



DEMOCRATS *for*  
EDUCATION REFORM

# Michigan *Policy Memo*

## *A Note From* **Our CEO**



Democrats face a critical juncture in education policy. Over the past decade, our party's traditional advantage on education has eroded, slipping from a 26-point lead over Republicans to now trailing by three. Voters' message is clear: They want something different, but Democrats have offered more of the same.

Michigan illustrates both the challenge and the opportunity. The state has high chronic absenteeism and teacher turnover, which contribute to poor rankings on The Nation's Report Card, low college readiness rates, and a lagging high school graduation rate. Without renewed urgency and a forward-looking vision, Michigan risks the futures of thousands of its students.

Across the country, several states are showing that reform can deliver real results for students—proving that progress is possible when leaders act boldly. While much of this progress is occurring in Republican-led states, we believe Democratic governors and gubernatorial candidates, including in Michigan, can claim the mantle of a results-driven education agenda that discovers what works, invests only in what works, and allows families to choose what works best for them. This is both a political and moral imperative: With the right leadership, Michigan can lead the nation in education, preparing every student to succeed in college, career, and life, and proving that Democrats are ready to deliver bold, forward-looking change for every child.

## *About* **This Report**

This report outlines a policy framework for improving education in Michigan through innovation, accountability, and choice. It is intended to inform candidates, campaign staff, and policymakers about both the current state of Michigan's education system and the opportunity ahead.

It includes:

### **Executive Summary (pg. 3)**

Overview of Michigan's educational landscape and opportunity for renewed progress.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Organized around three pillars that, together, create a roadmap for measurable improvement.

- Innovation (pg. 5)
- Accountability (pg. 9)
- Choice (pg. 13)

## Executive Summary

Today, nearly 1.5 million K–12 students depend on Michigan’s schools to prepare them for college, career, and life. But recent results show that the conditions necessary for Michigan students to succeed are not in place and student outcomes are suffering. Michigan has **persistently high chronic absenteeism** and **teacher attrition** while **persistently low college and career readiness** and **graduation rates**. In addition, when adjusted for demographics, Michigan ranks **in the bottom 15 states nationally** for scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card, with economically disadvantaged students performing **disproportionately worse** than their non-economically disadvantaged peers.

These challenges present opportunities for the next governor to enact bold reforms that could positively impact the trajectories of over a million students. Capacity and financial investments in the educator workforce pipeline, college and career pathways, innovative school models, chronic absenteeism, evidence-based literacy and math instruction, results-based accountability, high-quality charter school operators, open enrollment policies, and the new Federal Scholarship Tax Credit program would impact students’ lives for years to come.

Michigan is at a crucial moment. The state needs a leader who can not only implement urgently needed reforms but also demonstrate to the nation that sustained commitment and smart policymaking can deliver high expectations, modern learning opportunities, and lasting success for every student in Michigan.

## Michigan At a Glance

Public School Student Enrollment  
**1,427,386**

Chronic Absenteeism Rate  
**28%**

Economically Disadvantaged Students  
**50%**

English Learner Students  
**7%**

Students with Disabilities  
**14%**

Students with College-Ready SAT Scores  
**26%**

High School Graduation Rate  
**84%**

Two- and Four-Year College Enrollment  
**53%**

### Demographically Adjusted NAEP Rankings

4th-Grade Reading

**41<sup>st</sup>**

4th-Grade Math

**38<sup>th</sup>**

8th-Grade Reading

**39<sup>th</sup>**

8th-Grade Math

**44<sup>th</sup>**



## Innovation

- 1. Support and Reward Great Educators.** Adopt strategic staffing models and targeted pay incentives to attract and retain excellent teachers where they are most needed while laying the groundwork to permanently strengthen the educator workforce pipeline.
- 2. Expand, Reinforce, and Evaluate College and Career Pathways.** Ensure every student can earn transferable college credits and career credentials by increasing high school participation in dual enrollment, career and technical education, and other college and career pathways and evaluating outcomes for these programs.
- 3. Invest in a Range of Innovative School Models.** Provide financial and regulatory support for a broad array of high-quality school models such as Community Schools, early college high schools, charter schools, magnet schools, microschools, and other models outside traditional schools.



