

Northfield Public Schools Annual Report

April 2026



What's Inside:

- Northfield's CTE program prepares students for lifelong success.
- Hilliners Dance embraces progress, not perfection.
- Northfield Middle School receives recognition from MDE.

We prepare every student for lifelong success by developing critical thinkers who are curious and ready to engage in our society.



View this report online at
northfieldschools.org

Superintendent's Message



Dear Northfield School District Residents:

This annual report was revived to facilitate greater engagement with our broader school district community. While we provide updates to the community in numerous ways, our communications advisory committee recommended that a printed report would be a way to ensure that information about the school district is delivered right to district residents' homes annually. We hope it is useful for you and encourage you to follow the school district by signing up for our district family update newsletter at the link below, listening for school news on KYMN radio, and reading about us in the Northfield News.

This report is delivered during a time of great change in the school district. I have accepted a new position as the executive director of the Minnesota Association of School Administrators. MASA is a professional organization that serves more than 700 members, including superintendents, central office administrators, and curriculum and technology leaders across Minnesota. This role will allow me to use my strongest skills — coaching, supporting, and developing superintendents and other central office administrators; advocating for robust public education policy; and promoting sustainable funding in St. Paul and Washington, D.C. Additionally, I will be highlighting the exceptional work of public school educators. I will begin this role on July 1.

I am proud of the work we have done together over the last 16 years. We have centered our vision on preparing every student for lifelong success by developing critical thinkers who are curious and ready to engage with our society. We have maintained a comprehensive academic program that is the envy of surrounding districts, while offering a robust extracurricular program that has helped students grow outside the classroom. We have significantly improved our career and technical education programs and enhanced our world-class fine arts program. We have revolutionized our facilities and been responsible stewards of the generous resources the community has entrusted us with. We can be proud of how we navigated

difficult times for our society together. We are consistently rated among the best school districts in Minnesota, with good reason. Even with these successes, we have so much more potential. Our exceptional educators are committed to continuous improvement, and I know they will help our district reach new heights.

My wife, Mary, and I have felt incredibly supported by this community. It has been an outstanding place to raise our three children and is a fantastic place to live. It truly is a “special place” for us.

We are also fortunate to have an outstanding school board — a model for other communities to follow. They are in the midst of the search for my successor. You can learn more about that search process on our district website (northfieldschools.org).

Sincerely,

Matt

—

Matt Hillmann, Ed.D.
Superintendent



Students at Bridgewater Elementary complete their projects during art class.

Sign up for the district newsletter:

Fill out this form to receive the Northfield School District's family update in your inbox: bit.ly/4trfq1B



Northfield Public Schools to host 2026 Big 9 Music Festival

The Northfield School District is excited to host this year's Big 9 Music Festival on Friday, May 1. Now in its 93rd year, the Big 9 Music Festival is the nation's longest-running high school music festival. Established in 1933 and taking breaks only for World War II and the Covid-19 pandemic, it features the bands, orchestras and choirs from 12 southeast Minnesota schools.

This one-day festival includes performances and clinician feedback throughout the day, culminating in the grand finale concert, held this year at 7:30 p.m. at the Northfield High School auditorium. This celebration of music is a chance for students to perform for peers and receive expert feedback. Tickets are available online on the district's website.

“The Big 9 Music Festival is a valued tradition that brings our schools together and highlights music's power to connect us and inspire

excellence,” said Superintendent Matt Hillmann. “Events like this give our students the chance to learn from one another, challenge themselves, and share their talents with a wider audience.”



The Northfield High School Choir performs at their annual Traditions Concert at Skinner Memorial Chapel on Carleton College's campus.

View the Big 9 Music Festival Schedule:

View schedules and updates about the 2026 Big 9 Music Festival online: northfieldschools.org/big9music2026/



Northfield's CTE programs prepare students for real-world success



Students in the culinary arts program prepare handheld apple pies.

Northfield Public Schools offers courses in six career pathways that open students up to hundreds of careers, and many students enter a CTE class knowing little about the subject area. Welding, engine mechanics, woodworking, business ownership, preparing a meal for a crowd, caring for animals, supporting a family in crisis — these are skills and fields students get to explore as high school students. The career and technical programs meet students where they are and build the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to move forward. Students take ownership of where they go from there.

Work-based learning is offered across both general and special education classrooms at Northfield High School and the Area Learning Center, placing students at local employer worksites matched to their interests and strengths. One student placed at Benjamin Bus through work-based learning impressed his employer so much that the company offered him summer work and paid for his two-year mechanic program. The

student earned their CDL license, drives a school bus for the company, and mentors new students coming through the same program. Employer partners include Benjamin Bus, Family Fare, Cub Foods, Cannon Valley Cinema 10, Flaherty's Northfield Lanes, Hans Kitchen, Spring Creek Elementary, and Little Village Early Learning Center. Beyond placement, coordinators support students through weekly check-ins, safety training, resume and cover letter writing, interviewing skills, and helping them navigate today's job market.

