



Newsletters

Good Morning, Randi

Crain's Forum: K-12 standards

# Opinion: Funds are languishing, and students are paying the price

By Jeff Donofrio



Credit: UnSplash

Michigan's K-12 schools rank 42nd in the nation, highlighting a crisis that requires immediate action.

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Education is foundational to Michigan's success. We need best-in-class K-12 and post-secondary education and training systems to prepare Michiganders for future jobs, increase incomes, close the talent gap and successfully compete for business investment and job creation.

For years, Michigan has struggled in K-12 education performance. Now we can see the extent of the problem compared to other states — and it's alarming.

Launch Michigan is a bipartisan, nonprofit organization that brings together education, business, labor and philanthropy to reimagine our state's public education system. Its [online dashboard](#), released in March, reveals that 7 out of 8 Michigan school districts underperform similar districts in leading states in areas such as reading, math and graduation rates.



The dashboard shows that even with the extraordinary efforts of parents, teachers and administrators, Michigan can't overcome an educational system designed for a different time. Well-intentioned attempts over the years to update and improve have lacked the scale and long-term leadership needed to turn the ship.



Jeff Donofrio is president and CEO of Business Leaders for Michigan and is chair of the Launch Michigan Board of Directors.

To ensure better outcomes for our state and kids, we need to unite around comprehensive reform, including an overhaul of leadership and governance at the Michigan Department of Education.

We don't have to look far to see the struggles at the Michigan Department of Education. A healthy, well-functioning education system needs adequate funding, but those dollars must reach the classroom to be effective. For decades, overly bureaucratic systems have siphoned money from teachers and students. Despite declining student enrollment, redundant administrative functions have persisted.

The governor and Legislature took the issue head on by allocating \$245 million in one-time funds to help school districts implement noninstructional cost-saving measures

such as shared services, integrated technology and centralized purchasing. The goal was to redirect hundreds of millions of dollars in savings back into the classroom, benefiting kids the most, without raising taxes or tapping into other funds.

Instead of promoting the program and spurring innovation in our school districts, the Michigan Department of Education has sat on the money. Two years later, most of those funds remain unspent. This inaction by the state superintendent is depriving our teachers and students of essential resources for an optimal learning environment, while a bureaucratic and antiquated system remains unchecked.

Despite the lack of leadership from the top, many school districts have forged ahead with solutions. They have implemented shared software systems to access data and scale business functions and have reorganized and repurposed buildings. Many districts across the state have demonstrated both the willingness and ability to change. But they can't do it alone.

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Overhauling governance, optimizing and providing equitable, adequate resources, and setting high performance standards are three of the strongest ways we can catalyze change in the K-12 educational system. These interconnected strategies pave the way for transformation.

Michigan's K-12 schools rank 42nd in the nation, highlighting a crisis that requires immediate action. Voters must demand long-term change, and policymakers must take on the task of doing better for our kids. Our children deserve more, and the future of our state's economy depends on it.

*Jeff Donofrio is president and CEO of Business Leaders for Michigan and is chair of the Launch Michigan Board of Directors.*

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