



2025 Community Brief



>KCONNECT

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Letter from the Board

Dear Partners,

At KConnect, we believe that when systems align and communities lead, lasting change becomes possible. As Co-Chairs of the Board, we are proud to reflect on a moment in time defined by intentional collaboration, courageous conversations, and bold action to improve outcomes for all, no matter their starting point.

We continue to be encouraged by how KConnect has created space for community voice, coordinated strategy, and aligned accountability. Through trust-building and transparency, our network is modeling what it means to lead with equity. KConnect's policy work is also helping to reshape systems by identifying shared priorities, informing decision-making, and advocating for structural change rooted in lived experience.

We are clear about the challenges of our work together. Across our community, critical safety net programs are at risk of being reduced or eliminated. Families and neighbors who contribute so much to the richness of our shared life are experiencing threats to their safety and security. Nonprofit partners are navigating rising demand for services while facing funding constraints, leading to burnout and difficult decisions about programming. At the same time, narratives of fear and division threaten to erode our collective sense of belonging.

In this environment, our shared work has never been more essential. Together with you and the entire KConnect network, we are committed to advancing solutions that strengthen connections and block threats to our communities to ensure that every child and family can thrive.

Thank you for your partnership, your leadership, and your belief in what's possible when we act together.

Sincerely,
Jamon Alexander & Andrew Brower



Co-Chair

Co-Chair

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Jamon Alexander



Andrew Brower

Letter from the President

Dear Partners and Community Members,

In a time marked by deep uncertainty and increasing polarization, KConnect has remained grounded in our mission: to reimagine systems so they work for everyone. We recognize that too many children and families continue to face barriers, not because of personal decisions, but because of longstanding systems that were never designed with their success in mind.

That’s why we remain focused on systemic transformation grounded in collaboration and purpose. And this past year, we’ve continued to do what we do best: bringing people together across sectors, perspectives, and lived experiences to co-create bold, data-informed solutions rooted in community wisdom.

From Align and Design Teams™ such as Youth Justice, to expanding support for underrepresented entrepreneurs, launching the LivedPay eBook, and piloting a countywide STEM strategy to support student success, KConnect has helped Kent County envision what’s possible when systems reflect the values and voices of the people they serve.

This work is not easy, especially in today’s climate. But we believe systems can change when equity is placed at the center, when community voice drives decision-making, and when we act with urgency, clarity, and courage.

As we look ahead, KConnect is deepening our commitment to collective action. We’re investing in cross-sector partnerships, advancing a shared policy agenda, and continuing to elevate lived experience as essential expertise in designing and delivering systems-level change.

Thank you for walking alongside us. Whether you are a partner, a parent, a policymaker, or a young person advocating for a better future, you are the reason this work matters.

Backbone Team

- Salvador López**
President & CEO
- Mark Woltman**
Vice President of Strategy & Learning
- Dr. Shayla Young**
Vice President of Policy, Advocacy, & Community Engagement
- Maegan Frierson**
Director of System Building
- Katie Adrianse**
Director of Communications
- Stephanie Salamone**
Direct of Operations
- DeShawn Pope**
Administrative Project Manager
- Dr. Christopher Cadogan**
KConnect Fellow
- Yara Barbosa**
KConnect Fellow
- Lauren Conrad**
Senior Consultant at ConnectUs



With resolve & commitment,

Salvador López
President & CEO, KConnect



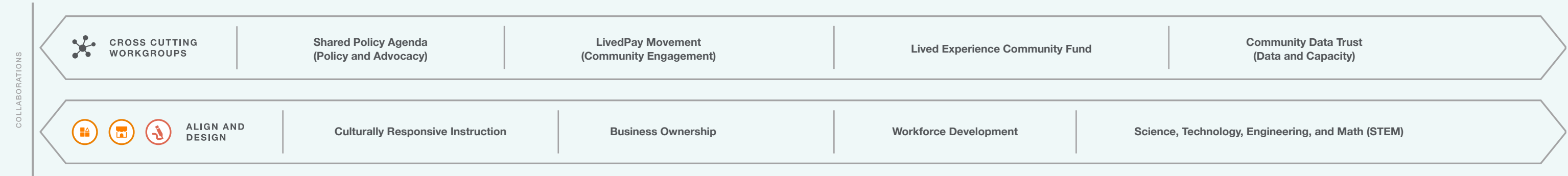
Updated in July 2025

KConnect Vision

A future where every child and family has the opportunity and support to thrive, no matter their starting point.

KConnect Mission

We connect people, organizations, and data to mobilize collective action for lasting systems change.



KConnect Workplan

During the first five years of work - from 2013 to 2018 - the KConnect Network co-created the Workplan. Eight **Success Measures** span the prenatal to career continuum. Within these Success Measures are 27 **Indicators**. We believe that by measuring and developing strategies under these categories, we will be able to improve outcomes in a significant way.

A Success Measure refers to a specific metric along KConnect’s Prenatal to Career Continuum that is used to measure the status of a particular goal. It serves as a quick and easy way to assess programs and determine whether the desired outcome has been achieved. These measures enable stakeholders and communities to make informed decisions and develop appropriate next steps to close disparity gaps.

An Indicator is a specific measure used to assess the performance of a key data point under KConnect’s Success Measures. Indicators were identified and vetted by KConnect’s Data and Capacity Workgroup in partnership with the Core Workgroups as the KConnect Workplan was developed.



KConnect Community Report Card

Tracking Progress on Our Shared Vision: Common Agenda & Roadmap 2.0

As we continue to move the needle toward improving economic mobility from prenatal to career, KConnect’s progress in 2024 reflects deep cross-sector collaboration, strengthened community partnerships, and a shared commitment to systems change. **Below is a summary of our advancement across the six high-level goals outlined in our Common Agenda and Roadmap 2.0:**

ONE

Launch innovative system-level strategies that eliminate racialized disparities from prenatal to career

ON TRACK

KConnect is driving forward system-level change through a variety of major initiatives aimed at addressing racialized disparities across the prenatal to career continuum. In the area of youth justice, KConnect launched a cross-sector Align & Design Team™ to develop a common language as well as a series of interventions that reduce court involvement and reframe how we define safety and accountability, especially for youth of color who are disproportionately impacted by the system. At the same time, our Business Ownership strategy is working to double the number of BIPOC-owned businesses in Kent County that surpass the \$1M revenue mark. This effort, in partnership with the Cincinnati Minority Business Accelerator, is focused on building an inclusive ecosystem that drives generational wealth and thriving family incomes. Both strategies are grounded in data, lived experience, and a commitment to dismantling systemic barriers.

TWO

Develop a shared policy agenda, and operationalize advocacy that dissolves inequities in our community

ON TRACK

KConnect’s inaugural Advocacy Day in Lansing brought community members, partners, and lived experts together to champion our Shared Policy Agenda, with a spotlight on Family Leave Optimal Coverage (FLOC). Through strategic relationship-building, KConnect has become a trusted policy resource, supporting evidence-informed decisions and advancing long-term systems change. Ongoing coordination with state and local legislators ensures that policy reflects the real experiences of those most impacted by systemic inequities.

