

MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

\$3.00

News and analysis for parents, educators and policymakers

Fall 2006



Damaged school buses are shown in this Sept. 1, 2005 photo, taken shortly after Hurricane Katrina and ensuing levee breaks flooded New Orleans. (AP Photo/Phil Coale)

NEW ORLEANS SCHOOLS: ONE YEAR LATER

Big Easy still in big hurt

More coverage on page 5

One year after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, a school district that had been devastated for years continues to rebuild.

"We were morally, academically and financially bankrupt," Leslie Jacobs, a member of the Louisiana state board of education and former Orleans Parish school board member said about the condition of the district before Hurricane Katrina even hit, speaking at an education writers conference this summer in New Orleans. "Shame on us if we don't take advantage of this."

The general feeling among those charged with rebuilding the school system in New Orleans and its surrounding areas is that the damage caused by the storm has given them a fresh start, a chance to begin from scratch.

"Our focus right now is making the best choices for children so that families will feel comfortable returning," said Robin Jarvis, superintendent of the Recovery School District.

While the term "Recovery School District" might make one think it has something to do with the city's overall post-Katrina recovery, the RSD actually came into existence before the storm, when the state took control of 112 of the area's 128 schools. Of

those, 107 were transferred to the RSD, while the other five re-opened as charter schools.

"Before Katrina, 70 of those 128 schools were failing under the state's accountability standards," Jarvis said during a bus tour with writers that visited damaged neighborhoods and schools. We had a severe financial crisis, too."

Performance was so low that a recent valedictorian at a city high school scored an 11 on the ACT, according to Bill Roberti, CEO of Alvarez and Marsal, a private management company hired by the state in July 2005 to address financial problems in the schools.

"The Orleans Parish School District was a catastrophe before the hurricane even hit," according to Mike Thompson, a fraud examiner with Alvarez and Marsal.

The district employed 10 superintendents in 10 years, and a forensic audit found that \$71 million in Title I money could not be accounted for. Two former business officials now face federal charges.

That was before Hurricane Katrina. Today, large swaths of neighborhoods remain uninhabitable. Some 30 schools are completely beyond repair, and most sit untouched since the storm and ensuing floods hit. Hardin Elementary School, just a few blocks away from where a major levee breach occurred near the 9th Ward,

NEW ORLEANS, Page 4

SHORT SUBJECTS

Teachers in Grand Rapids and Otsego agreed to new contracts with incentive-based raises. Both contracts hinge on student enrollment numbers, with bonuses tied to student retention.

Grand Valley State University has authorized a second Detroit charter school backed by philanthropist Bob Thompson. A charter was issued to Public Schools Academies of Detroit. University Prep Math and Science could open in 2008 and will be run by New Urban Learning.

Detroit Public Schools must repay almost \$1 million in federal money after a U.S. Department of Education audit found several instances where money and items cannot be accounted for, including five flat-screen televisions.

Charter schools outperformed their neighboring conventional public schools on a majority of 2005 MEAP tests in 18 areas across Michigan. Developed by the Michigan Department of Education, the model compared charter schools to their "host districts" in 18 cities.

School districts across Michigan spent about \$5 million by holding school board elections in May, rather than November. Low voter turnout prompted Oakland County Clerk Ruth Johnson to support House Bill 4755, which would require schools to hold November elections.

More than 20 percent of teacher candidates from five Michigan colleges failed state certification tests on their

SHORT SUBJECTS, Page 8

Court of Appeals rejects MEA suit over Bay Mills charters

32 public schools remain open

The Michigan Education Association union is not damaged by the existence of 32 charter public schools it sought to defund, the Michigan Court of Appeals ruled recently.

The Court of Appeals dismissed the union's lawsuit, as did a lower court last year, meaning that more than 10,000 students will be able to continue attending those schools this year.

The Michigan Education Association union told the Michigan Court of Appeals during oral arguments in July that it thinks the Bay Mills Community College board is not a public entity, even though the union was able to obtain documents from the board through Freedom of Information Act requests. Michigan's FOIA law applies

only to public bodies. Bay Mills is located in Brimley, in the Upper Peninsula.

Suzanne Clark, representing the MEA, told a three-judge panel that because the BMCC board is appointed by American Indian tribal members, not publicly elected, the union does not think the schools authorized by the college are public, and therefore not entitled to public dollars.

This marks the second major legal set back for the MEA in as many years. The union was unsuccessful in 2005 at attempting to organize teachers at an independent school in Metro Detroit. The MEA did not return several phone calls seeking comment for this story.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS WIN, Page 2

SURVEY SAYS: Competitive contracting spreading More public schools privatize services

Competitive contracting continues to be an increasingly popular option for public school districts across Michigan to save money.

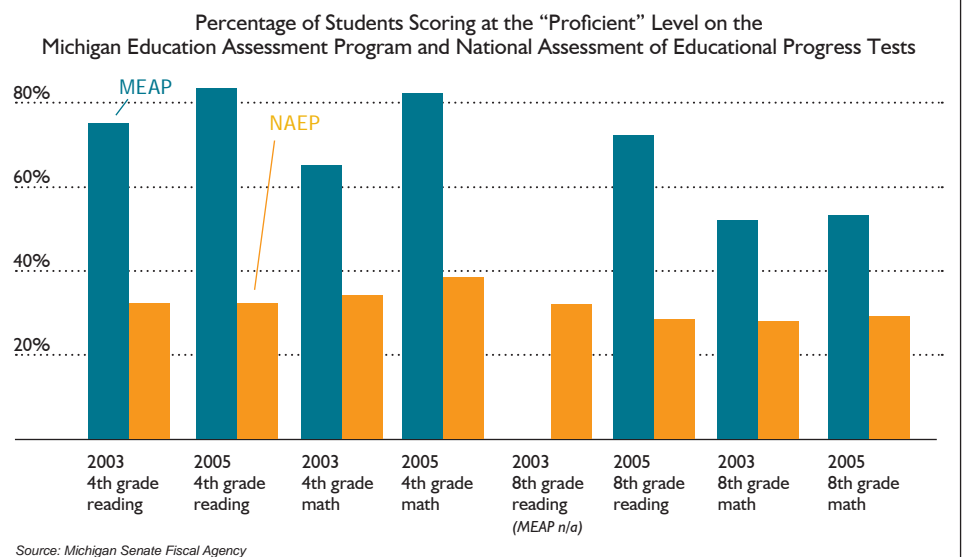
The Mackinac Center for Public Policy's 2006 privatization survey shows that 208 districts, or 37.8 percent, have a competitive contract in place for one of the three main non-instructional services: janitorial, food service or transportation.

Survey results in 2001 showed 31 percent of public school districts contracted out for one of the three major non-educational services. That rose to 34 percent in 2003 and to more than 35 percent by 2005.

All 552 public school districts in Michigan were contacted for the survey. All but one

PRIVATIZATION, Page 2

Education at a Glance



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Public schools win

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Parents of more than 10,000 students have chosen to enroll their children in the 32 public schools authorized by BMCC, many of them in underserved populations and urban areas, according to Richard Landau, an attorney with the Coalition for Educational Choice representing the Bay Mills schools.

"There has been no allegation that those schools deliver anything other than an exemplary education to the students," Landau told the court during oral arguments.

The MEA union's original lawsuit against the state was dismissed on three of four counts last year by an Ingham County circuit court. Judge Joyce Draganchuk did say, however, that the MEA had standing on one count, due to a relaxed standard set forth by the Legislature that makes it easier for law suits to be filed. That prompted the union to file its appeal last March.

Assistant Attorney General Robert Dietzel told the Appeals Court panel that the union had failed to meet the constitutional requirements to prove standing. That three-part test requires the party bringing suit to prove that it has suffered an injury greater than the population in general, the injury is traceable directly to the defendant, and the issue can be addressed by the court.

Landau pointed out that the union "carefully chose" not to sue Bay Mills or the tribe.

"The MEA has utterly failed to show any injury," he said.

Clark, however, said the union believes that since the college board is not a public body, it is not legally allowed to receive public dollars. Those dollars, in turn, are used to run the charter schools. Clark said this was an illegal expenditure of public funds.

"Our money is spent in an unconstitutional manner," Clark added.

After the Draganchuk ruling, Landau said the MEA's position was one of "naked, political self-interest," and that the union's position is that "public money is their money, its money their members are somehow entitled to."

In an August 2005 deposition before the case was heard by Draganchuk, then-MEA President Lu Battaglieri said roughly \$57 million of the union's \$70 million in yearly revenue was the result of member dues.

(T)he more available to bargain, the more is available for them for salaries and wages," he said at the time.

If the 32 public schools authorized by Bay Mills were to close, many of those 10,000 students could end up in conventional public schools, staffed by teachers who belong to and pay dues to the MEA. With those students would come nearly \$7,000 each in per-pupil funding from the state. That additional funding would then be part of the overall pot for bargaining.

As Dietzel noted at the circuit court level, students who would be forced to choose another school should the MEA succeed would not have to attend a conventional public school. They could pick from other

options, including independent schools, other charter schools and home-schooling.

Aside from complying with FOIA requests, Dietzel and Landau argued that the Bay Mills board does qualify as a public body because of the state's charter school law, which says the board is under the "exclusive control" of the state superintendent for public instruction, takes an oath of office to that effect, and members can be removed by the superintendent.

"The Constitution says the Legislature has the power to create a system of public instruction and that system is under the ultimate and immediate control of the state," Landau said. "With Bay Mills, the Legislature exceeded that, saying it has 'exclusive' control. Bay Mills is forced to jump through more hoops than anyone."

Dietzel said not only can the state superintendent remove a board member, the Department of Education also has other controls at its disposal, including the ability to stop funding the public schools authorized by Bay Mills, and the ability to take away authorization powers.

"There's a difference between public schools and private or parochial schools," Dietzel said.

Dietzel gave several examples of why the schools authorized by Bay Mills fit the criterion for public schools, saying they do not charge tuition, they have no church affiliation, they have open enrollment and they are funded with public dollars – meaning they do not charge tuition.

The court raised the issue of a parallel between a school like Central Michigan University, which also authorizes charter schools, and Bay Mills. CMU's trustees are appointed, rather than elected, albeit appointed by an elected official. The court also asked that by accepting public funds, was not Bay Mills "subordinating itself to state law."

Clark argued that because of the tribal affiliation at Bay Mills, it falls under federal guidelines as a sovereign power, and would not allow itself to be controlled by the state superintendent.

Landau countered that while the college is affiliated with the tribe, the BMCC board is not the tribe.

"They are appointed by the tribe, but that doesn't make them the tribe," he said. "It's a separate entity as a matter of law. The issues of sovereignty are immaterial."

Because the MEA failed to respond with comment for this story, it is unclear whether the Court of Appeals decision will settle the matter.

"Regardless of the decision, the charter school movement is anticipating this will be appealed to the Supreme Court," said Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies.

"Michigan no longer has time for turf wars," Quisenberry added. "It's time to focus on solutions – ensuring that all children have high-quality, public school options. Michigan's charter public schools have proven themselves. The question now is whether and how all of us, as leaders, will deliver the dream of high-quality schools to all families in all communities." ♦

Assistant Attorney General Robert Dietzel told the Appeals Court panel that the union had failed to meet the constitutional requirements to prove standing.

Privatization

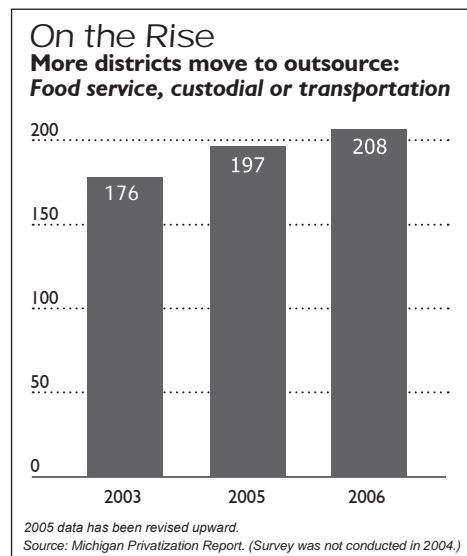
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district, Detroit Public Schools, responded. Of those saying that they do outsource one or more services, some 93.3 percent reported being satisfied with the process, a figure that has increased with each survey. Of the 208 districts, 162 said they saved money, while seven districts that said they did not. Some 44 districts reported they were unsure.

The most popular item schools contract for continues to be food, with 158 districts. An additional three schools have privatized busing compared to 2005, increasing from 21 to 24. Janitorial contracts saw an increase from 50 districts to 63.

