MEA employee salaries’ well above teachers’
Highly paid union officials oppose cost-saving measures for schools

Many Michigan Education Association employees are earning salaries more than twice as high as the average teacher, according to recently released U.S. Department of Labor data. The information, part of an annual report labor organizations are required to file with the U.S. Department of Labor, revealed that 125 staffers of Michigan’s largest school employee labor union received salaries and disbursements of over $90,000 from September 1999 to August 2000. The average Michigan teacher salary is $48,695. Executive Director Charles Anderson was the union’s highest paid employee, receiving $173,691 and over $50,000 in additional funding from the Michigan Public School Retirement System. Some of the funds are set aside for personal travel and a vehicle. The MEA disclosed that it spent nearly $11.7 million to maintain over the next five years.

Established schools convert to public school academies
For-profit companies now routinely provide to school districts food, transportation, janitorial, and other services—creating opportunities for schools, some of which were formerly private. But sometimes the trend works in reverse, such as when private schools convert to tax-funded public school academies, or charter schools. According to the Michigan Association of Public School Academies, nearly 13 percent of Michigan’s 186 charter schools converted from existing schools, some of which were formerly private.

Proposed federal rules could force changes in MEAP
State officials look at better ways to boost achievement, accountability

The state of Michigan likely would have to change how it tests public school students if legislation including new federal testing requirements passes Congress and is signed by President Bush.

The legislation, intended to promote greater school accountability by tracking student achievement, is in a joint committee, where legislators are working to reconcile differing versions approved by the Senate and House earlier this year.

Currently, Michigan students participate in Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) testing in the fourth, fifth, seventh, eighth, and 11th grades. The state-mandated tests are intended to ascertain how well students have learned the state-established curriculum in the areas of math, science, reading, and writing.

Revisiting the present system to conform to whatever new federal mandates, if any, are passed might be a monumental task, but some officials see it as an opportunity to better link testing and accountability.

On July 19, William Sanders, a Tennessee educator and researcher, met with Michigan State Superintendent Tom Watkins and members of the State Board of Education to explain a new method for improving accountability called “value-added assessment.”

Although forty percent of NEA members identify themselves as Republicans and Independents, more than 95 percent of NEA-PAC spending went to Democrats in the 2000 election cycle. Green Party members have received nearly $1,000 in contributions from NEA-PAC members since 1999.

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MEA SALARIES continued on page 2

MEPA CHANGES continued on page 4

Education at a Glance

NEA Political Spending Compared to Teachers’ Views

Political Contributions to Candidates from NEA-PAC (2000)

Although over fifty percent of NEA members identify themselves as Republicans and Independents, more than 95 percent of NEA-PAC spending went to Democrats in the 2000 election cycle.

Source: Federal Election Commission, National Education Association, Education Intelligence Agency, The Nielsen Group, Educational Policy Institute

Democratic
Republican
Independent

IND 28%
DEM 48%
REP 24%
IND .24%
DEM 95.18%

IND 28%
DEM 48%
REP 24%
IND .24%
DEM 95.18%
The union doesn’t see it that way. “Do we understand we’re well paid, and we have to earn every bit of it?” MEA Director of Communications Margaret Timmer-Hartley told the Lansing Gran Rapids Press. “We bet. The folks who work here are highly dedicated people. They’re very dedicated.”

MEA officials are also dedicated to ensuring that related school-union processes are performed only by dues-paying union members, and that MEA opposition, many districts have “outsourced” — contract out to private companies — non-educational functions such as busing, food service, and custodial work, reaping savings that in turn can be applied to classroom instruction, including increased teacher salaries. The union with its custodial work, food service, and safety, and mailing functions.

In addition to an annual revenue of $58.2 million, the union holds more than $32.6 million in net assets.

Some critics are charging the labor union with hypocrisy for taking money out of teachers’ more modest salaries in order to generally compensate the union officials.

Tom Shields, a Republican political consultant in Lansing, told the Grand Rapids Press, “The (MEA) guys plead poverty, and they say they represent the middle class then you see they’re all living high on the hog. There’s nobody making any sacrifices there.”

**Illegal Union Political Spending**

Washington state’s largest school-union employee union was fined $400,000 recently for illegally spending some school employee union funds on political campaigns.

The fine, levied against the Washington Education Association (WEA), is the final outcome of a compromise in a battery of lawsuits filed last year by the Evergreen Freedom Foundation, a public policy organization based in Olympia.

Evergreen accused the WEA of illegally using “agency fees,” compulsory fees paid by employees who are not union members but who still must pay for union representation, to fund its political activities. A Washington law requires employees to obtain permission from their employer before using agency-fee payers’ funds for political purposes.

The state Public Disclosure Commission found the WEA guilty of violating this law in May 2000. “The case was referred to the state Attorney General for penalties to be levied,” the WEA said.

Last year, the Landmark Legal Foundation, a nonprofit legal organization based in Virginia, filed a separate complaint against the National Education Association (NEA). Landmark filed complaints with the Internal Revenue Service and Federal Election Commission, claiming the NEA’s “spending substantial fees to the general operating funds on political activities, which it has not reported on its tax return for the last several years.”