THREE

Ensure that community voice is embedded throughout KConnect’s structure

ON TRACK

KConnect remains committed to ensuring that those most impacted by systemic inequities help shape the solutions. At the 2025 Education Summit, students shared firsthand experiences navigating educational systems, grounding our collective work in lived realities. Through local Issues Assemblies, students across Kent County elevated concerns that informed strategy. Additionally, KConnect gathered feedback from over 100 young people to better understand what student well-being looks like in their own words, directly influencing how we design supports and measure success. Embedding community voice is not a checkbox; it’s a principle guiding every layer of our work.

FOUR

Empower the Backbone to have decision-making authority

ON TRACK

KConnect’s Backbone has taken on a more visible leadership role in coordinating strategy, managing cross-sector partnerships, and facilitating network-wide decisions. These shifts reinforce KConnect’s role as both a convener and catalyst for collective action.

FIVE

Ensure sustainability by diversifying funding

ON TRACK

KConnect is strengthening its long-term sustainability by expanding and diversifying its funding streams. A key driver of this work is ConnectUs, KConnect’s national consulting arm, which provides strategic guidance on collective impact and systems building to organizations across the country. Revenue generated through ConnectUs supports and reinvests in KConnect’s local mission, allowing us to sustain and scale innovative initiatives while reducing reliance on traditional funding sources. This blended model ensures that our impact remains both locally rooted and financially resilient.

SIX

Increase and better leverage private sector partnerships

ON TRACK

KConnect deepened collaboration with private-sector leaders through the Business Ownership Align & Design Team™, partnering with the Cincinnati Minority Business Accelerator to develop a pilot tailored to scaling BIPOC-owned businesses in Kent County. Collaborations like these underscore the value of cross-sector buy-in to drive lasting, equitable outcomes.



Collective Impact 101

Collective Impact is a collaborative approach to addressing complex social issues by bringing together cross-sector stakeholders to work towards a common goal. It recognizes that individual organizations working in isolation cannot effectively address complex social issues. Collective Impact creates a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to social change by fostering collaboration and coordination. The following five conditions define Collective Impact:

Common Agenda

All network members must have a shared understanding of the problem and a common vision for change. This involves establishing specific, measurable goals that everyone can work toward, such as the KConnect co-created Workplan.

Shared Measurement Systems

Developing a set of common indicators and metrics helps align the efforts of different organizations, ensuring that everyone is working towards the same outcomes and can track progress collectively. This is operationalized by KConnect through our publicly available Data Dashboard.

Mutually Reinforcing Activities

Rather than duplicating efforts, organizations collaborate by coordinating their activities to complement and support each other.

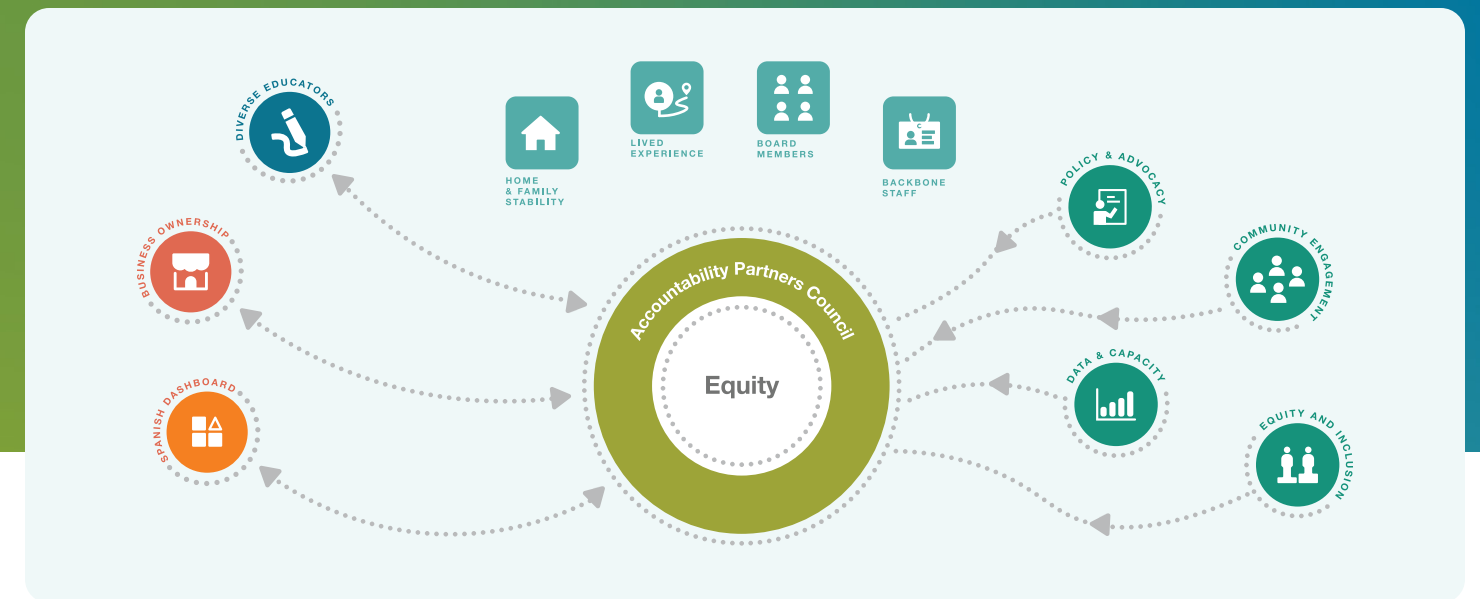
Continuous Communication

Open and frequent communication is essential to building trust among stakeholders. Regular communication ensures that everyone stays informed, engaged, and aligned with the common agenda.

Backbone Support

Collective Impact initiatives often have a dedicated support structure, known as the Backbone, that facilitates and coordinates the collaborative effort. This team helps manage the overall process, fosters communication and supports the network.

In addition to these five conditions, Collective Impact focuses on equity. Equity is central to Collective Impact because it recognizes that effective collaboration and sustainable change require a commitment to fairness, inclusion, and addressing the underlying causes of social issues. By prioritizing equity, organizations such as KConnect aim to create lasting positive outcomes for communities in a just and inclusive way.



KConnect Structure

KConnect's Structure has evolved significantly over the past ten years. What started as two workgroups has grown into a broad network of cross-sector partners across Kent County. As we move into our next phase, we will move from theory to action.

KConnect has always been committed to addressing the critical issues facing Kent County, especially for children and families of color. We have spent a decade collecting and visualizing data, developing our workplan, and designing a framework around our three Core Workgroups, which are focused on the prenatal to career continuum. These Core Workgroups laid the foundation and guided our path to where we are today.

In our commitment to drive impactful change, we have recognized the need for a more targeted and actionable approach. Therefore, we are announcing a shift to our framework and will refocus our efforts from Core Workgroups to Align and Design Teams. These are strategy-focused teams aimed at addressing specific racial disparities highlighted on our data dashboard.

This transition is a deliberate step towards fulfilling our vision to ensure that everyone in Kent County has an equitable path to economic prosperity. The Core Workgroups were essential in shaping our understanding of community gaps - the Align and Design teams will take it one step further to align with community work and design and implement strategies.

