











KCONNECT

Community Brief 2026

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Letter from the Board

Dear Partners,

The challenges facing children and families in Kent County cannot be solved by any one organization. They require trust, shared leadership, equitable investment, and a commitment to working differently. Throughout this year, we've seen that commitment in action through educators, community organizations, business leaders, policymakers, families, and countless others who continue to show up for one another and work together.

As a Board, we're grateful to everyone who contributes their time, expertise, and lived experience to this shared work. Your willingness to build relationships, collaborate across sectors, and pursue solutions together is what makes collective impact possible.

While longstanding and emerging challenges remain, new partnerships are taking shape, fresh ideas are emerging, and opportunities for meaningful progress continue to grow. Together we're building stronger systems that better support all children and families in our community.

Thank you for your continued partnership, your commitment to this community, and the important role you play in this work.

With gratitude,

Andrew Brower & Stacy Stout
Co-Chairs





Andrew Brower
Co-Chair





Stacy Stout
Co-Chair

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Dr. Chasity Bailey-Fakhoury, Joshua Spencer, and Teddi McEachern joined the Board in February 2026.

Letter from the President

Dear Partners and Community Members,

Think about a child born today in Kent County.

Before that child walks into their first classroom, much of their future is already taking shape. Does their family have a stable home? Can their parents and supporters find childcare they trust and can afford? Is there a doctor nearby, and a park where they can play safely?

They bring it all to school. Then come the milestones: learning to read, gaining confidence in math, finding a mentor who believes in them, discovering a career that excites them, and landing a job that can support a family.

Most of a child's life happens outside the classroom: at home, in the neighborhood, at the library and rec center, and eventually at work. The people in those places, from parents and childcare providers to teachers, coaches, faith leaders, and neighbors, shape their path. A child's success depends on them and on how well our community supports them.

That's why KConnect takes a cradle-to-career approach. No single school, nonprofit, business, agency, or family can give a child everything they need. Together, we can make sure each stage of the journey connects to the next.

This past year, our Network made real progress for children and the families who raise them.

For a ten-year-old looking for a place to create, perform, or belong, the Arts & Culture Collective of Grand Rapids is part of the answer. Nearly 300 artists, organizations, and residents are shaping a countywide arts and culture strategy to guide long-term investment, so more families can take part in our creative ecosystem.

For a fourteen-year-old who makes a mistake, our Youth Justice team is ensuring that one mistake doesn't define their life. Judges, school leaders, law enforcement, service providers, young people, and families are working together to reduce youth contact with the justice system.

For parents who dream of starting a business, our Business Ownership work is creating clearer pathways to entrepreneurship and aims to generate $1 billion in new revenue for underrepresented-owned businesses by 2035, strengthening the local economy so the community children grow up in has more to offer.

Each effort meets families at a different stage, and each works better because the others exist.

This Community Brief shares that progress, the stories behind it, and the work still ahead. It also reflects what families told us directly, because the people closest to a challenge understand it best. Many are carrying a heavy load, from rising housing and childcare costs to the daily work of making ends meet. In the year ahead, KConnect will stay curious about what families need, creative in how we bring partners and residents together, and courageous about changing the systems that stand between children and the futures they deserve.

Thank you to the parents, providers, educators, and partners who show up for Kent County's families every day, often without recognition. The future of every child born here is being built right now, and you are building it.

With gratitude,



Salvador López
President & CEO, KConnect











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

Our workplan reflects the continued commitment to advancing systems change across the cradle-to-career continuum. It outlines the priorities, initiatives, and collaborative efforts that will guide our work alongside Network partners throughout the coming year.

Within the 8 Success Measures, there 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 measurable 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.

View the full workplan by scanning the QR code. You'll also find additional resources on Collective Impact 101, KConnect's structure, and The Three Cs.



KConnect Community Report Card

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

As we continue to move the needle on improving economic mobility from cradle to career, KConnect's progress in 2025-2026 includes cross-sector 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:

01

ON TRACK

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

KConnect continues to advance system-level change through growing strategies designed to address disparities across the prenatal-to-career continuum. This year, our work has expanded to include efforts focused on education, economic mobility, career readiness, and policy and advocacy. Through initiatives such as Teach Here, Billi by 35, Out-of-School Time advocacy, and our ongoing youth justice work, KConnect is bringing cross-sector partners together to identify systemic barriers and advance solutions that can shift outcomes at scale. These efforts are grounded in data, lived experience, and community expertise, with an emphasis on moving toward coordinated systems and policy change that create more equitable opportunities for children and families in Kent County.

