

EDUCATION PROFILE

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AN EDUCATION PROFILE OF THE GREAT RIVERS REGION

INTRODUCTION

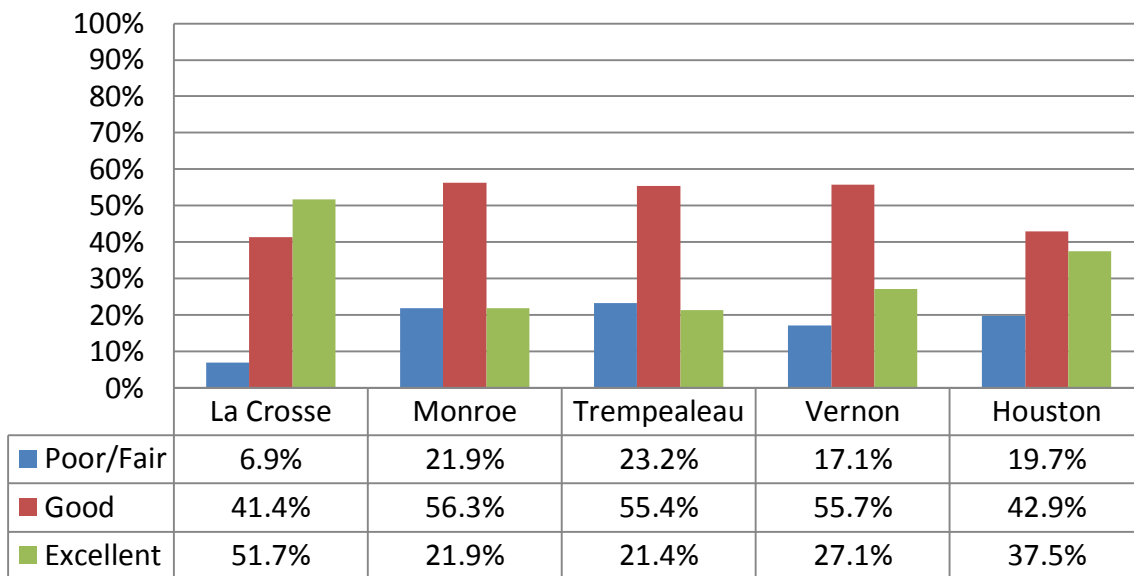
Education is important not only for professional development and advancement in the workforce but is an important indicator of the quality of life in a community. A community that provides access to a well-rounded education encourages the growth and development of its residents, giving them the tools to improve their prospects for a better life. Education is essential to economic growth and key to reducing poverty. Workers and community members with critical thinking skills can learn more quickly and communicate more effectively. Obtaining an education increases the opportunities for a longer, healthier life with higher lifetime earnings, and decreases the likelihood of homelessness, substance misuse, and financial instability.

This segment of the COMPASS NOW report will give an overview of the education systems and their outcomes in the Great Rivers Region. The purpose of this profile is to highlight educational assets and current trends, and to present data and information regarding the numerous education-related challenges within our community.

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

In the COMPASS NOW 2015 Random Household Survey, respondents from each county were asked to rate their community as a place that meets their family's educational needs. Overall, 71% of survey respondents gave an excellent or good rating to their community in this regard. This is down from the 2011 survey. **Figure 1** shows that a much larger percentage of La Crosse County residents rated their community as excellent in terms of meeting their educational needs than surrounding counties. There may be numerous reasons for this difference, including the wider variety of adult learning opportunities in La Crosse County. Many factors can affect how residents rate whether or not their community meets their educational needs. If we look at educational needs on a continuum of lifelong learning then needs range from early pre-school through elementary, secondary, post-secondary, job training and professional development, and life and leisure enrichment.

Figure 1: A Place that Meets Your Family's Educational Needs



Source: COMPASS NOW 2015 Random Household Survey

LEARNING THROUGHOUT EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Child development refers to the changes that occur as a child grows and develops in relation to being physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally sound, socially competent, and ready to learn.ⁱ Research has shown that the first five years of life, especially the first three years, are critical to the development of a child’s brain. These early experiences provide the base for the brain’s organizational development and functioning throughout life.ⁱ In addition, these experiences have direct impact on how children develop learning skills, along with social and emotional abilities. Children learn more quickly during these years than the other years in their lives. Love and nurturing during these years contribute to a sense of trust and security that can later translate into self-confidence.ⁱ For optimal learning and growth, children benefit most from love, attention, encouragement, mental stimulation, and nutritious meals. Whether these learning experiences take place in formal or informal settings, quality of care during these early years has a direct impact on the quality of life during and after childhood. For families that enroll their children in child care, the Great Rivers Region has several rating programs that help parents choose a quality child care facility.

YoungStar is a program of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families that evaluates and rates the quality of care given by child care providers, which helps parents choose the best child care for their kids, supports providers with tools and training to deliver high-quality early care, and sets a consistent standard for child care quality by using 1- to 5-star rating system. In December of 2014 there was a total of 4,339

YoungStar-rated providers in the state of Wisconsin. Of those, 370 were 5-star providers.ⁱⁱ

The state of Minnesota offers **Parent Aware**, a voluntary star rating program that measures the quality of child care and early education programs throughout the state. Families can use these star ratings to help them identify child care/early education providers who understand the latest best practices in early learning. In 2014, the Parent Aware Program of Minnesota included a total of 2,177 Parent Aware providers. More information regarding YoungStar and Parent Aware can be found in the COMPASS NOW 2015 Education Indicators.

Overall, 63.6% of the COMPASS NOW 2015 Random Household Survey respondents stated that they felt the early education opportunities in our community were good or excellent. More specifically, 55.9% of respondents stated that they felt the availability of birth-to-3 education in our region was good or excellent. When looking specifically at respondents who are in childbearing years (21-50 years old), this number increases to over 86%.

ENROLLMENT AND SCHOOL FUNDING

Enrollment in public schools is measured by counting the number of students enrolled in school on a particular day in September or October. In 2013, the Great Rivers Region had approximately **37,586** school aged students (Pre-K-12) in public schools, **3,451** students (K-12) in private schools, and **688** being homeschooled. Compared to the 2012 survey, this shows an increase in public school enrollment over other school choices. There are **27 public school districts** in the region with **119 public schools** and **46 private schools**.

Table 1 shows school enrollment by county for 2011 and 2013. Between these years, an increase in public school enrollment was seen in all counties except Vernon County, with most significant growth in Houston County. Private school enrollment varied by county, dropping most significantly in La Crosse County (4.32%). However, Monroe County experienced the largest increase in private school enrollment during this time (1.5%). Reporting of homeschooled students to the residential school district is required by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Amish schools are included in private school enrollment; however, their compliance with reporting varies. Homeschool enrollment dropped substantially in all Wisconsin counties of the Great Rivers Region in this two-year period.

Table 1: Public and Private School Enrollment

County	Public School Enrollment PK-12			Private School Enrollment PK-12			Homeschool Enrollment		
	2011	2013	% Change	2011	2013	% Change	2011	2013	% Change
La Crosse	16,098	16,152	+0.34%	2,339	2,238	-4.32%	337	215	-36.2%
Monroe	7,046	7,006	-0.56%	668	678	+1.50%	293	189	-35.50%
Trempealeau	5,832	5,825	-0.12%	298	302	+1.34 %	152	99	-34.90%
Vernon	4,129	4,082	-1.14%	343	338	-1.46%	276	185	-33%
Houston	4,317	4,521	+4.73%	347	297	-14.4%	n/a	n/a	n/a

Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Minnesota Department of Education
Information is reflective of 2011-2012 and 2013-2014 school years

The public education system is a significant and essential investment in our communities. Providing sufficient resources to meet student needs is a constant and growing challenge for communities and school districts. Funding for public schools is set by a complex mechanism of state revenue limits, calculations of state aid, and local taxes. School districts may seek additional funds through a referendum. All levels of government--federal, state, and local-- contribute to educational funding. Typically, state and local governments provide 44% each of all elementary and secondary funding for education. The federal government contributes approximately 12% of all direct expenditures.ⁱⁱⁱ Wisconsin has dramatically reduced the amount of state support for public schools in recent years. Between 2008 and 2015 the state cut support for investment in schools by 15% per student, which was a deeper cut than all but four other states. After a decade of cuts, the *Minnesota 2020 Report* shares how state aid is expected to jump by 7.8% per pupil. **Table 2** shows the percentage change in school aid to Wisconsin school districts from the 2012-2013 school year to the 2013-2014 school year.

