DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Innovation Service-Learning Grants

Report to the Legislature

As required by Laws of Minnesota 2023, chapter 55, article 2, section 64, subdivision 20

For more information:

Sally Reynolds
Career and College Success Division
Minnesota Department of Education
400 NE Stinson Blvd.
Minneapolis, MN 55413
651-582-8567
Sally.reynolds@state.mn.us
education.mn.gov

As requested by Minnesota Statutes, section 3.197: This report cost approximately $2,974.46 to prepare, including staff time, printing and mailing expenses.

Upon request, this material will be made available in an alternative format such as large print, braille or audio recording. Printed on recycled paper.

Table of Contents

Legislative Charge

The 2023 Legislature directed the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) to award grants to eligible applicants to implement or strengthen and expand student-led, student-designed service-learning projects together with a community partner. Grantees must report to the commissioner under Laws of Minnesota 2023, chapter 55, article 2 section 64, subdivision 20 on the educational and developmental outcomes of participating students and the eligible school's progress toward meeting at least one goal of the world's best workforce* goals in accordance with Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.11, or the state plan submitted and approved under the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Grantees must report on the community outcomes achieved through student service-learning experiences and the corresponding student service activities. The commissioner must submit a report on participating student and community outcomes under this section to the legislative committees with jurisdiction over kindergarten through grade 12 education by February 15, 2025.

Minnesota Statutes 2024, section 120B.11 updated the world's best workforce language to comprehensive achievement and civic readiness. References to the world's best workforce have been replace with comprehensive achievement and civic readiness in this report.

Introduction

The 2023 Minnesota legislature authorized $900,000 to fund up to 32 grants of up to $50,000 each to allow eligible partnerships to provide student-designed, student-led service-learning opportunities. The grant application period opened in December 2023 and closed on January 22, 2024. Successful applicants established partnerships consisting of at least two students, two school staff, and at least one adult community partner. They proposed student-designed, student-led service-learning projects, defined goals and outcomes, and established budgets. Official grant award notifications were issued on May 10, 2024, to 16 grantees which included 10 independent school districts, four charter schools, and one educational cooperative. Training and support were provided for grantees which included two 3-hour workshops and ongoing support throughout the grant period. Interim progress reports were due December 13, 2025. This report draws upon a qualitative analysis of the interim progress reports as submitted by the grantees.

While the projects enabled by this grant are still underway, grantees noted a variety of positive impacts across educational, developmental, school, and community outcomes in their interim progress reports. Some grantees indicated that students involved in these grant projects are demonstrating improved academic engagement and performance, higher attendance rates, and a stronger likelihood of graduating. Many students are developing durable skills such as project management, budgeting, research, public speaking, and design thinking. Students are also demonstrating more confidence and are taking on leadership roles within their communities. In alignment with the Comprehensive Achievement and Civic Readiness and federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) goals, some grantees noted service-learning opportunities are helping close academic achievement gaps, improving school climates, and ensuring students are prepared for college and careers. Service-learning projects