02

ON TRACK

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

This year, KConnect hosted its second annual Advocacy Day, bringing Backbone team members and Policy & Advocacy Workgroup members to the state Capitol to carry forward the momentum of PACE 2026 and amplify the education priorities of our Network. KConnect also successfully advocated for expanded Out-of-School Time funding, contributing to a $135 million investment. Additionally, KConnect developed an external-facing bill tracker to help partners and community members better understand and engage with state policy activity, with priorities reflected from our Shared Policy Agenda. Together, these efforts demonstrate KConnect's continued progress in translating shared priorities into coordinated advocacy and tangible policy outcomes.

03

ON TRACK

Ensure that community voice is embedded throughout KConnect's structure

KConnect continues to embed community voice and lived experience throughout its work, creating meaningful opportunities for those most impacted by inequities to shape strategies and advocacy. Through LivedPay, KConnect centered community members' experiences to better understand barriers to economic mobility and to elevate lived expertise in conversations across the continuum. KConnect also engaged parents and other community members with lived experience to inform its Out-of-School Time advocacy, ensuring that the push for increased state investment reflected the experiences and needs of families navigating access to quality OST opportunities. Together, these efforts demonstrate KConnect's commitment to making community voice a core component of strategy development, advocacy, and systems change.

04

ON TRACK

Empower the Backbone to have decision-making authority

KConnect's Backbone has continued to play a visible leadership role in coordinating strategy, managing cross-sector partnerships, and facilitating network-wide decisions. This responsibility has reinforced KConnect's role as both a convener and catalyst for collective action.

05

ON TRACK

Ensure sustainability by diversifying funding

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.

06

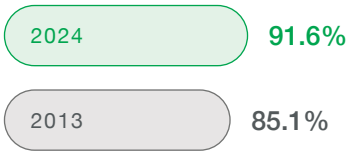
ON TRACK

Increase and better leverage private sector partnerships

KConnect has continued to deepen relationships with private-sector leaders through the Business Ownership Align & Design Team™ and the development of the Billi by 35 campaign. These partnerships are helping strengthen private-sector engagement in advancing economic mobility and creating greater opportunities for historically underrepresented business owners. KConnect has also continued to engage private-sector partners through sector-specific initiatives and collaborative efforts across the network.

Data & 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.



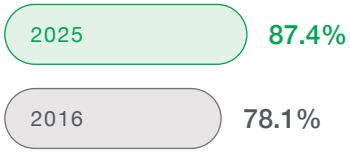
Career Readiness

The employment rate among young adults in Kent County has remained largely stable, reflecting a consistent presence of young people contributing to the workforce and vitality of the community. There was a slight 0.1% decrease between 2023 and 2024.



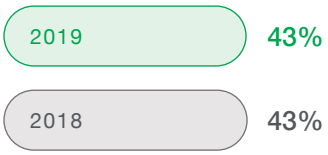
Post-Secondary Readiness

The percentage of students demonstrating post-secondary readiness increased by three percentage points from 2024 to 2025. While the rate has not yet returned to its pre-COVID level of nearly 40%, the gains made over the past year represent meaningful progress toward renewed post-secondary readiness.



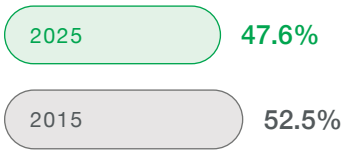
High School Graduation

Four-year high school graduation rates continue to trend upward, increasing slightly from 87.2% in 2024 to 87.4% in 2025, and nearly 10 percentage points since 2013. This progress is especially notable as the total cohort grew by more than 300 students, while the number of students graduating within four years increased by nearly 300.



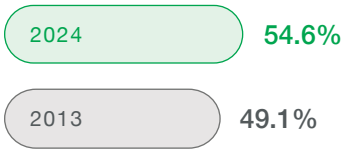
Kindergarten Readiness

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.



