

THE DISTRICT DISPATCH

School News & Updates
for the School District 197
Community

Spring 2025



Early Learning Center students enjoy the new outdoor play space.

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From the Superintendent

Ten years ago, our early childhood program found a permanent home with the opening of the Early Learning Center (ELC). Families wanted a stable, developmentally appropriate space for our youngest learners, and the ELC has become a cornerstone of our district, thriving with growing enrollment and expanded programming. Opportunities like this are possible because of our community's ongoing support.

We are incredibly grateful for the continued support of our school community. Your commitment has helped us maintain strong programs and opportunities for students—even as we navigate increasingly difficult financial times.

In this issue of the District Dispatch, we celebrate the ELC's 10 years of impact while also looking ahead to long-term financial stability. Like most Minnesota school districts, we're facing financial challenges, but thoughtful planning over the next few years will help us sustain the strong programs our students and families rely on. Thank you for your continued partnership in providing high-quality education for every child in our district.

Peter Olson-Skog, Superintendent

Nurture. Inspire. Prepare. Together, we thrive.



Celebrating 10 Years of the Early Learning Center

Over the past decade, the School District 197 Early Learning Center (ELC) has transformed from a program without a permanent home into a thriving, dedicated space for early childhood education. Before the ELC was established, early learning programs were moved between schools every few years, often landing in spaces designed for older students.

Recognizing the need for a stable, developmentally appropriate environment, the district opened the ELC, ensuring young learners and their families had a place designed just for them. Since then, the center has grown in enrollment, diversity, and programming, providing a strong foundation for children from birth to kindergarten.

The ELC continues to grow, with rising enrollment—especially among children from birth to age three—driving expanded class options, resources, and outdoor play spaces. Families also now have access to a one-stop shop for early learning programs, with integrated services such as Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), family education classes, and a curriculum aligned across programs.

Looking ahead, the ELC aims to continue its growth with expanded transportation options and additional outdoor learning spaces. As it marks its 10th anniversary, the ELC remains committed to shaping the future of early learning in School District 197.



Photo credit: Andy Berndt — Community Blueprint



It's because of the amazing team at the ELC that I am such an advocate of our district."

Nicole McMahon
ELC parent

One Family's ELC Journey

When Nicole McMahon and her husband, David, first enrolled their children at the School District 197 Early Learning Center (ELC), they had no idea how much of an impact it would have on their family. Their journey began with part-time preschool for their two younger children, Ryan and Mya. What started as a convenient option soon became a life-changing experience.

The welcoming environment, dedicated teachers, and strong sense of community quickly made them feel at home at the ELC, making the transition to full-day preschool an easy decision. "Mya and Ryan adored their teachers so much that they would miss them over the weekend," Nicole shared. "It was never a struggle to get them out the door. They were excited and looked forward to going to school—isn't that what we all want?"

The ELC provided something even more meaningful for Nicole's family—individualized support. One staff member, Melanie, played a crucial role in Ryan's journey. Noticing signs that he might need additional support, Melanie worked diligently to ensure Ryan qualified for Speech and Occupational Therapy services through the District. That early intervention, Nicole says, was a game-changer. "I will always be thankful for her advocacy for him," she shared. "Once he was finally qualified for services and an IEP was in place, it was a game-changer for him and our family. I credit his success and where he is today to her for being

such an advocate and to the ELC for that early intervention. I watched his speech progress, his confidence grow, behaviors change, and he just thrived!"

By the time Ryan and Mya graduated from the ELC, Nicole knew they were ready for kindergarten—not just academically, but emotionally and socially as well. Their time at the ELC had given them a sense of independence, confidence, and excitement for learning.

For Nicole, the positive experience also inspired a deeper connection with the district. She became involved with the Early Learning Center Advisory Committee, the Parent Ambassador Network, and other district initiatives. "It is because of the amazing team at the ELC that I am such an advocate of our district," she shared. "I felt the impact they made on my family, and I wanted to make sure that others knew about this great resource in our community."

