

Our Opportunity:

Lessons Learned from High-performing States and Nations

Evidence from high-performing systems gives us hope. There are states and nations that have faced similar challenges to Michigan and have been much more successful in educating all children to a high level. The Commission hosted speakers and reviewed literature to better understand what high-performing systems do differently. Here is what we learned must be included in Michigan's plan for the future.

Education Strategies that Work

Build a Comprehensive, Aligned Education Strategy

Every speaker and expert we encountered in our work was clear—there is no single strategy that will advance our state. We must abandon a piecemeal strategy and instead implement and sustain a series of fundamental changes to create the system our students and state need for the 21st century.⁶¹ These changes do not require us to close our existing systems and start new; many other systems have advanced from poor to good and good to great, and they did so by building on and improving existing systems. It does, however, require us to stop implementing disjointed strategies and instead create a shared vision for the future and shared strategies for achieving that goal.

Develop Excellent Educators

In high-performing systems, educators are respected and supported, and leaders commit to every student having an effective teacher.⁶² Before being accepted to preparation programs, educators meet demanding standards. They participate in rigorous subject matter training and complete apprenticeships

with master teachers which help ensure that they are well-prepared on their first day in the classroom. As educators progress through their career, they are well-supported and have opportunities to grow. High-performing systems have also restructured their school days to allow educators more time to collaborate with peers and hone their practice.⁶³

Set Rigorous Academic Standards for All Students

Lessons from a range of high-performing systems highlight the need to set and maintain the highest standards and expectations for our students.⁶⁴ We must have internationally benchmarked standards that articulate academic and noncognitive skills (sometimes called 21st century skills). Top performers align their assessments to these standards and ensure that assessments are designed to measure the complex skills their standards demand.⁶⁵

Create Multiple Pathways

High standards do not mean there is only one path to success. High-performing systems offer multiple pathways for students, and they work hard to ensure that the requirements at the end of one stage of education match the requirements for the beginning of the next.⁶⁶

One pathway is career and technical education and training. In high-performing systems, career and technical education has rigorous academic requirements. These programs are taught by highly trained educators, and they include apprenticeship components. Schools work closely with employers to ensure that students are well-prepared when they enter the workforce. In addition, students are educated so that they possess the academic skills to move between career education and college preparatory paths as their goals and interests evolve.⁶⁷

Invest Early

A key element of world-class education systems is investing in what happens to children before they begin formal schooling, even as early as prenatally.

Other countries implement this principle differently depending on their local needs, but all are working to ensure that children arrive at school ready to learn. Policy options include expanding access to quality medical and dental care, investing in early learning efforts such as preschool and child care, and improving service integration for families in need.⁶⁸

Recognize and Fight Inequality

High-performing systems also recognize that academic outcomes vary dramatically by race, ethnicity, income, disability status, and more. While some may blame students or parents for these achievement gaps, research suggests that society systematically expects less of poor and minority students and gives them fewer tools for success. Low-income and minority students are more likely to be assigned less experienced and less effective teachers. They are less likely to be enrolled in rigorous courses, and they are more likely to be suspended from schools. High-performing systems do not tolerate this disparity, and they actively

implement policies that recognize and address these inequalities.⁶⁹

For example, high-performing systems provide more resources to at-risk students to help them achieve at high levels. Most high-performing systems assign more teachers to support at-risk students and some provide incentives for teachers to work in needier schools.⁷⁰

Set Clear Goals and Measure What Matters

Accountability systems play an important role in motivating and monitoring change in high-performing systems. Good accountability policy prioritizes improvement for all students in all schools, including traditional public, cyber, and charter schools, community colleges, and universities. It sets clear goals and communicates these goals plainly with students, families, educators, and the broader community. Data is shared widely and used to inform practice. When a group of students is struggling, immediate action is expected and educators have access to evidence-based practices to better support learning. Throughout a strong accountability system, parents are partners—and their role in improvement is critical.⁷¹

High-performing systems also recognize the limitations of accountability. They recognize that accountability systems alone do not produce learning, and they fuse thoughtful accountability policy with a series of reforms that improve teaching and learning.⁷²

Essential Cultural Elements

Value Postsecondary Education

High expectations go beyond creating rigorous content standards. As a society, we must foster a state culture that sees postsecondary education as the primary path to prosperity. We must value academic success and expect students to put in the hard work required to succeed. We cannot just set these expectations for our own children. Our state benefits as more residents pursue postsecondary credentials. Data are clear—everyone can succeed at high levels.⁷³ High-performing systems recognize that different individuals will require different types and levels of resources, but they are committed to the belief that everyone can master the skills and knowledge necessary to be prosperous.⁷⁴



