

SHORT SUBJECTS

The National Education Association's Board of Directors approved sending \$750,000 to the Michigan Education Association (MEA) to fight the Kids First! Yes! voucher proposal. Michigan will be one of only two states, California being the other, with a school choice proposal on the ballot in November. See related story on page 7 about ALL Kids First!, the MEA-backed group opposing the measure.

Milwaukee's Democratic Mayor John Norquist says, "Fifteen years ago, I shared the view that vouchers would cripple public schools. But today, in Milwaukee, the debate about vouchers is over. And in response to the question, 'Does school choice help private school children or public school children?' the answer is 'yes.'"

The Charter Schools Development & Performance Institute at Central Michigan University opened its doors May 1, 2000. Funded by a \$1 million federal grant, the institute aims to foster effectively run charter public schools by promoting development, achievement, and accountability.

Harvard University establishes new program to study for-profit education. The David T. Kearns Program on Business, Government, and Education will concentrate on evaluating the challenges and opportunities at the intersection of business and education. Last year, the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education was established at Teachers College, Columbia University, to study growing private-sector involvement in public education.

Private schools effectively teach disadvantaged students, according to a Reason Public Policy Institute study. Since the early 1990s, several urban school districts around the nation have contracted with private remedial education companies to work in public schools using Title I and other public education funds. The report, *Remedial Education Reform: Private Alternatives to Traditional Title I*, can be viewed at www.rppi.org.

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Inkster turns to private firm to manage schools

Officials hope to avert state takeover with Edison deal

School board members in the Detroit-area Inkster school district in February voted 5-1 to engage New York-based Edison Schools, a full-service education management organization, to run all of the district's schools.

The move makes Inkster only the third school district in the nation to turn over its operations to a private company. From 1993 to 1997, Public Strategies Group Inc., ran the district of Minneapolis and schools in Hartford, Connecticut, contracted with Education Alternatives, Inc., now called Tesseract Group Inc., from 1994 to 1996.

The board hopes that Edison will bring the district out of financial ruin and allow it to avoid a possible state takeover or annexation by another district.

"This route we're looking at is a better
INKSTER continued on page 2



Academic failure and budget deficits forced the Inkster board of education to contract with Edison Schools Inc., an education service provider, to rescue the 1,500-student district.

Group files complaints against districts

Charges officials with using public money to fight voucher plan

Some Michigan school districts are illegally using public education tax dollars for political purposes, say proponents of a school voucher proposal Michigan voters will decide in November.

In a criminal complaint filed in April with the Secretary of State, Kids First! Yes! charged that officials of the Oakland Intermediate School District (ISD) violated the law when they conducted a "sustained and organized communications campaign against Kids First! Yes! involving e-mails, video presentations, and PowerPoint slide shows."

Michigan law prohibits the expenditure of "public monies to influence political campaigns."

The complaint alleges Oakland ISD violated the public trust by:

- Adopting a resolution against the voucher proposal;
- Creating and showing a biased presentation containing misrepresentations of the proposal; and
- Using tax-funded ISD resources to disseminate anti-Kids First! Yes! material and solicit letters to the editor against the proposal.

Kids First! Yes! also has filed a similar complaint against Kearsley Community Schools Superintendent Jeffrey Morgan and Board of Education President Richard Putvin for improperly using a January 2000 school newsletter to advocate against the voucher proposal.

Other school districts also have publicly expressed objections to the voucher proposal. State-funded vouchers are bad because "private and religious schools [that

COMPLAINT continued on page 2

State's largest charter school organized by labor union

Teachers at Mid-Michigan Public School Academy join MEA

In January, Mid-Michigan Public School Academy in Lansing became the largest unionized charter school in the nation when teachers there voted to join the Michigan Education Association (MEA).

Thirty-eight teachers voted to unionize at the 1,200-student charter school while 21 teachers either opposed union representation or abstained.

Many teachers cited concerns over long work-weeks, job security, and confusion over leadership and discipline as reasons for their decision to join the MEA, the state's largest school employee labor union.

Mid-Michigan teachers first considered a proposal to join the MEA in 1997, but they eventually rejected the idea by a vote of 35-18.

Gov. John Engler, an advocate of charter schools and frequent opponent of the MEA, shrugged off concerns that unionization might negatively affect Mid-Michigan's students.

"That's not a problem. We have unions in Michigan," he told *The Detroit News*. "The right to bargain and the right to organize are

rights Michigan has always recognized."

Mid-Michigan Public School Academy is managed by Edison Schools, a for-profit, New York-based company that operates many traditional public and charter schools throughout the country. Chris Cerf, chief operating officer of Edison, said that he remains optimistic that the company and the union can work together to implement reforms.

Unions traditionally have had difficulty organizing charter school teachers. A 1999 survey of 139 Michigan charter schools conducted by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy revealed that only 5 schools had collective bargaining agreements in place.

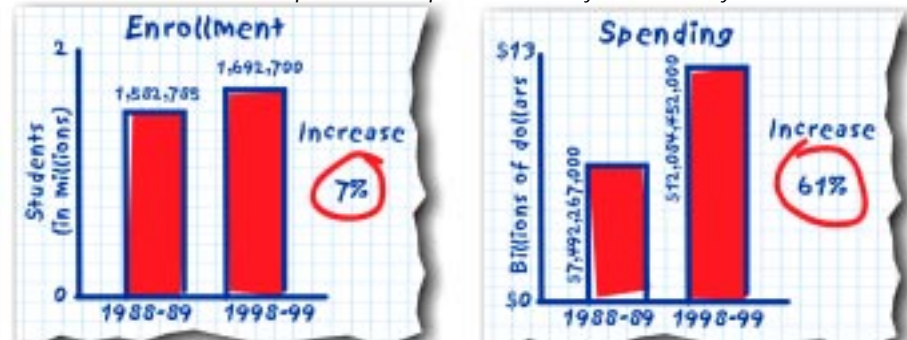
"In light of labor unions' opposition to charter schools, it is probably rather puzzling to most people that the MEA would even want to organize charter school teachers," says study author Matthew J. Brouillette. "But now that the unions have their foot in the door at the state's largest charter school, we shouldn't be surprised if their rhetoric begins to change."

CHARTER continued on page 2

Education at a Glance

Spending far outpaces enrollment growth

Student enrollment and state expenditures for public elementary and secondary education in Michigan



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 1999

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Future teachers receive MER

Thank you for the set [of *Michigan Education Reports*]. I gave them to my education class.

*Dr. Karen Selby, Chair
Department of Education
Kalamazoo College
Kalamazoo*

Phonics works!

I was thrilled to read your Winter 2000 edition of *Michigan Education Report*. Your two articles on reading ("Phonics, 'whole language,' and literacy" and "Special needs students make great strides") hit "home" with me.

My son has severe dyslexia. Like A.J. Jorgensen's parents, I had on my hands a very bright child who couldn't read or write; though in special education, he was going nowhere fast. Fortunately, I read about the Orton-Gillingham method of

teaching reading to dyslexic children (though not named in the article, that is the method Lynda Howe is using to help A.J., as illustrated in the pictures in your article about Crossroads Charter Academy). Orton-Gillingham not only raised my son's reading level, but it gave him confidence that grew tremendously from there. He graduates from high school in June having received numerous awards and was recently nominated by our high school as a *Detroit News* Outstanding Graduate. Even more amazing, he brought home an all-A report card the first marking period of this semester.

Congratulations to A.J.'s parents who sought out help for him! As Mr. Bertonneau wrote in his story, phonics is the only way handicapped kids are going to read and is the best method out there for reading success to be assured. Whole language will not work for the majority of students - something I've been arguing for years. Orton-Gillingham is phonics based. My thanks to Crossroads Charter Academy

for using a proven system where teaching reading to dyslexic children is concerned. Perhaps one day I'll start a charter school for dyslexic children myself. You can bet I'll use Orton-Gillingham.

*Gail Opper, Teacher
Anchor Bay High School
New Baltimore*

Best accountability comes from parents

It is encouraging that the "New" or centrist Democrats, like Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) president Al From, are finally embracing school choice as an essential component of school reform. But From appears to put choice entirely within the framework of public education, which he would redefine, in part, as schools "accountable to public authorities for results."

Charter schools are helpful spurs to change within the public system, but choice does

not end with them. There are bolder (not necessarily "New") Democrats like former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young, who have endorsed publicly financed vouchers to empower parents to choose privately run schools. Mr. Young understands that a government monopoly is part of the problem. "Poor people really need some power against the public education system," he recently told *The Christian Science Monitor*.

Ultimately schools must be accountable to parents for results.

*Robert Holland, Senior Fellow
Lexington Institute
Arlington, Virginia*

Send your letters to Letters@EducationReport.org, fax to (517) 631-0964, or mail to the address at the bottom of this page. Please include your name and how to contact you. MER reserves the right to edit letters for length, style, and clarity.

Inkster

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route than having the state take over," the Rev. George V. Williams, Inkster school board president, told *The Detroit News*. "With our problems, we figured [Edison has] a lot more to offer than the local board can put into place."

School officials are negotiating a five-year contract with Edison. The board also considered but rejected proposals from two Michigan companies, Public School Administration Services, Inc., of Southfield and the Leona Group LLC of East Lansing.

Edison has promised to invest \$4.5 million in the district, eliminating the

district's \$1.9-million deficit and allowing it to start the next school year with a budget surplus.

The company also plans to lengthen the school day and year, implement before- and after-school programs, and provide computers to all students, starting with third-graders.

