

Thank you Chair Hornberger and members of the Committee. My name is Beth DeShone, Executive Director of the Great Lakes Education Project.

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the important Return to Learn package you are considering today.

We all recall when on March 13th the announcement was made that school buildings in Michigan were going to close for a few weeks to slow the spread of COVID-19. No one thought that would be the final in-person contact for classrooms of teachers and students. I know my household and our local teachers didn't as was evidenced by my son not having his math book or other class items and my daughter not having many of her desk items. Thankfully band instruments came home.... Or maybe not thankfully for the ears listening to beginning musicians!

The landscape swiftly changed when the short-term closure turned into the rest of the school year. 13 weeks. The clock started ticking for educators faced with a litany of decisions, everything from how to manage the remaining curriculum, navigate food services for students, figure out connectivity issues for families in need or living in unconnected areas, find ways to provide mental and emotional support to those in need, make sure that students were engaged in learning, to answering mountains of questions from parents that have no idea what they are doing to help teach their children. I am confident I have missed many of the details.

But that clock kept ticking. Some schools turned that switch on right away. Some took a few weeks. Yet far too many schools took around six weeks to begin the process of communicating plans and educating students. Do not mishear me in this statement. I do not fault classroom teachers or building administrators for this pause. I fault a bureaucracy that has left our educators afraid to make a decision for the fear that if just one person is left out of the equation, then it cannot happen for anyone.

Here we sit in the middle of July uncertain what the start of the next school year will look like. Uncertain how many students, even the most academically successful ones, have fallen behind because it will be six months outside of a structured learning environment before they go back. Uncertain how many students are desperate to get back to a school building because it is literally the safest place in their world. Uncertain how decisions will have to be made about any possible positive COVID cases reported in a building or community. Uncertain the emotional, mental and social toll this time away has taken on our young people. Uncertain how extracurricular activities will resume. The list goes on.

We are seeing studies out of Iceland and Ireland proving that children are not at risk of transmitting the virus. We are also seeing countries in Europe that have been back to school safely that are not seeing a rise in virus transmission. Most importantly, the American Association of Pediatrics – the doctors that we trust most to care for our children – are steadfast in their belief that we must reopen schools and get students back in classrooms. In fact, just recently in a nightly national NBC news segment when a series of pediatricians were asked if they would be willing to send their children back to school, the resounding answer was YES. These alone should give us certainty that it is the right decision to make.

So, I would like to thank you for taking the lead and earnestly discussing how to safely get students and teachers back into classrooms to remove some of the uncertainty. This package of bills provides every local district in Michigan the opportunity to create a learning plan that meets the health and safety needs of their community while ensuring that academic success remains the focal point for every single student. Providing calendar flexibility, ensuring rigor in any distance learning plan, encouraging continuous learning opportunities even if the next snowpocalypse or global pandemic occurs, requiring a benchmark assessment so teachers, students and parents can understand what gaps, if any, might have occurred and providing impressive funding for it all. These are commonsense steps that should provide peace of mind to everyone and will ensure that the system that couldn't pivot swiftly to support students and teachers two years in a row will finally have more tools in the toolbox to get it right the next time.

I appreciate your time and continued commitment to our students, and I encourage you to support HB's 5910-5913.