

REIMAGINING HIGH SCHOOL SUCCESS


Milwaukee
Succeeds
cradle to career



Supporting the Whole Student

Discover what high school success means, why it matters and where Milwaukee stands.

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Why does high school success matter for Milwaukee specifically?

“Adolescence is a time of remarkable opportunity. The years between age 10 and 25 mark a period of rapid growth, development, and learning as we discover and adapt to the world around us. We forge our sense of who we are and who we aspire to be.”¹

Given the stark racial and ethnic disparities that exist throughout Milwaukee County and across the lifespan, the opportunity of adolescence as a critical developmental period to create more equitable systems and outcomes for the Milwaukee community could not be clearer.

To understand why high school success matters for the Milwaukee community, we must understand the context in which Milwaukee’s youth are growing up. Systems and historical racial inequities, such as housing, redlining, education, health care, and incarceration, all play a role in creating significant racial disparities². Of the largest metropolitan areas in the country:

- Black Milwaukeeans have the second lowest homeownership rate in the nation,³ due to many factors, including a long history of redlining, inequitable access to lending, and a lack of safe, affordable housing.
- Black males ages 25 to 54 had the third lowest employment rate in the nation, resulting in the second largest Black-white male employment gap in the country.⁴
- Milwaukee has the second highest rate of Black Opportunity Youth,⁵ defined as 16- to 24-year-olds who are neither working nor in school. It is a rate of disconnection “with troubling implications for the region’s labor market as well as K-12 schooling.”⁶
- Milwaukee has the third highest rate of Black incarceration in state prisons, which is ten times higher than the white rate.⁷ Factors such as inequitable policing practices, Wisconsin’s criminalization of marijuana, and mandatory minimum sentencing for low-level offenses have led to consistently high incarceration rates for Black individuals.
- And, life expectancy for Black people in Milwaukee County is five years less than the County average and seven years less than white people.⁸

¹ *The Core Science of Adolescent Development*. (n.d.) UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent. Retrieved November 2023 from https://developingadolescent.semel.ucla.edu/assets/uploads/research/resources/Core_Science_Summary.pdf.

² See <https://redressmovement.org/sm-mke/> for additional information.

³ Levine, M. (2020). *The State of Black Milwaukee in National Perspective: Racial Inequality in the Nation’s 50 Largest Metropolitan Areas*. In *65 Charts and Tables*. Center for Economic Development Publications. 56.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, page 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *County Health Rankings and Roadmaps. Building a Culture of Health, County by County*. (2021). County Health Rankings. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/explore-health-rankings/wisconsin?year=2021&measure=Premature+Death>.

Perhaps the most jaw-dropping data point that can motivate policymakers, funders, and the community to action is the following:

The ability of low-income Black youth to climb the economic ladder in Milwaukee is among the most truncated in the country. A Black child born into a low-income household in Milwaukee in the late 1970s or early 1980s has estimated household income in early adulthood about 11 percent less than his/her low-income counterpart born and raised in Baltimore and over 40 percent less than his/her counterpart born and raised in Boston. Moreover, the racial gap in the ability of low-income youth to climb the economic ladder is wider in Milwaukee than all but three other metro areas (Pittsburgh, Chicago, and New York). A child born into a low-income Black household in Milwaukee has estimated young adult income 80 percent lower than his/her white counterpart.⁹

Despite this, there are positives. Often not seen in the quantitative data is the resiliency of Milwaukee’s Black youth. One student said, “A lot of the environments in schools aren’t set up for Black students to be successful. So, the persistence to achieve in spite of that is amazing and we never see that reflected in the data.”¹⁰

Here we aim to elevate the incredible need for action to support Milwaukee’s youth, and we will highlight bright spots that are working to change these outcomes. What we know is that focusing on ensuring ALL Milwaukee’s youth are able to thrive across all four domains of our high school success definition—mental health, physical health, academics, and life skills—will lead to a healthier, more equitable Milwaukee.

How is high school success defined, exactly, and what’s Milwaukee’s current situation?

True high school success goes beyond standardized metrics, recognizing the impact of racial inequity embedded in societal systems. It encompasses not only academic achievement but also mental and emotional well-being, social and cultural inclusion, and equitable access to resources. It involves fostering an environment where students feel seen, heard, and supported—where their individual identities, cultures, and lived experiences are embraced and integrated into the educational fabric. Which is why we asked young people what high school success meant to them: to ensure that their voice and experiences were included in the definition.

This definition acknowledges that success isn’t solely about reaching graduation but is deeply intertwined with dismantling systemic barriers. It prioritizes equipping students with critical life skills, empowering them to navigate an ever-evolving world, and fostering a sense of agency in

⁹ Levine, M. (2020). *The State of Black Milwaukee in National Perspective: Racial Inequality in the Nation’s 50 Largest Metropolitan Areas*. In *65 Charts and Tables*. Center for Economic Development Publications. 56.

¹⁰ Data You Can Use. (Summer 2023). Black Youth Achievement in Milwaukee.

shaping their future. Ultimately, high school success, in its holistic essence, aims to cultivate empowered, resilient individuals who are prepared to thrive in diverse and equitable societies.

Mental Health

Definition

Mental health is the “springboard of thinking and communication skills, learning, emotional growth, resilience, and self-esteem.”¹¹ Mental health encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being, and can be defined as a state of successful mental function resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships, and the ability to adapt and cope with challenges. A person’s mental health helps determine how they handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices. Mental health is incredibly important in every stage of life, from childhood to adolescence to adulthood.¹²

Protecting adolescents from adversity, promoting social-emotional learning and psychological well-being, creating opportunities to find meaning, and ensuring access to mental health care is critical during this time period.¹³ According to the U.S. Surgeon General, there are five factors actively shaping the mental health of young people: individual, family, community, environment, and society.¹⁴ Creating healthy ecosystems for youth across all layers of their lives will lead to improved mental health outcomes.

