

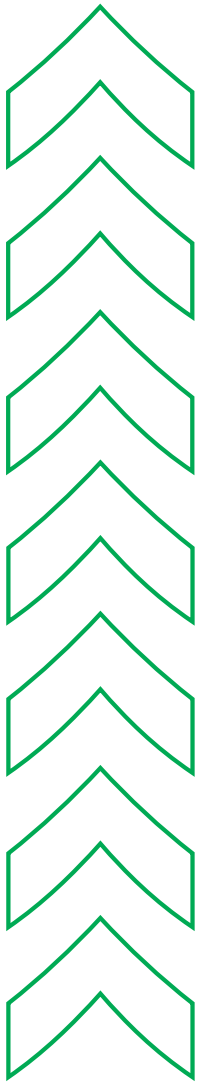


VALOR *Voice*

Avail Academy Newsletter **Summer 2025**



**Equip minds.
Nuture hearts.
Reclaim God's world.**



Why Christian Education Matters Now More Than Ever

By Dr. Ross Douma, President, Avail Academy

When I walk the halls of Avail Academy, I don't just see students – I see stories unfolding. Stories that are part of God's grand plan of redemption.

Christian schools like Avail Academy are playing a vital role in this story.

We live in a world that's noisy, uncertain, and pretty confusing for young people. They're growing up in a digital age with infinite information that doesn't carry much wisdom. And I believe now more than ever that Christian education is not just an option for families – it's essential.

At Avail Academy, we hold to a bold mission: **equipping minds and nurturing hearts to reclaim God's world.** It's a mission that drives everything we do –

from the structure of our curriculum to the relationships we build with our students.

We talk a lot at Avail about "Teaching for Transformation," and that's exactly what we mean. Our goal is not just to get students into good colleges (although our graduates certainly do that). We are aiming higher. We want students to know who they are in Christ, to love what is good and beautiful, and to live with purpose in God's story.

That means our curriculum is designed not only to stretch the mind but to shape the heart. Whether it's a science experiment, a literature discussion, or



a moment of prayer in chapel, everything we do is about forming students who are intellectually capable, spiritually grounded, and emotionally healthy.

Students at Avail are not left to figure out life's big questions on their own. They are given tools to discern right from wrong, truth from falsehood, and to walk with integrity, courage, and compassion. These are not just classroom outcomes – they're lifelong values.

Our students perform at high levels academically, but the true distinctiveness of our academic program is that it's rooted in a biblical worldview. We're not just teaching what to think; we're helping students understand why it matters and how to connect their learning to God's redemptive work in the world.

Christian education matters. It's not just about academics. It's about anchoring students in truth and love so they can stand strong in an unsteady world.

Thank you for being part of this mission. Whether you are a parent, grandparent, alumnus, or supporter – you are helping shape the next generation of leaders, peacemakers, and image-bearers. Let's keep working together to equip minds and nurture hearts to reclaim God's world.



Big Vision for Little Learners: Junior Kindergarten Launches Fall 2025

After a year of planning, paperwork, and prayer, we're ready to launch Avail Academy Junior Kindergarten (JK), opening in Fall 2025. The program will serve four-year-olds at both the Blaine and Edina campuses.

"Launching Junior Kindergarten is more than adding a grade – it's planting seeds of faith at the most impressionable stage of life," says Dr. Ross Douma, Avail Academy President. "It's an important step in reclaiming God's world by shaping hearts and minds early, for Christ and His Kingdom."

Grounded in the school's Teaching for Transformation (TfT) framework, the JK experience will nurture the whole child – academically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually – while inspiring a love for God and His world.

Leading the new Junior Kindergarten program is Kristin Hatton, who brings both experience and deep enthusiasm to the role. Her passion for nurturing the hearts and minds of our youngest learners is contagious.

"I believe these early years are sacred," Kristin shares. **"They're a beautiful window of opportunity to help children experience the love of Jesus, develop confidence in who God made them to be, and discover joy in learning."**

Program Highlights:

- Small class sizes, individual attention
- Faith and character integration
- Academic readiness and skill development
- Hands-on and playful learning
- Dedicated, enclosed outdoor play areas
- Safe and nurturing environment
- Fully licensed Jr. K program

Parents are invited to schedule a personal visit to learn more about the program, meet the teaching staff, and tour the facilities. Enrollment for the 2025-26 school year is open. Learn more at availacademy.org/junior-kindergarten.



Rooted in Purpose, Growing with Vision

This year, we refined Avail's purpose and envisioned our future. We've refreshed our mission, vision, and values to better reflect who we are and where God is leading us.

