

# Minnesota's AgEd Advocate



MAELC

Spring/Summer 2026

Kari Schwab, Editor

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## The 2030 Minnesota AFNR Education Blueprint: A Year of Progress

Released in early 2025, the 2030 Minnesota Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources (AFNR) Education Blueprint serves as a five-year strategic roadmap for promoting and improving AFNR education statewide. MAELC is pleased to provide an update to share statewide efforts to date.

Developed with input from over 200 stakeholders, the Blueprint focuses on four critical sectors: *School-Based Agricultural Education, Agriculture Teacher Preparation, Post-Secondary AFNR Education, and Farm Business Management (FBM)*.

To drive progress, the plan identifies three overarching goals:

- **Students:** Increasing access, awareness, and participation
- **Programming:** Improving content and upgrading facilities and equipment, and providing the best methods of instruction to meet the needs of the AFNR industry
- **Instructors:** Recruiting, retaining, and supporting highly qualified educators

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MAELC is a 16-member legislative council that provides leadership to promote and expand agricultural education in Minnesota.



## From the Desk of Sarah Dornink MAELC Executive Director

As I write this article, my dear co-worker and MAELC Program Coordinator, Kari Schwab, is in her last full week with our organization. Her decision to step down and spend more time with her family has sparked many recent conversations about our daily processes, to-do lists, and decades of institutional knowledge. Since she first shared her plans with me, I have found myself noticing all the subtle, invaluable things that her 13 years of practice naturally provide. These are the nuanced tasks and underlying purposes that aren't always written down but are always remembered the moment our annual events and programs roll around. They are the rarely discussed roles and responsibilities of each activity that we just instinctively know how to handle, simply from years of shared implementation. On a personal note, it means losing a colleague who knows my idiosyncrasies and moods without me ever having to explain a thing. When you operate as a team of two for over a decade, you become a truly well-oiled machine. Both MAELC and I have been deeply blessed by Kari's dedication and loyalty, and we thank her from the bottom of our hearts while wishing her the absolute best on her next adventures in life.

Navigating this transition has naturally put me in a highly reflective state, during which we have focused heavily on reviewing our body of work, updating our procedures, and planning ahead for this major staff change. We have worked hard to seamlessly incorporate the

new 2030 Minnesota Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources (AFNR) Education Blueprint into our ongoing efforts and programs. In addition, we have evaluated our grant and scholarship programs to ensure they not only align with this new Blueprint, but also provide greater clarity for applicants, streamline our deadlines, and maximize efficiency for both our staff and committee members. Finally, we have placed a strong focus on internal organizational processes to prepare for staff transitions; this has included restructuring how we save and share files, updating our handbooks to reflect current practices, and creating a clear retention schedule for paperwork and historical information. I am incredibly proud of everything we have accomplished on this front, all while maintaining our usual, robust yearly body of work.

The articles packed into this newsletter truly capture these dynamic changes and dedicated efforts, reflecting the hard work of both the MAELC staff and our incredible stakeholders. I hope you take the time to dive into these stories and see the impactful strides being made throughout the state. As you read through, please feel free to reach out if you see an opportunity for us to connect, collaborate, and work together in the future.



# The 2030 Minnesota AFNR Education Blueprint: A Year of Progress

(continued from front page)

## Key Initiatives & Progress

In the year since its release, MAELC has reached significant milestones. A primary achievement is the realignment of the MAELC grant program to directly support Blueprint priorities. These updated grants focus on increasing student access and participation, enhancing curriculum and facilities, and supporting the career lifecycle of agricultural educators through mentorship and professional development.

Additionally, Minnesota's Team AgEd is currently leading initiatives focused on facilities and equipment needs at both the secondary and post-secondary levels. At the secondary level, efforts include creating resource lists for essential shop tools and piloting "shop rescues" to modernize local programs. For post-secondary, the focus is on identifying facility gaps through evaluating current assets statewide and comparing them against neighboring state institutions. The goals will be to identify attractive and necessary upgrades to ensure students have access to industry-standard technology. MAELC will facilitate continued discussions on these and other assignments, with further updates planned for the next meeting in July.

