

Class is in for teachers, federal administrator

By Tim Richard
staff writer

A western Wayne County teacher raised her hand to ask her congressman and a U.S. Department of Education administrator.

"How does all that research out there apply to us in southeastern Michigan?"

Her question, asked in Livonia's Randolph Elementary School, echoed the words of a reading teacher in Ann Arbor's Abbott Elementary a day earlier.

"I think grants are given to researchers on the basis of what they want to research, not what we need to know."

Listening and taking notes were

U.S. Rep. Carl Pursell, R-Plymouth, a senior member of the House appropriations subcommittee on education, and Christopher T. Cross, assistant secretary of education in charge of \$96 million in research grants.

A WEEK AFTER being elected to his eighth term in Congress, Pursell held forums with teachers in Jackson, Ann Arbor and Lansing to test several ideas on the nation's growing education budget:

• The findings take 10 years to "trickle down" to classroom teachers.

• Much research on education is done in think tanks with a "Washington Beltway/University of Michigan

mentality" and is less than useful to classroom teachers. In the words of James (Doc) Doyle, Observer & Eccentric columnist and Pursell consultant: "A lot of educational research is a bunch of crap."

• The money might better go to state departments of education or regional teachers' colleges like Eastern Michigan.

• Classroom teachers themselves need to be actively involved in research projects. "We need more collaborative research," said a Livonia master teacher.

• Teachers need help dealing with new social problems — kids from broken homes, parents from Asian and other cultures, the continuing "achievement gap" between black and white students.

companies are gaining dominance, American kids are falling drastically behind in such critical areas as math by fifth grade.

"Our assistant superintendent is excellent in pulling research," said a Northville teacher — a distinct minority. Most teachers complained they didn't know what was being done and had little time for in-service training.

"Here we are, taking on all the social problems of the world," said a teacher in the Livonia forum. "The divorce rate is sky-high. They (kids) are left at home alone."

"Years ago we used to see only one or two (with emotional problems)," added another.

OTHER TEACHERS' comments: "We need more information on what's available to us" — an Ann Arbor teacher.

Pursell reply: "At U-M, 400 researchers are getting National Institute of Health grants."

Teachers' comment: "They're there, and we're here."

"A lot of research is good because it tells us to keep on with what we're doing to ditch it. . . Sometimes we don't give the federal government

credit" — a reading teacher. She cited a federal finding that says girls have as many problems as boys, confounding the conventional wisdom that boys have the majority of reading problems.

"It takes 10 years for research to get to the practical level" — Ann Arbor teacher.

Pursell's comment: "We can't afford 10 years."

"We don't know what's going on around the country" in improving blacks' performances.

Cross' reply: "We're making progress. Among blacks the high school graduation rate is 81 percent; among whites, 84 percent."

Teacher's response: "We're not closing the gap. Where do we go to

find out what other districts are doing?"

"There's no time to plan" — a western Wayne teacher.

"You have three months every year" — a Jackson County superintendent.

CROSS, AS an administrator, often is at odds with Pursell, a former classroom teacher in Taylor and Livonia in the 1960s.

Cross said laws and the bidding process require many educational research grants to go to universities.

"I've put emphasis on the dissemination. We have that on the boards — get the information into the hands of teachers," Cross said, citing the addition of a journalist from U.S. News & World Report to his staff.

Teachers couldn't find lab — on a bet

U.S. Rep. Carl Pursell said he won lunch in a bet with Chris Cross, assistant secretary of education. Cross said he won a second bet.

The two are at odds over the usefulness of federal educational research grants.

"We have a federal (education) lab that serves Michigan. How many of you know where it is?" Pursell asked educators from Plymouth-Canton, Northville and Livonia.

No hands went up — except for

Livonia Superintendent Joe Marinelli.

Answer: The Midwest Educational Research Lab in Elmhurst, Ill. — a \$200 million a year lab serving seven states. It's one of nine regional labs in the country.

Cross claimed his victory when he asked teachers whether they knew about certain research and innovations. Many said yes.

"You're using the product coming from it, but you don't know where it's coming from," said Cross.

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