MISSION

Equipping minds and nurturing hearts to reclaim God's world

VISION

To become a Christ-centered learning community with kingdom impact in the Twin Cities, serving 800 students by 2035

VALUES

Intentional Excellence

Thriving Partnerships

Transformational Discipleship

These statements are a lens through which we will evaluate decisions, set priorities, and cultivate a shared sense of belonging and direction.



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Unplugging to Reconnect: Phone-Free Campus Begins Next School Year

Beginning Fall 2025, Avail Academy will become a phone-free school. From the first bell to the last, students will store away their personal devices – including phones, earbuds, and smartwatches – so they can be fully present in their learning, relationships, and spiritual formation.

Yes, this is a policy change. But it's more than that: it's a step toward creating a healthier, more focused, and more connected school culture.

“Technology has transformed the landscape of parenting and education,” says Principal Kyle Mast. “But it's also introduced challenges we can no longer ignore – distraction, anxiety, sleep loss, and fractured attention spans. As a Christian school, we have a calling to steward our students' growth in mind, body, and spirit. That means resisting the noise and creating space for deep focus and connection.”

Why This Change?

Smartphones, smartwatches, and wireless earbuds are powerful tools – but they're also relentless. Studies show that even having a phone nearby (even turned off) reduces attention and engagement. Social media, in particular, is linked to heightened levels of anxiety and loneliness



among teens. The U.S. Surgeon General reports that nearly one-third of teens are online almost constantly. Meanwhile, classroom distractions, cyberbullying, and screen-driven social isolation continue to rise.

Schools that have adopted similar policies report major wins: better classroom focus, stronger peer relationships, improved academic performance, and significantly less stress. Teachers spend less time policing phones and more time teaching. Students become more independent, resilient, and socially connected.

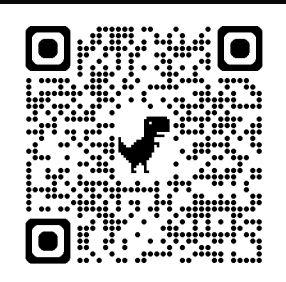
What Will This Look Like?

Starting next school year, all personal electronic devices will be stored in assigned compartments at the front office. Students will be expected to keep their phones off and out of sight from the moment they enter the building until the end of the school day. Exceptions will be made for documented medical needs.

Technology for learning, such as classroom Chromebooks and educational tools, will still be used as directed by teachers. And parents who need to reach their child during the day can simply call the school office.



Congratulations to Avail Academy teachers making headlines



Awarded
Edina's Teacher
of the Year by
Sun Current



Given
Honor Teacher
Award by
Minndependent

In Memory of Marilyn Hielkema

We mourn the loss of Marilyn Hielkema, a beloved teacher who dedicated 39 years to Avail Academy, who passed away this year. Marilyn began her teaching career at the Edina Campus in 1975 and later became a lead teacher at the Blaine Campus in 1992. She shaped the lives of so many in our community before retiring in 2014. Marilyn's legacy of love and dedication to her students will be remembered by all who knew her.



Dive in for a Deeper Look at the 3rd-Grade Water Project

Women and children in many developing countries spend an average of 6 hours each day collecting water, which can limit their opportunities for education and employment, according to a UNICEF and WHO Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply, Sanitation, and Hygiene (JMP).]

If you happened to be near the Avail Academy Blaine playground one brisk November afternoon, you might have seen something unusual: a line of 3rd-graders carrying sloshing five-gallon buckets of water around the sports fields. Some trudged in silence, while others talked about how heavy the buckets were. All of them were participating in something far more profound than just carrying water; They were stepping into a story of justice, compassion, and calling.

Led by 3rd-grade teacher Jennifer Klobe, students dove into a science unit about water and climate this fall. The real heart of the unit was inviting students to “seek to find and seek to shine,” the storyline that framed their journey. That meant not only learning about water but seeing water as something God uses to meet both physical and spiritual needs.

As part of their unit, students explored the science behind water’s properties, its role in weather patterns, and its potential as a source of energy. They also explored its role in God’s story of provision and restoration. Their learning targets focused on growing in appreciation for

how God provides through water, while also cultivating compassion for the millions around the globe who walk miles each day to collect it. In a series of thoughtfully crafted FLEx experiences (Formational Learning Experiences), students moved from head knowledge to heart transformation. They adopted storm drains around the school to help reduce pollution in the Mississippi River. They walked to nearby Laddie Lake to collect water and tried to purify it themselves, learning just how complicated it is to make water truly clean. They listened to a guest speaker from the Coon Creek Watershed District and heard stories from their principal about her time volunteering with World Vision. But the most powerful moment came with the Water Walk.

