



# **Pre K-12 Public Education**

*A Michigan Platform*

# **2011**



## Overview

*Michigan's future depends on the quality of education it provides for learners of all ages.*

Education reform has taken center stage in state and federal policy debates of late. Through all the confusion of competing claims, one thing remains clear: educators, parents and other stakeholders want a quality education for all students, and recognize that this means supporting “what works” in public schools.

All of us want schools with high standards and high expectations, small class sizes, and highly qualified teachers and support staff. We want students spending time learning, not testing. And we want all students to be safe, secure and prepared for post-secondary education and successful careers.

AFT Michigan has always advocated for accountability, transparency, and meaningful research-based initiatives. Accountability and transparency must encompass all stakeholders—from students, teachers, and administrators to parents, civic and business leaders.

We must avoid the temptation of trendy “silver bullet” solutions and base our reforms on quality research. Lasting improvements in our schools will be found through collaboration and locally-negotiated solutions to the challenges we face, supported by a similar spirit of cooperation at the state level.

In this platform, AFT Michigan has identified a set of priorities for Michigan public schools. Decades of solid evidence support these ten pillars of a high quality education system:

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*AFT Michigan is a union of 35,000 members working in preschool, K-12, intermediate school districts, community colleges, universities, and local government. Our 98 locals extend as far south as Monroe and north to Whitefish Township in the Upper Peninsula.*

## **Background Issues**

Our curriculum is the foundation of our hopes for the next generation. It must provide children with the knowledge, skills, and tools to lead successful and meaningful lives. All children, regardless of neighborhood, deserve to be exposed to a rich, well-sequenced curriculum, starting before kindergarten. Increased testing requirements have squeezed music, arts, history, and other non-tested subjects out of the curriculum. Just because something is easily tested does not make it more important. A well-rounded and rich common curriculum is essential to preparing students to be college and career ready.

The strength of any curriculum rests on the *standards* that frame learning experiences. Standards define the knowledge and skills that students should acquire and are vital to ensuring that we hold all students to high expectations. Governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states and the District of Columbia (including Michigan) have committed to developing *Common Core Standards* in English-Language Arts and Mathematics for grades K-12 that are clear, understandable, aligned with college and work expectations, rigorous in content and higher-order skill application, and evidence-based.

In order to provide useful feedback on student progress and inform future learning experiences, student assessment must consider *multiple measures of learning* (not just standardized tests) in order to provide thorough information. Standardized testing can be a useful tool, but only if it is aligned with a rich curriculum (tied to common core standards) and combined with other assessment tools.

## **What We Need**

**Re-emphasize Social Studies, Science, the Arts, and Physical Education:** These important disciplines must be included in curricular frameworks even though they are not often

included in high-stakes testing. Michigan should adopt common core standards for these important subjects in order to ensure that they do not vanish from our schools.

**Extra-Curricular Opportunities:** Common sense and years of research support the crucial role extra-curricular activities can play in student success, but tight budgets and the focus on test scores are squeezing them out.

**Comprehensive Reading Instruction for Early Learners:** There is no stronger educational research finding than the importance of developing early literacy skills. Quality pre-school and all-day kindergarten programs allow children to develop the language, vocabulary, and conceptual skills crucial to becoming an active reader. Reading instruction should include the proven combination of individualized, small group, and whole class instruction. Class size matters when teaching reading, and staff must have access to all necessary supplies, materials, and professional development.

**Responsible Student Testing:** High-quality student testing that supports and enhances teaching and learning can be a useful instruction tool. However, testing should not overshadow the importance of student learning, and high stakes tests should not carry disproportionate weight in educational decisions. Quality assessment means using a variety of assessment tools, including multiple measures of student performance, and aligning assessment tools with curricular standards.

**Career and Technical Education Options:** The overemphasis on high stakes testing has also reduced opportunities for students to learn concrete career skills, which particularly impacts some of our most at-risk students. Reviving such programs will require funding and will.

**Meaningful Professional Development:** In order for curriculum to meet its goals, it is essential that staff receive high quality professional development aligned with common core standards.

