

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



Students getting lunch in the busy Park High School cafeteria.

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Built to Serve: A Cafeteria Upgrade

Construction has been underway at all secondary schools for nearly two years as part of the 2023 bond referendum. One of the most impactful outcomes will be the creation of new kitchens and expanded cafeterias at Park and Woodbury high schools.

For years, existing food service facilities have struggled to keep up with a growing student population. During busy lunch periods, students navigated crowded lines and limited seating while staff worked in tight kitchens not built for modern equipment.

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Valley Crossing Recognized for Academic Excellence

Valley Crossing Elementary School (VCES) is one of only eight schools statewide honored by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) for exceptional academic achievement and closing achievement gaps.

"These eight schools are doing outstanding work and deserve recognition," said MDE Commissioner Willie Jett. "In Minnesota, we believe every student deserves access to a high-quality education."

Although the U.S. Department of Education discontinued the National Blue Ribbon Schools program in 2025,

Minnesota continues to recognize schools that meet those high standards. VCES earned distinction in both the Exemplary High Performing and Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing categories.

The school serves nearly 750 students in grades K–5. Its success is rooted in the Multiage Magnet Program, where students stay with the same teacher and peer group for two years. Classrooms are organized into cohorts—K–1, 2–3 and 4–5—allowing students of different ages to learn together. The school also hosts the Gateway Program for advanced learners.

"Learning is built on relationships," said VCES Principal Connha Classon. "We believe social-emotional learning is just as important as academic learning. This honor is a testament to the strong connections between students, staff and families."

While Valley Crossing is a large school, it is designed to feel small. Students are grouped into three "neighborhood pods" to create close-knit communities.

"I have made a lot of friends here. Valley Crossing feels like home," said third-grader Crosby Olson.



◀ Principal Classon with school staff and Assistant Superintendent Kristine Schaefer.

VCES shared the news with students during an all-school assembly to thunderous applause. Superintendent Julie Nielsen said the sense of belonging and community at the school is palpable.

"I am so proud of their achievements," Nielsen said.

Principal Classon was also nominated for the Terrel H. Bell Award for Outstanding School Leadership, which recognizes principals who overcome significant challenges to achieve excellence.

Valley Crossing's honor celebrates the students, staff and families who make its learning community thrive. Congratulations!



▲ Valley Crossing students cheering during the school assembly announcing the award.



Dear Community Members,

As the dandelions bloom and the trees bud across our community, I am reminded of the incredible growth we have witnessed within our classrooms this year. Spring is a season of transition—a time to reflect on our progress, while also looking forward to the celebrations and milestones that the end of the school year brings. We have some of the most amazing students and will take time to celebrate the graduation of more than 1,500 students this June.

Thanks to your continued support of our bond referendums, construction is in full swing. We are making significant progress on the first phase of our construction at our secondary schools. These projects are more than just brick and mortar; they are essential investments in ensuring every student has a modern, safe, and welcoming space to learn and grow. The construction work approved with the 2023 bond, will be completed by the Fall of 2027. We are so grateful for the support of our communities and the investment made in our facilities.

While there is a lot to celebrate, we also need to face the reality of the budget constraints everyone is seeing and feeling, both at home and related to running the school district. This fall we will begin conversations and a district process to make the necessary budget adjustments. District leaders

have already begun developing the process for how we collect feedback and make decisions. While we could consider asking our community for more money, we know that we must live within our means. Please watch for more information about the budget process in our quarterly mailings, along with our district website.

Finally, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to our staff, volunteers, and families. Whether you are working on the front lines, cheering from the sidelines, volunteering in a classroom, or supporting your child's learning at home, you are the foundation of what makes our school district great. We look forward to finishing the school year strong, focused on student success and a whole lot of kindness.

Happy Spring!

Julie Nielsen
Julie Nielsen, Superintendent

One Pack, All Belong

Wolfpack Buddies is a student-led club at Park High School (PHS) that pairs general education students with peers receiving special education services to build one-to-one friendships. Part of Best Buddies International, the club creates opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Students are matched for the school year and commit to spending time together during lunch, school activities or study sessions. The club also hosts monthly events to foster a welcoming environment.

For those who receive special education services, these connections build confidence and communication skills.

"I will always remember making friendship bracelets with my buddy," said junior Jazzy Stafford.

General education students also find the experience transformative, gaining a deeper understanding of empathy and advocacy.

"I never would have had the chance to build a friendship with my buddy otherwise," said junior Kroix Pearson. "Being a buddy leader has given me the chance to make friends and build a bridge."

The club also offers leadership roles. Co-president and senior Camilla Brooks



▲ Group photo of the Wolfpack Buddies.

