February 2026

LCSC Communicator

Regional News, Views, and Information

LAKES COUNTRY Service Cooperative

Together we achieve

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

DOBOT BRINGS MECHATRONICS LESSON TO LIFE AT PERHAM HIGH SCHOOL

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR JEREMY KOVASH

JANE EASTES CLASSROOM TO COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

MINNESOTA STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS

CELEBRATING BROWNS VALLEY ELEMENTARY

LCSC HEALTH & SAFETY PROVIDES OSHA 10 TRAINING FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ALEXANDRIA AND ROTHSAY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SENIOR HIGH KNOWLEDGE BOWL SEASON BEGINS WITH A DECEMBER TRADITION AT CONCORDIA COLLEGE

YOUTH AGENCY IN ACTION WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE LEAD COMMUNITIES THRIVE

BLUE & GOLD SCHOLARS PROVIDING TUITION-FREE FUTURES FOR STUDENTS

REGISTRATION FOR THE INTRODUCTION TO MNMTSS SPRING INTENSIVE COHORT AT LAKES COUNTRY SERVICE COOPERATIVE IS NOW OPEN!

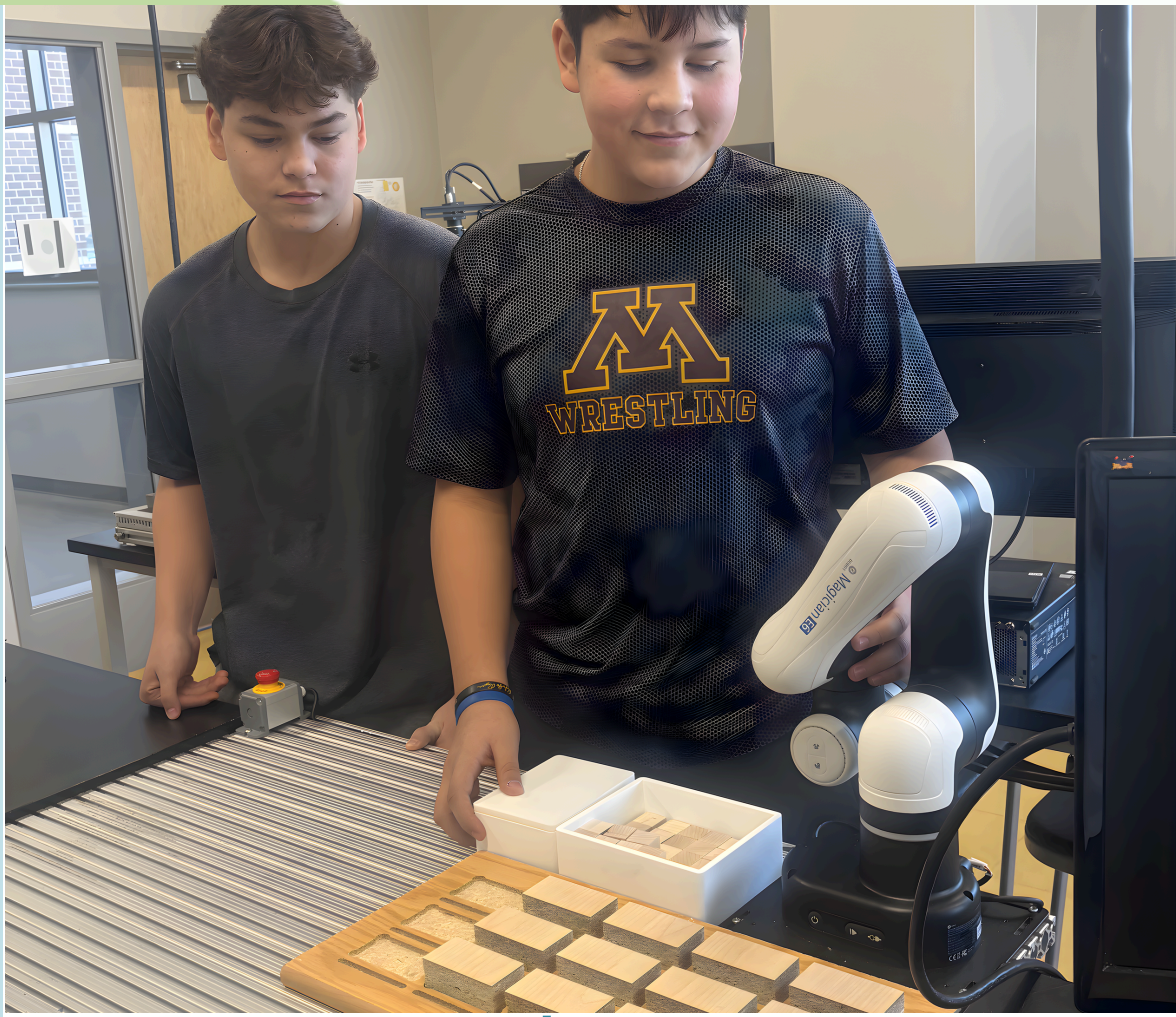
PLEASE VISIT OUR CALENDAR FOR IMPORTANT DATES.

CLICK HERE FOR A LISTING OF OUR CURRENT JOB POSTINGS

An equal opportunity employer

PDF

www.lcsc.org



DOBOT

Brings Mechatronics Lessons to Life at Perham High School

by Darren Glynn, Work Based Learning Coordinator, Perham High School

Students in the mechatronics classroom at Perham High School are gaining hands-on experience with advanced robotics using a Dobot robotic arm—technology more commonly found in modern manufacturing and engineering environments.

Recently, Perham applied and received a Youth Skills Training Grant. This allowed for the purchase of the "Dobots."





Darren Glynn
Work Based Learning Coordinator
Perham High School

"The students take ownership of their projects," the teacher explained. "They're not just following instructions. They're experimenting, troubleshooting, and improving their designs, just like engineers do in the field." In addition to including the robotics in the high school, 8th Grade teacher Andy Paulsen also uses the mechatronics curriculum in his 8th grade STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) class. "Students get a basic understanding of how cobots/dobots work." They love it.

The Dobot, a compact programmable robotic arm, allows students to bridge the gap between theory and real-world application. In class, students learn how mechanical systems, electronics, and computer programming work together, then immediately apply those concepts by programming the robot to perform precise movements, pick-and-place tasks, and automated sequences.

"Reading about automation is one thing, but seeing it happen right in front of you is a completely different experience," said mechatronics teacher Nancy Sandeen. "The Dobot gives students instant feedback. If their code or design isn't right, the robot shows them—and that's a powerful learning moment."

One of the biggest benefits of using the Dobot is engagement. Students are more motivated when they can see the results of their work in real time. Programming the robot requires problem-solving, logical thinking, and teamwork—skills that are essential in today's engineering and manufacturing careers.





