

POINTS OF VIEW

Improve education by merging school districts

Some said it couldn't be done. But the Legislature did it. Now the issue of how to pay for schools is in voter hands.

And no matter which tax plan is chosen, there will be more equity between have and have-not districts. Plus, the legislative plan includes some effort at making changes in the actual education our children receive. This is a start, but we can do more.

One issue that still cries for attention is reducing the number of school districts from the current 502.

It makes sense on the basis of cost savings, educational opportunity and community spirit.

When you think about it, it's kind of ridiculous. Detroit, with a population of 1 million, is all one district. But West Bloomfield Township, with a population of about 50,000, is divided among seven school districts.

This has no bearing on the quality issue. Detroit was a premier public school district for many years when it was even larger. Meanwhile, I have personal knowledge that at least two systems that serve West Bloomfield —

Walled Lake and West Bloomfield — have not always been perceived as the excellent districts they are today.

Consolidation of districts should save significant dollars. Why do we need a Clarenceville, which schools 1,700 kids from three communities — Livonia, Redford Township and Farmington Hills? Clarenceville has fewer students in the whole district than attend many of our high schools.

If Clarenceville students were doled out to the districts where they live, taxpayers probably wouldn't be paying the salaries of Clarenceville's superintendent, an assistant superintendent for business, a director of special and vocational education and an administrative assistant for instruction. Just multiply this by the number of other small districts.

Larger districts also allow more educational opportunities. Think of the advantage Plymouth-Canton high school students have, with both high schools on one campus and the ability to choose among offerings at each school without having to figure out how



JUDITH DONER BERNE

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to get there. Or, consider the Bloomfield Hills Public Schools, with the ability to choose among two traditional

high schools and a more experimental one.

Those kinds of choices are available only in larger districts.

I remember the reasons given for the elementary school in the tightly knit village of Franklin, part of the Birmingham School District, more than 16 years ago. The village's student population had declined to the point that it was down to one teacher per grade, and sometimes that teacher would teach a split-grade class. But even back then the Birmingham schools knew that certain children learn better in a more rigid atmosphere, while others need a more "open" classroom. There was no give in that school. And, in a worst-case scenario, a student could even have the same teacher from whom he or she had trouble learning two years in a row.

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Another reason for consolidating districts is to revive "Our Town."

Having pride in where you live and where you go to school is a pretty basic human emotion. If they can be one and the same, all the better.

Bitterness pervades Redford Township because its Redford Union district lacks the tax base of the South Redford schools. The school reform plan may help to alleviate some of that tension. But wouldn't the community be better served by having a single school district that is a source of unity, rather than of divisiveness?

Just as closing individual schools causes an uproar, consolidating school districts causes an initial emotional uproar. But these things pass. And children, and, finally, their parents, form attachments to the new. (Who in the Wayne-Westland system mourns the passing of the Cherry Hill district?)

The Legislature has accomplished a lot this year. But its resolution for 1994 should be "We have just begun."

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You can do some really dumb things acting naturally

It's nearly an impossible task to make it through the holidays without reading or seeing a review of the past year. There are death lists, navel-gazing stories about school financing and predictions of peace in the Middle East.

These days, chances of peace in the Middle East are better than the chances of coming up with a school financing plan that will work.

But I'll leave all the serious looks back and looks forward to others. For me, this is the time to look back at all the stupid things I did all year.

Here's a sampling:
■ Stupidity came in with the New Year. It was time for a new car battery. However, I didn't buy one until the following December, when the car engine was dead as a New Year's resolution and it was 5 degrees.

■ Forgetting Valentine's Day. Being a seventh-generation redneck, I thought it fell on leapy year. Too bad it doesn't.

■ Even having thoughts of spring during March sentences you to a prison for the terminally stupid. I'm serving a life sentence.

■ April is a month for new beginnings: baseball and trout seasons open. I was on more road trips for trout than the Tigers for away games. And, of course, the Tigers' middle-of-the-pack finish was much better than my trout record.

■ May was the month that I gave up on the idea of jogging. Stupid me, I hadn't run much in 10 years but kept the shoes in vague hope that I'd start again. Perhaps it was my 45th birthday, but it was probably my realization that it's better to walk than run.

■ June is the month for school tax elections and, like others, I voted yes for a small tax increase in Livonia for sports and other activities. It's also the month during which it dawned on me that, after listening to the woes of school financing for more than 20 years, there never will be a solution. Stupid me to think there would.

■ For years I would stupidly drive for hours into the brush country of the Upper Peninsula in quest of an unfished portion of a trout stream, ignoring the easily fished areas near major roads. In July my son and I got lazy and fished



JEFF COUNTS

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near a blacktop road. In 40 minutes my kid had caught more fish than he had all summer. Having campers whiz past 20 feet from us may bother our sense of nature aesthetics, but trout aren't bothered by such intellectual nonsense.

■ August was a relief. It was too hot to do anything too stupid.

■ For the first time I was going to get all the storm windows up early in September, but there was that one lost fishing trip, and grouse season started. I remembered that well while putting up storm windows the day after Christmas.

■ In October I actually did something smart. For years I had stupidly piled my leaves in the street, usually on the wrong day, waiting for the city to pick them up. This fall I tested the old theory that they'll blow away if you ignore them.

■ In November I made up for August. For years I just thought I was sexist, but then I learned I was nothing of the

sort, I was just unevolved. I had always thought that not being evolved was the same as not being able to walk upright and tossing stones at animals. It turns out that being unevolved is being a man of the 1890s living in the 1990s. It sounds good to me, and, anyway, saying you're unevolved carries much less stigma than saying you're sexist.

■ December is a month filled with potential for being stupid. I lived up to my potential. Here's a quick sampling: Ever try to find The Clapper at Meijer on Christmas Eve when you have other things on your mind? . . . Don't buy the first Christmas tree you see. . . . The amount of bourbon consumed doesn't help you get through the holidays, much less put up the crooked tree. . . . Don't even try to pretend you know the words of a Christmas song. . . . Ask your wife what you bought for your mother so you'll know when she thanks you.

Jeff Counts is the editor of the *Plymouth and Canton Observer Newspapers*, and is still searching for The Clapper. He can be reached at 459-2700.

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