Rebranding and Launching a Signature High School Program In-House

2022 NSPRA Gold Medallion Entry
Special Communication Projects/Campaigns

Minnetonka Public Schools
Communications Team in collaboration with Minnetonka High School

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Type of School/Organization: 11,250 students
Number of Communications Staff: 5
Synopsis

Minnetonka Public Schools has reimagined its high school technology education department, turning it from just another set of electives into MOMENTUM, a signature program that has students and parents excited to explore essential career paths in design and skilled trades.

The project began when the Minnetonka Communication team and MHS leadership organized a series of visioning sessions to rethink the technical education program and imagine possibilities. That initiative was deepened by creating a series of focus groups composed of students, staff and industry professionals to think about what the trades program could become. A desire for real-world learning through experiences such as site visits, collaborative projects, mentorships and guest lectures from industry professionals rose to the top, as did the opportunity for interdisciplinary courses.

The Communications team took those insights and developed a comprehensive rebranding plan for the Minnetonka trades program that included a new program name (MOMENTUM), logo, messaging and collateral. Every step of the process was centered on the idea of listening to students and truly reflecting their hopes and aspirations in creating a new identity for the program.

The ideation and investment have paid off: in 2019-20, 605 students took a technical education course, and for the 2022-23 school year, 755 students have registered for MOMENTUM, an increase of 150 students.

Student engagement was met with enthusiasm from the Minnetonka School Board, and in late Fall 2020, the Board approved a 10,300-square-foot addition to the high school campus specifically for the program, featuring a four-car automotive shop and flexible-use “maker space” classrooms. This building opened for classes in the winter of 2022, and four sections of a course titled Automotive Investigations course are running this spring, demonstrating an exceptional amount of student excitement and buy-in for the MOMENTUM program.

A second building for the program was approved in late Fall 2021, and ground will break on the construction of this building in April 2022. This will be the first completely new building Minnetonka Public Schools has commissioned in 57 years.

For this booming program, building MOMENTUM is only the beginning.

“If our program is staying the same, and we’re just getting a couple extra classes, call it Minnetonka Trades. But, if you are going to raise it up to the level of other Minnetonka signature programs, and really invest in it, call it MOMENTUM.”

- Student from Minnetonka focus group

Cover page: MOMENTUM students toured the Plymouth Creek City Center as part of a site visit with professionals from RJM Construction and HGA Architects.

Right: The Physics in Home Renovation class participates in a volunteer project with Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity.
**Project Summary: Research**

Minnetonka High School (MHS) is often referred to as a ‘school of opportunities,’ able to support and challenge students to discover and pursue their passions while achieving personal excellence.

The idea for MOMENTUM arose from collaboration between the Minnetonka School Board and Minnetonka High School staff, with input from students and support from the Communications team at each step of the way.

**Market research** completed by the Communications team, with support from MHS leadership, revealed opportunities in technical education as an important opportunity for students and for the local community, with industry research showing a skilled trades gap of three million job vacancies by 2028. By offering rigorous, hands-on opportunities for students to experience the skilled trades, high school leaders knew that students would be positioned to excel in the field after graduation from Minnetonka High School.

Minnetonka has been a pioneer in personalized learning, launching other signature programs within its schools to give students opportunities to expand and explore their interests. "As we dreamed about what MOMENTUM could become, we looked to the success of other signature programs at the High School, such as VANTAGE and Minnetonka Research," said Jeff Erickson, Minnetonka High School principal. VANTAGE is an advanced professional studies program that launched in 2013, and Minnetonka Research is an interdisciplinary research program that challenges students to pursue authentic, collaborative research projects based on their own curiosities and interests.

"We saw the drive in our students to learn about the trades in an experiential way, and we saw the opportunity to partner with businesses and organizations in our community to provide authentic learning and mentoring as part of the courses. It’s been amazing to see the excitement that students, staff and community members have brought to the table," said Erickson.

When the idea to reimagine technical education was put forward, the high school formed a Trades Advisory Board made up of local professionals and business owners to provide insight. The group still meets regularly to share feedback and assist in idea generation for next steps in the program.

**Student focus groups** have been another key asset in the research process for expanding and rebranding the program. A group of current high school juniors and seniors who had taken technical education courses and who were interested in pursuing the trades after graduation were gathered together by the Communications team and MHS leadership to give their input throughout the branding and program design process.

