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# From Citywide to Neighborhood-Based: Two Decades of Learning, Prioritization, and Strategic Action to Build the Skillman Foundation's Youth-Development Systems

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*Keywords:* Neighborhood-based youth-development systems, learning, prioritization, strategic action, program integration, outcome focused, system evolution, social-innovation practices

## Introduction

Since 1960, the Skillman Foundation has been dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth in metropolitan Detroit. The city, which has the highest child poverty rate in the country,<sup>1</sup> saw a massive exodus of residents<sup>2</sup> during this period due to deteriorating economic, political, and social conditions. The city's declining funding for youth programs, exacerbated by the economic crisis of 2008, led to a significant erosion of the infrastructure supporting and delivering programs and the basic services (notably, transportation and safe streets) that enabled young people and their families to access them.

Between 1992 and 2003, the foundation launched the citywide, intermediary-driven Youth Sports and Recreation Initiative (YSRI) and the Culture and Arts Youth Development Initiative (CAYDI). While these initiatives produced positive outcomes, they were not adequately addressing the need for effective out-of-school-time activities for youth in Detroit. Under the leadership of Carol Goss, who became the president and chief executive officer in 2004, the foundation, reflecting on

## Key Points

- This article explores the Skillman Foundation's shift in its approach to fulfilling its mission to improve the lives of children and youth and to making grants – moving from a traditional grantmaker to a place-based investor and change-maker.
- Three aspects of Skillman's approach have directly shaped the evolution of its youth-development investments: recognizing Detroit's economic, social, political, and environmental challenges; articulating overarching goals to provide direction and setting priorities for the scope and focus of its programmatic work; and using rapid learning to inform strategic decisions and social-innovation practices designed to tackle deeply entrenched problems.
- This article reflects on the foundation's evolution over two decades of learning, prioritization, and strategic action in its efforts to build and sustain outcome-focused youth-development systems.

experience and evaluations of YSRI and CAYDI, recognized that years of traditional grantmaking<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation's National KIDS COUNT Project (2010 Census) found that among the nation's 50 largest cities, Detroit ranked 50th in child poverty: 60 percent of Detroit's children lived in areas of concentrated poverty. See [www.milhs.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/HighPovertyinMI.pdf](http://www.milhs.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/HighPovertyinMI.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> According to the U.S. Census, Detroit's population dropped from 2 million in 1950 to 713,777 in 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Traditional grantmakers typically take a "hands off" approach, studying needs, identifying programmatic areas to fund, issuing calls for proposals, and then funding projects with some follow-up and attention to outcomes. With YSRI and CAYDI, Skillman began a shift toward being outcome-oriented and, with the Good Neighborhoods Good Schools Initiative, became an "engaged investor" – actively involved with partners in defining outcomes, building capacity, designing strategies, and seeking system and policy changes to support their agenda.

**INVESTMENT IN CITYWIDE SYSTEM BUILDING  
1992-2007**
**Challenge**

- The need for quality out-of-school-time activities for youth in Detroit.

**Approach**

- Launch Youth Sports and Recreation Initiative with citywide intermediaries to support and sustain high-quality after-school programs; improve coordination and leadership, build public support for young people, and identify resources to continue these activities.
- Establish the After-School Roundtable to coordinate citywide efforts, make children and youth a top priority, and strengthen connections with business, philanthropy, and government.
- Launch the Culture and Arts Youth Development Initiative to provide youth with resources and tools to learn and take action.

**Results**

- There were positive outcomes, but for relatively few youth.
- Serious issues with recruitment, retention, and access led to unfilled slots.
- Intermediaries struggled to stay afloat due to prolonged public disinvestment.

**Action**

- Continue quality improvement and learning agenda with grantees (as occurred with YSRI and CAYDI).
- Build systems directly interfacing with youth and families at the neighborhood level and include support for organizational capacity building and leadership development.
- Invest in system and policy change.

had benefited individual children but produced no lasting change in conditions for the majority.

Newly pledged to “changing the odds for kids,” the foundation launched a 10-year, \$100 million commitment to the Good Neighborhoods Initiative in 2006. The initiative’s original purpose was to ensure that the 60,000 young people living in six Detroit neighborhoods<sup>4</sup> would be safe, healthy, well educated, and prepared for adulthood. Meanwhile, the foundation honed its longtime work with schools and in 2008 linked it with the Good Neighborhoods Initiative to create the Good Neighborhoods Good Schools Initiative (GNGS).

<sup>4</sup> The six neighborhoods – Brightmoor, Chadsey Condon, Cody Rouge, Northend Central Woodward, Osborn, and Southwest – were selected because of their high concentration of children and youth, their low-income status, and the presence of assets that could be maximized to enhance the well-being of children.

With these initiatives, the foundation became a “place based”<sup>5</sup> community change agent, employing neighborhood-, school-, and system-change strategies and actively engaging public and private partners, residents, and other stakeholders to improve outcomes for youth. More specifically, GNGS strategies incorporated building capacities of neighborhood leaders, youth-development systems<sup>6</sup> and programs, and neighborhood schools, along with system and policy change that included school reform.

The point of this new focus was transformational change. Among many efforts to promote such change, Skillman brought Geoffrey Canada, founder of the neighborhood-based Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ), to Detroit and took foundation trustees to New York City to learn as much as possible about the HCZ, which later grew into the Promise Neighborhoods Initiative. Taking the lessons from HCZ and others, Foundation Trustees, staff, and community partners worked to figure out what might work to transform conditions for kids in Detroit. As Gibson, Smyth, Nayowith, and Zaff (2013) noted:

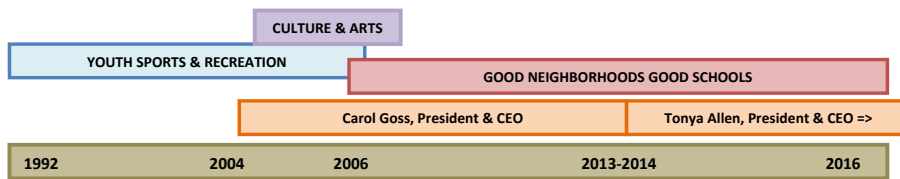
Transformational change requires digging down into the trenches and facing the reality that problems like poverty are nuanced and multidimensional and may require an array of approaches to resolve (note that we use the word “resolve” versus “solve”). It requires understanding that definitions of problems are fluid and subjective. It means wrestling with the uncomfortable truth that we can’t address everything. ([http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/to\\_get\\_to\\_the\\_good\\_you\\_gotta\\_dance\\_with\\_the\\_wicked](http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/to_get_to_the_good_you_gotta_dance_with_the_wicked)).

