



YEAR ONE REPORT • 2025-2026

So, What Happened?

*A Counter Impact Report on Learning, Adaptation, Belonging, and
Community-Centered Growth*



STILL RISING INSTITUTE
Rise with Purpose



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01 WHY THIS REPORT EXISTS

Still Rising Institute started with a question:

“Can you help?”

The question came from educators at Benjamin Stoddert Middle School who wanted to provide field trips, cultural experiences, and extended learning opportunities for their students.

The answer was **yes**.

Together, Ms. Kendall Newman, Dr. Zaneta Brown-Ingles, school administrators, counselors, teachers, families, community members, and supporters built what would eventually become Future Focus Academy, Legacy Builders, and **Still Rising Institute**.

Looking back, our first year exceeded many of our expectations.

We initially hoped to attract five students. Instead, students and families showed up in numbers that allowed us to build a true cohort experience. Students who began the year as strangers became part of a community. Our end-of-year celebration brought together families, educators, and supporters to recognize the accomplishments of our students and staff, and we were honored to receive the county's **Be The Difference Volunteer Award** for the 2025-2026 Academic Year.

Those successes matter.

But they are not the reason this report exists.

Much of my professional career has been spent studying education through research, data, strategy, and policy. Over time, I became interested in a foundational question:

How well do we actually understand the experiences of the students we are trying to help?

Adults make important decisions about young people's lives every day. We decide what support they need, what opportunities they should have, what challenges require attention, and what success should look like.

Yet many of those decisions are made from a distance.

I wanted to know what school felt like for the students living it.

I wanted to know whether they were okay.

Whether they were finding joy.

Whether they were building meaningful relationships.

Whether they felt comfortable with who they were.

Whether they saw value in themselves, their families, and their communities.

Whether they believed they had something meaningful to contribute.

And whether they felt the future still belonged to them.

This report is not a collection of charts and outcomes. It is a record of what we observed, what changed, what surprised us, and what students and families taught us along the way.

Because before we can improve educational experiences, we have to understand the people having them. And before we can make good decisions for young people, we have to understand how they experience the environments we create.

Ashley Robinson-Spann, Ph.D.

Founder & Board President

Still Rising Institute



02 WHAT WE SET OUT TO DO

Still Rising Institute began with a simple idea: young people need opportunities to learn, grow, and engage with their communities beyond the traditional school day.

Our original vision was to create extended learning cohort experiences that combined academic enrichment, cultural identity, community engagement, social and emotional development, and future preparation. We wanted students to build relationships, develop confidence, strengthen foundational skills, and participate in experiences that would support them throughout middle school, high school, college, and beyond.

We also believed students should have opportunities to understand the communities they were part of and the role they could play within them. Students will always need to navigate the world as it is, but they should also have opportunities to imagine, build, contribute to, and strengthen the world around them.

From the beginning, we viewed learning as more than academic performance. We wanted students to experience education as something connected to their lives, relationships, communities, and future aspirations. We hoped to create an environment where students could form meaningful peer relationships, engage with caring adults, develop a stronger sense of identity and belonging, and begin to see themselves as active participants in their schools and communities.

Our Original Goals

Before students can learn from a program, they have to choose to participate in it. One of our earliest and most important goals was simple: create an experience students would want to return to week after week.

- Provide meaningful extended learning opportunities for sixth-grade students at Benjamin Stoddert Middle School.
- Build and sustain a learning cohort by creating an experience students wanted to attend consistently.
- Create an environment where students felt welcomed, valued, and excited to participate.
- Provide hot, high-quality meals that reinforced a sense of care, hospitality, and community. We wanted students to feel less like participants in a program and more like members of an extended family gathered around a shared table.
- Strengthen connections among students, families, schools, and community partners.
- Increase student exposure to new ideas, experiences, and possibilities.
- Support students' academic, social, and personal development.
- Create learning environments that felt engaging, relevant, and community-centered.
- Explore how extended learning experiences influence student confidence, participation, belonging, and future planning.
- Better understand what students experience day to day and the conditions that support their growth, engagement, and well-being.

Our Original Assumptions

At the outset, we believed it was possible to create a learning experience that felt meaningfully different from what students typically encountered during the school week.

We believed we could combine several elements that are often treated separately:

- Academic enrichment
- Cultural and historical learning
- Community engagement
- Future planning and career exploration
- Social and emotional development
- Relationship-building among students and adults

We assumed students would value opportunities to learn in different environments and through different experiences.