are addressing real community needs, increasing student awareness of social issues, and strengthening relationships between schools and communities.
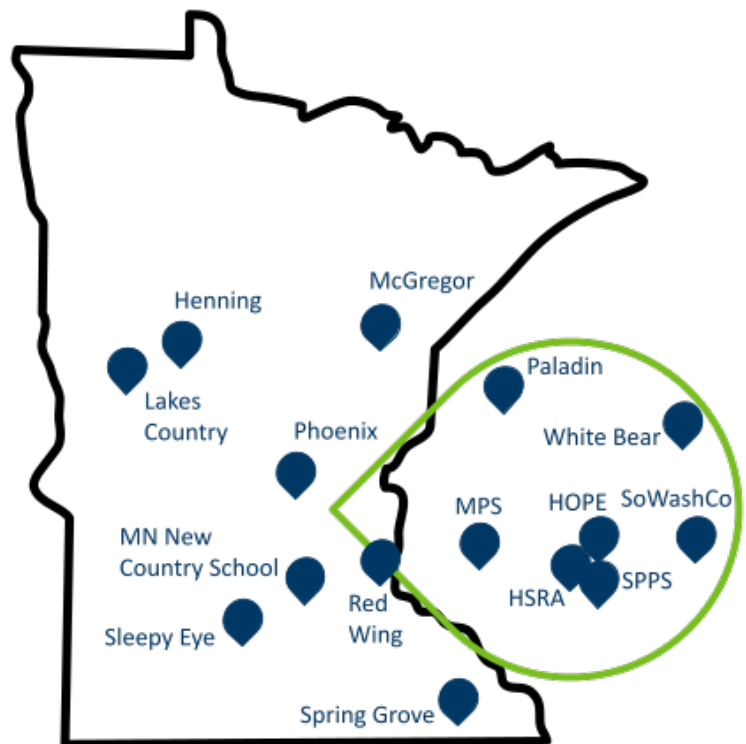
Analysis

Overview

The 2023 Innovation Service-Learning grant began with an informational session about the grant opportunity on December 11, 2023, with 82 people attending. Applications closed on January 22, 2024, with 19 applications received. Of those, 16 applicants provided sufficient information to demonstrate their eligibility to receive funding through the grant.

The grantees represent a broad spectrum of eligible institution types including 10 independent school districts, four charter schools, and one educational cooperative. As shown on the map, the grantees are geographically diverse, and they represent a range of school sizes from some of the largest districts in the state to some of the smallest and include state-approved alternative and community education programs.

Training and support were provided for grantees which included two workshops, one held on May 23 (44 attending) and the other on August 21, 2024, (48 attending) with ongoing support throughout the grant period. Interim progress reports were due December 13, 2025, with a 94% return rate (n=15). Final reports will be collected at the conclusion of the grant on June 30, 2025, and full analysis of outcomes can be conducted at that time.

Service-Learning Projects Summary

Qualitative analysis of the interim project reports was conducted to understand the range of service-learning projects funded by the grant that address diverse community needs. The projects represent a range of ages including elementary, middle-level, and high school. Several projects center on environmental stewardship, with students working to enhance green spaces, address sustainability issues, and promote environmental awareness and sustainable food production within their communities. Other projects focus on providing essential resources to those in need, such as food, clothing, and school supplies. Students are involved in planning and carrying out food drives, establishing food pantries, and assisting with distribution efforts. Several schools are working to

improve the physical infrastructure of their communities, engaging in projects to renovate public spaces, enhance community aesthetics, and create spaces that promote social interaction and recreation. Many projects are designed to promote educational opportunities and address social issues by providing mentorship, tutoring, and raising awareness about topics such as youth homelessness, conflict resolution, and cultural diversity. These projects demonstrate the power of service-learning to connect classroom learning with real-world experiences, fostering student growth, community engagement, and positive social change.

See addendum for a complete list of grantees, partners, and their projects.

Summary of Goals

The analysis of the interim progress report revealed goals outlined by grantees reflecting a strong commitment to student development, community improvement, and alignment with broader educational goals. Many grantees aim to enhance students' academic and developmental outcomes. These goals include improving academic performance in specific subjects, increasing student engagement and interest in learning, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and developing students' social-emotional learning and leadership abilities. A significant number of grantees state goals that focus on improving school climate and culture including creating more inclusive and supportive learning environments, increasing student belonging and connectedness, and fostering a sense of responsibility and agency among students.

In alignment with the Comprehensive Achievement and Civic Readiness and ESSA goals, grantees aim to close achievement gaps, prepare students for college and careers, and increase graduation rates. These goals are embedded within projects designed to provide students with real-world skills, mentorship opportunities, and exposure to various career paths.

