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MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

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SHORT SUBJECTS

The high cost of school employee health insurance is being scrutinized by independent policy analysts and the Michigan Senate. A cost-benefit analysis of a proposal to switch school and community college employees to state-administered insurance plans will be evaluated by the Senate in July. Two bills have been introduced to transition school employees to plans akin to those covering state workers. A new Mackinac Center for Public Policy study offers quantitative data illustrating that school employee health insurance costs are becoming a potential budget breaker for school districts. (see "Legislative Action," page 3 and "Study," page 8)

The United States ranked 10th in the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds who have completed high school, according to an annual study published by the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The study compared the education levels of 30 countries worldwide. Moreover, the United States ranked first in the percentage of adults ages 35 to 44 who have a high school diploma, but the trend among its younger population suggests an impending decline in the number of educated citizens. The study also found that the United States spends $10,871 per student, the highest in the world.

Schools in Allen Park, Livonia and Roseville are replacing traditional letter grades with competency ratings in academic and behavioral skills in order to meet requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Marks for academic achievement are given using a number system in which "1" is the lowest ranking and "4" is the highest. Letters are used to rank a student's consistency in achieving his number marking, with the letters denoting "consistently," "usually," "sometimes," or "area of weakness." The NCLB Act requires schools to assess students in both academic and nonacademic areas.

Under Michigan Public Act 227, passed last summer, teachers can have their children admitted to schools within

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NCLB underfunded?

Reform debated; educators work to meet standards

The No Child Left Behind Act, passed by Congress in 2002, is a landmark in federal education law. In the words of a federal government Web site devoted to the act, NCLB is designed to improve student achievement through "strong incentives for better academic results," "more (policy) freedom for states and communities," "proven education methods" and "more choices for parents." The stated intention of the law is to see all American children achieve high standards, regardless of "poverty, race, ethnicity, disability (or) limited English proficiency."

In October, a national coalition of more than 20 organizations dealing with education, civil rights, children, disabilities and citizens' concerns called for major changes to NCLB. The coalition's requested reforms included changes in the act's progress measurements, sanctions and funding. Among other specific changes, the coalition is collectively requesting a raise in authorized levels of federal NCLB money to cover a substantial percentage of the costs that states and districts will incur in carrying out the remedies required under the NCLB in cases where students repeatedly demonstrate weak academic performance. The coalition also argues that the federal government has failed to "fully fund Title I" federal monies for disadvantaged children. Since these Title I monies are, along with other federal title

UNDERFUNDED? continued on page 2

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, shown here with President Bush and her husband, Robert Spellings, was sworn into office on January 31, 2005. She has promised "room to maneuver" in administering the No Child Left Behind Act, but she says states should not expect many waivers.

State Superintendent Watkins resigns

Rift spotlights governor, board, union

On Jan. 29, Michigan Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Watkins resigned, ending an unusually public and acrimonious conflict between Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the state Board of Education over Watkins' leadership.

Debate over Watkins' ability to head the Department of Education marked the final weeks of his tenure. The governor's office stated in the Detroit Free Press on Jan. 19 that Watkins was "not providing effective leadership in one of the most critical departments in state government." In the same article, Gov. Granholm claimed, "(Watkins) needs to resign for the good of the state board, for the good of public education." She said her disapproval of Watkins' work had been known to him for months.

However, Booth Newspapers reported on Jan. 12 that Granholm had given Watkins a letter of praise for a July (2004) performance evaluation. The state board, which had hired Watkins, had recently awarded him a job evaluation of "A-."

Among the events which transpired from July 2004 to January 2005 was a difference of opinion between Watkins and the Michigan Education Association. According to a letter sent to Watkins from the MEA on Oct. 4, 2004, Watkins chose not to withhold funds from a Bay Mills Community College charter school after having done so in April 2003 due to questions of legality. The MEA was opposed to this charter school receiving state funds because the union contended that Bay Mills charters could not be considered public schools.

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Union files labor complaint

Holland says custodial privatization brings savings

Last October, the support staff union for the Holland Public Schools filed an unfair labor complaint against the Holland school district in an ongoing battle over privatization of school custodial services, according to The Holland Sentinel.

In the complaint, the Holland Educational Support Personnel Association made several allegations related to the district's talks with the union prior to the school board's recent decision to contract with a private firm for custodial services. "We charged them (the board) with refusal to bargain in good faith, and we claim that they took action to split our bargaining unit apart by telling members of the bargaining unit that this didn't really affect them and they didn't have to be concerned about it," Paul Kirschner, a Michigan Education Association representative, told The Sentinel.

Jim Sullivan, Holland's assistant superintendent of finance and personnel, told The Sentinel that the district found "most of the accusations to be groundless or without merit." He also denied a union allegation that a food services employee was verbally reproached by a supervisor for making comments during a school board meeting that discussed privatization.

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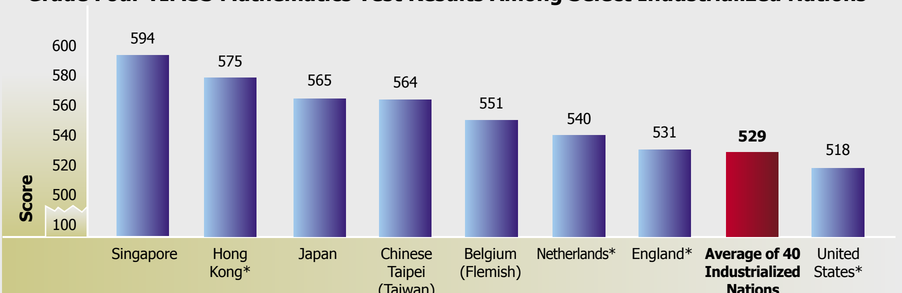
EDUCATION AT A GLANCE

Grade Four TIMSS Mathematics Test Results Among Select Industrialized Nations



In the recently released results of the 2003 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, American fourth-graders were 11 points below the industrialized country average in math, but nine points above it in science.

Source: Ina V.S. Mullis, Michael O. Martin, Eugenio J. Gonzalez, Steven J. Chrostowski, TIMSS 2003 International Mathematics Report (Boston, TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, Lynch School of Education, Boston College: 2004), p. 35.

**Met International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement guidelines for sample participation rates after replacement schools were included.*

Underfunded?

continued from page 1

monies, an important part of the money available to schools for NCLB, the coalition argues the NCLB is underfunded and is thereby failing "to ensure that 100 percent of eligible children are served."

Mandate?

Kimberly Wells, director of State and Federal Programs at Central Michigan University's Charter Schools Office, has researched the question of NCLB funding.

She notes that the U.S. Government Accountability Office addressed the question of NCLB's funding earlier this year. It found that NCLB is not a mandate because the requirements in the law are a result of states and local districts voluntarily deciding to participate in a federal financial assistance program.

Under the GAO's reading of the law, states choose to accept federal funding in exchange for performing annual testing and offering a plethora of assistance to failing schools, such as tutoring, transportation to alternative schools of choice, mandatory hiring of highly qualified teachers and paraprofessionals, reopening failing schools as charter schools and replacing existing school administration and staff. Thus, Wells explains: "In order to receive federal financial assistance, schools and local districts agree to play by certain rules. Otherwise, they can decide to opt out of taking federal funds."

Critics of the NCLB's current structure, however, argue that this view is an unrealistically narrow interpretation of the predicament states face. A state that chooses to opt out of NCLB requirements will also forgo a significant portion of some of the federal title monies associated with the act. These federal dollars have become a significant part of states' education budgets, the critics claim, and states cannot reasonably be asked to do without this money.

While several states across the nation have explored the possibility of opting out of NCLB, even to the point of drafting resolutions to do so, Michigan has never entertained the option. Yvonne Caamal-Canul, director of school improvement for the Michigan Department of Education, says: "Our office supports the moral imperative of NCLB. We are working closely with the federal government with the interpretation of the law."

Wells believes the acceptance of federal funding should come with increased accountability. "The responsibilities of NCLB are great, but so is the financial investment made by taxpayers supporting education. If the public is willing to commit large amounts of resources to education, they have the right to expect quality schools," says Wells. "It is irresponsible for the education community to constantly ask for more funding while at the same time fighting accountability measures found in NCLB such as annual testing, expanded choice for parents, additional services for struggling students and access to quality data."

Sufficient Funding?

"NCLB is not an unfunded mandate," she states. "First of all, it is not a mandate. Secondly, states are receiving adequate funding to implement the provisions of NCLB."

Wells also says federal funding for education has grown at a record pace. "Total taxpayer investment in K-12 education in the United States for the 2003-2004 school year was over $501.3 billion, exceeding that for national defense," she states. Other supporters of NCLB argue that federal funding for education is at an all time high and point to the 40 percent increase in education funding during the Bush administration.

Yet many educators say that even the recent influx of federal NCLB money does not pay for new requirements for comprehensive state assessment systems, highly qualified personnel, sophisticated data management systems and intensive school improvement efforts. Caamal-Canul argues that this is the case in Michigan.

"In order to deliver adequate support of the NCLB requirements, schools and districts have to retool their existing organizational structure," says Caamal-Canul. "This requires human capital to implement, monitor and support NCLB sanctions. Title I monies cover expenses that are tied to the actual education of the children, but not to the expenses for the administration of the sanctions."

The core component of NCLB is grade-level assessment. Michigan already has some testing in place: The Michigan Educational Assessment Program tests are being administered in several grades, and additional testing is currently being added. Michigan already had a functioning data collection process, but given NCLB requirements, it will have to change its methods to include a disaggregation of the data based on gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, special education needs, limited English proficiency, homelessness and migrant status.

"Though Michigan was years beyond many other states in the assessment and data collection of students, the data collection infrastructure in Michigan was not set up to support the new requirements charged by the NCLB Act," says Caamal-Canul.

If a school fails to achieve NCLB's Adequate Yearly Progress requirements for two consecutive years or more, federally required sanctions include offering students in these schools transportation to more successful schools and to supplemental services in the form of tutoring. But again, infrastructure and manpower to implement such mandates are feared to exceed school district budgets.

"In order to offer the kind of transportation required by NCLB, a district must drastically rethink staffing and equipment," says Caamal-Canul. "Likewise, organizing a multitude of tutoring services to support the 'supplemental services' provision will have to require at least a full-time person, possibly more, to fulfill the obligations of such a monumental task."

The nonprofit Education Leaders Council, which includes elected state education officials and supports standards-based education reform, conducted a cost analysis last year for collection, disaggregation, reporting of student achievement data, and implementing choice transportation and supplemental services. The research found Title I funds to be adequate to cover the state's costs. In contrast, Michigan Education Association spokesperson Karen Schulz recently pointed to a National Education Association study showing that the federal government underfunded grants to Michigan local education agencies by almost $400 million, and underfunded Michigan's special education grants by more than $350 million.

