

In 2018, the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota (WFMN), launched its girlsBEST Cohort V three-year funding initiative, (girls Building Economic Success Together), to help build the next generation of women economic and civic leaders. The initiative’s underlying theory of change suggests that girls can increase their readiness through increased awareness of systematic gender inequalities; a growing sense of being change agents, fostered through leadership development skills; and a capacity for individual and collective activism as a result of participation in girlsBEST programs. The initiative provides grants to grantee-partners focused on using leadership development strategies to foster opportunity and

future economic success for Minnesota girls, and nonbinary or gender non-conforming youth¹, ages 12-18. The Foundation seeks organizational partners that prioritize engaging underserved or underrepresented populations in their activities, such as girls of color, American Indian girls, low-income girls, and girls from Greater Minnesota. During the 2018–2020 funding cycle, girlsBEST-funded programs reached nearly 4,000 youth, with more than 2,200 core participants who engaged in:

- Education and career training, and support programs
- Leadership skills trainings
- Identity development and cultural education programs
- Entrepreneurial and financial literacy skill-building activities

FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE

Invest in Girls

\$901,000 in grants to 31 unique partners over 3 years²

Build Awareness & Skills

- Education & career support programs
- Leadership skills trainings
- Identity development & cultural education
- Entrepreneurial & Financial skill-building

Develop Change Agents

- More connections w/ school systems
- More connections w/ civic & civil society organizations
- Expansive cultural support networks
- New professional networks

Build Economic Success

- Educational & career attainment
- Advocacy & community leadership
- Self-esteem & cultural identity
- Entrepreneurial proficiency

KEY OUTCOMES OVER FUNDING PERIOD

98%

of seniors graduate from high school

93%

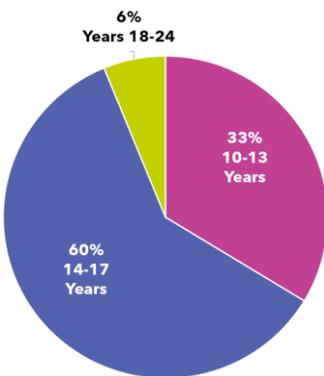
of graduating seniors projected to enroll in post-secondary institutions

99%

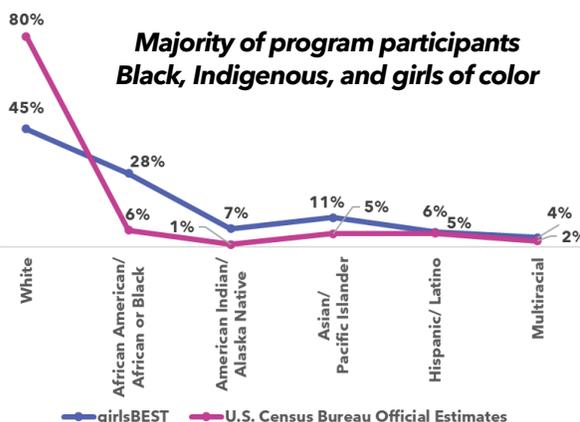
of girls avoided unintended pregnancy

WHO WAS REACHED AMONG CORE PARTICIPANTS?

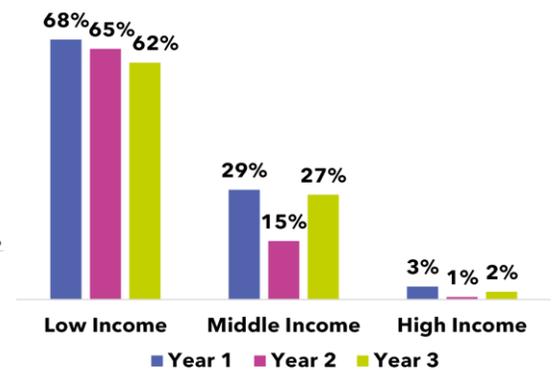
Majority of participants 14-17 years old over three-year period



Majority of program participants Black, Indigenous, and girls of color



Girls from low-income families were consistently the majority of participants



¹WFMN defines girls to include any young person that identifies as a girl; all WFMN programs are inclusive of transgender, gender nonconforming, and gender nonbinary people who experience gender-based structural harm.

