

Public Education Finance Project
Does the Latest Education Reform Proposal Promote Educational Equity?

Over the last several years, there have been a series of attempts to change the way that Michigan provides public education. Governors, the Legislature, the State Board of Education, and the Michigan Department of Education have suggested, required and supported strategies to improve achievement and graduation rates. Many communities around the state are trying different ways to move all kids to better outcomes, with varied success. The bulk of the attention has been paid to the concentration of student failure – those students, schools and communities who are at the bottom of the heap in terms of achievement or graduation, many who have not seen success with their educational outcomes for some time. Governor Snyder has also taken up the continued challenge of the lowest performers with a series of suggestions for change.

However, education challenges stem from the challenges that many Michigan families face. Michigan's economy, coupled with disinvestment in public programs assisting low-income families, has caused poverty to skyrocket, with one in every four Michigan children currently living in poverty. The research is undeniable about the ties between family poverty and the increased challenges for students. Also undeniable is the increasing academic achievement gap. The race, ethnicity, and income level of families predict disparities in child outcomes that begin before birth and continue to worsen as children grow older. This gap contributes to differences in school readiness, educational success, high school graduation and college enrollment, leading to clear disparities in lifetime earnings. The need for education reform to better serve ALL students has never been greater. As Michigan's population grows more diverse, education reform must focus on reducing the achievement gap and increasing educational success for all students to build the workforce that Michigan needs to be competitive in a global economy.

In November of 2012, a proposed rewrite of Michigan's School Aid Act – the Michigan Publication Education Finance Act of 2013 – was released for public comment. The Public Education Finance Project team was asked to operationalize Governor Snyder's concept of education at "any time, any place, any way, any pace," and components of the proposal will be considered in the 2013-2014 Legislative session, beginning in January. Michigan's Children is joining many others to weigh in on the implications of the new funding model on the state's public education structure, and how changes to that structure can serve to grow more educated and skilled workers and leaders. While there are valid arguments on the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, the top priority when assessing any education reform should be ensuring that all students have equitable opportunities to succeed in school. This issue brief identifies students challenged by the current education system; how "any time, any place, any way, any pace" can work to

improve educational outcomes for all students; and how the current draft of the Michigan Public Education Finance Act of 2013 works to promote or hinder educational equity.

Students Challenged by the Current Education System

The traditional education system has not been able to adapt to the current challenges many students face. Time restrictions related to the traditional school year and length of school day, pace restrictions pertaining to the number of years available to obtain a high school diploma, and place restrictions based on the quality of local schools as well as alternative opportunities or lack of opportunities accessible to students all create educational barriers which further perpetuate educational disparities. Students most at-risk of school failure may need other options pertaining to time, place, way, and pace to ensure educational success.

First, the traditional school calendar poses challenges as a result of the lengthy summer break. Strong research, including research done with Michigan students, concludes that many students lose academic ground over the summer, in part due to limited participation in activities that promote learning during that time. Students of color and students from low-income families lose even more ground than their higher income, white peers. Removing long breaks from the school calendar can remove learning loss opportunities that too many students who cannot access high quality summer enrichment programs face.

Similarly, for too many Michigan students – particularly students of color and students from low-income families and those in struggling communities – local schools are underfunded and under-resourced to provide a high quality education. While Michigan provides open school district choice in order to increase options for families to access other programs that may be of higher quality, the ability for this option to promote educational equity is limited. This is because many of the most challenged families have difficulty accessing transportation to get to other schools, and students may have difficulty staying in any school consistently due to family mobility issues such as housing insecurity. The main point is that quality educational settings need to be available to all kids throughout the state, and geography alone should not determine a student’s opportunities for educational success.

Additionally, the traditional hours of the school day and/or the traditional classroom setting may make it difficult or impossible for some students in particularly challenged circumstances to stay engaged. For older students in low-income families, working during the school day may be essential due to family financial constraints. Similarly, teenage parents who must care for a young child struggle with traditional school settings due to limited access to high quality child care. For students that may have priority obligations during the traditional school day, alternative education options such as evening or weekend classes or alternative education programs that connect to workforce development are essential to ensure that students can continue to pursue their education in a meaningful way.

