



Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is: A Liberatory Approach to Building an Ecosystem For Equity

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**Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is:
A Liberatory Approach to Building an Ecosystem For Equity**

Doctorate of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.)

Capstone

Submitted by

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To the Harvard Graduate School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Education Leadership

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Dedication

To my first teachers, **mom** and **dad**. Not only did you create a beautiful home for us, you also showed me what it was like to lead in service of others.

One for all...

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Abstract

There are vast disparities in educational outcomes along the lines of race and socioeconomic status in the American PreK-12 education system. One of the contributing factors to this discrepancy is the enrichment gap. Put simply, racially marginalized and low-income students are less likely to participate in enriching, supplemental learning experiences than their wealthier, white peers. Outschool.org, a non-profit organization with roots as an edtech company, aims to eliminate this gap and create the conditions so all students love learning. This project documents the development and implementation of Outschool.org's newest program, the Ecosystem For Equity (E4E), piloted with a homeschool collaborative, Engaged Detroit. The E4E provides families with direct access to funds and a community to share information to navigate an ecosystem of high-quality educational experiences for their children. Research supports the underlying philosophy behind the program design: families need both access and information to exercise agency. One principle, without the other, would be insufficient to empower families to close the enrichment gap. In designing the program, it was essential to use a liberatory approach responsive to the unique needs of the homeschooled families in Detroit. Collectively, the families valued the agency to choose resources and relied on the broader community to support their journey. During the study, the program successfully launched, and families began to spend their funds and organize robust enrichment experiences for individual children. However, some families did not spend any funds, indicating that despite having access, there were insufficient systems to share information enabling parents to exercise their agency. It is too early to measure the overall outcomes and impact this program had in closing the enrichment gap, though initial results are promising.

Introduction

Outschool.org

Outschool is an online marketplace founded in 2015 offering live, synchronous classes. Teachers list whatever topics they wish to teach, and learners can enroll in courses a la carte. The platform delivers classes as singular sessions or as regular, recurring meetings. A current scan of the over 140,000 offerings indicates that students can access a variety of unique courses. Offerings range from "Words and What to Do With Them: From Vocabulary to Essays" for a rate of \$160 for a course that meets weekly for four months to "GIRLS Workout Club! (ages 9-13)," which meets weekly for 30 minutes at a rate of \$10 per session. The most popular courses are in high-interest topics marketed to particular age groups. Small-group tutoring and homework help are also available.

In the early days of Outschool, the homeschool community found the most value in the platform. It is an appealing option for students to supplement their academic experience with fun, specialized, interest-based classes offered on an ad-hoc basis. However, usage exploded during the pandemic. With virtually all students shuttered in to learn at home, parents scrambled to find resources to keep their children engaged, challenged, and supported. Outschool has delivered nearly 14 million hours of instruction to over 1 million students across 195 countries (Outschool, 2023).

In March 2020, Outschool established the non-profit Outschool.org to provide free classes to families facing financial hardship and COVID-19-related school disruptions. At first, Outschool.org existed as a department within the Outschool organization. Now, the two have formally split into two distinct organizations that operate in strong partnership together. In the wake of the pandemic Outschool.org established the Family Financial Assistance Program

(FFAP), providing a \$300 credit to families who identify as low-income and in need of financial assistance. To date, FFAP has granted more than \$3.5 million to support families in need. In total, Outschool.org has served over 30,000 families and 34,000 individual learners, who have collectively enrolled in more than 142,000 free classes on Outschool.

Despite the massive scale, it is difficult to assess the impact of FFAP. As stewards of charitable donations, Outschool.org has wondered if this was the most effective way to help those in need. An internal audit suggested that nearly half of the families taking advantage of the program may not be in financial need. Additionally, only 6% of families who applied for the funds fully exhausted them (Outschool, 2022). In light of these findings and looking toward long-term sustainability and targeted impact, Outschool.org has decided to sunset FFAP and direct resources toward low-income and racially marginalized learners through community grants.

Acting as a grantmaker is not a new endeavor for Outschool.org. Over the last two years, through two grant cycles, the organization has supported schools, districts, microschools, homeschool co-ops, refugee networks, and other community-based organizations that explicitly support racially marginalized and low-income learners. Outschool.org offers up to \$80,000 in cash grants to empower communities to access high-quality, engaging learning experiences. The monies need not be spent solely on Outschool classes. Instead, community partners can choose to invest in any resource aligned with our logic model of “providing underserved communities with access to three key opportunities: 1) Consistent opportunities to work on academically and social-emotionally engaging content; 2) Strong, culturally affirming instruction, where students do most of the thinking during a lesson; 3) Teachers who create a safe learning environment

while holding high expectations for students and believe they can meet grade-level standards” (Outschool.org, 2022).

Throughout the grant, Outschool.org provides high-touch technical assistance and programmatic support. For instance, Outschool.org will design class schedules, curate high-quality teachers, observe lessons, conduct site visits, and provide feedback to ensure students have a positive learning environment. In addition to providing feedback to educators, we also analyze academic achievement with research-based pre-/post-assessments and track social and emotional learning through student surveys.

Problem of Practice

The FFAP was the hallmark program of Outschool.org. The decision to retire the program has led the organization to an inflection point. By doubling down on targeted community grants, Outschool.org must redefine its vision for ensuring the success of each grantee in supporting its larger vision of "a world fueled by the power of human connection to create a learning ecosystem that is distributed, democratized, and deeply connected to the lived experiences of marginalized youth" (Outschool.org, 2022). Outschool.org has rightly recognized that the classes on Outschool are insufficient to achieve this vision alone. Therefore a critical problem of practice is:

How is Outschool.org best positioned to support low-income and racially marginalized students to foster a love of learning?

Head of Programs Morgan Camu envisions Outschool.org as an aggregator of excellent educational content, not just through Outschool. She recognizes that "we were hearing from communities and families that it is extraordinarily difficult to create coherent learning experiences once you are outside the [school] system. [While] looking for rigorous, affirming, and personalized content, there is not one platform that meets all of [our] needs." Frankly, as a

platform, "Outschool does not have enough [Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC)] educators, culturally relevant content, and it is not easily accessible to all" due to increasing costs of classes, as teachers raise prices amid inflation (personal communication, August 2022). In addition to aggregating great content experiences, she sees a need for structural support, such as issuing grades, credits, and a transcript, as an acute need for our increasingly growing homeschool community.

Relatedly, Executive Director Justin Dent is curious about the community's role in supporting a thriving virtual learning experience. He envisions an ecosystem of support that provides access to excellent academic content and increases the vibrancy and capacity of the community of learners. Justin recognizes that this expansive vision of an entire ecosystem would require more expertise and increased capacity than the team can currently support. He raises the question, "who can we serve through this work? But also, who can we not?" (personal communication, August 2022). With Outschool's roots as a virtual education company, what supports are we positioned to offer effectively, and when do we need to draw on other partners?

Bernita Bradley, founder of Engaged Detroit, a partner, and grantee is a self-described "community person" (personal communication, August 2022). She often wonders what her constituency of homeschool families needs to thrive. Her families have been let down by the public school system for generations, to the point where they decided to work together and build their own system of support. She sees her partnership with Outschool as a piece of the puzzle. She appreciates the access to free online courses for her families. However, she is constantly looking to cobble together other missing pieces: securing an in-person meeting place, training and funding her parent coaches, providing rigorous, real-world experiences for high school

students preparing to go to college, and even providing counseling and mental health supports to address untreated trauma within the community (personal communication, August 2022).

Overall, each stakeholder sees the need for more structured support to enable our partners to thrive. Nevertheless, where do we begin? How do we design a scalable solution to apply across different contexts since each partner experiences unique challenges?

My strategic project is explicitly designed to address this problem of practice. I was charged with creating our newest family-facing program, the Ecosystem For Equity (E4E). This is a high-visibility project for Outschool.org, especially as the FFAP retires. This project's success (or failure) will have lasting implications for how Outschool.org directs its resources in the future and how it chooses to engage with community partners. At the core, we are testing our hypothesis that we can have a more substantial impact when engaging with communities rather than individuals.

Using Engaged Detroit as the testing ground, I will create an ecosystem—a dynamic system of supports—to ensure this network of homeschool families has access to a suite of resources to ensure all learners have excellent educational experiences and outcomes. While this pilot is with a Black homeschool co-op, the goal is to scale this program to other partners across educational contexts.

Engaged Detroit

The Detroit Public Community Schools is one of the lowest-performing districts in the country. According to the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results, Detroit ranks last compared to other urban districts. For instance, only 5% of eighth grade students are proficient readers, which has steadily declined since 2013 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The pandemic exacerbated these disparities as children and families scrambled

to access quality tools to make virtual learning as effective as their neighboring, more affluent school districts. Bernita Bradley felt this herself. After a career advocating for education and public schools, her own daughter nearly dropped out of high school during the pandemic. Despite loving school her whole life, she was disillusioned and disheartened by the lack of support from her public school. So, Bernita turned to homeschooling. It was not easy, but it was the best alternative available.

She quickly realized she was not alone. So many families in her community were beginning to tap out of education entirely. She knew from her experience as a community organizer that there is power in a collective, so she started Engaged Detroit to bring homeschool families together to offer support and guidance to one another. To lead families through the complex and overwhelming prospect of designing their own education, Engaged Detroit assigned coaches to support each family. The coaches meet with families regularly to diagnose their hopes, dreams, and needs. They discuss the legal complexities to ensure compliance with Michigan law. The coaches help curate resources, from curricula and field trips to delivering basic needs like internet access and supporting students with special needs.

Importantly, the coaches are parents who have successfully homeschooled their children in Detroit. Providing experienced coaches, representative of the community they serve, sent a clear signal to families that they were empowered to work around a system that has failed them for generations. Engaged Detroit was created by and for Detroit parents and caregivers under Bernita's charge that "if schools won't reinvent education, then we need to reinvent it ourselves" (personal communication, August 2022).

In September 2020, 12 families joined the collaborative. This year, Engaged Detroit plans to serve nearly 200 students. Many thought homeschooling would be a temporary solution during

the pandemic. But even as schools have fully reopened, Engaged Detroit continues to grow and has gained much national attention for its efforts. They were featured in a New Yorker article on [The Rise of Black Homeschooling](#), invited to speak at [The Hoover Institute](#), [SXSW EDU](#), and recently spotlighted on [The TODAY Show](#) (2022). Bernita reflects on this attention by noting that homeschooling has long been a part of white culture. Research shows that when it comes to homeschooling, “proportionately, White families often outnumbered families who came from other groups by almost two to one” (Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), 2021, para. 3). However, now that it happens to be Black parents taking control of their education, Bernita fears many are looking on with trepidation, if not scrutiny.

Despite receiving national acclaim and skyrocketing enrollment, Engaged Detroit has yet to receive much funding or support. With an annual budget in 2021 of less than \$50,000, they have provided families with intensive coaching, individualized support, access to community resources, and a supportive community. Outschool.org believes it can catalyze Engaged Detroit’s impact to serve more students more sustainably with significant funding and the wraparound support of the Ecosystem For Equity.

In the following sections, I will first review the existing literature and research base related to my problem of practice, with a specific focus on the rise of Black homeschooling, the unique Jobs To Be Done through homeschooling, the difference between interdependent and modular architecture in program design, and using Liberatory Design principles to sustain systemic change. Following that, I will outline the design and implementation of the Ecosystem For Equity before providing evidence of its impact. I will analyze the initial results of this project to acknowledge what was successful, what could be improved, and what is still unknown.

Finally, I will reflect on the implications this project had on my own leadership, on Outschool.org as an organization, and on the entire education ecosystem.

Review of Knowledge for Action

COVID-19 Amplified Existing Inequities

The COVID-19 pandemic uprooted our public schools. In a matter of days, schools shuttered their doors and shifted to virtual instruction. Most school districts were caught flat-footed as they had to change all facets of their operational and instructional models. For many families, the instructional experience was inadequate. Dr. Sonja Santelliesis, CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools, explained that now parents had a unique window into their child's education during the pandemic. She explained, "for the first time ever, parents can see what exactly we're giving their children—and what we're not. They are hearing how we talk to students. They are coming to know, through all that we do, what we believe about their children" (Santelises & Newcomb, 2020, para. 10). Desperate to supplement what many believed to be inadequate education and avoid "learning loss," families began to seek creative options. Some of the most intensive interventions such as learning pods proved to be quite costly and were only truly available to the privileged few "parents who can afford it" (Meckler & Natanson, 2020).

While the approach of a pandemic-borne learning pod may be new, the enrichment gap is not. People with the means have long provided additional enriching and supplemental educational experiences for their children. In a report exploring this inequity, Bellwether et al. (2022) highlight that "the poorest quintile of families spent \$1,391 in enrichment, but the richest spent almost seven times as much \$9,384" annually and indicate this gap has been widening at alarming rates (p. 9). In trying to address the root causes of this disparity, Tyton Partners suggest that to bridge the gap, families must have information to navigate their options, agency to exercise their choices, and access to a robust supply of resources (Newman & Lehr, 2022, p. 6). The aforementioned Bellwether et al. report, *Some Assembly Required*, suggests a similar

framework that families need "adequate funding, information, and agency...to assemble" a student-centered ecosystem of supports to supplement the core schooling experience. Both reports make it clear that access and information are necessary inputs to close the enrichment gap.

