



April 28, 2009

To: Members of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee for School Aid and the Department of Education

From: Jack Kresnak, President & CEO

RE: FY 2010 K-12/School Aid Budget

On behalf of Michigan's Children and its Board of Directors, I am pleased to be able to share with you our priorities as you consider the Fiscal Year 2010 budget for K-12 School Aid. Michigan's Children is a statewide child advocacy organization that provides a voice for vulnerable children. Michigan's Children is independent; it does not receive any government funding or represent professionals who receive government contracts.

Michigan's Children's work is based on a set of core beliefs, including:

- *Equal opportunity:* We believe all children need equal opportunities to thrive.
- *Prevention:* We believe that Michigan can and must prevent problems facing children and families, rather than intervene after children are harmed and families destroyed.
- *Civic engagement:* We believe everyone has a stake in ensuring the success of our future generations and we work to engage a range of stakeholders, including community leaders, parents and youths.
- *Collaboration:* We believe that neighborhood and community partnerships that include both the public and private sectors are critical.

Unfortunately, we again find ourselves in the position of trying to protect basic services for our most vulnerable citizens in the face of devastating economic problems at the state and federal levels. We respect the tough choices that you need to make, and ask you to remember that the state budget is the vehicle through which you will express what we value as a state. We trust that you will make decisions that reflect first and foremost the needs of the most vulnerable children who will ultimately determine the state's future.

Michigan's Children urges you to support the following in the fiscal year 2010 budget:

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Early childhood programs.

- *Interagency early childhood grants:* We urge you to protect funding for interagency early childhood grants (0 to 3 Secondary Prevention). The Governor eliminated all funding in the K-12 School Aid budget for interagency early childhood grants (\$2.123 million) while the House included continuation funding in fiscal year 2010. These funds are combined with funding in the budgets of the Departments of Human Services and Community Health and are used by communities for services to support families, improve parenting, and prevent the abuse and neglect of young children ages 0 to 3. The programs have been evaluated, and the benefits are clear. In 2007, the total cost per family for early childhood grants was \$10 per day as compared to \$57 per child per day for the direct costs associated with child abuse and neglect. More importantly, the programs have kept children safe. In 2008, virtually all of the children (99.9%) whose families received services were not referred to the Department of Human Services for suspected child abuse and neglect (as of September 30, 2008).
- *Great Parents/Great Start program:* We also urge you to maintain funding (\$5 million) for Great Parent/Great Start early childhood programs as recommended by the House. These funds, which flow through Intermediate School Districts (ISDs), are used by communities to leverage other local dollars to provide services to encourage early literacy, improve school readiness, strengthen families, improve parenting and reduce the need for special education services. Many communities are funding local early childhood services through the creative coordination of public and private funds, including interagency early childhood grants (0-3 Secondary Prevention), Great Parents/Great Start dollars, philanthropic contributions and general donations. Although I am sure you will be hearing from many of those communities today, as one example, Saginaw County has been able to use its \$127,000 Great Parents/Great Start allocation to leverage \$1.1 million in funding for services for vulnerable families and children.
- *Great Start Strategic Fund:* We ask for your support of new House language directing the Department of Education and the Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) to study the feasibility of consolidating funding for some early childhood programs and services into a Great Start Strategic Fund. Michigan currently has a patchwork of programs and services for young children that includes more than 80 separate funding streams across three state departments. The result has been barriers for communities trying to meet the needs of their most vulnerable children, including needless administrative complexities. Ultimately, children and their families are less able to access the services they need to thrive, and too few children enter the school house doors ready to learn.

Local Great Start communities have been working over the last several years to develop strategic plans for more effectively meeting the needs of their young children. We believe that Great Start communities need flexible dollars to effectively implement their strategic plans, and the Great Start Strategic Fund is an approach worthy of support. In addition to starting the conversation

about the coordination of existing state programs and funding streams, the establishment of a Great Start Strategic Fund would put Michigan in a better position to attract private and philanthropic dollars, as well as effectively use any new federal dollars for early childhood services, including the early childhood block grants currently being considered by the Obama Administration.

