LCSC Communicator
July 2025
LAKES COUNTRY Service Cooperative
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Regional News, Views, and Information

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A Champion for Every Student

Inside Detroit Lakes' Laker Transitions Program



From essential job skills to independent living, learn how Laker Trek, Project LIFE, and Project SEARCH are ensuring young adults with disabilities find their path to success.

In Detroit Lakes, Minnesota, the Laker Transitions programs are reshaping pathways to employment and independent living skills for young adults with disabilities. Through innovative programs like Laker Trek, Project LIFE, and Project SEARCH, Detroit Lakes Public Schools empowers individuals to build essential job skills while fostering independence and confidence as they prepare to step into their future.

"I want people to know that we are here, offering opportunities to young adults who, in the past, may not have had these types of programs to choose from," said Wendy Fritz. Fritz serves as the Special Education Transition Facilitator for Detroit Lakes Public Schools.

Continued on next page

Source: Wendy Fritz, Special Education Transition Facilitator; Detroit Lakes Public Schools, dlschools.net – Laker Transitions
Author: Mary Phillipe, LCSC Communications Generalist



"The young adult who walks into Laker Trek, Project LIFE or Project SEARCH's door at the beginning of the school year is starkly different than the more mature, confident young adult who has gained valuable authentic work skills, walking out of the door into improved independence at home, work and within the community they choose to live."

Wendy Fritz, Special Education Transition Facilitator

"Public school districts are federally mandated to provide services to students receiving Special Education until age 22 if they show a continued need in employment and/or independent living skills. What Detroit Lakes Public Schools has tried to do is create programs that meet every need, addressing a range of disabilities and levels of support," said Fritz.

WITHIN LAKER TRANSITIONS, THERE ARE THREE PROGRAMS.

Laker Trek is a multi-year transition program designed to support students with higher needs who receive special education services and have completed their senior year of high school. The program concentrates on vocational and independent living skills, with the ultimate goal of ensuring a successful transition to LIFE after public education.

Project LIFE is a comprehensive transition program that combines classroom and LIFE skill education with authentic work experiences to prepare students with disabilities for a self-determined future. Paired with Project SEARCH® as a final year, employment outcomes are well above the national average for persons with disabilities.

Project LIFE provides two levels of a transition-focused course of study. Classroom instruction for both levels develops skills essential for future employment, daily living, community participation, self-determination, social communication, personal financial literacy, and the safe and effective use of technology.

Project SEARCH is a nine-month high school transition program that provides training and education leading to employment for individuals with disabilities. It is a collaboration between interns, families and guardians, Essentia Health, Detroit Lakes School District, Becker County, and Vocational Rehabilitation Services. Interns are immersed in the workplace and participate in three internships to explore career options while learning transferable job skills. The goal of the Project SEARCH program upon completion is competitive, integrated employment.

Project SEARCH is an international program that started in Cincinnati, Ohio. The Detroit Lakes location was the first available program outside the metro area in Minnesota.

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The program is a partnership between a local school district, a business with 250 or more employees, vocational rehabilitation services, and county human services. The participating business provides the classroom space, department internship locations while the school district provides the instructor and skills trainer. The Project SEARCH training room is located within the business in which the program is embedded.

The program started with nine departments and four interns in their first year and have since grown to nineteen departments with the ability to accept up to ten student interns. Rachelle Isaacson is the Project SEARCH Instructor, and Beth Hedstrom is the Project SEARCH Skills Trainer. Unlike other Special Education programs, participants must apply, attend an interview, and pass a skills assessment to participate. Vocational Rehabilitation Services and job developers follow Project SEARCH interns who complete the program for one year after graduation to ensure they are employed for at least 16 hours a week for nine months. Project SEARCH graduates have a 70%+ employment rate following graduation. “It is astoundingly fantastic because, historically and data proven, adults with disabilities are not employed close to this rate,” said Fritz.

Essentia Health was already a partner with the Project SEARCH program in Wisconsin and was familiar with how the program worked. “It has been a fantastic partnership,” said Fritz. “These relationships and integrations into Essentia’s departments have helped the interns more easily transition into employment.”

Project SEARCH interns follow the Detroit Lakes Public Schools calendar as the program still falls under the school's administration. The interns enter the instruction space at 8:00 a.m. and receive instructions for approximately one hour. Then, the interns head out to one of three internship rotations over the nine-month period. They are at their internship rotation for four hours, plus a half-hour lunch. They bring their lunch and eat with their co-workers. They return to the instruction room at 2:00 p.m. for a debrief and depart at 2:30 p.m.