## Accountability

- 1. Strengthen and Sustain Strategies to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism.** Strengthen the state's approach to addressing chronic absenteeism by developing a statewide policy agenda prioritizing the issue and ensuring financial sustainability of proven practices.
- 2. Expand Evidence-Based Literacy and Math Supports Across K-12.** Expand evidence-based literacy and math supports across K-12 through larger investments in and stronger requirements about high-quality instructional materials.
- 3. Ensure High Standards and Emphasize Results in Accountability.** Align school report cards with rigorous NAEP benchmarks and enforce clear, transparent accountability for all schools—especially those that are chronically underperforming—while empowering families and communities to help drive improvement.



## Choice

- 1. Create a “fast lane” for proven providers of high-quality charter schools.** Create a formal designation for fast-tracking charter school operators that consistently demonstrate their effectiveness through improved student outcomes.
- 2. Enact policy mandating within- and cross-district enrollment, based on an analysis of open enrollment policies and their effects on access and equity.** Ensure that families have unmitigated access to enrolling their children in any school within their school district or in another school district, informed by an analysis of the effects of the current open enrollment policies on access and equity.
- 3. Leverage the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit Program (FSTC).** Use the new Federal Scholarship Tax Credit program to expand tutoring and out-of-school time opportunities, directing resources to under-resourced students and trusted community organizations that provide academic and enrichment support.



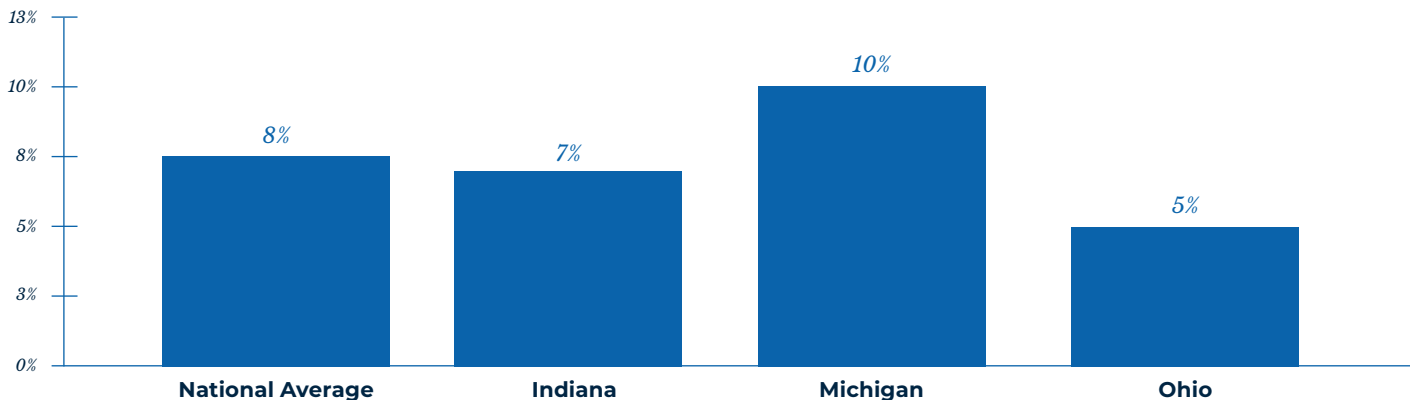
## Innovation

Michigan's next governor has the opportunity to ensure that the state becomes the best place in the country for students to prepare for college, career, and life. In order to do so, they must embrace a spirit of innovation that allows all students to flourish. The next governor of Michigan should usher in a new era of education innovation informed by the following recommendations.

### Recommendation 1: Support and reward great educators.

Michigan has an educator workforce crisis, with the tenth-highest teacher attrition rate in the country as of the 2021-22 school year. Inadequate salary, limited career growth, and unsustainable working conditions are among [the top reasons](#) certified candidates choose not to teach in Michigan. As high-quality teachers are widely considered to be the [most important](#) in-school driver of student outcomes, improving the quantity and quality of educators should be top priorities. And there is significant public favorability towards more financial support for teachers: [76%](#) of surveyed Michigan residents report that teachers' starting salaries should be increased.

