NCLB underfunded? Reform debated; educators work to meet standards

The No Child Left Behind Act, passed by Congress in 2002, is a landmark in federal education reform. The bill was designed to improve student achievement through “strong incentives for better academic results,” “more (policy) freedom for states and communities,” “proven education methods” and “more choices for parents.” The stated intention of the law is to see all American children achieve high standards, regardless of “poverty, race, ethnicity, disability (or) limited English proficiency.”

In October, a national coalition of more than 20 organizations dealing with education, civil rights, children, disabilities and citizens’ concerns called for major changes to NCLB. The coalition’s requested reforms included changes in the act’s progress measurements, sanctions and funding. Among other specific changes, the coalition is collectively requesting a raise in authorized levels of federal NCLB money to cover a substantial percentage of the costs that states and districts will incur in carrying out the remedies required under the NCLB in cases where students repeatedly demonstrate weak academic performance. The coalition also argues that the federal government has failed to “fully fund Title I” federal monies for disadvantaged children. Since these Title I monies are, along with other federal titles

Union files labor complaint

Holland says custodial privatization brings savings

Last October, the support-staff union for the Holland Public Schools filed an unfair labor complaint against the Holland school district in an ongoing battle over privatization of school custodial services, according to The Holland Sentinel.

In the complaint, the Holland Educational Support Personnel Association makes several allegations related to the district’s talks with the union prior to the school board’s recent decision to contract with a private firm for custodial services. We charged them (the board) with refusal to bargain in good faith, and we claim that they took action to split our bargaining unit apart by telling members of the bargaining unit that this didn’t really affect them and they didn’t have to be concerned about it,” Paul Kerschner, a Michigan Education Association representative, told The Sentinel.

John Sullivan, Holland’s assistant superintendent of finance and personnel, told The Sentinel that the district found “most of the accusations to be groundless or without merit.” He also denied a union allegation that a food services employee was verbally reproached by a supervisor for making comments during a school board meeting that discussed privatization.

State Superintendent Watkins resigns

Rift spotlights governor, board, union

On Jan. 29, Michigan Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Watkins resigned, ending an unusually public and acrimonious conflict between Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the state Board of Education over Watkins’ leadership. Debate over Watkins’ ability to head the Department of Education marked the final weeks of his tenure. The governor’s office stated in the Detroit Free Press on Jan. 19 that Watkins was “not providing effective leadership in one of the most critical departments in state government.” In the same article, Gov. Granholm claimed, “(Water’s) needs to resign for the good of the state board, for the good of public education.” She said her disapproval of Watkins’ work had been known to him for months.

However, Booth Newspapers reported on Jan. 12 that Granholm had given Watkins a letter of praise for a July (2004) performance evaluation. The state board, which had hired Watkins, had recently awarded him a job evaluation of “A-.”

Among the events which transpired from July 2004 to January 2005 was a difference of opinion between Watkins and the Michigan Education Association. According to a letter sent to Watkins from the MEA on Oct. 4, 2004, Watkins chose not to withhold funds from a Bay Mills Community College charter school after having done so in April 2003 due to questions of legality. The MEA was opposed to this charter school receiving state funds because the union contended that Bay Mills charters could not be considered public schools.

Watkins continued on page 4

EDUCATION AT A GLANCE


Grade Four TIMSS Mathematics Test Results Among Select Industrialized Nations

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<tr>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>Average of 4th Grade Students</th>
<th>Average of 4th Grade Students</th>
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<td>Singapore</td>
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Underfunded? (continued from page 1)

Michigan Education Report

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Michigan Education Report is a news and analysis quarterly published by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and educational institute devoted to analyzing Michigan public policy issues. Michigan Education Report is released by over 130,000 Mackinac teachers, school administrators, legislators, policy experts and elected officials. Copyright © 2005. All rights reserved.

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Spring 2005

Sufficient Funding?

"NCLB is not an unfunded mandate," she says. "States do not have to fund NCLB. Secretly, states are receiving adequate funding to implement the provisions of NCLB." The Center also says federal funding for education has grown at a record pace. "Total taxpayer investment in K-12 education in the United States was just over $503 billion in the 2003-2004 school year was over $501.3 billion, exceeding that for national defense," she states. Other support from national government for NCLB funding for education is at an all-time high and point to the 40 percent increase in education funding in the last five years.

Yet many educators say that even the recent influx of federal NCLB money does not pay for new requirements for comprehensive state assessment systems, highly qualified personnel, sophisticated data management systems and intensive school improvement efforts. Caamal-Canul argues that this is the case in Michigan.

