



MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Graduation Rate Guidance





STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
LANSING

GRETCHEN WHITMER
GOVERNOR

MICHAEL F. RICE, Ph.D.
STATE SUPERINTENDENT

November 2022

Dear Michigan Educational Leader:

As we emerge from the pandemic and develop a new and better normal, we call on educational leaders to reinvigorate efforts to address barriers to graduation and to help improve local graduation rates. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Michigan generated increases in the state's high school graduate rates eight of ten years from 2011 to 2021 in **all student groups**, with only 2016 being an exception in the nine years of overall growth pre-pandemic and only 2021—a 1.6 percentage point decline—during the pandemic. While these increases are noteworthy—particularly the 10.6 percentage point increase for African American/Black students and the 12.1 percentage point increase for Hispanic/Latino students in the last decade, much work remains to be done to raise our overall four-year graduation rate in the state not simply back to its 2020 peak of 82 percent but well beyond. All Michigan children require not simply high school education and graduation but some form of postsecondary education or training as well.

[Michigan's Top 10 Strategic Education Plan](#) provides focused direction to the education community and includes Goal 5: to increase the percentage of all students who graduate from high school. As a local superintendent for 17 years, first in New Jersey and then in Michigan, I found that the strategies noted herein—absenteeism intervention, academic enrichment and tutorial support, extracurricular engagement, and mentoring—were effective in helping individual children to graduate, especially those who were less engaged than others, for whatever reason or reasons. A mentoring program that we started in a former district ultimately had more than 400 mentors who were working with 1,300 students. Started in collaboration with a tremendous community partner, a tutoring program helped thousands of children over the years. The support of engaging curricular and extracurricular offerings, even in the face of challenging financial times, helped countless children stay connected to schools and to the promise of their education.

These are research-based strategies. They work. Many of you are already using one or more of these strategies for your students, which I applaud. That said, many of your students could benefit from targeted tutoring, mentoring, or absenteeism intervention. It is the hope that this document will encourage more of you to reflect upon and/or extend beyond your current work in service to children—all children—as we come out of the pandemic and seek to improve upon the education of our kids.

I am pleased to share this graduation rate guidance document, which was developed by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) with feedback from the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP) and the Michigan Association of School Administrators (MASA). This graduation rate guidance is intended to enhance the efforts of intermediate and local school districts, both traditional public school districts and public school academies (PSAs), in identifying additional ways to support high school students in and through graduation success as we emerge from the pandemic.

I hope you will find this guidance and resources helpful to your students, staff, schools, and districts.

Sincerely,

Michael F. Rice, Ph.D.
State Superintendent

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Purpose of the Guide

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) Graduation Rate Increase Guidance Document serves as a resource to encourage and support intentional efforts of intermediate school districts (ISDs) and local education agencies (LEAs), both traditional public school districts and public school academies (PSAs), in identifying efforts to assist high school students in graduation success as we emerge from the pandemic. This guidance highlights research-based strategies that will improve graduation rates. This effort supports [Michigan's Top 10 Strategic Education Plan](#) Goal 5: to increase the percentage of all students who graduate from high school.

The national landscape on graduation rate increase is similar to Michigan. The [Building A Grad Nation 2021 Annual Report](#), authored by [CIVIC](#) and the [Everyone Graduates Center](#) at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University, has been tracking the progress of students in the United States for the past decade. The national effort to reach a 90 percent graduation rate by the Class of 2020 peaked pre-pandemic in 2019 at 85.8 percent. Similarly, Michigan has seen a steady increase in four-year cohort graduation rates during eight of the nine years immediately pre-pandemic and eight of the past ten years, with the exception of the 2015-16 and 2020-21 academic years. The March 2022 presentation to the Michigan State Board of Education on state progress on Goal 5 of the Michigan Strategic Education Plan highlighted the following for students in Michigan:

- All groups in Michigan showed increases in four-year graduation rates during the ten-year period from 2011 to 2021. African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students showed **double-digit** increases during this time frame, while the overall increase in four-year graduation rate was 6.2 percentage points.
- Virtually all groups showed increases during the five-year period from 2016 to 2021. The overall increase in four-year graduation rate from 2016 to 2021 was 5.4 percentage points.
- While the overall four-year graduation rate declined 1.6 percentage points in 2021, the overall five-year and six-year graduation rates both increased in 2021, though perhaps less substantially than they might otherwise have increased in the absence of the pandemic.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that we “go well beyond academic recovery to reignite students’ interest in and connection to school.” ([Plunging Graduation Rates Signal Long Recovery](#), September 7, 2022.) To do so with intentionality warrants the need to offer research-based universal supports and strategies that have proven to increase graduation rates. The following strategies, when coupled with innovation and strategic partnerships, detail the equitable supports that can be beneficial to Michigan students for graduation:

- Absenteeism Intervention
- Academic Enrichment and Tutorial Support
- Extracurricular Engagement
- Mentoring





I. Absenteeism Intervention

As educators, we know that students want to attend schools that they find safe, engaging, and supportive. For some, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this ideal learning environment, as some students could not be physically present due to extended school closures and remote learning. Sometimes situations beyond a student's control can lead to absenteeism or chronic absenteeism.

Chronic absenteeism is defined federally as missing 10 percent or more of the possible scheduled school days. Chronic absenteeism can be especially problematic for students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. Students may be pulled away from school because they must enter the workforce to support their families or themselves. When chronic absenteeism occurs during the early high school years and students get behind in course credits, graduation is often less likely.

Chronic absenteeism should set off an alarm to identify the most appropriate intervention for a student suffering from its effects. Emergence from the pandemic provides an opportunity for a reexamination of the attendance systems to identify chronically absent students and the supports necessary to reduce chronic absenteeism. Attendance policies that are more punitive than helpful to the learner can do more harm than good. Yes, we want to help our learners become responsible adults who understand the consequences of their actions.

But we never want to be so rigid that a student feels there are no means to overcome absenteeism, whether due to an unforeseen circumstance or just not attending school due to a lack of interest or engagement.

Research shows that absenteeism is another element of school complexity to address based on the specific dynamics of a student's school community and population. The Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI) reports the 2021-22 chronic absenteeism rate for Michigan students as 38.5% in comparison to an average rate of 20% the previous four years. Students who are chronically absent are less likely to graduate and enter adulthood equipped with the skills to navigate responsibilities and execute viable opportunities that assist them in living as thriving citizens who deem themselves validated and valued.

Schools across the country have seen a rise in chronic absenteeism. Compared to a typical school year prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, 72 percent of U.S. public schools reported an increase in chronic absenteeism among their students. Compared to last school year (2020–21), 39 percent of public schools reported that chronic absenteeism has increased. (https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/07_06_2022.asp)

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 provides legislative leverage for schools to develop local accountability systems that address complex factors that negatively affect school and student success. One such factor is absenteeism. The national chronic absenteeism report, *Every Student, Every Day: A National Initiative to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism*, has emerged as a foundation and example for schools across the nation.

District and school leaders should include the following important factors when developing a district-wide attendance initiative:

- Research-based K-12 “bell times” (start and end of the school day) and grade configurations by building
- Transportation routing for both district-provided and public transit systems
- Community partnerships that market local attendance initiatives and invest in incentives that promote attendance
- School-based policies that are data-driven and align with the overall district effort to increase attendance





The following research and resources can assist with addressing chronic absenteeism:

- [Early Warning Intervention Monitoring System](#)

The Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System (EWIMS) is a process developed by the National High School Center at American Institutes for Research (AIR) and is a data-driven, decision-making process that helps educators systematically identify students who are showing signs that they are at risk of dropping out of school; examine the underlying causes of risk and match students' needs to interventions; and monitor students' progress and the success of the interventions. Fundamentally, EWIMS is an ongoing cycle of examining data and making decisions about supports and interventions to help students succeed.

