

SHORT SUBJECTS

“Vouchers are dead. Vouchers are not for Michigan.” According to a recent Detroit News editorial by George Weeks, Lt. Gov. Dick Posthumus made this comment about vouchers at a recent Michigan Association of School Administrators gubernatorial candidate forum.

Former cops will investigate allegations of cheating on MEAP tests under a Department of Treasury plan announced in December. The plan would also employ child-abuse and other investigators to enforce MEAP standards. In 2001, the state accused a record 67 schools of cheating on the tests. Investigations showed that 21 of the schools employed “inappropriate practices” in MEAP testing; yet, the schools faced no penalties.

A report on Michigan schools conducted by Standard and Poor’s, the Wall Street bond rating firm, was released in December. The report, entitled “Michigan: Statewide Insights,” suggests that significant achievement gaps exist between Michigan school districts on standardized tests. The report concludes, however, that increased spending is not an effective way to boost public school performance. The report is available to view online at www.ses.standardandpoors.com.

Hazel Park father Bill Schraeder spent 30 days in jail in the fall of 2000 when his then-16-year-old daughter missed 523 days of school since kindergarten, according to a recent Detroit News story. Schraeder was the first person in Michigan to be imprisoned because of a child’s chronic truancy. Schraeder was charged under Hazel Park’s educational-neglect misdemeanor ordinance. Twelve other parents also were charged, but pleaded guilty and avoided jail.

An Ann Arbor school bus driver was fired in January for her role in organizing a Dec. 20 “sick-out” that left students stranded at bus stops and parents scrambling to get children to school, according to the Ann Arbor News. The sick-out, in which 38 of about 100 drivers called in sick, prompted administrators to cancel nearly all of the day’s bus routes. Driver Monica Wafford received a termination letter, citing 12 reasons for her firing, including initiating an illegal “work stoppage.”

State superintendent launches plan to grade schools

Critics: Timid plan a “mockery of accountability”

On Dec. 10, 2001, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Watkins unveiled “Education YES! A Yardstick for Excellent Schools,” a plan designed to keep Michigan public schools accountable for the quality of education they deliver.

The plan comes months after Watkins and the State Board of Education abandoned a previous accountability model drafted by former State Superintendent of Public

Instruction Arthur Ellis.

Though it remains to be seen how the evaluation criteria for the accreditation system will be crafted, the plan features an annual letter grade for Michigan public schools, which includes charter schools. The grades will be based on a combination of student Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test scores, staff development programs, student attendance,

and level of parental involvement. The plan will go into effect beginning with the 2002-03 school year, and the first official grades will be posted after a year of evaluation.

Watkins emphasized three goals for Michigan schools: first, that all elementary and middle school students read and compute at their own grade level; second, that

ACCOUNTABILITY *continued on page 2*



On Jan. 8, President Bush signed into law the “No Child Left Behind Act,” the legislative culmination of months of debate over his education proposals.

President signs “No Child Left Behind Act”

New law is largest-ever increase in federal education spending and regulation

On Jan. 8, 2002, President Bush signed into law the “No Child Left Behind Act” (H.R. 1), acting on his campaign promise to improve accountability in public schools, provide more options for students in poorly performing districts, and deliver more flexibility for states administering federal funds. The new legislation will enable individual student academic performance to be tied to federal funds for the first time in the history of U.S. public education.

Late last year, the House and Senate approved the act by votes of 393-30 and 90-7, respectively. The act includes a \$48.9-billion education appropriation package, with \$26.5 billion going toward elementary and secondary education for fiscal year 2002. The \$26.5 billion figure is \$8 billion more than last year’s funding level. The balance of the appropriation is for programs outside of K-12 education.

The primary feature of the act is mandated, state-administered testing in reading and mathematics for all students in grades three through eight. Title I and other federal funding will be tied to student performance on the tests.

Each state will be required to design

its own test, develop benchmarks, and create a system for measuring students’ performance. The U.S. Department of Education also will develop a national test that will be used periodically to measure student progress against national academic standards. Students in schools deemed “low-performing” for three years will be able to transfer to another public school or

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND *continued on page 4*

Educators ratify historic public school contract

Teachers at Lansing school not required to support union

Teachers at a Lansing public school have ratified a historic contract with a unique voluntary union membership provision that permits individual teachers to decide whether or not to financially support the Michigan Education Association (MEA), the union a majority of teachers chose to represent them. Although all Michigan public school employees can today refuse union membership regardless of contract provisions, all other district contracts require employees to be fired if they refuse to pay a fee, regardless of membership status.

Mid-Michigan Public School Academy and the local MEA union affiliate signed the contract on Jan. 8, after it was unanimously ratified by teachers at a December meeting. The contract specifies that union dues, which average about \$600 annually, will be deducted only after a teacher has chosen to join the union. The Mid-Michigan Academy is believed to be the only public school in the state with such an arrangement. The contract will remain in effect for the remainder of this school year.

That this option even exists is news to many school officials.

“When negotiating contracts with the union, most public school board members

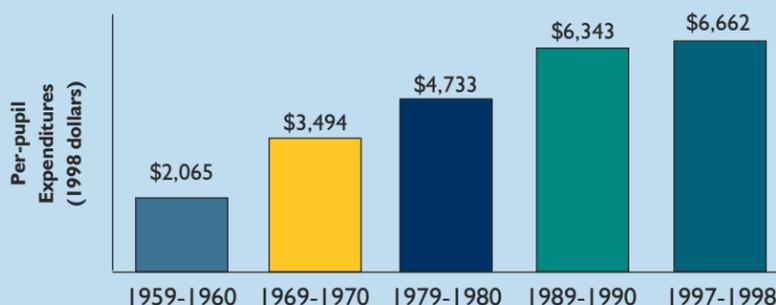
HISTORIC CONTRACT *continued on page 2*

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Education at a Glance

Total Per-Pupil Expenditures for Education Triple (Over 40 Years)



Source: Digest of Education Statistics, 2001, National Center for Education Statistics

Accountability

continued from page 1

all students demonstrate a year's academic growth in a year's time; and third, that all high school students follow an education plan tailored to their post-high school goals.

"We're trying to hold schools accountable in a fair and reasonable way," Watkins said. "We're calling for having grades—A through E—because it's easily understandable [with] 'E' representing a failing grade."

"This will be controversial," he added.

Out with the old, in with the new

Letter grades aren't the only controversial thing about the Watkins plan. Some critics are charging that the plan does not

this plan, schools would have been required to have at least 80 percent student participation on the MEAP, and would have received different levels of accreditation based on the number of students performing well on the MEAP. Schools with less than 25 percent of their students demonstrating proficiency on MEAP would have been "unaccredited" under the Ellis plan. Nearly 1,000 Michigan schools – or about a third – would have been unaccredited under the Ellis plan.

Defining accountability

In May 2001, Watkins defended his decision to craft a new accountability plan, saying the Ellis plan unfairly designated too many schools as "unaccredited." Watkins negotiated with Ellis to withhold the list of unaccredited schools until Watkins could establish the "Education YES!" plan,

teachers, administrators, and supporters that accountability to parents is the ultimate measure of accountability in education. He challenged Watkins, who was present, to embrace reforms that would put the focus of education on children, parents, and more educational choices and encourage multiple educational options that he said could better serve a diverse population rather than a "one-size-fits-all" system.

As part of the release of the new accreditation program, the Michigan Department of Education is holding hearings around the

state to introduce the program to teachers, community leaders, and citizens and to solicit feedback on how best to implement the system.

Historic Contract

continued from page 1

are unaware that they do not have to agree to a compulsory support or 'union security' clause," said Lori Yaklin, executive director of the Michigan School Board Leaders Association. "Union membership and support should be an individual decision, and school board members around the state should learn from Mid-Michigan academy's voluntary arrangement."

The contract has been praised by both school and union officials.

"This contract gives the teacher group some legitimacy, and is also friendly to effective administration," said Mid-Michigan academy Superintendent Ned Curtis.

"Since I've taken over leadership of the academy in August, I've been impressed with the professionalism of the teaching staff, and I don't expect that to change."