"We have multiple goals," Deborah M. McGriff, an executive vice president with Edison, told *Education Week*. "We want to improve the academic performance of the students who are there. We want to improve the fiscal stability of the district. And because they have lost so many children to other choices, we want to improve enrollment."

Enrollment in Inkster schools has dwindled over the past 10 years: In 1990, the district had 3,000 students; today, Inkster claims less than 1,500 students, and the four-year high school graduation rate is a dismal 38.7 percent.

Edison Schools has a strong presence in Michigan, managing individual schools within public school districts in Battle Creek, Mt. Clemens, and Flint. The company also manages a number of charter public schools throughout the state.

Complaint

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accepted vouchers] are not subject to any oversight from any elected official," writes Gobles Public Schools Superintendent Tom Saylor in a recent district newsletter.

Publications by Grand Haven Public Schools and the Kent ISD make similar charges in recommending citizens reject the voucher proposal in November.

But these charges have no basis in fact, according to Glen Walstra, executive director of the Michigan Association of Non-Public Schools, which represents 140,000 students in Catholic, Lutheran-Missouri Synod, and Christian Schools International schools.

"We are accountable to the government in several compliance areas," Walstra told *MER*. "We voluntarily submit ourselves to plenty of government oversight."

"All of our schools adhere to state health and safety standards, teacher certification, and a voluntary disclosure of what is going on in our schools," adds Walstra. "In addition, many nonpublic schools participate in federal Title programs, which subject us to additional government rules and regulations."

Kids First! Yes! communications director Greg McNeilly says the complaints filed against Oakland and Kearsley are to ensure a fair and honest debate on the voucher issue. He adds that school districts should stop using education money for political purposes. "That money should be going into the classroom," he says.

State officials have yet to rule on the complaints.

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Charter

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The 148,000-member MEA has been one of the harshest critics of charter schools, recently helping to defeat legislation that would have raised the 150-school cap on university-authorized charter schools.

Lori Yaklin, executive director of the Michigan School Board Leaders Association, a professional association for public, charter, and private school board members, notes the irony of the situation.

"It appears that the MEA is happy to take money from charter school teachers, while simultaneously criticizing them and trying to hinder their effectiveness," she says. "I hope the school board will not allow the MEA to transform Mid-Michigan into a union/management battleground where children are the casualties," she says.

Negotiations between the Mid-Michigan school board and union officials are expected to be completed later this summer.



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Leading the Way...

- In putting parents and children first in education
- In promoting the efficient use of educational resources
- In encouraging innovative, responsible education initiatives
- In quickening the pace of educational improvement

Membership is open to current or former school board members from public or private Michigan schools. Associate memberships are available to others who share the MSBLA mission.

For online membership applications or for information on upcoming training and events, visit www.msbla.org or call 810-658-7667.

Detroit grad chosen to run ailing district

Adamany asks corporate execs to help fix schools

The Detroit public schools reform board ended its nearly year-long search for a permanent CEO May 11 when members voted unanimously to replace outgoing interim CEO David Adamany with Kenneth Burnley, Detroit native and current superintendent of Colorado Springs, Colo., schools.

"I think it's of great benefit for us to have a graduate of Detroit schools," board member and State Treasurer Mark Murray told *The Detroit News*. "[Burnley] knows the issues of education up front. But he also knows the Detroit situation."

Burnley graduated from Detroit's Mumford High School in 1960. He has led Colorado Springs schools since 1987.

Board members were impressed with Burnley's reform ideas, which focus on increasing parental involvement, encouraging the use of technology in the classroom, and tying teachers' raises to their performance.

But some parents are skeptical that Burnley can turn around the struggling Detroit district.

"His district cannot compare to what we go through here," Abby Phelps, whose 16-year-old daughter attends King High School, told the *Detroit Free Press*. "There's just too many issues for one man to address."

Colorado Springs is a 33,500-student district with an annual budget of \$175.7 million. Detroit has 180,000 students and a \$1.2-billion budget.

At press time, Detroit Deputy Mayor and school board President Freman Hendrix was negotiating a contract with Burnley, who could receive up to \$250,000 per year. Outgoing CEO David Adamany earns \$193,000.

Meanwhile, Adamany has begun his own reform program by assembling a team of corporate executives to help Detroit contract with private companies to cut red tape, reduce costs, and improve quality.

Most district officials have backgrounds in education, rather than business, and this lack of corporate experience has led to waste and mismanagement in the district, according to Adamany.

"Many people in the district didn't know what to do," Adamany told the *Detroit Free Press*. "They were not sophisticated in what was happening in the private sector."

The executives—from companies including DaimlerChrysler, Ford, and Detroit Edison—are acting "on loan" to the district, which means in most cases the companies will continue to pay their salaries.

Banquet marks first anniversary of education leaders' group

Legislators, school board members call for reform

School board members from around the state gathered March 10 at the Sheraton hotel in Lansing to discuss education reform and celebrate the one-year anniversary of the Michigan School Board Leaders Association (MSBLA), an organization of school board members from public, charter, and private schools.

Speakers addressed a crowded banquet hall of education reform leaders, legislators, and board members from private, charter, and traditional public schools. Topics ranged from "child-focused change" to school choice and competition.

Keynote speaker Jeanne Allen of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Education Reform held up MSBLA as a model for other reformers across the nation. Allen, a nationally known education expert, told attendees that parents all across the country are demanding change. She encouraged reformers to harness the grassroots momentum toward school choice and "seize the day."

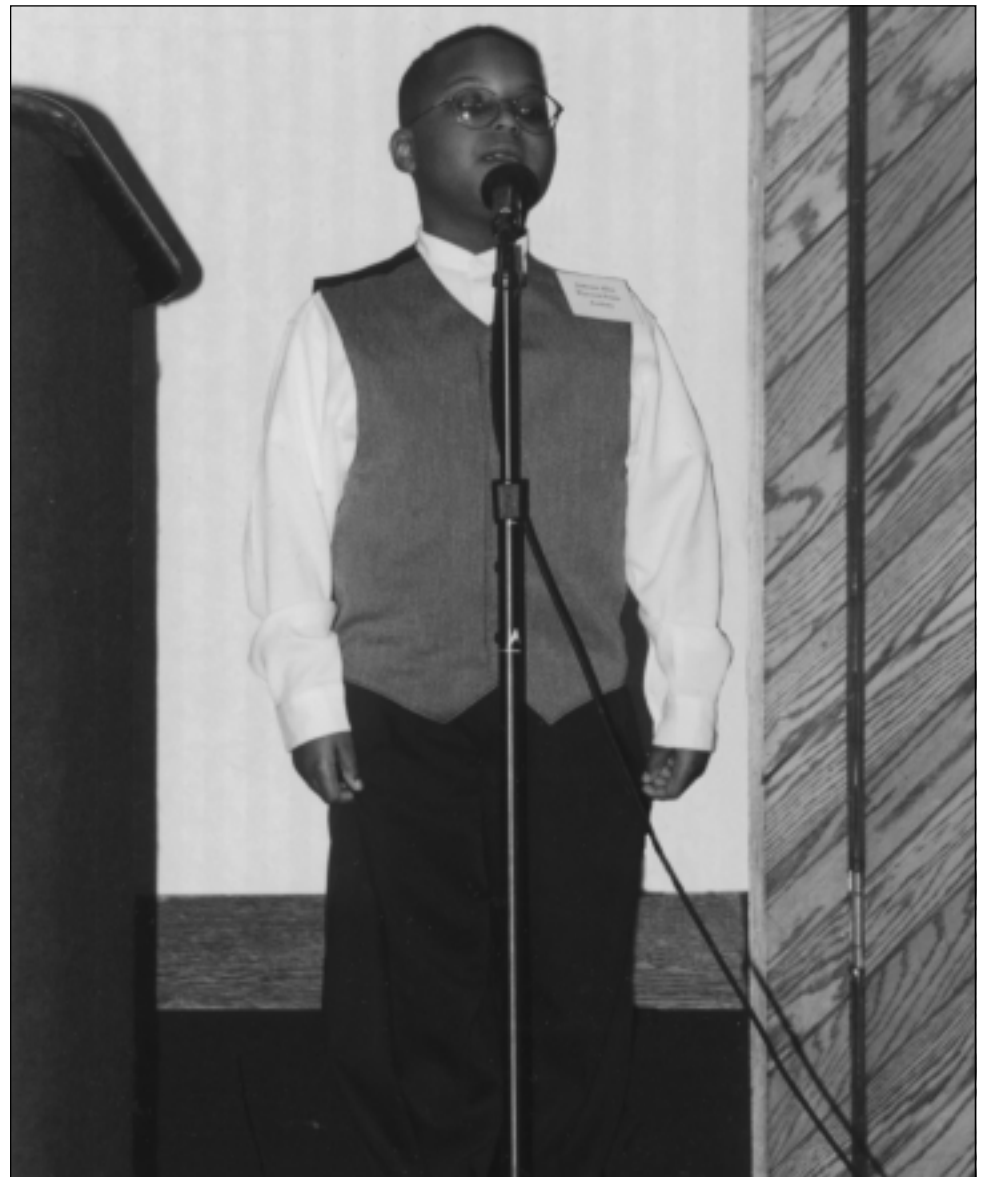
"We must make sure that we provide for children who don't have the opportunities that others have just because their parents cannot afford to move or because their parents do not have as much money in their pockets," said Allen. "[School choice] is the issue of people who care about children."

The overriding theme of the evening was a focus on children. First-grader Jameson Allen, 8, performed a song for the crowd, and 8th-grader Lisa Moy, 13, played piano to a standing ovation. Both are students from Warwick Pointe Academy in Grand Blanc.

