

Penta Policy Insiders

Michigan Insights Review Series

K-12 Education

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Executive summary

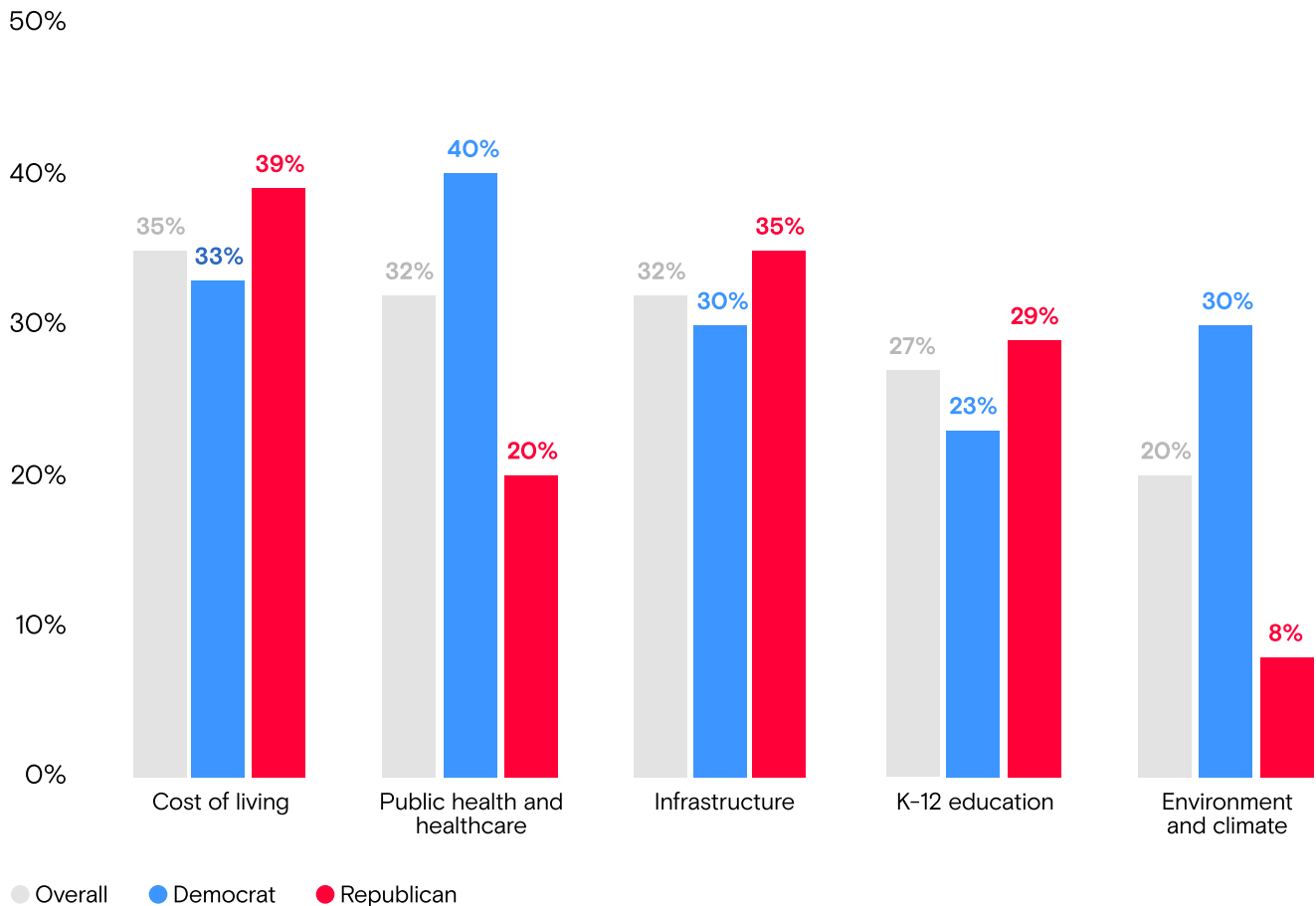
We are pleased to share our findings from this year’s Michigan Insights Review. From January to May 2023, we interviewed 237 policymakers in the state to learn about their top policy priorities, as well as the most pressing challenges for policy leaders across the political spectrum.