For most people, their mental model of education typically invokes the schoolhouse. However, many stakeholders are involved in each child's education and development. In his seminal publication, *The Ecology of Human Development*, Bronfenbrenner (1979) first introduced this ecological systems theory to indicate the nested environmental layers that contribute to the psychological development of a person. Educators and policymakers tend to focus on the schoolhouse as the sole unit of influence for academic outcomes. However, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model asserts that the interconnections between the immediately proximal microsystem (schools, homes, etc.) and the structural components of the exo- and macro-system (policies, cultural values, etc.) also play an integral role in human development. Dr. Irvin Scott (2022) defines this education ecosystem broadly, recognizing the role that local organizations, policy and advocacy organizations, investors, businesses, research groups, and others play in addition to the PreK-12 school systems. It is important to acknowledge that schools are not the only institutions that contribute to healthy human development.

Yet, it requires a particular savvy and privilege for a family to exercise agency to choose the best resources for their child within the ecosystem. Based on Bellwether and Tyton's findings, two significant barriers to exercising agency are the lack of access and information. Access, in the simplest terms, boils down to money. Additional enrichment opportunities outside of school tend to be prohibitively expensive. When it comes to information, "nearly two thirds of parents — including 75.3% of young millennials, 71.2% of Black parents and 75.7% of Latinos — said

they would benefit from knowing more about the choices available for their children's education," according to a recent study (Doyle, 2023, para. 4).

Building agency and getting actionable information into the hands of parents is more complex than it seems. Schools have long struggled with effective family engagement strategies to build the capacity of caregivers to become more active and informed stakeholders. Dr. Karen Mapp and Dr. Eyal Bergman developed the Dual Capacity-Building Framework as a blueprint for schools to become more effective in engaging families. The phrase "dual capacity" indicates that the relationship is bidirectional in that systems must learn from families as much as they learn from them. The framework goes on to outline the 4C's of capacity building: "capabilities (skills + knowledge), connections (networks), cognition (shifts in beliefs and values), confidence (self-efficacy)" (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). Strengthening family engagement requires more than just sharing information but also honing skills, fostering connections, changing mindsets, and building confidence to empower a family to exercise agency. Engagement goes far beyond simply involving and informing parents. Professor Susan Moore Johnson implores that teachers thrive when they are "the agents, not the objects, of change" within their schools (Moore Johnson, 2022, para. 10). This agency translates directly to families as well, especially during the pandemic, as families began to exercise agency in unprecedented ways, including choosing to homeschool.

Understanding The Black Homeschool Movement

Homeschooling has been a fringe movement until recently. Between 1999 and 2016, for instance, only 1.7-3.4% of families homeschooled their children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). For many years, most families choosing to homeschool their children were white and religious. In fact, a 2007 study indicates that 83% of families choose to homeschool

“to provide religious or moral instruction” and were concerned with the environment of their public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).

However, the number of families and the reasons they chose to homeschool changed drastically in 2020 in the wake of the pandemic. Many districts were unprepared to deliver robust instruction in a remote learning environment, which left many families unimpressed by their instructional experience and pushed them to lose faith in their schools. Some districts, like Detroit Community Public Schools, struggled mightily to transition to remote instruction during the first year of the pandemic. Skye Morris, who was in eighth grade then, reported that after schools closed in March, her school did not issue her a laptop or offer live, online instruction for a few months. Even then, she recalls her daily experience logging into Zoom and sometimes waiting hours for a teacher to arrive (personal communication, August 2022). Eventually, the frustration mounted, and Skye and her mother decided to homeschool the following year.

Feelings of angst and disappointment compounded during the pandemic, and across the country, families began to seek other educational options like homeschooling. By October 2020, just seven months after the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, homeschool rates across the country more than tripled from 3.4% pre-pandemic to over 11.1% of school-aged children now receiving home-based education (Reilly, 2022, para. 3). However, the rise of homeschooling in Black communities grew at an even more staggering rate, increasing five-fold from the start of the pandemic through the following school year. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, now over 16% of Black school-aged children are homeschooled, with the most pronounced increase occurring in Detroit, Michigan (Eggleston & Fields, 2021, Table 2).

It is clear that COVID-19 precipitated this change. However, it is worth examining why Black families chose to homeschool at starkly higher rates than their peers across the country.

For years before the pandemic, Dr. Cheryl Fields-Smith has been the preeminent scholar studying the motivations of Black homeschoolers. She suggests that Black families have different motivations for homeschooling their children than white families. Especially since the roots of the homeschool movement in America are so deeply entrenched in white, conservative values, Black families must arrive here via different paths. A quick literature scan of the titles of Dr. Fields-Smith’s work gives a glimpse into the motivations of Black families: *Resisting the Status Quo: The Narratives of Black Homeschoolers in Metro-Atlanta and Metro-DC* (2013), *Exploring Single Black Mothers' Resistance Through Homeschooling* (2020), as well as the work of Lisa Puga, “*Homeschooling Is Our Protest: Educational Liberation for African American Homeschooling Families in Philadelphia, PA* (2019). These authors assert that homeschooling is an act of resistance or protest for Black families.

Through a series of extensive interviews and focus groups, Dr. Fields-Smith and Dr. Wells Kisura identify the factors that *push* Black families out of traditional public school options and *pull* them into homeschooling (Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013), outlined in Table 1:

Table 1: The Motivations Driving Black Families to Homeschool

<p style="text-align: center;">Pushes (The Negative Experiences in Schools)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Pulls (The Positive Opportunities in Home Education)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Culture of low expectations ● Plight of Black boys ● Psychology of safety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Imparting Black/African American culture ● Seeking a global perspective

There is a pervasive culture of low expectations for Black students in American schools, which is defined in this study as the “lack of rigor in the curriculum, teacher acceptance of mediocre work, and teacher racial stereotyping” (p. 272). This perception has been empirically

confirmed many times, including TNTP's *The Opportunity Myth*, which illuminated that “4 out of 10 classrooms with a majority of students of color never received a single grade-level assignment” despite demonstrating the same ability to achieve (TNTP, 2018, p. 27). Black boys face a particularly unlevel playing field. Black boys are significantly and disproportionately overrepresented in special education referrals and are disproportionately disciplined at higher rates than their peers for similar infractions (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020, p. 4).

The authors then indicate the compelling reasons that pull Black families to choose to homeschool. Namely, the opportunity to impart Black culture as an intentional curricular choice was significant for many families. Today, the idea of “culturally responsive” content and pedagogy is still nascent as traditional schools grapple with infusing relevant methods and resources into their curricula. Unfortunately, it is often applied as an afterthought rather than a guiding principle. Further, Black families are vested in how their cultural story is told. Many families reported receiving a “mono-cultural view of history” in their schooling and sought to provide their children with a more global perspective (Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013, p. 277).

Jobs To Be Done

While these studies are informative and give a clear view into the distinct and unique reasons Black families chose to homeschool, there is one crucial flaw to the existing research base. Namely, this research was conducted *before* the pandemic. Now, with over five times as many Black families choosing to homeschool, it is essential to examine if these are still the reasons compelling Black families to homeschool. While the pandemic catalyzed all

demographic groups to homeschool at increasing rates, there is an asymmetric increase in Black families. Why?

To understand the root cause of any behavior, it is helpful to invoke the Jobs To Be Done (JTBD) methodology (Christensen & McDonald, 2020). This approach drives understanding of the fundamental problem people seek to solve and the progress they desire to make. It serves as a reminder not to provide a solution before having a deep, contextual understanding of the issue. Intuitively, people choose a solution to meet their needs on three dimensions: functional, social, and emotional. *Functionally*, it must meet the minimum requirements to get you from point A to point B. However, there are many products and services that can meet one's functional needs; how does one decide which to choose? Naturally, people consider the *social* aspect of the solution as well – how will others perceive me when I choose this solution? The dimension that determines whether or not people find allegiance in a solution, and continue to choose it, is the *emotional* dimension—how does this solution make me feel? Is it a positive experience? Does it make me feel better?

Let us consider an educational example such as choosing a college to attend, a decision that students and families toil over every year. Imagine it is April, and an eager senior has been admitted to five schools and must choose which to attend. She will first consider whether or not the school meets her functional needs at the most basic level. Does it offer a major that interests her? Is there guaranteed dormitory housing with a good meal plan? Can her family afford it, given the financial aid she was offered? These functional items are often binary yes/no questions; luckily, several of her admitted schools check all the boxes. However, her ultimate decision extends beyond the functional into the social. She will ask herself whether or not her peers and future employers highly regard the school. Can she build a network of like-minded friends there?

Perhaps the most influential factor, however, is the *emotional* dimension. How will she feel at school? Will it challenge and support her? Will she have fun there? Will her parents be proud to tell their family where her daughter enrolled? Ultimately, she will pick the school that meets her needs across the three dimensions, but the social and emotional factors often weigh more heavily. This is why online universities, for example, have not caught fire the way that many had predicted in the early 2000s. While they fill the functional need of providing classes and conferring a degree, they fall short of meeting many students' social and emotional demands.

Every job has a functional, social, and emotional dimension. It is essential to understand a user's needs at each level. When crafting a solution to a problem, it is a common mistake to focus simply on the functional need. Instead, one must examine the social and emotional factors contributing to decision-making calculus. It is important to unearth the motivations behind a user's decisions to understand the job. Through conversations and constantly asking 'why?', clear themes will begin to emerge. This is a beneficial exercise to examine the contributing factors as to why someone changes to a new solution. For instance, why are so many Black families suddenly choosing to homeschool? Bob Moesta, one of the architects of the JBTD framework invokes "the forces of progress," to help examine the competing motivations people consider when choosing a solution to a problem (Moesta & Spiek, 2012, para. 1). When people evaluate whether or not to choose a new approach, they subconsciously evaluate the forces that would promote the change. They will consider whether the new solution and its promise outweigh changing their current habits and uncertainty to try something new. The families that have chosen to leave their public schools during the pandemic have determined that homeschooling (despite the added burdens it carries) helps to solve the job of education better than any other option.

Interdependence and Modularity Theory

Homeschooling requires parents to build a system to support their child's education piece-by-piece from the ground up. The theory of interdependence and modularity explores how connected components of a solution must be to meet an individual's needs. Traditional public schools, for instance, are designed to be completely interdependent systems. Consider the perspective of a typical seventh grade student's experience with school. When she walks into school, she is offered free breakfast before heading to her math class, staffed by a licensed teacher using a curriculum aligned with the state's standards. She has access to a school counselor, social worker, and speech pathologist, each of whom she sees on a regular monthly basis. She also has access to a licensed nurse who offers yearly vision screenings and is available for medical attention as needed. She stays after school for tutoring twice a week with a free after-school program. Additionally, she joined the school band, which provides her with a flute, music instruction, and a uniform for marching competitions, to which the school provides transportation via a bus. This entire suite of services is offered to her as one streamlined, interdependent package. Enrolling in her public school gives her a tightly-linked experience where each component is intentionally connected.

The issue with such interdependent solutions (like schools) is that they can often overshoot the needs of their users, offering such a tightly controlled experience with little means of customization. In such instances, users may seek more modular solutions with a competitive advantage in "speed, convenience, and customization" (Christensen, 2019). Homeschooling is a modular approach to education, compared to the one-size-fits-all approach of traditional public schools. Each family is now responsible for piecing together an educational experience independently.

Consider the perspective of a typical seventh grade student's experience with homeschooling. She wakes up without an alarm at 9:30 AM and eats breakfast at home. Her mom signed her up for a live, online 30-minute math class on Outschool covering geometric translations, which is usually not covered until eighth grade. She has some questions after the class, so she watches a free Khan Academy video on the same topic. She enjoys historical fiction and spent the afternoon reading a book about the daughters of Russian Tsars during World War I. Later in the afternoon, she grabs her flute and heads to her local YMCA for youth orchestra practice. This modular experience is customized to her needs, interests, and ability level. She does not have access to everything her school offers, like a social worker, speech pathologist, or free breakfast, but she never utilized these services anyway.

In his book, *From Reopen to Reinvent*, Michael Horn applies the concept of interdependence and modularity to the context of education. The central thesis of his book is that educational institutions should leverage this unique moment in the wake of COVID-19 to reinvent their approach to serve students better. He employs this theory to explore which domains must be tightly linked within schools versus outsourced through a modular approach. Regardless of the design approach, to deliver on the promise of a well-rounded, whole-child education, one must tend to six domains: “content knowledge, skills, habits of success, real-world experiences and social capital, health and wellness, and basic needs” (Horn, 2022, p. 66).

All students must have exposure to a diverse base of *content knowledge*. Beyond the core subject disciplines of English, math, science, and social studies, students need to develop background knowledge to apply their learning across various settings. Additionally, our world is becoming increasingly complex, and students must hone the *skills* necessary to be active and

productive contributors to an ever-evolving world. In addition to the rudimentary literacy and numeracy skills, most educational institutions are also focused on developing more complex “21st-century skills” such as critical thinking, collaboration, and communication across various media (Jenna, n.d., para. 1). *Habits of success*, also referred to as social-emotional learning, tend to healthy and productive human development and empower students to thrive in today’s society. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Framework indicates the five areas of social-emotional learning as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). Educators must explicitly teach and develop these skills with students to support equitable outcomes.

