



*An Initiative of Minnesota Alliance With Youth*

MN Youth Council  
Annual Report 2022

## INTRODUCTION

The 2022 Minnesota State Legislative Session was the tenth session in which the Minnesota Youth Council Committee represented the voices and interests of youth from across the state. The Minnesota Youth Council Committee grew out of an interest by the Minnesota Youth Council [MYC], a diverse group of 36 youth and adults representing each congressional district of Minnesota, plus one at-large district. The MYC's mission is to "mobilize middle and high school students across the state to create equitable systems through youth-led outreach, education, and advocacy."

The MYC is an initiative of the Minnesota Alliance With Youth, a statewide nonprofit that serves as a leading youth development capacity-builder, convener, and collaborator in Minnesota. Legislation in 2013 formalized the relationship between the Minnesota Youth Council youth members and the Minnesota Legislature, putting youth voice into law with the formation of the Minnesota Youth Council Committee [MYCC].

## YOUTH REPRESENTATIVES

### **At Large Representatives:**

Rhys Willoughby, 12th Grade, Blake School  
Rhea Rajvansh, 12th Grade, Eastview High School  
Paula Akakpo, 12th Grade, Math + Science Academy – Woodbury  
Laichia Vang, 12th Grade, Roseville Area High School

### **Congressional District 1:**

Kaycie Brookens, 12th Grade, Fairmont High School  
Salma Abdi, 12th Grade, Rochester Century  
Zamzam Abdullahi, 12th Grade, Rochester STEM  
Paige Friedrich, 10th Grade, Kasson-Mantorville High School

### **Congressional District 5:**

Alexis Moracco, 12th Grade, SAVHS  
Naomi Teshome, 10th Grade, SAVHS  
Sarah Ragoonanan, 10th Grade, Hiawatha Collegiate High School  
Charlie Schmit, 10th Grade, Washburn High School

### **Congressional District 2:**

Sahasra Molleti, 11th Grade, Eastview High School  
Eric Li, 12th Grade, Eagan High School  
Maryama Warsame, 12th Grade, Rosemount High School

### **Congressional District 6:**

Trinity Hanif, 12th Grade, St. Michael-Albertville High School  
Grace Vu, 10th Grade, Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists  
Chloe Billiet, 10th Grade, Watertown-Mayer High School

Coco Leonard, 12th Grade, Minnesota Connections Academy	Heba Hussein, 12th Grade, Blaine High School
<b><u>Congressional District 3:</u></b> Jacob Kiflu, 11th Grade, Thomas Jefferson High School Sage Hartman, 10th Grade, Wayzata High School Chae Lee, 12th Grade, Minnetonka High School Arjun Prasad, 12th Grade, Wayzata High School	<b><u>Congressional District 7:</u></b> Bridget Westrum, 12th Grade, Homeschooled Alya Nimis-Ibrahim, 11th Grade, Bemidji High School Karen Guise, 12th Grade, Red Lake Senior High School
<b><u>Congressional District 4:</u></b> Adri Arquin, 12th Grade, Central High School Aila Brodd, 11th Grade, Twin Cities Academy Ava Roots, 9th Grade, Stillwater Area High School Juwaria Jama, 12th Grade, Spring Lake Park High School	<b><u>Congressional District 8:</u></b> Katelyn Dorry, 12th Grade, Grand Rapids High School Emily Geier, 12th Grade, Cambridge-Isanti High School Ria Edberg, 12th Grade, Mora Jr/Sr High School Sara Maki, 12th Grade, Grand Rapids High School

## BILL SELECTION

As in previous years, bill selection began with the Minnesota Youth Council connecting with stakeholders to hear directly from communities regarding their biggest concerns and needs. Supplemented with input from the Minnesota Youth Councils subcommittee's areas of focus centered around education equity, environmental protections, juvenile justice and expansion of mental health resources and accessibility for students.

Health and Wellness	Education Equity	Environmental Justice	Juvenile Justice
Paige Friedrich Rhea Rajvansh Sage Hartman Arjun Prasad Laichia Vang Alexis Moracco Heba Hussein Karen Guise Emily Geier	Zamzam Abdullahi Coco Leonard Chae Lee Adri Arquin Ava Roots Charlie Schmit Grace Vu Bridget Westrum Ria Edberg	Salma Abdi Maryama Warsame Rhys Willoughby Juwaria Jama Aila Brodd Naomi Teshome Chloe Billiet Sara Maki Adri Arquin	Kaycie Brookens Sahasra Molleti Jacob Kiflu Paula Akakpo Sarah Ragoonanan Trinity Hanif Alya Nimis-Ibrahim Katelyn Dorry

