



Bethune Academy students ride past a painted traffic circle. *Source: Wisconsin Bike Fed*

# Milwaukee Brings Beauty to Traffic Calming

## Introduction

The City of Milwaukee and Wisconsin Bike Fed staff teamed up to bring a creative, community-centered approach to improve the walking and biking connection between a school and a nearby park. Utilizing Milwaukee's High Injury Network and community feedback, the project team selected the Galena Street corridor, which serves the K-8 Mary McLeod Bethune Academy and the surrounding neighborhoods. The team partnered with Bethune Academy students to design and paint a series of existing pinned-on concrete bump outs and traffic circles along the corridor. The project was supported by the National Center for Safe Routes to School mini-grant program made possible by General Motors (GM).

# Leveraging existing community partnerships for quick results

Marissa Meyer, Senior Transportation Planner with the City of Milwaukee, leads the city's Safe Routes to School program in close partnership with the Wisconsin Bike Fed. With just a few months to work on the Bethune Academy project, Meyer worked with Danya Littlefield, Senior Transportation Planner with the City of Milwaukee, who oversees the city's Paint the Pavement program, to design the project approach with the Wisconsin Bike Fed. The Paint the Pavement program is designed to support community-driven requests to paint crosswalks, sidewalks, intersections, residential streets, and curb extensions to "enhance community identity and build a sense of place."<sup>1</sup>

Wisconsin Bike Fed, founded in 1988, has been a key player in Safe Routes to School programming in the city and throughout the state.<sup>2</sup> Through a program led by Education Director Michael Anderson, Wisconsin Bike Fed developed a series of bike education campaigns designed to educate teens and youth on safe biking practices. In addition, Wisconsin Bike Fed plays a significant role in creating spaces that prioritize safety and uplifting community in the City of Milwaukee through successful collaborations with schools, community organizations, local artists, and city staff.

Littlefield emphasized that the city's partnership with Wisconsin Bike Fed was essential to the project's success, emphasizing that the "friendships, partnerships, and colleague-ships across the organizations made this project able to happen quickly."

## Enhancing existing traffic calming

Galena Street connects Bethune Academy to Washington Park. The park serves the neighborhood as a significant community center, home to the Urban Ecology Center, a music venue, walking paths, and playgrounds. The city had previously installed concrete traffic circles and bump outs between the school and park, and saw this project as an opportunity to add vibrancy and community identity to the features. "This project allowed us to paint those traffic calming measures with designs by local artists," Littlefield explained. "It's not something we've done before in the city."



Galena Street and its connection between Bethune Academy and Washington Park. Source: Wisconsin Bike Fed



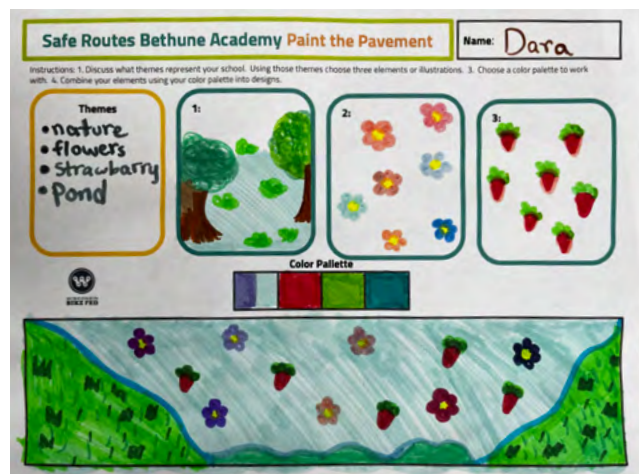
Students, the artist, volunteers, and city staff came together to paint. Source: Wisconsin Bike Fed

## Project implementation

Together, the City of Milwaukee and Wisconsin Bike Fed aimed to develop an approach that prioritized community involvement, safer routes to school for children biking and walking, and a bike education component for students to further interact with the project. Anderson emphasized, “we want people to know that we care about their neighborhoods and their lives and their safety.”

