October 2026

LCSC Communicator

Regional News, Views, and Information

LAKES COUNTRY Service Cooperative

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How the BARR Program Is Transforming Schools in Our Region

Two years ago, Perham and Battle Lake Public Schools initiated the Building Assets and Reducing Risk (BARR) program. Lakes Country Service Cooperative (LCSC) highlighted these early efforts in the November 2024 Education Edition of the Communicator. Now entering its third year, the BARR program is yielding impressive, positive outcomes for both students and staff.

Although integrating the program into school culture requires significant time and dedicated effort, this foundational work is paying off.

Spurred by this success, Fergus Falls, Underwood, and Parkers Prairie Public Schools have since adopted the BARR program as well.

Source: Ehren Zimmerman, Perham High School Principal; Dr. Hannah Frink, Perham Public Schools Student Success Coordinator; Tamara Uselman, Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative Coordinator; Ivan Hirst, Fergus Falls Middle School Principal; Tracy Grabowska, Fergus Falls BARR Coordinator; Alonna Johnson, Fergus Falls Seventh- and Eighth-Grade Counselor; Matt Johnson, Fergus Falls Dean of Students; Judah Burlingame, Parkers Prairie High School Principal; Jessica Chouinard, Parkers Prairie BARR Coordinator; The BARR System; Perham Chronic Absenteeism and Failure Rate charts; Fergus Falls BARR Results Poster.
Author: Mary Phillipe, LCSC Communications Coordinator

The BARR System

- Focus on the whole student
- Provide professional development for teachers, counselors, and administrators
- Use BARR's U/I-Time lessons to foster a climate for learning
- Create cohorts of staff and students
- Hold regular meetings of the cohort teacher teams
- Conduct Community Connect meetings
- Partner with families in student learning
- Engage administrators

BARR improves communication with families, treating them as active partners.

Teachers regularly connect with parents and caregivers in order to share connections, assess challenges, and work together more effectively.

Supported by the Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative and grant funding from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), BARR is built on two core beliefs outlined by Founder and CEO Angela Jerabek:

- Students are highly capable of learning if educators truly see who they are.
- Educators are extraordinarily talented if you provide a system where we can realize their talents.

The BARR Three-Year Process

Year 1: Centers on initial model implementation, setting up teacher cohorts and block schedules, and launching core training.

Years 2 and 3: Transition to advanced implementation, including deeper risk-review strategies, understanding trauma, fostering resilience, and refining team collaboration

Long-Term Goal: The framework is designed to run for three years so data-driven and relationship-based practices become embedded in the school's permanent culture, after which the formal BARR coaching exits without ongoing financial obligations.



Ehren Zimmerman
High School Principal
Perham Public Schools



Dr. Hannah Frink
Student Success Coordinator at Perham Public Schools

Perham Public Schools is in the final year of implementation of the BARR Program

Now in year three of implementation, Perham High School Principal Ehren Zimmerman and Student Success Coordinator Dr. Hannah Frink reflected on the district's progress across Perham Middle School and High School.

Before BARR, staff support was heavily compartmentalized within subject departments such as Math and English. BARR transformed this structure into multidisciplinary, grade-level teams that bring together core educators, business teachers, and Career and Technical Education (CTE) staff.

"I feel the BARR program really drills down on the purpose and mission of public schools—to support students and their families," noted Zimmerman. "Not only did BARR help with connectivity for our students and families, but it really has transformed our relationship with our staff."

Perham Public School Staff Testimonials

- BARR builds unity among teaching staff! BARR makes students more successful because they know they are cared for and someone keeps them accountable.
- BARR is the best program I've seen in education in 35 years. When your school goes all in, it will literally change the environment of your schools. It is a program that will help ALL teachers build relationships and become better teachers.
- BARR has completely changed how I think about education. Focusing on the whole student has made my career so much more rewarding. I feel as though I am making such a bigger impact on students and know that I am building meaningful connections that will last. BARR strengthened our staff to where it no longer feels like I am ever alone when working with a student.
- Teacher collaboration has improved immensely with the addition of BARR in our school. I have meaningful visits with staff from all over the building and outside my department because of our weekly meetings. In addition, students are less likely to fall through the cracks. We have a supportive network of teachers working together to make sure all students get the attention and assistance they deserve.

Rather than teachers focusing solely on their direct student caseloads, all staff members now collaborate in middle school and across grades 9 through 12, leveraging diverse connections, personalities, and interests to support every student.

Perham organizes its planning through three distinct operational tiers:

1. **Small Block Meetings:** Grade-level teacher collaborations focused on student needs.
2. **Big Block Meetings:** Discussions that integrate administration and school counselors to address broader concerns raised during small block sessions.
3. **Community Connect Meetings:** Strategic wrap-around support bringing together administrative staff, the school nurse, and Freshwater Special Education.

When Perham introduced BARR, the district secured a competitive Closing the Opportunity Gap Grant from MDE—one of only 14 recipients out of 52 applicants. This funding covered the first two years of implementation.

"As a district, we knew we had heavy work to put in if we were going to ask the Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative to cover our third year," said Dr. Frink.

Transitioning to a new model was not without hesitation. During initial year-one training, staff were somewhat skeptical, viewing it as "just another initiative." However, sentiment shifted rapidly. Dr. Frink stated that by the Minnesota Educators Academy (MEA) Break, staff already felt pretty good about the program. She added that by the time the winter holiday break rolled around, the staff was 100 percent sold on the program.

"Ehren did a great job providing staff autonomy to hold discussions and make decisions on how we rolled things out and paced ourselves," Dr. Frink explained. "After the first year, we really watched the staff come into their own and truly own it."

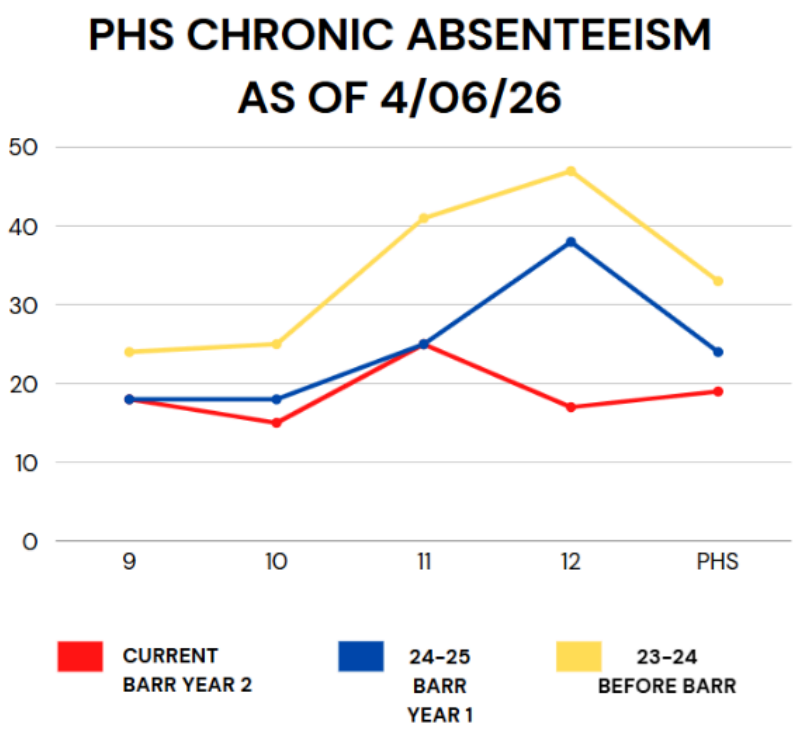
Dr. Frink recalled her favorite moment on the final day of the previous school year: "We were here after Memorial Day, and I said, 'Okay, we need to set goals for next year and set our BARR calendar.' They all looked at me and said, 'Hannah, it's summer break.' However, they sat down, set goals as a team, and set their schedule. When I asked if they wanted a week off to meet with their respective departments instead, they replied, 'No, we just want to talk about kids.' I thought, Okay, they've got this! That is your hope as a coordinator: that you can give them the keys, walk away, and know they are going to be okay."

