



Strengthening Child- and Family-Centered Neighborhoods in Detroit: A Primer

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*The Marygrove Early Education Center in northwest Detroit is part of the Kresge-supported Marygrove Learning Community.
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INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

The Kresge Foundation’s neighborhood-focused grants in Detroit prioritize the economic mobility, quality of life and resiliency of the community members and residents that live and work in them. Since 2016, Kresge has invested deeply in Detroit’s early childhood, community development and health systems. However, as these systems have continued to strengthen and develop, the intersection of these systems has become even more critical to the vitality and quality of life in Detroit’s neighborhoods.

The intersections of education, community development, health and other strategies provide the foundation of Kresge’s focus on strengthening Child- and Family-Centered Neighborhoods in Detroit. This strategy is grounded in the fundamental belief that as a society, we must work to support the upward mobility of children and their families – to move low-income families into the middle class and beyond. We know that [one of the best predictors of a child’s upward mobility](#) is the neighborhood in which they were raised. We also recognize that in order for a city to thrive, its families – particularly its middle-class families – must thrive.

Since 2000, Detroit has experienced a significant decrease in its middle class households; according to Detroit Future City, [it has lost over 60,000 middle class households](#) – many of them to suburban communities, and many due to the lack of opportunity in their neighborhoods. In order to retain middle class families in Detroit, and to grow Detroit’s population, it is imperative that there is a clear case for families to raise their children in Detroit, rather than needing to move to a neighboring community to experience opportunity or improved quality of life. Rather than success being defined as one’s ability to move out of their neighborhood, we seek to ensure that a family can feel that they can achieve upward mobility within the places where they already are, especially among more transient, lower-income families who seek greater residential and economic stability. A commitment to strengthening child- and family-centered neighborhoods, therefore, will not only strengthen and stabilize middle-class neighborhoods by providing families with the option to remain and thrive where they are, but will advance opportunity and mobility for all children and families. Indeed, this should and must be Detroit’s value proposition for both its current and future residents: **Parents and caregivers will believe that a Detroit neighborhood is the best place to raise their children.**

This will be accomplished through:

- **Growing middle-class neighborhoods** centered on children and families, so that middle-class resident families can choose to remain and raise their children in those neighborhoods;
- **Attracting middle-class families** into Detroit’s neighborhoods, particularly African American middle-class families originally from Detroit that may have left to neighboring suburban communities in search for opportunities for their children;
- **Supporting existing lower-income residents** in Detroit neighborhoods to grow into the middle-class, by providing stability and opportunities for growth, wealth-building and upward mobility.

In many other communities, [investments](#) in neighborhood mobility have prioritized moving low-income families, especially families of color, into wealthier, majority-white neighborhoods. They seek to provide more opportunities for low-income families to move into more economically prosperous areas, whether through the targeted use of vouchers, the development of new affordable housing, or similar interventions. In Detroit, we recognize that this strategy has a number of limitations, namely the limited number of opportunities and time required to move individual families to higher income neighborhoods while the majority of residents remain in place, and secondly, the negative impact of such moves on Black and brown families’ experience of inclusion and belonging. These racial dynamics are evidenced, for instance, in the [significant disparities in school discipline](#) for Black and brown students, and students in poverty, especially in white-majority schools – one of many factors that suggest that moving low-income students of color into wealthier, majority-white school districts is not the singular solution to residential and educational segregation.

As we consider the context of economic mobility in Detroit, we must recognize the inherent power and assets of its majority-Black and brown neighborhoods. Families have built longstanding social networks in their existing communities; those neighborhoods reflect their culture and heritage, and create a sense of belonging for them. Rather than encouraging families to move, we must make investments where families already live – to provide opportunities and improve quality of life within the context of their existing neighborhoods, so that Detroit is a place where families choose to raise their children and have the access to economic opportunities and support to do so. This requires both investing in the people and places that have been historically disinvested, while ensuring that they have the tools and resources to stay in place as they choose while their neighborhood increases in value.

Therefore, Kresge’s strategy recognizes the parallel and deep effort needed to invest in the places where low-income families already live to enable them to better serve children and in families where they already are. Kresge’s strategy to strengthen child- and family-centered, middle-class neighborhoods in Detroit is adapted from [extensive research by Chetty et al.](#) that describes five key indicators that best support upward mobility within neighborhoods, while adapting them to highlight assets and opportunities that already exist in Detroit’s neighborhoods:

1. **Low levels of income inequality**
2. **High family stability**
3. **Access to high-quality schools**
4. **Low residential segregation**
5. **High social capital and social connectivity¹**

These indicators are further augmented by priorities expressed by Detroit residents when asked about quality of life in their neighborhoods. These priorities were highlighted in the City of Detroit’s [Community Health Needs Assessment](#) and the ongoing [Detroit Area Metropolitan Communities Study²](#). Additional indicators include:

6. **Community safety and belonging**, including walkability, a sense of belonging and safety from violence.
7. **Health and well-being**, including physical health, social-emotional health, and access to health services and resources, while free from environmental harms.

