

COMMUNITY Connections

A newsletter for the communities of Stillwater Area Public Schools | WINTER 2026



Learning Beyond The Classroom

Some of the most powerful lessons happen beyond the walls of a classroom. That's why we offer our students amazing opportunities to explore the world around them. Read more about the unique outdoor learning experiences our students are having in elementary and middle school on pages 4-5.



News From Around the District



Phones Are Off. Engagement Is On.

Teachers, staff and students are seeing measurable changes in student engagement and overall school culture following the implementation of a phone-free school policy. The new policy, which is in effect at each of our schools, keeps phones and other personal devices out of the hands of kids from the first bell until the last. Students are encouraged to leave devices at home, or to keep them locked away during the school day, to promote better engagement in their learning.

After just one semester the feedback has been encouraging. Classrooms across the district are experiencing increased collaboration, more focused work time and fewer distractions competing for students' attention. Both students and adults have also reported a decline in behavior concerns, including fewer conflicts and less online bullying during the school day.

Perhaps the most noticeable shift can be heard in hallways and lunchrooms. Without phones in hand, students are talking with one another more frequently, strengthening peer relationships and contributing to a more connected, positive school environment. The renewed sense of interaction has helped foster a culture that feels more present, engaged and community-centered.

Expanding Opportunities at Stillwater Area High School

College Degrees. Career Certifications. Online Academy.

The high school is launching several student-centered improvements for the 2026–27 school year designed to expand opportunities, increase flexibility, and strengthen the student experience.

A redesigned schedule will allow students to take up to eight additional courses over four years, creating more opportunities to explore interests and personalize learning.

This strategic realignment is designed to protect enrollment — directly tied to the district's long-term financial stability — while expanding access to coursework and increasing scheduling flexibility. The changes are being funded through reallocations and staffing adjustments within the existing high school structure.



College Degrees in High School

Earn up to **60 college credits**, and even a **two-year Associate of Arts (AA) degree**

Career-Ready Certifications

Credentials in **Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)** and **Digital Technologies**

Personalized Pathways

Explore interests and gain **hands-on experience** through internships and real-world projects

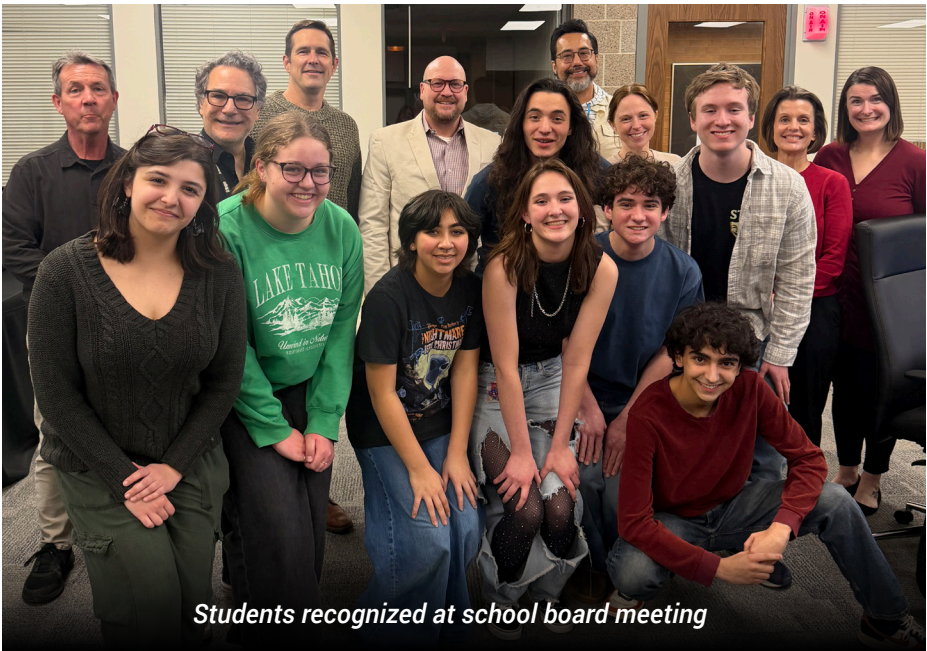
Online Options, SAHS Teachers

Flexible, high-quality courses taught by our high school teachers

More Time, More Electives

New schedule allows students to take eight more courses and dive deeper into subjects

You can learn more online at stillwaterschools.org/discoverSAHS.



Students recognized at school board meeting

Stillwater Students Star in International School Safety Video

Stillwater Area High School staff and students are featured in the new training video for the I Love U Guys Foundation, which provides the emergency Standard Response Protocols (SRP) used in our schools.



