

# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS REPORT



Fall 2024

Knapp, Julian Thomas and the Academies of Racine at Mitchell Community Schools



United Way of Racine County

## ▶ What are Community Conversations?

Community Conversations are 90-minute “kitchen table”-style discussions where small groups of participants share their thoughts and opinions about the community, centered around a central topic.

The style is inspired by the work of The Harwood Institute. Founded in 1989, The Harwood Institute is a national nonprofit organization that coaches people and organizations to improve how communities work together.

The 2024 Community Conversations series focused on the community schools that are part of the partnership between United Way of Racine County and Racine Unified School District. United Way staff members spoke with students, parents, school staff and community members about the aspirations, challenges and opportunities at Knapp Elementary, Julian Thomas Elementary and the Academies of Racine at Mitchell Community School.

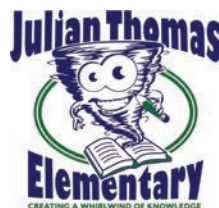


## ▶ What is a Community School?

A community school puts the school at the center of a neighborhood hub that unites family, educators and community partners. United Way of Racine County implemented the community school model with the Link and Inspire for Tomorrow (LIFT) strategy in collaboration with Racine Unified School District. Through LIFT, community schools create an infrastructure that forges relationships to help move the needle on key indicators related to young people’s success.

### Community School Pillars

- Integrated Student Supports
- Expanded and Enriched Learning Time and Opportunities
- Active Family and Community Engagement
- Collaborative Leadership and Practices



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## ▶ Common themes emerge at all Community Conversations

- Number of Community Conversations sessions: 10
- Community Conversations participants: 105
- Ask Exercise conversations: 50

United Way of Racine County staff members led 10 traditional Community Conversations with students, teachers and staff, Racine Unified School District administration members and community members.

The sessions were held at the community schools, United Way's office and Racine Public Library. Conversations were grouped by role within the community school to encourage open and honest communication.

Conversations were held during May and June 2024, with 65 students and 25 teachers and staff members participating in the school-based sessions. Additionally, a Community Conversation was held with seven members of the public on May 29, and a separate session with eight school and district administrators on June 27.

Parents were engaged in using The Harwood Institute's "Ask Exercise," an engagement tool designed to spark three- to five-minute conversations to gain insights about people's aspirations, concerns and ideas for their community.

UWRC staff engaged 50 parents in these conversations at community nights at each of the community schools during May.

Each conversation yielded different concerns and priorities, but common themes emerged. These are the top three:

“It's not about a moment, it's about a relationship” – Community school principal

### ▶ Safety

Safety is the most frequently mentioned concern, appearing in almost every group's list of aspirations and challenges. This includes physical safety in schools, neighborhood safety, and the need for security measures to protect students, staff, and families.

### ▶ Respect and Behavioral Issues

Issues related to respect and behavior are also heavily cited. This includes the need for respect between students, towards teachers, and within the community, as well as the challenges posed by bullying, violence, and a lack of consistent discipline.

### ▶ Community Connection

The importance of building stronger community connections and increasing engagement between the school, parents, and the broader community is a common theme. Solutions often involve organizing events, improving communication, and fostering a sense of community within and around the school.



## ▶ Knapp Elementary Community School

- 12 students
- 19 parents/caregivers
- 8 teachers/staff members

### ▶ Aspirations

- **Respect and positive relationships** – All participants expressed a desire for increased respect and positive relationships between students and teachers, with the school feeling like an extension of home, with community and family members involved.
- **Community and resource expansion** – Students seek more educational opportunities and support, while staff and parents want more community involvement through events, sports, and additional resources like clinics and extracurricular activities.
- **Safety and responsibility** – Students were focused on safety outside of school. Parents emphasized a safe and healthy environment. Students and staff emphasize responsibility – students desire more accountability among peers, and staff seeks greater community responsibility for the school's wellbeing.



### ▶ Challenges

- **Mental health and behavioral issues** – Students that struggle with mental health issues are often disengaged from learning and can be disruptive. A parent with mental health issues may also have an effect on a student's ability to engage at school.
- **Resource limitations** – Teachers cited the expectation to “wear many hats” can leave them feeling burnt out and unappreciated.

- **Systemic problems and communication barriers** – A disconnect between parents and teachers and past negative experiences are seen as major obstacles, along with communication challenges, including how information is shared.



### ▶ Solutions

- **Enhanced engagement and responsibility** – Students suggested clean-up crew to help hold each other accountable for the school environment. Updated programs to increase community and parental involvement were also among the solutions.
- **Increased safety measures** – A bigger police presence to help control speeding on the roads around the school, along with an additional crossing guard to help students who cross 16th Street were among the ideas mentioned by students, parents and staff.
- **Increased support and simplified communication** – Both students and staff suggest simplified and more effective methods of communication and support. Parents also emphasize the need for clearer communication, especially about safety and resources.



