

COMMUNITY CONNECTOR

SPRING 2026



GRAND RAPIDS
AREA SCHOOLS

Resilience • Readiness • Excellence

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Schools of



From Our Superintendent

In the last few months we've seen the harsh effects of unrest, divide, and violence in Minnesota and its effect on families, children, and schools. We've also seen the triumph, unity, and celebration that comes when people gather from around the world to represent their country in the Olympics. In both situations we've seen the importance of hope. Hope that things will get better. Hope that good will overcome. Hope that effort will pay off.

I know the effort here in our district is paying off. In classrooms, on the fields, rinks, and courts, and in the boardroom, we are seeing that planning matters. That commitment matters. That effort matters.

But hope alone isn't a plan. Schools have to keep learning and adjusting just like our students do. The world our children are growing up in is changing quickly, and part of our responsibility is making sure our system changes with it by doubling down on what works while simultaneously building additional ways for students to succeed.

Our goal remains simple and steady: every student known, supported, and graduating with a path forward. When we hold onto that, the future feels a little less uncertain and a lot more hopeful, and I think you'll see a lot of reasons for hope in this issue.

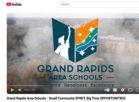
Matt Grose
Superintendent-GRAS

Grand Rapids Area Schools (GRAS)

Over the past two years, our district has been engaged in a deliberate process to review and update curriculum materials in both math and language arts. Teams of teachers, principals and instructional leaders have worked together to study standards and evaluate resources to ensure they align with Minnesota academic expectations. This work has included committees, classroom pilots, and opportunities for feedback so decisions are informed by both research and day-to-day classroom experience. The goal is straightforward: provide students in every school and grade level with clear, consistent, and high-quality learning experiences and expectations.

Just as important as selecting strong materials is how they are put into practice. Since our teachers are central to this work, we are committed to a thoughtful rollout that includes professional learning, collaboration time, and ongoing support, so the new curriculum strengthens instruction rather than simply adding another initiative. By pairing careful selection with sustained and supported implementation, we aim to give educators the tools they need and students the best opportunity for improved learning outcomes.

Scan to learn more about our schools.



Grand Rapids Area Virtual Academy (GRAVA)

Not every student thrives in the same learning environment. While many succeed in a traditional school day, others face barriers such as anxiety, health concerns, attendance challenges, or the need for credit recovery. The Grand Rapids Area Virtual Academy (GRAVA) was created to give those students another way to stay connected to school while remaining part of GRAS.

GRAVA is taught and supported by licensed teachers. Students complete coursework online but are closely monitored, meet regularly with staff, and have access to counseling, special education, and school activities. Graduation expectations remain the same; what changes is the structure and flexibility. Without a local option, many families enroll their students in other online programs outside our community. GRAVA keeps students connected to Grand Rapids schools while also helping the district retain and attract enrollment.

MCA's vs Progress Assessments

Assessments at GRAS are designed to support student learning, not simply measure it. While the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) provide an annual snapshot of student proficiency and help measure district and school performance across the state, GRAS relies on ongoing benchmark data to guide instruction.

Excellence



SENIOR SPOTLIGHT

At GRAS, students are benchmarked three times a year (fall, winter, spring), using FastBridge in grades K-2 and STAR assessments in grades 3-12. These reading and math benchmarks provide timely data on student growth and performance.

Following each benchmarking window, school teams engage in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) meetings to review data, identify trends and establish learning goals. In addition, Tier 2 academic placement meetings are held for all grade levels to determine which students need targeted interventions in reading and/or math. Diagnostic assessments are then used to pinpoint specific skill gaps so that evidence-based interventions can be matched to student needs.

Zac Erickson, MTSS and GATE Coordinator, adds: "A typical Tier 2 intervention looks like daily, targeted support tailored to the student's needs. For example, a second grade student might receive daily phonics intervention, while a middle school student may receive a morphology intervention. All academic interventions are monitored weekly using brief, reliable progress monitoring assessments to ensure they are effective and to make adjustments as needed."

By responding to assessment data in real time, educators can adjust supports, strengthen core instruction, and ensure every student has a clear pathway for growth.

Intervention Tier 2 Program

At Grand Rapids Area Schools, our Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) uses screening data, classroom performance and ongoing progress monitoring assessments to match students with evidence-based interventions. Through our Tier 2 intervention program, students performing below benchmark receive targeted, small-group support in reading and math, supporting all students to be successful.