The 2008 economic downturn, which reduced both Skillman’s endowment and external resources that could be leveraged, heightened the foundation’s awareness of that “uncomfortable truth” and added urgency to prioritizing strategies. In 2011, the foundation and its partners reflected on experience and a portfolio of devel-

<sup>5</sup> “Place based” refers to a targeted geographic area where a change effort is focused and in which the change agent resides.

<sup>6</sup> Skillman defined “youth development system” as a neighborhood-based, accessible, coordinated range of age-appropriate, high quality, out-of-school-time programs and activities for youth ages 11-19.

FIGURE 1 Timeline of Skillman Foundation Youth Development Initiatives



opmental evaluation findings and recommendations, and began to fine tune GNGS. Tonya Allen, named vice president and chief operating officer for Skillman during this period, led the strategic realignment of the foundation's investments and change-making approach. The result was a more focused overarching goal: to increase the number of youth in the foundation's six targeted neighborhoods who graduate from high school prepared to pursue post-secondary education and who have the skills to transition into careers and adulthood.

With this sharpened focus, the foundation became even more deliberate. The youth-development strategy now encompasses:

- a stronger outcomes-oriented framework – “Achieving, Connecting and Thriving” – to create a continuum of opportunities to help youth move toward adulthood, including a pathway to high school graduation and college access;
- a fund to support quality and scale;
- a resource center to support a neighborhood-based youth-coordination body and cohorts of grantees;
- integration of youth employment with youth development and linked learning;<sup>7</sup> and
- innovative strategies and market-based principles to address persistent problems.

The foundation's journey has been one of cycles

<sup>7</sup>The James Irvine Foundation defines linked learning as a practice that “integrates real-world professions with rigorous academics, transforming education into a personally relevant, wholly engaging experience – and opening students to career and college opportunities they never imagined.” See <http://www.irvine.org/contact-us/120-youth/967-multiple-pathways?format=pdf>.

of learning, prioritization, and strategic action. Patrizi, Heid Thompson, Coffman, and Beer (2013) write that this type of process “requires foundations to make several changes in their approach to strategy”:

- “These endeavors are, by definition, ongoing, long haul, and will necessarily evolve; therefore learning and strategy decisions need to be iterative.”
- “There is more that is unknown about a strategy than what is known, therefore better diagnosis and more informed capacity can be developed only by doing the work, thinking about it, and importing experience and knowledge into strategy decisions.”
- “Rote strategy tracking needs to give way to questions, reflection, and strategy adaptation (p. 59).”

This article is informed by evaluation reports and memos, interviews, meetings with foundation staff and community stakeholders, foundation documents, research from the field, and a previous article in *The Foundation Review* about Skillman's work (Brown, Colombo, & Hughes, 2009). It chronicles the history, challenges, and lessons of Skillman's commitment to youth-development programs and systems to increase access, quality, and scale to ensure the best results for kids, including the foundation's 2013 strategic realignment and plans for the next decade.

### Investment in Citywide System Building: YSRI and CAYDI, 1992-2007

The philanthropic sector has invested intermittently over the past few decades in a wide variety

*In addition to providing direct program support, the foundation created a learning community among grantees.*

of youth-development<sup>8</sup> system-building initiatives at city, state, and national levels. The common thread among the city-level efforts, identified in a recent study (Simkin, et al., 2013), was an emphasis on out-of-school-time (OST) programs.<sup>9</sup> The report found three core OST system components: a coordinating entity, a common data system, and quality standards or a framework. It further emphasized the point that has been made in many studies that high-level city leadership is an essential factor in providing consistent funding levels for system building efforts.

Through the Youth Sports and Recreation Initiative, begun in 1992, Skillman funded two citywide intermediaries to provide training and technical assistance to support and sustain high quality<sup>10</sup> after-school programs, improve coordination and leadership, build public support for young people, and identify resources to continue these activities after the conclusion of the initiative. At the time, similar public-private youth-development system building was occurring in major U.S. cities; in fact, “the largest share of investments in the [OST] system building was devoted to increasing program quality and expanding access to participation” (Hayes, et al., 2009, p. 71).

<sup>8</sup> In youth development, young people are engaged and invested in their own learning and development, and attempt to meet their basic personal and social needs and build competencies necessary for successful youth and adult life. It focuses on their capacities, strengths, and developmental needs and not on their weaknesses and problems.

<sup>9</sup> Out-of-school time is defined as activities occurring before or after school and during evenings, weekends, and summer.

<sup>10</sup> For YSRI and CAYDI, program quality was measured from two perspectives using similar constructs. The first was a customer perspective, that of youth and their parents, in order to understand the subjective judgments of consumers. The second perspective was that of independent experts from High/Scope using an adapted version of the Youth Program Quality Assessment tool.

Skillman was acknowledged for its important role in bringing stakeholders together through city-wide efforts to increase after-school participation:

In 2004, the Skillman Foundation, the largest funder of children’s programs in Detroit, established and charged Mayor’s Time, the citywide nonprofit intermediary, with leading the After-School Roundtable. Its mission was to ensure that children and youth became Detroit’s top priority. The Roundtable – comprised of coordinating organizations, direct-service after-school providers, and a major parent network – work[ed] to establish and strengthen connections with the business community, philanthropists, and local, state, and federal governments. (Lee, 2006, <http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/building-and-evaluating-out-of-school-time-connections/mayor-s-time-in-detroit-a-citywide-system-for-after-school>).

In another effort to expand youth-development opportunities, Skillman launched the Culture and Arts Youth Development Initiative in 2003. That initiative funded programs in low-income neighborhoods to give young people opportunities to be nurtured and create art to “expand their worlds and others’ by enlarging the canvases of their imaginations and providing the resources and tools for them to learn and take action” (Hughes, et al., 2007, p. 10). In addition to providing direct program support, the foundation created a learning community among grantees. Learning opportunities included quarterly meetings, training sessions, travel seminars to model youth programs in Philadelphia and Chicago, and scholarships for grantees to participate in a statewide leadership academy designed for people working in and for the arts.

