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Finding the Fix: Embracing Philanthropy's Role in Transforming an Urban Education Landscape

Kristen L. McDonald, M.P.A., Education Administration, Skillman Foundation

Key Points

- Education funders have historically used a “demonstration project” approach to funding, designed to lever change by demonstrating a new program and providing technical assistance to foster broader adoption.
- Despite demonstrating success with many of its grants, the Skillman Foundation's education reform initiatives were derailed and undone by the instability of the district leadership, political landscape shifts, and disintegrating neighborhoods.
- A complete turnaround model must address the many issues facing a failing school, including culture, curriculum, school leadership, professional development, and classroom instruction. The stability of the central administration must also be considered.
- The new look at urban reform at scale asserts that a specific set of conditions must exist across a city's education landscape to enable innovation and foster sustainability.
- The philanthropic community can no longer wait for the right set of conditions to emerge for programmatic success. Funders must take an active role in creating the right conditions, often challenging conventional wisdom and long-held assumptions about the role of philanthropy.

Foundations investing in urban education reform historically have focused their efforts on singular programmatic and piecemeal change within the large bureaucratic systems that typically govern urban schools. These investments are designed

to lever reform throughout the larger education system and are based on the assumption that well-executed program demonstration coupled with intensive technical assistance will sufficiently motivate and inform large urban systems to scale successful reform district-wide.

This method typically assumes that the right capacity exists to scale successful reform and ignores philanthropy's role in building the complex set of conditions that must be in place for school reform to take root and grow to a level that influences student achievement. More recently, funders across the country have taken a new approach to urban education reform, recognizing that external parties cannot substantially impact internal district reform through programmatic investment. The new look at urban reform at scale asserts that reform is only nurtured and sustained when a specific set of conditions exist across a city's education landscape to enable innovation and foster sustainability. This approach requires a new role for the funding community as well, requiring pooled resources under a common agenda to successfully build the conditions to change the landscape for children. This article describes and analyzes the rationale behind this shift in thinking and the resulting change in strategy of education reformers in the city of Detroit.

For decades Detroit led the nation in showcasing American ingenuity for the world. The Motor City not only produced the nation's best and fastest cars, but also brought innovations in

manufacturing and technology and a new sound in music that changed a generation. Forty years ago, Detroit was a thriving city of 1.7 million people and more than 300,000 children attended Detroit Public Schools (DPS), where they received an education that prepared them to find well-paying jobs in the automobile industry or other blue-collar sectors. Economic conditions began to deteriorate in Detroit and the rest of Michigan in the 1990s, leading to rising unemployment and poverty. Since 2001, Michigan has lost jobs every year and manufacturing jobs have been cut by two-thirds (Scorsone & Zin, 2010). The conditions supporting education and children's programs across the city and in the schools began to deteriorate as well. Today, Detroit's population has dropped below 800,000, the city's children are poorer than ever before, and the school system is in acute crisis.

As a local embedded funder in Detroit, the Skillman Foundation has invested in school reform since the mid-1980s. Like other urban education funders, the foundation pursued multiple programmatic reform strategies in Detroit's schools, typically programs led and guided by external partners and buttressed with technical assistance. The foundation made these investments believing that once the programs began to show results, they would be incorporated across the citywide system. Despite demonstrating success with many of its grants, the foundation's education reform initiatives have been derailed and undone by the instability of the district leadership, political landscape shifts, and disintegrating neighborhoods. High-performing schools have been established as a result of the foundation's work; however, its need to insulate itself against the chaotic landscape of the city prevents such innovations from scaling citywide. Detroit student progress has steadily declined over the last three decades, recently posting the lowest scores in the history of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

In response to Detroit's rapidly deteriorating economic and political environment and the resulting lack of traction in scaling education innovation, the foundation shifted its strategies