Families receive regular updates on benchmark data and intervention plans, allowing them to support learning at home and celebrate progress. Funding from Alternative Delivery of Specialized Instructional Services (ADSIS) and Title programs provide access to deliver high-quality interventions.

Laura Helmbrecht, kindergarten teacher at West Rapids Elementary, notes: "As a kindergarten teacher, I am extremely grateful for our Tier 2 interventionists. By collaborating with interventionists in 1:1 and small group settings, students can learn and grow quickly, experiencing success with more caring adults in their corner."

Tier 2 interventions respond to need, not labels. With targeted support and strong family-school communication, every student can build skills, confidence and academic success at Grand Rapids Area Schools.



Meet Christian Shafer, Grand Rapids High School Class of 2026.

After graduating from GRHS this spring, Christian plans to attend the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities to double major in Agricultural Communications and Pre-Law. "I came to this decision after numerous experiences in Grand Rapids' FFA Program," he explains, citing his work with Minnesota legislators to mitigate the Emerald Ash Borer's ecological impact.

Christian reflects on the preparation for college that started at GRHS by successfully completing five IB/CITS courses. He specifically highlights Mrs. Carlson's class Human Geography: Our Globalizing World. "This class taught me a great deal about how global populations and industries interact. Providing an insight into numerous careers in the area of humanitarianism," he explains.

Alongside his academic focus, Christian found a sense of community within the FFA. He fondly recalls a recent memory after a Poultry, Fish & Wildlife Career Development Event. "After another incredibly successful day at competition, our vehicle broke down. While we waited, some of the most unique individuals came together as a family, laughing, conversing, debating, and just generally enjoying each other's company."

Christian's advice for current students: "Don't be afraid to make new friends, some of them will follow you for a lifetime."



IT'S A FACT

A Balanced 2026-27 (FY27) Budget Brings Relief for Spring

For the past six years, spring in our district has meant budget reductions. Each year the school board set a reduction target and the district worked to close the gap between what it costs to operate schools and the revenue we receive. Those decisions affected staffing and programs, creating real uncertainty for employees and families and leading to larger class sizes and fewer opportunities for students.

The school board recently reviewed the proposed 2026–27 (FY27) budget and moved forward on a recommendation that no cuts are needed to balance next year's budget. After years of difficult decisions, that represents an important milestone for our district.

When school districts reduce spending, the effects are felt most in people. Salaries and benefits make up the majority of school budgets, so reductions often show up through larger class sizes, program changes, health care adjustments, and added responsibilities. Recent contract settlements emphasized one-time compensation and limited ongoing increases so the district could stabilize financially; an approach that required cooperation and

good faith compromise from employees and the district.

This outcome didn't happen by accident. A year ago, we laid out a clear plan: finish the year balanced, rebuild our reserves, make necessary reductions, negotiate modest settlements, and responsibly increase local revenue where possible. That work is now showing results.

Why reductions were necessary.

A balanced school budget simply means revenues and expenses match without cuts. When they don't, districts only have a few options: grow enrollment, receive more state funding, seek local voter support, or reduce spending, and since more than 80% of school spending is staff, reducing spending usually means staff cuts.

Over time, several factors create ongoing pressure for districts like ours:

- gradually declining enrollment
- state funding that has not kept pace with rising costs
- increasing operating and health care expenses

At one point our district's reserves fell below 2%. Through reductions, careful planning, and cooperation across the organization, we rebuilt

that reserve to near the level recommended by our board and financial advisors.

Looking forward.

The relief of a spring without budget reductions is welcome, but it isn't permanent. Stability is not the same as excess funding. Enrollment trends, rising costs, and uncertainty in state funding mean we will almost certainly face challenges again. Our projected operating margin is small, and several factors could quickly change our situation.

A balanced budget also doesn't mean we are staffed or offering programs the way we or our families would ideally want. Smaller class sizes and additional electives would benefit our students, but they are not possible right now.

This spring does feel different, and it's worth acknowledging. The progress we're seeing is the direct result of years of difficult choices and shared commitment from staff, students, and our community. Our focus now is straightforward: maintain stability, plan carefully, and continue moving Grand Rapids Area Schools forward.

Your voice matters.

833 + 50 + 4 =

October, survey responses collected across the district

November, FORWARD Community Advisory Team members

FORWARD Team discussions to explore options

Building Solutions Together



YOUR Voices Are Shaping Grand Rapids Area Schools

What does the future hold for Grand Rapids Area Schools (GRAS)? That question is at the heart of FORWARD, a Community Advisory Committee bringing together families, staff, and community members to help shape what's next for the district.

