



Executive Summary: Detroit K–12 Education Ecosystem Study

2026

DETROIT K–12 EDUCATION ECOSYSTEM STUDY

Executive Summary

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About This Study

This study maps the organizations, relationships, and structural conditions shaping K–12 education in Detroit. Drawing on focus group conversations with The Skillman Foundation grantees and partners at the Foundation’s Education Changemakers Summit in November 2025, 24 in-depth qualitative interviews conducted between November 2025 and March 2026, a structured conversation at the February 2026 Common Grounds gathering with Detroit community leaders, and a network survey completed by 117 organizations across a known ecosystem of 219 organizations generating 3,224 documented connections. It examines who is shaping education priorities in Detroit, how those actors connect and coordinate, and where there are concrete opportunities to strengthen community-centered education outcomes. An interactive network map is available at <https://skillman.org/ecosystem-map>.

Key Findings

- **Detroit’s education ecosystem is fragmented by design, not by accident.** No single body is accountable for the city’s 113,266 K–12 students, who are split across DPSCD, Detroit charters, and Schools of Choice. Formal authority over Detroit education policy is held by state actors who sit largely outside the city: the Governor’s Office, MDE, and the State Board of Education.
- **The organizations closest to Detroit students and families are the least integrated into the processes where education policy gets made.** Network analysis of 117 organizations and 3,224 documented connections, triangulated with 24 interviews, shows a consistent pattern: community-based actors hold deep relational trust and legitimacy but lack reliable mechanisms to translate that legitimacy into binding decisions.
- **Five recurring dynamics constrain community-centered influence in the ecosystem:** community voice is invited after policy direction is already set; families, not institutions, absorb the cost of system fragmentation; institutional metrics and community knowledge operate in parallel rather than in concert; community legitimacy does not translate into formal policy influence; and the dominant narrative about Detroit education shapes which solutions and leaders appear credible.
- **The path forward rests on commitments that must hold across political transitions.** Longer-arc investments in backbone coordination, parent organizing infrastructure, cross-sector data architecture, and proven community-to-policy pipelines must be sustained across mayoral and gubernatorial administrations rather than treated as episodic project work.

Detroit has a vibrant K–12 education ecosystem focused on improving outcomes for students in the city. It spans Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), a robust charter sector, and Schools of Choice serving Detroit students in neighboring districts. It includes the state actors who hold formal authority over education in Michigan: the Governor’s Office, Michigan Department of Education, the State Board of Education, and the state legislature. It also includes Wayne Regional Education Service Agency (RESA), the City of Detroit’s Office of Youth and Education under the Sheffield administration, out-of-school-time providers, community-based organizations with deep family trust, advocacy and organizing groups, teacher unions, research and data partners, philanthropy, and a business community increasingly engaged around strengthening education outcomes and economic competitiveness. The people across this ecosystem are working hard, committed to better outcomes for Detroit children and youth.

This study documents the structural conditions that prevent committed effort from aggregating into systemic change. A pattern surfaces consistently across both interview and network evidence: some of the organizations with the deepest legitimacy in Detroit communities, and the clearest view of the lived experience of Detroit students and families, are least integrated in the processes through which education policy actually gets made. That is not an intractable condition. It is a challenge to be addressed.

The Challenge

There have been real gains across the ecosystem, warranting cautious optimism about what coordinated investment can produce. And yet Michigan’s fourth-grade reading rank on the 2024 NAEP has fallen from 32nd to 44th nationally since 2019. The slide, happening alongside documented local progress in Detroit schools, is the clearest signal that individual gains are not aggregating into durable systemic change.

This is not a lack of will or capacity. It is a coordination challenge in an ecosystem whose defining characteristic is fragmentation. No single governing body is accountable for all 113,266 K–12 students living in Detroit; 38 percent attend DPSCD, 26 percent attend charter schools located in Detroit, and 36 percent attend public schools outside the city through Schools of Choice. And formal authority over Detroit’s education policy, including budget allocations, curriculum standards, and accountability frameworks, is held by state actors who sit largely outside the city: the Governor’s Office, MDE, and the State Board of Education.

The pattern that follows is predictable. Outcomes that span education systems lack clear ownership. Actors with the ability to shape education system conditions are not consistently aligned around shared strategy. Programs operate effectively within institutions but do not reliably aggregate into system-level change. Community insight is present but not systematically

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“Detroit has been in a state of educational repair for some time. I still don’t know who decides.”

