



MICHIGAN STATE POLICY NETWORK

Education Policy Forum

Sponsored by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory and the Education Commission of the States

Special Education, Assessment and School Facilities Funding: Implications and Alternatives for Michigan Schools

Summary of Forum Proceedings


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Introduction

On June 21, 1999, members of the House and Senate, the Governor's Office, the State Board of Education, and other education leaders from throughout the state, gathered in Lansing to attend a forum aimed at addressing issues relative to special education, assessment, and the funding of school facilities. The forum was sponsored by the Michigan State Policy Network, a group comprised of the Chairs of the House and Senate Education Committees and the K-12 Appropriations Subcommittee, the Governor's Education Policy Advisor, and the State Superintendent for Public Instruction. The Network is convened under the auspices of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) and the Education Commission of the States (ECS).

Representative Ron Jelinek, opened the meeting. Three panel discussions followed – the first on the rising costs of special education, the second on assessment strategies and issues, and the third on school facility funding methodologies. This report is an overview of the forum proceedings including:

- A brief summary of each panel session
- Overarching policy questions

Throughout the text you will see recommendations by the panelists identified with this icon . These recommendation areas are some potential next steps Michigan policymakers may want to consider as they continue to address the issues of special education, assessment and school facilities funding.

Summary of Presentations and Panel Discussions

Session I

Michigan Senator, Leon Stille, opened and moderated the first panel, providing a summary of

what occurred during 5 separate public hearings on special education, recently held throughout the state. The hearings were said to have been very emotional, as numerous parents, teachers and students testified, relaying their feelings and experiences, hoping to prevent cuts to special education services. All tolled, approximately 800 participants were heard. Among the questions addressed at the hearings:

- Why has the "learning disabled" (LD) category increased from 16% to 42% in the last ten years?
- Has special education become a dumping grounds for teachers that have low-performing students?
- Is there a determination between reading disabled and learning disabled?

Senator Stille cited a proposal released by the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA), which suggested that an increase in the student teacher ratio may help offset special education costs. This too was a concern of the hearing participants, the majority of which did not want to see special education class sizes increased, nor the number of special education teachers decreased.

Dr. Jacquelyn Thompson, Director of the Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services for the Michigan Department of Education, provided an overview of Michigan special education statistics, echoing Senator Stille's concerns over the growing numbers.

Although special education students represent less than 10% of the total student population, the associated costs have surpassed those of regular education in Michigan. Nationally, the state is far from being considered an anomaly. The state's special education numbers are aligned with national averages, representative of the fact that Michigan is just one of many states dealing with skyrocketing costs.

LD students represent the majority (42%) of the total special education population in Michigan, roughly 89,000 students. Speech and Language Impaired students represent the second largest population (16%), the percentage of which has remained relatively consistent over the past ten years.

Some see the growing number of LD students as symptomatic of parents' perceptions, many believing that LD students receive more attention from teachers than regular education students. Parents no longer consider the LD label as a *scarlet letter*, but rather as an opportunity to place their child in a better learning environment. Not surprisingly, as the number of LD students rises, so does the demand for early identification and intervention strategies, as well as for assessments that definitively distinguish between students exhibiting low performance and students that actually have a disability.

Noting that a system-wide model for determining whether or not a student should be considered LD is currently unavailable, Dr. Thompson concurred with forum participants' remarks, elaborating both on identification methodologies and options under consideration. Typically, LD is determined by means of a discrepancy model, which basically rules out mental retardation as a cause for the student's difficulties. While only an emerging discussion, the use of a cognitive model, which places the focus on a student's learning process, or how the student thinks through a particular problem, is also being considered.

Lending credence to the notion that an increase in early intervention strategies will help reduce the number of LD students, Dr. Thompson cited current research:

- Delaying intervention to nine years of age results in 75% of LD children experiencing continued difficulties

Likewise, Dr. Thompson mentioned several intervention programs that districts could potentially implement, specifically citing statistics from Livonia Public Schools' Reading Recovery program. Through their program, Livonia Public Schools managed to reduce both the number of retentions (students "held back") as well as the district's special education population by 34%. Any intervention strategy, however, will require an increase in teacher professional development. Dr. Thompson warned that schools and districts looking to implement interventions will simultaneously need to train teachers in approaches to literacy and positive behavior supports.