²\$45,000 of \$901,000 went to seed grants to nine organizations. These organizations did not complete a survey so are not represented in report findings.

INCREASED EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT & CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

The circles below highlight strategies and achievements by girlsBEST grantee-partners and participants. Educational attainment was a major achievement across the years. Grantee-partners highlighted improvements in core participants' high school and post-secondary graduation rates.

100% of seniors graduated from high school in year three.

5% increase in the rate at which girls graduated from high school from year one to year three.

33% increase in girls choosing to enroll in 4-year degree programs, with 64% enrolling in such programs by 2020.

94% of all seniors enrolled in post-secondary institutions in year three.

36% of all participants over the 3-year period enrolled in a 2-year degree program.

Each year one-fifth of programs sought to launch girls into high-earning occupations through engagement with STEM fields.

Cultural education dialogue-based workshops provided girls a sense of belonging to empowered communities.

Political education and advocacy-based activities helped girls build a sense of agency.

A majority of organizations used mentoring to foster career skills, ideas, and awareness within participants.

A few organizations provided mental health services to build girls' resilience and tenacity to pursue academic success.

Programs grounded in boosting confidence and competence correlated with greater educational attainment.

girlsBEST grantee-partners employed cultural awareness learning consistently throughout the three years, and advocacy skills and financial literacy building became more widely employed over time. These strategies focused on improving girls' self-esteem and confidence and appeared linked to girls reaching their educational and professional goals. For instance:

- ▶ Grantee-partners that included cultural awareness education or advocacy-based learning witnessed higher rates of educational attainment than those that did not employ these strategies.
- ▶ Grantee-partners that provided financial literacy trainings/workshops were more likely to see a high percentage of girls enroll in post-secondary education.

Programs established a foundation for maintaining educational and career attainment during the COVID-19 crisis.

COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact on the girls and their families participating in girlsBEST programs. As one grantee partner explained: "COVID-19 is magnifying and compounding systemic issues such as scarcity of affordable childcare, underemployment and lack of protections for workers, and the pervasiveness of poverty, all of which impact women and girls of color most deeply."

Since all grantee-partners in the third-year cohort had long been steeped in building academic, community connections, and leadership skills, all were well-positioned to expand programs to include wraparound support services when the pandemic hit. Key services included:

- ▶ Reconnecting girls to community, especially educational community, and peers by moving programs to a virtual platform, and providing computers and other technological tools and procuring internet service.
- ▶ Direct assistance to help with housing, food, and basic living expenses.
- ▶ Emergency response assistance, such as disease information.
- ▶ Increasing mental health or community health awareness and resources.

These services helped participant girls and their families to maintain positive academic and career momentum.

INCREASED LEADERSHIP WITHIN COMMUNITY & ADVOCACY ARENAS

Deepening participants' sense of agency through building leadership skills was a key focus for the majority of grantee-partners throughout the three-year period. While 95% of grantee-partners employed leadership development strategies in their programming during the initial year, in both subsequent years 100% adopted such strategies. The most prominent activities used were holding convenings and trainings to enhance leadership skills, practiced by nearly half of the grantee-partners over the three years. A majority also gave participants hands-on opportunities to lead as a way of developing these skills. Girls exercised their newfound leadership skills by stepping up to:

- Plan and develop key aspects of the programs in which they were participating.
- Conduct peer-led trainings.
- Plan and launch community outreach events.
- Organize and advocate around community issues.

Beyond cultivating girls' leadership skills, grantee-partners used these activities to build awareness about gender-based violence and empower them to take a lead role in fighting its systemic causes. Grantee partner, **Men As Peacemakers (MAP)** shared their success with this strategy:



We provided 104 (50 core) girls and nonbinary youth with asset-based programming focused on race and gender equity, relationships, leadership, and financial literacy. Girls improved their skills in finding their voice, advocacy, and leadership. Girl-planned and girl-led gatherings and events included: Resilient Survivors Healing Circle, the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women's March, and an ACT OUT LOUD performance.