- [Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools](#)

Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools is an educator's practice guide published by What Works Clearinghouse. The guide includes the following four evidence-based recommendations for reducing dropout rates in middle and high schools and improving high school graduation rates:

- o Monitor the progress of all students and proactively intervene when students show early signs of attendance, behavior, or academic problems.
- o Provide intensive, individualized support to students who face significant challenges to success.
- o Engage students by offering curricula and programs that connect schoolwork with college and career success and that improve students' capacity to manage challenges in and out of school.
- o Create small, personalized communities to facilitate monitoring and support for schools with many at-risk students.

II. Academic Enrichment and Tutorial Support

It is crucial to intervene early to ensure appropriate support is available and that students feel they can ask educators for help. For example, missed daily homework assignments must be addressed before the student accumulates a failing mid-term grade.

Research-based academic enrichment delivers the best results when it is individualized and provided consistently. For Tier 3 intensive intervention, this tutoring should be either daily or, at minimum, three times per week for 30-60 minutes. Additionally, students ideally would have access to an adult credentialed in the subject area content for which the support is being provided. It is also essential for the academic interventionist or tutor to have prior experience in tutoring or be willing to participate in a district- or school-based training program. When these guidelines are met, the educational entity has committed to what recent research has deemed to be high-impact tutoring, according to the National Student Support Accelerator (further review here: [High-Impact Tutoring: State of the Research and Priorities for Future Learning.](#))





District and school leaders should include the following factors when developing academic enrichment and tutorial supports:

- Intentional and strategic planning and implementation (e.g., [Michigan Integrated Continuous Improvement Process](#) (MICIP))
- Student voice and choice
- Training programs for staff and volunteers
- Dedicated funding for staff compensation, student transportation, marketing, and public relations
- Program and student progress monitoring

Here are resources and research to consider when including academic enrichment, programming options, and tutorial supports to increase student mastery, which leads to increased graduation rates:

- [Personal Curriculum](#)
Personal curriculum (PC) is a tool for modifying the Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) to individualize the rigor and relevance of the state graduation requirements. All students are eligible for a PC, with different populations of students falling under different rules for modifications allowed.
- [Flexible Learning Options](#)
Flexible learning options provide unique opportunities to students in Michigan. These opportunities may be defined in law, including services available under specific circumstances or topics not typically associated with conventional learning in public schools.
- [Graduation Decisions for Students with Disabilities](#)
To earn a high school diploma in Michigan, students must complete specific requirements set forth in the MMC. A high school diploma is available to all students and does not include an alternative credential that is not fully aligned with the state's academic standards, such as a certificate of completion or a general educational development credential (GED). (See details of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act at [IDEA: 34 CFR § 300.102\(a\)\(3\)\(i\).](#)) The guidance document, *Graduation Decisions for Students with Disabilities*, supports Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams in developing an individualized plan for graduation over a multi-year frame, with strategies and planning tools.
- [Discipline Toolkit Manual](#)
The Discipline Toolkit is a framework for districts to develop a sustainable plan to reduce suspensions and expulsions. The toolkit was designed by MDE-Office of Special Education to assist districts identified as having a significant discrepancy in the percentage of students with an IEP in one or more ethnic groups who were suspended or expelled for more than ten days over multiple years. However, any district can benefit from analyzing discipline data and using this process to improve practices and prevent the occurrence of significant discrepancies.

According to *The Impressive Effects of Tutoring on Pre-K-12 Learning: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Experimental Evidence*, tutoring programs yield consistent and substantial positive impacts on learning outcomes. On average, effects are stronger for teacher and paraprofessional tutoring programs than for nonprofessional and parent tutoring. While overall effects for reading and math interventions are similar, reading tutoring is shown to be more effective in the earlier grades, while math in the later grades. (<https://www.edworkingpapers.com/ai20-267>)





- [Accelerated Learning](#)

Accelerated learning helps students who are behind in school to catch up by strategically preparing them for success in current grade-level content. Acceleration requires teachers to identify crucial content that they need to teach and that students need to learn so that students can access current grade-level material and continue to progress. By extension, it also requires teachers to identify and forego less foundational material.

- [3-P Learning in Michigan](#)

3-P Learning stands for problem-, project-, and place-based learning. 3-P learning pedagogical approaches are student-centered. These approaches engage students in their learning resulting in a higher likelihood of student graduation.