As the ELC celebrates its 10th anniversary, Nicole has one message for the staff: "You are the welcoming committee for so many families—their first impression of the district, their first experience with their child's education. You have the power to change lives, just like you changed ours."



1st Day of Preschool

Pictures from Ryan's first day of preschool at the ELC.

Nicole and David McMahon with their family.



CONGRATULATIONS
on 10 amazing years, Early Learning Center!

Points of Pride Across the District

Join us in celebrating District students for their academic success, earning national recognition and awards in math, writing, STEM, and beyond!

Two Rivers Students Named National Merit Semifinalists and Commended Students

Two Rivers seniors, Elizabeth Barnes and Quinn Keyes, have been named National Merit Semifinalists, placing them in the top 1% nationally on the PSAT. Additionally, seniors Garrett Aukema and Izabela Carlson were recognized as Commended Students in the 2025 National Merit Scholarship Program, an honor given to about 34,000 students nationwide.

135 Two Rivers Students Earn AP Scholar Awards

135 Two Rivers High School students earned AP Scholar Awards for their strong performance on last spring's AP exams.

Heritage Students Win Scholastic Art & Writing Awards

Two Heritage 8th graders, Elizabeth Pendergrass and Ezra Yocum, earned Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, the nation's longest-running recognition program for creative teens. Elizabeth received a Silver Key for her short story and an Honorable Mention for her poem, while Ezra earned a Silver Key for his short story and an Honorable Mention for his poem.



Pilot Knob Awarded STEM Innovation Award

Pilot Knob STEM Magnet School received the 2024 MESPA STEM Innovation Award, in partnership with the Science Museum of Minnesota, for its unique integration of Native American principles and traditions with STEM education.



Two Rivers Students Participate in Model Legislature

Two Rivers AP Government students experienced the legislative process firsthand at Metro State's Model Legislature, debating bills and participating in hearings over two days, with senior Raul Vaz serving as Speaker of the House.

Middle School Math Teams Win Big in SE Metro Division

Our Middle School Math Teams finished another great season! The Friendly Hills Middle School math team took first place in the SE Metro Division, and the Heritage E-Stem Magnet School team took second place!



Friendly Hills Earns Innovation Award at Future City Competition

Friendly Hills Middle School students competed at the Future City Competition with their innovative "Ciudad Flotante" (Floating City) design. Their model, featuring solar panels, nuclear fusion, and step-powered energy generation, earned them the Most Innovative Power System award.

More Clubs, More Fun for Students

We know how important it is for students to get involved, and we've got clubs for all kinds of interests! Here are some of the new student-led clubs popping up around the district.

BASS FISHING CLUB **Two Rivers High School**

The Bass Fishing Club has been around for a few years, but they have grown in size and are now affiliated with The Bass Federation. This club offers student anglers membership in SATT (Student Angler Tournament Trail) and the Lund Virtual Fishing League, providing opportunities to compete in catch-and-release tournaments across the state. Last summer, three Two Rivers teams qualified for the SATT Tournament of Champions, with one team finishing 9th overall, and this year the club is also competing with BASS Nation.



Photo credit: Chad Eddings Photography

YOUNG AUTHORS GROUP **Heritage E-STEM Magnet School**

The Young Authors Group at Heritage offers a dedicated space for student writers of all grade levels. Students can use the time to work solo, share ideas, provide and receive feedback, collaborate, and spend time with other writers. Young Authors is a safe space for new and experienced writers alike to explore and expand their knowledge of the wonderful world of the written word.



GIRLS WHO CODE **Pilot Knob STEM Magnet School**

Pilot Knob STEM Magnet School introduced two Girls Who Code clubs this year, providing elementary-aged students with an opportunity to explore coding in an engaging and supportive environment. A total of 32 students—15 third-graders and 17 fourth-graders—are developing foundational coding skills that will support their future success in technology. The clubs foster hands-on learning, creativity, and problem-solving, empowering students to build confidence and competence in coding.

