Better writing: High-scoring schools say it's not easy Curriculum director: 'There is no magic program'

Good writing scores are hard to come by in the Michigan Educational Assessment Program, but a few school districts are producing students who are the exceptions.

While reading and math scores generally improved on fall 2006 MEEP tests, the number of students who met or exceeded writing expectations fell in four of six grades tested. In addition, writing scores generally trailed reading scores by 10 to 40 percentage points, particularly in early grades.

But Okemos Public Schools, near Lansing, and Vanguard Academy, a charter public school in Wyoming, Mich., have better news to report. Michigan Education Report talked with Patricia Terl, assistant superintendent at Okemos, and Valerie Musamus, eighth grade English teacher at Vanguard, about their schools' respective scores, which bested the state average by as much as 30 percentage points in recent years.

A number of factors contributed to better writing, Page 7

CONTRACTING

How schools can optimize cost and quality Primer discusses 5 Ws of hiring firms to provide support services

The number of public school districts in Michigan that hire companies to provide custodial, transportation and food services is on the rise, and a new book from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy explains how the process works and how schools can gain the benefits and avoid the pitfalls of competitive contracting.

A School Privatization Primer for Michigan School Officials, Media and Residents" describes the frequency of privatization in Michigan and nationwide, discusses the contracting process and offers "rules of thumb" for school districts new to this management practice. The author is Michael D. LaFave, the Mackinac Center's director of fiscal policy. The Mackinac Center also publishes Michigan Education Report.

"Knowledge about competitive contracting is hard to find in a central source that is focused on the needs of schools, specifically in Michigan," Contracting, Page 2

Show me the money

MACKINAC CENTER BOOK EXPLAINS HOW MICHIGAN PAYS FOR K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS

More than $19 billion — at last count — makes its way from taxpayers to Michigan public school districts each year, according to a new book published by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy that explains public school financing.

At 180 pages, "A Michigan School Money Primer," is a comprehensive overview of the system of state, federal, local and intermediate district tax revenues that pay for public schooling, as well as the state and local school budgeting processes that determine how the money is allocated and spent. The primer also explains how the state constitution and various Michigan statutes, as well as court decisions, affect school financing.

"Our desire was to produce an accurate, thorough and objective overview for anyone involved or interested in how public school dollars are raised, channeled and spent," said Ryan S. Olson, director of education policy at the Mackinac Center. He, along with Michael D. LaFave, the center's director of fiscal policy, authored the book. The primer is designed both for readers who know little about public finance but would like to learn more, and for those already familiar with the system who would like a broader understanding of it, Olson said.

The primer opens with an introduction to more than 25 revenue sources that channel money to Michigan school districts, explaining those as well known as the local property tax to those as little known as housing project service fees. The Michigan Lottery, for example, contributed about $689 million to the Michigan School Aid fund in 2006, or about 5.5 percent of the $12 billion School Aid Fund that year.

In the next section, the authors explain how state legislators distribute money to local and intermediate school districts and charter public schools, and the process used to determine the "foundation allowance," or how much each school district will receive per pupil each year. In Show ME THE MONEY, Page 2

Michigan average ACT scores by year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>ACT Composite Score</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>21.8</td>
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<td>2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ACT test covers English, mathematics, reading and science. Individual scores may vary from 1 (low) to 36 (high). This graph shows average scores in reading and math among Michigan students who took the test in the years indicated. The composite score is the average of the four test scores. Source: 2006 ACT National Score Report.

Student Marching Band

Luke March, tuba player, heads toward the practice field at the Home School Building in Wyoming, where The Northern Lights Marching Band meets on Wednesdays. March is wearing a souvenir T-shirt from the band's 2006 parade season. (Story, pg. 8)


Teachers in the Burt Township School District, Grand Marais, have voted in favor of a “local-only” contract, ending their membership in both the Michigan Education Association and National Education Association. The announcement was made in a press release issued by the Association of American Educators, which assisted the Burt Township educators in the process.

The Burt Township School District is located in Alger County in the Upper Peninsula. District enrollment is approximately 70 students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

“Teachers are looking forward to making decisions regarding their terms and conditions of employment without the outside interference and the excessive dues,” elementary teacher Mary Hannon told Michigan Education Report in the press release. Michigan Education Report was not able to reach Hammer directly for comment.

The teachers’ most recent contract with the school district expired on June 30, so the BTEA now will be responsible for negotiating a new contract. According to the release, each member of the BTEA will save about $650 per year by not paying union options, Munk said.

For example, LaFeive suggests that school districts take full advantage of the “Request for Proposal,” a written document inviting bids from vendors which should spell out the services a district expects and the criteria by which it will meet. Here the district can establish its expectations for quality, oversight, employee training, licensing and more.

“The heart and soul of a contract arrangement in the public sector and the one area in the private sector that is the most frequently levered at districts during contracting is that vendors pay lower wages than the district. In a recent case the district was faced with a comparison with a competitive analysis, the primer suggests, adding that vendors’ wages are frequently competitive and may be a difference in benefits, however. A key reason vendors can provide services at lower cost is that the district itself is that the company’s employees are not public employees, and so the vendor is not required to contribute to the state employee retirement system. Those savings can be passed on to school districts. Another reason is the economy of scale that large transportation, food service and custodial companies can bring to bear on purchasing.

“The primer “explains and simplifies what to the outsider, can too often appear to be a complex and arcane school funding process,” said Michael Williamson, former deputy superintendent for the Michigan Department of Education.

The Michigan figures are based on a complex and arcane school funding process. The goal of the bidding process is not to seek the lowest possible price from a vendor for any aspect of school services as well as a competitive price, the primer explains.

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Programs link education, industry to answer workforce needs

Students need information: companies need skilled-trades workers

Bill Moneypenny pulls out a piece of scrap paper and draws a bell curve, then splays it into three parts, two thin and one fat. In this corner, he says, putting his ballpoint on the skinny area to the right, are all those students who don’t graduate from advanced placement classes, join dual enrollment programs and get 4.0 grade point averages. Here, he explains, most students are “a policy category on the left, are the students who struggle through every class and will need help next year.”

But it’s the students in the fat part of the bell curve — about 80 percent of all students, by Moneypenny’s estimate — who are going to become most of Michigan’s workforce in the next decade. He believes educators and business leaders alike need to pay more attention to them.

“We still take this bunch (the 80 percent in the middle) and we’re going to shove them into the four-year college group,” Moneypenny said.

Moneypenny is chief executive officer of MITECH+, a private, nonprofit corporation headquartered in Midland that advocates the value of technical careers. Founded in 2001, the organization works with business, industry, educators and families to create informational programs related to technical careers, career training and career planning.

“Companies need a four-year degree if they want to land a job as a chemical process operator at two nearby global companies — the Dow Chemical Co. and the Dow Corning Corp. Each company is looking for more than 100 operators annually “for the mid-term future” to replace retiring workers, officials have said.

Hundreds of electricians, pipe fitters, welders and other skilled-trades workers will be needed shortly at Dow Corning’s Hemlock Semiconductor Corp., a silicon production facility where a $1 billion expansion was announced this year. Hundreds more will be needed if a proposal to build a $3 billion expansion at Dow Corning is given the green light. Dow Corning is a manufacturer of silicon-based products for use in the electronics, transportation, construction and packaging industries.

“There’s so much emphasis on college, college, college, that some people assume that just because someone graduates from high school, that their education is done,” said Anne M. DeBoer, executive director of the Dow Corning Foundation.

Dow Corning’s educational efforts are designed to be responsive to workforce needs — within the firm’s U.S. labor relations manager. A chemical process operator is responsible for supervising the mixing of raw materials into a finished chemical product, he explained. That includes timing and amount of mixing, adjusting temperatures and catalysts, doing laboratory tests on the finished product, reducing waste and suggesting improvements.

“Operators in our plants are in an extremely challenging role,” he said. “We’ve got to get the word out that those are challenging and rewarding careers.”

