

Faxon rips plan, Dolan expects changes

Engler from page 1A

By THE RICHARD STAFF WRITER

Tax differences can be ironed out, but Gov. John Engler's plan for non-union "charter schools" is in big trouble in the Michigan Legislature.

"He's attacking teachers. It's an affront to the profession," said Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills. Faxon called the charter school plan a refuge from "Alice in Wonderland — off with their heads!"

"Buzz words," scoffed Rep. William Keith, D-Garden City, chairman of both the House Education Committee and a Democratic task force on school reform. "Our survey showed 74 percent don't want to use public tax dollars to fund charter schools. The charter plan may drain taxes into elitist schools."

"Gov. Engler has proposed some sweeping changes in how he addresses not only the funding of public education but in quality and cost containment," explained state Rep. Jan Dolan, R-Farmington, in a written statement Wednesday.

"As the suggested changes move throughout the legislative process, I'm quite certain some revisions will occur. The final product must place the education of all children in Michigan at our top priority while not negatively impacting our high quality districts," Dolan said.

Plan outlined

Engler Tuesday came out swinging against public schools as a failure, a "gulag" (Siberian

■ 'The governor has been consistently wrong. He lost on Proposal C. He lost on Proposal A. He does not hear what the voters are saying.'

Sen. Jack Faxon

prison), a "monopoly," a "Berlin wall," the "company store . . . holding kids hostage" as he advocated competition through charter schools.

The first-term governor spoke to a national television audience as well as 149 legislators. He said local school districts should be empowered to grant charters to groups of teachers, a business or other entities to operate a school specializing in math, history, the arts, technology or even preschool. Charter schools would be free from "bureaucratic rules" such as dealing with unions or using certified teachers, he said.

"No public school teacher should be compelled to be in the union to teach in the classroom," said Engler to prolonged Republican applause. House Democrats, many with teachers union leaders as their floor guests, sat in stony silence.

The House Taxation Committee will hear public testimony three times next week: from 10 a.m. to noon Wednesday, Oct. 13; 1:30-5 p.m. Friday, Oct. 15; and from 9 a.m. onward Monday, Oct. 18, in the State Capitol, GOP co-chairman Willis Bullard of Millford announced.

To pay for the \$7 billion in local school property taxes which Engler and the Legislature wiped out in July, Engler proposed:

■ No income tax hike — OK with Republicans, unacceptable among Democrats.

■ A statewide business property tax of 16 mills — a stronger version of the tax base sharing plan that suburban schools bitterly resisted in court — OK with both parties this time.

■ A 16-mill property tax on second homes and non-residents' homes — not objectionable to either party.

■ A 0.5 percent hike in the single business tax rate (now 2.95 percent) — not overly objectionable to either party.

■ A 4 percent tax on homestead transfers — no immediate reaction but probably facing a major fight from real estate agents.

■ A 50 cents-a-pack hike in the cigarette tax and other tobacco taxes — no audible objections.

Sales tax hike

The cornerstone of Engler's plan is a 2 percent hike (to 6 percent) in the sales tax. He asked for a Feb. 8 special election on this item.

"That ballot proposal also would raise the Headlee amendment's limitation on state taxes as a percentage of income. Without both, Engler said, "We will be \$2 billion short" of replacing the nearly \$7 billion in property tax revenue

that would be lost next year.

Even if Engler's plan were to pass unchanged, the state would be \$300 million short of replacing the repealed property taxes. He proposed cost-saving measures, such as competitive bidding on school district health insurance, privatizing and cutting administrative costs.

The governor proposed a three-tier system for school funding: (1) Every district would be guaranteed at least \$4,500 per pupil; (2) schools already spending \$4,501 to \$6,500 would be "held harmless" (would be fully reimbursed); and (3) the 35 school districts spending more than \$6,500 would be allowed to ask voters for local property taxes.

"He wants to bring the bottom up, not the top down," said Senate Education chairman Michael Bouchard, R-Birmingham, summing up a broad suburban reaction. He praised Engler's local option tax proposal.

Bouchard was cool to the second home tax and raising the single business tax.

"The governor has been consistently wrong," said Faxon. "He lost on Proposal C (a sales tax increase in 1992). He lost on Proposal A (a sales tax increase in June 1993). He does not hear what voters are saying."

Faxon and a group of Oakland County Democrats this week will launch a petition drive to repeal PA 145, the law that eliminated school property taxes. CARE (Citizens Alliance for Responsible Education) can be reached in Farmington Hills at (313) 478-6942, fax (313) 473-6441.

the plan to be challenged on Constitutional grounds.

"This is all talk, by the way. Most of the legislators who hung around afterwards said that 50 percent of this will never happen. But no one knows which 50 percent."

"I applauded selectively (during the speech)," Flanagan said. "It's awkward to do when others around you are applauding for everything."

Who's broken?

Bruce Barrett, assistant superintendent for finance, criticized Engler's speech for lacking substance and for calling the entire school system "broken."

"Farmington isn't broken," Barrett said.

Barrett said the schools of choice idea is flawed because of the limits of both building space and the willingness of parents to drive farther to get their kids to school.

Parents are already in their district of choice in Farmington, Barrett said.

A common Engler refrain was: "They (school children) deserve better." School board president Cathy Webb believes Farmington schoolchildren are already getting better.

"I feel that 'better' will be taken away," she said.

Also, Webb is "frightened" by the concept of charter schools but is trying not to be "skeptical" of the entire plan.

"Who will open and govern them (charter schools)?" she asked. "There will be no labor negotiations and no unions involved."

Follow-up speech

Debbie Cornwell, a PTA representative, and Debbie Lukasiak, of Advocates for Excellence in Education, attended a second Engler speech Tuesday night at Lahser High School in Bloomfield Hills.

Cornwell favors improving existing schools and wonders if districts that don't open their schools to non-residents would be penalized. She called Engler's plans "grandiose."

Lukasiak said the Engler plan is not equitable and does not deal with local control issues.

And she spurned the proposed sales tax increase.

"How many times do you need to say, 'No'?"

"This (Engler's plan) translates to another shell game. I don't see where we will be any further ahead."

Economist Patrick Anderson, who works for Richard Headlee's Alexander Hamilton Insurance Co. in Farmington Hills, welcomes Engler's proposal.

"It would inject some competitive pressures," Anderson said. "Schools of choice would give us the ability to demand good service."

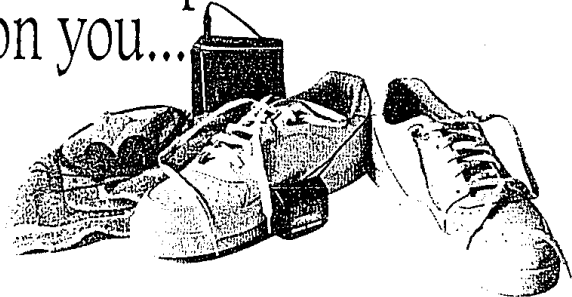
He favors neighborhood schools at the elementary level but comes flexibility to choose high schools.

The plan would put "new money into a changed system," Anderson said.

It's what Engler didn't say that concerns Farmington Hills City Manager Bill Costick.

"I didn't hear him speak to state revenue sharing," Costick said. "He didn't outline it."

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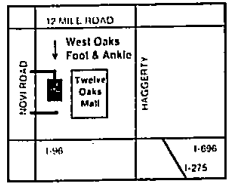


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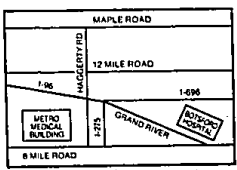
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