

Libraries and Literacy: Making the Case for State Funding

University of Michigan School of Information
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1. Executive Summary

This paper addresses the potential benefits of drawing a clear connection between advancements in literacy and the resources available through school, public, and academic libraries in Michigan. Libraries are often thought of as vital organizations in our communities, including for literacy initiatives, but they rarely receive appropriate funding to make this happen. Our two clients, the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services (MCLS) and the EveryLibrary Institute, are both completing important work regarding resource sharing, political library, and funding initiatives for libraries including in the state of Michigan. In order to understand this opportunity gap and support our clients, this paper first introduces the problem, then analyzes solutions taken from a significant literature review, and finally posits important conclusions for our clients to use on future projects.

2. Introduction

Literacy is an integral part of a person's development, growth, and education over the course of their whole life. Building literacy and reading skills is the foundation for having a solid education, and can lead to positive outcomes even later in life. Literacy is often a skill gained in school, but libraries similarly contribute to lifelong learning and the cultivation of reading proficiency. Federal library funding is in jeopardy, with the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) on the chopping block again in 2027 [1]. In Michigan, IMLS cuts could put the Michigan eLibrary system (MeLCat) at risk [2], limiting citizens' access to free information and the ability to share resources across the state.

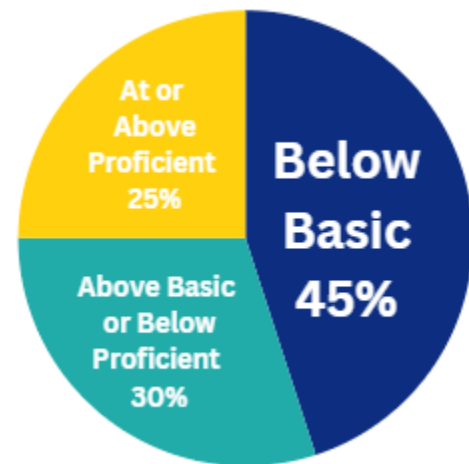
In tandem with threats to library funding, there is an increased interest in improving literacy across the state of Michigan. On February 11, 2026, Governor Gretchen Whitmer identified literacy as the number one priority of the state in the proposed 2026-2027 budget [3]. The literacy initiatives in the proposal are focused towards school-aged students, including paying for teacher training, investing in Pre-K For All, and adopting literacy curricula and tutoring support [ibid]. There remains a lack of connection between literacy and libraries of all aspects (school, public, and academic) in the proposed budget. In order to bridge the gap between library funding and positive impacts on literacy for all members of the Michigan community, regardless of age or status, there needs to be a significant literature review and analysis on the connection between libraries and literacy.

3. Problem

This project focuses on drawing a connection between funding libraries—including their materials, digital resources, and programs—and improvements in literacy rates and overall reading comprehension of the communities they serve. We aim to answer the question: “Where do libraries complete Michigan’s existing literacy policy agenda?”

We conducted thorough secondary research to create an annotated bibliography that not only answers the questions stated above but also provides insight into the literacy problem

Michigan currently faces. Through our research, we found that Michigan ranks 44th in education nationwide [4], which is lower than its ranking in 2022 at 40. Furthermore, 45% of Michigan fourth graders perform at below basic reading achievement levels [5]. While Governor Whitmer’s 2026-2027 proposed budget includes hundreds of millions of dollars going towards literacy investments in public schools, this plan does not include or mention more funding for libraries in order to improve literacy [6]. Funding for



libraries is pertinent to the success of students and the improvement of literacy and reading scores. Without it, we risk continuing the deterioration of educational development. Students across the state, in rural and urban areas, are struggling to achieve adequate literacy standards. Only 14% of third graders in Detroit met or surpassed ELA grade level standards, and 91% of students scored below college readiness on their SATs in all subject areas in 2023 [7].