> **Using equipment like this helps students build confidence," said Sandeen. "They realize they're capable of working with advanced technology, and that opens doors for their future.**
>
> -Mechatronics Teacher, Nancy Sandeen

The Dobot also exposes students to industry-relevant technology. Automation and robotics are becoming increasingly important across many industries especially in Perham, from manufacturing and healthcare to logistics and research. Early exposure helps students better understand potential career paths and prepares them for post-secondary education or technical training.

Both Sandeen and Paulson have plans to bring students to area businesses, such as KLN, to see actual robotics in action.

By incorporating the Dobot into the mechatronics curriculum, Perham High School is giving students more than just technical knowledge—it's giving them practical experience, critical thinking skills, and a glimpse into the technology shaping tomorrow's workforce.

FROM THE

Executive Director

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



Jeremy Kovash
Executive Director

The Power of Making People Feel Seen

As we welcome the Spring of 2026, I find myself reflecting on a book that has stayed with me in a meaningful way — Theo of Golden by Allen Levi. It is a story that quietly but powerfully reminds us of something simple and profound: people want to be seen, heard, and valued.

Theo's gift is not wealth or status. It is presence. He listens carefully to the voices of others. He honors their stories. Regardless of age, background, accomplishments, or past struggles, he makes each person feel significant. That struck me deeply. And candidly, it stirred a bit of humility in me. Am I slowing down enough? Am I listening well enough? Am I fully appreciating the stories unfolding around me every day?

I have been blessed in my own life by friends and mentors in education who carry this same gift.

Many of them proudly reflect on former students, colleagues, and community members — not simply for their achievements, but for who they are.Spend time with these leaders and before long you are not just talking about programs or outcomes; you are sharing stories. Stories of resilience. Stories of growth. Stories of impact.

You leave those conversations feeling fuller. Encouraged. Reminded that the true measure of our work is found in people — in their journeys and in the difference they make in the lives of others.

At Lakes Country Service Cooperative, this spirit is central to who we are. Our mission calls us to advocate for strong communities through service and leadership. One of the most important ways we live that mission is by listening.

We work to hear the voices of our members, our students, our partners, and our communities. We strive to express genuine joy in their stories and to celebrate their successes. We believe strong communities are built not only through systems and services, but through relationships grounded in respect and understanding.

Spring is often a season of renewal. As we look ahead, I hope this season brings more individuals into our work and our communities who embody that spirit — leaders who listen deeply, colleagues who lift others up, and partners who celebrate the beauty and potential in those they serve.

May we continue to slow down long enough to hear one another. May we continue to find joy in the stories around us. And may we remain committed to building vibrant, inclusive communities — one conversation at a time.

Thank you for the work you do every day to make that possible.



Classroom TO COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

JANE EASTES
Deputy
Executive Director

Youth in Civic Life:

Building a Pipeline of Community Leaders

Did you know it takes 30,000 election judges to run an election in Minnesota? That's a lot of local folks giving their time to democracy. I learned that fact recently while listening to Secretary of State Steve Simon and a panel of dedicated local election administrators in Detroit Lakes. Thanks to West Central Initiative, Secretary Simon spent the day visiting several schools in our region, talking to students. It turns out that students aged 16 and older can take the training and become an election judge. What a great way to learn civics, develop those leadership and life skills, and contribute to community growth at the same time.

When we can foster these opportunities where young people both lead and learn, like becoming an election judge, or participating on a local board, or designing community wellness projects, everyone, our youth, our schools, and communities, benefit well into the future.

West Central Initiative and Lakes Country Service Cooperative are partnering with each other and with youth focused organizations and funders around the state under the auspices of the Aspen Institute for Community Solutions to initiate youth-centered programs around the four pillars of Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing, and Purpose.

BMWP is an emerging framework based on a growing body of evidence that youth thrive in communities where these four principles are embedded. Where youth thrive, communities thrive.

LCSC's Youth Data Summit (read about the summit in this issue's Youth Agency in Action article) in January kicked off our Youth Agency Collective program designed to build capacity in our schools to engage all youth in learning and leading opportunities.

Together with WCI, we will be bringing our school and community members more opportunities to engage youth in civic life.

Belonging	**Having a meaningful voice and opportunity to participate in the design of political, social and cultural structures that shape one's life.[1]**
Meaning	**The ways in which people make sense of themselves, others and social situations.[2]**
Wellbeing	**Having the support, confidence, and resources needed to thrive in contexts of secure and healthy relationships, realizing their full potential and rights.[3]**
Purpose	**One's desire and intention to achieve something that is significant to one's life and of consequence to the world in which one lives.[4]**

From Advancing Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP): Six Essential Ingredients for Success, Aspen Institute for Community Solutions, April 2025, https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Six-essential-ingredients_BMWP-Final.pdf

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

five decades of serving our region

Lakes Country Service Cooperative

At LCSC, 2026 marks a momentous milestone: our 50th Anniversary.

For five decades, we have remained steadfast in our mission: "We Advocate for Strong Communities Through Service and Leadership."

To honor this legacy, we are dedicating the entire year to celebrating our region and the people who make our work possible.

Visit our website's **"50th Anniversary"** page to learn more about our celebration and important dates to add to your calendar!

February

is Career and Technical Education (CTE) Month



We want to give a big shoutout to our incredible team of seven who lead the way for Minnesota CTE. As part of Lakes Country Service Cooperative and the Minnesota Service Cooperatives, they are the engine behind the scenes, connecting students to high-demand careers!

MN CTE provides statewide services and leadership for Minnesota teachers of Career and Technical Education. MN CTE is a part of the Minnesota Service Cooperatives, as a service of Lakes Country Service Cooperative. Visit the Minnesota CTE website at mncte.org.

Learn more about CTE by visiting our website: https://www.lcsc.org/programs-services/career-technical-education/about-career-and-technical-education



Simple, Affordable Electric Fleets

Highland Electric Fleets removes the cost and complexity of electrification and guarantees you'll pay less for electric buses than you currently pay to own, operate, and maintain your diesel buses.

For a fixed annual fee, we provide the vehicles, upgrade your infrastructure, train your team, pay for electricity, manage your charging, reimburse for maintenance, and guarantee a successful electric fleet.

Why Work with Highland?

Simplicity
We plan, implement, and optimize your electric fleet so you can focus on what you do best.

Grant Assistance
Our experts help you navigate the funding landscape to make your upgraded fleet affordable.

Performance Guarantee
It's simple. Your buses will be charged & route-ready every school day – if not, we pay for the downtime.

