

# responding to a crisis to accelerate policy change

**RACINE, WISCONSIN**

Higher Expectations for Racine County and its partners align their work around a fully capable and employed workforce. From the United Way of Racine County to the Racine Unified School District, funding decisions and efforts focus on ensuring all students graduate prepared for college or a career. In 2017, Higher Expectations became the third community to earn the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network's national designation of Proof Point.

COVID-19 threatened to undermine their shared vision and the opportunity for students to succeed. This case study explores how Racine used the civic infrastructure built over the years to bridge the digital divide.



## BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

As Jeff Neubauer reflects on his hometown of Racine, Wis., he charts the course of an industrial city whose fortunes have swung widely over the decades: from one of the most prosperous cities for working-class families in America to one plagued with economic and civic ills. Neubauer, the executive director of Higher Expectations for Racine County, describes a one-time manufacturing powerhouse that cranked out tractors and auto parts as a mini-Detroit. In the 1970s, a young person could drop out of high school and walk into an assembly line job that paid a union wage and generous benefits. Now, he says, “no one in the factories has a wrench in their hands.”

Racine can still boast of being the headquarters of S.C. Johnson, Case IH and InSinkErator, where garbage disposals were invented and are still made. But deindustrialization has taken a heavy toll on this city just south of Milwaukee on the shores of Lake Michigan. In the early 1980s, the United Auto Workers counted 3,400 members in Racine’s Case plants alone. Today, it has about 500 members who make agricultural equipment.

Over the years, the population of Racine has grown increasingly diverse: Once largely white, the



Racine Unified School District remained open during the pandemic and delivered 75% of planned curriculum for the year.

city is now only about half white, 22% Black and 19% Latinx. And racial economic and educational disparities are pronounced. The poverty rate for Black people in Racine is nearly twice that of the population as a whole, at nearly 32%. Proficiency in third-grade reading is just 5% among Black students, compared with 30% among white students. The unemployment rate among Black residents is 12%. On a range of disparities within its metropolitan statistical area, Racine’s are notably stark.

So when COVID-19 arrived here last year, wiping out jobs and severely disrupting schooling, it came as a piling-on. “It only exacerbates our already heartbreaking disparities,” Neubauer said.

On March 18, with pandemic numbers climbing, the state ordered all schools in Wisconsin to close. The majority shifted to online learning for the remainder of the school year.

Not in Racine. Racine Unified School District was

### Approximately 30% of the district’s students were unable to connect to the internet at the beginning of COVID-19.





**“We have a leadership table with most of the CEOs in the community, the mayor and county executive, the police chief, the head of the United Way and the leaders of the three local colleges. It’s the only place where we all get together on a regularly scheduled basis and consistently talk about things.”**

– Jeff Neubauer, executive director Higher Expectations for Racine County

one of only 3% of Wisconsin districts — and the only large urban district — that didn’t provide virtual learning after the shutdown. Instead, the district distributed printed packets at meal distribution sites that focused on “review and enrichment.” All in all, school officials estimated they delivered just 75% of planned curriculum for the year.

As with the other school districts, Racine lacked the capacity to provide online instruction for one simple reason: Families lacked internet access. Their connections were too slow, or they didn’t exist at all. At the same time, too many students lacked the laptops, tablets and other equipment essential to online learning.

In many ways, because of its existing problems, Racine was ill-prepared to deal with this calamity. Yet in one critical way, it was ready to face the challenge head on. Racine had in place a high-functioning civic infrastructure in the form of a partnership of business and local government leaders, nonprofits, community organizations, K-12 schools, higher education institutions and others that have been collaborating to improve outcomes for youth from cradle to career. Pulling them all together is its backbone organization, Higher Expectations for Racine County.

“One of the tangible benefits of the civic infrastructure which has developed in the Racine area

with the assistance of Higher Expectations is the ongoing, engaged leadership of many community leaders who meet regularly to tackle major opportunities in our community,” Neubauer said. “We have a leadership table with most of the CEOs in the community, the mayor and county executive, the police chief, the head of the United Way and the leaders of the three local colleges. It’s the only place where we all get together on a regularly scheduled basis and consistently talk about things.”

That kind of collaboration has been welcomed in the Racine area. In April, when the superintendent of the Racine Unified School District asked the Higher Expectations partners for help in bridging the digital divide, he was confronting a significant gap: Approximately 30% of the district’s students were unable to connect to the internet at the time. “The community was having a really hard time,” said Chelsea Powell, managing director of Higher Expectations. “And there was not a lot of direction coming from the higher levels of government.”

Internet access was hardly a new problem. The district’s chief information officer had been seeking ways to expand access, boost bandwidth and improve speeds for years. Many students were having trouble accessing online resources to do homework even when the schools were open. As it has with so many other needs, the pandemic forced the question, giving the partners a reason to pursue genuine systems change in the area of technology. “Access to technology is a key lever around all the

things we measure,” Powell said, “so it was not far afield from what we were already doing.”

