

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

## Be seen. Be heard. Be bold.



### Pen Pals Unite for the First Time to Plant Trees for Arbor Day

This year, South Washington County Schools (SoWashCo Schools) launched a district-wide pen pal program to promote wellness, connections and literacy among students. The pen pal program involves AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) students at our four middle schools, Cottage Grove and Oltman middle schools in Cottage Grove and Lake and Woodbury middle schools in Woodbury, along with third and fourth-grade students at six of our elementary schools, Armstrong, Crestview, Hillside and Grey Cloud elementary schools in Cottage Grove, Newport Elementary in Newport, and Pullman Elementary in St. Paul Park.

Nearly 950 students are participating in this pen pal program.

“This program is about more than just writing, it’s about building relationships across grade levels and schools,” said Newport Elementary teacher Amy Kestner. “The students gain confidence in their communication while supporting one another.”

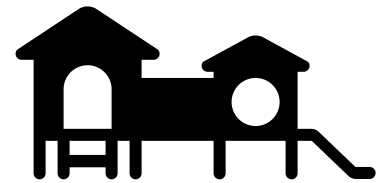
“It was really cool to write to each other by hand,” said Woodbury Middle School eighth-grader Brayden Martin. “It felt a lot more authentic.”

Each middle school student is paired with an elementary student, writing back and forth monthly throughout the school year, allowing them to gain confidence in their writing and literacy skills and practice thoughtful, supportive communication.

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### SoWashCo Schools Playgrounds Closed on Summer Weekdays

South Washington County Schools (SoWashCo Schools) reminds families and community members that school playgrounds and green spaces are not open to the public on weekdays from 7 a.m.-6 p.m. year-round, including during the summer.

This rule is in place to keep students, staff, community members and pets safe.



Dear SoWashCo Schools Community,  
As we approach the end of another school year, I want to take a moment to reflect on the incredible achievements we've made. This year has been one of growth, resilience and collaboration, and I am proud of everything we've accomplished together.

To all of our graduating students, I extend heartfelt congratulations to each of you. Your hard work and perseverance have led you to this important milestone, and we are excited to see where your futures take you and hope you will look back with fond memories of your time spent in the school district. You will always be a part of our SoWashCo Schools family.

Summer serves as a perfect opportunity to rest, recharge and continue learning. This year we have invested a lot of time in literacy training for our staff with the goal of making sure that all students are literate and reading at grade level. As families, you can help support our work by making sure reading and writing is occurring over the summer months. That should not mean turning your home into a classroom, rather, finding creative and fun ways to incorporate time to talk with your children, to make sure they are reading and by encouraging opportunities for writing.

The summer months will go by quickly and the warm weather provides plenty of opportunities to get outside and stay active. Go for a hike, bird watching or even camp at the nearby Lake Elmo Park Reserve. Take a bike ride on the Battle Creek Regional Bike Trail, swim in a backyard pool or simply just enjoy being outside.

We look forward to seeing everyone back in the fall ready for another year of learning.

Wishing all of you a safe and enjoyable summer!

Warm regards,

*Julie Nielsen*

Julie Nielsen, Superintendent

## CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

"We wrote about our favorite things to do," said Hillside Elementary third-grader Greta Lepsche. "I liked handwriting letters because we could also draw pictures for each other."

"My pen pal knows so much about dinosaurs and trees, he's taught me so much," said Cottage Grove Middle School seventh-grader Rose Mahady-Moua.

To celebrate a year of letter-writing, students in the pen pal program had the opportunity to meet in person while attending a field trip to the Newport Bailey School Forest Park. Students participated in outdoor learning activities while having time to connect with their pen pals.

During their meeting, students planted trees in restoration areas of the school forest with assistance from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in honor of Arbor Day. DNR Rangers provided seedlings and demonstrated how to plant and tend tree seedlings.

"Neither of us has ever planted a tree before," said Newport Elementary third-grader Geo Vang. "This is my favorite field trip ever."

"It's exciting to see students come together not just to meet their pen pals, but to help each other plant trees," said DNR forester Karl Mueller. "This year's Arbor Month theme is Plant it Forward, and that's exactly what these kids are doing. They're leaving something lasting for future students. That's what Arbor Day and Arbor Month are all about, growing stronger communities through trees." The student pen pal teams also participated in Indigenous education through storytelling sessions and lessons about native Minnesota plants and wildlife that can be found in the school forest.