> **"Making the switch to electric buses is good for kids, and it's good for your community."**
>
> **Tim Shannon**, Transportation Director, Twin Rivers School District, CA

Founded in 2019

Active in 30+ states & Canada

~350 million in grants and incentives secured for our partners

Largest electric school bus project in North America

600+ electric school buses under contract

CPC Cooperative Purchasing Connection



Minnesota

STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS

by Jane Eastes
Deputy Executive Director
Lakes Country Service Cooperative

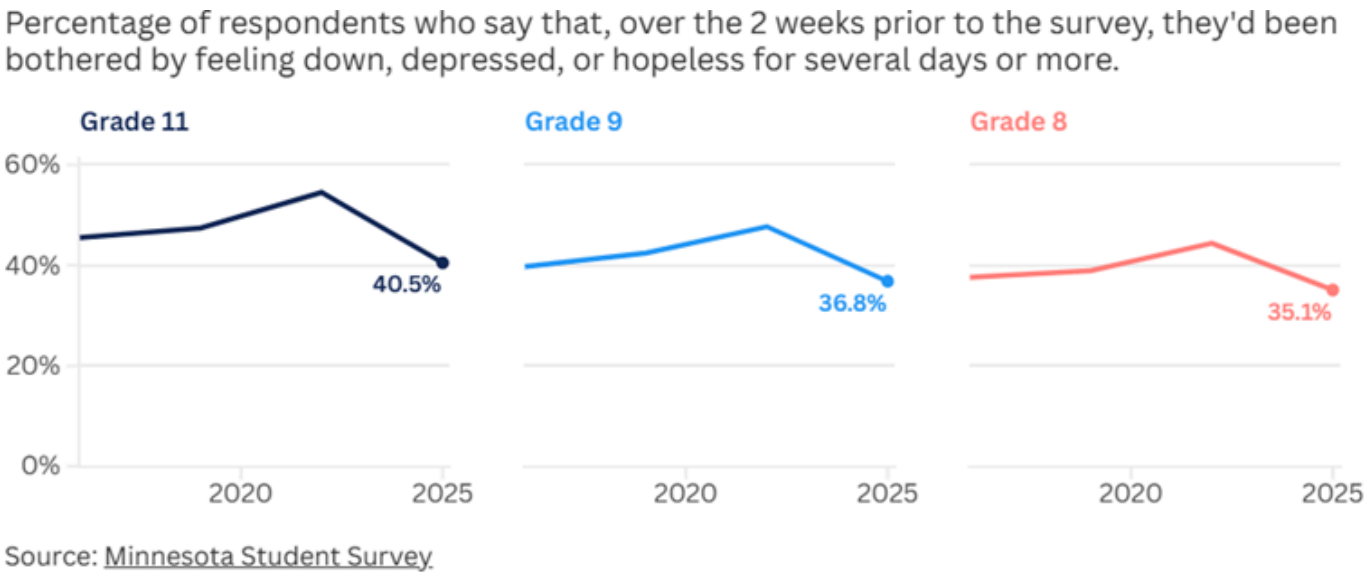
The results of the Minnesota Student Survey given last year to 5th, 8th, 9th and 11th grade students in public, charter, and tribal schools have recently been made available, and the data are showing some interesting trends. If you are not familiar with the survey, it is the longest-running state survey that asks about matters important to youth and families, including mental health, engagement, safety and social development. The survey is voluntary and the questions (also voluntary) are tailored for each grade. The information is used by many youth-oriented organizations, not just schools, for community supportive programs. In our own region, Horizon Public Health has used the MSS to support over $4 million in competitive grants to help keep youth healthy and safe in Pope, Stevens, Traverse, Grant and Douglas counties.

The triennial survey last occurred in 2022. While the 2025 survey has mixed results, there are many positive trends worth noting. We haven't had good news in Minnesota for too long, so when I see headlines that are positive about kids, I'm ready to celebrate. I bet you are too!

What's Positive

On the whole, students are reporting better mental health, healthier eating, a better school climate, and closer connections with schools and families. The group of mental health measures related to anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and comfort in talking with school mental health resources when feeling stressed showed an improvement for all age groups taking the survey. The percentage of 11th-grade students who said they were considering suicide fell to its lowest point in a decade. The Minnesota Department of Health lists the positive trends seen in the survey data, such as:

- An increase in fruit and vegetable consumption.
- A decrease in substance use, including tobacco, alcohol, and cannabis.
- A decrease in sexual activity.
- An increase in overall educational engagement.
- An increase in students reporting they believe their teachers and others in their lives care about them.
- An increase in reporting that an adult in school helped connect them with post-secondary career and educational opportunities.



I know these results are not random. We know schools, communities, local and state government, and nonprofits are working diligently to make systemic changes to address the crisis that was so apparent in the last student survey. One thing we've all learned is that the youth themselves have to be collaborators within and alongside our organizations doing this work. They, after all, know the issues better than any of us.

What's Next

Seeing the overall trends in youth health and relationships improving adds fuel to our drive to continue building partnerships, initiating supports that are proven to work, and changing our systems to work for all youth. The data show that we still need to turn around some of the concerning trends around school attendance and inequities by gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. For example, the percentage of American Indian students who strongly agree with the question of feeling safe at school is half that of White male students.

For the first time, the survey asked about social media use. Youth recognize both heavy use and its effect on them. About 90% of high school students reported using social media every day. About 4 out of 10 students say they may have a problem with spending too much time on social media, and many believe it's contributing to them having trouble getting homework or other major responsibilities done. More than half of high school students reported using technology between midnight and 5 a.m. on a school night at least once per week.

One thing we can all do is understand the importance of this survey. It is not perfect, but is one of the most comprehensive, voluntary tools for gathering information about youth and families directly from youth that we have. The information is crucial for effectively using scarce resources to improve student and family well-being.

The survey has been under attack in the last ten years for asking some controversial questions about sexuality and drug use, and as a result, participation is falling. According to the Minnesota-based nonprofit Education Evolving, district participation has fallen from 85% to 61%, and student participation from 68% to 45% over the past 10 years.

We are advocating for updates and changes to modernize the survey. In the meantime, let's keep listening to our youth and work to respond to what they are telling us to build a healthier future for our communities.

Information Technology Team



From Left: Scott Wendorff, Program Director of Information Technology; Matt Holtberg, Assistant Program Director of Information Technology; Gilbert Perry, Senior Information Technology Specialist; Travis Johnson, Information Technology Coordinator

IT Services & Support Designed for Your Needs

Lakes Country Service Cooperative's (LCSC) dynamic team of IT professionals provides affordable, high-quality hardware and software solutions for members.

- Fully Managed and Co-Managed IT Services
- Technology Infrastructure and Cybersecurity Audits
- Network Design, Installation, and Management
- Wireless Site Surveys and Remediation
- Server Installation and Management
- Microsoft 365 and Google Workspace Management
- IT Helpdesk Services



Reach out to Scott Wendorff to learn more!
218-737-6538
swendorff@lcsc.org

Celebrating Browns Valley Elementary

A Community Honored for Its Commitment to Students

by **Shea Maisonneuve**
COMPASS Continuous Improvement Coach
LCSC



Denise Pikarski
Principal
Browns Valley Public School

This month, one of our Lakes Country school communities has a meaningful reason to celebrate. Browns Valley Elementary has been recognized by the Minnesota Department of Education as one of eight schools across the state honored for exceptional work in supporting student success. The announcement was shared at the Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association (MESPA) Institute, where Commissioner Willie Jett highlighted schools that are making a real difference for children.

