



# **Brainerd Public Schools**

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*Spring 2025*



A Brainerd Dispatch Publication




**50 years of ECFE:  
Building strong  
families, one  
connection at a time**

**Alumni  
Spotlight:  
Eric Felleggy**

**Full STEM ahead**





**Andrew Zhao, MD**  
Orthopedics & Sports Medicine

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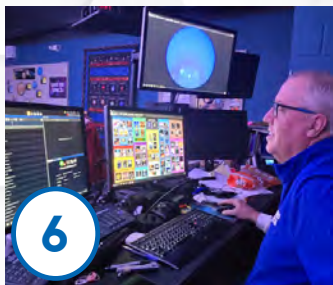
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*Brainerd Public Schools magazine is produced by the Brainerd  
Dispatch in cooperation with the Brainerd Public Schools.*

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## BRAINERD DISPATCH

506 James Street, Brainerd, MN 56401  
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### ON THE COVER:

"This is my famous pose, giving glory to God for living in such a beautiful place and giving me the strength to get up the mountain. This view is from Reynolds Mountain in Glacier National Park and overlooks Hidden Lake. I believe this was taken in 2023," said Eric Felleggy, Brainerd High School alumni. *Photo courtesy of Eric Felleggy.*

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# Hello, Spring!

BY PETER GRANT, INTERIM  
SUPERINTENDENT  
OF SCHOOLS

## A Place To Belong...Brainerd Public Schools

Hello and welcome to the spring Brainerd Public Schools magazine. It is great to realize we have survived the winter and can begin to look forward to warmer days and sunnier skies.

Since the beginning of Blueprint 181 and the conclusion of the building projects completed over two years ago, I felt it was time to begin a new effort to communicate with you information about the District and our schools.


Two times per month, articles will be submitted to the Brainerd Dispatch and available on [isd181.org](http://isd181.org) for your interest. All of our Insight 181 articles will be tied to educating the 6,000 students who enter our schools daily. I hope that you will find these articles informative and that they create a greater interest in our schools.

Over the past several months, the District has been quite active in our efforts to provide the best educational opportunities for our students. When I think back to the start of the school year and reflect on how fast the time has flown, it is amazing what we have accomplished, but it is also important to understand what lies ahead. I have always believed that starting is one thing, but the way you finish is more important.

So, up through early March, we have seen fall and winter sports come and go. We have had fine arts activities and our students have performed wonderfully. We have been able to enjoy watching

our student athletes represent Brainerd Public Schools with class, success and good sportsmanship. Our fine arts programs have provided outstanding concerts and performances. All in all, I am very proud of what our students, their teachers and coaches have shown with the "Warrior Way!"

Coming into spring, we will start focusing on preparing our students for the MCA testing cycle. In order to have our students be prepared as best as they can be, the District has been using a testing program called Fastbridge — a tool we use to measure the growth of our students in reading and math throughout the year. Our teachers use the data to help understand where a student might be struggling or performing above grade-level expectations. In all cases, the teachers then make appropriate instructional changes to help their students continue to show growth.

As the school year starts to wind down, our spring sports and spring concerts will be in full swing. And, of course, the end of the school year will not be far away. As of this writing, we have only about 54 days of the school year left. And we all know how fast that flies by. So, please take advantage of the spring activities our students will be performing in and encourage them that "finishing the school year strong" is very critical to their success. 







