

# MICHIGAN'S TOP-TO-BOTTOM RANKING



**A MEASURE OF SCHOOL QUALITY  
OR STUDENT POVERTY?**

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# Michigan's Top-to-Bottom Ranking: A Measure of School Quality or Student Poverty?

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## **Executive Summary**

To comply with state and federal requirements, the Michigan Department of Education developed a ranking list for schools that attempts to measure school quality. This “Top-to-Bottom” ranking has been repeatedly criticized by school officials for appearing to be correlated with school poverty rates: Schools that serve more lower-income students tend to receive lower scores on the TTB list.

This study examines this issue and finds evidence that there is a statistically meaningful relationship between a school’s poverty rate and its TTB ranking. Indeed, 55 percent of a school’s ranking on the 2012-2013 TTB list could be explained by the portion of students enrolled who qualified for a federally subsidized free lunch. The study also finds that Michigan’s TTB list is more highly correlated with school poverty rates than similar rankings in several other states.

These results matter because TTB rankings are used to impose consequences on low-ranking schools. Such a system risks penalizing schools based not on their actual performance, but rather on the portion of low-income students they happen to enroll. This study suggests that Michigan should look at how other states rank schools in an attempt to reduce the likelihood of penalizing schools for simply serving more disadvantaged students.

A survey of seven other states reveals the uniqueness of Michigan’s ranking methodology, especially with regard to the way it measures how well schools serve low-scoring students. Other surveyed states measure the achievement gap between traditionally disadvantaged and more advantaged students, instead of measuring the relative size of the achievement gap between the top- and bottom-scoring 30 percent of students as Michigan does. Multiple states measure the academic growth of low-scoring students in each school as an indicator of overall school performance.

Consequences for low-ranking schools are also compared among these states. Michigan mandates particular staffing reforms for low-ranked schools in response to state and federal requirements. These include firing the school principal, replacing a majority of the staff, reopening the school as a charter school or even closing the school.

Other states incorporate more choice-based accountability into their school assessment system by permitting parents to transfer their children out of low-ranked schools and enroll them into higher ranked ones at state expense, including private schools in some cases. This study identifies several similar options that would bring this type of accountability to Michigan: 1) Fund districts that serve students outside their own borders; 2) Provide extra financial support to charter schools opening near low-ranked schools; 3) Remove all geographic barriers to Michigan’s “Schools-of-Choice” program; and 4) Require districts to enroll nonresident students transferring from low-ranked schools, subject to reasonable enrollment limitations.

This study suggests that Michigan should reconsider both the methodology used for the state’s TTB school ranking list and the state-imposed consequences levied on low-ranked schools. It also makes the case that a choice-based accountability system is preferred above any other, as it would allow students to escape schools that are not serving their needs and reduce the risk of penalizing undeservedly low-ranked schools.





## Introduction

On April 30, 2013, Principal William Patterson was removed from Jackson's Middle School at Parkside, due to the grade his school received from the Michigan Department of Education.<sup>1</sup> This decision may have seemed puzzling to some, as Patterson had been rated "outstanding" by a company Jackson Public Schools hired to train and evaluate its school leaders.<sup>2</sup> And on the Mackinac Center for Public Policy's report card published earlier this year, Parkside received a C — certainly not a stellar grade, but one that placed Parkside in the middle of the pack.<sup>3</sup> The state's ranking system, however, put Parkside in the bottom 4 percent of all Michigan schools.<sup>4</sup>

The JPS school board appealed Patterson's forced termination, but state officials enforced the mandate.<sup>5</sup> Instead of firing Patterson outright, however, JPS hired him back on as director of student achievement for secondary students. "We feel he has a very bright future in education," JPS Superintendent Dan Evans said.<sup>6</sup>

