

POINTS OF VIEW

More tricks than treats at state charter schools

The state Senate, prodded by ideologues on the State Board of Education, is about to ram through changes in the School Code. Few amendments will be allowed to alter the ideology of SB 679.

One major feature will be to lift the cap on the number of "public school academies" (PSAs) that may be chartered. Charter schools, as they're also called, are a year-old idea of untested merit. None is reported to have graduated anyone.

Why, then, are the ideologues in such a dither to charter more PSAs? Shouldn't we examine their effects on students? Shouldn't we study test scores and other measures of performance?

Ah, but educating students isn't the name of the game. The name of the game is satisfying parents — particularly authoritarian, fundamentalist parents — with tax dollars and government power.

Consider the "vision" statement Clark Durant concocted and rammed through the State Board of Education: multiple references to parents. Consider the testimony of Nancy Jenkins, the so-called research assistant of Michigan Family Forum, before the Senate Education Committee: 13 references to parents, two to students. (I counted.) The idea of public schooling is to raise kids above the level of their parents. If schools were guided by authoritarian parents, we'd still be teaching



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that stars are embedded in the Firmament and never have heard of Evolution and Abolition.

Last week the State Board of Education received a status report on 37 operating or planned PSAs from the

Michigan Partnership for New Education. Some sound good.

West Michigan Academy of Environmental Science, Grand Rapids, "stresses academic achievement and sound character and citizenship principles emphasizing responsibility to the environment and society." Livingston Technical Academy in Brighton is offering 11th and 12th graders a "school-to-work manufacturing program." Morie Academy for Creative Arts and Sciences will open in 1996 in Southfield with "arts education an integral part."

But I have questions about others: Thomas Gist Academy in Westland will "prepare students to succeed in the global free enterprise economy" —

in kindergarten through fifth grade?

Academy of Detroit-Southfield will complement core academics with a "business and entrepreneurial component" — for K-5th grade?

Academies which concentrate on arts, science and the job market seem to be balanced by academies that are ethno-centric or trying to indoctrinate kids in ideologies, some fundamentalist, others ultra-liberal.

It would be unwise to give them the title of "public schools," worse to give them tax dollars and power to set teacher certification rules.

Worse for students, that is.

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

Failing grade says a lot about teaching methods

BY WARREN SCHROEDER

GUEST COLUMNIST

Usually a parent is reluctant to acknowledge his child's first "F." As one of the four parents (Aug. 28, Farmington Observer) that removed their child from public school, I cherish my daughter's first "F."

My daughter was the one that was double promoted. She received 22 4's and 13 5's on her final quarter fifth-grade report card. How is it possible that this child can bring home a paper with "F" in grammar from a private middle school?

Is it because she is deficient in cognitive ability? Is it because she is incapable of applying herself academically? Is it because public school teachers are unwilling or unable to teach? Or is there another explanation?

For the record, my daughter was removed from the Farmington Public School system primarily based on a conversation that my wife and two of the other parents had with Dr. Maxwell and Judy White last fall.

The district made the statement that "we never have and never will have ed-

ucational programs for the top two or three percent of the population." As a parent of a high ability child, I found that statement unacceptable and elected to educate my daughter elsewhere.

Children that score at or above the 97 percentile are usually considered gifted. The figure is based on national averages. The Farmington district is blessed; last year the district tested 855 fifth-grade students.

At the average of 3 percent you could expect 26 children to be considered gifted. In the quantitative category, 120 children or 14 percent tested at or above the 97 percentile.

In the cognitive verbal category, 74 children or nine percent tested at or above the 97 percentile. This represents a significantly higher number of students than the district's estimation. It also represents an unacceptable number of students whose academic needs are not being met.

As to why my daughter received a grammar paper graded "F," the answer is in the district's own "Language Arts philosophy statement."

It reads: "Researchers recommend

GUEST COLUMN

that grammar instruction not be emphasized in a formal sense at the elementary level . . . because many children have difficulty with the abstract nature of grammar."

Children who had difficulty in a particular subject matter in the past were given additional help to meet the objective. The district's Outcomes Based philosophy is to dumb all children down to a consistent level.

In order for the district's mission statement "All children can learn" to be viable, it mandates the lowering of academic standards so that all children can indeed learn.

In Outcomes Based Education it is the district, not the student, that sets the level of academic achievement. Under Outcomes Based Education no child fails. A child's grade or academic achievement is no longer a function of his or her ability or dedication to task, the district imposes an academic ceiling (predefined outcome) that children regardless of ability cannot exceed.

