

How Minnesota students helped win the battle for unemployment benefits

A diverse coalition of students spent more than a year making their case to legislators, elected officials and the media.

By Kavita Kumar (<https://www.startribune.com/kavita-kumar/6370490/>) Star Tribune |

JULY 31, 2021 — 4:00PM

They used a combination of new-school and old-school tactics to press their case.

They started with social media. They forged alliances with powerful groups and sued the state — and won. And then they took their fight to the State Capitol.

The result? With broad bipartisan support, the state Legislature passed a bill during the special session this summer that will make Minnesota high school students eligible to receive state unemployment benefits starting next year.

"The impact of the law will help young people for generations," said Lincoln Bacal of Minneapolis who sprung to action last year after she lost two part-time jobs at a restaurant and ice cream shop because of the pandemic. "That's really an incredible feeling."

She was part of a diverse coalition of more than a dozen young people across the Twin Cities who began mobilizing last year when they discovered that a little-known state law dating to 1939 shut them out from receiving jobless benefits because they were in high school. It was a shocking revelation after many of them lost their after-school and weekend jobs at coffeeshops and restaurants during the first pandemic-induced shutdowns.

In March 2020, Walter Cortina, then a junior at a St. Paul charter school, lost his job at a car wash. It was one of a number of jobs he had held since he was 14.

"I was unemployed for like two months maybe, but that was something scary," he said, noting that the wages he earns are not just to support himself, but also to help his family in Mexico.

Surprised to learn he wasn't eligible to receive jobless benefits, he called Bacal, a former classmate. She was in a similar boat, also frustrated that she couldn't receive aid.

"Walter and I were like, 'We have to do something about this,'" she said.

They turned to their mentors for advice, who suggested they connect with Youthprise, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit that funds youth initiatives, particularly those that focus on low-income youth and people of color. The organization was launched in 2012 by the McKnight Foundation.

Youthprise gave the students a small grant to begin recording stories of other Minnesota students in similar predicaments. The students began blasting those videos on YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.

Impressed with the stories they brought back, Youthprise decided to get more involved and became a key advocate. It helped them connect with more students as well as powerful and experienced allies at organizations such as Project for Pride in Living and the Children's Defense Fund Minnesota.

Other students got wind of their budding movement and joined them, including Cole Stevens, who lost his job at a Bloomington coffeeshop early on in the pandemic. He had initially received a couple thousand dollars in unemployment benefits. But once the state realized he was in high school, it ordered him to pay it back.



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Members of Bridgemakers MN held a celebratory picnic at Boom Island in Minneapolis. From top left, Jose Perez, Walter

"I didn't give them a nickel," Stevens said, adding that he appealed his case and that he had already spent the money to help pay the rent and other bills.

The students testified before legislative committees (<https://www.startribune.com/jobless-minnesota-students-press-for-unemployment-benefits-in-pandemic/571132282/?refresh=true>) and attracted media coverage. But efforts to get a bill passed didn't go anywhere last summer.

An adversary and supporter

Then they played their next card. Youthprise and the students sued the state.

In a lawsuit against the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), the agency that processes unemployment claims, the students argued they'd been wrongly deprived of benefits that came to the state through the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program. Congress established that program early in the coronavirus pandemic to support gig workers and others not usually covered by unemployment insurance.

"We were quite happy to lose that court case," said DEED Commissioner Steve Grove, who said that the federal guidelines had been vague but that he was eager to find a way to pay the students.

Grove became an champion of their cause, adding that the issue would not have gone as far without the leadership and advocacy of the students.

"They were savvy and they were persistent," he said.

The December ruling (<https://www.startribune.com/minn-court-jobless-high-school-students-can-access-pandemic-unemployment-aid/573267141/>) meant that high school students could apply for back payments. DEED estimated that 15,000 to 20,000 students were eligible to do so. DEED has since doled out more than \$30 million in jobless payments to high school students, with the federal program set to expire in September.

Stevens said lawmakers and other officials started to take them more seriously after the court sided with them.

"There was definitely a huge shift when we actually won the lawsuit in the demeanor of everybody we had been in contact with," he said. "I really think we sent a shock wave that young people are not going to sit around and be ignored anymore."

Battling an outdated notion

With victory under their belts, the students again set their sights on changing the state law.

Some other states also make it difficult for high school students to receive jobless benefits, but Minnesota was one of the most restrictive, said Marcus Pope, vice president of Youthprise. The general rationale was that the unemployment system didn't apply to teenagers because many only work during the summers and for extra pocket money.

Pope and others argued it was an outdated notion.

"The wages that they're pulling in aren't to spend on records and soda pop," said Grove. "It's to support their families and to put food on the table."

This time around, the movement to change the law got the endorsement of Gov. Tim Walz (<https://www.startribune.com/minn-lawmakers-encourage-students-to-apply-for-pandemic-assistance/573450601/>). Students also found an unlikely and powerful ally in AARP Minnesota, which was working to change another part of the state's unemployment law in which social security benefits were deducted from seniors' unemployment payments.

"Separately, both of our efforts had a lot of momentum," said Erin Parrish, AARP Minnesota's associate state director. "But it was a natural fit for us to carry the message together in showing it was an advocacy effort that spanned generations."

For many backers of the effort, it came down to a question of fairness. Employers already were paying unemployment insurance taxes on behalf of all of their employees, including those in high school or who may be receiving social security.

"So there was absolutely no reason why if they're being paid in for that they shouldn't receive the benefits," said Sen. Jason Rarick, R-Pine City, who championed the legislation with Rep. Mohamud Noor, DFL-Minneapolis.

The biggest stumbling block was deciding when the benefits should kick in. That was a concern of some legislators and business groups given that the state had already racked up more than a \$1 billion deficit in its unemployment insurance trust fund during the pandemic. In a compromise, changes benefiting both students and seniors won't take effect until next July.

While he had hoped there wouldn't be a gap in benefits, Youthprise's Pope said it was still a monumental achievement for young people in Minnesota.

"It's something to study," he said. "It's something to learn from. It's something to build on."

They're not done yet. The young leaders at the center of the unemployment fight, including Cortina, Stevens and Bacal, have formed their own youth-led organization, Bridgemakers. With funding from groups like Youthprise, it is a full- or part-time job for some of them.

"We figured we're a powerful team, so we should keep on working together," said Bacal.

They have several projects, including one to create "changemakers" teams at schools so young people have more influence in everything from the budget to the curriculum. They are also accepting applications (<https://www.bridgemakersmn.org/becomeafellow>) for a fellowship program to support young people of color looking to address issues in their communities.

"We're making sure that there's nothing about us without us," said Bacal. "That's sort of our tagline."

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