

MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

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News and analysis for educators, parents, and policy makers

Fall 2001

SHORT SUBJECTS

Whether Michigan is to have more charter schools will depend in part upon the recommendation of a new commission created this fall by legislators to assess the performance of the 186 existing charter schools that serve 66,000 Michigan students. The commission, headed by Michigan State University President Peter McPherson, includes state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Watkins and six other appointees—four appointed by the House and Senate leadership and two by Gov. Engler.

The constitutionality of vouchers will be decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in a case challenging the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program. The court's ruling, expected next summer, will determine whether or not tax dollars can be used for children's education at private and religious schools. The case stems from an Ohio voucher plan instituted in 1995, which offers publicly funded scholarships to children from low-income families in Cleveland. Approximately 4,000 students participate in the program. The case, *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, will be heard in January.

A new web site, MichiganVotes.org, is helping citizens keep track of education-related and other legislation by offering plain-English, nonpartisan descriptions of all bills and the complete voting records of all Michigan legislators. The site, maintained by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, allows web users to access the full text and analyses of recent bills and amendments in the Michigan Legislature and can be customized to send email updates on legislative activities by issue or legislator. "Citizens—be they students, advocates, reporters, researchers, or just curious—should check it out," said Lynn Jondahl, a former Democratic state representative.

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Teacher shortage feared *Many blame cumbersome certification rules of dubious value*

The twin pinch of an increase in student enrollment and a rise in the number of retiring teachers has many school districts scrambling for ways to address an expected teacher shortage. The looming problem has prompted a discussion among school officials and policy-makers over how state teacher certification rules might be changed to simplify and accelerate the process by which qualified candidates can become

educators.

The U.S. Department of Education estimates that public school districts across the country will need to hire over a million new teachers by 2010. Many of the new teachers will replace a retiring workforce of teachers who are now in their 40s and 50s. According to the department, demand for teachers will be greatest in the areas of special education, science, and math.

In Michigan and other states, state governments regulate entry into the teaching profession through licensure and certification programs. These programs are intended to ensure that quality teachers without criminal records enter school classrooms with adequate knowledge to teach in their subject area. However, stringent certification processes also can

SHORTAGE continued on page 2



Students gathered at full-day workshops throughout the state in September to hear perspectives on terrorism from national foreign policy experts at the 14th annual High School Debate Workshops, sponsored by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

Terrorism experts headline debate workshops *Students gain perspective on foreign policy, weapons of mass destruction*

One week after the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., hundreds of Michigan high school students gathered in four cities to learn about terrorism, U.S. foreign policy, and weapons of mass destruction.

It was all part of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy's 14th annual High School Debate Workshops, held Sept. 18-27 in Grand Rapids, Jackson, Livonia, and Midland.

Expert speakers from New York and Washington provided 330 debate students from 28 public, charter, and private schools around the state with information on the 2001 high school debate topic, "Resolved: That the United States federal government should establish a foreign policy significantly limiting the use of weapons of mass destruction."

The annual debate topic, which is debated by over 100,000 students across the country, is selected each January by state and national debate officials.

Students in Livonia and Jackson learned debate techniques and information from speakers including terrorism expert Ivan Eland, director of defense policy at the

Washington-based Cato Institute; Gregory Rehmke, director of the New York-based Foundation for Economic Education's (FEE) High School Speech and Debate Program; and David Beers, a debate expert and consultant with FEE.

Speakers in Grand Rapids and Midland included Rehmke; Gary Leff, director of development for George Mason University;

TERRORISM continued on page 4

Teachers vote to remove union from charter school

"It is important we focus on what is best for children"

The teachers of Island City Academy, a charter school in Eaton Rapids near Lansing, voted on Oct. 29 to remove the Michigan Education Association (MEA) as their bargaining representative. The vote was nearly unanimous, with 12 voting to decertify the union and 1 favoring its retention. The teachers said they did not like the MEA's adversarial approach to relations between teachers and the school's management.

"It is important that we focus on what is best for children," says Janelle Leonard, a first- and second-grade teacher at Island City.

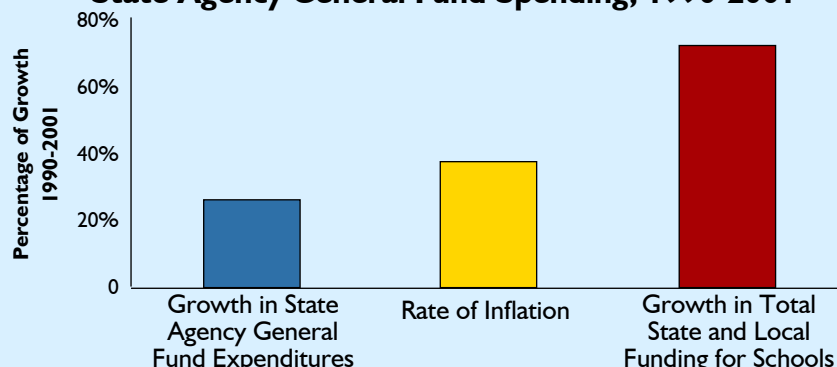
"My focus, as a teacher, has always been on what is best for children and I hope now that focus will be our collective priority," agreed Sarah Coons, another teacher at the academy.

The MEA organized the teachers at Island City Academy in August 2000 by a 6-5 vote. Union organizer David Crim said Island City teachers approached him in early June of that year about joining the MEA. "Their major concern was that they were having problems with the administration of the school," he told *Michigan Education Report*.

ISLAND CITY continued on page 2

Education at a Glance

Michigan School Funding Far Outpaces Inflation and State Agency General Fund Spending, 1990-2001



Source: Office of Revenue and Tax Analysis, Michigan Department of Treasury

Shortage

continued from page 1

limit access to the teaching profession, keeping out many otherwise qualified individuals.

Michigan's teacher certification program, which is administered by the Michigan Superintendent of Public Instruction and State Board of Education, requires various components including college-level education coursework, a period of student teaching, a state licensure exam, and a criminal background check. State teacher certification is required for teachers in public, charter, and private schools across

Michigan Teacher Certification Facts

- 31 teacher education and certification programs are approved by the Michigan State Board of Education.

- Teacher education students must complete 14 semester hours of education methods courses, 6 semester hours of student teaching and coursework in reading instruction.

- Secondary education candidates must complete a major in the subject area he or she will teach, as well as an academic minor. Elementary education candidates must complete a major or set of minors, but state regulations do not specify what academic areas the major or minor must cover.

- State teacher licenses are valid only in specific teaching fields. However, teachers wishing to teach in a field outside the one in which they are licensed may do so by obtaining a license "endorsement" for the additional subject.

- After completing all requirements toward certification, new teachers receive a provisional license, good for six years.

- To obtain "continuing" certification, a teacher must complete three years of successful teaching, earn 18 semester hours of continuing education, and be recommended by his or her teacher education program and local school district.

- To maintain a continuing certificate, teachers must complete six semester hours of continuing education coursework every five years.

To search for issued Michigan Teacher Licenses, visit: http://meis.mde.state.mi.us/teachercert/sr_teaCerts.asp

For more information on state teacher certification requirements, visit: <http://www.state.mi.us/mde/off/ppc/index.htm>

the state. There are few exceptions to the law, such as a provision for teachers who object on a religious basis.

Does certification equal qualification?

Teacher test scores can be a catalyst for teacher certification reform efforts, as one state has discovered.

In September, the Chicago Sun-Times evaluated the results from the Illinois teacher licensure exam—also called the "basic skills tests." The results revealed that over 5,000 current Illinois teachers failed the state's tests.

Through Freedom of Information Act requests, the Sun-Times obtained test pass rates for teachers around the state. The Sun-Times reviewed records for basic skills and subject matter tests taken between July 1998 and April 2001. Nearly 416,000 pass-fail records of aspiring teachers were reviewed in the process.

The Sun-Times analysis revealed that hundreds of teachers employed by Illinois public schools failed both the basic skills test and a subject matter test. Over 5,000 failed at least one certification test.

The Sun-Times reported that the state's "worst teacher-test flunker" failed 24 of 25 teacher tests—including 11 of 12 basic skills tests and all 12 tests on teaching learning-disabled children. Yet, according to state records, that teacher was assigned to teach learning-disabled children in Chicago.

Following the Sun-Times exposé, Illinois Gov. George Ryan asked the State Board of Education to investigate questions raised by the newspaper's findings, the Illinois Legislature held hearings on the issue of improving the teacher certification process, and Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan told the Sun-Times that city schools would require job applicants to disclose how many tries they needed to pass their teacher certification tests.

Alternative certification in Michigan

The Sun-Times investigation produced action by state and school officials to reform Illinois teacher certification requirements. Michigan also is in the process of reforming its teacher certification program. The State Board of Education has formed the "Ensuring Excellent Educators Task Force," a group comprised of teachers, university representatives, union officials, State Board of Education members, policy experts, and legislators. The task force is evaluating current certification requirements and is expected to issue its recommendations in December.

The goals of the task force include enhancing the teaching profession; increasing teacher quality; restructuring schools

and educational processes; and developing partnerships among educators, universities, legislators, and all involved in the education process.

Currently, Michigan has an alternative teacher certification program that can be invoked when schools face shortages in certain grades or subject areas and have no state-certified applicants for open positions. However, the program requires candidates to possess or obtain training similar to teachers already in the classroom and to participate in an accredited teacher preparation program.

Under current regulations, a person with a master's or doctoral degree could not be certified to teach, even in a school with a teacher shortage, without agreeing to take hours of college pedagogy courses and pass state tests.