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Although Essentia Health is the host site, Project SEARCH belongs to and benefits our community. As a host site, we look forward to developing the interns to become part of our community's workforce.

Tanner Goodrich, Senior Vice President, Essentia Health



Fritz shared that the interns are not picked up in "yellow school buses" because adults do not use "yellow school buses" to go to work. Project SEARCH encourages all their students and interns to provide their transportation or use the county-provided transportation. If the student or intern cannot arrange their transportation, Fritz shared that the program has a driver who will provide transportation to and from the work site if needed and they live within the school district's boundary. The end goal with Project SEARCH is competitive, integrated employment. They have six employment planning meetings (EPMs) per year. Special Education has one Individualized Education Plan (IEP) per year. The intern leads the EPM with a PowerPoint presentation that they have created. The Vocational Rehabilitation counselor, county human services, parents or guardians, and the job developer are all invited, along with the department manager and mentor. Discussion includes what is going well in the current internship, the employability and hard skills the intern performs well, and which ones need improvement.

Employability skills include:
Professionalism, teamwork, hygiene, initiative, reliability, communication, motivation, problem solving, self-management and time management.

In the second year of operating Project SEARCH, Fritz shared that after graduation, 100% of the interns are now competitively employed. When asked about the number of hours employees work, Fritz shared that they strive for a 40-hour workweek if possible, and their interns are accustomed to working 20 hours a week at the internship sites. Some work full-time and others part-time, with the idea that their hours will increase once they are comfortable in their job setting.

The pay is competitive, and the participating business is not creating a special job specifically for the Project SEARCH program. Instead, the business hires an intern as an employee to fill an existing position. They undergo the regular hiring process and participate in an interview. Interns have a folder containing all the information outlined in the program they completed. This may include details about an accommodation that has worked well during their internship.

Fritz shared that during their first year, they had a young adult in the program who was in his last year of eligibility. This young man struggled with language skills.

Continued on next page



However, he had strong computer skills and completed the Materials Management internship. He used a handheld scanning computer to pull orders and deliver them to 32 different locations on the Essentia Health campus. One of the guidelines for Project Search is that participants do not repeat rotations at the internships. He performed so well that he was offered a return to Materials Management when an opportunity arose. He then learned the rest of the job in the receiving department at Essentia Health. Later, this young man was able to apply at Lakeshirts, where he was hired as an inventory order puller, allowing him to transition into a full-time position. He has since received an award from Lakeshirts for being the most accurate inventory puller for that month.

PROJECT LIFE®

For individuals who do not meet the requirements for Project SEARCH, they may participate in the Project LIFE program. Project LIFE is a comprehensive transition program that combines classroom and life skill education with authentic work experiences to prepare students with disabilities for a self-determined future. Project LIFE is similar to Project SEARCH in that they have three internship rotations; however, rather than all internships at one business, Project LIFE internships are at three different businesses in the community.

Project LIFE 101: 9:00 am – 2:30 pm daily, with interns spending two hours at an internship in the community.

Project LIFE 201: 8:30 am – 2:30 pm daily, with interns spending three hours at an internship in the community. A goal of Project LIFE is to build interns' work interests, stamina, and pace. By the time they start Project SEARCH, they are well-prepared.

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Fritz shared that when they began their transition programming, they started with the Project SEARCH program and were unaware of the Project LIFE program. Fritz attended a Project SEARCH Conference, participated in a Project LIFE training session, and met with the Project LIFE Coordinators. Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation awarded Laker Transitions a grant to significantly reduce their license agreement fee for the initiation of Project LIFE in a rural community. Last year was the inaugural Project LIFE year. Interns bring their lunches to Project LIFE just like regular employees do. Most interns at Project LIFE are provided with transportation via the school district in a school suburban. They will utilize public transportation as much as possible during the day. The business partners for Project LIFE are Lakeshirts, Central Market, and Ecumen. Project LIFE interns go out in groups of four interns with one skills trainer. The skills trainer will help the interns learn the expectations and tasks needed to perform the job. Once the intern has mastered a task, a new one will be added so there is continual learning.

Each department in the businesses provide a mentor for questions that arise from the skills trainer or interns. The skills trainer stays at the business the whole year, working with all the internship rotations. The interns spend ten to twelve weeks at each of the participating businesses. Interns are at the business four to five days a week. Fridays can include community outings such a grocery shopping, banking needs or discovering social activities available in Detroit Lakes. Fritz shared that learning how and where to socialize as an adult is an essential part of an intern's life. “It can be a difficult transition for our young adults and their parents/guardians to go from a public education setting, where students are guided so closely, to independently making choices in adult life and navigating their community,” said Fritz. “Project LIFE focuses on life at home, life at work, and life in the community.”

