

GREATNESS

 **PAPILLION LA VISTA**
COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

UPDATE

FALL 2025



STUDENTS LEAD THE WAY:
COMMUNITY SHAPES VISION FOR PLCS FUTURE

PAGE 10

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NOTE FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT

Welcome back to another incredible year at Papillion La Vista Community Schools!

As I walked through our hallways these first weeks of school, I witnessed something truly remarkable: the energy of fresh beginnings and limitless possibilities filling every corner of our district.

This fall, I'm struck by how our community continues to rally around a shared vision of excellence. The conversations I've had with families, students, community members, and staff through our strategic planning process reveal a deep commitment to not just maintaining our standards, but elevating them. We're seeing this commitment translate into real, meaningful changes throughout our schools.

Our facilities are transforming into dynamic learning environments that reflect modern educational needs. But more importantly, I'm watching our students thrive in ways that go beyond test scores or traditional metrics. They're discovering passions, building confidence, and developing the critical thinking skills they'll need as tomorrow's leaders.

What excites me most is witnessing the ripple effect of excellence. When one student succeeds, it inspires others. When a teacher innovates, it sparks creativity across the building. When our community invests in education, it creates opportunities we couldn't have imagined just a few years ago.

Thank you for taking time to explore these pages and learn more about the exceptional work happening in our schools.

Yours in education,



INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 4** Across PLCS in 21 Photos
- 6** Room to Grow: Why Larger Classroom Sizes are Essential for Today's Students
- 8** Known for Greatness: Alumni Spotlight
- 10** Students Lead the Way: Community Shapes Vision for PLCS Future
- 12** Safety First & Always: All PLCS Schools Earn Top Safety Recognition
- 14** From Studios to Sidelines: Academy Programs
- 17** 15 Minutes of Insight: Mindshift Returns for Season 2
- 18** Celebrating Staff: 2025 PLCS Greatness Awards

The Greatness Update was created by the PLCS Communications Department. For more information about Papillion La Vista Community Schools, visit www.plcschools.org. You can contact us at 402-537-6200 or by emailing communications@plcschools.org.

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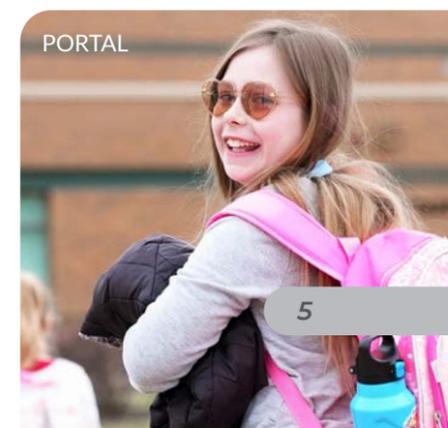
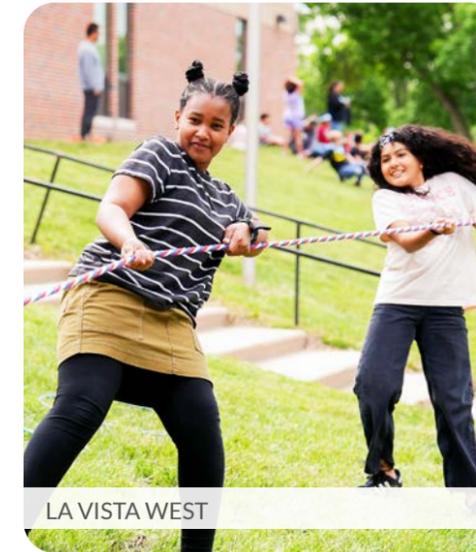
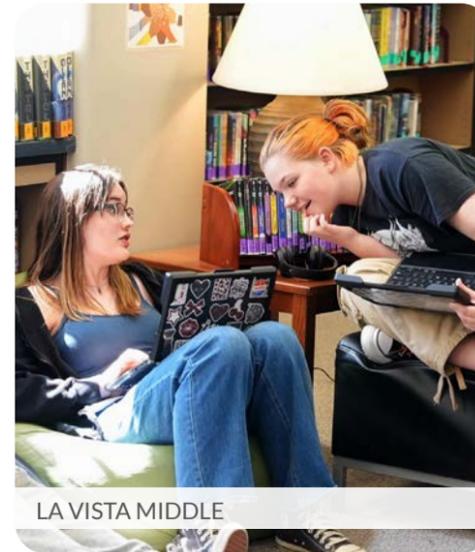
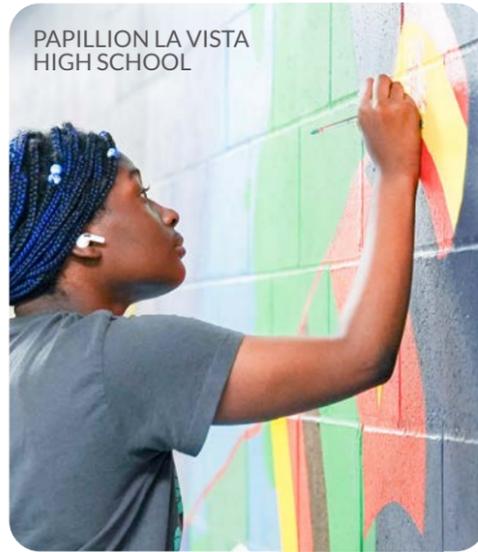
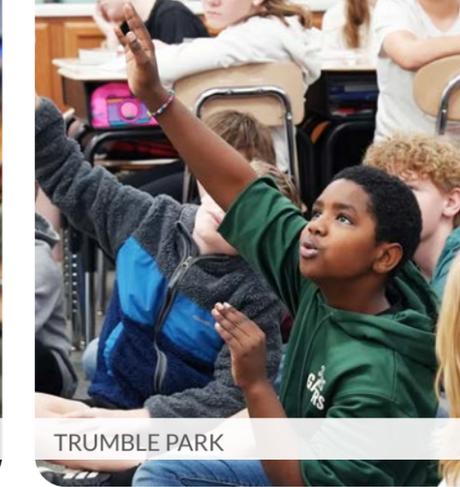
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ACROSS PLCs IN 21 PHOTOS





