

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 posing in front of the playhouse they created.

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Learning by Building

Each year, students in Park High School's Math and Construction Career and Technical Education course gain hands-on building experience. They develop real-world skills, confidence and teamwork that will serve them long after graduation.

In the class, students take on the challenge of constructing a full-sized playhouse from the ground up. Using plans, measuring tools, power equipment and safety procedures, students work through every stage of the project. They learn construction fundamentals while applying math concepts in practical ways.

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Dear Community Members,

We are excited to begin a new school year in South Washington County Schools. I want to extend my warmest wishes to you and your family and express my gratitude for your support of our public schools. We hope summer has provided you with time to soak up some sun, to enjoy the water and parks, to travel through the construction and most importantly to spend time with friends and family.

Each school year brings a fresh sense of hope, opportunity and a chance to reflect on where we've been and the vision for our work moving forward. One thing I feel confident about is that: **we are stronger together**. That is a lesson that I have taken from my many years of teaching, leading and coaching young athletes. **Stronger Together** will serve as our district theme for the school year.

Our district thrives because of the amazing students we have, the incredible staff who show up each day to make a difference and the deep partnerships between our families and communities. We see "stronger together" every day in our classrooms as our students problem solve, interact with one another and learn together.

As we look ahead, it means being transparent about the challenges we will be facing together. Like many public school districts across the state, we are facing financial challenges where our expenditures are outpacing the revenue we receive. It is important for staff to know that enrollment is the key revenue driver to operations. We invest 78% of our resources in the people who are in our schools and working throughout the district. The work is difficult when it means we have to give some of that up. People and programs that exist in our district are in place because they are valued.

This fall we will enter into Planning for the Next Five Years and map out what the district will look like and what priorities will move us into the future. Our collective purpose must remain unchanged: **keeping students as our focus**.

While the fiscal landscape may present challenges, it also shows why our collective strength matters so much. When we stand together, listen to one another, and keep our students at the center of every conversation, we can navigate difficult times without losing sight of our mission. We will remain committed to fostering safe, welcoming, and supportive spaces where every student feels seen, valued and empowered to succeed. This commitment leads to Educating all students for Success!

Thank you for your continued trust, partnership and support of our students and the schools and programs you serve. As your superintendent, I remain committed to celebrating the great things happening in the district, while being honest and open about the challenges we are faced with.

Looking forward to an incredible school year and celebrating staff on September 2, at East Ridge High School during our All Staff Welcome to a New School Year Event.

Warmly,

Julie Nielsen, Superintendent



Securing Our Future.

Supporting Our Students.

Construction Update and Highlights

Construction crews have been busy working on the first phases of construction projects at 15 schools that will occur through 2027. Here are a few things to know if you are visiting our schools under construction and highlights from some of the projects.

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





East Ridge High School

Things to Know When Visiting East Ridge High School

- The drop-off and pick-up lane has been renovated for site safety
- New activity entrance opening this fall

Construction Highlights

- New science and general classroom addition, career and technical education wing and expansion of the cafeteria and kitchen and renovation of the inclusion center



Park High School

Things to Know When Visiting Park High School

- The new drop-off / pick-up road behind the school (north-side of building)
- New North Entrance Plaza is completed

Construction Highlights

- New cafeteria, kitchen and renovations of the secure entry, admin and counseling offices, special education, inclusion center and school store



Woodbury High School

Things to Know When Visiting Woodbury High School

- The drop-off and pick-up lane was renovated for site safety
- New North Entrance completed

Construction Highlights

- New cafeteria, kitchen and renovation of the inclusion center, locker and training rooms, new science and general classrooms



Cottage Grove Middle School

Construction Highlights

- New secure main entry, administrative and health office



Woodbury Middle School

Construction Highlights

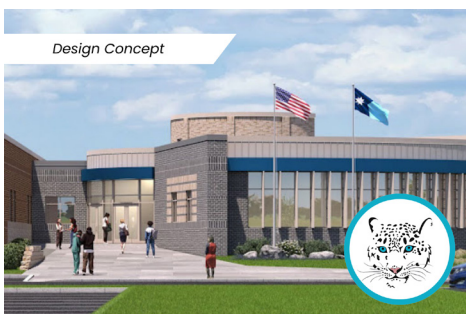
- New secure main entry, administrative and health office
- New band, choir and orchestra Rooms



Oltnan Middle School

Construction Highlights

- New bus entry is completed
- Kitchen/cafeteria expansion completed



Lake Middle School

Construction Highlights

- New secure main entry, administrative and health office



Please note: Full details about all the construction projects are available at: sowashco.org/construction.



