



**HOWARD COUNTY  
LIBRARY SYSTEM**  
Learn. Grow. Connect.

2024-2027

# Strategic Plan



connect



learn



grow





# Welcome!



In 2019, the Library embarked on a collaborative project to update our strategic plan. Starting with conversations at the Longest Table, we held 26 sessions in our branches and at community group meetings to talk with and listen to community about their aspirations, learning trends, shifts in technology, growth patterns and more...until the world shut down in March 2020.

Exercising our expertise and agility, we quickly and efficiently stood up virtual classes and events, developed ways to get materials into your hands expediently and safely, and created new opportunities and services all while navigating our way through the pandemic and working with partners to best serve our community during an unprecedented time.

In 2023, we resumed strategic planning, contracting with Due East Partners to lead a process to engage our team and community in a variety of ways. We gathered thousands of data points from our staff, partners, and residents about their hopes, dreams and big ideas, and most importantly, what matters most for the future of our library. We heard two things loud and clear: You want the library to be the place where

everyone can learn, grow, and connect. And you love your library!

We believe a strong library is vital for a strong community. We are grateful you see this demonstrated through our service. Your library stands ready to help move the needle in areas of great importance. You shared, and we agree, that libraries provide critical early learning spaces, resources and instruction for preschoolers and their caregivers. Teens need safe havens to be themselves, discover opportunities, and explore new experiences. And everyone deserves to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion at the library, through people, programming, materials, and policies that represent their identities and interests.

Guided by the input of thousands of community members, this new strategic plan provides the framework for HCLS to fulfill our mission in service to our beautifully diverse community in the years to come. Together, we will empower all people in Howard County to reach their potential.

We hope you see yourselves in this plan and look forward to seeing you at the library.



Tonya Aikens, President and CEO



Kelly Smith, Board Chair



# About Our Strategic Plan





# Engaging Our Community

In early 2023, HCLS issued a public Request for Proposals and selected Due East Partners, a local, women-owned consulting firm, to guide our strategic planning process. With Due East's support, HCLS engaged thousands of community members through listening & engagement sessions, events, interactive displays, and surveys in five languages.

The feedback was clear. **You love your library.** We also heard that HCLS needs to do more to communicate what we do and why as we broaden our reach. As a first step, we updated our mission, vision, and core values to reflect the words and voices of our community. We also prioritized three shared results we are working toward with our partners.

**3167+**

**survey respondents** including:

Board • Staff • Friends • Partners • Users  
Residents • Volunteers • Business and  
Community Leaders • Key Informants • Others



**600+**

**Attendees of  
listening and  
engagement sessions  
& community events**



**“A library is a cathedral for learning—it should be welcoming, beautiful, comfortable, inclusive, and also feel calm and alive as a place of thinking and discovery.”**

Community survey respondent





# Mission

Your place to...



connect



learn



grow



Hi

## Vision

An empowered community  
where all people reach  
their potential.

## 3-5 Year Results



All children enter kindergarten  
ready to learn



Teens and young adults feel a  
sense of agency and belonging



An inclusive, connected community  
where everyone feels they belong

## Values

Community

Learning

Equity

Intellectual  
Freedom

Teamwork

Hi



..... We Are Working Together to Ensure...

## All children enter school ready to learn.

While just over half of all students entering kindergarten in Howard County demonstrate readiness on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, that figure masks major inequities.

Among English Language Learners, just

**11%** demonstrate readiness

Other subgroups with below average readiness include:

**41%** Black/African American students

**32%** low income households

**27%** Hispanic/Latino Students

**23%** those with disabilities



Every child deserves a strong start in school and life. HCLS' instructors and child-friendly environments fill a critical space in kindergarten readiness for ages birth to 5.

Directly addressing disparities and opportunity gaps, **libraries play an enormous role in predicting future reading levels and closing vocabulary gaps by providing stimulating, literacy-rich environments for young children.**

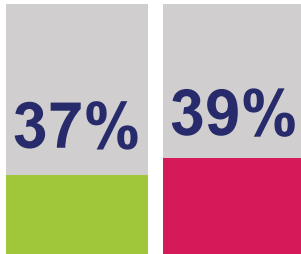


..... We Are Working Together to Ensure...

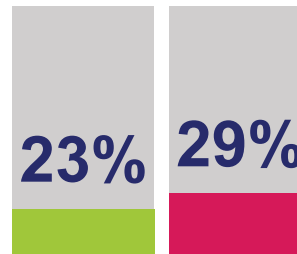
## Teens and young adults feel a sense of agency and belonging.

More than one-third of middle and high school students reported:

feeling sad or hopeless for at least two weeks or more during 2021



that their mental health was not good most of the time or always



● middle school students ● high school students

The teen years are critical for social and emotional development; however, teens are more isolated than ever. **At the library, teens can feel a sense of belonging as they navigate the challenges of adolescence and explore their futures.**

HCLS works in collaboration with teens to create spaces where they will feel welcome and included. Additional staff co-create programs and activities with and for teens. Creating a sense of connectedness decreases risks related to substance use, mental health, violence, and sexual behavior.

