

Closing the Achievement Gap in Vera Court: Strategic Plan for Vera Vision 2020 at Vera Court Neighborhood Center

Summary

Vera Court Neighborhood Center is located in Dane County, Wisconsin. Wisconsin has the largest achievement gap in the nation, and Madison ranks among one of the widest achievement gaps in the state. Students in Madison who are non-white are more likely to read below grade level, less likely to graduate with a four-year diploma, and are less likely to go to college.

Through its longstanding presence in the community, Vera Court Neighborhood Center seeks to counteract this effect with mentorship, tutoring, and family engagement. Vera Court has a track record of success at closing the achievement gap for its kids. This plan outlines strategies to build on that success and further equip Vera Court to support children toward academic success. These include: expanding and renovating the space, tailoring our programming to individual students, and training staff in literacy best practices. Future goals include stronger coordination with families and school teachers and greater capitalization on the Madison community.

Rationale

Our vision is to give students an equal opportunity to thrive inside the classroom through the services we provide outside the classroom. We do this through addressing basic needs: like providing a safe place to go after school, tutoring for homework, a nutritious meal, and resources for parents to help with employment, homelessness, and applying for social services.

Vera Court set an ambitious benchmark **to close the achievement gap for each student actively involved in a program at our center.** This means each child will read and test at grade level by the end of 2020.

The Achievement Gap

Achievement gaps occur when one group of students (such as, students grouped by race/ethnicity, gender) outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant (that is, larger than the margin of error)¹. It is the job of community organizations and neighborhood centers to step in and help correct this gap, where the schools cannot.

The achievement gap is a worsening problem for Wisconsin. Currently Wisconsin has the largest achievement gap in the nation, and Madison ranks among one of the widest achievement gaps in the state. Madison Metropolitan School District graduation rates

¹ <https://nces.ed.gov/outnationsreportcard/studies/gaps/>

highlight this issue: 91% white versus 70% Hispanic and 56% African American; and, 61% receive free lunch (best measure to estimate percentage of low-income youth in school district) versus 91% that do not.

At Mendota Elementary, located in the Vera Court neighborhood, the math proficiency for African Americans is 12% and the reading proficiency is 7.5%. Participants at VCNC are primarily low-income (95%) and represent races and ethnicities most often impacted by the achievement gap: 61% African American, 27% Hispanic/Latino, and 10% Multi-racial.

The City of Madison overall is 81.9% Caucasian, 5.8% African American, 5.8% Asian, and 4.1% Hispanic or Latino. The Warner Park planning district, where Vera Court is located, is 64.3% Caucasian, 15.1% African American, 9.1% Asian and 7.1% Hispanic or Latino. The City of Madison overall has 5% female headed household with children; Warner Park has 12.9%.

Thus, efforts outside the classroom are needed to improve these conditions. Vera Court Neighborhood Center is poised well to catalyze this change.

Overall Goal

The Vera Vision campaign lays out the following commitments:

- **We commit to every VCNC third grade student reading at a third grade level.**
- **We commit to every VCNC fifth grade student being prepared to enter middle school.**
- **We commit to every VCNC eighth grade student being prepared to enter high school.**
- **We commit to every VCNC high school student graduating and creating a plan for education or employment post-graduation.**

Our Programming

One of the highlights of our program is individualized, academic support for Northside children affected by the achievement gap. VCNC will use benchmarks set by Madison Metropolitan School District to measure students' success.

Current programming includes:

- Youth after-school and summer camp during parents' working hours
- Daily academic support for kindergarten through high school
- Youth Leadership – middle school club to encourage civic engagement and positive character development

- Life as a Boy – mentorship for elementary and middle school boys, with a special emphasis on boys from single parent homes
- Girl Neighborhood Power – mentorship for elementary and middle school girls with a focus on healthy lifestyles and volunteering
- RISE – tutoring, college and career exposure, and employment assistance for middle and high school students
- More than 15,000 nutritious meals a year

For elementary and middle school children, our tutoring programs provide a snack and a quiet working environment where students can focus on their school work. The programming currently has 75 students enrolled, with 60 typically coming in any given day. For students from low income families, 16% of whom had been or are at-risk of becoming homeless, Vera Court’s tutoring programs are critical to improving performance inside the classroom.

In the summer, Vera Court provides one of the few free summer camp in all of Madison. The camp runs Monday through Friday, providing the kids with nutritious meals and fun, active, and educational activities to keep them learning through the summer.

90% of children enrolled in programming are walking distance from the center. Vera Court programs are voluntary, meaning the child and parents have elected for the child to be involved. This encourages active participation and engagement from the student to ensure they are working with us toward a better education.

