

***GOOD NEIGHBORHOODS, GOOD SCHOOLS AND  
SKILLMAN'S STRATEGY FOR PLACE-BASED CHANGE***

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## INTRODUCTION

**L**eaders of the Skillman Foundation faced a major decision point in 2005 as they looked at what the then-45-year-old foundation had accomplished and what it had not yet achieved. Their grants to support youth development and early childhood and to improve schools had helped many children and families, but their approach wasn't sufficiently targeted, strategic, or results-focused to transform the lives of significant numbers of children. So, under the leadership of President Carol Goss, Skillman began to reshape the way it operated, acted, and interacted to achieve its goals.

Skillman (then worth about \$550 million)<sup>1</sup> developed *Good Neighborhoods*, a decade-long effort to improve outcomes for children, families, and neighborhoods in Detroit, and subsequently paired it with the Foundation's education reform work, which was known as *Good Schools*. Foundation leaders also added a "changemaking" emphasis to the grantmaking role, upped the ante on institutional learning and improvement, and intensified efforts to influence policy; this area of work, along with a few legacy projects, was classified as *Good Opportunities*.

With these changes, Skillman's leaders embarked on a journey that had consequences for the Foundation, its local partners, dozens of community-based organizations, and potentially thousands of families living in Detroit's poorest neighborhoods. Along the way they broke new ground, both for the Foundation itself and for the philanthropic approach known as place-based change.

**This paper gives an overview and topline analysis of *Good Neighborhoods*, *Good Schools*, and Skillman's strategy** for place-based change. It provides background on the thinking behind Skillman's efforts and the context in which they occurred; synthesizes evaluators' findings on the successes and challenges that Skillman encountered in that work between 2006-2011; suggests opportunities and challenges that lie ahead in the second half of *Good Neighborhoods*' decade; and makes observations about Skillman's work that may have implications for the broader field of place-based change. It is too early to call these "lessons." Instead, we offer them as emerging insights to inform the next phase of Skillman's work and to encourage further discussion about important issues within the field.

This is not an evaluation report. The findings presented here are culled from 10 evaluation reports that cover *Good Neighborhoods*' first five years<sup>A</sup> and an analytical review of *Good Schools*. The observations, context, and additional analysis are drawn from the author's decade-plus of research and writing on community change and from interviews with Skillman leaders and staff. A list of sources used in this report can be found in the Appendix.

Readers may use this report in three ways. Those who are interested primarily in the thinking behind *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools* and the context in which the work unfolded can read *Chapter I, Overview of Elements and Activities*. Readers who are curious about what Skillman has accomplished thus far, and where the work encountered challenges and opportunities, can read *Chapter II: Readiness Phase Evaluation Findings*. And those who are already familiar with *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools*' approach and accomplishments and want to consider the implications for Skillman and the broader field can focus on *Chapter III, Cross-Cutting Observations*. The report concludes with *Chapter IV: Looking Back and Heading Forward*.

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<sup>A</sup> Brandeis University's Center for Youth and Communities is producing a separate synthesis of the evaluation reports that delves more deeply into the evaluation methods and data.

## I: OVERVIEW OF GOOD NEIGHBORHOODS / GOOD SCHOOLS

***“I believe that we can change the face of Detroit, one neighborhood at a time....The road ahead is long and winding. But we know where we need to go.”***

—Carol Goss, president of Skillman  
Letter to Trustees, 2007

### GETTING TO GOOD NEIGHBORHOODS/GOOD SCHOOLS

**During its first four decades of existence, the Skillman Foundation developed a robust portfolio of grantmaking** focused primarily on child welfare, youth development, early childhood, and school improvement as a way of fulfilling founder Rose Skillman’s desire to improve the lives of disadvantaged children.<sup>2</sup> By the early 2000s, however, it was clear that this general approach, while beneficial in many ways, was not adequately targeted, strategic, or results-focused to transform the lives of significant numbers of children.

Moreover, the playing field on which Skillman hoped to succeed had changed. The national economic downturn of the late 1990s and early 2000s devastated Detroit’s auto industry. Two-thirds of the area’s manufacturing jobs disappeared between 2001 and 2010,<sup>3</sup> and the city population declined by nearly 25%. By 2005 Detroit was among the poorest cities in the United States, with nearly half of its children living in poverty.<sup>4</sup> The child poverty rate was growing—from about 35% in 2000 to 48% in 2007<sup>5</sup>--and Detroit’s human service systems struggled to meet residents’ needs.

To reach sufficient numbers of children and families in ways deep enough to move the needle on youth outcomes, Skillman would have to sharpen its vision and its strategies. The focus on Detroit’s children still made sense, but the Foundation would also have to strengthen the systems that served children and their families. Skillman could not rely only on its own resources to meet the city’s vast needs; it would have to leverage its money to attract support from other funders<sup>6</sup> and expand the leadership pool to include parents, teachers, neighborhood residents, and other “natural leaders.”<sup>7</sup> And it would have to find new ways to interact with and inspire grantees and community players.<sup>8</sup>

Skillman’s trustees recognized the need to do something fundamentally different, so in 2004 they chose Carol Goss to become the Foundation’s new president. Goss, previously Skillman’s vice president for programs, was a native Detroitier with a reputation for creative thinking and a passion for improving opportunities and outcomes for children. She began consulting broadly to learn from other foundations’ initiatives, examining Skillman’s prior investments, and engaging senior managers in an extensive planning process.

Goss was aided by Tonya Allen, Skillman’s Vice President of Program,<sup>B</sup> who became *Good Neighborhoods’* architect. Earlier in her career, Allen was the Detroit site director for the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Rebuilding Communities Initiative (RCI), which operated from 1994-2001. Allen drew many lessons from RCI and from research on other initiatives conducted by the Aspen Institute’s Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives (now the Roundtable on Community Change).

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<sup>B</sup> and now also its Chief Operating Officer

**The new way of working that emerged meant new roles, practices, and areas of focus** for Skillman. Leaders characterized the new approach as a combination of grantmaking and changemaking.<sup>c</sup> On the grantmaking side, the approach encompassed three program areas:

- **Good Neighborhoods**, a 10-year, \$100 million intervention that focused on building the capacities, assets, resources, and wealth of six Detroit neighborhoods that contained “the greatest numbers of children, the greatest need, and the greatest opportunities for success;”<sup>9</sup>
- **Good Schools**, which pursued education improvements citywide and, over time, in the places where *Good Neighborhoods* operates; and
- **Good Opportunities**, which aimed (mainly through targeted grants) to influence the policies needed to ensure a system of youth-development and human services, supports, and opportunities. *Good Opportunities* included Skillman’s new changemaking and organizational learning efforts (see pp. 9-10) as well as some legacy programs.

These program areas began and evolved as separate portfolios of work. *Good Opportunities* was envisioned as a way to support the programmatic work in neighborhoods and schools. *Good Schools* created a vehicle for collaboration and a positive reputation for Skillman, but on a practical level the neighborhood and schools portfolios had only begun to be integrated during the years summarized here. Since 2008, Skillman has called the schools and neighborhood work *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools* (GN/GS) as a way to refer to the two strands together without implying they are a single initiative.

The rest of this chapter describes the timeframe for the work; the theories of change, principles, and strategies that drove it; the development of a framework for *Good Neighborhoods*; changes within Skillman that enabled and advanced the Foundation’s approach; the selection of communities to participate in *Good Neighborhoods*; and the national context in which the work occurred.

## **TIMEFRAME**

***Good Neighborhoods’ decade was designed to span three phases of activity: planning*** (2006-07); ***readiness*** (2008-10), which focused on building capacity and “strengthening and further develop[ing] action strategies”<sup>10</sup> through community engagement, goal setting, and the formation of neighborhood governance structures, an evaluation framework, and a culture of learning; and ***implementation*** (2011-16), a period of “demonstration” and “transformation” during which the work would focus on neighborhood strategies for achieving youth outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

***While Good Neighborhoods moved through these phases, Good Schools shifted*** “to focus more directly on expanding options for high-quality education and...on the conditions necessary for systemic education change in Detroit, rather than funding specific programs.”<sup>12</sup> By 2010 Skillman had spent about \$48 million on *Good Neighborhoods* (60% for developing neighborhood capacities and 40% for systems of supports and opportunities).<sup>13</sup> Between 2006-10 the Foundation spent an additional \$43 million on *Good Schools* for education reform and school improvement in Detroit (approximately \$13 million was in the target neighborhoods).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>c</sup> For Skillman’s perspective on changemaking, combined with an emphasis on learning, see pp. 9-10.

## THEORIES OF CHANGE

**Skillman’s leaders wanted *Good Neighborhoods’* theory to evolve through conversations with community members**, to make sure that it reflected their priorities and points of view. So instead of beginning with a fully-developed model of connections between resources, strategies, actions, and outcomes, they allowed the theory to evolve from a basic notion, set of principles, and goals. The notion was that:

*Children are more likely to be safe, healthy, educated, and prepared for adulthood when: (1) they are embedded in a strong system of supports and opportunities, (2) they attend high-quality schools, (3) their neighborhoods have the capacities and resources to support youth and families, and (4) broader systems and policies create conditions under which youth can thrive.*<sup>15</sup>

By aligning the domains of schools and neighborhoods and by improving the systems that affect them, Skillman hoped to generate more resources for the neighborhoods and create pathways by which children could escape poverty as they moved into adulthood. The goal was nothing less than transformation: “to change the odds for all children, not just help a few children beat the odds.”<sup>16</sup>

**The evolution of *Good Schools’* theory of change is more complicated** than *Good Neighborhoods’*, because education reform was not a single initiative but rather a portfolio of work that encompassed different theories at different times. Skillman began supporting education reform in 1984 with investments to “honor and support promising youth.” The Foundation then supported comprehensive school reform via the Schools of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Comer Schools and Families programs before shifting to more targeted approaches, such as principal leadership training.<sup>17</sup>

In 1993, Michigan lawmakers approved the establishment of charter schools, triggering an exodus of students from the Detroit public schools to other options. Before long, an estimated 40% of school-aged children had moved to charter or suburban schools, rendering ineffective any reform strategy that focused only on the public system.<sup>18</sup> So Skillman created an initiative called *Making The Grade*, which shifted the conversation to the quality of education in classrooms—regardless of school type—by lifting up and rewarding high-performing schools, collecting data on individual school performance, and making the data available to parents so they could select high-performing schools for their children.

