

**Third-Grade Reading Workgroup Report to Governor Rick  
Snyder**

**June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015**

## I. Introduction

On March 1, 2015, Governor Snyder created the Third-Grade Reading Workgroup (Workgroup) to analyze Michigan’s reading proficiency at the third-grade level (reading proficiency), and to suggest policy to improve this necessary element of future academic and career success.<sup>1</sup>

For the past twelve years, Michigan’s reading proficiency has been steadily declining, while almost every other state has improved.<sup>1</sup> To understand this problem and address it effectively, the Workgroup reviewed data and programs from various states, and interviewed teachers, reading intervention specialists, principals, superintendents, professors of early literacy development, and policy experts who have all had significant positive impacts on reading proficiency despite challenges posed by child poverty. These schools, districts, and states are achieving early literacy using similar diagnostic-driven instruction and intervention methods which are individualized for each student (diagnostic-driven).

National test results indicate that more than two-thirds of Michigan students fail to demonstrate third grade proficiency on standardized reading tests. Michigan must do better and should strive to be the national leader in early literacy by 2025.

## II. The Scope of the Problem

Currently, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 69% of Michigan students are **NOT** proficient in reading at the beginning of fourth grade.<sup>2,3</sup> This deficit represents a troubling future for our students and for Michigan. Unfortunately, the reading proficiency gap remains as students advance through the educational system.<sup>4</sup> In fourth grade, schools shift gears from teaching students how to read, to relying on students’ literacy to

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<sup>1</sup> Amber Arellano, STALLED TO SOARING: MICHIGAN’S PATH TO EDUCATIONAL RECOVERY, 2014 STATE OF MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT, 6 (The Education Trust—Midwest, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Dept. of Education, Institute of Educational Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, AVERAGE SCORES AND ACHIEVEMENT-LEVEL RESULTS IN NAEP READING FOR FOURTH-GRADE PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS, BY STATE/JURISDICTION (2013).

<sup>3</sup> The National Assessment of Educational Progress (‘NAEP’) says that “Fourth-grade students performing at *Proficient* level should be able to integrate and interpret texts and apply their understanding of the text to draw conclusions and make evaluations.” Definition from NAEP Reading Achievement Levels by Grade, 2009-2011 Achievement Level Descriptions, Grade 4.

<sup>4</sup> JK McNamara, M. Scissons, and N. Gutknecht “A Longitudinal Study of Kindergarten Children at Risk for Reading Disabilities: The Poor Really are Getting Poorer” 44(5), 421–430, JOURNAL OF LEARNING DISABILITIES, (September/October 2011).

teach science, math, history, civics, geography and other subjects.<sup>5</sup> Students who do not read proficiently by fourth grade are not likely to catch up.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, there is a strong connection between third-grade literacy and high-school graduation.<sup>7</sup> Students not proficient in reading at third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school on time.<sup>8</sup> Adults without a high school diploma are far more likely to end up in prison, have difficulty finding work, receive lower wages, and live in poverty.<sup>9</sup>

Many of the devastating effects of students' poor literacy will fall on these students themselves and on their children, perpetuating the effects of poverty. Michigan and its citizens will be affected as well. Each high school dropout costs our state more than \$292,000 in lost revenue and higher social costs.<sup>10</sup> Employers have already started and will continue to relocate to other states and countries where they can find the talent they need to grow.<sup>11</sup>

Until recently, many Michigan residents were not fully aware of the scope and severity of Michigan's literacy problem. In fact, Michigan's standards suggest that 70% of our students are achieving third-grade reading proficiency.<sup>12</sup> National data, based on higher national standards, tells us the complete opposite, that only 31% of our children are nationally proficient in reading at third grade.<sup>13</sup> When we compare Michigan to other states using this same national test, Michigan is far behind other states, in 40<sup>th</sup> place, and continues to fall behind; Michigan is one of only five states to lose ground in reading proficiency from 2003-2013, while every other state

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<sup>5</sup> Donald Hernandez, DOUBLE JEOPARDY: HOW THIRD GRADE READING SKILLS AND POVERTY INFLUENCE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 4 (2012)

<sup>6</sup> National Governor's Association, A GOVERNOR'S GUIDE TO EARLY LITERACY: GETTING ALL STUDENTS READING BY THIRD GRADE, 3, 7 (October 2013).