School District	% Change
Arcadia School District	+6.86%
Bangor School District	-1.26%
Blair-Taylor School District	-9.28%
Caledonia Public School District	-1.68%
Cashton School District	-2.0%
De Soto Area School District	+16.23%
Eleva-Strum School District	+6.36%
Galesville-Ettrick-Trempealeau	+1.71%
Hillsboro School District	-0.89%
Holmen School District	-1.72%
Houston Public School District	+0.89%
Independence School District	-4.12%
Kickapoo Area School District	-1.76%
La Crescent-Hokah School District	-4.11%
La Crosse School District	-5.45%
La Farge School District	+21.21%
Norwalk-Ontario-Wilton School District	+1.97%
Onalaska School District	+0.06%
Osseo-Fairchild School District	+0.34%
Sparta Area School District	+3.46%
Spring Grove School District	-12.0%
Tomah Area School District	+0.75%
Viroqua Area School District	+1.07%
West Salem School District	-2.66%
Westby Area School District	-2.74%
Whitehall School District	+2.0%

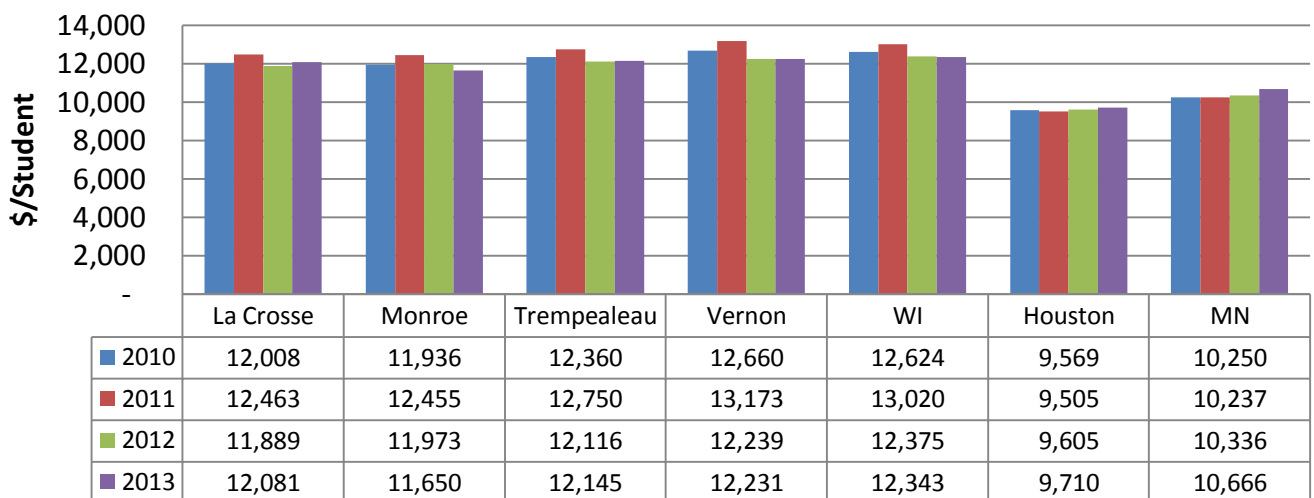
Source: Wisconsin Department Public Instruction

The majority of school district expenses are instruction-related, including teacher salaries and benefits, supplies, equipment, and textbooks. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, instruction-related expenses made up approximately 64% of total expenditures during the 2011-2012 school year. Budget cuts to education impacts school staffing decisions, affordability of materials and technology, and professional development opportunities, and could result in cuts to courses. Budget cuts may also result in larger classes and fewer electives offerings.

Education administrators have a variety of measures to help identify the costs to educate a student each school year. **Total Current Educational Cost (TCEC)** attempts to identify overall instructional and instructional support service costs attributable to district resident students. It can generally be described as the cost of the district's General and Special Project funds, excluding transportation and facility acquisition expenditures, inter-fund transfers and revenues for instructional services the district provides to non-resident pupils such as tuition receipts, CESA (Cooperative Education Service Agency) and cooperative agreements, and state inter-district integration aid.

The **Total Education Cost (TEC)** is the TCEC plus transportation, expenditures for facility acquisitions charged to the General, Special Project, and Capital Expansion funds, and debt service principal and interest.^{iv} The TEC figure does not include the cost of food, or community service activities funded by fees. **Figure 2** shows the average TEC figures for each county, along with state averages. During the 2013 academic year, TEC in the region ranged from \$9,710 in Houston County to \$12,231 in Vernon County.

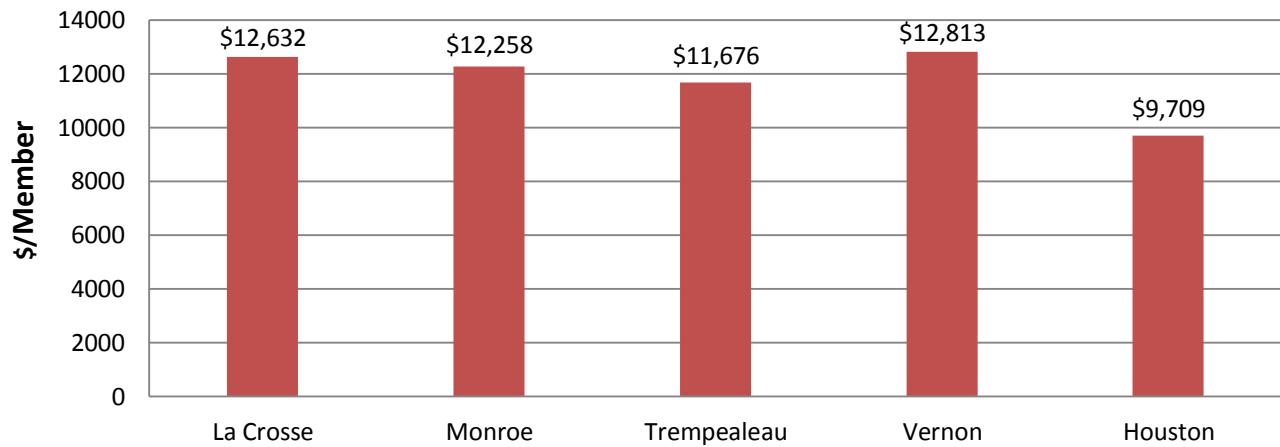
Figure 2: Public School Expenditures



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction: Comparative Cost per Member, Minnesota Department of Education: Expenditures, District/State Level Report

In cooperation with the Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials Accounting Committee, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) School Financial Services Team has developed several revenue benchmarks that can be used for informational and general analysis purposes. The **Comparative Cost per Member** can differ from one district to another and from one year to another. There may be several reasons for this variance- educational programming, pupil transportation requirements, increases or decreases in debt service expenditures, or having food and community service operations. **Figure 3** shows the average cost each County spent per member during that same year. This calculation is based on district resident pupil counts and does not reflect the actual number of pupils (resident and non-resident) in attendance in a district.

**Figure 3: Cost per Member
2012-2013 Academic Year**



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Minnesota Department of Education

In the Great Rivers Region, approximately 13.84% of students were in an **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**.^v Users of this program include students with autism, cognitive disabilities, emotional behavioral disabilities, hearing impairments, orthopedic impairment, other health impairments, significant developmental delay, speech/language impairments, specific learning disabilities, traumatic brain injury, visual impairments, and the need for special education.^v Public school districts are required to offer special education services for children ages 3-21. Expenses for services for students with severe and multiple disabilities are challenges for local school budgets.

CHARTER SCHOOLS AND ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

There is an increasing amount of choice in the Great Rivers Region when it comes to public education options. **Charter schools** are independent public schools that offer a choice to parents and students in the area of curriculum, teaching methodology, and classroom structure. Charter schools foster an environment of innovation and are created with the best elements of traditional public schools in mind. Each school is created through a contract or “charter” between the charter school body and the sponsoring school board. Charter schools employ licensed teachers, offer services to special needs students and require students to take state assessment tests to assure academic accountability. Charter schools do not charge tuition. There are several charter schools in the Great Rivers Region. Laurel High School, Pleasant Ridge Elementary School, The School of Technology and Arts, Coulee Montessori Charter School, Monroe Alternative Charter School, Monroe Virtual Charter Middle School, Monroe Independent Virtual Charter High School, Viroqua Area Montessori School, and

the Youth Initiative High School are a few of the Wisconsin Charter schools within the Great Rivers Region. Houston County charter schools include La Crescent Montessori Academy and Ridgeway Community School.

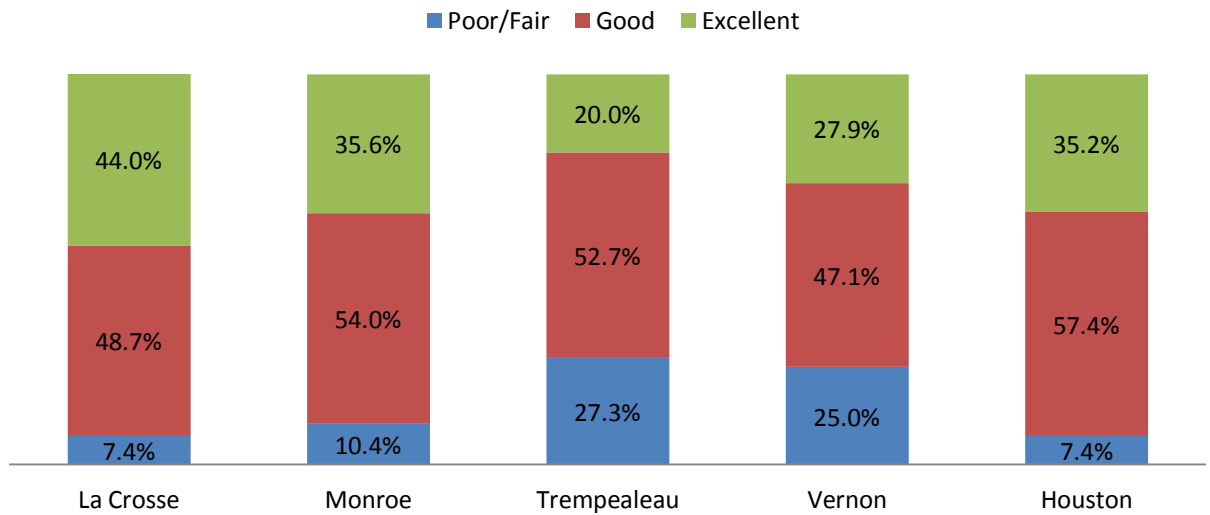
School districts have also developed alternative education options focused on reaching **at-risk students** who were not succeeding in traditional school settings and are at-risk for not graduating. These schools may or may not be charter schools but all offer programs with a low student-to-teacher ratio, individualized instruction, and extra social support to create a positive learning atmosphere where students are more likely to succeed. Some of these schools include: Better Futures (Vernon County), Sparta Area Independent Learning School and the Robert Kupper Learning Center (Monroe County), Summit Learning Center (Houston County), and LaCrossroads (La Crosse County).

