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Iris K. Salters: Labor Voices

Retirement plan could spur school achievement

MEA proposal cuts money for state, but only if savings get reinvested



Our state is in the middle of the most severe economic crisis since the early 1980s. We are all tightening our belts. In times like this, cuts in state funding are inevitable -- Gov. Jennifer Granholm has already said she will cut per-pupil state grants by at least \$73 for next year.

But what we cannot do is slash our children's future to solve today's problems.

We cannot afford to make further cuts in education that impact student programs. Preparing students for the jobs Michigan needs must be our top priority if we are to find our way out of the economic turmoil and once again make our state the kind of place where young people can build their American dreams.

That's why the Michigan Education Association strongly supports a proposed school employee retirement stimulus plan that would help plug a \$400 million hole in school funding next year and save schools \$1.7 billion in the next decade.

The plan would encourage teachers and other school employees already eligible to retire to do so in the near future. Those retirements will not only save money in salaries and benefits, they will also open badly needed jobs in our schools for the next generation of dedicated school employees and keep young families here in Michigan.

But we must be careful about where those savings go. The MEA's support for this retirement stimulus hinges on keeping the money in public education -- filling the gap in school budgets and ensuring there are not further devastating cuts in programs that help prepare students for

the changing work force. Furthermore, these savings also must spur greater investment in programs that are proven to help students achieve.

We have to address our state's dropout crisis, and these savings provide a unique opportunity to invest in early childhood programs, class size reduction and other proven methods to help more students graduate from high school.

Investing some of the savings in teacher training and mentoring is critical, making sure that new, less-experienced teachers gain and maintain all the necessary tools to help students succeed. Losing experienced teachers to retirement will have an impact on our schools, and we must ensure that the teachers taking their place are well-prepared to meet the challenges our students face.

Encouraging good teachers and staff to retire is not an easy thing to do. These hard-working employees are the backbone of our public schools -- they have dedicated their lives to serving the needs of Michigan students.

But difficult times call for innovative solutions, and the school employee retirement stimulus plan is the best opportunity we have to make sure our public schools remain strong and our students get the kind of high-quality education that will rebuild Michigan's future for all of us.

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