Align and Design Teams consist of dedicated cross-sector experts and those with lived experience, each equipped with the knowledge and passion to tackle the distinct challenges faced by our community. With this transition, we aim to create tailored strategies that are agile, responsive, and effective in producing measurable outcomes.

KConnect is

- A voluntary partnership
- A community-wide collective
- A private-public collaborative
- A process facilitator
- A collector-integrator-assessor of data
- A coordinator of work groups
- An innovation scout
- A transparency advocate
- An experiment in "collective impact"
- Committed to equity
- Research and data-driven
- A system change effort
- Open

KConnect is not

- Mandatory
- A direct service provider
- A program designer
- A funder
- A competitor
- A funding filter
- A protector of status quo
- An exclusive club
- A power structure
- Committed to past structures
- Idea and opinion-driven
- A band-aid approach
- Closed



Curious
Creative
Courageous

The Three C's

At KConnect, we use the following three words to describe our work.

Curious

KConnect embodies curiosity by:

Exploring, analyzing, and visualizing data that few organizations can or are willing to explore

Using this data to encourage others to ask questions that have previously been unasked

Gathering knowledge and opinions from cross-sector partners with various perspectives

Fostering conversation between community members, partners, organizations, government, and philanthropy that may not typically find themselves seated at the same table

Creative

KConnect embodies creativity by:

Developing innovative solutions to close disparity gaps along the prenatal to career continuum

Fostering a culture of innovation that benefits from creative thinking, experimentation, and risk-taking

Experimenting and creating innovative strategies, frameworks, and tools that are new to the community or focus area

Working to make invisible systems visible, fostering a sense of belonging, and crafting solutions for our shared future.

Courageous

KConnect embodies courage by:

Challenging the status quo to change systems and structures that perpetuate disparities by disrupting norms, sharing stories, and highlighting applicable data

Being open and willing to address the root causes of these systemic inequities, which tackles the deep-rooted issues that can upset some system leaders and organizations

Addressing inequities by confronting those who uphold an unjust system

Embracing uncertainty and taking risks when developing solutions to complex problems

Acknowledging or owning that failure is a part of a courageous process.

Data and Scorecard

Data plays a pivotal role in the success of Collective Impact organizations by providing a solid foundation for informed decision-making. KConnect relies on data to understand the nuances of the challenges we seek to address. Comprehensive and accurate data enables us to identify the root causes of problems, assess the impact of interventions, and track progress over time. It is a common language that unifies stakeholders, fostering transparency and accountability.

2023 91.7%

2013 85.1%

Career Readiness

The employment rate among young adults in Kent County has demonstrated a positive uptick, showcasing the growing pool of talented individuals contributing to the workforce and vitality of the community.

2024 32.6%

2016 39.9%

Post-Secondary Readiness

The number of high school graduates ready for continuing education has shown a slight improvement, underscoring the strengths and potential of these students as they embark on their academic journeys beyond high school.

2024 87.2%

2013 78.1%

High School Graduation

While the number of high school students graduating within four years has remained consistent, it's important to recognize the persistence and dedication of these graduates, who have successfully completed their high school education within the traditional timeframe.

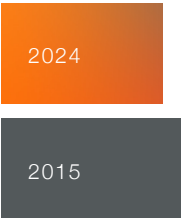
2019 43%

2018 43%

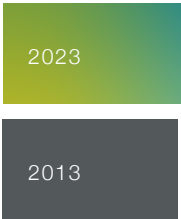
Kindergarten Readiness

Although there isn't a standardized Kindergarten Readiness Assessment in Kent County, our partners at First Steps Kent have been actively bringing together community advocates and experts to create a thorough assessment. They aim to utilize existing resources and expertise to address the current gap.

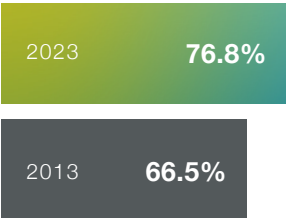
Data and Scorecard, continued



Third Grade Reading
The proficiency levels of third-grade students in reading have shown a slight increase since 2023. This progress highlights the valuable strides these students are making in their literacy skills, laying a strong foundation for their academic and personal growth.



Post-Secondary Success
While the total number of adults with an Associate’s degree or higher has seen a slight decline since 2021, it’s crucial to highlight the significant assets and capabilities that individuals possessing such qualifications bring to their respective fields and communities.



Basic Family Income
While the number of families living at or above 200% of poverty has remained constant, it’s essential to acknowledge the significant improvement since KConnect began collecting data in 2012. This improvement underscores the strength and resourcefulness of these families, highlighting their ability to navigate challenges and work towards greater economic stability over time.



Thriving Family Income
Thriving Family Income looks at the racial/ethnic gap in income across Kent County. The gap has significantly decreased over the past year, caused primarily by the improving outcomes for Hispanic families.

A Look Back at KConnect’s Accomplishments



StriveTogether: Courage in Leadership Award

KConnect has been honored with the 2024 Nancy Zimpher Courage in Leadership Award by StriveTogether, recognizing its transformative efforts to address systemic inequities in Kent County, Michigan. This prestigious award celebrates organizations within the Cradle to Career Network that demonstrate bold leadership, a commitment to equity, and the courage to challenge the status quo.

This recognition underscores KConnect’s unwavering dedication to collaborative, data-informed strategies that drive meaningful, equitable change. By fostering inclusive environments and holding systems accountable, KConnect exemplifies the principles of curiosity, creativity, and courage essential for advancing equitable outcomes for all children and families.

PACE Forward: A New Podcast

In 2024, KConnect launched PACE Forward, a new podcast created to bring community voices, policy conversations, and systems-change stories directly from the people driving impact. Each episode dives into the “why” behind our work.

PACE Forward is more than a podcast; it’s a platform to amplify cross-sector collaboration and explore what it truly means to move systems toward equity. Whether you’re a policymaker, nonprofit partner, parent, or passionate advocate, this podcast offers real insights, honest conversations, and bold calls to action.



You can find it by scanning the QR code or wherever you listen to your favorite podcast.



Collective Impact In Action

CONNECT»US

Elevating Systems Change: ConnectUS Advances Collective Impact Nationwide

As the consulting arm of KConnect, ConnectUs is helping communities across the country reimagine what's possible when systems work together. Rooted in the principles of collective impact and community voice, ConnectUs partners with organizations, collaboratives, and local leaders to operationalize bold strategies to create lasting change.

Since its launch, ConnectUs has expanded its national footprint by supporting organizations in building more accountable, community-centered systems. From facilitating governance redesigns and shared measurement systems to helping coalitions define their unique value proposition, ConnectUs delivered tailored support rooted in systems thinking and leadership.

WHAT'S NEXT

ConnectUs will expand its national imprint by deepening partnerships across the country. This includes facilitating initiatives, supporting communities in developing shared policy agendas, and helping organizations strengthen the infrastructure needed to sustain collective impact.

