

What's working across the Cradle to Career Network

Outcome: Postsecondary Enrollment



Essential Question: Are students taking the necessary steps to apply to college after high school with sufficient counseling support?

Indicator: Postsecondary enrollment directly after high school graduation, postsecondary persistence, FAFSA Completion, college applications

Impact

Postsecondary enrollment is a key driver of long-term economic mobility. In Kenosha County, adults with a bachelor's degree earn an average of \$2.8 million over their lifetimes compared to \$1.6 million for those with only a high school diploma. While gaps in access remain, especially for students of color and low-income families, the community is seeing signs of recovery.

Building Our Future in Kenosha and **Higher Expectations for Racine County** measure postsecondary enrollment as enrollment directly after high school, including both 2-year and 4-year colleges. Kenosha County enrollment fell from 52% in 2019 to 29% in 2020. Racine County faced similar challenges. Since then, both communities have made steady gains. By 2024, Kenosha County's enrollment rose to 47%, representing nearly 900 additional young people pursuing education after high school. In Racine County, postsecondary enrollment reached 36.4% in the 2023 school year, showing the momentum that can be built by expanding access to postsecondary pathways.

Building Our Future in Kenosha and Higher Expectations for Racine County, both members of the

StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network, co-lead the Postsecondary Equitable Enrollment Collaborative in Wisconsin. As conveners, facilitators and data leads, they are advancing a regional effort with a clear vision. By 2028, 62% of graduates will enroll in postsecondary programs the fall after graduation and by 2030 equity gaps in enrollment will be eliminated. The collaborative drives this work through data-informed action, cross-county partnerships and student- and family-centered supports.

Strategies

The Postsecondary Equitable Enrollment Collaborative aligns K-12 schools, higher education and community partners across the two counties. Each StriveTogether network member brings complementary strategies to drive change.

Building Our Future in Kenosha and Higher Expectations for Racine County have centered FAFSA completion as a key entry point to postsecondary access. A regional data-sharing agreement with school

districts enabled the FAFSA Completion Dashboard, which tracks each school's progress in real time. As data leads, the teams provide counselors with individual-level completion data to identify which students have and have not completed the FAFSA. This shift allows counselors and support staff to take a more targeted approach, holding one-on-one meetings and offering personalized support.

In 2024, the FAST FAFSA Initiative, supported by the ECMC Foundation, made more than 1,100 calls, 465 texts and nearly 440 follow-ups, resulting in 290 additional FAFSA completions, a 21% increase from the previous year. Locally, these efforts are driving measurable change. Racine Unified School District reported 533 completed FAFSAs compared to 377 at the same time last year, a 41% increase. Every high school in the district saw gains, with completions nearly doubling at Park (102 vs 54) and Horlick (131 vs 74), the two highest-poverty schools.

Higher Expectations for Racine County has also focused on building pathways into the teaching profession through the Academies of Racine. Working with UW-Parkside and Carthage College, Higher Expectations created a coordinated Education Pathway that gives high school students no-cost, dual-credit opportunities. Students can earn up to seven college credits in teacher education before graduating high school. Participation has steadily grown, with 49 students in 2021–22, 149 in 2022–23 and 182 in 2023–24 gaining early exposure to education careers and college-level coursework.

In 2023–24, the Education Pathway expanded into a Youth Apprenticeship program, increasing funding and creating paid opportunities for students. Higher Expectations is also working to boost diversity by actively recruiting Black and Latine students and partnering with youth to identify barriers. By 2024–25, the Racine/RAMAC Youth Apprenticeship Consortium supported 16 Education Youth Apprentices, raising

the number of Racine Unified students in Youth Apprenticeships from 224 to 240. These apprentices gained hands-on experience at organizations across the community, including Racine Unified School District, Racine Gymnastics Center, The Academy of Early Childhood and Focus on Community.

Both Building Our Future in Kenosha and Higher Expectations for Racine County are deepening youth and family engagement. Building Our Future integrates family surveys into FAFSA events. Higher Expectations is forming a Youth Leadership Committee and a First in Family group to better understand the challenges facing students whose families have no prior college experience.

Scaling What Works

Looking ahead, Building Our Future in Kenosha will refine the definition of priority populations, expand student-led interviews into an annual practice and strengthen collaboration with local postsecondary institutions. These interviews, launching in summer 2025, will ensure youth perspectives guide strategies and keep the work grounded in lived experience.

At the same time, Higher Expectations for Racine County will expand the Education Pathway, increase recruitment of underrepresented students and create new apprenticeship opportunities.

Across both communities, the focus on eliminating equity gaps by 2030 will guide all strategies, ensuring progress benefits all students, particularly those historically underserved. By combining real-time data, student and family voice and regional partnerships, Building Our Future in Kenosha and Higher Expectations for Racine County are transforming postsecondary access across southeastern Wisconsin.

Strategies Creating Impact



FAFSA > Unlocks access to federal and state aid



Dual Credit > Earn college credits in high school



Advising > One-on-one guidance to navigate pathways



Youth Apprenticeships > Paid, hands-on learning aligned to careers