



## What I Learned in Public School

by Tom Bowles

### Summary

Many private, charter, and public school board members have come to believe the current government-run education system is too rigid and resistant to much-needed reforms. They have formed the Michigan School Board Leaders Association to explore and promote innovative ways to improve education for all students, including greater school choice for parents.

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Being a public school board trustee for four years has taught me a few things about how the government-run school system works. I learned enough to now know that sweeping reforms are the only way to save or improve education for our children, and that we can't afford to sacrifice another generation before we act decisively.

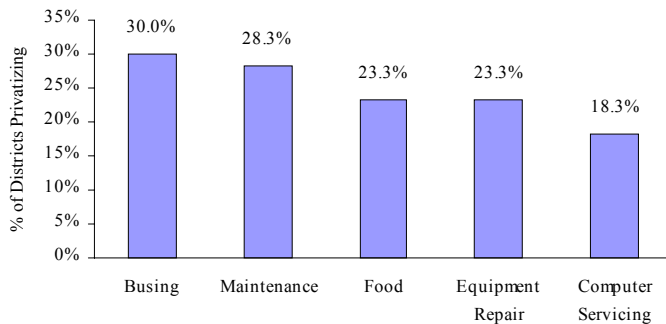
When I first ran for trustee, I was an outspoken critic of many financial aspects of our current system. I felt I could not support a huge tax increase when so much of our budget was being wasted. From a common-sense citizen's perspective, it doesn't take a genius to recognize that cutting the grass and shoveling snow should not cost \$30 per hour, which is what it costs our district.

It doesn't take a lot of studying to learn that privatizing services like transportation saves a lot of money because big transportation firms have economies of scale working for them, and it takes a huge burden off administrative staff members, freeing them to concentrate on educational improvements.

From a private businessman's perspective, I know something about what health benefits cost, and I knew our school system's costs were way out of line. Our district hired a benefits consultant, who told us the same thing. Yet we continue with the wasteful MESSA health system, an education employees' union creature that a 1993 Mackinac Center for Public Policy study proved was more about generating cash for the political coffers of the Michigan Education Association than it was about providing health insurance for teachers at a reasonable cost.

I naively thought that if I could shed a little light on some of the decisions we make in our school system, I could improve things. I had hoped we could start promoting people on the basis of what they know, instead of who they know. I thought parents could be given a voice in what they wanted their school system to be, instead of having to follow what educrats and union bosses told them it had to be.

### School Districts Privatize to Improve Quality and Save Educational Resources



Source: American School & University

More school districts could privatize non-instructional services and re-direct savings to the classroom. Respondents to a 1999 *American School & University* magazine survey revealed which services are most often privatized.

Active, informed parents who have new incentives to get involved in the education of their children are key ingredients in school improvement. Virtually every study on student performance proves one thing: student outcomes correlate most strongly with parental involvement. Even dire economic situations can be overcome when parental involvement is strengthened. But what I have learned about public schools is that there is little room for the reforms that would truly transform education by activating parents and improving efficiency and accountability.

The public school system does very well at what it has become: a vast employment and money distribution machine. Albert Shanker, former president of the American Federation of Teachers, hit the nail on the head when he said, "It is time to admit that public education operates like a planned economy, a bureaucratic system in which everybody's role is spelled out in advance and there are few incentives for innovation and productivity. It's no surprise that our school system doesn't improve. It more resembles the communist economy than our own market economy."

Consequently, I have become deeply committed to the Michigan School Board Leaders Association (MSBLA), a new group that gathers school board leaders from the public, private, and charter school sectors across Michigan. I strongly urge every school board member in Michigan to reject the status quo and make a statement for reform, choice, and new ways of school governance by joining MSBLA. Unlike its establishment counterpart, the Michigan Association of School Boards, this exciting organization has its sights not on preserving power but in making a real positive difference in our schools and in the lives of Michigan's children.

School choice is the future of education. It is an idea whose time has come. MSBLA represents school board members who are not afraid of competition and are not intimidated by the thought of treating parents as customers, instead of captives. MSBLA understands that in an environment of choice and competition, bad or unsafe schools won't last. Under today's design, bad and unsafe schools never go away.

Whatever your occupation, you have a stake in our education system. I urge you to embrace real reform and become active on its behalf. Our kids are waiting to see what we do.

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**(Tom Bowles, president of the Michigan School Board Leaders Association, is completing his term as a trustee of the Van Buren Public Schools in Wayne County, Michigan. More information on education is available at [www.mackinac.org](http://www.mackinac.org). Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.)**

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