A CALL TO THE KCONNECT NETWORK

As ConnectUs continues to grow its national presence, the KConnect network remains a vital partner in modeling what's possible. Your leadership, innovations, and lessons learned here in Kent County serve as a blueprint for systems change nationwide. We invite you to stay engaged, share your stories, and continue championing the values of equity, collaboration, and community voice, because the work we do locally is shaping what's next nationally. Learn more about ConnectUs at connect-us.org.

Partners Driving Impact

ConnectUS proudly supports communities and organizations across the U.S., including:

A Glimpse of Africa

Arts & Culture Collective of GR

Grand River Network

Jackson County Public Health (InCoLab)

Kent County Health Department

No Surrender Running Club

Steepletown Neighborhood Services

Building a More Inclusive Business Ecosystem: KConnect's Pilot Accelerator

In Kent County, entrepreneurs of color continue to face systemic barriers to building and scaling successful businesses. KConnect and its partners are tackling this challenge head-on, with a goal to elevate businesses of color beyond \$1M in revenue, driving sustainable economic mobility for Kent County families.

The team is guided by a clear vision: to create a connected and supportive business ecosystem that removes barriers and expands opportunity. At the heart of this work is the understanding that business growth leads to community wealth and that closing the racial wealth gap requires intentional, coordinated action.

A Strategic Partnership for Scalable Success

KConnect is advancing a bold vision for business ownership in Kent County by partnering with the Cincinnati Minority Business Accelerator (CMBA), a nationally recognized leader in supporting the growth of minority-owned businesses. Together, we are co-designing a business accelerator model tailored to the unique needs of local entrepreneurs of color—one that is both scalable and sustainable.

With technical expertise from CMBA and in alignment with impactful efforts already underway locally, this partnership is building a stronger, more inclusive business ecosystem. The team is mapping existing resources and identifying where critical service and capital gaps remain, ensuring entrepreneurs have the tools they need to succeed.

Central to this work is engaging directly with local business owners, funders, and those with lived experience. Their voices are shaping a pilot that is designed specifically for Kent County, reflecting both community priorities and market realities. The ultimate goal is to support high-growth potential businesses led by entrepreneurs of color, expanding opportunity, elevating economic prosperity, and strengthening the foundation for long-term systems change in Kent County's economy.



WHAT'S NEXT

With community input and cross-sector collaboration, the Business Ownership Align and Design Team™ is launching a pilot accelerator program in Kent County. Next steps are:

- 1 Finalizing the pilot plan and participation criteria.
- 2 Securing investments to operationalize the pilot's infrastructure.
- 3 Develop a shared measurement system with goals, and outcomes.

Through this work, KConnect and its partners are laying the groundwork for a stronger, more inclusive economy.

A CALL TO THE KCONNECT NETWORK

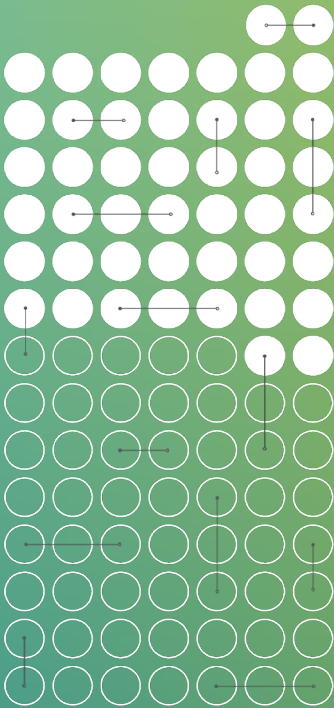
Building a more inclusive business ecosystem will take all of us. As we prepare to launch the pilot accelerator, we're calling on our network to lean in by sharing your expertise, championing entrepreneurs of color, investing in scalable solutions, and helping us remove barriers to generational wealth. Whether you're a policymaker, funder, business leader, or community advocate, your partnership is essential to ensure businesses of color grow and thrive.

Partners Driving Impact

This initiative is made possible through collaboration with a wide network of partners, including:

- 42 North Partners
- Cincinnati Minority Business Accelerator
- Dataverse Consulting, LLC
- Grand Rapids Center for Community Transformation
- Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce
- Grand Rapids Urban League
- GROW
- Mindset Meals
- Nationwide Software Solutions
- Start Garden
- Urban League of West Michigan
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

46% of 8th graders are proficient in math.



Partners Driving Impact

This work is made possible through collaboration with partners:

- STEM Greenhouse
- Gentex
- Gordon Food Services
- GR Community College
- Midwest Tech Project
- Kent ISD
- The Right Place

STEAM: Building a Pathway to Tech Careers

As the future of work rapidly evolves, so must the systems that prepare our students to succeed. KConnect is aligning efforts locally, regionally, and nationally to ensure Kent County students have the math and science proficiency they need to thrive in a growing tech economy.

Why STEAM Proficiency Matters

Math and science skills aren’t just academic benchmarks; they’re critical tools for navigating and shaping the future. Yet persistent disparities in access and opportunity have left too many students behind in these fields. That’s why our mission is clear: to create a more competitive and fair workforce by building strong STEAM foundations, starting in elementary.