Students picked up five-gallon buckets filled with bottled water and walked a 30-minute circuit outdoors, simulating what millions of people endure every day. The bottled water used during the walk was donated to Hope4Youth, a local organization that supports homeless teens in Anoka County. Parents, teachers, and community members joined forces to form a visible, communal response to an often-overlooked global crisis.



“My deep hope,” Klobe shared, “is that my students would see themselves as part of God’s plan to reclaim and restore His Creation – as Earthkeepers. That they would understand they have an important role to play, whether that’s protecting a storm drain or offering the spiritual hope of Jesus to someone in need.”

And her students are seeing it. As 3rd-grader Emery reflected, “My deep hope for those who do not have access to clean water is they learn about Jesus and God and get the spiritual water that never runs dry.”

Classmate Mara added, “By walking for water, I learned that it hurts their back and is very heavy... and that we are BLESSED.”

Jesus says in Matthew 5, “You are the light of the world.” Through the Water Project, our students carried that light – one bucket at a time.



National Honor Society Inductees

Five Avail Academy High School students have been inducted into the National Honor Society, an achievement that reflects both academic excellence and commitment to serving others. This year's inductees are Daniel Kusie (11th grade), Ainsley Mick (10th grade), Jenna Eggimann (12th grade), Leo Milner (10th grade), and Carsten Mick (10th grade).

To be inducted, students must meet a high standard of excellence, including maintaining a GPA above 3.0, demonstrating leadership in school and community initiatives, participating in meaningful service, and exemplifying qualities of integrity and respect.

Avail Academy Hosts TfT Seminar

This Spring, more than 60 Christian educators from across the U.S. and Canada came to Avail Academy for the annual Teaching for Transformation (TfT) Site Seminar. What they encountered wasn't just a showcase – it was an invitation into a vibrant culture of Kingdom learning, led by Avail's own teachers.

Avail teachers were chosen to guide the experience, leading panel discussions, hosting classroom learning walks, and mentoring fellow educators. Throughout the two-day event, they demonstrated how the TfT framework helps students see every subject through the lens of God's Story and understand their calling to live for Christ.

Panel conversations revealed the deep integration of faith and learning happening in Avail classrooms, and visiting educators gained a firsthand look at how our teachers design experiences that shape both intellect and character. One participant reflected, "I used to think TfT implementation is primarily about methodology. But now I think it's first and foremost about personal, spiritual transformation that fuels transformative teaching."

The Site Seminar affirmed what we see daily: Avail's teachers are leaders in Christian education – faithful, thoughtful, and passionate about equipping students and fellow educators to think biblically, live faithfully, and act boldly.



Shining in Competition

Avail students stepped into public arenas to share their ideas, creativity, and scholarship. From robotics and science to history and conservation design, our students made an impact in four major statewide competitions.

Science Fair

Ten of our 7th-grade students qualified for the Minnesota State Science Fair after presenting their original research at the Twin Cities Regional Science Fair. Among them, Simon Bosch won the Lemelson Award/Early Inventor Prize and Joel Abbring won the 3M Personal Safety Award at Regionals. Isabel Bandstra earned a bronze award at the state level for refinement Vegetation. Mira Byers received the American Heart Association Community Impact Award for her project, Trees: A Breath of Fresh Air.

History Day

In April, 14 8th-grade students advanced to the National History Day State Competition after months of deep research and critical thinking around the theme “Rights and Responsibilities in History.” Evie Dammann was the Junior Division Winner with Responsibility for the Rights of a Child: The Photography of Lewis Hine. Allie Huston received 3rd place for her performance, Florence Nightingale: Advancing the Rights of Quality Medical Care and of Women in Medicine.

Minnesota Zoo Engineering Challenge

Fifth graders at our Edina campus once again brought imagination and care to the MN Zoo Redesign Challenge, focused this year on improving the white-cheeked gibbon exhibit. Two teams were honored with awards: Lauren Doble and Evelyn Racine received the Wolf Pack Award for outstanding teamwork, and Wyatt Hoekman, Wyatt Fesler, and Duke Dammann earned the Conservation Award for their thoughtful integration of habitat preservation and ethical design.

Robotics Team Moves to State

Our high school Gearshift VR Robotics Team earned a spot at the Minnesota State Robotics Championship, where they competed among 56 top teams and finished 11th in their division.

