



Lessons IN Collaboration

— A CASE STUDY —

By Detroit's Early Childhood Education Support Cohort

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Cover image: Keep Growing Detroit, Courtesy Keep Growing Detroit

FOREWORD

In 2019, The Kresge Foundation launched the Detroit ECE Support initiative, which awarded \$2.2M to nine nonprofit organizations to provide wraparound supports to Detroit’s children and families through early childhood centers. Together, these organizations supported over 100 early childhood centers across Detroit to provide programs that support the whole child and the whole family, ranging from healthy living and nutrition (Keep Growing Detroit and National Kidney Foundation of Michigan), creative learning and literacy (Living Arts and Learn Early), access to health and human services (ACCESS and The Children’s Center), and parent and caregiver engagement and advocacy (Mothering Justice, Detroit Public Television and Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation).

During the four-year grant period, these organizations collaborated as part of the Detroit ECE Support Cohort to identify ways to collectively strengthen the early childhood system, improve coordination with families and providers, and leverage each other’s programming to more holistically serve the needs of children and families. Recently, they joined together to reflect on their experience – both in how met the needs of children and families during a global pandemic, and how they worked together as a cohort to maximize their impact. This case study, jointly authored by the nine cohort organizations, tells the story of the stories of the children and families they served, and shares how the collaboration and self-care through this cohort process strengthened their work together. We hope it will provide inspiration and practical advice for those in the ECE field and beyond considering collaborative endeavors. They do take work and dedication. They are also doable and — as you will see here — they enrich the lives of their communities and providers.

—Jonathan C. Hui, Program Officer, Kresge Foundation Detroit Program

I. FORMING ALLIANCE IN SUPPORT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN DETROIT

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE COHORT

In May 2019, as a part of its Hope Starts Here commitment, The Kresge Foundation formed the Detroit Early Childhood Education Support Cohort with ongoing facilitation support from Mathematica. Members include nine organizations in the Detroit area. We each have a unique mission, but all share the vision of a Detroit where all children and families have sustainable access to quality early childhood education resources that improve their lives. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, we managed to forge authentic relationships and used grant funds to successfully meet the ever-changing needs of their community.



A cohort meeting at Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation in 2019, before the pandemic changed everyone's plans. Courtesy DHDC.

KEY TENETS OF OUR WORK

The Detroit Early Childhood Education (ECE) Support initiative provided \$2.2 million to our organizations, each of us selected for pioneering the *whole child* approach. This entails supporting children through four key tenets: healthy living, kindergarten readiness, creative engagement, and support for parents and other caregivers.

- **Supports for Parents and Caregivers.** Some cohort members support underrepresented Detroit parents, caregivers, and children through educational programming and workshops, such as the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) and the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation (DHDC). Mothering Justice aims to empower mothers of color to be leaders through advocacy, leadership development, and voter empowerment.
- **Kindergarten Readiness and Creative Engagement.** Other cohort members center their work on kindergarten readiness, creative engagement, and culturally responsive curriculum, such as Detroit Public TV (DPTV), Living Arts, and Learn Early.
- **Healthy Living.** The National Kidney Foundation of Michigan (NKFM) and Keep Growing Detroit target healthy living, each taking unique approaches to improving childhood nutrition and access to healthy food. The Children's Center targets healthy living through a mental health lens with evidence-based and trauma-informed care for children.

SURPASSING THE GOALS OF THE PROJECT DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

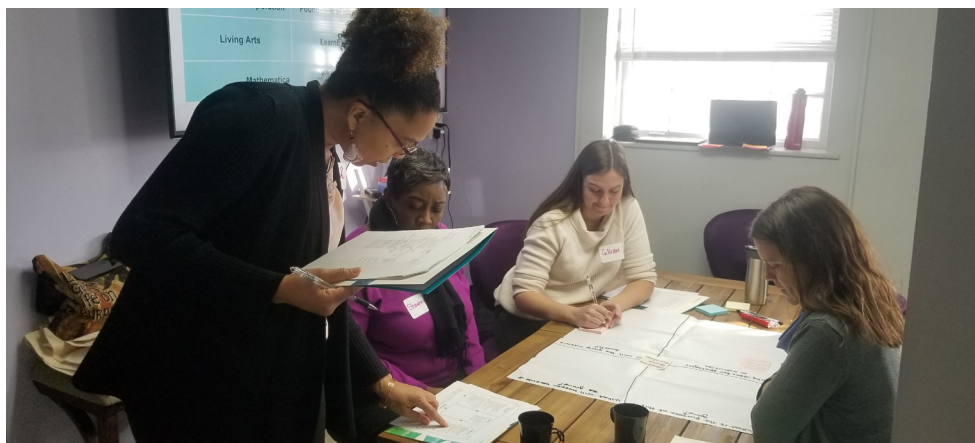
The Detroit ECE Support cohort had two primary goals:

1. Encouraging funded organizations to deliver wraparound services to young children and families in promoting four key outcomes of the *whole child* approach
2. Forming a community of practice to engage all member organizations as supportive partners in this work and increase collaboration and connection among agencies.