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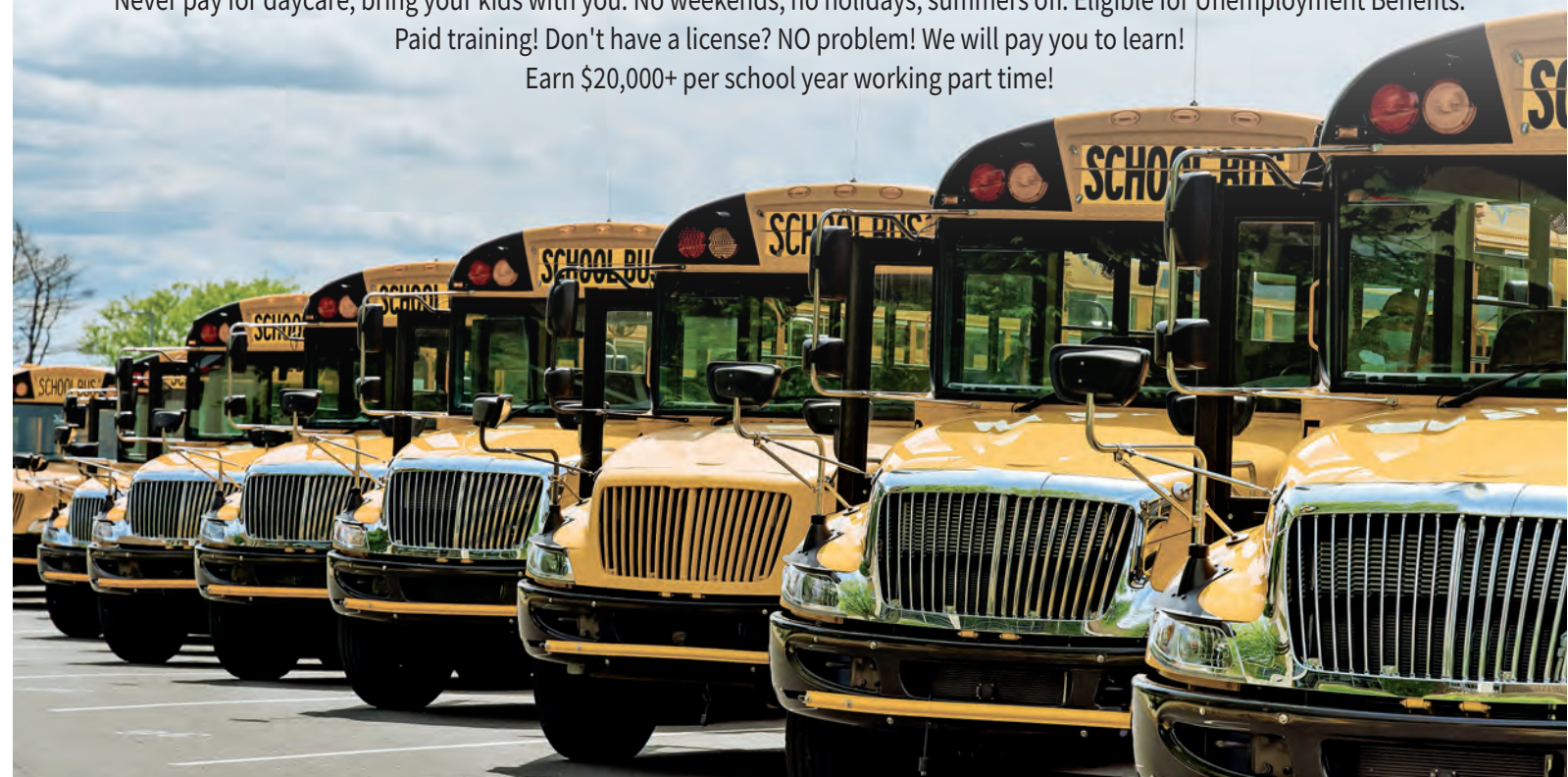
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## Forestview Planetarium takes teaching beyond words

BY SUE STERLING

Kelly Humphrey /  
Brainerd Dispatch  
A Beatles themed laser  
show is played on  
Wednesday, Feb. 26,  
2025, at the Forestview  
Middle School  
planetarium in Baxter.

**T**he planetarium is out of this world — virtually that is. Students of today are accustomed to looking down as they focus on their Chromebooks. Not in this class.

In this class, they look up at the dome, immersing themselves in the universe that surrounds them. They view real-time animations of the night sky, allowing them to see the exact positioning of planets and constellations. But it's not just about

planets, it's about all the sciences middle schoolers need to study. The curriculum embraces life sciences, physical sciences and earth sciences, and can plunge them into earthquakes, natural disasters, climate change and weather phenomena.





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Photo by Sue Sterling  
Tim Peabody is the director  
of the planetarium.

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The planetarium at Forestview Middle School has been in operation for 20 years with Tim Peabody as the current director of the program. He has spent 35 years teaching earth, life and physical sciences, but feels the planetarium takes teaching beyond words and virtually transports students into worlds beyond their digital devices. Their experience in this classroom enhances the aspects of learning that are much more engaging than reading a book or listening to a documentary.

Thanks to the continued support of Sourcwell, the planetarium is open to students in the five counties represented by Region 5: Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, Todd and Wadena. Brainerd Public Schools would like to reach out to the surrounding communities to let them know the planetarium is available for their use. Communicating with the correct teachers has been a challenge, even with the information shared on websites. When Mr. Peabody makes a connection, he asks them to let their staff know there's material for their kids to see at no cost to them. He lets them know Sourcwell will cover the transportation expenses to Forestview. However, coordinating the time and travel arrangements remains challenging.



