



A Union of Professionals

AFT Michigan
AFL-CIO

**Pre K-12
Public Education:
A Michigan Platform**

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Pre K-12 Public Education: A Michigan Platform

Overview: What works for our children's future

Pollsters and the media tell us again and again that educators, parents and other stakeholders support academic standards. They want quality education for all students; they want “what works” in the public schools. They want schools where all children achieve; where there are high standards and high expectations; where all students are safe and secure; where there are smaller class sizes; where there are highly skilled teachers and support staff. Toward that end, the AFT Michigan, (AFT/AFL-CIO) outlines eleven major priorities for Michigan’s public schools. These measures call for:

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We believe that these priority components, taken together, form the core of real public school reform. We recommend that rather than using taxpayer dollars to experiment with more charter schools, vouchers, tax credits and privatization efforts, to name a few, we should focus our resources and our efforts on proven methods to affect concrete reforms that will raise the performance level in our public schools for all Michigan children. We hope that Michigan’s elected leaders will not only support the kinds of standards-based reforms outlined herein, but take an active leadership role in promoting them, so that together we can help our schools match or surpass the accomplishments of the world’s highest achieving nations.



High Academic Standards

The Issue

To achieve high academic standards it takes more than setting standards and testing students. Reassessing, developing and aligning standards, curriculum, classroom instruction, professional development, high quality tests and funding to provide assistance with redesigning schools to raise student achievement, are necessary to achieve the kind of standards-based reform public schools need to better prepare all Michigan children to be productive, successful members of society.

Action Steps

We urge elected officials to support these elements of success:

- **Common Academic Standards:** Our schools need common, publicly known, rigorous, clear and specific standards for what students should know and are able to achieve at each level and from grade to grade. Significant work has been done strengthening standards and aligning curriculum to these standards. Additional work needs to be done to strengthen curriculum in all subject areas. Teachers should be involved in the development of grade-by-grade curriculums;

- **Assessments:** Tests administered by the state must be based on the standards and must ensure the results reflect student growth in both skill and knowledge at the appropriate grade and performance level. Too often high-stakes decisions are based on a single test, forcing educators to spend excessive amounts of time preparing students for the test that is not aligned with curriculum. Tests must not drive the system;

- **Explicit Rewards for Achievement:** We need to acknowledge and reward student achievement gains, such as eligibility for college and training programs, and preference for job placement;

- **Student Support:** Providing a strong academic foundation at the lower elementary level (K-3) and providing quality pre-school education should be the focus, particularly in lower socioeconomic communities. As students progress through school, quality early intervention programs must be made available to students identified as at risk of failing to reach established goals.

End Social Promotion

The Issue

It is essential that all students be given the opportunity, the knowledge and the skills to succeed at the next level. It is, therefore, of equal importance for any student, who is in danger of failing or is struggling, to be identified early and receive the assistance needed. High academic standards provide the measuring tool; assessment, early intervention and quality assistance programs provide the solution.

Particular attention should be given to students in poverty and low-income areas. Studies show that many of these students, because they do not have the same out-of-school learning opportunities that advantaged children receive, struggle to stay abreast, lose interest as the achievement gap broadens, and finally give up. Studies done by Doris Entwisle and others at Johns Hopkins University found that “. . . children from poor and middle-class families make comparable gains during the school year, but while the middle-class children make gains when they are out of school during the summer, poor and disadvantaged children make few gains, or even move backwards academically.”

There are those students too that simply “fall through the cracks”, students who were either

not identified as needing assistance or did not qualify for the programs available. These students are most likely to be passed on to the next level because of age, parental or administrative pressure, or because there are no alternative options available.

Action Steps

We encourage elected officials to support policies and programs that:

- **Standards:** Institutionalize rigorous grade-by-grade standards;
- **Help Programs:** Provide early intervention and funding for quality help programs to underachieving or struggling students before they fall too far behind. As elsewhere mentioned, some quality help solutions may include alternative settings, before and after school tutoring, summer learning laboratories focusing on specialized reading and comprehension programs, smaller class settings and access to specialists and special services and others as need dictates.



