



**What Works Cities
Economic Mobility Initiative
RACINE**

Racine: Helping residents get the credentials they need for high mobility jobs

The City of Racine is committed to increasing economic mobility for unemployed and low-income residents by improving their chances of finding jobs in high growth industries that offer family-sustaining wages. High school credentials are a common prerequisite for both jobs and training programs that lead to high mobility career tracks. Through the What Works Cities (WWC) Economic Mobility Initiative, the Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) worked with the City of Racine and community partners to scale and improve the local YWCA Southeast Wisconsin's High School Equivalency Diploma Program. This memo summarizes our high-level findings and recommended next steps.



⚠ Issue Motivation

In Racine, a city of just under 80,000, more than 10,000 adults lack a high school diploma or equivalent. State-funded workforce training programs and well-paid jobs exist in the City, but the vast majority of both require a high school diploma or an equivalent degree. As a consequence, Racine residents' lack of diplomas perpetuates a skills gap that keeps unemployment and underemployment high, limiting mobility for residents and slowing growth for employers. Against this backdrop, the City of Racine has decided to focus their work as part of the WWC Economic Mobility Initiative on helping Racine residents get a High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED).

Racine is also home to a promising, evidence-based HSED program from the local YWCA Southeast Wisconsin (YWCA SEW). This program is 20 weeks long with three hours of teaching a day and strict attendance requirements. Students are grouped into cohorts of 10 to 15, which typically fosters strong interpersonal bonds between peers, and their competency is measured through participation, assignments and quizzes, rather than long exams. In addition to GED subject matter (e.g., math and language arts), students learn employability and life skills (e.g., memo writing, conflict resolution, and budgeting). The unique combination of life skills, strong cohorts, and competency-based assessment is aligned with the evidence on "what works" for adult education to improve employment opportunities.

"I'm the oldest of six children and my siblings look up to me. By earning this diploma, I will be able to show them that anything is possible if you never give up. Not only will I be the first high school graduate in my family, but I would be able to get a good paying job."

— HSED graduate

Our Approach

As part of the WWC Economic Mobility Initiative, BIT and the City worked with YWCA SEW to scale and improve their HSED program, with the vision of enrolling 250 students annually by 2022. This work had three strands:

* **Recruitment & Enrollment:**

BIT worked with YWCA SEW to develop and evaluate new recruitment and enrollment strategies, such as a formalized word-of-mouth referral approach called the “Ambassador Program” and targeted outreach with paper and digital communications.

* **Expanding Program Capabilities:**

Using the grant funding from this initiative, YWCA SEW was able to hire an HSED coordinator and greatly expand its technology infrastructure while switching to online instruction. For example, students are now able to access laptops on loan from YWCA SEW during the program.

* **Supporting the Transition to High Mobility Careers:**

BIT worked with local non-profit Higher Expectations for Racine County (HE) to develop a prototype Career Pathways Tool that uses data on high-mobility careers to guide students through career exploration. This tool can be used by HSED students, as well as students from other programs, to identify high-mobility career tracks to pursue.

COVID-19 Modifications

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, several changes were made to the HSED program and related work:

- * HSED enrollment processes were shifted to be entirely digital.
- * HSED programs were offered virtually.
- * The Career Pathways Tool was reconceptualized as a digital offering rather than a paper-based tool.
- * Work on the Pathways Onward curriculum (originally planned to be in-person) was paused while YWCA SEW overhauled its program for virtual instruction.
- * The Ambassador Program was paused between spring and winter 2020.

Evaluation Methodology

BIT conducted a formative evaluation focused on YWCA SEW’s HSED recruitment and enrollment initiatives. Using HSED program administrative data, BIT sought to understand how the HSED enrollment process is working and to identify opportunities to expand or alter outreach strategies and enrollment-retention efforts.

We were able to answer the following main research questions:

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| 1 What steps in the enrollment process constitute the largest barriers for prospective students? | 2 How do enrollment and graduation rates differ by sociodemographic background? |
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To answer these questions, we analyzed a slice of HSED administrative data pulled from April 2020 through August 2021. Our analysis focused on the conversion rate between each of the following four steps: **1**) submitting the interest form, **2**) attending orientation, **3**) enrolling (starting class), and **4**) graduation.

