



News and analysis from The Center for Michigan

Guest Commentary

Opinion | Want my vote? Pay attention to Michiganders too young to vote



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Matt Gillard



Guest Commentary

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Matt Gillard is president and CEO of Michigan's Children, a children's public policy advocacy group.

To Michigan's candidates for state and federal office:

Michigan's children will be our next scientists, entrepreneurs, teachers, parents, laborers, artists and lawmakers. Our future depends on preparing them for education, work and life.

Unfortunately, our state currently fails many of its youngest citizens. According to [Kids Count](#), Michigan ranks at or near the bottom third of states in a range of child well-being indicators, from low reading and math test scores to rising abuse and neglect rates to the sixth-highest rate of children living in high-poverty neighborhoods in the country.

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Given the opportunity, young people can change the way policymakers see problems and find solutions. [Michigan's Children](#) has spent 25 years learning from youth, parents and those who serve them about what they face. They would like our next elected leaders to address some [key issues](#):

Child Care Matters

Families want engaging and nurturing spaces for their young children when they're away, but business leaders and workers alike cite the lack of access to child care among the most common employment barriers. Unfortunately, Michigan's child care system struggles to retain professionals and community-based providers who can fill that need, to the point that [nearly half of Michiganders](#) live in a "child care desert" without access to affordable, licensed care for young children as well as school-aged children after school and in the summer.

As an elected official, how will you lend a hand to families who need child care but cannot afford or access it?

Families Matter

Nearly one-third of Michigan children live in families in which adults lack a stable job, and many children also experience abuse, neglect and parental substance use, separation or incarceration, events that expose them to toxic stress which, without support, can lead to long-term health, educational and behavioral issues. Adult literacy and voluntary home visiting programs and behavioral health services help parents ensure that their children grow up healthy and ready to learn, but access is limited.

As an elected official, how will you work to strengthen families and help enable parents to best help their kids?

Foster Care Matters

There are more than 13,000 children and youth experiencing foster care in Michigan, nearly half of whom have had four or more adverse childhood experiences. Despite some improvements, many children suffer from inconsistent placements, untrained caregivers and missing services from the moment they enter the system onward. Youth who age out of care, instead of returning home or being adopted, are at higher risk than their peers of failing high school and experiencing substance misuse, unemployment, homelessness, incarceration, early pregnancy and chronic health conditions.

As an elected official, how will you ensure that children in foster care, for whom the state has a unique obligation to serve, receive the support they need?

Learning Matters

There is universal agreement that a high-quality K-12 education matters, but our results are not meeting our high standards. We know what kids need to grow and succeed in school: parents and caregivers who can support their children's learning at home; trained school professionals who can recognize and respond to student needs; access to basic resources that promote learning; safe, clean, and secure spaces, at home and at school; and academic tools and pathways, like after-school and summer learning programs that enable educational success.

As an elected official, how will you ensure that all children have the tools and the resources to learn?

[Mental Health Matters](#)

Good mental health is critical for the healthy growth of children and youth and for the stability of families. Unfortunately, about half of Michiganders living with mental illness [have not received care](#). The lack of access to mental health services, either through traditional health care or through schools, child welfare, and justice systems, costs all of us, in both lost loved ones and state spending to address the symptoms of poor mental health.

As an elected official, how will you work to support children, youth and families with mental health needs?

Our future depends on having an engaged, highly skilled population of Michiganders. We urge you, our state's next political leaders, to help make Michigan a place where all children and youth can thrive and succeed. To do that, you will need to consult the voices, experience, and ideas of youth and families who are directly impacted by public policy decisions early and often.

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