MEA Uniserv Director James Boersma, who led negotiations for the union, is optimistic about future negotiations. "I think we've developed a fairly good working relationship with the board and the administration, and that's a critical part of labor negotiations," he said.

Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies, believes that the voluntary membership provision is a good deal for Mid-Michigan's 59 teachers as well.

"Charter schools are all about options, not just for parents and their children but for teachers as well," he said. "Options provide flexibility for professional educators, giving them choices in how they work with the union. Those choices have the potential to improve relations between teachers and administration. It speaks well of the board, the MEA, and the teachers that they have the creativity and courage to be innovative like this."

Both opponents and supporters of voluntary support provisions in contracts have their arguments. Unions argue that since they are required by law to represent all employees in the bargaining unit, and since at least at one time a majority of teachers voted to adopt the union, they should receive compensation for their services. When support is voluntary, they claim, there will be "free riders"—employees who enjoy the benefits of union services without paying the cost.

Opponents of voluntary support provisions also claim that unions are responsible for Michigan teacher salary and benefits levels being among the highest in the nation, which they say aids in recruiting quality faculty and staff. They also claim that unions protect employees from discrimination or other unfair practices by employers.

Teachers who support voluntary provisions, however, say that the union is more of a hindrance than a help and point out that many teachers vote against union representation in the first place. In the case of Mid-Michigan, 25 percent of teachers opposed the union in the January 2000 certification vote, which made the school the first unionized university-chartered school in Michigan. In October 2001, teachers at the Island City Academy—then the second and only other unionized university-chartered school—voted 12 to 1 to oust the MEA union after collecting enough petition signatures to call for a decertification election.

Teachers may also object to the union

seniority system, which prevents them from being financially rewarded for their performance, or rigid work rules that stifle innovation and advancement. Many teachers also oppose being forced to fund union political activities through compulsory dues. The last internal MEA survey of its membership made public found that 69 percent of teachers and 86 percent of leaders are bothered that "the MEA takes stands I do not agree with." The 1989 survey, disclosed in a lawsuit brought against the union by an educator who opposed having dues used for political purposes, found that 64 percent of teachers



State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Watkins launched a new school accountability plan in December. The plan, called "Education Yes! A Yardstick for Excellent Schools," will include school report cards.

do enough to hold schools accountable and that the abandoned Ellis plan would have done a better job.

"[Watkins's plan] makes a mockery of accountability, leaving millions of parents and taxpayers in the dark about Michigan's growing achievement gap," said Greg McNeilly, director of Choices for Children, a Grand Rapids-based education reform group.

The Ellis plan would have implemented a three-part accreditation system for schools, using the MEAP as a benchmark. Under

which does not classify any schools as unaccredited.

Some observers note that the Watkins plan's effectiveness will be difficult to measure from one year to the next, especially when some of the plan's components include things that are hard to evaluate, such as parental involvement.

Addressing a November 2001 Michigan Association of Public School Academies conference, Lawrence Reed, president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, told a crowd of charter school parents,

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Collective Bargaining Agreement

Between
Mid-Michigan Public School Academy

and

Mid-Michigan Education Association (MEA)

January 1, 2000 to January 1, 2002

...

In January, teachers at Mid-Michigan Public School Academy ratified a historic contract with a voluntary union membership provision that permits individual teachers to decide whether or not to financially support the union.

are bothered that "the MEA is mainly committed to union goals, not professional goals for education."

But the Mid-Michigan Education Association (MMEA), the local union representing teachers, intends to bargain for the standard compulsory fee provision when talks begin on a new contract. MMEA President Felicia Underhill stated that the union has "not started discussing the dues yet. We will be meeting in February and we will be bringing up some of those issues then." As for teachers who elect not to join the MEA, "they will be represented either way," according to Underhill.

James Goenner, director of the Central Michigan University Charter Schools office, which issued Mid-Michigan academy its charter and oversees the school's operations, said he was impressed by the contract.

According to Goenner, the ratification vote was "a very positive sign for us in that the charter school board, its teachers, and the MEA could come to a mutually agreeable contract that keeps kids first."

Report: Michigan schools above average in test scores, below in teacher quality

Education Week releases annual state report cards

Michigan schools rank above average on national achievement test scores but below average in teacher quality and accountability, according to a recently released report by Education Week, a national education newspaper.

The report, entitled "Quality Counts 2002," rates schools in five categories including student achievement, standards and accountability, improving teacher quality, resources adequacy, and resources equity. Education Week publishes the report annually.

The report measures student achievement using scores from the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam, a federally sponsored program that tests students in the 41 states that agree to participate. NAEP tests Michigan fourth-graders in math, science, and reading and eighth-graders in math and science.

NAEP scores reported in "Quality Counts" show Michigan students performing above average. Thirty-three percent of Michigan fourth-graders taking the science test scored at or above the "proficient" level, compared to the national average of 28 percent. Michigan eighth-graders posted even higher scores on the science test, with 37 percent performing at or above proficient, compared to a 30-percent national average.

However, nearly 30 percent of Michigan students continue to score "below basic" on fourth- and eighth-grade math and science tests.

"Quality Counts" also evaluates other factors such as the availability and use of advanced classes in Michigan schools. For example, the report shows that 65 percent of Michigan public high schools offer Advanced Placement courses, which allow students to take certain classes in order to test out of entry-level college courses and obtain college credit while finishing high school. The report also shows that only 30 percent of Michigan eighth-graders are taking algebra I, algebra II, or geometry, with the majority often opting to take the courses in high school.

Michigan received a C grade in standards and accountability. The report rates states in this category according to whether or not state standards are adopted for core subjects, what assessment tests are given and when, how schools are held accountable (e.g., report cards, sanctions for poor performance), and how student performance is evaluated. Michigan's C grade reflects a lack of comprehensive evaluation of school and student performance and a lack of enforceable sanctions for poor performance. The report also downgraded Michigan for failing to make student graduation contingent upon exit exams and for not requiring remediation for students who are failing.

"Quality Counts" gave Michigan a C-minus in improving teacher quality due to the state's lack of extended testing and certification procedures, lack of performance-based pay policies, and lack of sanctions for teacher-training programs whose students perform poorly on teacher assessment tests.

Michigan is one of the top-spending states in education, according to the report, with a grade of A-minus assigned in resources adequacy. On average, Michigan spends \$7,922 per student, or nearly 112 percent of the national average. However, teachers comprise only 46 percent of the state's total education staff, and more than 50 percent of education expenditures are used to cover non-classroom administrative and noninstructional services. According to data compiled by *Michigan Education Report* in 1999, Michigan teachers comprise



Quality Counts 2002 Michigan Report Card	
Student Achievement (NAEP)	
4th graders proficient or above in math (2000)	29%
8th graders proficient or above in math (2000)	28%
4th graders proficient or above in science (2000)	33%
8th graders proficient or above in science (2000)	37%
4th graders proficient or above in reading (1998)	28%
8th graders proficient or above in reading (1998)	?
8th graders proficient in writing (1998)	?
Standards & Accountability	C
Improving Teacher Quality	C-
School Climate	—
Resources: Adequacy*	A-
Resources: Equity*	C-