Metrics of Past Success

Vera Court is successfully addressing the achievement gap through its after-school and summer programming. Second graders with low reading scores are placed in our literacy program that raises their reading levels ½ to 1½ grade levels within a year. Through our college preparation program, 70% of the participating middle/high school students obtain a GPA of at least 3.0. However due to space limitations, Vera Court is only able to these intensive academic services to a select number of students.

Expansion of Programming and Future Strategy

Moving forward, we seek to expand on the results our programs have achieved and direct our efforts to reach more students in our neighborhood. The primary focus of our strategic plan is one-on-one academic support for each child. However, every aspect of the new center will contribute toward academic success and growth.

Through the ongoing Vera capital campaign, we seek to raise funds which will be used for the following:

Expansion of space

- Currently, we serve over 15,000 meals a year from an apartment-sized kitchen. The renovated kitchen will allow Vera Court to increase the number of healthy meals served year round to kids and community members. Academic success starts with nourishing food, and many children count on VCNC to provide regular healthy meals.
- The new wing will provide physical space to separate the different grades so that more than 100 elementary, middle, and high school students can receive age-appropriate academic support. The new building will include a literacy classroom, technology classroom, and computer lab.
- Two multipurpose rooms will provide space for hands-on learning activities and physical activity. It will also provide the much needed venue to continue enriching lives even after graduation with fitness classes, lecture series, and community gatherings.

Expansion of programming

- Staff will create Academic Support Teams with parents or caregivers and the teachers to design out-of-school learning plans that identify each child's strengths and challenges and help them accomplish their personal educational goals. Vera Court will provide resources to help parents incorporate learning into the household. The success of an Academic Support Team relies heavily on the relationship between Vera Court and the parents. Vera Court has built very strong connections with the families over the years. Unlike most lower-income communities that tend to be highly transient, 46% of families participating in Vera Court programming have been in the neighborhood for at least five years.
- Vera Court will implement a literacy program developed by University of Wisconsin - Madison. All elementary school children behind grade level will receive one-on-one tutoring from trained literacy experts and participate in hands-on activities.
- Middle school students will participate in an additional academic-focused summer camp called Summer Academy. This camp will lead students in project-based learning where they develop and implement a project to solve a problem they identified in their community. Summer Academy will include specific programming and mentorship for students transitioning into sixth grade, and will include STEM and literacy to avoid summer learning losses.
- High School students will receive case management to assist in developing post-graduation plans for employment and/or further education. Students

receiving case management will also be eligible for leadership opportunities as a volunteer, intern, or employee at the center.

Future Goals

While Vera Court has been integral to improving the success of Northside children, we will not rest until the achievement gap is closed for all children who seek access to our programs. In order to improve our support in the community, we establish the following future goals to engage the community