—Men As Peacemakers

As MAP suggests, programs focused on building leadership skills helped girls find their voice and/or sense of agency. In fact, girlsBEST grantee-partners increased these types of offerings by 21% over the funding period, bringing the rate at which they delivered these types of activities in line with the more conventional leadership skills training.

INCREASED CONFIDENCE & SENSE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Increasing girls' self-esteem and confidence was a growing focus of grantee-partners throughout the three-year period. While only one-third of grantee-partners focused on boosting confidence initially, nearly half were focused on developing these qualities within girls by the end of the funding period. Grantee-partners employed a variety of confidence-building strategies—such as supporting peer relationships and academic skill-building. As part of this, nearly all grantee-partners offered cultural awareness education as a key approach, primarily through developing and implementing mentoring programs. Mentoring programs included:

- Professionals mentoring students.
- College women mentoring high school seniors.
- Community members mentoring middle and high school girls.
- Community elders mentoring youth of diverse ages.
- Parents/caretakers learning life skills with the participant.

While grantee-partners used multigenerational mentoring to varying degrees early on, there was an overall increase in this approach over the three years. Mentoring programs engaging community elders or professionals were most common. Girls' stories such as the one provided by **Hmong American Partnership** suggest that, in addition to contributing to girls' sense of cultural identity, forming these adult mentoring connections contributed to girls making better life choices. It is possible that these choices included avoiding unwanted pregnancies, as participants' pregnancy rates fluctuated between three-tenths to one percent over the years.



Silvia and Yasmine...obtained leadership roles when they were both promoted to a supervisor position at their first jobs; they prioritized reproductive health and contraception to delay pregnancy and put academics and finances first... And although our program provided them the culturally specific mentoring that strengthened their cultural identities...it was their persistence, resilience, intelligence, and strength that made them wonderful leaders and role models.

—Hmong American Partnership

INCREASED COMPETENCE IN FINANCIAL LITERACY & ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS

Over the funding period, girls not only gained awareness of the systemic gender inequality within the economic system, but proficiency in entrepreneurship and financial literacy to circumvent this inequality. By the third year, there was a 39% increase in grantee-partners providing financial literacy education. Girls, like Amber from **Girl Scouts Dakota Horizons**, felt these skills really helped them in their pursuit of further educational and professional opportunities.

“Many skills were developed during my experiences with the Girl Scout Cookie Program. I learned how to budget, handle money, and the importance of entrepreneurship, marketing, and how to be a good salesperson. All these skills are important as I will use them for the rest of my life, especially during college and in my career.

—Amber, Girl Scouts Dakota Horizons

One innovative strategy girlsBEST grantee partners used was project-based entrepreneurial skills training. **Liberty Community Church's** model included:

- Inviting Black entrepreneurs to present information about their business experience to the girls.
- Providing girls' seed money to start their own small businesses.
- Training girls on formulating business and marketing plans, budgeting, and financial literacy.

When they completed the program, girls launched their own businesses, averaging profits of \$300.

GEARING UP FOR SUCCESS

WFMN Support

Grantee-partners applied grant funding to a wide range of expenses including, operational costs (transportation, event space, etc.), stipends for girls, curriculum development materials, and other uses. This funding flexibility expanded opportunities for girls to participate who otherwise would not have had the necessary resources to do so.

Best Practices

- ▶ **Financial Literacy training increases girls' confidence in becoming independent.**
Understanding how to manage money gives girls' confidence that they can be agents of their own lives.
- ▶ **Leadership development is a centerpiece of success.**
Deepening leadership skills helps build self-confidence and academic success.
- ▶ **Mentoring showcases professional and personal opportunities.**
Multigenerational mentorship opens up a world of new networks to girls and contributes to their ability to make positive life choices.
- ▶ **Staff should be of the community to maximize trust with program participants.**
Seeing staff who are from their own community builds the trust program participants need to take risks and soar.

**girlsBEST
Education and
Life Choices
Successes!**