

points of view

Choice is not passing fad

Question: Gov. Engler's Schools of Choice program already seems to be panicking the teachers' organization, the Michigan Education Association (MEA) and also the Michigan Association of School Administrators (MASA). What's wrong with competition between districts? Is it that it might shake up the present public school bureaucracy?

Answer: The issue of students crossing district lines has always been a major headache for local school districts. It is especially troublesome for those districts that offer a quality program but border with other school districts with weak educational opportunities, usually those with meager finances.

In fact, school districts with quality programs, for years, have been hiring full-time people whose only job is to check and verify the real address of any newly enrolled student. Oftentimes authorities find a non-existent address.

Why? The parents very simply want their child to receive a sound educational experience.

Yet when a quality, usually wealthy school district, picks up 100 students who are non-residents, they receive no state aid money and pay for the non-resident students' education out of local tax money.

Still the Schools of Choice concept is not a passing fad.

PRESENTLY, 30 states are under way with the school of choice concept. The most notable states, Massachusetts and Minnesota, already have a voucher system (giving fami-



Doc Doyle

lies \$2,500 to \$3,000 to use for any school they wish their children to attend).

And Kentucky has a program to overcome what they call "bureaucratic sluggishness." The amount of state aid money given to each school district is to be tied in with improved performance by children in each district.

But the real issue may be, as you indicated, the competition aspect. Educators are not conditioned to competing with each other as say the auto companies do.

In fact teachers and administrators really don't compete with each other in terms of performance. Both groups are basically on a fixed salary scale and all receive the same percent pay increase each year regardless of commitment or competence.

And although some professional organizations seldom if ever want to talk about it, the greatest competition down the road may come from the private educational entrepreneur sector.

ALREADY in Dade County, Florida, a private company, Education Alternatives has received a \$1.5 million contract to run an elementary

school. And this firm was selected from several dozen other private sector bidders because of their previous success in Phoenix and suburban Minneapolis. Yet, even private contracting is not new.

Many school districts have been contracting with private-for-profit groups for years. Many districts contract out their food service program, some their maintenance and in some states, transportation. Adult education has contracted with the private sector for programs such as cosmetology for years. Outside for-profit organizations such as food service have in many cases been more cost effective. Why? Because if private companies don't do a superior job they will be continually badgered by those deeply ingrained status quo educators who consider any outside competition a threat and removed.

What does all this mean to most of the Observer & Eccentric readership communities. Very little, in my opinion. Few if any Observer & Eccentric area students, clerical or not, will want to leave their own district, their own classmates, their friends to enroll in another school district. The exodus will be out of the poorer, more underfunded school districts.

And it is also in these districts that competition from private companies will initially expand. In the districts with the "poor, hard to serve" children, such as are found in Dade County, Florida.

James "Doc" Doyle is a former Troy Schools administrator. His column on educational issues appears regularly.

75 years of loving is worth a second look



Judith Doner Berne

VALENTINE'S DAY was last Thursday.

But this is a love story originally reported by Susan Steinmueller that's still worth sharing.

This is an age of late marriage and early divorce, but Troy residents James and Retta Brown were 22 and 16 when they were wed and now have been married for 75 years.

And in this age of children taking off for lives in other parts of the country and world, James and Retta Brown's three children live nearby — in Rochester, in Troy and in Franklin — and a set of grandchildren refused a transfer to the west to stay close.

And in this age of moving in together to make sure, James and Retta Brown never even really dated each other. They shared a box lunch at church fellowship meetings and he helped her turn the milk separator on her aunt and uncle's farm.

They were married in a church, with Retta wearing a dress James bought her — and which she continued to wear for many years.

OF COURSE, the secret we all want to know is why are James, 98, and Retta, 92, still happy? Why do they feel the same about each other as the day they were married? "She had big brown eyes and that kind of hypnotized me or whatever you call it," James said.

We want to know this secret whether we will celebrate our 30th anniversary or have had a failed marriage. We want to know this whether we are teenagers dreaming of the person we will marry or a couple debating whether to make that commitment.

James and Retta credit their happiness to "lots of love and understanding" which is obviously laced with humor.

Retta: "Sometimes he gets provoked with me, and I with him, but we smooth it out. You just have to give and take."



James and Retta Brown celebrating 75 years

James: "I get the last word in but I say it under my breath."

Both laugh. ONE GREAT SORROW was losing their son, Gordon, who died in an accident in World War II. "He was such a good boy," Retta says.

One large happiness is 16 grandchildren, 18 great grandchildren and four great-great grandchildren.

And the good health to enjoy them. At age 98, James still drives and even Troy traffic doesn't bother him. "I drive just as well as I ever drove."

According to a "grandchild," "They've always kept busy. They don't dwell on their problems. Pa will still say 'what can we help you with.' I think that's the whole key right there."

I think we've got it.

Support for government is a protected right

EAST LANSING, my old stomping ground, has done it again.