<sup>7</sup> National Governor's Association, Report, *supra* at 6.

<sup>8</sup> DOUBLE JEOPARDY, *supra* at 5.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Sum, et. al, THE CONSEQUENCES OF DROPPING OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL, Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University (2009)

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> George Erickcek, et. al., A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT AND FUTURE TALENT NEEDS FOR THE TALENT 2025 REGION, 29 (W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2013)

<sup>12</sup> MI School Data Dashboard & Accountability Scorecard, Student Outcomes "Students Proficient in Reading at the End of Third Grade" available at [www.mischooldata.org/DistrictSchoolProfiles/ReportCard/EducationDashboard.aspx](http://www.mischooldata.org/DistrictSchoolProfiles/ReportCard/EducationDashboard.aspx)

<sup>13</sup> *Supra*, nt. 2.

improved.<sup>14</sup> Michigan must make dramatic changes to our early literacy system to fix this serious problem.

### **III. The Bridge to Success**

Michigan can and should have the highest national early reading proficiency in 2025.<sup>15</sup> By 2020, Michigan should be the most improved state in early literacy, and be in the top ten states overall. These are lofty goals, but illiteracy is not fair to our children or state, and it is not what Michigan parents or taxpayers expect. We can only achieve these objectives through relentless positive action, supported by a firm understanding of the root causes of Michigan’s literacy problem and how programs in Michigan and other states have succeeded.

Research indicates a very strong correlation between a student’s reading proficiency and socio-economic status.<sup>16</sup> “Students living in poverty are less likely to reach proficiency than their more affluent classmates.”<sup>17</sup> However, demographics is not destiny.<sup>18</sup> This Workgroup examined exceptional schools where students are significantly outperforming their socio-economic peers to discover what they had in common.

Each program’s success began with literary instruction focused on individual strengths and weaknesses in the “Five Building Blocks of Reading.” Research shows that students reach literacy by mastering these five building blocks: (1) phonics; (2) phonemic awareness; (3) fluency; (4) vocabulary; and (5) comprehension and general content knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Many of these programs also use the following foundational elements within a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) to help their students master these building blocks, and to support long-term commitment to effective reading instruction:

- The frequent use by a properly trained teacher of research-based screening and diagnostic instruments for each student, along with diagnostic-driven instruction and interventions;

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<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> As measured by Fourth-grade Reading results on the 2025 NAEP.

<sup>16</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *OUR KIDS: THE AMERICAN DREAM IN CRISIS*, 19, 29, 72 (2015); Sean F. Reardon, *THE WIDENING ACHIEVEMENT GAP BETWEEN THE RICH AND THE POOR: NEW EVIDENCE AND POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS*, 3 (2011). See also, *READING NOW NETWORK FIELD STUDY REPORT*, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> *READING NOW NETWORK FIELD STUDY REPORT*, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> See e.g., National Reading Panel, *PUT READING FIRST: KINDERGARTEN THROUGH GRADE 3, THE RESEARCH BUILDING BLOCKS FOR TEACHING CHILDREN TO READ*, (National Institute for Literacy).

- At least 90 minutes of daily reading instruction and focused reading time for every K-3 student, with an intervention system that allows struggling students to receive targeted literacy interventions;
- A passionate and engaged leader who supports diagnostic measurements of each student's strengths and weaknesses, and instruction and intervention targeted to each student's needs;
- Teachers with strong content knowledge, vocabulary, and thorough training in research-based diagnostic tools, instruction, and interventions. These teachers faithfully use these techniques to help their students succeed.

