

MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

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Spring 2008

SHORT SUBJECTS

Five new charter schools opened in Michigan last year and one closed, according to the Michigan Department of Education's annual report on charter schools. The state's 230 charter public schools now serve 5.7 percent of the state's students. More public school academy students in grades three through eight scored proficient on state assessment tests than did their counterparts in their host districts, the report said.

Detroit Public Schools' fall enrollment dropped to 104,975, about 5,000 fewer students than school officials had projected. The decline means the district now will have to cut about \$44 million from its budget, the Detroit Free Press reported. If enrollment drops below 100,000, a provision in state law that prevents Wayne County Community College from opening charter public schools in the district will no longer apply.

Earnings of \$90 million were reported by the Michigan Education Special Services Association in 2007, the third-party administrator that sells health care benefits to a majority of Michigan public schools. MESSA's end-of-year assets were \$359 million, up from \$268 million a year ago, according to the Michigan Information & Research Service's Capitol Capsule. An association spokesman said MESSA will use some of the earnings to lower rates in the coming year. MESSA is affiliated with the Michigan Education

SHORT SUBJECTS, Page 5

MESSA SAYS NO TO REQUESTS FOR INSURANCE DATA

School districts in holding pattern on teacher benefits

Battle lines are being drawn over Michigan's new Public Employees Health Benefit Act, as public school districts report they are unable to obtain from a Michigan Education Association affiliate the information they need to seek competitive bids for employee health care.

Enacted late in 2007 as part of a deal to resolve a state budget deficit, the new law requires public school districts to seek competitive bids for medical benefits plans and makes it easier for schools and other public employers to form health insurance pools.

The law also requires insurance companies and third-party administrators that currently work with school districts to release aggregate information about each district's past medical claims and costs. That claims history is supposed to be made available to individual school districts, which then are supposed to

MESSA, Page 8

Personal use of vehicles, car allowances part of benefit package in some ISDs

ISDs own or lease 700-plus vehicles that aren't buses

At least a dozen of Michigan's 57 intermediate school districts provided a vehicle for business and personal use by their superintendent in 2007, while others paid a car allowance for use at the superintendent's discretion.

While it isn't the most expensive benefit that ISDs offer their top administrator, providing a vehicle earmarked for superintendent use and allowing personal use of that vehicle adds up to thousands of dollars in some districts.

School board members say they provide a vehicle or a car allowance for the superintendent because the job requires frequent travel, both to constituent districts and to Lansing. Depending on the miles traveled, providing a vehicle can be more cost effective than a mileage reimbursement, finance directors told Michigan Education Report.

The Saginaw Intermediate School District, which reported the lowest amount of personal use of a vehicle in terms of dollar value, provides a car to its superintendent primarily for business use, but allows personal use for efficiency, according to board treasurer Richard Burmeister.

"It (personal use) can be allowed, but it's not standard practice. The superintendent is responsible for going to Lansing and being politically involved because of the districts we represent," Burmeister said. "Yes, he drives it home because he may go from home to Lansing or to another appointment. It's a way to be more effective in his work."



At least a dozen intermediate school districts in Michigan provide vehicles for business and personal use by superintendents or other senior administrators, including this 2007 Buick Rainier, top, and 2004 Chevy Tahoe, below. The Rainier is designated for superintendent use in the Gratiot Isabella Regional Educational Service District and the Tahoe for superintendent use in the Clinton County Regional Educational Service Agency.

Personal use of public vehicles came under scrutiny at the state

and local levels in 2007. A majority of Michigan appellate judges gave up their state cars, though they continue to be reimbursed for business travel, and Gov. Jennifer Granholm also prohibited use of

ISD VEHICLES, Page 2

EDUCATION DEANS WANT TO MEASURE GRADS BY STUDENT TEST SCORES

Data would help gauge teacher impact in classroom, deans say

Education deans from three Michigan universities told the state Board of Education in November that they want more feedback on how well teachers who graduated from their programs perform in the classroom.

"It's been very frustrating to us for years," Dr. Susanne Chandler, dean of the School of Education and Human Services at the University of Michigan-Flint, told board members. "That drives our whole industry, and yet we can't get to it."

Chandler was referring to standardized test score data maintained by the Center for Educational Performance and Instruction within the Michigan Office of the State Budget. The data includes such things as student scores on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program. She and other deans said that they support the idea of linking student test scores to their respective teachers, then to the institution where that teacher was trained.

"That's what we're looking for from the state, to have access to that data so we can

match our graduates to ... how students are doing in their classrooms," said Dr. Karen Adams, dean of the College of Education and Human Services at Central Michigan University. Universities could use the data to help identify strengths and weaknesses in teacher training programs, she said.

The comments came as part of a lengthy discussion during the November board meeting on the new "Plan to Advance Teacher Preparation." The plan suggests wide-ranging changes in how Michigan prepares and licenses teachers, including requiring national accreditation of teacher preparation programs; a tiered licensing system for educators based partly on demonstrated performance; a research initiative on teacher education; and making technology a priority in instructional practices.

The recommendations resulted from the work of a teacher preparation study group and were presented by state Superintendent Michael Flanagan.

Flanagan said that work to

provide universities with test score data is continuing.

"CEPI is moving along," he said, but the department wants to provide the information "in a way that's fair to the institution and not just ... to connect a

student to a teacher to an institution without the proper context. All students. Over time. Those kinds of things."

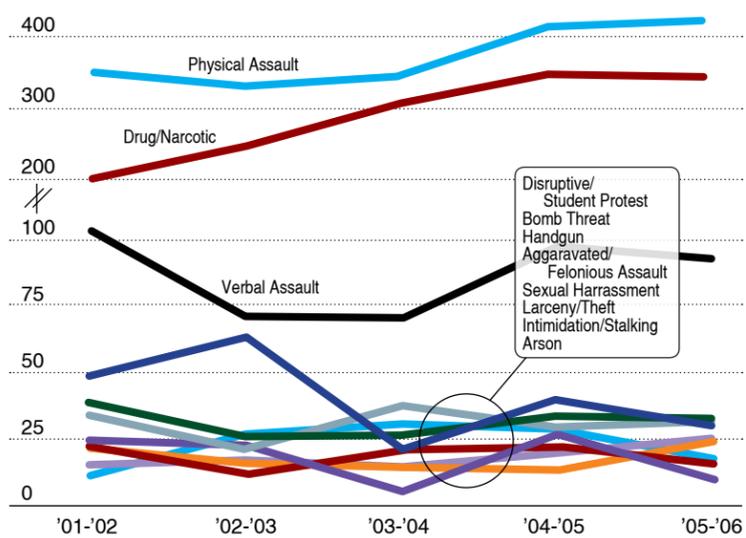
Adams told Michigan Education Report that universities already assess their graduates' performance through surveys of school principals and of new teachers. Universities also know their graduates' scores on the Michigan Test for Teacher Certification and sometimes make program changes based on scores in a given subject, Adams said.

TEST SCORES, Page 8

EDUCATION AT A GLANCE

Leading causes of student expulsions in Michigan public schools, 2001-2006

Sources: Center for Educational Performance and Information, Office of the State Budget



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ISD VEHICLES

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state vehicles for personal purposes.

Now a Michigan legislator has introduced a bill that would prohibit use of a publicly owned vehicle by any employee in local municipalities, townships or school districts.

VEHICLE LISTS ONLINE

Intermediate school districts are required to list the vehicles they own or lease in an annual report posted at their Web site. The reports were first required in 2005-2006, after a legislative investigation of a financial scandal in Oakland Schools and other intermediate districts. Intended to bring more public scrutiny to ISD spending, the reports must list each vehicle as well as top salaries, budget totals, travel expenses, and lobbying and legal expenses, among other items.

The latest reports, filed in December, show that intermediate school districts owned or leased a combined 700-plus vehicles during 2006-2007. Most of those were pool cars for business-only use, maintenance vehicles, courier vans or vehicles that students use for practice in auto shop. Vehicles for top administrators are typically 2004 or newer sport utility or minivan models.

"I never know when I'll be going out," said Superintendent Mary Vratana of the Cheboygan-Otsego-Presque Isle Educational Service District. "This is a service agency. You can't see people if you aren't out there."

Vratana's district provides her with a 2006 Chrysler Pacifica for business and personal use. Based on mileage reports, Vratana said her personal use added up to about half of the overall use of the vehicle in 2007. Most of that consisted of the 33-mile drive from her home to the district office in Indian River, she said.

Similarly, Superintendent Michael Hill said the 20-mile commute from his home in Maple City to the Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District offices in Traverse City makes up most of his personal use of the 2006 Chrysler Pacifica the district provides for the superintendent.

"I don't drive it all the time," he said.

Personal use of a public vehicle is considered taxable income by the IRS, and school districts must calculate a dollar value for that use and report it on the employee's W2 form. In Hill's case, the district business office calculated the value of his personal use of the vehicle at \$7,750 in 2007.

Michigan Education Report asked districts that allow personal use of vehicles for one or more administrators to provide the dollar value of that use for the latest year available. Figures provided by the districts' finance offices include the Kalamazoo Regional Educational Services Agency (2005 Chevy Tahoe, \$2,966); Oakland Schools (2005 Dodge Grand Caravan and 2005 Chrysler Town and Country, \$10,836 combined); Clinton County Regional Educational Service Agency (2004 Chevy Tahoe, \$4,900); Saginaw Intermediate School District (2006 Buick Lucerne, \$574); Cheboygan-Otsego-Presque Isle Educational Service District (three 2006 Chrysler Pacificas, \$13,200 combined); Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District (2006 Chrysler Pacifica, \$7,750); Gratiot-Isabella Intermediate School District (2004 Buick Rendezvous, \$2,115); Hillsdale County Intermediate School District (2006 GMC Envoy, \$698); Kent Intermediate School District (two 2006 Dodge Durangos, \$2,316 combined, one vehicle provided for only half the year); Genesee Intermediate School District (2007 GMC Yukon, \$3,777); Van Buren Intermediate School District (2005 Chevy Trailblazer, \$5,857), and Washtenaw Intermediate School District (2003 Ford Expedition, \$3,708). The Gratiot-Isabella District has since changed to a 2007 Buick Rainier.

About three-quarters of the miles put on the district-provided vehicles in Oakland Schools were for personal use, according to calculations by the district. Of 20,000

miles reported by Superintendent Vickie Markavitch, about 15,500 were for personal use. Of about 16,700 miles reported by Deputy Superintendent Robert Moore, about 12,000 were personal miles.

Three districts, the Wayne Regional Educational Services Agency, the Kent Intermediate School District and the Alpena-Montmorency Intermediate School District, stopped providing a vehicle for the superintendent during the past year. As of July 1, Wayne RESA switched to providing business-only mileage reimbursement for all employees, while the Alpena-Montmorency board of education decided that the 2006 Chevy Trailblazer it leases will be available for business use by all employees.

"This year we just said that if the superintendent wants to schedule it, he can," explained Anthony Suszek, business manager in Alpena-Montmorency. "It stays in the parking lot at night."

Wayne RESA made the switch to a business-only reimbursement plan because it gives the district better control of the system, said James Beri, president of the district's board of education.

