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Supporting Thriving Students: School-Community Partnerships

Michigan's children will be our next scientists, entrepreneurs, teachers, parents, laborers, artists and lawmakers, and our future depends on preparing them for education, work, and life. There is universal agreement that a high-quality K-12 education matters for our future, but our results are not meeting the outcomes we need. Differences in literacy skills emerge as early as 9 months of age, and educational disparities grow from there throughout academic careers depending on available teaching and learning opportunities. By the third grade, white students are well above their peers of color in reading and math test scores. By the time poor children are in the 6th grade, they have spent 6,000 fewer hours learning. High school dropout rates remain higher for Black, Hispanic and American Indian students, and for those facing life challenges like poverty, disability, homelessness, and involvement in the foster care system.

Bridging the Learning Gap, Building Brighter Futures

The 6,000 fewer hours learning experienced by low-income children and youth includes fewer hours being read to by caregivers, fewer hours spent in quality early programs, and many fewer hours spent in after-school, summer and other extracurricular activities. Many families struggle to access these - 40% of working families in Michigan [struggle to afford their basic household costs](#), let alone proven resources like preschool and afterschool programs, and many parents struggle to access educational and career opportunities for themselves.

Learning opportunities are tied not only to resources but also to children's developmental experiences. The science is clear that our brains are constantly changing, rewiring themselves in response to what happens to us. When families experience instability from events like substance use, incarceration, abuse and neglect, or mental illness, younger brains respond by diverting energy away from growing new brain connections and towards "fight, flight, or flee" responses that are less conducive to learning. Without supportive adults and services, children and youth are at higher risk to experience physical, behavioral, emotional and [academic problems](#) from trauma and toxic stress. With adequate supports, however, behaviors can be better managed and brains can be rewired for success.

Research confirms lived experience from youth and families. Students who face significant challenges are more likely to succeed when they and their families are connected with proven community supports and service professionals through their schools, including integrated health and social supports, parent and family-based supports, and expanded learning opportunities.¹ Studies find that every dollar invested in strong school-community partnerships returns between \$3 and \$12 in both reduced need for other services and increased economic growth.



¹ Find research on the effectiveness of integrated student supports, family engagement, and expanded learning opportunities at the Learning Policy Institute's *Community Schools Online Research Compendium* <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/online-research-compendium>

But to build effective and strategic partnerships, schools need professionals responsible for coordinating and providing services, and community institutions need the resources to make services accessible, and well-connected to teaching and learning. The Michigan School Finance Research Collaborative recently [outlined](#) a collection of different professionals critical to

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supporting a diverse student population and their families, including extended day and summer educators, nurses, psychologists, counselors, social workers, family liaisons, and developmental service providers like speech pathologists, as well as sufficient administrative support. While all of these professionals do not need to be, and often shouldn't be, school employees, it takes school-based resources to effectively manage services and track and evaluate the goals and outcomes of their

work. School-community partnerships that expand the availability of and access to critical services require investment in community resources and in strong professionals who can maintain and cultivate access to those services in schools. The research shows that these partnerships benefit school leaders, and classroom teachers by ensuring this work is shared by others who are much better positioned to match students' needs with appropriate integrated health, social and academic support services for students and their families.

School-Community Partnerships Expand Access to Health and Social Supports

Common sense and decades of research confirm that healthy students have better school attendance, performance and other [outcomes](#), and school success is connected to a lifetime of adult health benefits. The idea of connecting schools with community health resources is not new; in fact, many schools around the state have partnerships with local public and private health providers because they recognize that children and youth who receive consistent physical and mental health care attend school healthier.

Recent school safety issues have caused policy makers and institutions to turn to the need for better access to mental health services for students. The crisis around opioids, drug legalization and other substance use disorders has also garnered significant attention to the lack of service access for young people. In fact, 40% of Michigan children who needed services for depression, anxiety, and ADHD diagnoses, the three most common mental and behavioral health conditions, [received none](#). Adult studies find [similar results](#), with 80% of the need for substance use services going unmet. Historically, access rates have been even worse for adolescents.

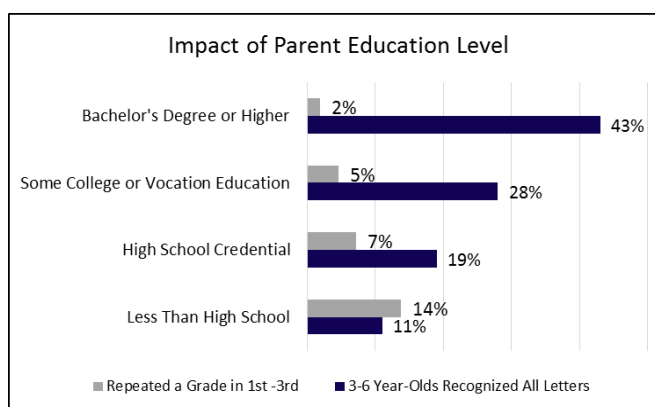
Michigan's network of school-based and school-linked health services represents a commitment to coordinating trained physical, mental and behavioral health professionals to serve students and sometimes their families as well. However, not every student can access appropriate health assessment and supportive services; the presence and strength of these partnerships depends on community service capacity as well as the capacity of schools to effectively cultivate and facilitate the partnership. Community mental and behavioral health services have experienced significant underfunding for years, and the overall workforce for these supportive services is constrained.

Recommendation: Strengthening school and community systems is necessary for full access. Build investment through both school and health budgets to expand access to physical, mental, and behavioral health and social supports for all students.

School-Community Partnerships Engage and Support Families

Research also shows the impact of parental education and engagement on children's success in school and in life; caregivers remain children's first and best teachers. However, 40,000 Michiganders ages 18-34 have less than a ninth grade education, and may need some support to better help with their kids' school, navigate the school system itself, and maintain employment and financial stability for their families. Furthermore, adults are less likely to engage with their children's schools when they had poor school experiences themselves growing up. Children with more educated and engaged parents have more literacy readiness skills and greater education success. Building caregiver skills and improving access to services for families will cultivate more resilient and successful students. Family literacy and other basic skills programs support parents and caregivers to both build financial stability and get more involved in their children's education.

Michigan's adult and community education system provides family literacy programs in addition to providing degree attainment and workforce and career training. However, these programs are not available statewide and are not always accessible to the parents who need them. School-community partnerships that build parent and caregiver skills, including adult education and family literacy programs, will leverage other school investments by helping families to thrive in their school community and access its resources.



Recommendation: Invest in family literacy supports through adult education and other programs and include adult learners, parents, and caregivers, in measures of best practices and success for providing integrated student services.

School-Community Partnerships Provide Rich Academic and Developmental Supports

Every community has resources outside of its school building that have the potential to spark and sustain a student's academic or personal growth. Afterschool and summer learning programs [improve student achievement](#) by pulling the resources of community partners into educational programs that engage students through creative projects, mentorship and peer support, and career and post-secondary learning opportunities. These programs build interpersonal skills and positive behaviors that are key to workplace success because they create environments that encourage children to build connections in their brain that help them both find relevance in their learning and rebuild from earlier traumas. They also provide critical high-quality child care for parents who work longer hours than a typical school day. However, Michigan's federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant, which directly funds afterschool programs designed to capitalize on school/community partnership, supports fewer than half of all qualified school applicants. Afterschool and summer learning opportunities once received dedicated state funding, but that was cut during the state's last economic recession.

Recommendation: Increase state funding for afterschool programs through all state budget sources, including new revenues and child care.

School-Community Partnerships Improve Outcomes for the Most Challenged Learners

Strong partnerships between schools and other agencies that serve children facing difficult life circumstances can allow us to better maintain high academic expectations for all students while addressing the realities they face. Sometimes, students move often from school to school due to the quickly-changing circumstances of foster care, homelessness, or a juvenile sentence. Frequent movement results in lost skill building and actually serves to prevent high school youth from accumulating credits, or results in the loss of student credit records, which can slow a young person's progress toward graduation and may lead them to drop out. While we must work to strengthen families and prevent instability, we must also structure our state's academic pathways to present our most mobile students with a clear, equitable, and accessible opportunity to continue to pursue academic success. Afterschool and summer learning programs that bear credits, along with partnerships between schools and workforce agencies, juvenile justice programs, homeless shelters, and child welfare programs, will allow youth to remain on strong academic pathways. Strengthening school systems as well as the agencies and community partners that provide necessary support for our most mobile youth is critical for their success.

Other students move through school with diagnoses for special education which guarantee their access to educational and career and workforce supports in some cases until the age of 26, recognizing the need for additional time and resources are necessary to help many students who experience physical, mental, or emotional challenges live as independently as any other individual. However, many students living with a disability cannot access the same kinds of support as they transition out of high school, nor supports like one-on-one coaching and mentorship, in addition to critical services, that create accessible workplaces. As a result, [high school graduation rates](#) for students living with disabilities are lower than many of their peers'.

Recommendations:

- *Enact legislation defining partial credit opportunities to remove barriers to credit and skill accumulation for students who move across school districts.*
- *Provide increased transition support for students with disabilities and students who experience foster care, including early transition planning, high-quality academic pathways, appropriate learning resources, and supports for employers.*

High-Quality Education Requires All-Hands On Deck: Supporting Partnership Between our Schools and their Communities, Families, and Students

Whether we work inside or outside of a school building or district, we all have a role to play in supporting the learning of our young people. State policy and investment must shift to build bridges between schools and the many resources of their communities – including families, health and social services providers, employers, and many more – to support student learning.