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## President's Message...

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*Michigan Reading Association*

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# President's Message...

by Leah van Belle, MRA President

Sending a warm hello to each of you, beloved community!

Together as the Michigan Reading Association we are collectively committed to ensuring that all children have access to what they need to grow and thrive as readers, writers, speakers, thinkers, creators, and doers. One of our key levers for this includes supporting educators in accessing the tools, resources, professional learning, and support they need to serve children across contexts—classrooms, libraries, and community-based literacy programs. Centering empowered educators is at the heart of transformative teaching and learning, and education policy plays a key role in this.



**Leah van Belle, Ph.D.**

When I was a young classroom teacher, I often said, “I don’t care about policy; I care about kids” as a way of saying that my heart and skills were focused on serving the little humans in front of me in the classroom. Children and youth remain the focus of MRA’s collective work as we serve as educators and literacy leaders. However, policy shapes (and often constrains) so much of what we are able to do as literacy champions. Recognizing that, MRA has always been involved in advocating for education policies that affirm and empower students and educators. We care about policy *because* we care about kids.

All children deserve to have access to what they need for academic success, regardless of race, gender, disability, family income, native language, or geography. The Michigan Partnership for Equity and Opportunity (MPEO) is a diverse, bipartisan coalition that brings together organizations from across the political spectrum to work toward educational equity for all Michigan students, especially the most underserved. Discover more at their website: [partnersformistudents.org](https://partnersformistudents.org). As your MRA president, I am humbled and grateful to serve at the MPEO table and advocate for policies that empower schools and teachers with the funding they need to serve learners. In a recent letter to Michigan legislators, MPEO elevated the need for more equitable budgets and policies for school funding:

“With [education] revenue estimates coming in close to \$1 billion above what was expected, there is a real chance to close the opportunity and achievement gap by ensuring these dollars go to our most underserved populations, including at-risk students, English learners, students with disabilities and students in rural districts. It is important to note that these students live in every region of the state and come from all demographics. Unfortunately, Michigan currently ranks among the worst states when it comes to fairly funding these students... Special education has long been underfunded despite the requirements to provide services. According to the Michigan Department of Education, special education is only being funded at 77%.”

To read the entire open letter from June 2, 2022, please visit: <https://midwest.edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/MPEO-Budget-Requests.pdf>

With the 2022 midterm elections came significant shifts in the political landscape, which are poised to shape state policies on critical matters, such as the “Read by Grade Three” law’s retention component

and more equitable education funding to ensure that teachers and students have what they need to close opportunity and achievement gaps. Regardless of our individual political views, Michigan faces a landmark moment in education policy. Learn more about proposed legislation and its progress through the Michigan Legislature’s on their official website ([www.legislature.mi.gov](http://www.legislature.mi.gov)). You can find contact information for elected officials on the Michigan House of Representatives website ([www.house.michigan.gov](http://www.house.michigan.gov)) and the Michigan Senate website ([senate.michigan.gov](http://senate.michigan.gov)). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) also has a helpful resource titled “Writing Your Elected Official” ([www.aclu.org/writing-your-elected-representatives](http://www.aclu.org/writing-your-elected-representatives)) that reminds us that “You are the expert. Remember that your legislator’s job is to represent you.” Your voices matter in education and literacy policy for equity! Our collective voice as MRA matters!

An additional way to lend your voice to shaping literacy education in Michigan is by serving on the Board of MRA. If you’re interested in learning about opportunities to serve on the Board or as a regional representative, we would love to connect with you. Please reach out to [mra@michiganreading.org](mailto:mra@michiganreading.org) or [leah@313reads.org](mailto:leah@313reads.org). Or, connect with us in person in March in Grand Rapids for the 2023 Annual Conference, “RISE: Embracing and Celebrating a Beloved Community of Literacy.” See you there!

In solidarity,  
Leah

Dr. Leah van Belle is a proud Detroit and first-generation high school and college graduate. She serves as the Executive Director of 313Reads, a community coalition for grade level reading and literacy equity. She serves as a member of the Early Literacy Task Force of Michigan and as the President of the Michigan Reading Association. Passionate about the need for diverse educators, she serves as the Vice-Chair of the Board of the Black Male Educators Alliance and on the Diversity and Equity in the Educator Workforce Advisory Group for MDE. As the mama of a neurodiverse child, she is an advocate and co-conspirator for educational equity for exceptional learners, and proudly serves on MDE’s Special Education Advisory Committee. Her son is a third grader in a Detroit public school and is teaching her how to build with LEGO. In turn, she is teaching him about the power of old school jazz. Family read aloud is one of their favorite parts of the day!

