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Protect state's tough new math requirement

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Rigorous math training is part of the state's new high school curriculum. Yet before it has begun to be implemented, some parents and lawmakers are trying to water it down, complaining the courses are too tough.

At state legislative hearings this month, parents drove from across the state to Lansing to express their frustration over the new math requirements. In coming years, all students will have to pass classes such as Algebra and Algebra II to graduate.

State Rep. Joel Sheltroun, D-West Branch, is among the lawmakers who are leading the disturbing backlash. He has even introduced House Bill 4349 to create a separate track for kids "who don't want to become microbiologists."

News flash to Sheltroun and his misguided allies: Everyone needs to learn algebra today. Indeed, in congressional hearings held last week, business leaders, researchers and educators made it clear that if American young people want a job — any decent job — in the global economy, they better be trained in high-level math.

"Students who complete higher-level mathematics coursework are not only better prepared for work, they earn higher salaries," testified Laura Slover of Achieve Inc., a bipartisan Washington-based organization made up of business leaders and governors.

"Such courses are critical for college and job success, including those that don't require a four-year college degree."

Policymakers know this. They know Michigan is just one of more than 33 states moving toward mandating challenging math classes. They know any state doing its job is adopting such requirements lest their children become the grunt workers of the knowledge economy.

So who is instigating this emerging backlash? Many are educators. That's not surprising, considering that the new curriculum demands schools innovate and become better, meaning more work for teachers and administrators.

That requires change, and many people don't like change. It means schools need to stop using the same 1950s' approaches. And it means the state — particularly Gov. Jennifer Granholm — needs to step up and improve schools' support services and capacity to deliver strong math teaching.

That's what Indiana did when it made its high school curriculum more rigorous. It provided support services that cost little — just \$60 per student — compared with the economic benefits it generated.

By 2004, Indiana had jumped to 10th nationally in college attainment from 47th in 1986. That's given the state an edge in attracting high-tech manufacturing jobs.

"What parents need to be fighting is for better preparation for their kids, not high school reforms," says Ed St. John, a professor at the University of Michigan's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education.

Access to rigorous high school classes is the great equalizer of 21st century. Parents and lawmakers need to protect this important new gain for Michigan's children, not sabotage it.

Michigan merit curriculum

High school courses required to graduate :

- Four credits or years of English language arts
- Four credits of math, including Algebra I, Algebra II and geometry
- Three credits of science, including biology and physics or chemistry
- Three credits of social studies, including civics, economics, U.S. history, world history and geography
- One online course or learning experience
- One credit of physical education and health
- One credit of visual, performing and applied arts

Michigan Department of Education