High wages are part of the reward, he and others pointed out. U.S. Census Bureau data shows that a skilled or technical tradesperson earned an average of $690 a week as of 2002, compared to $787 for a person with a bachelor’s degree, $606 for an associate degree and $474 for a high school graduate. People with master’s degrees earned an average of $969 a week, followed by those holding a doctoral or medical degree, at $1,069 and $1,468, respectively.

“Jobs in the type of work you’re doing, the job description as a labor relations manager has expanded to include regular visits to high schools and career fairs to promote interest in the field as well as in the two-year chemical process degree program at nearby Delta College.

“It’s not often you see marketing set up booths at career fairs. We didn’t used to, but because of changes in the use of those skills, we need to recruit candidates,” he said.

Corporations like Dow Corning can no longer hire someone to replace a worker and risk of training young employees on the job, he added.

Each of those organizations used to interview for work ethic and attitude and then train them for skills. Now they have to have all three coming in.”

Business and industry should make their needs and opportunities known by showing up at career fairs, sending recruiters into the classroom and inviting teachers into the workplace, Moneypenny said. But he added educators and parents have a role to play in Michigan’s post-assembly line economy as well.

“I think one of the strengths of Midland is that it has a real manufacturing base,” said John valley, director of the Midland City Career Center.

One of those was a construction and manufacturing class in the Midland Area Career Center, which includes area teachers, college faculty and skilled-trades workers from area industry.

MITECH+ also cosponsors a Career Showcase in which area businesses invite students, parents and teachers to spend an afternoon touring their facilities and learning about career possibilities. The organization also sponsors “Reality Store” in area middle schools, in which students spend time in advanced exploring different career paths, and then choose a career for themselves. On the day of the program, the students are “given” one month’s income for their chosen career and sent out to shop for such things as housing, utilities, food and health care at different work stations hosted by volunteer adults.

One Reality Store participant who chose to be a disc jockey told Moneypenny that, “I learned I need to live close to the radio station, because I can’t afford a car!”

Parents need to be open to skilled-trades careers as well, Moneypenny and others said.

“We have a lot of households that have one or two degrees held by the parents. There’s earning power in those degrees and they want that for their kids,” said Mark Schag, director of MITECH + and Delta College, with support from the Saginaw Valley chapter of Associated Builders and Contractors. “We also work with the Midland Area Career Center and other middle school and high school students spent a week at the college getting training and experience in fields like welding, computer-assisted design, carpentry and chemical processing, with guest teachers from the college and industry.

The previous summer, Middleton said, he helped build a concrete block wall, put framing, insulation and drywall in a model house, and helped install an electrical outlet and two switches as part of a construction camp cosponsored by MITECH+ and Associated Builders and Contractors.

“His program is a job well done,” Moneypenny said. “This creates the pipeline from middle school to high school to college to the workforce,” said Darra White, MITECH+ executive director.

Chris’ mother, Diane Middleton, said, “We’re always told to push our kids, ‘You must go to college, but you have to further your education in some way after high school.’

“I’ve been able to see just how competitive it’s becoming. I don’t think it’s ever too early to discuss with your child what you want to do for the rest of your life.”

In addition to the summer camp, MITECH+ also sponsors an Annual Career Showcase. In addition to the annual Career Showcase, MITECH+ also presents Career Awareness Weeks to middle school classes.

“Why we do this is, we want to make a difference in our community and that’s why we’re here,” said Middle school counselor Eileen Zink.

“The Bay Area Acadia Career Center offers 25 career-related programs to students, ranging from agriculture science to hospitality to nursing. Students run an on-site restaurant; medical science students attend classes at Bay Regional Medical Center, and students in the truck mechanics program might work at local businesses. The center is now adding a $6 million health and science occupational wing.

“There are some that are always pushing the envelope,” Volt said. “with work and knowledge and welding together in one space.

That hands-on component pushes up the cost of career education, he added.

When you have hands-on, you have a safety component. The oversight piece is big. You can’t have 35 kids in a class with a single teacher.”

High school programs can and should be responsive to workforce needs — within limits, Volt said.

“I think that doesn’t mean to say that those who want to go to a four-year university, he and the others said, but they also said they see too many university graduates who might not have been prepared in an associate degree program.

Michigan school districts vary in the amount and type of career and technical education they offer. Some offer programs in their own high schools or jointly with other high schools, local colleges or businesses. In Midland, Volt said, schools work with area colleges, universities and businesses for programs in health care, information technology, chemical processing and cosmetology. Other school districts have their own career centers or send students to regional career centers administered through intermediate school districts.

Thirty-one of Michigan’s 37 intermediate school districts levied a vocational-technical education millage in 2006.

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A CHARTER CHALLENGE
Finding an affordable building can be a hurdle

Financial markets showing interest in charters with track record

Finding and financing a school building continue to be among the main challenges facing new charter public schools in Michigan. A way to build and to attract funding for new buildings or renovations, charter schools cannot. Instead, charters use part of the state or privately raised funds, to pay for facilities.

Some charter start-ups are backed by management companies that pay for buildings up front, many new charters can’t afford to do so, and lenders are less likely to provide money to a school that has yet to prove itself. If the school build a track record, not all buildings are suitable for use as schools, and some conventional public schools may lease or sell or lease their unusable buildings to charter operators.

The cumulative effect is that charters call a wide range of facilities “home” as they look for affordable and suitable spots, according to the Michigan Council of Charter School Authorizers and Charter FS Corp., a financial services provider.

“Charters public schools … rely on innovative facilities arrangements and financing options to secure, safe, secure learning environments for their children,” the report states.

Charters are found in storefronts, modular facilities, former industrial buildings and former private or parochial schools, according to Smiggen, vice-president of Charter FS. Many of them open under lease-to-agree arrangements that let the charter public schools renovate and convert the buildings to their needs.

This year, the firm’s latest request for proposals brought in 10 possible buyers.

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“Teachers open new spaces to charter schools and that their time would be better spent improving their own operations,” Afonso said.

Another group — financial investors — “are finally realizing that charters are here to stay,” Romine said. Charter schools that find suitable facilities and that show stable enrollment, fiscal responsibility and the trust of their authors are attracting attention in the bond market and from some lending institutions, added Smiggen, of Charter FS.

“There are more players coming into the marketplace,” she said. Two years ago, when Charter FS looked for underwriters for academies interested in selling bonds, there was only one active investor, she said. This year, the firm’s latest request for proposals brought in 10 possible buyers.

“That’s a significant difference,” she said. “Bankers by nature are risk-averse and nobody wants to be the first one, but now they realize, ‘Hey, this is a pretty good place to make money.’

In Big Rapids, Crossroads Academy got its start by purchasing an empty building downtown. The Academy later purchased about eight acres at the School for the Blind site.

Hugh Clarke Jr. was asked by local media to explain the deal. He was quoted as saying, “From an ideological standpoint, it might be difficult for me to swallow. … That’s almost like cutting off your nose to spite your face.”

To swallow. … That’s almost like cutting off your nose to spite your face.

The Academy later purchased about eight acres at the School for the Blind site from the state.

The Michigan School Code states that schools that are sold to public or private entities “shall not impose any deed restriction prohibiting, or otherwise prohibit, property from being used for being used for any lawful public educational purpose” without advance approval of the State Board of Education. Further, “the school board or intermediate board shall not refuse to lease or rent the property to a person solely because the person intends to use the property for an educational purpose, if the intent of the person is to use the property for an educational purpose.”

“It’s been the law for 11 years, but people know how to get around it,” said Leon Berman, a lawyer who specializes in the development of charter schools. Michigan: “The law doesn’t require conventional school districts to sell their property to charters, he said, but is supposed to prevent them from putting advance restrictions on such sales.

“They took the for-sale sign down,” he said, until the charter operators found a different site.