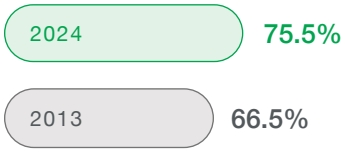
Third Grade Reading

Third-grade reading proficiency has improved slightly since 2024. However, more than half of Kent ISD third-grade students remain either not proficient (29.9%) or partially proficient (22.5%), highlighting continued gaps in early literacy.



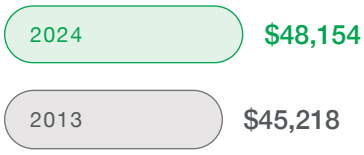
Post-Secondary Success

Although the number of adults with an associate degree or higher has declined slightly since 2021, these individuals continue to contribute valuable skills and knowledge to their communities and workplaces.



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 examines the racial/ethnic income gap across Kent County. The gap has decreased slightly from last year but remains significant.





KConnect Advances to Systems Change Designation

Lasting change requires more than strong programs. It requires transforming the systems, policies, and practices that shape opportunity.

In 2025, KConnect reached a significant milestone in that journey: receiving the Systems Change designation from StriveTogether, a national organization that supports cradle-to-career partnerships across the country.

This designation recognizes communities that have demonstrated measurable progress toward changing the conditions that influence outcomes for children and families. KConnect is one of only seventeen communities nationwide to reach this milestone, reflecting years of intentional collaboration and commitment from partners across Kent County.

The recognition represents more than an organizational achievement. It reflects the collective efforts of partners who continue to align strategies, share data, center community voices, and work together to create systems in which every child and family has the opportunity and support to thrive.

This milestone builds on national recognition received in 2024, when KConnect was honored with the Nancy Zimpher Courage in Leadership Award for advancing strategies that confront systemic inequities and expand opportunity. Together, these recognitions highlight the progress made when communities commit to working differently: across sectors and systems, and alongside the people most impacted by the challenges we seek to address.



Cradle-to-Career: Collective Impact in Action

Improving outcomes for children and families requires more than isolated programs or short-term solutions. It requires systems that are designed to support people at every stage of their journey, from early childhood through adulthood.

Across Kent County, partners are working together to understand challenges, align resources, and build new approaches that address the root causes impacting opportunity. This work recognizes an important truth: children and families do not experience systems separately.

Education, housing, healthcare, transportation, and economic opportunity are interconnected. That is why KConnect brings partners together around shared goals and supports collaborative efforts that strengthen the systems. It's not a single thing; it's a systems thing.

The following examples highlight how partners are redesigning and reshaping systems across the cradle-to-career continuum.

Kindergarten Readiness: Building Strong Foundations from the Start

The earliest years of a child's life lay the foundation for future learning, health, and success. Yet too many children enter kindergarten without the experiences and supports they need to thrive.

In Kent County, kindergarten readiness remains an important indicator of how well our systems are supporting children before they enter school. Because Michigan does not currently have a single statewide assessment for measuring kindergarten readiness, communities must work together to better understand what children and families need before that critical transition.

In 2019, 43% of children in Kent County were kindergarten ready.

Behind that number are thousands of children with different experiences, strengths, and needs—and an opportunity for our community to build stronger pathways before a child ever enters a classroom.

WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE

Imagine if:

> Every child in Kent County entered kindergarten healthy, supported, and ready to learn.
>
> Families had easy access to the resources, relationships, and information they needed from pregnancy through their child's first day of school.
>
> Every organization supporting young children worked together around a shared vision for success.

That is the future we are working toward.

A Systems Approach to Early Childhood

Moving the needle for children and families requires engaging the full ecosystem—educators, caregivers, families, health providers, community organizations, and the systems that shape most of a child's daily life.

At KConnect's May 2026 Accountability Partners Council, we introduced the Early Partners Council, a cross-sector group of leaders prepared to tackle early childhood priorities together. Currently, the group includes:

> Ashley Karsten, Kent ISD
> Dr. Ron Gorman, Kent ISD
> Dr. Sommer Jabbar-Pearson, AYA Youth Collective
> MaDonna Princer, Head Start for Kent County
> Scott Lewis, YMCA of Greater Grand Rapids
> Salvador López, KConnect

Through collaboration, shared data, and community voice, partners can better understand where gaps exist and design solutions that meet families where they are.