In a recent Detroit Free Press commentary, former history teacher and Mackinac Center Director of Education Policy Matthew Brouillette suggested that serious changes must be made to the teacher certification process to open the door for highly qualified individuals to teach in Michigan schools and alleviate the teacher shortage.

"Second only to parental involvement, teacher quality dramatically affects student academic success. Michigan's public schools need teachers with a solid knowledge of subject matter," Brouillette wrote.

Brouillette has also argued that certification does not equal qualification and that highly qualified individuals are often left out of the teaching profession due to the needlessly onerous rules and regulations of the certification process.

But some teachers believe the current certification process must be protected, and doubt the efficacy of alternative or limited teacher certification programs.

"I don't think you can ensure quality with these kinds of programs," Nancy

Pietraszkiewicz, a Central Michigan University teacher education professor, told The Detroit News earlier this year, in response to questions about fast-track alternative certification programs.

"You get a warm body in the room and probably not much else."

A new national certification source

Along with state legislatures and education officials, organizations around the country also are grappling with teacher certification issues and seeking new ways to ensure that enough knowledgeable, capable teachers are hired.

The newly formed American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence unveiled plans recently to set up a national credentialing system for educators that will gauge their knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy through rigorous standardized tests. The new system, supported by a \$5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, seeks to supplement rather than replace current state-licensure requirements, Dr. Michael Poliakoff told Education Week. Poliakoff is the president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, the Washington, D.C.-based group that is leading the new credentialing effort.

A voluntary national certification test already exists; in 44 states, teachers who achieve national certification through this program are provided with bonuses.

Dr. Sam Peavey, professor emeritus of the School of Education at the University of Illinois, believes that the link between current certification of teachers and student success is weak at best.

"After 50 years of research, we have found no significant correlation between the requirements for teacher certification and the quality of student achievement," he said.

The American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence hopes to reform "Byzantine" teacher certification processes by creating a streamlined test that will prove useful for determining teacher quality.

Island City

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However, by the beginning of the 2001-02 school year, most of the teachers who originally voted to be represented by the labor union had resigned from the school. The MEA had filed an unfair labor practice against Island City's board of directors for not bargaining with the union for six months. That was when several of the current teachers approached an alternative teachers' association, the Association of American Educators, to explore other representation options.

The teachers publicly protested, in a petition to the board, that "the [MEA] is seeking to protect its own agenda and... is causing the district to spend precious resources of time and money that could be used to improve the compensation of teachers or to better meet the classroom instruction needs of students." The petition asked the school board to withdraw recognition of the union and urged the MEA to withdraw the unfair labor practice complaint that had delayed the vote to remove the MEA.

The MEA's Crim believes that one factor in particular led to the removal of the union. "I think the biggest contributing factor was that there was a 70-percent turnover rate in teachers at the school," he told *MER*. "The vast majority of teachers who brought in the MEA are no longer at the school."

The decertification of the MEA as the teachers' representative clears the way for the teachers to negotiate their wages and other work issues directly with school administrators. "We are glad that we can focus our energies and resources into what we do best—educating children," said Coons. Had the teachers not decertified the union, Crim said that teachers would have been required to pay \$580 per school year in union dues.

Attempts to decertify the MEA have

also occurred in traditional public school systems. In 1998, Branch County Intermediate School District employees tried to terminate their relationship with the MEA. Among the grievances cited by dissatisfied teachers as the reason for the referendum was the complaint that most had not seen an MEA representative during the entire three-year period of their current contract with the school district. Despite early support among employees throughout the southern Michigan district, the vote to decertify the MEA failed 30 to 16.

The MEA has stepped up efforts to unionize charter school teachers. Mid-Michigan Public School Academy in Lansing became the largest unionized charter school in the nation when teachers there voted to join the MEA in January 2000. Thirty-eight teachers voted to unionize at the 1,200-student charter school while 21 teachers either opposed union representation or abstained. Since then, student enrollment has plummeted to fewer than 400 students. In recent months, charter teachers in Saginaw, Midland, and Pontiac have thwarted efforts by the MEA to unionize their schools.

Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academics says, "It's fortunate, in the case at Island City Academy, that the teachers had a professional choice regarding a union, unions who have historically been opposed to charter public schools in Michigan. We think this is an indication that teachers are interested in options—professional options for themselves and education options for their students."

Teachers who want to learn more about their legal rights regarding choices in union representation can receive free information from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. Call 1-800-22-IDEAS and ask for the brochure, "My Union Doesn't Represent Me! What Are My Choices?" or visit www.mackinac.org/2716.

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Public school borrowing tops \$8 billion

Record-high debt comes despite funding increases

Michigan citizens might expect their education tax dollars to fund teacher salaries, school buildings, and classroom materials, but they may be surprised to learn that a large and growing amount now goes just to pay for public school debt.

A recent Detroit Free Press article reports that Michigan schools are posting a troubling amount of public school indebtedness, with schools owing more than \$8 billion. According to recent U.S. Census

Bond revenue cannot, however, legally be used for regular maintenance or operating expenses.

The changes in school funding mandated by Proposal A have drastically reduced property taxes—by as much as 82 percent in some cases—while eliminating the ability of most schools to seek additional funding for operating expenses through local property taxes. Before Proposal A, some schools received \$3,300

exceeding \$30,000. In Grand Rapids, schools are facing a budget deficit of \$18 million that, left unresolved, could create a major debt problem. This deficit exists in spite of the fact that from the 1993-94 academic year to that of 2001-02 total revenues rose from approximately \$153 million to \$187 million. With fewer students and greater revenue, Grand Rapids public schools face a deficit despite a more than \$2,000 per-pupil increase in funding.

taxpayers, and the cost of borrowing detracts directly from funds available for use in the classroom. He recommends that districts develop written debt policies to guide responsible public borrowing. The policies would include features such as a prohibition against using debt to “capitalize” operating expenses.

“The capitalization of expenses—that is, the shifting of operational costs, facility maintenance, and repair onto long-term debt—is a classic pitfall of government finance,” Arens wrote. “The practice should be expressly prohibited.”

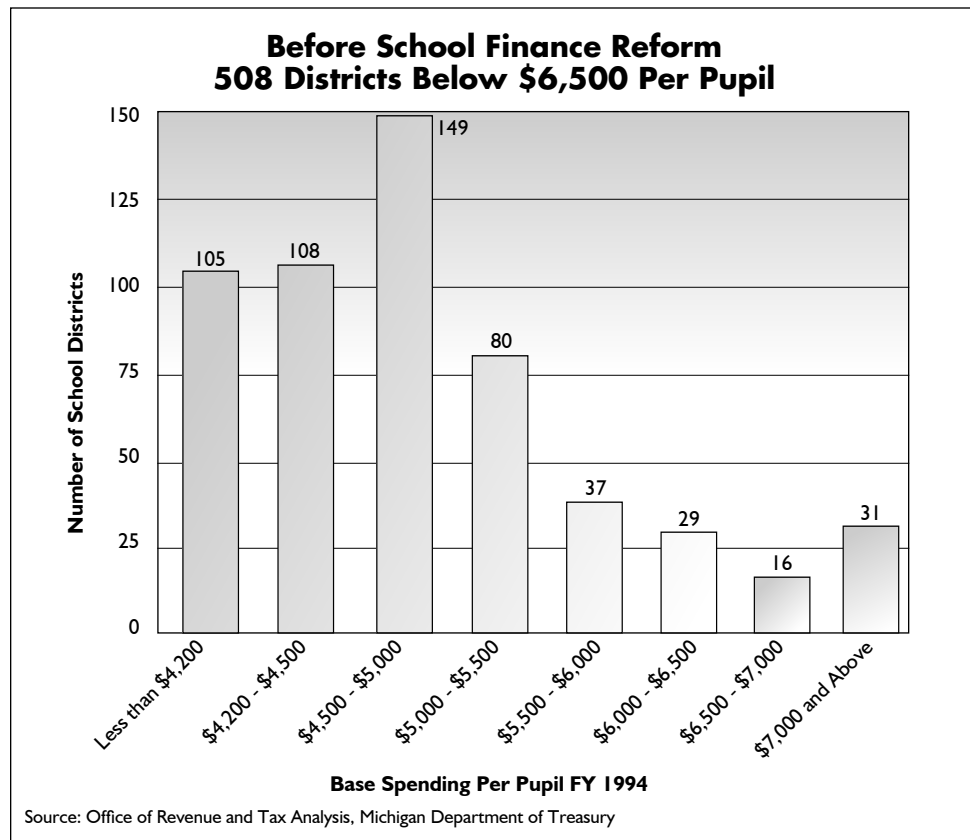
Schools might also avoid the need for debt through taking advantage of public schools-of-choice laws. By attracting more students to their schools and increasing enrollment, districts will gain more per-pupil funding.

Facing record levels of debt at a time when school funding is at an all-time high, Michigan school districts are faced with a quandary: continue to take on more debt, or seriously reconsider spending habits and practices. While bond proposals fail in many areas across the state and Michigan citizens become increasingly wary of new

Getting a handle on school debt

Despite some school districts assuming large amounts of debt, other districts have taken a different approach, exercising fiscal restraint and incorporating innovative ways to stay within their operating budgets. According to the Free Press, Trenton Public Schools has chosen to make incremental improvements to its facilities using funds left over from its operation expenses instead of financing them through voter-approved tax increases.

Observers have warned about the problem of excessive debt and school



data, Michigan ranks seventh in the nation in public school expenditures per pupil, and fourth highest in the nation in public school indebtedness.

