From 2002 to 2005, Detroit Public Schools collected $259 million in unauthorized property taxes from nonhomestead owners. While it is not clear how the mistake was made or whether the district will have to repay the amount, the improper tax has negatively affected the district’s credit rating, thus making it more expensive to finance its growing debt.

An 18-mill school operating expense tax on commercial property and rental housing was authorized in a November 1993 vote, and expired on June 30, 2002. School officials continued collecting the tax over the following three years. It has not yet been determined how the district overlooked the renewal. The 1993 millage election came at a time when school districts were anticipating the transition to the new financing system created by Proposal A, which was to be on the ballot on March 15, 1994, and which would peg future state aid to local property tax rates.

The error came to light in July of this year, just as the district was preparing to repay a $500 million debt restructuring bond. The district was forced to amend the prospectus for new bonds with an addendum in which the error was disclosed. At the same time, the district announced it would seek reauthorization of the 18-mill tax, which $259 million in taxes continued on page 2.

Six years later

Takeover of Detroit Schools shows few intended results

On Nov. 8, voters elected a new Detroit Public Schools board of education which will take control of the district in January. One of the top vote-getters was Rev. David Murray, who had been elected to the school board in 1998, just months before the state took over the district.

Six years have passed since Detroit’s last elected school board was replaced by a biennially-appointed one. Over that time, the test score gap between Detroit and the rest of the state has diminished, but remains large, and sought-after improvements in financial management have failed to materialize.


To gain perspective on what has and has not changed in the district, it is helpful to recall the highly debated issues that concerned legislators about Detroit Public Schools.

According to its sponsors, the legislation was motivated by desperation over the district’s poor academic performance, falling enrollment and dire graduation rate – then estimated at just 30 percent. The legislative debate over the measure that took place in 1999 was contentious.

Then-Sen. Bill Schuette, R-Midland, and Rep. James White, R-Royal Oak, were among those who sponsored the bill. Schuette called the measure a “brave, bold move to fix a failing school district.”

Six years later, the district is still struggling with an academic achievement gap of 7 percentage points with the rest of the state. But the district is also grappling with a $1.2 billion debt and $1.8 million annual deficit.

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argued that Detroit Public Schools students were "being short changed by a system that is failing," and that as a result "we need some fundamental change." His sentiments were echoed by a number of other Detroit leaders, including Gov. Jennifer Granholm, who told his colleagues, "I … cannot stand by knowing that these kids who need so much are getting so little." By observing that the city's population had fallen from 2 million to 1 million, Sen. Leon Stille, R-Port Huron, introduced Senate Bill 297, which became PA 10 of 1999, said, "This is not an easy decision for me. Rarely do I step away from my Detroit constituents and say, 'I don't like this.' But while the gap has narrowed, it remains large in absolute terms. The percentage of high school seniors scoring at or above basic in math, by 2005, the number of low performers grew to 59.1 percent. But the percentage of students reading proficiently (those scoring at level 1 or 2) rose from 36.5 to 57.4 over the same period.

The gap between Detroit students and their peers in the rest of the state is so large, the district claimed that it was failing more than a quarter of its students. Revenue to the district was also up $240 million, and $150 million came from local taxes, $79 million of which was the unauthorized property tax. Expenditures grew by $67.5 million in 2004, a 4.3 percent increase over 2003 expenditures. The district's per pupil expenditure rose as well to $7,400, an increase of 7.4 percent, and federal revenue grew by 28 percent per pupil. These increases came despite the fact that the federal aid the district received was 2.6 percent. Despite the revenue increases, DPS spent $234.4 million more than the revenue in 2004.

A review of Bulletin 101 4 data for DPS from 1994 through 2004 shows significant invest-ment in the district and a significant reduction in the number of students it serves. Since the passage of Proposal A in 1994, the revenue received by the district has increased by 38 percent per pupil. Total revenue for the district grew from $1.1 billion in 1994 to $1.5 billion in 2004, an increase of 38 percent over a period when cumulative inflation was 21 percent and the district's enrollment was decreased by 17 percent. With a revenue increase 17 percentage points above the rate of inflation, and $259 million in taxes ...
**Outsourcing rises slightly in Michigan public school districts**

The number of public school districts outsourcing one or more non-instructional service functions has grown slightly over the past two years, according to a Mackinac Center for Public Policy biennial survey. Denver, Colorado, was the only one of the three major non-instructional services: busing, janitorial or food. This figure is up from 2003 by 2.8 percentage points or 34 percent. The growth occurred despite the fact that 27 districts brought once-contracted services back in-house in the last two years.

The bulk of those districts opting for privatization, 156, picked the privatization in which a private company hires its own employees to serve students. Another 48 districts contracted for some type of janitorial service and 21 employed private busing contractors.

In one prominent instance of privatization, Grand Rapids Public Schools signed a contract with Chartwells Food Services.

"You don’t privatize food service if it’s making money and no one is getting fired," said Tim Loock, assistant superintendent. "They’re pleased with the way it’s going.

"We have an on-site food services director as part of the contract," Loock said. "If someone has a concern or complaint, they can contact her directly.

"I guess indirectly we benefited from the outsourcing," he said. "It’s a semi-satisfactory solution.

Elsewhere in Oakland County, the Auburn Hills-Avonade School District entered into a year-long contract with Chartwells Food Services.

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Governor’s letter on charter schools stirs controversy among authorizes
Growing number of districts seek solutions to costly health insurance

Rising health care costs, coupled with generous health coverage for employees, threaten to eat up a recently approved $262 million in state aid, according to a public school superintendents’ survey that just to meet obligations in the new pupil increase provided by the state, Feeley Myrand said.