**Michigan has one of the highest teacher attrition rates in the country**



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics \(2021-22\)](#)

To help address the educator workforce crisis, we recommend incentivizing the use of [strategic staffing models](#) to accelerate learning and scaffold educator career development, providing [supplemental pay](#) for teachers in hard-to-staff schools (e.g., high-poverty and rural schools) and specializations (e.g., special education, English Learner, and STEM classrooms), and creating a statewide task force charged with examining Michigan's educator workforce pipeline and producing recommendations to permanently strengthen it.

An example of innovative policy directly impacting teaching and learning, North Carolina’s [comprehensive redesign](#) of the state’s teaching profession has included the adoption of a strategic staffing model—[BEST NC Advanced Teaching Roles](#)—which has [significantly improved](#) student outcomes and teacher experiences in participating schools. Students in schools with the model had an **additional 1 month of growth in math and science compared to comparable schools** without the model. Similarly, a team teaching model in Arizona—[Next Education Workforce](#)—has led to an **additional 1.4 months of reading growth** for students as well as higher educator effectiveness, lower turnover, and increased job satisfaction.

In addition, several states and school districts across the country have implemented supplemental pay for teachers in hard-to-staff schools and specializations, [with promising results](#) showing that this can be an effective strategy to address teacher shortages where they are worst. This strategy can be scaled through [grant programs](#) tailored to address chronic shortages, [pay scheme flexibilities](#) for qualifying districts, [scholarship programs](#) that cover full tuition costs for teacher preparation programs in exchange for a multi-year commitment to a hard-to-staff assignment or specialization, or even a [sliding scale tax credit](#) for teachers based on the poverty level of the school in which they teach. This strategy could be particularly helpful in addressing [Michigan’s concentrated shortages](#).

Finally, efforts must be undertaken to strengthen the entirety of Michigan’s educator workforce pipeline. This will require a coordinated effort by state stakeholders to examine and act on challenges compromising the pipeline’s integrity. A roadmap already exists for this work: New America, in collaboration with 23 national education policy organizations, has published a comprehensive [Six-Strand Strategy for Educator Excellence](#) to create a framework for strengthening the educator workforce. Michigan could utilize this roadmap to inform a statewide task force’s investigation into the state’s greatest areas of improvement and ensure the sustained integrity of the educator pipeline.

## **Recommendation 2:**

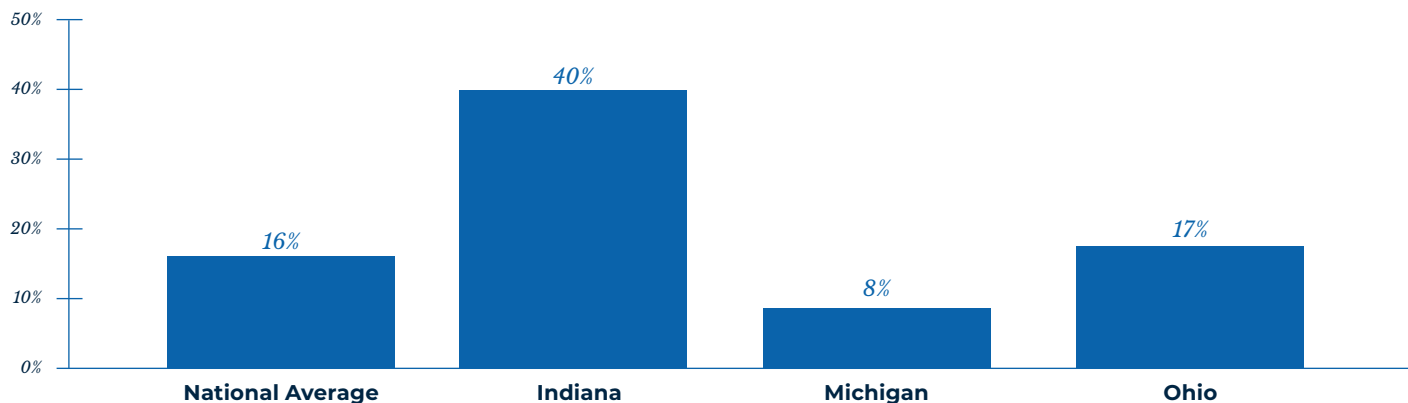
### **Expand, reinforce, and evaluate college and career pathways.**