Michigan policymakers we spoke to detail a variety of priorities for their communities, including improving K-12 education, healthcare, infrastructure, and more. At the top of policymakers’ minds is the rising cost of living, with 35 percent of leaders citing it as a top issue. This focus on cost of living comes at a time when nearly 40 percent of Michiganders say they struggle to afford basic needs.¹ When it comes to rising living expenses, policy leaders also convey concerns about housing prices and rising income inequality. The fourth highest-ranked priority for policy staff is K-12 education, with 27 percent of policy leaders saying it’s a top-of-mind challenge. In fact, when asked about education objectives, a notable 58 percent of policymakers say teacher shortages are a pressing issue.

This report is the fifth in a series that examines Michigan policymakers’ top policy priorities for 2022. This review examines K-12 education in the state.

Top policy priorities in Michigan

Multiple selections permitted

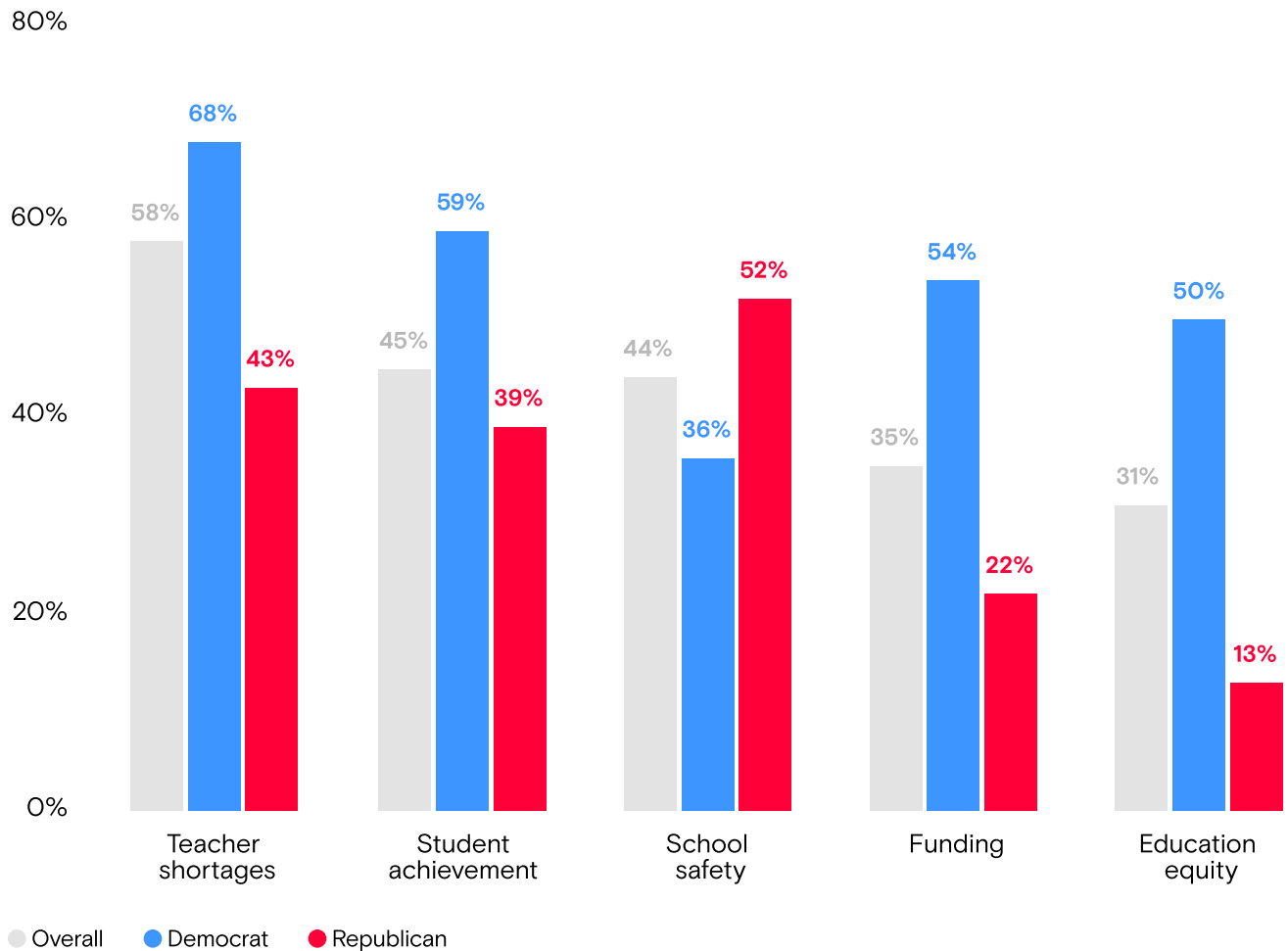


Michigan's education priorities

K-12 Education is a top policy priority for Michigan policymakers, with 27 percent of policy leaders ranking it as a forefront issue. Policymakers in the state outline a variety of issues regarding education in their communities, with teacher shortages, student achievement, funding, and student safety among the main concerns.

Policy leaders also discuss Michigan's charter schools and the state's School of Choice mandate, which allows families to enroll their children into schools outside of their district jurisdiction.² While many policymakers support School Choice and charter schools in the state, some say it's also valuable to consider how the prevalence of charter schools may impact the ability of undeserved, traditional public schools to get the support they need.

Top education priorities in Michigan



Teacher shortages are a pressing issue

Both Democrats and Republicans in Michigan are highly concerned about the lack of teachers in the state, with 58 percent of policy leaders citing teacher shortages as the most pressing concern in education.