We believed field trips, guest speakers, college and career exploration, hands-on learning activities, and community partnerships could help make learning feel more relevant and engaging.

We assumed we would have sufficient time, resources, volunteers, and partner support to deliver many of the experiences we envisioned.

We believed a cohort-based model would help students build lasting relationships with one another and create a stronger sense of belonging and community.

We also assumed that if we created an environment that was engaging, welcoming, and meaningful, students would continue to return week after week.

Perhaps most importantly, we assumed that combining academic support with experiences focused on identity, relationships, community, and the future would create a more holistic model of student development than any one component could achieve on its own.

Our Original Design

The program was originally designed as a four-hour Saturday experience for 6th Grade students, running from **8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.**, that combined academic support, relationship-building, enrichment, and community.

We wanted the experience to feel different from a traditional school day while still maintaining strong connections to what students were learning during the week.

The morning began with a fresh, hot breakfast prepared on-site and available from **8:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.** Food was not viewed as an operational necessity, but as part of the program's culture. We wanted students to start the day around a shared meal, creating opportunities for conversation, relationship-building, and a family-like atmosphere.

From **9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.**, students participated in online Math and English Language Arts learning overseen by certified teachers. Students utilized the same educational platforms, accounts, and tools provided through their school. The intent was twofold:

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- Support continuity between the Saturday program and the school day.
 - Create opportunities to monitor participation and academic growth over time.

From **10:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.**, students participated in enrichment experiences designed to expand learning beyond traditional academic content.

These activities were intended to develop critical thinking, curiosity, communication, and problem-solving skills while introducing students to new ideas, topics, and disciplines.

Enrichment experiences were designed to include:

- History and cultural learning
- Science and STEM exploration
- Hands-on projects and activities
- Community engagement opportunities
- Career and future pathway exploration
- Leadership and social development experiences

A particularly important part of the original design was cultural learning and exposure. We wanted students to engage with history, community, and identity in ways that helped them understand both the legacy they inherited and the possibilities available to them in the future.

We also envisioned multiple field trips as part of the experience. These trips were intended to extend learning beyond the classroom while increasing exposure to institutions, environments, careers, cultures, and experiences that many students might not otherwise encounter. Rather than treating field trips as rewards, we viewed them as learning opportunities that could expand students' understanding of themselves, their communities, and the wider world.

At its core, the program was designed to create a learning community. Academic support was important, but it was only one component of a broader effort to help students build relationships, develop confidence, explore new possibilities, and experience learning as something connected to their lives and futures.

03 WHAT WE ACTUALLY DID

The 2025-2026 program year began with the launch of **Future Focus Academy**, a Saturday extended learning program for sixth-grade students at Benjamin Stoddert Middle School.

The program was delivered in partnership with school administrators, teachers, counselors, and community supporters. Programming combined academic support, enrichment activities, meals, relationship-building, and opportunities for students to engage with new ideas, experiences, and environments.

17 SATURDAY SESSIONS — SIXTH GRADE	30 APPROX. SIXTH-GRADE PARTICIPANTS	2 FIELD EXPERIENCES COMPLETED
10 SATURDAY SESSIONS — SEVENTH GRADE	12 APPROX. SEVENTH-GRADE PARTICIPANTS	1 FIELD EXPERIENCE COMPLETED

Timeline

PERIOD	PROGRAM ACTIVITY	SESSION DATES	KEY NOTES
Fall 2025	Future Focus Academy launched in October 2025 with sixth-grade students.	October 18, October 25, November 1, November 8, November 15, November 22, December 13	Attendance ranged from 12 to 19 students per session, with most sessions serving 16 to 19 students .
Spring 2026	Programming resumed in February 2026 and continued through May 2026.	February 21, February 28, March 7, March 14, March 21, April 11, April 18, April 25, May 2, May 9	Programming expanded to include a seventh-grade cohort, Legacy Builders.

Students Served

SIXTH GRADE PROGRAM

The sixth-grade cohort included approximately **30 participating students** throughout the year.

A total of **17 Saturday sessions** were offered across the fall and spring semesters.

Attendance remained relatively consistent throughout much of the year, with many students returning for multiple sessions and several attending six or more Saturdays.

One of our original goals was simple: create an experience students wanted to return to. While attendance fluctuated throughout the year, the number of returning students suggested many found value in the program experience.

