



Strengthening Child- and Family-Centered Neighborhoods in Detroit: Opportunities for Partnership with Detroit's Next Mayoral Administration



Strengthening Child- and Family-Centered Neighborhoods in Detroit: Opportunities for Partnership with Detroit's Next Mayoral Administration

As Detroit welcomes a new mayor in 2026, there is an opportunity to re-center the priorities and voices of children and families in Detroit's next chapter. Thanks to our current administration and the leadership of Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), Detroit has made significant strides over the past decade in how it supports children and families. Through Hope Starts Here, Detroit established its first-ever early childhood framework that led to critical zoning reforms and a net gain of over eight thousand early childhood seats that ensure a record number of Detroit children now have access to high-quality early care and education. Through state reforms, every four-year-old in Detroit now has access to free, universal Pre-K. DPSCD now offers students a range of options for academic excellence: from Montessori to career technical education and from districtwide arts and enrichment programs to an unprecedented \$700M Facility Master Plan. And Detroit established its first-ever cradle-to-career educational campus at the Marygrove Learning Community, offering families an educational pathway rooted in a neighborhood from birth through college and beyond.

And yet, there is much more that we can do as a city to make our future one that uplifts the hopes and dreams of our greatest treasure: our children, and their families. Between 2013 and 2022, [Detroit lost 16% of households with children](#), and we know that over 30,000 Detroit children leave the city every day to attend school. And recently, there are now more Detroit children (51%) living in poverty than not – an [increase](#) of almost 10% in the past five years. As we seek to grow Detroit's population, and to serve the generations of Detroit that never left, there is a unique opportunity for our next mayor to bring the full scale of city government to move households with children into the middle class. While city government does not operate schools, a strategic, integrated partnership between our city government, school district and neighborhood-based partners is critical to ensuring we collectively are supporting the whole child and the whole family to be secure, healthy, and thrive. The Kresge Foundation is committing, through its Child- and Family-Centered Neighborhoods strategy, to build on our city and district partners' existing priorities to reimagine how public-private partnerships can make Detroit a city that puts its children first. Below are five critical opportunities to consider as we seek to reimagine the future of our city through the eyes of a child.

Activating public infrastructure that promotes health, quality of life, and social connections in neighborhoods.

The past decade has seen unprecedented growth in Detroit's public spaces – ranging from parks to streetscapes to greenways – that serve children and their families. Neighborhood parks have been restored, streetscapes and bike lanes renewed, and new greenways from the Dequindre Cut to the Joe Louis Greenway that provide new amenities in neighborhoods. This public infrastructure are critical for racial and socioeconomic integration for families; parks foster connections in neighborhoods across all types of families, and streets and greenways promote access across geographic and cultural boundaries. But we know that building these spaces is only the first step; we must build on the momentum to ensure that how these spaces are programmed and utilized foster the kind of community-building and quality of life improvement that these physical spaces were intended for, including:

- **Strengthen cross-cultural, inter-generational programming in parks.** For the past three years, the [Detroit Parks Coalition](#) has partnered with Detroit Parks and Recreation and neighborhood-based park steward organizations to provide summer programming in both public and private parks. These programs have brought neighbors together and provided programs to improve cultural vitality, health, and quality of life. There is an opportunity for an even stronger partnership between the City and parks stewards to make additional city services and resources available to activate parks and public spaces, and to bring City resources to bear to ensure safety for youth participating in park programming.
- **Enrich a walkable public realm for children and families.** Recent investments in streetscapes and bike lanes have made neighborhood throughfares safer, more walkable, and more attractive to young families. A next administration can build on those efforts to consider how our public realm can cater to young children – from sidewalk widening to traffic calming, or from protected bike lanes to cultural activations along corridors that make our streets more walkable and improve connections across neighborhood amenities.
- **Create thoughtful, youth-driven Safe Routes to School.** Building on creating a walkable public realm, [Safe Routes to School](#) is an evidence-based strategy that makes walking and biking to school safer for students through improvements in the built environment, safety initiatives, and neighborhood-based activations. Safe Routes to School make it easier for students to walk and bike to school, and improve access to after-school and enrichment programs in the neighborhoods that surround a school – addressing some of the most critical barriers to school attendance.