Not only did we manage to collaborate and develop a shared mission despite the wide range of services we provide, but we also managed to surpass the above goals by continuing to connect, learn, and advocate together through the COVID-19 pandemic that struck just a year into our cohort's existence.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we sustained and adapted our missions in various ways. We adjusted the timing and delivery of services and transitioned much of our programming from in-person to virtual for the safety of staff and community members. We also supported the uniquely COVID-19-related needs of ECE providers and families, distributing PPE, cleaning supplies, and thermometers; some of us even facilitated the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. By using our connections within the cohort and taking advantage of Kresge's flexibility in the usage of our grant funding, we were able to better target community needs.

A 2020 cohort gathering just weeks before COVID-19 closed down such in-person gatherings.



The below activities are just a small sample of the ways we used support from Kresge to strengthen the capacity of ECE staff and parents. We hope our achievements serve as testaments to the power of authentic collaboration and resource sharing between like-minded advocates and professionals with a passion for supporting families and young children.

- The Children's Center improved parent and caregivers' understanding of child development, particularly for children who may have experienced trauma or struggle with emotional, educational, intellectual, and developmental challenges.
- DHDC supported ECE staff in working culturally responsively with Hispanic students and parents. They are currently hosting nine educational virtual workshops in English and Spanish to parents of preschool children in Southwest Detroit.
- Living Arts integrated art and creative learning into ECE programming through its Wolf Trap program, installing artist residencies and workshops in schools teaching young children.
- KGD provided support and training to residents and childcare centers starting and maintaining over 2,000 Detroit gardens, promoting garden-based learning and improving access to fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Mothering Justice provided leadership opportunities to women of color with young children, empowering them to advocate for critical policy issues, such as affordable and quality childcare, reproductive justice, and paid sick leave.
- Learn Early provided instructional models, practices, and resources to providers, allowing them to realize their visions for adult and child learning.
- ACCESS provided orientations and courses to informal childcare providers seeking to meet licensing requirements of "Level 1" and "Level 2" providers and worked to make these programs more accessible to providers of all ages and languages.
- DPTV continued to engage their youngest viewers with access to unique educational opportunities and curriculum-based programming. They also hosted workshops in English, Spanish, and Arabic for parents of all ages navigating common parenting challenges.
- NKFM worked with parents and ECE staff to integrate nutritional education and healthy living principles into young children's education and daily practices in their homes. They also continued to provide wraparound services and educational opportunities to children with kidney disease.

BENEFITS OF COHORT PARTICIPATION

Our work, both separately and together, yielded great benefits for Detroit children and families. By building knowledge and skills through participation in cohort events and building better understandings of what each of our organizations does, we gained a more in-depth understanding of early childhood education, public policymaking, and other areas that some of us didn't have a lot of prior exposure to. We also found that the cohort served as a flexible and informal space for us to share lessons learned, tips for connecting with providers, and offer advice and support to other members. Perhaps most importantly, we were able to identify avenues for collaboration, referrals, and mutually beneficial activities. One-on-one contact outside of scheduled cohort activities further solidified these connections and resulted in a number of memorable collaborations that benefitted Detroit ECE providers and families:

- DHDC's program participants and staff visited Keep Growing Detroit's farms to understand how to integrate healthy living and nutrition efforts into early childhood programming. DHDC staff highlighted that the trip raised program participants' awareness of available resources and supports from collaborating organizations.
- Mothering Justice worked with DHDC to identify ways to work with license-exempt and family caregivers.
- DHDC began referring informal childcare providers to the NFKM's Go NAPSACC program. They also began offering translation services to cohort organizations to improve their own clients' access to the services these organizations offered.
- Recognizing this need for translation services directly led the NKFM to hire a Spanish speaking person to work for their early childcare programs.

The relationships formed with other members were one of the cohort's greatest successes. We plan to sustain and build upon these partnerships beyond the project's end; we are excited for what the future holds!

