

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

Be seen. Be heard. Be bold.



Watch the Video

Visit the SoWashCo Schools YouTube channel to watch a video about the program.

SoWashCo Schools Donates 10,000 Pounds of Food to Local Food Shelf

South Washington County Schools (SoWashCo Schools) has donated more than 10,000 pounds of food to the local food shelf, Basic Needs, since the beginning of the school year.

It's all part of the Food Rescue Program, a partnership between SoWashCo Schools and Basic Needs. Students who have unwanted and uneaten packaged food are encouraged to place the item on the donation shelf. Each week, volunteers collect the food donations at the schools and deliver them to Basic Needs.

The food is then made available to anyone in the community who needs it.

The pilot program started at five schools at the beginning of the school year and has now grown to 20 of our 23 schools that serve meals twice daily.



Wendy Peterson, SoWashCo Schools Director of Student Nutrition, plans to expand the Food Rescue program to all SoWashCo Schools by the end of the school year.

"I'm so glad to be part of this partnership where food that would otherwise end up in a landfill is instead going to people who need it and will eat it," said Peterson, "Even before 'free meals' was enacted in Minnesota, we had a lot of food waste in our schools. Now, if a student doesn't want a food item that is eligible to donate, they can place it on the donation shelf and that item will go to someone who does want it."

Volunteers from SoWashCo Schools, such as Woodbury High School senior Miles Michelson, bring the food to Basic Needs in Cottage Grove.

The volunteers at Basic Needs sort the food, and just as quickly as it is dropped off, it hits the shelves and is

available for anyone who visits the food market to take.

"What I love most about this partnership is that it came from the school district itself and they were so passionate about not wanting to simply just throw away this food. They wanted to give it a second life and they wanted to make sure that it got out into the community to the people that really need it," said Opey Peñalogue. It's opened us up to serve the community in a whole new way."

Basic Needs is available to anyone in the community and there are no income requirements to shop at the food market. They are also looking for volunteers, whether that's someone looking to do it long-term or a group or individual that just wants to help out for a couple of hours for a day. You can learn more at basicneedsmn.org/volunteer.

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Spring is a vibrant time of year. My memories of Spring include time spent on our family farm where my dad and brothers were planting crops and my mom, sister and I were busy making sure that the seed and fertilizer were delivered to the right fields so that planting could continue once the equipment showed up. It meant long hours outside planting the garden that would eventually feed the entire family of 8 for the year.

Likewise in our schools and programs, Spring is a time when student growth makes a leap. Many times, it takes students repeated practice to really master new knowledge and information.

When I taught juggling as a physical education teacher, I would watch students toss the scarves up in the air, and oftentimes one would fall to the ground. You could just see the frustration on their faces. But then, there was that one time when they toss the scarf up, catch it in the other hand and just keep going. You see that glow on their face knowing they did it, they learned how to juggle! I told students that starting with scarves and practicing, would allow them to move on to juggling balls and after a lot of practice ... The fire sticks!!!!

There's no prouder moment for a teacher, parent, caregiver or loved one than to see someone grow because you taught them something new!

Spring is a great time to get outside and connect around shared activities. It's also a great time to head to one of our schools' spring plays or sporting events or check out one of the classes and activities offered through Community Education to connect with neighbors who have similar interests.

As we head into this final stretch of the school year, my hope is that we continue to commit to growing and fostering a community where learning thrives and our students are successful.

Wishing you all a wonderful spring filled with growth, joy and meaningful connections.

Julie Nielsen

Julie Nielsen, Superintendent



CONGRATUALTIONS FOR BEING NOMINATED FOR MINNESOTA TEACHER OF THE YEAR

AMANDA CZEPA
PARK HIGH SCHOOL, COTTAGE GROVE MIDDLE SCHOOL

EMILY BALL
PARK HIGH SCHOOL

JENNIFER STRONG
COTTAGE GROVE MIDDLE SCHOOL

LISA FLYNN
EAST RIDGE HIGH SCHOOL

STEPHANIE HARBERTS
EAST RIDGE HIGH SCHOOL

JESSICA WILDS
GREY CLOUD ELEMENTARY



Karley Mejía Named Woodbury Educator of the Year

Karley Mejía, a Spanish Immersion teacher at Woodbury High School (WHS), was named Woodbury Area Chamber of Commerce's 2024 Teacher of the Year.

