

Level Ground Mixed Martial Arts

FOUNDED: 2013

CURRENT ORGANIZATION BUDGET: \$1,138,000

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Based in Dorchester, Level Ground (LG) is the only nonprofit in New England—and one of the few in the world—that leverages mixed martial arts as a catalyst for youth development, community transformation, and economic mobility. Through transformative athletic, academic, and employment opportunities, LG serves over 1,200 under-resourced, BIPOC youth in Boston annually. By providing professional instruction in mixed martial arts, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, and Muay Thai, LG empowers its youth to build confidence and community while building a career. While gym memberships in Boston often exceed \$3,000 per year, LG keeps classes at its 6,400-square-foot center free for children and teenagers and affordable for adults, ensuring that price and proximity never hinder personal growth.

In addition to athletics, Level Ground provides academic support, workforce development training, and mentorship to Boston youth. LG youth experience a disproportionately high level of poverty and crime and live in neighborhoods that experience a greater prevalence of obesity. LG strives to meet the needs of its youth in an authentic way through academic tutoring and support with college applications, training as certified personal trainers and managers at the LG gym, nutrition workshops, one-on-one mentorship, and more.

Ultimately, LG's innovative model leads to increased academic achievement, long-term career potential, and improved health and wellbeing for youth facing barriers to success.

Two-Year Goals

- Increase annual Student Trainer enrollment from 50 to 60
- Develop a new pilot program (FitPro Fellowship) for young adults ages 19–24
- Empower Student Trainers to grow LG's satellite martial arts sites from 4 to 12
- Launch a preparatory program for children (ages 10-13)

Investment Opportunity

Level Ground is at a critical inflection point in its growth and development and well-positioned to maximize the impact of major philanthropic investments. Specifically, LG is seeking \$1,200,000 over the next two years to achieve its two-year goals. With additional support, LG can scale its impact to serve 2,200+ youth and young adults annually by 2028, equipping them with the skills, support, confidence, and experience they need to reach their full potential.

Ways to Invest

- \$129,500 for Student Trainer wages, matched by public funding
- \$73,000 for FitPro Fellowship Program Manager
- \$39,000 to scale school-year Student Trainer program by 20%
- \$10,000 to help launch 5 new satellite sites

Ways to Get Involved

- Hire LG students as personal trainers
- Host a corporate self-defense workshop or a tour of your company's office
- Join the board

Level Ground's Model



Student Trainer Program

The flagship Student Trainer (ST) Program offers a year-round, paid professional pathway for high schoolers. Participants earn industry-recognized personal training certifications while receiving intensive academic tutoring and trauma-informed mentorship. By integrating youth into gym operations and satellite site leadership, LG ensures students gain real-world administrative and instructional experience. This “Mat-to-Career Pipeline” successfully bridges the gap between education and employment and equips youth with the agency and transferable skills necessary to pursue meaningful careers and post-secondary success. The program integrates three core components:

Workforce Development

Student Trainers gain hands-on experience in operations, marketing, client relations, and financial management while serving as gym managers and launching their own personal training businesses.

Academic Enrichment

80 hours of summer academics (business, ELA, and math) in partnership with Boston Public Schools, reinforced by tutoring, grade monitoring, and college support.

Healthy Living

Daily martial arts training, social-emotional learning, and nutrition education.

Programming is delivered Monday-Friday for 20 hours/week.

In year 2, youth serve as teaching assistants and satellite site leaders, instruct classes for children and adults, provide personal training services, and at program completion transition to college, post-secondary pathways, internships, or meaningful employment.



Expanding the Pipeline: Apprenticeship Program & FitPro Fellowship

To strengthen and extend its impact, LG is expanding its mat-to-career model both earlier and later along the continuum to reach children and young adults.

Student Trainer Apprenticeship Program (Ages 10–13)

In partnership with BPS' 5th Quarter of Learning program, this initiative supports middle school youth who show interest in the Student Trainer pathway, but need stronger academic foundations and leadership readiness.

Participants receive structured academic instruction, executive functioning development, mentorship, and athletics programming to build the skills necessary for long-term success in high school and entry into the ST Program.

FitPro Fellowship (Ages 19–24)

The FitPro Fellowship is a 12-month, paid workforce development pathway for opportunity youth disconnected from education and employment. Participants complete a 3-month Bootcamp (earning industry-recognized certifications and training as instructors and gym managers), followed by a 9-month internship (30 hours/week) leading satellite programs, instructing classes, and managing operations.

Together, these expansions create a comprehensive pipeline—from early academic preparation to sustainable employment in the fitness and wellness industry.

“ Before Level Ground, I had no inspiration for what I wanted to do with my life. Now, I have a sense of purpose and confidence that I never had before.”

— Jonathan Wilson, *Level Ground Alum*

Leadership & Governance

Level Ground is led by Founder & Executive Director, Alexandra Mercer (MBA). Recognized as one of the Boston Celtics' "Heroes Among Us" in 2022, Ali has 14 years of nonprofit leadership experience and 20 years of martial arts experience. Program Director, Ricardo Moreno (Teach For America; M.Ed., M.S., Tufts), oversees curriculum, instructor development, and evaluation. Michael Rodriguez, former UFC athlete and Dorchester native, leads athletic programs and trains Student Trainers. A ten-member board provides strong governance across finance, HR, strategy, and community engagement.