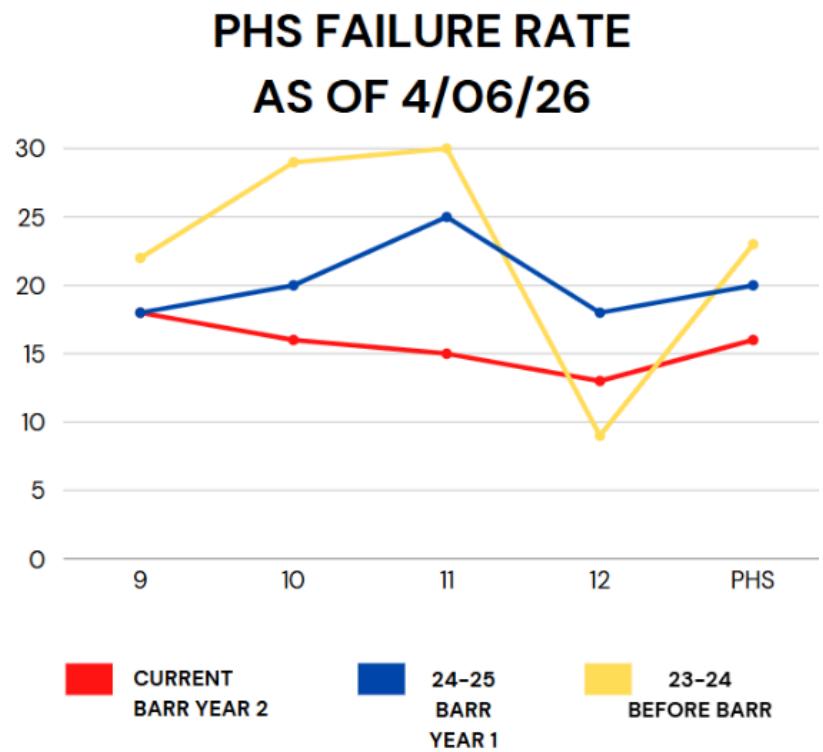
Zimmerman proudly added, "It is an unbelievably connected teaching staff."

To support long-term success and smooth onboarding for new teaching staff, Perham now dedicates two days of BARR training during in-service at the start of each school year.

Professional Growth and Statewide Connectivity

Ongoing coaching is a fundamental component of BARR. Assigned BARR coaches conduct weekly calls and four on-site visits in year one, followed by three on-site visits in years two and three. Zimmerman called the year-one training the most professional and practical conference experience he had encountered. By year two, the district supported seven staff members in attending national training. Last year, Perham educators presented to a packed breakout session on family engagement at the BARR National Conference. Dr. Frink shared that it was incredible to watch three of her fellow staff members shine in that moment and share their story.





Beyond local impacts, Perham collaborates with participating schools across Minnesota and joins Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings nationwide.

Strengthening Family Engagement and Measurable Results
To ensure equitable outreach across all demographics, Perham introduced TalkingPoints, an app that sends direct messages to parents and caregivers and can translate messages for non-English speakers. The app also tracks positive interactions, helping teachers build stronger, proactive relationships with caregivers.

Coupled with support from the Otter Tail County Truancy Team and the School Engagement Committee, the results have been substantial. Within the first 18 months, Perham Public Schools recorded:

- A 50 percent reduction in student chronic absenteeism.
- A 30 percent decrease in student failure rates.
- Increased graduation readiness, reducing the need for Credit Recovery programs at the Alternative Learning Center.

Josh Omang, the Associate Director of Engagement for BARR Center, also shared, "Perham Middle School has reported a significant decrease in failure rates so far this fall compared to last year, which is great news!"

"This has changed everything," Dr. Frink reflected. "Not just student attendance, not just grades, but the connectivity and how this building feels and functions on a day-to-day basis is absolutely different from where it was prior to BARR."

Fergus Falls Middle School – Now Beginning Their Second Year of the BARR Program

Fergus Falls Middle School, home to 590 students, is in its second year implementing the BARR program for grades 6–8.

Principal Ivan Hirst, now in his 20th year as a principal and his sixth year at Fergus Falls Middle School, says that as a former math teacher, he loves analyzing the data, trends, and statistics BARR provides. However, before adopting BARR, the school needed a systematic way to collect and act on student data, and BARR provides that system.

Before implementing the BARR program, sixth-grade counselor and current BARR Coordinator Tracy Grabowska, seventh- and eighth-grade counselor Alonna Johnson, and Dean of Students Matt Johnson met with Principal Jim Kennedy at Prairie Wind Middle School in Perham to observe BARR in action. The team also connected virtually with Horizon Middle School in Moorhead's BARR team. Impressed by what they saw, the Middle School Leadership team recommended bringing the program to the Fergus Falls Middle School.

"Sometimes when teachers hear about a new school initiative launching, they react with, 'Oh my gosh, another thing to do,'" Hirst said. "BARR is not another thing to do—it's doing what we already do, but differently and more effectively."

Fergus Falls Middle School BARR Leadership Team



Ivan Hirst
Middle School Principal
Fergus Falls Public Schools



Tracy Grabowska
6 Grade School Counselor and BARR Coordinator
Fergus Falls Public Schools



Alonna Johnson
7 -8 Grade School Counselor
Fergus Falls Public Schools



Matthew Johnson
Middle School Dean of Students
Fergus Falls Public Schools

Fergus Falls Middle School

DEMOGRAPHICS

School Type: Middle School Grades 6-8
Student Population: 600
Student Demographics:
- 84.6% White
- 3.3% Hispanic
- 3.5% American Indian
- 3% Black
- 5.6% Other/2+ Races

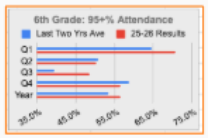
-18.6% Special Education
-35.8% Free & Reduced Meals

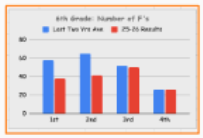
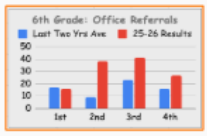
Years in BARR: 1st
Coordinator: Tracy Grabowska
Coordinator Email: tgrabowska@fergusotters.org
Principal: Ivan Hirst
Principal Email ihirst@fergusotters.org

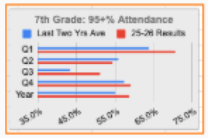




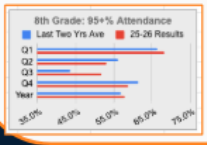

DATA










STRENGTHS

- More Positive School Climate for Staff and Students
- Focus on the relationship first, then behavior & academics
- A systemic positive approach to discuss students and support growth

BARR'S IMPACT

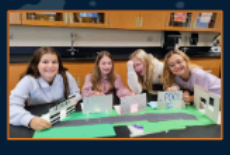
We have realized the following improvements in our school:

Improved Engagement with families in the form of Monthly MS Newsletter, Positive Postcards to students, and overall more phone calls/emails to parents.

I-Time Lessons have been impactful. Strong content, engaging for students and teachers, and students working together

Glow and Grow: **Celebrate Success** for Staff. ShoutOut to those finding success

Completed Two **Staff Surveys** this year to gather feedback about BARR

"The BARR program has provided the framework for our staff to constructively discuss students and strategically implement interventions to benefit the student in an area of need."

- Ivan Hirst
Middle School Principal, Fergus Falls Public School

In their first year, the BARR leadership team—comprising Hirst, Alonna Johnson, Matt Johnson, and sixth-grade counselor/BARR Coordinator Tracy Grabowska—met weekly with a dedicated BARR coach who challenged them to think differently.

Before BARR, teachers utilized common prep time, built into the master schedule, to attend twice-a-week meetings while students attended music or physical education classes. During these times,
teachers gathered to discuss students, but meetings often lacked clear resolution. "We
would share stories and common experiences with a student, but we really didn't move
to the solution or action plan phase," Hirst noted.

BARR provided the necessary structure. Using a centralized spreadsheet, staff track data similar to the Minnesota Early Indicator and Response System (MEIRS)—monitoring grades, attendance, and disciplinary referrals. The spreadsheet requires staff to start with a student's strengths and school connections before identifying a single target area for improvement. During structured Small Block meetings, every team member has an assigned role, including a timekeeper to keep the discussions on track.

