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Iris Salters: Labor Voices

How Michigan should improve schools Strengthen teacher relations with students and make instruction relevant



Too many schools are responsive not to today's realities but to the demands of an earlier time, when education's aim was to prepare young people for employment in an industrialized economy.

We need to help schools meet a different mandate -- to prepare students for engaged citizenship in a diverse democracy and productive employment in a high-tech global economy.

The modern mission means schools need to evolve. We need to build on what we know works -- a rigorous, relevant curriculum built on close relationships.

Next week, Gov. Jennifer Granholm plans to deliver her State of the State speech, which undoubtedly will touch on some education themes. Some of the ideas may become reality.

So now is a good time to consider what works in education and how we can improve.

Rigor was part of the governor's agenda last year. Michigan adopted tougher high school graduation requirements to help students achieve more. But we shouldn't stop there because a rigorous high school curriculum is just part of the equation.

As part of a work group studying ways to help students achieve more, I recently visited a small high school in Chicago. The school is part of an initiative to break up Chicago's large schools into more manageable smaller settings. We have seen this in Michigan in the form of schools within a school.

The "small high school movement" is highly regarded as a possible solution to high dropout rates, but it isn't a panacea. Attending a large school doesn't predict failure for all, just as attending a smaller school doesn't guarantee success.

What I took away from my visit to Chicago was a renewed emphasis on the importance of relationships. Most recently, school research has emphasized the importance of the three R's -- rigor, relevance and relationships. Michigan has embraced rigor, but we need to do more to ensure teachers can do what they're paid to do -- teach children effectively.

Regardless of school size, students need a sense of belonging. They need to take responsibility for decisions about their learning. In a transformed high school dedicated to building relationships, empowered staff members learn to share leadership responsibilities, innovative ideas, student profiles and best practices.

Instruction must be relevant to practical applications, too. Students need to understand how to use what they're learning in the world beyond high school. And we must tailor instruction to

fit students' diverse learning styles. After all, not all students learn in the same way or time frame.

Beyond these areas, all students need a strong foundation with access to solid preschool and kindergarten programs, highly qualified teachers, up-to-date books and technology, consistently high expectations and a safe environment where basics are taught well.

In Chicago, I saw many tried-and-true methods that I wish existed in all schools.

As I look to the governor's speech next week, I pledge to be part of the solution that is built on sound educational principles proven to boost student achievement. Anything less is a disservice to our students and our future.

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