As another alternative to traditional K-12 education, some students are now able to participate in **online education**. Online education may offer flexibility for students, teachers, and parents, although its efficacy is still being tested. It can be an inexpensive supplement to existing curriculum. This method may offer more options for students as they explore what electives and career paths they are interested in. An example of an online school in the Great Rivers Region is the Minnesota Virtual Academy (MNVA), a K-12 online public school based in the Houston County School District that is one of the first statewide online programs in Minnesota. Since it was founded in 2002, it has developed over 130 courses, some of which include Advanced Placement (AP) courses and electives. Similar to some high schools in our region, students may earn college credit while attending. Wisconsin also has online school options. The Wisconsin Virtual School (WVS) partners with school districts throughout Wisconsin, including several in the Great Rivers Region, to offer online courses to middle and high school students. WVS has been operated out of CESA #9 since 2000 and has served over 25,000 students to date, with over half of Wisconsin's school districts participating in the program. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has an agreement with the Wisconsin Virtual School to provide online courses and services to Wisconsin school districts as a partner in the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Enrollment in school is mandated by law at the age of six. However, participation in high quality early childhood education before the age of five can have a positive influence on test scores, lower the rates of grade repetition and special education, and result in higher educational attainment.^{vi} Participation in early childhood is not mandated by law. Respondents of the COMPASS NOW 2015 Random Household Survey were asked to rate the availability of early education opportunities in their community. The results are shown in **Figure 4**.

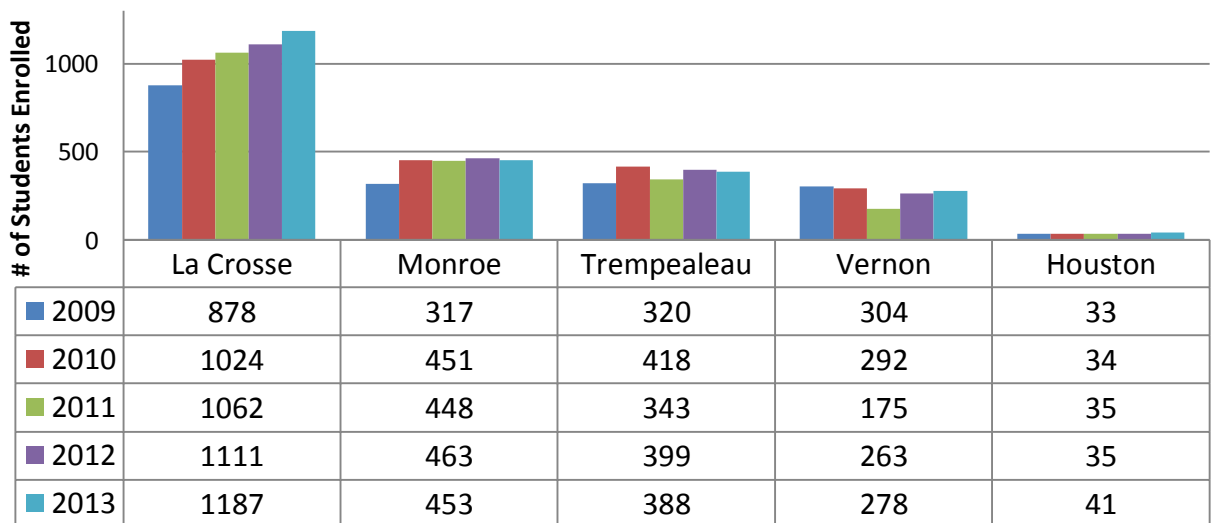
Figure 4: Availability of Early Childhood Opportunities



Source: COMPASS NOW 2015 Random Household Survey

Respondents stated the availability of early childhood opportunities was excellent or good; 8.6% (down from 12% in the 2011 survey) indicated the availability was fair or poor. Overall, the public preschool enrollment in the Great Rivers Region has increased or remained steady over the past five years; see **Figure 5**. All school districts in La Crosse, Monroe, Trempealeau, and Vernon counties offer public preschool education. The structure of preschool programs varies throughout the region, with most districts offering a half-day schedule 4-5 days a week and a few districts offering a full-day schedule 2-3 days a week.

Figure 5: 4K Enrollment



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Minnesota Department of Education

Not all preschool aged children have equal access to preschool education. Availability depends on location, cost, hours of operation, and numerous other variables. **Child Care Assistance Programs** are designed to assist income-eligible families in accessing quality child care by subsidizing a portion of their child care costs. Minnesota's Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) pays child care costs for children up to age 12, and for children with special needs until age 14. Child care costs may be paid for qualifying families while they go to work, look for work, or attend school. To qualify for CCAP, families must comply with child support enforcement if applicable for all children in the family. In 2014, Minnesota counties provided child care assistance services for 30,339 children in an average month, with families receiving an average of \$1,276 per month.^{vii} Wisconsin Shares Child Care Subsidy Program also helps families pay for child care. To be eligible, the family's gross monthly income must be equal to or less than 185%-200% of the federal poverty level. Once that guideline is met, a parent or caregiver is able to enroll a child if they are participating in one of the following: unsubsidized work, high school, W-2 employment, approved employment skills training while employed in unsubsidized work, FoodShare Employment and Training (FSET) work search or work experience activities, or are a W-2 applicant participating in job search, training, or orientation activities.^{viii} For those who do not qualify for financial assistance, cost can be a factor in deciding whether or not to take their child to preschool. For example, Houston County preschools charge anywhere from \$85 to \$195 per month. Some of Houston County's early childhood educational opportunities are offered through **Early Childhood Family Education**, which is open to all Minnesota families with children from birth to kindergarten entrance. The program is offered through Minnesota public school districts and is based on the idea that the family provides a child's first and most significant learning environment. ECFE provides transportation along regular school bus routes for participants when space is available, a reasonable sliding fee for participation in program including waived fees for those unable to pay, and home visits to families with multiple stresses (i.e. no access to transportation, pregnant mothers on bedrest, first-time parents, families with several preschool-age children). In Houston County, Spring Grove works closely with the School District ECFE program.

Head Start is a publically funded preschool option that provides low-income preschoolers with education, nutrition, health, and social services at community-based settings throughout the region. During the 2012-2013 program year, **596** children participated in Head Start in the Great Rivers Region with **310** on waiting lists.^{ix} It is unknown whether the children on Head Start waiting lists are able to enroll in another preschool option or if they do not attend school at all. According to the U.S. Census, the number of families living in poverty in the Great Rivers Region has been rising since 2000. The largest increase was in Trempealeau County, where 4.9% of families were living in poverty in 2000, compared to 9.0% in 2012.^x According to the 2009-2013 American Community Survey, 8.9% of the families in the Great Rivers Region live in poverty, and 14.6% of families with children under the age of 18 years old live in poverty. This number points to an increase in financially vulnerable populations in our community.

The Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards (WMELS), developed by a partnership of the Department of Public Instruction, the Department of Health and Family Services, Head Start, Work Force Development, and the Early Childhood Collaborating Partners, provides a framework of developmental expectations for children from birth to 1st grade for families, professionals, and policy makers based on evidence-based research. The WMELS are intended to reflect a comprehensive approach to child development. However, 4K programs are not required to use the WMELS as a guideline, nor do the standards include benchmarks, a curriculum, or assessment tools. Apart from licensing requirements of child care centers, preschool programs have the flexibility to design their curriculum based on their own adopted philosophy. That said, it is helpful for parents/guardians to research 4K programs before enrolling their child to ensure they agree with the program’s vision, mission, and methods.

Screening and assessment in early childcare environments can provide critical information to parents, caregivers and educators that can lead to identification, early intervention and improved outcomes for children, which allows teachers to teach more effectively and children to learn more successfully. Screening and assessment give teachers and parents a starting point for the child that makes it easier to measure how a student is progressing, if they are on track, or if they need extra help in certain areas. Programs such as Birth to 3 are federally funded and mandated to provide services for children identified with disabilities and to coordinate with school districts for continuity and education planning. Although there are a number of early learning programs in the Great Rivers Region, one survey found that the use of developmental screening and assessment was inconsistent and that barriers to assessment included lack of time, training, and assessment tools.^{viii}

Table 3: Comparison of School Readiness Factors by County 2009-2013

County	Percent Uninsured 18 Years or Younger	Children Under 18 Living in Poverty	Free and Reduced Lunch	Percent of Births that were Teen Births	Births to Mothers Who Received Late/Inadequate Prenatal Care
La Crosse	2.6%	13.2%	30.9%	4.8%	77%
Monroe	14.4%	22.3%	46.7%	6.2%	69%
Trempealeau	9.35%	19.2%	40.7%	5.2%	68%
Vernon	24.8%	21.3%	40.7%	3.6%	51%
Houston	4.05%	16.1%	27.3%	N/A	N/A

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2009-2013 5-Year American Community Survey; U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data (CCD); 2000 U.S. Census, Summary File 3; 2010 U.S. Census Summary File 1; 2008-2012 U.S. Census American Community Survey (ACS); Kids Count, Annie E. Casey Foundation

What one considers to be key indicators for **school readiness** may vary greatly among parents, school districts, and states. Head Start defines school readiness as children possessing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success in school and later life learning. In 2007, Child Trends Data Bank's report *Early School Readiness: Indicators on Children and Youth* emphasized that school readiness is a multi-dimensional concept and that children who enter school with early skills, such as basic knowledge of math and reading, are more likely than their peers to experience later academic success, attain high levels of education, and secure employment.^{xi} The National Education Goals Panel conceptualizes school readiness in five dimensions: physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development (including early literacy), and cognition and general knowledge.^{xi} **Table 3** below summarizes a few key indicators that in a broader definition contribute to children's school readiness. The trends seen in the period 2008-2012 point to the challenges children face today and in the future.

