

points of view

Tax plan 'picks' our pockets

"COLLY GEE, what's wrong with tax base sharing?" The GRALS (Guilt-Ridden Affluent Liberal Suburbanites) stare wide-eyed, when the topic comes up.

"Shucks, tax base sharing seems fair enough. There are poor school districts with only \$2,500 to spend per pupil a year and rich districts blowing \$8,000.

"See whippersnappers, doesn't every kid deserve an equal chance?" ask the GRALS with charming innocence, as if the issue were really educating kids.

The proposal has minor variations, but it's basically this. School taxes on commercial and industrial property would go into a common pot and be distributed on a per-pupil basis.

As currently floated in Lansing, the bills call for pooling only half the growth. That way it looks as if nobody loses anything. Don't be suckered. If Lansing can take half the growth now, in time it can take all, and then go after existing business property.

THE FARMER originated the idea of tax base sharing no later



Tim Richard

than the 1950s, decades before education-minded city boys like Reps. Bill Keith of Garden City and Jim O'Neill Jr. of Saginaw bought in.

It's Necken, in his 1974 essay "The Husbandman," called The Farmer the most "grasping, selfish and dishonest mammal" in existence. "Has anyone ever heard of a farmer making any sacrifice of his own interests, however slight, to the common good? Has anyone ever heard of a farmer practicing or advocating any political idea that was not absolutely self-seeking — that was not, in fact, deliberately designed to loot the rest of us to his gain?"

"(Only one issue ever interests or fetches him, and that is the issue of his own profit. . . . He simply cannot imagine himself as a citizen of a commonwealth, in duty bound to

give as well as take; he can imagine himself only as getting all and giving nothing."

Since 1924, The Farmer's ethics have spread.

HERE IS HOW The Farmer and friends rationalize tax base sharing: • "I could get tax base sharing by consolidating some of Michigan's 526 school districts into 200. But I don't wish to give up my political control of my risky-dink district.

• "I could get more revenue by collecting all property taxes in common. But with tax base sharing, I keep all my farm taxes and make the city feller surrender his business tax base.

• "We all could get new revenue by raising the income or sales tax and pumping it into the poorest districts. But I would have to pay, too. With tax base sharing, I pay nothing more, and only the city jasper gives up anything."

And now the Keiths and O'Neills are helping The Farmer.

OUR POLITICOS face the task of coining the term for tax base sharing that will wake up the GRALS before

it's too late. I like "the pickpocket bill."

Rep. Jan Dolan, R-Farmington Hills, denounced the scheme and offered its perpetrators a black bandit's mask. Not bad.

A colleague of hers described it as a "Sheriff of Nottingham bill." The evil sheriff collects the yeoman's regular state taxes, then invades the man's house and takes half the bread from his table, too. Pretty good.

The core of the problem is that our legislators who have constitutional responsibility for providing free public schools, won't use the tools at hand.

They won't cut non-school spending and pump more into poor districts, as we noticed last week when they caved in to the welfare and arts lobbies.

They won't consolidate little districts. They won't raise new state taxes.

Instead, the pickpocket bandits of Lansing want to dip into local school districts for revenue.

Arise, ye Guilt-Ridden Affluent Liberal Suburbanites!

Tim Richard reports regularly on the local implications of state and regional events.

MET program goes beyond who's governor

JOHN ENGLER apparently subscribes to the NIH syndrome - Not Invented Here.

In an effort to inscribe the Engler Republican crest on every program out of Lansing, he is willing to scrap anything. Blanchard Democratic — in this case the Michigan Education Trust in which thousands of Michigan families — Democrats and Republicans — have invested.

Now, Engler has purported to place his emphasis on education, tearing into the social services and arts funding to balance the budget but still bolster less fortunate school districts.

So then why does he go after a program which helps people save for their children's and grandchildren's higher education and, as a byproduct, may help retain some of our most talented students for Michigan colleges and universities?

IT'S CERTAINLY NOT because the program is on shaky financial ground.

In April, the actuarial firm of Deloitte & Touche, under the Engler administration, confirmed the MET's solvency, reporting: "In our opinion, the valuation was conducted in a manner consistent with generally accepted actuarial principles using sound actuarial methods, consistently applied, fairly stated and based upon actuarial assumptions which are appropriate for financial statements of the Michigan Education Trust."

But Engler has chosen to ignore the facts in favor of his own bent.

Now it's true that metro Detroiters bought "MET" contracts in disproportionate numbers. Oakland County residents bought 25 percent of the first 40,000 contracts sold. And Wayne County purchased another 19 percent of that initial batch.