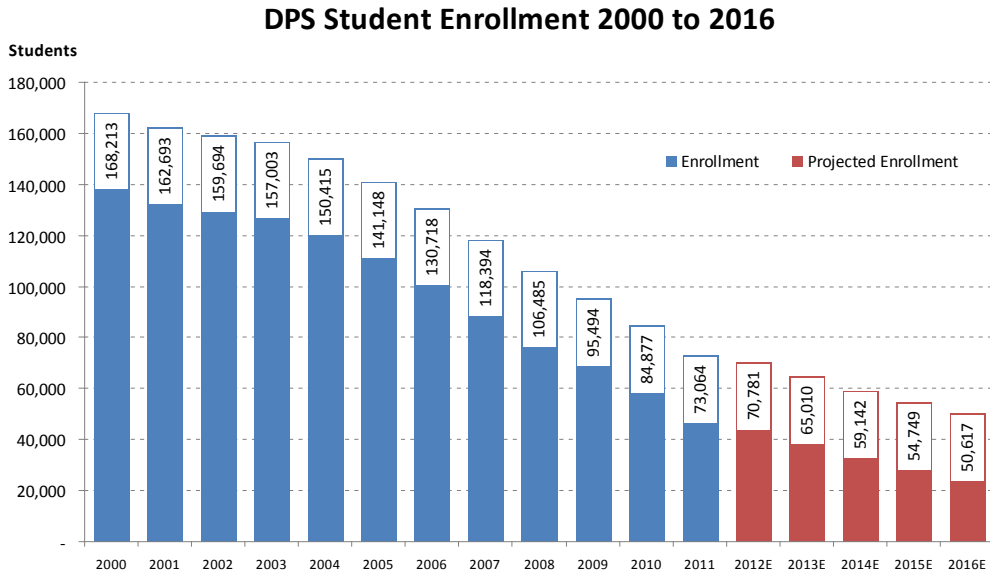
from programmatic to infrastructure development, seeking to stabilize Detroit's educational landscape. The result was a master education plan for Detroit, developed as a part of a powerful coalition of the city's strongest leaders under the banner Excellent Schools Detroit. If successful, this agenda will not only dramatically change the outcomes for children in Detroit, but also place the city among the top-performing education systems in the nation. This article describes the events that led to the fundamental shift in strategy and role for the foundation and its partners, identifies the necessary conditions for a successful implementation of a game-changing plan for all schools in an urban center, and examines the challenges of such a bold move.

In response to Detroit's rapidly deteriorating economic and political environment and the resulting lack of traction in scaling education innovation, the foundation shifted its strategies from programmatic to infrastructure development, seeking to stabilize Detroit's educational landscape. The result was a master education plan for Detroit, developed as a part of a powerful coalition of the city's strongest leaders under the banner Excellent Schools Detroit.

Major Education-Reform Initiatives in Detroit

Detroit Public Schools has felt the brunt of the economic downturn affecting the city and state. Once one of the largest public school systems in the country, DPS has lost more than 60 percent of

FIGURE 1 Detroit Public Schools, 2011



its students in the last 10 years as families left the city in search of jobs or moved students to charter schools, which they perceived to be of higher quality (Figure 1).

Not all student populations fell proportionally, though; the decline has left the school district with an increased proportion of special education students and high-poverty students that further contributes to the district’s academic decline. DPS is now caught in a negative cycle. A drop in student population results in fewer resources, leading to school closures and staff layoffs. This instability creates academic decline and results in more and more students leaving the district, thereby perpetuating the cycle.

Since 1984, shortly after it was fully endowed, the Skillman Foundation has invested more than \$100 million in a variety of best-practice programs and reform strategies in Detroit’s schools. Each of the foundation’s initiatives was a careful attempt to navigate an increasingly complex educational landscape for school reform in Detroit, and often began with a specific need identified by the community. In response, the foundation launched multiple reform programs and large school initiatives. Lessons from a few of these investments are highlighted here.

In the spring of 1986, the foundation launched its first major reform initiative by creating, in partnership with DPS, an all-male ninth-grade academy for students who were at risk of dropping out of school. At the time, the district had no specific programs for these students, and many were lost to the streets as early as age 12. Researchers and experts in the field, in partnership with the district, designed the academy; however, the program model was not implemented as planned. In spite of a multiyear, \$4.5 million commitment from the foundation, DPS failed to carefully select students and never offered the support services for students, parents, and teachers that were so critical to the model’s success. The district simply lacked the capacity to implement such a complex reform strategy, particularly since it required significant modification of staff practices. Students in the new school did show improved academic progress and attendance, but they dropped out of high school at the same rate as their peers. Although the school still operates today as a four-year alternative high school, it never adequately addressed the dropout problem of African American boys. Twenty-five years later, DPS has one of the lowest graduation rates in the country (Swanson, 2009), with some studies showing that fewer than 25 percent of boys of color graduate in four years.