After several years of implementation, Skillman’s education staff saw that high-performing schools were vulnerable to school closure because they didn’t market themselves effectively and were under-enrolled, while other schools tended to move up and down the quality ladder but couldn’t seem to stay in the high-performing category. Moreover, the deteriorating economic and political environment left the infrastructure for all schools vulnerable. Those observations led Skillman to invest more in creating the conditions for school success and developing infrastructure to scale and sustain education reform (e.g., stable governance, strong school leaders, etc.).<sup>19</sup>

Beginning in 2007, Skillman leaders made an explicit effort to bring *Good Schools* and *Good Neighborhoods* together. On the surface, *Good Schools’* goal—“to have children attend high-quality schools, to graduate from high school, and to attend college so they can lead self-sufficient and prosperous lives”<sup>20</sup>—seemed to align with *Good Neighborhoods’* theory. In reality, however, their approaches were not well-integrated. Although program directors and staff of the respective portfolios communicated regularly about their theories and about what it meant to facilitate place-based change,

the differences in their approaches were not tested until Detroit Public Schools announced the imminent closure of several low-performing high schools, including two located in *Good Neighborhoods'* communities. Skillman's education staff, who viewed the issue through the lens of academic performance, had encouraged the school system to sanction low-performing schools and protect high-performers, so they saw the decision as a positive step—although it was unfortunate that the closure happened in the neighborhood. The Skillman neighborhood-based teams, however, were outraged that neighborhood schools—especially ones that successfully integrated students speaking 17 different languages—might be eliminated. Moreover, the closures created a safety challenge for students who would now have to cross neighborhood gang lines to attend school. From this perspective, the schools, while not academically stellar, were a vital community resource.

The discovery that Skillman teams were working at cross purposes triggered heated debates within the Foundation and then the realization that the education and neighborhoods theories needed to converge. The neighborhood revitalization work wasn't going to fully succeed if it didn't help schools improve; and the citywide school reforms weren't going to reach schools in struggling neighborhoods unless Skillman worked more intensively and intentionally with neighborhood schools. In 2010, Education Program Director Kristen McDonald and Neighborhoods Program Director Edward Egnatios began planning to integrate their work more fully by creating education reform conditions and infrastructure citywide while also working closely with specific schools in the six neighborhoods.

## PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES

**The principles and strategies that shaped *Good Neighborhoods*** grew from the scan of previous initiatives that Skillman conducted before launching its new work and from Carol Goss' conviction that the Foundation had to be “deeply rooted” in Detroit so it could “break down the structural barriers that prevent many smart kids from succeeding.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, Tonya Allen drew many lessons from her experience with the Rebuilding Communities Initiative, including a sense that:

- Community work must be asset-based;
- Community leaders are an essential ingredient for achieving and sustaining change;
- Investments should build social capital, individual capacities, and families' economic success as well as providing needed services; and
- Investments should complement local circumstances rather than apply a rigid model.<sup>22</sup>

Allen had learned from RCI the risk of romanticizing resident and community engagement. She came away believing that while it is very important to invest in neighborhood residents and to help them develop the capacity for self-determination, it also is possible to spend so much time trying to engage communities that the goal of achieving better outcomes on specific indicators falls off the table. Allen also gained an awareness that leaders should focus on results early in the initiative and make sure that everyone involved expects to push for continuous growth and improvement in outcomes. Moreover, to keep momentum toward results alive, she believed that leaders should reengage people periodically by rearticulating and clarifying what the initiative is intended to achieve.

Allen further realized that the amount of money that flows into a neighborhood from a private initiative isn't enough, on its own, to change community context on a large scale. Therefore, the sponsoring foundation has “a civic responsibility...to bring the whole breadth of institutional resources and clout”

into the communities in which it invests, rather than merely making grants, Allen observed. With these lessons in mind, Skillman's leaders made the following early decisions about *Good Neighborhoods*:

***We will work in neighborhoods to make them places of support and opportunity.***

*Good Neighborhoods* aimed to ensure that “[high]-quality services and programs, an abundance of opportunity, and a continuum of care”<sup>23</sup> were available in each neighborhood and to concentrate efforts in specific places rather than scattering them geographically.<sup>24</sup>

***Our role will be that of a “change agent, not a banker”—a catalyst for “sweeping change.”***<sup>25</sup>

Skillman retained oversight of initiative design and a hands-on role in implementation that utilized the Foundation's “deep knowledge about Detroit, its skilled staff, and relationships with a wide range of public, private, and nonprofit stakeholders and organizations.”<sup>26</sup> Program officers would work with residents and other stakeholders to plan and execute changes while Skillman's executives, trustees, and senior staff would work “in a more explicitly political way to change policies and practices and leverage public and private funding to better support positive child and youth outcomes.”<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, *Good Neighborhoods* contracted with intermediaries to help with community outreach and engagement, capacity building, and technical expertise. The National Community Development Institute (NCDI) facilitated the neighborhood planning process. The University of Michigan School of Social Work Technical Assistance Center (UMTAC, an entity Skillman created in 2005) conducted research, shared best practices, facilitated learning across neighborhoods, and provided leadership training.<sup>28</sup> The Prevention Network administered the small grants program and its resident-stakeholder review panel.<sup>29</sup>

***We will work directly with neighborhood residents to help them change their own lives.***

Allen and Goss believed that residents of the selected neighborhoods should be involved in meaningful decision-making roles. A key strategy for involving residents, giving them a say in what happened, and building their leadership capacities would be *Good Neighborhoods'* small grants program,<sup>30</sup> administered by a group of residents from across the six neighborhoods, which made grants of \$500 to \$5,000 available to residents and community groups for youth-related neighborhood improvement projects. Skillman leaders viewed the small grants as “a strategy to leverage residents and other ‘natural leaders’ and ‘natural helpers’ as neighborhood resources for change...[and] to ‘respond quickly to community needs, build resident leadership, and empower residents and small nonprofits to help implement programs that will support their community goal.’”<sup>31</sup>

***We will cultivate leadership within neighborhoods.***

GN/GS would identify, nurture, and develop leaders among residents, nonprofit organizations, schools, and other stakeholder groups. Thus the National Community Development Institute offered multiple courses of an eight-session Leadership Academy to develop core leadership and “mobilize a critical mass” as well as a four-day Community Builders Leadership Institute, attended by community liaisons and others, to deepen knowledge about the process of community transformation. UMTAC provided skill-building workshops, customized training, and individual coaching.<sup>32</sup>



***We will promote relationships, networks, and collaboration as essential components of neighborhood change.***

*Good Neighborhoods* needed to partner with nonprofit organizations, schools, churches, business leaders, and other key players to achieve its ambitious goals, but Skillman staff didn't want these stakeholders to speak for residents. So staff met with them before convening other community members and asked them not to dominate the conversation. Then Skillman paid for a full-time liaison in each neighborhood to facilitate relationships.

The Foundation made its leaders and staff visible in each neighborhood, where they listened directly to residents rather than going through spokespeople. They worked on concrete, long-term tasks alongside neighborhood stakeholders. *Good Neighborhoods* established a local governance structure in each neighborhood and created opportunities for residents to initiate and control projects. And when differences of opinion arose, Skillman staff consistently responded with respect.<sup>33</sup>

***We will improve knowledge and capacity for change by promoting data and learning.***

Skillman put a priority on collecting and analyzing data to measure progress and using the information for continuous improvement. During *Good Neighborhoods'* planning phase, the Foundation made learning grants (up to \$1,500) to neighborhood individuals and nonprofits to assess community needs and assets, and their findings informed planning teams.<sup>34</sup>

In 2008, in collaboration with the Kresge Foundation, Skillman committed \$1.85 million to incubate Data-Driven Detroit (D3), an independent data center that would: track neighborhood-level social, economic, and environmental indicators; improve community access to and utilization of data; and collect and manage a comprehensive data warehouse.<sup>35</sup> D3 formed a local data collaborative that conducted a block-by-block inventory of the condition of Detroit's residential property.

To develop the knowledge and skills of individuals and groups within neighborhoods, Skillman supported neighborhood governance, leadership development, and the small grants program. On the systemic change side, Skillman committed \$1.5 million to establish the Youth Development Alliance (YDA), a collection of three intermediaries (each serving two of the neighborhoods), that build the capacity of youth-serving organizations through training, program quality assessment, and data tracking.

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, AND NEIGHBORHOOD CAPACITY BUILDING IN GOOD NEIGHBORHOODS**

**DURING THE PLANNING PHASE:**

- Focus groups identify community assets, challenges, needs, and leaders
- Stakeholder meetings give overview of *Good Neighborhoods*, introduce partners, and elicit feedback on community planning
- Large community meetings focus on neighborhood selection, data sharing, and setting one big community goal
- Small community meetings engage residents around success indicators, strategies, and data, while large meetings refine strategies
- Small grants begin to support programs that further the community goal
- Large grant process is introduced
- Action planning teams form expectations and process related to community goal

**DURING THE READINESS PHASE:**

- Neighborhoods endorse plans and implement short-term objectives
- Action planning teams receive assistance integrating multiple plans into a single "community change plan"
- Leadership Academies offer teaching sessions, workshops, and coaching to residents
- Listening sessions strengthen relationships and explore governance options
- Neighborhood task forces recommend governance structures and elect members
- Each neighborhood holds meetings to present recommendations and develop consensus
- Cross-neighborhood learning groups meet
- Lead agencies are identified to oversee governance structures initially
- Resident-stakeholder partnerships (governance entities) operate in all communities and transition to self-governance

—Adapted from *Center for Youth and Communities (July 24, 2011), Appendix A*

To evaluate *Good Neighborhoods*, Skillman contracted with Brandeis University's Center for Youth and Communities, and Brandeis became a key partner in developing evaluation capacity and determining outcomes and measures throughout *Good Neighborhoods'* readiness phase. In addition, Skillman engaged several external evaluators with expertise in specific content. During the last year of the readiness phase, these consultants evaluated key areas of effort as well as the outcomes of the readiness phase. An important aspect of the relationship with evaluators was the sense that evaluation was not an add-on activity but something incorporated into Skillman's learning, management, and operations.

To link results to learning, Skillman held quarterly planning meetings for partners; a monthly Learning Partnership meeting for program grantees, governance partnership chairs, and neighborhood liaisons, focusing on data and policy advocacy; quarterly Lunch 'n' Learn sessions for grantees; and cross-neighborhood learning communities facilitated by UMTAC.<sup>36</sup>

***We want all children to have high-quality educational experiences so they can succeed later in life.***

*Good Schools* would focus on what individual children and their families need to gain that access, with the Foundation as a catalyst for and active partner in developing new and better schools. The Foundation also would "stimulate an environment that appreciates and embraces innovation so that high schools can be successful"<sup>37</sup> and seek partners and champions for that work.

Thus, for example, the Foundation created a technical assistance resource center that helped schools participating in *Making The Grade* improve on key quality indicators. Skillman also partnered with other local funders to create an incubator of new, small, innovative schools called the Michigan Futures High School Accelerator. To turn around preexisting low-performing high schools without having to rely on the highly stressed public school system, Skillman joined other partners in seeding a Greater Detroit Education Venture Fund at United Way for Southeastern Michigan. And to boost school quality citywide, in 2009 Skillman convened a group of key stakeholders that became *Excellent School Detroit*, a citywide partnership to ensure that, by 2020, 90% of Detroit students graduate from high school, enroll in college or postsecondary training, and are prepared to succeed without remediation.