Caamal-Canul concurs that Title I funding is tight. "Title I monies in Michigan are already in short supply. Monies received this year were based on the poverty census of 2000, when the economy in Michigan was up and the poverty numbers down, and before NCLB was even passed," she reports. "Serving poverty numbers that are far higher in the current economy presents obvious challenges."

Flexibility?

A third area of contention is NCLB "flexibility." NCLB supporters say the law allows local communities and schools a great deal of discretion in the way they ultimately use their federal funds. When NCLB was passed, it was advertised as enabling states and local communities to use federal monies to pursue their own strategies for raising student achievement, so they could experiment with innovative ways to improve education.

"When implementing provisions of the law, states and local educational agencies have the ability to choose fiscally responsible and reasonable solutions," argues Wells. "It is important that states, districts and schools work together to develop innovative solutions for implementing the provisions of NCLB. Parents with children in failing schools do not want to be told that the school cannot afford to pay for their child to be transported to another school or to receive special tutoring services. By sharing best practices and pooling resources, (the) states, districts and schools can make NCLB work."

Caamal-Canul agrees that there is flexibility in the spirit of the law. "However," she adds, "no one could have predicted the stratospheric number of situations at the local level this flexibility would result in."

Some states and districts have reported that the law's promise of flexibility has yet to become reality. "In Michigan," says Caamal-Canul, "we recently attempted to use a flexibility option. We worked closely with the ISDs and found a solution that was legal, research-based and meaningful. Our solution was found unacceptable by the federal government. What's flexible about that?" Michigan is currently challenging the decision. She adds, "States and districts I talk to all over the country are dealing with this."

Changes in the Future?

The re-election of President Bush and Republican control of the U.S. Congress make it likely that the NCLB will continue to be a key vehicle for federal education policy. The likelihood of modifications to the law is unclear. The new U.S. secretary of education, Margaret Spellings, has said that states will have room to maneuver with NCLB, but that they should not count on receiving waivers.

MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

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Debate students hone skills at workshops

Nearly 300 high school debate students and their instructors from across Michigan attended Debate Workshops hosted in September by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and educational institute and the publisher of Michigan Education Report.

For 17 years the Mackinac Center has held the workshops to provide high school debaters with training for their debates on the National Forensic League's annual resolution. "It's hard to believe that this year's senior debaters were born the year we started this program," said Lawrence W. Reed, president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

The Debate Workshops are the Center's longest-running program and have exposed more than 8,000 students to debate arguments and ideas that they may not have received from other sources. "The Mackinac Center provides students with unique arguments because few academic and mainstream sources of information detail public policy solutions that require less government intervention as opposed to more," noted Michael LaFaive, director of the Mackinac Center's 2004 Debate Workshops program.

This year, the topic being debated was international in its scope. It reads: "Resolved: That the United States federal government should establish a foreign policy substantially increasing its support of United Nations peacekeeping operations."

This year's debate topic was particularly timely. LaFaive noted that, "With Iraq, Afghanistan and the horrors of Sudan in the news daily, this year's debate workshop was perfectly positioned to increase students' knowledge of world affairs."

High school debate coaches throughout the state receive invitations to these programs in late August. For only $5.00 per student, teachers can bring students to any one of three sites in the state to hear lectures from top experts in their respective fields. This year's Debate Workshops were held in Grand Rapids, Jackson and Livonia. The Mackinac Center also provided lunch to all debate participants.

The Mackinac Center constructs a debate Web site where students can find more information on their topic and have access to an interactive function called, "Ask the Debate Coach." "Ask the Debate Coach" provides e-mail access to experts who answer student debaters' questions about their subject or about debating itself. The site can be found at **www.mackinac.org/features/debate/2004/.**

At this year's Debate Workshops, Center experts included speakers who described peacekeeping operations in areas ranging from the Balkans and North Korea, to the whole of Africa. This year's speakers were:

- **June Arunga**, director of youth outreach at the Inter-Regional Economic Network in Kenya. Ms. Arunga has lectured in Europe and the United States on such topics as globalization, trade and economic freedom in Africa. She has produced a BBC documentary entitled, "The Devil's Footpath," on the African diaspora and has been a first-hand witness to U.N. peacekeeping operations.
- **Doug Bandow**, syndicated columnist and foreign policy specialist for the Washington, D.C.-based Cato Institute. His work at the Institute includes a variety of studies involving United Nations policies. Bandow is also the author of a forthcoming book, "The Korea Conundrum."
- **Gregory Rehmke**, program director at Economic Thinking/E Pluribus Unum Films, a nonprofit organization in Seattle. He has spoken and written on each year's national high school debate topic since the 1980s.

To inquire about signing up for next year's Debate Workshops, send an e-mail to **MCPP@mackinac.org.**

Brother Rice case in court

Union rights collide with religious autonomy

State officials and private school groups are awaiting a Michigan Court of Appeals opinion on the question of whether a state labor agency can require parochial schools to recognize labor unions if teachers at those institutions express interest in unionization.

In September 2003, 30 of 42 teachers at Birmingham's Brother Rice High School, a Catholic high school, expressed interest in joining a union and requested an election to determine whether their workforce could be organized by the Michigan Education Association. Board members of Brother Rice opposed the unionization attempt, citing a 1979 U.S. Supreme Court decision, NLRB v. Catholic Bishop of Chicago, which ruled that applying federal labor law to "church-operated schools" would create "a significant risk of infringement of the religion clauses of the First Amendment" and give rise to "difficult and sensitive questions."

The MEA, however, brought an action to the Michigan Employment Relations Commission, the state's labor relations board, asking the state to require the school to allow a vote by teachers on whether they should be represented by the union. MERC determined in May 2004 that it held jurisdiction over labor issues at Brother Rice because the 1979 ruling did not explicitly state that its decision held in future cases. In accordance with that finding, MERC ordered an election to be conducted at the school on Aug. 20, 2004.

School administrators appealed MERC's decision, stating the union and its politics would interfere with the right of the school to hold and teach its religious beliefs, as permitted by both the Michigan and United States Constitutions. After MERC denied a self-review of its decision, the school took its case to the Michigan

Brother Rice High School

Court of Appeals, which granted a stay, postponing the vote until the court acted on the case.

The court will decide two issues: the first, whether MERC has jurisdiction to decide labor cases in parochial schools; the second, whether state intervention in the policies of parochial schools would abrogate state and federal constitutional guarantees of religious liberty and expression.

"Being decided are issues of law concerning MERC jurisdiction under the Michigan Labor Relations and Mediation Act," said Patrick T. Gillen, a lawyer with the Thomas More Law Center, an Ann Arbor-based public interest law firm that is representing Brother Rice. Additionally, the court may decide whether the case "will be interpreted in a manner where the MERC has jurisdiction over religious schools," Gillen stated.

Several groups have filed amicus briefs with the court. The Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty and the Archdiocese of Detroit have weighed in favoring the school, while the Michigan Federation of Teachers supports the position of the MEA. There are "obviously a set group of interested parties," observed Gillen.

The opinion by the Court of Appeals could potentially allow unions to organize in parochial schools statewide. "It will be a decision of some import," noted Gillen, who also said the case could possibly be headed to the United States Supreme Court.

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LEGISLATIVE ACTION

School attendance

A new bill in the Michigan Senate would significantly alter public school attendance expectations statewide. Senate Bill 4, introduced on Jan. 12 by Sen. Liz Brater, D-Ann Arbor, would amend P.A. 451 of 1976 with regard to the age at which parents and legal guardians are required to send their children to school. The bill seeks to increase the maximum age from 16 to 18, meaning that parents would be obligated by law to ensure that their children attend "continuously and consecutively" from age 6 until their 18th birthday.
www.michiganvotes.org/2005-SB-4

Accelerated education

House Bill 5791, known as the Michigan Accelerated College Education Act, was introduced last April by Rep. Jacob Hoogendyk Jr., R-Portage. The bill, likely to be reintroduced this year, stands in contrast to Senate Bill 4, referenced above. House Bill 5791 allows high school students who have not yet graduated to enroll in post-secondary programs before receiving a high school diploma, with the state paying a portion of the cost. Under the plan, qualifying students would receive a grant worth up to 50 percent of "eligible charges" to participate in a post-secondary degree program provided they maintain a 2.0 or higher grade point average. After a total of 8 semesters of high school and post-secondary instruction has been completed, the post-secondary institution could award a high school diploma and the appropriate post-secondary degree or certification.
www.michiganvotes.org/2004-HB-5791

School employee health insurance

Certain health insurance plans covering school employees would be superseded by a state insurance plan under 2005 Senate Bill 55. The bill, introduced by Sen. Shirley Johnson, R-Royal Oak, on Jan. 25, and supported by Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema, R-Wyoming, would create a state school employee health care board. According to the legislation, the new board would consist of two members nominated by the governor, two members nominated by the Senate majority leader, and two members nominated by the speaker of the House of Representatives. This panel would take on the responsibility of designing an optimal and stable health insurance plan to be offered to school and community college employees, similar to the plans covering other state workers. School districts or community colleges choosing to provide health insurance to their employees would be allowed to provide only the insurance plans determined by the new state board. Transition to the new plans would be made upon expiration of the currently provided health insurance. It is reported that the state spends significantly less per employee for health coverage than most Michigan school districts.
www.michiganvotes.org/2005-SB-55

Appointment of superintendent

2004 Senate Joint Resolution H, introduced in February 2004 by Senate Republicans is once again gaining attention in light of the recent dispute between former Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Watkins and Gov. Jennifer Granholm. The resolution proposes that the state constitution be amended "to provide for gubernatorial appointment of the superintendent of public instruction." Currently, the power to appoint the superintendent resides with the state Board of Education, itself an elected body. The superintendent is the principal executive of the Board of Education, and presides as the chairperson without the right to vote. The governor is an ex-officio member of the board, also without a vote. The recent power struggle between the state superintendent and the governor sparked renewed interest in the bill. This year's version of the bill, 2005 House Joint Resolution C, was introduced on Feb. 1 by Rep. John Moolenaar, R-Midland.
www.michiganvotes.org/2004-SJR-H
www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HJR-C

Charter school cap

A new House Bill has been introduced to modify some of the conditions under which charter schools exist in Michigan. House Bill 4078 abolishes the cap of 150 university-authorized schools that currently limits the expansion of charters. The bill does not specify a new upper limit, but eliminates the old restriction. Also, the legislation would allow community colleges to authorize public school academies in Detroit, permit limited charter school enrollment preferences, require that assets of closed schools revert back to the state school aid fund and establish various other rules for charters and education management companies. The bill was introduced by Republicans Brian Palmer (Romeo) and Kevin Elsenheimer (Bellaire) on Jan. 27.
www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HB-4078

