

Record-breaking school aid budget ignores proven ways of improving student achievement

Teachers are key, but lawmakers favor seniority rules over teacher quality

By Molly Macek | July 2023

The record \$21.5 billion K-12 budget recently passed by Michigan lawmakers will do little to improve student achievement. While spending on myriad plans and programs, the budget does not focus on initiatives that would narrow the state's growing achievement gaps.

Among the budget's larger-ticket items is a 5% increase to the foundation allowance.

Conventional districts will be awarded \$9,608 per student in the 2023-24 school year, \$458 more than they currently receive. This state-funded allocation created by Proposal A helps level the playing field across districts by paying nearly all the same guaranteed, minimum amount. The new budget breaks from this principle, however.

Lawmakers decided not to increase the foundation allowance for one type of public school: online charter schools. They did this though online charter schools, unlike conventional districts, cannot raise extra funds through local property taxes. Lawmakers' move to deprive online charter schools of the funding

boost disadvantages students who are unable to attend conventional schools for medical, social or other reasons.

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Other large-ticket items in the budget include free school meals for every student and taxpayer-funded preschool for middle-class families. Spending on these items won't do much to help the poor, despite what

advocates say. That's because government programs like the National School Lunch Program and Great Start already provide the state's at-risk students free meals and early learning programs. Spending more on school meals and preschool means that taxpayers, including low-income ones, subsidize these services for increasingly wealthier households.

The budget's spending priorities divert funds from programs with a history of helping students learn more. Spending on ways to equip teachers to better help their students, for example, would make a difference. There is a small allocation in the new budget for helping school staffers be more effective

in teaching young children how to read. But it is not enough, given how much students fell behind during pandemic-era school closures, which harmed all students and grade levels.

Most elementary students who could not read at grade level were still promoted to the next grade in 2022. Social promotion — moving students up a grade level even if they did not learn what they should have learned — continued as students advanced to middle school. Fewer than 40% of sixth- and seventh-grade students earned a “proficient” score on the M-STEP English language arts test. Only 30% were proficient in math. All teachers — veteran and new — need training in evidence-based instruction, in all grade levels and subjects, so they can better meet the specific needs of each student. Directing a greater share of school funding to teacher quality is key to greater student achievement.

Benchmark testing is another initiative that — if implemented properly — improves student learning. Teachers who use student data from benchmark tests administered in the fall can tailor their instruction to fill in gaps in their students’ knowledge and skills. Tests administered in the spring tell them how much progress their students made and where they need more support. But lawmakers removed benchmarking testing from the 2023-24 school aid budget.

In response to claims that there’s a shortage of teachers in Michigan, which is getting worse, the Legislature increased funding for recruiting and paying new teachers. Paula Herbart, president of the Michigan Education Association teachers union, praised the move. “It’s critical that we keep

great educators on the job and attract talented people into this noble profession, and this budget agreement provides our schools with much-needed resources to help accomplish these goals,” she told Chalkbeat Detroit.

Without question, recruiting and retaining quality teachers is critical to student success. Yet House bills 4354 and 4820, both awaiting the governor’s signature, will decrease educator quality and deter talented younger teachers from the profession. These changes enacted by the new laws will result in schools making hiring, placement and layoff decisions about teachers based on seniority and not performance. They also further water down teacher evaluations, making it more difficult for schools to hold teachers to high standards. A robust evaluation system and performance-based pay would do much to improve teacher effectiveness and, in turn, student outcomes. The Legislature rejected both.

The newly passed budget allocates record funding to a laundry list of items intended to improve the state’s public education system. Yet it neglects to focus on proven initiatives that help students in all grades catch up from the losses they incurred during the pandemic. In adopting this budget, lawmakers missed the mark.

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