MSBLA Executive Director Lori Yaklin remarked that MSBLA had already proven its critics wrong.

"People said the turf wars in education were too fierce to allow private, charter, and traditional public school board members to come together in one organization to focus on children instead of competing systems," she told the crowd. "But I look around and see all of us here together dedicated to competing, not by tearing each other down, but by building the children up."

Public school board trustee and MSBLA Chairman Tom Bowles acknowledged the difficulties of being a public school board leader who wants to do more than "just approve the decisions that the administrative staff has allowed you to approve, so that you can continue the bureaucracy that the bureaucracy needed you to continue."



First-grader Jameson Allen of Warwick Pointe Academy in Grand Blanc celebrates with song the one-year anniversary of the Michigan School Board Leaders Association. The nationally recognized organization includes school board members from public, charter, and private schools.

He went on to encourage education "trailblazers" to mark many trails.

Three individuals were recognized for their efforts to improve education for Michigan children.

State Rep. Paul DeWeese (R-Williamston) received the Legislative Leadership Award for his advocacy greater school choice.

DeWeese's remarks were interrupted by applause when he said, "Together we must ensure that every family has access to a wide variety of educational options so that each child can achieve their God-endowed po-

tential. We need to say to the current school system, 'Tear down this wall.'"

Flint school board member Lily Tamez Kehoe was presented with the Courage in Leadership Award. Kehoe was the subject of controversy last year when the union president and board president in her district unsuccessfully tried to force her resignation over her support for a proposed charter school for minorities.

Sandra Nadig, board president of the Saline school district, received an award for her work in promoting effective board governance.

School choice group garners half-million signatures

Governor: cut state funds from voucher-qualifying districts

A school voucher proposal has moved one step closer to appearing on Michigan's November ballot.

On Feb. 24, Kids First! Yes!, the coalition backing the proposal, filed nearly 460,000 petition signatures with the Secretary of State's elections division. The group needs 302,711 valid signatures, as well as the approval of the Board of State Canvassers, to place the issue before voters in the fall.

The group displayed the petitions during a rally at Colin Powell Academy, a Detroit charter school, before filing them with the state.

"We've been in high gear for several months now, collecting signatures," says Jeff Timmer, former campaign manager for Kids First! Yes! "Now we'll be discussing the issue, raising public awareness, and debating the issue at several public forums."

Meanwhile, Gov. John Engler, who opposes the Kids First! Yes! proposal, has endorsed legislation to cut per-pupil spending from districts that automatically qualify for the voucher program, should it pass. The legislation enjoys support from Senate Republicans, who helped turn aside repeated amendments that would have nullified it.

"It's hard to speculate why the governor would put the voters in the situation of extortion," Greg McNeilly, communications specialist for Kids First! Yes!, told the *Detroit Free Press*. McNeilly suggests that Engler is providing voters with a financial incentive to defeat the proposal in November.

Officials from the governor's office disputed this characterization of Engler's plan, stating that the governor simply is

suggesting a way to pay for vouchers if voters approve them.

"We're not playing politics," Engler spokesman John Truscott told the *Free Press*. "We're just planning in a prudent, appropriate way."

State officials estimate that the voucher program would cost \$160 million in the first and most expensive year, but Kids First! Yes! insists that the cost would range from \$60 million to \$100 million. The Senate Fiscal Agency analysis estimates the cost to the state to be around \$80 million.

Currently, there is an education budget surplus of more than \$500 million that is expected to grow to more than \$670 million in the next year. Kids First! Yes! says any increased costs to the state caused by the voucher plan could easily be balanced by this surplus.

The Kids First! Yes! initiative seeks to

amend the state constitution to allow state aid indirectly to support tuition at nongovernment schools. A 1970 amendment to the state constitution currently prohibits the state from providing direct or indirect aid to students through vouchers or tuition tax credits. The amendment would retain the prohibition on direct aid to private schools.

Under the proposal, parents in school districts that fail to graduate at least two-thirds of their students would receive vouchers to pay for tuition at private or parochial schools. Parents in other districts could vote to join the voucher program.

The program would grant vouchers worth about \$3,150 and guarantee that public schools receive per-pupil funding at least equivalent to the 2000-01 school year.

The plan also would require competency testing for teachers in public schools and in private schools that accept vouchers.



Kids First! Yes!

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

U.S. Senate votes to expand federal ESAs

The U.S. Senate in March approved a bill to expand the use of education savings accounts (ESAs) for K-12 education.

The bill would allow parents, employers, and others to deposit as much as \$2,000 per child each year into an ESA bearing tax-free interest. The money could be spent at public, private, or parochial schools, for such expenses as tuition, books, transportation, and tutoring.

Existing law allows only for an annual deposit of \$500 for higher-education costs.

Republicans praised the bill as one that decentralizes power from Washington, giving individuals and parents more control over their children's education.

"In Washington, sometimes we get a one-size-fits-all mentality, but everyone knows that every child in this country is different and every child has different needs," Texas Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison told *The Washington Post*. "What we should be doing in Washington is giving parents the ability to choose what is best for their particular child."

Republican sources told the *Post* that the House likely will pass the bill. De-

spite his support for higher-education savings accounts, President Clinton has threatened to veto the measure.

State legislature to allow locker searches?

Governor Engler is expected to sign a bill that would allow public schools to search students' lockers.

The legislation is in part a response to the discovery of a pipe bomb near Holland Woods Middle School in Port Huron last year. Four boys subsequently were charged with conspiracy to commit murder.

Although many schools already have established policies regarding locker searches, many legislators cited a need for the state to address the issue with a new law.

"This right is not in state statute, and we feel we need a more sound basis on which these policies are carried out," the bill's sponsor, Rep. Lauren Hager (R-Port Huron), told *The Detroit News*.

"Some school districts have been calling for clarification for years," House Speaker Chuck Perricone (R-Kalamazoo) told the *News*.

Critics of the bill claim schools already search lockers, and the bill is "feel-good

legislation."

"It gives the illusion we're actually doing something when we're not," Sen. Burton Leland (D-Detroit) told the *News*. "It's phony."

Others insisted that the state should avoid becoming involved in the matter and defer to the policies of local districts.

"Once again, we're stepping on the toes of the local control issue," Rep. Irma Clark (D-Detroit) told the *News*. "We are micromanaging school business."

State Senate approves takeover of Benton Harbor school district

The Michigan Senate has given the green light to a plan to increase state control over the Benton Harbor school district. The Republican-sponsored bill passed along party lines.

Republican proponents of the bill argued that the district's high dropout rates and poor test scores justified state action.

"We've been sending \$5 million more to that school district than any other school district the same size and test scores haven't improved," said Sen. Leon Still (R-Spring Lake).

Benton Harbor, which has been under federal court supervision since 1967, had

a graduation rate of 55 percent during the 1997-98 school year, compared to a statewide average rate of 83 percent.

The bill would create a three-member panel that would choose a chief executive officer for the district. The panel would consist of the governor, the state schools superintendent or his designee, and the Berrien County Schools intermediate school district superintendent.

The panel would then appoint three additional board members to the Benton Harbor district—increasing the board from seven to 10 members—but they would serve in an advisory role only. The powers of the current elected school board would be suspended and transferred to the CEO.

After five years, voters would decide whether to keep this system or return control to the elected school board.

Consideration of the bill comes one year after the state asserted control over Detroit schools, a move that remains controversial.

Democrats criticized the legislation for hindering local control of the district.

"It's time to stop micromanaging what goes on in our communities," Rep. Martha Scott (D-Highland Park) told *The Detroit News*.

Companies prepare students for careers in science

Innovative program goes beyond classroom to teach skills

Few would deny that the future health of the Michigan economy depends on the skills and abilities of tomorrow's workforce.

That fact is the rationale behind a program initiated by Dow Corning and Dow Chemical Corporations to introduce high school and college students to the advanced skills they need for careers in the chemical industry.

Beginning this fall, the Chemical Technologies Professional Education Partnership (PREP) will offer both coursework and job training to students, allowing them to begin a career in chemical manufacturing or providing them with a foundation for further education.

The PREP program was launched in conjunction with Saginaw Public Schools, the Saginaw Career Complex, and Delta College, and any high school junior or senior in Saginaw, Bay, or Midland County may participate.

Tremendous opportunity awaits students who are interested in chemical manufacturing, according to Mike Warren, Dow Corning's Midland-area learning and development manager.

"The chemical industry is facing a very real need for qualified chemical process operators," says Warren. "This program will create between students and our industry a direct link that did not exist in the past."

About 30 percent of the current chemical operators likely will retire in the next five years, creating job openings that could pay over \$60,000 a year, according to Warren.

After establishing the PREP program in late 1999, each partner participated in the development of the curriculum. The partners also invested about \$1 million in new facilities and equipment.

Courses include applied chemistry and physics, computers, plant science, process equipment, and safety and regulatory pro-

cedures. PREP also will train students to succeed in a professional environment, placing emphasis upon interviewing and interpersonal relationship skills.

The PREP program will allow students to become process operators in a variety of industries, including chemical manufacturing, power generation, water treatment, food processing, and pulp and paper. High school students can earn 12 or more credits toward a certificate and associate degree in Delta College's Chemical Process Technology program, which requires a total of 64.6 credits.

PREP "gives students a running start on a career or college degree," says Julie Walker, principal of the Saginaw Career Complex, which hosts the program. As the site of a new chemical-processing laboratory, the Career Complex will provide students with a hands-on introduction to chemical manufacturing.

