

Helping children: Kids in Detroit talk about school, parents and sex

Katrease Stafford, Detroit Free Press 8:51 a.m. EST November 21, 2016



(Photo: Brian Kaufman, Detroit Free Press)

This is one in a series of stories on efforts to improve children's lives. The Free Press spent a year talking to children across Detroit about how they live and what issues they see as most important. Safe neighborhoods, schools, job opportunities, teen pregnancy and help for young parents were among key issues raised. Based on these conversations, as well as community meetings and a poll, the Free Press looked at efforts both local and around the country. This project was done with a \$75,000 grant from the Solutions Journalism Network, New York-based nonprofit that partners with newsrooms around the country to do projects that focus on solutions to social issues.

Beyond crime, students interviewed by the Free Press expressed concerns about a range of other issues. Here's what they had to say:

About school

Karlen Staniel was nervous when he began filling out college applications several months ago. He recalled feeling he wasn't adequately prepared for college.

"You go to a school in the suburbs, and they are actually learning what's on the ACT," Karlen, 18, said. "In DPS (the Detroit Public Schools Community District), I looked at that test and I asked someone about it, they said they didn't know nothing on there. DPS did not prepare me for the ACT. It was so stuff on it that I knew, but some of that stuff, I know for sure I was never taught."

Karlen, a recent graduate of Cody High School, focused on his grades and began his freshman year at Michigan State University this fall. He said if he were to return to Detroit to raise a family, he would seek alternatives for his children's education.

"I honestly wouldn't recommend DPS for my kids," he said. "I've been in DPS kindergarten through 12th grade, and I don't want my kids in this."

Worries are not confined to the Detroit school district.

Kayla Lloyd, a 16-year-old who attends the Detroit Public Safety Academy, a charter school on Rosa Parks Boulevard, said she also is worried that she not being prepared for the next step after high school.

"We take the SAT next year, and they're not getting us ready for that at all," Kayla said.

Even the district's most celebrated schools are not without challenges.

Cass Tech student Aryanna Dorsey, 16, said she is receiving a quality education, but that the school hasn't always had enough supplies.

"For a long time, they didn't have enough books for how many students the Rosedale Park resident said. "So keep the books at school."

Chance Carson, 17, said that he felt his education was inadequate. He now wishes all students in Detroit had access to the kinds of resources available at Cass and similar schools.



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"I wanted to go to Cass because I felt like it was a school where I could better myself," Chance said. "The middle school I went to wasn't the most prestigious. They couldn't do much for you. I felt like me coming to Cass was me breaking the barrier and becoming less of a statistic."

The choice for some students? Attend schools outside Detroit.

Tanell McCalebb, 17, said attending the Michigan Collegiate Academy in Warren has moved him closer to realizing his dreams.

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Tanell McCaleb, 17, of Detroit, credits his school environment with helping him to thrive. "If I didn't come here, if I didn't have football, I'd probably be in juvenile or I'd probably be gone," he said. (Photo: Eric Seals, Detroit Free Press)

"If I didn't come here, if I didn't have football, I'd probably be in juvenile or I'd probably be gone," he said.

According to the academy's administration, the school has 420 high school students and 160 middle school students, 85% of whom are from various parts of Detroit.

Tanell's classmate, 17-year-old Ervin Butler, said the school's staff has been critical to his development, even beyond education.



John Garrett, 14, wants to see all children in Detroit be able to take advantage of educational opportunities, but fears "there are more opportunities in the suburbs," he said. (Photo: Elaine Cromie, Detroit Free Press)

"They don't want to just teach school work. ... They want to teach you how to be successful in life and give you that discipline so you can pass that on to others," he said.

