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Iris Salters: Labor Voices

Schools need finances to teach kids the basics



The old adage "you have to learn to walk before you can run" has never been truer than when it comes to educating our children.

Parents, administrators, community leaders and educators share a common belief: For Michigan children to succeed, classrooms must get back to the basics. Those basics must include a comprehensive list of offerings to reach students with different learning styles, including core courses, vocational opportunities, fine arts and physical education. A focus on the basics provides a complete education for all types of students in order to ensure they achieve their full potential.

But beyond the academics, we also must ensure that they have the skills to succeed in the world, including a sense of respect for others and readiness to work hard throughout their lives.

The simple fact is that Michigan schoolchildren are competing with the world. When it comes to the basics, children in Michigan and the United States lag behind those in countries that will compete with them for the good-paying jobs of the future. Throughout their education, students take a litany of standardized tests like the MEAP, PSAT, ACT and SAT, as well as final exams, midterm exams and quizzes. While these are all helpful to measuring a child's growth and development, parents and teachers know that the most important test is, "Can you get a good job?" The best foundation we can give our children as they prepare today to become the workers of tomorrow is a variety of offerings that ensure the development of the whole child.

Teachers across Michigan are eager to help students grasp and succeed in the basics of reading, writing, math, science and basic work habits. But they have some basic needs of their own, such as up-to-date textbooks and smaller class sizes. While the jobs of the 21st century require high-tech tools, the basic impact of individual attention and current textbooks can't be ignored. Beyond the classroom, other public school employees also provide vital, yet basic, components for student learning, such as safe buses to transport them to school, clean classrooms to learn in and healthy food to fuel their bodies.

Too often, these basic necessities are ignored because of tough financial times. Schools are struggling just to keep their textbooks up-to-date, let alone purchase new ones to meet new, more-demanding standards. Layoffs are inflating class sizes. Not investing in high-quality cleaning materials can lead to spreading more illnesses throughout our schools. Making the investment in these necessities is key to helping our students succeed.

Another important part of going back to the basics involves bringing back concepts of respect to Michigan classrooms. Teachers can't teach and students can't learn if a teacher spends more time dealing with disciplinary issues than teaching. This isn't a problem that school employees can fix alone. Getting back to basics, strengthening our children's sense of respect and giving teachers and school staff the tools they need will help today's students succeed as tomorrow's workers and leaders.

Iris Salters is president of the Michigan Education Association, a union that represents teachers and education support staff.

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