



W.K.
KELLOGG
FOUNDATION®

CASE STUDY

Tripling Kindergarten Readiness and Transforming the Early Care and Education System in Battle Creek



August 2026



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) would like to acknowledge our many partners for their dedication to creating stronger futures for children and their families in Battle Creek, Mich. We are grateful for the time, insight and expertise they shared to formulate this case study.

This report was prepared by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The views presented herein may not reflect the views of those acknowledged for lending their expertise or providing input.

ABOUT THE W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, founded in 1930 as an independent, private foundation by breakfast cereal innovator and entrepreneur W.K. Kellogg, is among the largest philanthropic foundations in the United States. Guided by the belief that all children should have an equal opportunity to thrive, WKKF works with communities to create conditions for vulnerable children so they can realize their full potential in school, work and life.

WKKF is based in Battle Creek, Mich., and works throughout the United States and internationally, as well as with sovereign tribes. Special attention is paid to priority places where there are high concentrations of poverty and where children face significant barriers to success. WKKF focuses its U.S. programming in Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico and New Orleans. International focus geographies are Mexico and Haiti.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By using shared data and building trust and alignment across organizations that serve young children and their families, we can achieve extraordinary outcomes. That's what the W.K. Kellogg Foundation learned through a 10-year investment in the early care and education (ECE) system in Battle Creek, Mich.

The care and education that children receive from birth through age 5 have a tremendous impact on their futures, families and communities. [Children who participate in high-quality ECE programs](#) perform better in school, complete more years of education, earn higher wages and are healthier as adults. These benefits also extend to parents, who are better equipped to work and support their families, earn higher wages and take advantage of more career opportunities when they can trust their young child is receiving quality early care.

Multiple long-range studies have demonstrated the lifelong impact of quality ECE. The landmark [Perry Preschool Project](#) has followed a group of students for more than 50 years, starting when they were in preschool. It found that every dollar invested in high-quality ECE programs resulted in \$13 in societal benefits, and the project continues to document the long-lasting positive impacts of these programs. Similarly, studies of North Carolina's [Carolina Abecedarian Project and Carolina Approach to Responsive Education program](#) found that children enrolled in high-quality ECE programs had improved education and high school graduation outcomes, higher employment rates and incomes, and better long-term health outcomes than those who didn't. A long-range

study of participants in the [Chicago Parent Center program](#) found that children who took part in the quality ECE program from ages 3-9 had higher rates of high school graduation, college attainment and postsecondary degree completion.

The decade-long effort in Battle Creek offers a powerful example of how community-led, cross-sector collaboration can transform a city's ECE system and unlock a multitude of benefits.

Its genesis dates back to 2010, with a tool called the Early Development Instrument (EDI), a neighborhood-level metric that measures young children's health, development and school readiness. The EDI found serious challenges within Battle Creek's ECE system and indicated that far too few of the city's young learners were set up to succeed when starting school.

These findings prompted community, government, philanthropy and nonprofit leaders to form a coalition to reinvest in and reimagine the city's ECE system. They embraced a long-term strategy that considered the broader family and community context to create a system that would effectively prepare children to enter kindergarten.

Together, they worked to build an effective, efficient and equitable ECE system rooted in strategic planning. In particular, they focused on:

- Fostering collaboration among early childhood providers, families, nonprofits, government and funders.
- Strengthening partnerships across education, health, social services, workforce and economic development.
- Identifying and working toward shared goals, and evaluating progress based on impact.

The development and implementation of this model took sustained commitment and iteration over the course of 10 years, with continuous learning and regular course corrections throughout.

The result was a dramatic, positive improvement in Battle Creek's **kindergarten readiness rate**, which measures children's physical, academic and social-emotional readiness to start school.

Battle Creek Public Schools (BCPS) is the second-largest school district in Calhoun County, Mich., and it is home to the largest share of the city's public school students. Families in BCPS neighborhoods are much more diverse than those in Calhoun County as a whole, and they face greater economic barriers, with a median family income that is 40% lower than that of Calhoun County overall.

In 2013, just 15% of incoming BCPS kindergartners were deemed kindergarten ready in reading and mathematics. Over the decade-long transformation of the city's ECE system, BCPS kindergarten readiness rates more than tripled, reaching 55% by 2023 and surpassing the national kindergarten readiness rate of 50%.

Importantly, this was accomplished despite economic challenges facing Battle Creek families. Between 2013 and 2022, the city's poverty rate was approximately **twice the national average**, according to data from the American Communities Survey. Scores also continued to rise amid COVID-19, a time when [kindergarten readiness fell markedly](#) in communities throughout the U.S.



Dramatic Improvement of the Proficiency Level of BCPS Students Entering Kindergarten: 2013-2024



Note: Figures represent the percentage of Battle Creek Public Schools' kindergartners who attained 50th percentile or higher on Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) fall assessments.

It is important to acknowledge that this work did not take place in a vacuum. State and local policy changes — such as the expansion of Michigan's Great Start Readiness Program — also helped advance the transformation. While other funders supported ECE-focused efforts in Battle Creek, including Battle Creek Community Foundation and the Binda Foundation, this document focuses specifically on work funded by WKKF.