## DEVELOPMENT OF A FRAMEWORK

Shortly after *Good Neighborhoods* began, Skillman hired evaluator Della Hughes of Brandeis University's Center for Youth and Communities and independent evaluation consultant Prudence Brown, who, with Skillman's Knowledge Management Officer Marie Colombo, formed a "learning team." Their goal was not only to evaluate the work but to help participants use evaluation in real time as a tool for learning, management, and problem solving.<sup>38</sup>

The learning team's task was daunting. As often happens at the beginning of a complex initiative, collaborators (within the Foundation and among its partners) did not always share a common vision for what *Good Neighborhoods* should do or a common language for talking about it. Hughes, Colombo, and Brown spent six months meeting with each of the Skillman staff, individually and with Tonya Allen, to prioritize concerns, focus expectations, and align points of view. They spent another six months helping staff refine their ideas to make them specific, actionable, and evaluable.

**The product that emerged was an evaluation framework for *Good Neighborhoods*' readiness phase,** which Skillman staff called the “readiness framework.” The framework aligned broad long-term goals for *Good Neighborhoods*—children would be safe, healthy, well-educated, and prepared for adulthood (SHEP)—along with strategies, interim outcomes, and indicators for the readiness phase. The framework outlines five areas of focus:<sup>D</sup>

1. **Building neighborhood capacities** (i.e., establishing local governance groups and strengthening neighborhood leadership);
2. **Increasing access to high-quality supports and opportunities** (i.e., strengthening neighborhood organizations' capacity and improving programs and services that address youth development);
3. **Making systems and policies** more supportive and responsive;
4. **Becoming a results-oriented learning organization** (i.e., Skillman's internal changes); and
5. **Improving neighborhood schools** and reforming the education system citywide.

Over the next year, the learning team helped Skillman staff, consultants, and community partners set “2016 goals”—outcomes to be achieved by the end of *Good Neighborhoods*—plus benchmark measures to be reached by 2012. (A task force later formed to drive efforts to achieve the 2016 goals; see p. 26).

The process of breaking long-term goals into interim goals and measures fostered buy-in and kept collaborators focused. In 2011, the evaluation team worked to further refine the benchmarks, and Brandeis evaluators began developing a data dashboard to capture progress toward the goals.

## CHANGES WITHIN THE FOUNDATION

### **Skillman reshaped itself, meanwhile, by making a significant commitment to changemaking.”**

As a study of Skillman's changemaking found,<sup>39</sup> the approach refers to “roles and practices beyond grantmaking through which a foundation tries to advance its goals,” including the strategic use of “staff and board networks, deep local knowledge, civic reputation, professional expertise, access to national resources, and political capital”:<sup>40</sup>

*Skillman staff view grantmaking and changemaking as intimately connected: grant resources are “what give us our standing” and allow us to “access a portfolio of changemaking tools beyond money for advancing our agenda” [while] changemaking is the “connective tissue that helps create more powerful outcomes from... unconnected and unleveraged strategies.”*

*[T]he Foundation thinks about changemaking as a tool—like grantmaking, knowledge management, and strategic communications—through which to exert influence, leverage resources and partnerships, and work toward scale in achieving its goals.*

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<sup>D</sup>These categories did not explicitly frame *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools* on the ground, but since evaluators used them to organize their research and findings we use them similarly in Chapter II.

The changemaking strategy has four elements:<sup>41</sup>

- **Influence**—harnessing Skillman’s reputation as a supporter of Detroit’s children to “attract others, inspire ideas, sway decisions, and promote opinions” on behalf of the Foundation’s change agenda;
- **Champions**—engaging influential people and institutions “more directly and explicitly in the Foundation’s work”;
- **Leverage**—pursuing relationships with other funders (and factoring the potential for leverage into funding decisions) with the goal of leveraging Skillman’s investments in place-based change by a ratio of 5:1; and
- **Scale**—targeting investments to have the greatest impact on the most children,<sup>42</sup> aiming to expand and replicate strong models and programs, and influencing policymakers and public entities.

As changemakers, Skillman’s leaders weren’t only interested in financial investment; they also wanted good ideas, models, and practices from other parts of the country to land in Detroit. Thus, for example, they encouraged the Annie E. Casey Foundation to share information about its successful Centers for Working Families, which provide an array of workforce development, benefits access, and asset-building services to low-income residents. Then Skillman aligned local funding partners, LISC, and United Way to implement the model locally. Today, a robust set of Centers for Working Families spreads across *Good Neighborhoods* communities. Similarly, along with the Kresge Foundation, Allen and Goss fostered interest in Detroit within the Living Cities consortium of national funders. Living Cities designated Detroit one of the sites for its *Integration Initiative* and linked the initiative with one *Good Neighborhoods’* location, providing up to \$20 million of loans, grants, and program-related investments.

**The second major internal change Skillman made was to deepen its commitment to being a learning organization.** Goss wanted to transform Skillman into a place that was “nimble, sharp, and opportunistic,” a place that could attract and retain “the best and brightest staff and partners,” as she wrote in a 2007 message to trustees.<sup>43</sup> Being a learning organization meant being able to obtain data and information quickly, feed it into the work on the ground, and assess what was and wasn’t working in real time—essential capacities given *Good Neighborhoods’* commitment to “learning while doing.”

The emphasis on learning necessitated changes to Skillman’s internal structure so that staff didn’t have to fight their own system to work differently. Foundation leaders developed a staff appraisal process that created goals, within individual units of work and also foundation-wide, and linked them to target outcomes. They hired a knowledge management officer to lead the learning effort within the foundation and a special projects officer to oversee the changemaking strand and integrate it with grantmaking. Skillman invited experts on key topics to sessions at the Foundation “where staff examined lessons and best practices from past initiatives and debated new ideas.” Foundation leaders also encouraged staff to participate in professional associations, conferences, and collaborations nationally, and they hosted meetings of national organizations.<sup>44</sup>

## SELECTED NEIGHBORHOODS

In choosing locations for *Good Neighborhoods*, Skillman staff looked primarily for places that (a) had a large number of children who fared poorly on indicators of well-being and (b) showed a “readiness to address problems and mobilize resources to support and nurture children.”<sup>45</sup> From a set of quantitative and qualitative data on 38 Detroit neighborhoods analyzed by Wayne State University researchers, they chose six. Collectively, these neighborhoods—Brightmoor, Northend, Chadsey/Condon, Vernor (later Southwest), Cody/Rouge, and Osborn—contained more than 65,000 children when they were selected. Although by 2011 the number had dropped to just under 58,000, the neighborhoods still comprised almost 29% of the citywide population of children.<sup>46</sup> Compared with other Detroit neighborhoods, these communities had more unemployment, poverty, households in which English was not the primary language, and environmental hazards, and less residential stability among homeowners.<sup>47</sup>

## THE NATIONAL PHILANTHROPIC CONTEXT

**Skillman’s desire to become more strategic and effective reflected a national philanthropic trend.** Disappointed that their best efforts had done little to address some of society’s most persistent issues, leaders of several national foundations had spent the early 1990s rethinking their assumptions about how to improve outcomes for children and youth on a large scale.<sup>48</sup> By the end of that decade, the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Change, which had helped to define the category of “comprehensive community initiative” and the principles of community building, was pushing foundations to clarify their theories of change.<sup>49</sup>

Concurrently, philanthropy professionals were becoming more attentive to specifying target results and measuring progress toward them:

*The quest for results...accelerated in the 1990s with the advent of new approaches, such as venture philanthropy, and innovations in digital and Web technology. Online resources like GuideStar made data-based decision making easier. New concepts, such as the method for calculating social return on investment created by the Roberts Enterprise Development Fund, entered common discourse if not mainstream use.*<sup>50</sup>

*Within a few years, the Center for Effective Philanthropy would be established as a source of comparative data, assessment tools, and research on effective practices for foundation leaders and staff. Over the next decade, while terms like “corporate social responsibility” and “sustainable responsible business” reverberated in the for-profit world, leaders and constituencies within the philanthropic field and nonprofit sector tried to define their own standards of practice.*<sup>51</sup>

**Skillman’s substantive decisions about GN/GS also reflected the state of the field.** The notion that results for children are inextricably linked to the experiences of families and neighborhoods, and that to improve outcomes for children it is also necessary to address family and community conditions, had gained currency among national funders in the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>E</sup>

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<sup>E</sup> See for example: Fiester, L. (2011). *Measuring Change While Changing Measures: Learning In, and From, the Evaluation of Making Connections*. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, pp. 5-6.

National initiatives weren't the only players making connections between place and outcomes, however. A category of philanthropy known as the "embedded funder" was identified in the mid-2000s, and a learning community formed around it with technical support from Chapin Hall Center for Children and funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Skillman's Carol Goss and Tonya Allen were early members of this learning group. According to researchers at Chapin Hall, the embedded funders share: (1) commitment to a specific community over an extended period of time; (2) direct, long-term relationships with many types of community actors; (3) a practice of operating via community relationships; and (4) commitment to providing significant resources and supports that go beyond conventional grantmaking.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, by the time *Good Neighborhoods* was moving into Detroit neighborhoods, the community change field had begun to recognize the value of linking new community capacities and processes to the achievement of specific results. In embracing this approach—along with the commitment to new roles, new ways of managing and interacting, and new ways of learning—Skillman's leaders put their foundation on the front lines of a new generation of place-based change.



## II: EVALUATION FINDINGS

*"The risks of aiming high and failing, it seems to me, pale in comparison to the risks associated with carrying on the status quo. Fear of failure doesn't keep me awake at night. Fear of mediocrity does."*

—Carol Goss, president of Skillman  
Letter to Trustees, 2007

**G**ood Neighborhoods and Good Schools accomplished many noteworthy things during the five-year period spanning 2006-2011, but not everything that planners set out to do. The box on the next page summarizes evaluators' findings on accomplishments and challenges with broad strokes, and the rest of this chapter examines them more closely. Because each evaluator focused on a separate strand of the initiative, we use the same categories to organize their findings here: (1) building neighborhood capacities, (2) increasing access to high-quality supports and opportunities, (3) making systems and policies more supportive and responsive, (4) becoming a results-oriented learning organization, and (5) improving neighborhood schools and the education system.

The outcomes in each area of focus were shaped by the context in which the work unfolded. The systems and policy work, for instance, faced major challenges beginning in 2008, when the national economic crisis caused a surge in unemployment and home foreclosures, and the demand for family supports began to exceed city resources. That same year Detroit's political leadership was thrown into turmoil by the conviction and incarceration of Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick for obstruction of justice. The school reform work, meanwhile, had to contend not only with budget cuts caused by the financial downturn but with turnover in district leadership, culminating in the state's appointment of an emergency financial manager; and the exponential growth in charter schools (described in the previous chapter), which complicated "the system" that Skillman sought to change. Those and similar factors, described more fully in the evaluators' reports, provide an important lens through which to view the accomplishments of *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools*.

## OVERVIEW OF EVALUATION FINDINGS, PLANNING AND READINESS PHASE (2006-2011)

### ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

Community members who are involved in GN/GS are highly engaged and have developed new leadership skills. The initiative has established functioning resident-stakeholder partnerships in all neighborhoods, with boards, staff, and structures for community action in place. Some small and midsize community organizations have better infrastructure and capacity to lead or participate in change.