SEVENTH GRADE EXPANSION

In Spring 2026, the program expanded to include seventh-grade students.

While enrollment was similar to the sixth-grade cohort, attendance was less consistent than anticipated. Communication challenges and the timing of the program expansion likely contributed to lower participation rates and reduced continuity among students.

The seventh-grade experience provided an important opportunity to compare participation patterns across groups and identify challenges associated with recruitment, communication, and cohort development.

MEALS

Meals became a significant part of the program experience.

During the first phase of the program, breakfast and lunch ingredients, materials, field trips, and many operating expenses were funded directly by the founder.

Breakfast was prepared on-site and often included hot meals cooked by staff and volunteers before students arrived.

Students frequently observed meal preparation and interacted with staff during this time. Over the course of the year, it became clear that the meals served a purpose beyond nutrition. They created opportunities for conversation, connection, and community-building.

In Spring 2026, grant funding became available and helped support program operations, including lunches.

While the additional funding provided much-needed support, it also changed part of the experience. Vendor-provided meals reduced the level of personalization that had been created through preparing food on-site. The difference was noticeable, and students often expressed appreciation for the homemade meals and the sense of care associated with them.

Partnerships and Support

The program relied heavily on partnerships with:

- Benjamin Stoddert Middle School
- Teachers and school staff
- Counselors and administrators
- Community supporters
- Volunteers

These partnerships made it possible to provide academic support, enrichment experiences, meals, supervision, transportation planning, and future program development.

Enrichment and Field Experiences

Throughout the year, students participated in enrichment activities focused on:

- Critical thinking
- History and culture
- Science and exploration, including an inventors workshop led by the U.S. Patent Office
- Hands-on learning
- Community awareness
- Future planning

The original design envisioned multiple field experiences throughout the year. In practice, only two field trips were completed.

Transportation costs, distance limitations, available funding, scheduling constraints, and the need for families to provide drop-off and pick-up transportation ultimately limited the number of off-site experiences we were able to offer.

This reality became one of several important implementation lessons explored in the following sections of this report.

04 WHAT CHANGED

Like many new programs, our plans encountered reality.

Some assumptions proved true. Some proved incomplete. Others required significant adaptation as student needs, available resources, attendance patterns, staffing, and implementation realities became clearer. What follows are some of the most important changes we made throughout the year and what prompted them.

THE LEARNING PATTERN

WE THOUGHT the program would mainly extend students' learning.

WE OBSERVED that implementation revealed deeper needs, constraints, and opportunities.

WE ADAPTED by treating the first year as a learning cycle rather than a finished model.

01 We Thought Students Needed Enrichment. We Learned They Also Needed Foundations.

We designed many activities around critical thinking, discussion, cultural exploration, and exposure to new ideas.

Students arrived with a wider range of academic readiness than we anticipated. In many cases, reading, writing, vocabulary, and analytical skills required additional support before students could fully engage with higher-level activities.

Rather than following our plans rigidly, we adapted. The experience reminded us that opportunity and foundation-building are not competing priorities. Students often need both.

02 We Thought Food Was Logistics. We Learned It Was Culture.

Meals were originally included to ensure students were fed and ready to learn.

Instead, food became one of the strongest community-building elements of the program. Students gathered around meals, conversations emerged naturally, and relationships developed over time.

The lesson was simple: hospitality matters. Students notice when people invest time and care on their behalf.

03 We Thought Field Trips Expanded Opportunity. We Learned Access Has Limits.

We envisioned multiple field trips throughout the year.

What we underestimated was the influence of transportation, scheduling, funding, and family logistics on student participation.

The year reinforced a simple reality: opportunities only matter if students can access them.

04 We Thought Program Quality Came from Design. We Learned It Depends on Capacity.

We believed strong lessons and engaging activities would be the primary drivers of success.

They mattered, but so did staffing, volunteer support, energy, and time.

We learned that not every lesson needed to be completed exactly as planned. Sometimes relationships mattered more than coverage. Sometimes flexibility mattered more than fidelity.

05 We Thought Enrollment Created Participation. We Learned Participation Must Be Earned.

Enrollment and participation turned out to be very different things.

Attendance was influenced by transportation, family schedules, competing commitments, weather, relationships, and motivation.

The lesson was clear: recruiting students is only the beginning. Participation depends on continuously building value, trust, and relationships with students and families.