This case study documents what is possible when communities and sectors unite their efforts through a model built on collaboration, trust building, shared goals and sustained investment.

It offers valuable lessons for cross-sector stakeholders — including funders, local governments, educators, caregivers and community-based organizations — on the

power of long-term, community-driven investments, the importance of engaging local communities and families, and the role they can play in aligning efforts across sectors.

Most importantly, the case study provides a flexible framework that other communities can reference and adapt to address similar challenges, make measurable progress and ensure all children enter school ready to thrive.

While WKKF's investment in this work over 10 years was approximately \$30 million, that funding supported a broad system and involved experimentation to land on the most effective approaches.

With the lessons from Battle Creek's transformation as a starting point, we believe communities could create their own versions of these efforts with a lower level of investment.



SECTION 1:

THE ROOTS OF BATTLE CREEK'S ECE TRANSFORMATION

In the early 2010s, the city of Battle Creek found itself at a turning point. It had a rich history and vibrant, diverse communities. Yet, the effects of ongoing population shifts, a history of disinvestment and resource gaps weakened its ECE and K-12 educational systems.

Battle Creek's ECE system included a wide range of high-quality programs, including home visiting, play groups and shared reading efforts. While each of these programs supported students and families, they did not share goals or coordinate efforts. In part, this was because providers saw each other as competitors, making it difficult to build trust and preventing them from forming productive, collaborative relationships.

Funding structures that centered on activities and short-term outputs of individual organizations, rather than on family outcomes and broader impact, perpetuated this dynamic.

Defining High-Quality Early Care and Education

High-quality early care and education programs give children the foundation to thrive and succeed, in and beyond school.

They promote social, emotional, physical, language and cognitive growth and learning, using assessments to monitor and track students' ongoing development. High-quality programs enable children to build strong, positive relationships with peers and caring

adults while working in partnership with students' families and communities. They are inclusive of families, celebrating their diversity and supporting their cultures, and use home languages where possible to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed.

To provide the best possible care to their students, high-quality programs continuously assess their work, align with research-based standards and make changes based on the needs of the children, families and communities they serve. Their staff meet state licensing, health and safety standards and take part in ongoing professional development and training.

The State of Early Care and Education in Battle Creek

In 2010, WKKF funded a community-wide study, the Early Development Instrument (EDI), to determine how Battle Creek could better ensure that local children arrived in kindergarten ready to learn. Neal Halfon, director of the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities and leader of the Transforming Early Childhood Community Systems initiative (now known as Data Informed Futures), played a key role in gathering this data.

To bolster the EDI data, WKKF partner BC Pulse (then housed at Michigan State University and now called Pulse at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research) sought input



The EDI is used around the world to provide a community-level snapshot of children's health, development and school readiness. It focuses on data in five key areas:



Physical Health and Well-being



Emotional Maturity



Social Competence



Language and Cognitive Skills



Communication Skills and General Knowledge

from local families, government and school district leaders, and representatives of faith-based organizations, nonprofits, education, childcare and direct-service providers to get a more comprehensive understanding of the community's needs, goals and context.

The research illuminated major, pervasive gaps in the city's ECE system. Battle Creek neighborhoods that had the largest share of low-income residents and residents of color had no access to quality ECE centers. The findings also confirmed that ECE organizations worked in silos, hampering their ability to meet the needs of local children and their families.

A Coalition to Transform ECE

This research made clear the urgent need for Battle Creek to address vast disparities in the city's ECE system, which particularly impacted the city's immigrant communities and communities of color.

In 2012, Pulse held a community visioning session that brought together more than 200 residents to share their ideas of what Battle

Creek's ECE system needed to better serve the city's families and children. They offered a clear picture of what success could look like.

The Battle Creek community formed a coalition to address gaps identified by the EDI and later Michigan State University surveys of Battle Creek families to understand the root causes of disparities. The coalition developed action items to create a system that provided quality ECE to all the city's children and families.

Over the years, the coalition included Battle Creek Community Foundation (BCCF), BCPS, Burma Center, Calhoun County Public Health Department, Calhoun Intermediate School District (CISD), Catching the Dream Learning Center, the City of Battle Creek, Community Action Agency of South Central Michigan, Family & Children Services, Grace Health, Harvest Learning Center, Kellogg Community College (KCC), Michigan Department of Health & Human Services, New Level Sports, Pulse, Southwest Child Care Resource and Referral, Southwestern Michigan Urban League, Summit Pointe, the United Way of the Battle Creek and Kalamazoo Region, Voces and WKKF.



Several of the group's members served specific communities throughout the region, including Harvest Learning Center and New Level Sports (Washington Heights neighborhood), Burma Center and Catching the Dream Learning Center (serving the Burmese community) and Voces (serving Latino communities).

With support from WKKF, Pulse took on the critical role of convening this coalition and driving the creation of a plan.

The organization played an instrumental role in bringing stakeholders, providers, nonprofits, funders and institutions together to advance

the work as the coalition expanded. By conducting community listening with families with young children, hosting regular meetings and overseeing the collection of new data that built on the EDI's findings, Pulse helped participants identify gaps in coverage and collaborate on a path forward. As the work progressed, Pulse also led efforts to create and support action teams that could respond to specific needs and collaboratively advance the efforts to transform Battle Creek's ECE system.



