

Prop 1 would help Michigan's children

By Matt Gillard and Jane Zehnder-Merrell, Special to Digital First Media

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A new spotlight has been cast on addressing the long-standing problem of third-grade reading proficiency among Michigan schoolchildren. Gov. Snyder understands we need a well-educated workforce and to get it we must increase the number of children who are literate by the end of third grade. His 2016 budget recommendations include a comprehensive set of measures to improve early literacy – a key component of academic success and career readiness for children here and statewide.

The annual Kids Count in Michigan Data Book closely tracks critical literacy benchmarks. From the Data Book, we know that one-third of fourth-graders are not reading proficiently on the state's MEAP test, nor are half of high school students on the Michigan Merit Exam. The statistics are worse for students of color, students from low-income families, and students facing other challenges.

A child unable to read by the end of third grade will struggle in fourth grade and beyond when literacy skills are essential to acquiring the content knowledge necessary to move ahead. In fact, students who are not reading proficiently by third grade are four times more likely not to graduate high school on time than proficient readers, and will need more costly remediation to assist them toward a high school credential and a path to college or a career.

Michigan's Children and the Michigan League for Public Policy have joined other local and state advocates to urge action on policy solutions, many that align with the governor's recommendations because his plan recognizes that what happens in a child's earliest years – starting at birth – impacts academic success. Key components of Snyder's plan include: expanding opportunities for voluntary, evidence-based family coaching and support for new parents to better support their child's literacy development; opportunities for children in our lowest-income families to access high-quality, continuous child care that provides learning opportunities before kindergarten and through after-school and summer learning during the elementary years; and expanded literacy-focused learning opportunities through after-school programming and/or through a balanced calendar.

While these strategies are an important start, much more needs to be done. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers can target the expanded learning opportunities to students who face challenges such as family poverty. Further, the state should invest more in Early On, which has failed to serve many families with infants and toddlers who have developmental delays or disabilities, although the evidence is clear that appropriate early intervention can avoid costly special education down the road. And investments should bolster parents' literacy and education, as research has consistently shown the impact of parental education on children's academic success.

Addressing poverty should be an overarching approach to helping kids become school ready and academically successful. Michigan's child poverty rate — with one in every four children living in families with incomes below the poverty line (\$24,000 for a family of four) — is shameful. Children who

are hungry and homeless struggle to learn.

So what can we do today? Contact members of House and Senate Appropriations Committees and urge them to support the governor's budget and the Senate's comprehensive package to improve early literacy.

And take a closer look at Proposal 1 on the May 5 ballot. Removing the sales tax on fuel and replacing it with a gas tax leaves a \$1 billion hole in state revenues to fund schools and cities. A penny boost in the state sales tax fills that hole and gives schools an extra \$300 million for at-risk programs and additional reporting. The added cost to Michigan's low-income families would be offset by reinstatement of the Earned Income Tax Credit that will lift an estimated 15,000 families above poverty. If the measure fails, lawmakers could shift or deny funding for critical programs and initiatives like early literacy.

Matt Gillard is President and CEO of Michigan's Children, a statewide independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children from cradle to career and their families. Jane Zehnder-Merrell has been project director for Kids Count in Michigan, producing the annual data book on child well-being at the Michigan League for Public Policy, since 1994.

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