

## The Governor's Education Reforms: Are They Enough?

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*Today, a new standard for an educated citizenry is required, one suitable for the next century. Our people must be as knowledgeable, as well-trained, as competent, and as inventive as those in any other nation. All of our people, not just a few, must be able to think for a living, adapt to changing environments, and to understand the world around them. They must understand and accept the responsibilities and obligations of citizenship. They must continually learn and develop new skills throughout their lives.*

An excerpt from *America 2000: An Education Strategy*

Traditionally, education goals have been set by individual states and localities, but with the onset of fierce international competition and a national decline in the quality of education, the stakes have become too high. Thus, for the first time in history, the president of the United States and the governors joined together at an historic education summit to set national education goals. The goals they developed are as follows:

1. All children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
3. American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.
4. U.S students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.
5. Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
6. Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

To accomplish these goals, President Bush has challenged the nation's governors to develop their own reform strategies. Governor after governor has developed sets of proposals for education reform. For example, the "Minnesota 2000" proposal emphasizes prevention programs such as preschool and prenatal care. Wisconsin has embarked on a strategy of allowing school choice for innercity youths and adopting a European tracking system under which tenth graders are directed toward careers or higher education. Ohio is concentrating on the management of the education system. Iowa is emphasizing technology.

In Michigan, Governor Engler has unveiled his own education reform proposal called "Education 2000." The proposal, patterned closely after President Bush's, challenges the state's education community and legislature to step up to the difficult task of finding practical and constructive ways in which to meet the changing education needs of our society.

### **WHAT THE REFORM PROPOSAL CONTAINS**

The governor's plan for education reform contains twenty-nine specific recommendations for improving education. The following are the newest, most innovative recommendations:

- Establish an educational warranty mandating the schools to certify the skills and knowledge of graduates.
- Allow teachers to establish charter schools to be overseen by intermediate school districts.
- Create educational enterprise zones freeing schools from state regulations.
- Provide state aid for high school seniors attending college classes.

Almost all the other recommendations have been passed by the legislature, are under debate in the legislature, or are being implemented by local districts. (See Exhibit 1 for a complete list and status report.)

The governor's reform proposal provides an incremental strategy for education reform. Instead of calling for abolishing teacher tenure, he proposes extending the probationary period. Instead of suggesting that Michigan abolish a lot of red tape, he proposes educational enterprise zones.

Governor Engler's most dramatic reform proposals (the four recommendations listed above) provide the greatest likelihood of creating change. He does this by stressing outcomes through the warranty and choice through creating new schools and allowing students additional options. Emphasizing outcomes and choice is a common theme among most state's reform proposals as they attempt to attain the goals outlined by the president.

The governor's reform proposal has been highly praised. Rather than reiterating the problems of the past, his plan includes concrete steps for improvement in the future. It recognizes the many recent accomplishments of educators and legislators and builds upon those successes in practical ways.

### **WHAT THE PROPOSAL DOES NOT INCLUDE**

In his reform proposal the governor does not, as many thought he would, make calls for radical changes in the education system. The plan definitely supports the current education establishment. It does, however, contain some ideas, such as allowing teachers to create new schools, that could result in major changes in the delivery of public education. On balance, though, it is a mainstream education reform proposal.

Four reform areas that could have been emphasized by the governor were not. First, he did not call for a redrafting of the constitution to allow aid to nonpublic schools. The governor could have supported a constitutional amendment allowing aid to nonpublic schools, thereby increasing competition and allowing students additional choice. This would have been a major threat to public education in Michigan and would have sparked a very divisive political debate.

