

# Educators *of* Excellence

*Celebrating positive  
impact and leadership*



April 29 & May 6, 2026 | 5:30 p.m.

## Celebrating excellence

Educators of Excellence Awards celebrate the dedication, hard work, and leadership of innovative teachers and school staff throughout Sourcewell's central Minnesota service region of Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, Todd, and Wadena counties and the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe.

## How it works

Schools may select a **Teacher of Excellence** and a **Pillar of Excellence** who have had a positive impact on students and on their school environment.

## Agenda

5 p.m.	Check-in, doors open
5:30 p.m.	Welcome
5:40 p.m.	Dinner <i>Music provided by Rick Adams</i>
6:45 p.m.	Group photo
7 p.m.	Awards ISP Innovative Teacher of the Year <i>Lindsey Riffle</i> Educators of Excellence Awards <i>Paul Drange, Sourcewell Chief Regional Solutions Officer</i> <i>Kassidy Rice, Sourcewell Senior Director of Education Solutions</i>
8:15 p.m.	Closing

Thanks to tonight's musician!

Rick Adams is one of the area's best-known musicians. With over 30 years of experience entertaining crowds with bands like Burbank Station, Buffalo Alice and The Roosters, he's known for giving the audience a show they'll always remember and leaving them wanting more.

A special thanks to our trophy sponsor:





Innovative Schools Project (ISP) is a nonprofit organization funded by Sourcewell that provides matching grants to Region 5 public school districts to support teachers' innovative classroom ideas.

ISP recognizes innovative teachers to highlight creative problem-solving strategies and connect educators. By providing resources to local school groups, ISP helps promote community collaboration and sustainable support networks within each district.

For more information, please contact:

Lindsey Riffle  
Executive Director  
(218) 208-3435  
lindsey@ispmn.org

## INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR

### Randy Thompson

Menahga High School



Randy Thompson teaches Work-Based Learning, College and Career Ready, Business, Technology, and CiHS Intro to Education courses at Menahga High School. Randy has been instrumental in building Menahga's Work-Based Learning program, expanding internship opportunities while cultivating strong partnerships with local businesses and community organizations. Signature initiatives such as the annual Mall of Menahga and Menahga Elementary Shark Tank exemplify his passion for student engagement, creativity, and career readiness. Randy collaborates with educators to explore new ideas that strengthen teaching and learning across the region.

## TEACHER OF EXCELLENCE

### Karen Miller

Bertha-Hewitt School



Karen is a consistent and dependable presence in her classroom. She creates an engaging space for every student to succeed, building strong relationships and fostering trust with each of them. She tackles each challenge with flexibility, humor, and energy, making a positive impact on her students and school each time.

## PILLAR OF EXCELLENCE

### Adam Wutzke

Bertha-Hewitt School - Custodian



Adam is a problem solver, a mentor, and a steady presence who keeps the school operating safely, efficiently, and with pride. No job is too big or too small: If there's a solution, he'll find it. Adam is also an outstanding role model for students. He takes time to work with student helpers, training them on new skills and the value of hard work. His presence makes the school better every day.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Sarah Baker

Nisswa Elementary School



In Sarah's classroom, learning feels human and joyful. Students are often using her "Bakerisms" by the end of each year — always smiling when they do. Sarah has shaped generations of students at Nisswa Elementary, helping them to see themselves as both capable learners and kind citizens. She has brought joy, authenticity, and deep care to her work each day for 30 years.

### Brian Bordwell

Brainerd High School



Brian's vision and leadership have made a lasting mark on his school through the many programs he has led and even founded. He works hard at his craft, always taking extra steps to help both students and teachers succeed. Students don't just learn lifelong skills in his classroom: They also learn to challenge themselves, think creatively, and respect themselves and others.

### Adam Extrand

Brainerd Learning Center



Adam works tirelessly to open doors for every student. No matter the program, his classrooms are uplifting places where students learn that they matter. His presence is often the difference between a student walking away from school and a student rediscovering their confidence and purpose. He has changed countless lives, not through grand gestures, but through years of supporting those around him.

## Jenny Hall

Garfield Elementary School



Jenny is a hardworking, passionate, lifelong learner who provides the best for her students and gives her colleagues opportunities to learn and grow. As a member of the Continuous Improvement team, Jenny has brought many ideas for maintaining and building her school's positive and supportive cultures. She is always active and always seeking ways to make education better.

## Alex Hirsch

Baxter Elementary School



Alex's energy is contagious, her smile is genuine, and her positivity lifts everyone's spirits. Her commitment to high-quality education keeps every student engaged: She has found endless ways to make physical activity a positive and confidence-boosting experience regardless of skill level. Every student leaves her gym feeling capable, valued, and excited to move.

## Shannon Moran

Riverside Elementary School



Shannon is an exemplary teacher who constantly works to make Riverside a place of belonging. She is a supportive colleague and a fierce advocate for all students. In meetings, she engages in tough conversations while honoring others' perspectives. No matter how difficult the circumstances, she steps up with grace, understanding, and a deep commitment to her school.

