

Shared Policy Agenda

UPDATED MAY 2026



KConnect is a network of community leaders, content experts, and systems change-makers working toward this shared vision. We envision a future where every child and family has the opportunity and support to thrive, no matter their starting point. Our Network connects people, organizations, and data to mobilize collective action for lasting systems change.

The KConnect Shared Policy Agenda initiative brings community partnership and collaboration to the table, intending to drive significant improvements in outcomes for all children and families from cradle to career across Kent County. The Common Agenda aims to improve the education, employment, and well-being of children and families by helping to align current efforts and fill necessary gaps. The 2013 KConnect Common Agenda and Roadmap (the organization's founding document) communicates a goal for Policy and Advocacy: to educate and advocate for policies, resources, and practices that strengthen the political will to pass, implement, and sustain effective long-term solutions aligned with the initiative's goals. It went on to say that the Cross-Cutting Workgroup will collaborate closely with the other teams to identify key policies to support.

In 2022, KConnect hired its first Postdoctoral Fellow, Dr. Shayla Young, to focus on Community Engagement and Policy and Advocacy. Dr. Young created the P.A.C.E. framework (Policy, Advocacy, and Community Engagement), which highlights the interconnectedness of these two focus areas and reminds us that the voices of those most impacted by inequitable policies are the very ones that should be brought to the table when advocating for change at the local, state, and national levels. In early 2023, Dr. Young brought three tri-chairs to lead the Workgroup (Kathleen Ley-Bruinsma, Renell Weathers, and John Helmholdt). These individuals were key in developing the group's foundation.

Our current Workgroup members are:

Renell Weathers	Dr. Tony Baker	Dan Behm	Kathleen Ley-Bruinsma	Tanell Hills
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Jayme Vosovic from the Michigan League of Public Policy (MLPP) was also brought on board to provide technical assistance to the group. MLPP continues to be a critical partner in maintaining the policy agenda and strengthening advocacy efforts.

Together, the Policy and Advocacy Workgroup developed practices and frameworks that led to the development of KConnect's first Shared Policy Agenda, launched in January 2024. Now updated for current priorities, the consensus policy agenda features seven system-level focuses on equity and access, applicable legislation, and budget priorities. Overall, we seek to advance equity and dissolve the systems that perpetuate disparity.

An Evolving Document

The comprehensive list of policy priorities is designed to remain dynamic. It undergoes continuous review and updates from our Policy and Advocacy Workgroup, concentrating on endeavors actively pursued by KConnect and Network members.

We acknowledge two fundamental understandings: 1) policy and advocacy are complex and have many parts to consider, and 2) our policy agenda is one step on a much larger journey toward dissolving system inequities. Therefore, by design, this policy agenda will remain an evolving document.