That university village, the home of politically correct thinkers and other strange species, has banned the display of yellow ribbons, U.S. flags, peace signs or any other symbols related to the Gulf war on any municipal property open to public view.

In a memo sent to city employees last week, City Manager Tom Dority said that such things are "symbols which convey to various members of the public some quite emotional meanings in favor (of) or against the war. Please avoid conveying those meanings as if they were public policy."

That "public policy" refers to the official position of the city of East Lansing. Such displays, Dority said, might give people the mistaken idea



Jack Gladden

that East Lansing supports the war when, in fact, it hasn't taken a position on it.

And Mayor Liz Schweitzer, who said the city wasn't trying to keep residents from displaying yellow ribbons on private property, added, "I can't believe that people would disagree that it's inappropriate to display these type symbols on public property."

WELL, IN THE immortal word of

Gomer Pyle, "Gollygee!" I never knew it might be inappropriate for municipalities in the United States to display the U.S. flag, even if there was a war going on. But what do I know?

Meanwhile, having taken no position on an issue that they can't do anything about anyway, East Lansing officials don't want their employees expressing their own personal views on public property.

And East Lansing isn't the only community to hand down such restrictions since Operation Desert Storm got under way. From New England to Hawaii hundreds of petty bureaucrats have issued orders telling public employees not to display their personal views while on public property or while wearing official uniforms.

Predictably such regulations have

resulted in a backlash of protests and most of the time the officials have ended up backing down, or at least greatly modifying the new rules.

New York City, for example, refused to let police officers sew flag patches on their uniforms but, after the uproar, agreed to let them wear small U.S. flag pins — sending the same message.

And a police union in East Lansing is protesting that city's "politically neutral" regulations. Some changes probably will take place there also.

BUT IT ISN'T just bureaucrats

who are worried about the overtones of public displays of patriotism. Employees at Disneyland have been told not to wear yellow ribbons, lest the reminders of the war spoil the customers' fun.

And at least one restaurant in the local area had a similar policy, based on a concern for the "safety" of its patrons and employees.

What's fascinating about it is that many of the people who are vehemently against any display of support for the war or the troops by public employees nodded in agreement when the Supreme Court ruled that burning the American flag as a

statement of political protest is protected by the Constitution.

In their minds, apparently, showing contempt for the government is a constitutionally protected right, but showing support for it, well, that's somehow different. If protesting government policies is as American as apple pie, what about showing support for those policies?

The bottom line is that, in some kind of twisted 1980s newthink, patriotism has become un-American. It's inconceivable to show support for something that not everyone agrees with. It might even be dangerous.

Picking Brian's Brain

ON PERSONAL STYLE

It is very important that when the room of the home is done it looks like the client and it doesn't look like Brian Kilian. If you look through my portfolio you probably would not find two rooms that look alike. You would not recognize that one designer had done it all. And that's the most important thing.

ON LIFESTYLE

I don't sell furniture. I sell lifestyle hopes, dreams, a way that people are going to live and raise their children. I always hope that the things I choose for them today are going to be those cherished things that will reflect a particular period of time in their life.

ON BUDGET

A designer's role is to assist a client with budget issues, where to spend money where not to. A client of mine will hear me say, "You don't need to spend that much money," as often as they will hear me say, "You do need to spend the money."

ON THE DESIGN PROCESS

A designer's art is the ability to coordinate all of the other art families together. I've got a chair, I've got fabric and wallpaper, I've got color and a painter, I've got an electrician, all those things are my palette. And when I put them together I'm practicing my art.

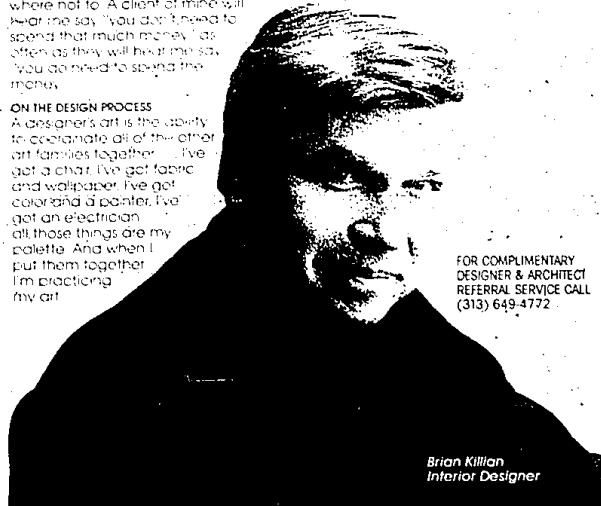
ON USING MICHIGAN DESIGN CENTER

To me, the most important thing about the Michigan Design Center is the fabrics and wallcoverings. I put us on a national par with New York or Los Angeles. If I open an architectural firm and find a fabric that I love, I don't have to fly to Paris to get it. I just have to go over to Stutz Drive and it's there! That's where the Michigan Design Center gives us an edge.

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