Community outcomes are also prioritized by most grantees addressing a range of local needs. These goals include improving the physical environment of the community, addressing social issues such as food insecurity and homelessness, promoting cultural awareness and understanding, and fostering stronger relationships between schools and community organizations. As of the time when interim progress reports were submitted, almost all goals are in-progress.

Educational and Developmental Outcomes

Qualitative analysis of the outcomes discussed in the interim progress reports indicated that students participating in these grant projects have shown growth in several key areas including academic performance, attendance, essential skill development, and leadership. Students at the High School for the Recording Arts, Phoenix Learning Center, and Sleepy Eye Public Schools all reported improved academic performance and engagement as a result of their service-learning projects. Increased attendance and a stronger sense of commitment to their education were also noted. Students across multiple projects developed valuable skills, including project management, budgeting, research, communication, and collaboration, through their hands-on experiences. These skills recognized indicators of career and college readiness. Many projects emphasized student leadership and provided opportunities for students to advocate for social change within their communities.

Comprehensive Achievement and Civic Readiness and ESSA Outcomes

Many grantees reported progress toward achieving their Comprehensive Achievement and Civic Readiness and ESSA goals in their interim progress reports. Several projects specifically targeted students at risk of academic disparities and aimed to close the achievement gap. Multiple partnerships included skill development opportunities leading to students' college and career readiness including Lakes Country Service Cooperative which marked this goal as achieved. Career exploration activities and mentorship opportunities were mentioned by Henning, High School for the Recording Arts, Minneapolis, and Red Wing. Grantees highlighted the positive impact of service-learning projects on school climate, with students reporting increased engagement, a greater sense of belonging, and a more positive learning environment.

School and Community Outcomes

The grantees provided numerous examples of the positive impact service-learning grants have on student academic outcomes and community engagement in their interim progress reports. Qualitative analysis of their responses revealed the following:

Students develop real-world skills and apply them to their communities. Many grantees reported their students developing and applying skills like project management, budgeting, research, public speaking, and design thinking. In Henning, students are leading work to design, manage projects, and lead work crews to refresh the communities damaged baseball and softball fields. Students at Paladin Career and Technical High School engaged in grant writing, communication, and research while implementing their environmental service project. In Red Wing, high school students are participating in a mentorship program where they are trained to provide math tutoring to middle school students. These skills can benefit students in their future education and careers.

Students are empowered to take ownership and leadership in their communities. The grantees often described students leading projects and engaging with community leaders. For example, students at Menlo Park Academy in Minneapolis are leading educational sessions for elementary students about the Mississippi River watershed. At Spring Grove Public Schools, the Design Lab students' architectural design for a student union within the cinema was adopted by the building's new owner. The McGregor Public Schools project brought students together with community representatives to plan and implement a project focused on community curb appeal. These experiences provide students with a sense of agency and responsibility in their communities.

Community partnerships provide students with valuable resources and mentorship. The grants facilitate collaboration between schools and community organizations, providing students with access to experts and opportunities they may not otherwise have. For example, Lakes Country Service Cooperative in Fergus Falls partnered with a local expert vegetable grower to improve production. In Minneapolis, Camp Fire Minnesota is partnering with Minneapolis Public Schools to provide students with outdoor learning experiences. The Center for School Change has been a vital partner in the High School for the Recording Arts grant project, providing guidance and resources for video production, facilitating career exploration opportunities, and empowering student advocacy on issues like youth homelessness. At Phoenix Learning Center, the partnership with Legacy 2 Inspire connects students with experienced woodworking mentors who guide them in creating community

service projects that address food insecurity. Partnerships like these enrich the learning experience and connect students with their communities.

Service-learning projects address real community needs and increase student awareness of social issues. Many of the grants support projects that directly address community needs, providing students with a sense of purpose and making a tangible difference. For example, the Sleepy Eye Public Schools grant helps students provide food bags and other necessities to families in their community experiencing food insecurity. In Minneapolis, students at Hall Elementary are creating a Public Service Advertising (PSA) campaign to encourage their peers to reduce littering and become better stewards of the land. In St. Paul, students from the High School for Recording Arts are creating films to raise awareness about significant issues in their community including youth homelessness, career opportunity, conflict resolution, and free post-secondary education. They have shared their work with legislators and community organizations working to address the issues. These experiences foster empathy, civic responsibility, and a deeper understanding of social issues.