The initiative has cultivated trust, overcome skepticism, and forged new partnerships and alliances in the neighborhoods. Collaboration and communication among Skillman, its intermediaries, and key local partners have grown. The small grants program has improved dynamics between residents and agencies, expanded programs and opportunities in the neighborhoods, and mobilized residents as resources for change.

Many requisite conditions for school and education system reform now exist, including a vision, plan, and infrastructure for citywide school reform; a common language and accessible data to help parents choose *Good Schools*; more and better school options (including 11 new schools); improvements to teaching capacity; and processes for improving existing schools.

Skillman's grants have established new hubs of co-located youth services in the neighborhoods and increased the services available. New community-based centers help parents gain employment skills, jobs, and benefits to support their families.

Efforts to leverage other funds for neighborhood transformation exceeded Skillman's 5:1 target. Progress has been made to establish an "investment pipeline" in each neighborhood. Infrastructure now exists to collect, analyze, and use data for advocacy and decision making.

Skillman's internal learning activities established a "new way of working." Staff now understand what it means to be a learning organization, and evaluation practices are consistent with best practices in the field.

### CHALLENGES:

Some neighborhoods are readier for implementation than others. Across neighborhoods, the spectrum of engaged residents is not yet broad enough to ensure full representation or the presence of a critical mass of leaders who would make the capacity sustainable, and the effort to cultivate champions outside the neighborhoods did not develop as fully as expected.

More collaboration, integration, and alignment are needed among intermediaries, governance boards, residents, and other leaders as well as across program areas within Skillman and in the initiative. In the neighborhoods, there is a need to balance competing agendas, especially when local leaders want to take on issues that fall outside the scope of Skillman's child- and youth-focused mission.

Neighborhood investment pipelines vary in their quality and amount of resources. The policy and system-reform agenda lags behind the other work and still remains to be fully designed.

*Good Schools'* goals, outcomes, and measures need clarification; leaders will have to decide how prescriptive to be in this work and how to allocate resources most effectively.

—*Distilled from evaluation reports listed in the Appendix and from interviews conducted by the author*

## NEIGHBORHOOD CAPACITIES

**Good Neighborhoods' capacity-building work focused on** (a) developing the knowledge, skills, and leadership ability of residents and other community stakeholders; and (b) incubating, launching, and assisting neighborhood governance structures. The goal of both strategies was to help the neighborhoods become “capable of implementing a community-owned plan to improve child and youth outcomes”<sup>53</sup>—specifically, to help the neighborhood’s children and youth develop in healthy ways and graduate from high school. In part, this was because Tonya Allen wanted to build on Skillman’s competencies in youth development and success replicating research-based programs. It was also because Allen viewed *Good Neighborhoods* as a children’s change initiative that unfolds in a neighborhood context. That framing differentiated Skillman’s approach from other community-change efforts. As Allen explains, “We had to prioritize the goal of making children’s lives better. Otherwise people get lost in the comprehensive nature of this work, in things [like physical redevelopment] that help create good environments for families but don’t directly improve outcomes for children.”

**Evaluators found a high level of engagement among residents and other community members** involved with the *Good Neighborhoods*. Residents have participated in community meetings, the Leadership Academy, Action Planning Teams, and the neighborhood governance development process. “They have demonstrated energy and enthusiasm and have a deep investment and pride in their neighborhood, in their neighborhood development efforts, and in their emerging advocacy activities.”<sup>54</sup>

Resident engagement and leadership development activities produced these results:

- **Mutual trust and respect grew between residents and the Foundation**, across boundaries of class and race, leaving people on both sides more comfortable communicating and working together.<sup>55</sup>
- **The initiative prepared and encouraged residents to take on new roles:** applying for small grants, running for election to governance groups, organizing neighbors, and partnering with businesses.<sup>56</sup>
- **Skillman gained credibility and respect among philanthropic colleagues and improved its own partnership skills** through its “consistent commitment to engage residents/stakeholders and develop a deep and sophisticated knowledge of neighborhood context has built credibility.”<sup>57</sup>

However, a need remains to bring together residents who aren’t accustomed to collaborating with each other and who have (or are perceived as having) different agendas, to develop more participation across a broader array of racial and ethnic groups, and to manage conflicts among constituencies.<sup>58</sup>

**Neighborhood governance groups, working as resident-stakeholder partnerships, are operating in all six neighborhoods**, have developed action plans and elected board members, are committed to Skillman’s long-term goals, and have established viable ways to implement community plans.<sup>59</sup> Skillman leaders expect the neighborhood governance structures to: include both residents and other stakeholders (e.g., representatives of community organizations, agencies, faith institutions); give residents a strong voice; reflect ethnic, racial, and geographic diversity based on the neighborhood’s composition; and include young people as voting decision-makers.<sup>60</sup>



These groups evolved in different ways across neighborhoods, yet evaluators who surveyed residents found that all of the partnerships: developed structures that reflect a collective approach; identified a lead agency to manage financial matters and hire and supervise staff; show potential to operate as “planning and advocacy voices” for the neighborhoods in their efforts to improve outcomes for children; and have capacity to make good decisions.<sup>61</sup> All of the partnerships are now staffed by executive directors (including four who have served as community liaisons since the beginning), part of the planned transition to neighborhood leadership.

Still, the governance boards are works in progress. Brandeis evaluators observed “an early lack of clarity” about goals and processes: “Foundation staff, NCDI staff and liaisons, and UMTAC staff had three understandings of the plan, multiplied by the number of staff in the three organizations. These diverse messages were delivered to dozens of people on governance development task forces, who in turn had their own interpretations of what was being communicated.”<sup>62</sup>

The game-changers for *Good Neighborhoods* were the development of the readiness framework, followed by the articulation of goals to be achieved by 2016. The “2016 goals,” as they are known, “weren’t just a statement of what we will do but also a declarative statement about what we will *not* do but will try to engage partners and leverage investors to do,” Tonya Allen explains. Work on the evaluation framework began in fall 2007; work on the 2016 goals began nearly two years later, and the goals were not presented to a broad audience until early 2010. Today, Allen says that if she were starting *Good Neighborhoods* again she would get to the 2016 goals sooner as a way to reach clarity on the end results and help everyone see where they fit into the bigger picture.

**The Community Connections Small Grants program has been a valuable tool** for developing neighborhood capacities and achieving short-term results. From July 2006 through April 2011, the program distributed 430 grants worth a total of \$1.54 million to grassroots organizations in the six neighborhoods.<sup>63</sup> Each neighborhood received a total of about \$59,000 in small grants each year, and the average grant size was about \$3,200.<sup>64</sup> The projects funded by small grants produced these results:

- **Individuals who received grants or participated on the grant review panel acquired new skills** and an understanding of funding structures and grant making that “improve[ed] their chances of obtaining other funding and [improved] the organizational capacity of [neighborhood] groups.”<sup>65</sup>
- **Many grantees or review panelists became leaders on the governance boards.**
- **Dynamics improved among residents, small resident-led organizations, and larger agencies.**
- **Positive, visible changes occurred in the neighborhoods.** Activities funded by the grants “are expanding the number of spaces where people can meet neighbors and begin to engage in collective efforts that improve the neighborhood.”<sup>66</sup>

***Good Neighborhoods’* effort to build neighborhood capacities, while well on track, has not yet succeeded on every score.** Challenges include:<sup>67</sup> documenting the number of residents involved in the initiative, beyond participants in the governance structures and leadership training and the small grant recipients—and increasing their numbers; tensions and territorialism between some neighborhood factions; a need for more collaboration and alignment among intermediaries, governance boards, other leaders, residents, and other stakeholders—in the neighborhoods and between the

neighborhoods and Skillman; and a need for more systematic ways to assess progress. These challenges are neither unusual nor unexpected for place-based change initiatives like GN/GS, and they are likely to play out during the upcoming implementation phase.

## SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

**GN/GS' effort to increase neighborhood supports and opportunities for youth involves two approaches:** grants to support youth development programming, and more modest investments to build capacity within youth-serving organizations. To date, the programmatic work has been more thoroughly implemented than the organizational development piece.

In 2010, Skillman funded a baseline assessment of the systems of supports and opportunities that exist for young people in the six neighborhoods, focusing on accessibility, quality, and scale—indicators from the readiness framework. Brandeis evaluators interviewed representatives of 270 programs operating out of 76 agencies and found that<sup>68</sup>:

- **Accessibility**—about a third (34%) of the youth, across neighborhoods, participate in youth development programs (although the numbers are not firm, as there may well be duplicated counts). Transportation is residents' biggest barrier to accessing these programs.
- **Quality**—Slightly more than half (54%) of programs require formal youth development training for instructors, and less than half (44%) conduct formal program assessments (indicators of program quality). Extensive programming exists but certain categories are limited; more programs offer life skills, leadership development, arts and culture, academic enrichment, and sports and recreation than offer mentoring, career preparation and exposure, volunteer opportunities, job preparation, and college preparation and access.
- **Scale**—Many programs serve a small number of youth, often fewer than 50.

**The Foundation's big bet for building a system of programmatic supports is the Youth Development Alliance (YDA)**, a partnership of three youth development agencies that aims to create a well-coordinated system of high-quality, year-round youth development programs and services to effectively reach large numbers of young people and produce more positive youth outcomes. Numerous high-quality youth programs operate in Skillman's target neighborhoods; however, many are undersubscribed or are disconnected from additional programs and services that can benefit youth. The Alliance is building the infrastructure to connect community assets by engaging multiple partners (e.g., neighborhood schools, governance groups, and the small grants program); developing a data system to link programs and track youth participation and outcomes; and providing coordinated training. Each agency serves two of the six GN/GS neighborhoods, and collectively they focus on "formal youth development training, program quality assessment, and a management information system capable of tracking individuals and handling program data."<sup>69</sup>

Skillman also invested in the establishment of a Detroit Youth Employment Consortium, which coordinated public and private funding for more than 11,000 summer jobs during 2008-2010 and attracted \$1.7 million in pledges and grants for 2011. The Consortium's mission is to "[rebuild a] private, sustainable system of summer jobs connecting employers with city youth (ages 14-18)" by

creating a more effective job pipeline and linking with Skillman's education reform work to build a continuum from school to post-secondary education to career.<sup>70</sup>

Other investments in programming include:

- **The creation of new multi-service centers hubs** where no services previously existed, which now reach more than 900 children a day with centralized, coordinated youth development activities;<sup>71</sup>
- **The development of four Centers for Working Families** located in *Good Neighborhoods* (created in collaboration with LISC and United Way), that had provided workforce, budget management, and income-related services to 3,330 participants by April 2011;<sup>72</sup>
- **The creation of three neighborhood-based super-centers** that offer tax filing and accounting assistance to low- and moderate- income residents. Since 2006, the centers have helped 18,600 residents of the *Good Neighborhoods* claim \$18 million in federal tax returns, of which \$10 million went to families with children;<sup>73</sup> and
- **Support for other initiatives** that serve the six neighborhoods or their residents, such as the Detroit Regional Workforce Fund, the New Economy Initiative, LISC, and Living Cities.<sup>74</sup>