When asked what high school success meant to them, one Milwaukee youth who attended a community listening session around high school success stated, “Being able to find your own happiness in whatever you’re doing.”¹⁵ This speaks directly to mental health.

Current State

Up to 1 in 5 children ages 3 to 17 in the US have a reported mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder, and even before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people.¹⁶ It is estimated that of the nearly 8 million children with a treatable mental health disorder in the US, about half

¹¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1999). *Mental health: A report of the Surgeon General*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health.

¹² *About Mental Health*. (April 2023). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm>.

¹³ *Mental Health of Adolescents*. (November 17, 2021). World Health Organization. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>.

¹⁴ *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory*. (2021). Surgeon General of the United States. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

¹⁵ Listening session with Youth Forward MKE Ambassadors. Data not publicly available.

¹⁶ Perou, R., Bitsko, R. H., Blumberg, S. J., Pastor, P., Ghandour, R. M., Gfroerer, J. C., et al. (2013). *Mental health surveillance among children--United States, 2005-2011*. MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Supplements, 62(2), 1–35.

did not receive adequate treatment.¹⁷ And the Surgeon General of the United States has declared that mental health challenges in children, adolescents, and young adults could be the next major public health crisis.¹⁸

In Wisconsin, nearly 1 in 5 children experience a mental health disorder, and between 41 and 47 percent do not receive adequate treatment.¹⁹ The latest data (2021) from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey shows more than half of youth in Milwaukee Public Schools high schools (51 percent) self-reported “significant problems with anxiety,” with more at-risk groups like LGBT students reporting significantly higher levels.²⁰ Female students were 68 percent more likely to self-report anxiety than male students (38%).²¹ Depression was self-reported overall at lower levels (37%), but again with significantly higher rates for female students (49%) compared to male students (26%).²² LGBT students were 2.5 times more likely to report bullying than their cisgender peers.²³ Across the state of Wisconsin, “Over one-third of all Wisconsin students surveyed reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for more than two weeks in a row, a statistically significant increase of 5.2 percentage points since 2019 and the highest rate since the YRBS has been administered (1993).”²⁴ Nearly one in five seriously considered suicide in the past 12 months, which is the highest rate since 2003.²⁵ Students identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual were four times more likely than their peers to report seriously considering or attempting suicide, while females were twice as likely than males.²⁶ State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly emphasizes:

“When we talk about our youth mental health crisis, we must also talk about the LGBTQ+ youth and other marginalized students in our classrooms across Wisconsin. Learning environments that foster a sense of belonging take on a different significance for LGBTQ+ kids and students of color because the world at large is not always safe for them. The reality is that hateful rhetoric and misguided policies are only exacerbating the stress this vulnerable population of students already feels. As adults and leaders in our communities, we must care for all children, and that means we must commit to doing the work necessary to foster belonging for every child in every school and in every community.”²⁷

¹⁷ Whitney, D.G. & Peterson, M. (2019). *US national and state-level prevalence of mental health disorders and disparities of mental health care use in children*. JAMA Pediatrics, 173(4), 389-391. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.5399

¹⁸ U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory. (2021). Protecting Youth Mental Health. Retrieved December 2023 from <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Milwaukee 2021 District-Level YRBS Results (High School Version). (2021). Milwaukee Public Schools Department of Research and Assessment. Retrieved November 2023 from https://mps.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/MPS-English/CIO/Research--Development/SpringYRBS_Milwaukee2021HighSchool.pdf.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Data shows Wisconsin students face significant mental health and emotional challenges. (December 2022). Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://dpi.wi.gov/news/releases/2022/youth-risk-behavior-survey-wisconsin-mental-health>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

With 1 in 4 Milwaukee City/County adults reporting a mental health condition, adolescence can be leveraged for prevention through a variety of strategies.²⁸ Milwaukee has a rate of adolescent admission to the ER due to pediatric mental health crises that is nearly double what the state of Wisconsin rate is, and when broken down by race and ethnicity, Black rates are nearly double the overall Milwaukee rate, indicating significant racial disparities in occurrence and access to primary care and mental health professionals.²⁹

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), defined as potentially traumatic events that occur between the ages of 0 and 17,³⁰ occur at a rate higher in Milwaukee than in surrounding areas (24 percent of adults experiencing 4 or more ACEs in the City of Milwaukee, compared to 20 percent in West Allis and Wauwatosa and 19 percent in the North Shore suburbs).³¹ Research shows a strong correlation between the number of ACEs a person experienced as a child and his or her adult health and well-being.³² One comment shared in the Black Youth Achievement data in Milwaukee demonstrates the powerful experience this leaves on the lives of youth—“The unfortunate exposure to violence, whether they witnessed it or it impacted their family, is also a mental trauma experience. And all this when you are already dealing with poverty and other obstacles. It adds to all the trauma.”³³

Talk to students themselves, and the data comes alive. One student emphasized the need for culturally competent care: “There have to be more therapists that understand the Black experience.”³⁴ Another student shared their experience with the survey tools themselves—“There is a survey that we would take every year. The survey was intrusive, invasive, and triggering and there were no professionals in place to support the students that were triggered.”³⁵

Physical Health

Definition

“Other than the first year of life, there is no other developmental period during which individuals grow than during the period of adolescence.”³⁶ Youth in adolescence are actively building a foundation for their physical health for the rest of their lives, learning how to make positive

²⁸ MKE Elevate Issue Brief: MENTAL HEALTH. (February 2023). City of Milwaukee Health Department. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://city.milwaukee.gov/ImageLibrary/Groups/healthAuthors/MKE-Elevate/MentalHealth.pdf>.