## Kati Reynolds

Lincoln Education Center — ATLAS



Kati is the kind of teacher everyone hopes to be when they start in education. She works tirelessly to give her students positive yet challenging experiences that will prepare them for the workforce when they leave. Kati is always pushing herself, her colleagues, and her students to improve and grow. Her love for what she does is always evident, no matter what the day brings!

## Michelle Tollefson

Forestview Middle School



Michelle approaches every task, expected or unexpected, with professionalism and grace. She will do whatever it takes to ensure quality lessons for her students, who feel safe and supported around her. Beyond the classroom, she is an insightful collaborator on multiple teams and a constant supporter for her colleagues. Regardless of circumstances, Michelle is always a joy to work with.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

## Jenny Barnhart

Brainerd Learning Center - Secretary



Jenny is the heartbeat of the building. Through every transition, regardless of size, Jenny has been the steady, reliable presence that keeps the school running smoothly. She solves problems with a level of insight and patience that makes even complicated situations feel manageable. She is a sounding board and trusted partner for her colleagues and a compassionate supporter for students.

## Trisia Hughes

Baxter Elementary School - Administrative Assistant



Trisia's strength, intelligence, and tireless work ethic ensure the school runs smoothly each and every day. She has a remarkable ability to connect with students, helping them feel seen and deeply cared for. Whether handling communications or keeping daily routines on track, she approaches every task with professionalism and matchless attention to detail.

## Ilda Johnson

Nisswa Elementary School - Paraprofessional



Ilda has been a constant and trusted presence at Nisswa Elementary for more than 24 years, supporting generations of students, families, and staff. She generously shares her deep knowledge of the community to help newcomers feel welcomed and connected. She knows every student, family, and schedule without ever needing a list. In everything she does, Ilda creates belonging without ever seeking recognition.

## Lonna Rozinka

Forestview Middle School - Educational Assistant



Time and time again, Lonna has proven she can navigate the most chaotic situations with respect and empathy. She has built strong, trusting relationships with students: Whether working one-on-one or with an entire room full of students, Lonna can always find a way to forge connections. Her unwavering, selfless commitment to their success shines in everything she does.

## Sara Schafer

Riverside Elementary School - Educational Assistant



Sara is a true team player with unwavering dedication to Riverside. Every student Sara works with knows she is in their corner, ready to do whatever it takes to help them succeed. Students visibly react in her presence, feeling safe enough to engage, regulate, and learn. She has a profound impact on their emotional well-being and sense of safety at school.

## Sheryl Schmidt

Garfield Elementary School - Media Center Secretary



Sheryl brings her positivity and smile to everything she does. She is constantly finding ways to help, coordinating yearbook, reading activities, media center, and library activities. Her ideas inspire students to find new and interesting books and dig deeper into their passion areas. Sheryl's vision has improved the library experience for everyone!

## Sam Wicklund

Lincoln Education Center — ATLAS - Behavior Management Specialist



Students love Sam for many reasons: She is dedicated, supportive, and a great listener. She finds what makes each student tick and uses that to help even the most challenging students grow. That growth goes far beyond the walls of the classroom, as she creates opportunities to build valuable life skills. Sam's example makes students (and colleagues!) want to grow and excel.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Shannon Alto

Cass Lake-Bena Elementary School



Shannon exemplifies passion for learning, teaching, and serving others. She constantly seeks out opportunities to grow her instructional practice — not out of obligation, but out of her genuine drive to give students her best. Her thoughtful insights help move the school forward for reading outcomes. Her passion for learning is on display in the time and energy she invests in every moment with students.

### Lisa Maki-Kuhn

Cass Lake-Bena Middle School



Lisa embodies the highest standards of professionalism, leadership, and dedication to student success. Beyond her exceptional classroom teaching, she is a true leader in the school community, as administrator for the summer school program and an influential member of the leadership team. Her dedication has made a profound impact on students, staff, and school culture.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Marie Hickman

Cass Lake-Bena Elementary School - Paraeducator



Marie represents the very best of what it means to serve students and strengthen a school community. Her steady presence and caring heart make a lasting difference. Marie builds people up: She helps students and staff alike feel calmer, more supported, and more capable. Marie is at the forefront of everything that is right about Cass Lake-Bena Elementary.

### Lance Koland

Cass Lake-Bena Middle School - Lead Custodian



Lance leads the custodial team with excellence, kindness, and thoughtfulness. Any maintenance issue he encounters is solved, above and beyond expectations. Many, many students admire and rely on him, both in daily interactions and as student custodian workers. Students even greet him with "Hi, Bestie!" when seeing him in the halls, showing the trust and warmth he brings to every day.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Debra Ann Jelencich-Jensen

Cuyuna Range Elementary School



Debra Ann is a true professional who leads by example. Her classroom is inclusive and full of compassion, and she has high expectations for learners while still meeting each student where they're at. In her classroom, every student feels valued. Outside of her classroom, Debra Ann is a team player who faces each challenge head-on, supporting or relying on her colleagues with a smile on her face.

