

COMMUNITY CONNECTOR

FALL 2026



GRAND RAPIDS

— AREA SCHOOLS —

Resilience ♦ Readiness ♦ Excellence

FORWARD



Moving FORWARD Together

Following the 2023 referendum, the Grand Rapids Area Schools Board of Education made an intentional decision: before determining what should come next, the district needed to spend time listening to and learning from the community.

That decision led to FORWARD, one of the most sustained community engagement efforts in the district's recent history. Over seven months, hundreds of parents, families, staff members, students, longtime residents, and other community members helped identify what Grand Rapids Area Schools (GRAS) should prioritize for the future.

The process was designed to be authentic and participatory, not simply a way to inform people about decisions that had already been made. The Board wanted community members to examine the district's situation, share their perspectives on educational priorities, and discuss how those priorities could be delivered responsibly and sustainably.

The approximately 50-member FORWARD Community Advisory Committee represented a cross-section of the district in role, perspective, and geography. Special effort was made to include voices from Bigfork and Cohasset, where participants raised concerns about equitable access to courses, programs, resources, and other opportunities. Committee members participated in four facilitated meetings from December 2025 through April 2026, with each meeting building on the work that came before it.

Four Meetings, One Shared Foundation

The first meeting established a common foundation. Participants reviewed information about the district's size, students, academic outcomes, finances, and programs. Many were surprised by the complexity of operating nine sites across a geographic area comparable to the state of Delaware. The conversation also highlighted the wide range of student needs and the importance of using more than a single test score to measure student success.

During the second meeting, committee members examined how Minnesota funds public schools and how that system affects GRAS. Participants learned about state funding formulas, restricted and unrestricted revenue, enrollment-based funding, and the financial pressures facing rural districts. They also reviewed nearly \$9.8 million in district budget reductions made between fiscal years 2021 and 2026, including the elimination of approximately 80 staff positions.

The third meeting moved from learning to doing. Committee members participated in a hands-on school budget simulation that required them to make difficult choices with limited resources. The exercise reinforced several financial realities: much of a school district's budget is committed before discretionary decisions are made, circumstances can change quickly, and every new investment may require reducing or delaying something else. Members then participated in a consensus workshop to identify shared priorities.

A Year's Worth of Sustained Community Engagement



From Our Superintendent

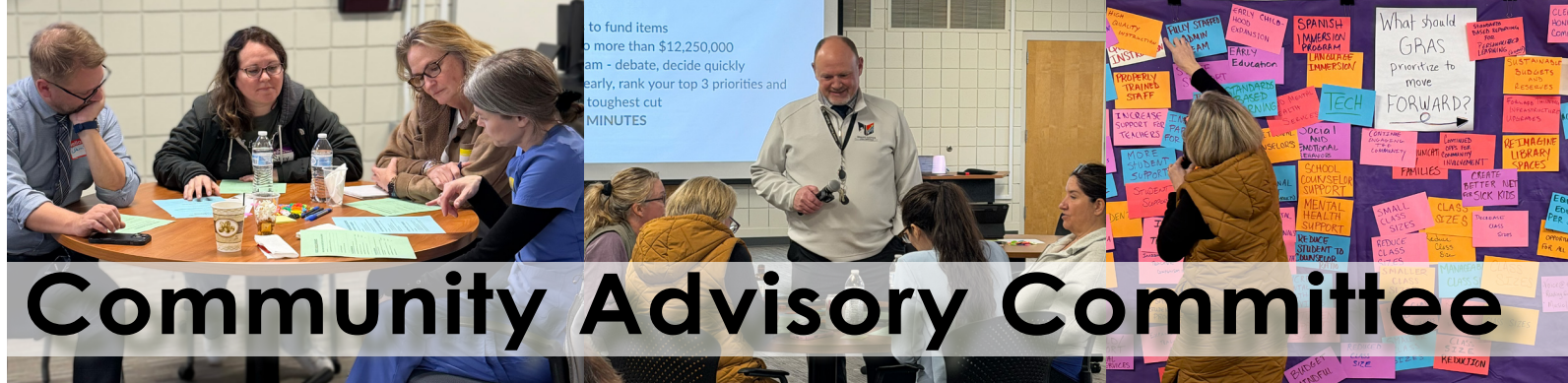
A new school year always brings energy and possibility. It is also a reminder that our work is connected. What happens in classrooms depends on the strength of our curriculum, the support our teachers receive, the relationships students build, and the trust we maintain with families and our community.