Bailey Elementary School

Construction Highlights

- Kindergarten addition is underway on northeast corner



Grey Cloud Elementary School

Construction Highlights

- Gym addition is underway and fully standing near main entrance



Red Rock Elementary School

Construction Highlights

- Site fencing will be onsite for the start of school, addition construction to start in September



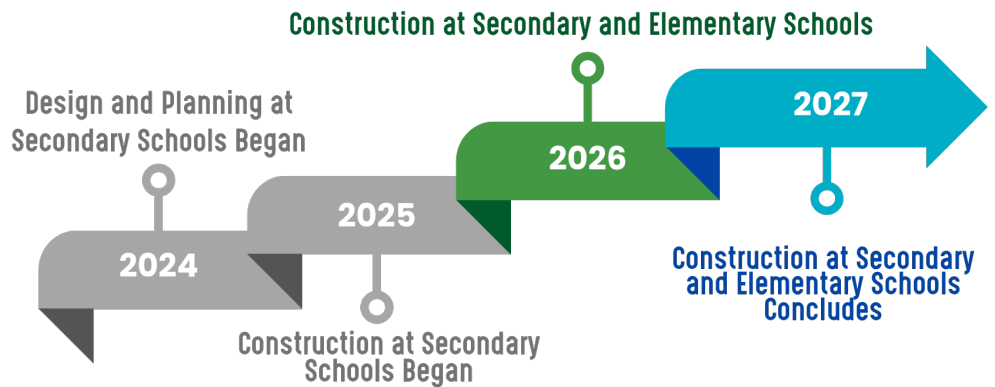
Pine Hill Elementary

Construction Highlights

- Renovation of special education classrooms are completed
- Classroom addition on the north-end is underway

Construction Schedule

Please note: Design and construction schedules are subject to change.



Cottage Grove Middle School Decades Project

This past spring, seventh-grade at Cottage Grove Middle School (CGMS) traveled back in time through an exciting and engaging "Decades Project" that allowed them to explore important moments, trends, music, fashion, inventions and historical events from different time periods.

Students researched, collaborated, and created projects that highlighted both their creativity and learning. Students then proudly presented

their work to fellow students, families and staff. The project allowed the students to showcase their communication skills, creativity and historical understanding in an authentic and engaging way.

Pictured: Various student groups presenting their decades projects.



Important Dates

Event Information		Grades
SEPTEMBER		
3	Assessment Day	K-5
8	First Day of School	6, 9
8	Assessment Day	K-5
9	First Day of School	K-5, 7-8, 10-12
28	No School	K-12
OCTOBER		
14	No School	K-5
14	Pre- ACT and Practice ACT Testing	10, 11
14	Complete Schoolwork at Home Day	9, 12
14	Normal School Day	6-8
15-16	No School - Fall Break (MEA)	K-12
NOVEMBER		
3	No School - Professional Development	K-12
26-27	No School - Employee Holiday	K-12
DECEMBER		
3	End of Trimester 1	K-12
4	No School - Teacher Work day	K-12
23-31	No School - Winter Break	K-12
JANUARY		
1-4	No School - Winter Break	K-12
18	No School - MLK Jr. Day	K-12
FEBRUARY		
12	No School - Professional Development	K-12
15	No School - Presidents Day	K-12
MARCH		
11	End of Trimester 2	K-12
12	No School - Teacher Workday	K-12
15-19	No School - Spring Break	K-12
26	N School - Employee Holiday	K-12
APRIL		
16	No School - Professional Development	K-12
20	ACT and Science MCA Testing	9-12
20	Complete Schoolwork at Home Day (if not participating in testing)	9-12
MAY		
31	No School - Employee Holiday	K-12
JUNE		
9	Last Day of School, End of Trimester 3	K-12

- First or Last Day of School
- No School for Students (K-12)
- Important Date

Family Calendar
2026-2027 School Year



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Last Updated: Oct. 29, 2025
Calendar is subject to change



Back To School



Physical and Immunization Requirements

For the Start of School SoWashCo Schools requires all students to be current with required immunizations and physicals or have a valid exemption form on file with the district. Students not compliant with state law will be excluded from school in October. To view requirements, find the exempt form, or for help finding free or low-cost clinics, visit sowashco.org/health.

