

MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

\$3.00

News and analysis for parents, educators and policymakers

Winter/Spring 2006



Several dozen students at Wright High School in the Upper Peninsula's Ironwood school district recently wore T-shirts to express their view over contract talks between the local teachers union and school board. The front of the shirts read "What about US?" The backs read "87 percent," a reference to the percentage of American workers who choose not to belong to unions. Photo provided by Ironwood Daily Globe

SHORT SUBJECTS

Teachers in Pinckney, Mich., voluntarily gave up coverage from the Michigan Education Special Services Association, a third-party insurance administrator affiliated with the Michigan Education Association. Some 97 percent of teachers voted to switch health insurance plans, joining several other bargaining groups in the district that have abandoned MESSA in the recent past. The district estimates the changes will reduce costs by \$800,000 and allow staffing levels to remain constant.

A group of students in Ironwood, Mich., expressed their displeasure over unsuccessful contract negotiations between the teachers union and their school board by wearing matching T-shirts to school recently. Several dozen students at Wright

High School in the Upper Peninsula's Ironwood wore the maroon shirts that said "What about US?" on the front and "87 percent" on the back. Student organizers said the "87 percent" was in reference to the percentage of American workers who choose not to belong to unions.

Two national teachers unions released studies recently that show Michigan teachers are paid in the top five nationally. The National Education Association said Michigan's average teacher salary of \$56,973 in 2005 placed the state fourth. The American Federation of Teachers said Michigan teachers averaged \$54,474 in 2004, good for fifth in the country. The NEA also said Michigan moved up from ninth to

SHORT SUBJECTS, Page 8

MEA loses lawsuit against public schools *Union to appeal*

A lawsuit filed by the state's largest teachers union against more than 30 public school academies was dismissed by an Ingham County Circuit Court judge. If successful, the Michigan Education Association's suit could have displaced more than 10,000 students who attend public school academies authorized by Bay Mills Community College.

"The MEA has long opposed charter schools, and made no bones about the fact that they wanted to close down all BMCC-authorized schools," Bay Mills Community College President Michael Parish said after the ruling. "Perhaps this time the MEA will finally comprehend what thousands of Michigan families have known all along – that charter schools pro-

LAWSUIT DISMISSED, Page 2

School districts wrestle high health care costs

Legislature could address problem this year

Little, if any, progress has been made this school year in dealing with the rising health care costs for public school employees. Some districts have taken matters into their own hands, while others patiently wait for legislative action.

"At this point, any help would be greatly appreciated," says Tom TenBrink, superintendent of Jenison Public Schools.

The boards of education for Holland Public Schools, in west Michigan, and Lakeview Public Schools, north of Detroit, both face union accusations of unfair labor practices after implementing health insurance changes for teachers that will significantly reduce costs. A Macomb County Circuit Court Judge turned down a request for an injunction from the Lakeview teachers union. It had hoped to block the new insurance plan from taking effect Jan. 1, a move the district says will reduce costs by \$500,000 annually. Aside from the insurance issue, the Lakeview Education Association says the district did not bargain to an impasse, and a 3.5 per-

cent pay raise, given in conjunction with the insurance change, is unacceptable because it occurred outside the confines of a contract.

"It really benefits the students, the citizens and in the long run the teachers of Lakeview Public Schools," district attorney Craig Lange told The Macomb Daily after the ruling. "Lakeview's whole approach has been in finding savings that wouldn't require layoffs or reduction of educational standings."

At issue is the Michigan Education Special Services Association, a third-party insurance administrator affiliated with the Michigan Education Association. MESSA provides no insurance benefits, but repackages benefits from Blue Cross/Blue Shield and sells them to school districts. MESSA is a bargaining issue for the union, and covers more than half of Michigan's public school teachers in about 75 percent of the state's districts. School boards face difficulties because MESSA generally refuses

HEALTH CARE COSTS & SCHOOLS, Page 2

MESSA IN THE NEWS
Oakland Press, Dec. 7, 2005
"Next to fixing the state's woeful economy, one of the most pressing problems Lansing has to deal with right now is halting the runaway health care and pension costs that are decimating our public schools."

Labor struggles continue for SCS Lakeview district

Four board members face recall

Contract tensions, lay-offs and a recall effort targeting four school board members have dominated the landscape at one Detroit-area school district the past several months.

The previous contract between the Lakeview Education Association and Lakeview Public Schools, in St. Clair Shores, expired Aug. 31, 2004. Since then, more than a dozen bargaining sessions have been held, a fact finder from the Michigan Employment Relations Commission has filed a report and the school board declared an impasse, prompting a lawsuit against the district.

After declaring an impasse in negotiations, the district implemented a contract proposal for teachers that included a 3.5 percent pay increase over two years, and a new health insurance plan for employees. The Blue Cross/Blue Shield PPO is the plan that was recommended by a fact finder in May 2005 who had been assigned to the case by the Michigan Employment Relations Commission. Fact finding, according to the Michigan Association of School Boards, takes place only after mediation fails to settle bargaining disputes. Either party may petition MERC to appoint a fact finder, and during the hearing both sides present exhibits and witnesses.

The switch to the Blue Cross/Blue Shield Community Blue Option 1 program meant that Lakeview's teacher health insurance would no longer be purchased from the Michigan Education Special

Services Association, a third-party administrator affiliated with the Michigan Education Association.

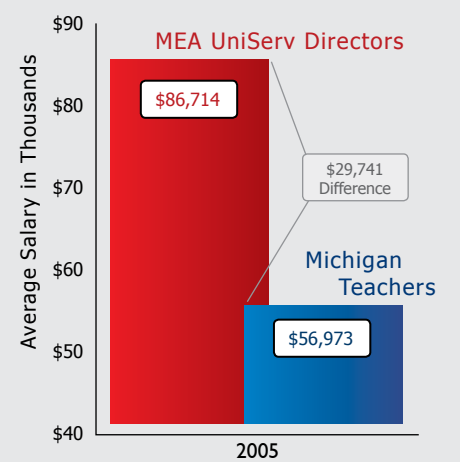
After the Aug. 10, 2005 vote by the Lakeview Board of Education to implement the teacher pay raise and healthcare provider change, Superintendent Sandra Feeley-Myrand posted a press release on the district's Web site, outlining the district's reasoning.

"Over the past year, the sticking point in negotiations both at Lakeview and around the state has been MESSA

LAKEVIEW, Page 3

Education at a Glance

MEA Salaries v. Teacher Salaries



Source: Form LM2 Labor Organization 2005 Annual Report and National Education Association, Rankings and Estimates: A Report of School Statistics (update) Fall 2005

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Fenton, MI
Permit #1776

Mackinac Center for Public Policy
140 West Main Street
P.O. Box 568
Midland, Michigan 48640

Lawsuit Dismissed

continued from Page 1

vide valuable educational alternatives, and that educational choice is here to stay.”

Judge Joyce Draganchuk dismissed one count of the lawsuit and said the union lacked standing to bring three other counts. The suit named the state superintendent of public instruction, the state Board of Education, the state treasurer and the Department of Treasury as defendants. Bay Mills Community College has been criticized by some since 2001, when the college, located on the Bay Mills Indian Reservation in the Upper Peninsula's Brimley, began authorizing charter schools in Bay City and Pontiac. Community colleges are allowed to authorize schools only within their immediate vicinity. Like most charter schools, those authorized by Bay Mills are not unionized.

Complaints arose that Bay Mills' actions were circumventing the state's 150-school cap on university-authorized charters and whether or not, as a community college, Bay Mills was limited to the boundaries of its geographic district for the purposes of authorizing charter schools. Then-Attorney General Jennifer Granholm, in an opinion requested by state legislators, ruled that as a federal tribally controlled community college, Bay Mills was limited to its geographic boundaries. The boundaries in question, however, are found in Article XI of the "Charter of the Bay Mills Community College," which states "the district of the Bay Mills Community College shall consist of the whole state of Michigan."

The MEA's suit said Bay Mills should be limited to authorizing charter schools only within its tribal boundaries, and that the college had illegally delegated the oversight of its schools to a private company. Assistant Attorney General Robert Dietzel told the court that the MEA failed to show Bay Mills charter schools had caused the union any harm. Dietzel said if the Bay Mills schools closed tomorrow, that did not mean all 10,000 plus students, and hence the per-pupil state aid money for them, would revert back to conventional public schools.

"There are lots of different options these students could take," he told Draganchuk. "They could go to a private school, they could go to another charter school, or they could be home schooled."

Although the judge granted summary disposition to Bay Mills on three of the counts, she did say the MEA had standing on one count, that being that the board of governors at the community college is not a public body because it is not elected. That, the MEA argued, means the charter schools authorized by BMCC are not public and should not receive public dollars. Representing the state, Dietzel pointed out that the legislature, in passing the charter school law, made sure to include provisions that recognize tribal community colleges. The public schools authorized by Bay Mills also remain subject to the state Board of Education, a publicly elected body, and they therefore qualify for state funding.

The MEA has filed a notice to appeal the case.

Parental choice advocates statewide expressed satisfaction with the judge's ruling, calling it a major victory for schools, students and families.

"This ruling not only supports Bay Mills and 10,600 students in its 32 schools, it upholds the fundamental freedom of all families and communities to have high-quality public school options," Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies, said after the court's ruling. "The MEA has wasted thousands of dollars, including direct taxpayer dollars, to harass charter schools with a frivolous case it knew it would never win."

Richard Landau, an attorney representing a group that includes Bay Mills, called the suit "naked, political self interest." Landau also said "the MEA's position is that this public money is their money, it's money their members are somehow entitled to."

Draganchuk's ruling marks the second major court defeat the school employee union has suffered this year. Last August, the Michigan Court of Appeals rejected the MEA's attempt to unionize teachers at Brother Rice High School, an all-boys Catholic school in metro Detroit. After teachers expressed an interest in union representation, the MEA brought an action before the Michigan Employment Relations Commission, which scheduled a vote at the school for August 2004. The school's board of directors appealed and the vote was postponed. The appeals court eventually decided MERC has no jurisdiction over lay teachers in parochial schools, a decision the MEA chose not to appeal. ♦



Health Care Costs & Schools

continued from Page 1

to give claims data to individual districts. School boards, in turn, cannot obtain competitive bids because other potential providers have no claims experience on which to base offers.

MESSA health insurance can cost school districts more than \$16,000 per teacher annually. The average family insurance plan nationwide, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, is less than \$11,000 a year. A package of bills in the Michigan Legislature would attempt to bring those costs under control, allowing school districts to pool resources and purchase less expensive coverage.

"It is my hope that the legislature addresses this in a forthright manner," says Bill Mayes, executive director of the Michigan Association of School Administrators. "If we don't get this under control, the goose will die."

MESSA IN THE NEWS

The Bay City Times, Dec. 6, 2005

"The leaders of Michigan's public schools want the freedom to save hundreds of millions of dollars in health care costs. They should get it."

Senate Bills 895-898 passed in the Michigan Senate on Dec. 1, and now await a vote in the state House. The legislation would allow districts to pool together for the purpose of self-insuring employees, while at the same time shifting catastrophic claims to the state in order to reduce the risk of those pools. Backers say the change would reduce costs by more than \$150 million the first year and by more than \$233 million by the third year, as well as provide more choices to employees. The Detroit News, Oakland Press and Bay City Times all have editorialized in favor of the plan. Also under consideration in the House is a bill to move teachers from a defined benefit plan for retirement to a defined contribution plan, such as a 401(k).

"The money this saves would go back into education – to hire more teachers, for pay raises, to buy textbooks or technology," Sen. Wayne Kuipers, R-Holland, told the Associated Press. "Schools will get this money back."

Mayes agreed.

"Health care and retirement costs have become a real detriment," Mayes said. "It limits the number of new teachers schools can hire, and getting that new blood into the system is so valuable."

MESSA's opposition to the changes was detailed in a recent Associated Press story.

"It's politics," Gary Fralick, a MESSA spokesman, said of the reform efforts. "I think they saw an opportunity to try and divide the house of labor."

The bills are supported by the state's second-largest teachers union, the Detroit Federation of Teachers, along with the

Michigan AFL-CIO.

"If MESSA provides a quality product at a competitive price, MESSA will be alive and well," said David Hecker, AFT Michigan's president.

During testimony before the Senate Education Committee, Fralick said the new legislation would allow other insurers to "cherry pick" districts that appear to have healthier employees, based on claims data.

The pool approach is getting a trial run in West Michigan, where 14 school districts from Kent, Muskegon and Ottawa counties have formed the West Michigan Health Insurance Pool. More than 1,000 employees, none of them teachers, are covered, and costs are expected to decrease 8 to 10 percent this year.

Amid mounting criticism, MESSA has taken steps recently to create an alternative to its Super Care coverage. MESSA Choices II is a PPO that has been widely accepted in recent contract negotiations. The Employment Relations Information Network, a service of the Michigan Association of School Boards, lists recent contract settlements on its Web site, where MESSA insurance figures prominently.

Iron Mountain Public Schools, for example, gave teachers a 2 percent pay increase this year and 2.5 percent for next year, along with a change to Choices II and an employee contribution of \$34.50 per paycheck toward insurance costs starting with the 2006-2007 school year. Hudsonville Public Schools kept Super Care and teachers received 1.5 percent

MESSA IN THE NEWS

The Detroit News, Dec. 7, 2005

"School health insurance legislation pending in the state House Education Committee could save school districts up to an estimated \$150 million in the first year. The bills correctly offer the districts more options in buying costly health insurance for their employees."

pay increases for two years. Teachers in the Parchment schools pay \$1,000 toward Choices II coverage, but more than three times that, \$3,100, if they opt for Super Care.