This record-high level of debt comes at a time when schools enjoy large overall funding increases: Since the passage of Proposal A in 1994, state education funding is up over 50 percent. Yet Michigan schools continue to borrow money at an average of two and a half times the rate of debt retirement.

How schools are funded

Michigan schools are funded by several means. Under the current system, districts are allocated a basic foundation allowance by the state of Michigan on a per-pupil basis. This primary source of funding is used for all general operating expenses and relies on statewide sales and other use taxes, and less on property taxes. In addition to the basic foundation allowance, districts are able to ask taxpayers for approval of millages for the direct support of building construction, building repair, and technology enhancements.

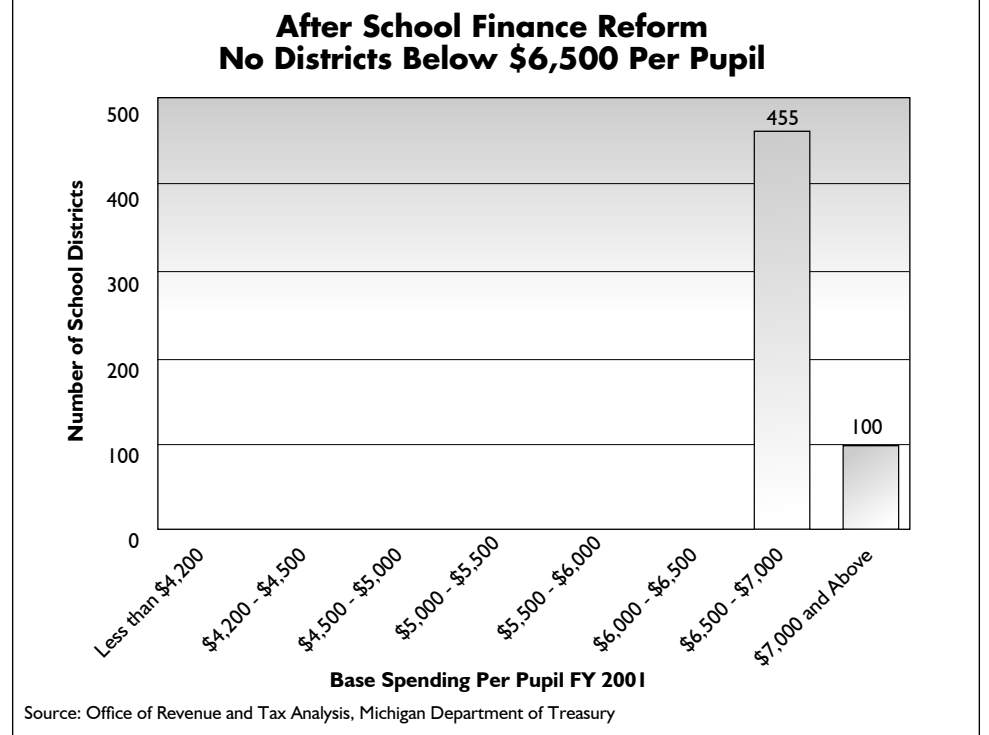
per pupil, while others received \$10,400. Because of Proposal A, all Michigan districts will receive at least \$6,500 in 2001-02.

Increasing debt

Though Proposal A has helped poorer districts achieve a higher level of equity in funding, wealthier districts are no longer free to seek unlimited increases in funds as they once were. As a result, some schools have turned to the issuance of both short- and long-term debt in order to compensate for the change.

Although some Michigan districts owe nothing, others owe up to about 40 percent of district property value. The average district indebtedness in Michigan is 6.2 percent of the total value of taxable property. Such discrepancies reflect, among other things, differences in administrative decisions relating to money management practices.

According to the Detroit Free Press, in the Detroit metropolitan area alone several districts have debt exceeding \$100 million, with average debt per student sometimes



funding.

“Maintaining trust with voters is imperative at a time when support for the concept of public education seems to be waning,” Michael Arens, a professional engineer involved in public construction projects, wrote in a 1998 Mackinac Center for Public Policy report on school debt.

“Michigan’s public schools owe it to parents, taxpayers, and students to issue and manage debt with the utmost responsibility,” noted Arens.

According to Arens, public school debt is a costly proposition for Michigan

tax proposals, schools will be forced to take a harder look at their budgets and find creative ways to meet their financial challenges.

More information on school debt policies is available at www.mackinac.org/363.

Elements of a Sound Debt Policy for School Districts By Michael Arens

1. Long-term debt should not be used to finance current operations or to capitalize expenses.
2. Long-term debt should be used only for capital projects that cannot be financed from current revenue sources.
3. Total district indebtedness should not exceed 15 percent of the district taxable valuation for any given year.
4. Retire 50 percent of the total principal on debt within ten years.
5. Avoid variable-rate debt and back-loading and balloon repayment schedules.
6. Bonds should only be re-issued (for the purpose of interest rate savings) under limited circumstances.
7. Avoid capital leases, certificates of participation, or similar instruments for the acquisition or use of facilities or equipment.
8. Limit capital fund investment instruments to reliable sources.
9. Issue debt through a competitive bidding process.
10. Seek independent debt counsel through formal requests for proposals.
11. The district and its financial advisors should comply with all applicable financing and full disclosure reporting rules.
12. Public funds, property, and resources should not be used, directly or indirectly, to influence the outcome of ballot questions.

Source: “The Need for Debt Policy in Michigan Public Schools,” by Michael Arens, Mackinac Center for Public Policy, January 1998.

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

"Ed-Flex" Bill Passes Michigan House

School districts would be able to free themselves from some burdensome state rules and regulations under a package of bills passed by the Michigan House on Oct. 11.

The bills, sponsored by Reps. Wayne Kuipers, R-Holland, and Tom Meyer, R-Bad Axe, would allow schools to negotiate exemptions from virtually any requirement the schools deem to be too restrictive in return for agreeing to adhere to a school improvement plan that increases student achievement. To apply for so-called "Educational Flexibility and Empowerment Contracts," districts would submit applications to the state superintendent of public instruction.

The bills are modeled after a current federal program that allows school districts to apply for waivers from federal regulations in return for adherence to performance-based contracts.

For text and analysis of the bills, visit www.michiganvotes.org/bill.asp?ID=5942 www.michiganvotes.org/bill.asp?ID=5941

New Ritalin Rules Proposed

Public and charter school administrators and teachers would be prohibited

from recommending the drug Ritalin for students under a bill approved unanimously by the House Education Committee in October.

The legislation, which now heads to the House floor, would bar teachers from diagnosing "Attention Deficit Disorder"—a controversial diagnosis often given to students with behavior problems. Teachers also would be prohibited from recommending that parents put their children on Ritalin, a psychotropic drug that alters brain activity and is thought to have a calming effect on children.

Under the legislation, teachers would be allowed to discuss behavior problems with parents, refer children for evaluation if they believe the child has a learning disability or emotional impairment, and recommend that a child be evaluated by a health-care provider.

The committee also approved a bill that would create a commission to investigate whether schools are pushing psychotropic medication for students who may not need it.

For text and analysis of the bills, visit www.michiganvotes.org/bill.asp?ID=6500 www.michiganvotes.org/bill.asp?ID=6502

Bill would stretch school construction dollars

In October, state Rep. Robert Gosselin, R-Troy, introduced three bills that would

repeal prevailing wage requirements and union-only contract requirements for school construction. The bills were discussed at a House Employment Relations, Training, and Safety Committee hearing in mid-October.

At the hearing, supporters of the legislation said that allowing prevailing wage exemptions for school construction projects would leave schools with more money for teacher salaries and other classroom expenditures.

Charlie Owens, Michigan director for the National Federation of Independent Business, testified on the legislation at the hearing: "With more than a billion dollars of ongoing school construction projects, \$100 million a year could be saved."

In 1997, Ohio exempted its schools from its prevailing wage law, saving schools an average of 10.5 percent in construction costs, according to the nonpartisan Ohio Legislative Budget Office.

Representatives from Michigan construction unions testified against the bills, saying the changes could reduce wages and benefits for construction workers.

The bills are awaiting action in the committee.

For text and analysis of the bills, visit www.michiganvotes.org/bill.asp?ID=5331 www.michiganvotes.org/bill.asp?ID=5314 www.michiganvotes.org/bill.asp?ID=6631

Also, see the commentary, "Michigan's prevailing wage law forces schools to waste money," by Dr. Gary Wolfram on page 11.

Consolidating school and local elections

School board elections would be consolidated with regular local elections under a package of bills introduced in the Michigan Senate in October.

Among other things, the bills would remove from school districts the power to administer and operate elections, and require that school elections be conducted by local units of government under the Michigan Election Law. The legislation also would require school districts and intermediate school districts to place an estimate of the cost of repaying bonds on the ballot when submitting a bond question to the electors.

Bill sponsors include Sens. Hammerstrom, R-Temperance; Steil, R-Grand Rapids; McManus, R- Traverse City; and Bennett, R-Canton. Supporters of the bill say the changes would increase voter turnout at school elections and save schools and cities money by consolidating election expenses.

For text and analysis of the bills, visit

www.michiganvotes.org/bill.asp?ID=6812 www.michiganvotes.org/bill.asp?ID=5830 www.michiganvotes.org/bill.asp?ID=5831 www.michiganvotes.org/bill.asp?ID=5832

"Zero-tolerance" policies aim to reduce school violence But critics doubt rules' efficacy

In 1995 the Michigan Legislature passed a law requiring that any student found to be in possession of a weapon face a hearing and possible expulsion. Known as the "zero-tolerance" policy, the law mandated that schools around the state—public and private—comply, but allowed for certain exceptions to be made by local school administrators in unusual circumstances. However, a growing number of parents, advocates, students, and others affected by the policy are worried that this hard-line approach to student discipline, while politically popular, may be ineffective.