Scan the QR code if you're interested in joining. We're still looking for partners within community, private, public, government, healthcare, and housing sectors.

Top Takeaway

Kindergarten readiness begins long before kindergarten. Supporting children early requires strengthening the systems that surround families from the beginning.

Math & Science: Investing in Student Success

Math is more than a school subject. It is a gateway to future opportunity. Strong math and science skills help students develop critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and the confidence needed to pursue careers in high-demand fields that drive innovation and economic growth.

Yet too many students in Kent County continue to face challenges in math achievement. In 2025, only 39.5% of eighth-grade students were proficient in math.

These numbers represent more than academic performance. They reflect the need for continued investment in the systems that support student success, from classroom instruction and educator development to community partnerships and state policy.

KConnect's Math Policy Brief, developed in partnership with Kent ISD and community educators, highlights the importance of strengthening math and STEM learning opportunities throughout a child's educational journey. Improving outcomes requires more than classroom-level interventions. It depends on coordinated investments in educator support, high-quality learning opportunities, cross-sector collaboration, and policies that equip every student to succeed.

WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE

Imagine if:

> Every student developed confidence in math and science and saw these subjects as pathways to opportunity.
>
> Educators had the resources, professional learning, and support needed to help every learner thrive.
>
> Students could clearly connect math to the careers and opportunities available in their communities.
>
> Schools, families, community organizations, and policymakers worked together to create the conditions for long-term student success.

Top Takeaway

Improving math outcomes is not just an education goal—it is an investment in our community's future. When students have access to strong math and science learning opportunities and the support they need to succeed, they gain the skills and confidence that open doors throughout their lives.

Scan the QR code to review KConnect's Math Policy Brief.

Career Readiness: Preparing Every Young Person for What Comes Next

A successful cradle-to-career system does not end with high school graduation. Young people need opportunities to explore careers, build skills, connect with mentors, and access pathways that lead to meaningful employment and economic mobility. Career readiness requires alignment between education, employers, workforce organizations, and community partners.

When these systems work together, young people can see a clearer connection between what they learn today and the opportunities available tomorrow.

WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE

Imagine if:

> Every young person in Kent County had access to career exploration, mentorship, and meaningful experiences before entering the workforce.
>
> Employers, educators, and community organizations worked together to create pathways that reflect the needs and aspirations of young people.
>
> Every student graduated knowing what opportunities exist and how to reach them.

Top Takeaway

Career readiness is about more than preparing students for a job—it's about connecting every young person to the experiences, relationships, and pathways they need to thrive after high school.





Teach Here: Strengthening the Educator Pipeline

Strong educators are essential to student success, yet communities across the country continue to face challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers, especially in high-need fields and in hiring educators who reflect the diversity of the students they serve.

To help address these challenges, KConnect, West Michigan Teacher Collaborative (WMTC), and Grand Valley State University launched Teach Here, an initiative designed to attract, prepare, and retain educators in high-need fields, including STEM, special education, urban and rural education, and foreign languages.

Teach Here creates accessible pathways into the teaching profession for both certified teachers relocating to West Michigan and individuals pursuing teacher certification through the program. Participants receive meaningful support, including relocation stipends, mentorship, direct connections to hiring managers, and wraparound resources such as housing and childcare navigation.

By strengthening the educator pipeline, particularly for individuals from communities historically underrepresented in education, Teach Here helps improve student outcomes while expanding workforce opportunities across West Michigan.

Top Takeaway

The future of education depends on building and supporting the next generation of educators. When aspiring teachers have clear pathways into the profession and the resources to succeed, students, schools, and communities all benefit.

Scan the QR code to learn more about Teach Here eligibility and benefits.



Billi by 35: Building Economic Opportunity

Economic opportunity is shaped by more than individual success. It depends on whether communities have the systems, resources, and relationships needed for people and businesses to thrive. Across Kent County, historically underrepresented-owned businesses continue to face barriers that limit their ability to grow.

Billi by 35 (Billion by 2035) is a collaborative economic campaign focused on generating $1 billion in new revenue growth for historically underrepresented-owned businesses across Kent County by 2035. The goal is measured by businesses growing their revenue, creating opportunities, and building long-term economic stability.