Elementary Assessment Days Before the school year begins, families can sign their K-5 student(s) up for an individual 30-minute session with their teacher at their school. This gives each student and their teacher time to connect and get familiar with the student's skill level, the classroom and the school. Assessment days are scheduled for Thursday, September 3, or Tuesday, September 8. Schools will provide more information via email to families.



Cell Phone and Electronic Device Guidelines To help students stay present and engaged, we ask families and students to follow these cell phone and E-device expectations: Elementary and Middle School (K-8) "Away for the Day": Cell phones and E-devices are not allowed during the school day. High School (9-12) "Time and Place": Cell phone use is not allowed in classrooms/instructional spaces, including the media center. Cell phone use is allowed during passing time, at lunch, before and after school. To view the full guidance visit sowashco.org/families/cell-phones.



ParentSquare is SoWashCo Schools' new mass messaging, newsletter and family communication tool. This new platform brings all school, district, and classroom communication into one place, making it easier for staff to connect with families and for families to stay informed and engaged. Learn more at sowashco.org/families/parentsquare.

Early Childhood Screening is Recommended at Age 3

Early Childhood Screening is a free and simple check of how your child is growing and developing. Screening is recommended at age 3 and is required by the State of Minnesota for any child entering kindergarten in a public school. If your child has not yet been screened and is between the ages of 3 and 5, please schedule an appointment at 651-425-6175 or visit sowashco.org/screening.

School Supply Lists You can find school supplies lists for grades K-5 and 6-8 at sowashco.org/schoolsupplies. Note: High school students will be informed during the first week of school of any supplies needed for their classes.

Transportation Updates SoWashCo Schools will have bus route information posted in Campus Parent Portal accounts starting August 28, 2026. Families will also receive a postcard confirming your child's busing status. If you need assistance with bus routes please call 651-425-5303 or visit sowashco.org/transportation.



Ebikes and Scooters As more of our students ride e-bikes and motorized scooters to school, we are asking families to discuss important safety guidelines with their child.



Students cannot operate a recreational vehicle on district property; students must turn off the electronic motors of e-bikes and motorized scooters and walk with them as they enter school property. Recreational vehicles should also be parked and locked at the designated bike rack area. Please have safety conversations with your child about riding near high traffic areas, such as school parking lots during drop-off and pickup times.

Apply for Educational Benefits

Every family with children enrolled in SoWashCo Schools is encouraged to apply for Educational Benefits, formerly known as 'Free and Reduced Lunch,' through their School Café account every school year. Households that qualify will receive discounted or free services both in and out of school. Even if a family does not qualify, their completed application could provide additional funding for their child's school. Learn more at sowashco.org/edbenefits.

Benefits In School



Activities



Student Fees



Kids Club



Instrument Rentals



Community Education Programs



Funding for Schools

Benefits Beyond School



Some Energy Companies



Some Internet Providers



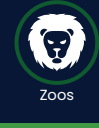
Some Cell Phone Providers



Public Transportation



Children's Theatres



Zoos



Museums



More

Apply in SchoolCafé

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Pictured: Student assembling wood frame.

"One of the most rewarding parts of teaching this class is watching students realize they are capable of building something real with their own hands," teacher Megan Diediker said.

From measuring materials to framing walls, students experience what it takes to finish a real build. They use professional tools, follow industry instructions and practice problem-solving, time management and collaboration.

"First we do the math to get the layout to see what we are building," sophomore Nevaeh Durham said.

"Wood isn't perfect, you have to feel it," Diediker tells her students. "Math only gets you so far; you have to be fluid and adaptive to what you are working with."

Beyond technical skills, the project fosters perseverance, creativity and pride in craftsmanship.

As demand grows for skilled labor, career programs like this prepare students for future jobs while showing that learning can be both practical and rewarding.

"I feel a lot of pride knowing we built this playhouse all ourselves, especially as a group of girls," sophomore Mildred Hernandez said.

Sophomore Makayla Conley added that it is heartwarming to know children will enjoy what they built.

