

Area residents hear education plan still in flux

By TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

School people can look forward to little state tinkering with the curriculum, a combination of new taxes to replace local property taxes and no voucher plan to drain money into private schools. "That is the sum of what five legislators and a State Board of Education member told a Bloomfield Hills audience of 50 as Michigan awaits Gov. John Engler's special address on school reform at 2 p.m. Tuesday.

"There is no plan out there," said Rep. Barbara Dobb, R-Union Lake, holding up a daily paper with an advance look at Engler's plan to the 100 or so people brought together by the Bloomfield Hills School District. "Take what you read with a grain of salt," said the second-term lawmaker.

"The governor would like to throw out the school code, boil it down to 10 pages of objectives, and say to the local districts — 'you do it,'" Dobb said. "On Oct. 15," said Rep. John Jamian, R-Bloomfield Township, "Democratic and Republican task forces will bring their plans together. We'll see a lot of local control in those plans."

Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Lansing, a gubernatorial hopeful, said lawmakers should not be tinkering with curriculum but should replace all \$6.3 billion in

lost school property tax revenue with other taxes. "I would like to get you out of the millage campaign business so you can focus on quality," said the sponsor of the bill that repealed school property taxes.

Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills, deplored the notion of the Senate Education Committee — chaired by Michael Bouchard, R-Birmingham — looking at curriculum changes. "The idea that he is looking at curriculum frightens me," said Faxon, adding there are "some with unusual agendas in the Legislature. I don't think they (lawmakers) should do curriculum. We're not going to reinvent the wheel in nine or 10 weeks."

"The great lesson of the 20th Century," said Sen. David Honigman, R-West Bloomfield, "is that distant, large organizations can't do the job. Michigan has a powerful culture of local control."

Educators and parents in the PTO audience were still disturbed, three months after it passed, that lawmakers had repealed the chief source of funding of suburban schools without first identifying replacement taxes. "The only thing that would make me comfortable would be a Valium," said one mother.

Faxon said he is supporting a Farmington Hills-based petition drive to repeal the Senate bill and suspend it until a new program can be enacted.

What new taxes?

Asked about replacement taxes, Jamian, who campaigned for two terms on reducing property taxes, said, "I personally think it should be a sales tax. I don't have a problem with an income tax (increase) — that's fine. A commercial property tax up to 16 mills — that's fine. A local property tax — that's fine."

"The governor's against an income tax. Sin taxes (on tobacco and alcohol) will bring in only \$200 million. They're not stable because people are quitting smoking," Jamian said.

Kathleen Straus, Democrat member of the State Board of Education, liked a school administrator's idea of dedicating Lottery revenues (\$460 million) to the state board to finance special needs such as metal detectors in



STAFF PHOTOS BY STEPHEN CAMPBELL

Gangs all here: Legislators John Jamian, (left) Barbara Dobb, Kathleen Straus (state Board of Education), David Honigman and Jack Faxon field questions from Bloomfield Hills school district residents.

Detroit schools or computers.

"Income tax is not a dirty word," Straus added. But she pointed out that the state constitution allows only \$3.8 billion in new taxes, so some kind of local tax is likely.

Faxon, who has been in the

Legislature since the 1980s, said the property tax system had served Michigan public schools well since 1837, and should continue to be used.

"Only 27 percent of Headlee overrides (property tax hikes) were being approved," said Sta-

benow. "The public is saying 'no' to the property tax."

She added, "Forty or 50 schools are on the verge of bankruptcy," particularly in mid-Michigan, which hasn't seen the kind of assessment inflation the suburbs have seen.

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