Student Achievement [By State]							
(Percent scoring at or above proficient)							
State	4th grade NAEP math (2000)	8th grade NAEP math (2000)	4th grade NAEP science (2000)	8th grade NAEP science (2000)	4th grade NAEP reading (1998)	8th grade NAEP reading (1998)	8th grade NAEP writing (1998)
Alabama	14	16	22	22	24	21	17
Alaska	?	?	?	?	?	?	?
Arizona	17	21	22	24	22	28	21
Arkansas	13	14	24	23	23	23	13
California	15	18	14	15	20	22	20
Colorado	?	?	?	?	34	30	27
Connecticut	32	34	35	35	46	42	44
Delaware	?	?	?	?	25	25	22
D.C.	6	6	?	?	10	12	11
Florida	?	?	?	?	23	23	19
Georgia	18	19	24	23	24	25	23
Hawaii	14	16	16	15	17	19	15
Idaho	21	27	30	38	?	?	?
Illinois	21	27	31	30	?	?	?
Indiana	31	31	32	35	?	?	?
Iowa	28	?	37	?	35	?	?
Kansas	30	34	?	?	34	35	?
Kentucky	17	21	29	29	29	29	21
Louisiana	14	12	19	18	19	18	12
Maine	25	32	38	37	36	42	32
Maryland	22	29	26	28	29	31	23
Massachusetts	33	32	43	42	37	36	31
Michigan	29	28	33	37	28	?	?
Minnesota	34	40	35	42	36	37	25
Mississippi	9	8	14	15	18	19	11
Missouri	23	22	35	36	29	29	17
Montana	25	37	37	46	37	38	25
Nebraska	24	31	26	36	?	?	?
Nevada	16	20	19	23	21	24	17
New Hampshire	?	?	?	?	38	?	?
New Jersey	?	?	?	?	?	?	?
New Mexico	12	13	18	20	22	24	18
New York	22	26	26	30	29	34	21
North Carolina	28	30	24	27	28	31	27
North Dakota	25	31	38	40	30	?	?
Ohio	26	31	32	41	28	?	?
Oklahoma	16	19	26	26	?	29	25
Oregon	23	32	28	33	?	33	27
Pennsylvania	?	?	?	?	?	?	?
Rhode Island	23	24	27	29	32	30	25
South Carolina	18	18	21	20	22	22	15
South Dakota	?	?	?	?	?	?	?
Tennessee	18	17	26	25	25	26	24
Texas	27	24	24	23	29	28	31
Utah	24	26	32	35	28	31	21
Vermont	29	32	39	40	?	?	?
Virginia	25	26	33	31	30	33	27
Washington	?	?	?	?	29	32	25
West Virginia	18	18	25	26	29	27	18
Wisconsin	?	?	?	?	34	33	28
Wyoming	25	25	33	36	30	29	23
U.S.	25	26	28	30	29	31	24

COMMENT: Major funding has gone into learning for children from birth to age 5, and a state-financed preschool program has a long record of success. A bleak revenue picture in 2001, however, led lawmakers to make sizable cuts to their three-year budget for schools, including money to provide new services for young children and their families. The state is revising its accountability system and did not release school ratings last year, dropping its grade from a B in 2001 to a C in 2002 for standards and accountability. New ratings are expected in fall 2002.

*NOTES: School climate was not graded this year. Some state grades for resource adequacy changed this year because of changes in methodology. For details, see "State of the States." State grades for resource equity are based on 1998-99 data, the most recent available. ? indicates the state did not participate in the national assessment.

Source: "Quality Counts 2002," Education Week

Michigan Vital Statistics	
3,606	Public schools
95,000	Public school teachers
1.7 million	Pre-K-12 enrollment
\$13.7 billion	Annual pre-K-12 expenditures (all revenue sources)
23.7%	Minority students
15.4%	Children in poverty
4.8%	Students with disabilities
672,000	Children under 5

Source: "Quality Counts 2002," Education Week

No Child Left Behind

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receive funding for tutoring. Definitions for "low-performing" schools are being developed.

Under the act, parents will receive mandated school report cards describing student test score results, graduation rates, and student achievement comparisons across districts and states. Teacher performance also will be scrutinized: States must require that teachers demonstrate qualifications in the subjects they are teaching or the state must inform parents of the lack of teacher qualification in the school report cards.

The final measure of accountability under the act involves the reconstitution of failing schools. Schools that are repeatedly identified as "low-performing" will be given options of reorganizing the school's administration or changing their faculty.

Critics of the law say it undermines local control of education.

"Mostly, the bill allows the federal government to further usurp the authority of local communities to run their own schools," said David Salisbury, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. "For the past 50 years or more, we have observed a steady trend toward a situation where the federal government makes all the big decisions about education."

The act in its early form in Congress contained a voucher provision to help students escape failing schools, but this provision was stripped from the bill during Senate deliberations last spring. School choice supporters criticized this move, saying the revised bill did little to help students in failing schools.

According to the Council for American Private Education (CAPE), the act includes funding for four federal programs intended to benefit students who attend private schools.

The act increases funding levels in nine major program areas, keeps funding the same in three, and decreases funding in two. The largest increases were in Title I (grants to local education agencies) and programs in math, science, and reading. These increases are intended to reflect President Bush's goals of making sure every child can read by third grade and demonstrate mastery of basic math and science skills in elementary school.

What the new law means for Michigan schools

President Bush touts the "No Child Left Behind Act" as the first major legislative effort to close the achievement gap between

disadvantaged students in chronically low-performing schools and those students in high-performing schools.

But critics are skeptical that more federal involvement will improve education. Lisa Snell, director of education and child welfare for the Los Angeles-based Reason Public Policy Institute, expressed concern that the country's lowest performing urban districts will receive the most federal money yet also will be the most resistant to accountability requirements in the new law.

"Los Angeles Superintendent Roy Romer has repeatedly told reporters that districts will learn to game the system and lower standards to make sure all students meet the requirements," she wrote in a recent commentary.

Michigan currently requires testing of students in grades four, five, seven, eight and ten. State Department of Education officials are preparing to respond to the new federal mandates.

In addition to the existing state-mandated exam, many individual school districts in Michigan also administer nationally recognized standardized tests. One Michigan school district, Coopersville Area Public Schools in Ottawa County, has been for several years voluntarily administering the Stanford Achievement Test.

"We recognized the need more than three years ago for an annual measure of our students' academic achievement at every grade level," said Coopersville superintendent Kevin O'Neill. "This information helps parents and teachers work with every student, and also helps the district measure its growth over time. We use the results to make curriculum changes and to provide professional development for our staff in areas that need improvement."

According to a recent survey, 76 percent of the state's charter public schools also administer an annual standardized exam.

"Michigan charter schools embrace accountability," said Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies. "Our charter schools are prepared to meet the president's challenge of leaving no student behind through many of the measures including regular school report cards for parents and annual standardized testing."

State Department of Education officials expect to learn more about the implementation and funding details of the new law in coming months.



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LEGISLATIVE ACTION

School finance plan may nullify public schools-of-choice program

Under a proposal released in December by a subcommittee of the House Education Committee, led by Rep. Gerald Van Woerkom, R-Norton Shores, school districts losing money from declining enrollments would receive additional state funding. The plan also would provide incentives for schools that seek to consolidate services or districts.

The plan, dubbed the "Declining Enrollment Assistance Program," would allow qualifying districts to average student counts that determine school funding over three years. The House Fiscal Agency estimates the plan could cost the state up to \$102 million annually.

The plan is a response to complaints from districts losing students through the state's public schools-of-choice program, which allows students in participating districts to choose another school in their

own or a neighboring district if their local school is failing to provide the education they need.

The schools-of-choice law, adopted in 1996, is designed to create an economic incentive for districts to improve by tying funding to the number of students they attract and educate. Districts unable to retain students lose revenue attached to departing students, but are no longer required to spend money to educate those students.

State to encourage personal financial management classes for students

In January, the Michigan House passed a bill which requires the Department of Education to develop, and encourage schools to offer model financial literacy programs that teach students personal financial management skills and the basic principles involved with earning, spending, saving, and investing.

The bill, HB 5327, sponsored by Reps. Mike Bishop, R-Rochester, Alexander

Lipsev, D-Kalamazoo, and five others, now heads to the Senate Committee on Education for consideration.

Bomb threat bill would postpone driver's licenses

Senate Bill 645 passed in the Michigan Senate in December would prevent students who make false bomb threats from obtaining their driver's licenses until 21 years of age.

The bill, sponsored by Sens. Valde Garcia, R-St. Johns, George Hart, D-Dearborn, and nine others, was offered in response to a rash of bomb threats at Michigan public schools in 2001. The House Committee on Education is currently considering the bill.

For up-to-date information on these bills and other legislative activity, visit www.michiganvotes.org; enter the bill number to view bill history, sponsors, and analysis.