The effort began last fall as part of a broader community engagement process including a community-wide survey inviting residents—parents, grandparents, business owners, recent graduates, and longtime community members—to share what matters most to them. “The feedback we received now guides FORWARD’s work,” notes GRAS School Board Chair David Cowan. “This work forms the foundation of a transparent, collaborative process aligned with the district’s strategic directions.”

At its first meeting in December, participants celebrated strong outcomes like a 93% graduation rate while discussing how the district can continue to grow, improve, strengthen communication, and support student well-being. As one participant put it, “Our staff cannot do this alone.”

“Our staff cannot do this alone.”

FORWARD Participant

The second meeting, held on January 29, took a deep dive into district finances. Participants started by gaining a deeper understanding of Minnesota’s complex school funding system and how restrictions placed on spending can create challenges for balanced budgets.

Then attendees took a look at spending, revenues, and trends in GRAS, including what led to \$9.8 million in reductions and the elimination of nearly 80 positions since 2020. Finally, information was shared that compared our local school district to 11 other districts.



Meet Brooklyn Noble, Bigfork High School Class of 2026.

After graduating from Bigfork High School in the spring, Brooklyn plans to attend Lake Superior College to study Dental Hygiene. “I know there are jobs available. My uncle (a dentist) let me shadow his work and I think I am a good fit for this career,” she explains.

Through the Health Care Career Pathways program, Brooklyn says, “Getting to work in health care around Bigfork Valley as a high school student helped me to see all of the different career options. At one point I thought I would be a nurse or an X-ray technician.”

Preparation began long before graduation. By taking Medical Terminology and earning her CNA certification in high school, Brooklyn gained hands-on experience in patient care and communication. “I’ve always loved helping people, and my CNA training gave me a level of confidence in health care that I wouldn’t have gotten without taking Career Pathway courses,” she recalls.

Brooklyn’s advice for current students: “Take opportunities you can get in high school like all of the field trips that are offered, talk to people about their careers, and the CNA course really helps. Just because a certain Career Pathway isn’t your immediate choice, you don’t really know until you give yourself experiences.”



AROUND THE DISTRICT

Big Opportunities, Global Experiences: Grand Rapids Area Schools Students Travel the World

Students in small towns often hear that big opportunities only happen in big cities. Across Grand Rapids Area Schools students are proving that isn't true.

Through the Grand Rapids High School International Club, students, parents, and community members have access to school board supported, student-funded educational travel abroad each year. Since 2012, the club has traveled throughout Europe and to destinations including India, Nepal, Egypt, Morocco, Thailand, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. Upcoming trips include Scotland and Ireland, Japan, Switzerland, France, and Italy.

Trips are strategically planned at least two years in advance, giving families time to budget and students opportunities to fundraise. The club's mission is to foster global citizenship, cultural empathy, and a lifelong passion for exploring the world.

Bigfork students are also preparing for global experiences. In summer 2026, students will travel to Greece to explore ancient ruins and study the origins of democracy. In 2027, students will head to Costa Rica to experience rain forest ecosystems and learn about biodiversity and conservation firsthand.

These programs send a clear message: where students grow up does not limit how far they can go. Travel builds confidence, independence, and understanding. Students return home with broadened perspectives and a greater appreciation for both the wider world and their own communities.

For information about future trips, contact GRHS International Club co-advisors Brielle Carlson at bcarlson@isd318 or Jessica Felosi at jfelosi@isd318.org. In Bigfork, Michelle Hill at mhill@isd318.org.



Boozhoo: Anishinaabe Gikinoo'amaadiwin Program Expands Cultural Learning Across District

Graduation is right around the corner. Anishinaabe Gikinoo'amaadiwin program students, staff and their families have been busy preparing to celebrate the Class of 2026. Many students and families are beading their graduation caps in preparation. A beaded graduation cap is not only functional but, also a breathtaking and meaningful work of art.

In 2023, Minnesota enacted legislation to ensure this culturally affirming practice is supported and honored by schools. Some students bead their own cap, and some students have their cap beaded by a loved one. The creative process of every graduation cap is filled with intention and love. Also, it honors the culture of the student and their family and affirms that Indigenous identity is not absent

and belongs in our schools. Walking across the stage and accepting a diploma at graduation is no small feat. For our students to honor their culture while experiencing this monumental moment in their lives, is a community celebration.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

Learning Opportunities for Everyone!

Did you know the Grand Rapids Area School District offers learning and enrichment programs for residents of all ages through our Itasca Area Community Education program? Our mission is “To ignite learning through ever-changing opportunities that enrich and enhance lives, giving everyone a chance to explore new interests, develop skills, and connect with their community.”

