



Why Statewide Education Policy Is Limited

By Audrey Spalding

Summary

The Michigan Merit Curriculum law imposes course requirements on schools that do not serve the best interests of struggling students. A better course would be to grant greater flexibility to public schools so they can better serve the needs and interests of their students.

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Recently, en route to Michigan's northernmost point, it struck me that Calumet is more than 500 miles away from Lansing. Yet the notion of drafting statewide policies to govern school curriculum and practices in places as different as Lansing, the Upper Peninsula and Detroit is rarely hailed as an absurdity.

The Michigan Merit Curriculum was signed into law in 2006, imposing a sweeping statewide expansion of graduation requirements that specified how many credits of math, science, language arts, social studies and other courses students must take. State Superintendent Mike Flanagan promoted these expanded requirements at the time, saying that "[they] will evolve Michigan from being a rust belt, blue-collar state to being a high-tech and high-skills state."

But preliminary data on the first wave of Michigan students subject to the new requirements should give policymakers pause. Since the MMC requirements were imposed, graduation rates have dropped and lower-achieving students have been hit the hardest. Indeed, the Michigan Education Research Consortium released data in late October that showed that the five-year graduation rate for the lowest-achieving students declined by 5 percentage points after MMC requirements were imposed. This is a large drop when only about half of the lowest-achieving students were making it to graduation beforehand.

The MMC requirements seem reasonable for students preparing to enter a conventional four-year college program. But these requirements might not be suitable for all students, and are likely limiting the amount of time students have to take other courses. The lowest-achieving students who fail to graduate are worse off without a high school degree, even if they did take an extra math course or two before dropping out.

Calumet High School, located on the uppermost tip of the Upper Peninsula, is an alternative to the argument that every Michigan student should take the same college preparatory courses. Calumet is near Michigan Technological University, enabling its students to collaborate with Michigan Tech students on vocational projects.

Calumet students have access to up to two years of Computer-Aided Design training, as well as geospatial analysis training and

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Schools as far away as Detroit and Calumet need more autonomy over school practices and curriculum to serve their students' particular needs.

conventional shop classes. Many Calumet students go on to Michigan Tech. Some students have even received part-time job offers from engineering companies while still in school.

Calumet students with an exceptional interest in a subject or medium are encouraged to explore it. One student built a remote-controlled airplane using CAD to design it. According to Principal George Twardzik, the student managed to get the plane to fly. So much for Popsicle stick projects in so-called advanced physics courses.

Unfortunately, in the wake of MMC, there are now fewer teachers available to teach non-MMC courses. Researchers found that the proportion of high school teachers in non-MMC or mixed academic areas decreased from 41 percent to 28 percent between 2004 and 2011.

Compared to Calumet, Detroit has wholly different advantages and disadvantages. Selective schools with a strong history of success are just a short drive away for students who can meet admission requirements. Detroit-area students can choose to attend a school that provides years of Arabic or Spanish training. The conventional school district, however, has had to grapple with rapidly declining enrollment, high administrative turnover and power battles.

It is easy to see that Calumet and Detroit students have different needs, but the MMC curriculum requirements apply regardless of student need, background or local opportunities.

A better approach would be to allow parents greater latitude in choosing schools for their children (while permitting state funding to follow families where they choose) and to empower schools to serve their students — not students who are 500 miles away. Calumet has been providing advanced vocational courses to its students in addition to core classes for decades and without a directive from the state.

State officials could start by asking Calumet administrators and teachers what struggles they have undergone to provide those courses while also complying with state directives. Easing MMC requirements would be a good place to start.

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