In the wake of the highly publicized school shootings in Littleton, Colo. and Mt. Morris Township's Buell Elementary, few would argue that school safety is not important for schools. Many Michigan politicians, school administrators, and educators view zero-tolerance as a necessary and effective component of the effort to combat violence in schools. But some fear that the policy may actually harm those punished as well as the very students that

the policies were designed to protect.

In a recent case, Jeremy Hix, a senior in Holt, Mich., was nearly expelled under his school's zero tolerance policy when he brought a small ceremonial blade as a part of his costume to the high school prom. In another case, Derrick Sorenson, a 13-year-old Livonia resident, was expelled for carrying a baseball bat to school.

Zero-tolerance policies are now extending to behavior not involving weapons. Recently in Mount Pleasant, a lawsuit was filed on behalf of a student suspended over reading a parody of his school's tardiness policy. Nationally, students have been expelled for cases involving carrying over-the-counter medication, and using violent or objectionable language.

Recently, the American Bar Association criticized zero-tolerance policies, saying that they "fail to take into account the circumstances or nature of an offense or an accused student's history."

Ruth Zweifler, director of the Ann Arbor-based Student Advocacy Center

ZERO TOLERANCE continued on page 8

Terrorism

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ty's Institute for Humane Studies and former California state championship debate coach; and Doug Bandow, senior fellow with the Cato Institute and frequent author and lecturer on foreign policy issues.


Speakers lectured and discussed with students topics including types of weapons of mass destruction, the nature and causes of terrorism, the importance of sound foreign and economic policies, and current defense programs and proposals.

"[Eland] was amazing," Lida Ataie, a junior at public Dearborn High School, told the Detroit Free Press. "He opens your mind to new ideas. He gave so many different views and looked at the long-term

effects, but not only from the American perspective."

For 14 years, Mackinac Center High School Debate Workshops have equipped debaters with winning ideas. Southwestern High School (Detroit), the 1993 Detroit Public School Debate League champion, and Calvary Baptist Academy (Midland), winner of the 1996 American Association of Christian Schools' debate championship, both applied ideas and techniques learned at the Center's workshops. More than 7,000 students have honed their forensic skills at past debate workshops.

But no previous debate workshop gained the media coverage and attention from attendees that this year's did.



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"The traumatic events of Sept. 11 imparted a degree of gravity to the discussions at the recent debate workshops; it seemed to engage the students and enable them to better grasp the seriousness of the subject at hand," said Mackinac Center Programs Director Catherine Martin. "Students came away from the workshops with not only a better ability to form a coherent, reasoned argument, but also with a better understanding of the issues facing America."

The debate workshops are held every fall and are open to public, private, and charter school students from around the state. The Mackinac Center also offers a workshop for home-school students.

For more information, visit the Mackinac Center web site at www.mackinac.org/debate.

MichiganVotes.org

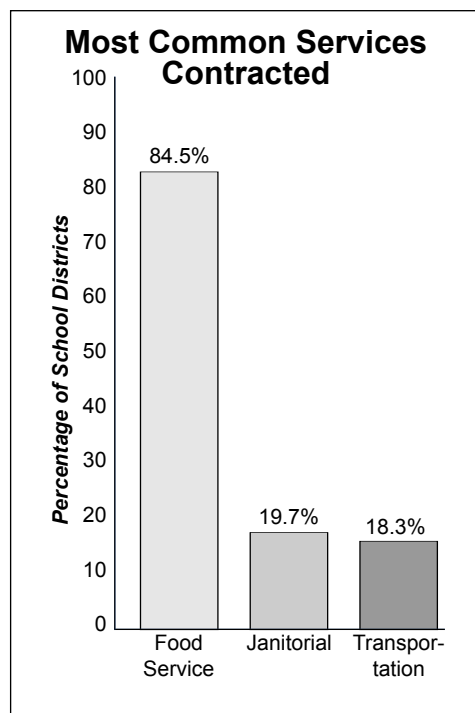
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Survey says: Outsourcing non-instructional services benefits Michigan schools

A survey of school district superintendents and business managers by *Michigan Privatization Report (MPR)*, a publication of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, has yielded a bonanza of information. Of the more than 500 Michigan school districts contacted between May and August of 2001, 228 have to date detailed their outsourcing experiences to *MPR*. Only a few districts refused to participate in the survey.

Survey results indicate that 31 percent of responding districts outsource one or more of three primary non-instructional services: food, busing, and janitorial services. An impressive 26.3 percent of responding districts outsource either management of their food program or the entire program itself. Janitorial services are contracted for in 6.1 percent of the responding districts and busing accounted for 5.7 percent.

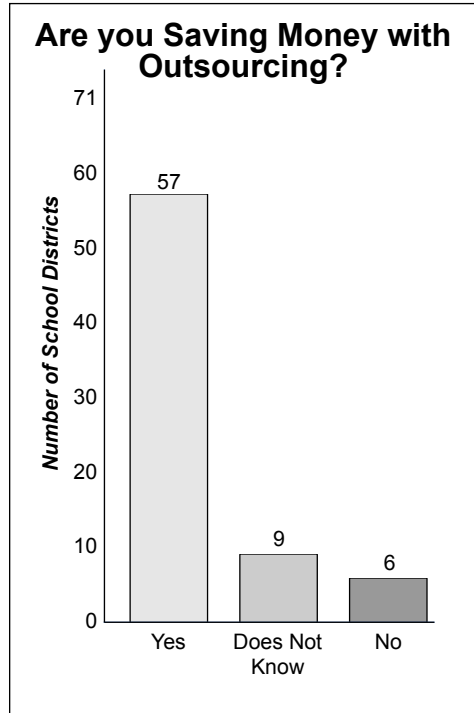
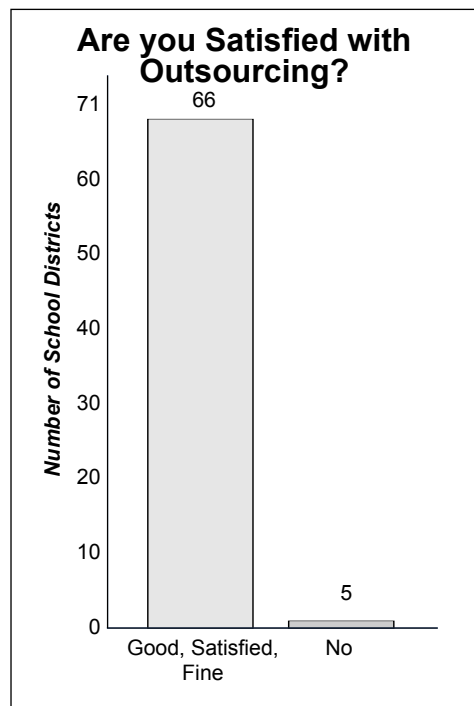


Only the Detroit Public Schools reported outsourcing all three services to some degree. Detroit officials also volunteered that the district was outsourcing for maintenance of buildings and grounds as well as information technology services.

According to American School & University magazine's popular annual survey of privatization and contracting in American schools, 23.3 percent of districts across the nation outsource for food services, which is 3 percent less than in Michigan. But districts in other states tend to contract out more for other important areas of non-instructional services, such as janitorial and busing. Nationwide, 15 percent and 30 percent of school districts contracted for these functions, respectively.

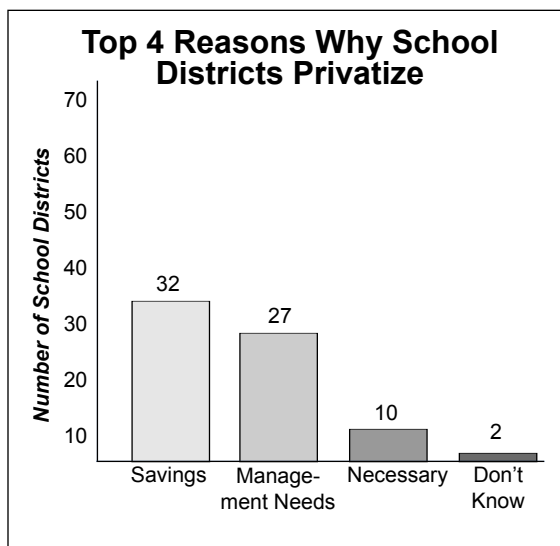
According to American School & University, nationwide, "districts with enrollments of more than 2,500 are more likely than small institutions to privatize

services." In Michigan, the opposite is true. Of those school districts outsourcing food, janitorial, or busing services, a whopping 67 percent have fewer than 2,500 enrolled students. This is an extraordinary figure given the natural inclination of successful companies to seek out large districts in order to take advantage of economies of scale. *Michigan Privatization Report* has long heard complaints from



superintendents in small districts about the difficulty of finding vendors to service their non-instructional needs.

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence suggesting that small districts are quite capable of outsourcing services. The experiences of Mackinac Center staff, and new



contacts made through the survey, suggest that small districts can and do outsource for non-instructional services. For instance, Arvon and Marenisco school districts in the Upper Peninsula have a combined 120 enrolled students, yet they manage to outsource busing and janitorial and food services, respectively. While Arvon has not outsourced food services yet, it is the district's intention to do so. These districts prove that finding vendors to service small institutions is far from impossible.