Karley has been teaching for 11 years and has been with the Spanish Immersion program at WHS for the past nine years. Karley plays a pivotal role in mentoring all new incoming teachers to the program, helping them navigate the unique challenges of teaching in an immersion setting.

Karley says her passion for Spanish began back when she was a student at Park High School. She recalls writing an essay saying how she wanted to use her knowledge of the Spanish language to benefit the Spanish-Latino community.

"I took courses where we spoke 100% in Spanish and I knew this was something I wanted to do with my life," said Karley.

"Karley has become the cornerstone of the Spanish Immersion program at WHS," said Principal Sarah Sorenson-Wagner. "Her dedication to fostering a strong,



dynamic learning environment has been instrumental in the success of our immersion students."

Throughout students' four years at WHS, Karley is an unwavering advocate for them. She offers the support they need to succeed academically and personally.

"I love being connected to the kids all four years they're in high school," said Karley. "We become like a little family and it is amazing seeing them grow."

Karley's contributions to the SoWash-Co Schools Spanish Immersion program and the students it serves will be felt for years to come.



Enroll in Kindergarten

Children who are five years old on or before Sept. 1 are eligible to start kindergarten in the 2025–26 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.

Kindergarten Welcome Night is April 17

Families with a child entering Kindergarten in the fall are invited to attend Kindergarten Welcome Night at your student's boundary school on Thursday, April 17, 2025 from 5–6 p.m. You will have the opportunity to tour the school, meet your student's teacher and more!

To determine your student's boundary school, use our boundary school calculator at sowashco.org/enroll

Age 3 Time to Screen

Early Childhood Screening is a free and simple check of how your child is growing, developing and learning.

Families are recommended to have their child screened at age 3. Early Childhood Screening is required by the State of Minnesota for any child entering Kindergarten in a public school.

If your child has not yet been screened and is between the ages of 3 and 5, please visit our website to schedule an appointment at sowashco.org/screening.



First Time on the Ice

Royal Oaks Elementary students in fourth and fifth grade explored the natural world beneath the ice through the "10,000 Ice Anglers" project, ice fishing on Lake Como in Saint Paul.

The "10,000 Ice Anglers" project, sponsored by Elpis Enterprises and led by Karl Erickson, introduces thousands of students to ice fishing. A DNR grant and the Saint Paul Police Activities League provided equipment, bait, and fish houses.

Volunteers from Saint Paul Police, Urban Ice Anglers, and Baztec Fishing and Outdoors taught students ice safety and fishing basics. They demonstrated drilling holes, setting up lines and recognizing bites.

It was many of the students' first time on the ice. Out of the over 150 students from Royal Oaks Elementary who participated, 127 had never been ice fishing.

"I had never been on a frozen lake before," said fifth-grader Penelope Lor. "The ice makes all sorts of sounds."



Students quickly learned ice fishing requires patience. Students cheered each other on as they waited for their lines to tug.

"It was really fun even though I didn't catch a fish," said fourth-grader Copelyn Kluge.

"It's not just about catching fish," said fourth-grade teacher Jennifer Birkel. "It's about learning new skills and connecting with and respecting the nature around you."



Next Step Pathways Students Thank Service Members

Students in SoWashCo Schools' Next Step Pathways program, a transition program for ages 18–22 receiving special education services, worked on a service learning project to thank Minnesota National Guard members.

In Tess Hentges's class, students wrote heartfelt letters expressing their gratitude for the sacrifices of those who serve.

"We wanted to teach our students the value of saying thank you and recognizing the efforts of others," said Hentges. "Writing these letters not only helped them practice their writing skills, but also allowed them to engage in an act of kindness that has a real impact."

"My dad and mom and uncles served, so it was important to me," said Pathways student Jenny Sievers.

"I wanted to say thank you to the heroes for being brave," said Pathways student Lauren Yang.

The Minnesota National Guard distributed the students' cards at a welcome event for returning soldiers and their families, who were deeply moved by the gesture.

To show their gratitude, Guard members visited the students, shared military experiences, answered questions and personally thanked them for their kindness.

"It was nice to put a face to our letters," said Pathways student Shariyf Curry.