— Community practitioner,
25 years in Detroit education

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“There’s no governing body in the city of Detroit, elected or otherwise, that’s actually accountable for all the kids in the city. This is a problem of design, likely intentional.”

— Detroit education philanthropist

connected to the processes where decisions get made. Progress occurs in parts of the education system. It is harder to sustain across the education system as a whole. The question that follows is direct.

What would it take to align Detroit’s education ecosystem to enable sustained, system-level improvement?

Opportunities For Alignment

Addressing the challenge requires three mutually reinforcing moves:

1. **Actively cultivate connections** across the Detroit education ecosystem.
2. **Focus ecosystem attention** on the dynamics that structure and constrain effective advocacy.
3. **Sustain focus on priorities** that require attention across multiple political administrations to see through.

1. Actively cultivate connections across the Detroit education ecosystem

Making the ecosystem visible begins with recognizing that there are multiple ways organizations influence education outcomes for Detroit youth and families. Formal decision-making authority is one of them: the ability of a governor, a superintendent, the legislature, a school board, or a system administrator to approve or redirect resources. But it is not the only one. Organizations also influence outcomes by shaping which issues receive attention and how they are framed; by controlling the funding that sustains initiatives; by bridging across sectors that would not otherwise connect; by holding the trust and legitimacy that communities extend to those who know them; and by organizing people to act around shared priorities. Drawing on foundational frameworks from Steven Lukes and John Gaventa, this study treats those six modes of influence as equally weighted. Education policy and systems change happens when they are aligned with one another; the challenge this study documents is how often Detroit’s ecosystem produces mismatches across them.



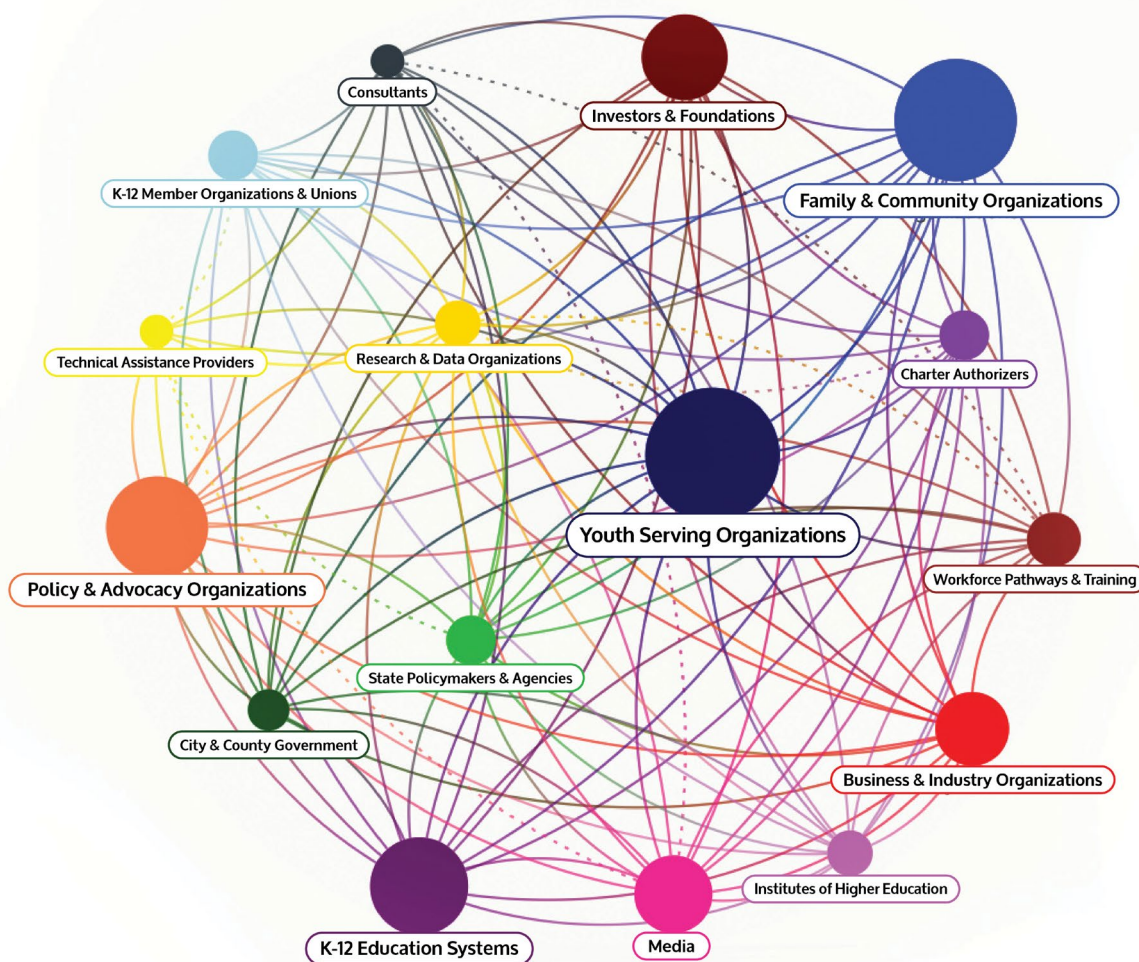
To make the connections within the ecosystem visible, the study surveyed 117 organizations across a known field of 219, asking each to identify the actors they interact with, and the nature of those relationships. The responses generated 3,224 documented connections and were rendered into an interactive map. Each node on the map is an organization; each line is a relationship. Three simple measures of network position help read it.

