June 2026

LCSC Communicator

Regional News, Views, and Information

LAKES COUNTRY Service Cooperative

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Beyond the Grade

How a High School Burger Competition is Serving Up Real-World Success

This year marks the third annual Family and Consumer Science (FACS) Burger Competition at Morris Area High School, featuring students from the 2026 Global Foods class.

The initiative began when FACS teacher Nissa Rose learned about a project in the Alexandria school district where students partnered with a local restaurant to market a burger. Intrigued by the concept, Rose bounced ideas around with a colleague in the business department to launch their own competition. She then approached CJ and Stacey Fromm, owners of a local restaurant called The Fire Side.

The Fire Side already ran a successful "Burger of the Month" program featuring fun themes—such as an Elvis Presley burger with peanut butter and bananas or a "Three Pigs in a Blanket" burger—with proceeds benefiting local community programs. The Fromms originally started the initiative to help pay off student lunch fees before the state legislation began covering school lunch costs. "CJ and Stacey Fromm are just fun people, super supportive of education, and they have kids enrolled in the school," Rose said.

Source: Nissa Rose, Morris Area High School FACS Teacher; www.themorrisfireside.com, morris.k12.mn.us

Author: Mary Phillipe, LCSC Communications Coordinator

“I enjoy watching the students get excited and work at something," Rose said. "You're working toward collaboration, brainstorming, and creativity. The students are way more creative than I am.”



Nissa Rose
FACS Teacher
Morris Area High School

During the initial planning phase of the first year, the Fromms met with the class to share the history of their restaurant, explain how they plan their monthly themes, and outline their charitable goals. From there, the students took the reins. “They kind of let us go for it," Rose recalled. "So much of it is stumbling as you go. You have an idea of what you want to do, but you don’t quite know how you are totally going to get there.”

The competition structure challenges the class to develop six distinct burgers.

These six are eventually narrowed down to three finalists that are placed on The Fireside’s menu for the month of April. Whichever burger sells the most wins a permanent spot on the menu for a full year. The Fromms also donate $2 from every competition burger sold to the Morris Area School “Angel Fund,” which supports students in need. Rose was thrilled to share that nearly 850 burgers from the top three were sold in April.

Throughout the three weeks of the students' development of their burgers, the groups work in the FACS classroom's six kitchens.

Students design their recipes, learn how flavor profiles and textures interact, and practice balancing acid with salt and sweetness. They compile grocery lists and test their creations multiple times, adjusting the recipes after each taste test.

Funding the project can be tough, as groceries are expensive and Rose operates on a tight annual budget. However, she noted that the Fromms have been incredibly generous in providing supplies along the way.

Cooking logistics have also evolved: in the first year, Rose's husband and CJ Fromm grilled the patties outside the school, while in the second year they prepared the burgers at Fireside and brought them back to the classroom to warm them up.

To determine the top three burgers that will be served for a month at The Fire Side, the Fromms visit the school to judge. To prevent the challenge from becoming a popularity contest, the tasting is completely blind. Students do not present to the Fromms or reveal which group made which burger. Instead, they hand-make descriptive posters detailing the ingredients and assembly. Because of this, the posters and burgers must do all the talking.

Rose also pushes students to think like actual restaurateurs. It is not just about what tastes best; the burger must be practical. It cannot be too time-consuming to assemble during a fast-paced lunch rush, and the ingredients must stay fresh. For example, while fresh avocado sounds delicious, students must figure out how to keep it from turning brown and unappealing to customers.

Marketing is another major component of the project. Students practice food photography by staging their final products with the Fromms. They then use those photos to launch a multi-channel marketing campaign, creating flyers to hang around town, school TV screen promotions, table tents, and social media content.



CJ and Stacey Fromm, the owners of Fireside, evaluate the burgers while the FACS students watch attentively.

THE TRIO OF BURGERS SELECTED FOR APRIL'S MENU!



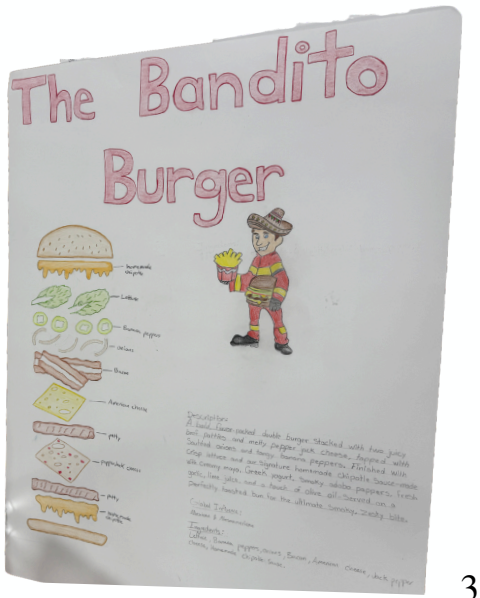
BLUEBERRY HARVEST



SUNSET SIZZLE



BANDITO BURGER



Rose has even discussed the role of modern technology with her students. While they are not allowed to use AI to write their descriptions or design their posters, they are encouraged to use it as a research tool to brainstorm recipe improvements or marketing strategies.

The real-world project is clearly paying off. The first year's winner, the "Teriyaki Twist," was such a massive seller that it remains on The Fire Side menu today. This year, top honors went to a burger dubbed "The Bandito."

The excitement is also spreading beyond the classroom. Rose shared that community notoriety is growing, with locals stopping her at the grocery store to ask when the next burger challenge will be held.

Rose's path to the classroom is as unique as the project itself. She holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and a Master of Business Administration. After spending many years as a stay-at-home mom—moving across several states and overseas for her husband's career—the family decided to settle down in Morris, where her husband grew up. Rose initially started at Morris Area Schools as a paraprofessional before stepping into the FACS role.

To secure her Tier 3 teaching licensure, Rose worked closely with Troy Haugen, LCSC's Director of Career and College Readiness. "He helped me navigate the process, explaining what I had to do at each step so I could understand how to reach my ultimate goal - a Tier 3 licensure," shared Rose.



For Rose, the ultimate reward is seeing her students thrive beyond traditional testing constraints. "Part of what I like about projects like this is that they are not done for a grade. It's an experience," she said. Judging by the success of the students' creations, "Teriyaki Twist" and "The Bandito," the Morris community will be savoring this real-world experience for years to come.

