

Opinion: School improvement requires investment



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The recently released 2017 results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, often called the “nation’s report card”) show little change in Michigan’s dismal performance in fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math. Michigan’s rank among the states in fourth-grade reading ticked up six places, but only because other states slipped. Our 2017 scale score was actually lower than our 2011 score and only 32 percent of our fourth-graders were deemed proficient in reading in 2017. And we ranked last in the Midwest in every category.



Real and lasting improvement in our pre-K-12 system will require systematic statewide support for schools addressing curriculum, instruction and student needs. This cannot be done without adequate resources.

We can take a lesson from Massachusetts which, once again, led the nation in all four categories. After forging a bipartisan commitment to ambitious learning goals, the Bay State relied on an adequacy study to guide its school finance policy. Leaders adopted a pupil-weighted funding formula that adds substantial supplements to base funding for low-income students, English language learners and children with special needs.

In 1980, school spending levels in Michigan and Massachusetts were about equal. Today, Massachusetts outspends Michigan by more than 30 percent on a per-pupil basis.

But the School Finance Research Collaborative has taken an important step in the right direction by delivering Michigan’s first comprehensive school adequacy study that determined the true cost of educating a child to Michigan’s academic standards. The School Finance Research Collaborative is a diverse, bipartisan group of business leaders and education experts from all corners of Michigan who agree Michigan’s school funding system is broken. The final report provides a road map for a school funding system that serves the wide-ranging needs of all students.

The collaborative’s adequacy study was conducted by the nation’s two most prominent school finance research firms and used state-of-the-art methods to estimate the true cost of educating a child, regardless of location, income, learning challenges or other circumstances. And it directly addressed the severe underfunding of school programs and services for impoverished and otherwise educationally at-risk kids.

The collaborative's study recommends substantial funding enhancements above the base level for low-income children (35 percent above base), for English language learners (from 35 percent to 70 percent above base, depending on proficiency), and special education children (70 percent above base for mildly impaired children and 115 percent above base for moderately impaired children). Programs for the severely impaired would be fully funded by the state.

The wisdom of investing in the schools of our lowest-income children is confirmed by other recent, high-quality academic research. Analyzing individual student NAEP test scores, researchers from Berkeley and Northwestern found that, over the long run, states that invest additional money in their lowest-income districts see more academic improvement.

Examining earnings for about 15,000 people born between 1955 and 1985, another team of researchers from Berkeley and Northwestern found that for poor children, a 10 percent increase in per-pupil spending each year of elementary and secondary school was associated with nearly 10 percent higher wages and a drop in adult poverty.

Real financial support for Michigan's public schools has been steadily eroded for more than 15 years. Since 2000, inflation-adjusted pre-K-12 spending in Michigan has fallen by \$663 per pupil, while the U.S. average has increased by more than \$1,400 per pupil.

Our schools' resource deficits have been years in the making and we cannot expect to close them in a year or two. But if our policymakers can agree on a path forward, resource and program needs could be prioritized and implemented over time.

Increasing support for our at-risk students is an excellent place to start.

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