Conclusion

The Detroit Early Childhood Education Support Cohort highlights the value of unifying the efforts of like-minded and passionate community leaders to amplify their impact on early childcare providers and families. Cohort members recognized that each organization's work was highly intersectional and jumped on the opportunity to learn from and support other members of the cohort. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, all nine participating cohort organizations continued to build strong partnerships and a shared vision for supporting early childcare in their communities; by leveraging these connections and the flexibility of Kresge's grant funding, they made that vision a reality. We hope that the successes and lessons learned from the Detroit Childhood Education Support Cohort will serve as both a blueprint and a jumping-off-point for future inter-organizational communities of practice.

II. LASTING PARTNERSHIPS START WITH RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Building relationships are challenging, as most people know – it takes time to build trust and create authentic connections. Now, imagine having to build relationships at a level that directly impacts your work and your community with people from nine other organizations – all while under a pandemic! Understandably, many of us were hesitant and unsure of how to collaborate at first. Although we were all working towards a similar goal – improving and supporting early childhood education in Detroit – we hadn’t worked together before. As one of our cohort members stated, “It takes a while to learn about/from each other before we’re really able to see how ‘collaboration’ can proceed effectively.” We all agree that making that time and having Kresge’s support and investment in facilitating that time and space for us was worth it. In this section, we share how we built relationships across nine organizations and how we used our connections to expand opportunities and create transformational changes to benefit the communities we serve.



A Detroit Hispanic Development Corp. field trip to Keep Growing Detroit. Photo courtesy DHDC.

KICK-STARTING THE COHORT ENGAGEMENT

We learned about the opportunity to be a part of a cohort of organizations working with Detroit early childhood education centers in the fall of 2019. At least one member from each organization got together for an informal lunch meeting organized by the cohort facilitators, a team from [Mathematica](#). We called this lunch meeting a “Mirror Chat.” This lunch was meant to be a time of reflection and a time to begin getting to know one another. Then, we had two in person meetings: the first was held at Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation [image will be added], and the second at Mothering Justice [image will be added]. These meetings were meant to activate us and get us to identify a shared “Big Hairy Audacious Goal” to collaborate on. Ideally, we would have walked out of there ready to partner and support each other’s work, but realistically the trust wasn’t built yet, and we weren’t going to be able to build it in a two-to-three-hour meeting. Trust was a necessary foundation if we were going to connect any new organizations to our community members.

We asked the Mathematica facilitators to slow down and provide more opportunities for us to get to know each other and visit each other’s sites. However, 2020 had other plans for us: COVID-19. We quickly shifted to meeting virtually and shifted our individual and collective priorities to quickly meet the needs of the communities we serve. For some of us, this meant leaning into building relationships as we shared resources, and



A cohort dinner at Keep Growing Detroit. Photo courtesy KGD.

for others (like those of us who are smaller organizations), it was more challenging to find the time to build these relationships. The staff attrition rates our organizations were experiencing also made it challenge, because this meant some members of the cohort either left the organization or had to transition off for other work and new members needed to be onboarded. Many times, new members were not as familiar with how their organization could partner with other organizations or felt as if they didn't have enough of a say in the organization to agree to partner, or we simply had different work styles. So it took time to get into the flow of working together.

It took about a year for us to realize that we had to make the time to build these relationships to collaborate and increase the impact of our work. Throughout the next year, we participated in activities designed to create connection. These activities included 1) a monthly newsletter which each orga-

nization updated with resources and opportunities to collaborate, 2) peer spotlight presentations in which each organization had the opportunity to share more about their organization at a high level, including our strengths and areas of support needed, 3) monthly small-group meetings (instead of one monthly large group meeting) based on individual interests such as education and advocacy or leadership, and 4) social activities which included getting together to participate in a restorative activity like meditation or vision boarding.

It was through these activities that several of us were able to identify opportunities to collaborate. For example, The National Kidney Foundation of Michigan (NKFM) gave Adverse Childhood Events (ACE) presentations for other organizations, recruited new providers with the help of other organizations, and connected their providers with other organizations to help with things outside the scope of NKFM. ACCESS partnered with NKFM to provide an ACEs presentation to ACCESS trainers. Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation (DHDC), NKFM and Keep Growing Detroit also all participate in each others' parent workshops. Keep Growing Detroit sees "the benefit of being able to bring their expertise and layer it with the strong relationships that DHDC has with families."