The Sanilac Intermediate School District agreed to a 1.75 percent pay increase each year for three years and increased prescription co-pays from \$2 to \$10. Current employees were offered Super Care at no cost, but new hires will pay the difference between Choices II and Super Care if they choose the more expensive plan. Employees volunteering to switch to Choices II receive \$100 a month for 12 months.

"This is not a case of administrators versus the MEA," Mayes said. "It's the facts of life." ♦

DATA-DRIVEN EMPOWERMENT!!

- Quick Surveys**
 - faculty, student, staff, parents
- Statistical Analysis**
 - student achievement
 - teacher evaluation
 - grade level performance
 - program evaluation
- Your educational research needs are only limited by your imagination!!**



Contact: [Wren's Research and Consulting Services](http://www.wrensresearchandconsulting.com)

at
wrensresearchandconsulting@yahoo.com

MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

Ted O'Neil
Managing Editor

Ryan S. Olson
Director of Education Policy

Daniel E. Montgomery
Graphic Designer

Michigan Education Report is a news and analysis quarterly published by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and educational institute devoted to analyzing Michigan public policy issues. Michigan Education Report is received by over 145,000 Michigan teachers, administrators, school board members, policy experts and elected officials. ©2006. All rights reserved. Permission to reprint any article contained herein must be obtained from Michigan Education Report. Please contact the editor at

Michigan Education Report • 140 West Main Street • P.O. Box 568
Midland, Michigan 48640
(989) 631-0900 • Fax (989) 631-0964
www.EducationReport.org • MER@EducationReport.org

Forgive Detroit school debt

A state representative from the City of Detroit has introduced a bill that would require the state's taxpayers to pay off a multi-million dollar debt for the Detroit Public Schools. House Bill 5600, introduced in early January by Rep. LaMar Lemmons III, D-Detroit, calls for the state to assume the debt incurred by DPS while it was under state control between 1999 and 2005. Recent media reports indicate the district has a \$200 million deficit. The bill is assigned to the House Committee on Appropriations.

www.michiganvotes.org/2006-HB-5600

Money for employee fingerprints

A group of state representatives wants to give schools an additional \$3.5 million to reimburse the cost of fingerprinting employees. House Bill 5609, introduced in January by Rep. John Moolenaar, R-Midland, would give districts money for conducting criminal background checks on employees. Student safety legislation that took effect Jan. 1 requires the background checks, including fingerprinting, be done by July 2008. The bill was referred to the House Committee on Appropriations.

www.michiganvotes.org/2006-HB-5609

Local zoning for school construction

A bill introduced by Rep. Phil LaJoy, R-Canton, would amend the revised school code to allow for local zoning oversight of new construction or expansion of high schools. House Bill 5479 would require school districts to submit plans to a local zoning authority, which would then have 60 days to either approve the plan or offer suggested changes. If the 60-day period lapses, the school district "shall be considered to have received a written notice of concurrence." If there are suggested changes, the school board then would have 45 days to respond with a new plan incorporating the changes, or with an explanation of why the changes were not being made.

The requirement applies to expansions only if they are 20 percent or more of the existing structure, but does not apply to temporary structures or facilities that are needed due to unexpected enrollment increases and will not be used for a period of more than two years. The bill



LEGISLATIVE ACTION

BROUGHT TO YOU BY **MichiganVotes.org**

has been referred to the House Natural Resources, Great Lakes, Land Use and Environment Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HB-5479

At risk teacher loans

House Bill 4129, introduced by Rep. Leslie Mortimer, R-Horton, would create a student loan forgiveness program for teachers in what are considered "at risk" schools. HB 4129 creates a new law, the "Excellence in Public Education Act," while a companion piece of legislation, House Bill 5210, would require the Department of Education to notify colleges and universities that offer a teaching degree, as well as identified at-risk school districts, about the program. HB 5210 was introduced by Rep. Glen Steil Jr., R-Cascade. The loan forgiveness program applies only to student loans obtained through a state program called "MI-LOAN," and would cost taxpayers between \$500,000 and \$1.5 million, according to the House Fiscal Agency.

Eligible applicants could receive grants equal to 10 percent of their outstanding loan debt each year, for up to 10 consecutive years, not to exceed \$17,500 total. The legislation classifies "at risk" schools as those where a majority of students are eligible for federally-funded free or reduced cost breakfasts and lunches. Committee testimony showed 839 schools, or about 25 percent of schools statewide, fall into this category. The schools are spread over 206 of the state's 700 school districts, intermediate school districts and charter schools and have an enrollment of about 239,000 students. HB 4129 passed in the Michigan House by a vote of 92-13 on Nov. 29, 2005 and was referred to the Senate Education Committee. HB 5210 passed 100-4 on the same day and also was referred to the Senate Education Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HB-4129

www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HB-5210

Hold harmless tax exemption

A metro Detroit legislator has intro-

duced a bill that would exempt many homeowners and owners of qualified agricultural property from paying school taxes on "hold harmless" mills above the 18-mill non-homestead amount now being paid. House Bill 4125, sponsored by Rep. Paul Condino, D-Southfield, is before the House Education Committee. Under Proposal A, passed in 1994, homestead exempt principal residences and qualified agricultural property are assessed a 6-mill state education tax, while other property, including rental, commercial and industrial, are assessed an 18-mill levy in addition to the 6-mill SET. Certain higher spending districts, according to the House Fiscal Agency, are allowed to levy supplemental "hold harmless" mills beyond the 18-mill non-homestead tax in order to maintain the same level of per-pupil spending they had before Proposal A was passed. According to the House Fiscal Agency, only the Southfield and River Rouge public school districts currently fall into that category. If the bill passes, Southfield would receive about \$2 million less in taxes, while River Rouge would receive about \$63,500 less.

www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HB-4125

Unused Merit Award money

House Bill 5232, introduced by Rep. Bruce Caswell, R-Hillsdale, would require unused Michigan Merit Award money be returned to the Department of Treasury. The bill passed the Michigan House of Representatives 106-0 on Dec. 1, 2005 and was referred to the Senate Appropriations Committee. Under current law, a Merit Award scholarship is paid directly to the recipient's college or university, according to the House Fiscal Agency, and can be put toward tuition, fees, room and board, supplies, daycare or transportation. More than \$865,000 in unused Merit Award money was returned to the state in fiscal 2005 by post-secondary institutions, due to students withdrawing from school before the end of the term or semester, but an undetermined amount apparently was given directly to the students who left school without finishing their course of study. Money returned to the state would be placed in an account,

on behalf of the student, for five years, after which time it would be escheated to the state. The bill would further require the Michigan Merit Award Board to pay scholarship money, on behalf of winners, directly to an approved college or university. The money now can be paid either to the school or to the student.

www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HB-5232

Career and tech prep

A bill passed by the Michigan House of Representatives would keep intact a program that allows high school students to gain technical skills via dual enrollment in community colleges and vocational training centers. House Bill 5282, introduced by Rep. Lorence Wenke, R-Richland, would eliminate the June 30, 2006 sunset provision in Public Act 258 of 2000, also known as the Career and Technical Preparation Act. According to the House Fiscal Agency, Michigan and 30 other states allow dual enrollment, whereby high school students can take college level courses and receive credit at both institutions. Michigan law requires school districts to pay for students who take post-secondary classes, up to the pro-rated percentage of the student's state aid. HB 5282 passed the House 106-0 in December and was referred to the Senate Education Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HB-5282

More tax dollars for public schools

Two pieces of legislation aimed at increasing per-pupil expenditures in public schools passed in the state House of Representatives. The bills would spend part of a projected \$55 million surplus in the state school aid fund.

House Bill 5436, introduced by Rep. John Moolenaar, R-Midland, would spend up to \$49 more per student for middle school math programs, for a total expenditure of \$18.5 million. House Bill 5452, introduced by Rep. Tim Moore, R-Farwell, would use \$16.5 million of the surplus, giving an extra \$25 per pupil to school districts with a foundation allowance below \$7,200. These dollars would be in addition to the extra \$175 public schools are to receive for each student as part of the approved budget for fiscal 2006, which increased the foundation allowance to a minimum of \$6,875.

www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HB-5436

www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HB-5452

Lakeview

continued from Page 1

insurance," Feeley-Myrand said in the press release.

The release also indicated that MESSA "has come under increased scrutiny by the Michigan Supreme Court and other nonprofit organizations," for what Feeley-Myrand called "the large scale transfer of funds back to the union on an annual basis."

Lakeview said its decision to switch insurance administrators could reduce costs by \$500,000 annually, and that the plan was endorsed by the state's fact finder. The union proposed that all teachers be covered by the MESSA Choices II plan, which would have carried various costs for employees.

"In this time of tight budgets, when we can provide raises and the absolute best PPO insurance from Blue Cross/Blue Shield at no cost to the employees, the Board is demonstrating that they value the teachers and staff," Feeley-Myrand's statement said.

Jane Cassidy, president of the local union affiliate and a social worker for Lakeview Public Schools, disagrees.

"Because both sides were not at an impasse, we believe the imposition was illegal," Cassidy said in a written response to questions submitted to her by Michigan Education Report. "An imposition does

not mean an agreement, so hopefully a fully bargained agreement is what's next. We would rather negotiate than litigate."

UNION FILES LAWSUIT

The union did file a lawsuit in late 2005, asking for an injunction against the new proposal. In December, Macomb County Circuit Court Judge Deborah Servitto denied the request, saying the union's claims that the new plan would cause "irreparable harm" were "speculative at best." Servitto also noted that while the changes to insurance were imposed, other changes also were imposed, "some of which were to the Plaintiff's advantage, and all changes were generally consistent with the fact finder's recommendation."

Several other factors were involved in the board's decision, beyond changing insurance plans. The 3.5 percent pay raise over two years for teachers was in line with the fact finder's recommendation, but not as high as the union's request for a retroactive 2 percent raise for 2004-2005 and 3 percent each of the next two years. The board did approve the union's request to increase weekly preparation time for elementary school teachers to 200 minutes, increase the unused sick day payout for retirees and increase longevity pay.

Cassidy points out, however, that because the first 1 percent of the pay raise was not retroactive, it was not in effect very long, and the other 2.5 percent for

this school year is split between semesters, so it adds up to fewer dollars than a full year's pay raise.

BOARD MEMBERS FACE RECALL

As the disagreements over bargaining difficulties continued, a recall effort appeared. Four board members – Phil Thomas, Cathy Culhane, Don Wheaton and Dan Dombrowski – were targeted because of a May 2005 vote that privatized custodial services in the district. Recall petition language was rejected twice by the Macomb County Election Commission before being approved last August.

Wheaton, a 1982 Lakeview graduate who first won a seat on the school board in 1991, says it's frustrating.

"I try to do what is best for the kids, and when I do, they want to take me out of office," he said. "Our job is to deliver the best possible education to the kids in the most cost-effective way. Paying more for janitorial services doesn't accomplish that."

Wheaton said over the past several years, the board has attempted to keep budget cuts away from the classroom as much as possible.

"We've had numerous public meetings over the last few years to explain our financial situation to parents," he said. "We had 200 people show up on a Saturday and they told us not to close any buildings."

Wheaton said that led the board to open the district to Schools of Choice, a

decision that brings in 400 students and nearly \$3 million a year from state foundation grants.

"Schools of Choice kids make up 14 percent of our budget," he said. "We must be doing something right."

Cassidy said that while the union has taken no formal position on the recall effort, current and retired teachers are involved as individuals.

The decision to privatize janitorial services meant the district had to permanently layoff the 20 custodians on staff. The maintenance and operations budget for 2002-2003 was \$3.2 million, according to Wheaton. That line item is \$2.2 million this year.

"Our contract is locked in for next year at this year's price, and the next three years it will only go up by the rate of inflation," Wheaton said. "If we had kept our janitors on staff, we'd be bargaining for salary, worker's comp and retirement, plus having to buy new equipment."

The Michigan Employment Relations Commission is now considering unfair labor practice charges the union filed last year against the district. ♦

For in-depth coverage of janitorial, busing, food service and other areas of privatization for Michigan schools, see Michigan Privatization Report at mackinac.org/mpr.

State charter schools see enrollment increases

Urban schools continue to lose students

Two very different stories about school enrollment appeared in Detroit-area newspapers late last year. While the Detroit Free Press was detailing school closures in several districts, The Detroit News was reporting a 13 percent increase in students at local public charter schools.

"It all comes down to one thing," says Dan Quisenberry, executive director of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies. "Those who can, will."

Quisenberry is referring to parents, who year after year are flexing their public school choice muscles, shifting the enrollment landscape between schools, districts and counties.

"We believe in the power of parents," Quisenberry added. "Many are willing to make choices and there is mounting evidence they want more of it."

More than a decade has gone by since the passage of Michigan's charter school law. Public Act 362 of 1993 paved the way for universities, community colleges, intermediate school districts and conventional public school districts to authorize public school academies, or charter schools. Some 220 charter schools exist in Michigan today, serving an all-time high of 91,000 students. The enrollment surge is even more impressive in Detroit, where charters are now serving 22.5 percent more children than last year.

"That growth would be much, much bigger if more seats were available," Quisenberry said. "There are waiting lists everywhere you go."