PREP is part of the Career Complex's "school-to-careers" effort, which provides high school students with an applied curriculum in a variety of fields, ranging from arts and communication to business technology to health services. As part of the city of Saginaw school district, the Complex prepares students for college, advanced technical training, and skilled entry-level work.

For more information concerning the Chemical Technologies PREP program, contact Scott Seeburger of Dow Corning at (517) 496-4078 or Mike Manley of Saginaw Public Schools at (517) 759-2230. For more information concerning the Saginaw Career Complex, contact Julie Walker at (517) 797-4836.

Tragedies spur action on school safety

Legislators debate different approaches to student violence

School safety has become a dominant concern among Michigan parents, legislators, and school officials following several highly publicized school shootings, including the fatal shooting of 6-year-old Kayla Rolland at Buell Elementary in Mt. Morris Township.

The response to these tragedies has ranged from proposals for new programs to teach children about guns to "character education" courses for students.

In late March, the state House passed a bill authorizing the State Police and Michigan State University to develop a gun-safety course for schools. The voluntary program would address students from kindergarten through 12th grade and be available to schools that request it.

One sponsor of the legislation believes that a gun-safety program could have prevented the tragedy in Mt. Morris. "If the program had been there, and another kid saw that kid with a gun, they would have known to go to a teacher and tell them there was a weapon," said Rep. Mike Green (R-Mayville).

Although some lawmakers had considered presenting such a proposal in the past, recent events made it clear that "it was time to do something," Rep. Samuel Thomas (D-Detroit), told *The Detroit News*.

The gun-safety proposal drew widespread support from both Republicans and Democrats. "I think it's the only time we've come together on an important issue since day one," Rep. Gilda Jacobs (D-Huntington Woods), said.

Programs that strive to educate students about personal character and values also are becoming more common in schools both in Michigan and nationwide. Many argue that weak character often leads to violence in schools and that these programs can help ensure school safety.

"We all agree there are character attributes that we'd like a student to leave school with," the late Detroit school board member Bill Beckham told *The Detroit News*. "The question lies in what methods we use to instill these attributes."

One such program, called Character First!, is used in several schools in Detroit, Grand Rapids, and Lapeer. Character First! instructs children in values such as truthfulness, gratefulness, orderliness, and forgiveness. Volunteer instructors, or charac-

ter coaches, illustrate the values by invoking examples from the behavior of animals.

This program has generated controversy, however, by emphasizing immediate obedience to all figures of authority. Critics charge that this message discourages children from thinking freely.

"It's promoting a boot-camp mentality, where the children can become rote beings," Beckham told *The Detroit News*.

Others charge that the program could lead to the promotion of religion in public schools, raising church and state issues. A Christian minister developed the Character First! curriculum, and although the program makes no specific mention of religion, critics assert that the program incorporates subtle religious teachings.

The Josephson Institute of Ethics in California has developed a less controversial program called Character Counts! The Institute maintains that its "Six Pillars of Character"—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship—"transcend divisions of race, creed, politics, gender, and wealth."

Several Michigan districts employ the Character Counts! program, including Battle Creek and Plymouth-Canton.

Dearborn Public Schools instituted its own program seven years ago, stressing the values of honesty, integrity, respect, responsibility, and courtesy. Teachers integrate these values into science, language arts, and history classes.

"We decided there were basic values that could be taught in the classroom," Dearborn Schools Superintendent Jeremy Hughes told the *News*. "We've seen our playground accidents and school confrontations go down significantly."

Some critics remain skeptical even of programs like Character Counts! They fear that any type of character education will expose children to the personal agendas of those who teach it.

The debate over character education is expected to intensify when the Michigan House Education Committee considers a bill introduced by State Rep. Valde Garcia (R-St. John) that would require public schools to adopt some type of character education by this fall.

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Detroit schools to get facelift

But \$1.4 billion in new construction, renovation not enough, says CEO

In late March, Detroit Public Schools officials unveiled a plan to build 69 new schools and renovate 50 others by 2006, using money from a \$1.5-billion bond initiative voters overwhelmingly approved in 1994.

The district will spend the remaining \$1.4 billion of the bond project, which was brought to a halt last summer due to management problems. To date, \$100 million on management costs, studies, and minor repairs has been spent.

The original bond plan called for the building of only five new schools.

"We want to emphasize that this bond program, which has floundered for five years, is under way," Detroit Schools Interim CEO David Adamany said as he announced the plan at a news briefing.

The plan will finance less than half of the construction and renovations that the district require. To address the remaining structural problems, the district will have to renew old bonds as they expire.

"There is not a single building in the district that meets a standard of satisfactory. Most of the buildings fall in the range of fair to poor," Adamany said. "At the end of this program, we will have completed about 40 percent of what needs to be done."

The plan calls for the construction of 50 elementary schools for \$750 million, 15 middle schools for \$255 million, and four high schools for \$140 million. The renovations of 50 existing schools will total \$175 million, and an additional \$75 million will finance special projects.

The new schools will be equipped with air conditioning and technological wiring, Don Shalibo, leader of the new Detroit Public Schools Construction Management Team, told *The Detroit News*.

The district also will address many of the most outdated aspects of its schools, such as the 34 coal-fired boilers that remain in 17 schools.

"There are more children learning in conditions that are undesirable than there are dollars to address the problem," Adamany said.

Construction will begin this summer on three elementary schools, making them available by the fall of 2001. These schools would represent the first that Detroit has built since the 1970s.

A new management team will oversee the process. The team includes Detroit-based Barton Malow, Consoer Townsend Environdyne Engineers in Chicago, and Spillis Candella/DMJM, an architectural and engineering firm with offices across the country. The former manager of the bond project—A-MAC Sales & Builders, Inc.—now will play a minor role in planning.

On May 15, officials will announce plans for the summer projects, as well as the sites of the first three elementary schools. The district will announce on June 30 the 23 projects that will begin this year. It will reveal the entire plan on Sept. 1.

Former Detroit superintendent praises charter schools

McGriff predicts "many challenges" lie ahead

State policy makers gathered April 6 to hear former Detroit Public Schools superintendent Dr. Deborah McGriff discuss charter schools and their impact on public education at a luncheon hosted by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

McGriff, now executive vice president of charter development for Edison Schools Inc. in New York, spoke to a crowd of over 35 legislators, legislative aids, school board representatives, and State Department of Education officials at the Parthenon restaurant in Lansing. She served as Detroit superintendent from 1991 to 1993.

According to McGriff, charter schools are transforming public education by giving parents more choices for their children's education. The resulting competition for students is providing traditional public schools with much-needed incentives to improve their own educational curricula, standards, and processes, she said.

"Successful charter schools will ultimately inspire traditional public school districts to change," she told the audience.

McGriff also said that privatization—contracting with private companies to provide public services—is an "excellent" way to improve education. Although public schools have outsourced non-instructional services such as busing and janitorial services for many years, she notes, districts are now considering contracting for instructional services as a way to boost quality and accountability while reducing costs.

"In many ways, charter schools represent fully privatized public schools," she said. Charter schools outsource virtually



Former Detroit Public Schools superintendent Dr. Deborah McGriff tells legislators, "Parents don't want innovation, they want their sons and daughters to learn how to read, write, and do arithmetic."

everything, including instructional services, she said. Most for-profit education management organizations including Edison Schools routinely hire teachers and administrators in the public schools they manage, she noted.

Critics of charter schools charge that the schools do not live up to their billing as "laboratories of innovation" that experiment with new methods of instruction and curricula.

"Parents don't want innovation, they want their sons and daughters to learn how to read, write, and do arithmetic," McGriff said. "They want a safe learning environment, too."

"Since 1992, charter schools have grown from 4 to 1,674," she added. "These numbers

are evidence that parents are demanding alternatives to under-performing schools."

McGriff concluded by saying that charter schools face many challenges in the coming years. Among these will be continuing to do more with less money, creeping regulations from federal and state government, competition from public, private, and home schools, and the unionization of teachers, she said.

The Mackinac Center hosts monthly "Issues and Ideas" luncheons in Lansing to discuss current public-policy issues. For more information on upcoming events, please contact Programs Director Catherine Martin at (517) 631-0900.