Beyond academics, one of the goals of education is to teach students how to interact in society. As such, students need opportunities to develop *social capital* and have *real-world experiences*. Students must have an authentic opportunity to apply their knowledge meaningfully. Employers and recent graduates often bemoan that college did not adequately prepare them for the workforce (Hansen, 2021). Similarly, colleges blame the K12 education system for not preparing students for post-secondary studies, as over 96% of universities must offer remedial courses to students (Butrymowicz, 2017). A sound education system must break this cycle by providing students with authentic, real-world experiences in the controlled environment of K12 education before they face higher stakes in college or the workforce. In whole-child development, one must also attend to *health and wellness*. Nearly all educational institutions have tended to the health and wellness of its students by providing nutritious meals, mandating health and physical education, and providing opportunities for students to participate in organized sports. Mental health and wellbeing will receive additional attention in the coming years as recent reports indicate that childhood depression and anxiety doubled during the

pandemic as schools were closed (Racine et al., 2021). It cannot be ignored that students' *basic needs* must first be met to ensure healthy development. First introduced by Maslow (1943), the hierarchy of needs indicate that one's physiological and immediate safety needs are prerequisite to meeting one's full potential.

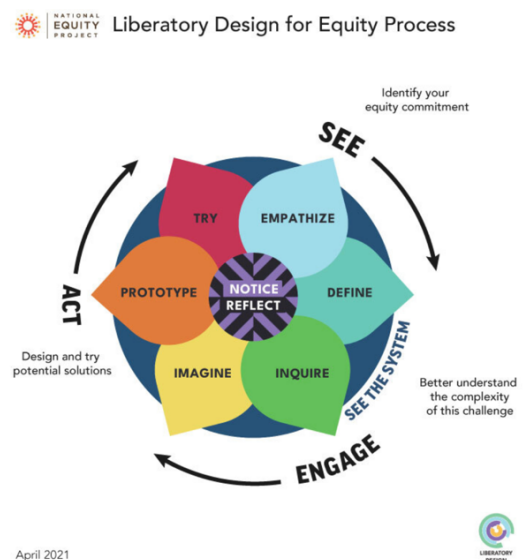
Regardless of which educational setting children attend—public or private schools, in-person or online schools, homeschools or microschools—a great education will provide learning across these six domains. Different models of education demand different architectures to integrate these domains across a student's experience. Typically, traditional public schools tie these six domains tightly together, forming one cohesive, interdependent approach to education. As in the example above, schools can serve as a one-stop-shop for all services. Homeschooling requires a different approach entirely, sourcing separate, modular solutions to attend to different aspects of each domain. Consider the student profile from above, whose parent must lean on a variety of materials, providers, and resources to stretch across the six domains. The theory posits that industries, including education, operate on a pendulum-like continuum between interdependence and modularity. I do not seek to apply the theory to suggest which approach will lead to the best student outcomes. Rather, it is a useful framework to recognize the difference in the architecture between homeschooling and traditional schooling and examine the conditions that allow either a interdependent or modular approach to thrive. Generally, when an experience is not yet “good enough,” an interdependent approach is the most efficient way to achieve an end. However, these solutions will eventually become too rigid and immutable that some users will begin to seek piecemeal, modular solutions that are more customizable and convenient. By virtue of choosing to homeschool, families are choosing a modular, piece-by-piece approach to education rather than the tightly bundled solution that a school provides.

Liberatory Design

Systems-level change is notoriously difficult to achieve, let alone sustain. Within a complex system, multiple stakeholders, contributing factors, competing demands, and limited resources exist. A common mistake is for an external organization to enter a community with a solution without thoroughly understanding the unique context and specific problems. One way to mitigate these predictable shortcomings is to utilize a design process that centers the voice of those most impacted. The Liberatory Design process is a design thinking process that “meshes human-centered design with complex systems theory, and deep equity practice” (Anaissie et al., 2021). The process allows one to gain a deep, empathetic understanding of a challenge from the perspective of those closest to the problem. This process is iterative and elicits co-creation, so solutions are designed *with*, rather than *for*, those being served.

Liberatory Design, illustrated in Figure 1, is first centered on noticing and reflecting on the system in which one exists and what inequities it perpetuates. Systems tend to produce predictable inequities for certain populations. The first step is to notice them and reflect on one’s position in relation to these inequities. This noticing spurs curiosity, and the framework pushes each group member to *see* the system. To do so, one must empathize with the various stakeholders within the system to gain a fuller, authentic picture of others’ experiences. Especially as an outsider, it is essential to listen deeply to the experiences of those closest to the issue. A common method in design thinking is to engage in empathy interviews.

Figure 1: Liberatory Design for Equity Process



An empathy interview allows an outsider to gain deep insight into the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of those most affected by the system. In their book *Street Data*, Shane Safir and Jamila Duggan assert this process allows the group to “begin to humanize the process of data-gathering” and that “listening deeply and responsively will help us build relational capital and trust and shift the culture as we gather data” through empathy interviews (Safir & Dugan, 2021, p. 71). Empathizing allows the group to gain a broader range of perspectives, define a clear, consistent equity challenge, and commit to disrupting it.

By making a specific and granular commitment, the group can begin to *engage* in designing a solution. This portion of the process is centered on an inquiry stance, pushing each member to stay curious about finding the root cause of the inequity within the system. This phase surfaces the issue's complexity and that there will not be a clear path forward, and it is essential to embrace this uncertainty. The group can imagine a more just, equitable future as these questions surface. It is essential to dream big without fear of failure or judgment. Often, one becomes so entrenched within a system that it is difficult to see other ways of being. This phase forces the group to brainstorm unconventionally without limits and boundaries. From here, the framework is biased towards *action*. The group must translate their dreams and imaginations into quick prototypes. Often organizations try to make the perfect solution before launching it. However, in a complex system, this is a foolish quest. There is too much uncertainty and variability that is impossible to predict. Instead, it is vital to build a lean prototype and try it organically. This attempt will allow the group to learn what is working and where they are still falling short. The group can gather immediate feedback, challenge their assumptions, and unearth biases within the solution.

Building a solution to a systemic problem steeped in persistent inequity is complex. Despite all the technical, specific actions that will need to happen, the work is adaptive. Ron Heifetz and Donald Laurie (2001) recognize the difference between technical and adaptive work with a critical distinguishing feature in that adaptive work requires people to change old habits and challenge deeply held beliefs . They assert that to solve such problems, the people closest to the problem must be the ones involved in solving the problem. This principle undergirds why it is essential to invoke a co-design framework, such as Liberatory Design when tackling a thorny, uncertain scenario, such as redesigning an education system.

Theory of Action

Taken together, these bodies of knowledge informed the following Theory of Action to lead a strategic project of creating the Ecosystem For Equity to serve Engaged Detroit:

If...

I deeply understand the context in Engaged Detroit by engaging stakeholders in thorough, asset-based empathy interviews;

So That...

I develop a clear understanding of the problems families are trying to solve through homeschooling, as well as their hopes, dreams, successes, and challenges;

Then...

I can co-design a program that provides access to an ecosystem of supports along with information to navigate it;

Which...

Will empower families in Engaged Detroit to exercise their agency to close the enrichment gap.

Description of Strategic Project

Vision of the Ecosystem For Equity

We intend for the Ecosystem For Equity (E4E) to be our hallmark program at Outschool.org. We seek to build a program that a) supports learners to access customized and relevant learning experiences that are high-quality, culturally affirming, and meet their needs and b) increases the capacity of the community to sustain and thrive after the formal partnership ends. Through the E4E, we envision providing access to the Outschool platform, aggregating additional high-quality content resources, offering high-touch technical support to design and implement programming, and co-creating solutions that meet the unique needs of the specific community partner. This capstone documents the design, execution, and evolution of the Ecosystem For Equity.

Outschool.org is committed to supporting Engaged Detroit to scale its efforts and increase its capacity to ensure families thrive and has raised \$200,000 to explicitly support this partnership. Our team secured the funding from an anonymous donor through the philanthropic community, Stand Together. Education is one priority area for Stand Together, and they invest in “social entrepreneurs who see beyond the one-size-fits-all model and are creating individualized opportunities for learners” (Stand Together Trust, n.d.). One interesting point about the funding is that we are also expected to scale the E4E to another community in Western Michigan after we launch in Detroit. The funder has dedicated an additional \$400,000 to support this scaling effort. Therefore, the goal is to build a program that can meet the unique needs of a community partner (like Engaged Detroit) but is agile enough to scale to other communities.

Empathy Interviews

Before designing a solution, however, I must seek to genuinely comprehend the context and problem. To be successful in this endeavor, I needed to develop a rich understanding of the families in Detroit and seek to understand why they chose to homeschool in the first place. I must learn what is going well and where they need additional support. Despite my deep experience in K-12 education, I had never considered homeschooling a viable approach to achieve systematic change in student outcomes. Additionally, I had never been to Detroit, Michigan. I instantly realized that I needed to better understand the community I was serving. So at the first opportunity, I boarded a plane to spend time in Detroit.

I spent three days in the community, first at Engaged Detroit's Family Fun Day and then visiting people at their homes across the city. As I sat in their living rooms, now serving as de facto classrooms, I was eager to learn more. After the trip, I wanted to gain a wider variety of perspectives, so I contacted more people to talk over Zoom or the phone. Each conversation lasted roughly an hour, and by the end, I had spoken to 15 different stakeholders: parents, students, and coaches, some new to the community, and some returning. The conversations were not scripted, outside of two questions, and families were eager to share their experiences and perspectives. The first question I asked was, "how are your children doing?" which elicited specific stories, anecdotes, and emotions that shed light on the current state of affairs. Next, I would ask families to describe the moment they decided to leave their public schools and pursue homeschooling. Each family had a poignant story to tell and described this juncture of their lives, giving me a more nuanced understanding of their motivations. I recorded, transcribed, and coded these conversations to distill themes across the community and diagnose the Jobs To Be Done as

a homeschool parent. Overall, it was immediately clear that while homeschooling was difficult, families believed the benefits were worth the effort.

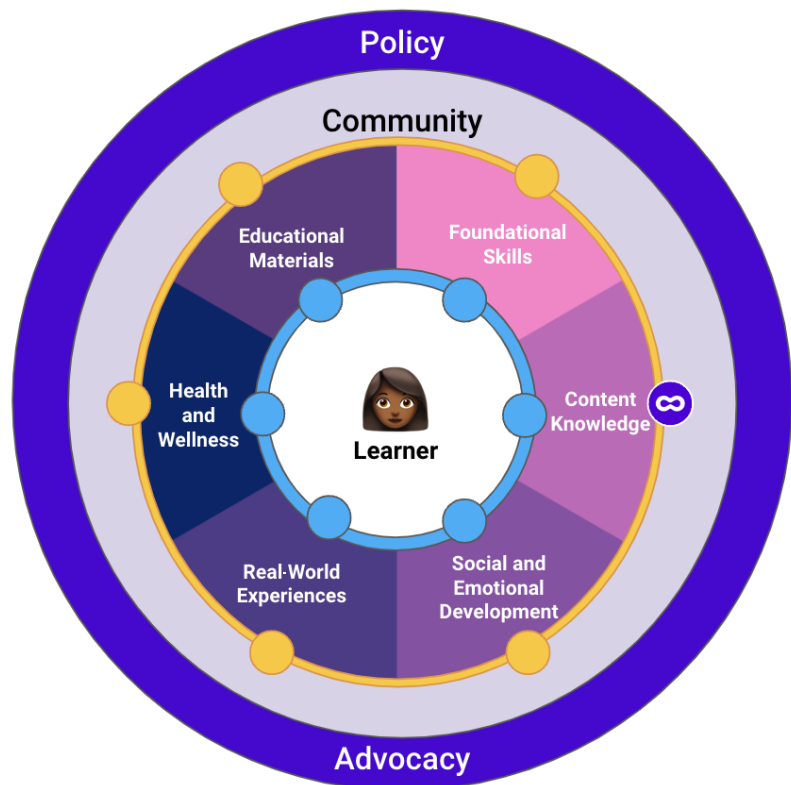
Developing a Framework for the Ecosystem For Equity

As I gained a deeper understanding of the context of Engaged Detroit, it was difficult for me to conceptualize how the E4E—a dynamic web of supports—could work. I learned that families relied on dozens of resources, curricula, and community supports to build an educational solution for their children. It was a complex and confusing web, leaving many families uncertain if they were choosing the “right” tools. The purpose of this ecosystem model is to streamline and organize resources so that each learner has access to a robust suite of tools to support their education. The model is based on a whole-child approach to education, where students and families are supported and empowered to design experiences that meet each child's individual needs. Families must have access and information to effectively exercise agency while navigating the ecosystem.

Informed by the literature in the Review of Knowledge for Action section (including Bronfenbrenner, Interdependence vs. Modularity), I created the framework in Figure 2 to demonstrate my vision for an ecosystem that can accomplish this.

