to pursue academic success for a brighter future, and I am truly grateful.

**What extracurricular activities were most meaningful to you?** The Superintendent Student Advisory Council. This council allowed me to contribute to the development of my District. The chance to meet with the superintendent and provide my insight for improving our schools brought me immense joy.

**What advice would you give to younger students?** Try to have a clear goal earlier on, and don't let negative things get in the way of your educational aspirations.

**What would you like to share with your teachers?** Thank you, teachers, for being there and providing the support and encouragement I needed to get to where I am now. I could not have done it without your support!

## What is your favorite memory from Two Rivers?

A couple of top choices have to be doing well at Speech/Debate tournaments, watching telenovelas in Spanish class, and making new friends in all my activities.

## Which staff member made a lasting impact on you?

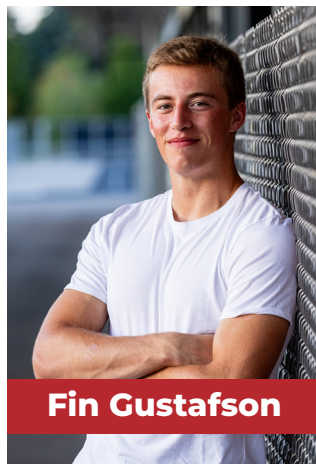
Benjamin Geiger has most definitely impacted me the most. As both my Debate and Speech coach he has helped me become more upstanding, confident in my abilities, and better at speaking for what I believe in while doing it well.

**What extracurricular activities or clubs were most meaningful to you?** Speech and Debate as well as Band for sure. Without them, I wouldn't be who I am today.

**What advice would you give to younger students?** Get involved. It may sound like a broken record but it's super important. Try new things out! The worst that'll come of it is that you don't like it and don't do it again. All of the extracurriculars I've been in have been invaluable and I wouldn't trade them for anything, so go out and find your community!



Grace Lyles



Fin Gustafson

**What is your favorite memory from Two Rivers?** I have so many great memories, one being meeting our current principal, Dr. Johnson. He is so fun to be around, and the best kind of person you could know. I also think one of my favorite memories is lunchtime. It's a small moment during the day, but I can just sit and eat with my friends for a little bit. It doesn't feel special on a day-to-day basis, but I feel like I will miss it the most.

**What extracurricular activities were most meaningful to you?** At Two Rivers I was on the Boys Swim and Dive team, the Soccer team, a member of NHS, and the JSU. The most meaningful part of them all to me were the people. My teammates, friends, and fellow club members were the ones that made them so fun to be a part of.

**What advice would you give to younger students?** To find a way to enjoy learning. Try to prioritize understanding a topic over grades or scores. Both are important, but the grade will come if you work to deeply understand a topic. It's okay to struggle, so stick with it and ask for help.

**What would you like to share with your teachers?** I want to say a big thank you. I know teaching is an incredibly difficult job, and I appreciate all the teachers who dedicate themselves to their students.



# A FOND FARWELL

## Honoring School District 197 Retirees

With heartfelt thanks for their years of service to our school community, we bid farewell to staff members leaving for new adventures. We wish them all the best in their retirement!



### **MATT HURON | Heritage E-STEM Magnet School**

Matt has worked in School District 197 for more than 30 years, spending all of his time as a teacher at Heritage (for a few of those years, it was still Grass Junior High!). He's taught primarily social studies and AVID. He's also served as an Instructional Peer Coach, mentoring and supporting new teachers as they enter the District.



### **SARAH KANTOLA | Moreland Arts and Health Sciences Magnet School**

Sarah Kantola has taught for 38 years. Four of those years were at Garlough Environmental Magnet School, and 18 were at Moreland. For the last 17 years, she has served as a Reading Intervention teacher at Moreland. Sarah says she'll miss the day-to-day interaction with friends, colleagues, students, and families.



### **JOANNE LAUBACH | Two Rivers High School**

Joanne Laubach is a longtime Two Rivers team member who works as a special education paraprofessional in the science department. Her file maintenance skills also play a critical role in the department. Joanne's two daughters graduated from Henry Sibley, and she worked for over 10 years in the band program and served on the band board.



