

Opinion

Our Take: When federal funding shortcomings hit home, families become vulnerable

By Matt Gillard and Oogie LaMar

Posted Jul 13, 2020 at 2:00 PM

To say that our reality has changed since the coronavirus outbreak began would be a drastic understatement from advocates who work to close equity gaps and ensure positive outcomes for all our children, youth and families. A more pressing fact has been the lack of sufficient action from Congress and the White House to meet the needs of this moment, as we plan to return to school. With the past school year disrupted, learning opportunity gaps that many students experience in their lives are more pronounced than ever, due to differences in household stress, resources, and skills.

Now with resurging positive cases, including in hotspots here in Michigan, states continue a great balancing act — working to re-open schools, ensure safety and well-being of residents, and support students as they catch up and move ahead. But here's the kicker: Michigan cannot afford to do this alone; it's not possible without additional federal funding. Without significant, additional federal relief dollars, the state's budget crisis will land on the backs of the most vulnerable who are least able to recover.

Analysts project that Michigan's state revenues will have fallen by \$2.2 billion in the current fiscal year, which ends in September, and will leave another \$2 billion budget hole for next year. At the same time, core issues affecting the health, safety, and well-being of Michigan's children, youth, and families, and therefore our state's medical, economic, and educational recovery from this crisis have not subsided but grown more severe.

In our community, deserving programs that require additional federal support to help families include one of West Michigan's most important success stories for building family stability and economic security — and one now undermined by the pandemic. In the 13-county West Michigan region served by Adult

Education programs, 3,500 adults — half of whom are parents of school-age children — have been working to raise their academic and occupational skills proficiency, improve their literacy, and achieve a high school diploma, GED, or career-enhancing credential. Many are immigrants and English language learners or those whose own educational journeys were interrupted by tragic life events.

Data provided by the Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education indicates that two-thirds of these adult learners struggle with low literacy. With parents being called upon in unprecedented ways to assist in their children's at-home learning, this is not the time to shortchange programs that help parents participate in their children's educational journeys. Instead, support should be stepped up. Helping a parent achieve greater educational and career success creates positive benefits that naturally extend to their children who gain a parent better able to support them financially and academically.

Yet, the pandemic has upended adult education programming, even closing testing centers where adult learners demonstrate their mastery of information and skills needed to obtain a diploma or equivalency, move ahead in their job, or earn a pay raise. The crisis has cast a glaring spotlight on this and other disparities among us, particularly for low-skilled adults in rural and urban areas who don't have full access to internet service, devices and infrastructure needed to work and learn from home. Federal relief is needed to invest in those most harshly impacted by the crisis, particularly the lowest skilled among us, if we are to survive and recover from this pandemic.

Over the past few months the outcry from both sides of the aisle for federal support has been present, but we should not engage in any scenario that leaves vulnerable populations even more vulnerable in the guise of budget cuts. Neither should we entertain conversations about what is more important — education, health, or safety.

In crisis, we often talk about the need for state and federal investment to prevent the most vulnerable from irreparably falling behind, but today our leaders have a moral imperative to make tough funding decisions that don't adversely impact program closures, service delivery, and an equitable distribution of resources that sustain families. Let's make this time different.

How we treat children, youth, and families who faced challenges before the pandemic and are facing even tougher challenges right now will be the ultimate factor in whether or not our state truly recovers from this crisis. The time for leadership is now. Call on our Congressional leaders to fight for Michigan families.

— Matt Gillard is the CEO and president of Michigan's Children, a multi-issue public policy nonprofit working in the best interest of children and families, particularly those facing the most challenges, across Michigan. Oogie LaMar is director of adult education and community relations for the Kent Intermediate School District.