"Connecting students to nature and each other makes this experience truly special," said AVID District Coordinator Molly Lester. "They're growing friendships and a deeper appreciation for our community and environment."

## Boys Volleyball Spikes Into SoWashCo Schools

For the first time in state history, boys volleyball is officially recognized as a Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL) sport. While club volleyball has existed at Park, East Ridge and Woodbury high schools, official recognition opens new doors—allowing schools to form teams that compete for state titles and give athletes the same opportunities as their peers in other sports.

"We have lots of guys who are new to sports who now get to experience the excitement of playing with a team," said Woodbury head coach Amanda Cordes.

For players, coaches and fans, it's more than just a season—it's a chance to make history.

"It's really cool being the start of a legacy," said

Woodbury senior Ethan Parzych.

This inaugural season is focused on growth, competition and community.



"I love it," said East Ridge sophomore Nathan Hegemann. "It's my first time playing, and it's just a fun, positive environment."

Years of advocacy led to the sport's approval, driven by its growing popularity and the need for more non-contact sports options for boys. Previously, many athletes had to choose between club volleyball or school sports.

"Now students can practice more often and get transportation to matches," said East Ridge head coach Lau Yang. "It also makes the sport more accessible for families who couldn't afford club fees."

The launch has brought new energy and inclusiveness to high school athletics.

"It's brought in a whole new group of students and given them a place to belong and shine," said Park head coach Robert Lozinski-McLean.

Looking ahead, leaders hope to grow the sport at the youth and middle school levels across SoWashCo, laying a strong foundation for the future.

## TIPS TO ENCOURAGE

# SUMMER READING!

"25% of reading loss can take place in the summer unless 5 or more books are read."  
— Scholastic

There are so many opportunities in the community to support summer reading. Whether you frequent the local libraries, bookstores or access books digitally over the summer, the research is clear: Readers should have a plan!



### Create a Summer Reading Plan

- Talk about what types of books your student enjoys—genres, topics, authors or series.
- Set a realistic reading goal for the summer—for example five books.
- Use a calendar to plan when each book will be finished.
- Track progress together and celebrate small wins.
- Read alongside your child to model good habits and start conversations.



### Read Every Day

- Join a summer reading program at your library or online.
- Listen to audiobooks during car rides or quiet time.
- Let your child choose their own books—they're more likely to read them.
- Keep books in places your child spends time—bedroom, car or living room.
- Start a simple book club with friends, neighbors or family.



### Support Reading and Writing at Home

- Read and write in front of your child to show it's part of daily life.
- Talk often—ask questions, tell stories and listen.
- Offer real writing tasks like grocery lists, notes or messages.
- Encourage their ideas and make it okay to make mistakes.

A simple plan and a little support can keep reading fun and on track all summer. Every page counts—**just keep reading!**

SUN Bucks, formerly S-EBT, is an income-based food support program that provides families with \$120 per eligible school-aged child to buy groceries when school is out for the summer. Families receiving Educational Benefits typically qualify and will automatically receive a card in their child's name in the mail in late May or early June. Learn more at [dcyf.mn.gov/sun-bucks](https://dcyf.mn.gov/sun-bucks)



## Skoolie

### Family Fun Nights

Free books, games, crafts and food!  
**5-6:30 p.m., 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

[commed.sowashco.org/skoolie](https://commed.sowashco.org/skoolie)

SoWashCo  
COMMUNITY EDUCATION

## SoWashCo

COMMUNITY EDUCATION

### 2025 SUMMER CAMPS

**Plan Now for a Fun-Filled Summer!**  
There's something for everyone. Build your perfect summer schedule.

Register Online at  
[sowashco.ce.eleyo.com](https://sowashco.ce.eleyo.com)



# Securing Our Future.

## Supporting Our Students.

### Construction Update and Highlights

Construction on our first projects is underway and more will begin soon. Design and planning work will continue through the end of the year for our elementary school construction projects at eight elementary schools.

A more detailed schedule of projects is available at [sowashco.org](http://sowashco.org). Please note that this is a proposed schedule and design and construction schedules are subject to change.

#### East Ridge High School

- Construction is underway for the addition and security updates.
- Crews are onsite starting the work for the new expansion on the east side of the building.
- More construction vehicles and crews will be at the school in the coming weeks.