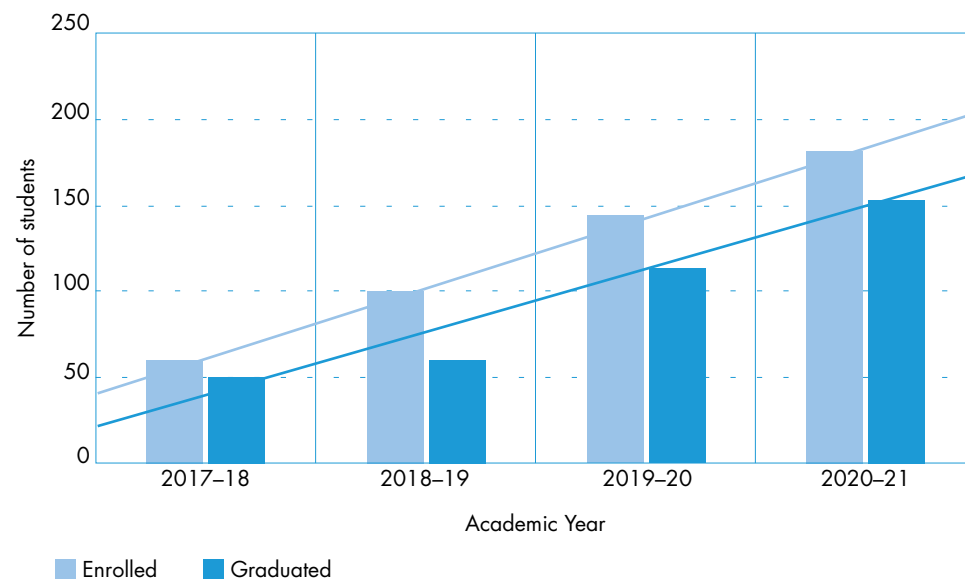
Findings

The HSED program has grown linearly over time, from 60 enrollees and 50 graduates during the 2017-18 academic year to 179 enrollees and 153 graduates in 2020-21. This growth was steady through the pandemic period. Figure 1 shows this growth trajectory.

Based on our data covering April 2020 through August 2021, the most detering step in the journey from the first touchpoint to graduation is the first step. After submitting an interest form, only 38% of people proceed to orientation. After orientation, however, an impressive 74% of students go on to fully enroll in the course, which involves completing a GED Practice Test, attending multiple meetings, and showing up to the first day of classes. At least 78% of those enrolled then go on to graduate. Figure 2 gives an overview of the enrollment process and conversion rates between steps from our analysis.

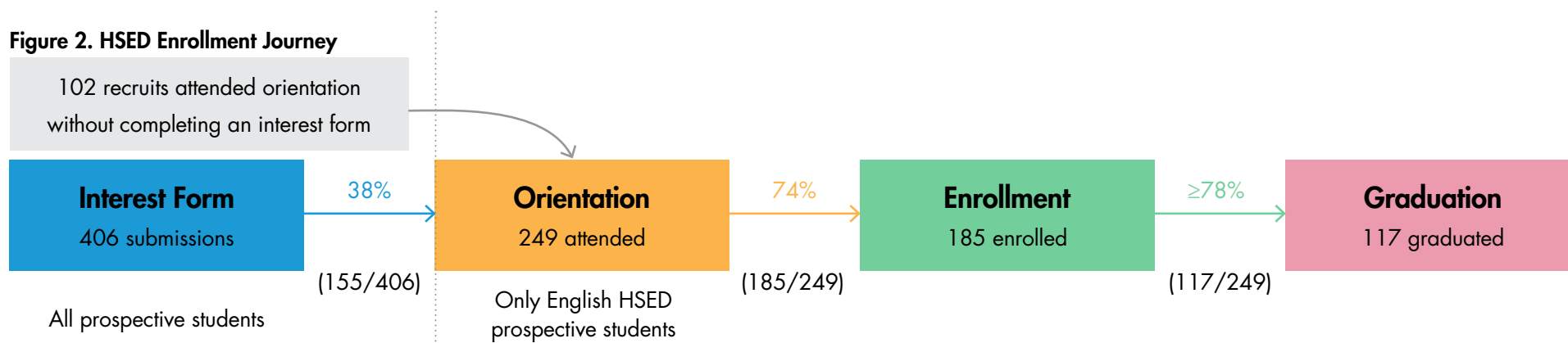
In terms of racial or gender disparities, we found no substantial differences by race or gender for all of the steps prior to graduation. However, among those enrolled, our descriptive analysis found that slightly fewer Black students had already graduated relative to white students and Hispanic or Latino students. While this may be due to lower graduation rates among Black students, it could also be due to Black students starting later or taking longer to graduate, making them appear to have a slightly lower graduation rate in our point-in-time analysis.

Figure 1. Total Number of YWCA HSED Students Enrolled & Graduated

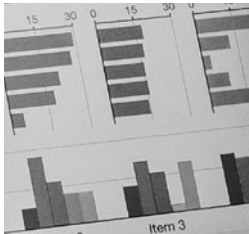


Finally, the 10 Ambassadors from the piloted Ambassador Program referred at least 16 students to the HSED program, 11 of whom went on to graduate. Ambassadors frequently referred a small number of close friends or relatives, rather than a large number of strangers, suggesting that the Ambassador Program may be a promising “steady state” recruitment method, but will not on its own dramatically accelerate the linear growth we have observed to date.