SAVINGS ARE UNDENIABLE

The Avondale School District, in Oakland County, had already privatized food services, as well its bus maintenance program. Assistant Superintendent Tim Look told The Detroit News that the food services program lost more than \$100,000 the year before it was contracted out, but is now profitable. The bus maintenance program is expected to save \$65,000 a year. A competitive contract for custodial and maintenance work, which took effect July 1, will save the district more than \$500,000 a year.



The amount of money schools can save by hiring private firms to handle janitorial work far outpaces many of the other services that can and have been privatized. Muskegon Reeths-Puffer said it will save \$480,000 a year with private custodians. Hartland Consolidated Schools said it will save \$5 million over five years with a competitive contract for maintenance. Lakeview Public Schools, in Macomb County, was able to reduce its janitorial budget by \$1 million after privatizing that service. Kalkaska reported it will save \$324,000 with a competitive contract for custodial work, while Battle Creek Lakeview expects to reduce costs by up to \$300,000 over 18 months by doing the same.

Greater savings can be realized in custodial work because of the gap between what it costs schools and what it costs the private sector," Dean Van Zegeren, assistant superintendent for business and operations at Reeths-Puffer, told Michigan Education Report.

Van Zegeren said he thinks busing has seen relatively few districts move toward privatization because there is little difference between what the schools pay and what the private sector pays.

"It's a more specialized job," he said. "They have to be certified, pass rigorous tests for the state to license them. They've got 80 kids behind them, yelling, while they're paying attention to road conditions and trying to maintain order."

The amount of savings is substantial because of what administrators call "legacy costs," meaning retirement and health insurance.

"For the last four years, the amount of revenue from the state has been the same amount, or slightly increased, depending on who you listen to," Look told The News. "But our health benefits and retirement funds have seen double-digit increases over the past four years."

The amount school districts must contribute to the Michigan Public School

Employee Retirement System has increased to 17.75 percent. Because the system is set up as a defined-benefit plan, whereby the state is required to pay a certain dollar amount to retired school employees, schools must pay a higher percentage of payroll costs each year to meet increasing costs. This differs from most other retirement plans, which are usually run as a defined-contribution plan, the most common name of which is a 401(k). Under the latter system, the employee is free to decide how much of their pay to set aside for retirement needs, with a matching amount put in by the employer up to a threshold.

In the Gull Lake schools, for example, salary and benefits make up 81 percent of the district's \$24 million budget. School board member David Krueger told The Kalamazoo Gazette those personnel costs will increase by \$1 million in the next year, even if there is no salary increase.

"We offered our custodians a package where they could have kept their jobs," Van Zegeren said. "It would have reduced wages by about 30 percent, down to what's more in line with the market, and it asked for less expensive insurance and a pro-rated pay for hours worked."

Van Zegeren said food services at Reeths-Puffer is not privatized because it actually makes money for the district's general fund.

"We have a great supervisor who really runs a tight ship," he said. "We have only the amount of staff needed, and they're very efficient and careful with the use of food."

Rick Simpson, a regional sales director with Chartwells Food Service, said that although his company works with 130 school districts in the Great Lakes region, most of those districts continue to employ their own cafeteria workers, opting to contract out for management services.

"We generate \$125 million in revenue for our schools," Simpson told Michigan Education Report. In food services, privatization doesn't always mean all the employees work for us. Sometimes it's just a manager on-site to oversee the paperwork, make sure the USDA guidelines are being met."

SCHOOLS GET CREATIVE

Districts have moved beyond busing, food services and maintenance when it comes

saving on non-instructional costs have spread to other areas of school budgets, allowing districts to devote more of the increases in state spending they receive on teachers and students.

Cass City, for example, is able to save \$32,000 a year by contracting for secretarial services. Ypsilanti estimated it could save about \$130,000 by privatizing its top three administrative positions, and Ithaca has reduced costs by outsourcing its counseling services.

The next big wave of cost savings could come through a competitive bidding process for the oversight of substitute teachers. Fennville, Grand Rapids, Houghton Lake and the Kent County Intermediate School District have already taken that step, and many more school districts are studying it. By contracting out for substitute teaching, districts save money because they no longer have to pay retirement costs for a line of work that is not meant as a lifelong occupation, nor do schools have to spend money on paperwork, daily phone calls or other administrative matters.

Competitive contracting is not limited to just K-12 public schools, either. Several of Michigan's 15 public universities have turned to competitive contracting for services ranging from food and custodial to laundry, legal, vending and book store operation. One of the more successful examples recently was a custodial agreement Western Michigan University signed with a company that is expected to save the school \$1.5 million a year. The school took bids from five firms, as well as the 60-member union that represented the employees previously working in maintenance. The winning bidder, Commercial Sanitation, is able to provide the services at a cost \$1.1 million less than the union said it could. ♦

MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

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Tax break for school giving

Senate Bill 382 would allow Michigan residents to deduct 50 percent of contributions made to public educational organizations such as foundations. Such foundations would have to be involved in helping a local school district or charter school, or continuing and adult education. The foundation would have to qualify for exemption from federal taxes as a 501(c)(3) organization in order for a taxpayer to claim the state tax exemption. The Senate Fiscal Agency estimates tax payers would benefit by as much as \$25 million per year. The bill was passed out of the Senate Education Committee and is before the full Senate.

www.michiganvotes.org/2005-SB-382

Labor Day issues for ISDs

House Bill 5977, introduced by Rep. John Moolenaar, R-Midland, will allow Intermediate School Districts that provide services to a conventional school district to be exempt from a state-mandated post-Labor Day start to the school year. State law was changed in the fall of 2005 that requires all public schools to start classes after Labor Day, except in cases where a start date already was specified by a collective bargaining agreement that has yet to expire. Many ISDs were already under contract with local school districts that have school calendars calling for a pre-Labor Day start for the 2006-2007 school year. The legislation also would exempt schools that move to a year-round calendar from having to comply with the post-Labor Day regulation.

www.michiganvotes.org/2006-HB-5977

Minimum requirement for instructional time

Legislation approved by the Michigan Senate would require public schools to provide a minimum of 1,098 hours of instruction in each academic year, and eliminate a requirement for incremental increases in subsequent years. Current law has taken the minimums for instruction from 180 days and 1,098 hours in 2004-2005 to 189 days and 1,134 hours for 2005-2006, and will eventually

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

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increase to 190 days and 1,140 hours in 2006-2007. Senate Bill 95, introduced by Sen. Valde Garcia, would eliminate the incremental increases and allow school districts to offer a minimum of 1,098 hours of instruction in 180 school days. SB 95 passed in the Senate and was referred to the House Education Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2005-SB-95

\$10 million more for Detroit

House Bill 6042, introduced by Rep. Marsha Cheeks, D-Detroit, would give Detroit Public Schools an extra \$10 million from the state school aid fund for the 2006-2007 school year in order for the district to establish a medical-themed high school. The school would be for students who want to pursue a career in the medical field, particularly nursing, medical billing and bookkeeping, and science and technology related to medicine. The school would offer a certification testing program so that graduates would be immediately employable. The bill was assigned to the House Appropriations Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2006-HB-6042

Steroids in high schools

The use of steroids in high schools has been addressed by two pieces of legislation from the Michigan House. House Bill 4118 would require public schools to include a policy indicating that the use of performance-enhancing drugs can affect a student-athlete's eligibility to participate in interscholastic sports, and direct the Department of Community Health to distribute to schools a list of what qualifies as a performance-enhancing drug. Introduced by Rep. Daniel Acciavatti, HB 4118 unanimously passed in the House and passed with a single "no" vote in the Senate. House Bill 4594, which passed unanimously in the Senate and with a lone "no" vote in the House, would expand the state's definition of a "drug-free school zone" to prohibit the possession of steroids within 1,000 feet of

a school, and make the offense punishable by up to twice the maximums of a \$25,000 fine and 10-year prison sentence for possession of other illegal drugs within 1,000 feet of a school. HB was introduced by Rep. Leslie Mortimer.

www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HB-4118

www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HB-4594

Freedom for religious schools

A package of bills introduced in the Michigan House would amend state law to exempt Bible colleges and other higher education institutions affiliated with churches from having to meet certain state regulations. House Bills 6014, 6015 and 6016 are before the House Higher Education Committee. Currently, state law addresses the ownership and oversight of such colleges by any ecclesiastical or religious order, society or corporation, but not a church.

www.michiganvotes.org/2006-HB-6014

www.michiganvotes.org/2006-HB-6015

www.michiganvotes.org/2006-HB-6016

Certification changes

House Bill 5279 would allow teachers certified in either elementary or secondary education to teach sixth grade. The change could help more middle school teachers become "Highly Qualified" under the federal No Child Left Behind act, because most middle school teachers have secondary teaching certificates that allow them to teach grades seven through 12. The bill is before the House of Representatives.

www.michiganvotes.org/2005-HB-5279

Full-day kindergarten

Senate bill 1306 would mandate that all public schools offer full-day kindergarten and that all children who turn 5 before December 1 be enrolled in kindergarten. The bill does not address details about funding, enforcement, or when the program would begin.

www.michiganvotes.org/2006-SB-1306

Classroom instruction dollars

Legislation recently introduced in the House of Representatives would require school districts to issue a report each year on what percentage of its general fund budget is spent on classroom instruction. House Bill 6216 indicates schools should use the definition of classroom instruction put forth by the National Center for Education Statistics. NCES considers money spent on classroom teachers and personnel, classroom materials, activities such as field trips, music, art and athletics, and tuition paid to out-of-state schools or private institutions for special needs students as counting toward instruction. Not included in the NCES definition is administration, operations and maintenance, food service, transportation, support personnel, media specialists, counselors and nurses. The bill is before the House Education Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2006-HB-6216

Tax exempt school stores

House Bill 6217 seeks to exempt resale thrift shops operated by non-profit private schools from real and personal property tax. The store must be operated by the non-profit entity that runs the school, and the proceeds from the sale of items must be used to benefit the students enrolled in the school. The bill was assigned to the House Tax Policy Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2006-HB-6217

Merit Scholarship

Senate Bill 1335 would replace the Michigan Merit Award Scholarship with a new plan to give students \$4,000 while they pursue a post-secondary education. Currently, high school students can receive \$2,500 toward college expenses if they score well on the MEAP. SB 1335 would give students \$1,000 in each of their first two years of college, plus another \$2,000 after completing two years, as long as the student maintains a 2.5 grade point average. The program would be available to students in associates and bachelor degree programs, as well as vocational training. The bill is assigned to the Senate Appropriations Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2006-SB-1335

Competitive contracting grows despite myths

"The reaction is quite emotional"

As more and more public school districts across Michigan turn to competitive contracting as a way to save on costs and spend more dollars on education, the reactions by those opposed to it become more negative.

Accusations ranging from poor performance and putting children in danger to claims that private company employees are outsiders or illegal immigrants have sprung up at school board meetings and union rallies across Michigan this year.

Last May, The Detroit News reported that David Murray, a member of the Detroit Public Schools board of education, filed a police report over what he perceived to be threats of violence on a radio call-in show. The comments came after the DPS board voted to sign a \$21.7 million contract for food services with a private company. Aramark, which won the contract, bested other offers, including one from the union that had been overseeing the operation.

In April, at a Michigan Education Association union rally to protest the privatization of custodial services in the Reeths-Puffer schools, state Rep. Doug Bennett, D-Muskegon, was overheard telling Kathie Oakes of the MEA, "We all know what's going to happen — they are going to hire illegal immigrants to fill the jobs," The

Muskegon Chronicle reported.

"When we try to discuss this, we're met with an emotional outburst," said Jason Church, a school board member in Perry. "We're told we're evil, we have no morals. There's nothing constructive there."

Church said the Perry schools, near Lansing, have been discussing competitive contracting for custodial services. The discussion is often met by claims that janitors from a private company are "outsiders and low lifes," have "criminal backgrounds" and would be a "danger to the children," Church said.

"This really doesn't make any sense," Church said. "Half of our entire staff lives outside the district. Just because someone lives 20 minutes away makes them a bad person?"

While privatization opponents say that public school employees care more about students, or that non-school employees would pose some type of danger, it was revealed earlier in the summer that a Michigan State Police background check found almost 470 public school employees with felony conviction records, including 56 teachers. Charges ranged from stalking to larceny to drunk driving. Those found with felony sex crime convictions were immediately fired as per a 2005 "student safety"

package of new laws.

Rick Simpson, a regional sales director with Chartwells Food Service, said most companies had stricter hiring guidelines than the state did for public schools up until the adoption of a new state law last fall aimed at increasing student safety.

"We did drug testing, fingerprinting, background checks, everything," Simpson said. "We don't hire people with felony convictions."

"It doesn't matter if you're a school or a private firm, people need to remember we all dip our buckets into the same well of applicants," said John Markey, vice president of Educlean Services. "The difference is what you do after you draw up that bucket."

Markey said his company puts employees through a rigorous background check that includes fingerprinting and personality testing. Educlean's insurance coverage includes not only liability, but also theft, mysterious loss and third-party indemnity.

