

State's School Closure Plans Under Fire

Michigan's School Reform Office (SRO) should rescind all threats of school closures, which stand to harm those targeted low-income communities and further erode school employee morale, according to a strongly worded statement issued by the State Board of Education on Wednesday.

"There is a potential for disruption and harm to students, as school closure is a state-created form of student mobility and a large body of research finds that student mobility can have harmful effects on student performance," the statement said.

In a 6-1 bipartisan vote to issue the statement, State Board members also agreed authority over the SRO should be returned to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). Gov. Rick Snyder transferred the SRO away from MDE to an office under his control nearly two years ago.

Major changes to state standardized testing have occurred in the last four years, and more shifts are expected as the state implements a new federal law that replaces No Child Left Behind, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

As part of its draft ESSA implementation plan, the MDE is proposing changes to accountability measures that include a "partnership model" to help turn around low-performing schools rather than forcing closures.

[Analysis of needs and investment in struggling schools is the way to effect meaningful change, MEA President Steven B. Cook argued in his "Labor Voices" column in Wednesday's Detroit News.](#)

Last month, the state's School Reform Office (SRO) issued the list of [38 schools at risk of closure as soon as the end of this school year](#) - a list dominated by communities with high concentrations of children and families living in poverty.

Snyder should "reconsider and reverse Executive Order 2015-9 that removed the State Superintendent of Public Education's authority over the School Reform Office and authority to develop the list of priority schools," the State Board said in the statement.

"With intermediate school districts, MDE is currently the agent providing school reform guidance through its Partnership Model. It is in the best position to support change, demand performance and evaluate whether schools are able to educate their students," the board concluded.

Under the looming threat of school closures since last fall, MEA has been working with a number of organizations and stakeholders to fight back against ill-conceived policies that do nothing to serve the needs of children in struggling communities.

The group's strategies will include legal action if school closures are ordered.

"Closing schools without finding out why those schools are struggling is not a viable long-term strategy," Cook said in the News column. "If we are serious about improving low-performing schools, we must first identify problems and then commit to solutions."

Meanwhile, a close aide to Gov. Snyder on Wednesday [admitted it was a mistake for the state to send letters to parents](#) of children who attend the 38 schools identified for possible closure. The letters angered school officials who received no warning that parents would be told of other schools where they could transfer their students.