In general, new charter operators like to buy existing schools because they require less renovation to meet school code requirements and are located in residential neighborhoods. But Sabis Educational Systems Inc., an international company with 31 private and charter schools, has converted some of them into charter schools, according to Joe Afonso, director of the board and governmental affairs.

In one case, the company converted a former department store to a school by installing skylights and a large central courtyard and removing components, said Afonso. He believes that could be a model for other schools.

“The idea is so we do that,” he said. The facility now houses 700 students and costs $12 million to purchase and renovate.

As an exception to most districts refusing to sell to charter operators, Sabis recently signed a purchase agreement to buy a former elementary school from Bridgeport-Spaulding Community Schools for $180,000 as the site for its new International Academy of Saginaw. The school will be the company’s second Michigan site; the first is the International Academy of Flint.

Before bidding on Kaufman Elementary School, Sabis considered putting in a bid on a two-story, 109,000-square-foot site in downtown Saginaw. They dropped the plan because there was no room for parking or a playground, “unless we used the roof, which we thought about,” Afonso said.

Among other examples, who see the schools as a viable investment. John Romine, president of The Romine Group, a Michigan-based company currently manages five charter schools in Michigan.

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This page contains a mix of content that is not clearly organized or coherent. It seems to be a mix of legal or financial information, possibly related to health savings accounts, but it is not clearly presented in a readable format.
**School in Focus**

**Walden Green Montessori**

**Walden Green Montessori: An early charter shows it has staying power**

Sheryl Marshall found Walden Green Montessori in the Yellow Pages as she researched schools for her two young children. She applied in 1998, knowing that her family couldn’t afford the then-private school’s tuition.

“When the family received a telephone call from Jean Hicks, the school’s founder, Walden Green had received authorization to operate as one of Michigan’s first charter schools, making it a tuition-free public school academy. Were the Marshalls interested?”

“It was like the answered prayer,” Marshall said. More than 10 years later, her younger child completed eighth grade at Walden Green this year, the highest grade offered. “We wish that they would go to 12th grade,” she said.

Families choose Walden Green for different reasons, according to Tom Hicks, Jean Hicks’ son and now the school’s director. Jean Hicks continues at the school as a teacher. Like the Marshalls, some parents are familiar with Montessori philosophy and want that atmosphere and approach for their children. Others want a small school. Still others have heard about the school’s high test scores. Walden Green has ranked first among Michigan charter schools for two consecutive years in the Michigan Educational Assessment Program. The school achieved nearly a 90 percent proficiency rate in reading, writing, science and math on the latest tests.

Whatever the reasons, the school’s enrollment has grown from 65 students in its first charter year to 170 this year and an anticipated 196 next year. Hicks expects to reach 220 students the following year, about as many students as will fit comfortably into their new building in Spring Lake, near Grand Haven. The school is authorized by Central Michigan University.

Like its growing enrollment and low student turnover, the new building is a sign of the school’s staying power. Walden Green is financing the facility through a $4.3 million bond issue.

“All our bonds were sold locally,” Hicks said. “We had somebody ready to buy them based on the reputation of the school.”

Montessori education rests on the work of Dr. Maria Montessori, who lived in Italy in the early 1900s. Her teaching method emphasized children’s ability to teach themselves, given uninterrupted time and a prepared environment.

“It’s choice and ownership in education,” Hicks said. “We give kids choices within boundaries.”

Children in Montessori classrooms study typical subjects like math, English and science, but are given leeway to choose when and, to some extent, how they study each subject. Rather than having all children working on math in their seats, at the same time every day, a Montessori teacher would more likely present a new math concept to small groups or individuals. The students would then work on those concepts individually, at a time they choose, using materials provided in the room. Instead of everyone moving on to the next subject according to the clock, the Montessori method allows a child uninterrupted time to work on a task.

“You don’t have to sit at a desk and do so-called ‘seat work’,” Hicks explained, “where one child may be tracing wooden cutouts of the countries of Africa, and in another corner another child may be identifying geometric shapes.

“Generally, the younger the children, the larger the classroom, Hicks said, recognizing that younger children are still developing large motor skills. Each room can cost up to $20,000 to equip, he said.

In addition to working with children individually or in small groups, teachers follow each student’s progress through the child’s written work plan, a list of the tasks the child needs to complete to advance through Montessori levels to see where they’re at and through weekly assessments. Montessori advocates say this system allows children to learn at their own pace and fosters love of learning, self-discipline and initiative.

Montessori education at Grand Valley State University, a former middle school teacher and a new school board member at Walden Green. Training focuses heavily on children’s developmental stages and their needs at each stage. One of the teacher’s key roles is to link each child with the learning material that matches his or her development and interests.

“It’s all individualized because it follows the child,” Westerhof-Shultz said, in contrast to what she called the “egg crate” approach of teaching all children the same thing at the same time.

There are few middle-school Montessori programs and even fewer Montessori high schools. Hicks said, partly because Dr. Montessori primarily worked with younger children and died before developing programs for adolescents. Walden Green uses a thematic approach that matches his or her development and interests.

Walden Green’s new facility sits on nearly five acres of partly wooded land. The building features outdoor classrooms in many spots, some spanning more than one level. A system of ramps, rather than stairs or an elevator, stretches between levels. There is no gymnasium or media center, but there are “common areas” — open areas where children can play, thanks to what Hicks called the “egg crate” approach of teaching all children the same thing at the same time.

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There are few middle-school Montessori programs and even fewer Montessori high schools. Hicks said, partly because Dr. Montessori primarily worked with younger children and died before developing programs for adolescents. Walden Green uses a thematic approach that matches his or her development and interests.
Better writing: High-scoring schools say it’s not easy

tributed to the numbers, each said, but common to both schools is an emphasis on writing in all areas of the curriculum. "Writing, curriculum and time spent specifically focused on writing," said Tina Troy, school improvement specialist for the Six Traits method. "We have our School Improvement Plan, all schools have writing as a school improvement goal. It’s a focus in all of the buildings. When you see a high school at the high level, “all the staff in the building have made a commitment to write with students. People understand that kids can’t write in lan-
guage arts class. Writing is a focus in a broad sense in Okemos."

When Vanguard students are asked to write a paragraph in math class about a mathematical concept, they are graded not only on how well they understand the topic, but on how well they explain it, Masunas said. The school requires non-language arts teach-
ers to write each week.

"This approach of “writing across the curricu-
ulum” not only allows a school to spend more time on writing, but also demonstrates that writing is important in all fields. It is also one of the recognized ways of improving writing skills," according to Dr. Gary Troia, a Michigan State University associate pro-
fessor who studies writing instruction and assessment.

Another similarity between the schools is the use of the “6 Traits” approach — a modern version of what used to be called the "basic criteria," characteristic of good writing — for at least some writing instruction. The traits are “ideas and organization,” “word choice,” “sentences fluency” and “conven-
ions.” Developed at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, a private, nonprofit organization in Oregon, the original model came from teachers looking for a way to evaluate writing consistently and objectively. Today the organization sells books and related material for classroom use.

“I’ve absolutely fallen in love with it,” Masunas said. Writing — and grading of writing — is often seen as subjective, but students judged the traits in Okemos, for example, as needed to make writing instruction concrete and specific. Students understand that if they are studying “organization,” they are likely to be graded on such things as transition or closing sentences.

This process also matches up well with what Michigan expects of its students, Troelstad and Masunas said. When a teacher focuses on one or two traits, that common to both schools are an emphasis on writing in all areas of the curriculum. "Writing, curriculum and time spent specifically focused on writing," said Tina Troy, school improvement specialist for the Six Traits method. "We have our School Improvement Plan, all schools have writing as a school improvement goal. It’s a focus in all of the buildings. When you see a high school at the high level, “all the staff in the building have made a commitment to write with students. People understand that kids can’t write in lan-
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Talk about increased class size. Wendy March’s first band class numbered 43 students. The next year, 100 more wanted to join. Nobody was more surprised than the Belding home-school mother herself.