With [fewer than 29%](#) of Michigan students college-ready and [no data available](#) on how many students earn industry-recognized credentials through career and technical education (CTE) programs, Michigan has significant work to do to improve college and career pathways so that students are ready for life after high school.

One notable area of improvement for Michigan is student participation in dual enrollment programs. Dual enrollment has a [host of positive outcomes](#), including improved high school academic achievement, higher likelihood of high school completion, increased college access and enrollment, more credit accumulation, and higher college degree

attainment. Michigan students are [among those](#) experiencing positive results. However, with only [8% participation](#) among high schoolers, Michigan has the **fifth-lowest dual enrollment participation rate** in the nation.

**Michigan has fewer students in dual enrollment than average**



Source: [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Survey \(2022-23\)](#)

Given Michigan’s low rate of dual enrollment participation, the next governor should implement strategies to expand access and uptake. These strategies should focus on [three pillars](#): accessibility, affordability, and quality. Strategies could include increasing state funding for participating institutions; ensuring that students can participate free of cost; building awareness and accessibility through program coordinators and marketing campaigns; partnering with existing college and career readiness out-of-school time programs; and setting or reinforcing statewide goals for dual enrollment participation.

In addition, one near-term area of focus for Michigan should be equitable access to career and technical education (CTE) programming. Though Michigan CTE program enrollment has increased in the last ten years, [nearly half of all districts](#) are considered CTE deserts. Furthermore, because CTE program funding is reliant on local millages, economically disadvantaged, Black, and Hispanic students have [less access](#) to CTE programs than more economically advantaged and White students. One possible strategy is to establish a [statewide funding mechanism for CTE programs](#) to ensure equitable access to CTE experiences and credentials.

More broadly, we recommend developing multiple pathways to college and career readiness for students, with aligned supports, metrics, and graduation requirements. States such as [Indiana, Colorado, and Iowa](#) are helping to lead the way on connecting education and career opportunities to ensure that all students find a meaningful path after high school. Indiana, which has introduced new [graduation pathways](#) and redesigned its [graduation requirements](#) to ensure that students graduate college and/or career ready, is a state from which Michigan might learn.

The next governor of Michigan should craft a cohesive strategy to build a robust college and career pathways model accessible to all students, aligning education and industry leaders around shared K–12 goals and metrics.

### **Recommendation 3: Invest in a range of innovative school models.**

Our traditional school models are no longer working for enough students. We recommend providing financial and regulatory support for Community Schools, early college high schools, charter schools, magnet schools, microschools, and other models outside traditional schools that allow for faster, community-driven, and more iterative innovation.

For instance, [Community Schools](#)—which serve as that center of their neighborhood by providing access to critical programs and services like health care, social services, expanded learning programs, mentoring, adult education, and other resources—have been shown to improve attendance, reduce disciplinary incidents, boost academic achievement, strengthen school climate, and increase high school graduation rates. They also have a significant ROI, with [studies](#) calculating that **for every \$1 spent on Community Schools, there is a return of up to \$15.**

As another example, graduates of Early College High Schools (ECHS) are [considerably more likely](#) to earn some form of college degree over the next ten years than non-participants and do so faster, allowing them to begin earning wages earlier than they otherwise would. In Massachusetts, ECHS graduates are [14 percentage points more likely](#) (68% versus 54%) **to go on to college** compared to control-matched peers, and [14 percentage points more likely](#) (58% versus 44%) **to persist into a second year of college**—a strong predictor of eventual graduation.