Brandeis University conducted developmental and outcome evaluations of YSRI and CAYDI from 2005 to 2008<sup>11</sup> (Hughes, Curnan, Fitzhugh, & Frees, 2007; and Hughes, Curnan, Fitzhugh, Frees, & Blinkiewicz, 2008) and found that the programs were for the most part high quality and promoted

<sup>11</sup> The Center for Youth and Communities at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University has been an evaluation and learning partner with the Skillman Foundation from 2005 to 2014.

positive youth outcomes; that program quality, intensity, and duration influenced youth outcomes; and that 43 percent of grantee programs were underenrolled. But there was little evidence that the citywide investments had the impact the foundation hoped to achieve. While the foundation's support of an array of quality programs resulted in positive outcomes for youth, the effort was spread across the sprawling Detroit landscape<sup>12</sup> – with relatively few youths receiving program benefits. Additionally, issues with recruitment, retention, and access – in large part because programs were increasingly locating downtown rather than in the neighborhoods where youth lived – led to unfilled slots. In addition, the intermediaries Skillman had established or supported struggled to stay afloat as prolonged public disinvestment in youth programming led to intense competition for resources. Leaders were often ill prepared to sustain their own already undercapitalized organizations in such challenging times, much less provide the direction necessary for citywide efforts, hence further eroding the chance for genuine collaboration and system building.

Foundation staff took the evaluation findings seriously. They determined that:

1. The focus on quality improvement with YRSI and investment in the learning agenda with CAYDI grantees were important elements to carry forward to encourage use of promising practices and produce strong youth outcomes.
2. The foundation had underestimated the need for public investment in citywide youth-development infrastructure and acknowledged that private funds were insufficient to sustain it.
3. Macro social, political, economic, and environmental forces would always influence the success or failure of the foundation's efforts. This recognition caused Skillman to resolve to:

*There was little evidence that the citywide investments had the impact the foundation hoped to achieve. While the foundation's support of an array of quality programs resulted in positive outcomes for youth, the effort was spread across the sprawling Detroit landscape – with relatively few youths receiving program benefits.*

- Build systems directly interfacing with youth and families where they live, at the neighborhood level, and include support for organizational capacity building and leadership development.
- Apply effective practices and lessons learned from the citywide approach to the neighborhood level, a more localized situation that could allow the foundation to better “stabilize the environment” (T. Allen, personal communication, October 23, 2013) and increase access and enrollment.
- Invest in system and policy change to increase public resources and create conditions in which children and families can thrive.

### Shifting From a Citywide to a Neighborhood Focus, 2006-2016

When Carol Goss became Skillman's president in 2004, she began a transition to a more deeply rooted, strategic, and results-oriented approach to the foundation's work. She brought in Tonya Allen – widely acknowledged as the architect of GNGS – as senior director of programs. The new leadership was characterized by asset-based

<sup>12</sup> The geographic footprint of the city of Detroit could easily hold those of Boston, Manhattan, and San Francisco. See <http://blog.thedetroitHub.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/1.png>, 2009.

*Deep in my heart, I know that Detroit can change. Deep in my heart, I know that this plan's ambitious goals are achievable. ... The mandate of the board of trustees of the Skillman Foundation to me and to the staff of the foundation has been consistent: Results matter – think broadly and figure out a way to change the equation for Detroit's children. ... We want to be a change agent, not a banker. More than anything, we want to be judged by our results.*

—Carol Goss, in *Mapping the Road to Good*, Skillman Foundation 2007 Sustainability Plan

#### SHIFTING FROM A CITYWIDE TO A NEIGHBORHOOD FOCUS 2006-2016

##### Challenge

- Building capacity from the ground up to ensure youth are safe, healthy, educated, and prepared for adulthood.

##### Approach

- Commit to 10 years in six Detroit neighborhoods.
- Transform the foundation into a strategic, results-oriented learning organization.
- Develop a guiding theory for the work.
- Establish 2016 Goals and benchmarks.
- Launch the neighborhood-based Youth Development Alliance pilot.

##### Results

- The neighborhood-based youth-development infrastructure made it easier to connect directly with local youth, created a known partner for advancing collaboration at the neighborhood level to achieve the overarching goal, and provided a knowledgeable broker for foundation resources to strengthen the neighborhood coalitions.
- The overarching goal for GNGS was sharpened to better guide programmatic efforts to high school graduation and preparation for life and work as the core effort.
- Key to achieving the foundation's overarching goal was integrating neighborhood efforts, youth development, and education.

##### Action

- With the leadership transition, strategic planning was conducted to refine GNGS and plan for the future.

values, which included commitment to extensive resident and stakeholder engagement; building the capacity of individuals, families and organizations; and developing capacities congruent with local circumstances (Goss & Allen, 2007).

#### Laying the Groundwork for GNGS

After the launch of Good Neighborhoods Initiative in 2006,<sup>13</sup> the foundation spent two years organizing neighborhood residents and stakeholders and learning with them about their neighborhoods and priorities. Supported by Skillman resources, each of the neighborhoods developed action plans specifying the goals and the strategies they envisioned using to attain them. Building on these goals, Skillman in 2008 articulated its guiding theory: Young people are more likely to be safe, healthy, well-educated, and prepared for adulthood when:

1. they are embedded in a strong system of supports and opportunities,
2. they attend high-quality schools,
3. their neighborhoods have the capacities and resources to support youth and families, and
4. broader systems and policies create conditions under which youth can thrive.

The foundation defined how it would make this theory operational by establishing the 2016 Goals – a comprehensive list of goals that it was committed to achieving by the end of the 10-year initiative. Skillman created these goals in partnership with community members and stakeholders, and used them as the overarching agenda for its 2016 Task Force,<sup>14</sup> a deliberate effort to make the goals public to increase the foundation's accountability to and shared ownership with the six neighborhoods and its partners. The goals also populated the GNGS Evaluation Framework (Brown, Colombo, & Hughes, 2009), providing concrete priorities for funding and program development. According to Kristen McDonald, then a senior program officer for GNGS, "It served as a working model that provided direction, common language, intentionality, and the ability to track

<sup>13</sup> YSRI and CAYDI were winding down in 2007, while GN was starting up in 2006.

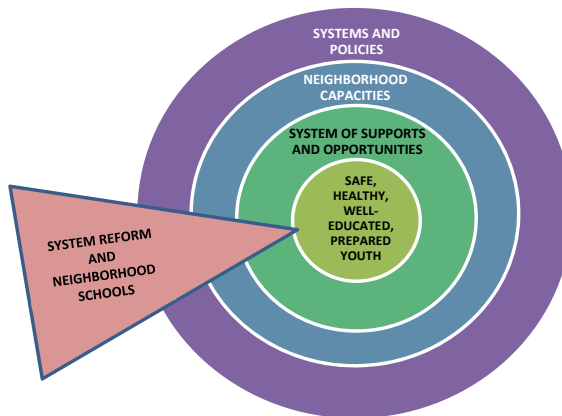
<sup>14</sup> The 2016 Task Force was intended to provide results-oriented leadership that holds the Skillman Foundation and its community partners accountable for achieving community change on behalf of Detroit's children. The task force members are youth, resident, and organizational leaders that represent critical partners in GNGS.

