

# CONNECT

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

Be seen. Be heard. Be bold.

AFTON | COTTAGE GROVE | DENMARK | GREY CLOUD ISLAND | NEWPORT | ST. PAUL PARK | WOODBURY



Pictured: Sophia Soo posing in front of her artwork.

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## The Anatomy of a Perfect AP Art Portfolio

East Ridge High School (ERHS) senior Sophia Soo joined an elite group of artists this year by achieving **every point possible on her Advanced Placement (AP) Art portfolio**, placing her in the **top 2% of portfolios submitted worldwide.**

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Dear Community Members,

As we begin a new year, I want to extend my warmest wishes to you and your family. We are fortunate to be part of such wonderful communities that support our students and work alongside us. I hope that winter break provided an opportunity to spend time with family and friends and share in the joy of the season.

A new year brings new opportunities - to learn, to grow and to strengthen our partnerships. I want to take this moment to say how truly valued you are. Whether you are a parent, grandparent, neighbor, community member, volunteer or local partner, your involvement enriches our schools and helps build brighter futures for our students.

I have been deeply moved by the generosity of our students this season. From the students at South Washington Alternative High School launching their new partnership with the Basic Needs Food Market to nourish our neighbors to the "New Wave of Kindness" clubs spreading positivity across our elementary schools, our students are learning that their actions matter. They are showing us that when we work together, we can lift up those around us.

Our schools thrive because of the people and families that make up our communities. The differing perspectives, traditions and experiences help create a school district that is welcoming, inclusive and reflective of all who call it home. We are committed to providing safe, supportive learning environments where every student, family, and community member feels seen, heard and respected.

Thank you for your continued trust and partnership. I look forward to all we will accomplish in the year ahead. May the winter season bring you warmth, hope and new beginnings.

**Together We Can** make 2026 our best year yet.

Warmly,

*Julie Nielsen*

Julie Nielsen, Superintendent

## CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1



Pictured: Original artwork by Sophia Soo.

The perfect score is the culmination of countless hours, moments of frustration and artistic breakthroughs, representing a comprehensive examination of her entire artistic process. The AP Art portfolio is a year-long marathon, unlike most AP exams, which are three-hour sit-down tests.

ERHS AP Art teacher Jessica Frisco announced the news to Sophia during a surprise pop-up gallery celebrating her accomplishment, which staff had secretly arranged. While ERHS Principal Jim Smokrovich created a diversion, staff and Sophia's family borrowed her artwork to assemble a gallery of her pieces, including a favorite self-portrait of her inner self. Sophia was greeted by a cafeteria full of staff, friends and journalists.

"I don't think people understand the level of talent it takes to create a successful AP Art portfolio," Frisco said. "It is more than just technical skill mastery. For a teenager so fresh in her journey to be able to successfully express who she is **speaks volumes about her talent and personal growth.**"

Sophia was awarded a certificate, a photo book of her portfolio, a monogrammed leather sketchbook and a bonsai tree for her **impressive accomplishment.**

Her portfolio, titled, "How can I explore and reckon with my cultural identity?", **focused on how her Chinese culture has shaped her experiences as an American.** In her artist statement, Sophia says, "These works led me to explore the relation of my physical body to my feelings of authenticity/'chineseness.'"

"I wanted to explore the existence of duality, like the shell of a chick versus the inside embryo," Sophia said.

"Sophia has always been full of independence and individuality, even from a young age," said Sophia's mother, Hue. "We are so proud of her, and so excited to see her celebrated."

"The AP curriculum helped me get out of my comfort zone and challenged me," Sophia said. "Ms. Frisco really encouraged me to trust myself when it came to my new ideas, no matter how silly I might have thought they were."

Sophia's perfect score is a **recognition that her voice, vision and dedication have been seen and understood at the highest level.** Following graduation, Sophia hopes to attend Brown University in Rhode Island and plans to study medicine with a minor in art.

Congratulations Sophia!



Pictured: Sophia Soo with ERHS AP Art teacher Jessica Frisco

## Crestview Takes a Walk on the Wild Side

Crestview Elementary students have a unique, hands-on learning opportunity through the school's partnership with Shepard Farm. Shepard Farm, managed by Dodge Nature Center, is a nature preserve used for **agricultural and environmental education** in Washington County.

Each week, Shepard Farm's naturalist, Michael Harrison, joins Crestview's kindergarten, first and second-grade classrooms to teach science lessons about the natural world. They participate in nature walks in the wooded area behind the school, allowing student curiosity to lead the science lessons.