The School Readiness Indicators Initiative started in 2005 sought to develop a core set of indicators and found that school readiness needed to be more broadly defined than the knowledge of language and math. According to the Initiative, school readiness expectations should include not only all areas of child development: physical, cognitive, social, and emotional competence but also positive attitudes toward learning and community factors that influence children's learning. Children cannot enter school ready to learn unless their families and communities are also ready to provide an environment that is conducive to positive growth.^{xii} Children who are unhealthy and experience barriers to accessing quality healthcare or children who are hungry and live in a household where food security is tenuous are likely to be less ready for school. Thus indicators such as percentage of children covered by health insurance, percentage of pregnant mothers accessing appropriate pre-natal care, household income, and percentage of children in poverty are as relevant to school readiness as basic measures of literacy and numeracy.

To ensure every child begins school on a path for success, the Minnesota Department of Education is revising a decade-long *School Readiness Study: Developmental Assessment at Kindergarten Entrance*. The purpose of the school readiness study is to assess entering kindergarten student proficiency across 5 domains of child development. The sample for the study is selected randomly and is large enough to ensure that the results are reliable and generalizable to the state population. The results of the study provide information on school readiness that can be fed back to parents, school teachers and administrators, child care providers, policy makers, and the general public. During the 2012 assessment, 126 elementary schools participated, with a total of 7,539 children.^{xii} This study was designed to capture a picture of the readiness of Minnesota children who are entering kindergarten and to track their readiness over time. The results from the 2012 study are summarized in **Table 4**. Students entering kindergarten in Wisconsin are assessed early in the school year in accordance with K-12 standards.

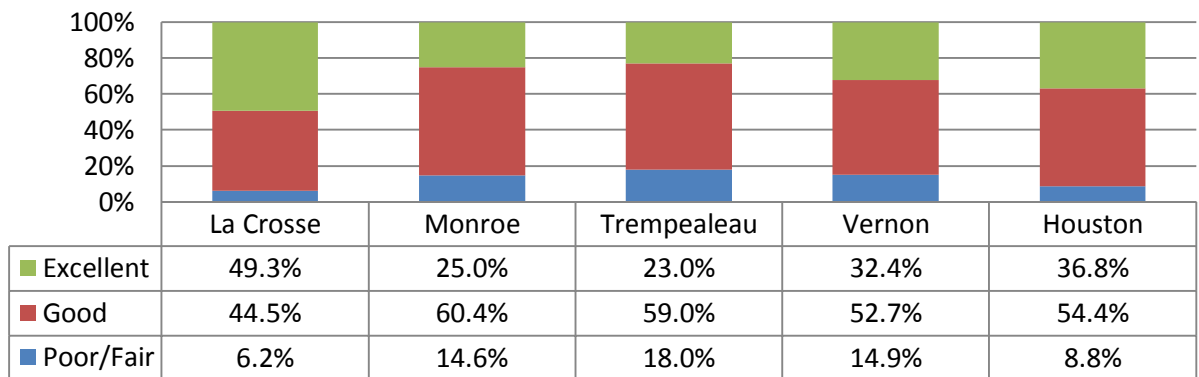
Child Development Domain	Percent Proficient
Physical Development	73.3%
The Arts	61.7%
Personal & Social Development	60.3%
Language & Literacy	60.2%
Mathematical Thinking	57.6%

Source: Minnesota Department of Education: School Readiness
 Note that categories are adjusted for stratified cluster sampling.

4K-12 EDUCATION

The 2015 COMPASS NOW Random Household Survey asked respondents to rate the quality of the 4K-12 schools in their community, and results are shown below in **Figure 6**. Approximately 41% of respondents rated their 4K-12 schools as good and 32% rated schools as excellent.

Figure 6: Quality of 4K-12 Schools



Source: COMPASS NOW 2015 Random Household Survey

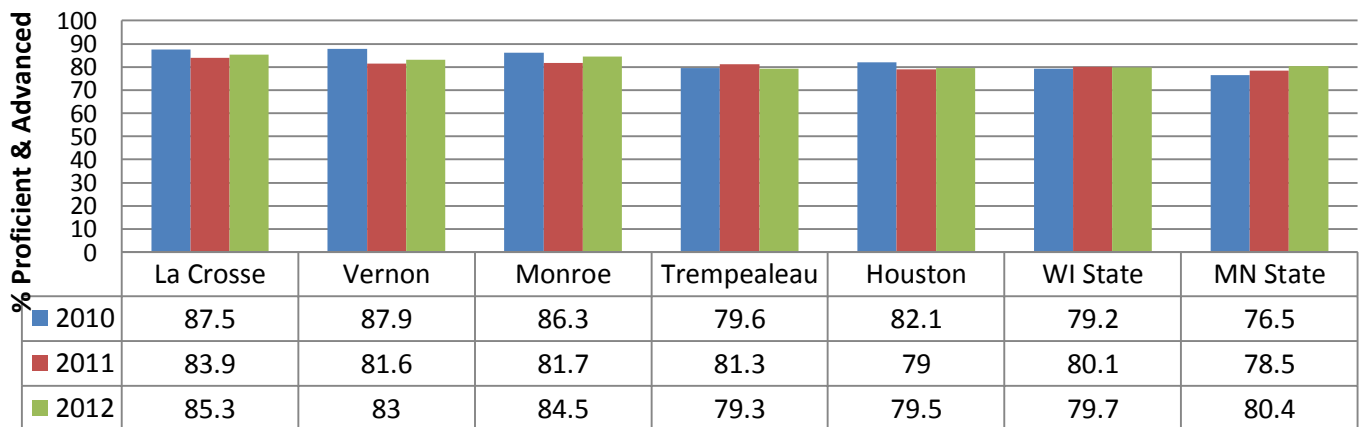
There are several measures of student assessment that Wisconsin and Minnesota use to measure student attainment of subject-area proficiency. The **Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE)** and the **Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA)** were developed by educators and designed to meet state and federal requirements and provide timely information that educators could use to inform curricular and instructional decisions to improve student achievement. Administrators use assessment data as an accountability measure for school improvement. In addition to these state-developed standards, the Common Core State Standards Initiative is an effort to establish a shared set of clear educational standards for English language arts and mathematics that states can voluntarily adopt. Wisconsin adopted the Common

Core State Standards for English language areas and mathematics in 2010, and Minnesota adopted the Common Core Standards for English language arts that same year. It is important to note that beginning with the 2012-2013 school year the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction had established performance standards (cut scores) for the WKCE reading and mathematics content areas to more closely align with national and international expectations of what is required to be college and career ready. The higher cut scores are comparable to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) cut scores. Therefore, comparisons to previous years should not be made.

Reading proficiency is a key education indicator and the cornerstone of all learning. However, reading proficiency is consistently lower for students from low-income families and children of color.^{xiii} In addition, there is a correlation between poverty, failure to read proficiently, and failure to graduate from high school.^{xiii} The WKCE and MCA tests are administered to all students in grades 3-8 and grade 10. **Figures 7 and 8** show the assessment scores for 3rd and 10th grade reading from 2010-2012.

County averages of student scores show that a majority of students in the Great Rivers Region test similarly or higher than the rest of the state in both 3rd and 10th grade. Since 2010, 10th grade reading test scores have increased in all five counties.

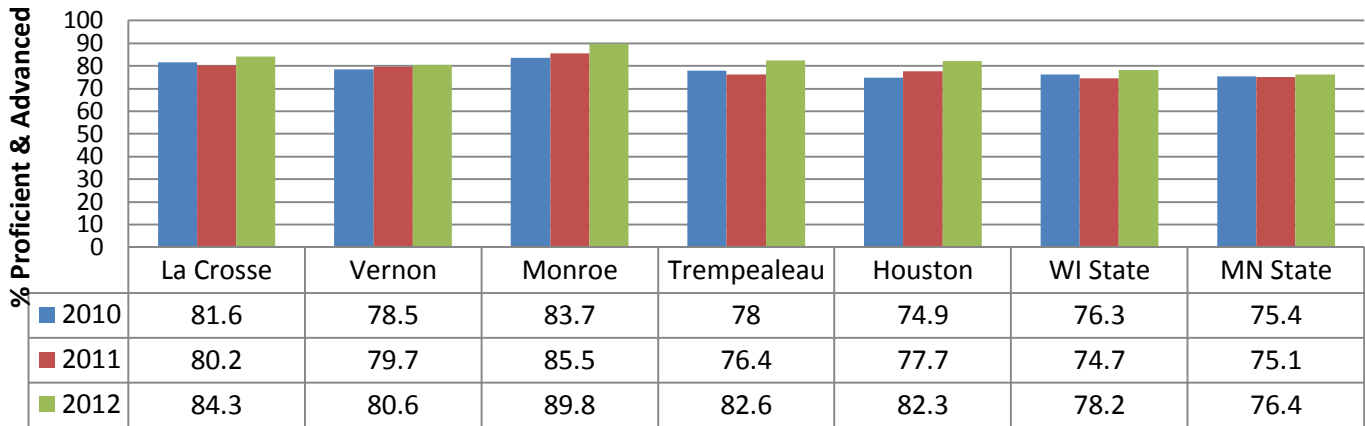
Figure 7: 3rd Grade Reading Results



Source: Great Schools, Wisconsin Department of Instruction, Minnesota COMPASS, Minnesota Department of Education

Percent of 3rd graders who scored at or above proficient on the MCA-II test of Reading (Minnesota) and Percent of 3rd graders who scored at or above proficient on the WSAS test of Reading (Wisconsin). New standards in Reading were implemented in 2013 for both Minnesota and Wisconsin. Comparisons between years prior 2012 and after should not be made.