## Updates since last conversations

In the 2020-21 Community Conversations, one aspiration for Knapp was “offer more relationship-building activities and opportunities.”

A basketball program was started in the 2022-2023 school year and a pickleball program was established the following year. During the 2023-2024 school year, almost 40 students participated in basketball skills and drills sessions and 15 students joined the basketball team. Eighteen to 20 students participated in the pickleball program during the same school year. Students have shown positive changes in behavior, attendance and accountability because the programs require weekly behavior reports and limited absences to participate. Additionally, the program requirements have engaged parents in their student’s progress.



One challenge was “Parent engagement limited by time, transport and remote programming.”

A Kindergarten Meet & Greet was piloted in 2023-24 to provide families with early insights into the importance of attendance and class time. The initiative led to improvements in attendance and higher test scores, and the program has now expanded to the entire district. Knapp plans to offer similar programs in other grade levels.



Have questions about Knapp Elementary Community School?

Contact **Zyaire Strowder**  
Knapp Community School Coordinator  
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(262) 994-5025



## ▶ Julian Thomas Elementary Community School

- 31 students
- 20 parents/caregivers
- 8 teachers/staff members

### ▶ Aspirations

- **Increased opportunities and engagement** – More extracurricular activities, including language options and sports, along with more community events and family activities.
- **Positive learning environment** – Students and staff aspire to make learning enjoyable and engaging, and parents want a welcoming and supportive atmosphere for their children.
- **A sense of belonging and involvement** – Students seek more meaningful relationships with their teachers and peers, while parents express a need for community-building events to strengthen ties among families. Staff emphasize the importance of creating a space where everyone feels empowered to contribute.



### ▶ Challenges

- **Bullying and lack of respect** – Bullying was noted by students, parents, and staff. Students mention bullying, cussing, and fighting, while staff highlight a lack of respect from both students and parents. Parents also express concerns about bullying and the division among families, which hampers their sense of community.
- **Safety concerns** – Students mention not feeling safe at school, including fights occurring between students at recess. Staff note physical safety issues for both students and teachers. Parents share concerns about neighborhood safety and racial

segregation, leading to a sense of disconnection among families.

- **Lack of resources and support** – Staff and parents highlight a lack of resources and support. Staff mention limited youth advocates, counselors, and mental health support, while parents express a desire for more access to extended learning programs and emotional support initiatives. The COVID learning gap is also a significant challenge for teachers.



### ▶ Solutions

- **More emotional support programs and activities** – Additional structured activities could help foster engagement and emotional support, including kindness and affirmations training. Art activities to understand emotions, youth advocates and parenting resource availability were solutions specifically suggested by participants.
- **Consistency and accountability** – Staff and students call for greater consistency and accountability. Students want bullies to be held accountable, and staff emphasize the need for consistent consequences for misbehavior, including a stronger disciplinary process. Teachers also seek support from administration to ensure discipline and learning standards are maintained.
- **Increased security and community involvement** – Safety solutions include increasing security around the school and fostering more involvement from community members in school activities. Both parents and staff suggest holding events to bring parents together and build connections, such as family days, black-tie events, or community-based initiatives.

## Updates since last conversations

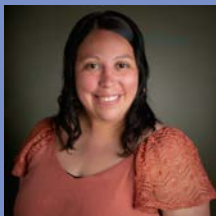
In the 2020-21 Community Conversations, one aspiration for Julian Thomas was to *“offer more community resources.”*

Since the 2021-2022 school year, there have been 21 Community Night events. At the 2023-2024 school year’s eight Community Nights, an average of 285 people attended. An average of six community partners were on hand to share resources during each Community Night at Julian Thomas.



An additional aspiration was for the school to *“offer tutoring for students.”*

During the 2023-2024 school year, nine mentors and five Schools of Hope tutors worked with students providing instructional help and guidance. The mentoring program at Julian Thomas was established during the 2022-2023 school year and has grown to nine mentors.



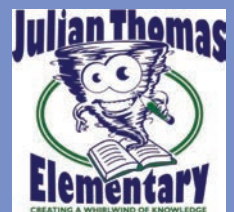
Have questions about Julian Thomas Elementary Community School?