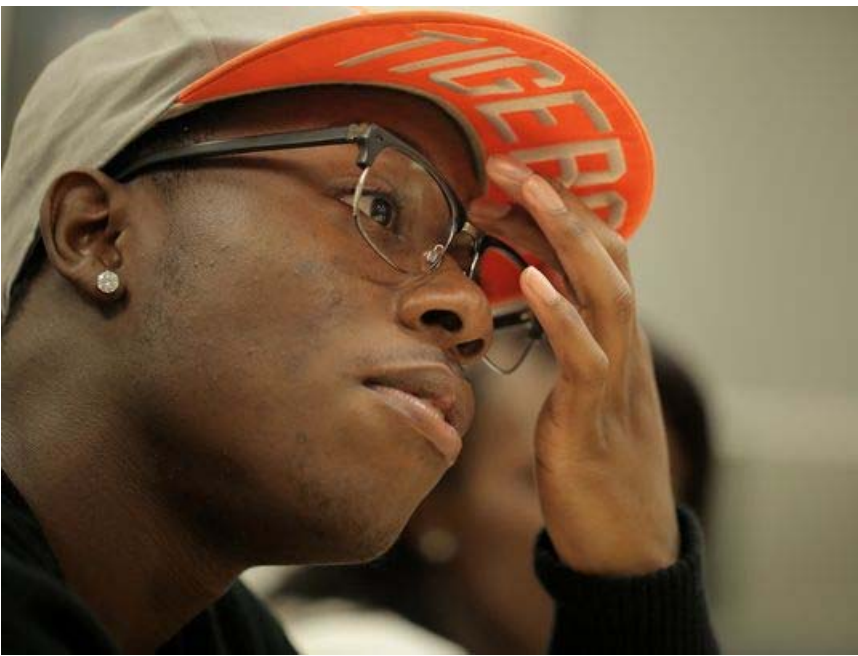
Some Detroiters have chosen private schools for their children.

John Garrett, a 14-year-old ninth grader at University of Detroit Jesuit High School, said he's appreciative of having access to a quality education. According to the high school's website, tuition for this academic year is \$12,375.

John, who lives in Rosedale Park, said he wishes there were more opportunities for children living in the city to obtain a quality education like his.

"I think there are more opportunities in the suburbs," he said.

About mentors



Charles English, 17, is pushing himself to realize his dream of attending Columbia University in New York. (Photo: Brian Kaufman, Detroit Free Press)

Cass Tech student Charles English, who lives off Woodward on the border straddling Highland Park and Detroit, said he's one step closer to attending dream school, Columbia University in New York, because of support from family and others. English said his mother has been his rock, along with several adults he met at Cass.

"That's been my dream forever," Charles, 17, said. "I have so many mentors here. I remember I said to my main mentor (principal Lisa Phillips) I couldn't go to Columbia. She asked why, then she told me, 'If you believe you can do it, you can.' It took me forever to realize my own strength."

But not everyone is that lucky.

Matthew Jones, an 18-year-old senior at the University Preparatory Academy charter school, said he believes many problems youths are facing can be traced to a lack of mentors.

"A lot of kids, they feel like they have no one in their corner," said Matthew, who lives in Rosedale Park. "I think mentors might be the solution. If they give them the support, they'll have better grades and want to be more."

Chance agrees that youths need more mentors. He said his two main mentors — his godfather and uncle — helped steer him in the right direction.

"They have taught me right from wrong," he said. "I used to talk a lot of slang, but after a while of hanging with my uncle, I began to speak more maturely."

Chance said he also gained another mentor, drama teacher Marilyn McCormick, once he started attending Cass and began acting.

"She is your mother; your best friend, your mean teacher when she needs to be, and nice when you need it," Chance said. "She has introduced me to people, as well, who have encouraged me. I think everyone needs that person in their life."

Danzel Coleman, 18, who volunteers through a youth program sponsored by the Neighborhood Service Organization, said he hopes to be in a position soon where he can help young Detroiters become successful and have role models to follow. For Coleman, being part of NSO gave him strength to pursue his passion.

"I want to stay here and try and give back to the community," said Danzel, who lives on the east side. "They (kids) need someone to look up to. Some children grow up with a missing parent in the home. ... I got a couple older brothers, and their lives didn't go that well, so they taught me not to make the same mistakes that they did. ... NSO motivates me."



Some Detroit children find recreational activities outside the city. Metro Cheer and Dance group, based in Livonia, offers support and encouragement, girls say. "They comfort us and push us to where you need to go," 10-year-old Aliyah Kendrick explained. (Photo: Salwan Georges, Detroit Free Press)

For 10-year-old Aliyah Kendrick, participating in the Livonia-based Metro Cheer and Dance organization has allowed her to be surrounded by supportive adults, including gym owner and director Perrmella Harris.

