

POINTS OF VIEW

For kids' sake, close some charter schools



TIM RICHARD

More dismal news about the "charter schools," this time from Auditor General Thomas H. McTavish, CPA.

McTavish's office audited Central Michigan University's Charter School Office (CSO), which is supposed to oversee the academics it has chartered. CMU is our leading charter mill, having chartered 40 of the 78 PSAs (public school academies) operating as of May 31.

PSAs, many of them private in origin, got full public funding but zero voter surveillance. McTavish's troops examined CSO records for 13 academies Sept. 11, 1996 and June 5 and visited 10 sites. Unfortunately, they don't say which sites.

Usually, auditors are dreary writers who can turn a narrative of Custer's Last Stand into an opiate. But in the CMU charter audit, many items leap out at you:

■ "The PSAs had not obtained criminal records checks for some employees. Also, eight PSAs did not hire some staff as conditional employees pending the results of criminal records checks."

■ "Eight PSAs employed individuals to teach who did not have certificates or permits to teach." (Remember, 13 are in the sample.)

■ "One PSA was beginning to provide special education services at the time of our site visit. This PSA had students with special education needs who had been attending the PSA for more than one year without special education services being provided."

Here we come to the most glaring fault of PSAs. Required by law to provide special ed. many don't. As the friends of public education feared, PSAs want real public schools to be their dumping ground. PSAs want to skim the \$5,400 per pupil state aid cream but not the additional \$8,000 or so per pupil that special ed requires.

■ PSA boards are self-appointed, not elected. CMU is supposed to gather questionnaires from board members to check for potential conflicts of interest. There were no questionnaires for 23 board members, incomplete follow-up for 14 and a failure to identify nine potential conflicts of interest. These persons worked for the CSO or companies which had

contracts with the CSO. Eight of the nine resigned.

■ PSAs are supposed to hold lotteries for enrollment. Two had "application periods that were less than the suggested two-week period," suggesting less than a true open-enrollment practice — in other words, skimming.

■ CMU is supposed to send "regional representatives" to PSA board meetings. Reps to 12 of the 13 failed to attend the required number of meetings (three) and failed to collect information on insurance policies, board minutes, etc. CMU had to send six notices to one academy to obtain its insurance information.

■ CSO failed to ensure they had written procurement policies. This underlines a major flaw in the whole charter school concept — the possibility of a tiny school operated by insiders seeking favorable business deals.

■ "Two PSA boards did not appoint an individual to post meeting dates as required by sec. 15.265" of the Open Meetings Act.

And what does Central Michigan University have to say in reply? It agreed with 17 of the auditors' 19 recommendations, began to implement them, and acknowledged the other two. By the way, the CMU charter mill has been operating three years.

Currently, state law authorizes 100 public school academies. Their champions say the number should be unlimited.

Advocates of charter schools such as Gov. John Engler and gubernatorial wannabe Dick Posthumus ignore test scores, audits and how well the kids are doing. They say PSAs are good because the parents, parents, parents want them. Well, the parents, parents, parents are being taken for suckers, suckers.

Instead of chartering more, the state needs to think about shutting down a quarter of these PSAs — for the sake of kids, kids, kids.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state events. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047 ext. 1881.

LETTERS

Competition takes big toll

Competition? When the Telecommunications Act of 1995 was passed, the sponsors heralded it as leading us into the 21st century. Actually this legislation, which was written by Ameritech and passed by the legislature after significant lobbying efforts and PAC contributions, has done little except allow Ameritech to raise rates indiscriminately. Witness the recent announcement that Ameritech increased the cost of a "local toll call" from 15 cents to 17 cents a minute.

Ameritech suggested that this new rate was competitive with "rates offered by our competitors." Perhaps that is true because Ameritech has seen to it that there is no real competition. Sure, AT&T has offered local phone service. But until the competition installs its own equipment and no longer buys the overpriced, Ameritech services at a small discount, and then adds to it their costs and margins, we will never see any real price breaks. Does anyone question why it costs 17 cents to call Ann Arbor when it costs 10 cents to call across the country?

The news article I read suggested that a "local toll call" is a call where it is necessary to dial a 1 first. Of course, that's not true. With the new area codes, a call may be a local call but it is necessary to dial 1 plus the area code to connect. Did you note that Ameritech removed from its directories the chart which indicated whether a call is a local, zone or toll depending on the exchange called? Now unless you want to spend the time and call the operator, you have no idea whether your call will be local, zone or toll. Of course, this is just another Ameritech ploy to confuse the public.

Perhaps everyone in the Farmington, Farmington Hills area is so affluent that a few dollars to line the pockets of the Ameritech corporate executives in Chicago is of no real concern. No one seems concerned about the ever increasing Time Warner cable rates. So when the next Time Warner increase is announced, it will be no surprise and perhaps even no concern to my fellow residents.

I spent the last 16 years analyzing utility rate increases. I know that we are being gouged in Michigan. We have a weak Public Service Commission and a legislature that can be manipulated by Ameritech. Other states don't have zone calls, there is no limit on the number of local calls and the local calling area extends for miles, not just across the street. With the advent of technology and the rapid growth in customers and lines, other states have seen millions of dollars in rate reductions. Of course just the opposite is true in Michigan.

If you want to do something about the high rates, give me a call and leave a message. Perhaps some in the Farmington area are as con-

cerned as I am. Or write me a short note — my address and number are in the phone book, or at least they were. If enough people show some concern I will schedule a short meeting to discuss what we can do. Perhaps the voice of the people can have the same impact as the Ameritech dollars — but that will depend on whether we can generate any real interest.

Tom DeWard
Farmington Hills

House of card wobbles

After reading Rep. Raczowski's letter on Oct. 9, I have come to the conclusion that Governor Engler has found another willing accomplice to carry out his version of the con game, Three Card Monte with our children and taxpayers the victims of a gaudy educational finance policy.