Do you want to learn more about the Burger Challenge and the Global Foods Class at Morris Area High School? You can email FACS Teacher Nissa Rose at nrose@morris.k12.mn.us.

LAKES COUNTRY Service Cooperative

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- Thursday, July 30: Revenue Sources
- Tuesday, August 4: Revenue Continued, UFARS, Budgets, Audits, Miscellaneous
- September TBD: Levy Sheets

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Location: Lakes Country Service Cooperative, 1001 E. Mount Faith, Fergus Falls, MN 56537

Cost: All Four Sessions: $400
Per Session: $125



FROM THE

Executive Director

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



Jeremy Kovash
Executive Director

Strength Through Shared Learning

One of the things I have learned throughout my career is the value of visiting other schools and organizations.

There is something powerful about stepping into someone else's space and seeing their culture in action. You can read strategic plans, review websites, and study data, but there is no substitute for being present—listening to conversations, observing relationships, and experiencing firsthand how people work together to serve students and communities.

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit both Battle Lake Public Schools and Brandon-Evansville Public Schools. I also spent time with the team at ESU #3 in La Vista, Nebraska. In each visit, I came away with new ideas, fresh perspectives, and a deeper appreciation for the incredible work being done by educators and leaders.

Most importantly, I was reminded that great organizations are built by great people who care deeply about their mission and one another.

At Lakes Country Service Cooperative, our mission is to advocate for strong communities through service and leadership. One of the best ways we can do that is by learning from one another. When we take time to visit neighboring districts, ask questions, listen carefully, and observe with curiosity, we expand our own thinking and strengthen our ability to serve.

I would encourage each of us to reach out to our neighbors and make a visit. Look for opportunities to collaborate, share ideas, and build relationships. Some of the best solutions to our challenges may already exist within our region, waiting to be discovered through a simple conversation.

Our value of collaboration reminds us that Together We Achieve. We achieve more when we learn from one another, support one another, and work together on behalf of the students, staff, and communities we serve.

This summer, I look forward to visiting the new school leaders across our region. More importantly, I look forward to listening and learning. Every visit is an opportunity to better understand the unique strengths, challenges, and aspirations of the schools we serve.

Thank you for being partners in this important work. I am grateful for the opportunity to learn alongside you as we continue building vibrant communities throughout Lakes Country.

Together We Achieve.



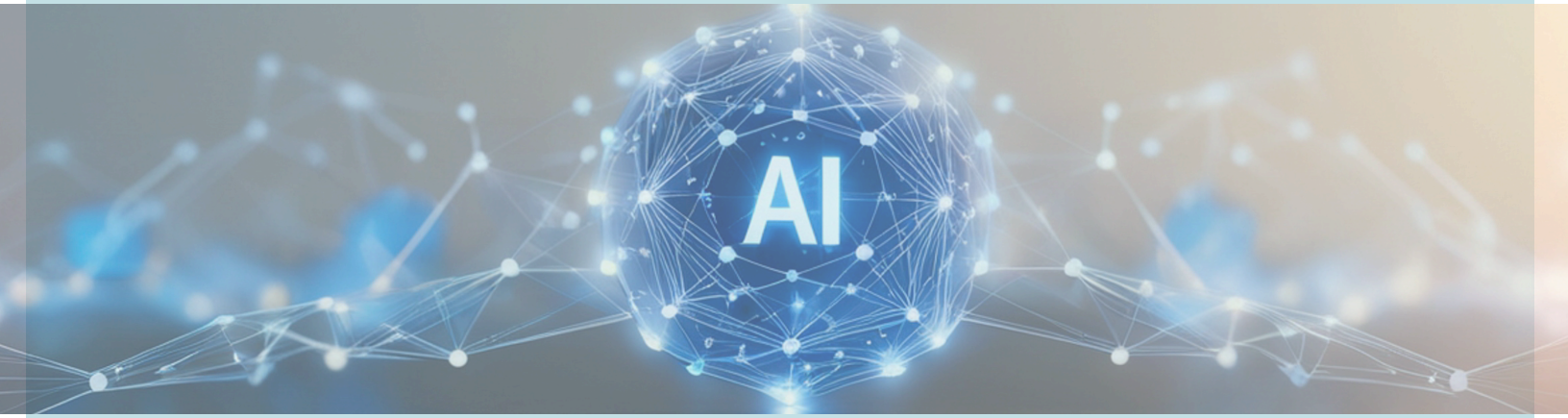
Classroom

TO COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

JANE EASTES
Deputy
Executive Director

Youth in Civic Life:

Building a Pipeline of Community Leaders



If you are feeling at all overwhelmed, apprehensive, confused, excited, welcoming, jazzed, or anywhere in between about AI in Education, you are not alone. In fact, most of us are experiencing all the above emotions at once. AI will be another challenge to education systems. No one can predict the nature of the change, who will be most affected and how it will change the teaching profession.

Fortunately, there is a coalition of organizations and individuals in Minnesota, the **Minnesota Generative AI Alliance for Education (MNGAIA / AI4MN),** who are taking the time to thoughtfully work on a productive dialog on how to usher in the AI era.

Over 200 educators, community, and business members from around the state met in St. Cloud this month for the MNGAIA Conference. Built around human-centered design principles, it was one of the better conferences I have attended. The keynotes and panels shared their experience, raised thoughtful questions, and gently guided us toward how to think about AI in education without losing sight of our core principles. There was plenty of much needed guidance on when and how to use AI and methods to introduce AI into classrooms. At all times, educators remain central to the process. It was comforting to not hear the same simplistic and meaningless memes, like "AI will replace teachers," or "every student will have to be fluent in AI to get a job in the future."

The conference themes were positive, realistic, and learner centered. In the hands of skilled educators, AI should either unlock barriers or accelerate learning. It has the potential to help us fulfill the promise of individualized learning and student agency in learning. Teaching to the future means teaching how to learn, think critically, know how to adapt to change, and what it means to be human in the workplace, the community, and in society. I am still feeling all the emotions about AI to some degree, but after this conference, with a reminder of **core beliefs** and lots of **resources** in hand, I can add the feeling "hopeful" to that list.