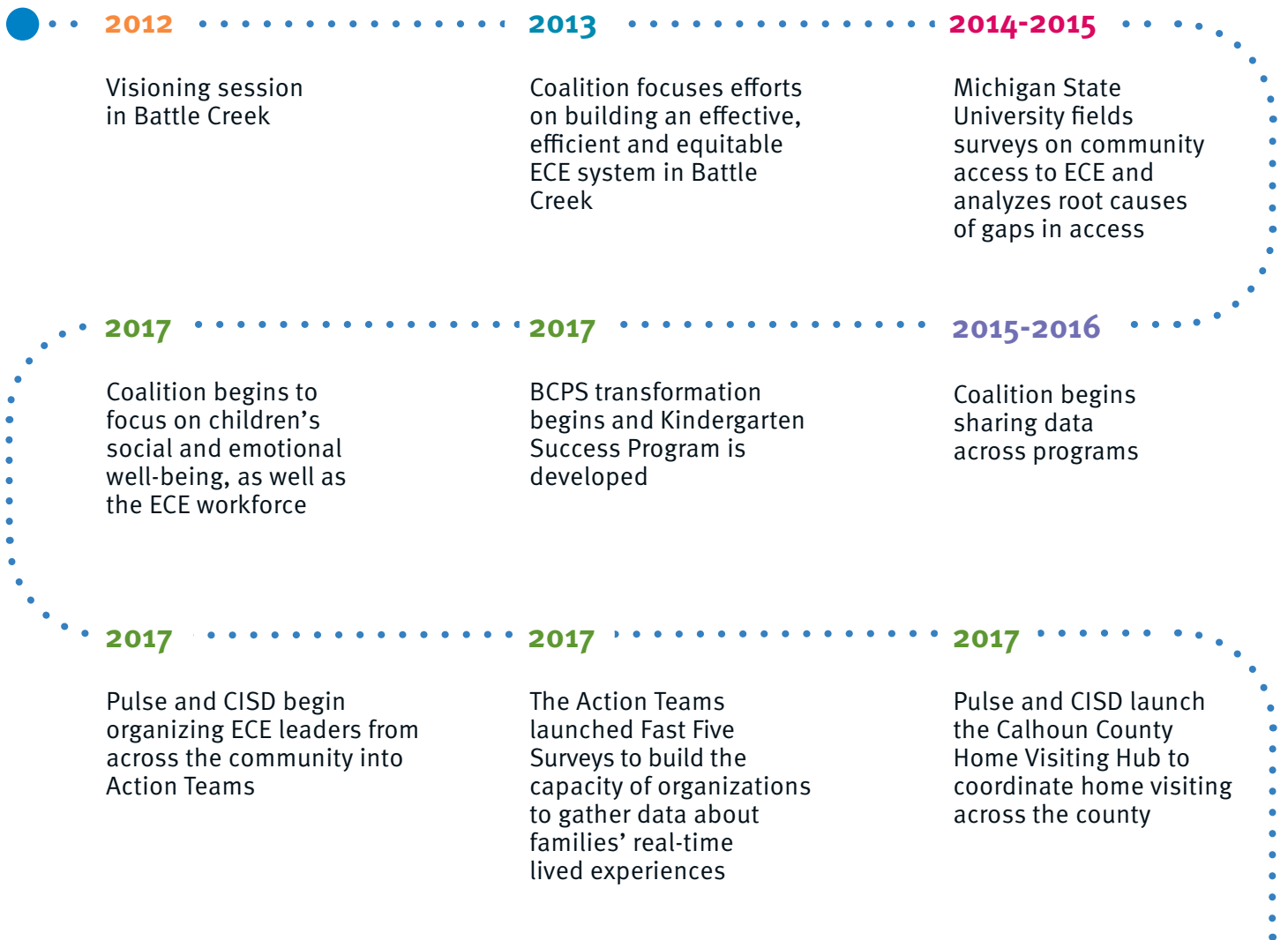


SECTION 2:

THE BATTLE CREEK MODEL

Over the course of a decade, the coalition designed a multifaceted model to transform the ECE system in Battle Creek under a unified strategy that focused resources on families with the most pressing needs for support and evaluated long-term impact, rather than short-term outputs.

The development of this model involved continuous evaluation and subsequently evolved over time. The coalition course-corrected when strategies weren't succeeding, making real-time adjustments and adapting to major changes in context, such as COVID-19.



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2018-2019

Community Action Agency — working with a team including BCCF, BCPS, Battle Creek Shared Services Alliance, Pulse, CISD, Child Care Resources, KCC and Michigan Works! Southwest — researches and pilots the ECE Educator Pipeline Work. Its goal is to improve marketing, access and support in order to strengthen, grow and diversify the ECE workforce. This successful work was expanded in 2022

2017

The Public Will Building Action Team (later known as the Early Childhood Jobs Systems Action Team) — which included representatives from KCC, CISD, Child Care Resources, BCPS, Michigan Works! Southwest, Battle Creek Shared Services Alliance, BCCF and Pulse — launches “Because,” a shared marketing campaign to raise awareness of the importance of ECE and share information about available ECE slots