SPORT ANALYTICS CLUB **Two Rivers High School**

The Sport Analytics Club explores the role of data in sports through analytics, visualization, and predictive modeling, analyzing team and player statistics to understand and predict game outcomes. Founded by juniors Darian Lopez and Robbie Lovett, the club welcomes any student with a passion for sports and data analysis, currently focusing on the NBA after their initial NFL season analysis.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS CLUB **Friendly Hills Middle School**

Founded in 2022, the Dungeons & Dragons Club at Friendly Hills Middle School has grown to over 50 students in grades 5-8. Led by seven student Dungeon Masters (DMs), players navigate creative storylines, make strategic decisions, and roll dice to determine outcomes. Beyond the game, students develop problem-solving, teamwork, and critical thinking skills while building friendships.



Expanded Electives: New Opportunities for Middle School Students

From Design and Modeling to Competitive Sports, middle school students in School District 197 have more course opportunities than ever to explore their interests and develop new skills. As part of our new middle school schedule implemented this year, students in grades 7 and 8 now have access to a wider variety of elective courses designed to spark creativity, build real-world skills, and align with student interests.

These changes—developed with input from students, staff, and families—aim to provide more choice, create a consistent schedule across both middle schools, and ensure students meet new state media and fine arts standards. Students have up to 19 elective options to choose from, including several new courses for the upcoming school year.

Here's a closer look at just a few of the exciting new options available:

THEATER, GRADES 7-8



Offers students a hands-on introduction to the world of theater, providing a space to build confidence, explore creativity, and collaborate with peers. Students explore a wide range of theater topics, with a strong emphasis on acting, improvisation, and playwriting. Beyond performance skills, theater fosters empathy and understanding by encouraging students to step into different perspectives.

HEALTH, GRADES 5-6

Covers digital citizenship, physical and social health, emotional well-being, financial literacy, tobacco/vape prevention, and human growth and development. It aims to provide students with an earlier foundation in health and wellness, freeing up science classes to focus on core concepts. Students gain essential knowledge to support their well-being and feel more prepared for any potential challenges in middle and high school.

TEENAGER 101, GRADES 7-8



Equips students with essential life skills they'll need for both academic and personal success. Students develop abilities in areas like organization, communication, emotional management, and financial literacy. They learn how to set personal goals, build healthy relationships, manage stress, improve study habits, and develop a strong sense of personal responsibility. The course also covers health and wellness, basic cooking and household management, and personal safety.

WRITING, GRADES 5-6



Empowers students to write clearly, creatively, and purposefully, fostering a love of writing and building familiarity with the craft and conventions of major writing genres. This course blends the latest research in writing instruction with support for students' social and ethical development. Grammar instruction will also reinforce writing skills, covering sentences, nouns/pronouns, verbs, modifiers, and punctuation. Students also learn keyboarding skills.

Want to learn more about our middle schools? Visit isd197.org.



Building an Inclusive Community Through Unified Programming

In School District 197, we work hard to foster inclusive school communities where all students feel welcome, valued, and connected. Through Unified programming—an educational model that integrates students receiving special education services with their general education peers—we are creating meaningful relationships that extend beyond the classroom.

At Two Rivers High School, this commitment comes to life through Unified courses, a Unified club, and a student-run coffee shop, all designed to foster learning and growth for students of all abilities.

Unified Classrooms

Unified Physical Education (PE)

brings together students of all abilities through fitness and recreation. During gym class, students participate in activities like kickball and track and field. A similar course will launch at Friendly Hills next school year.

For 12th grader Gabriela Walz, who plans to study elementary and special education after high school, Unified PE has been an eye-opening experience. “It has opened my eyes to the friendly students who many don’t get to interact with on a daily basis,” she shared. “It’s so important to connect all types of students to enhance a school’s community, and having inclusive classes such as Unified PE is a great way to do so.

