

House committee eyes school equity plans

By Tim Richard
staff writer

A subcommittee of state representatives is mulling three proposed constitutional amendments aimed at "equitable opportunity" in state school funding.

They anticipate a lawsuit in which Michigan's school funding system may be held unconstitutional because it provides only \$2,500 per pupil in some districts and \$9,000 in others.

"There are districts out there twisting in the wind," said Rep. William Keith, D-Garden City. A nine-term lawmaker, Keith chairs both the subcommittee and the House Education Committee.

THE TRICK is to write constitutional language that (1) a court could use in saying Michigan is failing its poorer school districts and (2) allows the Legislature to rewrite the budget itself to meet the "equitable" test.

"It should be illegal to have a \$2,500 to \$9,000 disparity in school funding," Rep. Kirk Profit, D-Ypsilanti, said at last week's meeting. A freshman, Profit has a district that neighbors western Wayne and southern Oakland and Livingston counties. "The danger," replied the veteran Keith, "is that we're putting our-

selves at the mercy of the courts."

Rep. James Kosteva, D-Canton, agreed, noting that the Kentucky Supreme Court ordered an education program costing \$1.2 billion.

A legislative staff analysis said the highest courts in Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Kentucky, Montana, New Jersey, Texas, Washington, West Virginia and Wyoming have declared unconstitutional their states' school financing plans.

BUT KOSTEVA, a third-term, and freshman Susan Grimes Munsell, R-Howell, are uncertain the public will accept an "equitable opportunity" amendment.

Munsell wants to see such an amendment supported by two of the biggest players in educational funding — the Michigan State Chamber of Commerce (business) and the Michigan Education Association (teachers union). "I don't feel we can move forward without those two," she said.

Kosteva has grave questions about whether the public will buy equitable funding. "Politically, there's a real lack of support. No one has fire in their belly," he said. Kosteva also fears the public will see it as "a pig in a poke" — something costly that fails to benefit their hometown schools.

HERE ARE the three proposed constitutional amendments:

• House Joint Resolution Q requires the Legislature to provide "an efficient system" of public schools ensuring "equitable opportunity for a thorough education."

Sponsored by Profit and co-sponsored by Keith, it is the shortest and simplest of the three. For that reason, Profit says it's the most understandable, the most salable and the best.

• HJR S requires the Legislature to fund schools "on an equitable basis." It also gives constitutional status to local boards of education — the meaning of which puzzles lawmakers. Further, it adds sex to the list of reasons (religion, race, color and national origin) for non-discrimination.

Sponsor is Rep. James O'Neill, D-Saginaw, the acknowledged House expert on school funding. Keith is a co-sponsor.

• Senate Joint Resolution O started out identical to HJR S but was amended in the Senate Education Committee to make education "a fundamental right."

Keith thinks the term is "overkill." SJR O is sponsored by Dan DeGrow, R-Port Huron, the Senate

GOP expert on school funding. The Senate Education Committee reported it out without recommendation. Thus, SJR O is in limbo, not on the Senate calendar but not dead.

Some subcommittee members, such as Munsell, like the idea of prohibiting sex discrimination. But

the consensus is that it doesn't belong in an "equitable funding" proposal.

THE HOUSE and the Senate, each by a two-thirds vote, would have to place the measure on the ballot.

A majority of all Michigan voters

would have to say yes to amend the constitution.

And that presents another problem to Keith. "We could put this out (on the ballot), and the public could say no, then what do we do?" he asked. "There would be no pressure on the Legislature."

OCC registers by phone

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

High tech is eliminating one of college's biggest frustrations — at least at Oakland Community College.

The long lines and time-consuming screw-ups often linked with class registration are almost a thing of the past, according to OCC registrar Charles W. Kurzer.

Almost 10,000 students — about two-thirds of the 15,000 students expected to begin spring semester this week — signed up for classes by using a Touch-Tone telephone system designed to allow students to register more conveniently, Kurzer said.

Cinnamon French, an Orionville student who graduates this year, said she likes telephone registration because it's easy. "You can do in minutes what used to take hours," she said.

Brenda Dick of Oxford said registering by phone is "really simple. Even if you make a mistake or change your mind. You just cancel and start over."

OCC BEGAN experimenting with the automated telephone system for early registration in the winter semester of 1988, with a randomly selected test group.

The system was so glitch-free, that one year later telephone registration was used exclusively for early registration, Kurzer said.

Students could not use the telephone for late registration — which continues through Tuesday. But almost two-thirds of the student body registered the easy way, Kurzer said.

"It was a snap," Kurzer said. "Students received a step-by-step instruction sheet with their registration packet."

Most students never spoke to a human during registration, but signed-up by responding to automated instructions.

Some students couldn't use the telephone system because of extenuating circumstances, Kurzer said.

"But those were very few cases." ENCOURAGED BY the ease with which the student body adopted to telephone registration, OCC is intro-

ducing yet another high tech innovation.

Students can also pay tuition over the phone via Visa, Mastercard or other credit card, Kurzer said. "It's a logical extension . . . just punch a few more numbers."

Nearly 1,000 students — or a mere 10 percent who registered by phone — paid by credit card, he said. But OCC officials expect that number to increase, much the same as the number of telephone registrations jumped as people became aware of the option.

To his relief, Kurzer said errors and mistakes related to telephone registration have been relatively minor and easily correctable . . . no cases where 1,000 students were signed up for the same class at the same time in the same building.

"I'd say there were no screw-ups apparent to the student," Kurzer said, "although there's room for improvement."

The five OCC campuses hope to equal or surpass enrollment for the spring term of 1989 when 14,754 students signed up for classes.

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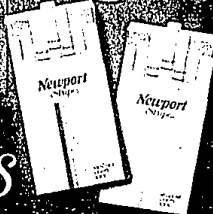
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