

MENAHGA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

216 Aspen Avenue SE, PO Box 160, Menahga, MN 56464

218-564-4141

"Home of the Braves"



A Letter to the Menahga Community

Dear Menahga Community,

After a great deal of thought, prayer, and conversations with Mary Jo and our family, I have made the decision to retire from Menahga Public Schools. My final day serving as Superintendent will be June 30, 2027.

It is hard to believe that five years ago I was interviewing to become your superintendent. I remember the day of my first interview very well. Before the interview, I went out to our property and spent some time snowshoeing. We had owned that property for 16 years, and I realized that day that I had never really had the opportunity to do something as simple as snowshoe around it.

I remember thinking that maybe moving north would allow me to slow down a little. Maybe I would finally have more time to hunt, fish, and enjoy the outdoors.

Something happened instead that makes me smile today.

I moved north, and I actually started hunting and fishing less.

Not because the job demanded it or because I couldn't find the time. I did it because I found a school and a community where I wanted to be present.

I wanted to be at the games. I wanted to be at the concerts and activities. I wanted to be around our students and staff. I wanted to attend community events, talk with people, solve problems, and be part of what was happening here.

It didn't take long for me to realize Menahga was different.

One of my first student discipline situations taught me that. I was meeting with a student who had made a mistake. During our conversation, he looked me directly in the eye and said, "I will make this right."

And he meant it.

His dad then partnered with the school to determine the appropriate response. There wasn't an "us against them" mentality. There was a student taking responsibility, a father supporting his



The Mission of Menahga School District #821 is to build strong partnerships with stakeholders to ensure all learners succeed.

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child while also supporting the school, and educators working with a family to help a young person learn from a mistake.

I remember thinking, "I am going to like this place."

Five years later, I can tell you that I didn't just come to like Menahga. I came to love it.

That interaction represented so much of what I have experienced here. This is a community that believes in accountability, but also in grace. We expect a lot from our kids, but we also stand beside them when they stumble. We may not always agree, but overwhelmingly, people come to the table asking the same question: What is best for our kids?

That is what makes Menahga special.

I also came to a district that was already in a strong position. My job was never to "fix" Menahga. My responsibility was to work alongside our School Board, staff, students, families, and community to build upon what was already here.

Together, we have accomplished a great deal.

We moved the needle academically. In 2022, approximately 22% of our students were receiving special education services. Today, that number is around 13%, as our staff have become increasingly intentional about early intervention and providing students with the right support at the right time.

Our literacy results have grown to the point where more than 70% of our students are reading at or above grade-level benchmarks. Behind that number are individual children and countless hours of work by teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, students, and families.

We strengthened an already strong financial position and continued investing in students, staff, programs, facilities, technology, safety, and opportunities for kids. We reduced staff attrition and worked to make Menahga a place where good people want to work and stay. We strengthened our safety protocols and procedures because families need to know that the people caring for their children take that responsibility seriously.

We took career pathways from an idea and made them real, with more than 35 paid and unpaid internships connecting our students with businesses and professionals in our region.

We developed a strategic plan that didn't end up sitting on a shelf. Our mission, vision, and core values are being used every day to help guide decisions about the future of our district.



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And we were willing to think differently about how a small rural school district can serve students.

Menahga Online is perhaps the clearest example. Through creativity around open enrollment and online learning, more than 400 students have chosen Menahga Online. That has extended the reach of our district far beyond our geographic boundaries while creating additional opportunities and resources for the students we serve.

But there is one student whose story probably explains better than any statistic why I am so proud of what we have built together.

When he was in ninth grade, he told me he was going to quit school.

He was struggling, and the traditional school experience simply wasn't connecting with him. Instead of giving up on him, we started asking a different question:

What does this student need from us?

We convinced him to try an internship with Randy Thompson.

Something began to change.

He found work that interested him. He developed relationships. He experienced success. Instead of asking him to fit into education, we found a way for education to better fit him.

In the spring of 2026, I watched that young man graduate from Menahga High School.

A ninth grader who once told me he was going to quit school walked across the stage as a Menahga graduate.

That is why career pathways matter. That is why literacy matters. That is why intervention matters. That is why innovation matters.

And ultimately, that is why schools matter.

Education needs to continue evolving to meet the changing needs of students and families. Kids aren't all the same. They don't all learn the same way, they aren't motivated by the same things, and their paths to success aren't always going to look the same.

One of Menahga's greatest strengths is that we have been willing to recognize that and do something about it.



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That graduate's diploma won't tell his entire story. It won't list the teachers, staff members, family members, community partners, and others who helped him along the way. It will simply say that he is a graduate of Menahga Public Schools.

But to me, his story represents exactly what our mission means:

Partnerships to ensure all learners succeed.

Not some learners.

All learners.

I am proud of what we have accomplished, but I also want to be very clear about something as I prepare to leave.

I didn't accomplish these things. We did.

A superintendent can bring ideas to the table, but ideas don't teach a child to read. Ideas don't mentor an intern. Ideas don't drive a bus, prepare a meal, coach a team, clean a classroom, answer a parent's phone call, balance a budget, or sit beside a struggling student.

People do those things.

I have been blessed with School Board members willing to govern, ask good questions, and give our educators room to innovate. I have worked alongside administrators willing to lead and staff members willing to try new things. Community businesses have opened their doors to our students. Families have trusted us with their children. And our students have continually reminded us why this work matters.

To every teacher, paraprofessional, secretary, custodian, cook, bus driver, coach, advisor, administrator, board member, parent, volunteer, business owner, community partner, and especially every student who has allowed me to be a small part of their journey—thank you.

And to Mary Jo and our family, thank you for sharing me with this profession and this community for so many years.

I came to Menahga thinking this might be a wonderful place to finish my career.

I had no idea just how right I was.



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I am ready for the next chapter, but I am also thankful that I have the remainder of this school year to continue serving. There is still important work ahead, and I intend to finish with the same energy and commitment I brought with me five years ago.

When June 30, 2027 arrives, I know I will leave Menahga Public Schools with tremendous gratitude, great memories, lifelong friendships, and complete confidence in the people who will carry this work forward.

Thank you for welcoming Mary Jo and me. Thank you for trusting me. Thank you for allowing me the privilege of serving your children and your community.

It has been one of the greatest honors of my life.

And no matter where the next chapter takes us, I know one thing will always be true:

It's a great day to be a Brave.

With gratitude,

Jay Kjos
Superintendent
Menahga Public Schools



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