Unified Introduction to Foods

provides students the opportunity to develop essential cooking skills in an inclusive environment. Like Unified PE, this course unites students of all abilities for hands-on food preparation.

Unified Club

The Unified Club at Two Rivers fosters inclusion and acceptance by connecting students with and without intellectual disabilities. As part of the Special Olympics Unified Schools model, the club increases athletic, social, and leadership opportunities for all students. Through a variety of projects and activities, the club empowers students to build meaningful relationships.

Unified Student Life

Warrior Wake Up is a student-run coffee shop that provides hands-on work and life skills training. Over the past six years, it has grown into a thriving business where general and special education students work side-by-side as cashiers, baristas, and customer service representatives, mastering 16 drink recipes and operating industry-standard equipment. Beyond providing job opportunities, proceeds from Warrior Wake Up fund special education field trips, student expenses, and two annual Dollars for Scholars scholarships.



Learning and Growing Together

The benefits of Unified programming go far beyond social inclusion. Research shows that these programs improve academic outcomes, foster leadership skills, and strengthen school communities for all students. By supporting Unified programs, we’re ensuring our students have the chance to learn and grow together.



Want to learn more about our Unified Programming?

Email district.communications@isd197.org

Alum Spotlight

Moustafa Arafa

Meet Moustafa Arafa, a 2013 graduate of Henry Sibley (now Two Rivers High School) and the owner of local favorite Ze's Diner. With a passion for both his business and community, Moustafa has created a warm, welcoming space where families and neighbors come together to connect and celebrate.

Moustafa grew up in the family restaurant business, watching his parents open the first Ze's Diner in 2009. After earning a degree in Computer Networking from Dunwoody College, he discovered his true passion remained in the restaurant industry. Embracing his roots, Moustafa joined his parents in expanding their vision, eventually opening Ze's Diner in Mendota Heights.

Below, Moustafa shares how his experiences at School District 197 influenced his career, gives advice to current students, and reflects on the value of building strong relationships.

What are some of the most valuable lessons you learned during your time at Henry Sibley/School District 197 that you apply to your business today?

The importance of hard work and perseverance. Balancing school, work, and personal responsibilities taught me time management and dedication—both of which are essential in running a business. I also learned the value of building strong relationships, whether with teachers, classmates, or now with my customers and staff. These experiences shaped my leadership style and commitment to providing a welcoming, community-focused atmosphere.

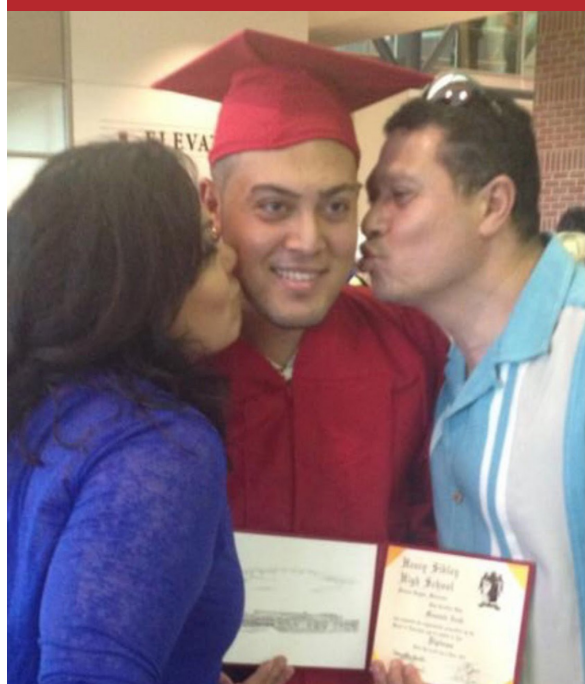
What do you enjoy most about our community?