According to the district's guidelines, teaching grammar in elementary school is yet another academic endeavor that now exceeds that ceiling. My daughter received an "F" on a grammar paper simply because she had not been formally taught the subject in the public elementary school system.

I'm grateful that her new school, with their higher academic standards and grading system, brought that deficiency to my attention. It is far easier to correct at this level than it would be at the high school or college level.

It is the parent who must ultimately accept the responsibility for a child's education. Why is it that a private school that spends less than one quarter of what the local public school system spends (\$8,750) per year both expects and delivers higher academic standards?

Are other parents also being deceived by the magic of the Outcomes Based Education grading system into believing that their children are attain-

ing academic excellence?

How many parents of children at or close to the 97 percentile are aware that by the district's own admission their child's potential is now forfeit?

I remember when Dr. Maxwell came to the district, his stated educational philosophy was "Equity and Excellence." Farmington public schools recently published 1995-96 information brochure now reads "quality and equity." Where's the excellence?

The school board and Dr. Maxwell may find it acceptable to lower academic standards and throw out excellence. I do not. Each parent must decide if the district's academic objectives are in their child's best interest.

The question that as yet remains unanswered for now and for the near future is simply: Is the district's Outcomes Based Education experiment the answer or will it prove only to exacerbate a preexisting academic decline?

Warren H. Schroeder lives in Farmington Hills. His daughter is in her first year at Our Lady of Sorrows School in Farmington.

Dysfunctional families are at root cause of social ills

Peter Luke is a reporter in the Booth Newspapers' Lansing bureau. In his column last Sunday, he produced the interesting idea that the Michigan Legislature may be on the way to giving something more than mere lip service to the now-trivialized phrase "family values."

As evidence, Luke pointed to bills now under consideration that would make it tougher to get a divorce, crack down on underage drinking and restrict driving privileges for teenagers.

I think he's on to something.

Most thoughtful people are beginning to come around to conclude there is something terribly important about maintaining intact, functioning families as social units that can pass on values and ethics and discipline to the unruly impulses of adolescents.

Interestingly, the day after Luke's column was published, the wire services moved a piece reporting U.S. Census Bureau findings that the percentage of single-parent families is continuing to grow in the U.S. From a low 13 percent in 1970, the figure rose to 22 percent in 1980 and to 28 percent in 1990. Last year it was nearly 31 percent.

Of the 11.5 million single-parent families nationwide, 9.9 million are headed by mothers and 1.6 million by fathers. Nearly two-thirds of black families with children are headed by single parents; for whites, it's 25 percent.

Nationwide, 30.6 percent of all births (22 percent white, 68 percent black) are now out of wedlock, the highest in the world.

Ask the cops. The kids who get in trouble with the teachers. The kids who are in trouble at school are more often than not from single-parent families. Ask the social workers. Dysfunctional families are the single most common root cause for a whole range of social ills from drug abuse to sexual abuse.

Our society's crisis is not legal. It's no longer even racial. It is social. Whole neighborhoods of children are growing up without families, mostly without fathers and usually without the habits, schooling and skills required to survive in today's world.

The obvious question is whether a device as clumsy as a bill enacted by the Michigan Legislature can really do anything concrete or effective about reversing the trend toward deteriorating families.

In the case of divorce, where the Legislature is considering rewriting the no-fault divorce law, it seems clear that passing a law would



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have an undeniable effect. If a couple is childless, the divorce would be granted if both parties want it. But if one spouse objects or if there are kids, the divorce would be granted only if a spouse broke the marriage contract — i.e., adultery, abuse, drugs, drinking.

But most abuses remain stubbornly immune even to legislative prohibition.

I think instead we should explore novel ways to punish (and, hopefully, deter) bad behavior and to stimulate that old-fashioned feeling, shame.

Newspapers already print the names of "Johns," men who are arrested for soliciting prostitutes, as well as people convicted of drunk driving. What about requiring convicted drunk drivers to put an icon of a bottle or a big red "D" on their license plates? Big-time troublemakers in school used to be made to wear dunce caps; why not now?

Why shouldn't unwed, underage mothers be required to live with their parent(s) instead of using welfare to get their own apartments? And why shouldn't we start enforcing the old regulation that every birth certificate has to contain the Social Security number of the father?

Wringing our hands about the decline in family values seems pointless. What we need to do is identify concrete ways in which our social institutions can help the values of the family, now under assault from a complex, rapidly changing, and sometimes threatening world.

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