"There's a huge sense of pride when students step back and see a finished project they built together from start to finish," Diediker said.

Once completed, the playhouses are sold on social media. Proceeds fund materials for future classes so more students can take part in upcoming semesters.

If you would like to donate any materials or funds towards this program, please contact Megan Diediker at mdiedike@sowashco.org.



Pictured: Student operating a chop saw.

"I never thought I'd be able to build something like this, but now I feel a lot more confident using tools and working on projects," sophomore Layna McKay said.

Junior Ella Hammergren said the class inspired her to pursue a career in carpentry and the trades.

Pullman Elementary Brings "Community Helpers" to Life

Second-grade students at Pullman Elementary School (PES) have been diving into books about community helpers, learning what it means to serve others and the many ways people contribute to keeping a community safe, healthy, and connected.

From firefighters and nurses to teachers and police officers, these early literacy experiences are helping students build both reading skills and real-world understanding.

"I really loved the book we read called 'More than a Pet'," said second grader Edmon Doom.

After spending time reading stories about community helpers, students had the unique opportunity to meet several community members.

Detective Shaver, a member of the Cottage Grove Police Department, along with a very special guest, a therapy service dog named Riggs, were the most recent members visiting PES.

Detective Shaver shared how they help keep the community safe and explained the important role that Riggs plays.

"Riggs is trained to help calm and de-escalate people who are having a hard time," Detective Shaver explained to the students.

The students learned that therapy service dogs provide comfort during difficult situations and help build trust and support both children and adults in times of need.

"He's such a happy dog," shared second-grader John Adeleke.

Students listened intently, asked thoughtful questions, and practiced the kind of engaged learning that started with books and now has expanded into the world around them.

"It has been a joy to watch the children's excitement and learning grow as they connect what they read to real people and experiences," said second-grade teacher Amy Maddox.

Pictured: Student petting CGPD therapy dog.



Woodbury Middle School Welcomes Guest Musician

Eighth-grade band students from Woodbury Middle School (WMS) had a unique opportunity to learn from and perform alongside a professional musician thanks to a grant from the St. Croix Valley Foundation.

The grant brought acclaimed trumpet player Dr. Amy Schendel to the school, where she worked directly with students and joined them as a featured soloist during the school's eighth-grade band, choir and orchestra concert.

For students, the experience was a chance to see firsthand how music education can open doors, build confidence and inspire future possibilities.

"It was really cool to see where Dr. Schendel is and where I could be," said eighth-grader PJ Hinton.

During Dr. Schendel's visit to WMS, students had the opportunity to learn directly from a professional musician who has dedicated her life to the arts.

"Dr. Schendel was so nice and she plays so clearly," says eighth-grader Lydia Giles. "She kept us on tempo and was really inspirational."

Through rehearsals, instruction, and performance preparation, students gained valuable insight into

musicianship, perseverance, and the discipline required to succeed in music.

"Our band really worked hard to improve to support her solo," says eighth-grader Claire Nestingen.

"She has really cool skills and she taught us a lot."

"Music education gives students a place to grow creatively, work together and build confidence both in and out of the classroom," says WMS Band Director Sara O'Connor.

Thank you to Dr. Schendel and the St. Croix Valley Foundation for this amazing opportunity.



Pictured: Dr. Schendel playing with the WMS Band.

Planning for the Next Five Years

This fall South Washington County Schools (SoWashCo Schools) is entering into two important conversations that are separate, but linked: a budget adjustment process and a comprehensive 5-year district planning process.

The short-term budget adjustment process will address deficit spending in the 2025-26 school year, and the projected deficit spending for the 2026-27 school year. Recommendations from the budget adjustment process will be implemented for the 2027-28 school year. Some ideas that will be generated in the budget adjustment process that need a longer "runway" for implementation will be moved into the comprehensive 5-year planning process.

The Planning for the Next 5 Years process (beginning this fall) will ensure every student has access to optimized learning environments, balanced enrollment and modern facilities. The plan is expected to be implemented from 2028 through 2033.

Attend a Community Listening Session

We are inviting members of the SoWashCo Schools community to learn more about the five-year planning process. This is a great opportunity to listen and ask questions. We encourage anyone to attend!

