



Guiding Principle 5:



**Partner
with Parents**

Michigan's education system must partner with parents to actively support development and learning, build strong partnerships with educators, provide the information necessary to guide decision-making, and ensure all children and parents have the support and resources necessary to succeed.

Photo taken at Starfish Family Services in Inkster



Rationale

Parents are children's first and most important teachers. Across income levels and racial and ethnic backgrounds, children with involved parents are more likely to earn higher grades, pass their classes, and earn college credits. Children have more regular attendance and better social skills, and they are more likely to graduate and go on to a postsecondary education.¹⁰⁷ (It is important to note that the term “parents” is intended to be an inclusive term that includes all caregivers parenting a child.)

Parent involvement can be taught and learned. There is a deep research base that identifies evidence-based strategies that educators, child care providers, schools, and others can deploy to build strong partnerships. These strategies broadly work to (1) build trusting relationships, (2) respect and support families' diverse needs, and (3) create a culture of partnership.¹⁰⁸

In addition to working together to improve academic outcomes, parents and schools are also natural partners to help children and their families access the services they need to thrive. It is well-documented that when children are struggling to meet their basic needs, they are also struggling to learn. Schools must partner with parents, as well as the broader community, to ensure that each and every child arrives at school ready to learn.

What does a 21st century Michigan look like?

Parents across the state report being engaged partners in their children's educations and feel welcome in their child's learning environment. From the time their children are born until the time they graduate from college, parents have access to information about child and adolescent development, and they understand how to effectively support their children. Communication between educators and parents is effective and ongoing, and parents regularly volunteer at school. Parents are confident helping their children with homework, and they understand what their children must know and be able to do to excel in a 21st century world.

Parents are equipped to make, and support their children in making, sound educational decisions. They know what quality programs look like—from child care and preschool to K–

12 and higher education—and they can weigh their options to decide which choice is best for their child and family. Parents also actively participate in local governance through opportunities such as the Parent Teacher Association, school councils, and school boards.

Critically, communities, schools, and parents are prepared to support all children—including those with additional academic, social-emotional, and socioeconomic needs. There are strong partnerships between educators and community agencies that allow children and families to access the supports they need to help their children thrive. Children's basic needs are being met, and when they attend school they are able to focus on learning. Statewide, these partnerships are creating a culture of high expectations and improving outcomes for children.¹⁰⁹

What does Michigan look like now?

In some classrooms, in some communities, parents are empowered to partner with their child's teachers, providers, and schools in exactly the way we envision. Schools are welcoming places, and parents support their child's education in a variety of ways, like helping with homework and speaking up when their child needs more help. Some schools offer specific programs to engage parents, and others help parents learn more about child development through home visiting or child development seminars.

However, access to the knowhow, programs, and tools necessary to be an engaged parent is by no means a guarantee statewide. Parent involvement is too often defined narrowly. Parents that can volunteer at holiday parties and run the concessions stand are considered highly engaged, others are not. Schools invite parents to open houses and fifteen-minute parent-teacher conferences, but parents do not feel welcome to engage actively with their

child's teachers. In some schools, unclear governance structures make it uncertain who is ultimately responsible for student outcomes, making it difficult for parents to raise and resolve concerns.

There are tools to help parents pick the best educational option for their child, but data are often nascent and the tools can be clunky, making side-by-side comparisons difficult. There are different tools for different levels of education, and not all parents are aware that the tools are available.

Michigan has made progress in connecting students and families to human services, but too often these connections are built on interpersonal relationships and do not ensure access for all children. Michigan's most struggling schools are serving high concentrations of low-income students without the support of robust wraparound services, and zip code continues to be highly correlated with outcomes.

Measuring Success

While we implement these strategies, we must track progress and outcomes by asking questions such as:

- Do parents report being engaged in their children's education?
- Do educators report having engaged parents?
- Do accountability systems reflect the importance of partnering with parents?
- Does our accountability system provide an easy tool for parents to evaluate and compare?
- Are families gaining more efficient access to human services?
- Are children learning more?
- Have we begun to close achievement gaps?

Key Strategies

- 5.1 Connect human services to schools
- 5.2 Nurture parent and educator collaboration
- 5.3 Create user-friendly tools to navigate educational options

Photo taken at Starfish Family Services in Inkster



5.1—Connect Human Services to Schools

Michigan must embed human services in schools and strengthen links between schools and community-based human services in order to connect children, students, and their families with the right services at the right time.

Details

In the long run, social workers and caseworkers should be ubiquitous in schools across Michigan because every school has students with needs that prevent them from achieving their full potential academically. This effort, however, should begin by serving our highest-need students first, including students receiving free and reduced lunch and students with disabilities.

Rationale

Children, students, and their families across Michigan struggle with basic needs, making it challenging, or impossible to focus on education. This was a common theme heard during listening tour events in Southeast and West Michigan. The effects of poverty on learning are clear, and Michigan must do more to level the playing field. One way to do this is to systematically increase access to services in schools. By making it easier to access human services, Michigan can support families and increase educational outcomes. Traditionally, schools provided education services, and human services were provided by the state and community-based partners. By collocating these services, strengthening collaborations between schools and community-based initiatives, and training and empowering some school personnel (such as principals or school counselors) to help families navigate and access human services, Michigan can respond to needs quickly and strategically. These collaborations allow experts in navigating and accessing services to support student's nonacademic needs, freeing up teachers and principals to focus on learning.¹¹⁰

One way to start doing this more systematically is to place a dedicated caseworker in every high-poverty school. To be successful, caseworkers must be trained in effective human service delivery, and continued funding should be contingent on outcomes such as improved attendance and falling dropout rates. This is a cost-effective and common-sense way to start bridging the divide between schools and community supports.¹¹¹ These caseworkers could be supported by a cadre of school personnel that are trained to help families understand the services available to them, complete the applications, and maintain their eligibility. This strategy would increase a school's ability to support families. This team could triage families' needs and assign the most difficult cases to highly trained caseworkers.