2019

Early childhood leaders work with Pulse to pilot a joint Data Carousel. The effort was modeled after Head Start’s Carousel, which brought CISD and Head Start data together for community partners to review, provide feedback and explore possible strategies to address what was learned

2019-2020

WKKF’s Battle Creek program team identifies kindergarten readiness as the north-star measurement of success for all investments in Battle Creek

2021-2022

Coalition places greater focus on connecting the formal and informal ECE systems

2020

Pulse began participating in the ECE Community of Practice, a statewide group led by Policy Equity Group, which brings together ECE leaders and organizations across Michigan to align on policy and advocacy priorities

2020

Coalition launches efforts to serve children and families virtually

2021-2022

Pulse hosts the When Early Childhood Works, We All Work Summit to celebrate kindergarten readiness results, revisit collective efforts and focus on the ECE workforce

2023-2024

Kindergarten readiness data reaches highest point



Members of the coalition used a wide range of programs to support this work, such as family outreach, public education, home visiting programs, playgroups, the expansion of Head Start programming and the creation of a county-wide data system to track children born in Calhoun County (where Battle Creek is located) and enable partners to better reach each child's family with services.

The result was major improvements in kindergarten readiness and a more integrated, equitable ECE system in Battle Creek.

An Effective, Efficient and Equitable ECE System

The coalition focused on engaging and [integrating the two principal segments of the ECE system](#): the **formal system** — curriculum-based education taking place in settings like preschools, home visiting programs and early learning centers — and the **informal system**, which is typically care and education activities provided by a relative, friend, neighbor or other trusted adult.

The goal was to create an effective, efficient and equitable ECE system.

- **Effective** programs and services generate positive outcomes on their own.
- **Efficient** systems ensure alignment across services so they can work together to amplify impact.
- **Equitable** systems close gaps to ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to succeed.

Supporting Children and Their Families

The coalition also fully integrated the role of the parent and guardian, recognizing that each plays a defining role, and their economic and social stability, or lack thereof, has a profound effect on children's early development.

The model supported children and their parents and guardians simultaneously, offering both practical supports — such as home visits, parent-teacher conferences and workshops — and socio-economic supports, including childcare for working families, interpreters, transportation assistance, health and food assistance and incentives.



SECTION 3:

KEY FACTORS FOR ECE PROGRESS

The transformation of Battle Creek’s ECE system isn’t the story of a single innovative idea, one effective organization or a standalone committed individual. Instead, it is the story of an entire system growing stronger together.

Rather than working in isolation or competing, ECE system participants built connections — to each other, to shared goals, to their stakeholders and to the communities they served.

Battle Creek achieved this vision of a connected ECE system through deliberate steps designed to develop common ground and support common action. By defining a clear north-star goal, focusing on outcomes, building trust and relationships, strengthening partnerships, expanding career pathways for ECE professionals and supporting more reflective and culturally conscious ECE options, the community created an infrastructure that could sustain its gains in kindergarten readiness and better support its families over time.

Defining a North Star

The coalition understood that creating positive futures for children and families required them to do more than gauge progress by outputs or activities. They needed to measure real outcomes.

WKKF commissioned independent evaluators Jianping Shen and Alton Leon Alford to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of Battle Creek’s ECE system. Rather than a one-off evaluation, this



was a sustained assessment over time, using quantitative and qualitative data to determine how well the system was supporting children from birth through the start of kindergarten.

This led to perhaps the most important step the coalition took: agreeing on a single north-star metric that could align the efforts of all the organizations involved — **kindergarten readiness**.

Kindergarten readiness refers to a child’s level of preparedness to enter and succeed in kindergarten. The concept covers areas such as physical, sensory-motor, social, emotional and cognitive development.

Because education is a layered process, with each grade building on the skills learned before, kindergarten readiness has a ripple effect. Children who start school behind in these areas are [more likely to experience negative outcomes or require more extensive educational support](#). But if children enter kindergarten prepared, they are set up for success in and beyond school.



Defining Kindergarten Readiness:

Battle Creek Public Schools students are tested at the beginning of the fall semester when they enter kindergarten using the Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP) assessment, which evaluates where students are in terms of reading and math proficiency.

Students who score in the 50th percentile or above on the MAP are considered kindergarten ready in reading or math.

While academic measures are important, they are not the only factors that impact students' readiness to succeed in kindergarten. Because of this, the ECE coalition also worked to identify other critical indicators of kindergarten readiness connected to social and emotional development, such as self-regulation, compliance, social communication, adaptive functioning, autonomy, affect and interaction with people.

Because kindergarten readiness is measured using the NWEA MAP assessments, it offered a critical and clearly definable outcome measure that could be used to gauge progress.

Administered three times a year, these assessments are used to identify students' learning needs, track their mastery of skills and measure academic growth in English and math.

Aligning on this target and creating a shared definition on which all members could agree made much of the rest of this transformation possible. By zeroing in on kindergarten readiness, the coalition was able to maximize their impact and provide Battle Creek children

and families with concerted, unified support. And because Shen and Alford conducted this research consistently over multiple years, the coalition was able to measure success, recognize challenges and course correct to improve student outcomes over time.

