

The Education Achievement System *Plans for Helping Failing Schools in 2011 and Things Left Undone*

The Governor announced his newest recommendations for a new Education Achievement System that defines the way that this administration will be addressing the needs of the state's lowest performing school systems.

Michigan's economic recovery is predicated on young people being ready for post-secondary, work and life. This fact is seen acutely by community members, and many Legislators are feeling particular pressure from their constituents, consistent with their own beliefs, to work for changes that move more young people into educational success. In addition, there has been added pressure by the Federal Government for several years, culminating in current funding initiatives that create competition and incentive resources for innovation and reform.

Previous Governors, the Legislature, the State Board of Education, and the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) have suggested, required and supported new strategies to serve young people who are not succeeding through high school. Many communities around the state have tried new strategies to improve high school graduation rates. Much attention has been paid to the concentration of student failure – those students, schools and communities who have not succeeded in their educational outcomes for some time.

Most recently, at the very end of December, 2009, a series of bills were agreed on by the House and Senate and signed by the Governor into law. Changes in law include pieces of the school restructuring discussion, as well as changes in teacher and administrative certification and evaluation, changes to high school curriculum requirements, and a change in the legal age to drop out of high school before graduation from 16 to 18. One component of P.A. 204 of 2009 instructed the MDE to identify the lowest achieving 5% of schools in Michigan, and required those schools to submit a redesign plan to the state. All of the identified schools in 2010 worked with the MDE staff on these redesign efforts.

Governor Snyder's new redesign plan is similar in nature to what currently exists, including continuing to require redesign plans for the lowest 5% performing schools in the state, and assuming operation of those schools not improving under those plans. However, rather than continuing with the current statewide approach, the initial group to be evaluated under the new system are only those within the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) that have been identified by the state system as low performers in the 2010-11 school year. They will have the 2011-12 school year to complete a school improvement plan with the Emergency Manager. The new redesign mandate for restructuring will begin in the 2012-13 school year. The system is structured to expand in 2013-14 to other identified low performers in Southeast Michigan and then to all low performers statewide in 2014-15.

Rather than the Michigan Department of Education leading the redesign efforts, the Education Achievement System will be led by a free-standing Education Achievement Authority. The Authority will be governed by a board of directors appointed by DPS, Eastern Michigan University and the Governor and led by the DPS Emergency Manager, appointed by the Governor, who will take on the role of EAS Chancellor. As part of redesign efforts, the system includes plans to:

- Empower principals to hire and fire staff. Contract negotiations will be overseen by the EAS.
- Require continuous improvement models for each member of the staff and education plans for all students.
- Provide intensive training and professional coaching for teachers and administrators.
- Offer the potential for a longer school day and school year.
- Form and utilize Parent Advisory Councils at each school with increased decision-making authority, more information sharing with parents, and operating written parent agreements.

Michigan's Children applauds the Governor's efforts to continue to tackle the challenge of improving the educational success of Michigan's young people. This need goes well beyond the boundaries of the Detroit Public Schools, so a statewide approach to our educational challenges is preferred.

It is important to note that despite this pressure for improved outcomes for young people, educational support programs have been cut over the last several fiscal years, including in recently signed budgets. Further cuts in funding for educational options and support programs will leave thousands of young people less likely to graduate. In addition, cuts in early childhood services, health prevention services, child abuse and neglect prevention service leave children unprepared to succeed in school, and make it more difficult to implement any restructuring efforts.

WHAT DOES MICHIGAN'S CHILDREN THINK WAS LEFT UNDONE?

Any school restructuring is unlikely to see intended results without a specific focus on building community partnership and connecting community, higher education and workforce development resources to reform efforts. We are glad that there was mention of the "great emphasis on community involvement in its schools," but are disappointed in the lack of emphasis on and incentives for schools to leverage partners. Legislative activity is needed to establish incentives for schools to create community links aimed at strengthening schools, increasing parent involvement, and meeting children's needs. Reform needs to include specific technical assistance to schools to help with the ties to community resources. Tying school-based approaches to reform with local or intermediate school districts can ease community partnership efforts, as most community agencies, workforce and higher education providers serve the catchment areas of many individual schools.

The students, schools and communities targeted by this and other reform efforts often face layers of challenge and will need a coordinated approach that is likely to need more targeted resources. We know that young people face barriers to educational success that one system along can't solve – not the education system alone, not communities alone, and certainly not individual school buildings alone. Legislative activity is needed that includes more detail about how a myriad of necessary resources that could include school-based health, positive behavior supports, and other services, would be targeted toward all schools facing restructuring demands.

If we are serious about serving all young people through age 18 or a high school diploma, we need to remove barriers to graduation. We know that when kids get behind in school, it's too hard to catch up; when they leave before getting that diploma, it's too hard to find a path back. Specifically:

- We need to revise Michigan's "Zero Tolerance" suspension and expulsion policies that disproportionately affect youth of color and are much stricter than federal law, and create incentives for schools to establish effective discipline alternatives; and
- We need to focus on supporting alternative pathways: better support to those that we have, like alternative and community education options, community college and workforce development partnerships; and create other pathways that we need to consistently serve young people throughout the state.

The disparity in educational success in Michigan and the subsequent economic, social and fiscal consequences of that disparity are profound and unacceptable. These gaps can be traced to the earliest years of a child's life and continue to grow during their educational careers. To shrink them, investments are needed not only in the quality of traditional K-12 systems, but also in parent support, high quality child care and pre-school, expanded learning programs, physical and mental health services, and efforts to take advantage of the 5th and 6th year of high school.

Current actions that have diminished services for at-risk young people through cuts in the state budget are counter-productive to meaningful reform. Cuts to the current K-12 system are counter-productive to innovation, partnership and reform, and support programs will likely need to be expanded in order to see real improvement in school success for those most challenged schools, communities and young people.

What are the Next Steps for the Legislature and for Advocates?

In the Governor's Special Message on Education Reform on April 27, 2011, he indicated the need for Michigan's education system to be "Any Time, Any Place, Any Way, Any Pace," and Michigan's Children certainly agrees. Unfortunately, the school reforms outlined in the Education Achievement System don't adequately address this framework for practice.

This is the perfect time to talk with your Legislators about what you expect in school reform efforts – what is positive about current discussions, and how you would like them to focus their attention this year and next. Let them know that you are there to help them succeed in moving Michigan to an "Any Time, Any Place, Any Way, Any Pace" system, and talk with them about successful efforts to keep young people connected to college and career paths in your community. Also talk with them about those young people who didn't have access to those efforts.

You can find who represents you on our website at www.michiganschildren.org. Whether or not your Legislators are part of the committees debating these issues, let them know that you expect that they will actively participate in these discussions with their colleagues and make clear their constituents' positions on the issue.

To access other information to help get engaged in the legislative process, see Michigan's Children's website at www.michiganschildren.org