Important updates have also been made to MAELC's Farm Business Management (FBM) Challenge Grant parameters, directly supporting the FBM Blueprint strategies related to:

**Expanding Connections** - Colleges must now host at least one public stakeholder meeting specifically with a school-based agricultural education program, FFA chapter, or post-secondary student audience. This expands FBM connections across the state.

**Promoting FBM** - Colleges are required to submit a marketing plan to promote FBM by July 2026 (as part of their progress report), and an example of communication resources for program supporters by July 2027 (as part of the final report). This supports the development of local college marketing plans and communication resources.

## Sustaining Success Through Collaboration

While MAELC facilitates and tracks the Blueprint's progress, its success is fundamentally rooted in collaboration. We continue to rely on our partners to push these strategies forward, holding regular stakeholder meetings and reporting progress at MAELC board meetings to ensure momentum is maintained across all sectors. Together, we are building a stronger future for Minnesota's AFNR education.



Learn more about the goals and strategies laid out in the Blueprint at:

[mn.gov/maelc/initiatives/2030\\_AFNR\\_Blueprint.html](https://mn.gov/maelc/initiatives/2030_AFNR_Blueprint.html)

# Over \$126,000 Invested: MAELC Launches New Grant Program to Fuel Minnesota's Agricultural Education Future

This past fall, MAELC implemented a brand-new grant program, awarding over \$126,000 in Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources (AFNR) Education grants. These funds are directly supporting high schools and post-secondary institutions committed to improving AFNR education across the state.

The grant program directly reflects the goals of the 2030 Minnesota AFNR Education Blueprint and is designed to create maximum impact by focusing on three strategic goals:

- **Increasing Student Access and Participation:** Projects focus on implementing new or expanding current AFNR programs to attract new or underserved groups, providing applied learning experiences, and promoting career exploration to recruit the future workforce.
- **Improving Programming Content and Facilities:** Projects in this area focus on providing equipment and improving facilities to enhance student experiences and instruction. They also fund curriculum enhancements to provide students with the leadership, technical, and career readiness skills needed in the AFNR industry.
- **Recruiting, Retaining, and Supporting Highly Qualified Instructors:** Funding is allocated to implement recruitment strategies to encourage individuals to join the AFNR education profession and support the entire career lifecycle of agricultural educators (e.g., pre-service, early, mid, or late career) through professional development, mentorship, and cohort opportunities.

## Fall 2025 Grant Winners Highlight Innovation

A total of 21 institutions were awarded grants to bring innovative projects to life.

- [Aitkin Public Schools](#) (\$6,714): Enhancing Agricultural Mechanics Learning Through Updated Tools and Supplies
- [Albany Area Schools](#) (\$5,895): Two Schools, One Trailer: Expanding Meat Science Education
- [Benson Public Schools](#) (\$5,712): Advancing the Benson AFNR Program
- [Caledonia Area Public Schools](#) (\$7,500): Acquisition of a Hydraulically Powered Iron Worker for the Welding and Metal Fabrication AFNR program