The lack of capacity of DPS surfaced over and over again as the foundation and others attempted to bring education reform to Detroit. Eight years after its first major education initiative, Skillman launched a systemwide strategy designed to complement the work of a new superintendent who was aggressively implementing reform initiatives that emphasized local-school empowerment, rigorous curricula, and open enrollment (school choice) for all of the district's students. Skillman hoped to strengthen the district's ability to reach out to parents and community members by committing \$20 million over 10 years to implement the Comer Initiative, a process designed to improve student achievement and parent involvement in a number of schools. A key piece of the initiative sought to build and sustain capacity at both the school level and the district's central office in order to implement reform models proven to increase student achievement, including shared decision making and collaborative leadership. Evaluations of the work found that some schools were reaching their targets and out-performing the schools in the control groups, while others were seeing no improvements at all. The high-performing schools implemented five key factors well:

- facilitative principal leadership,
- welcoming school culture,
- shared vision among school staff,
- small school size, and
- strong external partners.

These schools developed their own capacity and motivation to move the work forward, with little support from the district's central office. In the face of increasing chaos at the administrative level, they insulated themselves and worked independently to implement the model. Because the reform did not move forward at a steady and predictable pace in every school, the district had a difficult time offering rewards and sanctions to keep all of the Comer schools moving forward. The foundation's work as an external partner was critical in building capacity at a school level, but the district capacity did not take hold. Two years into the initiative, a new superintendent was brought into DPS who decided to eliminate the initiative despite evidence that academic scores

were slowly improving districtwide.

Although the initiative was not ultimately viewed a success, the foundation and its partners gained critical knowledge about the importance of key conditions to foster success. Additionally, the Skillman Foundation emerged as a credible leader in school reform, resulting in great opportunity to influence the city's educational landscape. The district and other leaders across the city began to reach out to the foundation leaders to help navigate its education-reform efforts, and as a result the foundation was able to guide and inform the city's dialogue around education. This also marked the beginning of a fundamental rethink at the foundation regarding its education strategies and role as a reform partner in the city. However, DPS was facing increased scrutiny as the achievement gap between Detroit and other public schools in Michigan continued to widen.

An Altered Landscape

In 1993, the education landscape in Detroit was permanently altered when the Michigan Legislature permitted charter schools. Suddenly, DPS was not the only option for Detroit students and new political stakeholders entered the fray. Public universities, community colleges, and intermediate school districts were permitted to operate schools and receive public per-pupil funding from the state to do it. The steady academic and financial decline in the district was accelerated as students began to leave in search of better options. Public pressure on DPS continued to increase, prompting an independent financial and operational audit of the district and, eventually, a state takeover. In 1999, the Legislature replaced the elected Detroit school board and superintendent with an appointed school-reform board and chief executive officer. The resulting instability and political turmoil within the district caused further decline in academic achievement in nearly all of the its schools. Large numbers of the district's experienced administrators and teachers retired or left for other area school districts.

Detroit parents had new options for their children's schooling and many exercised those options. Almost 20 years after the legislation was passed, more than one third of Detroit's students

attend a charter school. Overall, charters in Detroit are showing gains in student outcomes, particularly in graduation rates. The average graduation rate for DPS in 2009-10 was 57 percent; the rate for Detroit charters was 80 percent (State of Michigan, 2010). Sadly, this shift did not always guarantee a higher-quality education. While several notable examples of excellence exist, by and large the new charter schools are faring no better than their counterparts in the public system. The unstable landscape in Detroit presents the same challenges for charter and private schools as it does for DPS.

Nevertheless, it is estimated that 40 percent of the city’s school-age children attend charter schools or surrounding suburban schools, and that percentage is rising every year. And DPS, which once had 300,000 students, today struggles to maintain an enrollment of 70,000. A DPS-only education reform strategy, therefore, will no longer reach a critical mass of children in Detroit.

With this fundamental shift in the landscape, the foundation has transformed its approach to education reform. This shift, however, does not come without risk. Partnering with charter schools and other education sources was and is a controversial step. The district is a long-standing institution in Detroit and although the majority of residents and policymakers loudly call for its reform, there is little tolerance for strategies that are perceived as destructive to DPS. Like other cities with a growing number of charter schools, Detroit struggles with the power balance between the “old” district and the emerging new schools. Leaders of the foundation, including the board of trustees, were readied themselves and staff to withstand criticism in the community that inevitably came with a new strategy embracing charters along with the traditional public schools. The foundation solicited input from residents and parents as its strategies started to shift, seeking to inform both the foundation and parents directly affected by its work.