MDE's annual "Top-to-Bottom" ranking is used to require school officials to change certain practices. Under state law, a low ranking on the TTB list may require a school to terminate its principal, replace half the teaching staff, or even require the entire school to close.<sup>7</sup> Proposed legislation would use the TTB list to identify schools for state takeover.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, the TTB list is a flawed tool for measuring school quality. TTB rankings appear too closely correlated with student poverty rates to adequately distinguish a "good" school from a "bad" school. This shortcoming is no secret:

- ♦ In 2011, Brendan Walsh, a Grosse Pointe Public Schools school board member, plotted schools' TTB scores against the percentage of students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch in each school, and wrote of the TTB ranking, "... [O]ne should not conclude that low scores on standardized tests are a sign of a bad school any more than concluding high scores mean a school is ideal."<sup>9</sup>
- ♦ David Britten, superintendent of Godfrey-Lee Public Schools, conducted a similar analysis in 2013 and concluded, "Disguised as a ranking system... [the Top-to-Bottom list] really is nothing more than another blinding flash of the obvious. Did we really need another expensive system for identifying which schools and districts have higher rates of poverty than others?"<sup>10</sup>
- ♦ MDE posted a similar scatter plot to the ones Walsh and Britten produced, noting, "Schools with lower proportions of economically disadvantaged students tend to rank higher on the TTB List..."<sup>11</sup>

Though Michigan's public school accountability system is subject to a host of federal regulations and rules, there is room for the state to develop a clearer and better measure of school quality — one that does not unnecessarily penalize schools for simply enrolling students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

## Why Grade Schools?

Despite an increase in the number of public school options for parents (inter-district open enrollment, charter public schools, etc.), enrollment in conventional public schools is still largely determined by which students happen to live within a school district's boundaries.<sup>12</sup> Conventional public schools, therefore, are assured a level of enrollment, regardless of their actual performance. State-produced report cards aim to hold these types of schools accountable for their performance.

### *Use of the Top-to-Bottom List*

There is no question that state and local officials are attempting to use the TTB list to measure school quality and that the general public views the list in that way. In a published statement accompanying the release of the rankings in 2011, State Superintendent Mike Flanagan said, "[The TTB list] provides a real look at how our local schools are doing in educating their students."<sup>13</sup> Each year, the release of the TTB list prompts dozens of news articles throughout the state based on the presumption that the list allows parents and school officials to adequately measure school performance and compare performance among schools.<sup>14</sup>

Michigan's TTB list is also used to satisfy federal requirements.<sup>15</sup> In documents published to guide states in applying for waivers from requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the U.S. Department of Education writes that states must identify "Priority" (low-performing), "Focus" (large achievement gaps) and "Reward" (high-performing) schools.<sup>16</sup>

The federal government does not, however, specify *how* states must identify schools to meet this requirement. Federal officials, for example, required states to identify 10 percent of Title I-funded schools\* with large achievement gaps as Focus schools.<sup>17</sup> In response, Michigan officials chose to measure achievement gaps between the top-scoring 30 percent of students and bottom-scoring 30 percent of students within each school.<sup>18</sup>

Graphic 1 outlines the general methodology used to generate the state TTB list in comparison to federal guidance. As shown, the state has some flexibility when it comes to choosing how to measure student growth and achievement.

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\* Title I is a federal law that provides additional funding to schools that serve a large population of disadvantaged students. Federal money under the program is slated for items such as school wide improvement and upgrading educational programs for disadvantaged students. For more, see: "Title I - Improving The Academic Achievement Of The Disadvantaged," (U.S. Department of Education), <http://goo.gl/4JFQT> (accessed Sept. 16, 2013).

