Building Ladders of Opportunity for Young People in the Great Lakes States
A Brief Overview

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The Great Lakes region is positioned to rewrite its Rust Belt narrative as a story of resurgence. Leaders, residents, and business in the six Great Lakes states—Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin—have weathered a challenging two decades of economic and social transition and upheaval. But the region has the ingredients it needs to sustain and increase broad-based future prosperity: a high quality of life; a stable population renewed every year by over a half-million children born and hundreds of thousands of people arriving from other states and nations; a long tradition of innovation and investment in some of the world’s most important industries; strong philanthropic and civic organizations; and natural resources, such as the Great Lakes themselves. To capture that potential, regional stakeholders need to intentionally foster the productivity and well-being of young people.

If decisionmakers in the Great Lakes build on these strengths, working intentionally to foster the productivity and well-being of everyone who lives there, the region will innovate and sustain greater prosperity in the future. Evidence-based policy and philanthropic strategies can help the Great Lakes region mitigate the challenges of the major demographic and economic transitions it faces and effectively leverage its assets to put it on the path to growth.

Central to the work of preparing for a more prosperous future is a profound and holistic commitment to the well-being of children, youth, and young adults who already live in the region and will be born there over the next generation. In this series of briefs, authors from across the Urban
Institute recommend five broad strategies to build ladders of opportunity and economic mobility for young people, especially young people of color, in the Great Lakes states.

Support Access to High-Quality Child Development and Preschool Programs

Investments in home visiting programs and high-quality preschool programs contribute to children’s healthy development and school readiness, pay long-term dividends for social and economic mobility, especially for young people of color, and encourage young people to stay and grow their families in the region. To advance the child-development and preschool agenda, we recommend the following:

- **Garner bipartisan political and legislative support.** Garner the necessary support for expanding high-quality preschool by publicizing the evidence of the effectiveness of preschool and using strategic framing and messaging to build collaborations among key stakeholders.

- **Develop creative financing solutions.** State leaders and legislators must leverage new and existing funds, blend funding streams, tap private-public partnerships, and generate new local tax sources, learning from examples in the region, such as Wisconsin and elsewhere.

- **Improve quality.** States should adopt and adapt high standards developed for federal grants, such as the Preschool Development Grant or those used in high-performing states like Michigan, and emphasize developing and supporting the early childhood workforce.

Eliminate Reading and Graduation Gaps in K–12 Education

K–12 education is a core influence on youth development and opportunity and has a crucial role in ensuring all can read by third grade and graduate from high school ready for college or career. Reading at grade level by third grade is a strong predictor of future success. Likewise, for youth to access higher education and workforce opportunities, they need to graduate from high school ready for college and career. To meet the reading goal, we recommend the following:

- **Prepare teachers for racially and economically diverse classrooms** by designing teacher training and professional development programs equipping teachers with the training and tools they need to succeed, particularly in classrooms where students are not well prepared or where there is a mix of abilities.
- **Increase the share of teachers who are teachers of color.** Longitudinal student data show that student-teacher race match matters for achievement and achievement-related outcomes.

- **Bolster funding formulas to support learning.** Spending matters—higher per pupil spending results in more years of education, higher wages, and lower rates of adult poverty. A recent funding formula change in Michigan redistributed resources from more affluent to less affluent communities. In response, student outcomes improved substantially.

- **Use evidence-based strategies to improve reading and comprehension in the earliest grades.** A growing body of research has been translated into useful guides for teachers to maximize their effectiveness at teaching reading.

### Promote Successful Transitions to Adulthood, Higher Education, and the Workforce

Young people need to graduate from high school ready to take advantage of diverse post–high school learning opportunities and supports to help them succeed in college and access jobs. To meet this goal, we recommend the following:

- **Implement and expand career and college pathways programs at the high school level.** Stakeholders should continue to invest and innovate in such high school approaches as career academies, dual enrollment between high school and college, and early college high school, all of which can increase high school graduation, college enrollment, and college completion. All of them are currently deployed in all six Great Lakes States.

- **Expand and improve opportunities for work-based and out-of-school–time learning.** States and employers can partner to bolster registered apprenticeship opportunities for youth, experiment with enhancement to summer youth employment programs, and create alternative avenues for work-based learning, such as apprenticeships that are not registered, internships or externships for high school students, co-op education, and clinical experience as a part of career and technical education programs.