The following events will be held in person:

- Tuesday, October 20, 2026, 6:30-8 p.m.
- Thursday, October 29, 2026, 6:30-8 p.m.
- Wednesday, November 4, 2026, 6:30-8 p.m.

The following events will be held virtually:

- Tuesday, November 10, 2026, 7-8:30 a.m.
- Thursday, November 12, 2026, 6:30-8 p.m.

Apply to Join the District Advisory Committee

We are forming a community and staff Advisory committee that will advise three steering committees. The District Advisory will meet from January 2027 through August 2027.

Learn more at: sowashco.org/next-5yrs.



SoWashCo Voices

The SoWashCo Headwaters Life Skills Program is opening its doors for the first time this fall. The new school will serve students ages 18–22 with special education needs. Designed with inclusivity in mind, the building offers dedicated sensory rooms, a culinary lab, a makerspace, a horticulture lab, along with spaces tailored for work-based learning, all complemented by outdoor gardens and learning environments. We asked a few students and staff to share their thoughts about their new school.

“It has been a privilege for our district to reimagine the property at 7000 Jamaica Avenue South. As we count down to the start of the school year, I cannot wait to welcome our students and families into a school built entirely with their growth and learning in mind. I am profoundly grateful for the incredible possibilities this new school holds for our students, district, and community.”
–Nicole Loch
Headwaters ation Program Administrator

“I loved seeing the big gathering room and all the spaces look fun.”
–Kalabe Tobe

“I saw all the spaces we will be learning life skills and I am excited to start classes.”
–Daniel Michaud

“I am so excited for the accessibility and the combined opportunities we will have in this new space.”
–Peter Strand
Paraprofessional

“I can't wait to read books in the reading nooks.”
–Cady Lewis

“Thanks to the support of our School Board, we were able to redirect funds previously spent on multiple lease payments into permanent ownership in one location, all without asking taxpayers for a new bond. Most importantly, we've created a stable, purpose-built space where our young adults can develop the independence, life skills, and confidence they need to thrive.”
–Julie Nielsen
Superintendent

“I am excited to enjoy the new building, we will have so much more room in our classrooms and a real cafeteria.”
–Teme Gebrehiwot

“We will have more room for more students to participate in work-based learning and I am so grateful to be able to provide that for them.”
–Tess Hentges
Work Experience Coordinator



The Minnesota Permanent School Fund Constitutional Amendment

In November, Minnesota voters will consider a proposed change to the Minnesota Constitution. The amendment would allow more money from the Permanent School Fund to be distributed to Minnesota public schools.

The Permanent School Fund is an existing state investment fund that has supported public education since 1858.

If approved, the amendment would provide additional funding to public schools without increasing property, income, sales or other taxes.

Every Minnesota public school district and charter school receives funding from the Permanent School Fund.

If approved, the amendment is estimated to provide about \$1 million in additional funding to SoWashCo Schools.

The fund has grown from approximately \$675 million in 2010 to more than \$2.3 billion today. The proposed amendment would change how the amount distributed to schools each year is calculated.

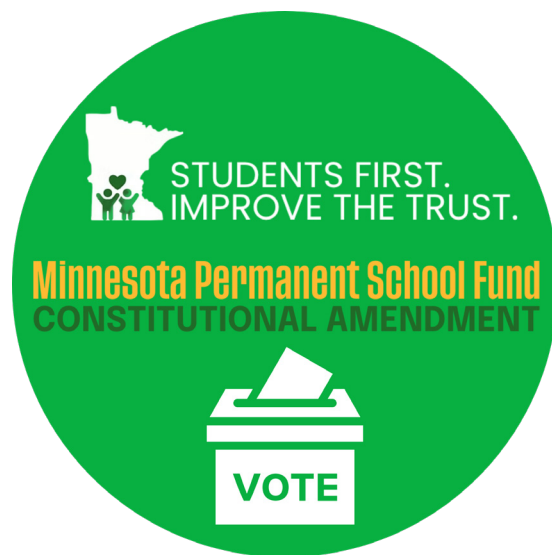
The proposed change would not increase property taxes, income taxes, sales taxes or other taxes.

The amendment is intended to provide additional support for students while preserving the fund for future generations.

Because the current distribution formula is part of the Minnesota Constitution, voters must approve any change to the formula.