Building Trust and Relationships

Before the transformation, ECE providers often saw themselves as competing for resources and students, which created distrust and made it more difficult to engage in collaborative work. The different sectors — such as healthcare, social services and education — often worked in isolation, despite each being critical to kindergarten readiness. And the power dynamics inherent in government and philanthropic funding created obstacles to building strong, trusting relationships between nonprofits that rely on limited, unstable funding.

To address systemic barriers, Battle Creek needed an interconnected network of organizations that provided support to children and families. Achieving that required greater trust and stronger relationships between providers, government agencies, funders and others involved in ECE.

Having played a leading role in the formation of the coalition that led the transformation, Pulse was a natural choice to help build and nourish these bonds. The organization's knowledge of local communities, extensive understanding of the ECE sector and commitment to responsiveness made them perfectly suited for the role.

“Any time we call, Pulse is really eager to find ways that they can help,” said Harvest Learning Center Executive Director Pastor Ivan Lee. “A lot of times, they give us more information, things we hadn’t even thought about.”

Pulse Founder and Co-Director Kathy Szenda Wilson explained that Battle Creek’s ECE system historically operated in silos “out of necessity and survival” due to chronic underfunding. Pulse created space for relationship-building and shared strategy development.

“We spent a lot of time building those relationships,” Szenda Wilson said. “You had to help them first see our shared faith, our common goals.”

Pulse Co-Director Maria Ortiz Borden added, “When you have facilitators that honor the experts that are in the room, they can say, ‘Yes, we know you’re doing amazing work, and we want to make sure that you’re getting access to all the resources you need. Plus, if we do it together, we can have a bigger impact.’”

Borden noted that part of the systems-change work required a shift in mindset — recognizing that educational outcomes begin in early childhood, not high school or even elementary school.

“There’s this misconception that [ECE providers] are just babysitters instead of educators and brain builders,” Borden said. “There was a shift that was happening ... where everybody was starting to say, ‘Oh, we need to invest in this space.’ And that’s when the [Great Start Readiness Program](#) came along for the state of Michigan.”

“This is a group effort ... We just played a role in it,” Szenda Wilson said. “Being able to bring a framework in and help people coalesce around a common goal: Let’s get kids into kindergarten ready to learn. And there’s still a lot of work to be done.”





These aspects of Battle Creek’s ECE work were featured in an article in Stanford Social Innovation Review by FSG, a global nonprofit consulting firm. [“How Funders of Collective Impact Initiatives Can Build Trust”](#) outlines key practices funders can adopt to strengthen trust, including:



Be a Humble Learner:

Value the expertise of local practitioners and community members with lived experience. Without this mindset, funders risk misdiagnosing problems and misdirecting collaborative efforts.



Be Transparent About Data and Funding Priorities:

Clearly communicating goals and remaining open to learning and adapting helps to balance power dynamics, reduce competition and foster stronger alignment.



Align Internal Expectations and Practices:

Funders must prepare staff, boards and internal processes to understand the emergent, nonlinear nature of community-led change. Rigid timelines and prescriptive guidelines can undermine trust. Inclusive, reflective strategic planning offers an opportunity to reset expectations and foster a culture grounded in collaboration, flexibility and trust.



Develop Feedback Loops:

Trust-building requires ongoing learning — not just about the collaborative’s progress, but also about how funders are supporting or hindering the work. Informal conversations, surveys and formal evaluations of funders’ roles can drive change. But to do so, they require transparent feedback.

Together, these practices illustrate that building trust is not a one-time effort, but an ongoing commitment that is essential to creating conditions for lasting change.





Aligning Grantmaking and Evaluation

Improving child outcomes is connected to the larger progress of Battle Creek as a whole. But WKKF traditionally evaluated progress in workforce, economic, health, community and education development separately.

Program Officer Megan Russell Johnson, who leads WKKF's ECE investments in Battle Creek, noted that the foundation had a lot of good work in each of these areas, but they were "all separate grants, and they were not necessarily intentionally designed to be working together."

To strengthen the system through a coordinated, long-term effort, WKKF staff broke down the silos separating their work. To achieve this, they focused on aligned grantmaking efforts and shared evaluation. Russell Johnson saw it as an opportunity to think differently.

"Through a coordinated approach and aligned evaluation, we are able to see the impact of each individual opportunity a child experiences from birth through kindergarten and how it all adds up to greater readiness," she said.

Children who are raised in thriving communities are much more likely to succeed. That makes it vital to acknowledge and embrace the interconnectedness of systems such as workforce development and early education.



"[Looking at the] ECE sector as a whole," said WKKF Program Officer Alana White, who focuses on workforce development, "and doing the same thing to look at the workforce system as a whole makes it easier to see where they connect, where they are not connecting well and the impact of some things we've done on the workforce side to affect kindergarten readiness."

Strengthening Partnerships

The intentional effort to cultivate and forge strong relationships among stakeholders drove critical progress in Battle Creek's ECE system. This was particularly true with the coalition's school district partners, CISD and BCPS.

CISD played a central role in fostering relationships across the formal ECE system in Battle Creek. Supporting 12 school districts across Calhoun, Branch and Barry counties, CISD offers early childhood programs, special education, professional development, business services, career and technical education and technology services.