Joanne Cashman, Director of the Policymaker Partnership at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, stressed the

importance of aligning education policy with interagency policies, as well as with state regulatory and fiscal decisions. Currently, Cashman and her colleagues view the changes that occur in most local and state education systems as "random acts of improvement". Cashman advocates greater collaboration between agencies, centers and associations, utilizing the resources of each to bring about more meaningful and lasting changes.

Cashman suggests that special education collaborations focus specifically on early intervention/pre-school services. Collaborations should exist among state agencies that serve children, such as:

- the State Education Agency
- Health and Human Services
- the state's healthcare financing agency

She recommends that interventions be implemented at a *whole school* level, as opposed to concentrating only on special education services.

Session II

Richard Laine of the Illinois Business Roundtable, opened the panel on assessment, drawing on his experiences as an Associate Superintendent with the Illinois State Board of Education.

Laine shared seven recommendations pertaining to Illinois' assessment program, previously presented to the Illinois General Assembly. Among the recommendations, Laine stressed one in particular. "Professional development. Professional development. Professional development," echoed Laine. "If there's one overarching experience that I can relate back to you, it's the importance of aligning standards and assessments with teacher professional development."

Addressing the changes in Michigan's standards and assessment system, **Diane Smolen, Director of Standards, Assessments & Accreditation Services, Michigan Department of Education**, provided a brief historical perspective, illustrating the correlation between public criticisms and the state's shift toward a more comprehensive accountability system. "As the paradigm has shifted from -how are our students doing to -how are our schools doing, criticism of the MEAP tests has intensified."¹

Michigan has been publicly announcing the accreditation of schools since 1994. Based solely on students' Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test scores, the ranking of schools and districts has influenced a good deal more than just procedures and processes within the school system. As property values fluctuate in tandem with

school accreditation, many view the state's accountability system as threatening.

As the stakes rise and more members of the community are effected, MEAP practices have stirred up considerable controversy. Tests were perceived as being too long, unrealistically difficult, and at times "political".¹ Parents in some suburban school districts went so far as to exempt their child from taking the test. In response to public scrutiny and legislative action, the Department of Education made changes to student tests and reporting practices. Tests have been shortened and performance descriptions clarified.

Currently, Michigan describes student performance on the tests as Exceeding Michigan Standards, Meeting Michigan Standards, Performing at a Basic Level or below. High school students are currently tested in mathematics, science, reading and writing. Social Studies has recently been added to the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) for grades 5, 8 and 11. Endorsements, or whether or not a student met the standards of a particular subject area, are currently noted on high school transcripts. Beginning with the Class of 2000, high school students who meet or exceed Michigan standards will be eligible for the Michigan Merit Scholarship Award (\$2,500). Likewise, students who score well on the 7th and 8th grade tests will be eligible for up to an additional \$500, bringing the total scholarship award to \$3,000 for students graduating in the year 2005.¹ For some, the practice of awarding scholarships to high achieving students is viewed as taking money away from students who, arguably, have a greater need - namely low achieving students who require additional support and intervention.

In many ways, Smolen's presentation spoke of the frustrations that come along with change. The public's first reaction is often to *kill the messenger*. Drawing on this reality, **Adam Kernan-Schloss of A-Plus Communications**, provided public engagement strategies and tips, designed to help prevent knee-jerk reactions from an often-disgruntled public.

Shloss contends that testimonials or real-life stories get through to larger segments of the audience and have a much more lasting effect on their perceptions of the issue. His strategies utilize logical approaches that connect to what people value. Among his suggestions:²

- **Be Strategic** - communicate effectively with everyone about everything you want to say
- **Connect To What People Value** - let people know why the issue or decision is important
- **Stay On Message, Stay Focused** - Be clear and know what you want your audience to do after they hear you



- **Don't Shoot Yourself in the Foot** - Make sure your state has quality standards, tests and accountability systems. Don't push a lemon.
- **Keep it Short and Simple** - Less is more. Plain language works. You should be able to get your message across to anyone in under a minute
- **Show Don't Tell** - use examples that are personal and relevant to the audience.
- **Repeat, Repeat, Repeat** - just when you are getting sick of saying the same thing, your listeners are first starting to hear you point

Reginald Robinson of the Center for Performance Assessment provided a national perspective on educational assessment and accountability, emphasizing the roles policymakers play in ensuring that assessments facilitate the goals of the system as a whole.

