

# MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

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Fall 2007

## SHORT SUBJECTS

**Advertising is permitted on school district buses**, though a Michigan State Police bus inspector had told Ypsilanti school officials that existing ads had to be removed. The agency's Traffic Safety Division now says the policy is under review.

**Single gender schools or classes have the support of a state legislator who says he is drafting a bill that would allow the change in Grand Rapids.** Sen. Bill Hardiman, R-Kentwood, said his bill would specifically target a single-gender school for young women. A similar measure passed in 2006 applied to Detroit Public Schools.

**School districts in Leelanau County paid about \$15,222** to hold separate elections instead of coordinating dates with other local government units, the Leelanau Enterprise reported recently. School districts generally can avoid election costs by holding elections on the same day as other government units. Area superintendents said they plan to examine the issue further.

**Black River Public School has introduced teacher merit pay**, setting aside \$60,000 for the program, school officials told The Grand Rapids Press. The program will be based on academic goals set and assessed by teams of teachers from specific subjects and grades. Black River is a public school academy in Holland.

**A retired Michigan Teacher of the Year** who helped to write a report on performance pay said she has been told

SHORT SUBJECTS, Page 5

## Better writing: High-scoring schools say it's not easy

Curriculum director: 'There is no magic program'

Good writing scores are hard to come by in the Michigan Educational Assessment Program, but a few school districts are producing students who are the exceptions.

While reading and math scores generally improved on fall 2006 MEAP tests, the number of students who met or exceeded writing expectations fell in four of six grades tested. In addition, writing scores generally trailed reading scores by 10 to 40 percentage points, particularly in early grades.

But Okemos Public Schools, near Lansing, and Vanguard Academy, a charter public school in Wyoming, Mich., have better news to report. Michigan Education Report talked with Patricia Trelstad, assistant superintendent at Okemos, and Valerie Masunas, eighth grade English teacher at Vanguard, about their schools' respective scores, which bested the state average by as much as 30 percentage points in recent years.

A number of factors con-

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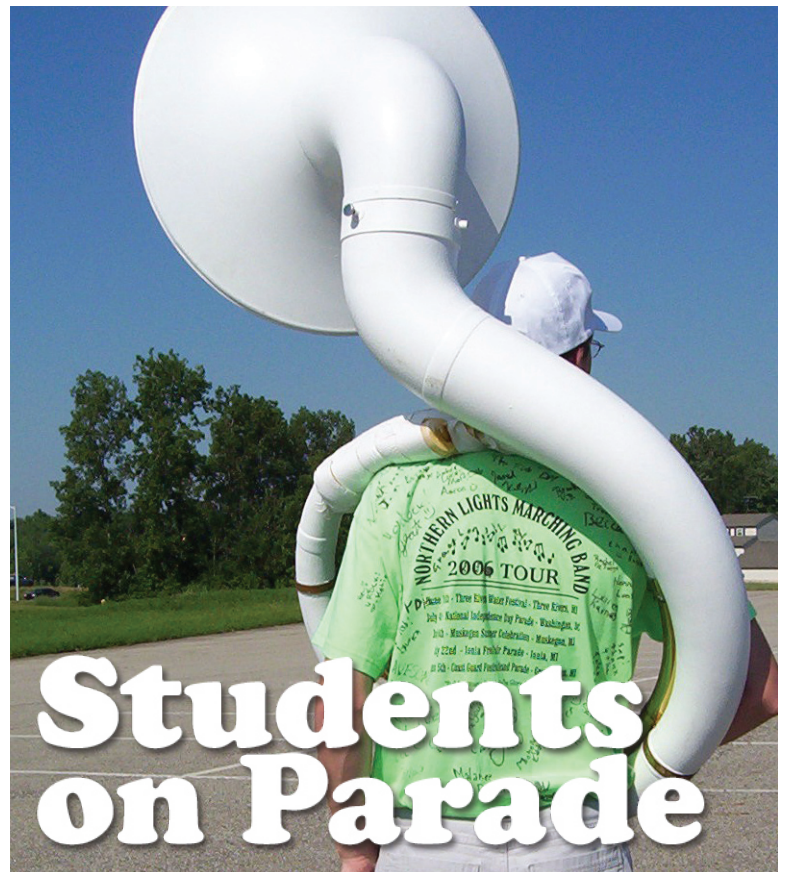
## 'A PLUS' plan would permit states to opt out of NCLB

Other groups wrangle over ways to make law more flexible

As Michigan educators testified before Congress this year on ways to improve No Child Left Behind, a Michigan congressman has proposed giving states the right to opt out of the federal act altogether.

Never an NCLB supporter, U.S. Rep. Pete Hoekstra has introduced legislation that he says would return more freedom and flexibility to states in determining how to spend federal funding for education. A Republican, Hoekstra represents Michigan's 2nd Congressional district, which spans 11 counties along the central Lake Michigan shoreline.

As proposed, "Academic Partnerships Lead Us to Success," or A PLUS, would allow a state to submit a "declaration of intent" to the U.S. Department of Education under which the state agrees to take full responsibility for the education of its



Luke March, tuba player, heads toward the practice field at the Home School Building in Wyoming, where The Northern Lights Marching Band meets on Wednesdays. March is wearing a souvenir T-shirt from the band's 2006 parade season. (Story pg. 8)

## Students on Parade

students. The state would continue to receive federal funding, but would not be subject to the requirements of NCLB and instead could spend the money according to its own educational priorities.

Accountability wouldn't suffer, Hoekstra said, because states still would be required to establish their own assessment programs and report their progress. The difference is that local communities and parents would

hold the schools accountable, not the federal government, he said.

"NCLB clearly has moved a lot of decisions away from the state, local communities and parents," he said. "Parents have come to feel they are irrelevant in the education of their children. The most important ingredient in determining whether a child will learn ... has been exorcised out of the process."

Hoekstra introduced the bill

NCLB, Page 11

## CONTRACTING

### How schools can optimize cost and quality

Primer discusses 5 Ws of hiring firms to provide support services

The number of public school districts in Michigan that hire companies to provide custodial, transportation and food services is on the rise, and a new book from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy explains how the process works and how schools can gain the benefits and avoid the pitfalls of competitive contracting.

"A School Privatization Primer for Michigan School

Officials, Media and Residents" describes the frequency of privatization in Michigan and nationwide, details the contracting process and offers "rules of thumb" for school districts new to this management practice. The author is Michael D. LaFaive, the Mackinac Center's director of fiscal policy. The Mackinac Center also publishes Michigan Education Report.

"Knowledge about competitive contracting is hard to find in a central source that is focused on the needs of schools, specifically schools in Michigan,"

CONTRACTING, Page 2

## Show me the money

MACKINAC CENTER BOOK EXPLAINS HOW MICHIGAN PAYS FOR K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS

More than \$19 billion — at last count — makes its way from taxpayers to Michigan public schools each year, according to a new book published by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy that explains public school financing.

At 180 pages, "A Michigan School Money Primer," is a comprehensive overview of the system of state, federal, local and intermediate district tax revenues that pays for public schooling, as well as the state and local school budgeting processes that determine how the money is allocated and spent. The primer also explains how the state constitution and various Michigan statutes, as well as court decisions, affect school financing.

"Our desire was to produce an accurate, thorough and objective overview for anyone involved or interested in how

public school dollars are raised, channeled and spent," said Ryan S. Olson, director of education policy at the Mackinac Center. He, along with Michael D. LaFaive, the center's director of fiscal policy, coauthored the book. The primer is designed both for readers who know little about school finance but would like to learn more, and for those already familiar with the system who would like a broader understanding of it, Olson said.

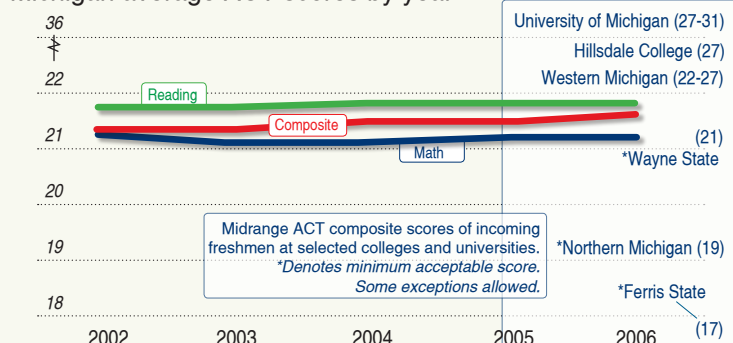
The primer opens with an introduction to more than 25 revenue sources that channel money to Michigan school districts, explaining those as well known as the local property tax to those as little known as housing project service fees. The Michigan Lottery, for example, contributed about \$688 million to the Michigan School Aid fund in 2006, or about 5.5 percent of the \$12 billion School Aid Fund that year.

In the next section, the authors explain how state legislators disburse money to local and intermediate school districts and charter public schools, and the process used to determine the "foundation allowance," or how much each school district will receive per pupil each year. In

SHOW ME THE MONEY, Page 2

## EDUCATION AT A GLANCE

Michigan average ACT scores by year



The ACT test covers English, mathematics, reading and science. Individual scores may vary from 1 (low) to 36 (high). This graph shows average scores in reading and math among Michigan students who took the test in the years indicated. The composite score is the average of the four test scores. Source: 2006 ACT National Score Report

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## BURT TOWNSHIP TEACHERS VOTE OUT MEA, NEA

### BURT TOWNSHIP EDUCATION ASSOCIATION NOW A 'LOCAL-ONLY' UNION

Teachers in the Burt Township School District, Grand Marais, have voted to become a "local-only" union, ending their membership in both the Michigan Education Association and National Education Association. The announcement was made in a press release issued by the Association of American Educators, which assisted the Burt Township educators in the process.

Members of the BTEA had been considering the change since November 2006. All of the group's members agreed to request the decertification election, which is handled by the Michigan Employment Relations Commission.

The Burt Township School District is located in Alger County in the Upper Peninsula. District enrollment is approximately 70 students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

"Teachers are looking forward to making decisions regarding their terms and conditions of employment without the outside interference and the excessive dues," elementary teacher Brent Hammer was quoted in the press release. Michigan Education Report was not able to reach Hammer directly for comment.

The teachers' most recent contract with the school district expired on June 30, so the BTEA now will be responsible for negotiating a new contract. According to the release, each member of the BTEA will save about \$650 per year by not paying state and national union dues. The group will receive professional services such as liability insurance from AAE, a nonprofit professional association for members of the teaching profession.

"That they took a stand and pushed forward is very significant," La Rae Munk, an attorney and AAE director of legal services, told Michigan Education Report. "Teachers should have the right to be self-governed and make their own decisions regarding their employment."

Many Michigan public school teachers are not aware of local-only union options, Munk said.

"We're doing a very poor job educating teachers that they have that possibility," she said. Munk wrote the study "Collective Bargaining: Bringing Education to the Table," published by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, in 1998. ♦

## CONTRACTING

*continued from Page One*

LaFaive said about the primer's purpose. "But the goal isn't just saving money and improving services — it's freeing district officials to focus on helping teachers in the classroom."

The primer is the third and final book in the Mackinac Center's Michigan School Management Series; the companion publications discuss collective bargaining and school finance.

"Support service privatization is no longer an exotic concept," said LaFaive. Nearly 30 percent of Michigan's conventional public school districts contracted with a firm for food services in 2006, roughly double the national rate. More than 11 percent of school districts hired companies for custodial services that year, about equal to the national rate, and about 4 percent contract for bus transportation, which the primer says is probably well below the national rate.

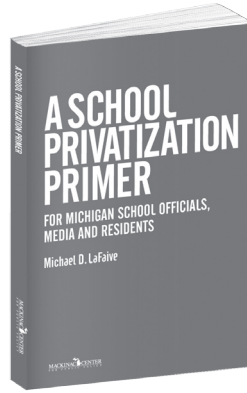
The Michigan figures are based on the Mackinac Center's own statewide surveys on school privatization, which show consistent growth in the practice from 2001 through 2006. Numbers from the 2007 survey were not complete at the time of the primer's publication or publication of this issue of Michigan Education Report.

Two factors that lead most districts to consider privatization are a desire to focus on education and the potential cost savings, according to LaFaive.

Cost savings are one reason Jackson Public Schools has extended its contract with Enviro-Clean Services through the 2009-2010 school year, according to William Hannon, deputy superintendent of finance. The district's positive experience with that firm influenced it to also contract with Professional Educational Services Group to dispatch its substitute teachers, Hannon said.

"It's going well. I would recommend it," Hannon told Michigan Education Report. The district has two contracts with Enviro-Clean, one for custodial and minor maintenance services and the other for four grounds positions.

"The price has not gone up since the first year we contracted with them," he said. The district saves approximately \$1.2 million per year through the contract. With enrollment at approximately



6,600, the savings equals \$181 per student.

Other districts, among them Howell, Northville and Dowagiac, have said they are considering contracting for support services for the first time, primarily because of potential cost savings.

Privatization efforts can be controversial, and sometimes fail, the primer notes, but school districts officials can expect a better experience if they understand in advance the contracting process and the arguments — often raised by employee unions — against privatization.

### The primer is the third and final book in the Mackinac Center's Michigan School Management Series; the companion publications discuss collective bargaining and school finance.

For example, LaFaive suggests that school districts take full advantage of the "Request for Proposal," a written document inviting bids from vendors which should spell out the services a district expects and the criteria a vendor must meet. Here the district can establish its expectations for quality, oversight, employee training, licensing and more.

"The heart and soul of a contract arrangement in the public sector and the private sector is the RFP," LaFaive said. "The number one pitfall is not getting it right the first time, because it gives a good management tool a bad name while causing pain to district employees and other members of the community."

When Jackson first investigated privatization, it reviewed the RFPs used by other districts.

"There's no need to reinvent the wheel," Hannon said. "We just tailored it to the needs of our district."

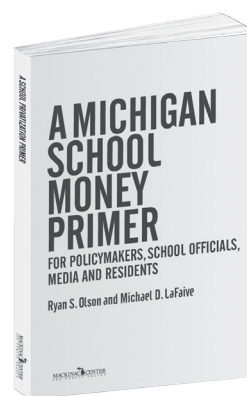
## SHOW ME THE MONEY

*continued from Page One*

addition, it explains the "categorical funding" earmarked for specific purposes such as special education or transportation.

Since 1994, the way in which Michigan's public schools are financed has been largely guided by Proposal A, a voter-approved constitutional amendment that reduced the reliance of most school districts on local property taxes and increased their reliance on state sales and property taxes. Today, most public schools receive the majority of their funding on a per-pupil basis from the state, meaning that enrollment changes can — and often do — have a significant effect on each district's budget.

Finally, the primer explains how local



school districts develop budgets and account for their spending. School districts are required to prepare an annual budget that shows the previous year's expenditures and the coming year's estimated expenditures, as well as an estimate of

revenues for the coming year and the amount of any surplus or deficit from the past year or anticipated in the current year, among other items.

