



Dr. Teri Staloch, Superintendent
Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools
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Back in 2009 Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools (PLSAS) opened a first-of-its kind school in our district - one with a unique setting and approach designed to meet and support the changing needs of students. Now, more than a decade later, hundreds of Bridges Area Learning Center (ALC) students have earned their high school diploma, thanks to their own hard work and our talented teaching and support staff.

What started in small office spaces in the Northgate Center in Prior Lake has now flourished and developed into a high school program focused on personalizing student learning, strengthening, and enhancing connections to school, as well as focusing on a vital aspect of student academic success: social and emotional wellness.

Each time I visit Bridges I am struck by the sense of belonging students have in their school. Led by Bridges ALC Coordinator, Dave Brown, students and staff are a tight-knit community of learners where instruction is adapted to the needs of the student. The flexible approach to teaching and learning has been a key to student success.

Community support has also played a large role in the success of Bridges' students. From the very beginning, Prior Lake Rotary Club members have volunteered their time, offering one-on-one mentorship through the STRIVE program that supports students by fostering positive relationships with adults to help them navigate the complexities of school and life.

Bridges experienced two significant changes starting in the 2019-2020 school year. The first was designing and moving into a brand-new school, thanks to the support of our community through the successful passing of the 2017 referendum. Today Bridges is located near the middle school campus in a school that was designed specifically for multiple uses and student choice, with open spaces, flexible furniture, and opportunities for collaborative student learning and socialization.

In the 2020-2021 school year, Bridges adopted a new learning model for part of the school day called Project Based Learning (PBL). PBL focuses on tapping into student interest and passion while working with a teacher as a project manager. Students work through a project design process that allows them to display their learning and knowledge of academic standards. In this way, when students have choice in their learning and work on relevant and meaningful topics, engagement happens in a deeper and more consistent way.

This change in Bridges teaching and learning was a result of three years of studying PBL in partner schools, as well as securing funding support through EdVisions. Thanks to grant donations, we have been able to accomplish staff professional development as well as

purchase equipment and tools that support projects with high student interest such as a kiln, heat press and laser engraver.

The Bridges team helps to meet the needs of our students to help sustain their progress and reach their full potential. For the last thirteen years, we have worked with area students to help them graduate and move on to the next steps of their lives. Whether it's been pursuing post-secondary education, a job or entering the military, our students have been able to achieve their goals and become productive members of our ever-changing global community.

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