Two buddies pose together. ►

recently organized the school's first unified dance, featuring a sensory-friendly room.

"We wanted to create another opportunity for students to participate in a school dance," Brooks said. "Advocating for others has helped me better advocate for myself."

Club advisor Robert Carrero called the program the highlight of his teaching career.

"Seeing the dedication of our buddy leaders and the social skills our buddies gain is invaluable," Carrero said.

By celebrating differences and prioritizing friendship, the club embodies the PHS motto: We Run as One.

Kids Club Curates Birthday Wishes

Every child deserves to feel celebrated on their birthday, but the cost of supplies can be a barrier for some families. Students at the **Nuevas Fronteras Spanish Immersion (NFSI) Kids Club** recently created **86 birthday kits** to meet that need.

The kits, donated to the Friends in Need food shelf in St. Paul Park, contain cake mix, frosting, pans, balloons and candles. Each kit also includes a handmade card.

"This project helped students see how small acts of kindness can make a big difference," said NFSI Kids Club supervisor Kathy Gross.

As part of their service-learning curriculum, students learned that not all families have the same resources. Third-grader Lauren Holzbauer said she enjoyed making the cards to give the recipients "something extra special."

The initiative was so successful that families held a social to assemble the kits together. "In the midst of hardship, these kits offer a moment of celebration," said Crystal Schneider, director of Friends in Need.

Staff noted that students were eager to help those who cannot afford party supplies. "We are teaching kids to give," says NFSI Kids Club paraprofessional Alejandra Rodriguez. As fourth-grader Michael Tody put it:

"Helping people in need feels good."



▲ Two students pack birthday kits

2026 GRADUATION CEREMONIES

Watch the Ceremonies

Graduations for East Ridge, Park and Woodbury high schools will be livestreamed on the SoWashCo Schools YouTube channel. Recordings for South Washington Alternative High School and SoWashCo Online will be posted following their ceremonies.

East Ridge High School

- 11 a.m., Friday, June 5
- TCO Stadium in Eagan

Park High School

- 3 p.m., Friday, June 5
- TCO Stadium in Eagan

Woodbury High School

- 7 p.m., Friday, June 5
- TCO Stadium in Eagan

South Washington Alternative High School

- 6:30 p.m., Thursday, June 4
- Oltman Middle School Auditorium

SoWashCo Online

- 3 p.m., Thursday, June 4
- Central Park

Next Step Transitions

- 6 p.m., Thursday, May 28
- Park High School Auditorium

Great Rivers Adult Education

This year, the Great Rivers Adult Education Consortium proudly celebrates 41 graduates who turned their dedication into a diploma. Through relentless hard work, these students have reached a life-changing milestone. Congratulation Grads!





Securing Our Future.

Supporting Our Students.

Construction Update and Highlights

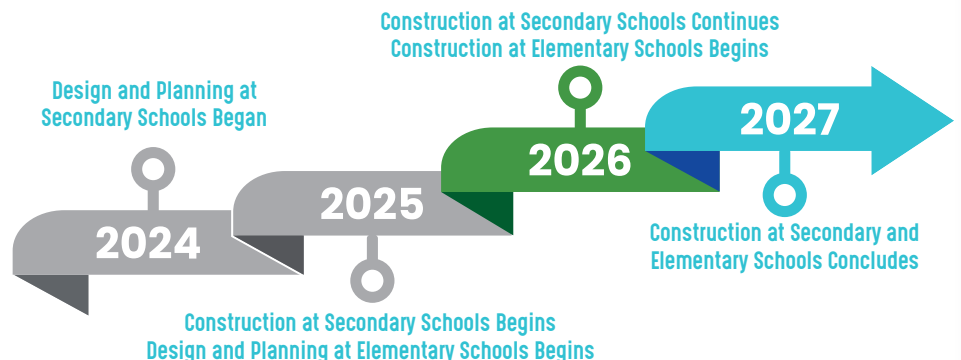
Construction projects across the district's seven secondary schools continue to move forward on schedule. As some of the new spaces will become functional over the summer, it marks a milestone in the implementation of the two voter-approved bond questions, which are bringing improvements to 15 schools over five years to enhance learning environments for all students.

Construction at Bailey, Grey Cloud, Pine Hill and Red Rock elementary schools is set to begin this summer, continuing the district's steady momentum.

Together, these efforts reflect a thoughtful, coordinated approach to upgrading spaces across all grade levels, enhancing safety, functionality and learning environments while keeping disruptions to the school day to a minimum.



Learn more about the construction plans and view design concepts and a detailed schedule of projects at sowashco.org/construction





Kitchen staff show off the impressive scale of the new walk-in cooler currently under construction at Park High School.