Quisenberry points to a recent survey MAPSA conducted in cooperation with the Black Alliance for Educational Options. More than 60 percent of parents in the City of Detroit surveyed said there are not enough education options available to them, and more than half said they have considered moving in order to find those options.

"This isn't just charter schools," Quisenberry points out. "Parents are always looking to meet the needs of kids. It can be charters or home schooling or parochial or even inter-district choice."

Public Act 300 of 1996 effectively opened much of the state to limited public school choice for the first time by allowing districts to enroll students assigned to other districts in the same ISD. Before 1996, families had to ask permission from the local school board in order for a student to attend school in a different district. The answer virtually every time was "no" because the assigned district wanted to keep the state funding that is tied to the student. The School Aid Act gave some choice to parents, but districts still are able to limit students who want to attend a different school, either by not participating in the program, or not accepting very many students. The law also limits choice, restricting students to school districts within their own intermediate school districts, or, beginning in 1999, school districts in contiguous ISDs. More than two-thirds of Michigan school districts participate in "schools-of-choice" today.

"Every child deserves a quality education and every family deserves a quality school."

DAN QUISENBERRY

About 8,000 students used the public school choice opportunity in the 1996-1997 school year, the first it was available. That number quadrupled to more than 33,500 within five years, and has grown steadily since then.

Bill Mayes, executive director of the Michigan Association of School Administrators, said economic factors often play a role in school choice.

"A lot of times it can be because grandma or the babysitter lives in the next school district over," he said. "Or a plant closes down and parents have to go elsewhere for new jobs."

Michigan's urban school districts have all seen significant enrollment drops in the past 10 years, while some suburban districts have flourished. Detroit Public Schools, for example, has 10,000 fewer students than a year ago, and enrollment is down more than 40,000 from a decade ago. Lansing, Flint and Grand Rapids have all seen public school numbers fall by 4,000 to 5,000 each since 1995. All have closed buildings, including 30 in Detroit.

During the last decade, however, the number of school children in Michigan has grown by roughly 200,000. Not all have gone to public charter schools, and non-public schools have actually seen a decrease in students. However, suburban districts have experienced huge booms in the last decade.

Chippewa Valley, Utica and Warren, all in Macomb County, enroll 4,000-plus more students today than 10 years ago. Plymouth-Canton and Northville, both of Wayne County, have added 4,000 and 1,500 students, respectively, during the same time period. Oakland County's South Lyon and

Walled Lake districts have 2,500 and 3,500 more students, respectively, than 10 years ago, while Howell, in Livingston County, has 1,600 more students. Kalamazoo Public Schools has 2,200 fewer students than a decade ago, and while nearby Portage has not seen a large enrollment increase, the Kalamazoo area's charter and independent schools serve about 3,600 students collectively.

In other areas of the state, Ann Arbor has added more than 7,000 students since 1995, while Forest Hills, outside Grand Rapids, has 3,000 more. East Lansing, Holt, Mason, Okemos and Eaton Rapids have all experienced small gains in contrast to Lansing's student losses.

Mayes, formerly the superintendent of the Huron County Intermediate School District, said student loss can apply competitive pressure to rural schools, too, even though the numbers may not look as big.

"For a school in the Thumb to lose 10 or 12 kids, that's \$100,000," he said. "For a rural school, that's huge."

Part of the reasoning behind the changes in school finance laws during the 1990s, is that when the money follows the student, the school district the student actually attends receives the per-pupil state funding, since the district is responsible for educating the student. The school district the student left no longer has the cost of educating him or her, and therefore does not receive the money.

School choice has spawned a new concept: public schools that advertise. Billboards, bumper stickers, mailings and other ideas have been used by public schools to keep or increase head counts.

"At first, there was some rancor over that," Mayes said. "People said it didn't seem very professional, and that only attorneys did that. For the most part, districts should just concentrate on what they do well and improve what they don't do well."

When schools do lose a significant number of students, it can be used as motivation to make changes.

"It can be difficult on the superintendent, on the board, on the whole community," Mayes said. "But when it happens, you need to redouble your efforts, go back to the drawing board and make sure what you're teaching is providing the best possible education to the kids that you can."

Quisenberry said parents are looking for certain characteristics in a school when they decide to move their children. A rigorous academic environment, quality teachers and safety top the list, he added.

"Every child deserves a quality education and every family deserves a quality school," Quisenberry said. "The question is, what do you do with the schools that are struggling? I'd suggest looking at what they lack in those quality criteria, and fixing it." ♦

Kent County ISD to "guarantee" diplomas

When high school graduates cross the stage and receive diplomas at commencement, it means they should be, at the very least, ready and able to meet the minimum skills necessary to perform certain types of jobs. But what if they aren't?

The Kent County Intermediate School District is trying to do something about that. Beginning with the Class of 2007, all public and parochial schools within the ISD's service area will award a "Guaranteed Diploma." That means the graduate will have the math and reading skills needed to perform about 75 percent of the jobs available to them.

"This will apply across the board to all students," said Ron Koehler, director of communications for Kent ISD. "We encourage all of them to get some type of post-secondary training, because in this economy a high school diploma really isn't enough. But at the very minimum, this means those with a high school diploma will be employable in the jobs available to them."

The idea is backed by the Kent County Superintendents Association, meaning it has the backing and participation of more than 20 public school districts, several charter schools, the Grand Rapids Christian Schools Association and the schools run by the Catholic Diocese of Grand Rapids.

Koehler said the concept for a guaranteed diploma began after a series of talks with the local business community. When the plan was first unveiled in the fall of 2002, the measurement standard was going to be the Michigan Education Assessment Program.

"The business people asked 'what will be different' with this," Koehler said. "They weren't so sure because they'd been getting graduates who passed the MEAP but didn't have the skills."

The district decided instead to use the ACT Work Keys as the standard for measuring student readiness, performing a pilot test in the fall of 2003.

"That is commonly used across the business community because the scores relate to the jobs they have," Koehler said. "It's a good indicator of skill level and suitability, and the businesses felt more comfortable using something they're familiar with."

It boils down to this. If a graduate with a guaranteed diploma enters the workforce and cannot perform the expected duties, the employer simply has to call the ISD.

"They just call us, and we'll provide the remedial training at our expense," Koehler said. "That can either be here or maybe something on-line."

Koehler said although the public and private schools in Kent County are all on board with the program, it is the ISD that

will bear the financial burden. A Mackinac Center for Public Policy study from 2000 showed Michigan businesses and universities spend an estimated \$600 million on remedial education each year.

"That's why it was important to have an actual measure we could all agree on," he said. "Do we face some exposure? Sure we do. Is it the right thing to do? Absolutely."

Rockford Public Schools, also located in Kent County, has been using a similar guar-



antee for a decade. The program began in the fall of 1991, with the first guaranteed diplomas going to the class of 1995. At Rockford, freshmen are given the math and reading California Achievement Tests in the spring. Those who don't pass are given remedial instruction, and then take the test again in the spring of their sophomore year. The same occurs again in their junior year. Those who still do not pass are given a certificate of completion, rather than a diploma, but they are welcome to return, at no expense, and receive more remedial instruction in hopes of earning a diploma.

"We're talking about maybe two or three kids a year who don't get a diploma," Rockford Superintendent Michael Shibley said. "The class of 2006 will be our 12th class to go through this program, and I've never had a single call from an employer."

In a December 2000 commentary written for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, Shibley said all districts should guarantee their diplomas.

"I encourage all public school districts in Michigan to hold themselves accountable by adopting competency testing that reflects the expectations and desires of their local communities," he wrote. "Doing so would ensure that the diplomas they grant are truly representative of academic achievement."

For years, Koehler says the conversation between educators and business owners has gone something like this: The business community tells schools "kids aren't learning the skills we need," and the schools say "yes they are," and the businesses say "no, they aren't," over and over.

"That's as far as that conversation ever went," Koehler jokes. "Even back in 1983, with the 'Nation at Risk' report, we were

hearing that students were not attaining the necessary skills and as a result, the economy was suffering."

Koehler said the process has been good as a way for the two sides to discuss those skills.

"This is really the first time we've been able to step back and ask just what are the minimum skills," he said. "We've reached the agreement not only on what the skills are, but also we know that those skills can and will change and increase over time. This is a good starting point."

The ACT Work Keys is now given to all ninth graders in the ISD. Koehler says freshmen, sophomores and juniors pass at about the same rates, so the earlier students take the test, the better. About 75 percent of students pass on the first try.

"Giving it to ninth graders leaves a lot of room for remediation if they don't have the skills," he said. "That gives them three more years to take the courses necessary and give it another try in following years."

The Work Keys test also fits in with what the district calls "educational development plans," which combines class selection with post-high school goals.

"We use an on-line program called 'Career Cruising' that measures skills and aptitudes," Koehler said. "It looks at what path the student is interested in and makes suggestions on what classes to take in order to meet those goals."

Not only does the Work Keys test give the schools and business owners a good indication of what is being taught and learned, it also lets students see the larger picture.

"It really can act as a way to inspire and encourage students," Koehler said. "If they pass it as freshman, we can say 'look, you already have the skills to do 75 percent of the jobs available to you as a high school graduate,' and then get them to work harder and look beyond that."

A few details still need to be worked out as the program grows. One is how to communicate the "guarantee" that comes with the diploma. That may be an accompanying document or some other written instrument. The second is, how exactly to deal with students whom business owners send back for remediation.

"We have an on-line course called Key Train, that students use to prepare for the Work Keys test," Koehler said. "It might be as easy as having them take a refresher in that, maybe even right at work if it's convenient for them. We'll also look at developing some classes in conjunction with our adult education folks, or maybe even partnering with a community college." ♦



Ann Arbor-based Quest Education works at increasing emotional literacy for students and teachers alike. Yale University psychologist Dr. Marc Brackett (right) works with a group of middle school teachers in Springdale, Ark.

Improving emotional literacy in the classroom

Michigan company aims to help schools boost student performance, communicate better

An Ann Arbor firm is helping public schools apply emotional literacy – long a staple in the corporate world – in order to raise test scores, close achievement gaps and increase workplace satisfaction.

“Humans are social beings, and they need to feel comfortable in their surroundings,” according to William Carpenter, co-founder of Quest Education. “It is only at that point that the brain can be conditioned to excel at various tasks.”

Based on a concept created by Yale researchers on emotional intelligence, which focuses on how to perceive, generate, understand and manage the emotions of yourself and others, emotional literacy aims to help teachers, administrators and students do the same in an academic setting. Quest Education uses Dr. Marc Brackett’s book, “Emotional Literacy in the Middle School,” as the building block for the services it provides to school districts.

“For many years, schools have been going through a succession of disjointed fads,” Carpenter says. “They are very reactive.”

Carpenter says his firm is different because it is focused on application, not theory.

“We are more of a professional development firm,” he explains. “Some call us school improvement specialists.”

An example of Quest Education’s work can be seen in a project it is doing for North Dallas High School, part of the Dallas Independent School District in Texas. Quest uses what it calls a “Learning Life Cycle” which entails planning and design, a customized solution, support and resources and a process review.

Dina Townsend, principal at North Dallas, said she used Quest’s services previously, while at an elementary school.

“I’m having them back, so that kind of says it all,” Townsend said about Quest’s performance.

“We’re working with their curriculum director to identify very specific areas of instruction,” Carpenter said. “We want to look close enough to see teacher A in classroom A and why the students are scoring poorly on tests.”

Quest will design a “professional learning curriculum” for a school, looking at details all the way down to class schedules.

“Sometimes students aren’t given enough time between classes to get from one to the next,” Carpenter said. “They start off the class with a high level of stress and anxiety and may never get to a point where they can actually learn.”

Carpenter said the concept is based on a belief that a student’s emotional state directly affects what people learn, how they learn it and how long they will remember it.

“Emotions have everything to do with how we process information,” he said. “This is not some pop psychology, ‘I’m OK, you’re OK’ thing or even character education. This is proven research based on neuroscience.”

Once a plan is designed for a particular school, Quest spends about 20 days on-site, performing teacher workshops, observing classrooms and fine-tuning the program.

“I think teachers would resent it if it was just a three-day thing where they had no input,” Carpenter said. “This way, they can use things

from the workshops in class, then come back and discuss it and see how well it works, or what needs to be changed.”

Carpenter said it also helps being a private company, as opposed to having this type of instruction come from within the district or from a state education department.

“We don’t have any power to hire or fire the teachers, so it makes them more comfortable,” Carpenter said. “We’re not saying they are bad teachers. Anyone with the passion to be a teacher can learn key strategies, it’s just knowing how to employ them in different circumstances.”

Carpenter said by modeling certain techniques in class and providing coaching opportunities, it gives the teachers confidence to use the emotional literacy approach.

“A teacher has to be a performer, to some degree,” Carpenter said. “They have to know the content they are teaching, so they can command respect academically, but they also have to command respect socially and emotionally in order to run their classroom effectively.”

Townsend said she thinks modeling successful teaching is what Quest does best.

“It goes beyond theory,” she said. “They actually get in the classroom and do it.”

Carpenter relates the use of emotions by giving an example of a teacher in a history class.

“Let’s say the students are studying the Revolutionary War,” he explains. “Before they even start in on the subject matter, the teacher can move the emotional level of the class to a level for learning. The Revolutionary War involved people with a lot of dissatisfaction, so the teacher can start by asking the kids if they ever wanted something and didn’t get it. Then that can be related to how the colonists felt.”