²⁹ This Month's Health Focus: Children and Youth Health. (n.d.). Health Compass Milwaukee. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.healthcompassmilwaukee.org/>.

³⁰ Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences. (June 2023). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html>.

³¹ Experienced Four Adverse Childhood Experiences. (n.d.). Health Compass Milwaukee. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.healthcompassmilwaukee.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=8477&localeTypeld=67>.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Data You Can Use. (Summer 2023). Black Youth Achievement in Milwaukee.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ DeHart, G., Sroufe, A. & Cooper, R. (2004). Child development: Its nature and course. (5th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw, Hill.

dietary choices, live an active lifestyle, and engage in their own healthcare.³⁷ In this time period, social support contributes to regular physical activity, and family and community engagement can increase physical activity for adolescents as well.³⁸ Adolescent behaviors more likely to support health into adulthood, include eating a nutritious diet, being active, and getting adequate amounts of sleep.³⁹ Community factors like access to and affordability of nutritious foods, access to safe and suitable built environments, neighborhood safety, access to preventive clinical services, access to health education, family income, and education level all impact a youth's physical health.⁴⁰

Current State

Lead poisoning in children is known to significantly impact brain development and future decision-making, and recent research has been shown that lead poisoning contributes to delinquency and crime-related behavior.⁴¹ In Milwaukee, nearly 1 in 20 children under 6 years old had elevated lead levels, which is nearly double the incidence rate across Wisconsin.⁴² Lead levels in children in some north side Milwaukee census tracts, home to predominantly Black children, range between 15 and 20 percent—the result of high levels of rental properties with little incentive for landlords to abate lead.⁴³ And, recent research shows a connection between lead poisoning and gun violence in Milwaukee—in a dataset of nearly 90,000 children who lived in Milwaukee between 1986 and 2003, those who later experienced gun violence were likely to have had high lead levels as children, suggesting that over half of the gun violence among this sample might be due to lead exposure.⁴⁴

Ample evidence exists that shows the positive impacts that physical and nutritional health have on long-term health benefits, including reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety, preventing and managing noncommunicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer and diabetes, and improving your overall well-being.⁴⁵ However, the percentage of children who are physically active has declined in recent years, from a high of 70 percent in 2015 to a low of 58 percent in 2018.⁴⁶

³⁷ Healthy Behavior (n.d.). Office of Population Affairs. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://opa.hhs.gov/adolescent-health/physical-health-developing-adolescents>

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Emer, L., Kalkbrenner, A., O'Brien, M., Yan, A., Cisler, R., & Weinhardt, L. (2020). *Association of Childhood Blood Lead Levels with Firearm Violence Perpetration and Victimization in Milwaukee*. Environmental Research, (180).

⁴² Wisconsin Watch. (September 2023). Milwaukee renters face higher lead poisoning risks as city struggles to hold landlords accountable. PBS Wisconsin. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://pbswisconsin.org/news-item/milwaukee-renters-face-higher-lead-poisoning-risks-as-city-struggles-to-hold-landlords-accountable/>.

⁴³ Wisconsin Watch. (September 2023). Milwaukee renters face higher lead poisoning risks as city struggles to hold landlords accountable. PBS Wisconsin. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://pbswisconsin.org/news-item/milwaukee-renters-face-higher-lead-poisoning-risks-as-city-struggles-to-hold-landlords-accountable/>.

⁴⁴ Emer, L., Kalkbrenner, A., O'Brien, M., Yan, A., Cisler, R., & Weinhardt, L. (2020). *Association of Childhood Blood Lead Levels with Firearm Violence Perpetration and Victimization in Milwaukee*. Environmental Research, (180).

⁴⁵ World Health Organization. (October 2022). Physical activity. Retrieved December 2023 from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/physical-activity>.

⁴⁶ Children Who Are Physically Active. (n.d.) Health Compass Milwaukee. Retrieved December 2023 from <https://www.healthcompassmilwaukee.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=8067&localeId=3140>.

Academic Success

Definition

Academic success is an excellent indicator of the overall well-being of youth and a primary predictor and determinant of adult health outcomes.⁴⁷ Likewise, health-risk behaviors such as early sexual initiation, violence, and substance use are consistently linked to poor test scores and lower educational attainment.⁴⁸ According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, “Leading national education organizations recognize the close relationship between health and education, as well as the need to foster health and well-being within the educational environment for all students.”⁴⁹ Academic success is often measured through grades and graduation rates, but can be more broadly encompassing of engagement, finding fulfilling passions, and feeling a sense of belonging.

When asked what high school success meant to them, one Milwaukee youth stated, “Getting the best grades and trying your hardest to graduate.”⁵⁰ Milwaukee Succeeds looks at disaggregated data on high school graduation rates and attendance rates, knowing that disaggregated data allows the community to identify opportunities for systems to adjust to better support students.

Current State

Ambassador Kaylee Marsh: “What we learned from youth in Milwaukee is that the community is eager to see a radical shift away from traditional classrooms and instruction.”

When looking at data from the Forward, a test administered online in the spring of each year to gauge how well students are doing in relation to the Wisconsin Academic Standards, students enrolled in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) are behind their peers across the rest of the state. For example, 81 percent of MPS students tested not proficient in English Language Arts, compared to 58 percent of students at the state for the 2022-2023 school year.⁵¹ Math is similar, with 85 percent of MPS students testing at not proficient, compared to 56 percent of peers at the state.⁵²

In 2022, 4-year high school graduation rates varied significantly across race and gender groups in Milwaukee, the result of several factors, many of which are rooted in systemic and historical racism. Across all genders, 65 percent of Black students in Milwaukee are graduating high

⁴⁷ Health and Academics. (August 2019). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved November 2023 from https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/index.htm#6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Listening session with Youth Forward MKE Ambassadors. Data not publicly available.

