

rebuilding trust after tragedy

KENOSHA, WISCONSIN



StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network member Building Our Future knows that the only way to increase the overall success of children in Kenosha County is with a focus on students of color and students experiencing poverty. Thus, its equity work is indistinguishable from all its work to improve cradle-to-career outcomes for every young person. Building Our Future is committed to making all systems more reflective of the Kenosha community.

The work of Building Our Future and its partners has never been more important than in the past year, when Kenosha was suddenly faced with both a pandemic and a civil rights struggle in its own backyard. This case study shows how an existing civic infrastructure allowed Building Our Future and its partners to rise to these extraordinary challenges.

RACIAL EQUITY

Before August 2020, many Americans hadn't heard of Kenosha, Wis. But because of tragic events last summer, it has emerged as a prominent example of the racial inequities that exist in the criminal justice system. On August 23, 2020, Jacob Blake, a 29-year-old Black man, was shot in the back seven times and paralyzed from the waist down by a police officer while three of Blake's sons were in the car. Coming on the heels of police shootings elsewhere — and in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic — the shooting provoked protests and further violence when a heavily armed white teenager killed two protestors.

At the time, StriveTogether network member Building Our Future was already hard at work tackling the racial inequities that have stymied cradle-to-career opportunities in this county of 169,561 residents between Chicago and Milwaukee. In many respects, Kenosha is economically healthy: Although it lost auto plants that powered its economy decades ago, it remains the headquarters of Snap-on tools and Jockey International, and thanks to health care, higher education and high-tech industries, it had a pre-pandemic unemployment rate of 3.9%. After spiking to 15% in May, the jobless rate stood at 6.7% in December 2020.



Building Our Future has worked to have youth and family voice incorporated into every level of the organization, including at its Leadership Table. Alaina Carmickle, a student at Indian Trail Academy and co-founder of EquiTeens, explains, “Building Our Future has worked, first hand, with me and many of my peers. They remind us that we are capable, intelligent, and have the utmost potential to graduate and become successful and important parts of our community.”

Yet one third of Black residents in Kenosha County, most of whom live in the city proper, live in poverty, compared to only 11% of white residents — who make up nearly 80% of the population. Half the public school population — composed disproportionately of students of color — are economically disadvantaged, and cradle-to-career indicators such as kindergarten readiness, proficiency in third-grade reading and postsecondary completion are lower among populations of color.

A recent study for the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee drew a grim comparison with Kenosha's larger urban neighbor to the north: “On almost all of the indicators... from poverty to employment to general income trends, to income inequality, incarceration trends, school segregation levels — Black Milwaukee ranked either the worst or next to worst among the nation's 50 largest metropolitan areas,” writes Prof. Mark Levine. “And... on most indicators... the status of the Black community in Kenosha is actually slightly worse.”

“It’s not just that Black Kenoshans are worse off than their white neighbors; it’s that they’re worse off here than almost anywhere else in the country on almost every measure.”

– Becky Sullivan, National Public Radio



In other words, wrote Becky Sullivan for National Public Radio after the summer’s unrest: “It’s not just that Black Kenoshans are worse off than their white neighbors; it’s that they’re worse off here than almost anywhere else in the country on almost every measure.”

The Building Our Future partners were already committed to improving these measures by eliminating systemic disparities. But while they continued their work across the educational continuum, they were now facing a civic emergency. The partners had already pivoted in June to address the inequities exacerbated by the pandemic — the digital divide being just one of them. Now it was clear that they would have to address inequities even more intensively in another crisis. They embarked on an effort to help the community unify and heal. Tatjana Bicanin, executive director of Building Our Future, said, “We have to repair some trust.”

This effort took the form of a series of candid conversations.

Much of Kenosha’s Uptown neighborhood lay in rubble when Building Our Future first brought

community partners and community members together to address the aftermath and causes of the civic unrest. They focused on one neighborhood in particular, Lincoln Park/Uptown, which was hard hit by the pandemic and the site of many protests. On hand at these forums were public officials, Building Our Future partners and members of the general public. The purpose was to foster dialogue and action toward healing, to prioritize community needs and to identify next steps and roles for healing. At the first meeting — no press, cell phone cameras or videos allowed — 74 people attended and dozens spoke up.

First asked to express what they were feeling, participants gave answers like “overwhelmed,” “frustrated,” “scared,” “heartbroken,” “discouraged,” “tired,” “conflicted,” “hurt,” “pessimistic,” “oppressed,” “angry,” “broken” and “exhausted.”

Then, they asked for: leadership that listens; jobs for young people to clean up the neighborhood; more personalized education; grocery stores in food deserts; funds to deal with racism in public health; more diversity in institutions; a curb on gentrification; more homeless shelters; programs for Black men to learn new skills; better

representation in local government; a pipeline to blue-collar jobs.

One speaker seemed to sum up the appeals when he asked the local community “to come out before all hell breaks loose.” Another pleaded for “change, not t-shirts.”

Building Our Future was primed to take on this work because it had assembled the necessary network and had built the civic infrastructure to do so. “Over the last three years we have been talking about equity and putting it at the foundation of our work because racism is everyone’s problem,” Bicanin said. She added, “We were seen as a trusted force, a neutral facilitator, [a partner] who wasn’t here to point fingers.”

Already, Building Our Future had been holding forums to build community awareness of local resources and the roles and responsibilities of elected officials. It has partnered with the Racial Equity Institute on trainings in which participants share their experiences and perceptions and ask questions to develop an understanding of systematic racism and why challenges persist. And Building Our Future worked behind the scenes,



providing crucial data, on behalf of a resolution by the County Executive Board that declared racism a public health emergency.

“Everyone is at a different point in their racial equity journey,” Bicanin said. “If you want to improve outcomes for all, you must acknowledge the systemic issues that create the barriers that perhaps people are not aware of.”

There is no question, however, that the events in 2020 have presented unimaginable challenges for Building Our Future and all of Kenosha County. “It was hard,” Bicanin said. “You’re in this pandemic and you are already pivoting, working remotely, and you want this authentic connection with the community. And then we have the shooting of Jacob Blake and social unrest. It was a really sad time. It was just shocking that it happened in our community.”

“Change, not t-shirts.”

– Kenosha community member

Now, Bicanin said, “We’re having better, bolder conversations. The pandemic and the social unrest exposed inequities that showed us that we are charting down the right path — that our work must be grounded in equity, that we have to be listening to each other, that we have to have courageous conversations.”

After the September 2020 meeting in Lincoln Park, the Building Our Future facilitators acknowledged the many expressions of fury and frustration. But they also celebrated the many articulations of hope.

“As we checked out of the conversation, some of you expressed that you were feeling energetic, motivated, determined, informed, heard, connected, lit, hopeful and empowered,” wrote a facilitator in a follow-up note. “What happened in those 90 minutes that changed the way most of us were feeling? I would say we were living out our community conversation’s vision: To be a model community that builds partnerships through awareness, trust and relationships to support the success of children and families.”

Bicanin said, “It’s really great to build collective clarity, which hopefully will lead to a shift in mind-sets and more equitable outcomes for all.”



Layali Morris, daughter of Building Our Future’s Manager of Community Engagement, calls for change as she participates in one of the many community mobilized efforts.

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