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School with a view

Mackinac Island students enjoy life off the beaten path

The Mackinac Island Public School, a school with a spectacular view of the Mackinac Bridge and mainland, serves nearly 80 students and operates year-round. Students ride in horse-drawn carriages or take their snowmobiles to school each day.



Imagine taking a horse-drawn carriage to school every morning, going to the dock to get groceries and school supplies from a boat each week, and carrying a cooler to keep your food from freezing. Where would you be?

The answer is Mackinac Island. This most renowned of Michigan summer tourist destinations is also a year-round city in itself, with a school, a bank, and plenty of snow.

The school, located near the waterfront, boasts a spectacular view of the Mackinac Bridge and the mainland and has an enrollment of between 70 and 80 students year-round. All but one of the school's 10 teachers are full-time residents of the island.

Though the fall and spring months are easygoing with stores and restaurants open for residents and the many visitors to the island, winter brings a whole new face of quiet beauty, empty streets, and logistical juggling.

In late October, all but a few hotels and restaurants close their doors and only one of the ferry lines operates. Several small grocery stores remain open, but all of the food must be shipped by boat or plane from the mainland.

As ice forms over the Straits of Mackinac, the ferry can no longer operate, and the only way to the island is by a small plane—a round trip ticket costs \$34. Usually, an ice bridge forms between the island and the St. Ignace portion of the mainland. At this point, people often ride their snowmobiles across the “bridge” to reach the mainland.

Outings to the movie theater on the mainland, trips to grocery or other stores, or shopping or dinner out, are all subject to the weather and travel options available. Groceries often must be stored in coolers to keep them warm so they do not freeze on the plane or snowmobile trip to the island.

For the students and staff of Mackinac Island Public School, and the island's 500 year-round residents, these logistical details are simply a way of life—and one they consider a small price to pay for the majestic view and the benefits of living on the island.

The Mackinac Island School serves

students in grades K-12 and also offers a preschool program. In addition to the teachers, the school employs a small support staff and a superintendent, Gary Urman, who also serves as principal, shop teacher, and athletic director.

Urman, who has been with the school nearly 18 years, says his is an enjoyable job. With such a small staff, he noted, no one minds having to “push the broom around,” if necessary.

“Everybody here models hard work, cooperation, and kindness,” he said.

Regarding the unique location of the school, and the logistics the staff and students face to get food and supplies and to simply live, Urman concluded, “We’re not really isolated, but we’re not on the beaten path either.”

A typical but solid curriculum is offered to the school's students, including math, science, English, social studies, foreign language, art, music, and physical education. And through the Internet and distance learning programs, Mackinac Island students also are able to take a variety of classes with students from other schools, including advanced placement and dual enrollment courses for college credit. Currently, many of the high school students are enrolled in a Japanese language course with another school district. Class is held through two-way video conferencing, where students can ask and answer questions in real-time. The school also offers services for special education and learning disabled students.

One of the frequently asked questions the school receives is, “How do your students participate in extracurricular sports and activities?” As with everything, the students and staff do not allow the logistical details to limit their activities. The school has sports teams, including basketball and volleyball, and others as the interest permits. Some years, the teams are co-ed; in others, they are not. Mackinac students travel, often via plane, to other small school districts, or fly the other school's teams to the island for a weekend of competing. Due to the cost and time to travel, the teams often play numerous games over the course of two days. And, if they play on the island, the

teams camp out in the school's new gym for the night.

Students also conduct fundraisers for class trips. In past years, for example, students have raised enough money to travel to France, Italy, and other countries.

Urman also points out that the school boasts a 100 percent graduation rate, and nearly all of the students go on to college.

When asked if the Mackinac Island school ever has a snow day, Urman says, “Not likely!”

Students and teachers at the school have published a booklet, “We Live on Mackinac Island,” to answer frequently asked questions about the island and their school. To obtain a copy, send your request and \$2.50 for shipping to the following address: Mackinac Island Booklet, c/o Michigan Education Report, 140 W. Main St., Midland, Mich., 48640. Quantities are limited.



Mackinac Island school students enjoy snowmobile trips to school, a media center, new gym, and specially designed lockers with the perfect place for a snowmobile helmet.

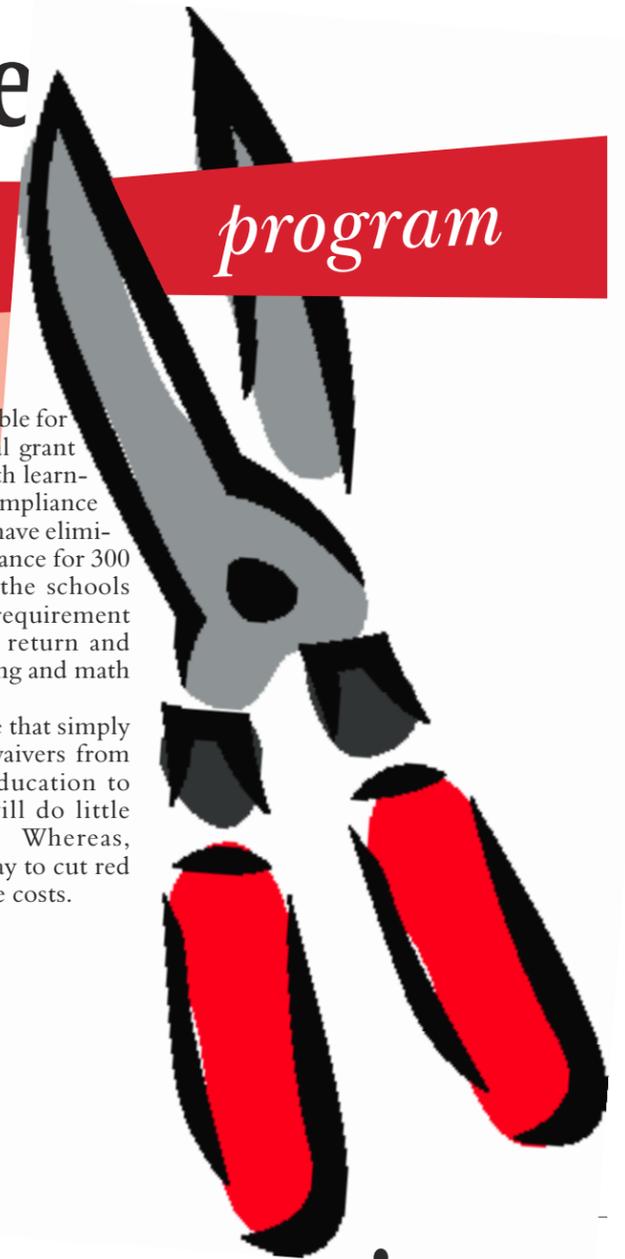


Via teleconferencing, students on Mackinac Island are able to participate in specialty classes held in other school districts, like this Japanese foreign language class.

Federal "Ed-Flex" rules could free schools from red tape

Michigan considers innovative state

program



Michigan may join ten other states participating in a federal program designed to free public schools from certain federal rules, if several state legislators get their way.

The "Education Flexibility Partnership Program," or Ed-Flex, first passed by Congress in 1994, allows the U.S. Secretary of Education to delegate to states the authority to waive selected federal education requirements if states agree to a performance contract with the federal government.

"Ed-Flex gives states that are committed to accountability and reform more flexibility to use federal resources to improve the quality of education for all children," according to U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige. "But we have to see results."

Before states can participate in Ed-Flex, their respective legislatures must first pass enabling legislation. To date, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Kansas, Massachusetts, Oregon, Delaware, Colorado, Vermont, Maryland, and Texas have passed such legislation. House bills 4760 and 4761, if passed into law, would make Michigan the eleventh Ed-Flex state.

But the bills, originally sponsored by state Reps. Wayne Kuipers, R-Holland; Tom Meyer, R-Bad Axe; and Barb Vander Veen, R-Allendale, are not without controversy.

The Michigan Education Association (MEA), the state's largest union of teachers and other school employees, opposes the bills because it believes school districts already have wide latitude with regard to state and federal public school regulations. According to a recent issue of MEA Voice, the MEA's newsletter, "No need has been shown for such blanket exemption from the rules and laws regulating public education. In 1996 the [Michigan] Legislature drastically reduced the rules by adopting a major overhaul of the school code. At that time districts were granted so-called general power, which is defined as the power to do everything deemed appropriate by the district that is not specifically prohibited by law or regulation."

