

Engler may be receptive to property tax sharing

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Gov. John Engler dropped a broad hint he'll support property tax base sharing as a method of narrowing the gap between rich and poor among Michigan's 560 school districts.

The plan circulating in Lansing is to pull half the growth in commercial and industrial property taxes into the state treasury and distribute it on a per-pupil basis.

"That's something Rep. (James) O'Neill (D-Saginaw) and Sen. (Dan) DeGrow (R-Port Huron), two leading experts on school finance in the Legislature, have advocated as a way, over time, of closing the per pupil expenditure gap," Engler said.

"I'm committed to making progress on that gap because I think it is unfair."

"I'm not prepared to announce any components of that plan today," Engler said Monday in an interview in his temporary Olds Tower office facing the Capitol Building.

"But I have spoken approvingly of what DeGrow and O'Neill are doing. I think they're on the right track," said Engler, who last week promised to attack the equity problem in spring.

THOSE TWO lawmakers chair their respective appropriations subcommittees on school aid.

In a recent joint appearance before the Michigan Association of School Boards, they closed the door on the possibility of a state tax hike to pay for equity. They said equity must come from spreading the commercial and industrial wealth that

has sprouted up in suburbs around Detroit and Grand Rapids. Per pupil spending ranges from \$2,500 in rural areas to \$8,000 in Oakland County suburbs.

Tax base sharing wouldn't cost suburban districts any existing money — just half of future non-residential growth. Suburban lawmakers strongly resist it. Proposal B on the 1989 ballot contained a tax base sharing plan and was rejected by 70 percent of voters.

Engler praised the Republican-led Senate for passing his proposed 20 percent reduction in school operating property taxes even as it raised the price tag saying, "They're headed in the right direction." But he scored House Democrats for wanting to raise business taxes \$100 million to pay for a program of relief to small businesses.

ENGLE DEFENDED his plan to cut state funding of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit Symphony Orchestra and most Michigan Council for the Arts grants, despite criticism from fellow Republicans. For example, Joe Bianco, executive vice president of the Founders Society of DIA, was a strong presence at last week's Lansing rally protesting the cuts and grant freeze. DIA gets virtually all its \$16 million operating budget from the state.

It is impossible to defend funding the arts and cutting families," Engler replied. "We had to make a choice to stand with the families, and that's what we've done."

Francesco Dilibasi, music director of the Livonia Symphony Orchestra, had wondered why DIA's \$2 million grant couldn't have been phased out

over three years "so we can plan our lives."

"We have a deficit today that is still in excess of \$500 million," Engler replied. "The problem is we've been spending more money than we've been taking in."

"We've been kidding everyone, telling them there was money for their projects, hopes and needs when in fact there was not."

This has been financed in recent years by a series of one-time measures and gimmicks, and we've run out of those. We've reached the point where honesty is the best policy."

"If we're going to be fair in this, everybody had to share in the challenge. For every impact on the symphony, it's far greater for somebody who happens to be on AID (aid to families with dependent children)."

ENGLE'S CONSTANT themes are that education is the No. 1 spending priority, and cutting property taxes is the No. 1 method of attracting business. The governor, an upset winner last November, contends the state is trying to support above-average programs with below-average incomes.

While his stand against cutting aid to schools and colleges has drawn praise from both parties, publisher Phil Power, among others, has criticized state cuts to job training, which supporters see as adult education.

"We'll still be spending \$164 million on job training next year, with federal funds, and we think that's a very substantial investment," Engler said.

One of our immediate challenges is to see that that \$164 million buys the best programs — the right services and the right programs and greater accountability."

This happens to be an area loaded with companies, organizations and schools that wish to do job training. We've got to be very rigorous in our buying."

We think there were signs in the total state program that some of the money was awarded more on the basis of political cronyism than on the basis of where effective job training could be done."

We don't feel the reduction of a modest amount of general fund support, which is a percentage of the total program, is not something we can't overcome by doing a better job targeting the federal dollars. We think we'll get more job training, not less, out of the smaller investment."

Culture opens roads for self-expression

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musicians utilized in running a museum.

They had hands-on experiences at Lawrence Tech in the architecture and graphics departments, and talked to student actors at Wayne State's Hillyer Theatre after watching a play rehearsal.

Some of these young people rode a train for the first time on a trip to Detroit which included a view of the city from the top of the Westin Hotel in Renaissance Center. Several had to be convinced they were actually looking at Canada across the river.

"Visits to places like the Science

Museum, Children's Hospital, a luxury hotel, radio shows, a school for broadcasting and an advertising agency were designed to expand those kids' thinking. They are asked to grow up so fast yet their perception of the world is so limited," said Richard Thibodeau, M.S.W. community organization specialist for the Oakland County program.

We are encouraging the local Youth Action groups to do more and more of these cultural as well as other projects within their community," said Dr. Westbrook.

Next, school districts also match up culture and kids.

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