Evaluation Summary:
The Skillman Foundation's Youth Development System-Building Initiative

For nearly 25 years, the Skillman Foundation has been committed to funding youth development programming, and putting in place youth development systems infrastructure. In 2006, the Skillman Foundation launched the Skillman Good Neighborhoods (SGNs) Initiative, focusing its efforts on six Detroit neighborhoods. Youth development investments in these neighborhoods have centered on funding programs and on building coordinated systems of high-quality programs for youth. Since 2014, Skillman has intensified its system-building efforts by explicitly grounding its work with programs and partners in the Achieve-Connect-Thrive youth development framework and on codified program quality standards. Starting in 2015, the foundation and its partners have engaged in intentionally planning for citywide expansion of the youth development system. The most recent evaluation focuses on 2014 and 2015 implementation of the Foundation's youth development strategy (see www.skillman.org/GNI for full report, or download it here).

This summary shares the progress made on system-building by the end of 2015, beginning with a definition of each **system component**. As Skillman turns its attention to supporting the development of a *citywide* system, the Skillman Foundation and other key system actors can capitalize on the groundwork laid in the SGNs.

Lead Entity *(A city department, nonprofit intermediary, or school district)*	The **lead entity** coordinates other elements of the system and promotes a clear, shared vision for the system of programs and providers. The lead entity creates cohesiveness in the youth development system through: ▪ Developing and disseminating frameworks and standards, ▪ Providing or coordinating professional development and capacity-building, ▪ Convening and coordinating providers in learning communities, ▪ Overseeing a shared data system, and ▪ Promoting sustainability.
Youth Development Framework & Quality Standards	A **youth development framework** and **quality standards** are codified sets of principles that articulate the attributes of high-quality programming. They enable partners to: ▪ Speak with the same vocabulary, and ▪ Develop a common understanding of what it takes to implement with high quality.
Capacity-Building & Professional Development	A **capacity-building** function in the system supports providers to develop their capacity to track data, assess program performance, and improve program quality and youth outcomes. **Professional development** enhances the ability of frontline workers to provide high-quality programming.
Neighborhood Learning Networks	**Neighborhood learning networks** are groups of providers that meet regularly, building relationships, sharing referrals, providing information about capacity-building and professional development, and reinforcing a shared language around a youth development framework and quality standards.
Shared Data System	**Shared data systems** can serve a range of functions, including: accountability and contract management (for grantees), providing data about program need and supply, supporting efforts to improve program quality, ensuring better access to services in underserved communities, sharing information with youth and parents about the programs available, and tracking system-wide progress.
Dedicated Funding	A strong system of programs depends on **dedicated funding**: a stable and dependable source of financial support that allows providers to plan for the future and invest in infrastructure and program quality.

Lead Entity as a Collaborative Intermediary

Four organizations collaboratively function as the system's **lead entity.** All four are funded by the Skillman Foundation:
- The Youth Development Resource Center (YDRC) provides capacity-building and professional development to SGN providers.
- Don Bosco Hall runs the Youth Development Initiative (YDI) – a key function of YDI is to coordinate Neighborhood Learning Networks (NLNs) in four of the six SGNs.
- Southwest Solutions runs the Partnership for Youth (PFY) – a key function of PFY is to coordinate NLNs in two of the six SGNs.
- Think Detroit PAL serves thousands of youth in all six SGNs (and beyond).

The YDRC, YDI, and PFY have collaborated closely to effectively take on the lead entity roles. Examples of their critical work are:

- **Bolstering the youth development framework and quality standards.** The YDI and PFY have worked with the YDRC to use the NLNs as forums for effectively promoting and reinforcing the Achieve-Connect-Thrive youth development framework and the quality standards (see next section for more on the framework and standards). At each monthly meeting of the NLNs, the facilitators highlight one of the quality standards, helping providers find ways to operationalize each quality standard in their programming (the YDA activities are based on a toolkit created by the YDRC).
- **Offering professional development to providers.** The YDI and PFY leads share information about, and encourage participation in, professional development opportunities offered by the YDRC. The YDI and PFY leads have worked with the YDRC to build their own skills to offer professional development workshops and coaching to providers.
- **Coordinating learning communities.** The PFY and YDI coordinate monthly NLN meetings, and work with the YDRC to enhance the quality and utility of these meetings.

Youth Development Framework & Quality Standards

Key actors in the SGN youth development system have intentionally used a framework and quality standards to undergird and provide conceptual coherence to system-building.