## EXHIBIT 1

## Proposed Education Reforms and Current Status

Reform Measure	Status
<b>State Policy Initiatives</b>	
Adopt a statewide core curriculum that emphasizes specific measurable outcomes, high-order problem-solving skills, linkages between curriculum and the demands of the workplace, and increased instructional time and tutoring for low-performing students.	Included in P.A. 25 of 1990, funded in P.A. 118 of 1991.
Broaden the assessment process to include alternative evaluation methods, such as written work, projects, and portfolios.	Included in P.A. 25 of 1990, funded in P.A. 118 of 1991.
Base accreditation on outcomes of the core curriculum and other less traditional indicators, such as attendance and dropout and retention rates.	Included in P.A. 25 of 1990.
<b>Tax Measures</b>	
Reduce school property taxes by 30 percent across the board over a five-year period. Pass a constitutional amendment allowing for the reimbursement of each school district for lost revenue.	May be a ballot proposal on November 1991 ballot.
Create two tax base-sharing regions; distribute revenues generated in regions to local in-formula school districts on a per-pupil basis.	Included in P.A. 108 of 1991.
<b>Administration Initiatives</b>	
Develop incentive programs based on the gains of the entire school instead of on individual classroom achievements. Also increase incentives for improvements made by traditionally low-performing and limited English students.	Included in P.A. 118 of 1991.
Create education enterprise zones by (1) waiving regulations for schools experimenting with innovative instructional models, (2) providing grants for restructuring programs and school calendars, and (3) providing new options and resources for professional development.	No action has been taken, possible future school aid act.
Provide funding for intermediate school districts to plan and implement cross-district schools of choice.	Included in P.A. 118 of 1991.
Form local district "schools of choice" committees to develop in-district choice plans. Provide counseling and information to families interested in the new schools of choice legislation.	Included in P.A. 118 of 1991.
<b>Teaching Reforms</b>	
Restructure the tenure process by increasing the probationary period from two to four years.	Not yet introduced in the legislature.
Implement alternative forms of teacher certification, such as eliminating student teaching requirements for degree-holding professionals with nonteaching backgrounds.	Included in P.A. 25 of 1991.
<b>Student Initiatives</b>	
Provide extended-day kindergartens for at-risk children.	No action taken yet, possible future school aid bill.
Provide tuition reimbursement for high-school seniors (within 5 credits of graduation) attending postsecondary schools.	Not yet introduced in the legislature.
<b>Incentives for Business</b>	
Grant state aid to businesses supplying job training for vocational and adult education programs in public schools.	Not yet introduced in the legislature.
Create a Michigan Education Warranty that requires schools to pay for the reeducation of their graduates if businesses determine they lack the skills guaranteed by the warranty.	Not yet introduced in the legislature.
<b>Alternative Schools Initiatives</b>	
Develop New American Schools in each of Michigan's congressional districts.	Legislation in planning stage.
Allow teachers to open charter schools within existing districts.	Legislation in planning stage.
Allow universities to operate schools.	Included in P.A. 118 of 1991.

The governor does mention in his proposal that maintaining the option of attending a private school is important, but he does not incorporate it as a major plank in his education platform.

Second, the governor's proposal does not specifically address the state of education in Michigan's largest urban school districts. To a large extent, the reform plan appears to be directed more toward small rural schools than urban districts.

This is unfortunate because urban districts face such severe social problems. Drugs, dysfunctional families, crime, and poor race relations have contributed substantially to the deterioration of the social infrastructure in urban districts. The governor's reform proposal could have included:

- adopting the Wisconsin plan allowing Detroit students to attend any school they choose;
- providing monies to guarantee preschool programs for all innercity children;
- breaking up the Detroit school district into smaller districts; or
- tying AFDC benefits to school attendance.

By not including more dramatic reform strategies for urban districts, particularly Detroit, the governor's plan could be criticized for ignoring an increasingly clear fact: Many of Michigan's urban school districts have failed and need to be changed dramatically.

Third, the governor's proposal stops short of calling for year-round schools. If there is any one thing that can improve student achievement it is to increase the length of time students spend in schools. Many educators recognize how outdated the present "agricultural" calendar is and the inefficiencies in learning that occur by having three months of vacation in the summer. Oregon recently adopted a year-round calendar. It is not unreasonable for Michigan to do the same. At a minimum, the state should adopt a standard school year calendar to synchronize educational services.

The governor indicated his support for going to 200 days of instruction by advocating use of incentives and special grants to school districts willing to add two weeks. He stopped short, however, of suggesting it should be mandated.

Finally, the governor's plan does not include a strong policy for "schools of choice." Many conservatives would have preferred a clearly articulated position that Michigan should adopt schools of choice as the key element in education reform. The governor supported mandating schools of choice within districts, grants for intermediate districts to begin cross-district choice, and allowing community colleges, state universities, and other government units to run schools. He did not, however, make schools of choice the centerpiece of the reform package.