"It was exciting!" said Pathways student Blake Radcliffe. "I liked hearing about all the air vehicles they use."

"This isn't just about saying thank you," said program supervisor, Nicky Loch. "It is about building connections and understanding the importance of service and community."



Securing Our Future.

Supporting Our Students.

High School Construction Update and Highlights

Over the past year, architects have met with design teams to form the design work for the additions and renovations at the secondary schools that were approved by voters last fall. Drafts of design concepts can be viewed on the website.

The first projects slated to “break ground” are East Ridge High School and Oltman and Woodbury middle schools. Construction at East Ridge High School will begin in March. Construction at Oltman and Woodbury middle schools is scheduled to begin construction in May of this year. The start and end of the construction schedule will be determined by frost.

A more detailed schedule of projects is available on the website. Please note that this is a proposed schedule and design and construction schedules are subject to change.

Our three comprehensive high schools will each have extensive projects taking place in each building over the next two years, we have detailed some of the highlights to the right.

East Ridge High School's project consists of:

- Construction of an addition to increase the capacity of the school to 2,300 students.
- A kitchen and cafeteria expansion to serve future student population growth.
- Construction of additional Career and Technical Education and Science, Technology (CTE), Engineering and Math (STEM) spaces to support future growth and curricular offerings.
- Reconfigured drive lanes and parking lot to enhance traffic flow and safety for parent pickup and drop-off.
- A redesigned plaza space at the Athletics and Activities entrance.
- Renovation of existing spaces to expand and enhance Special Education and Online learning.

Park High School's project consists of:

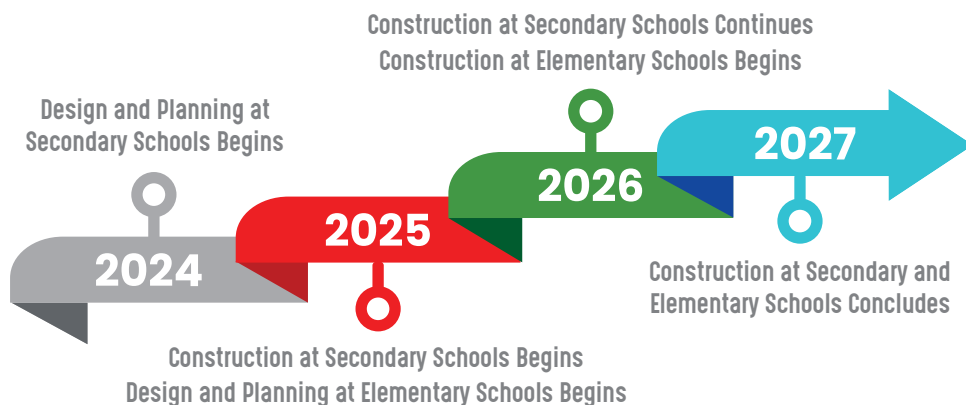
- Construction of a new cafeteria and kitchen addition to serve future student population growth.
- Renovation of existing spaces and construction of new Career and Technical Education (CTE) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) spaces to support growth and curricular offering.
- Creation of secure entry and consolidated Administration and Student Services offices.
- Reconfigured roadway to enhance traffic flow and safety for parent pickup and drop-off entryways for Park High School and Crestview Elementary.

Woodbury High School's project consists of:

- Creation of secure entry and consolidated Administration and Student Services offices.
- Construction of a new cafeteria and kitchen addition to serve future student population growth.
- Renovation of the Media Center, creating a large group gathering space, conference rooms, and additional storage.
- Reconfigured drive lanes and parking lot to enhance traffic flow and safety for parent pickup and drop-off.
- Renovation of existing spaces and construction of new Career and Technical Education (CTE) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) and art spaces to support growth and curricular offerings.



Learn more about the construction plans and view design concepts and a detailed schedule of projects at sowashco.org/construction





ERHS - Plaza Space (Draft)



PHS - Secured Entrance Exterior (Draft)



WHS - Lobby (Draft)

Construction Updates

The design process is underway for the additions and renovations at Woodbury and Oltman middle schools that were approved by voters last in 2023. Draft floor plans and renderings are available on the website.