## 2016 GOALS FOR THE SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

By the end of 2016, the system of supports and opportunities will be strengthened to include:

1. A diverse array of youth-development experiences engaging 80 percent of youth ages 11-18 in one or more diverse program offerings and/or work, volunteer, or career experiences. This means that each neighborhood will have:
  - a. Three to five high-quality hubs that serve 60 percent of 11-18 year olds and their families.
  - b. Drop-in-center programs that serve 20 percent of 11-18 year olds.
  - c. A variety of youth-development academic enrichment, character building, and leadership programs such as service learning; math, science and technology; sports and recreation; arts and culture; homework assistance; and tutoring that serve 75 percent of 11-18 year olds.
2. Youth-employment preparation and employment opportunities that serve 40 percent of 14-18 year olds.
3. Volunteer and college- and career-exposure opportunities that serve 75 percent of 14-18 year olds.

FIGURE 2 Good Neighborhoods Good Schools Ecological Model



progress” (K. McDonald, personal communication, October 23, 2013).

The 2016 Goals established targets and benchmarks for the system of supports and opportunities and provided concrete priorities for funding, as well as for program and system development.

An ecological model (see Figure 2) reflecting the 2016 Goals was then developed to illustrate that kids are at the center of the work and that “the foundation’s work exists in a larger political, economic, and social context that impacts the way the strategies are translated into practical, feasible tactics” (Skillman Foundation, 2008). It was also

intended as a concise tool to communicate with residents and other stakeholders.

The foundation’s youth-development work falls into the “system of supports and opportunities” circle of the ecological model. It was designed to be a coordinated, accessible system of supports and opportunities for children and youth connected to the neighborhood goals in each neighborhood.

### *Shifting Youth-Development System Building to the Neighborhoods*

Skillman began this phase by shifting from funding citywide intermediaries to funding programs



### An Example of Integration: Youth Development and Academic Gains

In the Cody Rouge neighborhood, the small high schools model is demonstrating gains in attendance and academics. Principal Jonathan Matthews directly attributes student improvement to programs and services his students and their families receive at the Don Bosco Hall Community Resource Center. Don Bosco Hall provides students with positive activities such as sports, after-school programs, mentoring, and summer employment. These supports reinforce what Matthews is trying to instill in his students and helps to prevent many of the youth from reverting to negative behaviors such as crime and gang involvement.

The center is open six days per week [and offers space for a range of community-based organizations] to provide tutoring, arts and culture, recreation, and family-support services. This type of clear connection between schools and nonprofit organizations, which proactively builds and nurtures relationships between the schools and communities, helps to ensure students and families have access to programs that improve child well-being (Egnatios, Johnson, & McDonald, 2011, p. 9).

operating in the six targeted neighborhoods. By early 2010, however, the need for neighborhood-level leadership and a coordinating infrastructure was evident. In response, the foundation identified grantee partners to lead the system-building work by piloting the Youth Development Alliance (YDA). Its purpose was to build a neighborhood-based youth-development system to increase capacity to respond to youth needs and develop varying programmatic models based on each community's context, assets, and needs.

The foundation recognized that programming challenges included insufficient youth worker training, disconnected programming, and a lack of quality standards. The YDA represented a robust network of locally based leaders who knew which organizations were sufficiently equipped to work with kids and could play a critical role in weaving together opportunities for young people where they live. At the same time, this shift in focus meant that the foundation might have to fund some financially tenuous organizations; to mitigate this risk, Skillman again focused on organizational capacity building.

During the pilot, YDA lead agencies – Don Bosco Hall, Southwest Counseling Solutions, and Youthville Detroit – each convened provider collaboratives in two neighborhoods.<sup>15</sup> In the first two years, they also vetted potential data-tracking systems and worked on building a better understanding of the landscape in the six neighborhoods. The foundation staff and a consultant provided support and technical assistance on system building. The YDA filled a need that youth-serving organizations in the neighborhoods had identified – leadership for collaboration. It played a central role in orienting neighborhood youth-development agencies to collective work by developing a common language, creating opportunities for reflection on organizational practice in the context of the multilayered and interconnected nature of the work, and making youth-development programming more intentional. As one YDA leader said, the neighborhood focus of their work together “shifted the conversation from organizational to community development.”

#### *The Need for Integration Emerges*

Through the process of implementing the YDA strategies and developing the 2016 Goals and benchmarks, foundation staff and partners started to make deeper connections among the areas of youth development, neighborhood leadership and capacity, and neighborhood schools.

By late 2011, as YDA was gaining traction, both the foundation and YDA lead agency representatives saw its potential as a “connector to work with schools to identify high-quality programs and services available to youth, and to identify and address programmatic gaps” (Egnatios, Johnson, & McDonald, 2011, p. 9).

Findings from a series of developmental studies completed in 2011 (Curnan & Hughes, 2011) underscored the need for integration. At this time, the foundation revised its 2016 Goals – refining targets and benchmarks, concretizing strategies, and adding strategies not yet articulated. This revision, aligned with the new attention to inte-

<sup>15</sup> Youthville had financial difficulties that made it unable to continue as a lead agency; Don Bosco Hall assumed responsibility for its two neighborhoods.

gration, linked system-building priorities with youth worker training, transportation, and the data capacity of youth programs. The foundation also concentrated on strengthening YDA's core infrastructure to encourage scale and quality and stabilizing existing community assets<sup>16</sup> that provide safe places for adolescents to drop in throughout the day.

### *Youth Employment — A Component of GNGS*

Skillman began investing in youth employment in 2008 as part of neighborhood capacity building, through underwriting staffing of the citywide Youth Employment Consortium and, later, by making grants that funded jobs for teens in the six neighborhoods. As the foundation and its partners have moved toward integration of the major strands of work in GNGS, it has become apparent that youth employment needs to connect more explicitly with youth development and academic achievement. City Connect Detroit, which managed the consortium, has begun this effort through external resources that fund organizations in the six neighborhoods to create summer programs focused on educating, employing, and supporting youth; some of the organizations are linking the summer offerings with year-round programming.

### **Lessons Learned**

Three key lessons emerged from evaluation and experience in 2011:

1. The overarching goal for GNGS was too broad; it needed sharpening to better direct programmatic efforts. As a result, the foundation defined high school graduation and preparation for life and work as the core effort.
2. The key to achieving the foundation's overarching goal is in integrating neighborhood efforts, youth development, and education.
3. Having a neighborhood-based youth-development infrastructure makes it easier to connect

<sup>16</sup> For example, the foundation engaged finance and business expertise to stabilize a major community youth-development center that was in danger of closing.

