

# Michigan Parents for Schools

*Parents working for excellent public schools  
—for our children, our communities, and our future.*

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*Executive Director*

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Remarks of Steven Norton, Executive Director of Michigan Parents for Schools, to the Legislative Roundtable hosted by Ann Arbor Public Schools, Pioneer High School, 6 May 2011.

Senators, Representatives, and supporters of public education:

My name is Steve Norton, and I'm executive director of Michigan Parents for Schools, a statewide organization, based in Ann Arbor, working for strong and excellent public schools in the state of Michigan. I'd like to thank you for coming here, to Washtenaw County, to discuss these critical issues about funding for public education. As most of you know, Washtenaw County is in many ways a microcosm of the state, with urban, rural and suburban communities, great variety in our local economies, and great diversity in our ethnic and cultural heritage.

Yet, when it comes to schools, all of us are facing the same issues. School districts face tremendous financial pressure, endangering the quality of their programs and their ability to retain excellent faculty and staff. Parents share similar worries about what will become of their children's schools. Our children share similar hopes and dreams for the future, hopes that we jeopardize when we erode public education in our communities. While our communities are on different parts of the downward staircase, we are all, sadly, moving in the same direction. We must also search for common solutions.

As it is here in Washtenaw County, so it is in the state as a whole. Everyone who cares about public education in our state should be frustrated and angry about the school aid budget proposals currently making their way through the legislature. The Governor's proposal takes what might have been a reprieve and turns it into a heavy blow to our schools, which have already suffered years of stagnant or falling support. We should also be appalled that, in addition to undermining our schools, the budget bills would further harm the most vulnerable members of our communities. Cuts like the elimination of the state Earned Income Tax Credit will push thousands of children into poverty,<sup>1</sup> just as their schools are being denied the resources to adequately help at-risk children.

As shameful as the current budget proposals are, the current debate over how to slice the revenue pie is distracting us all from the main problem: that the pie itself is shrinking, and has been for years. The issue should not be whether or not higher education should receive funding from the School Aid Fund. The issue is that the funds earmarked for the SAF have not even been adequate to fund K-12 education. These latest cuts come after years of 'structural strangulation' of our schools. State funds committed to K-12 education have fallen, as a percentage of total Michigan personal income, for a decade. In other words, in good times or bad, we have been investing less and less of what we have in our schools and our children.<sup>2</sup> Why? Because our tax policy is designed that way.

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Our state has a peculiar way of providing resources for the education of our children. Rather than identifying what resources are required to provide a quality education, we first decide how to collect the funds and then pretend that the limits imposed by this system are somehow beyond our control. But we get to choose what resources to give to our schools, and I am not sure we have chosen wisely. We have been systematically disinvesting in our children.