"They comfort us and push us to where you need to go," Aliyah said.

Krisshawn Cherry-Cross, 15, said participating in the dance team has been a place to grow.

"Since we're all around the same age and girls, we all understand each other," said Krisshawn, who lives near Greenfield and Fenkell. "And if we need help with something, Coach Harris will help."

Karlen said finding a mentor not only helped him gain new friends, such as fellow classmate Michael Drayton, but it also helped him become more serious about school.

The mentor was Edmund Lewis Jr., founder and executive director of Minority Males for Higher Education, which focuses on helping teens succeed. Lewis works closely with students at the Cody High School Academy of Public Leadership and the Cody High School of Medical and Community Health as well as with students at five elementary and middle schools.

Karlen was accepted into his dream school, Michigan State University in East Lansing, this year and plans to major in biochemistry. Michael accepted a football scholarship to attend Siena Heights University in Adrian. Both are first-generation college students.

"I just got to make that transition into being a college student and find myself," Karlen said. "My dream is, I want to own something. I want to open up a business and get my degree. I want to build my own little empire and just invest in myself."

About parents

Desaray Harris, 18, has watched some of her friends struggle. They lack what she says every child should have: strong parenting and a good family support system.

"I feel like a parent is supposed to teach you everything," said Desaray, who lives near Warren and Evergreen on the city's west side. "They can build you up so when you get older, you're not struggling. A lot of my friends, the parents they have act like they're teenagers themselves. Instead of having a parent, they're really hanging out with a friend."

Chance said many of the friends he grew up didn't have much guidance, which he believes has a profound impact on how a child develops into an adult.

"There are kids who don't have the best situation at home because their parent isn't around, and that's how it branches off into other things," he said. "The kids that are always in trouble, a lot of times, the parents just aren't there for them or they just don't care."

Aryanna Dorsey, who lives in Rosedale Park, said it can be hard to succeed without guidance and help from a parent.

"They might feel like no one cares about them," Aryanna, 16, said. "I do believe there is a lack of parents, and because of that, kids don't necessarily get the attention they need.

"Like a single parent or (a parent) who has to work all the time might not be able to help her child with her homework."

About sex and babies

Eighteen-year-old Matthew Jones says a lack of parental guidance is a factor in teen pregnancy. Youths "do reckless stuff," he said, "then they end up relying on their parents to take care of the kids."

Candice Smith, 17, a student in 12th grade at Pathways Academy, a charter school on East Jefferson in Detroit that serves primarily teens who are already pregnant or are parents, said schools should provide birth control. She said she came to Pathways because it provides daycare for her 6-month-old son.

"I didn't have anyone to watch my child," she said.

The school, which opened in 2014 and serves about 250 students in grades 7-12, has an on-site day care that serves kids from 6 weeks old until they enter kindergarten. It also offers students van transportation.

Dezirae Mack, 16, also a 12th-grader at Pathways, said more sex education should be taught in school. She attended a different Detroit high school before enrolling in Pathways.

"We have the classes now here at Pathways, but not before," said Dezirae, who has a 5-month-old daughter.

Tuvall Howard, 20, also in 12th grade at Pathways, said when his son, now 2, was born, "me and my son's mother, we were having a hard time at school ... because now we had a newborn child on the way, and financial problems. ... That kind of drew our attention away from school. And we needed more help about learning to care for a child."

He said child care was especially hard to find for him and the mother who graduated from Pathways.

About opportunities

Aiden Turner would love to have clean, safe and updated parks in her Detroit neighborhood near I-96 and Telegraph on the city's west side.

But instead, the 6-year-old said her family often has to go parks in neighboring Redford Township.

"There aren't any parks by our house," Aiden said.

Seven-year-old McKenna Sanders, who lives near 7 mile and Lahser on the city's west side, said her family once lived in Taylor and she had access to two parks within walking distance of home. Now, she craves the opportunity to go swimming at a nearby park or recreation center, but she said her options are limited.



"I just wish there were more places to swim because it's fun to play in the pool," McKenna said.

Many Detroit youths long for more recreational options, accessible after school programs and jobs.

