

## PODS IN ACTION:

# Engaged Detroit

SPURRED BY PANDEMIC, A BLACK HOMESCHOOL CO-OP IN DETROIT HELPS FAMILIES THRIVE AS THEY EDUCATE THEIR OWN CHILDREN

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Lengthy school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic were challenging across the country. In cities like Detroit, where many students already were struggling, the difficulties for students and families were compounded. Bernita Bradley, a social entrepreneur and education-reform advocate, launched Engaged Detroit to help Black families interested in homeschooling “take control” of their children’s learning. CRPE interviewed coaches, parents, and the founder of Engaged Detroit during summer 2021 to learn more about the organization.

### KEY LESSONS:

1

Community leaders who cultivate strong relationships with families and external partners and who demonstrate flexibility and agility in meeting challenges can bring much-needed stability to an educational crisis. Such leaders listen deeply, communicate often, value collaboration, and anticipate and meet families’ needs.

2

External partnerships were mutually beneficial for families and partners alike. The collaboration provided enrichment and exposure for families and increased partners’ understanding of the benefits of expanding their enrollment to include nontraditional educational groups.

3

Families are well suited to attend to their children’s educational and developmental needs once they are confident in their ability to educate their own children through Engaged Detroit coaching.

4

A community of like-minded individuals, with cultural values and mores in common, provides a foundation for adults to feel supported and empowered to envision and achieve goals that may initially seem unattainable.

5

External sources of funding are crucial to ensure that all families who want to homeschool their kids have access to the resources they need. That includes technology, curriculum, supplies, and enriching experiences, as well as support from knowledgeable members of their communities. This is a missing piece in our systems as they currently exist.

## No More Waiting: A Social Entrepreneur Helps Families Lead Learning

Engaged Detroit is a homeschool cooperative established on August 25, 2020, by Bernita Bradley, a social entrepreneur, educational consultant, advocate, and parent. The co-op supports a culturally relevant educational approach that empowers families to educate their children based on their goals and values, including project-based, hands-on, and real-world learning supplemented by extracurricular and enrichment activities.

The organization offers several strands of support and advocacy. In ongoing, one-to-one sessions, paid coaches support families as they select curriculum and establish learning goals and objectives for their children that reflect each family's values. Through robust partnerships with philanthropic organizations, families also are equipped with educational materials and supplies. The co-op also provides enrichment opportunities and field trips through partnerships with more than 30 organizations.

Engaged Detroit serves 36 children between the ages of 2 to 17 years old, whose families participate in weekly group meetings in addition to individual coaching sessions. An additional 300 families have been provided with homeschooling resources and supplies since the group began. Though the initiative began as a short-term response to students' disconnection from school during the pandemic, nearly all families interviewed plan to continue homeschooling or remain involved in the future.

Michigan is among the nation's least-restrictive homeschool states, with policies Bradley described as "fluid." Homeschooling can take many forms: an individual parent as full-time teacher; a hybrid model where a child primarily learns at home but takes elective classes at a local public school; or a group model where families form a support group, co-op, or independent school.

Bradley had initially hoped to create a school. But after listening to parents, she discovered that each family had different ideas about what they wanted to achieve, so she decided to form an organization of parents supporting one another.

"To have just one model was not indicative of what our families needed," she said. "That's why we ended up becoming a co-op, so that everybody's cooperating to make sure one another is good," Bradley said.

## Community Connections and Cultural Capital Bolsters Families' Strengths

Bradley's leadership has helped Engaged Detroit grow and thrive. First, she had a track record of cultivating community partnerships, which she leveraged to direct local assets and benefits to the group. She also established respectful relationships with parents, which encouraged families to volunteer their strengths, talents, and networks in service to the cooperative. And she sought philanthropic support, including a major grant from the National Parents Union, which has helped hire coaches, provide computers and other supplies, and offer families opportunities for enrichment. Engaged Detroit has become an exemplar of cooperative startups and been the subject of several national news stories covering the rise of Black homeschooling in the United States for its entrepreneurial origins, mutual-support model, and commitment to helping families.

### Growing Beyond a Crisis Response

What began as a project to share homeschool information with a loosely associated group of parents evolved into Engaged Detroit.