Opportunities and Challenges

Qualitative analysis of the interim progress reports submitted by grantees included both challenges they have faced and successes they experienced. Grantees encountered various challenges in implementing their service-learning projects. A recurring theme is maintaining consistent student engagement and motivation, as students may struggle to balance their project responsibilities with other commitments. Project management and logistics were noted requiring careful coordination of schedules, transportation, and resources. Some grantees identified the need to shift adult mindsets toward a more learner-centered approach, allowing learners to take greater ownership. Time constraints, often due to session-based program structures, limit the depth of student learning and community impact. Finally, budget limitations restrict the scope and scale of projects, particularly impacting transportation and resource acquisition.

Several successes were also mentioned by grantees in their interim progress reports. Students are demonstrating increased enthusiasm and a strong sense of ownership in their projects, leading to greater initiative and creativity in project development. Many projects are fostering meaningful collaboration between students, educators, and community partners. This collaboration is leading to a greater understanding of community needs and the development of projects that have a tangible impact. Several grantees reported instances where student projects have exceeded initial expectations and gained recognition beyond the school setting. Students have presented their work to community leaders, participated in advocacy efforts, and garnered media attention for their projects, highlighting the potential of service learning to empower learners and inspire community action.

Conclusion

The 2023 Innovation Service-Learning Grant program is creating opportunities for meaningful student engagement through projects designed to address diverse community needs across Minnesota. These student-led initiatives, ranging from environmental stewardship and food security to infrastructure improvements and social awareness campaigns, have not only made a tangible impact on communities but have promoted student

growth and civic engagement. Interim progress reports highlight the positive outcomes of these grants, including improved academic performance, development of essential skills, and strengthened partnerships between schools and communities.

Despite challenges such as time constraints, budget limitations, and the need for shifts in adult mindsets to support youth leadership, the successes achieved thus far are noteworthy. Students have demonstrated ownership of their learning, initiated impactful projects, and cultivated stronger connections with their communities. These efforts have addressed immediate needs while fostering empathy, civic responsibility, and critical skills that will provide long term benefits to students, their schools, and communities.

While the projects are achieving significant benefits to the participants, the interim findings do not indicate that significant gains are being made on systemic integration of service-learning in schools. Professional development and supported pilot projects could help scale these efforts, embedding service-learning more deeply into school culture and curriculum. Further analysis of barriers to implementing more systemic approaches to service-learning in schools would be possible with additional resources.

The 2023 Innovation Service-Learning Grant program has fostered meaningful learning experiences and positive community impacts, highlighting service-learning as an effective strategy for advancing educational, developmental, and societal goals. As these projects conclude, gathering insights from grantees, students, and community partners will be crucial to refining and enhancing future efforts to promote high-quality service-learning initiatives.

