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MI Teachers Say Per Pupil Funding Increase Still Falls Short

By [KEVIN LAVERY \(/PEOPLE/KEVIN-LAVERY\)](/PEOPLE/KEVIN-LAVERY) • 9 HOURS AGO

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[Michigan Republican lawmakers say they've passed the largest per-pupil funding increase in 17 years.](http://wkar.org/post/mi-teachers-say-pupil-funding-increase-still-falls-short)

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The Michigan Legislature has approved a \$57 billion budget package that includes what GOP leaders tout as the largest per-student spending increase in 17 years. The state will crunch those numbers to prepare a final budget for Governor Snyder's signature. But Michigan teachers say the funding boost won't soothe the crunch they've been feeling for years.



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A decade after plunging into the deepest economic whirlpool since the FDR era, most politicians agree Michigan is now sitting high and dry. Emboldened by strong job growth and a series of tax cuts, Republican lawmakers in 2018 are pumping more dollars into K-12 education.

"Federal tax cuts and state tax cuts put a lot of money into the economy, and it feeds right back into the School Aid Fund," says state senator Phil Pavlov (R-Port Huron).

Pavlov chairs the Michigan Senate Education Committee. He helped create the plan (<https://www.legislature.mi.gov/documents/2017-2018/billanalysis/Senate/pdf/2017-SFA-0863-U.pdf>) that would give school districts up to \$230 more per student next fall. Pavlov says that's only part of the big picture.

"There's over \$2 billion worth of targeted categorical line items in this budget that go to support unique programming across the state," Pavlov says. "So, that number certainly represents a commitment to do unique and innovative things for our districts."

While the Michigan Education Association recognizes the legislature's gesture, it's not celebrating it.

"To be fair, it is a bigger increase than usual," says MEA economist Ruth Beier. "But the problem is the base wasn't big enough in the first place."

Beier disputes Pavlov's notion that tax cuts improve the economy. She says that's been true in Michigan ever since 1994, when Proposal A (https://www.michigan.gov/documents/propa_3172_7.pdf) switched the school funding mechanism from property taxes to sales taxes. That, she says, ultimately led the state to cut its foundation allowance by nearly \$500 per student back in 2012. The costs have been apparent.

"Because of our funding system, we've had to increase class size, we've had to cut AP classes and special programs in almost every single district. We've had to cut teacher pay. We've had to increase the cost of benefits and increase the cost of retirement for teachers...so that people don't want to become teachers anymore."

Beier believes Michigan should invest as much as \$1,500 more per student to recover from years of cuts. That's more than six times the top end of this year's proposal.

Matt Gillard is president and CEO of the nonprofit group Michigan's Children. He says while those increases are a positive step, the budgetary process needs change.

"We're trying to do that in a system that's based on this concept of, all kids get this X amount, and then we do some adjustment," he says. "That's kind of a backwards way to look at it."

Gillard knows what it takes to write a state budget. The Democrat from Alpena served six years in the Michigan House, and once chaired the K-12 School Aid Budget subcommittee. Today he's a member of the School Finance Research Collaborative, a non-partisan education think tank.

In January, the collaborative published a study (<http://www.fundmischools.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/School-Finance-Research-Collaborative-Report.pdf>) of Michigan's school funding system. Among its conclusions was the notion that state lawmakers should give more consideration to the socioeconomic factors that impact students and their families, rather than apply a blanket per-student allotment.

But the study didn't get much traction during this budget cycle.

"Adequacy studies are their own industry; consultants make a lot of money drawing conclusions that aren't necessarily based on the economy and the budget of the state," says Pavlov.

Matt Gillard isn't surprised by his comments. In fact, he concedes the collaborative really didn't push the study too hard, knowing it had missed its window. Instead, Gillard hopes the study will spur dialogue as Michigan accelerates into the 2018 election season.

"This is hopefully the start of a real conversation that's going to take years, honestly," Gillard says. "Education has changed dramatically in 25 years and we think the funding formula should at least be looked at as to how we move forward."

Budget watchers say the proposed per student spending hike isn't likely to change very much once the dust settles from the revenue conference (<http://www.house.mi.gov/hfa/Consensus.asp>). It appears the 2019 budget could land on the governor's desk by the end of June, three months before the start of the next fiscal year.

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