In response to the educational uncertainty and safety concerns that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic, a concerned group of Black families coalesced over social media in summer 2020. The pandemic had thrust parents into a trifecta of new roles—advocate, researcher, and educator—and they sought out like-minded peers who were also navigating whether they would homeschool for the 2020–21 school year.

This necessitated new sources of social support. Homeschooling could empower families to take full control of the decision-making process and find innovative pedagogical tactics that would best serve their children. Where they may have formerly advocated for their children as outsiders to the school system, they found themselves researching policies and procedures that would enable them to educate their own children.

Engaged Detroit was established to provide the supports that families needed. It began as a pilot with 12 families, grew to more than 20 at the start of the 2020–21 school year, and has since expanded to 32 families. During summer 2020, educational coaches provided pro bono expertise via Facebook Live group sessions. Their roles have evolved since; coaches are now paid, with one lead coach and additional coaches who provide private, one-on-one mentoring. The growth of family involvement was via word of mouth, social-media networks, local homeschool networking events, and organizational affiliations.

Engaged Detroit sought to help parents “take ownership of educating their children back into their own hands,” Bradley said. The goal was “getting parents the support that they need to make sure their kids stay engaged and learn, because kids were really tapping out and families were crying out for help but [weren't] getting the help from the school systems they were in,” she said. “That was charter, traditional public and even some private schools. . . . They just weren't getting that support.”

Months into school closures caused by the pandemic, school district leaders were asking families to be patient as they figured things out, she said. Meanwhile, Engaged Detroit was corralling community partners and enlisting the support of parent coaches. Bradley said parents could not wait.

“They weren’t telling parents what they were going to do as far as planning to reopen schools, and parents were scrambling for answers. . . . Parents were crying out, saying, ‘My child cannot do this.’ Like, ‘Why is my child forced to be online for six hours with a teacher who barely shows up or [is] just yelling at them or whatever?’ [I was] just trying to help families navigate how they could do it on their own and if they saw a path for doing it on their own and being successful, then do it.”

## Social Entrepreneurs Responded to Crisis as External Partners Lent Support

Initially, the idea was to create a “pop-up” for families to gain access to educational materials. This signaled the entrepreneurial spirit of Engaged Detroit—rather than responding to whatever educational offerings local schools were putting in place for the 2020–21 school year, the organization would support parents to explore options that may have seemed otherwise unattainable.

Currently, families do not pay to be involved in Engaged Detroit. External financial support helped establish it as a stable, ongoing source of homeschooling assistance. Engaged Detroit received a grant from the National Parents Union through the VELA Education Fund, as well as support from a partnership with the Skillman Foundation. Engaged Detroit also has cultivated an in-kind network of more than 30 supporters.

Said Bradley, “Before it was kind of pop-up opportunities, and then the funding began to have a strategic timeframe in which we wanted to help families throughout the entire year and to pay those coaches to actually do that work to share the information and help families.”

Engaged Detroit’s leadership structure is nontraditional. Although there are assigned roles for Bradley, as administrator and for coaches, they collaborate in the running of the organization, and there is flexibility in who completes tasks.

This flexibility helped the organization adapt to shifting needs during the pandemic. One coach noted that, like many organizations, Engaged Detroit began with an assumption that the pandemic would last a few months and that it would need to support families through a temporary crisis. However, that changed when, after a few months, they realized, “We have parents who were like, ‘Wow, this is great. I’m never putting my kid back in school.’”

These efforts have borne fruit for students, families said. The [COVID-19 pandemic illuminated and exacerbated existing problems](#) that had long existed: an unresponsive school system, a digital divide, and inequitable access to needed resources. Parents found the option to homeschool as a “silver lining” in an otherwise untenable situation.

As one parent stated,

“I know my daughter. One of the reasons why I took her out of school was because I reached out to the teachers a couple of times and to let them know that she was kind of struggling with the virtual learning and finding out what other options we had. They never got back with me, and it just became a point where it was just frustrating. Instead of my child being frustrated and not wanting to learn, I took that into my own hands and decided that she would be homeschooled, and I felt like I could do a better job.”

When parents asked students what they like about homeschooling, they typically cited flexibility and responsiveness. For example, according to one parent, her daughter said: “Mommy, you take your time. You teach me, you actually talk to me, you help get me involved in everything. . . . My teachers used to yell at me.”