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Omada for Prevention, Managing Diabetes, & Weight Health

Support yourhealth journey with apersonalized program and simpletools to help you build healthier habits—at no cost to you. Whether your goal is weight loss, diabetes management, or overall wellness, Omada meets you where you are..

Omada for Joint and Muscle Health

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Ovia for Cycle, Fertility, Pregnancy, Postpartum, & Menopause Tracker

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Make living healthier easy andrewarding.Build healthyhabits,access personalized support and benefits, and earn rewards—all in one place.

COLLABORATION AND CULTURE

How Student Teamwork Brought Ribbon Skirts to Life at Detroit Lakes Area Learning Center

Source: Brandon Schlenner, Principal, ALC Detroit Lakes Public Schools; AudreyAnne Dahl, American Indian Education (AIE) Program Assistant; www.dlschools.net
Author: Mary Phillipe, LCSC Communications Coordinator

At the Detroit Lakes Public Schools Area Learning Center (ALC), educators are not just teaching academics; they are teaching the whole student. This year, 52 students were enrolled at the ALC, where the curriculum includes learning how to cope with daily life outside of the classroom. To achieve this, the school frequently brings in community partners, such as the military, local banks, and various community organizations.

Brandon Schlenner, Principal at the ALC, shared that the school initiated a 25-minute afternoon period for students called "Skills." This is a non-academic block where staff members introduce engaging, hands-on activities. For instance, because one of the ALC teachers is a professional fishing guide, he taught the students how to fish for walleyes. Puzzles, cards, physical education activities, and cooking have all been a part of the rotation. When AudreyAnne Dahl, the American Indian Education (AIE) Program Assistant, heard about these “Skills” activities, she saw a perfect opportunity to share Indigenous culture with the students. The ALC students began with beading instructions and were quickly introduced to the art of making ribbon skirts.

Ribbon skirts are beautiful, handmade garments traditionally worn by Indigenous communities. Made of fabric and multiple layers of colorful ribbons, they symbolize Indigenous pride, personal expression, and connection to the Earth. While they are most commonly worn at ceremonial powwows, they can also be worn daily. The ribbons hold deep personal significance, often representing an individual’s name, Clan colors, or specific Tribal traditions. For example, using yellow for the East, red for the South, or black and blue for the West.

While a typical Skills project lasts for just one week, a group of ALC students became so captivated by the ribbon skirts that the timeline was extended. Because 25-minute increments were insufficient to complete the complex garments, the project spanned three weeks.

During this time, the students learned how to master sewing machines, effortlessly integrating practical math and geometry into their work. Schlenner noted that several students finished their projects ahead of schedule and immediately stepped in to mentor their peers. “It was cool to see the teamwork built from that,” said Schlenner.

“We were so excited on so many levels,” Dahl reflected. To acquire the authentic supplies needed for the project, Dahl sourced materials from a previous class at Detroit Lakes Middle School led by RaeAnna Connor of White Earth Nation and White Earth Tribal and Community College (WETCC). They also purchased fabric options from Shelley Mae Buffalo at Minnesota Indian Education Association (MIEA), purposely supporting Indigenous makers and merchants.

Dahl admitted that it was an awkward and formidable undertaking to construct full garments in brief, 25-minute daily increments. “I didn't tell the students that until they were nearly done,” said Dahl.

The design, measurements, and assembly were performed entirely by the students, with Dahl providing guidance and troubleshooting when a sewing machine misbehaved or a bobbin needed to be changed.

> **I was so impressed by Michelle, Brooklyn, and Oakley's skirts; they all required incredible patience and attention to detail.**
>
> – AudreyAnne Dahl, American Indian Education (AIE) Program Assistant









Of all the students who began making a skirt, only one did not complete it. Dahl finished the final skirt herself, which will be proudly featured in the school's annual powwow.

Oakley Davis, an ALC student who just finished her sophomore year, loved the hands-on experience. As someone who already enjoys crafts, she was thrilled to learn how to use a sewing machine and ultimately completed a beautiful blue skirt for a friend. Through the process, Davis and her classmates also received printed histories from Dahl, allowing them to truly connect with the heritage behind their creations.

Learn More

The beautiful ribbon skirts created by these talented students do more than just showcase their newfound tailoring skills—they weave a story of cultural appreciation. Projects like these rely heavily on the support of community partners and local resources to keep thriving. To learn more about the Detroit Lakes ALC or the American Indian Education Program, please contact the Detroit Lakes Public Schools district office or visit their official website. www.dlschools.net



Building Strong Readers

How Collaboration and the Science of Reading Are Transforming Literacy Instruction in Underwood



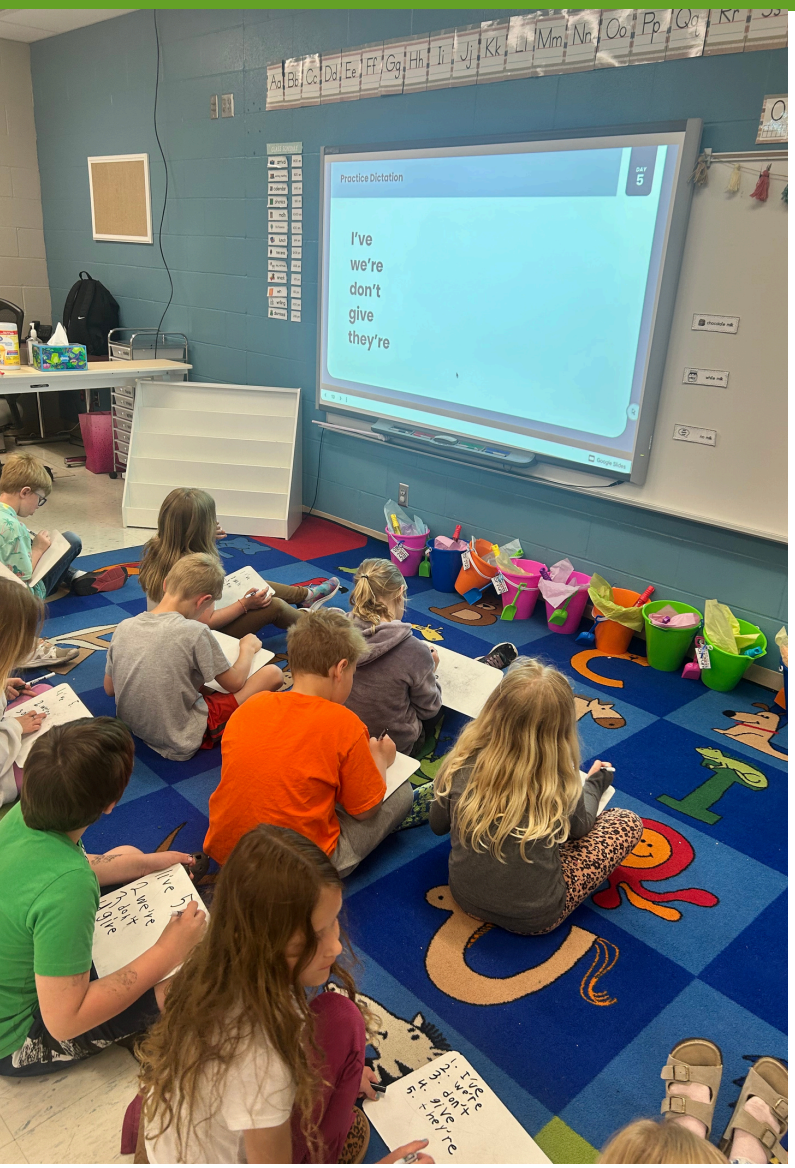
by: **Holly Inniger**
COMPASS Regional Literacy Network Coach, LCSC

