

THE DISTRICT DISPATCH

School News & Updates
for the School District 197

Community

Fall 2024



Two Rivers High School Principal Dr. Al Johnson proudly poses with the new Two Rivers Cheer Team before the homecoming parade.

WHAT'S INSIDE

This year's School Board Student Representatives

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Somerset's new inclusive playground

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Kindergarten enrollment for 2025-26

And more!

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You're receiving this publication because you live in our district and/or have a student enrolled. We value your input and want to keep you informed.

From the Superintendent

Welcome back! It's been wonderful to see our staff, students, and families return to our schools, join in activities, and come together at community events. We are excited for a year of learning, growth, and connection.

In this issue of the District Dispatch, you'll read about many of the people who make School District 197 so special. If you've been a part of this community for a while, you may have noticed how often those who grew up here return as teachers, staff, and coaches. On page three, we welcome new staff members who are all proud graduates of our district and have come back to serve in our district. You'll also read about our new "grow your own" program, the Thrive With Us scholarship, launched this year to recruit and prepare local community members for teaching roles. This initiative will strengthen our community ties and increase teacher diversity to better reflect the students we serve.

Finally, check out page nine for the Class of 1974 reunion tour of Two Rivers High School. It was a joy to welcome these Warriors back to where it all started for their 50th reunion and celebrate their lasting connection to the Warrior community.

As always, I'm grateful for our school community and the excellent staff, students, and families that are a part of it. My best wishes to the School District 197 community for a great school year.

Peter Olson-Skog, Superintendent

Nurture. Inspire. Prepare. Together, we thrive.

Welcome Back, Warriors!

September in School District 197 is full of smiles, community, and school spirit! From the first days of school to homecoming festivities—we're ready to learn and grow together.



Photo by Studio Mendota Photography



Homegrown Talent: New Staff Members Join School District 197

We're excited to introduce a few of our new staff members—all of whom are district alums!

Isaiah Robinson, Two Rivers Boys Basketball Head Coach

Meet Isaiah Robinson, a proud alum of Henry Sibley, who brings extensive basketball experience and passion to his new role as the Two Rivers boys basketball head coach. Beyond a personal successful playing career, Robinson has coached at various levels, including at Apple Valley, Wayzata, and Eastview High School, and founded the local AAU program Minnesota Blue Chips. As a husband, father of two, and leader in a local mental health agency, he is excited to guide the Two Rivers basketball program, fostering a culture of excellence, accountability, and growth.

"It has always been a dream for me to coach at my alma mater," Isaiah shared. "The past few years I told myself that if the position were to ever open I would go for it. I have always felt a special connection with the student-athletes and staff here. I feel like the Two Rivers basketball program has a ton of potential and it's a great fit on both sides."



Heidi Koury, Heritage E-STEM Magnet School Principal

Meet Heidi Koury, the new principal of Heritage E-STEM Magnet School. Heidi joins us from Saint Paul Public Schools, where she served as principal of Cherokee Heights Elementary School for the past five years. She has also held roles as Dean of Students at Burnsville High School, as well as an instructional coach and teacher at Maxfield Elementary in St. Paul. Known for her collaborative, compassionate, and courageous leadership, Heidi is excited to bring her experience and passion to the Heritage community.

Having lived in West St. Paul for most of her life, Heidi has a deep personal connection to the community. "Our family has a long history of attending School District 197 schools," Heidi shared. "I graduated from Henry Sibley, and all three of my children attended or attend Heritage. I love the Heritage community, and I am very excited to be part of the team. Accepting this role feels like coming home."



Josselyne Nila, Garlough Environmental Magnet School Teacher

Meet Josselyne Nila, Garlough's new 4th grade teacher! A former Garlough student herself (with Dr. Powell as her principal!), Ms. Nila has been part of the Garlough family for the past five years as a Special Education Paraprofessional while completing her coursework to become a teacher. When asked why she chose to teach at Garlough, Josselyne shared, "It is an amazing school, and there really is no other place like Garlough!" We're excited to see her bring her passion and experience to our 4th graders this year.





Thrive With Us: School District 197 Launches Teacher Scholarship Program

We're thrilled to partner with Metropolitan State University to introduce a new initiative in School District 197—the Thrive With Us Scholarship Program. This initiative, similar to “Grow Your Own” programs, aims to recruit and prepare local community members for teaching roles within the district and help increase teacher diversity to reflect the students that the district serves.

“We believe that having a diverse and thriving educator workforce benefits all students and our community,” shared Tye Michaels, Director of Human Resources. “We're excited about the program's first cohort and the dedication these Warriors have already shown our district.”