"This way we can trace it a lot better and make sure we have control," he said, adding that the change was proposed by the district superintendent.

Aside from vehicle benefits, a number of intermediate districts pay for tax-sheltered annuities, life insurance policies and universal service credits on behalf of superintendents. Those extras pushed the total compensation for ISD superintendents in Michigan from \$7 million for salaries alone to nearly \$8 million.

Kent switched to a monthly car allowance of \$500 for its superintendent rather than providing a vehicle, but retained a vehicle for the business and personal use of the district's facilities director, according to Ronald Koehler, assistant superintendent.

"He (the facilities director) is on 24-hour call and we have 3,000 students on campus every day," Koehler told Michigan Education Report. "The last couple of days he's been out at 3 or 4 in the morning to see if we should be open."

Other school board members said they provide a vehicle or car allowance because they expect their top administrators to travel.

"We have a rather large district and we require the superintendent to interact with local districts in our county," said Delores Myers, president of the Kalamazoo RESA board of education.

Other intermediate districts that provide car allowances to superintendents rather than vehicles include Jackson County and Monroe, which each paid allowances of \$6,000, Lewis Cass, which paid \$11,400, and Allegan County, which paid \$14,000. Still other districts reserve a vehicle for the superintendent, but for business use only.

OTHER BENEFITS

Aside from vehicle benefits, a number of intermediate districts pay for tax-sheltered annuities, life insurance policies and universal service credits on behalf of superintendents. Those extras pushed the total compensation for ISD superintendents in Michigan from \$7 million for salaries alone to nearly \$8 million with added compensation. The average base salary was \$126,000.

No intermediate school district, or any other local unit of government, could permit personal use of public vehicles under legislation introduced by state Rep. Brian Palmer, R-Romeo. House Bill 5506 would punish violators through reduced revenue sharing or school aid.

"Business use makes sense," Palmer told Michigan Education Report. "To use those cars on weekends... is absolutely unconscionable. We have the highest foreclosure rate in the nation (in Detroit). And what do we

have? We have government still growing."

Vratana pointed out that use of the vehicle is the only added benefit she receives as superintendent.

"I pay my own health insurance. I don't get any annuities. The only monetary benefit I get is my salary," she said.

Van Buren Intermediate School District Superintendent Jeffrey Mills said he isn't sure the ban on use of vehicles by judges and state employees will save much money.

"Here's the number that will be interesting in a couple of years. How much are they turning in for reimbursement?" Mills said. He continued, "I travel a lot. I go out to every local school district to get feedback about what we're doing."

The Van Buren ISD covers 725 square miles and serves 20 public and nonpublic school districts. Though intermediate districts vary widely in geography and number of students served, most, like Van Buren, offer programming or support in the areas of special education, career and technical education and early childhood education. Superintendents say their programs save local districts money and improve services by consolidating educational programs, in particular special education and career and technical education, as well as some business functions like payroll, data management, technology and purchasing. As of this year the ISDs are required to develop a plan for potential consolidation of noninstructional services among their local school districts.

FEW QUESTIONS

Palmer said he believes the law requiring intermediate districts to post financial information on their Web sites has helped to put intermediate spending "on the radar screen," though several superintendents told Michigan Education Report that they have not received any questions or feedback from the public on the numbers they posted.

"This is the first phone call I've gotten about it," Menominee ISD Superintendent Larry Godwin told Michigan Education Report. It's more common for school board members at the intermediate and local levels to raise questions about the budget than to hear questions from the public at large, he and other superintendents said.

Lenawee ISD Superintendent Steve Krusich said posting the numbers is "excellent public policy," but one that has not been applied equitably to all publicly funded programs.

"If it makes sense, it makes sense in a broader application," he said.

Ray Wilson, president of the Kalamazoo County Taxpayers Association, said intermediate school districts do not receive enough public scrutiny, mainly because many ISD boards are not elected by the public at large, but by school board members of the constituent districts.

"The ISDs spend tens of millions of dollars with very little public oversight," he told Michigan Education Report. "There's no way for the public to enforce accountability."

In addition to superintendent vehicles, the reports list vehicles for other uses, often reflecting the variety and scope of programming in a given district. (The reports do not include school buses.)

The Saginaw intermediate district has one of the largest fleets of vehicles in the state, with 27 cars and vans used to transport students with disabilities from school to community work sites and back. An additional 13 vehicles are used to transport food, families and employees to Head Start sites which the intermediate district operates throughout the region.

Bill Hartl, the director of special education, said no employee is allowed to use the special education transportation vehicles for personal use, a policy enforced through the use of global positioning systems.

"I can tell where those vehicles are every 17 seconds," he said.

Conversely, the system defends drivers in cases when parents claim the bus never arrived, giving Hartl proof that a vehicle was at a certain driveway at a certain time.

The Lenawee and Allegan County intermediate school districts each main-

tained a fleet of motorcycles used in safety education programs during 2006-2007, though the Allegan district has since discontinued the program.

The Lenawee district owns 11 motorcycles, all of them donated or paid for through a state grant. The motorcycle driver safety program is one of a large number of adult and community education programs the district offers at its Vo-Tech Center.

"We believe we belong to Lenawee County. While our primary mission is education, we believe our mission also is to make Lenawee a better place to live every day," Krusich said.

The Allegan County Intermediate School District discontinued its motorcycle safety program in 2006-2007 after a teacher left.

"It was providing a service to the community, but there wasn't really a student benefit," administrator and instructor Jon Gates said. "The direction our technical center is headed for is work-based learning."

The Traverse Bay ISD leases 33 vehicles for use in the MichiganWorks! program, which it administers through a contract with the Northwest Michigan Council of Governments. The ISD provides workforce development services to adults, youths and local businesses in a 10-county region, with funding from federal and state sources as well as a local grant from the United Way.

"I see it as a very efficient model," Hill said. "If there are ways we can help this region through collaboration, I will push our agency to look for those areas, and this is one example."

FUND BALANCES

The vehicle list and the Traverse Bay ISD budget in general have prompted questions from Maynard Wheeler, a Lake Leelanau resident and member of the Leland Public Schools Board of Education. Leland Public Schools is within the Traverse Bay ISD. Wheeler, a retired corporate executive, told Michigan Education Report he believes many intermediate districts can and should funnel more money directly to struggling local districts.

"We're sitting here with a 7 to 8 percent fund balance," he said of the Leland district, while the Traverse Bay ISD intermediate district has a general fund balance equal to about 37 percent of general fund expenditures.

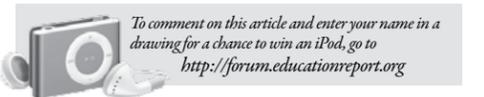
"Our ISD is no different than the others," Wheeler said. In correspondence between Wheeler and the Michigan Department of Education, Wheeler was told that Michigan intermediate districts had a combined total fund balance of about \$780 million as of June 30, 2007, of which about \$600 million was restricted for use in special education, vocational education or capital projects. In their general funds alone, as of 2006, 34 of the 57 districts had a fund balance equaling 50 percent or more of their expenses.

"They could offer half of that (to local districts), easily," Wheeler said. "The dollars you can get closest to kids are the best dollars you can spend."

In letters to Wheeler, the state department noted that general operations funding from the state to ISDs reduced by 15 percent in recent years, though an inflationary increase was provided in 2007.

Hill responded that one reason for the higher fund balance at the intermediate level is to pay for initiatives like its special education transportation consortium. Ten of the ISD's 16 districts participate in the consortium as a way to save transportation dollars. The seed money to begin the program came from the ISD general fund, Hill said. The ISD also pays for 70 percent of the cost of a digital videoconferencing system that saves districts money by providing for distance learning programs for both students and staff.

"When you look at our fund balance, we've positioned ourselves to meet changing needs. We take that role very seriously," Hill said. ♦



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CHARTER NETWORK GROWING, BUT NOT LIKELY IN MICHIGAN SOON

KIPP KNOWN FOR LONG HOURS, HIGH TEST SCORES

The first question Michael Feinberg fielded was not about requiring school on Saturday, not about his schools' high test scores and not about his budget.

The first question Feinberg fielded after his presentation about the Knowledge is Power Program was when and if it is coming to Detroit.

His answer? Detroit is welcome to get in line, just like everybody else.

A KIPP cofounder, Feinberg said that demand for KIPP schools has grown so much in the past 10 years that rather than scout the country for potential school sites, the program now requires applicants to come to it. With 57 schools in 17 states, two more scheduled to open this year and a growing list of philanthropic supporters, KIPP is becoming selective about its future.

In an address at the 10th annual Michigan Charter Schools Conference sponsored by the Michigan Association of Public School Academies in November 2007, Feinberg explained the KIPP model and how the foundation plans to "tip" public education.

KIPP sponsors a national network of free, open-enrollment public schools that offer a college preparatory program primarily to low-income minority populations. Most KIPP schools are fifth- through eighth-grade operations known for long hours, academic rigor and discipline.

High math scores in Houston and New York, the first KIPP sites, brought the model national attention. The day after a "60 Minutes" program about KIPP was broadcast in 1999, Feinberg received a telephone call from a California school administrator who said, "We want to order 15 KIPPs for next year, please."

Shortly after, Feinberg and cofounder Dave Levin partnered with the founders of Gap Inc., to establish the KIPP Foundation. Today the foundation works with groups to establish KIPP schools, and it also trains school leaders and teachers.

KIPP's goal, Feinberg told the audience in Cobo Hall, is to move into cities where detractors say the political, social and economic obstacles are too much for school systems to overcome and then to overcome those obstacles.

"We know we aren't capable of KIPP-izing all 50 million children in public education today. But we think we can contribute," Feinberg said. "Wherever people are making ... excuses, we want to start schools there under the same conditions, to prove what can and should be happening across the board."

KIPP succeeds by opening locally con-

trolled schools resting on five tenets: time on task, choice and commitment, power to lead, high expectations and measurable results.

The typical KIPP schedule requires students and teachers to be in school from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays. Students spend two to three hours on homework nightly and attend school on alternate Saturday mornings as well at least four weeks each summer.

"I don't care if everything else is figured out perfectly," Feinberg said. "Wonderful teachers. Wonderful school leaders. Brand new buildings. If everything else is fixed and we still put on the clock (only) four or five hours a day for half a year, we're setting the whole thing up for failure."

It's not difficult to find teachers willing to put in those hours, Feinberg said, because the best teachers already are. For the extra time, KIPP pays teachers 15 to 20 percent more than the average surrounding districts.

"Every single school here in Detroit — and I don't care how bad the school is — has at least got a handful of great teachers. There are a few cars in that parking lot at 7 in the morning and a few cars ... at 5 in the afternoon. At KIPP, all the cars are there at 7 ... and at 5."

CHOICE AND COMMITMENT

KIPP won't open a school in a community without favorable charter school laws, Feinberg said, because parental choice is the surest way to improve a school.

"The most important accountability measure, beyond any test score ... is the pitter patter of the kids' feet," he said. "If they choose to come to our school, what are we doing to view the kid and the parent as our customers?"

It's tough to find the balance between academic rigor and customer satisfaction, he acknowledged.

"We've got to push in a way that we aren't pushing so hard that we're pushing them out the door."