In 2005, Skillman established the “Good Schools: Making the Grade” initiative to recognize high-quality schools in Detroit and encourage others to

improve. This marked a sea change for the foundation as it sought to work with all schools, regardless of their governance structure. It intended to change the education landscape by showcasing quality and moving public dialogue from governance (public versus charter) to excellence. The goals of the Making the Grade initiative were to:

- publicly identify, recognize, and reward good schools in Detroit;
- support schools that apply best practices;
- help parents identify good schools and make informed enrollment decisions using unbiased data from public, charter, private, and religious schools; and
- create and share knowledge of best practices related to nine identified indicators of student and school success.¹

Now in the final year of this seven-year initiative, the foundation has recognized 245 schools, distributed more than 200,000 school guides to parents, and awarded more than \$8 million. One of the strongest legacies of the initiative is the creation of the Good Schools Resource Center, a high-quality technical assistance center that provides direct services to schools from one of the nation’s strongest colleges of education, Michigan State University. The center is uniquely positioned to bring the latest best practices in urban education reform to Detroit, and operates as a critical partner to schools as well as the foundation and other reformers in the city.

Lessons Learned

- High-performing schools lack the ability to market themselves.
- Struggling schools rarely improve through discrete programming and financial awards.
- School turnaround/reform often falls victim to the instability of a large urban school system.
- Parents lack access to information to identify the best school choices.

¹ Good Schools indicators are principal leadership; strong school staff; parent involvement; a strong school leadership team; school culture and vision; a strong school improvement plan; external community partners; resilience; and use of data.

The foundation learned a set of important lessons from its work in education over the last 30 years. Most importantly, it learned that high-performing schools can and do exist in Detroit. However, they often lack the ability to market themselves sufficiently to sustain full enrollment, making them vulnerable to closure in budget considerations. Additionally, struggling schools rarely improve through targeted programmatic technical assistance and discrete financial awards. The vast majority cannot sufficiently tackle shifting school culture and effectively address the learning needs of a largely lower-socioeconomic student population. A complete turnaround model must be applied that addresses the many issues facing a failing school, including culture, curriculum, school leadership, professional development, and classroom instruction. Even where such a model is under way, DPS schools in particular are often stymied by the instability of the central bureaucracy, resulting in a lack of sustained school-level leadership when implementing improvement plans. Detroit's landscape is not unique. Many large cities face similar circumstances. Funders across the country are shifting their strategies and priorities to address unstable school systems that threaten the ability to sustain real reform.

One of the most critical lessons of the reform work in Detroit over the past decade is that parents across the city lack access to the information to identify the best school choices for their children, largely due to the constant change across the education landscape with the addition of charter schools and the substantial restructuring and closure of other schools due to population declines. Like other post-industrial cities, Detroit still struggles with a critical shortage of quality K-12 options, particularly at the high school level and in neighborhoods with high concentrations of children. The lack of conveniently located high quality schools exacerbates the problems confronting parents who are actively seeking good options for their children. Where high-performing community schools exist, they maintain deep relationships in their surrounding neighborhoods that allow them to meet the comprehensive needs of their students and develop meaningful relationships with parents. However, far too few of such schools exist in Detroit.

Despite 30 years of attempts by the foundation and other partners to influence Detroit schools, conditions for the city's children continue to decline. A fundamental shift in strategy is necessary to improve child outcomes and the trajectory for thousands of students.

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Conditions for Education Reform and Scaling Innovation

Clearly, Detroit's approach to education must change. A new system of schools must emerge that educates children utilizing best practices in teaching and innovative school models proven effective in high-poverty urban settings. The entire education work force must be retrained. All of this is necessary at a time when a smaller student population and a shrinking budget lead to school closures across the city and massive teacher and administrative layoffs. Detroit must rethink the entire education landscape, including the city's charter schools and the Detroit Public Schools system, in a way that allows high-performing schools to flourish.

Yet, the strongest reform strategies cannot succeed without a supportive ecosystem. After years of investment in education reform and careful study of successful citywide reform efforts across the country, the Skillman Foundation has identified 15 conditions that it believes must be present for high-quality schools to implement the five key factors of success — leadership, culture, shared vision, small personal environments, and external partnerships:

- *Quality control and accountability* – a clear definition of high-quality education and a

public system that measures schools against the common standard.

- *Stable governance and leadership* – consistent leadership at the city and district level committed to a single strategic plan for education excellence.
- *Political will and public policy* – committed leaders at the city, state, and federal level who will create and sustain public policy that allows effective education innovation and reform in Detroit.
- *Innovative practices and technical assistance* – cutting-edge school models, classroom instruction, and other practices showing promise in urban settings, with intensive technical assistance to implement effectively.

