

State tax cuts: There's more to them than meets the eye

In an election year, we can expect a governor's budget to be as much a political document as a spending plan. The journalist, however, is under no obligation to make a case for or against incumbent Republican John M. Engler. So here are some random reflections:

■ Engler may indeed beat Democrat Jim Blanchard's job creation record by year's end. Blanchard boasted 600,000 new jobs during his tenure (1983-90). Engler, after seven years, boasted 650,000, and his economic outlook predicts 61,000 more jobs during calendar 1998. That would add up to 601,000 new jobs on his watch.

■ Headline on Engler's news release: "FY 99 Budget Reflects Twin Goals of Tax Relief and Spending Priorities." He now counts 25 tax cuts, including some that you won't see until 1999 and one you won't see until 2000 that hasn't been enacted yet. "Tax burden continues to tumble," says the text in Chapter A.

Meanwhile, the fine type in Chapter O gives us the other side of the coin. "Oil and gas regulatory fee increase. Wetlands permitting fee increase. Air quality fees — eliminate sunset. Court fee fund ... Diesel tax increase," the last with this footnote: "FY 98 initiative not yet enacted; passage built into budget assumptions for FY 99."

Sorry, there's no detail about how much new revenue he expects to collect from the fee hikes and diesel fuel tax hike. Just don't be fooled about the tax-cut talk when there are many, many fees that are still governmental revenue.

■ Big winner in Engler's budget, as many media have pointed out, is the Department of Corrections, up 4.2 percent to \$1.45 billion. Prison population is 42,000, and the governor expects to expand it by 6,420, or 13 percent, in just four years.

Engler's message concentrates on locking 'em up and throwing away the key: "Now is no time to retreat. If you're serious about getting tough on violent criminals, then you'd better get serious about building the prisons to lock them away," said he.

His data: In 1989, we put away 51 percent of prisoners for violent felonies for an average of 7.2 years. Today, 60 percent are being committed for crimes of violence, and the average sentence minimum sentence is 8.1 years.

Parole is harder to get. In 1991, under the



TIM RICHARD

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civil service parole board system, inmates had a 64 percent chance of being released after their minimum sentence. Today, their chances have shrunk to 42 percent.

I looked in vain for any mention of English as a second language (Spanish-speaking inmates need this) or more job training (it's practically non-existent). Remember, most of these guys and gals will be back on the streets at some time, even if Engler wins a third term.

■ State elected officials had little to applaud. Engler's budget proposes 0.5 percent for the executive office (his or his successor's), 0.5 for the Legislature and 0.4 for the judiciary. This is in an era where his economic forecasters see 2.3 percent inflation.

■ Overall, Engler's general fund is up 18.5 percent since fiscal 1992, the first one for which he was totally responsible, to \$8.77 billion.

■ Total state spending, which includes federal aid and non-discretionary funds like transportation and school aid, has soared more than 54 percent, from \$20.7 billion to \$32 billion. The transportation fund is fed by our new 4-cents-a-gallon fuel tax. The school fund is fed by our increased 6 percent sales tax.

Those tax cuts aren't all they seem, are they? Tim Richard's Touch-Tone voice mail number is (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1881.



PHILIP POWER

1998. The hated labels of results — "proficient," "novice" and "not yet novice" — will be scrapped. New labels, to be set by the State Board of Education next month, will appear on transcripts, not diplomas.

Fine-tuning is required. That's why the Legislature keeps holding hearings on testing.

Third question: Other than the State Board of Education, a few in the Legislature, many school people who administer and are evaluated by test results, does anybody care?

Despite concerns about form and content, test results are turning out to be pretty good indicators of how well students perform in their freshman year at college, according to Bauer.

Art Ellis, state superintendent of public instruction, told the State Board last year that it will take up to five years for employers and college admissions officers to ask consistently to see MEAP scores on student transcripts. That sounds about right, given how slowly employers and colleges react to change.

The main point, however, is that students are for the first time being tested to measure what they learn in school. The tests are not perfect, but they are being improved. They are setting a de facto standard of achievement that eventually will be adopted by employers and higher education institutions.

This is the way we will improve our education system. Not by a silver bullet, but row by row, classroom by classroom, school by school.

Liberals can grumble that there are lots of factors other than school effectiveness that affect MEAP scores. Conservatives can complain there doesn't seem to be much correlation between the amount spent on schools and what kids learn. Educators can pick holes at any test design.

But at the end of the day, the idea of testing kids to see what they are learning is an idea whose time has come and is becoming solidly entrenched in the realities of our schools.

That is the good news coming out of the debate over schooling in Michigan.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@coonline.com

LETTERS

Packed mall not always good

I would like to respond to a letter written by Mary Jane Leininger of Novi regarding the complaints made by other merchants on Saturday, Feb. 7, about the Beanie Baby sale at Deb's Crafts.

First of all I agree with Ms. Leininger that doing business in a store that is friendly and fair is something everyone appreciates. I am glad that she has that kind of relationship at Deb's Crafts. All of the merchants at the Village Mall strive to create an atmosphere that makes shopping in our stores a pleasant experience.

Quite often the shop owners come together as a single entity to hold an open house for our customers, with live entertainment, refreshments, sales and giveaways. The Village Mall offers a unique variety of stores and merchandise and the nicest part about the mall is that each individual shop adds to the others.

