June 10, 2020
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.

Tom TenBrink
Superintendent
Jenison Public Schools

Ron Caniff
Superintendent
Kent Intermediate School District

Dr. Kevin Macina
Superintendent
Byron Center Public Schools

David Washburn
Superintendent
Comstock Park Public Schools

Dr. Heidi Kattula
Superintendent
East Grand Rapids Public Schools

Daniel Behm
Superintendent
Forest Hills Public Schools
Kevin Polston
Superintendent
Godfrey-Lee Public Schools

Bill Fetterhoff
Superintendent
Godwin Heights Public Schools

Dr. Ronald Gorman
Superintendent
Grand Rapids Public Schools

Roger Bearup
Superintendent
Grandville Public Schools

Gerald Hopkins
Superintendent
Kenowa Hills Public Schools

Mike Weiler
Superintendent
Kent City Community Schools

Michael Zoerhoff
Superintendent
Kentwood Public Schools

Dr. Mike Shibler
Superintendent
Rockford Public Schools

Greg Pratt
Superintendent
Lowell Area Public Schools

Samuel Wright
Superintendent
Kelloggsville Public Schools

Pete Bush
Superintendent
Sparta Area Public Schools

Rob Bitichok
Superintendent
Thornapple Kellogg Public Schools

Craig Hoekstra
Superintendent
Wyoming Public Schools

Dr. John Severson
Superintendent
Muskegon Area ISD
Bob Szymoniak
Superintendent
Fruitport Community Schools

Dr. Curt Babcock
Superintendent
North Muskegon Public Schools

Dr. Adam Bayne
Superintendent
Holton Public Schools

Tom Livezey
Superintendent
Oakridge Public Schools

Bill O’Brien
Superintendent
Mona Shores Public Schools

Jeff Johnson
Superintendent
Montague Area Public Schools

Jim Nielsen
Superintendent
Orchard View Public Schools

Greg Helmer
Superintendent
Ravenna Public Schools

Matt Cortez
Superintendent
Muskegon Public Schools

Steve Edwards
Superintendent
Reeths-Puffer Public Schools

Rane Garcia
Superintendent
Muskegon Heights Public School Academy System

Dr. Jerry McDowell
Superintendent
Whitehall Public Schools

Dr. Dedrick Martin
Superintendent
Caledonia Community Schools

Peter Haines
Superintendent
Ottawa Area ISD
Dr. Garth Cooper
Superintendent
Allendale Public Schools

Shannon Brunink
Head of School
Black River Public Schools

Ron Veldman
Superintendent
Coopersville Area Public Schools

Andy Ingall
Superintendent
Grand Haven Area Public Schools

David Tebo
Superintendent
Hamilton Community Schools

Dr. Brian Davis
Superintendent
Holland Public Schools

Dr. Doug VanderJagt
Superintendent
Hudsonville Public Schools

Dr. Tim Travis
Superintendent
Saugatuck Public Schools

Dennis Furton
Superintendent
Spring Lake Public Schools

Tom Martin
Superintendent
West Ottawa Public Schools

Cal DeKuiper
Superintendent
Zeeland Public Schools

Dr. Scott Korpak
Superintendent
Northview Public Schools