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“Amid a contentious political scene nationally, a diverse group of Michigan leaders from the education, business, civic, and philanthropic realms – often at odds in the political arena – have spent the past 18 months seeking common ground on education policy.

On Wednesday, the unusual coalition known as Launch Michigan released its [first set of recommendations](#) for rebuilding a public education system battered by years of underfunding and punitive accountability approaches.

The phase-one agenda for 2020 includes a focus on elementary literacy and increased funding based on need, commonly referred to as weighted funding, in which all schools receive the same base amount with additional money allocated for at-risk and underserved students.

Beginning the coalition’s advocacy work with an emphasis on providing adequate and equitable resources is an important start, said MEA President Paula Herbart, a co-chair of Launch Michigan’s steering committee.

“To be successful we must fund our students, we must fund our educators, and we must value and respect what they do for our economy in the state of Michigan and for the global society at large,” Herbart said – echoing themes from her [Detroit News column about Launch’s focus on literacy and poverty](#) published Wednesday.”

For too long, “fixes” to the education system have been mandated without the input or broad support of educators, said Doug Rothwell, a Launch Michigan co-chair and CEO of Business Leaders for Michigan.

“Launch Michigan represents a different approach,” Rothwell said. “Never before in Michigan’s history has such a diverse coalition aligned behind a common set of education improvement recommendations.”

Next the panel will begin the work of advocating for the recommended changes at the Legislature even as efforts continue to devise more specific strategies for long-term system improvements.

“The past year’s (state) budget process was not pretty, to say the least,” Rothwell said, referring to a recent two-month standoff between Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and Republican leaders in the House and Senate over a lack of negotiations.

“I’m hopeful the governor and the legislature can use our recommendations as a way to make next year’s budget process less contentious and more impactful by adopting these as a whole,” he concluded.

In her budget proposal last March, Whitmer recommended a weighted funding formula to allocate what would have been the largest investment in public education in a generation if passed by lawmakers.

In 2020, the Launch Michigan panel is recommending the establishment of a new “Equity in Literacy” fund to provide additional support to K-3 readers – particularly those students living in poverty or in geographically isolated regions. Strategic planning at the district level would determine how best to use the money locally, employing evidence-based practices. The goal is to address “opportunity gaps” in the state, said Tonya Allen, a Launch co-chair and president and CEO of The Skillman Foundation.

“This state is such a diverse and rich place,” she said. “We have so many talented young people, and one thing I know to be true is that talent is distributed equally but opportunity is not.”

By focusing additional resources on students who are furthest from their aspirations, all children benefit, Allen said.

“A lot of times when we talk about addressing these problems, we talk about how we can come up with a one-size-fits-all solution, an equal solution, where every child gets the same thing. But equity is about giving children what they need.” Nothing will change, however, without everyone across the political spectrum pushing in the same direction, said Don Wotruba, executive director of the Michigan Association of School Boards. The Launch Michigan coalition has given him hope, he added.

“We have under-invested in our students that need the most help,” Wotruba said. “We need to change how we are doing things. We need to move from funding schools in Michigan to funding the needs of students.”

The panel’s recommendations grew out of a [survey conducted last spring](#) of nearly 17,000 Michigan educators. In that query, 75 percent of teachers said they would not recommend the profession to young people.

Enrollment in teacher preparation programs has plummeted in recent years, and 40 percent of educators leave in their first five years.

“These are staggering statistics that Launch Michigan hopes to change,” said Herbart. “We are thrilled to bring forth real solutions to legislators that we

believe will make a difference in tandem for both our students and our educators.”