Supporting families to access critical services and basic needs that serve the whole child and whole family through neighborhood anchor institutions.

We know from ample evidence that one of the most significant barriers to upward mobility and educational attainment for young children is a family's health and economic stability. Currently in Detroit's neighborhoods, the services and resources that support a family's health and economic stability are dispersed; families must navigate multiple disconnected systems to access basic needs, meaning that they often fall through the cracks. There is an opportunity for strengthened partnerships between the City of Detroit, schools, and neighborhood anchor institutions such as community development organizations to coordinate how services are accessed and coordinated through key trusted partners. These trusted partners, such as DPSCD schools as neighborhood anchors, can allow families to access multiple resources through a single point of entry. Examples of such partnerships could include:

- **Enhanced coordination with Community Schools.** DPSCD's Health Hubs initiative has proven to be a successful model at providing one-stop access to basic needs and thereby improving student health and increasing school attendance. Through Health Hub navigators, students and families can access an array of services from legal aid to housing services or food and supplies. There is an opportunity for increased coordination between city services and schools to ensure that a broader range of city services can be accessed through DPSCD's schools, and to complement the existing Health Hubs framework through additional resources and supports.
- **Integration of Community Violence Intervention programs.** Community Violence Intervention (CVI) programs have been successful in preemptively addressing the root causes of community violence through a focus on healing, mental health and social connection. These CVI programs are led by community organizations and require significant coordination with Detroit Police, schools, mental health providers and other government agencies. There is a role for city government to convene and facilitate greater integration of CVI programs within neighborhoods.
- **Thoughtful coordination of transit hubs, routes and schedules.** One of the most significant barriers to school attendance and student achievement in Detroit is transit access. Students travel miles to attend school, often subject to inconsistent and unpredictable bus schedules. There is an opportunity to better integrate bus schedules, routes and bus stops to align with school start and end times, optimal drop off and pick up locations, and even aligning routes to and from neighborhood high schools to key residential nodes. This will require extensive data-sharing and coordination between DDOT and schools, but could lead to significant improvements in school attendance, safety, and access for families.
- **Integration of housing services with intake at schools and neighborhood partners.** Often-times, the first point of contact to identify housing insecurity is a school social worker, or an after-school provider engaging with a family member. However, these front-line staff do not have direct access to facilitate housing services, often relying on providing phone numbers for a family member to call without a warm hand-off. There is an opportunity to build on the work of the City's Housing Services division or the Detroit Housing Network, to better integrate with intake systems at schools and neighborhood partners to develop feedback loops and case management tools that can in real-time identify students with housing needs and immediate capacity to provide interventions.

Strengthening the cradle-to-career continuum in Detroit's neighborhoods as the key to retaining families in our neighborhoods.

As we seek to retain longstanding families in Detroit's neighborhoods and attract families that see Detroit as a place to raise their children, it is imperative that we offer opportunities for families to remain in place from birth through high school, college and career. Often, families leave Detroit at key transition points, such as entry into kindergarten or high school, or they graduate, go to college, and do not return home. As we consider how to retain families, we must consider how Detroit's neighborhoods offer a cradle-to-career continuum for families – and they can see themselves being able to raise children and thrive in their neighborhoods.

Building on the cradle-to-career educational campus established at the [Marygrove Learning Community](#), the Cradle-to-Career Neighborhoods approach focuses on integrating the educational experience for students from early education through K-12 and postsecondary education. While city government does not operate schools, it has a critical role to play in convening and facilitating partners that can strengthen the cradle-to-career pipeline, including:

- **Supporting streamlined connections at key transition points.** Families often find it difficult to navigate the transition from early childhood education to kindergarten, and from middle to high school, since it often involves entering a new educational system or provider. Public and private partners can facilitate more streamlined transitions by coordinating early education and K-12 schools, or high school and postsecondary partners, to ensure consistent information sharing across those transition points.
- **Facilitating full-day, full-year programs in neighborhoods.** Oftentimes, families have to navigate between schools, after school programs and other enrichment programs to ensure students are cared for and educated throughout the workday and during school holidays. However, there is no coordinating infrastructure across these programs; navigating them can be costly and often forces families out of the city in search for a one-stop shop elsewhere. There is an opportunity for city government to partner with schools and community program providers, including those already doing this work such as Brilliant Detroit, to create a coordinating infrastructure in neighborhoods that provide families with information and navigation support to make accessing these programs as easy as possible – thereby providing reducing another need for them to leave their community in search of resources.