**Health and Wellness**  
**Chair: Alexis Moracco, CD 5**

Value Statement:	MYC Bill Hearing:	Feedback Letter
<p>“We believe that inclusivity is key in conversations surrounding mental health: all students should have the opportunity to seek help, and feel respected, represented, and supported, regardless of their gender identity, sexuality, racial identity, socioeconomic status, and other identity factors.”</p>	<p><a href="#">Minor Vaccine Consent (HF 2625) with Representative Freiberg</a></p>	<p><a href="https://mnyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/Feedback-letter-MHW.pdf">https://mnyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/Feedback-letter-MHW.pdf</a></p>

**Education Equity**  
**Chair: Bridget Westrum, CD 7**

Value Statement:	MYC Bill Hearing:	Feedback Letter
<p>“The Education Excellence subcommittee believes that all students across Minnesota deserve an equitable education, meaning that all students, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, race, etc. have access to a learning environment that best suits their needs.”</p>	<p><a href="#">Access to Menstrual Products in School Buildings (2750) with Representative Feist and Senator Cwodzinski</a></p>	<p><a href="https://mnyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/EE-Feedback-Letter.pdf">https://mnyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/EE-Feedback-Letter.pdf</a></p>

**Environmental Justice**  
**Chair: Adri Arquin, CD 4**

Value Statement:	MYC Bill Hearing:	Feedback Letter:
<p>“We recognize the disproportionate impacts of environmental justice on communities of color. We hope to redistribute additional</p>	<p><a href="#">Climate Justice Education (HF 550) with Representative Jordan</a></p>	<p><a href="https://mnyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/HF-550-MYC-Feedback-Letter.pdf">https://mnyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/HF-550-MYC-Feedback-Letter.pdf</a></p>

<p>resources to ensure equal access to combat environmental racism. Our aim is to involve such communities in environmental justice discussions so that we can protect them from the consequences of environmental disasters and work to combat the climate crisis with those”</p>		
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## COMMITTEE MEETINGS + TESTIFIERS

Minnesota Youth Council representatives were presented with several opportunities to share their experiences and insight before committee members. Through written, in-person and virtual testimonies, Youth Representatives shared personal experiences and advocated on behalf of their communities for:

- **Feb 2, 2022 House Education Finance Committee:** Adri Arquin, Charlie Schmit, and Sara Maki (testimony starts at minute 13) (See also: Minnesota Reformer article [House education committee hears directly from high school students](#))
- **Feb 9, 2022 House Education Policy Committee** Increase Teachers of Color Act: Rhea Rajvansh (testimony starts at minute 19:40)
- **March 11, 2022 State Government Finance Committee: Minnesota Youth Advisory Council** (testimony from Rep. Jim Davnie, Halla Henderson, Sage Hartman, Eric Li and Salma Abdi- starts at minute 2:20)
- **March 21, 2022 House Education Policy Committee HF341 Student Data Privacy Act–** Sahasra Molleti and Charlie Schmitt (testimony starts at 1:06:35)
- **April 2022 E-12 Omnibus Bill Press Conference:** Chae Lee

## HIGHLIGHTS

**Virtual Youth Day at the Capitol**

Youth Day at the Capitol 2022 was held virtually on February 15th, with students across the state joining online to hear about advocacy and personal histories from State Auditor Julie Blaha, Secretary of State Steve Simon, Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan, and Governor Tim Walz.

Attendees also participated in an Advocacy Training with members of the Minnesota Youth Council, and had one-on-one meetings with their Senators and Representatives.

### **Minnesota Youth Advisory Council**

After nearly ten years of engagement at the Capitol, the MN Youth Council has established itself as a crucial voice for students across the state. Every year, the Youth Representatives are called to testify on a vast array of issues, work on projects, provide feedback and seek input from their peers. Recognizing the impact the Youth Representatives have had on the legislature, the MYC was approached by Representative Jim Davnie (63A), chair of the Education Finance committee, to consider a bill that would reshape the structure of the council and add perspectives that were missing from decision-making conversations. The bill would create a first of its kind youth advisory council modeled after Minnesota's ethnic councils. The aim would be to expand the reach of youth voice, and institutionalize it for years to come.

Excited at the opportunity to draft their first piece of legislation and to lay the groundwork for an innovative new council, the Youth Representatives held meetings with Chair Davnie, engaged with community partners and other students to determine both the impact of the bill and whether it was a path that was sustainable and supportive of the MYC's goals to increase youth engagement and participation in decision-making spaces. Though the bill ultimately did not move out of committee, the MYC was able to gain crucial skills drafting and adapting bill language, identifying potential authors or legislators to engage with and advocating for additional pathways for youth voice.