"The kids get so excited when they know we are going to have a nature walk day," first-grade teacher Kayla Kieser said. "They love finding things to ask Mr. Michael about."

Students report excited discoveries:

- "Last week we learned about milkweed seeds and how they use the wind to travel," said first-grader Teagan Olson.
- "We found a bumblebee sleeping in a flower," said first-grader Olasunkanmi Ekundayo. "I never knew that bees and grasshoppers sleep."
- "Did you know that leaves turn into dirt?" said first-grader Vivian Star.

For Naturalist Michael Harrison, these moments of student-led discovery are the ultimate goal. **"When a child stops to ask how a pond dried up or why a mushroom is that color, that's the real learning beginning,"** he says. **"Our role isn't to have all the answers, but to foster that innate sense of wonder."**

This partnership is cultivating a generation of curious observers and future stewards of the natural world. Their education is alive, growing, and rooted right outside their door.



## Middle School Students Share Their Genius

Woodbury Middle School's 7th Grade Resource Teacher, Lexie Nelson, recently assigned students a unique project: **"Genius Hour" presentations.**

Students select and research a topic they are personally passionate about. The project gives students the **autonomy to choose their topic and how to teach others about it.** This approach is based on the idea that when students explore their passions, their engagement and learning soar.

"In school and in life, we are so often bound to work within a framework of rules and instructions," said Nelson. **"It's so exciting to see them challenge themselves to think outside the box** while allowing them to teach others about their special interests."

Students shared their diverse interests:

- Linea Symthurst researched her favorite musician: "My Genius Hour was about Frank Ocean. I found out he has recorded over 700 songs, most of which were never released!"
- Abram Kahn presented on his pets: "I love my dogs, so I presented on the breeds of dogs we have at home. I liked learning the facts about their breeds."



The Genius Hour project **helps nurture curious, confident and lifelong learners.**



## Algebra Whodunit

Teresa Willkom, an 8th-grade math teacher at Oltman Middle School, is inspiring students by creating a clue-based murder mystery. Students become detectives, solving algebra equations to determine the who, what, when and where a crime took place.

Traditional instruction offers structure, but **Willkom's narrative-based approach brings excitement and hands-on engagement.**

"Algebra is abstract. A story about a crime is concrete," said Willkom. **"By embedding equations within a narrative, students have a tangible reason to solve them."**

Students work in teams, collaboratively solving each clue's equation. Incorrect answers become "false leads," prompting teams to work together to backtrack and correct their errors, leading to **even more powerful learning.**

The physical act of rushing around the classroom to find clues also helps. Incorporating movement channels their energy productively, and the race to solve the mystery adds excitement, sharpening focus.

"This is fun," said 8th-grader Jami Wright Rhodes. "I like doing something more interactive like this."

Willkom's classroom proves that creativity can transform subjects students feel they have to learn into adventures they are excited to take part in.



# Now Enrolling PreK - 12

Discover where you belong, choose your great school today!

Welcome to SoWashCo Schools! Our mission is to educate students for success. We understand that choosing the best school for your child is one of the most important decisions your family will make.

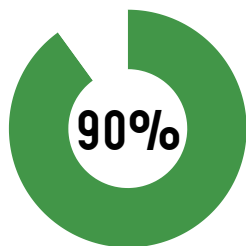
At SoWashCo Schools, we provide the right environment for **every child** to discover and reach their **full potential**.



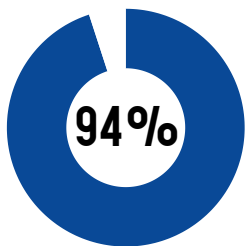
## Enroll Today!

Submit your enrollment paperwork early to stay up-to-date and secure your spot.

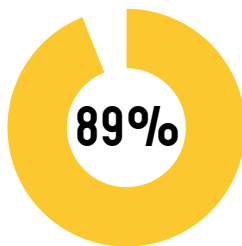
Open enrollment lists and intra-district transfer requests can fill quickly.



View our staff favorably



Feel supported and welcomed in our schools



Stated staff truly care about them



Source: 2025 community survey of enrolled students and families.