Browns Valley Elementary was recognized as an Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing School, a distinction that reflects the heart of the work happening in their classrooms every day. At the center of this progress is a deep commitment to strengthening literacy instruction. Over the past several years, Browns Valley school has become increasingly data-focused and intentional about refining literacy systems grounded in the Science of Reading. Teachers have collaborated closely to align best practices, examine student growth, and ensure that every learner receives the support they need to thrive.

Principal Denise Pikarski emphasized that Browns Valley Elementary's Blue Ribbon recognition is the result of years of intentional systemwide work. "This honor reflects the many shifts our staff have embraced to strengthen instruction and support every learner," she shared.

She pointed to foundational improvements like implementing high quality curriculum to build consistency across classrooms, as well as a renewed commitment to continuous work with MN State Standards. The school also established schoolwide data-collection processes and completed LETRS training even before it became a statewide requirement due to data showing student need. Pikarski is proud of how staff have approached new initiatives—such as launching WIN groups building-wide—with courage and professionalism. "The team was initially apprehensive, but they were never afraid to dive in, adjust, and do what's best for students," she said.

Receiving this honor has turned into one of their most meaningful celebrations this year. It affirms the intentional, data-driven decision- making that guides their work and highlights the improvements they've made to district infrastructure to better support all learners.

This is a reflection on the dedication of leadership, the hard work of staff who have invested deeply in the process, and the ongoing professional learning that keeps them growing together.

According to Pikarski, their ongoing partnership with Lakes Country Service Cooperative's Regional COMPASS Team has also played an important role in their success. "Through a strong, collaborative working relationship between the district and the COMPASS Team, we've received support from our COMPASS Continuous Improvement Coach—including coaching, facilitation, data and assessment guidance, and professional learning. Their consistent partnership has allowed us to solve problems together, align systems, and tailor support to our district's specific needs." By strengthening everything from literacy and math interventions to culture and climate initiatives, and all the layers in between, this collaboration has helped them stay focused on what matters most—student growth.

"This recognition validates the impact our staff is making every day, and it motivates us to keep refining our practice through continuous improvement." Principal Pikarski's words reflect the years their team has invested—engaging in deep discussion, embracing trial and error, and refining practices to meet the needs of every grade level. From implementing UFLI across classrooms to expanding responsive instructional strategies, Browns Valley staff continue to push forward with dedication and purpose. Pikarski notes, "We are taking this time to celebrate the hard work of staff and learners, but we remain focused on the work ahead and our continued efforts in closing achievement gaps and working toward continued growth."

Through the efforts of a driven leader, dedicated staff, and a sustained partnership with COMPASS, Browns Valley continues to work towards the best outcomes for their learners—and this recognition highlights the strength of that collaborative work.



Our purpose is to work collectively to guide and equip adults within education systems to cultivate the behaviors, actions, and conditions that promote inclusive intellectual, social, and emotional learning experiences for all young people.

COMPASS offers support for districts to further continuous improvement in the following areas:

- American Indian Education
- Culturally Responsive School Leadership
- Data and Assessment Literacy
- Highly Effective Tier I Instruction
- Literacy
- Math
- Multilingual Learners and English Language Development
- School Culture, Climate and Wellbeing
- Special Education
- Early Childhood Special Education

Contact Us!

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION COMPASS

Lakes Country Service Cooperative and West Central Initiative are teaming up to present:

The Full Circle of Philanthropy – From First Gift to Lasting Legacy.

This interactive 2.5-hour session explores the growing transfer of wealth, practical approaches to legacy giving, and relationship-based fundraising strategies that build long-term impact.

Whether you're new to fundraising or looking to strengthen donor relationships, this session will help you confidently move from conversation to lasting commitment.

THE FULL CIRCLE OF PHILANTHROPY

From First Gift to Lasting Legacy



Rebecca Lynn Petersen

Director of Development and Philanthropic Services, WCI



Rick Schara

Community Engagement Officer, WCI



Samantha VanWechel-Meyer

Community Philanthropy Officer, WCI



Mary Phillipe

Communications Coordinator, LCSC

11 am - 2 pm | April 7, 2026

LCSC |1001 E. Mount Faith
Fergus Falls, MN 56537

FEE

LCSC Member - $50
LCSC Nonmember - $75
Pay What You Can, rates available

West Central Initiative

LAKES COUNTRY Service Cooperative

www.wcif.org
www.lcsc.org

Presented by West Central Initiative & Lakes Country Service Cooperative

LCSC Health & Safety

Provides OSHA 10 Training for high school students in Alexandria and Rothsay Public Schools.





"I was so excited that my Rothsay students were able to take part in this OSHA 10 training. I believe knowledge is power. Not only did this training allow my students to get a better understanding of the safety we practice in school, but have now also been able to add onto that basic information and build it into something that can provide them a career worthy certification. All the students that participated in this program thought it was very beneficial and it has led to some great follow-up discussions and questions even since the training. They are taking a more observant look at their current work experiences and past work experiences and reflecting on some of those things. This training has opened them up to another perspective on safety for themselves and themselves in the workplace."

Rita Olson, Agricultural Teacher - Rothsay Public School

Lakes Country Service Cooperative's (LCSC) Senior Health and Safety Facilitator, Jeff Preuss, recently provided OSHA 10 training to 36 Career and Technical Education (CTE) students from Alexandria and Rothsay Public Schools. The training included 20 students in Rothsay and 16 in Alexandria.

OSHA 10 is a 10-hour introductory safety course for entry-level workers and is part of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Outreach Training Program. The course teaches basic hazard recognition, prevention, and avoidance in general industry, while also covering worker rights and employer responsibilities.

Bridging the Knowledge Gap

Preuss noted that many participating students are considering attending a two-year technical school or entering the workforce immediately after graduation. While a few students had prior work experience, many began the class knowing only that OSHA was related to safety.

"What we were trying to do," Preuss explained, "is to give students an advantage over those who have not had this training as they enter the workforce."

The Power of In-Person Learning

LCSC's Program Director of Health and Safety, Rick Brynildson, emphasized the importance of hands-on experiences. "By hosting the training on-site, Preuss was able to lead students through their own school buildings to identify real-world safety measures. That is the beautiful thing about schools," Brynildson said. "They house many industries, from welding and auto shops to carpentry and Family and Consumer Science. Students can see a guard on a commercial kitchen mixer or an eyewash station in a chemistry lab and relate it directly to a manufacturing job."