The strong sense of connection and support. Mendota Heights is a place where people truly care about each other, and that makes it feel like home. The best part of owning a business in the community I grew up in is the opportunity to give back. That's what makes running Ze's Diner so special to me. I cherish this community, especially the high school I attended and the sports I played there. Being able to support the school, local athletes, and various organizations means so much—it's my way of giving back to the place that helped shape me.

What advice would you give to current students who are interested in pursuing a career in the food industry or starting their own business?

My biggest advice is to be passionate, stay committed, and never stop learning. Surround yourself with good mentors, ask questions, and learn from every experience—whether it's a success or a failure. The food industry is challenging, but if you love what you do, it's incredibly rewarding.

The Two Rivers girls basketball team starts their day with a team breakfast at Ze's Diner.



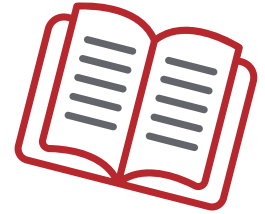
Moustafa with his parents at the 2013 Henry Sibley graduation ceremony.



I understand that a restaurant isn't just about food; it's about creating connections, supporting local organizations, and being a place where people come together."

Moustafa Arafa

A Focus on Foundational Literacy



Reading is fundamental to success, and at School District 197, we're committed to ensuring all students become strong readers. To support this goal, and in response to the 2023 Minnesota READ Act, we've added three professional development days to this year's academic calendar. These dedicated days allow our teachers to receive training in research-based literacy practices to enhance our already strong foundation and benefit students across all grade levels.

What the READ Act Is

The READ Act aims to ensure all students read at or above grade level, starting in kindergarten. It emphasizes the science of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. School District 197 began implementing some of these research-based strategies in 2020 and will work to implement our new learning from our science of reading training. We remain committed to literacy development at all levels, including dedicated reading and writing periods for grades 5-6 and future training for staff in grades 5-12.

Read, Read, Read

At Pilot Knob STEM Magnet School, they are already seeing the impact. First-grade teacher Jennifer Marcotte shared how the new approach to reading is making a difference:

"Every day, my students receive direct, intentional phonics instruction that is explicit and systematic. Through whole group lessons, small group work, and independent practice, they are building essential reading and writing skills. I use weekly assessments to track progress and provide extra support where needed. I believe that adding this direct phonics instruction to our reading curriculum has increased my student's reading and writing abilities this year. I am so proud of the confident readers and writers they are becoming!"

A Team Effort: Teachers, Families, and Literacy

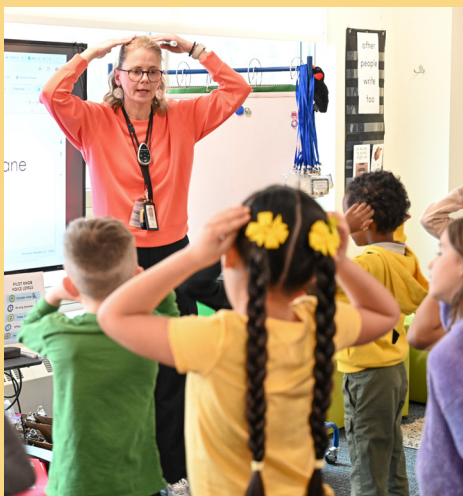
We are incredibly proud of the hard work and dedication of our teachers in this work. "Their commitment to learning and implementing these new strategies is exceptional," shared Cari Jo Drewitz, Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. "They are excited to put their training into practice and see the positive impact it will have on their students."

Families also play a key role in literacy development. **Marcotte encourages parents to make reading part of their daily routine:**

"Reading instruction starts at home. I get asked all the time by my classroom parents, 'What can I do to help my child with reading?' My simple answer—read to them! Expose them to as many types of rich literature as possible. Go to the library. Sit down with your child and read together, and ask them questions about what they are reading. Reading to your child is one of the greatest gifts you can give them."

