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STATE OF MICHIGAN  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
LANSING



THOMAS D. WATKINS, JR.  
SUPERINTENDENT OF  
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

November 26, 2002

**MEMORANDUM**

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Thomas D. Watkins, Jr., Chairman

SUBJECT: Discussion Regarding Early Start Pre-Kindergarten Policy Proposal

The time to lead is **now**. I am proposing adoption of the following policy statement:

*Every four-year-old child in Michigan shall be offered a high quality pre-kindergarten learning opportunity by the 2006 school year. This voluntary early childhood development and educational program shall be established according to nationally recognized, high quality standards. It shall be provided at no additional charge to all Michigan four year olds without reducing funding for existing education, health and child development programs.*

The State Board Task Force, Ensuring Early Childhood Literacy ([www.michigan.gov/mde](http://www.michigan.gov/mde)) chaired by board member Sharon Wise states, "Studies show over one-third of American children enter kindergarten unprepared to benefit from classroom instruction." The report points out that nine out of ten children who are poor readers in first grade have the probability of being poor readers in fourth grade. Perhaps even more ominous is that seventy-five percent of poor readers who do not receive help before age nine continue to have reading difficulty through high school.

Both the State Board Task Force and Ready To Succeed's recent position paper, Pathways To Success for Our Youngest Children ([www.readytosucceed.org](http://www.readytosucceed.org)), call for better linkages among education entities and increased public awareness regarding the importance of early childhood education. Both call for restoration of budget dollars for these vital programs.

Research on brain development and the value of early childhood education is overwhelmingly compelling and clear. National and state studies demonstrate that investment in early childhood development enables children to start school ready to learn. More importantly, it provides the foundation for continued growth and educational achievement throughout the elementary school years.

All of these actions will help. Yet, they are only cursory attempts to address a problem that impacts our children and our families. More than that, failure to take action to prepare our youngest children to enter school ready to learn will impact the very fabric of our society and the economic stability of our State in the future.

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Michigan cannot prosper unless we invest in our human capital. There is simply no better way to do that than to invest in our youngest citizens. The viability of our society, the strength of our economy, the quality of our lives and the vibrancy of our democracy and our prominence in the world depend on the investment we make in our children today.

Michigan has fallen behind over the last decade by neglecting to invest in the zero to age four years. In 1995 Georgia became the first state to pay for preschool for every four year old. North Carolina, New York and Oklahoma have followed that lead. Many will argue that current fiscal challenges prevent this investment. The response should be to ensure a viable future for Michigan we *must* make this investment.

Common sense tells us we can invest now and reap future benefits or we can refuse to act and suffer the consequences later. Data supports the notion that investment in early childhood education reduces crime, the incidence of welfare and avoids unrealized human potential. In a competitive, global society our most valuable national resource is our people.

I urge you to adopt this proposal and to forward it to the legislature and to the governor requesting consideration as policy and for appropriations in future legislative sessions.

All reality begins with a dream and a vision. I envision a day when we will invest in our youngest citizens so that they will have greater opportunities to grow into successful, productive adults.