Figure 8: 10th Grade Reading Results



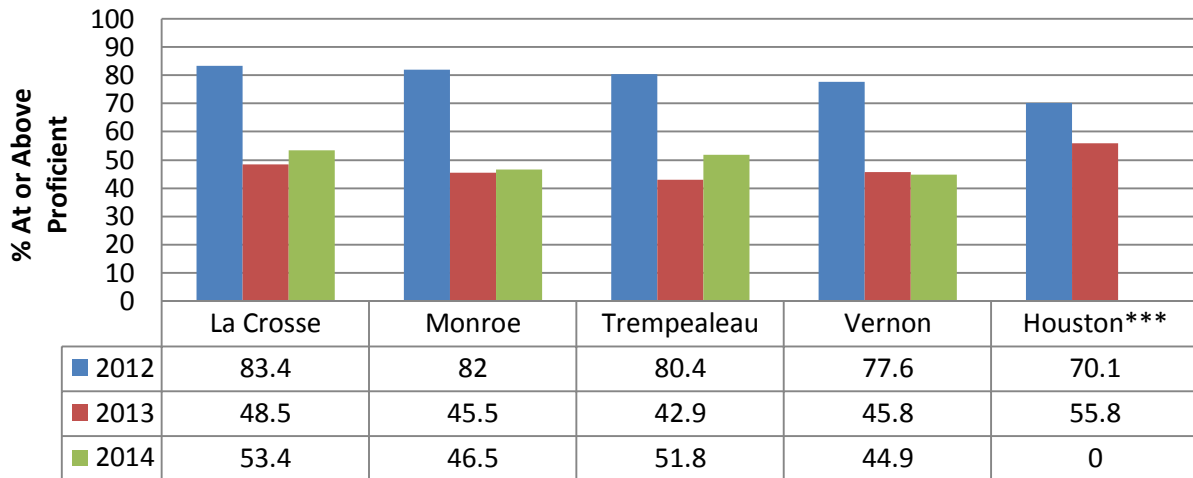
Source: www.greatschools.org; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction; Minnesota Department of Education, Minnesota Report Card

Percent of 10th graders who scored at or above proficient on the MCA-II test of Reading (Minnesota) and Percent of 10th graders who scored at or above proficient on the WSAS test of Reading (Wisconsin)

New standards in Reading were implemented in 2013 for both Minnesota and Wisconsin. Comparisons between years prior to and after 2012 should not be made.

Mathematics proficiency is another key indicator of student achievement and is fundamental for daily functioning in our society. One study of high school females found that one difference between those who later dropped out of school and those who graduated was lower math scores among the former group.^{xiv} The WKCE and MCA tests are administered to every student in grades 4-8 and grade 10 and 11. **Figures 9 and 10** show the assessment scores for 4th and 10th grade mathematics from 2011-2014.

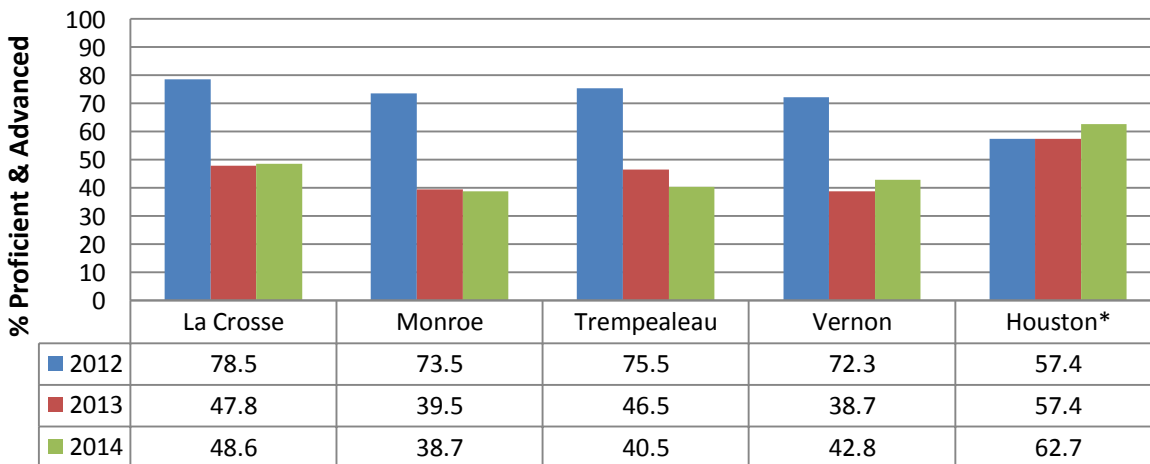
Figure 9: 4th Grade Math Results



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction WKCE, Minnesota Department of Education MCA-II
 Based on averages from School Districts within the County. New standards in Mathematics were implemented in 2013 for Wisconsin. Comparisons between years prior to and after 2012 should not be made.

2014 data was not available for Houston County at time data was retrieved.

Figure 10: 10th Grade Math Results



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction WKCE, Minnesota Department of Education MCA-II
 Based on averages from School Districts within the County.

Houston County math results are from 11th grade assessments.

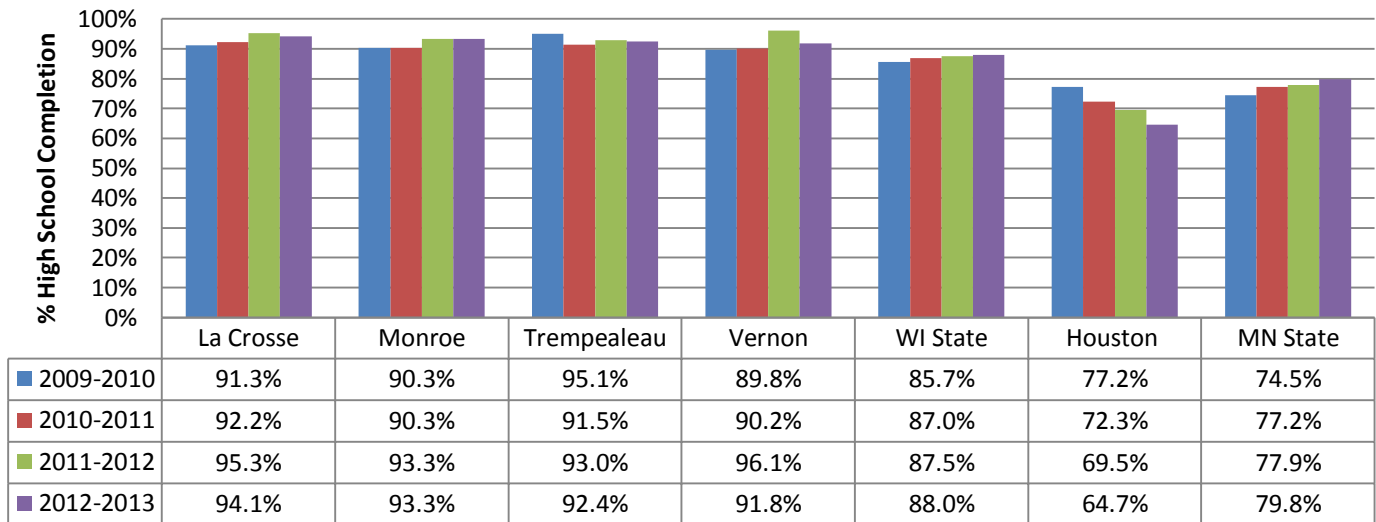
New standards in Mathematics were implemented in 2013 for Wisconsin. Comparisons between years prior to and after 2012 should not be made.

Both 4th and 10th grade student reading score averages among the counties reflect that the majority of students test similarly or higher than state averages. Overall, a greater percentage of 4th grade students tested proficient or advanced in math than 10th grade students. High school students in both Wisconsin and Minnesota are required to complete at least three credits of math in order to graduate.^{xv, xvi} Because of differences in curriculum, these scores should be compared at the school district level rather than the county level.

High school graduation rates are one measure of the state's elementary and secondary education system as well as the quality of the workforce. For most positions, employers require a diploma or the equivalent when hiring an employee. Lifetime earnings are higher (50%-100% higher in lifetime income) and unemployment rates are lower for high school graduates.^{xvii} High school graduates are also less likely to draw on state and federal income assistance programs and are less likely to be involved in the criminal system.^{xviii}

Wisconsin and Minnesota rank as two of the highest states in the nation for graduation rates, with Wisconsin ranking 3rd and Minnesota ranking 7th. Calculations for students who complete high school in an extended amount of time or receive high school equivalency diplomas are now available on the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Minnesota Department of Education websites. County averages of **four-year graduation** rates in the Great Rivers Region ranged from **64% – 94%** for the 2012-2013 school year. Specific regional high school graduation rates can be found in **Figure 11**. All Wisconsin counties consistently scored higher than the Wisconsin state average. However, while the Minnesota state score average rose, Houston County average declined.

Figure 11: High School Graduation Rates



Source: Wisconsin Department of Instruction; Minnesota Department of Education, Minnesota Report Card

Wisconsin data compares the percentage of students who complete high school with their adjusted cohort and earn a credential. A cohort is a distinct group of students who enter 9th grade together. The Minnesota graduation rate is a four-year, on-time graduation rate based on a cohort of first time 9th grade students plus transfers into the cohort within the four year period minus transfers out of the cohort within the four year period. The 4-year rate is the percentage of students who complete within 4 years or less.

County graduation rates were calculated by averaging the completion rates of the school districts within each county. See Indicator Appendix for a specific list of school districts included in the data for each county.

The **American College Test (ACT)** is designed to assess educational development and the ability to complete college level work. It is used nationally for college admissions and is one of the primary measures of college readiness. The ACT consists of four subject areas and a timed writing test. The 215-question, multiple-choice test covers English, mathematics, reading, science, and an optional writing section. It is an optional exam typically taken by college-bound students in their junior or senior years. The Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), an alternative test that is reason-based instead of content-based, is required by some colleges.

