

# network stories

## Higher Expectations for Racine County - Racine, Wisconsin



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### context

In Wisconsin, the state legislature made sweeping changes in 2011 to existing landlord-tenant law, with nearly every change favoring landlords. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel published [\*an article\*](#) in 2019 pointing out that one in every five legislators who voted to approve the 2011 changes were themselves a landlord or property manager.

Unbalanced laws like these inherently produce disparities and force local governments and social sector organizations to think and work creatively to reduce their harm. In Racine, Wis., the downstream effects of these laws also served to create an unlikely cross-sector partnership between city government and education advocates.

### Lesson #1: Do your research on local government partnerships

Within the city of Racine, thousands of people are on waiting lists for affordable housing. Network member Higher Expectations for Racine County, which is focused on improving education and employment outcomes, is grappling with the connectedness of these outcomes in areas such as school attendance with housing stability.

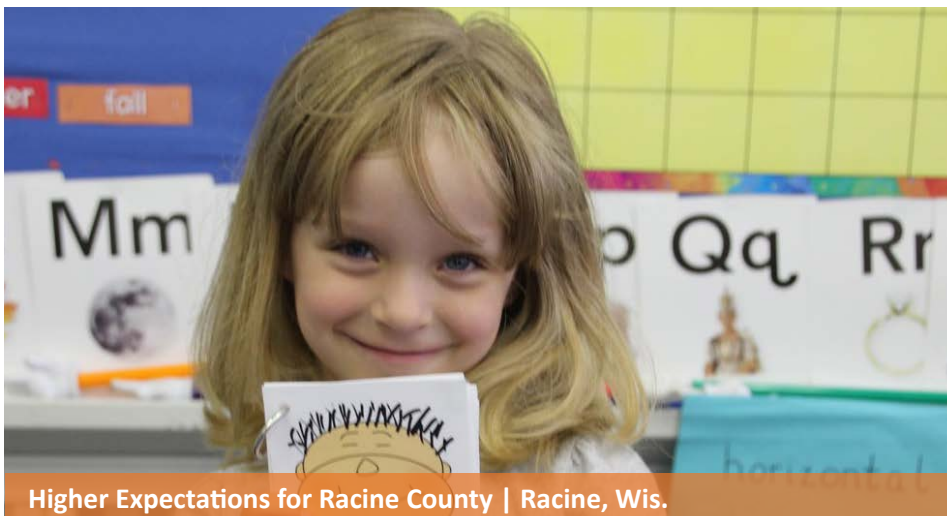
Based on years of studying these outcomes, Higher Expectations for Racine County and their partner organizations knew that school attendance was a key driver of student success, but the scope of the issue —and its list of contributing factors —made it difficult to know where to start with creating solutions. A couple of years ago, Higher Expectations for Racine County also started sharing student mobility rates, persistently trying to draw the through-line from education outcomes to poverty and housing stability. The findings were not surprising: Students did worse on state tests if they switched schools that year.



To gauge local interest in the potential education-housing partnerships that could align around these issues, Higher Expectations for Racine County initiated conversations with various stakeholders in the local housing ecosystem. Initially, they were focused on how they might work with the regional housing authority. However, federal restrictions on funding and operations presented barriers to approaching new and creative solutions.

They had to pivot. Through their participation in a StriveTogether program seeking to create local change to enable economic mobility, Higher Expectations was connected with *Enterprise Community Partners*. Over the last 35 years, Enterprise has created 662,000 homes while also leading the charge for policy change aimed at increasing affordable housing nationwide.

Enterprise suggested Higher Expectations for Racine County look into the city’s housing department, as municipalities often have more flexibility than federal housing authorities. Chelsea Powell, managing director of Higher Expectations for Racine County, said this was the first big learning for them. “Figuring out where you need to start is part of the research. What is your state policy landscape? Who has authority related to the housing issue you are working on? And like everything else —how can you bring them to the table and convince them they should be a part of this?”





## Lesson #2: Start with the data

Once Higher Expectations for Racine County connected with the local government, the attendance and mobility data took on new life. City officials hadn't previously looked at educational data, nor did they have the time to research national data resources. When the city was working on developing its rental inspection zones, Higher Expectations shared community- and school-level data connected to several indicators of poverty. This furthered their working relationship and path to collaboration.