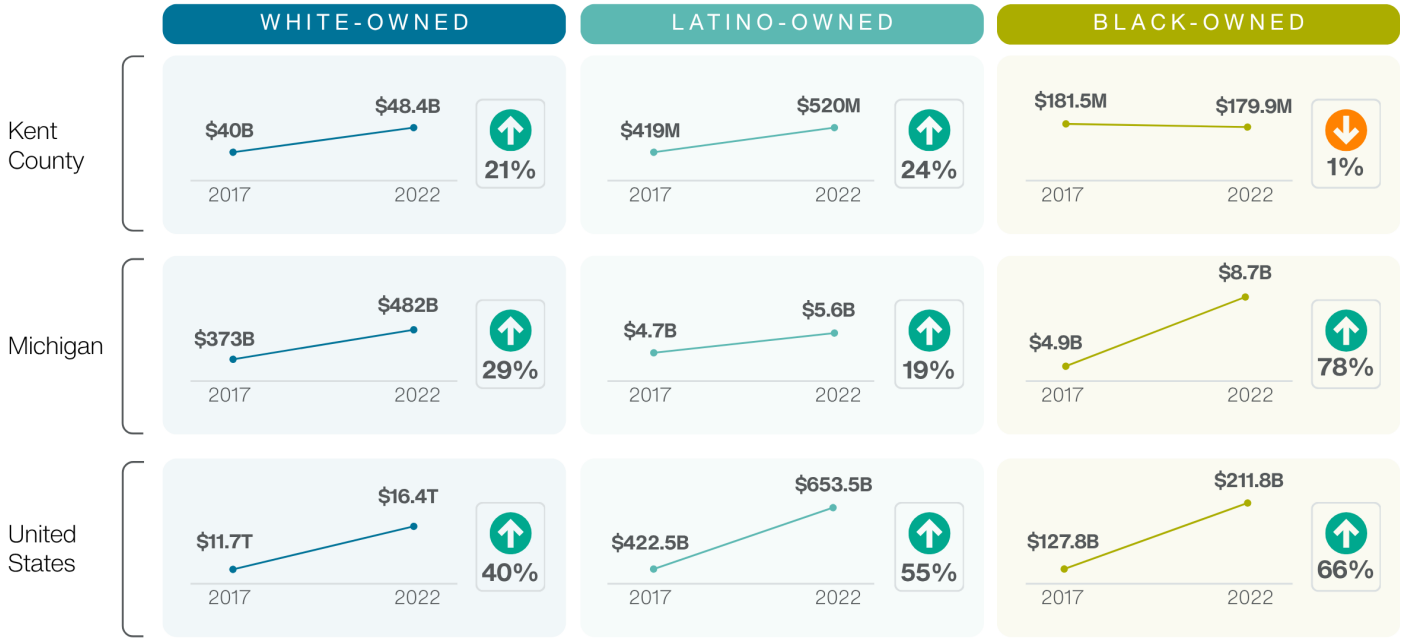
It was developed by the Business Ownership Align & Design Team, consisting of a group of leaders from business, philanthropy, government, and community organizations working to strengthen Kent County's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Together, they're building a more inclusive economy by expanding opportunities for entrepreneurs to start, grow, and sustain businesses, driving family income, community wealth, and economic mobility across Kent County.

Kent County is home to more than 675,000 residents, with nearly 30% of residents from diverse communities. When underrepresented-owned businesses have the opportunity to grow and succeed, the impact extends beyond individual companies—it strengthens the local economy, helps close income and wealth gaps, and improves Kent County's ability to attract jobs, talent, and investment.

Reaching the $1 billion goal requires a coordinated approach that supports businesses throughout their entire lifecycle. The Billi by 35 Spectrum identifies six stages of growth (Start, Grow, Build, Acquire, Attract, and Sell), recognizing that businesses need different resources and connections depending on where they are in their journey.

Billi by 2035 Campaign

BILLI BY 2035	Start	Grow	Build	Acquire	Attract	Sell	Total
Individual Businesses Revenue Growth	$250K	$1M+	$5M+	$5M+	$10M+	$15M+	
# of Businesses	200	100	20	50	20	20	400+
Total Revenue Growth in Kent County	$50M	$100M	$100M	$250M	$200M	$300M	$1B



Data from the US Census Annual Business Survey, 2017 & 2022 • Please note this is a working document and details are subject to change.