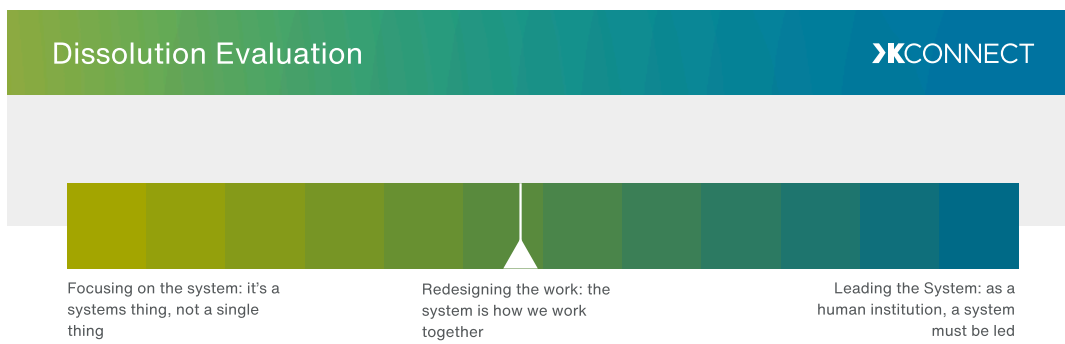
Equity First

We know systemic racism is the root of many problems across the country. Communities are situated differently in relation to well-being and opportunity. Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian communities each have their own experiences of racism. We must address and acknowledge each community's unique expertise, assets, and needs. We must also break down and rebuild the policies and power structures that fail people of color. Racial and ethnic equity is necessary to help every child succeed in school and life. Our shared policy agenda mirrors this commitment to equity and aims to ensure that everybody in Kent County has equitable access to economic prosperity.

Dissolution Continuum

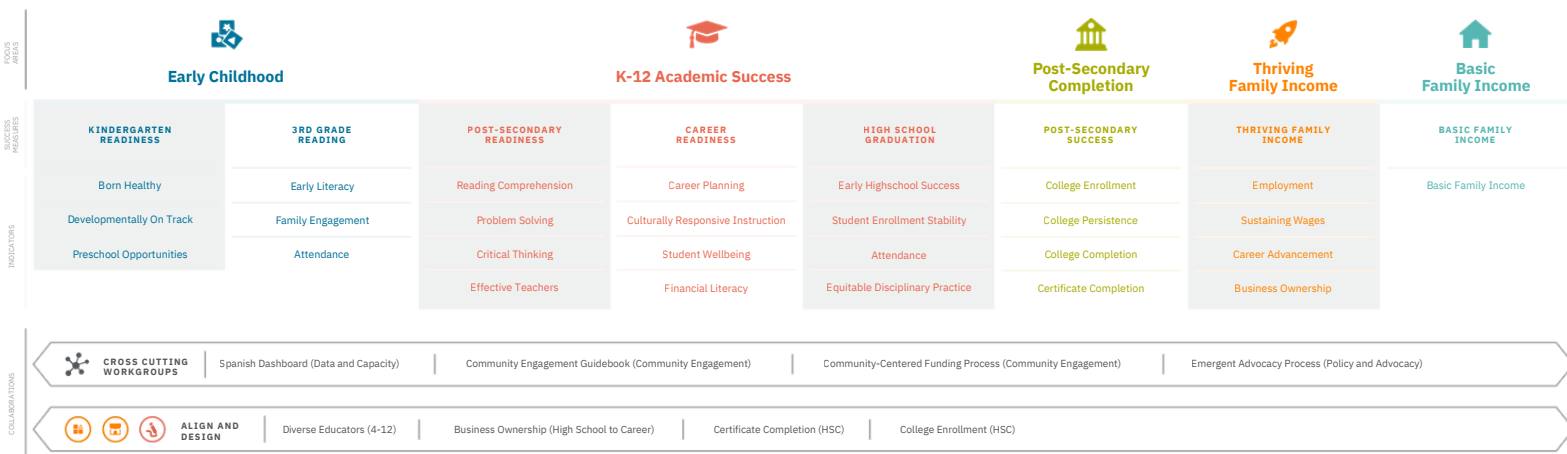
Dissolution is a concept that refers to the process of breaking down deeply ingrained issues or structures within a system that contribute to systemic problems or inequities. It involves identifying and addressing the root causes of these challenges and working to disrupt and transform the factors that continue to lead to inequities and injustice.

The Policy and Advocacy Workgroup is developing a framework to identify where each policy sits on the dissolution continuum, as pictured below.



A System-Level Approach

Our policy agenda aligns with our workplan with five focus areas, eight success measures, and twenty-seven indicators. Our focus areas include Early Childhood, K-12 Academic Success, Postsecondary Completion, Career Success, and Home and Family Stability. Our workplan indicates the comprehensive, system-level focus we must have to dissolve deeply-rooted inequities in our community and beyond. Our strategies will include local and state-level focuses to ensure we advocate at our greatest potential and support state-level alignment where there's opportunity.