Finally, one emerging school type that is expanding across the country is the [microschool model](#). Microschools, which evolved from the homeschool-style learning pods formed during the COVID-19 pandemic, are typically small and focus on individualized learning. They can operate either as private or public entities, depending on state context and regulatory structures, but are most commonly private and tuition-based. Because of the nascent nature of the microschool model, data on their performance is currently limited.

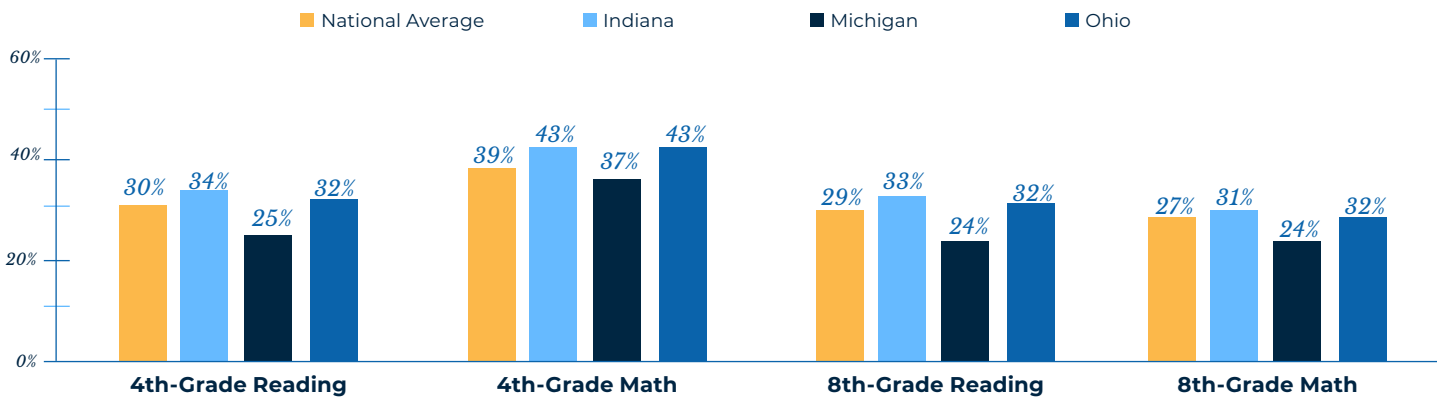
To help address the unique challenges of rural education, Indiana has [begun operating](#) microschools as public charter schools. Board members of the Indiana Microschool Collaborative describe the schools as a way to avoid unnecessary infrastructure investments and better personalize learning to students' individual needs.

Michigan's next governor should be judicious and decisive about investing in innovative school models that can accelerate learning outcomes for all students.

Michigan’s next governor must create a shared sense of urgency about creating a school system that achieves positive outcomes for all students, especially those from historically underserved groups.

**Michigan’s educational outcomes are alarming.** On the 2024 NAEP—the only nationally representative test that compares student achievement across all 50 states—**only 1 in 4 Michigan students demonstrated proficiency** in 4th-grade reading, 8th-grade reading, or 8th-grade math. **Fewer than 2 in 5 demonstrated proficiency** in 4th-grade math. Moreover, when adjusted for comparison with demographically similar peers, Michigan ranks in or near the bottom 10 states in the nation for all four tests.