Employer premiums for health care coverage for employees, Feeley said, have increased to $15,300 per employee, up from $13,000 per employee just two years ago. It is part of contract negotiations.

Education officials are looking at the idea of forming their own insurance pools, whether as part of contract negotiations or in forming their own insurance pools, as a way to keep costs down.

Critics say that MESSA drives up costs through MESSA.

A survey conducted by Michigan School Business Office in May found that 84 percent of Michigan school districts, with three collective bargaining units – that alone will cost $220 per student, she said.

In September, the union, which represents more than 1,900 employees in Michigan, went to the Lakeview board for unfair labor practices, the Macomb Daily reported. We believe they are violating the law and imposing a changed working condition without bargaining to an impasse,” an attorney for MEA/NEA Local 1, told the Macomb Daily.

Houghton Lake

The Houghton Lake Board of Education, facing a $362,000 deficit, voted last week to take immediate action to cut costs, according to The Houghton Lake Register. Among his recommendations, which were delivered at a September special meeting, was that the board seek quotes from Blue Cross/Blue Shield for comparable health care benefits which, he said, “should reduce your cost from your current MESSA contracts.”

In early October, the school board in Hesperia declared an impasse in mediated contract negotiations with the teachers’ union and announced it would require teachers to start paying 12 percent of their MESSA health care premiums. The Muskegon Chronicle reported. Prior to that move, Hesperia teachers did not pay any share of their premiums and medical deductibles were paid by the district, the newspaper reported.

A survey conducted by Michigan School Business Officials in May found that 84 percent of Michigan school districts modified their health care plans during the previous year. The survey found that districts employed different strategies to lower costs: 73 percent increased their co-pays or deductibles, 70 percent shifted to a lower cost plan and 42 percent instituted or negotiated premium sharing with employees.

“Next to school finance, (the cost of health care) is the biggest issue facing schools,” said MSBO Executive Director Tom White. “In some districts it’s bigger.”

Holland

After seven months of negotiations, the Holland board of education chose a less expensive health insurance plan that will require teachers to pay $199 a month toward their own coverage. The district had been paying more than $15,300 per teacher annually for health care, but switched to a less expensive plan costing about $13,000 per teacher per year.

In Jackson, the switch to a managed health care plan allowed the school board to save about $200,000 annually, avoid a 15 percent to 17 percent insurance increase and approve a 2 percent raise for teachers, the Jackson Citizen Patriot reported.

The Shephard Public Schools board is offering teachers two options as they negotiate a new contract. Teachers can have MESSA Choices II with no pay increase or accept a Blue Cross/Blue Shield PPO and receive a 2.95 percent pay raise.

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The shift from MESSA to less cost insurers could become a trend, according to a report in Michigan Health Plan Analy- sis. Health Leaders-Interstudy, a healthcare business information company that provides integrated data and analysis, analyzed five education groups in the Pinckney Community School District – including three collective bargaining units – that dropped their MESSA insurance for Care Choices.

“It’s evident how MESSA is vulnerable to competitors when it seeks 10 to 12 percent premium increases while the company that its network is built upon, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, is trumpeting its smallest increases in a decade—in the mid-single-digits in some segments,” the report concluded. “Inscribed Blue Shield PPO and the Blue Cross Blue Shield PPO prices may be able to compete for education groups, but they better come armed with quality data as Care Choices did in Pinckney.”

Michigan districts in healthcare negotiations

Suttons Bay

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In Michigan, districts are fighting for the most cost effective plan.

The Hay Group study also estimated that school districts will pay an average of $11,362 for health insurance per em- ployee, compared to $9,212 spent on state employees.

The impact of these higher costs is devastating,” said Rep. Barb Vander Veen. “We absolutely need to do something. It has a definite impact on the education of Michigan students. We’re seeing 12, 15, 18 percent increases in a year’s time. I would not hesitate to call it a crisis situation.

Part of the answer is to provide school districts with more health care options. Vander Veen is sponsoring legislation that would allow districts to pool resources, as was done in West Michigan, in purchasing health care. In Oakland County, a bill is pending that would amount to a cost reduction of $6 million to $8 million annually.

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High school debate students hone skills and vie for scholarships at four workshops

Student: “Attend Mackinac Center Debate Workshop to kick-start season!”

More than 300 high school debate students and their instructors from across Michigan attended Debate Workshops hosted in September by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

“For 18 years now, the Mackinac Center has been assembling top-notch teams of experts to assist Michigan high school students with the national debate topic,” says Lawrence W. Reed, president of the Mackinac Center. “This year the Center is offering four $1,000 college scholarships to the winners of essay contests, so the benefit to the students of attending these sessions is greater than ever.”

The Debate Workshops are the Mackinac Center’s longest-running program and have shown more than 8,000 students how to debate arguments and ideas that they may not have received from other sources. This year’s Debate Workshops were held in Livonia, Jackson, Grand Rapids and Traverse City.

“The Mackinac Center provides students with unique arguments because few academic and mainstream sources of information detail public policy solutions that require less government intervention as opposed to more,” noted Amy Kellogg, director of the Mackinac Center’s 2005 Debate Workshops program.

