Superintendent Op-Ed
West MI Superintendents Say Restore Schools to Restore Economy…No Excuse

A few months ago, amid the depths of despair of this global pandemic, Michigan schools were asked to reimagine and remake themselves literally overnight.

With classes canceled, and no end to the strict prohibition of large gatherings in sight, Governor Gretchen Whitmer and the Legislature ordered schools to deliver education remotely to students, online or otherwise. No internet access? No excuse. No computers? No excuse. And we did it.

Now, we're asking the same of our elected leaders.

Michigan's revenue dropped precipitously during the pandemic. Budget projections released in May documented a loss of $1.2 billion in the school aid fund during the current budget year and similar revenue losses in the next two budget years before the economy is fully restored.

One Senator, the chair of the K-12 appropriations subcommittee, warned of a potential 25 percent cut in school funding. Our response? Senator, that's not acceptable. If it wasn't acceptable for school leaders to allow children to spend a third of their school year without instruction, it's not acceptable to suggest we can reduce their programming by 25 percent in the next school year.

We didn't say remote learning was impossible when asked. We stepped up and made it happen. We need our legislators and the governor to do the same.

They can start, as Governor Whitmer and Mike Shirkey, the Senate majority leader, have done, by calling upon Washington to support schools as the federal government did during the recession in 2007-2010. Nearly $4 billion in stimulus funding was sent to Michigan to prop up government operations. $1.6 billion of that was sent directly to schools, and legislators were allowed to spend the remainder on schools and other essential operations as needed.

In March, Congress passed and President Trump signed the CARES Act providing over $2 trillion in stimulus aid. **In one of the largest stimulus packages in our country's history, less than 1 percent was dedicated to public schools across the country.** Early estimates suggest an investment of $200 billion will be needed to protect education nationwide. Congress needs to take this action, and do so quickly, so the nation's schools can adequately prepare for the challenges ahead.

Why are schools so important to our state's recovery? Because they're our past, our present, and our future. The education provided in the past has brought us to the peak of innovation and economic strength we enjoy today. Many of those working to mitigate this pandemic, and a vaccine to control it, were educated in our public schools.

More importantly, our present circumstances demand some return to business as usual. Education is our chief child care provider in this state, and the nation. Obviously, we do much more than child care, but that single aspect of our function allows moms and dads to work without fear for their children's welfare. We cannot fully restore our economy without restoring our schools.

Unfortunately, the conditions under which students will return to class will require greater investment, not less. Schools will incur higher expenses in order to adhere to health and safety guidance from the federal government and state and county health officials, as it is likely class sizes will need to be reduced and safety measures implemented to ensure the health of staff and students.

We have a simple message for our elected officials: Lansing, we have a problem. Washington, we have a problem. To reopen our economy, and to maintain our economic growth thereafter, you MUST find a way to hold schools harmless. You MUST find a way to afford schools the opportunity to perform their invaluable functions for our children and our economy.

We've met our challenge. We're preparing to do better in the fall. If we are to successfully reopen our economy, if we are to equip our children with the problem-solving skills to thrive in an increasingly uncertain world, you must do the same. No excuse. Our future depends on it.

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