The process also can be used to identify why students are having problems with a particular subject. Carpenter, who grew up wanting to be an orchestra conductor, says a teacher trained in emotional literacy could have spotted his own aversion to algebra as a student.

“I’m right-brained, so I was fine with words and music and concepts, but not very analytical with numbers,” he said. “At the same time, I was smart enough to mask it. Students like that define the achievement gap, and it takes a mature person, with emotional literacy, to pull those students aside and say ‘OK, you and you and you, three days a week you’re going to get extra help,’ because the worst thing you can do is point them out in class and embarrass them about why they didn’t do their homework or why they never answer questions.”

Emotional literacy training also is available for administrators, so they can better communicate with teachers.

“There are a lot of things administrators have to do, both at the building level and district level, that come down to them from the state and federal policies,” Carpenter said. “If they are very clear about these with their staff, and also are able to empathize with staff needs or concerns, it goes a long way toward increasing job satisfaction. Employees are about more than just wanting a paycheck. They want to feel like they matter.” ♦

K-Promise: A whole new environment for Kalamazoo

Enrollment grows as schools offer incentive of free college tuition

Kalamazoo Public Schools received more than 100 phone calls from parents interested in moving into the district in the week after the “Kalamazoo Promise” was announced last fall.

Known as the K-Promise, the plan announced late last year will provide up to 100 percent of college tuition at any public university in Michigan for graduates of Kalamazoo Public Schools. Funded by millions of dollars in private, anonymous donations, the gift was announced in November and was met with great acclaim.

“This will create a whole new environment for us,” Gary Start, KPS deputy superintendent, told the Kalamazoo Gazette when the plan was made public. “A new real estate environment. A new enrollment environment. Students who couldn’t afford college before can go now. That’s got to have an effect on their focus and student achievement.”

The scholarship fund will pay for 100 percent of Michigan public university tuition for Kalamazoo students who

have been enrolled since kindergarten and whose parents live in the district, beginning with the graduating class of 2006. The scholarship will pay for

65 percent for students who enter after kindergarten, but before 10th grade.

The cost for next year is expected to be about \$3 million, and will increase by about the same amount as each successive class graduates. Of the 500 students who

graduate from the district each year, about 75 to 80 percent go on to college. Yearly costs vary, depending on the school, from about \$6,500 for tuition and fees at Western Michigan University, to more than \$9,000 at the University of Michigan. Western Michigan, located in Kalamazoo, announced not long after the K-Promise was unveiled that it would waive room and board fees for students attending as part of the program.

Aside from the benefits the graduates will receive, the district itself is expecting a jump in enrollment, which

K-PROMISE PLEDGE, Page 8



FINANCE SOLUTIONS

Charter finds answer to high health care costs

As conventional public schools across Michigan struggle with overwhelming health insurance costs, one public charter school has adopted an approach that will save money and increase employee benefits at the same time.

“We have to be business-minded about this,” says Lee Rogers, treasurer for the Woodland Park Academy in Grand Blanc. “We don’t get more tax money on a whim, and we can’t request millages.”

Charter schools, also known as public school academies, receive the minimum amount of state aid in per-pupil funding, \$6,875, but because they do not have geographical boundaries, charters receive no additional local property tax dollars.

Rogers, who owns two businesses in the Clarkston area, joined the Woodland Park board in 2004. He said the rising cost of health care for teachers led him to suggest an approach he has been using in his private businesses to great success.

“My costs kept going up every year and so finally I just screamed uncle,” Rogers says of his companies, one that manufactures granite counter tops and another that makes architectural limestone. “I told my insurance agent to get creative and give me something to fix it.”

His insurance agent came back with a Health Reimbursement Arrangement. With an HRA, the deductibles for Rogers’s employees increased from \$250 a year to \$2,000, which decreased premiums significantly. The employer agrees to cover the large deductible in exchange for the lower premiums.

“I have about 35 people at each company, and I figured at most, I’d have to cover the full deductible on six of them,” Rogers said. “So far, it’s only been two or three per year. It saves tens of thousands of dollars a year, even in a worst-case scenario.”

By implementing the changes at Woodland Park, premiums will be cut 28 percent to 55 percent the first year. Total

outlay will fall from \$195,000 to what Rogers says is a worst-case scenario of \$140,000. He predicts it is more likely to be around \$88,000.

“The costs will go down enough that our teachers won’t have to contribute toward premiums for at least the first two years,” Rogers said. “We have medical, dental and eye coverage, and we were able to add long-term disability.”

Rogers sees no reason why this approach could not work for school districts around Michigan.

“The concept doesn’t change with a bigger school,” he said. “A lot of it depends on the demographics of the staff. If you have a lot of people over say, age 45, then you’ll have more claims. But even in a district with 150 teachers, you’re talking a decent amount of money. If you had to pay the maximum on everyone, you’d still save \$25,000.”

Rogers thinks larger school districts sometimes don’t consider cost-cutting measures if the savings are deemed too small.

“Even \$70,000 or \$80,000 isn’t chump change,” he said. “That’s another teacher with benefits. What school couldn’t use an extra \$50,000?”

Rogers said he isn’t the only board member at Woodland Park who brings a business perspective to the table. The school of 330 students was able to pay cash for a 10-acre parcel, where a new school is being built.

“We should be in there by spring, and it can handle 450,” he said. “Within three years we’d like to expand to 600 students, so we bought another five acres that is adjacent.” ♦

Early college high schools helping at-risk teens in Ohio

Inner city youths often have a hard time finishing high school, let alone thinking about going to college. A group of private foundations, however, is helping make both a reality – at the same time – in Ohio and 12 other states.

“No one wants to put down public education,” says Marge Mott, co-field director for KnowledgeWorks Foundation in Ohio. “But the reality is, schools aren’t working to the benefit of all children. There are things that can be done differently and hopefully done better.”

Mott, who earned a doctorate in education from the University of Dayton, oversees Early College High Schools in Ohio. Through funding, on-site support and guidance from KnowledgeWorks, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Boston-based Jobs for the Future, private groups are helping public schools reach more students than ever before. The Carnegie Corp., the Ford Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation also are involved.

“But the reality is, schools aren’t working to the benefit of all children. There are things that can be done differently and hopefully done better.”

MARGE MOTT

“The drop-out rate in urban schools is about 50 percent,” Mott said. “Of those who do go on to college, almost none finish their first year, or go beyond that. We need these kids to grow up to be productive adults, to earn good livings and to become leaders.”

The concept behind the program is to identify students in eighth grade and move them into an ECHS. An Early College High School is usually affiliated with a university or community college, and located on the school’s campus. Students take high school classes while at the same time gently easing into college-level courses.

“From the name, one might think this is some special program that only takes the cream of the crop,” Mott said. “But our mandate is to serve the underserved kids, often the poorest of the poor.”

Mott says an Early College High School is not a charter school. It is an autonomous school that awards its own diploma, but maintains a relationship with the local public school district.

“Our criteria is that a student cannot be older than 15 and must be starting

their freshman year of high school,” Mott said. “They commit to being here four to five years, and during that time they will earn transferable college credit.”

Other requirements include a 95 percent minimum attendance record, heavy parental involvement, job shadowing, an internship and successful completion of the Ohio Graduation Test.

Mott, who grew up in Michigan, was involved with the first ECHS in Ohio when it was created more than three years ago. The Dayton Public Schools, University of Dayton and Sinclair Community College are partners in DECA, the Dayton Early College Academy.

Mott said although she was on campus for a different reason, the dean of the college of education invited her to sit in on a meeting where DECA was being discussed.

“I’m kind of an out-of-the-box thinker, and by the time I left the meeting, I had a new job,” Mott said. “It has been the most exciting work I’ve ever done. The possibilities are endless.”

Mott said her training as an elementary school teacher, along with experience in teaching learning disabled students in high school, has been a perfect fit for the ECHS setting.

“That’s been a good combination that most of us seem to have,” she said. “It helps to be able to individualize the basic skills students need and take them from where they are now to where they need to go.”

Mott said the “three R’s” of teaching theory, “relevance, rigor and relationship,” are strongly stressed in the ECHS setting.

“The key is to start with the relationship,” Mott said. “Elementary school teachers are trained to teach the student, whereas high school teachers are trained to teach content. We find that teaching the student works well in this setting.”

While the ECHS model is designed to help at-risk students, students can vary as to how or why they are at risk.

“There really is no middle class in urban schools,” Mott said. “Families with the resources either send their kids to private schools or move. The kids who are left are very vulnerable to dropping out, many have parents who didn’t go to college, and others are very bright but it’s not considered ‘cool’ to be smart.”

As is the case with change or innovation, the establishment’s first reaction is often negative. That has held true for the ECHS movement.

“At first it’s met with a lot of suspi-



Students at Mott Early College High School sign a canvas displayed in the hallway of the school which demonstrates their commitment to attending college. Written below the canvas (and several other places) is a phrase which reads, “I’m going to college!”

cion,” Mott said. “Mostly because it is so bizarre. It is such a new concept.”

That suspicion has been dispelled enough to allow Early College High Schools to open in Dayton, Toledo, Lorain-Elyria, Canton and Columbus. Mott said part of DECA’s early success was the cooperation on the part of the Dayton teachers union.

“They agreed to a waiver on hiring, which was a great blessing in that we could hire the teacher who was best for the school and not have to take the next person on the seniority list,” Mott said. “The Ohio Education Association also has been very helpful in working with us to remove barriers.”

Because of those barriers, and the need for open lines of communication, planning meetings for an ECHS include a union representative. A new school goes through a year of planning, with teachers and staff on board by May, a full three months before students start attending.

For example, although DECA teachers remain part of the Dayton Education Association, there has been a compromise on the seniority clause of the established contract. DECA is able to hire the teachers it thinks will best fit the needs of the students, and does not have to accept teachers who want to transfer to the school simply because they have been employed in the district longer than a newer teacher.

“The cooperation varies from town to town and district to district,” Mott said. “This is really about changing and enhancing what is already being done in schools. It’s an attitude shift.”

Much like Michigan, Ohio’s public education dollars “follow the student,” so the local school district does not collect money from the state when a student attends an ECHS. To help keep the ECHS connected to the community, a governing board is set up, including the local school superintendent, a liaison from the college president’s office, parents and community members.

“We can’t stress enough how important community engagement is,” Mott said. “It’s really the key.”

Community support is necessary because eventually, the schools will be on their own.

“When the time comes for them to be independent from the Gates Foundation, they have to remain viable,” Mott said.

“Foundations can’t support all of these schools forever.”

In that vein, the college can help the high school with resources while also getting a benefit. At the University of Dayton, for example, education students and graduate students gain experience serving as tutors and teachers in the high school, while the development and public relations offices can help guide the high school staff through how those functions work.

About 20 percent of the students who enroll in an ECHS are ready by the second semester of their freshman year to begin taking some college classes.

KnowledgeWorks also provides coaches who visit the buildings two to four times a month, then meet with foundation field representatives once a month to let them know what is going on in the high schools. Several professional development opportunities also are made available, both in the schools and at locations around the state. This includes a Leadership Institute for all ECHS personnel each June.

About 20 percent of the students who enroll in an ECHS are ready by the second semester of their freshman year to begin taking some college classes. The goal, by the time they graduate from the ECHS, is to have at least 60 transferable college credits, while many will leave with an associate’s degree in hand.

“Advisers are there to meet with the students and parents, develop a Personal Learning Plan and help them along the way,” Mott said. “Before they can start college classes, students must pass an entrance exam and show maturity that they are ready for that step.”

On one wall inside DECA hang three mirrors, all at varying heights. Above them is a banner that reads “I’m Going to College.” Students can sign their name on the wall, and many repeat the phrase as they walk past and look in the mirrors.

“When those kids take their first college class, you can just see the difference in them,” Mott said. “Suddenly they walk a little taller. They are very proud of what they’re doing.” ♦

LEGO MINDSTORMS FOR SCHOOLS

RoboChallenge: Exploration Mars

Take your math, science, and technology students on the field trip of their lives – to the Red Planet!

Request a Catalog! • 800-362-4308 • www.LEGOeducation.com

Ivery Toussant, Jr.
Educational Consultant
LEGO Education
313-371-8709
fax: 313-371-8768

SCHOOL FOCUS

*Mott Middle College High School***“We fit a very unique need”**

At-risk students in one Michigan county have the opportunity to go from dropouts to college graduates all in one place.

Mott Middle College High School, run by the Genesee County Intermediate School District and located on the campus of Mott Community College, offers students the choice of earning a high school diploma and working toward an associate's degree simultaneously. This is made possible under the 1996 Postsecondary Enrollment Options Act.

“We fit a very unique need,” says Thomas Svitkovich, superintendent for the Genesee ISD. “There aren't many intermediate school districts that run high schools, much less one located on a college campus.”

Mott Middle College High School was the 12th such school to open in the nation, getting its start 15 years ago. It involves the cooperation of 21 K-12 districts in Genesee County, the ISD and the college.

“It takes a lot of cooperation on everyone's part to make this work,” Svitkovich said.

Individual districts must sign a release form for students who want to attend Mott Middle College. Flint Community Schools acts as the fiscal agent, receiving the foundation allowance for each student, and then passing it along to the GISD, which acts as the operating agent. Flint keeps 10 percent of the foundation allowance for administrative costs, but 100 percent of any grants or charitable contributions go directly to GISD.

“We operate the school, set policy and pay for the dual enrollment,” Svitkovich said. “Mott Community College partners with us by providing the facility and serving on our advisory board.”