In culinary arts, students master far more than recipes. They earn ServSafe manager certification while developing knife skills, creating focaccia gardens, and preparing three-course meals. "We focus on enhancing their communication and problem-solving skills, while adapting to uncertainties and adaptability. Students learn how time management is important in the industry while maintaining professionalism throughout their labs. We are more than a cooking class. We are a life skills, career-minded program," the instructor emphasizes.

The agriculture, food, and natural resources (AFNR) program challenges the "cows and plows" stereotype entirely. "Everything you eat, drink, touch, breathe is AFNR-related. [Students] just have to find their way

NORTHFIELD CTE CONTINUED ON PG 3 >>>

FFA returns to Northfield



Members of the Northfield FFA.

By Josiah (Josie) Kuennen | Northfield FFA Reporter

The Northfield FFA chapter is home to a wide variety of people and communities. After a 33-year hiatus, the Northfield FFA chapter was re-established three years ago and has been growing steadily ever since. With every new member, it becomes more diverse, welcoming students regardless of their background or upbringing.

Tara Alaniz, the 2025–2026 chapter president, is a "town kid" and a three-sport athlete. She discovered FFA through her grandfather, a longtime member, but she doesn't fit the traditional image of an FFA leader. When asked, "How do you encourage non-farm kids like you to join FFA?" she responded with, "I think it's important for everyone to know FFA is not just cows and plows, it is truly a lot more than that. FFA builds community and connections with so many people. I think one of the big ways to encourage kids similar to me is by showing them that I don't come from a farm, but I still have a place in the agriculture world."

The Northfield FFA chapter has welcomed a growing number of members, creating a supportive environment where students are encouraged to explore a wide variety of career development events and leadership development events. Opportunities range from floriculture and agriculture mechanics to prepared public speaking and creed speaking. "I like to challenge students to step outside their comfort zones," said TJ Austin, the chapter advisor. "Trying new things helps them grow and become stronger individuals. Through these experiences, members not only develop new skills but also gain confidence and strengthen their leadership abilities, which deepens their connection to the FFA community."



Alex Altermatt creates a travel mug in advanced woodworking.

Hiliners Dance Team embraces progress not perfection

With a new coaching staff this season, the Hiliners Dance Team embraced a new philosophy of progress not perfection. The focus shifted to growth, confidence, and pride, helping each dancer feel proud of the work they put in and the team they represent.

That mindset paid off as Varsity, JV, and B-Squad delivered strong performances throughout the season, earning multiple top placements and the program's best Big 9 Conference results in more than a decade, with a second place overall finish. More than the scores, this season was about rediscovering passion for dance and strengthening the bonds that make the Hiliners a true team. "I've been impressed with their work ethic and [Coach Allen] challenging the girls to do their best each day," Activities Director John Mahal said.

Follow Northfield Activities Online:

View updates, schedules, register for activities and more on Northfield's activities webpage: activitiesnorthfieldschools.sportngin.com/



The 2026 Hiliners Dance team performs during a competition.

MCA, ACT test results rank Northfield top in the state

Northfield Public Schools continues to demonstrate outstanding academic achievement, with results from both the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) and the ACT placing our students among the best in the state.

Northfield's third through eighth grade students, along with our high school sophomores, achieved reading MCA scores that ranked them in the top 20% of Minnesota districts testing ten or more students. Northfield students' math MCA scores were equally impressive in 2025, reflecting strong, consistent performance across grade levels.

Northfield High School's class of 2025 ACT performance placed the district in the top 10% of 300 Minnesota districts for overall ACT composite scores. Our graduates also rank in the top 10% for meeting the ACT college readiness benchmark in three of four subjects, showing both high achievement and strong college readiness.

These results are a testament to the dedication of Northfield's students, teachers, and families. The district is proud of the accomplishments of our students and look forward to continuing to prepare our students to be academically and socially ready to choose their preferred pathway after high school.



Students at Spring Creek Elementary read together.

NMS receives MDE recognition



Members of the middle school WEB team, a group of eighth grade student leaders who help sixth grade students transition to middle school, on the first day of school.

Northfield Middle School was recently recognized by the Minnesota Department of Education for excelling in academic performance and making significant strides in closing achievement gaps. NMS was one of eight schools in Minnesota to receive this honor, previously the National Blue Ribbon School program. NMS received recognition in both categories: Exemplary High Performing School and Exemplary Closing the Gaps School.