## Background Issues

It is undeniable that teachers and support staff play an essential role in providing a high-quality education for students. Therefore, it is necessary to provide our students with highly qualified teachers in every classroom. This requires that the state help recruit, train, and retain a highly qualified teaching, paraprofessional, and support staff workforce.

Every student should have access to teachers who hold students to high expectations, know the subject matter, care deeply about their students, understand how to assess student and differentiate instruction, use data to inform instruction, work collaboratively, participate in the evaluation and development plans that inform student learning, and are supported by a quality administration.

Research shows that the best teachers are ushered into the profession through a practical, proven and realistic training process that includes clinical instruction mentoring and professional development. The National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research found that teacher *credentialing* (being highly qualified) and *experience* are positively correlated with student achievement (Clotfelter et al, 2007). Similarly, Huang and Moon (2009) found that teaching experience at a particular grade level increased reading achievement.

## What We Need

**Effective Teacher Evaluation:** When done effectively, evaluating teachers is an extremely important professional development tool that improves teaching and learning. As educational experts, teachers' perspectives are essential in deciding what constitutes "good teaching" and what it takes to improve student learning. It is essential that teachers and our unions are involved in developing and implementing evaluative tools, including peer assistance and review. Teacher evaluation, like

student evaluation, should include *multiple measures of success* and combine teaching standards with student learning variables. AFT Michigan has developed a comprehensive guide to help local leaders develop effective evaluations.

**Clear Expectations for Educators:** Teaching requires instructors to be masters of content, engaging facilitators, and leaders of a classroom community. Including all stakeholders in developing professional standards will ensure that our shared expectations are reflected in how teachers are evaluated and supported.

**Prepare Educators for Challenges:** Working with children requires a variety of skill sets, especially because challenging situations often arise quickly and unpredictably. Staff should receive training in conflict resolution and other techniques to support student and group behaviors.

**Quality & Stable Staff:** Consistent staff presence is crucial to student growth and school improvement. Legislators should *amend PA 112* to remove the ability of administrators to unilaterally outsource so-called non-instructional support staff.

**Professional Salaries and Benefits:** Fairly compensating teachers and staff is essential to attracting and retaining quality educators and maintaining a stable and high quality workforce in our schools.

**Meaningful Professional Development:** Even extraordinary educators benefit from meaningful professional development. Effective teachers and support staff are cultivated through high quality, job-embedded professional development that is aligned with appropriate standards and curricula (ideally developed collaboratively with staff and linked to an effective evaluation system).

# Safe and Supportive Learning Environments

## Background Issues

We can all agree that Michigan's children deserve great teachers and first-rate instructional materials. In addition, student success depends on healthy, safe, well maintained, and adequately equipped schools.

One of the most recognizable obstacles faced by many educators is school infrastructure. The research is unequivocal: poor school building conditions are a serious threat to the health and academic performance of students (Filardo, 2008). Even the best teachers and support staff cannot help their students succeed in a classroom that lacks necessary teaching tools. Similarly, when students and teachers are distracted by the conflict and blight present in some schools, learning is much more difficult.

Many students come to school with needs that impede their ability to thrive academically. Healthcare, social services, and parental involvement are too often divorced from education discussions, even though they are critical to student success. If we are serious about increasing student learning and closing achievement gaps, we must address factors that are beyond the control of teachers and schools.

## What We Need

**Community Schools & Wraparound Services:** "Community schools" create a culture and environment that nurtures children and their families. There are successful models of community schools in Michigan and across the country where school buildings are open into the evening for tutoring, homework assistance, and recreational activities, as well as housing medical, dental, recreational, counseling and childcare services. Some students, especially those from low-income communities, depend on human services provided at school. Guid-

ance counselors, psychologists, social workers and other support staff are essential to fostering a student's emotional and social growth and ensuring they are ready to learn.

**Clear and Comprehensive Codes of Conduct:** School communities must adopt clear disciplinary expectations that support student learning and are consistently applied.