Policy Priorities — Guiding Principles

KConnect's network has identified the following core principles to guide our policy and advocacy work. These guiding principles are also reflective of focus areas in our workplan.



Home and Family Stability

KConnect is committed to prioritizing the well-being of all children and families in Kent County by advocating for policies prioritizing access to high-quality, affordable, and equitable resources, supports, and services that families need to succeed.



Postsecondary Completion

KConnect strives to ensure every student's success by championing policies that promote equitable access to the social and financial resources necessary for post-secondary education.



K-12 Academic Success

KConnect is dedicated to promoting educational equity by supporting policies that provide adequate funding to vulnerable school districts while recognizing educators' invaluable role in a student's success.

Home & Family Stability

Access to Paid Family and Medical Leave



KConnect prioritizes family well-being by advocating for equitable policies and recognizing the importance of supporting individuals during life transitions. We believe that all employees must have access to paid family and medical leave, and that all employers, whether small or large businesses, can offer paid leave without adverse impact.

Workplan Success Measure

Employment

Dissolution Rating

In Progress

Applicable Legislation

SB 332 and 333 made it out of committee but never received a floor vote.

Update: Efforts are underway to reintroduce legislation in the next session or to pursue a ballot initiative (potentially in 2028).

Short-Term Policy Goal:

KConnect hosted its first advocacy day in November 2024, meeting with legislators to discuss optimal family leave coverage (FLOC). Our organization served as a liaison among state coalition leaders, Mothering Justice, and Kent County organizations to unite in advancing this piece of legislation. See the [blog here](#).

Update: KConnect remains a part of the statewide coalition as decisions are being made on pursuing Paid Leave as a ballot initiative.

Applicable Budget Priorities

Not identified at this time.

Advocacy Actions

Contact lawmakers regarding the need for paid family and medical leave. Refer to the KConnect policy brief for helpful statistics.

Join the [Paid Leave Coalition](#) for regular updates.

Coalitions

Mothering Justice is a nonpartisan, grassroots, women-of-color-led multi-state organization working to shift policies and culture to create the conditions for mamas of color, birthing people, and caregivers in the US to thrive.

Visit their page for more information on the [MAMA's Agenda](#)

Home & Family Stability

Access to Affordable & Quality Childcare



KConnect is committed to advancing accessible and quality childcare solutions by advocating for affordability, quality, and the well-being of children and providers. We believe all families in Kent County must have access to affordable and quality childcare, and childcare providers have the support and opportunities to thrive.

Workplan Success Measure

Employment

Applicable Legislation

There is active legislation aimed at ensuring the MI Tri-Share Childcare Program is written into law.

Senate Bill 310 - legislation to formally establish the tri-share child care program with the Office of MI Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP)

Update: SB 310 has been reported out of the Senate Housing and Human Services Committee and is currently pending before the full Senate.

Applicable Budget Priorities

- The Executive Budget (Governor) maintains current funding at \$3.4 million
- The House Budget reduces funding by \$1.3 million, bringing total investment to \$2.1 million
- The Senate Budget maintains current funding at \$3.4 million: Maintains at current levels (\$3.4 million)

Dissolution Rating

In Progress

Short-Term Policy Goal:

KConnect continues to promote local efforts on its shared policy agenda. Additionally, we maintain a strong partnership with First Steps Kent and other Network members to stay informed about policy implications for affordable and quality childcare.

Advocacy Actions

Join regional efforts and local coalitions such as Vibrant Future's "Village."

Complete the tri-share, employee, and/or employer interest forms [here](#).

Contact local lawmakers to increase the market rate compensation for early childhood professionals.

K-12 Academic Success

Equity in K-12 Education Funding



KConnect is dedicated to promoting educational equity by advocating for fair and adequate funding for vulnerable schools and districts, ensuring every student has access to a quality education regardless of socioeconomic status. We believe that all children must have access to a high-quality educational experience in equitably funded schools.