**Black and Hispanic students in Howard County report worse mental and emotional health experiences than students of other racial and ethnic groups.**

Hispanic students are:  
**5X** more likely to skip school because they do not feel safe

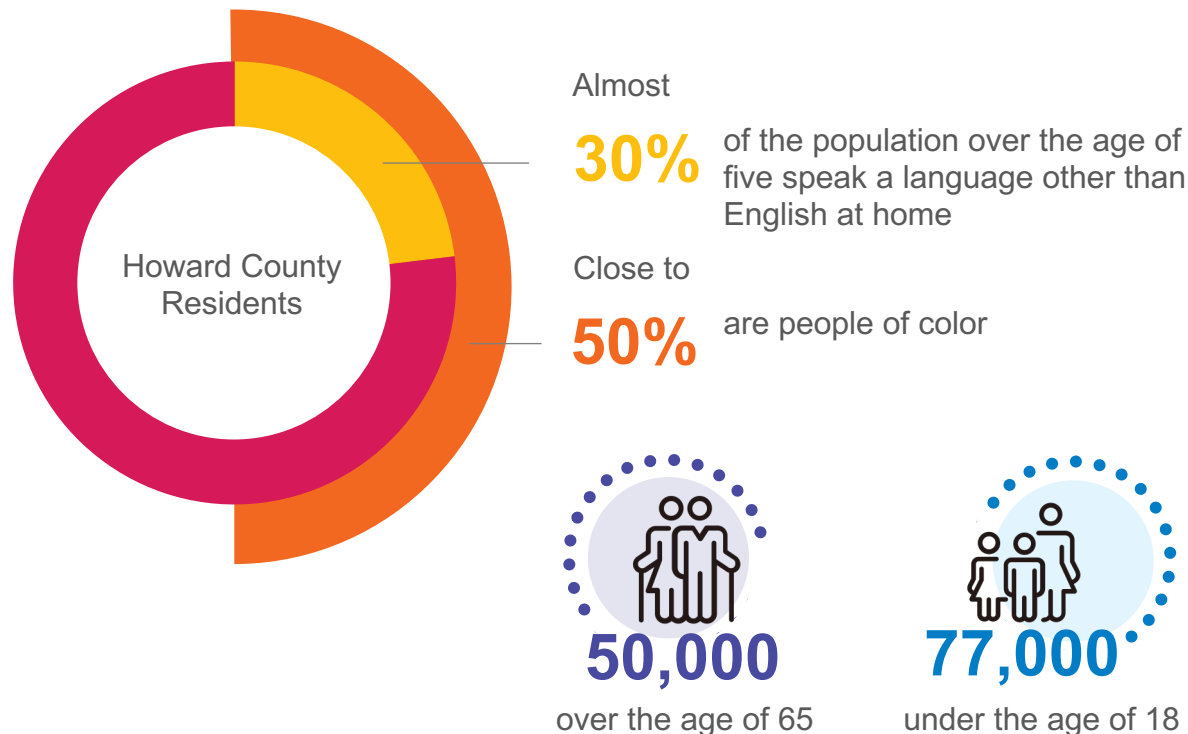
Black students are:  
**2.5X** more likely to report being threatened with a weapon compared to NH White students

Source: [Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2011-2021](#)



# ..... We Are Working Together to Ensure... An inclusive, connected community where everyone feels they belong.

Howard County is a diverse community of nearly 350,000 people.



Source: [U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2017-2021 microdata.](#)



Remembering that all community members are library stakeholders, whether they are current library customers or not, we made efforts to learn from both users and non-users alike. We held engagement sessions and made our survey available in five languages - Spanish, Korean, Mandarin, Cantonese, and English.

By adopting an Asset Based Community Development - Equity Focused (ABCDEF) framework, **libraries increase collaboration and empower stakeholders to transform their lives and communities in ways that are truly relevant, even to those experiencing the most marginalization.**



**“A public library is a physical and online location for people to answer questions; it’s also a place to discover what we didn’t know we needed to know.”**

**Partner engagement session participant**





# Pulling It All Together



# Priority #1 .....

## Enhance Early Learning

**WE BELIEVE...Libraries, a child's first public learning space, are essential to succeed.**

Learning begins at birth. Through its classes and resources, HCLS is critical in setting all children up for success in kindergarten and beyond.

### GOALS

- 1 Increase language, literacy, and social foundations for ages birth to 3
- 2 Increase parent and caregiver engagement

**“The most important period of life is not the age of university studies, but the first one, the period from birth to the age of six.”**

**Maria Montessori**



## Priority #2 .....

# Engage and Empower

**WE BELIEVE... Everyone has gifts to offer and should have the power to shape what impacts them.**

By enhancing community ownership in library programming, HCLS will give everyone the chance to lead, learn, and serve others.

### GOALS

- 1 Strengthen community understanding and access of the breadth and depth of service we offer
- 2 Increase co-creation
- 3 Increase opportunities and impact in teen engagement, belonging, and educational success

**“There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.”**

**Margaret J. Wheatley, author, co-founder and president of The Berkana Institute**





## Priority #3 .....

# Celebrate and Connect

**WE BELIEVE... We are better together.**

Libraries welcome individuals with diverse lived experiences, backgrounds, and beliefs to come together, where they can share personal stories, listen to the stories of others, and celebrate community together.

### GOALS

- 1 Strengthen community connectedness across all incomes and backgrounds
- 2 Equip community with tools, resources, space, and connections to advance their priorities

**“Diversity is the mix. Inclusion is making the mix work.”**

**Andres Tapia, author**





**“The public library is one of the last free spaces where the community can gather, find entertainment, be educated, or just be.”**

**Staff survey respondent**



# Acknowledgements

Thank you to the **600+ community members** who provided input in 2019 and **nearly 3,200 staff, Board of Trustees, Friends, partners and community members** who participated in 2023, collectively shaping our new Strategic Plan for Howard County Library System.



## SPECIAL THANKS TO:

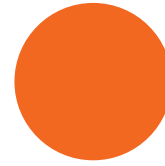
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**“La biblioteca es un lugar que enriquece nuestra comunidad. Es bonito, provee servicios gratuitos y hace la educación accesible para todos.”** Staff survey respondent







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