Financial investment is still a key tool for the foundation, but Skillman also utilizes its reputation in the community to move key stakeholders toward a stronger reform agenda and create the necessary conditions to scale and sustain quality.

- *New schools* – high-quality new schools serving elementary, middle and high school students in Detroit to replace schools closed after decades of academic failure.
- *Turnaround partners* – organizations working to transform failing schools into high-performing education providers.
- *Great teachers* – classroom leaders specifically skilled at teaching in high-poverty urban environments.
- *Great school leaders* – strong leaders trained to run high-quality urban schools and empowered to implement and sustain innovative practices.
- *Early-childhood education* – an integrated system of parents, child-care providers, and preschools utilizing best practices and comprehensive supports to ensure all children are prepared for kindergarten.

- *Portfolio of schools and choice* – multiple high-quality schools at every grade level in Detroit’s neighborhoods and open to all children, giving parents multiple choices for their children’s education.
- *Community schools and social supports* – sufficient health services, tutoring, and conflict-resolution and other youth-development programs located in schools that help mitigate the effects of poverty on Detroit’s children.
- *College access and readiness* – parents and students who understand and successfully navigate the academic and financial pathways to college.
- *Parental and community will* – parents and community members who advocate and demand high-quality, high-performing schools.
- *Research and data* – education and outcome data that is publicly available and used to inform education policy and practice across the city as well as parent and student enrollment decisions.
- *Reform infrastructure and talent* – a vibrant set of organizations and leaders working to bring innovative practices to scale and transform the education marketplace in Detroit.

Each condition requires a complex set of strategies led by multiple organizations to successfully alter the education landscape in Detroit and ensure that all children have access to high-quality schools from preschool through high school. It is clear from previous investments that the work must be both deeply rooted in the community and focused on leveraging citywide partnerships in order to scale and sustain reform.

After decades of programmatic investment, the Skillman Foundation changed its education approach to facilitate the development of each condition, providing significant leadership when necessary and pushing from behind the scenes where other partners have elected to take on a leadership role. The board of trustees adopted a new theory of change that leverages the full weight of the foundation toward stronger academic outcomes for children. Financial investment is still a key tool for the foundation, but Skillman also utilizes its reputation in the community to move key stakeholders toward a stronger reform agenda

and create the necessary conditions to scale and sustain quality. Traditionally, education philanthropy across the country has funded individual programs that show promise under the right set of circumstances believing that success will eventually scale across the education landscape. Decades of failed school-reform efforts in urban districts demonstrate that a new approach is required. The philanthropic community can no longer wait for the right set of conditions to emerge for programmatic success. Funders must take an active role in creating the right conditions, often challenging conventional wisdom and long-held assumptions about the role of philanthropy.

The complexity of the work requires collaboration of all education stakeholders. The foundation has utilized its credibility, based on years of investments on behalf of children in Detroit, to convene a common table to create these 15 conditions for the work. The result is a new coalition of partners willing to be held accountable for a new system of schools that better serve Detroit's children. The Skillman Foundation's strong reputation and credibility with parents and families in Detroit has positioned it to lead this coalition and carry the potential risk that inevitably comes with fundamental change to citywide infrastructure.

A Coalition to Carry Out the Work: Excellent Schools Detroit

One thing is perfectly clear: too many children in Detroit live in dire circumstances, including deteriorating neighborhoods and substandard schools. Their odds of success in life are shockingly low without immediate and direct intervention into the systems that serve them. The sense of urgency to implement major reform is pervasive throughout the city as well as around the public-policy table in the state capital and in Washington.

In the summer of 2009, the Skillman Foundation convened a group of stakeholders to discuss the education landscape in Detroit, and specifically address the governance of DPS as the state once again considered a takeover in response to financial and academic mismanagement. National evidence makes clear that one form of governance

does not increase the quality of education; it only provides a mechanism to sustain quality. The foundation recommended a key change not just to its own approach to the work, but to the approach of other reformers across the city. Rather than investing in individual programs designed to change the outcomes of a few children at a time, this new approach would fundamentally change the city's education ecosystem. It led to the development of a game-changing plan to move each of the 15 conditions identified by Skillman forward under a common goal.