Painting the private school picture

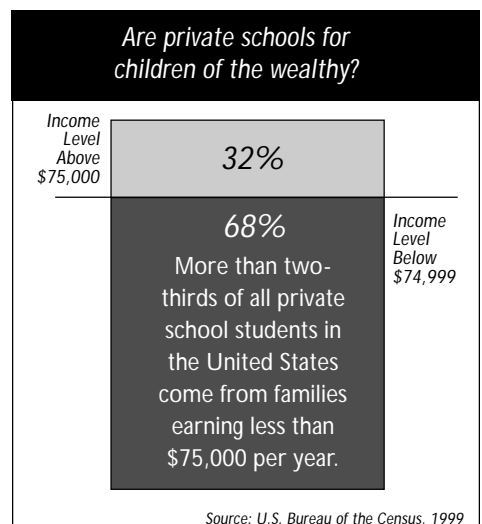
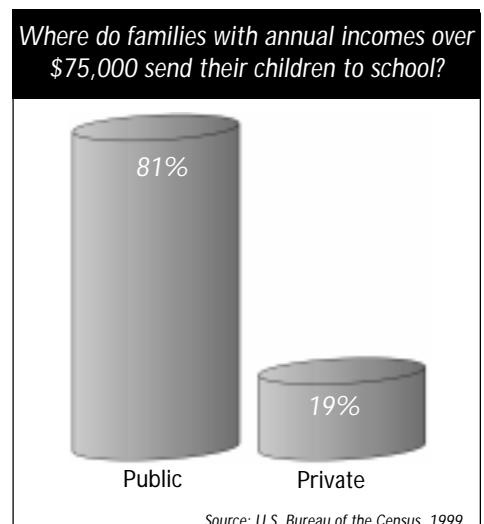
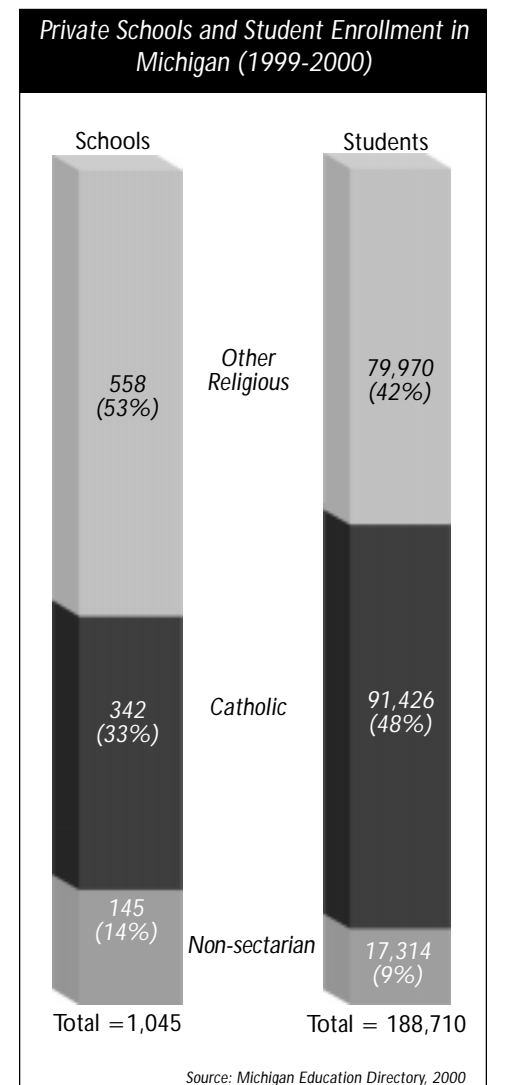
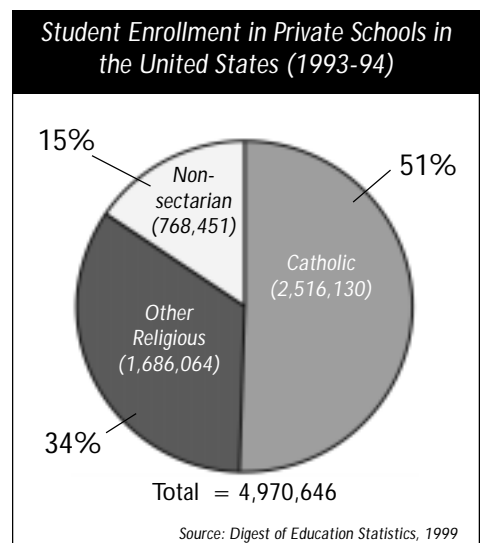
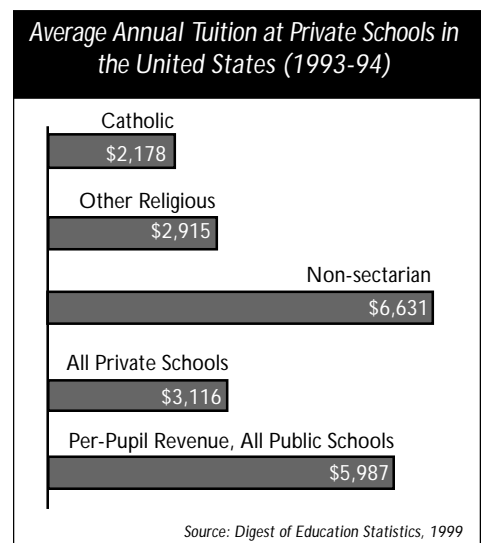
Public school per-pupil revenue almost twice the average private school tuition

How much does it cost to send a student to private school? How many students attend private schools nationwide and in Michigan? How many of those schools are religious? Do only wealthy children attend private schools?

The answers to these and other questions can be found in the recently released *Digest of Education Statistics, 1999*, published by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, and the *Michigan Education Directory, 2000*,

published by Michigan Education Directory Inc.

Below is a snapshot of facts about private education in the United States and Michigan.



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STUDENT FOCUS

Student with 'attitude' turns things around at new school

Mom credits discipline and incentives to learn

"Jeff used to be in my office so frequently that he could have had a chair named after him," says Principal Paul Fallon of North Saginaw Charter Academy.

Jeff Merchant, the fifth-grader of whom Principal Fallon speaks, readily concurs.

"Yeah, I spent a lot of time in Mr. Fallon's office at the beginning of the school year," he says. In fact, Jeff was suspended from school in the first week.

Michelle Toews, Jeff's mom, remembers sending Jeff to different public schools and being in tears because nothing seemed to get him on track behaviorally. "He liked school but he had a bad attitude, refused to do his homework, and was very disrespectful."

But that was then, and this is now. In less than six months, Jeff has gone from consistent trouble to a well-behaved, focused student.

What caused this dramatic change?

"Jeff just needed a little help in redirecting his rabble-rousing energies into something more constructive," says Fallon, a Marine-turned-educator. "Children want structure in their lives. They want order. We challenge Jeff with the high expectations and structured environment he needs."

Jeff agrees with his principal. Asked what turned him around, he responds with a maturity one would expect from someone beyond his years: "There is much more discipline here."

Jeff says he is particularly motivated by an academic incentives program called "Making Waves in Education." He credits it with helping him improve both his attitude and school work. "I try harder because of the [program]," he says.

Under "Making Waves," students are recognized for their improved performance by receiving color-coded cards representing

increasing levels of achievement. The better the student's color group, the more rewards are given to that group.

One day Jeff arrived at school to find donuts and juice waiting for students with Silver Cards.

"Right now I have a Silver Card, but I'm trying to get a Blue Card," he says. The Blue Card will get him off-campus for fun at a bowling alley or a skating rink with his classmates. He hopes to earn that card by the next grading period.

Jeff's enthusiasm for learning is evident. "I really like my school and my teacher, Mrs. Watson," he says.

Although his favorite subject is math, he is most proud that he has been able to improve his grades in both history and language arts.

"Mrs. Watson really helped me in spelling," he says.

According to his mother, Jeff's improved attitude has made its way home as well. "Jeff is doing his homework and he's much more respectful. I really appreciate all Mr. Fallon and Mrs. Watson have done for me and my son. North Saginaw is a wonderful school."

Everyone at North Saginaw is celebrating Jeff's achievements. Mrs. Diane



His mother's choice of North Saginaw Charter Academy in Saginaw made a world of difference for struggling fifth-grader Jeff Merchant. The first-year charter school has attracted many students with special learning and behavioral needs.

Swincicki in the front office says she "got to know Jeff early in the year because of the trouble he got into. But now, he doesn't want to let me down by being sent to the office. We have developed a relationship that encourages him to do the right thing."

"Some kids respond to incentives like the 'Making Waves' program and others don't," says Mr. Fallon. "For Jeff, it has made a world of difference for him and his family."

TEACHER FOCUS

Fifth-grade teacher reaches students' intellects, hearts

Parents, students flock to Kathy Watson's class

Most adults can look back on their school days and remember having one teacher who really made a difference. Someone who made learning fun and genuinely cared about individual students.

Years from now, many students at North Saginaw Charter Academy in Saginaw will probably recall Kathy Watson as that special teacher in their lives.

By all accounts, Watson, the fifth-grade teacher at this first-year school, has a knack for motivating students to achieve their full potentials.

"This school was a last resort," one mother says. "I don't know what I would have done if Mrs. Watson had not been able to reach my son."

North Saginaw Principal Paul Fallon says Watson is one reason more and more parents are sending their children to his school. "Parents and students alike are just drawn to her," he says.

The school opened in August 1999 with only 135 students, but has since attracted more than 215 students from the areas of Bay City, Saginaw, and Midland.

Fallon says when he interviewed Watson for her position last summer, "I felt like I was the one being interviewed."

"She was sizing me up to see if she would have the freedom to teach in her style and character," he adds. "At that moment I knew I had to have her on my staff."

For her part, Watson was only interested in the job if she could fully engage her students in the learning process. Fallon says he was sold when she said she wanted "to reach the hearts of her students, not just their intellects."



Kathy Watson's journey from homeschool mom to private school teacher to the fifth-grade at North Saginaw Charter Academy are part of her commitment to helping every child succeed.

And that's exactly what she has done. This past winter, Mrs. Watson's class of 19 students traveled to Spring Hill, an outdoor retreat area, for three days of exploratory learning. This spring, her class will be experiencing firsthand the struggles of early settlers. Watson has teamed up with a friend who reenacts life as a French fur trapper in the northern Lower Peninsula.

"My students are going to learn what life was like before television and video games," says Watson.

Watson says she would not be as successful with students without "Making

Waves in Education," a motivational program developed by Michael Fox, a college freshman at Saginaw Valley State University and a former student of Principal Fallon.

"Making Waves enhances and celebrates even the smallest of achievements by students," she says. Depending on the level of attainment, students earn rewards including trips to go ice skating and bowling as well as smaller prizes such as food and drinks. Students have no idea when rewards are coming so they are always working to make improvements, says Watson.

