

Becoming a Leader in Education:

An Agenda for Michigan



The Education Trust—Midwest

TO THE POINT

- ▶ Michigan must—and can—reverse the shockingly low performance of its schools, colleges, and universities.
- ▶ The problem is statewide. Detroit has the weakest scores of any big city nationally—but other districts are even less successful. Both higher-income and lower-income students trail their peers nationally.
- ▶ With honest information, focus on quality, and support for revamping bureaucracy, we can build Michigan's leadership in the global knowledge economy.

Michigan's Educational Performance: A Few Facts

- Though 84 percent of parents of Michigan fourth-graders are told by the state their children are proficient in reading, only 30 percent of those same students scored proficient on the national reading exam.
- In math, our children's performance is also inflated: 70 percent of our eighth-graders score proficient on the state math test, but only 31 percent are proficient on the national test.
- On the national math exam our state's low-income eighth-graders ranked behind low-income students in 46 states; our higher-income eighth-graders trailed similar students in 37 states.
- In eighth-grade reading, low-income African-American children in Detroit perform below their counterparts in all urban school districts participating in national exams; in eighth-grade math, low-income African-American children in Detroit also perform at the bottom—about three grade levels below low-income African-American children in Boston, Houston, and New York.
- Within Michigan, Detroit is not at the bottom. African-American eighth-graders in Flint, Lansing, and Pontiac have lower proficiency rates than African Americans in Detroit in math. In reading, Latino fourth-graders in Pontiac and Battle Creek do worse than their counterparts in Detroit, and African-American fourth-graders in Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, and Pontiac perform lower than their counterparts in Detroit.

Becoming a Leader in Education:

An Agenda for Michigan

BY AMBER ARELLANO

Executive Director of The Education Trust-Midwest.

Most Michiganders know that our state has long been a center of industrial innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship. Michigan's extraordinary mix of talent, leadership and work ethic made us a global manufacturing leader—and made our state one of the wealthiest industrial centers of the 20th century. Now more than ever, Michigan needs to draw on this rich heritage to drive the new engine of growth in the global knowledge economy: education.

We are far from a leader in education right now. Though glowing reports from state education leaders regularly inform us that the vast majority of our children (around 80 percent in elementary and middle schools) are meeting state standards,¹ performance plummets when these students take the more rigorous national examinations. And our beloved colleges and universities are not coming close to producing the educated residents our state needs to rebuild our tattered economic base, our confidence, and our position of global leadership.

Michigan will not be able to rebuild its economic base overnight. But we *can* and *must* begin now to change the way our education system does business. That means our state's leaders must focus on what they can change, not on what they cannot. Many leaders have argued the budget-strapped state cannot improve its educational performance because it lacks money and capacity. Other states, however,

also have faced these challenges and have overcome political gridlock to improve schools for their children. Leadership is critical. Instead of being driven by what's best for the adults who work in the education system, we've got to be driven by what's best for our kids.

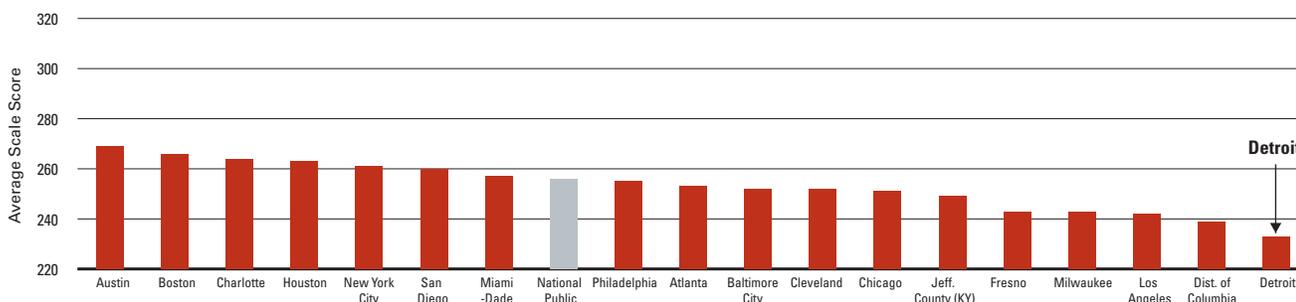
And that starts by being honest—painfully honest—about where we are right now.