Workplan Success Measure

All indicators under the K-12
Academic Success Focus Area

Applicable Budget Priorities

Ensuring that the opportunity index increases in funding by 30% by 2030 and, ultimately, 100% funding.

- The Executive Budget (Governor): Moves English Language Learner funding and At-Risk (Opportunity Index) funding into the foundation as weights. Increased ELL funding and At-Risk funding by 6.1%.
- The House Budget: Keeps all categorical line items/did not move anything into a weighted formula. Increased ELL funding and At-Risk funding by 5%.
- The Senate Budget: Follows the Executive's Budget recommendation to move ELL funding and At-Risk funding into a weighted formula, but provides larger increases to these weights (25%).

Dissolution Rating

In Progress

Short-Term Policy Goal:

Collaborate with EdTrust Midwest, community partners, and legislators each legislative cycle to keep this issue at the forefront and properly fund it.

Coalitions

The Michigan Partnership for Equity and Opportunity (MPEO) is dedicated to closing opportunity gaps in Michigan's education system. This group is facilitated by EdTrust Midwest.

Advocacy Actions

KConnect visited Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., during a StriveTogether Policy Conference and advocated for K-12 education funding, both general and at-risk.

KConnect has hosted several events to educate and inform the Network and community members on the advocacy needs for the Opportunity Index, including the 2025 Education Summit.

K-12 Academic Success

Equity in K-12 Education Funding



KConnect is dedicated to promoting educational equity by advocating for fair and adequate funding for vulnerable schools and districts, ensuring every student has access to a quality education regardless of socioeconomic status. We believe that all children must have access to a high-quality educational experience in equitably funded schools.

Workplan Success Measure

All indicators under the K-12 Academic Success Focus Area

Applicable Budget Priorities

Math and Science

- The House Budget: Includes \$100 million for math supports and \$50 million for STEM programming, which are not currently in the Senate or executive proposals.
- The Senate Budget: Includes \$12 million for Mathematics Pathways, focusing on PreK-5 improvement, with \$9 million designated for early math specialists within Intermediate School Districts (ISDs).
- KConnect continues to advocate for funding that can support initiatives such as MEERA Labs.

Out-of-School Time

- The Executive Budget: Proposes a \$60 million increase, totaling a \$135 million investment.
- The House Budget: Maintains investment at \$75 million.
- The Senate Budget: Follows the Executive recommendation to increase investment by \$60 million.

Invest in MI Kids: Efforts are expected to resume in 2028.

Dissolution Rating

In Progress

Short-Term Policy Goal:

Collaborate with the Network, community, school and business partners, and legislators each legislative cycle to keep these issues lifted and properly funded at the forefront.

Coalitions

Along with the Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Network and support from leading partners such as the Michigan Afterschool Partnership (MASP), KConnect has developed an OST campaign. Visit: www.mi-ost.org.

Advocacy Actions

KConnect hosted an advocacy day on March 18, 2026, advocating for Out of School Time, Opportunity Index, and Math funding.

Read KConnect materials used to educate partners and legislators here: <https://k-connect.org/resources/>.

K-12 Academic Success

Equity in Teacher Compensation



KConnect champions fair and increased teacher pay as a vital component of educational equity, recognizing the essential role educators play in shaping the future. Our approach includes addressing racial and geographical disparities in teacher wages.

Workplan Success Measure

Effective Teachers

Dissolution Rating

In Progress

Applicable Budget Priorities

- The Senate proposed \$150 million for the Educator Compensation Program
- MI Future Educator Fellowship
 - All budget proposals retain funding at \$25 million
- Grow-Your-Own Grants
 - Executive: Reduced by \$10 million, totaling a \$60 million investment
 - House: Eliminated funding
 - Senate: Reduced by \$45 million, totaling a \$25 million investment
- MI Future Educator Student Teacher Stipend
 - Executive: Retains investment at \$50 million
 - House: Increased by \$12.5 million, totaling a \$62.5 million investment
 - S: Follows Executive recommendation to retain funding at \$50 million

Short-Term Policy Goal:

KConnect has partnered with the West Michigan Teacher Collaborative and Grand Valley State University to acquire state grant dollars to invest in educators in West Michigan. Visit www.teachheremi.org to learn more about Teach Here.