At the center of the figure is the learner, serving as a symbolic representation of an individualized,

Figure 2: The Ecosystem For Equity



learner-centered approach. Surrounding the learner is an adapted version of the six domains of education, outlined by Michael Horn in *From Reopen to Reinvent* (2022). There are two notable differences. One is renaming “skills” to “foundational skills,” which is a specific nod to developing fundamental reading, writing, and math skills that students need to access a broader range of content. The other is reframing “basic needs” to “educational materials,” since the funding for this project was restricted to support direct educational needs. The goal of the ecosystem is to aggregate partners across each of these domains so that students and families can access a range of resources in each category.

It is essential to acknowledge that many place-based partners in Detroit are already assets to the community. In the E4E framework, I refer to these partners as the *local ecosystem*, indicated by the blue ring. These are often in-person, local resources that families can use to support their children across each domain. The yellow ring represents the *virtual ecosystem*. These are online-based partners that are expert providers in particular domains. Naturally, we have a partner in Outschool to provide learners with rich content experiences, but Outschool is insufficient to provide a robust suite of support across each domain, so I must identify external partners to support the ecosystem. This *virtual ecosystem* is intentionally a set of national, online partners, so we can scale this model to other partners, regardless of the local setting. In Engaged Detroit, the coaches, other families, and peers serve as the community, and this model suggests that for the learner to thrive, so must the broader community. Lastly, the outermost ring represents the broader political and regulatory environment. In Michigan, for example, when a family opts to homeschool their children, they lose access to almost all state and federal educational resources. To sustain itself as an organization, Engaged Detroit must advocate for policy changes and access to resources to support its learners.

Building the Ecosystem through a Liberatory Design Process

The Liberatory Design process first calls for empathizing with the community, which I achieved through deep, field-based interviews. This process allowed me to surface and *define* the inequities that persist. Moreover, to fully “see the system,” I created the E4E Framework to organize our work. The quickest path forward would have been for me to find partners to round out each ecosystem domain and tell families to sign up for specific programs. However, this would be antithetical to a liberatory approach and would predictably fail unless those closest to the problem had agency in creating the solution.

At this point, I had been working solely with Bernita Bradley, the founder, to inform our path forward. We both recognized the need to bring more voices to the table to provide more diverse perspectives and make the work more sustainable for her. Bernita recruited 12 community members to serve as board members. On October 23, 2022, I facilitated the first board meeting—the first time this group had formally come together to work in a leadership capacity to guide the organization. Drawing upon my experience as a certified Data Wise Coach, I leaned on protocols and processes to organize the team for collaborative work with teaming exercises and shared goal-setting activities (Boudett & City, 2014).

Once we established ourselves as a functioning team, our next step in the Liberatory Design process was to *imagine* and envision an ideal future. We collectively began to set a vision and mission for the year and to brainstorm solutions, using the E4E framework as a container for our thinking. Together, we conducted a community asset map to identify the existing entities and agencies across the six domains of our whole-child education approach to form or strengthen partnerships with Engaged Detroit. Simultaneously, I vetted a set of high-quality virtual partners to fill out our *virtual ecosystem* while soliciting input and feedback from the team along the way.

After three board meetings, we had a working vision for the year, a rough draft of goals, and numerous partners in the *local* and *virtual ecosystems*. Now it was time to prototype a solution to get these resources into the hands of families in a way that allows each stakeholder to have autonomy and options over the path they choose.

On the technical end, I had to figure out a way to give people access to these funds. I needed a frictionless solution that allowed users to spend their funds easily and immediately. Additionally, I needed to be able to track their spending patterns. After surveying different options, I decided that PEX was the best product for this prototype. PEX is a prepaid expense card that allows me to distribute funds, set spending rules to authorize the cards to work at specific vendors or merchant categories and track spending habits in real time. This solution gives families easy and direct access to funds. However, my theory of action asserts that access to funds is insufficient to enable parents to act with agency. Families also need information on how to navigate this complex ecosystem.

Therefore, before distributing cards, I created systems to share information. I built a [website](#) (Appendix A) that organizes our ecosystem partners. The platform enables parents to navigate resources specific to the learner's age, learning domain, format (online or in-person), and price. With a few simple clicks, a parent can directly access a suite of high-quality resources curated to their learner's needs. Additionally, the site includes a form for parents to suggest additional resources they have found and trust. This feature allows for information sharing to be bidirectional and community-driven.

By mid-December, we were ready to launch and invited all Engaged Detroit families to attend our monthly community event at a local movie theater to receive their cards. This event was our fifth monthly community gathering. It followed a familiar agenda: families were

greeted, signed the necessary paperwork, and Bernita Bradley and I hosted a 30-minute informational session before everyone was treated to popcorn and a movie. Attendance was high, as families were excited to receive their cards and begin spending.

Each family received a folder branded with the E4E website to navigate resources, brochures from our trusted partners in the core ecosystem, a tip sheet on spending and tracking their funds, and other FAQs. I informed families that cards would be activated that night, and I asked families to complete a survey before using their cards, which assessed their baseline sentiment about their access to resources, their confidence as homeschool parents, and how informed they were about selecting high-quality educational resources. I informed families that each card was loaded with \$270 per learner, so a family with three children had \$810 loaded onto their cards. Bernita reminded families that this initial tranche was only *half* the total funding they would receive for the year. To be eligible for the second deposit, they must remain active in attending the monthly community meetings and meeting with their family coaches.

Each family is assigned to a coach for monthly meetings. This person is an experienced homeschool educator within Engaged Detroit and paid a stipend supported in part through our partnership. Families left the movie theater on a cold December evening appreciative and eager to exercise their agency and tap into resources for their children. I was curious to learn where the first dollars be spent.

Rapid Prototyping and Iteration

I woke up early the following day, constantly refreshing the PEX dashboard to see which resources families would choose first. At 11:37 AM, my stomach dropped. A parent tried to spend their card on an Outschool class, and the card was declined. An hour later, she attempted another purchase on Outschool, which met the same fate. At 2:24 PM, a different parent

attempted to purchase enrollment in an in-person weekend STEM Camp at DAPCEP, which was declined. I was flummoxed and embarrassed. I previously approved both vendors as trusted, high-quality partners and suggested them on the navigator website. Further, they were listed as approved vendors in the PEX payment system. After dozens of emails and phone calls with customer service at PEX, we struggled to fix this spate of declines. After a few days, we fixed the issue for many of our established national vendors, like Outschool and the YMCA. However, cards were still not working at local Detroit-based programs like DAPCEP and the Michigan State University Community School. Further, I noticed that parents were attempting to use their cards at other vendors, such as the Detroit Dance Center and Lakeshore Learning, a teacher supply store, which were not listed as trusted partners on our navigator website, but there was an evident demand. With more transactions declining than approved, I needed to adjust course quickly.

When planning for this initiative, I only found one other group doing similar work, providing direct-to-family funding for educational resources, RESCHOOL Colorado. Over the last several years, they have refined a process for “supporting families to access, resource, and navigate learning” (RESCHOOL Colorado, 2022). Similar to our approach, they provide access to families by funding cards per learner and curate a website to aid families in navigating resources. One key difference in their approach is that they do not restrict spending to specific vendors, like my initial design. Instead, in their agreement forms, they explicitly state that the funds are for educational resources for children, and they reserve the right to require repayment of misused funds. However, Executive Director Dr. Amy Anderson informed me that in the several years of the program, they have never had to recoup misspent funds (personal communication, December 2022). She recounted a story about a parent who used funds to enroll

her daughter in a soccer league but also needed funds to purchase cleats and a bus pass to get to practice and games. This anecdote stuck with me and made me reconsider my approach to restricting funds at all.

Meanwhile, I continuously worked with the PEX customer service and engineering teams to determine why our cards kept declining. To control spending, I created a series of spending rules in the PEX platform and listed our curated partners as approved expenditures. However, the PEX system was not as robust as promised and could not effectively distinguish between approved and unapproved individual vendors. Instead, the customer service team suggested that instead of setting spending rules for specific vendors, I instead use merchant categories. In short, when a business registers to accept cards on the Visa network, it must declare the type of business it is. For instance, Outschool is registered as a School and Educational Service, and STEM courses at the nonprofit DAPCEP are listed as a Charitable and Social Service Organization. There are approximately 500 different merchant category codes, like the two aforementioned. PEX suggested that I identify the approved spending categories instead of approving resources individually. This method works with 100% efficacy as the PEX system can immediately distinguish approved categories. However, if I wholly approve spending at Charitable and Social Service Organizations, the cards would work at *any* institution registered as such, limiting the impact of curating resources.

Overall, I identified three options to move forward:

1. Continue to work with PEX to troubleshoot the initial strategy of approving individual vendors (complete control over spending).
2. Set category spending rules to allow the cards to work at specific *types* of businesses (limited control over spending).

3. Remove any restrictions on spending (no control over spending).

What presented as a technical problem at first (cards frequently getting declined) later emerged as an adaptive, philosophical problem (what level of control should we have over spending?). After racking my brain for a few days, my supervisor, Morgan, suggested I engage a broader team in a divergent thinking exercise to guide my path forward.

At our next all-team meeting, I took the reins to facilitate a conversation to generate new thinking and ideas from others further from this work. I designed the meeting using the Consultancy Protocol, which “is a structured process for helping an individual or a team think more expansively about a particular, concrete dilemma,” elevating an external perspective (Thompson-Grove et al., 2021). This protocol is one that I have used for several years to clarify my thinking when leading through difficult times. After outlining the context and dilemma, I responded to clarifying and consulting questions from the group before stepping out of the conversation and allowing the group to generate new thinking.

The group pushed each other to consider the implications of the three options I laid out and tried to square them against our logic model. For instance, if we removed all restrictions on spending, it would remove friction from parents to spend and demonstrate our trust and respect for them to choose the best resources for their children. On the other hand, if they could use the cards anywhere, then what role do we play in curating high-quality resources and ensuring parents have enough *information* to wade through a complex ecosystem? Quickly, the conversation rotated back towards sticking with our initial plan, not to be deterred by a technical problem. However, one team member rightly pointed out that there was no foreseeable workaround for our current issues, and we needed to adapt to meet the immediate needs of families. Ultimately, the group landed on the second option: to restrict spending by category.

This method would allow families to spend their money at any business registered as an educational service, charitable organization, childcare service, or youth recreation, sports, music, and dance classes. Additionally, we could curate resources across each educational domain outlined above.

With this increased flexibility, I was eager to see how families would spend their funds. The E4E program provides direct-to-family grants for educational and enrichment resources. The funds provided access and affordability to new programs and coupled with our navigator website and community events to ensure families have the information to make the best decisions for their learners. This combination of access and information will empower families with the agency to design enriching educational experiences for each learner.

Evidence

Empathy Interviews

Over three weeks, I interviewed 15 stakeholders in Engaged Detroit, including homeschool parents, coaches, and a student. The conversations typically lasted 45 minutes to an hour and were recorded and later transcribed. Additionally, during my monthly visits to co-host community events in Detroit, I engaged students and families in less formal conversations to understand their motivations for homeschooling and recent experiences. While each person had a unique experience, several themes emerged (Figure 3).

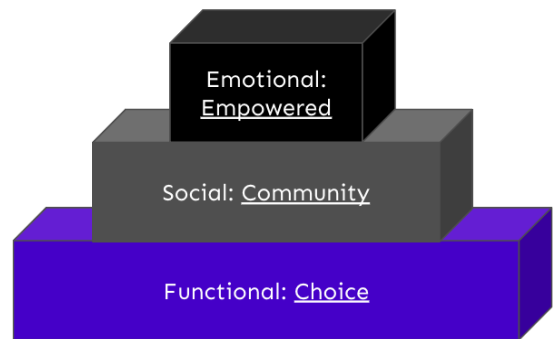
Functionally, families wanted choices to pick the best resources for their children. A common refrain centered around wanting options to meet the specific needs of their children. Parents and coaches frequently acknowledged that every child is unique, and their schools offered a wholesale, one-size-fits-all approach to education. One parent lamented, “I just want my kids to get what they actually need,” and did not trust the school to deliver (personal communication, 2022). Especially during the stretch of virtual learning during COVID-19, many families recognized that the instructional quality was insufficient to meet their child’s needs, nor did it tend to their interests or learning styles.

Many interviewees harbored these feelings for quite a while before leaving their public schools. When I inquired about what ultimately pushed them to leave their schools, the response often centered around the social dimension. A typical representative response would be something similar to “I didn’t know I could do this before I found a community of other families that looked like mine” (Riley, personal communication, August 2022). Several families surveyed other local homeschool co-ops but never felt at home since they were often the only Black participants. To many families, Engaged Detroit offered a community to traverse the daunting

prospect of homeschooling alongside families that reflected their culture, values, and geographic location. This sentiment of *community* served as a tipping point for many families.

Still, homeschooling is a challenging and taxing endeavor. I was curious about the emotional root cause that pushed families to continue homeschooling despite the inherent challenges. One parent simply stated, “it makes me feel good” (personal communication, 2022). She was not alone. Parents echoed the sentiment of feeling empowered as a homeschool parent. They reported feeling more effective and involved as parents who had more control to ensure a better life for their children.