These findings are deeply interrelated. To obtain success statewide, Michigan must find a way to replicate these diagnostic-driven practices with fidelity in every school. Notably, each successful Michigan school or district we consulted has implemented this effective model with current state and federal funding. There is not a strong correlation between public spending and educational outcomes, and money alone will not improve Michigan's third-grade reading problem.<sup>20</sup> Currently, Michigan's spending is in the top ten among all states, taking personal income into account.<sup>21</sup> Florida spends \$2,000 less per student and is 50<sup>th</sup> nationally in spending, by this same metric.<sup>22</sup> Regardless, Michigan's results are far worse than Florida's: Michigan is tied for 40<sup>th</sup> in third-grade reading, while Florida is eighth.<sup>23</sup> Florida has accomplished this with a much larger at-risk population: 58.6% of Florida's students are at risk, compared with 48.6% in Michigan.<sup>24</sup> Florida spends less, has more children in poverty, yet they outperform us.

Comprehensive statewide strategies, modeled after successful programs, are needed to help all of our students learn to read. The best way for the legislature and governor to encourage the implementation of necessary reform in Michigan is to incentivize a comprehensive set of strategies using targeted funding, and requiring districts to implement them to access these funds.

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<sup>20</sup> Reading Now Network Report, *supra*.

<sup>21</sup> United States Census Bureau, Government Division Reports, PUBLIC EDUCATION FINANCES: 2010, Table 12.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* See also, Governing Data, EDUCATION SPENDING PER STUDENT BY STATE, (Data collected from U.S. Census Bureau) available at <http://www.governing.com/gov-data/education-data/state-education-spending-per-pupil-data.html>

<sup>23</sup> *Supra* nt. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Kids Count Data Center, STUDENTS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE IN FREE/REDUCED LUNCH (Data collected from Florida & Michigan Depts. of Ed.) available at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/>

Literacy is within reach for every Michigan student, even though many students are currently at risk of falling behind. The five key strategies of this comprehensive plan will make sure that every child receives effective diagnostic-driven instruction and interventions so that all of our students can learn how to read.

**Strategy 1: Give every student the research-supported diagnostic and screening instruments, instruction, and interventions necessary for success.**

**A. Provide diagnostic and screening instruments in every classroom (K-3) to measure each student’s strengths and weaknesses, accompanied by targeted literacy instruction and interventions by a qualified teacher.**

Diagnostic and screening instruments are used to measure each student’s strengths and weaknesses on a regular basis, and to provide data that properly trained teachers can use to target instruction. Targeted instruction and intervention has a huge impact when it is used effectively.<sup>25</sup>

We recommend that every district use a diagnostic/screening instrument for every K-3 student. The Michigan Department of Education should be required to provide a menu of acceptable diagnostic/screening instruments, so that districts or schools that are already successfully using a diagnostic/screening instrument can continue using what works. Any diagnostic/screening instrument selected should be a product that has been widely and successfully used for diagnostic-driven instruction.

Diagnostic-driven methods require specific complementary instruction and intervention techniques. Some teachers in Michigan are currently using these tools without sufficient training in how to use resulting data. Others lack adequate clinical experience in individually targeted instruction and intervention techniques. Strategy 2 of this proposal will ensure that every Michigan educator is equipped to use diagnostic-driven teaching methods.

**B. Provide a reading period of at least 90 minutes per day for all students and additional instructional time for students who are struggling.**

Nearly all diagnostic-driven programs we examined dedicate a minimum of 90 minutes per day to reading instruction and focused reading time. These programs also provide additional

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<sup>25</sup> Reading Now Network, Field Study Report, Finding #2; Ron French, “Smartest Kids: In Tennessee, an epic turnaround” in Bridge Magazine (September 9, 2012); Ron French, “Smartest Kids: In Florida, Early reading and frequent testing bring results, and pushback” in Bridge Magazine (September 30, 2014).

instruction time for students who are struggling to read. These reforms make sense; students learn better focusing on one task without distractions or interruptions.<sup>26</sup>

We recommend that every district provide at least 90 minutes per day of reading instruction and focused reading time for each K-3 student, with additional targeted instruction time for students who need extra help, so that every student receives enough focused attention to succeed at reading.

