

points of view

# Guv's message lacks focus

SOME REFLECTIONS on Gov. John Engler's special message to the Legislature on school quality and how the media covered it: That Republicans thought it innovative and Democrats didn't was hardly news. What surprised me was the way everyone picked out something different to praise or bash: charter schools... early education... the importance of parenting... "New American" schools... easier certification for non-traditional people... 200 class days... doubling aid for teacher improvement... high schools' warranting their graduates... how we're going to pay for it... It was a nightmare for news people. Every paper you read, every broadcast you heard, every politician you talked to opened with something different. TRUE, MUCH of what Engler advocated wasn't new, as Democrats pointed out. That's par for governors. There is



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no copyright on political ideas, so governors are free to "borrow" them, the way Nick Pinz borrowed watermelons. Jim Blanchard (1989-90) used to borrow Republican ideas all the time, to the Grand Old Party's delight. Engler's message goes on for 49 pages, but here are the unifying themes: • Kids at risk. Some are 4-year-olds from poor families. Others have been kicked up to 12th grade without learning what they were taught. (Read Phil Power's column.) • Teachers. More in-service training. Empowerment — more chances to start alternative schools of choice. Reform of protective ten-

ure laws. Easier certification for those with non-traditional backgrounds. Less "student teaching." • Parents. Unlike Blanchard, who would have introduced teachers who had benefited from state programs or his own favorite mentors, Engler introduced his first two and most important teachers — mom and dad. More chances for parents to choose programs for their kids. Some teaching of parenting. It was a conservative's political message. "Schools don't count, families do" — Moynihan. There was nothing for superintendents, nothing for principals, little for bureaucrats and not much for college-bound kids from stable, working families. But that's OK. I'M NOT CERTAIN whether it was the fault of the listeners or with Engler for not providing a crisper, more pungent, central theme. The TV crews were there, and film clips were on the 6 o'clock news. By 11 p.m., the topic of improving educational quality was

dropped completely in favor of extended coverage of the Wayne County jail shooting. CBS newsmen Mike Wallace, in a University of Michigan appearance last weekend, called metro Detroit TV news some of the worst in the country. "Murder and mayhem," he said. Most of my friends have noticed it, too, for the last two years or so. Blame station managers, not the individual TV reporters and anchors. WJBK has ignored state government for years. WDIV's "senior political correspondent," Bob Plsor, has been shunted to chasing fire engines and soon will take a leave of absence, perhaps never to return. WXYZ's Jim Herrington is being wasted on general assignments and rarely is sent to the Capitol any more. Except for WJR, metro Detroit radio has no one on the spot. Tim Richard reports regularly on the local implications of state and regional events.

# Legacy of racism proves to be costly in B'ham history

PURELY BY CHANCE both of my daughters were matched up with roommates who were black during their freshman year at the University of Michigan. Jennifer and Geri, who was a sophomore, remained friends for a couple of years, then drifted apart. Deborah and Lisa roomed together, adding other roommates, all four years in Ann Arbor and are currently backpacking through Europe. For both daughters, West Bloomfield High School graduates, it was their first close friendship with blacks. That probably wouldn't be true if they were growing up in West Bloomfield today. There are now two black families on our street, making four in our subdivision and adding to the tapestry of life — particularly for the youngsters riding bikes and skateboarding up and down the block. Unfortunately, the slow-growing diversity which is now visible in the suburbs of West Bloomfield, Farmington Hills and Bloomfield Township — and to a lesser degree in Bloomfield Hills and Southfield Township (Beverly Hills, Bingham Farms and Franklin) — has not spilled into Birmingham. Birmingham, with nearly 20,000 residents, has 87 blacks. That's less than half a percent of its population. BIRMINGHAM IS the high profile community out our way. Birmingham is where two racial incidents occurred last spring. And Birmingham kids are growing up in the same lily-white environment that has marked it as "a closed community to African-Americans and other minorities," according to James Agnew, president of the Oakland County Center for Open Housing. That's why last week's race relations meeting including Agnew, city, chamber of commerce and NAACP officials and representatives of the Birmingham-Bloomfield Task Force on Race Relations is so important. The Birmingham City Commission proposed a plan, praised by the NAACP, designed to circumvent future racial incidents: The neighborhood association will be involved if an incident happens in their neighborhood. The chamber of commerce will take a more active role, appointing a delegate to the race relations task force. Sensitivity training will be made available for store employees through the chamber of commerce, and the task force and city commission will meet jointly each year. But the open housing center, which