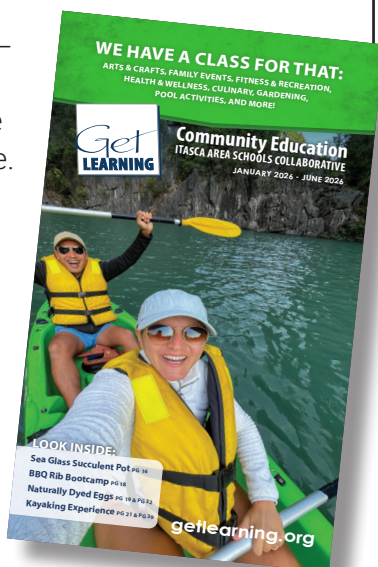
Through Community Education, we invite community members to use our gyms, classrooms, and other spaces during times outside the regular school day. Families can take part in early childhood programs that build foundational skills and encourage family engagement. School-age students can enjoy after-school and summer classes, camps, and activities that inspire creativity, problem-solving, and teamwork. Adults have access to personal enrichment, professional development, and lifelong learning opportunities designed to inspire learning, connecting, and creating.

Our programs are inclusive, accessible, and designed to meet the interests and needs of our community. From exploring a new hobby to connecting with neighbors, Community Education provides a welcoming space for growth, creativity, and connection.

See what's possible! The Itasca Area Community Education program, through Grand Rapids Area Schools, is here to build a stronger, more vibrant community—one program, one participant, and one experience at a time.



getlearning.org



SCHOOL BOARD

GRAS School Board's 2026 Legislative Priorities

Each year the school board identifies key issues at the State Capitol that affect students, taxpayers, and the stability of our schools. One question we often hear is, “What can I do to help?” One answer is to contact your legislators and urge them to support the following priorities:

Maintain the Compensatory Revenue Hold Harmless Provision

Recent changes in how the state identifies students eligible for compensatory funding reduced revenue for some districts even though student need did not change. Without the hold harmless provision, our district would lose more than \$1.2 million in a single year.

Adopt Seasonal Recreational Property Tax Base Replacement Aid

Current law excludes seasonal recreational properties from the tax base used for school operating levies. In communities like ours with many seasonal cabins, this shifts more of the tax burden onto year-round residents.

Protect the Inflationary Adjustment to the Per-Pupil Funding Formula

Linking the state funding formula to inflation helps prevent school funding from losing purchasing power and supports more stable district budgets.

Protect Special Education Cross-Subsidy Aid

If the work of the “Blue Ribbon Task Force” comes up short of a required \$250 million in savings, an important special education funding stream will be reduced, shifting more costs onto general education programs.

Fully Fund or Revoke the Summer Unemployment Requirement

Recent policy changes allowing summer unemployment benefits will create significant and unpredictable costs for school districts without state funding.

Increase Safe Schools Funding

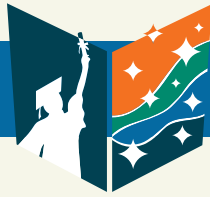
Safe Schools revenue supports counselors, mental health services, facility security, and cybersecurity protections.



Details Matter!

For more on each of these priorities, please visit the full list on our website.
www.isd318.org/legislativepriorities

FAST FACTS



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Minnesota passes legislation ensuring American Indian students can honor their cultural heritage at graduation ceremonies



GRAS students with 12 sport teams participated in MSHSL section final or state tournaments during the fall/winter 2025-26 season



students enrolled in 1888 at the first school built in Itasca County located at the present site of Old Central School



individual opportunities in FY25 provided by Itasca Area Community Education



countries on 4 continents have been explored by GRAS students, staff, and community members since 2012

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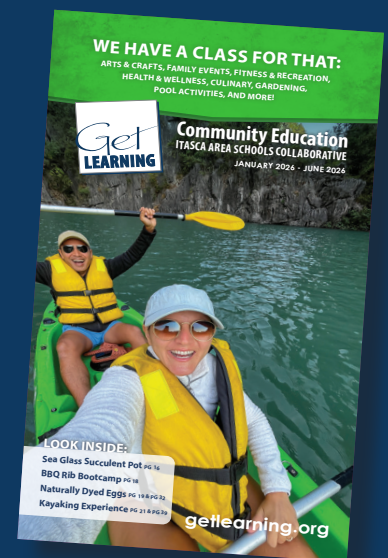
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