



Michigan COMMENTARY

A PROFILE:

DONALD L. BEMIS
STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

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When he learned that accepting appointment as Michigan's superintendent of public instruction would prevent him from traveling to the Soviet Union with fifty students this summer, Donald Bemis briefly considered turning down the job. Bemis, superintendent of Utica's community schools, also is state chairman of the Initiative for Understanding, a program that arranges exchange visits for U.S. and Soviet students. Bemis and his group had played host to fifteen Russian students during Easter break.

The lure of the challenge awaiting Bemis in Lansing when he takes over July 1 proved irresistible, however. Indeed, the job of state school chief "is the only one that could have made me leave Utica," Bemis says. He has worked for the district 28 years, almost from the moment he received his B.S. degree from Wayne State University in 1960.

Bemis will succeed Interim Superintendent Gary Hawks at an extremely critical time for public education in Michigan. As many as seventy school districts throughout the state may be on the verge of bankruptcy, and the system of financing K-12 schools has come under fire from virtually every quarter, most especially from districts with relatively low property values and millage rates at the constitutional limit. Indeed, according to Bemis, many districts are considering filing court suits of the kind that resulted in the revamping in the 1970s of the state formula for funding schools. District lawyers expect to argue that under the current method of school financing, which makes the amount of money behind each pupil a function of a district's property values, the state is abdicating its constitutional responsibility for providing equal access to education.

Bemis believes that the state must develop "a systematic, responsible" approach to funding schools "before we have a major, painful crisis." He knows that he will be heavily involved in creating a new funding system almost immediately, whether or not the legislature places a proposal on the November ballot.

A frank, sincere man, Bemis believes he can help persuade voters to make the right choice "because I always make sure that they fully understand the consequences of whatever decision they make." In his 18 years as Utica's superintendent, Bemis has never lost a millage election or a bonding proposal. Miraculously, he convinced voters to accept a five-mill increase in property taxes in the same month that a majority of them recalled State Senator David Serotkin for voting to raise the state income tax in 1983. This took place in notoriously antitax Macomb County during the difficult economic times of 1980-1983.

Bemis employs simple but painstaking methods of persuasion. He recruits volunteers who know they have a vital stake in education and communicate that fervor to voters. "The people, given the right information, will always choose to support education. All they want is assurance that their kids are safe and learning communication and mathematics skills," Bemis says.

When he speaks to voters, Bemis deals in specifics. "I got a \$40 million bond issue passed because I stood there and said 'that window will be replaced, this gym floor will be refinished, there will be thirty new chairs over there'; and I gave them places and dates when it would happen. And we delivered."

Bemis's own fervor for education began in Depression-era Detroit, where he grew up in a large Eastside family, with grandparents in the same house. His father had to hold down two jobs, so Bemis spent much time with his grandfather, a streetcar conductor, which was a heroic occupation in the eyes of a grandson. "He would take me aboard, and I would ride to the end of the line and walk back," Bemis says. This grandfather also initiated him into such household skills as watering the lawn and instilled in him a strong sense of responsibility for the places one lives and works.

Bemis learned to admire teaching and schools from Mrs. Halems, an eighth-grade instructor in Warren, who conveyed to him "that she genuinely cared about me as a human being." When he had graduated from high school and returned from the Army in 1955, Bemis received another gentle shove along his lifelong path from Mrs. Hilger, registrar at fledgling Macomb Community College: "I had no intention of ever completing school. I just thought I would spend a couple of terms there to pick up some easy money under the GI Bill." Each term, Mrs. Hilger would convince Bemis and his wife Chelsie, to register; they were among only 92 students in an institution that now has 32,000 enrollees and is the state's largest community college.

This personal encouragement and federal financial support have made Bemis a fervent supporter of public policies to aid the disadvantaged. "When I speak to Rotary Clubs and the like, at least half of the people in the audience admit to having received grants, loans, all sorts of financial support from any number of programs. Some of them like to pretend that they pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and want to eliminate these worthwhile programs. I like to remind them--especially the ones my age [Bemis is 53]--where they came from."

Bemis says that he accepted the state superintendent's job primarily because the "next eight to ten years are going to be among the most exciting in the history of education. We are on the threshold of new national policies, and I want to help shape those policies. Both Vice President Bush and Governor Dukakis have committed themselves to education policy and funding initiatives, so the future looks promising." Bemis believes that the federal government can assist the states in solving dropout problems by providing seed money for business-education partnerships, encouraging minorities and women in science and mathematics programs, helping educate migrants with language problems, assisting Native Americans, and creating special programs for Hispanics. Of particular interest to Michigan, Bemis says, is the concept of distance learning. "North of Bay City and Muskegon, kids have to spend hours in buses to get to school because the area is so sparsely populated. It is prohibitively expensive just to bring them to one spot to learn. Under distance learning, we could use modern reactive video techniques--computers and keyboards--to teach over great distances. The federal government could

help obtain that technology for us and other states with similar problems--Montana, the Dakotas, Minnesota."

Bemis also keeps an eye on education innovations in other states. Open enrollment/school-of-choice programs are beginning in Minnesota and New Mexico. Bemis believes the latter will have most relevance to Michigan because New Mexico also has a large population of minorities. Utica allows open enrollment, but parents must provide their own transportation. Bemis is also proud of his district's innovations: 15 years ago a preschool program was begun that now enrolls 90 percent of the district's four-year-olds and 70 percent of its three-year-olds; another offers after-school care for children (aged two weeks and older) of working parents.

Bemis believes his background at Utica--the fourth largest district in the state, with 25,000 students--has prepared him to direct the entire state education system, with its 1.6 million public school students, 564 school districts, 15 public universities, and 29 community colleges. He cites his experience in school construction programs as well as closures and in labor negotiations.

"I will be the only state executive who can be hired and fired by an elected board. I have 18 years of similar experience here. I never make the mistake of not knowing who I'm working for. In Lansing, I will be working for eight board members, not a clique or faction on the board," he says, acknowledging that "we might not always agree, but my job is to implement board policy, which they will make with my advice." He also hopes to instill a sense of "ownership" in the Department of Education, much as he has done in Utica: "Everyone, from cooks and custodians to building principals, has to act like a proprietor, to be responsible for every piece of equipment, every student, every policy."

Although he believes he will spend the rest of his working life in Lansing ("I accepted this job forever"), Bemis says he will keep his home in Utica because it is still the center of activity for his family, which includes four children, ranging in age from 21 to 28, and three grandchildren.

How will he run the education department? "I'm practical, a pragmatist tempered by humanism. I give direction and hold people accountable. I've made a long-term commitment, and I'm looking forward to a lot of hard and rewarding work when I get to Lansing."