“In many ways, we are part of the college,” said Chery Wagonlander, the high school's principal. “If we order something like say, volleyball nets, the college gets to use them, too. By the same regard, our students get to use the college's science

The bottom line is, we're trying to help these students become productive members of society, not a burden.

THOMAS SVITKOVICH

labs. If we use anything consumable, it's billed back to us.”

When the middle college high school first began, taking college-level courses was an option for students, but it now is mandatory.

“We had several years in a row where 100 percent of our graduates were going on to four-year colleges,” Svitkovich said. “So we redesigned things so that now, dual enrollment is a must. Our mission is to have them earn a high school diploma, while earning as many college credits as they can handle, up to and including an associate's degree.”

Taking college classes while still in high school is important for the future success of the students.

“For many of these kids, they are the first ones in their family to ever think about going to college,” Wagonlander said. “The more college credits they take and the more success they have here, the better their chances of succeeding at a four-year college when they leave.”

“Only about 25 percent of all students who enter college end up graduating (nationally),” Svitkovich said. “These kids have a lot of other issues to deal with, and we realized they need mentors and cheerleaders and someone to make sure their homework is completed.”



The class of 2005 at Mott Middle College High School. During the 2004-2005 school year, Mott Middle College had about 360 students enrolled in 250 different college classes with no student receiving less than a 3.0 grade point average.

At the high school level, students take classes that are considered part of a college prep curriculum. Classes include traditional courses of study such as English, math and science, along with a heavy emphasis on fine arts, from theater to dance to music to painting. Most students who enter Mott Middle College are found to be “right brain dominant,” which means they tend to be intuitive, creative and abstract learners. They also excel at hands-on, experiential forms of learning.

“Every student has an individualized, customized program,” Wagonlander says. “There is a lot of blending in how we teach, how the guidance works. It's beyond seamless.”

Failure is not an option in high school classes.

“If they don't get a C or better, they take the class again,” Wagonlander said. “We like to think of this as a high school, not a building. There is a lot of focus on accomplishments and learning.”

That strict approach translates into success at the next level. During the 2004-2005 school year, Mott Middle College saw about 360 students take part in more than 250 different college classes, with none receiving lower than a 3.0 grade point average.

Students come to Mott Middle College for several reasons, and via several paths.

“Many are referred to us by their high schools, some come in themselves and others are brought in by parents,” Svitkovich said. “We have a very thorough intake process, because those kids who have severe discipline problems or are violent, we just don't have the capacity to deal with that history.”

Svitkovich said it takes a particular type of student to thrive in the middle college high school setting.

“There has to be a certain level of self control, because there is a great deal of freedom on a college campus,” he added. “There is a potential to be successful, but the student has to have the basic ability to handle a fairly sophisticated curriculum.”

Wagonlander said attendance is at the root of many student problems.

“One reason they weren't succeeding in their old schools was because of deplorable attendance habits,” she said. “We tell them, if we don't have you, we can't work with you.”

Some students end up returning to their original schools, once they figure out how to be more successful and responsible. Most stay, and one former student has even returned to teach at the high school.

Aside from taking classes at Mott Community College, some participants can dual enroll at other colleges. The Greater Flint Education Consortium, which consists of the Genesee ISD, 21 K-12 school districts, Flint Powers Catholic High School, Mott, Baker College, University of Michigan at Flint and Kettering University, provides multiple opportunities for students county-wide, not just those who attend Mott Middle College.

“We have a great working relationship,” Svitkovich said. “Although the majority of our kids take classes at Mott, we always try to look for the right program for the student. There is a variety from which to choose.”

Svitkovich said the program has hosted visits from at least a half dozen other Michigan community colleges who may be interested in starting similar programs. Asked why there aren't more already up and running, Svitkovich said that is due to the result of several factors.

“There are a lot of hurdles to cross,” he said. “Facility space is a big one. This

type of program has to be done on a college campus, because that's a big motivator for the students.”

The philosophy of various school districts also plays a part, as well as other alternatives already are being offered.

The future of middle college high schools, however, may be jeopardized by various legislative initiatives, including the anticipated changes in high school graduation requirements.

“Some of the Department of Education rules and regulations can be very restrictive,” Svitkovich said. “We can't keep a student past the age of 20 already, and some changes being talked about might take away the ability for students to do a fifth year. This type of program needs to be very flexible in order to deliver the type of product we do.”

Svitkovich said he hopes any further legislative changes will take that flexibility into account.

“When you look at what dropouts cost society, it makes more sense to pay now rather than later,” he said. “For example, some don't feel it is appropriate to use K-12 money to pay for dual enrollment in college classes. The bottom line is, we're trying to help these students become productive members of society, not a burden.” ♦

LIFE SCIENCE

Bring Your Biology Curriculum to Life with LEGO Bricks!

Life Science Sets NEW!

- Photosynthesis
- Chromosomes
- DNA

See abstract concepts come to life!

Ivery Toussant, Jr., Educational Consultant

LEGO Education

313-371-8709

fax: 313-371-8768

Request a Catalog! • 800-362-4308 • www.LEGOeducation.com

K-Promise Pledge

continued from Page 5

in turn would increase the amount of money it receives from state tax dollars. The current minimum state foundation grant is \$6,875 per pupil. Alex Lee, KPS spokesman, told the Gazette that the district had received phone calls from families not only in the surrounding communities, but also as far away as Indiana and Maine.

Current enrollment in the district is about 10,200, down from more than 11,800 a decade ago. Two elementary schools, along with other vacant space caused by enrollment decreases, have been put to use for other things, including offices, computer labs, art and music rooms and smaller K-3 classes, which average just 18 students each.

"We need to look at how we create space," Start said of the potential enrollment growth. "It's a great problem, one that we had only dreamed that we would have."

In late January, KPS officials reported a net enrollment of 65 more students in

Current enrollment in the district is about 10,200, down from more than 11,800 a decade ago.

the 11 weeks immediately following the announcement, compared to the same period of time during the 2004-2005 school year.

Students who do move into the district have to come from somewhere, and that could include local private schools, as well as public charter schools. Three local charter schools enroll about

The Kalamazoo Promise
kept exclusively at The Kalamazoo Public Schools

WHO: All Kalamazoo Public Schools students

WHAT: Free college tuition

WHEN: Starts fall 2006

WHERE: Any public college or university in Michigan

WHY: The donors wish to remain anonymous

HOW MUCH: 100% for students enrolled since Kindergarten;
65% for students enrolled since 9th grade

HOW LONG: Guaranteed for all students now in K-12
as well as students who enroll for 2006-2007

1,200 students, while roughly the same numbers attend the Catholic Schools of Greater Kalamazoo and the Kalamazoo Christian School Association. Officials from those schools said they would take a wait-and-see approach to how they are affected.

"I'm just not that worried," Larry Baker, superintendent of the K-Christian schools, told the Gazette. "We offer things KPS can't offer. We pray in our schools. We talk about Jesus."

Baker did say, however, that the potential effect could actually help his schools. The Gazette said he sent an e-mail to his staff the Monday after the K-Promise was announced, telling them that "if you consider KPS our competition, then they have picked it up a notch and we need to, too."

David Rutten, executive director of

the area's Catholic schools, said private schools and KPS could both benefit. Students could potentially attend or continue attending private schools up until eighth grade, then transfer to a Kalamazoo public high school and still be eligible for 65 percent of the scholarship.

The housing market in Kalamazoo also could benefit from the generosity of the donors. Parents might be willing to pay a little more for a house that was thought to be out of reach because they know college costs will be covered. Todd Bradfield, a Kalamazoo real estate agent, told the Gazette that the announcement increased salability by 50 percent. Home owners in Oshtemo Township, which borders the city and 65 percent of which is in KPS, pay 28.6 mills in taxes, compared to 45.2 mills paid by

city residents.

Similar programs have been started around the country over the years, with varying degrees of success. According to Education Week, a Hartford, Conn., man offered to pay college expenses for kindergartners at five schools in New York City's Harlem. George Weiss, a money manager, tried to do the same thing in the mid 1980s when he promised to pay for college for 112 sixth graders in Philadelphia. Fewer than 20 ended up graduating, while 20 were arrested for felony crimes and four were murdered. Rex and Ethel Clemens set up a college tuition scholarship fund in 1959 in the logging town of Philomath, Ore. The plan was to cover the cost either at Oregon State University or a similar cost at any other school nationwide. About 1,200 students have participated in the program, but the foundation's trustees have narrowed its scope over time. Requirements were changed so that students must attend Philomath Public Schools for at least eight years to be eligible. Today, most of the scholarships are given to students from private school or those from families with a mining, timber or agricultural background, according to Education Week, due to what is seen as the anti-timber political involvement of many teachers in the Philomath schools.

For now, the program is set to run indefinitely. John Manske, the school district's attorney, said donors assured KPS that all students currently enrolled will be covered.

"Right now, this is in place for KPS and it will continue year after year," Manske told the Gazette. "It's in place until we are told otherwise." ♦

SHORT SUBJECTS

continued from Page 1

eighth in the total amount spent on public education, at \$19.2 billion a year.

The first post-Katrina school to open in New Orleans was a charter school, the International School of Louisiana. Although both of the school's buildings, in Orleans Parish, were destroyed by the hurricane's flood waters, it became the first public school in the city to reopen, holding classes Oct. 31, 2005 in spare rooms at a local church and a portable classroom. Gov. Kathleen Blanco signed a law allowing the state to take control of 102 of the 117 public schools that were operating in New Orleans before the hurricane. Most of the schools will be turned over to universities and foundations and reopen as charters. Before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck, some 90 percent of the city's public schools were performing below the state average. Of the 170 schools statewide deemed "failing," 68 were in New Orleans. Tulane University, the Eli Broad Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have expressed interest in the charter school project.

Michigan Department of Education officials say they will not need the extra year states were given to meet federal standards that all teachers be "highly qualified" under the No Child Left Behind Act. In a letter last October, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings said that funding would not be cut off if schools could show they were making progress toward meeting the standard. Schools originally were given until June 2006 to meet the goal of having 100 percent compliance. Set in 2001, the requirement means teachers must have a bachelor's degree, be state certified and demonstrate knowledge in their subject. Officials at the Michigan Department of Education expect to meet the goal of having 100 percent of Michigan teachers highly qualified under the No Child Left Behind Act by the end of this school year. They estimate around 94 percent of Michigan teachers already meet the standard, while Detroit Public Schools, the state's largest district, estimates 98 per-

cent of its teachers are highly qualified. The state has been using special permits to allow teachers to teach in subjects outside of their major, and programs through state universities offered training over the past three years to help teachers pick up the certifications they need under NCLB.

The Cleveland Public Schools could lose 10 percent of its funding after misreporting absentee rates. During the 2004-2005 school year, the district of 63,000 students originally reported 620 total absences. Those numbers were reviewed last October and a new figure of about 519,000 absences was reported. The district said employees counted students present if they were not in school, but thought to be doing classroom work from home. The Ohio Department of Education said it will monitor and review the district's data collection and reporting. Ohio law allows for a 10 percent reduction in state aid for misreporting data.

Denver voters agreed recently to pay an additional \$25 million in property taxes as part of a plan to reform the way teachers are paid and reward them for student achievement. The ballot measure, called ProComp, not only will reward teachers for student performance, it also will give bonuses for taking on "hard to teach" subjects or teaching in tough schools. The plan phases out the current union-negotiated salary structure.

"(Denver Public Schools) will be the best big-city school district in the United States," Mayor John Hickenlooper told the Denver Post. ProComp passed 58-42 percent, despite opposition from many teachers. "I'm 100 percent against it," teacher Anna Cafaro told the Post. "I just don't think it's an effective way to pay teachers." ProComp will allow teachers to make as much as \$80,000 to \$90,000 a year, depending on what they do to earn it, as compared to a top salary of \$54,185 now for a teacher with 13 years of experience and a master's degree. Current teachers have seven years to opt into the plan. All new hires as of January 2006 will automatically be enrolled.

High school graduation requirements have been raised in Missouri. Students starting high school in 2010 will need

24 credits to finish, up from 22, and will have to earn four credits of English, three each of math, social studies and science, and one-half credit each of health and personal finance. The changes drew about 600 mostly favorable public comments, according to the Missouri Department of Education. The law was last changed 20 years ago.

A home schooled student from California won first place in the Siemens Westinghouse Competition in

Math, Science and Technology. Michael Viscardi, 16, won \$100,000 for his work on a 19th century math problem known as the Dirichlet problem. Viscardi's theorem could be used in engineering and physics, including in the design of airplane wings. Viscardi takes math classes at the University of California at San Diego, and has been home schooled since fifth grade. His father is a software engineer, while his mother, who stays at home, has a doctorate in neuroscience. ♦

Union rules dictate urban school staffing

Union staffing rules, rather than employee performance or student need, dictate how 40 percent of teacher vacancies are filled in urban public schools, according to a study by The New Teacher Project. The study, "Unintended Consequences: The Case for Reforming the Staffing Rules in Urban Teachers Union Contracts," looked at hiring and teacher movement in five urban districts. The districts were given anonymity in exchange for access, but two, San Diego and New York City, have identified themselves. Specific contract rules such as "voluntary transfer," and "excessed teacher" were examined, according to a TNTP press release highlighting the study. A voluntary transfer is a teacher with seniority who moves between schools in the same district, while an excessed teacher is one whose position has been cut, usually for budget reasons. Excessed teachers are often given jobs at a different school within the same district.

