

WAYFINDER

WINTER 2025 | VOLUME 9



Shaping a diverse and equitable One91

Meet the programs, partnerships and educators bringing diversity and inclusion to life, including two teachers who joined us from half a world away.

FEATURING

07 Diversity in action: How District 191 is building a truly equitable education system

14 Filipino teachers in District 191 are enriching classrooms and community

INSIDE ONE91

02 Finding the beat that connects us all: Teaching culture through music

04 Empowering students through 'Heritage Learners' classes

11 BHS Hall of Fame Class of 2025

12 Supporting the elementary to middle school transition through WEB programming

16 Meet the students shaping - and shaped by - affinity groups at BHS

PATHWAYS

19 Light the spark

20 Fuel exploration

21 Blaze new trails

Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School District 191

Diamondhead Education Center
200 W. Burnsville Pkwy
Burnsville, Minnesota 55337
952-707-2000
isd191.org

Superintendent

Dr. Latanya Daniels

School Board Members

Anna Werb, Chair
Abigail Alt, Vice Chair
Lesley Chester, Treasurer
Scott Hume, Clerk
Annemarie Anderson
Rachael Mikkelsen
Tyler Sachse

Please direct publication questions to communications@isd191.org.

SUPERINTENDENT'S MESSAGE

Embracing our diverse community

It's a pleasure and a privilege to connect with you through the Wayfinder for the first time as superintendent of District 191. In my Listen and Learn sessions with staff and community members, one of the top points of pride that consistently shines through is the incredible diversity of our school district. That diversity is not only something we celebrate – it is a strength that enriches the experiences of our students every day.

That's why I'm especially excited about this issue of the Wayfinder and its focus on how we are serving our diverse community; and how, in turn, our diverse community serves and supports our students. Together, we are building a district where every student feels seen, valued and empowered to succeed.

One of the things that attracted me to District 191 was its unwavering commitment to cultural proficiency. At the heart of this commitment is a simple but powerful belief: meeting the needs of all students means meeting each student where they are and giving them the tools to thrive. When we do this and build the capacity of our staff, honor student and family voices, and include diverse cultures in our curriculum, we create something extra special. We build a school system that is not only stronger, but one that reflects the richness of our community and inspires every student to see themselves as capable, valued and limitless in their potential.

Let's continue to value diversity. Let's continue to provide space for ideas that may otherwise be ignored. And let's continue to remove barriers that impede students from being the best version of themselves. The diversity of our community is a gift and when we embrace it, that's when we are truly One91.

Thank you for being part of our community. We're better because you're here.

Sincerely,



DR. LATANYA DANIELS
Superintendent





FINDING THE BEAT THAT CONNECTS US ALL:

Teaching culture through music



District 191 classrooms are the setting for some incredible moments of connection, exploration and passion. For music teachers Abigail Adkins and Kimberly Wood, music is not just something to listen to or perform, it serves as a gateway to centuries of history, continents and cultures. That bridge is built one rhythm, one story and one “aha moment” at a time.

Wood teaches at Hidden Valley and Sky Oaks; Adkins is at Edward Neill and also teaches in the district’s middle school and high school Virtual Academy. Their reach is wide, and so is their impact.

Adkins laughs when she thinks about how she ended up in District 191. “I actually grew up with a mom who was a music teacher and thought that was the last thing I’d be,” she said. But after trying to step away from music, she found herself drawn back to the infectious joy of teaching it. “I thought being a music teacher would be a joy-filled career,” she said.

Wood’s path has its own musical roots. “I grew up in a small town and my grandma was a piano teacher, so we all learned how to play piano,” she said. She tried her hand at teaching math, but quickly realized her heart – and her gifts – belonged elsewhere. “After one year of advanced math, I knew that wasn’t my gig,” she said with a laugh.

Across District 191, music teachers approach music as a universal language that opens doors to understanding and identity. Wood sees examples of that through moments that unfold naturally in her classroom. “Every culture has poetry, rhythm that goes back thousands of years,” she said.

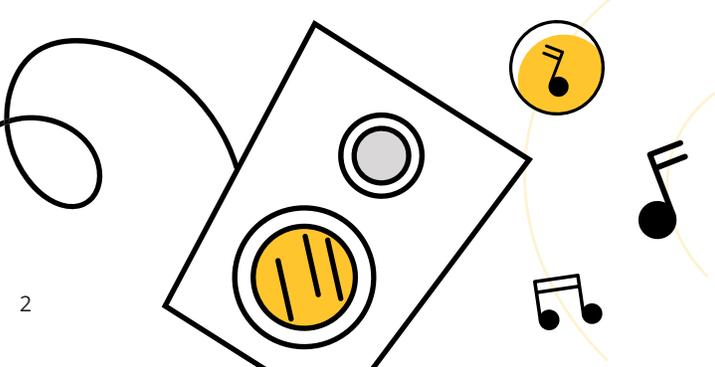


Different songs, similar rhythm

A class of fifth graders recently studied the dances of Indigenous and African cultures when they suddenly noticed striking similarities, which led to a breakthrough moment. Students were able to clearly see that cultures separated by time and distance had created expressions that ultimately felt connected.