Room to GROW

why larger classrooms are essential for today's students

Collaboration. Movement. Serving all learning styles. These are the recurring themes you will hear from teachers about the importance and benefits of spacious classrooms. As our understanding of how students learn best continues to evolve, one factor has emerged as increasingly important: physical space. Larger classrooms aren't just a luxury. They're becoming essential.

Physically expanding classrooms has been a key element of the 2023 Bond Issue construction. Parkview Heights, Tara Heights, and Trumble Park elementary schools all received building additions that allowed square footage to be added to classrooms. The classroom expansions in these older buildings bring them up to today's teaching standards. But what does that really mean, and why are larger classrooms necessary?

Student-Centered Learning

What once worked in classrooms - rows of desks arranged to face the chalkboard - no longer serves modern research-based teaching practice. "The learning environment back when I was in elementary school (late '80s-early '90s) was more teacher-centered with lectures and limited interaction," notes Melani Weale, a third grade teacher at Tara Heights Elementary. "This type of instruction didn't require much space. The learning environment today is more collaborative."

Garrett O'Dell, also a third grade teacher at Tara Heights, describes this historical style of learning as "sit and get." He contrasts it to today's classroom culture of active participation, collaboration, and engaging learning activities. "Learning is about being student-centered," he explains.

Modern Classroom: Movement and Interaction

Ms. Weale and Mr. O'Dell both started this school year in a newly expanded room, which already makes it easier to conduct whole class discussion, partner and group work, and hands-on practice. "We have a lot more movement integrated into our lessons, and larger classrooms help teachers incorporate this movement safely," Ms. Weale adds. "Research has shown that incorporating movement into instruction increases engagement and information retention."

By having the flexibility to set up their classrooms in a variety of ways, teachers can personalize the educational experience of their classrooms to accommodate different learning styles and help each student succeed. "Bigger classrooms mean more flexible seating and collaborative learning spaces," Mr. O'Dell said. "This helps encourage students to get involved and interact with each other."

Ms. Weale gives the example of the learning exercise known as the Kagan Inside-Outside Circle, where students form two circles and rotate to discuss concepts with different partners. In cramped quarters, this becomes difficult to execute safely. With adequate space, teachers can easily fold active learning activities into their lessons to get the blood flowing and reinforce academic concepts.

Benefits All Around

In larger spaces, teachers can create distinct areas for different purposes: quiet zones for independent work, collaborative spaces for group projects, flexible desk arrangements, and still have room to gather to sit on the floor at the front of the room. Increased storage for materials can be distributed throughout the room, preventing bottlenecks during transitions and reducing the time lost between activities.