Michigan merit scholarship

A bill affecting Michigan merit scholarship money was introduced in the Senate on Feb. 22, 2005. Senate Bill 232, sponsored by Sen. Deborah Cherry, D-Burton, Sen. Gilda Z. Jacobs, D-Huntington Woods, and Sen. Bruce Patterson, R-Canton, establishes that merit scholarship money be returned to the state in the case that a student recipient leaves school. The bill states: "If a student elects to leave an approved postsecondary educational institution without completing the classes in which he or she enrolled, the approved postsecondary educational institution shall return any money remaining in the student's account … to the Department of Treasury. The Department shall deposit the money returned from the student's account into an account in the state treasury for the student. Any money remaining in an account for 5 years shall escheat to the state."
www.michiganvotes.org/2005-SB-232

Prevailing wage

House Bill 4412, introduced by Rep. Kevin Elsenheimer, R-Bellaire, will amend PA 451 of 1976, "the revised school code," if passed. Specifically, HB 4412 targets section 503 of the Public Act by striking from it PA 166 of 1965, the Prevailing Wage Act. This 40-year-old law stipulates, "Every contract executed between a contracting agent and a successful bidder as contractor … shall contain an express term that the rates of wages and fringe benefits to be paid … by the bidder and all of his subcontractors, shall be not less than the wage and fringe benefit rates prevailing in the locality in which the work is performed." These wage rates have traditionally been determined by a commissioner of labor, based on wages and benefits that prevail "on projects of a similar character in the locality under collective agreements or understandings between bona fide organizations of construction mechanics and their employers." This prevailing wage requirement currently applies to public school construction projects.
www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HB-4412

Watkins

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The October MEA letter to Watkins states: "As the Superintendent of Public Instruction you have a legal duty to ensure that academies are legally authorized and are adequately supervised by a public body … If you feel you need more statutory authority, and more funding, we will support your efforts to achieve such within the Legislature."

The Department of Education had previously been given the green light to disburse funds to Bay Mills charters after Gov. Granholm's legal division determined it was indeed legal to do so.

In December, another point of contention between Watkins and the MEA developed when Watkins released a controversial school-funding report offering ideas about reforms to Michigan's education system. His untraditional approach to solving the "Structural Issues Surrounding Michigan School Funding In the 21st Century" may have raised some eyebrows.

In his report, Watkins challenged some widely-held views within the education community: "A simple solution would be to join the chorus that simply asks for more tax revenue to fund our schools. … However, solely funding the current system will not yield the results our children need and deserve." The report goes on to say: "Boldness and candor are required to identify the challenges as well as to make recommendations that address them. The primary postulate, that additional revenue without unprecedented change in the fundamental structure of our public education system is not enough, is **not** widely agreed to by the education populace" (*Watkins' emphasis*).

Watkins' troubles were not limited to disagreements with the MEA or fallout from the December report. He attracted attention with comments published in a Jan. 2 Grand Rapids Press story on charter schools. In the article, MEA Communications Director Margaret Trimer-Hartley stated that she believed the progress of charter schools was inconclusive, and that she was concerned about stories of charter schools discouraging special education students from enrolling. Watkins responded bluntly: "Does some of it happen? Sure. But let's take a look at traditional schools. Some of them will complain about losing 300 (students) to a charter, but you won't hear a peep out of them when 3,000 (dropouts) go to the streets."

On Jan. 11, four weeks after the Watkins report was released and nine days after his Grand Rapids Press comments,"Dozens of educators and parents packed a state board meeting to praise Watkins for his 'call to action,'" reported Booth Newspapers Lansing Bureau. The governor offered a tepid endorsement of Watkins on the same day, refusing to say anything other than him being a "valued member" of her cabinet.

The board itself was split in their support for Watkins. Board Vice President John Austin, D-Ann Arbor, told Gongwer News Service: "I personally for several years thought we could do better, somebody who was more effective. We now have four of us who see a long pattern of things we would have wanted Tom to have done differently." But, Board President Kathleen Strauss, one of Austin's fellow Democrats, never wavered in her support of Watkins, according to Gongwer: "She saw Mr. Watkins as both a cheerleader for education and a leader for the department. And she said she still had backing on that from other members of the board."

The board, however, voted to table an extension to Watkins' contract.

Speculation over the reasons for Watkins' fall from grace was widespread. Writing for the Oakland Press on Jan. 14, Lansing political commentator Tim Skubick offered one explanation for Granholm's insistence that Watkins leave his post, "Rightly or wrongly, here's the knock on Watkins: He is great with the sound bite about moving children up the education ladder, but his depth of expertise is the proverbial mile long and a silly millimeter deep."

On Jan. 19, the Free Press reported that Granholm education adviser Chuck Wilbur said, "Watkins has wrongly suggested that Granholm was perturbed by (the) Dec. 6 report on the plight of schools." Wilbur continued, "It has to do with the way he managed the department."

Watkins responded to criticisms against him on Jan. 20 in a letter to the governor. Claiming he was "inappropriately criticized," Watkins wrote that he was "surprised and perplexed" at Granholm's turn against him: "Neither you nor any of your staff have shared these concerns with me personally." Watkins asserted that all of Granholm's comments toward him had been positive, the only exception being in regard to a diagram in Watkins' December report. He stated, "You said 'you were furious' regarding the … funding illustration … that shows that almost 2/3s of new dollars invested in our schools will be used to cover pension and health care expenses."

Watkins also urged Granholm to "direct members of your staff to cease bullying members of the statewide-elected state Board of Education to sell out their conviction and their support of me."

Highlighting further alleged injustices, Watkins hinted at a possible MEA connection though he did not give names. "I have been told that you have asked special interest groups to discredit me and convince my supporters on the State Board to fire me, as a 'personal favor,'" he wrote.

Watkins maintained that having been successful in private business and in managing the multi-million dollar Department of Mental Health, his administrative and leadership skills could not be called into question.

As for the MEA's continuing opposition to the Bay Mills charter schools, the union has filed a lawsuit against the superintendent of public instruction, the state Board of Education, and the state treasurer to stop the funding of Bay Mills charter schools. The suit, dated February 3, 2005, was filed days after Watkins' resignation. Stated explicitly in the complaint is an account of another confrontation between the MEA and Watkins over Bay Mills, occurring only one month after Watkins' office received the original letter in October. In this subsequent contact, Watkins continued to hold his ground, again deciding not to withhold funds.

The state Board of Education has chosen Jeremy Hughes, Michigan's chief academic officer, to be acting superintendent until a new permanent superintendent can be appointed. A set of selection criteria has been developed by the board, and they have decided to accept applications until April 8th.

Holland

continued from page 1

The district had proposed privatizing custodial work in the midst of a financial downturn.

Kirschner claimed that after the school board informed the support personnel staff of the board's desire to privatize, Holland Educational Support Personnel Association was given only a week to change the board's mind. The MEA was called in to assess what its regional representative deemed a "critical" situation.

Sullivan told The Holland Sentinel on Oct. 28 that he was not surprised at the steps the union had taken. "Their role is to protect their members," he said, "My role is to advocate for the school district."

Sullivan's proposal to save as much as $700,000 for the school district had been widely and publicly criticized by HESPA as only a quick-fix solution. James Forster, the president of HESPA, said his union had been lobbying for the opportunity to make a counteroffer.

The school board said this opportunity was granted, but Forster told The Sentinel that the board had been unresponsive: "We have made some offers — little pieces of the pie but when you add them up you could get a full slice — but when we brought those up, they weren't very receptive."

Concerns about the safety of contracting with a private firm have been raised by the union. Union fliers have warned that privatization carries uncertainties that could end up harming the school and its students in an attempt to reduce expenses. They question whether the district will have a firm knowledge of the personal history of the private personnel, especially regarding criminal activity.

In response, School Board President Bob Carlson has stated, "One of (the contractors) does even more for background checks than what we presently do with our people."

According to The Holland Sentinel, the district has lost 200 students per year for the past two years. A continuation of this trend would produce a $2.5 million deficit in the district by June 2006.

As of December, privatization of custodial services has been implemented, according to Carlson. The union has since withdrawn the unfair labor complaint as part of a settlement that was reached in order to finalize negotiations over teacher contracts. Carlson also said that although the exact cost reduction from privatization has not yet been calculated, the district has indeed realized the savings originally projected. The district has received many positive comments about the new services, and very few complaints.

Carlson told Michigan Education Report that the district will focus on assuring a quality educational program and improving existing programs to market themselves and increase enrollment. He also noted, "We will continue to look at ways to become more efficient in our operations as a way to decrease costs."

This story is an expanded version of an article from a November 2004 issue of Michigan Education Digest based on source stories from The Holland Sentinel.

Profile: Jack Martin

When Jack Martin was appointed chief financial officer of the U.S. Department of Education, the department's financial woes were a longstanding problem. But as the saying goes, "If you want something done, give it to a busy person" — and Martin, a native of Ferndale, Mich., has always been a busy man.

After beginning his career at General Motors, Martin went on to hold management and accounting positions at a variety of companies. At the height of his private-sector career, he acted as chief executive officer of his own accounting firm and of the Home Federal Savings Bank of Detroit. Martin thus had the accounting expertise he needed when he was confronted with the challenges he inherited at the U.S. Department of Education.

U.S. Department of Education Chief Financial Officer Jack Martin

When Martin took the reins in early 2002, the DOE had received a clean financial review and passed an audit only once in its two decades of existence. Following his arrival, however, the department has received a clean opinion on its financial statements for two years running.

With the presidential administration's emphasis on education reform, this improvement was seen as vital. In December 2003, then-Secretary of Education Rod Paige praised the accounting improvements as "major milestones" and stated: "We have made great strides in improving financial operations here at the Department of Education, and (the 2003) audit proves that we can lead by example. It also demonstrates that we are at the beginning of a sustained, trustworthy stewardship of taxpayer dollars here at the department."

Kudos came from outside the department as well. In September 2004, the DOE was awarded a Certificate of Excellence in Accountability Reporting by the Association of Government Accountants for the department's improved integration of financial and program reports. Last December, the DOE received the Presidential Award for Management Excellence for its "improved agencywide financial performance." According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, the Education Department was one of only seven federal agencies to receive the presidential award among the 68 that were nominated.

Martin's efforts at the Education Department were further informed by his extensive experience in the not-for-profit business sector. According to his federal biography, Martin served in a variety of nonprofit posts prior to his stint at the department, including chairman of the board of the Detroit-based Health Alliance Plan, board member for the Henry Ford Health System and treasurer of the Alzheimer's Association. He had also worked with government institutions, acting as vice president of the Merrill Palmer Institute at Wayne State University in Detroit and chairperson of the Michigan Advisory Committee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission.

