

# In the 2020 general election, cast your vote for equity in education

**Matt Gillard and Michele Strasz, guest writers**

Ballots are now being cast as the big-stakes fight for the presidency ignites voter turnout across federal, state and local races. In these anxious times fueled by a great pandemic, civil unrest, and negative political climate, it's easy to lose sight of elections as opportunities to bring people into office who we believe can help build a better future for our families and kids.

We ask voters to reach out to candidates today (virtually or by phone), read their platforms, and probe how they would improve educational opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities.

Then vote!

So many contributors to the current inequity in educational outcomes have been further exposed during the pandemic, coupled with increased attention to how systemic racism contributes.

A group of students who cross issues of race, income and other special needs are students with a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability, whose struggles to access accommodations and the support services needed to be successful in school have only expanded over the past several months.

Parents are frequently overwhelmed — juggling work, virtual schooling and managing their child's special needs in isolation. Underfunded school systems are hampered by huge staff caseloads and lack of trained special education staff.

The Capital Area College Access Network (CapCAN) has been working to expose the shortcomings and find solutions with renewed hope from Michigan's adopted educational goal of 60 percent college attainment (a postsecondary degree or credential) by 2030. We have some work to do, though.

Right now, Ingham County is at 48.9 percent while Eaton County is at 40.2 percent. With this in mind, elected leaders from the White House to local school boards must address the challenges schools have to ensure students with special needs have what they need to pursue meaningful employment one day.

All students need updated Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to set annual academic and social goals, and determine what services (such as occupational therapy, speech and language) they are eligible for. IEPs also identify what missed education needs to be made up. This is particularly critical for students approaching high school graduation.

All students with a learning, cognitive or physical disability are supposed to complete a transitional IEP that they “take” with them to request support and accommodations of their college or workplace. It is currently up to the student, not the institution, to make sure that this information is transferred as they move on.

These young people often fall through the cracks in this transition because they don’t know the post-secondary process, have difficulty self-advocating, or are just tired of having adults in their business.

Too often, students planning to attend college flounder because systems don’t exist to support them in post secondary institutions.

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CapCAN has been working with our K-12 and higher education partners to design systems to assure students with disabilities and their parents are informed about the college-going process, have the critical IEP documentation to take to college, and facilitate a warm handoff to the post-secondary support network.

Michigan’s Children partners with CapCAN in advocating for systemic change.

Seventy percent of jobs in greater Lansing require some form of post-secondary education. To achieve our 60 percent goal, all young people must have the support and capacity to pursue education after high school.

It’s time more candidates and elected officials address the legal and bureaucratic hurdles that exist as well as inadequate state and federal resources to ensure post-secondary success for all Michigan youth including those with disabilities.

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