As a well-respected and impartial resource in Detroit, the Skillman Foundation is seen as an honest broker in identifying quality where it exists. Leveraging the power of the foundation's reputation, its president, Carol Goss, convened community leaders, other area funders, local education providers, and civic leaders including Detroit's mayor to seek dramatic change. Initial coalition members were convened based on their ability to have an impact on one or more of the 15 conditions and their willingness to partner in radical change across the ecosystem (Appendix A). The result was the Excellent Schools Detroit Coalition, which released a detailed plan² in March 2010 to restructure the city's education system and make Detroit the first major city in the United States where 90 percent of students will:

- graduate from high school,
- go to college or receive quality career training, and
- be ready to succeed without remediation.

While those goals seem herculean in task, a confidence is spreading across the city due in large part to the extensive community meetings and aggressive communications work around the plan. The Skillman Foundation was able to leverage its position in the community to receive genuine and organic input from key stakeholders in the neighborhoods of Detroit. Furthermore, previous investment by the foundation through its Good Schools: Making the Grade initiative showed that it is possible for students in Detroit to achieve at

² The full plan can be found at www.excellentschoolsdetroit.org.

high levels. These schools continue to show what can be done no matter the social, economic, and emotional challenges children might bring to school. The new, comprehensive education plan for Detroit lays out the specific path with a set of strategies to help improve the education ecosystem.

The Excellent Schools Detroit plan is predicated on the theory that informing parents and community members about quality in education will create a significant enough demand for high-performing schools to change the education landscape, provided a reform infrastructure exists to support schools adequately.

The plan is designed to help every child in Detroit, regardless of whether they attend a DPS, public charter, or independent school. Its funding is based upon the collective budgets of the coalition members, including DPS and the city of Detroit, as well as national investors and local donors. The Excellent Schools Detroit plan is predicated on the theory that informing parents and community members about quality in education will create a significant enough demand for high-performing schools to change the education landscape, provided a reform infrastructure exists to support schools adequately. The plan calls for the implementation of three distinct strategies to achieve these results at scale: enforce real accountability, create excellent schools for every child, and recruit and develop the best school leaders and teachers. Now, just over a year later, significant work is under way on each strategy and the education landscape in Detroit is starting to change.

Strategy One: Enforce Real Accountability

A strong and vibrant educational landscape must define quality and have a system of accountability. All schools, no matter who controls them, should be held to the same standards of excellence. The first strategy of Excellent Schools Detroit (ESD) is not only to define these standards and collect the data upon which they can be evaluated, but to help parents understand this information as they seek to select the right schools for their children. The community, including parents and students, will be notified and informed about which schools are succeeding and which are not.

An independent voice. The plan calls for the creation of an independent, citywide Standards and Accountability Commission (SAC) to lead the accountability work. The ESD coalition will help shape the commission by appointing well-respected members of the Detroit community who have a deep commitment to and expertise in urban education to lead its development and implementation. The SAC will set a common standard of quality and excellence for all schools in Detroit.

ESD will also publish a report card listing academic data for every school in the city, and release it to the public every year as parents are making enrollment decisions. The SAC, through this report, will ultimately call for the closing of the worst-performing schools.

Informed parents. Detroit is largely an open-enrollment city; parents are not limited to the neighborhood school and can send their children to any number of schools across the city. Like parents in most large cities, however, the vast majority of Detroit parents have never seen a high-performing school and do not know what to look for when making enrollment decisions. If the system is going to be truly accountable to students, parents need to become smart shoppers for their child's education. Detroit Parent Network, an ESD coalition member, has hosted a series of bus tours for parents to showcase the best schools in the city. The network is uniquely positioned to host these tours because of its long history of advocating for strong student outcomes and par-

ent rights across the city. Education experts work directly with participants of the bus tours and discuss the factors that make a good school, utilizing the original Good Schools indicators established by the Skillman Foundation in the Good Schools: Making the Grade initiative. ESD also has hosted enrollment fairs with the best schools in Metro Detroit to give parents direct access to the region's high-performing schools in one location.

A new form of governance. Perhaps the most controversial component of the plan advocated a single point of accountability for DPS and called on the city's mayor to take an active role in the day-to-day operations of the school district. The foundation made a grant to fund early research into the public's attitudes on this subject. Based on that research, a subset of the coalition sought to put the issue of mayoral accountability before Detroit voters. Although the mayor was active behind the scenes, he failed to create a public case for the shift in governance in a manner that created confidence in his ability to lead the dysfunctional system. In response to the mayor's perceived inertia, the Detroit City Council refused to place the issue before voters and the campaign was unsuccessful. However, the ESD coalition continues to advocate for a new system of governance for the beleaguered district, believing that stability and a solid commitment to quality is fundamental to lasting change for children.