Figure 2. HSED Enrollment Journey



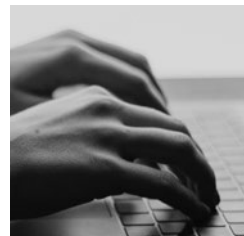
Scaling Opportunities & Recommendations



Recruitment & Enrollment

Standardize the HSED enrollment process and automate data collection

Currently, not every student experiences the same steps in the enrollment process (for instance, some prospective students did not fill out an interest form), and enrollment data is recorded in different, manual processes. Additionally, enrollment data for students who do experience the same enrollment process is sometimes recorded in different ways. This can make it difficult to identify clear points of drop-off during the enrollment process, as in the analysis above. Standardizing enrollment, as YWCA SEW currently has plans to do, and automating data entry, for example by integrating software that records activities automatically at particular checkpoints, would help save staff time and enable YWCA SEW to accurately monitor conversion rates through the enrollment process. As they scale, this will help them identify any new or evolving barriers to enrollment and monitor for differential enrollment rates.



Recruitment & Enrollment

Focus energy on getting students who complete an interest form to attend orientation

Improving the current 38% conversion rate between the Interest Form and Orientation will have an outsized impact on enrollment downstream. To increase this conversion we suggest:

- 1) Making follow-up after the interest form as quick and seamless as possible by sending swift follow-up emails or text messages with easy-to-book orientation times.
- 2) Reaching out to students who have expressed interest months ago but who have never showed up for orientation.
- 3) Holding focus groups with students who filled out the interest form multiple times before attending orientation. These students' experience may help shed light on why other residents are not following through after expressing interest.



Recruitment & Enrollment

Continue to recruit new Ambassadors, using timing to your advantage

The Ambassador program was a moderately successful way to continue the steady growth of the HSED program while recognizing and showing appreciation for graduates who help with recruitment. We believe that the Ambassador Program should continue and be scaled. We recommend building in a regular timing and cadence to recruit new ambassadors around program graduation. From speaking with HSED staff and students, we know that in the moments before and during graduation, students feel particularly proud and grateful for their experience as an HSED student. Consider asking students immediately before and during graduation whether they would like to represent their program as an Ambassador. During graduation, consider asking graduates to write down the names of three people who they think would be a good fit for the HSED program.





Recruitment & Enrollment

Continue with regular racial equity analyses to explore differences in orientation attendance and graduation rates

We suggest YWCA SEW continues to evaluate program graduation rates by race, exploring the potential reasons for differences. In addition, we also suggest reflecting on the baseline demographic differences we observe in students who attend orientation, and investigating why we see underrepresentation of certain groups (e.g., men) relative to the makeup of Racine residents without a high school credential. As the HSED program grows, the YWCA SEW will have a larger sample, enabling them to look at socioeconomic variables as well, quantitatively exploring the role that family size, access to transportation, and occupation have on student success. In the meantime, the YWCA SEW should consider collecting qualitative data (e.g., interviews or focus groups) with a randomly sampled set of students who attend orientation to further understand prospective students' motivations and barriers.



Recruitment & Enrollment

Explore developing a scholarship program

We recommend instituting a scholarship program that either provides students with direct stipends or helps cover personal expenses that students may be struggling to pay during the program, like rent. This scholarship can help students weather unforeseen events, such as a layoff at work, and persist in the program. It also may help offset the opportunity cost of going to school and may help counter the hesitation that students feel about committing to such an intensive program, potentially leading to higher enrollment.



Supporting the Transition to High Mobility Careers

User-test the Career Pathways Tool with a sample of HSED students to gather feedback

Once the Career Pathways Tool is in its final stages of development, we suggest HE work with YWCA SEW to hold user testing sessions for current students or alumni of the HSED program to observe whether students are able to easily navigate the tool, learn new information about career possibilities, and enjoy using the tool. Based on these findings, the user interface can be tweaked before the site is fully complete.



Supporting the Transition to High Mobility Careers

Evaluate the long term impact of the HSED Program

We recommend continuing and expanding the efforts that HE and YWCA SEW have in place to track long term outcomes such as employment and earnings for graduates of the HSED program using data from the WI Department of Workforce Development. In particular, we recommend identifying a relevant comparison group (such as graduates from other HSED programs, or GED graduates) to use as a benchmark for these earnings data.

The City, YWCA SEW, and HE have made significant strides to scale and improve the HSED program over the course of the WWC Economic Mobility Initiative and can continue to improve their student experience and serve as a model for other programs across the country.

About this Initiative

The [What Works Cities Economic Mobility Initiative](#) is a program that aims to help nine participating cities identify, pilot, and measure the success of local strategies designed to accelerate economic mobility for their residents. Through the expertise of the What Works Cities' network of [local government leaders](#) and the support of Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Ballmer Group, this initiative puts data and evidence at the center of local government decision-making. The Initiative launched in April 2019, with an 18-month timeline, but was extended to 30 months as a result of COVID-19. In each city, a project was selected in collaboration with the city leaders that met the following five criteria: evidence base, mayoral priority, scalability, feasibility, and stewarding taxpayer resources.

Launched in 2015, [What Works Cities](#) helps local governments use data and evidence to tackle their most pressing challenges and improve residents' lives. Learn more at [www.whatworkscities.org](#).

City Partners

The City of Racine, YWCA Southeast Wisconsin, and local non-profit Higher Expectations for Racine County were each instrumental to the success of this project.