**C. Provide a certified reading specialist and literacy coach to support every student and teacher.**

Many students will learn how to read proficiently during the focused reading period; some students will require additional interventions to reach proficiency.

To support these interventions, every ISD should have at least one literacy coach. ISDs with larger numbers and percentages of at-risk K-3 students should have additional literacy coaches. Literacy coaches will train all K-3 teachers how to effectively use the school's diagnostic-driven method throughout the year.

To further support this targeted instruction for our students, every district should have at least one certified reading specialist. Districts with higher numbers and percentages of at-risk children should have additional reading specialists. Certified reading specialists will provide interventions and targeted instruction for every student who needs additional reading support.

We recommend that each district hire an appropriate number of additional reading specialists and each ISD hire an appropriate number of additional literacy coaches, with provided targeted funding.

**Strategy 2: Provide every educator with training to use diagnostic-driven methods with knowledge and fidelity.**

**A. Provide teacher candidates with the skills and training to effectively teach reading and use diagnostic-driven instruction and interventions.**

Our teacher candidates are the future of Michigan's education system. Michigan must ensure all future educators are well prepared to teach early literacy. Every future teacher needs

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<sup>26</sup> See generally, Reynol Junco & Shelia Cotten, No A 4 U: The Relationship between Multitasking and Academic Performance, in Vol 59, Issue 2, Computers and Education, (September 2012).

more hands-on practice teaching reading, as well as instruction and clinical experience using diagnostic-driven methods. Michigan must ensure that every teacher has the necessary skills and content-knowledge to effectively teach, as well as developmentally appropriate training.

We recommend that Michigan increase the required clinical early literacy instruction credit hours from 6 to 12 hours, including 6 credit hours in diagnostic-driven teaching methods. In addition, Michigan should have a clinical internship program for every teacher candidate, to provide all teacher candidates with the skills and experience necessary to successfully use diagnostic instruments and instruction. This clinical internship should combine instruction in diagnostic/screening instruments with diagnostic-driven teaching experience, under the supervision of a literacy coach or reading specialist who will provide feedback and further development. As an example, Michigan could provide this training following the same GRPS Summer Literacy Pilot model mentioned in Strategy 2(B).

We recommend that Michigan change its teacher certification test to predictively measure teaching skills and basic content knowledge and vocabulary necessary for teachers. We recommend that Michigan also develop a PreK-3 literacy endorsement, which requires additional instruction and clinical experience in diagnostic-driven techniques, and encourage schools and districts to prioritize this endorsement when hiring elementary teachers.

**B. Provide teachers with training and skills to effectively use diagnostic-driven methods.**

Successful programs and states train their teachers to effectively use diagnostic-driven instruction and interventions with dramatic results.<sup>27</sup> The ultimate success of Michigan’s literacy reform depends on whether teachers are able to use diagnostic/screening instruments to inform and target their instruction.

One example of how Michigan could provide needed teacher training is the Summer Literacy Program pilot currently conducted in West Michigan at three elementary schools with serious deficits in reading proficiency. This program provides three days of diagnostic-driven training for K-5 teachers with a highly qualified literacy coach/reading specialist. For the next

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<sup>27</sup> Ron French, “Smartest Kids: In Tennessee, an Epic Turnaround” in Bridge Magazine (September 9, 2014), Ron French, “Smartest Kids: In Florida, Early Reading and Frequent Testing bring Results, and Pushback” in Bridge Magazine (September 30, 2014), National Governor’s Association, “A Governor’s Guide to Early Literacy”, Action 4 (2013).



four weeks, these teachers work with students entering grades 1-4 who have low reading proficiency. These teachers also receive a few hours of coaching and support each week from the same literacy coach/reading specialist, in the classroom, which allows every teacher to master the skills required to be an effective early literacy instructor.