Long-Term Policy Goal

Continuing to advocate for teacher increases and comprehensive supports for educators in training.

Advocacy Actions

Coordinate local and state advocacy efforts.

Operationalize the KConnect 360-Degree Diverse Educators model locally and across the state of Michigan.

K-12 Academic Success

Access to Comprehensive School-Based Supports



KConnect is committed to fostering students' well-being by advocating for comprehensive mental health support in PK-12 education, ensuring every child has access to the resources they need to thrive.

Workplan Success Measure

Student Wellbeing

Dissolution Rating

In Progress

Applicable Budget Priorities

All (Executive, House, and Senate) proposed budgets maintain 31N investment at \$107 million. (31N) funds support the hiring of qualified mental health professionals and interventions in a school setting.

(31aa) pay per pupil for school safety and mental health services, currently at \$214 million

- Executive Budget Increases funding to \$300 million
- House Budget: Maintains current investment
- Senate Budget: Proposes a small increase for a total of \$255 million

(97j) This funding has been eliminated.

Short-Term Policy Goal:

Permanently fund 31N funding so schools can plan and hire staff for mental health support beyond assessments.

Restore support and funding for the MI Student Voice Survey or some mechanism to ensure that we are aware of student voice and student experiences related to well-being.

Advocacy Actions

KConnect hosted an Education Summit in 2025, convening local and state legislators, community members, students, the institutional community, and statewide partners to focus on wraparound supports for youth in Kent County. This in-district advocacy event promoted community conversation, education, awareness, and youth engagement around the necessary wraparound supports needed for students from kindergarten through college.

Post-Secondary Completion

Increased Access to Postsecondary Opportunities



KConnect advocates for universal access to financial aid for all high school seniors, ensuring equitable opportunities for post-secondary education and empowering students to pursue their academic aspirations without financial barriers.

Workplan Success Measure

College Enrollment

Applicable Legislation

Universal FAFSA: A statewide mandate that requires promoting FAFSA completion among all high school seniors.

Update: The Universal FAFSA bill has not passed yet. The State is employing incentivized approaches, such as the “FAFSA Challenge,” to encourage districts to incorporate FAFSA completion into their graduation requirements.

Applicable Budget Priorities

Universal FAFSA:

- Executive: \$10 million investment for FAFSA Completion Challenge.
- House: Eliminates funding.
- Senate: Follows the recommendation of the Executive Budget for a \$10 million investment.

Community College Guarantee (CCG):

- All budgets support the CCG with a substantial increase to the program totaling \$532 million.
- The Governor and Senate proposed expanding MI Reconnect to ages 21 and older. The House did not include this recommendation.

Dissolution Rating

In Progress

Short and Long-Term Policy Goal:

Help educate the wider community on the applicability of the FAFSA to the trades, college access, etc., and help educate lawmakers on community and K-12 needs and necessary supports.

Coalitions

The Student-Centered Policy Advocacy Collective (SC-PAC) is a coalition formed by TICAS Michigan (The Institute for College Access & Success) that brings together student-centered community leaders, policy organizations, and on-the-ground service providers in Michigan.

Advocacy Actions

KConnect has developed several materials that amplify coordinated efforts in our community and state on college access efforts, specifically the CCG and Reconnect. See the following materials:

- [Reconnect Communications Toolkit](#)
- [Community College Guarantee StriveTogether](#)

Post-Secondary Completion

Access to Wraparound Supports in Postsecondary



KConnect strives to ensure every student's success by championing increased college graduation rates through a collaborative community effort and statewide initiatives.