Initiatives to address high dropout rates and low academic achievement in Michigan high schools. One of Michigan's Children's top priorities is to ensure that all Michigan children are ready for post-secondary education, work and life. One critical step toward readiness is to make sure that more young people are receiving high quality educations leading to high school diplomas--the ticket to higher education and success in the 21st Century's knowledge and innovation economy.

Michigan's Children thanks the Administration and the Legislature for continuing to tackle the pressing dropout issue. The Governor's and House's continued support for the 21st Century Schools Fund provides one vehicle for funding multiple pathways to high school graduation and that funding needs to be maintained. That, however, is not enough. To prevent young people from dropping out of school, Michigan will need to increase incentives for school districts to provide multiple pathways to high school graduation, including alternative education, truancy prevention, credit recovery initiatives and innovative partnerships with community colleges and other local agencies.

As we listen to young people around the state, and look at research from other states, it certainly becomes apparent that the education system needs to become more personal. Young people who have dropped out often remark that they believed no one cared whether they were there or not, whether they did well or not. Resources to help districts develop small schools can create a different learning environment that promotes more personal relationships, and is certainly one piece of the puzzle. But there are others.

There is now strong research that allows us to predict which students are at-risk of dropping out. Young people who fall behind in credits are much more likely to not complete school, yet there are very limited options for credit recovery for these students. Once young people fall behind in school, or when they face significant personal and educational obstacles, a traditional high school setting is not always successful in reengaging them, yet few alternatives exist. In addition, school discipline policies often contribute to disengagement and lost credits.

One opportunity that exists to address the dropout issue is through alternative school discipline policies. Surveys of teachers, parents, and students have revealed that classroom behavior and bullying among students often leads to suspension, expulsion, and ultimately complete withdrawal from school. In order to help reduce the number of dropouts, additional attention and resources are needed within schools to assist students, parents, and teachers to develop skills to manage, deescalate, and resolve conflicts. Dispute resolution skills have proven effective to

reduce suspensions and expulsions, restore relationships, and reduce disruptive classroom behavior and conflicts. Schools across the state have worked with community partners to expand successful, evaluated discipline practices, and more should be done to encourage that school-community partnership. Michigan's Children, along with other community and education advocates, urges you to find ways to support the creation and maintenance of these partnerships. The development of a grant program within MDOE where school districts could apply for grant funding of \$15,000 - \$50,000 to develop and implement programs that reduce the use of suspension and expulsion would serve to increase school and community partnerships, allowing school districts to maximize their use of resources.

We hope that you will work to capitalize on the many efforts being made to improve graduation rates through the Administration, the Legislature, and the philanthropic, business and nonprofit communities. For example, with the support of the Mott Foundation, Michigan's Children is currently engaged with four Michigan communities as they struggle to address dropout prevention and recovery. We are including in the network more than a dozen other communities that were engaged in the statewide Dropout Prevention Leadership Summit in October of 2008, and who are now working in collaborations that include educators, workforce development, youth serving organizations, business, local philanthropy and others to improve graduation rates.

The Shared Youth Vision Partnership, a public/private partnership housed in the Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth and supported by Michigan's Children and many others, provides a strong foundation for prioritization, investment and policy change in this area. The Partnership can be a resource for you as you develop strategic responses to the dropout problem.

Before- and after-school programs. The Governor's budget, as does the House recommended budget, recognizes continued federal funding for 21st Century Community Learning Center after-school programs, with up to \$50,000 for the Michigan After-School Partnership, an initiative that we strongly support. After-school programs have been shown to improve school attendance and academic achievement, as well as reduce violence and other risky behaviors by youths. While after-school programs have been available for elementary students whose parents can afford them, once children enter middle school, they are increasingly less likely to be in structured after-school activities. Michigan's Children encourages you to provide incentives and technical assistance to districts to develop innovative after-school programs in middle and high schools that might help adolescents stay in school and graduate, including, for example credit recovery programs and apprenticeships.

Thank you for this opportunity. I am available to address questions throughout the budget process. Please feel free to contact me at 517/485-3500 or by email at kresnak.jack@michiganschildren.org.