

Conversations SPARK Community CHANGE

Four Minnesota FFA members helped pass legislation to provide grant funding for after-school programming in their state.

— By Jessica Walker Boehm



After extensive preparation, Kaiya Grossman (left), Isaac Palecek (center), Emma Braford (right) and Savannah Moinichen (not pictured) presented their research to state leaders.

Grand Rapids FFA members Emma Braford, Kaiya Grossman, Isaac Palecek and Savannah Moinichen are a testament to the saying “hard work pays off” — and young people across their state now benefit from their tenacity.

After discovering the prevalence of chemical substance abuse in Minnesota youth, these four took action in March of 2023, working with Minnesota State Representative Matt Norris and Senator Steve Cwodzinski on a \$48 million bill designed to fund after-school programs.

Although their initial attempt didn’t make final legislation, these dedicated members didn’t give up.

“We were disappointed, but quitting wasn’t an option,” says Braford, Grand Rapids FFA Chapter vice president and 2024-25 Minnesota FFA State vice president.

A NEW FOCUS

According to Braford, the group pivoted to support a Minnesota Department of Education bill that would award \$26.5 million to school districts over three years through After-School Community Learning grants.

Thanks, in part, to their persistence and determination, including hours speaking with lawmakers, this bill passed in February 2024.

“To say we’re excited doesn’t even begin to cover it,” Braford says. “Substance abuse issues are often due to low self-esteem or a lack of self-worth. We believe after-school programs devoted to giving students a sense of purpose and accomplishment will make a huge difference.”

Although the grant funds could support existing clubs, organizations or programs, they could also be used to start new after-school programs that align with students’ needs.

“We recently came up with an idea called Eighth Hour, which would be an after-school program with break-out rooms for students to explore career pathways that interest them,” says Grossman, who’s currently serving as the Grand Rapids FFA Chapter president and the 2024-25 Minnesota

FFA state secretary. “We’re hoping it’s approved and our district receives grant funding to make it happen.”

PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER

After experiencing significant losses in her life, Grossman says it was important for her to advocate for the well-being of her peers. She credits FFA with helping her build the confidence to do this.

“When I first zipped up my blue jacket, I was shy and couldn’t imagine talking in front of people,” Grossman says. “Fast-forward to this experience, where I stood in front of Minnesota state senators and spoke up for something I believe in. I almost can’t believe it, and I’m so thankful FFA helped me learn to use my voice.”

Moinichen echoes a similar sentiment as she reflects on the impact she and her fellow chapter members made in their effort to create positive, lasting change.

“I would have never pictured any of us being part of something so big as high schoolers,” Moinichen says. “We helped pass a bill that will change lives and showed our voices truly matter. I’ll never forget that.”

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— KAIYA GROSSMAN