"In order to deliver adequate support of the NCLB requirements, schools and districts have to retool their existing organization structure," says Caamal-Canul.

"This requires human capital to implement, monitor and support NCLB sanctions. Title I monies cover expenses that are tied to the actual education of the children, but not to the expenses for the administration of the sanctions."

The core component of NCLB is grade-level assessment. Michigan already has some testing in place: The Michigan Educational Assessment Program tests are being administered in several grades, and additional testing through different programs, all of which already had a functioning data collection process, but given NCLB requirements, it will have to change its methods to include a disaggregation of the data based on gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, special education needs, English proficiency, homelessness and migrant status.

"Though Michigan was years beyond many other states in the development and collection of student data, the data collection infrastructure in Michigan was not set up to meet the new requirements changed by the NCLB Act," says Caamal-Canul.

If a school fails to achieve NCLB's Adequate Yearly Progress requirements for two consecutive years or more, federally required sanctions include offering students in those schools transportation to more successful schools and to supplemental services in the form of tutoring. But again, Michigan is behind: "The Mackinac Center has held the workshops to provide good schools with training for their debates on the education issue," said Michael LaFaive, a Mackinac Center economist and vice-president of education and state programs. "It’s hard to believe that this year’s senior debaters were born the year after the Education Act was passed," noted Michael LaFaive, director of the Mackinac Center’s 2004 Debate Workshop.

The Debate Workshops are the Center’s longest-running program and have exposed more than 8,000 students to debate arguments and ideas that they may not have received from other sources. "The Mackinac Center provides students with unbiased arguments because our economic and mainstream sources of information detail public policy solutions that require less government intervention and less government spending," noted a Mackinac Center survey of debaters.

This year’s topic was debated internationally in its scope. It reads: "Resolved: That the United States federal government should establish a foreign policy substantially increasing its support of United Nations peacekeeping operations.

Nearly 300 high school debate students and their instructors from across Michigan attended Debate Workshops hosted in September by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and educational institute and the publisher of Michigan Education Report.

The Mackinac Center constructs a debate Web site where students can find more information on their topic and have access to an interactive function called, "Ask the Debate Coach," which provides e-mail access to experts who answer student debaters’ questions about the debate. The Web site can be found at www.mackinac.org/features/debate/2004/.

For 17 years the Mackinac Center has hosted Debate Workshops, Center experts included speakers who described peacekeeping operations in areas such as the Balkans and North Korea, to the whole of Africa. This year’s speakers were:

• June Arunga, director of youth outreach at the Inter-Regional Economic Network in Kenya. Ms. Arunga has lectured in Europe and the United States on such topics as globalization, trade and economic freedom in Africa. She has produced a BBC film, "Assistors: The New Peacekeepers," which received an Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject, "The African diaspora and has been a first-hand witness to U.N. peacekeeping operations in Africa.

• Doug Bandow, syndicated columnist and foreign policy specialist for the Cato Institute and a frequent contributor to Libres금 유한회사. University Films, a nonprofit organization in Seattle.

• Gregory Rehmke, program director and a first-hand witness to the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Somalia, "The Kora Conundrum."".

• Sylva Arunga, a first-hand witness to U.N. peacekeeping operations in Africa.

Debate students hone skills at workshops

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Brother Rice case in court
Union rights collide with religious autonomy

State officials and private school groups are awaiting a Michigan Court of Appeals opinion on the question of whether a state labor agency can require parochial schools to recognize labor unions if teachers at those institutions express interest in unionization.

In September 2003, 30 of 42 teachers at Birmingham’s Brother Rice High School, a Catholic high school, expressed interest in forming a union to negotiate the terms of their work. The unionization attempt, citing a 1979 U.S. Supreme Court decision, NLRB v Catholic Bishop of Chicago, which ruled that applying federal labor law to “church-operated schools” would create “a significant risk of infringement of the religion clauses of the First Amendment” and give rise to “difficult and sensitive questions.”

The MEA, however, brought an action to the Michigan Employment Relations Commission, the state’s labor relations board, asking the state to require the school to allow a vote by teachers on whether they should be represented by the union. MERC determined in May 2004 that it held jurisdiction over labor issues at Brother Rice because the Michigan 1979 ruling did not explicitly state that its decision held in future cases. In accordance with that finding, MERC ordered an election to be conducted at the school on Aug. 20, 2004.

School administrators appealed MERC’s decision, stating the union and its politics would interfere with the right of the school to hold and teach its religious beliefs, as permitted by both the Michigan and United States Constitutions. After MERC denied self-study review of its decision, the school took its case to the Michigan Court of Appeals, which granted a stay, postponing the vote until the court acted on the case.