⁵¹ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction WISEdash Public Portal. (n.d.). Forward Proficiency by All Students. Retrieved December 2023 from <https://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/dashboard/22275>.

⁵² *Ibid.*

school, compared to 86 percent of both white and Asian students, and 72 percent of Latine students. Black males are ten percentage points behind their female counterparts, with 60 percent graduating high school. Compare this to white female and Asian female groups, which are graduating at a 91 percent rate.⁵³

One key indicator of successful high school graduation is attendance rates and chronic absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism is defined by the state of Wisconsin as a student missing greater than 16 percent of available school days.⁵⁴ In Milwaukee, rates of chronic absenteeism are high—54 percent of all high school students in the 2021-22 school year were considered chronically absent.⁵⁵ This is compared to 26 percent across the state of Wisconsin for the same time period.⁵⁶ While chronic absenteeism is over double in Milwaukee compared to the state, student groups within Milwaukee fare quite differently, with 67 percent of Black students, 65 percent of American Indian students, and 60 percent of students of two or more races were chronically absent, all above the city average.⁵⁷ Comparably, 46 percent of Latine students, 29 percent of white students, and 27 percent of Asian students were considered chronically absent.⁵⁸

Suspension data is also critical to understanding the inequities that students face. While Black students comprise 51 percent of high school students in Milwaukee, 80 percent of suspensions in the 2021-22 school year were attributable to Black students.⁵⁹ Black female students faced slightly higher disproportionality than their male counterparts, accounting for 83 percent of female suspensions compared to 77 percent of male suspensions.⁶⁰ Hispanic students are underrepresented in suspensions in the 2021-22 school year, making up 30 percent of the Milwaukee student body but only 13 percent of suspensions.⁶¹

Another indicator of academic success for youth is the rate of students participating in Dual Enrollment programs, in which high school students take college courses for both high school and college credit. “Extensive evidence demonstrates these courses can positively impact student outcomes, such as college access while lowering college costs. These benefits are greatest for traditionally marginalized students, and yet structural, systemic, and other issues

⁵³ Data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Not publicly available. Additional information can be found at <https://www.milwaukeesucceeds.org/hss-dashboard>.

⁵⁴ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (n.d.) *About the Data - Chronic Absenteeism*. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://dpi.wi.gov/wisedash/about-data/chronic-absenteeism>.

⁵⁵ Data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Not publicly available. Additional information can be found at <https://www.milwaukeesucceeds.org/hss-dashboard>.

⁵⁶ Hess, C. (May 2023). *State's Students Missed Nearly a Month of School Last Year*. Urban Milwaukee. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2023/05/16/states-students-missed-nearly-a-month-of-school-last-year/>.

⁵⁷ Data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Not publicly available. Additional information can be found at <https://www.milwaukeesucceeds.org/hss-dashboard>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

create obstacles that can lead to deepened educational inequities.”⁶² Looking at participation during the 2021-2022 school year across 29 high schools in Milwaukee, three schools (all within the Carmen network of schools) are “doing a strong job” of engaging students equitably in dual enrollment opportunities, but 26 percent of schools were below the state average of 19 percent participation in dual enrollment. Twenty of these schools serve students who primarily identify as Black and/or Latine and qualify as economically disadvantaged, yet had minimal dual enrollment participation, suggesting a significant opportunity to expand the impact dual enrollment can make on Milwaukee’s students.⁶³ This problem extends to Advanced Placement (AP) courses, where even though students of color are enrolled in AP courses, fewer students of color actually take the exam.⁶⁴

There is a bright spot pertaining to completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which allows access to federal grants and loans based on family income to help students pay for college. To get more students ready for college, MPS started requiring graduating seniors to fill out the FAFSA. MPS’s FAFSA completion rate increased from 41 percent in 2022 to 58 percent in 2023.⁶⁵

Student-specific academic data is part of the picture, but the picture of how Milwaukee’s youth are doing is not complete until we consider the system within which they are learning. “There’s an identity issue. There are so many Black students while there are more white teachers that don’t represent the Black population.”⁶⁶ While students of color have been rising as a share of Wisconsin’s K-12 student population, the state’s teacher workforce has remained overwhelmingly white.⁶⁷ Between 2009 and 2019, the number of public K-12 students of color in Wisconsin increased by 28 percent, or 58,080 students—growing from 24 percent to 31 percent as a share of all students.⁶⁸ During this same time period, teachers of color as a share of all teachers increased by only 1 percentage point, to 6 percent, ultimately widening the gap between students and teachers of color from 19 percentage points in 2009 to 25 points in 2019.⁶⁹ The importance of students having teachers who are reflective of their identities and lived experiences should not be understated—among school-related determinants of student achievement, teachers have been shown to have the most influence.⁷⁰ “We’ve started to see people that look like our students in positions of power and success. We have a Black Mayor,

⁶² BLEST Hub (n.d.). *Equity in MKE: Breaking Down Dual Enrollment Data*. Retrieved November 2023 from https://www.marquette.edu/urban-research-teaching-outreach/documents/de_school_report_cards_overall.pdf.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Wisconsin Policy Forum. (August 2022). Fewer Students of Color Take Advanced Placement Exams. Retrieved December 2023 from <https://wispolicyforum.org/research/fewer-students-of-color-take-advanced-placement-exams/>.