### **JULIE POPPITZ | Mendota Elementary School**

Julie Poppitz has taught for 40 years, with 37 of those years at Mendota Elementary School. Julie says she'll miss the great community of students, teachers, administrators, and families she has worked with. She'll also miss the smiles and fun that come with working in a school.



### **KAYE WOHLWEND | Community of Saints Regional Catholic School and St. Croix Lutheran School**

Kaye Wohlwend is a special education teacher at Community of Saints Regional Catholic School and St. Croix Lutheran School. For over a decade, Kaye has been instrumental in ensuring that all students receive the support they need as School District 197 extends its services to numerous local nonpublic schools.



# Warrior Alum Profile

## From School District 197 to Filmmaking Success

Andrew Zuckerman, Dillon Orth, and John Cronin—three alums of Henry Sibley (now Two Rivers High School)—are making their mark in the film industry and have returned to their hometown to shoot their latest project, a comedic sports movie titled "Good Sport."



### MEET THE ALUMS

#### Andrew Zuckerman Class of 2017

**Post-High School:** Attended New York University and the University of Minnesota

**Current Role:** Directing and editing commercials and feature films

#### Dillon Orth Class of 2017

**Post-High School:** Studied Film Production at DePaul University in Chicago with minors in Spanish and Business Administration

**Current Role:** Employment Specialist in Chicago and a filmmaker

#### John Cronin Class of 2017

**Post-High School:** Attended Minneapolis College and the University of Minnesota

**Current Role:** Associate Director of Development at The ALS Association and filmmaker



### The Filmmaking Journey

Andrew, Dillon, and John discovered a shared passion for writing and acting, eventually leading them to produce films together. Since high school, they have collaborated on three short films and two feature films. The three filmmakers emphasize that their time in School District 197 equipped them with essential critical thinking, collaboration, time management, and leadership skills. Teachers like Mr. Guinn and Mrs. Temple had a lasting impact on their approach to film and life.

Their latest film, "Good Sport," is a satirical take on youth sports. Co-written by Andrew and Dillon and co-produced by John, it was shot in the gym at Heritage E-STEM Magnet School and other locations in West St. Paul.

### Words of Wisdom

For students interested in pursuing a similar path, John advises, "Experience is often the best teacher, so don't be afraid to take chances and fail." Dillon adds, "Create what excites you with whoever shares your interests."

The trio extends their gratitude to the staff of School District 197: "Thank you to our teachers who played a role in educating us. We don't forget the impact you've had on our careers. To all students, know you have alumni to lean on for career advice and support."

We're grateful that these talented filmmakers continue to stay connected to the community that helped shape them, and we look forward to watching their work and success grow!



**Experience is often the best teacher, so don't be afraid to take chances and fail."**

John Cronin





# Bringing the Inside Magic to the Outside

## Moreland Unveils New Mural

Nearly five years ago, Moreland Arts & Health Sciences families began to dream and wonder how to showcase their school pride and bring the vibrant energy from inside the building to its exterior. The idea of creating a large-scale community mural took root. After three years of fundraising by the Moreland PTA, this spring saw the realization of that dream—aligning perfectly with this year's school magnet theme, "It's Possible."

### Designing the Mural

The Moreland PTA partnered with GoodSpace Murals for a school-wide residency project. The design process began in December 2023, when artist and GoodSpace owner Greta McLain held listening sessions with students and staff, asking questions like "What makes Moreland unique?" and "What does being a Moreland Monarch mean to you?" The school community also provided input about what they wanted to see in the mural. Greta crafted the design based on these ideas.

### Making the Magic Happen

Once the design was complete, the painting started! Greta returned in April to guide Moreland students and staff in painting the mural. GoodSpace Murals uses an indirect technique where murals are painted on canvas sheets before being installed on the wall. This paint-by-numbers approach allowed everyone to contribute to the mural's creation, fostering a sense of belonging and community.