Overall, Robinson's presentation centered on the common misperception that assessment and accountability efforts can operate independently of the system as a whole.³

- Accountability must include both student achievement scores and classroom/building practices
- Accountability is more than test scores
- Assessment is more than one test
- Teaching, leadership and assessment practices profoundly influence student achievement

Citing student performance as the central purpose of assessment, Robinson stressed the importance of focusing policy-related decisions on factors that directly influence learning. Increased attention to policies pertaining to attendance, teaching and writing, are likely to yield positive returns on assessment results. Specifically, education leaders can influence:



- Teacher assignment to buildings
- Course assignments of teachers
- Course offerings and curriculum

Session III

Senator Leon Stille, opened the panel on school infrastructure, relaying the difficulties Michigan has experienced in its attempts to ensure equitable school facility funding throughout various economically disparate districts. Senator Stille was candid with forum participants, admitting that systemic barriers have made alternative approaches to school facilities funding difficult to implement.

Richard Snider, Executive Director of the Barton Malow Company - a company that builds schools across the nation and throughout the state of Michigan, stressed the importance of linking educational goals and objectives with construction plans. Snider relayed stories of districts being overly

concerned with the historical preservation of older school buildings – a practice that may preserve the look and feel of a community, but that’s often more costly than building a new facility. Snider suggests that district planners should think more about how the needs of future students will effect the utilization of space and resources in a new building.

Dave Honeyman, a professor in the University of Florida’s Educational Leadership Department, has worked with Florida Senator Bob Graham and has been instrumental in drafting new and creative school infrastructure policies. His work in Florida, a state that grows at a rate of 60 school districts per year, focuses on providing equitable funding to districts without the need for significant tax hikes.

Referring to Florida’s “Public School Capital Outlay Program Act,” Honeyman encouraged Michigan to incorporate similar practices and goals inherent throughout the Act. Specifically:⁴

- Encourage building projects that encourage local control but also reduce taxation and government
- Provide state funds equitably and fairly to each district for increasing classroom capacity
- Require each district to adopt and submit to the state a five-year facilities work program
- Create an independent commission to assist local boards, provide information on facilities construction and evaluate districts for the award of various financial incentive plans
- Provide financial incentives for districts to reduce building costs and also recognition for districts and specific schools that meet these goals
- Encourage local districts to maximize utilization of existing state and local revenue sources for capital projects

Florida requires that districts adopt a local half-cent sales tax, a two mill capital levy, and utilize all locally available bond revenues before they can be eligible for any additional monies available through the Public School Capital Outlay Program Act. Districts are also funded through the issuance of state bonds, which are repaid by income received from the state lottery. Although Michigan has an inherently different funding structure, Florida provides an initial benchmark on which to base future policymaking efforts.

Overarching Policy Questions

While the panel presentations answered many questions for the forum participants, several new questions also emerged from the discussion.

- What role will policymakers play in bridging the gap between Michigan’s expectations for new teachers and higher education’s criteria

for graduating teachers? What incentives might policymakers provide for the continuous improvement of existing teachers?

- What role might policymakers play in the promotion of public awareness around all of the issues discussed at the forum?
- What systemic changes need to occur before any of the examples Florida has implemented can be put into practice in Michigan?

- 1 Michigan Department of Education. Michigan Educational Assessment Program/Educational Accountability. Presented at the Michigan State Policy Network Policy Forum. Lansing, Michigan.
- 2 A-Plus Communications. (1999). Communicating About Standards, Assessments and Accountability. Making Your Messages Count (Tab 3, pp. 1-9). Presented at the Michigan State Policy Network Policy Forum. Lansing, Michigan.
- 3 Robinson, Reginald (1999). A National Perspective on Educational Assessment and Accountability. Center for Performance Assessment. Presented at the Michigan State Policy Network Policy Forum. Lansing, Michigan.
- 4 Honeyman, David. Legislative Remedies for Public School Construction in Florida. Paper presented at the Michigan State Policy Network Policy Forum. Lansing, Michigan.

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