The court will decide two issues: the first, whether MERC has jurisdiction to decide labor cases in parochial schools; and the second, whether state intervention in the policies of parochial schools would abrogate state and federal constitutional guarantees of religious liberty and expression.

“Being decided are issues of law concerning MERC’s jurisdiction under the Michigan Labor Relations and Mediation Act,” said Patrick T. Gillen, a lawyer with the Thomas More Law Center, an Ann Arbor-based public interest law firm that is representing Brother Rice. Additionally, the court may decide whether the case will be interpreted in a manner where the MERC has jurisdiction over religious schools.

Several groups have filed amicus briefs with the court. The Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty and the Archdiocese of Detroit have weighed in favoring the MEA. There are “obviously a set group of interested parties,” observed Gillen.

The opinion by the Court of Appeals could potentially allow unions to organize in parochial schools statewide. “It will be a decision of some import,” noted Gillen, who also said the case could possibly be headed to the United States Supreme Court.

School Board of Education, itself an elected body. The superintendent is the principal executive of the Board of Educa-
tion and provides as the changes required, without the right to vote. The governor is an ex-officio member of the board, also without a vote. The revisory board, struggle between the state superintendent and the governor sparked renewed interest in the bill. This year’s version of the bill, House Joint Resolu-
tion C, was introduced on Feb. 1 by Rep. Vincent C. Amore, R-Grand Haven.

Michigan merit scholarship
A bill affecting Michigan merit scholarship money was introduced in the Michigan Senate in March. Senate Bill 232, sponsored by Sen. Deborah Cherry, D-Burton, Sen. Gilda Z. Jacobs, D-Huntington Woods, and Sen. Bruce Patterson, R-Canton, establishes that merit scholarship money be returned to the state in the case that a student recipient leaves school. The bill states: “If a student elects to leave an approved post-secondary educational institution without completing the classes in which he or she enrolled, the approved post-secondary educational institution board may require the student to repay any money remaining in the student’s account to the Department of Education. The board shall determine what constitutes repayment of the student’s account in an amount for 5 years shall escheat to the state.”

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Brother Rice High School

The case could be decided in the next few months, and would significantly alter public school attendance expectations statewide.

A court of appeals, the state’s labor agency can require parochial schools to recognize labor unions if teachers at those institutions express interest in unionization.

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Brother Rice High School
Watkins' emphasis continued from page 1

The October MEA letter to Watkins stated that the state auditor's letter was a "warning sign" and that if Watkins did not take action, she would be "surprised and perplexed at Granholm's turn against him: "Neither you nor any of your supporters had anything to do with me personally." Watkins asserted that all of Granholm's comments toward him had been "taken out of context" and that for a "diagram in Watkins' December report, he stated, "You said 'you were furious' but the fact is we were not planning a resignation. The government could reinstate the draft, if it so chooses, and charge money could be withheld from a payment. However, solely funding the current system will not yield the results our children need and deserves."

Watkins' troubles were not limited to failed negotiations with the MEA or fallout from the December report. He attracted attention with comments published in a June 10, 2004 issue of the State Journal. In the article, MEA Communications Director Margaret Trimmer-Hartley stated that she believed Watkins was "inappropriate" regarding the fundamental structure of our public education system is not enough, is not why we have to go to the education populace" (Watkins' emphasis).

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Watkins responded bluntly: "Does some of the traditional schools. Some of them will be proposed to solve the "Structural Issues Surrounding Michigan School Funding In the 21st Century" may have raised some eyebrows.

In his report, Watkins challenged some of the views expressed by the education community: "A simple solution would be to join the chorus that simply as a quick-fix solution. James Forster, $700,000 for the school district had been approved as part of a settlement that was reached in a January 2005 settlement. The DOE was awarded a Certificate of Excellence from the Association of Government Accountants and the Selective Service System while continuing to work as chief financial officer of the Department of Education.

Kudos came from outside the department as well. In September 2004, the DOE was awarded the Governor's Exemplary Service Award in Accountability Reporting by the Association of Government Accountants for the department's improved integration of financial and program reports. Last December, the DOE received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Financial Management for "improved agencywide financial performance." According to the U.S. Department of Education, the Education Department was one of only seven federal agencies to receive the Presidential Award for Excellence in Financial Management for the 2003-2004 fiscal year. The award is given to agencies that have "demonstrated an exceptional commitment to the efficient and effective management of financial resources."
Michigan has just crossed the threshold into an era of consolidated elections. Starting this year, all elections in the state — including federal, state, school and local elections — must take place on one of four regular election dates. Many hope that the change will ensure voters participate in more election decisions, particularly school ballots, while others fear the change will lead to confusion and longer ballots in the voting booth.

