

MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

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SHORT SUBJECTS

Security upgrades at three Saginaw Public Schools buildings will cost nearly \$500,000, according to Campus Safety Magazine. The Saginaw Board of Education approved a contract with Security Corp. of Novi to place approximately 90 cameras in each of three schools. Motion sensors, a new key system and access control also are part of the security plan.

Competition and hands-on learning help boys academically, according to Plymouth-Canton Community Schools officials. The district is working with an educational consultant to change how boys are taught in response to research showing they learn differently than girls, the Detroit Free Press reported. Some research suggests physiological differences in the brains of boys and girls play a role in achievement gaps.

A Dallas-based energy management company has signed contracts to manage energy use in several Metro Detroit school districts, promising to refund the difference if the districts' actual savings on natural gas, electricity and water falls short of goals. So far, Novi, Farmington, Ypsilanti and Utica school districts have signed on with Energy Education Inc., according to The Detroit News.

Detroit Public Schools remains the largest school district in Michigan, followed by Utica, but third-place Grand Rapids Public Schools is losing ground to Plymouth-Canton, the Grand Rapids Press reported. GRPS

SHORT SUBJECTS, Page 11



Kendra Freedman and her students at the Learning Circle Academy in West Bloomfield observe the plant life that has sprouted on a model elephant. The academy is this issue's "School in Focus," Page 8.

CHARTER STUDENTS GROWING UP

Parents want high school options

Charter school parents who live in the Grand Rapids area are pushing both conventional public schools and charter school operators to provide more options for high school students. The parents want the conventional school system, in particular Grand Rapids Public Schools, to "release" any student who wants to attend high school outside the district, and they also are lobbying charter school operators to begin serving older students.

So far, results are mixed. National Heritage Academies, which operates eight elementary public charter schools in the area, does not plan to open a high school itself but has had "very

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More schools contracting for support services

CONTRACTING FOR CUSTODIAL WORK UP MORE THAN 26 PERCENT

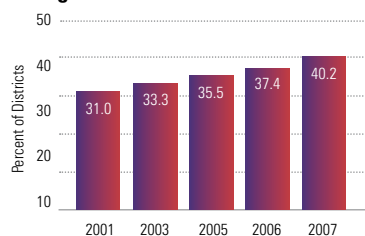
More than 40 percent of the conventional public school districts in Michigan contract for at least one support service, according to a survey completed by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, up from 37.4 percent a year ago. The largest increase was seen in custodial contracting.

The Mackinac Center publishes Michigan Education Report.

The center's fifth school privatization survey shows that 222 of Michigan's 552 districts contract for at least one of the three major noninstructional services: food, custodial and transportation. "Survey 2007: More Growth in

School Support Service Privatization" found that 22 districts chose to contract for at least one service for the first time in 2007, while six districts resumed in-house operations, for a net increase of 16 districts.

Outsourcing by Michigan School Districts



A growing number of Michigan public school districts are relying on the contracting of noninstructional services for cost savings. Source: Mackinac Center for Public Policy

Nearly 90 percent of the districts reported they were satisfied with the results, and 80 percent reported saving money. The survey was conducted by Daniel J. Smith, an adjunct scholar with the Mackinac Center and a Ph.D.

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Following the lead of the Kalamazoo Promise

Schools and communities develop their own scholarship initiatives

Is the promise of a college scholarship enough to motivate students to study harder, convince parents to choose a particular school or bring business to a community?

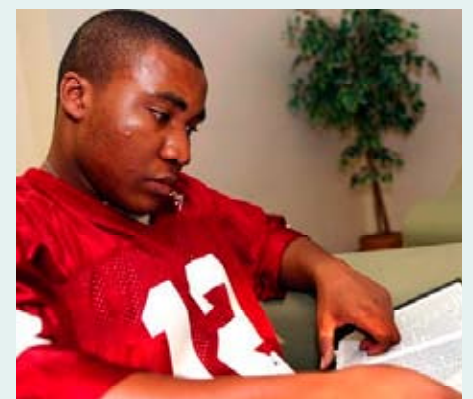
To varying degrees, that is what Michigan schools and communities will find out in the next year as they launch their own college tuition programs in the wake of the Kalamazoo Promise. Organizers of the original Promise, which offers to pay up to four years of tuition to eligible Kalamazoo Public Schools students, say it has boosted enrollment, raised graduation rates and brought new residents to the Kalamazoo area.

At least one researcher said, however, it is too early to tell whether the program will achieve its broader goal of revitalizing Kalamazoo's urban core. In the meantime, other schools, school districts and communities are putting eggs into similar baskets. Some are in the talking stage, while others have announced formal programs. For example:

— Carrollton Public Schools in Saginaw County has set aside \$14,400 in the general fund budget to purchase 40 contracts through the Michigan Education Trust on behalf of this year's kindergarten and preschool students. When those students graduate, eligible members will receive financial awards equaling one year of tuition at a community college.

— In Northport, at the tip of Michigan's Leelanau Peninsula, community organizers launched a college tuition program to maintain enrollment and keep the local high school open. They plan to raise money through private donations and community fundraisers.

— Kalamazoo Advantage Academy, a public charter school in downtown Kalamazoo, has responded to the Kalamazoo Promise by offering its own tuition program. The Gift for Tomorrow was announced this summer.



Alex Plair II, 18, of Kalamazoo, a sophomore at Western Michigan University, was among the first students to benefit from The Kalamazoo Promise, an anonymously funded free-tuition program for graduates of the district's high schools. (AP Photo/Shawano Cleary)

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EDUCATION AT A GLANCE / Survey

Top 10 Traits of Quality Schools and Type of School Likely to Provide Them

	INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS	PUBLIC SCHOOLS	BOTH DO WELL
Use of technology	30%	28%	19%
Prepare for global economy	36%	28%	22%
Prevent drug/alcohol use	41%	16%	24%
Encourage parents to participate in child's education	43%	20%	21%
Prepare students academically for college	49%	16%	20%
Climate of support to study and excel	44%	16%	26%
Keep students motivated/enthusiastic about learning	48%	17%	20%
Maintain discipline	57%	12%	16%
Employ high-quality teachers	47%	19%	17%
Provide a safe environment	52%	12%	20%

Source: Survey commissioned by National Association of Independent Schools and carried out by Shugoll Research, Bethesda, Md., in November 2006. The survey asked adults to rank the importance of 20 characteristics of educational quality and which schools most often reflect those traits. The full report is available at <http://www.nais.org/files/PDFs/PublicOpinionPollSummary2006.pdf>.

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CHARTER OPTIONS

preliminary” meetings with charter high school operators about opening a Grand Rapids program, a spokesperson said. The program would not be operated by NHA.

In an unrelated move, a group of West Michigan businessmen has filed a request to open a charter high school in Grand Rapids modeled after University Preparatory Academy in Detroit. That request has not yet been approved by Grand Valley State University, although it is among the final four being considered, according to GVSU officials.

Meanwhile, a new policy in the Kent Intermediate School District has changed the way by which students can apply to attend conventional public schools in a district other than their assigned district. Intermediate school officials said the new policy was needed because the former system gave an unfair advantage to certain groups of students. Charter parents said they fear the new system will make it harder for them to send children to the high school of their choice.

“I don’t want to gamble on my child’s education,” said Pam Sult, a Grand Rapids parent involved in the effort. “I want to go someplace where I’m confident.”

The situation in Kent County demonstrates the demand for public charter high school programs in Michigan, according to Stephanie Van Koevering, executive director of the Michigan Council of Charter School Authorizers.

“There is strong demand statewide,” she said. “There’s demand in Flint, Saginaw, Kalamazoo. ... We need to figure out a way to make that happen.”

Pupil enrollment figures show that of all the students enrolled in Michigan public charter schools in 2005-2006, fewer than 20 percent were in ninth through twelfth grade. In comparison, of all the students enrolled in conventional public school programs, more than 30 percent were high schoolers. Of the 229 public charter schools in operation in Michigan this year, 99 have at least one high school grade, according to Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies.

‘GROWING’ A HIGH SCHOOL

Charter school groups suggest various reasons for the lower high school enrollment: that charter schools are still “growing” their high school programs, that there are fewer requests to open charter high schools and that those groups who do want to open a school might be stopped by the legislative cap on the number of schools.

Some of the market demand for charter high schools will be met by K-8 schools who are adding a grade at a time, Van Koevering said.

That’s the approach used by The Romine Group, which manages five charter schools in Michigan. All of the schools opened with elementary programs but are now in various stages of adding high school, John Romine, company president, told Michigan Education Report.

“If we’re doing a good job K-8, I think we have a moral obligation to create a high school program for those kids in the environment their parents have selected,” he said. “It’s a deliberate philosophy on my part.”

Quisenberry said that the number of charter high school students in Michigan has doubled in the past five years, from about 6,300 to 14,000. Approximately 3,000 seniors graduated from 85 Michigan charter high schools last year; in eight cases, it was the school’s first graduating class.

Still, only about 25 percent of the applications for new charter schools include high school programs, according to Van Koevering.

There are 15 public charter schools in the Kent Intermediate School District, which encompasses Grand Rapids Public Schools and 19 surrounding districts. Of those 15, four offer high school programs. One is an alternative high school. Of the six charter

schools in the city of Grand Rapids, none have a high school program.

“Educating a high school student is very different than educating a student in K-8,” Van Koevering said. “These are two very different approaches to teaching and learning. High schools require a great deal more in terms of facilities.”

“There is strong demand statewide. There’s demand in Flint, Saginaw, Kalamazoo. ... We need to figure out a way to make that happen.”

*Stephanie Van Koevering
Michigan Council of Charter School
Authorizers*

Black River Public School, a public charter school in Holland, spends about \$1,000 more per high school pupil than elementary pupil, according to Head of School Dave Angerer. In keeping with its original mission as a college preparatory academy, the school offers numerous Advanced Placement courses to its upper level students, he said. That curriculum is expensive, and so are support facilities such as science laboratories.

“We’ve devoted our resources to that,” he said.

Black River opened as a sixth- through ninth-grade operation and then added one higher grade in each of the next three years. After the first seniors graduated in 2000, the school began adding lower grades, working downward until reaching kindergarten this year. The school, named one of the country’s top 100 high schools in 2006 by Newsweek magazine, now has 780 students with a waiting list of 150.

Romine said that adding high school grades “has become the most difficult task I have faced in 44 years in education.”

In elementary classrooms, one teacher can cover all the core content material, he said, but even a small group of high school students will need several teachers who specialize in different subjects and who meet the highly qualified teacher provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. One way smaller charters cope is by hiring part-time teachers — if they can find them.

“That first year or two is monstrous in finding part-time teachers,” Romine said.

STUDENTS WANT EXTRACURRICULARS

New charter operators also might find it difficult to pay for such high school facilities as band rooms and science labs, Van Koevering said. While 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.

“The challenges present themselves fairly immediately,” she said.

That situation has eased for some long-term charters, Romine said, as investors have become more willing to purchase bonds or otherwise invest in schools with a proven track record.

Another explanation for lower charter high school enrollment is that some students migrate to the conventional public high school to participate in sports or extracurricular activities if their charter high school doesn’t offer them, according to Todd Ziebarth, a senior policy analyst with the National Alliance for Charter Schools.

“For some students, those have appeal. For some students, those things aren’t as important,” he said.

Romine said his company found that extracurricular activities are important not just to high school students and parents, but middle schoolers as well. Romine Group schools now offer a variety of after-school and sport programs, he said, naming

chess club, music programs, basketball and soccer as examples.

“I think what has to happen at the middle school and high school level is you need to give kids a full school experience,” he said.

Black River parents know when they apply that the high school emphasizes college preparatory work, Angerer said.