Financial Stability

Level Ground leverages earned income from its MMA studio to mitigate back-end costs so that grants can more directly fund youth services. With 89% of expenses program related, the organization operates with exceptional efficiency, stretching every donated dollar toward coaching, academics, and workforce pathways rather than overhead. In the coming years, LG will continue diversifying its revenue mix and scaling major donor funding.

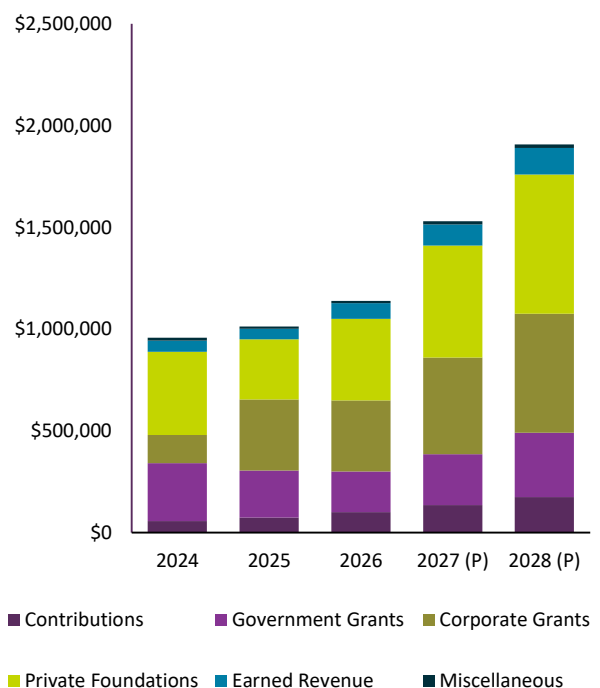
KEY INVESTORS

- Anna B. Stearns Foundation
- Boston After School & Beyond
- Department of Youth Engagement and Employment
- The Executive Office of Economic Development
- Liberty Mutual Foundation
- Mabel Louise Riley Foundation
- State Street Foundation
- Wellington Management Foundation
- Youth Development Fund

KEY PARTNERS

- All Dorchester Sports League
- The American Academy of Personal Training
- Boston Asian YES
- Boston Centers for Youth and Families
- Boston Public Schools
- Revamp Training
- UFC GYM

Revenue by Source





Success Story

JONATHAN

A Student Trainer for 2 years, Jonathan learned strategies for client acquisition, scheduling, and financial management through LG business courses, complementing the hands-on experience he was gaining through daily operations at Level Ground. He progressed through both Martial Arts Instructor Training and earned his Personal Training certification. For the last year, Jonathan has been training his own clients.

Upon graduating from high school, Jonathan took on a summer internship with Boston Centers for Youth and Families, where he led personal training sessions and martial arts classes for their youth. Jonathan began a private-sector internship last Fall with Revamp Training while teaching three satellite classes with nonprofit partners including All Dorchester Sports League and BCYF, and leading evening sessions at Level Ground. In January 2026, Jonathan began a second private-sector internship with the UFC GYM, where he is leading their children’s martial arts program and supporting instruction for adult classes. Most recently, Jonathan has launched Level Ground children’s Kickboxing programming.

Program Performance and Organizational Health

Over the next two years, Level Ground will scale youth programs, expand leadership pathways, strengthen staffing and governance, and grow revenue to ensure sustainable impact and organizational resilience.

	FY 2026	FY 2027 (P)	FY 2028 (P)
Program Performance			
Total individuals served across all programs	1,500	1,850	2,200
Number of Student Trainers (ages 14-18)	50	55	60
Number of children in Apprenticeship Program (ages 10-13)	50	80	100
Number of FitPro Fellows (ages 19-24)	n/a	12	20
Number of weekly satellite sites run by Student Trainers & FitPro Fellows	4	7	12
Organizational Health/Capacity-Building			
Number of full-time staff members	5.5	7	9
Number of board members	10	12	14
Total Revenue	\$1,138,000	\$1,530,000	\$1,908,000

Social Impact

Over the next two years, Level Ground will expand a seamless pipeline from the Apprenticeship Program to the Student Trainer Program and FitPro Fellowship—broadening access to academic, leadership, and workforce development from children to teens and young adults. LG will promote healthy living by training youth in martial arts and fitness and equipping them to lead classes and wellness initiatives at its gym and satellite sites across Boston. Its impact will be measured by successful transitions into college, attainment of industry-recognized credentials, paid internships, and permanent employment in the fitness industry.

Indicator	Current Numbers	2028
% Student Trainers wishing to pursue a career as a fitness professional who obtain their Personal Training certification by program completion	100%	100%
% of youth on the gym management track who transition to management positions at the LG gym and/or internship partners, or launch their own personal training businesses	85%	95%
% of qualified Student Trainers placed in an internship	90%	95%
% of college-bound seniors who transition to a 2 or 4-year program	100%	100%
% of Student Trainers who do not want to attend college and transition to meaningful employment, an internship with an LG partner, and/or alternative post-secondary opportunities aligned with their career interests	90%	95%
% of children who complete the ST Apprenticeship Program and transition into the Student Trainer Program	N/A	75%
% of FitPro Fellows who complete the program and transition into permanent employment in the fitness industry	N/A	90%