"These staffing rules often require other schools to hire these incumbent teachers even if they are not the right match for the job," TNTP's press release said. "As a result, urban schools are often forced to hire teachers regardless of students' needs. These contract rules thwart any sustained attempt to significantly improve teacher quality - the single greatest school-based factor in increasing student achievement."

The study also found that of more

than 70,000 teachers in the five districts, only four tenured teachers were terminated due to poor performance in a one-year period. Because of the difficulties in firing teachers, 25 percent of principals surveyed in one district and 40 percent in another admitted that they urge poor performers to transfer to another school. The American Federation of Teachers, a union of 1.3 million teachers and school personnel, called the study "meritless," in its own press release. "The TNTP report completely misses the mark on the challenge of retaining new teachers in urban schools," said Antonia Cortese, the AFT's executive vice president. "Almost 50 percent of new teachers leave schools within five years."

TNTP's study, although not about new teacher retention, did find that staffing rules in union contracts mean new teachers are often expendable. "Novice teachers are, by default, the first to be excessed," TNTP's press release said. "In three districts, a subset of novice teachers also can be stripped of their positions if more senior teachers need or want their jobs. As a result, one-quarter of principals surveyed reported having a new or novice teacher bumped from their school the prior year." According to its Web site, "The New Teacher Project is a nonprofit organization dedicated to partnering with educational entities to enhance their capacity to recruit, select, train and support new teachers effectively." ♦

Jenison's money woes garner attention from national television news

A West Michigan school district made headlines late last year when it was featured on national news as an example of how escalating teacher pension costs are hurting public schools.

Jenison Public Schools, in Ottawa County, was featured on the Nov. 21, 2005 NBC Nightly News. During the telecast, Superintendent Tom TenBrink said the district could very well run out of money and go bankrupt. TenBrink told Michigan Education Report the condition of his district is not out of the ordinary.

"We're not the Lone Ranger, going through this by ourselves," he said. "Everyone is experiencing the same difficulties; it's just that I've decided to be more public about it."

Jenison, a district of about 4,700 students, has a \$42 million budget. It gets \$30 million of that from the state of Michigan, with the rest coming from federal and local sources.

Pension problems in Michigan schools stem from state law that gives teachers a defined benefit plan, whereby school districts put a certain percentage of a teacher's salary into the Michigan Public School Employees Retirement System and guarantee future payments to retirees. House Bill 4947 would move teachers toward a 401(k)-style plan, also called a defined

contribution plan.

"In the last three years, the pension contribution amount has increased from 12.99 percent to 14.87 percent (of teacher salaries)," TenBrink said. "Now they're saying it's going up to 16.34 percent. That eats up the foundation allowance."

Public schools in Michigan this year received a \$175 increase in the per pupil state aid, also known as the foundation allowance. The minimum guarantee now is \$6,875 per student.

"The increase in pension is about \$120 of that amount, right out the back door," TenBrink said. "So you can't really equate that \$175 with new money."

TenBrink also said pension costs are not the only culprit leading to the financial problems in his district and many others. Health care costs also have skyrocketed. Many place part, if not all, of the blame on the Michigan Education Special Services Association, a third-party insurance administrator affiliated with the Michigan Education Association. A package of bills in the Michigan Legislature would attempt to reduce those costs, by as much as \$150 million the first year according to some estimates, by allowing school districts to access claims data. MESSA frequently refuses to release that information to districts, making it nearly impossible for

boards of education to compare prices against other insurance plans.

"It's very frustrating," TenBrink said. "We can't compare apples to apples because we can't get any data from MESSA. Our hands are very much tied from looking anywhere else."

As for the various bills in both the Michigan House and Senate, TenBrink is all for them.

"Anything would help at this point," he said. "We're looking at a \$3 million deficit for next year."

TenBrink did point out that the teachers union in his district did agree to a less-expensive version of insurance through MESSA, reducing costs by about \$400,000.

"To their credit, they went against the norm," he said. "It's a start."

Administrators and support personnel in the district, however, are part of a pool of Ottawa and Kent county area school districts that have joined together for insurance needs. They hope to reduce costs by looking at competitive alternatives.

TenBrink said health care for retirees has also become a budget problem. He pointed to a study done by the Citizens Research Council of Michigan, which said retiree health care is draining resources from classrooms.

"Funding pension and health care benefits by the Michigan Public School Employees Retirement System will constitute an increasing burden on state finances in coming years," the Council said in a 2004 report. TenBrink said part-time school employees, who are not eligible for health insurance while working, become fully vested in MPSERS after 10

years of service and qualify for full retiree health care.

In recent years, Jenison has reduced expenditures by \$4.1 million, cut 33 teaching positions by attrition, cut three administrative positions and another 30 support staff.

"We still had to use \$2 million from our fund equity this year to balance the budget," TenBrink said. "It's down to about 6 percent, whereas it should be at about 15 percent."

Not far from Jenison, the Bloomington Public School District in Van Buren County recently voted to privatize its janitorial services, a move expected to reduce costs by as much as \$80,000 in the first year. Coincidentally, they hired a firm from Jenison to do the work.

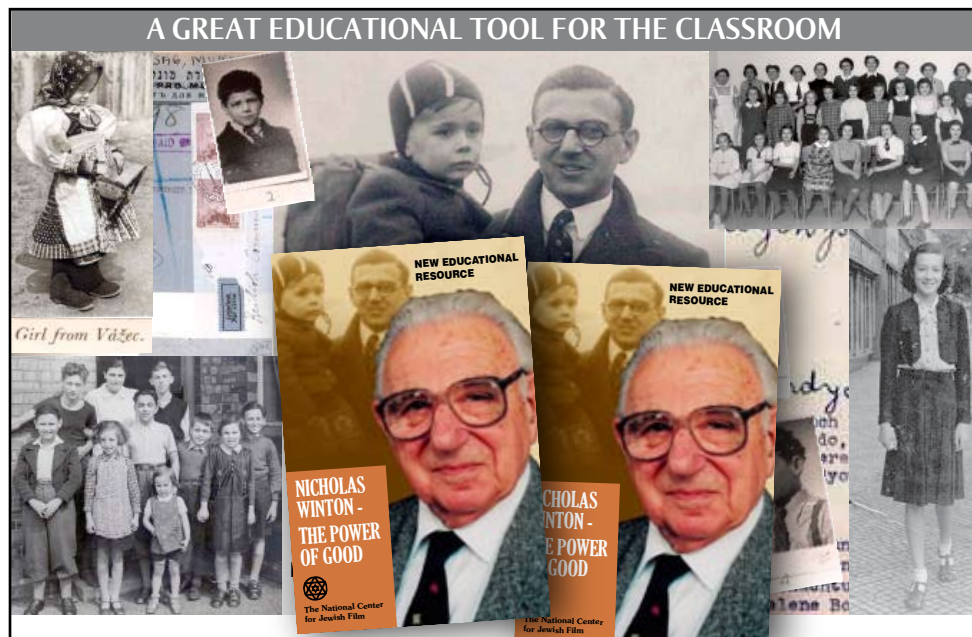
"This is a widespread problem with a lot of different situations," Bloomington Superintendent Dale Schreuder said. "Health care, pensions, utility costs. It's hitting schools, industry, everything."

Schreuder said privatizing janitorial services is just another step in a series of moves to find dollars to pay for pension and health care benefits.

"We've taken small steps along the way," he said. "We've laid off administrators and paraprofessionals, reduced the number of field trips and cut teaching materials and supplies."

TenBrink said he's been in touch with legislators about the financial problems, both before and since the NBC story.

"This is real," he said. "This is not just us saying 'give us more money' again. If they want to talk about keeping and attracting new business, we need good schools." ♦



KNOWN AS "BRITAIN'S SCHINDLER," Nicholas Winton was a stockbroker on holiday who saw the plight of Jewish children in Nazi-occupied Prague and knew he had to take action.

In 1939, he organized eight rescue missions that saved 669 Czech children and moved them to England.

This is his story. "The Power of Good"

A \$65 VALUE

Through an arrangement with the promoters of this inspirational, 64-minute DVD, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy is able to offer it to schools and teachers for \$15 postpaid. Order your copy today!

Mackinac Center for Public Policy
140 W. Main Street • Midland, Mich. 48640 • (989) 631-0900

Michigan Education Report | COMMENTARY

Advancing the cause of educational excellence



Andrew Coulson

(Note: In December, Reason magazine's editors asked several education writers to name the reforms necessary for improving American education and to identify the biggest obstacles to these reforms. One of these experts was Andrew J. Coulson, an adjunct scholar with the Mackinac Center. Following is Coulson's response excerpted from the original article, "Let a Thousand Choices Bloom.")

Most necessary reform: Choice is a necessary but insufficient condition for the creation of an education marketplace. The international and historical evidence suggests that effective education markets rely on the interaction of parental choice, direct parental payment, minimal regulation, vigorous competition, and the profit motive.

To best serve the public's needs and ideals, we must not only create an education market, we must ensure universal access to it. Some third-party financial assistance is therefore necessary, but it must be minimized because it impedes the market's effectiveness by relieving parents of direct financial responsibility. It is also important to avoid compelling taxpayers to fund instruction that violates their convictions, in order to avoid social tensions over the content of schooling.

One policy most effectively advances these sometimes competing goals: a combined personal/donation tax credit. First, parents with school-aged children not enrolled in government schools should be eligible for credits of up to several thousand dollars, whether they are home-schooling, sending their children to private schools, or a combination of the two. This will allow them to spend more of their own money on their children's education. Second, individuals and businesses that pay for the education of someone else's school-aged child (whether directly or by donating to a scholarship fund)

should be eligible for a credit.

In the case of scholarship donations, the credit should have either no cap or a very generous cap. In the case of direct payments, it should have the same cap as the personal-use credit claimable by parents. These credits should be non-refundable, which is to say they should never result in a net payment from state coffers to a taxpayer. They should be applicable to state and local income and property taxes. (The Constitution gives the federal government no role in education.)

Biggest obstacle: The greatest barrier to reform is that, when it comes to education, Americans have lost sight of the distinction between means and ends. Our state-run school system is no longer recognized as just one possible tool for pursuing universal education; it has come to be misperceived as an ultimate goal in and of itself. The term "public education" has come to refer to both the institution of public schooling and the ideals that the institution is meant to advance.

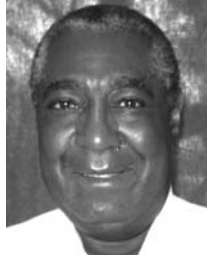
In George Orwell's 1984, the state deliberately circumscribes its citizens' vocabulary to impede dissenting thought. The conflation of educational means and ends in modern America produces a similar result. Many Americans can no longer even imagine a world in which education is delivered other than via a government monopoly. And criticisms of state schooling are often misconstrued or misrepresented as attacks on the idea of universal access to good schools.

Those with a vested interest in the status quo are so effective in scuttling reforms because they leverage this equivocation between means and ends. If it can be eradicated, or even mitigated, it will dramatically advance the cause of educational excellence.

Andrew J. Coulson is the director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute and an adjunct scholar with the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. This article first appeared on Reason.com in December 2005.

| COMMENTARY

New Detroit school board should consider all educational options



Harrison Blackmond

The newly elected Detroit Public Schools Board of Education was recently sworn into office. Six women and five men comprise the first elected board since 1999, when state law was changed to allow the mayor of the City of Detroit to appoint all but one member of the board of education. That ushered in almost five years of political turmoil, the consequences of which were evident even in the 2005 Detroit mayoral election. The challenger, Freman Hendrix, was appointed by then-Mayor Dennis W. Archer to chair the first so-called reform board of education. He was castigated during the mayoral campaign for his efforts to preserve order during those early board meetings. In the meantime, many district schools continued to under-perform and parents continued to look for alternatives. The only visible success of the reform effort was the fact that \$1.5 billion in bond money that had languished under the previous elected board was finally used to repair, remodel and build new schools.

Under the 1999 law, after five years, Detroit voters were permitted to vote to either keep the appointed board or return to an elected board. Last year Detroit voters overwhelmingly voted to return to an elected board. While some of the appointed board's critics complained about lack of educational achievement over the five years, most of the criticism was that Lansing had taken away Detroit's "right to vote." This act was viewed as racist by many. So instead of looking at the reform effort as a way to move forward, the reform board critics chose to move backwards.

This is not to say that the reform board was the ideal solution. It missed many opportunities to improve students' academic performance; it failed to get a handle on spending; it failed to gain key work rule concessions from the unions; and it failed to achieve adequate yearly progress as a district under the No Child Left Behind legislation. More than half of Detroit Public Schools are in some phase of improvement and 17 percent of those are in the final phases of restructuring for longstanding failure. According to the State Department of Education, six of the 24 schools on a critical list of the state's most troubled public schools are in Detroit. These schools have failed to meet academic standards for six straight years.

The challenges facing the newly elected board are clear. Yet one wonders if these well-intentioned and well-meaning men and women truly appreciate the depth and complexity of the problem.

- Will they be able to change the minds and hearts of the 20,000 employees so that they will embrace a culture of achievement instead of the culture of failure that seems to be pervasive in the system?
- Will they be able to encourage major institutional players, such as the teachers union, to think first about the impact of policies and work rules on children and learning?
- Will they be able to find the administrative leadership who will see the position not as just a job, but a "calling," and who will not be deterred from the goal of providing a quality education for every child?

| COMMENTARY

More diplomas, more ivory tower research won't cure Michigan's ills



Jack McHugh

A recent University of Michigan report suggests that the solution to Michigan's economic malaise is to produce more college-educated citizens, which will then attract more job providers. Much like the "Cool Cities" scheme promoted by Gov. Jennifer Granholm, the idea is that potential employers make plant location choices based on which states have the "coolest" cities and coolest "knowledge" workers.

