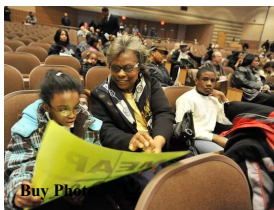


Column: State must invest in special ed

Matthew Gillard Published 10:57 p.m. ET Dec. 18, 2017



(Photo: Robin Buckson / The Detroit News)

Every new parent looks forward to their baby's first smile, first words, and first steps. Our earliest expectations for how and when infants and toddlers should act and engage with the world precede any academic standard.

But when those first milestones take some time to reach, families need support to address those delays and proceed on a path for children to reach their full potential. Without help, the learning and opportunity in store when those infants and toddlers head to school will be put in jeopardy. For some, Early On Michigan is there to find and provide that help, but today, thousands of families who need it do not have adequate access.

Expanding Early On would be a critical step (<http://www.michiganschildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Early-On-Issue-Brief-Jan-2016-Update.pdf>) to improve future educational and life success for some of the most vulnerable children and families in our state.

Early On Michigan works with families to identify developmental delays in their young children, provide them skill building and support, and help to connect additional services. Early On's program of coordinated screening and follow-up care from birth through age 2 works for infants and toddlers with all kinds of needs: 84 percent of the 19,000 families who receive care through Early On report developmental growth.

Since parents and caregivers are the key to helping address early delays, Early On focuses on supporting the family with home-based services, helping build parent skills and confidence to be effective partners in their child's development and learning. With Early On, parents have better tools to work with their children and access the best services to help their children catch up and face whatever obstacles come their way as their child progresses through school and beyond.

Unfortunately, the state has left Early On funding to a patchwork of local and federal funds, far too low for the existing need and unequally distributed, which has created a service gap. The 60 percent of infants and toddlers with treatable delays that are not covered by special education are not being equitably served, despite the fact that they are the children who, with adequate intervention, can most likely "catch-up" developmentally and not need special education services later on. And because Early On cannot adequately serve every infant and toddler who need it, families are struggling and our K-12 schools are paying dearly through increased special education and other costs.

For the past several years, Michigan's Children has joined with families and practitioners to call for state investment. This month, a recommendation to fix Michigan's indefensible lack of Early On support was put forward from the administration. Lt. Gov. Brian Calley's Special Education Reform task force's recent report (http://www.michigan.gov/documents/calley/Special_Education_Finance_Report_-_final_2017_606751_7.pdf) called state investment in Early On a top priority strategy to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

The report reiterates what [we've been saying](http://www.michiganschildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Early-On-Cost-Burden-March-2017-FINAL.pdf) (<http://www.michiganschildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Early-On-Cost-Burden-March-2017-FINAL.pdf>) about Michigan's lack of state investment in Early On unique in the Midwest and around the nation. Minnesota, Illinois, and Pennsylvania each spend between \$60 million and \$120 million per year in state funds, providing significantly more equitable and robust access to services. While Michigan did appropriately invest some state resource as part of a package to Flint due to the recent water crisis, there is no excuse for Michigan not to invest consistent statewide resources in the program.

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All families deserve to see their child grow up and discover themselves and the world — that's what we really want for all of our children's education. All families deserve convenient, quality help for their children with developmental delays. Early On is there when issues arise, and it's time we made sure great services are there for every family.

Matthew Gillard is president and CEO of Michigan's Children.

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