**Graphic 1: The Top-to-Bottom List and Federal Guidance**

School Category	Michigan Methodology	Federal Guidance
<b>Priority Schools</b>	Bottom 5 percent of schools, based on student achievement (50%), student growth (25%) and size of achievement gap between bottom- and top-scoring 30 percent of students (25%).	Bottom 5 percent of schools on both achievement and student growth, or schools with low graduation rates.
<b>Focus Schools</b>	Schools with the largest achievement gap between bottom- and top-scoring 30 percent of students.	Determination based on low achievement and student growth, largest gaps between subgroups.
<b>Reward Schools</b>	Top 5 percent of schools on TTB list, plus the top 5 percent of schools with the greatest average student growth and any school on the "Beating the Odds" list.	"Highest performing" schools making "adequate yearly progress" or "high progress" schools." <sup>†</sup>

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Michigan Department of Education.

## The Top-to-Bottom List

### *Ranking and Penalizing Schools*

Fifty percent of a school's rank on the state's TTB list is determined by overall average student test scores, 25 percent on student growth and the other 25 percent on the achievement gaps between the top-scoring 30 percent of students and the bottom-scoring 30 percent of students. Graduation rates also factor into scores for high schools.<sup>19</sup>

A school's rank on the TTB list largely determines which accountability category that school will fall into — Priority, Focus or Reward. MDE has determined that Focus schools are those that have the largest achievement gap between the top- and bottom-scoring 30 percent of students. Approximately 10 percent of Michigan schools are identified as Focus schools.<sup>20</sup> Districts with Focus schools must notify parents of this label, consult with state officials about strategies to reduce the achievement gap, set aside Title I funds to implement state-prescribed reforms and meet other state-mandated requirements.<sup>21</sup>

Priority schools are those in the lowest 5 percent of Michigan schools based on the TTB list or schools with a graduation rate of 60 percent or less for three consecutive years. Priority schools are under state supervision for four years.<sup>22</sup> Along with additional reporting requirements, these schools must develop a plan that follows one of the four intervention models created by the U.S.

\* "Beating the Odds" schools are deemed by MDE to be academically outperforming similar schools. BTO schools were identified in two ways: Finding schools that did significantly better than expected, and finding schools that dramatically outperformed peer schools, with similarities based on variables such as grade configuration, funding level, enrollment, student demographic makeup and more. For more information, see: "2011-2012 Beating the Odds Business Rules," (Michigan Department of Education), <http://goo.gl/QkGC2h> (accessed Sept. 16, 2013).

† "Adequate Yearly Progress" was established by the federal government under the No Child Left Behind Act. Each state establishes AYP criteria, subject to federal guidelines. For more information, see: "2012-2013 Michigan District & School Accountability Scorecards: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)," (Michigan Department of Education), <http://goo.gl/C9KZjQ> (accessed Sept. 20, 2013).

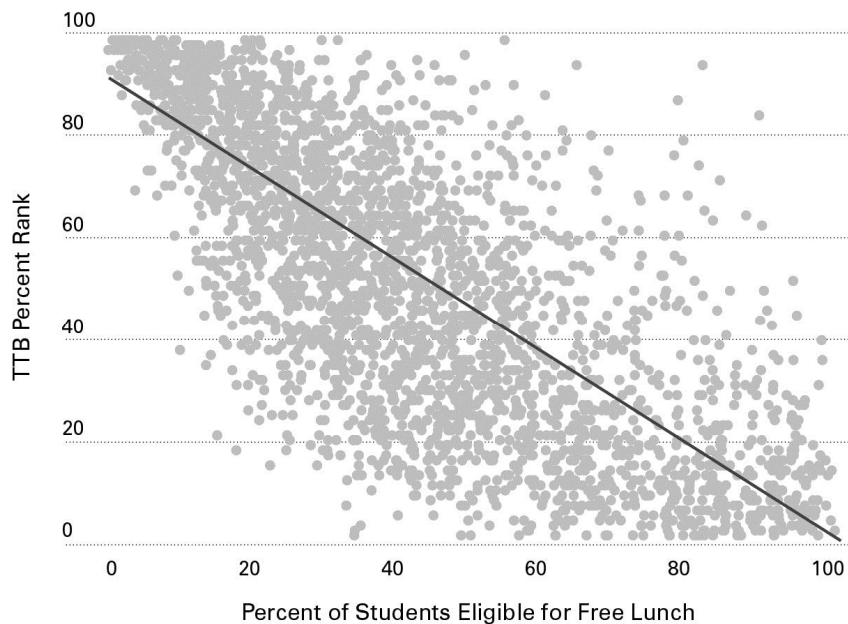
Department of Education: termination of the principal, firing of half the teaching staff, closure of the school, or reopening the school as a charter public school.<sup>23</sup>

