

Rich, poor districts take issue with voc ed bill

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Rep. Bill Keith's vocational ed bill ran into a crossfire from rich and poor school districts Monday in his House Education Committee.

"I sense a threat, a fear of getting into this," said the veteran committee chair after Northville and Romulus school officials criticized the measure.

Keith, D-Garden City, and panel members heard nearly three hours of testimony Monday in Garden City High's auditorium.

"It's frustrating," agreed Rep. Glenn Oxender, R-Sturgis, co-sponsor of Keith's House Bill 4165. "Business says high school graduates aren't prepared. Educators say business should be more involved. The school-to-work transition is not very smooth (for graduates). We need to integrate school and work."

NORTHVILLE school board vice president Glenna Davis said 85 to 91 percent of local graduates pursue higher education and are well-served

without state-mandated vocational training for only 15 percent.

She criticized Keith's two-tiered school system as "restrictive," adding that federal courts have found systems forcing students to choose between vocational and academic tracks at age 15 are "arbitrary and unconstitutional."

Davis said the bill provides no state funding of state-mandated programs, as required by the state constitution — "financial oppression" for out-of-formula districts like Northville which get no state aid.

Replied Rep. James Kosteva, D-Canton: "Some of those Northville students might be wasting their time in an area (college) where they don't benefit. Forty percent (of college students) don't graduate, and 27 percent of graduates don't work in the field they studied."

But Rep. Lyn Bankes, R-Livonia, came to Northville's defense. The state gives no aid to out-of-formula districts, has taken away their categorical aid, is forcing them to share their local business property taxes, has frozen property taxes — and

now is proposing to make them pay for vocational training.

"There should be pilot programs in in-formula districts so the out-of-formula districts don't lose again," Bankes said.

ROMULUS Supt. William Bedell sees only 25 percent of his graduates go to college but opposed Keith's bill for another reason.

"I don't think a local school district should train 16- and 17-year-olds for specific jobs," Bedell said. "No one can tell us what the shop of the 21st century is going to look like."

"Traditionally, the purpose (of high schools) has not been to train skills for industry. Traditionally, it has been to educate functional human beings, not drill press operators."

Bedell said his problem is to bring kids from poor and single-parent families up to academic grade levels, not to train them for jobs. "Forty percent of our ninth graders fail math," he said, and 30 percent drop out. Industrialists tell him, "Bill, just give us kids who can read, write, do math and come to work on time, and we'll do the rest."

Bedell criticized the shortage of school teachers and administrators on Keith's proposed state Career-Technical Advisory Council.

Dr. Youssef Yomfoh, superintendent of Willow Run schools, criti-

cized Keith's plan to start the vocational track at age 15. "Age 15 is too early to pick a specific occupation," he said.

KEITH REPLIED, "Big business would say, 'you've got too many damn educators.'"

"We have a lot of industry involvement (in vocational training) on a short-term basis, in pockets all over the state. But it's a non-system. It's a non-system of excellent local systems with no coordination."

An educator who agreed with Keith was David Otwell, a one-time Pinckney farm boy and now principal of a three-district career technical center in Ypsilanti.

In a blistering attack on the "general" curriculum as opposed to college prep and vocational, Otwell said, "I didn't want my son and daughter to be generally prepared for generally nothing. They have to have a focus — not be wandering generalities."

Otwell said he learned about equipment by "muddling around" on the farm, but today's kids lack that opportunity. "We're serving 30-40 percent (of college-bound) kids very well, but 60-70 percent are not served very well."

ALSO SUPPORTING Keith's bill were: Victor Fredriksen, a retired Ford

manufacturing engineer from Waterford: "The bill is very, very important and well-founded because it calls for cooperation between schools and industry. It's no use saying we're going to equip schools. The best equipment is in the factory."

Wilson Mudge, National Federation of Independent Businesses, Lansing: "Michigan must begin

treating vocational students equal to college-bound students."

Charles West, president of the Taylor Federation of Teachers: "Education is a state function. We're looking to a more state-oriented system. But we have all these people running around yelling local control."

Here's voc ed bill's aims:

Here are the main features of House Bill 4165, an amendment to the school code to restructure vocational education:

- Students, after counseling and testing, would choose between academic and career-technical programs after 10th grade. They could transfer between programs.

- Businesses would provide students on-the-job training and apprenticeships for the last two years of high school. Half of a student's time would be in class, half on the job.

- A statewide advisory council and smaller local councils would develop and oversee the vocational programs. Four groups — business, state officials, educators and the general public — would be represented equally on the state panel. It would determine what skills are needed in the market and set subject standards.

- Students would be tested for proficiency in basic subject areas before they could continue onto grades 11-12. Those who flunk would receive "alternative" education with individualized instruction.

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