

O/K education reform proposal joining fray

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Michigan will see a third entry Monday in the 1994 school tax reform sweepstakes.

Educators are expected to meet soon in Redford Union School District to launch a petition drive for the so-called "O/K proposal."

It's aimed at increasing state funding for public schools and bringing some equity between rich and poor districts.

"O/K" is named for Detroit attorney David Olmstead, one of the HOPE team recently defeated for re-election to the school board, and C. Phillip Kearney, professor of education at the University of Michigan.

Also likely to face voters are:
■ The "KIDS" proposal, to amend the state constitution by guaranteeing "equity" — and thereby allowing a lawsuit under which a court could order massive funding changes.

■ The Group of 12 plan, a bipartisan legislative proposal to eliminate all \$5 billion in local school property taxes for operations and replace them with higher state income and single business taxes. The Legislature could implement it without voter approval, but voters in 1994 would be offered a chance to substitute a higher sales tax for the other state taxes.

Kearney said the plan would force both the state and local boards to fund schools properly and cut property taxes. As he outlined his principles:

■ The state would be required to fund 60 percent of all K-12 public schools, with the lottery proceeds as a bonus. "This would bring the approximate percentage of state funding back to the levels of the early 1970s," said Kearney. Currently, state school aid is \$3 billion, and local taxes are \$5 billion.

■ Voters would not be asked to approve a tax increase. The Legislature would be forced to deal with it.

■ "All new state money" would be earmarked for schools and tax relief.

■ Property assessment increases would be limited to the rate of consumer price inflation.

■ Out-of-formula districts, which get no general state aid, would be "held harmless" — they could not lose what they have. State aid for categorical — such as special education — would be frozen at current levels.

"If, over the past several years, the state had assumed a larger share of the cost, we wouldn't be facing this situation," Kearney argued.

KIDS plan alive

Born in Washtenaw County, the KIDS plan was born in 1990 but faltered on its way to the ballot.

"We're planning a fresh start," Barbara Ebeling, chair of the Ypsilanti-based group, said in mid-1992. The acronym stands for "Knowledge Is Democracy's Safeguard."

Centerpiece is a constitutional amendment sponsored unsuccessfully by Rep. Kirk Profit, D-Ypsilanti. It calls for "equal op-

portunity for education for each public elementary and secondary school pupil.

In states with such constitutional language, underfunded school districts have been able to sue for massive equalization in funding. Kentucky, for example, passed \$1 billion in new taxes, lowered the richer districts and increased the poorer ones.

The Michigan State Chamber of Commerce is adamantly opposed. Rich Studley, vice president for governmental relations, calls it "a wolf in sheep's clothing."

"The KIDS proposal clearly opens the door for litigation that could easily result in court-ordered levels of government spending — perhaps even court-ordered tax increases," Studley said.

Group of 12

Odds are slim that the bipartisan Group of 12's reform plan will get through the Legislature in its abbreviated post-election session.

It was crafted by Rep. Glenn Ossender, R-Sturgis, author of several plans over the years to replace local property taxes with a state income tax.

The group will be reduced to 10 next year. Rep. Wilfred Webb, D-E Hazel Park, is retiring, and Rep. James Kosteva, D-Canton, lost his re-election bid.

If adopted, the plan would yield about \$4,700 per student statewide. Currently Michigan's 662 school districts spend between \$2,000 and \$9,000 per pupil. If adopted, it could remove the need for either the O/K or KIDS proposals.

The plan was developed in secrecy in Lansing and so far has had no public hearing. Gov. John Engler is cool to the call for increased state taxes.

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