**Anti-Bullying:** All students deserve a safe and secure learning environment. Michigan should pass anti-bullying legislation encouraging districts to implement effective programs.

**Positive Learning and Work Environments:** Safe, modern, and healthy work environments maximize performance and are essential to attracting and retaining highly qualified educators. Existing buildings should be surveyed and assessed so that they can be improved. School districts - especially those with the greatest needs - need assistance in developing effective school design, renovation and construction programs.

**Greening Our Schools:** As we build new schools and renovate old ones, we should green our schools by prioritizing energy efficiency and environmentally friendly practices.

**Meaningful Professional Development:** Staff need support in addressing the needs of individual students and fostering a productive learning environment for all students. This requires that staff receive professional development on issues such as classroom management, diversity, and conflict resolution to prepare them for challenging situations.

### Background Issues

Early childhood programs not only have an immediate impact by ensuring that children are “school ready,” pre-school attendance predicts students’ chances to be retained a grade, to graduate high school, increase their earning power, and even avoid prison (Reynolds, 2004; High/Scope, 2005). Unfortunately, many Michigan families are unable to find affordable, high quality early childhood programs for their children. We need to increase early childhood education funding to ensure access to support services and quality programming.

### What We Need

**Universal Early Childhood Education:** Michigan currently has two main early learning programs: Head Start (federally funded) and MSRP (state funded). While these programs reach some children, we need to expand programming throughout the state. All children, regardless of their families’ financial standing, deserve access to high quality pre-school.

**Mandatory Full-Day Kindergarten:** It is important that students do not fall behind in their early years. Michigan should require and fund full-day kindergarten for all children.

**Quality Staff:** Our early learners deserve high quality early childhood staff that is skilled, competent, consistent, caring and adequately paid. The impact of pre-school is connected to its quality and amount of personal interaction, making a highly qualified early childhood workforce extremely important.

**Well-Rounded and Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum:** Learning experiences must be age appropriate and tailored to the individual.

### Background Issues

For years, the most methodologically sound educational studies (e.g. Tennessee Star Project) have shown that small classes facilitate student learning. Other studies have found that class size reduction provides benefits that are not easily quantified, like increased student engagement and a greater likelihood that teachers will be able to address individual learning styles.

Most studies that claim class size does not matter only measure the impact of class size on standardized tests. Some of these studies have found that an extraordinary teacher can offset the importance of a small class. While this may be true, the most talented teachers have an even greater impact in a smaller classroom.

More importantly, small class sizes benefit students beyond just raising their test scores. They provide a learning environment that nurtures cognitive, emotional, and social growth. We know that lower student to staff ratios benefit children. Those who deny its impact usually do so because they are reluctant to provide the resources necessary to create smaller classes.

### What We Need

**Funding for Class Size Reduction:** This is especially important in the elementary grades, where a small student to teacher ratio has its greatest impact.

**Fully-Staffed Classrooms:** It is essential that all students have a highly qualified teacher, as well as paraprofessionals and other support staff, as part of creating a positive learning environment. Support staff allow for more individualized and small group instruction within classrooms.

# Academic Assistance for Struggling Students

## Background Issues

Michigan's 75% graduation rate (CEPI Graduation Report, 2009), means that one in four students struggles to complete high school on time. While there are certainly achievement gaps between and within school districts, all schools service children that require additional academic assistance. Some of these students "fall through the cracks" because they are not identified as needing assistance, do not qualify for available programs, or are unaware of existing services.

Supporting struggling students is a necessary step towards reducing Michigan's dropout rate and ensuring that our education system works for all students. Providing meaningful assistance for those that struggle requires identifying struggling students, implementing early intervention strategies, and supporting full accountability for all educational personnel.

## What We Need

**Early Intervention Strategies:** Schools should provide school-entry screening programs that identify hearing, vision, and other medical conditions that may impede student learning. Staff need resources and professional development to help identify struggling students.

**Student Support:** Students have unique issues, learning styles, and abilities, and learning environments should accommodate their individual needs. There are proven programs that provide targeted academic assistance for struggling students. Solutions may include alternative settings, additional academic instruction through tutoring, mechanisms for family and community engagement, smaller class settings, and access to specialists.