More than a dozen of our high school staff and students worked alongside a professional film production crew on the Teen SRP Video project that will be shared with more than 50,000 schools and organizations worldwide.

Stillwater first adopted the SRP in 2018 and has been invited to speak at local conferences and as part of a national webinar on how we've successfully implemented the protocols in all of our schools.

In appreciation of the district's involvement, the I Love U Guys Foundation is providing free safety training for key staff, and made a \$2,500 donation to the SAHS Theatre Department.



Watch the video!

Superintendent in Residency

Once a month, Superintendent Mike Funk gets out of his office and spends a week in a school. During these visits he connects with students and talks with teachers and staff. It's a great way to see learning in action and build relationships with the school community.



Bond Construction Update

Winter weather may have moved the workers inside, but it hasn't slowed down progress on our two newest school buildings. Tile is being laid, walls are being constructed, and classrooms are taking shape at both Bayport Elementary and Lake Elmo Elementary. Both projects are on schedule and will be ready for next fall.

Construction is also continuing at Oak-Land Middle School, where a new gymnasium is being built and new classroom addition will be constructed. The second phase of the project - which will begin this summer - will see the existing gym converted into a media center and commons area.

Thanks to the overwhelming support of voters in 2023, construction is nearing completion on several major projects throughout the district.

Follow along on all of these projects

Visit our website for the latest photos, videos, and monthly progress reports.



Learning Beyond the Classroom: Environmental Education in Stillwater Schools

Environmental learning in Stillwater Area Public Schools is rooted in the belief that some of the most powerful lessons happen beyond the walls of a classroom. Through hands-on, outdoor experiences, students build academic knowledge while also developing curiosity, confidence, and a lasting connection to the natural world. Two cornerstone partners in this work are Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center and Belwin Conservancy, each offering unique opportunities for students to explore Minnesota’s diverse ecosystems.



Middle Schoolers Explore Wolf Ridge

At Wolf Ridge, students step into a fully immersive residential learning experience set along the North Shore of Lake Superior. Surrounded by forests, wetlands, and rocky shorelines, seventh grade students from both Stillwater and Oak-Land middle schools participate in field-based investigations that bring science standards to life. Instead of reading about ecosystems in a textbook, they test water quality in streams, study forest ecology firsthand, and observe wildlife in its natural habitat. The experience challenges students to think critically, ask questions, and collaborate with peers. It also fosters independence and resilience, as students spend multiple days learning and living together in a new environment. Many students return from Wolf Ridge with a deeper understanding of environmental systems and a stronger appreciation for the interconnectedness of nature.

Elementary Students Learn at Belwin Conservancy

Closer to home, Belwin Conservancy extends environmental learning throughout the elementary years. Located in nearby Afton, Belwin provides ongoing, place-based education for students in second through fifth grade. Through a combination of classroom visits and outdoor field experiences, students build scientific skills year after year. They explore prairies, woodlands, and wetlands while learning to observe seasonal changes, identify plant and animal species, and understand habitats. Because these experiences happen repeatedly over time, students are able to see patterns, make connections, and deepen their understanding as they grow.



Benefits of Environmental Learning

What makes environmental learning in Stillwater Area Public Schools especially impactful is its alignment with academic goals and its emphasis on stewardship. These experiences are not “extras”; they are intentionally designed to support science standards while also nurturing responsibility and care for the environment. Students learn that their actions matter — whether conserving resources, protecting habitats, or making thoughtful choices in their own community.

Beyond academic growth, environmental learning builds lifelong skills. Students develop teamwork, problem-solving abilities, and perseverance. They gain confidence by navigating outdoor challenges and pride in contributing to something larger than themselves. Most importantly, they form personal connections to the land and water around them.

Through partnerships with Wolf Ridge and Belwin Conservancy, Stillwater Area Public Schools ensures that environmental education is meaningful, memorable, and transformative. By stepping outside, students discover not only the natural world, but also their own potential to understand it, protect it, and lead within it.

Celebrating Stillwater Students

Congressional App Challenge

Two SAHS students were recognized in the 2025 Fourth Congressional District App Challenge. Riddhi Singhvi's app, Bite Balance, took first place in the STEM competition. The wellness app replaces calorie counting and manual food logging with simple, AI-driven insights. Ethan Finch earned second place for his app, ArticuRace.



One Act Play Earns Starred Performance Rating

SAHS thespians performed Le Bête at the Class AA State Festival. The fast-paced comedy set in 17th century France earned the highest rating.



Oak-Land 8th Grader Makes State Honor Band

Noah Benson earned a spot in the Minnesota

State Honor Band. Only five students out of all the trombonists in grades 6-8 in Minnesota were selected. Noah will practice and perform with the other students from all over the state later this spring.