Sixteen students at Alexandria Area High School recently completed OSHA-10 training during a two-day, in-person course held at our school. Jeff, the instructor, presented the material in an engaging and accessible way that kept students involved and asking thoughtful questions throughout the training.

Students shared that they learned a great deal over the two days and appreciated the in-person format compared to taking the course self-directed online. They expressed pride in completing the training and said they would recommend offering it again. We are excited to share that all 16 students successfully passed the final assessment and earned their OSHA-10 certification.

This opportunity was offered as a pilot program through Lakes Country Service Cooperative, and we are grateful to partner in providing meaningful learning experiences for our students.

Shannon Patience, Academy Coach - Alexandria Public Schools

Brynildson added that having Preuss on-site for the two-day training also removed transportation barriers for the schools.

While interest in the program is high across the region, participation often depends on funding, as the cost is $125 per student. To make this pilot possible, Preuss collaborated with Troy Haugen, LCSC's Director of Career and College Readiness, to secure financial support.

"We used Lakes Country Perkins Consortium funds to pilot this in-person training so more students could earn a nationally recognized safety credential while still in high school," said Haugen. "Safety is a baseline expectation across career pathways. This training reduces preventable risk while giving students a credential that carries into work-based learning and entry-level employment."

By investing in these foundational skills today, LCSC and local school districts are ensuring that the next generation of workers enter the local economy not only more employable but significantly safer. As the success of the Alexandria and Rothsay pilots demonstrates, when schools and regional cooperatives collaborate, students gain the tools necessary to build secure, successful careers.

Learn more about OSHA 10 training by visiting our website at lcsc.org. Have questions? You can email Senior Health and Safety Facilitator, Jeff Preuss, at jpreuss@lcsc.org.





CALM HEALTH

Members with MHC insurance can access this personalized wellness experience at no additional cost.

Support for Mental and Emotional Well-Being
Calm Health offers tools to manage stress, improve sleep, and enhance balance in everyday life.

Why Use Calm Health

- Mindfulness and Sleep Support**: Access guided meditations, relaxing music, and mindfulness exercises anytime through the Calm Health app.
- Personalized Programs**: Receive a customized wellness plan with self-guided programs and track your progress towards better sleep and healthier habits.
- Support for Major Challenges**: Access expert-designed programs addressing stress, anxiety, and life changes for overall mental well-being in one convenient platform.

Senior High Knowledge Bowl Season Begins with a December Tradition at Concordia College

by Monica Thompson
LCSC Coordinator of Technology Integration and Academic Challenges

For hundreds of high school students, the start of winter break didn't mean slowing down—it meant buzzing in. The Senior High Knowledge Bowl season officially kicked off in December at Concordia College in Moorhead, where more than 150 teams from across the region gathered over two days to test their knowledge, teamwork, and quick thinking.

The Concordia kickoff is a long-standing tradition for Knowledge Bowl teams, and this year's event delivered both excitement and a dose of Minnesota winter. A winter storm forced the postponement of the December 18th meet, but 70 teams still made it to Concordia on December 19th, filling classrooms with the sounds of energetic questions, whispered collaboration, and the unmistakable sound of the buzzer. The postponed teams returned after Christmas break on January 7th, completing the two-day kickoff and showcasing the determination and enthusiasm that define the season.

In January, teams entered the second round of meets with renewed focus—stronger communication, sharper recall, and growing confidence. February will bring the final regular-season competitions, where teams make their last push before the stakes rise.

Postseason play begins March 9th and 10th with Subregion meets, followed by Regions on March 17th. From there, the top six teams will advance to the State Knowledge Bowl Meet held at Cragun's on April 9th and 10th, earning the opportunity to compete among Minnesota's best.

From the snowy December to the excitement of postseason play, the Senior High Knowledge Bowl season is about more than points and rankings. It's about students showing up, thinking fast, supporting one another, and discovering just how powerful teamwork and learning can be!









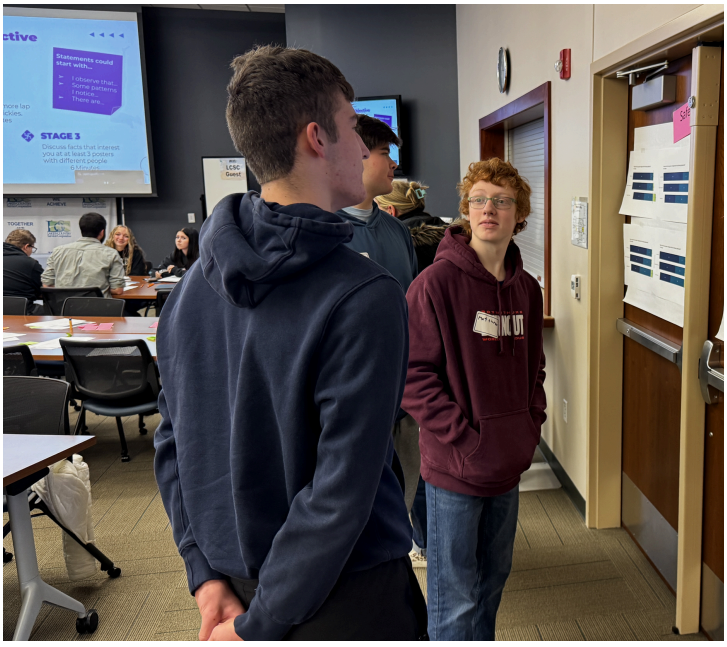
Youth Agency in Action

When Young People Lead, Communities Thrive

by **Staci Allmaras**
Director of School and Youth Engagement
Lakes Country Service Cooperative

Across Otter Tail County, schools and communities are navigating complex challenges—rising concerns around student mental health, attendance, and belonging—alongside a growing desire to better understand what young people need in order to thrive. One thing is clear: we cannot solve these challenges without youth at the table.

That belief sits at the heart of LCSC's newest initiative, the Youth Agency Collective. Last month, we piloted our first event, a county-wide Youth Data Summit designed to elevate youth voice, strengthen youth–adult partnerships, and support young people as leaders and changemakers in their schools and communities.



On January 14, Lakes Country Service Cooperative (LCSC) hosted the Youth Data Summit, the foundational event launching this work.



Youth and adult teams from Battle Lake, Fergus Falls, Pelican Rapids, Henning, and New York Mills gathered at LCSC for a full day of learning, dialogue, and collaboration. Together, they explored local data, reflected on lived experiences, and began identifying shared priorities for action.

This was not a traditional conference—and it was not a one-day event. The Youth Data Summit marked the beginning of a process grounded in Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), an approach that positions young people as researchers and leaders in identifying challenges, designing solutions, and leading implementation. Rather than adults interpreting data about youth, this work centers youth in making meaning with the data.