“I never would have thought it would turn into this,” she said, eyes on the group of students marching in parade formation around a parking lot in Wyoming. “It met a need in West Michigan we didn’t even know existed.”

The single band class that March initiated in 1996 has grown into the West Michigan Homeschool Fine Arts program, encompassing beginning, intermediate and advanced band and orchestra, a marching band, choir and chorale, and various music classes, together attracting some 500 home-school students each year. March, 48, a mother of six, continues to teach beginning and intermediate band, with a dozen other teachers instructing other classes.

During the school year the students meet regularly at The Home School Building in Wyoming, a multipurpose facility that includes classrooms, a gymnasium, library and bookstore. During the summer months, the focus is on the Northern Lights Home School Marching Band, a group of more than 100 elementary to high school students that performs in half a dozen Michigan parades each summer.

March’s oldest sons were ages 9 and 8, respectively, when she began looking for a way for them to participate in a band. A longtime choir director, she holds a bachelor’s degree in secondary music education and at the time held a Michigan teaching certificate. But credentials aside, March remembered how much she had enjoyed playing trumpet in the New Hanover High School band in North Carolina, and she wanted that experience for her children.

“I saw that music attracted the cream-of-the-crop kids,” she said. When her husband suggested she start a band herself, March was willing, but not sure how much response she would get.

“I didn’t think too many would want to come out of the woodwork,” she said. Still, she put the word out through home-school groups and found not only parents who wanted their children to join, but parents who eventually would volunteer to help by bringing refreshments, coordinating uniform orders and sales, and supervising a banner corps for children too young to join the band.

“Parents want this as badly as they’re willing to give up their time,” she said. By the second season, March had asked Robert Stiles, a retired school band director who lives in Belding, for help.

He loved it and he’s been coming ever since. What brought him out of retirement was the attitude of the kids. So eager to learn. They wanted to be there,” she said.

Students join the advanced bands through audition and are allowed to stay based on performance. There is a fee to participate in band classes, and while some families purchase their own instruments, the Fine Arts program purchases some as well.

“We’ve had kids go collect pop cans to buy a tuba,” March said.

“To stay in the program they have to practice,” she continued. “We believe in accountability and responsibility. They learn that some places require a uniform and that you’re part of a team. It’s not a one-man job.”

The Gravelle children – ages 17, 16, 13, 10, and 8 – joined the band program this year, traveling about 30 minutes each way from their Ada home to the Home School Building.

“It was a little intimidating at first, but the kids jumped right in. We all fell in love with it within the first few months,” said Shelly Gravelle, their mother. Four of the children played in the beginning band during the school year and five are in marching band, one as a banner carrier. “They had tinkered a little with the piano, but they had never played instruments. I’m amazed at the progress they’ve made in one year.

Now the Gravelle family constitutes most of a brass section, with one child each on tuba, baritone, trombone and saxophone.

“There is a very high standard,” Gravelle said. “If they do not practice, you will hear about it as a parent.”

That emphasis on excellence was one of the things that attracted the Zuidema family, also of Ada, but not the only thing.

“It’s not just a competition. It’s about loving each other as well,” Michele Zuidema said. The Zuidemas have six children. Of the five that have participated in band programs so far, two have physical disabilities. Ana, 10, has no legs and shortened arms, her mother explained, and was on the verge of dropping out of the program this year due to a series of health problems.

“She was in tears,” Zuidema said. When they met with March to discuss it, “Mrs. March said ‘You can’t leave us. We need you,’” so Ana remained in the program as a banner carrier this summer.

“How many places do you know where a little girl in a wheelchair could be in a marching band?” Zuidema asked. “She (March) does push them hard. She wants excellence, but she also has a love for them and love for what they’re doing.”

Of the two March sons who originally spurred their mother to form the band, one is now serving in the U.S. Army and the other is attending Western Michigan University. He plans on returning to the area to help with the program after graduation, March said. March still teaches her other four children at home, often using Saturday as a school day to make up for the Wednesdays dedicated to band. Her husband operates a tax preparation business and also is a part-time administrator at the home-school facility.

“We work everything around the schedule for the band. It’s time-consuming, but it’s worth it,” March said.

The bands compete in Michigan School Band and Orchestra festivals and have been invited to perform across the state and at selected other events, including the Peach Bowl in 2003. March gauges the program’s success not by festival ratings, but by the number of students who volunteer to play at nursing homes, who have gone on to study music in college, and who have graduated, married and are now home-school parents themselves. Calling those “the fruits of our labor,” she said they demonstrate that the students “take what they learn and apply it.”

The name Northern Lights, which applies only to the marching band, was chosen by the members, she added. “These kids want to be the light of the world, and they’re from the North. So they’re the Northern Lights.”

Word of the program has spread in Michigan, and now there are at least seven home-school bands in operation, March said. In the future, she said, she would like to arrange a sharing of instruments among home-school communities in which the instruments would be available for use in Wyoming on Wednesdays, then packed into a trailer and used elsewhere on another day of the week.

“I like the idea of expanding that way to help other people,” she said.

Listen to the Northern Lights in rehearsal and hear an interview with Wendy March at www.educationreport.org/8828

Banner carriers lead the way for the Northern Lights in a parade in Cora. The band performs in community parades and festivals throughout the summer.

Northern Lights band members march in the Muskegon Summer Celebration this summer. The band is made up entirely through high school home-school students from throughout West Michigan.

Tyler Stilt plays saxophone for the Northern Lights home-school marching band in a parade this summer.

Josh Zuidema, on trumpet, joins other members of the home-school marching band for Wednesday morning practice.
More time for reading course

New teachers will have longer to complete a required course in reading instruction under a new law passed in June by the Michigan Legislature and signed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm. Senate Bill 70 extends by two years the beginning of a six-year window during which new teachers must complete a three-credit course in the diagnosis and remediation of reading disabilities. The law also would allow a portion of the required course to be completed as part of his or her regular inservice education.

The bill was introduced by Sen. Nancy Casis, R-Novi, in January. It passed in the House on a 107-0 vote and in the Senate on a 36-0 vote.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-SB-70

Expand definition of vocational education

‘Career and technical education’ will be added to the definition of vocational education in the Michigan School Code following action by the Michigan Legislature. Introduced by Sen. Gerald Van Woerkom, R-Muskegon, on Feb. 8, Senate Bill 188 added a following to the definition of the education designed to provide career development and the knowledge and skills leading to entry-level technical employment or higher education in a technical field. Career and technical education programs including, but not limited to, classroom experiences and work-based instruction.

The bill authorizes a variety of expenditures by school districts related to career development and established required procedures and regulations. It passed in the Senate on June 26 and in the House on July 5, and was given immediate effect. Gov. Jennifer Granholm signed the legislation on July 17.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-SB-188

BETTER WRITING continued from Page Seven

The state’s primary role in teaching writing is to set expectations and explain them clearly to teachers, said Betty Underwood, interim director of the state Office of School Improvement. “As far as going out and working with individual schools, we don’t have the capacity to do that.”

Many intermediate school districts have literacy coordinators on staff to work with local districts, she pointed out, and some also publish sample lessons or guidebooks that “pull together” common experiences and work-based instruction. The bill authorizes a variety of expenditures by school districts related to career development and established required procedures and regulations. It passed in the Senate on June 26 and in the House on July 5, and was given immediate effect. Gov. Jennifer Granholm signed the legislation on July 17.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-SB-188

'Promise' recipients outside of Michigan

As schools look for ways to improve writing, they are using this broad redefinition of what constitutes “professional experience” in order to narrow the emphasis to predefined, “measurable” skills at the expense of creativity. Some of that happens already, he said.

Measurable skills are easy to pick out and evaluate, like whether a paragraph has a topic sentence, or whether a child’s writing is clearly to teachers, said Betty Underwood, interim director of the state Office of School Improvement. “As far as going out and working with individual schools, we don’t have the capacity to do that.”