The first test of the new system occurred in the Feb. 22 election, when scores of communities turned out to vote primarily on local tax issues. This election did seem, based on a cursory review of the voting numbers, to have higher voter turnout than similar elections in the past. At the same time, this election was not a complete test of the new system, since the ballot included fewer issues and therefore did not pose the same risk of ballot clutter that a presidential election would.

Under the new election regimen, the four statutory election days each year are the fourth Tuesday in February; the first Tuesday after the first Monday in May; the second Tuesday after the first Monday in August; and the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. In addition, all elections will now be run by local and county clerks. The parallel system of school-run elections will cease, along with its separate polling places and separate absentee voter procedures.

There are three exceptions to the four regulars in the voting booth: first is the constitutional authority of the governor to call an election to fill a vacant state House or state Senate seat, and of the state Legislature to place constitutional amendments before the electorate in special elections. The second exception allows cities that currently hold their primary election in September to continue to do so. The third exception was added to overcome opposition from public school districts and school employee unions. It allows a school district to submit to one annual ballot question to voters to borrow money or increase taxes. This so-called “floater” election requires the district to obtain or receive a petition signed by either 10 percent or 3,000 of the district’s registered voters, whichever is less. The election must be on a Tuesday, and it cannot occur within 35 days of one of the four regular election dates.

These sweeping changes come after a legislative struggle that persisted for at least a decade. The abundance of Michigan’s governmental units and candidates has given immunity to both sides of the election consolidation debate.

According to the Citizens Research Council of Michigan, hosts 2,884 local units of government, 147 highest among the 50 states. As of 1998, these local units were comprised of 1,859 counties, cities, villages and townships; 748 education districts, including intermediate school districts and community college districts; and 277 special districts and authorities created for specific purposes.

Most of these districts have elections. Michigan political analyst Bill Ballenger says that this abundance of governments meant the institute for election consolidation was the fact that a new law requirement result in Michigan having the longest November presidential-year schedule of any state — the so-called “bed sheet ballot.”

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The numbers are imposing: According: Accord to the Michigan Center for Teacher Policy, the district’s registered voters, whichever is less. The election must be on a Tuesday, and it cannot occur within 35 days of one of the four regular election dates.

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-Carole Mortenson Crary

Carole Mortenson Crary considers teaching her calling. She has worked in both conventional public schools and a public school academy.
Study says costs benefits strangle districts

A study soon to be released by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy offers hope that Michigan schools can control costs by solving the inflated costs of certain employee benefits.

Michigan newspapers in recent months have reported that struggling school districts have been forced to lay off teachers, close schools or make other educational cuts in an effort to stay afloat. The new study suggests that reining in rapidly escalating health care costs might go a long way in alleviating the anxiety of school districts worried about budget shortfalls.

“Employee benefits are becoming the primary obstacle to contract agreements between Michigan school boards and school employees,” according to the study. “More specifically, Michigan Education Special Services Association, or MESSA, insurance is the sticking point in causing more and more school districts to seek alternatives to out-of-control health care costs.”

The study describes the problem quantitatively, pointing to data compiled in another Mackinac Center study from 1993, and surveys from groups such as the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, the Michigan Association of School Boards and the Census Bureau. This comparative analysis yields some striking conclusions and implications for Michigan’s school finance programs.

As of today, “the most common Michigan public school choice program is the MESSA plan, which costs public schools $15,834 per year for each covered employee,” the report shows, an increase of over 150% from 1993 levels. Even after a 1994 Michigan Insurance Bureau probe into the MEEA - MESSA connection resulted in the state auditor’s finding that the dollars were excess, interest-bearing MESSA reserves to Blue Cross/Blue Shield, many school districts continue to make agreements with MESSA that opposes any prospect of school districts evaluating alternative plans.

The study says that the shared interest that the MEEA and MESSA have in landing teacher health package contracts. MESSA itself is a Third Party Administrator. The insurance, and therefore the risk, is underwritten by another company. MESSA was established by the MEEA in 1960 as a wholly-owned subsidiary of the association, and some individuals serve simultaneously on the board of directors and trustees of both entities.

In today’s environment, health insurance costs are taking up an ever larger portion of school district budgets. “Health insurance premiums are rising at a rate of 11 percent to 12 percent per year as school budgets are increasing at a much slower rate,” according to the report. The Kaiser Family Foundation conducts surveys that have shown, “MESSA insurance is almost $5,000, or about 50 percent, more expensive per year than a typical policy purchased by employers nationwide.”