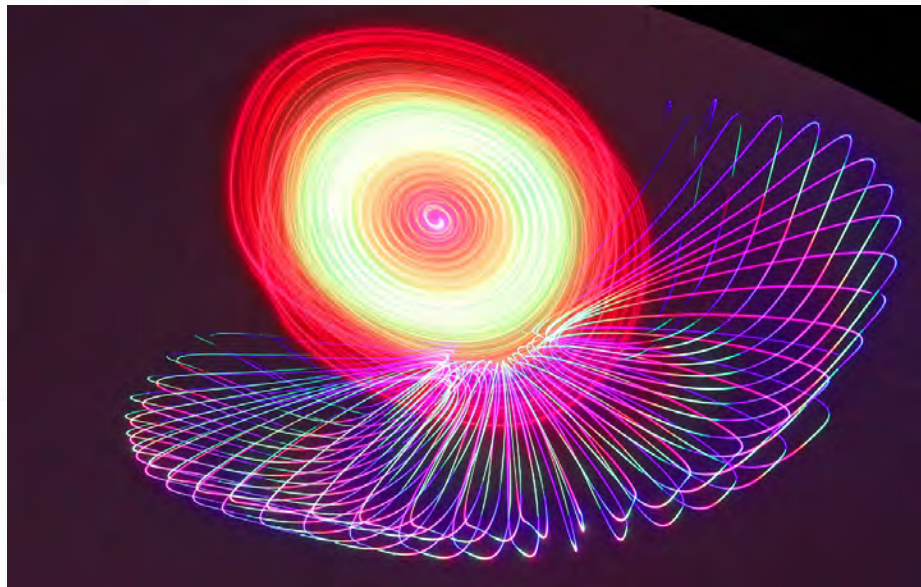
Photo by Sue Sterling



Home school groups and Discovery Woods groups are welcome to use the planetarium as long as they are located in Region 5, but they have to pay for their own transportation. Adult evening groups can use the facility also, but with a small charge for evening or weekend groups to cover custodial costs.

State standards are strictly followed and are the same for all Region 5 schools. They are using cutting-edge technology in this state-of-the-art facility, which incorporates programs created by or through NASA, European Space Organization, the James Webb Observatory and other Cloud resources.

Recently the planetarium was open to the public for viewing many of the laser light shows they offer. These 16 shows featured diverse musical platforms designed to appeal to a wide audience, ranging from Led Zeppelin to Taylor Swift, as well as Disney and the Wizard of Oz. Both the young and the old were mesmerized by the scenes and sounds as colorful creations bounced around the dome, changing size and shape frequently to match the tempo and mood of the music. It was an experience they won't soon forget.



**Kelly Humphrey / Brainerd Dispatch**

A Beatles themed laser show is played on Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2025, at the Forestview Middle School planetarium in Baxter.

The planetarium's success is largely due to the support of the community and the dedication of the staff to provide valuable educational experiences. The impact of

the planetarium on students, who often leave with a better understanding of astronomical concepts, can't be put into words. 🌌

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## 5 inducted into 2025 Legendary Women Hall of Fame

**F**ive Brainerd High School graduates were inducted into the Legendary Women Hall of Fame in March.

This year's inductees were Carla Anderson Benjamin, Deborah Goble Erickson, Lee Gunsbury Seipp, Meghan Thurlow and Laurie Potvin Wig. The induction ceremony was March 27.



### **Carla Anderson Benjamin, class of 1973**

Benjamin is the owner of Anderson Studios in Pillager, a visual artist specializing in encaustic techniques, stained glass and illustration. Her work has been featured in the National Archives in Washington D.C. and in international collections. Benjamin has an associate of arts degree from Brainerd Community College and a bachelor of science degree in studio arts, design and agricultural journalism from the University of Minnesota. She studied stained glass techniques at Burleighfield Craft School in England and created the Cold Hands Warm Hearts fundraiser for the Salvation Army and Northland Arboretum in 2015.





## Deborah Goble Erickson, class of 1991

Erickson serves as Crow Wing County administrator and is the first female to have the job. She began her career with the Crow Wing County Assessors Office in 1994 and served as president of the Minnesota Association of County Officers. For eight years, she was Minnesota's local government representative to federal elections committees and was awarded Outstanding Member of the Year in 2017 as president of both the Minnesota Association of County Officers and the Minnesota Association of County Auditors, Treasurers and Finance Officers. Erickson has a bachelor of science degree in management from the College of St. Scholastica.



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## Lee Gunsbury Seipp, class of 1978

Seipp is a marketing and pricing associate for Fleet Farm and has an associate of arts degree from Central Lakes College, along with degrees in liberal arts, communications and journalism from the University of Minnesota-Duluth. She worked 36 years at her family's business, the Quarterdeck Resort in Nisswa, and has applied her myriad skills at area businesses in the fields of marketing, customer service, employee benefits, insurance and event planning. Seipp is a longtime volunteer for more than 19 community organizations. Recognitions include 2021 Nisswa Citizen of the Year and 1995 Brainerd Rotary Foundation Volunteer of the Year.



## Dr. Meghan Thurlow, class of 2001

Thurlow is the lead technical adviser for M3 Advisors of San Francisco, adviser to the CEO and COO for Optama Inc. in Las Vegas, and lecturer of business and public policy at University of California Berkeley Haas School of Business. She has a master's and a Ph.D. in physical chemistry from Harvard and an executive master's of business administration with honors from University of California Berkeley Haas School of Business. She also has a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Carlton College. Thurlow has four patents, one called Integration and Active Flow Control for Environmental Sensors, and six others pending. She received the Misties Award for Top 20 Individuals in Intelligent and Connected Devices in 2024.