MICHIGAN'S EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE: HARDLY JUST A "DETROIT PROBLEM"

Detroit families received devastating news about their children's performance on the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress. Called the NAEP, the test is the only nationally representative assessment of what American students know and can do in reading, mathematics, and science. In eighth-grade reading and eighth-grade math, Detroit's low-income, African-American students posted the worst results among their counterparts in big cities around the nation. Experts said Detroit's 2009 scores were the lowest ever posted in the history of the test since NAEP was first administered to the country's big cities in 2002.

In eighth-grade math, for example, low-income African American children in Detroit perform about three grade levels below their peers in Boston, Houston, and New York (see Figure 1).² And our Detroit Latino students performed worse than Latinos in many other major U.S. cities.

Figure 1: Low-Income, African-American Students: Performance Across Districts Nationwide Grade 8 – NAEP Math (2009)



Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, U.S. Department of Education), NAEP Data Explorer.

Most Michiganders responded to the news in horror—and sadly concluded, “Well, that’s just Detroit.”

It turns out, however, that it’s not just Detroit.

On key state tests, Detroit, in fact, is not the worst-performing school district in Michigan, especially for certain groups of students.³

- In fourth-grade reading, for example, African-American students in cities like Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, and Pontiac perform below African Americans in Detroit (see Figure 2).
- Similarly, African-American eighth-graders in Flint, Lansing, and Pontiac perform below their Detroit counterparts in math (see Figure 3).
- Among Latinos, eighth-graders in cities such as Grand Rapids, Lansing, and Pontiac perform below their peers in Detroit in math.

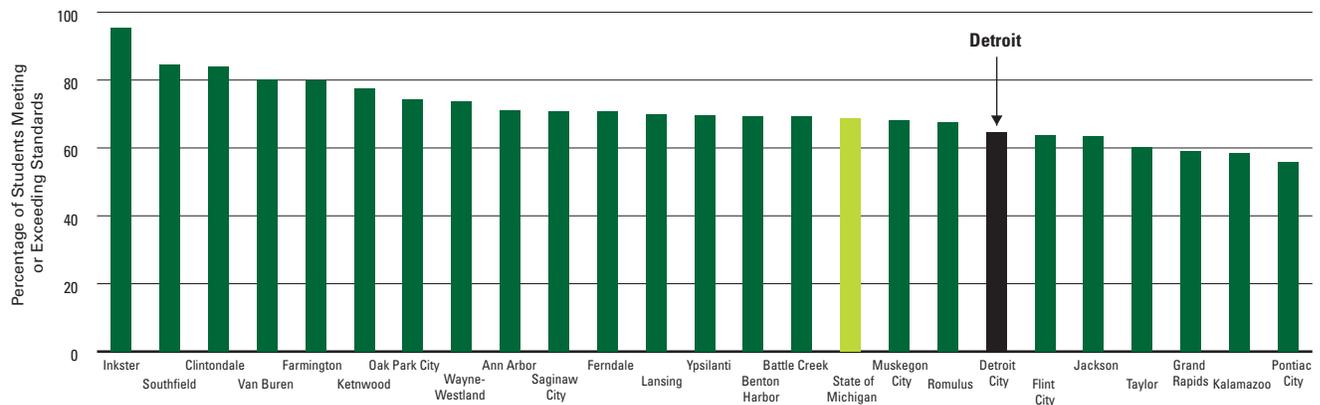
So yes, our biggest city may have the weakest performance of any big city in the country. But Detroit is by no means our lowest performing district.

MICHIGAN’S EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE: A STATEWIDE PROBLEM

Still, many Michiganders might say, “Well, that’s the cities.” But the truth is that Michigan as a state doesn’t perform at all well on national examinations. This truth is masked by the state assessments, which test students at lower standards than do national tests. Here’s the ugly reality:

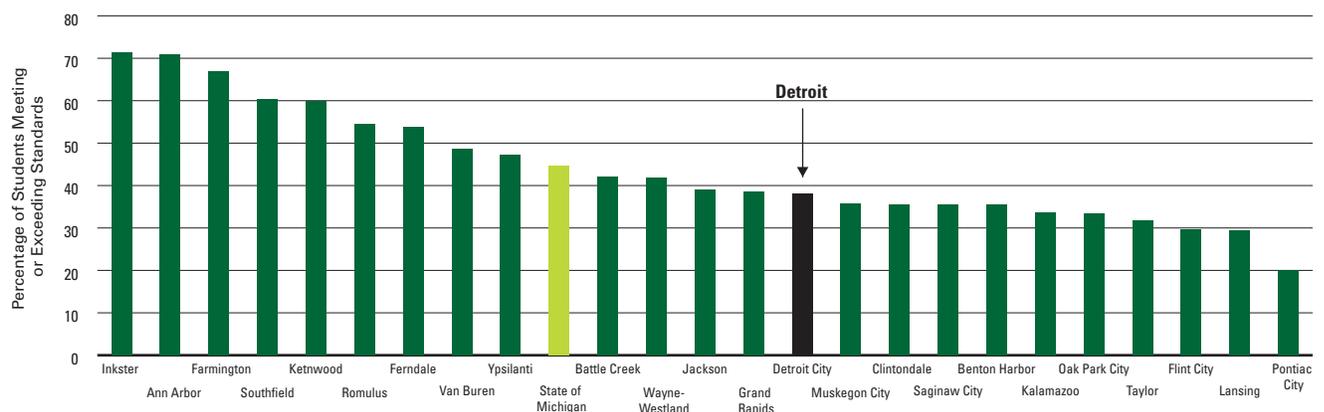
Though 84 percent of all parents of Michigan fourth-graders receive information from their schools telling them their kids are proficient in reading according to the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP), what

Figure 2: African-American Students: Performance Across Michigan Districts*
Grade 4 – MEAP Reading (Fall 2009)



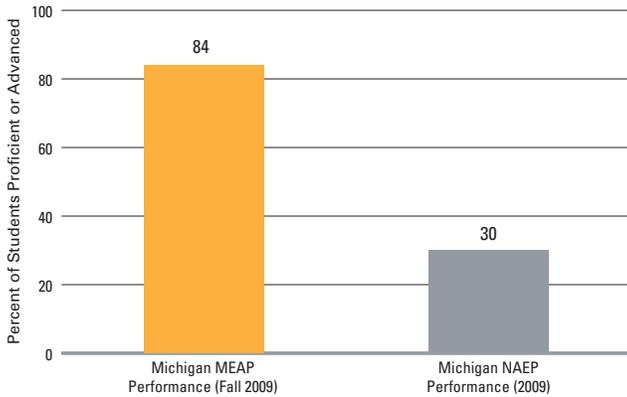
*Districts with the largest number of African-American students
Source: Ed Trust analysis of data from Michigan Department of Education, fall 2009 MEAP results.

Figure 3: African-American Students: Performance Across Michigan Districts*
Grade 8 – MEAP Math (Fall 2009)



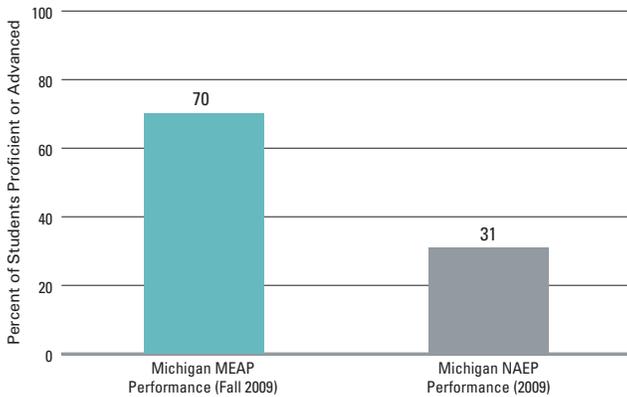
*Districts with the largest number of African-American students. Source: Ed Trust analysis of data from Michigan Department of Education, fall 2009 MEAP results.

Figure 4: Overall Proficiency Rates by Assessment
Grade 4 Reading



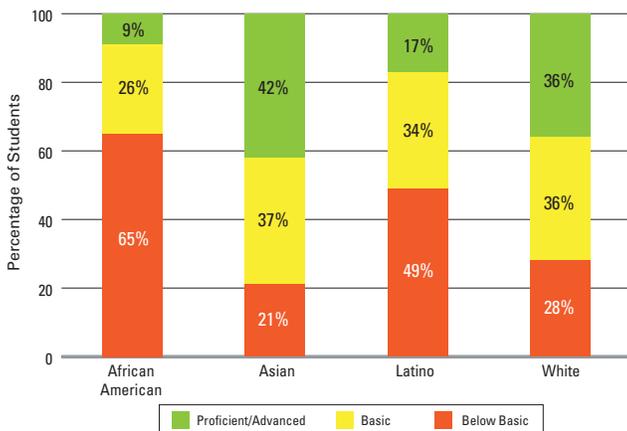
Source: NCES and Michigan Department of Education, fall 2009 MEAP results.