- **Leverage federal policy changes to support continued systems reforms and effective programs.** When the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act and the Higher Education Act are up for reauthorization, employers and philanthropy can push Congress to ensure that funded programs engage and build relationships with industry and use funding to prepare young people for jobs in in-demand fields.

- **Continue to develop labor market information capacity and use it to shape available programs and engage employers.** To improve our knowledge about what works and to ensure that resources are used efficiently, Great Lake states should continue to invest in
efforts to connect education data with labor market data, thereby enabling them to follow the trajectory of young people through educational programs to careers.

Reduce Criminal and Juvenile Justice Involvement and Related Inequities

Progress is being made on reducing the crime rate, but too many young people are still involved with the criminal justice system, with damaging long-term consequences to them, their families, their communities, and the region. To meet the goal for reduced criminal and juvenile justice involvement, we recommend the following:

- **Reduce the justice system footprint.** Stakeholders can reduce penalties for low-level offenses and build robust options for diverting youth away from the justice system and, if appropriate, toward behavioral health services. Stakeholders can also work to reduce incarceration of youth in out-of-home residential facilities; remove consequences that inflict long-term harm on people with a criminal record, expand protection of juvenile records, and facilitate juvenile record expungement; and reduce the application of court fees, supervision fees, fines, and restitution to lift destabilizing financial burdens.

- **Develop nonjustice options to address youth needs and issues.** Great Lakes state policymakers should make services and treatment available to youth to reduce their risk of criminal offending, before they become involved in the justice system. In addition, schools can revise disciplinary criteria to prevent expulsion, which is a risk factor for justice involvement. And policymakers should ensure access to substance abuse and mental health interventions without justice involvement.

- **Make responses to serious offending effective, focused, and appropriate for youth.** Training for law enforcement, courts, probation officers, and defense and prosecution lawyers should be revised and refocused to facilitate healthy human development instead of punishment for young people who offend. In addition, antiviolence efforts should focus on the relatively small population most at risk.

- **Build the legitimacy of the justice system.** Great Lakes policymakers can lay the foundation for long-term compliance and cooperation with the law. They should ensure that authorities treat people with dignity and respect, give people voice during encounters, make decisions neutral, and convey trustworthy motives. They should also acknowledge the racial and ethnic disparities in the justice system and commit to mitigating the drivers of disparity. And they should collect and disseminate data regarding racial and ethnic disparities and use these data to guide their efforts to reduce disparities.
Support the Basic Needs of Low-Income Children and Parents

Better supporting the basic needs of low-income children and parents in the Great Lakes states requires making sure that families are aware of available work supports and how to access them so that families can make informed decisions about whether to seek assistance. To ensure that parents and children can rely on these essential supports, we recommend the following:

- **Adopt systems, policies, and practices that promote access to Medicaid and CHIP.** To boost participation, states should identify and enroll children in Medicaid or CHIP if they already participate in certain other programs. States should also use technology to access electronic data from other programs to simplify enrollment processes.

- **Streamline and simplify access to nutrition assistance through policies and technology.** States should reduce the red-tape burden SNAP participants often bear, provide applications and assistance in more languages, and aim to give eligible families their benefits the same day they apply, whenever possible.

- **Expand outreach for the earned income tax credit.** States should raise awareness of the credit through targeted informational campaigns that emphasize the importance of filing tax returns to access this widely available tax credit.

- **Simplify and align policies to improve access to child care assistance.** States should improve families’ access to high-quality care by simplifying child care subsidy processes and aligning child care policies and processes with those of other work support programs serving the same families.

- **Implement paid family leave policies.** The Great Lakes states should enact and implement paid family leave, requiring at least some employers to provide paid family leave as an employee benefit.

- **Align program requirements and processes to improve access to the full set of work supports.** States should create combined applications for multiple programs and routinely assess new applicants for the full range of programs for which they might be eligible, automatically enrolling those whose documentation for one program demonstrates their eligibility for another program.

The future prosperity of the Great Lakes states depends in large part on the presence, skills, and well-being of young people. The five broad strategies outlined here offer evidence-based actions for federal, state, and local governments and philanthropies to build ladders of opportunity and economic mobility for young people and promote the productivity, stability, and prosperity of the Great Lakes region.
About the Authors

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