Across the region, schools are experiencing a powerful shift in literacy instruction rooted in collaboration, consistency, and evidence-based practices. With the implementation of the READ Act, schools are having to navigate many changes in their systems. Professional development of educators has been a huge component. Educators describe moving away from fragmented approaches of reading instruction toward a shared understanding grounded in the Science of Reading and structured literacy practices. Prior to LETRS training, many teachers reported using a variety of disconnected strategies, programs, and resources. Today, districts are seeing stronger alignment in literacy instruction, intervention systems, assessment practices, and instructional language across classrooms and grade levels.



One of the most significant changes has been the increased use of data to guide instruction and support students. Carly Jensen, District Literacy Lead for Underwood Public Schools, helps drive this work for their school.

"The elementary teachers have strengthened the literacy systems through a greater focus on evidence-based instruction, explicit instructional practices, and data-driven decision making. There is now stronger alignment across grade levels in literacy instruction, intervention processes, and assessment practices. The district has also adjusted student supports by improving the use of progress monitoring and diagnostic data to better meet individual student needs. Intervention structures have become more intentional, flexible, and responsive, allowing schools to create targeted, needs-based groupings, and provide precise instruction to struggling readers."



Kelly Foertsch, a 4th-grade veteran teacher, has seen many things during her tenure in education. “As a veteran educator, I have navigated many instructional cycles, but the shift toward the Science of Reading stands apart. It moves beyond 'trends' by providing a rigorous, evidence-based framework for understanding exactly why a student struggles. While compiling and interpreting data is demanding, it is the most effective way to advocate for our students. By committing to this scientific approach, we can design precise interventions that ensure every child becomes a successful reader.”

Teachers shared that literacy support is no longer isolated to a single classroom or interventionist; instead, there is a collective responsibility for student growth. “Literacy is not just something that lives in one classroom or grade level. We've gotten more intentional about using data to find kids who need support, and our intervention structures are more consistent than they've ever been. We are developing a real shared sense of how to work together to support students’ growth,” comments Chad Gilbertson, Underwood Principal.



The successes educators celebrate most are often centered on students themselves. Teachers described the joy of watching students recognize their own growth through improving scores, increased confidence, and literacy gains that once seemed out of reach. Breck Grove, an interventionist for the Underwood School District and 7th Grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, comments, “It is so fun to see the success and growth of some of our struggling readers. The steady growth is a great indication of trusting the process!” Staff also point to quieter but equally meaningful victories: stronger collaboration among colleagues, richer professional conversations, and growing confidence in instructional decision-making.



A major contributor to this growth has been the collective professional learning experience through LETRS training. Educators repeatedly emphasize the impact of completing the two-year training together, which created a shared language, deeper understanding of how students learn to read, and greater consistency across buildings.

These professional learning conversations have been rich and increased collaboration among staff, strengthened confidence in instructional decision-making, and improved the district's ability to support students with targeted interventions. As a result, the district is seeing stronger student growth in foundational literacy skills. "The LCSC Regional COMPASS Team has been a huge asset to our continued growth and success over the past two years. They have been more than willing to help us dig deeper, find us resources, steer us in the right direction, and just have conversations.

The training that they provided was extremely meaningful and applicable to our everyday classrooms. They also provide resources on how to continue to apply the learning done at training into our classroom. We are very thankful to have them on our team and all the support they provide," Jensen adds.
Throughout this journey of continuous improvement work with literacy, the LCSC Regional COMPASS Team has played a critical role in supporting schools and districts. Educators described the coaching, feedback, professional learning, and ongoing partnership as transformational.

Kala Richards , 4-6 Special Education Teacher, just finished up her LETRS training this spring. "The coaching and feedback from the LCSC Regional COMPASS team has been phenomenal! We would not be at the place we are today without their support." Beyond delivering LETRS training, the LCSC Regional COMPASS Team has helped Underwood apply learning directly to their classrooms by working alongside staff, discussing real challenges, analyzing data, and problem-solving difficult student cases.

Learn more about Lakes Country COMPASS by visiting our website.



"One of the most meaningful successes has been the district's commitment to training staff in the Science of Reading and the positive impact this has had on instruction. Teachers and support staff have strengthened their understanding of evidence-based literacy practices, leading to more systematic, explicit, and consistent instruction across grade levels," mentions Jensen.

Kelly Foertsch couldn't agree more. "We owe much of our progress to the hands-on support of the COMPASS Team. While the LETRS training provided the foundation, it was having their instructors here with us—discussing our specific challenges and working through them in person—that truly solidified our knowledge. That personal connection and immediate feedback transformed the training from a requirement into a successful instructional shift."

Perhaps the strongest message educators want others to hear is that meaningful improvement takes time, consistency, and collective commitment. Schools encouraged others to "start before you're ready," trust the process, celebrate small wins, and remain honest about areas needing growth. Principal Gilbertson would remind districts of their why. "Keeping students at the center of this has really made a difference for us and how we are managing all of these changes."