Project LIFE has two life planning meetings led by interns who present using a PowerPoint. Most interns have not had experience in presenting to a group of adults before enrolling in Project LIFE. “This is a big confidence booster,” shared Fritz. The team includes Vocational Rehabilitation, Becker County Human Services, and any other providers/agencies working with the intern. A critical aspect of these meetings is that the interns become familiar with the team members and understand the services they can provide. If the intern's goal is to eventually attend college, Project LIFE and SEARCH will support this goal by helping the intern acquire the skills necessary to work while enrolled, live independently, and reach out for support as needed from their team.

Fritz shared that one intern in Project SEARCH had a desire to be a graphic designer. There were barriers preventing him from attending college. One of the intern's rotations at Essentia was working in a department that created flyers and completed entry-level graphic design projects. He was able to learn some design software and then received an internship at Lakeshirts, where he was hired and remains today.

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"We don't pigeonhole our interns," said Fritz. She shared that both in Project LIFE and Project SEARCH, the instructors assess the skill sets the interns bring to the table, as well as their interest areas and what they envision themselves doing beyond graduation. The instructors help develop those skills and place them in a job site or internship rotation that matches their level of ability, providing opportunities for further skill development.

Laker Trek

Laker Trek is for young adults who are not ready for competitive employment. Here, they focus on developing vocational skills and addressing their independent living needs. Laker Trek students are typically individuals who continue to live at home or may move into a group home and may spend time in a Day Activities Center. Participants may become employed with a job coach providing one-to-one support with fewer hours per week. Students who are progressing in Laker Trek can merge into Project LIFE. Students enrolled in Laker Trek are also out investigating the community. Laker Trek helps students living at home become as independent as they are able.

Fritz shared that one of the reasons she wants to share her story about the work happening at Laker Transitions is so that businesses understand what it means when interviewees have completed Project LIFE, Project SEARCH, or Laker Trek. They come with the experience of learning how to be a great employee.

The second reason Fritz shared is "We shouldn't put a ceiling on our child or student. Even though we at Laker Transitions, who are champions of independence and employment, can't help but sometimes meet a young adult and think employment for this individual may not be possible, and then they blow us out of the water. Every single one of our interns has proven that once they learn the job tasks, they can perform a job just as well, or even better, than a co-worker who is employed by the business."

Fritz has been speaking to schools, groups, and organizations about the transition programs Detroit Lakes Public Schools have to offer. "I think what Detroit Lakes is providing for these young adults is beneficial and life changing. I would be happy to talk with anyone interested in implementing these programs in their own school districts and communities."

If you would like to learn more about the Laker Transitions programs and how they champion for people, email Wendy Fritz at wfritz@detroitlakes.k12.mn.us.

FROM THE

Executive Director

"Learning, Leading, and Innovating to Achieve Vibrant, Inclusive Communities."



Jeremy Kovash
Executive Director

Celebrating Contributions

and Embracing New Beginnings

I hope you enjoy this edition of the Communicator. I also hope that you are able to refresh this summer. I am hoping to enjoy family, catch a few sunset pontoon rides, watch some baseball, and refresh my learning this summer. I would be remiss if I did not mention some long-time friends, mentors, and colleagues who are no longer serving as Superintendents in our region: Eric Koep of Bertha-Hewitt, Tim Godfrey of Lake Park Audubon, Kyle Edgerton of Campbell-Tintah, Brenda Reed of Browns Valley, Darcy Josephson of Alexandria, Rick Bleichner of Herman-Norcross, and Dan Posthumus of Wheaton. Josephson, Bleichner, and Posthumus all served the cooperative and their region by serving on the LCSC Administrators' Advisory Committee.

Posthumus also served on the LCSC Board of Directors in an ex-officio role and was recently awarded an Outstanding Service Award by The Minnesota Service Cooperatives. Their contributions to children and education will be felt forever in our region and state.

My best,
Jeremy



As an LCSC ex officio board member, Dan has played an instrumental part in providing feedback to the board and advocating not only for his school district but for every district in our region. We at LCSC are grateful for the many years of service from Dan and wish him all the best in his future endeavors as he begins his new superintendent position at Foley Public Schools.

