



Guiding Principle 7:



**Ensure Access to
High-quality Learning
Environments**

Michigan must ensure that all students have access to high-quality, innovative, welcoming, and safe learning environments equipped with the technology necessary for teaching and learning 21st century skills and achieving high-performance standards.

Photo taken at Schoolcraft College in Livonia



Rationale

When providing a high-quality education, place and facilities matter. For optimal learning to occur, schools must be clean, safe, and welcoming. Students and teachers need access to 21st century technology for students to learn 21st century skills. School facilities affect student health, behavior, engagement, and learning.¹¹⁷ For teachers, facilities affect teacher recruitment and retention. Further, the quality of facilities is a statement about the value of education as well as the value we place on students and their learning. Michigan provides state-level support for facilities at community colleges and state universities through its capital outlay process. The state does not, however, provide any direct funding to local school districts for facility costs. Michigan cannot expect all students to succeed but then relegate its most disadvantaged students to its lowest-quality facilities. Instead, Michigan needs to send a message to students that they matter by educating all students in safe, high-quality learning spaces. High-quality learning environments are important not just for K–12 students but also for young children, college students, and adult students.

What does a 21st century Michigan look like?

Students and teachers in every community have access to the tools they need to teach and learn 21st century skills. All students feel safe and welcome at school, and urban and rural parents do not feel that they need to send their children to suburban schools for them to have access to modern, safe, and technologically advanced facilities. In addition, Michigan recognizes that learning occurs not just in the classroom, but also at home, in libraries, and in other community settings. Student access to the technology needed for learning does not end at the classroom door but is available to them wherever they need it. To achieve this, Michigan has implemented capital funding reforms, and all students have access to high-quality physical environments and technology.

What does Michigan look like now?

Currently, 540 traditional individual districts across the state are responsible for funding,

building, and maintaining schools. Districts fund capital expenses, such as constructing new buildings or updating current facilities, by asking voters to approve a local millage. Michigan's wealthiest districts can generate more than five times as much revenue per-pupil for a given millage rate than Michigan's poorest districts.

While Michigan's 1994 school finance reforms addressed inequality in operations spending, it ignored capital funding. As a result, wealthier suburban districts have significantly better facilities than poorer urban and rural districts, and Michigan is a bottom-ten state in terms of equity in capital funding.¹¹⁸ Many states address these challenges by assisting local districts with funding, but Michigan is one of just 11 states that does not provide any capital funds to local districts. In addition, public school academies in Michigan have no means to raise revenues for capital costs and must use operational revenues to fund and maintain spaces.

Measuring Success

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

- Is school facility spending more equitable?
- Do all students have access to the technology needed to learn 21st century skills?
- Are all schools safe?

Key Strategies

7.1 Assist poorer communities with funding for school facilities

7.2 Support public school academies with funding for school facilities

7.1—Assist Poorer Communities with Funding for School Facilities

Guarantee a minimum yield per mill to help traditional school districts in poorer communities afford high-quality school facilities.

Details

Michigan should provide state aid to local school districts levying property taxes for facilities to ensure that every district is guaranteed a minimum yield for each mill raised. On average, one mill of property taxes raises \$216 per student, but this yield varies widely by district, ranging from less than \$100 per student in the state's poorest communities to over \$500 per student in the state's wealthiest communities. Michigan should strive to ensure that every district can raise at least the statewide average of \$216 per student for every mill levied by supplementing local property taxes with state funds.¹¹⁹

It is critical that limited taxpayer funds be spent wisely. Therefore, the state should establish a process for evaluating the need for capital projects, and the state should only provide state funds to districts that can demonstrate need. Schools that are unable to demonstrate need could fund projects through a local millage if approved by local electors.

Rationale

Michigan is one of 11 states that provides no support to local districts for capital outlay.¹²⁰ As a result, the playing field is highly uneven. Wealthier suburban districts can finance facilities at much lower tax rates than poorer urban and rural districts. Taxpayers in the Shepherd School District would need a tax rate five times as high as taxpayers in the Bloomfield Hills School District to raise the same amount on a per-pupil basis. Since poorer students generally live in communities with lower property values, districts educating economically disadvantaged students are often doing so in lower-quality facilities, making success more difficult.

Facilities matter. They are important to attracting and retaining teachers, and they affect health, behavior, engagement, and learning of students.¹²¹ Facilities also make a statement to students that the community values their education. For all students to have access to high-quality infrastructure and learning environments, the state will need to support infrastructure spending in low-property-wealth communities.

Potential Responsible Party

The Legislature must change state law to implement this policy.

7.2–Support Public School Academies with Funding for School Facilities

Details

Michigan should provide direct funding to PSAs to help pay for purchasing or renovating facilities provided that there is demonstrated need for the project. Charter schools and their education management organizations will need to meet financial transparency requirements to be eligible for state funds.

It is critical that limited taxpayer funds be spent wisely. Therefore, the state should establish a process for evaluating the need for capital projects, and the State should only provide state funds for purchasing or renovating facilities to charter schools that can demonstrate a project is needed. The building will be property of taxpayers and the state would recover any investment if the charter school were to close. Charter schools that are unable to demonstrate need could fund capital projects using private funds or other available funds.

Rationale

Traditional school districts in Michigan can ask local voters to support facility and infrastructure costs through local property taxes. This option is not available to PSAs, which instead pay for facilities with their foundation allowance, donations, and grants. Providing PSAs with support for facilities costs will allow them to direct additional funds into the classroom. Safeguards will be put in place to ensure that the funds are spent properly and that state funds are only used to support construction and renovation projects in communities that demonstrate high need.

Potential Responsible Party

The Legislature must change state law to implement this policy.