**Michigan is far behind on reading and math proficiency**



Source: *The Nation’s Report Card (2024)*

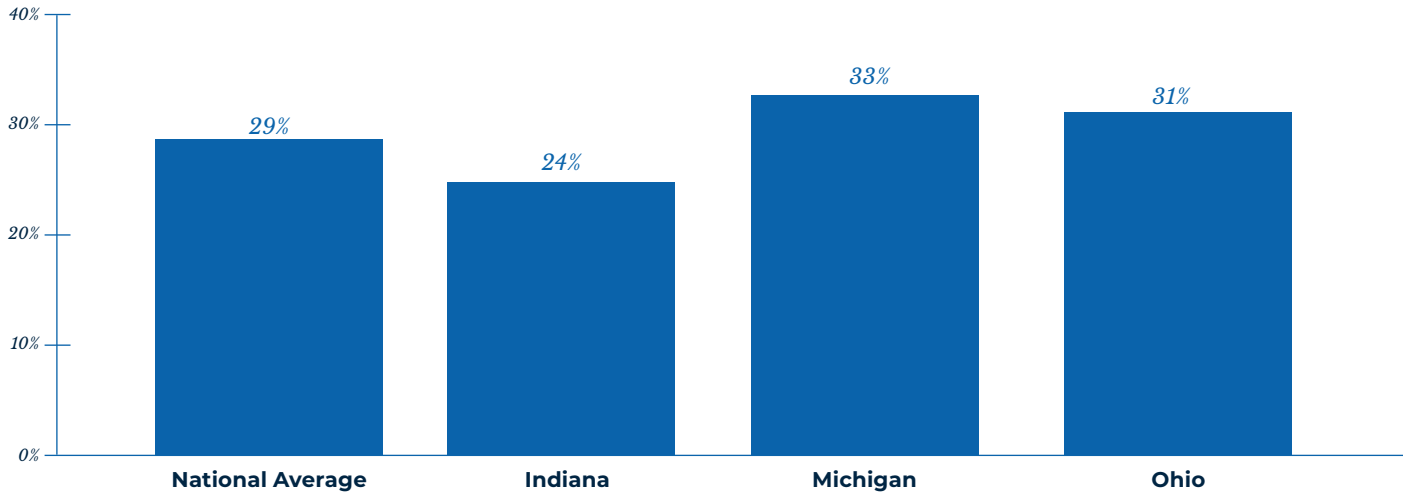
**Demographically Adjusted NAEP Rankings (2024)**

	4th-Grade Reading	4th-Grade Math	8th-Grade Reading	8th-Grade Math
Indiana	5th	7th	6th	5th
Michigan	41st	38th	39th	44th
Ohio	31st	28th	15th	7th

Source: *Urban Institute (2024)*

Compounding the issue, Michigan has the [worst chronic absenteeism](#) in the Midwest. While it has declined somewhat from 33% in the 2022-23 school year (the last national comparison) to 28% in the 2024-25 school year, it remains troublingly high, with 1 in 10 students missing seven or more weeks of school. Children who are chronically absent from school [tend to have](#) disproportionately worse academic outcomes. Moreover, schoolwide chronic absenteeism [affects all children](#), even those who have perfect attendance.

