

Windom's ELC helps meet needs for some District 518 special education students

This year, fewer than a dozen District 518 students are attending school at the SWWC's Educational Learning Center in Windom, along with students from other area schools.



Jim Lentz, site administrator at the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative's Educational Learning Center in Windom, sits at the round table in his office, marked with heraldry representing the "knights of the round table" staff members at the school. The shields also appear on classroom doors, and they were used when students went on their own "Grail Quest."

By [Kari Lucin](#), Worthington Globe, December 21, 2022

WINDOM — A wide variety of students attend District 518 schools, including many who receive special education services due to a disability or a special need. Some District 518 students have more unique educational needs, however, and to ensure those needs are met, they attend school at one of the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative's learning centers in southwest Minnesota.

This year, most of those students — fewer than a dozen — attend school at the SWWC's Educational Learning Center in Windom, housed in the former Winfair Elementary School building, along with students from other area schools.

"It's a great program. It certainly fills a need and fills a void," said site administrator Jim Lentz. "We're building relationships and meeting kids where they are."

The SWWC offers two different types of programs at its learning centers, Lentz explained, and students range from kindergarten through 12th grade.

- **The SUN Program** is geared toward students who may have more severe disabilities, mostly those with autism or Down syndrome. Some have relatively simple needs but others may need a couple of people to help them learn, and most of the students are nonverbal, some using tablets to communicate.
- **The Bridges Program** is intended to help students who have behavior issues, whether the issue is elopement — wandering or running away from caregivers — fighting, swearing or some combination of those issues. Educational programming for students in Bridges includes social-emotional instruction with licensed professionals.

According to SWWC's website, referrals to those programs are made by the student's home school district.



A District 518 van sits outside the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative's Educational Learning Center in Windom, housed in the former Winfair Elementary School building.

As a former elementary school, the ELC in Windom has a cafeteria and a gymnasium, as well as plenty of classroom space.

A maze made of painter's tape on a wall at the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative's Educational Learning Center in Windom provides students with a distraction or something to focus on and puzzle out, as needed.

"The one thing we do need is more individual spaces for students who need that nonstimulus," Lentz said. "We're getting some of that done."

Like many other schools in the area, the ELC is experiencing a staff shortage. With 17 positions available, 12 were filled at the start of the school year and an additional one has been filled since. The school could use a social worker or a counselor, a couple of teachers and, of course, it's always looking for paraprofessionals, Lentz said.

"People who are smart, like kids, who are trainable, who work well with others — those are some of the main traits" Lentz is looking for. "Our backgrounds here are very diversified. We draw on a lot of personal experience too."

Quite a few paras work at the school, providing one-on-one time, and the ELC also offers speech, adapted physical education and occupational therapy for students who need it.

"A lower student to staff ratio, that's one thing we can provide," Lentz said, adding that his staff is well-trained on student behavior.

Lentz is in his second year as site administrator, and has learned a lot by listening to how ELC staff talks to and approaches kids, encouraging them to use their voice and offering them choices. They often ask students questions and give them options, asking in a way that helps the student make more positive decisions, he explained.

Echoes of positivity can be found throughout the corridors of the school, as many of the doors have words painted over them: honesty, equality, self-control, kindness, empathy, responsibility, respect and many others.

Other doors feature images of shields — as Lentz had a large round table for staff meetings and there were 12 staff members who called themselves the "knights of the round table" and sent kids from room to room on a "Grail Quest" of their own. The "knights" are led, naturally, by Arthur, a friendly, furry little king who also serves as one of the school's three therapy dogs.

There's a sensory room, too, with plenty of items to help students with sensory challenges, and some "solution spaces," where kids who get physical can go.

Near the entrance is a little showcase that could be found in any business, with mugs, chargers and wooden crafts made by students that are for sale.

The school also features some more unusual decor — small mazes made of painter's tape displayed on the occasional wall. Some are more challenging than others, but all of them can help offer students a much-needed distraction if a break is needed, and the tape means they can easily be removed or reconfigured.

Lentz has one in his office, too.



The sensory room at the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative's Educational Learning Center in Windom is shown here.

Much like other schools, the ELC divides its day into sections, and during every period, students receive points based on what they did. A student who tried might get two points, and one who "did everything right" might get three, while one who was exceptional could get four points.

"Those are added up every day and they can 'buy' from the school store," Lentz explained. "So they get to earn stuff."

They also get to earn experiences.

One Friday a month, the students get to have a fun day, going bowling, contributing to and eating a Thanksgiving dinner or sharing a holiday meal, with the financial support of the Remick Foundation. In the past, kids have gone to the movies, seen a play at Chanhassen Dinner Theatre and even gone ice skating, just like their same-age peers would.

For the most part, students stay in the same classroom throughout the day, with six to eight kids in a classroom, heading to other parts of the school for breakfast, lunch and physical education. If a student needs a break, a staff member will go with them; if they need to use the restroom, a staff member will go along and wait outside.

Sometimes, a student will head to Lentz's office to share ideas or suggestions, like making rice krispie bars instead of brownies for the Thanksgiving dinner.

Sometimes the students are very in tune with their classmates, helping those with visual difficulties get where they need to go or asking a teacher to talk to a fellow student who's just having a bad day.

"They're really in tune to how people feel," Lentz said. "If you're a phony, they'll spot you in a second."

Staff at the ELC get to see changes in the students, not just over long periods of time but sometimes day-to-day, he said.

"I love the kids, but the staff here is extraordinary. They are so dedicated," Lentz said. "Being part of a team that basically changes the world is something special. They accept everybody; they deal with all kinds of stuff."

Generally speaking, the ELC is trying to help students transition back to schools in their district, a goal which can be a struggle, Lentz said. Like any other student, they're not going to be perfect, and after experiencing success at the ELC they still might revert to old habits and behaviors when plunged into an environment they found challenging before.

An inability to adapt to certain conditions can be part of a student's disability, too.

Generally, students transition back to their district schools a class period or two at a time, but some students find it easier to transition all at once, Lentz said.

Either way, the important part is having a positive relationship with someone there.

"Relationship-building is huge," Lentz said.

For more information about the SWWC and its programs, visit swsc.org.



Many of the doors at the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative's Educational Learning Center include values such as "kindness" and "equality," and some are marked with heraldry representing the "knights of the round table," used when students went on their own "Grail Quest."

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