## **THE DILEMMA**

Governor Engler's reform proposals are positive steps in the right direction. Adopting his reforms will improve education. The question is, Will they improve it enough?

Education reforms, and calls for reform, are not new. Education, in contrast to many policy areas, is subject to periodic reform movements. An education reform movement typically begins with a denunciation of the present system and a catalog of its failures.

For example, in the mid 1950s reformers emphasized the failure of American schools to compete with the Soviets in science and math education. Congress responded by beginning to fund science and math programs in local school districts.

In the 1960s James Conant led a national movement to consolidate school districts. The goal was to provide maximum efficiency and adequate services for students. Michigan responded by reducing the number of districts from more than 5,000 to slightly more than 500.

Later in the 1960s, Governor Milliken called for structural reform of schools by enhancing the power of intermediate school districts. He presented the dual goals of "equity and adequacy" as the basis for providing new methods of funding education and providing basic educational services. Included in his reform package was financial aid for private schools.

The dominant reform effort in Michigan during the 1970s was the accountability movement led by former State Superintendent John Porter. Porter's accountability model put pressure on districts to improve education achievement by clearly identifying objectives and then measuring students' success in attaining the objectives. The adoption of the state assessment test (Michigan Educational Assessment Program test) for fourth and seventh graders was the result of this movement.

In the 1980s reformers pointed again to America's losing out to international competition in math and science education. It was increasingly clear that the "information age" identified by Alvin Toffler and others required workers competent in information processing skills. America became a "Nation at Risk" due to the failure of its public education system to provide these skills. Legislative response to this criticism included increased funding, up 111 percent nationally in ten years; adoption of core curriculums; teacher testing; and graduation exams. Known generally as the "excellence movement," the reforms of the 1980s were widespread and included a variety of changes such as parental education, teacher testing, graduation standards, and preschool programs.

In the fall of 1991 the questions remain, Will the reforms significantly improve education or is Chester Finn, correct in identifying education reform as the "Ho Hum Revolution"? In seeking answers it is worthwhile to look at what researchers know about how to improve student achievement.

## COMMON SENSE CHANGES TO EDUCATION

First, research shows that almost 75 percent of the variance in educational achievement is due to the socioeconomic status of the students. Students that come from upper-middle-class homes with well-educated parents are much more likely to succeed than students from low-income families with poorly educated parents. While politically controversial (the State Board of Education has dropped socioeconomic status questions from the Michigan Educational Assessment Program tests) the fact remains that altering the education system without dealing with socioeconomic problems is likely to accomplish little.

A disturbing fact highlights this point. In Detroit, 50 percent of children entering kindergarten come from single-parent households run by unwed mothers.<sup>1</sup> According to Michael B. Katz, author of *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare*, this is the group among which poverty is most

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1 Bushworth M. Kidds, "Fuel for Serious Students," *The Christian Science Monitor*, vol. 81, p. 12

widespread. In 1985, 27.3 percent of all persons living within families headed by white women and 51.8 percent of those living within families headed by black women were poor. Thus, regardless of institutional reform, the Detroit schools will face a nearly impossible task of overcoming socioeconomic barriers so that they can educate an adequate percentage of children to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

In addition to socioeconomic barriers, Michigan and the nation must address teenage pregnancies, drug addiction, and lack of child-rearing skills before attempting education reform. The difficulty is that resources must be used for programs that work. The problem appears to be beyond government's ability to affect it in a positive way.

Second, we know that the current education establishment works for people who are willing to work at learning. Millions of Vietnamese, Laotian, Korean, and other disadvantaged children have used the education system to advance themselves. It appears, however, that society's commitment to education and willingness to sacrifice for education has diminished. Without parental pressure on students to (a) attend school, (b) work hard, and (c) be good citizens, there is little the education system can do.