"A policy for mysterious loss can be better than bonding, because a bond will generally only pay out when there's a conviction," Markey said. "With mysterious loss, if say, a laptop computer turns up missing while we're in the building, the claim is paid because of the loss, not a conviction."

Third-party indemnity covers property or equipment that are considered in the "care, custody and control" of the company's personnel.

"If someone trips over an extension cord we're using for a floor buffer, that covers it," Markey said. "It's specifically written in that way."

Church said another roadblock people use when fighting against competitive con-

tracting is the question of a track record.

They say privatization is one thing, but what if it doesn't work," Church said.

According to a 2005 privatization survey by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 35.5 percent of the 552 districts surveyed privatize at least one of three major non-instructional services — custodial, transportation or food services. That was up from 34 percent in 2003, even though 27 districts brought some service back in-house after it had been privatized two years earlier.

"A lot of people think of it in terms of proposals and contracts, when they're really partnerships," Markey said. "We used to always want to be the first one (contractor) in, but not any more. Being the first one in means you take all the heat. Being the second one in is much easier."

Markey said one way to reduce problems with competitive contracting is for school boards to be as specific as they can be in issuing RFPs (Requests for Proposals).

"There are companies that are certified and there are associations for these kinds of firms," he said. "The school board should make sure about the level of insurance a company has. They can request the background checks, drug testing, things like that."

Simpson said people who oppose privatization should remember that the companies are driven by performance.

"It's not easy to terminate an employee who works for a school district, but it is easy to terminate a contract," he said. "All of our contracts have 60-day cancellation clauses. Knowing you can lose all your business in 60 days is pretty good motivation to hire people you can trust and depend on." ♦

New Orleans

continued from Page 1

is a collection of twisted metal, disintegrating insulation and overturned desks. A half-dozen slices of bread and a handful of M&M candies still sit on a table in the cafeteria. At Abramson High School, down the street from a boarded-up Wal-Mart and shopping mall, about two dozen cars sit in the parking lot. From a distance, it looks as though the cars are neatly lined up in angled spaces, but up close, broken windows and rusting frames show the damage caused by flood waters.

Thompson says the schools overall sustained \$850 million to \$1 billion damage. Because the district was underinsured for flood damage, the schools would need to pay \$272 million in cash to rebuild.

CHARTERS LEAD THE WAY

By January 2006, 25 schools had reopened between the Recovery District and Orleans Parish. All but four of them are charter schools.

"We plan to have a large number of charters," Jarvis said. The RSD has four now, but that should be up to 19 for the 2006-2007 school year."

Jarvis, a lifelong educator who held several leadership roles with the Louisiana Department of Education, said the old, adversarial attitudes towards charters is a thing of the past.

"We have to rely on charters to be successful," she said. "We used to see them as a drain on resources, but there's a different way of thinking now."

Jarvis also said there has been a great deal of cooperation with private schools as everyone's focus shifts to doing what is best for students.

Nearly \$21 million in federal funds has

been dispersed among the private, conventional public and charter schools in the area. That money allowed the schools to reopen, some even before the end of 2005, because no state education money was forthcoming. Hurricane Katrina hit shortly before the annual student count day, on which funding is determined.

"No kids, no money," says Lourdes Moran, a New Orleans Public Schools board of education member.

Moran and others helped push for the approval of six charter schools in what is now called the Algiers Charter Association, a group of schools in the Algiers area of New Orleans on the west bank of the Mississippi River, across from the French Quarter.

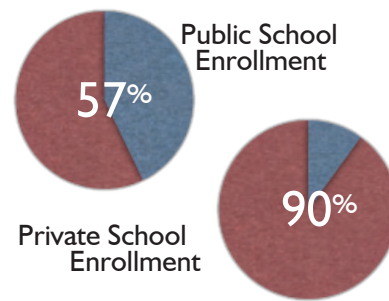
A NEW SCHOOL YEAR

When the 2005-2006 school year began, New Orleans had roughly 60,000 students in public schools. The school year ended with about 12,000, and demographers estimate schools could see as many as 34,000 students enrolled by Jan. 1, 2007.

Compare that to independent schools. Before Katrina hit, some 40 percent of New Orleans-area students attended private and parochial schools. By the end of January almost 80 percent of students in the Archdiocese of New Orleans had returned to classes. This was possible because the archdiocese covers a large geographic region, including areas outside of the damage area. Students were able to attend other schools in the archdiocese, as well as those in Baton Rouge, about an hour from New Orleans. Within the greater New Orleans area, the archdiocese was able to reopen 25 of 28 schools in the months following Katrina. Another 200 private schools have not reopened, and contact with the administrators from those schools has been difficult.

"There were quite a few smaller, independent schools, and we just have no way to

Enrollment Estimate 01/07



The pie charts above show the estimated enrollment levels for January 2007 at private and public schools in New Orleans, as compared to the pre-Katrina student population.

locate the people," Jarvis said. "We haven't heard from anyone."

Jarvis said the future of public schools in New Orleans, be it charters or conventional, will be different.

"We are going to recreate a school district that serves all children," Jarvis said.

In the past, the city had what Jarvis called a "dual" system, with a number of magnet schools taking in the cream of the crop based on selective admissions standards. Because of legislative changes, the city will operate under methods much like what Michigan public schools have, with limited open enrollment and per-pupil funding that follows the student.

Questions remain, however, about how many people will return to the city, which schools should be rebuilt, and where new schools should be built.

"We've heard from a lot of people who moved and they say their kids are enrolled in such and such a district and they're getting a better education," Jarvis said. "We need to focus more on student achievement."

Jarvis said it will be difficult to deter-

mine where to build new schools because it hasn't been determined where people will live. The 9th Ward, for example, was considered a low-income area, but had a high percentage of home ownership and many life-long residents. It's proximity to the levee system means FEMA has designated it a Zone One area, where structures will have to be elevated by an as-yet-undetermined height.

"It's a real balancing act," Jarvis said. "We don't want to spend money to build schools no one will use in the long run, but at the same time we don't want to hinder people's ability to come back and rebuild by not having schools."

THE FUTURE

Part of the long-range plan for the RSD and other education providers in New Orleans is community involvement.

"We held a series of public forums in the spring and we kept hearing that in the past, people hadn't felt welcome in the schools," Jarvis said. "We're trying to create a new image and be up front about the problems we're facing. We are asking the community to help."

After hearing input from community members, some changes were made immediately. One charter school, for example, offers classes from 4-9 p.m., so that students with jobs can work during the day and contribute to the financial needs of their families. Another charter school, set to open this fall, will focus on architecture and construction management.

"Won't that be a great thing for this city in the long run," Jarvis said. ♦

Ted O'Neil, managing editor of Michigan Education Report, attended the Education Writers Association annual conference, held June 1-4 in New Orleans.

Year-round schools give parents, students another option

As most districts across Michigan prepare for a state-mandated post-Labor Day start to the school year, some have already been in session for several weeks. Others are never really out of session.

Although not common, almost 500 year-round schools can be found in about three dozen states, including Michigan, at the elementary, middle and high school levels, according to the National Association for Year-Round Education.

One such school, Alexander Macomb Academy in Mt. Clemens, a conventional public school north of Detroit, has been in session since Aug. 14. The K-6 school conducts classes until the third week in June, giving students about six weeks off in the summer, compared to the more than two months students in most schools receive.

"Being off so long in the summer can lead to what is called 'learning loss' because the kids forget so much," Macomb Academy Principal Sharon Gryzenias said. "Even with the shorter time off here, we give the kids packets that are grade-appropriate with books, flash cards and a writing journal. Things to keep them thinking."

Gryzenias said the school also has a subscription to StudyIsland.com that students can access from home. The site provides games, tests and other activities in a variety of subjects, including math, science, history and foreign languages.

Aside from a longer school year, Macomb also has a longer school day. Students there attend for seven hours and 45 minutes, an hour more than other elementary schools in the district.

"Having a longer day means the teachers can get everything in that they need to," Gryzenias said. "They can really get deep into a topic."

Gryzenias said students get at least 90 minutes a day of English/language arts, plus 60 minutes of a specialized class, such as physical education, science lab or art.

The unique approach is working,

Gryzenias said. With a 70 percent minority student population, including several who are low-income, the school has achieved Adequate Yearly Progress every year, and all teachers on staff are rated "Highly Qualified" under federal No Child Left Behind Act requirements.

"All of our third and sixth graders were above their state averages in every category of the MEAP," Gryzenias said. "I would highly recommend this for anyone. It's made an enormous difference for the students."

Gryzenias said the longer days, and more of them, can be a bit difficult for kindergarten students, who attend school for a full day.

"During the first semester, they think it's a pretty long day," she said. "They usually have a rest break in the afternoon, but in the second semester that gets phased out. There's just too much for them to do."

Because Macomb is in session 200 days a year, it is considered a year-round school under Michigan law, and thereby not subject to the post-Labor Day law. Other year-round schools are in session virtually year-round, with shorter breaks spread between sessions. At two elementary schools in Highland's Huron Valley, students attend four sessions of 45 days each, with 15 days off in between.

"The year-round students attend the same number of days, use the same curriculum, same text books, it's just split differently," Highland Elementary School Principal Bruce Bendure said.

Both Highland and Kurtz elementary

schools have year-round and nine-month students within the same building.

"It can be tricky, but it's a popular choice among parents," Bendure told MER, referring to Huron Valley's participation in Michigan's school choice program. "We have neighborhood kids who come here and do either track, and we also have school choice by parents across the district."

Bendure said the students have recess and lunch at the same time, and all fifth graders go to yearly camp at the same time.

"It's not as delineated as you might think," he said. "We have it aligned so everyone has the same major holidays, in-service days and breaks."

For year-round students at Highland and Kurtz, a typical school year goes from late August to late October, mid November to mid February, early March to mid May and mid June to late July, with breaks in between.

"Very few teachers leave year-round once they get into it," Bendure said. "And once families get involved, they tend to stay through it."

Bendure said the year-round and nine-month programs are aligned such that a student should be able to transition from one to the other without much trouble.

"There is the issue of learning loss, but I think that can be overstated," Bendure said. "Some students need more remediation than others after any type of break, but I think parents who would make the choice of year-round tend to be involved anyway."

Bendure said that parental involve-

ment often means keeping the kids busy with reading and other learning activities during the mini-breaks.

Whether it entails summer reading programs and on-line learning such as what is used by Macomb Academy, or filling in mini-breaks with unique educational opportunities, conventional public schools in this regard are following the example set by home-school parents for many years.

Bendure said Huron Valley's plan is to consolidate the two year-round programs into one school that operates solely on a year-round calendar.

"We're trying to be cost effective," he said.

About 3,000 year-round schools operate nationwide, with half of them in California. There are 30 year-round schools in Michigan, according to the National Association for Year-Round Education.

"The west and southwest can't build schools fast enough," Bendure said. "When you have multi-tracks, you can get 33 percent higher capacity."

In year-round education, multi-track means more than one group of students using the same building at different times. A building designed to accommodate 750 students, NAYRE says, can hold 1,000 students with four tracks of 250 students each. The school still has 750 students at all times, with one group, or track, always on break on a rotating basis. A single-track is when just one group of students uses the year-round program. Variations of both kinds of tracks can include a 45-15, 60-20 or 90-30 split.

Opponents of year-round schools point to a lack of data that shows better academic performance, as well as the effects on family calendars, summer tourism and the lack of air conditioning in many older buildings.

"Some people are just really stuck on that summer vacation," Bendure said. "But other families love it. They can go somewhere in the fall and not battle the crowds in the spring." ♦



New Orleans family makes Michigan home

Leland Showers and Rose Clark had been thinking of moving away from New Orleans for a long time. Hurricane Katrina made the decision for them.

Showers, 35, and Clark, 32, along with their four children, moved to Grand Ledge in September of 2005 as part of a Federal Emergency Management Administration relocation program. A church in the Lansing suburb offered the family use of its parsonage for one year, and the children were enrolled in school by the third week of September.

"We definitely plan on staying," Showers said. "We feel like we've landed in a nice, pleasant, peaceful neighborhood. Somewhere the kids can actually go outside and play."

Showers said although the poor quality of schools in New Orleans played a role in the decision not to return, crime played an even larger role.

"The city is more violent than ever before," he said. "Here, the kids can come and go, play with their friends, and we don't worry all the time."

Showers has found full-time employment at Meijer, while Clark works part-time for a party planning company. The children, two boys and two girls who range in age from 7 to 14, spent almost an entire academic year in their new Michigan schools last year.

"I think we moved here September 15 and they started school on September 19, so they didn't miss too much," Showers said. "The schools here are so much better than what they had. The classes aren't nearly as crowded."

