



A new path to school reform

Michigan task force's goal: Replace state takeovers of struggling districts with locally tailored, expert plans to help them improve

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Earlier this fall, a legislative task force comprising 12 legislators in the Michigan House culminated several months of public research and testimony by releasing a report with substantive findings and recommendations to help struggling schools in the state.

I was honored to serve as co-chair of the task force along with Rep. Brandon Dillon, and believe the task force's work provides a path for strengthening our K-12 schools and improving how our state works with them.

What set the content of our final report apart from the work of previous task forces is the process used to prepare its findings: We chose to focus on expertise and transparency in order to arrive at our recommendations.

Budget cuts trigger downward spiral

Over the past two years, Michigan's schools have faced approximately \$2 billion in state budget cuts. As a result, hundreds of school buildings around our state have closed, and thousands of teachers have been laid off. The size of classrooms swelled as our state's children were crowded into fewer remaining buildings.

One school district, in fact, could no longer afford to keep its high school open, and two other districts were declared insolvent and then dissolved.

To make matters worse, the Michigan Legislature has also enacted many laws that favor charter and cyber schools over neighborhood public schools.

For example, the state recently removed its cap on charter schools. Unlike in other states, a large portion of Michigan's charter schools are run by for-profit corporations, and the removal of the charter-school cap was little more than a giveaway to the companies that manage them.

Worst of all from my perspective, the Legislature allowed for the takeover of financially stressed public schools by the Education Achievement Authority, a state board that operates in near secrecy with little to no input from parents or community members.

Despite this, Michigan has always had strong public schools. Such historical commitment to public education was reflected in the goal of the task force: to provide a constructive response to efforts to expand the unproven EAA across the state, even though the 15 schools now run by the authority are under fire by students, parents and educators for not providing a safe and sound learning environment.

As we set out to develop our plan for conducting the task force, we decided to seek the widest array of expert input that could help legislators best understand what it takes to properly educate students.

We did not have to look far to find some of the best minds in education to guide our work.

Our task force met between May and August, gathering information from educators and experts on programs and ideas that could provide constructive solutions.

We first worked with Dr. Rossi Ray-Taylor (an education consultant and former local school superintendent in Michigan) on framing the issues and examining the elements of an excellent school.

At subsequent meetings, we heard and learned

% of Midwestern public school students performing at or above 'proficient' level, 2013				
State	Mathematics		Reading	
	4th grade	8th grade	4th grade	8th grade
Illinois	39%	36%	34%	36%
Indiana	52%	38%	38%	35%
Iowa	48%	36%	38%	37%
Kansas	48%	40%	38%	36%
Michigan	37%	30%	31%	33%
Minnesota	59%	47%	41%	41%
Nebraska	45%	36%	37%	37%
North Dakota	48%	41%	34%	34%
Ohio	48%	40%	37%	39%
South Dakota	40%	38%	32%	36%
Wisconsin	47%	40%	35%	36%
U.S. average	41%	34%	34%	34%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education

from many current school superintendents and state education experts on a vast range of subjects, such as:

- external pressures facing our schools and the current research guiding school-improvement tools;
- the history of education reform efforts in Michigan and the problems resulting from the creation of competing school systems;
- special education services, public school finance and program evaluation; and
- the impact of state education policy on rural and isolated school districts.

Finally, with the help of Dr. David Arson — a professor of K-12 administration at Michigan State University — we turned this information into a plan of action for school reform.

During the course of holding task force meetings, all of which were conducted publicly, it became clear that previous legislative undertakings had failed to focus on creating great schools.

A better alternative: input from experts

There are, in fact, better alternatives to taking over schools and throwing them into an EAA, especially since this state authority had been created without any input from experts who are in the trenches every day — those people in our state who not only teach our students, but also teach our teachers.

The research of the task force led to recommendations in three different focus areas:

- adopting review and action plans specific to local school districts,
- studying what it really costs to educate students in order to provide proper funding, and
- leveling the playing field for all schools.

As an alternative to the EAA, and to avoid a takeover or dissolution of a school or school district, we proposed that schools and districts in crisis go

through a comprehensive review, under the authority of the state Department of Education.

The state would guide local school leaders through a careful examination of everything from finances to leadership and curriculum. State and local leaders would work together to determine the unique challenges occurring in the school or district.

This review would be followed by a detailed action plan to put the school or district on track to improve.

The experts we heard from in our meetings all emphasized that Michigan cannot approach school reform with a "one size fits all" plan.

To this end, our recommendations called on the Michigan Department of Education to conduct a comprehensive study on what it actually costs to educate Michigan students.

This study would give legislators and policymakers a better understanding of the investment needed to educate students, because only then could we all see how much it costs to provide services such as transportation, special education, and programs to help our youngest children begin school ready to learn.

Understanding these costs would allow legislators to better understand the specific needs of each school district — based on the population and needs of its students — and provide proper funding.

There are more educational choices available to Michigan students than ever before. Students can choose a nearby public school, a charter school or even a virtual school, and schools compete for these students — creating, in effect, parallel school systems.

If we are to achieve effective school reform, we need to ensure that all these competing publicly funded schools operate under the same requirements and are held to the same standards of accountability and transparency.

We propose, for example, that all schools — public, charter or virtual — have school boards that comply with our state's Open Meetings Act. We also propose requiring disclosure of the amount of taxpayer dollars actually spent on classroom instruction, including the cost to provide instruction in a virtual school over the Internet.

The process undertaken by the task force, as well as the report's findings and recommendations, are an important step in defining our state's role in assisting struggling schools, and we remain committed to ensuring that every child has the opportunity to receive an excellent education in our state. ★

Rep. Ellen Cogen Lipton, a Democrat, was first elected to the Michigan House of Representatives in 2008.

Submissions welcome

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