For more information on becoming an agency-fee payers or on illegal activities of school-union employees, visit the following sites: www.mackinac.org/mea/revfund.htm www.landmarklegal.org www.efwfa.org

**Charter Schools**

Academy says it strives to maintain academic excellence and correct problems. Recent MEA studies show that Woodland Park students placing in the “low” category tend to perform in the past.

Charters have the advantages in enrollment and student composition. Teachers in a charter school. Woodland’s student enrollment has sharply declined in the first few years as a charter school. The student population expanded to include more students with special educational needs.

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Winendorf High School in Midland is one of the 24 charter schools in Michigan that were converted from private or traditional public schools.
Thousands of students switch public schools under choice law
But programs let districts do the choosing

In 1996, the state of Michigan made it easier for parents to choose their child’s school from among those in their own and neighboring public school districts. Previously, parents wanting to send their children to schools other than their assigned district school were typically forced to obtain permission from the assigned district in order to be able paying tuition to the desired district.

For participating districts, the law now allows students to attend public schools in the same local district, to public schools in the same intermediate school district, or to public schools in contiguous intermediate districts without paying tuition, provided the desired district has space.

The number of students exercising public school choice is increasing; however, the number involved in the school-choice program is limited because districts control whether or not they participate. Although the law doesn’t explicitly limit the number of students who can leave a district to attend schools outside their district boundaries, the average public school districts often strictly limit the number of students they enroll from outside neighborhoods. Intermediate school districts may “opt out” of certain provisions in the state’s public school choice plan and create their own choice programs that are actually aimed at curtailing the level of choice. Although the law encourages more choice than ever, choice remains elusive for many students.

According to the Michigan Department of Education, 283 out of 554 districts participate in Michigan’s state schools-of-choice plan, and another 165 districts have adopted their own plans, offering very limited forms of choice. More than 100 districts do not permit choice. Overall, the number of students participating statewide in the choice program has grown from 5,611 in the 1996-1997 school year to 20,025 in 2000-2001, a small percentage of the 1.7 million K-12 public school population in Michigan.

Districts such as the Genesee and Kent Intermediate School Districts have created their own choice programs, allowing very few students to choose the school in which they are enrolled. The programs allow students assigned to districts to deny or grant permission each year for that student to attend their assigned district’s or their school-of-choice. A report by the Flint Journal stated that in Genesee County these restrictions allowed only 2 percent of the district’s students to switch schools using the choice program. Kent permits even less choice.

In May, New Jersey’s Bret Schundler, the first Republican mayor of Jersey City in 75 years, recently won his party’s nomination for the upcoming gubernatorial race. In a city where only 6 percent of registered voters are Republican, Schundler has won re-election three times running on platforms of lower taxes and school choice. He advocates for more charter schools and education tax credits.

In Michigan, state tax credits for K-12 educational purposes are expressly prohibited by the Michigan Constitution. This could only be changed through a statewide referendum or initiative.

National attention to the tax-credit idea is growing. Last year, a study from the Washington, D.C.-based Cato Institute, co-authored by Michigan-based Mackinac Center Public Policy Director of Education Policy Matthew Brouillette, explained the benefits of expanding school choice through education tax credits.

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But programs let districts do the choosing

In May, U.S. Rep. Pete Hoekstra, R-Mich., introduced federal legislation modeled after the Arizona program and a tax credit plan designed by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in 1997. Hoekstra’s legislation was crafted to provide individuals and corporations with a 75-percent tax credit on money given to private or public schools. Individuals could donate as much as $500 and corporations up to $100,000.

In addition, the American Legislative Exchange Council, a bipartisan association of state legislators, adopted in August a tax credit resolution to encourage state governments to draft tax credit legislation.

And recently, two gubernatorial candidates in New Jersey and Virginia won their party’s nominations running on platforms that include education tax credits.

Virginia Attorney General and Republican gubernatorial candidate Mark Earley spent his years in the state Senate and his campaign for the upcoming gubernatorial race. In a city where only 6 percent of registered voters are Republican, Schundler has won re-election three times running on platforms of lower taxes and school choice. He advocates for more charter schools and education tax credits.

Schundler recently asked in the Wall Street Journal, “Tell me how keeping poor kids trapped in schools that consistently won’t reform helps society?”

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State to Recently Consider or Enact K-12 Education Tax Credit Legislation*

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*Iowa passed tax credit legislation in 1989

Momentum shifts toward education tax credits

Credits replace vouchers as preferred vehicle for school choice

After Michigan and California voters last year resoundingly rejected two high-profile school voucher proposals, education tax credits are supplanting vouchers as the preferred vehicle to expand educational opportunities for children across the country.

In recent years, 12 states have considered, and six have passed into law, some form of education tax credit. Arizona’s program is the largest in the country, having provided more than 18,000 scholarships worth over $31 million to low-income students since 1998. Earlier this year, Pennsylvania and Florida enacted credits for businesses that want to help pay tuition for students to attend either par or private schools.