⁶⁵ Files, E. (July 19, 2023). MPS FAFSA completion increased 40% under first year of new graduation requirement. Retrieved December 2023 from <https://www.wuwm.com/2023-07-19/mps-fafsa-completion-increased-40-under-first-year-of-new-graduation-requirement>.

⁶⁶ Data You Can Use. (Summer 2023). Black Youth Achievement in Milwaukee.

⁶⁷ Chapman, A. & Brown, A. (June 2020). *A Teacher Who Looks Like Me*. Wisconsin Policy Forum.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Opper, I. (2019). *Teachers matter: Understanding teachers’ impact on student achievement*. RAND Corporation. f

and that's really important for our Black students. People are successful and positive and look like them, and that's really important to our Black students.”⁷¹

Life Skills & Extracurricular Supports

Definition

When asked what high school success means to them, one Milwaukee youth said, “Knowing what to do after high school, like filing taxes and everyday stuff. Doesn't revolve around grades. Taking care of yourself.”⁷² This student is describing life skills, a core set of skills that all youth need to develop, which allow them to manage school, work, outside interests, and social relationships successfully.⁷³ These are also known as executive functions, which are foundational for self-regulation and encompass life and other skills, such as planning, focus, self-control, awareness, and flexibility. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, “Adolescence is a vital ‘window of opportunity’ for building core life skills—and for practitioners to provide support.”⁷⁴ Adolescence is also the time in which children acquire the social skills to thrive as adults.⁷⁵

The importance of life skills in the future success of youth cannot be understated. According to Pew Research, 90 percent of employed adults say interpersonal skills such as patience, compassion, and getting along with people are extremely or very important in their jobs.⁷⁶ The importance of having space outside of academic settings to learn these skills is critical—in this same report, only 8 percent of those who said that interpersonal or leadership skills were important in their work cited they learned them through formal education.⁷⁷ Rather, it was through a combination of life experience, self-teaching, and work experience that helped them develop.

Current State

While academic data gives a glimpse into how Milwaukee's students are doing, many youth across Milwaukee are not engaged in school or work at all. Known as “Opportunity Youth,” these youth face both short- and long-term barriers to career success. Nearly one in ten youth ages 16 to 19 in Milwaukee are considered Opportunity Youth, with wide variation across

⁷¹Data You Can Use. (Summer 2023). Black Youth Achievement in Milwaukee.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Center for the Developing Child. (n.d.) *Building the Core Skills Youth Need for Life: A Guide for Education and Social Service Practitioners* Boston: Harvard University

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Lake, A. (2017). *The Adolescent Brain: A second window of opportunity - A Compendium*. UNICEF Office of Research

⁷⁶ The State of American Jobs. (October 2016). Pew Research Center. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2016/10/06/the-state-of-american-jobs/>.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

census tracts.⁷⁸ According to research conducted by UW-Milwaukee, Milwaukee has the second highest rate of Black Opportunity Youth,⁷⁹ defined as 16- to 24-year-olds who are neither working nor in school. It is a rate of disconnection “with troubling implications for the region’s labor market as well as K-12 schooling.”⁸⁰ This leaves significant opportunities for increased engagement of youth in alternative educational programs or job training.

Financial literacy, the understanding of personal finance and skills to plan for a future, is a critical life skill for youth to develop. Particularly for Milwaukee’s Black and Brown youth, who face significant systemic financial barriers, financial literacy is one small, yet important, tool in the toolbox of systemic and individual interventions that can address Milwaukee’s inequitable economic outcomes. Milwaukee’s median Black male worker makes only 60 percent of a white worker’s earnings, the worst racial disparity in the U.S.⁸¹ MPS is working to implement financial literacy courses across the district, and all students graduating from high school in the class of 2028 and beyond will have a personal finance course graduation requirement.⁸²

One strong tie between a student’s financial literacy skills and their academic outcomes lies in their completion of the FAFSA. According to the National College Attainment Network (NCAN), “FAFSA completion is strongly associated with immediate postsecondary enrollment, and that’s especially true for students coming from higher poverty school districts. So, where we see FAFSA completion increasing, we generally tend to see similar increases in the fall postsecondary enrollment rate following that high school graduation.”⁸³ With the connection between FAFSA completion and postsecondary enrollment, MPS implemented FAFSA completion as a graduation requirement in the 2022-23 school year—increasing FAFSA completion rates by 17 percentage points between 2022 and 2023 (41% to 58%).⁸⁴

These data are complemented by the voices of youth themselves, who have expressed a desire for such skills. In youth listening sessions conducted by Milwaukee Succeeds, there was significant desire for life skills and financial literacy—32 percent of youth mentioned desire for life skills, such as finances, budgeting, taxes, and home buying.⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Youth Not in School or Working. (n.d.). Health Compass Milwaukee. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.healthcompassmilwaukee.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=2739&localeTypeId=4&periodId=9907>.

⁷⁹ Levine, M. (2020). *The State of Black Milwaukee in National Perspective: Racial Inequality in the Nation’s 50 Largest Metropolitan Areas*. In *65 Charts and Tables*. Center for Economic Development Publications. 56.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Files, E. (March 2022). Efforts are growing in Milwaukee to teach students about personal finance. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.wuwm.com/2022-03-10/efforts-are-growing-in-milwaukee-to-teach-students-about-personal-finance>.

⁸³ Files, E. (July 2023). MPS FAFSA completion increased 40% under first year of new graduation requirement. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.wuwm.com/2023-07-19/mps-fafsa-completion-increased-40-under-first-year-of-new-graduation-requirement>.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Data from youth listening sessions conducted by Milwaukee Succeeds. Data not publicly available.