Martin's skills have brought him additional duties within the administration. Last April, he was asked by President Bush to serve as acting director of the Selective Service System while continuing to work as chief financial officer of the Education Department.

This appointment led Martin into a campaign-season controversy. When a journalist inquired whether the federal government could reinstate the draft, Martin answered, "I think we could do it in less than six months if we got the call." Although the administration stated it was not planning a resumption of the draft, Martin's comment made the rounds quickly. Martin subsequently clarified the remark, saying, "There is absolutely nothing we are doing as an agency to implement a draft." Ultimately, the controversy was short-lived.

Martin's political career has so far been a footnote to his service at the DOE. His financial expertise at the Education Department appears to have provided important accounting improvements to an organization that needed them.

Michigan reforms election calendar

Transition removes burden from school districts

Michigan has just crossed the threshold into an era of consolidated elections. Starting this year, all elections in the state — including federal, state, school and local elections — must take place on one of four regular election dates. Many hope that the change will ensure voters participate in more election decisions, particularly school ballots, while others fear the change will lead to confusion and longer ballots in the voting booth.

The first test of the new system occurred in the Feb. 22 election, when scores of communities turned out to vote primarily on local tax issues. This election did seem, based on a cursory review of the voting numbers, to have higher voter turnout than similar elections in the past. At the same time, this election was not a complete test of the new system, since the ballot included fewer issues and therefore did not pose the same risk of ballot clutter that a presidential election would.

Under the new election regimen, the four statutory election days each year are the fourth Tuesday in February; the first Tuesday after the first Monday in May; the first Tuesday after the first Monday in August; and the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. In addition, all elections will now be run by local and county clerks. The parallel system of school-run elections will cease, along with its separate polling places and separate absentee voter procedures.

There are three exceptions to the four regular election dates. The first is the constitutional authority of the governor to call an election to fill a vacant state House or state Senate seat, and of the state Legislature to place constitutional amendments before the electorate in special elections.

The second exception allows cities that currently hold their primary election in September to continue to do so.

The third exception was added to overcome opposition from public school districts and school employee unions. It allows a school district to submit one annual ballot question to voters to borrow money or increase taxes. This so-called "floater" election requires the district to obtain or receive a petition signed by either 10 percent or 3,000 of the district's registered voters, whichever is less. The election must be on a Tuesday, and it cannot occur within 35 days of one of the four regular election dates.

These sweeping changes come after a legislative struggle that persisted for at least a decade. The abundance of Michigan's governmental units and candidates has given ammunition to both sides of the election consolidation debate.

According to the Citizens Research Council, Michigan hosts 2,884 local units of government, 14th highest among the 50 states. As of 1998, these local units were comprised of 1,859 counties, cities, villages and townships; 748 education districts, including intermediate school districts and community college districts; and 277 special districts and authorities created for specific purposes.

Most of these districts have elections. Michigan political analyst Bill Ballenger says that this abundance of governments and the constitutional election date requirement result in Michigan having the longest November presidential-year general election ballot of any state — the so-called "bed sheet ballot."

The numbers are imposing: According to Ballenger, in November 2004 Michigan voters selected from candidates seeking some 7,500 elected positions in national, state, judicial, county and township elections. (No single voter faces 7,500 choices; the elections are spread around the state.)

These positions included more than 5,900 races across the state for elected township officers. Add to this the presidential election; 15 U.S. House of Representatives seats; the state Supreme Court and appellate court judges; circuit, district and probate court judges; 110 members of the state House of Representatives; the state Board of Education; and governing board members of Michigan State University, Wayne State University and the University of Michigan (state Senate members were not on the ballot last November). Then there are state and local ballot initiatives — everything from the definition of marriage to local library millage renewals.

This represents only November in even-numbered years. At other times, there are primary elections; school elections; city and village elections; library and other special district elections; plus a stream of tax and borrowing ballot issues from various levels of government in the state. Prior to the recent election consolidation, the tax and borrowing issues in particular could occur on almost any day of the year.

Those who favor more election dates point to the excessive length of that November "bed sheet ballot," which slows voting, leads to long lines at the polls and may discourage voter participation. Even when a voter enters the polling booth, participation may suffer, since many of those voting in high-profile presidential or gubernatorial elections will stop voting before they reach the more obscure races farther down the ballot. In 2000, 4.2 million Michigan citizens voted for president, but a million fewer voted for state Board of Education candidates. The disparity can be even greater for races at the bottom of the ballot.

Supporters of election consolidation, on the other hand, typically point to the sparse turnout in the regular school elections that have been held in June. They allege that school districts have scheduled "stealth" tax increase votes on unusual dates in order to make voting difficult or inconvenient for those who do not have a personal financial interest in increasing school spending. They make a similar argument about June school board elections (held on a Monday), and they note that voter turnout rates of less than 5 percent are the norm in regular and special school elections. Contributing to this low participation rate, they argue, was the fact that for most voters, school election polling places were not the same as those for other elections, and that these elections had different absentee ballot procedures, confusing absentee voters.

From a longer-term historical perspective, they continue a trend that has been under way for almost two centuries.

After the U.S. Constitution was ratified, federal elections in the various states took place on different dates. The Constitution, however, gave Congress the authority to impose a single date, and in 1845, Congress passed a law that effectively required all congressional elections to take place on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November.

The Michigan Constitution of 1850 stipulated only that the state Legislature be elected in November of even years. The 1908 state constitution consolidated elections for legislators, the governor and other state officers, judges and county sheriffs into the "biennial general election," also in November of even years. The current state constitution, adopted in 1963, requires that all elections for national, state, county and township offices take place in November in each even-numbered year.

These gradual election consolidations in the state's constitution did not include the state's many school, municipal and other elections.

By 2003, a consensus had formed in the state Legislature that, at the very least, the job of superintending elections could potentially distract school districts from their primary mission of educating children. Many legislators were also beginning to question the wisdom of maintaining two separate election systems in the state — one run by school districts, and another run by county, township and municipal clerks.

The Michigan Education Association, which had successfully opposed election consolidation efforts in previous legislative sessions, surprised observers by taking no position on the legislation that would end school-run elections beginning in 2005, though the union did win the important concession of the school "floater" election described above. The bills passed, and Gov. Jennifer Granholm signed Senate Bill 877 and House Bills 4820 and 4824 into law on Jan. 8, 2004. The new system went into effect on Jan. 1, 2005.

How will this change affect voting behavior in Michigan? First, the "bed sheet ballot" characteristic of November general elections in even years could get a bit longer, since the law allows school board elections to be held on this date. Nevertheless, the new law does not mandate that additional contests be added to the abundance of offices filled on that day, so in many election areas, the ballot length probably will not change. In general, elections for various governmental units will probably be spread among the seven other regular election dates that occur over each two-year voting cycle (four election dates per year).

Transitioning to the new system may be confusing at first. One thorny issue is the fact that school and municipal boundaries do not always coincide. The new election consolidation law requires schools and county or municipal election officials to devise a school election plan every two years to deal with this issue. Local units of government will run school elections, and school districts will reimburse them from the operating funds that the schools receive from the state.

This expense to schools, however, is expected to be less than the cost they faced when running elections themselves. In addition, the new arrangement may gradually encourage school districts to align their boundaries with those of local governments, which supporters of the new law hope will make the election process easier for voters and election officials. Regardless of these potential benefits, however, straightening out the details of the new election regime is likely to present school and local officials with challenges in the months to come.

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Teacher Focus

Experienced teacher finds niche at charter

"Jack London has a phrase," observes Carole Mortenson Crary. "'Life achieves its summit when it does to the uttermost that which it was equipped to do.'"

Mortenson Crary, a fifth, sixth and seventh grade language arts and social studies teacher, seems to have found her summit at The Midland Academy of Advanced & Creative Studies. She says she has a deep, sustaining love for her occupation.

At the charter school, Mortenson Crary has been amply rewarded with good results. In 2002, the academy won two Golden Apple awards from the state of Michigan. She credits the school's entire staff with this success: "We had the highest fifth grade language arts MEAP scores in Michigan for three consecutive years, and the highest science scores in 2002. That reflects the work of dedicated teachers."

Success has not been elusive for Mortenson Crary who has been honored by the academy's administration as a Teacher of the Quarter, and has received praise for her work in preparing students to succeed on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program.

On top of the honors, and even more important to Mortenson Crary, is the abundant satisfaction expressed in parents' letters and phone calls. She notes that the academy has received an overflow of parental support — a contrast, in some instances, with what she experienced as a teacher in the conventional public school system.

She is a graduate of the University of Michigan and Saginaw Valley State University with both a bachelor's degree in education and a master's degree in classroom teaching. Some 31 years after she began teaching, Mortenson Crary brings a wealth of experience to her profession and an extensive background in both conventional public schools and public school academies.

The literature I have selected is classical; things that have stood the test of time and have been admired by people for generations. … And I find that students respond to these and like them, and parents are delighted.

-Carole Mortenson Crary

Beginning her career in 1974 in the Midland public school district was rewarding for Mortenson Crary: "I enjoyed the children tremendously. … I loved the fact that I had other people within the same grade level to communicate with and discuss issues with." She also offers acclamation for the "fantastic material" in Midland, a district she says is known for its good elementary curriculum.

Carole Mortenson Crary considers teaching her calling. She has worked in both conventional public schools and a public school academy.

However, her time spent in a charter school has brought to light some aspects of the conventional public school system that she did not enjoy: "I guess the one thing that I found a little frustrating was the union mentality. … I was raised to think that I should be able to talk with people on my own, one-on-one, and settle differences of opinion that might arise or handle things on a very personal level. And I was very comfortable with that. But it is true that in some of the very large systems, that kind of thing does not happen. You have to work through channels, and there are certain things that you are told you should do and you should not do, and you're just not quite free in the choices you make."

Mortenson Crary says she now enjoys the level of personal interaction with the administration at the academy. In contrast, "(Unions) sometimes drove a wedge between teachers and administrators, and I tend to think of us all as being on the same team. … We have the same purpose and same goal as we work together day in and day out."

Mortenson Crary also enjoys the flexibility her school allows in choosing the material she teaches at the academy. She has been able to personally select all of the textual material that her classes use, and she has been given the freedom to build it into her own program.

A lover of literature and history, Mortenson Crary believes her students benefit from reading the "great books": "We read complete novels instead of … little excerpts. … The literature I have selected is classical; things that have stood the test of time and have been admired by people for generations. … And I find that students respond to these and like them, and parents are delighted." Mortenson Crary takes seriously her charge to prepare her students for post-secondary success. "I use British literature as far down as seventh grade," she says, "and (some public) high school programs don't even require it. They don't do Chaucer, Donne, Milton. That's a shame. I taught them in eighth grade."