In May, U.S. Rep. Pete Hoekstra, R-Mich., introduced federal legislation modeled after the Arizona program and a tax credit plan designed by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in 1997. Hoekstra’s legislation was crafted to provide individuals and corporations with a 75-percent tax credit on money given to private or public schools. Individuals could donate as much as $500 and corporations up to $100,000.

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Corporations donate millions for public school programs

Critics decry growing trend of “commercialism” in schools

Seeking corporate donations has become increasingly popular as an alternative way for school districts to raise money for additional programs and activities that are not covered by their regular, publicly-funded budgets.

In a recent article examining the issue of school commercialism, the Detroit News reported that Detroit Public Schools, which serves approximately 150,000 students, received $8 million in corporate and individual donations during the 1999-2000 school year. Though that may seem like a large amount of money, Detroit hasn’t stretched the surface of what financial contributions, particularly corporate donations, could provide.

For example, Chicago Public Schools, with nearly three times the enrollment of Detroit Public Schools, received $8 million in corporate and individual donations during the 1999-2000 school year—35 times more than Detroit, according to the Detroit News. In addition, a 33,000-student district formerly run by current Detroit Public Schools Chief Executive Officer Kenneth Burnlee, raises approximately $1.5 million a year and spends most of its extra money on reading and writing programs.

Arguing for increased corporate involvement in education, former president of the Plymouth-Canton school board, Mark Horvath, told the News, “It is time we utilize businesses as a revenue source. Why are businesses giving money to public schools in addition to the taxes they already pay? It’s a win-win situation.”

Traditional public schools are not the only educational institutions taking advantage of opportunities to involve local businesses in the education process. The Plymouth Educational Center, a charter school in Detroit, is seeking business partners to help finish a new $8 million facility and help fund other improvements. Executive director Vivian Ross says the school’s largest donors are foundations and other nonprofit organizations, but that local, private enterprises are becoming increasingly interested in funding her school.

Corporations also offer myriad programs to students, such as internships, summer camps, and work opportunities. One notable program, in Michigan’s Southfield High School, allows students to operate an in-school Kinko’s copy and office-supply store instead of a school-run enterprise. The store serves students, teachers, administrators, and community members while providing work experience and training in office management, printing and design and giving Kinko’s a chance to advertise its services to the community.

Echoing Rokita, Margaret Holcomb, business partnership director for the Southfield district, agrees, “It’s a win-win situation.”

But not everyone sees it that way. A growing number of parents and other critics are concerned that corporations see school children as simply another market to be conquered and that by allowing advertisers free reign in the school environment, America may turn out a cadre of “consumer cadets” little interested in intellectual pursuits.

Almost as if to confirm critics’ worst fears, groups like Lifetime Learning Systems, a company that specializes in business/school partnerships, markets its services to businesses with brochures explaining that, “Through these materials, your product or service will be featured and recognized in exciting educational programs.”

Corporate sponsorships in the school system are expected to the children and wrong. Not only is it unethical, but it is wrong to subject kids to commercialism in an educational environment.” And in a recent editorial, nationally syndicated columnist George Will wrote, “schools are becoming case studies in the commodification of everything.”

However, as long as school districts struggle with ways to pay for ever-more expensive programs, it is likely that partnerships between businesses and schools will expand. The debate over whether this is good or bad for education is sure to intensify as districts seek more funding through corporate contracts and donations, and businesses seek the positive community image such activity engenders.

MEAP Changes

continued from page 1

added assessment

The added assessment creates the opportunity to track student achievement, as expressed by test results, on an annual basis as classroom trends in teaching and learning over time.

The single biggest factor affecting students in the classroom is the teacher,” says Sanders, who manages a company. Value-added Assessment and Research. According to his research, the residual effects of a teacher on a student can be seen up to four years after that student leaves the classroom. These effects, along with student gains in performance, can be traced using value-added assessment.

The goal of value-added assessment is to measure academic growth for all students. “A minimal expectation is for each kid to make at least a year’s gain in a year’s time,” says Sanders. The proposed federal testing requirements may help Michigan schools assess and monitor trends in teaching and learning according to the value-added assessment model, something that is not possible under the existing MEAP system.

Currently, Michigan’s MEAP test is not designed to measure student-level yearly gains. It assesses students in certain grades and does not track individual students over time. Michigan’s testing plan was two years behind schedule before a value-added assessment system could be implemented.

There are two major challenges with using the MEAP for value-added assessment. First, MEAP is a criterion-referenced test, meaning the test measures specific content information as determined by the state and/or curriculum. Second, the testing pattern with MEAP tests make it impossible to measure yearly student academic growth. Students are not followed year-to-year, school-to-school, to track academic progress.

According to Sanders, value-added programs work best with year-to-year testing using norm-referenced tests, which compare an individual student’s results against the total results for a group of students. Norm-referenced test scores are often designed to produce results that can be illustrated by a bell curve with the highest percentage of students placing in the middle. Most large-scale national exams such as the ACT are examples of norm-referenced tests.