Poverty

Significant numbers of youth in Milwaukee are growing up in poverty. Family income has been shown to affect a child's well-being in numerous studies. Compared to their peers, children in poverty are more likely to have physical health problems like low birth weight or lead poisoning and are also more likely to have behavioral and emotional problems. Children in poverty also tend to exhibit cognitive difficulties, as shown in achievement test scores, and are less likely to complete basic education.⁸⁶ In Milwaukee County, 1 in 4 children live below the federal poverty level, nearly double the number of children in Wisconsin as a whole.⁸⁷ When looking at race, 40 percent of Black children, 33 percent of Asian children, and 25 percent of Latine children are living below the poverty level.⁸⁸

What is the solution?

In today's climate, Milwaukee's Black male youth are disproportionately struggling to succeed. They experience the lowest graduation rates, the highest chronic absenteeism, and the highest ninth-grade suspension rates in a context of systemic racism, deep racial segregation, and complex community challenges. For this reason, Milwaukee Succeeds employs a Targeted Universalism approach—a framework that uses targeted approaches to achieve universal outcomes. Data and lived experience both point to the need for an explicit focus on Black male youth.

With this goal in mind, Milwaukee Succeeds and its partner organizations employ strategies across four domains:

1. local youth-adult partnerships, to give youth access to additional supports to succeed
2. equitable governance, to ensure that youth have a voice
3. mental health, to support youth as they overcome inequities
4. advocating for change, to guarantee that change is made

Local youth-adult partnerships

Youth Forward MKE⁸⁹

Youth Forward MKE is a diverse local partnership focused on improving the success trajectory of Black male youth. Partner organizations, including Mentor Greater Milwaukee, MPS, PEAK Kellogg Initiative, SKY Schools, Urban Underground, Employ Milwaukee, Lad Lake, and YMCA of Metropolitan Milwaukee, aim to create space for, build relationships with, and shift power to young people in Milwaukee in order to achieve more equitable outcomes.

⁸⁶ Children Living Below Poverty Level. (n.d.). Health Compass Milwaukee. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.healthcompassmilwaukee.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=189&localeId=3140>.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ See <https://www.youthforwardmke.org/> for additional information.

Youth Forward MKE is a city-wide call to action to all stakeholders and systems leaders to end educational inequity by building authentic relationships throughout the community, creating space for lived experiences, and shifting power to those directly impacted. Youth Forward MKE Ambassadors serve as youth leaders within the Youth Forward MKE partnership, playing an integral role in designing, leading, and advising various initiatives intended to shift power to youth.

The Youth Forward MKE 2023 cohort includes 8 ambassadors - 4 new and 4 returning - who are building awareness of the issues that are impacting Milwaukee's youth. Through a variety of recruitment and engagement efforts, they're assembling a community-grounded, youth-led coalition base. The part-time, paid internship gives ambassadors a chance to learn about youth-adult equity, serve as youth representatives in their community, and fight for an equitable education system in Milwaukee.

"I came here because I felt like there was nothing really changing," said Youth Forward MKE Youth Ambassador Amaya Bauldwin. "But when I heard about this opportunity, I knew I had to get on to it because they were actually willing to hear us out and put our voices onto a platform."⁹⁰

Design Your Future⁹¹

Milwaukee Succeeds launched the Design Your Future summer fellowship in June 2021 in partnership with UBUNTU Research and Evaluation and Equitable Systems Consultants. In this paid summer program, 58 young people from around Milwaukee created plans to improve high school for Black male youth. Six groups laid out blueprints for equity-based programs to introduce into Milwaukee schools. Resulting in three cohesive projects, two of these proposals focused on advancing local youth-adult partnerships: SKY Schools and Wellness Lab Wraparound Supports.

Proposal 1: SKY Schools

This project aims to make mental health a standard practice in schools. To achieve this, SKY Schools⁹² has created targeted mentoring and mental health curriculum, which was rolled out at multiple schools. MENTOR Greater Milwaukee and the Department of Black and Latino Male Achievement at MPS will assist these efforts by expanding mentoring and peer-to-peer support networks. Training from the Coalition of Anti-Racist and Restorative Educators will help teachers and staff develop their own cultural and racial competency.

⁹⁰ Milwaukee Succeeds. (December 2022). Explore a Year in the Life of a Youth Forward MKE Ambassador. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.milwaukeesucceeds.org/blog/explore-a-year-in-the-life-of-a-youth-forward-mke-ambassador>.

⁹¹ See <https://www.youthforwardmke.org/theproject> for more information.

⁹² See <https://skyschools.org/> for additional information.

Proposal 2: Wellness Lab Wraparound Supports

This project involves afterschool mental, physical, and spiritual wellness programming for students who need additional resources. To be housed in the Wellness Lab at the ThriveOn King building, this wraparound support will include access to such partners as Vertical Essences Dance Company, Brazilian Joy Yoga, and Fort Farms, all of whom youth are named as important stakeholders. Youth will also have the opportunity to shape what the Wellness Lab looks like as the build-out continues.

My Brother's Keeper

The City of Milwaukee's My Brother's Keeper (MBK) Initiative is the City's direct response to President Barack Obama's My Brother's Keeper Community Challenge. It is based on the belief that the members of our community have a shared responsibility to work together to find solutions to ensure that all young people, and especially boys and young men of color, reach their full potential – and it puts their dignity front and center.

Black & Latino/a Ecosystem & Support Transition (BLEST) Hub⁹³

Housed within the Center for Urban Research, Teaching, and Outreach at Marquette University, the BLEST Hub aims to contribute to improving outcomes for Black and Latine students in the Milwaukee area by strengthening spaces, initiatives, and connections that support youth during periods of transition from middle school through post-secondary completion and/or fulfilling and stable employment.