In Detroit, two types of investments address these opportunities and challenges in creating child- and family-centered neighborhoods:

- **Catalytic Neighborhood Proof Points:** Investing deeply in neighborhood-level proof points to integrate these key conditions within the context of place, with a focus on [middle class neighborhoods and near-middle class neighborhoods](#) based on Detroit Future City’s report on Growing Detroit’s African American Middle Class,
- **Systems Investments:** Investing broadly in citywide policies and systems that support the conditions that advance upward mobility in neighborhoods for children and families.

Together, these investments create an ecosystem of supports for children and families within the context of their neighborhoods: *systems investments* provide the enabling conditions and structures to augment *neighborhood-based investments* that are most proximate and immediately impactful to families’ lives.

¹ Social capital has also been written about extensively by researchers such as Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Putnam describes communities with high social capital as those whose residents are well-connected to each other and have social relationships with others across racial, cultural and socio-economic lines, especially of connecting those in lower socioeconomic classes with those in a higher SES. While Putnam’s research does not fully address the inherent social capital of low-income communities and communities of color, it is important to recognize that in a Detroit context, social capital means much more than connecting low-income families with higher-income families, but to create cross-cultural relationships and networks to fully leverage the inherent capital and assets of families of different backgrounds.

² The Detroit Community Health Needs Assessment indicated that the top five needs were: food access, school quality, transit access, workforce programs, and parks and public spaces. The latest DMACS survey (October 2022) indicated the top five reasons for moving away from Detroit were: crime and safety, housing issues, cost of living, blight in public spaces, and school quality.



Marygrove Early Education Center classroom and the play area beyond. (Photo © Timothy Hursley)

OUR STRATEGY

Kresge’s Child- and Family-Centered Neighborhoods strategy in Detroit is grounded in three areas that together, create the conditions and provide the on-the-ground resources to center opportunity and quality of life for children and families in neighborhoods.

- Its **POLICY** strategies create the enabling conditions to ensure rising incomes, reducing burdens of the built environment, and providing appropriate services for children and families.
- Its **PEOPLE** strategies center the experience of children and families to ensure that they are able to access and benefit from resources and programs immediately within their own neighborhoods and enables Detroit to invest in its own human capital.
- Its **PLACE** strategies then ensure that the physical space of neighborhoods create welcoming, safe and inspiring environments for them.

POLICY: Innovations for Youth & Family Participation

Long-term policy and systems change are required to fundamentally change the inequitable structures that have long disadvantaged low-income families and families of color. Federal, state and local government have a unique opportunity and responsibility to utilize the power of policymaking and public resources to shift systems that perpetuate unjust and inequitable outcomes. Moreover, policies cannot truly center children and families unless they are active participants not only in the design of policy, but in its implementation to ensure that the intended impacts of policies are realized on the ground. Kresge’s efforts in Detroit support enabling policy conditions that address the **key indicators of income inequality, residential segregation, community safety and belonging, and health and well-being**, through the following policy issue areas:

- **Increasing incomes and wealth-building opportunities for low-income families.** The scale and power of public resources are necessary to ensure low-income families have access to opportunities to increase their incomes, which in turn provide a foundation of stability for further upward mobility into the middle class. Adults with children, especially mothers and mothers of color, experience unique barriers to access opportunities to build wealth, such as full participation in the workforce. Policy changes are necessary to ensure that the needs of working families are met, including access to child care, equitable workplace policies, and other policies that facilitate greater access into the workforce. Moreover, there is an opportunity to examine how policies like guaranteed income or expanded tax credits can increase incomes for low-income families. In Detroit, for example, Kresge co-facilitated the [Detroit Child Tax Credit Campaign](#), which coordinated outreach, marketing and tax preparation efforts to ensure that Detroit families were able to benefit from the expanded Child Tax Credit, which provided families with up to \$3,600 per year to support the costs of raising children.
- **Building Black wealth through a reparative justice lens.** We recognize that the [wealth gap](#) between Black and white Americans is the result of generations of racialized discrimination, disinvestment, and denial of wealth-building opportunities for Black Americans that exist to this day. In order to address the racial wealth gap and provide equitable opportunities for wealth-building for Black and other communities of color, it is critical that public policy centers a reparative lens to specifically address areas where those communities had been denied opportunities to build wealth. This includes opportunities to build wealth through housing ownership, entrepreneurship, educational attainment and more. There is an opportunity to explore [evidence-based policy innovations](#) that include guaranteed income, Baby Bonds, reparative acquisitions and access to banking and entrepreneurship resources.
- **Equitable public funding for programs that serve children and families.** Public funding for child-serving programs in Detroit have long been inequitable; they fail to account for the context and history of disinvestment in Detroit, and the deep need that our families face. There is an opportunity to ensure that Detroit's children and families are able to access high-quality programs by fully funding early childhood, K-12 and postsecondary education programs. This could include strategies such as Universal Pre-K, equitable K-12 education funding, tax capture for ECE and out-of-school programs, and more.
- **Uplifting the power and voice of children, youth and their families.** Policies that serve children and families cannot be made in siloes devoid of the leadership and voice of those stakeholders. There is an opportunity for philanthropy to support uplifting the power and voice of children, youth and their families to inform the design and implementation of policies that best serve their needs. In Detroit, both neighborhood-based organizing efforts, such as those led by community development organizations (CDOs), and systems-level organizing efforts, such as those led by [Hope Starts Here's Detroit Champions for Hope](#) family engagement initiative are critical in ensuring that children and families are not only heard, but can be decision-makers at policy tables.
- **Creating enabling policy conditions that support the health of Detroit's children and families through the lens of community safety, health equity and environmental justice.** Oftentimes, public policy decisions adversely impact the health, well-being and safety of children and families, especially families of color and of low incomes. In many cases, public policy can be zero-sum, creating a dichotomy between economic development and job creation, and environmental health, for example. We must support federal, state and municipal policy, such as Vision Zero policies, to center the health and well-being of children and families in Detroit's neighborhoods, and especially to focus on walkability and mobility for children, environmental health and justice

to ensure that the impacts of pollution, climate change and other environmental factors do not adversely impact children and families in these communities. Moreover, initiatives that support holistic community health and safety such as Community Violence Intervention (CVI) initiatives are critical to address community violence as a public health issue.

PEOPLE: Cradle-to-Career Neighborhoods



Basketball at the Detroit Boxing Gym Youth Program. (Photo by Lon Horwedel for The Kresge Foundation.)

We know that residential segregation and displacement can destabilize neighborhoods, and research has shown that [key drivers of residential mobility](#) include school quality, lack of workforce opportunities, lack of access to basic needs and health services, among others. In Detroit, specifically, [research demonstrates](#) that more than a quarter of its students attended a school outside of Detroit – and even among students that remained in Detroit, almost 20% of students changed schools (and thus, likely neighborhoods) outside of regular school transitions. Kresge’s strategy in Detroit aims to mitigate those drivers of residential displacement and transiency, ensuring that residents are able to access the resources that allow them to be healthy, stable and thrive in their neighborhoods.

Kresge’s focus on cradle-to-career neighborhoods ensure that children and families have what they need to thrive within their neighborhoods. It recognizes

that for families to be healthy, stable and thriving requires the resources and amenities that serve their needs to be integrated both vertically and horizontally: vertically across their lifespans from birth through adulthood, and horizontally to serve the myriad of needs at any given point in their lives. These resources and services must be integrated within the context of the neighborhoods in which they live and work; we know that having to travel outside of one’s neighborhood is a key barrier for residents to access services. Even when services are available, they are not adequately accessed by Detroiters because they are often too far from where residents live or are not integrated, meaning that residents have to navigate multiple complex systems. Further, Detroit’s neighborhoods are deeply contextual; neighborhood organizations and leaders thus play an especially important role in supporting residents to access information and services.

Our strategies prioritize the opportunity for children and families to experience both vertically and horizontally integrated services and resources that provide access to high-quality learning and enrichment opportunities, and resources that maintain stability and advance mobility. They seek to address the **key indicators of family stability, access to high-quality schools, and health and well-being**, through the following strategies:

- **Vertical integration from cradle to career.** For families, transitions across systems from cradle to career are often the most difficult; they are forced to navigate unfamiliar systems and institutions. Creating an ethos of cradle-to-career alignment removes barriers for families – they can experience high-quality, integrated programs from birth through postsecondary graduation and workforce participation, further incentivizing them to remain in their neighborhoods throughout

their most formative years. Rather than families having to navigate multiple systems year-on-year and experience changes in culture, who their children's teachers are, or where they go to school, cradle-to-career pipelines make families' experience consistent and streamlined – all in the context of their neighborhood. Indeed, high-quality cradle-to-career educational options within one's neighborhood are particularly important, given that Detroit students are [more likely](#) to attend school outside of Detroit when there is a lower concentration of schools within their residential radius.