Sanders explains that yearly student-level testing would provide more information on Michigan’s educational system and could aid in school improvement and accountability efforts. The best insurance policy is to test each kid, each year in all subjects,” he says. Some school officials say a plan to create a student-level testing program has been on the back burner for some time. Given the increased emphasis on school accountability and standardized testing at the federal level, the state may be forced to implement a new assessment program in the near future.

One of the primary criticisms of commercialism, the Center for Commercial Free Education, a national non-profit based in Oakland, Calif., says its purpose is to “provide support to students, parents, teachers and other concerned citizens organizing across the United States to keep their schools commercial-free and community-controlled.” The center offers a number of community action and youth programs to discourage the use of commercial contracts and advertising in schools around the country.

Some school districts also are speaking out against commercialism. In June 1999, the San Francisco school board voted to prohibit the use of textbooks and other instructional material that mention brand names. The board also banned exclusive beverage contracts, saying the agreements could imply that the schools endorsed certain products.

Bill McMaster, Michigan chairman of Taxpayers United, agreed with the board’s actions, telling The Detroit News that, “Corporate sponsorships in the school system are exploitive of the children and wrong. Not only is it unethical, but it is wrong to subject kids to commercialism in an educational environment.” And in a recent editorial, nationally syndicated columnist George Will wrote, “schools are becoming case studies in the commodification of everything.”

However, as long as school districts struggle with ways to pay for ever-more expensive programs, it is likely that partnerships between businesses and schools will expand. The debate over whether this is good or bad for education is sure to intensify as districts seek more funding through corporate contracts and donations, and businesses seek the positive community image such activity engenders.
Home-schoolers turn to public schools for support

Families split on extracurricular participation

Rebecca Stephens loves music. But the 14-year-old home-school student’s parents didn’t have the expensive equipment necessary to develop their daughter’s knowledge and love of her favorite subject.

So the Stephens, taxpayers in their school district, turned to their local public education system for help. For the past three years Rebecca has been able to participate in the Bullock Creek Public Schools music program.

Rebecca has played in the Bullock Creek band at various levels. She began in the fifth-grade band, but due to her previous experience playing the piano, she was able to proceed directly to the eighth-grade band. Last year, while still in eighth grade, she even played with the varsity band.

How did the district react to taking on the home-schooler?

“Everyone at the school was very warm and accommodating,” Rebecca’s mother, Susan, recalls. She says when she approached Bullock Creek officials, they were completely open to working with the family’s schedule and required no records or exams to be presented in order for Rebecca to participate in the school. The school was even willing to fill out a report card every marking period on Rebecca’s progress.

Rebecca will not continue in Bullock Creek’s band next year, due to her involvement in other activities, but is grateful for the opportunity that the district provided her with.

Rebecca is one of a growing number of home-schoolers in Michigan who are taking advantage of their local public school’s extracurricular programs and non-core classes including foreign language, art, and, of course, music.

Margaret Lee, assistant principal at Herbert H. Dow High School in Midland, said her school is open to home-schoolers participating in non-core classes and has had several students participate in the past. Dow has only one requirement: that participating home-school students reside within the boundaries of the Midland Public School District.

More charter schools in Michigan?

The number of university-chartered schools in Michigan would gradually increase over the next few years under legislation introduced in the State House in May.

The legislation, sponsored by Rep. Wayne Kuipers, R-Holland, is similar to the one that stalled in the House last year. The plan would number the charters schools by 15 this year, lift the current cap of 100 on university-sponsored schools. The legislation would allow the cap to increase to 200 by this year, with an increase of 50 more in 2002 and 40 in 2003.

Observers say the bill would also increase the number of rules and regulations that current and future charter schools face. “We support choice, not more regulation,” says Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Superintendents.

The House may debate the bill in the fall.

Defining and improving “failing” schools

Also in May, legislation to define what constitutes a “failing” school district—a definition that will trigger measures such as hiring consultants or management companies, was introduced in the Michigan Senate Education Committee.

The package of bills, now headed to the full Senate for review, would define “priority schools” as the bottom 5 percent of schools as ranked by test scores, free lunch eligibility, dropout rates, graduation rates, and percentage of students testing at grade level. Under the legislation, failing schools would be evaluated on their academics, management, and fiscal stability, and to follow an improvement plan created by a State Education Improvement Board. The board would consist of chairpersons of the Michigan Association of Public School Superintendents, the Michigan Education Association, and the Michigan Association of Public School Administrators.

One factor currently keeping home-schoolers off most public school sports teams is the eligibility rules of the Michigan High School Athletic Association. Jack Roberts, the MHSAA’s executive director, told The Detroit News that the MHSAA’s rules do not expressly prohibit home-schoolers from participating, but there are “certain eligibility rules and standards that need to be met by all high school students, public, private and otherwise.”

Requiring 20 credit hours a semester, not having been enrolled in more than eight semesters, and not changing schools within a month involvement. These rules make it difficult for some home-schoolers to prove their eligibility.