This year’s debate resolution, “Resolved: That the United States federal government should substantially decrease its authority either to detain without charge or to search without probable cause,” is an exciting and timely one. The National Federation of State High School Associations report on this topic begins with this quotation:

“The American Constitution was designed to limit and constrain the use of power in order to protect liberty. But as the founders knew, and as has become even more clear in modern times, liberty can be threatened even by well-meaning people. Justice Louis Brandeis put it well: ‘Experience should teach us to be most on our guard to protect liberty when the government’s purposes are beneficent. . . . The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding.’”

This will be an important and educational topic for students as they work to understand how the Constitution was designed to protect both civil and economic liberties, and yet to be flexible through the amendment process.

This year’s Debate Workshop speakers were prominent experts in their respective fields. Dr. Richard Edwards, professor of communication studies at Baylor University, has been the author of the “topic introduction” issue of the Forensic Quarterly since 1972 and has also been a college debate coach for 25 years. Mike Winther has written articles on many public policy issues and is a frequent lecturer at debate camps and has 30 years of experience as a debater and coaching debate. His teams have ranked among the top 10 in the nation. Gregory Rehmke, who has lectured and published widely on the economics and history of a variety of public policy issues, directs educational programs for Economic Thinking/E Pluribus Unum Films, a nonprofit organization in Seattle, Wash. This year’s debate workshops also included special appearances in Livonia and Jackson by Kary Moss, executive director of the ACLU of Michigan since 1998.

Comments from coaches and students alike were very affirming of this year’s dynamic team of speakers. “Need a ‘kickstart’ to your debate year? Attend one of the Mackinac Center workshops,” one student who attended the Jackson workshop wrote. Not often does one hear students asking for sessions to be longer, but this year students wanted as much information as they could obtain from each of the experts. One coach commented: “This was the best program in 10 years; good balance; excellent points for both the negative and the affirmative sides; excellent speakers.” Responses like “awesome,” “best in several years,” “I will be back,” “great way to start out each new debate season,” are just a few examples of the feedback that were received at the conclusion of the workshops.

Visit www.mackinac.org to learn more about debate 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 their subject or about debating itself. To get information on the 2006 Debate Workshops, please contact mcp@mackinac.org or call Amy Kellogg at (989) 631-0900.
Miss Parker and Diane Linn have every-thing and nothing in common.

Parker is black. Linn is white. Parker is a widow with two children. Linn lives in a blue-collar neighborhood. Linn lives near the upscale Indian Village, not far from Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick’s home. Both live in the City of Detroit. Both home schooled their children. Both sent children to the University of Michigan. Both talk excitedly and frequently about their experiences in home schooling. Both see problems with the Detroit Public Schools, but also want to see the district improve.

Parker started home schooling 20 years ago after an older daughter got a full scholarship to the University of Michigan and is now in the final year of medical school, also at Michigan. Another daughter is at Western Michigan University and a son is attending Wayne County Community College. Parker says she got involved with Detroit Public Schools,” Parker said. “Safety, class sizes, behavior problems, drugs. The teachers can be wonderful, but the system needs to be overhauled.”

Parker said she and her husband, Rick, chose home schooling based mainly on their faith.

“We didn’t think our faith stopped just with formal training,” Parker said. “We tried to carry that over into the academic and social lessons for the kids.”

Parker’s husband passed away in 2000, Parker was forced to get a job outside the home, which meant an end to home schooling for her younger children. One high schooler goes to private school while two others attend a charter school.

“Our three younger kids are adopted and have different challenges,” Parker said. “They are in the schools, they are in now have smaller class sizes, reading specialists, a social worker on staff and they kind focus on character building.”

Linn and her husband, Tom, could have afforded any school their children wanted to attend. An adopted daughter did end up graduating from a high school after moving back and forth between home schooling and conventional schooling.

“We made it very clear each year,” Linn said. “If they wanted to go to school, we’d be the first ones out the door to take them around and visit some options.”

But Linn also makes it very clear how she feels about the current status of DPS.

“The potential is there for an educational system,” she said. “But it’s broken down. The enrollment is bottoming out and the tax base is eroding.”

Linn, a certified teacher, said she would love to see Detroit Public Schools become “nontraditional.”

“It could be so new and exciting,” Linn said. “It could attract students on a regional basis and actually become a leader in encouraging home schooling. They could offer drop-in classes for things like high level math and science.”

The Lins ended up sending three children to college at Michigan. One daughter earned two degrees from Michigan while the other daughter earned two degrees from Madonna University.

Linn says while the home-schooling movement began mostly as a faith-driven issue, it has now become a more mainstream option.

“I’m not some home school evangelist,” she said. “It’s not always right for everyone, and it’s not always right for a child’s whole education.”

Linn’s youngest son last year wanted to “test his wings,” as she says, and took several classes at Macomb County Community College for one year, off and on.

The experiences of the Parker and Linn children do not support the notion that students who are home schooled have difficulties being accepted to college. Linn said the Clonlara School in Ann Arbor helped track college successes, grades and transcripts, making the college application process easier. Both women also refute the notion that home schoolers have problems with socialization.

“We meet every Friday with other families for things like art, music, drama, foreign language,” Parker said. “You’re not just stuck in the house.”

Parker said her mornings were devoted to more traditional curricula, while the afternoons were for recreation or special projects.

“There are so many ways available in the world to us as adults that should be available to young people,” Montgomery said. “Students should not be always supposed to be going to a school.”

A third approach, the Clonlara School Compulsory instruction, was introduced in 1994. The program is done entirely over the internet, including communication between teachers and children.

“The possibilities with the Internet are endless,” Montgomery said. “It’s wide open for new enrollments.”