Relationships with families and providers enable cohort members to mobilize groups to improve ECE systems and services, increase engagement and participation, improve their organizations services, maintain communication, and assess and address family and provider needs. These relationships also strengthened the ways cohort members were able to deepen connections within and across communities to benefit children and families, as well as raise new awareness of and access to resources. As part of an evaluation of the cohort, Detroit ECE providers reported greater awareness of other organizations after being engaged with cohort member organizations. A program participant stated, "[Our partner] is well connected and sometimes we might have a problem or something and we know they are there and could help with anything we need." This work has created a domino effect: by investing in opportunities for us to connect and share our resources and knowledge, The Kresge Foundation helped us take what we learned from meeting with one another and share it with our colleagues and the communities we serve.

As one of our cohort members from The Children’s Center (TCC) stated, “community partnerships help to decrease silos, and can exist post a grant cycle. [These] relationships can also serve as potential collaborative grant work in the future.” We all couldn’t agree more – making the time to be a part of this cohort and building relationships with one another was worth it. We encourage readers, especially those in the nonprofit or foundation space, to make time to build relationships with other organizations and make sure to communicate expectations and think about how to sustain collaboration efforts as organization staff change. If you are a funder and are thinking about unifying your grantees through a cohort model, we encourage you to do so and ask that you think about how you might communicate expectations about the goals and scope of the cohort. This cohort has taught us that building relationships across grantees is way to build access to resources and increase impact of our work, and that relationships can last beyond the grant cycle.

III. ORGANIZATIONAL SELF-CARE BENEFITS COMMUNITY CARE

The Detroit ECE Support Cohort was thinking about self-care before the pandemic made self-care and addressing burn out – a trendy topic. There are plenty of blogs, social media posts and articles out there focused on these topics, yet many of us still haven't been able to figure out what self-care really means for us or how to prioritize it. In this section we will share how we, a group of caring professionals in the nonprofit world, prioritized self-care as a goal for our cohort and how we made sure to make time to practice self-care even when facing day to day barriers to making it a priority.

Check-in - JUNE 2022

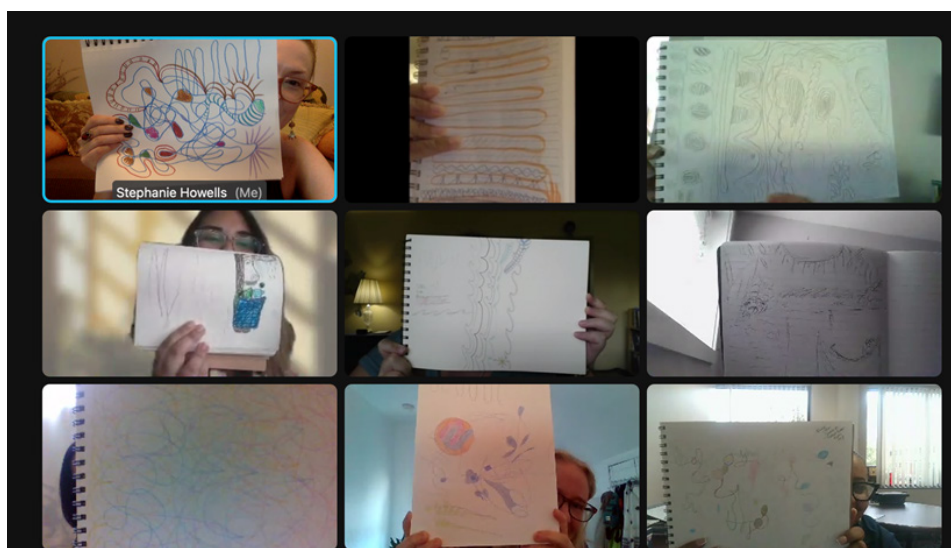
<p>How are you feeling today?</p> <p>tired</p> <p>Tired</p> <p>It's a good day. Cloudy but a Bones Day</p> <p>tired, a little drained, but excited too</p> <p>tired, hanging in there</p> <p>needing boost of energy please</p> <p>team tired</p> <p>Joyful</p> <p>relaxed</p> <p>Calmer</p>	<p>Are there any recent wins or successes you'd like to share? What are they?</p> <p>We had a successful Family of Trauma event at MOCAD on May 25</p> <p>Great turn out at our carnival event</p> <p>getting organized and checking items off my to do list</p> <p>Had some items taken off my plate</p> <p>work has been busy but fulfilling</p> <p>Showcase with all students and families</p> <p>just had our first in person showcase of our annual showcase since pandemic</p> <p>started working on implementing an event with ECE and parents and providers around stress with applying for funding</p> <p>a new provider relationship</p> <p>small, steady wins: greet campus with classroom leaders</p>
<p>Are you facing any challenges at work that you'd like the cohort's advice on? What are they?</p> <p>Hiring a program assist.</p> <p>one of our trainers resigned two weeks ago and another is resigning in July</p> <p>Workforce changes</p> <p>Keeping things going amidst transition</p> <p>We need support with more youth programming at our events, wondering what pigs could collaborate with us or have ideas</p>	<p>Wild card: is there anything else you'd like to share with the cohort today?</p> <p>you all are wonderful people</p> <p>Your work & efforts are important and greatly appreciated!</p> <p>working to keep the work going</p>

Monthly virtual meetings began with check-ins on key questions.

