

Why Equity-Focused Investment Matters for Michigan's Future

The Problem

Michigan's K–12 outcomes highlight a national issue of uneven access to effective math instruction. The state ranks 31st in 8th-grade math, with the largest gaps affecting students in poverty, students of color, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities.

8th Grade Math Student Data in Kent County



Overall **2 out of 5** (39.5%) are considered proficient



Approximately **1 in 10** black students are proficient in math (11.8%)



Approximately **1 in 5** Latine students are proficient in math

Source: KConnect Data Dashboard

Lived Experience Quotes

“When it comes to math and STEM, we have to get the kids out of buildings and let them see industries doing the work. It's hard to dream about things that you don't have background on. It's important to partner with industries to make experiences for students not just tours.”

- Principal

“Students need to physically see and touch while learning Math... We need to ignite a passion in students, helping them to see the bigger picture when it comes to math. They need to understand the real-world application, so it doesn't seem useless.”

- Educator

“Teachers need more training to educate (themselves) on industries connected to math to be able to share with students. It's also helpful to have those industry leaders come into the classroom to support learning.”

- Educator

These disparities are worsening as federal and state funding for math and STEM support declines. Positions previously funded through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) program, such as math coaches and STEM specialists, have been reduced. Critical state programs, including MAISA's Early Mathematics Project (Section 35a), Section 23h initiatives, and the MiSTEM Network, have also lost funding. These cuts reduce professional learning for educators and limit students' access to hands-on, applied math and STEM experiences, disproportionately impacting high-need districts.

In total, approximately \$38M was cut from these programs, reducing statewide math and STEM funding to \$0 for the foreseeable future.

Teacher listening sessions in Kent County districts, including Godfrey Lee, Godwin Heights, and Grand Rapids Public Schools, confirm these challenges. Educators report limited access to hands-on STEM and math resources, making it difficult to provide differentiated instruction and real-world learning experiences. Students struggle to see math as meaningful, and teachers express a need for ongoing support to meet diverse learning needs.

Key Economic Impacts



Reduced Workforce Quality: Declining math proficiency, as evidenced by nearly a 6% drop in eighth-grade math proficiency in Kent County over the past three years, reduces the pool of qualified candidates for in-demand STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and other technical fields. This can make it harder to retain and attract new professionals to our community.



Lower Individual Earning Potential: Studies, such as those by [Rose & Betts \(2004\)](#), show that academic achievement, particularly in foundational subjects like math, correlates with higher lifetime earnings. For example, individuals with a postsecondary certificate or associate's degree in Michigan earn significantly more than high school graduates.



Increased Achievement Gaps: Funding disparities and cuts disproportionately affect students from underrepresented populations, widening existing achievement gaps. Research indicates that closing the academic achievement gap in the United States would lead to a remarkable boost in both individual earnings and national GDP. ([Laudon, 2024](#))



Loss of Tutoring and Support Programs: Specific cuts have targeted programs that provide crucial one-on-one academic intervention and tutoring. The loss of these programs hinders efforts to close achievement gaps and improve student recovery from learning loss. ([Mooney, 2025](#))



Reduced State Competitiveness: Michigan has consistently ranked low in national education performance in subjects like math. Insufficient funding and program cuts move the state "backwards" in terms of educational quality, potentially hindering its long-term economic growth when compared to states that invest heavily in education. ([Decker, Rice, Moore, 1997](#))

Advocacy Opportunities

In 2024, KConnect's network affirmed the Shared Policy Agenda, which includes a policy priority "Equity in K-12 Education Funding." Specifically, we advocate to ensure that the Opportunity Index increases in funding by 30% by 2030 and, ultimately, to **100% funding**. ([KConnect Shared Policy Agenda](#))

In the FY26 Michigan budget, the state will invest more dollars for students from low-income backgrounds by increasing funding for the Opportunity Index by 25%, representing a \$258.7 million increase. That brings the total to \$1.29 billion. The Opportunity Index, created in 2023, provides resources to districts to improve the educational outcomes of students from low-income backgrounds and targets those dollars toward school districts with the highest concentrations of poverty. Funding the Opportunity Index is critical to addressing the opportunity and achievement gaps between students from low-income backgrounds and their wealthier peers. ([EdTrust Midwest, 2025](#))

Potential Community-Based Solutions

[MEERA \(Manufacturing and Engineering Education Reimagined for All\)](#) is a turnkey, competency-based STEM learning model that embeds real-world math applications into instruction. MEERA includes standards-aligned curriculum, technology, hands-on equipment, and structured teacher support. Students progress through modules at their own pace, applying math reasoning to engineering and manufacturing challenges that deepen understanding and engagement. The model strengthens foundational skills, supports differentiation, and exposes students to STEM pathways.

MEERA has been piloted in Allendale, Muskegon Heights, and Caledonia through different partners. Teachers reported increased student engagement, clearer scaffolds for struggling learners, and greater ability to differentiate instruction. Students gained exposure to STEM careers and applied math in meaningful ways.