



August 2018

Helping All Kids Thrive and Achieve in School

Michigan's children will be our next scientists, entrepreneurs, teachers, parents, laborers, artists and lawmakers, and Michigan's future depends on preparing them for education, work, and life. There is universal agreement that a high-quality K-12 education matters to life success. Accordingly, academic expectations are rising, with employers and citizens demanding critical thinkers, team players, problem solvers, and communicators.

However, our educational results are not meeting our high standards for core academics, creating additional barriers to students honing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Just 44% of Michigan children score "proficient" in reading at a third-grade level, with just 20%, 32%, and 31% of Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students scoring proficient, respectively. For eighth-grade-level math, those scores are 36%, 10%, 20%, and 22%, respectively. And despite recent improvements, nearly two in every ten Michigan students who should have graduated in 2017 failed to do so. Dropout rates remain higher for Black, Hispanic and American Indian students, and for those facing life challenges including poverty, disability and homelessness. Wherever they go after high school, many students are unprepared for higher learning – 65% of students did not score at a "college-ready" level on SAT standardized tests. And again, traditionally underserved populations of students score far below the statewide average.

Reaching A High-Quality Education Needs All Hands On Deck

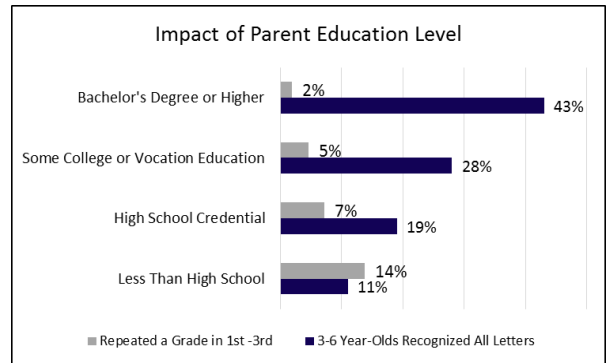
Different aspects of a child's life are interconnected. In addition to teachers, high standards, and high-quality curricula, life experiences have a tremendous influence on a child's learning in school - abuse, homelessness, parental substance use or incarceration, if faced without supportive relationships, coping skills, and basic necessary resources, can actually alter the brain. This can impede early cognitive, biological, emotional, and social growth, leading to a host of negative outcomes, including [poor school performance](#). Years of research and the lived experience of youth and families have taught us what kids need to grow and succeed in school:

- Parents and caregivers who have tools to support their children's learning at home
- Trained school professionals who can recognize and respond to student needs
- Access to basic resources that are essential to learning
- Safe, clean, and secure spaces, at home and at school
- Academic tools and pathways that enable their educational success

Parents and Caregivers

Adults can have a powerful influence on a child's life. Children learn best when their households have the skills and capacity to reinforce what's taught in school. However, over 40,000 Michiganders aged 18-34 have less than a ninth grade education. Adult education programs provide critical literacy services across the state, providing parents with tools to better assist their children's learning, but lack the capacity to meet the full demand.

Many Michigan parents also live with the effects of childhood trauma, impacting their own physical and emotional health: over 60% of adults in the Michigan Behavior Risk Factor Survey reported having had [at least one adverse childhood experience](#), which without support can harm a person's long-term well-being, and 15% reported having had at least four. Mental health care, substance use, and other services must be available for both kids and adults, so parents who may face challenges of their own are best able to serve their children.



Skilled School Professionals

Children and youth need adults while they are in school to help them build important skills and connect them with critical supports they need, both academic and otherwise. Teachers, already stretched for time during the school day, must work in partnership with [counselors](#), [mental health professionals](#), social workers, and others who are trained to coordinate services in order to adequately assess and respond to the demonstrated needs of every student. Access to trained professionals who can provide critical support services like school-based physical and mental health and social services are essential to keeping students from falling through the cracks.

School professionals help maintain environments that enable children to focus on learning. High quality professional development can [improve teacher practice and boost student achievement](#). Unfortunately, many educators and other school staff do not have the necessary training in order to be able to effectively recognize different student needs and provide students with the right kind of support. For example, when staff cannot recognize trauma-influenced student behaviors, which children and youth cannot always control, kids are penalized, often in the form of suspensions and expulsions, when more restorative practices or other services would help most. Students of color and students with disabilities disproportionately suffer from these disciplinary practices. Michigan has taken some steps to [discourage the most harmful student discipline policies](#) in recent years, and must continue to encourage best practices in student discipline and provide adequate wraparound services so both teachers and students can perform their best.

Access to Basic Resources

Children learn best when their brains and bodies are healthy. Overwhelming evidence points to the role of nutrition and physical and mental health care in healthy brain development. Nutrition is extraordinarily important: well-nourished children not only have all the vitamins and minerals their brains need to function, their bodies are also primed to fight off dangerous threats to physical and mental well-being, including disease and lead poisoning, which impose serious barriers to learning. However, it's getting harder for families to afford the nutrition their children need – according to the Michigan League for Public Policy, monthly food costs for a Michigan family of four [have risen 15%](#) since 2007. While schools offer federally subsidized meals programs for students who qualify, many gaps still exist, especially after school and during the summer.