The Thrive With Us program is open to Two Rivers High School seniors and district employees interested in obtaining a teaching license. Recipients receive full scholarships for their education at Metropolitan State University, mentorship from experienced teachers, and regular classroom observations. After graduation, recipients return to School District 197 to teach for at least three years.

We're proud to introduce the inaugural cohort of Thrive With Us scholarship recipients: Caleb Tate, Cayla Friemann, Dominique Harness, and Keyla Betanzos. You may know them, as they have already been working in schools across our district as paraprofessionals!

For Keyla Betanzos, this opportunity is extra special because she grew up in School District 197 schools. “My siblings and I grew up in this district, so we got to meet amazing and inspirational educators through the years,” Keyla shared. “I'd love to give back to my community and be that inspirational educator to other students and families.”

CONGRATULATIONS to our Thrive With Us scholarship recipients! We look forward to seeing their positive impact on our schools for years to come.



Get to Know Our Student School Board Representatives

At School District 197, we believe that students should have a meaningful voice in shaping their schools and classrooms. To amplify student voice and ensure that students are a part of the decision-making process, we have two high school students to serve as School Board Student Representatives each school year. Their primary roles are to provide insight from a student lens and support and enhance the Board's understanding of student issues and how students experience their education.

This year's Student Representatives are seniors Patrick Bohmbach and Nawal Hassan. They shared with us why they serve on the school board, things they have learned by participating in meetings, and how they stay involved in our community.



Why did you want to become a School Board Student Representative?

Nawal: I wanted to become a student representative because I saw it as a path to further expand my voice in the district and make sure students' concerns are heard and felt. I wanted to capture that and help become a catalyst of change in our district and not only our district but our community and make sure everyone benefits from the power of student voice.

What are your goals this year as a School Board Student Representative?

Patrick: One of my main goals this year is to focus on community outreach within our district to learn more about the students that I represent. I want to be able to connect with all kinds of students of different backgrounds and share their ideas and stories with the board. I also want to learn more from educators and fellow board members, especially how their meetings affect the district as a whole.

How can students get more involved in the decision-making process?

Nawal: Students can get involved in a multitude of ways in our district. Honestly, I believe the best way to achieve this is by branching out, don't be afraid to take initiative and look for outlets to become part of a decision-making group.

What are your hopes and dreams for the future of our school district?

Patrick: I am very optimistic about the future of our district, and I hope that we continue our work toward being an equitable and fair district. One of my biggest dreams is that, as a whole, we can encourage students to prioritize the powers of their voices and presence in our district. I want students to be unafraid to be themselves and pursue and voice their passions, and I fully believe we are on the right track to culturing that in our district.

Alum Spotlight

Ericka Maldonado Medina

Meet Ericka Maldonado Medina, a 2012 Henry Sibley graduate who currently works as a physical therapist at a local clinic. Ericka began her educational journey in School District 197 at Garlough Environmental Magnet School, where her mother Xiomara Medina Calderón works. She then attended Friendly Hills Middle School before moving on to Henry Sibley (now Two Rivers High School).

Below, Ericka shares how her experiences at School District 197 influenced her career, gives advice to current students, and reflects on her family's contributions to the district.

Tell us about your family!

I grew up in West St. Paul and Eagan. Currently, I live in Prior Lake with my fiancé and dog. I have three younger sisters who also went to School District 197. My mom has worked for the school district most of my life!

What do you do for a career?

I am a physical therapist at a clinic. I work with patients who are experiencing orthopedic issues such as shoulder or back pain. I also specialize in working with patients with breast cancer and patients with Parkinson's Disease.

What was your post-high school journey?

I went to the University of Minnesota and majored in Biology. Afterward, I continued my education at the University of Minnesota with my Doctorate in Physical Therapy.

What is your family background in the district?

My three sisters and I have all been to the same schools in the district. Our legacy mainly is at Garlough. My sisters

and I still love going back to visit! My mom's legacy has been creating a great space to celebrate diversity and community at Garlough.

What advice would you give to current students in the district?

Explore as many classes and activities as you can! If you expose yourself to more learning early on, then you set yourself up for even further growth and opportunities in the future.

Were there any staff members who had a significant impact on you?

I feel like my senior year math and physics teachers significantly impacted me. They were inspiring in how they displayed their love for what they do and pushed me to keep working hard.

What do you believe is the most unique characteristic of our school district?

It is very telling how special the school district is given the fact that many people who grew up here return here to work or live.



It's special to have teachers and staff who stay with School District 197 for years and work with multiple generations of families in the community."