"In Minnesota we believe that every student deserves access to a high-quality education, and these schools are embodying that mission," said Minnesota Education Commissioner Willie Jett. "They are an example of what educators can achieve when they make their school a place where all students can learn, grow, and thrive."

According to the Commissioner of Education, Exemplary High Performing Schools are "schools that are among the top performers in the state as measured by assessments or nationally normed tests," and Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing Schools are "schools that excel in narrowing achievement gaps between different student groups and the overall student body."

Very few schools receive this award, and even fewer earn recognition in both categories. This honor reflects the dedication of our staff, the hard work of our students, and the support of our families and community.

Northfield Schools provides proactive fiscal stewardship



Northfield Public Schools: 2025–26 Financial Outlook & Stewardship Report

Excellence in Accountability



13 CONSECUTIVE SCHOOL FINANCE AWARDS

Recognized by the Minnesota Department of Education for 13 years of excellence in financial reporting and accounting.



7 CONSECUTIVE CLEAN AUDITS

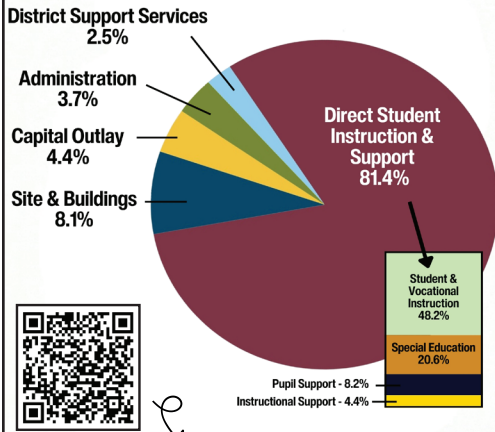
Independent audits confirm that the district's financial statements are transparent and free of material misstatements for seven years running.



S&P Global Rating: AA

Northfield is one of only a few Minnesota school districts to hold a high investment-grade credit rating, reflecting exceptional fiscal management.

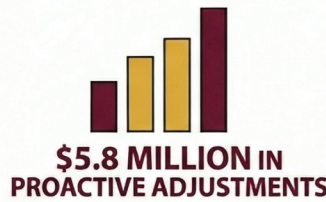
2024-25 Expenditures by Program



Learn more online:

northfieldschools.org/about/departments/finance/

Proactive Fiscal Stewardship



Through a priority-based budget process, the district identified \$5.8 million for fiscal stewardship to balance the FY26 budget.



\$1,962,780 PLANNED SURPLUS

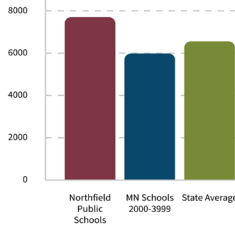
The 2025–26 revised budget anticipates a nearly \$2 million surplus to help offset future enrollment declines and funding gaps.



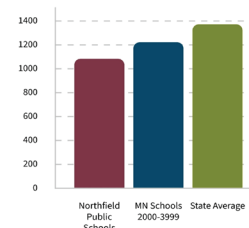
18.4% PROJECTED UNASSIGNED FUND BALANCE

The unassigned fund balance for FY26 is projected at 18.4%, exceeding the Board's minimum stability goal of 14%.

Prioritization of Student Instruction

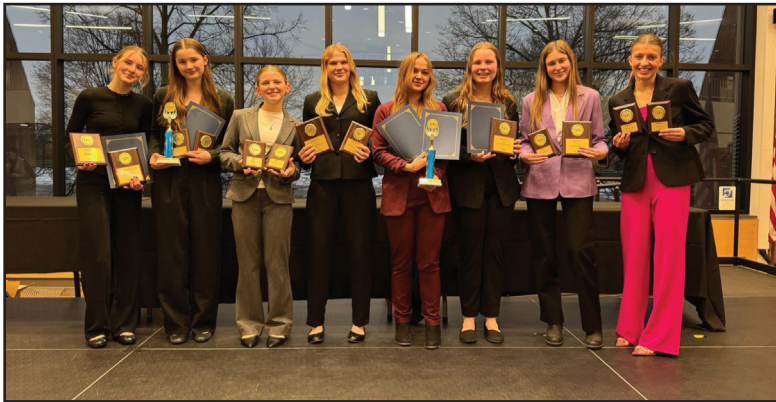


In 2024, the district spent \$7,704 per student on direct instruction, above the state average of \$6,558 per student and the average of \$5,982 spent by districts of a similar size (2000-3999 students).



In 2024, the district spent \$1,084 per student on administration and support costs, below the state average of \$1,372 per student, and the average of \$1,222 spent by districts of a similar size (2000-3999 students).

