



Michigan COMMENTARY

Proposals A and B

by Craig Ruff

Tuesday, proposals A and B became the 8th and 9th school finance/property tax reform issues since 1972 to be rejected by state voters. Rational and pragmatic people would argue that if there is to be restructuring of the way we finance K-12 education, it has to be accomplished by the legislature.

Sophisticated exit polling may explain more fully why voters rejected proposals A and B. Various friends gave me an earful of criticisms.

"Don't ask me to do my legislator's job. If they put another one on the ballot, he can send me his state paycheck."

"Trust state government to improve schools? You've got to be kidding."

"More money?"

"At least the property tax is federally tax deductible; the sales tax isn't."

"Why do we have to pass a statewide ballot issue to get better performance out of and more computers into classrooms?"

"Two proposals? I don't want choices. I want leadership."

The paid advertising in support of Proposal A was slick and saturating. It was also useless. Voters traditionally make up their minds on ballot questions in the 48 hours before casting ballots. On Sunday, newspaper readers woke up to many negative or damning-with-faint-praise editorials, perhaps the most persuasive force behind ballot issue decisions by voters. (Of twenty major newspapers we surveyed, eight editorialized in support of A, ten opposed it, and two offered no opinion. Eleven supported B, eight opposed it, and one had no position.) On Monday, office staffs traded insults about the proposals; the homebound listened to countless citizens blasting the proposals on radio call-in shows; and everyone read negative letters to the editor. As the rains fell Tuesday, so did the prospects of proposals A and B.

Conventional wisdom said that Proposal B never had a chance. It had no money behind it. It tried to do too much. It started out on the wrong foot by calling for a two-cent sales tax increase. It had ambitious aims and altruistic champions, but the aims were oversized and the champions undersized.

Proposal A should have had a chance because of its organizational backing, firepower endorsements by Blanchard, Milliken, and Iacocca, and money. Its supporters outspent its opponents \$3 million to none (about \$10 for every "yes" vote) and came up short. Apparently no level of TV time, home mailers, and yard signs could dispell the cynicism of a majority of voters toward the notion that more money would

improve quality. It was also naive to think that a majority of the public could be led to believe that more money equals better education. On the issue of school finance, the majority of the Michigan electorate is sophisticated, knowledgeable, impervious to persuasion, deeply distrustful of school finance "reforms," and disdainful toward having to vote on ballot questions.

It is not fair to conclude the voters (grandparents, parents, teachers, school administrators, taxpayers) are content. Far from it. On November 7 voters, for what many hope will be the final time, ordered the educational and political caretakers of this state to move the venue of school reform from the statewide ballot into the halls of the legislature and the meeting rooms of local school boards.

Funding inequities among school districts likely will be resolved by the courts. Core curricula, performance standards, and outcome measurements will be mandated and guidelines set by the legislature. Accountability—credit for success and blame for failure—will be ascertained within each school district, at parent-teacher conferences and school board meetings. Computers in the classroom will come from funds reallocated from other educational or public purposes. Reliance upon the property tax for educational funding will have to be reduced through an increase in the income tax; the regressivity of property taxes will have to be eased by expansion of tax credits and circuit breakers.

Necessary and substantive changes in public schooling are inevitable. By rejecting proposals A and B, the public did not necessarily slow progress toward reform; in fact, it may have accelerated it. The ways in which the public funds and measures public schooling were not changed Tuesday. But never more clearly did the public pronounce that the responsibility and accountability for making those changes lies someplace other than in the statewide voting booth.