Contact **Fega Coronado**

Julian Thomas Community School Coordinator

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## ▶ Academies of Racine at Mitchell Community School

- 11 elementary school students
- 11 middle school students
- 11 parents/caregivers
- 9 teachers/staff

### ▶▶ Aspirations

- **Classrooms with engaged students** – Students want to be able to learn and earn incentives without their peers causing distractions with off-task behavior.
- **Safety and respect** – All groups want a safe and respectful environment. Students want teachers who engage and care, and staff want parents to help instill the value of non-violence in students. Parents desire a safe community and supportive learning environment.
- **More extracurricular activities** – Students and parents hope for more opportunities, especially in after-school programs, sports, music, and extended learning activities. These are seen as ways to improve student engagement and provide positive outlets.



### ▶▶ Challenges

- **Community perception of the school** – People make assumptions about what Mitchell is like without taking time to learn about the positive things and the work being done to make improvements.
- **Behavior and engagement challenges** – Elementary students note disrespect for school property, while middle school students note distractions caused by cell phones. Staff note that high teacher turnover and absenteeism make it difficult to create a sense of community.



### ▶▶ Solutions

- **More security and mental health support** – All groups mentioned the need for more safety measures. Suggested solutions include hall monitors, additional cameras and a greater police presence. Mental health support included availability of crisis lines and mental health assistance being made available for those showing violent behavior.
- **Teacher support and incentives** – Staff called for incentives like stipends for after-school activities, teacher retention bonuses, and support for teachers needing breaks. Middle school students suggested increasing incentives for positive behavior.
- **Community engagement and extended learning** – Parents and staff highlighted the need for more community events and after-school programs to provide positive outlets. Parents suggested activities like dance, karate, and extended learning options, while staff emphasized parent engagement in reducing violence and fostering a more positive environment.
- **Strategies already in place for the 2024-2025 school year** – Continued use of the Evolv screening system helps keep Mitchell free of weapons. Ahead of the 2024-2025 school year, grade levels at Mitchell were redistributed among the school's principals. This work was completed after our conversations took place at the end of the 2023-2024 school year.



## Updates since last conversations

In the 2020-21 Community Conversations at the Academies of Racine at Mitchell Community School, “add a mental health clinic” was a frequently repeated aspiration.

In the 2021-22 school year, United Way of Racine County, Racine Unified School District and Children’s Wisconsin partnered to open a school-based mental health clinic. Locating the clinic within the school building removes potential barriers such as scheduling and transport. The clinic serves students and families with a goal of addressing emotional and behavioral problems that are preventing the student from succeeding at school and at home. In the last three years, 178 students have been supported through the clinic.



A common solution suggested for the barriers identified in the 2020-21 conversations was to engage more community partners.

Since the 2021-22 school year, we’ve hosted over 17 community events that connect families to information and resources and provide academic and enrichment opportunities.

During the 2023-24 school year, an average of 8 community partners and organizations attended each of the 7 community nights hosted at the Academies of Racine at Mitchell Community School.



### Have questions about AoR Mitchell Community School?

Contact **Haley Olson**

AoR Mitchell Community School Coordinator

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## Next Steps

United Way of Racine County uses the information gathered in the Community Conversation process to further engage the community, find new partners and mobilize resources to build solutions and live up to the aspirations expressed in the sessions.

While United Way of Racine County cannot make every idea happen or solve every challenge, the goal is to work together, listen fully and take the steps to move forward as a community.

In the 2024-2025 school year, each of the community schools will regularly host opportunities for community members to support their student's success and contribute to our community school partnership. We encourage students, parents, teachers, staff and community members to reach out to their school's coordinator or to Leigh Ann Martinez ([lmartinez@unitedwayracine.org](mailto:lmartinez@unitedwayracine.org)), Community Schools Director, with comments or questions.

## Get Involved with Community Schools in Racine

### Volunteer

You can support the Community Schools work by volunteering your time in one or more of the following programs:

- **Walking School Bus:** Help kids walk to school each morning. Routes are available at Knapp and Julian Thomas. Visit [UnitedWayRacine.org/WSB](https://UnitedWayRacine.org/WSB) for more information and to volunteer.
- **Schools of Hope:** Help young children improve their reading skills through one-on-one tutoring. Visit [UnitedWayRacine.org/SOH](https://UnitedWayRacine.org/SOH) for more information.
- **Mentoring:** Programs are available at Julian Thomas and Mitchell. Contact the Community School Coordinators at those schools for more information.
- **Community volunteer:** Offer your time to help staff community nights at the schools, as a teacher helper or any number of other ways available through Racine Unified School District. Contact the Community School Coordinators for more information.

### Donate

Visit [UnitedWayRacine.org/Give](https://UnitedWayRacine.org/Give) to donate to United Way of Racine County to support the LIFT Community Schools efforts.

### Let People Know

Follow United Way of Racine County, Racine Unified School District, Knapp Community School, Julian Thomas Community School and Academies of Racine at Mitchell Community School on Facebook and other social channels and share the good news about the achievements of the community schools.



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