### Emma Otterstad

Crosby-Ironton High School



Emma doesn't have to demand excellence from her students: They're eager to meet her high standards. She builds relationships with each student, showing them they're capable of success. With her encouragement, they rise to the occasion. Many students credit Emma with helping them gain confidence, discover career interests, and develop skills they'll use throughout their lives.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Jessica Kayfes

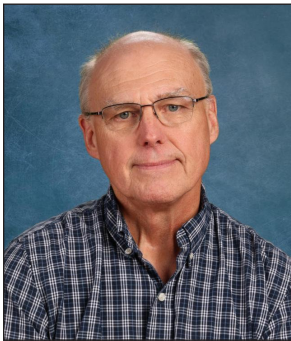
Cuyuna Range Elementary School - SPED Paraprofessional



Jessica cares about and understands the needs of the students she works with. Her problem-solving skills maximize learning potential for every student she helps. Whenever there's a high need, Jessica raises her hand to meet the challenge, taking on difficult tasks with grace and willingness. She is always looking for ways to help others and ways to improve her own practice.

### Scott Skinner

Crosby-Ironton School District - Food Service Director



Scott brings a constant smile and aura of respect to his leadership of the food service team. He works with grace, stays flexible, and adjusts to each day's unique menu and staffing challenges. He doesn't just work behind the scenes, either: He can often be found in the serving line himself, supporting wherever needed. Thanks to him, students feel cared for at every meal.

## TEACHER OF EXCELLENCE

### Lisa Steffen

Crosslake Community School



Lisa has been teaching kindergarten for over 20 years, but she brings a passion to every new school year as if it were her first. She is extremely dedicated, creative, and inspirational, coming up with ideas to get students excited to learn. If an idea isn't working, she tries something new. She's constantly collaborating and sharing ideas with colleagues, lifting up the whole school in the process.

## PILLAR OF EXCELLENCE

### Rebekka Sievert

Crosslake Community School - Behavior Interventionist



Rebekka works tirelessly to ensure students achieve amazing behavior and keep accountable. She's always looking for new ways to repair relationships and teach social skills to students who need extra assistance. She is compassionate and kind; firm yet fair. She has amazing rapport with students, staff, and families, and she inspires everyone to care more for each other as a result.

## TEACHER OF EXCELLENCE

### Joshua Hendrickx

Wadena Area Learning Center



Joshua's teaching goes well beyond textbooks. In his classroom, students feel a true sense of belonging and community, while also feeling driven to participate and succeed. Students who have struggled in other settings quickly learn that Josh will support them, believe in them, and hold them accountable. He inspires students and sparks their curiosity through his innovative approach — to both learning and life.

## PILLAR OF EXCELLENCE

### Kayla Kneisl

Verndale Preschool - Paraprofessional



Kayla is a “see it, fix it” person. If an idea is mentioned, she moves it forward. If a student needs a tool, she’s already thinking ahead. She shows up each morning with genuine energy and joy for her work that’s obvious to everyone. Her reliability and intuition keep things running smoothly, and her calm, supportive presence helps children think, try, and build their independence.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Andrea Czeck

Lindbergh Elementary School



Andrea is a shining example of excellence in the classroom. She's willing to accept new challenges, always embracing change with enthusiasm and class. She is a beloved and effective teacher thanks to the strong, positive connections she builds with students. Known for her "can do" attitude, she creates an upbeat learning environment with every lesson.

### Joelle Gwost

Little Falls Early Childhood Center



Joelle genuinely wants what is best for her students, and it shines through her passion, excitement, and creative approach to fostering learning opportunities. She offers unique, hands-on learning opportunities for students and is great at engaging with families. Joelle's ambition, inventiveness, and excitement is clearly evident each day she shows up to work, and her dedication is a model for the entire team.

### Lindsay LeClair

Lincoln Elementary School



Lindsay is an outstanding educator committed to high-quality instruction, professional growth, and student success. She arrives fully prepared to every lesson or conversation with accurate, organized data and a plan to move forward. Her willingness to engage, check in on colleagues, and offer support, even during the busiest moments, enriches the entire school.

## Melissa Miller

Little Falls Community Middle School



Melissa is an incredibly hardworking English teacher whose impact on her school extends far beyond her classroom. Melissa mentors colleagues, serves on multiple committees, and is a trusted partner in teaching and learning. Her classes seamlessly blend whole-group lessons with targeted small-group learning, meeting each student's needs and helping them grow and succeed.

## Tara Schlagel

Little Falls Community High School



Tara's students not only acquire content knowledge but also develop the skills necessary for informed citizenship and lifelong learning. Her lessons are engaging, purposeful, and centered on students' experiences. Tara is also a welcoming colleague and mentor who leads the social studies department with professionalism, encouraging others and helping them overcome any challenge.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Sabrina Hanfler

Lindbergh Elementary School - Administrative Assistant



Sabrina is an unsung hero of Lindbergh Elementary who ensures the entire building runs smoothly. Her management of the office is the cornerstone of the school's efficient operation, and she has played a key role in the school's successful transition to grade level banding. The team can always rely on her to get any job done, no matter how complex.

