



Michigan Disconnect: Whitmer education proposals don't inspire confidence

Expansions to two programs are not supported by evidence and could push school costs even higher

By Jennifer Majorana | February 2023

In her 2023 State of the State address, Gov. Whitmer proposed an age eligibility change to Michigan Reconnect, a program that allows Michigan residents 25 and older with no degree to attend community college at no additional cost to them. The governor wants to lower the eligibility age for Michigan Reconnect to 21.

The proposed change is premature. Taxpayers haven't had a chance to evaluate the impact of the existing program, which opened for student applications in February of 2021. It is unlikely students have had time to complete a two-year program since then. We don't know if students in the program will finish their degrees or if those degrees will help them earn more money than they would have otherwise.

Whitmer made ambitious promises for the Michigan Reconnect program and MI Opportunity Scholarships (later converted into Futures for Frontliners). "Together these paths will go a long

way toward closing the skills gap and creating real opportunity for everyone," she said in her 2019 address.

“These programs and planned expansions of these programs put current and future taxpayers on the hook with no guarantee of benefits.”

While those are lofty goals, we still don't know whether the program has actually helped close the skills gap or created real opportunity. The governor is proposing we add more

people to a costly initiative before we know if it does any good.

The governor also lauded Michigan Achievement Scholarships in her address Wednesday. Starting this year, students graduating from Michigan high schools or earning their GED will get additional state aid for higher education.

Both programs fall under Gov. Whitmer's Sixty by 30 initiative, which aims for 60 percent of working-age Michigan residents to have a postsecondary degree or credential by 2030. Currently, just under half of working-age Michigan residents have a degree beyond high school, and the only county in Michigan

that exceeds the 60 percent threshold is Washtenaw county, home of the University of Michigan.

It's important to think through the short-term and long-term implications of giving students more money for college.

In the short run, students and families will probably feel happy. They will get an additional benefit at no immediate cost to them. College will feel cheaper.

In the long run, the cost of higher education is likely to increase because neither program encourages schools to lower their spending, which is a primary factor driving tuition increases. It's not difficult to imagine how government subsidies will have to expand in stepwise fashion to keep college affordable.

Shielded from the sticker price of tuition by these scholarship programs, students will be less likely to choose their college based on cost. Colleges will need to compete less with one another on keeping costs down. Less competition, higher prices.

Another long-term implication relates to graduation rates. Low college completion rates are a problem across the nation. The most recent data available from the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard show a 53% graduation rate for Michigan's public four-year universities.

We already have too many people going to college and not finishing. This is bad for the person, who wasted time and money and did not get a degree. It is also bad for taxpayers, who paid for a program that was never finished.

Giving students more money to go to college will make the completion problem worse.

Sound policy requires that we consider long-run effects and all people, not simply short-run effects and a few people. These programs and planned expansions of these programs put current and future taxpayers on the hook with no guarantee of benefits.

In her 2023 State of the State address, Gov. Whitmer claimed she is centered on problem-solving. Unfortunately, these college scholarship programs are counterproductive to solving the problem of expensive college tuition and low college completion rates.

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