Showers said it was typical to have 30 or more students in a class at the schools the children attended in New Orleans.

"The kids are doing much better in school," Showers said. "It's really a new learning experience for all of us."

Katrina Evacuees Spread Out

After Katrina and the subsequent levee failures and flooding, more than 70,000 New Orleans-area students were spread across 46 states. The largest concentration was in Texas, with about 44,000. In Michigan, students enrolled in districts from Detroit to the Upper Peninsula. The Michigan Legislature amended the school aid budget bill to allow for public schools to count Katrina students toward the \$6,875 foundation grant districts receive for each student. The state, in turn, will receive \$6,000 to \$7,500 for each student from the federal government, depending on whether they received general education or special education services.

Jan Ellis, a spokeswoman from the Michigan Department of Education, said Michigan schools reported 571 relocated students in October of 2005. That enrollment number fell during the course of the school year, but there were still 379 students in Michigan at the end of the academic year. Ellis said she was not sure if the state would continue to keep track of these students as the 2006-2007 school year begins.

"At this point, it looks like the feds are only going to pay for the one year," she said. "If these kids are still here in the fall, if their families have moved here permanently, then they'll be included in the regular district count days and the schools will get a foundation allowance grant, just like any other student." ♦

New Orleans schools take new approach to teachers, qualifications

Teachers must pass test to get jobs back

Among the hundreds of thousands of people forced to flee the New Orleans area in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina were some 4,000 public school teachers. Now that schools are re-opening and reform-minded leaders are set to lead the schools out of both physical and fiscal destruction, how many of those teachers will be rehired is yet to be determined.

About 25 of the area's 128 schools had reopened by last May, with plans to open another 15 for the 2006-2007 school year, depending on how many students return. About 12,000 of what had been a 60,000-student population had returned to classes last spring, and that could reach as high as 34,000 by Jan. 1, 2007.

HIRING PHILOSOPHY

"We're looking for people who really want to be here."

-Robin Jarvis

Robin Jarvis, superintendent of the Recovery School District, said about 500 more teachers will need to be hired, in addition to the roughly 90 already on board. The Recovery School District was set up in early 2005, before Katrina, after the state took control of 112 schools in New Orleans due to poor academic and fiscal performance.

Because almost all the schools that have reopened since November 2005 have been charters, the administration has a great deal more flexibility in who it hires and how. With no students and no revenue, the schools were unable to pay teachers and ended up laying them off, in effect gutting the local union and getting

rid of the collective bargaining contract.

Jimmy Farenholtz, an Orleans Parish School Board member, told a group of education writers at a conference in New Orleans recently that the move was necessary so that teachers did not pass up offers for other jobs while waiting to see what the future of New Orleans schools held.

ONE-YEAR CONTRACTS

"A lot of people were leaving, moving to other cities and other states, looking for work," he said. "The teachers were in the same situation. They had to move on."

Each school now sets its own salary and benefits schedule, and employees work on one-year contracts.

"Our goal is outcomes," Jarvis said. "We let them (schools) handle the input."

The staff at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School has picked up on the idea, and will open a charter school in a different location for the new academic year, with plans for a new curriculum and a 20:1 teacher-student ratio.

"We look at it as a rebirth, a renewal and a rebuilding," Joseph Recasner, a fourth-grade teacher at King, told USA Today.

Jarvis said teachers hired by the RSD are employees of the district, which is conducting a nationwide recruiting drive.

"We want quality teachers," Jarvis said. "If they happen to be former New Orleans teachers, we'll be happy to have them back, if they're quality teachers."

Another option for hiring new teachers is an alternative certification method, whereby a person with a bachelor's degree

is hired to teach the content of their degree, then placed in a practitioner certification program, earning a teaching certificate in 18 months.

"We're looking for people who really want to be here," Jarvis said.

The RSD also is making use of competitive contracting, having hired private companies to handle busing, janitorial, food service and even construction management services, as do more than one-third of Michigan's public school districts.

"We're relying heavily on contractors," Jarvis said. "And we have a very small central staff."

Another five schools, which sustained very little damage, are located in Algiers, which is on the west bank across the Mississippi from the French Quarter. The Algiers Charter Schools Association operates three K-8 schools and two high schools, and are open to any student in the New Orleans area. The schools had been part of the New Orleans Public School District.

TEACHERS MUST PASS TEST TO GET REHIRED

Brian Riedlinger, a retired New Orleans school principal who was brought in to run the ACSA, told the Times-Picayune that 500 former teachers applied when the schools reopened. The list was cut in half after interviews, and the remaining 250 had to take a test made up of five math questions found on an eighth-grade assessment test, as well as a one-paragraph essay about why the candidate became a teacher. Some 50 teachers failed the math portion of the test, and the list was cut down to 100

based on answers to the essay question.

Carol Christen, principal of Ben Franklin High School, said the new system gives her much more responsibility in the decision-making process. Each school is given a certain dollar amount from which to pay staff, then an additional amount that can be used at the school's discretion, depending on its needs, such as an extra foreign language teacher or science teacher.

Ben Franklin, located on the campus of the University of New Orleans, was academically one of the highest performing public schools in the state before Katrina. It admitted students based on test scores, and had a heavy math and science focus, having opened shortly after Russia launched Sputnik during the space race. Today, it has 540 students, down from the 935 that began school last August, and is, like the rest of the charters, an open enrollment school.

When asked how many former teachers were rehired at Ben Franklin, Christen said, "Those I wanted back, if you want to be blunt about it."

Steve Thompson, president of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, said the union has become a "scapegoat" in the wake of a corrupt school system. Several class action lawsuits on behalf of the fired teachers are before courts. In June, the Orleans Parish School Board decided not to seek a 45-day extension of its contract with the New Orleans Teachers Union, effectively putting an end to collective bargaining in the last four schools that had a union presence. ♦

Public and private schools share faculty for electives

Private and public schools throughout Michigan can find common ground in promoting education through a program known as "shared time."

Shared time allows public schools to provide teachers to private schools and then count the private school students toward state aid. It is only allowed for non-core classes, such as art, music, phys. ed. and computers. It cannot be used for English, math, science or history.

"It's really beneficial to both sides," Bernie Stanko, superintendent of schools for the Catholic Diocese of Grand Rapids, told Michigan Education Report. "It's a trade off in that we don't have to hire more teachers, and they get to count our kids for the time spent teaching them."

The formula for counting the private school students, according to the Michigan Department of Education, is as follows: divide the sum of instructional hours for each class by the minimum number of required instructional hours. The department's Web site gives an example of a public school providing a computer class for one hour a day for 90 days, or (60 minutes/60 minutes per hour) x 90 days/1,098

hours, which gives each private school student a "full-time equivalent" of 0.81.

"It's a trade off," Stanko said. "Our kids get more instruction, and they (individual public school districts) get some more money."

The Diocese of Grand Rapids has shared time programs in 38 elementary schools and four high schools spread over 11 counties.

"In some cases, it's just one teacher who comes in a few days a week for one class," he said. "In other cases, you might have one teacher who works for the diocese, and the rest are shared time, and they're teaching several sections of the same class."

Stanko said the latter example is mostly found in the high schools, where there is high demand for certain classes at different times of the day. No matter which way shared time works, Stanko said the benefits to private schools cannot be understated.

"Every little bit helps," he said. "We have a limited amount of resources."

Tim Purkey, assistant superintendent for Grandville Public Schools, said the program is "an ongoing, working relationship."

Students from local private

schools come to Grandville for water safety instruction, as well as some "gifted and talented" classes, while art and gym teachers from Grandville go to the private schools to teach.

Purkey said he thinks the private school students are getting a "richer education," and the parents of those students are being served, too, because they are Grandville tax payers.

F.Y.I.

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Esther Kuiper, director of the shared time program for Grand Rapids Public Schools, said the district works with 30 different independent schools in and around the city.

"Parents have so many good options now on where to send their children to school," Kuiper said. "We all have to work together."

Kuiper said GRPS serves 27 parochial schools within the district, and one each in neighboring Kentwood, East Grand Rapids and Kenowa Hills districts. State law allows for such cross-boarder

operations among contiguous districts.

"It really isn't something that can work on a smaller scale," Kuiper said. "Those districts with just one or two non-public schools would end up spending more than they get from it."

Shared time was used by schools until the mid 1980s, when the United State Supreme Court ruled it was unconstitutional and, in effect, subsidized religion. The court eventually reversed that decision and ruled that such an arrangement did not present "an unnecessary entanglement" of church and state. It was reinstated across Michigan in 1997, although not without changes.

"It used to be where the teacher who may have been in a private school for years would become a shared time teacher, and still remain under the authority of the private school," Stanko said. "The public school would just pay for the teacher and count the kids."

"Now, there is a clean separation," Stanko continued. "The public school does the hiring, the evaluations, the assignments. There is some input from the building principal, but the responsibility belongs to the public school district." ♦

SCHOOLING IN FOCUS

Jackson Area Home Schoolers

Pioneering new methods in education

Jackson home schoolers share resources, knowledge

Cooperative agreement reaches all ages, subjects in education

In a setting that combines home schooling, bartering and elements of a one-room school house, the Jackson Area Home Educators Pioneers are pioneering new methods in education.

The group that began with 21 students in 1994 has grown to almost 150 in grades five through 12, plus another 25 in preschool and younger grades. The students meet once a week to learn subjects ranging from reading and writing to math and science from other parents, as well as hired tutors.

"With the older kids, it's basically a full core high school curriculum," according to Patti Sailor, one of the founders of the group. "Most of it is parents who have an expertise in one area or another, but for the high-level classes, we hire people to come in and teach."

Sailor said such tutors can cost between \$10 and \$20 an hour, which can make it cost prohibitive for some families. In a cooperative setting, the money is pooled and more students can benefit.

"We have a lot of former teachers, people who have retired or moms who stopped teaching to stay home with their kids," Sailor said. "Most of them have master's degrees, and some are professionals in their field."

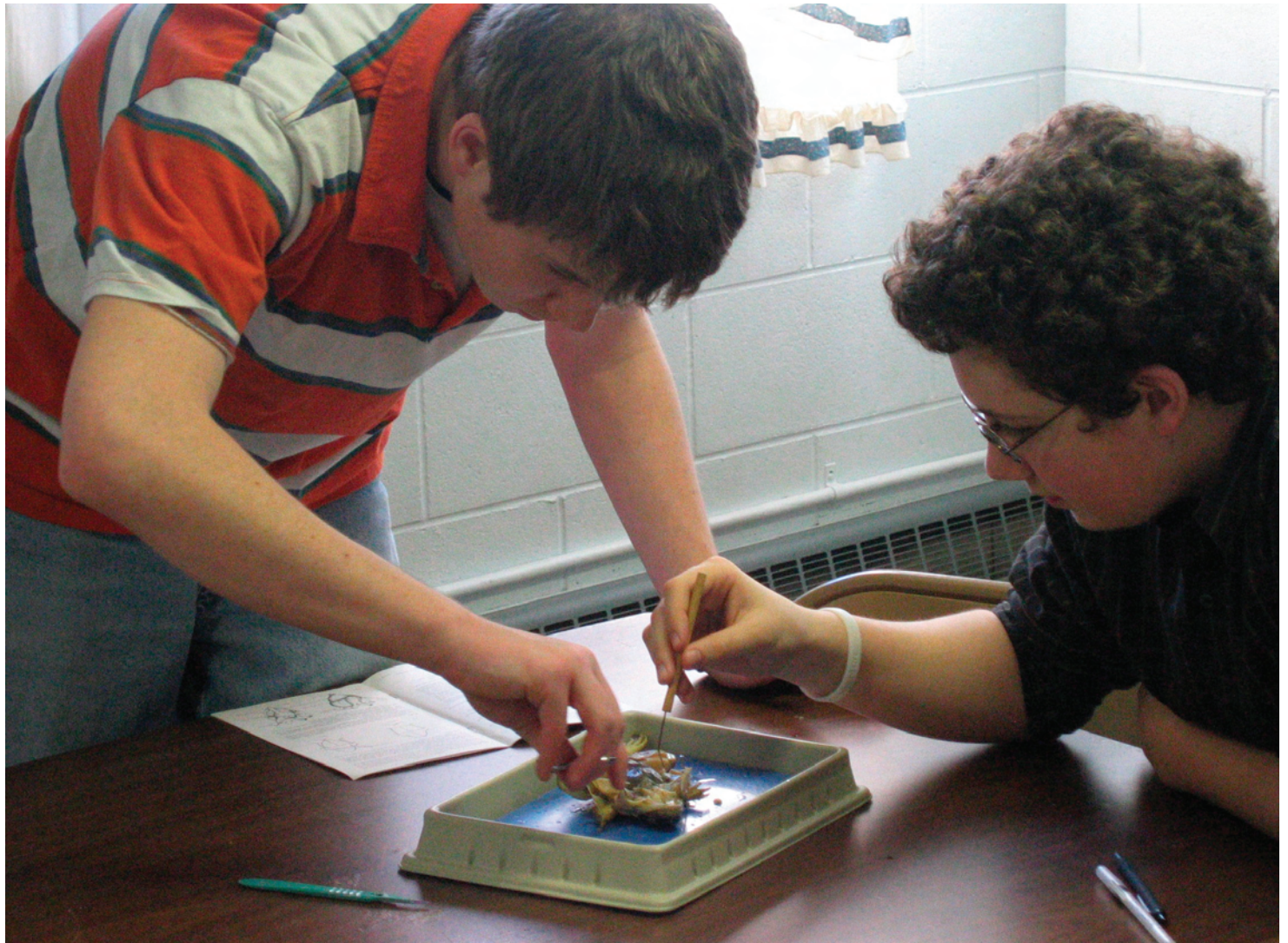
"One person might know a lot of things about a particular subject, but not so much of something else"

Sailor points to one woman who has a master's degree in engineering.