### The primer "explains and simplifies what, to the outsider, can too often appear to be a complex and arcane school funding process."

Nearly 9,000 copies of the primer were sent to school district superintendents, school board members, state legislators, public libraries and reporters. In conjunction with the primer, the Mackinac Center has compiled school finance data from the Michigan Department of Education into an interactive Web database. The database may be accessed through the center's Web site and used to create reports, perform comparisons between local school districts, sort dis-

The goal of the bidding process is not to seek the lowest possible price from a vendor, but to obtain a high quality of service as well as a competitive price, the primer explains.

Once a district has decided to investigate privatization, it can expect opposition from employees whose jobs might be affected as well as from organized anti-privatization campaigns by the National Education Association and Michigan Education Association.

"Passions will also run high at board meetings," the primer notes. "Shouts, catcalls and angry language are common, and the meetings are made more uncomfortable by the larger turnout and the probable presence of reporters and television cameras."

Privatization critics often allege that companies hire unqualified workers who will pose a danger to school children. The primer responds to arguments along those lines, noting that most private vendors have an incentive to hire employees already employed by the district who have knowledge of the job, while having no incentive to hire a worker who would damage the company's reputation by putting a child at risk.

Some school districts ask vendors to give preference to current employees when hiring new staff, and districts also can establish personnel qualifications as a condition of the contract.

Another accusation frequently leveled at districts considering contracting is that vendors pay lower wages than the district pays. Those charges should be challenged with a comparative analysis, the primer suggests, adding that vendors' wages are frequently comparable. There may be a difference in benefits, however. A key reason vendors can provide services at lower cost than the district itself is that the company's employees are not public employees, and so the vendor is not required to contribute to the state employee retirement system. Those savings can be passed on to school districts. Another reason is the economy of scale that large transportation, food service and custodial companies can bring to bear on purchasing. ♦

"A School Privatization Primer" is posted on the Web at [www.mackinac.org/8691](http://www.mackinac.org/8691). Copies are available by calling 989-631-0900.

tricts by varied revenue and spending categories, and more.

"It is difficult and time consuming to teach reporters how to deal with audits, budgets and millages. Thanks to the Primer, my job just got easier," said Oscoda Press Editor Holly Nelson in an e-mail to LaFaive.

The primer "explains and simplifies what, to the outsider, can too often appear to be a complex and arcane school funding process," said Michael Williamson, former deputy superintendent for the Michigan Department of Education.

The "Michigan School Money Primer" is a companion publication to the Mackinac Center's "Collective Bargaining Primer," released earlier this year, and "A School Privatization Primer," released in June. (See related story, this issue.) The Mackinac Center also is publisher of Michigan Education Report.

The primer acknowledges the help of 20 state and local education officials, including a number of school finance administrators and Michigan Department of Education analysts. ♦

"A Michigan School Money Primer" is on the Web at: <http://www.mackinac.org/8534>. Copies may be ordered by calling 989-631-0900. The school finance database is at <http://www.mackinac.org/michiganschoolmoney>.

## MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

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## Program links education, industry to answer workforce needs

### Students need information; companies need skilled-trades workers

Bill Moneyppenny pulls out a piece of scrap paper and draws a bell curve, then splits the shape into three parts, two skinny and one fat. In this corner, he says, putting his ballpoint on the skinny area to the right, are the students who take Advanced Placement classes, join dual enrollment programs and get 4.0 grade point averages. Here, he continues, shifting the pen to the skinny category on the left, are the students who struggle through every class and will need help to find and keep a job.

But it's the students in the fat part of the bell curve — about 80 percent of all students, by Moneyppenny's estimate — who are going to become most of Michigan's workforce in the next decade. He believes educators and business leaders alike need to pay more attention to them.

"We still take this bunch (the 80 percent in the middle of the curve) and shove them into the four-year college group," Moneyppenny said.

Moneyppenny is chief executive officer of MITECH+, a private, nonprofit corporation headquartered in Midland that advocates the value of technical careers. Founded in 2001, the organization works with business, industry, educators and families to spread information and organize projects related to technical careers, career training and career planning.

Students don't need a four-year degree if they want to land a job as a chemical process operator at two nearby global companies — the Dow Chemical Co. and the Dow Corning Corp. Each company is looking for more than 100 operators annually "for the foreseeable future" to replace retiring workers, officials have said.

Hundreds of electricians, pipe fitters, welders and other skilled-trades workers will be needed shortly at Dow Corning's Hemlock Semiconductor Corp., a silicon production facility where a \$1 billion expansion was announced this year. Hundreds more will be needed if a proposal to build a coal-fired energy plant in Midland is approved. Those workers won't need a four-year degree either, but all of them will need technical training in high school and beyond.

"There's so much emphasis on college prep that sometimes I think the other side has suffered," said Anne M. DeBoer, executive director of the Dow Corning Foundation. Dow Corning executives were involved in MITECH+'s earliest stages, along with others from business, industry, education and economic development organizations. The Dow Corning Foundation and seven other Midland-area foundations provided start-up funding. Four of those provide ongoing support.

"It really was self-interest and survival," she explained the corporation's interest in MITECH+. Dow Corning currently draws about one-third of its workforce from the Saginaw Valley area, and if it's going to continue to do that, it needs to find students who took math and science in high school and are interested in a career in skilled trades.

"We need those kids in the workforce. We need them badly. The idea of MITECH+ is to bring a lot of these resources together," she said. "We're in a global marketplace and people in this country need to understand that."

That's not just a Midland area phenomenon, Moneyppenny said.

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that the number of unskilled jobs dropped from 60 percent of the labor force to 15 percent from 1950 to 2005. The number of professional jobs remained steady at 20 percent during the same time period. The number of skilled jobs, however, jumped from 20 percent of the labor force to 65 percent.

In its 2006 position paper, "Reinventing

the American High School," the American Career and Technical Education Association said that today's high schools should offer students "rigorous core knowledge" classes and career-related learning experiences in high school, followed by a "full spectrum of college opportunities."

"They (future workers) won't just need a strong back and a good work ethic. They need strong math skills and strong science skills," Moneyppenny said. "Slowly, people are getting this, but in Michigan we're way behind the curve."

At Dow Corning, the company needs students who took advanced math and science classes, have mechanical aptitude and a desire to do the work, said Brad House, the firm's U.S. labor relations manager. A chemical process operator is responsible for supervising the mixing of raw materials into a finished chemical product, he explained. That includes timing the amount and order of mixing, adjusting temperatures and catalysts, doing laboratory tests on the finished product, reducing waste and suggesting improvements.

"Operators in our plants are in an extremely challenging role," he said. "We've got to get the word out that these are challenging and rewarding careers."

High wages are part of the reward, he and others pointed out. U.S. Census Bureau data shows that a skilled or technical tradesperson earned an average of \$890 a week as of 2002, compared to \$787 for a person with a bachelor's degree, \$606 for an associate degree and \$474 for a high school graduate. People with master's degrees earned an average of \$969 a week, followed by those holding a doctoral or medical degree, at \$1,269 and \$1,468, respectively.

House's job description as labor relations manager has expanded to include regular visits to high schools and career fairs to promote interest in the field as well as in the two-year chemical process degree program at nearby Delta College.

"It's not often you see manufacturing set up booths at career fairs. We didn't used to, but because of changes in the use of these skills, we need to recruit candidates," he said.

Corporations like Dow Corning can no longer afford the time, money or safety risk of training young employees on the job, he added.

"We used to interview for work ethic and attitude and then train them for skills. Now they have to have all three coming in."

Business and industry should make their needs and opportunities known by showing up at career fairs, sending employees into the classroom and inviting teachers into the workplace, Moneyppenny said. But he added that educators and parents have a role to play in Michigan's post-assembly line economy as well.

Chris Middleton of Bay City is an example. A polite, 13-year-old middle-school student with freckled cheeks, oversized sneakers and brown hair, he hasn't chosen a career. But when he's ready to decide, he'll already know quite a bit about construction, welding and chemical processing as a participant in two summer camps.

One of those was a construction and manufacturing camp sponsored in July by MITECH+ and Delta College, with support from the Saginaw Valley chapter of Associated Builders and Contractors. Middleton and other middle school and high school students spent a week at the college getting hands-on experience in such areas as welding, computer-assisted design, carpentry and chemical processing, with guest teachers from the workforce.

The previous summer, Middleton said, he helped build a concrete block wall, put up framing, insulation and drywall in a model house, and helped install an electrical outlet

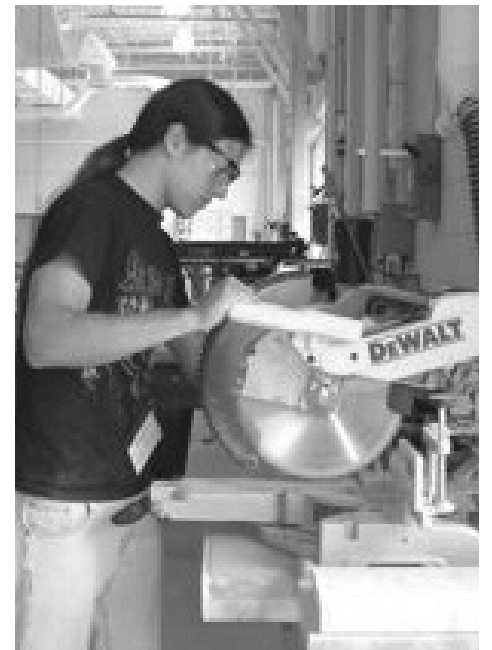
and two switches as part of a construction camp cosponsored by MITECH+ and Associated Builders and Contractors.

"This creates the pipeline from middle school to high school to college to the workforce," said Darryl White, MITECH+ executive director.

Chris' mother, Diane Middleton, said, "We've always told our kids, 'You don't have to go to college, but you have to further your education in some way after high school.'" She is employed with the Midland Area Chamber of Commerce, directing its Partnerships for Education program, and her husband, Lance, is a journeyman electrician with the Michigan Sugar Co.

"For 13 years now I've been watching business and education interact," she said. "I've been able to see just how competitive it's becoming. I don't think it's ever too early to think about what you want to do for the rest of your life."

In addition to the summer camp, MITECH+ also cosponsors a Career Showcase in which area businesses invite students, parents and teachers to spend an evening touring their facilities and learning about career possibilities. The organization also sponsors "Reality Store" in area middle



Estevan Rocha trims floor joists that will be used in a model home project at the Construction and Manufacturing Camp sponsored by Delta College and MITECH+. Camp participants use the college's industrial arts equipment and classrooms. Rocha said he plans to take classes in building construction as a junior at Saginaw Heritage High School this fall.



Todd Ross, a junior at Merrill High School in Saginaw County, uses welding equipment at Delta College as part of a skilled trades career camp sponsored by the college and MITECH+ this summer. Camp instructors include area teachers, college faculty and skilled-trades workers from area industry.

schools, in which students spend time in advance exploring different career paths, and then choose a career for themselves. On the day of the program, the students are "given" one month's income for their chosen career and sent out to shop for such things as housing, utilities, food and health care at different work stations hosted by volunteer adults.

One Reality Store participant who chose to be a disc jockey told Moneyppenny that, "I learned I need to live close to the radio station, because I can't afford a car."

Parents need to be open to skilled-trades careers as well, Moneyppenny and others said.

"We have a lot of households that have one or two degrees held by the parents. There's earning power in those degrees and they want that for their kids," said Clark Volz, superintendent of the Midland County Educational Service Agency. One MITECH+ study of 500 "heads of households" in Midland County showed that about 46 percent held a four-year degree or higher. Of those residing within Midland Public Schools boundaries, the number jumped to 65 percent.

In comparison, Census 2000 figures showed that about 21 percent of Americans age 25 or older held bachelor's or master's degrees, and 3 percent held a professional or doctoral degree.

Nobody in business or education wants to discourage students from going to a four-year university, he and the others said, but they also said they see too many university dropouts who might have been happier in an associate degree program.

Michigan school districts vary in the amount and type of career and technical education they offer. Some offer programs in their own high schools or jointly with other high schools, local colleges or businesses. In Midland, Volz said, schools work

with area colleges, universities and businesses for programs in health care, information technology, chemical processing and cosmetology. Other school districts have their own career centers or send students to regional career centers administered through intermediate school districts. Thirty-one of Michigan's 57 intermediate school districts levied a vocational-technical education millage in 2006.

The Bay Arenac ISD Career Center offers 25 career-related programs to students, ranging from agriculture science to hospitality to nursing. Hospitality students run an on-site restaurant; medical science students attend classes at Bay Regional Medical Center, and students in the truck mechanics program might work at local businesses. The center is now adding a \$6 million health and science occupational wing.

"There are some that are always pushing the envelope," Volz said, "with work and knowledge welding together in one space."

That hands-on component pushes up the cost of career education, he added. "When you have hands-on, you have a safety component. The oversight piece is big. You can't have 35 kids in a class with a single teacher."

High school programs can and should be responsive to workforce needs — within limits, Volz said.

"What I don't think K-12 can do is reshape their school populations to accommodate momentary trends," he said. "Your child deserves some resiliency."

"We need to keep kids versatile and capable and to have competencies they'll be able to use," he said. "I think there's tremendous freedom for our kids if they have a broad range of skills." ♦



# A CHARTER CHALLENGE

## Finding an affordable building can be a hurdle

### *Financial markets showing interest in academies with track record*

Finding and financing a school building continue to be among the main challenges facing new charter public schools in Michigan, but experts say those with a proven track record are now attracting interest from financial investors.

Locating a place for a new charter school is difficult because of the expense and the building requirements. Conventional public school districts may levy a tax to raise money for new buildings or renovations; charter schools cannot. Instead, charters use part of the per-pupil aid they receive from the state, or privately raised funds, to pay for facilities.

While some charter start-ups are backed by management companies that pay for buildings up front, many new charters can't afford to build or purchase a building immediately, and lenders are less likely to provide money to a school that has yet to prove itself. Even if the seed money is in place, not all buildings are suitable for use as schools, and some conventional public school districts have said they will not sell or lease their unused buildings to charter operators.

The cumulative effect is that charters call a wide range of facilities "home" as they look for affordable and suitable spots, according to a report issued jointly by the Michigan Council of Charter School Authorizers and Charter FS Corp., a financial consulting firm.

"Charter public schools ... rely on innovative facilities arrangements and financing options to secure safe, secure learning environments for their children," the report states.

Charters are found in storefronts, modular facilities, former industrial buildings and former private or parochial schools, according to Christine Smiggen, vice president of Charter FS. Many of them open under lease-to-own agreements that let the school build a track record it can show to investors when it's time to purchase the building.

"New charter schools really need to start in a leased facility," Smiggen said. "They can't build. It's really hard for them to borrow up front like that."

"Our experience is that new charter schools can't build their own building. ... They have no financial track record, no credit. They almost have to rent," agreed John Romine, president of The Romine Group, an education service provider. The company currently manages five charter schools in Michigan, but has worked with 18 schools over the years and helped a dozen of those find facilities.