Each portion of the ACT has a maximum score of 36. The composite score is the weighted average of the four (or five) subject-specific scores. In 2014, less than one-tenth of 1% of all students who took the ACT scored a perfect 36. Typically, students who take a rigorous college preparatory curriculum will score better on the ACT. Composite score averages are influenced by the percentage of students who opt to take the test--the greater the percentage, the lower the composite average. Students are allowed to retake the ACT, with only the most recent score being recorded.^{xviii}

On average, 60-79% of graduating students in WI and MN take the ACT. The ACT is not required for admission to two-year Minnesota and Wisconsin technical and career colleges. **Figure 12** shows ACT scores for the Great Rivers Region for the past five years. Overall, students in the Great Rivers Region score similarly to the national average. Students in La Crosse and Houston County have the highest composite scores in the region in 2013.

Figure 12: Average ACT Scores (max. 36)					
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
La Crosse	22.2	22.1	22.6	22.8	22.5
Monroe	21.7	21.6	22.4	21.6	21.6
Trempealeau	22	21.6	21.8	21.7	21.8
Vernon	21.4	20.1	21.7	22.2	22
WI State	22.3	22.1	22.2	22.1	22.2
Houston	23.2	23.6	22.8	22.2	22
MN State	22.7	22.9	22.9	22.8	23
National	21.1	21	21.1	21.1	20.9
Source: Wisconsin Department of Instruction, Minnesota Department of Education					

STUDENT SERVICES

Students come to school with an assortment of basic needs, such as hunger, shelter, safety, or family support system, which can have a profound impact on the student's ability to be successful. It is also vital that students have a strong and positive relationship with at least one adult in their lives. This relationship helps children and teens develop high self-esteem, independence, and good decision-making skills. In one study of more than 3,300 teenagers, researchers found that teens who had the benefit of a mentor made significantly better choices about risky behaviors. These mentors can be parents, teachers, coaches, neighbors, ministers, or counselors.^{xix} Youth who work with a mentor are 27% less likely to start drinking and 46% less likely to use illegal drugs.^{xx} Youth who have a mentor also show an overall reduction in depression symptoms.^{xxi}

Some other examples of barriers to learning include mental illness, being uninsured, living in poverty, experiencing abuse, having a difficult home environment, and the use and/or abuse of drugs. Every two years a national survey of young people called the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is conducted by the CDC to monitor health risks. Between 2011 and 2013, students in grades 9-12 in the Great Rivers Region were surveyed using the YRBS and the Minnesota Student Survey. The results of the survey point to a number of alarming issues facing students today including **tobacco use,**

inhalant use, physical abuse by boyfriend or girlfriend, bullying on school property, electronic bullying, sexual activity, and attempting suicide. These issues were discussed more extensively in the COMPASS Health issues profile but are worth mentioning here, as they affect education outcomes. **Table 5** summarizes YRBS findings on risky behaviors youth of the Great Rivers Region.

Table 5: Select 2013 Youth Risk Behaviors

YRBS Data	La Crosse	Monroe	Trempealeau	Vernon	WI	Houston
Tobacco Use						
Used tobacco products in past 30 days	19.8%	11.6%	10.2%	14.0%	8.0%	31.0%
Smoked in past 30 days	13.5%	17.4%	12.6%	10.4%	12.0%	9.5%
Alcohol Use						
Binge drinking in past 30 days	15.8%	22.5%	16.5%	16.4%	18.4%	5.5%
Drove after drinking in past 30 days	6.9%	8.8%	8.8%	7.6%	8.9%	N/A
Drug Use						
Marijuana use ever	33.2%	28.3%	23.3%	16.0%	31.2%	13.0% (used alcohol and marijuana in past 30 days)
Used inhalant ever	7.4%	9.0%	5.6%	5.2%	5.9%	N/A
Used ecstasy ever	5.2%	5.1%	4.3%	4.0%	NA	N/A
Used prescription drug without a doctor's permission	16.1%	8.4%	13.1%	17.6%	14.9%	N/A

Violence						
Were ever hit, slapped or physically hurt by their boyfriend or girlfriend during the past 12 months	12.4%	10.6%	8.8%	3.2%	8.5%	6.2%
Bullied on school property in past 12 months	29.5%	28.8%	32.1%	24.0%	22.7%	10.0%
Electronically bullied in past 12 months	N/A	21.5%	20.8%	16.8%	17.6%	13%

YRBS Data	La Crosse	Monroe	Trempealeau	Vernon	WI	MN
Sexual Activity						
Ever had sex	38.2%	45.0%	36.3%	32.4%	35.3%	39.2%
Mental Health						
Seriously considered suicide in past 12 months	16.8%	12.8%	12.2%	6.8%	13.2%	9.5%
Feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 weeks	28.9%	23.9%	22.1%	15.2%	24.6%	30.5% (over last 12 months)
Hurt or injured yourself over the past 12 months without wanting to die	18.1%	15.7%	14.4%	10.0%	N/A	8.0%
Have attempted suicide	6.6%	6.8%	6.3%	3.6%	2.5%	5.0% (within last 12 months)

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). *1991-2013 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data*. Available at <http://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/>. Accessed on December 1, 2014; Minnesota Student Survey, 2013. The CDC website represents this data at a state and national level. However, not all school districts within each County were required to participate in this survey. As part of a CDC grant, the YRBS was collected for La Crosse County in 2013. The YRBS is not generally available by county unless the county or school district voluntarily completes the online survey. Current cigarette use is defined as those who smoked at least one cigarette every day for 30 days. All high schools from La Crosse and Monroe counties participated in the online YRBS survey. The state of Wisconsin did not include a question regarding self-harm on the 2013 questionnaire.

SUPPORT FOR YOUTH

In addition to assessing risks, the YRBS also asks participants to disclose possible assets in their lives. These positive attributes include feelings of belonging, caring, and family support. The majority of students in the Great Rivers Region report having a strong support system. Such factors strongly contribute to growth and achievement. The results are summarized in **Table 6**.

Asset	La Crosse	Monroe	Trempealeau	Vernon	Houston
Family gives love and support	84.6%	78.5%	84.0%	84.0%	68.5%
Teachers really care, give support, and encouragement	64.3%	46.7%	50.8%	64.4%	12%
Feel like you belong at school	68.0%	56.1%	59.8%	69.2%	N/A
Adult (teacher or other staff) at school you could talk to	70.6%	62%	65.0%	74.0%	N/A

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 1991-2013 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data. Available at <http://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/>. Accessed on December 1, 2014; Minnesota Student Survey, 2013.

EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Extra- and co-curricular activities can be participated in by students on or off school grounds and are not included in the mandatory curriculum requirements necessary for grade advancement. These activities have historically been enjoyed on a not-for-credit basis, although in recent years some schools have allowed students to earn credit for certain extra-curricular activities. Some co-curricular activities allow for enhanced physical development, additional learning, a creative outlet, and improved self-esteem; some assist in learning time management, encourage an atmosphere of community and teamwork, and can help reduce stress. One study found that participating in a wide range of extracurricular activities was generally related to having a higher proportion of academic peers and a smaller proportion of risky peers than individuals who were not involved in structured activities.^{xxii}

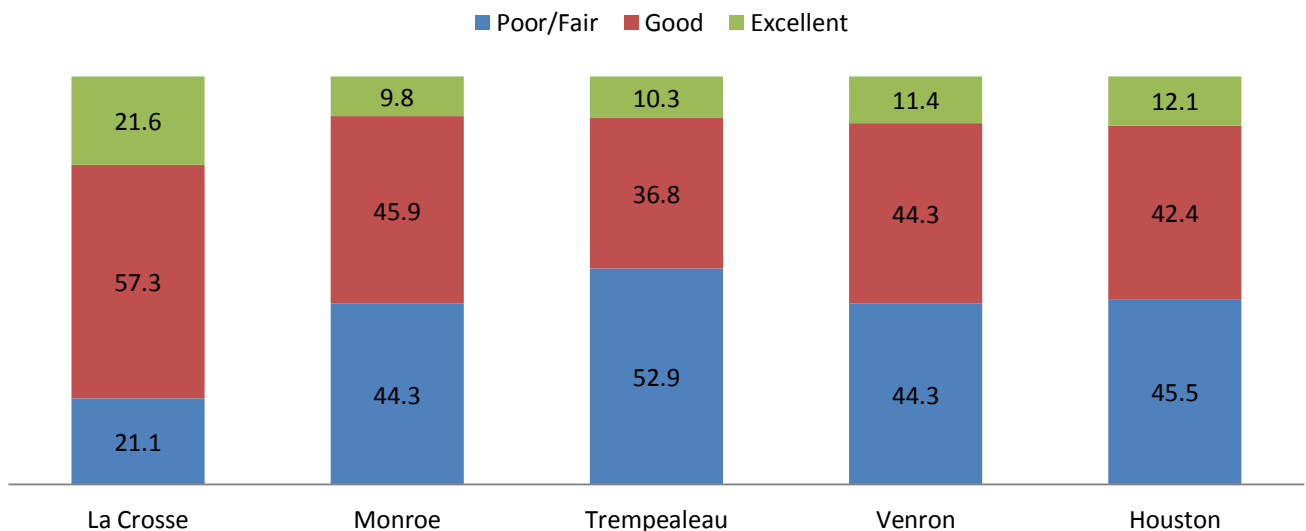
Table 7 shows an average percentage of students that participate in academic, athletic, or music extracurricular activities in the Great Rivers Region. Participation in athletics was typically the most common in each school district, while participation in music was usually the least common in most schools.

County	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
La Crosse	32.0%	36.0%	33.1%
Monroe	46.8%	45.3%	46.3%
Trempealeau	49.5%	63.0%	50.9%
Vernon	44.5%	44.8%	48.5%

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Percentages are based on average percentage of participation in academic, athletic, and music extra-curricular activities.

As part of the COMPASS NOW 2015 Random Household Survey, respondents were asked to rate their community with regard to opportunities youth have to explore and participate in positive activities. Approximately 68% of respondents rated their community as good or excellent in this regard. **Figure 13** shows the ratings by county.

