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Don't hurt our state's students by lowering curriculum standards

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Sen. Phil Pavlov

In 2006, Michigan boldly adopted a set of rigorous high school graduation requirements. The Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) resulted from extensive research by a statewide alliance of business and education leaders and a historic bipartisan legislative effort.

The previous standard was a mere half-credit of civics, letting a high school diploma mean very different things in different communities and too often leaving students' educational fate to chance. The research showed our students were lagging their peers regionally, nationally and internationally in academic achievement, which in turn was affecting our work force development and economic vitality.

Michigan's new curriculum was expertly designed to prepare all students — from Ecorse to Escanaba — for whatever future they might face in a rapidly shrinking, fiercely competitive world. Whether they chose a career or college path, they would be armed with subject knowledge, critical thinking skills, self-discipline and sense of accomplishment.

At the time, some argued requirements like Algebra II or foreign language were too difficult for some students or irrelevant to others' goals. There were claims that the curriculum would have disastrous effects, but none of those fears has materialized. In fact, since implementation, graduation rates have risen, dropout rates have fallen and test scores have improved — which is why new efforts to weaken the MMC are misguided.

School districts who understood its necessity for both career and college readiness found ways to incorporate MMC content into all kinds of courses. Many began offering foreign languages in earlier grades, where the benefits to children are greater anyway.

Statewide, more students are exploring career-technical education, thanks to their schools' creativity and accommodations made in the law to allow personalized curricula when appropriate. East Jordan Public Schools runs programs in automotive technology, drafting and design technology, furniture and wood making and more, all

of which include at least one course that counts as college credit. Other districts have similar stories, with participation remaining constant or increasing since the MMC took effect.

Today, rigor and relevance remain vital. Other nations are outpacing us educationally and economically. Michigan has thousands of unfilled jobs, but it's unclear whether the employment gap is at the college or high school level or outside the education system entirely. How does eliminating Algebra II or foreign language fill that gap?

This conversation is about many things. It's about competitiveness — Michigan's, certainly, but more importantly that of our students. It's about producing a capable, well-rounded citizenry. It's about instilling a love of learning and an appetite to tackle big challenges, and fostering the next round of ideas and inventions. It's also about leadership, from one generation to the next. A hallmark of America has been each generation envisioning better things for those who follow. That noble selflessness should apply to education, too.

How many of us at age 16 were qualified to make lifelong decisions? It is a tricky balance honoring teenagers' desires, while adequately preparing them for a future that could easily involve shifting goals or unexpected events.

We certainly should give students ample opportunity to pursue their interests, but we must also give them a solid educational foundation that affords them every opportunity for success later in life. With the right public policy, we can provide that opportunity on both ends, and I remain committed to working with Gov. Rick Snyder and my legislative colleagues to ensure we truly meet our children's needs.

State Sen. Phil Pavlov, R-St. Clair Township, is chairman of the Senate Education Committee and represents Michigan's 25th District in Lansing.