Workplan Success Measure

College Completion, Certificate Completion

Dissolution Rating

In Progress

Applicable Legislation

Grand Rapids Community College is a participant in the Hunger Free Campus Pilot program. Find out more [here](#).

Short and Long-Term Policy Goal:

Fund wraparound services for those at-risk students in post-secondary education and continued investment into college student success.

Applicable Budget Priorities

In all three budgets (Executive, House, Senate), there is no funding for Hunger Free Campuses or significant investments in wraparound supports.

Advocacy Actions

KConnect hosted an Education Summit in April 2025, convening local and state legislators, community members, students, the institutional community, and statewide partners to focus on wraparound supports for youth in Kent County. This in-district advocacy event promoted community conversation, education, awareness, and youth engagement regarding the wraparound supports necessary for students from kindergarten through college.

2026 PACE Convening Themes

On January 16, 2026, over 80 of KConnect's Network members and partners convened to highlight the current threats to the well-being of children and families in Kent County. This experience included panel discussions, legislator insights, gallery walk stations, and large and small group table discussions. The KConnect backbone team collected data using the registration form and table discussion notes to develop the following three focus areas for the action-oriented Turn the Curve event. Below are the three themes and actions that emerged from our 2026 convenings.

K-12 Funding and Student Experiences

- Connection across major transitions and educational milestones
- Student Well-being and Voice (MI Student Voice Survey - Funding Cut)
- Funding of Schools (Opportunity Index, Invest in MI Kids, Weighted Funding Formula)
- Teacher Well-being (respect, resources, pay)
- Out-of-School Time (OST) Funding and Access

Turn the Curve Action: Align and maintain existing efforts toward a weighted funding model for schools (Opportunity Index) and OST.

Healthy and Safe Kids

- Proactive vs Reactive Supports
- Dehumanizing Crisis Stabilization
- Dehumanizing Practices that Dehumanize (ICE)
- System Alignment and Coordination
- Cash Assistance for Families (Steelcase, RxKids)
- Funding Crisis and Resource Scarcity
- Food Insecurity - challenge of getting food on policy agendas
- Healthcare Access

Turn the Curve Action: Align food access efforts with the Kent County Food Policy Council.

Quality and Accessible Housing

- Rising Costs in the midst of stagnant wages
- Displacement
- Lack of affordable options - disruption to families and children's education
- Hazardous home environments - lead poisoning (49507 zip code), asthma triggers, disproportionately impacting low-income families and black and brown children

Turn the Curve Action: Align housing efforts with Housing Kent.

PACE Forward Podcast

For more stories and insights on how KConnect operationalizes its advocacy efforts, visit the [PACE Forward Podcast](#) on all of your favorite streaming platforms. KConnect has built a formal partnership with Developing Dreams to produce episodes that provide context for our policy, advocacy, community engagement, and collective impact work.

Advocacy Framework

CURI
OUS

Storytelling

CREATIVE

Data

COURAGEOUS

Purpose
& People

The Power of Connection

Advocacy is defined as any action that speaks in favor of, recommends, argues for a cause, supports or defends, or pleads on behalf of others¹. In the intricate web of policy, advocacy emerges as a tool that offers hope, momentum, and, ultimately, a power shift. Our advocacy strategy is centered around forging power through storytelling, data, purposeful relationships, and connection. As we navigate the interplay between power dynamics and the need for connection, we champion strategies that empower the community, are data-driven, and ensure collective action.

We remain committed to serving as a catalyst for dissolving inequities and shaping policy that fosters equitable outcomes. As an organization, we have three guiding principles to describe how we show up in our collective impact work: curious, creative, and courageous. These three guiding principles help strengthen our advocacy efforts and influence how we function in policy and advocacy. As an organization, we envision a future where every child and family thrives; we must reconstruct systems to achieve this.