Figure 13: Opportunities for Youth to Explore Interests and Participate in Positive Activities



Source: COMPASS NOW 2015, Random Household Survey

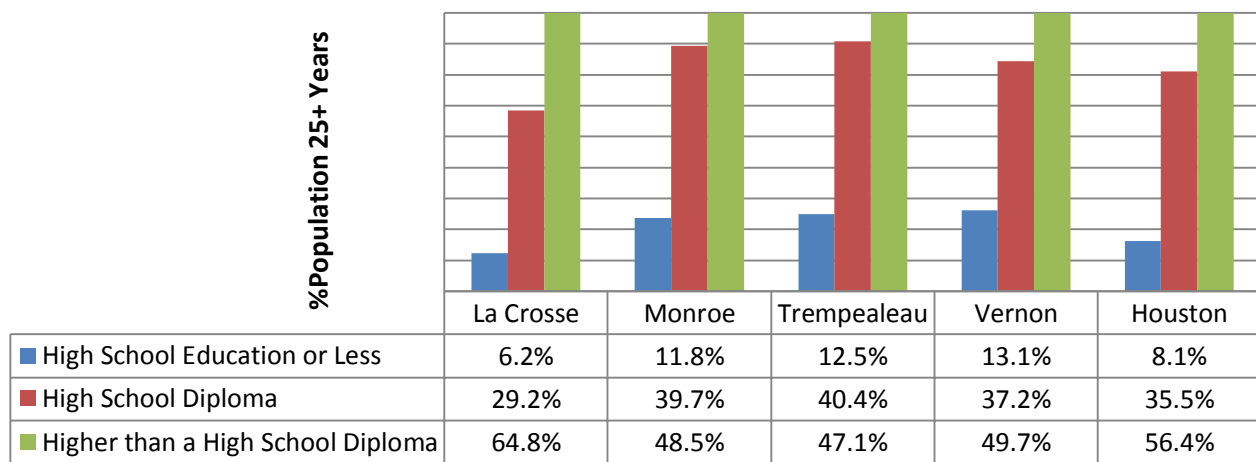
POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Higher education is critical to success in our 21st century globally competitive, knowledge-based economy. Employers are increasingly seeking a more educated workforce. Jobs that previously required a high-school diploma now require some postsecondary education, including two- and four-year degrees, certifications, and other industry recognized credentials. This trend will continue as more industries demand specific skills to compete effectively in a global and technology-based economy.

One of the most commonly measured benefits of achieving a higher education is earning potential. In 2011, the median earnings of individuals with a bachelor’s degree were on average \$21,000 higher than those with only a high school education.^{xxiii} The earning gap increases with age. For example, the gap between those with a bachelor’s degree and those with a high school education increases 54% for 25 to 29-year-olds to 86% for 45 to 49-year-olds.^{xxiii} College-educated adults and their children are also less likely to be obese, and mothers with higher levels of education tend to spend more time with their children (regardless of employment status) and to have higher job satisfaction than those without a college education.^{xxiii}

According to a report from the White House, the number of jobs requiring postsecondary education is rapidly growing. Of the 30 fastest growing occupations, more than half require post-secondary education.^{xxiv} **Figure 14** indicates educational attainment by county for the Great Rivers Region. This trend also applies to rates of unemployment. According to the 2013 U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. unemployment for those with a high school diploma stood at 10.4%, compared to 8.3% for those with some college or an associate’s degree and 4.4% for those with a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Figure 14: Educational Attainment



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2008-2012

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS OF THE GREAT RIVERS REGION

The Great Rivers Region is fortunate to have a great number of higher education choices, including the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Viterbo University, Western Technical College, and Globe University. Other nearby colleges and universities outside the region include Chippewa Valley Technical College, Globe University–Eau Claire, Luther College, St. Mary’s University, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, UW-Richland, and Winona State University. Nearly 80% of respondents to the COMPASS NOW 2015 Random Household Survey rated the quality of higher education in the region as either good or excellent (see **Figure 15**).

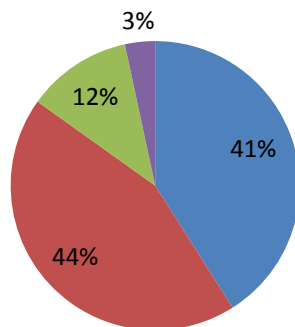
The University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, part of the University of Wisconsin System, continues to position itself among the country’s elite public universities. 2014 fall enrollment reached a record 10,558 students, both graduate and undergraduate. UW-L offers 91 undergraduate programs and 25 graduate programs. Nearly 400 international students bring the world to campus. The University is divided into three colleges: Business Administration, Science and Health, and Liberal Studies. UW-L has consistently ranked among the state’s top public or private higher education institution for master’s

degree institutions, according to US News & World Report, for more than a decade. UW-L is also listed annually among Kiplinger’s Top 100 Best Values, and in spring 2014, the magazine also named UW-L No. 4 in a ranking of the 25 Best College Values Under \$30,000 a Year.

Viterbo University, a private Catholic university, is located in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and enrolls more than 2,000 undergraduate and 800 graduate students in over 70 programs. Viterbo’s nursing program is one of the largest in Wisconsin, and its offerings in education, business, science and the arts, which enjoy a strong reputation. Many adult students seeking to access return-to-school and degree- completion options attend Viterbo. The university has also expanded its online programs for students needing or favoring the convenience of that format. Ten programs are now completely online. Nearly 7,200 alumni of Viterbo live and/or work in the Great Rivers Region’s counties, adding to the economic, cultural, and educational vitality of their communities. As of fall 2014, 39% of Viterbo’s undergraduate enrollment is comprised of residents from the five-county area. Viterbo’s undergraduate enrollment is comprised of 51% first-generation students—a strong indicator of Viterbo’s commitment to improving the lives and opportunities of those seeking the opportunity of a college education.

Figure 15: Quality of Higher Education in the Community

■ Excellent ■ Good ■ Fair ■ Poor



Source: COMPASS NOW 2015 Random Household Survey

Western Technical College is state technical college and part of the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS). The system was created over 100 years ago to meet the training and education needs of specific regions throughout the state. Western’s main campus is in La Crosse, but classes are offered throughout the region, including Black River Falls, Independence, Mauston, Sparta, Tomah, and Viroqua. Western offers more than 60 programs of study, including associate’s degrees, technical diplomas, and certificates, as well as employment skills training.

The mission of the college is to provide relevant, high-quality education, in a collaborative and sustainable environment that changes the lives of students and grows the communities that they serve.

Traditional students and returning adults choose Western for the available programming and for the lower tuition costs. The goal is to keep tuition affordable while maintaining quality education and relevant technology. One way in which Western keeps education more affordable for students is its ability to transfer credits through articulation agreements, which allow students to complete an academic program or general education course at Western and transfer those credits to another institution to complete their studies there. Whatever the ultimate path of education or the investment, Western positively impacts the lives of its students. According to a six-month graduate follow-up survey:

- 93% of 2012 graduates had a job within six months of graduation
- 76% were employed in Western's district and 87% were employed in Wisconsin
- 98% of graduates were satisfied or very satisfied with the education they received
- 34% were continuing their education

Globe University – Opened in 2009 and located in Onalaska, Wisconsin, La Crosse Globe University (GU – La Crosse) is a member of the Globe Education Network (GEN). GEN consists of Globe University, Minnesota School of Business, Broadview University, Minnesota School of Cosmetology, The Institute of Production and Recording and Duluth Business University. These private, for-profit school systems work together through a consortium agreement to provide students with easy transferability of credits if relocating as well as increased options for course selection through online offerings.

The GU-La Crosse campus population is mostly centered in health science programs (Medical Assistant, Medical Administrative Assistant, Massage Therapy, and Veterinary Technology). Together, these programs comprise 53% of the total student population and account for over 50% of the faculty employed at the GU-La Crosse campus. The business, accounting, legal, information technology (IT), and criminal justice programs at the campus, while being smaller programs, are increasing in program population size from quarter to quarter. La Crosse area employers offer potential placement opportunities consistent with the interest in health science programs. Globe University has placed over 82% of the graduates in their field of study upon graduation each year. Globe University is also ranked nationally as a top military-friendly school.

COST OF HIGHER EDUCATION

As has been discussed, obtaining a post-secondary degree is becoming increasingly more necessary when seeking employment. Cost is one of the barriers that is most commonly voiced by those seeking higher education. The cost of a college degree in the U.S. has increased 1,120% over the past 30 years, four times the rate of the consumer price index.^{xxv} According to The College Board, an organization that prepares and administers standardized tests that are used in college admission and placement, the

projected four-year tuition and fees for enrolling at a public university for an in-state resident in 2015 would cost approximately \$39,400. By the year 2033, it is estimated that the same scenario will cost \$94,800.^{xxvi} These studies paint a clear picture as to why students are becoming increasingly indebted when investing in their education.

Figures 16-19 indicate the cost per year, graduation rates, loan default rate, and median borrowing level at higher education institutions in the Great Rivers Region. **Table 8** shows the change in average net cost at each institution from 2008-2010. The cost of education is an important consideration because of its effect on future debt. Students who do not have the luxury of extensive savings will require financial aid to cover the cost of college. Some forms of financial aid must be repaid after completing school regardless of whether the student completes his or her degree. This is an important consideration because, depending on a graduate’s ultimate occupation and salary, his or her debt may be difficult to pay off in a timely manner. The default rate of an institution is also an important consideration because it reflects the likelihood of students repaying their financial aid. Some lenders will not loan money to students attending institutions with high default rates. The graduation rate of an institution should also be considered when choosing a college or university. The percentage of college graduates at a given institution may be influenced by the size of an average college class, faculty hiring practices, quality of curriculum, age of the student, full- or part-time status, the amount spent per student, and availability of support staff.