A teacher herself for 15 years, Montgomery ran in parochial and public schools. Montgomery started Clonlara as an alternative when her daughters needed, for one reason or another, to drop their subjects covered, grade point average and credits earned.

“We have 12 pages, single spaced, of all the colleges our graduates have been accepted to,” Montgomery says. “Because all home school students are enrolled in Clonlara’s private day school, they are able to receive an official transcript and diploma upon graduation. The transcript contains the same basic information one would find on any transcript, including all subjects covered, grade point average, and credits earned.

“Ian Slatter, director of The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University estimates the total number of home schooled students in Michigan to be about 126,000 students. A home school check in Michigan requires a signature from 1,000 subscribers alone. Ian Slatter, director of media relations for the Home School Legal Fund, estimates the number of school-age home schooled children is about 40,000 children are home schooled in Michigan.

“It really is difficult to get exact numbers, but through state organizations, support groups and our membership, we can make an informed guess,” Slatter said. “Home schooling is very fluid. Families can enter and leave it very rapidly, even in the middle of a school year.”

Slatter said home schooling is most prevalent in rural areas, followed by suburbs, with its popularity in urban areas lagging behind.

“Rural areas tend to be more conserva-tive,” he said. “About two-thirds of home school families are evangelical Christians, and in rural areas they feel isolated from good schools, so home schooling is a default.”

Suburban families can turn to home schooling because of faith issues, but also out of concern for a negative peer environment, crime and drugs in public schools.

“The real paradox is in the inner cities,” Slatter said. “That’s where home schooling could be of the most benefit, but is used the least.”

Parker said she knew of several families in Detroit who home schooled. “Most of them were blue collar,” she said. “Our husbands didn’t work or lawyers. We made sacrifices, but it was worth it. We saw the benefits.”

Linn said she knows of several “small pockets” of home school families in Detroit, but in her experience, many minority families do not turn to home schooling as a first alternative. She said, “There is a real conflict in the black community about home schooling.”

Most of the African-American families I know have a great respect for the traditional aspects of structure found in private or parochial schools,” Slatter said. “They tend to turn to that first if they’re not satisfied with public schools.”

Linn said she knows of several families in Detroit who home schooled.

“We really experienced freedom as a family,” Linn said. “We felt like we were a little group of constitutional revolutionaries who took responsibility for what we were doing.”

Linn said the family embarked on a six-year study of the Western world, including trips to Greece, Rome, France and England.

“We walked on the very sites we were reading about,” she said. “Life and education merged in the most astonishing ways.”

Linn added that dinner table conversa-tions lasted less than three hours during this time.

“I feel my kids were uniquely prepared for college,” she said. “They made friends very easily and those friends are a reflection of our family’s values, not peer values.”

It’s difficult to determine how many chil-dren in the city of Detroit are home schooled, since Michigan does not have mandatory reporting for home school families. Voluntary registration shows 1,566 children being home schooled statewide in 943 households, according to the Michigan Department of Education. The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University estimates the total number of home schooled students in Michigan to be about 126,000 students. A home school check in Michigan requires a signature from 1,000 subscribers alone. Ian Slatter, director of media relations for the Home School Legal Fund, estimates the number of school-age home schooled children is about 40,000 children are home schooled in Michigan.

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The older generation fought for equal access to public schools, and still Detroit area kids fight for that. When the younger generation sees these public schools not servicing the needs of their students, and is tempted to pull out, it creates tension with parents and grandparents.”
A Michigan Court of Appeals ruling to block union organizers at Brother Rice High School in Bloomfield Township, Mich., from meeting with the Michigan Education Association will stand, now that the time to appeal to the Michigan Supreme Court has expired.

In September 2003, 30 of 42 teachers at Brother Rice expressed interest in joining a union and requested an election to determine if the workforce could be organized by the MEA. Brother Rice-board members, including the union's filing a 1979 U.S. Supreme Court decision, National Labor Relations Board vs. Miami-Dade County Public Schools, which found that federal labor law could not be applied to church-operated schools because of infringement on the religious clauses of the First Amendment,” and give rise to “difficult and sensitive issues.”

The MEA, however, brought an action before the Michigan Employment Relations Commision, arguing in May 2004 it did have jurisdiction because the 1979 ruling did not specify the decision could apply to Michigan. In an election scheduled an election at the school for August 2004. School administrators approximated the number of teachers and its politics would interfere with the right of the school to hold and teach religious beliefs in accordance with the Michigan and United States Constitutions.

Brother Rice eventually took its case to court, arguing that the MEA had no jurisdiction in private schools, the Court of Appeals until it decides. A three-judge Court of Appeals panel ruled unanimously in August that MERC has no jurisdiction over the school board or individual teachers would find in opposition to their beliefs.

Brother Rice, however, has high school with 675 students, a faculty of mostly lay teachers. While not all teachers are Catholic and they are expected to be in end classes with a prayer, and daily religion class is part of the overall curriculum.

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Support creation of new Detroit charters

Bob Thompson, Dave Bing and the Skillman Foundation are trying to give kids in Detroit a quality education. As Americans, we believe that providing a quality public education to every child is a fundamental freedom. Yet, the question remains: are we providing that education?

One recent study revealed half of Michigan’s teachers say they give up on disadvantaged students at least “sometimes,” if not “a lot.” Another study noted that state colleges and universities spend about $600 million a year to teach students what they didn’t learn in high school (which says nothing of youth who never make it to college).

To add to that, the thousands of students displaced this summer when the Detroit Public Schools and the Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit in separate actions shuttered nearly 50 schools. These families had few if any options, with most charter public schools at capacity and suburban schools threatening to oust and arrest incoming “carpetbaggers.”