Reward schools are schools that made "Adequate Yearly Progress" and rank in the top 5 percent of Michigan schools according to the TTB list, had the greatest gains in student achievement or were identified as outperforming schools with similar student populations ("Beating the Odds").<sup>24</sup> The state promises to identify Reward schools and highlight successful practices.<sup>25</sup>

### *Relationship to Student Poverty*

More than 60 variables were used in the calculation of the 2012 TTB rankings.<sup>26</sup> Though its methodology is complex, the outcome is clear: the TTB list is strongly correlated with student poverty levels. Plotting each school's TTB score against the percentage of students eligible for a free lunch through the National School Lunch Program shows a strong, negative relationship (see Graphic 2).<sup>\*</sup> TTB rankings and student poverty are so closely related that if the state had ranked schools simply on the percentage of students eligible for free lunch in the 2012-2013 school year, nearly half would have seen their ranking change by less than 10 percentage points.<sup>27</sup>

**Graphic 2: TTB Ranking and Percentage of Students Eligible for a Free Lunch, 2012-2013**



\* Eligibility for this federal program is based on household income. For more information about the National School Lunch Program, see: "National School Lunch Program," (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2012), <http://goo.gl/9a3wC> (accessed Sept. 17, 2013).

For the 2012-2013 school year, 55 percent of the variation in TTB scores for schools could be explained by the percentage of students eligible for free lunch at each school.\* This has been consistent across years — this same figure was 56 percent the previous school year. Interestingly, the correlation between a school's TTB rank and student poverty is similar in value to the correlation between raw standardized test scores and student poverty.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the formula used for the TTB list does not appear to mitigate the fact that schools serving larger portions of low-income students will generate lower standardized test scores on average.

Of the variables used to calculate TTB rankings, those that measured student test scores were most strongly correlated to poverty. However, several of the variables used to measure learning growth (such as annual gains in math and reading test scores) were also similarly tied to school poverty rates.<sup>†</sup> That is, poverty affects the level of student achievement as well as the rate of growth in learning as measured by MDE.

### ***Other State Report Cards and School Poverty Rates***

Comparing Michigan's public school accountability system to other states demonstrates that it is possible to craft such a system that both follows federal guidelines and is not as highly correlated with school poverty levels. In fact, of the eight states surveyed for this analysis, Michigan's school ranking had the strongest correlation to student poverty. Some of these states' ranking systems have been criticized by politicians and major newspapers for their association with poverty rates, even though these states' report cards have a much lower correlation than Michigan's report card.<sup>29</sup>

Arizona's accountability system is an example of one that meets federal guidelines and has a relatively limited relationship to school poverty rates. It scores schools based on a combination of broad, overall student academic outcomes (including student pass rates on state exams and graduation rates), learning gains for all students and learning gains made by just the lowest-scoring 25 percent of students in each school.<sup>30</sup> Although this seems similar to the formula used for Michigan's TTB list, the portion of students eligible for free lunches in Arizona schools explained only about 12 percent of the variation of scores for the 2012-2013 school year. Data from previous years yielded similar results.

