

Raise standards, ask more of schools, Dems say

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Raise school standards, don't lower them. Require more of teachers, not less. That's the nub of a state House Democratic task force report to the Republican-dominated State Board of Education and Gov. John Engler, who are advocating

voluntary curriculum standards and easier teacher accreditation. The State Board also is seeking to re-define "public schools" in a way that could open the door to parochial, state aid to private and church-related schools.

"We will go to war over the issue of compromise quality," said

the Democratic leader, Rep. James Agee, a former Muskegon school superintendent.

Rep. Thomas Kelly, D-Wayne, signed the report. A freshman, Kelly succeeded Rep. William Keith, D-Garden City, who chaired the House Education Committee for many years before retiring.

Agee has asked Attorney General Frank Kelley to determine whether the State Board broke a 1993 school reform law when it not only failed to adopt a core curriculum but moved to ease curriculum standards.

On teaching standards, the Agee task force said, "If we abolish teacher certification standards, would it be logical to abolish the certification standards for the architectural, engineering, dental or medical professions?"

The Democrats recommended that the state:

■ "Develop a master teacher incentive program." A master teacher serves as mentor to new teachers.

■ "Develop an assessment mechanism that would test a person's actual capacity to teach and find out if that person should be admitted into a teacher certification program."

■ "Lengthen the teacher preparation and certification to five years, including a classroom internship and field residency."

Democrats didn't call for an end to charter academies and "choice" options but said they should be considered experimental and evaluated before hundreds of charters are granted.

The Agee report relied heavily on public hearing testimony and "experts' comments, including a Harvard University research report that says schools of choice

fail to reach the poorest families. "It is unlikely that choice will do anything other than simply move achievers around from one school to another," said the Harvard study.

And if public money flowed to private schools under the charter system, the private schools would have to become publicly accountable and be added with new costs such as special education, building maintenance, administrative and safety costs.

A major bone of contention is the Teacher Tenure Act, adopted in 1937. Some Republicans say it protects bad teachers, is costly to administer and should be repealed.

The Agee task force, however, argued that "the answer may be to put more money into professional development for teachers and administrators."

It argued against repealing the

tenure law for the same reasons the law was adopted: to prohibit firing for political reasons, for non-residence, to make places for friends and relatives of school board members, and to get rid of senior teachers and hire new ones at lower pay.

One theme running through the Agee report was open government. Agee's group held public hearings while Engler and State Board president Clark Durant worked in secret. Agee called for a public hearing in the House Oversight and Ethics Committee on a Democratic resolution to establish a public commission on school governance.

Other panel members were Reps. David Anthony of Escanaba, Deborah Cherry of Burton, Lings Brewer of Holt, Sharon Gire of Clinton Township, Mary Schroer of Ann Arbor and Martha Scott of Highland Park.

ROLL CALL REPORT

Here's how Observer & Eccentric-area members of Congress were recorded on major roll call votes in the week ending Aug. 11

HOUSE

Abortion The Senate voted 50 to 44 against to ban abortion coverage in federal workers' health insurance policies except in cases of rape or incest or when the mother's life is at stake. The ban was added to a fiscal 1996 appropriations bill (HR 2020) that was sent to conference with a House bill containing equally strict anti-abortion language. An estimated 1.2 million women in the civil service and their dependents are covered by private policies obtained through the federal health insurance program with premiums heavily subsidized by taxpayers.

Supporter Dan Coats, R-Ind., said the issue was "whether or not we will force taxpayers to send their money to the government to provide a medical procedure" that may violate one's religious and moral beliefs.

Opponent Patty Murray, D-Wash., said the measure "discriminates against women in government by severely limiting their access to abortion services through the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program."

A yes vote was to limit federal employees' abortion coverage. Michigan Senators Carl Levin, D, voted no. Spencer Abraham, R, voted yes.

Mining Law: The Senate refused, 49 for and 51 against, to continue banning the sale of hard-rock mineral resources in western states to private companies at \$2.50 to \$5 per acre. The vote would allow mining firms to resume purchasing certain patents under terms of The 1872 Mining Law, which was enacted to spur development of the West. The vote lifts a moratorium that is now blocking certain transactions between the Bureau of Land Management and mining companies.

Critics called it wrong for the government to relinquish valuable mining patents at below market prices, while defenders said the 19th Century law should be reformed only in a way that protects mining industry jobs and property rights as well as the public interest.