"She's more than qualified to teach things like algebra and trig," Sailor said.

While a main staple of the home-school movement has always been parental guidance, Sailor said home-school families learn early on that they can all benefit by sharing resources.

"One person might know a lot of things about a particular subject, but not so much of something else," Sailor said. "Some bartering goes on there, sort of like a 'you teach my kids art and music and I'll teach your kids



Nick Willford (left) and Seth James (right) in Mrs. Cindy Roger's biology class.

Latin and composition' type approach."

For younger students, the cooperative serves as a way to experience hands-on enrichment classes.

"Some things, like art or choir, are just more fun when done in big groups," Sailor said. "And for science, no matter what level, we can do experiments on a larger scale."

The group rents space from a Jackson-area church and meets once a week during the school year.

"One day a week on site is for things like labs, lectures, that type of instruction," Sailor said. "The kids then get a week's worth of assignments, which the parents can help with at home the rest of the week."

Sailor said instructors make themselves available by telephone and e-mail to answer questions in the interim.

"It's nice, especially with e-mail," Sailor said. "Kids and parents can send a message any time of day or night if they've got questions."

The cooperative also includes a nursery for the infants and toddlers of parents who

teach classes.

"That's another spot where the barter system comes in handy," Sailor said. "If you work in the nursery, you can get a free class for one of your children, and that's \$150 to \$200 savings right there."

Sailor said other cost savings can be realized by high school students being exposed to Advanced Placement classes. One of her sons, for example, tested out of two years of Spanish at Spring Arbor University.

"We don't have the option of dual enrollment being paid for, so AP courses are a big help," she said.

That son, Sailor said, who was home-schooled for many years, including high school, is now at Michigan State University medical school.

"He did graduate," Sailor joked. "He

can read."

Sailor said the changes in home schooling, including broader acceptance and less government intrusion in the process, have been extremely noticeable over the past 20 years. Michigan law is among the most liberal in the country when it comes to parents making home-school choices they feel best serve their children. The law, in fact, says there is no requirement for home-schoolers to "notify, seek approval, test, file forms, or have any certain teacher qualifications." The law goes on to say that the burden is on the state to prove parents are not teaching their children.

"My son met a lot of other kids in college, from Michigan and other states, who were home-schooled," she said.

The Home School Legal Defense Association reports that about half the students educated at home go on to attend college, which is roughly the same rate as the general population. HSLDA also reports that in 2004, home-schoolers reported an average ACT score of 22.6, compared to a national average of 20.6.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 2 million students nationwide are home-schooled, compared to roughly 50,000 in 1985, with a growth of 15 to 20 percent a year. A June New York Times story said the U.S. Department of Education found that 21 percent of home-school families employ some type of tutor. ♦



Mrs. Cathy Lehman's Drawing III students.



SCHOOL IN FOCUS | *Oneida Township School District No.3***Small district - Big family**

The parents help with snow removal. School board members pitch in to help with custodial work. The lone teacher is rewarded for meeting yearly goals. Students of varying ages sit in wooden chairs at wooden desks, their daily assignments written on the chalkboard.

It may sound like something out of "Little House on the Prairie," or a quaint description of a one-room school house from a century ago. But the above scenario is being played out still today at Oneida Township School District No. 3, located outside of Grand Ledge in Eaton County.

Unique educational setting combines frugality, choice

"We've been around since 1879 and have generations that have been here forever," Diane McNeil, Oneida's school board president, told Michigan Education Report. "We might be out in the country, but it has a real neighborhood feel to it. It's very family-oriented."

The school district, which usually serves about 20 students in kindergarten through fifth grade, is one-square mile.

"Two miles east is a home that used to be one-room school house, and two miles north is another one that up until a few years ago had been the township hall," McNeil said. "So I guess at one time there must have been other Oneida Township school districts."

McNeil said the school used to go up to eighth grade, but the board found that many students were leaving after fifth grade because of extracurricular activities such as band or athletics that larger middle schools offer.

"We participate in schools of choice, so sometimes our numbers can be as high as 21 or 22, especially if it's a family and all the siblings want to come here," McNeil said. "And if any

of the students who live in the actual district want to continue here until eighth grade, they certainly can."

Students who attend Oneida usually go on to either the Grand Ledge or Pottersville school districts, or attend one of the Lansing-area independent schools, such as Lansing Catholic Central where McNeil's children went to high school.

"The parents have a few options to consider when deciding where their child should continue their education," McNeil said.

Oneida's teacher, Nancy Ewing, said all but one or two students each year are schools of choice participants.

"Proposal A was such a blessing for us," Ewing said. "Before, we were paying thousands of dollars to other school districts for our students to attend high school. Now, the money follows the student and that's the way it should be."

Oneida's budget is about \$150,000 a year. From that, the school pays one teacher and one aide, as well as individual contracts with teachers who provide music, computers and art classes.

"Rarely do we ever rent (buses) for field trips," McNeil said. "Parents do the driving."

While the school board and parents help with a variety of custodial and maintenance chores at the school on a regular basis, the students also have assigned tasks at the end of each day.

"They put the chairs up on the desks, they sweep, they wash the chalkboard," McNeil said. "Everyone helps out."

When it comes time for larger projects, McNeil said the board tries to find someone with a price that is "friendly or reasonable."

"We make all the phone calls, buy all the supplies," McNeil said. "If something needs repaired, we get the estimates, or else we just

go fix it ourselves."

Ewing said because so many families choose to enroll their children at Oneida, the district values the relationships with those families.

"Everyone is just so supportive," she said. "If I'm shoveling off the walk in the morning, one of the dads will volunteer to do it, so I can be with the kids."

One job the board did contract out for was a restoration project that helped return the school to a condition as close to its early years as possible. The wooden, flip-top desks and wooden chairs also are reminiscent of a 19th century one-room school.

"The walls had been painted and papered and paneled over the years," McNeil said. "We brought in a person who redoes Victorian homes and they got the floors and walls looking like it would have back when the school started."

When the board decided the school could benefit from more space, they decided not to expand the structure, which would have diminished its historical integrity, but instead added a small building that is now called the Resource Center. McNeil said it houses supplies, files and a computer lab.

"The computers used to be right in the classroom," she said. "And that can be pretty distracting for the other students who aren't using them at the time."

The school day itself is as unique as the way the school is run. McNeil said the teacher writes each grade's assignments on the board at the start of each day, and students work on those assignments while grade-specific sessions are held at the front of the room.

"We have an aide in the morning, and usually a high school co-op in the afternoon to help the students," McNeil said. "The teacher will have, say, fifth grade history or second grade math at a larger table with her, and the rest of the students do their work until they get called up."

McNeil said one benefit to this method that students enjoy is that there is rarely any

homework.

"The teacher tells parents that if students are bringing assignments home, they aren't managing their time very well during the day," McNeil laughed.

Unlike many districts around Michigan that experience contract strife on a regular basis, Oneida has no such problem. The board and Ewing keep in constant contact, and each year brings a discussion of goals and objectives.

"We're the only ones she has to report to," McNeil said. "It's not like she has to go to 700 meetings."

McNeil said board members evaluate Ewing's year-end performance, then decide if a bonus is in order.

"We have to stay within our budget," McNeil said. "But everything is based on performance and economics. If she has something she thinks needs to be taken care of, all she has to do is ask."

Ewing said she enjoys the personal contact with the board.


"I may not make as much as teachers in big schools, but it all balances out," she said. "I also don't have to put up with a lot of the hassles they do. We just sit down, talk things out and decide how to proceed."

Ewing, who attended Oneida as a child, began teaching at the school in 1978. It was her first job out of college.

"To teach in a school like this, you almost have to have attended one as a student," she said. "I think I'd get bored teaching just one grade."

Ewing said it took her a few years to develop the proper lesson plans, but now that runs smoothly, as does the transition from one year to the next.

"My kids know exactly what's going to happen when they come back to school," Ewing said. "There's no anxiety about what teacher they have, or who they don't know. I know exactly where each child is from day one, so I don't have to spend months evaluating them."



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SHORT SUBJECTS

continued from Page 1

first try between October 2001 and July 2004. The Michigan Department of Education has told these schools – the University of Detroit, Olivet College, Rochester College, Sienna Heights University and Wayne State University – as well as others that they must do a better job of preparing future teachers.

A home-school student from Portage signed a national letter of intent to play soccer at Olivet Nazarene University in Illinois. Ian Arnold, an Eagle Scout who also has earned 36 credits with a 4.0 grade point average at Kalamazoo Valley Community College, will study pre-medicine.

Trimesters are gaining in popularity at Michigan schools. In the Muskegon area, Holton and Orchard View will switch this fall, joining Muskegon Heights, Spring Lake and Newaygo County schools. The switch means a new way of structuring class schedules.

A study released in June said Detroit Public Schools had the worst

graduation rate of the nation's largest 50 districts. Written by Editorial Projects in Education, the study said Detroit graduated just 21.7 percent of its students in 2003.

Some 470 public school employees, including more than 50 teachers, were found to have felony records in a recent background check. After several months of disagreements, including legal injunctions, a report from the Michigan State Police to the Michigan Department of Education showed administrators, cooks, janitors, bus drivers, support staff and teachers who were employed as of Jan. 1 had felony convictions.

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy will again award college scholarships at its annual Debate Workshops. Four winners will each win a \$1,000 college scholarship based on an essay contest. Debate Workshops will be held Sept. 25-28 in Livonia, Jackson, Grand Rapids and Traverse City. Students must complete in a workshop to be eligible for the scholarship. Call (989) 631-0900, or visit www.mackinac.org/debate for more information.

Two Metro Detroit charter schools have met demands for enrollment

growth with new facilities. Great Oaks Academy, with 300 students in kindergarten through sixth grade, expects to add 300 more students by 2008. It recently purchased the former St. Vincent Ferrer school in Madison Heights. Michigan Technical Academy High School, which expects to add 100 students to the existing 250, opened a new school on 8.5 acres in Redford Township.

Livonia Public Schools has found uses for three of seven buildings it closed after enrollment continued to drop. Neighboring districts Redford Union will rent one for an Adolescent Day Treatment Center, while Plymouth-Canton will rent another to house students while it renovates an elementary school. The third will house overflow high school students and a Japanese day care center.

The number of high school graduates who say they plan to attend college is often higher than the actual number who do. While many school districts claim up to 80 percent of graduates go on to college, the National Center for Education Statistics said a recent study shows it to be closer to about 66 percent nationwide.

No state met the requirement that 100 percent of its teaching force be

“highly qualified” by June 30, 2006. The designation is part of the federal No Child Left Behind act, and says a teacher meeting the standard must have a bachelor's degree, state certification and “demonstrated knowledge” in the core subject they teach. The Michigan Department of Education reported last fall that 94 percent of teachers statewide met the criteria.

Michigan could be a pilot program state for teaching Arabic to school children under a program being introduced by the Department of Defense. The “National Strategic Learning Initiative,” could net Michigan \$700,000 a year for 16 years to start programs in elementary schools in at least two school districts.

Detroit Public Schools can keep \$259 million in taxes it wasn't supposed to collect. A Wayne County judge and the Michigan Tax Tribunal both ruled that cases filed by businesses and other tax payers came after the allotted time according to state law. DPS from 2002 to 2004 continued to collect an 18-mill non-homestead tax on commercial, industrial and rental properties, even though the levy expired. The district did not divulge the error until July 2005. ♦

State: juniors must take ACT National test replaces MEAP

Add one more test to the alphabet soup that makes up a high school student's regimen.

Beginning with the class of 2008, all students will take the ACT in the spring of their junior year. This year's juniors will take the test this coming spring as part of a two-day battery that also includes an ACT Work Keys job skills test, along with a portion of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program test for science and social studies.