### Michigan has the highest chronic absenteeism rate in the Midwest

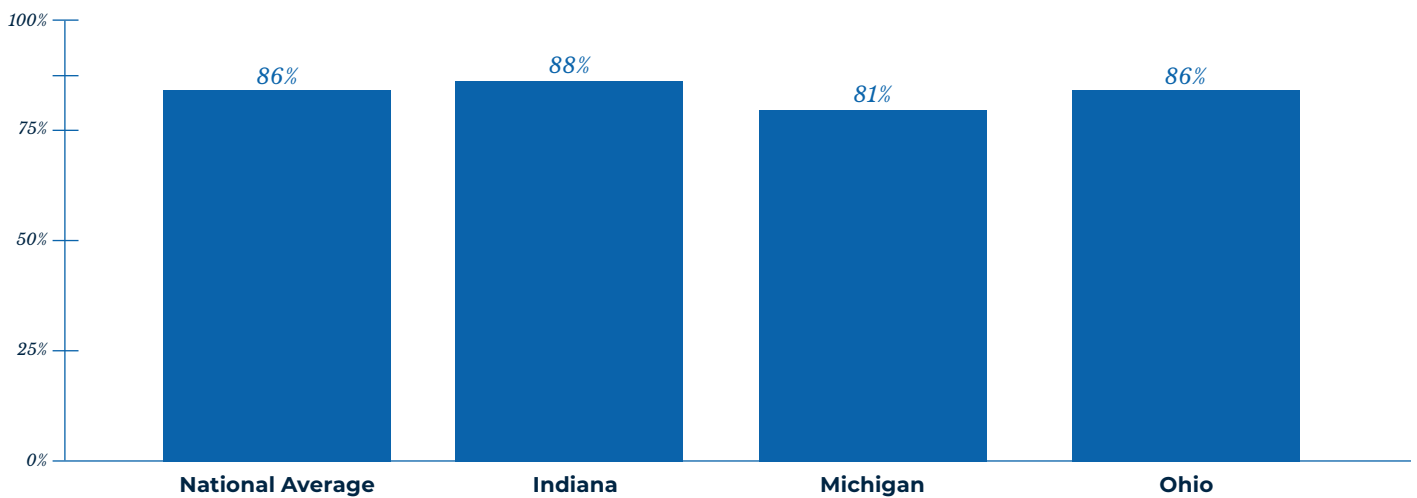


Source: *U.S. Department of Education (2022-23)*

These attendance and academic challenges culminate in a low high school graduation rate for the state, with only [84%](#) of 2024 graduates completing their studies within four years. Although this is slightly up from [81%](#) in 2022, the last national comparison, it is still below the national average and its Midwestern peers.

A generation of students will be left behind if Michigan does not continue to invest in robust accountability measures and curricular reform.

### Michigan has the fifth-lowest high school graduation rate in the nation



Source: *National Center for Education Statistics (2021-22)*

## **Recommendation 1:**

### **Strengthen and sustain strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism.**

While Michigan has [made progress](#) on reducing chronic absenteeism in recent years through daily attendance tracking, an early warning indicator system, and disaggregated data reporting, rates [remain higher than pre-pandemic levels](#) and the state's progress must be sustained in order to ensure that all students receive the learning they need. The next Michigan governor should strengthen the state's approach to addressing chronic absenteeism by [developing a statewide policy agenda](#) prioritizing the issue and [ensuring financial sustainability](#) of [proven practices](#). As noted earlier, Community Schools are a [promising approach](#) to addressing chronic absenteeism and should be considered in tandem with other efforts.

## **Recommendation 2:**

### **Expand evidence-based literacy and math supports across K-12.**

Given the state's performance on The Nation's Report Card, Michigan has much work ahead to improve student proficiency in literacy and math.

The state has already made significant strides to advance evidence-based literacy instruction in schools. In 2024, Michigan [passed laws](#) requiring educator preparation programs to align their instruction with the [Science of Reading](#) and schools to implement [mandatory early literacy screenings](#) as well as [provide assurances](#) that educators are trained in evidence-based reading practices. In 2025, Governor Whitmer also [increased state funding](#) for literacy, and in January 2026, the state department of education [published a curated list](#) of approved, evidence-based instructional materials. Several of these new requirements would take effect in the 2027-28 school year and the next governor should ensure that they are implemented with fidelity.

The next governor of Michigan may take a further step by requiring schools to select curricula from the new curated list of evidence-based instructional materials, which is currently encouraged but not explicitly required. They should also ensure that the state department of education tracks districts' selection and usage of chosen curricula to evaluate the efficacy of the materials and additional support needed from the state.

Michigan has similar work to do regarding evidence-based math instruction. While the state legislature recently made [significant investments](#) in math education and state scores [have improved](#), additional action is needed. NCTQ [reports that](#), similarly to the necessary policy actions with literacy, Michigan must enact policies strengthening high-quality instructional materials for math, including issuing state guidance, requiring

districts to adopt approved materials, collecting and publishing data on adoption and usage, and other measures.

Alabama made [significant investments](#) in evidence-based math instruction and has seen notable improvements since then, making the [largest jump in the nation](#) on the 2024 NAEP results. Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Indiana [have also implemented](#) strong reforms.

### **Recommendation 3:**

#### **Ensure high standards and emphasize results in accountability.**

The next governor of Michigan should treat the state’s dismal NAEP scores like the emergency that it is. They should introduce stronger reporting requirements and accountability measures for all schools, but especially chronically underperforming schools. Legislation and regulations should provide clearer, more stringent guidance, aligned with the conditions for entering into and out of various levels of state support or intervention. Lasting improvements in education depend on centering the affected community. Families who have too often been left out of decision-making must play a meaningful role in shaping the development of a better educational ecosystem.