### Jessica Janski

Little Falls Community Middle School - School Counselor



Jess brings genuine heart to every interaction with students and staff. She is a deeply caring person who is never afraid to show or share emotion, and she ensures that students are supported both academically and in their daily lives. Jess is a steady, trusted presence at the heart of the school. She is a natural leader whose energy and follow-through set the tone for the whole team.

### Theresa Messinger

Lincoln Elementary School - Paraprofessional



Theresa is an exceptional paraprofessional whose dedication, compassion, and professionalism make her an irreplaceable member of Lincoln Elementary. She consistently takes on challenging situations that many would hesitate to step into, always grounded in doing what is best for students. Theresa builds strong, trusting relationships that allow students to feel safe, supported, and respected.

## Mary Sitzman

Little Falls Community High School - Secretary II



Mary's remarkable 48 years of service speak better than any words could. She has been a constant source of stability and support, drawing on her deep institutional knowledge to serve students, staff, and families alike. Her warm smile is often the first thing people see walking through the school doors, making them feel seen and valued from the moment they arrive.

## Monique Waldoch

Little Falls Early Childhood Center - Paraprofessional



Monique arrives each day ready to support students and staff, greeting challenges with a smile and a genuine willingness to help wherever she is needed. Her steady presence and dependable work ethic create stability in an environment that often requires quick thinking. Her patience and flexibility help students feel safe, supported, and understood, even during challenging moments.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Mary Susan Miklavcich

Long Prairie-Grey Eagle Elementary School



Mary Susan refuses to place limits on students' potential. Every student is capable of high achievement to her, and she's ready to meet them with high expectations and engaging, personalized learning moments. When students struggle, she's ready with a new angle or a creative solution, and she backs it up with hard work to make those ideas come to life. Students rise to meet the challenges she sets.

### Ashley Pesta

Long Prairie-Grey Eagle Secondary School



Ashley is a true "data wizard," deeply in touch with each student's learning needs. She's always finding new techniques and evidence-based strategies to help students succeed. Her classroom is a safe and welcoming place, and she's known as an advocate for students who are struggling. Her blend of data-driven expertise and personal connection makes the whole school better.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Karen Holt

Long Prairie-Grey Eagle Elementary School - Elementary Secretary



Karen is the backbone of the school's daily operations and a constant source of support for students, families, and staff. Her knowledge of the school community keeps the building running smoothly. No matter the task or challenge, she performs with excellence. Teachers and staff can focus on instruction and student support, knowing they can rely on her to keep the whole school moving forward.

### Jennefer Ramos

Long Prairie-Grey Eagle Secondary School - Paraprofessional



Jenny consistently goes above and beyond the expectations of her role. Her calm, caring, yet firm approach gives students the guidance and structure they need to be successful, no matter their age or needs. Colleagues know they can rely on Jenny without hesitation. She fosters trust, stability, and motivation wherever she goes and whoever she helps, always seeking ways to change the day for the better.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Megan Huus

Menahga Elementary School



Megan's outside-the-box thinking and passion for student success are truly unparalleled. Her classroom is a model of innovation: A space that makes students excited to learn while feeling safe enough to explore. Her genuine care for students is at the heart of everything she does, including multiple committees and initiatives that help shape the future of her students and her school.

### Randy Thompson

Menahga High School



Randy's leadership, creativity, and commitment to students make him an outstanding educator. He's community-minded, always building strong connections with local businesses to support internship and work-based learning. He is the heart of the Career Pathway Program, working with each student to help them feel confident about their real-world strengths, interests, and futures.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Christina Albin

Menahga Public Schools - Transportation Director



Christina runs a complex and demanding operation with calm, care, and precision. Her supportive leadership has built a strong, dependable transportation team that's trusted by both staff and families. Her caring and flexible approach stands out in particular. When a route needs adjusting or a family needs help, Christina is there with empathy and understanding, always putting people first.

### Katie Walsh

Menahga Elementary School - LSCI Team Member/Paraprofessional



Katie's colleagues fondly call her the "Spreadsheet Guru." She's always ready to share her technical expertise to boost everyone's work. She transforms time-consuming processes into efficient and accessible tools that benefit the entire team. Whether she's refining student resources or deepening her own skillsets, her dedication to students shines through everything she does.

## TEACHER OF EXCELLENCE

### Brianna Brateng

Mid-State Education Building



Brianna consistently embodies the qualities of a truly exceptional educator: compassionate, competent, knowledgeable, kind, and articulate. She leads with empathy and uses her skills and knowledge to create well planned, data-driven instruction. She is a confident advocate for students, always ensuring their voices are heard and their needs are met regardless of circumstance.