Currently, many districts assume 100 percent responsibility for the MESSA plan, and the union continues to reject proposals to switch to a non-MESSA plan. In Kentwood, health insurance was so high that for school board voted unanimously to impose a contract that asked employees to pay any health premiums above $916 per month. “The study explains that some schools have been successful in switching to alternative plans such as Priority Health. Many alternative plans presented to districts provide similar and competitive benefits, and include the same doctors and hospitals used under current MESSA plans. The difference is in the price.”

A recent example from Houghton Lake Public Schools, in which the district had been using an uncompetitive health care plan that would have saved the district $1 million over three years was rejected. Retaining the MESSA plan in turn resulted in layoffs of 15 teachers and eliminated funding for a sports program.

The study offers four solutions that will help school districts decide on the most economic way to handle their health insurance options in view of an overall responsibility to their budgets:

- Competitive bidding
- Health benefits redesign
- Premium and co-payment sharing
- Health benefits plan consolidation

The report says: “The most straightforward way for school districts to deal with rising health care costs, especially for those who use one of the MESSA plans, is simply to open up the process to competition. MESSA should not be barred from such competition, of course, but MESSA itself actively blocks competition by refusing to provide claims histories to school districts, information that almost all insurers routinely provide to their customers.” The study advises that school districts must know how much benefits will cost if they are to efficiently provide them, and when this does not happen, some districts are “squeezed to the point of cutting teachers from their rolls.”

The study suggests that the status quo in district employee health care should not be sacrosanct, and that school districts can rid themselves of the burden of high health care costs by following the study’s recommendations.

Nearly 40 of the failing schools received a vote last year, and all of them must provide competitive benefits for one year, although they must improve during that time.

Michigan’s common high school curriculum should be tougher, according to a report by the Michigan Department of Education’s High School Reform Team. The report recommended that the state require exams for core classes to measure student preparedness, that there be stronger connections between coursework and employment, and that the school calendar become more flexible.

Traverse City Area Public Schools district will receive close to $1 million in U.S. Department of Education grants over three years to fight student obesity. Studies cited in the grant stated that one-third of Traverse City students are either overweight or at serious risk of being overweight. The federal Department of Education will reportedly give $69 million to 237 schools and community organizations nationwide to promote healthy diet and exercise habits as part of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Please note that this section is continued on page 1 of this newspaper.
The results of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study were released in December, detailing the performance of fourth- and eighth-graders around the globe. On the eve of the results’ publication, I published an article predicting that Asian nations would dominate the top spots, that U.S. fourth-grade students “would perform at about the average for industrialized nations,” and that U.S. eighth-grade students would be “below the average for industrialized nations—possibly far below it.”

Here’s how it played out: Among eighth-graders, the top five nations in combined mathematics and science performance were Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan. Among fourth-graders, the top four nations in combined mathematics and science performance were Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (Korea did not test students in the fourth grade).

How did the United States perform? I compared us to the top 40 industrialized nations, choosing these nations based on purchasing power parity adjustments to the World Bank’s per-capita income figures. At the fourth-grade level, American students were 9 percentage points above the rich-country average in science and 11 percentage points below it in math, putting them clearly, but not abysmally, below average.

The weak point in my prognostication thus appears to be my suggestion that U.S. eighth-graders’ overall performance might be “far below” the average of industrialized nations. But perhaps it actually was. Many nations that typically outscore the United States in math and science at the eighth-grade level did not participate in TIMSS 2003. These countries include France, Germany, Canada, Ireland, Finland, Switzerland, Ireland and Poland.

But while they skipped TIMSS 2003, they all participated in another test of mathematics and science: the 2003 Program on International Student Achievement. Tellingly, every one of the eight countries significantly outscored the United States on the PISA test. In math, Canada bested us by 49 points, while Finland outsored us by 61. In science, France and Switzerland beat us by 20 and 22 points, respectively. If all of these nations had participated in TIMSS 2003, it seems likely that U.S. performance at the eighth-grade level would have been worse. The bottom line is that the average of industrialized nations than it already was.

* * *

One question is often raised in response to international test comparisons: Do these results really mean anything? The past few international testing programs have been criticized on a variety of grounds. Two allegations, in particular, have been common:

1. First, that other nations have not tested as a large percentage of their student population, and hence their scores have been inflated; and second, that our best students are among the world’s best, with our average being brought down by a large cohort of low-achievers.