National Heritage Academies, the education management organization that operates North Saginaw, is considering adopting the "Making Waves" program in the other charter schools it manages.

Meanwhile, North Saginaw plans to add a sixth-grade class and will continue to add a grade each year until the eighth grade.

And as word spreads about teachers like Kathy Watson, Principal Fallon may soon be considering a major building expansion project.

"If they come, we will build it," he says.

Coalition seeks to sink voucher initiative

Says school choice must benefit all students or none

For months, Michigan citizens have been reading news stories about Kids First! Yes!, a group gathering petitions to place a school voucher initiative before voters in November.

But as summer approaches, temperatures won't be the only thing heating up in the Great Lakes State.

ALL Kids First!, an organization formed to counter the voucher drive, is laying plans to derail the momentum of the school choice movement.

"[Kids First! Yes!] said for weeks that they had the signatures, we knew they were going to file, the next step is waiting for the Secretary of State to verify the signatures on the petition," says Michael Emlaw, vice-chairman of ALL Kids First!. "Once that happens, this campaign is going to heat up by about a thousand degrees."

ALL Kids First! is beginning to take action now that Kids First! Yes! has submitted nearly 460,000 signatures to the State Board of Canvassers. The 460,000 signatures represent 53 percent more than are required to qualify an issue for a position on the statewide ballot.

According to its Web site, "ALL Kids First! is a coalition of child advocacy, civil rights and education groups supporting the constitutional guarantee of a free public education for all Michigan children." It opposes

the use of tuition vouchers or tax credits at private K-12 schools, saying they will "increase taxes, subsidize private and parochial education and drain badly needed resources from those who need them most."

"We've definitely been concentrating on getting organized and strategizing in anticipation of this moment," says Georgene Campbell, chairman of ALL Kids First! and former Michigan PTA president.

"We're ready for the upcoming battle. Our top priority is to make sure every child in Michigan has access to a great school." That means defeating the voucher initiative, she says.

ALL Kids First! lists over 120 organizations as supporters of their effort, including more than 60 school districts, 60 chapters of the PTA and NAACP, two dozen government employee associations and unions, the People for the American Way, and the Michigan chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Other members of the anti-voucher coalition include the International Electronic, Electrical, Salaried Machine and Furniture Workers and groups like the Triangle Foundation, a Michigan-based "organization for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people."

"The gay opposition to vouchers is that we don't want private schools to be able to



ALL Kids First! is expected to spend millions of dollars, including \$750,000 from the National Education Association, to prevent Michigan children from receiving state-funded K-12 tuition vouchers.

receive government funding without having to abide by equal-access laws," Sean Kosofsky, a spokesman for the Triangle Foundation told *MER*. "Private voucher schools could be exempted from mandates that schools allow gay-straight alliances," says Kosofsky. These are clubs on school

campuses aimed at fostering a "dialogue" between hetero- and homosexual students, he says.

At press time, the State Board of Canvassers had not yet approved the Kids First! Yes! petition, but it appears that it will survive any ballot access challenges.

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Vouchers divide Van Buren school board

Pro-school choice trustees make fashion, political statement

School vouchers have been a contentious issue within the public education community for years, but with Michigan headed for a vote on vouchers in November, the line between supporters and opponents is being drawn ever sharper.

On April 10, Van Buren Public Schools board members Vesta Losen and Thomas Bowles raised eyebrows by attending a school board meeting wearing t-shirts emblazoned with a "Kids First! Yes!" logo. Kids First! Yes! is the coalition promoting an amendment to the state constitution that would remove the ban on tuition vouchers enacted in 1970. The proposal also would require public school teachers and teachers in private schools that accept vouchers to take competency tests. In addition, the proposal would establish a minimum level of per-pupil funding by the state.

"I believe we are elected to represent the best interests of all children," Losen told *MER*. "If a child is not being served by our district, then he or she should be given the opportunity to find a better school."

But Bowles and Losen's support for voucher initiative puts them at odds with Van Buren's board president Karl Gorham, the Michigan Association of School Boards (MASB), and many of their peers.

"Although the board has not taken an official position on the amendment, I am personally opposed," says Gorham. "First of all, private schools in the area do not have the capacity to accommodate additional students and we already have teacher testing. We don't need any more."

MASB encourages public school districts to adopt resolutions against the Kids First! Yes! proposal. However, according to ALL Kids First!, an anti-voucher coalition, less than 10 percent of all public school districts have adopted a formal resolution against the Kids First! Yes! proposal.

Gorham says Van Buren Public Schools, which encompasses the community of Belleville, hosted a public forum

and parents."

"That is what I'm all about and why I am working with Tom and MSBLA," says Losen. "Children are my first priority. And unfortunately, I frequently find them short-changed by the system."

Bowles and Losen are serving their last term as board members and have decided not to run for reelection this June.

Bowles ran four years ago with the hope of improving the financial situation in his district. "When I ran for trustee, I was an outspoken critic about many financial aspects of our system," he told *MER*. "It doesn't take a genius to recognize that cutting the grass and shoveling snow should not cost \$30 per hour, which is what it costs our district."

"My choice to not seek reelection is not because I have abandoned my reasons for running in the first place," Bowles says. "On the contrary, I just figured out I cannot change things from within the system."

Bowles claims that he has no intention in changing "the educational model from what others think works to what I think works."

"Parents should be able to choose the best schools for their children, whether public, private, or home schools. If they want schools that concentrate on traditional education they should have the freedom to choose them," he says. "If they desire schools with a strong association to religious belief, they should be able to choose them, too."



Van Buren Public Schools board members Vesta Losen and Tom Bowles expressed their support of school choice at a recent board meeting. "Children are my first priority," says Losen. "If a child is not being served by our district, then he or she should be given the opportunity to find a better school."

where presenters from both sides of the issue debated the ballot initiative. He doesn't expect the district to take an official position until the November election draws nearer.

Bowles cites MASB's position against school choice as one reason he formed the Michigan School Board Leaders Association (MSBLA), an organization for school board members in both public and private schools. MSBLA's Web site (www.msbla.org) emphasizes that, "School Board members are not elected to serve schools. They are elected to ensure that schools serve children

The Biggest Consumer Fraud In America

NEARLY 60 PERCENT of today's high school graduates enter college—an impressive number considering the fact that tuition rates have grown nearly three times as fast as inflation and twice as fast as the economy. A college education is, it seems, no longer a four-year expense; it is a lifetime mortgage.

What kind of return do students receive for their investment? According to national surveys, tens of thousands of college seniors do not know when Columbus sailed to the New World, who wrote the Declaration of Independence, or why the Civil War was fought. In one recent test, half of the graduates could not even interpret a simple bus schedule. No wonder higher education has been called "the biggest consumer fraud in America."

On many campuses, students pay as much as \$20,000 a year for the privilege of being crammed into classrooms of 500 or 1,000. Seldom do they come into contact with professors—most of their courses are taught by other students who are called "teaching assistants." And so few sections of required courses are offered that it takes them five to six years to complete their degrees.

One educator admits that all this "is a condemnation of higher education. If we were running an automobile plant, we would be out of business." He knows, however, that most colleges and universities stopped acting like businesses a long time ago. That's because they have gone on the dole. Government subsidies are their "bottom line."

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COMMENTARY

Markets, not MEAP, best way to measure school quality



Gary Wolfram, Ph.D.
Gary Wolfram, Ph.D., former member of the Michigan State Board of Education, is George Munson Professor of Political Economy at Hillsdale College.

Many education reformers today like to use student scores from standardized exams, such as the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test, to evaluate schools' progress in improving education. Tests certainly can be useful tools of measurement; however, there are several reasons why the MEAP is of questionable effectiveness when it comes to weighing how successfully school districts are meeting the needs of students.

The primary reason to be skeptical is that the whole construct of MEAP-driven reform is based on a flawed paradigm and a flawed system. Ninety percent of K-12 educational services in America are provided through government-funded schools. What we call the "public school system" is actually a political system that itself determines what is taught, how it is taught, and how well it is taught, without much reference to the needs and desires of the parents and kids who use the system. Unlike services that are delivered through a voluntary market process, education as a government monopoly yields no indicators to provide a direct measurement of how well schools are serving their customers.

Consider this analogy. If Farmer Jack's is doing a poor job of providing retail food services to its customers, we do not need to test Farmer Jack's employees or the produce they sell to find this out. Farmer Jack's will

simply lose customers to Spartan stores or other supermarkets. In fact, even if Farmer Jack's is doing a good job, if it is not doing as good a job as Spartan stores, we will know this by observing where customers decide to get their food.

This process does not work for K-12 schools because the vast majority of them are owned and run by the government. Since there are large barriers to entering the K-12 school market—most conspicuously the fact that citizens have to pay for government schools whether they use them or not—customers have very limited choices, a fact that makes it difficult for them to switch to other providers if the product is not good. Since we cannot observe customer response, how can we tell if the \$14 billion spent annually on Michigan's government-produced K-12 education is put to good use? The answer, so far, has been testing.

Using tests to measure school quality sounds reasonable enough—until we think about how the testing is done. The government produces the tests, so by definition the tests will be designed and scored through a political process. Now suppose for a moment the tests are completely reliable in testing the knowledge of students, something that is far from certain. There is no mechanism to ensure that what knowledge the bureaucrats design the test to measure will be what parents want their children to know. In fact, it is fair to say that close to zero percent of parents have ever seen one question on the MEAP test. So what the MEAP system actually tests is what the legislature or bureaucrats wish to have tested.

