

NEWS RELEASE:

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Michigan Education Justice Coalition: State Budget Addresses Significant Needs, More Work to Be Done

Funding equity, special education and mental health are key wins for Michigan communities. Lawmakers urged to start working to address long-term structural funding issues now

LANSING, Mich. – With school districts across the state working to finalize their FY23-24 budgets this week, Michigan lawmakers worked late into the night to pass a budget that made significant strides in addressing longstanding issues in the state’s K-12 education system.

Earlier this year, the Education Law Center released a report finding that our education system needs an additional \$4.5 billion annually to achieve the stated policy goals Michigan leaders have set, with the average district in Michigan under-funded by roughly \$3,000 per student.

This year’s Education Budget increases per-pupil funding school districts receive to \$9,700, a 5% increase over the previous year. School districts that have a larger percentage of at-risk students and English language learners will also share an additional \$13.3 million in funding – something that Michigan Education Justice Coalition members have been advocating for years.

“We are so very grateful that the Legislature prioritized young people in this year’s budget. Our young people have been hurting and asking for more responsive, healthy, and healing schools,” said Peri Stone-Palmquist, executive director of the Student Advocacy Center, which has offices in Ypsilanti, Jackson and Detroit.

“They’ve shared stories of ceiling tiles falling, school bus cancellations, classrooms with no teachers, unilateral assignments to virtual schools, and suspension after suspension. Our young people have shared those concerns and made very specific asks for greater investments in the students struggling the most. The Legislature listened and we look forward to seeing the way education will be transformed with these and future investments.”

In addition to overall funding increases, students in Michigan will be able to receive free breakfast and lunch thanks to \$160 million in new funding. Funding gaps were also addressed in special education and student mental health, with special education being funded at the full per-student allowance.

Despite being concerned that school debt relief was removed from the final education budget, **Benton Harbor Public Schools Board Member Elnora Gavin** saw several areas that will benefit her district.

“Districts like ours have been hit hard in the areas of special education and mental health, so this year’s budget will be critical in ensuring our students get the extra support that parents have been advocating for far too long,” said **Gavin**. “Immediate debt relief would have gone a long way towards restoring vital programs that have been cut over the years, so removing debt forgiveness from the budget poses a striking blow to our projections, but we will still rise and

seek solutions to rebuild healthy programs in hopes that state lawmakers keep their promise to provide debt relief within the upcoming months.”

Betsaida Valdivia, a recent Grand Rapids Public Schools graduate with a special needs brother still in the district, recently organized 75 parents to attend the last GRPS board meeting to urge the district to address students’ unmet needs.

“We have about 14,000 students that are predominantly minority and at risk. The district recently hired a new mental health director and new youth therapists to help address the mental health needs, so the budget passed today will ensure that can continue,” said **Valdivia**.

Molly Sweeney from 482 Forward in Detroit was encouraged by steps made to address funding equity but also pointed out that there are serious funding issues that remain in the long term.

The roughly \$6 billion in federal COVID relief funding (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief or ESSER funds) that Michigan received to help students recover from lost learning during the pandemic is slated to expire in 2024. Low-income districts received a higher percentage of that funding and are already making funding decisions based to account for those dollars not being available in the future.

“We are thrilled that lawmakers finally funded the \$94.4 million for Detroit Public Schools Community District for literacy, and that this year’s budget took serious strides to ensure that the districts with the most at-risk students receive additional funding to meet their needs,” said **Sweeney**. “However, lawmakers need to recognize that structural issues in how we fund education must be fixed if we want Michigan to have a public education system that can work for all. Until that happens, we will still be shorting our students and teachers by \$4.5 billion every year.”

MEJC Executive Director Trina Tocco stated that addressing the state’s structural shortfall in education funding needs to be the top priority for Gov. Whitmer’ newly created “Growing Michigan Together Council.”

“The first step to stopping the outflow of people from Michigan is to ensure that we are a place where families can thrive, and that starts with our schools,” said **Tocco**. “Education experts have put forward several proposals in recent years to fund our education needs fairly and equitably, and we stand ready to be a resource to the governor and her council to get them done.”

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