

Listening, Learning, and Moving Forward

A Message from Superintendent Brian Zambreno

Dear Packer Community,

Last May, South St. Paul Public Schools asked voters to consider two ballot questions related to our district's facilities and long-term needs. Neither question was approved. While the election determined that the proposed funding would not move forward, our facility needs remain, and the election provided an important opportunity for us to listen, learn, and better understand the questions and priorities of our community.

Following the election, we invited our community to share feedback through a Post-Election Bond Survey. Thank you to everyone who took the time to respond. In September, our School Board dedicated a special work session to reviewing the survey results and comments in greater depth, considering feedback from both those who supported the ballot questions and those who did not.

What We Heard

Several themes emerged from the feedback:

- A desire to better understand **district finances and how schools are funded**
- Questions about **facility needs, how we got here and how we plan for the future**
- Concerns about **academic achievement and student progress**
- A desire for **clear, transparent communication**
- A need for greater clarity around **district priorities, needs, and decision-making**

The School Board then moved from reviewing the feedback to discussing how we can act on it. The conversation was organized around **Now, Next, and Later**, recognizing that some work can begin immediately, while other work will continue to develop through additional planning, learning and community engagement.

Beginning a Year-Long Conversation and Beyond

This issue of the SixTimes begins that work

In this issue, we are launching three ongoing communication series: Finance, Facilities, and Packer Performance (descriptions on the right).

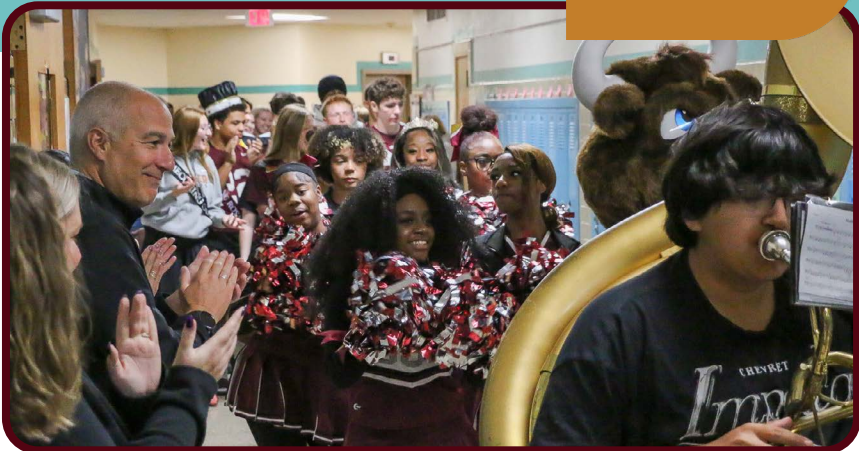
These are not one-time updates. We will continue building on these topics throughout the year through future issues of the SixTimes, district newsletters, our website, social media, School Board updates, and community engagement opportunities.

Our goal is to provide clear, transparent information, answer questions, increase understanding and create opportunities for our community to stay informed and engaged as we plan for the future of South St. Paul Public Schools.



Thank you for continuing to learn, engage, and move forward with us.

Brian Zambreno
SSPPS Superintendent



Now: Communicate and Educate

Strengthen communication and education around district finances, facilities, academic progress and district outcomes, while continuing to share and celebrate student achievement and successes.



Next: Listen and Engage

Expand opportunities for community outreach, listening and engagement, while continuing to build understanding of district funding, its limitations and how resources support students and learning.



Later: Plan for the Future

Use what we learn through updated facility information, financial planning, academic progress monitoring and community engagement to inform longer-term decisions and strategies.

These are not intended to be a checklist or a final plan. They provide direction for how we can continue learning from the feedback and carrying that work forward.



Finance



Facilities



Academics

Finance, Facilities, and Academics Communications Series

Finance Series:

A closer look at how our schools are funded, how district resources are allocated and used, and the financial realities that shape our decisions.

Facilities Series:

A closer look at how we care for our schools, address the challenges of aging facilities, prioritize maintenance and improvements, and plan for future needs.