06 We Thought Academic Support Would Strengthen Learning. We Learned Learning and Participation Are Not the Same Thing.

The academic component of the program relied largely on existing school platforms and assignments.

Over time, we became less convinced that activity always reflected learning. Students completed tasks, but some of the most meaningful learning occurred elsewhere: in conversations, collaboration, experimentation, and creative problem-solving.

As a result, we increasingly emphasized activities that required students to create, design, test ideas, and make decisions. The experience reinforced an important lesson: knowledge and skills matter, but so does ownership. Students need opportunities not only to learn, but to think, create, and contribute.

05 THE RESPONSE

One question sat beneath everything else:

Would students come back?

Many did.

Students returned, relationships formed, and a collection of individuals gradually became a community. Families stayed engaged, supported participation, and celebrated accomplishments alongside their children.

The strongest outcome was not a lesson, activity, or field trip. It was belonging. Because before students can develop confidence, leadership, or agency, they often need something more fundamental:

A place where they can be their whole selves.

06 LOOKING AHEAD

The first year of Future Focus Academy gave us more than a program model. It gave us a clearer understanding of the challenges students face, the opportunities they value, and the conditions that support growth, belonging, and engagement.

In the coming year, we hope to expand our cohort model to include sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students, serving approximately 20 students per grade level. Future cohorts are expected to meet twice monthly, a change that reflects both implementation realities and school-level decisions regarding scheduling, staffing, and participation.

We also expect to benefit from stronger funding and partnership structures. Breakfast and lunch will be supported through a combination of grant funding and community school resources, helping ensure that meals remain part of the program experience while reducing the financial burden on staff and volunteers.

At the same time, growth is not the primary goal.

Our first year reinforced that meaningful youth development is not simply about providing activities or increasing participation. It is about creating environments where students feel connected, supported, challenged, and valued.

As we continue this work, several questions remain central:

- How do students develop ownership over their learning?
- What experiences strengthen confidence, agency, and decision-making?
- How do young people build meaningful relationships with one another and their communities?

- What conditions help students move from participation to contribution?
- How do we create experiences that students not only attend, but genuinely value?

We hope to increase not only the number of students we serve, but also our understanding of what helps young people and communities flourish.

07 CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Still Rising Institute was created to support students. It was also created to learn.

Over the course of this first year, students taught us far more than whether particular activities worked or whether specific goals were achieved. They helped us better understand what engagement looks like, what belonging feels like, and how trust is built over time.

Many of the lessons were simple.

Students want to feel welcomed.

They want opportunities to build relationships.

They want experiences that feel meaningful.

They want adults who are present, consistent, and invested in their growth.

And they want spaces where they can be more than a test score, a behavior report, or a set of outcomes.

Perhaps the most important lesson was that relationships are not separate from learning. They help make learning possible.

When students feel connected, they participate differently.

When they feel valued, they engage differently.

When they feel that they belong, they begin to imagine new possibilities for themselves and their future.

The work ahead is not simply about expanding a program. It is about continuing to understand the experiences of young people and creating environments where they can grow into confident learners, contributors, and community members.

The first year gave us a starting point. The students showed us where to go next.

08 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The first year of **Still Rising Institute** was made possible through the time, effort, expertise, encouragement, and generosity of many people.

We are deeply grateful to the students and families who chose to spend their Saturdays with us. Thank you for your trust, your participation, your feedback, your patience, and your willingness to be part of something new.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the educators, leaders, and staff of Benjamin Stoddert Middle School whose partnership and commitment made this work possible.

SPECIAL THANKS

- Principal Marquelle Peavy
- Mrs. Tiffany L. Casey-Omosowon
- Dr. Zaneta Brown-Ingles
- Ms. Kendall Newman
- Ms. Tami Dahm
- Mrs. Michelle Bullock
- Mrs. Danielle Badgett
- Ms. Bria Hill
- Ms. Rachel Nelson
- Mr. Victor Lopez
- Ms. Lisa Devlin
- Ms. Cayla Newkirk
- Ms. Maiya Mack-Harris

We are also grateful to the support staff, volunteers, guest speakers, community partners, and supporters who contributed their time and expertise throughout the year.

A special thank you to the parents and guardians who adjusted schedules, provided transportation, encouraged participation, and trusted us with their children. Your support made this work possible.

Finally, thank you to the students. Thank you for your willingness to try new things. Thank you for your questions. Most importantly, thank you for teaching us.



This report reflects what we learned together.