DPS is now under the temporary control of an emergency manager appointed by the governor of Michigan to solve the district's financial and academic crisis. Early in the Summer of 2011, Governor Rick Snyder established the Educational Achievement System, a recovery district for the state's worst performing schools that eventually will directly control many of Detroit's schools and potentially provide a stable governance structure that will allow other reforms to take root.

Strategy Two: Create Excellent Schools for Every Student

Detroit needs many more high-quality school choices for students. The plan calls for the creation of new schools and establishes a zero-tolerance policy for schools that, year after year fail to

Like parents in most large cities, however, the vast majority of Detroit parents have never seen a high-performing school and do not know what to look for when making enrollment decisions. If the system is going to be truly accountable to students, parents need to become smart shoppers for their child's education.

educate our children. New schools will not create additional slot capacity, but will replace schools closed due to academic failure.

Forty new schools by 2015 and 70 new schools by 2020. Momentum is building in Detroit for the startup of new schools, particularly high schools, and the turnaround of failing, "drop-out factory" high schools. Michigan Future's High School Accelerator, a new school incubator, has already partnered with education entrepreneurs to open seven new high schools and intends to incubate up to 13 more by 2020. The Greater Detroit Venture Fund, a turnaround entity, is working in two high schools in Detroit and will expand to two more in 2012. The turnaround work is focused on traditionally failing DPS schools and has demonstrated significant gains within its first year of implementation. The new schools, through Michigan Future and the venture fund, have put into place the needed supports for district and school leadership as well as staff, and are seeing improved student-retention rates and academic gains in comparison with the schools they replaced.

Citywide "community schools" initiative. Schools are natural neighborhood centers for programs that support children and their families, but they often lack the deep relationships within the com-

munity to accommodate partnerships. Students in Detroit often come to school with a host of social-services needs in addition to their academic goals. A team of community organizations are partnering with Excellent Schools Detroit to develop a model for community schools that will include health clinics, mental health services, counseling services, adult literacy, and other programs that support children and their families from within the schools. The team is connected to the national community schools movement, which continues to study the issue in depth, and intends to scale the community school concept to all schools across the city.

Detroit, like other large cities, must establish an infrastructure that adequately trains and supports principals and teachers for an urban setting. The talent-pipeline strategy encompasses key partnerships with universities to redesign teacher preparation programs.

Strategy Three: Recruit and Develop the Best School Leaders and Teachers

To be successful, the growing portfolio of new schools will need to recruit, develop, reward, and retain enough talented principals to lead them, as well as enough effective teachers. High-performing urban schools often find themselves retraining principals and teachers to better equip them for success in a high-poverty, inner-city school. Detroit, like other large cities, must establish an infrastructure that adequately trains and supports principals and teachers for an urban setting. The talent-pipeline strategy encompasses key partnerships with universities to redesign teacher preparation programs, as well as embracing alternative routes to the classroom like Teach for America.

Strong local leaders and teachers. Many of the small high-quality high schools in Detroit have

difficulty finding teachers that are trained to teach poor, urban students. University partners have been engaged to create a teacher-preparation program that will directly feed current schools and schools created in coming years. If successful, the program will be a national model for urban teacher education.

Attracting new talent. Teach for America solidified its involvement in Detroit with 200 corps members in DPS and charter schools, and will continue to increase that number over the next five years. Alternative teacher programs such as Teach for America, the Woodrow Wilson Michigan Teaching Fellowship Program, and other urban residencies support efforts to attract the best and the brightest leaders to Detroit's schools.

Reflections on Progress and the Challenges Ahead

The education landscape in Detroit is ripe for reform. While conditions for children both in their neighborhoods and in their schools are dire, for the first time in decades a unified effort is under way to dramatically increase high school graduation rates and college attendance. These efforts, however, face significant challenges in the near term:

- *Governance of Detroit Public Schools.* DPS continues to be unstable, in large part due to the lack of sustained leadership. The district currently operates under an emergency manager appointed by the governor. Although an emergency manager has considerable statutory authority to make significant financial and academic reforms, the sustainability of the initiatives they seed are difficult to predict given the manager's limited term and the uncertainty of governance after he or she leaves. Furthermore, the shifting political priorities of the city and state complicate such sustainability planning.
- *Declining population, resulting in decreased enrollment.* Detroit's population continues to fall and, as a result, its schools are faced with declining enrollment. Recent census numbers show the city's population below 750,000, a loss of almost 25 percent in just 10 years. Since both state and federal dollars are tied to the pupil, the loss of students has meant a major decline

in revenue for the schools. Resulting school closures continually displace students and families and lead many students to drop out of school, leaving abandoned buildings in the neighborhoods and jeopardizing graduation goals.