**An excerpt from the 2025 MSC Annual Conference program.*



Classroom TO COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

JANE EASTES
Deputy Executive Director

Youth in Civic Life:

Building a Pipeline of Community Leaders

We are lucky to have many wonderful examples of community-building action that we can use as a model. I was excited to read about the work Rebecca, Kevin, and the Morris Council are doing to add a high school senior as a junior council member. Have you thought about adding a Youth voice to one or more of your School Boards or internal committees, or encouraging your city to add a youth representative? What an incredible community-building step – a learning and leadership win for Youth, and a growth and opportunity win for the school. This article is timely as we at LCSC partnered with MSBA in May to hold our first training for youth and school administrators, preparing both for successful youth representation. LCSC just received a grant from West Central Initiative to expand our efforts in helping our members effectively bring the Youth perspective to Board and Councils.

We are dedicating our work for youth as our action step in response to the horrific events with the tragic shootings of two Minnesota lawmakers, John Hoffman and his wife Yvette, and Speaker Emerita Melissa Hortman and her husband Mark. It's hard to believe that it occurred just a little over a month ago. It continues to shake us to the core. Today, I can think of nothing but the devastating loss of life for the families of Melissa and Mark Hortman, the forever changed lives of the Hoffman family, and the chilling effects of the apparently politically motivated violence in our home state. Today, we know a little more about the shooter, Vance Boelter, and his intentions, which are chilling. There were many more lawmakers on his list. I grieve for everyone, regardless of political view, who give so willingly in service to their community and now feel vulnerable.

Grieving gives way to anger over the too often negative public discourse and polarization that influences the Boelter's of the world, and drives good people out of public positions, whether from fear, just plain frustration, or both.

The Hortman's grown children, Sophie and Colin, published a statement to the media that is stunning in its simplicity, kindness, and grace. It so eloquently reminded us that we need to fall back on our values and that the best way to manage these strong emotions is to channel them into positive actions.

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"The best way to honor our parents' memory is to do something, whether big or small, to make our community just a little better for someone else."

They write about the simple, but powerful things we as individuals can do to honor their parent's memory; plant a tree, pet a dog, visit a park and enjoy its amenities, bake a cake (for Melissa) or bread (for Mark) and give it to someone, tell your loved ones a cheesy Dad joke and laugh about it, stand up for what you believe in, especially for justice and peace.

We choose to channel our pain into positive actions to uplift our youth, not only for the Hortmans and the Hoffmans, but for everyone working in the public sphere. We will always have differences, but must never lose sight of our common purpose and humanity.



LCSC/MDE COMPASS Pathways
Ready for All Districts

Author: Jane Eastes, LCSC Deputy Executive Director



From left, front row: Raina Askin, Anna Gross, Erin Spies, Michelle Steele, Ernesto Velez and Naomi Miranowski
From left, back row: Craig Bahr, Erin Potter, Shea Maisonneuve, Courtney Henderson. Todd Van Erp, Staci Allmaras, and Holly Inniger

District and School Leaders, as you move into 25/26 preparations, LCSC would like to reintroduce you to the **LCSC COMPASS team** with a brief overview of the supports we have available to you with no registration costs.

We're excited to share that **COMPASS Pathways** are now available to all school districts, Tribally controlled schools, and charter schools across Minnesota. These professional learning opportunities are made possible through state legislative funding and are developed and delivered by statewide and regional teams to ensure consistent, high-caliber learning and aligned support.

We've included a list of the team members and their respective content areas, contact information, an overview of the newly launched **COMPASS Pathways,** and a complete list with registration links. The document includes registration links for the statewide offerings, and we also offer in-person trainings and coaching, depending on regional interest. Please inquire about these opportunities directly to the content lead or Staci Allmaras.

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What are COMPASS Pathways?

COMPASS Pathways are clearly defined, content-area professional learning opportunities aligned with the goals of MnMTSS (Minnesota Multi-Tiered System of Supports). Each pathway is thoughtfully designed to build educator knowledge and capacity through interactive and participatory sessions, with follow-up support that bridges the gap between learning and implementation.



Support may include:

- Consultation
- Coaching
- Technical assistance

What to Expect:

All COMPASS Pathway sessions are:

- **Interactive:** Designed for engagement, dialogue, and shared planning
- **System-Focused:** Equip your teams to improve instructional and leadership systems
- **Accessible:** Offered statewide with regional support options
- **Practical:** Built to move from learning to action with implementation support

Most importantly, we are here to support your teams in identifying the learning and professional development that best aligns with the needs and priorities of your district. One of our LCSC COMPASS team members will be reaching out to schedule an in-person introduction meeting to review the COMPASS Pathways and support model. In the meantime, please don't hesitate to contact any member of the team with further questions.

We're here for you!