But not all home-schooling families are eager for their children to participate in the public school’s extracurricular activities. In 1999, a survey of state home-school association presidents conducted by the Home School Legal Defense Association found 34 percent believed the public schools’ extracurricular programs should be opened to home-schoolers while 30 percent thought home-schoolers off most public school sports teams is the eligibility rules of the Michigan High School Athletic Association. Jack Roberts, the MHSAA’s executive director, told The Detroit News that the MHSAA’s rules do not expressly prohibit home-schoolers from participating, but there are “certain eligibility rules and standards that need to be met by all high school students, public, private and otherwise.”

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Honor-roll student ready to tackle college, career

Program helps football player achieve goals

Marlon Robinson, a recent graduate of Bishop Borgess High School, is an accomplished athlete and honor-roll student with a strong work ethic. Last year Marlon participated in a unique school-to-work program sponsored by Chrysler Corporation. His mother, a Chrysler employee, recommended the program.

The Chrysler National Training Center’s high school student program offers 10 courses in subjects including robotics, computer graphics and design, machinery repair, electrical training, customer service, advanced math, and labor relations. Each course lasts four to six weeks, and is held two nights a week from 4 to 6 p.m.

‘I believe these classes will help me achieve my personal career goals,’ Marlon said about his experience with Chrysler. ‘I believe this program will someday help me find a good job,’ he said.

Marlon says one of the most helpful courses in the Chrysler program was customer service, which included a section on how to apply and interview for jobs. The School-to-Work program has given me skills I am able to use in the automotive industry, school, and everyday life. These classes have also shown me how to talk, dress, act, and handle pressure while staying calm.

Marlon’s favorite classes were computer accounting and physical science. His math teacher, Ron Ferenczi, says Marlon is a good student who conscientiously works toward his career goals and exemplifies the same work ethic.

But Marlon gives a great deal of credit for his success to his school. “In this environment, you get a lot of one-on-one attention and help from teachers,” he says.

As for his work ethic, his parents’ influence is responsible. “It’s in my blood,” Marlon says. “I don’t really like to hang out on the weekends, I’d rather work.” In addition to the Chrysler program, Marlon’s jobs have included working for a grocery store, a cleaning service, and a record store. In his free time, he enjoys working on computers and playing football.

Marlon hopes to play football at the collegiate level, and the school he attends will probably like that idea. Through two years of junior varsity basketball and two of varsity football, Marlon has received many awards, including All-State, All-Area, All-Catholic, and All-League awards. He also was invited to play in all-star games in Hawaii and Australia.

Marlon is looking forward to a bright future at college and beyond. He plans to enter a technical university where he can study computer engineering and accounting.

And he hopes to get in a little football, too.

Schoolteacher brings his experience to the classroom

Former stockbroker invests time in kids

Ron Ferenczi’s teaching philosophy comes from more than 15 years as a stockbroker, owner of an investment firm, and award-winning investment columnist: Take full advantage of every opportunity.

Ferenczi turned to teaching when his wife Linda told him that the school where she teaches math, Bishop Borgess High School, a Catholic school in Redford Township, needed a teacher.

That was in 1996. By 1999, Ferenczi had been voted Teacher of the Year by the Catholic Association of Secondary Administrators. Today he serves as an algebra, geometry, and chemistry teacher at Borgess. Ferenczi also serves as the school’s director of development and marketing, sharing students’ success stories with the community and with potential students. This year, Ferenczi began surveying parents on school performance issues, and asked for suggestions on how to improve programs and offer a better education to students. He says the survey was a great success, and parents appreciated the attention given to their opinions and suggestions.

Ferenczi’s students say he has an excellent teaching style, is easy to understand, and provides plenty of one-on-one assistance to students. Ferenczi says, ‘I enjoy being able to show a concept to somebody and see them understand.’ He takes pride in the school, and the fact that nearly 100 percent of its students go on to college.

The school currently enrolls about 200 students, many of whom receive scholarships and commute from other districts including Detroit.

Last summer, Ferenczi was one of only 40 teachers chosen from across the nation to participate in the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Scholarship summer institute for Environmental Science, a three-week program sponsored by Princeton University. The program assists teachers in creating new learning strategies for environmental topics and allows them to continue their own science education through hands-on projects and field trips. Ferenczi enthusiastically encourages other teachers to get involved with the program, which has a web site at www.woodrow.org/teachers.

Ferenczi also participated last summer in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Teacher at Sea program, spending 18 days on the Whiting, a 163-foot research vessel, helping NOAA to chart the ocean floor. The data gathered on his trip will ultimately be incorporated into NOAA’s nautical charts—documents used by military, passenger, and fishing vessels around the world.
Workshops prepare public, private, and homeschool students for debate season
Thousands benefit from annual program

While most students were sleeping in on their summer vacation, 15 eager young minds gathered the morning of June 22 at The Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland to learn more about U.S. agriculture policy, the fall debate topic for home-schoolers.