The Ed-Flex enabling bills, passed by the Michigan House in October 2001 and now under consideration in the Senate, would give the state superintendent of public instruction authority to effectively waive some regulatory provisions of federal programs as well as certain state rules.

"This gives the schools all the leverage and flexibility they need," State Rep. Wayne Kuipers, R-Holland, told the Lansing State Journal.

Some opponents argue that Ed-Flex would diminish the Michigan Legislature's authority by giving the state superintendent too much power to grant waivers to regulations.

"Enactment of the measure would potentially relinquish the Legislature's role in setting education policy," State Rep. Rose Bogardus, D-Davison, told the Michigan Information & Research Service (MIRS), a Lansing newsletter covering state politics. "Ultimately, it's like turning over one third of the state budget to someone . . . we don't even know who it will be."

Rep. Mark Schauer, D-Battle Creek, said Ed-Flex is unnecessary. During the

legislative hearings on H.B. 4760 and 4761, he challenged the bills' proponents to provide examples of school districts that have applied for waivers under the current system and been denied. No examples were given, according to MIRS. And no school official could cite any particular requirement his school district would apply to waive using the process that would be established under the Ed-Flex enabling legislation, according to a nonpartisan House legislative analysis.

Ed-Flex in action

Not all federal rules can be waived under Ed-Flex. Regulations under the Civil Rights and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act cannot be waived, nor can any waivers be granted that would undermine the purpose or intent of those laws.

So how does Ed-Flex work in practice?

In Massachusetts, one federal requirement would have made three schools in

Massachusetts no longer eligible for funds under Title I, a federal grant program serving children with learning needs in basic skills. Compliance with the requirement would have eliminated math and science assistance for 300 students. Under Ed-Flex, the schools were allowed to waive the requirement and allow eight teachers to return and continue providing the reading and math services with Title I funds.

Ed-Flex opponents argue that simply shifting authority to grant waivers from the U.S. Department of Education to the state superintendent will do little to improve school quality. Whereas, advocates see Ed-Flex as a way to cut red tape and lower administrative costs.

Report calls for greater union financial disclosure

Proposed law would curb corruption, say experts

New legislation proposed by Rep. Robert Gosselin, R-Troy, would require public-sector unions to obey the same sort of financial disclosure laws as corporations. The legislation was originally proposed in a December 2001 report from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

The report, entitled "The Michigan Union Accountability Act, A Step Toward Accountability and Democracy in Labor Organizations," and authored by Robert Hunter, Paul Kersey, and Shawn Miller, analyzes current union finance laws and concludes that they are too lax, allowing vast potential for misuse of workers' dues dollars.

"There is nothing about unions or their leadership that insulates them from the same sorts of misjudgments and ethical lapses that cause us to monitor the financial dealings of business or government," said Hunter, a former member of the National Labor Relations Board and a current member of the Michigan Civil Service Commission, the four-member body that sets wages, hours, and working conditions for over 61,000 state employees.

The report cites numerous examples of misconduct by union officials, both in the private and public sector, and including examples in Michigan. "The number of abuses is staggering, and Michigan, sadly, is well represented," said Hunter. "The lack of adequate financial reporting makes unions very tempting targets for embezzlement."

The report also reviews information

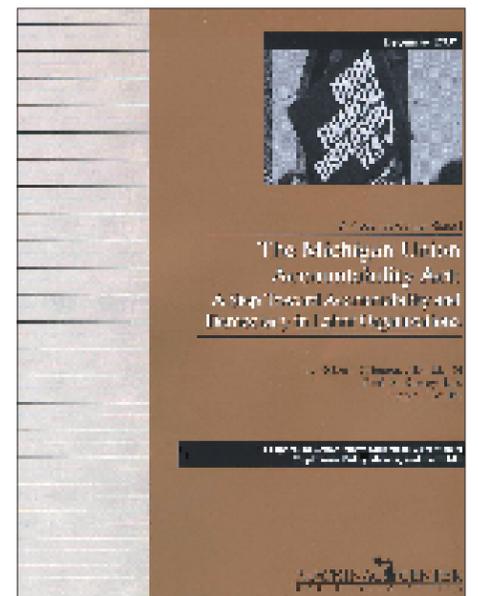
about political activities of various unions, including the Michigan Education Association (MEA).

"This is a critical component of union disclosure, because the Supreme Court has ruled several times that objecting workers are not obligated to pay for union political activity," explained Hunter, "but workers who support the union certainly deserve access to this information as well, so they can gauge the union's effectiveness both at the bargaining table and in the political arena. The irony is that currently the only way workers can receive even a cursory report on this is to resign from the union."

The statute proposed by Hunter, Kersey, and Miller would require government employee unions in Michigan to file annual reports similar to the LM-2 form required from unions representing private-sector workers under federal law, but with critical additions. The Michigan "Union Accountability Act" would also require a breakdown of political spending, including both direct contributions to candidates and "issue advocacy" spending. The report also suggests that reports be drawn up according to financial accounting rules typically used in business and be audited by an independent accounting firm.

Michigan Education Report contacted a spokesman for the Michigan Education Association, but at the time this article was written, the union declined to make a formal statement on the report or the pending legislation.

Hunter is optimistic that the legisla-



Recently released legislation, recommended by a new Mackinac Center for Public Policy study, "The Michigan Union Accountability Act, A Step Toward Accountability and Democracy in Labor Organizations," would require public-sector unions to obey the same sort of financial disclosure laws as corporations.

tion incorporating some of these features, House Bill 5574, will receive serious consideration in the House.

For more information on the legislation, visit www.michiganvotes.org/bill.asp?ID=7326. Or, visit the www.michiganvotes.org home page and enter the bill number.

Quality Counts

continued from page 3

the lowest percentage of total public education employees of any state.

The report gave Michigan a C-minus in resources equity, the category that measures how well states equalize funding across districts.

The National Education Association (NEA), the nation's largest school employee union, praised the report. NEA President Bob Chase called it "an essential roadmap in our journey to helping every child learn" and encouraged schools to model the programs spotlighted in the report.

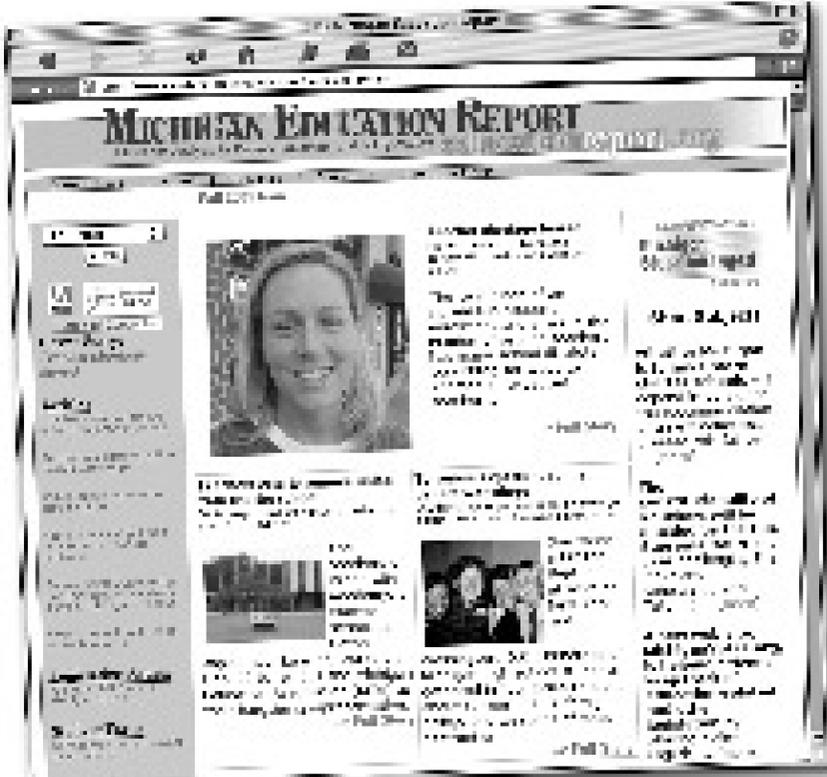
But others believe the report's findings are inaccurate. Dennis Redovich, an educational researcher with the Wisconsin-based Center for the Study of Jobs and Education, said, "[the data in the report] indicate that the methodology used to determine the state rankings and grades is absurdly flawed."