At their roots, the building enhancements empower teachers to format learning according to best practice and to best serve the learners in each of their rooms.

Room for Excitement

Melani Weale

"I think students will just be excited to have the extra space to move around. Students will love the freedom to move around and engage with the dynamic learning environments that we create."

Garrett O'Dell

"I'm excited about having the room to build upon the flexible learning areas that I've done before to support both individual focus and group collaboration. The extra space will also make it easier to do hands-on activities and create a comfortable and inclusive classroom atmosphere."



Scan to see a time lapse of Ms. Weale setting up her room!

KNOWN FOR GREATNESS

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

from Classroom Preparation to Career Success

Papillion La Vista Community Schools alumni are making their mark. The common thread? Hands-on learning experiences that taught them not just technical skills, but how to think, adapt, and lead. From healthcare architecture to international design projects, construction management, or safety consulting, SkillsUSA and Skilled and Technical Science programs prepare students for leadership across diverse industries. The combination of technical skills, problem-solving experience, and real-world application creates graduates who don't just find jobs but who build careers that make meaningful contributions to their communities.

Sarah Finkhouse PLHS '08

Senior Project Architect, BWBR

Sarah's journey from building drag cars with a bandsaw to designing Critical Access Hospitals across the Midwest began with SkillsUSA. That first memorable project sparked something unexpected: she placed second in competition and discovered her passion for turning ideas into tangible results.

Walking into her first college architecture courses, Sarah already had a solid foundation in CAD drafting and design principles that many of her classmates were seeing for the first time. But it wasn't just the software skills that mattered. Those collaborative high school projects taught her how to work with teams and manage complex timelines, abilities that still serve her today.

"Those Skilled & Technical Sciences classes were foundational in helping me become resourceful, detail-oriented, and confident in my problem-solving — skills I use every single day in my career."



DakotaHa Whiteowl PLSHS '08

Director of Safety, MGX Equipment Owner, Whiteowl Safety Consulting LLC

DakotaHa's path from high school woodworking and metalworking classes to founding his own safety consulting business shows how practical skills can open doors you never expected. His coursework in Skilled and Technical Science classes gave him firsthand experience with the tools and hazards that workers encounter regularly, knowledge that became the foundation for understanding workplace safety on a deeper level.

What started as shop class safety lessons has evolved into a career helping businesses nationwide stay compliant and keep their workers safe. DakotaHa now supports companies of all sizes, from major corporations to small businesses, drawing on his foundation of hands-on experience solving safety challenges.



"As our teacher Mr. Campbell preached constantly, basic safety and understanding can prevent the majority of problems in the shop or on the job site. His passion for shop safety helped fuel my desire to go into workplace safety management and I use the information and skills learned in my classes on a daily basis."



Brian Hrbek PLSHS '13

Journeyman Electrician & Field Supervisor, Control Services Inc.

Brian served as a SkillsUSA chapter officer for three years in high school, leading community projects and gaining real-world experience that extended far beyond the classroom. This sustained leadership role developed his understanding of teamwork, responsibility, and service to others.

"SkillsUSA taught me how to be a leader, to take pride in everything I do, and to always help others along the way. I am constantly trying to instill these values in our future generations of tradesmen/tradeswomen!"



Connor Pudenz PLSHS '15

Commercial Construction Superintendent, Montage Builders, LLC

The Woods I-IV classes helped Connor realize he loved working with his hands far more than sitting behind a desk. This discovery steered him toward Construction Management in college. Today, as Connor oversees complex construction sites, he draws on everything from the proper tool techniques he learned in Woods class to his OSHA certification.

"Through my participation in SkillsUSA, I was first exposed to the importance of creating a project schedule and sticking to the established timeline. This skill has been instrumental in my success as a professional."



Vinnie Hunter PLHS '16

Project Manager, Peacock & Lewis

As part of the inaugural cohort to complete all four years of the STEM Program, Vinnie developed 3D visualization skills and mastery of industry-standard software that directly translated to his architecture career. The presentation and communication skills he developed in high school now enable him to present design concepts to diverse clients in boardrooms and projects around the world.

"The STEM Academy taught me how to think and visualize things three-dimensionally. Being able to explain and defend a design is a skill that is not often acquired until university, but PLHS ensured those experiences were gained long before entering higher education."