Our advocacy strategy is a three-part approach that includes connection through stories, data, purpose, and people. All of our policy priorities and advocacy efforts are tied to the KConnect workplan. To further illustrate our advocacy framework, we will utilize the example of our Diverse Educators initiative and 360° model.

¹ Alliance for Justice. (2013). What is Advocacy? [Fact sheet]. https://mffh.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/AFJ_what-is-advocacy.pdf

Advocacy Framework

CURIOUS

Storytelling

CREATIVE

Data

COURAGEOUS

Purpose & People

CREATIVE

Connection Through Storytelling

Humanizing the Impact of Policy Through Storytelling:

Storytelling is a tool that can help policy issues resonate with various audiences, ranging from legislators and administrators to community members, students, and families. Our advocacy efforts include adding stories to data points to offer a deeper understanding of how policy impacts Kent County and beyond.

Centering Lived Experience in Communication:

Our advocacy includes utilizing communication techniques such as collective impact storytelling. Collective impact storytelling crafts a narrative that captures the interest of the audience, highlights both qualitative and quantitative data, and inspires the audience to take action*. It helps the audience make sense of the world, comprehend complex data, understand different perspectives, and convey cultural values. Collective impact storytelling is a powerful tool for creating shared understanding, mobilizing action, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders.

Our strategy emphasizes lived experiences and storytelling as a means of education. This includes recognizing lived experience as an area of expertise and ensuring equitable pathways for communication between legislators and community members. Additionally, KConnect commits to embedding lived experience throughout its organization and leadership composition.

“It is important to note that storytelling isn't just about personal anecdotes and inspiring narratives. It can also be used to explain complex policy issues in a way that is easy for voters to understand.” (Izryadnov, 2023)**

* Hop, K., & Streng, M. (2023). Developing communications to create systems change. StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network Convening, San Francisco, California.

**Vinci Agency. (2023). Why Storytelling is Crucial in Political Campaigns. LinkedIn. Retrieved April 9, 2023, from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-storytelling-crucial-political-campaigns-alexander-izryadnov/>

Advocacy Framework

CURIOUS

Storytelling

Data

CREATIVE

COURAGEOUS

Purpose & People

CURIOUS

Connection Through Data

Creative Approach to Education and Awareness:

We aim to ensure that our educational and awareness efforts meet the needs of the Network and people of the community. This includes a two-part approach as we seek to bridge education and awareness efforts among the community, legislators, and policymakers. Additionally, we will create space for folks in our Network to be highly engaged in our advocacy efforts, including training opportunities.

Accessible and Relatable Data Dashboard:

KConnect is data-informed, meaning we track and disaggregate local metrics on our eight success measures and twenty-seven indicators to determine how to optimize strategies that create the most equitable outcomes for our community. We strive to ensure that data is communicated clearly and appropriately through data visualization. Without data, we won't have a collective understanding of the problems facing our community, nor will we have the tools to address them. As our network continues to evolve, this data—which is publicly available on our [Data Dashboard](#)—will affect policy changes and system-level strategies that address the areas that need the most attention.



Advocacy Framework

CURIOUS

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COURAGEOUS

Connection Through People & Purpose

Mobilizing Community:

We recognize that there are community leaders and mobilizers who work diligently within the community and are committed to equitable outcomes and seeing our community thrive. We desire to come alongside community mobilizers and continue to grow our Network members' capacity in their policy and advocacy efforts. Overall, we seek to amplify impact by forging partnerships and continuing to foster a collaborative environment.

Coalition Building at the Local and State Level:

There is a great deal of power that is harnessed when groups unify action rooted in shared values and purpose. KConnect embarks on a mission to cultivate and strengthen coalitions within the local and state context. We envision that, through these alliances, we will advance our policy priorities and ultimately contribute to a thriving Kent County.



>PACE | POLICY,
ADVOCACY,
COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT

>KCONNECT