We recommend that Michigan ensure **all** teachers (K-12) receive similar training and clinical experience to renew their license to teach. Every elementary teacher should receive this training as soon as possible.

**C. Provide school building leaders with leadership skills and early literacy training.**

Principals and superintendents have a difficult job. Many of these leaders had to learn on the job to manage our schools without formal training. Successful programs have a passionate building leader with a clear vision for their school's success, based on helping their teachers use diagnostic-driven methods to drive reading proficiency.<sup>28</sup> Michigan needs more leaders with these qualities.

We recommend that all elementary school principals and superintendents receive leadership development to renew their certification. This leadership program will allow highly successful education leaders to share their experiences with other education leaders and promote leadership skills. We also recommend that all principals and superintendents receive instruction in early literacy and how to support diagnostic-driven methods, to renew their certification.

**D. Promote best-practices research and resources.**

The "What Works Clearinghouse," is a federally funded early literacy resource. In addition, Michigan Virtual University's "LearnPort," could become a good, early literacy online teacher learning portal. The Michigan Department of Education should promote these resources and other similar research-based resources, so more people have access to current early literacy research.

**Strategy 3: Give every parent the information and support needed to develop early literacy skills, to parent effectively, and to provide adequate home-supports for every student.**

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<sup>28</sup> Reading Now Network, Field Report, Finding #3.

In order to effectively help our children succeed, we must engage and support their parents and family.<sup>29</sup> Children’s development during their first few years has an enduring impact on their educational and vocational outcomes.<sup>30</sup> Early interventions, including home visits, have many lasting positive impacts, including improved maternal and infant health, higher levels of school readiness, and stronger parent-child relationships.<sup>31</sup> Michigan must provide parents with training to promote their children’s physical and social health and early literacy skills. We recommend Michigan allocate additional targeted funding to help developing infants and toddlers.

The learning gap between students in different socio-economic groups develops long before children arrive in kindergarten.<sup>32</sup> To address this gap, Michigan should develop a parent education pilot program, modeled on Minnesota’s Early Childhood Family Education program. Minnesota touts this program as part of its success in early literacy.<sup>33</sup> We recommend Michigan allocate targeted funding to pilot the parent education program in each Prosperity District.

**Strategy 4: Implement K-3 smart promotion to ensure struggling students succeed.**

We recommend that Michigan adopt a smart promotion policy to provide each K-3 student, one or more grade levels behind in reading proficiency, with additional time and interventions at their current grade reading level, while moving to the next grade level in each subject the student is proficient in.

Parents will be immediately notified that their student is behind grade-level, students will receive intensive targeted interventions to get back to grade-level proficiency, and students will

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<sup>29</sup> Engaged Families, Effective Pre-K: State Policies Bolster Student Success, The Pew Center on the States, June 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2010). The foundations of lifelong health are built in early childhood; Available at [http://developingchild.harvard.edu/library/reports\\_and\\_working\\_papers/foundations-of-lifelong-health/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/library/reports_and_working_papers/foundations-of-lifelong-health/); and American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (2008). Roles and responsibilities of speech-language pathologists in early intervention: Technical report. Available at <http://www.asha.org/docs/html/TR2008-00290.html>

<sup>31</sup> National Governor’s Association, “A Governor’s Guide to Early Literacy”, 25 (October 2013), and Sarah Avellar et al., Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness Review: Executive Summary, 10, 12 (Mathmatica Policy Research, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Lisa Klein & Jane Knitzer, “Promoting Effective Early Learning: What Every Policymaker and Educator Should Know (January 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Ron French, “Smartest Kids: Teaching starts early with special focus on the poor in Minnesota” in Bridge Magazine (September 16, 2014).

have a number of opportunities to demonstrate proficiency throughout the school year. Students will be able to advance to the next grade level as soon as they reach proficiency.