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## Laurie Potvin Wig, class of 1983

Wig is a retired teacher, spending 34 years in education in Pillager, Brainerd and Pequot Lakes. In 2023, she developed the Battle of the Books summer reading program, serving over 400 student readers in Brainerd. After retiring from teaching, she returned to Brainerd Public Schools, serving in middle school curriculum support and data analysis. She has a bachelor of arts degree in elementary education from St. Catherine's University and a master of arts degree in curriculum/instruction, along with an administrative K-12 principal license from St. Cloud State University. Wig has used her strengths of communication, organization, math, data and technology to serve a wide variety of grade levels, curricular areas and educational focuses in area school districts. 📖

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# Full STEM ahead

BY SARAH NELSON  
KATZENBERGER

Tim Speier / Brainerd Dispatch  
Shelly Munoz, STEM curriculum  
coordinator for Brainerd  
Public Schools, tells the kids  
what they will be doing for the  
day while out at Gull Lake on  
Friday, Sept. 20, 2024.

Sometimes, the best place for learning is outside the classroom.  
"Once you get the spark, you just have to fan the flame,"  
STEM coordinator Shelly Munoz said.



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Munoz came to Brainerd Public Schools in July of 2024 with a big idea and she knew she was going to need a lot of help.

The plan — create an innovative STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) project with the Brainerd Learning Center Middle Level Alternative Program (MLAP) in collaboration with area businesses, indigenous history experts, nonprofits and government agencies to create a truly immersive outdoor classroom experience.

In short, the students were going to learn about the physiology of fish, then design and make their own fishing lures and finally test them out on the water. But Munoz's vision wasn't just to let students test their new skills off a fishing pier — she wanted boats.

"I told people the vision and the mission and they immediately said yes," Munoz said. "I think when it comes to kids, people really show up."

Munoz said the classroom experience started with students ages 12-16 learning about the physiology of different species of fish native to the area and why certain types of lures are more effective for some fish than others.

The math portion included learning about buoyancy and water displacement.



Tim Speier / Brainerd Dispatch

Brainerd Learning Center students learned about all things fishing at Gull Lake on Friday, Sept. 20, 2024.

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**Tim Speier / Brainerd Dispatch**

Shelly Munoz, STEM curriculum coordinator for Brainerd Public Schools, tells the kids what they will be doing for the day while out at Gull Lake on Friday, Sept. 20, 2024.



“”

I told people the vision and the mission and they immediately said yes,” Munoz said. “I think when it comes to kids, people really show up.

Shelly Munoz



**Tim Speier / Brainerd Dispatch**

A Brainerd Learning Center student shows off the lure they made while out at Gull Lake on Friday, Sept. 20, 2024.

“They learned how to measure and calculate density and how that might affect the lure when it hits the water,” Munoz explained. “I really just wanted the kids to see that STEM is everywhere and in everything. And really STEM is for everyone.”

With the help of local experts, students took their science and math skills and applied to designs made to catch specific kinds of fish. Jason Bahr, who owns Tutt’s Bait and Tackle in Garrison, and Brian Bordwell, who coaches Brainerd High School Fishing Club, offered their expertise to make the students’ experience successful. Bahr and Bordwell’s insight helped students determine what shape would work best for what fish and made their own educated guesses instead of just coming up with a basic design.

“(Bahr) let the kids come and get as many lures as they wanted so they could actually make some hypotheses and start to create their own lures,” Munoz said. “He was a huge help to the project.”

Students designed their lures on TinkerCad and created them on 3D printers.

On Sept. 20, just a few weeks into the 2024-25 school year, students loaded up on a convoy of fishing boats and headed to Gull Lake in a collaboration Munoz said she believes is unprecedented. Local fishing boat guides lent their boats and time to get students on the water and the local DNR agency helped educate them on the impact of invasive species and even brought along live fish, which the students got to release into the lake.



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**Tim Speier / Brainerd Dispatch**

Luther Sam, with the Tribal Historic Preservation Office of the Mille Lacs Band Of Ojibwe Indians, giving the blessing at Gull Lake on Friday, Sept. 20, 2024.

Regional indigenous history guide Luther Sam provided a lesson in the indigenous history of Gull Lake.

“It was a truly remarkable effort,” Munoz recalled. “Some of the kids had never been on a boat before. Some caught fish. Some didn’t. At the end of the day, some just really enjoyed going on a boat ride. And we got a great history lesson, too.”

The project was made possible because of a grant through Sourcewell in conjunction with Minnesota’s STEM Ecosystem. Munoz, who worked with Sourcewell before coming to ISD 181, said Minnesota’s STEM Ecosystem is an effort to connect all the STEM hubs throughout Minnesota with innovative STEM projects.

“It could have been anything we wanted it to be,” Munoz said.

Munoz has other big ideas for future projects, including hopes of doing ice fishing in the future and, hopefully, someday, a science in-flight class at the airport.

“It’s the learning and making it as hands-on and fun as possible,” she said. “When you make something, you have to get out and experience it — otherwise, it kind of defeats the science.”



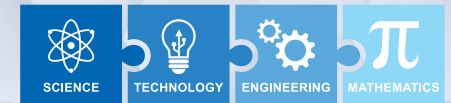
**Tim Speier / Brainerd Dispatch**

Brainerd Learning Center students learned about all things fishing at Gull Lake on Friday, Sept. 20, 2024.