Moratorium supporter Dale Bumpers, D-Ark., said that since 1972 "we have given away more than 3.2 million acres . . . for \$2.50 an acre. The mining companies took \$241 billion of gold and silver, and we got the short end . . . I have heard a lot about corporate welfare but I have never heard anything approaching this."

Opponent Frank Murkowski, R-Alaska, said the Senate should wait for reform legislation being produced by the Energy Committee. He said that bill will "protect the U.S. mining industry, protect U.S. jobs, protect the environment and provide a fair return to the U.S. Treasury."

A yes vote opposed the sale of public mining rights under terms of The 1872 Mining Law. Michigan Senators Carl Levin voted yes. Spencer Abraham voted no.

African-American Museum: Voting 50 for and 47 against, the Senate tabled (killed) an amendment authorizing the Smithsonian Institution to establish a National African-American Museum. While the measure did not specify costs, it enabled the Smithsonian to launch the project by collecting private contributions to it. The amendment was offered to a fiscal 1996 appropriations bill (HR 1977) for the Interior Department and other agencies that was sent to conference with the House.

Tabling supporter Slade Gorton, R-Wash., said "there just is not any money for this project now . . . and there is nothing in a budget resolution leading to a balanced budget in the year 2002 that indicates we are going to be able to do so between this day and then."

Museum supporter John McCain, R-Ariz., said: "I remind my colleagues that there are a lot of questions now about our relations with minorities in this country. I think recognition of the contributions that African-Americans have made is appropriate for this country to do . . . sooner or later, we will decide to do that."

Ayes opposed authorizing a National African-American Museum. Michigan Senators Carl Levin, D, voted no. Spencer Abraham, R, voted yes.

Indian funds cut: The Senate affirmed, 68 for and 30 against, a \$26.6 million cut in funding for an Indian education program in fiscal 1996. The vote tabled (killed) a move to maintain the current spending level of \$81 million for grants to tribal organizations that work with public schools and communities. The vote came during debate on HR 1977 (above).

Supporter Slade Gorton, R-Wash., said the program at issue "represents no more than 10 percent of all of the money which goes into the education of Indian children," adding there is "more than \$470 million in the Department of Education for Indian education."

Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., said that without the \$26.6 million, "we will be eliminating special services for Indian students in public schools . . . training for their teachers and critically needed adult education and (diploma) programs that are operated by Indian tribes and Indian people. We ought not to be cutting programs that are essential for the very neediest in our society."

A yes vote supported a 30 percent cut in funding for an Indian competitive grant education program. Michigan Senators Levin and Abraham both voted yes.

Defense: By a vote of 56 for and 42 against, the Senate kept spending in the fiscal 1996 defense appropriations bill (S 1087) at the committee-approved level of \$242.7 billion. This killed a bid for unspecified cuts of \$3.2 billion in the Pentagon budget for the year beginning Oct. 1. The bill was later sent to conference where it will be meshed with a comparable House measure.

Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, said he, too, would like to spend more for domestic programs but that "there are still people outside our borders and inside our borders that would relish the thought of destroying us. This is not paranoia. This is the real world."

Sponsor Paul Wellstone, D-Minn., said the cut was in order because "American taxpayers are paying for costly, obsolete, fantastically expensive Cold War era weapons systems that are no longer or justifiable, basically to preserve the political health of certain Members of Congress."

A yes vote opposed a \$3.2 billion cut in 1996 defense spending. Michigan Senators Levin voted no. Abraham voted yes.

Star Wars: The Senate voted 57 for and 41 against to preserve full funding in the 1996 defense budget (S 1087, above) for continued development of defense-based lasers that would defend against incoming enemy missiles. This killed a bid to cut \$70 million from the bill's \$670 million for advancing space-based anti-missile systems including the "Star Wars" plans of the 1980s.

John Kyl, R-Ariz., said: "This is a very good program. We are only talking about research money. We are a long way from any decision to deploy. It is the kind of program we need as a hedge against 'an unstable world'."

Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, who sponsored the cut, called the \$70 million "just the first step toward a \$30 billion expenditure of money . . . Are we serious about committing this kind of money to a weapons system that may or may not work?"

A yes vote opposed cutting funds for space-based anti-missile programs. Michigan Senators Levin voted no. Abraham voted yes.



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