Finally, students facing multiple challenges may need more than four years to graduate from high school. Luckily in Michigan, fifth and sixth years of high school are funded through the current School Aid Act, yet

with that extra time, Michigan still fails to graduate all of its students within six years. The students who need additional time in high school are most likely the same students who need alternative education programs to stay in school or return to school. Access to at least six years of high school through non-traditional programs may be needed for students most at-risk of school failure to obtain a high school credential, and that time should be available without creating an extra financial burden on those young people.

How “Any Time, Any Place, Any Way, Any Pace” Can Promote Educational Equity

Given the challenges that disproportionately affect students from low-income families and students of color, it is essential that education reform take into consideration options that ensure all students have opportunities for educational success. “Any time, any place, any way, any pace” can be avenues to promote educational equity, but any reforms must have oversight and regulation to ensure that they are in fact promoting equitable opportunities for all students. Here are some examples of how “any time, any place, any way, any pace” can promote educational equity:

- Any Time: Moving to a year-round school calendar that provides shorter, more frequent breaks would mitigate the summer learning loss experienced by many students. Further, providing options in the evenings or weekends is essential to ensure that students with priority obligations during the traditional school day can continue to pursue their education.
- Any Place: Providing targeted financial support and technical assistance to increase the quality of schools in most challenged communities can ensure that all learning options provide students with opportunities for educational success.
- Any Way: Opportunities beyond the traditional school day that provide options and flexibility can ensure that students at-risk of dropping out of school stay engaged in their education. While this can take the form of a variety of different models, they all must have evidence-base and a level of quality to ensure that the students who capitalize on these types of programs are college and career ready upon completion. Accommodating the need for learning opportunities beyond the traditional school day can cut down chronic absence and dropout and help to ensure that students most challenged by their circumstances can stay engaged in education.
- Any Pace: Ensuring that all school districts utilize fifth and sixth years of high school through alternative pathways, expanding School Aid funding to support young people for additional years under certain circumstances, and building better funding and program partnerships between K-12, community colleges and youth employment initiatives can ensure more students reach high school completion.

The Public Education Finance Project Proposal

Any Time

The current proposal’s “any time” concept alters the current school year and the structure of a traditional school day in ways that improve educational equity. First, the traditional school year is redesigned to allow

for a full-calendar year schedule with breaks throughout the school year that are significantly shorter than the traditional two- or three-month long summer break. This is a positive step towards improving educational achievement for all students by eliminating opportunities for academic loss during long breaks. However, the full-year school calendar shift must occur for all schools, otherwise whether students most at-risk of summer learning loss would opt-in to this type of school is unknown. The proposal also expands on the traditional school day by funding learning options that are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week – another step to reducing the achievement gap.

Any Place

A commitment to learning in “any place” has the potential for reducing the achievement gap, but components of the proposal promote inequitable educational outcomes by leaving behind students most at-risk of school failure. The proposal opens up the funding formula to “follow the student” by enabling a student to be enrolled in more than one school, with the per pupil allotment then split between the programs that a student attends. In theory, this creates the ability for families to pick different systems for different services based on individual learning needs, but it is difficult to predict how local schools will be able to maintain consistent quality in an environment that has potentially limitless options for change.

Additionally, this funding mechanism assumes that students and families will “opt-in” to high performing schools or programs if their local school or local program is underwhelming. However, with current options available for school choice in Michigan, the vast majority of students continue to utilize their traditional public school rather than opting for charter or other alternative programs with no evidence that a completely open educational marketplace will result in more students “shopping” for schools. Further, research on school choice have demonstrated no improvements to reduce the academic achievement gap since academic achievement for low-performing students is often the result of a myriad of factors beyond the education system’s purview.

A funding formula that follows the student leaves schools serving a high proportion of students with multiple challenges in serious financial risk. Specifically, families with the ability to “opt-out” of schools serving the most challenged communities may do so, resulting in less funding and resource for those schools. This is counter-intuitive to “any place” by promoting higher quality options that many students may be unable to access. “Any place” should instead increase the level of quality for all schools and learning programs so that regardless of geography, students are accessing an education that will ensure that they are college and career ready. Thus, the “any place” concept as written into the current draft will further perpetuate the disparities between high quality and low-performing schools.