#### Park High School

- Fencing is in place and crews have began work on the expansion and security upgrades at the school.
- New bus turnaround has been completed to allow for the site work in the drive lanes on the north side of the school.
- Interior demolition has started.
- Construction vehicles and crews will become more noticeable in the coming weeks.

#### Woodbury High School

- Equipment vehicles will become more visible in the coming weeks as crews begin work on the expansion and security upgrades.
- Construction fencing will be installed on June 5.
- Demolition will start inside and outside of the building on June 5.
- The north parking lot will be closed starting on June 9.

#### Cottage Grove Middle School

- Work on security upgrades will begin soon.
- Construction vehicles and crews will become more noticeable mid- to late-summer.

#### Lake Middle School

- Work on security upgrades will begin soon.
- Construction vehicles and crews will become more noticeable mid- to late-summer.

#### Oltman Middle School

- Construction fencing is in place around both expansion areas.
- Work is underway on the expansion and security upgrades.
- Digging for the new expansion and storm shelter have begun.
- Construction vehicles and crews are already on site.
- The bus parking lot will be very active with construction vehicles over the summer.

#### Woodbury Middle School

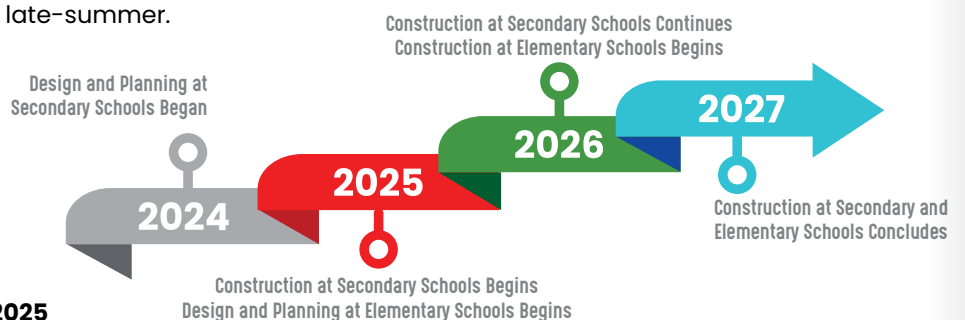
- Construction fencing is in place and crews are onsite to begin the security upgrades and space renovations both interior and exterior.
- The interior demolition has started.
- Work to construct a new bus-only road is underway.
- The road will be ready for use mid-summer.
- The new road will help improve safety and traffic flow on School Road.

#### Woodbury Elementary School

- Crews are currently working on constructing a new bus-only road that will be ready mid-summer.
- The new road will help improve safety and traffic flow on School Road.



Learn more about the construction plans and view design concepts and a detailed schedule of projects at [sowashco.org/construction](http://sowashco.org/construction)



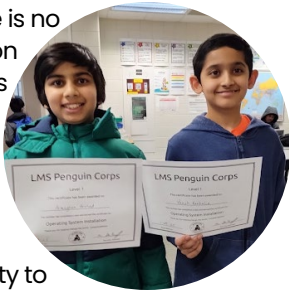
## Lake Middle School Penguin Corps Give Back

Lake Middle School (LMS) Penguin Corps is a unique and inspiring student-led club dedicated to learning technology and community service. The club provides students with hands-on experience setting up and using Linux-based systems.

Through teamwork and problem-solving, members learn how to install, configure and troubleshoot Linux, a free, open-source operating system. Through their work in the Penguin Corps, middle school students gain valuable technical skills that prepare them for future opportunities in technology.

"Currently, there is no formal education for K-12 students teaching them open-source," said club advisor and coding teacher Stu Keroff. "The ability to navigate open-source is a highly desired skill in the technology field and this club introduces and allows students to experiment and grow an interest in this much-needed skillset."

"I've always loved technology and computers and learning how to take



things apart," said seventh grader Sawyer Case. "I now can use my knowledge to do bigger things."

The Penguin Corps is committed to making a difference in their community. Through partnerships with the South Washington County Schools (SoWashCo Schools) cultural liaisons and SoWashCo CARES Education Foundation the club refurbishes used and outdated computers with Linux and distributes them to families lacking technology access. So far, the club has donated 47 computers to families in need.

"It feels really good knowing we are helping open doors for people who have encountered a lot of closed doors in their lives," said seventh grader Ben Brody.

