

Growing reform

What plans must include

Michigan's landscape is growing so many school finance reform schemes that plain taxpayers need help in bushwacking a trail through them.

The latest appears to be on a fast track through the Legislature to be placed on the June 1 ballot. In order to guarantee \$5,000 per student, it would increase the sales tax by 2 percent while reducing the property tax to 20 mills. Another 5 mills could be levied at a district's discretion. Property assessment increases would be limited to the lesser of the rate of inflation or 5 percent.

The situation has gotten so desperate that the Kalkaska district has sent students home for the year — 10 weeks early. It may be a jungle out there, but it's clear what is going on here.

Farmington will lose under many plans. School officials know this and want a financing reform plan that provides responsible reimbursement — possibly tie-barred to a sales tax increase.

The slash-and-gash approach doesn't cut it with the schools, especially out-of-formula districts such as Farmington.

The Farmington Board of Education has endorsed the Olmstead/Kearney proposal, which requires the state to pick up 50 percent of the cost of local schools and reduce the reliance on property tax money.

"Lansing is not taking care of it," said Debbie Lukasiak, a Farmington Hills resident who belongs to a group called Michigan Coalition of Parents. "We have to do it for them."

Lukasiak and other Farmington-area parents are involved with a statewide petition drive to get the Olmstead/Kearney proposal before the Legislature.

There is no one plan that contains all the fertile ideas required to solve the problems of school finance reform. Here are characteristics that any flowering of change in school funding must include:

■ **Equity:** There is no excuse for the huge disparity in funding that currently exists. Any plan must include a concrete guarantee for a reasonable level of per-pupil funding, keeping in mind that it costs more to live in certain areas of this state.

There are school districts in crisis, near their local taxing limit. But well-funded districts, particularly those in the metropolitan suburbs, shouldn't be robbed of their good programs to help.

The Robin Hood plan to rob suburbs of their hard-earned business tax growth is an abomination that, thankfully, is being strangled in the courts.

The new legislative Robin Hood plan to rob suburbs of their costly residential tax base is losing steam. The Legislature's continual paring away of categorical aid and pension funding is a breach of trust and still a threat.

■ **Method of finance:** The property tax always will be with us and is a good reflection of the cost of living. A dozen times in the last 20 years, Michigan voters have said no to property tax cut schemes. Much as high taxes are disliked, people fear other tax schemes even more, and they don't want change at the cost of hurting their schools.

Good education is our highest priority. If the property tax were cut, the money would have to be made up elsewhere. Groups who look at state

business growth rates for extra income probably also can't recognize a desert when they see it.

■ **Consolidation:** There are too many school districts — 562. Some have as few as a couple dozen pupils. Many can't afford to teach the skills and arts necessary for the 21st century. Some are so tiny that they lack adequate tax bases; others have sugar daddy industries that allow them to require no local tax effort worthy of the name. Each has a costly administrative superstructure.

Michigan could safely reduce the number of districts without sacrificing the values of local management. Progress for kids, not provincial politics or pride, should be the guiding principle.

■ **Community service center:** School buildings should be used as delivery mechanisms for services besides teaching. Such widely differing forces as Gov. Engler's administration and the Michigan Education Association agree they could be used for social services, counseling, legal services, public health and other state functions not directly connected to academic teaching of children.

This has long been held by Gerald Pine, dean of the Oakland University School of Education and Human Services.

■ **Head Start:** Michigan should prepare for and welcome President Clinton's intention to broaden Head Start funding to cover every eligible preschool child. The well-being of Michigan's kids ranked a lowly 40th in the 50 states, according to a 1990 "Kids Count" study by the Center for the Study of Social Policy.

Seven studies following the long-term effects of high quality early childhood programs confirm that they improve children's intellectual performance; reduce the need for children to be placed in special education programs; lead to consistent improvement in poor children's achievement throughout their schooling; lower rates of delinquency, arrest and teenage pregnancy; increase rates of employment at age 19; and decrease the rate of welfare dependence at 19.

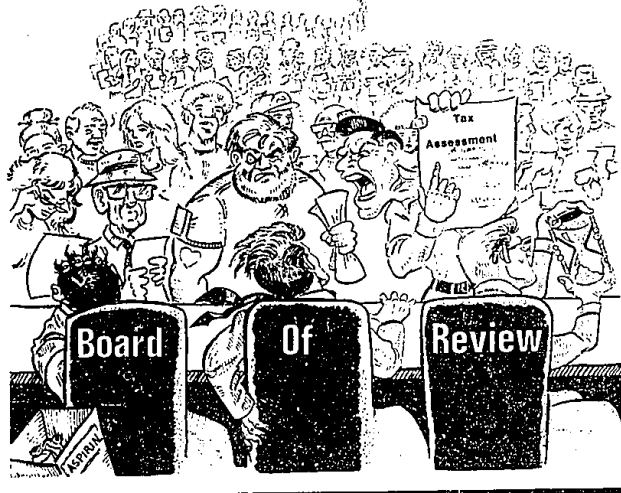
■ **Teaching methods:** Schools must continue to change the way they teach. They are moving away from authoritarian rote learning to group problem solving, the system employed by successful international industries. Teachers no longer do the chalk and talk routine, routinely. The know that students can learn from other students and from their own resources.