**To build organizational capacity, Skillman invested in four organizations** that provided technical help to community-based nonprofit organizations<sup>75</sup>—a strategy that reflected the Foundation's "deep appreciation of the role of grassroots organizations and the safety net that they provide in neighborhoods that have been undeveloped and under-resourced."<sup>76</sup>

The Foundation financed the creation of the University of Michigan Technical Assistance Center (UMTAC) to provide technical assistance not only on community engagement but also to small- and mid-sized community organizations and to the Foundation itself. Skillman funded New Detroit, a coalition of leaders from the civil rights, advocacy, and human service arenas, to implement the Compassion Capital Initiative, which offered workshops and subgrants to strengthen the infrastructure of small- and mid-sized organizations. The Youth Development Commission, a long-time Skillman grantee, received money to host workshops and provide technical assistance and minigrants to small organizations in the *Good Neighborhoods*.<sup>77</sup> And the Prevention Network received funds to help community organizations improve programming.<sup>78</sup>

These intermediaries' efforts reached 4,395 individuals and 703 organizations via 348 workshops, webinars, and events between 2008-2010. Each neighborhood benefitted from a level of investment by the intermediaries ranging from about \$237,000 to more than \$385,000 (rounded); altogether, this strategy provided more than \$1.5 million in funding to the neighborhood organizations.<sup>79</sup>

Skillman's investments in building organizational capacity produced the following results, according to evaluators from Wayne State University:<sup>80</sup> more programs and opportunities for youth were offered in the target neighborhoods; neighborhood governance structures became more formalized through staffing; membership expansion; and improvements to program design, infrastructure, policies, and procedures; a sense of community identity began to form; and organizations' board members became more engaged in governance.

Researchers concluded that by funding four different intermediaries to build organizational capacities Skillman capitalized on each entity's strengths, but it was not a failsafe approach: "[T]he absence of a planned strategy to coordinate efforts across intermediaries may signify a missed opportunity...The four groups did not engage in joint planning, [so] training options were redundant, technical assistance was provided in a silo, and funding for programs or consultants was uncoordinated. Capacity building appeared as a smorgasbord of options."<sup>81</sup> New Detroit, the Youth Development Commission, and UMTAC all provided individualized coaching but "none provided sustained follow-up."<sup>82</sup>

## SYSTEMS AND POLICIES

### Systems and policy change were part of Skillman's *Good Opportunities* program area.

However, the notion that systems and policies would have to change to better support children, families, and neighborhoods largely remained an aspiration as *Good Neighborhoods* unfolded. Although it paid deep attention to reforming the education system through *Good Schools*, Skillman did not develop a coherent strategy for system and policy reform through *Good Neighborhoods* during the 2006-2011 period.

Evaluators of this piece of GN/GS noted that it is difficult to achieve social change "with systems that are slow to change on their own but subject to political and economic forces that can dramatically alter the landscape," including abrupt changes in political leadership and economic downturns.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, the systems and policy work was an entirely new field for Skillman, one that had not previously been on par with the Foundation's grantmaking efforts and one for which Skillman had little internal capacity.

Despite lagging behind other parts of *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools*, however, "a systems approach to creating deep and sustainable change" remained an important notion within Skillman's aspiration to transform children's lives through GN/GS.<sup>84</sup> In addition to the education-related results summarized on pp. 19-20, GN/GS had achieved the following system and policy results by mid-2011:

- **Skillman leveraged other funders' investments of \$303.4 million** on its own neighborhood investments of \$47.7 million, a rate of 6:1.<sup>85</sup> In particular, Skillman formed funding relationships with the Kresge, Max M. and Marjorie Fisher, Kellogg, and PNC Bank foundations around early care and education.<sup>86</sup> Observers note that these and other philanthropies are "acting differently" now because of their interactions with Skillman around system and policy change; other foundations have become more place-based and have aligned their work in a more collaborative way.
- **Each neighborhood made some progress toward establishing an investment pipeline**, but the quality was not consistent and they varied in resource levels from "medium" to "little or none."<sup>87</sup>
- **Some unofficial champions emerged, although the champion strategy did not unfold as planned.** Carol Goss was a persuasive champion for children, and several informal champions emerged from the philanthropic, corporate, and community sectors, but other positions to which Skillman expected to assign champions were unfilled.<sup>88</sup> After an initial startup, Skillman leaders chose to delay full-scale implementation of the champion strategy while civic, corporate, and government leaders dealt with immediate political and economic crises. Skillman now is reactivating this strategy by hosting informational events that introduce potential champions to the neighborhood and children's agenda.

- **GN/GS leaders tried but were unable to develop a policy agenda** in collaboration with advocacy grantees. Instead, Skillman staff tried to set policy targets linked to neighborhood goals. This effort lost ground when the staff person in charge left Skillman and some time elapsed in identifying a replacement.
- **Other illustrative successes in systems change include** a partnership with the Department of Housing and Urban Development that is on track to mitigate environmental hazards in the homes of one GN/GS neighborhood and success in helping to secure a federal waiver that allows Michigan to use Social Security resources to keep children from ending up in foster care.

Evaluators conclude that Skillman’s development of relationships with federal officials and agencies has “positioned the Foundation as an effective broker for many efforts involving national partners, both public and private,” including but not limited to the U.S. Department of Education’s *Promise Neighborhoods* initiative and Living Cities’ *Integration Initiative*. Skillman also “served as an intermediary between state and federal resources and its target neighborhoods” around neighborhood safety and youth violence prevention.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, the Foundation’s “adaptive capacity, strategic positioning, agility, and ability to work in a chaotic environment in order to seize resources and opportunities” bode well for the systems and policy work in the future, evaluators observed.<sup>90</sup>

## RESULTS-ORIENTED LEARNING

**To ensure that Skillman’s internal structure supported and reflected GN/GS’ ambitious goals,** the Foundation committed to becoming a learning organization. Skillman’s embrace of a place-based approach set the Foundation up to address several learning tasks in particular: (1) clarifying how the Foundation would work differently and what roles it would play; (2) identifying the skills and knowledge Skillman would need to assume its new roles;<sup>91</sup> and (3) being able to learn in real time.<sup>92</sup>

Skillman addressed these needs, and also prepared for *Good Neighborhoods*, by:<sup>93</sup> examining lessons and best practices from past and current community change initiatives and their evaluations; gathering and analyzing data; creating an initial theory of change; building support among key constituencies; restructuring staff roles and management policies to eliminate programmatic silos and to accommodate the flexible work schedules needed for community engagement activities; developing a process that allowed staff to make funding decisions of \$250,000 or less between trustee meetings, to become more responsive to emerging opportunities; creating new staff positions for a knowledge management officer to oversee learning and evaluation and a special projects officer to focus on changemaking activities; adding trustees who had connections to Detroit neighborhoods and expertise in community-level work, and holding learning retreats for all trustees; and improving strategic communications.

Foundation leaders also selected an evaluator who could not only measure outcomes but also help to develop an evaluation framework; refine the theory of change; facilitate the Foundation’s learning; and help residents, technical assistance contractors, and other partners acquire evaluation skills.<sup>94</sup>

**Midway through the initiative, evaluators find Skillman farther along the organizational learning continuum than most of its peers.** Skillman’s culture is described as “open and candid,” with leaders who are willing to take risks.<sup>95</sup> “We’re not afraid to make mistakes,” explains a staff member. “It’s an environment in which innovation and entrepreneurial thinking are welcome. In fact, if you *don’t* stretch yourself, you are definitely in the minority.”

Skillman staff seem to understand that being a learning organization means: continually examining and refining policies and practices; acting as a team to do whatever it takes to get the job done; being thoughtful, data-driven, and results-oriented; communicating well, internally and externally; taking time to reflect, interpret, and make adjustments; knowing when to accelerate and when to change course; and being able to talk openly and honestly about what works and what doesn't.<sup>96</sup> A survey conducted by the Center for Effective Philanthropy in May 2011 revealed that Skillman staff:<sup>97</sup>

- **Participate in professional development conferences or seminars more frequently** than staff at other foundations (97% of Skillman staff, compared with 90% elsewhere);
- **Have a high level of satisfaction** with their jobs and with the extent to which Skillman is a team-oriented place that manages the changes needed to improve work quality well; and
- **Have positive perceptions** of the Foundation, rating Skillman, its work, and its culture above 75% of other funders whose staff the Center has surveyed.

However, the survey also elicited staff comments on the need for more time for reflection. That sentiment was echoed by other researchers, who found that, too often, “[Skillman] staff and partners don’t get the opportunity to engage in or understand the thinking of the Foundation, which reduces their ability to make the autonomous, creative action that it will take to achieve [GN/GS’ ultimate goals], which in turn reinforces dependence on senior leaders.”<sup>98</sup>

When considering evaluation as a tool for learning, evaluators from Signet Research and Consulting found that Skillman’s evaluation practices reflect best practices in the field. The evaluation framework is “a powerful resource” for decision making, and the encouragement and assistance that neighborhoods receive for their own evaluation and learning “amplifies the value of Skillman’s investment.”<sup>99</sup>

## SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION

**With *Good Schools*, Skillman has concentrated explicitly on expanding options for high-quality education and on fostering the conditions** (e.g., vision, public will, capacity, knowledge, and accountability) needed to improve education, rather than on funding specific programs.<sup>100</sup> For example, Skillman has given schools financial incentives for professional development and technical assistance that will lead to improvement, informed parents about school quality, made more high-quality schools available by supporting new small schools and expanding charter schools, and increased support for schools in *Good Neighborhoods*.<sup>101</sup> Those efforts have produced the following results:<sup>102</sup>

- **Development of *Excellent School Detroit (ESD)***, a city-wide vision, plan, and infrastructure for school reform that engaged an array of local leaders in improving education quality. ESD calls for 90% of students to graduate from high school, 90% of graduates to enroll in college or postsecondary training, and 90% of enrollees prepared to succeed;<sup>103</sup>
- **Creation of 11 innovative new schools** (with four more expected to open in Fall 2011);<sup>104</sup>
- **Creation of the Michigan Futures High School Accelerator** to incubate new, small, innovative schools;

- **Creation of the Greater Detroit Education Venture Fund** at United Way for Southeastern Michigan to help turn around low-performing schools;
- **Development of an annual school report card** for all Detroit schools (part of *Making the Grade*), that helps parents choose the best schools by giving them quality indicators, data on specific schools, and a language for talking about school quality;<sup>105</sup>
- **Infrastructure** to expand and support high-quality early learning centers;<sup>106</sup>
- **Technical assistance** to more than 200 schools over eight years in developing and implementing goals, and monetary awards and recognition for schools that perform well;<sup>107</sup> and
- **Coordination of influential groups and individuals** interested in education (e.g., foundations, civic leaders, parents) to help them reach consensus on improving the quality of education.<sup>108</sup>

These changes have helped community members realize that their schools can and must improve; changed the conversation from one about school governance to one about education quality, regardless of whether the school is managed by the public system or a private charter entity; and created many of the conditions needed to facilitate major reforms.<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether these changes will be sufficiently meaningful and lasting. Thus far, *Good Schools* has aimed mostly for long-term outcomes, and Skillman has not yet specified “how much [it] expects the needle to move on each outcome, over what period of time,” as a result.<sup>110</sup>

**Alignment and coordination between *Good Neighborhoods* and *Good Schools* remains a challenge.** Evaluators found that Skillman “failed...to make sure the *Good Schools* and *Good Neighborhoods* program staff spent enough time talking to each other within the Foundation and communicating a shared agenda with residents and neighborhood stakeholders,” which resulted in some negative public perceptions of what the initiative was trying to accomplish.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, while there is “high alignment” among Skillman staff on the outcomes specified in the evaluation framework, evaluators found less agreement regarding measures of change, which they cautioned could indicate “misalignments” on the direction or scope of the work.<sup>112</sup>

The problems caused by lack of alignment didn’t become apparent until 2007, with staff from Skillman’s schools and neighborhoods programs taking opposing views on planned school closures (see p. 6). “It wasn’t until we experienced that conflict that we understood there wasn’t alignment,” recalls Tonya Allen. *Good Neighborhoods* and *Good Schools* program staff subsequently began working together to align target outcomes and create a safe space for learning together,<sup>113</sup> and Foundation leaders have created more opportunities for sharing information across program areas.