- [Cedar Mountain High School](#) (\$7,000): Shop Improvements
- [Cleveland Public School](#) (\$5,021): Cutting Edge Students
- [Dassel-Cokato High School](#) (\$3,019): Greenhouse Propagation Experience
- [Goodhue High School](#) (\$8,000): Models and Curriculum for Additional Animal Science Pathway Courses
- [Granada Huntley East Chain High School](#) (\$5,000): Horticulture CASE Curriculum and Implementation
- [Hendricks Public School](#) (\$12,500): Virtual Sparks, Real Skills: Welding Pathways for Hendricks Students
- [Holdingford Schools](#) (\$9,055): Meat and Agricultural Processing
- [Kasson Mantorville High School](#) (\$7,095): Wild Game Meat Processing
- [Minnesota FFA Association](#) (\$4,000): MN FFA Technology Empowered Careers Conference
- [Montevideo High School](#) (\$6,690): Star Lab CNC Plasma Table
- [Northern Lights Community School](#) (\$3,367): Hook, Line, & Sinker: Building Natural Resources Skills
- [RTR High School](#) (\$4,500): RTR Power, Structural, and Technical (PST) Systems Department Expansion
- [Sleepy Eye High School](#) (\$1,561): Materials for Agricultural Engineering Class
- [Swanville Public School](#) (\$2,864): Hands-On Growing Systems
- [Tri City United Public Schools](#) (\$5,500): Addition of Hydroponic Education to AgExplore and AFNR
- [University of Minnesota-College of Food, Agricultural & Natural Resource Sciences](#) (\$10,000): AFNR ROCs: Connecting Teachers to AFNR Resources & Opportunities in their Backyards
- [University of Minnesota-Department of Soil, Water & Climate](#) (\$5,136): Expanding Soil Education Access Statewide

This vital funding is provided by the Minnesota Legislature through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) and administered by MAELC.

# AFNR Education Grant Spotlight

## Minnesota FFA's T.E.C. Conference: Empowering Careers in Agricultural Technology



The Minnesota FFA Association hosted a new, three-day conference in March called **Technology Empowered Careers (T.E.C.)**. This conference was made possible, in-part, through MAELC's Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources (AFNR) Education Grant program.

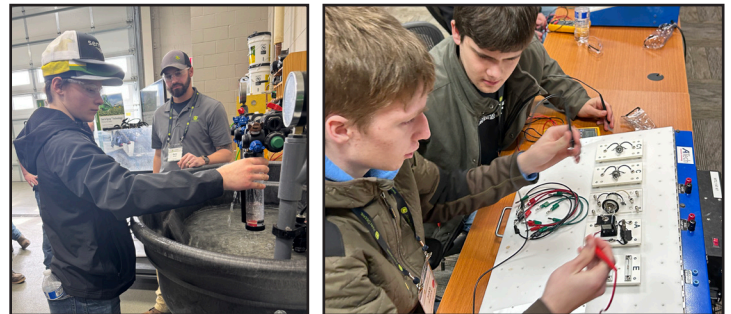
The T.E.C. Conference focused on power, structural, and technical systems (PST) and the many career pathways within agricultural mechanics and technical industries. The PST career pathway encompasses the study of:

- Agricultural equipment and power systems
- Sustainable fuel sources and precision technology
- Woodworking, metalworking, welding, and electrification
- Project planning for agricultural structures

Nearly 60 students attended, participating in hands-on technical skill experiences, learning about new and emerging technology, and taking part in tours. These experiences took place at industry-leading locations, including the John Deere Training Center, St. Paul College, The Toro Company and Zeigler Cat.

At these facilities, they experienced practical opportunities including electrical boards, soil compaction tire troubleshooting, drone mapping and flight, and diesel engine troubleshooting.

The greatest impact of the project was exposing the students to the multitude of careers available in the agricultural technology sector. Students also connected with industry professionals during an evening networking reception, where they participated in one-on-one conversations with potential employers. This direct interaction allowed students to learn about the skill requirements and education needed for different jobs in the agricultural technology fields.



Mary Hoffmann, Executive Director of the Minnesota FFA, highlighted the success, saying, "it was so great to see the students ask questions directly to the industry representatives and interact with them." The conference successfully brought together 50 partners for programming, tours, and the networking reception.

Looking ahead, Minnesota FFA plans to offer this conference annually with even more hands-on opportunities for students!

# Celebrating Future Agricultural Educators:

## MAELC Awards \$23,500 in Scholarships

MAELC recently awarded \$23,500 in scholarships for the 2026-2027 school year through the Agricultural Education for All program. Congratulations to these future educators!