Figure 16: Cost per Year to Attend

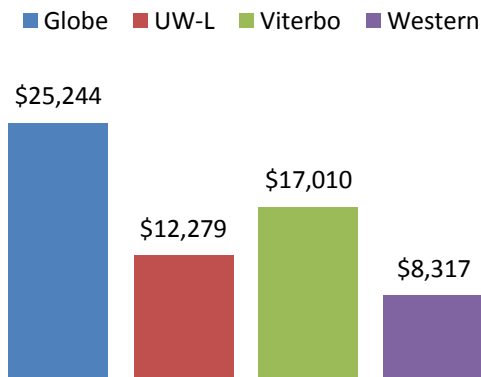


Table 8: Change in Average Net Cost, 2008-2010	
Institution	% Change
Globe	0%
UW-L	+10%
Western	+6.7%
Viterbo	-6.2%

Source: The White House College Score Card: U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

Source: The White House College Score Card: U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

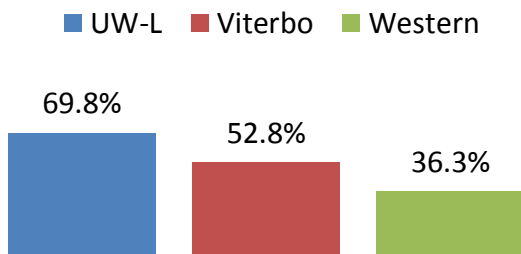
Net price is what undergraduate students pay after grants and scholarships are subtracted from the institution’s cost of attendance.

Costs refer to the average net price for undergraduates at the institution for academic year 2011-12.

Graduation rate data are based on first-time undergraduate students who enrolled full-time. This may not represent all undergraduates that attend an institution. For primarily bachelor’s degree-granting institutions, the graduation rate displayed is for students beginning in fall 2006 and seeking a bachelor’s degree. For primarily associate’s degree-granting institutions and primarily certificate-granting institutions, the graduation rate displayed is for students beginning in Fall 2009.

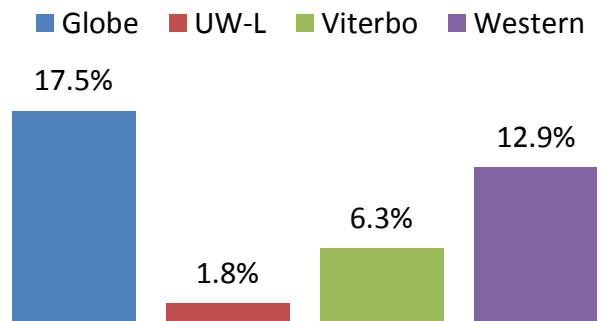
69.8% of full-time students enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse received their bachelor’s degree within 6 years. During the fall of 2012, 1,890 new freshmen were enrolled at UW-L. During the fall of 2013, 1,636 (86.6%) of that same cohort were enrolled at UW-L. 36.3% of full-time students enrolled at Western Technical College graduated within 150% of the expected time for completion and 17.3% transferred to another institution. 52.8% of full-time students enrolled at Viterbo received their bachelor’s degree within 6 years and 38% transferred to another institution. Globe data unavailable due to limited length of time it has been established.

Figure 17: Graduation Rates



Source: The White House College Score Card; U.S. Department of Education’s National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS)

Figure 18: Loan Default Rate



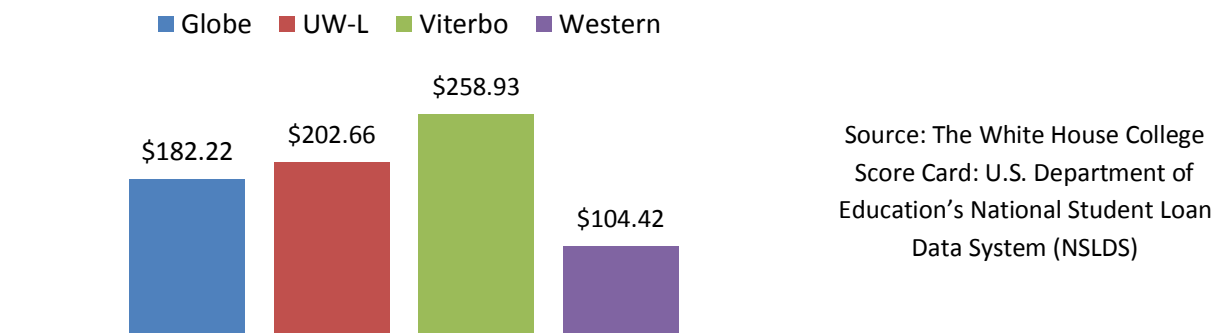
These percentages reflect the percentage of borrowers who defaulted on their Federal student loans within three years of entering repayment. Globe has the highest loan default rate when compared to the other counties in the Great Rivers Region, as well as the national rate of 14.7%.

Source: The White House College Score Card; U.S. Department of Education’s National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS)

Data in **Figure 19** represents all undergraduate borrowers who graduated or withdrew from the institution between July 1, 2011, and June 30, 2012. All federal loans for undergraduate study, including Parent PLUS loans, are included for this cohort of borrowers. Only the debt associated with the students' attendance at the institution is included in the calculation. The estimated monthly repayment amount has been calculated using the Department's standard graduated repayment calculator based on an interest rate of 6.8%. See bullets below for details about institutions in the Great Rivers Region.

- Globe students typically borrow \$15,834 in federal loans for a student's undergraduate study. The federal loan payment over 10 years for this amount is approximately \$182.22 per month.
- University of Wisconsin-La Crosse students typically borrow \$17,610 in federal loans for a student's undergraduate study. The federal loan payment over 10 years for this amount is approximately \$202.66 per month.
- Viterbo students typically borrow \$22,500 in federal loans for a student's undergraduate study. The Federal loan payment over 10 years for this amount is approximately \$258.93 per month.
- Western students typically borrow \$9,074 in federal loans for a student's undergraduate study. The federal loan payment over 10 years for this amount is approximately \$104.42 per month.

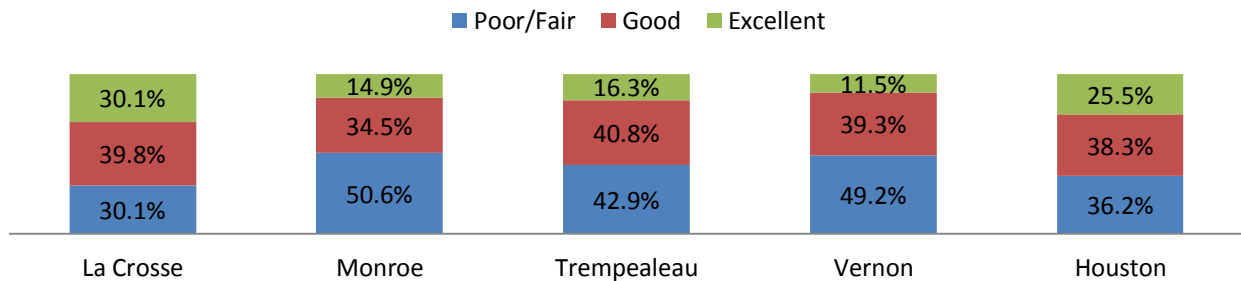
Figure 19: Median Borrowing per Month



JOB SKILLS TRAINING AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

Continually acquiring knowledge and developing skills is vital to succeed and advance in the workforce. Job skills training can involve learning or improving upon many skills including math, work ethic, verbal and written communication, or leadership and collaboration. Respondents of the COMPASS NOW 2015 Random Household Survey were asked to rate the opportunities in their job to gain knowledge or skills (**Figure 20**). Approximately 17% of respondents ranked this as excellent.

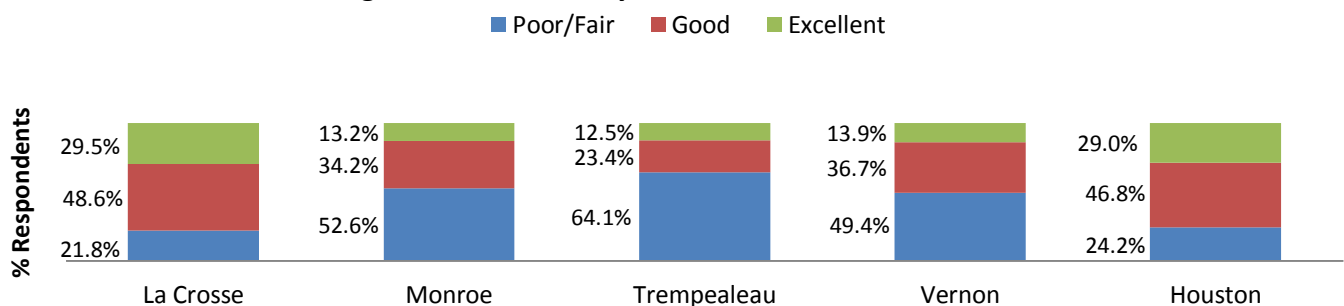
Figure 20: Opportunities in Your Job to Gain Knowledge or Skills, Percent



Source: COMPASS NOW 2015 Random Household Survey

The importance of lifelong learning is not only visible in the workforce. Learning new skills throughout the lifespan develops abilities, adds openness and interest to life, and keep skills current in an ever-changing world. Respondents to the COMPASS NOW 2015 Random Household Survey were asked to rate the availability of community resources to learn new skills (**Figure 21**), and on average, 22% ranked this as excellent. Residents of the Great Rivers Region have several opportunities to explore job training and professional development outside of their employer through licensure and certification programs at Western Technical College, continuing education at UW-L, independent learning programs through UW-Extension, and job training programs offered by Workforce Connections, a non-profit organization largely funded by the Workforce Investment Act to provide training and employment assistance to displaced workers.

Figure 21: Community Resources to Learn New Skills



Source: COMPASS NOW 2015 Random Household Survey

COMPASS NOW 2015 Education Profile Sources

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