- **Achieve-Connect-Thrive (ACT).** In 2013, Skillman introduced the ACT framework to the YDRC, YDI, PFY, and Think Detroit PAL. Since then, through continual dissemination and intentional use by the Skillman Foundation and the four organizations that compose the lead entity (as part of Skillman's grantmaking, NLN activities, capacity-building, and professional development), the framework has become firmly established as a common language among providers.
- **Quality Standards.** In 2014, the YDRC led a community process to develop local quality standards for the SGNs. The YDA leads reviewed and voted on quality standards from 13 other cities and states. The YDRC held youth and youth worker input sessions in each SGN to get their input on the standards. Completed quality standards were rolled out to the youth development community at a conference in Oct 2014. Professional development trainings focus on the implementing programs in ways that meet each standard.

Achieve: The skill sets necessary for youth to achieve academically with a specific focus on literacy and math proficiencies.
Connect: Skills that help students develop supportive relationships.
Thrive: Perseverance, self-efficacy, and the resilience necessary for youth to maintain the effort to succeed.

SGN Quality Standards
Program Quality Practices:
- Positive Relationships
- Safe & Supportive Climate
- Active, Engaged Learning & Skill-Building
- Youth Voice, Choice & Leadership

Management Practices:
- Quality Staff & Support
- Intentional Program Design & Improvement
- Diversity, Access & Inclusion
- Family, School, & Community Engagement

Capacity-Building & Professional Development

YDRC has been responsible for championing **capacity-building** work within the SGN youth development system. The work of the YDRC, including the work the YDRC has done in collaboration with YDI and PFY, has functioned as one of the most important unifying and cohering forces in the system. Efforts have included leading development of the quality standards, creating and sharing an approach to continuous quality improvement, integrating capacity-building with NLN activities, disseminating and encouraging the use of common metrics (measuring program quality as well as youth outcomes in the Achieve, Connect, and Thrive domains), and building out a **professional development** function that includes frequent workshops available to all providers, and that align with the quality standards.

Neighborhood Learning Networks

The NLNs perform the vital functions of connecting providers together and promoting an aligned vision of high-quality programming. YDI and PFY lead NLN monthly meetings in each of the six SGNs. The meetings are well-attended, with between 15 and 40 people attending each neighborhood meeting (the size of meeting varies by neighborhood). These NLNs work consistently to:

> **Small Grants from YDI and PFY**
> The Skillman Foundation provides funds to YDI and PFY that they can use to make small grants to providers in their networks. These grants build the capacity of grassroots providers and fill programming gaps in the neighborhoods.

- Support neighborhood providers to convene, build relationships, share information, and learn together,
- Create an efficient platform for coordination (referrals and resource-sharing),
- Grow the system-wide understanding of the ACT framework and quality standards, and
- Give providers access to the tools and technical assistance they need to improve program quality.

Shared Data System & Dedicated Funding

The last two system components – a **shared data system** and **dedicated funding** – were not put in place as part of the youth development system in the SGNs. However, some progress was made for each component that may serve to lay the groundwork as a citywide system is built.

- **Shared data system.** The YDRC vetted a variety of data system platforms, and has established a range of criteria for what type of system would constitute a good fit for Detroit. In addition, the Grow Detroit Young Talent initiative (a youth employment initiative that Skillman funds) has learned a great deal from working with a data portal – and these lessons can inform the choice of a data platform for a citywide youth development system. Most importantly, system actors recognize that a successful data system will be seen as a benefit to providers, rather than a "data burden." Ideally, it should: have a user-friendly interface, offer reporting capability or data visualization that enhances continuous program improvement, and come with technical assistance that supports providers' ability to enter data *into* and extract data *from* the system.
- **Dedicated funding.** The Skillman Foundation continues to explore a range of options for establishing a dedicated funding stream that can finance youth development programs at the scale needed to meet the needs of youth in Detroit. The most promising option may be public fund established through a referendum, and financed through an entertainment tax.

Conclusion: Progress in the SGN Youth Development System

While system-building can be slow and uneven, the SGNs have nonetheless shown a great deal of progress toward a coordinated system of providers focused on high-quality service delivery to youth: (1) The YDRC led the effort to develop and operationalize a set of local quality standards; (2) the YDRC has elaborated a model of continuous data use and program improvement that can work for local nonprofits; (3) The NLNs have offered ready-made organizational platforms for framework and resource dissemination, and the trusting relationships that YDA leads have built with local providers have opened doors for the YDRC to build that trust as well; and (4) In monthly NLN meetings, providers have practiced operationalizing the quality standards and the ACT framework – and NLN meetings have created a space for building enthusiasm for data use and quality improvement.