Some critics have said KIPP is doing just that, pointing to high attrition rates at some KIPP schools. If the students who leave KIPP are low achievers, then the program is not serving who it claims to serve, they said. Rather, it is serving motivated low-income students who already are higher achievers.

Other education researchers say that attrition is common among urban minority populations in any school because those populations are more transient in general. They also point out that KIPP's highest attrition numbers are found, not unexpectedly, during the first year in new KIPP schools and that the attrition rate

decreases over time. KIPP is now doing its own national analysis of attrition.

POWER TO LEAD

Too many school principals today are not school leaders; they are babysitters, Feinberg said.

"They're told who will teach in their building. They cannot get rid of people. ... They don't have any real control over their budget dollars," he said. "No wonder they're frustrated."



Michael Feinberg, cofounder of the Knowledge is Power Program, told audience members at a charter school conference in Detroit that the best way to hold schools accountable is through school choice. (Photo by Josh Nunez)

Every KIPP school is led by a director who has completed a year of KIPP training. That person has the freedom to hire and fire staff and make budget decisions, and then is held accountable for results, Feinberg said. In the few cases when a KIPP school has failed, it was because the wrong person was chosen as leader, he said.

"Great people make or break it, so what are we doing to attract great people ... and what are we doing to find a quick exit strategy for the people who are not even mediocre?"

In return, KIPP teachers and leaders are expected to bring underperforming students up to and beyond grade level within two years. Every KIPP student is expected to attend college.

Overall, Feinberg said, KIPP has made its mark on education, but "we haven't really tipped anything."

"We want to have an effect on the public education system the way Fed Ex had an effect

on the U.S. Post Office," he said. "When Fed Ex got to 10 percent market share, that's when the Post Office, a government monopoly, learned to do next-day air. So at the end of the day, Fed Ex didn't hurt the Post Office. They made them better."

The charter school movement overall has not "tipped" education either, Feinberg said, in part because of quality control.

"The fact is that several of our brothers and sisters in the school movement have not started very good schools, and they've not been held accountable," he said. "It can't just be about growth. It's got to be about quality."

KIPP itself has revoked permission to use its name in five schools. Of those, three are now operating under other names and two have closed.

Asked about bringing KIPP to Detroit, Feinberg said that any group can file an application for a KIPP license, but they have to meet three core requirements — funding, facilities and freedom.

KIPP schools typically do not take in enough local and state revenue to cover the cost of running the school. One reason is that charter public schools typically receive less per-pupil funding than conventional public schools. Another is that KIPP has added costs due to the extended school day and school year. To make up the difference, which KIPP estimates at roughly \$1,000 to \$1,500 per student, KIPP schools must develop a fundraising plan and seek out additional revenue through public grants and private donations.

Even with the additional fundraising, however, KIPP spends less per student, on average, than most urban districts, according to the foundation.

Regarding facilities, Feinberg said they don't have to be fancy, but zoning and other regulatory questions have to be resolved in advance. "Freedom" means there is a legal way — preferably a "healthy charter law" — for the school to open.

In Michigan, getting a charter would probably be the biggest obstacle for a group interested in opening a KIPP school, said Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies. Michigan law caps the number of charter schools that can be authorized at state universities to 150. As of mid-December, he wasn't aware of any organization planning to apply.

The KIPP Foundation confirmed that it has not received an application from Michigan to date, but said that it has been approached for information by a number of business and education leaders here. In any case, the earliest the foundation will accept new applications is this spring, for schools that would open in 2010. ♦

To hear excerpts from Feinberg's presentation, go to www.EducationReport.org/9290



MEA members pay \$66 million in dues, fees

Michigan Education Association members paid about \$66.6 million in dues and fees to the union in 2006-2007, a 5 percent increase over the previous year even as the number of active teacher memberships decreased. Total income and spending by the MEA, the state's largest employee union, also increased.

In filings with the U.S. Department of Labor, the MEA reported total membership of 157,181, about 200 more than the previous year. The number of student and retired members grew, but active educator memberships declined by about 1,500, while support personnel membership remained essentially unchanged. The number of fee payers — individuals who choose not to join the union but pay a fee for its services — rose from 685 to 734.

MEA dues are calculated as a percentage of a teacher's salary, to a maximum of \$620 per year. That does not include dues paid to the National Education Association.

The MEA reported spending \$31.5 million last year on employee compensation, up 8 percent from the previous year. The average MEA employee earned about \$81,000, although the actual figures ranged from a high of approximately \$204,000, the gross salary recorded for Arthur Przybylowicz,

general counsel, to \$8,500 paid to a bargainer. Executive director Luigi Battaglieri's gross salary was reported as \$195,000. The average Uniserv director salary was about \$100,000.

In comparison, the average Michigan teacher earns \$58,482, according to salary tables at the National Education Association Web site. The gap between the average teacher salary and average union employee salary widened by about \$1,000 since Michigan Education Report reported on union filings in 2006. About 40 percent of MEA employees earned \$100,000 or more in 2006-2007.

The MEA did not respond to a request for comment on the report.

In Coopersville, elementary teacher David Eppelheimer said that he does not object to some MEA employees, specifically Uniserv directors, earning more than the average teacher, but that "their rate of increase should be no more than the average teacher."

"If their wages are going up faster than the industry they're working for, there's a problem," he said. "They should be reflective."

Uniserv directors work with local teacher unions on a variety of issues, among them organizing, bargaining and grievance procedures. As for other MEA staff members, such as clerical employees, Eppelheimer said their

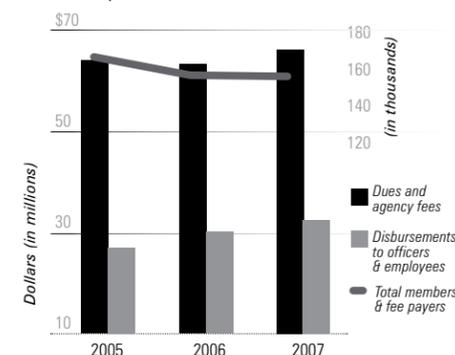
wages should be comparable to those found in local public school systems.

"I do believe many MEA salaries are out of line with rank-and-file MEA members, and are increasing at a much greater rate than the typical teacher," said Judith Meier, a junior high school teacher in Vassar Public Schools.

In addition to employees, the MEA also spent about \$809,000 on officers and board members, of which \$540,000 was for salaries and the remainder was for other reimbursements. That amount was down

MEA Membership and Dues

MEA members pay more per capita as total receipts from dues and fees rise while membership decreases



about \$100,000 from a year ago.

MEA President Iris Salters received a salary of \$198,945 from the union, according to the filing, which covers the time period of Sept. 1, 2006, to Aug. 31, 2007. Vice President Steven Cook received \$178,000, while Margaret McClellan, secretary/treasurer, received about \$122,000.

With the exception of the top three positions, most MEA board members receive \$1,000 or less, much of it labeled as disbursements for official business.

A University of Michigan labor researcher was not surprised that compensation for union officials and employees rose more than the average teacher salary despite Michigan's tough economy.

"In Michigan and elsewhere, we're seeing a ratcheting down of wages and benefits in the private sector," which leads to similar downward stress in public sector services, said Roland Zullo, an assistant research scientist in the university's Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations.

That situation creates more work for union negotiators, not less, he said. If there is less money available, opposing groups take longer to come to terms on how to spend it, he said, suggesting that administrative salaries have not been reduced either, for the same reason.

"In a difficult climate, it sometimes

Parents push for changes in special ed waiver system

Bill would give more control to state board, less to state superintendent

A grassroots group is pushing on several fronts for changes in the way special education is delivered in Michigan.

One member of the Michigan Alliance for Special Education has brought scrutiny — and change — to the way Michigan determines if its secondary special education teachers are “highly qualified.” Another member has requested an investigation into whether Michigan violates federal law regarding placement of special education students in private schools.

Further, alliance leaders are lobbying legislators to pass a bill that would remove authority for some special education decisions from the Michigan superintendent of public instruction and return it to the Michigan Board of Education.

Marcie Lipsitt, a parent from Franklin, and Karen Barnhart, a parent from Beverly Hills, Mich., say they believe an elected board would be more accountable to parents of special needs students.

“We elect the state board. We vote them in. We can vote them out,” Lipsitt said.

The women, both parents of sons with

such as a portfolio showing experience and relevant education.

The result is that some secondary level teachers who thought they were “highly qualified” under the federal No Child Left Behind Act might not be, or might have to use a different procedure to prove it. It also likely means that the number of “highly qualified” teachers reported by Michigan is inflated. The state has until December 2008 to submit a more accurate count, and teachers have until 2009 to meet the new standard.

In response, several Michigan newspapers quoted angry teachers who had paid to take the elementary content exams.

“I just want the Michigan and the federal government to be on the same page and not do things that are useless, not waste our time,” high school teacher Kelly Campbell was quoted as saying in the Lansing State Journal. “Figure it out and be done with it.”

Jan Ellis, spokeswoman for the state Department of Education, told the Detroit Free Press that, “At the time, this (the elementary test) was believed to be an appropriate means to meet the requirements — until guid-

should not be responsible for instructional programming for more than 15 students. Alternative plans approved for the Oakland, Wayne and St. Clair intermediate districts allow for teacher caseloads of 20, 18 and 18, respectively, as well as larger class sizes with the help of an aide. A spot check of plans posted at intermediate district Web sites throughout Michigan shows that a number of districts operate under alternative plans.

“It’s being used in an incredibly disturbing way,” Lipsitt said. “ISDs use it to override all the other rules.”

Special education administrators disagree, saying that the rules are outdated. Michigan rules were written at a time when children with disabilities spent the whole day in a single classroom with the same teacher, said Kevin Magin, executive director of special education for the Wayne County Regional Educational Service Agency.

“Some of our rules are 1980s rules and our services are 21st century,” he said. Today, most special education students spend at least part of the day in a regular education classroom, spreading the responsibility for their instruction among teachers.

“I could have 10 kids on my caseload and if I see each of them one hour a day, I have a full-time equivalent of one kid,” he said.

Lipsitt and Magin both said that more special education students can and should graduate from high school. Approximately 80 percent of students identified as having special needs in Michigan are within normal IQ range, according to information from the state department, while the graduation rate is about 70 percent.

“Even with progress, the numbers are abysmal,” Lipsitt said.

“More kids can learn more than they have been learning,” Magin said. General education teachers need help to work effectively with the special education students who increasingly join their classrooms, he said, while special education teachers need content knowledge to effectively teach core subjects like math and English at upper grade levels.

HOUSE BILL 5323

Alternative plans must be approved by the state Superintendent of Public Instruction, currently Michael Flanagan, but under House Bill 5323 that authority would revert to the Michigan Board of Education. Introduced by Rep. Fred Miller, D-Mount Clemens,



Marcie Lipsitt

in October 2007, the bill would effectively rescind a 1996 gubernatorial order moving some decision-making authority from the board to the superintendent.

Lipsitt is lobbying hard for the legislation, saying the executive order stripped too much authority from the board. More than 60 legislators have signed on as co sponsors, but the bill had not been scheduled for a hearing as of mid-January.

Three state board members who talked with Michigan Education Report had varying opinions on the proposal. Elizabeth Bauer, a longtime advocate for special needs populations, said that she would support the legislation.

