



School Reform
TASK FORCE

★ ★ **2013** ★ ★

Michigan House
Democrats
REPORT



HouseDemTaskForces.com



Earlier this year, the Michigan House Democrats conducted a listening tour across the state. Building on those conversations, we formed task forces to address the issues people told us matter the most. Those task forces sought ideas from people around the state to create policies that will make a real difference for people who live, work and raise families in Michigan.

Michigan House Democrats'
Great Lakes and Conservation Task Force

Michigan House Democrats'
School Reform Task Force

Michigan House Democrats'
Small Business and Job Creation Task Force

Michigan House Democrats'
Veterans Services Task Force

Michigan House Democrats'
Women's Health and Economic Security Task Force

Over the past two years, we have watched as Gov. Rick Snyder and the Republican-led Legislature have passed laws draining funding and resources from our schools. As a result, classroom sizes have increased and they lack books and basic materials students need in order to learn. Rather than working with our struggling schools on meaningful reforms, Republicans have forced some of these schools into a separate, unproven new school district – the Education Achievement Authority (EAA). Most recently, and even more alarmingly, they have engineered the dissolution of the Buena Vista and Inkster school districts. Yet another school district, the Albion School District, decided its only option was to close its high school and send students to school in a neighboring city.

The House Democrats' School Reform Task Force met between May and August, gathering information from educators and experts on programs and ideas that could provide real solutions for Michigan's struggling schools. The task force is a response to House Republicans' effort to expand the unproven EAA across the state, even though the 15 schools currently run by the EAA are under fire by students, parents and educators for not providing a safe and sound learning environment.

Our meetings included educators and researchers from schools and universities throughout Michigan. At our first meeting, we worked with Dr. Rossi Ray-Taylor on framing the issues and examining the elements of an excellent school. At our following meetings we heard from Oakland Schools Superintendent Dr. Vickie L. Markavitch, who discussed the external pressures facing our schools and the current research guiding school improvement tools. Dr. Yvonne Caamal Canul, superintendent of Lansing Schools, and Dr. Gary Miron, professor of evaluation, measurement and research at Western Michigan University, explained where we've been and talked about the history of education reform efforts in Michigan and the problems resulting from the creation of competing school systems. Eastern Michigan Special Education Department professor Steven Camron and Wayne State University education professor Dr. Michael Addonizio talked about special education services, public school finance and program evaluation. We also heard from Lake Superior State University President Anthony McLain about his experiences as a school superintendent and how education policy impacts rural and isolated school districts. Finally, we worked with Dr. David Arsen, professor of K-12 administration at Michigan State University, to turn this information into a plan of action for school reform.

This report outlines the steps we must take in order to successfully help struggling schools and create a level playing field among our traditional and nontraditional public schools to help all of our schools provide the best possible education for Michigan students. Michigan's children deserve a first-class education no matter where they go to school. House Democrats are committed to ensuring that all of our public schools offer the best possible education and are accountable to their communities and the taxpayers. We are committed to fighting for these ideas and for the success of every student in Michigan. We hope you'll join us.

Sincerely,


Rep. Ellen Cogen Lipton


Rep. Brandon Dillon



House Democrats' School Reform Task Force members:

Rep. Ellen Cogen Lipton
(Huntington Woods)
co-chair

Rep. Brandon Dillon
(Grand Rapids)
co-chair

Rep. Theresa Abed
(Grand Ledge)

Rep. Terry Brown
(Pigeon)

Rep. Douglas A. Geiss
(Taylor)

Rep. John Kivela
(Marquette)

Rep. Collene Lamonte
(Montague)

Rep. Stacy Erwin Oakes
(Saginaw)

Rep. David Rutledge
(Superior Township)

Rep. Andy Schor
(Lansing)

Rep. Thomas F. Stallworth III
(Detroit)

Rep. Adam Zemke
(Ann Arbor)



Community Education Action Plans: Working together for student success

The Michigan School Reform Office, established in 2010, is tasked with helping struggling schools – those that fall in the bottom 5 percent of schools in the state – improve. Reforms and efforts to work with these schools were supposed to come from this office. That has not happened, however. Instead, we have Gov. Rick Snyder's Education Achievement Authority (EAA) and more schools falling into a financial crisis such as the Inkster and Buena Vista school districts that were dissolved last summer. Since 2010 the number of deficit districts in our state has more than doubled.

Michigan students, parents and educators deserve better. Our job as a task force was to conduct a data-driven effort to determine what the state should do to help struggling districts and improve student achievement.

Our vision for these action plans is that the state, education experts, the community, parents, local teachers and school administrators will work together on improving our challenged schools. Each group has a stake in our public schools, and each group has a role to play in improving them. We also want all schools to recognize that there is always room for improvement. When it comes to educating our students for the future, we must constantly be improving and never settle for the status quo.

As an alternative to the EAA and to avoid a takeover or dissolution of a school or school district, we propose that schools in crisis go through a comprehensive review, under the authority of the state Department of Education, followed by a detailed action plan that will put them on track to improve. This involves the state guiding the school through a careful examination of a number of components including finances, leadership and curriculum to determine the unique challenges occurring in that school. Recognizing that a school is an integral part of its community, a plan for its improvement must be implemented and embraced by all of the stakeholders, with careful mentoring and guidance from the state.

We can't tell our schools that they need to change and then just walk away and leave them to figure it out for themselves or face a state takeover or shutdown. Our schools have had to make do with diminished state funding that has made educating students more difficult for these schools. We owe it to our students, parents, educators and our communities to work proactively with them on improvements.

Our plan for educational reviews followed by a detailed action plan for improvements includes the following recommendations:

- Legislation to strengthen the Michigan School Reform Office by requiring education professionals, parents, community leaders and other experts to conduct a review of struggling schools and the creation of an aggressive turn-around action plan designed to address the specific issues and challenges of that school.
- Legislation to create a master teacher plan with the goal of preparing our best students to choose to be teachers and to mentor those teachers now in our classrooms.



Answering the question: What does it really cost to educate our students?

The experts we heard from in our meetings all reinforced and confirmed our belief that Michigan cannot approach school reform with a “one-size-fits-all” plan. Different districts have issues and needs unique to their students and community. Poverty, English as a second language issues, special education needs, transportation costs and the availability of early childhood learning programs are just some of the issues that can affect a school district’s success.

If we are going to spend taxpayers’ educational dollars effectively, then we need to know what it actually costs to educate students with varying needs across Michigan. To this end, the School Reform Task Force will call on the Michigan Department of Education to conduct a comprehensive study that will allow us to better understand what it actually costs to educate Michigan students.

This study will give legislators and policymakers a better understanding of the investment needed to educate students because they will see how much it costs to provide services such as transportation, services for special needs students, ESL services for students of all ages and programs for our youngest children so they begin school ready to learn. We also recognize the need to increase our investment in community colleges and higher education by prioritizing general fund dollars. We believe that knowing what the actual costs are will in turn lead to better policy making and budget decisions.

Our plan for this study of costs and follow-up actions includes the following recommendations:

- Legislation requiring a comprehensive study of the true cost to educate a child in a Michigan public school.
- Ensuring that, as a result of this study, the specific needs of each unique school district are addressed and properly funded.
- A constitutional amendment to guarantee that school aid dollars are protected and only used in our public schools for education through high school (House Joint Resolution Z-Rep. Collene Lamonte).



Community schools: Leveling the playing field for all schools

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 use their own computer as a virtual classroom. Michigan students have options, and schools compete for these students creating, in effect, parallel school systems.

If we are to achieve effective school reform, we need to level the playing field so that all Michigan public schools operate under the same requirements and are held to the same standards of accountability and transparency. Michigan parents and taxpayers deserve complete and accurate information about their children's education and those teachers and administrators who are delivering that education either in person or over the Internet. We need to know what educational methods work in different school settings so that they can be shared with other schools. The best way to know that is by holding all schools to the same reporting requirements. Furthermore, holding all schools accountable using unbiased and equal measures of success is a critical reform needed in an environment with numerous options for students and parents.

Our plan for leveling the playing field includes the following recommendations:

- 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.
- All schools – public, charter and virtual – must have school boards that comply with the Open Meetings Act and hold their school board meetings in their school communities at times and places that are accessible for parents and community members.
- No group with the ability to authorize charter schools will be allowed to authorize new charter schools if any of their existing schools fall in the bottom 5 percent of schools.



Conclusion

Task force members realize that school reform includes many other issues and needs outside of the scope of our particular mission. We chose to focus our work within our specific timeframe of our meetings and within the time we have left to act in this current legislative session. There are many other issues and bills important to delivering a world-class education to enable our students to succeed in school, in a trade school, at a university and in the workforce. Our task force report focuses on the steps we should take to begin successfully reforming and improving our schools recognizing the challenges they all face.

Our children deserve the best education possible, and the House Democrats have a plan that will help us deliver an excellent education to every Michigan student.

A copy of each presenter's testimony will be available on the website – www.housedemtaskforces.com

Conclusion

These proposals are just the start.

Keep up-to-date with the latest task force events, read about our proposals
and encourage action at our website:

HouseDemTaskForces.com