Packer Performance Series:

A closer look at how our students are learning and growing, the work taking place across our district to strengthen instruction and support student success, and how we measure progress along the way.

Facilities Communication Series

Maintaining the places where our Packer community learns, works, and gathers

Every day, students, staff and community members learn, work, compete, perform, and gather in South St. Paul Public Schools facilities.

Behind all of our spaces are building systems and infrastructure that require ongoing maintenance and investment, including:

- Roofs
- Heating and ventilation systems
- Plumbing and electrical systems
- Pavement- sidewalks and parking lots
- Safety and security systems
- Building finishes and high-use surfaces

SSPPS currently maintains 768,397 square feet across six district buildings, plus Roosevelt Field. Caring for those facilities means maintaining what we have today while planning ahead for systems and infrastructure that will eventually need major repair or replacement.



Lincoln Center Elementary- Built in 1950

Maintaining Our Schools Is Ongoing Work

Just like a home, school buildings require both routine maintenance and larger investments over time. Every year, the district:

- Performs preventive maintenance, inspections, and repairs
- Services heating and ventilation equipment
- Repairs roofs and plumbing
- Maintains sidewalks, pavement, and parking lots
- Protects and repairs high-use surfaces
- Manages health and safety requirements, including indoor air quality, asbestos, and fire safety

This ongoing work helps extend the life of our buildings and systems and prevents smaller problems from becoming larger ones.

But routine maintenance can only go so far.

When major systems such as roofs, heating and ventilation equipment, fire alarms or other infrastructure reach the end of their useful lives, the cost can exceed what is available through annual maintenance funding.

Think of it like a home: A household maintenance budget may cover regular upkeep, but it may not be enough to replace the roof, furnace, and electrical system at the same time.

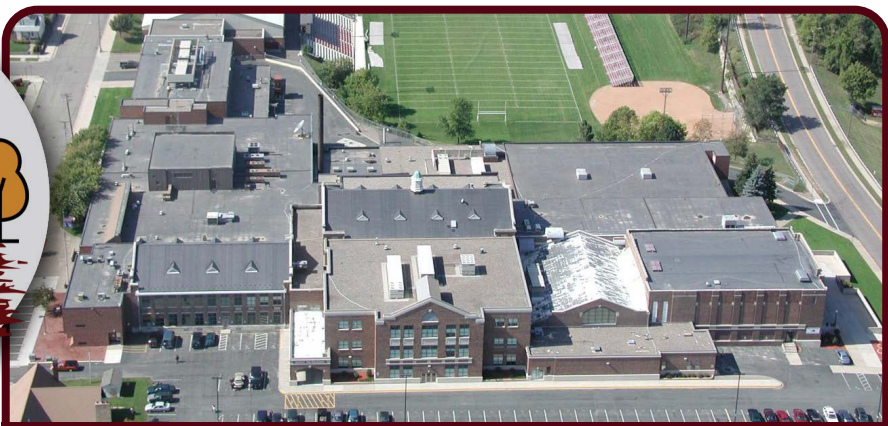
The Bond Did Not Pass. The Needs Did Not Go Away.

In May, voters did not approve the district’s proposed \$50 million bond request or renewal of the Capital Projects Levy. That decision determined that the proposed funding would not move forward. It did not, however, change the age or condition of our buildings or eliminate the maintenance and infrastructure needs identified across the district.

The district is now taking a fresh look at those needs. Rather than assuming the previous facilities plan remains the right path forward, SSPPS is:

- Updating its facilities study
- Reassessing current facility conditions and needs
- Reviewing priorities
- Considering available funding options
- Preparing for future School Board discussion and community engagement

In the meantime, the district will continue maintaining our buildings and addressing priority needs within available resources.



SSP Secondary- Built in 1921

Understanding the Size of the Need

The district’s most recent comprehensive facilities study, completed in 2022, identified approximately \$150 million in deferred maintenance needs across SSPPS facilities.

That number did not develop all at once. It reflects years of maintaining aging buildings with limited annual facility funding.