Smiggen and Romine both said that charters that stay the course — those whose contracts are renewed by their respective authorizers and show stable enrollment — are beginning to attract financial investors who see the schools as a viable investment.

The U.S. Department of Education has also entered the scene, recently announcing a \$6.5 million grant for the Michigan Public Educational Facilities Authority through the federal Credit Enhancement for Charter Schools Facilities program. The grants are designed to help charter schools increase credit worthiness and help them obtain facilities funding.

"Charter schools are one of the fastest-growing sources of school choice in American education today, but many can't obtain financing for the facilities they need to house their schools," Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings said in announcing

the grant. "These grants will help communities open up new spaces to charter schools so that, in turn, these schools can open their doors to new students."

In some of the state's largest urban areas, charter organizers can't look to conventional public school districts for school sites. Even though a number of districts have buildings for sale (See "School for sale," this issue), at least two large districts have said publicly that they will not sell or lease their buildings to a charter organization or to a third party acting on behalf of a charter.

Detroit Public Schools plans to close more than 30 buildings this year and next, but the Detroit Free Press reported that the board of education adopted a resolution not to make the buildings available to charter operators. The Lansing School District, which has put eight vacant school buildings on the market since spring of 2006, said it would not sell one of its empty elementary schools to the Mid-Michigan Leadership Academy, a charter school that was renting space at the nearby state-owned Michigan School for the Blind.

Lansing Board of Education member Hugh Clarke Jr. was asked by local media about selling property to a charter operation. He was quoted as saying, "From an ideological standpoint, it might be difficult for me to swallow. ... That's almost like cutting off your nose to spite your face."

The Academy later purchased about eight acres at the School for the Blind site from the state.

The Michigan School Code states that school boards and intermediate school boards "shall not impose any deed restriction prohibiting, or otherwise prohibit, property sold or transferred by the school board ... from being used for any lawful public education purpose" without advance approval of the State Board of Education. Further, "the school board or intermediate board shall not refuse to lease or rent the property to a person solely because the person intends to use the property for an educational purpose, if the intent of the person is to use the property for a lawful educational purpose."

"It's been the law for 11 years, but people know how to get around it," said Leonard Wolfe, an attorney who helped develop the language. Wolfe, a former Michigan Senate staffer and clerk in the executive branch's legal division under former Gov. John Engler, is now an attorney in Lansing. The law doesn't require conventional school districts to sell their property to charters, he said, but is supposed to prevent them from putting advance restrictions on such sales.

"It's been a horrible situation," Romine said. In one case, he said, a conventional public district put a building up for sale, then took it off the market after a charter school showed interest.

"They took the for-sale sign down," he said, until the charter organizers found a different site.

In general, new charter operators like to buy existing schools because they require less renovation to meet school code requirements and are located in residential neighborhoods. But Sabis Educational Systems Inc., an international company with 31 private and charter schools, has converted various types of buildings to educational facilities, according to Jose Afonso, director of the board and governmental affairs.

In one case, Sabis converted a former department store to a school by installing skylights and a large central courtyard and rimming the courtyard with classrooms, Afonso said. He believes that could be a model for other schools.

"It was so cheap for us to do that," he said. The facility now houses 700 students and cost \$12 million to purchase and renovate.

As an exception to most districts refus-

ing to sell to charter operators, Sabis recently signed a purchase agreement to buy a former elementary school from Bridgeport-Spaulling Community Schools for \$150,000 as the site for its new International Academy of Saginaw. The school will be the company's second Michigan site; the first is the International Academy of Flint.

Before bidding on Kaufman Elementary School, Sabis considered putting in a bid on a two-story, 109,000-square-foot site in downtown Saginaw. They dropped the plan because there was no room for parking or a playground, "unless we used the roof, which we thought about," Afonso said.

Afonso, who formerly worked in the Massachusetts Department of Education, believes conventional school districts are shortsighted in declining bids from charter schools and that their time would be better spent improving their own operations.

"Charter schools are here to stay," he said. "This kind of opposition is an awful waste of time and energy and money. Very, very few charters have been stopped by a district's intransigence on charter schools. Charter schools are created by people who are determined to provide choice. They will find a way."

But conventional school districts have a responsibility to consider the financial impact that selling their property will have on their operation, said William Bowman, president of the Great Northern Consulting Group. Bowman's firm works with school districts to plan and carry out real estate sales. Bowman said that it doesn't necessarily make economic sense to sell property to a competitor, whether charter or private.

His company advises schools to put out requests for proposals for the purchase of school property and then determine the "net economic value" of each offer. That includes projecting how many students are likely to leave the conventional school district and attend the new school. Each student who switches schools represents a loss in state aid to the host district, he said.

If a conventional district receives three offers for a building, he said, one from a competing school, one from a project that would have no effect on school enrollment and one that would boost the conventional district's enrollment, then "purchase price is only one thing they're going to take into consideration." Royal Oak Public Schools, for example, has sold most of its elementary sites to housing developers.

Bridgeport-Spaulling put Kaufman Elementary on the market as part of a consolidation strategy, Superintendent Desmon Daniel said. In recent years the school had been used for a day care program and as an alternative education site.

"We had some extensive discussions" about selling to a charter operation, he said. The board of education voted 3-2 in May to move ahead with the purchase agreement.

"We have high-quality teachers and we believe our teachers do a more than competent job at educating our stakeholders — the students of this district," he said.

Another group — financial investors — "are finally realizing that charters are here to stay," Romine said. Charter schools that find suitable facilities and that show stable enrollment, fiscal responsibility and the trust of their authorizers are attracting attention in the bond market and from some lending institutions, added Smiggen, of Charter FS.

"There are more players coming into the marketplace," she said. Two years ago, when Charter FS looked for underwriters for academies interested in selling bonds, there was only one active investor, she said. This year, the firm's latest request for proposals brought in 10 possible buyers.

"That's a significant difference," she said. "Bankers by nature are risk-averse and nobody wants to be the first one," but now they realize, "Hey, this is a pretty good place to make money."

In Big Rapids, Crossroads Academy got its start by purchasing an empty building from Big Rapids Public Schools, according to former superintendent Dave VanderGoot. The 1928 facility had been used over the years as a high school and a middle school, but was left empty after Big Rapids built a new high school.

Crossroads opened with approximately 330 students in kindergarten through eighth-grade and today has nearly 700 in kindergarten through twelfth-grade. When they outgrew their building, they decided to build a new high school in two phases, VanderGoot said, first building nine classrooms and an office complex and, in the second phase, nine more classrooms and a gymnasium.

"We built by borrowing from a local bank," he said. "They watched our growth. ... Suddenly you have people willing to spend on charter schools."

Because they pay for facilities out of their general operating budgets, not sinking funds or debt millage levies, charters look for less-expensive options, Smiggen said. They might build over time, design multi-use rooms or go without media centers or gymnasiums.

In response to a challenge to build a school at half the normal cost, Bouma Construction has developed a model for charter school construction that it says saves money by using standardized products, design and construction methods. According to its Web site, the Grand Rapids-based company has been involved in 35 school construction or renovation projects, with an additional 10 in progress.

"They (charter schools) have got to make that foundation allowance stretch much further," Smiggen said. "They understand that and the parents understand that. I'm always amazed at some of these charter schools that have huge waiting lists and there's nothing special about the building." ♦



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Sabis Educational Services has signed a purchase agreement to buy the former Kaufman Elementary School building and grounds, shown here, from Bridgeport-Spaulling Community Schools. Sabis plans to open the International Academy of Saginaw, a public charter school, at the site.



# DISTRICTS LOOK TO CUT INSURANCE BILLS THROUGH HEALTH SAVINGS ACCOUNTS

Superintendent Bob Smith estimates his district will save more than \$200,000 on health insurance in 2008 by moving to a health savings account plan.

The Elkton-Pigeon-Bay Port Laker Board of Education and the Laker Education Association agreed to the plan as part of a new teacher contract ratified in March. The district joins a small, but growing, number of employers in the public and private sectors using the accounts, according to the U.S. Treasury.

## Health savings accounts combine a tax-free savings account earmarked for medical expenses with a high-deductible health insurance policy.

More than 100 school employee groups in Michigan, most of them administrators and support staff, now participate in HSA plans through the School Employers Trust and School Employers Group, SET SEG officials told Michigan Education Report, and one state legislator would like to require schools to offer the plans to all employees in the future. Meanwhile, the Michigan Education Special Services Association, or MESSA, is watching to see if HSAs are a “flash in the pan,” a spokesman said.

Health savings accounts combine a tax-free savings account earmarked for medical expenses with a high-deductible health insurance policy.

### EMPLOYEE OWNS MONEY

In Huron County’s Laker district, the plan calls for the district to set up a savings account for each covered employee. The district will contribute \$1,250 per individual or \$2,500 per family to each account, but the employees can add more, up to the \$2,850 individual limit or \$5,650 family limit set by the Internal Revenue Service. Those contributions are tax-deductible.

Each employee owns the money in his or her account and can draw on it to pay the deductible for the accompanying health insurance policy. Those deductibles are higher than in a traditional plan, typically \$1,250 for an individual or \$2,500 per family. Once the deductible is met, the insurance policy picks up 100 percent of the cost of eligible services, Smith said. But employees also can use the money to buy health care that isn’t covered under the policy, like surgery to correct faulty vision, or over-the-counter medication. If an employee doesn’t use all of the money in the savings account, it carries over to the next year and is added to that year’s contribution from the district.

The carryover feature is a key attraction, Smith said, allowing employees to accumulate tax-free dollars in the account. (Withdrawals for non-medical purposes are taxed and subject to a penalty until age 65. After that, withdrawals for non-medical purposes are taxed, but not subject to a penalty.)

“Once that money goes into the account, that money belongs to the employee for the rest of their life,” said Chuck Miller, SET SEG director of sales and marketing. “The hope is that they will give some thought to the best way to spend it.”

“It’s very consumer driven,” agreed Marla Kopah, an agent with Haley, Ward & Associates of Bad Axe. “It changes the way insurance works.” Haley Ward is the Laker district’s insurance company; the medical services are underwritten by Blue Cross Blue Shield.

The plan gives employees an incentive to consider the need for — and the

cost of — treatment before buying it, she said, because unspent dollars remain in the employee’s personal account. For example, employees who had no reason to think beyond the \$5 co-payment when buying prescription medication in the past now might comparison shop among pharmacies, she said.

### CONSUMER-DRIVEN EMPHASIS

“When it’s your own money, you pay attention to it,” Smith said.

“What we’re really pushing is engaging the consumer,” agreed Brian Flowerday, SET SEG operations manager.

Traditional insurance plans — which SET SEG also offers — tend to “keep people insulated from the true cost” of health care, he said. The selling point of many of those plans is that the consumer doesn’t have to worry about any costs other than a \$100 to \$200 deductible and small co-payment, he said.

“It’s a mindset change,” Miller said. “Do I really need that \$500 brand-name drug? Do I really need to go to the emergency room tonight, or could I see the doctor tomorrow?”

Employees who are already healthy tend to gain the most from HSA plans. Since they don’t spend much on health care, their savings accounts build the most from year to year.

“Some people will save no money and some will save lots,” Kopah said. People with chronic health conditions or who take prescription medication regularly are likely to spend all of the money in the savings account each year.

### “When it’s your own money, you pay attention to it.”

- Bob Smith, Superintendent  
Elkton-Pigeon-Bay Port Laker

Critics of HSA plans say they encourage people to put off medical treatment because they don’t want to spend money from their account, including money for preventive care like well-child checks.

“Medical research is starting to show that HSAs are not reducing the cost of health care,” said Gary Fralick, Michigan Education Special Services Association director of communications and government relations. MESSA is a third party that administers Blue Cross Blue Shield health insurance to a majority of Michigan school districts. MESSA was established by and is affiliated with the Michigan Education Association, a school employees union. It does not offer a health savings account plan.

HSAs may drive up costs because of consumers who delay treatment until their condition worsens and requires more-expensive care, Fralick said.

Flowerday countered: “HSAs are not about skimping on health benefits. If somebody needs to go to the emergency room, they should go to the emergency room. ... We very concertedly try to help people be wise consumers.”

### PREVENTIVE CARE

Some HSA plans exempt preventive care costs from the deductible. The SET SEG plan allows up to \$500 per family member — which is not deducted from the savings account — for preventive care, Flowerday said.

Fralick said there already are other incentives in place that “are helping people make better decisions about appropriate care.” Many teacher unions have negotiated contracts in the last two years that switched teachers from MESSA’s traditional fee-for-service plan,

SupraCare, to its less-expensive preferred provider organization. Preferred provider arrangements require consumers to select health care providers from an approved group or pay a premium out of pocket. Some districts and unions also have negotiated contracts with higher co-payments by teachers for treatment or prescription medication. Those encourage consumers to consider health care costs, Fralick said.

Under the Laker plan, the district will fund each employee’s savings account and also pay the full premium for the accompanying insurance, but still save money, Smith said.

Calling it a ballpark figure, Smith said the district could save more than \$200,000 during 2008, the year the policy takes effect. The savings come mainly from lower premiums. At about 1,000 students, the savings could equal up to \$200 per student.

MESSA also questions whether HSAs will shift costs from employer to employee, Fralick said. The Laker district is putting enough money into each employee’s savings account to cover the deductible, but “many employers don’t fund that deductible,” he asserted, or fund it initially but not in later years.

“We’re watching the market,” he said.

### HSA MANDATE?

Kopah, at Haley Ward and Associates, said that a handful of other school districts have inquired about HSA arrangements, but that “people are a little nervous taking the plunge.”

State Rep. Bruce Caswell, R-Pittsford, introduced legislation in January that would require conventional public school districts, intermediate districts and charter public schools to offer HSAs as an option beginning this year or when the school’s current collective bargaining agreement expires. House Bill 4012 was referred to the Education Committee but has not been taken up.

“My intent is to make it one more type of health care plan people can access,” Caswell said, adding that HSAs will encourage districts to “think beyond the traditional type of health care vehicles. Yes, costs are certainly one part of it, but more than cost is the opportunity to have a choice.”

School employees should have the opportunity to “build a little nest egg” using HSAs as a vehicle, he said.

The U.S. Treasury reported that 3.2 million people were covered by HSA policies in December of 2005, but projected that between 25 and 30 million would participate in HSAs by 2010. ♦

## SHORT SUBJECTS

continued from Page One

by the Michigan Education Association that she may no longer present at MEA events. Nancy Flanagan told Washington Post columnist Jay Mathews that she was contacted by the teachers union after the report, “Performance-Pay for Teachers: Designing a System that Students Deserve,” was published. The report calls for using student success and teacher leadership to help determine teacher pay, in addition to experience and a salary schedule.