Munoz said the most important part of the initiative is community involvement with students and continues to be moved by the feedback from organizations and businesses involved in the first innovative project.

“To me that’s what STEM is. It’s about connecting the community and the students,” Munoz said. “It’s connecting everything, everywhere.”

# THE WHO



# BEHIND THE HOW

This massive collaboration wouldn’t have been possible without all the organizations, businesses and individuals who said yes to being part of an extraordinary educational effort.

## Sourcewell

Amanda Tegels  
Nancy Bruns  
Rachel Johnson  
Aaron Logan

## Minnesota STEM Ecosystem

Emily Saed  
**Brainerd Public Schools**  
Shelly A. Muñoz  
Justin Barnhart  
Angie Bennett  
Shayla Budrow

## Brainerd Learning Center

Jessica Haapajoki  
Adam Extrand  
McKinley Anderson  
Jackie Janousek  
JoDee Moen

## Community Contributors

Marcus Lynch, Lucky Lynch Fishing Tours  
Jason Bahr, Brainerd Warrior Fishing Team  
Luther Sam, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Indians  
David Lockwood, Brainerd Department of Natural Resources  
Tutts Bait and Tackle  
JMO Radio Show  
Tim Edinger  
Tyler Bahr  
Jessamyn Foley, Brainerd Department of Natural Resources  
Jeff Lederman, MNDNR

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# 50 years of ECFE

BY JODIE NORQUIST

**B**uilding strong families, one connection at a time

Fifty years ago, Brainerd Public Schools embraced a groundbreaking program that would transform early childhood education and family support: Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE).

Today, ECFE continues to thrive, providing invaluable resources for parents and young children, fostering connections, and evolving to meet the ever-changing needs of families in our community.

ECFE has come a long way since its early days in a small space at the East Brainerd Mall. Over the years, it moved to the Brainerd Learning Center and now finds its home at the Warrior Early Learning Center in Baxter. ECFE classes also are now offered at Nisswa Elementary School. But no matter the location, the heart of ECFE has remained the same: supporting parents in their journey and creating a community where families feel connected and empowered.

ECFE enables young children, from birth to age 5, to participate in classes alongside a parent, grandparent, or guardian. While children play and learn with a teacher in the classroom, the adults convene separately for part of the class to discuss various parenting topics.

"Minnesota is the only state in the nation that has ECFE, which is special," Martha Smithson, principal at Warrior Early Learning Center, explains. "To provide families with this opportunity is unique. Family education is important. So much growth, change, and development happens in those first five years. It's foundational, and it really sets the standard of success for a family and a child."





“““  
It's a  
comfortable,  
nurturing  
environment, not  
intimidating, to  
talk with other  
parents.  
– Karlie Larson



Smithson attended ECFE classes as a child and later brought her own young children to classes. Her mother, Peggy Norman, is a retired ECFE teacher who is passionate about family education. Norman also taught parenting topics to parents at the Crow Wing County Jail, the women's shelter, and WIC.

"It's been a big passion of hers, which is really why I'm here, too," Smithson said of her mom. "That's always inspired me."

The impact of ECFE is evident in families like Karlie Larson's. Larson attended ECFE as a child, and her sons have taken ECFE classes. Her oldest son, Bo, age 4, now attends preschool, while her youngest son, Will, age 2, enjoys attending ECFE with his mom.

"I feel they are more confident and more positive toward school in general by going with me at first and getting comfortable with their teachers," Larson explained.

ECFE has allowed her sons to make friends, but she has also made friends. While she has many supportive friends, she was the first of her friends to have a baby, so it's been nice to meet other mom friends who are going through the same things.

"It makes you feel like you're not the only one going crazy some days," Larson said with a laugh. "It's a comfortable, nurturing environment, not intimidating, to talk with other parents."

Larson said she's appreciated the advice and information she's gained from the parent educational piece of ECFE classes.

Sometimes, guest speakers are brought in to discuss topics like medical care and car seats, which she found beneficial.

ECFE classes aren't just found in the classroom. Warrior Early Learning Center has developed new initiatives, such as intergenerational programs with senior citizen centers and outdoor nature classes, including field trips to Mount Ski Gull and Brainerd Public Library. There are creative evening and weekend class options, ensuring that more families can participate. Some classes accommodate families with multiple children, allowing older siblings to join. ECFE continues to expand its offerings to fit the needs of today's families. Families do not need to live in the Brainerd School District to participate in ECFE classes.



"I'm excited that we are growing and evolving into a real resource for connecting families and getting kids excited about learning," ECFE teacher Kelsi Brusehaver said. "It's great for the youngest kids in our community to become familiar with our school and classroom. We try to meet the needs in a community to educate and support as many families as possible."

One of the biggest changes over the years is the growing involvement of fathers, grandparents and other caregivers. Smithson explained that the whole family is more involved in the child's learning journey.

"Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) programs can be a game changer for parents, especially during those early years from birth to age five when kids are growing and learning at a rapid pace," explained Stacy Gold, Brainerd ECFE teacher. "These years are crucial for a child's development, and ECFE helps parents understand how to support their child's emotional, social, cognitive, and physical growth."