Michigan has already started moving services and supports out of government offices and into schools, where relationships can be built and services can be provided when they are needed most. Importantly, as Commissioners heard from leaders in the Upper Peninsula, need exists in rural areas as well as urban settings; many rural settings lack the support infrastructure often seen in denser regions of the state. With this knowledge and experience, Michigan can now work to expand access to caseworkers in schools statewide. Fortunately, as a state, we already make investments

in many of these services. This effort is not about duplicating existing services; rather, it is about making it easier to access the services families otherwise qualify for to help children and students focus on their education.

Potential Responsible Party

The Michigan Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, in collaboration with community-based human service organizations, must design and implement this strategy, including determining how to effectively deploy current resources and when additional resources are necessary.

5.2–Nurture Parent and Educator Collaboration

Michigan must invest in training and tools to help parents and educators across the P-12 spectrum partner more effectively to improve learning outcomes for children and students.

Details

Michigan must be much more intentional about nurturing parent engagement. With a diverse set of stakeholders, we must identify and evaluate existing parent supports and recognize and address gaps. This includes offering innovation grants to districts and community-based organizations to improve existing supports. In addition to supporting parents, Michigan must actively share best practices with educators and teach them to strategically embed parent engagement to achieve our state’s educational goals.

Rationale

Family engagement is a critical part of an effective education system. To fully leverage the benefits of parent engagement, however, Michigan must expand its definition of what it means to be an engaged parent. Research shows that attendance at school activities is important, but that setting high expectations, maintaining ongoing communication about school, and helping students develop good reading habits are far more critical.¹¹² Parents and schools need help understanding and operationalizing this broader view of engagement.

Parents need the knowhow and tools to actively engage in their child’s education, and residents in Southeast Michigan confirmed this during a listening tour event. Tools and knowledge can be gained through formal programming such as home visiting programs or parent university, where parents learn about topics such as developmental milestones and how to help with homework. Informal engagement, such as ongoing communication or evening events like homework nights, is also a crucial part of a broader parent engagement strategy. In general, all of this programming should be culturally and linguistically appropriate and aimed at improving school readiness and learning.

If we want schools to engage more effectively with parents, educators also need support and guidance about how to change current practices. In recent years, schools have started to offer more opportunities for parents through efforts like parent workshops or academies, but they have generally not offered the same type of development and support for staff.¹¹³ This void has been recognized nationally, and researchers have developed a framework for schools to revamp their parent engagement efforts.¹¹⁴ Michigan must now share this framework and provide support for implementing it, as well as other family engagement best practices, through the mechanism provided for in the second guiding principle. We recommend that this topic be one of the first researched and shared through the key strategies detailed in that part of the report.

Potential Responsible Party

MDE and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services should collaborate with school districts, early childhood providers, community-based organizations, and other critical stakeholders to implement this recommendation.

5.3—Create User-friendly Tools to Navigate Educational Options

Our state must create user-friendly tools to help parents and students make the best choices regarding education options—including early childhood, K–12, higher education, and workforce development.

Details

Michigan must create a comprehensive set of user-friendly tools to help students and parents select the educational option that best meets their needs. This must include an online tool to help parents identify their choices, define criteria, evaluate their options, and select a school. Critically, this online interface must include all the educational options that parents consider, including early childhood services and providers, K–12 options, higher education, and workforce training. In addition to access to quality information from the state, Michigan must create consumer protections that ensure that educational providers share accurate information about their services, programs, and outcomes.

Rationale

Publicly reporting data and aggregating information in a user-friendly way is a powerful tool to help parents and other critical stakeholders make sound educational decisions. Too often, online reporting interfaces are geared at complying with state or federal law rather than empowering constituents.¹¹⁵ For parents to be partners in education and informed consumers in our public education system, that must change.

The Data Quality Campaign suggests several criteria that together form a strong foundation for such a system. Data must be accurate, trustworthy, and safeguarded. It must be coordinated and connected across P–20 and workforce entities. It must meet the needs of all stakeholders—from parents and students to policymakers and the press. Finally, data must be easy to find, access, and understand.¹¹⁶ For example, as Commissioners heard during a listening tour event in Southeast Michigan, many parents only access the Internet through a mobile device, meaning that any online system must be mobile compatible.

In recent years, Michigan has taken significant, but insufficient, steps to improve access to quality information and data. MI School Data aggregates data across P–20 and is a powerful tool for savvy users. Many parents, however, are unaware the tool exists and struggle to make sense of the often-confusing data presentations. Parents can also search for child care options using Great Start to Quality which identifies providers in their area and provides basic information. This is a wonderful starting point, but again is underused and provides an incomplete picture due to a lack of provider participation. These platforms may prove to be a strong foundation for the additional work necessary to create the tools that parents want and need.

Accurate information is an important foundation, but Michigan must do more to help parents make the best educational choice for their child. One important way to do this is to prohibit the use of gifts—such as gift cards, computers, and groceries—to entice parents and children to enroll in a school. These gifts create perverse incentives and too often ask our state’s neediest families to choose between the best educational option and extra room in their family budget.

Potential Responsible Party

MDE and the Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI) should lead efforts to create a blueprint for an online comparison tool that reflects available data and the needs of diverse stakeholders. Stakeholders involved in this effort should include individuals who will use the tool (including parents, students, and the general public) as well as education providers (representing early childhood providers, traditional public schools, charter schools, community colleges, universities, and others). The State must then identify how to create and maintain the online tool and ensure there is quality information for all parents and consumers of educational information.

Photo taken at Starfish Family Services in Inkster