**Comprehensive Accountability:** Insist that all educational personnel, including administrators, superintendents, teachers, and support staff, play a role in supporting struggling students.

**Adult Education and Non-traditional Programs:** For decades, we have bemoaned the difficulty of educating students whose parents left school before graduating and/or had bad experiences in the system. It is not realistic to break this cycle without reinvesting in adult education and non-traditional high school completion programs to increase educational levels in our communities across the board.

**Meaningful Professional Development:** Staff members working with struggling students require targeted professional development opportunities.

# Strong Special Education Programs

## Background Issues

Michigan has some of the most effective rules and regulations for special education in the nation. These regulations provide thousands of students with the accommodations necessary for their education and support special education teachers and paraprofessionals in their efforts to deliver quality learning experiences.

Unfortunately, many students who are eligible for special education resources do not receive them because they are not in settings that are equipped to address their needs. Additional funding is necessary to supply appropriately trained staff, accessible school buildings, flexible curricula, and other necessary supports. Shortfalls in special education funding inevitably impact general education, as districts draw from general education funds to address special education shortfalls.

## What We Need

**Strong and Consistent Regulations and Rules:** Students and families depend on public education, regardless of their special needs. Weakening the regulations that protect the quality of education for these families is harmful to the children who need us most.

**Adequate Funding:** Adequately funding special education will help districts avoid using general education funds to make up shortfalls, and deliver services to the students who need them most. It is also essential to ensure that the federal government makes good on its promises of special education funding.

**Access to Needed Service Providers:** Special education students must have support from service providers such as occupational therapists, speech/language therapists, physical therapists, and art/music therapists.

**Utilize Individual Education Program (IEP) Goals as the Foundation for Evaluation:** Assessment of special education students and their teachers must consider student growth based on IEP goals, which provide an individualized framework for educating a student with special needs, and define the accommodations necessary for student learning.

# Research-Based School Improvement Strategies

## Background Issues

Our children's education is too important to wager on unproven practices and policies. Research-based knowledge is essential to developing and implementing sound policies and enhancing professional practice. Too often, policy makers, even those that herald the importance of "data-driven decision-making," grasp at the latest reform fad trumpeted by the media.

Lost in many recent discussions of school improvement is the critical need to remedy *achievement gaps*—the disparity in performance between groups of students, particularly based on race and class.

Recent federal and state policies target our "lowest performing" schools for intervention. In December of 2009, following the lead of the federal government, the state passed legislation requiring schools performing in the lowest five percent on state assessments to implement one of four school improvement strategies: closure, restart (as a charter school), turnaround, or transformation.

While it is extremely important to improve chronically low-performing schools, there is little research suggesting that these strategies will improve student learning or address achievement gaps. There is no evidence that closing schools and moving control over educational programming to educational contractors, educational management companies, and for-profit or non-profit charter school operators raises student achievement or is a viable school improvement strategy (Saltman, 2010).

Similarly, no research supports the mass removal of staff as a turnaround strategy (Advocates for Children and Youth, 2010). In fact, the consequences associated with such strategies may be damaging to communities, school districts and children. Most low-

performing schools are marked by high levels of staff turnover and mistrust between adults. The collaboration required to turn them around requires more stability, not less.

## What We Need

**Research-Based School Improvement Strategies:** Research shows that student learning increases when staff members are supported with high quality professional development, given the opportunity to collaborate with their colleagues, have access to resources and tools that foster growth, and are supported by strong leaders (Silva, 2008). Legislation forcing schools into one of four improvement models should be amended to eliminate strategies not supported by the evidence.

**Multiple Measures of School Success:** We can certainly learn a good deal about educational quality through student achievement data. But in too many places, "student learning" has become a euphemism for standardized test scores. Evaluating the merits of a school or a reform practice calls for mixed-methods research that examines multiple types of data.