Accountability Partners Council & Next Steps

The strength of Billi by 35 comes from building the campaign alongside the community it aims to serve. The initiative was introduced to the KConnect Network during the 2026 Accountability Partners Council (APC), where partners engaged in a shared discussion and Voting Protocol to provide feedback and guidance. While the Network affirmed the campaign's vision, they identified an important opportunity: ensuring the messaging was clear and accessible. They reflected the experiences of the people and businesses at the center of the work.

The conversation reinforced a critical lesson in systems change—how we communicate matters. For Billi by 35 to inspire collective action, every audience must understand the goal, see their role in achieving it, and recognize how economic growth benefits the broader community. In response to this feedback, the campaign's messaging and communication approach have evolved to create greater clarity, connection, and shared ownership across Kent County.

Share Your Feedback
Your feedback is essential to making Billi by 35 a reality.

WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE

Imagine a Kent County where:

> Entrepreneurs from every background have access to the resources, relationships, and opportunities needed to grow successful businesses.
>
> Economic success is shared more equitably.
>
> Business ownership strengthens families, neighborhoods, and the broader economy.

Top Takeaway

Billi by 35 is about more than growing individual businesses. It is about building a stronger economic system where historically underrepresented-owned businesses have the opportunity to thrive, create generational wealth, and help shape Kent County's future. By working together toward $1 billion in new revenue, our community can create a more successful and competitive economy for everyone.

PACE: Policy, Advocacy, and Community Engagement in Action

Across Kent County, partners are working to address the policies and structures that influence equity challenges. Policy shapes what resources are available, who has access to opportunity, and how systems operate. When community voices, data, and lived experiences inform policy decisions, we create stronger pathways for children and families.

Through shared advocacy, collective learning, and coordinated action, KConnect and partners are working to ensure that local and state decisions reflect the needs of our community. This work recognizes that lasting change requires continuous and steady action.

Shared Policy Agenda: Aligning Around What Matters Most

Complex challenges require coordinated solutions. The KConnect Shared Policy Agenda provides a framework for partners to align around policy priorities that support children, families, and communities across the cradle-to-career continuum.

Rather than approaching advocacy as individual organizations working separately, the Shared Policy Agenda creates opportunities for partners to elevate shared priorities and advocate together. By aligning around a shared vision, partners can amplify community voice and create stronger momentum for policies that improve outcomes.

The updated Shared Policy Agenda also reflects insights gathered during KConnect's annual Advocacy Day, when members of the Backbone team and Policy & Advocacy Workgroup met directly with legislators to discuss issues affecting children, families, and communities throughout Kent County.

Updated in June 2026, KConnect's Shared Policy Agenda now includes the following areas of focus:

- Monitoring House Property Tax Elimination (roughly $6 billion cut to K-12 funding)
- Advancing a Weighted School Funding Formula that equitably distributes resources
- Supporting investments in math and science
- Understanding the impact of federal school vouchers on public K-12 education

Top Takeaway

Policy change is stronger when communities come together around shared goals and shared solutions.

Scan the QR code to access the Shared Policy Agenda and Bill Tracker



PACE Convening & Turn the Curve: Turning Collaboration Into Action

Creating lasting change requires people and organizations working together to take action.

In February, KConnect and the Michigan League for Public Policy brought together community leaders, advocates, educators, and partners for Turn the Curve, a hands-on advocacy workshop designed to transform the conversations from January's PACE Convening into coordinated action.

Building on the convening's discussions, participants identified three shared priorities that are critical to improving outcomes for children and families in Kent County:

- K-12 Education Funding
- Housing Stability
- Keeping Kids Safe and Healthy



The workshop challenged participants to move beyond awareness and toward collective action. Through KConnect's Movement Alignment Self-Assessment, participants reflected on how they currently engage in advocacy and explored opportunities to strengthen their impact.

Working across sectors, participants then developed practical strategies to advance each priority area by identifying opportunities, potential partners, and concrete actions that could move the work forward. Rather than ending with conversation, the day concluded with shared commitments to continue collaborating and advancing these priorities.

Top Takeaway

Systems change happens when communities move from conversation to coordinated action. By aligning around shared priorities and committing to collective advocacy, partners can create lasting improvements for all residents of Kent County.