### **Escape The Vape**

The Minnesota Youth Council is a proud partner of Minnesotans for a Smoke-Free Generation and recognizes the impact of tobacco usage on youth-health concerns. For the second year, the Youth Representatives spent time working with the Tobacco Free Alliance on various tobacco cessation initiatives as well as [judging part of the Escape the Vape contest](#).

Escape the Vape is a PSA video contest where students are encouraged to use their voice to raise awareness about vaping and the ways in which tobacco manufacturers target minors. The Council considered the quality of each video as well as the effectiveness of its message when bringing awareness to the impacts of vaping.

### **Safe Routes to School**

The Minnesota Youth Council partnered with the MN Department of Transportation to create the [Youth Partnership Resources and Action Plan](#), a guidebook for a Minnesota where youth can "safely, confidently, and conveniently walk, bike, and roll to school and in daily life." Youth-led meetings (table talks) guided the process in identifying barriers and opportunities, as well as

developing resources and recommendations to support youth engagement, empowerment, and leadership opportunities in Safe Routes to School across Minnesota.

### **Social Justice Through the Humanities Mini Grants**

In collaboration and partnership with youth, the Roseville Area School district, Minnesota Alliance With Youth, Youth Service America, and the Minnesota Humanities Center, the Social Justice Through the Humanities grant program funded projects that expanded youth leadership on issues of social and racial justice and amplified youth-led solutions. The service grant offered young people in the state of Minnesota the opportunity to showcase their ongoing youth-led advocacy and organizing efforts centering the humanities. At the core of the work was the Absent Narratives Approach— a values-driven framework for community engagement and collaboration. These values include: learning from and with multiple voices, building and strengthening diverse relationships, recognizing the inequity or dangers of a single story, and amplifying community solutions for change. This approach puts relationships with people at the center of community change-making and centers diverse voices statewide — especially those left out, marginalized, or otherwise absent from our education and public awareness. MYC Representatives reviewed and awarded over [10 mini grants across the state](#).

### **Youth-to-Youth Listening Sessions**

For one of the final events of the year, the Youth Reps “took over” the Spring Retreat by organizing a series of youth-to-youth engagement sessions. The goal was to hear directly from students and student groups from across the state on matters that were important to them. Four groups; Bridgemakers, the Body Org, Climate Generation, and RAHS Progressives met to share their experiences, hopes for the future, and consider the ways they could work together in the future.

### **Community Event Spotlight**

A priority of the Youth Council over the years has been reaching young people in innovative and meaningful ways. Each year, that’s looked different depending on community need, the pandemic, and the desires of the Youth Representatives. Congressional District 7 decided to center the voices of young people through artistic expression. Bridget Westrum, CD 7 Chair, had this to say about their event,

*“Our community engagement event went extremely well this year. When planning our event, we were trying to think of meaningful things in our community, and one of the first things we thought of was art! We encouraged youth from around CD7 to submit their statement pieces, their art with purpose, art with a story, and I have to admit, it was a tear jerking event. We had vocalists singing about what is wrong in the world, and pianists playing the tune of systemic change. The best part, though, was the physical art submissions. We had pieces about how religion is terrorizing our society, we had pieces about homelessness and social Justice work. Climate change photography was a staple as well. Seeing and hearing these pieces from our youth was truly eye-opening. An*

*attendee asked us what we thought mattered to today's youth, and we promptly told them to open their eyes and check out the art surrounding them. These everyday issues we see in the news do affect all youth, and that was evident at our event "Art, Advocacy, and Storytelling". Youth are the future and it's important for adults to know what they do now affects us too."*

Through their event, they established a deeper understanding of some of the concerns facing Bemidji youth and demonstrated that advocacy and engagement can take many forms. For some students, it looked like surveys and one-on-one meetings with their peers, and for CD 7, it looked like creative expression. The MYC intends to continue to push for engagement that meets students where they are as opposed to only utilizing traditional formats.

## MEDIA

[Rochester Students Expands Her Advocacy to the International Stage](#)

[Trinity Hanif: Minnesota lawmakers must pass legislation providing free menstrual products in schools](#)

[Education finance panel begins walk-through of omnibus E-12 education bill](#)

[House Education Committee Hears Directly From High School Students](#)

[Minnesota House Panel Approves Adding Ethnic Studies, Climate Change to K-12 Curricula](#)

[Bemidji Teen's Gardening Program Continues to Flourish](#)