The summit was thoughtfully designed and facilitated through strong collaboration. Planning and facilitation partners included:

- COMPASS MnMTSS and Continuous Improvement specialists
- Data and Assessment Literacy and Attendance specialists
- Minnesota Department of Education Minnesota Student Survey data team
- Otter Tail County leaders
- Mentor Minnesota
- PartnerSHIP 4 Health
- Otter Tail County Family Community Collaborative
- LCSC staff

Together, these partners supported a learning environment that balanced data, lived experience, and relationship-building.

Throughout the day, young people stepped into roles as analysts, facilitators, and storytellers. Adults participated as allies—listening, asking questions, and learning alongside youth. Participants represented a wide range of leadership styles, experiences, and identities, including traditional student leaders, creative thinkers, connectors, emerging leaders, and voices that are often underrepresented in decision-making spaces. What emerged was powerful: honest conversations about attendance, mental health, connection, and school climate, paired with a strong sense of possibility. Youth articulated not only the challenges they see, but also what is working—and what could work better—when schools and communities partner with young people in meaningful ways.

Following the Youth Data Summit, the LCSC team will engage in follow-up conversations with each participating school team to reflect on learning from the day and to determine if and how they would like to continue with implementation or further learning. These conversations allow each school and community to identify next steps that align with their local context, goals, and readiness—honoring youth voice while respecting the unique needs of each district.

At LCSC, we see this work as deeply aligned with our role as a regional partner. Youth Agency in Action is not about adding another initiative—it is about strengthening the systems already in place by ensuring youth voice is embedded in how decisions are made. When young people experience belonging, agency, and trust, schools benefit from stronger engagement, more responsive practices, and deeper community connection.

Youth Agency in Action reminds us of something essential: young people are not just future leaders—they are leaders now. When we create the conditions for youth to lead, our communities are stronger for it.

“Youth Agency in Action is about more than listening to youth—it’s about trusting them as partners. When young people help shape the decisions that affect their lives, schools and communities are better, stronger, and more connected.”



Youth Agency Collective
Why This Work Matters – and Why Now

Across schools and communities, adults are working hard to address some of the most pressing challenges facing young people today—attendance concerns, mental health needs, disengagement, and a growing sense of disconnection. We are collecting more data than ever, investing in programs, and asking important questions.

And still, many systems struggle to move the needle.

The Youth Agency Collective begins with a different question:
What if the people most impacted by our decisions were positioned as partners in shaping them?

Research and experience tell us that young people are more engaged, more connected, and more likely to thrive when they experience belonging, agency, and meaningful relationships with adults. Yet in many systems, youth voice is still limited to feedback after decisions have already been made.

This work challenges that pattern.

The Youth Agency Collective is designed to help schools and communities move from listening to youth to working with youth—not as a symbolic gesture, but as a practical strategy for stronger outcomes and healthier systems.

The Youth Agency Collective Model
Three Core Areas for Impact

Youth Agency in Action is not a one-size-fits-all program. It is a flexible model that supports schools and communities in embedding youth agency into the work they are already doing. The model centers on three interconnected areas, each offering multiple entry points depending on local goals and readiness.

1. Youth Voice & Belonging

Why it matters:
Students who feel seen, valued, and connected are more likely to attend school, engage in learning, and reach out for support when they need it.

What this can look like:

- Youth advisory groups connected to schools, districts, or community organizations
- Youth-led listening sessions or focus groups
- Student-designed surveys and sense-of-belonging check-ins
- Adult ally learning focused on listening and shared leadership

2. Youth Leadership & Civic Skill-Building

Why it matters:
Leadership is not a title—it is a skill set. When young people develop the ability to analyze information, communicate ideas, and work across differences, schools and communities gain capable partners in improvement.

What this can look like:

- Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) teams
- Data literacy experiences using tools such as the Minnesota Student Survey
- Youth facilitation, presentation, and storytelling training
- Opportunities for youth to share insights with boards, staff, and community leaders

3. Youth-Led Action & Systems Improvement

Why it matters:
Sustainable change happens when insight leads to action—and when those closest to the work help shape the solution.

What this can look like:

- Youth-informed action plans connected to attendance, mental health, or prevention goals
- Youth participation in continuous improvement or planning efforts
- Pilot projects co-designed by youth and adults
- Reflection cycles that support learning, adjustment, and shared ownership

A Different Way of Working

The Youth Agency Collective is grounded in a simple but powerful truth:
Systems improve when the people within them have voice, agency, and shared responsibility.

This model invites school and community leaders to rethink how youth are engaged—not as an add-on, but as a core strategy for strengthening outcomes, relationships, and long-term impact.

The Youth Data Summit was the starting point. The possibilities that follow are shaped locally, driven by purpose, and grounded in partnership. Please reach out if you are interested in learning more.

Do you want to learn more about the Youth Data Summit and the Youth Agency Collective? Email Staci Allmaras, Director of School and Youth Engagement



Smarter. Healthier.
More Affordable Benefits
for Minnesota Public Employers.

The Minnesota Healthcare Consortium (MHC) brings together seven Minnesota Service Cooperatives to deliver high-quality, community-focused employee health benefits for schools, cities, counties, and public agencies across the state.



Built for Employers. Driven by Community. Focused on Health

MHC is committed to helping Minnesota public-sector organizations provide exceptional, sustainable healthcare options, and improving well-being by leveraging collective purchasing power.

Visit mnhc.gov



United Bus Sales: A Legacy of Service and Quality

United Bus Sales is a third-generation, family-owned dealership renowned for its dedication to integrity, transparency, and customer success. With years of expertise in the transportation sector, the company offers customized solutions for schools, organizations, and businesses throughout Minnesota and beyond.

Our Offerings

- Extensive Selection of New Vehicles**:
  - Sun Set vans
  - Collins buses
  - Endera buses
  - A variety of Blue Bird, IC, and Thomas buses
- Parts Supply**:
  - Components for all makes and models of vans and buses
- Repair and Maintenance Services**:
  - Available at three locations in Minnesota:
    - Big Lake
    - Detroit Lakes
    - Lake City

How to Place an Order

To place an order, reach out to Randy Johnson at randy@unitedbussales.com or call 320-447-7817. Be sure to inquire about your CPC membership benefits. You can view their current inventory at www.unitedbussales.com. If you don't find what you need in stock, they can help locate it for you.



Providing Tuition-Free Futures for Students

by: **Jackie Maethner**
Executive Director
Fergus Area College Foundation

Minnesota State Community and Technical College (M State) proudly announces the launch of the Blue & Gold Scholars program, ensuring a tuition-free education for eligible students. The initiative is designed to significantly lower or eliminate student debt for eligible students from area high schools, empowering graduates to focus on their futures. The Blue & Gold Scholars program is a merit-based "last dollar" scholarship that covers all remaining tuition and fees after other scholarships and grants are applied. Scholars are rewarded for their academic achievements not only financially, but also with perks like VIP registration and special recognition events.