Figure 5: Overall Proficiency Rates by Assessment
Grade 8 Math



Source: NCES and Michigan Department of Education, fall 2009 MEAP results

Figure 6: 2009 NAEP Grade 4 Reading
By Race/Ethnicity – Michigan



Source: NCES, NAEP Data Explorer.

the state doesn't tell them is that on the more rigorous national reading exam only 30 percent of Michigan's students rank as proficient (see Figure 4). In fact, some of the kids we in Michigan call "proficient" don't even read at the "basic" level on the national test.

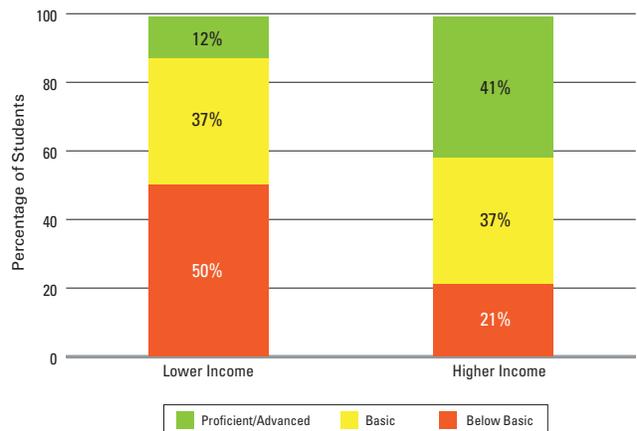
We tell Michigan parents that 70 percent of kids in the state are proficient in math on the MEAP, but the NAEP ranks only 31 percent as proficient (see Figure 5).⁴

Underneath these averages, there are alarming gaps on national examinations between different groups of young Michiganders. In fourth-grade reading, for example, 36 percent of white students in Michigan are proficient or above on the national exam, while only 28 percent perform at the lowest, "below basic" level. By contrast, only 9 percent of our African-American and 17 percent of our Latino 4th graders perform at or above the proficient level, while 65 percent and 49 percent, respectively, perform at "below basic." (see Figure 6). There are similar gaps in mathematics (see Figure 7).

And while some states are narrowing gaps and producing sharp improvements in student performance on national exams over time, Michigan's performance relative to other states is declining:

- Over the last six years the state's rank in fourth-grade reading dropped from tied for 25th place to tied for 34th.
- In eighth-grade math, we dropped from 34th place to tied for 36th.⁵

Figure 7: 2009 NAEP Grade 8 Math
By Family Income – Michigan



Source: NCES, NAEP Data Explorer.

IS THE PROBLEM OUR KIDS AND THEIR FAMILIES, OR OUR SCHOOLS?

Conventional wisdom in Michigan often finds excuses for the state’s falling student performance. Many leaders and citizens argue: “Well, what do you expect? Our state is hemorrhaging jobs and talent; poverty rates are soaring; and we have a lot more troubled youths than many other states.”

It can’t, in other words, be our schools.

Once again the truth is different. Group for group—poor, rich, white, black and Latino—our children perform well below their counterparts in other states.

Take our higher-income students. They trailed their higher-income peers in 37 states in eighth-grade math last

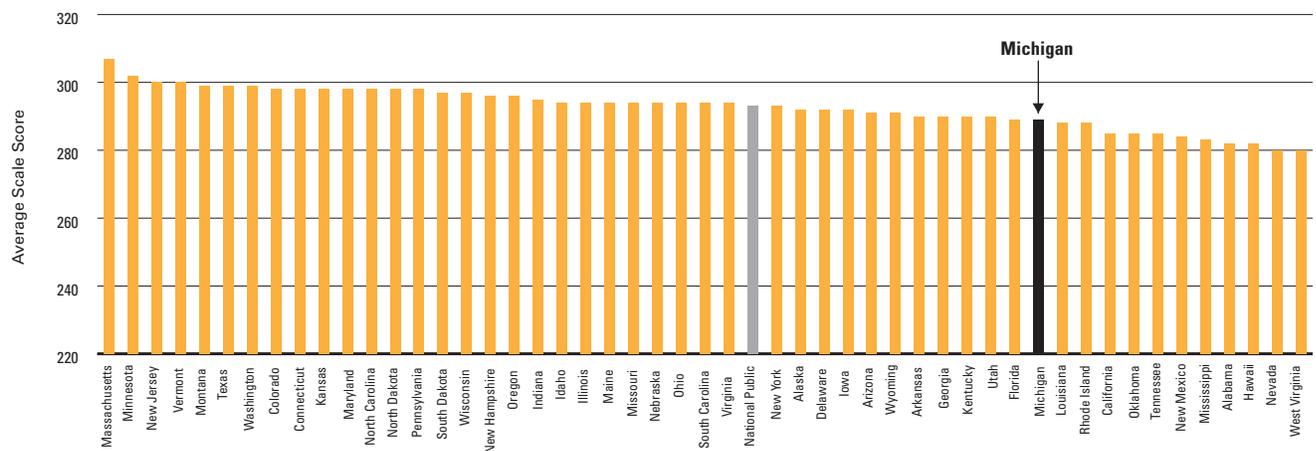
year (see Figure 8)—another indication that the problem is not just in Detroit.