Arvon is an interesting privatization case-in-point. It has only 10 registered students for the 2001-2002 school year. Last year, Arvon operated on a \$260,000 annual budget, 38 percent of which was being eaten up by food, transportation, and janitorial services. In an attempt to get more money into the classroom last year the board proposed a "School Excellence Plan" for contracting out these services. The resulting savings would have been used to fund a new \$20,000 science, music, art, foreign language, and technology program. Unfortunately, the privatization hurdle faced by this tiny district was not economies of scale, but the Michigan Education Association (MEA).

The Michigan Education Association is the state's largest union of custodians, cooks, bus drivers, and teachers. In 1993 the MEA made it plain where it stands on the issue of privatization in an internal document known as "Parameters." It unequivocally opposed "any privatization of public school functions." True to its word, the MEA fought hard to defeat Arvon's attempt to outsource services. "The union did everything it could to prevent us from going through with the School Excellence Plan," said Mary Rogala, board president. This opposition is ironic given the fact that the MEA has contracted out at its own headquarters in East Lansing for food, janitorial, mail, and security services—and in

three cases with nonunion labor.

The Arvon board approved the plan despite opposition from the MEA. Unfortunately, one member then called a special meeting to rescind his yes vote following a series of threats against his person and his business. The member subsequently resigned from the board. Since then a special election has been held to fill the vacancy left by his resignation, and the MEA-backed candidate lost. This led Arvon to address outsourcing again—and they have, quite successfully.

Privatization of school support functions can and is being done across Michigan in every size school district, as the *Michigan Privatization Report* survey suggests.

For more information on privatization visit www.mackinac.org/pubs/mpr.



The Mackinac Center for Public Policy has published two guides for helping school districts outsource. *Doing More with Less: Competitive Contracting for School Support Services* and *Making Schools Work: Contracting for Better Management* are available to superintendents, business managers, and school board members free of charge. Call 989-631-0900 for your copy today.

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STUDENT FOCUS

Willoughby charts a course for excellence

Morey Charter School the right choice for accomplished junior

A solid and basic education, individualized instruction, career awareness, honesty: These are some of the core principles upon which Morey Charter School of Shepherd, founded in 1997 by Michigan industrialist Norval Morey, stakes its claim.

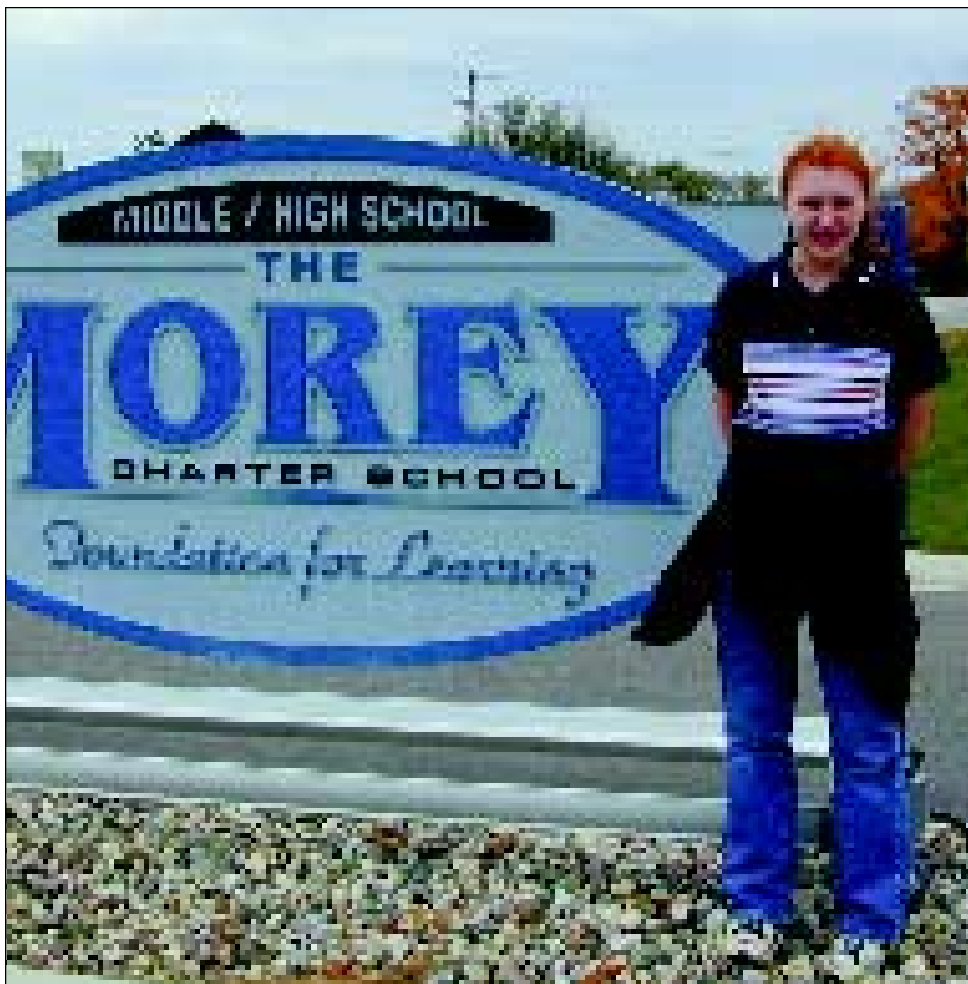
Norval Morey, who passed away later that year, stressed his belief that education is an integral part of personal achievement. Accordingly, the principles with which he imbued the school hang on the wall of every classroom as a reminder to the school's 382 students that success in education means success in life.

One student who has taken that reminder to heart is Jennifer Willoughby, an 11th grader who excels in both her classes and her extracurricular activities.

Spanish is Jennifer's favorite subject, and she has aspirations of using Spanish in her future career. After school, Jennifer enjoys youth group activities and plays volleyball for the Morey Malamutes. Her sport of choice is one of the seven junior and senior high school sports programs offered at Morey. Jennifer also takes part in drama and dance activities and mentors a fourth-grade girl in reading through Morey's Adopt-a-Reader program. And even with this busy schedule, she still finds time each day to help out the administration and staff in the main office at the school.

Diane Schroeder, one of the school's administrators, describes Jennifer as an "outstanding student."

The choice to send Jennifer to



Junior Jennifer Willoughby is one of nearly 400 students who travel from surrounding communities to attend Morey Charter School.

Morey—which is about 10 miles from her home—was made by her parents, who also considered home-schooling, an option they have exercised in the past. Ultimately, the Willoughbys chose Morey not just for Jennifer but for her two younger sisters as well.

Morey, located 10 miles southwest of Mt. Pleasant, draws students from 13 school districts in 5 different counties, some traveling up to 40 miles each day for school. The Charter School Office of Central Michigan University provides for oversight of the school. Morey also recently hired a new CEO, Ralph Crosslin, who brings more than 30 years of teaching and administrative experience to the school.

Morey Charter School has proved to be a rewarding environment for Jennifer, and she plans to remain with the school until her graduation.

Asked about her future plans, Jennifer says, "I'm still trying to narrow it down, but I'm thinking about forensic science."

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TEACHER FOCUS

Charter school principal enjoys her work

"I saw administration as a larger opportunity to make an impact"

Diane Schroeder always wanted to have a positive impact on the lives of children. That's why, a decade ago, she entered the traditional public school system as a teacher. Now, after two years as a principal at Morey Charter School of Shepherd, she feels she is making an even bigger difference for students.

"I saw administration as a larger opportunity to make an impact," she says. "My ultimate goal is to have the students become capable, talented, and productive members of society—that's what the school system should be all about."

Schroeder, chief administrator for grades 6-11 at Morey, believes she is meeting her goal. Morey's curriculum is challenging and the staff may be "tough," but she says her students

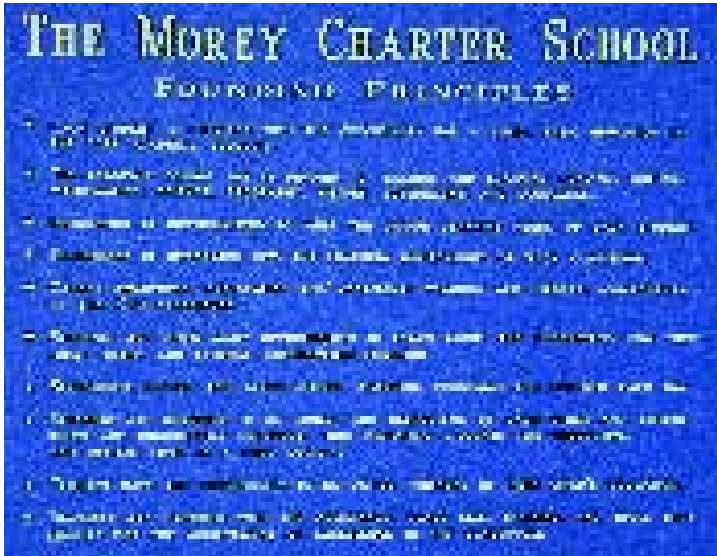
are rising to the occasion and reaching the standards set forth.

Schroeder describes the teachers at Morey as hard working and creative. "They have a positive attitude in a positive learning atmosphere. They're a joy to work with," she says. According to Schroeder, this positive learning atmosphere is pivotal to the school's success and is the foundation for the great relationships among parents, students and school staff.

For Schroeder, Morey Charter School, located about 10 miles from Central Michigan University (CMU) in Mt. Pleasant,

has been a good fit. She received both her undergraduate degree in mathematics and computer science and her master's degree in educational administration from CMU. CMU's Charter School Office serves as the oversight agency for Morey.