Debate Earns Second at State

The Stillwater classic debate team finished second in the state tournament with Sophia Amundgaard and Ella Venzke earning All State Honors. Lucy Kleczka and Nicholas Smith came in second place in the Junior Varsity Division. Stillwater had a strong showing in the Novice Division. Pablo Santiago de la Torre Tagle and Anvita Ghosh earned first place, while Aerie Griffin and Rowan Cunningham came in second.

Stock Market Team Wins State Competition

Stillwater high school students placed 1st and 5th in the Minnesota BestPrep Stock Market Game. The national simulation gives students a virtual \$100,000 to invest in stocks, bonds, and mutual funds for 12 weeks. Teams make trades on the internet using real ticker symbols and watch their portfolio value change with the stock market. Adam Brosziski captured first with a portfolio of just over \$142,000.

Yearbook Receives International Accolades

The high school yearbook earned the First Class Award from the National Scholastic Press Association. The Kabekonian earned international recognition, landing a spot on the 2025 Pictavo International Honor Roll. Only 200 yearbooks from around the world received this honor.

A panel of professional journalists and designers praised the Kabekonian for capturing the "OMG moments" that make high school memorable, along with strong design, creativity, and representation throughout the yearbook. This recognition reflects the talent, dedication, and hard work of our student editors, photographers, writers, and advisers.



Andersen Elementary Students Win State Math Challenge

Congratulations to Mrs. Barsness's class who won the Prodigy State Math Challenge in their division last month. Students work on Prodigy when all other work is completed, and at home if they choose. This challenge counted the number of correct math answers from the students over the month. The students answered 12,149 questions correctly!



Girls Soccer Wins State

The girls soccer team staged a thrilling comeback to win the state title. The Ponies stormed back with 3 unanswered goals to beat undefeated and defending state champion Wayzata 3-2. It was Stillwater's fourth state crown in program history.

Boys Nordic Skiing Wins State

Stillwater boys won the state team championship for the first time since 1996 with 383 points. Wyatt Wolfe and Talbot Ward claimed gold in the team sprint.



Wrestling Captures Third at State

The Stillwater wrestling team placed third at state, beating Hastings 58-10. The Ponies had 14 individuals compete between the boys and girls and ended with 8 place winners including 2 state champions: Noah Nicholson (127 pounds) and Audrey Rogotzke (148 pounds) and one runner-up: Grayson Eggum (160 pounds). It was the third state championship for Rodgotzke, considered one of the early pioneers of girls wrestling in Minnesota.

Unified Basketball Places Third at State

The Stillwater Unified Basketball team beat Bemidji 37-23 to capture the third place title at the Special Olympics tournament. The team is made up of boys and girls with and without intellectual differences.



Girls Swim and Dive Finish Season Strong

The Ponies placed second at True Team state and third at the MSHSL state meet. Stillwater medaled in eight events. In individual races Maddie Mathiason placed second in the 100 Yard Breaststroke and Claire Christianson placed third in the 200 Yard Individual Medley. In the relays Stillwater placed third in the 200 Yard Medley (Claire Christianson, Maddie Mathiason, Molly Mahoney, Lucy Paczosa) and third in the 400 Yard FreeStyle (Claire Christianson, Molly Mahoney, Reese Bilot, Lucy Paczosa).

Stillwater also extended its long conference (198) and overall (222) dual meet winning streaks which date back more than two decades.

Bowlers Named All-State

The bowling team had a fantastic regular season finishing with a whopping 207.3 average and a 16-2 record. Congrats to Drake Wait and Hadden Podlucky who were named to the first team all-state and Jacob Roettger who was named to second-team all state.

Teams Competing at State

- Adapted Soccer
- Boys Cross Country (placed 9th)
- Girls Cross Country
- Girls Tennis
- Girls Volleyball
- Adapted Floor Hockey
- Girls Nordic Skiing (placed 6th)



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150 Graduating Classes and Counting



This spring, our high school will celebrate an incredible milestone: the 150th graduating class crossing the stage in May.

For generations, our schools have helped shape students, families, and the community we're proud to call home. While a lot has changed since those first graduates walked the halls, one thing hasn't—our commitment to helping students learn, grow, and discover what's possible.

Celebrate 150 years with us! Follow our social media series leading up to graduation in May. We're highlighting memories, traditions, alumni stories, and the many generations of Ponies who came before.

Whether you graduated five years ago or fifty, we invite the whole community to follow along and help celebrate 150 classes of Pony pride—and counting.

Si usted tiene alguna pregunta acerca de esta hoja informativa, por favor llame a la oficina de su escuela para hablar con un intérprete.

Learn more about Stillwater Area Public Schools

stillwaterschools.org | 651-351-8340



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Pony Voices Podcast