WHAT WE’RE DOING

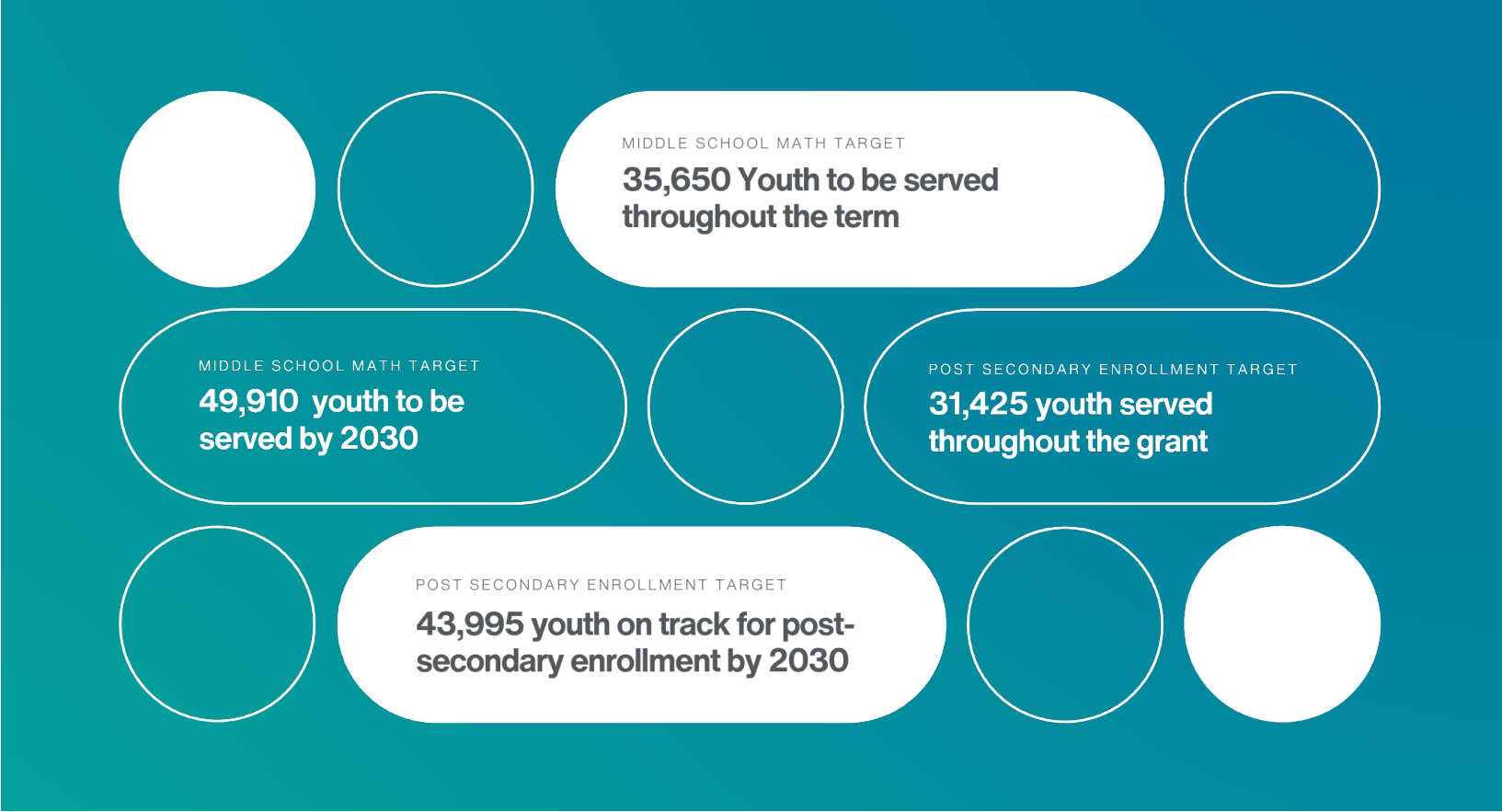
KConnect, in collaboration with the West Michigan Tech Council Talent Subcommittee, is helping to build a stronger and more inclusive technology workforce for Kent County. By aligning local and state STEAM initiatives, we are connecting resources and partners so that students and workers alike can thrive. Our focus on math and science proficiency is laying the foundation for future success, while cross-sector partnerships with schools, colleges, corporations, community organizations, and families are ensuring innovation and opportunity reach every corner of our community.

WHAT’S NEXT

The Right Place and KConnect will bring together stakeholders across sectors to co-create a shared strategy for advancing STEAM learning and building Kent County’s tech talent pipeline. This strategy will reflect the voices of students, employers, and community partners, positioning Greater Grand Rapids as a hub of innovation, competitiveness, and inclusion.

A CALL TO THE KCONNECT NETWORK

We cannot do this alone. Building this strategy will require investment and the active participation of our partners. We invite you to share information about STEAM and technology initiatives, amplify resources, and champion opportunities across your networks. Together, we can meet Kent County’s talent needs and ensure that every learner and worker has the opportunity to succeed in a rapidly changing economy.



West Michigan Tech Council Talent Subcommittee

The Tech Talent Taskforce focuses on strengthening the Greater Grand Rapids (GGR) region’s technology workforce by addressing key talent needs across the education and career pipeline. This group collaborates to ensure the region remains competitive, innovative, and inclusive by driving initiatives in five strategic areas:

- Developing K-12 Talent for Success in STEM:** Creating pathways to spark early interest and achievement in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, preparing students for future tech careers.
- Increasing Diversity in GGR’s Tech Community:** Promoting equity and inclusion to build a tech workforce that reflects the diverse community it serves.
- Increasing Tech Enrollment/Retention in Higher Education:** Supporting programs and partnerships that encourage students to pursue and complete technology-related degrees in local institutions.
- Reskilling Talent:** Equipping the workforce with the skills needed to transition into technology roles, ensuring adaptability in a rapidly evolving industry.
- Attracting Outside Talent:** Showcasing Greater Grand Rapids as a vibrant hub for tech professionals, leveraging campaigns and resources to attract skilled talent from outside the region.

The Taskforce unites stakeholders from education, business, and community organizations to cultivate a thriving and sustainable tech talent ecosystem.

Reimagining Youth Justice:

A System Designed for Healing, Accountability, and Belonging

KConnect launched the Youth Justice Align and Design Team™ in 2024 to drive system-level change that ensures every young person in Kent County has the opportunity to grow up in a community rooted in healing and safety. Centered on the voices of those most impacted, including youth, families, and frontline workers, the team created a full continuum of youth justice involvement and developed solutions that prevent harm, promote accountability, and support thriving futures.

Building Shared Understanding: The Continuum and Common Language

To ensure that partners across sectors can move forward with clarity and alignment, the Youth Justice Align and Design Team™ developed a Youth Justice Involvement Continuum, which is designed to clarify the stages of youth interaction with the justice system and unify cross-sector partners around shared terminology, reducing confusion and promoting more coordinated responses.

The Continuum of Involvement not only helps visualize how youth move through systems; it also pinpoints where and how we can most effectively intervene. This resource is foundational to the systems-change work ahead, ensuring that everyone, from schools to courts to community organizations, speaks the same language.

Risk Level			Youth Justice Involvement Continuum				
Low Risk	Rising Risk	High Risk	Initial Involvement	Probationary Involvement	Repeat Involvement	Deeply Involved	Adult System Involvement
Definition							
Displaying nonexistent, minor or infrequent behavioral challenges that pose a low likelihood of juvenile justice involvement, especially when they remain engaged with appropriate supports and interventions.	Exhibiting an escalating likelihood of legal system involvement, often characterized by reduced engagement with support systems and extracurricular activities and worsening behavioral issues.	Facing numerous intersecting challenges—such as behavioral problems, family instability, educational difficulties, mental health struggles, or living in high-crime environments—that substantially elevate the likelihood of justice involvement.	Having been arrested, charged, or experienced any interaction with law enforcement related to involvement with a crime. Involvement is often informal, not resulting in a formal charge.	Youth who are actively engaged in fulfilling the terms of their court involvement w/o new charges in the current calendar year. Could include probation, participation in court-ordered programs, or other supervision and accountability.	Recurring formal justice involvement due to repeated offenses, probation violations, or other legal issues, but who has not yet required intensive interventions beyond community service, house arrest, probation, or community-based programs.	Prolonged and significant justice involvement, often due to serious or chronic offenses, involving long-term court supervision, residential programs, jail, or detention while awaiting placement in nonlocal treatment facilities.	Transfer to the adult justice system due to severe or repeat offenses, where they are charged and sentenced as an adult, often resulting in jail, prison, or adult probation without the oversight of juvenile parole systems.
Community Responsibility							
Promote early intervention, empathy, and accessible community supports.	Offer holistic support systems and interventions to address emerging needs.	Build resilience through intensive guidance, resources, and mentorship.	Engage collaboratively to redirect paths and address systemic barriers.	Ensure accountability with care.	Strengthen support networks and create pathways for stability and growth.	Facilitate reintegration through coordinated support and opportunities.	Support rehabilitation, reentry, and long-term self-sufficiency.
Success Measure							
Youth Engagement: Total Youth - SUM (Rising Risk: System Involvement)	Early Intervention: Chronic Absenteeism - (Suspensions + Explusions)	Building Resiliency: Suspensions & Expulsions	Successful Diversion: Single involvement in Youth Justice system	Positive Resolution: Cont. court monitoring and no new charges or petitions in a year	Pathway to Stability: 2-3 instances of involvement in Youth Justice system	Rehabilitation: 4 + instances of involvement in Youth Justice system	Successful Reentry: # in the adult system from Kent County

Co-Designing a New System

The Youth Justice Align and Design Team™ developed seven high-level interventions that reflect what’s already working here in Kent County, where gaps still exist, and where we can better align our efforts across sectors.