Low-income students in Michigan fared even worse in eighth-grade math – lagging behind their peers in 46 states (see Figure 9). Only their counterparts in Alabama, Mississippi and California performed at lower levels.⁶

BUT DON’T WE COMPENSATE BY HAVING SOME OF THE BEST COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN THE COUNTRY?

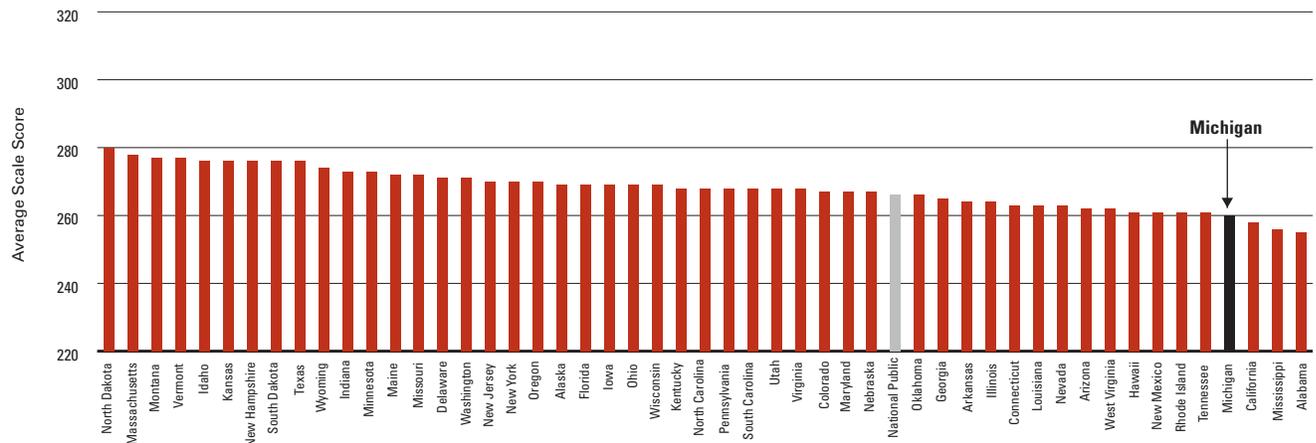
Many Michiganders take unabashed pride in our public higher education system. Our public universities give us a point of passionate connection and identity that few states can match.

Figure 8: Higher Income Students: Performance Across States
Grade 8 – NAEP Math (2009)



Source: NCES, NAEP Data Explorer.

Figure 9: Lower Income Students: Performance Across States
Grade 8 – NAEP Math (2009)



Source: NCES, NAEP Data Explorer.

Despite our affection for them, however, our colleges and universities are not delivering the results we need. Though post-secondary educational credentials are hugely important in the new economy, college-completion rates in Michigan remain below the national average.⁷ Many Michigan colleges have graduation rates well below those of institutions serving similar students in other states. Gaps in graduation rates between white and black students, and white and Latino students are among the very largest in the country.⁸

Today, Michigan ranks 32nd nationally in the proportion of young adults with at least an associate's degree; and 28th nationally in the proportion of young adults with at least a bachelor's degree.⁹ And below the national average in post-secondary degrees is not a good place to be in a country that itself is tied for eighth internationally.¹⁰

SOLUTIONS FOR MICHIGAN

So, what should Michigan do?

We should start by getting over the excuses. We know what is needed; most of it is just common sense. Now it is time for state leaders to gather the political courage and know-how to do the hard work of acting on that knowledge. Leadership is critical to improving student outcomes for both Pre-K-12 and higher education.