- *Decreased per-pupil expenditure.* Michigan's weak economy has led lawmakers to make significant school-funding cuts. The revenue impact of schools' declining student population is compounded by continued reductions in the state's per-pupil allotment. Since 2002, the state education expenditures have been steadily reduced, resulting in budget cuts for both DPS and public charter schools.
- *Lack of capacity at the state level.* The state of Michigan has significantly cut its work force over the years, leading to a major lack of capacity within the Michigan Department of Education that will make it difficult for the department to carry out legislation associated with state's efforts to stabilize DPS and implement education reform initiatives. Those initiatives include the development of the Educational Achievement System, which allows the new state recovery district to assume operational control of most of Detroit's public schools.
- *Political climate.* The political climate remains uncertain. While Governor Snyder has indicated that reforming Michigan's education system will be among his top priorities, it is unclear what that will mean for children in Detroit. The announcement of a recovery district was a bold first step, but its exact function and funding is still undetermined. Changing legislative leadership that results from Michigan's term limits makes state involvement even more uncertain. In addition, Detroit's City Council and the mayor's office continue to express interest in the education-reform work but offer no concrete details of specific involvement.
- *New charters.* Detroit's growing state and national visibility in education reform has led many to the work, including the development of new charter schools; a local coalition of business leaders, for example, has proposed a "quasi-district" of up to 25 charter schools. The foundation's partners are continuously fielding inquiries from national education operators seeking to start schools in Detroit. Although this significant interest is a positive turn for

the city, there is a need to ensure such schools offer a high-quality academic experience to its students. Detroit does not have an appropriate charter infrastructure to support this mounting interest, and needs to quickly develop its capacity.

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A New Role for Education-Reform Funders

The Skillman Foundation is working and investing in new ways to move academic outcomes for children in Detroit. Shifting strategies required the Skillman Foundation to adopt a new theory of change and dramatically alter its approach to education reform. Internally, it demanded different skill sets of its education-program staff, requiring a deeper understanding of the political environment as well as stronger expertise in system-level reforms. Externally, the foundation works as a part of greater whole, leading the Excellent Schools Detroit coalition to change the conditions that comprise the education landscape in the city and leverage the power of every stakeholder for a collective impact on the city's education ecosystem. The foundation can no longer claim exclusive recognition in the success of a specific

strategy, but rather shares positive and negative attribution with other partners in the comprehensive work.

One year into the 10-year Excellent Schools Detroit plan, positive results are emerging. The coalition continues to grow in membership and stature. The unique approach that considers the full landscape of the city assures accountability for child outcomes for new reform initiatives, like the newly formed Educational Achievement System. ESD is now the common voice that will shape the new recovery district and assure it is aligned with the other work under way across the landscape. By aligning its efforts behind a common agenda and working collectively to ensure the right conditions are in place, The Skillman Foundation and its partners are starting to make progress toward their ambitious goal to make Detroit the first large American city to reach 90 percent graduation, 90 percent enrollment in high-quality post-secondary education, and 90 percent doing so without the need for remediation.

There are always significant political and economic challenges to moving student outcomes in an urban setting. The lessons learned in Detroit over the last three decades of school-reform work show that fundamental change in the education landscape can only be sustained if the right

conditions are in place to keep the reform moving forward. Reformers must work intentionally to develop these conditions so that innovation can take root. The philanthropic community is uniquely positioned to support a new approach – one that leverages the collective power of stakeholders across the education ecosystem toward meaningful school reform.

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APPENDIX A Excellent Schools Detroit Coalition Members

Black Family Development Inc.	Michigan Future Inc.
City of Detroit	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
City Year Inc.	New Detroit Inc.
Communities in Schools	New Paradigm for Education and Detroit Edison Public School Academy
Cornerstone Schools	New Urban Learning
Detroit Federation of Teachers	Teach for America
Detroit Parent Network	The Broad Foundation
Detroit Public Schools	The Kresge Foundation
Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce	The Skillman Foundation
Education Trust – Midwest	United Way for Southeastern Michigan
McGregor Fund	W. K. Kellogg Foundation
Michigan Associations of Public School Academies	Wayne State University