It may take months to see how many of the 10,000 students Detroit’s public schools are projected to lose this year have indeed found someplace else to go – or hit the streets, but school officials say they may close another 20 to 30 schools to offset a $200 million deficit.

Can anyone argue the city’s children don’t need additional choices in public education? Or that the future of Detroit and the state don’t demand a far-reaching educational turn-around?

Such arguments can’t be made, at least not in good faith. It’s time to get all students in quality schools, keep them there, keep them safe, and engage them in the kind of active learning that positions them to be successful adults.

There are answers, if only decision-makers would keep the interests of children at the forefront. The most obvious solution comes from businessman and NBA Hall of Famer Dave Bing, who’s teaming with Detroit’s Skillman and Thompson foundations to build 15 smaller charter high schools, all opened under a unique 2003 law. The first school would be near Bing Group headquarters, where he also is building 40 middle-income homes, in part to serve the company’s 1,400 workers.

The new schools would fulfill a graduation rate of 90 percent, with 90 percent of those going on to college. Grand Valley State University is supporting the effort, helping to ensure the schools are beacon of hope.

“We all have a duty to make a difference,” Bing said. “I can no longer sit idly by and watch this city, this community, continue to fail. People don’t have to live like this. … Our residents need to know that people care and that there is an alternative to what we have now. It has to be done today; we can’t wait another moment.”

Are charter public schools really different? Do they work?

A 2005 Michigan Department of Education report shows charters perform at or above their peers — even while serving many students who were plucked from lower schools. It’s heartening that Detroit-area charters surpassed the local district in all 7th- and 8th-grade MEAPs, including by 13 percentage points in reading and 15 points in writing.

Are charters different? Well, they’re small. Each is its own district, so bureaucracy isn’t an issue. Academic performance and nurturing environments are given, or changes are made. As one Detroit charter leader says, if a teacher can’t hug and love children, that teacher is in the wrong place.

Detroit has charters focused on the arts — one has computed that students each receive the equivalent of nearly $225,000 in private arts lessons during their 13 years of schooling. Others focus on the basics, moral character, or ethnic cultures. Extensive tutoring is frequently available.

Importantly, charters welcome parents into the school, arrange parent support programs, and involve them in the learning process.

One school tracks involvement through ID cards, and had 431 parents last year volunteering 10 or more hours. Total time volunteered? More than 7,000 hours. This school’s MEAP scores even beat the state average in fourth and seventh grades.

Charter public schools have proven themselves as families of 50,000 southeast Michigan students can attest.

Consider the Detroit mom whose daughter attended a charter until the 20-minute commute became impossible. Shortly after the girl re-enrolled in the nearby public school, a neighbor saw her walking. When the neighbor heard what was happening, she contacted the mom and said, “Your daughter is going back to [the charter school].” She noted that the girl had loved her charter and worked hard to excel there. She said no child should be deprived of an excellent education, and she now takes the girl to and from school, free of charge.

That’s the child-focus we all need.

Every child deserves a quality educa-
tion, yet – as Americans, we believe this. Like Bob Thompson, Dave Bing and the Skillman Foundation, let’s get to work. Let’s not get in the way. Let’s move forward and provide excellent schools for every family and every community.

Daniel L. Quisenberry is president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies.
Private K-12 scholarships: a viable alternative for Detroit’s school children

According to news reports, the Detroit public school district may have illegally spent more than a quarter of a billion dollars of business property taxes that it had no right to collect. To even begin to repay that money, the district would likely have to levy a new tax on all taxpayers, including the ones it allegedly overtaxed in the first place. That’s not just robbing Peter to pay Paul. It’s robbing Peter and Paul to pay Paul. To those who have watched in despair as every effort to turn the district around has ended in Shakespearian tragedy, I offer this proverb: When the horse you’re riding is dead, get off.

The Detroit district is a dead horse. This sounds harsh, but imagine for a moment that Michigan’s 2000 school voucher initiative had passed, operated smoothly for five years — and was suddenly found to have perpetrated this quarter-billion-dollar fiasco. The program would have been killed. But after a decade of fiscal mismanagement that has made the Prodigal Son look like Warren Buffett, the Detroit public school system may once again get a pass from voters and community leaders. There will naturally be some token red tape. But could enough money be raised to make a real difference? That’s not just robbing Peter to pay Paul. It’s robbing Peter and Paul to pay Paul.

Fortunately, there is an immediate alternative: a full-scale, privately financed scholarship program for the children of Detroit. Businesses, foundations and individuals can contribute to a fund that provides private school tuition assistance to every family in the city who needs it. Michigan is already home to at least four nonprofit private scholarship programs, so we don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Among these are a Detroit chapter of the national Children’s Scholarship Fund, managed by the Catholic Archdiocese (but not restricted to its own schools), and the Grand Rapids-based Education Freedom Fund, which now serves children primarily outside of Detroit. Both programs are heavily over-subscribed, currently having between two and four times as many applicants as scholarships. Either or both of these programs could be radically expanded as scholarships. Either or both of these programs could be radically expanded as scholarships. Either or both of these programs could be radically expanded as scholarships. Either or both of these programs could be radically expanded as scholarships.