EXIT



Advocacy Day: Bringing Community Voice to Decision-Making

Policy decisions have real impacts. Advocacy Days provide opportunities for partners and community members to engage directly with policymakers, share experiences, and highlight priorities that matter.

KConnect hosted our second annual Advocacy Day in Lansing, primarily focused on Out-of-School Time funding and the themes identified during PACE and Turn the Curve events. Members of the Backbone team and the Policy & Advocacy Workgroup met with nearly 20 legislators to advance the conversation around K-12 funding and educational priorities.

Top Takeaway

Communities create stronger solutions when lived experience helps guide policy decisions.







LivedPay: Recognizing Lived Experience as Expertise

Strong communities are built when the people closest to challenges have the opportunity to shape the solutions. Yet too often, community members are asked to share their time, experiences, and expertise without compensation or meaningful decision-making power.

LivedPay explores how communities and organizations can move beyond traditional engagement practices by recognizing lived experience as a valuable form of expertise. Developed by KConnect, the LivedPay Compensation Model provides a framework for organizations to meaningfully compensate community members, strengthen partnerships, and create more equitable decision-making processes.

Economic stability and opportunity are shaped by the systems that surround families. By valuing the knowledge and experiences of those most impacted by these systems, organizations can design solutions that better reflect community needs and create stronger pathways for long-term success.

The Kent County Food Policy Council (KCFPC) is one example of how this shift can take shape. As a committee of the Kent County Essential Needs Task Force, KCFPC has long centered community voice in its work to build a more equitable and accessible local food system. Through community conversations, focus groups, and resident engagement, the council gathered critical insights to shape its food system plan and identify opportunities for change.

Through this process, KCFPC recognized an important opportunity: while community members were helping to inform strategies and solutions, their expertise was not always reflected in ownership, leadership, or compensation. LivedPay provided a framework to help bridge that gap.

By implementing LivedPay, KCFPC is shifting from viewing community members as participants to recognizing them as partners and leaders. The model helps organizations create consistent approaches for compensating lived experience, strengthening trust, and ensuring that community expertise has a meaningful role in shaping decisions.

Early lessons from KCFPC's experience demonstrate what is possible when organizations invest in more equitable partnerships:

> **Lived experience is expertise.** Community knowledge is essential to understanding challenges and creating effective solutions.
>
> **Compensation reflects value.** When people contribute their time, knowledge, and perspectives, those contributions should be recognized.
>
> **Internal alignment creates lasting change.** Sustainable systems change requires organizations to examine their own practices and relationships.
>
> **Trust is built through action.** Meaningful engagement requires consistency, transparency, and shared accountability.

Top Takeaway

Community voice is not just feedback—it is expertise. When organizations create systems that value, compensate, and elevate lived experience, communities are better equipped to build solutions that work for everyone.

Scan the QR code to read the full KCFPC LivedPay case study.

Out-of-School Time: When Parents Lead, Systems Listen





For parents and caregivers, out-of-school time (OST) programs are about more than what happens after the school day ends. They can provide children with safe, enriching spaces to learn and grow while giving families the flexibility and support they need to work, manage responsibilities, and thrive.

For KConnect Parent Engagement Consultant Shanequa Mosley, the impact of OST is personal. Fifteen years ago, as a single parent working to support her family, Shanequa relied on an OST program for her son, Phillip. She couldn't afford child care, but the program enabled her to keep her job while giving Phillip opportunities to build relationships, develop, and grow. The bonds he formed through the program continue today.

Her experience is not unique. In 2026, Shanequa brought that perspective to KConnect's work to better understand how OST programs are serving families today. In March, nearly 20 parents from Grand Rapids Public Schools' Parent Action Leaders (PALs) joined a KConnect focus group to share their experiences and insights. Parents described how OST programs help them manage work and family responsibilities, while others shared the challenges of living in communities where programs are limited or unavailable.

One parent shared that OST allowed them to run errands and manage responsibilities they otherwise could not. Another described how, without an OST program at their child's school, their family has had to work different schedules so someone is always home.

These experiences help illustrate why parent voice matters in shaping systems. Through conversations with parents and students, KConnect is helping bring lived experience into broader efforts to strengthen OST opportunities across Michigan. In partnership with the

Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Network, business leaders, and community partners, KConnect is advocating for investments to expand access to programs supporting young people, families, and Michigan's future workforce.