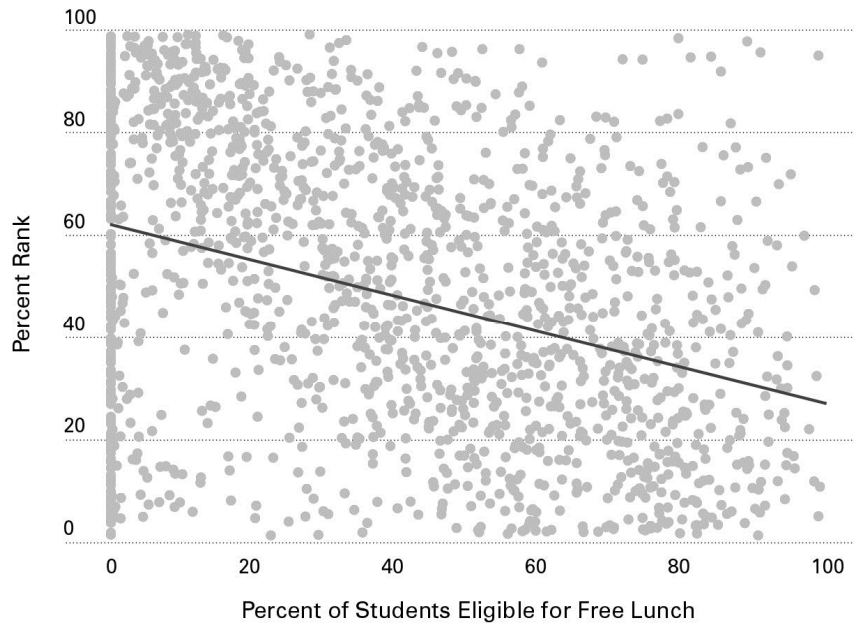
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\* This figure is based on analysis assuming a linear relationship between school rankings and poverty. A nonlinear model was tested and did explain slightly more of the data variation. However, to keep the analysis consistent and simple, a linear model was used to analyze the relationship between school rankings and poverty levels in Michigan and other states.

† Author's calculations using "2011-12 Data Needed for Replication of the Top-to-Bottom Ranking," (Michigan Department of Education, 2012), <http://goo.gl/E0kE1> (accessed Sept. 17, 2013). This finding echoes one made by the Cleveland Plain Dealer in June 2013, when reporters discovered that the state's "value-added" rankings were correlated to students' family incomes. Patrick O'Donnell, "Teachers' 'value-added' ratings and relationship to student income levels questioned," Cleveland Plain Dealer, June 18, 2013, <http://goo.gl/GliiCF> (accessed Sept. 17, 2013).

Graphic 3 shows scores of Arizona schools based on that state's school accountability model plotted against the percentage of students eligible for a free lunch in those schools.\* The spread of school scores shows that Arizona rankings are less correlated with student poverty, and the slightly sloping line shows that the "penalty" for having more students in poverty is less severe than in Michigan (see Graphic 2).

**Graphic 3: Arizona School Percentile Ranking and Percentage of Students Eligible for a Free Lunch, 2012-2013**



Graphic 4 shows all eight states surveyed and the coefficient of determination of each state's ranking to the percentage of students eligible for free lunch. This value shows just how much of the variation in individual school scores can be explained by the level of student poverty within each school. State school ranking data were paired with 2010-11 data on National School Lunch Program enrollment from the National Center for Education Statistics.†

States are listed in order of their school ranking's relationship to student poverty, with the largest correlations on top. As is apparent, Michigan has the strongest relationship between student poverty and school rankings. Florida is the next highest, with student poverty explaining 47 percent of the variance of school scores in the Sunshine State. Arizona's school rankings have the weakest relationship to school poverty and the relationship is consistent over time.

\* Arizona school scores were converted to percentage top-to-bottom rankings for a clearer visual comparison to Michigan.

† For states with multiple years of school rankings data, the use of older student socioeconomic datasets appears to make little difference. Both Michigan and Florida saw the correlation to student poverty of their school ranking systems barely change across years when paired with newer student socioeconomic data. "Elementary/Secondary Information System," (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), <http://goo.gl/ED34jG> (accessed Sept. 10, 2013).