However, the freedoms of teaching in a charter school come with certain drawbacks. Mortenson Crary points out that because most charters are still relatively new and small, every staff member takes on a heavy workload. In a profession that receives less respect than it truly deserves, working in a charter school has the potential to compound the problem. Although she draws motivation from her mission and packed schedule, Mortenson Crary knows that it takes extra effort to do what she does.

In addition, many charter schools have come under criticism for offering less opportunity for extracurricular growth. Many of the schools lack fully-developed sports programs typically due to their smaller size. The Midland Academy of Advanced & Creative Studies does have a few sports teams, but does not host a big-time football or basketball program. Mortenson Crary says that parents looking for this kind of activity in their child's education should look first at conventional public schools, adding, "Charters are depth, not breadth."

Mortenson Crary does believe that charters offer a "viable alternative." She says there is a huge difference in the positive feedback that she has received in charter schools as opposed to conventional public schools. "Because people are looking for something distinctive," she observes, "they come here and we can deliver it to them." But she also realizes that comes with pressure: "We know that we have to perform. It's very simple. This is a business in which we all participate, and we all have a stake. If we are not successful, our school will not attract students, and we will end up closing down. So, we know that we have to perform. We know we have to work extremely hard. And we have staff with tremendous knowledge and experience that helps them succeed." Thus, she argues, competition "forces us to be the best we can be and to keep examining our curriculum; keep looking at our test results; keep looking at our teaching strategy — what we are doing that seems to be successful, what could use improvement or alteration," she says.

She concludes: "In our school … there was a very conscious desire to experience something more, something above and beyond. We've tried to provide that." She says she is proud of the academy and feels fortunate to be sharing her passion for literature and history with her students. Her experience, drive and commitment appear to have found a setting where her efforts can produce unequivocal academic success.

Study says benefit costs strangle districts

A study soon to be released by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy offers hope for school districts wrestling with the inflated costs of certain employee benefits.

Michigan newspapers in recent months have reported that struggling school districts have been forced to lay off teachers, close schools or make other educational cuts in an effort to stay afloat. The new study suggests that reining in rapidly escalating health care costs might go a long way in alleviating the anxiety of school districts worried about budget shortfalls.

"Employee benefits are becoming the primary obstacle to contract agreements between Michigan school boards and school employee unions," according to the study, "More specifically, Michigan Education Special Services Association, or MESSA, insurance is the sticking point that is causing more and more school districts to seek alternatives to out-of-control health care costs."

The study describes the problem quantitatively, pointing to data compiled in another Mackinac Center study from 1993, and surveys from groups such as the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, the Michigan Association of School Boards and the U.S. Census Bureau. This comparative analysis yields some striking conclusions and implications for Michigan's school finance programs.

As of today, "The most common MESSA family plan … costs public schools $15,834 per year for each covered employee," the report shows, an increase of over 150% from 1993 levels. Even after a 1994 Michigan Insurance Bureau probe into the MEA - MESSA connection resulted in the return of roughly $70 million dollars of excess, interest-bearing MESSA reserves to Blue Cross/Blue Shield, many school districts have indicated that the MEA fiercely opposes any prospect of school districts evaluating alternative plans.

The study highlights the shared interest that the MEA and MESSA have in landing teacher health package contracts. MESSA itself is a Third Party Administrator. The insurance, and therefore the risk, is underwritten by another company.

MESSA was established by the MEA in 1960 as a wholly-owned subsidiary of the association, and some individuals serve simultaneously on the board of directors and trustees of both entities.

In today's environment, health insurance costs are taking up an ever larger portion of school district budgets. "Health insurance premiums are rising at a rate of 11 percent to 12 percent per year — school budgets are increasing at a much slower rate," according to the report. The Kaiser Family Foundation conducts surveys that have shown, "MESSA insurance is almost $5,000, or about 50 percent, more expensive per year than a typical family policy purchased by employers nationwide."

Currently, many districts assume 100 percent responsibility for the costs, while the union continues to reject proposals to switch to a non-MESSA plan. In Kentwood, health care costs had risen so high that the school board "voted unanimously to impose a contract that asked employees to pay any health premiums above $916 per month." Employees were given the option to switch to Priority Health HMO, whereby the board would *pay them* each $126 per month in the first year and $112 per month in the second to switch (due to district money saved). Even proposed deals like the one in Kentwood that offered employees monthly rebates have failed in the face of threatened strikes.

The problem appears to be especially acute in Michigan: "Over these ten years, (1992 – 2002) total U.S. spending on benefits increased by about 38 percent; however, for Michigan's school districts, benefits spending increased 119 percent, even though the number of school aged children was relatively unchanged." The report reads, "Michigan's proportion of spending on benefits is now the second highest in the nation."

The study explains that some schools have been successful in switching to alternative plans such as Priority Health. Many alternative plans presented to districts provide similar and competitive benefits, and include the same doctors and hospitals used under current MESSA plans. The difference is in the price.

A recent example from Houghton Lake Public Schools, in which a proposed alternative health care plan that would have saved the district $1 million dollars over three years was rejected, illustrates the point. Retaining the MESSA plan in turn resulted in layoffs of 15 teachers and eliminated funding for a sports program.

The study offers four solutions that will help school districts decide on the most economical way to handle their health insurance options in view of an overall responsibility to their budgets:

— Competitive bidding
— Health benefits redesign
— Premium and co-payment sharing
— Health benefits plan consolidation

The report says: "The most straightforward way for school districts to deal with rising health care costs, especially for those who use one of the MESSA plans, is simply to open up the process to competition. MESSA should not be barred from such competition, of course, but MESSA itself should not be a barrier to the bidding process, as it is now. Indeed, MESSA itself actively blocks competition by refusing to provide claims histories to school districts, information that almost all insurers routinely provide to their customers." The study advises that school districts must know how much benefits will cost if they are to efficiently provide them, and when this does not happen, some districts are "squeezed to the point of cutting teachers from their rolls."

The study suggests that the status quo in district employee health care should not be sacrosanct, and that school districts can rid themselves of the burden of high health care costs by following the study's recommendations.

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Short Subjects

continued from page 1

the district that employs them, even if they live in a different school district. Teachers have this right even if the district they work for does not participate in Michigan's public school choice program, or if the district has already filled its school-of-choice admission slots. Some have criticized the law, saying it benefits school employees unfairly and could increase taxpayer costs, but others defend this form of school choice as a justifiable benefit for teachers who have children.

Ann Arbor Public Schools has been ordered by a federal judge to pay legal fees to a student who sued the district for violating her free speech rights. The suit began in July 2002 after Pioneer High School senior Betsy Hansen was denied the opportunity to place an adult representative who believes homosexual activity is sinful on a "Homosexuality and Religion" panel. Hansen also claimed that the school censored portions of a speech she made during the school's "Diversity Week." The ruling ordered the district to pay damages, legal fees and other expenses to the law firm representing Hansen.

Bloomfield Hills School District plans to rent out its facilities to the private sector, including its conference center, sports facilities, computer lab and nature center. In an effort to maximize the use of its resources and its accountability to taxpayers, the district began renting its athletic facilities in the offseason. The district has already taken in $50,000 through this action, and is now looking for opportunities with its other properties.

Ballot initiatives to increase education spending were defeated in three of four states in the Nov. 2nd election. An Arkansas ballot initiative asked voters to set aside property taxes for schools. Washington's Initiative 884 asked voters for a 1 percentage point increase in the state sales tax to be set aside for education. Nevada's Ballot Question 2 asked voters to increase per-pupil spending to the national average. All three were defeated. A ballot initiative was approved in South Dakota, however, giving the state authority to fund busing of students to private schools.

Students that used vouchers to attend private schools graduated at a higher rate than students enrolled in the Milwaukee Public Schools, according to a recent study published by Jay Greene of the nonprofit New York-based Manhattan Institute. About 64 percent of Milwaukee-area students who used vouchers to attend private schools graduated from high school after four years, versus just 36 percent of students in Milwaukee public schools.

Howell Public Schools district voters last September approved an override of the state constitution's "Headlee Amendment," allowing officials to levy an 18-mill tax on homestead and commercial property to fund education. The Headlee Amendment, named for the recently deceased Richard H. Headlee, limits local property taxes for schools to an inflation-related rate while allowing voters the option to override it in local districts. Early last year, Howell voters had voted against the override, but officials placed it on the ballot again.

Michigan ranked 45th in "teachability," according to a study published by the Manhattan Institute (see above). The Adjusted School Efficiency Index takes social problems like poverty and teen pregnancy into account in calculating each state's efficiency in handling these problems while educating students. The study also found that students are more "teachable" today than they were 30 years ago, contrary to popular assumptions.

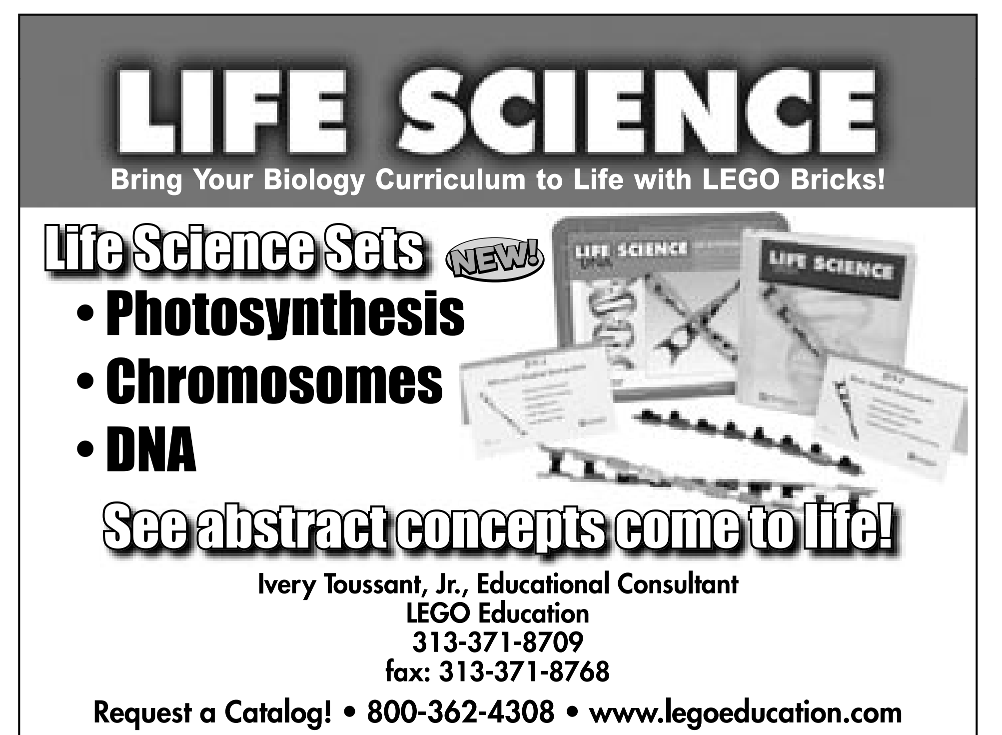
Michigan's state average on the SAT test declined this year, but remains above the aggregate national average. Average math scores declined three points to 573, and verbal scores declined one point to 563, compared to the national averages of 508 and 518 respectively. Michigan scores had been improving since 1999. Michigan students' ACT scores were also above the national average, with a mean score of 21.4, up from 21.3 last year.

