



Students with higher levels of lead in their system are more than twice as likely to perform at 'less than proficient' levels on tests compared with students with no lead or very low levels. / 2003 photo by Sylwia Kapuscinski/Detroit Free Press

By David Fukuzawa

Detroit Free Press guest writer

For several years, Detroit has been engaged in efforts to [improve](#) the performance of its public schools. Indeed, K-12 reform of one kind or another has been going on for decades. There are surely many factors that can contribute to poor educational outcomes. However, there is one that's not in doubt: lead poisoning.

Researchers from the [University of Michigan](#) and University of South Florida, the Detroit Public Schools and other partner organizations have shown that Detroit students who have a history of lead poisoning are far more likely to perform poorly on Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) tests than peers. The more lead found in students' blood, the higher the likelihood that they will perform poorly on these tests.



Students with higher levels of lead are more than twice as likely to perform at “less than proficient” levels on tests compared with students with no lead or very low levels. These results are statistically significant, and remain stable after adjusting for other factors that might provide alternative explanations. This adds to a large body of scientific work demonstrating that lead diminishes intelligence.

Lead mainly comes from old lead-based paint peeling from the windows, doors, porches and walls in neighborhoods with homes built before 1978. Maps of lead cases show lead poisoning in every county in the state.

The evidence argues that policymakers should make it a priority to eliminate lead from homes where children reside as a primary step toward improving academic performance. Instead, Michigan has seen a decrease in already-minimal funding for eliminating lead poisoning across the state.

Federal dollars that state health departments have depended on for lead poisoning prevention have been effectively eliminated. The recently passed state budget does provide \$1.25 million in new funding.

But as a society, we are missing the opportunity eliminate an entirely solvable, high-cost problem.

When a child was diagnosed with lead poisoning in Detroit or many other places in Michigan, it was once standard practice for a nurse to visit and for an expert to conduct an investigation to identify the source of the lead poisoning. That laid the groundwork for requiring landlords to eliminate lead hazards.

Those services have been virtually shut down for lack of funding. The equivalent of two classrooms of Detroit children go without intervention every month, and that number is increasing.

The cost is tremendous for individuals, families and the public. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that Michigan children’s exposures to dangerous amounts of lead costs the state upward of \$3 billion per year in lost future earnings of those children — a calculation that does not account for the cost of special education or medical treatment.

And intervention offers [value](#). The National Institutes for Health calculates that each dollar spent on lead paint hazard control returns \$17-\$221.

The state, the city, foundations and corporations have spent millions of dollars to improve Detroit schools, but these efforts cannot succeed without improving the public health of the city's children, especially young children.

The elimination of lead, combined with efforts to ensure that there is comprehensive and quality early childhood education, would lead to dramatic improvements in school performance in the next decade.

We can do this: Detroit has made great strides in reducing the numbers of lead-poisoned children, but further progress depends on sustained funding commensurate with the scope of the problem. This could be more important than all the other school reform measures taken by the state.

David Fukuzawa directs the Kresge Foundation's health program, which has provided funding for lead abatement and safe and healthy housing efforts in Detroit.