

Guest column: Expanding preschool is first step in education advance

By Michele Corey/Michigan's Children

Advocates across the state are rejoicing in Gov. Rick Snyder's proposed \$65 million expansion (\$130 million over two years) for the Great Start Readiness Program— Michigan's public preschool program for 4-year-olds at-risk of being under-prepared for kindergarten. Credit is due to the Center for Michigan and Bridge Magazine for bringing additional public attention to the thousands of eligible children unable to access GSRP; the Children's Leadership Council of Michigan for making GSRP expansion a priority; and legislative and administrative champions for putting comprehensive funding proposals in motion.



This is great news for the additional young children who will be able to access this equity-promoting program, as well as for Michigan's education community, which is under increased pressure to close gaps in educational outcomes. GSRP has proven to lessen disparities, including reducing the kindergarten readiness gap; improving reading proficiency for third-graders; and getting more young people to high school graduation. In fact, children of color who participated in GSRP were three times more likely to graduate high school on-time than children of color who did not attend GSRP.

At the same time, science has shown us that the most critical time of brain development happens during the first 1,000 days of life when the foundation needed for life-long learning and success is built – before four years of age. For the most challenged youngsters, the achievement gap begins well before children reach preschool, with cognitive disparities emerging as early as nine months of age. To truly reduce the school readiness gap, we must build an early childhood system that recognizes the needed services for Michigan's most struggling young children beginning before birth. This system includes:

- adequate health care for women of child-bearing age;
- adequate prenatal care for pregnant women;
- evidence-based home visiting programs for the most challenged families with infants and toddlers;
- high quality child care for low-income working families;
- services to identify and support developmental needs; and
- two years of preschool to ensure that all kids are kindergarten ready.



Michele Corey is interim president & CEO of Michigan's Children, michiganschildren.org/, the only statewide independent voice for children, with a focus on reducing disparities in child outcomes from cradle to career.

Increasing investments for young children prenatally through age 3, coupled with full funding of the GSRP expansion, is the most effective way to prevent the school readiness gap from even emerging.

But to comprehensively address disparities that begin early and continue throughout young people's educational careers, we can't stop there. Once children begin school, we must ensure that necessary supports await them in K-12 to ensure their success. Snyder is taking another courageous step by seeking to overhaul Michigan's education finance system. The proposed Public Education Finance Act would operationalize his concept of education at "any time, any place, any way, any pace"; some components of the draft plan will help reduce disparities in student success such as funding learning opportunities beyond the traditional school hours or school year.

However, the current plan fails to capitalize on already existing strategies that have proven to reduce the achievement gap – before kindergarten and throughout a student's K-12 career. The research is clear that children and youth who attend high-quality extended learning programs (before- and after-school and summer learning opportunities) are more likely to succeed in school, particularly students of color and from low-income families, effectively narrowing the achievement gap. Research shows that students who participate in after-school programs improve in key areas that foster school success including social and emotional development, increased interest and engagement in school, and avoidance of risky behaviors in addition to making academic gains in reading and math. Additionally, more than half of the achievement gap can be explained by unequal access to summer learning opportunities – another effective, evaluated equity-promoting strategy.

To reduce the academic achievement gap, proven strategies must be prioritized and adequately funded to ensure kids and their families receive the support they need to succeed. The first crucial step: fully fund the GSRP expansion. To make sure that we see the best return on that investment and to continue down the path toward educational equity, we also need smarter investments throughout the cradle-to-career continuum.