This initiative reduces electronic waste and ensures that more students and families have the tools to succeed in school and daily life. The LMS Penguin Corps is proving that middle school students can be leaders in technology, sustainability and social good.

Do you have a "gently" used computer that you no longer need? Contact Mr. Keroff to donate it to the Penguin Corps at [skeroff@sowashco.org](mailto:skeroff@sowashco.org).

## Yearlong Service Learning Project Makes a \$25,000 Impact

Advanced Via Individual Determination (AVID) and Kids Club students finished the final phase of a yearlong service learning project supported by an Innovation in Service Learning Grant from the Minnesota Department of Education. Together with SoWashCo CARES Education Foundation, they completed three projects focused on meeting real community needs: winter clothing, nutritious snacks and school supplies.

For each project, AVID students created and taught mini-lessons to Kids Club students at Bailey, Pine Hill and Woodbury elementary schools. Then, both groups collected donations—either money or items—to support South Washington County Schools (SoWashCo Schools) students.

In total, students donated about \$25,000 in winter gear, healthy snacks, school

supplies and monetary contributions.

"I've liked getting to know how to work with kids more," said Stephanie Ikuomola, a senior at Woodbury High School (WHS).

"I like that we got to do stuff to help people. I like to help people," said Natalie Usher, a second-grade student from Woodbury Elementary School.

"It teaches us how to be involved in our community," added Aieesha Hassan, a senior at WHS.

This partnership gave students meaningful ways to lead, mentor and give back. Most importantly, both groups made a difference in their community.

Read more at [sowashco.org/news](http://sowashco.org/news).



## Next Step Branches Out to New Career Fields

This past winter, students from Next Step Transition Program participated in Tree Trust's Branches, a 10-week work program that introduces students to "green collar" work.

Tree Trust's Branches is an advanced training program for young adults ages 18-28 that teaches participants about tree care, landscaping, construction and property maintenance. Students were taught the safety basics of tree care and how to operate heavy machinery, including chainsaws and woodchippers, to complete their work in the program.

"It takes time to learn all of the steps and things to think about when properly felling a tree," said Clovis Nde. "The trainers were really engaging and our crew got along great."

"We pruned trees, removed invasive plant species and did a lot of vegetation management," said Alexander Haney. "It is super beneficial, helping the environment."

Students began their 10-week stint during the middle of January and worked through extreme cold and snow to cut down dead and diseased trees and clear forest areas of buckthorn.

"I enjoyed working with the crew," said Kyan Christian. "I really liked learning how to use a chainsaw."

The experience has inspired some of the students to pursue a career in "green collar" work.

"I really enjoyed my time with Branches," said Clovis Nde. "Now I am currently looking for work in outdoor maintenance."

# SoWashCo Voices

## Graduates Thank the Educators Who Made a Lasting Impact

Graduating students were invited to recognize the educators who influenced them most. Their messages reflect the deep appreciation they feel for those who helped shape their journey. Here are a few highlights—read more at [sowashco.org/news](http://sowashco.org/news).



-Vivienne Kassabian,  
Park High School

"When I joined [Mr. Osland's woodshop class] I was thinking about dropping out of it a week in. I was so scared of the machines, but Mr. O was always encouraging, and the table I ended up making is one of my favorite accomplishments to this day. One thing that I took away from this class is, if you put your mind to it you can do anything and that is a piece I am going to bring to college with me this fall."

"Ms. Lamar was my 7th grade social studies teacher. She was able to be there for me in a lot of hard moments and she always stayed calm and collected, which in turn helped me to lessen my anxiety. When someone asks me who my favorite teachers are, she is always one that I think of, even five years later."



-Ava Duran,  
East Ridge High School

"Charlie Cauthorn — I really enjoyed having Charlie for a GED teacher, he broke down the math & algebra so one could understand it and was very patient in making sure we understood it, wouldn't have passed my GED without his help!"



-Joe Hayes,  
Great Rivers Adult Education

"Breanna Taft introduced me to Orchestra in 3rd grade and inspired me to learn so much about music, showing me this amazing concept that means so much to me...This teacher has encouraged me to learn about music and its history, and so many different genres and styles."

-Connor Karras-Sack,  
South Washington  
Alternative High School/  
Woodbury High School



"Ms. Thao has been a wonderful counselor as she's helped me with some of my struggles and hardships with school and personal life. She's helped talk about if I'm on the path of school. She's been supportive and helpful with my choices."