Another standout moment came when Wood was reviewing an African American spiritual that mentioned Moses. A Somali student raised their hand and shared that Moses appears in the Quran, which launched a thoughtful class discussion – not about religion, but about shared stories. “We are more alike than we are different,” Wood said. “Music creates something deeper for our students if we give them the opportunity to see it.”

Adkins sees the same connections when she introduces genres like samba, salsa, reggae, blues and the irresistible hooks of American soul institution Motown. Her students often start with little context but quickly surprise themselves. “When working on Motown, my students had no idea of the Motown sound or its history. As soon as they heard the songs, they were excited to find out how



much Motown music they knew,” she said. Reggae, too, sparks instant recognition. “Kids recognize the beats,” she said. Even fourth and fifth graders hear echoes of reggae rhythms in current pop tracks — proof that music history lives in today’s playlists.

Listening beyond the notes

Music teachers throughout the district believe part of teaching culture through music is giving kids space to experience it personally. Wood uses “SQUIT” — Super Quiet, Uninterrupted Listening Time, which is a chance for students to absorb music without judgment. “You don’t have to like things to learn and absorb them,” she said. She invites honest reactions: thumbs up, sideways, or down. The point isn’t to force appreciation, it’s to build awareness.

Context matters too. “If I’m teaching a song, there’s always some important background information on why I’m teaching it,” Wood said. Her students light up when they discover that The Beatles wrote a song they’ve heard before. Some even return the next day with new finds, ready to talk about what else they listened to. “That’s what you want to happen — a love of learning and sharing what you learned,” she said.

That energy is on full display in Adkins’ room. She often sees it in action, before students even know they’re learning. Turn on a Latin pop track, a Somali hit, or even a sea shanty, and everything shifts. “Every time we start on a new song, their bodies will start to move and that gives me so much joy as a teacher,” she said. That movement is more than dancing. It’s readiness, engagement and curiosity. It’s the beat taking hold.

“You don’t have to love everything we do in music class, but you can appreciate the different styles of music,” Adkins said. She encourages students to use respectful language, even if something isn’t their style.



Connecting through tone, texture and tempo

Showing cultural connections through music requires music teachers district-wide to expand the definition of culture beyond geographic boundaries. “We often think of culture as being a language,” Wood said, but culture is also the people you’re with — a third-grade class, a lunch table, a group of friends. Adkins agrees. “Look at the similarities,” she said. “It’s not all in one box. We’re not teaching these things in a vacuum.”

One place teachers have seen student’s curiosity sparked is when they’re able to host live music performances. This fall, the Havana Quartet visited Gideon Pond Elementary and introduced students to Cuban culture through their classical and contemporary music. While scheduling keeps the two teachers from bringing in visiting musicians as often as they’d like — it doesn’t stop them from filling their classrooms with rich experiences. Both teachers ultimately have the same hope for their students: that music class becomes a place where they feel safe, joyful, curious and themselves. Adkins says she wants students to grow into their own preferences over time, whether that’s heavy metal, classical, or anything in between.

A former student — one who had been in her class for only a few months — once recognized her at a restaurant and told her she had been their favorite teacher. Moments like that affirm her purpose. “And that’s what I want,” Wood said. “Specialists like music teachers are kids’ outlets and safe places. It also gives them a place to shine. You can teach music and have a lot of fun. When you’re having fun, kids will have fun, too.” ■



EMPOWERING STUDENTS THROUGH LANGUAGE:

‘Heritage Learners’ classes help students embrace their identity, culture and heritage

How language courses at Burnsville High School help students feel seen, respected and proud of their heritage

Heritage Learners courses offered at Burnsville High School (BHS) are designed for students for whom Spanish or Somali is their native or heritage language. The classes provide students with the opportunity to expand their proficiency, while also developing and strengthening reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Students also learn appropriate use of the language in both academic and professional settings.

Any student can enroll in the classes per instructor approval, but the courses are designed with the native or heritage speaker in mind as they aim to improve students’ literacy skills and boost their oral communication. Just as importantly, students gain confidence in their identity while learning about their heritage, culture and language.

Spanish for Native and Heritage Speakers

When teacher Javier Blazquez started teaching Spanish classes at BHS 14 years ago, he quickly recognized that the classes did not meet the needs of native speakers. Spanish-speaking students seemed bored in the classroom and disengaged with coursework. As a native speaker himself, Blazquez was not surprised.

“These kids were in a classroom alongside English speakers learning how to say ‘hello’ and ‘how are you,’” said Blazquez. “They already knew the language.”

So Blazquez got to work and began developing the curriculum for a native and heritage learners Spanish class, which was launched just two years later.

Through the years, Blazquez has witnessed the positive shift in both student learning and behavior.

“Not only do students learn to read or write better in Spanish and feel more confident using their language, but they also learn about the culture and history of Mexico and South American countries—helping them better understand who they are and where they came from,” said Blazquez. “Many students feel proud after taking this class because they feel seen and their bilingual skills are valuable. It helps them in school and at home, and it will also help them with future jobs or college opportunities.”