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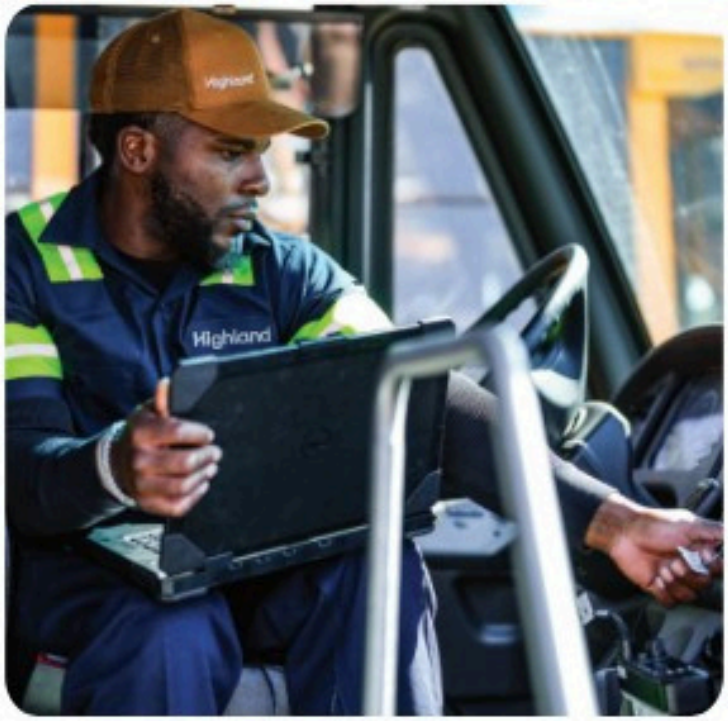
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Inside Lakes Country Academy

A Day in the Life of a Site Administrator

Source: Cheryl Hirst, Fergus Falls Lakes Country Academy Site Administrator; Josh Wahlin, Alexandria Lakes Country Academy Site Administrator
Author: Mary Phillipe, LCSC Communications Coordinator



Cheryl Hirst
Fergus Falls Lakes Country Academy Site Administrator



Josh Wahlin
Alexandria Lakes Country Academy Site Administrator

"What does your typical day look like?"

I asked the Lakes Country Academy (LCA) site administrators that question. It was a hard one to answer because their days never look the same. To better understand their operations, I took some time to learn about the daily goals, schedules, and routines at each academy. Cheryl Hirst serves as the Fergus Falls site administrator, while Josh Wahlin leads the Alexandria LCA site.

The Programs

Lakes Country Academy provides two specialized special education programs for students facing behavioral difficulties, both utilizing structured environments and low student-to-staff ratios:

- **Academy Program:** Designed for students facing significant behavioral challenges, this program offers academic and social-emotional learning. Referrals come from the resident school district or special education cooperative.
- **SUN Program:** Tailored for students with severe disabilities, including autism spectrum disorder and other diagnoses, focusing heavily on behaviors and communication skills. Referrals are similarly made by the resident school district or cooperative.

Cheryl Hirst

In Fergus Falls, Cheryl Hirst oversees the daily operations of LCA. Her day begins before she even sets foot in the building, as she fields early-morning messages about staff or student absences. Hirst maintains open lines of communication with families, who feel comfortable texting her updates directly.

Upon arrival at the site, the morning routine includes intake meetings, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), behavior meetings, and other meetings requiring staff collaboration. Cheryl leads the site each day through a daily hallway meeting or email, which serves as her daily communication. The daily communication updates the staff on what's happening that day so everyone can be on the same page. She also sends out a weekly memo on Monday mornings that plans the week at a glance.

Students arrive at 9:30 AM. Hirst and a colleague greet them outside, following a strategic routine that ensures Hirst connects with almost every student. All students start their day with breakfast in the gymnasium before transitioning to their classrooms at 9:45 AM.

This year, the Academy program utilizes three classrooms on a rotational schedule. Meanwhile, Pre-Academy students follow a dedicated schedule within their own classroom, and the SUN program features highly individualized programming for each student.

To streamline these movements, Hirst introduced a new method this year: manually "calling" classroom transitions. Because LCA does not use a traditional bell system, Hirst utilizes their personal communication system to announce transitions. This new structure ensures classrooms are entirely ready before moving. During every transition, Hirst and the support staff remain in the hallway to supervise, greet students, and monitor behavior, which has significantly smoothed out the daily transitions.

While students are settled in class, Hirst is in her office writing evaluations, testing students, and managing behavioral escalations. She also finalizes grades and report cards, communicates with families and resident districts, and schedules various intake, IEP, and team meetings. LCA shares a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA), Kendra Roob, with the Alexandria site. Roob spends three days a week at the Fergus Falls site; however, because Hirst is also part of the crisis team, she frequently steps in to assist staff and students directly if the need arises. The additional support team staff shared between the Fergus Falls and Alexandria LCA sites also includes School Psychologist Heidi Bucher and Social Worker Kady Gergel.

“I have many years of experience working with students myself,” Hirst shared. “It is a strength of mine, so you will not find me hiding out in my office.”











Staff and student safety is Hirst's top priority. She carefully coordinates building coverage alongside the site's three Registered Behavior Technicians (RBTs). When a student elopes from the property, the team must act fast, and Hirst plays a key role in executing their safety protocols. Student dismissal occurs at 2:30 PM. Hirst heads outside once more to assist students as their transportation arrives. After the students depart, the staff reunites to debrief, collaborate, discuss Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), track student progress, and reset for the next day.

Now in her fourth year as the Fergus Falls site administrator, Hirst is currently wrapping up the school year by completing paraprofessional evaluations and planning Extended School Year (ESY) services for the 10 to 12 students who qualify for summer programming.

She is focused on hiring to fill teaching and paraprofessional vacancies. If given a "magic wand," Hirst would wish for a quicker hiring process, as the limited pool of applicants occasionally enables competing organizations to secure candidates before LCA can finalize their offers.

What keeps Hirst motivated each day is the students and her dedicated staff. LCA accepts the students that traditional school districts are unequipped to serve—specifically those with highly unique needs or intense behavioral challenges.

The impact of their work is tangible. "We have had a record year of kids making the Gold Level this year, which is the highest level toward transitioning a student back to their home district," Hirst said.

