

Ron Koehler: When it comes to education, one size doesn't fit all

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By Ron Koehler / Kent ISD
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Nobody needs to tell a parent every child is different.

All children bring different gifts to the party, and no two children are exactly alike in their interests, physical and mental development, or aptitude and abilities.

Our state pounds the same square peg into a round hole for every child with the exception of special education mandates, a relatively small amount of money for at-risk students and an even smaller amount for English Language Learners.

Michigan's current, one-size-fits-all school finance system doesn't adequately address the needs of each student or the characteristics of our school districts. Our school funding system is broken and failing our students and, in turn, potentially stalling Michigan's economic comeback. Our dogged determination to drive down the cost of education to the lowest possible denominator is denying our children the education they need and deserve.

The School Finance Research Collaborative challenges Michigan's cookie-cutter approach to school funding with an exhaustive analysis of what it costs to educate all students. The School Finance Research Collaborative is a diverse and bipartisan group of business leaders and education experts from across Michigan who agree it's time to change the way Michigan's schools are funded. In January, the Collaborative delivered Michigan's first comprehensive school adequacy study that determined the true cost of educating a child to Michigan's academic standards.

The final report also addresses the unique individual needs of students enrolled in special education, English Language Learners and students living in poverty. The report also calls for additional resources for Career and Technical Education to help prepare students for careers.

The final School Finance Research Collaborative report provides the building blocks for a school funding system that serves the wide-ranging needs of all students. The full report can be read [here](#).

Predictably, there are those who will say this is just about money. It isn't. It's about children, their individual needs, and the resources to meet those needs. It's about bringing all students up to the standards set in law through the Michigan Merit Curriculum, the Merit Exam, and the M-Step standardized testing system.

When Michigan's policymakers adopted our current state standards, they said they were doing so to help our children and our state compete in a global economy on an international stage for 21st-century jobs. They didn't ask how much it would cost to achieve those standards. In the years since the standards were adopted, Michigan students have fallen further and further behind their peers across the country and around the world.

In previous years, most discussion about education funding focused on the dollars available in the School Aid Fund and the state's per-pupil allocation to districts. We've never before had the data to discuss what it costs for all students to meet Michigan's academic standards. Without that information in hand, the debate devolved into adults arguing with adults about money.

We must use the School Finance Research Collaborative report — representing arguably the most detailed adequacy study in the nation — to change the debate to a discussion of what children need to be successful. This study makes it clear that money makes a difference in educational outcomes. It must be used wisely and deployed strategically to achieve results, but it does matter.

If we truly care about all children and giving them the assistance and education they need, we need to change the conversation.

To truly begin improving student achievement in Michigan, we must break the per-pupil mentality and begin thinking about each child's individual needs. Our students and Michigan's continued resurgence hang in the balance.

— Ron Koehler is Assistant Superintendent of Organizational and Community Initiatives for Kent ISD, and a member of the School Finance Research Collaborative Steering & Technical Committee.