The students were attendees of a special workshop designed to offer debaters a head start on the upcoming academic debate season. Attendees listened as Gregory Rehnske, director of program development with The New York-based Foundation for Economic Education, stressed the ways in which students can employ economic arguments to present a solid case.

Since 1988, the Mackinac Center has helped over 7,000 public, private, and home-schooled students and their coaches through such workshops hosted annually in Midland and other cities including Grand Rapids, Livonia, Jackson, and Grayling.

At the workshops, students hear informative speakers, receive free materials, and get up-to-date news and research so they can begin the debate season armed with an arsenal of new knowledge.

Each year, the National Forensic League selects the resolution debated by public and private school students. The 2001 topic is, “Resolved: The United States federal government should establish a foreign policy significantly limiting the use of weapons of mass destruction.”

The home-school debate topic is selected by the National Christian Forensics and Communication Association.

Throughout the debate season, all students are required to demonstrate an ability to debate both sides of the issue, weighing evidence from an objective point of view.

Students and coaches who participated in past workshops are pleased with the depth of material and unique approach provided. “All the free material that was handed to [my students], the different books and articles were very helpful,” says Ucal Finley, debate coach at St. Martin DePorres High School in Detroit. She adds that officials representing small schools, particularly in districts with declining enrollments, particularly in the Upper Peninsula, say Proposal A has limited their ability to provide educational services, because those services don’t lend themselves to the per-pupil model.

“You’ve got fixed overhead per class. You’ve got tuition per pupil. They also know to look at the facts and to be able to back up their beliefs, their side with evidence.”

The Mackinac Center’s 2001 fall workshops will be held Sept. 18 to Sept. 27 in Livonia, Jackson, Grand Rapids, and Midland. All students, whether they attend the workshops or not, have round-the-clock access to a wealth of debate research and information at www.mackinc.org/features/debate, including the interactive “Ask the Debate Coach” feature, a free service that provides answers to students’ research questions within 48 hours.

Debate over Proposal A continues seven years later
School officials criticize lack of taxation power

In 1994, a Michigan ballot measure called “Proposal A” changed the source of school funding from local to state, with the exception of small districts. What was once a local responsibility, funded through a variety of state revenue sources including a 50 percent sales tax increase, is now responsible for providing approximately 48 percent of school funding.

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School districts such as Redford Union are facing costs in extracurricular programs and teacher layoffs. Some attribute the budget difficulties to Proposal A, which shifted school funding from the local to the state level. Others say the problem is failure to manage costs.
Moving beyond bake sales
What teachers, parents, and the law say about “parental involvement”

“Parental involvement” is a term that has taken root in the public discourse on education reform. Unfortunately, as is usual with such terms, everyone’s for it, but everyone has a slightly different idea of just exactly what it means.

Recently, Detroit schools chief Kenneth Burnley announced a plan called “Shhh! Our students are working,” aimed at motivating parents to get their children to school well-fed and on time, and to make sure they have regular, undisturbed homework time.

“People send their children unprepared to learn every day,” Burnley recently told the Detroit Free Press. “And the community pitches in to help them do homework time.

Even the law says something about the importance of parental involvement.

PTOs are similar to PTA groups in that they are local groups of interested parents created to get school issues done. PTOs tend to be solely focused on the activities and issues in their district or school building and less involved with lobbying for state or national issues. PTO membership dues are usually reserved for local activities, whereas a considerable portion of PTA member dues is sent to the national PTA for lobbying activities.

The national PTO maintains a web site with resources for parents, parents and students, and parent-school partnerships, providing school materials and training to help parents work with their children at home, and instructing parents on school curriculum and standards.

Despite a reported 6.2 million PTA members across the country and an established reputation in Washington, the PTA is known for forming local groups of parents to participate in school activities and lobby school boards and legislators on education issues. The PTA supports the ESEA and other federal mandates for parental involvement programs. Its web site can be viewed at www.pta.org.

The PTO offers the following suggestions for involving parents in schools.

1. Attend the fall “Meet the teacher” night
2. Attend parent-teacher conferences
3. Monitor your child’s homework
4. Take your child to the library regularly and spend time reading with your child
5. Volunteer at school if you are able
6. Offer to share a hobby or area of expertise with your child’s class
7. Talk to the teacher if your child indicates there is a problem.

Cathy Egerer, a fifth-grade teacher from Midland, suggests the following for parents:

The MEA acknowledges the importance of parental involvement, the union has fought some parental involvement proposals, including the aforementioned parent survey proposal in Hazel Park, because they would impose new requirements on teachers. For more information contact the Hazel Park proposal, see the related article, “Parent-designed survey to rate parents,” in the spring 2001 issue of Michigan Education Report (www.educationreport.org/3414).

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Homework requires teamwork—
between teachers and parents

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### Homework requires teamwork— between teachers and parents

**Proposal A**

Continued from page 7


Some teachers stop teaching early in the class period and tell their students to work on their homework. They explain that this is the only way homework will actually be done. But is homework if it’s done during class time?

When the quantity of homework is excessive or when “busywork” is assigned, little is learned and negative attitudes can develop. In most of the successful schools and students.