Morey Charter School's day starts



School founder Norval Morey laid out 10 key principles that hang on a plaque in every classroom.

early in the morning and extends into mid-evening every day during the week. Norval Morey, the school's founder, saw that before- and after-school programs could unite students through positive extracurricular activities. An added bonus of these programs, Schroeder says, is that parents and students can engage in activities with their parents and the school staff, creating a family-oriented environment that does not cut into valuable classroom time.



Diane Schroeder is the junior high and high school principal at Morey Charter School. She says that of the many rewards her job provides, "hugs rank the highest."

Charter school conference draws hundreds

Speakers challenge school officials to “step up” and improve education

Hundreds of individuals from Michigan’s charter school community of 186 schools and 66,000 students gathered Nov. 7-8 to participate in the 4th Annual Charter School Conference in Ypsilanti.

The Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA), a nonprofit, nonpartisan coalition of charter school leaders and supporters, hosts the conference each year as a way for teachers, administrators, parents, policy-makers, and others to network and share the latest news on developments relating to charter school education.

The two-day affair featured joint presentations and a discussion by Lawrence Reed, president of the Midland-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy, and Tom Watkins, Michigan Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Reed’s speech, entitled “Four Principles and a Challenge,” outlined several concepts he said are essential if the quality of Michigan public education is to improve. The concepts included an understanding that the needs of children come before the needs of the school system, parents are an indispensable component of the educational process, competition is a necessary precondition to improved quality, and encouraging diverse methods of delivering education to students is important.

Reed publicly challenged Watkins to embrace the reform concepts and offered six things Watkins could personally do to facilitate dramatic and positive school reform.

“Tom, I want you to be the best and most successful education superintendent in the nation,” Reed said. “If you’ll step up and implement the agenda I’m presenting here, you’ll become just that.”

The six things Reed said Watkins

should do included being supportive of all modes of education, whether public, charter, private, or home school; emphasizing that more money is not the solution to every problem; encouraging schools to better manage their budgets through privatization of support services; championing greater parental choice in education; calling for repeal of a union-supported prevailing wage law that forces schools to waste millions of dollars every year; and demanding an end to the forced unionization of public school teachers.

“Do you want me to be run out of town on a rail?” Watkins joked, before offering praise for charter schools and admitting that reforms are needed to improve public education.

Watkins’s suggestions included paying teachers for performance and allowing teachers to form private partnerships and associations. He also argued that changes in the state’s teacher education programs would boost teacher quality.

“When 80 percent of our teachers are certified, 20 percent have master’s degrees, but 20 percent or less of our children are learning—something’s not right,” he said.

“Colleges of education are the weakest link in education reform today,” he added.

Other speakers at the conference agreed.

“Stop talking about teacher certification, start talking about teacher qualification,” said Samuel Casey Carter, author of the book, “No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools.”

“Principals must be free to decide who to hire, who to fire, what to teach. . . . We must be able to accept freedom in exchange for performance,” he told attendees.

Carter profiled a number of schools featured in his book and described how the



Lawrence Reed, president of the Midland-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy, and state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Watkins offered a joint presentation at the November Michigan Association of Public School Academies 4th Annual Charter School Conference in Ypsilanti.

success of schools that serve low-income students, yet post impressive gains on standardized tests, leaves “no excuse” for other schools to have poor performance.

“If they can do it with so little, we can do it,” he said.

Carter concluded by encouraging charter school officials to elicit feedback from parents and students as the best guide for how to improve their schools.

“If you want to know how you’re doing, ask your customers.”


Several state legislators updated conference participants on the latest education bills, including HB 4800 (see www.michiganvotes.org/

bill.asp?ID=6003), which would increase the legislative cap on university-sponsored charter schools. The cap currently stands at 150.

State Rep. Wayne Kuipers, R-Holland, sponsor of the bill, said the legislation may pass if legislators can garner enough support in the House.

More information on MAPSA and Michigan charter schools is available at www.charterschools.org.

More information on “No Excuses” is available at www.noexcuses.org/lessons/. The text of Lawrence Reed’s speech is available at www.mackinac.org/3852.

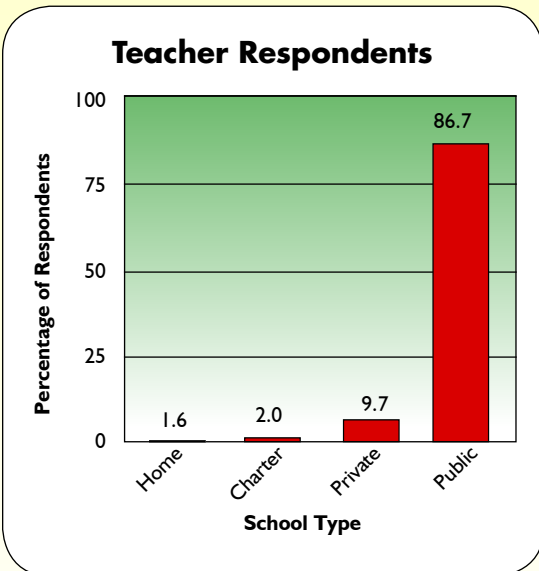


MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

Reader Survey Results

Michigan Education Report recently surveyed readers to invite feedback and find out how the newspaper can better serve educators, policy makers, school officials, parents, and others. Hundreds of readers responded to the non-scientific, electronic survey, which was advertised in MER and conducted on the MER web site. Below are some of the survey’s results. MER invites readers to send their suggestions and letters to MER@educationreport.org.

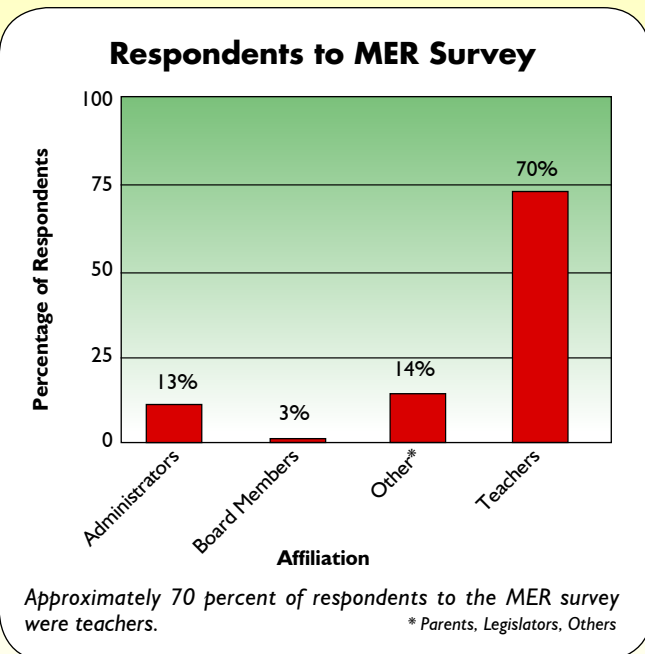
Teacher Respondents



School Type

Of the teachers responding to the survey, 40 percent chose to designate their affiliation with the Michigan Education Association, while less than one percent listed affiliation with the Michigan Federation of Teachers. Nearly 50 percent chose “no affiliation” or did not answer the question.

Respondents to MER Survey



Affiliation

* Parents, Legislators, Others

Of those responding to the question, nearly 60 percent of survey respondents said they have read 3 or more issues of MER.

Of those responding to the questions, the vast majority found MER to be fair, accurate, and relevant.

Zero Tolerance

continued from page 4

(SAC), also disagrees with zero-tolerance policies. Her center was established to assist students with various aspects of school related disciplinary issues, up to and including expulsion.

"The mandatory expulsion law was marketed as a way to stop dangerous 'punks,' older adolescents with guns," says Zweifler. "In reality, instead of netting sharks, the law and its attendant policies and practices are catching minnows—young children who are often frightened, sometimes thoughtless, rarely dangerous, but now clearly endangered."

According to SAC publications, Zweifler says many students expelled under zero-tolerance policies find themselves bewildered by a bureaucratic process that is difficult to navigate, frequently dissimilar to the court system, and without any educational alternatives after expulsion.

Currently, under Michigan law, school districts are not required to provide any sort of alternative education to expelled students. Under some circumstances districts are even prohibited from providing alternative options. However, a 1997 study from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy found that many school districts contract with private educational institutions to handle the most troubled students. "Those students whom the public schools cannot or will not enroll are often sent, at public expense, to private schools with expertise in educating a certain type of student," according to the study's authors Dr. Thomas Bertonneau and Janet Beales.

Some charter schools, such as Saginaw's Benito Juarez Academy, also specialize in helping troubled or at-risk students.

"Our staff is particularly committed to working with at-risk, low-achieving, culturally and linguistically different, gang-associated, and typically recalcitrant youths," said Dr. Laurencio Peña, former director of the academy. "We select teachers who possess the belief that they can make a difference in these kids' lives."

According to the Detroit Free Press, the Michigan Department of Education estimates over 1,200 students are expelled in Michigan each year. Estimates from the Oakland County Intermediate School District place the number of students expelled there at 79 during the 1999-2000 school year. By comparison, Oakland County schools expelled only 35 during a three-year period ending in 1998, before the schools began enforcing a zero-tolerance policy. Another report by the Michigan Family Independence Agency covering a three-year period from Jan. 1, 1995, to Dec. 31, 1997, states that there were 471 weapon-related expulsions reported to them.

Despite the number of expulsions growing under zero-tolerance policies, national juvenile crime rates have remained relatively constant or have declined marginally. In a recent study, the Washington, D.C.-based Justice Policy Institute found that between 1975 and 1998 the percentage of reported victimization in schools decreased only slightly, while the rate of suspensions and expulsions in schools nearly doubled, rising from 3.7 percent of students in 1974 to 6.8 percent in 1998.