"We accept many students who are referred to LCA, and I witness firsthand the success many of them begin to achieve due to our small setting and higher staff-to-student ratio," said Hirst.

Hirst recalls one standout success story: a student who arrived in November 2024 with extreme behaviors that posed safety concerns. After a little over a year of attending LCA, she successfully transitioned back to her home district. "I teared up thinking about where she was when she first came to LCA—very tough and cold. In the end, she was the one who wanted to give you a hug," Hirst shared. "I'll never forget her initial tour of the school and where she started. She continues to be successful at her school since transitioning."

When transitioning a student, the LCA team works closely with the home district to share proven strategies so the student maintains the same level of support. Hirst wants fellow Lakes Country Service Cooperation (LCSC) staff members to know just how dedicated her team is to giving these kids a second chance. She has sat across the table from emotional parents who are deeply grateful that their child finally found a "place" to belong.

Initially, Hirst moved to Fergus Falls when her spouse relocated for a job. Having previously worked as a director of special education, she initially looked for positions in Moorhead and surrounding similar-sized communities but quickly realized she didn't want a one-hour commute with a family at home. When the LCA site administrator role opened, she jumped at the chance to return to leadership.

In her spare time, Hirst enjoys keeping up with her four children. She stays busy following her two youngest through their various school activities and sports, cheering on her college son who plays basketball, and enjoying quality time with her oldest son as a young adult. To stay active, Hirst loves walking, riding her bike, traveling, and spending time at the lake. Additionally, thanks to a couple of staff members who started a book club at LCA, she is enjoying reading again as a way to slow down and carve out some time for herself."

Josh Wahlin

Josh Wahlin grew up in Fertile, Minnesota. A former basketball coach and teacher, he eventually decided to transition into administration.

"I felt I had a great impact in the classroom and believed I could do the same for a whole school," Wahlin shared. "It's what I think I have been called to do."
Now in his third school year with the Academy since starting in 2023, Wahlin's daily goal is a paradox: "If there was anything I could improve on, it would be that the LCA never existed. That would mean the students were getting the support they needed in their resident district. My goal every day is to work myself out of a job."

LCA in Alexandria serves SUN (Students with Unique Needs) students as well as those with significant behavioral challenges. Since moving into a larger, newly renovated facility, the site has been better able to meet these complex needs. Under Wahlin's leadership, the program has expanded from serving 8 students to supporting 15, while also increasing staffing.

However, growth brings new goals; Wahlin notes that they still hope to add a gym space to help simulate those environments for the students.







For Wahlin, there is no such thing as a predictable schedule. “There is no typical day; it's wherever the needs take me," he said. "There might be times when a student arrives dysregulated, and I must set things aside and support the team working with them. In another classroom, a student may have experienced something difficult over the weekend and may need a little extra support. I look where the needs are and help as much as possible.”

A typical morning requires juggling referrals, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), transportation, staffing, and lunch logistics. To manage this, the Alexandria staff is equipped with personal communication devices. This allows the team to efficiently communicate and share updates the moment a student begins to show signs of dysregulation.

Wahlin stresses that his team functions as a highly trained, interconnected unit, specializing in de-escalation and prevention strategies.
“We work as a functioning unit; if one person must tackle a large issue alone, it can lead to chaos," Wahlin explained.

He wants fellow Lakes Country Service Cooperation (LCSC) employees to know just how dedicated the LCA staff is. "They could work in any number of careers in the area, but they chose to stay and work with their students at LCA because they care. They deal with many tough situations, but they do not give up."

Right now, Wahlin’s top priorities include organizing proper staffing for the Extended School Year (ESY) summer program—a vital resource to prevent student regression—and reviewing new district referrals during the team's weekly Monday meetings.

> "I try to organize and coordinate people, so they succeed, but at the end of the day, it is the teachers, registered behavior technicians (RBTs), and paraprofessionals working with the kids who make the difference. Anytime you can appreciate their dedication and service, it is warranted.”
>
> **— Josh Wahlin, Alexandria Lakes Country Academy Site Administrator**

However, the ultimate goal remains the successful transition of students back to their resident school districts.
“A student transitioning back to their residential district is the biggest win,” shared Wahlin. Often, students arrive at LCA after numerous other interventions have failed. The core mission of LCA is to implement successful programming, build students' skills, and confidently recommend their return to their home district.

The LCA team serves as ongoing consultants throughout this process, equipping the resident district with data and ensuring that proper support is in place. For example, after a student transitioned back to their home district at the beginning of the year, Wahlin continued to visit the school on-site every 10 days to provide follow-up support. “It is super rewarding," Wahlin said.



"Most of the time when they come to us, they are really struggling in their current environment. When they come to LCA, we work on programming that gives them the skills they need. We go back to the school and see how they interact differently from the first time I observed them.”

Wahlin credits much of the school's success to the growth and development of its staff, noting how new employees have embraced feedback to sharpen their competencies.

He is also incredibly grateful for the broader LCSC network supporting his site. Wahlin, alongside other LCSC Special Education colleagues, recently returned from the Minnesota Administrators for Special Education (MASE) Conference. Mirroring notes with other Setting Four schools at the conference solidified for Wahlin that Alexandria LCA is in an excellent position, thanks to the invaluable, overarching support they receive from LCSC's Health and Safety, Human Resources, and Information Technology teams.

There are many intrinsic motivators that keep Wahlin focused on his students' success. "These kids deserve it. I think every student deserves an opportunity, and it's my job to make sure that I support the people who are giving them the opportunities to be successful," he said.
When he is not at LCA working to reduce the daily stresses of the job, Josh enjoys golfing, spending time on the lake, and being with his family.

For Cheryl Hirst and Josh Wahlin, leadership means stepping out of the office and onto the front lines, guiding teams that refuse to give up on kids who have run out of other options. Backed by the broader LCSC network, these administrators, teachers, RBTs, and paraprofessionals handle challenging situations daily to ensure every student gets a second chance. The schedules may be unpredictable, but the mission is clear: transforming lives and proving that with the right support, every student is capable of a comeback.

Want to learn more about Lakes Country Academy?

Visit our website at LCSC.org and click on LCA.