None of us are against any business, small or large, "doing well" or "attracting customers." However, on Saturday, Feb. 7, when the other merchants and myself arrived to our businesses within the mall we found the hallway packed with potential Beanie Baby buyers from the back entrance to the front entrance three deep. There were adults as well as children sitting and in some cases lying on the floors. These customers were leaning against the doors of the other shops making it impossible for their owners or customers to enter. As parents waited in line, some of their children were roaming from shop to shop unattended. While Ms. Leininger may believe that these sales create additional business for the Village Mall the opposite is the fact. In fact I would ask her if she took the time to visit the other shops in the mall? From 10 a.m. until at least noon, the hallway in the mall was virtually impassable.

While we are not opposed to the Beanie Baby "phenomenon," and know that it offers a wonderful opportunity for a small business to capitalize on such a fad, we do not feel that it offers anything more than that just that. In fact, one merchant in the mall has discontinued having sale days for her Beanies, choosing to make them available to customers at all times, because she found the sale days to be impractical.

I think Ms. Leininger missed the point; we are glad that Deb's Crafts is finding success with Beanie Babies, we did not however appreciate the apparent inconsideration of those people blocking the hallway and our shop entrances or those who did not properly supervise their children. As a former small business owner I'm surprised she did not immediately understand the situation.

Barbara Horrigan-Goins
The Celtic Shamrock

Peaceful dialogue

A members of the Detroit Archdiocesan Catholic Campus Ministers' Association, we are called by our mission to be "educators for justice" on our campuses, and it is to that end that we speak.

We are extremely concerned about the willingness and apparent eagerness of the U.S. government to abandon multifaceted diplomatic options in favor of a massive violent attack on the people of Iraq. Such an attack can also increase the suffering of the civilians who have already suffered so much due to the embargo, while most likely increasing the stature of Saddam Hussein.

We want to be a voice for peace and dialogue, at a time when massive violence appears to be our only option. Conscious of the large number of our students who have family and friends in harm's way in Iraq, we urge our leaders to also see "bombing targets" as brothers, sisters, grandmothers and uncles. We are a global community, and it seems ironic that at a time when our leaders urge us to recognize economic ties around the world, we are quick to opt for severing the more important human ties that are destroyed in any act of violence. Instead of creating more problems through bombing, we must all work to find a solution through peaceful dialogue.

The Detroit ACCMA

Steps to boost education

We are very happy that your paper is concerned with education. In response to Gov. Engler's concern about education, the staff of Eriksson Elementary in Canton, with cumulative teaching experience of 605 years, has suggestions that would have a positive effect on children's learning:

■ Move the cut-off date for starting kindergarten from Dec. 1 to Sept. 1.

■ Lower class size in kindergarten through third grade to 18 students as suggested by President Clinton in his State of the Union Address.

■ Provide an optional transitional year between kindergarten and first grade.

President Clinton's proposal is that students are successful readers by the end of fourth grade. Gov. Engler's proposal is that students are successful readers by the end of third grade. The implementation of our three suggestions would have the greatest impact on achieving these goals.

The Eriksson Elementary Staff
Canton

Tests make sense

The debate over our schools keeps taking fascinating twists and turns.

Released last week, the results from the most comprehensive and rigorous international comparison of performance in science and math revealed that American high school seniors score among the industrial world's worst. "This study has burst another myth," said Michigan State's William H. Schmidt, who coordinated the American part of the study. "Our best students in mathematics and science are simply not world class."

In January, the Detroit Free Press published an enormous series on the MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Program) tests that have become the main basis for comparing student achievement between schools. Relying on complex regression analysis, the Free Press concluded that simply comparing numerical scores between districts was inherently unfair because other factors — the number of single parent households, unemployment, students eligible for free lunch and school per pupil revenue — had a big effect on the results.

Quite possibly in response, The Detroit News last month ran its own analysis of the effects MEAP test results of per pupil spending, hiring more teachers and raising teachers' salaries. The News concluded that the relationship was "minimal," observing that schools scoring "in the top half statewide on MEAP exams and HSPTs differed little from schools that scored in the lower half."

So a House Education subcommittee now holding hearings on the MEAP test has a lot to think about.

First question: Is the test as now designed a useful indicator of how our kids are doing in school?

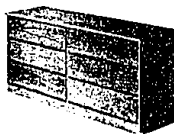
Not entirely, says Ernest Bauer, a consultant for Oakland Schools, the countywide intermediate service agency. "There appears to be a disconnect between the scores kids actually get on the MEAP and the scores required to get a "proficient" ranking."

"The latest fourth-grade reading results showed that just under 50 percent of the students were 'satisfactory,'" Bauer told the subcommittee. "Most educators and parents are amazed that the most common score in the state for those same fourth grade students on the narrative reading test is 19 out of 20 possible."

Second question: Can the tests be improved? Sure.

When the Legislature passed laws last year on the MEAP, it agreed on a bunch of bipartisan improvements. Time to take the test, for example, was cut from 505 to 370 minutes in

comfort zone



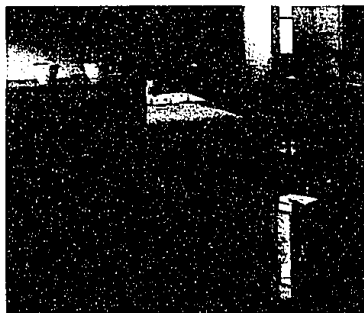
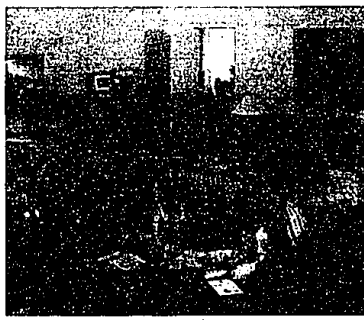
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