Degree Centrality	A count of all direct connections reported by an organization. <i>In plain terms: who knows the most people? High degree centrality signals prominence and broad reach, but not necessarily strategic influence.</i>
Closeness	A measure of how quickly an organization can reach every other organization in the network, through direct and indirect connections. <i>In plain terms: who is best positioned to spread information quickly across the whole network?</i>
Betweenness	A measure of how often an organization sits on the shortest path between two others. An organization with high betweenness serves as a bridge, connecting parts of the network that would otherwise be disconnected. <i>In plain terms: who holds the network together? High betweenness indicates brokerage power and structural indispensability.</i>

Interviews and network analysis each provide a different view of influence. Interviews show how influence is perceived, who respondents name as powerful, trusted, or well-connected. Network analysis shows how influence is positioned, which organizations sit on the structural paths through which information, coordination, and priorities actually move. The two often confirm each other. Where they diverge is often where the most important findings lie. An organization frequently named in interviews but structurally peripheral in the network data is exercising influence through reputation rather than position, and that influence is more fragile. An organization rarely named but with high bridging centrality is a leverage point the ecosystem’s own participants may not fully recognize. Both patterns appear in the Detroit data.

These measures do not always move together, and the gap between them is where the map does its most useful work. Organizations with extensive reach and high network centrality are not always the critical nodes connecting different parts of the ecosystem. Others with more limited reach can occupy a critical bridging position, linking actors that would otherwise remain disconnected. Breadth of connection and bridging capacity are different properties, and the map makes both legible.

The map is built to be used. The sector-level ecosystem map below will be available to the general public. The Foundation’s grantees and partners will additionally be able to see which other actors in the ecosystem share a focus on the same policy priorities; what the shortest path is to reach an organization working on a shared interest it is not currently connected to; and where its own relationships already bridge parts of the ecosystem that would otherwise be disconnected. The map turns information about the ecosystem into a tool for acting within it.



Explore the Network Map

An interactive network visualization for this study is available at <https://skillman.org/ecosystem-map>.

Detroit K-12 ecosystem network map, organized by sector. Node size reflects the number of known organizations in the sector; edge color indicates sector of origin.

2. Focus Attention on the Dynamics That Shape Advocacy

Five recurring patterns, surfaced consistently across 24 interviews and 117 surveyed organizations, shape the space for effective advocacy in Detroit’s K–12 ecosystem. These are not parallel problems. Each is a dimension of the same underlying condition: an ecosystem in which power, information, accountability, and narrative are organized in ways that make community-centered influence difficult to achieve and easy to displace. Focusing ecosystem attention on these dynamics, naming them, tracking them, and building strategy around them, is the precondition for the kind of durable community-led education policy change People Powered Education supports.

- 1 Community Voice Is Often Invited After Policy Direction Is Already Taking Shape.** Agenda-setting sits upstream within institutional processes before broader community actors are engaged. Parents, youth, and grassroots leaders are brought in at defined stages but are not consistently embedded when core decisions are formed. This is not a participation failure; it is a timing misalignment built into the policy cycle.

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“Parents are exhausted. People in community get asked stuff all the time, get no feedback, and don’t see results, so they’re tired. They’ve had bad experiences in the education system themselves, so they don’t trust it.”

— Detroit Education Leader

- 2 Families, Not Institutions, Are the System’s Primary Integrators.** In the absence of a common enrollment system, shared transportation, or cross-sector student tracking, families become the connective tissue, the actors who carry records across sectors, coordinate transitions, and absorb the costs of fragmentation. Time spent navigating multiple systems is time not spent shaping them; the structural transfer of coordination work to households also diffuses families’ capacity to influence the decisions that produced the fragmentation in the first place.