**Howell Public Schools is requesting bids for competitive contracting of its custodial and transportation services** shortly after approving a new contract with teachers that is expected to cost the district \$750,000 to \$1 million more in personnel costs. According to the Daily Press and Argus, Howell’s latest contract with the Howell Education Association includes teacher pay raises and requires teachers to contribute toward their Michigan Education Special Services Association health insurance premium.

**“Schools of choice” programs were dropped, added and helped prompt a recall across Michigan this summer.** Clinton Community Schools and Saline Area Schools have become school districts of choice, but Bridgeport-Spaulding Community Schools will close enrollment to students not assigned to the district, according to media reports. Two members of the Hazel Park Schools Board of Education are being targeted for recall after voting to close two schools and to continue the Schools of Choice program.

**French language classes will be replaced with Chinese in South Lyon Community Schools beginning in 2008-2009, according to the South Lyon Herald.** Though a group of parents and students protested, administrators said that knowing the Chinese language will help students compete in the global market.

**A school custodian in the Essexville-Hampton school district has lost his job** and has pleaded not guilty to a charge of assault and battery after allegedly carrying a 7-year-old child into the principal’s office and slamming him into a chair. Ray R. Meeks, who had been a district employee for 33 years, allegedly grabbed the boy after the first-grader called him a name, the Bay City Times reported. The article said that personnel and court filings indicate Meeks was subject to discipline in the past relating to alleged excessive use of force.

**School employees are paying for extra electricity** in Grosse Pointe Public Schools this year as part of an energy-efficiency effort, and Chippewa Valley Public Schools is considering a similar system, the Detroit Free Press reported. The charges would cover certain personal items, such as air cleaners and small refrigerators.

**Cedar Point saw a 31 percent jump in attendance by Michigan travelers the year after Michigan passed a law forbidding schools from opening before Labor Day in 2005.** Ohio legislators once again are hoping to pass a similar law, an idea that crops up annually, the Cincinnati Enquirer reported. Educators dislike the idea, with one teacher union official saying education should not be put at the “mercy of the tourism industry.”

**The National Labor Relations Board has upheld a decision** requiring Dean Transportation to recognize the Grand Rapids Education Support Personnel Association as the bargaining unit representing former Grand Rapids Public Schools bus drivers. Dean hired about 100 former Grand Rapids school bus drivers in 2005 when the district privatized transportation service. Dean said the drivers rightfully belonged in the Dean Transportation Employees Union, but GRESPA said the drivers should remain in their original bargaining unit. ♦



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## SCHOOL IN FOCUS

### Walden Green Montessori

#### Walden Green Montessori: An early charter shows it has staying power

Sheryl Marshall found Walden Green Montessori in the Yellow Pages as she researched schools for her two young children. She applied in 1994, knowing that her family couldn't afford the then-private school's tuition.

But in 1995 she received a telephone call from Jean Hicks, the school's founder. Walden Green had received authorization to operate as one of Michigan's first charter schools, making it a tuition-free public school academy. Were the Marshalls interested?

"It was like the answered prayer," Marshall said. More than 10 years later, her younger child completed eighth grade at Walden Green this year, the highest grade offered. "We wish that they would go to 12th grade."

Families choose Walden Green for different reasons, according to Tom Hicks, Jean Hicks' son and now the school's director. Jean Hicks continues at the school as a teacher. Like the Marshalls, some parents are familiar with Montessori philosophies and want that atmosphere and approach for their children. Others want a small school. Still others have heard about the school's high test scores. Walden Green has ranked first among Michigan charter schools for two consecutive years in the Michigan Educational Assessment Program. The school achieved nearly a 90 percent proficiency rate in reading, writing, science and math on the latest tests.

Whatever the reasons, the school's enrollment has grown from 65 students in its first charter year to 170 this year and an anticipated 196 next year. Hicks expects to reach 220 students the following year, about as many students as will fit comfortably into their new building in Spring Lake, near Grand Haven. The school is authorized by Central Michigan University.

Like its growing enrollment and low student turnover, the new building is a sign of the school's staying power. Walden Green is financing the facility through a \$4.3 million bond issue.

"All our bonds were sold locally," Hicks said. "We had somebody ready to buy them based on the reputation of the school."

Montessori education rests on the work of Dr. Maria Montessori, who lived in Italy in the early 1900s. Her teaching method emphasized children's ability to teach themselves, given uninterrupted time and a prepared environment.

"It's choice and ownership in education," Hicks said. "We give kids choices within boundaries."

Children in Montessori classrooms study typical subjects like math, English and science, he explained, but they are given leeway to choose when and, to some extent, how they study each subject. Rather than having all children working on math, in their seats, at the same time every day, a Montessori teacher would more likely present a new math concept to small groups or individuals. The students would then work on those concepts individually, at a time they choose, using materials provided in the room. Instead of everyone moving on to the next subject according to the clock, the Montessori method allows a child uninterrupted time to work on a task.

"You don't have to sit down at 10 o'clock and do social studies if your mind is on science," said Sandra Kuhn of her four children's experience at Walden Green. "Montessori teaching methods have grabbed each of them in different ways and taught them."



Spreading his work out on the classroom floor, Griffin Peterson traces puzzle pieces to create a map. The youngest students have the largest classrooms because they are still working on large motor skills, the school's director explained. The Montessori philosophy emphasizes independent, hands-on approaches to learning.



Janelle Clark stands next to a sculpture she created after reading the book "The Giving Tree," by Shel Silverstein.



Ramps and walkways connect various levels at the new facility housing Walden Green Montessori School, a public charter school in Spring Lake.

"It's a participatory kind of learning," said parent Jolanda Westerhof-Shultz, whose daughter completed third grade this year. Westerhof-Shultz is an associate professor of education at Grand Valley State University, a former middle school teacher and a new school board member at Walden Green. "There's an emphasis on quality, not just on getting the work done, but also on the

handling of the work and tools."

The Montessori environment is different from most conventional classrooms. There are tables and chairs instead of desks, but many younger children choose to work on the floor. The furniture, including cabinets and counters, are child-sized. Hands-on materials are set out by subject throughout the room, so that in one corner, for example,

a child may be tracing wooden cutouts of the countries of Africa, and in another corner another child may be identifying geometric shapes.

Generally, the younger the children, the larger the classroom, Hicks said, recognizing that younger children are still developing large motor skills. Each room can cost up to \$20,000 to equip, he said.

In addition to working with children individually or in small groups, teachers follow each student's progress through the child's written work plan, a list of the tasks that need to be done that day or week, and through weekly assessments. Montessori advocates say this system allows children to learn at their own pace and also fosters love of learning, self-discipline and initiative.

"The Montessori method fits in well with my children's personalities," Marshall said. "They were able to move around and use tactile materials." Her son disliked math, she said, but he understood that math assignments handed out on Monday had to be completed by Thursday. If he finished his math work plan on time, he got extra gym time on Friday.

In addition to time and environment, the third key component in the Montessori method is the teacher, Hicks said. Walden Green teachers have standard teaching certification through the state of Michigan, but additional training in Montessori methods. Training focuses heavily on children's developmental stages and their needs at each stage. One of the teacher's key roles is to link each child with the learning material that matches his or her development and interests.

"It's all individualized because it follows the child," Westerhof-Shultz said, in contrast to what she called the "egg crate" approach of teaching all children the same thing at the same time.

There are few middle-school Montessori programs and even fewer Montessori high schools, Hicks said, partly because Dr. Montessori primarily worked with younger children and died before developing programs for adolescents. Walden Green uses a theme-based approach with its seventh- and eighth-graders. They study a selected topic for four weeks, are tested during the next week, and then spend "Immersion Week" at a camp on the shores of Lake Michigan where they apply what they've learned. That might include putting on a play, conducting science experiments or rock climbing, Hicks said.

**Children in Montessori classrooms study typical subjects like math, English and science, he explained, but they are given leeway to choose when and, to some extent, how they study each subject.**

Dr. Montessori stressed the importance of practical living skills, so the students also plan and prepare their own meals and help with maintenance and upkeep at the camp. Middle-school students also spend time in community service work, partly because they are at a time in life when they want to know where and how they fit into society, Hicks said.

Walden Green's new facility sits on nearly five acres of partly wooded land. The building features floor-to-ceiling windows in many spots, some spanning more than one level. A system of ramps, rather than stairs or an elevator, stretches between levels. There is no gymnasium or media center, but there are "common areas" — open areas of space — where children from different classrooms can meet to work. The design takes into consideration Montessori practices, but also the bottom line, Hicks said.

SCHOOL IN FOCUS, Page 11



# Better writing: High-scoring schools say it's not easy

continued from Page One

tributed to the numbers, each said, but common to both schools are an emphasis on writing in all classes, teacher development, a writing curriculum and time spent specifically focused on writing.

"If you look at our School Improvement Plan, all schools ... have writing as a school improvement goal. It's a focus in all of the buildings," Trelstad said. At the high school level, "all staff in the building have made a commitment to write with students. People understand that kids can't just write in language arts class. Writing is a focus in a broad sense in Okemos."

Similarly, when Vanguard students are asked to write a paragraph in math class about a mathematical concept, they are graded not only on how well they understand the math, but on how well they explain it, Masunas said. The school requires non-language arts teachers to assign writing projects, she added.

This approach of "writing across the curriculum" not only allows a school to spend more time on writing, but also demonstrates that writing is important in all fields. It is also one of the recognized ways of improving writing skills, according to Dr. Gary Troia, a Michigan State University associate professor who studies writing instruction and assessment.

Another similarity between the schools is the use of the "6 Traits" approach — a model that identifies six specific traits that are characteristic of good writing — for at least some writing instruction. The traits are "ideas and content," "organization," "voice," "word choice," "sentence fluency" and "conventions." Developed at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, a private, nonprofit organization in Oregon, the original model came from teachers looking for a way to evaluate writing consistently and objectively. Today the organization sells books and related material for classroom use.

"I've absolutely fallen in love with it," Masunas said. Writing — and grading of writing — is often seen as subjective, but supporters say the Six Traits approach helps make writing instruction concrete and specific. Students understand that if they are studying "organization," they are likely to be graded on such things as transition or closing sentences.

This process also matches up well with what Michigan expects of its students, Trelstad and Masunas said. When a teacher focuses on one of the six traits in the classroom, he or she can expect that the same trait will be measured in MEAP testing. The MEAP scoring system says student essays are evaluated for "ideas and content," "organization," "precise word choice" and "mastery of writing conventions," among other things.

Other Michigan districts have found that using curricula with specific writing objectives has improved test scores. An article in the Toledo Blade said that teachers in Monroe County's Bedford Public Schools reported higher MEAP writing scores after the district began using the CraftPlus writing program. Similarly, Niles teachers told local media that the CraftPlus writing program helped one of their elementary schools earn a designation as a Michigan Department of Education Blue Ribbon Exemplary School.

Still, a helpful curriculum isn't enough, educators said. MSU's Troia said there is little empirical research to date to show that any one curriculum boosts writing scores, although he agreed that a methodology that provides concrete, specific feedback to students about their work is "very important."

"Sometimes people want a magic program," Trelstad said. "The magic program in education is the teachers."

Teachers in Okemos who want to become better writing instructors might take extra training voluntarily, or they might be sent by a building administrator, she said. They might join other teachers in buildingwide professional development programs.

"Professional development is greatly supported by our administration," echoed Masunas. Vanguard teachers have attended writing workshops sponsored by the Kent Intermediate School District as well as workshops in the Six Traits method.

## TEACHERS AS WRITERS

Not all teachers feel as confident in their own writing as they do in reading or math skills, and that may show up in their instruction, Troia said.

"Many teachers don't consider themselves to be quote, unquote, writers," he said. "They may not write poetry, for example, or keep a

"Was that teacher taught grammar? Did that teacher actually write a lot? Did that teacher receive careful oversight of her writing?" he asked.

In his own class, Fennell has introduced an assignment that requires students to write an essay. It's only a one-page essay, he said, but each student must rewrite it until it meets Fennell's expectations.

"The record last year was 13 drafts," he

The good because They Are  
glad because They  
got up the hill buy  
playing a game when  
They war walking up  
The hill

I think that the brother, sister, Iris, and  
Walter feel good. I think they feel good because  
it says in "The Hill" at the end of the story "The  
sister smiled, and her little brother smiled back. In  
"Iris and Walter Are Friends" it says at the end of  
the story "Oh Walter!" and she is very happy. Walter  
is happy because he says "May I have a turn now?"  
with his eyes sparkling. These stories are connected  
because all of them are very happy at the end and  
both of them show that if you are patient good  
things will happen.

*These two pieces of writing were among those released by the Michigan Department of Education as examples of student work and how it was scored on the fall 2006 English Language portion of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program. Both pieces are from the third-grade test, which asked students to read two stories and then answer this question: "Do the children feel good or bad at the end of the stories? Why? Explain your answers using specific details and examples from both 'The Hill' and 'Iris and Walter Are Friends.' Be sure to show how the two selections are alike or connected." The third-grade test also asked students to edit sentences for such things as spelling, structure and capitalization. The complete test and released items from other grades are available at [http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-22709\\_31168\\_31355---,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-22709_31168_31355---,00.html).*

journal. They often feel ill-equipped to take on the role of (writing) mentor for students. ... I think that's one reason why teachers may feel writing is more difficult to teach."

Consequently, teachers may teach less of certain forms of writing, like poetry, even though for some students poetry may be the best genre for motivating them to write, he said. The National Writing Project is attempting to address that issue, he said, by offering workshops across the country that help teachers develop as writers, not just as teachers of writing.

Another MSU educator, Fred Barton, used to be a case in point.

"I was trained as a literary critic," he said of his own undergraduate coursework. "The idea of composition as a field of study isn't that old." Teachers who are now mid- to late-career educators are less likely to have studied teaching methodologies for writing than today's teacher candidates, Barton said.

"Students (in teacher preparation programs) coming through now are getting exposed to both reading and writing instruction much earlier than I was," he said. Barton is coordinator of the Learning Resources Center at MSU and previously taught in public and private schools for more than 30 years. He also is president of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English.

At Hillsdale College, students in the teacher education program are expected to become good writers themselves as the basis for teaching writing in the future, said Jon Fennell, director and associate professor of teacher education. Fennell said he is skeptical of technology or curricula that claim to improve writing, saying the teacher's own skill level is more important.

said. "I think that student learned something about how to write."

The number of parents looking for writing tutors has increased enough to prompt Sylvan Learning Center, a national tutoring services company, to expand its writing program to include second- and third-graders next year, according to Emily Levitt, program manager for writing.

"We are seeing so many elementary students coming to us," she said, particularly as more states implement standardized writing tests in lower grades.

"Our two biggest parent concerns are spelling and organization," she told Michigan Education Report. "I think those are two things that are easy for parents to spot."

At the other end of the age spectrum, the company also sees a growing number of high school students who want an edge on college admission essays. More colleges and universities are requiring students to complete the essay portion of the ACT test, she pointed out.

"Some students feel pretty comfortable with the SAT or ACT, but they want to know how to write for the test. They're looking for strategies," Levitt said. "We also have some students who really need writing help from the ground up."

