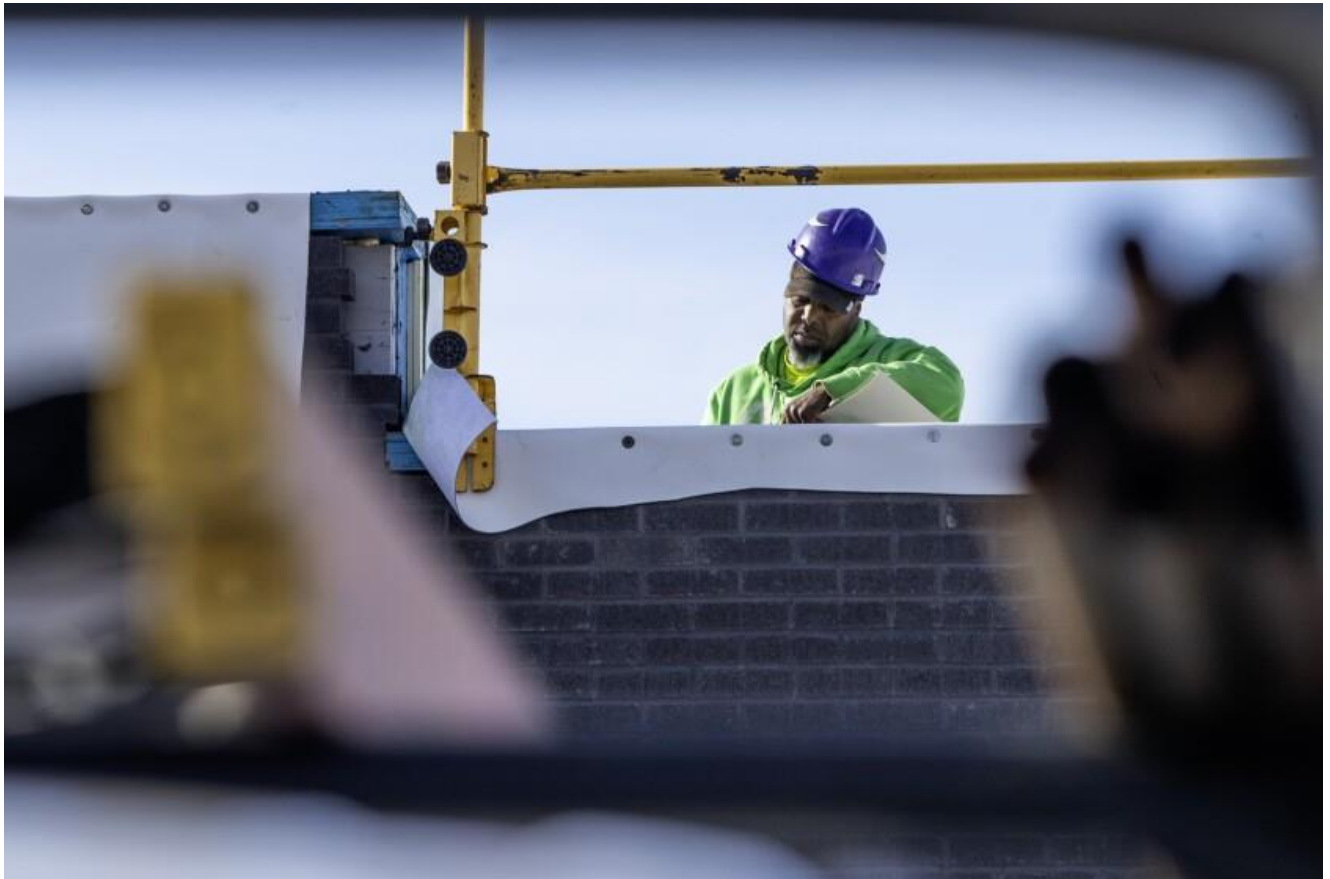


Construction of new educational learning center underway in New London, Minnesota

The new ELC will be built to replace the current Willmar facility due to high costs of repairs and renovations needed at that location.

By [Levi Jones](#)

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A worker is shown Thursday, Feb. 1, 2024, on the roof of the new educational learning center under construction in New London. The Southwest West Central Service Cooperative will operate the ELC in the new building it will lease from the city of New London.

Macy Moore / West Central Tribune

Editor's note: The new educational learning center in New London will be located along County Road 9 Northeast, across the street from the elementary school in New London. The story has been updated since original publication to give a better description of the location.