A lot of the rights and privileges that have been stricken away over the years, benefits that have been stripped down over the years for teachers, have made it much less and less desirable profession to be a teacher. **We've seen a mass exodus from the teaching profession over the last 15 years in Michigan.** COVID obviously has made that worse. If that doesn't change, **we're already in a crisis, so [it might become] a catastrophe.**

State Representative, Michigan House of Representatives, D



Teacher retention [is a top issue]. Because of the **lack of funding** and the **lack of investment** in the teacher profession.

Councilman, Michigan State Municipality, D



There's definitely a shortage of teachers right now, we need more teachers, we need more funds being spent on special education.

District Director, Michigan House of Representatives, R



When you have a lack of qualified educators who's teaching the kids? How do they learn and how do they move on to grow up and be successful and able to be independent and take care of themselves?

State Manager, Michigan Executive Branch, D

Schools of choice and charter schools

Most Republican and Democrat policy leaders we interviewed support Michigan's Schools of Choice program.³ At the same time, policymakers in the state are debating the role and efficacy of charter schools within Michigan's education system. Some policy leaders voice concerns about how the increase of charter schools may impact the ability of undeserved, traditional public schools to get the support they need.

Charter schools, while publicly funded, are intended to offer an alternative option to the state's public school system by offering more autonomy in the way schools operate.



I think that **charter schools in a lot of parts of the states are the best chance children have to have a good high quality education.** So let's make sure we're providing kids every opportunity to succeed and not be limiting opportunities for students to get ahead.

Representative, Michigan State Senate, R



I have seen that with the way that charter schools are implemented in other states, it's more programmatic learning, it's more to liberate the district on how it goes about educating. But **in Michigan, unfortunately, I think a lot of times it's used as a way to escape a school that's trapped by poverty.**

Councilman, Michigan State Municipality, D



Here's the thing. **School choice is a huge deal for parents.** And historically, my position has been - I'm never going to blame a parent for making the best decision for their child.

