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Ensuring College and Career Readiness: Supporting High School Graduation Matters This Election Season

Michigan has many educational challenges, including some of the largest achievement gaps in the nation, consistently poor showing compared with other states on several educational measures, and limited improvement on state assessments, to name a few. Fortunately, many proven strategies have successfully increased high school graduation rates including having multiple pathways, more time and more flexibility towards a credential, lowering suspension and expulsion rates, addressing the impact of trauma, and ensuring non-academic services are available for students to stay academically engaged. Since a high school diploma is an essential first step to future educational attainment, employment opportunities and lifelong success; candidates must be aware of these strategies that lead to a high school credential – particularly for students with the most challenges. Once elected, officials must support these and other proven strategies to improve graduation rates and college and career readiness, ensuring more success for struggling students, schools and communities.

We Know A Lot About Who Is Not Graduating And What Can Help:

The good news: significantly fewer young people, particularly youth of color, are dropping out before completing four years of high school than in recent years. However, despite improvements, more than one in every ten students who should have graduated in 2015 in Michigan left high school without a diploma. Michigan rates remain higher for Black, Hispanic and American Indian students than for white students, and higher for students facing a variety of challenges, like poverty, disability and homelessness.

There is strong research that allows us to predict which students are at-risk of school failure and high school dropout. Not surprisingly, students facing personal and educational obstacles are much more likely not to complete high school. Increasing numbers of students need more than four years to complete high school and graduate; but when young people fall behind in credits, there are limited options for credit recovery and a traditional high school setting is not always successful in reengaging them, yet few alternatives exist. School discipline policies often contribute to students' disengagement and lost credits, and transitory student populations like young people experiencing homelessness or those currently or formerly in the foster care or juvenile justice systems often have trouble spending enough time in school without interruption to accumulate credits.

Additional time in high school improves graduation rates for everybody. Increasing numbers of students are remaining in school for more than four years to keep moving toward a high school credential. State graduation rates increased for all groups after a fifth or sixth year of high school. Those additional years are significantly more important for students of color and those with other challenges.

What is the Role of Policymakers?

Policymakers at the state and federal levels make decisions on how to fund programs that support children, youth and their families; and these investment decisions demonstrate where the public's

priorities lie. Both Congress and the State Legislature fund and regulate the kind of education, health and human services, and other programming that promotes college and career readiness. However, some of the state and federal initiatives to improve educational outcomes don't include attention or funding for critical strategies that work to improve graduation and eventual post-secondary and life success.

Suggested Questions for Candidates

- As a business owner/leader I recognize that I need every young person in my community to be prepared to succeed in work. How will you make sure that even struggling learners are graduating from high school prepared for their next steps?
- As a mental health professional, I see how the challenges some young people face make it tough for them to succeed in school. How will you make sure that there are educational settings that work for kids who have experienced trauma or have trouble regulating their behavior?
- As a grandparent raising my grandchildren, I need to be involved in their education. How will you make sure that schools are reaching out to all different types of caregivers?
- As a kid who has had trouble in school, how will you give me another chance to succeed so I can contribute to my family and my community?
- Young people and their families are the experts on why the educational system hasn't been successful with them. What will you do to make sure that you are hearing from the young people, parents and others consistently if you are elected?

What Candidates Can Do If Elected Into Office

- ✓ Support multiple pathways to graduation that provide more time and flexibility for students. Michigan law allows state payment for additional time beyond a traditional 4-years of high school, but does not reward local school districts for utilizing alternative, adult and community education options or community college and workforce partnerships to serve those older students.
- ✓ Address suspension and expulsion rates. Michigan needs to bring its harsh zero tolerance policy in line with other states and federal standards and give schools greater ability to handle challenging student behavior. Current suspension and expulsion policy and its disproportionate effect on youth of color must be reviewed, and schools must be provided with incentives to create discipline alternatives.
- ✓ Promote policy and practice that recognize student trauma. Any efforts to improve graduation rates will be hampered by the challenges students and their families face. This includes basic needs outside the classroom, but also other unresolved or continuing issues including mental and behavioral health, including their own and that of their caregivers; family and neighborhood violence and loss; and other traumatic experiences that clearly impact their ability to excel in the classroom.
- ✓ Stop diminishing services. Actions that have diminished services for at-risk young people through cuts in the state and federal budgets over the last decade or so are counter-productive. Disinvestment in the very communities most in need does not promote innovation, partnership or reform. Evidence-based support programs will need to be expanded in order to see real, sustainable improvement in school success for the most challenged schools, communities and young people.