**The Educational Entrepreneur: Making A Difference**

By Donald E. Leisy, Ed.D, and Charles Lavorani, MS

The authors, former public school superintendents and private school owners, celebrate the lives of twenty two educators who have built a wide variety of successful businesses for improving education and learning.

Learn how these men and women focused their passion to create exciting programs, products, services or technologies that enhance learning experiences for students.

**Visit our web site at www.edentrepreneurs.org**

1-800-804-0021
Stem the erosion of local control in Michigan

Have you ever wondered why it seems that everything politicians touch in the name of “reform” ends up worse than before? Education reform in Michigan is a fine example of what happens when politicians’ prescriptions fail to adhere to guiding principles that have provided good education in the past.

Take local control as a case in point. Instead of restoring control of education to parents, children, and teachers, reforms of the past decade—including Proposal A, charter schools, vouchers, and MEAP testing—have served to centralize decision-making with distant bureaucracies. And these reforms have, in true doublespeak fashion, done so in the name of “local control.” How did this happen?

First, Proposal A of 1994 was sold as a way to “break the mold” of the educational status quo and stimulate more experimentation in our public schools. The verdict isn’t in yet, but preliminary studies seem to show little deviation from the traditional norm. Many of these schools are authorized by public universities, which also erode local control. But most importantly, the pressure to do well on the MEAP ensures that most of these schools will be more concerned about conforming to state standards (read: the status quo) rather than experimenting with new different, and—dare we say—better approaches.

Vouchers then were proposed as a way to empower parents in their choice of schools. But vouchers will merely lure private schools, and their constituencies, into the fold of state dependency. There is merit in the impulse for greater school choice, but relieving schools of state dependency through tax credits rather than state-funded vouchers would better preserve local control. Likewise, although the state has a vested interest. Local control is not a quaint new idea, it is the bedrock of our country’s greatness. Local control is the main cord that binds educational reform to the people most affected by the system.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of state education policies are serving to further remove local control of education. Instead of centralizing such important decisions, it is time we stem the erosion of local control in Michigan and restore decision-making to the people most affected by the consequences.

We Have a Winner!

Michael Ohanian, a seventh-grade technology education teacher and Michigan Education Association member at Shelby Junior High School in the Utica Community Schools system, is the winner of Michigan Education Report’s Palm Illex giveaway!

Michael’s name was drawn from among the names of the over 350 educators, parents, and others who responded to MER’s 2001 Reader’s Survey.

Michael has been teaching for seven years and holds a bachelor’s degree in technology education from Eastern Michigan University and a master’s degree in educational leadership from Saginaw Valley State University. Michael’s name was drawn from among the names of the over 350 educators, parents, and others who responded to MER’s 2001 Reader’s Survey.

“I enjoy reading Michigan Education Report because it is an easy way to receive information that directly pertains to me as a teacher,” says Michael. “It’s hard to find the time to research a topic and find information that is up to date and correct. I have made reading Michigan Education Report part of my ongoing education process that I do as a teacher to keep myself informed of topics that are shaping the future of education.”

Survey results will be in the next issue of Michigan Education Report.

To learn more about Education Freedom Fund, how to apply for a scholarship, or where to make a tax-deductible contribution, please call toll free 800-866-8141 or visit our website at www.educationfreedomfund.org.
“[Reading Recovery] is great, it builds self-confidence in the children and they’ll love to read. In fact you won’t get them to stop! Keep up the good work, it’s really working and it shows in my son!”

Dear Mrs. Zarow,

I would like to thank you for all the reading support you have given my child this school year. It is amazing how I have watched him become a confident reader with the will and desire to want to read. I have spent long hours at home myself trying to help him with this important skill, and together, parent/teacher, the foundation of academics were built.

I am truly grateful for this wonderful program, each day I could see him slowly make progress soon he became excited about reading I could see, and hear, great progress. I see a need to have such programs available to all children in public schools. As he continues to grow and learn, we will continue to use the skills he has learned.

Thank you,

Debbie P.
Accountability in education requires choice and competition.

Educational accountability seems like a straightforward concept, but in the bureaucratic maze of modern public schooling, even the simplest things can take on Alice-in-Wonderland proportions. In fact, the “Caucus-race” scenario on Lewis Carroll’s classic work perfectly illustrates the typical bureaucrat’s idea of accountability. When asked by Alice what a Caucus-race is, the Dodo responds by making out a creed, “a semi-circular Page (exact shape doesn’t matter) which is called a race track. The other assembled characters, including Alice, run about the track at random until the Dodo declares the race over. Asked who won, the Dodo cries, “Everybody has won, and all must have prizes!”

Carroll apparently preferred what today is known as “outcomes-based” education, where the individuals ostensibly in charge are afraid to measure actual academic results for fear of “playing favorites.” Therefore, there are never any wrong answers and everyone is always happy.

But is everyone always happy—or are students being cheated out of a real education?