## MID-COURSE STRATEGIC REALIGNMENT 2012-2016

### **Challenges**

- Further focus the foundation's investments.
- More rapidly increase the quality, scale, and sustainability of youth-development programs.
- Strengthen the connections among schools, neighborhood leadership, and safety strategies.
- Approaches to persistent problems weren't working.

### **Approach**

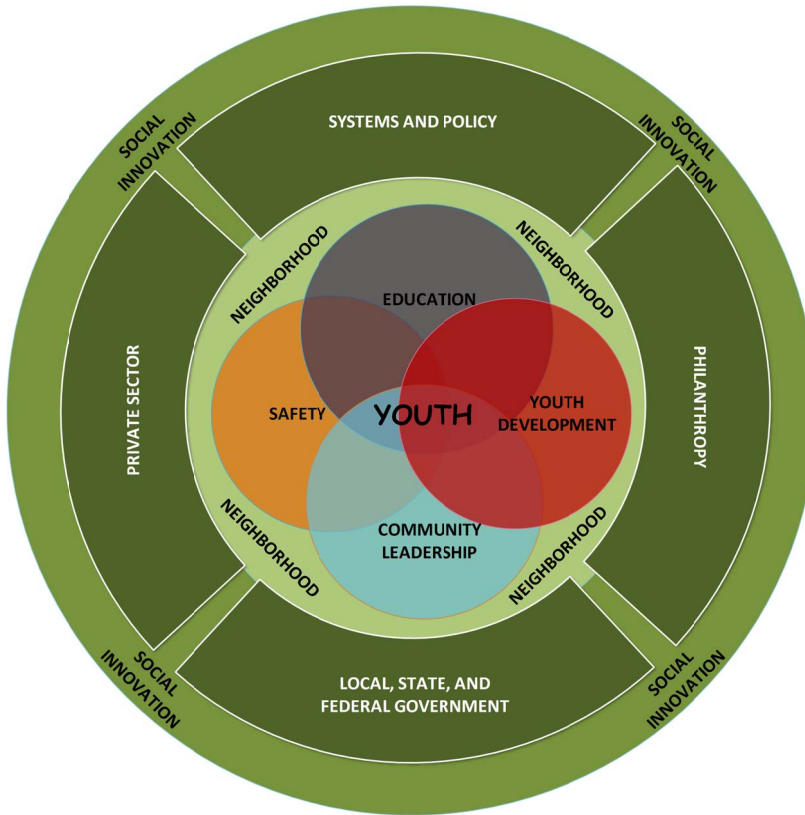
- Refine the overarching goal to increase the number of youth [in the foundation's six targeted neighborhoods] who graduate from high school prepared to pursue post-secondary education and who have the skills to transition into careers and adulthood.
- Implement an evidence-based framework: Achieve, Connect, Thrive (ACT).
- Create the Youth Development Resource Center to increase programs' data and evaluation capacity for continuous improvement and evidence building.
- Create a Youth Development Fund to leverage external resources to support the scaled youth-development system.
- Restructure foundation grantmaking processes and organizational structure to support the new approaches. Shift from three siloed programs to four cross-functional teams, and use social-innovation practices.

### **Preliminary Results**

- Foundation-supported program grants are beginning to align with the ACT framework.
- The network and learning community approach is being implemented, including a focus on routine collection and use of data.
- There is increased emphasis and action on program quality through the adoption of quality standards and youth worker training.
- Innovative approaches to problems like transportation are being tested.
- Internally, cross-strategy teams are intentionally aligning the work.

directly with local youth, creates a known partner for moving collaboration forward at the neighborhood level to achieve the overarching goal, and provides a knowledgeable broker for foundation resources to strengthen the neighborhood coalitions.

FIGURE 3 Skillman Foundation's Good Neighborhoods Good Schools 2014 Ecological Model



**Mid-Course Strategic Realignment: Moving to Scale, Quality, and Collective Outcomes Across the Neighborhoods, 2012-2016**

In late 2012, Carol Goss announced she would retire in December 2013 and Skillman’s board of trustees named Tonya Allen as her successor. The yearlong leadership transition included the continuation of strategic planning to assess the status of the work, further focus the overarching goal, and prioritize strategies to attain the most impact. For youth development, that meant identifying the core components that could increase and sustain scale, quality, and accessibility of youth opportunities in the six neighborhoods.

The strategic planning focused on issues such as:

- the foundation’s role and positioning within the “pervasive volatility” (Skillman Foundation, 2013b, p. 5) of the Detroit context and the financial markets,
- maximizing the foundation’s reputational, social, and political capital.
- intensifying the concentrated effort to achieve the 2016 Goals while building a platform for the next generation of the foundation’s work, and
- retooling and shifting program strategy to achieve maximum sustainable impact for children, schools, and neighborhoods after the end of the foundation’s 10-year commitment.

FIGURE 4 2010-2014 Neighborhood Youth Development System Expansion

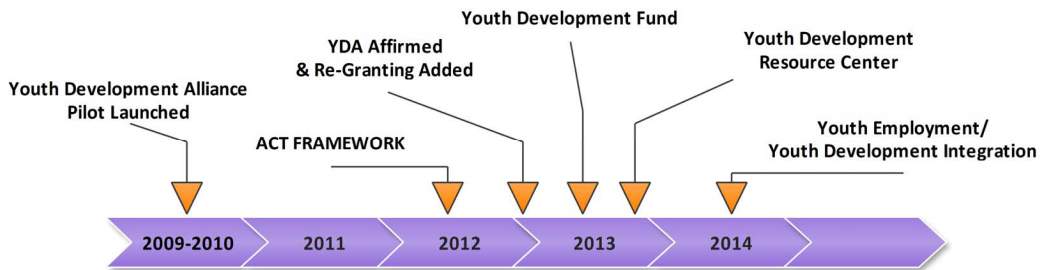


FIGURE 5 ACT Framework

# A C T

**Achieving** refers to the skill sets necessary for youth to achieve academically and, specifically, will encourage development of literacy and math proficiencies.

**Connecting** domain refers to relationship skills that help students develop supportive relationships.

**Thriving** domain refers to perseverance, self efficacy, and the resilience necessary for youth to maintain the effort to succeed.

