

CSP FUNDS HELP DIVERSE MILWAUKEE SCHOOL MAINTAIN HIGH QUALITY

Just two years after its founding, Milwaukee Excellence Charter School, which serves students in grades 6-10 and where 97% of the students are Black, was the [highest-rated school in the city of Milwaukee](#). The school's math proficiency rates are double those of the district, and the school has also surpassed the district in reading proficiency. In a city that dramatically underserves its Black students — 52% of Milwaukee's student population is Black, yet just 7% of its Black students were proficient in reading on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) — that's no small feat. That Milwaukee Excellence achieved such notable success in just a few years demonstrates what's possible for Milwaukee's Black students when there's meaningful investment in their families

and communities. The \$750,000 Federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) implementation subgrant awarded to Milwaukee Excellence by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has been a crucial component of that investment.

Growing up in Milwaukee, Maurice Thomas rarely saw schools serving Black children well. It was even rarer to see Black-led schools. Thomas wanted to change that. He founded Milwaukee Excellence Charter School in 2016, with a simple but bold mission: put all students on a path to college through rigorous curricula and intensive remediation. His approach, which included doubling instruction time in math and reading, weekend homework, and an extended school day, quickly paid off. Within two years, students were





experiencing academic success and Milwaukee Excellence had begun to receive [nationwide acclaim](#).

Milwaukee Excellence's model did not leave much room in the budget, however, and when the district could no longer accommodate transportation for the extended school day, Thomas was unable to cover the cost within the school's budget. He and his staff had to abandon the extended school day—sacrificing students' extra remediation time with teachers. These and other constraints prevented Thomas from sustaining the school's success while it was saving up the money necessary to expand to serve more students. In response, he applied for a CSP grant.

CSP funds helped put Milwaukee Excellence on stable financial footing, provide school leaders with resources to sustain the school's academic outcomes, and position the school to add more grades in the coming years. In particular, the \$750,000 grant from CSP allowed the school to make one-time investments that would pay off over the long term — specifically investments in the school's academic model, including professional development for the administrative and teaching staff; a new math curriculum; salaries to hire a dean of curriculum and an instructional coach; and a new accountability tool to track attendance, academics, and culture. Each investment helped Thomas and his team sustain their success even without the benefits of the extended school day. Thomas highlights the impact of two particular investments that would not have been possible without CSP funding: an important professional development opportunity for his staff and a new math curriculum, ALEKS.

Knowing his teachers would need to be more effective with fewer hours in the classroom, Thomas used a significant portion of the grant on professional development. In 2018, he flew his staff to New York City to study two high-performing charter schools, Uncommon Schools and KIPP, for three days. “[That trip] would not have been possible without CSP funds. We spent three days

studying their instructional models and observed teachers in action. We saw the school culture in action. We took notes, made videos, and had time to interview teachers about their experience with professional development and coaching. We took what we learned and implemented it in our school a week later,” explains Thomas. “With this kind of professional development I was able to ensure that the lessons we learned were translated to our practice.”

Thomas also used CSP funds to purchase a new math curriculum, the ALEKS Math Program. “ALEKS is [like having a] third math teacher in every grade level. Students are expected to complete 20 units of math outside of the work required by the teacher. Using our students' Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) scores, ALEKS creates an individualized learning plan for every student. This allows for acceleration, which means we have some 6th graders learning fractions and others doing 9th grade geometry,” says Thomas. “[ALEKS] gives us a competitive advantage that would not be possible in the early years of our school without CSP funding.”

With these and other investments enabled by CSP funding, Thomas and his staff have been able to adjust to a shortened school day in ways that do not compromise academics or instruction. With a strong academic foundation, Milwaukee Excellence is well positioned for growth: the school added its first 10th grade class this fall and will eventually serve students in grades 6-12. Notes Thomas, “Without CSP funds, it would just be too difficult to consider expansion. If we couldn't expand, our impact on Milwaukee's students would be limited, and a lot of people like me would have to start thinking about other ways to make an impact [on children].”