## PILLAR OF EXCELLENCE

### Cat Tillman

Mid-State Education Building - Behavior Support Specialist



Cat is a calm and trusted support for her students and a highly collaborative partner to her colleagues. Her professionalism and commitment have made a strong impact on the entire school. Her presence brings clarity to the most challenging situations, and her persistence has paid off time and again as she works over a student's entire school career to build trust and a sense of support.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Stacey McKinney

Northland Elementary School



Stacey is the ultimate team player! She readily offers her time and expertise, whether helping a struggling student or assisting a staff member. She creates a positive and nurturing classroom culture where students feel safe enough to participate actively, ask questions, and take ownership of their education. She isn't just a participant: She's a proactive contributor to school-wide success.

### Abbie Newman

Northland High School



Abbie is 100% invested in providing the highest quality of instruction possible, enhancing her lessons with proven strategies and the creative quirkiness that middle school students love. Abbie pushes students and staff alike to do their best, sitting on multiple leadership committees and always presenting an optimistic, solutions-focused approach to challenges.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Toni Gross

Northland Elementary School - Special Education Paraprofessional



Toni is a genuine workhorse, consistently doing whatever it takes to support students, staff, and school. Whether preparing resources, assisting colleagues, or taking on extra duties, Toni keeps the school operating smoothly. Her dedicated work has made an incredible impact on young learners, helping them get the most from their classroom activities and pushing them to meet their goals.

### Denise Stefan

Northland High School - Support Room Para



Denise is a pillar of stability for students in need. She provides a listening ear, a safe place to decompress, and a firm but supportive approach that holds all students to high expectations. Denise will step up to any challenge, filling in a variety of roles, always right where she's needed and knowing exactly how to help. Her attitude is the oil that keeps the school running smoothly!

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Kathleen Harman

Eagle View Elementary School



Kathleen's impact reaches far beyond the walls of her reading intervention classroom. She works with countless students across multiple grade levels each day, offering patience and a deep belief in their potential. Her ability to seamlessly differentiate, meeting each student at their level while always pushing them forward, is a true testament to her skill and commitment.

### Sheri Levasseur

Pequot Lakes Middle School



From coding to digital marketing, Sheri always offers students a dynamic classroom experience. She is very conscious of the importance of literacy across the K-12 experience, and she is a state and regional advocate for students and literacy. From her creative presence on district teams to after-school student clubs, she demonstrates a deep care for the school in all she does.

### Dan Skaaland

Pequot Lakes High School



Dan's focus has never wavered from what matters most: Ensuring that every student gets meaningful, hands-on learning opportunities. His leadership of the house construction program immerses students in real-world experiences with a tangible advantage as they enter the workforce. He is always willing to learn and lead... whatever it takes to prepare students for their futures.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### China Harmala

Pequot Lakes Middle School - Paraprofessional



China has risen to the forefront of the team. As her district navigated many instructional and systemic changes, China sought training to understand each situation and stepped up to help the team navigate them. She is a high performer who brings great value to every classroom and student relationship, and she is always looking for ways to improve and accelerate student growth even further.

### Melissa Kjonaas

Eagle View Elementary School - Paraprofessional



Melissa has an amazing work ethic, even in the most challenging circumstances. She is committed to helping students become as independent as possible, which she does by developing positive relationships with each student. They trust her and are driven to meet her expectations, thanks to her consistent support and encouragement. Students feel safe and confident with Melissa!

### Robin Olson

Pequot Lakes High School - Administrative Assistant



Robin is a consistent and indispensable presence, ensuring that daily operations run smoothly. She keeps the entire building organized and responsive, managing complex tasks with such precision and efficiency that there are virtually no issues. Teachers rely on her quick and thoughtful responses, even for last-minute needs, letting students focus on learning without disruption.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Bryce Rushmeyer

Pierz Healy High School



Bryce stands out for his exceptional dedication, both in and out of the classroom. He has an entire compendium of strengths, including an infectious passion for teaching. His classroom is a warm, fun, welcoming environment for students even as they tackle his rigorous learning challenges. Bryce also serves as an exemplary role model who instills vital lifelong skills like integrity and honesty.

### Jessica Teske

Pioneer Elementary School



Jessica views students holistically and fights tirelessly to ensure each child receives individualized supports. She coordinates services, advocates for transportation, and ensures families feel heard and respected. Her instruction is data-driven and individualized, and students are eager participants even when working on challenging skills. She is a natural leader who willingly steps up at every opportunity.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Tracy Gaffke

Pioneer Elementary School - Paraprofessional



Tracy consistently demonstrates exceptional pride, integrity and dedication in everything she does. She doesn't simply complete assigned tasks: She anticipates needs, takes initiative, and goes beyond expectations to support student learning and classroom success. Tracy creates a warm, welcoming environment where students, especially the youngest learners, feel safe, valued, and loved.