Over the next six months, foundation staff and partners reviewed extensive data on demographic, social, and economic trends in addition to evaluation findings. They also clarified the overarching goal to be improving graduation rates to prepare Detroit's young people for college, career, and life. To reach this goal and further enhance integration of the programs, the foundation refined its strategies to focus on four program areas: education, youth development, community leadership, and safety. A differentiated neighborhood approach – responsive to the 2014 context of each neighborhood – was also implemented, and social-innovation practices became an integral force for propelling the action.<sup>17</sup>

To further clarify the foundation's intentions, the foundation leadership (Skillman Foundation, 2013b, p. 11) stated:

- “We will leverage our legacy of innovation to invest our resources in grants and PRIs [Program Related Investments] and attract others to invest in leaders, organizations, and networks taking bold action for children.
- “We will serve in the role of trusted convener. We are on the ground in neighborhoods and schools, so we can identify and connect decision-makers to what we know is working.
- “We will invest in organizations and projects using the Skillman Triple Bottom Line:
  - Entities will have high social impact coupled with solid financial and operational practices.
  - Investments will benefit children explicitly.
  - Investments will strengthen neighborhoods.”

A new ecological model (see Figure 3) has emerged from Skillman's reflection on lessons learned, and its assessment of how best to organize efforts to achieve its intended impact: to increase the number of youth [in the foundation's

<sup>17</sup> The foundation defines social innovation practices as identification and investment in ventures that can support Skillman's goals through innovative financial tools and connections to the private sector.

## *Rather than approving grants throughout the year, Skillman moved to a biannual competitive application process designed to align and strengthen the focus on quality and scale.*

six targeted neighborhoods] who graduate from high school prepared to pursue post-secondary education and who have the skills to transition into careers and adulthood.

This 2014 ecological model illustrates education, youth development, safety, and community leadership programs, all of which are embedded in a neighborhood context, integrating efforts to achieve youth outcomes. The neighborhood and programmatic work is supported and sustained by systems and policy strategies at many levels, and by social innovation practices to bring entrepreneurial solutions to persistent problems.

The foundation also affirmed its belief in the importance of quality youth programming and added a new emphasis on mitigating toxic stress to help young people succeed. The youth-development strategy now encompasses:

- a stronger outcomes-oriented framework – Achieving, Connecting, and Thriving (ACT),
- a new fund to support quality and scale,
- a new resource center to support the YDA and cohorts of grantees,
- integration of youth employment with youth development and linked learning, and
- innovative strategies and market-based principles.

### *The Achieving, Connecting, and Thriving Framework*

After researching effective practice and youth-development systems in partnership with YDA lead organizations, the foundation chose the

Achieving, Connecting, and Thriving Framework (ACT)<sup>18</sup> to guide its youth development work. ACT, based on educational and developmental psychology, identifies the core assets and skill sets important for success in school, college, and careers. (See Figure 5.) The plan is to invest in programming that aligns with ACT and “create a continuum of opportunities that help youth move toward adulthood, including a pathway to high school graduation and college access” (Skillman Foundation, 2013a, p. 4).

### *Youth Development Fund — Supporting Quality and Scale*

Before and during the 2012-2013 strategic planning process, the foundation assessed progress on 2016 Goals using data gathered between 2010 and 2012. Staff reflected on the “2012 assessment of supports for youth in [the six] neighborhoods conducted by Brandeis University and Data Driven Detroit<sup>19</sup> [that] found 77 agencies overseeing 216 youth programs with 292 program sites Skillman staff went on to say that they understood the data to say, “while we have seen a 15 percent increase in the number of youth-development opportunities for youth in their neighborhoods since 2010, we still do not have enough programs working seamlessly to meet the needs of children” (Skillman Foundation, 2013a, p. 3). While the increase in opportunities was encouraging, questions remained about what constituted “high quality.” The 2012 assessment found that while most programs emphasized connections with caring adults (75 percent of programs) and general life skills (71 percent); fewer programs specialized in academic enrichment (28 percent), career preparation and exposure (27 percent), college preparation and exposure (21 percent), and youth employment preparation (16 percent) (Hughes

<sup>18</sup> The ACT Framework, originally commissioned in Boston by Mayor Thomas Menino, the Boston Public Schools, Boston After School & Beyond, and the United Way and with support from the Wallace Foundation, was adapted for Skillman’s work. See [http://www.bostonbeyond.org/initiatives/ACT\\_Framework](http://www.bostonbeyond.org/initiatives/ACT_Framework).

<sup>19</sup> Data Driven Detroit (D3) was created in 2008 with funding from the Skillman and Kresge foundations to provide neighborhood-level data that could be used by stakeholders in developing strategies and assessing outcomes. D3 has been a source of critical information for the Skillman Foundation, partners, and neighborhood residents throughout the GNGS initiative.

& Leavitt, 2013). In response to the foundation's commitment to increasing high school graduation rates and to deeply concerning data showing very low student proficiency rates in math and literacy skills, strategic-planning discussions focused on the desired array of youth-development programs in each neighborhood and what opportunities should be scaled by 2016. Geo-coded maps of program locations generated by Data Driven Detroit were overlaid with 2010 youth-population census data, and aided discussions on the strategic role of hubs, where multiple programs are located; "safe places to drop in"; and transportation for boosting access. Knowing that its own grantmaking resources would never achieve the scale, quality, and access targets alone, the foundation created YDF as a means to leverage external resources to support these and the ACT goals.

The foundation also changed its process for funding youth-development programs. Rather than approving grants throughout the year, Skillman moved to a biannual competitive application process designed to align and strengthen the focus on quality and scale. The Request for Proposal process aligns programs under ACT, sets concrete parameters for funding programs, and creates a cohort of grantees who can work and learn together. The YDA lead organizations advise the foundation on YDF funding decisions. Skillman invested \$1.2 million in the YDF in 2013.

In addition, the foundation has created the Detroit Children's Fund, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, as a mechanism for other funders and people who care about Detroit to invest in GNGS, including youth development. The foundation believes increased attention to outcomes has enhanced the possibility of obtaining private investments.

#### *Youth Development Alliance in 2010 and 2013*

Between 2010 and 2013, YDA refined its goals of building partnerships to close gaps faced by youth and scaling up participation, using regranted foundation funds. It also defined quality, conducted training for youth workers, and aligned its efforts toward the goal of all youth in the neighborhoods graduating from high school prepared for college, work, and life.

*Their biggest lesson was "how important it is for neighborhood and program leaders to see youth development as a way to understand what youth need to succeed." Instead of an array of "disconnected types of youth work, there is now an intentional framework [ACT]" for what needs to happen for youth to succeed, especially in school.*

In order to close gaps and build participation, YDA developed coalitions in each of the six neighborhoods with membership totaling approximately 133 programs across all six – from grassroots groups to local affiliates of national organizations.