Woodbury Middle School's remodel consists of:

- Remodel existing space (old pool area) for additional multipurpose space
- Creation of a secure entry / Moving the main office
- Music suite renovations / Creation of third music room
- Create new bus road to revise traffic flow for safety

Oltman Middle School's remodel consists of:

- Additional classrooms, increasing capacity to approximately 1,300 students
- Expansion of cafeteria and kitchen serving areas
- New STEM and special education spaces

The Phase 2 design process began early this year at Pine Hill, Bailey and Grey Cloud elementary schools and will be followed by Red Rock, Pullman, Crestview, Royal Oaks and Hillside elementary schools.

Pool Closure Plans at WMS and WHS

SoWashCo Schools will permanently close the swimming pools at Woodbury Middle School (WMS) and Woodbury High School (WHS) after the 2024-25 boys swimming season is complete.

The pool at WMS has not been operational for the last four years. Construction for the recently-passed referendum includes money to convert the pool area into an educational space. The pool area at WHS will be renovated to add a larger cafeteria space at the high school.

SoWashCo Schools plans to reopen the Community Pool in St. Paul Park before the WHS pool is decommissioned.

Read more about the closures and the plans for the Community Pool at sowashco.org/construction.

SoWashCo Voices

Women's History Month

We asked SoWashCo students from Valley Crossing Elementary and Park High School to share about an inspiring woman who has made a difference in their life or the world—or a favorite quote about women's empowerment. Their responses were truly inspiring! Here are a few highlights—read more at sowashco.org/news.



"Marie Curie inspires me because of her hard work becoming one of the first recognized female scientists."

Lauren Dupont, Grade 5



"A woman that inspires me ...would be my grandma. She went through the Vietnam War, provided a place to her 7 kids to sleep, eat, and drink, and still stayed strong for her 18 grandchildren."

Emily Yang, Grade 10



"Mrs. Stueve was the best teacher and inspires me to want to be a K1 teacher one day."

Bristol Gehrz, Grade 5

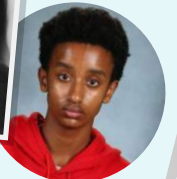


"My mom is inspiring and the hardest worker I know, she understands me like no one else. She is strong and caring and amazing to me."

Ulises Rivero, Grade 5



"We may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated."
Maya Angelou,
Author, poet and civil rights activist



"It's a powerful reminder of resilience and strength."

Milki Idris, Grade 10

"My sisters Alyssa and Emily are always there for me whenever I need them. They are always positive and push me to be the best version of myself."

Addi Orth, Grade 10



"My mom never gives up. She always says, 'If the first time didn't work out try again.'"

Angie Hernandez Sosa, Grade 10

"VICTORY DOESN'T COME WITHOUT PRACTICE, BUT PRACTICE DOESN'T COME WITHOUT TRYING"
ABBY WAMBACH,
RETIRED SOCCER PLAYER AND COACH



John Brewinski, Grade 5



Pictured: Baapi Waagosh and Woodbury Elementary student Sara Houska.

Anishinaabe Storytelling

SoWashCo Schools hosted its first Indigenous Storytelling event last month. During winter, elders from Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) communities come together to tell stories and pass teachings on from one generation to another.

"It was a perfect night for winter storytelling with freshly fallen snow and Grandmother Moon watching over," said Indigenous Education Community Coordinator Stephanie Schroeder. "A winter night like that assures that the animals are asleep and it is safe to tell their stories."

Gifted Native American storyteller and member of the Red Cliff Band of Lake

Superior Chippewa, Michael "Baapi Waagosh" (Laughing Fox) Charette shared Anishinaabe origin stories, Waynaboozhoo and trickster stories and performed some of his original flute music.

"The Storytelling Event was a great success and a wonderful opportunity to share our traditional Anishinaabe stories with the greater SoWashCo Schools community," said Schroeder.

Miigwech (thank you) to Baapi Waagosh for performing and to all who attended. Future Indigenous Education events will be announced at sowashco.org/news.

Reading The Fine Print

"The Fine Print," is student-operated literary art magazine, featuring artwork and written pieces by SoWashCo Schools high school students, including works of prose, poetry, visual art, ceramics, sculpture and photography. East Ridge High School (ERHS) seniors Caroline Zhang and Nina Krejci created the magazine and serve as editors-in-chief.

"We had noticed there was no cohesive place for art and literature to be recognized in the school community," Nina said, "so we decided to create The Fine Print."