Now, in year two, meetings have become significantly more efficient. Staff have shifted from lengthy narrative discussions to quickly pinpointing student concerns and creating targeted action and follow-up plans.

To further support student success, Hirst introduced a 22-minute daily advisory period for seventh- and eighth-graders. Advisory groups consist of 16 to 18 students intentionally arranged to foster positive relationships with peers and teachers. Advisors track their advisory students on the BARR spreadsheet that each teacher in the grade level has access to. "The rule for teachers during advisory is simple," said Hirst. "Go connect with students, sit with them, help them,check their grades and enjoy getting to know them."

By focusing on process over outcomes, Fergus Falls Middle School continues to refine its approach. As Hirst emphasizes, staying static means falling behind—and BARR offers the exact vehicle needed for continuous growth. “Now we have the data to show where students are performing and where there are opportunities to help them reach their full potential,” said Hirst. “It has really helped us focus on how we support students.”

What Does Year One of BARR Look Like for Parkers Prairie Public Schools?

Parkers Prairie Public Schools is also embarking on the journey to support its 245 students in grades 7–12 by implementing the BARR program. The driving force behind bringing BARR to Parkers Prairie was High School Principal Judah Burlingame. Coming from an Area Learning Center (ALC) background, Burlingame was accustomed to structured, collaborative environments where staff regularly met to discuss student progress and intervention strategies.

"When I came to Parkers Prairie, one of my first questions was what kind of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) program had been run here in the past," said Burlingame.

While the school had previously utilized various initiatives to help students with challenges, Burlingame noted that "nothing really stuck." Burlingame shared that Parkers Prairie has great students and families; however, he noticed that a few students were falling through the cracks—a problem compounded post-pandemic by online options.

Seeking a proven solution, Burlingame visited Battle Lake Public School to observe their K–12 BARR program in action. Seeing the results firsthand, he realized, "This is what I hoped for!"

Parkers Prairie Public Schools BARR Leadership Team



Judah Burlingame
High School Principal
Parkers Prairie Public Schools



Jessica Chouinard
High School Math Teacher and BARR Coordinator
Parkers Prairie Public Schools



Tara Pham
Mental Health Counselor
Parkers Prairie Public Schools



Emily Arens
High School English Teacher
Parkers Prairie Public Schools

To maximize the program’s reach, Parkers Prairie chose to roll out BARR to all students in grades 7–12 simultaneously. Joining Burlingame in leading the effort is BARR Coordinator Jessica Chouinard, who also brings a strong background in ALC and MTSS practices. Chouinard completed her training on-site when BARR representatives visited Parkers Prairie.

To prepare for the rollout, Burlingame, School Mental Health Counselor Tara Pham, and High School English Teacher, Emily Arens, attended the national BARR Conference in April.



At its core, BARR relies on teacher-led insights rather than administrative directives. "The teachers are the first ones who recognize there is an issue," explained Burlingame. "BARR was the perfect opportunity to build relationships with students and deliver interventions right where they need them most." Because implementation is still new, school leaders are adapting the rigorous BARR model to their specific staffing realities while avoiding burnout.

"We are crawling before we walk because this is brand new," said Burlingame. "It is a lot for staff right away." In a smaller school where every teacher instructs at least three grade levels and wears multiple hats, meeting fatigue is a real concern. Currently, grade-level "Small Block" teams meet once a month. Teachers also participate in "Big Block" meetings monthly—a step toward full implementation, even if staffing constraints make the standard BARR schedule challenging at first.

While it is still too early to track long-term academic or behavioral outcomes, the administration remains confident in the program's trajectory.

There is the strict BARR model, there is where I would like us to be, and then there is where we are now. Getting to where I would like to be will take some time," Burlingame shared. "The goal is that as teachers start seeing connections with students that we wouldn't normally see, the program will take off, and we will be right where we are supposed to be."

What began as a bold step by Perham and Battle Lake public schools has evolved into a regional movement across Otter Tail County, supported by the Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative. As schools like Fergus Falls refine their data-driven approaches and newcomers like Parkers Prairie lay their foundation, the BARR model continues to prove its core promise: when educators have the structure to truly see their students, entire school cultures transform. These area schools aren't just adopting a temporary program—they are embedding a lasting culture of empathy, connection, and success for every student who walks through their doors.

Stay tuned for the December Education edition of the Communicator! In December's issue, we will explore how the BARR program is helping teachers and students in other schools in our region.

FROM THE

Executive Director

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

Jeremy Kovash

Executive Director



The Power of Conversation and Civic Participation

Before becoming an administrator, I spent several years teaching U.S. History, U.S. Government, and Political Science. I loved those classes. Not necessarily because of the dates, historical figures, or even the Constitution itself, but because of the conversations. The discussions. The debates. And the opportunity to help young people understand that their voice matters.

As we approach another election, I find myself thinking about those classroom conversations. Across our region, communities will be making important decisions. Some will be electing school board members. Others will be considering school referendums and bond issues. All will have opportunities to choose individuals who represent them at the local, state, and national levels.

These decisions matter. And so does the process.

One of the things I tried to teach my students was that democracy doesn't require us to agree. In fact, it works best when we are willing to listen to perspectives different from our own, ask thoughtful questions, and engage in respectful dialogue.

I have tremendous respect for those who put their names on a ballot, particularly our local school board members. These are often thankless positions, filled with difficult decisions and competing perspectives. We don't have to agree with every decision to appreciate someone's willingness to serve.

My encouragement is simple. Be informed. Ask questions. Listen. Engage in the conversation. And vote.

Perhaps most importantly, remember that the person across the table who sees things differently isn't necessarily your opponent. They may simply be someone who cares just as deeply about their school, their children, and their community as you do.

Thank you for reading this issue of The Communicator.

Together We Achieve.



Classroom TO COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

JANE EASTES
Deputy
Executive Director

At its core, a whole-child approach to education recognizes that preparing students for the future requires more than academic instruction alone. As educational research builds, we have a clearer understanding that to truly thrive and develop future-ready skills, young people need learning environments that value them for who they are and help them see their future path. They need educational experiences rooted in relevance, meaning, and belonging. We hear this directly from the youth, too.

Recently, The Center for Rural Policy and Development (CRPD), one of Minnesota's premier sources of research, presented its findings on workforce pathways high school graduates in Greater Minnesota take after graduation. Their results carry profound implications for how we build supportive communities where youth choose to stay, contribute, and thrive. (Be sure to check out their full study report by region, along with a wonderful summary on the CRPD website.)