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THE NEW SMART BOARD 600 series interactive whiteboard

As educators like you work to merge technology, digital content and pedagogy, we at SMART are working to provide educators with tools that will make the classroom a more engaging place. In SMART’s classroom, students can use their own devices to access content, contribute to discussions, and the teachers can see all student comments at once. The new SMART Board 600 series interactive whiteboard will provide a more collaborative learning environment.
The bottom line is that we need to ask the question: Who will decide the future of our children’s education? Face- less bureaucrats in Washington, or parents and local school administrators who know our children’s names and needs? My vote is for local control,” he said in a press release announcing the bill.

“Preference, in the long run, is to allow education tax credits,” Hoekstra said. Under a tax credit plan, individuals or corporations would receive a tax credit for money set aside for public or private education.

Hoekstra has the support of Tom Horne, the superintendent of instruction for the Arizona Department of Education, who said in a letter that the goals of A PLUS would be “vastly superior” to those of NCLB. The American Association of Christian Schools and the Home School Legal Defense Association also support the bill.

AUGUST WINDOW PERIOD FOR UNION RESIGNATIONS
August is often specified as the month in which employees who want to resign from a union, including the Michigan Education Association, must notify the union of their decision. The exact requirements for resigning by (commonly called a “fee payer”) typically are spelled out in local collective bargaining agreements or the union’s rules.

In general, those who wish to become nonunion employees must draft a letter of resignation revoking any authorization for payroll deduction of membership dues and authorizing only those fees which are legally chargeable for collective bargaining purposes. Copies are then sent to the local union and school district superintendent.

School in Focus: Walden Green Montessori

Walden Green is one of a growing number of public school academies who are selling bonds to finance facilities or renovations, according to Thomas Letavis, executive director of the Michigan Public Educational Facilities Authority, within the state Department of Treasury. The Walden Green’s exempt bonds were issued through MPEFA.

It’s difficult for a start-up charter school to attract investors, Letavis said, but, like Walden Green, more academies today can point to growing enrollment, a waiting list, high MEAP scores and reauthorizations of their original charters. Those items make the bonds more attractive and also bring down the interest rates, he said.

But high MEAP scores are more a byproduct at Walden Green than a goal, several parents said.

“I don’t see a lot of a big fan of standardized testing,” said Sandra Kuhn, Walden Green’s Parent. “It gives some minimal form of assurance.”

Walden Green’s objective is to grow, but slowly, Hicks said. Instead of accepting the maximum enrollment possible this year and next, “We talked to handful the bondholders into saying we’ll grow in steps,” one of his challenges is helping families make the transition from a non-Montessori school, he said, and “to open the doors and double enrollment would have cheated the parents already here.”

But, she said, “I want to make it abundantly clear that the Michigan State Board of Education ... (embrace) the role of education goals of the bid which Left Beh. Act.”

Hoekstra’s colleague, Rep. Tim Walberg, R-Tipton, met with educators in the Jackson area in May to promote the A PLUS plan.

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Hoekstra’s colleague, Rep. Tim Walberg, R-Tipton, met with educators in the Jackson area in May to promote the A PLUS plan.
A number of Michigan school districts are trying to instill new life into nonprofit educational foundations they established previously or set up previously coming back. It's not always easy to raise money simply by asking for it.

While even the most ambitious programs to date by and large struggle to raise $250,000 to $500,000 annually over the past 15 years, that's potential for a foundation to bring in significant private support of a district's educational program.

“Community members give because they know exactly where their local school district because, ‘It’s their community; it’s their neighborhood; it’s happening across the country,’” he said.

One example is Ann Arbor, where “eighty to ninety percent of the people on the Ann Arbor Public Schools Educational Foundation, a privately operated, nonprofit corporation established to support the school district. Correll previously served on the board of the district’s board of education and was hired for the half-time foundation position in May 2006.

Like many districts, Ann Arbor has had an up-and-down relationship with its foundation in recent years it has shifted from passive to active fundraising, setting a goal for at least 30% of the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“The waters are untested in Ann Arbor, and the district’s leadership and development team that works with schools on foundation development are seeing a resurgence of new foundations...as well as foundations we set up previously coming back. It’s not just happening in Ann Arbor; it’s happening across the country,” he said.

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The effects of Proposal A increased the potential for a foundation to bring in significant private support of a district’s educational program.

“Proposal A lowered local school taxes paid by property owners, substituting a higher sales tax, it did not do the same for business owners. Asked if Michigan’s business tax load affects donations from that sector, Correll said, “That is not something I hear. Quite simply, I think it’s hard to get dollars out of businesses in the overall declining economic climate of Michigan. They continue to be willing to give us time and small dollars that provide them with advertising, but not large impact dollars. We will be rethinking: Is there some idea of ‘Give for the greater good’ doesn’t seem to work in the overall business world; perhaps in coming years if the economic climate changes, their attitude may change.”

GAVE AT THE OFFICE

One businessman told Michigan Education Report that school taxes and school performance both affect his decisions on donations.

“When it comes to public schools, I already gave at the office. It’s called taxes,” Don West, business owner in Grand Rapids, Thomas said. “And I think too many schools fail to get much bang for the bucks they are paying. Business owners and the colleagues in business, I am far more interested in a tax credit for contributions to school foundations,” he said. But even then at least the money goes directly to help the student and his parents’ choices, not business-as-usual bureaucracy.”

“If people want to give money, they can do it,” said Jim Sandus, executive director of the Michigan Business Leadership for Education Excellence, a statewide coalition of business leaders who are advocates of school reform measures. There are some tax advantages in making a contribution, he said, “but donors should be aware of how the money is being spent. Even if foundation dollars are earmarked for specific academic programs, and the district pays to support the district’s general fund budget, he pointed out. The question is whether that takes pressure off districts to operate efficiently.

“It’s just creating more and more pots of money for schools as we’ve seen in the past, schools with more pots of money don’t always manage them well,” he said.

Foundations use a number of ways to raise money, among them solicitations by mail, personal contacts and fundraising events like golf outings. Some of them also receive investment earnings from endowments. Whatever the method, Howard said, “the nonprofit fundraising campaigns give donors a specific idea of how the money will be used and how it will impact education and work in the future. Foundation money is typically spent on academic projects, arts and music, science and technology, professional development or capital improvements, he said.

Some foundations also pay for college scholarships.

When the Forest Hills Educational Foundation was established in 1986, it was decided by its board of directors that the foundation would be “a safe, secure place for children ‘would be provided with’ than they would consider ‘the icing on the cake,’” according to Director Amy Clark said. Today, the mission statement calls for the organization to support core academic programs, “which is vastly different,” she said. One school gala held by the foundation brought in $86,000, of which half went into an endowment and half was spent on instructional materials, including new math textbooks. “The Forest Hills Foundation has transitioned from a bake-sale mentality,” she said.

In Ann Arbor, the foundation’s major recent campaign, “When I Grow Up,” was created to ensure that “children’s future is not marred by the same foundation, like many others, also awards smaller amounts of money to teachers throughout the year.

The Portage Education Foundation has been in operation since 1990, but this alternative to the annual fundraising campaign called “Putting Excellence First.”

The campaign brochure says, “It’s no secret that school systems across Michigan — Portage included — are as always balacing the budget of growing — becoming more stable each year — for an adequate education. Or seek alternatives to raise funds.”

The Portage foundation gave $23,000 in grants to students, faculty and school districts in 2005, compared to $19,000 the year before, according to its annual report. It received $35,000 in donations. The Portage Foundation of School Boards also has seen increased interest in school foundations among its members, according to its director of board leadership and development.

In “these tough economic times, there seems to be more interest in starting foundations going again,” she said. The MASB has developed a training program for foundation board members that includes staff and volunteers in conjunction with The McCormick Group and the National School Foundation Association.