Michigan needs a renewal of commitment to education. If the public does not place a high value on education, the system will not succeed. The evidence is clear, the public's commitment to the pursuit of excellence in education is very, very limited. Few citizen groups are demanding that the school day or school year be lengthened. Few businesses are willing to invest substantial monies in schools. Few teacher unions are willing to admit that there may be poor teachers. Few administrators are willing to take the risk of firing incompetent school principals. Few board members are willing to admit that "local control" of schools is not always the best practice.

Third, the school year should be extended substantially. The school year consists of 243 days in Japan, 240 in West Germany, 192 in England, and 185 in France. (See Exhibit 2.) In America, we mandate 180 days for schools and then wonder why our test scores are not competitive. It is time for the education system to dispense with the present schedule and develop a school calendar more compatible with the needs of the 21st century. Of course, the quality of what is taught during the extended year must be addressed as well.

## EXHIBIT 2

### Length of School Year (in days)

Japan	243	Hungary	192
West Germany	226-240	Swaziland	191
South Korea	220	Finland	190
Israel	216	New Zealand	190
Luxembourg	216	Nigeria	190
Soviet Union	211	France	185
Netherlands	200	Ireland	184
Scotland	200	Spain	180
Thailand	200	Sweden	180
Hong Kong	195	<b>United States</b>	<b>180</b>
England	192	Belgium	160-175

SOURCE: Michael J. Barrett. "The Case for More School Days" *The Atlantic*, November 1990, p. 78.

Finally, better teachers and administrators should be paid more than less competent teachers and administrators. Whether called "merit pay" or "bonus payments for achievement," the education system needs to be managed better. Achieving better management requires that there be a reward structure for attaining the organization's goals and objectives.

Educators have long resisted the movement toward merit pay because of the difficulty of measuring successful teaching and the competence of school principals and the tendency to evaluate teachers on the basis of students' test scores. It is time for teachers, administrators, and school boards to develop teacher evaluation and reward systems based on talent and success. At present, the system increases teachers' salaries if they return to the college classroom and attain a master's degree or doctorate. The more credits earned, the higher the pay scale. Michigan taxpayers are paying millions of dollars annually for salary increases because teachers added college credits to their academic vitae. Michigan needs to move from paying educators to be students to paying educators to be good teachers.

### **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE ?**

Governor Engler's reform proposal is an excellent first step toward taking the initiative on education change and insuring that change will occur within the public school system; it outlined a number of good ideas. With the proposal, the governor fulfilled one of his constitutional obligations: to lead through proposing to the legislature needed changes to improve Michigan. The question is now, What happens next?

The governor's education initiative will fail if it stops with the twenty-nine recommendations. The list is too broad and inclusive to be a reform strategy in and of itself. As Joel Berk, an education finance expert suggests, to achieve change the reform needs to identify the "strategic increment" that drives other reforms.

In achieving education reform in Michigan there appear to be three strategic increments that will drive other changes. The first is the identification of a clearly defined core curriculum and objectives for each grade level. This movement is under way and has a momentum of its own. In achieving this change, the State Board of Education and the legislature have made significant progress. A core curriculum and educational objectives for each grade level have been established for all school districts.

The second strategic increment is to develop a system of accountability that evaluates whether and how well the goals and objectives are being attained in Michigan. The adoption of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program in the seventies was an important first step in creating such a system. The governor's call for an expansion of the MEAP is a good second step. A better second step is the call for an "education warranty" guaranteeing the skills of high school graduates. The warranty system will provide a strong market force placing pressure on schools to be accountable.

The final strategic increment is policy recommendations that, if adopted, would challenge the education establishment by creating competing institutions. The call for universities or community colleges to establish schools, providing schools of choice, and allowing groups of teachers to form their own schools or subsidiaries of existing schools will provide considerable challenges to the present establishment.

The pressure to change existing institutions will double if alternative schools prove that students can be educated regardless of family background or socioeconomic status. Competition in the education marketplace will increase efficiency and accelerate change.

The governor will need to marshal his political capital to attain passage of these three strategic increments. The other proposals are less essential and can be "bargained away" or diluted. He must not lose sight of these three critical elements to achieve reform.

The president has asked each governor to report annually to the people and to him on how his/her state is doing in achieving the goals. The first report is due this fall. Governor Engler and the state can report that the reform debate has begun in earnest. We shall see if the reforms are significant enough to make a real difference.

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