The class, which consists of students representing # of countries, connects students to their heritage by exploring stories, music, traditions, geography, real-life experiences of students and their families, and accounts of well-known or historical figures. There



are a variety of hands-on projects, many of which are self-directed, that help students not only learn about their heritage but also the history and culture of other countries.

Since the class includes students who are both native speakers and students who understand and speak the language because they grew up listening to the language, there are varying language proficiencies in the class.

“Some students speak fluently but need help with grammar or writing, while others understand the language but don’t often use it in an academic or professional environment,” said Blazquez. “I use a variety of strategies to differentiate instruction and every student feels comfortable to make progress at their own pace.”

Blazquez added, “While I make the student groups flexible and often give choices for assignments, the students are great at helping and supporting each other, too.”

“This class makes me feel confident in my language. I can speak and express myself better in my native language,” said Valeria Pineda Namicela, 9th grade. Kerly Arevalo Condor, 9th grade, added: “This class helps us improve our language and spelling. It also introduces us to the culture and foods of different countries.”

“The assignments have helped me improve my communication skills, and Mr. Blazquez is good at explaining things,” said Randy Benalcazar Chavez, 9th grade.



Somali for Native and Heritage Learners

One difference between the Spanish and Somali classes is that students in the Somali class, for the most part, are heritage learners not native speakers.

Sahro Abdullahi, who was initially hired to teach English Language Learner (ELL) students, was asked if she’d be interested in teaching a Somali for Native and Heritage Learners class. At that time, only the Spanish courses existed for native or heritage learners.

Abdullahi enthusiastically accepted the challenge and with the help of the District 191 Teaching and Learning Department, she developed a curriculum. In 2023, the first Somali class was offered.

There was such a positive response to the class that she had to begin developing a second level to the class.

The class teaches Somali heritage, culture and language. Students develop Somali language skills, including reading, writing, listening and speaking, while gaining confidence in their identity.

Abdullahi, affectionately referred to as “habo” (auntie) by her students, creates lessons that are meaningful and connected to the students’ experiences. She covers the history of Somalia, from colonization through independence and civil war through migration, so students understand how their families landed in Minnesota. Creative



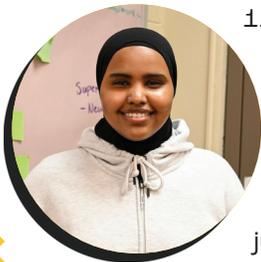
CONTINUED »

and interactive activities – including cultural and historical research projects, presentations, short stories, folktales, proverbs, poems, writings, storytelling, quizlets, performances and more—not only explore the language but help students feel proud of their cultural roots.

Through these culturally-rich activities, students build strong language and communication skills, deepen cultural understanding and find their sense of belonging.

“Students can proudly say, ‘This is my identity. This is where I came from,’” said Abdullahi.

Abdirisak Yussuf, 11th grade, feels that there is a strong sense of community in the class. He also feels closer to his heritage and family. Before taking the class, he did not know any Somali. Last year, he visited his family in Somalia and was able to communicate with them.



11th-grader Sabrina Yasin, decided to take the class because she wanted to learn about her culture and feel connected to Somalia.

“Ms. Abdullahi’s class is a judgement-free zone. I was really shy and she helped me with that. This is just a comfortable environment where everyone feels included.”

Her favorite part of the class is the connection she has with the other students.

“This is just everybody’s story,” she said.

Sabir Sheikh, also in 11th grade, has learned a lot about Somalia – the history, customs and language. He feels more confident using Somali inside and outside of school.



“The class makes me feel proud and confident in my identity, and I feel more comfortable speaking in Somali and expressing my culture around others. It reminds me that being Somali is something beautiful to celebrate, not to hide.”

He added, “This is a great space for Somali and non-Somali students to come together, share experiences and learn from each other. It builds understanding and respect among us.” ■

A Reflection of District 191 Core Values

The Spanish and Somali Native and Heritage Learners courses support District 191’s vision to provide transformative learning experiences that mirror students’ own stories.

District 191 core values are represented in the course by:

✘  Students feeling seen, valued and respected (**CARING COMMUNITY**);

 ✘ Understanding and responding to cultural uniqueness of students, and adapting education to meet the needs of each student (**CULTURAL PROFICIENCY**);

✘  Students being better equipped for future opportunities by being multilingual (**FUTURE READINESS**);

 ✘ Students taking ownership of their learning and expressing their identity through language and projects (**STUDENT AGENCY**); and

✘  Building connections between students, families and the broader community (**INCLUSIVE PARTNERSHIP**).

▼▼▼▼▼

◀◀◀◀◀

DIVERSITY IN ACTION:

How District 191 is building a truly equitable education system



Over the last two decades, the Burnsville community has grown significantly more diverse racially, culturally and linguistically. In Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School District 191, that reality has shaped a clear and urgent focus: building an equitable education system that serves every student – ensuring they are seen, supported and given meaningful pathways to success.