“Before 1996, those waivers had to be approved by the state board,” she said, and parents or advocacy groups often showed up at board meetings to testify for or against the plans. “When all of those authorities were transferred, it kind of cut the board out of the process. It cut the people out of the process.”

But John C. Austin, board vice president, said the board’s proper role is to set policy, including special education policy, then see to it that the state superintendent carries it out.

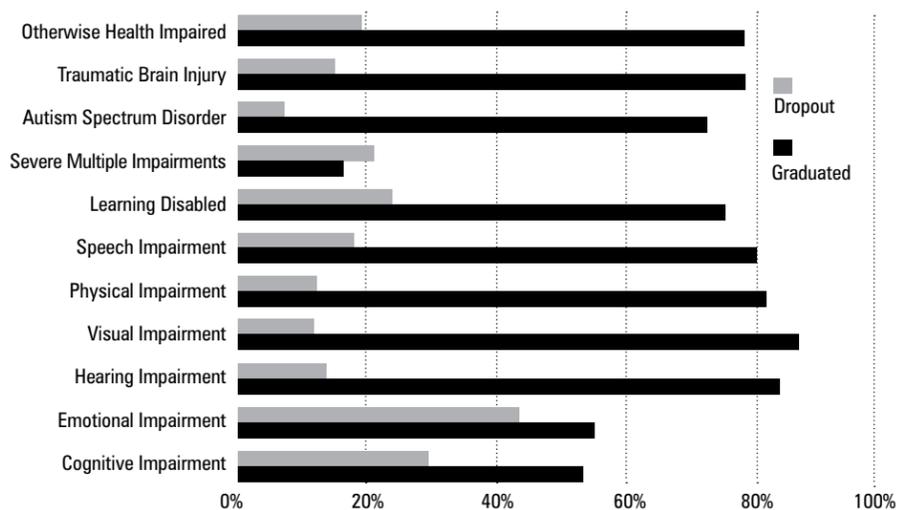
“It is totally unrealistic for the state board to take up every waiver request,” he said. “It is not workable or appropriate.”

Parents can approach the state board directly with concerns, as they have done in the past on other issues, Austin said. “We have, as always, the opportunity and responsibility to ask questions about it.”

Board President Kathleen Straus was the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit against former Gov. John Engler over the 1996 executive orders. A circuit court ruled against Engler, but the decision was overturned on appeal and the Michigan Supreme Court declined to review the case. Straus, a board member since 1992, said she prefers the system under which the board approved any special education waivers.

Under the current process, “We don’t see decisions until after they’re made,” she said. ♦

Special Education Graduation/Dropout Rates 2005



special needs, are founders of the alliance, which they say has several hundred supporters. Lipsitt won a lengthy battle with Birmingham Public Schools over her son’s educational plan, concluding when a hearing officer ruled that the district had to pay for the youth’s in-home, private instruction, a rare occurrence in Michigan special education.

Barnhart also disagreed with her son’s educational plan, so she removed him from his assigned public school and enrolled him in a private school at her own expense. She then filed a complaint with the Michigan Department of Education alleging that although the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act says that public schools may place children in private settings and cover the costs as a way to provide an appropriate education, Michigan school districts routinely avoid doing so.

Sixty-four parents signed the complaint, which is now under investigation. (See related story on page 5.)

Even though the overall graduation rate among the special education population in Michigan has increased steadily in the past decade, from 33 percent in 1996 to 70 percent in 2006, Lipsitt calls it “abysmal.”

Lipsitt is the parent who contacted the U.S. Department of Education to question the policy allowing Michigan to count secondary special education teachers as “highly qualified” if they passed an elementary-level content examination. Lipsitt had raised the same issue at the state level, but with no results, she said. The federal department notified the Michigan Department of Education in October that secondary teachers must demonstrate competence at the secondary level, either by passing a secondary level content examination in each subject they teach or by alternate methods,

ance from the federal government directed us to amend the requirements.”

But Lipsitt said that many middle school and high school special education students are in programs leading to a standard diploma and that “no one will convince me that our students aren’t better off with a trained teacher with knowledge in content.”

“I am thrilled that the U.S. DOE took my concerns so seriously,” she told Michigan Education Report. “Far too many people believe that students with disabilities can’t reach grade level proficiency and beyond.”

ALTERNATIVE PLANS

In addition to the issue of highly qualified teachers, Lipsitt and Barnhart also are pressing for changes in the practice of allowing intermediate school districts to use “alternative plans” for special education services. They believe such plans water down programs by allowing schools to increase class size, age range or teacher caseloads. School administrators disagree, saying the alternative plans allow them flexibility in providing services.

All intermediate school districts are required to write plans detailing how they provide services to special needs students. The plans are developed by the intermediate district, the local school districts they serve, and the local Parent Advisory Council. Many intermediate districts use a provision added to special education rules in 2002 that allows them to deviate from specific rules if the state superintendent approves.

One example is the rule stating that programs for students with specific learning disabilities must be limited to 10 students per classroom at one time and that the teacher

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MICHIGAN EDUCATION REPORT

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MEA

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makes it (negotiations) more costly," he said. "When times are good, it's easier to negotiate a settlement, for all the parties."

Dues and fees accounted for about half of the MEA's total income of \$131.8 million during the period covered. Other revenue came from a wide variety of sources, including about \$5.3 million from the National Education Association and \$4.7 million from the Michigan Education Special Services Association. MESSA is a third-party insurance administrator established by and affiliated with the MEA. It pays the union for marketing and shared service fees, according to the filing. About \$32 million in receipts is listed as "all other," with no source named.

The MEA's total spending topped \$124 million, up 5 percent over the previous year. Of that, \$16 million was spent on representational activities, according to the report. The union spent \$56 million on general overhead, \$20 million on benefits and \$6 million on union administration.

On the spending side, the report shows that the percentage of hours that MEA employees spent on "representational activities" decreased 4 percent from 2006 to 2007. On average, union members spend 41 percent of their time representing members, the report said.

The American Federation of Teachers Michigan also filed its annual report with the Department of Labor, reporting that its president, David Hecker, received a salary of approximately \$128,000. Lois Doniver, secretary/treasurer, received approximately \$97,000. With allowances and disbursements for official business, the total spent on the two officers was \$292,000.

AFT members paid about \$2 million in dues and fees to the union in 2006/2007, down nearly a third from \$3 million the pre-

vious year. Total income of \$3.2 million was down 16 percent from a year ago, and total spending was down 22 percent.

The AFT Michigan represents about 25,000 employees in 94 locals across Michigan, according to its Web site.

Membership was up by nearly 1,000 in 2007 compared to a year ago, but a larger share of members are now in half-time or quarter-time positions. The number of full-time working members of the AFT shrank by about 300. The number of AFT fee payers grew by 400 and now represents 5 percent of the organization.

The AFT reported having 40 employees. Jeanette Harris, comptroller, Jon Curtiss, organizer and Julie Matuzik, political organizer, each received the top gross salary of \$104,353. The average salary was about \$50,000, but that includes five people making less than \$10,000 and three making less than \$500 for the year. When those eight are excluded, the average salary equals about \$66,000.

In addition to requiring labor unions to file financial reports, the Department of Labor requires separate filings called "Officer and Employer Reports" from union officers, employees and businesses or other organizations that do business with unions or their officials.

The separate filings show that, in addition to their income from the Michigan Education Association, several officers and employees of the union have received income or gifts in recent years from sources that do business with the union.

Salters is a member of the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan board of directors, which reported expenditures or payments of about \$33,000 to her in 2006. That included \$31,000 in board fees and smaller amounts for assorted receptions, as well as \$1,200 for Super Bowl tickets. A number of large and

small labor organizations are represented on the BCBSM board, which sells insurance products directly to school districts and indirectly through the MESSA, an MEA-affiliated insurance administrator. Salters also reported receiving about \$1,800 in gifts, meals and football tickets directly from MESSA as a member of its board.

Salters also sits on the board of directors of The Accident Fund Insurance Co., headquartered in Lansing. The company reported paying her about \$16,000 in board fees and for the cost of board receptions in 2006.

Battaglieri, the MEA executive director, reported that he received \$28,688 as a board member of Delta Dental Plan of Michigan in 2006 in the form of a monthly retainer, meetings stipend and for meals and lodging associated with meetings. Delta underwrites part of the MESSA insurance plan. He also reported receiving about \$1,800 in football tickets, gifts, hotel rooms and meals directly from MESSA. Battaglieri is MESSA's executive secretary.

Przybylowicz, MEA general counsel, reported that his wife, Suzanne K. Clark, received about \$96,000 from the MEA in 2006 through her law practice. Clark is affiliated with Lee & Associates, PLLC, a Southfield law firm that did \$512,000 of work with the MEA that year. Przybylowicz's own salary from the MEA was reported as \$204,000. ♦

A copy of the labor filings from the U.S. Department of Labor is available at <http://www.mackinac.org/archives/2008/MEA-LM-2-2007.pdf>



SHORT SUBJECTS

continued from Page 1

Association. A new state law requires public school districts to seek competitive bids for employee health insurance.

A New York state audit says Flint's controversial former schools superintendent was overpaid more than \$44,000 in salary, moving expenses and other reimbursements while leading the Fallsburg Central School District in New York. The district hopes to recover the money from Walter Milton Jr. and other employees the audit identified as overpaid, according to an article in The Flint Journal. Milton was superintendent in Fallsburg for two years before coming to Flint in fall 2005. He left Flint in 2007.

Power House High School in Chicago will open in August as the first in a network of schools patterned after Henry Ford Academy, a public school academy located on the grounds of the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn. The venture is funded by the Ford Motor Co. Fund and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The Chicago school will serve 480 students with a curriculum centered on sustainability and alternative energy, according to a Detroit News article.

Teacher absences jump 30 to 40 percent on Fridays and Mondays, according to Professional Education Services Group, a Caledonia company which subcontracts substitute teachers to school districts in 26 West Michigan counties. An article in The Grand Rapids Press said that those are the days when teachers are most likely to call in sick or take a personal day. About 80 percent of all teacher absences are pre-arranged and used for training, parent-teacher conferences or personal business, the article said.

The number of schools offering Advanced Placement courses worldwide dropped by 13 percent in 2006-2007, following the first-ever audit of the program. AP teachers at high schools around the world took part in the audit, which the College Board announced in 2005 amid concerns about whether the program's rapid growth had diluted its quality, according to an article in Education Week. The audit, still ongoing, included a review of syllabi used in AP courses.

Poor math performance by his own sons prompted Nicholas Aggor, a Detroit-area engineer, to write a series of math textbooks called the Math Masters Series. The Riverview Community School District in Wayne County tested the books with some students who struggled in math and the district's curriculum committee plans to consider adopting it as a supplement when the full series is published, the Washington Times reported.

The Madison school district's "no-flunk" policy is under scrutiny by the Madison District Schools Board of Education. A long-standing policy in the district has allowed parents to write a letter instructing administrators to move their child up a grade level despite failing grades. Some officials believe that the policy might be the reason the district failed to meet federal No Child Left Behind Act standards for four years in a row.