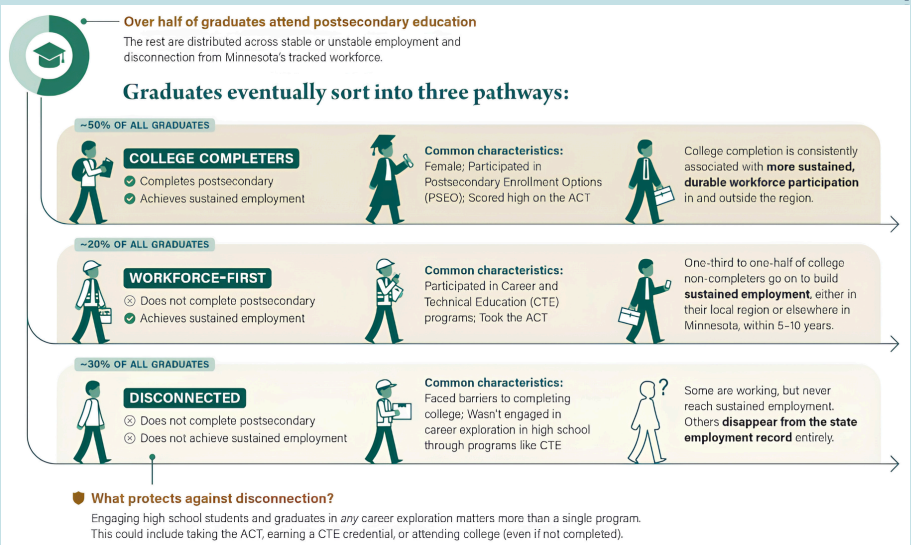
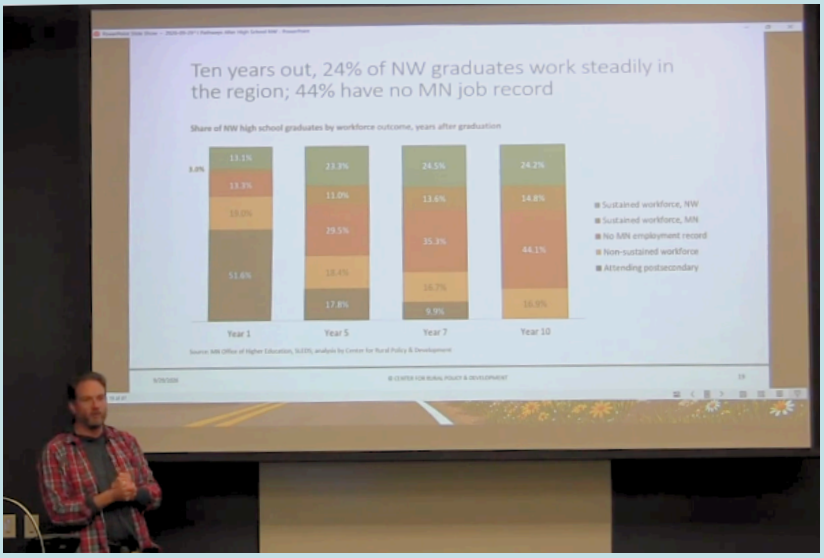
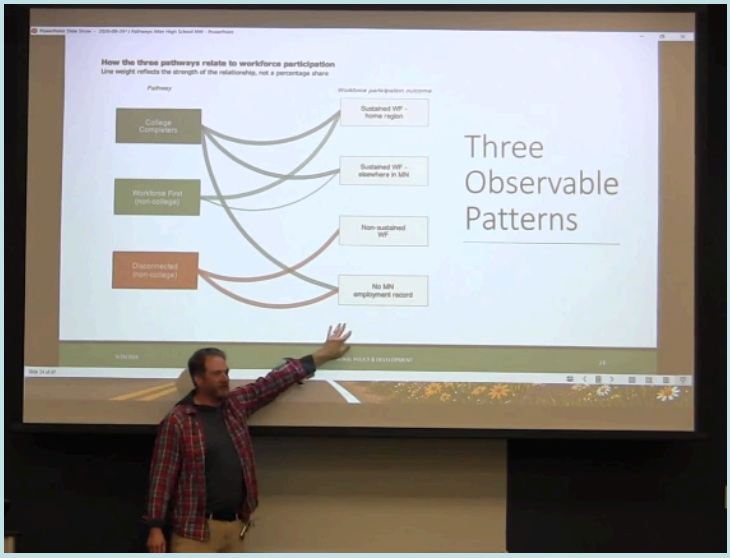


Image provided by The Center for Rural Policy and Development

Broadly, CRPD found that high school graduates tend to sort into three main pathways:

- **College Completers (~50%):** This group earns post-secondary credentials and is consistently associated with sustained workforce participation over many years, both within and outside the region.
- **Workforce-First (~20%):** These graduates do not complete post-secondary education, yet they achieve sustained, long-term workforce participation. Crucially, the data shows that most students in this group were actively engaged in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, participated in career planning, or took the ACT.
- **The Disconnected (~30%):** This group neither completes post-secondary education nor participates in high school career planning or CTE programs. While some work intermittently, they rarely achieve sustained employment, and many disappear from state employment records entirely. (Note: there is no data on the reason some disappear from state employment records. Some examples of reasons include joining the military or moving out of state, among others.)





Kelly Asche, Center for Rural Policy and Development Senior Researcher

CRPD's research appears to point to the fact that youth who are engaged in thinking about their future (attending CTE classes or taking the ACT) are more likely to stay and enter the workforce and civic life in the long term. It also suggests that the factors characterizing disconnected youth are identifiable while students are still in school.

It is encouraging that about 70% of our graduates find their niche in employment and civic life. Our goal now is to support them, so they choose to build their futures here in Minnesota. However, having nearly one in three graduates fall into the "disconnected" category is a stark reminder of what happens when students miss early engagement and meaningful connection.

We are not alone in asking how to prevent this disconnection. Nationally, more than 4.3 million young people (18-24) fall into the category of Disconnected Youth (often called Opportunity Youth). As CRPD points out, this represents a pool of potential talent and engagement currently left on the sidelines of our local communities.

Finding the right mix of interventions and building a structure to use them is the challenging part that follows the research. It can take years, and experimentation to find an effective set of strategies. This is especially true when our goal is to empower 100% of our graduates to feel they belong, can build meaning and purpose into the future, and feel a sense of well-being in their lives.

In this edition of the Communicator, many of the articles follow the journeys of our schools and the communities beside them working to implement ways that support all students.

- Be sure to read about the experiential learning opportunities of the Science and Nature conference and Climb Theater's performances that teach life skills and positive behaviors.
- The BARR program, which develops the infrastructure to deliver a full system of support to each student, is in the early years of adoption in several schools, but already you'll read about positive outcomes.
- Lavyne Rada has a great article about how we are strengthening our CTE programs across the state with teacher and leadership development programs.
- Finally consider joining our COMPASS team in the Lakes Learning Collaborative, a regional community of practice offering connection with fellow educators and practical and effective steps to focus on your own data, align your priorities and develop a plan.

CURIOUS MINDS



Explore at the First Science & Nature Conference

By: Monica Thompson, Coordinator of Technology Integration and Academic Challenges at Lakes Country Service Cooperative

A light mist hung over the prairie, but it did little to slow the curiosity of fourth- and fifth-grade students arriving at the Prairie Wetlands Learning Center in Fergus Falls. For students from Henning, Breckenridge, Fergus Falls, Detroit Lakes, and Parkers Prairie, the September visit offered a chance to step outside their everyday classroom routines and explore science together.

Each student received a nature pouch containing a notebook, pencil, and magnifying glass to use during sessions and while exploring the prairie. With tools to record observations and take a closer look, students were ready to investigate the world around them.

At the first Science & Nature Conference, the prairie became a place to observe, experiment, build, and ask questions. Learning took shape through hands-on experiences that invited students to look more closely at everything from the soil beneath their feet to the energy that powers their lives.

The Science Museum of Minnesota challenged students to think like engineers, giving them opportunities to test ideas and work through problems. The Bell Museum brought a playful approach to learning about amphibians through the MN Frog and Toad Olympics, connecting science with movement and discovery.



Prairie Wetlands Learning Center staff helped students explore the landscape through Weather Watchers, Nature Journal, Bat Adventures, and Explore the Prairie. These sessions made room for a different pace of learning: slowing down, observing carefully, and paying attention to details that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Other sessions connected students with forces and materials they encounter every day. The Minnesota State Energy Center of Excellence led activities exploring electricity and solar energy. The Center for Rural Education in Science & Technology (CREST STEM) invited students to investigate MN Beneath Our Feet through soil sampling. Additional hands-on experiments gave students more opportunities to test their thinking and make discoveries alongside classmates.

Across the sessions, students had opportunities to contribute in different ways by building, observing, asking questions, or sharing what they noticed. Teachers, chaperones, and presenters supported those experiences, helping students connect classroom learning with things they could see, touch, and investigate for themselves.

Sponsored by Lakes Country Service Cooperative and the MN STEM Ecosystem, the conference brought schools and science educators together for a day of exploration. The presenters, Prairie Wetlands staff, teachers, and chaperones helped make that day possible. For the students gathered on the misty prairie, there was an invitation at every turn: look closer, ask another question, and see what you can discover.