Over the past two decades, the District 191 community has evolved from a mostly white suburb to one of the most diverse school districts in Minnesota. In 2000, the city of Burnsville was nearly 88% white. By the 2020 Census, the city's population was 61% white, with robust growth among Black (15%), Hispanic/Latino (12%), Asian (6%) and multicultural residents.

Inside District 191, that diversification showed up even earlier: by 2009–10, several schools were already majority-minority, and within a few years students across the district spoke 80+ home languages. That transformation, say district leaders, has shaped everything about how the district teaches, supports and celebrates its students. It's why actively leading by developing and sustaining a diverse and equitable education system is one of the district's strategic directions and why that work continues to deepen each year.

"We're not reacting to diversity," said Dr. Kathy Funston, Director of Pathways and Partnerships. "We're embracing the normalness of living in a pluralistic society. Our community looks like the world, which is something we're proud of because it benefits every student in our schools."

A journey toward cultural proficiency

The district's commitment to equity didn't happen overnight. As the demographics in the district changed, district leaders began to reimagine what an inclusive education system looks like – from curriculum to culture.

According to Isis Buchanan, Director of Equity and Multilingual Services, the journey started by looking inward.

"Our work has been focused on really knowing who our students are and using the tools of cultural proficiency to ensure we're meeting their needs," Buchanan said. "That means examining our systems – our grading practices, our curriculum, even how we communicate with families – to make sure we're giving every student equal access and opportunity."

Today, the concept of "cultural proficiency" isn't just an initiative outlined in a plan. It's embedded in daily practice, reflected in classroom instruction, family partnerships and staff professional learning. Teachers make space for students' identities and languages in the classroom and use materials that mirror the cultures of our community.

Because when students see themselves in what they learn, they feel known, valued and motivated. That is when learning takes root and students succeed.

Even small details matter. Walk through a District 191 school and you'll see student artwork and photos displayed on walls, a visible reminder that every child belongs.

"It's about building the capacity of all of us to see the value we have in impacting outcomes for students," Buchanan said. "Cultural proficiency gives us tools to identify barriers and take action to remove them."



We're not reacting to diversity. We're embracing the normalness of living in a pluralistic society. Our community looks like the world, which is something we're proud of because it benefits every student in our schools.

DR. KATHY FUNSTON
Director of Pathways and Partnerships

Reflecting a changing community

When Funston started working in the district nearly 16 years ago, about 70% of students were white. Today, roughly three-quarters of District 191 students identify as students of color. That demographic shift has fueled new energy around equity and access.

"We live in a universal community – people from all walks of life, all religions, all backgrounds living and learning together," said Funston. "Now, our programming reflects the way we all live and work together."

That programming includes the district's nationally recognized Pathways model, which connects students' academic experiences with real-world





opportunities in careers, college and community life. The model is designed to help every student, no matter their background, discover their strengths and passions while earning industry certifications or college credits along the way.

“It’s about eliminating barriers,” Funston said. “We want every student to test drive their future while they’re still in high school, not when they’re \$75,000 into their time in college.”

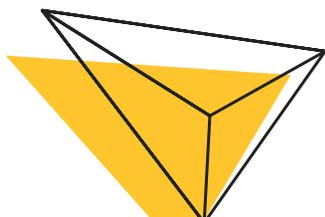
Funston recalls one student who entered Burnsville High School convinced she wanted to become a nurse. Through a health sciences pathway, she discovered that direct patient care wasn’t the right fit, but found her calling in hospital management after pivoting to the business and leadership pathway.

“That’s equity in action,” Funston said. “She had the freedom to explore, to learn about herself and to change direction without penalty.”

Representation matters

With more than 80 languages spoken in the district, representation, both in classrooms and across leadership roles, remains a top priority. The district continues to make a concerted effort to hire and retain staff of color and create programs that help current employees become licensed teachers and grow as educators.

“Our Grow Your Own program pays for paraprofessionals and support staff of color to earn their teaching degrees,” Funston explained. “We’ve already hired two graduates back into the district. It’s working!”



Research shows that students thrive when they are challenged to think critically and when their teachers reflect the diversity of their school community. These students are more engaged, achieve at higher levels and are more likely to graduate and pursue college.

That understanding is one reason District 191 has sought and secured more than \$2.3 million in Grow Your Own grant funding. These grants help support students and employees of color in earning their teaching licenses, strengthening representation in our schools and building a workforce that mirrors the community we serve.

The district’s goal is for every student to see themselves reflected in their teachers, mentors and leaders. When classrooms don’t reflect the diversity of the school, Funston said, educators are expected to ask “why.”

“As professionals, we need to dig deep and ask who doesn’t feel like they belong here and why,” she said. “If we really want to improve education for young people, they need to have their own seat at the table.”

Empowering multilingual learners and families

As the number of multilingual students has grown, District 191’s approach to language learning has evolved, too. Today, Buchanan’s department supports students at all stages of English acquisition, ensuring that instruction is both rigorous and accessible.