Comprehensive Reading Programs

The Issue

Language learning is holistic. A child's ability to read early and well is one of the strongest predictors of life-long success. Fostering a desire to read and establishing good reading skills early in a student's school career prevents chronic school failure and ultimately ends social promotion. Extensive research has been done to understand how children learn and process information along with indicators as to why many fail. This research has been translated into a number of successful teaching, learning and assessment techniques, supported with materials that help all children, including those who have been identified as having a disability, learn to read by the third grade. Furthermore, reading programs must be in place for higher elementary, middle and high school students who, for whatever reason, need such assistance.

Action Steps

To meet high achievement standards in reading, we urge elected officials to support:

- **Professional Development:** State funding for professional development, for administrators, teachers and paraprofessionals at all levels in researched-based reading instruction and assessment to determine how a student processes information to encourage progressive levels of proficiency;
- **Smaller Class Size:** State funding to provide for smaller class sizes, reading specialists and paraprofessionals;
- **Pre-school & All-day Kindergarten:** State funding for quality pre-school and all-day kindergarten programs that can foster early literacy by early development of language, vocabulary and conceptual skills, as well as familiarizing all students with books fostering life-long readers and learners;
- **Support Programs:** State funding for before school, after school and summer programs and/or other quality support programs for students in all grades with reading difficulties or to enhance progress;
- **Parent Involvement:** State funding for methods training designed for parents to enable them to assist the students progress at home;
- **Physical Conditions:** School-entry screening programs that identify hearing, vision and other medical conditions that may impede student learning;
- **Early Assessment:** Research-based diagnostic assessments at entry level that are designed to promote early identification of students with language learning problems.

Small Class Sizes

The Issue

Educators and parents have long believed smaller classes are better. Better for several reasons but primarily better for student achievement. The question is, does lowering class size make a positive difference in achievement, particularly with children from low-income families?

The bottom line in a number of studies shows that educators and parents are right. Lowering class size substantially improves student achievement and is especially effective for low achieving and low-income students. A long-standing Tennessee project remains the standard of class size research. The project looked at the results of assigning randomly selected students to small classes (13-17 students) in grades K-3 and regular classes (22-25 students). Four years of data revealed that students in small classes significantly outperformed the other students in both math and reading at all grade levels. In Wisconsin, it was found that low-income minority students gained the most from smaller classes. Researcher Harold Wenglinsky, of the Educational Testing Service, analyzed school district spending patterns and math achievement of fourth and eighth graders on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. His study found that increased teacher-student ratios raised achievement at both grades. Fourth graders in smaller-than-average classes, for example, were about half a year ahead of the

counterparts in larger-than-average classes. An unexpected residual effect has been reported in various reports. Smaller class size generated a renewed confidence in public schools by parents who were sending their children to private schools.

Action Steps

To help raise student achievement, state leaders should:

- **Smaller Class Size:** Provide funding to public schools to reduce class sizes, particularly in grades K-3;
- **Quality Teaching Staff:** Provide training and funding to recruit, hire, retain and train qualified teachers to meet the additional needs of staffing smaller classes.



High Priority Schools

The Issue

Special efforts must be made to enhance high priority schools. While the state has taken steps to find and improve these schools, more can and should be done. State law provides that high priority schools, once identified, may receive technical assistance to help them improve. However, the state (as well as the federal government) is not providing the extra monetary assistance needed for quality technical assistance once a school has been identified as a high priority school.

Action Steps

Further reforms should be considered and modeled on what has worked in similar schools around the country. In several school districts in other states, for example, education unions and district management have been working together to:

- **Identify:** Identify high priority schools;
- **Identify Needs:** Analyze the schools' most pressing needs;
- **Programs:** Provide school faculties with information about and access to effective, research-based improvement programs;
- **School Improvement Plan:** Develop procedures whereby an improvement program is selected by a super majority vote of the school faculty;

- **Administration:** Replace ineffective building or district administrators;
- **Staff:** Offer transfer opportunities, without stigma, to faculty members who differ with their colleagues' choice of improvement program;
- **Assist & Support:** Provide technical assistance and support as improvement plans are implemented.