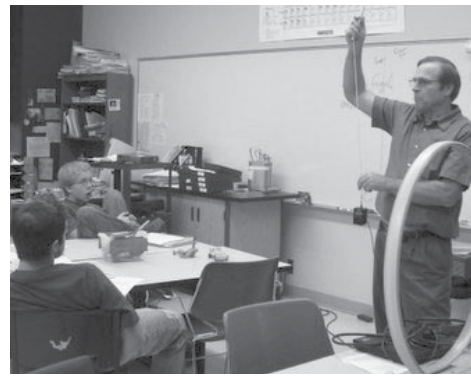
“We can’t offer the breadth of programming other high schools offer,” he said, explaining that the school’s sports program and technical education programs are smaller than most conventional high school programs.

CHOICE POLICY SPARKS DEBATE

In Grand Rapids, about 300 people showed up for a meeting between parents and National Heritage Academies officials about future high school options, Sult said. “Most of them were charter parents. My daughters went to nine years of charter school and we still don’t have a high school.”

National Heritage spokeswoman Tara Powers told Michigan Education Report that NHA does not plan to open a high school program itself, but has had discussions with other charter operators about opening a Grand Rapids site. NHA operates eight elementary charter schools in the intermediate district.

“It’s very, very preliminary. There’s not much more to share at this point,” she said. NHA’s “singular focus” always has been elementary education, she said. “We feel we’re good at it, but we still have the opportunity for improvement.”



High school teachers Randy Bos, top, and Tim Ewald, center, work with students in the science laboratory at Black River Public School in Holland. The students are Hannah Poindexter, center photo, and Larry Rasmussen and Jake Mogck, bottom photo. Some officials say the higher cost of facilities is one reason there are not more charter high schools in Michigan.

In the meantime, many charter students in the immediate Grand Rapids area attend a conventional public high school after eighth grade. Some of their parents are unhappy with a new agreement adopted by the Kent Intermediate School Superintendents Association early in 2007. Titled “The Kent ISD Collaborative Schools of Choice Plan,” the agreement outlines two ways in which students who live in one of the KISD’s 20 conventional public school districts may attend school in a different district.

The main method, an option any con-

ventional public school district may offer under state law, is called Open Schools of Choice. It allows parents to enroll their child in any district as long as that district has room. The student’s assigned district does not have to give permission, but the parents have to apply during a specific time period in the spring. Each district can set limits on how many students it accepts under this plan, holding a lottery in cases when the number of applicants exceeds the number of seats.

The second method, called Section 6 after a different provision in state regulations, allows families with “special circumstances” to enroll in a district outside their assigned district if the assigned district “releases” them and if the receiving district agrees to accept them. Section 6 releases can be done at any time.

Under the KISD’s former policy, a student who had attended schools outside the conventional public school system for at least two years would routinely be released under Section 6, according to KISD Superintendent Kevin Konarska. But this year the policy was changed due to the belief that it gave those groups — mostly charter and private school students — an unfair advantage.

“We felt it wasn’t fair to give students a preference from those programs,” Konarska explained. “We were even concerned that legally it may be questionable.”

Section 6 is supposed to be reserved for extenuating circumstances, he said, such as allowing a student to finish high school where he or she started, even if the family moves.

The new policy requires the charter and private parents to apply to the district of their choice through the Open Schools of Choice policy and, if necessary, participate in the lottery. In this first year of implementation, Konarska said, some parents may not have been aware of the new policy and consequently missed the deadline to apply. Others might not have been accepted into their first choice of high schools, depending on the number of seats available. Overall, about 2 to 3 percent of the approximately 100,000 students living within KISD boundaries apply for schools of choice in a given year, he said.

Grand Rapids Public Schools, the largest district in the KISD, said 954 students requested Section 6 releases this year. Of those, the district approved 623 and turned down 331, saying the latter group had failed to show that city schools could not meet their needs, according to an article in the Grand Rapids Press.

Konarska said he didn’t anticipate the controversy the new policy has created.

“I really felt the community would understand ... that this would be the fair thing to do,” Konarska said. “Sometimes change takes time to process and that’s the situation now.”

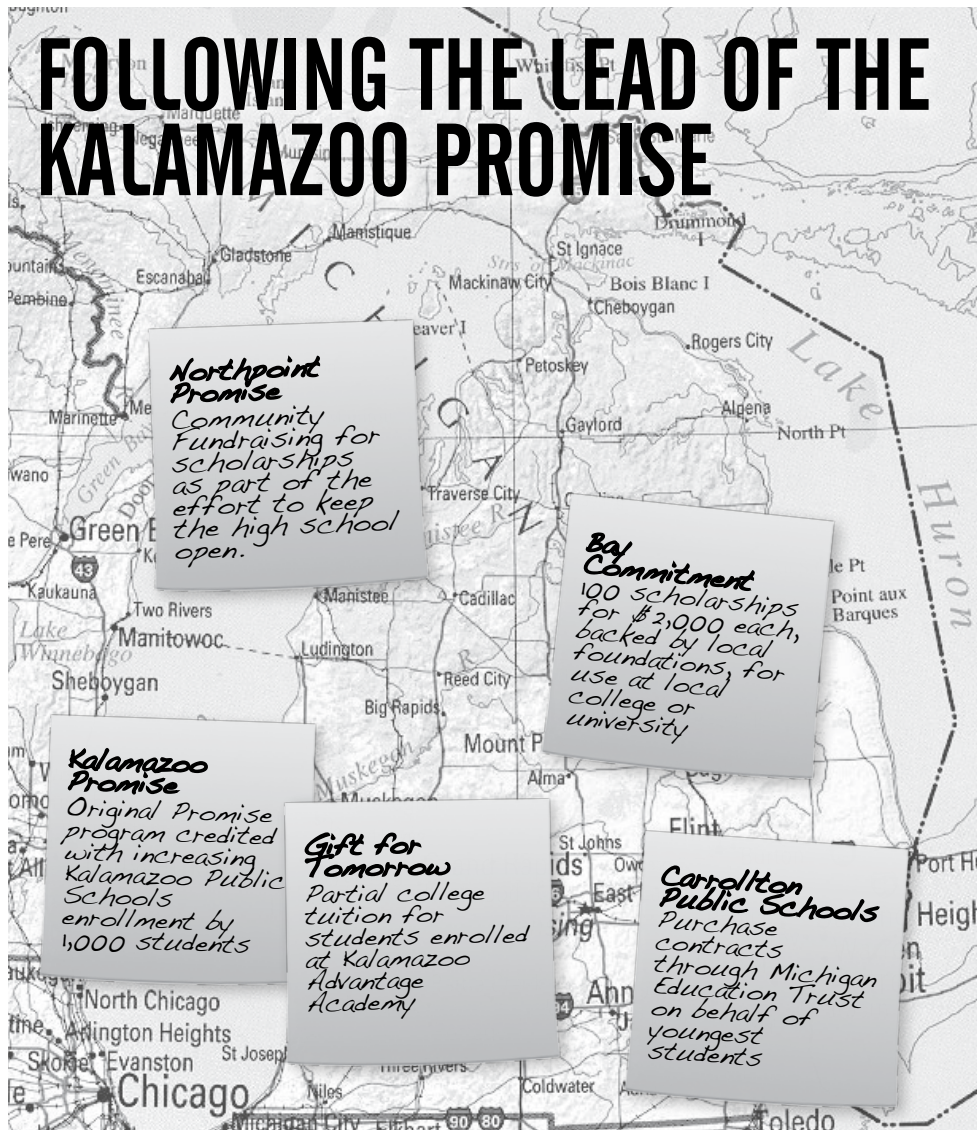
Public debate on the issue has been carried out at the Grand Rapids Board of Education meetings, in letters to local media and at a Web blog Sult initiated, primarily regarding the number of parents requesting to leave the Grand Rapids Public Schools system. Some accuse charter parents of “white flight” to suburban schools and others say parents should be willing to give the city’s high schools a chance.

“We feel as parents that our children’s safety and the education they get are extenuating circumstances,” Sult said. “We don’t do this just for fun.”

Sult’s own daughter and some other Excel students were released by GRPS to attend East Kentwood High School in Kentwood Public Schools this year, primarily because Kentwood had agreed to accept them before the new policy was made known, according to Sult.

“We really believe the right thing to do is let everybody go,” she said. “If you want to have a good education, you should not have to pack up your belongings and move.” ♦

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— Bay City Public Schools will pay part of the administrative costs for Bay Commitment, a 100-scholarship program launched jointly with the Bay Area Community Foundation aimed primarily at students who might not otherwise attend college.

A visiting scholar at the W.E. Upjohn Institute in Kalamazoo said she is not surprised that other communities are taking up the idea of Promise programs, but also cautioned that while it's clear that the Kalamazoo program resulted in higher enrollment, it is not clear yet how much and what type of effect there has been on the housing or business markets in the city itself.

"It's been great for the kids ... and good for the district. It looks like it's had an effect curtailing the dropout rate," Michelle Miller-Adams said. But she called the economic development effect on Kalamazoo's urban center "less clear," and something that will take more time to evaluate.

Miller-Adams is completing research on the Promise that will lead to a book explaining the program's origin and its economic, social and educational effects. Launched in 2005, the Promise made national headlines when organizers announced that anonymous, private donors would pay for college tuition for every eligible KPS graduate. So far the program has been credited with increasing enrollment by more than 1,000 students.

KALAMAZOO CHARTER RESPONDS

While Promise organizers describe the program as an effort to revitalize the Kalamazoo area, creating an educated workforce that will attract business, the tuition incentive also has had the effect of keeping students — and the state aid that follows them — in the Kalamazoo Public Schools system. The longer a student attends Kalamazoo Public Schools, the higher the award. Students must reside in the district; they may not enroll through schools of choice programs. At about \$5,500 in state aid per general-education pupil last year and \$7,500 in state aid per special-education pupil, increased enrollment of 1,000 adds at least \$5,500,000 million to the district's budget.

That incentive took a toll at Kalamazoo Advantage Academy, a public charter school in downtown Kalamazoo, which said about 70 of its students transferred to Kalamazoo Public Schools because of the tuition offer. In response, the academy has announced its own Gift for Tomorrow, which will pay up to 35 percent of the cost of college tuition and

fees to students who leave the academy after eighth grade and go on to graduate from any Kalamazoo public high school. The academy does not have its own high school program.

In effect, the Gift for Tomorrow takes away the financial incentive to switch schools. By combining the Gift benefits with the Promise benefits, a student would receive the same amount of tuition assistance that he or she would receive from attending Kalamazoo Public Schools from kindergarten through 12th grade.

NORTHPORT PROGRAM AIMED AT KEEPING HIGH SCHOOL OPEN

In northern Michigan, private money also will pay for the Northport Promise, but that money is not already in the bank. Steering committee members say they will have to raise thousands of dollars for a scholarship program that they hope will attract enough students to keep the local high school open.

With its entire K-12 operation housed in one building near the tip of the Leelanau Peninsula, Northport Public Schools has approximately 75 students enrolled in seventh through 12th grade this year, including a senior class of 12. That number has declined in recent years, and when enrollment projections predicted even fewer students in the future, the local board of education discussed the possibility of eliminating the high school program.

"How small do you get before you lose opportunities for kids?" Superintendent Ty Wessell said, describing the situation to Michigan Education Report. Low enrollment makes it hard to offer choir or band programs, he said as an example, as well as specialized academic classes that might only attract a handful of students.

"The board looked at all sorts of options last year," Wessell said, but eventually agreed to keep the high school program operating in part because community members agreed to launch the Promise.

The idea is not to turn Northport into a larger district, he said, but to keep enrollment stable.

"I think we can do a very strong program with 75 students," he said. The district already offers some classes online through the Michigan Virtual High School, and is discussing the possibility of guest student programs or distance learning with other districts.

Sally Viskochil, chairwoman of the Northport Promise steering committee, attributes the enrollment decline over the years to loss of jobs from the closing of the local hospital and controversy over a sewer issue. Housing development in the peninsula tends to attract

retirees and people who can afford waterfront vacation homes, she said, not young families. While that helps the local tax base — Northport is one Michigan district that takes in more money from non-homestead property tax than from state aid — it doesn't help school enrollment.