“We’ve shifted from a model where students came in with some English to now having many who are entering with little or no English,” Buchanan said. “That’s changed how we design support.”



CONTINUED »

Student voice and shared belonging

One of the clearest signs of progress, Buchanan said, is the growing role of student voice in district decision-making. From affinity groups at the high school to district-wide advisory teams, students are actively shaping how equity and inclusion show up in everyday life.

She recalls an example from last year when graduation fell on the same date as Eid, an important Muslim holiday. The district gathered feedback from students and families and ultimately made decisions guided by dialogue, not division.

“We don’t want a culture of cancellation, we want a culture of conversation,” Buchanan said. “Students want to be heard, and we want them to know their perspectives matter.”

That sense of belonging extends to every classroom, where students are encouraged to bring their full selves to the learning experience.

“We’re preparing students for a future we can’t fully see yet,” Buchanan said. “That’s why we have to keep evolving.”

A shared message to the community

As the district continues to grow and change, its schools stand as a reflection of the community’s values, where diversity is not a challenge to manage but a strength to celebrate.

“Our families should know that from pre-kindergarten to high school, their children will be cared for, valued and seen,” Funston said. “We meet students where they are and give them opportunities that make a real difference in their lives.”

Buchanan agrees. “Diversity is seen as a positive thing here,” she said. “Our story is one of continuous learning – of adapting, improving and moving forward together. The work never ends, but that’s what makes it powerful.” ■



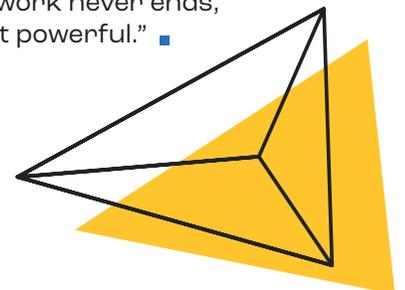
From co-taught classes in English Language Arts to intensive courses for emerging learners, the district’s multilingual programs are designed to build confidence and competence simultaneously. But it’s not just about academics – it’s also about connection.

District 191 employs cultural liaisons who act as bridges between families and schools, helping both sides understand each other’s expectations, traditions and communication styles. Translators and interpreters ensure families receive information in their preferred languages, but liaisons go a step further, fostering trust and building a mutual sense of understanding.

“Our liaisons help parents navigate school systems and help school staff understand family and cultural dynamics,” Buchanan said. “It’s truly a two-way partnership.”

Family engagement is another area of focus. The district is embracing creative ways to connect with parents, offering virtual meetings, flexible scheduling and community events that celebrate cultural heritage.

“We’re redefining what family involvement looks like,” Buchanan added. “It’s not just about parents coming to school. It’s about building ongoing relationships, however that connection works best.”



HALL OF FAME HONORS BURNSVILLE'S TRAILBLAZERS

Burnsville High School has a proud tradition of excellence, and each year, the BHS Hall of Fame recognizes individuals and organizations whose exceptional achievements in their field, significant contributions, and dedication to their community exemplify the spirit of the school. Honorees serve as role models for students and staff alike, showcasing the heights that District 191 alumni can reach.

Celebrating the Class of 2025

This year's class of inductees reflects the diversity of talent, dedication and impact that Burnsville High School nurtures in its students. From the arts to athletics, science to service, these alumni have made their mark on the world in extraordinary ways.



CEDRIC YARBROUGH
Class of 1991

MIKE WICKER
Class of 1973

MARK TUSZYNSKI
Class of 1975

TOM NGUYEN
Class of 1995

MICHAEL HUNTER
Class of 1994

DOUG BOE
Longtime BHS teacher
and coach



Watch our inductees share their best advice to current BHS students



Supporting the elementary to middle school transition through WEB programming

'Where Everybody Belongs' sets up middle schoolers for success

Implemented during hybrid learning in 2021, "Where Everybody Belongs" (WEB) at District 191 middle schools is a transition program aimed at welcoming incoming sixth graders and helping them feel comfortable and supported as they navigate their middle school experience.

The WEB program supports students as they make the transition from elementary school to middle school and encounter new challenges, such as opening a locker, finding classrooms and meeting new people. At its core, the program is designed to create a safe, positive learning environment where all students feel accepted and valued. It also provides opportunities for kids to connect with their peers, develop lasting friendships and learn skills that will help them be successful in middle school and beyond.

WEB programming is facilitated by teachers (advisors). This year's advisors include Laura Hermansen, Ryan Mokandu and Madison Thorton at Eagle Ridge Middle School (ERMS) and Katy Hemmah and Adam Iverson at Nicollet Middle School (NMS). Eighth-grade students interested in a

leadership role apply and interview in the spring of seventh grade, and then attend WEB training with advisors during the last week of summer break. Leaders are assigned to a small group of students that they'll mentor and support on the first day of school, which is an orientation day of sorts, and throughout the school year.

During the year, WEB programming includes an array of learning activities and opportunities that are built into advisory periods. WEB leaders present lessons to their groups during these periods. Academic lessons typically cover skills that contribute to middle school success while social follow-ups provide leaders and their assigned group an opportunity to connect and build relationships.