Time is another issue in writing instruction.

"To teach writing well is a very labor-intensive thing," Barton said. "In today's economy, that sort of thing is at the top of the line in likelihood of being cut."

According to data collected in 1998 through the National Assessment of Educational Progress, nearly seven in 10 teachers said they use a "process-oriented approach" to

writing instruction that includes brainstorming, research, writing and rewriting, Troia said. But only one-third of those teachers said they spend 90 minutes or more a week on writing instruction.

"That would suggest the process is very truncated," he said. "It doesn't give students time."

Teachers in Okemos tell Trelstad that, "It's harder to fit everything in. There's more to teach now."

At Vanguard, elementary students have focused writing instruction three days a week, each time with a core teacher and two assistants. That allows the teacher to group students by skill level, with each group receiving individual help, Masunas said. The middle school schedule is organized in 90-minute blocks, effectively giving students more time to write.

"You have to practice to be a good writer," said Levitt. Sylvan writing tutors — all certified teachers — focus on common school writing projects, such as compare-and-contrast essays and descriptive writing. Grammar, spelling and other conventions are worked in as part of the process, she said. But even among potential tutors, Levitt said, she has found some who prefer not to tutor in writing.

"I was really surprised to find how many aren't comfortable teaching writing," she said.

Research shows that students benefit from extensive and focused feedback about their writing, Troia said, but "for secondary teachers who often teach 120 to 150 students, it is overwhelming to them." The volume of paperwork is only part of the problem, he said; another is that in some cases teachers are able to recognize weak spots in student work, but don't know how to describe the weakness in ways that can help a student improve.

"That's one reason teachers may find it easier to give feedback on conventions," Troia said. So rather than explain to a student why his or her argument is not persuasive and offer concrete suggestions for constructing a better argument, the teacher might focus on spelling errors or run-on sentences.

"There's nothing more laborious than having to read those papers," Fennell said, but the alternative is fewer writing assignments and fewer opportunities for students to practice. As that cycle repeats itself, students end up at college without the ability to write effectively, he said.

## MEAP CHANGES AHEAD

The MEAP writing test will change next year to include five more multiple choice questions, according to Ed Roeber, senior executive director of the Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability in the Michigan Department of Education. The current test asks students to write one essay in response to a selected reading and another in response to a prompt. The third-grade test in 2006, for example, asked students to write about "being responsible." In addition to the essays, it included five multiple choice questions.

The challenge is to develop a test that reliably assesses student writing ability at a reasonable cost in time and money, he said.

"The shorter the test, the less reliable it is," Roeber said. But asking students to write another MEAP essay would increase the test time and the cost to score it. The writing portion is already MEAP's most expensive component, he said. Each essay is read by a scorer who has been trained on sample essays and gauges the student's work against established guidelines. The scorers are monitored as they work for "drift," or the tendency to stray from the guidelines, he said. That might happen if, for example, a scorer reads several exceptional essays in a row and then holds the next essay to a higher standard than called for by the guidelines. When scorers drift, Roeber has the option of retraining them or, if the problem continues, letting them go.

At the lower elementary level, 20 percent of the essays are scored a second time by a different individual to check for congruence among scorers, he explained.

Writing scores on assessment tests tend to be lower than in other subjects partly because students "can't guess at the answer," Roeber said. "They've got to produce it."

BETTER WRITING, Page 10



# HOME-SCHOOL MARCHING BAND

## PART OF MICHIGAN SUMMER SCENE



Tyler Stitt plays saxophone for the Northern Lights home-school marching band in a parade this summer.



Northern Lights band members march in the Muskegon Summer Celebration this summer. The band is made of up elementary through high school home-school students from throughout West Michigan.

Talk about increased class size. Wendy March's first band class numbered 43 students. The next year, 100 more wanted to join. Nobody was more surprised than the Belding home-school mother herself.

"I never would have thought it would turn into this," she said, eyes on the group of students marching in parade formation around a parking lot in Wyoming. "It met a need in West Michigan we didn't even know existed."

The single band class that March initiated in 1996 has grown into the West Michigan Homeschool Fine Arts program, encompassing beginning, intermediate and advanced band and orchestra, a marching band, choir and chorale, and varied music classes, together attracting some 500 home-school students each year. March, 48, a mother of six, continues to teach beginning and intermediate band, with a dozen other instructors teaching other classes.

During the school year the students meet regularly at The Home School Building in Wyoming, a multipurpose facility that includes classrooms, a gymnasium, library and bookstore. During the summer months, the focus is on the Northern Lights Home School Marching Band, a group of more than 100 elementary to high school students that performs in half a dozen Michigan parades each summer.

March's oldest sons were ages 9 and 8, respectively, when she began looking for a way for them to participate in a band. A longtime choir director, she holds a bachelor's degree in secondary music education and at the time held a Michigan teaching certificate. But credentials aside, March remembered how much she had enjoyed playing trumpet in the New Hanover High School band in North Carolina, and she wanted that experience for her children.

"I saw that music attracted the cream-of-the-crop kids," she said. When her husband suggested she start a band herself, March was willing, but not sure how much response she would get.

"I didn't think too many would want to come out of the woodwork," she said. Still, she put the word out through home-school groups and found not only parents who wanted their children to join, but parents who eventually would volunteer to help by bringing refreshments, coordinating equipment fund-raisers, organizing uniform orders and sales, and supervising a banner corps for children too young to join the band.

"Parents want this so badly, they're willing to give up their time," she said. By the second season, March had asked Robert Stiles, a retired school band director who lives in Belding, for help.

"He loved it and he's been coming ever since. What brought him out of retirement was the attitude of the kids. So eager to learn.

They wanted to be there," she said.

Students join the advanced bands through audition and are allowed to stay based on performance. There is a fee to participate in band classes, and while some families purchase their own instruments, the Fine Arts program purchases some as well.

"We've had kids go collect pop cans to buy a tuba," March said.

"To stay in the program they have to practice," she continued. "We believe in accountability and responsibility. They learn that some places require a uniform and that you're part of a team. It's not a one-man job."

The Gravelle children – ages 17, 16, 13, 10, and 8 – joined the band program this year, traveling about 30 minutes each way from their Ada home to the Home School Building.

"It was a little intimidating at first, but the kids jumped right in. We all fell in love with it within the first few months," said Shelly Gravelle, their mother. Four of the children played in the beginning band during the school year and five are in marching band, one as a banner carrier. "They had tinkered a little with the piano, but they had never played instruments. I'm amazed at the progress they've made in one year."

Now the Gravelle family constitutes most of a brass section, with one child each on tuba, baritone, trombone and saxophone.

"There is a very high standard," Gravelle said. "If they do not practice, you will hear about it as a parent."

That emphasis on excellence was one of the things that attracted the Zuidema family, also of Ada, but not the only thing.

"It's not just a competition. It's about loving each other as well," Michele Zuidema said. The Zuidemas have six children. Of the five that have participated in band programs so far, two have physical disabilities. Ana, 10, has no legs and shortened arms, her mother explained, and was on the verge of dropping out of the program this year due to a series of health problems.

"She was in tears," Zuidema said. When they met with March to discuss it, "Mrs. March said 'You can't leave us. We need you,'" so Ana remained in the program as a banner carrier this summer.

"How many places do you know where a little girl in a wheelchair could be in a marching band?" Zuidema asked. "She (March) does push them hard. She wants excellence, but she also has a love for them and love for what they're doing."

Of the two March sons who originally spurred their mother to form the band, one is now serving in the U.S. Army and the other is attending Western Michigan University. He plans on returning to the area to help with the program after graduation, March said. March still teaches her other four children at home, often using Saturday as a school day to make up for the Wednesdays dedicated to band. Her

husband operates a tax preparation business and also is a part-time administrator at the home-school facility.

"We work everything around the schedule for the band. It's time-consuming, but it's worth it," March said.

The bands compete in Michigan School Band and Orchestra festivals and have been invited to perform across the state and at selected other events, including the Peach Bowl in 2003. March gauges the program's success not by festival ratings, but by the number of students who volunteer to play at nursing homes, who have gone on to study music in college, and who have graduated, married and are now home-school parents themselves. Calling those "the fruits of our labor," she said they demonstrate that the students "take what they learn and apply it."

The name Northern Lights, which

applies only to the marching band, was chosen by the members, she added.

"These kids want to be the light of the world, and they're from the North. So they're the Northern Lights."

Word of the program has spread in Michigan, and now there are at least seven home-school bands in operation, March said. In the future, she said, she would like to arrange a sharing of instruments among home-school communities in which the instruments would be available for use in Wyoming on Wednesdays, then packed into a trailer and used elsewhere on another day of the week.

"I like the idea of expanding that way to help other people," she said. ♦



Listen to the Northern Lights in rehearsal and hear an interview with Wendy March at [www.EducationReport.org/8828](http://www.EducationReport.org/8828)



Banner carriers lead the way for the Northern Lights in a parade in Coral. The band performs in community parades and festivals throughout the summer.



Josh Zuidema, on trumpet, joins other members of the home-school marching band for Wednesday morning practice.



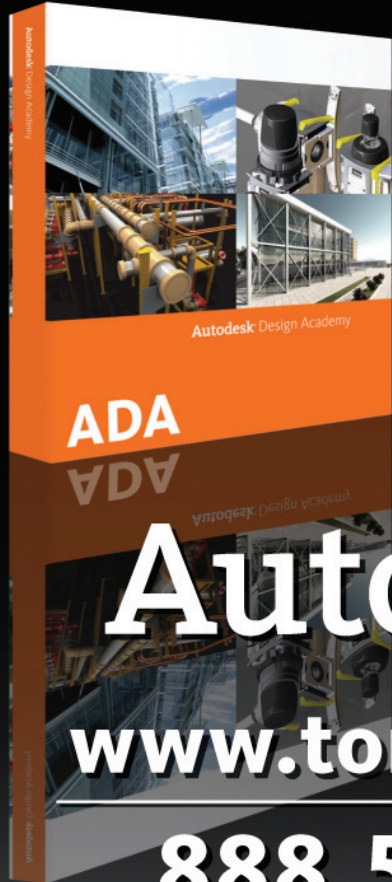
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## NCLB

continued from Page one

as reauthorization hearings got under way for No Child Left Behind, first approved in 2001. In addition to Hoekstra, more than 50 other Republican House members are sponsoring the bill, HR 1539. Similar legislation has been introduced in the Senate by U.S. Sens. Jim DeMint, R-South Carolina, and John Cornyn, R-Texas.

In contrast, Michigan education officials who have testified at the reauthorization hearings have proposed ways to change the act, not to eliminate it. Those suggestions range from giving schools more credit for student progress over time to allowing states to define “qualified” teachers to giving students more than four years to graduate.

Hoekstra said he doesn’t believe NCLB has improved student performance, and that school districts have suffered under the “heavy hand of federal mandates,” spending money according to federal priorities, not state initiatives.

“I came to the conclusion it wasn’t working. It wasn’t helping our kids get a great education,” he said. His opinion didn’t change when the Center on Education Policy released a study in June showing that student achievement in reading and math has increased overall since the start of NCLB. Even the study’s authors noted that the gains could not be attributed directly to NCLB, Hoekstra said. The study said the improvement could also be due to such things as “teaching to the test,” more lenient tests, scoring analyses or educational reform that was under way before NCLB.

Under Hoekstra’s plan, states could combine varied federal funding streams – such as Title I, intended to improve academic achievement among disadvantaged children, and Title II, for teacher quality programs – into one revenue stream and apply the money to state-set priorities. The only exception would be money funneled to states through the Individu-

One is that NCLB use a “growth model” that would give schools credit for student improvement on assessment tests, instead of crediting schools only for student proficiency. Burroughs also said that the NEA believes “adequate yearly progress,” the system under which districts must demonstrate progress toward target academic goals or face sanctions, should be based on more than statewide assessment tests. AYP should take into consideration graduation rates, school district assessments, attendance and the number of students who take advanced coursework, he said.

Also, schools should give newly arrived English language learners up to three years to master English before being tested in English in core content areas, the NEA suggests. Currently those students have one year. Many NCLB critics have pointed out that a school district’s overall performance can be heavily affected by subgroups within the district, including English-language learners and special needs populations.

Kathleen N. Straus, president of the Michigan State Board of Education, testified in June before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education, speaking on behalf of the State of Michigan as well as the National Association of State Boards of Education.

She told legislators that Michigan is meeting the spirit of the law, but “clearly we needed more flexibility to help our good faith efforts in meeting the letter of the law.”

Like Burroughs, she said states should be allowed to adapt tests for students with limited English language skills and with disabilities; should be allowed to use a growth model to track achievement, and should defer to state procedures to determine qualified teachers, given the challenges of finding teachers in some rural areas or high-need subjects. Also, she said, some students should be allowed more than four years to graduate, including many in alternative education programs.

graduation requirement. Some students can finish high school in three years, he pointed out, and others need five.

“It’s a very strict four years, and I think that’s contrary to what we need to be doing. It’s locking in an old model at a time when education is in the process of redesigning itself.”

Hoekstra said he believes such things should be up to states to decide.

“The bottom line is that we need to ask the question: Who will decide the future of our children’s education? Faceless bureaucrats in Washington, or parents and local school administrators who know our children’s names and needs? My vote is for local control,” he said in a press release announcing A PLUS.

“My preference, in the long run, is to allow education tax credits,” Hoekstra said. Under a tax credit system, individuals or corporations would receive a tax

credit for money set aside for public or private education.

Hoekstra has the support of Tom Horne, the superintendent of instruction for the Arizona Department of Education, who said in a letter that the goals of A PLUS would be “vastly superior” to those of NCLB. The American Association of Christian Schools and the Home School Legal Defense Association also support the bill. ♦

Listen to an interview with Congressman Hoekstra at [www.EducationReport.org/8813](http://www.EducationReport.org/8813)



To comment on this article and enter your name in a drawing for one of three iPods, go to <http://forum.educationreport.org>

## AUGUST WINDOW PERIOD FOR UNION RESIGNATIONS

August is often specified as the month in which employees who want to resign from a union, including the Michigan Education Association, must notify the union of their decision. The exact requirements for resigning and becoming what is commonly called a “fee payer” typically are spelled out in local collective bargaining agreements or the union’s rules.

In general, those who wish to become nonunion employees must draft a letter of resignation revoking any authorization for payroll deduction of membership dues and authorizing only those fees which are legally chargeable for collective bargaining purposes. Copies are then sent to the local union and school district superintendent.

## SCHOOL IN FOCUS: Walden Green Montessori

continued from Page six

“We wanted to build a building that was relatively maintenance free.”

Public school academies cannot levy millage to pay for bonds, so the money for the building comes out of the school’s per-pupil state aid allowance. The bond payments are roughly \$22,000 a month, Hicks said.