Councilman, Michigan State Municipality, D



I think there's a place for charter schools. I'm a **big school of choice advocate.** I think parents should be able to take their student to the school of their choosing if that's a neighboring public school district or if that's a charter school or a private school... They've consistently ranked higher with testing and other metrics that I've seen compared to many public school districts and I think a **greater school of choice allows for greater competition between schools.**

District Director, Michigan House of Representatives, R

Mental health spotlight

Democrat policymakers highlight the importance of providing mental health services to students in Michigan schools.



Mental health is a huge part of education now. We've seen a lot of cases with two threats: children unable to cope with stress, bullying, and then, of course, special education needs. **Transitioning to a virtual learning format has been challenging for a lot of kids in the inner-city schools.** Even though they do have in-person and hybrid learning, it hasn't fared very well.

Councilman, Michigan State Municipality, D



We have requirements in certain areas that we have to have some type of behavior health therapists or counselors that are ready to refer children to counselors and communities. **The problem that we have right now, is the demand is really high [for mental health professionals in schools].**

Director, Executive Branch, D

Supporting student achievement

Improving success in the classroom is also a top-of-mind priority for Michigan policymakers, with 45 percent of leaders agreeing that it is a key goal. Republican policy leaders are particularly vocal about strengthening educational outcomes in schools, with many citing the need for more accountability from students and teachers regarding test scores. Many Republicans also agree that schools should place an emphasis on improving reading levels and access to STEM education.



We tend to think of this end goal of K-12 as being like, 'I'm just going to graduate from high school, full stop, and then I'll figure it out.' And we need to open that door and make education more of a continuum so that kids are getting ready for what is that next step

Representative, Michigan House of Representatives, D



The skills that the kids are learning are not modern. So when you talk about software programming and coding and a lot of the STEM subjects, there's a big push to get them engaged with those things. **But I don't think a lot of schools are prepared for that.** They may not have the faculty that has the experience with it, and **we have to rely on business to offer that.**

Councilman, Michigan State Municipality, R



There's an erosion of basic accountability, assessments, and getting more toward putting the adults before the students, I would say. So by removing these accountability markers, it's more for the benefit of the adults and not for the betterment of the education of the students.

State Senator, Michigan State Senate, R



We have disappointing performance on reading level and on STEM. So I'd like to see more investment in after-school learning programs. And we still really haven't seen that, so I would like to see that.

Representative, Michigan House of Representatives, R



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Councilman, Michigan State Municipality, R

Bolstering education investment is vital

Over a third of policymakers – 35 percent – say increasing funding for schools is vital to supporting student success. Many Democrat policy leaders we spoke to say it is imperative to address funding disparities within underserved communities.



For my district [a top priority] is getting the equipment that teachers need so that they can give the students the best education possible. Making sure students are-- because every student, even though it's a poor community, they're still not equal.

Supervisor, Michigan State Municipality, D



[A priority is addressing] the disparity between schools throughout even in similar communities with the funding and quality of learning in each of the schools, getting that on the most equal playing field possible I think should be one of the top priorities.

Committee Clerk, Michigan House of Representatives, L



I just think that for the last two years, we've had historic investments in our education system. And unfortunately, I think it took a pandemic for those investments to be made at an appropriate level. And I would hope to see that those investments being made continue well past this pandemic.

Representative, Michigan House of Representatives, D

Conclusion

Michigan policy leaders agree that improving education in the state is vital. Policymakers outline a variety of pain points, such as the teacher shortage, falling student performance, and a lack of investment in the state's school systems. Democrat policy leaders in the state specifically convey a concern for students' mental health and say more mental health professionals are needed in schools.

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Penta Policy Insiders provides direct feedback from policymakers to government relations professionals, improving advocates' ability to understand, validate, and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their engagement.

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Citations

1. <https://www.uwmich.org/alice-report>
2. <https://www.michigan.gov/mde/services/flexible-learning/options/schools-of-choice>

Qualitative n: 32 | Quantitative n: 205

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