

The Detroit News

www.detroitnews.com

September 23, 2009

<http://detroitnews.com/article/20090923/OPINION03/909230316>

School cuts today cost more later

IRIS SALTERS

Sometimes short-term fixes are good. Sometimes they save money. But sometimes the quick fix can end up causing long-term devastation.

That is exactly what will happen if lawmakers in Lansing enact massive budget cuts to education and other programs, hurting students and communities for years to come.

Our leaders need to take into account the future impact of the decisions they make today and, instead of passing the buck, make the tough choices necessary to responsibly lead us out of this decade-long state budget mess.

Let's look at the long-term effects of a specific example from the school funding chopping block -- early childhood education.

The Senate passed a cut of \$104 million to these programs that ensure students get a great start to their school careers. If enacted in the coming weeks, this cut would all but eliminate preschool and early intervention programs. We'd save some money in the short run -- but what do we lose over the long haul by not making that investment?

The research is clear -- investing in early childhood education means fewer kids drop out of school. Putting students on a successful academic path from the beginning greatly increases the chances of them completing high school and moving on to post-secondary education and training -- and a job.

If we fail to invest in early childhood programs, we'll miss a critical opportunity to prevent more than 20,000 students per year from dropping out -- an opportunity we can't afford to pass up.

A study released this month by the Alliance for Excellent Education found that students who drop out this year will cost our state \$12 billion in lost income over their lifetimes.

Isn't it worth spending \$104 *million* now to save \$12 *billion* in the future?

That's a great return on our investment -- and lots of Michigan voters agree. Yet the Legislature seems ready to drop the budget ax anyway.

Making such a short-sighted decision should be unacceptable for our leaders in Lansing -- and it's no way to fix our state's economy.

Instead of slashing funding, we need to invest in early childhood programs to address our dropout crisis -- and invest in education overall to spur our faltering economy.

There are no quick fixes to the dropout crisis -- just as there are no quick fixes to our budget crisis. In education, we make a long-term commitment to students to guide them to success from an early age until they reach their end goal. Our political leaders in Lansing need to make that same commitment to all of us when it comes to our state budget.

Rather than cutting programs -- from education to public safety to human services -- that serve the public good and ensure our success as a state, let's invest in our future. Reform our state's antiquated tax structure so that it can meet the challenges of a 21st-century economy. Eliminate inefficient tax loopholes that don't create jobs.

As a state, Michigan has to make smart investments in these tough times, and nothing pays off more in the long run than public education. But to realize those long-term gains, we have to make the investment today - not continue the budget slashing of the past decade.

Iris Salters is president of the Michigan Education Association, a union that represents teachers and education support staff. E-mail comments to letters@detnews.com">letters@detnews.com.

Additional Facts

Labor Voices

Labor Voices columns are written on a rotating basis by United Auto Workers President Ron Gettelfinger, Teamsters President James Hoffa, Michigan AFL-CIO President Mark Gaffney and Michigan Education Association President Iris Salters. Look for Labor Voices every Wednesday in The Detroit News.

© Copyright 2009 The Detroit News. All rights reserved.