

# 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 put half the growth in commercial and industrial property taxes into the state treasury and distribute it on a per-pupil basis.

Rep. John Engler, R-Sparta, Sen. Sam DeGraw, 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 inside the Capitol building.

"But I have spoken publicly of what DeGraw and I 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 state budget. "They're headed in the right direction," he said.

Engler, a member of the

House Democratic Caucus, said he scored House Democrats for wanting to raise business taxes \$300 million to pay for a program of relief to small householders.

ENGLER 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, Jim Goss, executive vice president of the Detroit Society of Arts, 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 Dilibiasi, music director of the Lansing Symphony Orchestra, had wondered why LSOT's \$9 million grant couldn't have been phased out.

"We still be spending \$168 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 \$168 million buys the best programs, the right services and the right programs and greater acceptability.

It's happening to be an area held up with community organizations and schools that watch 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 cronism than on the basis of where effective job training could be done.

We must feel the reduction of a modest amount of general fund support, plus a percentage of the total program, plus a program we can overcome by being a better job targeting the federal dollars. We think we'll get more job training, not less, out of the smaller investment.

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

"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 these 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 Y.A.

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Next, school districts also match up culture and kids

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