"My motivation is to keep the school open and functioning," Viskochil said. She said she believes that closing the high school program would lead eventually to closing the entire operation. "You'd lose the whole school and by losing a school you lose the heart of a community."

It's too early to tell if the Promise already has had an impact, Wessell said, but it has generated a number of inquiries.

CARROLLTON BUYS EDUCATION TRUSTS

While Northport hopes to hand out scholarships as early as 2008, Carrollton Public Schools is taking a long-term approach. The board of education will set aside \$14,400 in each of the next 10 years to pay for 40 trusts on behalf of this year's kindergarten and preschool students. The money will be invested through the Michigan Education Trust, a prepaid college tuition plan administered by the state Department of Treasury. At graduation, eligible students will receive enough for a year of community college tuition, according to Carrollton Superintendent Craig C. Douglas.

"I'm going to call it a pilot program," Douglas told Michigan Education Report. "The outcome is potentially powerful."

Douglas' interest in paying for college is personal and professional. In addition to being a public school superintendent, he sits on the board of the Michigan Higher Education Assistance Authority and he also is the father of three college graduates.

To be eligible for Carrollton's program, a student must remain enrolled in Carrollton schools from preschool or kindergarten through 12th grade, have consistent attendance, meet academic requirements and graduate. That includes maintaining a 3.0 grade point average in high school and meeting or exceeding state requirements on standardized tests throughout elementary and middle school, Douglas said. The offer is open to residents of the Carrollton district and to non-residents who enroll through the schools-of-choice program.

"We want them to make a commitment to the school," Douglas said.

That includes parents, who must attend all parent/teacher conferences as well as two extra parent meetings each year. They also must volunteer for at least one school activity.

"The parent is the primary teacher. Always has been, always will be," Douglas said. "Now we've got the carrot to bring the parents to the table."

The district expects the program will pay for itself by keeping students in Carrollton schools and attracting newcomers. Every student brings in approximately \$7,000 in state aid.

"The brilliant piece of this, in my mind, is that the state allows you to put away a little at a time," he said. "You don't need someone to roll up in a Brinks truck."

The MET program has always been available to school districts, according to treasury department spokesman Terry Stanton, but this

year new rules allow districts to buy the trusts without naming individual beneficiaries at the time of purchase.

"We expect that will make it a little more popular," he said.

BAY COMMITMENT TAKES ALL-LOCAL APPROACH

Taking a more focused approach, Bay City Public Schools and the Bay Area Community Foundation have announced Bay Commitment, a two-year pilot scholarship program targeted at students who have been enrolled in the district long-term and meet academic criteria, but who might not otherwise go to college. The recipients are expected to include a number of "first-in-the-family" college enrollees. One hundred scholarships, for up to \$2,000 each, will be awarded to Bay City Public Schools graduates beginning in 2008. The money must be spent at nearby Saginaw Valley State University or Delta College.

While the school district will not fund the scholarships, it will pay approximately half the administrative cost to establish a College Preparation Services department, which will match students to scholarships, help families make college plans and help with the transition to college. The school district's share will be about \$50,000, according to Superintendent Carolyn Wierda.

The foundation and other philanthropic groups will pay for the rest of the administrative costs and will raise money for an endowment to finance the scholarships. The emphasis is deliberately local, Wierda said, in the hopes that students who grew up in Bay City and who attend a local college will stay in the area to build a skilled, local workforce.

SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS NOT A GUARANTEE

In Kalamazoo, Upjohn researcher Miller-Adams said a scholarship program may give a school district an edge, but it's no guarantee of enrollment. Parents consider many variables in choosing schools, among them size, safety, religious affiliation, test scores and programs offered, she said. As of the fall of 2006, for example, Kalamazoo Public Schools scored lower than the five surrounding conventional public school districts on math and reading scores in all grade levels on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program. In some cases the difference in scores was less than 10 percentage points, but in others it was as high as 35. The Upjohn Institute will track MEAP scores and other academic markers as part of its research.

It appears the Promise holds the most appeal for students who likely would not go to college otherwise, either for lack of funding or because they lack role models or other support systems, Miller-Adams said.

"If you're in the (college education) market anyway, the Promise was a draw, but only a draw," she said. "There's a lot of scholarship money out there."

The economy plays a role in school choice, too, she added. "It's not like people are flooding in here," she said. "Nobody is going to move somewhere without a job." ♦

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District hires company to provide alternative education

The Westwood Community School District has contracted with Ombudsman, a private company based in Illinois, to provide an alternative education program to students in the Dearborn area this year, marking Ombudsman's first foray into the Michigan education market and Westwood's first venture into contracting for alternative education services.

Westwood Superintendent Ernando F. Minghine said the program gives at-risk students a chance to complete high school, in some cases their last chance.

"We hope it will benefit all students who need something to catch fire. We can't afford to have a whole generation go by the wayside," Minghine told Michigan Education Report.

Ombudsman is a division of Educational Services of America, a national educational service firm. The company is under contract with the district for one year to provide alternative education programming to students not only from Westwood, but from three other conventional public school districts in the Dearborn area. In an arrangement among the districts, all of the students have enrolled as Westwood students so they can attend the Ombudsman program. The state aid the districts would receive for each student also will flow to Westwood, which will, in turn, use it to pay Ombudsman.

Alternative education students are usually described as those who don't perform well in a traditional classroom setting. Francis L. McCauley, Westwood's alternative education administrator, said many of the students come from transient families, moving frequently among school districts without putting down roots in any of them. Some live with relatives, not parents. Many have behavioral issues, social issues and legal issues, like pregnancy and truancy, and few role models.

"We just weren't able to give those kids the classes they needed" in the district's own alternative education program, McCauley said. "They had no identity with the school. They were uncomfortable. ... When you talk to them one on one, they have goals, but they can't accomplish them at the moment."

Allison O'Neill, vice president of operations for Ombudsman, said those comments are typical. Students who enroll

in Ombudsman programs are, "for whatever reason, disengaged, disenfranchised, not engaged in the learning process."

Ombudsman offers them a different environment, some control over their own schedule, an individual learning plan and a one-on-one relationship with a teacher, she said.

Ombudsman students don't attend their local school; they go to a learning center where they work their way through seven major areas of study, including core academic subjects like math and science, plus nonacademic subjects like college preparation. In Westwood, students temporarily are meeting in the district's administration center, but an off-campus site was expected to open by mid-November.

Most of the content is presented through computer programs, but there are some supplemental activities. Students work individually and must achieve 90 percent mastery in a subject before advancing to the next level.

Westwood students are expected to spend four hours a day at the Ombudsman center, either from 7 to 11 a.m., 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. or 3:15 to 7:15 p.m. They also have to participate in community service and work experience, something Westwood asked Ombudsman to add to the program.

"We don't think that will detract from the program. We think it will enhance it," Minghine said.

The teacher's role at the learning center is to "build a relationship with those kids and help re-engage them," O'Neill said. Teachers don't provide day-to-day instruction, but they do "sit down regularly and work with the students." They also play a large role in assessing each student's skills at the time of enrollment, in helping each student set goals and in developing the off-computer learning activities, she said.

Students like the freedom to choose among morning, afternoon or evening schedules, said Blanche Fraser, a former Michigan public school superintendent who is now executive vice president for sales and marketing for ESA.

"Giving them choices really empowers the students," she said.

Under the terms of its contract with Westwood, Ombudsman provides the building and equipment and develops the curriculum to meet Michigan graduation requirements. The teachers, who hold Michigan certification and have taken training in the Ombudsman program, are school district employees. In some states, Ombudsman hires teachers directly, but Michigan law requires instructional personnel to be district employees. The program currently uses two full-time and two part-time teachers, although McCauley said that could change if enrollment increases.

"We hope it will benefit all students ... We can't afford to have a whole generation go by the wayside."

*Ernando F. Minghine
Westwood CSD Superintendent*

Jill Basherian, president of the Westwood Education Association, said that the teachers hired for the Ombudsman program will not be members of the teachers union. That follows past practice, she said, adding, "Westwood has never had alternative education teachers in our unit."

Asked if she thinks the program will be a benefit to students, she said, "I'm waiting to see. I can't pass judgment on it."

High school debaters hone their skills at Mackinac Center workshops

Arguing for and against federal aid to sub-Saharan Africa

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy concluded its 20th annual High School Debate Workshop in late September, hosting more than 450 students and teachers from nearly 30 schools.

Students heard from three national speakers on this year's topic, "Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its public health assistance to sub-Saharan Africa." The workshops are designed to help the students prepare to argue both for and against the given

topic in debate competitions throughout the country, involving more than 100,000 students annually.

Workshops this year were held in Livonia, Adrian, Grand Rapids and Traverse City, drawing a mix of conventional public, charter public, parochial and independent schools. Speakers included Greg Rehmke, director of educational programs for Economic Thinking/E Pluribus Unum Films; Mike Winther, a former high school and college debater and now a debate coach; and

Ombudsman is required to report to Westwood on student attendance and academic progress, Minghine said. The company's literature cites an 85 percent success rate, which O'Neill said is defined as a student who has advanced to the next grade level in the Ombudsman program, who has successfully re-entered the regular school environment, or who has graduated.

"It might not work for every child, but it works for a lot," Fraser said.

There is room for 90 high school students in the Westwood program, but Minghine expects first-year enrollment to be closer to 60. At 60 students, the cost of hiring Ombudsman will be about equal to the cost of the districts providing the program themselves, he said. If the number of enrollees grows, then the district could save money by hiring Ombudsman.

"It could be lucrative in that regard, but believe me, that was not my intent," Minghine said. "We're trying to serve anyone who has a need."

Westwood's Board of Education approved offering Ombudsman the contract on a 7-0 vote in March. The other participating districts are Crestwood, District 7 and Dearborn Public Schools.

If the program goes well, Minghine said he might approach the Wayne County juvenile justice system about including the program as a site for court referrals.

Fraser, formerly the superintendent of Mount Clemens Community School District and of Mount Morris Consolidated Schools, said ESA has talked with a number of school districts in Michigan about providing services, but declined to say if any have signed contracts. Ombudsman operates 60 centers in 13 states, not including Westwood. ♦

Dr. Rich Edwards, professor of communication studies and debate coach at Baylor University, Texas.

The speakers addressed debate methodology and tactics, as well as discussing the economic impact of foreign aid and how well it has been put to use in the past. Points that students discussed during the workshops included research on how foreign aid is often misappropriated by dictatorial governments, methods of disease prevention that have proven successful in the past (such as the use of DDT to fight malaria) and the moral arguments against coercing taxpayers into funding foreign aid when nonprofit groups raise money from willing donors.

High schools that participated in the workshops were: Conner Creek Academy, Saginaw Heritage, Livonia Stevenson, Heart Academy, Brother Rice, Henry Ford, Northville, Hudson, Lenawee Christian, Adrian, Blissfield, South Christian, Holt, Grand Rapids City, Zion Christian, Grand Rapids Catholic Central, Northview, North Hills Classical Academy, Forrest Hills, Unity Christian, Frankfort, Bellaire, Traverse City Central, Traverse City West, Petoskey, Gaylord and East Jordan.

The Center asks each participant to fill out evaluation forms in order to improve the workshops from one year to the next. One student, although just a beginner, wrote that she learned so much from the experience, "I feel like I am confident enough to go to the state finals."

Another student said she appreciates the workshops because she feels high school debate is "underappreciated" and "it's nice to have an activity that supports the activity."

JoAnne Peterson, debate coach from Grand Rapids City High School, said although the workshop will help her team in the upcoming season, "The impact on the future and investment in our young people is the most powerful gift of all."

For the third consecutive year, workshop participants have an opportunity to win a \$1,000 college scholarship if they choose to participate in an essay contest sponsored by the Center. Winners will be announced in the spring of 2008. ♦

MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

Lorie A. Shane
Managing Editor

Ryan S. Olson
Director of Education Policy

Daniel E. Montgomery
Graphic Designer

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



Greg Rehmke, director of educational programs for Economic Thinking/E Pluribus Unum Films, shows examples of the coverage given to African affairs by American magazines as he speaks to debate workshop participants in Traverse City.

