

Lansing shows how city improves schools

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Michigan historically has separated schools from city governments. In fact, most school districts have different boundaries from cities. School elections are separate from city and gubernatorial elections. The theory is to take education out of "politics."

That system is coming under challenge. "Other mayors have reached out with the club. That's not my style," said Lansing Mayor David Hollister, who won praise from the State Board of Education for his leadership in community efforts to help the ailing Lansing public schools.

"It's not a turf war," agreed Lansing Superintendent Dick Halik. "He (Hollister) has a platform that I, as a superintendent, don't have. He can bring in General Motors, the UAW and chamber of commerce leaders."

At stake, Hollister told the state board Jan. 7, are 16,000 jobs and \$600 million in investment that General Motors would like to place in Lansing. He quoted GM officials as saying:

"We (Lansing) have the best workforce and the best labor-management relations. Oh, by the way, half of our workers will retire in the next 10 years. We need productive, hard-working, efficient workers with good math skills, good computer skills and many who can speak Spanish because we have a sister plant in Mexico."

Hollister, 55, spent six years in county government and 20 in the state House of Representatives.

Community tools

Elected mayor in 1995, Hollister set up a blue-ribbon committee headed by Michigan State University Peter McPherson to explore how a community could help schools — in five years — achieve a zero dropout rate, make every child computer literate, give everyone the work ethic and have every child drug-free.

Some of their tools:

- **Tutoring** — They signed up 1,000 volunteers who would mentor one child, one hour a week, for one year, in reading. Hollister himself is a volunteer. Their target: 1,400 kids in grades 3-5 who are reading below the 30th percentile.

"Those mentors have to be mobile," said Halik, the superintendent. "Some kids change schools five or six times a year." Turnover in some schools is 100 percent a year.

- **Truancy** — Police have recruited retirees to track down kids who aren't showing up for

class. "Lots of kids disappear when Mom is on drug treatment," said Hollister. "We haven't solved it."

- **Curfew** — "The (city) police department does sweeps of kids who aren't where they're supposed to be," said Rossie Ray-Taylor, deputy superintendent of schools. "The (county) prosecutor's office has taken on the attendance issue."

Parents who fail to get their kids to school or who let them violate curfews are brought before the law and have a choice: pay a fine, do community service or spend a day in school with their kids. "Most would rather pay the fine," said Hollister. "Going to school with their kid is the least favorite option."

- **Partnering** — The UAW came up with seven laid-off auto workers who work in schools as teachers' aides. "They're the most motivated people in the school. The laid-off guys are getting paid anyway," Hollister said.

- **Donations** — "GM showed up with a \$10,000 check for computers," said Halik. "We tried that through the schools and got not one cent."

Halik said he had several critical letters telling him to "take back managing the schools." His response: "They're entirely wrong. The superintendent needs to get all the resources he can."

National model

Hollister, Halik and Ray-Taylor spoke at the invitation of State Board president Kathleen Straus, D-Detroit. "The State Board will be exploring examples of partnerships where schools are working hand-in-hand with the community," she said, praising the Lansing model.

"This could be a model nationally," said board member Herb Moyer, D-Tempeance. "It's non-adversarial."

"Pontiac has a lot of the same problems," said board vice president Dorothy Beardmore, R-Rochester, citing mobility between schools. Pontiac's answer was to transport kids to their original school to provide stability. Did Lansing try that?

Yes, said Halik, but it still resulted in high rates of tardiness and absenteeism.

What will happen, they were asked, if GM doesn't produce two new car models in Lansing?

"The skills GM is asking are the same others are asking," replied Ray-Taylor, pointing to Sparrow Hospital.

Added Hollister: "We stand to lose 16,000 jobs if we don't get it right."

Publishing veteran joins HomeTown

BY LARRY PALADINO
STAFF WRITER

Jeanne Towar, a familiar and active figure in the southeast Michigan publishing industry for nearly 40 years, joins HomeTown Communications Network as vice president-editorial, effective March 2.

"Jeanne has had a long and outstanding career in newspaper publishing," said Richard Agninin, president of HomeTown Communications. "I am pleased that she will be joining us. She will be invaluable in contributing to the continued success of our corporation."

HomeTown, formerly Suburban Communications Corp., publishes community newspapers, local telephone directories and specialty publications in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky. It also provides Internet services. The Livonia-based company's holdings include both the *Observer* and the *Eccentric* newspapers.

Towar has worked as a consultant to the company the last two years on special projects.



Jeanne Towar

They included service as interim publisher of three newspapers in the company's Lansing Community Newspapers division and also in the 11 papers of its Cincinnati Community Press division.

"I am delighted at the prospect of working for this company," said Towar, who was

publisher and vice president of *The Daily Tribune* in Royal Oak when it was owned by Ingersoll Publications. In 1989, she joined Crain Communications as marketing director and was promoted to vice president in 1992. Her career at Crain's included serving as publisher of *Detroit Monthly* magazine. She founded Crain's Detroit Custom Publishing Division.

"Community journalism is my first love," Towar said. "HomeTown Communications does very well at that and I'm excited to be part of it."

"She'll make a significant contribution to our newspapers," said John Reddy, who is retiring as vice president-editorial and publisher emeritus of *The Observer* in Birmingham. "Her background in newspapers and magazines makes her sensitive to the importance of editorial content in the success of any publication."

Towar's newspaper career began in 1959 with Associated Newspapers, which included the *Wayne Eagle* and *Garden*

City Guardian-Review. She was the classified manager when she left in 1966 to join *The Daily Sentinel* in Utica, part of the Times Herald Corp.

From there she went to *The Macomb Daily* in 1971 as a sales representative, rising to advertising director in 1981. During her time there she took a leave of absence to serve as an administrative officer of The Newspaper Guild of Detroit, 1978-80.

Towar was elected to a six-year term on the Oakland Community College board in June 1996. She currently is interim executive director of the Royal Oak Chamber of Commerce. She is a member of Rotary International, Royal Oak Historical Society, AdCraft Club of Detroit and has been involved in projects for the Salvation Army, Haven, Boys & Girls Club of South Oakland, Stagecrafters, Oakland Community College Foundation, SEMCOG and Women's Economic Club.

Towar, originally from Dearborn, lives in Royal Oak.

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