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**3M**

The skilled trades gap in the United States is expected to reach 3 million job vacancies by 2028*

**2026**

Projected: Better-than-average employment in the building trades at least through 2026*

**16K**

Number of skilled electricians needed nationwide with more anticipated as professionals near retirement**

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*The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics  ** National Electrical Contractors Association
Project Summary: Planning

Once the vision for the rebranding was cast, the first step was to **choose a name** to embody the opportunity. From five initial options provided by the Communications team, two frontrunners were chosen by students and staff: Minnetonka Trades and MOMENTUM.

The Communications team then created **logo ideations** that were presented for both name options. Student, faculty and staff weighed in at every stage of MOMENTUM’s brand ideation. The logo went through several design phases, each reflecting student and staff feedback.

Ultimately, the program name was selected by students, and lifts MOMENTUM to the same level as other signature programs at Minnetonka High School. As one student pointedly shared, “If our program is staying the same, and we’re just getting a couple extra classes, call it Minnetonka Trades. But, if you are going to raise it up to the level of other Minnetonka signature programs, and really invest in it, call it MOMENTUM.”

After the name was chosen, **key messaging** was developed to highlight the insights gained from earlier focus groups. Those messages were:

- Forward-thinking, forward motion
- A passion for hands-on, experiential learning can lead to real-world opportunities and a lucrative career in the trades
- Real-world learning through guest instruction, site visits and local business partnerships

MOMENTUM’s **primary audience** was determined as current high school students interested in the trades and/or experiential learning, as well as their families who are helping them navigate course registration planning. To make courses accessible, innovative and interesting, “strand” classes were designed as two-period opportunities combining a core academic and elective course. Physics in Home Renovation was the first of these to be offered, and it demonstrates the harmony of hands-on learning well: during a unit on electricity, students learn about Ohm’s Law from a physics instructor, then they work with a construction instructor to practice installing outlets in a mock wall. Finally, a working electrician visits the class to speak about their career path, answer student questions and give career context to what the students have just learned.

**Secondary audiences** for the rebranding include local businesses to serve as community partners and younger families within the District, to see all of the opportunities they will have as part of the school community.

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**Why Minnetonka Trades?**

- Nod to the trades profession
- Direct, simple, valuable
- Represents real-world, hands-on learning
- Fits within current branding/expectations
- Can fit many programs under this

**Why MOMENTUM?**

- Inspirational, feels like a signature program
- Forward motion, forward thinking
- Empowering, solid and concrete
- Physics word and a physical word, adds weight
- Broad and expandable, anything can fit in here

Above: Excerpts from branding presentations explain the highlights for each program name.
Project Summary: Implementation

Program implementation has included many elements, from the launch of the courses themselves to the creation of marketing materials and coverage by local and national media.

PROGRAM LAUNCH AND GROWTH

The transition from “Technical Education” to “MOMENTUM” was gradual, but the “Physics in Home Renovation” course launched in Fall 2020 marked the first class developed with all of the research behind MOMENTUM in mind.

The program’s first automotive course was approved in Fall 2020, along with approval for a 10,300-square-foot addition to the high school to house a four-car automotive shop and flexible-use “maker space” classrooms for other MOMENTUM courses.

In Fall 2021, six more MOMENTUM courses were approved by the Minnetonka School Board: four automotive opportunities, Mathematics in Home Renovation and a Metal Sculpture course that combines elements of technical education and fine art.

In addition to the courses, a new building was approved for construction, and the District will break ground on it in May 2022. The building will be home to MOMENTUM Design & Skilled Trades and VANTAGE Advanced Professional Studies classes. It will mark Minnetonka Public Schools’ first free-standing construction project in 57 years.

Above: More than 100 MOMENTUM students have completed the S/P2 safety training as part of the high school’s Automotive Career Investigations course. Students stand in the program’s newly-completed Automotive Bay.

Below: Renderings of the new VANTAGE/MOMENTUM building. The building reflects community excitement for the growing programs and represents the District’s commitment to providing innovative, personalized opportunities for decades to come. IMAGES COURTESY OF ATS&R
MARKETING MATERIALS
All materials were developed by the Minnetonka Communications team.

The MOMENTUM website serves as a hub of information for students registering for courses and for trades professionals looking to become involved in the program.

The MOMENTUM brochure provides students with information about the skilled trades and illustrates the different career pathway opportunities available to them.

Videos are an important aspect of communication with students, families and the community to share personal stories and insight about the impact of the program.

Videos are shared on the program website as well as the District’s YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook and Instagram accounts.

Click the thumbnail to view each video.

Program Overview

Automotive Maker Bay

Student Experience
TRADITIONAL MEDIA
Successful pitches to local and national media by the Communications team have amplified stories about MOMENTUM’s expansion. See below for just a selection of these articles.