Redovich challenged many of the indicators used in the analysis. "Quality Counts" ranks states based on NAEP test scores, he points out, but not all states require their students to take all the NAEP tests offered.

Redovich also criticized the report for extolling centralized government control over schools. According to Redovich, even though locally controlled schools tend to fare better on achievement tests, the Quality Counts ratings are stacked in favor of more centrally-controlled school systems.

"Quality Counts" evaluates other issues such as parental involvement, school safety, and student engagement. For more information, or to read the entire report, visit www.educationweek.org/spreports/qc02.

Further Resources and Reading
<p>Teacher Certification: Viewpoint on Public Issues, "Must Teachers Be Certified to Be Qualified?" Feb. 1999 www.mackinac.org/1651</p>
<p>Accountability: Mackinac Center for Public Policy, "Setting a Higher Standard of Accountability in Public Education," Nov. 2001 www.mackinac.org/3848</p>
<p>Spending on Non-Instructional Services: Mackinac Center for Public Policy, "WNEM5 Report: Schools and Outsourcing," May 2001 www.mackinac.org/3463</p> <p>Michigan Education Report, "School board member recounts struggle to increase classroom spending," Spring 2001 www.mackinac.org/3413</p>
<p>Testing: Mackinac Center for Public Policy, "How Does the MEAP Measure Up?" December 2001 www.mackinac.org/3919</p>



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COMMENTARY

Graduation rates an imperfect measure of school excellence



Matthew J. Brouillette



Mary F. Gifford

Policy-makers at all levels of government, in an effort to define both “failing schools” and “quality education,” are busily enacting policies that require districts to measure student and school performance. One of the most popular measurements being touted is graduation rates. But there is reason to doubt graduation rates accurately reflect either student proficiency or school excellence.

Using graduation rates as a method of holding schools accountable seems to make sense on the surface. As a recent Wall Street Journal article asked, “How good could a school be if half of its students never graduate?” The federal government is now trying to answer that question: Congress recently passed an education bill that uses graduation rates to help determine whether high schools meet performance goals. Policy-makers are enthusiastic because, unlike test scores nationally, graduation rates are well tracked and on the rise. According to a U.S. Department of Education study, high school graduation rates rose to a record high of 86.5 percent last year.

But before anyone gets too excited, we need to recognize that high school graduation rates have little or nothing to do with educational quality. The reality is that schools could have graduation rates of 100 percent and still have students who can’t add, subtract, read, or write. A December 2001 Standard & Poor’s study compared student achievement on standardized tests against graduation rates in Michigan schools. Eight out of ten students gradu-

ated, yet only six out of ten students scored in the “proficient” category on achievement tests.

The shortcomings of using graduation rates as an indicator of adequate student performance show up in the collegiate and work worlds, as well. A September 2000 study by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy revealed that Michigan businesses and institutions of higher learning spend more than \$600 million per year to compensate for the lack of basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills among high school graduates. These are the minimal skills that young people need to be functional participants in society. Yet the fact is that many high school graduates are getting diplomas without mastering these basic skills.

There are ways, however, to make high school graduation a more meaningful measurement of student performance. Rockford Public Schools in Michigan offers a diploma guarantee. The district backs its diplomas with a “money back” warranty. If a student does not demonstrate a certain level of competency, the district provides for remedial education. In this way, Rockford seeks to ensure its graduation rates are representative of true academic achievement.

Unfortunately, few public school districts are willing to guarantee their diplomas, and Rockford will remain an anomaly as long as public schools remain exempt from the incentives and rewards we use and expect in every other area of our market economy.

Basic economics tells us that high-quality products and services are commonplace where choice and competition exist. If schools understand that they must produce quality results to survive, they will be motivated to improve. This motivation is absent in the current monopolistic setup—a setup whose lack of choices and incentives to improve also prevent us from accurately measuring educational quality.

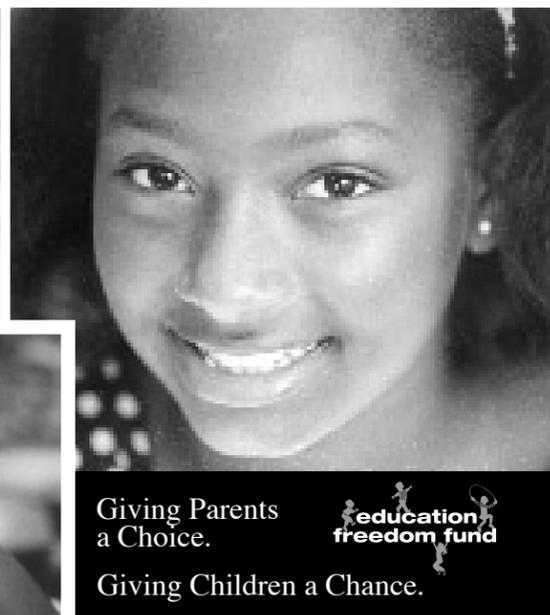
It’s true that a measure of choice and competition does exist in some communi-

ties in Michigan. But such benefits are strictly limited to families who possess the financial wherewithal to move into the “right” neighborhood or pay tuition at an alternative school. The greater tragedy, however, is that children in poor, urban communities are trapped in a one-size-fits-all system with few opportunities of escape and even less hope for the future.

The key to keeping our promises to the children of Michigan is returning to parents the ability to choose their children’s schools among many competing educational options. Until then, graduation rates—and other statistics that flow from

state agencies—will continue to conceal underlying failure and deceive too many parents into believing their children are doing well.

Matthew J. Brouillette is president of the Commonwealth Foundation in Harrisburg, Penn., and former director of education policy with the Midland, Mich.-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and educational institute. Mary F. Gifford is director of leadership development with the Mackinac Center.



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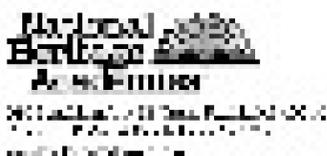
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What teacher shortage?



Chester E. Finn, Jr.

Education issues aren't foremost in our minds today, but I will note that the K-12 concern that reached my ears most frequently in recent months is the vaunted "teacher shortage" that our schools are said to face. As summer vacation ended, the press was

full of accounts of extraordinary measures that public school systems were taking to ensure that their classrooms would have enough adults ready to receive the children. Teachers were imported from India and Austria. "Emergency" certificates were given to all sorts of people who had never taught before. Signing bonuses were paid to individual teachers—and sometimes finders' fees handed to the agencies that located them. Substitute teachers were readied for full-time classroom duty. And so forth.

Surely, the journalists said, this sort of thing will only worsen in coming years—and would I please confirm that? After all, doesn't America need to hire two million—or was it three million—new teachers in the next decade? I believe I was being invited to say that the only possible way to forestall this crisis would be to dump zillions of dollars into salaries, crash training programs, and suchlike.

Talk about old-paradigm thinking! The most striking thing about the U.S. teacher "shortage" is the extent to which it

has mostly been induced by rules, customs, and practices that could be changed with a flick of the policy-makers' wrists. But instead of changing the rules, we proclaim a crisis. One senses that some groups see their interests advanced by this.

Almost everyone who has looked at the "teacher shortage" has noticed that it's spotty, not universal. It's concentrated in certain subjects (e.g., math, science, special ed), in certain kinds of communities (inner cities, rural towns), and in certain parts of the country (sun-belt states with rapid enrollment increases and those that are swelling their teacher ranks as part of a class-size reduction strategy).