SSPPS receives approximately \$1 million annually from the state for facility maintenance. Each year, the district must prioritize those limited resources, addressing the most critical needs first, including:

- Health and safety needs
- Preventive and routine maintenance
- Critical repairs
- Failing or aging building systems
- Projects necessary to protect and extend the life of district facilities

When available funding cannot cover all of the work needed in a given year, other projects must be postponed, or **deferred**, to a future year.

As those projects remain on the list, additional roofs, mechanical systems, pavement, plumbing, electrical systems, and other infrastructure continue to age and require repair or replacement. As a result, **the deferred maintenance list continues to accumulate over time.**

Why Not Save Those Dollars for Larger Projects?

The district also cannot simply set aside its annual facility funding for several years to pay for larger projects. Those dollars are needed each year to maintain and preserve the buildings we have today.

Saving a significant portion of those limited resources would mean:

- Completing fewer current repairs and maintenance projects
- Deferring additional work to future years
- Potentially allowing smaller problems to become larger/more costly
- Adding more projects to the deferred maintenance list

While some facility funding can be carried forward for eligible future projects, the district must balance taking care of our buildings today with planning for larger needs that annual maintenance funding alone cannot address.

In the meantime, the district continues to maintain our buildings, address priority needs within available resources and explore the funding tools available to support larger facility needs.

What does “deferred maintenance” mean?

It is not a list of work the district has chosen not to address. It is identified maintenance and infrastructure work that cannot all be completed within the funding available each year.

SSP Education Building

Since purchasing the SSP Education Building on 19th Ave N, SSPPS has transformed the space into a hub for learning and career exploration. It houses the Community Learning Center (alternative learning program for grades 10-12) and the TriDistrict CAPS Programs: Healthcare and Medicine and Business and Entrepreneurship. Click on the QR codes below to learn more.



This year students in the TriDistrict Healthcare and Medicine Program recently got hands-on experience at Regions Hospital in their simulation center.



CLC



CAPS Program

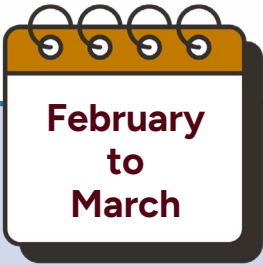
What's Next for Facilities Planning?

An important first step is making sure future decisions are based on current information.



Update the Facilities Study *September-January*

Facility experts will take a fresh look at district buildings and infrastructure, updating information about building conditions, systems, anticipated needs, and priorities.



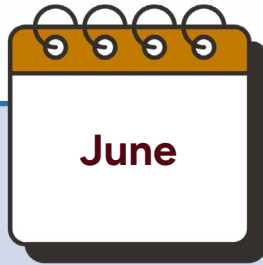
Present the Updated Study to the School Board *February-March*

The findings will be presented to the School Board, providing a current picture of facility conditions and needs and establishing a foundation for discussion of priorities and potential funding options.



Community Engagement *February-May*

The district will share information, listen to staff, families, and community members, and better understand community priorities as options and next steps are considered.



Findings and Recommendations *June*

Information from the updated study, School Board discussions and community engagement will be brought together to help inform recommendations for moving forward.

Finance Communication Series

Understanding how our schools are funded and how resources support students

School finance can be complicated. South St. Paul Public Schools receives funding from multiple sources, and those dollars come with different requirements for how they can be used.

Throughout our Finance Communication Series, we will break school finance into smaller pieces to help our community understand:

- Where district funding comes from
- Where district dollars go
- How different funding sources can be used
- Why some dollars are restricted to specific purposes
- What factors affect the district's financial picture

We begin with the district's primary operating fund, the General Fund.



What Is the General Fund?

The General Fund is the school district's main operating budget. It pays for much of the day-to-day work of educating students. While it covers many expenses, some of the money comes with rules about how it can be used.

Think of it like your family's main checking account. It's where most of your income goes and where you pay your everyday bills. But just like some household money may be set aside for a specific purpose, some school district funding can only be used for certain expenses. The district has to balance its needs while following those rules.