*"We don't want to just do work, we want to have an impact—a legacy. With the Youth Development Alliance, Skillman has opened the door and we will take it into the future for the long term."*

—YDA Lead Agency Member

Since collaboration was the priority, building trust among the programs was essential. The biggest surprise as YDA members got to know their coalition partners was that "the types of programming that we thought were there, were not there" – there were fewer after-school and summer programs than anticipated.

The YDA's regranted capacity allowed the lead agencies to provide funding for smaller grassroots programs that are ineligible for other foundation funding. One of the YDA coalitions utilized the funding to promote quality and identify gaps,

### An Example of Enhanced Youth Engagement

Followed by parents, youth teams came back from having mapped every block of their neighborhood, knocking door to door to ask what youth need. There wasn't a single chair left in the upstairs meeting room or basement auditorium. The YDA meeting started by agreeing to the agenda, then the youth and adults met separately for peer-to-peer discussions. Finally, everybody came back together to outline an action plan that respected both youth and adult perspectives.

There was intense concentration on the issues to be addressed from the data that had been collected. The youth and adults decided together the new communitywide activities to launch for older youth who had been left out, and they set ground rules for re-granting Skillman funds to close the gaps they had identified. Some after-school programs had too many youths and not enough resources; other programs offered excellent opportunities to learn, but few youths showed up.

*One young leader said, "It is time to make this different."*

- A. Schneider-Munoz, personal communication. (February 16, 2014)

and another to support collaborative efforts and attract programs to operate in hubs.

In addition to significantly increasing the number of youths participating and making sure program slots were filled regularly, especially by older "black and brown boys,"<sup>20</sup> YDA launched a campaign to strengthen the quality of the out-of-school-time program activities. As part of a strong foundation for quality programs, 40 percent of neighborhood youth-development program staff are on or will be on a pathway to youth worker certification by 2016. The evidence-informed training provides competency-based strategies to consistently manage behavior and guide skill development for youth across the neighborhoods.

<sup>20</sup> The goal of the "black and brown boys" priority "was not to do something highly specialized around this that would start and go away," said Tonya Allen, vice president of program and COO. "Rather, we wanted to make sure that it was embedded in our grantmaking for the long haul." See <http://www.skillman.org/Knowledge-Center/A-Rose-for-Detroit-Blog/Targeting-boys-of-color-is-more-than-just-an-initiative-for-Foundation#sthash.7GzVcm5f.dpuf>

One of YDA's primary undertakings has been to build a cohesive view of youth development so that adults and youth have a shared construct for understanding and promoting strength-based change. At first, the differing views of youth development made it difficult for YDA to foster collective action. As ACT unfolded, the lead organizations reached an integrative approach to youth development with shared values and lessons learned that has resulted in enhanced youth engagement, role modeling, and hands-on, quality developmental activities for youth reached by YDA.

In an informal assessment in August 2013, the YDA lead organizations said their biggest lesson was "how important it is for neighborhood and program leaders to see youth development as a way to understand what youth need to succeed." Instead of an array of "disconnected types of youth work, there is now an intentional framework [ACT]" for what needs to happen for youth to succeed, especially in school (Schneider-Munoz, 2013, p. 2).

In 2013, the foundation reconfirmed its commitment to YDA as the vehicle through which it would "expand the network of high-quality youth development programming and expertise in the six neighborhoods" (T. Allen, personal communication, 2013).

### *Youth Development Resource Center – Supporting YDA and Grantees*

As the foundation made early attempts to attract investors for youth development, the leadership realized they needed stronger evidence of outcomes. The Youth Development Resource Center (YDRC) was launched in September 2013 as a lean vehicle to enhance the foundation's capacity to expand and strengthen youth-development efforts and help programs connected through YDA build data systems to track youth, facilitate evaluation, and support scale, quality, and sustainability. All foundation-funded youth-development programs are required to collaborate with the YDRC, which will provide technical assistance around a shared evaluation and learning system.

In its first few months of operation, YDRC is building relationships with YDA and its coalition members, and learning more about their capacity-building needs and priorities for tracking attendance, program-level quality improvement, and youth-level outcomes. The YDRC will also lead the effort to define and develop a consensus on quality,<sup>21</sup> and establish quality standards for programs. Additionally, the YDRC and YDA will work together on incorporating restorative and trauma-informed practices<sup>22</sup> into youth worker training, and using the “black and brown boys” priority to deepen youth work practice.

Slated for further attention during 2014, youth employment continues as a priority for the foundation. Now embedded in the youth-development portfolio, there is an enhanced opportunity for integrating the two. The challenge is to determine what approach to youth employment makes sense given the neighborhood-based context of GNGS.

### Key Lessons from Two Decades of Supporting and Sustaining Outcome-Focused Youth-Development Systems

Skillman’s youth-development work continues to evolve, with an increased focus on rapid learning through enhanced data and evaluation processes, supported by innovative evidence-based practices and market-based strategies.

#### Transparency

Making core structural changes in the foundation challenges maintaining transparency with partners. When Goss became president and launched GNGS and again when Allen became vice president and COO and, then, president, they changed the foundation’s structure and ways of doing business.

<sup>21</sup> The YDA, YDRC, and Skillman are developing shared standards for high-quality youth-development programs that include such elements as trained staff; safe and supportive environments; active and engaged learning; youth voice, choice, and leadership; diversity, access, and inclusion; and family, school, and community engagement.

<sup>22</sup> Wachtel, T. defines restorative practice as “a social science that integrates developments from a variety of disciplines and fields – including education, psychology, criminology, sociology, organizational development, and leadership – in order to build healthy communities, increase social capital, decrease crime and antisocial behavior, repair harm, and restore relationships.” *Defining Restorative*. International Institute for Restorative Practices. (2012).

*A critical element of the neighborhood-based approach is that program staff, residents, parents, and youth have a stronger voice in identifying assets, needs, and solutions. Inclusion of youth voice cannot be underestimated.*

Allen and McDonald, her new vice president of program and policy, saw the foundation’s organizational structure supporting “siloe” thinking and acting, so they transitioned the original three GNGS overarching programs to form four program areas that are designed and expected to collaborate. This move led to cross-content teams; Youth Development, for example, has representatives from Safety and Education. Further, these teams are supported by social innovation and systems and policy teams.