"But ECFE isn't just about the kids — it's about supporting parents," Gold added. "The early years of parenting can feel pretty isolating and ECFE provides a space where parents can connect with others going through similar experiences. It's a great chance to share stories, swap advice, and get reassurance. Plus, the classes are led by experts who can guide parents with the latest research and strategies, helping them feel more confident in their parenting. Overall, ECFE helps parents build stronger relationships with their kids and gives them the knowledge and community support they need to feel more confident and capable in their roles."

Kristin Schaffhauser, a Brainerd ECFE teacher, said ECFE engages the community, is often a family's first interaction with the school district and builds relationships among parents.

"I brought my kids and fell in love with the program, and now I work here," said Schaffhauser.

To celebrate its 50th anniversary, ECFE hosted a party in September, drawing 500 people to enjoy the Teddy Bear Band,

“”

I'm excited that we are growing and evolving into a real resource for connecting families and getting kids excited about learning.

– Kelsi Brusehaver



A woman with blonde hair is smiling and holding a rolled-up document. The background is a light blue wall.

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bounce houses, a petting zoo and carnival fun. The celebration continues this spring with a special concert May 30 at Gichi-ziibi Center for the Arts featuring Koo Koo Kanga Roo. This high-energy duo will engage families in a lively, interactive performance.

Brainerd's ECFE program continues evolving to meet today's families' needs. Its social media accounts have become a tool for extending parenting support and offering guidance on navigating screen time, childhood literacy and behavior management.

As it celebrates 50 years, the focus remains on what has always mattered most: helping parents and children learn, grow and thrive together. 

## HOW TO REGISTER

Early Childhood Family Education classes are available to register through Brainerd Community Education. Many classes are free, while others have a small fee. No family is turned away, as scholarships are available for all families.

For more information or for assistance in signing up, call 218-454-5430.



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## CTE construction courses help build students' careers

STORY BY ALYSON LEVIG

PHOTOS BY  
JEN SALVEVOLD

**A**s the name suggests, career exploration is the focal point of the Brainerd High School's Career and Technical Education (CTE) Program.



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The robust initiative offers many aspirational electives, such as welding, agriculture, small engines, woodworking, food service, business and video productions to students throughout their high school careers. Each of these topics often expand into different courses that tie back to a specific workforce, or business, located in the Brainerd lakes area.

"The CTE program allows students to dive into something they like," teacher Brian Bordwell explained. "And provides them with the opportunity to work with local professionals."

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Supplying students with the chance to operate, ask questions and learn from specialists is a unique aspect of the CTE program, one the community requested after a brief remission of the program in the late 2000s.

Today, 12 electives are required to graduate and Brainerd High School students can select multiple avenues to explore within the CTE program throughout their four years.

"These course offerings are also a great way to expose students to local careers before college and give them a chance to ask all the who, what, when, where, and why questions to actual individuals working in those fields," Bordwell added. "Again, all of which wouldn't be possible without our supportive community or local partnerships."

Bordwell teaches the construction courses in the CTE program which consists of CAD & Construction, Construction 1 and a Capstone class. The CAD & Construction course is geared toward 9th graders and focuses on floor plan writing. Construction 1 takes 10th graders and older a step further by explaining the aspects that go into construction estimates, ordering materials and building an 8-by-12 foot shed. The Capstone class combines the foundations of the previous courses and guides students through the process of creating a house. The construction incorporates a two-hour work block and both the fall and spring semesters to complete.

Besides building and finishing a house, students can also expect to learn about permits, funding and interior finishing while working alongside local professionals.

"My favorite part as a teacher is seeing the light bulb moments with my students," Bordwell said. "And witnessing the confidence students gain in themselves as projects become finished." The only aspects of the house participants do not finish are the cabinetry, electrical and plumbing which are completed by masters in those fields. Regardless, the students still learn about these trades as they build the house alongside those professionals and have fun doing so.

“”

**My favorite part as a teacher is seeing the light bulb moments with my students. And witnessing the confidence students gain in themselves as projects become finished.**

– Brian Bordwell



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“Another great thing about the CTE program is that it allows students a hands-on work experience, which is easily their favorite part about the electives,” Bordwell said.

“Plus the knowledge of the steps it takes to build a shed or house are engrained because the students are actually completing the process.”

Additional information about the CTE program and its offerings is incorporated in the Warrior Pathways program, which can be found within the Brainerd High School’s registration process or on the high school’s page of the District website, [isd181.org](http://isd181.org).



Another great thing about the CTE program is that it allows students a hands-on work experience, which is easily their favorite part about the electives.

– Brian Bordwell

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Photo courtesy of Jen Salvevold

# A leap of faith

STORY BY SUE READY

**T**he Brainerd School District opened a door for Superintendent Peter Grant for the 2025-2026 school year he hadn't anticipated since Grant retired from public education in 2016 from Owatonna Schools.