The University of Michigan and Michigan State University ranked among the best in U.S. News & World Report's 2005 annual ranking of the nation's colleges and universities, while Central Michigan University and Wayne State University received lower rankings. Schools were ranked based on selectivity, average SAT scores and several other categories. The University of Michigan was ranked number 22 overall among 248 universities nationwide, and Michigan State University was ranked number 71.

More Michigan schools this year met "Adequate Yearly Progress," the benchmark mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act. But nearly 400 Michigan schools are still not meeting the requirement, according to report cards issued by the Michigan Department of Education. Of the failing schools, 101 have been on the list for 5 years; the maximum allowed before a school faces major sanctions under the act. Nearly 40 of the failing schools received a waiver that will allow them to avoid sanctions for one year, although they must improve during that time.

Michigan's common high school curriculum should be tougher, according to a report by the Michigan Department of Education's High School Reform Team. The report recommended that the state require exams for core classes to measure student preparedness, that there be stronger connections between technical and liberal arts classes, and that the school calendar be more flexible.

Traverse City Area Public Schools district will receive close to $1 million in U.S. Department of Education grants over three years to fight student obesity. Studies cited in the grant stated that one-third of Traverse City students are either overweight or at serious risk of being overweight. The federal Department of Education will reportedly give $69 million to 237 schools and community organizations nationwide to promote healthy diet and exercise habits as part of the No Child Left Behind Act.



COMMENTARY

A fair comparison: U.S. students lag in math and science

Andrew Coulson

The results of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study were released in December, detailing the performance of fourth- and eighth-graders around the globe. On the eve of the results' publication, I published an article predicting that Asian nations would dominate the top spots, that U.S. fourth-grade students "would perform at about the average for industrialized nations," and that U.S. eighth-grade students would be "below the average for industrialized nations — possibly far below it."

Here's how it played out: Among eighth-graders, the top five nations in combined mathematics and science performance were Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan. Among fourth-graders, the top four nations in combined mathematics and science performance were Singapore, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Korea did not test students in the fourth grade).

How did the United States perform? I compared us to the top 40 industrialized nations, choosing these nations based on purchasing power parity adjustments to the World Bank's latest per-capita income figures. At the fourth-grade level, American students were 9 percentage points above the rich-country average in science and 11 percentage points below it in math, putting them almost dead average overall. At the eighth-grade level, American students were 4 percentage points below the rich-country average in science and 24 percentage points below it in math, putting them clearly, but not abysmally, below average.

The weak point in my prognostication thus appears to be my suggestion that U.S. eighth-graders' overall performance might be "far below" the average of industrialized nations.

But perhaps it actually was.

Many nations that typically outscore the United States in math and science at the eighth-grade level did not participate in TIMSS 2003. These countries include France, Germany, Canada, Ireland, Finland, Switzerland, Iceland and Poland.

But while they skipped TIMSS 2003, they all participated in another test of mathematics and science: the 2003 Program on International Student Achievement. Tellingly, every one of the eight countries significantly outscored the United States on the PISA test. In math, Canada bested us by 49 points, while Finland outscored us by 61. In science, France and Switzerland beat us by 20 and 22 points, respectively. If all of these nations had participated in TIMSS 2003, it seems likely that U.S. performance at the eighth-grade level would have been considerably further below the average of industrialized nations than it already was.

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One question is often raised in response to international test comparisons: Do these results really mean anything? In the past, international testing programs have been criticized on a variety of grounds. Two allegations, in particular, have been common: first, that other nations have not tested as large a percentage of their student population, and hence their scores have been inflated; and second, that our best students are among the world's best, with our average being brought down by a large cohort of low-achievers.

Whatever the historical validity of such concerns, they are now, if anything, reversed. Particularly in the fourth and eighth grade, education has become universal in all of the leading nations. Moreover, in science, the percentage of randomly selected U.S. schools and students that actually did participate at the eighth-grade level was just 73 percent — the third-*lowest* of all 45 participating countries, and 11 percentage points below the average participation rate of industrialized nations. In fact, the United States had the third-lowest overall participation rate for both grades in both subjects. Japan, Taiwan and Singapore all had participation percentages in the 90s.

How about our best and brightest? At the fourth-grade level, there is some truth to the idea that the best American students are among the best in the world. Looking only at the top 5 percent of test-takers, American fourth-graders beat the average of wealthy nations by 13 percentage points. By the eighth grade, however, the tables have turned, with America's brightest students falling 10 percentage points behind their foreign peers.

If we carry this comparison to the final year of high school using the 1998 12th-grade TIMSS results (the most recent available), we discover that America's top students placed last in combined science and math achievement among all the industrialized nations for which data were available. In both math and science, the gap between our best and the world's best was substantially *larger* than the gap between our average performance and the average performance of other nations — not smaller, as many Americans believe.

It's no use claiming that U.S. 12th-graders did abysmally because some nations tested a smaller, more elite subset of the age cohort. The more selective nations generally did worse than the less selective ones, and America's own graduation rate is below average, meaning we're not as inclusive as we think.

The notion that America's public school problems are confined to inner cities, and that our wealthy suburbs produce world-beating high school graduates is a myth. It's time we resolve to do better.

Andrew J. Coulson is senior fellow in education policy for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich.

Report: Charter progress outpaces public high schools

Improvement rates used to evaluate schools

Results from Michigan Educational Assessment Program standardized tests in 2004 show that charter high schools are progressing at a faster rate than public high schools, according to an October analysis of test scores by The Detroit News.

Though charters are still behind conventional high schools in aggregate average scores statewide, The News found that scores on the reading, writing, math and science sections of the MEAP test at charter schools increased at a greater rate than at public schools.

Proponents of charters say these results are an indication of the ability of charter schools to help students that have problems in public schools. Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies, the organization that represents charter schools around the state, calls these results a success. "Charters are taking the students that drop out of public schools during high school, which is where they mostly do so," he said.

The News' analysis of results on the MEAP tests found that on the math section, charter students improved 2.7 percent over the previous year, compared to a 1.1 percent decline in conventional schools. In reading, charters saw an increase of 11.2 percent, compared to a 9.4 percent increase statewide, and in science, seniors at charters improved scores by 8 percent, while seniors at conventional schools improved by 2.3 percent.

Quisenberry noted that the faster pace of the charter schools' improvement over conventional public schools reflects the important role played by charters. The data, he said, "add to the body of evidence that establishes the need for charter schools in the education system as a whole."

His comments echoed those of other proponents, who say that charter schools add an element of competition to public education that promotes higher standards of learning in all schools, whether conventional public, public charter or private schools. Charter schools are publicly funded, but locally controlled by various independent organizations, including parent groups, nonprofit organizations and even corporations.

Critics point out that charter schools still lag behind state averages in all portions of the MEAP test, a fact that charter administrators acknowledge and say they are working to improve. "You can't do everything in one year, but we're making a lot of progress," Weston Technical Academy Principal Jim Baston told The Detroit News. The percentage of students at Weston meeting reading standards doubled this past year to 61 percent, but scores at the school remain low in writing and math.

One reason students at charters may have increased at faster rates than traditional schools this past year is their lower starting point, noted Western Michigan University researcher Gary Miron. "It's easier to show growth when kids aren't performing that well to begin with," Miron told The News.

Proponents counter that the lower initial results disprove the charge that charters would "skim" the best students from the conventional public schools. The evidence suggests that charters, on average, take in more students that were struggling in their former schools. This results in a lower baseline from which charter schools start their assessment testing, compared to conventional public schools. Researchers have begun to acknowledge this fact, shifting their assessments of charter schools toward "value-added" improvement, or the rate at which students improve within charters and conventional public schools, rather than just a snapshot of MEAP scores at a particular time. This methodology avoids making static comparisons between dissimilar groups of students.

Martin Ackley, spokesman for the state superintendent of public instruction, praised charters for their improvement. "We are pleased when any high school can increase achievement," he said. However, Ackley stated he doesn't think charters necessarily provide competition among schools "as much as it is an option for some parents to take." In any case, he said, "We want all students, whether at public school academies or traditional neighborhood schools, to achieve at the highest possible levels."

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BOOK REVIEW

The War Against Excellence

George C. Leef

A review of "The War Against Excellence," by Cheri Pierson Yecke; Preager (2003); 260 pages; $49.95.

In 1983, the U.S. Education Department's National Commission on Excellence in Education published its watershed report, "A Nation at Risk." The report famously stated, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."

Since then, there has been a great deal of talk about improving the educational system. Some legislation has been passed purporting to raise standards.

But on the whole, it's hard to perceive much improvement. In fact, if author Cheri Pierson Yecke is correct in "The War Against Excellence," things have gotten worse, particularly at the middle school level.

Yecke is a former U.S. Department of Education Commissioner for Minnesota. Her volume is the latest in a stream of books by a multitude of authors in recent years exposing unpleasant truths about government schools.

This stream is fighting a broader current. School districts and employee unions invest mightily in public relations to keep parents, taxpayers and politicians convinced that "public education" is doing wonderfully, but just needs more money. "The War Against Excellence" pulls back the curtain to reveal that over the last 20 years or so, middle schools — usually sixth grade to eighth grade — have been infested with an alarmingly antiacademic mindset.

According to the author, five beliefs that progressive education theorists embrace have infiltrated the middle schools. Yecke does not say that these views are confined to middle school, only that the problem seems worst there. The five views can be stated briefly:

- Belief in the overriding value of students achieving equal educational outcomes.
- Belief in questioning the value of individualism.
- Belief in the supremacy of the group over the individual.
- Belief that advanced students have a duty to help others at the expense of their own needs.
- Belief that competition is negative and must be eliminated.

University of Florida Professor Paul George, one of the educational "progressives" whom Yecke quotes, opines that middle schools should become "the focus of societal experimentation, the vehicle for movement toward increasing justice and equality in the society as a whole." "Schools," he writes, "are not about taking each child as far as he or she can go. They're about redistributing the wealth of the future."

The United States has always had plenty of educational theorists eager to use government schools as experimental laboratories for their own notions about the reformation of society, but the current crop seems to have been particularly effective in getting their ideas implemented.