"The Fine Print" released its first edition "Alphabet Soup" in March 2024, followed by its second issue "Sundial" in May 2024.

"There is something special about holding a printed version of your work being celebrated," said Caroline.

The magazine is printed and distributed within ERHS and is also available for sale. 100% of the proceeds from magazine sales are donated to the Minneapolis College of Art and Design scholarship fund for the K-6 art programs for under-served students.

The magazine staff has grown along with its popularity. Twelve students now work as editors, layout managers and illustrators and they want to continue growing their team.

"We field submissions from across the district and have even got some from students in neighboring districts who have found our magazine on Instagram," said Nina.



In its first year of publishing, "The Fine Print" earned seven Gold Medallions, a Journalism Educators Association Gold All-State Distinction and the Minnesota High School Press Association Best in Show First Place award.

After winning first place in Minnesota, "The Fine Print" competed against 600+ publications at the National High School Journalism Convention in Philadelphia, placing in the top 10 in multiple categories. It was also named National Runner-Up for the NSPA Best of Show Magazine award, ranking among the nation's best student publications.

The next issue is expected to be published in May 2025. Follow [@thefineprint833](https://www.instagram.com/thefineprint833) on Instagram for updates or visit linktr.ee/TheFinePrint833 to order past issues.



Work in the community you live in!

so wash co SCHOOLS

Summer Positions Available

Hiring Soon For the 2025-26 School Year



More Information
sowashco.org/careers

SoWashCo SCHOOLS

JOIN US
this Spring at the
Woodbury Community
Expo and Cottage Grove
Community Showcase.

FREE EVENTS

Woodbury Community EXPO
10 a.m.-3 p.m.
Saturday, April 5, 2025
Woodbury High School

Community Showcase
10 a.m.-2 p.m.
Saturday, April 26, 2025
Park High School

These free, family-friendly community events are open to all ages. It's a great opportunity to talk with school staff, visit local business booths, and enjoy kids activities, entertainment, great food and more!

Next Step Pathways Transition Program Secure a New Space

The Next Step Pathways Transition program will move to a new facility in the summer of 2026.

SoWashCo Schools recently purchased a church building on the southwest corner of Jamaica and 70th St. in Cottage Grove. "Light the Way Church" will remain as tenants on the property until June 2025.

Construction is scheduled to begin in July 2025, transforming the church into a specialized space for our transition program for young adults.

The construction project will remodel the building and expand the learning space with a 9,000-square-foot addition to the building.

The new facility will feature a culinary lab, makerspace, horticulture learning lab, and work-based learning experience spaces, specialized sensory spaces along with sensory supports embedded in classrooms, and a large multipur-

pose space with the capability for whole group assemblies. The grounds will also include outdoor learning spaces and gardens for students to utilize.

Learn more and view design concepts at nextstep.sowashco.org.





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For more information visit sowashco.org



Family Fun Nights

Skoolie is bringing free books, games, crafts and food to you!

Join us 5-6:30 p.m., Monday-Thursday, June 16-Aug. 14.

No programming June 19 and June 30-July 4.

Mondays

Pullman Elementary, St. Paul Park

Tuesdays

Newport Elementary, Newport

Wednesdays

Royal Oaks Elementary, Woodbury

Thursdays

Armstrong Elementary, Cottage Grove



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comm.ed.sowashco.org/skoolie.

"YOU CAN NEVER GET ENOUGH
BOOKS
INTO THE HANDS
OF ENOUGH
CHILDREN"
Dolly

ImaginationLibrary.com



SoWashCo CARES Brings Dolly Parton Imagination Library to Newport

SoWashCo CARES Education Foundation is sponsoring the Dolly Parton Imagination Library for children aged five or younger in the 55055 zip code. The program provides free, age-appropriate books each month from birth until they turn five years old. These high-quality books are carefully selected to support early literacy development and inspire a love of reading. SoWashCo CARES plans to expand to more South Washington County locations soon.

Families residing in the 55055 zip code with a child aged 5 or younger can enroll at ImaginationLibrary.com for free monthly books.

Plan a Fun-filled Spring and Summer

Arts and crafts, performing arts, skill development, STEM, athletics and much more!



Browse classes and register at sowashco.ce.eleyo.com