Funded by the Fergus Area College Foundation (FACF), the program is open to graduates of 21 designated high schools and to homeschooled graduates within those districts.

> "Our goal is to keep talented, engaged students in our region and help them thrive here."
>
> **M State President, Carrie Brimhall**

"The Blue & Gold Scholars program not only makes college more attainable but also strengthens campus leadership and enriches the college experience for all. It's a win for students, schools and the entire community."

Fergus Area College Foundation

The program's benefits extend beyond the classroom, as scholars are required to meet minimum GPA requirements as well as participate in athletics, fine arts, student organizations or campus leadership – building skills that will serve them throughout their lives and enriching campus life for all. The program also celebrates partnerships with local high schools, recognizing the schools and scholars through special events and promotions.

Partner high schools include:

- Ashby
- Barnesville
- Battle Lake
- Brandon-Evansville
- Breckenridge
- Campbell-Tintah
- Chokio-Alberta
- Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley
- Fergus Falls (Kennedy Secondary and Hillcrest Academy)
- Hancock
- Henning
- Herman-Norcross
- New York Mills
- Parkers Prairie
- Pelican Rapids
- Perham
- Rothsay
- Underwood
- West Central Area Secondary
- Wheaton

"FACF is thrilled to support the Blue & Gold Scholars program," says FACF President Erin Smith. "By investing in our students, we're investing in the future of our communities. This program ensures that bright, motivated young people have the resources and encouragement they need to succeed, right here at home."

Highlights of the Blue & Gold Scholars program:

- Covers remaining tuition and fees after other scholarships and grants are applied
- Open to all income levels
- Scholars and partner schools receive public recognition
- Scholars get VIP registration, mentorship, and other benefits
- Requires a 3.0+ high school GPA; 2.5+ GPA while at M State
- Scholars must be enrolled in at least 6 credits per semester at M State Fergus Falls and participate in an on-campus activity or leadership role

Students who may be eligible are encouraged to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and visit facfmstate.org to learn more about the Blue & Gold Scholars program.

COMPASS

Are you curious about MnMTSS?

Are you curious about how to align your school system more efficiently and effectively?

Have you previously attended the Intro to MnMTSS Course but find yourself needing a fresh start with a new team?

Call or email **Courtney Henderson** with questions or for more information:
Hendersonc@lcsc.org
Phone: 218-234-7351

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION | COMPASS | The Minnesota Service Cooperatives

Registration for the Introduction to Minnesota Multi-tiered System of Support (MnMTSS) Spring Intensive Cohort at Lakes Country Service Cooperative is now open!



Pathway Description: This course is foundational to MnMTSS Implementation.

Teams will unpack the five components of the MnMTSS FRAMEWORK and begin to get a clear picture of their own system in relation to each component and subcomponent.
To do this, teams begin gathering systems data (e.g., assessments, initiatives, and team inventories) and complete the Self-Evaluation of MnMTSS for District Leadership Teams (SEMI-DLT). Finally, teams use their SEMI-DLT results and the MnMTSS Action Planning Guide to create a focused plan for systems improvement to ensure equitable outcomes, access, and opportunities for the students and families they serve.

This pathway will be offered in a condensed format with the following schedule:

- **Thursday, April 9, 2026** – Full-Day (9:00 am - 3:30 pm) in-person sessions 1 and 2
- **Friday, April 24, 2026** – Full Day (9:00 am - 3:30 pm) in-person sessions 3 and 4
- **Friday, May 8, 2026** – Full Day (9:00 am - 3:30 pm) in-person sessions 5 and 6

**There will be an optional team time with coaching available before and after each session.*

Due to the condensed delivery model of this pathway, participating teams will receive support from their MnMTSS Lead after the pathway ends to consolidate learning and complete their action plan. With this support, teams will head into the summer with an action plan that is ready for implementation in the fall.

Interested? Register for this Introduction to MnMTSS Summer Pathway here.



Spuds Helping Spuds!

by: **Makynna Deelstra**
Intern at Moorhead Public Schools, MHS Alum, and Senior Student at MSUM



Ellen Hopkins Elementary 1st grader, Amarah Ramirez, experiences limited mobility in her arms, making it difficult for her to raise her hand in class. Renee Wolf, a special educator at Hopkins, was hoping to find a way to help Amarah do just that—so she reached out to Moorhead High School's Spudnik Robotics team to see if they could help.

Last year, the students used LED lights in their competition robot, and now they are applying that experience to design a custom device for Amarah. Robotics coach Matthew Craig met with Renee to discuss her vision for the project, and the team quickly began brainstorming.

Four students took on the challenge of helping Amarah: one focused on the 3D design of the box, two worked on integrating the LED hand display and one handled programming. They shared that the device is set up so Amarah can tap a button with her head to raise the LED hand, then tap again to lower it.

A major part of robotics is adapting and problem-solving to make things work even better. The students are completing their first version of the device and have already identified improvements they would like to make for the final product. Their adjustments include rounding the corners, incorporating a sound to indicate when the hand is raised, and changing the color of the hand to Amarah's chosen color, blue.

Coach Craig notes that this project feels different from the team's usual robotics work. "It's robotics, and when we're working on the robot, it feels removed from real life. But the skills that the students practice applying in robotics are useful for everyday things, too. If you ask kids why they do robotics, many will say that it's because of the other people involved in robotics. And this is sort of an extension of that. It's doing a robotics thing because it is for another person."

One student working on the project shared that this experience has been meaningful for him because it is helping a younger student succeed. "Everyone should be able to participate in class, and helping to make that possible feels rewarding".

The project to help Amarah also shows other students that robotics can make a real difference and help people in tangible ways. Typically, Spudnik works on one large project throughout the year. They have to wait to see the results until the competition in the spring. It has been exciting for the team to see immediate results and watch their efforts come to life.

Based on how this project delivers the intended outcomes for Amarah, it could serve as something of a pilot for Spudnik to engineer one or two products each month for students and peers in need across Moorhead Area Public Schools (MAPS.) Coming together to help others and using a shared passion to create something meaningful is what MAPS is all about.

PJ Vanderheiden Wins Region IV Spelling Bee

Advances to National Stage

by **Monica Thompson**
Coordinator of Technology Integration and Academic Challenges, LCSC

REGION IV CHAMPION



PJ Vanderheiden
Alexandria, MN

It was a day filled with anticipation, determination, and remarkable spelling talent as 24 district spelling bee champions gathered at Lakes Country Service Cooperative for the annual Regional Spelling Bee, sponsored by the Minnesota Service Cooperatives.

This year's competition was especially impressive, with nine district winners returning to the stage once again, a true testament to their dedication and perseverance.
After several intense rounds, PJ Vanderheiden from Alexandria emerged as the 2026 Region IV Champion. With calm focus and confidence under pressure, PJ correctly spelled the championship word, stagflation, to secure the title and earn the honor of representing Region IV at the national level.