And the theme behind it all: It's not how smart you are but how you are smart. Los Angeles has just implemented site-based learning, in which a school's administrators, teachers and parents determine what should be taught and how.

Our legislative master gardeners must get to work on these crucial tenets which should be a part of any school finance reform plan. It's time for them — and the governor — to do what is right, rather than what is politically expedient.

Work done now will plant the seed for our kids, who are our communities', our state's and our nation's future.

MARVIN TEEPLES



LETTERS

She's deserving

In this era of environmental awareness, I'm wondering if newsprint is poisonous? My 7-month-old son has developed quite an appetite for the stuff. We, of course, attempt to keep the paper out of his reach but his little hands seem to be able to ferret scraps that capture his attention.

I recently discovered a peculiar shade of gray discoloring his chin after finding him chewing on an editorial which appeared in the Thursday, March 11, Farmington Observer.

In this article, the formerly proposed Downtown Clock Tower was referred to as "Shirley's Temple." A remark that was made in humor by a longtime friend and constituent was heard and carried like a toxic current through rough waters.

As chairperson, Shirley Richardson devoted countless hours encouraging, coordinating and implementing the energies and ideas of the nearly 100 members of the 125th Committee.

In addition to this, she spent more time researching the design, manufacture and cost of an Old Towne Clock as a gift expressing the sense of history our town reflects.

It is not fair to assume she promoted a clock tower.

Many of our faces turned a peculiar shade of gray after seeing the clock tower referred to as "Shirley's Temple" in print. Whether we oppose or applaud the clock, we know that Shirley does not deserve our ridicule. She deserves our gratitude.

Nanette Reid, Farmington

Instead of clock

The Beautification Commission is dedicated to improving the total environment of the city of Farmington and believes that both beautification and environmental efforts should be recognized.

At its last regular meeting, in consideration of development that is consistent with the goals of the commission, the following criteria were developed:

- Development should be consistent with the architectural and historical style of existing structures.
- Development should not limit or reduce the flow of pedestrian traffic.
- Gardens and other sites of natural beauty should be preserved whenever possible; development should enhance existing landscaping rather than replace natural beauty with man-made structures.

On the matter of the clock tower currently under consideration by the Downtown Development Authority, we submit that, as it is currently planned, the proposed tower would not be consistent or compatible with the existing structure on the site.

Further, this construction will inhibit pedestrians in the annual Farmington Founders Day Festival.

The Beautification Commission is opposed to the proposed development.

We would, however, request that the Downtown Development Authority consider a modified proposal. We propose improvement of the existing garden area. Redesign of the garden area could increase pedestrian safety in the area by incorporating the public walkway within the garden area.

As a focal point to this new garden, we further propose that a large sundial of a style consistent with the period of construction of the Masonic Temple be included in the design.

In keeping with the philosophy of the Beautification Commission, this proposal would enhance the beauty of the downtown area, place a true point of interest at the center of the city, and, by selecting a low-tech, environmentally friendly design, help to educate students and other residents.

We predict that strong public support would exist for such a project and that the city would receive some well-deserved recognition from the press in choosing such a course for downtown development.

Sandra Shelly,

Thought provoking

I would like to thank Jeff Counts for his thought-provoking editorials that appear sometimes in the Observer.

Whenever I see his by-line, I know I will read something topical, straight-forward and often amusing. I appreciate the way he sees things, writing about topics the way he sees them. While I certainly do not always agree, I do not think that it is the point to agree but to think about an issue. His editorials have certainly generated a great deal of thinking on my part about subjects which might otherwise never come to my attention. Again, thank you.

Colleen M. Connolly, Livonia

Bill Isn't mean spirited

I disagree with columnist Jack Gladden. I do not think that the bill to cut welfare payments to parents who won't get up and get their kids to school is mean spirited at all.

I think it is mean and irresponsible of the parents to not care enough to get their kids to school. Why should the state keep paying people who are so irresponsible? Besides, the less dependent you are on government for your comforts, the harder you will work to obtain them yourself, for the most part.

It's time people stop making excuses for their conditions and take responsibility for their improvement and the betterment of their children. If they are responsible parents, what is there to worry about? If the almighty dollar gets their attention, then good. It will be in everyone's best interest.

Janice Brown, Bloomfield Hills

COMMUNITY VOICE

QUESTION:

Is the assessment on your house fair?

We asked this question at Luigi's restaurant in downtown Farmington.



'No. But have you ever seen one that was?'
 Sam Rosa
 Farmington Hills



'No. It's the government's fault. If they used our taxes properly, we wouldn't have these problems.'

Eric Sandusky
 Livonia



'I don't know... it's high, but I guess it's fair.'

Ray Haefner
 Farmington Hills



'I think it's way too high.'

Mary Spaulding
 Farmington

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