Yecke discusses several distressing manifestations of those beliefs. One is the attack on ability grouping. Schools have customarily followed the practice of putting brighter students in accelerated classes, so they can proceed at a faster pace; sometimes, too, schools have grouped slower students together, so they can receive special attention.

To egalitarian theorists, ability grouping is a practice that is both educationally bad and morally wrong. Yecke quotes education activist Elizabeth Cohen on the supposed need to redesign education along egalitarian lines:

> What is at stake here is the attempt to undo the effects of inequality in society at large as it affects the day-to-day life of the classroom. Social scientists have documented the ways in which classrooms tend to reproduce the inequalities of the larger society. Undoing these effects is an ambitious undertaking. Nonetheless, the application of sociological theory and research to the problem of increasing equity in [the] heterogeneous classroom leaves room for hope that these goals are within our reach.

From that statement, it is evident that the educational reformers who want to remake our schools as a prelude to remaking society would rather that the brightest children be held back from their natural learning pace in school so that there will be less inequality among adults in the future. If gifted kids can be slowed down, the thinking goes, they wouldn't be so successful later in life, thus taking a big step toward so-called "social justice."

That this leveling down would make everyone poorer in the long run by retarding those who have the most ability seems not to bother the activists.

The abolition of ability grouping has met with strong resistance from parents of gifted children, who resent having their kids held back just to satisfy the egalitarian impulses of education theorists. Yecke quotes one parent, who says, "The problem with this forced redistribution of intellect is that it limits my son's educational opportunity and intellectual growth. Advocates of collaborative learning argue that it's more important to encourage socially desirable aspirations than to develop individual students' knowledge base and intellectual skills. I disagree." Unfortunately, the complaints of such parents are usually met with indifference by school officials.

Another manifestation of the egalitarian impulse is the move toward "cooperative learning." That's another of those warm and fuzzy notions that hides an unpleasant concept, namely that students should work and be graded in groups, rather than individually. Again, this is supposedly necessary to correct an underlying social injustice.

The obvious problem with cooperative learning is that the smarter or more diligent students do most of the work, but must share the credit. To the theorists, this approach to education performs the vital task of informing the bright kids that they have to "share" their talents, and of discouraging them from using their ability to their own benefit.

A particularly disquieting aspect of cooperative learning is that it not only groups students together, but demands that the more gifted students instruct the slower ones. Under the concept of "peer tutoring," students who have already mastered new material are expected to help teach students who have not. This peer tutoring supposedly compels gifted students to develop a sense of responsibility to their classmates. If there are not any instructional tasks the gifted students can do, they can be required to help the teacher with other tasks.

Yecke writes, "(S)tudents who have completed their work can tutor others or perform clerical duties — but they cannot be allowed to work to the extent of their abilities and get ahead of the class." When parents of gifted students complain that school time is largely wasted for their kids, and that "cooperative learning" is holding them back, the educational theorists tend to reply that the research does not show that any educational harm is done to bright kids by holding them back so they can learn responsibility.

The author finds this "research" to be very feeble and reports that some of the activists privately acknowledge that their program does hinder the progress of bright students, but they regard it as a price worth paying in order to achieve their goals of "social equity."

The author is rightly concerned about the spread of the egalitarian vision of school, observing that it has been absorbed into the curriculum of many college education programs. Teachers in training often hear from their professors that these ideas are widely accepted and that they should aspire to become "change agents" within their schools.

Yecke is not optimistic about a quick reversal back to school cultures that emphasize academic achievement; the egalitarian mindset is too widespread. Fortunately, parents who can see that their children are being used as the guinea pigs in a sociological experiment have alternatives. Yecke cites the example of Maryland's Howard County, where the school administration chose to ignore parental protests against grouping students of unequal abilities together. As a result, the number of parents choosing either private schools or home-schooling in Howard County has risen by 50 percent during the last decade.

"The War Against Excellence" will startle readers who are unaware just how explicitly many middle schools set out to homogenize children and use the classroom to remedy society's imagined ills. Revealing to parents the often-unreported activities and theories practiced in their children's schools is worth the price of the book.

George C. Leef is executive director of the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy in Raleigh, N.C.

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COMMENTARY

Lansing must embrace basic reform following the Watkins debacle

Lawrence Reed

In a Dec. 6 report to the Michigan Board of Education, then-state Superintendent of Public Instruction Thomas Watkins called for "boldness and candor" in addressing a "structural funding challenge" in the state's public schools. A few weeks later, he exercised a bit of that boldness and candor in response to critics of charter schools, telling The Grand Rapids Press: "Let's take a look at traditional schools. Some of them will complain about losing 300 (students) to a charter, but you won't hear a peep out of them when 3,000 (dropouts) go to the streets."

In January, the Michigan Board of Education tabled a one-year renewal of Watkins' contract. This decision came just one day after Board President Kathleen Straus had bristled when asked by MIRS to respond to rumors that the Granholm administration wanted Watkins to leave. Straus asserted, "The State Board awarded the Superintendent an A- grade on his last performance evaluation, and my colleagues and I have the utmost confidence in Tom."

Perhaps Watkins made errors that have not yet come to light. But whether the board and the Granholm administration like it or not, his sudden political exile has sent the signal that it is virtual suicide to challenge the status quo or tolerate even weak forms of school choice, such as charter schools (once championed by President Clinton). Watkins' December report may have been short on specific remedies, but it did show promise, making it plain that "additional revenue without unprecedented change" in the state's education system was not likely to make a difference.

If the Michigan Board of Education, Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the state Legislature hope to regain any credibility with the public, they must now show that they are serious about helping kids — and not just shutting down people who offer straight talk about the system. They should enact at least four reforms that don't require school choice, but would free education money for kids in the classroom without raising taxes:

1. Exempt public schools from Michigan's archaic Prevailing Wage Act. Mackinac Center research suggests that forcing school districts to contract with only those construction firms that pay "prevailing wages" inflates school renovation and building costs by $150 million annually — a job-killing subsidy to construction unions that provides no equivalent increase in building quality. In 1997, Ohio exempted its public schools from a similar law, and the results there indicate that the Center's savings estimates are sound.

2. Create a level playing field for providers of employee health insurance. Many Michigan public school districts are awash in soaring health care costs because they face intense union pressure to buy insurance from MESSA, the health insurance provider affiliated with the Michigan Education Association. MESSA's Rolls-Royce premiums for Cadillac plans are financed by taxpayers who typically get nothing so irrationally excessive in their own jobs.

The Legislature's efforts to create a level playing field in school health insurance have foundered on MESSA's unwillingness to provide claims data that would allow school districts to shop around effectively. This costly game of cat-and-mouse should end: The Legislature should require district insurance contracts to stipulate that general health insurance data produced under the contracts are owned by the public, not the provider. Enabling school districts to consider multiple providers would likely save millions of dollars.

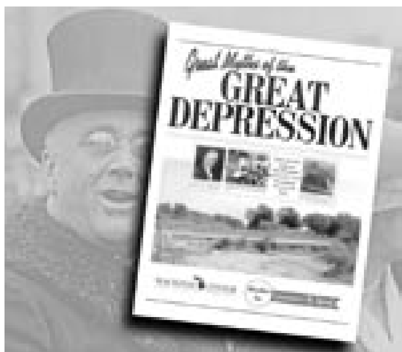
3. Overhaul teacher certification. School boards should be permitted broader latitude in hiring competent instructors, whether or not they've jumped through the dubious hoops of university education courses. If today's certification requirements guaranteed competency, poor student outcomes wouldn't be a national epidemic, and Michigan businesses and universities wouldn't spend $600 million annually on remedial education. Unfortunately, today's certification requirements exclude many competent candidates, creating shortages in key subject areas and driving up the cost of hiring teachers.

4. Encourage competitive bidding for school support services. Holland Public Schools in West Michigan voted recently to save as much as $700,000 in annual costs by outsourcing custodial work, but a Mackinac Center survey in 2003 indicated that two-thirds of Michigan school districts do not outsource busing, food or even janitorial services to the private sector. These districts should be strongly encouraged to do so; 63 percent of the districts that had privatized these services reported cost savings, while 88 percent said they were satisfied with the service quality (only 3 percent were not).

The problems listed above are the "elephants in the room" that are too often ignored when education spending is discussed. Tom Watkins wasn't quick to recognize them either. But if Watkins wasn't permitted to hint that there is more to fixing education than "spend more money" and "charter schools are evil," it's hard to see why Michiganians should send another nickel to the public schools until state policy-makers pass these commonsense reforms.

Lawrence W. Reed is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich. An earlier version of this article was published in The Oakland Press on Friday, Jan. 14, 2005.

Teachers...



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School officials find a new "Proposal A" loophole

Jack McHugh

In 1994, voters adopted the state school finance initiative known as "Proposal A" because it promised to cap their property taxes, lift spending in poor districts and end the constant stream of local elections seeking higher taxes for school operating expenses. Since then, public schools have relied on generous per-pupil foundation grants from the state to pay for day-to-day operations.

Nevertheless, they have diligently searched for loopholes in Proposal A's prohibition on new local taxes for operating expenses. With recreation millages, they appear to have found another one.

Originally, the most common loophole was disguising operating expenses as "capital improvements," since Proposal A did not prohibit higher property taxes for new school buildings or major physical plant upgrades. As a result, there has been an explosion in school debt millages. Statewide, local school building, site and sinking fund taxes have risen from 2.6 to 4.3 mills — a 65 percent increase.

Some of this "capital borrowing" pays for expenses that are clearly operational, such as repairs and short-lived assets like computers or school buses. Only under Enron-style accounting are such items considered "long-term capital assets" that justify increased borrowing.

But in addition to this "capital asset" loophole, there has recently been a rash of school millage votes to raise taxes for "recreation." These invoke a previously obscure 1917 law that allows schools to levy unlimited property tax millage for the operation of a "public recreation system and playgrounds." This old law is the newest Proposal A loophole.

In these elections, and also in a Michigan House Tax Policy committee hearing on repealing the 1917 law **(www.michiganvotes.org/2004-HB-5929)**, schools have been frank about using recreation millages to get around Proposal A. One superintendent recited for the committee a laundry list of school operations now supported by his district's recreation tax revenue. In adopting such tactics, schools are breaking not just the promise of Proposal A, but at the very least bending the law that allows these taxes only for "public recreation and playgrounds."

According to top Engler administration officials who helped craft Proposal A, the continued existence of this early 20th century law is a mistake. They have admitted that when Proposal A's enabling legislation was drafted, they completely overlooked the recreation law, which otherwise would have been repealed at the time. This makes sense, because the law is an obvious opportunity to subvert Proposal A's promise of no new local taxes for operating schools.