When asked how he prepared for the regional bee, PJ shared that he relied heavily on the Word Club app and consistent daily practice. "I used the Word Club app and practiced about 700 words every day," PJ said. As he looks ahead to the national competition, he plans to ramp up his studying even more in preparation for Bee Week.

The competition remained strong throughout the day. Linnea Malek from Morris earned First Runner-Up honors, and Haven Hovland from Barnesville claimed the Second Runner-Up position. Each finalist demonstrated exceptional preparation, composure, and resilience.

Spelling Bee Coordinator Monica Thompson praised the students for their courage and commitment. "All the spellers were incredible," Thompson shared. "It takes courage, poise, and skill to stand in front of a room full of people and spell challenging words under pressure. Every student here should be incredibly proud."

Events like the Region IV Spelling Bee are made possible through the support and dedication of many individuals. Special thanks to pronouncer Cris Oehler and officials Dee Johnson, Troy Haugen, Jolene King, Mary Phillipe, and Phyllis Rossow for their time, attention to detail, and commitment to making the day run smoothly.



Their efforts ensure a positive and memorable experience for every student who takes the stage. Also, thank you to all the sponsors: Minnesota Service Cooperatives, Merriam-Webster, Lathrop GPM, Medica, Wex and ORB.

After 15 years at the Gaylord National Resort, the national bee is returning to Washington, D.C. This year, the Scripps National Spelling Bee will take place at Constitution Hall during Bee Week, May 24–29, 2026.

Congratulations to all 24 of this year's outstanding district champions. We wish PJ the very best as he represents Region IV at the National Spelling Bee in May!



1st Runner-Up:
Linnea Malek from Morris



2nd Runner-Up:
Haven Hovland from Barnesville

Empowering Youth

in Fergus Falls Through Key Club

by Zoe Graham
West Central Initiative's Fall 2025 Development Intern

Community goes beyond just sharing a space. It means actively participating in the community's growth and well-being. For students at Fergus Falls High School, this belief has been a great motivation. As part of a class assignment, the students began brainstorming ways to better the school and community. They developed the idea of a group of students, originally named Fergus Falls Community Service Society (FFCSS), who go into the community to do volunteer work. The students were then presented with the idea of starting a Key Club chapter right here in Fergus Falls.

What is Key Club?

Key Club is a student-led organization that encourages leadership through serving others. The organization encourages high school students to take initiative, build character, and make meaningful contributions to their communities by guiding and fostering leadership skills. The club offers the perfect platform for students to find their voices and become leaders. The organization supports thousands of chapters in 45 different countries. Having a chapter in Fergus Falls is a great opportunity to connect with the community and the thousands of other leaders across the United States and beyond.



Bringing Key Club to Fergus Falls

Students at Kennedy Secondary School, Nadia Carlson, Zoe Graham, and Belle Holland, noticed the need for community involvement and began brainstorming ways to encourage volunteer work in their community. As part of a school project, students presented their idea for a student-led community volunteer group. Superintendent Jeff Drake and members of the school board were invited to attend the presentation. Superintendent Drake shared the idea with his Kiwanis group, which offered to support the idea by starting Key Club.

Fergus Falls had not had a Key Club chapter in many years, but thanks to encouragement and support from the Kiwanis, the club is now active again. The Fergus Falls Key Club has had over 50 students sign up and is working to improve student involvement around the town by offering students' time to local causes, businesses, and nonprofits. "Key Club is a wonderful community within our school that has the opportunity to reach out further than our student body," said Key Club President Nadia Carlson. "Each member is amazingly unique, and here to give back to our town of Fergus Falls."



Fergus Falls Key Club Needs Your Support

Many of the Key Club leadership roles are currently filled by high school seniors. Younger students must feel supported by the community to take on these leadership roles. Local businesses can support the students by reaching out to any of the officers or even Superintendent Jeff Drake to share volunteer opportunities and ideas. Nonprofits can also utilize Key Club as a source of youth involvement.

Key Club has already had many organizations reach out for their assistance and helped the YMCA with its Halloween game, the United Way backpack meal program, and other small projects, such as picking up trash around town. The club is in the planning process for more civil community involvement.

If your organization is interested in connecting with the Key Club, please contact any of the chapter officers through the school.

SENIORS IN OFFICER ROLES:

- **Nadia Carlson, President**
- **Cierra Ochoa, Vice President**
- **Zoe Graham, Co-founder and Social Media Manager**
- **Evie Millard, Secretary**
- **Sailyr Hansen, Photographer**

These students work as a team to brainstorm new opportunities and encourage more students to join and get involved. Key Club is a student-led organization that thrives when all members work as a team of leaders. Students are encouraged to use their voice, get involved by contributing ideas, and grow as leaders. Younger members will need to take over these roles in the future, so getting involved now to be an active part of the club is vital.

LCSC COMMUNICATOR

COMMUNICATOR STAFF
Editors: Jane Eastes: jeastes@lcsc.org
Mary Phillipe: mphillipe@lcsc.org
Address:
Lakes Country Service Cooperative
1001 E. Mount Faith
Fergus Falls, MN 56537
An equal opportunity employer

CONTACT US
Executive Director: Jeremy Kovash
Phone: (218) 739-3273
Email: communicator@lcsc.org

Follow Us For More

The LCSC Communicator is a publication of Lakes Country Service Cooperative.

Views and ideas expressed in the LCSC Communicator by its contributors or advertisers do not necessarily reflect views or policies of Lakes Country Service Cooperative and should not be considered an endorsement thereof.

Lakes Country Service Cooperative retains the right to accept, reject or edit any submitted material and requires all submissions to be signed and dated.



2026 LCSC BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Chair	Jon Karger	Board Member - Pelican Rapids Public Schools
Vice Chair	Suzanne Wing	Board Member - Ashby Public Schools
Clerk	Paul Ness	Board Member - Battle Lake Public Schools
Treasurer	Marc Hasbargen	Board Member - Breckenridge Public Schools
Director	David Meyer	Board Member - Becker County
Director	Maureen Eigen	Board Member - Alexandria Public Schools
Director	Kevin Campbell	Board Member - Clay County
Director	Kurt Mortenson	Board Member - Otter Tail County
Director	Judith Moeller	Board Member - Parkers Prairie Public Schools
Director	Scott Steffes	Board Member - Moorhead Public Schools
Director	Melissa Burgard	Board Member - Moorhead Public Schools
Ex-Officio	Supt. Phil Jensen	Hawley Public Schools
Ex-Officio	Todd Travis	Midwest Special Education Cooperative

CONNECT WITH PROGRAMS & SERVICES AT LCSC!

- Communications & Professional Development
- Cooperative Purchasing
- Education
- Finance
- Health & Safety
- Insurance & Wellness
- Lakes Country Academy
- Special Education
- Information Technology