Figure 3: Dimensions of the Job to Be Done



Pre-Survey

When I distributed PEX spending cards to families, I administered a pre-survey to 29 parents to assess their sentiment toward our design principles of access and information. Parents responded on a five-point Likert scale via a Google Survey. The results in Table 2 indicate that 42% of parents felt they currently had access to the resources they needed. Only 35% indicated they had enough information to find and choose the best educational materials and programs for

Table 2: Engaged Detroit Pre-Survey Sentiments

Survey Item	% of Respondents who Agree or Strongly Agree
Do you feel like you have access to all of the things you need to successfully homeschool?	42%
Do you feel you have all the information about finding the best educational materials and programs?	35%
How confident do you feel as a homeschool parent right now?	50%

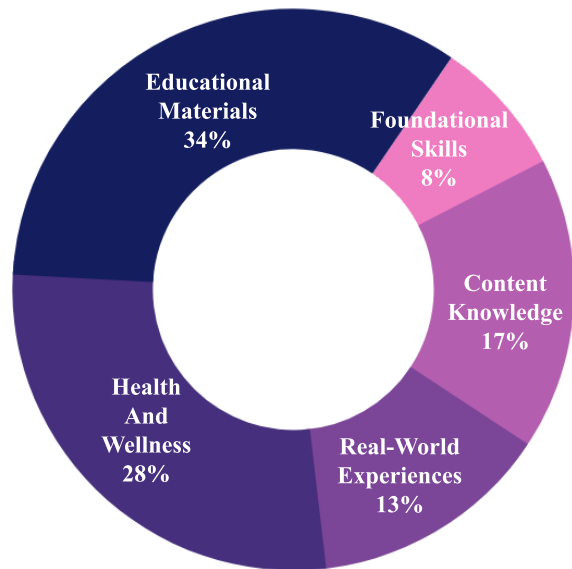
their children. The survey also asked respondents to estimate how much they spent each year on homeschooling per child. The spending ranged from \$250-\$2,500, with an average expenditure of \$975 per child.

Spending Habits

Beginning on December 19, 2023, 41 cards were funded with a total of \$29,700 to support the educational resources for 110 learners (\$270 per learner). I tracked spending through March 1. Over this period, \$10,541 was spent by 27 families, accounting for 74 learners. I sought to understand how spending tracked across each of the six domains outlined earlier, as shown in Figure 4.

Spending on Educational Materials included items like paper, math manipulatives, and other items from teacher supply stores like Lakeshore Learning. Most of the funds spent on Foundational Skills were attributed to enrollment in Exact Path by edmentum, a personalized learning and assessment platform for reading and math. The majority of spending on Content Knowledge was through enrolling in classes on Outschool, such as “Veterinary Science,” “2D + 3D Video Game Design & Coding,” and “Mythology for High School.” Families purchased various Real-World Experiences, including music classes at the MSU Community Music School, enrolling in an outdoor classroom, or attending in-person STEM camps through DAPCEP. Many families chose to spend funds on Health and Wellness activities, such as dance classes, YMCA memberships, and swimming lessons. Incidentally, no funds have been spent on explicit Social and Emotional

Figure 4: Spending Across Domains



Development experiences. It is unclear why this is the case, and additional focus groups and interviews are needed to analyze this anomaly. Nearly half of the funds were spent on in-person resources from the *local* ecosystem, a third was spent on tangible materials, and less than a quarter of the funds were spent on digital resources in the *virtual* ecosystem, which is tabulated in Table 3.

Table 3: Spending Personas

<i>category</i>	\$ spent	% of total
Local ecosystem	\$4,665	44%
Materials	\$3,546	34%
Virtual ecosystem	\$2,330	22%

Through March 1, families conducted 131 transactions across 23 merchants (Appendix B). Spending patterns emerged into three distinct personas, represented in Table 3. Super-users spent quickly, exhausting over 60% of their funds by March 1. Slow-adopters logged at least one transaction, but spent less than 60% of their funds. Non-consumers received a card, and were present at community events, but did not use their card at all during this period.

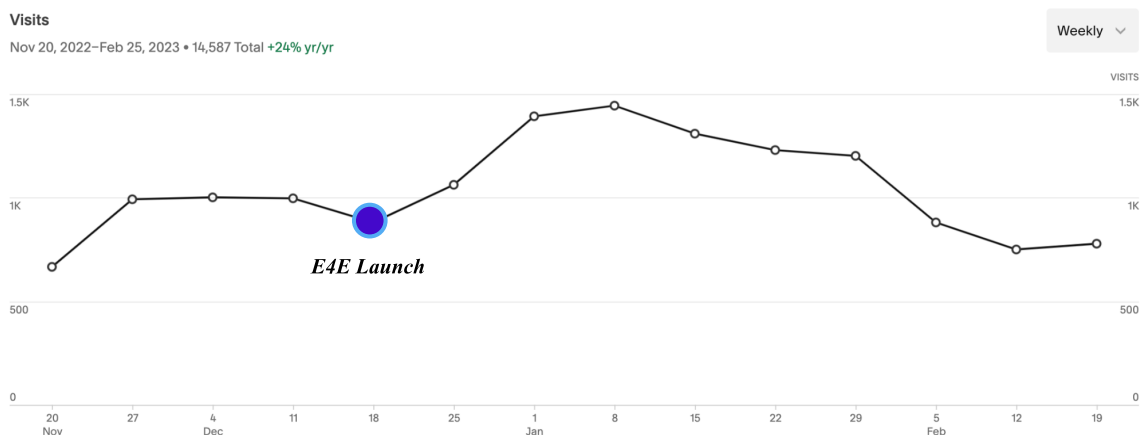
Table 4: Spending Personas

<i>persona</i>	# of families	% of total
non-consumer	13	32%
slow-adopter	16	39%
super-user	12	29%

Engagement Patterns

To coincide with the launch of the Ecosystem For Equity, I created a [navigator website](#) for families to gather information on where and how to spend their cards (Appendix A). The graph in Figure 5 demonstrates the rapid increase in traffic to the Outschool.org website in the

Figure 5: Outschool.org Navigator Website Traffic



weeks following the launch. Prior to the program, the website averaged less than 1,000 weekly visitors. In the six weeks following the launch, weekly traffic remained higher than average, with two weeks nearing 1,500 average weekly visits, a nearly 50% increase over the prior two months.

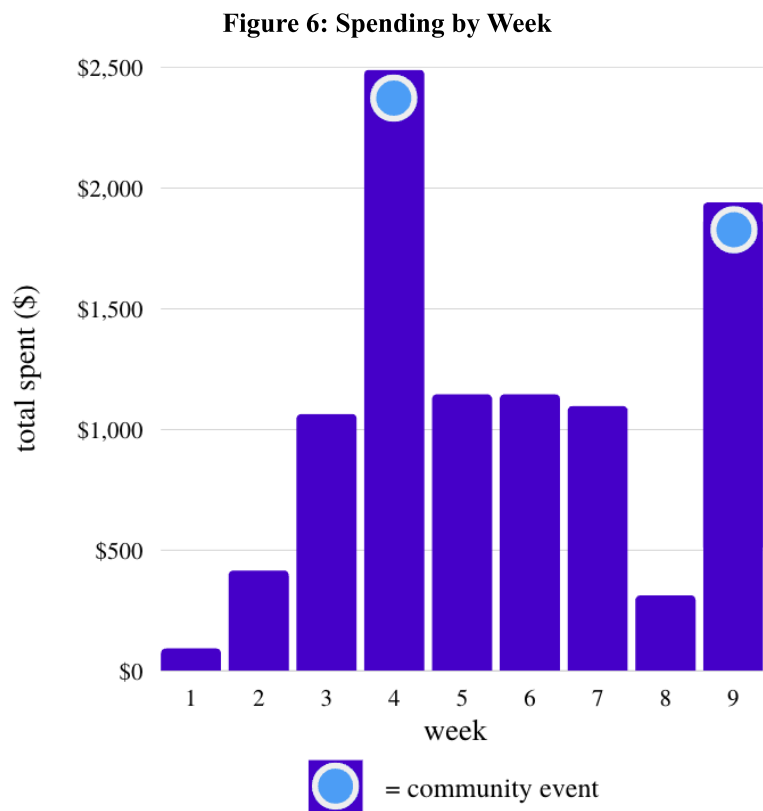
Additionally, each month we hosted an in-person community event to share information with families, discuss different ways families were spending their funds, highlight resources, and allow for the children to have

fun, social connection with peers. As shown in Figure 6, spending increased (both in the dollars spent and the number of transactions) in the week following a community event.

The average spend per week was just over \$1,000 in the week following a community event, and the rate more than doubled to an average spending rate of over \$2,200.

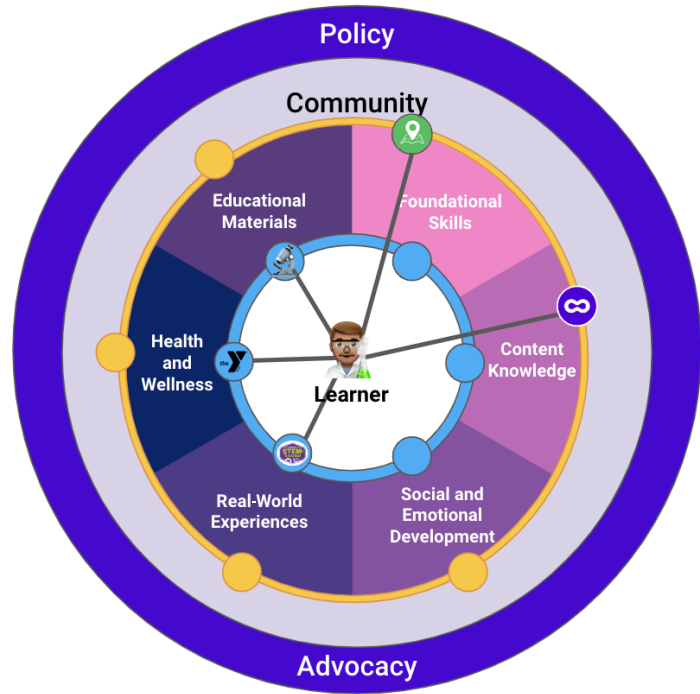
Family Profile

Families spend funds in different ways. This profile examines a family with three learners who spent \$361 (or 45%) of their initial funding over the first month of the E4E. Figure 7 demonstrates the actual spending pattern for one of the three learners in the family, Learner A.



Learner A’s mom recognizes that her son is a curious five-year-old interested in science. She is a nurse, and he frequently asks questions about her job and the tools she carries around her neck. To capitalize on his interest, she ordered a children’s stethoscope and sphygmomanometer from a teacher supply store (Educational Materials). As a skilled professional, she has the ability to teach him how to use these devices. She plans to enroll him in Outschool classes in different science topics, potentially dinosaurs (Content Knowledge). She also wanted to supplement his learning with in-person activities with his peers. She signed him up for a Math Explorers camp with DAPCEP, a part of the *local ecosystem*

Figure 7: Learner A Spending Pattern



that offers weekend STEM courses for all ages (Real-World Experiences). Additionally, she enrolled him in Exact Path, a personalized learning and assessment program from edmentum, one of our partners in the *virtual ecosystem*, to provide him with individualized lessons in math, reading, and language arts (Foundational Skills). Finally, she signed her family up for a membership at the local YMCA for youth fitness activities and classes (Health and Wellness).

Overall, the parent reported that she appreciated access to the funds to enroll her children in various programs to meet their needs. She relied on other families and friends for information on where to spend her funds. It was a friend that directed her to the teacher supply store.

However, another parent inaccurately warned her that the card was not authorized for the YMCA, which I corrected during the interview.

Analysis

Overview

Ultimately, this project sought to explore what would happen if we empowered families to choose the resources they wanted to supplement their children's education. Based on Outschool.org's prior experiences, it was clear that simply providing access to a resource was insufficient to meet each learner's wide variety of needs. Instead, we needed to also provide families with the information to sift through the market to find the best resources for their children. I approached this project using a Liberatory Design process to collaboratively create a solution that had the power to sustain over time, both in Engaged Detroit and when offered in other contexts. The runway to plan and implement this project was short, but there were still fruitful learnings in analyzing the success and shortcomings of this pilot of the Ecosystem For Equity.

Overall, many aspects of my theory of action came to fruition and led to successful outcomes. I developed a contextual understanding of what families in Engaged Detroit needed to improve their experience as homeschool parents. Then, I developed a framework and program, the Ecosystem For Equity, to meet these needs, and co-designed a plan to roll it out into the community and revise and adapt it over time. Ultimately, families spent over \$10,000 to supplement their children's learning and provide them with experiences they would not have had otherwise. During this project, Engaged Detroit grew and developed as an organization. Enrollment continues to grow, and the organization's leadership has grown into a formal body with a board of directors, annual goals, and plans to open an in-person, brick-and-mortar facility to host trainings, events, and educational experiences. I am optimistic about the future of Engaged Detroit and its capacity to serve more learners. Further, the Ecosystem For Equity is

poised to expand into another community to serve four times as many students. I believe the program is agile enough to adapt to a new context and empower families to close the enrichment gap.