Ericka is pictured here with her mother Xiomara Medina Calderón





WARRIOR HALL OF FAME

Class of 2024

2024 Warrior Hall of Fame Inductees

We're proud to announce the 2024 inductees into the Warrior Hall of Fame. This year's inductees have not only left a mark during their time in School District 197 but have also continued to make a positive impact in their post-district endeavors.

The 2024 inductees into the Warrior Hall of Fame are:



Eugene "Gene" Atkins

**Henry Sibley
Class of 1955 (deceased)**



After graduating from Henry Sibley in 1955, Gene served as a quartermaster in the U.S. Navy. Gene became a beloved history teacher at Frances M. Grass Junior High in West St. Paul and earned his Juris Doctorate from William Mitchell College of Law in 1968. Appointed a Minnesota First District Court Judge in 1983, he served with distinction until his retirement in 2003. Gene also served as Mayor of Inver Grove Heights and on the Dakota County Board of Commissioners. He passed away in 2012, leaving a lasting legacy.



Laura Ashley Grattan

**Henry Sibley
Class of 1999**



A standout multi-sport athlete, Laura Ashley earned All-State and All-Conference honors in soccer, led her team to state championships, and excelled in basketball and track. Academically, she graduated as valedictorian with a 4.0 GPA and was a National Merit Commended Student. After high school, she graduated from Dartmouth, played on the varsity soccer team, and earned an MBA from Harvard Business School. Now a partner at Hg Capital, Laura remains active in community service and lives in the Boston area with her husband and three sons.



Erin Pash

**Henry Sibley
Class of 2005**



As the CEO and founder of Ellie Mental Health Services, Erin has transformed mental health care with a mission to make it accessible for everyone. Under her leadership, Ellie Mental Health has grown from a single office to a nationwide presence with 225 clinics across 38 states, providing services to over 200,000 families. Erin holds a master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy and is a licensed clinical supervisor. Erin is also an author, professional speaker, and content creator, all while being a dedicated mother of six.



Scott Van

**Henry Sibley
Class of 1974**



Scott played on the first soccer team in school history, swam freestyle on the swimming team, and became a state champion in track and field. In his senior year, he was selected to be one of the captains for soccer, swimming, and track, making all-conference in all three sports. He received an Optimist Club academic achievement award as a senior. Scott's wife and three daughters all completed their education in School District 197, and he has served on the ISD 197 Educational Foundation Board for over 15 years, supporting academic opportunities for students.



Congratulations, 2024 inductees!





Play for All: Somerset's New Inclusive Playground

Somerset Elementary School is a school community that believes in the power of inclusive education and has worked to build a Somerset family that welcomes and includes all students. But when it came time for recess, their options for inclusion dwindled.

“Our aim at Somerset is to ensure that all students feel like they belong,” said Somerset Principal Libby Huettl. “We’ve created ways to do that inside, but when we go outside for recess, many students with physical and cognitive disabilities have not been able to access our playground.”

They Knew They Needed to Make a Change

With the support and determination of Somerset parent Anne St. Martin, their journey to a fully accessible and inclusive playground began. Last spring, Somerset students

chose their favorite design, and the community rallied together to start fundraising. In less than three months, the project was fully funded—a remarkable testament to our community’s generosity, the state legislature’s support, and the kindness of an anonymous donor, fondly referred to as their “Fairy Godmother,” who contributed \$200,000.

Play for All

Our community continued to support the project through a community build at the end of July, where volunteers braved the heat and the rain to ensure this playground would be ready for Somerset students before the start of the school year, while the old playground was donated to a school in Central America.

Photos by Andy Berndt — Community Blueprint





It's wonderful that our community said yes to these kids."

**Anne St. Martin
Somerset parent**

The new Somerset playground, completed in August, includes multiple ramps, a large variety of sensory panels, various heights of slides, musical instruments, an inground wheelchair-accessible merry-go-round, and rubberized flooring for wheelchair access around the entire structure. This is a playground where play is accessible to all, which makes Somerset Elementary the fifth school in Minnesota to feature a fully accessible playground.

"It's wonderful that our community said yes to these kids," said Somerset parent Anne St. Martin. "There are many

things kids with disabilities can't participate in, so finding ways to involve them in the community is crucial. Being able to join in recess and experience the social-emotional benefits of playing with friends is so important. The community stepped up big time, and we're so grateful.

The Somerset community celebrated the grand opening of their new playground with a ribbon-cutting event on September 28. Leo St. Martin, a Somerset student who uses a wheelchair, had the honor of cutting the ribbon before Somerset students eagerly explored the new playground.

Welcome Back, Class of 1974!

Last month, the Henry Sibley Class of 1974 returned to where it all started for their 50th reunion! It was great to welcome them back to the high school for a tour and celebrate their lasting connection to the Warrior community. Interested in a tour of Two Rivers High School? Email district.communications@isd197.org and we will arrange a tour for you!