**Graphic 4: School Accountability Systems and School Poverty Rates**

State	School Year	Percent of Ranking Explained by Poverty ( $R^2$ )
Michigan	2012-13	55%
	2011-12	56%
	2010-11	61%
Florida	2012-13	47%
	2011-12	47%
Wisconsin	2011-12	42%
Oklahoma	2011-12	35%
Ohio	2011-12	35%
	2010-11	35%
Maine	2011-12	32%
Indiana	2011-12	30%
Arizona	2012-13	12%
	2011-12	13%
	2010-11	11%

Source: See "Appendix A: Data Sources: School Accountability Systems and School Poverty Rates"

### ***State School Report Card Methodology Comparison***

Graphic 5 describes the various components used in the calculation of each state's report card and discusses choice-based consequences for schools that post low grades.\* Of the states surveyed, four included academic growth of the lowest-scoring students as a separate and significant part of a school's overall rank. Michigan does not include such a rank.

Michigan's achievement gap measurement also stands out among the surveyed states. Recall that the methodology used for the TTB list measures achievement gaps between the top- and bottom-scoring 30 percent of students within each school. In comparison, of the seven other states included in this analysis, only Wisconsin and Maine include similar achievement gaps assessments in their school rankings — and both states measure gaps between specific racial and demographic groups.<sup>31</sup>

\* Not all consequences for low-scoring schools are discussed. Many states, for example, have additional paperwork requirements for low-scoring schools. Consequences that increase choice for students attending identified Priority schools are listed.

Some states have implemented consequences for low-scoring schools that allow parents and students to determine whether a school succeeds or fails. In Wisconsin, for example, parents of students in districts with two or more low-scoring schools become eligible for a state-funded voucher to use to attend the school of their choice, including a private school.<sup>32</sup> Ohio also provides private school vouchers for students attending consistently low-achieving schools.<sup>33</sup> Arizona, interestingly, has a state law that stipulates that if a majority or otherwise five of a district's schools receive low grades, language disclosing this must appear above school board candidates' names on local election ballots.<sup>34</sup>

**Graphic 5: School Report Card Methodology and Choice-based Consequences for Low Scores**

State	Components	Choice-based Consequences
Michigan	50 percent overall achievement, 25 percent test score growth and 25 percent gap between top- and bottom-scoring 30 percent.	
Florida	50 percent overall achievement, 25 percent test score growth and 25 percent growth of lowest-scoring quartile.	State-supported student transfers to higher rated public schools.
Wisconsin	25 percent overall achievement, 25 percent test score growth and 25 percent demographic achievement gaps. K-8 schools: 20 percent attendance and 5 percent third-grade reading. High schools: 25 percent postsecondary readiness.	State-funded student transfers, including to private schools.
Oklahoma	33 percent overall achievement, 17 percent test score growth, 17 percent growth of lowest-scoring quartile, and 33 percent "whole school performance" (includes graduation rates, college entrance exam scores, etc.).	
Ohio	Overall achievement, academic growth, early literacy rates, demographic achievement gaps and postsecondary readiness.	State-funded student transfers, including to private schools.
Maine	50 percent overall achievement, 25 percent test score growth, 25 percent growth of lowest-scoring quartile.	
Indiana	50 percent math achievement and growth, 50 percent English achievement and growth; high schools graded on 30 percent math achievement and growth, 30 percent English achievement and growth plus 30 percent graduation rate and 10 percent postsecondary readiness.	Private school choice for students who would attend low-rated schools.
Arizona	50 percent mix of overall academic outcomes, 25 percent test score growth and 25 percent growth of lowest-scoring quartile of students.	State-funded student transfers and state assistance for remedial tuition.

Source: See "Appendix A: Data Sources: School Report Card Methodology and Choice-Based Consequences for Low Scores"

\* Ohio is in the process of developing a new accountability system which will phase-in these components over the next several years. Previous school ranking report cards put greater emphasis on overall proficiency rates.