MINNESOTA ALLIANCE WITH YOUTH

Promise Fellows

AmeriCorps Promise Fellows spend a year nurturing the promise of individual students in middle and high schools throughout Minnesota.

Source: Tamara Uselman, Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative Coordinator; MN Alliance With Youth
Author: Mary Phillipe, LCSC Communications Generalist

For the 2025-2026 school year, both New York Mills Public Schools and Perham Public Schools have been allocated a full-time Promise Fellow at no cost. This invaluable position is supported by the Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative and aims to help students achieve even greater success. The Promise Fellow will be hired through the MN Alliance with Youth, and they are seeking passionate individuals to fill these impactful roles.

What is a Promise Fellow?

A Promise Fellow is a dedicated individual who works directly with students, providing support and guidance to help them overcome challenges and reach their full potential. This includes academic assistance, mentorship, and connecting students with resources.

The Promise Fellows focus specifically on 15 to 30 students only, offering intensive support to teach and build healthy academic, attendance, and social habits with youth who are struggling to thrive. The Promise Fellows also work with the families of the youth, serving as a liaison between home and school. The Promise Fellows have time to invest more deeply than teachers can, given the number of students teachers must work with.

Promise Fellows are trained in research-based interventions and are prepared to serve 6th to 12th graders by building relationships and providing support. They coordinate and deliver academic enrichment activities, monitor student progress, develop engaging projects, and offer attendance and behavior coaching to promote positive behavior expectations. Promise Fellows work in every learning model imaginable and have demonstrated that their relationships with students are both meaningful and impactful.

Results

The Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative (OTFSC) ran a pilot program during the Spring semester with the Fergus Falls Area Learning Center (ALC) and Parkers Prairie Public Schools, which included a Promise Fellow. Both schools and the Promise Fellows reported significant improvements in school engagement and attendance to attendees at the OTFSC Annual Meeting in May 2025.



Benefits for Promise Fellows

These full-time, 40-hour per week positions offer a comprehensive benefits package designed to support our Promise Fellows as they serve our community.

Twice-Monthly Living Stipend:

A pre-tax stipend of $1,236.36 for full-time Fellows. (A 30-hour per week option is also available at $1,066.67).

AmeriCorps Education Award

Upon successful completion of service, Fellows will receive an education award of up to $7,395.00. This award can be used for higher education expenses or to repay qualified student loans. Transferability: Under specific conditions outlined in the Serve America Act, if a Fellow is at least 55 years old at the start of service, they can transfer their education award to a child, stepchild, grandchild, step-grandchild, or foster child.

Health and Dental Care

Monthly premiums are 100% covered for full-time members, if applicable.

Child Care Assistance:

Available based on family size and income.
Student Loan Forbearance: Eligible student loans can be paused during the service term.

Professional Development:

Fellows will receive valuable training, including a Youth Mental Health First Aid Training Certificate and Motivational Interviewing Training, along with additional professional development opportunities.

Ongoing Support:

Throughout their service term, Fellows will benefit from continuous cohort support and an AmeriCoach career coaching opportunity.

How You Can Help

If you know someone who would be an excellent fit for this exciting opportunity, please share the **application link**

Do you have questions about the Promise Fellows program? Contact Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative Coordinator, Tamara Uselman, at tusleman@lcsc.org.



Build your future workforce AND get reimbursed!

The Fergus Falls Chamber and Lakes Country Service Cooperative are teaming up through the High Tech Kids and Future Ready Workforce Grants to incentivize paid student internships in high-demand and STEM careers. Employers, this is your chance to access talent and receive wage reimbursement. Invest in tomorrow, today!
Contact the Fergus Falls Area Chamber of Commerce to learn more at www.FergusFalls.com or call the Chamber office at 218.736.6951.

A Youth VOICE on the Morris City Council



Seated: Junior Council Member, Abigail Alcantar
From Left: Morris Council members: Kim Gullickson, Brian Solvie, Zac Kroells, and Mayor Kevin Wohlers

Source: Rebecca Schrupp, Morris City Manager
Author: Mary Phillipe, LCSC Communications Coordinator

How do you spark civic engagement in the next generation and ensure local government truly reflects its entire community? In Morris, Mayor Kevin Wohlers believes the answer lies in the youth having a voice as a Junior Council member. "Not only is civic engagement an obligation of every elected official, but it is also crucial for the development of future leaders in our community. We need to start today, finding leaders for tomorrow," said Mayor Wohlers.

City Manager Rebecca Schrupp initiated the project by researching how other city councils with junior councils operated. The Morris City Council members worked together to establish the program's structure and operational outline in preparation for its launch in September 2024.