The advantages of this approach are obvious: instant results, no politics, no red tape. But could enough money be raised to make a real difference? As of 2002, Michigan nonprofits were spending $28 billion annually, 95 percent of which remained within the state. Michigan’s foundations alone made annual grants of $1.2 billion. If the private scholarships were capped at the lower of $3,000 or 75 percent of tuition, roughly $440 million would be required to award a scholarship to every single DPS student. Even with higher caps, it is feasible. A well-funded Detroit scholarship program would not only create the most vibrant and responsive education marketplace in the nation, but also have the likely benefit of lowering taxes — both features that would attract new jobs and businesses to the state. The tax benefit would accrue from the fact that the state government finances school districts based largely on their enrollment. If a well-funded Detroit scholarship program were a success with parents — as it almost certainly would be — students would voluntarily migrate out of the DPS and into private-sector schools, reducing the school district’s budget and its seemingly insatiable appetite for tax dollars.

The only thing standing in the way of this solution is our blinkered vision of what public education must look like. State-run schooling has been around for so long that few people can imagine anything taking its place, no matter how bad it gets. We have even lost sight of the distinction between the institution itself and the mission it is meant to fulfill, confusing one particular means — the current education monopoly — with our ultimate end: ensuring that all of Detroit’s children are prepared for success in private life and participation in public life.

Because of that confusion, we are unnecessarily sacrificing generation after generation of this city’s children to a system that is nearly bankrupt in every sense of the word. But Detroit doesn’t have to keep its children shackled to the remains of the public school system. There is a better option. All you have to do to make it happen is pick up the phone and donate to a scholarship fund. I have.

Andrew J. Coulson is director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C.
Tuition hikes at Michigan universities demonstrate need for reform

Richard Vedder

Fall 2005 www.educationreport.org Michigan Education Report

It was a painful summer for Michigan's public university stu-
dents and their parents. The fifteen state-fund-
ed schools announced tuition increases for the coming year, and uni-
versally they were far greater than the rate of inflation. The most pro-
minent schools — the University of Michigan, Michigan State, and Wayne State — all announced tuition hikes of 12 percent or more, while increases for four-year Michigan public universities rose 59 percent — compared with a 25 percent increase in the Consumer Price Index.

Why are tuition fees going up so much? The main reason is that the universities can get away with it, and have few incentives to cut costs. Third parties such as federal government student assistance programs and private scholarship donors pay most of the bills, making consumers relatively insensitive to the price of tuition. In the 10 years after 1994, federal financial as-
sistance rose at a breathtaking annual rate of 10 percent. With the fed all drooping dollars out of airplanes over college campuses, universities raised their tuition rates generally, even with good state appropriation increases.

Most colleges and universities, including private ones, have virtually no incen-
tives to reduce costs. There is no added compensation given to key employees if expenses are cut, and the opposite is true: university administrators increase staffing levels to ease the burden on existing personnel, thereby lowering productivity. In 1976, there were three non-faculty professional workers per 100 students at the University of Michigan. 25 years later, the number had doubled to six. Un-
less it can be demonstrated that there were enough students in college for the education delivered (which, as a college professor of 40 years, I strongly doubt), labor productivity is actually falling in higher education, even after allowing for research. This contributes to the productivity rise in the private for-profit sector where stronger incentives exist to manage costs and be efficient.

This brings us to another reason tuition levels are increasing even more than health care prices — the increased compensation of university employees. While in the last two or three years have raised health costs modestly, per-sonnel costs have been increasing even more. In the past generation university pay has increased even as the workload has fallen (due to added staffing). I estimate that the typical full professor today makes roughly 50 percent more in inflation-ad-
dusted terms than in 1980. Average teaching loads are far lighter today than when I be-
gan teaching. At major research universities like the University of Michigan, the typical full professor teaches no more than five hours per week for 32 weeks a year. At the highest levels, university presidents, foot-
ball coaches and truly superstar professors are earning salaries approaching the mid-six-
six-digits, or even more.

Some argue higher education is inher-
ently labor-intensive, and costs inevitably will rise as pay increases at the same time as the number of the people who would otherwise work else-
where. While partly true, universities have not used technology effectively to reduce costs; pared burgeo
ing administrative staff; shifted to lower demand expensive doctoral programs; fully outsourced non-
educational functions like housing and food; and effectively capped the number of their capital (the typical classroom is 35 percent of their capital). Private for-profit school in the past have operated at dramatically lower cost per course, offering a product well-liked by students (especially commuters, who can work through-
ally), taught in comfortable but not opulent surroundings.

The time has come for Michi-
gan to emulate Colorado, and begin giving more higher education assistance to the students themselves in the form of scholar-
ship vouchers, and less to the institutions, which by their behavior have demonstrated they are indifferent or even hostile to the cost containment measures needed to keep education affordable to all, rich and poor alike.

Richard Vedder is Distinguished Professor of Economics and the Phillip D. eddy/Office of Advanced Studies at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institution headquartered in Midland, Mich.

State should cut strings to most school funding

Recently, 126 former and current legislators who were involved in crafting the 1994 Proposal A school finance initiative were invited to review its results and recommend revisions. Most of the group’s recommendations are contrary to the mandates in the proposal on the predictable and politically unlikely “cat-
egoricals” grants, in which the state provides money to school districts strictly for activities in a specific “category” and replace most of them with a single “no strings attached” foun-
dation grant based solely on the number of pupils in the district. Before Proposal A there were 31 such funding categories that accounted for 44 percent of state support of public education. These programs had many strings attached, required that cash be sent to local school districts and the state to administer. After Proposal A the number of categoricals was reduced to 24 programs accounting for 15 percent of (greatly increased) state fund-

A 1999 Citizens Research Council recommendation, in fact, called for the elimination of Intermidate School Districts, since there was no real reason for them to exist, and local school districts “navigate the labyrinth of categorical program paperwork,” but that the categoricals were a “negative justification for keeping ISDs.”