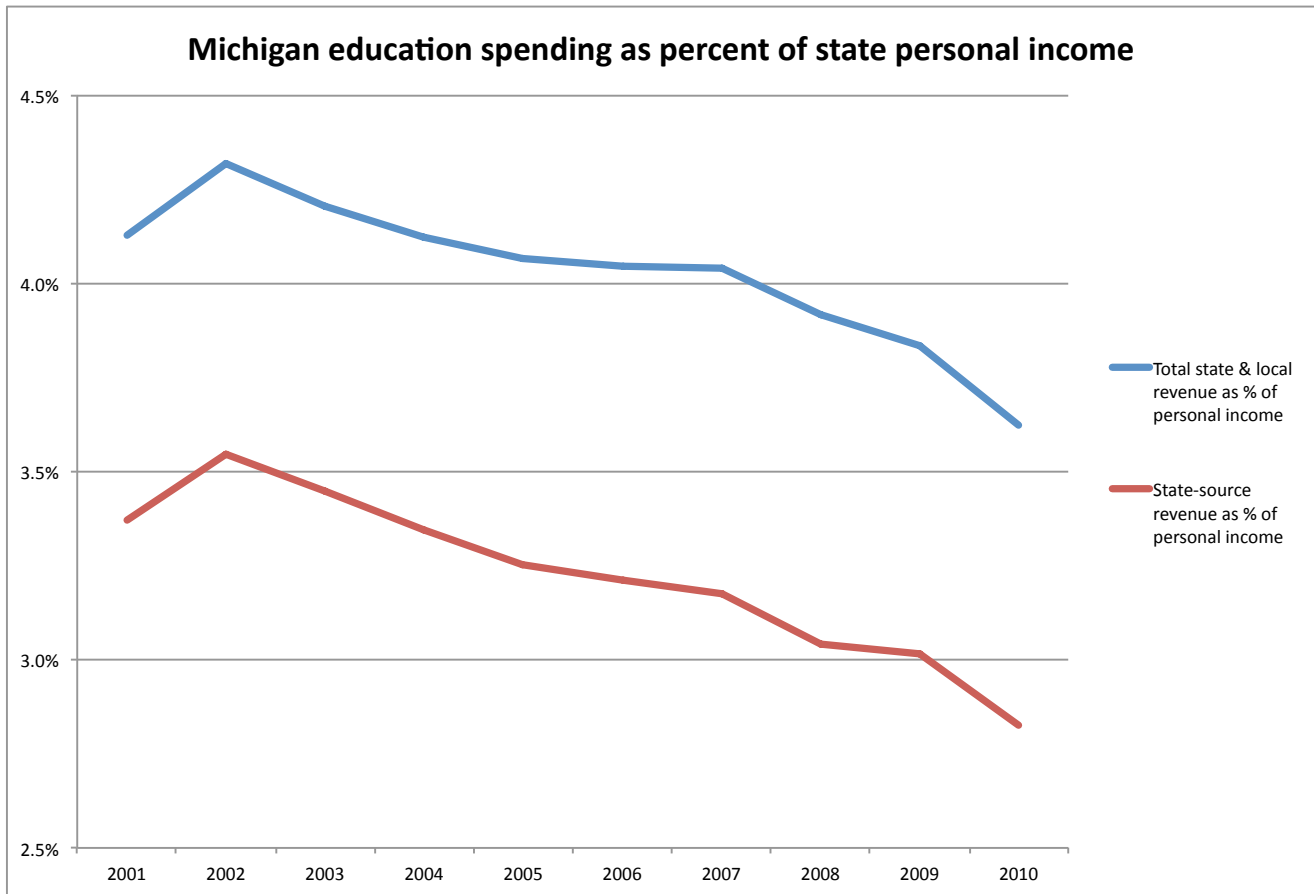
The costs of this cannot be understated. Education is a long-term investment. In fact, it was research performed right down the road in Ypsilanti that showed how investments in young children could pay dividends for them and for societies for decades. The Perry Preschool project, now part of the High/Scope program, randomly selected young children to participate in a high-quality preschool program. All the children then entered the same public schools as their neighbors. As measured by standardized tests, the positive effects of this intervention wore off by high school. But tests are not the measure of everything. Now, thirty and forty years later, the researchers have found that the early investment in quality education makes a huge difference: those who participated in their program are more likely to be employed, more likely to own a home, less likely to be on public assistance and less likely to have been in prison, than similar people who did not get that early experience.<sup>3</sup>

We cannot cut back schools and comfort ourselves that we will try to restore funding in the future. Half a generation of children will suffer as a result. We have been short-changing education for many years, partly because of the absurd idea that prosperity must come before good schools, rather than the other way around. All the efforts to improve public education will founder unless we commit the resources and skilled professionals such change requires. If we truly want to “reinvent Michigan,” we ought to be investing in our children, our communities and our future.

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<sup>a</sup> Michigan League for Human Services fact sheet: “Keeping Kids Out of Poverty with the Michigan Earned Income Tax Credit,” available at <http://www.milhs.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/FactSheetCPSPovDay2011.pdf>  
See also the calculations in the table available here: <http://www.milhs.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Low-income-family-at-various-incomes-taxed-with-100-percent-HPTC-no-EITC-w-joan-mods.pdf>

<sup>b</sup> The following chart uses data from the US Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis (personal income) and Michigan Dept. of Education Bulletin 1011 (revenues) to demonstrate how Michigan’s commitment to education has changed over time as measured by the fraction of our state’s income we spend on K-12 education:



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, Mich. Dept. of Education; MIPFS calculations.

Research from the Perry Preschool Study can be found here:

<http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219>

A nice overview of the research is presented by American Public Media here:

<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/preschool/>