The Morris City Council has established the following guidelines.

Junior Members of the council:

1. serve a one-year term.
2. are a non-voting member of the council.
3. may express opinions and have conversations.
4. do not participate in closed sessions.
5. at the end of the term, share their experience and provide input on proposed revisions to the program.

They decided to choose twelfth-grade students as candidates for the role. They contacted the local high school civics teacher about potential levels of interest from students and interviewed candidates in December. Seven students were interested in the program. Abigail Alcantar was selected and sworn in with the council in January 2025 and served through May 2025.

The Junior Council member does not serve on any committee and only attends the monthly meetings. Through the Southwest Administrators group, the Junior Council member is also offered the opportunity to participate in Council Orientation training.

When asked about Abigail Alcantar's participation as a Junior Council member, Schrupp mentioned that she attended all the meetings and spent much of her time listening to the council's discussions. "She was learning, so I think trying to step in and have a voice in the council was a little harder," said Schrupp. With this new program, the council was unsure how to involve the Junior Council member. They look forward to next year and learning how they can improve upon asking questions and engaging the Junior Council member on their thoughts and opinions.



Rebecca Schrupp
Morris City Manager

One example of the Junior Council member's perspective was that Abigail Alcantar shared with the council that the City of Morris has a significant Spanish-speaking population. However, there are currently no signs in Spanish throughout the community to assist Spanish-speaking residents with navigation and commuting.

Mayor Wohlers stated, "Our goal was to see what we can do to enhance our city. Basically, looking at our city through the lens of the youth in our community. We wanted to find out how the younger generation views city government, while educating them on the political process."

Now, with one year of experience, the council feels it will better grasp what the Junior Council member can accomplish while serving the council and increase the potential for a future in local government. Schrupp said they will begin selecting a new Junior Council member in the fall of 2025.

Do you want to learn more about the City of Morris's Junior Council? Contact Morris City Manager, Rebecca Schrupp, at rebecca@ci.morris.mn.us.

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A Memorable Experience at the

100th National Spelling Bee

Author: Monica Thompson, LCSC Coordinator of Technology Integration and Academic Challenges





There are moments in education that remind us why we do what we do—and for me, one of those moments happened at the 100th Scripps National Spelling Bee, held May 26–30 at the Gaylord National Resort in Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C.

I had the privilege of traveling with another regional coordinator and nine remarkable students, Minnesota's regional spelling champions, along with their families. In total, 36 of us boarded the same flight, buzzing with excitement and anticipation for what lay ahead. We weren't just headed to a spelling competition; we were stepping into a celebration of learning, resilience, and community.

Behind the Scenes of a National Stage

One of the first highlights of the week was a behind-the-scenes tour of the Bee. What most people see on stage is only a small part of the story. Behind the scenes, over 300 staff members work tirelessly to prepare for the event, ensuring that everything from pronunciation guides to lighting cues is flawless.

It was humbling and inspiring to witness the dedication that goes into supporting students from across the country.

Beyond Spelling: Building Community

The Bee organizers made sure the experience went beyond the stage. All 242 national spellers and guests were invited to Nationals Park for an afternoon of fun and connection. They explored the stadium, visited the dugout, hit in the batting cages, and shared lunch together—all while soaking in the excitement of being among peers who share a love for words and learning.

This year's Bee was especially meaningful—it marked the 100th anniversary of the Scripps National Spelling Bee. More than 40 former champions returned to celebrate the milestone. Their presence created a tangible sense of tradition and continuity, a reminder of how education and academic achievement can leave a lasting legacy.



From Left: Katie Hartman, Dr. Bailey (Pronouncer), and Monica Thompson



From Left: Peter Sokolowski, Monica Thompson, Mary Brooks, and Katie Hartman

Meeting Bee Legends

One of the most unforgettable moments of the trip was getting to meet Dr. Jacques Bailly, Mary Brooks, and Peter Sokolowski—three legendary figures in the world of spelling and language. For many of us, it felt like meeting celebrities. Dr. Bailly, the Bee's official pronouncer since 2003 (and the 1980 champion himself!), is known for his calm, reassuring presence and deep love of words. Before each round, he and the pronouncing team carefully review the entire word list to ensure every detail is just right. Mary Brooks, the Bee's longtime head judge, has been part of the event for over 50 years. The bell—dating back to the Civil War—has become a symbol of the Bee's history and tradition.

