



Give High Schoolers More Access to Career Training Options

Proposals offer students motivating paths, greater stakes in success

By Ben DeGrow | March 2022

The effect of lost learning from COVID school policies has impaired many high school students' abilities to chart a path to productive futures. Though many have struggled in recent years, lawmakers have tools to enlist students directly in support of their own future professional attainment. They should use those tools.

A recent article in Bridge Michigan highlights the uneven availability of career training for high school students, based on the county in which they live. Unlike the state's financial approach to general education, access is limited to some because program funding is heavily dependent on special local property taxes.

Voters in Kalamazoo approved funding for a \$100 million career tech center. The Bridge article highlights the possible development of partnerships between these education entities and local businesses, an arrangement that has the potential to align what students learn with labor market

demands. But is asking voters in more parts of the state to build vocational training facilities the only or best way to help the rising generation prepare for productive adult lives?

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Michigan is looking at a series of other proposals that would tap into the initiative of students and parents to meet this important need. First, the Let Kids Learn petition proposal to create Student Opportunity Scholarship accounts would

authorize state tax credits for private donations that underwrite low- and middle-income families' education decisions. Among the many possible uses of these account dollars would be the payment of tuition and fees for career and technical education.

Other eligible expenses would include transportation to a formal career or apprenticeship program. According to Bridge, some southwest Michigan school districts are “scrounging for money to support student transportation” from their enrolled schools to specific programs spread throughout

the county. High schoolers seeking vocational training in other areas of the state face similar logistical challenges.

The Flex Learning plan unveiled last year by the Mackinac Center would give students keys to unlock the same barriers to opportunity. Rather than applying for private tax-credit scholarships, public high schoolers who opt into the plan could control a portion of the per-pupil funding allotted to them by the state. Flex Learning students then could “purchase” individual courses or enroll in career training programs sponsored outside their school district, and get financial aid to help cover transportation costs.

While these bigger ideas come to fruition, lawmakers are considering a one-time proposal that could help some of the neediest students right away. House Bill 5859 would authorize some of the remaining federal COVID cash to directly fund lower-income students adversely affected by remote instruction and school shutdowns. In addition to tutoring, the proposed Learning Loss Recovery Grants could help pay for “tuition or expenses related to trade courses, classes, or apprenticeships.”

A school-sponsored career program, industry certificate program or private apprenticeship may provide needed motivation to a disadvantaged student whose learning has been set back by closures and other disruptive policies. Different educational options and paths should be left on the table for students to pursue.

Aiming to help Michigan teens achieve these important ends, policymakers should be ready to embrace everything from Student Opportunity Scholarships to Flex Learning and Recovery Grants. Any or all of these policies could give many students the chance to improve their trajectory by giving them greater stakes in their own success.

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