WEB leaders are also responsible for supporting school events beyond just the first day of school, including open houses, new student tours, fifth-grade visit days, advisory lessons and more.



WEB develops student leaders

The WEB leadership teams at schools consist of students interested in being a role model to the younger students and building a positive experience at school for themselves and their peers. They play an important part in helping sixth graders and newcomers feel welcomed and supported as they transition to a new school.

Many students want to become WEB leaders because of the way the program supported them during their first year of middle school and helped make their experience a positive one.

Through WEB, leaders develop a variety of skills, such as patience, listening, problem-solving and conflict resolution, and have the opportunity to support their peers in many ways.

ERMS student Arianna Cameron has leaned into her role as a leader, focusing on building relationships with others and being responsible and kind. She feels like she's grown socially, emotionally and academically through WEB.

"As a sixth grader, I was really scared to start middle school," said Arianna. "It's really important for new students to feel like they belong and can ask anyone a question. I just try to make everyone feel included."

"I became a leader because I wanted to help sixth graders understand and feel comfortable with middle school, because school should be a really safe place and not something to be afraid of," said ERMS leader Grace Duncan. "Mental health is really important – and the sense and feeling of belonging in a place where you can just be yourself is what the program is all about. It's such a beautiful feeling to know that you can go to anyone and they'll be able to help you."

Katy Hemmah believes that it's so impactful when students recognize themselves as leaders in the school.

"Over the course of the year, their confidence grows as they take on more responsibilities. They're excited to help out and be involved in making the school a better place," said Hemmah.



Where Everybody Belongs impacts school culture

As both middle schools continue to adapt and build upon their WEB programming, they are providing meaningful traditions and opportunities for students as well as creating a school culture that embraces inclusivity and kindness.

Staff has made a strategic effort to create a culture where students take pride in their community, find a sense of belonging and feel that they are valued. Since the implementation of the WEB program, advisors have seen a positive shift in school culture.

"It's a testament to the power of peer leadership," said WEB advisor Laura Hermansen.

From a programmatic standpoint, Madison Thornton, believes there's definitely more student buy-in. WEB programming helps students understand how their actions impact the community as a whole. As a result, many students want to positively impact their school and make it a safe space to learn.

"There's such a strong, positive culture here," said Thornton. "Like, seeing these students show up and take the initiative to support their peers is super, super awesome."

"Leaders understand that their attitude, effort and behavior play an important role in creating that culture," said Hemmah. "It motivates them to set an example for other students in our school." ■



A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE:

Filipino teachers in District 191 are enriching classrooms and community

When District 191 welcomed its first group of Filipino educators last year, it marked the beginning of a partnership that would fill critical staffing needs and bring cultural richness to classrooms across the district.

For Director of Student Support Services Amy Piotrowski, the idea began as a practical solution to a growing challenge: finding qualified special education teachers.

“In special education, we were struggling to find teachers, especially after COVID,” Piotrowski said. “We needed experienced educators, and through our collaboration with Intermediate Districts 917 and 288, we learned about PhilAm, an organization that helps connect Filipino teachers with school districts.”

The partnership offered more than staffing support. “We also wanted to hire teachers who reflect our students,” Piotrowski said. “It was a win-win — experienced educators who share our commitment to students and a chance to bring more diversity and cultural perspective into our schools.”

Building bridges and a home

In the first year, Burnsville welcomed nine Filipino special education teachers. This year, that number has grown to 11. As Piotrowski recalls, helping teachers settle in was truly a community effort.

“These teachers arrive with little more than suitcases,” she said. “They don’t have furniture or kitchen supplies or even towels. We reached out to our community and the response was incredible. People donated everything from couches to pots and pans. It was really about setting them up for success.”

From preparing for winter in Minnesota to securing housing and opening bank accounts, every step was thoughtfully planned. The district mapped out each



task, from arrival and onboarding to classroom setup, so teachers had both logistical and emotional support.

“When they arrive, they want to be here,” Piotrowski said. “They’ve worked so hard to get here, and seeing their excitement and their families joining them is so rewarding. They’ve become part of our family.”

Living their calling

Among the first recruits were Dave and Edevie Maravillas, a husband-and-wife teaching team whose warmth and positivity have quickly made them beloved members of the One91 community.

“When I was applying, I told myself, ‘Whichever district hires me first, that’s where I’ll go,’” Dave said with a laugh. “Burnsville was the first to say yes, and it turned out to be the best choice.”

The couple did their research before moving. “I searched YouTube because I wanted to find a place that was livable, diverse, and welcoming,” said Edevie. “Minnesota may be cold, but the people here keep us warm.”



A melting pot of learning and love

The Maravillases say that one of the most powerful parts of this experience has been connecting with students across cultures.

“One of my students didn’t speak English and was very shy,” Edevie said. “When he held my hand for the first time, I knew he trusted me. Sometimes it’s that simple.”

For Piotrowski, those moments reflect the heart of the program. “They bring joy and perspective that uplift everyone,” she said. “Even on my hardest days, I can walk into one of their classrooms and walk out smiling.”