We also had the chance to meet Peter Sokolowski, editor at large at Merriam-Webster and a familiar voice to anyone who follows spelling or language closely. His expertise and passion for words were evident in every conversation. Meeting all three of them in person was a true highlight of the trip, and it gave us an even greater appreciation for the people who help make the National Spelling Bee such an extraordinary event.

Minnesota's Champions Shine

Watching the Minnesota spellers take the stage was an emotional experience. Each student showed courage, curiosity, and composure as they asked questions about their words and stepped up to spell under pressure. These were not just competitors; they were ambassadors for their schools and communities. Every one of them represented Minnesota with grace and determination. As the competition advanced to the final three spellers, the energy in the room became electric. The suspense, the passion, and the collective pride were unlike anything I've experienced before.

Exploring the Nation's Capital

Many of us found time between Bee events to explore the rich history and culture of Washington, D.C. Families visited the U.S. Capitol, wandered through the Smithsonian Museums, and took in the beauty of the city's iconic monuments.

These adventures added another layer of meaning to the experience, combining learning, sightseeing, and special memories made along the way.

The Power of Opportunity

This journey was about so much more than spelling. It was about opening doors, connecting students with peers from across the country, and giving them a platform to grow and shine.

I'm incredibly grateful to the Minnesota Service Cooperatives for supporting programs like the Spelling Bee. Their commitment to student enrichment makes a real difference—and it shows in the confidence, character, and curiosity of every speller we had the honor of supporting.

Attending the National Spelling Bee reminded me that academic excellence isn't just about performance; it's about community, celebration, and the shared joy of learning.





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From Personal Passion to Powerful Leadership

Justine Anderson's Journey at Empowering Kids Perham

Source: Justine Anderson, Executive Director; EKP Perham, empoweringkidsperham.org
Author: Mary Phillipe, LCSC Communications Coordinator

Justine Anderson's passion for Empowering Kids Perham (EKP) began long before she became the executive director. She has been involved with EKP since its inception in 2017, having a personal connection as one of the first clients to use their services for her son, who has an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) diagnosis. Justine's commitment to helping children in the Perham community extended beyond her family's direct experience with EKP. She also served on the board of EKP, joining about four years ago. She was officially on the board as a parent and active community member, offering her support to the organization. In addition to her involvement with EKP, Justine serves on the school board for the Perham Public School District and has served on several other nonprofit and foundation boards.

While serving on EKP's board, Anderson recognized the challenges faced over the past year, including staff turnover and changes in organizational leadership. Anderson described this as a tough time for both employees and the board.

Anderson has a strong financial background and extensive experience managing nonprofit finances. She served as the Controller for Perham Health for six years and has spent the past seven years as the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of the organization, overseeing its financial aspects during this time. "When I entered the field of accounting, my goal was always to become a CFO," Anderson remarked.



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Despite being very fulfilled in her position at Perham Health, Anderson felt a strong pull in November 2024 to apply for the executive director opening at EKP. She then met with the EKP board to share her intention to apply for the position and officially resigned from the board. Her decision surprised her fellow board members and many community leaders in Perham.

Anderson, who applied in November 2024, was selected as the new executive director and started her new role on February 3, 2025.

Anderson reflects six months later, "I haven't looked back once. This is where my passion is.

"Within the first week of her new role, the annual Giving Hearts Day charity event, EKP's biggest fundraising event, took place. Anderson admitted to being nervous about the $50,000 goal, which she felt was a long shot. The local Perham Rotary Club visited EKP and the Boys and Girls Club that day to learn about their programs.
After the presentation, the Rotary Club donated over $8,000 between the two organizations.

"This gave us the momentum we needed to continue with our refresh and reset at Empowering Kids," said Anderson.
Local partnerships also contributed to the event's success, with K.L.N. Family Brands providing a match for donations from their employees who contributed to the Giving Hearts Campaign.
"Community support is one of the best things a nonprofit in Perham has.

This is a unique community with businesses supporting each other and community members who invest in Perham," said Anderson.

In her initial months, in addition to addressing the financial situation, Anderson focused on stabilizing the current workforce. Her priorities included getting to know the team, not making waves, allowing the team to get to know her, and building trust and showing appreciation for their dedication to EKP. Subsequently, she worked on expanding the team, reaching out to the community, and marketing to attract individuals interested in building careers at EKP.

EKP's biggest current struggle is that the demand for services is outpacing its capacity to serve more children, with over 30 children currently on the waitlist. To meet this demand, EKP needs to hire more providers. With the organization reset, Anderson is purposeful about ensuring the right people are in the correct positions. Currently, they are not hiring new employees, as Anderson is mindful of the detrimental impact on clients when providers start and leave in a short period of time.