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Tremco Roofing and Ehlers Collaborate for a Seminar on Facility and Budget Planning

Tremco Roofing and Ehlers recently collaborated with the Cooperative Purchasing Connection (CPC) to conduct an enlightening seminar on facility and budget planning at the Lakes Country Service Cooperative (LCSC) on Tuesday, October 20th.

The interactive lunch session brought together about a dozen regional school business managers to delve into critical strategies for long-term facilities maintenance (LTFM), accurate facility assessments, and capital budgeting. Designed to support both new and veteran district leadership, the presentation highlighted innovative funding and tax management strategies successfully utilized by school districts across Minnesota.

Attendees walked away with actionable insights and enhanced confidence in navigating complex capital budgeting processes, further backed by the administrative assurance of Tremco's competitively solicited CPC contract.

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.

CPC VENDOR LIST

Partner with Trusted Local Vendors

CPC Cooperative Purchasing Connection



Discover Our Vendors



Growing Leaders, Strengthening Systems, Transforming Communities

By: Tamara Uselman
Associate Director of Collaborative Programs at LCSC

Someone wise once said, “democracies don't fail because people disagree; they fail when people quit talking to each other.” Our world today benefits from learning even more civil discussion skills - skills that allow a hotbed of ideas to be discussed among people who hold divergent ideas. The Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative is partnering to increase area leaders’ capacity for civil dialogue through seven days of intense skill-based training. The Science Museum of Minnesota is providing the training.

As of today, the cohort, made up of 27 people including teachers, non-profit staff, and county staff, has participated in three days of training, held at the West Central Initiative building. How effective has the training been so far, with four more days to go?

Results from an anonymous survey at the end of Day #3 showed 23 percent of participants rated their experience “excellent,” and another 77 percent rated it “outstanding.” Comments in the survey included the following:

- This is the most included I've ever felt at a PD event and I want that for my staff and students every day they are at school.
- Well thought out. Great pacing. Grounded activities with fantastic scaffolding
- I felt very comfortable and welcomed into the group, while also feeling challenged and having time to work through those challenges.
- It was very eye-opening to learn and grow in such a short amount of time. I have ideas to use in my classroom, in the community groups I’m in, and in my personal life. It was also time for me to invest in myself and be away from the phone/computer and learn to slow down.
- This is one of the most thoughtful and intentionally planned learning sessions I've been a part of in my 23 years of education. Every practice, activity, research shared, reflection, and wrap-around had intention.
- I can't think of a person or group of people for whom this training wouldn't be a good opportunity.
- I can't think of anything that can be improved upon; the program was facilitated in a manner that was unpredictable and integrated information with practice. It's not something I was used to, and I feel the neuroplasticity working. My brain is very busy right now, and thanks for a great three days - looking forward to November!



Teaching Kids to Care for the Environment, One Play at a Time

By: Rick Schara, Community Engagement Officer at West Central Initiaitive

Students gather to watch a play. A character on stage struggles with what to do with an empty plastic bottle. Should it go in the recycling bin? Or the trash? Can it be reused?

For the students watching, the answer might seem obvious. But that moment offers something more than a reminder about recycling. It gives young people a chance to see a decision unfold, consider why it matters, and help a character make the right choice.

CLIMB Theatre

That's the power of theater, says Sara Cronk, managing director of **CLIMB Theatre, Inc.**, a Twin Cities-based organization that uses performance to teach life skills and encourage positive behavior.

"It's fun, and it's a good delivery method for a message," Cronk said. "It lets the audience see the scenarios play out. So, they get to see a character that they can relate to, go through this decision-making process, and learn all about it."

Thanks to a **grant from West Central Initiative**, students at three elementary schools in Barnesville, Fergus Falls, and Starbuck will have an opportunity to experience learning firsthand through CLIMB Theatre's environmental responsibility programming this school year.

Learning the Why, Not Just the What

CLIMB Theatre has spent decades bringing educational messages to young audiences. Its mission centers on creating customized assemblies, classes, and workshops that build skills such as empathy, perseverance, ownership, well-being, equity, and self-regulation.

Environmental responsibility fits naturally into that approach.

Rather than simply telling students what they should do, the theater uses characters and relatable situations to help them understand the reasons behind their choices. Students become observers, problem-solvers, and sometimes even teachers as they watch the action unfold.

Cronk says young people may already know how to recycle or understand some basic environmental practices. When a character struggles with a decision, students can explain what the character should do and why.

That participation reinforces what they know while helping them recognize that their actions matter.

“We don’t just teach what, we teach why,” Cronk says. “Why should we care about the environment? Why do we reduce, reuse, recycle?”

It’s a simple distinction, but an important one. Knowing the steps is useful. Understanding why those steps matter can help turn knowledge into habits.

And when those lessons reach children at school, they are often brought home, too.

The goal is to make environmental responsibility something students understand and practice, rather than just another subject they hear about once in a classroom.

Although CLIMB Theatre is based in the Twin Cities, its performers travel throughout Minnesota and other states in the Midwest.

For the West Central Initiative grant, CLIMB’s outreach team contacted eligible schools across the west central Minnesota region and had no trouble finding partners who were eager to bring theatre to their students.

A typical performance is tailored to different age groups from kindergarten through sixth grade. So, while the message may be the same, the performance speaks to the age group.



Sara Cronk, managing director of CLIMB Theatre, Inc.

Partnerships Make the Difference

For a nonprofit arts organization, delivering that experience takes more than talented performers. It also requires relationships with schools, community organizations, and funders willing to invest in the work.

Cronk describes CLIMB Theatre as a resourceful organization that combines educational programming with a variety of funding sources. Grants, such as the one from West Central Initiative, are especially valuable because they connect funding with a specific community need. Schools receive programming for their students, while the organizations supporting the effort help promote environmental themes.

That kind of partnership is important to West Central Initiative’s work throughout its service area. Supporting community well-being means recognizing that positive change comes through many approaches, including education, the arts, and opportunities for young people to learn by doing.



Theater may not be the first thing people think of when they consider environmental education. But it offers something different from a lecture or a list of instructions: a story, a character, a choice, and a chance for an audience to think through the consequences.

For Cronk, that's the heart of CLIMB Theatre's work.

The organization wants students to leave with more than a set of directions. It wants them to understand the reasons behind the actions they take, whether those actions involve caring for the environment, treating others with respect, or learning to manage their emotions.

The lesson reaches beyond the stage. When children understand why something matters, they have a stronger foundation for making thoughtful choices in their classrooms, their homes, and their communities.

And sometimes, helping create a better world starts with something as ordinary as deciding where to put an empty plastic bottle.



About Rick Schara

Rick serves as West Central Initiative's Community Engagement Officer. He convenes regional partners for collective action to ensure their legacy of giving continues to grow and create new opportunities across the region.

Congrats!

AMY LOHSE

RECEIVES CERTIFIED PROFESSIONAL PUBLIC BUYER DESIGNATION



Amy Lohse serves as a Procurement Specialist at LCSC.