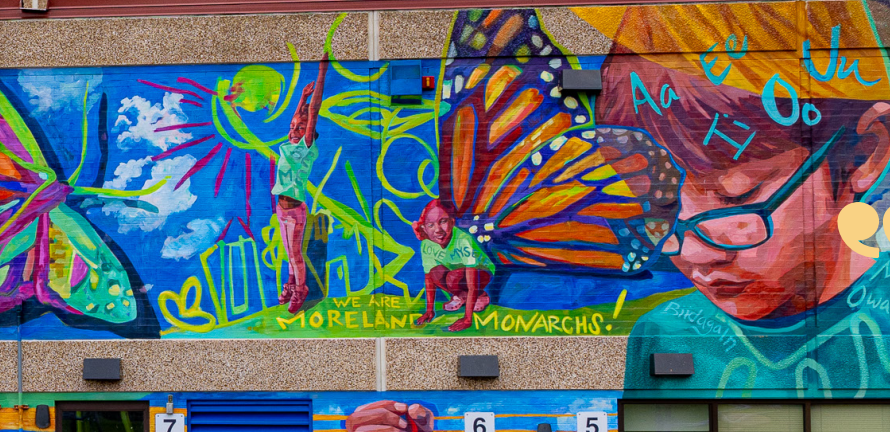
The community was also invited to help paint the mural at a community paint party. Hundreds of people attended Moreland's community painting party. Rotary Club members, grandparents, city officials, and neighbors all showed up to help contribute to the community art project.

### It's Possible

During the last two weeks of school, the mural was installed like permanent wallpaper, ensuring its longevity of at least 20 years. Then, on the last day of school, Moreland celebrated the unveiling of the new mural—complete with singing, speeches, and even a freeze-pop toast to what can be accomplished when we work together.







Moreland students are not just residents of this community; they are integral parts of it. Their involvement in painting this mural fosters a sense of belonging and pride in their surroundings."

Greta McLain, Muralist  
GoodSpace Murals

## Student Reflections

We asked the students featured in the mural what they thought about it, and here's what some of them had to say:

**Nicholas, first grade, on why the mural is important:** "When you look at the mural, at yourself, it looks like you are looking at a mirror... It makes my heart happy."

**Rayaan, second grade, on what her favorite part of the process was:** "When we painted it together as a whole school in the art room. [That was my favorite] because the kids made it and grown-ups usually make it all the time."

**Alexa, fourth grade, on why the mural is important:** "It's an arts school, and the mural adds to that [feeling]. Moreland is a very special school to me and the mural makes Moreland more special in its own way."



The creation of this mural at Moreland is a testament to the power of community, creativity, and collective effort. It stands as a lasting symbol of pride, belonging, and the enduring spirit of the Moreland Monarchs.

## ISD 197 Educational Foundation Awards 2024 Grants

The ISD 197 Educational Foundation is proud to announce it has awarded 31 grants this year, nearly doubling its impact from last year! This year's grants will cover library updates, after-school youth enrichment scholarships, STEM bins, large motor equipment for early learning programs, and more.

Thank you to everyone who attended the foundation's May luncheon—complete with special guest, Henry Sibley alum Ann Bancroft!—and for supporting the Annual Warrior 5K Family Run/Walk. **Save the date for this year's Warrior 5K on September 28, 2024!**



*Ann Bancroft, world-renowned polar explorer and founder of the Ann Bancroft Foundation, was the featured speaker at the ISD 197 Education Foundation luncheon fundraiser this spring. Ann grew up in Mendota Heights, graduated from Henry Sibley High School in 1974, and was inducted into the Warrior Hall of Fame in 2023. Photo by Andy Berndt – Community Blueprint.*



# CONFLUENCE

## Literary and Arts Publication

We're proud to present this year's Confluence literary and arts publication that showcases an impressive collection of writing and art by School District 197 fourth graders—all focusing on this year's theme: *Celebrate Imagination*. Students explored how stories spark creativity, ignite curiosity, and transport us to amazing worlds. In this issue, you'll find whimsical poems, enchanting tales, and creative artwork.

Four of the submissions are featured here, and the rest can be found at [isd197.org/confluence2024](https://isd197.org/confluence2024) or by clicking on the QR Code.



### A Child's Imagination

**By: Ava Stocking**

If you try to stop the imagination of a child.  
That idea at the start is pretty wild!  
Simply a child's imagination is not just an "it."  
It also is not just a little bit.  
A child's imagination can be their thinking.  
Their thinking can be faster than blinking!  
A child's imagination,  
Can be their own creation!  
From unicorns to flying cars.  
They can imagine running around on Mars!  
A child's imagination can be their type of thought.  
That's something that could never be bought.