## **Implications**

There are many reasons policymakers, taxpayers and parents would find a rank-ordered list of Michigan schools useful. A school ranking like the TTB list seems to provide the security of knowing exactly how one school, regardless of its location and particular circumstances, stacks up against all other schools in the state.

However, a statewide rank-ordered list such as this requires using a host of assumptions, values and variables, each chosen and assigned importance by the creator of a report card's methodology. These factors may or may not have any relation to what parents and students actually value in a particular school. Methodologies can also be sensitive to change, with slight modifications producing vastly different outcomes for individual schools. Since MDE uses school rankings to determine whether a school is to be praised, needs additional help, or is ultimately closed, the importance of measuring school quality accurately is critical.

Detroit Public Schools' Thirkell Elementary provides a clear example of the problematic nature of relying too heavily on a single methodology to determine the quality of a public school in Michigan. This school was ranked in the bottom 1 percent of Michigan schools on the TTB list.<sup>35</sup> Excellent Schools Detroit, however, a nonprofit coalition of community leaders that conducts unannounced visits of Detroit-area schools, ranked Thirkell as the best school in all of Detroit.<sup>36</sup> A report card produced by this author that controls for school poverty rates found Thirkell to be top-performing school in the entire state.<sup>37</sup> Even U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently visited Thirkell to honor the school's success and progress.<sup>38</sup>

Since Michigan's school ranking system list is so closely correlated with student socioeconomic background — more so than any other state surveyed — it is likely that some low-ranked schools would appear to be doing quite well when compared to schools serving students from similar backgrounds. If the state's TTB list were simply used to provide transparency, there would be not be as much cause for concern. But since the list has been used to replace principals, reorganize schools and may eventually be used to justify state takeover, the need to replace the TTB list with a more accurate measure of school quality is urgent.

## **Recommendations**

Michigan could look to other states for school ranking practices that have been approved by the federal government and that have less of a chance of penalizing schools for simply serving more disadvantaged students. Instead of measuring achievement gaps between the top- and bottom-scoring students, MDE should consider including the growth of lowest-scoring students as part of its report card, following the example of Florida, Arizona, Maine, Ohio and Oklahoma. As part of its research, the state could look for measures of test score growth that do not penalize schools that educate a large population of disadvantaged students. Arizona's methodology should be examined, since it had the smallest correlation to school poverty levels.

The state could also consider incorporating consequences for low-scoring schools that provide students and parents with more choice instead of automatic, state-imposed penalties. In other

words, instead of trying to figure out how to fix each individual low-scoring school, the state could empower parents to put the pressure on these schools to improve by making it easier for them to “vote with their feet” and enroll in another school of their choice.

Though the state does have to abide by federal requirements, other states, such as Florida, Ohio and Wisconsin have incorporated penalties for low-scoring schools that give parents a state-funded option to enroll in a different school, including private schools.

Michigan should consider such options within the limitations of its constitutional prohibition against private school choice.<sup>39</sup> The state could prioritize choice-based reforms by causing those reforms to apply to low-ranked schools immediately, while imposing longer delays before federal requirements take effect. Below are four such possibilities.

***1. Fund districts that serve students outside their own borders.***

The State Aid Act allows districts to receive funding for nonresident students it serves. Some districts, such as Berrien Springs and Suttons Bay, have begun innovative programs to serve nonresident students in this way.<sup>40</sup>

However, Michigan law also requires that if the educating district wishes to operate a facility outside of its own boundaries to serve such nonresident students, it must gain the approval of the district in which it wishes to operate such a facility.<sup>41</sup> By removing this requirement for educating districts that start a program near a low-ranked school, the state would be removing barriers to educational options for students who might be receiving inadequate educational opportunities.