But suppose the MEAP does accurately test what the bureaucrats want children to know and that what the bureaucrats want children to know is exactly what parents want the children to know. The MEAP still

wouldn't be a good measure of school quality. Take the example of charter school test scores. A report on charter schools from the Hudson Institute bases its criticism of the use of tests to compare charter schools with ordinary public schools on the fact that "the (MEAP) data reveal as much about where charter-school students are coming from as about how they're doing once enrolled." Since charter schools are so new, prior schooling experience of students has a strong effect on the early test scores of charter schools.

Using MEAP data to compare different school districts can also be misleading since the MEAP scores are "cut scores." That is, if my raw score is at a certain "cut" level, I will have passed the test satisfactorily. If my raw score is one point lower, I will not have passed the test satisfactorily.

Now imagine two school districts, A and B, each with 100 4th-grade students who took the 4th-grade MEAP reading test. School District A's students all have a raw score one point above the cut score. School District B's students all have raw scores one point below the cut score. While the raw score differential between the two districts would be two points out of perhaps 68 points, or about a 3-percent difference, we would find District A had 100 percent of its students with a satisfactory score, and School District B with 0 percent of its students with a satisfactory score. It is quite possible for the raw score differential between districts to be much different than the cut score differentials that are published by the Michigan Department of Education and used for comparison.

The MEAP test can provide us with rough information about what students know in certain subject areas, and this might be useful information. Studies that compare

different state measures of school accountability usually rate Michigan's MEAP tests relatively highly. However, the MEAP is at best a flawed attempt to solve a problem that requires a more fundamental solution. We must change the delivery system of K-12 education to one where parents decide what is best for their children and where entrepreneurs can enter the market and provide quality educational services when the needs of parents are not being met. Only then can we truly provide an intelligent answer to the question, "Are schools improving?"

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COMMENTARY

Vouchers give poor students a chance



Virginia F. Walden-Ford

Virginia F. Walden-Ford is the Executive Director of D.C. Parents for School Choice in Washington, D.C.

Four years ago I was a single mother with a son in 9th grade. When my son started having problems in and out of school, I knew I did not want him to attend Roosevelt High School, a Washington, D.C. public school that had (and still has) a lot of problems of its own.

Thanks to a neighbor's financial help, I was able to send my son to Archbishop Carroll High School, a private, parochial school, where his grades immediately began to improve. My son still may be "at-risk," but he is in a safe environment where he is learning, he is on his track team, and he is thinking about college.

In 1997, President Clinton vetoed a bill to give 2,000 low-income D.C. parents the same chance my son is getting. The bill would have provided as much as \$3,200 per year to send poor children to a school of their choice. As someone who has seen what a difference sending my child to a private school has made, I know that this bill would have benefited many parents who face problems similar to those that I faced with my son.

Unfortunately, arguments against the bill focused on the need to fix the public schools. I am all for saving the system, but I don't want to sacrifice my child in the process. Those who think that saving the system should take precedence over an individual child don't know what it is like to see a child begin to act like a hoodlum because of his school environment. They don't understand that good alternatives are out there for most low-income children—and at a price that is often less than the cost of educating that child in a traditional public school.

Some people worry that poor mothers don't have the knowledge it takes to decide

what is best for their children. That offends me. I work as a mentor with many low-income parents, and I know that being low-income doesn't mean caring any less about a child's education. It doesn't take a Ph.D. in education to figure out that a child is going down the wrong path by hanging out with gang members and performing poorly in school. Parents shouldn't be blamed for a school system that doesn't know how to teach children.

Critics say my support of vouchers puts me in the same camp as right-wing conservatives. I am a lifelong Democrat, and I am not sure when the Democrats decided that siding with the poor and the needy is no longer part of their platform. School choice empowers parents, and I don't care who is behind it, Democrats or Republicans.

However, I do worry when Democrats think that spending more money on education is the only answer to problems in the schools. Washington, D.C. spends between \$7,000 and \$10,000 for every child in its public schools. To demand even more funding while continuing to produce terrible test scores is unacceptable.

In 1998, 41 percent of D.C. public school 3rd-graders and 53 percent of 10th-graders performed below basic level on the Stanford 9 Achievement Test. Math results were even worse: 89 percent of 10th-graders scored below basic. Even though test scores slightly improved in 1999 for 3rd-graders in both reading and math, over 50 percent are still not proficient. For 10th-graders there was no improvement in math and in reading only 20 percent scored basic or above. With a record that abysmal, I don't see how anyone can think spending more money on public education is the answer.

As someone who has experienced what school choice can mean to a family, I know that Michigan's Kids First! Yes! voucher proposal will give those parents who desperately need options the chance to get their children out of failing schools and send them to schools that will meet their individual needs. Testing teachers in their subject areas will also ensure that children are learning from knowledgeable people who can give them the best instruction possible.

Critics say that choice may not help every child, but if it means saving one child who would otherwise end up in jail or drop out of school, I think it should be given a shot. The way I see it, those who oppose vouchers—despite all their high-sounding rhetoric—show that they don't really care about low-income parents and even less about their children.

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Tenure law is impediment to school reform



Gerard A. Pound

Gerard A. Pound, a former public school district superintendent, is president of Beyond Conventional Thinking, Inc.

Robert Byrne once said, "There are two kinds of people, those who finish what they start and so on . . ."

Similarly, there are two kinds of institutions in the world: those that meet and overcome challenges head-on and those that do not. Unfortunately, when it comes to the challenge of meaningful reform, public education, from the Legislature to the classroom, has usually proven to be in the "and so on" category.

One example of public education's unfinished job of reform is its unwillingness to eliminate antiquated and obsolete laws, regulations, and policies, such as teacher tenure. Tenure is a holdover from a bygone non-unionized era, and it's high time to abolish it so that critical and essential improvements to public education can proceed.

The tenure concept itself is a product of the bureaucratic, static, monopolistic, hierarchical, and generally incentive-less structures that have defined public education for over 100 years. As such, tenure has been and is a legal, cultural, and philosophical block to reform, and there are several reasons why we should eliminate it.

The first reason is that teacher tenure is redundant. Numerous federal and state statutory protections already exist to guarantee due process for teachers who are experiencing employment-related difficulties. In addition, union contracts provide, through their grievance and arbitration procedures, a first line of defense for most of the contentious issues a tenured teacher could face. Most districts also offer an appeal process directly to the school board for employees who feel that they have been wronged, providing them still another forum in which to be heard.

Tenure is also poor policy for financial reasons. Since taxpayers ultimately pay

teachers' salaries—which are then partially transferred to unions through the dues collection process—citizens bear the full costs associated with negotiating and maintaining labor contracts. The same line of reasoning holds true for the statutory and legislative protections, as the taxpayer pays for the union to defend or support teachers in judicial actions. Since the tenure system is redundant, the resources expended implementing it could be better directed toward the classroom.

Third, tenure actually acts as a disincentive for some teachers to do more than meet the minimum expectation of their professional roles. The vast majority of teachers require no incentives to excel—although they deserve them—and tenure protections mean little to such teachers. However, for those who operate in the land of mediocrity, tenure is a great benefit. The school district can neither truly force lackadaisical teachers to meaningfully improve nor can it afford to sever their employment. As a result, kids who deserve the best education possible inevitably are shortchanged.

It may be objected that tenure provides protection for all teachers, especially outstanding teachers who take risks in their classes to push student learning to higher levels, against the wishes of boards and administrators fighting to maintain the status quo. However, this is rare. A full-term, protracted teacher tenure discharge case may cost a school district \$250,000 to \$500,000, according to attorneys who handle such matters. It is not something that school boards and administrators would enter into lightly in order to "punish" a fine teacher.

Finally, the most important reason to abolish tenure is simply that it discourages change and improvement. Because it is costly and cumbersome, it is a silent anchor on the public school system whenever it tries to make progress for kids, staff, and the community at large. Protecting mediocrity in public schools, already under siege to improve, is neither appropriate nor intelligent policy.

The future of public education is becoming uncertain. The pace of deep change, innovation, and invention in our twenty-first century world demands that schools be-

come dynamic, agile, flexible, responsive, and continuously improving institutions. Tying up administrative and teaching staff in the sloth-like tenure processes requires time and money better spent on improving student learning.

Anyone who is even remotely aware of the pressures coming to bear on public schools from parents, students, media, community members, and others would also have to question whether sustaining

a burdensome, redundant set of laws, rules, regulations, processes, and bureaucracies is sound policy in today's emerging competitive educational environment. It's time to repeal Michigan's Teacher Tenure Act.

Note: The Winter 2000 issue of MER featured Dirk Koorstra's "Tenure protects good teachers, too." His commentary can be viewed at www.EducationReport.org.



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Diverse Viewpoints

Are we spending enough on public schools?

Greater competition will help schools do the job for less

In 1976, Dr. Max Gammon of Great Britain published a report in which he developed the Theory of Bureaucratic Displacement. His theory states in part that "[in] a bureaucratic system . . . increase in expenditure will be matched by fall in production . . . Such systems will act rather like 'black holes' in the economic universe, simultaneously sucking in resources, and shrinking in terms of 'emitted' production."

Public education in America certainly substantiates Gammon's theory. When government-supported public education first began taking hold around 1920, the most important factor that determined how the system operated was its decentralized political structure. School governing was handled on the village, township, city, or even neighborhood level, without much state or federal intervention.

Close monitoring of schools by local authorities assured that any widely shared desires of parents were implemented. It also assured more direct oversight of expenditures and new curriculum ideas, as these had to be balanced directly against the local tax support and justified to parents in terms of student achievement.