» Kresge's investments in the cradle-to-career pipeline are exemplified by the **Marygrove Learning Community: a Detroit P-20 Partnership**, which co-locates an early childhood center, a K-12 neighborhood school jointly operated by the Detroit Public Schools Community District and the University of Michigan, postsecondary programming, and connected community programming and workforce opportunities coordinated by the Marygrove Conservancy – all nested within one campus in Detroit's Fitzgerald neighborhood. There is an opportunity to build on lessons from the Marygrove campus to inform hyperlocal efforts in other neighborhoods focused on key transition points in the cradle-to-career pipeline, such as kindergarten readiness, postsecondary access, and workforce entry.

- **Horizontal integration serving the needs of the whole child and whole family.** The aforementioned Chetty and Putnam studies, as well as Detroit-centered research on community health and chronic absenteeism all suggest that in order for families to remain and thrive in place, their neighborhoods must center their basic needs, stability and quality of life. However, in many neighborhoods, these services are either not available, forcing families to travel hours to access them, or are disconnected, forcing families to navigate multiple disparate systems, often leading to them falling through the cracks. Neighborhood-based efforts to align and integrate these community institutions provide one-stop access to services, removing barriers for families to utilize basic needs and other resources – and [have proven to](#) lead to significant improvements in how these services are accessed, utilized, and ultimately, lead to improved health, academic and other outcomes. This requires both a cohesive coordinating infrastructure in neighborhoods, and the expansion of programs and resources that meet the needs of children and families, including:

» **Cohesive coordinating infrastructure in neighborhoods:**

- **Community Schools**, which co-locate and integrate services that serve the whole child and whole family within a neighborhood school, ranging from academic enrichment, out of school time programs, housing resources, basic needs, physical and behavioral health services, and more. In Detroit, DPSCD's Health Hubs initiative brings together a multitude of resources at neighborhood high schools, with a school-based health center at its core, and provides single-stop access through a community schools coordinator to assist families to access and navigate these resources.
- **Community Development Organizations (CDOs):** We know that strong community organizations are [one of the key indicators](#) of development without displacement. This requires elevating the role of CDOs, which are trusted neighborhood leaders and advocates providing community and economic development services, to coordinate resource navigation and case management services to assist families in navigating services provided by other nonprofit organizations. In many instances, these CDOs are also direct service providers, offering programs that support health, well-being, recreation, literacy and more. Beyond CDOs' roles as trusted community leaders, there is an opportunity to leverage their deep community organizing and outreach capacity, and their

physical spaces (which can be accessed outside of school hours) to augment programming offered by schools and other institutions.

- **Expanding access to and integration of place-based wraparound services:**

- » **Programs that advance health and well-being**, including centering neighborhood-level health stewards in coordinating how residents experience physical and behavioral health services, and supporting entities that provide access to health services proximate to where families live.
- » **Programs that provide access to social and human services**, such as supporting social service organizations to provide basic needs services in neighborhoods, co-locating tax preparation services at neighborhood locations, and more.
- » **Programs that enhance arts, creativity and cultural expression**, engaging the artistic capacity of our children and uplifting the cultural heritage of our families and neighborhoods.
- » **Programs that support youth to access postsecondary and advancement opportunities**, ensuring that our youth have the resources, knowledge and access to enter and succeed in postsecondary education and to enter the workforce.



Elementary students await the arrival of seniors for their clap out at The School at Marygrove. (Photo by Darrel Ellis for The Kresge Foundation)

PLACE: Child- and Family-Centered Spaces

We know that active, inclusive public spaces can promote health, well-being, and quality of life. Research and case studies have also shown that expanding access to equitable, accessible spaces can mitigate segregation, [improve health](#), [create a sense of belonging](#), and [increase social connectivity](#). Kresge's investments in child- and family-centered spaces recognizes the importance of both public spaces and of educational facilities that inspire learning and connection. They recognize that everyone deserves to live in a community with a beautiful and high-quality public realm. Furthermore, the conditions of the neighborhood also play a role in creating the conditions of good health and well-being of families, as understood through the social determinants of health. It also recognizes the role of philanthropy in catalyzing capital investments through innovative financing tools that leverage both public and private dollars to maximize impact.