-Malachi Thao,  
Woodbury High School

Ms. Block is so understanding of her students. She really knows and sees how we are doing and molds her teaching to how we feel that day. Ms. Block also makes an effort to know all of her students individually and what is going on outside of school for them. With this, her connection with students makes an impact on how the classroom works.

"Ms. Hentges taught me alot about living on my own in the community during my time at Pathways. She also taught me how to be a team player and a leader."



-Shariyf Curry,  
Next Step



-Sarah Glazer,  
Park High School



# 2025 GRADUATION CEREMONIES

## Watch the Live Stream

The graduation ceremonies for East Ridge, Park, Woodbury and South Washington Alternative high schools and SoWashCo Online will be live streamed on the SoWashCo Schools YouTube channel.

### East Ridge High School

- 4 p.m., Monday, June 9
- 3M Mariucci Arena

### Park High School

- 7 p.m., Tuesday, June 10
- 3M Mariucci Arena

### Woodbury High School

- 7 p.m., Monday, June 9
- 3M Mariucci Arena

### South Washington Alternative High School

- 6:30 p.m., Thursday, June 5
- Oltman Middle School Auditorium

### SoWashCo Online

- 3 p.m., Thursday, June 5
- Oltman Middle School Auditorium

### Next Step Transitions

- 6 p.m., Thursday, May 29
- Park High School Auditorium



### Great Rivers Adult Education

Earlier this month, Great Rivers Adult Education Consortium celebrated students who earned their GED or completed their high school diploma. Congratulations to the 32 students that graduated from the program this year!

## SoWashCo CARES Education Foundation Awards New Scholarship to High School Seniors

SoWashCo CARES Education Foundation has introduced a new scholarship program. The education foundation awarded four \$2,000 scholarships to high school seniors at East Ridge High School (ERHS), Park High School (PHS), South Washington Alternative High School (SWAHS) and Woodbury High School (WHS).

Recipients were decided based on a strong commitment to academics and community service as well as their future goals.

Congratulations to Ian Chao from ERHS, Hollen Thompson from PHS, Grace Her from SWAHS and Tenzin Dhondup from WHS.



## Celebrating Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month



### “Of Distance and Time” Photography Exhibit

This month, SoWashCo Schools celebrated Minnesota’s Hmong community’s rich history and resilience with a photography exhibit, “Of Distance and Time”.

The “Of Distance and Time” exhibit presented moving portraits and stories of 37 Hmong women, captured by MN Zej Zog and photographer Richard Schultz.

Learn more at [ofdistanceandtime.com](http://ofdistanceandtime.com)

### Hmong Special Guerrilla Units Remembrance Day

Hmong Special Guerrilla Units Remembrance Day is observed annually on May 14th. The day serves as a vital occasion to honor the immense sacrifices made by Southeast Asians, Americans and their allies during the Secret War in Laos (1961-1975). The Hmong Special Guerrilla Units, whose courageous support of U.S. forces resulted in staggering losses. An estimated 35,000 Hmong soldiers and nearly half the Laotian Hmong population perished.

Facing post-war persecution, the Hmong people have shown incredible resilience and a steadfast commitment to freedom and justice. This year marks 50 years since Hmong refugees began seeking safety, with many finding a new home in Minnesota. This Remembrance Day holds deep significance as we reflect on their bravery, immense sacrifices and their enduring contributions to our communities.



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**For more information visit [sowashco.org](http://sowashco.org)**

# Reflecting on Memorial Day

Memorial Day is a time to remember and honor U.S. service members who gave their lives in military service. We are grateful for their sacrifice and the freedoms they helped protect.

**To all who have served and continue to serve — thank you.**

We recognize the strength and dedication of service members and their families in our community and across the country.

# SoWashCo SCHOOLS HIRING EVENT

Join SoWashCo Schools for a hiring event. There are multiple opportunities in a wide variety of roles.

**Thursday**  
July 24, 2025

**Time**  
9:30 a.m. - 6 p.m.

**District Service Center**  
7362 E. Pt. Douglas Rd. S.  
Cottage Grove, MN 55016

**Find a Career**  
[sowashco.org/careers](http://sowashco.org/careers)

**ON THE SPOT INTERVIEWS**

**WALK INS WELCOME**