**“I’m not much of a big fan of standardized testing. It’s nice that the scores are high. It gives some minimal form of assurance.”**

- Sandra Kuhn, Parent

Walden Green is one of a growing number of public school academies who are selling bonds to finance facilities or renovations, according to Thomas Letavis, executive director of the Michigan Public Educational Facilities Authority, within the state Department of Treasury. The Walden Green tax-exempt bonds were issued through MPEFA.

It’s difficult for a start-up charter school to attract investors, Letavis said, but, like Walden Green, more academies today can point to growing enrollment, a waiting list, high MEAP scores and reauthorizations of their original charter. Those items make the bonds more attractive and also bring down the interest rates, he said.

But high MEAP scores are more a byproduct at Walden Green than a goal, several parents said.

“I’m not much of a big fan of standardized testing,” Kuhn said. “It’s nice that the scores are high. It gives some minimal form of assurance.”

Westerhof-Shultz said one reason she and her husband chose Walden Green was that the school did not emphasize standardized tests.

“For some reason they figured out how to jump through that hoop, but not be controlled by it,” she said. As a professor of education, she said she hears reports from student teachers that districts worried about MEAP scores now spend the first month of each new school year reviewing for the tests, an approach she believes fails to foster

a child’s curiosity.

Kuhn tracks her children’s progress through their weekly work plans, homework and communication with teachers. Like most parents, Kuhn and Marshall volunteer at the school regularly and see firsthand what happens in the classrooms. Kuhn helps in the special needs program and Marshall is a volunteer art instructor.

“Walden Green is a pretty high parental involvement school,” Kuhn said. “It wouldn’t throw anybody off to see a parent walk in.”

Walden Green’s objective is to grow, but slowly, Hicks said. Instead of accepting the maximum enrollment possible this year and next, “We talked the bank and the bondholders into saying we’ll grow in steps.” One of his challenges is helping families make the transition from a non-Montessori school, he said, and “to open the doors and double enrollment would have cheated the parents already here.” ♦



U.S. Rep. Pete Hoekstra has introduced legislation that he says would help restore local control of education by allowing states to opt out of the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

als with Disabilities Education Act. That money would have to be spent on education for students with disabilities.

Asked about exempting those funds from A PLUS, Hoekstra said, “That’s one bridge too far.”

Hoekstra said he will vote against reauthorization of NCLB, even in an improved format. That puts him at odds with President George Bush and other education officials, who have said they support the goals of the program but that it needs restructuring.

Steve Burroughs, president of the United Teachers of Flint, testified before the Education and Labor Subcommittee on behalf of the Michigan Education Association and National Educational Association. He told the Education and Labor Subcommittee in April that the NEA suggests 10 specific changes to NCLB, representing areas of “utmost concern.”

But, she said, “I want to make it abundantly clear that the Michigan State Board of Education ... embrace(s) the philosophy and goals of the No Child Left Behind Act.”

Hoekstra’s colleague, Rep. Tim Walberg, R-Tipton, met with educators in the Jackson area in May to promote the A PLUS plan.

“I think it attracted some interest,” Superintendent John Graves said, but “nobody I’ve talked to gives it any chance” of approval. Graves is superintendent of the Jackson County Intermediate School District, which encompasses 12 conventional public school districts.

“We haven’t really resolved what parts of governance of education should be done at the local, state and federal level,” Graves said. “Once we’ve had those debates, we’d have better guidance.”

One complaint he’s heard about NCLB involves the four-year high school



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# Schools take a second look at nonprofit foundations as revenue sources

A number of Michigan school districts are trying to instill new life into nonprofit educational foundations they established years ago, in hopes of bringing in money simply by asking for it.

While even the most ambitious programs generate only a drop in the bucket compared to a district's overall budget, foundation directors say the advantage is that the drop can be earmarked for specific academic programs. Donors like knowing that their money is going directly to the classroom, foundation officials say, where even a few thousand dollars can have a large impact.

Voters across Michigan have said no to additional public funding for schools in many ways over the past year. Proposal 5, on the statewide ballot last November, would have mandated annual funding increases. It was rejected by a margin of 62-38. More recently, voters said no in February to 13 of 17 funding-related elections in districts throughout the state, including requests for buildings, infrastructure and an override of the caps on local millage rates.

But those same voters are sometimes willing to make a private donation to their local school district because, "It's voluntary. They know exactly where their money is going," said Rich Howard, senior consultant with the McCormick Group, a national consulting firm that works with school districts on foundation development.

"We are seeing a resurgence of new foundations ... as well as foundations we set up previously coming back. It's not just in Michigan. It's happening across the country," he said.

One example is Ann Arbor, where Wendy Correll is the executive director of the Ann Arbor Public Schools Educational Foundation, a privately operated, nonprofit corporation established to support the school district. Correll previously served on the district's board of education and was hired for the half-time foundation position in May 2006. Like many districts, Ann Arbor has had an educational foundation for years. But in recent years it has shifted from passive to active fundraising, setting a goal for itself in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"The waters are untested in Ann Arbor for significant private support of K-12 (public) education," Correll said, but a feasibility study showed that there is potential for a foundation to bring in \$250,000 to \$500,000 annually over the long term.

"The reality is, we need to educate the public. It's easy not to pay attention to how school financing works," she said. "We've cut so much."

The effects of Proposal A increased the role of state government in funding public schools. Because of the state's increased role, the extent to which local school districts may add to their budgets by levying local property taxes is more limited than it was before Proposal A passed in 1994.

## PROPOSAL A CHANGES SYSTEM

Under Proposal A, each school receives state funding on a per-pupil basis, called a foundation allowance. The amounts per pupil have increased under Proposal A, but decreasing enrollment combined with increased retirement and health benefit costs has squeezed many district budgets. Like other foundation directors, Correll doesn't expect more money from the state. Other ways to generate revenue would include passing a countywide millage, which Correll said would be an "uphill battle," or to attract more students.

"People are not coming to Michigan. People are leaving Michigan," she said. The district could lose up to 200 students not only from cutbacks in the automotive industry, but also the closing of Pfizer Inc.'s Ann Arbor site, which will displace 2,100 workers. "The implication is huge," Correll said.

The point of establishing a school foundation is to draw support from the community at large, not just parents, according to Howard. Booster clubs for sports or music, and parent-teacher organizations, already rely heavily on parent contributions, and school foundations are not meant to intrude on that territory.

"The community member gives money because there is a huge correlation between the perception of the local schools and property values," Howard said.

Correll echoed that, saying that in presentations to community leaders, she emphasizes that "Strong schools support strong communities and strong communities support strong schools. ... The opportunity arose with Pfizer to say 'Do you understand the draw of a great school system?'"

One of the appeals of foundations is that donations made to them are tax-deductible. Foundations generally operate as tax-exempt organizations under section 501(c) 3 of the Internal Revenue Code, which prohibits them from paying dividends or profits, but makes them eligible to accept public or private grants. Some school foundations operate under the umbrella of a larger community foundation, such as the local United Way.

Tax-deductible status "plays an important role in our fundraising, particularly for contributions over \$25," Correll told Michigan Education Report. "For large contributions, over \$10,000, some contributors may find a tax advantage in making a contribution through our local Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation. I can say that people are more willing to give because of the tax break."

Most donations to foundations are not large grants from businesses, according to Howard, but small amounts from individuals. Educational foundations operate independently of their local school districts and have their own boards of trustees and financial accounts, but usually work closely with the district to define the foundation's purpose and activities.

Howard said it is difficult to say how much money foundations bring in to Michigan schools in any given year, because those that take in less than \$25,000 do not have to file annual financial reports with the state. The total is "certainly tens of millions of dollars," he said.

## PAYING FOR TEACHERS?

An article in the American School Board Journal in July said that foundations are becoming more visible in states where local property taxes are capped, the state has primary responsibility for funding schools, and there has been a downturn in state revenue from income or sales taxes.

**Most donations to foundations are not large grants from businesses, according to Howard, but small amounts from individuals.**

In Los Gatos, Calif., a small community near Silicon Valley, a six-day telephone campaign brought in enough

donations to replace 10 teaching positions that would have been cut, the article said. "These communities no longer simply add enrichments to the basic, state-funded program," the article stated. "They pay a de facto voluntary tax to the school district to fund the level of education they desire."

While Proposal A lowered local school property taxes for most homeowners, substituting a higher sales tax, it did not do the same for business owners.

Asked if Michigan's business tax load affects donations from that sector, Correll said, "That is not something I hear. Quite simply, I think it's hard to get dollars out of businesses in the overall declining economic climate of Michigan. They continue to be willing to give us time and small dollars that provide them with advertising, but not large impact dollars. We will be rethinking our strategy on this idea. 'Give for the greater good' doesn't seem to work in the overall business world; perhaps in coming years if the economic climate changes, their attitude may change."

## GAVE AT THE OFFICE

One businessman told Michigan Education Report that school taxes and school performance both affect his decisions on donations.

"When it comes to public schools, I already gave at the office. It's called taxes," Detroit businessman Steven Thomas said. "And I think too many schools fail to get much bang for the bucks they now have. Like many of my colleagues in business, I am far more interested in a tax credit for contributions to scholarship funds or private schools. At least then the money goes directly to help the student and his parents' choices, not business-as-usual bureaucracy."

"If people want to give money, they can do it," said Jim Sandy, executive director of the Michigan Business Leaders for Education Excellence, a statewide coalition of business leaders which has proposed various education reform measures. There are some tax advantages in making a contribution, he pointed out, but donors should be aware of how the money is being spent. Even if foundation dollars are earmarked for specific academic projects, the effect is to support the district's general fund budget, he pointed out. The question is whether that takes pressure off districts to operate efficiently.

"It's just creating more and more pots of money and as we've seen in the past, schools with more pots of money don't always manage them well," he said.

Foundations use a number of ways to

raise money, among them solicitations by mail, personal contacts and fundraising events like golf outings. Many of them also receive investment earnings from endowments. Whatever the method, Howard said the most successful campaigns give donors a specific idea of how the money will be used and how it will impact education now and in the future. Foundation money is typically spent on academic projects, arts and music, science and technology, professional development or capital improvements, he said. Some foundations also pay for college scholarships.

When the Forest Hills Educational Foundation was established in 1986, it was led by parents who wanted to be sure children "would be provided with what we fondly considered 'the icing on the cake,'" Executive Director Amy Clark said. Today, the mission statement calls for the organization to support core academic programs, "which is vastly different," she said. One school gala hosted by the foundation brought in \$86,000, of which half went into an endowment and half was spent on instructional materials, including new math textbooks. "The Forest Hills Foundation has transitioned from a bake-sale mentality," she said.

In Ann Arbor, the foundation's major recent project was a \$50,000 writing literacy program at the high school level, Correll said. A similar program already is under way in the lower grades. The foundation, like many others, also awards smaller amounts of money to teachers through a mini-grant process.

The Portage Education Foundation has been in operation since 1990, but this year announced a \$1 million endowment campaign called "Putting Excellence First."

The campaign brochure says, "It's no secret that school systems across Michigan — Portage included — are at a crossroads; rely on public funding — becoming more unstable each year — for an adequate education. Or seek alternative, private financing to guarantee an amazing education. For Portage, the choice is easy." The money would be used for start-up costs for innovative academic projects, fine and performing arts programming, and instructional technology initiatives.

The Portage foundation gave \$23,000 in grants to students, faculty and school- or district-based programs last year, according to its annual report. It received \$35,000 in donations.

The Michigan Association of School Boards also has seen increased interest in school foundations among its members, according to Kathy Hayes, co-director of board leadership and development.

"In these tough economic times, there seems to be more interest in getting foundations going again," she said. The MASB has developed a training program for foundation board members, staff and volunteers in conjunction with The McCormick Group and the National School Foundation Association. ♦

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# SCHOOLS FOR SALE

## Districts put buildings on market

One in Bridgeport. Seven in Royal Oak. Six in Grand Rapids. Eight in Lansing. More than 30 in Detroit. The numbers vary, but it is not uncommon to find empty school buildings for sale, for lease, recently sold or simply unused in many of Michigan conventional public school districts.

Downsizing drives many of the closures, as districts funnel fewer students into fewer buildings. Detroit Public Schools alone has announced plans to close more than 30 buildings over the next two years, adding them to a list of at least 20 buildings closed in previous years. Many of the buildings were operating at less than 50 percent capacity. In other cases, districts are shuttering old facilities and replacing them with new ones.

What becomes of the empty buildings and property varies by location, and in many cases the surrounding community wants a say.

In Grand Rapids and Detroit, developers have converted school buildings into condominiums. Former Lansing School District buildings now house child care centers, a rescue mission and high-tech companies, with two schools still on the market. And Royal Oak Public Schools has sold several school buildings and adjoining property to developers who plan to demolish the buildings and replace them with housing developments. The district sees that as a way to bring in more families, hopefully with children who will attend Royal Oak schools.

"My business tends to pick up ... when the economy in general is a little on the shaky side," said William Bowman, president of Great Northern Consulting Group in Ann Arbor. Bowman's firm works with school districts to plan and carry out real estate sales. He's worked on 10 to 15 school sales in southeast Michigan in the past two years, including Royal Oak. "We're getting busier and busier."

Selling school property is a balancing act between getting a reasonable price on behalf of taxpayers and considering whether the planned use of the land is a good fit for the community, Bowman said.

"We're not looking just to sell the property," he said. "I can tell you, if (school property) gets built up with a project that nobody's happy with, guess who hears about that forever? ... The goal is to get the use you want and the dollars you want."

In Royal Oak, a 50-member citizens group recommended the approach the district is now taking — to consolidate students into the district's larger, newer buildings, then sell the remaining buildings to developers who would build single-family homes. The immediate benefit is cash from the sales, and the long-term potential benefit is more families with school-age children, Superintendent Thomas Moline said.

"The recommendation was to consolidate buildings to gain maximum efficiency," he said.

Royal Oak had 20,000 students 40 years ago, about 5,900 in 1998 and anticipates enrollment of 5,400 this fall. After the consolidation, the district will have one high school, one middle school and six elementary schools, down from two high schools, four junior highs and 18 elementary schools four decades ago. Some districts like to hold on to empty buildings in case of future growth, but Moline said projections show that's not in the cards in Royal Oak. The district anticipates losing 200 additional students a year for the next several years. District capacity after the downsizing will stand at 6,000 students, he said, more than enough for the current enrollment and the new students the district hopes to attract.

Royal Oak sold one elementary site

for \$1.6 million in 2005, where 47 homes will be built, another for \$2 million this year for a 55-home project, and it is now reviewing bids for two more sites where one developer wants to construct more homes and another wants to convert the schools to senior housing. In 2005, the district sold an elementary site to Beaumont Hospital for \$6.1 million. Most of that property will be used for medical facilities, but a separate developer put in five homes as well.

Moline said the district moved toward a more aggressive sales plan after voters turned down two requests for bond issues for renovations in 2003 and early 2005. Those requests were for \$99 million and \$74 million, respectively. Voters then approved a \$69.5 million bond request in late 2005, Moline said, but that won't bring in enough money to cover the estimated \$102 million in renovation costs.