This year, we are continuing to strengthen those connections. Our instructional work is becoming more focused and coherent, not to create more activity, but to help teaching and learning improve. We are also building more ways for students to find belonging, experience success, and prepare for what comes after graduation.

You will see that same focus throughout this newsletter. The FORWARD process has given us a clearer understanding of what our community values, and this fall we are asking for your voice again as we move from broad priorities toward actionable steps. You will also find information about the Permanent School Trust Fund amendment and other work shaping the district's future.

Our responsibility is to listen, learn, act, and then measure whether our actions made a difference. That ongoing work is how we move forward together as one district with a shared purpose: ensuring every student is known, supported, and graduates with a path forward.

Matt Grose
Superintendent-GRAS



Community Advisory Committee

At the fourth meeting, the committee reviewed additional survey and staff feedback, reflected on the full process, and prepared its recommendations for the Board of Education.

Broad Engagement and Student Voices

Community participation extended well beyond the committee meetings. A fall 2025 survey received 833 responses, including 465 people who completed every question and provided written comments. Thirty-one percent of respondents had lived in the district for more than 30 years, while others represented families with children in school or residents without a direct connection to the district.

A second community survey, conducted April 17–22, 2026, drew 724 participants and had an 89 percent completion rate. Respondents included 460 parents and family members, 268 staff members, 99 community members, 24 people identifying with other roles, and 13 students.

Because students represented only two percent of that survey's participants, the district added two student World Café sessions in May, one at Grand Rapids High School and one at Bigfork High School. Students participated in three rounds of small-group conversations focused on what was working, what concerned them, and what they would change.

Students at both schools emphasized the importance of passionate and caring teachers, strong relationships, hands-on learning, school traditions, extracurricular activities, and proactive mental health support. They want to be known, challenged, and supported. Bigfork students also raised concerns about resource and opportunity gaps, while Grand Rapids students identified issues related to workload, grading practices, course access, and schedule flexibility.

Emerging Priorities and Next Steps

Across the committee meetings, budgeting exercise, staff engagement, student conversations, and community surveys, five priorities emerged:

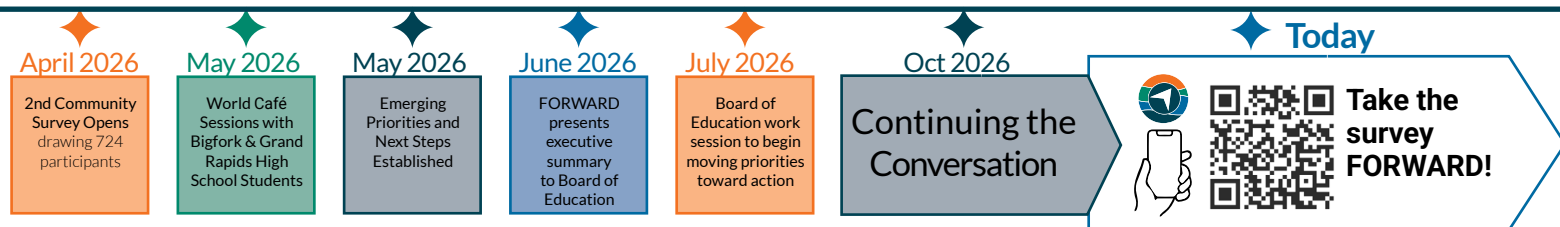
#1	Class Size & Staffing
#2	Instructional Quality & Teacher Retention
#3	Student Support Services (Mental Health)
#4	Financial Stability & Operating Costs
#5	Expanded Student Opportunities

Perhaps the most important finding was the degree of agreement. People came to the process with different experiences and perspectives, but the same priorities surfaced repeatedly. The community wants students at the center of decisions, teachers who are supported and able to succeed, meaningful services for students who are struggling, equitable opportunities across the district, honest communication, and a stable financial foundation.

In June, FORWARD representatives presented the findings to the Board. The Board followed with a July work session to begin moving from priorities toward possible action. Some responses may be possible within existing resources. Others may require reallocating resources, redesigning programs, conducting additional study, or securing additional revenue.

FORWARD does not provide a simple answer to every challenge facing the district. It does provide something essential: a clear community signal and a stronger foundation for making decisions.

