

Michigan COMMENTARY

Proposal A: Our Last Best Chance

by Gerald A. Faverman, Ph.D.

June 2 is fast approaching, when Michigan citizens will vote on Proposal A. Public awareness of the proposal is low, public understanding of its technicalities is lower still, and too much of what little dialogue exists is limited to a consideration of the personal, rather than the public, interest.

Michigan has been trying to change its method of financing schools for more than twenty years. The legislature has been unable to agree on a plan and always has left the decision to the voters. In a little more than two decades the voters have rejected seven school finance proposals. The first, in 1972, received the support of 42 percent of the voters, but support has declined since. In 1989 a school finance proposal similar to Proposal A received the support of less than 24 percent of the voters. The electorate also has rejected seven of nine other tax proposals since 1972. What will it matter if this proposal fails, as have so many of its predecessors? The answer is simple, challenging, and frightening.

Nations survive and prosper by courage and sacrifice. They fail by weakness, selfishness, and cowardice. Hindsight will expose villains and cowards because from the vantage point of the future the choices that we faced will be clear. We live in epochal times—the most challenging in a millennium. Will we grasp the gauntlet of opportunity or scuttle into the oblivion of history, weeping and whining, eager to blame others? The erosion of public confidence in democratic institutions is frightening. A Public Sector Consultants poll just completed, underwritten by the Michigan State Medical Society and the Michigan Retailers Association, discloses that a scant 21 percent of our citizens trust the state's executive and legislative branches of government to solve our school finance problems.

Michigan was once among the ten richest states: Our per capita income was almost 20 percent above the national average. Today our per capita income is two percent *below* the national average, and we are only the nineteenth richest state. This decline in wealth has sapped our ability to maintain the high level of public services we have provided to our citizens in the past. Much of our success has been based on the quality of our education system, but that quality has declined. Our state spending on K-12 education ranks forty-fourth among the fifty states. The only way we can again become a wealthy state is to improve our schools, colleges, and universities and turn out well-educated workers who can compete in an increasingly competitive world.

Success and prosperity build strong, confident societies with the capacity to love and share. Failure and economic adversity build weak, totalitarian, divided societies with the capacity to hate and do evil. The rise of Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Francisco Franco, and Antonio Salazar in the 1920s and 1930s were a direct result of people's loss of confidence in their government, impatience with their personal prospects, and diminishing economic opportunities. Fascism found the tools that led it to power: the manipulation and deployment of hatred. One thinks that such ugly eventualities happened only in the past and only to other people, and that we as Americans, midwesterners, and Michiganders are immune from these diseases of the body politic. Wish that it were so, for we are prisoners of our times and the forces of history.

On the world scene we are undergoing the greatest and most rapid change since the end of the Middle Ages. The stability we have forged over centuries now is in the process of disappearing as we voyage toward an uncertain future. We know that economic stability, job security, social cohesion, environmental quality, and health and wellness all are at risk. In these dangerous and challenging times it is easy to be seduced by the allure of the private interest. Yet history teaches us that success in shaping the world of the future rests in the sacrifice of embracing the public interest. That public interest is clear. For a society in transition—a

transition that may last a century or more as we evolve from a manufacturing society to a knowledge society—the investment we must make is in knowledge: communications technology infrastructure, colleges, universities, schools, and teachers.

For a generation we have watched silently as our public schools have decayed, their finances undermined and their will to serve eviscerated by the public unwillingness to pay for that which is right and required. We have spent untold billions on toys, games, drugs, liquor, entertainments, and frivolities too numerous to mention; yet we have been unwilling to spend on the basic investments to give us the tools to confront and conquer the future. Money alone will not solve all the schools' problems, but there clearly are a number of districts without resources adequate to provide a quality education. As a society we are unwilling to spend more than \$5,000 annually to educate a child but are willing to pay more than \$25,000 to keep someone in prison a year. Our priorities surely are askew.

Clearly, if we are to succeed we must mount an agenda of offensive strategies, fixing the financing of public education, reforming the structure, extending the school year, recruiting the best and brightest to be our teachers and competitively compensating them, introducing and utilizing technology, and modernizing the curriculum so that education will result in employment and not unemployment.

To do otherwise will seal our fate. Proposal A is our last best chance—not a perfect proposal, but our best first step on a demanding agenda of change. It is our generation's call to stand up and be counted.

Jack Kennedy, looking at the debacle of a Europe facing the onslaught of the Nazis, wrote *Why England Slept*, and later he wrote the famous *Profiles in Courage* as his sermon for the future. Let us not have some future observer write *Why Michigan Slept*, a profile in cowardice.

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