Addendum 1

Multimedia Resources

Multimedia resources are hosted locally by grantees who control the access to their own files. Click on a thumbnail to view multimedia files.
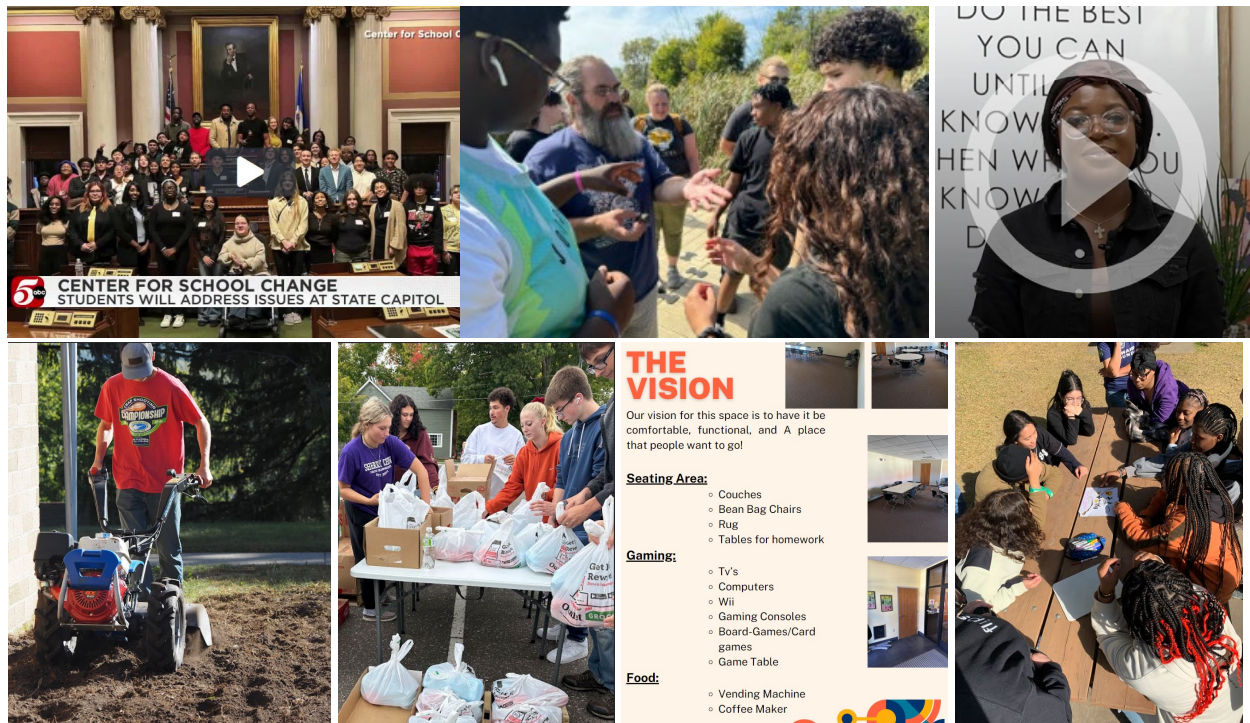
Addendum 2

Project Summaries and Goals

Henning Public Schools

Henning Public Schools is partnering with the **City of Henning** on a project to address the need to replace and repair damages to athletic fields due to safety hazards from drought and animal damage. Students assist in the project planning, volunteer recruitment and construction.

Goal 1: Improve Student Academic and Developmental Outcomes by aligning MN Academic Standards with a service-learning project.
Goal 2: Improve the baseball and softball fields as part of a service-learning project.
Goal 3: Improve the baseball and softball fields to result in positive community outcomes.
Goal 4: Incorporate service-learning as a graduation requirement.

High School for the Recording Arts

The **High School for Recording Arts** partners with **Edvisions** and the **Center for School Change** on creating videos for Minnesota youth on addressing mental health concerns of youth homelessness, bullying and conflict resolution. Through the project, students explore career pathways through video production.

Goal 1: Improve Student Academic and Developmental Outcomes.
Goal 2: School Improvement.
Goal 3: Positive Community Outcomes.
Goal 4: Increase Student Credit Recovery by 20%.

HOPE Community Academy

HOPE Community Academy and their partner **Minnesota Zej Zog** collaborate on Hmong culture and community projects centering student-led language revitalization.

Goal 1: Hold two workshops that will cover over 100 leadership concepts.
Goal 2: Each student will set a 90-day goal in both academic and personal areas, complete the curriculum and translation of curriculum.
Goal 3: Students will participate in the creation of the Hmong language sessions that will be delivered.
Goal 4: Engage in 3 community service projects that align with the students personal goals.