Meanwhile, a 1999 opinion poll indicated that the general public believed juvenile crime was on the rise. Public perception of juvenile crime is an important factor in the widespread implementation of zero tolerance policies.

Many school officials subscribe to a "better safe than sorry" policy in an era of

high profile media stories of tragic violence and legal liability. In a recent Detroit Free Press article, Mark Shultz, supervisor of public safety for Livonia schools was quoted as saying, "Columbine has made everybody a little more aware. . . . You bring a weapon to school, we're going to take the hard line."

Despite critics who claim that the inflexibility of zero-tolerance policies treats many students unfairly, Olivet Community Schools superintendent David Campbell asserts that ultimately, the decision to expel is not mandated by zero tolerance policies, but rather rests in the hands of local school boards.

"Olivet's interpretation of the zero tolerance weapons law is that there are four exceptions to mandatory expulsion and that the only true mandate in the law is the expulsion hearing," says Campbell. "At the mandatory hearing, the board of education listens to all sides and makes a determination as to whether an actual expulsion is deserved."

As a result of its zero-tolerance policy, Michigan will face a number of issues in the future ranging from providing alternative education for students expelled from primary and secondary schools to justifying a policy criticized by some as inflexible, potentially unfair, and sometimes contrary to basic judicial norms like individualized consideration and punishment under civil law.

Ultimately, the future of zero-tolerance policies is likely to be decided locally as the policy is interpreted differently according to varying security needs and prevailing attitudes regarding discipline.

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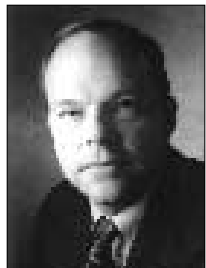
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COMMENTARY

Standardized tests vital for improving school and student achievement



David N. Plank, Ph.D.



Michael David Warren, Jr.

of what kids know. Measured scores fall in what may be a fairly broad range around a child's true score.

These are serious concerns that should be taken seriously. In our view, however, the concerns are dangerous if they are used to make the case against standardized testing. Instead, they should be seen as a compelling argument for the collection of additional and more precise information about how our schools and students are performing.

MEAP scores tell us that, when it comes to student learning, some Michigan schools are doing fine. But some schools are doing badly, and some are barely functioning. Without standardized testing to provide comparable information about schools, we could not make these judgments. The performance of our schools would be a mystery.

This lack of knowledge is unacceptable, especially in districts where parents do not have much objective information about how their schools and teachers measure up. The data on student achievement provided by the MEAP and other standardized tests are an essential diagnostic tool and a powerful incentive to improve performance.

MEAP does not tell us everything that we need to know about how schools and students are performing, because it only measures what students know at a single point in time. This is useful, but what we really want to know is how much students learn from year to year. What's the value added in our schools? To answer this question we need to test each child every year.

Many schools already perform annual testing, but to accurately assess our students' progress we need a statewide test that measures learning gains in a rigorous and comparable way.

We need to use standardized tests carefully, and resist the temptation to make summary judgments about schools and students on the basis of a single test score. We must also work to support educators

and parents to ensure that all children have the opportunity to learn the material that is being tested. But—as any farmer will tell you—we also need to measure what children know, and how much they learn from year to year.

David N. Plank, Ph.D. is director of the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University. Michael David Warren, Jr. is secretary of the State Board of Education and the vice president of the New Common School Foundation.

Resistance to standardized testing is spreading fast in Michigan and across the country. Parents in some suburban schools are discouraging their children from taking the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) exam, and many educators and legislators are challenging the validity and value of the test. This is bad news for Michigan schools, especially for our most disadvantaged students. Statewide assessment is an essential part of any serious effort to improve academic achievement in our public schools.

Resistance to standardized testing is growing for three main reasons.

First, there is widespread anxiety about the use of tests as a basis for rewards and sanctions, for both schools and students. Schools fear the stigma of low scores, and the possible loss of state accreditation. Students worry about endorsed diplomas and the availability of scholarships if their test scores don't meet the standard.

Second, some parents are concerned that an excessive focus on standardized tests is eating up instructional time and causing educators to "teach to the test." Using a farmer's metaphor, some critics have pointed out that "weighing the pig doesn't make the pig grow." They claim that measuring what kids know may distract attention from the more urgent tasks of teaching and learning.

Third, there are technical problems with standardized testing. For example, no single test provides an accurate picture

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Proposal A provided more money, but better management needed



Matthew J. Brouillette

In 1994, Michigan citizens approved a constitutional amendment that dramatically altered the way public schools are funded. Known as Proposal A, the amendment delivered much-needed tax relief to overburdened property owners in exchange for a sales-tax increase—and a significant shift in control of the education purse-strings from the local to the state level.

Now, seven years later, some officials are saying it's time to let districts again tap local property owners for more school taxes. Do these officials have a case, or are schools missing opportunities to better use the resources they already have?

First, a brief history lesson is in order. Prior to 1994, Michigan's property tax burden was 35 percent above the national average, thanks in large part to irregular millage elections that depressed turnout and ensured narrow special interests would always get the tax increases they wanted. Proposal A cut property taxes by one-third, but increased sales and use taxes by 50 percent. It also dedicated 4.2 cents of the now 6-cent sales tax to the state School Aid Fund and established a minimum "foundation grant"—a per-pupil allotment allocated by the state to schools based on their enrollment.

Public school funding, meanwhile, has become a top state priority. Revenues for

public schooling since 1995 have increased by more than 50 percent, from \$4,200 to \$6,500 per student—double the inflation rate. The National Education Association says Michigan outspends 43 other states in per-pupil funding.

Nevertheless, some school officials claim that a dearth of dollars resulting from Proposal A is forcing them to lay off teachers, close schools, and cut student programs. Paul Bosquette, a school board member in Wayne County's Redford Union School District, says that a lack of "proper funding" is to blame for his district's \$1.3-million deficit.

Is Bosquette right? It's hard to think so when per-pupil revenues in Redford Union are up nearly 40 percent since 1994. Redford's—and other districts'—problem is not so much a lack of revenue but rather that large amounts of education dollars continue to be consumed by unreasonable collective bargaining agreements, costly non-instructional services, and inefficient management practices. (The National Center for Education Statistics reports that only two states outspend Michigan on non-educational services rather than classroom instruction, as a percentage of classroom dollars.) The result is that no amount of taxpayer money is ever deemed to be "enough" to fund public schools.

Redford officials know how to cut unnecessary costs and fix the district's financial problems; they're just unwilling to make the tough decisions necessary to do it. Earlier this year, my organization met with Redford school officials to discuss their

options—including competitively bidding non-instructional services to private firms. The officials agreed that quality services at significant cost savings were readily available. But they also know the powerful school employee union, the Michigan Education Association, opposes any move that would lessen its annual revenue stream of over \$700 million in dues and premiums from school employees and districts. The result: Criticize Proposal A, because that's politically easier than risking a highly public union protest.

Others complain that Proposal A hurts districts facing declining enrollment. Holland Public Schools claims that Proposal A helped force the closure of a popular elementary school. Officials there argue that a loss of students, without a corresponding reduction in "fixed" costs, is causing financial troubles—even though Holland receives over \$2,000 more per student in 2001 than it did in 1994. In other words, Holland's budget is \$10 million *larger* than it was before Proposal A, while at the same time the district has to educate *fewer* students.

Declining enrollment does make certain budgetary decisions difficult, but what enterprise is immune to fluctuations in the marketplace? Every operation—including schools—must consider and plan for future changes in its customer base. This is simple economic reality. The fact is that most districts—including many that have received smaller funding increases than have Redford and Holland—are able to balance their budgets. Trenton Public Schools, for example, has not felt it necessary to ask for a single tax increase in over 30 years.

Our schools need to learn the same lesson parents hope their children will learn: You can't spend all your money irresponsibly and expect your allowance to increase.

Former teacher Matthew J. Brouillette is the author of numerous studies on education policy and school funding, and director of education policy for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a Midland-based research and educational institute.

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COMMENTARY

Michigan's prevailing wage law forces schools to waste money



Gary Wolfram, Ph.D.

In 1996, the northern Michigan school district of Mesick, after five failures, finally passed a new property tax millage to fund a needed expansion of its high school. Shortly thereafter, the project began on budget and on time. But something happened about halfway through the process: Construction bids suddenly ran over budget by \$285,000, forcing the district to eliminate new computers and lab facilities for the students and axe one of the proposed new classrooms.

What caused this sudden financial disruption? The untimely return of Michigan's Prevailing Wage Act, a piece of special-interest legislation that unnecessarily jacks up school construction costs and deprives districts of millions of dollars earmarked for education each year.

Michigan is one of 32 states that has a so-called prevailing wage law. Passed in 1965, it requires that any contract on a project that is supported, even minimally, by state funds must pay contractors wages that are "prevailing" in the area in which the project is located. This sounds innocuous enough. If that were all the law said, one would wonder why the law was even necessary. No school or city that wanted to build a building could pay construction workers less than the going wage, or it wouldn't be able to hire anyone.

But the actual effect of the prevailing wage law is to allow unionized construction workers and contractors to determine what must be paid for construction of school buildings and other government projects. The law states that the Department of

Consumer and Industry Services (CIS) "shall establish prevailing wages and fringe benefits at the same rate that prevails on projects of a similar character in the locality *under collective agreements or understandings between bona fide organizations of construction mechanics and their employers*" (emphasis added).

So whatever unions and union contractors agree to is the wage that must be paid by any school district when it wants to undertake any construction, no matter how much higher it might be than the real market wage.