Think globally, act locally

When asked what message they hope to share with families and the community, Edevie put it simply: “Think globally but act locally. Be open-minded and reach out to others. Our differences shouldn’t divide us — they should help us grow together.”

For District 191, that philosophy is at the center of this international partnership. What began as a means to fill critical teaching positions has evolved into something far more meaningful: a story of shared learning, cultural exchange, and belonging.

As Piotrowski reflected, “This program has been one of the best experiences we’ve ever had. It’s not just about filling jobs — it’s about building relationships and creating a stronger, more connected community.” ■



Their warm welcome began the moment they landed at the airport, where Piotrowski and ECSE supervisor Kristi Wanzek were waiting to greet them. “We were so surprised,” Edevie said. “Our directors themselves were waiting for us and had already pulled our luggage from the carousel. That’s not something we had ever experienced before. It made us feel so valued from day one.”

“Working in District 191 has taught us so much,” Dave said. “When we arrived, our supervisors, principal and colleagues were so welcoming. They told us to ask any questions, and that made it easy for us to learn.”

Now well into their second year, Dave and Edevie say the district feels like home. “We consider One91 a family, not just an employer, and feel connected to the district’s mission,” Edevie said. “We live to teach — not just to earn a living, but because it’s our calling.”

Growing together

Adjusting to life and work in a new country hasn’t been without challenges. “We were told by some other Filipino teachers there’s no paperwork in America — but we found out that meant no paper, just digital paperwork,” Dave said, laughing. “There’s a lot to learn when it comes to technology and documentation.”

Edevie agreed that mastering new systems and communication styles took time. “English is our second language, but there are differences in how we speak and write it,” she said. “At first, I wrote scripts for meetings with parents to make sure I was saying things clearly. Over time, it became natural.”

Through it all, the couple said they’ve grown both personally and professionally. “In America, I’ve really learned that time is gold,” Edevie said. “I’ve become better at managing time, respecting others’ time, and giving my best in everything I do.”



BEYOND BELONGING

Meet the students shaping - and shaped by - affinity groups at BTS

At Burnsville High School, affinity groups provide safe, welcoming spaces where students can connect with peers who share similar backgrounds, identities or experiences. Open to any student at the school, these groups foster belonging, build community and empower students to celebrate who they are while also learning from and supporting one another. The students who lead these groups play a vital role in shaping that sense of belonging within the groups and throughout the school.

Get to know two of our student leaders, not only their leadership within affinity groups, but also the unique stories, interests and perspectives that define who they are beyond their roles.



Exie
Soundara



Reese
Kanu

Explore more profiles
and learn about our
affinity groups



Exie Soundara

President, Asian Student Association

Senior Exie Soundara has always made it a point to help others feel welcome at school. She's done it in band and marching band where she served as a clarinet section leader.

"I'm just very passionate about music and most of my friends are also into music, so that's pushed me to be a part of those programs," she said. "It's really fun to help others and make them feel welcome in our community."

Exie does the same thing as a part of the Asian Student Association (ASA). She joined the affinity group as a freshman, became a board member last year and now serves as President.

"I joined because I wanted to be close with other people in the community and share our culture and interests," she said. "I had so much fun with the board members who helped me feel welcome in high school."

She is part of the ASA's contributions to Culture

Week at BHS, including organizing demonstrations of traditional dances and a fashion show. She appreciates the way Culture Week encourages students to learn a variety of cultures.

"I definitely think affinity groups create more community and educate people on topics that may not be studied in classes," she said.

Exie has learned more about her own culture as well. Her parents immigrated from Laos, and through her involvement in the ASA she's met other Laotian families, learned more about the culture's symbols and celebrations and attended Laotian events.

"When I was younger I didn't really think of getting too close to my culture. Since I've been in high school I've been more interested in exploring cultures," Exie said. "My parents love it since I'm getting to know other people from Laos and when we have something outside of school I bring my parents and they get to meet other parents as well."

Reese Kanu

Vice President, Black Student Union

Senior Reese Kanu has taken full advantage of exploring options and pursuing interests at BHS. They are involved in Link Crew, robotics, Youth Service Advisory Council, speech and AVID to name a few.

"I just have a lot of passions and I do a lot of different things. I kind of fit into different places," Reese said. "I've wanted to explore before I finally settle on one thing when I go off to college and BHS has a lot of different ways we can do that - and if there's a new group you want to create, they make it possible."

The club that's stood above the rest for Reese is the Black Student Union (BSU). Reese has served as Vice President the last two years, inspired by their older sister and cousin who were both in leadership roles for the BSU.

"BSU is all about empowering our Black students at our school," Reese said. "As the child of immigrants and someone of Sierra Leonean descent, I'm very passionate about encouraging students to find community and be comfortable in our own skin and give them the opportunity to show their talents and find a safe space with us."

Those talents are on full display every year during the BSU Showcase. Reese helps organize the talent show where students sing, dance, perform sketches and recite poetry.

Reese's advice for incoming BHS students is to find something they're passionate about and get involved.