Thank you to everyone who completed a survey, participated in a meeting, shared a student or staff perspective, or served on the committee. FORWARD was not intended to be a one-time conversation. It reflects the Board's commitment to continued engagement, transparency, and partnership as we plan for the future of Grand Rapids Area Schools.





Protecting Our Financial Future: An Update on OPEB

As indicated in our Strategic Directions, Grand Rapids Area Schools is committed to Stewardship of Resources that protects both the quality of our classrooms and the wallets of our community members. A key part of this responsibility involves managing Other Post-Employment Benefits (OPEB), which are the medical and prescription drug benefits promised to our dedicated retirees over decades of service.

For years, the district managed these obligations through a trust fund established in 2009. However, due to rising medical inflation and increasing lifespans, the trust was depleted, meaning we needed to transition to a “pay-as-you-go” model, where retiree healthcare premiums would be paid directly from the district’s operational funds and reimbursed via property tax levies. Knowing this would be an intolerable spike in taxpayer costs, the district set out to find options.

A Collaborative, Proactive Solution

Over the past year, the district leadership and the Fringe Benefits Committee engaged in a

rigorous, collaborative process to modernize our approach. We worked closely with our retirees to restructure how these benefits are delivered, ensuring we could fulfill our long-term promises while navigating current financial realities.

Effective January 1, 2026, the district successfully transitioned Medicare-eligible retirees (age 65+) into a fully insured Medicare Advantage platform. This change capitalized on federal funding structures that were previously inaccessible, allowing us to maintain high-quality coverage for retirees while simultaneously optimizing costs.

The Results: Smart Management in Action

This strategic restructuring has resulted in a significant financial improvement for the district and our community.

Massive Reduction in Liability:

The district’s total OPEB actuarial liability has been slashed by 61%, dropping from \$126.15 million to \$49.15 million.

Taxpayer Savings:

By shifting to this more efficient

model, we have reduced the projected annual property tax levy pressure by approximately \$2 million.

Preserved Benefits:

Through this transition, we maintained the aggregate value of retiree benefits, ensuring our former staff continue to receive the care they earned, while protecting the district’s General Fund from volatility.

This transition represents a major success in smart, long-term financial management. By acting early and collaborating with our retirees, we have secured a more stable fiscal environment for our classrooms and saved our community millions in future tax levies. We are proud of this outcome and remain dedicated to transparent, responsible management of our district’s resources.



Learn More

District Reports & Resources



AROUND THE DISTRICT



Indigenous Peoples Day

Indigenous Peoples Day is Monday, October 12, 2026 and marks the 11th celebration of the day in Grand Rapids. Indigenous Peoples Day embraces the rich indigenous history and culture of the Grand Rapids Area and honors Native perspectives, presence, and resilience in the community. This year, the GRAS Anishinaabe Gikinoo’amaadiwin program is partnering with Minnesota North College Itasca, and the MacRostie Art Gallery to host events for students and the community. Events will be free and open to the public. Additionally there will be activities and events to observe Native American Heritage Month in November. Our program is excited to highlight the contributions and strength of the Native American peoples in our community and schools.



My Ride K-12 Bus App

The My Ride K-12 app helps families stay connected to their

child's school transportation. Families can use the app to view bus routes, stop locations, pickup and drop-off times, and bus location information when available. My Ride K-12 is also the primary way our Transportation Department communicates with families about bus information, updates, delays, and other transportation-related messages.



Safe Anonymous Reporting

Grand Rapids Area Schools is implementing Sandy Hook Promise's Say Something Anonymous Reporting System to give students a safe, confidential way to report concerns about threats, bullying, violence, self-harm, or a classmate who may need help. Students will learn how to recognize warning signs, take them seriously, and speak up through a mobile app, website, text, or telephone hotline. Reports are monitored around the clock by trained crisis counselors and quickly shared with the appropriate school staff or emergency responders so concerns can be addressed before they become crises. Implementing Say Something reflects our ongoing commitment to safe, supportive schools and recognizes that students are often the first to notice when something is wrong. Although Minnesota law will require school districts to implement or promote an anonymous reporting system by July 2028, Grand Rapids Area Schools is moving forward well ahead of that deadline because student safety is too important to wait.



A Safer Front Door at Every School

Starting this October, Grand Rapids Area Schools will begin using Navigate360 Visitor Management, a modern check-in system designed to enhance safety across all district facilities. Following a successful rollout at West Rapids Elementary, the system is launching at remaining district schools on a staggered schedule over the coming weeks.