Even though much of CISD's ECE work predates Battle Creek's initiative to improve kindergarten readiness, the process led to important changes, according to Erika Burkhardt, assistant superintendent for early childhood at CISD and a former preschool teacher.

"The biggest shift is the peer coordination piece, really focusing on healthy growth, really focusing on developmental screening," Burkhardt said. "Those things were happening, but it's a much more coordinated, shared effort. It's a much more connected approach."



The BCPS Kindergarten Success Program, a free summer program launched in 2017 that aims to ease the transition to kindergarten for children and their families, played an important role in making sure the city's students were ready to enter school.

"If we're going to make sure that students have access to postsecondary success, we have to begin as early as kindergarten," said Kimberly Carter, superintendent of BCPS. "That starts with the readiness factor and working with families before they even set foot in our schools."

The Kindergarten Success Program offers an important bridge into the classroom environment. It familiarizes children with school routines and expectations, while giving them the opportunity to meet future classmates and educators — smoothing the transition into kindergarten and helping them feel confident from day one.

BCPS parents Josh and Corinne Harter credit CISD's home visits and the Kindergarten Success Program for laying a foundation for both their sons' transitions to elementary school.

"As parents, you can't teach them everything," Corrine Harter said. "You're expecting a school to step in and be a partner with you. So, I think that if those programs weren't there, our kids absolutely would not be as successful as they are today."



Creating Pathways for ECE Professionals

To increase equitable access to quality, affordable care, Battle Creek needed to develop a skilled and diverse workforce that reflects the community it serves. In 2019, the Community Action Agency of South Central Michigan introduced the Early Childhood Education Career Pathway program to help achieve this vision.

This grant-funded program provides essential training for the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential and helps participants discover different roles and opportunities in the ECE career ladder. The CDA requires participants to undertake 120 hours of training and 480 hours of work experience, complete a professional portfolio and be observed by a trained CDA observer. Participants in the program also qualify to receive a scholarship toward a degree in ECE.

"Early childhood is one of the few areas where you can work in the industry while you're getting your degree," said Michelle Williamson, former CEO of Community Action Agency of South Central Michigan. "Most of the people that come in, they just really like to work with kids ... and then as they begin to develop those skills, they can conceive the path forward."

ECE professionals face many significant barriers outside the workplace — particularly when it comes to stable housing. In response, Community Action, in partnership with Pulse and the City of Battle Creek, leveraged funding from the American Rescue Plan to introduce the Early Childhood Housing Incentive Program. The program offered Community Action employees



and those at three partner early learning centers with up to \$6,000 per year in rental support, as well as assistance for homebuyers.

As of January 2026, 134 people were enrolled in the pathway program, 205 had completed their CDA credential and 37 were working on their associate's degree.

Reflecting Battle Creek's Diversity

Battle Creek is a vibrant and diverse city representing a wide range of cultures, national origins and racial and ethnic backgrounds. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, Black residents make up approximately 20% of the city's population, Latino residents 8% and Asian and Pacific Islander residents 5%. The city is also home to many immigrant communities, including a large number of Burmese residents.

To strengthen Battle Creek's ECE system, local partners worked to better include children and families from these communities, which have historically had less access to Battle Creek's early childhood care and education system. This requires ensuring that childcare providers can reflect the culture, language and values of the communities they serve, which not only improves their quality of care but also helps to build trust with families.

The coalition placed an emphasis on adding more culturally responsive learning environments that meet families' needs, particularly among Black, Latino and Burmese families within the Battle Creek community.

Each of these centers provides high-quality early care and education rooted in the cultures and communities they serve, and all were able to open because of the strong support and partnership of the ECE system.



Providers Grounded in Their Communities



VOCES

The nonprofit Voces created La Escuelita to help address language and cultural barriers faced by the city's Hispanic and Latino families. The center is licensed to serve up to 32 children ages 3 and 4, offering a bilingual, bicultural ECE experience, supporting children's physical, cognitive, social-emotional and linguistic needs as well as their cultural identities.



HARVEST LEARNING CENTER

Harvest Learning Center offers quality, culturally responsive care to families in Battle Creek's historically Black Washington Heights and Historic Northside neighborhoods. The center aligns their curriculum with BCPS to create a clear educational pathway for young learners, and they partner with local organizations to offer their families holistic support such as food assistance, speech therapy and career training. Guided by a deep commitment to equity and education, the center provides a safe, nurturing environment where children thrive and families find meaningful support.

"Parents like the activities and they like that the teachers look like the kids. You're nervous as a parent starting out ... But for our staff, they are connected to somebody that they know. My mom knows you, or we find out they are related or connected."

— Pastor Ivan Lee, executive director, Harvest Learning Center





CATCHING THE DREAM LEARNING CENTER

The Battle Creek area is also home to an estimated 3,000 Burmese residents. In response to the needs of this growing community, Catching the Dream Learning Center opened in 2021 with support from the Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative of Battle Creek. The faith-based center is believed to be the first Burmese-owned preschool and childcare center in the United States, serving nearly 70 children under age 6.

“We value helping children find their identity and own value. We use family languages in the classroom. Most can speak one or two of the Burmese dialects.”

— Helen Pau, program director, Catching the Dream Learning Center

“I’m going to do my part to make sure (my kids) are rooted in their culture and where I’m coming from, so that they can be proud of who they are. Catching the Dream embraces our culture and community.”