Tracking union money in school board elections PUBLIC SHOULD BE AWARE OF WHO'S PAYING FOR CAMPAIGNS, SOME SAY

(Editor's Note – This article was written before the November 2007 school board elections. Some people interviewed as candidates may have been elected to school boards in the interim.)

School board elections in Michigan are traditionally low-profile events. Voter turnout is sparse, particularly in years with no bond issues, millage renewals or local controversy. Campaigns often consist of yard signs and flyers.

But a school board member in Rochester and a nonprofit organization in west Michigan are both trying to bring more public scrutiny to conventional public school board races, including who funds the candidates. They say the public should be aware of the time, money and organization put into local races in particular by the political arm of the Michigan Education Association and its local affiliates. That includes not only donations to help candidates cover the costs of fliers, postage and even robocalls, but also support in the form of public endorsements by the local

“Here is my policy,” he said. “Do you want all board candidates to be union-sponsored?”

The Michigan Education Association did not respond to a request for comment on those issues, although it did comment regarding a related lawsuit, as noted below.

However, the union’s political efforts are reflected in its publications, conferences and in campaign finance statements that show financial contributions to local school board races. At the MEA’s state conference at Cobo Hall in Detroit in February, one session titled “Elect your Employer” invited members to learn how run school board campaigns.

“There is no more important elected official in the lives of MEA members than your local school board member,” a conference brochure stated. “This session is designed to help members identify potential candidates, analyze election data and run a successful campaign.” At the same conference, attendees were invited to sessions titled “We Elected Our Employer, Now What?” on communication with pro-union board members, and “I Brought

came from. Ropeta planned to list all the donations his campaign received at his campaign Web site. “Just publish it yourself,” he said. “Let the voters decide.”

Candidate Beth Talbert didn’t plan to sign Kovacs’ pledge, either, but she agreed with his viewpoint on turning down contributions from the teachers union’s political action committee.

“I think that, personally, I would not be comfortable accepting donations from the local chapter of the MEA,” she said, saying that while it is legal, it could “create a perception” of influence. That would be true of any interest group, she said. “I think it would be unusual if all of a sudden somebody — say an architect — showed up at my door with a check.”

The Rochester Education Association still endorsed Talbert’s candidacy, a move she attributed to her background in higher education and work on a local K-12 reform committee.

Another Rochester candidate, 18-year-old Joe Stouffer, said he also did not plan to sign the pledge or take campaign money from the union’s political arm.

“It would be improper,” Stouffer said. The Rochester High School graduate said he was running in order to bring a younger viewpoint to the Rochester Board of Education.

It’s possible, but painstaking, to track the source of money spent in every local school board race in Michigan, according to at least two organizations that watch the flow of money in Michigan elections.

The Michigan Campaign Finance Act regulates the amount of money contributors can give to candidates and also requires most candidates to file campaign finance statements at regular intervals. An individual or a political action committee can donate up to \$500 to a school board candidate. An independent committee can donate up to \$5,000.

School board candidates must file affidavits with their county clerk stating their intent to run for office and also must form a committee. If they raise or spend more than \$1,000 for their campaign, they have to file statements listing their contributions and expenditures. To track the money flow in every school board race would mean compiling data from 83 county clerks, covering 552 conventional public school districts in Michigan. (The exception is districts with enrollment below 2,400 students; those candidates are not required to form committees, unless they raise or spend more than \$1,000.)

A few counties — among them Oakland, Macomb and Washtenaw — provide searchable online databases to allow the public to view campaign finance statements.

TRACKING DONATIONS

The nonprofit Education Action Group, based in west Michigan, is building a database on local school board races. The group has gathered information on 69 school districts to date, resulting in a list of school board members in those districts who have received donations from the MEA PAC or one of its affiliates between 2003 and 2006. According to their data, 19 current school board members have received \$1,000 or more in MEA PAC contributions since 2003. In some cases, as many as six members of the same school board have received contributions of varying amounts.

Local school board races are not typically aggressive campaigns, said Kyle Olson, the organization’s founder. “If the MEA PAC gives them \$1,000 or \$2,000, they can do a lot.”

(Olson is the brother of Ryan Olson, director of education policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. The Mackinac Center

publishes Michigan Education Report.)

A spot review of records filed in Macomb, Oakland and Washtenaw counties show wide disparities in spending and donations. In some races in May 2007, every candidate filed waiver requests, meaning they did not spend more than \$1,000 on their campaign. In other districts, including Utica, Bloomfield Hills and Ann Arbor, candidates spent anywhere from \$3,000 to \$8,000.

In Novi, school board member Katie Racon accepted an endorsement and campaign contributions from the Novi Education Association when she won a spot on the board in a close race in 2006. She told Michigan Education Report that “the thought never crossed my mind that I would have to pay extra attention to teachers. You’re elected to do a job. ... It’s not going to influence my decisions.”

Racon said that she has always believed that hiring quality teachers is a key component of a successful school district. “I make decisions in the best interest of the kids ... and keeping quality teachers is part of that,” she said.

A nurse, Racon ran for a position on the board three times, losing twice but winning by 100 votes in her third attempt. She was endorsed by the Novi Education Association and also accepted about \$1,200 from the teachers union during her winning campaign. Of that, \$673 was a direct donation and about \$500 came from “in-kind contributions,” meaning the value of phone banks and mailings that the association donated on her behalf. That total exceeded the \$500 contribution limit, and Racon paid back about \$700 following the election. She also spent about \$1,300 of her own money, according to her campaign finance statements.

George Kortlandt, another Novi school board member, was elected to the board for three consecutive terms, then lost to Racon, then came back this May to win a fourth term on the board. He has never been endorsed by employee unions or received campaign contributions from them, he said.

“In my opinion, the elections, especially those held earlier in the year, have such small turnouts that it (union support) makes a significant difference,” he said. Union activity in local races is “an attempt, really, to stack the deck in their favor.”

But he doesn’t necessarily agree with the pledge suggested in Rochester, Kortlandt said. “I don’t have as much of a problem as he does with campaign contributions. It comes down to the old rule of elections — how hard you work.”

In addition to campaign contributions, school employees apparently are more likely to vote in school elections than the public at large, according to a survey conducted early in 2007 by the polling firm Knowledge Networks. The survey was sponsored by the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University and Education Next, and was reported in the fall issue of the journal Education Next.

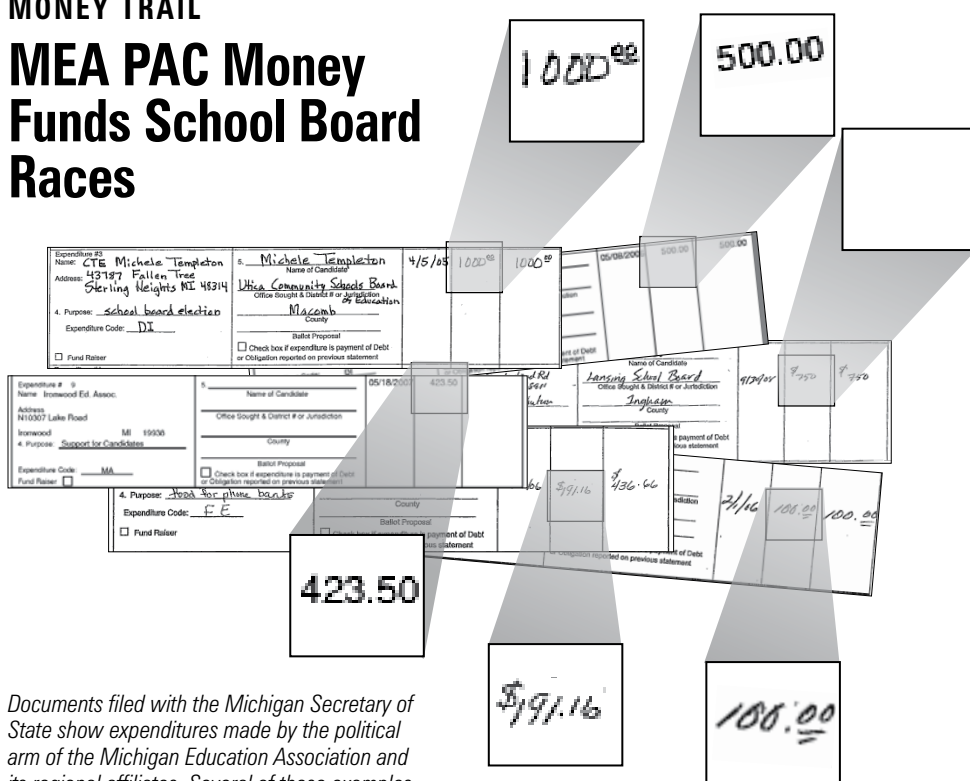
The survey asked adults if they remembered for sure whether they voted in the most recent school board election. Fifty-seven percent of school employees said yes, compared to 40 percent of respondents at large.

PAYROLL DEDUCTION LAWSUIT

In addition to the candidates’ own financial statements, spending in local school board races and bond issues is also reflected in the statements filed with the Michigan Secretary of State by the Michigan Education Association Political Action Committee or any of its affiliated PACs, such as the Washtenaw County Education Association, Northern Zone Cash for Kids and Saginaw Education Association Fund for Children & Public Education.

The MEA PAC takes in contributions from thousands of school employees through local political action fund drives or payroll deduction plans. It spends some of the money directly and also transfers some funds to local affiliates. Those affili-

MONEY TRAIL MEA PAC Money Funds School Board Races



Documents filed with the Michigan Secretary of State show expenditures made by the political arm of the Michigan Education Association and its regional affiliates. Several of these examples show direct contributions to school board candidates, one for \$750 in Lansing and the other for \$1,000 in Utica. Others show a \$500 contribution to a community college board candidate, \$100 toward a recall effort, and \$423 in food purchases for phone bank workers.

teachers union, get-out-the-teacher-vote efforts, phone calls and mail campaigns.

“How do you run against a machine like that?” Rochester Community Schools board member Steven Kovacs asked.

School employees have the right to support — financially or otherwise — the candidates of their choice, Kovacs said, but he questions whether school board members who receive hundreds or even thousands of dollars in campaign donations from employee unions can then make objective decisions on things like teacher pay and benefits. Even if they can, he said, the donations give the appearance of bias.

Further, Kovacs said, the union’s process of interviewing, publicly endorsing and financially supporting candidates discourages some people from running for office at all, leaving voters with a narrower range of choices. Kovacs invited all of the candidates in November’s Rochester school board election to take a pledge not to accept or solicit money from any individual, organization (including bargaining units), or business that markets to the district or any administrator who would be impacted by board decisions.

“I think you should run on the merits of

You into This World and I Can Take You Out! — How to Run a Successful Board Recall Campaign.”

The summer 2007 issue of the MEA Voice, a union magazine, praised the efforts of teachers and support employers in Ypsilanti who, the article said, “successfully elected seven board members who shared their vision for the district.”

Their efforts paid off, the article said, when the Ypsilanti Public School District Board of Education voted against investigating the possibility of hiring outside firms to provide transportation.

CANDIDATE VIEWS VARY

School board candidates in Rochester, interviewed before the election, had varying opinions on whether union support should be accepted and on whether it would unduly influence their work on the board.

“I think it’s a bit of an insult to teachers to not have their voice heard. Use of money is a form of freedom of speech,” candidate Joseph Ropeta told Michigan Education Report. But he also said that there should be full disclosure to voters, in advance of the election, of where each candidate’s money

SCHOOL IN FOCUS

Learning Circle Academy: Meeting special needs within special education

The Learning Circle Academy has carved a niche for itself in Michigan special education. A small, private school in West Bloomfield, it opened four years ago to serve youngsters with autism-related disorders and those with complex learning disabilities.

