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### **Ensuring Children Thrive While Parents Move Ahead: How Public Policies Can Lead to Increased Opportunities for Michigan's Families**

The children of Michigan will be our future scientists, entrepreneurs, teachers, parents, laborers, artists and elected officials. Ensuring all young children have a healthy start in life is essential to Michigan's economy. Scientists have proven that by the time children reach school age, up to 90 percent of the intellectual and emotional wiring of their brains has been set for life. Despite the evidence that children's earliest experiences affect the very architecture of their brains, too many families with young children face difficulties that may affect their long-term well-being and success – particularly children of color, children from low-income families, and children shouldering other challenging circumstances.

- *Of all Michigan children, one in four live in poverty. The statistics are worse for Michigan children of color with half of African-American children and nearly one-third of Hispanic children living in poverty.* The challenges of growing up in poverty are well documented. Poor children face more barriers to opportunities that ensure they grow up physically and emotionally healthy and educationally successful, and ultimately have greater difficulties entering the workforce and supporting families of their own.
- *One out of seven births in Michigan, and one of every three births in Detroit are to women without a high school diploma or a GED.* The education of mothers is a key predictor of future success for children. Not only do parents with limited education face significant hurdles to obtain their diploma, find family-supporting employment and afford high quality child care, but they also face more challenges navigating systems for their children.
- *Nearly 34,000 children are victims of abuse and/or neglect in Michigan each year, including just over 3,000 children in Detroit.* The lasting impacts of child maltreatment are well documented, as are the circumstances that make it particularly difficult for families to provide for and protect their children. Behavioral health needs, family violence, economic instability and other stressful conditions create challenges to successful parenting.

With these and other child well-being indicators stagnating, policymakers must embrace strong research findings that demonstrate the critical tie between the well-being of parents and their children's social-emotional, physical, and economic well-being and educational and life success. Two-generation strategies are essential to help children thrive while their parents move ahead, and are essential to the future economic prosperity of our state.

#### **What Are Two Generation Strategies**

Two-generation strategies take into account the needs of children and their parents to ensure that families can thrive. Two-generation strategies must have three critical components that are intentional and linked.

- 1) Education and/or job training that leads to a credential and family-supporting employment that helps parents get ahead in life to better support their families and improve outcomes for their children.
- 2) High quality early childhood education where children's learning and development is nurtured to lay the groundwork for future success in school and life.
- 3) Comprehensive wraparound services like family support, access to basic needs, health and mental health services for children, adolescents and their parents, and developmental screening and other assessments in child care, early education, and K-12 settings that appropriately engage parents more effectively in their children's learning and development.

Public policies must promote access and integration of these three components, and it is essential that programs targeting families are working to ensure successful integration. An intentional two-generation program would couple education and/or job training for parents with high quality early developmental or educational programming for their children. These programs would also connect families to needed services – whether it be connections to food assistance, housing needs, mental health or substance abuse services, or needs for their children like access to a pediatric medical home, special education services, etc. This type of intentional two-generation programming helps both parents and their children build the skills they need to move ahead and succeed in life.

Investment in specific two-generation programming is essential, but a two-generation lens can be used to support better investments in other programs as well. For example, Michigan has successfully increased state funding for the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) – a high quality preschool program targeted to four-year-olds that has proven to reduce racial and economic disparities in child outcomes. However, a GSRP slot only covers a half day of preschool which is clearly insufficient for parents working in low-wage jobs that have little flexibility, though their children would benefit the most from this high quality program. While some GSRP providers combine program options to provide care to cover a full work day, this does not happen in all communities. Furthermore, utilizing GSRP may still prove to be tricky for families that need child care during non-traditional work hours or who work particularly long days. With a two-generation lens, policymakers would provide opportunities for low-income families to access child care programs that are of similar high quality as GSRP to ensure that children in Michigan’s most challenged families can benefit and parents’ work or education can also be supported.

### **Well-Known Two-Generation Programs**

- ✓ One of the most commonly known two-generation programs, Head Start, was created nearly 50 years ago with the idea of supporting the developmental needs of children while also supporting their parents’ ability to parent and to improve their livelihood.
- ✓ Evidence-based home visiting programs provide low-income parents with voluntary home-based coaching to improve their parenting skills and connect them to opportunities in their communities while also ensuring that their young children are healthy and developmentally on-track.
- ✓ Michigan’s child care subsidy program was built as a work-support for parents to receive financial assistance to pay for child care while working or in job training. Now, the program is making strides to better support children’s learning and development while maintaining its work-support foundation.
- ✓ Adult literacy and high school credentialing programs, while geared toward adult skill-building, are also crucial to parents’ ability to assist with their children’s education.

### **Policy Solutions**

- ✓ Expand evidence-based home visiting services to ensure all eligible families can access them.
- ✓ Pair education and training pathways with high quality child care so that parents can effectively utilize those programs to get ahead in life while their children’s developmental and educational needs are being met.
- ✓ Expand access to child abuse and neglect prevention services that provide parents with the skills to handle challenging situations while ensuring that children are safe and healthy in their homes.
- ✓ Support opportunities for families to tackle mental health and substance use challenges so that adults’ parenting capacities are not compromised, and they can stay in the workforce to provide for their families. Similarly, meeting children’s mental health needs will ensure that the most challenged families can appropriately manage challenging behaviors so kids can stay on-track in school and life.
- ✓ Support opportunities for parents to build literacy skills, complete high school and move into post-secondary and family-supporting employment.