Name	School	Award
Falicia Gilman	Southwest Minnesota State University	\$1,000
Grace Herdering	University of Minnesota, Twin Cities	\$2,000
Alisa Hoven	University of Minnesota, Twin Cities	\$1,000
Allison Jepson	University of Minnesota, Crookston	\$2,000
Riley Joyer	University of Minnesota, Twin Cities	\$1,000
Gretta Kasper	University of Minnesota, Crookston	\$2,500
Sasha Katzung	Southwest Minnesota State University	\$1,500
Henry Koerner	University of Minnesota, Twin Cities	\$1,000
Siri Kuhns	University of Minnesota, Crookston	\$1,000
Jayma Lawson	University of Minnesota, Crookston	\$1,000
Taylor Lee	University of Minnesota, Twin Cities	\$2,500
Kaitlin Reitmeier	University of Minnesota, Twin Cities	\$1,000
Piper Rigge	Southwest Minnesota State University	\$1,000
Cole Sundeen	University of Minnesota, Crookston	\$2,500
Liv Vanderkoi	University of Minnesota, Twin Cities	\$2,500

# VantagePoint Enhances Teach Ag Outreach

In 2024, MAELC started partnering with VantagePoint Marketing Consultants to expand Minnesota Teach Ag outreach. This collaboration has yielded significant results, focusing on digital strategy and targeted communications to recruit future agricultural education instructors.

Previously, Minnesota Teach Ag had a website and social media platforms, however it was managed on a volunteer basis, leading to a lack of devoted time for targeted projects and inconsistency in messaging and online presence. In 2023, MAELC secured an increase in legislative funds to focus on agriculture teacher recruitment and retention, including communication efforts. This led to a contract position search for experts in the communication and marketing field, eventually hiring VantagePoint.

One of the first and most visible projects has been the redesign of Minnesota Teach Ag's website: [teachagmn.org](https://teachagmn.org). This site serves as a centralized information source, providing access for prospective agricultural educators to find details on scholarships, events, career paths, and steps to becoming an agriculture teacher. It also provides resources for current teachers around funding and curriculum support.

In addition to the website, VantagePoint's efforts have focused on digital platforms, such as social media and email campaigns to potential future educators. Content is developed collaboratively, incorporating input from MAELC staff and agricultural education stakeholders, along with VantagePoint's marketing expertise. Since working with VantagePoint, Facebook followers have increased by almost 31% and Instagram followers have increased by over 41%.

Finally, VantagePoint has provided expertise on specialized projects. For example, a "Why An Ag Ed Degree?" poster was recently designed and mailed to all high school agriculture teachers. This initiative served a dual purpose - to encourage students to become future teachers while also highlighting the variety of career options students can pursue within agricultural education.

Upcoming initiatives include celebrating students who participated in the 2026 Teach Ag Signing event and featuring Agricultural Education interns, showcasing their hand-on experiences and acknowledging the critical support for the program.



Facebook (@teachagminnesota)  
Instagram (@teachagmn)  
LinkedIn (@TeachAgMinnesota)

# Cultivating the Next Generation: Inaugural Agricultural Education CDE



At the 2026 FFA State Convention, Minnesota FFA launched the inaugural Agricultural Education Career Development Event (CDE). This milestone was achieved through a collaborative partnership between Minnesota FFA and Agricultural Education faculty from Southwest Minnesota State University, the University of Minnesota Crookston, and the University of Minnesota Twin Cities.

The CDE was designed to encourage FFA members to explore agricultural education as a potential career field and provide an introduction to the basic skills necessary for facilitating learning experiences, addressing the need to highlight the Agricultural Education teaching profession.