Lakes Country Service Cooperative

Lakes Country Service Cooperative is partnering with **West Central Initiative** on projects to support the initiative's collaboration around improving the community's access to locally grown foods. Students support the initiative's efforts to develop a customized food processing trailer and growing facilities at Ashby and West Central Area school districts.

Goal 1: Improve Student Academic and Developmental Outcomes: By the end of their semester in the ag classroom, students demonstrate an understanding of affecting change in the local food systems and the effect of nutritional content for those with limited choices by communicating these lessons learned to elementary classrooms and reporting their outputs at the end of their service-learning experience to their instructors. Instructors will identify the method of communication based on the student's abilities and strengths.

Goal 2: School Improvement: In alignment with ESSA, school administration arranges for piloting the county-focused service learning opportunity based on the evidence-based practice of school-based experiential food education, providing the social infrastructure and resources for high school ag students in their local food shelves and providing opportunities for HS students to interact and teach elementary students.

Goal 3: Positive Community Outcomes: Growing Grant County builds a network of growers in 10 locations in and around Grant County that donate product to the project, ultimately providing more nutritionally dense food to the food shelf.

Goal 4: Growing Grant County will work with a local expert vegetable grower to establish a total of 1,000 hours of expert support over the course of two years to assist the teachers and students in implementing the plant production systems to maximize crop yields, providing significantly larger donations to the Grant County Food shelf with fresh food grown locally by all students enrolled in plant**.**

McGregor Public Schools

McGregor Public Schools partners with **Something Cool, Inc.** on a project to improve the appearance of McGregor's main street to make it more appealing for walkers and riders through a Community Curb Appeal service-learning project. Students plan and paint a mural and help develop garden beds along the street.

Goal 1: Students will identify a personal strength to contribute to a service-learning project focused on community curb appeal.

Goal 2: Students will complete one task contributing to a school-wide service-learning project focusing on community curb appeal.

Goal 3: Students will create and display posters about their experiences with the project.

Goal 4: Produce from the service-learning project will be served in the school cafeteria.

Minneapolis Public Schools (Community Education)

Minneapolis Community Education is partnering with **Camp Fire** to provide Camp Fire students with student-led service-learning experiences during the school year and summer.

Goal 1: Practice inquiry-based learning.
Goal 2: Create a caring school community.
Goal 3: Students will believe in their ability to make a difference.
Goal 4: Mentorship will be provided to students in the class.

Minneapolis Public Schools (Menlo Park)

Menlo Park Academy, a Minneapolis Public School District school, partners with **East Side Neighborhood Services**, **Spark-Y** and the **Mississippi Watershed Management Organization** to educate K-5 learners attending Mulberry Junction, their families and the broader community about ways to protect the health and vitality of the Mississippi River. Students work with their teacher to create developmentally appropriate lessons and activities, engage Mulberry Junction learners in weekly learning and action days, and engage in community action days.

Goal 1: Menlo student leaders will adapt science curriculum for elementary students.
Goal 2: Provide new elective and core subject credit-earning opportunities to students.
Goal 3: Menlo and Mulberry Junction will increase community awareness and care for the Mississippi River through clean-up events and educational sessions.

Minnesota New Country School

Minnesota New Country School partners with **Henderson Feathers Inc.** on supporting the development of the National Ruby-Throated Hummingbird Center. Student service-learning projects focus on physical plant upgrades, creating displays and making artwork to decorate the space. Students design their own learning and present their findings and reflections on the project after completing their service-learning.

Goal 1: Research, develop and create two exhibits for the National Ruby Throated Hummingbird Center.
Goal 2: Increase student's sense of autonomy and belonging.
Goal 3: Establish a second Hummingbird Garden in the City of Henderson.

Paladin Career and Technical High School

Paladin Career and Technical High School partners with **Edvisions** on an outdoor learning space with the aim to transform an underused wooded area at the high school into an outdoor classroom.