In addition to getting around Proposal A's tax limits, schools have another incentive to seek higher recreation taxes. Many knowledgeable observers suspect that an ongoing school building boom is a response to Michigan's limited inter-district "schools-of-choice" program. Schools get state money based on how many pupils they serve, so they have an incentive to attract students from neighboring districts. The suspicion is that some are competing with new gold-plated school buildings, instead of better academic programs.

Top-flight recreation programs funded by this tax may be another way to outshine neighboring school districts in the competition for a finite pool of students and the state money that accompanies them. Schools also justify their recreation taxes on broader grounds: In the state House committee hearing, one superintendent reported that an elderly man who swims for free in a pool funded by this tax "told me he would be dead without it."

That's unlikely. Even granting his view about the health benefits, this individual would suffer only if school-funded recreational facilities were the only ones in existence. This is not the case, and this elderly gentleman could join a private health club or a YMCA, rather than asking his neighbors to pay for his recreation with higher taxes.

Defenders of the tax will claim that the elderly swimmer might not be able to afford a health club. Still, golf is a healthy activity, yet that doesn't mean schools should raise taxes to build golf courses.

The mission of public schools is to educate children, not compete with private health clubs by offering free or subsidized recreational facilities. Unnecessary taxes like these recreation millages break faith with Proposal A and remove resources from private individuals and businesses, reducing their ability to provide for their own needs and develop the economy. In the long run, such taxes make us all poorer.

Jack McHugh is a legislative analyst for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich. This commentary is adapted from his invited testimony at hearings by the Michigan House Tax Policy Committee on House Bill 5929, which would repeal the 1917 law that allows school districts to levy unlimited property tax millage for the operation of a public recreation system and playgrounds.

DIVERSE VIEWPOINTS

Do Michigan's schools of education prepare students to be "highly qualified teachers?"

NO

Conventional certification classes are unnecessary obstacles

Robert Genetski

The current and traditional system for teacher certification offers little in the way of quality training for education students, waters down relevant subject matter and chases highly talented people away from the teaching profession.

Based on my love of English, I decided in college to become a high school teacher. The education development classes, however, almost changed my mind. I detested every minute of "child and adolescent development." During the class, I learned what Rousseau and Piaget wrote about children and their development — none of which I have used during my nine years of teaching high school students.

After completing the class, I decided not to become a teacher. I still loved English, but I refused to endure another class that insulted my intelligence as much as these development classes had. Over summers and through the last two years of school, I talked to a lot of teachers and told them that I thought I wanted to become a teacher before I had to sit through ED classes. A number of those teachers already in the profession would convey a disdain for the classes, and indicate that ED classes do nothing to help prepare one for teaching. They said, "It's just something you have to sit through."

At the time, I wished there was a program like the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence. As Robert Holland noted in "Teach for America Shows Its Mettle," ABCTE is a program that streamlines the teacher certification process (School Reform News, Oct. 1st, 2004). The program is aimed at recent college graduates, individuals changing careers and current teachers. Future teachers can earn their certification by holding a bachelor's degree, passing a criminal background check and meeting American Board standards in their subject area, while also showing a "grasp of teaching methods."

I earned my bachelor's degree in English and was headed for the business world. Fortunately, I decided to take a teaching job at a Catholic high school in Florida when I found that I could start as an uncertified teacher, provided that I taught only part-time. I found that I loved teaching and working with young people. And while none of my students' parents ever asked if I was certified, many of them wanted to know from which school I had graduated. When I told them that I graduated with an English degree from Auburn University, that fact was good enough for them.

To become certified to continue teaching, I had to take a graduate-level "curriculum development" class. I learned trendy and fancy names given by theorists to simple, everyday things. It was a waste of time. The class demeaned my intelligence and did nothing to make me a more effective classroom teacher. In fact, it risked making me a worse teacher given the time it took away from lesson planning and sleep.

After moving to the Midwest, I learned that I would have to take numerous education classes and student-teach for four months. After a year in classes, a transcript audit revealed that I lacked one physical education class. After 13 years of playing soccer and captaining my college soccer team, I had to have one final P.E. class in order to teach English! My advisor was able to recommend a very nice jazzercise-dance class that would start at mid-semester, so I would not fall behind. I took the class and cursed educational bureaucracy with every step on the little plastic stepper. Finally, I moved to western Michigan and transferred my teaching certificate.

As I was writing this article, a colleague was interviewing another student teacher. I rushed to her for an opinion of teacher certification. "Well, they say the program is the best around," she said with a smile. I said, "But what do you think about it?" She winced. "Well, all education classes are just busy work," she said. "All?" I said playing devil's advocate, "How can you know about others?"

The young lady told me that she had started her freshman year at another school. She wanted very much to be a teacher, but she took an education class, and it changed her mind. "It was not very challenging. It was almost like you had to lose intelligence to stay interested," the student noted. I had to agree. I have taken education classes at five different colleges and universities in four different states, and I have seen very little in any of the programs that would make students better teachers.

The textbook theory and methodology of how to work with young people will not help a young teacher anywhere near as much as a sense of conviction and an ability to deal well with people. In an article titled, "Does Teacher Certification Matter?" Author Andrew Coulson comments, "Verbal ability and having a college degree in the subject being taught" are key factors in successful teaching. Coulson further notes that seven studies of the effects of teacher certification on student achievement have concluded, "New teachers who are certified do not produce greater student gains than new teachers who are not certified."

Across the hall from my classroom is a math teacher who spent 10 years with a big accounting firm before starting to teach. He knows his math; he is humorous and articulate; and he brings a lot of practical mathematics applications to the classroom. When he first went back to school for his teaching certificate, he was told he had to take more classes because he needed a "teachable major."

In our building of nine teachers, four of them were in the business world before becoming teachers, and I believe our students benefit tremendously from their experience. I am very thankful that each of them had the resources to leave their careers and become teachers. It also reminds me that not many people with potential to be great teachers can spend the time and money to go back to school so that they might learn the theories and methods of teaching the subjects they already know. Michigan's kids lose out for that.

Robert Genetski teaches language arts, and he has worked with At-Risk kids for five years at Orion Alternative High School in Grandville, Mich. He holds a master's degree in education from Grand Valley State University.

YES

Michigan colleges have a rich history of fostering great teaching skills

Alane J. Starko, Ph.D.

There is a lot of talk these days about "highly qualified teachers." One of the goals of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation is that every class be led by a highly qualified teacher. It is possible to argue about how that portion of the act has been implemented, but I do not think anyone would argue with the basic premise that our nation's young people need good teachers.

So, the real question is, How do we get more of them? How does a teacher become highly qualified? The federal government has defined a highly qualified teacher as one who has a bachelor's degree; full state certification or licensure; and proven knowledge of each subject they teach. Teachers in middle and high school must prove that they know the subject they teach with credits equivalent to a major or passing a state content test.

My personal definition differs a bit from the federal definition in that I would specify that for highly qualified teachers, the "full state certification" must include rigorous content preparation; equally rigorous preparation in learning theory and pedagogy; and in-depth field experiences, all provided by an accredited institution. Institutions accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education must demonstrate that their students are accomplished in all of these areas, as well as demonstrate that their graduates positively impact student learning. Institutions purporting to prepare teachers but lacking any of these key components do not pass muster among their peers.

In my childhood, my mother looked for the Good Housekeeping Seal as a signal of quality in household products. A variety of studies show teacher preparation that occurs in accredited programs brings similar assurance.

Unfortunately, such definitional specificity is necessary because of the movement afoot to "remove barriers to teaching," and to consider individuals certified whose only preparation is the ability to pass a multiple-choice test on content and teaching methods. This is akin to asking me to study for a multiple-choice test on biology and types of medical equipment, then sending me off to the emergency room to learn nursing on the job. I might be able to be helpful in handing out supplies, but I would hardly be considered a "highly qualified" nurse.

However, I might attend a high-quality nursing program that takes a form different from traditional programs. Perhaps I might attend night classes and spend my weekends in supervised activities in the emergency room. When I graduated from such a program, I could be a well-qualified professional.

Similarly, some individuals prepared in so-called alternative programs are highly qualified, and some are not. When those programs are associated with accredited teacher preparation programs, we have quality control. At Eastern Michigan University, our post-baccalaureate certification students follow requirements equal in rigor to our undergraduates. Other rigorous alternative programs prepare similarly qualified teachers who earn bona fide teaching credentials. In fact, one study of Teach for America graduates that has been cited as evidence supporting minimizing teacher preparation can be seen to do the opposite. In that study, a majority of the TFA candidates had gone on to complete full certification requirements. It is a tragic truth that they had a higher rate of certification than the novice "teachers" to whom they were compared. According to the study by Decker and Glazerman, it's not surprising that those who had more preparation to be teachers were more effective in their classrooms.

High quality alternative preparation can be a good thing. However, not all alternative programs are created equal. I do not believe that an individual who has a few weeks of preparation — or worse yet, no preparation beyond taking a test — can be called highly qualified by any reasonable observer. Preparation in one facet — content without pedagogy, pedagogy without content, or either of these without field experiences — is "partially qualified," rather than "highly qualified."

Why, then, if schools of education are preparing highly qualified teachers, do we continue to have students who fail in schools? While it would be nice to have a simple one-reason answer to that question, the truth is more complex. Students fail in schools for a host of reasons. One of them is that the students most in need of highly qualified teachers are least likely to get them. We do not have a crisis in teacher preparation in this country; we have twin crises of teacher distribution and retention. We are not preparing sufficient teachers to meet the needs in high-demand areas such as math, science and special education. In many cases, these shortages occur because individuals with skills in shortage areas have many other employment options, which typically include higher pay and more respect. In many institutions, including my own, high-quality post-baccalaureate programs are helping to ease some of those shortages by giving math and science professionals the preparation needed to succeed at teaching.

We also have terrible distribution problems across districts and buildings. Our neediest schools sometimes serve as de facto training grounds for teachers who put in a few years and then move on to schools with better facilities, better pay and fewer challenges. Worse yet, our most challenging schools are those most likely to be staffed by those teachers with little or no preparation. Addressing these issues will require a concerted national effort, resources and will. They will not be solved by minimizing the criteria for becoming a teacher, but rather by ensuring substance and rigor across both traditional and alternative preparation options.

As I contemplate the expertise our new teachers bring to the field, I often think, as the old television ads might state, "This is not your mother's teacher preparation program." Education classes today are not those remembered by my Baby Boomer colleagues. In my own preparation, long ago and far away, I experienced one of the best programs available at the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of education are more knowledgeable than I was about learning theory and motivation, lesson strategies that maximize understanding and assessing student learning in ways that support instruction. While no human being can be prepared for every need in today's complex classrooms, Eastern Michigan University graduates — undergraduate and post-baccalaureate — by any definition, are highly qualified. I am proud to send them out to our nation's schools.

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