Enrollment now stands at 30, up from 10 in the first year. Because it only accepts children within a specific range of conditions and needs, the school can focus on providing academic programs that help those students the most, rather than trying to be all things to all special needs students, one of the founders said.

Learning Circle's students have complex learning disabilities, which may also be accompanied by difficulties in language processing, sensory integration and social skills. The students may be diagnosed with moderate to high-functioning autism, Asperger's syndrome or other moderate to severe learning disabilities. Many of these students also have exceptional talents in art, music or mathematics.

"Our students fall in the middle. They need academic programming that falls between regular education and special education," said Bonnie McDonald, who, along with Carolyn Morris, founded the school. "In a special education classroom, these kids would not be adequately challenged. On the other hand, in a regular education classroom, the information just gets too complex."

Students in that ability range often develop behavior and academic problems starting around third or fourth grade, McDonald said, because their needs are not met in either setting. Mainstreaming a child, then pulling him or her out for services such as speech therapy, is not a good solution either, she said.

"Their schedules are not consistent on a day to day basis, and they miss a great deal of instruction. Most of these kids feel like they do not know where they really belong," McDonald said.

Autistic children in particular respond to schedules, and "what people don't think about is how confusing it is to be 'pulled out' all day long," she said. "Our kids start to just tune out or have behavior issues."

"They understand him. They're accepting of him... We were told he couldn't learn multiplication yet. Here he picked it up in a few months."

Cheryl Shear, parent

Seeing those problems in their own children — Morris and McDonald are each the parent of a teen-age son with special needs — the women tried a variety of remedies, including private school, private treatment and, eventually, a tutorial program they developed themselves and opened to half a dozen other children.

"People started piling in and we thought, 'Let's get a building,'" McDonald said. That led to the formation of Learning Circle Academy, first a non-profit organization and now a registered nonpublic school in Michigan. The group rents space in the Irving and Beverly Laker Educational and Youth Complex, part of the Congregation Shaarey Zedek, in West Bloomfield. Tuition is \$17,000 a year. Class size is limited to 10, with three teachers per classroom.

Parents who come to the Learning Circle Academy typically feel their conventional public school districts are not meeting their children's needs. Federal law guarantees every child with special needs a "free and appropriate public education," but at times parents and educators can't reach agreement

on what "appropriate" means.

That's what happened in the case of Cheryl Shear's son.

"We agonized. We wanted to keep him in public schools," said Shear, a Novi resident. Her son, Duncan, did well in younger grades, but when he was placed in a regular education classroom in middle school, with help from an aide, "all of a sudden they started to do everything for him. He wasn't writing. He wasn't paying attention. ... She (the aide) was writing everything down for him," Shear said.

This pattern of "learned helplessness" happens when students with learning disabilities are given too much help, sometimes unwittingly, by teachers or paraprofessionals, McDonald said. "They don't teach them (paraprofessionals) to fade back."

"If we had pushed harder, we could have gotten the school district to do things," Shear said, but her son was already unhappy and complained about going to school. He had complaints about the Learning Circle Academy, too, but not for long, she said.

"They understand him. They're accepting of him," she said. At his former school, "we were told he couldn't learn multiplication yet. Here he picked it up in a few months."

McDonald and Principal Amy Seidman attribute stories like that, in part, to the school's educational philosophy, which rests on the Reuven Feuerstein Theory of Structural Cognitive Modifiability. Feuerstein, a cognitive psychologist, is the founder and director of the International Center for the Enhancement of Learning Potential in Israel. Like Maria Montessori, whose educational theories led to today's Montessori schools, Feuerstein developed a philosophy of learning that rests on the belief that the nervous system can be modified to achieve cognitive growth. In practice, McDonald said, that means helping students "learn how to learn." The goal is to help the students become independent thinkers.

The school day includes subjects like math, science and English, but also "cognitive training," "thinking skills" and "social skills." Children with autism-related disorders, in particular, do not always understand that other individuals have thoughts and opinions different from their own, McDonald explained. Socially, they don't always recognize facial expressions or understand that those expressions are a clue to someone's feelings.

Social skills class teaches them "how to be social," Seidman said. "How to talk with peers. How to go to a store and buy a T-shirt they want. How to be a teen like any other teen in our society."

That social training appeals to Shear, who says there are things her son learns by going on field trips with his friends that he can't learn in a classroom or from his parents.

Field trips are a regular and important part of the program, McDonald said, and is the school's way of seeing that students are "included" in the world at large. "Inclusion" is often considered a primary goal of special education programs, emphasizing the importance of having children with special needs interact with children in regular education settings. The idea is that children in regular programs will be academic and social role models for the children with special needs, while at the same time learning to accept and include them.

That doesn't always happen in practice, McDonald said.

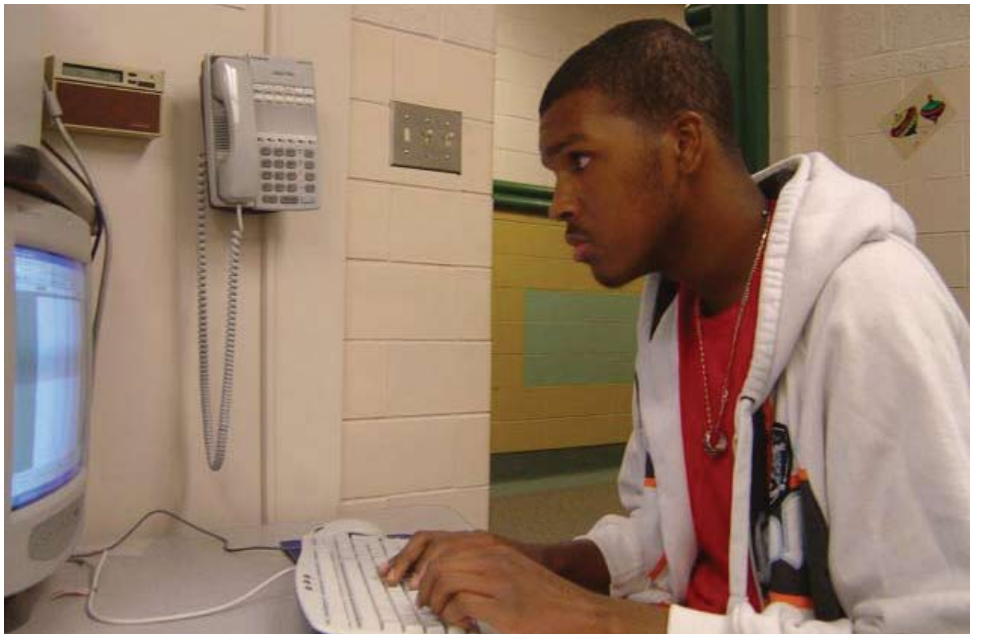
"I was a big advocate of inclusion," she said, until her own son realized for himself the differences between himself and his classmates. "He sort of gave up on himself."

"We see kids come to us with very poor self-esteem," she said. "But here, everybody is like them."

Now serving fourth through 12th graders, McDonald and Morris hope to expand programming to include younger grades in the future. They also are working toward accreditation through the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. But growth will depend heavily on how many parents can afford the



Kendra Freedman and her students at the Learning Circle Academy in West Bloomfield observe the plant life that has sprouted on a model frog. Freedman holds master's level certification in special education with an autism endorsement. Among her students are Stephen VanElsLander and Olivia Jacobczak, seated, and Donovan Montgomery, standing.



Hasani Tucker, an 11th grader, works in the academy's computer classroom.

\$17,000 annual tuition, which covers rent, salaries and supplies. The school does accept contributions, which are tax-deductible, and has a limited scholarship program.

"Almost every day I talk to people with kids who are so great for this school, but they can't afford the tuition," McDonald said. In other cases, she turns away parents who can afford the school, but whose children have different disabilities and wouldn't be helped by the Learning Circle program.

McDonald said that conventional public school special education programs, which are required to serve all children with all special needs, can't offer focused services to each student. Shear suggested that research into learning disabilities, and ideas for

intervention, may be progressing too quickly for public school programs to keep up.

"I wish more people would start schools, specialized schools to help kids we can't treat here." ♦

More information about Learning Circle Academy is available at the school Web site, www.learningcircleacademy.org.

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PUBLIC CAMPAIGN

ates make contributions to a wide variety of school-related political activity, such as school board races, bond issues and community college board elections.

The MEA PAC's latest report, covering the time period from Jan. 1 to July 20, numbers 3,455 pages chronicling approximately \$194,000 in donations. That doesn't include the separate statements filed by each affiliate.

"I come from the belief they have these 20-plus PACs to confuse people," Olson said.

"One of the efforts of this group is to expose the way they (the MEA) are involved," he said. It makes sense for union members to attempt to elect union-friendly candidates, he said, but it's also important for the public to be aware of the extent of union election activity.

How the union collects PAC donations is at the heart of a current lawsuit between the MEA and the Secretary of State. The MEA in the past has taken in money through payroll deduction plans in local school districts, but Michigan Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land ruled in 2006 that such plans violated the Campaign Finance Act because they use public school resources — school district administration — for political purposes.

The MEA filed suit over Land's ruling, and Ingham County Circuit Court Judge Thomas Brown ruled in September that public bodies, including school districts, can deduct PAC contributions from employees' payroll checks as long as the administrative costs of making the deductions are reimbursed by the PAC in advance.

The Secretary of State has filed an appeal in the case with the Michigan Court of Appeals. Among other arguments, attorneys for the state said in a written brief that if the MEA is allowed to prepay a school district for political fund raising activity, then it opens the door to others to do the same.

"What would prevent any private political entity from making a prepayment to a public body in order to raise political contributions?" the brief said.

In response to a request for comments on the ruling and on the role of education associations in local school board races, an MEA spokesman referred Michigan Education Report to its press release on the lawsuit.

"Many public employees choose payroll deduction for their PAC contributions because it's a convenient way to donate," Art Przybylowicz, MEA general counsel, was quoted in the release. "This legal victory allows them to continue to do so, just as their colleagues in the private sector can."

Olson's group also wants to lend encouragement to school board members who face union displeasure when, he said, they broach such subjects as competitive contracting or changes in health insurance providers.

"I want to work with school districts that are looking into contracting competitively for health care, contracting for services, and to stand with school board members who face recall because they voted for these things," he said. "This is not about attacking teachers. ... But people are afraid to stand up to unions and say there is a better way."

Kovacs said his remarks weren't intended to reflect poorly on Rochester's educational program.

"We have excellent teachers. The kids get an excellent education," he said.

CONTROVERSIAL DONATIONS

In Rochester, Kovacs' suggestion that two school board members' votes were influenced by contributions they received from the MEA PAC resulted in an angry exchange at a board meeting in March, according to a report in the Oakland Press.

Kovacs was in China on business on the evening the board voted on a three-year contract agreement with district teachers that Kovacs said did not go far enough to

address rising health care costs. In a letter to other board members, he said they failed to consider dozens of cost-containment ideas and questioned whether the yes votes of trustees Michelle Shepherd and Timothy Greimel were linked to the \$3,000 donations made to each by the MEA PAC, the Press reported.

Those are the largest donations in the list compiled by the Education Action Group.

Shepherd was quoted in the article as saying that "I am not the puppet of the people or organizations that contributed to my campaign." Greimel pointed out in a later e-mail to the Rochester News & Views Web site that he received contributions from numerous sources, not just teachers or the union's political action committee. "My decisions as a board member have never been influenced by anyone's donations to my campaign," Greimel wrote.

Since he raised the issue publicly, "I've had a lot of people ask me about this," Kovacs said. He said he developed his pledge after a candidate in the local city council election proposed a "clean campaign pledge" in that race.

Another organization tracking MEA political spending, the Michigan Campaign Finance Network, reported that the MEA PAC was 10th on the list of money-making PACs in Michigan in the first six months of 2007. At \$194,000, contributions to the MEA PAC were running 26 percent behind donations from the previous election cycle, noted Rich Robinson, the network's director. The Campaign Finance Network is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that conducts research and public education on money in Michigan politics.