Trevor Sotak PLHS '20

Drainage Engineer, Kiewit

Trevor credits his technical education with giving him essential skills that set him apart in college and launched his engineering career. His experience with surveying, land development projects, and the year-long capstone project taught him the persistence and systematic approach he uses to solve complex drainage issues.

"The capstone project was the most challenging and impactful experience. Going through iteration after iteration taught me how to stay focused on the end goal. It mirrors how projects are set up in the real world."



Students Lead the Way



Learn more information about the 2025-2030 Strategic Plan by scanning the QR code above with your phone camera, or by visiting plcschools.org/strategicplan.

This is a living plan that will guide our investments for the next five years. Because it was built with input from hundreds of community members, including our students, we know it reflects what our community really wants.

*Dr. Shureen Seery
PLCS Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment*

Community Shapes the Vision for PLCS Future

When students gathered around tables with district administrators last spring, sticky notes and markers in hand, they weren't just participating in another school meeting. They were helping chart the course for the next five years of education in their community.

The scene was colorful—literally. By the end of the day, hundreds of bright sticky notes covered every surface, each one representing a voice in the conversation. Students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members all contributed ideas that would shape the district's new 2025-2030 strategic plan.

"Build on to the academies," one student group wrote. "More AP/Advanced classes," noted another. "Mental health services for ALL students," emphasized a third, with the word "ALL" underlined twice for emphasis.

The strategic planning process reached far beyond typical school committees. Over 100 stakeholders participated in advisory groups, from custodians to business leaders, from parents to paraprofessionals.

Each group tackled the same question: What do you need from your schools? The answers revealed something remarkable. Despite coming from different perspectives, people kept saying similar things.

All those sticky notes and conversations boiled down to two main themes that now guide the district's work:

Perseverance to Purpose: Rigorous Academics & Planned Pathways

is about expanding opportunities. More career academies, more Advanced Placement courses, stronger trade programs, and better four-year planning for high school students. The goal is simple: every student should have a clear path forward.

Breaking Barriers to Elevate Engagement for All

focuses on the whole student. Mental health support, better attendance, life skills development, and removing obstacles that prevent kids from succeeding. It also means finding and keeping great teachers who connect with every student.



This fall, action teams are turning those sticky note ideas into real plans. Community volunteers and district staff are working together to create road maps, timelines, and budgets.

This isn't a "set it and forget it" process. Regular action team check-ins and board presentations will track progress throughout the life of the plan.

"This isn't just a document," emphasizes Dr. Shureen Seery, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. "This is a living plan that will guide our investments for the next five years. Because it was built with input from hundreds of community members, including our students, we know it reflects what our community really wants."

But the real work is just beginning. Success depends on ongoing partnerships between schools, families, and the local community. It requires everyone, from students to senior citizens, staying invested in the outcomes.

What made this effort special wasn't just how many people participated. It was watching teenagers articulate needs that perfectly aligned with what teachers and business leaders were saying. When that happens, you know you're onto something real.

The next five years will bring significant improvements. But the foundation is solid: a plan built on authentic community input and student leadership that's now becoming reality. 🙌



All PLCS Schools Earn Top Safety Recognition

SAFETY FIRST

When families entrust their children to schools each morning, they're placing their most valuable assets in the hands of educators and administrators. That trust comes with an enormous responsibility, one that Papillion La Vista Community Schools takes seriously at every level.

This year, that commitment to safety has been recognized at the highest level possible. All 21 schools in the PLCS district have earned the Diamond School Safety & Security Badge from

the Nebraska Department of Education, the top tier of recognition available to Nebraska schools.

"We often hear the expression 'safety first,' but in PLCS we believe in putting safety first and maintaining that focus always," explains Dr. Christopher Villarreal, Director of Communications and District Incident Management Team lead. "This recognition reflects our unwavering commitment to creating secure environments where learning thrives."

The Diamond badge represents the pinnacle of Nebraska's school safety recognition program, which evaluates schools across four critical pillars: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. While schools can earn Silver or Gold badges, achieving Diamond status requires meeting the most rigorous standards in each area.

For PLCS, earning Diamond recognition across all 21 schools – serving approximately 12,000 students – demonstrates a district-wide culture that prioritizes safety at every campus, from elementary through high school. The achievement required a thorough application process that included comprehensive reviews of safety standards throughout each building and detailed examination of Emergency Operations Plans.