Dr. Erica Jackson

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Contributed photos



Grant is not new to the area, as he and his wife Shelley have owned a condo in the Brainerd area since 2013. They have enjoyed all the lakes area life has to offer as well as the good fortune to establish many relationships with people in the community.

With some 40 years of experience in public education, Grant brings his leadership skills to the District, having several roles in the educational field. From 2012 to 2016, he was the superintendent

of the Owatonna Schools. Before that, he served as superintendent in two other districts, associate high school principal, interim junior high principal and language arts teacher.

Grant's leadership style reflects that of a person who values the importance of being a good listener. He strives to foster trust and honesty while building relationships with teachers and staff. By surrounding himself with a variety of talented people, he feels

confident they will help him get the job done. He is optimistic that a collaborative working relationship will ensure student success that is promoted and celebrated.

Understanding the district's inner workings is one of Grant's goals and it will provide stability to the district. Grant strives to be consistent in his expectations, finding students need to understand the "why" of rules and how their acceptance can impact the success of their education.



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One of the biggest challenges for Grant as he reentered public education after retirement was discovering the negative impact COVID-19 (2020-2022) had on the school, resulting in some instability. He found that a shift had evolved dramatically changing the education scene. Many parents had to deal with monitoring school lessons from home and found themselves unqualified for the task. Ultimately, some parents began to explore alternative school choices, including homeschooling or moving to private schools. The lingering effects of

the COVID-19 era brought about a lower student return to the district schools. He also began to question “whether schools are academic institutions with an awareness of social needs or have they changed to become social institutions with an awareness of academic needs.”

In addition, unfinished student learning had been compromised during this COVID-19 period, particularly in reading and math. Another challenge Grant faced was the lingering effects of COVID-19 on the budget. Despite fewer students, operational

costs were still on the rise, thus creating budget shortfalls.

The political scene is a roller coaster ride that has challenged schools to provide needed economic stability as well as looking ahead for growth and expansion. District 181’s challenge is to find a balance between what’s best for moving ahead for the future but still maintaining a kid focus to succeed and stay in school despite many ongoing initiatives that interfere with this progression. Cuts to public school funding use a formula funding model, which can



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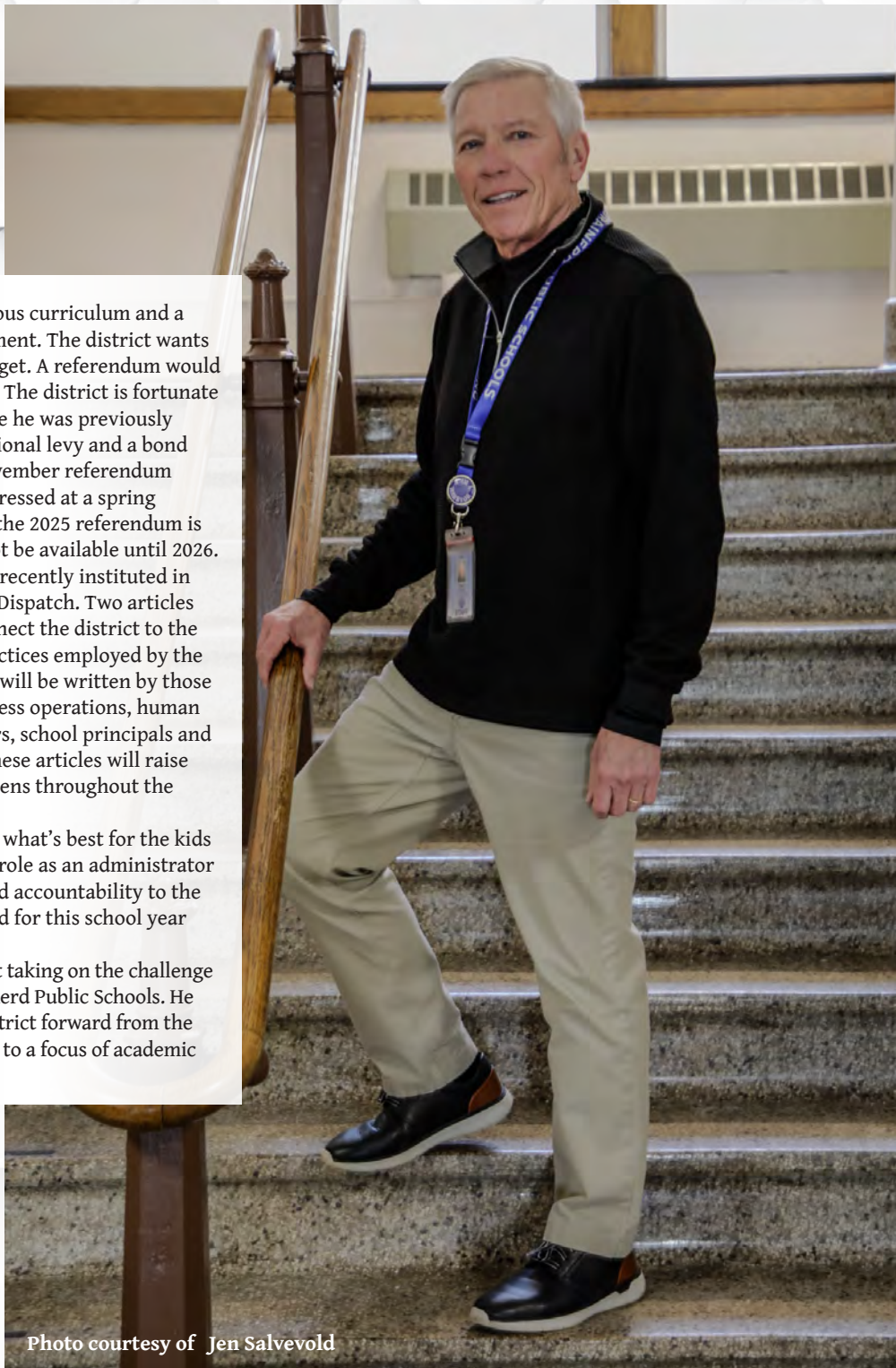