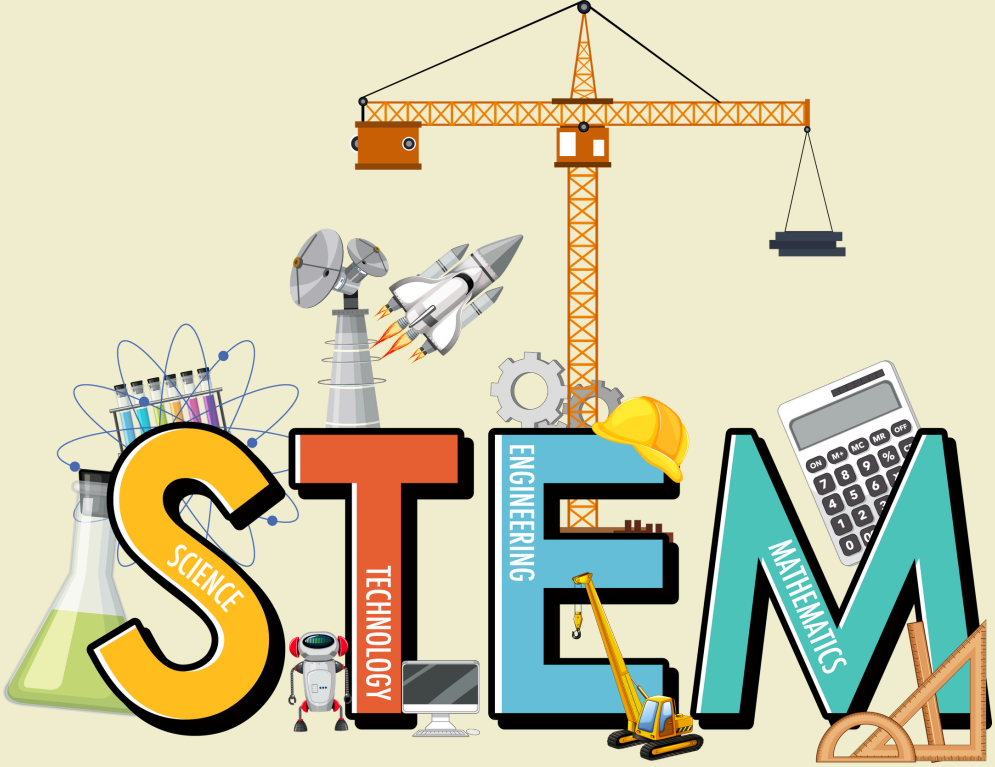
Earning the Certified Professional Public Buyer (CPPB®) designation is a major milestone.

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CPC Cooperative Purchasing Connection



Bring STEM Learning to Life with Classroom Kits and Visits

By: Monica Thompson, Coordinator of Technology Integration and Academic Challenges at Lakes Country Service Cooperative

Hands-on learning gives students opportunities to ask questions, test ideas, and discover how science connects to the world around them. Lakes Country Service Cooperative helps teachers bring those experiences into their classrooms through a variety of STEM kits available for free checkout to educators in our region.

The kits provide resources for engaging students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics through exploration and problem-solving. Teachers can use them to support classroom lessons while encouraging students to work together and try new ideas.

The newest additions include Kid Wind kits, solar kits, and Snatom kits. These resources offer opportunities to explore wind and solar energy and investigate the building blocks of matter. By making kits available for checkout, Lakes Country helps teachers introduce hands-on activities without purchasing the materials themselves.

Lakes Country is also excited to partner with West Central Initiative to offer classroom visits focused on renewable energy. Ryan Masog., a Minnesota GreenCorps member specializing in renewable energy, is eager to work with teachers and students to explore topics such as wind and solar power. Ryan offers lessons that encourage students' curiosity about renewable energy.



Teachers interested in checking out STEM kits or learning more about renewable energy classroom visits are encouraged to contact, **Monica Thompson** at Lakes Country Service Cooperative for availability and additional information.

Strengthening Career and Technical Education

Through Teacher and Leader Development

By: Lavyne Rada, Associate Director of Teacher Recruitment & Retention at Lakes Country Service Cooperative

Lakes Country Service Cooperative is working in collaboration with the other Minnesota Service Cooperatives to support career and technical education (CTE) teachers and educational leaders across Minnesota through two statewide professional learning initiatives.

This October, career and technical education (CTE) teachers and school leaders from across Minnesota gathered in St. Cloud for professional learning, collaboration, and networking through two programs: the CTE Teacher Induction Program (CTE TIP) and the LEAD CTE Network. While the programs serve different audiences, both focus on strengthening CTE by investing in the people who make high-quality programs possible.

CTE Teacher Induction Program: Building on Experience and Expertise

Teachers entering career and technical education bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to their classrooms. Some transition from successful careers in business and industry, bringing firsthand expertise in the technical skills and workplace expectations students are preparing to encounter. Others enter CTE after teaching in another content area, bringing established instructional practices and experience supporting student learning.

Regardless of their pathway into CTE, all teachers benefit from opportunities to continue learning, refining their instructional practices, and navigating the unique components of CTE programs.

CTE Teacher Induction Program (CTE TIP), a program coordinated by Lakes Country Service Cooperative, builds on the strengths and experiences teachers already possess while providing individualized mentoring, professional learning, and connections to a statewide network of educators. Since its inception, the program has supported more than 500 CTE teachers across Minnesota. CTE TIP is funded through the Teacher Mentorship and Retention Grant Program, managed by the Minnesota Department of Education's Educator Workforce and Development Center.

On October 4–5, early-career teachers and experienced mentors gathered in St. Cloud for the program's annual Induction Seminar. Participants explored the foundations of comprehensive CTE programs, effective instructional methods, classroom and laboratory safety, career exploration, work-based learning, and Minnesota teacher licensure.



Beyond instructional strategies and resources, participants consistently identify the relationships they develop as one of the program's greatest benefits. As one teacher shared:
"*I liked knowing that I was not alone and everyone's path is very unique. It was great to get to know other people in the same content area and also people who were not in the same content area but who were part of CTE and just beginning or changing their career path like I did.*"

Another participant reflected on the program's impact: "*There were so many things I didn't realize I needed to know to be successful in my role as a teacher. I found the entire TIP program extremely beneficial.*"

The seminar marked the beginning of a yearlong experience that includes continued mentoring, virtual professional learning, and opportunities to collaborate with teachers across Minnesota. By recognizing teachers' existing expertise while supporting their continued development, CTE TIP helps educators build confidence, strengthen instruction, and remain successful in the profession.

LEAD CTE Network: Empowering Educational Leaders to Transform CTE

Strong CTE programs require more than effective classroom instruction. They also depend on school leaders who understand the unique structures, opportunities, and resources needed to sustain high-quality programs.

The LEAD CTE Network, a project of the Minnesota Service Cooperatives' CTE Consortium Grant, brings together superintendents, principals, business managers, counselors, curriculum leaders, and other educational leaders to strengthen their capacity to support and expand CTE opportunities.

On October 5–6, LEAD CTE participants gathered in St. Cloud for their fall conference. The two-day experience provided a foundation in CTE programming while examining how local workforce needs, educational systems, and innovative practices can inform decisions about program development and improvement.







Participants heard from Luke Greiner, a regional labor market analyst with the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, about labor market signals and career pathways shaping Minnesota's workforce. Additional sessions highlighted innovative approaches to school scheduling, teacher licensure, middle school CTE programming, and funding.

Through discussions of systems thinking, work-based learning, CTE funding resources, and teacher licensure, participants explored how decisions made at the district and building levels influence the quality and sustainability of CTE programs.
The conference concluded with participants identifying goals to guide their work throughout the school year. These goals reflected a commitment to translating learning into action, including:

- "Connect with the CTE Teacher group to determine next best steps to support program development"
- "Dig into data from DEED to increase relevant partnerships"
- "Build stronger community for CTE teachers"



These priorities reflect the network's emphasis on using data to inform decisions, strengthening relationships between educators and industry partners, and creating systems that support CTE teachers and programs. The LEAD CTE Network will continue connecting educational leaders through virtual learning, collaboration, and additional in-person experiences throughout the year.

Investing in Teachers and Leaders to Strengthen CTE

CTE TIP and the LEAD CTE Network demonstrate LCSC's commitment to strengthening career and technical education through comprehensive professional support.

By investing in both the teachers who deliver CTE instruction and the educational leaders who support their programs, LCSC and its statewide partners are helping schools create the conditions for high-quality, sustainable CTE experiences.

Together, these initiatives support a shared goal: ensuring Minnesota students have access to meaningful career exploration, technical skill development, and opportunities that prepare them to be career- and college-ready.

Learn more: Visit **mncte.org** to explore CTE professional learning, teacher preparation, and leadership development opportunities.

Meet our new Ex-Officio Board Member



Shannon Hunstad is an experienced educational leader currently serving as the Superintendent of the Dilworth-Glyndon-Felton School District since July 2021, where he focuses on building strong community relationships and fiscal responsibility.

With a career spanning over three decades in education, his previous leadership roles include Superintendent and K-12 Principal at Lancaster School District, Activities Director, High School Principal, and Director of Educational Services at Pillager Public School.

He holds a Superintendent Licensure and K-12 Principal Licensure from St. Cloud State University, a Master's in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of St. Thomas, and a Bachelor of Science in Physical Education from Minnesota State University Moorhead.