"The current kitchens and cafeterias were originally designed for far fewer students," said Wendy Peterson, Director of Nutrition Services. "The spaces are simply too small and outdated to efficiently serve today's enrollment."

Park High School junior Lucy Kleoppel said the lunchroom gets so crowded and loud that it is often hard for her to hear her friends.

Thanks to community support, that is about to change. Park and Woodbury high schools will debut new kitchen and cafeteria spaces at the start of the 2026-27 school year. East Ridge High School and Oltman Middle School will also see renovations to their current dining spaces.

"Our Nutrition Services teams have always consistently delivered quality meals with care," said Bobbie Jo Grummons, Assistant Director of Nutrition Services. "We are beyond excited to have not just updated equipment but adequate space to meet the demands of our schools."

The new kitchens will meet current safety standards, improve workflow and support scratch cooking and healthier menu options. Peterson noted that the new prep and cooking areas are nearly three times the current size.

Expanded cafeterias will provide a more comfortable environment for students to connect and recharge. East Ridge, Park and Woodbury high schools will also add "grab and go" quick service areas to alleviate long lines.

"Students benefit from adequate time and space to eat in a calm, comfortable setting," said PHS Interim Principal Brian Boothe. "When students have positive dining experiences, they return to class better focused and ready to learn."

Construction Project Manager Alex Slocum said the goal is to improve operational flow and enhance the overall student experience.

"I want to extend my deepest gratitude to the community for supporting our students and for helping us build spaces that truly serve them," Peterson said.

Learn more about ongoing projects at sowashco.org/construction.

SoWashCo Schools 2026 Community Survey

Growth, Trust and the Path Ahead

South Washington County Schools (SoWashCo Schools) recently completed a comprehensive community survey this January, conducted by the Morris Leatherman Group.

The Community Survey is administered every three years to gather data and perceptions used to support the Strategic Plan. The survey of the results also gives the SoWashCo Schools administration information to use to plan for the future.

The survey revealed that SoWashCo Schools experienced a significant surge in community approval, contrary to regional trends. The respondents reported high levels of trust, even as the community faces the complexities of housing growth and a sensitive tax environment.

Residents acknowledge ongoing enrollment growth and prioritize facility equity, though they remain divided on whether current spaces can accommodate future students. The survey reporting mirrors a statewide shift in seeing technology as less "essential" than in previous years. The data gathered from the community survey will be used to support our Strategic Plan and to plan for the future.

Learn more about the Community Survey at sowashco.org/strategic-plan.

SoWashCo
SCHOOLS

CONNECT

is residents'
#1 source
of information
about South Washington
County Schools.

Source: Residents Survey January 2026,
Morris Leatherman Company

SoWashCo Voices

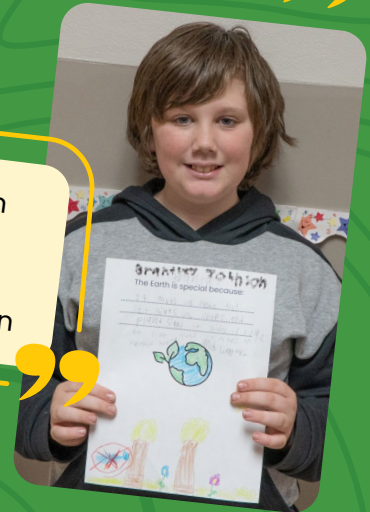
Each Earth Day, schools around the world participate in environmental and civic education programs to prepare their students to be engaged stewards of the environment. SoWashCo Schools teachers and students celebrate this time by organizing outdoor clean-ups, exploring nature and learning about the ways they can have an impact. We asked 5th-graders at Newport Elementary School to share some of their thoughts on our shared home planet.



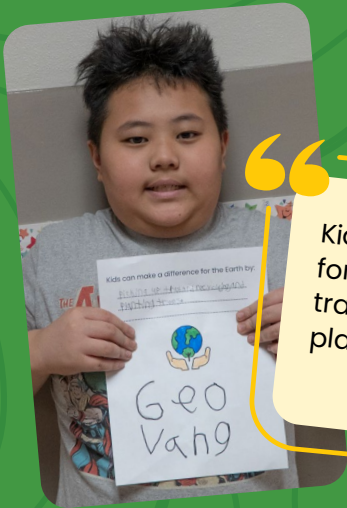
The Earth is special because without it, we wouldn't have a home. There is life on Earth.
- Reign Agaba