Over the next several years, Education Trust—Midwest will work with educators, policymakers, parents, and community organizations throughout the state of Michigan to put into place a common-sense agenda for improvement, and will support innovation to make it happen. Here are some of the most important building blocks from successful improvement efforts elsewhere:

1. Provide honest information for parents and the public.

We have to stop lying to parents about how well their children are prepared for the challenges of living and working in the 21st Century. At both the K-12 and the college level,

Every Child Learns At High Levels: North Godwin Elementary School

North Godwin Elementary School is in the kind of place very familiar to Michiganders — a once solidly working-class community that has fallen on hard times. The last big local employer, a General Motors stamping plant, closed more than a year ago, leaving 77 percent of the students — a mixture of white, Hispanic, African-American, and a few Asian students—eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

In many communities, academic achievement of students deteriorates along with the economy. But at North Godwin, located just outside of Grand Rapids, academic achievement has improved even as the local economy has fallen apart.

So, for example, every single sixth-grader met state reading standards in the fall of 2009, compared to 88 percent in the state; and 94 percent of North Godwin's sixth-graders met state math standards, compared to 82 percent in the state.

And it isn't just about meeting standards but exceeding them. In fact, 56 percent of the school's low-income third-grade students exceeded standards in math, compared to only 37 percent of low-income third-graders in the rest of the state.

The results are not an accident. Says teacher Pat Brower: "We're a family. We're all willing to do what's needed."

Arelis Diaz, who was principal of the school during its dramatic improvement, attributes much of the results to teachers. "When I first started," Diaz says, "about 50 percent of teachers were willing to try anything and half were resisters" a term she

uses for teachers who "feel sorry for [students] rather than help them."

But once teachers see every child can learn at high levels, Diaz says, "it transforms them to the core."

North Godwin brings teachers together before school starts to study state standards and build a curriculum map that makes sure they teach, for example, fifth-graders the Bill of Rights and the other content spelled out in the state's standards. They assess their students regularly and use the data to challenge the successful students and catch up the stragglers all the while working on building the students' confidence and sense that they can do difficult things if they work at it.

Hiring a teacher presents an opportunity. When hiring, the district focuses on three questions: Is the prospective teacher going to have the effect we expect? Is he or she going to be able to handle the behavior challenges? And is he or she going to believe in our children? Only superstar teachers are hired for the third year, which is when tenure kicks in, says Diaz.

"You don't just get tenure," Diaz says. "You earn tenure."

Although a great deal is expected of teachers, they say that the support they get means the job is do-able.

"Initially it's overwhelming because there's so much to do," says Michelle Morrow, who came to North Godwin after teaching in the Chicago Public School System. "But then it feels like support. The leadership in this district has been amazing."

we will work to assure that parents and the public have clear and honest reports about how well schools and colleges are serving our students.

2. Learn from success.

We've got to stop making excuses and commit ourselves to learning from success.

Around the country, other states have successfully tackled some of the biggest challenges we are facing today—from how to improve early reading skills to how to turn around our lowest performing schools. We will bring the lessons from those efforts back to Michigan and innovate strategies to suit Michigan's unique needs.

But the truth is that we don't always have to leave our state to find schools that are doing a better job educating all students. For example, the school profiled here—North Godwin Elementary—has a lot to teach others in Michigan about what works and what doesn't.

3. Focus on quality, not structure.

There are some in Michigan who think we can fix what ails the K-12 system easily by radically expanding the number of charter schools. Honest analysis of state reading and math achievement data, however, reveals that charter school performance in Michigan is distressingly similar to the performance of traditional public schools (see Figures 10 and 11).¹¹ Instead of solving Michigan's student achievement problem, most charters simply replicate it.

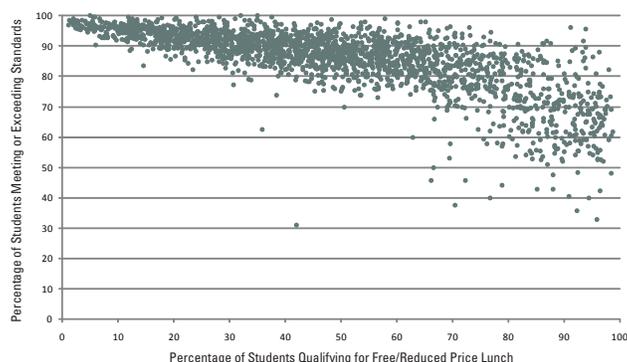
It's time Michigan's leaders moved past outdated ideological debates and focused on what matters most: high-quality teaching and learning in all public schools.