"My teacher treats all her students like her own children, and I will forever remember her for making school fun and a happy, loving environment."  
 ~ Kylee Gross  
 Park High School Graduate

## Some of What We Offer

**Can families who do not live in the district apply to enroll?**

**Yes\***

- Literacy at the Heart of Learning
- Math You Can See, Touch and Explore
- Science Through Hands-on Discovery
- STEM Learning in Every Grade
- Equity, Access and Opportunity for All
- Award-winning Theater, Choir, Band, Orchestra, and Visual Arts Programs
- Sports, Clubs and Extracurricular activities
- Outdoor Learning Opportunities at the Bailey School Forest
- World Language Instruction (Grades 8-12)
- Special Education Programming and Supports
- Before / After School Child Care (additional fee)
- Career and Technical Education Courses

**Can current families request to change schools?**

**Yes\***



**Priority Enrollment Begins:**  
 Monday, Jan. 5 through  
 Monday, Feb. 2

**Learn More at:**  
[sowashco.org/enroll](http://sowashco.org/enroll)

\*Space availability and school district policies still apply.



# Securing Our Future.

## Supporting Our Students.

### Construction Update and Highlights

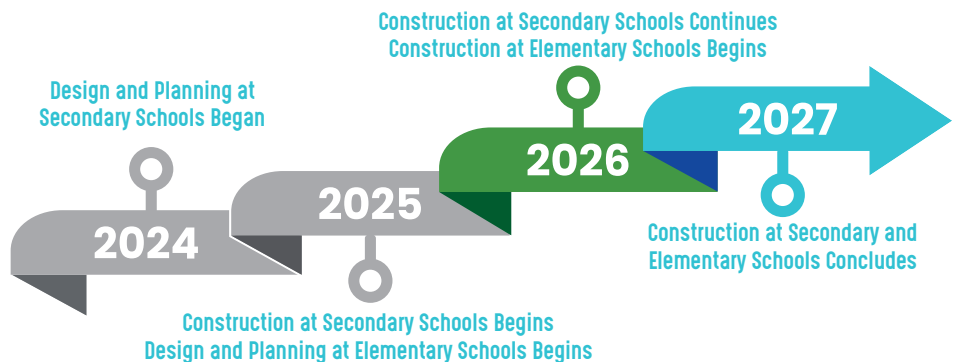
Ongoing construction at the district's seven secondary schools remains on schedule, with projects actively moving forward. The work is part of the two voter-approved bond questions, allowing SoWashCo Schools to begin construction projects at 15 schools over the course of 5 years to enhance learning environments for all students.

Concurrently, the planning phase has now officially begun for targeted improvements at eight elementary schools. This preliminary work includes finalizing designs and preparing bids. Construction at Bailey, Grey Cloud, Pine Hill and Red Rock elementary schools are slated to begin this summer.

The district emphasizes that these coordinated efforts aim to improve safety, functionality and educational spaces across all grade levels with minimal disruption to the school day.



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



## Building a Language Bridge

A partnership has been forged between students from South Washington Alternative High School (SWAHS) and adult English language learners from the Great Rivers Adult Education Consortium. The learning is not about history, math or science but about building connections.

The focus is on **building conversational skills and connections**, while learning about each other's favorite meals, workplace challenges, and cultural traditions. High school students help teach conversational skills, and in return, gain confidence speaking with adults.

"It is like a dual mentorship," said Cultural Liaison Elliott Vang. **"The kids feel empowered by helping people older than them and the adult learners have a chance to mentor youth while practicing their second language."**



The program has been transformative for Marriana Iglesias, a nutritionist from Venezuela. "In my English class, I worry about grammar and making mistakes," she shares. "But with my student partner, Myanna, it's just talking. She is patient and I understand her. She helps me find the right words. Now, I feel much more fluid and stronger."

Community Education Project Coordinator Ingrid Tollefson noted, "The informal, peer-to-peer setting reduces the anxiety that can block language acquisition."

"I was a little intimidated at first to talk to a random adult," said sophomore Gabby Lipscomb. "My partner, Doaa is so nice and has helped me ease into it and we talk about all sorts of things."

Adults are free to make mistakes and practice at their own pace, building conversational muscle memory. The high school students also grow, seeing themselves as capable mentors, bolstering their self-esteem and leadership skills.

These conversational partnerships show that **learning is not a one-way street, and everyone has something to teach and something to learn.**

## Road to the Super Bowl

Park High School (PHS) senior Alayna Adamez has been named the **NFC North winner of the prestigious NFL Latino Youth Honors award.**

In November, Minnesota Vikings defensive tackle Levi Drake Rodriguez surprised Alayna at school with the news. This award celebrates football skill, academic integrity, and community involvement. The honor includes an **all-expenses-paid trip to the Super Bowl** in San Francisco, where the national winner will be announced.

Alayna's success is well-earned. As the PHS Girls Flag Football starting quarterback, she led her team to the Final Four in the State Tournament, amassing **1,432 passing yards and 32 touchdowns**, earning the District 6 Gold Quarterback of the Year title.