The cap against categoricals is that they represent an effort by a cumbersome bureaucracy to micromanage local schools. Or, that they reflect political considerations in the legislature, rather than educational realities in the classrooms. On the other side, some “cat-
egoricals” are justified by the fact that eligibility for them varies widely across school districts with different socio-economic characteristics. Examples include funding for “at risk” pupils (defined somewhat arbitrarily on the basis of how many students in school qualify for free lunches), and funding for “educationally disadvantaged” students. And for “school readiness” programs for young children, an “educational experience at Brother Rice. It is true: university administrators increase staffing levels to ease the burden on existing personnel, thereby lowering productivity. In 1976, there were three non-faculty professional workers per 100 students at the University of Michigan. 25 years later, the number had doubled to six. Unless it can be demonstrated that there were enough students in college for the education delivered (which, as a college professor of 40 years, I strongly doubt), labor productivity is actually falling in higher education, even after allowing for research. This contributes to the productivity rise in the private for-profit sector where stronger incentives exist to manage costs and be efficient.

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Proposal A

A Brief History

• Passed with more than a 2-1 margin in March 1994.
• Significantly restructured property taxes and school funding.
• It increased the sales tax from 4 to 6 percent, and capped annual home assess-

Court correctly ended MEA’s Catholic school bid

Two years ago, the Michigan Educa-
tion Association col-
signed signatures from teachers at a school in Birmingham. The teachers wanted the union to represent them in labor talks, thus challenging the province of a Catholic school board to
duct any union activity. The school in ques-
tion was Brother Rice High School, which is Roman Catholic, and none of Michigan’s Catholic schools is unionized.

The issue became a legal dispute when the school board objected to the MEA’s representing Brother Rice employees. Recently, the Michigan Court of Appeals weighed in on the case, holding that labor unions cannot organize teachers at Catholic schools in Michigan. The deci-

dion is an important setback for the MEA in its efforts to extend its influence and income.

The MEA had in fact received a sufficient number of signatures in favor of teachers at Brother Rice High School to allow an election to determine whether it would become the first Michigan Catholic school teachers to be unionized. Instead, the MEA then petitioned the Michigan Employment Relations Commission to set such an election.

Brother Rice, in turn, asserted that the formation of a teachers union violated its First Amendment rights under the U.S. Constitu-
tion, suggesting that the union’s presence at Brother Rice would compro-
sess any Catholic (let alone Catholic) school and modeled the rationale in the Catholic Bishop ruling was persuasive in this case, as well.

Perhaps recognizing the weakness of their position, the MEA did not appeal to the Michigan Supreme Court. Therefore, the Court of Appeals’ opinion maintains the status quo, given that before this lawsuit, there were no teachers unions in Michigan’s Catholic schools. Neverthe-
less, this is a big loss for the MEA.

The union cannot now attempt to organize other Catholic schools in Michigan, but it may be able to organize other Catholic schools in Michigan, but it may be able to organize other Catholic schools if it can show that there is a “special characteristic” to Catholic schools that makes it reasonable for Catholic schools to be excluded from the law. That may be difficult.

The case has also become important for the Michigan Court of Appeals itself. The court’s decision was rendered in a case in which the court had no prior decision to follow, and it is likely to be considered a significant precedent for future cases involving the First Amendment.

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Are mandatory funding increases for public schools the key to student success?

No: Earmarking sets dangerous precedent

Michigan taxpayers cannot afford the K-16 education funding proposal. The non-partisan and independent House Fiscal Agency has estimated that this proposal would cost approximately $1.1 billion above current state spending on education—into the future year alone. Steady increases in state spending on education would follow.

The K-16 Coalition’s plan to automatically increase annual state government spending on K-12 school districts, community colleges and state universities by the rate of inflation—regardless of education outcomes or changing needs—would remove $1.1 billion of public money from annual review and budgetary control, severely limiting the ability of the Legislature and governor to set and fund state priorities.

According to a recent study prepared by Anderson Economic Group, the amount of funding available for K-12 public schools in Michigan has grown rapidly since the passage of Proposal A in 1994. Between 1994 and 2004, operating revenue increased by 71 percent, price inflation grew about 21 percent, and enrollment in Michigan schools increased by roughly 4 percent. (Most schools have received per-pupil operating revenue increases double or triple the rate of inflation.) During this same time period, property tax debt for capital expenditures grew more rapidly—around 217 percent. Despite all these increases in funding for public schools, the K-12 education establishment is demanding that more money be fed into a system with no linking to providing higher levels of academic achievement.

Michigan taxpayers have a right to know what has happened to all the money invested in our education system since 1994. While we are among the highest spending states for K-12 public education, Michigan remains solidly stuck in the lower half of states relating to academic achievement on almost every measure. If more money meant higher academic achievement, Michigan would be a national leader.

In September, the Michigan Chamber Board of Directors voted unanimously to reaffirm support for Proposal A, education spending on essential and compelling state needs. The Chamber and other business leaders should be a healthy debate in Lansing over setting the price and the priorities of government, along with the funding for each priority. And importantly, there should be an annual evaluation of the effectiveness of proposals and legislation.

The two primary issues regarding the K-16 proposal are first, how much will it cost? Thanks to the House Fiscal Agency, we know the answer to that question, an additional $1.1 billion for the first year with escalating increases for the future. And secondly, how will state government pay for it? The options are either a major tax increase on working families and job providers or a substantial reduction in spending in other areas of the state budget such as health care, public safety, or local government.