### Joan Sanoski

Pierz Healy High School - High School Secretary



Joan is the vital force behind her school's daily operations and spirit. Her professional dedication and tireless commitment to detail keep the front office running with remarkable efficiency. More importantly, Joan uplifts everyone with her heartfelt warmth. A kind word and simple encouragement from "Ms. Joan" makes the most stressed student feel seen and appreciated.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Heather Kadus

Pillager Middle School



Heather's dedication to student growth and leadership helps every student feel seen, valued, and capable of success. Known for her enthusiasm for hands-on learning, she creates engaging lessons that inspire curiosity and real-world thinking. Heather empowers students to lead and collaborate, and her warmth and enthusiasm make her a beloved part of the school community.

### Johanna Rudbeck

Pillager Elementary School



Despite her quiet demeanor, Johanna possesses an ability to connect with every student. She sees each child as an individual, offering consistent support and gentle guidance that builds confidence and fosters a love for learning. Her classroom is a safe, inclusive space where she sets high, yet achievable, standards and builds the scaffolding necessary for every student to succeed.

### Sue Turner

Pillager High School



Sue serves her students with intentionality and grace. Amidst ever-expanding student options, Sue has the capacity and work ethic to respond to the expanding challenges of her role. She is a conscientious problem solver who advocates for students on a very personal level. Sue has the heart to serve, and she has the capacity to serve at a very, very high level.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Brenda Disterhaupt

Pillager High School - Custodian



“We won the lottery with Brenda!” “We are so lucky to have her.” “She is the best!” Multiple staff members sing Brenda’s praises unprompted. Her kind and calm demeanor lets her work effectively with everyone, and her positive attitude creates a welcoming environment throughout the school community. She performs her job well and is a wonderful person as she does it!

### Kim Johnson

Pillager Middle School - Educational Assistant/Resource Room



Kim supports students in countless ways, always approaching each task with patience and care. Her calm presence and positive attitude make her a trusted and valued member of the school community. She works closely with teachers and staff, always ready to lend a hand and share her insight to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Kim’s commitment makes a lasting difference every day!

### Jamie Shypkowski

Pillager Elementary School - Nurse



Jamie’s contributions are difficult to summarize: She keeps students and staff safe in so many different ways! In between bandaging knees or listening to students’ worries, Jamie coordinates screenings, provides professional trainings for staff, assists the crisis management team, and much more. Even on the hardest days, Jamie is a listener, supporter, and caretaker for the entire school.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Tiffany Bergem

Pine River-Backus Elementary School



Tiffany consistently seeks out opportunities to help students grow and succeed, whatever the challenges they may face. Tiffany provides guidance and support to the broader school community with a positive, solution-focused mindset, ensuring all areas work together for student success. Her optimism, professionalism, and commitment make her a cornerstone of the school.

### Neil Travis

Pine River-Backus High School



Neil exemplifies the very best qualities of teacher leadership, student advocacy, and professional excellence. He is always willing to step forward, help where needed, and thoughtfully problem-solve to give students the best experience possible. One of his greatest strengths is his ability to build strong student relationships that make them feel respected and empowered in his classroom.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Makyla Jorgensen

Pine River-Backus High School - Paraprofessional



Makyla consistently exemplifies dedication, professionalism, and quiet leadership through her daily work with students and staff. She is an exceptionally patient person who leads through action rather than words. Her presence creates a sense of safety and trust, allowing students to regulate, refocus, and reengage in learning — an invaluable skill in a high school setting.

### Autumn Loge

Pine River-Backus Elementary School - Youth and Family Services



Autumn genuinely cares for everyone around her, regardless of the circumstances. She arrives each day with a positive attitude and a warm smile, creating a welcoming and supportive presence throughout the building. Her compassion and skill are a true gift to the building, and her positive impact on students, families, and staff members each day is immeasurable.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Kathy Brenny

Royalton Elementary School



Kathy is a leader when it comes to new ideas and trying new teaching tactics to best serve students. Kathy is willing to do whatever is necessary in the best interest of the students, no matter the situation. She is on top of progress monitoring, ensuring students are growing. Her excellent communication and passion for teaching herself as well as her students make her an incredible team player.

### Jeanne Omgig

Royalton Middle/High School



Jeanne is friendly, approachable, and always willing to help students while maintaining high expectations within her classroom. She is always open and receptive to professional development ideas, and she is a positive force who approaches her job with positive attitude. Kids respond to that positivity, knowing that they have a teacher who really enjoys being in class with them.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Dawn Towle

Royalton Middle/High School - Head Secretary



Dawn is the “straw that stirs the drink” in her school. She is the connection point for teachers, staff, students, parents, and the community: Alumni will stop back in school just to visit her. She can even have the tough conversations when needed, thanks to the strength of her relationships. Dawn handles endless challenges with expertise, keeping the ship afloat every day.