In other ways, parts of this project developed less robustly than I had imagined. While some families spent their cards quickly and developed a unique, compelling plan to support their learners, many families did not spend any of their funds. Further, the program was not mature enough to assess whether or not there were measurable differences in family or student sentiment towards access to resources, navigating information, and confidence in homeschooling. Therefore, it is inconclusive whether the fundamental logic behind my theory of action that with additional access and information, parents can exercise agency to close the enrichment gap holds true.

To evaluate this project's results, I will segment my analysis of the evidence on what I deem to be a success, an area of improvement, and what is still unknown. For each body of evidence, I will underscore the contributing factors and identify the root cause of the outcomes. In examining the challenges with this project, I will classify them each as the result of poor design, poor execution, or issues outside of my locus of control.

Success: Finding the Job To Be Done and Designing a Model

The most fundamental component of this project was to gain a deep understanding of the context. The target audience for this project was homeschool families in Detroit, nearly all of whom were Black. Despite spending my career in education in Washington, DC, most facets of my identity, both personal and professional, did not align with my stakeholders. My time as an educator was in a traditional public school system serving over 50,000 students. I had never considered homeschooling pedagogy or policy. I had never stepped foot in the state of Michigan.

Also, my racial identity as an privileged white male could be a barrier to fostering relationships with Black families. I faced a similar dynamic as a school leader in Washington, DC.

Further, the homeschool community tends to have an inherent distrust of public schools and power structures. Before starting this project, I knew it was essential to avoid the trope of the “great white savior” showing up to a new town with a bag of money and a prescription to improve education. Based on this confluence of factors and my past experiences, I knew that my foremost priority must be to build trust. Therefore, my first step was to fly to Detroit and start listening.

These meaningful conversations allowed me to build relationships with families and begin to build a deeper understanding of their journey with homeschooling. Although homeschooling was a massive undertaking, families thought it was worthwhile. Parents needed to balance their responsibilities to work and support their family financially *and* absorb the gargantuan task of educating their children. These conversations and empathy interviews allowed me to distill the Job to Be Done as a homeschooling parent in Detroit and construct the dimensions of the job (Figure 3), which would serve as design principles for the Ecosystem For Equity.

This construction asserts that homeschool families value choice and options at the most basic, functional level. They sought to be free from the “system” and to be in control of choosing their childrens’ content and educational experiences. Therefore, when designing the E4E framework, I ensured that the family was the unit of change in the equation. While the program provided access to funds and built systems to share information, the parent would need to be the ultimate decider in how to spend their funds. Additionally, the social dimension of the JTBD framework highlighted the need to be part of a community and not to feel alone while

homeschooling. For both caregivers and students alike, homeschooling can be an isolating endeavor. Families appreciate the connection to each other to share information, give and receive guidance, and learn from each other. Absent a school, students craved opportunities to engage with peers. Therefore, when designing the E4E, it was essential to bring the community together physically and virtually on a regular cadence. The emotional dimension of the JTBD pyramid is the most compelling in determining whether a user sticks with a new solution. In this case, parents felt empowered to be better parents for their children by homeschooling them. Therefore, it was critical to design a framework where parents could truly exercise agency through adequate access and funding and have the information to choose from the highest-quality resources.

At this point, I needed to synthesize my learning and attempt to create a model to empower families to close the enrichment gap. Designing a model reminded me of my experience as a principal, where it was essential to adapt research-based best practices to meet the unique context of my school. By analyzing the research base and Outschool.org's organizational experience, it was clear that a parent needs both access and information to exercise agency. When I uncovered these design principles, I was tempted to immediately build a solution to meet this need. However, this would have been an inadequate approach. Instead, I spent time building relationships and seeking to understand the end users and the job they were trying to accomplish. Only then was I able to design a robust solution that invoked research, organizational learning, and the local context.

Success: Piloting the Program

After designing the model, the next phase of the work was to roll it out and test its limits. Bernita and I considered several ways to roll out this program, including mailing spending cards directly to participants' houses or issuing virtual cards. However, we tended to the social

dimension of the JTBD and leveraged an in-person community event for the program's official launch. We could signify and celebrate the program's launch by bringing families together. Invoking Dr. Karen Mapp's Dual Capacity-Building Framework, the event attempted to build capabilities in learning the purpose of the program and how to spend their cards, foster connections across families and the network to share ideas on spending, and boost confidence in families to choose high-quality educational resources (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). This approach enabled the conditions for a successful program launch, and I am thankful I did not passively mail cards to families.

Further, we worked with an expansive view of community engagement beyond in-person events. Bernita moderates an active group messaging app for parents to share ideas and their experiences with homeschooling. Many families reported that this chat influenced their decisions on where to spend their funds. Additionally, I hosted a website (Appendix A) to serve as a navigation tool for parents to sift through resources at their convenience. According to web traffic and user interviews, this was a resource many families utilized to start uncovering their options. These additional asynchronous approaches to community engagement aided in developing family capacity throughout the process.

As explained previously, there was a massive technical issue the day after the card launch. This was the direct result of an execution error. When working with multiple stakeholders, a reliable maxim to live by is to *trust, but verify* the words of others. I trusted the vendor that the cards would work as designed, but I did not test the features before starting the program. My initial reaction to this dilemma was to troubleshoot the bugs and maintain the program design at all costs. However, in the moment, I relied on the Liberatory Design process (Figure 1). I had to remind myself that I did not ship a perfect product, and that was not the

intention. At this phase in the design process, the goal was to learn and iterate quickly. In other words, it was time to fail fast. This approach was daunting since I was in a relatively high-stakes situation and needed to figure out the path forward. However, instead of working alone, I leaned on the Liberatory Design process and engaged a broad group of stakeholders, from our internal Outschool.org team to Engaged Detroit Leadership and families. Together, we co-designed a solution to move forward, not committing to perfection but learning and adapting accordingly as the project progressed. This moment reminded me of the continual and iterative cycle of innovation.

It is interesting to see the concept of interdependence and modularity at play when looking into the actual spending habits of families. As homeschool parents, they have rejected the wholesale, interdependent structure of traditional schooling. Instead, they seek to build an educational experience using the best, most appropriate tools for each learner. The spending habits of families affirm this. No two families spent their funds in the same way. A typical family purchased resources from multiple vendors. Only one spent 100% of their funds on online academic learning resources at Outschool. There was spending across all of the educational domains of the ecosystem (Figure 2), except for Social and Emotional Development. Also, families spent across the local and virtual ecosystems, with a preference for in-person, local resources (Table 3). Taken alongside the Job To Be Done, this approach supports the notion that homeschool families prefer the customizable, convenient options that a modular solution provides. Modularity values the uniqueness of each child and authorizes the parent as the decision maker. Overall, it was a success that the program launched and enabled parents to begin spending their funds. As an organization, Outschool.org was able to turn an innovative and nascent idea into an actual, functioning program.

While not surprising, it was fascinating to see how spending rates dramatically increased in the week following a community event (Figure 6). Access to funds was consistent throughout the program. Yet the community meetings provided a formal setting to exchange information, which resulted in increased engagement with the program. This pattern affirms our theory that access, alone, is not enough to increase participation. Sharing information through community building has a dramatic effect on changing habits and behavior.

Area of Improvement: Utilization Rates

While the programming launch was a success, users' adoption and usage were lower than I had anticipated. One month after the launch, 22% of the funds were exhausted, and by March 1, the rate rose to 35%. At first glance, that is an appropriate burn rate, which would give the program about five months of runway, similar to what we planned. However, upon closer inspection, it turned out that a small number of super-users were spending their funds quickly, while nearly a third of the group had not yet participated at all. This was a surprise. Recalling the day when I hand-delivered the cards to families, there was excitement and enthusiasm. I was convinced that families would begin to spend their funds immediately. While spending rates increased over time, it is still interesting that some families have not spent their funds.

In seeking to uncover the root cause of this discrepancy in engagement, it is necessary to refer back to my initial theory of action and undergirding research. The theory asserted that if we provide stakeholders with access and information, then they will be able to navigate the ecosystem and choose the right resources. The program design gave people clear and immediate access through direct funding. Every family was funded per learner, which significantly reduced any barriers to accessing whatever resources they desired. Therefore, if this theory holds, the program provided insufficient information to build the family's capacity to choose. While I built

a navigator website (Appendix A) and handed families folders stuffed with brochures and FAQ documents, this information-sharing system was inadequate. When talking to families who were early adopters and spent with ease, they often reported getting information by word of mouth from other families. In these particular cases, families with expansive social networks could leverage their peers, but it is worth exploring how to more fully support a family who was new to the community without as many connections. Additionally, RESCHOOL Colorado, in their 10-year report of doing similar work, indicated that “most families take considerable time to decide how they want to use their funding because they want it to be used well,” indicating this pattern should be expected (RESCHOOL Colorado, 2023, p. 9).

The Ecosystem For Equity relies on a modular approach, where parents create custom educational experiences by piecing together various resources. For a user without enough information, finding the best solutions demands significant time and energy. The homeschool parents in Engaged Detroit are already quite burdened, with many working full time and educating multiple children. Participating in this program can be overwhelming, requiring a family to sift through the vast catalog of options to spend their funds. In some ways, it was an embarrassment of riches with too many options. Therefore, without sufficient information, families could not take full advantage of the program. For some, the program design was "not good enough." The theory of Interdependence and Modularity asserts that a modular solution can only exploit its advantages of being quick and customizable if all of the components are "good enough" (Christensen, 2019, 2). If not, a more interdependent, streamlined solution has an advantage.

Overall, the low utilization rates were the result of a design failure. The design worked well for a majority of parents to have adequate access and information to exercise their agency,

but not for everyone. In reflection, the program was designed for a particular persona—a homeschool parent that had an existing information base about homeschool and was comfortable utilizing a modular approach. A more robust design would be more inclusive and tend to a wider range of user types.

As I continue employing Liberatory Design principles to iterate and prototype new features, the research base points me to two possible improvement areas. First, improve information sharing. Instead of relying solely on passive and static information sources like a website or folder of brochures, I must also lean on organic social networks to share information. I am considering ways to amplify user stories and strengthen the community's connections to share information in multiple ways across various media. Secondly, I should consider designing a more interdependent architecture, bundling resources into a more coherent, packaged solution. Alternatively, instead of tending to all six domains of education, I could limit the program only to support one or two. This approach would lessen the number of decisions a family would make on their journey to close the enrichment gap and perhaps deepen the enrichment experiences. The caveat here is that this would contradict my findings about the Jobs To Be Done. Namely, homeschool parents want choices and do not like to be constrained by systems. Ultimately, the next steps can not be my decision alone. When employing a liberatory approach, I must collaborate with those closest to the problem to generate a meaningful and sustainable solution.

To Be Determined: Demonstrating Outcomes and Impact

Due to the time constraints of implementing and documenting this project, it is too early to determine if it will lead to its intended outcomes and deliver long-term impact. In the meantime, I can only use the evidence collected so far, such as surveys, engagement rates, and

spending patterns, as a proxy to measure our progress towards achieving larger goals of closing the enrichment gap and empowering more families through this approach.

The overall logic of this program rests on several smaller outcomes and underlying assumptions before achieving long-term system impact on closing the enrichment gap. Foremost, I emphasized that access and information design principles were fundamental to progress. Upon program launch, I assessed families' sentiments to access, information, and their overall confidence as homeschooling parents. However, their post-program sentiments will determine if we have progressed in advancing these indicators. The challenge with determining program outcomes and impact were outside of my locus of control given the time constraints of this strategic project. At first, I attempted to design around this issue and considered launching more frequent surveys and gathering additional data and evidence to assess the program's efficacy. However, there was simply not enough time to fully execute and evaluate this program on the short runway from December through March.

Further, there is a massive underlying assumption that closing the enrichment gap will lead to better life outcomes more holistically. While there is research to support this notion and personal observations and experiences, it will take a long time to prove that *this* program provided learners with new and valuable enrichment experiences, which in turn led to other profound outcomes. It would be worthwhile to monitor additional secondary or tertiary results, such as success on academic measures, attitudes towards education, and other social and emotional learning metrics, such as sense of belonging, curiosity, and growth mindset. While I recognize the need to be patient to see such results, I also feel the need to prove we are on a positive trajectory toward them to ensure we can continue to fundraise and support this initiative.

To Be Determined: Scaling to a New Context

As this pilot with Engaged Detroit ends, the Ecosystem For Equity (henceforth rebranded as Outbridge) continues. We are partnering with another community organization in Grand Rapids, MI, AmplifyGR, dedicating \$400,000 to support 400 learners and their families to close the enrichment gap. While the overall approach and goals are similar, the context and scale are markedly different. Most of the students in this community in Grand Rapids attend public and charter schools—they are not homeschoolers. Additionally, this is a new city with a unique context, resources, and needs. Some of our trusted partners in the ecosystem are accessible across geographic lines, like Outschool and Reconstruction that are available virtually, or the YMCA, which has local branches here, too. However, many other partners, like DAPCEP or the Michigan State Community Music School, were hyper-local to Detroit. The goal was to build a program that was focused enough to meet the needs in Detroit but nimble enough to work in other settings. This expansion will determine whether or not this program is replicable, scalable, and impactful across contexts. The success (or failure) of the program in Grand Rapids will depend on how Outschool.org learns from the design and execution challenges from Detroit.

