

Michigan Parents for Schools

*Parents working for excellent public schools
—for our children, our communities, and our future.*

12 November 2014

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Steven J. Norton
Executive Director

The Honorable Roger Kahn, M.D.
State Senator and Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee
S-324 Capitol Building
Lansing, MI 48909-7536

Dear Chairman Kahn and members of the Appropriations Committee,

I write to you today on behalf of parents across the state of Michigan to express our concern about the school district deficit “early warning” bills now before your committee (SB 951, 952, 953, 954, and 957). While the bills are very complex, as is the subject matter they cover, our general concerns can be stated rather simply.

Our objections to the bills stem from the fact that they seek to address the symptoms, rather than the root causes, of school districts’ financial distress. Moreover, they reinforce the notion that financial distress can only be the result of poor governance or management by local district officials. The punitive sanctions in the bills, and the narrow provision of technical assistance to help districts cut their budgets sufficiently, underline this view of the problem.

This “convenient” fiction continues to place full responsibility for choosing cuts to our children’s schools with local school boards and administrators. It also allows our state government to avoid any responsibility for the policy choices which have directly led to a record number of districts facing deficits and the huge number which might be identified as being in financial distress under these bills.

What these bills will not change is the fact that our state has committed a smaller and smaller share of our economy to K-12 public education over the last decade or more (please see chart A, attached). In good times and bad, the share of our state’s economic resources used for elementary and secondary education has declined.

Nor will these bills change the fact that the dollars per pupil available for schools to spend on operations, after mandatory contributions to the state school employee pension system are subtracted, continues to decline in real terms (please see chart B).

Finally, these bills do not address the fact that enrollment losses drive disproportionate budget cuts, since the savings from having one less student is much smaller than the lost revenue. These budget cuts then spur more families to flee the district, spurring more

1217 Olivia Ave
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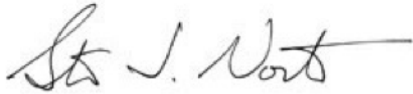
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budget cuts. We have already seen many districts caught in this “death spiral,” and more will fall into it if our school funding policies do not change soon.

We sincerely hope that the Committee will reconsider these bills and instead investigate policy choices that would ensure all districts have the resources they need to provide a quality education to our children today, and in the future. (In this connection, you may find our recommendations submitted to the State Board of Education helpful; they are available here: <http://mipfs.org/node/220>.)

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "St. J. Norton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Steven J. Norton
Executive Director

Chart A

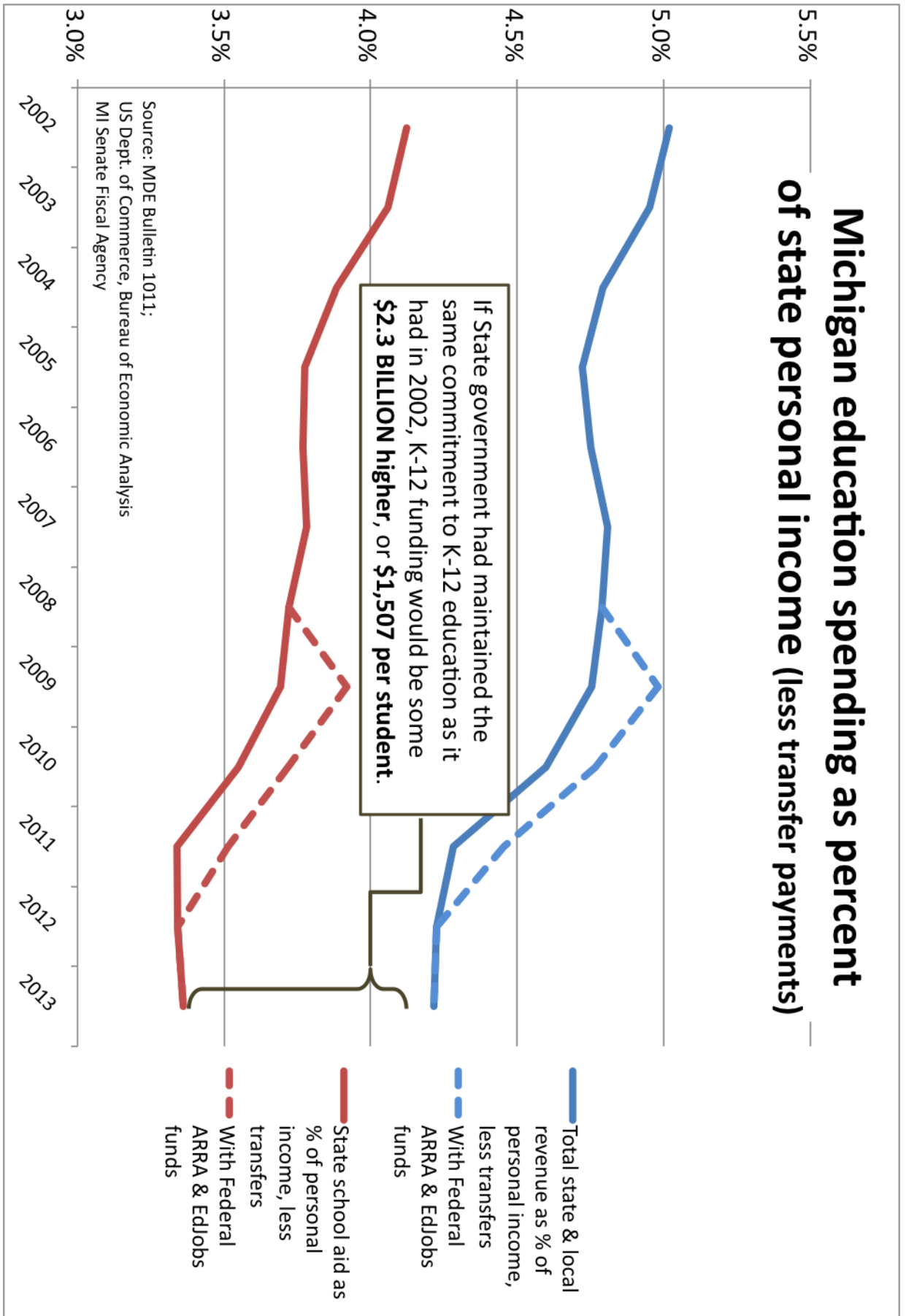


Chart B