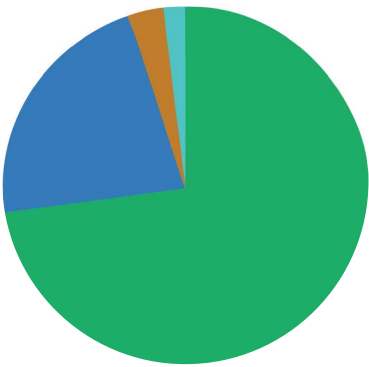
Where Does the Money Come From?

For FY27, SSPPS anticipates approximately \$53.2 million in General Fund revenue:

- 73% State funding
- 22% Property taxes
- 3% Local revenue
- 2% Federal funding

One important thing to understand:

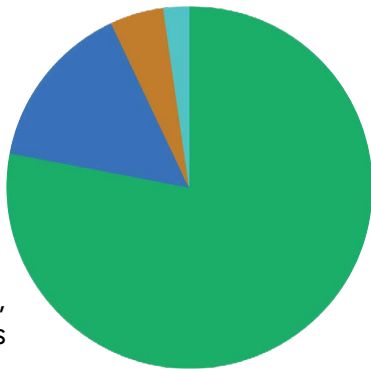
Revenue sources are not interchangeable. Some funding comes with specific requirements that determine how and where those dollars can be spent. Additionally, funding amounts can fluctuate from year to year based on factors such as student enrollment, state funding formulas, and other revenue sources. Because school budgets must be developed before final funding amounts are known, the district relies on projections and assumptions to plan for the year ahead, making adjustments as more information becomes available.



Where Does the Money Go?

People are the largest investment in our schools. Of approximately \$55 million in FY27 General Fund expenditures:

- 78% Salaries and benefits
- 15% Purchased services, such as transportation, substitute costs, & utilities
- 5% Capital and other expenses, including instructional materials, textbooks, technology, software, and facility maintenance
- 2% Supplies and materials, including paper, general supplies, and maintenance supplies



People are at the heart of a school district.

Teachers, paraprofessionals, specialists, administrators, transportation employees, custodians, food-service staff, technology professionals and many others make it possible for students to learn and for our schools to operate every day.

School Funding Has Different Buckets

School funding is not one large pot of money

Funding is divided among different funds and programs, and many dollars have restrictions on how they can be used. That means funding available for one purpose cannot necessarily be redirected to another. Next month we will discuss how public dollars come with different rules and dive deeper into the different buckets and some of the restrictions that come with them.



Still to Come in the Finance Communication Series

Throughout the year, we'll unpack the different pieces of the financial picture at SSPPS, one topic at a time and answer some of the questions we've heard from our community and families.

How does enrollment impact funding and budget decisions?

What is the difference between a bond and a levy?

What are the levy dollars we approved in 2022 being used for?

What financial challenges and opportunities is SSPPS facing?

What is the fund balance and why don't we just spend it?

Why can't we just spend less to balance the budget?

Packer Performance Communication Series

Building on Progress: Strengthening Student Learning

A closer look at student achievement and the work behind the numbers

At South St. Paul Public Schools, our mission to **engage, educate, and empower** every learner guides our commitment to improving student learning and experiences. As Superintendent Dr. Brian Zambreno shared in his message earlier in this newsletter, we are launching a series of communications to provide our community with a deeper understanding of the work happening across our district.

Through our Packer Performance Communication Series, we will take a closer look at how our students are learning and growing, the work taking place across our district to strengthen instruction and support student success, and how we measure progress along the way. Our goal is to share not only where we are, but also what we are doing to improve, the progress we are making, and where we are focusing our efforts moving forward.

We begin with a closer look at the recently released 2026 Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) results, including encouraging progress at the elementary level and across our district.



Hands-on learning brings science to life
From exploring microscopic details in biology to putting classroom concepts into practice, our Packers are building curiosity, critical thinking and a deeper understanding of the world around them.