In Minnesota, a constitutional amendment needs a 'YES' vote from a majority of all voters in the election. Leaving the question blank is counted as a "No" vote.

For more information, including frequently asked questions, videos and fact sheets, visit mnPSFamendment.org.



Celebrating Sensory Spaces

South Washington County Schools (SoWashCo Schools) is committed to creating learning environments that empower all students to succeed. That commitment is physically built into our buildings through our dedicated sensory spaces.

Pictured: Student using a sensory swing for big movement.

Pictured: Student using crash pad and climbing dome to regulate.

A sensory space, sometimes referred to as a sensory room, motor room or calming corner, is a designated area in a school designed to help students regulate their emotions and manage sensory input.

"When students feel overwhelmed, it can be difficult to focus, learn or communicate," says Special Services Coordinator Mary Watts. "Sensory spaces give students a safe place to calm their bodies and minds so they can return to class ready to engage."

"The motor room allows students to get the intense physical input their bodies crave in a safe, structured way. It's like a 'reset button' for a nervous system that is running too fast," says occupational therapist Allison Gilbert.

Sensory and motor spaces are designed to help students regulate, bringing their bodies back to a state of calm and focus so they can return to their peers ready to engage.

"We all need help regulating our nervous system from time to time," says Gilbert. "Sensory spaces normalize taking care of your mental health."

"I like when I got to help pick the day's motor obstacle course for the room," says Armstrong second grader Isaac Olson.

"Not every student experiences the classroom the same way and these spaces are one way we honor those differences," says Special Education Supervisor Kristin Papin.

Our sensory and motor spaces are a testament to our district's belief that when we meet a student's physical and sensory needs, there is no limit to what they can achieve.



The Next Generation of Engineers

Pictured: Senior students from the Project Lead The Way Engineering program presenting at the 3M Campus.

At the top of the engineering pathway at East Ridge High School (ERHS), students in the Engineering Design and Development course are taking on real-world challenges with the guidance of professional engineers and the skills they've built throughout their years in Project Lead The Way (PLTW) engineering courses.

As the capstone course in the PLTW engineering program, Engineering Design and Development (EDD) gives students the opportunity to apply everything they have learned in design, problem-solving, collaboration and innovation.

Throughout the school year, student teams work alongside assigned engineers from 3M to identify a problem, research possible solutions, develop prototypes and prepare professional presentations. The experience is designed to mirror the expectations students may encounter in college engineering programs and future careers in STEM fields.

"Engineering is rarely a solo job," explains PLTW Instructor Dennis Ware. "These students learn how to share ideas, problem-solve together and present their thinking clearly, which are skills they will use long after high school."

The course is built around three major phases: research, prototyping and presenting. Students are responsible for leading each stage of the process while receiving mentorship and feedback from their 3M engineer volunteers.

"Having support from the 3M mentors made the experience feel more real and helped us learn from professionals in the field," says senior Lukas Watson.

At the end of the year, each student group delivers a formal 20-minute presentation and demonstration showcasing their project at the 3M campus in Maplewood.

"If I'm being honest, I am a little nervous, but also excited," says senior Akporefe Akporherhe when asked about presenting to a room full of engineers. "We developed our project from what we saw in our school. We want to track food waste in schools and lower carbon emissions."

The presentation day also serves as a celebration of

students' hard work and dedication. The graduating seniors were presented with orange graduation cords representing their completion of the PLTW engineering pathway. Volunteer engineers from 3M were also honored with certificates of appreciation from South Washington County Schools for the time, expertise and encouragement they provide throughout the year.

"Working with these students is awesome and the future is bright," says 3M Vice President of Engineering Transformation Eric Opland. "This course allows them to test, try and participate in technical solutions before they graduate and see what engineering is really like."

Through mentorship, collaboration and hands-on problem solving, students leave the program with valuable skills, professional confidence and a deeper understanding of the possibilities that await them after high school.

Pictured: Student presenting 3M mentor with an award.





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ENROLL TODAY!



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

- New to District
- Transfer from Charter or Non-Public School
- Kindergarten
- Open Enroll



sowashco.org/enroll



We're Hiring BUS DRIVERS

WAGES START AT
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IMMEDIATE OPENINGS

PAID TRAINING

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sowashco.org/careers

Sign Up for Fall Fun!

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



Browse classes and register at sowashco.ce.eleyo.com