One point of entry towards understanding literacy gaps in Michigan for school-aged children is the decrease in qualified librarian staff in Michigan schools. There was a 60% drop in the number of certified librarians at Michigan schools between 2003 and 2013 [8]. However, the Michigan Department of Education named librarians as a key resource for schools in their 2021 “Equity in Literacy” guide [ibid]. Studies also show that schools with a lower library collection had lower achievement scores, especially for “poor, Black, and Latino students” [ibid]. However, literacy for school-aged children should not be the only focus for drawing a connection between libraries and literacy in Michigan.

Adult literacy, including for individuals in diverse situations like incarceration or using digital media, also needs to be addressed. Individuals now have access to large quantities of information on the internet, and often need more instruction in digital literacy [9]. In addition, incarcerated adults in Michigan are vulnerable to bans on library items (like a ban on non-English dictionaries that lasted until 2022) and further gaps in literacy compared to non-incarcerated adults [10]. Therefore, the solution to address these literacy gaps needs to consider how libraries can improve literacy for all individuals in Michigan, across multiple different fields.

4. Solution

After creating a Michigan literacy profile to help us better understand the status of literacy and reading in the state, we found evidence that supports the call to increase library funding in order to improve literacy. By performing a literature review of all the various studies covering literacy, reading skills, classroom achievement, even health and workforce outcomes in association with access to libraries and librarians, we are able to confidently say there is a positive correlation between these factors.

Multiple studies have confirmed the significant role school libraries and certified school librarians play in boosting the test scores of students. Both in North Carolina and Michigan, researchers found that when school libraries were staffed more, had larger collections, and librarians collaborated with classroom teachers, the students scored higher in reading and literacy [11][12]. When students are given access to such rich resources, like libraries, and instructed and guided by certified librarians, they thrive academically. In turn, this positively impacts their lifelong learning and achievement. This is not only true for K-12 students. When Hostos Community College in New York implemented digital literacy modules in instruction with the support of the academic library team, it supported college students as they learned to adapt to technology in the workplace [13]. Additional studies note the positive impact of financial literacy through training programs [14] and the importance of prison libraries in demonstrating equity in material and resource sharing [15].

Furthermore, there is a connection between literacy success and health outcomes. A 2024 study conducted by Yale found that diabetes patients with higher literacy skills were able to maintain better glycemic control [16]. Additionally, patients with lower literacy skills were less likely to seek preventive care. The researchers also found that children with lower literacy levels

were more likely to engage in violence, substance abuse, and be exposed to sexually transmitted infections [ibid]. Not only do literacy skills positively impact physical health, but they can create lasting impacts on one's emotional and mental health as well. Positive attitudes about literacy skills are connected to higher confidence, resilience, and motivation. Additionally, exposure to works of fiction improves social ability, as well as understanding the world by engaging the psychological processes that allow comprehension of a character's personal experience. Literacy, and the mechanisms that libraries and librarians use to improve it, is therefore significant across many different aspects of life in Michigan.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this research project, we have come to realize just how vital libraries are for the development and success of communities, regardless of size, demographics, location, and more. When libraries are well funded, their patrons are able to access countless resources, participate in civic engagement, and grow academically and socially. School libraries, public libraries, and university libraries—these institutions are all integral to the improvement of literacy rates. We are aware of the poor literacy rates in Michigan; steps are being taken by the current governor's administration to improve them. However, they fail to include libraries and school librarians in these plans. From our research, we have learned that well-funded libraries result in improved literacy across all ages and demographics. When libraries have increased numbers of qualified staff, larger collections, more resources, and are open for more hours, users are consequently more successful academically. Literacy also leads to improved outcomes in health, physically and emotionally. As such, it is vital that the state of Michigan takes steps to provide more funding for libraries. If their goal is to improve literacy rates across the state, then they need to invest in the libraries that can enact that change. By developing policy and making space in the annual budget for library funding, lawmakers have the power to improve literacy and set Michigan residents up for lifelong learning and success.

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