Earlier, I attributed much of my success with this pilot in Detroit to developing a deep, contextual understanding of the community. As I help to replicate this program in Grand Rapids, this must be an essential component of the design process. I cannot assume the resources, needs, and desires—or the Job To Be Done—is the same in the Western part of Michigan as it was in Detroit. Like I did with Engaged Detroit, I must build a team of diverse stakeholders to serve as a steering committee to hold this work long-term. I must spend time on the ground to conduct empathy interviews, build relational trust, and start to construct what the job to be done is for parents when it comes to enriching educational experiences for their children. I see this work as

essential to success. However, it is time and resource intensive. It is the rate-limiting factor that will perpetually slow us down from scaling to other communities and expanding our reach. Over time, I envision that we will build personas of different types of learners and communities that translate across contexts. However, in the immediate term, I believe getting on the ground to develop a deep contextual understanding is a worthy investment of time and energy.

The architecture and technology exist to reach countless learners. Loading PEX cards and updating the navigator website is quick, technical work. At that point, the only factor limiting our reach is the funding available. Therefore, I must develop the hosting organization's capacity to continually elevate the voices and perspectives of the users and foster strong social networks to share information and build community. In retrospect, the role I played with Engaged Detroit, attending monthly community meetings, having regular calls and interviews with parents, and fielding emails, is not sustainable as this program scales to new communities. If Outschool.org seeks to scale Outbridge to a broader audience across contexts, that work must rest with the hosting organization.

As an organization, we believe that regardless of one's educational setting (homeschool, traditional, or otherwise), parents should be empowered to choose enrichment activities for their children. This program has a clear value proposition to a homeschool family since they do not have access to the resources a school typically provides. However, in Grand Rapids, we will serve students who attend public and charter schools, which assumingly offer a suite of enrichment experiences for their students. It will be interesting to compare the use case of this program for homeschool students versus those in traditional schools.

Crafting a Theory of Action for Scale

Launching the Ecosystem For Equity helped Outschool.org to think more expansively about realizing its vision to ensure all children can love learning. At its core, this program sought to prove that families are best positioned to make the best decisions for their children when given access and information. This program will continue to thrive if we learn from the successes and failures of the pilot program with Engaged Detroit. Foremost, Outschool.org must continue to seek to understand and build trust in the communities it serves through deep listening and empathy interviews. In each community, Outschool.org must authorize a diverse group of stakeholders to co-design the rollout and implementation of the program. While providing access to resources is an easy technical fix, providing right-on-time, meaningful information proved more difficult. The next iteration of this project must think about providing information in a more expansive way that leverages the power of human connection. Before the program launches, Outschool.org must clearly articulate the outcomes and overall impact it seeks to achieve so that the organization can align resources and support in a concerted manner. If these things all happen, then Outbridge can be a vehicle to empower communities to close the enrichment gap one family at a time.

Implications for Self

During the first semester of the Ed.L.D. program, it is a rite of passage to publicly declare one's core values to faculty, peers, and the broader Harvard Graduate School of Education community. From start to finish, the exercise was a fulfilling search to uncover the motives and beliefs that guide my subconscious mindset and inform my explicit actions. On presentation day, I emphatically declared that the values of humanity, excellence, and fun drive my life. Reflecting upon my experience as a resident at Outschool.org, I recognize how these values emerged and were tested while designing and implementing the Ecosystem For Equity.

Education is a deeply personal and social endeavor. In conveying the Instructional Core, our esteemed faculty argue that learning results from the interaction between and among students, teachers, and the content (Elmore et al., 2009). I would argue that the core lacks the role that families can also play in learning, based on what I demonstrated in this project, but that is another paper for another day. Regardless, education relies on the power of human connection. Therefore, I was nervous about completing my residency at what is fundamentally and originally a technology company. Especially working remotely, I feared that I would be unable to fill my bucket of connecting with humans to improve an educational outcome.

However, my subconscious core value of humanity had a gravitational pull that I could not escape. I quickly turned what could have been a technology product into a community engagement effort. I advocated for conducting site visits and getting on the ground in Detroit for monthly visits. This approach enabled me to do work authentically and effectively. In my core, I can not advance any cause (personal or professional) unless I build meaningful connections with the people involved. Yet, I must acknowledge the constraints of this approach. It is time intensive and can limit opportunities to scale. In Detroit, I honestly could get to know most families. It will

be much more challenging in Grand Rapids when we have 400 learners. This approach will become impossible as this project scales across multiple sites simultaneously, serving exponentially more learners. I was forewarned of this dilemma many times in my career. Moving from a classroom teacher to a school principal, I was warned that I could never scale the relationships I fostered in my classroom to an entire school community. I took that as a challenge and found a way to do it. However, as I move into more systems-level roles, I recognize that this level of connection will not be as robust. I must consider ways to stay connected to individuals while driving towards a wider reach.

Throughout this project, I felt a tension with living into my value of excellence. After connecting with the humanity of the stakeholders in Detroit, I was personally convicted to deliver them the best, most excellent, and perfect solution to support their homeschooling experience. However, the work was messy. Working within a startup non-profit with an entrepreneurial spirit required me to iterate and pivot constantly. The organization demanded that I ship a minimum viable product (MVP). However, MVPs are prototypes, which are rough around the edges and often not yet excellent. At times, this ate at my core since the families and children deserved something great. However, in my quest to improve the program, I sometimes found myself chasing perfection. Perfection and excellence are not the same, but I found myself conflating the two. I had to remind myself of the Liberatory Design process, that excellent products result from continuous iteration and improvement. No solution to a complex problem will ever be perfect, let alone on the first try. Shifting this mindset, for me, was an act of vulnerability. In my past experiences, I always took care to deliver a polished product.

Nevertheless, in this case, I needed to embrace the process of iteration and adaptation. I reframed this internally as the pursuit of excellence. Rather than concentrating on the endpoint

with excellence as a value, I have learned to appreciate the process and overall pursuit of excellence.

Throughout my career, I recognized that I do my best work when I am having fun. In my prior role as a principal, my theory was that to achieve unprecedented academic achievement, I must first foster a culture where the children and adults genuinely enjoy being there. Stepping into a new organization, I was unsure if and how I could influence an existing culture from a temporary, newly created role. Further, Outschool.com had laid off a significant number of staff the week before I started, and I knew it would impact morale. At first, I entered the organization with a stiff and serious posture. I was unsure how a high-growth startup organization would react to my proclivity for fun. Eventually, I tried to influence the team culture by planning entertaining icebreaker activities to build trust and a sense of camaraderie. The team was receptive, allowing me to show up as my authentic self. Luckily, I found my team to have a similar mindset about a joyful work environment and to foster a positive organizational culture. This enabled me to “stay in the game,” as Hefetz and Linsky would say (2002). As I consider future roles and workplaces, I need to seek organizations that prioritize positive cultures, which enables me (and the overall organization) to thrive.

Beyond my core values, I changed my perspective on advancing equitable educational outcomes in the US preK-12 system. I used to think that the fundamental unit of change was through the schoolhouse. I thought the only way to achieve systemic change was by strengthening the instructional core by focusing on high-quality tasks and improving teacher quality. While I still think this is a lever of change, I no longer believe it is the only way.

After spending time with homeschooling families for this residency, I now more fully recognize that “learning happens everywhere, all the time,” as Engaged Detroit founder Bernita

Bradley often reminded me (personal communication, August 2022). Many factors influence a child's academic success, and I think the enrichment gap has long been ignored since it seemed out of our control as educators. However, technology has enabled us to close this gap in new ways, and the pandemic forced families to think more broadly about supplementing their children's education.

While I still believe in the value of public education and traditional systems, I am less convinced that they will ever be able to serve every student effectively. As I continue my career to advance my mission of ensuring all children receive an excellent and equitable education, I now hold a more holistic approach that includes a broader view of the educational ecosystem as a unit of change.

Implications for Site

Outschool.org is a young, budding startup non-profit organization that will play an important role in ensuring low-income and BIPOC children worldwide love learning. I am optimistic that this organization will continue to grow and develop into an established and innovative player in educational philanthropy and non-profit.

Outside of this strategic project, I oversaw the grant administration and program delivery for four community partners. At the middle and end of those engagements, I conducted a start-stop-continue protocol with the partners to systematically reflect on our progress and develop clear next steps and operating principles for moving forward. It is a self-explanatory three-part framework. The framework seeks to identify new processes to start and priorities to elevate, recognize points that are detrimental to the organization's health and must stop, and acknowledge those processes which should continue. I will use this opportunity to apply the framework to Outschool.org as an organization.

Start

It is imperative that the organization collaboratively update, communicate, and align around a clear mission and vision. This assertion is not to say that the organization is a rudderless ship, absent of these things. Outschool.org has a stated mission and vision. However, our focus shifted during my short tenure as priorities changed and the team grew. At this point, it would behoove the organization to clearly articulate the north star it is driving towards. This process should be collaborative and iterative. Due to the small team size, I suggest soliciting an external facilitator to guide the team through this process. Otherwise, the person facilitating will not be able to participate fully in the process, which would significantly restrict the number of voices at the table.

Creating a mission and vision statement is relatively easy. Living it is hard. It must percolate into the minds of each team member and live through each program. Workstreams must align around serving the mission. One path forward is to develop a logic model for each program. A logic model will clarify the resources, inputs, and activities we must direct toward each effort to produce specific outputs. The model will demand that the organization puts a stake in the ground about the outcomes and impact it seeks to achieve. Furthermore, each step of this process must be developed in precise alignment with the overall mission and vision of the organization. As of this writing, this work has started, and the next phase will be to actualize the written word into daily practice.

For Outbridge (formerly the E4E), Outschool.org must consider ways this can scale across communities. The program's current iteration is incredibly high-touch and requires immense dedicated manpower toward one community. Future versions of the program should prioritize building the capacity of the hosting organization to handle as many of the daily technical operations as possible (such as loading and monitoring PEX cards, enrolling students in programs, and planning and hosting community events). This shift will increase the program's scalability and improve the sustainability of the host site. One missing link in the original program design was leveraging the power of learning networks within the community to share information across families. Future design should consider this.

Additionally, Outschool.org must plant a stake in the ground when evaluating the quality of programming. We uncovered the asymmetrical access to information with parents choosing the appropriate resources; however, there is another chasm with regard to the impact of these choices. This has been a longstanding paradox within the school choice movement—*how do parents know if they made the right choices?* Outschool.org is positioned to help close that gap

by supporting features to collect formative, ongoing feedback about the resources they chose and also by tying these experiences to tangible academic outcomes. In essence, consider a way to support a double feedback loop in which parents and students can evaluate their experiences in real time, while also recommending to them the highest quality, evidence-based programs that are proven to increase educational outcomes.

Stop

Outschool.org should not rely on its past to inform its future. It feels odd suggesting this to such a young, rapidly changing organization, but it is relevant. In initial conversations designing our logic model or planning for future programming, I notice the urge to refer to the past practice as the template. Since so much of the work is in uncharted territory, it is sometimes hard to imagine what things *could be*, which makes it tempting to lean on what is known. Outschool.org should build structures (such as start-stop-continue reflections) to articulate what will stay the same and what is subject to change in the future. This advice is particularly important given the broader contextual changes surrounding the organization. When I started this residency, the "DotOrg" team was a functional group within Outschool.com. Now, the two are distinctly separate organizations. As such, our funding streams, resources, processes, and priorities have shifted accordingly. Because of this, the organization must not be shackled to the mindsets and processes of the past and be free to think of a new future.

However, that future should not be unbridled and unbounded. Put simply, stop saying "yes" to everything. Part of the fun of my work with different community partners was our green light to say yes to everything. If a community partner wanted to offer tennis lessons, we said yes. If a funder wanted to change focus areas halfway through a program, we would bend over backward to accommodate them. While it felt like we were working in our community partners'

best interests, it sometimes limited our capacity to do other, more meaningful work. Since we are a small (but mighty) team, slight deviations in priorities could cause a significant shift in focus and attention. I am reminded of Executive Director Justin Dent's quote I introduced with the problem of practice earlier, where he was "curious to know not only what we are well positioned to do, but what are we *not* best-suited to do."(personal communication, August 2022). As the organization settles on a mission, vision, and logic models, this should remain a central question.

Continue

Without question, the heart of this organization must continue as is. In so many ways, this was the most delightful team I have worked with. Outschool.org values maintaining a positive and productive organizational culture. This culture extends beyond the perfunctory feel-good messages but resonates throughout all aspects of the work. I felt this from my first day at the organization, through our in-person retreat in Portland, OR, where we bonded and strengthened relationships and continued into our day-to-day work. Holding a container for deep personal connection alongside rigorous, meaningful work begins at the top, and I attribute Justin to setting the charge. However, this culture is influenced by each individual across the team. Together, DotOrg is a unique collection of a thoughtful, passionate, and diverse group of people, where each individual is impressive in unique ways. When I joined, there were only five full-time employees, and now there are nine. When the team nearly doubled in size, I assumed that the culture would erode, at least a little. Yet, it has only strengthened. I encourage the organization to find a way to maintain this culture as it continues to grow and develop.