Our investments in child- and family-centered spaces seek to address the **key indicators of social capital and connectivity, community safety and belonging, and health and well-being**, through investments that center quality of life for children and families in neighborhoods, including:

- **Supporting innovative design and financing of educational facilities from early childhood through graduation.** A [needs assessment](#) in Detroit indicated that across the city, there was a gap of almost 30,000 early childhood seats – a major factor of which is the lack of quality facilities within which to house child care programs. Without bright, inspiring facilities, children cannot learn and families cannot find spaces for connection. Moreover, early childhood centers

and K-12 schools are places [where children experience connection](#), can support [healing, belonging and a child's mental health](#), and are centers of neighborhoods; those physical spaces must then be designed to that end. Finally, philanthropy can play a unique role through both its grant and non-grant capital and expertise to innovate new models to finance educational facilities and to leverage public and private funding to ensure that inspiring physical spaces can be accessed by all. Strategies include:

- » **The Marygrove Early Education Center**, a new-build prenatal to Pre-K educational center that anchors the Marygrove Learning Community: a Detroit P-20 Partnership. The Marygrove EEC exemplifies national leading practices in physical design, community-engaged design process, facility and operating financing, mixed-income program delivery and more.
- » **Learning Spaces**, a grant program housed at IFF, a regional CDFI, that provides renovation grants and technical assistance to home-based and center-based early childhood providers to improve facility quality.
- » **CDFI Partnerships**, working alongside local CDFI partners to increase equitable access to capital for early childhood and K-12 operators to support new facility builds, renovations, and reactivations.
- **Enhancing and activating public spaces centered on children and families.** While we recognize that public spaces have the potential to foster belonging, social activity and health, many of Detroit's public spaces are often not designed with children and families in mind, or do not provide programming that caters to them. There is an opportunity to activate public spaces in ways that center the priorities and needs of children and families, providing programming that reflects their desires and creating spaces that promotes active play and connection. Moreover, there are opportunities to leverage additional physical spaces in neighborhoods, such as schoolyards, recreation centers or smaller-scale activations, to promote more proximate access to programs that serve and bring together children and families.
- **Connecting neighborhood public space, housing, and transit amenities.** [Research](#) shows that home ownership and housing density are two key indicators of development without displacement, and we also know that housing access, quality and affordability, and blight and vacancy are key factors in a family's decision to move out of their neighborhood. There is an opportunity to ensure that public space and housing investments in neighborhoods can leverage each other to ensure families in those neighborhoods are able to remain and thrive in place. Public space and greenway networks can provide safe ways to connect across the city and enable greater mobility of children and families. This can include investments such as:
 - » A safe and pedestrian-friendly public realm, such as prioritizing Safe Routes to School
 - » Regional greenway networks, such as Detroit's Joe Louis Greenway or micro-mobility highways
 - » Middle class housing pilots and investments in affordable housing, including anti-displacement strategies to ensure that families can remain where they are as their neighborhoods strengthen and properties increase in value.
 - » Community safety hubs that provide safe spaces for connection, healing and violence prevention



School at Marygrove seniors on their last day on campus before graduation. (Photo by Darrel Ellis for The Kresge Foundation)

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Across the Child- and Family-Centered Neighborhoods strategy, we expect overall to see

- An increase in African American middle-class neighborhoods in Detroit;
- An increase in the number of children and families raising children in Detroit's neighborhoods;
- An increase in the number of children and families residing in middle-class neighborhoods; and
- An increase in the number of households moving from lower incomes to the middle class.

Within each of the research-based indicators of upward mobility, we also expect to see shifts in the following areas:

- **Income Inequality:** Decrease in child poverty and increase in household incomes within the target area; decreased rent and housing cost burden.
- **School Quality and Access:** Increase in kindergarten readiness rates and increase in percentage of neighborhood residents in the top quintile of schools.
- **Family Stability:** Increase in employment of adults with children, increase in rates of home ownership, and increase in the percentage of eligible households accessing public benefits.
- **Residential Segregation:** Increase in rates of home ownership, especially among BIPOC home owners; increase in housing density; and increased racial, cultural and socioeconomic diversity within neighborhoods.
- **Social Capital:** Increase in inter-generational and cross-cultural mixing in public spaces, increase in youth engagement in public spaces, and youth and adult engagement and agency, increased sense of belonging, as measured by perception surveys.
- **Community Safety, Walkability and Access:** Increase in neighborhood walk scores; increase in mode share/shift; decrease in the number of traffic injuries and fatalities; decrease in community violence; increase in perceptions of safety within a neighborhood.
- **Health and Well-being:** Increase in health outcomes; decrease in rates of blood lead levels and asthma.