- 1

Better Community Coordination
Strong community programs exist to engage youth at low risk of justice involvement, but awareness, accessibility, and utilization of programs are often low among youth who could benefit from engagement.

in mind. Expanding programs tailored to high-risk or justice-involved girls, including increased access to counselors and mentors, summer and alternative school options, and opportunities for physical activity, can provide more equitable and effective support.
- 2

Create Stronger Wraparound Supports for High-Risk Students
Schools often navigate disciplinary challenges with the tools most readily available to them, such as suspension or expulsion. Designing and supporting alternative education or programming for youth who are suspended or expelled can foster opportunities for growth rather than deepening disconnection. Additionally, wraparound supports —both within and beyond the youth justice system—tend to be designed primarily with boys

Restorative programs can be effective in redirecting youth away from formal justice involvement, but they are currently under-resourced and limited in availability. Increasing funding and infrastructure for evidence-based and culturally responsive restorative programs would allow more young people to receive individualized, community based supports that address root causes without the long-term consequences of system involvement.
- 3

Greater Emphasis on Restorative Opportunities

- 4

Greater Emphasis on Strengths-Based Individualized Planning
A strengths-based approach to future planning can help youth build a vision beyond justice system involvement. Rather than relying solely on traditional workforce training programs, this approach supports youth in identifying their unique strengths, interests, and aspirations. Connecting them with community opportunities that are aligned with their strengths can deepen a sense of purpose and commitment to the future they envision.
- 5

Increase Capacity in Organizations Serving Deeply-Involved Youth
Youth with deep system involvement benefit from high-resource, high-support interventions. More investment is required for current programs to scale and expand their reach, ensuring that youth with complex needs have access to healing, opportunity, and long-term support.
- 6

Reframe the Community Narrative Around Youth Justice
Helping the community better understand the system’s failures that lead to involvement in the youth justice system can generate greater investment.
- 7

Expanding Support Networks for After-School Programs
After-school hours are a critical window when young people are likely to be unsupervised. High-quality after-school programs offer structure, mentorship, and safe environments that support academic achievement, social-emotional development, and long-term well-being. While after-school programs once had broader reach, many have disappeared due to funding shifts and decreased investment over time.
- 8

Policy & Advocacy
Policy change is critical to sustaining and scaling impactful interventions. Our goal is to advocate at the local and state levels for funding and initiatives that support: alternative programs for youth who are suspended or expelled, interventions addressing chronic absenteeism, increased availability of after school programs, and stronger communication among diversion programs.

WHAT’S NEXT

With broad community input, cross-sector alignment, and a clear framework in place, KConnect and its partners are moving toward the next critical phase: **releasing a Community Plan for Youth Justice Transformation in fall 2025**. This plan will outline actionable priorities across the continuum, timelines for implementation, and more.

The Community Plan will serve as a roadmap for operationalizing the interventions identified by the Youth Justice Align and Design Team™. This includes:

PRIORITIZING INTERVENTIONS

Stakeholders will identify which strategies are most ready for implementation based on community momentum, system capacity, and youth needs.

RESOURCING THE WORK

KConnect will coordinate efforts to secure public, private, and philanthropic investments to fund pilot programs, capacity-building efforts, and backbone support.

TRACKING PROGRESS

The plan will outline key metrics to monitor implementation and outcomes, ensuring transparency.

Together, we can shift from a system of control to one of connection, creating a future where every young person in Kent County feels safe, supported, and seen.

A CALL TO THE KCONNECT NETWORK

Transforming youth justice cannot be the work of a single organization or sector. It demands a unified, cross-sector response that centers community wisdom and holds systems accountable for equitable outcomes. We invite the KConnect Network to:

Align resources by investing in prevention and diversion programs that address root causes of harm.

Champion policy change by advocating for state and local reforms aligned with our shared vision for justice.

Partners Driving Impact

Ferris State University

Hispanic Center of West Michigan

Kent County

Kent County ISD

Kent County 17th Dist. Court - Family Division

Kentwood City Commission

Realism is Loyalty

The Delta Project



From Shared Agenda to Shared Advocacy: KConnect's Inaugural Advocacy Day in Lansing

On November 12, 2024, KConnect held its first-ever Advocacy Day at the Michigan State Capitol. This powerful day brought together cross-sector partners, grassroots advocates, and community members to advocate for Family Leave Optimal Coverage (FLOC), one of seven priorities in KConnect's Shared Policy Agenda.

This inaugural event wasn't just about policy; it was about people. It was about ensuring that every child, parent, caregiver, and worker in Kent County and beyond has the opportunity to thrive. We elevated community voices and personal stories to lawmakers, showing how inclusive policy like FLOC can transform lives across the prenatal to career continuum.

Why Advocacy, and Why Now?

KConnect's advocacy in Lansing is grounded in our original structure, which included advancing systems change through collaborative policy work. Since day one, KConnect has been dedicated to building strong relationships with policymakers, emphasizing that systemic changes can be achieved when we listen to and elevate the voices of those most affected by policy decisions. Through these relationships, we are actively working to establish ourselves as a policy partner legislators can rely on for insights and support.

Advocacy Day wasn't just about one day of educating and lobbying; it was the result of years of trust-building and alignment with community partners. We've made it a priority to build relationships with legislators, not to push partisanship, but to offer reliable, equity-focused insights that support child and family well-being in a rapidly changing world.

What is FLOC and Why It Matters

At the heart of our Advocacy Day was Family Leave Optimal Coverage, a proposed framework for ensuring paid leave policies are inclusive, flexible, and accessible to all working families. Too many low-wage workers, especially women and people of color, are forced to choose between keeping their jobs and caring for a new baby, a sick parent, or their own health. FLOC proposes a different future:

- Comprehensive coverage for parental, eldercare, and family medical leave
- Equitable design that ensures low-wage workers aren't left behind
- Collaborative implementation through partnerships with employers, policymakers, and community organizations

The timing was intentional. With Michigan's lame duck legislative session approaching post-election, our network identified a strategic window to elevate FLOC and build momentum toward future legislative action. KConnect used Advocacy Day to build the foundation by raising awareness, generating interest, and positioning FLOC for continued advocacy in 2025 and beyond.

From Policy Agenda to Policy Action

Advocacy Day represented a growing belief across our network that collective impact isn't only about aligning around data and outcomes, but also about aligning our voices, values, and influence to push for the changes our communities need most. Through initiatives like FLOC, we are charting a new course where community needs shape public policy and where systems are accountable to those they serve.