4. Improve and support teacher quality.

Speaking of teaching, decades of research tells us that the single most important ingredient of improved classroom learning is a high-quality teacher.¹² But the data also shows huge differences among teachers in their ability to take kids from where they are to where they need to go.

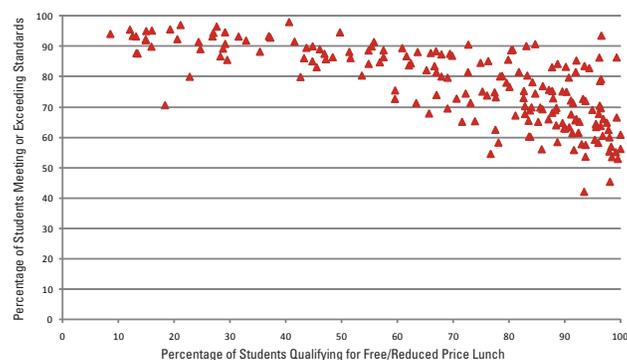
Some teachers, year after year, no matter what kinds of students are sitting in front of them, consistently enable kids to make huge progress in learning; other teachers consistently produce almost no academic growth at all.¹³ From school to school, there are also major differences in how much teachers and their development are supported.¹⁴ And sadly, the very children who most need highly effective teachers—those who enter school achieving below grade level—are the least likely to get them.¹⁵

Figure 10: 2009 Michigan Traditional Public School Performance
Grades 3-8 – MEAP Reading and Math (Fall 2009)



Source: Ed Trust analysis of data from Michigan Department of Education.

Figure 11: Michigan Charter School Performance
Grades 3-8 – MEAP Reading and Math (Fall 2009)



Source: Ed Trust analysis of data from Michigan Department of Education.

Despite all this, our state still lacks a coherent set of policies, systems and practices that focus squarely on teacher effectiveness — from preparation through recruitment, placement, compensation, and evaluation. Although the legislature took some steps forward last year, these are only the beginning of what must be done to make up for decades of neglect in areas like teacher evaluation, teacher support, and teacher tenure. We are especially troubled that our state lacks an effective system to grow the capacity of our teachers to teach rigorous content — such as Michigan's new required high school curriculum — to a wide range of learners.

If we want to produce real performance breakthroughs for our kids, we have to produce performance break-

throughs in our teaching force. And that will happen only if we act boldly to address all of these thorny issues.

5. Focus on college access and success.

If we're to have the best educated, as well as the hardest working workforce in the country, we must increase both college-going and college success.

Fortunately, there are models to learn from. In recent years, for example, higher education leaders in Georgia, North Carolina and Florida—three states with demographics similar to ours¹⁶—have made especially large gains in college completion. And institutions such as Georgia State University and Florida State University have entirely closed the gaps between black and white students in graduation rates.¹⁷

Clearly, if our college and university leaders put their minds to it, they can improve student success as well. Michigan leaders need to set aggressive stretch goals both for the state as a whole and for individual institutions, and then hold those institutions accountable for meeting their goals.

6. Support innovation and revamp state bureaucracy

Leaders on both the political right and left agree that the U.S. must empower civic innovators to work with the public sector and solve longstanding public problems in new ways at a reduced cost. Infrastructure, support services, the development of new organizations and other strategies should be used to bolster education innovation in Michigan — much as the Ann Arbor SPARK Business Accelerator has done to fuel business development in Washtenaw County.

One of the first places where these ideas can be brought to bear in Michigan is in the creation and organization of the "Recovery School District" established by the legislature in 2009 to take responsibility for improving our lowest performing schools. That legislation will be implemented over the next few years. A similar approach has been used with substantial success in New York City and in Louisiana, where New Orleans' Recovery School District relies on a web of civic organizations and social entrepreneurs to develop and staff high-quality schools. A new Michigan civic sector also could help provide more high-quality teachers for low-performing schools and develop strong teacher support and training across the state.

To successfully spur these kinds of innovations will require a major overhaul of the way the state education

department does business. Michigan's outdated school planning infrastructure consists of redundant and overlapping reporting requirements, hampering education reform. Principals are inundated with planning requirements, diverting their energies to filling out templates when they could be increasing student achievement. Moreover, the state's outmoded rules regarding the expenditure of federal funds prevent districts from spending their resources in the most effective and efficient ways. Instead of continuing what the Citizens Research Council of Michigan calls "policy pile-on," Michigan needs to revise its spending rules and radically streamline its policies and procedures.