Partner Capacity Building Grants

Youth Forward MKE is investing in change. In 2023, they provided \$400,000 in Partner Capacity Building Grants to five local youth-serving organizations. The funding, informed by discussions with youth ambassadors and the larger coalition, is intended to expand the work of coalition partners and fuel their innovative youth-centered programming.

Equitable governance

Youth-Adult Equity Ladder Assessment⁹⁴

Milwaukee Succeeds has created a unique assessment to help organizations determine where they are on the Youth Adult Equity Ladder, which examines why and how youth participate. This unique tool was piloted in early 2023, and feedback from 19 organizations was crucial to modifying the tool to be more inclusive and easier to complete. Upon completion of the assessment, each organization receives a score that places them on a specific rung of the Youth Adult Equity Ladder. Reflection questions and a guidebook allow organizations to consider changes that could be made to move higher on the Ladder.

⁹³ See <https://www.marquette.edu/urban-research-teaching-outreach/blest-hub.php> for additional information.

⁹⁴ See <https://www.milwaukeesucceeds.org/youth-adult-equity-assessment> for additional information.

Design Your Future

Proposal 3: Autonomous Youth Council⁹⁵ / Teacher Pipeline

This project establishes an autonomous youth council, to embed young people on governing bodies across the city of Milwaukee. It also supports a pipeline to attract local talent into education and act as an intergenerational network of practitioners. The process will involve developing students' "pedagogical toolbelts" during high school. Once they graduate, they will receive college credit toward an education degree, then eventually a signing bonus for coming back to teach in their community. This project provides a way for youth to explore and inform policies and practices, as well as bridges the divide between youth and adults.

Mental health

Numerous youth and adults across the City of Milwaukee have shared their thoughts and experiences as it pertains to mental health.

"There have to be more therapists that understand the Black experience."⁹⁶

"Why would I want to go to a social worker? I'm already in the system and have to watch out for what I say. That plays into adverse childhood experiences. Our experience is tough because it is not expected, and they don't know how to deal with us."⁹⁷

"Generally speaking, in the Black community is not a normal thing to go to a counselor, so we keep our things inside and go through that difficult time on our own. That needs to be advocated for us more."⁹⁸

"I feel like the mental health epidemic is even worse in the black and brown community. Nobody really wants to talk about their issues or feels like they can talk to anyone. It's still looked at as a negative, with stigma, even after the pandemic."⁹⁹

"It is hard to find services from people that look like us. Culturally are (sic) kids are taught to not be expressive, cry, show feelings ... I'm breaking that cycle, and I tell my kids it is ok to cry. We have to teach our kids that therapy is good."¹⁰⁰

"I would say that the unfortunate exposure to violence, whether they witnessed it or it impacted their family, is also a mental trauma experience. And all this when you are already dealing with poverty and other obstacles. It adds to all the trauma."¹⁰¹

"Mental health in Black youth is at a crisis point in terms of the exposure. It is constant. It is not one person you know; it is several."¹⁰²

⁹⁵ See <https://www.youthforwardmke.org/join-the-council> for additional information.

⁹⁶Data You Can Use. (Summer 2023). Black Youth Achievement in Milwaukee.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

“One of the themes – and perhaps this surprises nobody – but this was just so strongly elevated in all of the data chats was mental health. And the main thing...is that there's a real lack of culturally competent care. There have to be more Black therapists. There have to be more people that Black youth truly want to talk to.” - Amy Rohan, Data You Can Use

SKY Schools

The SKY Schools curriculum is an integral part of Design Your Future Proposal 1, which seeks to make mental health a standard practice in schools. The SKY Schools curriculum aims to help students and teachers show up and bravely be themselves in whatever space they inhabit. By applying physical activity, breathing and cognitive tools, participants can reduce their stress, boost their social-emotional learning, and even change ingrained behaviors. In Milwaukee, SKY Schools has found a consistent decrease in school violence, ranging from 55 percent to 90 percent. In the words of one of the participating school leaders: “Breathing is freeing. We talk about stress, but we don’t talk about the impact that stress has on us. I can now catch myself before I reach a point where I need to turn back. I see students take a breath before reacting.”¹⁰³

Altogether, SKY Schools showed that they’ve been able to move the needle on serious youth issues like bullying, depression, and anxiety, while boosting self-efficacy, coping and problem-solving skills, self-awareness, and emotional regulation. Even educators and parents benefit from the program, reporting better sleep, more energy, and an increased ability to remain calm in stressful situations.

Community Schools with United Way¹⁰⁴

The United Way Community Schools have already shown what shifting power can look like in practice. “It’s really necessary for us to actually partner with our young people in an equitable way to be able to create the learning environments that are necessary for them to be successful,” said Dom Portis, Community Schools’ high school manager. Milwaukee’s 16 Community Schools not only provide a variety of opportunities and resources, but they also ensure students have a seat at the table and ownership over their own education.

One prime example of the power of these Youth Councils is their work to improve school lunches through the \$25,000 Violence Prevention Grant, funded by the Greater Milwaukee Foundation and awarded by Youth Forward MKE Ambassadors. With their youth-directed Violence Prevention Grant, their youth councils proposed and implemented unique ideas to spice up school lunches. Now, with their \$50,000 capacity grant, they’ll be taking things a step further, expanding their thought power to other pressing student issues. The youth councils, which are divided into regions that encompass several schools, will identify the issues their peers are experiencing, then determine how they can best utilize their resources to address them. In addition, the council hosts two youth summits each year to brainstorm, learn from, and

¹⁰³ Milwaukee Succeeds. (n.d.). SKY Schools’ Stress Reduction Curriculum Success Story. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.milwaukeesucceeds.org/success-stories>.