While the check-in process itself is updated, district expectations remain unchanged. Every guest, including parents, community volunteers, contractors, vendors, and neighborhood partners, must still check in at the main office upon arrival.

For a first visit, guests will simply present a driver's license or state-issued photo ID. Office staff will scan the ID once to build a visitor profile, which screens against the national sex offender registry and existing district safety alerts. The system then prints a badge displaying the visitor's name, photo, destination, and date. Visitors must wear this badge while on school grounds and check out at the office before leaving.

Subsequent visits are streamlined. Returning guests state their name and destination to check in, a process as fast as signing a traditional paper log. Anyone proceeding past the front desk while students are present must check in. However, those simply dropping off items at the front desk or picking up students early do not need to go past the main office.

The Navigate360 system is not a criminal history or credit check. Personal data is used solely for badge creation and registry screening, and it is never sold or shared outside the district. Guests without a government-issued ID can work directly with office staff to verify their visit.

Accounting for every person in a facility during standard hours or an emergency is vital to maintaining safe schools. By standardizing this process across all locations, GRAS ensures consistent, reliable security for students, staff, and the broader community. For questions or scheduling requests, visitors are encouraged to contact their local school office.



Fueling Classroom Success: The Lifelong Impact of Extracurricular Activities

Grand Rapids Area Schools had a successful 2025-26 school year in activities with state tournament team or individual appearances in 16 sports, including Girls Swim & Dive, Boys and Girls Cross Country, Football, Volleyball, Girls Soccer, Boys Swim & Dive, Wrestling, Boys Hockey, Boys Nordic Skiing, Boys Basketball, Boys and Girls Track & Field, Boys and Girls Golf, and Baseball. We also celebrated an individual state wrestling champion. Three additional teams were section runners-up. We believe these 16 state appearances represent a school record.

Our schools provide numerous opportunities for students. Bigfork High

School offers 8 athletic programs, while GRHS offers 27, along with cheerleading and many other activities. Participation in teams totaled 86 athletes at Bigfork, 414 at RJEMS, and 1,226 at GRHS.

The Activities Department believes co-curricular activities are an integral part of our school's total educational program—not an extra. Our programs extend our educational philosophy of preparing students to become productive, contributing members of their communities.

Participation in activities challenges students to raise their performance in the

classroom. For some, activities provide a reason to stay engaged in high school; for others, they serve as motivation to meet the academic standards required for participation. Decades of research show that students involved in high school activities have higher GPAs, better attendance, improved classroom behavior, and greater rates of enrollment in trade schools and colleges after graduation. Activities also strengthen learning by building school pride, community, and a sense of belonging. Building climate and academics are improved through our activities.



GRHS Captains Council Developing Future Leaders

Grand Rapids High School (GRHS) is one of many schools across the nation that has established a Captains Council. The philosophy behind the program is simple: **Being a captain is a title; being a leader is a verb.**

The purpose of the Captains Council is to intentionally develop student leaders and help them understand that leadership is more than simply holding a position.

The Council provides activities, educational opportunities, and experiences for students who are named or elected as captains of athletic teams and activity programs. The group meets once monthly before school. These meetings are designed to help students better understand the role,

responsibilities, and expectations that come with being a captain.

While the Council focuses on leadership within a student's current season, its greater purpose is to prepare students to lead as they grow, advance to new levels, and face the challenges of life. The desired outcome is to develop a community of confident, responsible leaders who can positively influence GRHS and carry those leadership skills with them long after graduation.

A variety of instructional methods are used throughout the year, including hands-on activities, real-life leadership scenarios, group discussions, and guest speakers. Graduated captains return for panel discussions, sharing how their high school

leadership experiences have influenced their lives beyond graduation. A coaches' panel is also held to discuss the ways effective student leadership can support coaches, strengthen team culture, and contribute to a more positive and successful season.

Ultimately, the Captains Council is about developing better people as well as better leaders. Strong leadership contributes to stronger teams, healthier relationships, and greater success within a school community. Developing student leaders should not be left to chance or the assumption that captains will naturally know how to lead. Leadership is a skill that can be taught, practiced, developed, and carried forward throughout life.



Beyond the Score: Two Senior Perspectives on Academics and Sports

For senior Ava Limberg, a standout in Varsity Soccer, Track, FFA, Club Soccer, and 4-H, the hardest part of her packed schedule is simple: managing time while still making room to slow down. **“The pressure that comes with a tight schedule and many commitments is a privilege and should be valued, not feared,”** she says. That mindset has paid off—Limberg credits her activities with building the leadership skills, confidence, and independence she now relies on both in and out of the classroom.