She is a four-sport varsity athlete (flag football, softball, hockey, tennis) and a four-year hockey team captain. PHS Activities Director Phil Kuemmel called her a "great leader in our building."



*Pictured: Alayna Adamez with Levi Drake Rodriguez of the Minnesota Vikings*



Alayna maintains a **3.967 Grade Point Average**. Her leadership extends to the community as a WEB leader and a "Miracle League buddy helper" for children with disabilities.

"My biggest advice is get involved in things that interest you," Alayna said.

After graduation, Alayna will play **Division I softball for Southern Illinois University Edwardsville** while pursuing a degree in criminal justice—congratulations Alayna!

## SoWashCo Voices

This time of year is a season of gathering, reflection, and celebration. In our diverse community, **sharing our traditions helps us learn about each other and build a stronger, more connected community.** We asked a 10th-grade class at East Ridge High School to share some of the family traditions they celebrate.

"My parents are divorced, so I have different traditions for each side. On my mom's side we usually do a small get-together, watch Hallmark movies and eat big pretzels or we've taken trips to Arizona, Spain or Germany. On my dad's side, we get together at someone's house and we stay there and eat and do things together like shooting, or going to parks."

**Kylie Rakowczyk**



"In the fall, when there's a full moon, my family would get mooncakes and have them after dinner."

**Fiona Zhou**



"Every year my siblings and I dress up in our Hmong clothes and go to the big Hmong New Year event at the RiverCentre. My favorite part is watching the Hmong dancing and spending time with my friends."

**Giselle Fretotte**



"My family and I gather together to have a potluck and spend some time together before people get busy. This potluck helps us bond, remember good times, check in on each other and strengthen our bonds... While we make a lot of foods my two favorites have to be grape leaves and musakhan rolls."

**Cerine Aljaroudy**





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Sign up for our e-newsletter at [sowashco.org/news](http://sowashco.org/news)

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

### SoWashCo CARES Education Foundation Fills Food Gap to Fuel Student Success

SoWashCo CARES Education Foundation brought the community together to support students and families during winter break. In December, community members, alongside students and staff from East Ridge High School, gathered at Valley Creek Mall to **pack 300 food boxes for students in need.**

Each box included a variety of **easy-to-prepare, kid-friendly meals and snacks** designed to supplement school meals while students were out of school. Families also received a resource flyer connecting them to local food shelves and community partners.

This initiative reflected the strength of our school community and the **power of partnerships in meeting student needs.**



Visit [sowashcocares.org](http://sowashcocares.org) to learn more about the foundation, donate, volunteer, or find out about future events. Together, we can continue to ensure our students have the resources they need to succeed.

### Give Help or Get Help

#### Free Grocery Stores

*No Eligibility Requirements.*

- **Today's Harvest:** No appointment required.
  - ◊ **Hours:** Monday-Friday from 12-6 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m.-1 p.m.
  - ◊ **Locations:**
    - 8264 4th St. North in Oakdale
    - 1740 Van Dyke St. in Maplewood
- **Basic Needs Food Market:** No appointment required.
  - ◊ **Hours:** Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday from 10:30-3 p.m. and Wednesday from 10:30 a.m.-5 p.m.
  - ◊ **Location:** 8476 E Point Douglas Rd S in Cottage Grove
- **Friends in Need:** Schedule your visit at 651-458-0730.
  - ◊ **Hours:** Mondays from 12 p.m.-3 p.m. or Tuesdays from 7:30 a.m.-4 p.m.
  - ◊ **Location:** 535 4th St. in St. Paul Park

#### Crisis Support Lines

- **MN Crisis text line:** send "MN" to 741741
- **National Youth Crisis:** 800-442-4673
- **Washington County Crisis Response:** 651-275-7400
- **Ramsey Children's Mental Health Crisis:** 651-266-2233

#### Resource and Referral Services

- **St. Andrews Community:** Offers family sheltering, rental assistance, help finding food, clothing, and basic household items.
  - ◊ 651-762-9124
  - ◊ **Hours:** Monday-Thursday 9 a.m.-3 p.m.
- **United Way 211:** A free and confidential service that connects you with thousands of local programs and services.
  - ◊ Simply dial 2-1-1

### Explore this Season!

SoWashCo Community Education offers athletics and enrichment classes for **youth, teens and adults** and so much more!



Browse classes and register at [sowashco.ce.eleyo.com](http://sowashco.ce.eleyo.com)