Looking Ahead

We're proud of the progress School District 197 has made in literacy. For the past five years, we have consistently ranked #1 or #2 in reading proficiency on Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) among comparison districts. These new curriculum additions and focused professional development will build upon this strong foundation, creating even more opportunities for our students to thrive. This is a long-term investment in our students' success, and together, we will see a positive impact for years to come.



School District 197 Budget Adjustments

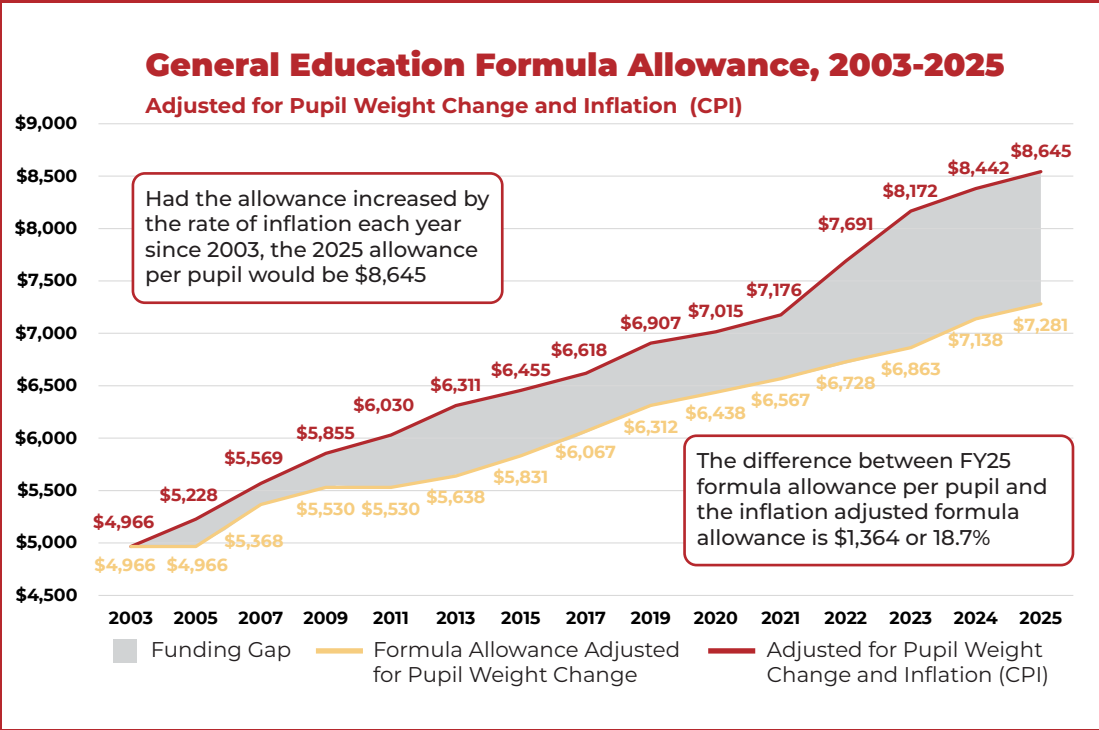
Like many districts across the state, we are facing financial challenges due to a convergence of factors: state funding that hasn't kept pace with inflation, rising operational costs, a projected significant increase in health insurance costs, unfunded and underfunded state mandates, and limited new revenue from state and federal sources.

To ensure long-term financial stability, School District 197 is planning a \$750,000 budget reduction for the 2025-26 school year. This reduction—less than 1% of our total budget—is part of a multi-year adjustment process, with similar reductions planned for the 2026-27 and 2027-28 school years. These steps will help restore the district's fund balance (or savings account) from an estimated 3% to 5% during that same timeframe. While still below the board

target of 8%, this approach strikes the balance of fiscal responsibility and minimizing impacts on our programs.