— Sara Thang, parent of two students at Catching the Dream Learning Center





SECTION 4:

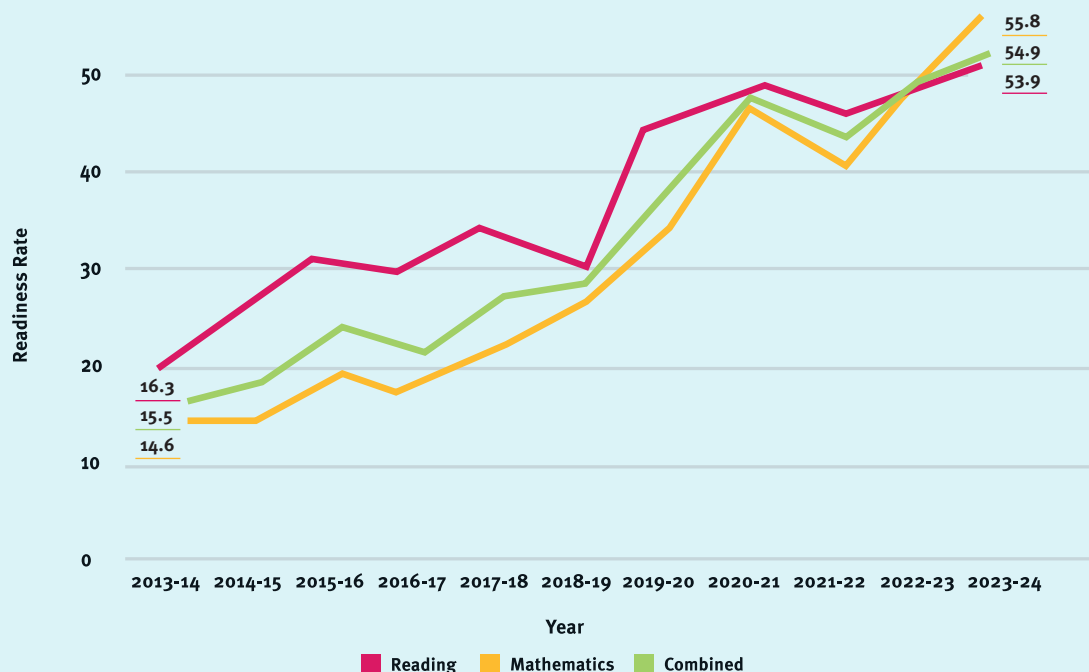
RESULTS

The transformation of Battle Creek’s ECE system provides a powerful blueprint for holistic, community-driven change at the local, state and national levels. Between 2013 and 2023, this connected, collaborative and transformed ECE system made a tremendous impact on the readiness of 3,700 incoming BCPS kindergartners. The more than tripling of kindergarten readiness among incoming students at BCPS — which had the highest levels of poverty of any district in the city — stands as a testament to

the effectiveness of this transformation. Moving from 15% readiness in 2013 to 55% in 2023 is a massive achievement and a huge step forward for Battle Creek families.

The strong positive impact was clear across racial and ethnic groups. For example, the percentage of incoming Black students who were kindergarten ready in reading more than quadrupled to 54% between 2013 and 2023, while the percentage of incoming Latino students who were kindergarten ready in math nearly quintupled to 61%.

Dramatic Improvement of the Proficiency Level of BCPS Students Entering Kindergarten: 2013-2024



Note: Figures represent the percentage of Battle Creek Public Schools’ kindergartners who attained 50th percentile or higher on Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) fall assessments.



“We actually looked at all the ECE program services we could put our hands on in Battle Creek,” Shen explained. “We tried to put the life history together for the child, and we use that longitudinal data, from birth all the way to preschool or the summer program to evaluate the effect. So it was qualitative, quantitative and also a longitudinal evaluation following the kids before birth all the way to getting into kindergarten.”

One of the most illuminating findings was an **11% jump in kindergarten readiness between fall 2019 and fall 2020** — the largest single-year increase — despite the disruptions caused by COVID-19. This suggests that Battle Creek’s ECE system gained strength in the years leading up to the pandemic and remained resilient through the crisis. During the pandemic, partners across public, private and nonprofit sectors adapted quickly — pivoting to remote services and maintaining engagement with families. They ensured that families could meet basic needs such as food, housing, hygiene and healthcare.

Ongoing monitoring of student progress also demonstrated how the impact of quality ECE continues to benefit students long after they entered kindergarten. It found that BCPS students who took part in a quality ECE program through Michigan’s Great Start Readiness Program were still performing better than their peers in both math and reading through the end of the third grade.

The collaborative, coordinated model also influenced the way that funders supported and sustained Battle Creek’s ECE system.

Importantly, the decade of data revealed a key insight: the more programs a child participated in, the greater their likelihood of success. This reinforced the value of coordinated, sustained support from birth through kindergarten.

Looking Back

When the efforts to transform Battle Creek’s ECE system began, fewer than one in five children entered BCPS kindergarten ready to succeed in reading and math. Today, more than half of the city’s children meet that standard.