These actions have resulted in significant student achievement gains in many schools. State leaders should encourage systematic, collaborative, focused improvement plans of this sort at the district level, as well as provide monetary and technical assistance to support them. The Elementary Secondary Education Act, better known as No Child Left Behind, purports to address the issue of high priority schools. However, the NCLB approach is significantly flawed.

Discipline For Safe, Orderly Schools

The Issue

All children deserve schools that offer a safe and orderly learning environment. In a disorderly school, teachers cannot teach, children cannot learn, and precious classroom time is lost forever.

Action Steps

Michigan school districts are required to have strong, clear student discipline policies and codes of conduct. However, consistent enforcement of these codes is still problematic. Elected officials should support:

- **Code of Conduct Standards:** Many school district discipline policies are extremely vague and inadequately enforced. To correct these inadequacies school districts must be required to form a committee of parents, teachers, support staff, and administrators to develop a code of conduct. If there is noncompliance or the code remains ineffective the state must provide assistance.

- **Quality Alternative Placements:** Some students will have to be removed from the regular classroom and into an appropriate alternative placement. Putting troubled students out on the street, or simply moving violent or chronically disruptive students to another school without providing them with behavioral intervention, special treatment or discipline programs is not the answer. Districts must provide and the state must fund a continuum of alternative educational placements that can help such students meet

their need for remediation of behavior and maintenance of academic progress;

- **Behavior Management Training:** The state should make it a priority to see that every teacher and classroom paraprofessional who needs help acquiring effective classroom management skills receives assistance, especially those just entering the profession. Behavior management training should also be provided to all school-related personnel who are given the responsibility of maintaining order and discipline.



School Infrastructure

The Issue

We can all agree that Michigan's children deserve highly skilled teachers and support staff and first-rate instructional materials to optimize achievement and provide a quality education. But, of equal importance, they deserve modern, safe and well-equipped schools with up-to-date technology.

A 1999 study by the U.S. Department of Education found that 77 percent of public schools 35 years old or more and 61 percent of schools 15 to 34 years old, were in less than adequate condition. Clearly the problem has gotten worse since then.

By eliminating overcrowded and crumbling buildings, not only will learning conditions but also working conditions be enhanced, allowing school districts to attract and retain highly skilled teachers and staff in areas where it was not otherwise possible. Decaying buildings, poor ventilation and overflowing schools neither promote high standards nor improve student achievement.

Action Steps

To address school infrastructure problems in Michigan, we encourage elected officials to support:

- **Survey:** A state survey of the physical plants in all school districts to determine the extent of the problem;

- **Assistance:** Increased state assistance programs to assist school districts, especially those with the greatest needs;
- **Federal Commitment:** New federal legislation that would offset some or all of these expenditures.

Quality Teachers and Support Staff

The Issue

Ensuring that there is a highly skilled teacher in every classroom is vital to student success. The state must do more to help school districts recruit, train and retain a highly skilled teaching and classroom paraprofessional force, as well as the very best for all support staff positions. This must be done statewide, but particularly in high-poverty urban and low-income rural communities where the academic needs of students are often greatest. Funds also need to be provided to assist teachers and paraprofessionals to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind.

Looking at countries showing high academic achievement, teachers, not unlike ours, have a solid academic background, mastery in their subject area and education in pedagogy, but also are ushered into the profession through a practical, proven and realistic training process including mentoring and professional development.

Action Steps:

To build on the state's efforts for teacher quality, we encourage state leaders to:

- **Mentoring:** Adopt a non-threatening, supportive fully-funded peer mentoring program across the state for entry-level teachers, for the first four years, with a plan to develop a peer intervention program to assist seasoned teachers who may have hit a rough patch;

- **Environment:** Provide funding for safe, modern, healthy working environments to attract and retain highly skilled educators;

- **Education Opportunities:** Provide funding for research based professional development and affordable higher education opportunities for paraprofessionals and other school personnel. This will not only raise support staff levels of effectiveness, but often encourages continuing education toward teacher certification and a source of new teachers familiar with district policy and programs as well as the community;

- **Salaries and Benefits:** Provide funding for professional salaries and benefits for teachers and support staff;

- **Professional Development:** Fund and support research based high quality, meaningful professional development for teachers, classroom paraprofessionals and all staff which would include:

1. Useful content;
2. Research-based educational programs;
3. Opportunities suitable to the need of students as determined by the educators in any specific location;
4. Programs that are sequential, that reinforce, compliment or expand on a given theme;
5. Enhance the work of all staff as all staff are part of a child's education.