A West Ottawa High School teacher facing dismissal for allegedly giving struggling students the answers to biology tests denies the allegations and hopes to continue teaching. The Grand Rapids Press reported. The district's school board voted 6-1 in early February to dismiss Karl Nadolsky, a 35-year veteran of the district, for improper testing practices. Nadolsky is expected to appeal, according to attorney Phil Iorio. The appeal would be heard by an administrative law judge who presides over tenure cases for the Michigan Department of Education. ♦

Parents seek private special ed with public funds

Editor's Note: The state investigation described in this article has since concluded and found that no violation has occurred. The findings were reported shortly before deadline; details were not available.

In Massachusetts, the parents of a special education student can visit a state Web site and scroll through a list of private schools offering special education programs. The state will pay for special needs students to attend those schools if parents and educators agree that is the best place for the child.

In Michigan there is no such list. Cases in which a student with special needs attends a private school or program, paid for with public money, are few and far between. Karen Barnhart, a parent from Beverly Hills, Mich., believes the cases occur so rarely that the situation constitutes a violation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the federal law that guarantees all children with disabilities a "free and appropriate public education."

Barnhart filed a complaint to that effect with the Michigan Department of Education in September, signed by 64 other parents. The complaint alleged that most public school districts routinely refuse to consider paying for private schools as an option for special education students, even though the federal law allows it. Most parents aren't aware the option exists, Barnhart alleges. Those who want to send their child to a private school at public expense typically face a lengthy, expensive hearing process pitting them against their assigned school district.

But others in the special education field in Michigan disagree, saying that the reason there are so few private placements is that there is little need for them. Public school districts here have developed their own comprehensive services, unlike other states that rely on private schools, they said.

The Michigan Department of Education is investigating Barnhart's complaint and declined comment in the interim. The department does have a written policy on

the matter. Titled "Public Agency Placement of Students with Disabilities in Private Schools," it states that if a student is placed in a private facility in order to receive an appropriate education, then that education will be at no cost to the parents. In practice, however, Barnhart alleges that there is a pattern of school districts refusing to consider such placements even when parents request them.

Many of the 64 parents who signed Barnhart's complaint said they either agreed reluctantly to educational programs provided by their public school districts or are paying for what they believe are better services from private sources at their own expense.

That's what Meath and Tere Ramos Dunne did for several years, until they decided to leave the state altogether.

The Dunes were living in China, on assignment with General Motors Corp., when they realized that their 2-year-old daughter, Katherine, was not developing language skills to match her age. When testing showed serious "global delays," the couple moved back to Michigan and enrolled her in an early intervention program in their assigned public school system. Simultaneously, they enrolled her in a private autism program for part of the day at their own expense.

Today, however, they live in Massachusetts, where the state pays for their daughter to attend The Northeast Center for Children near Boston. The center is a private, nonprofit autism education center. The Dunes moved primarily because they believe the school offers one of the best autism education programs in the country, based on an approach called applied behavioral analysis, Tere Ramos Dunne told Michigan Education Report in a telephone interview. It came as a relief to them that their local district agreed to pay the annual tuition of approximately \$80,000.

Private placement is more common in Massachusetts than Michigan, she said. "You can ask about it and it's nothing the

school system is so shocked about."

In Michigan, parents who disagree with their local school districts about the best educational plan for their children have the right to file a complaint and take the matter to a hearing. But the process takes time and money, Barnhart said. In her case, an attorney told her, "You'll never win. It will cost you \$40,000 to \$50,000 to go to due process." She chose instead to enroll her son in a private school and pay the tuition herself.

Many parents can't afford either option, Barnhart said, and accept what their district offers. "It's pretty much take it or leave it."

Except for cases in which a student has severe needs and lives year-round in a treatment facility, Barnhart said her review of state records showed only three cases in which Michigan paid for special needs students to receive private services in the past seven years.

Others in special education say they are not surprised at that number, and that the reason so few special education students attend private schools in Michigan is that there is not much need.

"When districts are pressed to look for private schools, it is usually because a child needs 24-hour residential placement," said Lyn Beekman of Special Education Solutions, a dispute resolution and training center. Beekman has worked in special education in Michigan for 30 years, the last 10 as a mediator, arbitrator and compliance investigator. "When there's a need, it should be doggone rare."

Michigan special education law, which Beekman helped develop, was intended to force public school districts to create programs to serve special education students, he said, a reversal of the days when special needs children were not even required to attend school.

"We wanted to force public schools to do what they should do," he said. When federal special education law was enacted in

SCHOOL IN FOCUS

Ashmun School: Combining education and therapy in northern Michigan

The lengthy driveway leading to Ashmun School is snow-covered and glistening on a sunny winter morning. Empty fields stretch away on either side, clumps of trees dotting the landscape. It's a picturesque northern Michigan setting.

But Mother Nature sometimes comes as a shock to inner city youths who are under court order to spend up to a year living and attending school here. Ashmun School sits on the 680-acre campus of Eagle Village, near Ewart, a nonprofit corporation offering comprehensive treatment programs for youth and families.

"We had one kid who was afraid of deer, and this was a pretty macho teenager," said Jeff Beckstrom, the school's special education director. In an agreement now 30 years old, the Mecosta-Osceola Intermediate School District provides the educational program, teachers and support staff at the school, while Eagle Village provides and maintains the building and furnishings.

The students attend Ashmun School while participating in the Village's Learning Experiential Accelerated Program, or LEAP. LEAP is for youth between the ages of eight and 18 who have a history of delinquency, abuse or neglect. Nearly all have experienced some type of breakdown in the family.

"There's a lot of low-level crime. Truancy from school. Some breaking and entering. Substance abuse problems," Beckstrom said. Some students are defiant. Some are impulsive.

"There's a big lack of trust for adults," he said. "You see that manifested as disrespect. They have difficulty bonding."

Beckstrom and his staff have the responsibility of finding out where the new arrivals stand academically — in most cases that's below grade level — and providing a program to keep their education on track.

The youth come to Eagle Village from all parts of Michigan, Beckstrom said, some placed by a judge, some by the state Department of Human Services and a smaller number by parental request.

In the LEAP program, they live with adult counselors in group homes of up to 12 students. Their day begins with breakfast and morning chores, after which they walk across campus to Ashmun School. The school day runs from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and much of the schedule looks routine — math, reading, art, computer lab. But time is set aside every week to teach social and life management skills.

"A very integral part of the program is to mesh education and treatment," Beckstrom said. Thursday afternoons, for example, are spent in "experiential learning," one of the key components of the Eagle Village program. Those activities typically combine a physical challenge with a skill like communication or cooperation. Beckstrom described one such activity: Two groups of students stand on opposite ends of a six-inch wide beam. The two groups must switch places, passing each other along the beam without stepping off.

"They can stop to develop a plan," Beckstrom said, but it's more common for them to become angry and argue first, then learn to iron out their differences.

Learning social skills is almost a daily focus in the classroom, agreed teacher Martin DuBois.

"A big component for me is to help teach them how to react to situations. Their emotional impairment gets in the way of learning. Sometimes they don't take even positive corrective feedback very well. They don't understand it. All they hear is criticism," he said. Like all Ashmun teachers, DuBois is a certified special education teacher. He and the other teachers meet regularly with the house counselors to discuss student progress in treatment and in school.

Gaining student trust is critical to his work, DuBois said.



Ashmun School teacher Martin DuBois works with a student on an English project in the school's computer center. The school operates on a year-round schedule, with one-week breaks every six weeks and a slightly longer break in the summer.



Jeff Beckstrom, shown here with a student in the Ashmun School computer center, taught at the school for 25 years and now is the director of special education for the Mecosta Osceola Intermediate School District. The intermediate district provides the academic program at Ashmun School as well as at two other residential treatment programs for youth, the Muskegon River Youth Home and Pineview Homes.

"It seems they can sense whether you're honest. Once you gain their trust, they'll do anything for you," he said.

Academically, many of the students arrive below grade level in math and language arts, but fall into the average IQ range, Beckstrom said. They may be eligible for special education services, typically in the areas of emotional impairment, learning disability or "otherwise health impaired," a category that includes students with attention deficit disorders.

In an agreement now 30 years old, the Mecosta-Osceola Intermediate School District provides the educational program, teachers and support staff at the school, while Eagle Village provides and maintains the building and furnishings.

A teaching consultant works with newcomers first, giving them assessment tests before placing them in a classroom with students working at approximately the same level.

Students in DuBois' classroom range in age from 12 to 16, but most are reading somewhere between the first- and fifth-grade levels, he said.

"You have to be flexible," he said. "To me, a good teacher can do that. You have to be very understanding."

"Typically, in a month, we might have a turnover of five kids," Beckstrom said. "The classroom dynamic is always changing. ... You just start developing a bond with a kid and then they're gone."

Knowing that students come and go, teachers tend to present short units of instruction rather than long-term projects, and alternate between group and individual work to accommodate students working at different levels. Class size is usually limited

to 12, with one teacher and one aide.

The school also does exit testing on every student who has attended Ashmun School for six months or longer. Beckstrom said that results show that for every month spent at the school, the typical student gains a month and a half toward their appropriate grade level in math and reading.

One reason for those gains is simply that the students are spending more time in the classroom, said DuBois and Gary Bennett, Eagle Village president and chief executive officer. In their home environment, the youths might have skipped school routinely with few consequences.

As one LEAP resident told Bennett recently, "I've got structure and I've got accountability. Nobody made me go to school before."

Eagle Village keeps track of LEAP participants for a year after they leave the pro-

gram. If the youth is living in a family-like setting, is in school or gainfully employed, and has had no further contact with the law for a full year, then the organization considers the treatment a success. Last year the success rate across all programs was 75 percent, Bennett said.

DuBois, who has taught at Eagle Village for nine years, said he is happy for students who succeed and understands why some do not.

"You see them make all this progress here," he said, "but some of them don't make it because they're back in the same environment that put them here."

"I believe I'm able to have a true impact here," he said. "I've had opportunities for other jobs. I just can't see myself leaving." ♦

Listen to an interview with teacher Martin DuBois at www.EducationReport.org/9297



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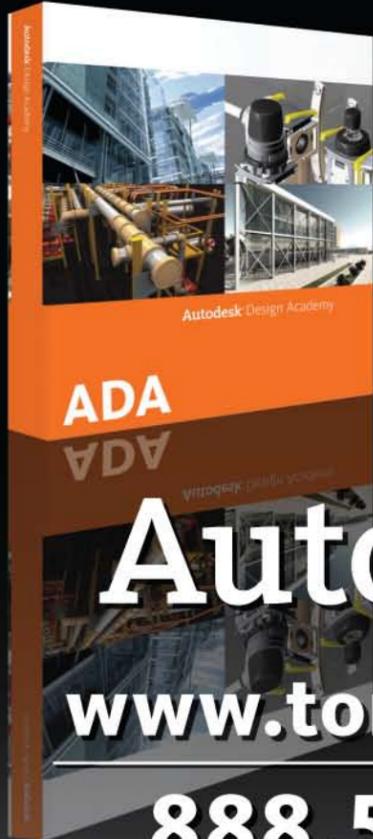
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MESSA

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provide the data to any competitor who wants to bid for the district's business. The idea is that more competition in the school insurance marketplace will bring down costs.