“The state didn't think the science portion of the ACT was strong enough,” Catherine Meyer, a counselor at Bath High School, told Michigan Education Report. “And the ACT doesn't cover social studies.”

Meyer thinks making the ACT mandatory for juniors has its advantages and disadvantages.

“If it will help encourage some kids to go to college, maybe have a better career step, then it will be a good thing,” Meyer said. “But there are other kids, who may be struggling a bit, who might go to community college, who will be disheartened by their score.”

ACT FACTS

- Created in 1959 by two University of Iowa professors
- Formerly called “American College Test,” now just ACT
- Used mainly for college admissions in Midwest and Southeast
- National average is 21
- Perfect score is 36
- No points off for wrong answers
- Also given to all juniors in Colorado and Illinois

Meyer said since community colleges do not require ACT tests for admission, students intending on enrolling in such a school have not been forced to take the ACT in years past.

“I think some of them are really going to struggle with it,” Meyer said. “But there's always some type of test they (the state) will want them to take.”

Bath Community Schools, north of

Lansing, has fewer than 1,000 students in a town heavily connected to the auto industry. Meyer said the district is made up of many parents who did not go to college and want to make sure their children do go to college.

The ACT

“It's easy to keep track of the students who are going to college and which ones aren't,” Meyer said. “About 80 percent of the kids (in the Bath district) go on to some type of higher education.”

Meyer added that the math class students take as freshman is often a good indicator of post-high school success.

“That's usually decided as far back as seventh grade,” Meyer said. “Although the new curriculum requirements may change that.”

State-mandated graduation requirements, passed into law last spring, require algebra I and II for high school students, beginning with students entering their freshman year this fall.

The Michigan Department of Education made the decision to switch in the fall of 2005, as part of the state's efforts to increase the number of residents with college degrees. Illinois, which also administers the ACT to all juniors, has seen a 23 percent increase in college attendance after implementing it.

Juniors used to take the MEAP, although it cannot be used as a college entry exam the way the ACT can be. Some students actually opted against taking the MEAP, realizing that it could not help them get into college, but a bad score could hurt them in the eyes of college admissions officials. The ACT also is different because it is a nationally norm-referenced test, meaning the results are comparable across the country against the same content. A 30 on the ACT for a student in Michigan is the same as a 30 on the ACT for a student in Montana. The MEAP, however, is a criterion-referenced test, meaning it is measured against state standards that are drawn up based on content expectations developed by the Michigan Department of Education.

The cost for an individual to take the ACT is about \$70, although juniors taking it as part of the state requirement will not pay. Juniors and seniors can

still choose to take the test at their own expense at other times of the year when it is offered. This can be an advantage for juniors who think they can improve on their score and then submit the higher score with college applications. The ACT also will be used to award \$2,500 merit scholarships that previously have been based on individual MEAP results. The cost to state taxpayers for all juniors to take the ACT will be about \$10 million, according to a Detroit News story from September 2005 that announced the change.

Aside from the ACT, Meyer said other students take a variety of tests ranging from the MEAP to the PLAN to PSAT, SAT and AP.

“The PLAN is a practice test for the ACT,” Meyer said. “Students can use it to see their strengths and weaknesses,

and the districts use the results for NCA accreditation.”

Students can take the PSAT in the fall of their junior year, as a primer for the SAT. That test also is the first step toward qualifying for a National Merit scholarship. The ACT and or SAT are then taken in the spring of a student's junior year or the fall of senior year.

“It still holds true that if you're planning on going to school in state, you should take the ACT,” Meyer said. “If you're going out of state, especially on either coast, then you should take the SAT.”

Finally, Advanced Placement tests are available for students who take AP classes. The cost for applicants is \$82, and a high enough score can earn college credits that cost several times more. ♦

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Blue Cross and MESSA

“We’re not going to put our employees at risk”

An increasing number of school employees and districts continue to abandon union-backed health insurance in an effort to balance budgets and protect jobs, all while maintaining a high caliber of coverage.

Districts that have abandoned costly insurance plans affiliated with the Michigan Education Association have seen a move toward fiscal solvency and full staffing, while many of those that continue to be associated with the more expensive MESSA have experienced lay offs, budget shortfalls and labor strife.

MESSA, the Michigan Education Special Services Association, is a third-party administrator affiliated with the MEA, which is the state’s largest school employee union. MESSA acts as a middleman, repackaging insurance plans, most often from Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and then reselling them to school districts. Benefits are bargained for during contract negotiations, and costs in those districts can sometimes be \$5,000 to \$6,000 more per employee per year than in districts that purchase insurance directly from an insurer.

While some districts find themselves paying up to \$16,000 a year per teacher for insurance, a Kaiser Family Foundation survey shows the average cost of insurance for all employees in the United

States is about \$11,900 a year.

In the Pinckney Community Schools, for example, 97 percent of the district’s 280 teachers voted to abandon the MEA’s MESSA in favor of a Blue Cross Blue Shield Flexible Blue PPO. The change to a less costly, yet comparable coverage, saved the district \$800,000, which is enough to ensure staffing levels will



Pinckney teachers are well covered.

“One-hundred percent of hospitals and 98 percent of doctors in Michigan take Blue Cross,” she said. “It’s accepted at 238 home health care companies, 98 percent of the pharmacies in Michigan and 90 percent around the country. To say it’s going to harm people is ridiculous.”

In districts that put a cap on how much they pay for insurance, teachers can pay the difference out of pocket if they wish to keep the more expensive union-affiliated insurance.

“I’ve never heard of an insurance company coming in to try to influence a decision like this,” Holland school board

The teachers union voted to change from the most expensive version of MESSA, called Super Care I, to Choices II, a PPO.

Douglas Newcombe, Bay City’s director of finance, said even the administrators changed to the Flexible Blue plan.

“We’re not going to ask our employees to do something we’re not willing to do,” he said. “And we’re not going to put our employees at risk by choosing an inferior product. We’re committed to having good coverage, but we want to do it at a cost we can afford.”

“One-hundred percent of hospitals and 98 percent of doctors in Michigan take Blue Cross,” she said. “It’s accepted at 238 home health care companies, 98 percent of the pharmacies in Michigan and 90 percent around the country. To say it’s going to harm people is ridiculous.”

LINDA MOSKALIK

remain the same for the 2006-2007 school year.

“As with any change, there is going to be glitches,” Linda Moskalik, assistant superintendent for finance in Pinckney, told Michigan Education Report. “It’s something you have to get used to. We sent out a card, and some people thought it was a credit card, so they threw it away.”

Despite claims in the union’s summer 2006 magazine that insurance purchased from vendors other than MESSA is somehow inferior, Moskalik told MER



MESSA

member Kevin Clark told The Press at the time. “This type of activity just builds a bigger wall between teachers and the district and makes it more difficult to achieve a mutual agreement.”

In the Bay City Public Schools, seven of eight employee bargaining groups abandoned MESSA in favor of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Flexible Blue PPO.

The decision to change, or not change, health insurance plans can have ripple effects on other aspects of school districts finances. In the Hartland Consolidated Schools, for example, teachers last spring refused to open their contract and renegotiate health insurance. Assistant Superintendent Scott Bacon told The Livingston Daily Press & Argus that had teachers abandoned the costly union plan, some \$600,000 could have been saved. The district eventually voted to privatize janitorial services and eliminated 29 custodial jobs to cut \$500,000.

The Michigan Legislature attempted to address the problem in 2005 with a package of bills that would have allowed districts to pool together and self-insure employees. Senate Bills 895-898 passed the Michigan Senate in December 2005, but as of yet have not been put to a vote in the Michigan House. The current legislative term ends at the end of this year, and all legislation not passed is wiped from the slate.

Backers of the legislation say public schools could save \$150 million the first year, and more than \$233 million a year by the fifth year. More than a dozen school districts in West Michigan have formed the West Michigan Insurance Pool, which buys insurance for all non-teachers. The districts say they will save about 10 percent a year on insurance costs for the more than 1,000 employees enrolled in the program.

The bills would require MESSA to release aggregate claims data to school districts, something it does not do now, in order to allow districts to seek competitive bids from other insurers.

The discussion to reform expensive health care costs in public schools was driven, in large part, by a study released in July 2005 by The Hay Group, a Virginia-based consulting group. It estimated health care costs for school employees would top \$2.2 billion, and that three-quarters of all school districts in the state have some form of MESSA insurance. The Hay Group estimated the average cost per employee in public schools for health insurance is about \$11,362, compared to the average for state employees of \$9,212.

Subpar school social studies standards

“Biased flavor” causes delay

The implementation of new high school social studies standards will wait another year after controversy arose over expectations and content.

The state Board of Education was scheduled to vote in June on a 21-page document that outlined social studies curriculum for high schools in Michigan, but Superintendent Mike Flanagan removed the item from the agenda after heated criticism and national attention.

The standards, developed as part of new state-mandated curriculum requirements for high school graduation, cover United States and world history, civics, government and geography.

The issue first came to light in a Detroit News commentary written by Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Michael Warren, a former state Board of Education member. In the May 24 Op-Ed, Warren said the Michigan Department of Education was prepared to instruct social studies teachers not to use the words “America” or “Americans” in describing the United States because North America also includes Canada and Mexico, while South America and Central America also make up the larger, “internationally friendly” America.

Warren’s commentary called such thinking a “well-intentioned, but pernicious example of political correctness.”

Flanagan responded with a written statement later the same day, saying no such dictate had come to his desk for review, but that an independent advisory

group representing diverse views and opinions had discussed the issue.

“I would never approve the removal of ‘America’ or ‘American’ from our classrooms,” Flanagan’s statement said. “Not on my watch.”

Warren, however, said department e-mails and verbal directives he had seen and heard about made it seem as if the recommendation was moving forward.

A LARGER ISSUE

According to Warren, the idea for revising high school social studies standards started two years ago under former state Superintendent Tom Watkins. Warren was a member of a task force Watkins formed out of concern over low social studies scores on MEAP tests. The recommendations were presented to the state Board of Education in July 2005, soon after Flanagan was hired.

“There were four of us there from the task force who spoke out against the standards,” Warren said. “They had a lot of glaring problems. They hadn’t been sent out for a national peer review, and they were not up to the quality our kids deserve.”

The Board of Education agreed to put its decision on hold while those issues were addressed. Warren could not attend the June board meeting due to his court schedule, but he did send a seven-page memo in lieu of public comments. In it, Warren said that “the document fails to

meet its professed objective of establishing what students are expected to know at the end of high school.”

As examples, Warren points to the omission of Presidents Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, as well as no mention of Henry Ford, Rosa Parks, the Holocaust, Watergate, the September 11 attacks or the “War on Terror.” Warren called the document “purposefully incomplete.”

Warren also felt that starting high school history in 1890 was too late, and that high school students should not spend four years in high school without studying the American Revolution, the founding documents or the Civil War.

While the Department of Education said students would learn pre-1890s history in earlier grades, Flanagan did agree that the document was flawed, telling WJR radio host Frank Beckman there was a “biased flavor” to some examples.

“The people have to have faith that we’re not propagandizing and that the committee does not have a certain agenda,” he said in a prepared statement.

Public Act 123 of 2006, which puts in place high school graduation requirements beginning with the class of 2010, directs the Department of Education to develop content expectations for each of the curriculum areas, including math, science and English.

“I’m not sure if this problem will raise its ugly head again for each of those processes or not,” Warren said. “I certainly hope not.”

Flanagan’s office did not respond to several requests for comment. ♦



Mike Flanagan



Michael Warren



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Granholtz gets MEA endorsement

"No one's education should end at high school"

Granholtz, 47, was part of the driving force behind the state Board of Education's push for new high school graduation requirements, which include 16 credits of math, science, social studies, English and foreign language. Because of the high-level math and science classes that will soon be required in high school, some concern exists about the number of teachers qualified to teach those subjects.

"The governor is very supportive of Superintendent (Mike) Flanagan's efforts to bring a mission-driven approach to Michigan's colleges and universities that certify teachers," Chuck Wilbur, Granholtz's education adviser, told Michigan Education Report. "The question remains as to why we're turning out more physics teachers than physics teachers."

Wilbur said Flanagan is addressing how to work with the colleges and universities to meet the state's specific needs for teachers.

"When it comes to recertifying them as teacher trainers, it's not automatic," Wilbur said. "They have to earn it."

Wilbur said Granholtz also is open to the concept of alternative teacher certification, as long as there are specific standards in place and the process is not too heavily relied upon.

"We have this whole elaborate system set up for training teachers," he said. "We don't want to solve things overall through alternative certification."

Wilbur said people who want to change careers and go into teaching would still have to learn how to teach.

"There are essentials on knowing how to teach," he said. "It's not just knowledge of a subject."