[NEW LONDON](#) — A new educational learning center for students with learning or behavioral issues is being built in New London.

It will serve up to 50 students and have 15-20 new employees, according to an announcement from the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative.

The project is a collaboration between the city of New London's Economic Development Authority and the service cooperative.

There are six educational learning center locations operated currently by the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative, including a location in Willmar.

The facility in a building on the [MinnWest Technology Campus](#) requires updates and renovations that have been deemed too costly for the current budget.



A sign sits Thursday, Feb. 1, 2024, at the entryway of the site in New London where a Southwest West Central Service Cooperative Educational Learning Center is under construction.

Macy Moore / West Central Tribune

"Our current building in Willmar needs a lot of repairs. The amount of repairs are extensive and it is no longer meeting the needs of our students and is too expensive," said Jennifer Kimman, director of Educational Learning Centers for the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative, in an interview with the West Central Tribune.

Repairs there "would have been outside of the budget range," she said.

The new educational learning center in New London will be 25,000 square feet and located along County Road 9 Northeast, across the street from the elementary school in New London. BCI Construction, which is in charge of the project, plans to complete construction by the end of June of 2024.

The cooperative in its news release did not list costs, and a message from the West Central Tribune was not returned by deadline. During a fall presentation to legislators, a figure of \$12 million was cited as a total budget for construction.

"Right now it is fully enclosed. A majority of the exterior is there, there may be some finishes that need to be done. The building is slated to be ready by the middle of June," Kate Lieser said during an interview. She is the site administrator for the Willmar ELC.

Once the new location is constructed, the Willmar location will be closed, which is expected to happen at the end of the current school year.

Plans for construction of a new ELC have been around for years, though what it would look like has changed.

"I have been on board for about six years now. When I originally came on board, most of the planning and development had been done, but that was just prior to 2020," Lieser said. "... But we all know that summer nothing was really happening."

The earlier plan had a new learning center included in the addition of the Willmar Middle School's new gym, which is currently being constructed, but that joint project never came to fruition.

Bids ultimately were rejected by the Willmar School Board in September 2022, the West Central Tribune [previously reported](#).

The Southwest West Central Services Cooperative then approached the New London Economic Development Authority for a partnership in the project.



Construction work continues Thursday, Feb. 1, 2024, at the building in New London where the Southwest West Central Service Cooperation will operate its newest educational learning center.

Macy Moore / West Central Tribune

“Because of the challenges we have in financing these projects, Willmar Public Schools wanted us to ask 54 school districts in southwest and west central Minnesota to sign a resolution that they would fund the program or fund the building if SWWC went out of business — we just weren’t able to do that, so that part of the project failed,” Southwest West Central Service Cooperative Executive Director Cliff Carmody said [during an October presentation](#) to members of the Minnesota House Capital Investment Committee who were touring the area to hear bonding requests.

“We went to the city of New London, the economic development authority. They are working with us. We’re designing the building. They will, if we can make this all work, they will build this to our specifications. It’s the same process we used in Montevideo, ” Carmody said at that presentation.

An educational learning center provides intensive special education and related services to students with learning or behavioral issues. The students are referred by the school district where they reside, in consultation with parents.

"There's a widening gap in the region for an educational center like this," said Trudie Guptill, New London city administrator, in a news release. "We're lucky to have a provider like SWWC in the region that can make this happen for our students and communities."

The new building will be able to accommodate up to 50 students from an area of around a 30-60 mile radius of New London. The Willmar location currently has 34 students and a maximum capacity of 42.

If students find that they are too far from the new location due to the move, they may be relocated to another ELC in the area. Lieser does not expect the move to the new location to affect the employment of current staff.

Current ELC locations include Belview, Cosmos, Montevideo, Pipestone, Willmar and Windom.

The Southwest West Central Service Cooperative is working with the city of New London and local school districts to make the transition into a new facility as seamless as possible.

The building will be owned by the city of New London, which will lease it for use. This is the same model used for the ELC that the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative operates in Montevideo.

Funds for the continued use of these ELCs come from districts who send students to them. According to the news release, taxpayers will not be impacted by the construction or operation of the new center.

[The Southwest West Central Service Cooperative](#) provides special education programs for districts across 18 counties in the area. Its locations have programs that specialize in working with students with disabilities and social-behavioral issues. The goal of these programs is to provide more targeted education for the students and help them return to their residential district schools.

"Our priority is to meet the needs of the students we serve and by doing that we are helping the students in their school, home and community environments," Kimmen said.