Elementary Reading Proficiency

2022 = 38.0%
2023 = 42.04%
2024 = 39.7%
2025 = 45.97%
Up 7.97 points!
2026 = *New Test



Elementary Math Proficiency

2022 = 31.72%
2023 = 34.95%
2024 = 35.8%
2025 = 39.3%
2026 = 38.5%
Up 6.78 points!



**Note: Minnesota introduced a new Reading MCA-IV assessment in 2026, establishing a new baseline. Reading results from 2026 cannot be directly compared with previous years.*

Building a Strong Foundation: Elementary Student Achievement

One area where we are seeing encouraging results is in our elementary schools. Across grades 3–5, proficiency has increased in both reading and mathematics over the past several years.

Reading: Elementary proficiency increased by nearly 8 percentage points from 2022 to 2025.

Math: Elementary proficiency increased by nearly 7 percentage points from 2022 to 2026.

These results are important because they offer a closer look at the progress students are making in the early grades, where foundational academic skills are developed. As students build on these skills and advance through our schools, our goal is to see that progress continue throughout their educational journey, contributing to stronger learning and achievement across the district.

Connecting Curriculum and Student Learning

Intentional Investments in Curriculum and Professional Learning

Over the past several years, SSPPS has made intentional investments in strengthening literacy instruction, including the implementation of Wit & Wisdom and Arts & Letters curriculum resources.

These resources are designed to build students' reading comprehension, vocabulary, knowledge, and ability to engage with increasingly complex texts. By strengthening literacy instruction in the elementary grades, our goal is to help students develop a strong foundation that prepares them for more challenging learning as they advance through school.

The improvement we are seeing in elementary reading proficiency is encouraging and aligns with the work our teachers and instructional leaders have been doing. While assessment results alone cannot tell us exactly how much improvement is attributable to a particular curriculum, they are one important indicator as we evaluate our instructional practices.

Our goal is to build on this foundation year after year, so students enter each new grade better prepared for increasingly challenging learning. As students progress through our schools, we hope to see these stronger foundational skills contribute to continued improvement across grade levels and throughout the district.

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Arts & Letters
Students build reading comprehension, vocabulary skills, and word recognition that support stronger reading achievement and continued growth.



Hooked on Learning!
Kaposia recently received a grant from the MN DNR to support hands-on experiences like fishing. These opportunities bring classroom science to life while building patience, problem-solving, confidence and an appreciation for Minnesota's natural resources. The grant is designed to get students out of the classroom and into nature.

Building Skills That Support Learning

Strengthening academic achievement also means helping students develop the skills they need to be successful learners. This year, SSPPS is incorporating social-emotional learning (SEL) instruction for students in PreK–5 using the CASEL–5 framework.

These skills help students manage frustration when a math problem is challenging, persevere when reading becomes difficult, collaborate during science investigations, and work through challenges with classmates. By developing skills such as self-management, resilience, collaboration, and responsible decision-making, we are helping students stay engaged, solve problems, ask for help, and learn from mistakes.

SEL isn't taking time away from learning. It helps students be ready to learn. This work complements our academic curriculum and is another part of our commitment to strengthening student achievement and supporting success throughout their educational journey.

ENGAGE. EDUCATE.
EMPOWER.

Districtwide MCA Results

Progress and Opportunities for Growth

The Minnesota Department of Education recently released 2026 MCA results, providing another opportunity to evaluate student learning and progress across SSPPS.

While our overall proficiency rates are not yet where we want them to be, several indicators show encouraging movement, including a narrowing of the gap between South St. Paul and statewide proficiency rates.