As time went on, consolidation in the name of eliminating duplicate services and taking advantage of other economies of scale became the rule. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1937-38 there were 119,001 school districts for 247,127 schools. By 1996-97, there were only 14,841 school districts.

While certain efficiencies certainly were realized, centralization also meant school district oversight was passed from local authorities to broader bodies, which meant that many school district boundaries no longer corresponded to any single local governmental entity. The result has been that the increase in school bureaucracy and centralization has substituted the desires of education consumers (parents and kids) with the demands of the producers (administrators, bureaucrats, etc.) and led to an explosion in financial expenditures.

The largest districts (typically in major urban areas) spend the most money per student, have the highest salaries and benefits for their employees, and yet produce the poorest outcomes and the greatest problems. In a recent report from the Education Intelligence Agency, *Mission Creep: How Large School Districts Lose Sight of the Objective—Student Learning*, researcher Mike Antonucci writes, "While the average U.S. school district spends nearly 62 percent of its budget on instruction, many large districts spend closer to 50 percent." And when it comes to the number of teachers as a percentage of staff, "on average about 52 percent of school district employees are classroom teachers, but in Philadelphia, only 48 percent of district employees are classroom teachers, while only 40 percent of the Detroit workforce is composed of teachers in the classroom."

Concurrent with consolidation, financial support for public schools increasingly has passed to state and federal governments, putting further distance between those who use the education system and can best make it accountable and those who run the system. In 1920, 83 percent of public school revenues came from local entities, and federal grants amounted to less than one percent. Today, local revenues amount to less than half of all support, with states assuming most of the balance and the federal portion increasing rapidly to well over eight percent.

This shift in financial support has led to the proliferation of whole new layers of the education bureaucracy, which eat up ever more portions of the school financial pie. Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Educational Reform in Washington D.C., defines what she refers to as "the blob": "The term 'blob' cropped up years ago when reformers began trying to work with the education establishment and ran smack into the more than 200 groups, associations, federations, alliances, departments, offices, administrations, councils, boards, commissions, panels, organizations, herds, flocks, and coveys that make up the education industrial complex."

Two of the blob's largest parts are the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers. In his book *The Teacher Unions*, Myron Lieberman states that together these two organizations "employ more full-time political staff than the Democratic and Republican parties combined." These organizations clearly carry the clout to promote their own costly demands, many of which do nothing to enhance educational outcome.

The public school monster that has been created is at the point at which one-half of its employees are not even directly involved in educating children. When public schools are saddled with such heavy overhead, is it any wonder that private schools continually demonstrate that they can supply better student achievement at half the cost?

We will reverse the public school system's "sucking of resources" and its attendant reduction in "emitted outcome" only when we take control of education from costly government bureaucracies and return it to parents, where it rightfully belongs. We should expand charter schools and schools-of-choice as well as support tuition vouchers, tax credits, and other reforms that introduce freedom and competition into a monopolistic industry.

Education does not need more money; the financial "problem" easily can be fixed. Simply return oversight to the consumers by allowing them the freedom to choose schools that serve parents and students, instead of schools that serve only a bureaucracy.

Thomas Bowles is a school board trustee for Van Buren Public Schools in Belleville, Michigan and founder and chairman of the Michigan School Board Leaders Association (www.msbla.org).



Thomas Bowles

YES



Kenneth Drenth, Ph.D.

NO

Districts often can't cut costs when budgets shrink

New school board members, when first reviewing a multi-million dollar school budget, are often overwhelmed by the numbers. Not until the budget is broken down, and reference points are provided, do the numbers make sense.

The same is true of the question: "Are we spending enough on public schools?" Until the numbers are placed into the context of what is needed, we cannot determine if it is "enough." Therefore, I would like to provide some reference points, attempting to put the question in a logical format for answering.

Since 1994, Michigan has seen unprecedented economic growth, resulting in the corresponding growth of the state's School Aid Fund. This has prevented executive order cuts, helped to narrow the gap in spending between districts, and provided most districts with adequate per-student annual increases. One might think that the problems of school finance have been solved and every district has enough money to operate a quality educational program. But that is not the case.

The cost of public education can be examined from a number of different reference points, but this article will examine just two: operation costs and infrastructure costs.

Operation costs include expenses to pay staff, operate the bus fleet, and so on. Infrastructure costs include the construction or remodeling of school buildings. When Proposal A was adopted in 1994, the responsibility of funding K-12 operation costs was transferred from the local district to the state. The legislature determined a per-student amount for each district, adjusted each year since except one, where it remained the same. While that system has worked well in districts that have steady or increasing enrollments, it does not work for those districts experiencing declining enrollment. Schools cannot cut expenditures at the same rate their numbers are declining.

Enrollment declines are usually haphazard: Seldom do enough students depart from a single grade or class to allow a teacher or an entire program to be eliminated. This is especially true in smaller districts where there is only a single section of each grade. In those districts it doesn't make any difference if there are 22 or 27 students in the fourth grade, you still need the fourth grade.

A quick analogy can help make the point. If there were 25 houses on a country road and four families moved away it would cost the same amount to plow the road. As long as the road is there, it needs winter plowing. Similarly, the loss of just two students from each grade will reduce K-12 enrollment by 26 students, and that amount multiplied by \$6,000 reduces the district's revenue by \$156,000. But what can be cut to offset the loss?

This phenomenon is occurring all across the Upper Peninsula as birth rates have dropped 35 percent since 1980 and 24 percent since 1990 alone. Some UP schools have made drastic cuts but still cannot cut as rapidly as the revenue decreases.

Most districts have had some fund balance that they have been able to use to soften otherwise devastating revenue reductions from the state. But those fund balances are being rapidly depleted and it is estimated that the majority of UP school districts will be facing deficit spending in two more years unless the present mechanism of funding on a per-pupil basis is changed.

A second reference point of school funding is that of infrastructure. The financing of new school buildings or renovations was not changed under Proposal A. The old system, depending on local tax base, is still intact, and huge disparities in tax bases prohibit some communities from being able to address their school building needs.

Michigan is one of only 10 states that do not keep records on school infrastructure, so we do not know the extent of the

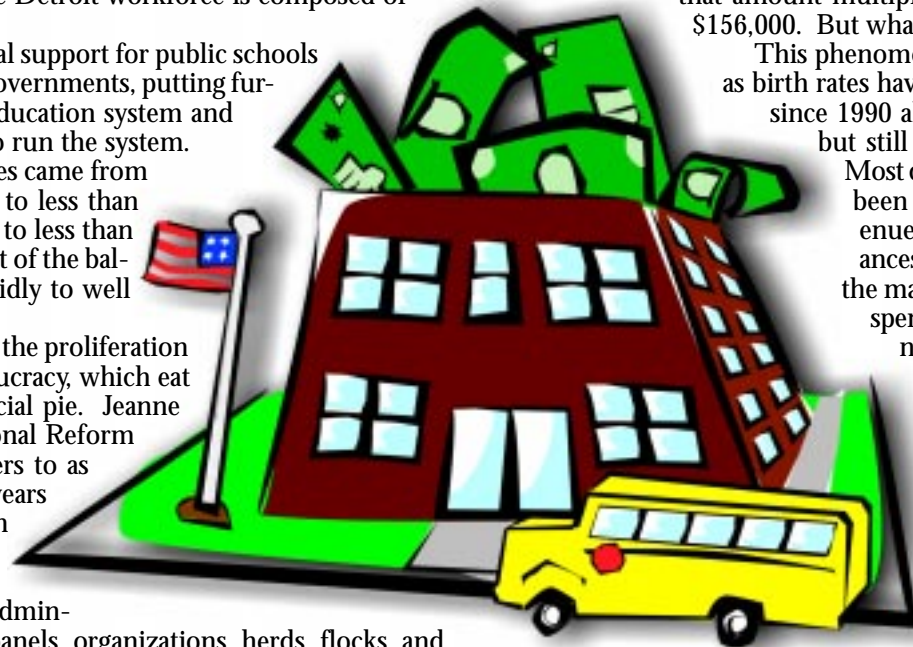
funding problem. However, we do know that there are communities desperate to do something about their school buildings but are without the tax base to do so. Do we include in the question: "Does the state have a responsibility to children who are forced to go to school in inadequate facilities?"

Currently, there is about \$740 million of unallocated funds in the state School Aid Fund. But schools have to borrow hundreds of millions of dollars annually because the state does not release funds on a schedule that allows schools to meet their monthly obligations. This adds more costs that have nothing to do with education to local district budgets. So maybe the question is, "Shouldn't we use our available revenues in a way that doesn't add non-education costs to local school budgets?"

In conclusion, the question: "Are we spending enough on public schools" has no significance in and of itself. There is no meaning in the answer until it is placed into the context of your local school. Does your district have enough revenue to maintain quality educational programs? Are the facilities that your children attend safe and conducive to learning? Should the School Aid Fund be distributed in a more timely manner to reduce non-education costs?

Until we can answer these questions, the answer to the original question is either no, we are not spending enough, or, we have chosen not to spend what we have in the best interest of our children.

Kenneth Drenth, Ph.D., is superintendent of Les Cheneaux Community Schools in Cedarville, Michigan, a position he has held for the past 13 years. He is author of a recent study on the financial impact of declining enrollment in Upper Peninsula districts. Dr. Drenth is retiring in June after 31 years in public education.



Diverse Viewpoints are the opinions of the authors and not those of Michigan Education Report. Tell us what you think: "Are we spending enough on public schools?" Send your comments to

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