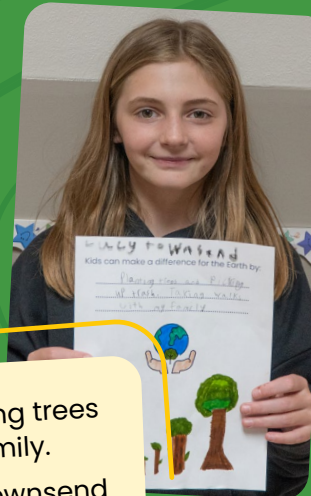
The Earth is special because I like playing outside with my friends and family. It also provides water and food to keep us alive.
- Maggie Geraghty



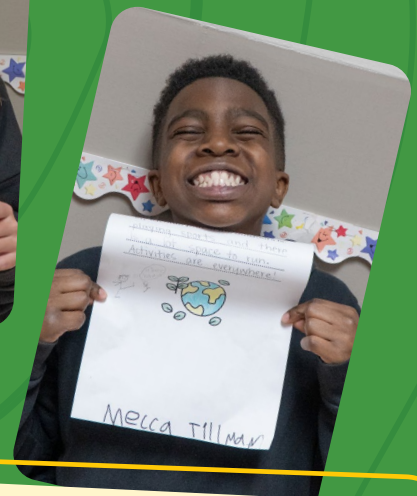
The Earth is special because it gives us oxygen and it gives us crops and plants. It gives us a place to live and we need to keep it healthy.
- Brantley Johnson



Kids can make a difference for the Earth by picking up trash and recycling and planting trees.
- Geo Vang



Kids can make a difference for the Earth by planting trees and picking up trash and taking walks with my family.
- Lucy Townsend



My favorite part of the outdoors is playing sports when there is a lot of space to run. Activities are everywhere!
- Mecca Tillman



Group photo of the class.

Celebrating SoWashCo's First Black History Student Social

This past Presidents' Day, SoWashCo Schools hosted its first Black History Month Student Social at East Ridge High School.

Cultural Liaison Naitoh Kai and the district DEI team partnered with Sheletta Brundidge's foundation to organize the half-day learning event. The day was designed for students who identify as Black or African American and their allies to foster cultural connection and leadership development.

"My goal was for them to walk away with a stronger sense of connection to their community and inspiration to lead," Kai said.

The event sponsor, Sheletta Brundidge, emphasized the importance of representation. "They need to see real people in careers and know there is a whole world out there for them," Brundidge said.

Students chose from breakout sessions focused on creativity, wellness and career exploration. Activities included afrobeats dance, songwriting, creative writing and sessions on teen mental health.

Assistant Superintendent
Dr. Tyrone Brookins
speaking to students. ►



▲ Students playing video games on the gaming truck.



Students practicing afrobeats dance. ►

"I loved the song creation," said freshman Goodness Aderemi Ata. "We wrote and performed a song together as a group. It was beautiful to see."

Sophomore Le'Nae Clark said a session on confidence provided tools for building identity in tough situations. Other workshops connected students with industry professionals, including gaming and streaming experts who discussed careers in digital media.

"The gaming truck was sweet," said junior Myles Lloyd. "The gaming coach talked about what it's like working in the industry."

Kai said she hoped students left feeling seen, valued and empowered.

"As the first districtwide event like this, the social was another way SoWashCo Schools is showing its commitment to creating inclusive spaces," said DEI Supervisor Ashley Acosta-Meyer.

A New Chapter for Special Education Transition Programs

The Next Step and Pathways special education transition programs are merging and moving to a new facility this fall. To celebrate the new chapter, the program has been renamed the **SoWashCo Headwaters Life Skills Program**.

The Headwaters facility will include a culinary lab, makerspace, horticulture lab and work-based learning areas. The building features specialized sensory spaces, sensory supports in classrooms and a large multipurpose room for assemblies. Students will also have access to outdoor learning spaces and gardens.

Construction progress continues on the new home of the SoWashCo Headwaters Life Skills Program.



SoWashCo Headwaters Life Skills Program
staff visiting their new building. ►



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Memorial Day Honoring Our Service Members

As Memorial Day approaches, we pause to honor the U.S. service members who gave their lives in the line of duty. We remain profoundly grateful for their sacrifice and the freedoms they secured for us all. To the veterans, active-duty members, and military families within our community and across the nation—we recognize your immense strength and thank you for your continued dedication to service.

SoWashCo SCHOOLS HIRING EVENT

WALK INS WELCOME



Thursday, July 23, 2026



9:30 a.m.-6 p.m.



District Service Center

7362 E. Pt. Douglas Rd. S.
Cottage Grove, MN 55016

ON THE SPOT INTERVIEWS

sowashco.org/careers



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