¹⁰⁴ See <https://unitedwaygmwc.org/MCSP> for additional information.

advise one another. With five local high schools represented, this allows for diverse thinking and collaboration across the community.

Advocating for change

Student Voice

Milwaukee Succeeds partners with MPS around their Youth Leadership Summit and Student Discipline Committees to better understand and address the challenges youth are facing. The resulting Student Voice Project¹⁰⁵ revealed students' perceptions on school culture, relationships, and discipline.

One of the main themes that emerged from the research is that relationships with teachers and staff matter – yet they're currently not living up to students' expectations. "Students are naming that currently the relationships that they have with adults are in crisis," said Clintel Hasan, Founder, LiberatED Consulting. "It is important for them to build positive relationships with their teachers."¹⁰⁶

The extensive time students spend on laptops and the high number of substitute teachers further impede the creation of those relationships. Then, without a solid foundation of trust and respect between both parties, issues arise in terms of discipline and punishment, where students report extensive inequity. These issues also feed into students' concerns around mental health, where youth are demanding additional supports.

MGM's Youth Summit

MENTOR Greater Milwaukee (MGM) is an advocate for the expansion of quality mentoring in Metro Milwaukee and a resource for mentors and mentoring initiatives county-wide. MGM works across sectors to support existing and emerging organizations that provide mentoring services to youth by:

- Ensuring quality standards in all mentoring efforts;
- Significantly increasing the number of youth in quality mentoring relationships;
- Convening local mentoring providers, and promoting networking, collaborating, and learning;
- Multiplying and leveraging the human, financial, and in-kind resources dedicated to mentoring initiatives;
- Supporting and building capacity of organizations — non-profits, faith communities, corporations, schools, civic groups, and universities — that are equipped to start, manage, and expand a mentoring initiative.

¹⁰⁵ See <https://www.milwaukeesucceeds.org/studentvoiceproject> for additional information.

¹⁰⁶ Milwaukee Succeeds. (July 2022). Youth Forward MKE Coalition Uplifts Youth Voice. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://www.milwaukeesucceeds.org/blog/youth-forward-mke-coalition-uplifts-youth-voice>.

In the summer of 2023, MGM hosted its 2nd annual Youth Summit at the Fiserv Forum. The aim was to make sure youth voices, often sidelined, took center stage. Youth leaders from MGM and Youth Forward MKE stepped up, planning sessions on mental health, mentorship, and leadership for fellow young people and youth-serving groups. Throughout the summit, youth led talks on staying connected, amplifying their power, and making sure the issues they care about get the attention they deserve. The summit wrapped up with strategies for stronger advocacy and insights on how youth can collaborate more effectively.

Black and Latino Male Achievement

MPS recognizes that Black and Latino boys and young men face unique challenges in school, career, and life. The Department of Black and Latino Male Achievement (BLMA) was established in 2017 and focuses on supports specifically tailored to increase success for Black and Latino males in MPS.¹⁰⁷

The important work of uplifting Black and Latino young men in MPS is grounded in three areas:

- Improving culture, climate, and communication in MPS schools
- Writing a positive narrative of our students' successes and accomplishments
- Connecting young men to teachers, mentors, and leaders with shared backgrounds who have achieved personal triumphs¹⁰⁸

Call to Action

High school success is about nurturing empowered, resilient individuals who are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and agency to navigate the complexities of the world. By addressing these priority areas through the lens of our young people and centering youth voice and experiences, we can create high schools that not only educate but also empower the next generation to lead fulfilling and purposeful lives. Join us in making change:

- **Engage with youth:** Actively seek out opportunities to engage with young people in your community. Listen to their experiences, concerns, and ideas regarding high school success, and amplify their voices in relevant forums.
- **Spread awareness and educate others:** Share the findings of this report with your network, emphasizing the importance of incorporating youth voice in educational initiatives. Educate others about the importance of youth voice in shaping educational outcomes. Spark conversations in your circles and encourage others to join the movement for youth empowerment in education.

¹⁰⁷ Black and Latino Male Achievement (n.d.). Milwaukee Public Schools Department of Black and Latino Male Achievement. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://mps.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/en/District/About-MPS/Departments/Office-of-the-Superintendent/Black-and-Latino-Male-Achievement.htm>.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

- **Advocate to shift power to young people and center youth voice in decisions made about and for youth, empowering the leaders of tomorrow to actively shape their own future:** Together, let's amplify the voices of the next generation, ensuring they are not just heard, but actively included and valued in all discussions and actions that impact their lives. Let's foster environments where young people are not only seen as beneficiaries but as active participants and changemakers in creating a brighter, more equitable world for all.
- **Understand if your organization is truly incorporating youth voice in your work and complete the Youth Adult Equity Ladder Assessment:** The assessment will show where your organization lies on the Youth Adult Equity Ladder and will help identify areas for improvement and celebration. You can ensure that youth are active participants in decision making and have equal access to resources, support, and opportunities to thrive.
- **Support the organizations and models mentioned in this report as they incorporate youth voice in their work:** We are at a pivotal moment in fostering high school success, and it is time to amplify the voices of our youth in this critical conversation. This report has highlighted several organizations and models that have demonstrated remarkable dedication to incorporating youth voice into their work. Now, more than ever, we must rally behind these initiatives and support them in their efforts to empower young people. By amplifying youth voices, we not only ensure that their perspectives are heard but also cultivate a more inclusive and effective educational landscape.
- **Join the Youth Forward Milwaukee Coalition:** Together, we can strengthen our impact to tackle complex issues and drive real, tangible change for youth in Milwaukee. Visit <https://www.youthforwardmke.org> for more information.