Many states still train far more teachers than their schools can hire. (A 1999 Pennsylvania study found one state producing 20,000 newly certified teachers annually even though it had just 5,100 teacher openings per year.) Communities with static and shrinking enrollments face few shortages. Cushy suburbs in major metropolitan areas have plenty of applicants for nearly every classroom position. So do most charter and private schools—which are free to hire almost anyone they like. And it's common knowledge that the United States contains a vast "reserve pool" of teachers, people who trained for this occupation, or formerly engaged in it, but who for various reasons are not teaching today. In fact, most "new hires" in American schools are not freshly minted teachers bounding out of their preparation program. A third of them are former teachers returning to the profession while another quarter are

teachers who prepared to teach at some earlier time but put it off.

Why are some schools having trouble finding enough grown-ups for their classrooms while others are awash in applicants? Look to the education field's bizarre policies and practices. Look, in particular, at four common practices that make precious little sense:

- **Uniform salary schedules.** It's crazy to pay the same salaries to people in high-demand subjects (e.g., high school science and math) as to those in high-supply fields (e.g., middle school social studies). It's insane to pay teachers in tough schools and challenging assignments the same as those in pleasant, low-risk settings. It's nuts to give identical compensation to outstanding and inept teachers, to hard workers and clock-watchers. Yet we do all those things in public education. If instead we developed a rational, market-sensitive compensation system for educators, shortages would wither.

- **Certification.** Today we make the public school teaching force pass through the eye of the state-certification needle. Yet private and charter schools don't do that, nor do colleges and universities. Though there's mounting evidence that traditional certification has little bearing on classroom effectiveness, we still require it—and the ed-school-based training that is its universal prerequisite. There's also mounting evidence that people who lack traditional certification—such as those in the Teach

for America program—can be as effective as those with it, yet we're stingy with these alternate pathways into the classroom and grudging toward people who follow them. In most places, they must still take the Mickey-Mouse courses, though they may have longer in which to do so.

- **Personnel management.** In most communities, those running public schools—their principals—have little say over who teaches in them. Due to seniority systems, bumping rights, union contracts, and centralized personnel offices, the principal has scant control over who is assigned to his school, who leaves, how much they're paid, how to reward excellence, and how to cope with incompetence. No effective modern organization operates this way. It's a holdover from old-style industrial management and government civil-service procedures. But industry and government are moving beyond it. Only the public schools remain mired in it.

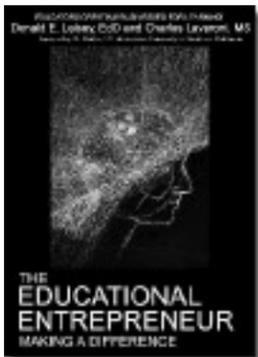
- **People and capital.** Whenever a school system has a spare dollar, it usually spends all one hundred cents on teacher salaries. It almost never looks seriously at alternatives—at completely different ways of structuring schools (e.g., a few master teachers working with a large number of aides and tutors) or other education delivery systems (e.g., technology) that might boost productivity and effectiveness. So nothing changes. And "shortages" are proclaimed.

It's no bad thing to import well-educated people from other lands to teach young Americans. In this, public education is following the lead of Silicon Valley, which looked overseas when it couldn't find enough U.S. workers with the proper knowledge and skills. But we wouldn't have to do this if we made these few (albeit profound) policy changes. Our shortages would melt away. Our schools would improve. Our children would learn more. And our teachers would get better, thus easing our quality problem at the same time we met the quantity challenge.

Chester E. Finn, Jr. is John M. Olin Fellow at the Manhattan Institute and president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (www.edexcellence.net), of which he is also a trustee. From 1985 to 1988, he served as Assistant Secretary for Research and Improvement and Counselor to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education. This article originally appeared in *Education Gadfly*, a weekly Internet education news and analysis bulletin.

The Educational Entrepreneur: Making A Difference

By Donald E. Leisey, EdD, and Charles Lavaroni, MS



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COMMENTARY

Fix Michigan Schools with Proposal A+



Lawrence W. Reed



Peter Hoekstra

When Michigan voters overwhelmingly approved the school finance constitutional amendment known as Proposal A in 1994, they thought they were going to get several important things: a sales tax hike in exchange for significant property tax relief, less disparity in spending among school districts and substantially more per-pupil funding.

The plan has delivered on those promises, but there's a rising chorus for giving school districts renewed authority to seek higher local property taxes. For schools that need extra money and can make a good case for it, there's a much better way than undoing what the voters endorsed seven years ago. We would like to suggest the broad outlines of what should become known as "Proposal A+."

First, it's important to take account of just how much Proposal A has accomplished for Michigan. Prior to 1994, our property tax burden was 35 percent above the national average and driving residents and businesses elsewhere. Today, that burden is much closer to the national average and one of the reasons for the state's impressive economic progress of recent years.

Proposal A has been good news for schools, too. Since 1994, the minimum per-pupil foundation allowance that school districts are guaranteed by the state has risen almost 43 percent, two and a half times the inflation rate. In 1993-94, the 10 lowest-spending districts spent \$3,476 per pupil while the top 10 spent \$9,726. Today, the lowest 10 spend almost twice as

much—\$6,500—and the highest 10 spend \$11,189. Even the National Education Association admits that Michigan outspends 43 other states, per-pupil.

One report based on Michigan Treasury Department figures claims that during the past five years, Proposal A generated \$58 billion for Michigan schools compared with \$60 billion if the former finance formulas had remained in place, "short-changing" schools by \$2 billion. But those numbers assume that extracting an additional \$2 billion from the Michigan economy would have had no impact on economic growth, that voters would have approved further millage hikes and that the courts would not have ordered some new finance structure to address equity issues. All are heroic if not impossible assumptions.

We know that paperwork, reporting requirements and special education costs that Michigan schools are forced to bear are among the highest in the country and ought to be reduced. We also know that school districts could get more bang for the taxpayer buck if they engaged in more competitive contracting for ancillary services and weren't encumbered by so many costly union rules and government mandates. Exempting school construction from the state's onerous Prevailing Wage Act, as Ohio did in 1997, would save the state's schools, by some estimates, a minimum of \$150 million per year alone.

Nonetheless, if there are schools that can't or don't want to effect cost savings to improve their bottom lines and can make a convincing case that they need more money to do their job, they could do so under our Proposal A+. This is not another tax hike opportunity. Rather, it's a chance to encourage greater financial support on a voluntary basis for all schools, public and private, at the same time.

The proposal would amend the Michigan Constitution to allow a "universal" tax credit for educational expenses and for contributions to scholarship funds. The credit could be claimed by parents, friends,

family members and even businesses against such levies as the state's personal income tax, 6-mill statewide property tax and the Single Business Tax.

The maximum credit need not be high. Arizona's \$500 tax credit has generated tens of millions of dollars in scholarship funds for students from low-income families, and millions more for use in the public schools.

Our Proposal A+ plan would apply toward contributions to public as well as private schools. It would mean that public schools would not have to mount expensive and uncertain ballot efforts to get voter approval for a tax increase. If they made their case persuasively, they could entice individuals and businesses to make voluntary contributions. Up to the maximum credit allowed, those contributions would not cost the donor a penny, and nobody's taxes would increase as a result of it.

By allowing even a small tax credit for private education, our proposal would strengthen local influence in the financial investment in our children's education. That's good for everybody, and it's only fair. Parents who choose private options, particularly low-income parents in our inner cities, are often securing excellent educations for their children at a savings to the taxpayer and at great sacrifice of their own resources. They deserve a break. Parents who want to help their local public schools will also have the opportunity to do so.

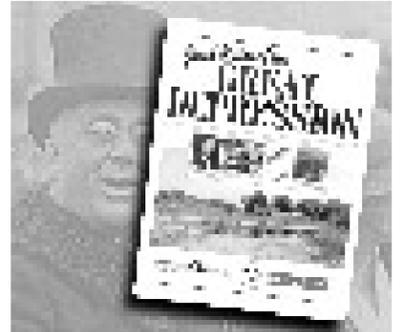
Proposal A+ is not a voucher. Voters spoke convincingly and finally on that question in defeating a voucher plan in November 2000. The much more palatable and familiar vehicle of a tax credit would encourage contributions to schools, public and private, that make the best case that their fellow citizens should do more to support education.