Those gathered around the virtual Higher Expectations Leadership Table on April 8 were eager to help. At the time, internet service providers (ISP), such as Spectrum and Comcast, were launching national marketing campaigns offering free broadband to households with students, as well as free Wi-Fi hotspots. Some of the providers’ information was misleading or confusing. So Higher Expectations’ partners engaged state legislators to reach out to the providers, encouraging them, as Powell put it, “to be a little bit more forthcoming about what was actually available.” These appeals spurred important follow-up conversations between the school district and the state department of public instruction.

These discussions, in turn, led to two major strategies for increasing internet access, one practical and one directed at policy. On the practical front, the team wanted to research and enhance Wi-Fi hotspots. Who provided them and where were they? How free and open were they? How could they expand their reach? Who had the capacity to create them? These were the key questions the team was asking.

“There were pieces of things that were set up to exist, but they just weren’t being offered,” Powell said. Now, Racine County, the City of Racine, Racine Unified School District, Gateway Technical College, University of Wisconsin-Parkside and others have either opened up free public Wi-Fi or

dramatically expanded the reach of Wi-Fi hotspots at their buildings.

With this work underway, StriveTogether connected Higher Expectations to the EducationSuperHighway, a national organization focused on increasing technology and internet access for students, who worked with the district to survey families about technology needs as a part of their plan to distribute hotspots.

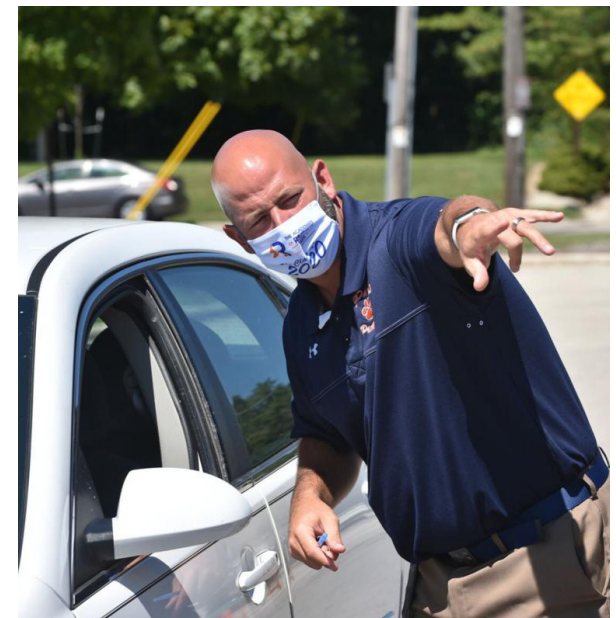
The other strategy aimed to change longstanding state laws that prevented school districts from directly providing internet to students — the way they do with busing, for instance — or subsidizing it. Although 22 states have such laws, Wisconsin’s is unusually rigid. The Racine Unified School District had always wanted to provide this crucial service to students, and the pandemic provided impetus. Over the summer, the school district and the state department of public instruction negotiated with the ISPs to create new rules to allow the district to pay for broadband.

Higher Expectations does not take credit for this successful campaign; lobbying efforts nationwide have pushed to get these and federal rules changed. But, Powell said, “Racine created that space and made the ISPs aware that we were going to put some pressure [on them] and that we had a district that was really motivated to find the financial [means] to do it, and it came together in a really productive way.”

By the second week of September, hundreds of

Racine students had free broadband, and Wi-Fi hotspots and laptops were available to every student who needed them. While manufacturing problems caused tablets to be delayed until October, they are now in the hands of all K-2 students. And compared with high rates of absenteeism last spring, 86% of Racine students are now attending virtual classes regularly. Essentially all have access to the internet and appropriate devices to receive instruction.

“In just five months,” Neubauer said, “we made dramatic, system-changing improvements that had eluded us for many years prior.”



Civic infrastructure enabled Racine to meet challenges presented by the pandemic head on.

# StriveTogether<sup>®</sup>

Every child. Cradle to career.

StriveTogether is a national movement with a clear purpose: help every child succeed in school and in life from cradle to career, regardless of race, ethnicity, zip code or circumstance. In partnership with nearly 70 communities across the country, StriveTogether provides resources, best practices and processes to give every child every chance for success. The StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network reaches more than 11 million students, including more than 7 million children of color, and has partners in 29 states and Washington, D.C.

125 East Ninth Street  
Second Floor  
Cincinnati, OH 45202

332 South Michigan Avenue  
Ninth Floor  
Chicago, IL 60604

513.929.1150  
[StriveTogether.org](https://www.StriveTogether.org)