"It is so detrimental to our work, and I feel very strongly that it has to be somebody here for the right reasons and wants to do this work," she stated. They plan to hire providers in the fall to avoid overwhelming the current staff. EKP has six providers for Early Intensive Developmental and Behavioral Intervention, which requires one-on-one therapy for clients. A major success has been filling the Level 2 Provider position with two new excellent providers. Anderson shared that all Level 2 Providers are gifted in the services they provide, with past experiences ranging from Special Education Teachers, Registered Behavior Technicians (RBT), or individuals with experience working as a PARA in Special Education. "I am proud of the quality service our staff provides and the focus on the kids. They focus on the mission," said Anderson. EKP offers intense one-on-one therapy that focuses on understanding each child, identifying their triggers, and helping them expand their goals and skill sets.

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EMPOWERING KIDS PERHAM TEAM

"What I want most for people to understand about Autism is that it is not something to be fixed. Let's understand it better, let's understand what it does, and how it impacts lives. Neurodivergent people have always existed. We just have so many more services, understanding, and compassion to help them." - **Empowering Kids Perham Executive Director, Justine Anderson**

This June, EKP is excited to introduce a new program called NeuroCrew, specifically designed for neurodivergent young adults aged 18 and older. This initiative will provide opportunities for participants to engage in fun social events within the community and hopes to expand this initiative further.

Additionally, EKP provides after-school and summer social and recreational groups led by special education teachers from the Perham School District. Anderson is excited about enrolling 20 children for the summer programming.

Another vital service EKP offers is occupational therapy (OT), which helps children develop essential skills for participating in everyday activities such as play, learning, eating, and socializing. It focuses on supporting children in building their independence, self-confidence, and ability to engage in activities that are meaningful to them.

Anderson recently received notification of a $7,500 grant from West Central Initiative for a Caregivers Support Group. "I am very excited about this grant because we often operate on a bare-bones budget as a nonprofit. Receiving this grant will allow us to provide childcare for parents so they can attend," said Anderson. She understands firsthand how a caregiver support group can offer emotional support, resource sharing, coping strategies, skill development, encouragement, and more.

Under Anderson's passionate leadership, EKP is well-positioned for continued growth and impact. Her deep personal connection to the mission, combined with her extensive financial and leadership experience, is propelling the organization forward. While challenges persist, particularly due to the high demand for services, Anderson's strategic focus on building a strong team and fostering community partnerships is helping to create a resilient and hopeful future for the children and families served by EKP.

To learn more about Empowering Kids Perham's services or how you can support its mission, visit their website at empoweringkidsperham.org or their Facebook page. If you have questions, contact Justine Anderson at justine@empoweringkidsperham.org.



AESA
ASSOCIATION OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICE AGENCIES

Staci Allmaras Selected for the 2025-2026 Executives in Residence (EIR) Program

Submitted by: Claire Sowder
AESA Director of Communications & Marketing

The Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA) is proud to announce that Staci Allmaras, Director of School and Youth Engagement at Lakes Country Service Cooperative (LCSC), has been selected to participate in AESA's prestigious 2025-2026 Executives in Residence (EIR) program.

The EIR program is designed to develop emerging national leaders within the Service Cooperatives in Minnesota by immersing them in a collaborative, mentorship-focused experience. Through active participation in strategic conversations, sharing of effective practices, and involvement in special initiatives, participants like Ms. Allmaras will enhance their leadership abilities and grow their professional networks.

Ms. Allmaras brings a strong track record of systems leadership, education policy experience, and deep community engagement. At LCSC, she helps serve over 140 members across west central Minnesota and contributes to broader partnerships that span public education, government, and nonprofit sectors. Her leadership has helped advance regional networks, equity initiatives, and multi-generational community development.

> "Staci brings a powerful combination of policy insight, community-driven leadership, and a passion for innovation to this year's EIR cohort," said Joan Wade, Executive Director of AESA.

"Her extensive experience in rural and multicultural settings, along with her commitment to systems-level change, will support a meaningful learning journey that strengthens her leadership and enriches the collective experience of the program."

The EIR program will begin on July 15, 2025, during AESA's Summer Leadership Conference, and will continue through July 2026. Over the course of the year, Ms. Allmaras and her peers will explore critical issues facing ESAs today, with a focus on advocacy, policy development, and expanding the impact of service agencies nationwide.

For more information about the Executives in Residence Program, please contact Dr. Joan Wade, AESA Executive Director, at jwade@aesa.us or visit www.aesa.us.



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