Math Masters

Our 5th- and 6th-grade teams achieved outstanding results in local competitions. The 6th-grade team placed 4th out of 32 teams, and the 5th-grade team also took 4th place out of 24.



CO-CURRICULARS



At Avail Academy, excellence on the field is matched by excellence in the classroom – and our student-athletes are proving it.

Four high school teams received Academic Team Awards from the Minnesota State High School Coaches Association. Both the boys and girls basketball teams earned Gold Level honors for maintaining a team GPA of 3.75 or higher, while the soccer and volleyball teams earned Silver

Level honors with team GPAs between 3.5 and 3.74. Even more impressively, our boys basketball team earned the Section 4A Championship Award – given to the team with the highest GPA in the entire section.

Senior athletes Isaac Aune and Jacob Ritzema were recognized individually with the prestigious Academic All-State Award, a testament to their dedication to both academics and athletics.

Ritzema to Ritzema: A 1,000 Points Legacy

By the time the final buzzer echoed through the gym at Christ Household of Faith on February 21, the scoreboard showed a 59-50 win for Avail Academy. But the real headline had already been written: Senior Jacob Ritzema had scored his 1,000th career point, becoming the eighth Avail athlete ever to do so. Watching him make the 1,000th point was his older brother, Coach Joey Ritzema.

Yes, that Joey Ritzema. Another Avail player to hit the 1,000-point mark back in 2021. Now in his first season as head coach of the Valor basketball program, Joey has been guiding this year's team.

Watching Jacob's journey unfold on the court where his brother once led as a player – and now as a coach – was a storybook moment not just for the family, but for the Avail community.



Additional High School Highlights

All-Conference Awards were given to the following athletes:

Volleyball: Jenna Eggimann (senior) and Stella Hagen (freshman)

Girls Basketball: Berean Bock (freshman), Keira Johnson (co-op player), Ruth Peterson (co-op player)

Boys Basketball: Lincoln Bock (senior), Jacob Ritzema (senior), and Isaac Aune (senior)



An all-conference award in high school athletics is a recognition given to individual student-athletes who are deemed among the best performers in their respective sport within a specific conference. Conference coaches vote on this award.



Junior Varsity Volleyball was the EMAC Conference Tournament Champions.



Varsity Volleyball took the Championship at the Columbia Heights Conference.



In Track, Senior Anderson Schuttinga won the 800 meters at the EMAC (Eastern Minnesota Athletics Conference) Meet and set a school record in the 400 meters at the 4A Section Meet. Additionally, seven athletes earned EMAC All-Conference honors in nine events.

Art Awards at the Great Get-Together

Our Edina art students are continuing a rich tradition of excellence – with over 50 students earning State Fair art awards in 2024, adding to a legacy of more than 20 years of award winning at Minnesota’s Great Get-Together!

This recognition isn’t just about ribbons – it’s about students courageously sharing beauty with the world. As Christian learners, they’re reflecting God’s creativity, engaging culture thoughtfully, and stewarding their gifts in public spaces like the State Fair.



One Act Play Wins Sub-Section 4A Championship

Avail Academy’s High School One Act team was named Sub-Section 4A Champions at the Minnesota State High School League competition, securing a unanimous vote from the judges. This victory reflects the team’s exceptional talent and commitment to telling meaningful stories with depth and purpose.

The cast performed “Dirt” by Mandy Conner, a play about the Loftin family’s struggles during the Dust Bowl in Texas, exploring themes of hope, suffering, and environmental disaster. With a strict 35-minute performance limit, precision and timing were key, and the team excelled in acting, set design, and ensemble work.



High School Band and Choir Tour

In April, 35 high school band and choir students toured Iowa and Nebraska, where they shared their musical talents with communities across the region.

During the trip, students performed six times and participated in workshops with Dordt University Band and Choir professors. A special highlights of the trip was leading worship at Faith Presbyterian Church, where students had the opportunity to connect deeply with the congregation.



Each year, our students glorify God by showcasing their talent and hard work on stage and behind the scenes at our theater and musical productions. In addition to “Dirt,” our students participated in four productions, pictured below.



Website Design Refresh



The Avail Academy website is getting a new look and updated digital features, including an improved calendar, smoother admissions features, and intuitive navigation. Check out the new site, available in August, at availacademy.org.

WHAT'S COMING UP?

Back to School Night.

Monday, August 25, 2025

First Day of School.

Wednesday, August 27, 2025

Avail Gala.

Friday, September 19, 2025