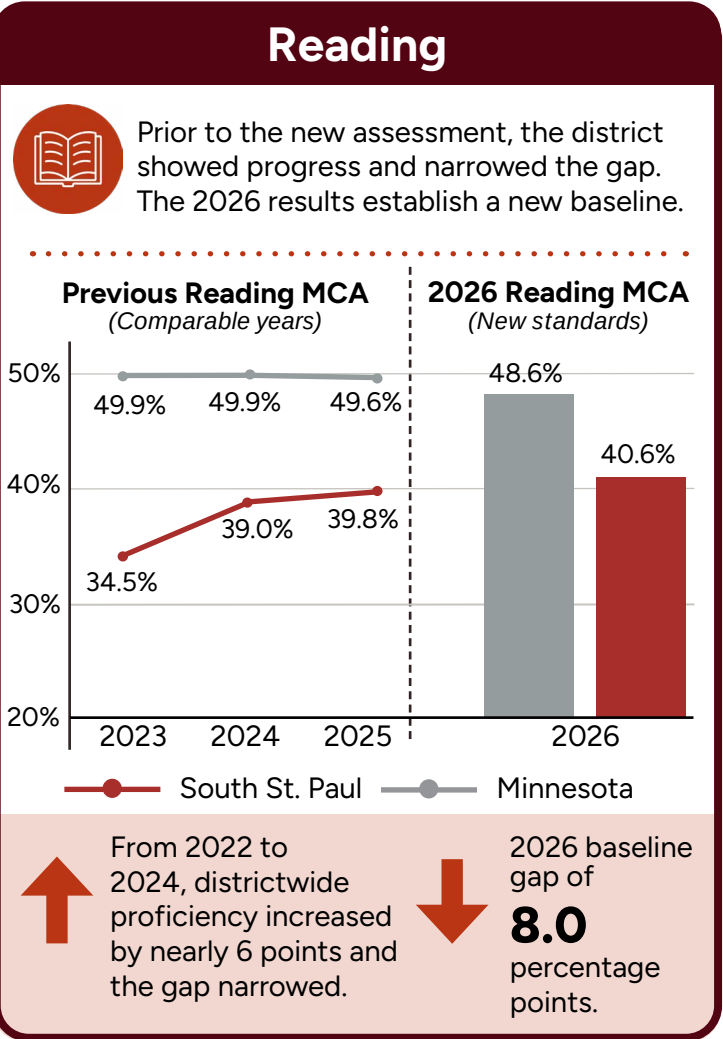
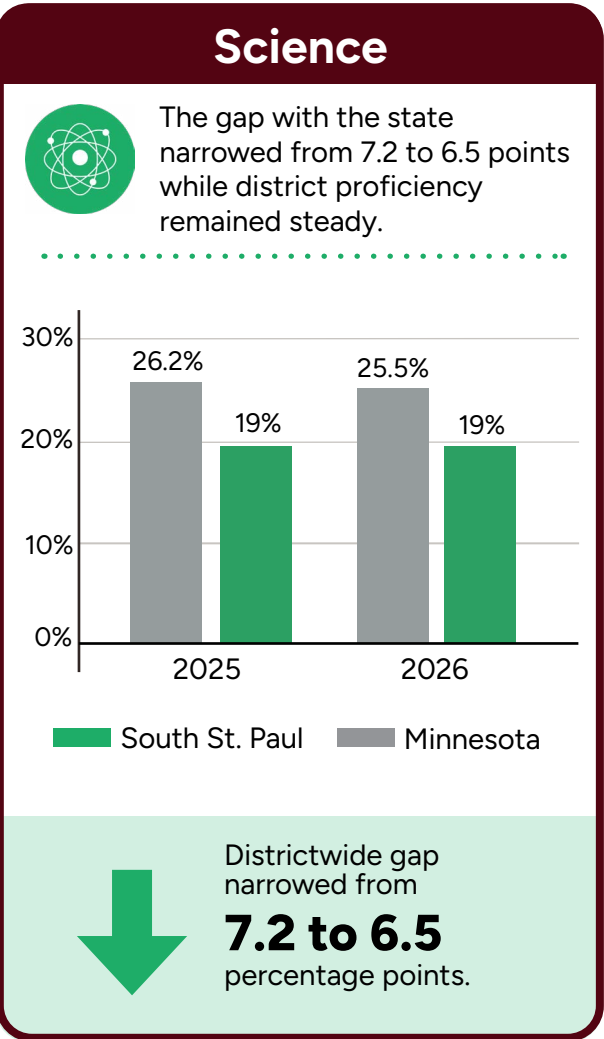
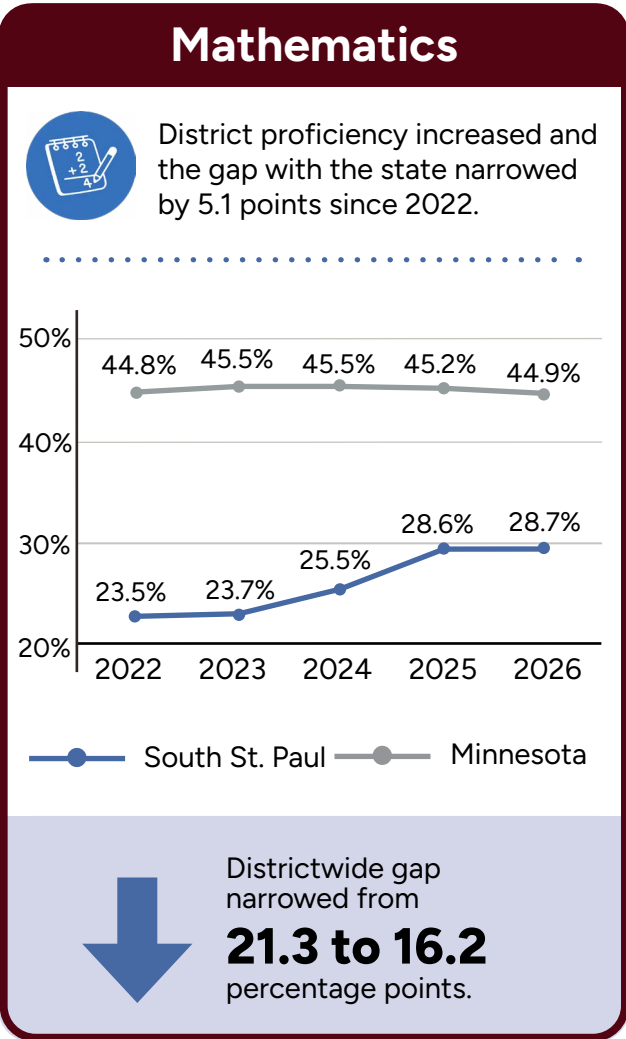
Mathematics: District proficiency increased from 23.5% in 2022 to 28.7% in 2026, narrowing the gap between SSPPS and the state by more than five percentage points.