Our budget adjustment process involves a careful review of expenditures to ensure our resources are directed where they have the greatest impact on student success. District leadership is committed to finding efficiencies and cost-saving measures that align with our Strategic Framework while preserving the high-quality education our students deserve. **Importantly, classroom size parameters will remain unchanged for the 2025-26 school year.**

We will share more as the 2025-26 budget is confirmed and passed by the school board in May or June.



Despite the historic funding increase specified in the state's 2023 education bill, the state's financial support is losing ground to inflation, resulting in a widening—rather than narrowing—gap in funding.

A Note of Gratitude

Thanks to our community's strong support, our district remains more financially stable than many other school districts. While some districts in Minnesota are closing schools and cutting entire programs, our adjustments allow us to maintain stability and continue providing excellent opportunities for students. "The community did their part, now we have to do our part to keep a stable financial position through smart efficiencies, savings, and prioritizing our student programming," shared Superintendent Peter Olson-Skog. "Your support makes a difference, and we are grateful for your partnership."



Your support makes a difference, and we are grateful for your partnership."

Peter Olson-Skog
Superintendent

School District 197 News



The Class of 2024 Warrior Hall of Fame with Superintendent Peter Olson-Skog and Two Rivers Principal Dr. Johnson.



Submit Your Nominations for the Warrior Hall of Fame!

Nominate outstanding former Warriors for the 2025 Warrior Hall of Fame through March 31, 2025! The Warrior Hall of Fame celebrates alumni, retired staff, and community members who have excelled in athletics, fine arts, academics, or service during and after their time at Henry Sibley/Two Rivers High School. Click the QR code to learn more and fill out a nomination form. You can also email the activities office at activities@isd197.org to request a paper submission form.



Introducing: Coffee with the Superintendent

School District 197 invites families and community members to join Superintendent Peter Olson-Skog for Coffee with the Superintendent! These informal gatherings are a chance to connect, ask questions, share feedback, or simply chat. We look forward to seeing you at our last two meetings of the year:



Thursday, March 20 | 8am-9:30am
Amore Coffee, West St. Paul

Monday, April 28 | 8am-9:30am
Ze's Diner, Mendota Heights



If you can't attend Coffee with the Superintendent but still want to connect, consider attending a listening session before the first school board meeting of the month from 5:00 to 5:45 p.m. at Mendota Heights City Hall. The superintendent and up to three school board members will be there to hear from community members. Click the QR code for instructions on how to participate.



School Board Elections Moving to Even Years

At the February 3 School District 197 School Board meeting, the board unanimously voted to transition school board elections from odd years to even years, aligning with most Minnesota districts and reducing costs by approximately \$50,000 per election. Dakota County supports this change as it streamlines election logistics and allows our district to focus on our core mission—supporting students in their education. To adjust to the new cycle, current board members will have their terms extended by one year, with the next general election set for November 3, 2026. Special elections may still be held at other approved times.



West St. Paul + Mendota Heights + Eagan Area

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COMMUNITY EDUCATION SPRING & SUMMER FUN

Dive into spring and summer fun with Community Education's offerings for youth, families, and adults!

YOUTH SUMMER CAMPS: Find your enrichment camp or Warriors athletic camp this summer. Opportunities for kids entering grades K-9, from flag football to chess camp.

FAMILY PROGRAMS: Tour de Rec brings **FREE** family fun to your neighborhood! Enjoy games and activities with our staff and equipment. No registration needed. Upcoming dates:

- **Games & Play Stations:** Thurs., Apr 3, 6-7pm, Garlough Gym
- **Sports Spectacular:** Thurs., May 1, 6-7pm, WSP Sports Dome

ADULT ENRICHMENT: *Introduction to Fly Fishing*: Wed., Apr 30, 6-8pm, \$25, Two Rivers High School. Learn the basics of fly fishing with instructor Mike Alwin.



LEARN MORE!