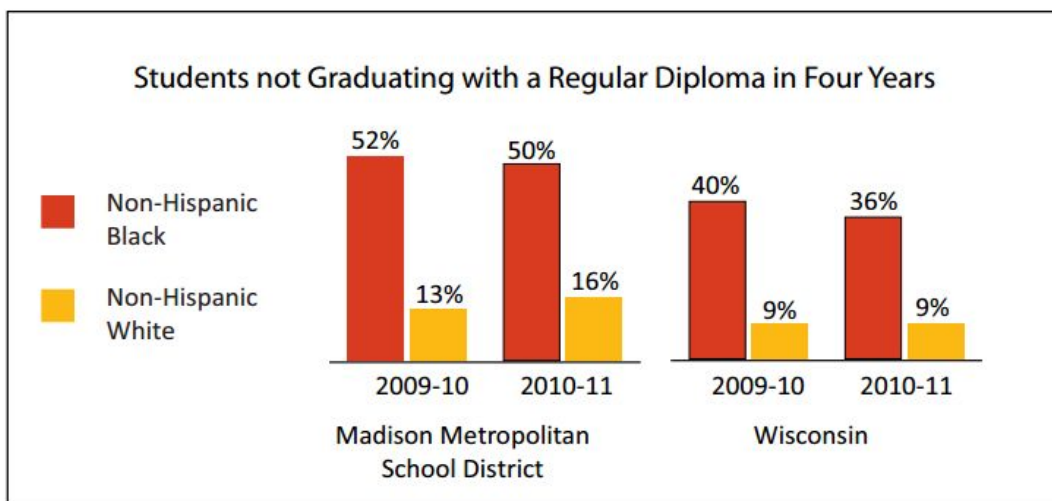
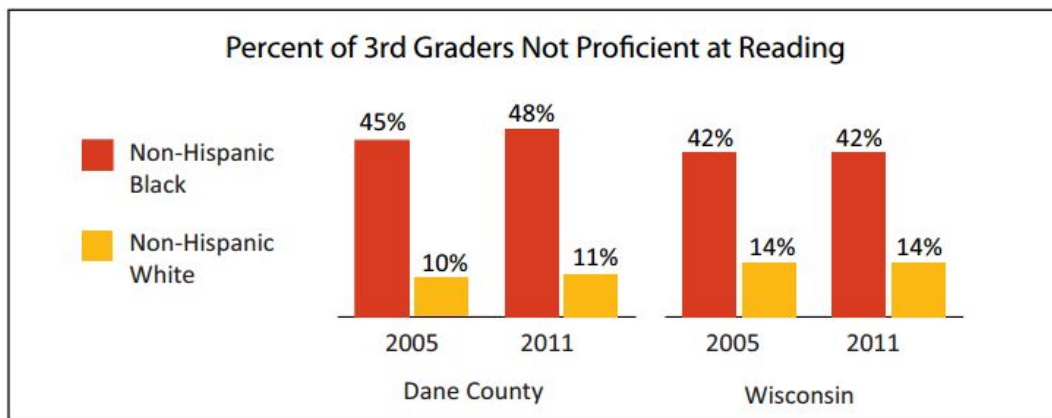
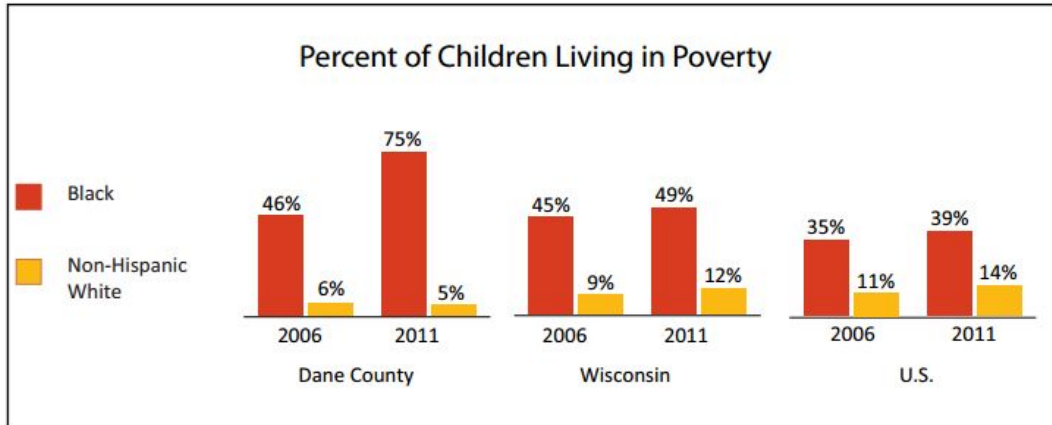
- **Further coordination with parents:** Parents are another resource to help children get the support and encouragement they need to do well in school. By providing resources for and regularly checking in with parents, Vera Court will further be able to ensure a child's success in the classroom.
- **Engaging the school:** Vera Court staff work with teachers in the school to measure their student's progress. Staff have access to information about student performance in class and can tailor lessons and tutoring sessions accordingly. In the future, we seek to further this coordination through regular contact between Vera Court staff and school staff.
- **Connecting and strengthening our partnerships:** Vera Court will expand their collaborations with businesses, nonprofits, colleges, and other community organizations to recruit volunteers, share resources, and obtain in-kind support, financial contributions, and programming support.
- **Initiating adult enrichment:** Closing the achievement gap is truly a community effort. Vera Court will begin adult programming to involve everyone in the neighborhood with the center. Engaging everyone in the center will motivate community members to invest in and support the future of our youth.

Conclusion

Vera Court has a demonstrated history of improving the achievement gap in Madison, Wisconsin. We are making an impact - but we are not satisfied while there are kids in our neighborhood who are still disadvantaged in their opportunity to succeed. Through our capital campaign, we seek to expand our efforts through a new building and more programming. In the future, we seek to increase our connection with the schools and with the Madison community. By taking these steps, we can provide a place where all children in Vera Court can thrive.

Appendix 1. Statistics on poverty and inequality in Madison

Statistics published by the NCES showed a wide Achievement Gap for Wisconsin, one of the largest in the 50 states². Dane County, Wisconsin has a wide achievement gap. The figures below demonstrate the correlation between race and achievement in Dane County.



² <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2009455.pdf>