But just because Engler's a small town, out-state guy is no reason to pull the plug on a plan in which city slickers invest. Those investors run the gamut from a banker who did his own research before buying into the plan to a blue collar family which pooled assets from two generations to send their next generation to college.



Judith Doner Berne

He must realize his political support depends heavily on the strongly Republican areas of Oakland County, where he has been making numerous appearances.

AS RENEE KING, a MET investor and resident of Beverly Hills, expressed: "I invested in the state of Michigan — not in a political party. I thought Michigan might be a forerunner for a national movement."

"I think it comes down to the question of what kind of mandate government has to the people," echoed Susan Schlom, a West Bloomfield resident who took out MET contracts for two children. "The implications are terrible. What does it say about integrity?"

And, as college costs spiral, the MET offers a way to save and could create a body of parents who will add their voices to containing tuition costs.

If the MET is discontinued or continued, but in another more expensive package as has been suggested, Engler grudgingly says he will probably fulfill current conditions for those already enrolled. But he says he doesn't have to.

Whether or not he "has to" is debatable and would probably touch off a flurry of lawsuits — stemming from Oakland County.

But what's so discouraging is that there is no sense that he only sits for a time in the governor's office. It's the office that stands, as it did before he got there and will after he leaves. He inherits obligations that were made before he came and will author others which will be carried on beyond his tenure.

Judith Doner Berne is assistant managing editor for the Oakland County editions of the Observer & Eccentric.

Saving kids takes money, effort

QUESTION: What do they mean when they label certain students as "At Risk." Who are they? Can anything be done to help them?

ANSWER: At risk students are those who it appears will not graduate from high school. They are the ones who reject or are rejected by our school curriculum, who have extreme difficulty finding a meaningful job in life.

Most of these suburban at risk kids, after laying sod for a couple of summers, eventually wake up, get a job with parental help or get on track through a community college experience.

John Hopkins researchers found that third graders from inner city poor families, in schools which serve many poor children, who are more than a year behind in reading (or have been retained one or more years) have practically a zero chance of graduating.

In the suburbs, we also have some at risk students, many from affluent families.

Most of these suburban at risk kids, after laying sod for a couple of summers, eventually wake up, get a job with parental help or get on track through a community college experience.



Doc Doyle

THE REAL disaster, however, is the inner city tragedy. Just look at Detroit! Approximately 50 percent of Detroit students who start high school drop out before graduation.

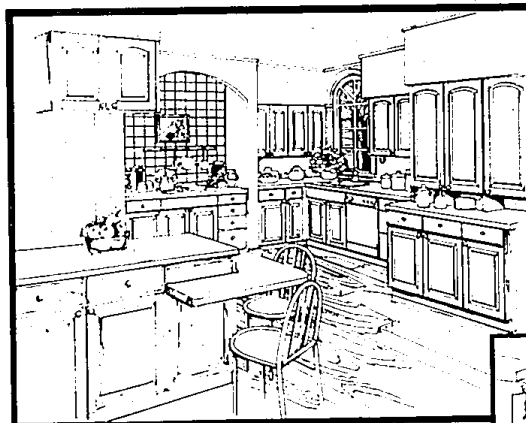
The daily average attendance in a stable suburban school is about 96 percent. In Detroit, some high schools have a daily attendance rate of 74 percent, one-fourth of the students are not even in school, let alone class on a given day.

You ask, "Can anything be done to help them?" Yes! Los Angeles' Phineas High School launched a program called the College Core Curriculum (CCC) program.

LESS THAN 200 students of the 3,000 student population in this inner city school initially signed up. Now approximately 1,000 at risk students are in the program. Now 65 percent of Phineas' students go to college.

It can be done. It takes money. But in the Phineas High School success story, it also took a commitment by all parties, the school, the parents and the former at risk drop-out students.

James "Doc" Doyle, a former teacher/school administrator/ university instructor is president of Doyle and Associates, an educational consulting firm.



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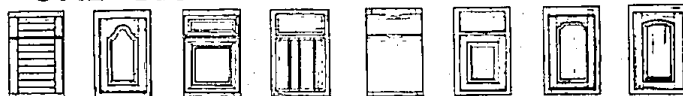
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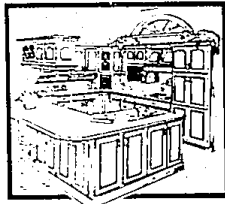


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