"The evaluation process took about two months and was incredibly thorough," notes Dr. Villarreal. "It examined everything from our physical security measures to our emergency response protocols. Having all 21 schools meet the Diamond standard simultaneously shows that safety excellence is embedded in our district culture."

The recognition comes at a time when school safety remains a top concern for families nationwide. The Diamond badge evaluation examined how well each PLCS school addressed the four pillars of safety through both policy and practice: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Schools had to demonstrate not just that they had safety plans in place, but that those plans were comprehensive, current, and effectively implemented.

AND ALWAYS

"We often hear the expression 'safety first,' but in PLCS we believe in putting safety first and maintaining that focus always. This recognition reflects our unwavering commitment to creating secure environments where learning thrives."

*Dr. Christopher Villarreal
Director of Communications
District Incident Management Team Lead*

The achievement reflects years of strategic investment in safety infrastructure and ongoing commitment to best practices. Many of the security enhancements that contributed to this recognition were funded through community support, including the 2023 Bond initiative that allowed the district to upgrade safety systems across all campuses.

"Safety First & Always means we're constantly evaluating, improving, and adapting to new challenges," adds Dr. Villarreal. "This recognition validates our approach, but it doesn't mean we're finished. It means we're committed to maintaining these high standards."

As the new school year begins, families can take pride in knowing their schools exceed state safety standards. The Diamond School Safety & Security Badge serves as verification that PLCS schools provide secure environments where students can focus on learning, growing, and achieving their goals.

This October, the district plans to share more details about the specific safety enhancements and protocols that contributed to earning this prestigious recognition, helping families better understand the comprehensive approach to school safety that makes PLCS schools among the safest in Nebraska.

For parents dropping off children each morning, the Diamond badge represents more than an award. It's a promise that their most valuable assets are protected by schools committed to safety first – and always. 🎓



FROM STUDIOS TO SIDELINES

ACADEMY PROGRAMS GIVE STUDENTS PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

The cameras are rolling in the media studio, and PLSHS junior Kaela Sizer is completely focused on capturing the perfect shot. Around her, teammates work at a bank of monitors and control equipment, coordinating what looks like a professional television production. But this isn't a TV station – it's just another day in the Media Academy, where students learn broadcast journalism and media production skills that prepare them for careers in communications.

"I had always had a slight interest in media and art, so when I found out about the Media Academy at the district's Academy Night, it seemed like a good opportunity," says Kaela. "I got in and over the past two years I've grown to love it and want to pursue a career relating to it. Being in the academy, I've realized that a lot more goes into media than what you see—there are so many decisions made that you wouldn't think about if you're just watching a stream or looking at a graphic."

Kaela's experience represents exactly what PLCS envisioned when launching the academy programs. These aren't your typical high school electives – they're immersive, multi-year programs that place students directly alongside professionals in their chosen fields.

In the Athletic Training/Sports Medicine Academy, the atmosphere is equally focused but dramatically different. PLHS senior Aiden Wesley is working with an athlete, demonstrating the hands-on rehabilitation techniques that are central to sports medicine. Nearby, his classmate Kailee Eyster, also a senior, is preparing treatment materials with the same precision and care that professional athletic trainers use daily. These students aren't just learning about sports

medicine – they're actually providing care to their fellow student-athletes.

"During athletic training we would practice a lot of our hands-on work on each other to make sure our taping was spot on for future athletes," says Kailee. "The most valuable lesson I learned through athletic training was to stay focused, especially during games where everything happens quickly."

The district currently offers seven specialized academies: Athletic Training, Education, Health Systems (Patient Care or Biomedical), Leadership, Media, STEM, and Zoo. Each program follows a carefully designed progression, typically starting with foundational classroom learning and advancing to hands-on internships and real-world projects.

"The beauty of our academy programs is that students aren't just learning about careers – they're actually doing the work," explains Missy Jabens, PLCS Career & Academy Administrator. "We partner with local hospitals, schools, and other organizations to ensure our students are getting authentic experience alongside the professionals they might work with after graduation."

What makes these programs particularly unique is their integration with the regular school day. Students don't have to choose between academic rigor and career preparation – they can maintain their involvement in sports, clubs, and advanced coursework while participating in their chosen academy.