"How do we bridge that gap? We get all the money we can out of the property we're selling," he said.

Local media have reported that some area residents regret the loss of the playgrounds and park-like schoolyards, while others want the school buildings saved as historic sites. According to an article in Preservation Online, the online magazine of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a grassroots group has gathered signatures on a petition calling for reuse of the schools.

But developers are primarily interested in the acreage at each site, not the buildings, Bowman said, because land is scarce in the "inner ring" of southeast Michigan.

"Within these urban areas, where can you create a little subdivision?" he asked. One school sale in Troy included 18 acres of land, he said. "Where can you get 50 lots in Troy? You can't. ... There are no large tracts of land that they can go out and buy. The process clearly works where there is a limited supply."

Great Northern also advises school districts to pay money up front to make things easier for potential buyers, he said.

"There are a lot of things you can do paper-wise and engineering-wise to make a property more valuable," he said, among them drawing up engineering site plans, confirming zoning restrictions, removing underground storage tanks and handling asbestos removal or abatement. The investment pays off in higher bids from developers who won't have to jump through those hoops, he said.

"The more questions you can answer for developers, the more aggressive they're going to be," he said.

Moline isn't expecting a large influx of students from the development projects.

"For every 100 homes, you might get 50 kids. We're just trying to turn the tide a little bit."

Closing a building saves the district about \$400,000 in operating expenses per year, he said, and renovations to the remaining buildings will make them more energy efficient and less expensive to maintain. The only increased operating cost in the future due to the renovations will be air conditioning, he said, and the district is installing that partly to make the facilities more attractive to community groups who want to rent the buildings after hours.

"If we have air-conditioned buildings, we could easily generate enough (rental) income to offset the air conditioning costs," Moline said. Royal Oak took in \$400,000 in rental income this year, he said, but the money isn't the only benefit of bringing



As this bright blue sign announces, the former Huff Elementary School in Grand Rapids has been sold to The Well Church.

people into the schools.

Only 16 percent of the households in the district send a child to Royal Oak Public Schools, Moline said, but allowing the community to use school facilities gives non-parents a link to the district.

Selling a school building is often a controversial matter. In Royal Oak, the question of historic preservation became an issue. In Grand Rapids, the board of education voted to sell five acres of land to an individual who wanted to build a home there, although neighbors said the district should either retain the land as green space or rent it to a Little League organization for \$1 a year, according to the Grand Rapids Press. The land is part of a larger parcel which includes a park and elementary school, and was provided to the district in the 1950s under a deed restriction that required it be used for educational or recreational purposes for 50 years. Board members who supported the sale said the district had promised voters to sell excess property when it used general fund money for school improvements in the 1990s.

Grand Rapids Public Schools also sold an elementary school to The Well Church. The sale was handled by S.J. Wisinski and Co., a commercial real estate firm in Grand Rapids. Stan Wisinski, company president, said his firm has handled about 10 school sales in the past year on behalf of both Grand Rapids Public Schools and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Grand Rapids.

"There seems to be a market for it," he said. "Location is important."

One former educational facility is now being used for mini-storage, he said, and another was purchased by Goodwill Industries for adult training programs. One better-known project is Union Square Condos. Formerly a high school, the building now houses more than 100 condominiums, some of them featuring vintage school fixtures like lockers and chalkboards.

The Lansing School District has sold five of eight vacant school build-

ings since spring of 2006, according to the Lansing State Journal, bringing in nearly \$1.5 million, and two more schools are on the market. The district recently received an offer from a group of Michigan State University staffers who want to lease a former school for \$1 a year, with an option to buy. The group wants to use the site as a technology center to spur research and entrepreneurship in the area.

One thing many conventional school districts do not do is sell their unused property to charter schools. (See related story, "Finding, financing a school building still a challenge to charters").

Smaller districts have buildings and property for sale as well. Merrill Community Schools put 80 acres of wooded property up for sale at \$3,000 an acre and has sold 45 acres so far, according to Superintendent John Searles. Years ago the site was used by agriculture science students, but the district doesn't offer those classes any more.

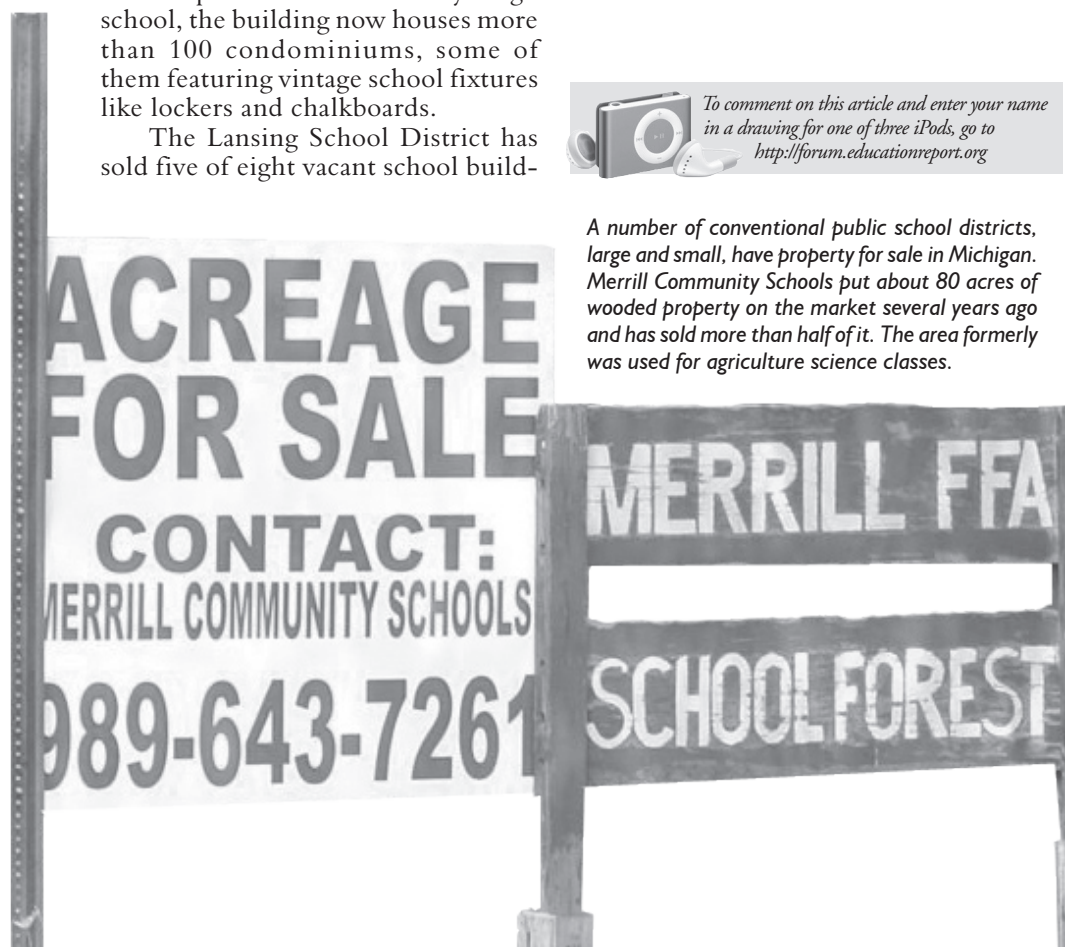
"The amount of time I've spent trying to sell this has been surprising," Searles said. The district has turned down half a dozen offers that didn't meet the asking price, and two other bids fell through when the purchasers couldn't arrange financing.

"There are oil developers in that area prospecting for mineral rights," he said, but, after a bad experience with natural gas wells in earlier years, district officials have decided against allowing oil drilling on the site. Slant drilling would be an exception, Searles said.

Money from the partial sales was spent on infrastructure, including \$60,000 in computer upgrades, he said. "The trickling in of money has allowed us to continue to add programming." ♦

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A number of conventional public school districts, large and small, have property for sale in Michigan. Merrill Community Schools put about 80 acres of wooded property on the market several years ago and has sold more than half of it. The area formerly was used for agriculture science classes.







## COMMENTARY

Lisa Snell

### Don't expect long-term gain from early education money

Gov. Jennifer Granholm's fiscal year 2008 budget calls for a nearly \$200 million increase in early childhood funding initiatives, bringing the early childhood budget to about \$300 million. The money would go to school districts offering full-day preschool programs to children at risk, followed by mandatory full-day kindergarten the next year. Meanwhile, legislators are considering requiring all districts to offer full-day kindergarten.

Proposals for universal preschool and full-day kindergarten are an increasingly popular policy solution for everything from low academic achievement to reducing crime to lowering the dropout rate.

In short, research on preschool and full-day kindergarten shows that these programs have had meaningful short-term effects on disadvantaged students' cognitive ability, grade-level retention and special-education placement. However, most research also indicates that the academic effects of early education programs disappear soon after children leave the programs.

The National Center for Education Statistics Early Childhood Longitudinal Study assessed 22,000 children at kindergarten entry and most recently reported on those students through the third grade. This research shows that by the end of third grade, the researchers no longer detect a difference between students who attended part-day or full-day kindergarten programs.

They write, "This report did not detect any substantive differences in children's third-grade achievement relative to the type of kindergarten program (full-day vs. half-day) they attended." The finding holds across all subject matters tested. Third-grade reading, mathematics and science achievement did not differ substantively by children's gender or kindergarten program type.

Similarly, the California-based RAND Corp.'s December 2006 report, "School Readiness, Full-Day Kindergarten, and Student Achievement," examined data from a nationally representative sample of almost 7,900 students and found "that full-day kindergarten programs may actually be detrimental to mathematics performance and nonacademic readiness skills."

The study established that "children who had attended a full-day program at kindergarten showed poorer mathemat-

ics performance in fifth grade than did children who had attended a part-day kindergarten program."

Evidence from other states that have made significant investments in universal preschool also cast doubt on the ability of universal preschool to fix long-standing problems with K-12 education. In New Jersey, for example, the 31 Abbott districts have been making a decade-long investment in public preschool. (The term "Abbott districts" originated with a New Jersey Supreme Court ruling that found the education provided to some urban school children was inadequate, and that mandated reform measures in certain districts. Those became known as Abbott districts.)

New Jersey's Abbott districts spend the most money in the nation on prekindergarten education. Yet in 2005 more disadvantaged children in New Jersey scored below basic, which means they cannot read, on the fourth-grade reading assessment of the National Assessment of Educational Progress than in 1998. In 1998, 54 percent of students eligible for the free lunch program scored below basic on the NAEP reading exam. By 2005, 55 percent of students eligible for free lunch scored below basic. New Jersey's significant investment in universal preschool in low-income Abbott districts has had zero effect to date on the bottom line of fourth-grade reading scores for disadvantaged children.

Similarly, in Oklahoma, which has also had a decade-long investment in universal public preschool, 47 percent of students eligible for the free lunch program scored below basic in 1998. By 2005, 50 percent of free-lunch students scored below basic.

Michigan reflects a similar pattern. Despite increased investments in preschool for disadvantaged children, more fourth-grade students in Michigan who qualify for free lunch scored below basic in reading on the NAEP in 2005 than in 1998. In 1998, 56 percent of free-lunch eligible students scored below basic on the NAEP; by 2005, 57 percent of free-lunch eligible children in Michigan scored below basic.

In Michigan, student performance is relatively high in the early grades. However, Michigan students have declining proficiency rates as they move toward high school. Test scores reflect a stair step pattern. Consider Detroit Public Schools, which has already made large investments in early education programs and full-day kindergarten. In 2007, 76 percent of third-graders were proficient in reading; in seventh grade only 57 percent of students were proficient in reading, and by high school only 48 percent passed the MEAP high school reading exam.

In addition, Education Week's "Diplomas Count" reports that Detroit public schools have a graduation rate of

24 percent. The longer DPS children stay in school, the worse they do. These performance issues in the public school system are unlikely to be fixed with early education programs.

While preschool and full-day kindergarten may be politically popular, they are no silver bullet to fix the academic performance issues that plague this state. Michigan is considering investing hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars each year in a program whose benefits disap-

pear by third grade to solve education problems that come after the third grade. Shouldn't policymakers be focusing scarce education resources on programs that can make a lasting difference? ♦

*Lisa Snell is director of education and child welfare at the Reason Foundation, Los Angeles, Calif.*



## BOOK REVIEW

by Bruce Edward Walker

### ENTREPRENEURS SHOW WHAT IS POSSIBLE IN EDUCATION

#### Educational Entrepreneurship: Realities, Challenges, Possibilities

Edited by Frederick M. Hess, Harvard Education Press, 2006

"Educational Entrepreneurship: Realities, Challenges, Possibilities," features conference papers presented at the American Enterprise Institute on Nov. 14, 2005. Revised and edited for publication, the essays serve as a lively discussion of the state of contemporary education and the means by which it may be bettered.

According to several of the volume's 12 essays, the chief problem facing education is institutional inertia brought about by administrative bureaucracy, government over-regulation, faculty burnout and union protection of underperforming teachers. The majority of authors encourage entrepreneurship — the movement of economic resources from lower to higher productivity and greater yield, according to French economist J.B. Say — from without and intrapreneurship from within as means by which inertia may be overcome.

As examples, they cite the initial successes of the Edison Schools management enterprise; Teach for America, which places recent college graduates in inner-city teaching positions; and the Knowledge is Power Program, which operates open-enrollment college preparatory public schools for mostly low-income minority students.

In the book's final essay, editor Frederick M. Hess makes the claim that "entrepreneurs can have an enormous impact on the education debates simply by providing visions of what is possible, and proof points that analysts and reformers can use in the course of public debate. TFA and the KIPP Acad-

emies, for instance, have fundamentally altered discussions about teacher recruitment and urban schooling and students."

And yet....

"Educational Entrepreneurship" also presents points of view that vigorously defend the status quo. Larry Cuban, professor emeritus of education at Stanford University, asserts that entrepreneurship has accomplished little since the educational reforms of the early 20th century. Alex Molnar, professor of education policy and director of the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University, likewise presents a laundry list of the failures of certain charter schools and the corruption of some entrepreneurial programs as if these flaws were somehow endemic to any system that challenges the status quo. Molnar fails to balance his arguments with a much longer list of the myriad and far more egregious failings of our conventional public school system.

Hess, getting in the volume's last words, counters: "Risk is the price of progress. Failed ideas, providers and schools are indeed a high price to pay. They are only worth paying when compared to the alternative, to the stagnation and the ceaseless, pointless tinkering that have for so long been the face of school reform." ♦

*Bruce Edward Walker is science editor at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, and is co-author of "What Can You Do With a Major in Education? Real People. Real Jobs. Real Rewards," Wiley Publishing, 2005.*

## READER Letters

Michigan Education Report invites readers to comment on articles by visiting our forum page at <http://forum.educationreport.org>.

Here's what readers said about our last issue.

