

Call to Action

In an economy where a superior education is the most reliable ticket to a bright future, where our children create and compete for the best jobs in the world, and where the next generation does better than the one before it, young people in most other American states and developed nations are being better prepared than in Michigan. It is a harsh judgement, but an unavoidable one based on the achievement data. Until we are honest about current performance in our state, we cannot demand the changes our education system needs to more effectively support today's kindergarteners and tomorrow's college students. It is hard to imagine higher stakes for our state and its families.

Falling K-12 Performance

The urgency could not be greater. While it is difficult to face, the data are clear: Michigan's public education system is dramatically failing our children. As early as fourth grade, Michiganders are falling behind their peers, ranking 41st on fourth-grade reading performance nationally. Michigan is one of only three states that has seen a decline in fourth-grade reading achievement since 2003; only West Virginia experienced a larger drop in student performance during this time. While Michigan's performance dropped two points, the top states for growth improved by double digits: Louisiana (eleven) and Alabama (ten).³⁷

In eighth grade, we continue to see a trend of low performance and slow growth. In 2015, Michigan ranked 37th for eighth-grade math performance. In 12 years' time, performance inched up a mere two points. As in fourth-grade reading, however, other states saw significant increases in eighth-grade math performance. Massachusetts—the top-performing state in the nation—continues to see large improvements in student performance (ten points since 2013). Students in Hawaii improved 14 points, and performance in New Jersey and Arizona increased by 12 points.³⁸

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Results are worse for students of color, students in special education, and students living in poverty. On any performance metric, at-risk students in Michigan underperform their peers. Perhaps the most jarring finding is that black fourth graders in Michigan have the lowest reading performance in the country. Hispanic students perform slightly better—ranking 32nd nationally.³⁹ The story is the same for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities score 44 points below their peers without disabilities on the fourth-grade reading assessment.⁴⁰ Our system must recognize and address this disparity and do much more to reverse the connection between learning outcomes and race/ethnicity, disability status, and socioeconomic status.

Some may think that these unacceptable statewide outcomes are a result of changing demographics, but that is simply not true.

Michigan's higher-income and white students are also among the worst performing in the country. When we remove our lowest-income students from the data set, Michigan's performance falls in comparison to other states.

In fourth-grade reading, higher-income Michigan students rank among the worse in the country.

For example, in fourth-grade reading, higher-income Michigan students (those who do not qualify for the means-tested free and reduced lunch program) rank 48th among their peers—seven slots lower than our state's overall ranking in this grade level and subject.⁴¹ When we disaggregate performance by race, white students rank 49th.⁴² Even among schools with a low number of students participating in free and reduced lunch—a proxy for wealthier schools—Michigan ranks near the bottom (36 out of 42 states reporting).⁴³

In a 21st century economy, our students need more than strong academic skills and knowledge. Employers report that they want employees who are critical thinkers who can process information and share their opinions verbally and in writing. They want good listeners, readers, and presenters.⁴⁴ To prosper, we need to help our schools achieve rigorous academic outcomes and increase their focus on these crucial 21st century skills.

In a 21st century economy, we must also give our students multiple pathways to success; our system cannot be one-size-fits-all. This includes helping more students enroll in and complete career and technical education programs. In 2015, over 126,500 high school students enrolled in one of 1,861 skilled trades programs statewide. Only thirty percent, however, completed their program.⁴⁵

Low Postsecondary Attainment

By 2025, 65 percent of jobs in Michigan will require a postsecondary credential, and our workforce is not yet prepared to meet these new demands.⁴⁶ Only 39.3 percent of Michiganders ages 25–64 have earned an associate degree or higher—ranking Michigan 29th for degree attainment. By comparison, Massachusetts has the highest degree attainment in the country with more than half of its population (52.4 percent) earning an associate degree or higher. Minnesota leads the Great Lakes region with 48.9 percent of its residents earning at least an associate degree.⁴⁷

Degrees, of course, are not the only pathway to postsecondary success. Postsecondary credentials, including certificates, industry certifications, and apprenticeships, also offer participants an opportunity to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to enter a particular field and succeed. In Michigan, 4 percent of residents have also earned a certificate.⁴⁸ This increases the state's overall attainment rate; 43.3 percent of residents have earned a certificate or an associate degree or higher.

EXHIBIT 3. 43.3 Percent of Michigan Residents 25–64 Have Earned a Postsecondary Credential or Higher

Less than 9 th grade	9 th to 12 th grade, no diploma	High school graduate	Some college, no degree	Associate degree	Bachelor's degree	Graduate or professional degree
2.4%	6.2%	27.6%	24.5%	10.3%	18.1%	10.9%

Note: The American Community Survey does not report on postsecondary credentials. Residents with postsecondary credentials are likely included in the “some college, no degree” category. The Lumina Foundation estimates 4 percent of residents have attained certificates.