**The successes and shortfalls that *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools* has experienced, viewed at midpoint** in the decade of place-based investment, indicate both that the initiative is on the way to achieving its 10-year goals and that there is more work yet to be done. The findings also suggest some cross-cutting observations about what it takes to do this work well, to maximize results, and to position the changes to be sustained over the long haul. Those insights are the topic of Chapter III.



## II: CROSS-CUTTING OBSERVATIONS

**A**fter decades of efforts to strengthen communities and the people who live in them, funders, strategists, and researchers have amassed a wealth of lessons about what it takes to produce “place-based change.”<sup>F</sup> Many useful analyses of approaches to community change also exist, ranging from Chapin Hall’s publications on embedded philanthropy to FSG’s recent work on collective impact. And the knowledge base on discrete aspects of place-based change—including but not limited to resident engagement, community mobilization, family asset building, affordable housing development, resident mobility, and organizational capacity building—is solid and growing. Indeed, *Good Neighborhoods*’ designers incorporated lessons from many of these sources.

Skillman’s situation is different, however, in that its place-based work is combined with commitments to embedded funding and changemaking. The former, as defined by Chapin Hall, encompasses an obligation to a specific community over an extended period of time; long-term relationships with many types of community actors; a practice of operating via relationships; and a commitment to providing resources and supports that go beyond conventional grant-making.<sup>114</sup> Changemaking, meanwhile, seeks to achieve goals through the strategic use of “staff and board networks, deep local knowledge, civic reputation, professional expertise, access to national resources, and political capital.”<sup>115</sup>

**This triple-whammy approach—the focus on changing a place, the funder’s embeddedness, and changemaking—simultaneously complicates the playing field** for Skillman and opens the door to success on multiple levels. It positions *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools* to help us learn something about:

- What it means to be an embedded funder working to change specific places;
- What it means to be an embedded funder involved in the practice of changemaking; and
- What happens when one combines the two to improve outcomes for children and families.

Skillman’s experiences with GN/GS also supports some early observations about three cross-cutting issues involved in place-based change: (1) finding or creating effective entry points, vehicles, and platforms for place-based change; (2) aligning, coordinating, and integrating multiple strands of work; and (3) learning while doing. These are only three of many relevant issues that place-based change efforts must address, but because they emerge frequently in the readiness phase evaluation reports we include them in our analysis here. The observations in this chapter come too early in *Good Neighborhood*’s life to count as lessons, perhaps, but they are a preview of knowledge that will grow and solidify over the next few years.

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<sup>F</sup> Among the most frequently cited are: the Surdna Foundation’s *Going Comprehensive: Anatomy of an Initiative That Worked*, on the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program; the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change’s *Voices from the Field Volumes I, II, and III*; the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation’s *Hard Lessons about Philanthropy and Community Change from the Neighborhood Improvement Initiative*; the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *Path of Most Resistance* and *Eye of the Storm*, both on the New Futures initiative; Chapin Hall’s *Toward Greater Effectiveness in Community Change: Challenges and Responses for Philanthropy*; and the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s “Real Time Lessons Learned” series.



## BEING AN EMBEDDED FUNDER WORKING TO CHANGE A PLACE

On a basic level, working in place is about “reconnecting individuals with where they live, about transforming the conditions of those physical places while at the same time transforming the skills and leadership of the communities,” as one interviewee said. But when an *embedded funder* is involved, place-based change takes on several other important characteristics. In addition to the dimensions specified by Chapin Hall, being an embedded funder working to change a place is about:

- **Putting everything on the line.** Skillman brought to its strategy social, political, and human capital; organizational structure; trustees’ clout and influence; and civic reputation. It takes all of those resources to make neighborhoods ready for investment and attractive to other investors while also building a tent big enough that everyone under it shares ownership and accountability for success.
- **Assuming more responsibility for results.** In Skillman’s approach, community change is not the sole responsibility of the people who receive the Foundation’s resources. Responsibility belongs equally to Foundation staff, leaders, and (presumably) trustees. In taking direct ownership of place-based outcomes, an embedded funder puts its own reputation at stake in a very public way.
- **Becoming more strategic about how to achieve results.** Skillman’s practice of philanthropy became more complex and nuanced as the Foundation evolved from being a grantmaker, to being a leverager of others’ funds, to being a “deal closer”—and, along the way, becoming an entity that is opportunistic about its work. The nimbleness that Carol Goss sought is one consequence of that progression; so is pressure on staff to acquire new skills. Skillman has had to invest time and resources in developing staff and supporting them in new roles as learners and implementers.
- **Committing to nurturing and refreshing relationships, while understanding that relationships change over time.** A large part of Skillman’s work involves relationship management. Foundation leaders changed structures so that program officers could spend more time in neighborhoods, but then found that partners come and go from leadership positions so relationships must continually be renewed. Realizing how labor-intensive this is, Skillman then shifted grant-processing responsibilities to program associates to take the burden off program officers.

The gist of these observations is that embedded funders who are working to change places require a level of flexibility, patience, long-term focus, tolerance for risk-taking and experimentation, and willingness to change core structures and practices that many foundations do not possess.

## BEING AN EMBEDDED FUNDER INVOLVED IN CHANGEMAKING

Being both an embedded funder *and* a changemaker carries additional risks and responsibilities as well as potential for unprecedented success. In particular, it necessitates:

- **Clarifying goals and priorities early on and making sure they are expressed clearly, explicitly, and frequently.** The importance of clarifying goals has been duly noted in nearly every lessons-learned document for at least a decade. Why do we keep returning to this point? Because it is so crucial and yet so hard to do, especially when one is simultaneously building the boat and piloting it through unknown waters. And nowhere is clarity more important than when people are attempting to work in ways that are fundamentally different from what they are used to doing.

- **Focusing relentlessly on results, and supporting that focus with capacity to collect, analyze, and use data strategically.** The key to moving the needle on outcomes is first to know what one wants to achieve and then to view everything one does through the lens of whether it will move the needle closer to the target. And the key to making the hard changes that produce desired results is being able to push for change not because one assumes it is the right thing to do but because the data indicate its necessity. *Good Neighborhoods'* leaders found that having data on the depth and extent of poor outcomes for children in the selected neighborhoods was essential to leveraging Skillman's networks to get other people focused on the penetration level and scale needed to achieve the 2016 goals, and to becoming more specific about the intended results.
- **Reaching a higher degree of alignment with partners and allies.** Changemakers persuade their partners not only to commit money but to align other resources, including staff time, reputation, and leadership, with the vision and work on the ground. In effect, an embedded changemaker aims to turn more stakeholders into allies and more allies into champions, with a definition of "champion" that is more fluid and inclusive than the one with which *Good Neighborhoods* began. Skillman's recognition of this fact is apparent in its shift away from designating specific people as champions and toward encouraging more people to be unofficial champions.
- **Participating in highly reciprocal relationships.** In a relationship that centers on influence rather than just co-funding, additional complexities enter into play. As an evaluator observes, "When you get deeper under each other's skin and *actually* change the behavior and practices of another funder, you have a responsibility to support them as they work through what the new approach will mean within their own context." At a minimum, this means that a changemaker can't simply dump new ideas and ways of working at the partner's door. It's necessary to follow up, respond to the challenges that the influenced party encounters, and recognize that a leveraged partner may not think exactly the same way as the changemaker. It may also be necessary to provide financial support for some of the partner's priorities, even if they don't fall within the changemaker's arena.
- **Having a broad array of relationships, from the neighborhood to the national level.** At the local level, *Good Neighborhoods* brought large and small grantees together to create an environment in which collaborative relationships are not just encouraged but expected. Nationally, Carol Goss and Tonya Allen's cultivation of relationships with public and private funders has helped to establish Detroit as a place of interest and investment. Skillman played a central role in developing proposals for federal funding, getting city leaders on board, and mediating differences among local players.

**Skillman's experience with *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools* once again underscores** how vitally important it is, if we want to maximize results throughout place-based changemaking, to be constantly explicit about what we aim to achieve and how we expect to achieve it—our theory, values, and desired results, even when they are still evolving; to embed these touchstones in everything that occurs; and to link and support them through strong and varied relationships.

It's a tall order, and one of the biggest challenges for a place-based effort that aims to improve outcomes for children may be to determine the degree to which the initiative will focus on improving the place versus changes that may lead more directly to specific outcomes for children. Of course, children's outcomes are undeniably connected to the environments in which they live and even to the regions in which their neighborhoods are located. Most people have come to believe it's not an

either/or situation but a matter of place *and* people—especially as research uncovers high mobility rates among residents moving from one low-income neighborhood to another.

As Tonya Allen points out, however, one still has to set priorities. One of the failures of many “comprehensive” community initiatives was that they tried to take on so many issues—housing and physical redevelopment, parents’ employment, health, education reform, commercial revitalization—that they ended up scattering resources shallowly. Moreover, they expected broad population-level change to accrue from all of the individual child outcomes that came from programmatic approaches.

This challenge is especially acute for embedded funders, who have a deeper commitment than others to the places in which they operate and therefore may be more pressured to overextend. Allen struggled to keep *Good Neighborhoods* focused on work that would lead as directly as possible to better results for children. Her solution was to position *Good Neighborhoods* as a “children’s initiative in a neighborhood context,” but in doing so she inadvertently sidestepped some important issues that threaten families, such as mortgage foreclosure and housing instability. “I wish we had come in stronger with a housing partner while still making it clear that *our* objective was to create stability in communities so children’s lives aren’t disrupted,” Allen now says. “However, I don’t know if a traditional housing partner would have been prepared for the foreclosure tsunami that occurred throughout Detroit and the country.”