2. Whatever the historical validity of such complaints, they are not doing anything new. Particularly in the fourth and eighth grade, education has become universal in all of the leading nations. Moreover, in science, percentage of randomly selected U.S. schools and students that actually did participate at the eighth-grade level would have been even smaller. Third-lowest of all 45 participating countries, and 11 percentage points below the average participation rate of industrialized nations. In fact, the United States had the third-lowest overall participation rate for both grades in both math and science. In the eighth grade, we had all participation percentages in the 90s.

How about our best and brightest? At the fourth-grade level, there is some truth to the idea that the best American students are among the best in the world. Looking only at the top 5 percent of test-takers, American fourth-graders beat the average of wealthy nations by 13 percentage points. In the eighth-grade, however, these trends turned, with America’s brightest students falling 10 percentage points behind their foreign counterparts.

If we carry this comparison to the final year of high school using the 1998 TIMMS results at their disposal (though the data are not available), we discover that America’s top students placed last in combined science and math achievement among the industrialized nations for which data were available. In both math and science, the gap between our best students and our peers was not as great as it was compared to the rest of the world, but it was still not as small as many Americans believe.

It’s no use claiming that U.S. 12th graders do not compare to their foreign peers, because they are smaller, more elite subset of the age cohort. The more selective nations generally did worse than the United States in math and science at the fourth-grade level, there is some truth to the idea that the best American students are among the best in the world. Looking only at the top 5 percent of test-takers, American fourth-graders beat the average of wealthy nations by 13 percentage points. In the eighth-grade, however, these trends turned, with America’s brightest students falling 10 percentage points behind their foreign counterparts.

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The War Against Excellence

A review of “The War Against Excellence,” by Cheri Pierson Yecke; Preager (2003); 260 pages; $49.95.

In 1983, the U.S. Education Department’s National Commission on Excellence in Education finished its landmark report, “A Nation At Risk.” The report famously stated, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the educational standards that exist today in our schools, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

Since then, there has been a great deal of talk about improving the educational system. Some legislation has been passed purporting to raise standards. But on the whole, it’s hard to perceive much improvement. In fact, if author Cheri Pierson Yecke is correct in “The War Against Excellence,” things have gotten worse, particularly at the middle school level.

Yecke is a former U.S. Department of Education Commissioner for Minnesota. Her volume is the latest in a stream of books by a multitude of authors in recent years exploring the unpleasant truths about government schools.

This stream is fighting a broader current. School districts and employee unions increasingly encroach on public relations to keep parents, taxpayers and politicians convinced that “public education” is doing wonderfully, but just needs more money. “The War Against Excellence” is a worth-while effort to make all of us ask the uncomfortable questions.

According to the author, five beliefs that progressive education theorists embrace have infiltrated the middle schools. Yecke does not say that these views have been adopted by school officials, only that the problems seem worst there. The five views can be stated briefly:

• Belief in the overriding value of students achieving equal educational outcomes.
• Belief in questioning the value of individualism.
• Belief in the supremacy of the group over the individual.
• Belief that advanced students have a duty to help others at the expense of their own needs.
• Belief that competition is negative and must be eliminated.

Yecke quotes one parent, who says, “The abolition of ability grouping has met with strong resistance from parents of gifted children, who resent having their kids held back just to satisfy the egalitarian impulses of education theorists.”

Yecke presents the views of parents of gifted students who are not happy that the more gifted students instruct the less gifted students in accelerated classes, and that the smarter or more diligent students do most of the work, but must share their talents, and of doing less work, and be graded in groups, rather than individually. They have to “share” their talents, and of doing less work, and be graded in groups, rather than individually. Again, this is supposedly necessary to correct an underlying social injustice.

The problem with the forced redistribution of inequity is that the more gifted students complain that the educational harm is done to bright kids by holding them back so they can learn responsibility.

Yecke quotes one parent, who says, “The problem with this forced redistribution of intellectual ownership is that it limits my son’s educational opportunity and intellectual growth. Advocates of collaborative learning argue that it’s more important to encourage socially desirable aspirations than to develop individual students’ knowledge base and intellectual skills. I disagree.” Unfortunately, the complaints of such parents are usually met with indifference by school officials.

Another manifestation of the egalitarian impulse is the move toward “cooperative learning.” That’s another of those warm and fuzzy notions that hides an unpleasant concept, namely that students should work and be graded in groups, rather than individually. Again, this is supposedly necessary to correct an underlying social injustice.

The obvious problem with cooperative learning is that the smarter or more diligent students do most of the work, but must share the credit. To the theorists, this approach to education performs the vital task of informing the bright kids that they have to “share” their talents, and of discouraging them from using their ability to their own benefit.

