

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## CHILD WELL-BEING IN MICHIGAN

As the state struggles to reinvent its economic base, all agree that key to its success is the expansion of the pool of educated, competent, and skilled residents. While much attention has been directed to the role of the education system, many other systems, such as the social safety net, the health system, the child welfare system, the economic system and overall family supports have important roles to play in the nurture and protection of the next generation.

**Child poverty (\$21,800 for a family of four) encompassed more and more children in Michigan between 2000 and 2009 and by 2009 engulfed over a quarter (27%) of young children in the state and one-fifth of all children.** Economic insecurity persists well above the poverty threshold; most researchers have agreed that families with income less than double the poverty level (\$43,500 for a family of four) still struggle to meet basic needs. Children living in economically insecure families have lower achievement levels and higher dropout rates than children in higher-income families. Many of the state's lifeline programs that help families weather economic downturns have been cut back or eliminated over the past 15 years.

**In recent years children in Michigan were less likely to die in infancy or childhood, but many children, particularly in low-income families, face chronic challenges related to their oral health, mental health, and physical health, including obesity, asthma, and lead poisoning.** These conditions can compromise children's capacity to learn by distracting their attention in school, provoking behavior problems, or causing regular absence from school. Succeeding in school requires being present. Access to care for the almost 1 million Michigan children who rely on Medicaid has eroded due to the ongoing cuts in provider rates in state appropriations.

**Birth and death rates for Michigan teens improved between 2000 and 2008, and dropout rates declined.**

Graduation rates, however, did not improve. Poor academic performance is strongly linked to risky behaviors, according to analysis from the 2009 Michigan Youth Risk Behavior Survey. For example, the percentage of Michigan high school students who reported earning mostly D's/F's in their classes were almost three times more likely to report never or rarely wearing a seatbelt when passengers in a car compared with their peers earning A's/B's: 16 percent versus 6 percent.<sup>1</sup> Students struggling academically are also more likely to have problems with substance abuse, depression, and suicide attempts.

**The rate of children who spend time in the foster care system declined despite increases in the rate of confirmed victims.** Researchers have found that children placed in foster care were more likely to sustain a second trauma when their school, as well as their home, is changed. Foster children are often academically challenged even before entering foster care. A recent study showed that only half of foster youth completed high school compared with 70 percent of their peers. By age 21 only 77 percent had earned a diploma or General Equivalency Degree (GED).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> These data are based on self-reporting; the question was asked "During the past 12 months, how would you describe your grades in school?" The options included: Mostly A's, Mostly B's, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



**A critical strategy to improving academic achievement is to ensure that children have their developmental needs met from birth through early elementary education so they can master reading skills by the end of the third grade.** Fourth graders need to read proficiently in order to learn. Fewer than one of every three fourth graders in Michigan demonstrated proficiency in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).