Like many K–12 outcomes, there is significant variation across residents of different races and ethnicities. For example, 63 percent of Asian residents have earned a bachelor’s degree compared to 28 percent of white residents, 17 percent of black residents, 16 percent of Hispanic residents, and 13.5 percent of Native American or Alaskan Native residents.⁴⁹

We also know that too often, access to higher education is a function of family income—something that is unacceptable if our state is committed to equality of opportunity. After high school, 69.8 percent of the students in the class of 2014 enrolled in postsecondary education. Only 57.1 percent of economically disadvantaged students, however, enrolled in a postsecondary program.⁵⁰ This disparity can be seen as students progress through college as well. National data show a dramatic difference in attainment between students with different socioeconomic backgrounds. Sixty percent of students from upper-income families earned a bachelor’s degree or higher eight years after high school graduation. Twenty-nine percent of students from middle-income families did the same, but only 14 percent of students from low-income families earned a bachelor’s degree in that time.⁵¹

Too many Michiganders face an uphill climb when enrolling in postsecondary education. Students face both financial and academic challenges. While state investment in higher education has steadily increased since its low point in FY 2012, Michigan’s investment is down 14 percent from appropriations in FY 2007–2008.⁵² At the same time, tuition at colleges and universities statewide has been on the rise, and state aid programs have been cut or eliminated.⁵³ This has increased the financial investment required for students to pursue postsecondary education. In addition to financial barriers, students too often enter postsecondary education underprepared. One in four graduates of the class of 2014 were required to take remedial courses when they enrolled in a community college or public university.⁵⁴ This is costly for students. Remediation requires the investment of time and resources without moving students closer to the credits they need to graduate. Michigan must reverse these trends to put more students on the pathway to success.

A Call to Transform, Not Tinker

It is easy to look for excuses or to believe that our local schools are doing fine—to believe that this is only a problem in other districts or for someone else’s children. We must be courageous enough to accept the fact that our public education system is falling behind those of our national and global competitors, and begin working immediately to reverse our trajectory. We need not blame people

or the past; we need to transform the system. This report outlines recommendations from the 21st Century Education Commission for how to design and rebuild our public education system to prepare all children for the careers, lives, and futures they aspire to and a better future for our great state.

A Commitment to Ambitious Goals

How will we know if we have built a high-performing public education system in Michigan that prepares our students for the 21st century? We believe that, together, these four goals help to assess Michigan's progress toward creating an education system that is more equitable and produces graduates that are more prepared and more competitive with their peers across the country and world.

To achieve these goals, we must all take responsibility for them. We must not expect that educators alone can be held accountable for these outcomes. Every stakeholder—from the Legislature to students and from parents to teachers—must take ownership of our state's outcomes. Michigan must also commit to publicly providing data about our shared progress toward the following goals. Data must be reported publicly and disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and county.

By 2025, 70 percent or more of our 25-year-olds will have completed a college degree, occupational certificate, apprenticeship, or formal skill training.

Why? Our economy demands that more Michiganders pursue postsecondary education to attract and create good-paying jobs.

Current performance: Of Michiganders ages 25–34, 45.8 percent have earned a certificate or an associate degree or higher⁵⁵

By 2025, Michigan children will score in the top ten among U.S. states on the bi-annual National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading, math, and science.

Why? We must prepare our students to compete with the best students in the country.

Current performance: Michigan ranks 41st in fourth-grade reading and 37th in eighth-grade math.⁵⁶

By 2025, the high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment gap between low-income and middle-income children in Michigan will have disappeared.

Why? This goal reflects our call for equity and a commitment to providing all children with a quality education. It also reflects the need for high schools and postsecondary institutions to collaborate for student success.

Current performance: In 2014–2015, Michigan’s overall four-year high school graduation rate was 79.8 percent. For that same year, 67.5 percent of economically disadvantaged students graduated—a difference of 12.3 points.⁵⁷ For the class of 2014, 69.8 percent of graduates enrolled in postsecondary within 12 months of graduation. Enrollment dropped to 57.1 percent for economically disadvantaged students.⁵⁸

By 2025, Michigan children will surpass the scores of Ontario school children on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in reading, math, and science.

Why? Michigan children must compete with the best in the world, and Ontario, our neighbor, has made significant education reforms and is now a top performer internationally. Michigan wants to see our performance increase overall and in comparison to top-performing states and nations. For context, PISA is an assessment tool used to evaluate educational performance worldwide by assessing 15-year-olds in more than 72 countries every three years.

Current performance: On PISA 2015, Ontario outperformed the U.S. by 28 points in science (Ontario: 524, U.S.: 496), 30 points in reading (Ontario: 527, U.S.: 497), and 39 points in math (Ontario: 509, U.S.: 470).^{59, 60}