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NIKE

Ceramist Blayze Buseth Inspires Students During Ulen-Hitterdal Artist Residency

By Therese Vogel
Communications and Grant Writer
Ulen-Hitterdal Public Schools

Students at Ulen-Hitterdal School recently had the opportunity to learn from professional ceramist and illustrator Blayze Buseth during a weeklong artist residency program led in partnership with K-12 art teacher Sarah Mendis.

Buseth, who works in pottery, sculpture, and illustration, spent the week introducing students to the creative process while helping them create their own ceramic projects using real clay.

"This year, I was selected as the artist for the Ulen-Hitterdal Artist Residency," Buseth shared. "It was a weeklong residency where I had the opportunity to work alongside the K-12 art teacher Sarah Mendis and bring a curriculum designed around my own art practice into the classroom."

Mendis said the residency gave students an engaging opportunity to learn directly from a professional artist. "Having visiting artist, Blayze Buseth, was a fun, engaging, and educational experience for students," Mendis said. "His knowledge and passion for his craft inspired students to create clay artworks for the first time or push their ceramic skills even further."

Throughout the residency, Buseth introduced students to his original cartoon-inspired character named Tom, explaining how the character developed from drawings he created as a child into a professional artistic project.

"I introduced myself as a professional artist working in pottery, sculpture, and illustration — someone who essentially brought to life a cartoon character I once drew as a kid," Buseth said. Buseth explained that Tom became the mascot for his Creation Shop in Fergus Falls and has inspired illustrated books, ceramic sculptures, and artwork over the years.

"We talked about the creation and naming of Tom, Tom's Adventure to China, Tom's Origin Story, and the India Adventure," Buseth explained. "After that, every class had the chance to create their own ceramic Tom using 'real' clay techniques.



“Therefore, my art students were not only able to create their own Tom sculpture out of clay, but also gain experience glazing or underglazing their character,” Mendis said.

The residency reached students across all grade levels and provided older students with additional hands-on experiences in ceramics. More than 120 Tom sculptures were created during the week. “Art students 7-12th also got experience throwing pottery on the wheel and creating illustration ideas for Tom's upcoming adventure through Minnesota,” Mendis said.

Buseth said one of the highlights of the week was seeing the excitement students brought to the project and how quickly the character of Tom became part of everyday conversation around the school.

“By the end of the week, I was walking down the halls of the small-town school getting waved at and hearing things like ‘How’s Tom?’ or ‘All hail the pottery guy,’” Buseth said. “Pretty intense week!”



Mendis said students thoroughly enjoyed the experience. “The students had a blast and loved learning from Blayze and ‘Tom,’” she said

“This activity is funded in part by a grant from the Lake Region Arts Council through a Minnesota State Legislative appropriation”.



The Opening of Youth**works**'

Transitional Housing Community in Moorhead

by: Thomas Hill,
Community Engagement Officer
at Youth**works**

Youth**works**' mission is to help ensure all youth have a safe place where they can belong and be heard. That belief continues to guide the work as services expand with the opening of Youth**works**' newest Transitional Housing Community in Moorhead, Minnesota.

These housing units will provide young adults experiencing homelessness with the stability and support they need to build successful futures.



For 40 years, Youth**works** has worked alongside youth and young adults throughout North Dakota, providing emergency shelter, counseling, support services, and housing assistance. Over the years, staff have seen firsthand how access to stable housing can change the course of a young person's life. The impact of our work can be seen not only through program outcomes, but also through the stories of staff and board members who once participated in transitional housing programs themselves and now help guide the mission.

Moorhead Transitional Housing Community

Located near downtown Moorhead, the Transitional Housing Community was created by repurposing the former Ecumen Evergreens buildings into a welcoming and supportive living environment for young adults, between the ages of 18 and 24, who are experiencing homelessness. The campus includes twenty-four individual housing units and was intentionally chosen to provide residents with access to public transportation, employment opportunities, education, healthcare, and other important community resources.

Stability is about more than having a roof overhead — it is about creating opportunities and helping young people reach personal goals toward independence.

The Transitional Housing Community offers safe housing paired with individualized support services tailored to each resident's goals and needs. Whether a young person is working toward finishing school, finding employment, learning financial responsibility, or securing permanent housing, Youthworks staff will walk alongside them throughout the process.

Support services include case management, employment assistance, educational guidance, life-skills training, and connections to community resources. With staff offices and drop-in center located on-site, support and resources are easily accessible to youth and young adults in need.

This project comes at a critical time for the Fargo-Moorhead community, as youth homelessness continues to be a significant issue.

Nearly **400** youth in the area experience homelessness each year, often facing unsafe living situations, couch surfing, sleeping outdoors, or staying in spaces not meant for habitation. With the addition of the Transitional Housing Community in Moorhead, Youthworks is positioned to serve more young adults experiencing homelessness from across the Fargo-Moorhead metro area and West Central Minnesota.

Community Support for Transitional Housing

Youthworks remains deeply grateful to the local leaders, organizations, donors, and community members who helped make this vision a reality.

Their support reflects a shared commitment to addressing youth homelessness and creating brighter futures for young people in our community. Youthworks continues its campaign to raise the funds to cover the $2 million dollar purchase price.





From left to right: Mayor Shelley Carlson of the City of Moorhead and Thomas Hill, the Community Engagement Officer for Youth**works**, participated in the Ribbon Cutting Ceremony and Open House.

As Youth**works** celebrates 40 years of serving youth, this expansion marks an important step toward the future. Youthworks remains committed to creating safe spaces where youth belong and are heard as they navigate life's challenges. The opening of the Moorhead Transitional Housing Community represents new opportunities for young adults to build stable, successful futures, and we are proud to continue building that future together.

For more information on how you can partner with Youthworks to support the project, please contact Thomas Hill at thill@youthworksnd.org or 701-941-5757.

CPC Cooperative Purchasing Connection

Cooperative Purchasing Connection offers a range of furniture vendors for government offices and nonprofits, providing solutions for various spaces, such as break rooms and libraries.

Key partners include:

- **Innovative Office Solutions:** Ideal for large and small projects with in-person support.
- **National Business Furniture:** A large vendor with a strong online presence for convenient shopping.
- **Demco:** Specializes in library interior design and furnishings.
- **Mackin:** Supplies high-quality materials for public libraries.

Explore all available vendors for contract pricing and services.