Photo taken at Escanaba Senior High School in Escanaba

Be Honest About Current Performance

As the previous section outlined, our current performance is subpar. It is easy to look for measures that assure us that our collective education performance is acceptable or to point to successful schools and districts and claim that our current system is working. We must

fight this urge and be honest about where we stand now, and we cannot simply say our state is in crisis. We must not accept mediocrity. We must energize our communities to understand that their schools can and must do better. As researchers regularly document, parents tend to believe their own school is doing fine, but the system at large is underperforming. High-performing systems challenge that notion in communities and capitol buildings. They are willing to face challenging facts. Several other statewide efforts to improve education started with a report like this one where residents were willing to say enough is enough. We can do better.⁷⁵

Do Not Accept Excuses

In addition to being honest, high-performing systems do not accept excuses. Many states and nations face challenges similar to Michigan's. We cannot tolerate excuses for poor performance. We must reject them now and we must have the courage to do so as we implement this plan for the future. Education performance is not about differences in children and students. It is about what we do in schools.⁷⁶

When comparing ourselves to high-performing states and nations, we too often explain away the differences, saying those nations do not educate all students, or they are homogeneous, or their cultures are too different from ours to suggest opportunities to improve. We must reject that thinking.⁷⁷

We need not look to other states and nations for evidence that all students can achieve at high levels. The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) identifies schools that are beating the odds. These are schools where students face incredible challenges, but outperform schools with similar demographics.⁷⁸ In the 2015–2016 school year, MDE identified over 100 schools that met their definition.⁷⁹

Persevere

Change takes time. Leaders in our state must have a sustained commitment to improving our education systems, and they must commit to implementing a shared vision over time. Implementing the reforms in this report will require significant changes in classrooms and schools across the state. We must give teachers and school leaders the time and support needed to change their practices, and they must have confidence that state policy will not shift midcourse. This is not to say we may not need to adapt, rather that we must commit to a steadfast focus on a shared set of policies to underpin our efforts. For example, Massachusetts has been implementing a consistent reform agenda since 1993. This sustained, shared commitment has helped to propel the state to consistently rank among the top states in the nation.⁸⁰

Forward Progress in Michigan

We are not the first to articulate and understand the challenge facing our state. While there is significant cause for concern, we are energized by Michiganders' commitment to improving outcomes for students. In classrooms from Harbor Beach to Grand Rapids and Warren to Escanaba, educators are helping students improve. Commissioners had the opportunity to visit with educators in Detroit, Grand Rapids, Traverse City, and the Upper Peninsula to hear firsthand what educators are doing to improve instruction and learning. At the Grand Rapids Public Museum School, strong partnerships between community, businesses, and school leaders are expanding opportunities for students. At Voyageur Academy in Detroit, educators are setting high standards and clear accountability metrics to improve outcomes for at-risk students. At Traverse City West Senior High School, educators are integrating 21st

century skills into instruction to help students be more prepared for postsecondary opportunities. Through a virtual event, Commissioners connected with educators and residents from the Upper Peninsula to hear about challenges facing rural schools, new programs in competency-based learning, and the benefits of a balanced calendar. These are only a few examples of how committed educators are improving outcomes and opportunities for young Michiganders.



Photo taken at Baldwin High School in Baldwin

Outside of the classroom, policymakers thoughtfully explored many policy options that high-performing systems embrace. We have set higher standards for educators and have instituted evaluation systems to ensure they get the feedback they need to improve. Michigan has dramatically increased preschool funding and expanded support for pediatric dentistry. We have adopted rigorous standards and debated the most effective assessment tools. Our state has acted on troubling early reading data—passing higher expectations for schools and students and creating an ongoing literacy commission to spearhead statewide efforts. Students are participating in extracurricular programs like FIRST Robotics in record numbers where they can practice problem

solving and teamwork. We have increased access to career and technical education and promoted technical arts as a viable path to prosperity. Students now have more access to college courses during high school through early middle college programs, and when students enter postsecondary it is easier than ever to earn credits at one institution and transfer them to another. In our community colleges, there is an increased focus on skilled trades, and community colleges can now offer more bachelor's degrees. University leaders convene annually at the State Universities Summit, and partnerships between high schools, community colleges, and universities are growing. More universities are engaging with the business community to offer internships, and performance funding efforts have been implemented.

None of these policies are perfect, and they alone are not the recipe for success. We are energized because these policies prove that many Michiganders understand the challenges we face, and they are willing to take steps to improve.



Photos taken at Greenville Public Schools in Greenville