In Florida, a similar policy was implemented in 2002. Since then, Florida has measured the difference between children who received this intervention, and those who did not: “on average, the students who were remediated did better academically, in both the short and long term, than those who [were not remediated]... The benefits ...were still apparent and substantial through the seventh grade.”<sup>34</sup> In Michigan, for example, one district implemented a similar policy alongside comprehensive education reform. Between 2012 and 2013, the district more than doubled its fourth graders’ proficiency in reading on the MEAP, and tripled proficiency in math and writing, even though 85% of these students are at-risk.<sup>35</sup>

It is inconsistent with our goal—to help every Michigan child succeed—to allow any child to fall behind by one or more grade levels. Accordingly, Michigan must strive for zero children who need the additional grade-level time and interventions provided by smart promotion.

Although not all successful programs have used smart promotion to help their most at-risk students, there is clear evidence that it helps students who are severely behind.<sup>36</sup> We recommend that Michigan require every district to implement the smart promotion reform, to ensure that every student reaches literacy.

**Strategy 5: Provide Michigan with accurate data about how our students and schools are performing in growth and proficiency compared to other states, and an annual report on our progress towards the highest early reading proficiency in the nation.**

**A. Provide a Kindergarten initial diagnostic instrument.**

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<sup>34</sup> Marcus Winters, THE BENEFITS OF FLORIDA’S TEST-BASED PROMOTION SYSTEM, No. 68 Civic Report April 2012, Executive Summary.

<sup>35</sup> Bridge Magazine & Center for Michigan, “4th grade Proficiency in Math, Reading and Writing for 2011-2013 in Beecher Community School District”, available in 2014 Academic State Champs Database, Performance by District at [http://bridgemi.com/2015/02/caspio\\_highcharts/](http://bridgemi.com/2015/02/caspio_highcharts/)

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*; Marcus Winters, THE BENEFITS OF FLORIDA’S TEST-BASED PROMOTION SYSTEM, No. 68 Civic Report April 2012, Executive Summary; *See also generally*, Jay Greene & Marcus Winters, Revisiting Grade Retention: An Evaluation of Florida’s Test-Based Promotion Policy (2007); Jennifer Li, Ending Social Promotion in New York City Public Schools without Leaving Children Behind, (Rand Education, 2009); and Foundation for Excellence in Education, K-3 READING: FAST FACTS, (2015).

Michigan has already begun to adopt a kindergarten initial diagnostic instrument for all students starting Kindergarten. This is a necessary tool, which will allow educators and parents to immediately know each student's strengths and weaknesses, and use targeted interventions and instruction to help students who are behind catch up.

**B. Provide a currently existing, research-based, interim measure of academic progress for K-3.**

We recommend that Michigan adopt a valid, research-based interim measure of academic progress in growth and proficiency for all students in grades K-3. This instrument will provide data that teachers can use to monitor and help their students. Michigan should adopt one instrument which has been successfully used by schools in Michigan and across the country, so that we can accurately compare our performance across the country.

**C. Establish an independent oversight commission.**

We recommend that Governor Snyder establish an independent early literacy commission. This commission shall provide an annual report to Michigan's Governor, Legislature and Department of Education on our performance as we work to become the national leader in literacy. This commission should use the aggregated data from the K-3 growth and proficiency referenced in Strategy 5 (B) to evaluate how Michigan's reforms are working, and advise Michigan on needed course-corrections and useful adaptations.

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<sup>1</sup>Governor Snyder appointed John C. Kennedy to chair the Third-Grade Reading Workgroup. Governor Snyder also appointed Sen. Goeff Hansen, Sen. Phil Pavlov, Sen. Hoon-Yung Hopgood, Rep. Amanda Price, Rep. Tim Kelly, Rep. Adam Zemke, John Roberts, Robbie Jameson, Darin Ackerman, Karen McPhee, and Tyler Sawher to serve as members of the Workgroup.