Goal 1: Improve student understanding of environmental science concepts and increase student engagement in outdoor learning activities.
Goal 2: Utilize the outdoor classroom in science and makerspace classes to improve student engagement and reduce behavioral incidents.
Goal 3: Establish partnerships with community organizations to facilitate service-learning projects in the outdoor classroom.
Goal 4: Improve social and emotional well-being of students through regular engagement in outdoor activities.

Phoenix Learning Center (Buffalo-Hanover-Montrose Public Schools)

Phoenix Learning Center partners with **Wright County Community Action** (WCCA) Food Shelf, **Grace Place**, **Legacy 2 Inspire** and **Central Minnesota Jobs and Training Services** (CMJTS) on projects to support the partners' work around food insecurity, inspiring students through exposure to trade skills and providing training, career guidance and job placement services.

Goal 1: Improve student academic outcomes by creating community service projects that help peers access food.
Goal 2: Address food access issues and foster a conducive learning environment.
Goal 3: Improve the Buffalo Community by initiating and overseeing community service projects focused on improving food access.
Goal 4: Increase student agreement with statements measuring their agency to "persist through obstacles" on the AVID Student Agency Survey.

Red Wing Public Schools

Red Wing Public Schools is partnering with **RiseUP Red Wing's Community Youth Council** on a project focused on math literacy among middle school students. High school students help with delivery of math workshops and developing community-wide excitement and responsibility for math education.

Goal 1: Increase student proficiency in reading and math.
Goal 2: Increase the number of 12th-grade students participating in Flightpath internships/mentorships.
Goal 3: Build a critical mass of young people and parents who take responsibility for their education and help younger students.

Saint Paul Public Schools

Saint Paul Public Schools is partnering with **Saint Paul Community Education** on a project to expand on the work of its Flipside Youth Change Makers Program.

Goal 1: Increase student school-day attendance through participation in the Youth Change Makers program.
Goal 2: School administration at each participating site will hold at least two meetings with YCM students to hear recommendations about school improvement.
Goal 3: Students will report a greater sense of belonging on end-of-year surveys.

Sleepy Eye Public Schools

Sleepy Eye Public Schools partners with a community backpack food program. Sleepy Eye agricultural program students do service-learning projects around nutritional needs of young people, how buying in bulk from non-profit organizations can help organizations provide foods at lower costs, budgeting, inventory management and the importance of health and mental wellness.

Goal 1: Provide food and snacks to students at risk of hunger to improve academic and developmental outcomes.
Goal 2: Provide service-learning teaching components in agriculture courses monthly to improve school climate and awareness.
Goal 3: Provide Birthday Boxes and Holiday Boxes to students in need to improve mental health and wellness.

South Washington County Schools

South Washington County Schools is partnering with **SoWashCo CARES** (South Washington County Community Action Reaching Every Student) and **Kids Club** on student-led service-learning projects. Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) students mentor younger children, lead mini lessons for Kids Club children, and supervise Kids Club children as they design, plan and execute a project.

Goal 1: Establish a service-learning program between AVID and Kid's Club to donate winter clothing.
Goal 2: Execute a collaborative service-learning project involving AVID and Kid's Club students to donate nutritious snacks.
Goal 3: Distribute school supply kits to students in need through partnership between Kid's Club and AVID.

Spring Grove Public Schools

Spring Grove Schools partners with **Spring Grove Community Education** on supporting four projects: developing and maintaining a community help desk, researching starting a new e-sports league in the community, creating a student union space in the Spring Grove cinema, and designing a 3D model of the city.

Goal 1: Create a syllabus for the Design Lab course that links service-learning to learning goals.

White Bear Lake Area School District

White Bear Lake Area School District is partnering with **H2O for Life** on a project by elementary students from Matoska International IB World School and Willow Lane Elementary to raise awareness about the global water crisis, inspire engagement in social causes, and raise funds for water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives for a global partnering school.

Goal 1: Increase student understanding of local and global water issues.
Goal 2: Provide an integrated service-learning project between two elementary schools to increase awareness of the global water crisis.