**Two guest educators argued for and against raising Michigan's compulsory attendance age in "Diverse Viewpoints," a regular feature of Michigan Education Report. Here's what readers think ...**

"Students' at the age of 16 to 18 can be ... disruptive and possibly dangerous to the other students in class as well as the teacher. Do we want this in our schools?"

- former charter school board member, Roseville

"I have been in education for 18 years. ... The decrease in parent involvement with both their kids and the schools is shocking, scary and sad. ... Whatever discussion we have on anything that has to do with kids, young adults, schools, society, etc.,

always has to have a section on the parents."

- high school teacher, Macomb County

**An article about Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's call for more charter and private schools in Detroit prompted these comments ...**

"Charter schools are the answer to many of the problems that plague DPS. Now we just need to find a way to provide all parents choices for their children's education."

- elementary school teacher, Taylor

**In conjunction with an article about advertising campaigns funded by school districts to attract students, Michigan Education Report sponsored an informal online survey that asked, "Should public schools spend money on advertising to attract students?" Results showed 53 percent of**

**respondents voting no and 47 percent voting yes. In a related comment, one reader said ...**

"The stipulations by the state on how schools can use money and the reliance on state money are getting out of hand. It is time for schools to advertise for students, to make themselves attractive. It is time for schools to allow advertising into the schools (limited to things like shoe ads or electronics) to help fund the school programs."

- business owner, Dundee

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## COMMENTARY

Paul Kersey

### Wrestling with reality: Is 'PACHo Libre' demeaning to teachers?

*This commentary originally appeared at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy Web site, www.mackinac.org., in April.*

Apparently some members of the Ann Arbor Education Association, a local affiliate of the Michigan Education Association public school employee union, believe that there is nothing more pressing than ginning up contributions to the MEA's political action committee, so they created a rambling, 21-minute video for that purpose. "PACHo Libre" is amusing in an immature sort of way — one can't help but generate snickers by presenting images of professional wrestlers while Olivia Newton-John sings "Let's Get Physical" — but underneath there are some troubling glimpses into the thinking of union supporters.

The story is set in a dystopian future in which pro wrestlers have successfully lobbied to cut school spending and reduced public education to a shell of its former glory ("Teacher, the chalk doesn't work!" one student cries out), dumbing down the public and ensuring the popularity of their, uh, sport. In the societal collapse that follows, one brave teacher decides to meet the wrestlers head-on. Donning a Mexican wrestling mask in a parody of the movie "Nacho Libre," he becomes PACHo Libre, the living embodiment of our only hope for saving American civilization: The Michigan Education Association PAC. (PACHo Libre — Get it?)

After the obligatory Rocky-esque training sequence, the human PAC fund faces his nemesis, "The Legislator," in the ring. The Legislator throws PACHo off balance with a combination of rhetorical boilerplate and logical non sequiturs. Just when PACHo looks to be down for the count, an orphan hands him a few coins. Enlivened by the modest campaign contribution, PACHo delivers heavy blows to the Legislator and eventually pins him to the mat, winning the match and apparently restoring so-called full funding to public education. The video ends with a woman identified as "Linda Carter, AAEA President and Shameless Wrestling Floozey (sic)," expressing her gratitude to PACHo with suggestive language.

To the extent that "PACHo Libre" provides insight into the thinking of MEA supporters, it's not encouraging. In particular,

there's no mention of the state's economic problems. The struggling auto industry, job losses, declining tax base, falling state and local government revenues — it seems these realities either don't exist or don't matter in the world of those who made "PACHo Libre". Neither does the Michigan Education Special Services Association, the MEA's controversial and expensive affiliate that acts as a third-party health insurance provider. Equally revealing is that the movie is "dedicated to the students, families, and staff whose lives, dreams, and careers will be affected by the closing of 52 schools in Detroit by the end of next year." The irony is that these schools are closing not as a result of state budget cuts, but because Detroit parents are choosing to pull their children out of a failed and unsafe system at the rate of 10,000 per year.

**"Is PACHo Libre demeaning to teachers?" To vote, go to <http://forum.educationreport.org>.**

To the extent that state funds are tight, the video's premise is that it is all due to some special interest that thinks it can profit from the decline of government-run education.

And funds aren't really all that terribly tight. According to the National Education Association, Michigan ranks in the top 10 nationally for total expenditures on public education, at roughly \$19 billion a year. On top of that, the Senate Fiscal Agency reports per-pupil funding has steadily outpaced the rate of inflation during the past decade.

One more observation about "PACHo Libre:" In the final fight scene, "The Legislator" makes arguments. The arguments may not be good ones — which is to be expected since his lines were written by a union member bent on making him look ridiculous — but the bottom line is "The Legislator" actually debates. PACHo Libre, on the other hand, needs money, but once he has it he wins on plain brute strength. He has no arguments of his own to make.

So now we know the truth: It isn't about winning debates or making wise policy or providing good education. It isn't even about securing good wages and benefits through collective bargaining. In the end it's all about political muscle; it all boils down to PAC money. That's not a happy ending. ♦

*Paul Kersey is senior labor policy analyst at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich.*

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## COMMENTARY

Clark Neily

### Michigan constitution hostile to school choice

Five years ago this summer, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* eliminated one potential barrier to educational opportunity by upholding Cleveland's school voucher program against a legal challenge under the U.S. Constitution's Establishment Clause. Does that mean the door to school choice is now open in states like Michigan? Unfortunately not, because each state has its own constitution that may (and in Michigan's case does) create local limits on school choice. Understanding the situation in Michigan requires a bit more background.

Seeking a "silver bullet" victory that would have effectively ended school choice across the nation in a single stroke, the National Education Association and other special interest groups attacked Cleveland's educational choice program for including religious schools among the wide array of educational options available to parents. Allowing parents to choose religious schools, they argued, amounted to an indirect attempt to aid religion in violation of the federal Establishment Clause.

Of course, that argument is hard to reconcile with the fact that the federal government routinely pays for prekindergartners to receive child care at religious schools and day-care centers, as well as for college students to attend religious colleges like Notre Dame, Georgetown, and Yeshiva University using Pell Grants and the GI Bill. And the Court rejected the argument, finding Cleveland's

voucher program to be one of "true private choice" designed to aid families, not religion.

Having lost at the U.S. Supreme Court, the NEA and its anti-choice allies did not give up. Instead, they committed themselves to fighting the battle for educational status quo state by state, dredging up whatever state constitutional provisions could be pressed into service both to discourage the future enactment of choice programs and challenge any existing ones in court. That's going to be a tall order: From eight programs in seven states when the *Zelman* case came down in 2002, we have gone to 17 programs in 10 states. Georgia is the latest state to join the voucher movement, offering state-funded scholarships to parents of children with disabilities. Arizona has a similar program that also includes foster children, as well as two different tax-credit-funded scholarship programs for other students.

Moreover, mounting evidence shows the benefits of school choice — not only for students receiving vouchers, but also for students who remain in public schools that, confronted for the first time with choice-driven competition, improve their overall performance in response. Other studies show beneficial effects on graduation rates (again, for students who take the vouchers and those who do not), racial integration, and substantial cost savings. No study has shown that any voucher program has ever harmed either voucher recipients or public schools. The only empirical question about vouchers today is whether their impact so far is best characterized as modestly beneficial or incredibly beneficial.

So where does that leave Michigan?

Unfortunately, Michigan's state constitution is among the most hostile in the country to school choice. Unlike virtually every other state, in which at least some form of publicly-funded school choice is possible, Michigan's constitution specifically provides that no public money

may ever be paid "to aid or maintain" any private school at the K-12 level. It states that no "payment, credit, tax benefit, exemption or deductions, tuition voucher, subsidy, grant or loan of public monies or property" may be provided "directly or indirectly, to support the attendance of any student or employment of any person at any such nonpublic school."

Realistically, the prospects for school choice in Michigan, absent constitutional amendment, are dim. A 2000 effort to amend the state constitution to permit school vouchers went down hard, and it is unclear what it would take to credibly mount a fresh attempt. One promising reform would be education tax credits, which have been a more popular school-choice policy than vouchers. In a 2002 survey conducted by the EPIC-MRA polling firm for the Mackinac Center, 67 percent of the respondents said they would support education tax credits.

The increasingly irrefutable evidence that school choice programs actually improve public schools while simultaneously providing a lifeline to thousands of children stuck in failing public schools may help to promote vital reform. The best evidence of the necessity of a school-choice policy must be the steadily increasing demand for school choice among the people who need it most: young, minority, urban parents, among whom polls show upwards of 80 percent support for school vouchers. Or maybe it will be the simple realization that those who now stand in the doors of our public schools to keep children trapped inside are just as morally culpable as those who stood in school-house doors 50 years ago to keep children trapped outside. ♦

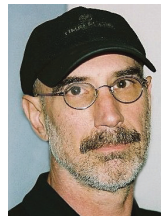
*Clark Neily is a senior attorney with the Institute for Justice, Arlington, Va.*



## DIVERSEVIEWPOINTS

# “Should ‘An Inconvenient Truth’ be shown in science class?”

### Yes: Let students analyze the evidence



Michael Benda

Our society is based on the free exchange of ideas and diversity of political and social thought. It should be the policy of every school district to encourage unbiased, unprejudiced and scientific study of controversial issues as they arise as part of the school curriculum.

A controversial issue is any topic or problem which society is in the process of debating on which there is honest disagreement. The issue of global climate change is current, significant and of interest to students. It is included as “Unit 8 — Climate Change” in the Michigan high school companion document, which explains high school science course content expectations.

The core concept states that, “Predicting and mitigating the potential impact of global climate change requires an understanding of the mechanisms of Earth’s climate, involving studies of past climates, measurements of current interactions of Earth’s systems and the construction of climate change models.”

In this case, the issue is the result of different interpretations given to the circumstances which surround global climate change.

One of the goals in science, when studying controversial issues, is to enable the student to develop techniques for considering such questions; techniques which he or she will use in later life. “An Inconvenient Truth,” the documentary film about climate change, specifically global warming, can provide opportunities for the development of clear thinking, balanced judgment, intelligent choices, informed opinion, an ability to differentiate fact from opinion and an understanding of propaganda devices.

The purpose of the film is to educate the public about the science behind global climate change and to enhance our understanding of global climate change, which, first and foremost, rests on the veracity of the science. It accomplishes this by giving the viewer access to a cohesive summary of scientific knowledge on this topic. The film does not contain “scientific proof;” it is a presentation of evidence based on science, which allows the student to engage in the most fundamental exercise as a scientist — to discover the truth.

Science education must give students an opportunity to read and listen for bias, to recognize bias and to research both sides of a situation. As the next generation of scientists, our students must be able to question, form hypotheses, experiment, adjust hypotheses and find supporting evidence.

In science, we teach students to identify a problem, check the literature for research about the problem, form a hypothesis, develop a way to

test the hypothesis, collect data from the test and analyze the data, repeat the tests to ensure validity and then draw conclusions from the data. The hypothesis (our prediction) is either supported or refuted by the data and usually leads to further questions regarding the problem statement.

Our students should analyze the scientific evidence and the science teacher should strive to keep the focus of discussion on empirical data available that supports or refutes the general hypothesis. The controversial nature of this film does not lie in its scientific basis, but rather in its socioeconomic implications. It is the predictions and the impact of those predictions on society that are fueling the controversy.

The implications of a sun-centered solar system by Copernicus caused a controversy because it threatened to upset the social underpinnings of a particular belief system. Galileo was tried before the Inquisition and required to renounce his beliefs in Copernican theories. The theory was supported by the evidence acquired, but shunned because it required people to change the basic tenets of their society.

The role of science isn’t to determine the correct socioeconomic path for the human population, but rather to present valid, substantiated data that can be used to formulate a course that ensures a healthy, sustainable future.

“An Inconvenient Truth” gives science students worldwide a view into what may become the most talked about and researched experiment conducted on this planet. Students can research and discuss the validity and implications of the scientific research that is presented and the predictions that are made based on the evidence.

The film is an opportunity to view some impressive graphs, media and data and to do a critical analysis of the scientific principals that produced them. My students will make the final decision for themselves based on their research into the validity of the evidence and will draw their own conclusion as to what can or should be done to remedy the problem. ♦

Michael Benda teaches science at Jeffers High School in the Adams Township School District, Painesdale.

### NO: Film is politics hiding under veneer of science



Tom Meeks

The snowcaps of Mount Kilimanjaro are receding. That’s a measurable fact. Some well-respected scientists believe it’s due to generalized global warming, while other, equally well-respected scientists believe the cause is deforestation around the base of the mountain that reduces available moisture. Still others believe it is a combination of the two. One fact and three differing opinions — contributing equally to a rich scientific discourse.

But there is no room for differing opinions in “An Inconvenient Truth,” the film about climate change, specifically global warming. Viewers are led to believe that all reputable scientists believe that Mount Kilimanjaro’s receding snowcaps are proof positive that global warming is destroying the world as we know it. Scientists believing otherwise are incompetent charlatans or sinister, money-hungry conspirators.

At their hearts, science and education are about expansiveness, exploration and discovery. Politics, on the other hand, is about domination, indoctrination and exclusion. The problem with “An Inconvenient Truth” is that it hides the sensibilities of politics under a thin veneer of the sensibilities of science.

To call “An Inconvenient Truth” a documentary is intellectually dishonest. It’s basically a vehicle for bringing Al Gore’s slide presentation to a wider audience. At its core, Al Gore’s presentation is a political polemic designed to demolish any and all opposition.

Let’s agree that the Earth is warming and that there is evidence that mankind is partly or even largely to blame. That is not the issue. The issue is whether this particular movie is the right vehicle for studying the problem

in the classroom. What makes for good “edutainment” in theaters does not always translate to good education.

The deliberate distortion of some of the video footage designed to make Al Gore look spectacular and his opponents look sinister is problematic. With years of experience covering events on Capitol Hill, I know the level of technical quality available to those covering hearings. The footage of U.S. Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., appears to have been deliberately post-processed and compressed to give him an unsavory look. It’s inconceivable that any file footage by professionals covering congressional hearings at that time would have been that bad. This should be no small point to teachers committed to truthfulness and fairness. Deliberately distorting images smacks of indoctrination rather than education.

Equally problematic for educators should be the fact that the same techniques and tricks one brings to demolishing political opponents were expanded and brought to bear on scientists and researchers having come to conclusions that might undermine Gore’s position. Is there any serious give-and-take on the scientific merits of any of Gore’s claims? No. In fact, he declares that all serious researchers agree with his presentation, which is patently false. Applying political methods to science, he ascribes sinister motives to well-respected scientists who disagree with his conclusions. This is intellectual dishonesty at an intolerable level. It treats science and scientists as pawns of politics and demeans the scientific process.

Global warming is a serious topic, and plenty of serious resources addressing it are suitable for classroom use. But a political polemic that sends the message that scientific thought must be monolithic and subservient to politics is certainly not among them. ♦

Tom Meeks, of Maryland, is a former elementary and middle-school science teacher who has produced documentary and educational films for the National Park Service and has worked for various news agencies.



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