



July 2020

## **Back to School To-Dos for Children, Youth, and Families in Michigan**

As our state leaders weigh priorities for next steps for K-12 education, virtual or in-person, steps must be taken to ensure every student learns and succeeds this fall and into the future. We know from research and from the lived experience of families what will have some of the strongest impacts on learning outcomes, and what is necessary to close the disparities that exist between students.

Other states are learning that if the state isn't providing leadership for these issues, it is unlikely that districts will. Leaving these priorities, which could mean the difference between a weak long-term recovery from COVID and a strong one, to be made squarely on the local level, especially without sufficient public support, will result in our leaving children and youth who shoulder some of the greatest challenges, including resource limitations, disability, foster care, juvenile justice, or homelessness, and migrant status, and their parents, behind.

### **Keeping Track of Special Populations**

The needs of students who shoulder more significant burdens must be prioritized equally with their safety from the virus. Youth who are part of "special populations" may have conditions, like a health issue or housing instability, which make them more vulnerable to contracting COVID-19, and have disproportionate health and academic risk right now. Before the crisis, high school dropout rates for these students were [dismal compared to peers](#) -- 27% and 20% for youth experiencing foster care or homelessness respectively, 18% for migrant students, and 14% for youth with a disability. While some of these rates had been decreasing, pre-pandemic they were driven by systemic barriers to student need identification and service access, including poor information-sharing. For students with disabilities especially, as well as other more mobile populations, lost time for services is likely to result in dramatic learning and behavioral losses that will require significant resource to meet.

Recommendation: Hold districts accountable, and provide sufficient funding, for supporting students across all "special populations" with specific academic supports, as well as general and targeted support for social, emotional and mental well-being. Currently, no plans discussed by policymakers seem to include requirements for districts to report how they will support all subgroups of students, both academically and otherwise, or how they will work with community partners or leverage community resources to do so.

### **Parent Support Beyond Engagement**

There has been a heightened focus on parents' role in supporting children's education during this crisis. However, many parents face life or skill-based challenges that make it more difficult for them to help. Over 40,000 Michiganders aged 18-34 have less than a ninth grade education

and over 13,000 babies are born each year to a mom without a high school credential, disqualifying them from access to post-secondary education and job training, and many do not have English as their first language. Supporting children's education by supporting their parents' foundational skill building will be crucial to meeting the needs of the most marginalized populations in our state.

Parents without adequate education themselves will need skill-building support not only to better help their children's education directly, but also to help them find a job if they have experienced unemployment. At almost [50% higher unemployment rate than the rate of adults with higher education credentials](#) at the very least, adults without a high school diploma have suffered some of the greatest employment losses, and demand for programs focused on adult basic skills and other skills training will undoubtedly increase. Investment in parent skill building, credentialing and career building will be important to help children as they return to school, address the gaps in educational loss and empower parents to be actively engaged in their children's education.

Recommendation: Require, and fund, school districts to work, including with community workforce, childcare and other partners, to meet their community's adult education needs. While released plans have recommended some family outreach to support K-12 learning, we have seen no such requirements for adult skill building and no increased resources.

### **Parent Support for Early Development**

Families with young children who were receiving in-person services for behavioral health needs, developmental delays or disabilities experienced a significant shock when services went distant, and many children experienced behavioral and learning regression. In addition, parents who are just now noticing developmental delays in their infants and toddlers likely cannot find appropriate services for early intervention due to a previous underfunding of need.

Before the crisis, experts estimated around a [\\$60 million gap](#) between current funding for services and funding necessary to meet all of the need for early assessment and intervention services for infants and toddlers through *Early On* services in this state. That gap has only grown. Failing to support early intervention needs that can often keep families out of or ease the transitions to the K-12 special education will increase costs in the future.

Recommendation: Require, and fund, school districts to expand outreach and services through *Early On* for infants and toddlers for every student with an IEP or IFSP through traditional or adjusted delivery methods, and recognize the additional COVID impact funding needed to make up services lost over time or those realized through changes in intervention delivery for those populations. Released plans have mentioned some strategies for reaching these populations, the language needs to be stronger and resources need to be forthcoming.

### **Prioritize Social and Emotional Supports**

Learning relies on a child's mental health. When families experience instability from events like substance use or domestic abuse, or when children experience increased isolation, younger

brains respond by diverting energy away from growing new brain connections, which happen during learning, and towards preparing to respond to potentially dangerous new situations.

Throughout the pandemic, children, youth and their families have been at higher risk to experience physical, behavioral, emotional and [academic problems](#) from trauma and toxic stress. When children come to school showing signs of trauma, or other social or emotional issues due to COVID and its effects on their family, they will need adequate identification, assessment and support. Behaviors and delays as a result of this trauma can be better managed and brains can be rewired for success.

Other states are outpacing Michigan in encouraging and supporting school-community partnerships to support student social and emotional growth. Professionals around the state and nation are recommending that mental health assessments be part of any back to school plans. In addition, plans need to include a review of disciplinary policies or practices in light of changes in many students' out-of-school experiences and in-school behavior.

Recommendation: Require school districts to coordinate with families, community partners including out-of-school time programs, and local agencies to promote social and emotional health and learning, and provide adequate funding for programming. No Michigan plans put forward at this point require social and emotional measures, and all recommendations disappear from the health and safety guidelines in later phases of the pandemic. And there have been no recommendations or requirements for reviewing disciplinary policies or practices.

### **Protecting Postsecondary Access**

Recent reports indicate that colleges and universities are noticing some trends that could predict lower enrollment rates for lower-income groups of students and would-be students for classes in the Fall. Many of the students who have lost access to postsecondary or workforce programs have experienced additional costs or barriers related to their status as parents, experiencing homelessness, experiencing a disability, and recent foster care experience.

Students with disabilities and students in foster care in particular prior to the COVID crisis faced challenges in attaining postsecondary credentials. We find that students experiencing disability and/or foster care face similar challenges achieving strong educational and eventual employment outcomes, including lack of personalized academic supports and struggle to access work-based learning opportunities. As we move forward to expand postsecondary education attainment and workforce participation in spite of uncertainty, our state must make significant investments in the populations who are farthest from that goal.

Recommendation: Dedicated funding for high school-to-postsecondary transition services for students shouldering challenging circumstances, and for resources and services for current post-secondary learners who are parents, homeless and foster youth, and others without stable housing and lacking other basic resources.