Photo courtesy of Jen Salvend

result in fewer supplies, a less rigorous curriculum and a lack of updated facilities and equipment. The district wants to avoid debt in the operational budget. A referendum would support a tax increase for residents. The district is fortunate that Grant has had experience where he was previously employed at passing both an operational levy and a bond referendum. The possibility of a November referendum is a consideration, and it will be addressed at a spring board meeting. Grant noted even if the 2025 referendum is successful, additional money will not be available until 2026.

Insight 181 is a creative initiative recently instituted in January 2025 found in the Brainerd Dispatch. Two articles a month are published that will connect the district to the community with a focus on best practices employed by the district. These contributing articles will be written by those in charge of specialized areas, business operations, human relations, technology heads, teachers, school principals and the superintendent. It is the hope these articles will raise community awareness of what happens throughout the school year and feels connected.

Grant strives to keep the focus on what's best for the kids and the community. He believes his role as an administrator is crucial to offering the stability and accountability to the district and his staff to move forward for this school year and in 2026.

It has been a leap of faith for Grant taking on the challenge of becoming superintendent of Brainerd Public Schools. He views his job as helping move the district forward from the two years of COVID-19 and returning to a focus of academic learning for all students. 

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# Alumni Spotlight: Eric Fellegy

BY REBECCA FLANSBURG

**A**s a Brainerd High School class of 1998 graduate, Eric Fellegy has never forgotten his school years.



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Currently a resident of Whitefish, Montana, he shared some of his favorite memories at Baxter Elementary School.

"I will always remember popcorn days, chocolate milk, Scholastic Book club and crawling through the inflatable dome to see the solar system," he said.

After graduating high school, he had no idea what to do with his life, so he went straight into the workforce, hoping a year or two away from school would help him figure out his true calling. It wasn't until his move to Whitefish, Montana, in 2014 that he found a fulfilling career. As a marketing specialist at a local credit union, he also spends much time giving back to his community.

"I love the flexibility of my job because some days I work in the office while, on other days, I can be helping a nonprofit with an event/fundraiser, attending a chamber event or volunteering in the community. One fundraising event we organized was a 5k/1-mile fun run for a local junior high school to raise funds to replace their 25-year-old appliances in their home economics class.

"We raised enough money to buy all new appliances for the home ec class and donated a few thousand dollars to a couple of nonprofits that helped organize the event."

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“”

As a boy growing up in the 80s, being outside is what we did. [...] Being outside, in the woods, on a trail, on a mountain, is my therapy.

– Eric Fellegly



When not working, Fellegly is a long-time outdoor enthusiast who enjoys hiking various trails and climbing the mountains in Glacier National Park. His love of being immersed in nature began as a Minnesotan, and some of his favorite boyhood adventures included exploring familiar destinations like the North Shore, Itasca, and Pillsbury State Forest.

“As a boy growing up in the 80s, being outside is what we did. While living in Colorado, I became an avid hiker and was dating a gal hiking the Pacific Crest Trail (Mexico to Canada). I joined her on the first day at the Mexico/USA border. I surprised her in the Sierras, and we climbed Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the lower 48 states. But when I joined her in the middle of Washington to finish the last stretch into Canada, that’s where my love for hiking began. Being outside, in the woods, on a trail, on a mountain, is my therapy.”



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To date, he has climbed over 125 mountains throughout the west and is gaining ground on climbing 100 mountains in Glacier National Park alone. His goal is to attempt to climb Mount Rainier in Washington again after abandoning his initial plan in June 2012 due to dangerous weather.

Over the years, Fellegly has turned his love of the great outdoors into a successful and award-winning hobby. His photos have been used in magazines, local chamber visitor guides and billboards in the greater Montana area. When asked what he misses most about the Brainerd lakes area, he revealed he misses his family, who still lives in the area, the most.

"I also miss the stunning fall colors and the calls of the common loon. I also miss those special spots that hold so many memories around the area. Oh, and of course, the taco pizza at Rafferty's!" 🍌

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