### Joy

**By: Eala Cotton**

Joy is everywhere  
It is in the Earth, the ground and the trees.  
In the serenity of the sunset sky.  
In the exuberance of your favorite team  
winning the game.  
In the living beauty of all humans.  
In the perfect family get-togethers.  
In the exercise of your favorite dance.  
In the beauty of cardinals.  
In the pleasure of laughing about a funny joke.  
Joy is everywhere.



### Reading

**By: Arie O'Keefe**

Reading a book feeling peaceful,  
running through the pages,  
meeting different characters,  
feeling the book in my hands,  
seeing the words on the pages,  
imagining the scenery in my head,  
looking at the trees in the forest,  
seeing rivers slither like snakes,  
hearing a waterfall splash,  
reading a book,  
feeling peaceful.



### Swimming is a Puzzle

**By: Ben Wilcox**

Floating on a piece of jigsaw puzzle  
Connected to the other seas  
Divers piecing together problems  
Gliding through the vastness  
Schools of fish connect  
Bubbles create pictures  
Dashing by corners and shapes  
Many different colors and sizes  
Deep sea fishers collecting things  
Just one last cast into the water



Some of the fourth-grade students who contributed to this year's Confluence publication were honored at the June 3 School Board meeting. Pictured here are Eala Cotton (Mendota), Linnea Lichtsinn and Lucy Borgstahl (co-writers from Somerset), Ava Stocking (Moreland), Kendyl Blood (Pilot Knob), and Emily Grace Rosas Morales (Garlough) with Superintendent Peter Olson-Skog and Board Chair Sarah Larsen.



# Back-to-School Guide for the 2024-25 School Year



As we prepare for the start of the school year, our calendars and to-do lists fill up quickly with important tasks and dates. Here is a condensed list of resources and information to help you navigate everything from school meals to important upcoming events. Make sure to click the QR code for the full guide.



## Meet and Greet Orientations

Each school hosts meet-and-greets and/or orientations at the beginning of the school year to welcome students and families. These events provide an opportunity to meet teachers, staff, and fellow classmates, tour the school, receive important information about the upcoming year, and get excited for the year ahead.

## Application for Educational Benefits

While all students will receive free breakfast and lunch during the school year, it remains critical that all families complete an Application for Educational Benefits each school year. These applications determine how much funding your child's school receives for educational programs and supports. Additionally, eligible families can qualify for other benefits.

## School Meals

Every student will receive one free complete breakfast meal and one complete lunch meal each school day. If your student wants seconds, just a milk, or à la carte items, they will need money in their account.

## Transportation

Previously registered students will be automatically rolled forward to the new year. Only new students or those with address, daycare, or bus service changes need to register. Registered students should have received a card in the mail with their current information. If you need to register, please do so by August 1.

## Fall Activities

Registration for fall high school athletics and activities opened on July 1. The fall high school sports season starts on August 12. Registration for fall middle school athletics opens on August 1, and practices will start after the school year begins. Sports physicals are required and good for three years—make sure you have yours ready when you register.



## Save the Dates

Our fun district-wide fall events are listed below and we hope you'll join us!

### Warrior Rally

September 14  
11am - 1pm

### Homecoming parade and game

Friday, September 27  
5pm parade / 6:30pm game

### Warrior 5K

Saturday, September 28  
9am - 11am

### Makers Market

Saturday, November 9  
9am - 3pm





West St. Paul + Mendota Heights + Eagan Area

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[isd197.org](http://isd197.org)

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# SUMMER fun

with Community Education

School District 197 Community Education offers a variety of enriching activities during the summer months, catering to all ages, interests, and abilities. Here's a glimpse of some offerings:

## **FAMILY PROGRAMMING** **FREE!**

### **Tour de Rec Summer 2024**

Every Tuesday from 1:30-2:30 p.m., various locations  
Themes include Water Day, Science Day, Crafts & Scavenger Hunts

## **ADULT 55+**

### **Chill with Music and Ice Cream**

July 24, 1-2 p.m., Thompson Park Activity Center

## **ADULT ENRICHMENT**

### **Nature Journaling: A Multicultural Perspective**

July 25, 5-7:45 p.m., Two Rivers High School

## **ACCESS PROJECT (ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES)**

### **End of Summer Picnic Party**

August 16, 5:30-7:30 p.m.,  
Thompson Park Picnic Pavilion



Click the QR code to  
learn more and register.