Science: SSPPS maintained a 19% proficiency rate from 2025 to 2026, while the statewide rate declined slightly, narrowing the gap from 7.2 to 6.5 percentage points.

Reading: Prior to the introduction of Minnesota’s new Reading MCA-IV assessment in 2026, district reading proficiency increased by approximately six percentage points from 2022 to 2025, while the gap with the state narrowed. The 2026 Reading MCA-IV is aligned with new English Language Arts standards and establishes a new baseline from which future progress will be measured.



Learning goes beyond the classroom!
Middle school students put teamwork, problem-solving, and perseverance into action during a trip to Base Camp. These hands-on experiences help students build skills, grow confidence, and stay engaged in learning.



While our proficiency rates are not yet where we want them to be, we are encouraged by the progress our students are making and the narrowing gaps with the state. We will continue this important work to increase student learning and achievement.

Looking at the Bigger Picture

- While MCA results provide important information about student achievement, they represent only one measure of student success. To better understand how our students are learning, growing and preparing for the future, we look at a variety of factors, including:
- **Academic achievement and growth**, both in the classroom and through assessments
 - **Attendance and engagement**, which help students stay connected to learning
 - **Relationships and social-emotional development**, which support students’ well-being and success
 - **College, career, and life readiness**, helping students prepare for opportunities beyond graduation

World’s Best Workforce, CACR provides a broader look at our progress toward student achievement and readiness goals. We will continue sharing this information with staff, families and our community as part of our commitment to providing a more complete picture of student success.

We also recognize that meaningful, sustained improvement does not happen overnight. It requires consistently strengthening instruction and student supports, learning from our data, building on what is working and making adjustments where needed.