Alongside his administrative duties, Shannon actively serves on regional service cooperative boards, educational boards, and district committees, demonstrating a lifelong commitment to student-centered learning.



Curiosity and Teamwork

Kick Off a New Knowledge Bowl Season

By: Monica Thompson, Coordinator of Technology Integration and Academic Challenges at Lakes Country Service Cooperative

MINNESOTA SERVICE COOPERATIVE
KNOWLEDGE BOWL

A challenging question. A quick exchange of ideas. A teammate ready to buzz in. Knowledge Bowl gives students a chance to experience the excitement of finding an answer and the satisfaction of figuring it out together. This fall, Lakes Country Service Cooperative kicked off its fifth and sixth grade and Junior High Knowledge Bowl seasons. Each team will participate in three meets, providing opportunities to build confidence, strengthen teamwork, and connect with students from schools across the region.

Now entering its third year, the fifth and sixth grade program continues to grow, with 14 schools and 35 teams participating this season.

For younger students, these meets offer an introduction to academic competition and a chance to discover how their individual strengths contribute to a team. The junior high program includes 35 schools and 115 teams, continuing a strong tradition of learning and friendly competition.

Knowledge Bowl challenges teams with questions covering subjects such as math, science, history, literature, and geography. During written rounds, teammates work together to discuss questions and choose their answers. Oral rounds bring a different challenge: students must listen closely, think quickly, and buzz in when they are ready to respond.



How would you do?

Here is a sample fifth and sixth-grade written question:

The product is 73,950. The multiplier is 75. What is the multiplicand?
A. 741
B. 986
C. 830
D. 998
E. 864
The correct answer is B. 986.

Junior High students might encounter this question during an oral round:

The majority of asteroids are C-type, so called because they have relatively large amounts of what element?

The answer is carbon, but during a meet, students must recall it and buzz in before another team does. Beyond the questions and scores, Knowledge Bowl is about learning to rely on one another. One student may recognize a science term, while another sees how to solve a math problem. Teammates practice sharing ideas, listening carefully, and trusting what each person brings to the table. An unfamiliar question can also spark curiosity that lasts beyond the competition.

As the new season begins, the growing fifth and sixth grade program is opening that experience to more young learners. With three meets ahead for every team, students have plenty of opportunities to tackle a tough question, encourage a teammate, and discover just how much they can accomplish together.

2-1-1: Your Community's Connection to Help.

211

Get Connected. Get Help.™



When residents face challenges like job loss or need senior support, 2-1-1 is a free, confidential service that provides 24/7 access to essential health and human services programs via phone, text, and online chat.

For schools, 2-1-1 streamlines access to your vital resources, making it easier for you to find the help you need.

By promoting 2-1-1, you empower your community with a single point of contact for food, housing, healthcare, employment, and more. Let's amplify this lifeline together.

UNITED WAY

211
Get Connected. Get Help.™



How Gen Z Use the Library

By: Katelyn Boyer
Adult Services and Reference Librarian
Fergus Falls Public Library

I recently attended a webinar about how Gen Z uses libraries. The presenters, Professor Kathi Inman Berens and Professor Rachel Noorda, both from Portland State University, used their research from 2022 and 2025 to inform their presentation "Gen Z and Libraries." Unless cited otherwise, the statistics in this column are from their presentation. Gen Z is the generation after Millennials and includes anyone born between 1997 and 2012. This generation is currently 14 through 29 years old. I found the information they were presenting fascinating, and it fits with how we are seeing Gen Z use the Fergus Falls Public Library.

Gen Z are big library users, and their library use is growing. Berens and Noorda found that 67% of Gen Z visited the library in 2025, up from 54% in 2022. On average, every day, 450 people visit the Fergus Falls Public Library, Monday through Saturday, and this number has increased from previous years. We had our busiest summer in recent record this year, with over 31,000 visits to the library between June & July.

We see many Gen Zers using the Fergus Falls Public Library to study. Earlier this month, on a Friday morning, I counted eight tables and couches, in just one portion of the library, being used by different groups to study and work. The first week of classes this fall, we saw high schoolers spending time at the library during their study periods and after school, and college students getting a jump on their assignments. The library has study rooms, conference rooms, and a large community room, all available free of charge. These spaces can be used by individuals or groups. They're perfect for studying, group projects, and working remotely. You can reserve a room in advance--at least the day prior to using it--or you can come into the library and use any of the rooms that are not in use.

One way the library welcomes Gen Z students studying is with Random Acts of Snacks. This program is supported by the Friends of the Library. Our Youth Services Librarian, Arielle McCune, wheels around a cart providing snacks for high school and college students studying in the library.



Many Gen Zers visit the library for "Me Time", and research shows that 85% of Gen Zers wish they had more third places--separate from work and home--where they can relax. Unstructured time in the library is part of the appeal for Gen Z. In addition to enclosed study rooms, the library has tables, booths, and comfortable seating throughout the building. We're heading into the cozy months, so I recommend our fireplace reading lounge for a warm, restorative fall and winter atmosphere. Likewise, our reading garden is a tranquil place to spend your time during the spring and summer months. Loneliness is pervasive for 18- 24-year-olds; 79% of those in this age category reported feeling lonely. Young adults are twice as likely as seniors to feel lonely. The library is a great place to spend your time while also being in community with others.

Gen Z are readers, and the number of Gen Z that identify as readers is increasing. In 2025, 66% of Gen Z identified as readers, up from 52% in 2022.



Borrowing books is Gen Z's #1 use of the library. Gen Z are digital natives, meaning they've always had the option to read on digital devices. However, their favorite format to read is print books. Despite this preference, they are agile and will switch off between all formats according to what is available. The Fergus Falls Public Library provides access to print books and magazines, audiobooks on CD, DVDs and other physical formats, as well as access to digital items. For ebooks and audiobooks, the library has two apps: Libby and Hoopla. For physical items not available at the Fergus Falls Public Library (FFPL), you can have books sent to FFPL from almost any library in Minnesota, for free, using MNLINK interlibrary loan.

Gen Z is an ethics and values based generation. They use social media and AI, but trust it less than other generations. For Gen Z, librarians are a trusted source to discover books, and libraries are Gen Z's second most-used way to get books (bookstores are #1). Libraries are part of Gen Z's turning toward the physical and local. It is heartwarming to see this generation so fully embrace the library.



Katelyn Boyer is the Adult Services Librarian at the **Fergus Falls Public Library**

NEW OPPORTUNITY!

Lakes Learning Collaborative

Bring a Challenge. Build a Plan. Create Impact.

The Lakes Learning Collaborative is a regional Community of Practice where school and district teams work together to address an area of growth in their program.

Review data → Set goals → Build an action plan → Collaborate with regional peers

Over three day-long sessions, teams will develop practical strategies, identify next steps, and receive support from both regional colleagues and the LCSC COMPASS Team. Dedicated time to reflect, plan, connect, and align district and school priorities, with aligned support offered between sessions.

Agenda:

9:00-11:30 The Impact Accelerator
The focus is on YOUR priorities, with zero wasted effort, radical clarity and built-in momentum to break massive initiatives for adults into highly motivating wins that ultimately positively impact all students.

11:30-12:30 Lunch

12:30-2:00 Regional Roundtable:
Dedicated, collaborative time, to gain fresh perspectives, and support from area districts/schools to focus on growth opportunities in your district.

LAKES COUNTRY Service Cooperative
Together we achieve

What You Will Leave With:

- A clear focus area based on your own data
- A Theory of Action that connects your actions to results for students
- Measurable goals and an action plan
- Connections with colleagues across the region

November 2nd, 2026
February 1st, 2027
May 3rd, 2027

9AM-2PM

Sign Up Today!

Registration

Who Should Attend:

District and school leadership teams of 2 to 5 people

(Districts may register more than one team, and individual schools may register their own team.)