"It's our motto to get involved in something and it's true that when you get involved it opens up doors to a lot of different opportunities," Reese said.



One91

PATHWAYS

Spark. Fuel. Blaze.

This edition of the Wayfinder is all about shining a light on the people, programs and partnerships that are driving a more diverse and equitable One91. Whether it is welcoming cultural perspectives brought by new staff, teaching culture through music or uplifting student voices, we are intentionally building learning experiences where every single student belongs.

By sparking curiosity, fueling the opportunity to explore passions, and allowing students to blaze their own path, District 191 is leading the way in college and career readiness, ensuring all students are equipped to succeed in their unique journeys. Check out a few moments from this school year that show this work in action!



Spark

Elementary students are inspired to approach the world with wonder.



Where learning takes root

In September, students at Gideon Pond Elementary harvested vegetables from their thriving school garden — planted back in April and nurtured all summer in partnership with the Dakota County Master Gardeners and the University of Minnesota Extension. The project gave students a hands-on (and tasty) learning experience while teaching them about sustainable gardening and healthy food cultivation.

Excellence lives here

Rahn Elementary was named a 2025-26 Minnesota School of Excellence, an honor awarded by the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association. Rahn was selected for its deep commitment to celebrating diversity, fostering strong family and community partnerships, and investing in teacher development to ensure each student thrives academically, socially and emotionally.

Students step up for veterans

Elementary schools across the district honored those who served or who are serving on Veterans Day. At Hidden Valley Elementary, the annual, schoolwide Veterans Day program celebrated local veterans, including some Hidden Valley parents. Fifth-grade students at Edward Neill Elementary, led by Ms. Misbah and Ms. Petrick, assembled more than 360 care bags for the Minneapolis veterans home affiliated with the Yellow Ribbon program.



Twel



Middle school scholars discover new ways to look at the world.



Leading the way in college and career prep

Earlier this year, Eagle Ridge Middle School was validated as an Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) National Demonstration School. Validation signifies that the school is an exemplary model for successfully implementing AVID strategies and curriculum to support students in achieving academic and personal success. AVID is a college and career prep program designed to increase the number of students who enroll in four-year colleges and improve college readiness for all students, especially those groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

Leaders building belonging

In November, eighth-grade Where Everybody Belongs (WEB) leaders greeted and toured Eagle Ridge and Nicollet Middle School with visiting fifth graders. WEB leaders are trained to lead team-building activities and are taught group leadership skills so they can support fifth and sixth graders throughout the school year.

From equations to roller coasters

Nicollet Middle School math teacher Rick Geddes enjoys taking advantage of “Fridays in the Library,” where he collaborates with media specialist Nancy Meyer to provide his eighth-grade honors geometry classes with engaging, hands-on extension activities. On Dec. 5, students had the opportunity to apply their math and money management skills while constructing a paper roller coaster within a specific budget.



Blaze

Immersive experiences increase future readiness for high school learners.



A golden ticket performance

The Burnsville High School Theatre Guild entertained audiences with eight performances of the fall musical “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.” The musical follows young Charlie Bucket and four other golden ticket winners as they embark on a life-changing journey through Wonka’s world of pure imagination. The combined efforts of the musicians, lighting crew, backstage crew, technology crew and actors made for an exceptional production!



Blazing the literal trail at record speeds

Carley LaMotte and Liam Merrell once again represented the Blaze at the state cross-country meet, where LaMotte placed third and Merrell placed 14th. LaMotte also broke her own school record at the section meet with a winning time of 17:18.



From classroom to fire call

In October, Burnsville High School students taking classes in the Health Sciences & Human Services Pathway, including the Nursing Assistant program, Healthcare Core Curriculum, and Emergency Medical Responder and Emergency Medical Technician programs, spent a day at the city’s new fire station experiencing hands-on learning about being a firefighter or paramedic in Burnsville.



Student voice:

Hallway chatter

High school students share their appreciation for the Spanish and Somali culture classes offered at Burnsville High School.

“

The class makes me feel proud and confident in my identity, and I feel more comfortable speaking in Somali and expressing my culture around others. It reminds me that being Somali is something beautiful to celebrate, not to hide.

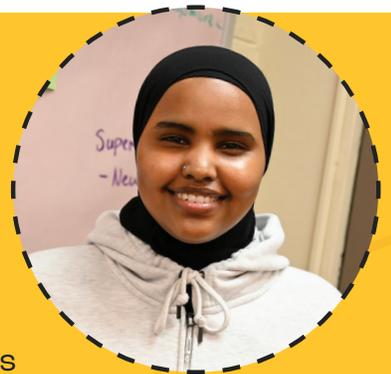
SABIR SHEIKH
11TH GRADE



“

Ms. Abdullahi's class is a judgement-free zone. I was really shy and she helped me with that. This is just a comfortable environment where everyone feels included.

SABRINA YASIN
11TH GRADE



“

This class makes me feel confident in my language. I can speak and express myself better in my native language.

VALERIA PINEDA NAMICELA
9TH GRADE