Although more than a dozen years old, the issue of charter public schools in Michigan can sometimes cause consternation. The Michigan Education Association school employee union, which endorsed Granholtz in June, did not bother to interview any other gubernatorial candidates before voting unanimously to back Granholtz, according to the union's Web site. The MEA for the better part of a year has been locked in a court battle attempting to defund 32 public charter schools authorized by Bay Mills Community College.

"Everyone needs to realize that charter schools are in the public school family," Wilbur said. "Anyone who thinks otherwise is just wrong."

Granholtz in the fall of 2005 sent a letter to an advisory committee overseeing the Detroit Public Schools transition back to an elected school board that indicated she would not support any discussion from DPS calling for a ban on charter schools.

"The committee put together a draft letter that called not just for a cap on charter schools, but eliminating them altogether," Wilbur said. "The governor thought that was a very extreme solution."

DPS at the time was moving back to an elected school board after five years of state control.

"The governor basically told them the focus needed to be on having more good schools and giving more options to parents on where they want to send their kids," Wilbur said. "Talking about eliminating the competition would not have been a

Gubernatorial candidates share education thoughts with MER

The primary election is over, and to no one's surprise, Jennifer Granholtz and Dick DeVos are the Democrat and Republican candidates for governor. Both have spent a great deal of time during this election season talking about jobs, Michigan's future and education – and how the three are so closely related. Both want to make education in Michigan better, but both have very different ideas on how to accomplish that goal.



good thing."

Wilbur said Granholtz's support of new graduation requirements will help more people earn what she calls "tickets of value."

"No one's education should end in high school," Wilbur said. "That saying pretty much drives our policy. There aren't many jobs that are suited to just a high school diploma alone."

Wilbur said the new high school graduation requirements will help expose more students to more options.

"No ninth or tenth grader should be making decisions about their future that limits their options," Wilbur said. "They can end up closing off whole areas of life."

While Granholtz in the past has said she would like to see a higher percentage of Michigan residents earn college degrees, Wilbur said she realizes a bachelor's degree is not for everyone.

"Whether it's a four-year degree, a Ph.D., an associate's degree or a six-month training course for phlebotomists, people need some broad sweep of specialized training."

Toward that goal, Granholtz supports a change in the Michigan Merit Award scholarship. Rather than giving \$2,500 to high school graduates who score well on the MEAP to use toward college costs, she wants \$4,000 available for students who pursue some type of post-secondary education, including community colleges and vocational training programs. The money would be awarded in stages, with \$1,000 for each student in their first two years of school, and another \$2,000 after completing two years.

"That way, the students have some sweat equity in their education," Wilbur said. "There are lots of people who continue on in school and have great success, but they're never going to score in the top half of a standardized test."

While Granholtz has not publicly come out in support of the November ballot measure that would require mandatory funding increases for public schools, she has worked with the Legislature to boost the minimum foundation grant. She does not, however, favor mandating a certain percentage of that money be spent in certain ways.

"The 65 percent issue is really an artificial distinction," Wilbur said.

"It's not as if you can say that some spending in schools is for the kids and others is not. We don't believe you can accomplish more in the classroom by eliminating a bus driver or a school social worker."

Granholtz also disagrees with individual merit pay for teachers, as well as any sweeping changes to the way districts acquire health insurance for employees.

"There are competing interests in the health insurance debate," Wilbur said. "One side feels it's important to offer good benefits to attract the best and the brightest, while the other side feels a need to control costs. That's what the bargaining process is for, to sort out those issues."

As for merit pay, Wilbur said Granholtz does support it if done in a "collective" manner for teachers.

When you use merit pay, it should be something that pulls people together and encourages teamwork," Wilbur said. "Like challenging a whole building to improve."

DeVos favors merit pay, insurance reform

Vouchers: "I have set that aside"

DeVos, 50, is most well known in education circles for his involvement with the failed voucher ballot initiative in 2000. The measure, which would have allowed parents to spend a portion of the state per-pupil allowance to send their children to an independent school, was defeated by a 70-30 margin.

"The Constitution of Michigan is what it is," DeVos recently told The Grand Rapids Press. "The people of Michigan spoke clearly on their concern about the voucher proposal we put forward. I have set that aside."

DeVos has said he will not pursue the voucher issue if elected governor, although he and his wife, Betsy, have remained active and involved in school choice issues over the years. According to The Press, the DeVos family has given

some \$7 million since 1999 in their fight to expand school choice issues, including support for vouchers, tax credits, charter schools – and the candidates who support such reform policies. All Children Matter, a Grand Rapids-based foundation DeVos founded, has given money to those candidates nationwide. The privately-funded Education Freedom Fund, which gives scholarships to low-income families who want to send their children to independent schools, has spent about \$3.6 million over the past three years, according to the Grand Rapids Institute for Institutional Democracy.

"Dick is a practical guy," Greg McNeily, DeVos's campaign manager, told Michigan Education Report. "As far as Michigan is concerned, the voters have spoken decisively about vouchers. Now it's time to fix education for all kids and it has to be done in a context that doesn't include vouchers."

McNeily said DeVos is "passionate" about education, and does pay attention to the nuances of



education reform that is occurring in other states.

In his "Turn Michigan Around Plan," DeVos lays out several education policy ideas and initiatives without once mentioning vouchers or tax credits. The 64-page document, which covers everything from jobs to agriculture to taxes, discusses what the candidate thinks Michigan needs to do to promote a competitive, successful educational atmosphere for the new century.

For example, DeVos supports incentive-based pay for teachers, as well as reforming the way health insurance is made available to public school employees, two areas where the Michigan Education Association union and DeVos disagree strongly.

"Dick knows that changing the way health insurance is delivered to teachers can be done so that we not only maintain the same high quality they're getting now at a more competitive rate, but that \$200 million dollars a year that can be saved can be directed toward the classroom, or maybe even toward more teacher compensation," McNeily said.

Aside from merit pay, DeVos also supports alternative certification and other incentives for people who want to teach math and science, especially for working professionals who have real-life experience in

those fields.

"The fact that a Nobel laureate can't teach in a Michigan high school is just insane," McNeily said. "We don't live in a single-career environment anymore. People change careers four, five, six times now. And with early retirement, a lot of people could bring some phenomenal life experiences to the teaching profession."

DeVos, who served on the Michigan State Board of Education and the Grand Valley State University Board of Trustees, did support the changes made by the Legislature that put in place mandated curriculum requirements for high school graduation.

The increased graduation requirements is just the beginning," McNeily said. "They have to be supported now, and there's a lot of recruitment to do in getting the most qualified math and science teachers in the schools to teach these subjects."

McNeily said alternative certification can be a short-term solution to that problem.

"It's really going to hit us in the fall of 2008, when those eighth graders roll over into high school," he said.

Although the idea behind the change in graduation requirements was to make Michigan more competitive by increasing the number of students who leave high school ready to go to college, McNeily said DeVos supports enhancing opportunities for those who do not plan on attending four-year universities, including community college programs, trades and technical training.

"College is certainly a goal, but it's not for everyone," McNeily said. "We still have to help those who don't go, so they can have the opportunity to realize all of their potential and talents."

While Michigan continues to spend record levels of public dollars on public schools, DeVos's plan calls for guidelines to spend more of that money in the classroom. His "Turn Michigan Around Plan" says that only 57 percent of the tax dollars allocated to public schools actually reach the classroom, which ranks Michigan 49th in that category. Often called the "65 percent solution," DeVos's plan sets that amount as a minimum for the amount of funding spent on classroom needs.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, an arm of the U.S. Department of Education, "classroom" spending includes teachers, aides, supplies, field trips and activities. It does not include administration, operations and maintenance, food service, transportation, teacher training or support staff such as nurses and counselors.

"That should be a bare minimum," McNeily said. "Spending most of the money on teachers and students only makes sense." ♦

| COMMENTARY

Character Makes the Difference



Lawrence W. Reed

It's time for another school year to start. Last spring's high school and college graduates are off to new lives, new challenges, new adventures. If this year was like most others, graduates were told a hundred different ways that "you are the future."

I recently took a different approach by starting a commencement address with these words: "I want to talk to you about one thing that is more important than all the good grades you've earned, more important than all the degrees you'll accumulate, and indeed, more important than all the knowledge you'll ever absorb in your lifetimes. It's something over which every responsible, thinking adult has total, personal control

and yet millions of people every year sacrifice it for very little. It will not only define and shape your future, it will put both a concrete floor under it and an iron ceiling over it. It's what the world will remember you for more than probably anything else. It's not your looks, it's not your talents, it's not your ethnicity and ultimately, it may not even be anything you ever say. I'm talking about your character."

Twenty years ago, school officials in Conyers, Ga., discovered that one of their basketball players who had played 45 seconds in the first of the school's five post-season games had actually been scholastically ineligible. They returned the state championship trophy the team had just won a few weeks before. If they had simply kept quiet, probably no one else would have ever known about it and they could have retained the trophy.

The team and the town, dejected though they were, rallied behind the school's decision. The coach said, "We didn't know he was ineligible at the time ... but you've got to do what's honest and right and what the rules say. I told my team that people forget the scores of the games; they don't ever forget what you're made of."

In the minds of most, it didn't matter that the championship title was forfeited.

The coach and the team were still champions — in more ways than one.

Character is what the coach and the players in Conyers possessed. People like me who have never met them will be telling that story for a long, long time. People who do know them surely must admire and look up to them with great pride and respect.

A deficit of character is revealed every time somebody knows the right thing to do, but neither defends it nor does it because it might result in discomfort or inconvenience.

When a person spurns his conscience and fails to do what he knows is right, he subtracts from his character. When he evades his responsibilities, succumbs to temptation, foists his problems and burdens on others, or fails to exert self-discipline, he subtracts from his character. When he is so self-absorbed he ceases to be of service to others unless there's something in it for him, he subtracts from his character. When he attempts to reform the world without reforming himself first, he subtracts from his character.

A person's character is nothing more and nothing less than the sum of his choices. You can't choose your height or race or many other physical traits, but you fine tune your character every time you decide right from wrong and what you personally are going to

do about it. Your character is further defined by how you choose to interact with others and the standards of speech and conduct you practice.

It is on this matter that the fate of liberty has always depended. A free society flourishes when people pursue honor, honesty and propriety at whatever the cost in material wealth, social status or popularity. It descends into barbarism when people abandon what's right in favor of self-gratification at the expense of others; when lying, cheating and stealing are winked at instead of shunned. If you do not govern yourself, you will be governed.

Character means that there are no matters too small to handle the right way. Cutting corners because "it won't matter much" or "no one will notice" still knocks you down a notch and can easily become a slippery slope.

In history, the men and women we most admire and best remember are those whose character inspires us to personal excellence. Academic achievement is always laudable but superlative character will always take you farther. ♦

Lawrence W. Reed is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich.

| COMMENTARY

Double-but-Nothing: More Education Spending Hasn't Yielded Better Results



Ryan S. Olson

A proposal likely to appear on the November ballot would change Michigan law to mandate annual inflationary education expenditures. But the results of government education spending over the last several decades have shown little that would lead us to think simply spending more would improve schools. In large part, this is because schools generally operate without significant institutional incentives for producing improved results.

Consider this: In what service sector have inputs more than doubled over three decades, while outputs have remained stagnant? If you answered, "Public education," go to the head of the class.

In both Michigan and the nation at large, the amount spent per student in public education has more than doubled since 1970, even after inflation is factored out. Compare that doubling of expenditure to students' performance on the federally administered National Assessment of Educational Progress. The most recent average reading and mathematics scores on that test are virtually identical to the scores in the early 1970s.

Our educational institutions usually do not create incentives for instructional improvement by rewarding effective teachers and sanctioning ineffective ones.

Student achievement has remained stagnant or slightly worsened by other measures, too, including achievement gaps, graduation rates, Scholastic Assessment Test results and international test scores, according to Harvard Professor Paul E. Peterson and education researcher Herbert J. Walberg.

However, following the logic of the proponents of this spending mandate, Michigan citizens should disregard the relationship between more money and unchanged results. Is this reasonable? Simple observations of the market reveal that firms strive to create value by keeping costs low, while simultaneously increasing the quality and quantity of the goods or services demanded by consumers.

The contention that these fundamental principles don't work in government schools has long been discussed by educa-

tion policy scholars such as Eric Hanushek, who found a decade ago that education sector productivity, or the ratio of outputs to inputs, "is falling at 3.5 percent per year relative to low productivity sectors of the economy."

Such a finding appears contrary to common sense, since our experience tells us that having more money makes individuals' lives better than having less money does.

Based on this perception, many people seem to believe that the worst performing schools are those spending the least per student. But this is not the case. Take, for example, the 117 Michigan public schools that have failed to meet federal and state standards under the No Child Left Behind Act for five or more consecutive years. Calculations based on recently released data from the Michigan Department of Education show that 89 percent of those consistently failing schools are in districts that rank in the top quarter of all districts in terms of per-pupil expenditures for operations.

