

County residents lead opposition to Engler plan

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

A day after Gov. John Engler's special address, opposition began forming to both the tax and reform legs of his education program.

"We've printed 80,000 petition forms, and we've ordered more," said Vicki Barnett, an Oakland County Democratic activist seeking to stall the nearly \$7 billion property tax cut voted by the Legislature and signed by Engler.

"The Michigan Education Association (123,000 members) will circulate them. The Detroit Federation of Teachers (10,500) will circulate."

"I've been inundated with calls from Realtors," Barnett said. "The reason: opposition to Engler's proposed 4 percent tax on property transfers."

"Many out-of-formula superintendents and school board members are calling. They (petitions) are going like gangbusters."

Out-of-formula schools got none of the \$3.5 billion in state

aid to public schools under the program due to expire next July 1. They live almost entirely off local property taxes at rates averaging 34 mills. Many officials are fearful that Lansing will have no replacement taxes in place by the end of the year.

"They keep asking, 'What part of NO doesn't Gov. Engler understand?'" said Barnett from her Farmington Hills home. She referred to 1992 and June 1993 ballot plans rejected by voters.

Barnett's group is called CARE, for Citizens Alliance for Responsible Education. It's led by Barnett, 11th Congressional District Democratic chairwoman, and Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills.

MEAs spokesperson Kim Brennan-Root called the CARE drive a

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Vicki Barnett
anti-plan activist

"safety net" if the Legislature fails to enact an acceptable school funding plan.

If the drive succeeds in raising 123,000 signatures by April 1, the property tax (Public Act 145) will be held in limbo until voters decide the issue in a referendum.

Schools defended

The Michigan Association of School Administrators attacked Engler's broad denunciation of public schools. The governor branded them a "gulag" (Siberian prison camp), "Berlin Wall" and "a company store" of mediocrity.

"He proposed a system of nonunion 'charter schools' freed from most of the state school code but

funded by state money.

MASA executive director Gerard Keidel issued a point by point rebuttal:

■ Dropout rates — "have never been lower and are continuing to decline. When those who return to school to gain their degree in an adult education program are counted, the graduation rate is 85 percent — best in the world."

■ Big spending — "steady for the last 15 years, while the investment in special education has risen dramatically."

■ Cost containment — "we've done it in the areas in which we have authority and autonomy. In special education, we have neither."

■ Shortage of skilled workers — "Most companies are concerned with personal and social skills rather than academic preparation. Research shows that 90 percent of the dollars spent by business for additional training are spent on college-educated and highly trained skilled employees. Very little is spent (by business) on basic skills remediation."

■ Falling test scores — "Not true. Scores on virtually all major tests have been stable, if not increased, in recent years. What has changed is the number and percentage of students taking these tests."

■ Adult literacy — "20 to 25 percent of those adults deemed less than literate were immigrants, not products of American schooling."

■ Math scores — "In 1977 the 90th percentile score in math was 628; by 1986, it had risen to 642. This is no accident. It is the product of hard work by school systems and students."

Options needed

The Michigan Association of School Boards said it will "have problems" accepting Engler's tax plans, fearing they are inadequate.

Biggest "flaw": Engler would allow no local option funding for nearly 530 of the state's 650-plus public school districts.

"Philosophically, it seems inconsistent," said MASA executive director Justin King, "for the governor to endorse choice as a concept for parents and their children and then deny choice to local communities if they want to raise additional revenue to enhance their basic education program."

MASA said Engler's plan goes from one extreme to the other — "from overreliance on the property tax to overreliance on state funding."

To obtain a CARE petition, call (313) 478-0942; fax (313) 478-6441. To comment to your legislator, write to State Capitol, Lansing 48913.

Dunaskiss in minority against latest no smoking bills

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Bills to ban smoking in all child care facilities are on their way to Gov. John Engler after a divided Senate last week approved the House bills.

Two dozen senators in both parties lined up in favor, while a dozen opposed the four bills.

"These would cover day care centers and homes and affect anyone handling infants and small children," said Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills, a vocal anti-smoker.

The bills came from the House Public Health Committee co-chaired by Rep. John Jamian, R-Bloomfield Township. Current state law places no restriction on smoking in child day care homes and allows smoking in child care centers with a smoking lounge.

Lining up against one or more of the bills were Sens. Fred Dillingham, R-Fowlerville, Mat Dunaskiss, R-Lake Orion, George Z. Hart, D-Deerborn, and the

Senate's two party leaders — Republican Dick Posthumus and Democrat Art Miller.

"When a neighbor might snitch on someone who is smoking a cigarette — how far are we going to go here?" said Miller, of Warren.

"You are listening to a person who has suffered serious health damage because I smoked."

"How far are we going to go when we go into someone's private home — even though it is a business during the day as a day-care center?" asked opponent Jim

Berryman, D-Adrian, a non-smoker. "We are saying that the individual (smoker) cannot even smoke at night unless the parents have given written permission."

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