That’s where accountability comes into the mix. Too many public school administrators seem to have only a dim grasp of what is meant by the term. Some administrators I’ve spoken to insist that they are totally accountable because their financial books are subject to almost daily review.

But true, educational accountability raises the question, “To whom are schools accountable?” Joe Cobb, elementary principal at Faith Baptist Schools in Davison, responds, “Whenever I’m asked, my answer is that ultimately we are accountable to our students’ parents.

Cobb, who also understands his school’s obligations to pastors, church members, and the community at large, knows that if parents are not satisfied with their children’s education, they can and will send the children to a different school. And that means losing “business” for Faith Baptist Schools.

Parental choice is the ultimate in accountability. Faith Baptist parents voluntarily choose to vote with their feet, even when the district is not required to support government schools—for Christian schools. The ongoing threat that parents might withdraw those dollars at any time in favor of another private school, home education, or a government school ensures Faith Baptist Schools remain accountable for the education provided.

For Faith Baptist and other nongovernment schools, accountability is similar to a restaurant’s accountability to its customers. No laws require “good tasting food,” but a restaurateur understands that he must provide a product that diners want. It must be of a quality that is higher than any government inspector’s standard and at a price that his patrons are willing to pay. The restaurant owner fully understands his customers voluntarily choose his restaurant and that they could choose one of his competing restaurants at any time. It’s not accountability to government health and safety standards that keep that restaurateur in business, but accountability to his customer who he must satisfy on a continual basis.

Accountability is measurable. Like the competitors in the Dodo’s Caucus-race, each runner wanted to know who won. It is unsatisfying to exert energy and effort and have the results be judged capriciously, or worse, to be told that everybody wins because everyone competed.

In the marketplace, where choice and competition are the rule rather than the exception, accountability is based ultimately on results. Recently, U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige told the nation’s largest school employee labor union, the National Education Association, that competition in education is inevitable. It’s tempting to pretend public schools are exempt from the law of supply and demand,” he said, “They are not. This pretension will destroy our system. Secretary Paige also added that record high spending has had little effect: “For 35 years, we’ve tried to address our failing schools the same way. We’ve just given them more money, without focusing on results.”

Other school officials are slowly recognizing that the private sector can do things better than government, and often at a lower cost. Government schoolteachers, for example, put their own children in private schools at a much higher rate than do parents in the general population. Inexpensive and low-quality education is increasingly turning to private enterprises to provide non-instructional services such as food service, building maintenance, and technical support. If privatization improves quality and reduces costs for some support services, why not subject the entire school, the classroom and all, to the real accountability that comes from choice and competition?

Accountability is central to providing children with a quality education. But accountability to the right people—the right people today, our public schools are “accountable” to the real-life version of Lewis Carroll’s Dodo, the government. While the government sets up its own Caucus-race, true accountability will remain elusive. Without making schools fully accountable to parents and children, everyone may “win” the farcical Caucus-race, but in the long run we will all lose.

How should we hold schools accountable?

Consider the MEAP test as one—but only one—important accountability measure. A lot of attention is focused on MEAP scores as a way to measure the success or failure of certain schools or districts, but we should not be blinded to other, equally important measures of accountability. No one would want to suggest holding baseball players accountable for their performance by measuring batting averages, but ignoring other measures such as home runs, strikeouts, runs batted in, and so on. By the same token, if we exclude graduation rates in our evaluation of districts’ educational performance, we run the risk of creating a different problem: districts that feel pressure to improve test scores only may not see the value of reducing dropout rates.

Use the new Standard & Poor’s analysis of Michigan school districts’ performance to spur improvement. The state of Michigan recently contracted with the bond-rating firm Standard & Poor’s to track a wide range of information about Michigan school district performance. Perhaps the most useful data for reformers is S&P’s “peer analysis,” which provides a powerful tool for comparing the academic performances of districts similar in terms of size, poverty level, and so on. For example, if the student body receiving “free lunch” funding, or other factors. When I was a local superintendent I would have given anything for such a tool to help me motivate the staff to improve our schools, relative to our sister districts.

Expand choices within the public school system. District officials are more concerned about how to create “private” jobs for themselves in for-profit schools. “Public” status quo jobs, even when it is obvious changes must be made. Others are more concerned about how to create “private” jobs for themselves in for-profit schools. But I know the overwhelming majority are just great Americans who care about our kids and the future of this country. All we need to do is to come together and do what’s right to fix our schools.

This is the best place to live in the world because of our strong commitment to education. It’s why our democracy and economy have blossomed and become the envy of the world. But it’s all in jeopardy. And our future depends on us to foster a culture of education and leadership, or whether we abandon our children and our future to mediocrity—will be decided one way or the other in the next few years, on our watch. So let’s stop the bashing, accept responsibility, and begin building the best possible future we can for our children.

Some people in the education debate are most concerned about how to keep their “public” status quo jobs, even when it is obvious changes must be made. Others are more concerned about how to create “private” jobs for themselves in for-profit schools. But I know the overwhelming majority are just great Americans who care about our kids and the future of this country. All we need to do is to come together and do what’s right to fix our schools.

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