***2. Provide extra financial support to charter schools opening near low-ranked schools.***

The state already provides startup grants to public charter schools on a competitive basis based on the assessed need for a charter school in a particular area, the school's educational goals, services to students with special needs and other factors.<sup>42</sup> The state should consider favoring applications for startup grants for charter schools that are opening near low-ranked schools (with a specified radius, for example). This would boost the incentive for competing schools to open near a school the state deems to be performing poorly.

***3. Remove all geographic barriers to Michigan's “Schools-of-Choice” program.***

In order to receive funding from the state on behalf of nonresident students, districts may only enroll students from districts within the same intermediate school district or within an ISD that is contiguous to the district's ISD.<sup>43</sup> This requirement should be removed to facilitate educational choice for more Michigan students. Its removal would allow students to enroll in a wider selection of online programs and would provide more options to students attending low-ranked schools.<sup>44</sup>

#### ***4. Require districts to enroll nonresident students transferring from low-ranked schools.***

Under the state's Schools-of-Choice law, districts can elect not to enroll nonresident students, even if they do enroll tuition-paying nonresident students.\* For students attending a low-ranked school, a better public alternative may be nearby.

To provide better options to students attending low-ranked schools, the state should require districts to take in those students under SOC, within the parameters of realistic enrollment limitations. The Legislature could consider whether districts would be able to accommodate taking in a number of nonresident students equal to 5 percent of their enrollment.

### **Conclusion**

With decades of education research showing the impact school poverty rates have on standardized test scores, accounting for this fact when attempting to measure school quality is not uncommon. In fact, Grand Valley State University, Michigan's highest-rated authorizer of charter public schools, adjusts for student socioeconomic status when evaluating its schools' success.<sup>45</sup>

Further, a recent study in Missouri recommends using an academic growth-based school ranking model that considers student background. Economists Mark Ehlert, Corey Koedel, Eric Parsons and Michael Podgursky write in the paper: "It is difficult to understand how a system that ignores [student background] and attempts to signal to all (or nearly all) disadvantaged schools that they must perform better will help improve instruction." In fact, they note, such a grading system could make things worse, and "... could result in a perpetuating cycle of the destruction and re-invention of instructional practices at disadvantaged schools, whether these practices are effective or not."<sup>46</sup>

State officials should keep this in mind when designing a statewide school accountability system. The reality is, however, that even though the state's TTB list can be improved, it will never be a perfect measure of school quality. There will always be error in any methodology that assumes to be an authoritative measure of school quality for nearly 3,000 schools that vary in size, location, emphasis, mission, demographics and a host of other characteristics.

Plus, there is no guarantee that what is chosen to be measured and graded is what parents actually value in public schools. For example, some parents may value schools that provide safe learning environments, flexible schedules, unique curricula offerings or community involvement more than schools that happen to be ranked high based on standardized test scores.

However, the state should provide some level of accountability of its public schools since public schools are provided with tax dollars and an assured level of enrollment regardless of school performance. The state can and should improve its ranking methodology, within the bounds of federal restraints, and implement consequences that provide incentives for low-scoring schools to improve and give students a chance to enroll in a school that better serves their needs.

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\* Birmingham Public Schools is an example of such a district. Audrey Spalding, "Birmingham Latest District to Exploit Schools of Choice," (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, Jan. 17, 2013), <http://goo.gl/zSQAqU> (accessed Sept. 17, 2013).

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## **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to acknowledge the following people for their assistance:

- ♦ Michael Podgursky, Ph.D., professor at the University of Missouri and fellow at the George W. Bush Institute
- ♦ Jay P. Greene, Ph.D., endowed chair and head of the Department of Education Reform, University of Arkansas, and adjunct scholar, Mackinac Center for Public Policy
- ♦ Daniel Bowen, Ph.D. candidate in education policy at the University of Arkansas
- ♦ Michael Van Beek, director of research, Mackinac Center
- ♦ Daniel Montgomery, marketing and design director, Mackinac Center

Although these individuals helped significantly with this study, any errors in the report are the responsibility of the author alone.

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