Northfield CTE CONTINUED FROM PG 2 >>>



Northfield BPA members win awards at the regional competition.

in,” one teacher explains. Students explore careers in veterinary science, environmental resources, marine mechanics, and engineering while gaining hands-on experience through goat health monitoring, trout raising with the DNR, and partnerships with local businesses. Several AFNR students are pursuing careers in agriculture, animal science, construction, and diesel technology through programs at SDSU, UW-River Falls, Dunwoody College of Technology, and Midwest Machinery, while alumni continue to find success in fields ranging from beef production and ag education to electrical work.

In woods and manufacturing, watching students flourish once they’ve been given the basics of safety and project-building is, as one instructor puts it, “an amazing thing to behold.” In advanced woodworking, one student’s work stands out as an example of what is possible: the student approached each project with passion and purpose, taking time to think through each step, and when problems arose, they worked with the instructor to find solutions. The results spoke for themselves: a beautiful sliding box, a wood travel mug, and a self-designed desk with an adjustable top.

The business pathway gives students a chance to explore what “majoring in business” actually means before they reach a college campus. From keeping books in accounting to building a full business plan around a real idea, students engage with practical, real-world skills every day. Several Northfield students have launched their own businesses based on their class projects, and one senior, after two years of business coursework, is heading to college this fall with a clear direction in mind. That competitive edge showed at the January 2026 Business Professionals of America regional competition, where Northfield’s team walked away with armfuls of awards. The instructor notes, “Whether it is writing a business letter or creating a resume, investing in the stock market, or keeping the books for a business, students gain insight, knowledge, and experience in real-world scenarios.”

The human services pathway helps students understand themselves and the world around them. One story from this year captures the program’s reach especially well. A student with limited English enrolled in Human and Family Relationships, a class built around daily discussion. The instructor worked with interpreters to understand what the student most wanted to learn, and then found resources that allowed them to engage with the material in their native language. The student was drawn to healthy family dynamics and the role therapy can play in them. They completed all of their reading and research in their first language, then translated every piece of their work into English. “It was very rewarding to see them gain knowledge, skills, and interest in possible careers,” the instructor reflected. It is a reminder that these classes meet students wherever they are, in more ways than one.

Whether students go on to technical colleges, four-year universities, or enter the workforce directly, CTE students graduate with certifications, portfolios, and real-world experience that employers and institutions recognize. For many, that discovery sparks a passion, and a career path, that lasts a lifetime.

The Northfield Board of Education meets on the second and fourth Monday of each month. All meetings are held in the Northfield Public Schools district office boardroom at 201 Orchard Street South and begin at 6:00 p.m. unless otherwise noted.

All regularly scheduled school board meetings are videotaped and rebroadcast on Northfield Public Television, Channel 187. Meetings are aired during the week of the meeting. Meetings are also streamed on the Northfield Public School Board's YouTube Channel, or you can listen to the audio-only version of the meetings on your favorite podcast platform.

Northfield School Board Members

- Claudia Gonzalez-George: Chair
- Corey Butler: Vice-Chair
- Amy Goerwitz: Treasurer
- Maggie Epstein: Clerk
- Ben Miller
- Jenny Nelson
- Jeff Quinnell
- Matt Hillmann: Superintendent

Follow the School Board Online:

View recordings of the meetings, read meeting minutes, and more at: northfieldschools.org/about/school-board/



Groundbreaking at NHS this summer

After a successful bond referendum in November 2024, Northfield Public Schools will break ground on a Reimagined Northfield High School in June 2026. Construction will occur in phases through the summer of 2029. Included in the project are:

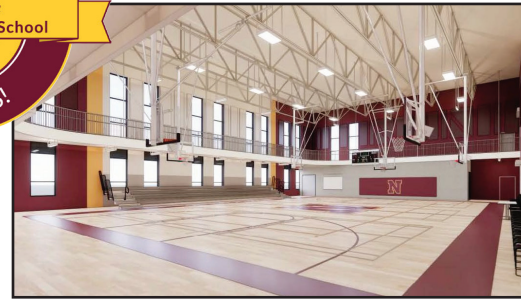
- A 120,000-square-foot multi-story classroom addition.
- Demolition of the D, H, M and S wings (102,000 square feet).
- Renovating the remaining 168,559 square feet.
- An expanded gymnasium addition large enough for four full-size basketball courts and an indoor walking track.
- A new HVAC system powered by geothermal technology.



The bond referendum's passage reflects strong community confidence in Northfield Public Schools and a shared commitment to providing students with an environment where they can thrive. The Reimagined Northfield High School is designed not just for today's students, but for future generations.

Follow Reimagine NHS Online:

View updates, photos, and more online at: northfieldschools.org/reimagine/



3-D Renditions of the Reimagined Northfield High School. Top: The NHS main entrance. Middle: The expanded gymnasium. Bottom: The cafeteria.