As the work forges ahead, continue to be bold and reject any attempt to be put into a box. No one else has done the work Outschool.org is trying to do. The organization is executing unique work that other people are only discussing. It is at the forefront of innovative

programming and seeks to address emergent problems. It works across the ecosystem, agnostic to whether learners study in schools, at home, or anywhere else. While it can be challenging to explain the work to funders, our families, and even the other side of Outschool, it is worthy.

While earlier I admonished the need for a logic model and clear, hard metrics, it is crucial to remember the power of storytelling. Although it is accurate and fulfilling to acknowledge that we have served 34,000 learners, the more compelling data comes from personal narratives. I have seen this work begin to scale, and the most inspiring parts of the journey come from the anecdotes, the text messages, and the smiles at site visits. Since it can be difficult to explain our work, storytelling is the easiest way to convey our unique value proposition. Continue to elicit and amplify the voices from the ground to demonstrate outcomes and inspire longer-term impact.

Implications for Sector

When explaining this strategic project to other educators, I am often told that “it seems a lot like an Education Scholarship Account (ESA).” I try reframing this comparison since ESAs are highly political and invoke many emotions. For the uninitiated, ESA policies are currently popular with republican policymakers. They have been rolled out in eight states: Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Mississippi, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia (EdChoice, n.d.). In Arizona, for example, if a family chooses not to enroll in their public school, they are eligible to receive “90% of the state funding that would have otherwise been allocated to the school district or charter school,” or about \$7,000 to spend on approved educational resources (Arizona Department of Education, 2023). This approach is often derided as a “neo-voucher” that diverts money from the public school system (Greene, 2021, para. 1).

While there are apparent similarities between the E4E and ESAs, there are also clear distinctions. Foremost, this project does not divert any funding from public schools but is funded entirely through philanthropic donations. Additionally, the E4E model does not require a family to leave the public school system to access the funds. While we piloted this program with homeschool families in Engaged Detroit, it is designed to be agnostic to the educational setting of the learner. The next phase of this project seeks to prove this by providing funds to learners who attend traditional public and charter schools.

Education has become a political lightning rod. The field is so politicized that nuanced, complicated approaches are boiled down to a simple dichotomy of good or bad. As such, our sector has been reduced to idealogues that unashamedly assert the “right” way to do education. This logical fallacy allows us to avoid difficult conversations and ignores unique contexts. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to meeting the unique needs of every learner in this country.

Wealthy families realize this and supplement each child's education in many ways. However, our most marginalized populations in this country need access to robust and specific enrichment the most. As a field, we must invoke an ecosystem approach to serving every family. While our traditional public schools must play a significant part in this ecosystem, they cannot hold this burden alone. We must find a way to connect children with a wide range of resources targeted to their unique needs.

In most cases, parents are best positioned to make many of these decisions. In schools, we tend to prescribe what is best for other people's children. Instead, we must empower families as active partners to build a robust educational system around their children.

On the first day of her class, *The Why, What, and How of School, Family, and Community Partnerships*, Dr. Karen Mapp clearly distinguishes between parent involvement and family engagement (personal communication, January 2022). After conducting this strategic project, I am convinced of the need to take parent involvement and engagement one step further. The field should consider ways to evolve from family engagement to family *empowerment*. I envision a world where at the household level each family is authorized to act with agency to make the best decisions for each child. Unfortunately, many families do not have the access or information to act this way in our current systems. However, those with wealth and privilege most certainly approach education in this way and create systems to serve their children rather than being subject to existing systems.

However, this notion of "choice" within our sector elicits many emotions and the conversation quickly devolves into a right or wrong dichotomous argument. In framing the debate in the concept of supply and demand, allowing parents to choose their educational setting (public, private, charter, homeschool, etc.), focuses on the demand axis. Simply, just give parents

choices, and trust the market to regulate itself. Good schools will become popular, and poor schools will be forced to improve or shut down. However, others argue that this demand-driven approach leads to inequitable outcomes, where the highest-quality resources are reserved for the privileged few, as many people do not have access to any high-quality educational options. Further, the current iteration of a choice-based model provides access to resources, but little information for parents to navigate their choices, which my project proved to be a critical design feature.

Critics of school choice assert it is better to focus efforts on the supply side and ensure that all public schools have an adequate baseline of quality and resources. However, this is easier said than done. Since No Child Left Behind was passed over 20 years ago, schools have been held to a high standard to improve. Yet, overall academic achievement rates have not improved, and massive achievement gaps continue to persist (Wood & Rose, 2022, paras. 2-3). My stance is that we must tend to both the supply and demand forces in this dynamic state and unequivocally resist the argument that there is a singular way to ensure all students have access to an excellent and equitable education.

In writing this reflection, I recognize that I am breaking from my tribe in some ways. However, there is no singular solution to fix the vexing issues in American PreK-12 education. I am not putting a stake in the ground that homeschooling is *the* solution to educating our youth. Nor do I suggest that public schools cannot work for most kids—they can. Instead, I assert that no single approach will work for every child. We must open our toolbox to add a variety of resources and methods. However, in our current political climate, any suggestion other than traditional public schools is ridiculed as anti-teacher and diverting public funds. We must reject

this either/or dichotomy and find a way to work together across lines of political and philosophical differences.

Our public schools are where most of the children are. If we want to systemically improve equitable results for all children, schools must be an active part of the solution. However, our schools are overburdened. As the son of two public school teachers and as someone who spent my entire career before this project teaching and leading in public schools, I can attest to how hard individuals are working on behalf of this mission. However, “sixty percent of teachers say they experience job-related stress frequently or always,” and they are burning out at alarming rates (Will & Najarro, 2021, para. 5). We are asking them to do too much. For instance, “more than 40 percent of school districts” have dedicated around \$1.7 billion for high-dosage tutoring in the wake of COVID-19 (Arthur, 2022, para. 2). However, this often requires districts and school principals to design new programs, often staffed by their already-stressed teachers, in addition to running a full school day.

What if, instead, we empowered families to access these resources outside school? Some promising policies are in the works, such as in Michigan, where I have spent so much time. Democrat Governor Gretchen Whitmer has proposed a “plan that would have provided publicly funded scholarships of up to \$1,000 for elementary students to get private tutoring or reading instruction” (Mauriello, 2023, para. 15). However, the plan is already facing political headwinds. Some members of her own party demean the plan since it allows public funds to be spent on private tutors, which is too “Republican.” Nevertheless, the same article acknowledges that “when Whitmer put forward the idea last May, she found little traction in a legislature controlled by Republicans reluctant to give her any policy wins during an election year” (Mauriello, 2023, para. 5).

It is a shame that our approach to education has become as polarized as every other topic in our country. I urge the field, and will personally dedicate myself, towards working across lines of difference to support our students. We must reject wholesale notions of what is right and wrong and dig into the nuanced complexity that these systemic problems require.

Whenever I become frustrated with the prospect of moving this work forward, I spend time with children. Whether with my niece and nephew or observing classes with our community partners, I am constantly refreshed by our youth. Their energy and creativity will be required to help fix this mess we have made for them. It is up to us to start cleaning it up so they can live in the future they deserve.

Conclusion

Outschool.org is a nonprofit that envisions a future where all children love learning, particularly racially marginalized and low-income students. Outschool.org has roots in its parent company, Outschool, which has a massive reach and has provided supplemental, enriching classes in a live, online format to over 1 million learners. However, Outschool.org is at an inflection point, seeking to understand how it is best positioned to fulfill its mission and revise its programmatic strategy accordingly. Particularly, Outschool.org is interested in closing the enrichment gap, noting that students of color and low-income students are far less likely to participate in enriching, supplemental learning experiences outside of school. My strategic project was to design and implement the Ecosystem For Equity (E4E) to ensure families could take advantage of a wide range of high-quality, enriching educational resources. The program was co-designed and launched with a homeschool collective, Engaged Detroit.

When designing the program, it was imperative first to understand the fundamental Job To Be Done by homeschool families in Detroit and seek to understand the problem they were trying to solve by homeschooling their children. Engaging in a series of empathy interviews and visits to Detroit made it clear that the homeschool families in Detroit valued having choice, appreciated being in a community with other homeschool families, and ultimately felt like better parents when homeschooling. Therefore, building a program aligned with these principles was essential. Further, the research base asserted that families needed two things to exercise agency and close the enrichment gap: access and information. Together, they needed access to affordable, high-quality resources and the information to navigate a complex and confusing ecosystem of options to meet the needs of their children.

Considering the job to be done in Detroit, combined with the research base, I designed and launched the first iteration of the Ecosystem For Equity. I provided each family with a pre-loaded debit card, authorized to work at specific types of vendors and loaded with \$270 per learner. Simultaneously, I built a system for sharing information to build family capacity and confidence in navigating the ecosystem by leveraging a website and monthly in-person community engagement events.

Once launched, I monitored spending habits and conducted interviews to learn how families were spending their funds. Families employed a modular architecture, building a unique experience, piece by piece, to support each of their children. Many families were creative in combining in-person resources from their *local ecosystem* alongside online experiences from the *virtual ecosystem*.

Overall, the pilot launch was successful, and several families spent thousands of dollars to close the enrichment gap. However, there was a discrepancy in spending across families. Quickly, several super-users emerged, fully tapping into the resource, while many other families did not spend any funds at all. Considering the thesis, all families had equal access to the ecosystem. However, the disparate spending suggested that families needed more information to navigate the ecosystem and make a spending plan. Moving forward, the E4E will require more robust systems of information sharing to ensure greater and more equitable participation in the program. Though the initial results are promising, it is too early to tell how effective the E4E was in closing the enrichment gap by providing more direct access and information to families.

At this point, the E4E is poised to scale to a new community in Western Michigan to serve four times as many learners, most of whom attend public schools. Learning from the pilot experience in Engaged Detroit is essential to ensure the program makes substantial progress

toward closing the enrichment gap. Outschool.org has proven itself to be a nimble and responsive organization and will need to continue to be so in order to fulfill the mission it seeks to achieve.

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Appendix A: The Ecosystem For Equity Navigator Website



OUTSCHOOL.ORG

Find the program for you:

Domain

Format Ages

edmentum Exact Path
\$0 FREE for Engaged Detroit families

3 4 5 6 7 8 + more (10)

[Enroll](#)

Grip Tape
\$0 FREE

14 15 16 17 18 19

[Enroll](#)

Detroit Food Academy
\$0 FREE

12 13 14 15 16 17 + more (2)

[Enroll](#)

Reconstruction
\$10 per class

5 6 7 8 9 10 + more (10)

[Enroll](#)

Outschool
\$15 per class

3 4 5 6 7 8 + more (10)

[Enroll](#)

Connected Camps
\$18 per class

8 9 10 11 12 13

[Enroll](#)

MSU Community Music School
\$20 per class

1 2 3 4 5 6 + more (14)

[Enroll](#)

DAPCEP
\$30 per camp

[Enroll](#)

Partner
DAPCEP

Explanation
DAPCEP's mission is to increase the number of historically underrepresented students who are motivated and academically prepared to pursue degrees leading to STEM careers. We achieve this with supplemental academic programs for Pre-K to 12th grade students by partnering with schools and universities to develop and facilitate engaging curriculum. We are driven to increase the number of students who graduate from high school and pursue degrees and/or careers in STEM fields and serve 11,000 students annually.

Core program models include:


- Six-eight week courses on Saturdays in the Spring and Fall (Saturday Series)
- Multi-year, cohort model programs
- Pop-Up STEM workshops and STEM Days
- Signature corporate collaboration programs
- College prep courses
- Curated in-school STEM programs

Format
In Person

Ages
3 4 5 6 7 8 + View More (10)

Cost
\$30 per camp

Website
<https://www.dapcep.org/>



Appendix B: Spending by Merchant Sorted by Total Spent (\$)

<i>Vendor</i>	Total Spent (\$)	Total # of Transactions
Lakeshore Learning Materials	\$3,546	21
Outschool	\$1,390	38
Exact Path by edmentum	\$850	34
Detroit Dance Center	\$616	5
YMCA of Metro Detroit	\$590	6
Motor City Track Club	\$510	1
MSU Community Music School	\$480	2
Aqua Tots Swim School	\$459	3
Tinkergarten	\$383	1
N Zone Sports Greater Detroit	\$315	1
DAPCEP	\$300	5
The Body Of Praize Dance	\$200	1
Mills Gymnastics	\$147	1
Enrich Christian Homeschool Co-Op	\$147	1
Education.com	\$120	2
Great Homeschool Convention	\$79	1
Charles H. Wright Museum	\$78	1
Urban Intellectuals	\$76	2
100K Scholars	\$75	1
City Of Detroit Recreation Center	\$73	1
STEMVILLE	\$60	1
Painting With A Twist	\$32	1
Keep Growing Detroit	\$15	1
Grand Total	\$10,541	131