- **NBPTS:** Support certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and fund monetary rewards for successful completion.



Early Childhood and Pre-school Programs

The Issue

Educators all over Michigan and across the country, know that early childhood education is essential to a child's success in school and that the first four years of a child's life are the most critical period of development and the most critical time for learning. Research is unequivocal in finding that disadvantaged children, on average, lag substantially behind other children in literacy, math, and social skills even before formal schooling begins. The roots of the persistent achievement gap through school are to be found outside of school (U.S. Department of Education, 2000, 2001; Lee and Burkam, 2002; Alexander, Entwisle and Olson, 2001). At the onset of kindergarten, the average cognitive scores of children in the highest economic group are a staggering 60 percent above the scores of children in the lowest economic group (U.S. Dept of Education, 2000; Educational Testing Service, 2002; Lee and Burkam, 2002).

These findings by no means suggest that disadvantaged children cannot learn. To the contrary; once they are in school, they progress at least as rapidly as other children do. By the end of kindergarten year, the basic-skills gap between disadvantaged and other children has virtually disappeared (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2001). School does indeed make a big difference.

Furthermore, study after study show that children who have quality pre-school learning opportunities enter kindergar-

ten better prepared both academically and socially. Additional studies indicate the benefits of full-day Kindergarten.

Action Steps

We urge elected officials to support accessible, affordable, high-quality state-wide pre-school available to all Michigan children. To achieve this we would encourage state leaders to:

- **The Program:** Enhance and expand access to the Michigan School Readiness Program;
- **Funding:** Provide state and seek federal funding to fully fund the program;
- **In-School Centers:** Establish quality early childhood centers in schools for teachers and support staff with small children, prioritizing hard-to-staff schools;
- **Staffing:** Provide professional development for teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff using research-based programs and provide for professional salaries;
- **Parent Involvement:** Encourage parental support and participation as an important component. Promote opportunities to strengthen parents/guardians abilities to provide active support through students and schools.

• **Kindergarten:** Require kindergarten for all students, and provide full day programs. Support Kindergarten Plus, an American Federation of Teachers’ proposal that provides an extended year, full-day kindergarten to disadvantaged children by enabling them to begin kindergarten the summer before they would ordinarily enter and to continue through the summer after kindergarten, right before entering first grade. Amend the “school starts after Labor Day” law to permit this to be implemented.



Strong Special Education Programs

The Issue

Michigan has some of the strongest and most effective rules and regulations for special education in the nation. These rules and regulations must not be weakened as they directly impact the ability of a special education teacher and paraprofessional to educate and the ability of a special education child to learn.

Unfortunately, special education does not receive the necessary funding to adequately satisfy the needs. This shortage of funds not only affects our special education children, but also our general education students. Often money is drawn from funds earmarked for general education and used to make up the special education shortfalls. It would seem evident this practice diminishes both.

Action Steps

We urge elected officials to:

- **Standards:** Make sure Michigan's special education rules and regulations are not weakened;
- **Funding:** Provide the funds necessary to educate our special education children, thus avoiding the use of general education funds to make up shortfalls;
- **Federal Responsibilities:** Ensure the federal government makes good on promises of special education funding.

Necessary School Funding

The Issue

School funding is grossly inadequate. For one there is not enough money for school aid. Secondly, there is much too wide a disparity between the lower and higher funded districts.

The school funding issue is a revenue issue, not a spending issue. Michigan's revenue system is unfair, unstable and inadequate.

Action Steps

We urge elected officials to support the education funding proposal of the K-16 Coalition to bring stability and predictability to school funding. (<http://www.michigank16.org>)

We also urge elected officials to examine the real financial needs of school districts and then adopt a revenue structure for Michigan that is fair, stable and adequate and funds not only our public schools, but higher education and all state services as well.