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recently moved its headquarters to nearby Bingham Farms, called on Birmingham to be pro-active, not merely reactive. They proposed an action plan to recruit black and minority residents that would cost the city \$20,000. It includes providing information and promoting fair housing to Birmingham real estate agents and landlords, and surveying and reviewing how housing is advertised and sold in Birmingham. NO ONE REPRESENTING the Birmingham real estate establishment was at the meeting to even try, and refute Mabel Hayes, a black resident of West Bloomfield, who told of her unsuccessful attempt 20 years ago to get housing in the city of Birmingham. "I appeal to you to look at this proposal, it is urgent," Hayes said. "We are dealing with housing racism in the city of Birmingham." About the same time Mabel Hayes was being denied housing, Richard and Imogene Angell, who are white, picked Birmingham to raise their five children, partly because it had adopted a more heralded open housing ordinance. "In the ensuing years we've been disappointed," said Angell, now retired as chairman of the philosophy department of Wayne State University. "I would be very proud" if the city adopted the open housing center's plan, he said. "Our city which is a fine city could become a model — a model to bring about greater unity among the races." The city commission is necessarily worried about the cost. They will discuss it further when setting up next year's budget. They must also discuss the cost of not doing it. And of continuing Birmingham's legacy as a racist city. And along the way, they must come up one more time with why Birmingham's plan for senior housing, which includes some low-income units, remains on paper. Judith Doner Berne is assistant managing editor for the Oakland County editions of the Observer-Eccentric Newspapers.

# Gender decides school acceptance

GROWING UP in a neighborhood heavily populated by first-generation Poles and Italians, it wasn't hard to see that sons were prized and daughters were nice to have, but not quite as vital. Parents would scrimp and save to put money in the bank to ensure that their sons would attend college after high school, get a fine education and get a solid job to provide for the wives and children they would have. That was the dream. Daughters, well, they learned to cook and clean. If they did well in school, it would mean that they could help their future children with their homework. Parents put money away for their weddings, not for their education. It's an Old World idea. Today it seems abhorrent. Or, rather, today it should be abhorrent. Women have a place in the workforce, and there shouldn't be even a question about that. Women do not have a mental deficiency

because of their hormones. BACK WHEN THE Equal Rights Amendment was a possibility, feminists argued that women deserved equal standing in the law and in opportunities. Feminists argued that women weren't covered by the Constitution because they weren't named specifically, as were men and blacks. The Happiness of Womanhood group — remember them? — argued that women had all the protection they needed without another amendment to the Constitution. We'll see. The women's issue should again be coming to the forefront now that President George Bush has vowed to allow publicly financed male academics. Some Michigan legislators also want state laws to allow such financing. It seems they would have the principle of "separate isn't equal" apply



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to racial questions but not to matters of gender. WHAT MESSAGE IS the president sending? Are girls less valued than boys? Is it worse for a male to be an illiterate than it is for a female? Why are only inner-city boys considered to be at risk? Don't little girls count? Maybe the question is, did they really ever? And now the nation is close to having a conservative black Supreme Court justice who is a firm believer in natural law, whatever that is. It would seem most ironic if nominee Clarence Thomas were to be a deciding voice in permitting all-male academics and breaking the "separate isn't equal" rule. Wouldn't his predecessor — Thurgood Marshall, who successfully argued before the court in Brown vs. the Board of Education, which ended racially segre-

gated schools — rue the day he retired? The new Supreme Court test then could be that separate is equal, if it helps boys. TWENTY YEARS ago, women came so close to being legally equals. But now it seems as if women have slipped back to the less-than-citizen status that they "enjoyed" during the 1950s and 1960s. Through the fine efforts of Bush, Clarence Thomas and certain Detroit school leaders, parents will again be scrimping and saving to send their sons to school, devoting their energies to the male portion of their family. And girls will stay in the background. Rather than putting a poor girl through the shame of scoring lower on college tests or dropping out of school, this kinder, gentler nation will once again encourage that girl to learn to cook and sew and find herself a good husband. Preferably, he would be one of those lucky enough — based on gender rather than smarts — to go to such a publicly financed, all-male school. Helen Niemiec is a staff writer for the Birmingham-Bloomfield edition of The Eccentric.

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