While designing housing inspection zones may seem unrelated to student mobility or educational attainment, Higher Expectations for Racine County was framing the data from a systems view, urging their partners to think more broadly about what a strategic alignment of resources and efforts should look like. In this case, that meant aligning efforts geographically.

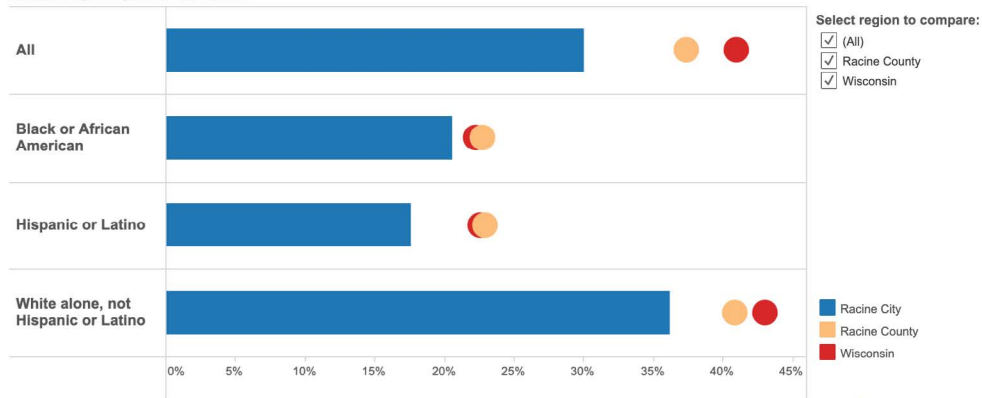
# College Completion Dashboard

Navigation tabs:

- What is the level of post-secondary education among Racine adults?
- What are the graduation rates for Gateway Technical College students?
- What are the retention rates for Gateway Technical College students?
- How many students graduate from UW-Parkside?
- What are the graduation rates for UW-Parkside students?
- What are the retention rates for UW-Parkside students?

### Highest Level of Education (Associate's Degree or higher): Racine City (bars) vs. Comparison Regions (dots)

Residents ages 25 years or older in 2018



Source: US Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.





Higher Expectations for Racine County and other community partners like United Way were already testing tutoring, professional development and community engagement interventions in two of the highest-mobility schools. Access to this data and insight around alignment ensured that education outcomes were a measured factor in the city's work to determine its inspection zones, which helped establish that the zones should overlay with local community schools' neighborhoods. The organizations believed that prioritizing inspections in the schools' respective footprints would lead to improvements in living conditions and housing code compliance, ultimately resulting in a positive impact on families' ability to remain in their homes.

### **Lesson #3: Remember that you add value to this work via facilitation, data support and adaptability**

Higher Expectations for Racine County's biggest piece of advice to other Cradle to Career Network members that are thinking about approaching a collaboration around housing is simply to be flexible. Many of the players within the housing ecosystem have very little leeway in their operations, so the ability of a backbone organization to adapt and fill in the gaps is immensely helpful.

When asked about Higher Expectations' support of the work, staff from the mayor's office highlighted the group's ability to continually shift as different capacities were needed:

**“Whether it’s serving as meeting facilitator and conveners, conducting focus groups, providing data and analysis, assisting with the development of performance measures and outcomes or coming up with creative graphics and messaging to help engage the community, their staff are always helpful, responsive and eager to partner.”** - Mayor's office staff



## What reforms did they pass?

In large part because of community will and alignment around housing reform, the Racine City Council passed the *Rental Empowerment & Neighborhood Tenant Services (RENTS) Initiative* in April 2020, which established the following:

- Creation of a landlord registry to ensure the city has current contact information;
- Creation of a public database so anyone can search a properties' history;
- Updating chronic nuisance codes to include housing code violations;
- Establishing an escrow account for landlords needing to make repairs;
- Stronger enforcement of ordinances barring retaliation against tenants; and
- Requirements that landlords facing a pending foreclosure register with the city.

When asked what's next, Chelsea Powell said,

“The city wants us to continue providing them with education data. It is the main value-add we brought the table, and we'll continue filling that role, as well as making the connections necessary to align all the related efforts across Racine County.”



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