To achieve this, the team:

- Partnered with a local artist to plan the paint designs with Bethune Academy students.
- Engaged students in the painting process.
- Facilitated a safe biking education class for students.
- Hosted a group bike ride through the project location with the students that participated in the project’s installation and design.
- Created neighborhood signs to call attention to the project’s purpose.
- Collected before and after data and surveyed neighbors to understand the impact of the new design



Worksheet used as part of the student design process. Source: Wisconsin Bike Fed

Wisconsin Bike Fed coordinated with local artist Ck Ledesma, who worked with Bethune Academy and the local Washington Park community in the past. Anderson and Ledesma led art design workshops at the school where students were able to learn more about the infrastructure that they were painting and the Milwaukee Paint the Pavement program. These workshops were designed so that students would learn about the infrastructure, design project art elements, and select art to be included within the paintings.

Painting occurred during the school's field day and included students, volunteers, and city staff. After some touch-ups by the project team, Washington Park Media Center, and Wisconsin Bike Fed produced a highlight video that told the story of the process and outcomes.

Anderson then led a bike safety class for Bethune Academy students that focused on the project area and the surrounding Washington Park area with the goal of students feeling connected to this part of their community. Many of the participating students were in 8th grade and would be heading to a new school in the fall. Anderson reflected on how the experience could have a ripple effect: "For me, the quick specific win was deeper relationships with the outgoing 8th graders [...] building a pipeline of advocacy."

Finally, project-branded yard signs using the same designs as the city's Paint the Pavement program were placed along Galena Street to raise awareness for the project and its purpose.

Two forms of data were gathered:

- Before/after speed data: The existing traffic calming features had already reduced speeds by 28 percent. The addition of painted art produced a slight, not statistically significant further reduction.
- Community feedback: Intercept and online surveys from 28 respondents representing drivers, bicyclists, pedestrians, and transit users revealed that the majority (75 percent) felt safe. Artwork received neutral or positive comments about its impact on safety perceptions. However, 81 percent indicated that the artwork "improved the street."

## Connecting a community

The project team recognized that the beautification itself, the student involvement, and soliciting community feedback together reinforced the safety benefits of the traffic calming features and strengthened perspectives on transportation safety within the neighborhood.

"One of the most wonderful things ... is to have people feeling continued attention and investment in their neighborhood," reflected Littlefield. "Ultimately we want people to know that we care about their neighborhoods and their lives and their safety."

The vibrantly painted traffic calming features have also drawn interest from outside the neighborhood. Encouraged by this success, the project team is now considering other locations around Milwaukee that could benefit from artistic, community-engaged painting. "This model is the most replicable slam dunk," declared Anderson. "I want to do more Paint the Pavement projects with schools."



Yard signs reinforced the traffic calming goals.  
Source: Wisconsin Bike Fed

# Acknowledgments

Thank you to Danya Littlefield and Marissa Meyer of the City of Milwaukee, and Michael Anderson of Wisconsin Bike Fed, for their leadership on this project and for sharing their insights for this case study. Microsoft Copilot Chat at UNC was used to generate an initial draft.<sup>3</sup> The content was verified, revised, and augmented by the authors.



Painted traffic circle. Source: Wisconsin Bike Fed

## SafeRoutes

National Center for Safe Routes to School



Made possible by:



**Suggested citation:** Figueroa, S. & Pullen-Seufert, N. (2026). *Milwaukee Brings Beauty to Traffic Calming*. National Center for Safe Routes to School.

- 1 City of Milwaukee Department of Public Works. (2026). *Paint the Pavement*. <https://city.milwaukee.gov/dpw/Infrastructure/Programs/Paint-the-Pavement>.
- 2 Wisconsin Bike Fed. (2026). *About the Wisconsin Bike Fed*. <https://wisconsinbikefed.org/about-the-wisconsin-bike-fed/>.
- 3 Microsoft. (2025). Copilot Chat (with Data Protection). [Large language model]. <https://m365.cloud.microsoft/chat/?auth=2>