**Another way to consider the embedded/changemaker role is to look at Skillman’s goal of making change not only in neighborhoods and in the funding context but in the Foundation itself.** What does it mean for a Foundation to position an initiative not just as an intervention but as a way to work differently? Skillman’s experience suggests that, at a minimum, it means:

- ***Committing staff to become deeply, personally involved on the front lines of neighborhood-level activity and leadership.*** Embedded, place-based changemaking isn’t a job for people who expect to maintain a degree or two of removal from the community. It’s for people who are willing to spend their weekends building neighborhood parks, as some Skillman staff have, or helping other organizations align their investments, if that’s what it takes to get the work done. Without the fundamental changes that Skillman made—making program officers directly responsible for bringing neighborhood partners together, funding liaisons to link residents with community organizations, and the like—it is unlikely *Good Neighborhoods* could have achieved as much during its early years.
- ***Leading from the middle or from behind the scenes.*** Being a place-based changemaker is about *sharing* both information and credit widely and knowing when, based on political considerations or on who possesses the most relevant knowledge, it’s best for someone else to lead. Place-based changemaking is not a job for an organization that needs to own ideas or achievements or to lead the parade. It is a behind-the-scenes role in which creating relationships and setting the stage so that others can take the spotlight are supremely important.

**One conclusion we could reach from these observations is that the embedded funder/ changemaking approach is not for everyone.** In fact, it may not even be feasible for most foundations. It takes an unusual perspective and combination of skills to meet these requirements, put them all in play, and keep them operating compatibly over time. In *Voices from the Field III*, Anne Kubisch wrote that “Not every foundation should take on community change work”<sup>116</sup> because of the challenges of working in place. Those challenges multiply when changemaking is added to the mix.

## ENTRY POINTS, VEHICLES, AND PLATFORMS

As funders have become more creative and strategic about using their resources to achieve ambitious, measurable results at the neighborhood level, they have become more intentional and sophisticated about finding or creating:

- **Entry points** into communities that are minimally invasive and maximally engaging—activities or services that attract a broad base of participants and allies around issues that are relevant to them while also giving the funder time to understand the issues and craft the most effective response;<sup>6</sup>
- **Vehicles** for organizing action, developing capacities, and building momentum for change in communities; and
- **Platforms**—a critical mass of capacities, skills, strategies, and resources that residents and community leaders can use as a springboard and scaffold to achieve new results and sustain progress over time, beyond the life of any one initiative.<sup>h</sup>

**Skillman addressed all of these initiative design elements** during *Good Neighborhoods'* planning and readiness phases. The National Community Development Institute provided a first point of entry by hiring organizers to conduct knock on doors and help co-design and facilitate community planning meetings. Later, NCDI's Leadership Academies and Community Builders Leadership Institute built out the circle of participants, as did the focus groups, action planning teams, and large community meetings NCDI facilitated to engage stakeholders and develop community goals.

*Good Neighborhoods'* small-grants program similarly served as both an entry point and a vehicle for change. This two-stage program first gave Skillman a way to enter the neighborhoods, learn about residents' capacities and concerns, elicit input and participation from community members (especially young people), and earn credibility by producing visible results relatively quickly. A second stage of small grants helped grassroots organizations develop organizational capacity, which advanced their missions<sup>117</sup> and cultivated civic infrastructure.

The process of developing and refining *Good Neighborhoods'* evaluation framework provided another vehicle for “enhancing clarity, strategic focus, and action learning.”<sup>118</sup> Similarly, the task force that formed around the 2016 goals—50 to 60 representatives of nonprofit groups, community leaders, and other key stakeholders who meet three or four times a year—became a vehicle for advancing the goals in a coherent way and for building collective accountability for results. Meanwhile, the neighborhood governance boards and *Excellent School Detroit* served as useful vehicles for moving a shared agenda, and both have potential to become platforms for achieving many other positive results.

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<sup>6</sup>Examples used by other foundations include neighborhood study circles, small-grant programs, and Earned Income Tax Credit campaigns

<sup>h</sup> Some initiative designers have come to see “platforms” as one of their efforts' prime leave-behinds in communities. See for example Smith, R. with Fiester, L. (Forthcoming). “Place, Plus: Insights About People, Place, and Community Change from Making Connections.” Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, p. 14.

**Skillman’s early experience with entry points, vehicles, and platforms reinforce two lessons** learned by other place-based change efforts. First, it helps to have multiple entry points and vehicles, both because no single option will reach everyone and because different strategies work best at different developmental stages in an initiative. Second, it’s important to create multiple platforms, because no single set of skills, knowledge, and capacities is likely to be flexible, powerful, and permanent enough to accommodate all future needs.

## **ALIGNMENT, COORDINATION, AND INTEGRATION**

**For Skillman, the issue of integration and alignment surfaced most dramatically in the disconnection between neighborhood transformation and education reform,** but it also occurred between the Foundation and external partners. For instance, *Good Neighborhoods* evaluators found that “the Foundation, NCDI, and UMTAC have developed a strong, effective partnership, but...[some] tensions could have been prevented by sharing a core understanding of each other’s approach, underlying assumptions, and theories of change.”<sup>119</sup> (The exception seems to be within the education strand of work, where Skillman got a broad coalition of leaders to engage and reach consensus on *Excellent Schools Detroit*. The Foundation’s 15 prior years of relationship building around education surely helped in that instance.)

The lack of programmatic integration both within the Foundation and in *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools* illustrates what others have observed more generally: A foundation can’t work effectively in place without integrating its own silos. Moreover, integration doesn’t usually happen naturally. It is the result of an intentional and strategic effort that begins with the alignment and/or coordination of activities and grows deeper iteratively—often prompted by conflicts that develop through working in neighborhoods, by the selection of target outcomes and the analysis of strategies that accompanies evaluation, or by both.

As Tonya Allen explains, it took Skillman two years to evolve to a place-based strategy and a few more to get to the integration of schools and neighborhoods:

*When we first started, we talked about our neighborhood and schools work, and we drew lines between showing who did what and how it would interface. I think that was developmentally appropriate, given where we were at that stage and what we were ready for. But the inability to integrate and align our work [more fully] also set us back. The more we went through the work, the clearer it got that the synergistic power of alignment is what creates the environment for transformation, not individual approaches and strategies.*

A strong push for programmatic integration came from the evaluators of the Foundation’s individual neighborhood, schools, and youth development strands. The Brandeis evaluation team convened these evaluators in March 2011 to compare and synthesize their findings. The participants agreed that the respective areas of work would not reach their full potential unless they were better integrated. Several national experts in education, youth development, and community change reinforced that message during a presentation to Skillman’s trustees a few months later, and Foundation staff began working internally and with partners to develop an agenda for more intentional connections beginning in 2012.

One option for improving integration, suggested by evaluators from IRRE, would be for *Good Neighborhoods* to promote a continuum of supports, services, opportunities, and care for students who live in the selected neighborhoods, both as a way to improve children's outcomes and also to engage the communities' adults and organizations in a more integrated approach to ensuring children's success.<sup>120</sup> Not only would such an approach provide a vehicle for integration, it also would reflect current thinking about the best way to prepare children to succeed in school and life.

## LEARNING WHILE DOING

**A foundation that positions an intervention not just as an initiative but as a way to get to a significantly new way of working** commits to becoming a "learning organization," whether wholly (as Skillman did) or partially. *Good Neighborhoods'* evaluators identified several key ingredients of organizational learning in Skillman's approach, including: structured and informal exchanges that allow people to share information; staff time devoted to learning; a culture that supports learning as a professional activity; an "adaptive stance" that keeps people focused on intended results while incorporating new knowledge; and creation of an internal staff position for knowledge management.

Skillman staff, evaluators, and observers interviewed for this report point to the knowledge management position as perhaps the most important item on that list. Several factors make the role work for Skillman. The person in the job has a background in evaluation, which gives her strong data analysis skills and relationships with data entities throughout Detroit. She understands diverse perspectives and coaches people through the process of reframing them, which has earned her considerable trust. She oversees Skillman's grants management process, and her efforts to streamline an intrinsically tedious process has earned the gratitude of program officers and grantees. Her location within Skillman's program unit helps to integrate knowledge management into the program areas.

**At this point in its evolution, Skillman appears to have been successful** at cultivating learning within the Foundation. "Everyone owns the role of being a learner in this organization," an interviewee said, while another noted that "The culture of learning and the integration of data into daily life here is very strong." However, evaluators and Skillman leaders alike note a need to build in more time for reflection on current work.

Skillman also has had some success building the expectation of mutual learning, and the level of candor and patience for course corrections that it requires, into relationships with partners. The Foundation's learning grants were a useful tool for helping community groups identify knowledge gaps, collect data, and communicate what they learned to others.

### **Skillman's experience suggests the following observations about learning:**

- ***Match the pace and rhythm of learning to that of the institution, while also responding to the pace of change in communities.*** Learning can't be forced or artificially applied to a Foundation's culture. That said, the pace of action outside the foundation may be fast, and implementers can't wait to learn and then do. Hence the need to learn while doing.
- ***Build into the structure an independent source of honest input about what is and isn't working.*** For Skillman, this role was filled by an evaluation team and an independent evaluation consultant whose functions encompass both hands-on and advisory roles.

- **Give the people doing the work adequate time to think about and reflect on it and opportunities to apply what they learn.** As Tonya Allen recognizes, “It’s not just about creating a learning space, it’s about creating a decision-making space.”



## IV: LOOKING BACK AND HEADING FORWARD

**T**he analysis in this report captures a period of time fairly early in *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools’* lifespan, when several key challenges remained unresolved or are just beginning to emerge. From its position on the front lines of change both in the neighborhoods and internally, Skillman is poised to contribute even more in the years ahead to how the field understands and resolves these challenges.

In particular, *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools* has potential to generate much-needed knowledge about what we mean by building community capacity and how to assess it systematically. Without that knowledge, “We’ll never know how to implement effectively,” Anne Kubisch, director of the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, has written. Skillman’s initiative also is well-positioned to build the knowledge base on the strategic use of small grants, the challenges and benefits of integrating community change with education improvement, the requirements of learning while doing, and the dynamics of blending grantmaking with changemaking.

First, however, GN/GS will have to address the challenges and opportunities that lie immediately ahead. As a starting point, the initiative’s evaluators laid out several distinct tasks that Skillman and its partners must take on in order to move the initiative successfully through its next five years in the areas of neighborhood capacities, systems of supports and opportunities, education reforms, organizational learning, and system and policy reforms.

**On the neighborhood capacities front**, the tasks ahead include:<sup>121</sup> increasing and broadening outreach for community engagement; enhancing youth development opportunities and youth engagement; improving access to leadership development opportunities and creating more opportunities for residents to exercise new leadership skills; supporting governance boards with ongoing training and technical assistance; and continuing to refine target outcomes and indicators of progress.