- [Linking the Timing of Career and Technical Education Course Taking with High School Dropout and College-Going Behavior - Michael A. Gottfried, Jay Stratte Plasman, 2018 \(sagepub.com\)](#)

Students with greater career and technical education (CTE) exposure are more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in a two-year college, be employed, and earn higher wages. CTE students are just as likely to pursue a four-year degree as their peers. The more CTE courses students take, the better their education and labor market outcomes. Among other positive outcomes, CTE concentrators are 21 percent more likely to graduate from high school when compared to otherwise similar students.

- [Career and Technical Education in High School: Does It Improve Student Outcomes?](#)

In general, taking just one additional CTE course increases a student's probability of graduating from high school by three percent and enrolling in a two-year college the following year by 0.6 percentage points. [Concentrators](#) are 21 percentage points more likely to graduate from high school than otherwise identical students (with similar demographics, grade 8 test scores, and the number of CTE courses taken) who do not concentrate.

- [Early and Middle Colleges Offer High School Alternative](#)

Written by the National Conference of State Legislatures, this research notes that "early and middle college students graduate high school at a rate of 93 percent, compared to the national rate of 78 percent." For Michigan specific Early Middle College (EMC) information, please visit: [MI early middle colleges](#).

- [MI Kids Back on Track](#)

With an appreciation of the importance of tutoring to helping children with unfinished learning, Governor Gretchen Whitmer's [MI Kids Back on Track program](#) is seeking volunteer tutors to help students catch up and succeed long-term. Individuals who have an interest in tutoring children at a local school should check at this link or reach out directly to their local public school.





III. Extracurricular Engagement

The opportunity to be engaged in organized activities beyond the regular school day can be a true benefit to students, especially once they reach high school. According to The Benefits of Participating in Extracurricular Activities (<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1230758.pdf>), benefits include:

- Balance between home and school commitments
- Character and personal development, including social skills
- Sense of belonging within the school community
- [Increased academic achievement](#)

For some students, participation in extracurricular activities fosters a sense of belonging that is critical to their self-development. According to U.S. Census data, even short-term poverty may be associated with fewer opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities because families may not have the financial means to support participation. These opportunities include youth sports or Little League organizations, as well as fee-required lessons in music, visual arts, STEM activities (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), dance, and more. The experience during the early years often determines which of these areas the student will continue in high school.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic limited the ability for students to participate in extracurricular activities, now is an important time to re-engage students. When students do not have access to extracurricular activities that excite and engage them in their earlier years, it may be harder for them to develop a sense of belonging, which can lead to disengagement and dropping out. It is vital for the high school to offer a variety of opportunities that appeal to their students' varying interests. These possibilities include athletics; school clubs; problem-, project-, and place-based (3P) learning opportunities; student leadership opportunities, such as student government, class officer positions; and/or comprehensive out-of-school-time learning programs. The key to engaging extracurricular activities is providing relevant student voice, student choice, and hands-on, experiential learning opportunities that reflect student and community culture.

District and school leaders should consider the following important factors when developing extracurricular engagement opportunities:

- Intentional strategic planning and implementation (i.e., MICIP)
- Student voice and choice through student surveys and focus groups
- Community and business/industry partnerships
- Policies that encourage attendance, academic engagement, and progress monitoring
- Recognition programs for students, such as digital badges or certification
- Marketing materials shared in multiple methods, languages, and multiple times (welcome back to school newsletters and events, school websites, social media outlets)
- Training programs for staff, coaches, and volunteers
- Dedicated funding for student access (stipends and scholarships), staff compensation, student transportation, marketing, and public relations
- Program- and student-progress monitoring to determine how to obtain the best return on investment





The following resources and research can assist with incorporating extracurricular activities in high school experiences that lead to engagement and graduation:

- [Summer Learning Toolkit, Michigan AfterSchool Partnership](#)
The toolkit provides best practices and resources to develop, promote, and sustain high-quality summer learning programs in Michigan.
- [Michigan's Out-of-School Time Standards of Quality - 4th Edition \(After-school and Summer Learning Programs\)](#)
The Michigan Out-of-School Time (MOST) Standards of Quality are designed to assist schools and other organizations in developing high-quality, comprehensive out-of-school (OST) programs for all children and youth in grades K-12. The standards are based on research concerning quality programs for school-age children and youth.