This success is a tribute to the commitment, creativity and collaboration of all the partners in Battle Creek’s ECE systems. Investments in building alignment across the sector, trust and relationship building, expanding capacity and growing the pipeline of ECE professionals are still creating value for the city’s children and families.

The result is a united effort, one in which Battle Creek families, childcare and education providers, government agencies, community organizations, funders and others continue to work together to ensure the city’s kids thrive in and beyond school.

“We want our kids to be proud of themselves and who they are,” said Christina Khim, executive director of Burma Center and the parent of two young children. “We want them to be proud when they go to the big school. Planting that seed is very important.”



ECE TRANSFORMATION ROADMAP

“How can we do what's best for children?” WKKF Program Officer Megan Russell Johnson on the unifying goal of the efforts to transform Battle Creek’s ECE system.

We believe that the work in Battle Creek represents a replicable, scalable means of transforming ECE systems. Its success demonstrates the power of an adaptive, community-driven model to achieve lasting change. Communities launching efforts to improve their early care and education outcomes should consider using the following approaches.

1

Measure outcomes and impact, not just outputs. Rather than focus on short-term activities and outputs of individual organizations, track the child and family outcomes and the improvements in their lives — and use those outcomes to guide grantmaking strategies.

2

Align around a shared vision. Kindergarten readiness can serve as a powerful shared metric, guiding collaborative investments and policies toward meaningful, measurable progress.

3

Think systemically. Carve out space for grantees to align efforts, learn from one another and use evidence-based strategies to build a coordinated, equitable early learning system.

4

Support long-term, place-based strategies. Sustainable change doesn’t happen overnight. It requires patient capital, strategic partnerships and rigorous, long-term evaluation that centers children and families.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEWEES

We're grateful to Nick J. Buckley and the following people who he interviewed for this case study.

Dr. Alton Leon Alford — evaluator/researcher

Maria Ortiz Borden — co-director, Pulse at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

Erika Burkhardt — assistant superintendent of early childhood, Calhoun Intermediate School District (CISD)

Dr. Kimberly Carter — superintendent, Battle Creek Public Schools (BCPS)

Lisa Farrell — early childhood career pathway navigator, Community Action / Early Childhood Education Collective of Calhoun County

Tricha Grajek — Kindergarten Success Program lead, Battle Creek parent, family participated in Kindergarten Success Program (KSP)

Corinne Harter — Battle Creek parent, family participated in CISD Early Childhood Connections and KSP

Josh Harter — Battle Creek parent, family participated in CISD Early Childhood Connections and KSP

Jerry Johnson — superintendent, Calhoun Intermediate School District

Dr. Megan Russell Johnson — program officer, W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Christina Khim — executive director, Burma Center

Pastor Ivan Lee — co-founder/leader, New Harvest Christian Center/Harvest Learning Center

Pastor Tina Lee — co-founder/leader, New Harvest Christian Center/Harvest Learning Center

Lashi Mai — executive director, Catching the Dream Learning Center

Samantha Meinke — communications officer, W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Jenefer O'Dell — senior program officer, W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Belinda Orozco — former co-executive director, Voces

Jose Orozco — former co-executive director, Voces

Jamie Schriner — program officer, W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Kermieka Scott — Battle Creek parent, family participated in BCPS early childhood programs

Dr. Jianping Shen — evaluator/researcher

Kimberly Walden — Battle Creek parent, family participated in KSP

Dr. Alana White — program officer, W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Michelle Williamson — executive director, Kellogg Community College Foundation

Kathy Szenda Wilson — founder and co-director, Pulse at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

Dr. Chandra Youngblood — former BCPS principal and director of elementary education



PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

The following organizations played an important role in the development, guidance and implementation of the efforts to transform Battle Creek's ECE system. Its success is a tribute to the power of their participation, insight, wisdom, creativity and commitment.

[Battle Creek Community Foundation](#)

[Battle Creek Public Schools](#)

[Battle Creek Shared Services Alliance](#)

[Burma Center](#)

[Calhoun County Public Health Department](#)

[Calhoun Intermediate School District](#)

[Catching the Dream Learning Center](#)

[City of Battle Creek](#)

[Community Action Agency of
South Central Michigan](#)

[Family & Children Services](#)

[Grace Health](#)

[Harvest Learning Center](#)

[Kellogg Community College](#)

[Michigan Department of Health
& Human Services](#)

[Michigan Works! Southwest](#)

[New Level Sports](#)

[Pulse at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for
Employment Research](#) (formerly BC Pulse)

[Southwest Child Care Resource and Referral](#)

[Southwestern Michigan Urban League](#)

[Summit Pointe](#)

[The United Way of the Battle Creek
and Kalamazoo Region](#)

[Voces](#)





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2015:

<https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2015.S1901?q=battle+creek+public+schools&t=Income+and+Poverty&g=9700000US2617730,2620850,2627810>

2016:

<https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2016.S1901?q=battle+creek+public+schools&t=Income+and+Poverty&g=9700000US2617730,2620850,2627810>

2017:

<https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2017.S1901?q=battle+creek+public+schools&t=Income+and+Poverty&g=9700000US2617730,2620850,2627810>

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Voces/La Escuelita: <https://www.vocesbc.org/>

W.K. Kellogg Foundation: <https://www.wkkf.org/>





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