While these moves were seen as essential to undergird the integration agenda, they also meant that Skillman staff had to learn new roles. Even with a commitment to partners and neighborhood engagement, “building the bike while you’re riding it” means inevitable disconnects (Brown, Colombo, & Hughes, 2009, p. 126). Keeping communication clear, and the cadence consistent, tests the best. Skillman’s advantages are a strong level of trust built over time with neighborhood leaders, and the smooth transition of top leadership. One YDA leader said, pointedly, “The community is not worried about the foundation’s change [in leadership].”

The tension between the foundation’s need to act and community timelines presents challenges (Brown, Colombo, & Hughes, 2009). For example, even though partners were involved in strategic planning where ACT was introduced, some wondered why it was imported from another city and



## *How long and at what level is it important to drive the work in the neighborhoods, and when does the foundation need to step back? How should that stepping back happen to ensure sustainability?*

neighborhood leaders were not given the chance to develop their own tool. Ultimately this was a concern over process, not content – the YDA partners support using ACT, but want a chance to make it their own and to receive technical assistance about how to make it operational in their neighborhoods.

### *Youth Voice*

Neighborhood-based development of the youth development infrastructure seems to be working, and youth voice is essential.

Organizing program providers in the six neighborhoods has happened within 2 1/2 years. The early indications are that the collaborations are stronger because the people involved know one another and have established trust, and there are deep commitments to strengthening quality, scaling, and coordination in the neighborhoods.

A critical element of the neighborhood-based approach is that program staff, residents, parents, and youth have a stronger voice in identifying assets, needs, and solutions. Inclusion of youth voice cannot be underestimated. As McDonald said, “Kids let us know that even with all this work we’re doing, they are still not feeling safe” (K. McDonald, personal communication, October 23, 2013). This voice was the chief reason the foundation added safety as a program emphasis during its reorganization.

### *The Long View*

The foundation has to take the long view, recognizing that failure can make you smarter, market forces and the social and cultural context matter in driving innovation, and a steady source of public support is essential for sustainability. When tackling persistent problems, “you have to expect to fail,” Allen said, and even with “with a 20 percent success rate you can accomplish a lot of things” (T. Allen, personal communication, October 23, 2013). To be innovative in grantmaking, the foundation has learned to embrace failure and use it to propel learning. Being candid about what works and what does not also frees foundation staff to act more decisively in discontinuing activities and developing creative solutions.

“Experience shows that tough economic times can usher in new opportunities and often bring potential partners together in ways that were not foreseeable when local agencies’ coffers were fuller” (Padgett, Deich, & Russell, 2010, p. 6). Social, political, and environmental forces present similar opportunities. As Skillman sees it, the foundation can no longer afford to evaluate the impact of investments and strategies years after implementation; opportunities for reflection, nimbleness, and changing course are needed as the work unfolds.

A major challenge in Skillman’s history has been unreliable support from public agencies. One consistent lesson from assessments of citywide systems is that strong, committed, high-level leadership is essential to OST system building (Simkin et al., 2013; Hayes et al., 2009). However, Skillman has consistently had to step in to fill leadership voids in Detroit, even to the point of creating its own role for Champions – Goss as a “Champion for Children,” for example. Yet, foundation staff remain committed to the deeper and more sustainable investments<sup>23</sup> and recognize they must think and act smarter, bigger, and entrepreneurially.

### *Closing Thoughts*

This retrospective look at the Skillman Founda-

<sup>23</sup> The revised 2016 Goal is: An evidence-based, sustainable system of youth-development programs exists with multiple funding partners, including public support.

tion's youth-development strategies has revealed important threads and questions for consideration going forward, especially as a place-based community change agent:

- The ongoing tension between balancing the foundation's agenda with that of its partners: How long and at what level is it important to drive the work in the neighborhoods, and when does the foundation need to step back? How should that stepping back happen to ensure sustainability?
- Investing in neighborhood systems to build capacity: How will the various components of the system Skillman is building (YDA, YDRC, youth employment) coordinate their efforts? Would the neighborhoods benefit from a citywide infrastructure? How would it operate? How should it interface with the neighborhoods?
- Measuring the efficacy of the foundation's grantmaking and initiatives against macro progress for Detroit youth: What measures are meaningful? What data are essential to chart progress?
- Timing and the foundation's role in the city: When should the foundation step in for public agencies? When it is a "moral hazard" to let them off the hook? With Detroit going through a financial reset, new opportunities and challenges will emerge. How will the dynamic tensions be addressed?

The foundation's commitment to its mission and core values runs deep and the learning agenda is full. One can talk to staff at Skillman and get passionate and measured responses that reflect both certainty that they are going to succeed and certainty that they will have failures. Apparent throughout the last 20 years is that the foundation and its partners have learned through each phase of the work. At each juncture, they dig deeper into the root problems and into what it would take to achieve their desired outcomes. Doing this in a highly volatile environment adds complexity. Knowing how hard, why, when, and where to push – and understanding what levers might be effective at a particular moment – requires a smart and adaptive approach. Therefore, there is a dif-

### An Example of Entrepreneurial Action

No matter how good the programs are, kids have to get to there for them to make a difference. After a two-year, neighborhood-based effort to address the persistent lack of transportation access didn't gain traction, Skillman took an unconventional step. The foundation launched a youth transportation pilot with the Detroit Bus Company – a startup for-profit company dedicated to finding innovative solutions – that helped kids in southwest Detroit get safely to and from youth-development opportunities. Hundreds of riders took part in the pilot program in the first year. The foundation is refining the model and hoping to expand it.

– [www.skillman.org](http://www.skillman.org)

ferent nuance to the lessons each time – they are seen in a new light, and with new knowledge and new partners' perspectives.

The work is not for the faint of heart. Everyone involved has been deeply frustrated with slow progress or backward movement, or the crisis of the moment. What keeps the foundation and its partners motivated is a deep commitment to kids and Detroit, and tangible momentum: The high school graduation rates are rising,<sup>24</sup> trained youth workers with new energy and skills permeate the neighborhood programs, and there are high-performing schools in the neighborhoods that are intentionally working with youth-development programs. These benchmarks – along with the stabilization of YDA, the launch of YDRC and co-location with the schools resource center; new plans for leveraging public and private resources; and entrepreneurial approaches to solving seemingly intractable problems such as safety and transportation – keep hope alive and keep hundreds of people from the neighborhoods to the foundation to the city of Detroit engaged and working together.

<sup>24</sup> Data Driven Detroit reported that graduation rates rose from 61.1 percent in 2007 to 69.6 percent in 2012 in the six Skillman neighborhoods, a 13.9 percent change versus 1 percent for the rest of Detroit (Skillman Foundation, 2013b, p. 15).

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