The application process for the 2026-27 school year begins this fall, and district officials encourage families to start exploring their options early. ▶





Scan to learn more about the Academies!

The College & Career Expo on October 28th will give students and parents the chance to meet with academy instructors, current students, and industry professionals at both high schools during the school day.

“We want students to see all the possibilities that are available to them,” says Jabens. “Whether they’re interested in healthcare, technology, media, or any other field, we have pathways that can help them get there.”

ACCESS Your Future Night, scheduled for November 3rd, will provide even more detailed information about each program, including application requirements, curriculum details, and opportunities to speak with current students and alumni. The application window opens that same evening and closes November 12th, giving interested families a tight but manageable time frame to apply.

For families considering these programs, the message from current students is clear: don’t wait. These academies fill up quickly, and the experience they provide is transformative in ways that extend far beyond career preparation.

“The Media Academy has helped me develop media skills like designing, filming, editing and using different creative programs, but Mrs. Hoch and the Media Academy have also taught me soft skills like work ethic, teamwork, adaptability, time management, and problem solving,” reflects Kaela. “What you put in is what you get out of the academy. If you put in the effort and volunteer to help where you can, you will have an amazing time.”

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

OCTOBER 28

College & Career Expo
During the school day at both high schools

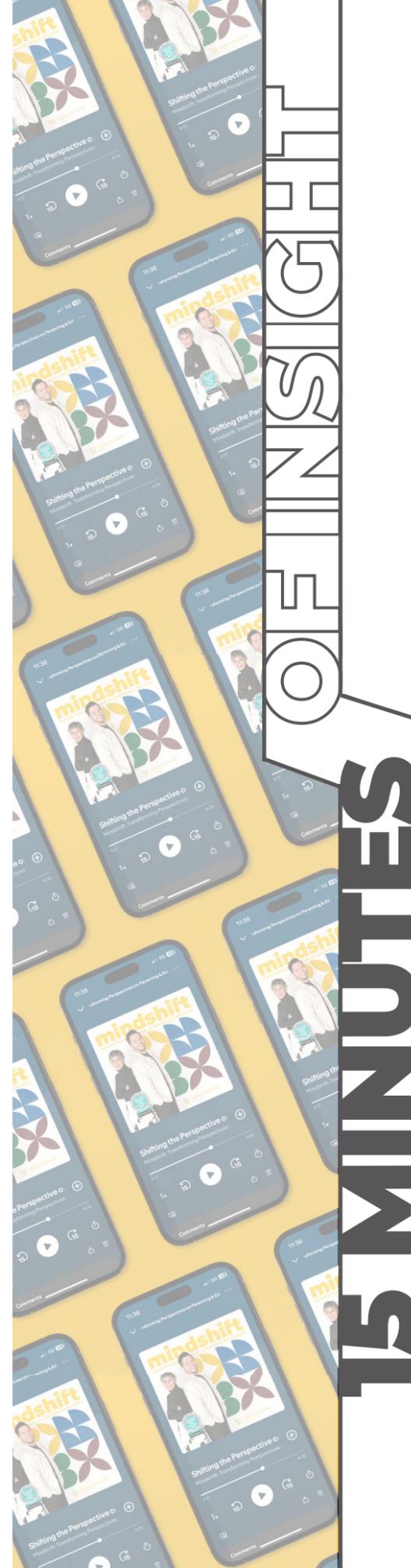
NOVEMBER 3

ACCESS Your Future Night
Located at PLHS for all PLCS students

NOVEMBER 3

Applications Open
Close November 12th

For more information about PLCS Academy Programs, visit plcschools.org/future.



MINDSHIFT RETURNS FOR SEASON TWO

The award-winning podcast *Mindshift* is back for its second season, focusing on parenting, education, and family life. With a clear mission to “transform perspectives on parenting and education,” this PLCS Empowerment Collective production has quickly become a go-to resource for families dealing with today’s challenges.

Mindshift’s first season was a hit, with over 3,000 downloads and recognition through a National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) Award for Excellence. Hosts Dr. Christopher Villarreal and Dr. Deb Anderson covered everything from screen time battles to sleep science. They brought in expert guests who shared both research-based knowledge and real-world advice in every conversation.

The season’s most popular episodes tackled what parents really want to talk about: discipline strategies that teach instead of punish, helping children navigate the digital world, and building healthy habits that actually last. Each 15-minute episode gave families practical tips without being overwhelming which proves that meaningful parenting conversations don’t need to take up hours of your day.