Desaray said she thinks many of the kids in her neighborhood would love to be able to go to a gym and play basketball or participate in programs, but the activities available are usually out of reach because of costs.

"Detroit needs to have more extracurricular activities and not charge," she said.

Tanykia Davis, 15, said she feels lucky to be able to participate in the Mercy Education Project's after-school

What does 7-year-old McKenna Sanders wish for? A place to play. Her family used to live in Taylor, with two parks within walking distance of home. Now that she lives in Detroit, she says, "I just wish there were more places to swim." (Photo: Salwan Georges, Detroit Free Press)

program, but she wishes more kids had access to similar programs. The Mercy Education Project, founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1992, offers a range of services to young girls who live in southwest Detroit. Its program include those for tutoring, college readiness, robotics, women's adult basic education and the GED.

About 65% of the girls in it are Hispanic or Latina, and the rest are mostly African-American and Caucasian girls.

"I like to do a lot of things, and it's not that much opportunity," in the city, Tanykia said, adding that she lives in Corktown on Bagley. "I mean, it's different things to do, like, the performing-arts school or different little things

but it's no major things like acting and jobs and big dance places and things like that."

Rahmya Trewern, 15, president of Rosedale Park's Teen Council, said she thinks there should be more teen-focused groups across the city.

Rahmya said the council has about 10 members and has grown slowly over time. She said it does community service projects and meets regularly at Pages Bookshop on Grand River for book club night.

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Rahmya Trewern, 15, is in a group of teens who are making their own positive recreational activity. They meet regularly at Pages Bookshop on Grand River for a book club. (Photo: Elaine Cromie, Detroit Free Press)

She admits it's a challenge to drum up support for those types of organizations.

"It's kind of hard to get people to join, because they're like, 'Oh, I don't want to do that because that's boring,' " Rahmya said.

Matthew, who is also a member of the council, said Detroit needs to create more opportunities for kids to find "their path in life."

"We also need more parents to get involved in their kids' lives," he said. "If my mom wasn't so involved in my life, I don't know what I would do."

Aryanna said she thinks kids in Detroit are at an unfair advantage when it comes to landing jobs or finding activities that might interest them. She said for some, it's a struggle to move forward in life because of where they live or their family background.

"I think it differs with who you know, and even your background," Aryanna said. "Someone might be able get a position at a barbershop because their grandfather was one, or someone could get a really, really good job because their dad was a CEO. It all depends on ... who you know and to be honest where you live can kind of impact your chances (for success)."

About neighborhoods

Jordan Davis, who lives near 7 Mile and Ryan on the city's east side, has yet to see much of the change that's impacted the downtown area reach many of the neighborhoods.



Jordan Davis, 17, of Detroit wants to see more efforts by the city to improve neighborhoods. Jordan Davis, who lives near 7 Mile and Ryan on the city's east side, says think my area is getting worse. ... I try to block out everything in my neighborhood. I hear stuff at night, gunshots." (Photo: Eric Seals, Detroit Free Press)

"I think my area is getting worse," said Jordan, 17, a senior at Michigan Collegiate Academy in Warren. "I try to block out everything in my neighborhood. I hear stuff at night, gunshots."

Davis said his neighborhood is filled with abandoned homes and empty fields. The number of liquor stores — one near a church — also unnerves him

"There's three liquor stores within five blocks," he said. "What is that for? One is fine. Why are there three?"

"When you go down toward the 8 Mile area, it's a ton of (pot) dispensaries. Why are there so many?"

"It's nothing but trouble."

Danzel Coleman, 18, a recent graduate of Osborn High School, said he's saddened to see how many neighborhoods have changed over the years.

"Growing up, you'll see a block of houses where you'll see people living in them, but then the next thing you know, over the next couple of years, it's abandoned and you got a field over here with tall grass," he said.

Cody High School graduate Jonice Sylvester said there are a lot of good people in her community, but sometimes, that's not enough.

"(That) is the saddest part for me," she said. "We have abandoned houses on my block, but we go and cut the grass. We have a block club, and it's a bunch of kids on my block, so we throw block parties for them. It's a lot of people who have good intentions, but sometimes, good intentions turn sour.

"I feel like the community is a good place to be in, if you're active in it. If you're not active in it, you're just going to see the bad stuff."

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