Want to share a story on Michigan education? Then join us at the Michigan Education Report Forum, a new site dedicated to discussing Michigan education issues. Hosted by Michigan Education Report, the site is now available at:

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Read current comments, and comment on Michigan Education Report articles, participate in surveys and join the virtual discussion about school finance, safety, parental choice and more. The forum page resides on www.educationreport.org as a timely source of news, analysis and opinion on Michigan schools.
SCHOOLS FOR SALE
Districts put buildings on market

One in Bridgeport. Seven in Royal Oak. Six in Grand Rapids. Eight in Lansing. More than 30 in Detroit. The number is tiny, but it is spurring a trend to find empty school buildings for sale, for lease, recently sold or simply unused in the Michigan conventional public school districts.

Downsizing drives many of the closings. Restructuring means fewer students into fewer buildings. Detroit Public Schools alone has announced plans to close more than 30 buildings over the next two years, adding them to a list of at least 20 buildings closed in previous years. The district is downsizing to operating expenses per student, at less than 50 percent capacity. In other cases, districts are shuttering old facilities and replacing them with new ones.

What becomes of the empty buildings and property varies by location, and in many cases the surrounding community wants a say. In Grand Rapids and Detroit, developers have converted school buildings into condominiums. Former Lansing School District building on Michigan Avenue was converted to child care centers, a rescue mission and high-tech companies, with two schools still in use. The Lansing School District has sold several school buildings and adjoining property to developers who plan to demolish the buildings and replace them with housing developments. The district sees that as a way to bring more families, hopefully with children who will attend Royal Oak schools.

“Your business tends to pick up when the economy is doing a little on the shaky side,” said William Bowman, president of Great Northern Consulting Group. Bowman’s firm works with school districts to plan and carry out real estate sales. He’s worked on 16 projects in Royal Oak since the mid-1990s. “We’re getting busier and busier.”

Selling school property is a balancing act between getting a reasonable price on behalf of taxpayers and considering whether the planned use of the land is a good fit for the community, Bowman said.

“We’re not looking just to sell the property,” he said. “I can tell you, if (school property) gets built up with a parking lot or used as a mosque, who hears about that forever? … The goal is to get the use you want and the dollars you want.”

In Royal Oak, a 50-member citizens group recommended the approach the district is now taking — to consolidate students into the district’s larger, newer buildings, then sell the remaining buildings to developers who would build single-family homes. The immediate benefit is cash from the sales, and the long-term potential benefit is more families with school-age children, Superintendent Thomas Moline said.

The recommendation was to consolidate buildings to gain maximum efficiency,” he said.

Royal Oak had 20,000 students 40 years ago, about 5,900 in 1998 and 4,400 today. According to an article in Preservation Online, the online magazine of the National Trust for Historic Pres-

Schools to districts. They are primarily interested in the acreage at each site, not the buildings, Bowman said, because land is a good fit for the “inner ring” of southeast Michigan.

“Within these urban areas, where can you put your project or subdivision?” he asked.

One school sale in Troy included 18 acres of land, he said. “Where can you get 50 lots in Troy? You can’t.”

In Royal Oak, there are no large tracts of land that they can go out and buy. “The property clearly works where there is a limited supply.”

Great Northern also advises school districts to pay money up front to make things easier for potential buyers, he said.

“There are a lot of things you can do to improve your marketing-wise to make a property more valuable,” he said, among them drawing up engineering site plans, removing underground storage tanks and handling asbestos removal or abatement.

One developer said that he received an offer from developers who won’t have to jump through those hoops, he said.

“The more questions you can answer for developers, the more aggressive they’re going to be,” he said.

Moline isn’t expecting a large influx of students from the development projects.

“For every 100 homes, you might get 50 kids. We’re just trying to turn the tide a little bit.”

Closing a building saves the district about $400,000 in operating expenses a year, he said, and renovations to the remaining buildings will make them more energy efficient and less expensive to maintain. “The only increased cost in the future due to the renovations will be air conditioning,” he said, and the district is installing that partly to make the facilities more attractive to community groups who want to rent the buildings for a little while.

“If you have air-conditioned buildings, we could easily generate enough (rental) income to offset the air conditioning cost,” he said.

Moline said Royal Oak took in $400,000 in rental income this year, he said, but the money isn’t the only benefit of bringing people into the schools.

Only 16 percent of the households in the district send a child to Royal Oak Public Schools. Moline said, allowing the community to use school facilities gives non-parents a link to the district.

Selling a school building is often a controversial matter. In Royal Oak, the question of historic preservation became an issue. In Grand Rapids, the board of education voted to sell five acres of land to an individual who wanted to build a home there, although neighbors said the district should either retain the land as green space or rent it to a Little League organization for $1 a year, according to the Grand Rapids Press. The land is part of a larger parcel which includes a park and elementary school, and was provided to the district in the 1950s under a deed restriction that required it be used for educational or recreational purposes for 50 years.

Board members who supported the sale said the district had promised voters to sell excess property when it used general fund money for school improvements in the 1990s.

Grand Rapids Public Schools also sold an elementary school to The Well Church. The sale was handled by S.J. Wisinski and Co., a commercial real estate firm in Grand Rapids. Stan Wisinski, company president, said his firm has handled about 10 school sales in the past year on behalf of both Grand Rapids Public Schools and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Grand Rapids.

“There seems to be a market for it,” he said. “Location is important.”

One former educational facility is now being used for mini-storage, he said. Another was by a group of Goodwill Industries for adult training programs. One better-known project is “Union Square Condos. Formerly a high school, the building now houses more than 100 condominiums, some of them featuring vintage school fixtures like lockers and chalkboards.”

The Lansing School District has sold five of eight vacant school buildings since spring of 2006, according to the Lansing State Journal, bringing in nearly $1.5 million, and two more schools are on the market. The district recently received an offer from a group of Michigan State University students who want to lease a former school for a 1 year, with an option to buy. The group wants to use the site as a technology center to spur research and entrepreneurship in the area.

One thing many conventional school districts do not do is sell their unused property to charter schools. (See related story. Finding financing a school building still a challenge to charters.)

Smaller districts have buildings and property for sale as well. Merrill Community Schools put 80 acres of wooded property up for sale at $3,000 an acre and has sold 45 acres so far, according to Superintendent John Searles. Years ago the site was used by agriculture science students, but the district doesn’t offer those classes any more.

The amount of time I’ve spent trying to sell this has been surprising,” Searles said. The district has turned down half a dozen offers that didn’t meet the asking price, and two other bids fell through when the purchasers couldn’t arrange financing.

“There are oil developers in that area prospecting for mineral rights,” he said, but, after a bad experience with natural gas prospecting, the district has decided against allowing oil drilling on the site. Slant drilling would be an environmental problem.

Money from the partial sales was spent on infrastructure, including $60,000 on a science technology center and $40,000 on a computer center, said Searles. The trickling in of money has allowed us to continue to add programming.”
Don’t expect long-term gain from early education money

Gov. Jennifer Granholm’s fiscal year 2008 budget calls for a nearly $200 million increase in early childhood funding initiatives, bringing the early childhood education budget to about $300 million. The money would go to schools district offering full-day preschool programs to children at risk, follow by mandatory full-day kindergarten the next year. Meanwhile, legislators are considering requiring all districts to offer full-day kindergarten.

Proposals for preschool and full-day kindergarten are an increasingly popular policy solution for everything from low academic achievement to reducing crime to lowering dropout rate. In short, research on preschool and full-day kindergarten shows that these programs have had meaningful, long-term effects on disadvantaged students’ cognitive ability, grade-level retention and special-education placement. However, most research also indicates that the academic effects of early education programs disappear soon after children leave the programs.

The American Center for Education Statistics Early Childhood Longitudinal Study assessed 22,000 children at kindergarten entry and most recently reported on those students through the third grade. This research shows that by the end of third grade, the researchers no longer detect a difference between students who attended part-day or full-day kindergarten programs.