Season 2 brings 38 new episodes with even more valuable content. The hosts plan to explore topics that matter most to today’s families, including children’s mental health and the pressures young athletes face. The podcast will continue bringing expert voices directly to parents and educators, maintaining its focus on practical, research-backed content that families can use right away.

As part of the PLCS Empowerment Collective, *Mindshift* serves as an important connection between home and school. It helps families access the same high-quality insights that guide our educational practices. The show recognizes that while parenting doesn’t come with an instruction manual, it doesn’t have to feel overwhelming either.

Ready to shift your perspective? Whether you’re catching up on Season 1 or jumping into the new content, these conversations offer the insights and support every parent needs to navigate the rewarding but complex journey of raising children in today’s world.

Season 2 premieres September 3rd at PLCSchools.org/Mindshift, on YouTube, or wherever you get your podcasts.

celebrating staff

2025 PLCS Greatness Awards

The PLCS Greatness Awards are presented annually to staff members in five categories: Secondary Teacher/Specialist, Elementary Teacher/Specialist, Classified Staff Member, Rookie Teacher, and Substitute Teacher. These staff members of the year demonstrate the trademark greatness that characterizes PLCS staff and education!



Left to Right: Kirk Walker, Samantha Glowacki, Kelly Aschwege, Lisa Elsasser, and Zac Konrad

Zac Konrad - Secondary Teacher Papillion Middle School - Instrumental Music Teacher

Known for his calm, level-headed demeanor, Zac creates an environment where every student feels listened to and appreciated. His impact is so profound that former students regularly return to visit, with many saying no other educator has matched his influence.

Lisa Elsasser - Elementary Teacher La Vista West Elementary - Kindergarten Teacher

Lisa is warm and inviting and always full of fun, but what truly sets her apart is her ability to make learning an adventure. Parents note how their children grew exponentially and came home excited to share what they discovered each day.

Kelly Aschwege - Classified Staff Member Papillion La Vista High School, Media Paraprofessional

Kelly demonstrates unwavering dedication and compassion. She has an extraordinary ability to create supportive environments and form meaningful relationships with students. Students often ask to stay in her room because it is a quiet, calming place for them to be.

Samantha Glowacki - Rookie Teacher Walnut Creek - Fourth Grade Teacher

Samantha combines heart, strategy, and excellence in everything she does. As a beginning teacher, she's created a learning environment that is inclusive, engaging, and built on mutual respect where students are both academically challenged and encouraged to believe in themselves.

Kirk Walker - Substitute Papillion La Vista Community Schools - Floater Substitute

Kirk began as a floater substitute and immediately made a building-wide impact. Always willing to work, determined to excel, and with a deep understanding of education, he shows up daily asking, "Where do you need me?"

"Zac gives you light when you are down, and your day will be better just by being in class with him."

"Lisa has a knack for making learning fun and my children grew exponentially during their kindergarten years."

"Kelly's unique ability to form meaningful relationships with 'tougher' students is a testament to her skill as an educator and mentor."

"Samantha creates a safe, welcoming environment where students are not only supported but are truly thriving."

"I have personally witnessed student transformation due to Kirk's individual instruction with a student that struggles with boundaries, attention, and task completion. This student has grown beyond my expectations."

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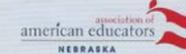
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GROWING UP GREATER

Build a Better Future Together



Will you help local kids grow up greater?



Papillion La Vista Community Schools
Foundation

Growing Up Greater is a three-year, \$10 million community fundraising campaign designed to strengthen connections between our schools and the community. Funds raised will support the construction of a modern, two-story Community Engagement Center on the PLCS Central Office campus.

The PLCS Community Engagement Center will serve as a catalyst for PLCS community engagement, uniting these important programs and functions under one roof in a building near the heart of the district.

- PLCS Community Closet
- Kids Club Headquarters
- Training and Event Center
- PLCS Foundation Offices

Led by the PLCS Foundation, the campaign welcomes support from local businesses, foundations, educators, alumni, and friends who believe in the power of education and community.

Learn more at plcsfoundation.org

LET'S TALK ABOUT DONOR OPPORTUNITIES

Lee Denker, Executive Director

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Mindy Bieck, Development Director

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PLCS COMMUNITY CLOSET



KIDS CLUB HEADQUARTERS



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