

POINTS OF VIEW

Want your high school diploma? Take a test

Gov. Engler wants students who pass the high school Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test to get a \$2,500 college scholarship from the state.

On the surface, it sounds like a pretty reasonable idea. After all, high school students have been blowing off the MEAP in droves over the past few years.

In some upper-income school districts such as Birmingham, less than 20 percent of students wound up taking the MEAP last year. How come? Because most of these kids are already taking lengthy and demanding ACT and SAT aptitude tests for college, and gearing up for yet another big test — one that colleges don't require for admission and employers don't request at job interviews — seems pointless.

And guess what? With the new \$2,500 incentive to take the MEAP in place, test-taking skyrocketed this year. Some districts reported that as many as 90 percent of their students took the MEAP.

There are plenty of critics, however. Some call the program welfare for the well-off. Others complain that spending public money on college scholarships that will go disproportionately to kids from relatively affluent families merely widens the gap between the haves and have-nots. Still others complain that teachers are ignoring educating their students by spending disproportionate time teaching to the test.

The current dispute merely highlights problems that have plagued the MEAP from the start.

Originally designed as an instrument to evaluate high school curricula and teaching methods, the MEAP got overtaken by the national passion for school reform. Quite rightly, reformers argued that the way to get school improvement was to design a test that would assess what students actually learned, publish the results school by school and depend on public pressure to improve teaching methods and course materials.

Michigan didn't have such a test in place. So rather than import one from outside (perish the thought!), school authorities decided to use the MEAP, even though everybody realized the test was being used for purposes for which it was not designed. Most experts quickly recognized the flaw, and the MEAP test went through a series of improving (and, often, confusing) redesigns.



PHILIP POWER

The news media (including, notably, this newspaper) jumped on the idea, regularly running detailed reports of MEAP test results, school district by district, school building by building. For a while, MEAP test results became the main driver for school reform, with teachers and administrators trembling with anxiety before the scores came out.

But lurking in the background was another flaw in the program. Although the State Board of Education tried to make the MEAP compulsory for all high school students, the Legislature, scared of grumbling students and cross parents, never went along.

So the MEAP, the primary instrument for school reform in Michigan, wound up as a confusing, long, arduous and ill-designed test that kids and parents could ignore without penalty. High school kids and parents caught on quickly, and participation rates tumbled.

The seemingly practical solution proposed by the Engler administration amounts to a \$2,500 college scholarship bribe for kids to take the MEAP in enough numbers so it can remain a valid instrument for assessing school performance. No wonder lots of people are unhappy.

The truly practical solution is to require all kids as a condition of receiving their high school diploma to take the MEAP test or some other better alternative. It's logical. It's cheap. It's common sense.

And, of course, our legislative masters are certain not to buy it. Philip Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@homecomm.net

The show still goes on

Another opening, another show is going on all around her.

It's the height of the high school theater season, as schools across Oakland County produce their annual spring plays and musicals for students, faculty, parents and the community at large.

But for 16-year-old Samantha Steckloff and her fellow students at Harrison High School in Farmington Hills, the stage is dark and the seats empty.

No winter production was scheduled at Harrison this year while the auditorium was rebuilt. Then, as construction delays took hold, it became apparent that it wouldn't be ready for the spring musical either.

Steckloff, a sophomore who hopes to make theater a career, tried to create alternatives, staff writer Tim Smith reported recently in the *Farmington Observer*.

She approached Principal Rande Horn, to suggest that Harrison share stage facilities with one of the other two Farmington Public School District high schools. There's precedent. In 1998-99, North Farmington's winter production was held at Harrison while North was under construction.

When Horn said that wouldn't work that out, she sent a letter to school Superintendent Bob Maxfield and school board members, expressing her disappointment.

He read, in part: "I am just a kid. I cannot force action on the part of Harrison's staff. . . . Last year, both Farmington and North Farmington high schools experienced complete reconstruction of their facilities, yet both schools — committed to excellence in the arts — managed to produce at least two plays each. . . . There is no leadership from the Harrison High School staff to champion a drama club or a play. How sad."

Meanwhile, ongoing construction didn't stop Birmingham's two high schools from mounting spring productions over the last couple of weekends. Groves students put on *Little Shop of Horrors* and Seaholm did *Muscle Man*, both to enthusiastic audience reviews.

"We've got construction at both Seaholm and Groves," reports Birmingham Board Trustee Geri Riascher. "Different folks have had to compromise to allow this to happen."

"Even when the high school was under construction, we did seven major productions a year," says Rob Leider, play director at West Bloomfield High School. The 30-year-old auditorium is due to be renovated as part of the \$52-million bond issued passed Monday. If that runs into the school year, "arrangements would be made to use the middle schools," he says. "I find they're very committed here."

Otherwise it's a year less of learning and experi-



JUDY BERNE

ence for students such as Steckloff, that could come into play when they apply to the highly competitive university theater programs.

For example, at West Bloomfield High School, which will put on *Camelot* today through Saturday, Leider is challenging his actors to age by 20 years without recourse to make-up.

The students developed their own techniques to achieve this, reporter Dan West describes in a story in Sunday's *West Bloomfield Eccentric*. "I sort of watched young children and noticed mannerisms, then I looked at films and looked at older characters," said senior David Sherline who plays King Arthur.

For senior Alex Borgorad, who plays Guinevere, the aging process means changes in emotional expressions. "From what I learned, there are different ways to control your emotions, and when you're older, it's harder and I hope to show that."

"It's not just that I need it for college because I want to major in it," Steckloff told reporter Smith. "But going for a year without theater is so hard for me. . . . I can't explain the feeling of being on stage in front of the lights and in front of the audience. It's my favorite thing to do in the world."

Jennifer Nathan, a junior at Bloomfield Hills Andover who enjoys playing character roles, told me she can relate to Steckloff's pain. Although she doesn't plan a career in theater, she would like to do some acting in college and community theater. "I would be really unhappy" if my school went a year without putting on a play.

Taking part has been an important part of high school. "If you love it, all that hard work pays off when you're up on stage," she says. "Most of my friends are people who also do theater. You spend a lot of time together. It's a real bonding experience."

Of course, it's not just actors who are missing the theater experience at Harrison. Students who work on stage management and direction, set design, costumes and who play in the pit orchestra all have lost out. Not to mention the opportunity to attend live theater for the entire student body.

Harrison, a perennial football powerhouse, would never cancel the football season if somehow its home field were unusable, Steckloff told Principal Horn in trying to re-activate the footlights. The team would most certainly play its games at another site.

But for Harrison drama, it's wait until next year. Steckloff's right. How sad.

Judith Doner Berne is a former managing editor of *The Eccentric Newspapers*. You can comment by calling (734) 953-2047, Ext. 5; faxing (248) 644-1314; or e-mailing jberne@att.net

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