That advocacy includes bringing parent and community perspectives directly to policymakers. During an Advocacy Day this spring hosted by the Advancing Change cohort, a partnership with the Detroit Urban Research Center and supported by grant funding from the Michigan Health Endowment Fund, Shanequa (along with KConnect Backbone team members Dr. Shayla Young and Maegan Frierson, Board Member Dr. Chasity Bailey-Fakhoury, and Fellow Dr. Chris Cadogan) met with legislators to share stories and data about the importance of OST. Their message was clear: while Michigan has made meaningful progress, continued advocacy is needed to protect and expand these opportunities.

More than 750,000 Michigan students still lack access to OST programs. Closing that gap will require more than funding alone. It will require listening to the people most affected and building systems that respond to those realities.

Shanequa's story is a reminder of what is possible when parents are not simply invited into the conversation but help shape it. Her experience as a parent informs her work today, and the voices of parents across Michigan are helping define what comes next for OST.

As a result of the advocacy we saw within our own Network and across the state, Michigan made a historic $135 million investment in out-of-school time (OST) for the 2026-2027 budget year. While we celebrate this win, the work isn't finished. Please continue to share why OST matters in your community and share your impact stories.

Top Takeaway

The people closest to an issue should help shape the systems designed to address it. When parents and students share their experiences, they bring insight that data alone cannot capture. By centering those voices, KConnect and its partners can advocate for support that works better for young people, families, and communities.

Scan the QR code to share how OST has impacted you or your community.



ConnectUs





At ConnectUs, we make collaboration work. As the consulting arm of KConnect, ConnectUs helps communities and leaders build shared goals, strengthen collaboration, and advance complex, systems-level work. Rooted in collective impact and community voice, ConnectUs partners to develop the structures and strategies needed to create lasting change.

Since its launch, ConnectUs has expanded its national footprint by supporting communities in strengthening the way they work together. From helping partners establish shared priorities and governance structures to facilitating decision-making and collaboration, ConnectUs provides tailored support that helps leaders navigate complexity, align efforts, and turn collective goals into action.

This year, ConnectUs has evolved its brand identity: one that reflects its role as a separate yet connected entity to KConnect. The refreshed brand highlights the intentionality behind the work, creating a clear and focused expression of ConnectUs' approach while allowing each client's unique story, identity, and vision to shape the work. Through thoughtful use of colors, shapes, and design elements, the brand reflects both consistency in the process and individuality in the outcomes.

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, and continue championing the values of equity, collaboration, and community voice, because the work we do locally is shaping what's next nationally, and ultimately bringing more resources to Kent County.

ConnectUs

Scan the QR code to learn more about ConnectUs

ConnectUs clients and projects include:

- The Arts & Culture Collective of Grand Rapids (ACCGR)
- Gilbert Family Foundation
- Grand Rapids Community College
- Grand River Network
- Hudson-Webber Foundation
- Jackson County Public Health (InCoLab)
- Kent ISD
- Michigan Center for Employee Ownership (MiCEO)

How to Engage

Systems change is not achieved through a single initiative, year, or organization. It is built over time through relationships, shared learning, and the collective commitment of people who believe a better, more equitable future is possible.

The path ahead will require continued curiosity, creativity, and courage. There is still work to do, but every conversation, partnership, policy decision, and shared action moves our community closer to the future we envision. Together, we are ensuring a community where every child and family has the opportunity and support to thrive, no matter their starting point.

Opportunities to Engage

Collective impact works because everyone has a role.

Whether you are an educator, business leader, nonprofit partner, policymaker, community member, parent, or young person, your experience and expertise are essential to building stronger systems.

There are many ways to participate in this work:

Attend the Accountability Partners Council on May 20, 2027

Join our Mailing List

Join a Cross-Cutting Workgroup

Community Engagement
Data & Capacity
Policy & Advocacy

Share Your Story

KConnect believes lived experience is essential to systems change. The voices of children, families, educators, and community members help identify challenges, highlight opportunities, and ensure solutions reflect the realities of the people they are designed to support.

If you have a story, experience, or perspective that can help inform this work, we want to hear from you.

Stay Connected

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- Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC)
- The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS)
- Heart of West Michigan United Way













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Community Brief 2026