

Senator wants state funds to pay for school computers

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

State Sen. Gary Peters, D-Bloomfield Township, wants to put \$300 million worth of computers into K-4 classrooms in the next decade, and he has an idea where to get the money.

He would earmark 75 percent of the Michigan Renaissance Fund (formerly the Michigan Strategic Fund) for technology grants at the pace of \$25 million a year.

But Gov. John Engler's appointees on the Renaissance Fund board have different ideas. According to Engler's office, the Renaissance Fund will go to:

- "Loans to local communities for land assembly and land reclamation in support of specific economic development projects."
- "Grants to the communities for infrastructure development for those projects."

Another line item

Engler dislikes Peters' bill because it amounts to "another line item" in the budget. The governor prefers to give school districts a lump sum and let them account to voters for how they spend it.

"Is the \$11 billion we're spending (state school aid fund) adequate to educate 1.6 million kids?" Engler asked. "Mr. Peters, who has had strong support from the teachers union, would argue that if you put more money in, they could have higher salaries. If you put in more for computers, it would free up more for wages."

"It's all part of the negotiation process. It's neither right nor wrong."

"I believe our approach has been sound in that we get rid of all these line items and say to the school board, the school community, here's the money; you decide."

"But there are people — Sen. Peters is one, President Clinton's another — who believe that government, being all-knowing, should take funds and earmark them for specific little purposes."

"We had over 100 categorical programs in our school aid bill (prior to Proposal A of 1994) that virtually no one understood except a handful of people in the Legislature. We've gotten rid of that. They (school districts) now have to evaluate how they do business."

Previously the Renaissance

Fund was used to push new industry. Some \$65 million is aimed at the new Detroit Tigers stadium. Unlike the Strategic Fund, which made direct loans to companies, the Renaissance Fund will go to local governments.

Source of funds remains the same: casino slot machines.

Change focus

Peters, a first-term senator, told a news conference Sept. 25 that a better use yet would be computers for kindergarten through fourth grade, until a ratio of one per five students is reached.

"Our focus in delivering public education has been charter schools and vouchers," Peters said. "It should be technology. Technology has resulted in dramatic improvement in test scores, reduced truancy and lower dropout rates," he said, citing Romulus, Cincinnati, and

Willow Grove, Ill.

"The (federal) General Accounting Office ranks Michigan 44th of the 50 states in use of computers in classrooms. We're at the bottom of every category (such as software). Ohio is investing \$400 million, primarily in the elementary grades."

"The biggest bang for the buck you can get is in the early grades. It's the opposite of what most schools do. It leverages teachers in math, reading and writing."

He expects his proposal to become an election issue. Just drafted, the bill so far doesn't have a number.

As Peters views it, teachers could group students by ability

in clusters of five and let each group work at its own pace. "The teacher becomes a coach rather than a lecturer at the blackboard, with half the students wanting to go faster, half slower and most of them bored."

Half the money would be used on training teachers and acquiring software, half on equipment. It sets up a "public school technology and infrastructure improvement fund" within the Renaissance Fund act.

Joining Peters to endorse the measure were representatives of the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals, Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association, Michigan Association of School

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Senator Gary Peters
D-Bloomfield Hills

Administrators, PTA, the Michigan State University Department of Education Administration, Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators and Michigan Federation of Teachers.

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