Any Way

The recognition in the draft bill that a traditional classroom setting doesn’t work for all students is applauded, since non-traditional programs have demonstrated success for students most at-risk of leaving school without a high school diploma. However, a complete open market system for all students to pick and choose classes and programs is counterintuitive to the research that shows that relationships impact student success, particularly for the most challenged students. For example, several effective cyber school models in Michigan have some component of mentorship and in-person face-to-face time with teachers to

ensure that students build the meaningful relationships that keep them engaged and connected to school. Strengthening supports to educational options that have evidence or promise toward closing gaps would be more effective than an approach that simply allows an open market of varying types of education programs without minimum quality standards or evidence-base.

Any Pace

The current draft provides incentives for students to complete high school in less than four years by providing a \$2500 scholarship for each semester that a student graduates early. In other words, a student who finishes high school after his/her junior year or eleventh grade would receive a \$5,000 scholarship. Students are eligible to receive up to a \$10,000 scholarship for early graduation. While providing incentives to promote achievement is an idea worth exploring, this type of financial incentive does nothing to promote achievement among students who need four, five or six years of high school to graduate nor does it promote high school completion programs specifically designed to re-engage young people who have already dropped out of school or are at-risk of dropping out. Rather than providing a financial incentive to accelerated students, those resources should be utilized to bolster strategies that get ALL students to a high school diploma through re-engagement and college or workforce connection.

Missed Opportunities Needed in Education Reform

A lot is known about which students are most challenged by the current education system. Yet, despite this knowledge, Michigan continues to graduate young people who are ill-prepared for college and career and fail to graduate too many others. Educational success is an outgrowth of successes and failures within many systems that have been built over the course of young people's lives. Nevertheless, Michigan has continued to allow the education system to work in a vacuum and expect that it alone will be able to change outcomes. Until a comprehensive approach to education is established, the chances for reform to succeed are small. Here are a few missed opportunities in the draft of the Public Education Finance Act of 2013 that must be included to ensure education reform success.

Focus Investment on Strategies to Close the Achievement Gap

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. The students, schools and communities who could potentially benefit the most from education reform efforts like the Public Education Finance Project are often the same students who face layers of challenge and will need a coordinated approach with more targeted resources. A laser-like focus on reducing the achievement gap is essential to any education reforms; and reform must recognize that one system alone can't solve the educational challenges that young people face – not the education system alone, not communities alone, and not individual schools or online learning programs alone. To shrink these disparities, investments are needed not only in the quality of K-12 systems, but also in parent support, high quality early childhood education, expanded learning programs, physical and mental health services, and efforts to re-engage students who have left high school before graduation. Education reform must include more detail about

how a myriad of necessary resources beyond education would be targeted to reduce academic achievement gaps by ensuring that struggling students have the supports they need to succeed.

Expand Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education is the one investment that economists, brain scientists and social scientists agree has the greatest payoff in both the short and long-term for Michigan communities and the state. Early childhood programs have been shown to more than pay for themselves by increasing achievement and reducing the kindergarten readiness gap, all while saving taxpayer dollars. Unfortunately, the current draft of the proposed bill does nothing to expand early childhood education, though Michigan's current early childhood programming is vastly insufficient to reach young children who would benefit from these programs. Bolder steps that ensure early childhood education beginning at birth that's connected to a high quality K-12 system is essential to reducing the academic achievement gap, and must be included in any education reforms.

Promote and Incentivize School-Community Partnership

Any education reform 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. Education reform must establish incentives for schools to leverage partners and create community links aimed at strengthening schools, increasing parent involvement, and meeting students' 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 and school districts.

Stop Diminishing Services

Cuts to services for children, youth and families across state departments over the last decade are counter-productive to meaningful reform. As previously mentioned, no one system alone can tackle the unacceptable educational disparities seen among Michigan students but the disconnect between cuts to family and children support programs are counter-intuitive to the efforts to improve educational outcomes for all students. Cuts to family support programs like food and cash assistance and the earned income tax credit increase challenges students face at home due to financial difficulties. Cuts to health promotion and prevention services like local public health funding and funding for mental health services result in more students facing health and mental health or behavioral health issues that take away from in-school experiences. Ensuring that children and families have the supports they need is critical to reducing the academic achievement gap – a gap that's driven by many factors beyond the education system.