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## Michigan needs a strategy for its children

BY JACK KRESNAK  
AND WILLIAM H. MAYES

In an effort to lead Michigan's educational system and economy forward, Michigan's school superintendents have issued the **2009 Lead Forward Report** describing and advocating for a redesigned public education system for the 21st Century.

In the report, school leaders describe a compelling vision for Michigan's public education system as a competitive national and international asset that can play a major role in Michigan's economic and social resurgence.

The Lead Forward report culminates nearly two years of research and discussion by representatives to the Michigan Association of School Administrators (MASA), a statewide professional association that represents school superintendents and their first-line assistants. The report recommends 18 action priority items around fulfilling and supporting the mission of teaching and learning.

As it turns out, the report reveals that school administrators and child advocates agree on quite a lot. We agree that a 21st Century commitment to education needs to start at birth and extend through adulthood. Research

supports it, and Michigan's economy demands it. We also agree that our current policy priorities cannot ensure it.

Michigan needs a child **investment strategy**. Without investments in young children, the state's attempt to improve schools will not succeed. Communities must ensure that all children begin school as prepared as possible.

Without **investments** in these same children once they enter the school doors, the state's attempts to improve schools – and increase educational achievement – will fail. Schools must develop relationships with community resources that strengthen schools, increase parents' involvement and meet children's ever-changing developmental needs.

Without investments in these same young people who struggle to stay engaged with school or have already become disengaged, the state's attempts to expand access to **higher education** and modernize its economy will not work.

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If we are serious about serving all young people through age 18 or graduation, we must support incentives for schools to establish effective discipline alternatives. We also need to focus on supporting alternative pathways, and to better support those that we have, such as alternative and community education options, community college and workforce development partnerships.

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Recent actions by leaders in Lansing have diminished services for children, youths and families through cuts in the state budget that are counterproductive to meaningful reform. Consistent funding for schools and support programs will need to be expanded in order to see real improvement in school success for those most challenged schools, communities and young people.

Ironically, Michigan is poised to make great strides in improving the educational success of all children. We have unprecedented engagement of the private sector, and renewed public sector attention. With supportive research and **innovation** in Michigan and around the nation, the time is now to ensure that all children are ready for post-secondary education, work and life. We must take advantage of this opportunity before we lose it to more disinvestment.

School leaders and child advocates agree: In order to Lead Forward to a brighter future, Michigan must have a child **investment** strategy.

*Jack Kresnak is president & CEO of Michigan's Children, a statewide, independent voice for children and their families. William H. Mayes is executive director of the Michigan Association of School Administrators, whose mission is to develop leadership and unity to achieve the continuous improvement of public education in Michigan.*

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