Children and youth who receive consistent physical and mental health care attend school healthier and are [more likely to graduate](#). Kids are more likely to get their check-up when their parents have health care access too; when their parents are covered, children are more likely to

see a professional for preventive care regardless of their own insurance coverage. National research has found that households with health care borrow less money for medical costs, freeing up resources for families to reinvest into their child's education, parents' skill development or other basic needs. Unfortunately, in Michigan, thousands of children and youth [don't access needed health care](#), many youth in foster care don't receive care to which they're entitled, and Medicaid-recipient families with school-aged children are at-risk of losing coverage under new work requirement policies. School-based health care can provide a depth of quality services, but they cannot replace the entire health care system.

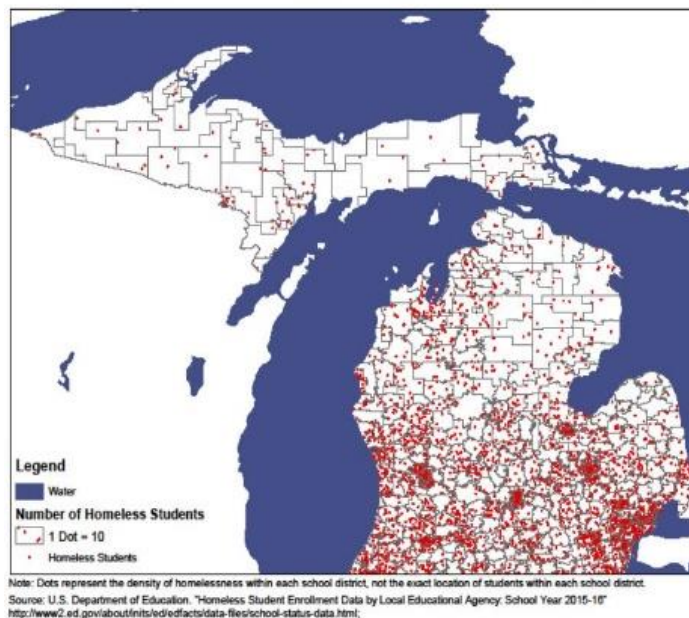
Safe and Stable Environments

We also know that young minds develop best in [safe learning environments](#) – loud noise, poor quality air and water, and crowding have all been found to significantly impede child development. Some studies even [suggest](#) that school building design factors can impact student learning. Excellent school facilities also come equipped with cutting-edge tools that provide opportunities for students to explore new career options and learn through strategies and media that work best for them. News reports have exposed some of the worst school building situations in Michigan, but the need extends far beyond Detroit - Michigan has billions of dollars in unmet capital need and a facilities finance system that forces smaller, poorer, and more rural districts to foot the entire bill, severely limiting the quality and flexibility of the buildings they construct.

For all the same reasons, children and youth need safe and stable housing. A student's environment out of school hours impacts their in-school behavior and learning; experiences of domestic violence incidents, abuse or neglect, mobility from place to place, or not having a place to sleep at all can all introduce toxic stress into the lives of children, causing them to have more trouble focusing in class. Due in part to reporting changes, the number of confirmed

victims of abuse and neglect in Michigan, which is proven to be associated with [lower third-grade reading](#) test scores, [increased 30%](#) between 2010 and 2016.

Number Students Homeless in Michigan School Districts School Year 2015-16



Youth homelessness in Michigan is also widespread: in 2016, over 26,000 children experienced homelessness or extreme housing instability, the 6th highest rate in the nation. In over 40% of school districts, at least 10% of children and youth [experienced homelessness](#), and many more lived in poor or substandard housing due to a lack of resources or options. Michigan's student population is the 10th-largest in the country, but our homeless youth population is sixth-largest.

Image from: **University of Michigan Poverty Solutions Center**

Comprehensive Academic Supports

Even when they have secure resources, secure environments, and secure relationships, most students will struggle at some point in school, and will need some combination of academic opportunities and comprehensive support to master the necessary skills for college and career. Unfortunately, young people and their families who most need additional learning opportunities and supports are often the least likely to have access to them. When a child from a low-income family reaches sixth grade, they have spent an estimated [6,000 fewer hours learning](#) than a peer from a wealthier household, including fewer hours being read to by family members; hours not spent in preschool programs; and fewer hours in after-school, summer and other extracurricular activities all of which are proven to support learning.



Additionally, many youth need more than four years to complete high school, and some already follow an extended pathway: Michigan's four-year high school graduation rate in 2016 was 79%, but its six-year graduation rate, which includes students who needed an extra couple of years to complete their program, was 84%. Having extra time to complete a degree matters significantly for student populations with the lowest four-year graduation rates; giving them a extra time paired with support is a proven strategy. But flexible options for achieving credits are limited for young people who fall behind. Mobile populations like youth 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, and their graduation rates are far below the state average. Furthermore, school discipline policies and untrained personnel contribute to increased suspensions and expulsions, often leading to students' disengagement and lost credits.

In order for Michigan to successfully educate all of our young people, we have to follow decades of research and experience in human growth and development, and provide necessary resources and create the conditions that are essential to setting students up to learn. These public policies and investments, paired with the most effective educational standards, practices, and pathways, and held accountable to families and communities through collaboration and responsible evaluation, will enable all children and youth to thrive and achieve.