

## OPINION

# Opinion: Michigan should invest in after-school programs

Mary Sutton and Matt Gillard Published 11:00 p.m. ET July 4, 2019

Summertime comes with significant losses for many families struggling to find activities to combat summer learning loss in reading and math.

Many students who rely on school meals go hungry and parents struggle to focus at work knowing their children are unsupervised. Thousands of these families who have relied on school-based programs are faced with new challenges as the news hits home that after-school programs and their summer school counterparts will close in nearly 40 school sites targeted for at-risk kids from Traverse City to Hamtramck. The result of a lack of federal funding and no state dedicated funding, these closures represent what ails Michigan's education system: lack of commitment and vision from our state leaders.

As a state, we would all benefit by making a commitment to hard-working Michigan families struggling to secure a safe place for their kids while they're working. That starts with a clear vision for the comprehensive educational needs of children, understanding that evidence-based after-school programs offer the added academic, social and career-inspiring benefits families crave and kids need, especially for those most at-risk of failure.

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Dozens of after-school programs serving thousands of at-risk students in districts including Hamtramck, Pontiac, Flint and its suburbs, Bay City, Union City, Port Huron and Traverse City are being defunded starting Oct. 1, 2019. These programs offer essential academic, social and behavioral help to children through the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers program.

To understand why these after-school programs are so critical for Michigan, consider that by 6th grade children from low-income families spent 6,000 fewer hours learning than wealthier peers. Consider how that impacts their development and career trajectory. Consider the benefits that additional learning time has for at-risk youngsters learning to read, or for helping middle and high school students stay in school and even graduate on time.



'Beyond Basics' tutor Chris Schaffer gives a high-five to Declan Williams, 7, as they work on reading skills. The Williams children are getting help from 'Beyond Basics,' a literacy center at the Durfee Innovation Society in Detroit. (Photo: Daniel Mears, *The Detroit News*)

The research solidly suggests after-school activities give more kids a better chance at life and school success. Unlike in other states, the 21st Century program is the only designated funder of after-school activities in Michigan where they've traditionally been underfunded. The Michigan Department of Education has urged state support for after-school programs in Michigan to boost our students' learning potential, recommending we add \$50 million a year just to cover schools that are eligible for federal funding but not able to be funded.

We agree it's finally time we have that conversation. Michigan's Children, which serves as a policy adviser to Michigan After-School Partnership, believes seeking after-school funding through the Michigan's school aid fund is a nonstarter because there are enough encumbrances on the school aid budget for school-day learning that can't be spared. The answer lies in finding a new funding source. Many advocates believe — and we wholeheartedly agree — that a likely source should be future online gambling revenues.

The 21st Century program annually serves 35,776 kids in Michigan, but the need for programs is far greater. The Afterschool Alliance surveyed parents and found 625,026 Michigan students in K-12 are waiting for after-school programs. When asked, 89 percent of parents said they would support public funding for programs.



If PHC is able to obtain funding, we plan to increase the number of afterschool programs in Northwest Detroit, and help other communities to replicate our efforts. (Photo: Rachel Woolf / *Special to The Detroit News*)

Out-of-school time programs are more than just a place to park a kid. Michigan schoolchildren spend 20 percent of their waking hours in school. More than 80 percent of their time is spent learning outside of school — at after-school and summer programs, in libraries, museums, science centers, at home or in the community. How at-risk kids spend that time — and how after-school programs can help boost literacy, improve student achievement, and prepare youth for a 21st Century workforce — has been studied and affirmed by academic researchers. It's time we demand our state leaders make after-school programs a priority in our state education system.

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