This premise is deeply flawed. The reality is that capital goes where it's welcome, and an unfavorable tax and regulatory environment has shredded this state's welcome mat. Businesses do not exist to pay taxes or even to provide jobs, but to make a profit for their owners. If an unfriendly tax and regulatory climate makes it impossible to accomplish that here, enterprises will move or never start up in the first place. The number of college graduates is irrelevant to that bottom-line reality. Michigan has plenty of qualified workers, but they are increasingly forced to move to places that do make capital welcome.

In addition, newly minted college graduates are highly mobile. Most haven't started a family, don't own property and have already been living away from home. Their friends may have moved and they're eager to try new things. If forced to choose between underemployment here and a flourishing career elsewhere, those with "get up and go" will do so.

More state spending on higher education won't change that. Indeed, research by

Mackinac Center adjunct scholar Richard Vedder, Ph.D., shows that because higher tax burdens are associated with such spending, the result may be slower economic growth. That would mean even fewer job opportunities for college graduates in their home state.

This is happening here already: A few weeks after the University of Michigan report, a Michigan State University survey found that Michigan employers plan to hire 43 percent fewer new college graduates next year than they did this year. However, the survey found that nationwide such hiring is expected to grow between 5 and 8 percent.

Remarkably, the University of Michigan report ignores these realities, choosing instead to promote the dual myths that more diplomas will boost Michigan's economy and increased public spending on university research will create technological innovations that yield long-term economic growth.

The latter proposition is as fallacious as the first. It ignores the fact that almost all growth-generating technological innovations came about in the private sector, unsubsidized by government. The steam locomotive, the radio, the light bulb, the automobile, the airplane, the telephone (and later the cell phone), the personal computer, the iPod — all were developed because private investors saw the promise of gain. This is not surprising: Why would anyone believe that the clumsy and myopic institutions of government, including public universities, can divine the next new thing better than private investors and entrepreneurs putting their own precious time and capital to work?

Examples are legion. A century ago, the

Smithsonian Institute wasted the equivalent of millions of today's dollars to subsidize an absurdly impractical flying machine developed by Samuel Pierpont Langley, its director. Nine days after his "aerodrome" splashed ignominiously into the Potomac River, two brilliant bicycle sellers named Wright flew the first real airplane, developed without any government money. Here's another: Almost a century later, a multi-billion dollar, multi-decade government "human genome project" was made irrelevant when a private entrepreneur mapped the human genome sequence in just a few years at a fraction of the cost.

The reality is that Michigan's economic malaise has nothing to do with a qualified worker "supply shortage." Instead, excessive regulatory and tax burdens have created a shortfall in demand for the services of those qualified workers. Self-serving calls for more spending on ivory tower research, or for increasing the number of college graduates, won't reverse that trend. In fact, if these practices make our tax burden even less competitive, the effect will be just the opposite.

Here's a better idea: Increase the demand for skilled workers by reducing burdensome business regulations and passing significant supply-side tax relief. When this state becomes a hotbed of job opportunities, able youngsters will have ample incentive to make themselves qualified and will successfully do so. On the other hand, if bad public policies wreck job opportunities here, it won't matter how many qualified applicants our educational system cranks out — they'll just leave anyway.

Jack McHugh is a legislative analyst for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

- Will they use every reasonable means, no matter how politically unpopular, to ensure that every child has an opportunity to receive a quality education?
- Will they listen first to parents and students rather than the politically powerful whose interests run contrary to those the district is required to serve?

Based on media reports and personal interviews, it appears that few of the new board members are prepared to take radical or even unpopular steps to quickly address the daunting issues facing the district. One board member sees the solution to the district's problems as getting rid of the current CEO and allowing no more charter schools. This is just the kind of thinking that will force Detroit parents who care about their children to look for alternatives. Those who are able will move out of the district and the city and the district will continue to suffer the loss of population. Even worse, families with low incomes and those who have recently lost jobs due to the problems in the auto industry will be forced to continue to send their children to schools that will fail them, year after year.

Detroit parents are not unlike parents everywhere. They want the best education possible for their children. They understand how important education is to their children's ability to succeed in a world increasingly driven by global competition. Their children are not just competing with children from Southfield, West Bloomfield, Farmington Hills or Birmingham; they are also competing with children from India, Singapore, China, England and France, to name but a few.

In a recent poll conducted by Troy-based John Bailey and Associates on behalf of the Detroit chapter of the Black Alliance for Educational Options and the Michigan Association of Public School Academies, the state charter schools asso-

ciation, only 44 percent of Detroit parents rated their public school as above average to excellent. By contrast, the poll found that 72 percent of Detroit parents who send their children to charter schools rate them as above average to excellent. More than half of the Detroit parents polled believe there are not enough educational options in Detroit and have considered moving out of the city in order to have those educational options.

The newly elected board will have to face and address this reality if it is to meet parents' expectations. Detroit BAEO, whose mission is to actively support parental choice, to empower families and increase quality educational options for black children, will be watching for signs that the new board takes seriously its first obligation: that Detroit children receive a quality education. DBAEO supports quality educational options for black children regardless of which institution provides them. We believe that the new board should not foreclose the charter school option, if opening more charter schools will more quickly provide quality options for Detroit parents. Detroit Public Schools has the option to estab-

lish charter schools and decide who will provide the education services to those schools, thereby ensuring that only those education service providers who provide quality educational programs, and who have the best interest of Detroit students at heart, will be selected to manage the schools.

We also support quality traditional public schools. Indeed, Gompers Elementary School, part of DPS, was recently honored with our "In the Spirit of Choice Award" for its outstanding efforts in educating Detroit children.

We at DBAEO wish the new board well and Godspeed. Detroit children deserve nothing less. Our commitment at DBAEO is to support the board in its efforts to provide Detroit parents and children with quality educational options; to work with Detroit parents to educate and inform themselves about their rights; and to be advocates for parents and quality educational options.

Harrison Blackmond is President & CEO of the Detroit Chapter of the Black Alliance for Educational Options.

**Get Your Free
Michigan Education Digest
Email Subscription!**

VISIT EDUCATIONREPORT.ORG TO SIGN UP.

COMMENTARY

Hope in state graduation standards misplaced



Ryan Olson

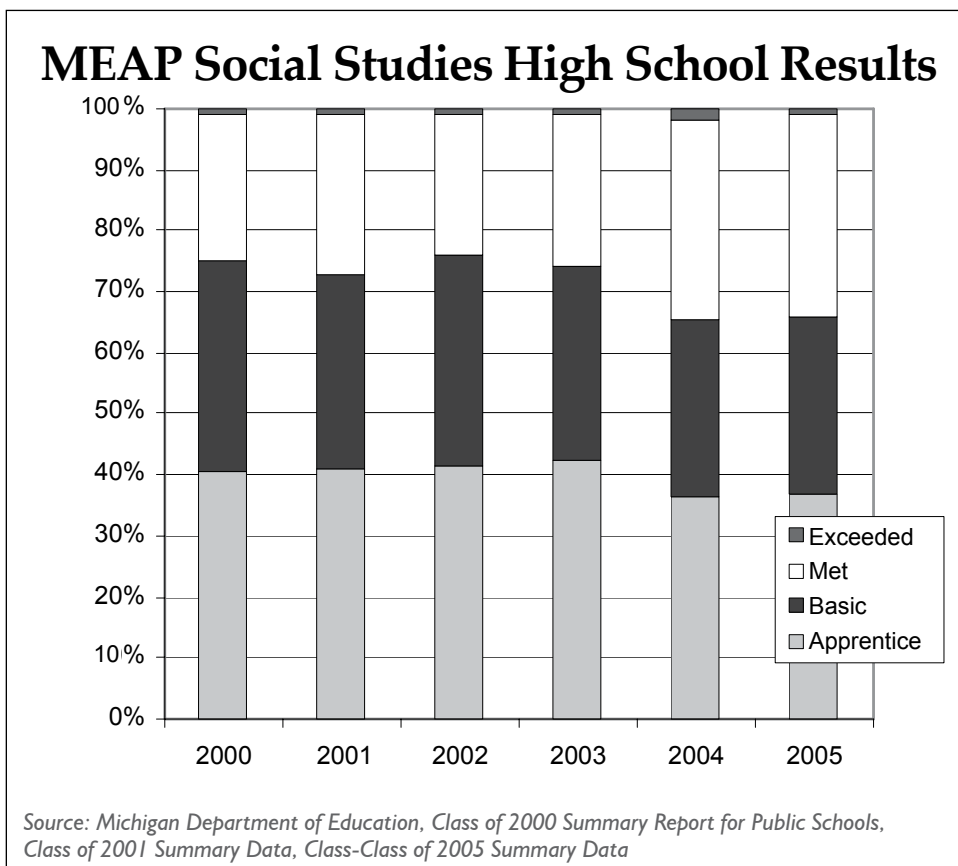
Speaking to the Michigan Board of Education, state Superintendent Mike Flanagan declared Nov. 15, 2005, “an historic day.” Gilding his announcement with Crosby, Stills and Nash’s “Teach Your Children Well,” Flanagan announced that new-and-improved graduation requirements would “change the face of public education.”

With the aim of creating a more skilled workforce, the superintendent unveiled a proposal that would require Michigan students to take a total of 16 credits, distributed over various subjects, before they can receive a high school diploma. The State Board of Education approved that plan with minor modifications and added two credits of foreign languages, for a total of 18 required credits.

In addition to the one civics course currently required by state law, Michigan high school students would have to take 17.5 additional credits, including 4 credits of English, 4 credits of mathematics, 3 science credits, 2.5 social science credits in addition to civics, 1 credit of physical education, a fine arts or music credit and 2 credits in foreign languages.

Raising state graduation standards may seem to be an intuitive solution for improving public education in Michigan. However, based on Michigan public high school students’ achievement in the area of the state’s single current graduation requirement, Michiganians should not place their hope for a better public school system or economy in higher state graduation standards.

One of the current problems these requirements are intended to fix is the high need for remedial education. In fact, a study released by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in 2000 estimated that the cost to Michigan businesses and post-secondary institutions



Source: Michigan Department of Education, Class of 2000 Summary Report for Public Schools, Class of 2001 Summary Data, Class-Class of 2005 Summary Data

Michigan currently requires one civics class for high school graduation. Above is a summary of results on the social studies MEAP test, which includes an assessment of civics knowledge. An average of about 28 percent of test takers “met” or “exceeded” state standards in the classes of 2000-2005.

of re-educating high school graduates with basic skills is more than \$600 million every year. To test whether higher state graduation requirements would solve this problem, we can analyze the effectiveness of the current standard. If we accept the logic employed by proponents of more graduation requirements, the current state requirement should be producing students who demonstrate exceptional competency in civics.

Social studies comprises a significant part of the Michigan Educational Assessment

Program test taken by Michigan 11th graders. From 2000 to 2005, an average of only about 28 percent of test-takers met or exceeded state standards in social studies. This means that, on average, nearly three-quarters of students who graduated from Michigan public high schools in the past six years did not meet the state’s standard for knowledge of basic economics, world geography, and the history and institutions of the United States and Michigan. Admittedly, not each of these areas is required by the state for graduation, though they may

be by local districts.

Civics knowledge comprises one “strand” of the social studies assessment, although several other questions relate to civics generally. For two of the last six years (the tests administered in 2001 and 2002), the Michigan Department of Education provides data for each area assessed on the social studies test, including civics. In 2001, an average of 62 percent of responses to multiple choice questions in civics were correct. In 2002, the average percentage of correct multiple choice answers to civics questions dropped to 46 percent. These percentages are not the best indication of student performance in civics because there were only five questions on each of these two tests that were specifically civics-related. However, each question required only the most basic knowledge of American government.

These basic data call into question whether Michigan’s single graduation requirement has increased competency in a way that advocates of the new proposal posit their standards will do. This simple analysis tracks with more general research. Data on teachers and student performance from the U.S. Department of Education indicate that over the past 30 years, increasing the time spent by secondary school students in core subjects has not yielded higher student achievement in those areas.

The debate over graduation requirements is significant — high standards are an important part of excellent education. But given state bureaucrats’ lack of success implementing the law’s one existing requirement, we should not place much hope in an additional mandate to fix public education or improve the economy. Legislators must keep this in mind when they consider whether to impose the state board’s policy on Michigan students, who would benefit far more if their parents were able to choose the courses and schools that best suit their needs.

Ryan S. Olson is director of education policy for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

COMMENTARY

Defining benefits down Should teachers be exempt from pension realities?



Thomas Washburne

Without reform, public school teacher pension plans will become as unmanageable for taxpayers as auto-workers’ pension plans are for the Big Three. Yet when considering legislation designed to address the problem, the Michigan Legislature decided to punt, ignoring proven reforms.

It’s not like the pension crisis is a matter of conjecture. Local governments and corporations have seen the writing on the wall and are responding in real time.

On Dec. 6, The Detroit News reported that in order to cut costs, city and county governments are moving away from defined benefit plans, which guarantee employees a set monthly payment when they retire. A Wayne State University finance professor told the News, “Defined benefit is going to go the way of the dinosaurs.”