"Certainly for the last four election cycles, cycle in and cycle out, it's been one of the top 10 PACs," he said. The MEA also spent \$454,140 on lobbying in the first six months of 2007, highest in the state but down 14 percent from the same time period last year.

Public scrutiny of school board races is likely to increase in any case in coming years, as more districts switch to November elections to save money, pointed out Oakland County Commissioner John Scott. More voters turn out in November, Scott said, bringing more attention to school board races, bond issues and millage renewals.

"I think it'll be a more open race than we've ever had," he said, speaking of coming elections in his own district, the Waterford School District. "I really believe this is going to be a fun election." ♦



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

Lawsuit filed over competitive contracting for aides

A lawsuit filed against the Harrison Community Schools by its support personnel union might prove to be the test case of whether a public school district can contract with a private firm to provide teacher aides.

The Harrison Board of Education voted 4-2 in July to authorize Superintendent Christopher Rundle to investigate competitive contracting for paraprofessionals, who currently are district employees and members of the Harrison Education Support Personnel Association. But the association, an affiliate of the Michigan Education Association, filed suit against the board and the district, arguing that the aides in question are instructional personnel and, under Michigan law, must be employed by the district. State law requires instructional personnel to be district employees.

Clare County Chief Circuit Judge Thomas Evans granted a temporary restraining order to the support personnel, halting the district's plans until he decides whether to issue a preliminary injunction in the case. His decision was not issued before the deadline for this issue of Michigan Education Report.

In briefs filed in the case, the school district argued that the aides are support personnel who provide only limited supplementary instruction in the direction of a teacher and therefore are not covered by the state mandate.

"If we have to be the test case, so be it," Rundle told Michigan Education Report. "I can't see the paraprofessionals being instructional. If they are, then we should be evaluating them as we would a teacher."

The legal firm representing the support personnel did not return a request for comment. Wendy Heinig, the MEA Uniserv director in Houghton Lake, told the Mount Pleasant Morning Sun for an article published in August that the union's stand is that the board did not want to bargain for a new contract and that it acted illegally when members approved the privatization of teacher aides.

The district already contracts with private firms for custodial, food and transportation services. The support personnel bargaining unit now has about 38 members, most of them aides, according to Rundle. Their duties include

playground supervision, clerical work, preparing snacks and sorting mail, and also supplemental tutoring of students under the teacher's direction.

The district wants to look at competitive contracting as a way to save money. Hiring aides through a private firm could have saved the district an estimated \$294,000 this year, according to business manager Kelly Hileman, or about \$166 per student at the latest enrollment figure of 1,772 students.

Most of the savings would be in health care benefit costs, Rundle said. The district's aides currently earn approximately \$12 an hour, or between \$12,000 and \$15,000 a year depending on their exact wage and work schedule. Their contract also provides for Super Care health insurance benefits through the Michigan Educational Special Services Association, a third-party insurance administrator affiliated with the MEA. A full-family policy under the Super Care plan costs nearly \$14,000 per year, Hileman said. Employees pick up part of that premium cost, or about \$378 a month for the full-family option, he said. Employees also can opt out of the insurance plan and receive cash in lieu of insurance equaling about \$466 a month.

"In some cases (the value of) their benefits might exceed their wages," Rundle said.

Rundle said the district is operating on a \$14 million budget this year with a \$2.9 million fund balance. Enrollment has declined from about 2,250 students five years ago.

"People are leaving for work," he said.

The contract between the district and the support personnel has been a point of contention for more than two years, involving mediation, arbitration, filings with the Michigan Employment Relations Commission and a separate court case over when the previous contract expired.

School district attorneys argued in the current case that Michigan Department of Education regulations state that "school districts are prohibited from allowing non-certified personnel to teach in the elementary and secondary schools," but that non-certified personnel may be hired for such roles as playground supervisors, library assistants, general student supervision and assisting teachers during instructional activities in the classroom.

"Our argument is that aides are support staff and that's what they are intended to be," said Martha J. Marcero, an attorney with Thrun Law Firm of East Lansing, representing the district.

The firm of White, Schneider, Young & Chiodini, P.C., of Okemos, is representing the support personnel. They did not respond to a request for comment. ♦

continued from Page One

CONTRACTING

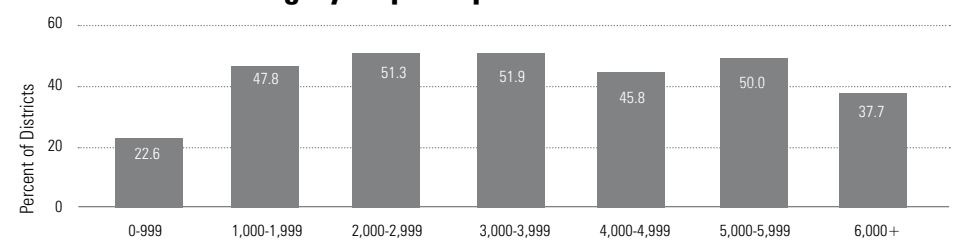
candidate in economics at George Mason University, and Michael D. LaFaive, director of the Mackinac Center's Morey Fiscal Policy Initiative.

The survey was completed on June 30 to coincide with the end of the fiscal year for public schools in Michigan. As of that date, an additional 42 districts were considering privatizing one or more support services in the 2007-2008 school year.

"Districts across the state are adopting support service privatization as a way to drive more money into the classroom," LaFaive said. "Officials recognize that noninstructional services are ancillary to the mission of their schools. Under a well-written contract, districts can save money, improve services, or both."

Custodial services continue to be the top growth area for private contracting. Statewide, the survey found that the number of school districts using private firms for custodial work rose from 63 to 80, a 26.8 percent increase. A similar increase took place between 2005 and 2006. In all, about 14 percent of conventional public school

District Contracting by Pupil Population



Source: Mackinac Center for Public Policy

districts in Michigan now contract for custodial work.

Food service remains the most frequently outsourced function, with 164 districts — or 29.7 percent of all districts — reporting having contracted either management or operation of their program. The contracting rate was up by one percentage point from 28.7 in 2006.

Contracting for bus services can be found in 24 districts, or 4.3 percent, statewide, up slightly from 4 percent one year ago. The tally does not include special education busing.

Of the 222 districts that contract for at least one support service, nearly 78 percent report saving money, while 89 percent report being satisfied with their respective

contracting experiences.

In a new feature this year, survey results also were reported by enrollment levels. Medium-sized districts tend to contract more than large and small districts. More than half of districts that are between 2,000 and 4,000 students contract for food, custodial or transportation services.

The survey findings are available online at www.mackinac.org/8881. Also this year, the center published "A School Privatization Primer," one in a series of publications on school finance and management. The primer describes the history and incidence of competitive contracting and includes a guide to help districts request, award and monitor contracts. The primer is available at www.mackinac.org/8691. ♦

Health insurance pooling, MESSA data release get nod

Negotiations over the 2008 state budget brought about new legislation aimed at making it easier for public school districts to form health insurance pools. The Michigan Senate and House of Representatives each passed legislation which would allow schools and local governments to form health insurance purchasing pools and prescribe standards and regulations for these. Senate Bill 418, originally introduced by Sen. Mark Jansen, R-Grand Rapids, in April, also would require third party insurance administrators to release individual school district claims history data, including the Michigan Education Special Services Association, a third party administrator affiliated with the Michigan Education Association. This information is said to be necessary to allow other insurance providers to bid competitively on a district's health insurance purchases. The House had passed a version of the bill that did not require the release of claims data, but a conference committee adopted the Senate version of the bill in last-minute negotiations in September. The bill was signed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm on Oct. 1.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-SB-418

School employee retirement

New school employees would become eligible for partial post-retirement health insurance benefits after 10 years of service under legislation adopted by the House and Senate as part of 2008 budget negotiations. An individual would first be entitled to 30 percent of the post-retirement health benefits after 10 years on the job and earn 3 percent for each additional year of service. The lengths of service and eligibility requirements are more stringent than under the previous benefit plan. The benefit would begin only after age 60.

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

MichiganVotes.org

It would also increase the premiums that new employees must pay if they choose an enhanced retirement program with more benefits and would limit the purchase of "service credits" that allow a school employee to retire early with a full pension. Senate Bill 0546 passed the House in a 65-44 vote and the Senate in a 21-17 vote, both on Oct. 1. Senate Bill 546 was originally introduced by Sen. Wayne Kuipers, R-Holland, in May.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-SB-546

No money for extra ACT

A series of bills to change the Michigan Merit Exam and ACT tests, given to all Michigan 11th graders, was introduced by Sen. Michael Switalski, D-Roseville, in September. Senate Bills 804 through 810 and 813 would have: eliminated funding to develop computer-based "practice tests" for the MME and ACT; eliminated the social studies component of the MME; made the writing portion of the test optional and required students to pay for it; required students who re-take the ACT to pay for the second test. The bills were sent to both the Senate Appropriations Committee and the Senate Education Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-SB-804

No end-of-course tests

The state would not be required to develop end-of-course examinations as part of the new state high school curriculum mandate under legislation introduced by Sen. Ron Jelinek, R-Berrien County, on Sept. 24. The original legislation called for the state to develop assessment tests which public school districts or public school academies could use to determine if

a student earned credit in a particular course. Senate Bill 812 was referred to the Senate Education Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-SB-812

Opt out of math, science

Students who do well on state assessment tests would not have to take three years of high school math and science in order to qualify for the state "Promise Award" under legislation introduced by Sen. Deborah Cherry, D-Burton, on July 24. Senate Bill 646 would eliminate the math/science requirement, scheduled to take effect in 2010. The bill was referred to the Senate Education Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-SB-646

Penalties extended to all school personnel

School volunteers, employees and contractual service providers would receive stiffer penalties for criminal sexual conduct when committed against a student under legislation approved by the Senate, 36-0, in May. Senate Bill 386 was introduced by Sen. Bruce Patterson, R-Canton. The extra penalties already apply to teachers. The bill was received in the House on May 17.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-SB-386

Single-gender programs

School districts that establish single-gender schools, classes or programs for one gender would not have to offer a comparable program for children of the other gender, although they still would have to offer a comparable coeducational program under legislation introduced in the House of Representatives this

summer. Rep. Dave Hildebrand, R-Lowell, introduced House Bill 5063 in July. He also introduced House Bill 5087, which proposes that the single-gender programs offered could be at one grade level or age range for one gender and a different grade level or age range for the other gender, if current research on student achievement or learning supported that decision. The bills were referred to the House Education Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-HB-5087

Increase teacher certification fees

Teachers, school psychologists, school counselors and administrators would have to pay more for certification under House Bill 4591, introduced by Rep. Hoon-Yung Hopgood, D-Wayne County, on April 5. Certification is required of Michigan public school teachers in almost all cases. Currently, certification fees range from \$125 to 175, and most would increase by \$35. The bill passed, 61-47. It was reported in the Senate in August and referred to the Senate Appropriations Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-HB-4591

Plan to consolidate services

Intermediate school districts in Michigan must create a plan to consolidate their constituent districts' procurement, human resources, busing, contracting activities and other noninstructional services under legislation signed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm in September. Originally introduced as House Bill 4592, by Rep. Tim Melton, D-Pontiac, the bill does not require the local public school districts or intermediate districts to act on the plans or to seek competitive bids for the services. Intermediate districts that already have such a plan would not be required to create a new one.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-HB-4592



COMMENTARY

John Morton

Economic Education: Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty?

The National Assessment of Educational Progress released the results of its first-ever assessment of economics on Aug. 8. At first glance, the results seem positive, particularly when they are compared with the results of NAEP assessments in other subjects, but don't get too excited too fast.

The economics results show that 79 percent of high school seniors performed at the basic level (a passing grade) or higher, and 42 percent performed at the proficient level or higher, including 3 percent at the advanced level. This performance stacks up well compared to the results in other subjects. For example, in the most recent NAEP assessments, only 47 percent of high school seniors passed the U.S. history test, 61 percent passed the mathematics test, and 73 percent passed the reading test.