A particularly disquieting aspect of cooperative learning is that it not only gives students the impression that the more gifted students instruct the slower ones. Under the concept of “peer tutoring,” students who have already mastered new material are expected to help teach students who have not. This peer tutoring potentially empowers gifted students to develop a sense of responsibility to their classmates. If there are not enough analytical students, the gifted students can do, they can be required to help the teacher with other tasks.

Yecke writes: “Students who have completed their work can tutor others or perform clerical duties—but they cannot be allowed to work to the extent of their abilities and get ahead of the class.”

Yecke is not optimistic about a quick reversal back to school cultures that emphasize academic achievement; the egalitarian mindset is too widespread. Fortunately, parents who can see that their children are being used as the guinea pigs in a sociological experiment have alternatives. Yecke cites the example of Maryland’s Howard County, where the school administration chose to ignore parental protests against grouping students of unequal abilities together. As a result, parents of bright students have managed to set up a private school system.

Yecke quotes one parent, who says, “The War Against Excellence” will startle readers who are unaware just how explicitly many middle schools set out to homogenize children and use the classroom to remedy society’s imagined ills. Revealing to parents the often-unreported activities and theories practiced in their children’s schools is worth the price of the book.

George C. Leif is executive director of the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy in Raleigh, N.C.
Lansing must embrace basic reform following the Watkins debacle

In a Dec. 6 report to the Michigan Board of Education, then-state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Watkins called for “boldness and candor” in addressing a “structural fund-milling challenge” in the state’s public schools. A few weeks later, he exercised a bit of that boldness and candor in response to critics of charter schools, telling The Grand Rapids Press: “Let’s take a look at traditional schools. Some of them will complain about losing 300 (students) to a charter, but you won’t hear a peep out of them when 3,000 (dropouts) go to the streets.”

In January, the Michigan Board of Education tabled a one-year renewal of Watkins’ contract. This decision came just one day after Board President Kathleen Straus had briefed when asked by MIRS to respond to rumors that the Granholm administration wanted Watkins to leave. Straus asserted, “The State Board awarded the Superintendent an A grade on his last performance evaluation, and my colleagues and I have the utmost confidence in Tom.”

Perhaps Watkins made errors that have not yet come to light. But whether the board and the Granholm administration like it or not, he has suddenly become a scapegoat; he has sent the signal that it is suicidal to challenge the status quo or tolerate even weak forms of school choice, such as charter schools (once championed by President Clinton). Watkins’ December report may have been short on specific remedies, but it did show promotion, making the argument that “additional revenue without unprecedented change” in the state’s education system was not likely to make a difference. If the Michigan Board of Education, Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the state Legislature have any credibility at all, they can no longer sit idly about the system. They must enact at least four reforms that don’t require school choice, but would free education money for kids in the classroom without raising taxes:

1. Exempt public schools from Michigan’s arcane Prevailing Wage Act. Mackinac Center research suggests that forcing school districts to contract with only those construction firms that pay “prevailing wages” inflates school renovation and building costs by $150 million annually — a job-killing subsidy that constrains the construction industry. Watkins himself noted that the Center’s saving estimates are sound.

2. Create a level playing field for providers of employee health insurance. Many Michigan public school districts are awash in soaring health care costs because they face intense union pressure to sustain generous benefit packages. Watkins’ insurance provider affiliated with the Michigan Education Association. MESSA’s rates are propped up by the fact that premiums are financed by taxpayers who typically get nothing so irrationality excessive in their own pockets.

3. Overhaul teacher certification. School boards should be permitted broader latitude in hiring competent instructors, whether or not they’ve jumped through the dubious hoops of university education courses. If today’s certification requirements guaranteed competency, poor student outcomes would be an efficient teaching market, and Michigan businesses and universities wouldn’t spend $600 million annually on school certification. Watkins’ examination of state certification requirements exclude many competent candidates, creating shortages in key subject areas and driving up the cost of hiring teachers.

4. Encourage competitive bidding for school support services. Holland Public Schools in West Michigan voted recently to save as much as $700,000 in annual costs by outsourcing custodial work, but a Mackinac Center survey in 2003 indicated that few public school districts do not outsource busing, food and even janitorial services to the private sector. These districts should be strongly encouraged to do so; 63 percent of the districts that had privatized these services reported cost savings of 78 percent. While 88 percent said they were satisfied with the service quality (only 3 percent were not).

The problems listed above are the “elephants in the room” that are too often ignored when education spending is discussed. Tom Watkins wasn’t quick to recognize them either. But if Watkins wasn’t permitted to hint that there is more to fixing education than “spend more money” and “charter schools are evil,” it’s hard to see why Michiganders should send another nickel to the public schools until state policy-makers pass these commonsense reforms.