### Joseph Wisler

Royalton Public Schools - Director of Transportation



Joe is the master of all things transportation. A problem solver in a very demanding position, Joe works hard to meet every need of the student population, sometimes on very short notice. He works with families on routing issues and continually improves the transportation system, but always leads with awareness and flexibility to remove chaos and ensure his changes have the best impact possible.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Emily Crabb

Sebekka Elementary School



Emily has a remarkable ability to meet kindergarten students at all levels at the beginning of the year and guide them to success. Every student is reading by the time they leave her classroom, thanks to her intentional instruction and grasp of early literacy development. Beyond her instructional strengths, she brings a positive, joyful presence to her classroom each day.

### Jacob Haag

Sebekka High School



Jacob brings science to life for students by connecting complex scientific concepts to their everyday experiences. Challenging content is accessible and exciting in his classroom. Students adore his classes and look forward to experimenting and exploring the results. He provides encouragement and clear instruction to help students grow in both confidence and understanding.

## PILLAR OF EXCELLENCE

### Dee Dykhoff

Sebekka Public School - District Administrative Assistant



Dee has been a reliable, knowledgeable, and caring presence at Sebekka Public School for 30 years. Her steady demeanor and attention to detail keep daily operations running smoothly, even at busy or high-pressure moments. Students and staff feel supported thanks to Dee's calm, dependable presence, knowing that they can focus on the tasks of learning and teaching with her help.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Sarah Decker

Staples-Motley Middle/High School



Sarah has been a steady, influential force in the district for more than 25 years. Her impact extends beyond the classroom: She's helped shape the direction and climate of the whole building. Sarah sets herself apart through her integrity, courage, and willingness to ask the hard questions. Her influence isn't loud — it's lasting, and it has shaped the school for the better.

### Melissa Holey

Staples-Motley Elementary School



Melissa is a true champion for all learners, working with students from different grade levels to help close their learning gaps and build confidence. She plays a vital role in shaping professional learning and supporting teacher growth, placing relationships at the center of her work with students and staff alike. Her unwavering belief in every child's potential shines through in everything she does.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Chris Dobson

Staples-Motley School District - Mechanic



Chris's mechanical and fabricating knowledge has been an incredible asset to the district. He's always on time, prepared, and ready to get to work wherever he's needed. Chris is willing to assist with anything, from managing students at big events to helping with bus safety to finding clever workarounds to unusual challenges. His work ethic and presence are second to none.

### Angie Kramer

Staples-Motley Middle/High School - Paraprofessional



Angie stands out for her consistent positivity, strong work ethic, and deep commitment to students. She has built exceptional trust with students, and her presence always brings stability and encouragement to those around her. To colleagues, Angie is a trusted and reliable colleague they can count on to strengthen the entire school climate. Her initiative, flexibility, and genuine care make every school day better.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Pam Czech

Swanville High School



Pam not only embraces challenges but places her own special brand on each solution. She pours her heart into projects, thoughtfully designing and refining each component to ensure students have the best experience possible. She leads by example as well, modeling professionalism and excellence as she collaborates with colleagues. Her passion for teaching is an inspiration for everyone to do their best work.

### Jordan Sales

Swanville Elementary School



Jordan demonstrates excellence in teaching through a deep commitment to student learning, professional integrity, and reflective practice. Jordan brings a sense of calm to the elementary. His easy-going nature makes him a magnet for others as he fosters confidence, curiosity, and a growth mindset. He motivates students to take ownership of their learning and their behavior.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Stacy Jackson

Swanville School District - Administrative Assistant



New to the district, Stacy has nevertheless jumped head-first into many, many new roles. Each time, she has become an indispensable part of the administrative team. Stacy handles any situation with poise and confidence, even during a long day or in the midst of a difficult challenge. She brings both a sense of calm and, more importantly, joy to the office. Simply put: Stacy is the best!

### Katie Moore

Swanville School District - Paraprofessional



Katie brings her “A” game daily. She is a whirlwind and doesn’t stop moving. Whether working with students, organizing, cleaning, or collaborating with staff, she’s never one to sit idle. She truly listens to people, and all are equally important in her eyes. She not only listens but finds ways to help each person. Katie is easy to find: Just look for a lot of happy people!

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Sara Bauer

Upsala High School



Sara's creativity shines through in every lesson, keeping students actively engaged and excited to learn. She consistently embodies the "Every Student, Every Day" mantra, taking on all challenges as long as they benefit students. Her commitment, compassion, and leadership make a lasting difference in the lives of students and families across the district.

### Karisa Justen

Upsala Elementary School



Even back when Karisa was student teaching in Upsala, it was clear that she had the skills and tools to become an outstanding educator. Her positivity and dedication are infectious. Karisa works tirelessly for student literacy: She is continually growing and improving her teaching practice, always striving to better meet the needs of her students. As a result, students in her classroom thrive academically.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Andrew Harren

Upsala Area Schools - Head of Buildings and Grounds



Andrew is truly a jack-of-all-trades. The facilities are always in top-notch condition and the school has never looked better since he joined the district. You can always count on Andrew to have the parking lot cleared and ready before the school day begins after a fresh snowfall. Most importantly, he does all he can to make sure the district is a safe and welcoming environment for all.

