

# SUN CURRENT

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*In the Community, With the Community, For the Community*

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**SPORTS**  
Blaze  
remain  
in Lake  
chase  
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SCOTT THEISEN • SUN NEWSPAPERS

Burnsville High School student Breanna Apple (center) picks up a dessert sample from fellow students Shelby Lesser (bottom left) and Sarah Burns (bottom right) during a taste testing Jan. 10 at the school. The test was sponsored by special-education students participating in the Star Reporter newspaper program. (For more photos, visit our online Photo Gallery at [www.mnSun.com](http://www.mnSun.com).)

## Learning the power of the press

Special students in District 191 create newspapers

HEATHER VOORHEES  
SUN NEWSPAPERS

Most youngsters are thrilled to be in the newspaper, but some special education students in District 191 are more proud of being behind the camera.

In seven elementary schools, two junior highs and Burnsville High School, autistic and developmental/cognitive delay students have begun creating their own monthly newspapers through the Star Reporter program.

Using special software and

equipment, they are in charge of virtually all aspects of the newspapers, including content and production.

"We want the kids to be the most important part of it and not have teachers do all of it," said Cyndi Dorigan-Slette, assistive technology collaborator for the district.

**NEWSPAPERS: TO PAGE 20A**

## International Festival earns grant

HEATHER VOORHEES • SUN NEWSPAPERS

Coming off a successful inaugural year, organizers of the International Festival of Burnsville now have 3,000 more reasons to smile.

The festival was one of 10 arts organizations throughout Dakota County to recently receive a grant from the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council (MRAC) in St. Paul.

Tuesday, Jan. 8, festival organizers were presented with a \$3,000 check to go toward the 2008 festival, scheduled for 4 to 9 p.m. Saturday, June 28, in Nicollet Commons Park.

"I think [the grant] says that we do a good job at figuring out what our community needs and wants," said Julie Dorshak, community service manager for the city of Burnsville. Dorshak helped plan last year's festival. "It's a good way of serving a need to the community as a whole and providing an activity that's something that everyone can enjoy."

She said this year's grant will probably help cover the cost of entertainment, which, last year, included Polish and Indian dancing, Japanese drumming and a mariachi band. The event also included informational booths from more than 10 different countries and several food stands.

The MRAC gives out grants twice a year; during the past cycle, it received \$15,000 worth of requests. A panel of reviewers determines which groups or projects make art accessible to community members. Based on how well applicants meet the qualifications, they are given between \$1,000 and \$3,000.

MRAC Program Director Bob Burns agrees the International Festival is a novel way to touch many different audiences within the Burnsville community.

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**SUN-EXTRA**

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FOR MONEY-SAVING INSERTS

# Newspapers

FROM PAGE 1A

“I think it’s exciting for the kids to go home and show their parents they’re in the paper, that *they* did this.”

Sue Allen, a speech pathologist at Burnsville High School, said her group of about 20 Star Reporter participants throws a party every month when their edition hits the presses.

“They’re really excited when it comes out,” she said. “They love it and they really take ownership.”

Brought to the district last October, the Star Reporter program is based around software of the same name, produced by a Minnesota-based company specifically for special needs students. Each month, the software offers a theme and several choices as to which activities the students would like to participate in and chronicle for their newspapers.

For example, the November theme was “nutrition,” so in “The Sioux Trail Star” students at Sioux Trail published results of their taste test between apple juice and cranberry juice, interviewed the school cooks and featured photos of them making fresh creations with a juicer.

There are several recurring elements, like a craft corner and feature article, but each school is allowed to individualize its publication. At BHS, students have added movie reviews and a fashion section.

BHS student Rebecca Lavergne, 16, of Burnsville is in charge of her class’s Star of the Week feature, for which she interviews people.

“It’s really hard because it takes hard work,” she said of creating their paper, the “Fest Press.” “It takes days and days to make sure it’s right, but it’s fun.”

She added with a smile, “It’s hard to write because you have to make sure it’s right – and I’m a bad speller.”

Star Reporter allows for customization depending on the severity of the students’ disabilities and their individual interests.

“At Sioux Trail, the kids are mostly in wheelchairs, with some use of their hands, but not much,” Dorigan-Slette said. “We have a stapler that uses a switch, a scissors on a switch and a camera connected to a switch so they can take pictures. To have these kids have a photograph that they actually took is really cool.”



SCOTT THEISEN • SUN NEWSPAPERS

Burnsville High School students J.J. Metz (from left), Vivian Moruri and Nick Luebke serve dessert samples during a Star Reporter newspaper program taste testing Jan. 10 at BHS. (For more photos, visit our online Photo Gallery at [www.mnSun.com](http://www.mnSun.com).)

At BHS, students learn how to lay the newspaper out using common computer programs.

“For some of them, sitting down at a computer and remembering their login information is a big deal, and we’ve taken them so far beyond that,” said literary teacher Julie Haughian. “They can change the fonts, do layout, change the way the text looks.”

Not only do the newspapers teach students about computers and cameras, it gives them a vital chance to practice personal interaction – something that might be rare for some of the more challenged students.

“For these kids, it’s about learning simple interaction – how do you ask a question? How do you greet someone when they sit down at the table?” Allen said. “It’s something they don’t get practice with every day.”

Oftentimes, the Star Reporter classes involve other students in their stories, such as inviting them to taste test or giving surveys.

“It’s a connection to the mainstream, and we’ve never had a chance to do that before,” Haughian said. “I’ve taught special education for 13 years and this is the best program I’ve used, by far.”

Dorigan-Slette said another great

aspect of Star Reporter is that, for once, it gives special education classes a unified curriculum. In the past, because each students’ needs are so different, teaching just one lesson at a time to all the students was difficult.

“The kids are learning better,” Dorigan-Slette said. “There’s never been a real curriculum for special ed, but now we have this exact vocabulary, this is exactly what we’re learning, and parents can even have that list and expand on it. I think it’s really exciting.”

Everyone involved agreed the best part of Star Reporter is that it truly makes youngsters feel like stars.

“A lot of these kids don’t have a way to shine,” Dorigan-Slette said. “They’re not leaders in their school and they’re not sports stars, but now they can go to their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, whatever, and say, ‘look what I did.’”

The teachers are apparently just as excited.

“I always bring a copy to show my folks ‘Look what my kids did!’” Haughian said.

(You are invited to comment about this story on our website at [www.mnsun.com](http://www.mnsun.com) and/or write a letter to the editor at [sun-currentsouth@acnpapers.com](mailto:sun-currentsouth@acnpapers.com).)

# Festival

FROM PAGE 1A

“This was a really high-quality arts project that looked at the community and said, ‘How has our community changed over the years?’ and responded to that,” Burns said. “It was very inclusive. It was responding to a community need.”

He added, “It’s a really great way to share your culture and build community through the arts.”

The International Festival began last

summer after the success of a similar event scheduled at Nicollet Junior High.

Burns said the festival is also unusual because it promotes diversity in the planning process.

“It was not like the city said, this is for you and we’ll do it for you,” he said. “They included the communities in the planning and implementation, and that showed a lot of depth.”

Dorshak estimates the festival cost about \$12,000 last year to put on (not including all in-kind services from the city) and attracted between 1,200 and 1,500 attendees.

Last year, the MRAC received more than 400 grant requests from throughout the seven-county metro area and gave out 223 grants totaling \$733,000.

Other Dakota County grant recipients last week included Exultate of Eagan, the Mississippi Valley Orchestra in West St. Paul, the Savage Arts Council and the Velvet Tones, based in Rosemount.

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