Parents and job providers who study the K-16 proposal carefully will be surprised and disappointed to learn that nowhere in the lengthy wording of the petition is any reference to education quality, student achievement, or what Michigan’s schools need to improve. The petition does not include reform measures to reduce administrative overhead and contain health care and pension costs.

The Michigan Chamber’s position on the K-16 proposal is consistent with the Chamber’s stand on similar proposals which tried to lock in guaranteed funding and bypass the decision making process of the Legislature and governor. In 2002, the Michigan Chamber opposed a proposal by the medical community to earmark tobacco settlement revenue for health care-related programs and projects. Proposal 4 of 2002 was overwhelmingly rejected by the voters—66 percent “No” to 34 percent “Yes.” Interestingly, the loudest opposition to Proposal 4 came from businesses, schools, and communities based on their elected officials and other education leaders—people who now want voters to support an attempt to earmark funding and tie the hands of the governor and Legislature in the budgeting process.

A yes vote on Proposal 4 is a no vote on Proposal A. The two proposals are different but, despite some procedural and definition variations, it is fundamentally the same concept. Protection for funding increases would be afforded K-12 public education without assurances of improved public education and achievement.

In an editorial that appeared in the Detroit Free Press on Oct. 18, 2002, Mary Sue Coleman, president of the University of Michigan and Peter McPherson, then-president of Michigan State University, wrote: “Responsible budgeting demands frequent reassessment of needs and performance or accountability measures. Without assurance that the state budget process may be an audacious step, but it would be in the best interests of the children for the state’s top elected officials could step in to address this issue. It would be a violation of our state’s constitutional right to decide how to spend taxes to fail to address this issue, and it would be an embarrassment to the state and the country.”

Meanwhile, many businesses continue to join the residents in fleeing for the suburbs. As the exodus continues, we are seeing a growth in the number of students from low-income backgrounds in the inner city. While the state’s overall student body has grown by more than 50 percent.

During that same time frame, the size of the district’s student body has shrunk by more than 20 percent.

We once it to all our children that they have equal access to the same quality of education: mid-level teachers, high-quality teaching materials, basic education outcomes for all students. The Detroit Public Schools is their best and only hope. But unless we can come up with a way to maintain the quality of academic programs we have offered for generations and unless we are able to continue to attract committed, first-rate teachers we may end up giving them very limited hope for the future.

That’s why we have teamed up with many other school districts in this state to call for an equity and adequacy study. Today, more than half a century after the birth of the modern civil rights movement, 21st century America still maintains what amounts to a dual education system. But unlike what has happened throughout much of the history of this country, this system is spreading and has become systemic and that is a shame. Our children deserve better.

The evidence suggests that the momentum will only continue to build. The U.S. Constitution gives states the right to decide how to fund public education. Right that states broad discretion. The state’s top elected officials could step in to address this issue. It would be unthinkable for the state to allow a de facto system of education to continue.

William F. Coleman III is CEO of the Detroit Public Schools.

Yes: More money promotes equal access

This academic year, the state of Michigan will pay approximately $7,300 for each Detroit Public Schools student. This money, known as a foundational allowance, is one of the lowest received by any public school system in the metro area. Of this amount, 6 percent will come from a non-homestead tax levied on businesses and other commercial enterprises in the city.

A high school north of the city’s northwest boundary is Birmingham, a tony community that bustles with offices, fashionable shops, chic restaurants and clubs. Birmingham’s school district is frequently praised as one of the finest in the state, a fact that makes the city one of the most desirable zip codes in the metro Detroit area. High school graduation rates hover at close to 100 percent, as does the percentage of seniors who are college-bound.

Like the other public school systems in Michigan, Birmingham automatically receives $6,700 from the state for each child it educates, but the money that pours in from the non-homestead levy pushes the per pupil allowance to more than $11,000. To be sure, several other schools in the area and throughout the state receive amounts through their non-homestead levy that significantly dwarf Detroit’s foundational allowance. But the disparities raise a larger question: should geography or fate determine how much money is doled out to furnish every child in this state with his or her birthright—a public education?

Many critics are quick to lambaste educators like myself who believe that state governments throughout this land ought to move aggressively to bridge the disparities in public funding. The solution to the problems in public education, they argue, is not more money.

I couldn’t agree more.

But the critics miss the point. It’s true that there are no conclusive studies that agree that pumping money into the education of a child guarantees strong reading skills, graduation from high school and above all, a competitive edge in the world. But there are many studies that show that more funds provide certain advantages. These advantages include stronger programs in fine art, music, technology, reading, science and mathematics. The advantages also include stronger extra-curricular programs and the ability to attract talented teachers and staff.

In recent years, the Detroit Public Schools’ precariously financial position has made it increasingly difficult to maintain first-rate academic programs and to recruit and retain talented teachers and administrators. If the past is anything to go by, I don’t expect that to change anytime soon. In the last half-century, the city has lost more than half its population. During that same time frame, the size of the district’s student body has shrunk by more than 20 percent.

Meanwhile, many businesses continue to join the residents in fleeing for the suburbs. As the exodus continues, we are seeing a growth in the number of students from low-income backgrounds in the inner city. While the state’s overall student body has grown by more than 50 percent.

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

Tell us what you think: Are mandatory funding increases for public schools the key to student success?

Jim Barrett is president and CEO of the Michigan Chamber of Commerce.