## A Community of Education Advocacy

Engaged Detroit parents sought out a community of Black homeschoolers that was more than curriculum or school materials but also an opportunity to network and share resources. It was a chance for children to create social and emotional bonds with other children and for parents to share best homeschooling practices.

### *Advocacy, Agency, and Community*

The importance of advocacy, both for self and others, is a central tenet of Engaged Detroit. Families share a common belief in the power of unity gained by harnessing the strengths of the collective to not only help their own families but also to uplift the community. Engaged Detroit is truly a “mutual aid” initiative, as the administrator, coaches, and parents all ensure that the students and their families have the resources they need to thrive.

As one coach said,

“Accessing things individually really is not where the power is. The power is for a group of people to mobilize their efforts and to move as a community to get resources that they need. . . . But when we mobilize as a group of parents, and we say, ‘Hey, all these kids need these resources,’ it shifts things, and schools push back on that. It’s the same thing with getting access to resources. It’s more effective when it’s done as a group.”

A strong sense of community pervades the cooperative, reflected in the exercise of communal practices—especially the sharing of resources and information—which is the glue of the collective. It is the “consistency of consistent community,” that keeps families engaged, according to a co-op parent. This means families could connect with each other as peers and didn’t have to navigate issues of cultural fluency or power differentials that often affect education.

Another parent spoke about having a background in education and a desire to homeschool—but also a need to find support to navigate the shift from simply being at home with their child to taking on a new role as their child’s primary educator.

“I had a desire to homeschool my children. My background is in education, and I wanted to find other people who had a strong interest in homeschooling, and not just being at home with their kids just teaching. It’s the difference between having the mindset, I’m going to homeschool, versus I’m just at home interacting with my child. It’s a whole different mindset, and it was a big, pivotal shift with COVID-19. I was thinking about putting my son somewhere for maybe just two or three days a week, just to get him some social interaction,” the parent said. “But when I found out about Engaged Detroit, I was really excited just to be in that network of other parents. Especially parents that are Black, or minorities in general.”

### *Culturally Relevant and Customized Curriculum*

“It’s been good to watch kids be able to be in environments that honor them,” an Engaged Detroit coach said. A culturally affirming learning environment grounds and empowers parents in ways that inspire confidence in themselves as teachers and in their children as learners. Participants interact with other Black homeschoolers, which motivates them to continue as they exchange triumphs and challenges and provides a safe space for the exchange of resources they may not have found on their own.

Parents and coaches alike shared the importance of Black children learning about their heritage to gain a better understanding of their history, themselves, and the resilience of their

people. Families consider education beyond the classroom essential to inoculate their children for the world they will face. As one parent said, “My son is a little Black boy who is looked upon as a cute, smart, and sweet child now. . . . But I know when he gets to be a teenager, he’s not going to be looked on as that. I need my son to be well equipped to face different challenges without me.”

Student-centered and student-led learning were common themes in parents’ accounts of their homeschooling experiences through Engaged Detroit. Families are empowered to select curriculum and arrange supplementary out-of-school opportunities, such as field trips based on the subjects that pique their child’s interest and get them excited about learning. As one parent said, homeschooling is a way to have an “individualized tailored curriculum” that is “keeping up with her academic pace.”

This personalized learning stands in contrast to what students typically did in traditional school environments, one parent said, because they could quickly capitalize on students’ curiosity to go beyond the basics. As one parent explained,

“I think we just require too little of our young scholars. My motivation for homeschooling is really controlling the information that my daughter receives, as well as keeping up with her academic pace. I just never want to slow her down. Really it’s an individualized tailored curriculum [that] I prefer. That works with homeschooling. . . . I do want a faith-based curriculum. For me it’s a holistic approach, it’s not just the math, science, art, everything disjointed. It really is just layers and layers of academics. You can just start somewhere and touch on all of those points. If you’re cooking, you do have math, but you have science and you have art. It doesn’t have to be disjointed. That helps instead of her going to a traditional school program where she has to go to this subject at this time and it be kind of cut like that. We can pick up and master and not just gloss over things too and take a deeper dive.”