### Alice Westrich

Upsala Area Schools - Food Service Coordinator



Alice is the heart of the food service team. She brings a smile and a positive attitude to work every single day, and her teammates love working with her because of her "team-first" mindset. Alice goes out of her way to interact with all students, helping them feel welcomed and cared for the moment they step into the cafeteria. She makes the cafeteria and the entire school a brighter place.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Alex Anderson

Verndale High School



Alex consistently demonstrates a selfless commitment to student success. His high-quality teaching features thoughtful instructional practices and a strong understanding of his students' needs. He has transformed the Verndale Honor Society program into one that emphasizes service, responsibility, leadership, and strong character. Through coaching, advising, and mentoring, he has had an incredible impact on the school.

### Sara Ross

Verndale Elementary School



Sara's highly individualized approach to instruction and her unwavering belief in student potential influence every lesson. Her instruction is intentional, flexible, and aligned to best practices, and her students are motivated to meet her high expectations for them. Her calm demeanor, professionalism, and positive attitude infuse every interaction with students and staff.

## PILLARS OF EXCELLENCE

### Lisa Cochran

Verndale Public School - Custodian



Lisa's diligent work creates a safe, clean, and welcoming environment where students and staff can thrive. Whether it's staying late to help with an unexpected issue, assisting staff and students without being asked, or addressing problems quickly and thoroughly, Lisa always goes the extra mile. Her dedication does not go unnoticed: It reflects a deep commitment to her school and the people in it.

### Kimberly Snyder

Verndale Elementary School - Paraprofessional



Kimberly is dependable, professional, and student-focused, always prioritizing what is best for learners. She willingly takes on additional responsibilities with a positive attitude and strong work ethic. She is patient, kind, and approachable, which allows students to feel comfortable taking academic and behavioral risks. Kimberly's dedication, compassion, and reliability make a meaningful and lasting impact every day.

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Tracy Jack

Wadena-Deer Creek Elementary School



The amount of love Tracy pours into her work is outstanding. Even working with some of the most challenging student situations, she always approaches the moment with compassion and grace. Tracy's consistency speaks for itself in her students' attendance rates and learning improvements. Tracy is also a great coworker, willing to step up and lend a hand if anything is needed.

### Laurie Kopischke-Pulju

Wadena-Deer Creek Middle/High School



Laurie is an outstanding art teacher who constantly challenges her students to be creative, take risks, and have fun with their art. Her classroom is a place of freedom for students, where they still feel motivated to push their boundaries. Laurie also helps students see the real-world meaning in what they are doing, showing them how to express themselves and create their own artistic voices.

## PILLAR OF EXCELLENCE

### Glen Wood

Wadena-Deer Creek Public Schools - Head Custodian



Glen has to have one of the hardest jobs in the district, but somehow he always has a positive attitude. He is always working to make the building a better place to be. He communicates clearly and addresses any issues that arise with speed and a smile. His team feels supported by his leadership and knows that he will be there at a moment's notice when they need help. He is the "go to guy" for the entire school!

## TEACHERS OF EXCELLENCE

### Katie Benjamin

Walker-Hackensack-Akeley High School



Katie is a powerful example of how to build a positive and supportive school culture. She believes every child deserves the opportunity to succeed and she makes it happen, whatever it takes. Katie works closely with colleagues, openly sharing time, information, and resources to ensure students receive the support they need. Her collaborative spirit and enthusiasm make her an outstanding educator.

### Kristen Bockovich

Walker-Hackensack-Akeley Elementary School



Kristen, known as “Ms. B.” to students and staff, consistently demonstrates professionalism, flexibility, and a deep commitment to student success. She is a teacher leader within her school, supporting multiple initiatives and modeling effective practices for her colleagues. Ms. B’s ability to balance high expectations with genuine care makes her an outstanding educator and a respected leader among her peers.

## PILLAR OF EXCELLENCE

### Kim Brown

Walker-Hackensack-Akeley Public Schools - Paraeducator



Kim is highly deserving of recognition for her dedication, expertise, and meaningful connections with students. She has strengthened programming and expanded student opportunities through her specialized knowledge. Kim’s commitment to students is evident in the way they make a point to greet her each morning: The relationships she forges last long after they have worked with her.

# Sourcewell: We are driven to serve

## Who is Sourcewell?

Sourcewell is a local unit of government and the regional service cooperative for Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, Todd, and Wadena counties. We are one of nine service cooperatives in the state. We partner with education, government, and nonprofits to boost student and community success. We offer training, student academic programming, and contracted services to our central-Minnesota members.

Statewide, we provide a self-funded group health insurance option for public entities. Throughout North America, we offer technology solutions for schools and a cooperative purchasing program for all public entities. Sourcewell staff aim to be force multipliers, empowering you to fulfill your public service mission to help your students, school, and community.

## Our core services

- Cooperative purchasing
- Community solutions
- Education and career and college readiness
- Regional low incidence project and collaborative service workers
- Insurance and employee benefits
- Technology solutions for schools