State takeovers of failing schools have proven politically unviable in Michigan, often triggering voter backlash and resistance. Instead, Michigan should adopt “Innovation Zones” (iZones), modeled on Tennessee’s approach for CSI schools. This model preserves district control while applying interventions that led to test score gains over six years.

Key components include strong leadership through top principals, extended learning time (including summer), financial incentives to attract high-quality teachers, consistent use of evidence-based instruction, and additional state funding of \$1,000–\$2,000 per student to fund intensive supports like tutoring.



## Choice

Michigan has several opportunities to expand the high-quality public education options available for families so that they can choose what works best for their children. While the state has a [large charter school student population](#) relative to other states, it could do more to encourage the expansion of high-quality charter schools. In addition, Michigan limits access to other options, such as open enrollment within and across districts. Providing easier and wider access to different high-quality options helps to ensure that all children, especially those who are most disadvantaged, can receive an education that meets their needs, sets high expectations for them, and prepares them to succeed in their life after high school.

### **Recommendation 1:**

#### **Create a “fast lane” for proven providers of high-quality charter schools.**

Michigan currently lacks a formal designation for fast-tracking charter school operators that consistently demonstrate their effectiveness at improving student outcomes. The next governor should embrace the choice-rich environment of the state’s education ecosystem while maintaining high standards for quality by creating such a designation, which would reduce regulatory burdens on reliable charter school operators.

One way this designation could be earned is if operators have a track record of exceeding state averages in student growth and proficiency. Designation could result in streamlined application processes for opening new campuses and longer charter terms to ensure stability for families. Massachusetts has a “[proven provider](#)” fast-track model, with [notably positive results](#). Such an approach would cut red tape for Michigan charter operators that are closing achievement gaps while maintaining strict oversight for the rest.

### **Recommendation 2:**

#### **Enact policy mandating within- and cross-district enrollment, based on an analysis of open enrollment policies and their effects on access and equity.**

Zip code should not dictate what school a child attends. Michigan should make it easier for families to choose the public school that works best for their child, no matter where they live. However, while the state’s Schools of Choice program gives districts the option to allow families to enroll their children in another public school within the same district or in another district, it [does not currently mandate](#) that districts do so. This means that families must rely on the discretion of districts to allow them to enroll their children in the schools best suited to their needs. Michigan’s next governor should work with the legislature to ensure that families have unmitigated access to open enrollment options, starting with an analysis of current open enrollment policies’ effects on access and equity.

One example of an ambitious inter-district enrollment model that could be adopted with shifts to state policy is in [Connecticut](#). The Greater Hartford system includes nearly 40 magnet schools along with an inter-district transfer program that together serve over 40,000 students in magnets and about 3,000 through open choice. More than half of Hartford’s students participate. Families pay nothing for transportation, and enrollment processes are designed to promote socioeconomic diversity. Many of the magnet schools are located in Hartford and New Haven, where large numbers of students of color live, creating new educational opportunities within city neighborhoods while also drawing in suburban students to achieve greater integration. Results indicate positive outcomes for students attending these magnet schools.

### **Recommendation 3:**

**Use the new Federal Scholarship Tax Credit (FSTC) program to expand access to tutoring and out-of-school time programs.**

The new [Federal Scholarship Tax Credit \(FSTC\) program](#) represents an opportunity to expand access to high-quality out-of-school time programs and for accelerating learning through evidence-based tutoring for students who need it the most. We recommend embracing the FSTC program and designing it to serve under-resourced students and families by providing free services through scholarship-granting organizations and identifying trusted community-based organizations that provide academic and non-academic support to K-12 students. [Out-of-school time programming provides academic enrichment and innovative learning opportunities for young people to build academic and durable skills](#). It also provides working class families with additional child care support, ensuring their children are in safe, supportive environments after school and on the weekends.

## *Moving* **Forward**

The next governor has a chance to transform education in Michigan, from the first day a child enters school to the day they graduate with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed to succeed in the world beyond. By embracing innovation that maximizes the potential of every student, ensuring schools deliver strong results, and expanding high-quality public options for families, the next governor can build a brighter future for all. This is how children, families, educators, and communities across Michigan will thrive for generations to come.