Lawrence W. Reed is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich. This commentary is adapted from his invited testimony at hearings of the Michigan House Tax Policy Committee in January 2005. This article was published in The Oakland Press on Friday, Jan. 14, 2005.
CONVENTIONAL CERTIFICATION CLASSES ARE UNNECESSARY

Robert Genetki

The current and traditional system for teacher certification offers little in the way of quality training for education students, watered down relevancy requirements, and classes largely talented people away from the teaching profession.

Based on the love of English, I decided in college to become a high school teacher. The education development classes, however, almost changed my mind. I detested every minute of “child and adolescent development.” During the class, I learned what Bourneus and Piaget wrote about children and I felt like they could be a better way to give me my state certification or licensure; and proven knowledge of each subject they teach. Teachers in middle and high school must prove that they know the subject they teach with credentials equivalent to a major or passing a state content test.

At the time, I wished there was a program like the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence. As Robert Holland noted in “Teach for America Shows In Michigan How to Get Effective Teachers,” (School Reform News, Oct. 1st, 2004). The program is aimed at recent college graduates, individuals changing careers and current teachers. Future teachers can earn their certification by being taught by a board-certified teacher, meeting American Board standards in their subject area, while also showing a “growing of teaching methods.” I learned my bachelor’s degree in English and was headed for the business world. Fortunately, I decided to take a teaching job at a Catholic high school in Florida when I found that I could start as an uncertified teacher, provided that I taught only part-time. I found that I loved teaching and working with young people. While none of my students’ parents ever asked if I was certified, many of them wanted to know from which school I had graduated. When I told them that I graduated with an English degree, they were surprised. I think they expected ED classes. And when I graduated from traditional programs. Perhaps I might attend night classes and spend my weekends in supervised academic classroom lessons, I thought.

To become certified to continue teaching, I had to take a graduate-level “curriculum development” class. I learned trendy and fancy names given by theorists to simple, everyday things. It was a waste of time. The class demeaned my intelligence and did nothing to make me a more effective classroom teacher. In fact, it risked making me worse teacher the given time it took away from lesson planing and sleep.

After moving to the Midwest, I learned that I had to take a graduate-level “classroom management” class. In this class, the professor told me that I had to take numerous educational classes and-student-teach for four months. After a year in classes, a transcript audit revealed that I lacked one physical education class. After 13 years of playing soccer and captaining my college soccer team, I had to have one physical education class. I went to Auburn University, that fact was good enough for them.

The young lady told me that she had started her freshman year at another school. She finally realized that she was choosing the wrong major, but she was still not satisfied with the education class, and it changed her mind. It was not very challenging. It was almost like a circus. I had to have one physical education class. My advisor told me that I was required to meet the course and she was interested in this student. She told me that she had no other way to learn about themselves. She invited me to attend a college preparation class, and I agreed. I have taken education classes at five different colleges and universities in four different states, and I have seen very little that was not very challenging. In many cases, instructors, including my own, high-quality post-baccalaureate programs are helping to ease some of those shortages by giving math and science professionals the preparation needed to succeed at teaching.

High quality alternative preparation can be a good thing. However, not all alternative programs are created equal. In fact, I do not believe that an individual who has a few weeks of preparation without content, or either of these without field experiences — is “partially qualified,” rather than “highly qualified.”

The textbook theory and methodology of how to work with young people will not help a young teacher anywhere near as much as a sense of conviction and an ability to deal with people. In an article titled, “Does Teacher Certification Matter?” Author Andrew Coulson comments, “Verbal ability and having a college degree in the subject being taught are not the keys to successful teaching.” Coulson further notes that seven studies of the effects of teacher certification on student achievement have concluded, “New teachers who are certified do not produce greater student gains than new teachers who are not certified.”

Across the hall from my classroom is a math teacher who spent 10 years with a big accounting firm before starting to teach. He knows his math; he is humorous and articulate, and he brings students into the classroom to see how their applications to the classroom. When he first went back to school for his teaching certificate, he told me he had to take more classes because he needed a “teachable major.”

In considering the expertise our new teachers bring to the field, I often think, as the old saying goes, “If you want to learn something, teach it.” The traditional teacher preparation programs, Education classes today are not those remembered by my Baby Boomer colleagues. In my own preparation, long ago and far away, I experienced one of the best programs available at the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited. Our students of the time. But I did not major in a content area, as students do today. And when I was learning to be a teacher, our knowledge of teaching and learning was more limited.}