But the Michigan Education Special Services Association, the third-party administrator that sells health insurance benefits to about half of Michigan's education market, now says it can't provide claims data to individual school districts.

In letters responding to districts that asked for their claims history, the association wrote that, "Due to our business model, MESSA has never maintained claims experience data on an individual school district or group basis." The letters go on to say that the association was to begin compiling the necessary data on Dec. 1, 2007, as required under the act. MESSA was established by and is affiliated with the Michigan Education Association.

"What they basically said is, 'We don't keep that kind of information,'" Reed City Public Schools Superintendent Steven Westhoff told Michigan Education Report. "I wasn't too pleased."

MESSA officials did not respond to a request for comment for this article.

Similarly, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan told Reed City that it was unable to provide claims history data because the MESSA pooling model "does not maintain data needed to separate out groups and membership history information." MESSA insurance plans are underwritten by Blue Cross Blue Shield.

That puts school districts in the awkward position of being required by the new law to seek bids and also to provide claims data that they don't have, said Tom White, executive director of the Michigan School Business Officials.

"It's holding up (employee contract) negotiations and it's frustrating people," White said. "To get the best product at the best price, we need the data."

The contract between Reed City

teachers and the school district expires in June, and Westhoff anticipates that contract negotiations, including negotiations over health benefits, will begin this spring. After receiving the letter from MESSA, he also sought the claims data from the Reed City Education Association and was told it "has no control over such information."

At this point, he said, the district plans to request claims data from MESSA for December of 2007 and the first three months of 2008 in order to have bids available during contract talks, but he isn't sure how useful that will be to bidders. Reed City currently participates in MESSA's Choices II, a preferred provider health plan.

"I think it's kind of a game," Westhoff said. "It's kind of like they (MESSA) have bought themselves ... time."

"Schools are always put into these rocks and hard places," said Raymond Telman, executive director of the Middle Cities Education Association, a group representing urban public school districts. "What's the enforcement mechanism? I don't know."

Staff members of state Sen. Wayne Kuipers, R-Holland, and Sen. Mark Jansen, R-Grand Rapids, both sponsors of the legislation, were to meet in mid-January to discuss the matter, a staff person in Kuipers's office said, but further details were not available before deadline.

White and Westhoff both were skeptical of claims that the data was not available at the district level.

"Blue Cross is sending bills to school districts with individuals' names on them. My guess is they have the capacity to do this," White said.

Priority Health, an insurance carrier based in Grand Rapids that sells a variety of insurance products to 25 Michigan school districts, said it is responding to customer requests for data and looks forward to bidding for business in other districts.

"We have decided we are going to comply with the letter of the law as well as the spirit of the law," said Amy Chambers, director of consumer engaged

healthcare products. "It takes some effort, but you can do it."

"Having the kind of claims information that Public Act 106 sets free is going to be very valuable for the carriers and for the school districts," she said. "From the school perspective, this information is going to be gold for them. That's going to give them ammunition to bargain for the best costs and services."

Asked if Priority Health will submit bids in districts where claims data is lacking, Chambers said it depends on the product.

"For a few of our programs, we would need actual claims data," she said.

Without knowing the claims history in a given district, insurance companies or third-party administrators are likely to bid high, building a safety factor into their numbers, said Jim Miller, director of sales and marketing for the School Employers Trust and School Employees Group. SET SEG oversees a group of non-profit entities that offer insurance products to Michigan schools. SET SEG is now offering consulting services to schools on health insurance bidding and has given a number of presentations to school administrators throughout the state about the new law.

"There are schools bidding out, but the problem is they're bidding without claims data. Some of them are getting bids back, but they aren't competitive," Miller said.

MESSA and the MEA, the state's largest school employee union, fought hard against the new statute, asserting that there is no evidence that pooling will save money on school employee health care and that releasing claims data by individual district will encourage insurance companies to offer bids only to "healthy" districts.

MESSA plans are extremely popular among teachers in some school districts, with teachers citing the high quality of both benefits and service. But the cost of these plans is also high. In a number of districts in recent years, union negotiators have agreed to give up pay raises in exchange for maintaining MESSA

coverage. Many more have agreed to switch from MESSA's most expensive plan to its less costly preferred provider option, Choices II. MESSA officials say that shows that teachers are already doing their part to bring down health care costs.

In contrast, some public school districts have switched carriers and used the savings for pay raises. That was the case in Kearsley Community Schools near Flint, where employees agreed to move from a MESSA product to Blue Cross Blue Shield's Flex Blue plan.

Tim Dillon, assistant superintendent, said the district saved 10 percent on health insurance by switching to a high deductible plan, with the district paying the entire premium and all deductibles.

"It was absolutely amazing," he said. "We took that 10 percent and it equated to about a 2 percent increase in salary."

Dillon said teachers' medical privacy is not at risk under individual district plans.

"I don't receive any information on anyone's medical condition on an individual basis," he said. "It's not delineated."

Insurance carriers who want to compete with MESSA have the task of convincing teachers that their plans and services are comparable. The final decision on health benefits is generally decided at the bargaining table.

"I'm hopeful this law will open them up to everything that's out there," Chambers said. "We're hopeful that this act and a lot of energy around the act will get our information in front of them."

Miller estimated there are at least half a dozen insurance carriers who would like to get into Michigan's school insurance market, particularly in southeast Michigan.

"This thing will break, but it hasn't broken yet," he said. ♦

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Test Scores

continued from page 1

"What we're going on is impressions," she said in a telephone interview. "We don't have a measure of what is their (teachers) impact on student learning."

There are potential concerns about linking the data, Adams said. For example, if a teacher has taken courses at more than one institution, she said, the universities will be left trying to discern which program is most reflected in test scores.

That concern is similar to those raised by teachers unions and some education researchers in debates over merit pay. Unions have long been opposed to the idea of evaluating teachers on the basis of student test scores, saying the scores are significantly affected by factors outside of individual teachers' control, such as the student's family life and the amount of time teachers have with students. They also argue that tests do not measure all that a student has learned.

Other researchers argue that factors like income level can be accounted for in the data analysis, making test scores a valid part of measuring teacher performance.

(See "Diverse Viewpoints," page 12, for opposing guest columns about the issue of linking test scores to teachers.)

NATIONAL ACCREDITATION

The state Board of Education did endorse Flanagan's proposal that all teacher preparation universities earn national accreditation by 2013, either from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education or the Teacher

Education Accreditation Council. The state would retain the right to determine standards by which Michigan programs are evaluated, with input from the national programs.

There are 31 teacher preparation programs in Michigan. Twelve are already accredited through NCATE and two are in the process through TEAC.

Evaluation teams from the respective organizations would visit each university for on-site assessments, joined by representatives from the Michigan Department of Education. The review agency would write the final report. The system would largely take the place of the state's own review process, which one dean said comes as a relief.

In some cases, information filed with the state became outdated by the time the state reviewed it, said Dr. Sharon Elliott, associate professor of education in the College of Education at Wayne State University. "It was very, very frustrating. Generally, people ... were happy to see the department was interested in going to national reviews."

There are 31 teacher preparation programs in Michigan. Twelve are already accredited through NCATE and two are in the process through TEAC, according to the organizations' Web sites. The Michigan Deans Council, made up of the education deans of Michigan's 15 public universities, supports the accreditation plan.

The Michigan Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, whose membership includes both public and private teacher

education institutions in Michigan, has not surveyed its members about the plan, but the association president described the reaction as largely positive.

"I would say the primary concern is the cost," said Stephen Barbus, MACTE president and education dean at Saginaw Valley State University. It takes time and staff resources to pull together documentation and build databases required for the review, he said, and some institutions believe that time would be better spent on education.

Also, "Some of our institutions question the loss of their institutional autonomy, as to how the institution feels is the best way to prepare teachers," he told Michigan Education Report in a telephone interview.

SVSU's program has been accredited through NCATE since 1990, and Barbus said he welcomes the self-scrutiny that the process brings.

"I think the discussion and work that have to be done are important to a program. ... It's good to have an outside objective group come in."

SETTING THE BAR

In a frank exchange about whether Michigan's own review was too easy, and whether an outside review would be any more rigorous, Chandler told the state board that she believes that universities want the bar set higher.

"We wanted to be sure the national accreditation bodies were strong enough so that they would fail some programs if that was important to do. We have not done that in this state," she said.

State board member Elizabeth Bauer asked for reassurance that the

accreditation system would not be a matter of "friends vetting friends at a high cost."

The deans responded by pointing to cases in which NCATE placed university programs on probation or offered only conditional accreditation. Evaluators must not be affiliated in any way with the programs they are assessing, Elliott added.

National accreditation would take pressure off her office budget and staff, said Flora Jenkins, director of the Office of Professional Preparation Services within the Michigan Department of Education.

"We have a limited number of staff in our office. You need a lot of people to do this and do it effectively," she said. She agreed that state reviews have been "very late" and said that it is difficult to find "enough people who have time to be committed to that review process."

In another area, the Deans Council said that if the state requires accreditation of traditional teacher preparation programs, it should place a comparable requirement on alternative certification programs. All programs should be required to demonstrate their quality, Adams told Michigan Education Report.

As a prelude to the accreditation mandate, the Professional Standards Commission for Teachers will develop a comprehensive set of standards related to teacher education, reviewing such things as the teacher certification code, content expectations, subject area endorsements and standards for alternative teacher certification. Standards in each of those areas were developed at different times and never aligned with each other, according to Sally Vaughn, the MDE's deputy superintendent and chief academic officer. ♦

WATCHDOG GROUP UNHAPPY WITH MSU UNION EXECUTIVE BOARD

Members attempting to recall union leaders

Some members of Michigan State University's largest labor union are attempting to recall all 13 members of the union's executive board.

The effort is the latest move in an ongoing dispute between some members of the Administrative Professionals Association, which represents more than 1,800 MSU employees, and the union's chairman and executive board.

Union members who are leading the recall effort call themselves the APA Watch Group, and say that the union leadership routinely denies rank-and-file members access to financial data and information about the board's work.

The group has filed two complaints with the Michigan Education Association, of which the APA is an affiliate. One complaint challenged the March 2007 executive board election on several counts, among them that the ballot itself was confusing and favored incumbent candidates. Challengers also claimed that the outcome was influenced by an e-mail sent from APA Chairman Leo Sell to some APA members which suggested that electing newcomers over incumbents would weaken the union.

The second complaint alleges that Sell improperly allowed union members to vote by e-mail on the ratification of the latest contract between the union and MSU. Union bylaws called for a vote by mail.

Sell did not respond to telephone or e-mail requests for comment.

Danny Layne, a hardware/software coordinator in MSU's Julian Samora Research Institute, is one of the leaders of APA Watch. He said that Sell's e-mail was a reference to a group of physical plant employees running as newcomers to the executive board. The e-mail, which Layne has posted on the APA Watch Web site, says in part that "I am concerned about an attempt ... to replace current, experienced, diverse Executive Board members with people from a single unit, with a parochial interest and view, not to mention, NO experience in APA leadership or bargaining or otherwise."

The e-mail also said that electing the newcomers would upset the board's gender and ethnic balance, and that the typical way

to join the board is to be appointed by the chairman to fill a vacancy.