WHAT'S NEXT

KConnect's work in Lansing is just beginning. With a strong foundation of relationships and a growing presence as a nonpartisan, trusted policy resource, we will continue to inform and influence public policy on behalf of children and families in Kent County.

Together with our partners, we are building a culture of advocacy that is inclusive, informed, and intentional because we believe a thriving community is one where policies reflect the lived experiences of those most impacted by them.

A CALL TO THE KCONNECT NETWORK

We invite every partner in the KConnect network to step into this shared advocacy journey. Whether you are a policymaker, nonprofit leader, business partner, or community advocate, your voice matters. Join us as we continue to champion Family Leave Optimal Coverage and the broader Shared Policy Agenda. Learn more at k-connect.org/PACE.

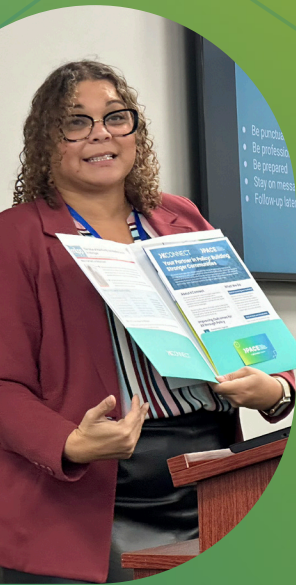
Legislators Involved

Event participants connected with legislators either through scheduled meetings with their offices or by delivering informational materials.

- Rep. Abraham Aiyash | Sen. Thomas Albert | Sen. Sarah Anthony | Sen. Majority Leader Winnie Brinks | Sen. Stephanie Chang | Rep. John Fitzgerald | Sen. Erika Geiss | Rep. Carol Glanville | Rep. Kristian Grant | Rep. Rachel Hood | Sen. Michele Hoitenga | Sen. Mark Huizenga | Sen. Jeff Irwin | Rep. Gina Johnsen | Sen. Veronica Klinefelt | Rep. Luke Meerman | Sen. Jeremy Moss | Sen. Kristen McDonald Rivet | Sen. Aric Nesbitt | Sen. Rick Outman | Rep. Laurie Pohutsky | Rep. Bryan Posthumus | Rep. Angela Rigas | Rep. Phil Skaggs | Sen. Sam Singh | Sen. Sue Shink | Rep. Joe Tate | Rep. Angela Witwer

Partners Driving Impact

- Jeran Culina, Parent Advocate | Kathleen Bruinsma, Policy Consultant
- MI Education Policy Fellowship through Teach MI: Powered by Teach for America Detroit
- Michigan League for Public Policy | Mothering Justice, FLOC Coalition Leader
- NAACP Grand Rapids | Renell Weathers, Policy Consultant | People First Economy
- Urban Core Collective, Parent Advocate | Urban League of West Michigan





Advancing Educational Equity Together: Highlights from KConnect's Education Summit

On April 19, 2025, more than 120 students, educators, policy advocates, families, and community leaders gathered at the Grand Rapids Center for Community Transformation for KConnect's first Education Summit. Organized by the College Enrollment Align and Design Team™, this convening centered on aligning cross-sector efforts to improve student well-being, particularly for students of color, low-income, and first-generation students.

Strengthening Relationships, Grounding in Student Voice

At the heart of the event was a shared belief that system change is only possible when those most impacted help lead the conversation. Through panel discussions, small group discussions, advocacy trainings, a gallery walk, and a powerful issues assembly, attendees heard directly from students about what it's like to navigate the educational system today.

These stories were not offered as anecdotes; they were framed as expertise, and they called the room to do more than listen; they asked adults in positions of power to build real, trusting relationships with youth and co-create changes that reflect their lived experience. By centering student voice, the summit affirmed that relationships are the foundation of systems change.

Equipping Advocates to Change Systems through Storytelling

Leading up to the event, KConnect offered virtual advocacy trainings focused on educational equity. These trainings, facilitated by partners such as EdTrust Midwest and the Michigan League for Public Policy, empowered attendees to become stronger advocates for systemic change. For example, in the session, Engaging with Legislators as Lived Experience Experts, participants learned how to elevate personal stories as powerful tools for policy impact.

WHAT'S NEXT

The Education Summit is not a one-day event. It's the beginning of a collective movement. In the months ahead, KConnect will:

- 1 Develop actionable strategies aimed at improving student well-being for all in our community.
- 2 Add that we'll track it on the data dashboard
- 3 Host an Advocacy Day to equip students and community partners to engage directly with local and state decision-makers.
- 4 Lift student stories

At the core of these next steps is a commitment to listening, learning, and co-creating solutions with the community. The summit surfaced powerful insights and relationships, but the real work is turning that momentum into long-term impact.

A CALL TO THE KCONNECT NETWORK

Now more than ever, we need sustained collaboration to ensure every student in Kent County is supported from prenatal to career. This means centering student voice, amplifying community power, and advocating for policies that dismantle inequities in access, opportunity, and outcomes.

KConnect invites all partners, education leaders, nonprofit advocates, youth organizers, families, and funders to walk alongside us in this work. Together, we can reimagine an education system that reflects the brilliance and potential of every student.

Partners Driving Impact

- Art of Mind Consulting
- Bethany Christian Services
- City of Grand Rapids
- EdTrust Midwest
- Empower Teen Recovery
- Grand Rapids Community Foundation
- Grand Rapids Public Schools
- Grand Valley State University
- Kent County
- Kent ISD
- Kent School Services Network
- Kentwood Public Schools
- MI League for Public Policy
- MI Reconnect
- Mothering Justice
- NAACP Grand Rapids
- National Policy Consultants
- Teach Plus MI
- Urban Core Collective
- West MI Teacher Collaborative



Resources

Building Momentum: Launching the Michigan Reconnect Communications Toolkit

To support the expanded eligibility for Michigan Reconnect, the Michigan College Access Network (MCAN) funded KConnect and Kent ISD to develop a comprehensive [communications toolkit](#) to boost enrollment among adult learners at Grand Rapids Community College and beyond.

Reconnect, Michigan's tuition-free pathway to an associate degree or skills certificate, has long served residents 25 and older. In 2024, Governor Whitmer's expansion of the program to include younger adults created a critical opportunity to engage a new population. Still, it also demanded coordinated outreach to ensure no one missed the opportunity.

The toolkit that gives partners across education, workforce development, and community organizations the messaging, templates, and materials needed to reach potential students where they are. The toolkit includes:

- Social media content and graphics tailored to younger adult learners
- Flyers, email templates, and talking points for trusted messengers
- Data-informed messaging that centers opportunity, affordability, and access
- Guidance for community partners to implement cohesive, aligned outreach strategies

By equipping partners with shared tools and language, we collectively advance equity in postsecondary access by removing barriers and making it easier for adult learners to take their next step. The toolkit represents more than a set of resources; it reflects our shared commitment to systems-level change.