Fynn Schlicht, who juggles Soccer, Football, Swimming, and Track and Field alongside a full IB course load, has found that a busy schedule actually sharpens his academic focus. **“Since I have a lot going on, I don’t have as much time to procrastinate, which forces me to manage my time well and be more productive,”** he explains. Beyond grades, Schlicht points to the friendships built through sports as a driving force in his growth, pushing him to step outside his comfort zone.

Together, Limberg and Schlicht show that extracurricular involvement does more than fill a resume — it builds the discipline, confidence, and community that carry students toward success both on the field and in the classroom.



SCHOOL BOARD

Permanent School Trust Fund Amendment on the November Ballot

Minnesota voters will see a proposed constitutional amendment on the November 3, 2026, ballot related to the state’s Permanent School Fund.

The Permanent School Fund has supported Minnesota public schools since statehood. Revenue generated from state-owned school trust lands, including mining, timber, leases, and land sales, is invested, and a portion of the investment earnings is distributed to school districts based on enrollment.

The amendment would modernize how the annual distribution is calculated. Instead of relying primarily on interest and dividend income, schools would receive an amount equal to 4.5% of the fund’s average value over the previous three years, an approach very typical for endowments and funds like this one. This strategy is intended to provide additional support to today’s students while preserving the fund’s purchasing power for future generations. The new formula would take effect July 1, 2027.

For Grand Rapids Area Schools, current projections estimate that the annual distribution would increase from approximately \$285,000 to \$423,000, about \$138,000 in additional yearly funding. Actual amounts would vary based on enrollment and the fund’s value. Across northeastern Minnesota, school districts would receive more than \$500,000 in additional revenue. Although this sum represents a modest portion of any single district’s overall budget, it offers welcome

support for many area districts that have endured years of budget cuts, including Grand Rapids Area Schools.

The amendment would not create a new tax or increase individual income or property taxes, and it wouldn’t take money from another place in the state’s budget. It would simply change how much money is distributed from an existing fund already dedicated to public education.

Because this is a constitutional amendment, approval requires more than a majority of the people who vote on the question. It must receive a majority of all ballots cast in the election. That means leaving the amendment question blank has the same practical effect as voting “No”. Voters should be sure to mark either “Yes” or “No” so their choice is counted as they intend.



\$33
MORE PER
STUDENT
STATEWIDE



**NO
NEW
TAXES**



**ELECTION DAY
NOV. 3**

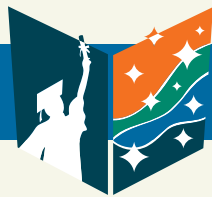
Constitutional Amendments	
PERMANENT SCHOOL FUND CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT	
Shall the Minnesota Constitution be amended to increase the funding going to all school districts from the permanent school fund, which is a fund that supports school districts without raising individual income or property taxes, effective July 1, 2027?	
☐	YES
☐	NO



Understand the facts!

See a presentation from Paul Peltier,
Executive Director (RAMS)

FAST FACTS



GRAND RAPIDS
AREA SCHOOLS
Resilience • Readiness • Excellence



Indigenous Peoples
Day marks the 11th
celebration of this day
in Grand Rapids, MN.



State tournament
team or individual
appearances during
2025-26 school year



Priorities established
by the FORWARD
Community Advisory
Committee, staff
engagement, student
conversations, and
community surveys



Students
transported daily

Grand Rapids Area Schools
650 SW 7th Avenue
Grand Rapids, MN 55744-2701

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
DULUTH, MN
PERMIT NO 1947

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

Complete a Community Survey

Let's continue the
conversation.

Scan to share your
thoughts.



FALL IN LOVE WITH LEARNING



WE HAVE A CLASS FOR THAT:

ARTS & CRAFTS, FITNESS & RECREATION,
HEALTH & WELLNESS, CULINARY,
POOL ACTIVITIES, AND MORE!



Community Education
ITASCA AREA SCHOOLS COLLABORATIVE
AUGUST 2026 - JANUARY 2027



LOOK INSIDE:

Dog Classes pg 5

Learn to Weld pg 8

Photography Classes pg 10

Fall Leaf Mosaic pg 15

getlearning.org

GetLearning.org