They write, “This report did not detect any substantive differences in children’s third-grade achievement relative to the type of kindergarten program (full-day vs. half-day) they attended.” The finding holds across all subject matters tested. Third-grade reading, mathematics and science achievement did not differ substantively by children’s gender or kindergarten program type.

Similarly, the California-based RAND Corp. December 2006 report School Readiness, Full-Day Kindergarten, and Student Achievement, commissioned from a study to represent a sample of almost 7,900 students and found “that full-day kindergarten programs may actually be detrimental to mathematics performance and nonacademic readiness skills.”

The study established that “children who had attended a full-day program at kindergarten showed poorer mathematic performance in fifth grade than did children who had attended a part-day kindergarten program.”

Evidence from other states that have made significant investments in universal preschool and full-day kindergarten on the ability of universal preschool to fix long-standing problems with K-12 education. In New Jersey, for example, some districts have been making a decade-long investment in public preschool. (The term “Abbott districts” originated from a New Jersey Supreme Court ruling that found the education provided to some urban school children was inadequate, and that mandated reform measures in certain districts. Those became known as Abbott districts.

New Jersey’s Abbott districts spend the most money in the nation on prekindergarten education. Yet in 2005 more disadvantaged children in New Jersey scored below basic, which means they cannot read, on the fourth-grade reading assessment of the National Assessment of Educational Progress than in 1998. In 1998, 54 percent of students eligible for the free lunch program scored below basic on the NAEP reading exam. By 2005, 57 percent of free-lunch students scored below basic.

Michigan reflects a similar pattern. Despite tremendous investments in pre-school for disadvantaged children, more fourth-grade students in Michigan who qualify for free lunch scored below basic in reading on the NAEP in 2005 than in 1998. In 1998, 56 percent of free-lunch students scored below basic on the NAEP; by 2005, 57 percent of free-lunch eligible children in Michigan scored below basic.

In Michigan, student performance is relatively high in the early grades. However, Michigan students have declining proficiency rates as they move toward high school. Test scores reflect a stair step pattern. Consider Detroit Public Schools, which has already made large investments in early education programs and full-day kindergarten. In 2007, 76 percent of third-graders were proficient in reading; in the seventh grade only 57 percent of students were proficient in reading; and by high school only 48 percent passed the MEAP high school reading exam.

In addition to a recent report by Michigan’s “Diplomas Count” reports that Detroit public schools have a graduation rate of 70 percent. The longer DPS children stay in school, the worse they do. These poor performances issues in the public school system are unlikely to be fixed with early education programs.

While preschool and full-day kindergarten may be politically popular, they are no silver bullet to fix the academic performance issues in the public school system. Michigan is considering investing hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars each year in a program whose benefits disappear by third grade to solve education problems that come after the third grade. Yet we cannot afford to have scarce education resources on programs that can make a lasting difference.

Lisa Snell is director of education and child welfare at the Reason Foundation, Los Angeles, Calif.

ENTREPRENEURS SHOW WHAT IS POSSIBLE IN EDUCATION

Educational Entrepreneurship: Realities, Challenges, Possibilities
Edited by Frederick M. Hess, Harvard Education Press, 2006

“Educational Entrepreneurship: Realities, Challenges, Possibilities” features conference papers presented at the American Enterprise Institute on Nov. 4, 2005. These papers focus on issues for publication, the essays serve a lively discussion of the state of contemporary education and the means by which it may be bettered.

According to several of the volume’s 12 essays, schools are facing education is institutional inertia brought about by administrative bureaucracy, government over-regulation, faculty burnout and union protection of underperforming teachers.

The majority of authors encourage entrepreneurship — the movement of economic resources from lower to higher productivity — to drive progress. Failed ideas, providers and public school system.


Here’s what readers said about our last issue.

Two guest educators argue for and against Michigan’s compulsory attendance age in “Diverse Viewpoints,” a regular feature of Michigan Education Report. Here’s what readers are saying:

“Students’ at the age of 16 to 18 can be … disruptive and possibly dangerous to the other students in classes as well as the teacher. Do we want this in our schools?”
- former charter school board member, Roseville

“I have been in education for 18 years and have seen the involvement with both their kids and the schools is shocking, scary and sad. Whatever discussion we have on anything that has to do with kids, young adults, schools, society, etc., always has to have a section on the parents.”
- high school teacher, Macomb County

An article about Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick’s call for charter and private schools in Detroit prompted these comments …

“Charter schools are the answer to many of the problems that plague DPS. Now we just have to find a way to provide all parents choices for their children’s education.”
- elementary school teacher, Taylor

In conjunction with an article about advertising campaigns funded by school districts to attract students, Michigan Education Report sponsored an informal online survey that asked, “Should public schools spend money on advertising to attract students?”

Results showed 53 percent of respondents voting no and 47 percent voting yes. In a related comment, one parent wrote …

“The stipulations by the state on how schools can use money and the reliance on state money are getting out of hand. It is time for schools to advertise for students, to make themselves attractive. It is time for schools to allow advertising into the schools (limited to things like shoe ads or snack ads) to help fund the school programs.”
- business owner, Dundee

To comment on articles in this issue and enter your name in a drawing for one of three iPods, go to http://forum.educationreport.org.
Wrestling with reality: Is ‘PACho Libre’ demeaning to teachers?

This commentary originally appeared at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy Web site, www.mackinac.org.

By Paul Kersey

Porters, it’s not encouraging. In particular, provides insight into the thinking of MEA speakers with suggestive language. Floozey (sic), expressing her gratitude to match and apparently restoring so-called full event, eventually pins him to the mat, winning the decisive sequence, the human PAC fund faces civilization: The Michigan Education Association (MEAA) has no arguments of his own to make. So now we know the truth: It isn’t about

Rhetoric, 21-minute video for that purpose.

A parody of the movie “Nacho Libre,” he sings “Let’s Get Physical” — but underneath snickers by presenting images of professional wrestlers while Olivia Newton-John sings “Let’s Get Physical” — but underneath

vying for attention, to try and draw the public’s eye. And it worked. The video got the kind of public attention that the education reformers say they need to get out there.

“Is PACho Libre demeaning to teachers?” To vote, go to http://forum.educationreport.org.

So now we know the truth: It isn’t about winning debates or making wise policy or providing good education. It isn’t even about securing good wages and benefits through collective bargaining. It is all about the video’s premise is that it is all due to societal collapse that follows, one brave

By Paul Kersey

Mackinac Center for Public Policy presents

A $1,000 scholarship to the United States federal government should substantially increase its public health assistance to sub-Saharan Africa.

Win $1,000!

Each student attending has a chance to win a $1,000 scholarship!

Monday, September 24

Burton Manor, Livonia

Tuesday, September 25

Siena Heights College, Adrian

Wednesday, September 26

Eberhard Center, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids

Thursday, September 27

Devinos Mansion, Northwestern Michigan College, Traverse City

Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its public health assistance to sub-Saharan Africa.

Paul Kersey is senior labor policy analyst at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich.

989-631-0900

www.mackinac.org

Michigan constitution hostile to school choice

Five years ago this summer, the U.S. Supreme Court in Zelman v. Simmons-Harris eliminated one potential barrier to educational opportunity by upholding Cleveland’s school voucher program against a legal challenge under the U.S. Constitution’s Establishment Clause. Does that mean the door to school choice is now open in states like Michigan? Unfortunately not, because each state has its own constitution, and its own approach may (and often does) create local limits on school choice.

Understanding the situation in Michigan requires a bit more background. Each state, that argument is hard to reconcile with the fact that the federal government routinely pays for prekindergartners to receive child care at religious schools and lets college students to attend religious colleges like Notre Dame, Georgetown, and Yeshiva University with Pell Grants and the GI Bill. And the Court rejected the argument, finding Cleveland's voucher program to be one of “true private choice” designed to aid families, not religion.