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“My hypothesis: out-of-school time programs serve all the same kids — the kids whose families have transportation and awareness. The kids who need it most aren’t showing up, and nobody knows.”

— Detroit Youth Development Leader

- 3 Institutional Metrics and Community Knowledge Operate in Parallel.** Education policy conversations rely on formal metrics and performance data. Parents, educators, and community organizations hold lived knowledge about service gaps and neighborhood realities. These two forms of knowledge are not consistently integrated into shared decision-making.

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“The difference between a state policy and a state goal and actual local implementation — we’re still trying to figure out some of the barriers: we do X state policy, why is it not being implemented the way we thought? What are we not seeing? What are the barriers on a local level that just aren’t getting up to us?”

— Senior State Education Policy Official

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- 4 Community Legitimacy Does Not Automatically Translate Into Policy Influence.** Community-based actors hold deep relational trust and legitimacy within Detroit’s neighborhoods. Detroit does not lack community voice; it lacks reliable mechanisms that translate community legitimacy into binding decisions.



“Parent advocates are used as tokens. Organizations and education entities bring parents off the sidelines to fight in the arena for policies, for more money, for changes they need. But the minute those parents say ‘okay, we’re helping you, but this is what we need,’ they say, ‘go back to the line, we’ll call you back when we need you again.’”

— Detroit Parent Advocate

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- 5 Who Gets to Tell Detroit’s Education Story and Whose Interests Does That Story Serve?** The dominant narrative frame shapes which solutions appear credible, which actors appear qualified to lead them, and which structural conditions remain politically stable. The contest over Detroit’s education narrative is not neutral.



“Others told the story of Detroit’s education system: it was always about achievement gaps, about Detroit students not being good enough. Those stories came predominantly from people who had not been in the system. The rhetoric has always diverted the conversation from under-allocation of resources.”

— Detroit Education Advocate

3. Sustain Focus on Multi-Administration Priorities

Some of the work this analysis identifies cannot be completed in any single administration's term. These are priorities where the window is not a season but an arc, and sustaining focus across political transitions is what distinguishes the coalitions that hold from the ones that collapse.

Backbone Coordination	A cross-sector coordination function, held by an actor with no sector stake and anchored in community-defined priorities rather than funder-defined ones. The design principle is what distinguishes durable coordination from the kind that collapses when political interest shifts: sustained neutrality, and accountability to the families the system serves.
Parent Organizing Infrastructure	Funding parent leadership organizations as the ongoing community power infrastructure they are, rather than as grantees awaiting the next cycle. Parent organizing has repeatedly produced outsized outcomes relative to the resources invested in it. Treating that capacity as sustained infrastructure, rather than as episodic project work, is among the higher-leverage investments the ecosystem has available.
Cross-Sector Data Architecture	A formal data brokerage function between districts and community organizations, providing advocates and nonprofits with access to aggregated, de-identified student data without overburdening district staff. Scaling community-driven research and building formal pathways for community knowledge to inform decisions is part of the same architecture, addressing the parallel tracks on which institutional data and community knowledge currently operate. Design work in this area already exists within the ecosystem. The sustained work is bringing it to operating scale and keeping it there across funding and leadership cycles.
Community-to-Policy Pipelines	Detroit has several types of community-to-policy infrastructure with a demonstrated track record of moving priorities forward: youth organizing and fellowship programs that feed into statewide advocacy coalitions; foster youth and lived-experience testimony models; and community-led campaigns. None are fully resourced, and all are scalable. Sustaining them across funding and leadership cycles, rather than supporting them as episodic project work, is what allows that track record to compound over time.

What It Will Take

This study was commissioned in service of People Powered Education, The Skillman Foundation’s strategy for ensuring that Detroit youth, parents, educators, and community members have the power to define, design, and influence the education system that most directly shapes their lives. People Powered Education is organized around four goals: expanding education organizing power, elevating Detroiters’ perspectives in education policy, building common ground for education system change, and being an accountable and racially equitable grant maker. How organized community power connects to the education policies and systems changes that determine outcomes for Detroit children is among the central questions this study sought to illuminate.

Taken together, the evidence supports the strategy’s central commitment: youth and community voice can be a meaningful driver of systems change in Detroit when the structural conditions allow it. This analysis advances the People Powered Education strategy by grounding it in a clearer picture of how the ecosystem currently functions, where alignment is possible, and where sustained focus across mayoral and gubernatorial administrations can support durable progress.