**Targeting Achievement Gaps:** The following policies will help reduce our persistent achievement gaps:

- Early childhood education for all kids
- Comprehensive social programs
- Adequately funding districts that serve students from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- Holding all students to high expectations by adopting common core standards

**Transparent Methodologies for School Improvement:** The Michigan Department of Education should develop a transparent process for identifying struggling schools that allows district leaders to intervene early.

# Community Well-Being and Responsibility

## Background Issues

There is no evidence that schools by themselves can close achievement gaps in a sustainable manner. Only by simultaneously targeting social and economic disadvantages can we make substantial progress (Economic Policy Institute, 2009).

Providing children with a high quality education requires outstanding schools, but it also requires that all stakeholders—students, parents, educators, administrators, community leaders, business, and elected officials—take responsibility for ensuring that all children receive the education that they deserve.

Families living in poverty face challenges that affect a child's ability to learn and succeed in school. For evidence, one needs look no further than a recent study that found nearly sixty percent of the children who attend Detroit Public Schools have a history of lead poisoning. What's more, those who scored "not proficient" on the MEAP test had lead levels up to 30 percent higher than those who scored "advanced" (Lam & Tanner-White, 2010).

Improving socioeconomic conditions cannot be extracted from conversations about improving education. Making a commitment to education for all children requires recognizing these

conditions and taking responsibility for improving them. There is no excuse for community stakeholders to ignore these realities. We must come together to work for justice and equal opportunity for all children.

## What We Need

**Community Commitment & Accountability:** Students, parents, educators, administrators, civic and business leaders, and elected officials are all educational stakeholders and should be accountable for ensuring a high quality education for every child in Michigan.

Community commitment means that parents should provide their children with the support to make them successful. It means that businesses should allow their employees time off to volunteer at school or attend parent teacher conferences. It means city officials should demand that every child's walk to school is a safe one. It means that state elected officials should properly fund our schools and only enact reforms that are research-based. This commitment entails improving social conditions, developing an economic system that supports families with good jobs, and delivering high-quality instruction to our children.

**Real Parent Participation:** Too many parents, particularly in low-income communities, lack a meaningful voice in their children's schools. Educators, administrators, and other professionals should actively encourage parent involvement and shared decision-making.

**Address Barriers to Academic Success Rooted in Poverty:** Research shows substantial benefits of providing prenatal care for pregnant women and preventive care for infants and children (EPI, 2009). All parents should have access to affordable and convenient health care for their children. Since many causes of achievement gaps are rooted in what occurs outside the school day, we should invest in high quality afterschool and summer youth programs that provide academic and enrichment opportunities to disadvantaged children, alongside the entire range of wraparound services to support their families.

# Necessary School Funding

## Background Issues

It is well past time for Michigan to align its spending priorities with our state's need to be an educational leader. In so doing we want to address the disparity between lower and higher funded districts. Only then will we be able to take steps towards closing the achievement gap. School funding discussions in Lansing are too often divorced from the real needs of students and schools. By continually looking to shave more dollars off the budget, we shortchange our state's future.

A handful of schools are able to implement reforms like smaller class sizes and extended school days because they receive large donations to supplement their state aid. While many foundations provide valuable resources, their funds are limited and inevitably benefit some children and not others. If we expect all of our schools to implement research-based reforms, they need state funding to do so.

At the heart of the school funding issue is a state revenue problem. Our state's revenue system is antiquated, unfair, unstable and inadequate. In short, it is holding our state back and hurting our children. It must be fixed if we are to have serious discussions about creating a great educational system in Michigan.

## What We Need

**Realistic Assessment of Financial Needs:** The State should examine the real financial obligations and needs of school districts to develop a starting point for budget discussions.

**Adequate, Stable and Fair Tax Structure:** Michigan needs a tax system that creates jobs, is stable, adequate and is fair to Michigan families.

**Predictable Funding for Michigan Schools:** Michigan schools need to be funded in a way that provides them with fiscal stability. This will require the Legislature completing the school aid, community college, and higher education budgets by June 1<sup>st</sup> and adequately addressing the reality of declining enrollment in school funding plans.

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