These relatively positive results may be due to more students taking economics in high school. Although less than a third of the states require an economics course, two-thirds of high school graduates have taken one. Some 16 percent take economics at the Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate level. The percentage of students taking economics at advanced levels is particularly high in comparison to other subjects.

The argument for economic education is that a more economically literate population will make choices and support public policy that best provides the goods and services that we need. It is not uncommon, however, for textbooks to portray such

things as free market competition, private property and entrepreneurship in a suspicious light, while presenting government intervention and its economic aftermath with little or no critical scrutiny.

What do the NAEP test results reveal about market solutions versus government solutions to economic problems? The answer to this question depends on what was on the test and whether knowledge of economics translates into more pro-market policies.

NAEP did not release the entire test, but the sample questions shown below represent sound economic reasoning. The numbers represent the percentage of students who provided the correct answer on a multiple-choice question or wrote an answer to an essay question at the basic level.

- 73 percent understood the benefit and opportunity cost of giving up a part-time job to go to college.
- 60 percent knew the cause of a government budget deficit.
- 51 percent knew that removing restrictions on trade decreases the price of imported goods.
- 46 percent knew that a government-imposed price floor on chocolate causes a surplus of chocolate.
- 40 percent understood that governments impose trade barriers even though they hurt the economy because the cost for any one consumer is small and the benefit to the affected industry is large.
- 36 percent knew that businesses maximize profits where marginal revenue equals marginal cost and hire workers based on the marginal revenue and marginal cost of the worker.
- 36 percent knew that the personal income tax is the largest source of revenue for the federal government. Thirty-one percent thought it is the sales tax.

Based on these results, students might

Continued on Page 11



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COMMENTARY

Charles Bacon, Ph.D.

Molding minds with a green curriculum

In 2003, Gov. Jennifer Granholm called for the development of an environmental curriculum for Michigan schools. The result is Michigan Environmental Education Curriculum Support, the \$1-million product of a three-year collaboration between the state Departments of Environmental Quality and Education. According to DEQ officials, the curriculum has been field tested by some 120 teachers in nearly 200 classrooms statewide. As both a scientist and educator, I was asked by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, publisher of Michigan Education Report and the Michigan Science journal, to assess the lesson plans and supplemental materials that comprise MEECS.

Considerable debate exists about the value of environmental education. Critics assert that research demonstrates serious biases in texts and curriculum materials, among them oversimplification, distrust of technology, misinformation concerning waste management and overly gloomy scenarios. They also contend that environmental education is rife with lessons in political activism that turn youngsters into tools of environmentalists.

In contrast, advocates contend that environmental education inspires students to take personal responsibility for environmental preservation and restoration, as well as to acquire the skills necessary to weigh issues and to make informed decisions.

For purposes of this review, the Department of Environmental Quality provided Michigan Science with the MEECS materials.

ECOSYSTEMS AND BIODIVERSITY

This unit is composed of 10 lessons divided equally between ecosystems and biodiversity, intended for grades four through six. As I found with the majority of MEECS materials, the lessons are more teacher-directed than oriented toward student discovery. For example, in three pages of instructions for this unit, teachers are repeatedly directed to “show,” “tell” and “explain” the information to students, all of which fosters passive learning.

The introduction of the nutrient cycle is certainly appropriate for these grade levels. The unit also conforms to state standards for teaching the patterns of interdependence and interrelationships among living things, habitats and ecosystems.

LAND USE

The Land Use unit is intended for grades

four through six. The lessons include observing, measuring and classifying land use in Michigan and analyzing changes in land use over time. This may sound straightforward, but the value of the exercise is limited by the fact that students are led along a designated path to reach a specific conclusion. For example, Lesson 2 asks students to view an aerial photo and identify whether the land use pictured is “human or natural.” Such a question casts human activity as outside of nature and, therefore, inherently destructive. Students are being told what to think rather than being allowed to draw their own conclusions.

This scripted approach also plants fear in students over land use in Michigan. The message is that land used for parks and wildlife habitat is good, but land used for housing and commerce is bad. There is not a single mention of private property rights in the unit; the curriculum instead endorses government control of land use and natural resources. Also left unaddressed are the inevitable tradeoffs associated with all land-use decisions.

The unit also suffers from empirical flaws. In Lesson 5, for example, students are presented with a line graph illustrating a decline in farmland, which is described as “urban sprawl that is consuming Michigan’s agricultural land at an alarming rate.” Students are told to ignore any increases in farmland over the past 57 years. The numerous reasons for a decline, such as greater agricultural productivity, are not addressed, nor is the fact that thousands of acres of farmland have been converted to woodlands.

AIR QUALITY AND WATER QUALITY

These units — intended for middle-school grades — share a theme, which readers might reasonably think would focus on the quality of the two resources. In the MEECS curriculum, however, the common theme is global warming; the two units combined feature no fewer than 105 references to “global climate change.”

The lessons do address various uses of air and water, and the changes that occur as a result of both natural and anthropogenic (human-caused) factors. However, the emphasis is clearly placed on human impacts and global climate change. For example:

“Scientists know for certain that human activities are changing the composition of Earth’s atmosphere ... It is well accepted by scientists that greenhouse gases trap heat in the Earth’s atmosphere and tend to warm the planet. By increasing the levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, human activities are strengthening Earth’s natural greenhouse effect.”

Such content is inappropriate because it assumes that the science is settled on the causes of climate change when it is not. The curriculum also fails to inform students that the climate is constantly changing — and always has throughout time.

My Environmental Diary, Week 2 Personal Actions

Directions: Answer each question every day. Write “yes,” “no,” or “sometimes” in each box. At the end of the week, total the number of “no” and “yes” responses and answer questions 17-19.

Today did you...	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	# of no	# of yes
turn off appliances and lights when you left the room?						
take a short shower instead of a long shower?						
use any disposable (throwaway) items? (e.g., paper plates, razors, etc.)						
use any recycled products or shop at secondhand stores?						
use public transportation or a carpool?						
walk or ride a bike instead of driving somewhere?						
think about the environmental impact of products before you purchased them?						
buy Michigan-grown food?						
buy Michigan-manufactured goods?						
reuse or recycle an item instead of disposing of it?						
change any of your normal habits based on what you’ve learned in this unit?						
tell anyone about how they can save energy and prevent pollution?						

17. How many “no” responses did you have for the week? _____

18. How many “yes” responses did you have for the week? _____

19. Consider what you’ve learned in this unit and your “no” responses above. How can you decrease your energy use and impact on the environment? _____

Source: Michigan Environmental Education Curriculum Support

ENERGY RESOURCES

This unit — intended for middle-school students — is focused on comparing energy use in the early 1900s and today, including how energy resources have changed and how people can employ more “renewable” energy to minimize our “environmental impact.” Students are presented with examples of “dramatic” increases in our energy consumption without any objective context with which to calculate both the costs and benefits of energy use.

The current of pessimism running throughout the MEECS materials is particularly evident in this unit. It presents a litany of complaints about conventional energy, including how fossil fuels foster “dependence” on other countries and create waste in their production. It ignores the costs and benefits of renewable energy, which robs students of a complete understanding of our energy challenges.

One lesson directs students to keep a record of their energy use and reflect on ways to reduce it — the presumption being that energy use is inherently wasteful. (See graphic this page)

Not only do these questions presume that energy use is wasteful, they imply that recycling, public transportation and locally produced goods are always more beneficial than the alternatives. Students would gain much greater insight if the lesson required them to also analyze the energy needed for recycling, for example, or the benefits of agricultural imports.

CONCLUSION

Science instruction should develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills in students. Real-world applications enable students to understand the relevance of what they are learning. Further, active learning promotes intellectual growth. As noted earlier, the MEECS curriculum relies heavily on passive instruction, which doesn’t foster independent learning or critical thinking.

Our students would benefit more if allowed to explore issues without indoctrination. Let them draw their own conclusions on such issues as land use, climate change and the use of nonrenewable fuels.

Every MEECS unit is prefaced with statements underscoring the balanced and science-based nature of the materials. However, the materials are not balanced. They promulgate a viewpoint, one that clearly favors centralized control and decision-making over scientific investigation and public debate. ♦

Charles Bacon, Ph.D., is professor of physics and chemistry at Ferris State University and coauthor of ‘DO SOMETHING: The Art and Practice of Project-Based, Active Learning’ and ‘A Guide to Connect Learning to Performance.’



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READER Letters

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

Here are some comments posted in response to articles in the August 2007 issue.

Two articles about school real estate were included in the August issue, one focusing on conventional public school districts with buildings for sale, and another about the difficulty that some public charter school operators have in finding appropriate facilities. Each prompted several responses from readers, including these ...

“As a member of the Byron Center School Board, my opinion on selling of school buildings is that if a building is not being used and will not be used in the future it should be sold in an expedient fashion. Sitting on property in today’s economic times is a poor use of school funds and resources ...”
-school board member, Byron Center

“When I first began my career at the school, the school itself was only in its second year of existence. We ... were housed in an older structure that had been a parochial school. Since then ... we have moved into a state-of-the-art building, complete with theater, computer labs and gymnasiums.

Charter public schools have to be much more creative with their money, especially when it comes to buildings. The test of time has shown that charter public schools are here to stay and are doing more with less.”
-charter public school teacher, Taylor

The article “Better Writing: High-scoring schools say it’s not easy” discussed reasons for Michigan’s lower standardized test scores in writing compared to reading or math, and how some successful schools approach writing instruction. These readers responded ...

“I enjoyed and agree with the article ‘Better Writing’ and was interested to read how Okemos and other districts improved their writing scores. It seems the 6 Traits and more time spent on writing throughout the curriculum is essential. Our district continually works on writing and it has been a goal of ours for several years, but we still haven’t done

enough to improve our writing scores significantly.”

-fourth grade teacher, Trenton

“I am fortunate to be a part of a district and school that supports individual teachers and allows for a creative approach to teaching writing. The article ‘Better Writing’ stresses the point that writing takes time, effort, patience, and a willingness to model the risky writing process. The teachers in our department devote a great amount of energy into those daunting requirements, and assign frequent and meaningful assignments. I know no magic formula other than hard work.”

-high school English teacher, Okemos

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

continued from Page Nine

ECONOMIC EDUCATION

oppose the minimum wage, support free trade and understand why legislators might pass trade restrictions. However, these results hardly support a finding of widespread economic literacy.

The question of whether a greater knowledge of economics causes more pro-market policies is difficult to answer because there is little research on it. One of the more recent and extensive studies of economic education in high school and attitudes toward markets was conducted by William J. Boyes of Arizona State University and Amy M. Willis of the Arizona Council on Economic Education.

This study tested 1,715 Arizona high school students on both economic knowledge and confidence in markets. Only 3 percent of the students agreed “completely” or “with slight reservations” that the price mechanism should be used to allocate resources in 10 hypothetical economic scenarios. However, economics education does improve this dismal situation. In nine of the 10 scenarios, students taking an economics course favored the price mechanism more than students who had not taken economics. Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate students did even better, with 11 percent favoring the price mechanism in all 10 scenarios. The authors concluded, “Economic literacy and agreement with market allocation tend to be positively related, while literacy and agreement with government

mandate tend to be negatively related. In general, then, literacy and acceptance of market allocation are related.”

The bottom line is that the NAEP economics results are better than many economics educators expected. Well-trained teachers increase economic knowledge and economic knowledge increases acceptance of the market. But until economic literacy is widespread, don’t hold your breath waiting for voters to defeat referendums that increase the minimum wage, build new sports stadiums or mandate health coverage. ♦

A writer and presenter of economic education, John Morton is senior program officer of the Arizona Council on Economic Education and formerly the vice president for program development at the National Council on Economic Education.

continued from Page One

SHORT SUBJECTS

officials said they expect their final student count to show a decline of more than 700 students, putting enrollment under 20,000. Plymouth Canton reported gaining 200 students, putting it next in line at 19,000.