A primary reason for this disparity between spending and achievement is the relatively weak incentives for schools to improve, a problem researched by Hanushek and others.

One vital area of education that lacks meaningful improvement incentives is instruction, an area of operations that accounts for more than half of all education spending. Instruction of students, a school's primary mission, is an activity that takes place largely in classrooms with teachers. Teachers' pay is usually based on a "uniform salary schedule" that gives raises according to increasing years of employment and the highest educational degree attained, as noted by a recent Harvard University study of collective bargaining.

Since the mid-1980s, median teaching experience has hovered at about 15 years. Moreover, from 1961 to 2001, the percentage of teachers with master's degrees increased from about 23 percent to 56 percent. This means that public education employers are maintaining an "experienced," highly educated workforce, even though their spending on labor is hardly ever connected to outcomes.

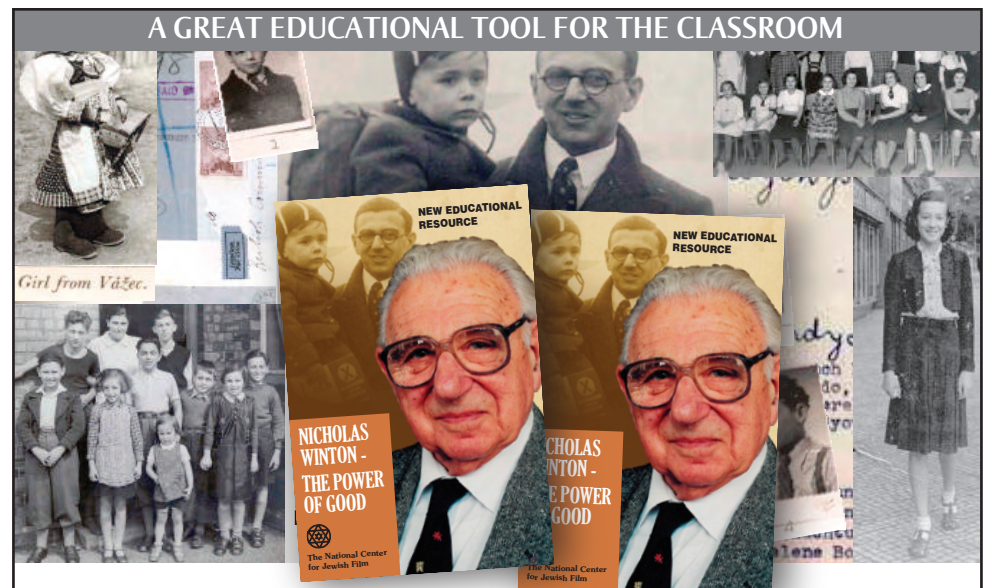
In other words, our educational institutions usually do not create incentives for

instructional improvement by rewarding effective teachers and sanctioning ineffective ones, even though the effectiveness of teaching in the classroom is the most important factor in student achievement.

The fact that measures of educational results have been stagnant or even slightly declining over the past several decades ought to alert Michigan citizens that simply hiking school spending — as we've already been doing for decades — will do nothing

by itself to improve learning for Michigan's children. In fact, increased spending distracts us from addressing the lack of incentives for public schools to fulfill their most vital mission: the quality instruction of students. ♦

Ryan S. Olson is director of education policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich.



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DIVERSE VIEWPOINTS

Should public school board members be required to have children enrolled in the district they serve?

YES: It's a matter of public trust

NO: All taxpayers have a vested interest in the quality of public schools



Henry Hatter

Men and women elected to a board of education provide a valuable and critical service to the school district and community at-large. The board is entrusted with a mandate, a roadmap if you will, for the development and implementation of educational programs beneficial to all students in the district. The board of education is the platform that sets the tone and environment on which all community institutions depend for fundamental leadership to the emerging generation of new leaders. It touches the business community, our senior citizens and many aspects of community life. Our youth rely on these educational leaders for guidance and direction.

Board members who choose to send their children to another district, a private school or home school demonstrate little confidence in the very public school system in which they have been elected to serve. Any candidate who seeks the position of board of education trustee, under the auspices of "doing the public will," ought to follow the principle of what's good for the public served is also good for the self. A board member who does not use the local school district abandons this creed. While this practice is legal, the action demonstrates poor leadership and destroys the public trust. Such actions are similar to the CEO of General Motors driving a Toyota or Detroit Tigers' Manager Jim Leyland rooting for the Chicago White Sox.

Citizens elected to the board of education should be the first in line to champion for their own district. Whatever the reason for sending their children to another district—smaller class size, low test scores or another reason—the board member should work to improve those issues rather than abandon the district, and the students, they were elected to protect and serve. By abandoning the public good in favor of their own individual interests, those persons, who practice in one of the most important and respectable professions in our communities, abuse and mislead both their students and communities. Board members with school-age children who do not attend the local district also take more than \$7,000 from that district, which further jeopardizes the delicate financial situation of Michigan public schools.

These are conflicting loyalties that collide with the philosophy of current mainstream education leaders. A board member may not be justified in pursuing such an action for a personal reason or for an ideology. When a board member is compelled to change the district they represent after a loss of confidence and/or faith in the district they represent, an honorable way to accomplish this task is to resign from that board and take up residency in the district of choice. These views divide the community, the board and take the focus away from student achievement. They cut into the heart of the current principles of self-governance, local control and self-determination so characteristic of the American education system.

No public servants share this distinction more than the men and women elected to a board of education. Early in their careers, board members with eager and enthusiastic voices cheer the opportunity to serve the students in their respective school districts. They promise and agree, unequivocally, to support the education framework, advocate for resources vital to stability, secure a positive and safe learning environment and represent the collective goals of the community, taxpay-

ers and parents of the children they serve. In exchange, they are given the highest badge of honor persons of this distinction can ever earn—public trust.

The requirements of a school board trustee are simple. Any ordinary citizen can be elected to a board position in any community provided they are a resident of the district and 18 years old. However, any resident elected to a local board of education has a primary obligation, to the office itself and to the oath of office they pledge, to serve the education interests of the people in their district.

I believe that every school district can become better. As a long time resident of Clio, I have observed over the years, the strength, weaknesses, challenges and opportunities for Clio Schools. I am in my 17th year on the Clio Board of Education. All of my children were born in Clio and all graduated from Clio schools. The quality of education each received translated into college degrees and professional careers. I can't say I was or am personally responsible for the better-than-average quality of Clio Schools, but I can say that I consistently advocate and promote ever increasing academic standards, while some trustees in remote districts resist, citing state or federal interference as an excuse to do nothing. As a result, I have earned the public trust for a persistent belief in Clio Schools, for advocacy of funds and continuous program improvements in raising student achievement. For this, I feel that I have been amply rewarded if not by the 5,000 students whose hands I have shaken over the years as they cross the graduation platform, then certainly for the public trust bestowed on me by my supporters and my critics.

Consider the alleged case of a school's dilemma in which some educators—like a maverick board member—have so little faith in their own institution that they, in small circles, proudly hail that they are sending their children to schools surrounding their district. Nothing can be more distasteful and psychologically damaging to students who discover themselves in the helpless situation of being abandoned by the leaders of their school district. Educators and parents who practice this option may do so and call it choice under their rights as parents or their rights under the law. They would be right. There is however, a greater reality.

The abandonment of one's own district eats away at the very foundation the board member was elected to uphold. If a board member abandons their commitment to the students in the district they promised to support with public dollars, the practice becomes sacrilegious. Several teachers and board members have attempted to make the case that it's OK to publicly proclaim choice over the public good when his or her child is a subject of concern. (I would argue that *all* students are subjects of concern!) Even so, it's a tough sell and not likely to be supported by the majority of education supporters or critics. If the practice were challenged in court it would likely be found contrary to the legislative intent on which boards of education were founded.

Those who are elected to the board of education have been entrusted with the futures of children and ultimately their success. Such trust requires unwavering confidence and support that goes beyond the self. A member of the board of education has a sacred obligation to be an advocate for its children, in action as well as in spirit. Our children deserve no less!

Henry Hatter is a trustee on the Clio Board of Education.



Wendy Day

As a recently elected school board member who does not have children in the public schools, I ran for the position for both practical and philosophical reasons.

Abraham Lincoln said that the philosophy of the school house in this generation will be the philosophy of the government in the next. With that in mind, everyone in America has a vested interest in the quality of our public education system. They also have a responsibility to hold local school boards and administrations accountable for what the schools are teaching our community's children and how they are spending our tax dollars.

Public education began as a way to increase literacy and ensure that every American child received a basic education. That slowly changed, over time, as we can see from John Dewey's statement in the 1930s that, "You can't make socialists out of individualists—children who know how to think for themselves spoil the harmony of the collective society which is coming, where every one is interdependent."

As this example of "education reform" has taken hold in the past 60 years, government, including schools, has become increasingly involved in our lives. From welfare to tax increases to proposed national health care, America seems to be sliding towards socialism. I find this trend both dangerous and disastrous for our country. The role public schools play in this trend, and challenges facing our local schools, prompted me to run for the Howell School Board.

Some have labeled me a "right-wing radical." A recent letter in our local paper said that people should fear me. The truth is I am a former liberal, pro-choice, feminist, who jumped ship in 2000 and voted for George W. Bush. I graduated from public school in California. I am a mother of three, a college instructor and a military wife. My children are home-schooled and I enjoy the time I spend with them. I embrace my role as both mother and teacher. I can now add School Board Trustee to my list of activities.

I don't believe that having children in the public school system makes someone any more or less qualified to serve on a school board. In fact, it could be argued that their children's presence may result in a conflict of interest. It is hard enough to make the tough decisions facing school boards without having to face your child's teacher or bus driver at the end of the school day.

We can benefit from school board members who come from outside the system. Our schools have become a bastion of groupthink. We need fresh perspectives about how to approach education. Board members can bring invaluable experience to the table. For example, a recent Howell School Board member owned an insurance agency and was able to give guidance on insurance issues. The board member who replaced him is a civil engineer who will prove a great resource as we finish building our new high school. By bringing in professionals with varied backgrounds, our schools will have more expertise to draw upon as they make decisions.

Board members need the courage to stand for what they believe in. Instead of following the prescribed "unified front," board members need to ask the tough questions and hold their administrators accountable. I believe the public wants to see how and why decisions are made, not just the outcome.

Schools are too important to have board business conducted in between, instead of at, board meetings. Current trends in school board training place too much emphasis on harmony, at the expense of good public discussion.

Board members should have a keen awareness of what public schools were and were not meant to do for our children. Schools are designed to give our children a foundational education. This foundational education should focus on helping them to reach their potential as a scholar, not as a person. Schools were not meant to be health clinics, job training facilities, day care centers, social welfare agencies or agents for social change. Schools need to get back to the basics of teaching a foundational education.

The oppressive mandates and regulations that come from federal and state governments need to be curbed. Nationwide test scores are not improving, even with all of the new laws regarding curriculum. The lowest performing schools may be getting better, but why subject all schools to these regulations when some are doing just fine?

Parents who have pulled their kids out of public schools have left for a reason. I pulled my kids out after much thought, research and discussion with my husband. He was deployed to Iraq last year for a 15-month assignment. His mission was dangerous and his absence was difficult on our family. My children were struggling with this tense and scary experience. This seemed like a good time to bring the children home to be schooled.

The second reason was that I wanted more control over what they are learning and when. Home-school parents can move ahead in a subject when the child is ready. We can also tailor the lessons to meet the needs of our child. Public school teachers simply don't have that luxury. Third, I am concerned about moral issues in our public schools. There is a general trend toward an "anything goes" environment that is often hidden behind the banner of tolerance. My children get one chance at an education. It is my responsibility as a parent to make sure they get the best education possible. For our family, that means home schooling. With more and more parents opting out of the public school system, it is time school boards and administrators started finding out why they are leaving.

Even though the numbers of parents choosing not to send their children to public schools is on the rise, 80 percent of students still graduate from public schools. These young adults will become the business owners and leaders of tomorrow. If our future government depends on the condition of the public schools today, every person should pay attention and get involved in what is happening in our schools. Whether or not they have children in those schools is irrelevant. I hope to bring to the table a healthy discussion about where our schools are headed and how best to spend the tax dollars we have been given. Will I put my kids back in the public schools, as some have asked? My husband and I are taking one year at a time. So far, home schooling is working for us. My goal as a school board member is to improve our schools for all students, not just mine.

Wendy Day was the top vote-getter among six candidates in May for a seat on the Howell board of education.

**Diverse Viewpoints are the opinions of the authors and not those of Michigan Education Report.
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