Another issue, not addressed as fully in the evaluation reports, will be to expand the scale of the neighborhood work. One might argue that in trying to change conditions in six neighborhoods that encompass nearly 58,000 kids—one-third of the children in Detroit—Skillman is already trying to work at scale. But the effort is not yet reaching all of those children. And scale will become increasingly relevant as Skillman integrates its program areas more fully, because aligning youth development and other programs to support the overarching goal of high school graduation will require Skillman’s efforts to reach more children across a broader spectrum of ages.

**For systems of supports and opportunities**, the challenge ahead is to “invest in quality,” particularly “formal youth development training, program quality assessment, and a management information system capable of tracking individuals and handling program data,” according to evaluators. Other priorities include: aligning the content of programming for youth development, employment, and

higher education with the 2016 goals; increasing youth mentoring opportunities; and jumpstarting collaboration among youth development programs, neighborhood schools, neighborhood governance groups, and the small grants program.<sup>122</sup>

**The next phase of education reforms will face serious contextual challenges**, including: a struggling economy accompanied by job loss, poverty, and low educational attainment; falling student enrollment, which in early 2011 led state officials to order Detroit to close half its schools; and a growth in charter schools, making it necessary to ensure that the students who most need high-quality education actually get it.<sup>123</sup>

On the opportunity side, Skillman staff take hope from the growing national and state interest in Detroit's status. The state legislature seems interested policy changes to improve education for low-income children, and in June 2011 Michigan's governor created a mini-district for more than 40 of Detroit's lowest-performing schools. Carol Goss sits on the oversight committee for the new district, known as the Education Achievement System (EAS). Beginning in 2012, EAS schools will have more autonomy over budgets, hiring, and professional development in return for improved achievement.

The EAS only affects about 40% of the children in Detroit, however—so, as one interviewee said, “We have to make sure it doesn't consume all the oxygen” around school reform. Meanwhile, Detroit Public Schools' plan to convert half of its schools into charters could destabilize the supply of high-quality principals and teachers that the redesigned schools will need. In this context, Skillman faces the challenge of holding together the coalition of education reformers, ensuring that relationships remain intact, and showing a unified front.

*Good Schools'* collaborators will need to take education reforms to scale while also ensuring high quality. They will need to lead stakeholders “toward a common vision for Detroit schools” and create a pipeline of high-quality teachers to improve the quality of existing schools and sustain the effectiveness of new ones.<sup>124</sup> As *Good Schools* matures, its target outcomes will have to be more fully operationalized so that stakeholders can tell if they are being achieved. As evaluators observe, Skillman will need to decide how prescriptive to be in defining activities and standards for each investment strategy; how to allocate resources both to the selected neighborhoods and to the citywide reform effort; which relationships to continue, expand, or end in order to maximize progress toward *Good Schools'* target outcomes; how much to invest in or bypass the school district to achieve school reform; and so on.<sup>125</sup>

**The integration of Skillman's education reform and neighborhood work** similarly offers both challenge and opportunity. According to Skillman staff, three priorities will help advance education in the neighborhoods: improving the quality of math and reading instruction; ensuring that personalized youth development supports wrap around children and enable them to achieve; and ensuring that capacity exists in the community to maintain progress beyond Skillman's involvement. Although the exact shape of an aligned GN/GS initiative is still taking shape, it is likely to include a focus on specific neighborhoods schools, with special attention to the intersection between youth development and neighborhood infrastructure.

**Skillman's organizational learning strand** faces the tasks of building more knowledge among staff, helping them share what they know across program areas, increasing the amount of time and effort devoted to reflection, and developing an effective process for debriefing. Evaluators urge Skillman to find “punctuation points” in current work practices and [link] learning to those, rather than treating



learning activities as a separate ad hoc activity”<sup>126</sup> and to share what it has learned on the ground with a larger external audience.

Here, again, the integration of *Good Neighborhoods* and *Good Schools* has potential to advance organizational learning. As an interviewee observed, “We’re in the same places working for the same kids but our constructs for how we proceed are different. We have to realize that both [approaches] are right. One is not more important than the other; they have to work in tandem.” The development of a data dashboard and design of the evaluation framework for the implementation phase also will help to focus and support the learning process.

**The main challenge for the systems and policy work**—getting off the ground in an intentional, focused, and assertive way—is documented in Chapter I. One of the main tasks this work will face is to nurture and sustain authentic collaboration among a diverse array of service providers, agencies, policy makers, funders, and other players.<sup>127</sup> The Youth Development Alliance offers promise in this regard, but it is also worth noting that similar endeavors—most notably, the Youth Futures Authority in Savannah, GA—have encountered serious challenges, especially over the long haul.<sup>128</sup> In this respect, the Strive Partnership in Cincinnati, OH may offer a promising new strategy for multisector collaboration to achieve “collective impact.”<sup>129</sup>

**The system and policy reforms face the same daunting contextual challenges** that Skillman’s education work must overcome. It isn’t easy to connect residents of poor neighborhoods to the larger regional economy under the best of circumstances, but when the local economy is struggling the task becomes even harder. Skillman will need to connect its neighborhoods with public/private resources and pipelines to jobs and neighborhood revitalization that lie outside their geographic boundaries. Skillman’s contribution on these issues is especially timely and relevant given developments in the federal and philanthropic arenas. At the federal level, recent initiatives have drawn attention and resources to place-based change involving system reform, including *Choice Neighborhoods*, *Promise Neighborhoods*, the *Partnership for Sustainable Communities*, and the *Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative*. On the philanthropic side, major place-based initiatives are still underway, including Living Cities’ *Integration Initiative*, LISC’s *Building Sustainable Communities* strategy, the California Endowment’s *Building Healthy Communities*, and numerous single-site efforts sponsored by embedded or community funders.

Increasingly, however, thought leaders have called the question on whether standalone “initiatives” are the best vehicle for place-based change. In a 2010 essay contained in the Aspen Roundtable’s *Voices from the Field Vol. III*, Mark Joseph called for “a more organic, open-ended, internally championed, and sustained mode of operating” by funders who quickly and intentionally “transition...to a less circumscribed, more locally driven and broad-based effort” in which the sponsor plays an “open-ended strategic partner role.”<sup>130</sup> In many ways, Skillman is attempting such an approach with *Good Neighborhoods*, and the field is hungry for the lessons it can provide.

**Another way to sum up the past and predict the future of *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools*** is in terms of readiness for change. *Good Neighborhoods*’ 10-year timespan encompasses three phases: planning, readiness, and implementation. At the cusp now between the second and third phases, it’s fair to ask not only whether the neighborhoods are ready to implement change but whether Skillman is prepared. As evaluators from IRRE observed,<sup>1</sup> the new phase “will require increased precision in

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to education reforms but making a point that pertains more generally to community change

specifying the actions, indicators, and outcomes of each investment strategy and new roles,” and Skillman “will be faced with redefining its role in the new landscape [and] determining how to move from being a visionary, convener, and voice of urgency and possibility...to being a collaborative partner with a unique contribution to the larger, more defined and resourced [effort].”<sup>131</sup>

Is Skillman ready? The answer—for Skillman or for any foundation that pursues goals as ambitious as “a new way of working” and “neighborhood transformation”—isn’t as simple as yes or no. Readiness isn’t a well-defined state; it’s more like a continuum along which individuals and organizations move in both directions. In an endeavor that is about learning, especially, readiness is achieved and then lost again repeatedly as new knowledge is incorporated into the work and, in so doing, reshapes expectations, refines strategies, and ups the ante for the achievement of results. And each transition requires a new stage of readiness.

Given the fluid nature of readiness for place-based change, it may well be that Skillman’s firm embrace of learning, not just as something one does but as the way one operates in all dimensions, is the deciding factor in how successfully the Foundation and its allies move forward with *Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools*.



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## **INTERVIEWEES**

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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Karlstrom, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Colombo, M. (June 2011). "Review of Foundation Grantmaking for *Good Neighborhoods*, 2006-2010." Memorandum. Skillman Foundation, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Colombo, *op. cit.* (June 2011), p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> McDonald, K. (2011). "Finding the Fix: Embracing Philanthropy's Role in Transforming an Urban Education Landscape." *Foundation Review* Vol. 3(3), p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> Colombo, M., *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Skillman Foundation Sustainability Plan, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Institute for Research and Reform in Education, Inc. (April 22, 2011). "Analytic Review of the Skillman Foundation's *Good Schools* Program." Toms River, NJ: Author, pp. 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> McDonald, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.skillman.org/Good-Schools/Current-Strategies>

<sup>21</sup> Goss, C. (2007). "Letter from the President: Mapping the Road to Good." Attached to Skillman Sustainability Plan, p. 1.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Skillman Foundation. (February 8, 2005). "Framework for Neighborhood Strategy." Memorandum, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Goss, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Soback, J., and Agius, E. (March 21, 2011). "Assessment of Capacity Building Efforts of the Skillman Foundation, 2008-2010." Executive Summary. Wayne State University: Center for Social Work Practice and Policy Research, p. 6.

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<sup>33</sup> Brown, P. (Forthcoming). "Changemaking: Building strategic competence." Article prepared for the Skillman Foundation. *The Foundation Review*, in press.

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- <sup>35</sup> <http://datadrivendetroit.org/about-us/history-2/>
- <sup>36</sup> Center for Youth and Communities (October 2011a), *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.
- <sup>37</sup> Institute for Research and Reform in Education, Inc., *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- <sup>38</sup> Brown, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
- <sup>39</sup> Brown, *op. cit.*
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>41</sup> Karlstrom, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>42</sup> Skillman Foundation Sustainability Plan. (2007) *op. cit.*, p. 10.
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- <sup>53</sup> Center for Youth and Communities (October 2011a), *op. cit.*, p. 12.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- <sup>55</sup> Brown, *op. cit.*, citing a "close observer."
- <sup>56</sup> Center for Youth and Communities (October 2011a), *op. cit.*, p. 22.
- <sup>57</sup> Brown, *op. cit.*
- <sup>58</sup> Center for Youth and Communities (October 2011a), *op. cit.*, pp. 27, 34.
- <sup>59</sup> Colombo, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
- <sup>60</sup> Center for Youth and Communities (October 2011a), *op. cit.*, citing presentation made by Carol Goss at November-December 2008 community meetings.
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- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.
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- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>80</sup> Sobeck, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, Full Report, pp. 6, 13.
- <sup>81</sup> Sobeck, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, Executive Summary, p. 3.
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- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
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- <sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 17.
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- <sup>92</sup> Brown, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
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- <sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.
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- <sup>103</sup> Institute for Research and Reform in Education, Inc. (April 22, 2011), analytic review, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- <sup>104</sup> Egnatios, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
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- <sup>109</sup> Institute for Research and Reform in Education, Inc. (April 22, 2011), *op. cit.*, p. 6 and analytic review, p. 17.
- <sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53-60.
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- <sup>122</sup> Center for Youth and Communities, (October 2011b), *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40.
- <sup>123</sup> Institute for Research and Reform in Education, Inc. (April 22, 2011), *op. cit.*, p. 5.
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- <sup>131</sup> Institute for Research and Reform in Education, Inc. (April 22, 2011), analytic review, *op. cit.*, p. 14.