Leveraging the power, authority and scope of city government to center children and families across the functions of city agencies.

The successful zoning reform in 2024 to allow for by-right zoning for child care facilities is an example of how city government functions that do not appear to be focused on children and families can make a significant positive impact on their lives. Even if they are not an educational institution, every decision made by city government has the potential of impacting children, and from city planning to housing, or from transit to buildings, there is an opportunity to center children in policy decisions and in city agencies' program implementation.

- **Adoption of a Child Friendly City designation.** Behind every operational decision is a call to action and an ambitious vision that guides those decisions – and there is an opportunity for Detroit to put a stake in the ground and state clearly its commitment to the priorities and voices of children. UNICEF offers an internationally recognized designation as a [Child-Friendly City](#) that focuses on five key areas:

1. safety and inclusion;
2. children's participation in policymaking;
3. equitable social services;
4. safe living environments; and
5. access to play and leisure.

There is an opportunity for Detroit to pursue such a designation in alignment with existing frameworks such as Hope Starts Here and DPSCD's Blueprint 2027, and utilize a globally recognized framework for how every operational decision in city government can be made to center the voices of children.

- **Re-establishing the Office of Early Learning.** The City of Detroit's Office of Early Learning, which was operational between 2020 and 2024, was the voice of early care and education providers, families and stakeholders within city government. It successfully shepherded the zoning reform effort before the Office's closure. There is an opportunity to re-establish the office in order to serve as the coordinator of city services that impact young children, be an internal advocate within the Mayor's Cabinet (much like the function of [Children's Cabinets](#) in many communities) to ensure the priorities of children and families are integrated into policymaking, and be a complement to DPSCD's leadership on academic program and quality to ensure that municipal policy is supportive of educational partners.

Partnering with Lansing to advance policies that uplift socioeconomic mobility

Detroit will not be a city that puts its children first until it addresses the fundamental root causes that lead to child poverty. In a city where [51% of its children live in poverty](#), it is a non-negotiable that every institution – from city government to philanthropy to schools to nonprofit partners – must commit to playing its role to reduce our child poverty rates and to mitigate the impacts of poverty. Families in Detroit have faced structural and systemic obstacles to socioeconomic mobility, from historical injustices and barriers to building generational wealth to current-day inequities in school funding. A city that centers its children and families must be one that takes a reparative approach to address those systemic inequities and provide pathways to upward mobility for children and their families. Our next city administration, with the support of philanthropy and social sector partners, can be a leading voice working with families to advance state policies that move our families into the middle class. This can include, but is not limited to:

- **Expansion of state tax credits.** The expansion of the state earned income tax credit has provided hundreds of additional dollars to low and middle-income families each year. There is an [opportunity](#) to build on those efforts to establish additional state tax credits aimed at families with children, similar to neighboring states of Illinois and Minnesota.
- **Dedicated funding for children and families.** Many states like [California](#) and [New Mexico](#) have established dedicated, permanent revenue generators and funding streams outside of K-12 school aid funding for early care and education, after school and other programs that enrich students and families. Detroit's mayor can be an advocate for dedicated state funding streams that can provide tens of millions of dollars each year to offer additional programs for Detroit families. This could also include alignment with our school systems to ensure that agreements for community benefit resulting from development subsidies includes funding for school infrastructure improvements.
- **Equitable school funding.** Detroit's mayor can be a champion, alongside our school district leaders, for equitable funding for Detroit schools, ensuring that state funding builds on the Opportunity Index to provide additional funding to districts that serve higher levels of students living in poverty, English language learners, and students with exceptional needs – and to ensure that Detroit receives equitable levels of funding compared to suburban districts.