RATCHET + WRENCH

Minnesota High School Adds Automotive Training Facility

March 8, 2021—A Minnesota high school has plans to add a 10,300-square-foot automotive repair facility to support the school’s trades program, the Sun Sailor reported.

Minnetonka High School, located northwest of Minneapolis, Minn., will begin construction on the project this spring. The facility will provide hands-on learning space for students to explore pathways in automotive, engineering, manufacturing, architecture, and construction-focused careers.

The facility will cost an estimated $3.9 million and will include a 900-square-foot classroom. It will have the capacity to service six cars at a time. The project is expected to be completed by the end of the year.

"One of the top requests was for automotive, and so that really drove that decision making," Minnetonka High School Principal Jeff Erickson told the publication. "The kids are excited. I think they know that we’re raising all the opportunities that the school has and this Momentum space really allows for that."

MOMENTUM Program at Minnetonka High School Expands Opportunities for Students in the Trades

Minnesota Public Schools

Minnetonka High School is often referred to as a "school of opportunities," able to support and challenge students to discover and pursue their passions while achieving personal excellence. The growing MOMENTUM Design and Skilled Trades program, launched in fall 2023, provides opportunities for students to explore the trades through pathways focused on manufacturing, construction, architecture, engineering & design and engine & automotive careers.

The vision for MOMENTUM began as a reimagining of the high school’s technical education department.

"As we dreamed about what MOMENTUM could become, we looked to the success of other signature programs at the high school, such as VANTAGE and Minnetonka Research," said Jeff Erickson, Minnetonka High School principal. VANTAGE is an advanced professional studies program that launched in 2013, and Minnetonka Research is an interdisciplinary research program that challenges students to pursue authentic, collaborative research projects based on their own curiosities and interests.

In Minnetonka High School’s signature programs, students engage in real-world learning through experiences such as site visits, collaborative projects, mentorships and guest lectures from industry professionals.

"We saw the passion in our students to learn about the trades in an experiential way, and we saw the opportunity to partner with businesses and organizations in our community to provide authentic learning and mentoring as part of the courses. It’s been amazing to see the excitement that students, staff and community members have brought to the table," said Erickson.

In the 2020-21 school year, 472 students took a class through MOMENTUM. From freshmen to seniors, the program’s launch has inspired many students to take a technical education course for the first time. The number of freshmen taking such a course tripled, the number of sophomores doubled, the number of juniors tripled, and in total, 56 seniors took their first technical education course last year.

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American School & University

The Minnetonka (Minn.) district is moving forward with plans to construct a $33.46 million facility to house special high school programs.

The 36,000-square-foot, three-story facility will enable the district to consolidate Minnetonka High School’s Momentum and Vantage programs under one roof, reports the Sun Sailor.

The Momentum program is a reimagining of the technical education department with a focus on design and skilled trades, including manufacturing, construction, architecture, engineering and automotive.

Vantage is an advanced professional studies program, offering study in business analytics, design and marketing; digital journalism; global business and sustainability; health sciences; and other subjects.

The proposed Vantage/Momentum building is closer to Minnetonka High than the space now being rented for Vantage. Momentum courses are taught in Minnetonka High’s technology education classrooms.

The district says the building will be more cost-effective than leasing space.

Construction is scheduled to begin in spring 2023.
MEASURING SUCCESS
The program’s success depends on student engagement and excitement. From freshmen to seniors, the program’s launch inspired many students to take a technical education course for the first time. In its first year, the number of freshmen taking such a course tripled, the number of sophomores doubled, the number of juniors tripled, and in total, 56 seniors took their first technical education course.

More than 750 students have registered to take a MOMENTUM course in 2022-23.

Long-term student outcomes after participating in the program are also important. Many have gone on to enroll in technical and trade schools, and MOMENTUM staff are maintaining connections with students to encourage their post-high school endeavors. The students in the original Trades Advisory focus group will be invited back for a dinner and tour of the new facilities when it opens in Fall 2023.

Community sentiment about the program is also incredibly high, as demonstrated by large reach and positive engagement with social media posts promoting the MOMENTUM program. Posts about MOMENTUM are routinely in the top quarterly Facebook and Instagram posts the District produces, and they inspire comments from community members and even local legislators voicing support for the opportunities MOMENTUM provides.

ALWAYS ASKING, “WHAT’S NEXT?”
The new VANTAGE/MOMENTUM building will open for classes in Fall 2023. This will only be the start of what the program will hold. New ideas for courses combining the trades with social studies and English and for partnerships with a local airport to provide experiences in aviation are currently being explored.

“I think classes like this will help a lot of kids who prefer hands-on projects and critical thinking. It’s a great chance for them to really succeed.”

- MOMENTUM alumni