Celebrating Culture and Connection With Our American Indian Education Coordinator

Meet Nell Barri, American Indian Education Coordinator for School District 197. Nell is a member of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe and has been making an impact on our school community since she joined our team last year. We're thrilled to share more about Nell and her important work in our district.

Hands-On Learning in the Classroom

Ensuring there is Indigenous representation throughout the school district is vital to Nell's role of supporting our Native American students. During her monthly visits to elementary schools, she shares Minnesota's Indigenous heritage and history and enhances classroom lessons with cultural insights. Nell often discusses topics like wild rice harvesting, bringing hands-on items like knocking sticks, a mini birchbark canoe, and wild rice for students to explore.

One of her favorite activities is reading *The Jingle Dancer* by Cynthia Leitich Smith, followed by introducing a real jingle dress for students to touch and admire—a highlight that sparks excitement and curiosity in the classroom.

Fostering Community and Culture

Outside the classroom, Nell organizes monthly community engagement events that cover topics like learning and playing cultural games, having drum and dance, and traditional storytelling. Nell also participates in our schools' cultural events, contributing and performing at many of them. Additionally, Nell facilitates the monthly meetings of the district's American Indian Parent Advisory Committee (AIPAC). This committee provides vital input to ensure the district offers culturally relevant and equitable educational opportunities for its Native American students.

Supporting Secondary Students

Based at Two Rivers High School, Nell works individually with Native American students in grades 9-12, building meaningful connections in her office where students can check in, do homework, or engage in cultural projects. She also organizes culturally relevant federal student loan nights and college tours. This year, Nell launched the Native American Student Group, encouraging students to take charge of the group's direction and impact. She hopes to start a similar group at the middle school level in the future.

School District 197 Educational Equity Coordinator Kevin Sheridan shares, "I am so grateful for the passion Nell brings as our district's first American Indian Education Coordinator. Every day, she makes a difference—advocating for our Native students and families while being an invaluable resource for our staff."



It's so rewarding to see our Native students see themselves represented within their schools and classrooms, as well as our non-Native students being able to learn and experience cultures different from their own."



KINDERGARTEN SHOWCASE

The elementary principals and kindergarten teachers from School District 197 are excited to meet you and tell you all about our five fabulous elementary schools.

Mark your calendars for Kindergarten Showcase events coming your way in November!

Our Elementary Schools

Garlough Environmental Magnet School

1740 Charlton St., West St. Paul, MN 55118
garlough.isd197.org • 651-403-8100

November 13, 9 a.m.
November 14, 6:30 p.m.

Mendota Elementary

1979 Summit Ln., Mendota Heights, MN 55118
mendota.isd197.org • 651-403-8000

November 12, 9 a.m.
November 14, 5:30 p.m.

Moreland Arts & Health Sciences Magnet

217 W. Moreland Ave., West St. Paul, MN 55118
moreland.isd197.org • 651-403-7800

November 11, 6:30 p.m.
November 15, 9 a.m.

Pilot Knob STEM Magnet School

1436 Lone Oak Rd., Eagan, MN 55121
pilotknob.isd197.org • 651-403-7900

November 11, 6:30 p.m.
November 15, 9 a.m.

Somerset Elementary School

1355 Dodd Rd., Mendota Heights, MN 55118
somerset.isd197.org • 651-403-8200

November 12, 6:30 p.m.
November 14, 9 a.m.



About Us

School District 197's kindergarten program offers a nurturing environment, experienced teachers, and a stimulating curriculum designed to foster academic, social, and emotional growth. Visit isd197.org/KG to learn more.



Visit the "Get to Know" pages on each school's website or check out their Facebook pages to learn more about our elementary schools.



Fill out and return the enrollment paperwork you will receive by mail in December.



Enrollment Questions?
Call 651-403-7030

Nurture. Inspire. Prepare. Together, we thrive!



West St. Paul + Mendota Heights + Eagan Area

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MAKERS MARKET CRAFT SHOW

SATURDAY, NOV 9

9:00 AM - 3:00 PM

TWO RIVERS HIGH SCHOOL

1697 DELAWARE AVE. MENDOTA HEIGHTS, MN 55118



FREE EVENT
TO SUPPORT LOCAL ARTISTS,
SMALL BUSINESSES AND SCHOOL
DISTRICT 197 FAMILY PROGRAMMING

**FOLLOW TRIDISTRICT COMMUNITY
EDUCATION ON FACEBOOK
FOR HIGHLIGHTED VENDORS**

IN PARTNERSHIP:

