Get It Done: Better Schools Now for Michigan Students

GRETCHEN WHITMER’S PLAN FOR HIGH-QUALITY SCHOOLS THAT FOSTER A TALENTED WORKFORCE
A generation ago, Michigan led the world in public education. This was the state families packed up and moved to because parents knew their children could get a quality education and the skills they needed to get a good-paying job. As a mom with two daughters in high school, these are the same opportunities I want for my own kids.

But over the past eight years, Republicans in Lansing have sided with Betsy DeVos to push an education agenda that included slashing school funding, expanding unaccountable for-profit managed charter schools, over-emphasizing standardized tests, attacking hard-working educators and adopting a one-size fits all approach to education that has left our kids behind.

This agenda has resulted in Michigan being near the bottom of the country on almost every meaningful metric from student literacy to college preparedness. Our educational crisis affects urban, rural and suburban school systems alike, and it disproportionately affects kids who are at-risk or have special needs.

It doesn’t have to be like this.

Michigan needs a governor who knows how to get things done to fix our schools, so every student has the support, tools and skills they need to compete for high-wage jobs and have full and productive lives. Students are preparing for jobs that don’t even exist today, which means we must teach them how to think critically, to problem solve complex issues and to work as a team. That’s what this agenda is all about.

My plan focuses on the first 1,000 days of a child’s life. We will prioritize early childhood education funding and get Michigan on a path to universal preschool to ensure that when kids enter kindergarten, they are ready to learn.

When children enter school, they need safe classrooms with high quality teachers to meet them where they are and help them succeed. Michigan will respect our educators and treat them as professionals, instead of attacking them for Lansing’s policy failures. We will expand offerings that give every child – regardless of their zip code – exposure to a full curriculum of classes and opportunities to find the right path for their future.
Lastly, when a child reaches high school, we need to help them develop a plan so they leave prepared for further education – be it with a certificate in the skilled trades, technical apprenticeship or to pursue a college track career. We must provide pathways of equal rigor for all these options. We will expose students to a wider variety of jobs earlier, so they have time to pursue classes that prepare them for life in the workforce. If their path is college, we will help them select the best one for their needs and provide a two-year debt-free talent investment if they work hard.

Making these changes won’t be easy, but I’m ready to roll up my sleeves and work with anyone who is serious about finding solutions to improve our schools and help every student build a good life right here in Michigan.

My plan for improving public education focuses on:

1) Quality Education from Cradle to Career
2) Paths to Prosperity with a Highly Educated Workforce
3) Respect for Educators
4) Stabilizing School Funding and Improving Accountability

1) Quality Education from Cradle to Career

After eight years in office, the Snyder administration has put Michigan schools and students on the wrong track. Their actions have resulted in classrooms all across the state that are too crowded, don’t have enough supplies and in some districts don’t even have functioning heat during the cold winter months. Schools must be given the resources they need to keep students safe and learning.

Remaking Michigan a top-tier state for education requires us to think differently about our public education system. Educating children from kindergarten through the 12th grade is no longer good enough. It is time for our public education system to begin teaching Michiganders earlier in their formative years and throughout a lifetime of learning.

Up until the early grades students “learn to read,” but as they progress they “read to learn.” This means students who do not meet adequate literacy competency in their early years are likely to struggle in other content areas in middle and high school – they are less likely to graduate1 and only two percent complete four-year college degree programs.2 Prioritizing early education services from birth to five years does more to bolster lifetime
literacy outcomes than any punitive measure, like retaining students in third grade. Research shows a 13 percent return on investment for every dollar spent on high-quality early childhood education. This is why universal preschool is the first step to ensure Michigan becomes a fully literate state.

To reimagine public education and provide quality classroom learning and education that starts at birth, we will:

» **Phase in quality, full-day universal preschool** by expanding the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) and increasing the income threshold incrementally during my first term in office, until all four year-olds are eligible.

» **Raise Michigan’s child care eligibility and reimbursement** rates from one of the lowest in the country to a competitive level that will remain year after year so parents can make long-term plans for their children. High quality, affordable, safe, clean and reliable child care starting from birth will improve the readiness of Michigan three-year-olds about to enter preschool. It will also give parents the time and peace of mind they need to get a job, pursue a promotion or go back to school themselves.

» **Triple the number of literacy coaches in Michigan** so that every elementary school has a better ratio of literacy coaches to teachers to improve reading instruction.

» **Give students the in-school support they need**, including: counselors, social workers, school nurses, school security, healthy meals and safe transportation. Michigan is woefully underfunding staffing in these key positions. With just one school nurse per 4,000 plus students, more than half of all Michigan students go to school in a building that does not have a nurse - when our schools should have one nurse for every 750 students.

Our educators have an incredible responsibility to help develop every student as a whole person who is ready for a future in Michigan’s workforce - but we need to recognize that every child has different needs.

» **Support schools as the center of our communities.** These community schools provide services to students and families and help create stable and healthy neighborhoods. This includes investing in wraparound services like nutrition, dental and medical services.
that address the needs of students and their families with one-stop access through a school. Learning is more difficult for students who come to school hungry, underdressed for cold Michigan winters, or if they are experiencing trauma at home.

» **Ban guns in our schools** unless the person carrying is a trained, licensed law enforcement professional. No parent should drop their child off at school and worry if they will come home safely.

» **Establish a reliable state funding source for Early On services**, which offers early intervention services for infants and toddlers. Doing so ensures access to the program for every child that needs it and saves the state hundreds of thousands of dollars in special education programming over the course of each student’s academic career.

» Encourage the innovation and implementation of education best practices in Michigan schools. Simple and effective changes can have significant impacts on academic outcomes. By harnessing the advantages of strong partnerships with Michigan business and the foundation community, we will award three **“Governor’s Innovation Prizes”** annually to districts that adopt education models that have proven successful, and can be measured and replicated in Michigan.

2) **Paths to Prosperity with a Highly Educated Workforce**

Vibrant communities and economies are built on the foundation of a strong public school system through 12th grade and beyond.

Employers value critical thinking, creativity and collaboration – so our education system needs to value that over rote tasks and test answers. We must stop the ineffective over-testing of students and the misuse of those results to punish schools and educators. We still need reasonable, high quality, non-duplicative, consistent assessments to help inform educators and parents about student growth, but we can do that while spending less time on testing and more time on teaching.

Once and for all, **Michigan needs to commit to developmentally-appropriate learning standards that do not shift with the political winds.** We need fair and accurate measures of student proficiency over time, not low-level tests designed to rank, rate and punish. For the sake of all students, we need to stop pointing fingers and adjust our methods, materials and time investment as soon as a student is not mastering material.

We will establish a system focused on growing a highly-educated workforce that gives Michigan the edge in the global economy by:
» Providing every pupil in Michigan the chance to explore a rich and varied world of learning while simultaneously being exposed to potential career opportunities that exist in each field. Our state’s caseload for Michigan school counselors is among the worst in the country. My administration will work with schools to **fix the shortage of counselors** who provide essential guidance for student success, both in terms of academics and social/emotional issues.

» Establishing best-practice high school programs with counselors to foster success. For example, the Freshmen-on-Track program is an uncomplicated, research-based indicator for ninth graders’ high school success that focuses on grades, attendance and solid work habits. Later in high school, we will ensure every student creates a **post-graduation career plan before the end of 12th grade**, which is a proven method to improve student success.

» Continuing to grow support for project-based learning – like **STEAM and Robotics** – while investing more in skills and technical trades and job training programs. This will ensure Michigan is building a talented workforce that can compete for high-skill, high-wage jobs of tomorrow.

» **Ending ineffective over-testing** and embracing alternative options that successfully gauge student outcomes, like work-product portfolios and year-end projects, as well as the flexibility offered in federal law about how and how often we test students.

» Working with the Michigan Department of Education to ensure quality literacy instruction through the 12th grade. There are critical reading skills that will be taught and reinforced in every year of a child’s development, from birth to postsecondary. We will also work with universities to support literacy instruction and ensure that all future teachers have coursework in critical reading skills.

» Renewing investment in elective and extracurricular opportunities, including valuing educators who teach the arts and physical education, as well as those who dedicate time to support after-school activities, clubs, teams and service groups. We cannot claim to provide a **well-rounded academic experience for every student** until every student has the chance to learn in ways that best work for them. For many students that includes education options in subject matters like athletics, music, art, theater, student newspapers, debate teams, AV and computer clubs, and student internship programs.

» Creating the **MI Opportunity Scholarship as a two year debt-free plan** to ensure every Michigander has a real path to get the skills or education they need to land a good-paying job. Every Michigander will have an opportunity
to improve their skills at any point in their life with two years of debt-free postsecondary education or skills training. This will give people choices, whether college is right for them or not. The MI Opportunity Scholarships may be used at skilled training programs, community colleges and four-year universities.

» MI Opportunity Scholarship participants would be required to have skin in the game:

• Completing eight hours of community service per marking period.
• Enrolling full-time and maintaining a good attendance record and a deserving grade point average.
• Students must have graduated from and maintained a good GPA and a high attendance record for the preceding three years at a Michigan high school.
• Students would also need to participate in a MI Opportunity mentoring program that will help with career navigation, understanding of college admittance, networking in job pathways and development of soft skills so graduates secure good-paying jobs right here in Michigan.

3) Respect for Educators
Teachers, administrators and school support staff work incredibly hard and deserve our respect. They also deserve safe, modern classrooms to teach in, supplies to support their lessons and specialists to help every student reach their full potential. Educating the next generation of Michiganders is our most important responsibility – level the playing field for kids, strengthen our economy and build a more vibrant state.

Michigan students have paid for the constant attacks on education professionals, who feel undervalued and underappreciated. That demoralization impacts those currently working with our students as well as future educators who are chased away from the profession. We must address our looming teacher shortage crisis and make Michigan a top education state again.
For eight years Lansing has failed to attract and retain quality educators. Subjecting teachers and students to failed experiments like the School Reform Office and the Education Achievement Authority, retaliating against those who speak up about the appalling state of their school buildings, and ignoring front-line expertise about what students need to succeed has eviscerated our ability to find and keep great educators. State government’s inadequate funding for schools has also resulted in larger class sizes, lack of supplies, crumbling infrastructure and cuts to educator compensation.

Lansing doesn’t listen to educators, ignores what they do and excludes their expertise.

In my administration, Michigan education will focus on the needs of all students and empower teachers and other education staff.

Respect for education as a valuable and worthwhile profession will attract quality educators to our schools. A high-caliber teacher is the most important school-based variable in determining how well a child learns. We will elevate the teaching profession with:

» Rigorous and practical teaching preparation programs in our colleges.

  » The current practice of evaluating and approving teacher training programs is not good enough. My administration will create a system for evaluating teacher training programs with a goal for improvement and parity where needed based on the expertise of education professionals. Additionally, my plan will institute mentorship programs to help new teachers learn the ropes faster and confidently integrate into a profession that too often sees teachers leave after their first few years.

  » Attracting quality teachers is a high priority, but we need cost effective solutions that get high-quality results. Grow Your Own (GYO) teacher programs are designed to help motivated community members and school support staff become fully-certified teachers in their local schools. GYO pilot programs have cut costs, reduced staff turnover, and diversified the workforce. Additionally, GYO teachers work because 42 percent teach in hard-to-fill positions like special education or English as a second language.

» Competitive compensation and professional working conditions.

  » To attract people to careers in public education, we need to honor the education profession, keep it competitive with other similar careers and keep occupational satisfaction and leadership opportunities high so we can retain quality teachers, support staff and administrators.
Raising educators’ pay and targeting resources towards competitive compensation are the best ways for Michigan to attract the best teachers of tomorrow and reverse the teacher shortage.

» To best utilize the expertise of our educators, I will establish the Governor’s Educator Advisory Commission – made up of educators on the frontlines of our schools – that will advise me on pending laws and assist in implementing needed school reform strategies. This commission will be the megaphone for educators’ voice in state government.

» Ongoing, content-specific professional development.

» Like any profession, continuous study for emerging best practices is critical. My administration will work with education agencies at the state, ISD and local level to increase the time, funding and options for effective professional development of Michigan’s teaching force. Allowing for greater use of research-based and small group setting professional development ensures this training is relevant for educators’ work with students, and encourages continuous improvement in the teaching field.

» Opportunities for teacher collaboration.

» The best professionals need time to collaborate with their peers to share creative ideas, study the results of their work and make improvements. My administration will work with local districts and statewide teacher and education groups to allow more time for professional collaboration – and minimize unproductive competition between educators that interferes with the teamwork needed to help students achieve.

4) Stabilizing School Funding and Improving Accountability

Improving our education system requires structuring school financing in an equitable manner and in a way that begins to provide adequate funding. Michigan also needs to adopt strong transparency and accountability measures for all public schools, including how taxpayer money is spent by for-profit companies managing day-to-day operations at charter and cyber schools. This ensures Michigan taxpayers are getting the best value for our money, and helps our students get the skills and experience they need to
compete for good jobs.

» Fixing Michigan’s broken one-size-fits-all school finance system requires a recognition that different students have different needs, which in turn have different costs to educate. With this in mind, my administration will:

» Convert to a weighted foundation allowance - one that accounts for every student’s needs - and change the financing system to address the higher costs of special education, at-risk pupils in urban, suburban and rural communities, and English language learners.

» Eliminate the $100-plus million in School Aid Fund money being spent out of the state budget on a variety of legislators’ pet projects, putting those funds back at the local level where they can support student learning best.

» Keep School Aid Fund money in K-12 and restore the School Aid Fund to its intended constitutional purpose. Since 2011-12, the SAF has spent almost $3.5 billion on non K-12 education. This must be reversed with the General Fund covering necessary funding for community colleges and universities.

» Carefully review Michigan state tax policies and ensure we have the necessary resources to educate our children. Decades of carve outs and targeted tax breaks have starved the School Aid Fund of hundreds of millions in revenue. While some of these policies are the right choice for the state’s overall best interest, some were shortsighted political choices that have taken money from our kids’ schools - students deserve that money back.

» Michigan will implement quality and accountability standards that every public school must meet, regardless of whether it is a traditional neighborhood school or a charter school, by:

» Holding all schools to the same performance standards.

» Requiring all schools to accept all students, regardless of student needs and the additional costs associated with those needs.

» Subjecting all schools to the same financial, health, safety and academic oversight.

» Requiring all schools to hire state certified teachers.

» Enforcing strict conflict of interest laws on every school to avoid decisions on academics from being made for the economic benefits of adults rather than the education of children, with a focus on relationships between school boards, traditional school administrators, as well as
charter management, their suppliers and landlords.

» Stopping the expansion of for-profit-operated charter schools, reserving the creation of new charter schools in Michigan for boards that either self-manage or use non-profit management.

» Providing the adequate financial support needed for all schools that meet these quality assurances – for every student and their individual needs – to achieve the state’s performance standards.
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