The challengers lost the election to five board incumbents.

Layne and others filed a complaint with the MEA, requesting a new election. According to Layne, the MEA Board of Reference issued a decision saying that while the ballot was confusing, the case did not warrant a new election except for one position, the region delegate to the MEA and National Education Association.

Mike Ramirez was one of the physical plant employees who ran for a seat on the executive board and lost. He told MER said he began attending executive board meetings early in 2007 to learn more about what the union receives in return for the \$54 in monthly dues paid by members. MSU records show that the university deducted \$946,000 from APA members' pay in 2006-2007 for union dues or service fees.

"We started to pay more attention," Ramirez said. He and fellow employees Dale Sebbon and Scott Kyes then decided to run for election.

Sell told the campus newspaper, The State News, in an article in March that it would be unfair to the membership for several members of the board to come from a single campus department, since the union represents a broad range of nonsupervisory administrative and professional workers in some 250 campus areas.

The Watch group also filed a complaint with the MEA, as well as a lawsuit, over a contract ratification vote conducted in October in which e-mail voting was allowed. Union bylaws state that votes will be conducted by "mail." Lansing Circuit Court Judge Paula Manderfield granted a temporary restraining order preventing MSU from implementing the contract, but later allowed the order to expire. She said that it was "fairly clear" that APA bylaws required a mail vote, but that holding up the contract could be damaging to the union membership. She noted that the MEA has an appeals process for such disputes.

Now the Watch Group is waiting for an MEA decision on the contract ratification process, even as they invite members to

sign recall petitions and recruit candidates for the next board election in March. The group also is gathering signatures to force a change in union bylaws that would allow the general membership to elect the union president at large. Currently the executive

board elects the president.

Layne told Michigan Education Report said that the group's overall goal is to make members more aware of the executive board's actions.

"We've done well," he said. "We're trying to make it transparent."

The Watch group also is investigating the pros and cons of disaffiliating from the MEA and becoming an independent union similar to others at MSU, Layne said. ♦

Private

continued from Page 5

1975, it allowed districts to either provide services themselves or pay for private services on behalf of students. Some states use the private option frequently, but Michigan schools provide their own services almost entirely, Beekman said.

A handful of states — Florida, Utah, Arizona and Ohio — offer voucher or scholarship programs for children with special needs. In Florida, the McKay Scholarship Program provides scholarships for students with disabilities to attend the public or private school of their choice. As of the 2005-2006 school year, the program served 17,300 students with an average grant amount of about \$6,500.

The Wayne Regional Educational Services Agency believes it is the public school system's job to provide appropriate programs for all special needs students, according to Kevin Magin, director of special education. Wayne RESA is the largest of the state's intermediate school districts, coordinating special education services for approximately 48,000 students.

"Your local district has a requirement to provide free, appropriate public education," he said. If a parent requested private placement, "I would say to my district, 'You're failing to do your job. What can we do to meet this need?'"

Barnhart and other special education parents disagree, saying that private placement should not be a last resort, but one considered alongside a public district's own programs. Information about private placement at public

expense should be readily available to parents, they said.

Paying for a private school is part of the issue, Beekman said, especially if the cost is more than a public school district would spend on the child in its own programs.

"That doesn't mean lack of money should shortchange a child," he said, but in practice, districts are unlikely to agree to private placement if they offer a comparable program of their own.

One question is whether the Michigan Constitution prohibits paying for special needs students to attend private schools. The constitution states that no public money may ever be paid "to aid or maintain" any private school.

However, Michigan school districts may pay for private school placement of special education students when necessary, according to a letter from the Office of Special Education Services to a Michigan legislator. Barnhart provided a copy of the letter to Michigan Education Report. The letter says that the Michigan Department of Education takes the position that a school district may use federal funds — but not state or local — as a way to pay for private school placement.

Nationwide, the number of special education students placed in private schools at public expense has risen steadily, from about 52,012 pupils in 1996 to 71,082 in 2005, according to the federal Department of Education. Overall, however, the number of such placements remains relatively small — just 1.1 percent of the country's 6.1 million special education students. ♦

No charter relocation

A charter public school could not relocate to another site unless it applies for and is granted a new contract to operate by its chartering authority under House Bill 5580, introduced by Rep. Steve Bieda, D-Warren, on Dec. 13, 2007. Schools could not move by amending their existing contracts. The bill was referred to the House Education Committee. Conner Creek Academy East, a public school academy based in Roseville, recently won approval from the state to build an \$11 million school for its middle and high school programs in Warren, though Warren city officials have fought the move. The academy's authorizing agency is Ferris State University.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-HB-5580

MESP accounts can pay for service academies

Michigan Education Savings Plan account funds can be used to attend a U.S. service academy under legislation signed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm on Dec. 20, 2007. Originally introduced by Rep. Tim Melton, D-Pontiac, on Aug. 23, the new law broadens the investment options in the tax-deferred college savings account program. It also explicitly allows using the funds to attend the U.S. Air Force Academy, Coast Guard Academy, Merchant Marine Academy, West Point or Naval Academy. The

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

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legislation passed the Senate and House of Representatives in unanimous votes in December.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-HB-5138

'Promise zones' for college tuition

Low-income communities could create "promise zones" and capture tax revenue to pay for college tuition on behalf of local students under House Bill 5375, introduced by Rep. Tim Melton, D-Pontiac, on Oct. 25, 2007. The Michigan Promise Zone Act would return to eligible communities part of future increases in revenue generated by the six-mill state education tax. That money could be used for college tuition assistance programs or educational activities aimed at college readiness. The program would be administered by the Michigan Department of Treasury. It passed in the House of Representatives on a 71-34 vote in December.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-HB-5375

Paid leave for adoption

Employers would be required to grant paid leave to employees who adopt a child age five or younger under House Bill 5261, introduced by Rep. Matthew

Gillard, D-Alpena, on Sept. 24, 2007. Under current law the mandate applies for the birth of an employee's child. The House of Representatives approved the legislation in a 101-7 vote on Dec. 13.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-HB-5261

No personal use of school vehicles

Employees would not be allowed to use a vehicle owned or leased by a school district or local government for personal business under House Bill 5506, introduced by Rep. Brian Palmer, R-Romeo, on Dec. 1, 2007. The act would include all local units of government, school districts and intermediate school districts. It includes school superintendents and other administrators. Violators would be subject to a reduction in state revenue sharing or state school aid. The bill was referred to the House Intergovernmental, Urban and Regional Affairs Committee.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-HB-5506

Excused absences for children of service members

Children of service members would automatically be excused from school on the days their parents are being

deployed or returning from active duty under Senate Bill 747, introduced by Sen. Valde Garcia, R-Howell, on Sept. 6, 2007. Public schools would be required to give the child an excused absence for up to one full day. Longer absences could be excused at the school's discretion. The bill passed the Senate in a 37-0 vote on Oct. 11 and was referred to the House Military and Veterans Affairs Committee. That committee recommended passage to the full House of Representatives on Dec. 5.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-SB-747

Repeal new act requiring health insurance bids

The month after it was signed into law, legislation to repeal part of Michigan's new Public Employees Health Benefit Act was introduced by Rep. Michael Sak, D-Grand Rapids. House Bill 5454 would repeal the part of the act that requires public employers, including school districts, to get four competitive bids when purchasing employee health insurance. The Act was passed as part of the 2007-2008 budget and tax increase deal. It also requires third-party insurance administrators to release claims history data and allows government and school districts to form insurance purchasing pools. House Bill 5454 was referred to the House Education Committee on Nov. 8, 2007.

www.michiganvotes.org/2007-HB-5454



COMMENTARY

Judge Michael Warren

History, civics take back seat in Michigan classrooms

America is slowly committing suicide. Contrary to popular wisdom, the most serious threat to America does not spring from overseas adversaries, but from within. Let there be no mistake — we may be fighting a hot war against Islamic terrorists today, but there is also a cold war brewing, here and now, for the hearts and minds of our citizens — and we are losing.

There is overwhelming evidence of our ignorance and disdain of American history, civics and First Principles. This crisis faces the K-12 system, higher education, the general public, media and political class. Many studies reveal that our K-12 students, college students and the general public lack a basic understanding of our system of free government.

In Michigan, history and civics has taken a back seat in education. An increased emphasis on math and science (which is needed) has come at the expense of social studies. There are efforts to eliminate civics and history testing in high school and time on task is being reduced. Too many of our educators are ill equipped to teach history and civics.

Yet, as a free people, we are fools to think that our free society will survive if we are ignorant of, or attack, what preserves our liberties. As a republic, the people are the ultimate guardians of their own freedom — and we are abdicating that responsibility.

We are a nation that was founded on the self-evident truths that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; and that governments are instituted by the people to protect those unalienable rights. These First Principles are the basis of our freedom.

As our founding history reveals, these First Principles were the underlying cause of the American Revolution and became the foundation for the Federal Constitution. These First Principles also formed the basis of the struggle for racial and gender equality.

To face this crisis Michigan should adopt an American Freedom Curriculum, in which American history and civics are taught every year in K-12 (as opposed to skipping several grades at a time). Our teacher preparation institutions should be reformed, so that all teachers are well versed in our history and First Principles. By implementing these reforms, we can stop ourselves from collectively drinking hemlock.

Please join me in fighting to preserve the greatest beacon of liberty the world has ever known. ♦

Michael Warren has served as an Oakland County circuit court judge since 2002. He served as a member of the Michigan State Board of Education from 1999-2002, is a member of the Michigan Center for Civic Education and author of "America's Survival Guide, How to Stop America's Impending Suicide by Reclaiming our First Principles and History," available at www.americassurvivalguide.com.

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COMMENTARY

Michael D. Ruch, Ph.D.

Well-intentioned folly

School psychologist suggests new grad requirements may leave some behind

In the movie "Dumb and Dumber," Lloyd, played by Jim Carey, asks the lovely and sophisticated Mary Swanson, played by Lauren Holly, what the chances are of his becoming her boyfriend. She honestly responds, "One out of a million." After a moment of contemplation, Lloyd sports a broad smile and exclaims, "So you're telling me there's a chance!"

Reckless optimism is funny in the movies. But it is a sad commentary when Michigan adopts this stance in relation to our children's high school education. Such is the case with

the new high school graduation requirements in the state, known as the Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC). The MMC requires that every high school student, beginning with this year's ninth grade class, successfully complete four years of English and math, three years of science and social studies, one year of health/physical education and one year of visual or performing arts. Required classes include Chemistry, Algebra 2 and Geometry.

For those students who cannot complete the MMC, public schools are forbidden from offering them a diploma. They may be given the consolation prize of a "Certificate of Completion," but not a high school diploma. No longer will some students choose a college prep program and others not. Now every student will be taking college prep classes.

High expectations are an important part of encouraging students to do their best. Students from all socioeconomic levels and from all ethnic backgrounds, even those with limited English language experience, should be expected and encouraged to perform at their highest level. And it is critically important for public high schools to promote education as one of the keys to personal success and social equality.