Large numbers of Michiganians don't want higher taxes. But some of them want more money for education, and most of them support the concepts of fairness,

choice, accountability and local control. Our Proposal A+ is a starting point for a discussion that could lead to a clear win for all concerned.

Republican Congressman Peter Hoekstra represents Michigan's 2nd District in the U.S. House of Representatives. Lawrence Reed is president of the Midland, Mich.-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and educational institute. The preceding article originally appeared in The Detroit News Dec. 7, 2001.

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Diverse Viewpoints

Can the current public education system reform to serve all students, even children it now “leaves behind?”

The only solution for children left behind is school choice

Competition leaves no child behind.

“Anything that siphons money or students from public schools must be opposed because it hurts the students left behind.” That may be the most persuasive-sounding argument advanced by school-choice critics.

So far, though, real life is teaching a different lesson.

In fact, communities that have embraced choice options—vouchers, tuition tax credits, charter schools, etc.—have found that competition doesn’t hurt public schools. Indeed, it actually helps them.

Take Florida. Since 1998, its elementary and secondary schools have been graded on the basis of an achievement test known as the FCAT. If a school receives an F for two straight years, the state offers vouchers to enable students at those schools to attend private schools or lets them leave for other public schools. Only two schools in the entire state have received two straight Fs and seen their students offered vouchers.

FCAT scores are used to evaluate school effectiveness in teaching reading, writing and math. And in all three areas, schools that made Fs one year—and thus were in danger of having vouchers offered to their students—showed more improvement the next year than schools that made any other grade. The differences, in fact, were remarkable.

On the reading test, schools that received an A, B or C grade improved from two to five points between 1999 and 2000. But schools that received an F improved nearly 18 points. The math and writing tests showed similar results.

It can be argued that scores for the F schools rose so much because they had the most room for improvement. Researchers investigated this by comparing the lowest-scoring D schools with the highest-scoring F schools. Low-D schools and high-F schools have much in common and likely would face similar challenges to improving, but the F schools face the considerable additional pressure of having their students “lured away” with state-sponsored vouchers.

And the pressure worked. The high-F schools improved by considerably more than the low-D schools on all three parts of the test.

In short, competition—or, more directly, the threat of students taking their vouchers to neighboring private schools—truly can turn around low-performing schools.

In Milwaukee, several officials—from the mayor to the school superintendent—say a voucher program that serves 10,000 students of low- or middle-income families has helped its 100,000-student school system to improve. A top researcher on the economics of education, Caroline Hoxby of Harvard University, recently released a study that backs them up.

At public elementary schools in Milwaukee where many students are eligible for vouchers, performance improved faster than at public schools where relatively few students could get vouchers, Hoxby found. In fact, the more voucher-eligible students schools had, the more they improved. Both groups of Milwaukee schools did better than a control group of schools outside Milwaukee, where no students were eligible for vouchers.

Critics charge that Hoxby’s study didn’t prove the voucher program caused schools to improve, only that they improved after the voucher program began. They point out that lower-performing schools have more room to improve. Hoxby agreed but asked why had they not begun to improve before the voucher program began.

The threat of competition, she said, tends to help those “who want to do the right thing” at the expense of “those who have other agendas.”

The Milwaukee program has benefited from strong community support. Not only have the mayor and school superintendent embraced it, the editors of the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* and other opinion leaders have come on board as well. As a result, public schools there have warmed to the challenge of retaining their students. The school district runs TV ads, and individual schools have tried everything from open houses to chili dinners to attract students. Officials like to say they operate in a free-market education economy.

Thanks in part to school choice, “we’re all feeling the pinch to make sure that people understand what our programs offer and, certainly, that we’re competitive,” Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Spence Korte told the newspaper.

Success stories abound. Charter schools in Arizona and elsewhere have goaded the public schools around them into offering a better education. In Cleveland, where 4,000 low-income kids attend private schools on vouchers, their former public schools also have shown improvement.

It’s time detractors realize that competition is not the enemy. Ask the folks in Florida or Milwaukee. Competition helps.

Thomas Dawson is a former education research fellow at The Heritage Foundation (www.heritage.org), a Washington-based public policy institute. He currently works for the U.S. Department of Education. This article was originally distributed by Scripps-Howard News Wire.



Thomas Dawson

NO



Stacy Mitchell

YES

The answer is smaller schools

Higher graduation rates, less violence, a sense of belonging instead of alienation: the case for small schools is supported by mountains of evidence and a growing number of innovative models. But many state and local governments persist in consolidation efforts, fueled by a misguided belief in the effectiveness of giant schools.

Since the late 1950s, state and local governments have aggressively closed small schools, herding kids into larger facilities. Between 1940 and 1990, the number of elementary and secondary schools decreased from 200,000 to 62,000, despite a 70 percent rise in U.S. population. Average enrollments skyrocketed from 127 to 653.

The trend toward giantism continues. The number of high schools with more than 1,500 students doubled in the last decade. Two-fifths of the nation’s secondary schools now enroll more than 1,000 students. Some schools have as many as 5,000 students and enrollments of 2,000 or 3,000 are common.

Yet, today, riding on a wave of real-world success and a mountain of empirical evidence, a full-fledged small-schools movement has emerged. It’s transforming public education in several big cities and, in rural areas, reinvigorating a long-standing fight to wrest local schools from the jaws of consolidation.

Many teachers and researchers believe that school size is second only to financial resources in the success of public schools. In her 1999 review of school size studies, Mary Anne Raywid of Hofstra University [New York] writes that the relationship between size and positive educational outcomes has been “confirmed with a clarity and at a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research.”

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s report, *Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools: 1996-97*, more than half of small-school principals report either no discipline or minor discipline problems, compared to only 14 percent of big-school principals. Schools of 1,000 or more students experience 825 percent more violent crime, 270 percent more vandalism and 1,000 percent more weapons incidents, compared to those with fewer than 300 students.

Students in small schools have higher attendance and graduation rates, participate more in extracurricular activities, and perform at or above the academic level of students at large schools.

In 1996, Kathleen Cotton, a research specialist with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, in Portland, Oregon reviewed the results of over 100 studies on school size and concluded, “Student achievement in small schools is at least equal and often superior to achievement in large schools.” Academic measures included grades, test scores, honor roll enrollment, subject-area achievement, and higher-order thinking skills.

Small school students are also more likely to go on to college. A Nebraska study found that 73 percent of students in districts with fewer than 70 high school students enrolled in a post-secondary institution, compared to 64 percent of those in districts of 600 to 999 high school students. These findings hold even when other variables, such as student attributes or staff characteristics, are taken into account.

Perhaps most important of all, small schools narrow the achievement gap between poor children and their more affluent classmates. According to a four-state study released in 2000, small schools substantially reduce the damaging impact poverty has on student learning. Researchers Craig Howley of Ohio University and Robert Bickel of Marshall University found that poor children who attend small schools have significantly higher test scores than those who attend large schools.

New small schools have been launched or are in the works in cities across the nation. In Boston, the teachers’ union and school district have worked together to launch several successful small schools. Chicago’s Board of Education has contracted with the nonprofit Small Schools Workshop to decentralize its large schools. In Oakland, [California] the Board of Education will soon adopt a policy creating 10 small schools, and wants to create more in the future.

The movement is beginning to catch the attention of national and state policymakers. The federal government now provides small grants to districts seeking to restructure large high schools by breaking them into smaller learning communities or autonomous schools housed within the same building. More importantly, some states are moving to rewrite school funding and facilities policies that currently favor and even mandate large schools.

As work continues to improve urban schools, mountains of evidence and real-world success suggest that reversing the trend toward bigger schools ought to be our top priority.

Stacy Mitchell is author of The Home Town Advantage and a researcher with the New Rules Project (www.newrules.org) of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. This article originally appeared in The New Rules journal and may be viewed at <http://www.newrules.org/journal/nrsum00schools.htm>.

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

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