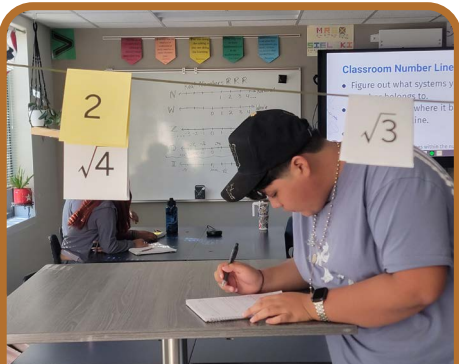
We are proud of the progress our students are making and grateful for the teachers and staff who support them each day. At the same time, we know there is more work ahead. Our goal is not simply a higher test score next spring. Our goal is sustained improvement in student learning and experiences, with more students reaching the high expectations we have for them.

Thank you for your continued partnership as we **engage, educate, and empower** every learner and work together to help each student succeed.

In the coming weeks, district leaders will share our annual Comprehensive Achievement and Civic Readiness (CACR) report with the School Board. Formerly known as



More than numbers on a page!
Through interactive activities students build math skills and discover that learning math can be fun and engaging.



Math and Movement!
At the CLC, they’re taking math on the move. Interactive activities increase engagement and improve focus, helping students retain information.

Meaningful, sustained improvement does not happen overnight.
It takes time, consistency, and a continued commitment to learning from our data, building on what works, and making adjustments where needed.

Can't Hide our Packer Pride!



Packer Pride starts early! Families welcoming a new baby in South St. Paul receive a "Newest Packer" onesie and an information packet from South St. Paul Public Schools. We're excited to welcome our newest members to the Packer family from day one!



Packer Pride keeps growing!

Our kindergarteners are continuing their Packer journey as "Lil Packers," sporting their new T-shirts sponsored by Dave Metzen and John and Nikki Laliberte. Building a strong sense of Packer Pride from the very beginning!

Every Packer Has a Beginning!

Enrollment for the 2027-28 school year is coming soon! Keep an eye on district communications about Open Houses and Kick-Off events in the coming months!



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WORK FOR SSPPS!
SSPPS is looking for great people to join our team. We're always hiring part-time, full-time, and seasonal employees with flexible day and evening hours. Scan the QR code to view current openings.



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Escanear aquí para leer una versión digital del Boletín Sixtimes de SSPPS en español.

What's on the Ballot?

A Look at Local Education this Election Season

School Board Elections

Five South St. Paul Public Schools School Board seats will be on the ballot. Four seats are four-year terms beginning in January 2027, and one is a two-year term filling the remainder of a vacated seat, ending in January 2029. We have a list of the names of the candidates running for these seats on our elections webpage.

Minnesota Permanent School Fund Proposed Amendment

This fall, Minnesota voters will consider a constitutional amendment that would change how the state's Permanent School Fund (PSF) distributes money to public schools.

The PSF was established in Minnesota's Constitution in 1858 to support public education. The fund generates revenue from state school trust lands, including timber sales, mining, leases and other natural resource activities. Today, the fund has more than \$2.3 billion in assets and keeps growing. The current constitutional formula primarily limits distributions to interest and dividend income, meaning the annual payments to schools have not grown at the same rate as the fund itself. The amendment would change how the existing state fund is distributed; it would not create a new tax or require a local property tax increase.

Because the current distribution formula is written into the Minnesota Constitution, voter approval is required to change it. **Minnesota constitutional amendments require a majority of all votes cast at the election. A failure to vote on the amendment has the same effect as voting "No".**



What could this mean for South St. Paul Public Schools?
Based on current estimates, approval of the amendment could provide SSPPS with approximately \$80,000 in additional annual revenue. The actual amount would depend on a few factors in place at the time of disbursement. We have more information, including frequently asked questions and the full ballot question on our elections webpage.

The 2026 General Election Takes Place



For more information on the upcoming elections... Including who is on the ballot for school board, more about the Permanent School Fund Amendment, and where to find your polling location, click on the QR code or visit: www.sspps.org/about/elections



Building Community Through Shared Values
SSPPS and the City of SSP are united in a foundational set of core values reflecting the best of our Community!