Hundreds of students stayed out of classes at Willow Run High School on Sept. 27 — the state’s official student count day — to protest the lack of a new teacher contract and a reduction in counselors. The action forced the district to postpone its count until the following day. A union representative told media that teachers did not encourage students to mount the protest, but appreciated their support.

The Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians will pay to continue an after-school tutoring program in Ontonogon County’s Ewen-Trout Creek school district this year. The program’s future was in doubt due to reductions in a state grant, according to the Ironwood Daily Globe. About 48 students were receiving tutoring services at the end of the 2006-2007 school year.

The number of students served under Ohio’s EdChoice voucher plan was expected to double this year, according to the Cleveland Plain Dealer. Nearly 8,000 students applied for the program, which offers private-school tuition to students who otherwise would attend low-performing public schools. The number of low-performing schools increased this year, making more students eligible.

CORRECTION

A “Short subjects” item in the August edition of Michigan Education Report incorrectly described a report titled “Performance-Pay for Teachers: Designing a System that Students Deserve.” The report calls for using student success and teacher leadership to help determine teacher pay, but does not advocate also including teacher experience or a salary schedule.



COMMENTARY

Frank Webster

It’s up to school boards to save insurance dollars

The Michigan Education Special Services Association reported \$268.8 million in net assets to the Michigan Office of Financial and Insurance Services in its most recent financial report. MESSA calls this accumulated revenue “Net Assets Available for Benefits in Excess of Benefit Obligations.” Sounds good! But it’s actually profit, or “net gain” that comes from overcharging schools for benefit plans.

MESSA is controlled by the Michigan Education Association, the labor union that represents teachers and other school employees. MESSA is not an insurance company. It’s a third-party administrator that sells insurance packages to school districts. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan is the insurance carrier for all MESSA health plans except for the benefits that exceed BCBSM’s operating authority. The extraordinary benefits not covered by BCBSM are insured by BCS Life, a for-profit company partially owned by BCBSM.

MESSA’s accumulated assets of \$268.8 million includes \$150 million gained in just one year and excludes the \$131 million of revenue gain that MESSA used to subsidize rates a few years

ago. The \$268.8 million is excess charges by MESSA to school districts. This represents more than \$2,900 per employee covered by a MESSA health plan and the \$150 million represents about \$1,600 per covered employee. This is all taxpayer money — money that could have been used by school districts to enhance public school budgets and improve education for children.

There are alternatives to MESSA, given the recent legislation adopted by the Michigan Legislature as part of the budget wrangling this year. The new law will make it easier for schools to form insurance pools and ask for competitive bids for health plans. It also will require MESSA to release the aggregate claims history that it holds on each individual school district. Most insurance administrators would want to review that data before making a bid, but MESSA routinely refuses to release the numbers.

One thing every school district could do is name itself the policyholder of the health plans they provide to their employees. Right now, MESSA is almost always the policyholder for the health plans it sells to school districts. Being the policyholder gives MESSA full control over the plan benefits and exclusive rights to the claims history data. Even though state law provides that naming the policyholder is not a matter of collective bargaining, most school district boards have unwittingly ceded this management right to MESSA and the teachers union. School districts should become the policyholder for all health plans that cover their employees and then solicit health plan quotes from qualified health plan administrators.

Beyond MESSA, the larger problem is that Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Michigan has a virtual monopoly on public school employee health care in Michigan, selling its plans directly to districts or through MESSA. BCBSM is governed by Public Act 350 as a “nonprofit health care corporation.” The act exempts it from state taxes in return for requiring BCBSM to insure anyone who can’t get coverage elsewhere.

BCBSM’s total annual premium from public schools is over \$2 billion, including \$1.2 billion from MESSA. It makes a substantial “profit” on those premiums. Yes, BCBSM is a “nonprofit” corporation by law, but maybe it would be good to ask how many BCBSM executives are paid in excess of \$500,000 each year? BCBSM is the last of the state-controlled Blues plans; many Blues in other states have become mutual companies or stock companies. BCBSM should do the same.

The real answer to reducing the cost of health care for teachers and school employees is for school boards to utilize the advantages of competition. When health insurance administrators compete for business, costs come down. This does not mean that school employees will not have responsible coverage. It means that school boards will have the funds to advance education for children. The money is there. It just takes courage and determination by school boards and administrators to redirect the dollars. ♦

Frank Webster is the former executive director of the Michigan Education Special Services Association and a health care cost management consultant.

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DIVERSEVIEWPOINTS

Do teacher preparation programs spend too much time on methods and too little on content?

NO: Content knowledge and effective practices are both critical



Nancy Flanagan

This question contains both an assumption and a false dichotomy. The assumption is that “teacher training programs” are similar, from one university to the next — and have not changed substantially since the days when “methods” courses made up the bulk of teacher preparation coursework. The false dichotomy pits two essential aspects of effective teaching — content expertise and mastery of pedagogical tools — against each other. All good teachers have deep content knowledge and equally deep skill in managing and monitoring student learning. High quality teacher preparation programs can neglect neither.

I am currently working with diverse groups of novice teachers in virtual mentoring communities. Some of the new teachers I work with were trained in well-regarded teacher preparation programs at research universities. Others are mature adults, second-career science, mathematics and technology teachers once employed by a major technology corporation, entering teaching through a number of alternative certification programs. The career switchers come to the teacher preparation process with decades of demonstrated deep, applied knowledge about mathematics and science.

And yet — the questions from both groups, now in their first years of teaching or in field placements (student teaching) are the same: How do I get these kids motivated? How do I break a complex model in chemistry into understandable chunks — and then design engaging lessons to teach those concepts? How can I measure learning besides multiple choice quizzes, which only tell me which students have memorized the text? Why don't they bring their books and pencils to class? Why don't I get help from my principal with my instructional struggles? Half of my honors class gets it, but the other half doesn't — I taught them, but they didn't learn!

We took care, with the career switchers, to provide exemplary math and science teachers as mentors, but — beyond sharing tested-in-the-trenches educational resources and lesson plans — there have been no discussions on content. The lack of a technical core of acknowledged research and wisdom on pedagogy is well-known — but doesn't mean that there isn't a critical need for training and support

for novice teachers in building a professional teaching practice.

Constructing an effective personal teaching system includes much more than classroom management strategies (although it's very easy for outsiders to underestimate the difficulties of working with 30 teenagers who aren't particularly interested in algebra). Professional teachers must be able to diagnose learning difficulties, prescribe effective strategies to address them, monitor up to 150 students' progress through credible data collection, design and deliver upwards of 300 lessons each year, select engaging and appropriate materials and work effectively with colleagues, parents and the community. As Lee Shulman, formerly of Michigan State University and now president of the Carnegie Foundation, is fond of

saying: Teaching is impossible.

While strong content knowledge is vitally important, knowing something does not automatically include the ability to teach it. Many of our best, brightest and most idealistic college graduates with disciplinary majors, looking to contribute to high-needs communities through programs like Teach for America, find the daily work of teaching far more challenging and complex than anticipated. While they “catch up” to traditionally certified teachers by year three, they are much more likely to leave the classroom; only 18 percent of TFA teachers remain in their schools by year five. Reducing their pedagogical preparation to a summer “boot camp” model has not resulted in retention or better results in their first years of teaching.

Perhaps our goals in improving teaching in America need to go beyond weighing the relative importance of disciplinary and

Yes: A teacher cannot teach what he or she does not know



Richard Grieves

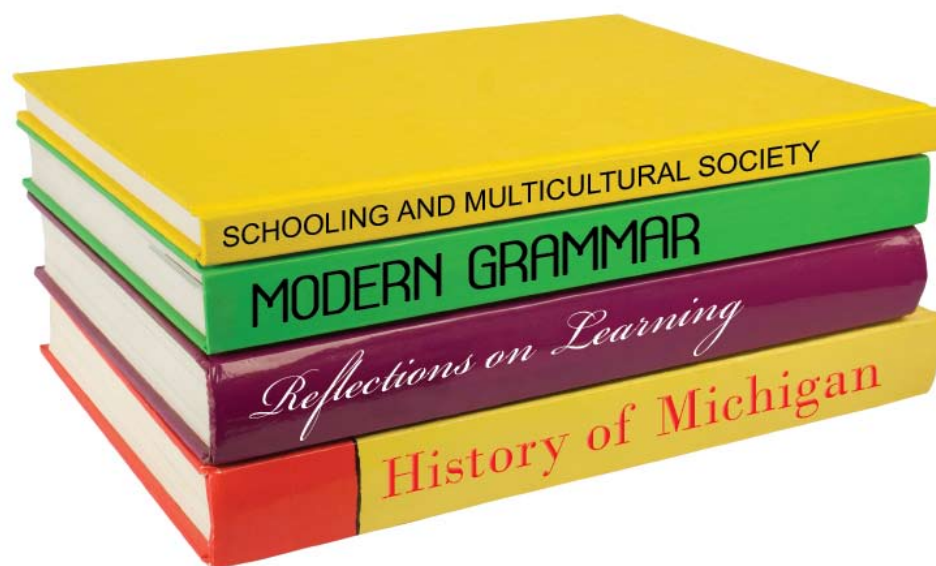
I have been a mentor to scores of student teachers and pre-student teachers over the last 27 years. In the last 15 years, I have seen a disturbing trend among the English majors with whom I have worked: Not one of these bright, industrious young people has an understanding of traditional English grammar. Whenever I inquire about this sad fact, I am given the same story: Either the student was not required to take a class in English grammar or the student took a Modern Grammar class that concentrated solely on linguistic theories. Linguistic theory is fine for academicians, but it does little good for high school students who must be prepared for

the several courses in educational pedagogy he or she must take. This would, of course, shake up the status quo of our universities' teacher preparation programs; nonetheless, common sense tells us that a teacher cannot teach what he or she does not know. In the high stakes testing arena, then, if students are expected to know traditional English grammar and the teacher does not know the subject, the student is the real loser.

Some might argue that every educational method or pedagogy class is essential. I disagree. Of the seven educational courses I was required to take before I began teaching, the content that I actually needed in my day-to-day routine could have been learned in one course, perhaps two courses at the most. The majority of the coursework was theoretical fluff and has been rarely useful for practical applications. In contrast, the traditional English grammar course I had at Central Michigan University (taught by Professor Emeritus James Hodgins) was stimulating, demanding and practical. I still have and have used my college grammar text, nearly every day, for nearly 30 years. Conversely, I sold my educational methods texts to the student book store 30 seconds after the course ended.

Our state's new “relevant and rigorous” curriculum demands such a change; not to allow our future teachers to take “relevant and rigorous” content courses in their teaching majors means that our new curriculum cannot be carried out. Worse, it means that our students are the real losers.

An English and Latin secondary teacher for nearly three decades, Richard Grieves was the South Lyon High School Teacher of the Year for 2006-2007. He is currently the English Department Facilitator at South Lyon East High School.



the complex grammatical questions on the Michigan Merit Exam and ACT. Certifying an English major to teach high school students without requiring a competency in traditional English grammar is akin to certifying a surgeon to do surgery without requiring him or her to have a competent knowledge of human anatomy.

To deal with this most disturbing trend, I recommend that English majors planning to teach high school English be allowed to substitute a thorough class in traditional English grammar for any one of

pedagogical coursework or getting teachers into the classroom quickly. There may well be universities where education coursework does not lead to understanding of the critical competencies of teaching — fix those programs or close them down, but do not eliminate serious study of effective practice for those who wish to teach.



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Nancy Flanagan recently retired, after 31 years as a K-12 music specialist with the Hartland Consolidated Schools, to pursue a doctoral degree in education policy at Michigan State University. She was named Michigan Teacher of the Year in 1993, is a National Board Certified Teacher and has extensive experience in writing and leading initiatives on teacher leadership, education policy, mentoring and music curriculum.

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Tell us what you think: “Do teacher preparation programs spend too much time on methods and too little on content?”

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