Self-care can be especially challenging for people like us who continuously prioritize our communities' needs above our own. So much of our energy goes into being able to advocate and provide services for our community, and often that leaves us with very little energy to focus on ourselves. As one of our cohort members said, "The care of those providing the services is just as important. Life does not give them a pass. The time to reflect and pause and take time for self-care is so important to keep the work going." This was our reality before the pandemic, so you can imagine how prioritizing self-care became more challenging during and after 2020.

At our first cohort meeting in the fall of 2019, we asked the Kresge Foundation if self-care could be one of our priorities and goals for the cohort. To our surprise at the time, we were met with complete support of this goal. Setting this goal led our Mathematica cohort facilitators to organize self-care activities during our cohort meetings to check in with one another and acknowledge all cohort members' personal goals and challenges. Mathematica also hired local Michigan-based consultants to lead quarterly self-care activities. These activities align with what we traditionally think of as self-care – checking in with how we are feeling, yoga, breathing exercises, meditation, vision boarding, and so on.

The emphasis on self-care became increasingly important during the pandemic as personal and professional pressures became more intense. The pandemic expanded our self-care practices to a whole new level of understanding of what self-care could be. We went beyond those typical activities and began practicing what is more commonly known as community care: small- and large-scale actions which show support for other individuals or groups of people. Kresge and Mathematica offered us community care by doing things such as reaching out to check-in, offering flexibility around our grant requirements, and by shifting our cohort goals and structure to meet our current needs. Over time and by building trusting relationships with one another, we also were able to offer each other community care in the ways that we collaborated and supported each other's work. We did so by getting into the habit of reaching out and connecting with one another outside of cohort meetings, serving as a sounding board for one another, connecting to brainstorm together, offering up our skills and expertise to support each other's work, sharing resources, and learning to collaborate as a way to share the workload and increase the impact and reach of our work. Additionally, having scheduled moments of self-care was beneficial to us during the pandemic, since it was a time in which we were working from home and needed to "truly relax with everything going on around us," in the words of one cohort member. The self-care sessions were a space for us to listen, to be heard, and to feel supported by one another.



A virtual self care exercise.

The pandemic also pushed us to shift our perspectives about our work and self-care. As one cohort member said, we learned to “be OK with less than ideal ‘outcomes.’” It is a perspective shift when you think that you have to be responsible for everything going as planned.” We also learned more about why and how we needed to prioritize self-care. However, despite the immense support and the opportunities for self-care being offered to us, we still found it challenging to prioritize practicing self-care. Though it was helpful to have structured, scheduled self-care, we sometimes did not feel like attending. It wasn’t always easy to make time to attend the self-care sessions and it wasn’t always easy to be fully present during the self-care components of the meetings when we knew there was so much work to be done and discussions we needed to have. Nevertheless, the Mathematica team never let us forget that self-care was a priority for us since the beginning of the cohort, and that we needed to take care of ourselves to provide care for the communities we serve. Logically this makes sense, but in practice this required a shift in mindset and being in the right frame of mind to intentionally practice and prioritize self-care. As one of our cohort members shared, “It’s easier to prioritize the work ... [but] burn out is real. When we can show up healthy and inspired, you’ll see the best results.”

Even though it was challenging to prioritize and show up to practice self-care, we were always glad when we did. We encourage you to do the same. Even when life gets busy and the work is piling up, take the time to practice self-care, in the same way you care for your community members. Practice self-care and model it for others. As one of our cohort members stated, “Self-care is so important! Being able to talk to participants about that and having them practice self-care has been a benefit for the community.” We also encourage funders to consider incorporating self-care and community care as a priority for grants. When funders build self-care into their expectations or hoped-for outcomes for grantees, that gives grantees the space, time, and resources to really make it a priority. Knowing that turnover rates in caring professions and nonprofits can be very high, funders should see self-care as essential not just for grantee well-being, but for organization stability: organizations can do their best work when staff are supported and taken care of.