

POINTS OF VIEW

Reforms beginning to yield results

Michigan fifth and eighth graders across the board improved their scores in the Michigan Educational Assessment Program tests for science, writing and social studies, according to scores released last week.

Farmington's fifth- and eighth-grade science, social studies and writing MEAP marks, for example, were superior to state-wide scores. Fifth-grade results remained stable in all areas compared to last year. Eighth-grade scores, however, increased in science and social studies, but decreased in writing.

What is particularly significant across the state is the long-term trend. By and large, scores are far higher than they were when the MEAP test became the instrument of choice for assessing student performance. Interestingly, some of the biggest gains have come from districts Lansing is now considering for takeover, such as Hamtramck and Inkster.

Various authorities greeted the report with enthusiasm. Local school officials say it's because teachers and teaching methods are improving.

State school authorities say the school system is finally beginning to make real progress in reform. Gov. John Engler, who directed the takeover of the Detroit schools, says it's because schools are realizing the governor is serious.

Whatever. When the news is good, everybody is entitled to take a chunk of the credit.

Although it's tough to do and takes a long time, reforming the public schools is not rocket science. Reformers proposed a sensible model for improvement years ago. First, you decide what kids are supposed to learn at various grades while they are in school. Second, you assess what kids do, in fact, learn; in Michigan, that's called the MEAP. Third, you release these scores - district by district, school building by school building - to the public so as to ensure accountability. Fourth, you demand that schools respond to the results by improving teaching methods and materials. Fifth, you make it clear that you are resolute in staying on the path of reform.

The main point to seize firmly - especially right now, before all the pro- and anti-voucher propaganda hits - is that the school reform model is working in Michigan. Kids are learning more, virtually across the board.

That's very, very good news.

It's important to realize that most of our schools were not so bad to start with and have improved considerably over the past decade. The districts with real problems have been the very urban and the very rural. In the case of urban districts like Detroit, where the outrageous politics of school governance got in the way of good schools, drastic measures like the state takeover appear to



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be yielding results. Remote rural districts, where geographic isolation limits resources of all kinds, a technology fix such as increased reliance on computers and the Internet may offer hope.

State Board of Education President Dorothy Beardmore, one of the unsung heroes of school reform in Michigan, is delighted.

"What these scores show is that standards-based education reform works because it makes sense to specify what kids should know at various stages in their education career," she says.

"All this goes back a long way," Beardmore continues. "It started in 1991 when we established model curriculum outcomes. In 1995, we established standards. We worked on the MEAP test and gradually turned it into an accurate assessment of what kids learn. And now we're starting to see some real progress as all this trickles into every classroom in Michigan."

Beardmore's right. Improving an entire school system in a state as big as Michigan doesn't happen overnight. "People are beginning to figure they might as well get on board because standards-based education reform is not going to go away," she says. "Some years ago, people in the Legislature were talking about abolishing the MEAP test, but you don't hear much about that anymore."

In fact, the numbers of pupils taking the MEAP tests are going up, evidently in large part because of Gov. Engler's bright idea of linking success on the junior year MEAP to a \$2,500 Merit Award scholarship to college. Starting in the 2000-01 school year, eighth graders can earn \$500 in scholarship money to attend a public college in Michigan by scoring well on the MEAP.

A small irony amidst all this encouraging news: Folks at the Michigan Board of Education have yet to receive the official MEAP scores report.

Administrative responsibility for the MEAP was transferred from the state board to the Department of the Treasury last year. Beardmore learned about the current results by reading the newspapers.

Maybe the next step in school reform should be to tidy up some bureaucratic organization charts so the right hand knows what the left hand is doing.

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Can't beat 'em? Then join them

I love a parade.

Where I come from, parades are a tradition, the proud hallmark of every community with gumption enough to organize the veterans' color guard, a high school band, a few Scout troops, a horse and a clown or two for a march down Main Street. I've been to harvest festival

parades, Memorial Day parades, threshing bee parades and waterman parades.

There's just something about the fire trucks, the cavalcade of sports cars bearing local dignitaries, pageant queens and school kids and the beat of the bass drum that draws me like a magnet. Which is why I volunteered to cover this year's Farmington Family Fest parade.

That, and everybody else already had plans for Saturday.

In any case, I arrived in the office Friday morning to discover my plum assignment was about to become a bit sticky. And it had nothing to do with the thunderstorms forecast for Saturday morning.

Our newspaper ran a column last Thursday written by the chairwoman of the Farmington/Farmington Hills Multi-Cultural Multi-Racial Community Council. The organization has been lobbying the Family Fest board and area Shriners to eliminate one of the Shriners' parade entries - an Old West, shoot 'em up, cowboys and Indians extravaganza.

The problem, Karen Bolen said, is the re-enactment perpetuates old, inaccurate stereotypes. She pointed out some historical truths and criticized the Shriners for poking fun at Native American culture.

Bolen's right. That clearly seems contrary to the spirit of this community. Few cities are more culturally aware than Farmington and Farmington Hills. Civic and elected leaders make a concerted and very public effort toward inclusion, cultural understanding and diversity.

Children in Farmington Public Schools speak an astounding 80 languages. The council, formed 10 years ago in response to diversity issues arising in our schools, has successfully launched a number of programs, including their renowned "Rainbow Breakfast," to encourage an appreciation and understanding among people of different nationalities, creeds and colors.

One MCMR council member, Bolen said, pointed out if the Shriners had re-enacted a



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lynching in the Deep South, the debate would end with the first volley. That's certainly true.

But nobody played "whites lynching blacks" as children. Well, nobody in MY neighborhood.

Many of us, however, played "cowboys and Indians." Kids still do. Those unenlightened, pre-1970s movies and television series air every day of the week on one of the 152 channels available on your satellite dish.

I'm not saying that makes this right. I'm saying it makes it understandable.

I'm not even saying this is reasonable. I'm saying we can discuss it in a reasonable way.

So there I stood ... or sat, rather, on a land-scaping boulder in front of a strip mall on Grand River, watching the parade go by. Perspiring in the muggy heat. Holding my breath. As far as I knew, the Shriners were still planning to show up, even though there had been rumblings they might not.

Wasn't long before the first group of them marched by, and then the stagecoach, accompanied by motorcyclists dressed up as cowboys, cavalymen, bandits and Native Americans. I watched as the guys dressed in buckskin whooped it up a little and the ones wearing 10-gallon hats fired their guns into the air. The bandits pretended to fall dead after being shot while attempting to rob the stage.

Personally, I don't like either racial stereotyping or violence, make-believe or otherwise. If they gave me a vote, I'd ask the Shriners not to run that particular group in the Farmington Family Fest parade.

Trouble is, I don't get a vote. The festival board of directors made a decision to allow the Shriners to continue, despite the opposing view.

Those of us who just don't feel right about it are left with a couple of options. A picket line, a boycott, letters to the editor ... all handy tools for a protest.

Then there's the old, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em approach."

If the Shriners come back next year with their guns blazing, maybe the Multi-Cultural Multi-Racial Council ought to put on a little show of its own. Their parade entry wouldn't have to be anything big and brassy. Only meaningful. That's what the council and its dedicated members do best.

I'd offer to help. Unfortunately, I'm booked again to cover next year's parade.

Everybody else already has plans. Go figure.

Joni Hubred is a Farmington Observer staff writer who covers the city of Farmington Hills.

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