Governor Engler vetoed Senator Joe Conroy's small class initiative which would have drastically lowered class room sizes in early elementary grades. The governor also vetoed \$252 million in funding for at-risk students across the state, which according to Rep. Raczowski, "the governor supports restoring." This leads to the question, if he's in favor of restoring it, then why did he veto it in the first place?

Rep. Raczowski also supports Engler's educational finance policy which is synonymous with a house of cards. First, the School Aid Fund is projected to have a \$240 million deficit. This is after the legislature raised the general fund contribution from 14.4 percent to 23 percent last year. This raise was needed to cover the unexpected \$143 million shortfall that occurred after the Legislature had already pumped \$300 million into it earlier that year.

Secondly, Governor Engler wants to pay the nearly \$1 billion settlement of the Durant case by giving the 84 plaintiffs their \$211 million settlement in three years. Then borrow \$788 million to pay off the 480 districts that didn't sue, in order to keep them from suing at a later date. The Governor's plan to borrow the \$788 million would take 15 and cost the taxpayers of Michigan a whopping \$1.2 billion after interest.

The money could just as easily be paid off using the interest from the Budget Stabilization Fund. Unlike Engler's plan, this approach would take only 10 years and wouldn't require the state to pay the costs of borrowing it on the bond market and save taxpayers over \$180 million.

When this house of cards that Rep. Raczowski helped promote collapses, will he stand beside Gov. Engler to accept the responsibility for his participation in the construction of it or will he simply create more smoke and mirrors to cover his backside?

Stephen Dibert
Farmington Hills

Proficiency tests do the job

Last year 87,584 high schoolers took the first-ever Michigan High School Proficiency Test. An event of this magnitude inevitably will attract the attention of the ever-alert members of the Michigan Legislature.

Responding to the usual chorus of complaints whenever anybody tries to do something new with the schools, a special House subcommittee on the HSPT spent several months holding hearings to review a slew of proposals to tinker with the tests.

Some make perfect sense, such as requiring the Department of Education to provide detailed feedback to students, parents and schools and including MEAP and HSPT test scores in annual school improvement plans. Others are more problematic, such as replacing the terms "proficient," "novice" and "not yet novice" with numerical scores that may prove entirely meaningless without context.

The subcommittee has finished its work and reported to the House Education Committee, which has sent a bunch of proposals for perfecting proposals the HSPT to the full House for debate this week.

In the middle of all this, I received a letter from Dorothy Beardmore, a member of the State Board of Education and a standing monument to the notion that able people, volunteering their time and energy to a public purpose, are the essential ingredients in a democracy. I suppose over the years I've received six or seven letters from Mrs. Beardmore, each thorough, well-informed and persuasively put — just like her service on the State Board.

She begins: "Both the public and the media seem to have forgotten why the HSPT was developed in the first place, so they overlook that it is doing exactly what it was expected to do. The HSPT demonstrates that most Michigan students are doing well in these essential areas of learning."

Mrs. Beardmore then goes on to show that of the 87,584 graduates of the Michigan class of 1997, "from a third to half of them met the very high standards for endorsement (of diplomas). Only six to 11 percent were in the lowest category. The rest were doing well, but not yet at the proficiency level.

"For a first effort with such a rigorous assessment," Mrs. Beardmore concludes, "Michigan students, educators and parents should be pleased, even more so since we already knew that the Class of '98 results show statistically significant improvement over the first year. In



PHILIP POWER

other words, the HSPT is a success!"

Absolutely! The most sensible method to improve schools does not require the application of rocket science.

It involves defining what kids are supposed to learn in order to be educated members of society and get a productive job (i.e., know the categories of math, science, reading and writing that are covered by the HSPT). It then includes assessing what kids actually know (i.e., taking the HSPT).

And it concludes by making the results public, so students, parents, teachers and administrators can improve teaching methods, change books, and so forth.

As Mrs. Beardmore puts it, "It identifies strengths and weaknesses in curriculum, instructional practices and student (and family) acceptance of educational standards to meet high standards."

Certainly the HSPT has provoked some (overblown by the media) criticism. Liberals don't like it that some kids will score badly; conservatives will whine that students are not assessed for familiarity with the Bible; some parents have tried to get their kids not to take the test for fear the scores will deprive their little geniuses their God-given right to attend Harvard or Vassar. Some representatives will try to eliminate the HSPT for any number of trumped-up rationalizations.

But the evidence so far is compelling. The High School Proficiency Test is doing exactly what it was intended to do. Any tinkering the House adopts should be around the edges, not at the core of an important and useful part of the school reform effort.

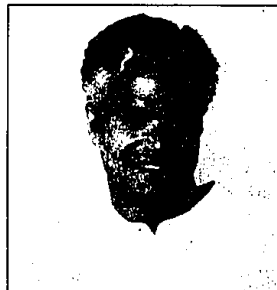
Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047 ext. 1880.

It's Fall Family FunCentral at Fairlane Town Center

A full month of music, magic, laughing and dancing!

This fall, Fairlane is the place to be for family-friendly entertainment. Each and every Saturday in October, kids can make something unique with Arts & Scraps...learn to tap dance with the Center for Creative Studies...and enjoy a spectacular lineup of free entertainment for parents and kids alike!

What's happening this Saturday, October 18:



4:30 & 6:30 pm
Craig 'N Co.

Disney recording artist
performs supercharged,
kid sized rock 'n roll.

For a full schedule of Fall Family FunCentral activities,
call Fairlane at 1-800-992-9500

Southfield Freeway at Michigan Avenue in Dearborn
Open 10 am to 9 pm Monday through Saturday, Sunday 11 am to 6 pm

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