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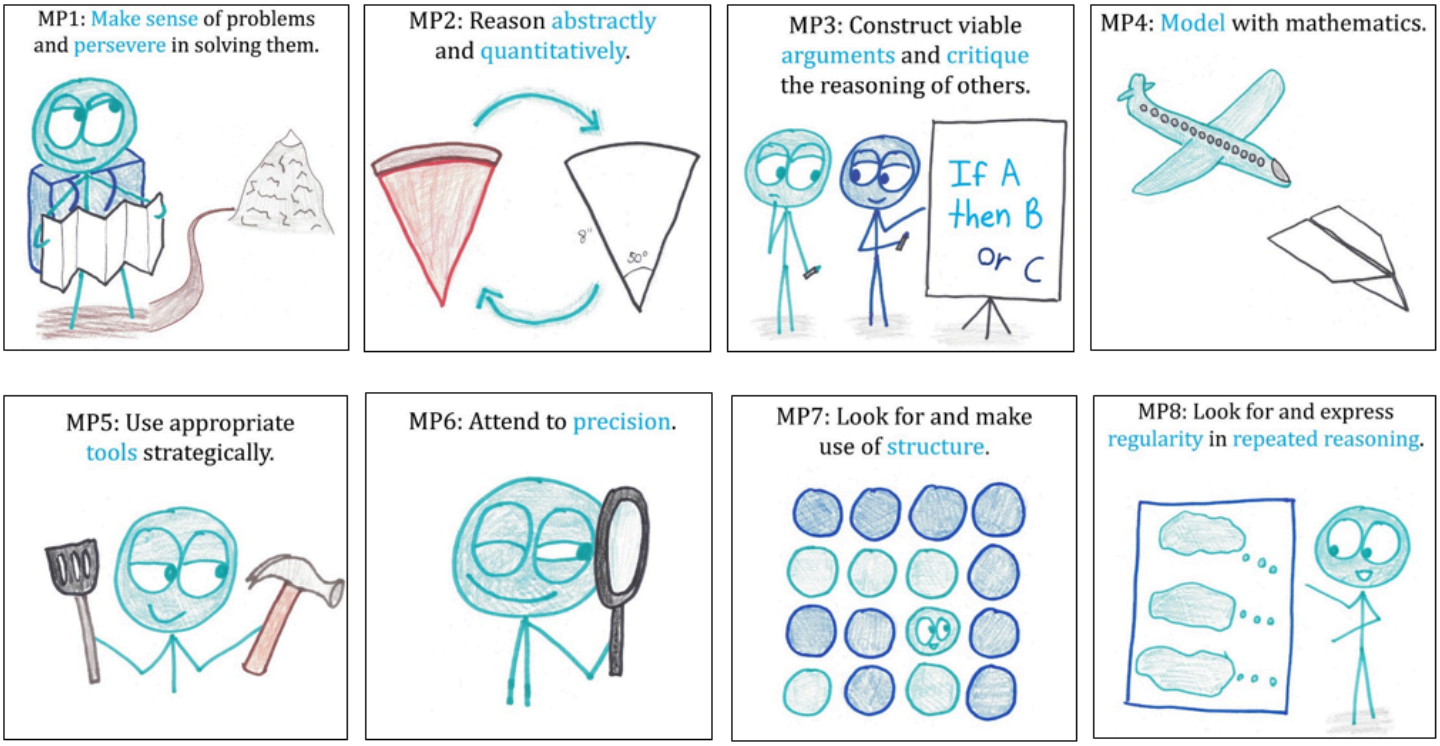


Discover Our Vendors

Preparing Students for the Future

Minnesota's New Mathematics Standards

by: **Craig Bahr**
COMPASS Regional Math Lead, LCSC



Beginning in the 2027–2028 school year, Minnesota schools will implement the 2022 Minnesota Mathematics Standards. These standards reflect an important shift in how students learn mathematics and prepare for future careers and everyday life.

In the past, math often focused on memorizing steps and completing worksheets with similar problems. While procedural skills still matter, today's world requires students to think critically, solve problems, analyze information, and apply math in real-life situations.

The new standards focus not only on what students know, but on how students think. Students are learning to:

- Understand why strategies work
- Recognize there are multiple ways to solve problems
- Explain and defend their thinking
- Connect mathematics to their own lives
- Use patterns, structure, and reasoning to solve problems



The standards are organized around three big ideas:

- **Data Analysis** – asking questions and making sense of information
- **Spatial Reasoning** – understanding shapes, measurement, and visual patterns
- **Patterns and Relationships** – building number sense and algebraic thinking

The standards also emphasize the "Mathematical Practices," which help students:

- Persevere through challenges
- Communicate clearly
- Think deeply and flexibly
- Use tools strategically
- Apply mathematics to the world around them

Today's math instruction is about more than getting the right answer. It is about developing confident learners who can think critically, solve complex problems, and adapt to an ever-changing world.

Find resources related to the new standards **here.**

ELM Expo

for Northern Lights Library Network and Affiliates

Join us for the ELM Expo, a dynamic virtual learning event held via Zoom for library staff in the Northern Lights Library Network region. This interactive online experience is designed to help you explore and confidently use eLibrary Minnesota in your daily work.

Through live demonstrations, guided walkthroughs, and practical examples, you'll see how ELM resources can support learners of all ages—from elementary students to adult researchers. Sessions will highlight key databases, search strategies, and instructional approaches that you can immediately apply in your library, classroom, or reference interactions.

Even in a virtual format, the Expo is designed to be hands-on and engaging, with opportunities to follow along, ask questions, and connect with colleagues from across the state. You'll leave with ready-to-use ideas, increased confidence navigating ELM, and new strategies for helping patrons find reliable information quickly and effectively.

Whether you're new to ELM or looking for a refresher, the ELM Expo offers a focused, practical, and welcoming space to build your skills and discover what's possible with Minnesota's statewide library resources.

Presenters



Beth Staats
Outreach & Instruction Librarian,
Ebooks MN Coordinator



Carla Pfahl
Outreach & Instruction
Librarian, AskMN Coordinator



Ann Kaste
Outreach & Instruction Librarian,
K-12 Outreach Coordinator

DATE
TUESDAY, AUGUST 11, 2026

TIME
9:00 AM - 12:00 PM

LOCATION
VIRTUAL

REGISTRATION
FREE

REGISTER NOW!

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

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