Having lost at the U.S. Supreme Court, the NEA and its anti-choice allies did not give up. Instead, they committed themselves to fighting the battle for educational status quo state by state, dredging up whatever state constitutional provisions could be pressed into service both to discourage the future enactment of Michigan and challenge any existing ones in court. That’s going to be a tall order: From eight programs in seven states when the Zelman case came down in 2002, we have now to 17 programs in 10 states. Georgia is the latest state to join the voucher movement, offering state-funded scholarships to parents of children with disabilities. Does that mean that a similar program that also includes foster children, as well as two different tax-credit-funded scholarship programs for other students?

Moreover, mounting evidence shows the benefits of school choice — not only for students receiving vouchers, but also for students who remain in public schools that, having faced competition, would otherwise have had no incentive to improve their overall performance in response to other studies show beneficial effects on graduation rates (again, only on students who receive vouchers, not necessarily those who do not), racial integration, and substantial cost savings. No study has shown that any voucher program has ever harmed either educational performance or educational quality. And arguments that vouchers go only to low-income students or religious schools is to sub-saharan Africa.

Realistically, the prospects for school choice in Michigan, absent constitutional amendment, are dim. A 2000 effort to amend the state constitution to permit school vouchers went down hard, and it is unclear what it would take to credibly mount a fresh attempt. One promising reform would be education tax credits, which have been a more popular school-choice policy than vouchers. In a 2002 survey conducted by the EPIC-MRA polling firm for the Mackinac Center, 67 percent of the respondents said they would support education tax credits.

The increasingly irrefutable evidence that school choice programs actually improve public schools while simultaneously providing a lifeline to thousands of children stuck in failing public schools may help to promote vital reform. The best evidence of the necessity of a school-choice policy must be the steadily increasing demand for school choice among the people who need it most: young, minority, urban parents, among whom polls show upwards of 90 percent support for school vouchers. Or maybe it will be the simple realization that those who now stand in the doors of our public schools to keep children trapped inside are just as morally culpable as those who stood in schoolhouse doors 50 years ago to keep children trapped outside.

Michigan constitution specifically provides that no public money may ever be paid “to aid or maintain” any private school at the K-12 level. It states that no “payment, credit, tax benefit, exemption or deductions, tuition voucher, subsidy, grant or loan of public moneys or property” may be provided “directly or indirectly, to support the attendance of any student or employment of any person at any such nonpublic school.”

Clark Neily is a senior attorney with the Institute for Justice, Arlington, Va.

COMMENTARY

Paul Kersey

Wrestling with reality: Is ‘PACho Libre’ demeaning to teachers?

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Clark Neily is a senior attorney with the Institute for Justice, Arlington, Va.
DIVERSE VIEWPOINTS

“Should ‘An Inconvenient Truth’ be shown in science class?”

Yes: Let students analyze the evidence

Michael Benda

Our society is based on the free exchange of ideas and diversity of political and social thought. It should be the policy of every school district to encourage unbiased, unprejudiced and scientific study of controversial issues as they arise as part of the school curriculum.

A controversial issue is any topic or problem which society is in the process of debating on which there is honest disagreement. The issue of global climate change is current, significant and of interest to students. It was included under “Climate Change” in the Michigan high school companion document, which explains high school science course content expected in the classroom.

The core concept states that, “Predicting and mitigating the potential impact of global climate change requires an understanding of the global climate change mechanisms of Earth’s climate, involving studies of past climates, measurements of current interactions of Earth’s systems and the construction of climate change models.”

In this case, the issue is the result of different interpretations given to the circumstantial evidence surrounding global climate change.

One of the goals in science, when studying controversial issues, is to enable the student to develop techniques for considering such questions; techniques which he or she will use in later life. “An Inconvenient Truth,” the documentary film about climate change, specifically global warming, can provide opportunities for the development of clear thinking, balanced judgment, intelligent choices, informed opinion, an ability to differentiate fact from opinion and an understanding of propaganda devices.

The purpose of the film is to educate the public about the science behind global climate change and to enhance our understanding of global climate change, which, first and foremost, rests on the veracity of the science. It accomplishes this by giving the viewer access to a cohesive summary of scientific knowledge on this particular topic, and plenty of serious, substantive data that can be used to form an opinion about the validity of the science.

“An Inconvenient Truth” gives science students worldwide a view into what might become the most talked about and researched experiment conducted on this planet. Students can research and discuss the validity and implications of the scientific research that is presented and the predictions that are made based on the evidence.

The film is an opportunity to view some impressive graphs, media and data and to do a critical analysis of the scientific principals that produced them. Students will make the final decision for themselves based on their research into the validity of the evidence and will draw their own conclusion as to what can or should be done to remedy the problem.

NO: Film is politics hiding under veneer of science

Tom Mocks

The snowcaps of Mount Kilimanjaro are receding. That’s a measurable fact. Some well-respected scientists believe the cause is global warming, while other, equally well-respected scientists believe the cause is deforestation around the base of the mountain that reduces available moisture. Still others believe it is a combination of the two. One fact and three differing opinions — contributing equally to a rich scientific discourse.

But there is no room for differing opinions in “An Inconvenient Truth,” the film about climate change, specifically global warming. Viewers are left with the belief that all reputable scientists believe that Mount Kilimanjaro’s receding snowcaps are proof positive that global warming is destroying the world as we know it. Scientists believing otherwise are incompe- tent charlatans or sinister, money-hungry conspirators.

At their hearts, science and education are about expansion, exploration and discovery. Politics, on the other hand, is about domination, indoctrination and exclusion. The problem with “An Inconvenient Truth” is that it hides the sensibilities of politics under a thin veneer of the sensibilities of science.

To call “An Inconvenient Truth” a documentary is intellectually dishonest. It’s basically a vehicle for bringing Al Gore’s slide presentation to a wider audience. At its core, Al Gore’s presentation is a political polemic designed to demonize any and all opposition.

Let’s agree that the Earth is warming and that there’s a good chance mankind is partly or even largely to blame. That is not the issue. The issue is whether bringing this particular movie is the right vehicle for studying the problem in the classroom. What makes for good “edutainment” in theaters does not always translate to good education.

The deliberate distortion of some controversial issues designed to make Al Gore look spectacular and his opponents look sinister is problematic. With years of experience covering events on Capitol Hill, I know the level of technical quality available to those covering hearings. The footage of U.S. Sen. James Inhofe, R-Oxla, appears to have been deliberately post-pro- cessed and compressed to give him an unsavory look. It’s inconvic- tent that any file footage by profes- sionals covering congressional hearings at that time would have been that bad. This should be no standard to be applied to professional or amateur presentation.

Equally problematic for edu- cators should be the fact that the same techniques and tricks one brings to demolishing political opponents were expanded and brought to bear on scientists and researchers having come to conclusions that might undermine Gore’s position. Is there any seri- ous give-and-take on the scientific merits of any of Gore’s claims? No. In fact, he declares that all serious researchers agree with his pre- sentation, which is patently false. Applying political methods to sci- ence, he ascribes sinister motives to well-respected scientists who disagree with his conclusions. This is intellectual dishonesty at an intol erable level. It treats science and scientists as pawns of politics and demeans the scientific pro- cess.

Global warming is a seri- ous topic, and plenty of serious research is being done. It is suitable for classroom use. But a political polemic that sends the mes- sage that scientific thought must be monolithic and subservient to politics is certainly not among them.

Michael Benda teaches science at Jeffers High School in the Adams Township School District, Painesdale.

Tom Mocks, of Maryland, is a former elementary and middle- school science teacher who has produced documentary and educa- tional films for the National Park Service and has worked for various news agencies.

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

Tell us what you think: “Should ‘An Inconvenient Truth’ be shown in science class?”

Send your comments to the following address:

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140 West Main Street • P. O. Box 568 • Midland, Michigan 48640 • 989-631-0900 • Fax 989-631-0964

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