Minnetonka Public Schools’ new transition program helps students with special needs to thrive in the local community.

Last September, Minnetonka Public Schools launched its Students Achieving Independent Life (S.A.I.L.) transition program, providing young people with special needs, ages 18-21, with guidance and skills training for their lives and careers.

S.A.I.L. affords students the opportunity to continue their educational programming within the Minnetonka community. Coursework includes classes taught by Minnetonka instructors and work study experiences with local businesses, focusing on developing skills and connections for life after high school. The S.A.I.L. building is a newly-renovated space uniquely designed to support transition education and includes a greenhouse, kitchen space, a video production studio and other learning labs for skill development, as well as a complete model apartment.

“The S.A.I.L. program is an important step forward for Minnetonka Schools in increasing the opportunities and providing an even stronger gateway to success for our students who are transitioning to independent life,” said Dr. Dennis Peterson, who was the Superintendent of Schools when the program was proposed, planned and launched. More than 30 students participated in the program in its inaugural year.

Lucas Hagen, a Minnetonka alumnus and the 2019 Homecoming
Lucas, a S.A.I.L. student this school year and one of the program’s first graduates, was employed with the Bethesda Thrift Shop, where he worked in the men’s clothing department folding and sorting donations, and with Trouvaille Homes memory care, where he interacted with residents and assisted the Activities Coordinator with scheduled classes and outings. Lucas will continue to work with Trouvaille after graduation.

“Going into this year, we wanted to focus vocationally on job training,” shared Julie Hagen, Lucas’s mother. “Lucas had such great work experiences [with S.A.I.L.]. The staff understood what he was looking for. They took his gifts and what he wanted to do into consideration and sought out local employers to best meet those desires.”

The Hagans also appreciated being back in the Minnetonka community after a few years of transition education through the Transition Plus partnership, which was based in a neighboring town. With the S.A.I.L. building less than a mile from Minnetonka High School, S.A.I.L. students can participate in extracurricular activities such as the Unified Club. “We truly felt part of the District again,” said Hagen.

“Minnetonka has high academic expectations for all students, and bringing our students back home into our community allowed us to maintain these high levels of academic excellence we hold throughout the rest of the District,” said Christine Breen, Executive Director of Special Education. “Students pushed themselves, as did parents, more than they thought they could this year. They have achieved higher levels of independence and functioning than some thought possible.”

Reflecting on S.A.I.L.’s first year, Erin Valenta, Coordinator of Transition Education, is proud of the ways students’ confidence has increased. “From the fall to the spring, students have gained so much independence in their decision-making skills.

Looking ahead, Valenta is hopeful about the ways the program will continue to expand breadth and depth by adding more community partners and aligning curriculum resources. Breen looks forward to building more business partnerships and expanding parent education.

“As much as we are launching students into adulthood after their final year of transition, we are also launching their parents,” said Breen. “We want to ensure we are setting them up for success as much as we are their children.”

The transition from S.A.I.L. to the adult world is one that made the Hagens feel apprehensive, but now they say that they feel prepared to make because of the support they’ve experienced from Minnetonka Schools. “Every transition is scary, and Lucas’s next step is going out to the big old world! My best experience with S.A.I.L. is how they’ve prepared me and connected me with his next steps,” said Hagen. From providing help with navigating forms to facilitating connections with vocational services, S.A.I.L. staff support families in making transitions smooth.

“S.A.I.L. has prepared me to be Lucas’s advocate for all of his next steps,” Hagen said. “Now, I know I’ll be ready.”

To learn more about the S.A.I.L. Transition Program, visit www.minnetonkaschools.org/SAIL.