The day before, Verizon Communications announced it would freeze its defined benefit plan and instead expand its defined contribution, or 401(k), plan. According to Verizon, the change would affect 50,000 managers and save the company around \$3 billion over the next decade.

In response to the unpredictable legacy costs that are burdening school districts throughout the state, the Michigan House tried to address the same problem in early December. For nine hours the House debated a bill to bring newly hired Michigan teachers in line with other public employees by providing them with a defined contribu-

tion plan. Unfortunately, the legislation was defeated.

Employees have long valued retirement benefits. Employers have met this demand in essentially three ways: pay workers enough so that they save on their own; organize a contribution-based benefit, where employees, and often the employer, pay into a special retirement account owned and managed by the employee; or promise to provide an employee a certain level of benefits upon retirement.

Public school teachers are able to choose between options two and three. The bill considered by the House would have moved new school hires to the defined contribution system, putting teachers in line with most other employees.

According to 2005 data from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 22 percent of private sector employees receive a defined benefit plan for retirement. It’s easy to see why. No employer can predict the future or realistically promise an employee, “If you stay with us through the years, when you retire I’ll guarantee specific benefits for the rest of your life.” There are too many variables outside the employer’s control.

Knowing that, why would even 22 percent of private sector employees find themselves in defined benefit plans? While the answer is multifaceted, at least one thing is clear: union involvement is a factor. When a private employer negotiates with a labor union, 73 percent of employees participate in a defined benefit plan. In the nonunion private sector, only 16 percent of employees are covered by a defined benefit plan. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “The rate of access to defined benefit retirement plans

was almost five times higher among union than among nonunion workers.”

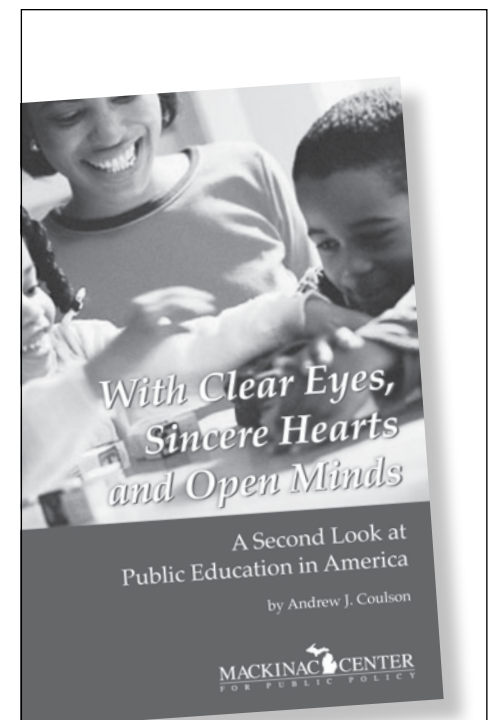
As a result, firms with strong unions — General Motors and Delphi are prime examples — are often saddled with expensive, unpredictable, benefits that most other employers — Toyota, for instance — simply do not have to contend with.

The uncertainty surrounding promised future retirement benefits is not just an employer-employee problem. Should a company with a defined-benefit plan become insolvent and file for bankruptcy, its retirement obligations are often discharged. If the company has participated in the federal program guaranteeing pensions — which is itself massively underfunded — then taxpayers will be burdened with much of the cost. Likewise, should Michigan’s teacher retirement benefits prove unworkable, it’s likely that the taxpayers will be asked to pick up that tab as well.

A key facet of human reason is the ability to recognize signs of danger. Consider how you would react, for example, if you were walking into a forest thick with smoke, and if woodland creatures were rushing past you in the opposite direction. Chances are that you are walking into a forest fire, and you ought to change direction — quickly.

When it comes to defined benefits, corporations and municipalities have seen the warning signs and are changing course to avoid getting burned. Public school employee unions and their allies in Lansing would be wise to do the same.

Thomas W. Washburne is director of labor policy for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.



Order your copy of
ANDREW COULSON’S
booklet

With Clear Eyes,
Sincere Hearts and
Open Minds

by calling (989) 631-0900

Order online at
www.mackinac.org

DIVERSE VIEWPOINTS

Will a state-mandated high school curriculum of 18 credits ensure better-prepared students in the 21st Century?

YES: Students need high skills to be hi-tech



Mike
Flanagan

The future success of our state is sitting in our classrooms. This entails economic success, societal success, and personal success for the people of Michigan. A quality education is the lynchpin of that success.

To plan for the future we need to act today, and the need to improve Michigan high schools is urgent. We can't wait five or 10 years.

The State Board of Education approved in December a set of improved state high school graduation requirements that establish a core level of high school credits to prepare Michigan students to succeed after high school, starting with the freshman class of next year.

We must embrace this effort to expect more out of our high school students so they aren't left behind by the rest of the world economically. We must insist that all students master the content of the core subjects of math, science, English language arts and social studies, as well as a world language, art and health. And we must believe, on a moral and economic level, that all kids can and will achieve this.

The State Board of Education approved in December a set of improved state high school graduation requirements that establish a core level of high school credits to prepare Michigan students to succeed after high school.

More than 60 percent of employers report that high school graduates have poor math skills, and nearly 75 percent report deficiencies in grammar and writing skills. These new, rigorous high school requirements, not surprisingly, are strongly supported by the Michigan Chamber of Commerce and the Michigan Business Leaders for Education Excellence.

Institutions of higher education are finding an increasing number of newly-enrolled students having to take remedial math and writing courses in order to meet the basic challenges of community college and university coursework. Currently, only one semester of civics is required for high school graduation under state law, placing Michigan far behind the requirements of all other states.

In order to compete with highly-educated students around the globe, we need a rigorous curriculum of math and science, along with strong reading and writing skills. We have heard too many stories of American jobs being sent overseas to China or India. Those nations are training their students in math, science and engineering to meet the employment needs of this new global knowledge economy. Michigan must insist on nothing less for its students.

As Gov. Jennifer Granholm has vowed to go anywhere and do anything to bring in new businesses and industry into Michigan, we need to send a loud and clear message that Michigan's high school graduation expectations are more than just a semester of civics. We need this to restore our economy by developing workers who will meet the needs of 21st century industries. If this means state-set credits or graduation requirements, then that is what we must have.

The state Legislature is ready to move on this. House Education Committee Chairman Rep. Brian Palmer has drafted legislation to increase graduation requirements,

and Senate Education Committee Chairman Sen. Wayne Kuipers has scheduled hearings around the state to receive public input. These legislative leaders understand the importance of a more rigorous education and are prepared to step forward in this regard.

The State Board recognized that these more rigorous graduation requirements are not meant only for the high school students planning to go to college. To the contrary, employers across Michigan are demanding students with a basic mastery of these core skills. The preparation students need for success in college is the same as the preparation required for success in the workplace after high school. These graduation requirements must focus on the knowledge and skills students must have to succeed in whatever direction they go after high school.

Four years of English language arts and math, including algebra I and II, and three years of science are among the requirements as well as three credits of social studies, two credits of world languages, and one credit each of health, physical education, and visual and performing arts.

We need to pry ourselves from the old thinking that not every student can learn at this level. They can. The key here is to actively engage every student, exhibiting how this knowledge is relevant to their lives and their future, and be flexible in how the course content is delivered. For instance, schools can teach economics in a social studies class and relate it to the fundamentals of capitalism, inspiring students to be entrepreneurs.

The State Board of Education's plan is rigorous, not rigid. It would impose a designed course structure while providing relevance and flexibility for all students and school districts. What the plan would not do is fill in every hour of a student's class day. It's saying: Have students take algebra I and algebra II instead of lower-level math, and physics and chemistry instead of community science. Schools have the teachers now to instruct students for a full day. This plan directs schools to have their teachers teaching the content that will help all students attain the level of education they need to succeed.

Students still will have the opportunity to take career and technical courses, art and music, and a foreign language, which are important as well. The plan is flexible and relevant for all students, and even though it requires students to learn algebra I and II, they still will have the ability to learn those same concepts in a building trades class instead.

The State Board also requires that all high school students take the Michigan Merit Exam, or the alternate MI-Access assessment for students with severe disabilities; and that all students complete at least one on-line credit or non-credit course or learning experience in order to graduate. This on-line course requirement has gained national attention and notoriety as being bold, innovative and unique across the nation.

The cornerstone of the plan is that all students learn the core concepts of math and science, learn about our world and how our government functions so they can be valued participants in the process, learn how to effectively communicate, express learning through creativity and learn how to live healthy lives. It will evolve Michigan from being a rust belt, blue collar state to being a high-tech and high-skills state. That is a goal which everyone can agree upon.

Mike Flanagan is the State Superintendent of Public Instruction

NO: Focus on skills, goals and parental involvement



Brian
Palmer

In December of last year, the State Board of Education adopted a proposal calling for mandatory, statewide high school graduation requirements. It is a lofty goal, to be sure, with a large and diverse smattering of courses for students to sample. In fact, it is essentially a start-to-finish format for four years of high school instruction. It is visionary and packaged to send a strong message regarding the improvement of our children's education.

That being said, it doesn't answer several fundamental questions. What basic building blocks will every child, regardless of their life's ambition, need to succeed? How do we measure success? And where is the all-important parental involvement?

If you were to travel around the state and ask the proverbial "man on the street" what should kids be taught in school today, I have a hunch that the answer you would get would be a mixed bag, varying greatly based upon the region, gender and age of the respondent. However, I would be willing to bet that when you boiled it all down, everyone could agree that students should be learning math, science, reading and writing, sort of a modified version of the "3-Rs" (reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic) of education.

These are the basic, most fundamental units of learning. Once you successfully master these skill sets, a whole new world of learning opens up, not just in the traditional classroom setting, but in any setting a person may find themselves.

21st Century Schools, 21st Century Skills ... is focused, responsible and enforceable, while keeping a majority of the decisions for how a child is educated with those closest to the child — the local district and the parents.

We have areas of our state with rates of functional illiteracy that exceed 60 percent. We have students entering college who need years of remedial math to catch up to where they should have been coming out of high school.

We cannot attract the types of businesses to this state, the high-tech businesses that we desire, with a workforce that is this dramatically under-prepared. We as a state need to stand up and declare that our children must meet a standard of education whether they are schooled in Ishpeming or Inkster.

21st Century Schools, 21st Century Skills is a curriculum we have developed to encourage parental involvement and individual attention in selecting a curriculum path for students, a curriculum that has set standards and requires reaching measurable goals to complete. Our plan is focused on what is essential to success, not scattered to include a wide variety of elective options. These options, while important, should best be left to the local districts to implement or require, not be a part of "a one-size-fits-all" directive from Lansing.

The key is in having a common set of course-level content expectations in the curriculum for all schools to meet. The State Board of Education has some of these already completed. All of them, however, need to be completed before we can hold

our schools and our children to any kind of new standard. It simply isn't reasonable to expect all districts to agree on what English I should be if they are left to their own devices. This would invite a scenario where one district could offer an English I class with readings from "War and Peace," while another may offer something called English I with a "Dick and Jane" story. The two would not be equitable, and would defeat the purpose for having a common curriculum.

21st Century Schools, 21st Century Skills calls for a standard, core curriculum to be in place for most students. However, at the start of a high school career, a student and his or her parents would have the option to sit down with a school counselor to plan a unique curriculum path for the child. The path would include as much of the core offerings as possible, while allowing for the interests of the student to be met. The parents would commit to quarterly interactions with the faculty to monitor progress and the path could be revisited on a yearly basis.

This is the level of flexibility that must be in the system in recognition of the fact that not all children are the same. For example, not every child is going to go to college. Some will go on to a trade school, some will serve our country in the military, some will set out on their own and become part of our next generation of entrepreneurs. But whatever they do, they need a foundation in the basic skills that one needs to have to survive in the modern world. Gone forever are the days of leaving high school to go directly into the factory. To that end, alternative means of delivery have to be available. For example, geometry and algebra can be learned in construction trades. We should be encouraging more vocational-technical training, dual enrollment, and articulation agreements between community colleges and other higher education providers.

Some may say that not all students can achieve the level of rigor spelled out in both proposals, that it will be "too hard." I reject that argument as the soft bigotry of low expectations. Students can and will learn what they are taught. The key needs to be the "new" three R's of education: relevance, rigor, and more relevance. We need to re-evaluate the way lessons are taught to ensure that our teachers reach all students. With the amount of money we commit to education and the level of compensation that educators receive — compensation that is among the tops in the nation — we simply must get a return on our investment.

Any statewide curriculum has to address the fundamental questions of basic skills, measurable standards and goals, and parental involvement. 21st Century Schools, 21st Century Skills answers all of these questions. It is focused, responsible and enforceable, while keeping a majority of the decisions for how a child is educated with those closest to the child — the local district and the parents. Michigan cannot afford to let another generation of students slip through the cracks; our future depends too much on them to stand idly by and watch our jobs and our economy head further south. Our children are depending on us.

Rep. Brian Palmer, R-Romeo, is chairman of the House Education Committee

Diverse Viewpoints are the opinions of the authors and not those of *Michigan Education Report*.
Tell us what you think: "Will a state-mandated high school curriculum of 18 credits ensure better-prepared students in the 21st Century?"
Send your comments to the following address:

Michigan Education Report • Letters to the Editor • c/o Mackinac Center for Public Policy
140 West Main Street • P.O. Box 568 • Midland, Michigan 48640 • (989) 631-0900 • Fax (989) 631-0964
www.EducationReport.org • Letters@EducationReport.org