IV. Mentoring

“Mentoring programs are a prominent strategy in the United States for preventing negative outcomes and promoting resilience among at-risk youth.” (DuBois, 2021) The key component around this strategy is the building of relationships. According to the 2013 *Role of Risk: Mentoring Experiences and Outcomes for Youth with Varying Risk Profiles* report, the relationships between youth and assigned mentors are key to the overall benefits of the experience. Additionally, the report confirms that youth involved in mentoring rated relationship quality based on 1) closeness with the mentor, 2) the extent to which the relationship included opportunities for learning and working toward goals, and 3) the extent to which the mentor considered the youth’s interests and input. In summary, the success of the mentor-mentee relationship is predicated on trust and consistent support, coupled with opportunities that elevate the mentee’s aspirations or future goals.

The [Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring](#) delineates standards for creating and sustaining quality youth mentoring programs and successful mentoring relationships. Monitoring of the relationship should be consistent and frequent. Regular and intentional contact has been associated with stronger mentoring relationships. This is an element of support that can and should be differentiated based on need or what is best for the student to keep them motivated to stay in school, do well, and ultimately graduate. As such, mentoring can occur either one-on-one or in a group setting. Sometimes, it would be beneficial to the student to offer both types of mentoring.

District and school leaders should note the following when organizing mentoring programs aimed at assisting students with goal setting and personal growth and development:

- Choose a program with a proven track record for success
- Establish a program that includes mentors who can consistently commit throughout the full school year
- Include external community and post-secondary partners who can help plan learning excursions on career development
- Incorporate a screening process that follows current district policy and state and federal laws to prevent the possibility of danger or threat to a student
- Develop measures for progress monitoring and participant feedback





The following resources and research share some of the most successful high school mentoring programs in the nation:

- [Check and Connect](#)
Check and Connect is a dropout prevention strategy that relies on developing relationships with students to support and maintain school performance, mentoring, and other supports. Like the Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System ([EWIMS](#)), the Check and Connect strategy supports student progress through early identification of barriers, proactive interventions, and intensive and individualized supports.
- [National Mentoring Resource Center](#)
Launched in January 2014, the National Mentoring Resource Center is a comprehensive and reliable resource for mentoring tools, programs, and training materials, as well as access to no-cost training and technical assistance.
- [Michigan Virtual Social and Emotional Resources](#)
Michigan Virtual hosts several resources to support educators and school leaders with social emotional learning (SEL). You may access professional learning courses [here](#).

Next Steps

MDE encourages local education agencies to use this Graduation Rate Guidance document to explore and implement strategies to directly support high school students. Locally, the next steps may include:

- Use the [MICIP platform](#) and process to develop local plans to increase graduation rates by assessing needs; selecting strategies; developing an implementation plan; and funding, monitoring, and evaluating the success of the plan.
- Share promising local practices with evidence of success for increasing graduation rates in Michigan's Top 10 Strategic Plan in the [Promising Practices Exchange](#), a public-facing repository that encourages the educational community to share practices that demonstrate improved outcomes for learners specific to Michigan's Top 10 Strategic Education Plan goals.

At the state level, MDE will:

- Monitor aggregate progress for Michigan's Top 10 Strategic Education Plan, Goal 5, by periodically presenting metrics to the State Board of Education and the broader community. (Current metrics related to Goal 5 are posted on [MDE's website](#))
- Curate research-based state and national strategies within the [MiStrategyBank \(MSB\) - Projects - MAISA](#) for districts to include in their [Michigan Integrated Continuous Improvement Process](#) (MICIP) and [MiEWIMS application](#)
- Produce and/or share periodically documents containing strategies, tips, and tools for increasing elementary and middle school student engagement to increase high school readiness and produce higher graduation rates



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