From December 1994 to June 1997, Michigan schools enjoyed 30 months when the Prevailing Wage Act was not in effect, thanks to a federal district court judge who ruled that the act was invalid because it was preempted by federal law. Before a higher court unfortunately reinstated the act, Michigan school districts achieved substantial savings.

For example, the Hastings School District in Barry County was able to take advantage of a nonunion bid for a \$4.3-million construction project and immediately save 13 percent. Savings like that can make a big difference for the taxpayer or for the classroom, or both. It could have saved those lost lab, computer, and classroom facilities in Mesick.

School construction in Michigan is on the order of \$1.5 billion annually, or close to \$900 per pupil. Because of the Prevailing Wage Act, these costs are substantially greater than they need to be. In a study for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, Professor Richard Vedder of Ohio University found that the law increased construction costs by at least 10 percent. The Ohio Legislature, incidentally, had the good sense in 1997 to exempt schools from that state's prevailing wage law—saving schools an

average of 10.5 percent in construction costs, according to the nonpartisan Ohio Legislative Budget Office.

If Michigan were to follow Ohio's lead, our schools would save at least \$150 million annually—a figure that amounts to \$90 for every student in the state. Nonetheless, former Michigan Attorney General Frank Kelly fought in the courts to keep the Prevailing Wage Act on the books, and any effort to save schools money by repealing it will face a challenge from current Attorney General Jennifer Granholm, as well as from organized labor.

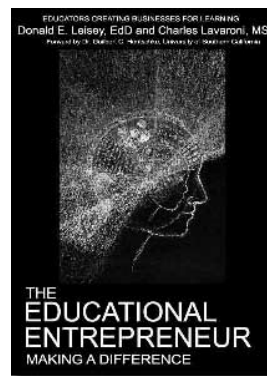
This puts certain Michigan legislators, Granholm, and some school officials in an awkward and indefensible position. Unless

they are willing to be hypocrites, they cannot continue calling for more money for schools and at the same time support wasting it through costly favors to unions.

Repealing Michigan's Prevailing Wage Act—or at least exempting schools from its rules—would make school construction more affordable, save money for use in the classroom, and allow for other improvements to public education. Michigan should follow Ohio's lead and put children ahead of well-heeled special interests.

Gary Wolfram, Ph.D. is George Munson Professor of Political Economy at Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Mich. and a former Michigan deputy state treasurer.

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Diverse Viewpoints

Is public education improving in Michigan?

Without choice, public education will not improve

Over the past decade, the state of Michigan has laid some important groundwork for improving public education. The Legislature passed one of the nation's best charter-school laws and introduced a measure of competition by funding public schools according to the number of students a school is able to attract. An increase in the state sales tax from 4 to 6 percent made it possible for a homestead exemption from local millages, creating a more level playing field for less affluent districts. But, by and large, public schooling in Michigan has failed to improve dramatically.

Today, even though only six states spend more per pupil than Michigan does, scores for Michigan students on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) tests have remained stagnant in the last few years. In 1996, 72 percent of Michigan eighth-graders taking the test were not proficient in math. In 2000, exactly 72 percent still were not proficient. In 1992, 74 percent of Michigan fourth-graders taking the NAEP were not proficient in reading. In 1998, over 70 percent still were not proficient.

Students across Michigan continue to graduate from high school without knowing the basics. A 2000 study by Mackinac Center for Public Policy Adjunct Scholar and Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance Research Associate Dr. Jay P. Greene revealed that Michigan businesses and institutions of higher learning spend more than \$600 million per year to compensate for the lack of basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills among high school graduates and employees.

This year, one in four Michigan public schools failed to meet the minimum academic goals required by our previous state superintendent. However, our new state superintendent and a new majority on the state board of education decided to pursue a different accreditation system when the current one would have removed 900 of Michigan's 3,128 government-run schools from the accredited list. Gov. John Engler called the state board and superintendent's decision an act of "cowardice."

Meanwhile, defenders of the educational status quo have been working overtime to hold school choice initiatives at bay. Half of Michigan's public schools still refuse to participate in the state's public schools-of-choice program, which allows students the minimal freedom to attend school in an adjoining district. Currently, only 283 of Michigan's 554 school districts participate. Another 165 districts have created their own choice programs, but many place severe restrictions on the number of students who can participate. That leaves over 100 districts that offer no choice whatsoever. The result: Only 1.5 percent of Michigan students are able to participate in even a minimal level of public school choice.

Michigan's charter school efforts did enjoy some success in the late 1990s before running into a brick wall. The state cap of 150 university-authorized charter schools was reached in 1999. During the 2000-01 school year, 3.4 percent of Michigan public school students were enrolled in charter schools. Although Michigan citizens have clearly shown they want more charter schools, as evidenced by huge enrollment waiting lists and applications for new charters, the Michigan Education Association's powerful lobbying efforts have ensured that bills designed to raise the cap have failed by a small margin in the state Legislature.

True choice in education remains available largely to those who can afford to move into more affluent districts or pay for private school tuition. Not surprisingly, a record number of Michigan parents of all socioeconomic backgrounds—fed-up with the poor performance of their local schools—are turning to home-schooling, despite the personal sacrifice it requires. The National Home Education Research Institute estimates that nationwide, the number of home-schoolers is growing at a rate of 7-15 percent per year. Dr. Brian Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute in Salem, Ore., estimates that there are currently 70,000-95,000 students in Michigan who are educated at home, a number equal to approximately 5 percent of Michigan's public school enrollment.

Bottom line: the main reason education in Michigan is improving at all is because lawmakers have been able to push through limited reforms such as charter schools and public schools-of-choice—in spite of a grumbling education establishment that digs in its heels at every turn. And those measures that do pass are being stymied by delaying tactics from that same unwilling establishment.

Michigan citizens must understand that the future of dramatic improvements in public education is in jeopardy. Without the implementation of greater choice and competition, public education will remain in the quagmire of mediocrity. The sooner lawmakers realize this, the sooner we will be on our way toward fulfilling the promise of a quality education for every child in Michigan.

Erich Heidenreich, DDS, is the founder and president of Marshall Academy, a charter school in Marshall, Michigan.



Erich Heidenreich,
DDS

NO



Tom
Watkins

YES

Public education continues to make our lives better

Michigan public education is shifting from being the "establishment" to being the "movement." But while there is certainly much more to do, there is much to celebrate, too.

Our public schools are not nearly as bad as critics want you to believe. Michigan fourth- and eighth-graders recently scored higher than the national average on a National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) mathematics test. Many good things are happening, too. A bill in the state Senate, SB 614, paves the way for legislative approval for a specialty license plate supporting public education. And we have begun to build a new accreditation system involving everyone with a stake in public education.

Of course, there are troubles as well. I am frustrated by the gap between what those who wax eloquently about their undying support of public education say and what they do to support teaching and learning. It concerns me that there is an ever-increasing number of students entering school with limited readiness to learn. There also is a persistent academic achievement gap between middle-class and poor and minority children. Ideological and political battles often seem more directed at partisan gain rather than academic achievement for all children. Our educational system touts college as the only viable option for children when employers are begging for competent, technically trained people who may not wear a business suit to work but will earn comfortable middle-class wages.

It concerns me that many parents seem to believe a new charter school or an existing private school is automatically better than the traditional neighborhood school. I find it troubling that the violence and bullying that permeates our society may take the life of another child or educator. Too many excellent, creative teachers who make learning exciting will change professions for higher-paid opportunities while less productive teachers will retire on the job and coast toward their pensions. Too often we allow societal challenges such as poverty, English as a second language, uneducated parents, or drug and alcohol abuse to be an excuse for not educating all children.

I fear that we will allow calls for reform without funds and calls for more money without reform to drown each other out. And probably most important of all: Too many people are leaving the important task of educating our children solely to educators when we all should be taking responsibility.

The 2001-02 school year is already underway. For many, it will be an exhilarating year as students learn to read and write, master a difficult subject, are admitted to the university or technical program of their choice, finally grasp algebra, help tutor a classmate, go to the prom, excel in athletics or forensics, march with the band, or act in a play.

Yet, we also know that the number of dropouts, functional illiterates, and students with no direction and even less hope is overwhelming. These are our children, too.

As a community, we must find ways to connect with all children.

Our public schools and the dedicated teachers who work in them have made America the greatest country on the

face of the earth. Michigan has fabulous teachers such as 2000-01 Michigan Teacher of the Year Jim Linsell from Traverse City Public Schools. Jim, and many other high-quality teachers like him, believe in building a strong sense of self in students, emphasizing real-world connections in the classroom to motivate students, inspiring creativity, and most importantly, making learning meaningful. In short, the quality of our teachers today is the gift we give ourselves tomorrow.

Yes, there are problems, inequities, and injustices in our system of public education.

However, let me paraphrase the words of President Bill Clinton in his

first inaugural address: "There is nothing so wrong with our public schools that cannot be fixed by what is right about them." The tragic, recent events emphasize the thought I share as I travel across our state—our public schools are our bedrock. They are the implementation of all the Statue of Liberty represents.

Public schools are the foundation of our democratic society. Which other institution takes in the hungry and tired to make their dreams come true? Now, more than ever we need to support our public schools.

The school bell is ringing and the beginning of a new school year still brings mixed emotions. But I believe that together we are better. If we all work together to do what is right for all of our children, great things can and will happen.

Former Blanchard administration official Tom Watkins is Michigan State Superintendent of Public Instruction.



Diverse Viewpoints are the opinions of the authors and not those of *Michigan Education Report*. Tell us what you think: "Is public education improving in Michigan?" Send your comments to

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