A NEW AGENDA FOR STATE LEADERSHIP

Michigan must rebuild its tattered education system. That system is failing students of practically every socioeconomic and geographic background—but especially our low-income and minority children.

We can and must do better. We can be honest about what is working. We can focus on improving both traditional public and charter schools, with special attention to building teacher quality. We can improve not only college access, but also college completion. Finally, we can find new ways to support innovation, and structure our schools to focus deeply on improving student achievement.

Michigan has long been a center of entrepreneurship, creativity, and hard work. It's time our state reclaims that heritage in education—for the sake of its children and its future.

NOTES

- ¹ Michigan Department of Education, fall 2009 Michigan MEAP results, http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-22709_31168_40135---,00.html
- ² U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>
- ³ Education Trust analysis of Michigan district data: Michigan Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2009-2010 district enrollment data, http://www.michigan.gov/cepi/0,1607,7-113-21423_30451_30460-235226--,00.html,
Michigan Department of Education, fall 2009 district MEAP results, http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-22709_31168_31530---,00.html
- ⁴ Michigan Department of Education, fall 2009 Michigan MEAP results, http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-22709_31168_40135---,00.html,
NCES, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>
- ⁵ NCES, NAEP Data Explorer, Michigan NAEP results, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>
- ⁶ NCES, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>
- ⁷ National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, Educational Attainment by Degree-Level and Age-Group (American Community Survey), <http://higheredinfo.org/>
- ⁸ The Education Trust, College Results Online, <http://www.edtrust.org/issues/higher-education/college-results-online>
- ⁹ National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, Educational Attainment by Degree-Level and Age-Group (American Community Survey), <http://higheredinfo.org/>
- ¹⁰ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Education at a Glance 2010, Indicator A1.3a, http://www.oecd.org/document/52/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_45897844_1_1_1_1,00.html
- ¹¹ Education Trust analysis of Michigan school data: Michigan Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2009-2010 school free and reduced lunch data, http://www.michigan.gov/cepi/0,1607,7-113-21423_30451_36965---,00.html
Michigan Department of Education, fall 2009 school MEAP results, http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-22709_31168_31530---,00.html
Michigan Department of Education, Public School Academies by Authorizer, http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-6530_6559_6558-23300--,00.html
- ¹² Jerald, C., Haycock, K. and Wilkins, A. (November 2009). "Fighting for Quality and Equality, Too: How State Policymakers Can Ensure the Drive to Improve Teacher Quality Doesn't Just Trickle Down to Poor and Minority Children." The Education Trust, Washington, D.C. http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/QualityEquity_4.pdf
- ¹³ Jerald, C. (November 2009). "The Value of Value-Added Data." The Education Trust, Washington, D.C. http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/ValueAdded_0.pdf
- ¹⁴ Jupp, B. (December 2009). "What States Can Do to Improve Teacher Effectiveness." The Education Trust, Washington, D.C. http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/TeacherEffectiveness_2.pdf
- ¹⁵ Peske, H. and Haycock, K. (June 2006). "Teaching Inequality: How Poor and Minority Students Are Shortchanged on Teacher Quality." The Education Trust, Washington, D.C. <http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/TQReportJune2006.pdf>
- ¹⁶ Engle, J. and Theokas, C. (January 2010). "Top Gainers: Some Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities Make Big Improvements in Minority Graduation Rates." The Education Trust, Washington, D.C. [http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/CRO%20Brief%20\(Top%20Gainers\).pdf](http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/CRO%20Brief%20(Top%20Gainers).pdf)
- ¹⁷ Lynch, M. and Engle, J. (August 2010). "Big Gaps, Small Gaps: Some Colleges and Universities Do Better Than Others in Graduating African-American Students." The Education Trust, Washington, D.C. <http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/CRO%20Brief-AfricanAmerican.pdf>

ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST-MIDWEST

The Education Trust-Midwest works for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, from pre-kindergarten through college. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement for all children, particularly those from low-income families or who are African American, Latino or American Indian, in Michigan and beyond. As a state-wide education policy and advocacy organization, we are focused first and foremost on doing what is right for Michigan students. The Education Trust-Midwest is affiliated with the national organization, The Education Trust, based in Washington D.C. Ed Trust-Midwest is the second state office of The Education Trust.



The Education Trust—Midwest

301 EAST LIBERTY ST., SUITE 650 • ANN ARBOR, MI 48104
WWW.EDTRUSTMIDWEST.ORG