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Granholm: Don't stall progress on education reform

GOV. JENNIFER GRANHOLM

In Detroit and throughout Michigan, we must accelerate our efforts to reform public education. This is not a moment for mediocrity or timidity. Instead we must be aggressive and bold.

Previous reforms are producing results. On Tuesday, we celebrated the fourth anniversary of Michigan's rigorous high school graduation requirements, some of the toughest in the nation.

The new requirements were the most significant education reforms in a generation. They were designed to generate dramatic increases in learning and college enrollment. Those reforms allow us to compete successfully not just with children in Indiana and Kansas, but with kids in India and Korea, too. Every single child in Michigan is now taking a college prep curriculum.

When we passed the requirements, many people feared the tougher standards would create more dropouts. Data released this week demonstrate just the opposite.

The Center for Educational Performance and Information reported that the graduating class of 2009 saw an improvement in the four-year dropout rate compared to 2008 and 2007. In 2007, 15 percent of Michigan's students dropped out. By 2009, the rate fell to 11 percent -- a solid improvement during the time the new standards were taking effect.

Finance, academics linked

The link between the new graduation requirements and a lower dropout rate can be seen at Battle Creek's Lakeview High School, which is laser-focused on student learning, and they intervene with every student who is falling behind. Lakeview graduates 93 percent of its students in four years despite a significant increase in students from economically challenged families. When students get an additional year to complete their work, the graduation rates are even higher.

On the other hand, the astonishing fact that only 3 percent of Detroit's fourth-graders and 4 percent of its eighth-graders tested proficient in math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress last year should cause every adult -- from legislators to parents to school board members -- to cry out for dramatic changes that improve student achievement.

Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb is pursuing dramatic reforms to repair the district's finances and academics, for the two are inextricably bound. But student learning cannot improve as long as the adults who benefit from the system are fighting to preserve the status quo.

Further reform needed

In January, I signed into law another round of reforms that will make improving student achievement the driving force in Michigan's education system and a significant factor in how we evaluate teachers, principals and schools. The reforms allow the state to intervene in the lowest-performing schools, permit new high-quality charter schools to open if they meet certain standards, and allow the closure of low-performing charter schools.

Further reform is needed, though.

We need to consider longer school days and longer school years. We need to recruit high-performing teachers to low-performing districts and compensate them for it. We need to reward the fantastic teachers who are clearly helping students progress.

We're working on our application for the second round of Race to the Top funds. A critical component will be our commitment to adequately funding education. That requirement has cemented my public commitment: I'll veto any bill that cuts K-12 funding in the 2011 school year.

The 2004 Cherry Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth set us on an arduous path to educational excellence and economic promise. If Michigan's recession has taught us anything it's that we must be relentless and fearless in continuing to improve student learning -- the foundation for the New Michigan.

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