But even high expectations must be tempered by the reality of ability. The maxim that "anyone can do anything" is simply not true. And while it may be the stuff of inspirational

pep talks, the myth that any student can master any educational challenge can quickly be disproved. Curiously, we readily admit variations in ability when it comes to physical skills or other talents. Imagine if the MMC included the standard that "every student must run the mile under six minutes", or "all students must be able to create a realistic and accurate self portrait using acrylic paints."

While psychologists will point out that half of the population will score below average on any measure, the MMC seems based on the belief that we can somehow push everyone into the "above average" category. As designed, the MMC will selectively punish school districts that serve more "at risk" and special education students.

Further, the Bureau of Labor Statistics forecasts only a 1 percent increase in jobs requiring a four-year degree in the next eight years, while demand for skilled trades workers is expected to grow. While it is clear that high school graduates can no longer expect to enter the job market immediately, it is also clear that post-high school education can and should take many forms.

The MMC naively sets minimum graduation standards equal to and in many cases beyond entry requirements at four-year institutions. The coursework dwarfs the requirements of any community college

Here's what readers said about our last issue

Michigan Education Report invites readers to comment on articles by visiting our forum page at <http://forum.educationreport.org>. The items below were posted in response to articles in our Winter 2007 issue.

An article about union influence on local school board elections brought this response ... :

"It has been quite obvious in our community who pays for school board campaigns. The 'chosen ones' who will maintain the employee status quo are supported in so many ways it is impossible to track ... Much of the hard monetary support can be tracked to MEA PACs ... and local employee union PACs, but so much of the soft support is in the form of phone banks, mailers, poll workers, materials, facilities, supplies... right down to the donuts and coffee for the out of town union personnel ..."

Two guest columnists presented opposing viewpoints on this question: "Do teacher preparation programs spend too much time

on methods and too little on content?" Their commentary generated a number of responses, including these ... :

"I think teachers need both an excellent understanding of content, as well as effective methodology. Our best teachers have both. But I doubt if teacher prep got them to this point of excellence. I think these folks tend to be "naturals." I do think improved teacher prep could get more teachers in this effective "zone," however. We need more specialized content classes (content math classes distinct for elementary vs. secondary, for example). We also need methodology classes that are *specific* to the *content* area."

 "There are too many active teachers and too many student teachers who just don't have the teaching gene. ... That's not a matter of teaching them how to teach or teaching them the content. ... [I]t's a matter of them not having the innate skills and desire to teach."

 "I tend to support alternative pathways to teacher certification. Rock-solid content knowledge plus some meaningful practical work on the ground is

just as capable of producing a good teacher as all the theory in the world."

In his review of a new environmental curriculum, Dr. Charles Bacon, Ph.D., a professor of physics and chemistry at Ferris State University, said he found the material lacking balance. His review brought these responses ... :

"I recommend that Dr. Bacon write an Op Ed based on his analysis and share it with all major newspapers in Michigan as well as with our two Michigan senators and all representatives in Washington. It is insanity to believe that anything good and meaningful will emerge in the environmental debate by propagandizing with a "green curriculum" within our public school system ...".

 "I think teachers should always stress that science and scientists question everything, but when and where do we draw the line in including minority scientific opinion? Do we say that some scientists think the Earth is 6,000 years old when teaching geology?"

Folly

continued from page 10

or technical school. Students simply do not need to complete the MMC model in order to be successful in any number of educational settings after high school.

To understand how the MMC will affect students, imagine these scenarios:

- Susie wants to enlist in the U.S. Navy, but if she doesn't pass chemistry, she won't get a diploma and won't be eligible.
- Tom's dad owns an auto repair garage and Tom plans to join the business. But since he failed geometry, he will not get a diploma and won't be able to attend an automotive technical school to become a certified mechanic.
- Julie has always been a slow learner, but she's gifted in working with young children. Unfortunately, she cannot pursue post-high school education in early childhood care without passing Algebra 2.

And do we really believe that all students who aspire to become fire fighters, custodians, cosmetologists, or computer technicians need to master higher level math and science? By ignoring individual differences, the MMC will not only keep some of these students from getting a high school diploma, it will deprive them of their dreams.

In short, students who previously would have left high school and gone on to colleges or technical schools may no longer have that option. It is reasonable to predict that the MMC is going to increase dropout rates by discouraging students who struggle to pass required classes. Imagine what happens to a student's motivation when he or she struggles to pass geometry, only to look ahead and see two more years of required math.

The solution to this problem seems simple. High schools should offer a two-tiered diploma. The MMC can be preserved and used for the large number of students who can obtain a "state-endorsed MMC diploma." But those unable to meet those standards should have the opportunity of obtaining a "district-sanctioned high school diploma."

At a time when we have begun to accept and understand the benefits of cultural diversity, we must also embrace ability diversity. Michigan public schools welcome every student who comes through their doors. Let us make sure that we also give them the chance to walk across the graduation stage and toward productive citizenship. ♦

Michael D. Ruch, Ph.D., is a graduate of Hope College and the University of Wisconsin-Madison with 29 years of experience as a clinical and school psychologist in private and public schools. He currently works with Kentwood Public Schools and has a private practice of child psychology in Grand Rapids.

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DIVERSEVIEWPOINTS

Should standardized test scores be linked to individual teachers?

YES: Tests offer the most objective measure



Marc Holley

Linking student standardized test scores to individual teachers would enable principals, teachers and perhaps parents to know more precisely the contributions that teachers make to individual students' learning.

This question is often framed as one of fairness. For example, is it really fair to teachers to measure their performance by their students' scores on standardized tests? Will students be unfairly shortchanged by having teachers teaching to the test? If we knew that some teachers were more effective than others, would it be fair to pay them all the same?

If we knew that poorer schools routinely had less effective teachers than wealthier schools, would it be fair to poor students to let that inequity persist? Is it fair to students and teachers for principals to make teacher retention decisions on less precise information when more precise information is available?

In approaching these questions, I try to remember the lessons learned as a private school principal — primarily that sometimes there are trade-offs inherent in making tough decisions to put students first.

FAIRNESS IN MEASURING TEACHERS

Many will argue that teachers cannot be held responsible for their students' academic performance because there are too many factors beyond a teacher's control. They contend that the only way to give students a chance at success is to address the social inequities associated with poverty that interfere with their ability to learn. They also argue that schools are underfunded and overcrowded, so it is not fair to hold teachers accountable.

The alternate viewpoint is that we have not yet maximized the learning potential for all students, and improving the available educational inputs would go a long way to helping students achieve.

Of the factors that schools can control, teachers make the most difference for student success; therefore, it is best for schools to focus on improving teacher quality. The most objective measure of teacher quality is to evaluate the performance of a teacher in the classroom as measured by student performance on standardized tests. To do so, it is essential to link individual students to their teachers.

To be fair to teachers, school administrators must employ a statistical technique, called value-added measurement. These techniques control for, or tease out, the factors that contribute to a student's learning that are unrelated to a teacher's skill or effort. It is true that there are some trade-offs in choosing the particular statistical controls and that test scores are not perfect, but by controlling for prior

academic performance, statisticians can get a relatively accurate measure of teacher quality by looking at student achievement gains.

As a beginning teacher, I thought my job was to stand up in front of students and present the material in the best way I could. Learning was, however, ultimately up to them. Certainly, some students are more reluctant learners than others, but I came to realize that a teacher's job is not simply about delivering material. High-quality teachers also communicate a love of their subject and of learning, and they form relationships with their students that help to motivate their students to learn and to perform.

TEACHING TO THE TEST

Some argue that teaching to the test is an inevitable negative outcome of focusing so much attention on standardized tests. They assert that it is unfair to students for teachers to spend an inordinate amount of time in standardized test preparation. If teachers could substitute test preparation gimmicks for real learning and still have their students succeed, the critics would be right — students would be the losers. This reasoning breaks down when we examine what a good test measures.

Consider a test of reading comprehension. Teachers may prepare their students by working on sample problems. Teachers may spend time instructing students on how to identify a passage's main idea. They may also show them how to use context clues to figure out unknown words. Further, teachers may show students how to identify supporting evidence or conclusion sentences. These critical reading skills are precisely what teachers should be teaching anyway; in this light, teaching to the test may not be such a bad thing after all.

Another criticism of teaching to the test is that other untested subjects do not receive as much attention. Rather than spending extra time at recess or in music or art, students practice for reading, math, science or social studies tests. Again, is this a bad thing? Students need a balanced curriculum, but the best thing we can do is to ensure that they are developing the cognitive abilities and skills that will prepare them for success in the workforce or higher education.

Teacher pay, teacher quality distribution, and teacher hiring and retention decisions could all be made more fairly with the information that can be gained through linking student standardized test scores to individual teachers.

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Brianne Pedini

Although teachers should be held accountable for the achievement of their students, standardized tests are not the way to do so. There are many reasons why standardized test scores should not be linked back to individual teachers. The time of year tests are given and student attitudes towards testing, as well as other factors, support the idea that tests should not be linked to teachers.

First, we must look at the nature of standardized tests. Universities instruct teacher candidates to look at students as individuals. They push differentiated instruction and multiple intelligences. Upon graduation, these teachers move into careers and utilize this knowledge with students. Standardized tests do not support these methods of teaching. They are "one size fits all" tests that measure knowledge of a standard or benchmark, but do not take into account the learning styles of the students taking them.

Equally important to note is the time of year these tests are given. In Michigan, the Michigan Educational Assessment Program standardized tests are given in the fall. This assesses the knowledge of students from the previous year and would need to be linked back to the previous teacher. If teachers have changed jobs, left the profession, or taken leave, they may not be available to be accountable for the test scores. Giving a test in the fall also does not allow for students to familiarize themselves with the teacher or their methods before something that has so much bearing on the school and the teacher is presented. Administering the test in the spring to assess the knowledge of the current school year would be much more beneficial in linking scores to the teacher.

Another factor in linking test scores to teachers is student attitude towards testing. Let's face it; most students do not enjoy taking tests of any kind. This being said, teachers are already at a disadvantage because they need to give the standardized test in the first place. Students know that while the scores matter in terms of school achievement, scores are not linked to their classroom

grades and therefore may not try as hard on the test. As teachers we can motivate our students, instruct them using the best methods and prepare them as much as possible, but ultimately we have no control over what they choose to do on a test.

We also must take into consideration the environment each student is coming from on the day of the test. With such a small window given to test, there's not much we can do if a student has had a rough morning, not eaten breakfast, missed medication or any other number of things that a student could be dealing with.

Finally, we must look at a number of other aspects when considering linking test scores to individual teachers. How long has the teacher been in that position? What type of support is offered by the administration? What type of preparation is offered to those teachers who administer the test? Are there any other student situations that are being dealt with in the classroom? The environment the teacher is instructing in and the amount of support they are offered can have a great effect on the students that they teach.

Rather than solely using test scores to assess teachers, school administration should be using a variety of factors. We would never give a student a report card grade based on one test, so why should the same be done for teachers?

Teaching institutions should also be assessed using a variety of factors, including grade point averages of pre-service teachers, portfolios, student teaching success and success of teachers while holding a provisional teaching certificate. Teaching institutions as well as teachers should be assessed on a regular basis, and the best way to do so is by school administration using a variety of factors. If test scores were to be used in any way, many changes would need to occur with the testing process as well as the tests themselves.

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