Superintendents, Principals, and Curriculum Leaders

We invite you and your school or district leadership team to the Lakes Learning Collaborative starting on November 2, 2026, from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at Lakes Country Service Cooperative, **1001 E Mount Faith, Fergus Falls, MN 56537**

- This opportunity provides dedicated time and support to advance your current priorities. Whether you need to identify a focus or strengthen an existing goal, you'll review your data, develop an action plan, and collaborate with regional colleagues and the LCSC COMPASS Team.
- Additional sessions are planned for **February 1 and May 3, 2027**.
- Questions about who should attend or how this connects to your work? Contact Staci Allmaras at sallmaras@lcsc.org.

AESA Executives in Residence:

Learning, Connections, and Systems Thinking

By: Staci Allmaras, Director of School and Youth Engagement at Lakes Country Service Cooperative

Over the past year, I had the opportunity to participate in the AESA Executives in Residence (EIR) Program, a national leadership experience for emerging educational service agency leaders. The experience included national conferences, advocacy and policy experiences, executive mentoring, and monthly learning around organizational management, governance, talent development, entrepreneurship, collaborative leadership, and community engagement.

A highlight for me was spending a week in residency at Puget Sound Educational Service District (ESD) in Seattle. I was able to step inside another educational service agency and learn alongside their leadership team—seeing how they think about strategy, culture, partnerships, sustainability, and their role within a much larger educational and community system.

One area I was especially interested in throughout the EIR experience was systems work. At Puget Sound ESD, and through learning from other agencies across the country, I had the opportunity to think more deeply about what it looks like for an ESA to work beyond individual programs and services. How do we bring the right people together around a shared challenge? How do we use data to better understand what is happening? How do we connect people, resources, and efforts that may currently be working separately? And how do we build capacity so that the work can continue and grow?



From left: Joan Wade, Ed.D., Executive Director of AESA; Staci Allmaras, Director of School and Youth Engagement at Lakes Country Service Cooperative

Those questions connected closely to how I think about LCSC and the unique role service cooperatives can play. We can provide great programs and services while also serving as a connector, convener, and systems partner for our schools and communities.

LCSC is built around innovative programs and services, and this experience challenged me to think more deeply about what innovation looks like for us moving forward—how we move beyond individual programs and ideas to build the partnerships, structures, and systems that allow innovation to grow, connect, and create lasting impact.

The experience also gave me an opportunity to look at LCSC from the outside in. I came home with new ideas and questions, but also a greater appreciation for what we have built and the expertise that exists across our organization. I also came home with a national network of ESA leaders I can continue to learn from and connect with our work.

I am incredibly grateful to LCSC and our Board of Directors for investing in my professional growth and giving me the opportunity to participate. I see this experience as more than an investment in my own leadership. It is an opportunity to bring new relationships, perspectives, systems thinking, and possibilities back to LCSC and to the schools and communities we serve.

Calm Minds learn Better



By: Tamara Uselman
Otter Tail Family Services
Collaborative Coordinator

OTTER TAIL
FAMILY SERVICES
COLLABORATIVE

In a proactive effort to bolster mindfulness and improve emotional well-being of our youngest learners, the Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative (OTFSC) is supporting up to ten pilot sites in deploying Inner Explorer, a leading daily mindfulness software platform designed for PreK-12 environments.

The initiative targets the core goals of the Collaborative, which focuses on increasing academic engagement, improving emotional well-being, and reducing risk behaviors among local children and youth. By integrating Inner Explorer's evidence-based platform into early childhood school days, the Collaborative aims to provide pilot sites with a daily "plug-and-play" mindfulness program that helps tackle chronic stress and reduce behavioral disruptions by teaching students skills in self-regulating.

Inner Explorer delivers a 5 to 10-minute daily audio-guided mindfulness practice in both English and Spanish. The platform requires almost no planning time from educators or site coordinators and focuses on building core executive functions like attention, memory, and impulse control.

National data from schools utilizing the software indicates substantial benefits, including up to a 60% reduction in behavioral issues and improved academic engagement.

"By facilitating the rollout of Inner Explorer at up to ten pilot locations, we are directly investing in preventive health and mental health practices for our youth," a representative from the Collaborative noted. "This tier-one intervention helps create calmer, more focused environments where kids can thrive both emotionally and academically."

In addition to classroom use, the program includes an integrated component that lets families access mindfulness practices at home, extending stress-reduction tools to parents and caregivers and creating a more holistic support ecosystem.

The Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative believes the launch of these ten pilot sites marks a major step forward in embedding proactive mental wellness strategies into the daily routines of local youth.

Contact the **Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative Coordinator** for more information



Traveling Tree House Brings a Summer of Learning, Books, and Adventure to Local Communities

By: Jen Jabas, Executive Director
at United Way Lakes & Prairie

This summer, children across the region attended the Traveling Tree House for a summer filled with stories, creativity, discovery, and plenty of fun.

Presented by United Way Lakes and Prairie, the Traveling Tree House brought free, 75-minute literacy experiences directly into local parks and communities throughout the summer. From June 8 through August 14, Traveling Tree House teachers led children through interactive activities, story time, crafts, hands-on learning, and themed adventures, all while helping children discover the joy of reading.

The impact this summer was made possible by a simple idea: bring the books, the learning, and the fun directly to children where they live and play.

A Summer of Stories and Discovery

Over the course of the 10-week program, the Traveling Tree House visited 14 communities and parks, providing and serving approximately 150-200 children each week, giving children throughout the region a consistent opportunity to learn, explore, and connect with others during the summer months.

The learning didn't stop when the session ended. Each child received a gently used book of their choice to take home after every visit, putting books directly into the hands of young readers and giving families another opportunity to read together.

This summer, the Traveling Tree House distributed approximately 2,000 books to children in our communities.

Every week brought a new theme and a new opportunity for children to explore their imaginations. From Pete the Cat and puppets to generosity, persistence, ingenuity, and sportsmanship, the themes encouraged children to think creatively, try something new, and learn through play.

More Than a Summer Program

The Traveling Tree House is about more than keeping children busy during the summer. It creates positive experiences around reading and learning while helping families access books and educational activities close to home.

For children, a weekly visit might mean discovering a new favorite story, creating a craft, making a new friend, or proudly taking a book home to read. For parents and caregivers, it provides a free opportunity to support their children's learning in a welcoming community setting.





United Way Lakes and Prairie invests in programs like the Traveling Tree House because youth opportunity begins with giving children the experiences, resources, and encouragement they need to grow and succeed. When children have access to books, caring educators, and opportunities to learn outside the classroom, they are building confidence and developing skills that can support them well beyond the summer.

Thank you to the families who joined us, the communities that welcomed us, the teachers who made each session special, and the donors and partners who helped make free summer literacy programming possible.

Together, we are United for Reading, and UNITED is the WAY we are creating opportunities for children to learn, grow, and thrive.

To learn more about United Way Lakes and Prairie and the programs made possible through community support, visit www.uwlp.org.



BRIAN SKOGEN consulting

SCHOOL CRISIS RESPONSE & RECOVERY

2 Day Training with Brian Skogen SW/WC MN SCRT Coordinator & Suicide Prevention Specialist

This two-day training is designed to develop a Regional School Crisis Response Team that would be available to respond to school tragedies within their region.

This training reflects the three most common phases of a crisis: pre-crisis planning, acute crisis response and post crisis activities. Participants of this training are introduced to the CISM framework and specific intervention techniques that can easily be applied within the school setting. Participants will be given opportunities to explore the elements of effective crisis management through multiple group activities. This course is 14 contact hours.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- Nature of school crisis and traumatic stress on learning.
- Major components of crisis management.
- Specific goals of crisis intervention and
- crisis management.
- Standard of care as it relates to school crisis management.
- CISM (Critical Incident Stress Management) as a model of crisis intervention.
- Unique role and needs of the school staff.
- Group intervention techniques for students and staff.
- Protocol used for small and large incidents.

WHY THIS COURSE?

The training is intended for those who will actually serve on the SCRT. School administrators must be supportive of the team and understand their role, but they typically don't attend this training.

- School Social Workers
- School Psychologists
- Other school mental health professionals
- School Counselors
- School Nurses

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LCSC COMMUNICATOR

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