The following faculty spearheaded the event:

- Dr. Kristin Kovar, Associate Professor  
*Southwest Minnesota State University*
- Dr. Michael Martin, Assistant Professor  
*University of Minnesota, Crookston*
- Dr. Kirby Schmidt, Teaching Assistant Professor  
*University of Minnesota, Twin Cities*
- Dr. Amy Smith, Associate Professor & Program  
Leader of Agricultural Education  
*University of Minnesota, Twin Cities*

Dr. Schmidt served as the Faculty Chair, working alongside Teacher Chair, Ms. Sarah Lee from the Marshall High School Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources (AFNR) program.



For several years, there had been conversation about how to highlight the Agricultural Education teaching profession to current FFA members, with proposals drafted to offer an Ag Ed CDE. In 2025 the contest gained momentum and the faculty developed rules and recommendations.



An invitational competition was held at each of the three institutions to draw interest from FFA members, with the FFA State Convention event being the culmination of all their efforts.



Eight teams were selected to compete where they developed a lesson plan for a 50-minute class period, taught a 12-15 minute portion of the lesson to a panel of judges and student volunteers,

and then responded to questions related to the lesson content and/or presentation. The top two teams were from the St. Paul-Highland Park FFA Chapter and the Hendricks FFA Chapter.

Dr. Schmidt emphasized that the presence of 36 student volunteers (grades 7-12) from five chapters made the experience more authentic. "Competitors had a more impactful experience because they were teaching AFNR topics to their actual peers," he noted.

Beyond the competition, the event provided students a chance to network with faculty and collegiate student volunteers, fostering relationships as they consider their post-secondary futures. "This was a fantastic opportunity for high schoolers to interact with Agricultural Education majors at our universities in a real-world setting," said Dr. Martin. "Some of the best recruiters for Agricultural Education are our pre-service teachers."

National FFA introduced its own Agricultural Education CDE invitational last year, with the 2026 event scheduled for October 22-23 in Indianapolis. "As National FFA develops this CDE, we hope to see more students explore teaching and increased enrollment in teacher preparation programs," Dr. Smith added. Minnesota is excited to continue offering and growing the Agricultural Education CDE in the future, with plans for the 2027 FFA State Convention already in the works.

The Agricultural Education CDE is an initiative of Minnesota's State Teach Ag Results (STAR) program, which is chaired by MAELC. Minnesota STAR was honored to serve as the inaugural financial sponsor of the new CDE award area.



# 2026 Agricultural Education Interns

In its twelfth year, Minnesota is again offering an Agricultural Education Internship as part of a State Teach Ag Results (STAR) program initiative, which is coordinated by MAELC. Six students majoring in Agricultural Education at Minnesota State-Mankato, North Dakota State University, South Dakota State University, and the University of Wisconsin-River Falls have been selected and paired with current Minnesota agriculture teachers for the summer.

The purpose of the Agricultural Education Internship is to spark an interest in current collegiate students to consider entering the teaching profession and to provide interns hands-on experience as an agriculture teacher. The experience will focus on summer programming, such as Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) visits, curriculum development, community service events, and FFA leadership activities. One week will be spent at the Minnesota Association of Agricultural Educators (MAAE) summer conference. Interns can also take advantage of optional activities for professional development and networking.

## Intern & College

**Chloe Hanson**  
SDSU

**Ellie Hoffman**  
NDSU

**Holly Hughes**  
SDSU

**Sarah Jensen**  
MSU, Mankato

**Katie Ketchum**  
UW-River Falls

**Gracie Sellner**  
SDSU

## Supervising Teacher & High School

**Brad Novacheck**, Humboldt-St. Paul  
**Nikki Flaen**, Zumbrota- Mazeppa

**Laura Morken & Kaylee Rudolph**  
Hawley

**Rebekka Paskewitz**  
Glencoe-Silver Lake

**Katie Emmett**  
Sleepy Eye

**Stacy Fritz**, Chatfield  
**Samantha Selness**, St. Charles

**Cassidy Wiethoff & Jill Grams**  
Buffalo Lake-Hector-Stewart

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