WHAT'S NEXT

As the toolkit rolls out, our focus is shifting to implementation and learning. We'll be gathering feedback from partners to refine materials and providing targeted support to organizations putting the toolkit into action.

A CALL TO THE KCONNECT NETWORK

We invite our partners, community organizations, educators, advocates, and employers to use this toolkit as a catalyst for enrollment conversations. Let's work together to ensure every eligible learner knows that tuition-free college is not just a dream, but a real and reachable opportunity.

Partners Driving Impact

MCAN

Kent ISD Adult Education

MI Reconnect

Grand Rapids Community College



LivedPay: Elevating Community Voice as Expert Insight

At the heart of systems change is a foundational truth: lived experience is expertise. The people most impacted by systems hold essential knowledge about what works, what’s not working, and what change is possible. That’s why KConnect and the Community Engagement Workgroup created “A Seat for Everyone: Building Stronger Communities with KConnect’s LivedPay Compensation Model,” a practical resource for compensating community members for their time, insights, and leadership.

The eBook is a commitment to valuing community wisdom in the same way institutions value professional credentials. It offers tools for organizations seeking to move beyond performative inclusion and toward authentic, power-sharing partnerships.

Community-Driven, Practitioner-Tested

Developed through a multi-year, co-design process led by individuals with lived experience alongside nonprofit leaders, funders, and system leaders, the LivedPay eBook reflects a collective commitment to honoring community voice as central to systems transformation.

Inside, readers will find guiding principles, sample compensation models, and real-world examples. It’s a hands-on resource for any organization looking to engage lived experience experts.

Equitable Access: Free for Community, Priced for Institutions

To uphold the value of this expertise and support its continued investment, the LivedPay eBook is available at no cost for individuals with lived experience and community members. For institutions and organizations, the eBook is available for \$50, with all proceeds directly supporting community expertise.

WHAT’S NEXT

Proceeds from institutional sales of the LivedPay eBook will go into a **Community Compensation Fund**. This pilot funding pool will directly support lived experience experts participating in systems-change work. The eBook is just the beginning! The LivedPay movement is evolving into a broader framework for systems rooted in equity, expertise, and shared power.

A CALL TO THE KCONNECT NETWORK

We call on our partners to read, share, and apply the LivedPay framework. Commit to compensating lived experience experts fairly. Budget for it. Normalize it. Build it into your operations. Get the eBook at livedpay.org

Partners Driving Impact

The LivedPay eBook is the product of intentional collaboration with:

Community Engagement Workgroup

Eric Brown
Urban League of West Michigan

Kendsie Channing
Downtown GR, Inc.

Ali Conley
Dwelling Place

Evelyn Esparza-Gonzalez
Formerly at Hispanic Center of West MI

Eric Freeman
Mindset Meals

Danielle Gritters
Priority Health

Tanell Hils
Blue Cross, Blue Shield

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A Fellowship Journey with KConnect: Elevating Educator Voice in Policy

Yara Barbosa, an English and Multilingual Learner teacher at East Kentwood High School, recently completed a Michigan Education Policy Fellowship through Teach Michigan. As an immigrant educator with firsthand experience navigating systems as both a student and a teacher, Yara brought a valuable and deeply personal perspective to her policy work. Her placement at KConnect provided a powerful opportunity to bridge classroom realities with policy development, helping to shape strategies that reflect the needs and assets of students and educators in Kent County and beyond.

WHAT'S NEXT

Yara's work with KConnect and Teach Michigan has reinforced her commitment to ensuring educator and student voices are included in decision-making spaces. While the formal fellowship has concluded, her advocacy journey continues. She plans to build deeper connections with other educators, expand the conversation around multilingual learner success, and explore opportunities to write and speak publicly about the intersection of classroom experience and policy.

Her recent OpEd, developed during the fellowship, offers a compelling perspective on how the collective impact framework can inform more inclusive and aligned education systems. Scan the QR code to read the OpEd.

A CALL TO THE KCONNECT NETWORK

As a former fellow, Yara offers a clear and action-oriented invitation to the broader KConnect network: continue making space for educator and student perspectives in policy conversations. She reminds partners that the best strategies come from collaboration and that policies are most effective when they are informed by lived experience.

Partners Driving Impact

This fellowship was made possible by a partnership between Teach Michigan and KConnect. Teach Michigan's fellowship program equips educators to engage in policy conversations with clarity and confidence, while KConnect provided a dynamic environment where Yara could contribute directly to systems-level strategies focused on equitable outcomes.

Throughout the experience, KConnect's backbone team offered mentorship and support, modeling how data, community input, and cross-sector coordination can move policy forward. The organization's deep commitment to centering lived experience made it a natural fit for a fellow like Yara, whose voice continues to influence how systems can become more responsive, inclusive, and effective.

A Fellowship Journey with KConnect: The Path to Equitable Education Policy

Dr. Chris Cadogan recently served as a Policy Fellow at KConnect, a role made possible through the Michigan Education Policy Fellowship program led by Teach Michigan. This fellowship pairs educators with policy-focused organizations to strengthen the connection between classroom experience and systems-level change.

Chris is a seasoned school administrator and holds a doctorate in educational leadership. As a Black male educator and policy advocate, Chris brings lived experience expertise to the fellowship, bridging the gap between policy formation and the realities faced by Michigan's most marginalized students.

At KConnect, Chris worked to advance legislative priorities, including the coordination of KConnect's first-ever Advocacy Day. This convening brought together cross-sector partners to advocate for the Family Leave Optimal Coverage (FLOC) Bill, demonstrating the power of organized, community-driven policy engagement.

WHAT'S NEXT

Chris sees this fellowship as a critical launching point to expand his leadership beyond the school building. It has offered space for reflection, connection, and clarity on how he can meaningfully contribute to the broader policy landscape in Michigan. Recognizing a gap in educator-led policy work, Chris recently co-founded Edquity Partners, an LLC dedicated to supporting schools and systems in becoming more culturally responsive and equitable.

Their first major initiative focuses on refining the Becoming Culturally Responsive Matrix, a tool designed to evaluate and guide equity practices within educational institutions. The matrix integrates practitioner insight, academic research, and culturally sustaining frameworks, offering a tangible way to operationalize equity across school systems.

To learn more about this work, visit edquitypartners.org.

A CALL TO THE KCONNECT NETWORK

Chris encourages members of the KConnect network, as well as the broader community, to engage more deeply with education policy. As a first step, he recommends reviewing KConnect's current Shared Policy Agenda to better understand the bold, data-informed, and community-centered strategies the organization is advancing.

Additionally, he highlights EdTrust Midwest's recent report, Closing the Opportunity Gap, as a critical resource for anyone interested in understanding and addressing Michigan's ongoing teacher shortage and its disproportionate impact on marginalized students.

Partners Driving Impact

Chris's fellowship experience was shaped by the collaborative strength of KConnect and Teach Michigan. Through these partnerships, he was able to engage in high-impact advocacy efforts, access critical research and thought leadership, and build relationships with organizations like EdTrust Midwest.



Dr. Christopher
Cadogan
KCONNECT FELLOW



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Michigan College Access Network	
Michigan Health Endowment Fund	



2025 Community Brief