### *Veteran Homeschoolers as Coaches*

Critical to the success of Engaged Detroit is the role that coaches play. Coaches provided “morale support,” as one coach called it, encouraging parents to believe in their abilities to lead learning, as some parents initially questioned their self-efficacy to educate their children if they had not finished college. Parents also were concerned by stereotypes of homeschooled kids having “no social connection,” as one parent said.

While each coach has a unique philosophy of education, including their core beliefs about teaching and learning and the role of education, they shared a common goal: to help parents tap into their children’s innate interests and make learning a joyful, lifelong endeavor. Bradley explained,

“Each one of our coaches is a little bit different. . . . We have one coach who’s like, ‘Throw the whole system in the garbage.’ Then we have a coach who’s more like, ‘Okay, here’s ways you can educate your child, as well as here’s partner groups that can educate your child.’ Then we have another coach who’s like, ‘It’s okay if I educate my child up to this portion to prepare them, so that when they go to public school or a charter school, whatever, that they are equipped to learn and keep their education on pace and grow well.’”

One coach describes her role as follows: “What we were taught in the traditional education system in regards to going to a government-funded, or even private, but an organized a systematic educational, or organized education system; and the children are fully told what to do, what to think, what to learn—where the focus is being told what to do, and how to do it, as opposed to tapping into who they are, and what their interests and desires are, I would say that is the big shift or one of the big shifts.”

Prior in-school disciplinary issues were mentioned in several parent interviews, ranging from a teacher yelling to an out-of-school suspension. As one coach noted, “Schools require parents to be co-conspirators with their program.” That coach saw an opportunity in her role to reframe the discipline conversation and persuaded parents not to replicate school rules at home, such as strict scheduling, attire, and limiting where learning could take place.

## Engaged Detroit Homeschoolers Plan for a Long Future

Engaged Detroit has become an exemplar of Black homeschooling cooperative startups and been the subject of national and regional news headlines that tell a compelling story about a current trend in homeschooling. What is replicable are the best practices modeled. They began with the resources they had in hand—an entrepreneurial term known as “minimum viable product,” a handful of coaches, families and community partners, and built as they went along.

Engaged Detroit parents sought out a community of Black homeschoolers that offered more than curriculum and school materials. Together they created a viable sense of community with a common purpose and an opportunity for parents to network and share resources and best practices, as well as for children to create social and emotional bonds with other students.

When asked what would strengthen the organization, members said that new policies and procedures for capacity building and organizational growth are essential for ensuring the future success of Engaged Detroit. The co-op’s greatest barrier to stability and growth was funding. Given the positive experiences of families in Engaged Detroit and other cooperatives, policymakers should support families who are homeschooling. This could include providing funding directly to families, such as through education savings accounts, providing high-quality curriculum such as that provided by [outschool.com](https://www.outschool.com) and other resources, supporting community-led efforts to help families navigate homeschooling, and providing access to educational opportunities with public funds.

Engaged Detroit families say they have seen their children become more joyful as they have made learning contextual, culturally responsive, and relevant to their life experiences. In addition, parents have become more confident and engaged as their teachers. These are positive outcomes that policymakers should actively support.



## About This Project

In the fall of 2020, the Center on Reinventing Public Education launched a national learning agenda on the small pandemic learning communities known as pods. We set out to understand the learning-pod landscape with an eye toward surfacing lessons that can outlast the pandemic and help the field invest in learning experiences that better meet the needs of students, families, and educators.

As part of that work, we identified more than a dozen pods and leaders on which to base a series of case studies, which we hope will inform and influence the field. This case study was primarily based on interviews with Engaged Detroit founder Bernita Bradley, three coaches, and five parent members in June 2021.

### Bonus Material

- [Black Families Homeschooling Isn't New. We've Been Doing This](#) (CitizenEd)
- [Pandemic Learning May Have Made Some Black Parents Homeschool Converts](#) (WDET)
- [A Record Number of Parents Are Turning to Homeschooling](#) (Amanpour and Company)
- [The Rise of Black Homeschooling](#) (The New Yorker)
- [She Advocates for Us: Social entrepreneur builds homeschooling network for Detroit families](#) (Model D)
- [Homeschooling Exploded among Black, Asian, and Latino Students. But It Wasn't Just the Pandemic](#) (Washington Post)
- [How Engaged Detroit is Helping Students and Families #MeettheMoment](#) (VELA Education Fund)