

POINTS OF VIEW

# Butt-bashers 'light up' this smoker's ire

It never occurred to me that in my "golden years" I wouldn't be allowed to light-up a cigarette in the theater lounge, restaurant, place of employment or government building.

I'm appalled at the great emphasis put on "second-hand smoke" by fanatics (one time chain-smokers, who now dictate my behavior).

Tourists from Europe are flabbergasted by our "freedom of choice" was so flagrantly usurped. Indictment of my longtime smoking enjoyment frightens me, when important issues go unresolved. For instance: artificial insemination, abortion, adoption rules, euthanasia, paying for education, taxes, health insurance, crime, drugs, high speed police chases, etc.

I have recorded an explicit account of minor players forcing their "will" on senior citizens at Mercy Center in Farmington Hills.

Five years ago, seniors were allowed to smoke at whatever table they were having lunch. Ashtrays were supplied.

Four years ago, a designated area in the dining room was allowed and a "smoke removal machine" was centered on our table. Showing signs of senility instead of avoiding our space, some seniors would deliberately come into our area and then complain that they had difficulty breathing.

Three years ago, a closet-size room with no ventilation was accorded seniors who choose to smoke.

Two years ago, our closet locked room

GUEST COLUMNIST



HELEN MOTRIUK

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down and all amenities were withheld. One year ago, it was obvious that we were being discriminated against and they were only tolerating us.

This year, at the start of fall season, our space is now being used as a junk room. It has been totally razed. Yet, I'm not surprised. At another facility, a suite of pony-ante was outlawed. I'm sure these seniors felt the same enmity I do when visiting our Senior Center. These facilities should accommodate all seniors, not try to alter their lives.

Thursday, Sept. 10, I was the last person to sign-up for lunch. My number was 65. Five years ago, they were serving more than 200 people. To be assured of lunch, you had to sign up an

hour early. Most of my smoking friends have discontinued attending, moved or dropped dead.

None of the deaths were attributed to lung cancer. Besides, these youthful directors need not concern themselves whether I make a good or bad choice in my old age.

Some seniors are so paranoid about dying, they run about yelling, "Give me clear air! I need clean air!" My right to exist and my free will are passe.

Alarmingly skeptical I remain.

Helen Motriuk, a Farmington Hills resident, has been a smoker for more than 50 years. She says she smokes "less than a pack a day."

# Education conservatives wear 'free market' mask

John Engler gets his school "reform" doctrine from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, Midland. President Lawrence Reed describes its approach as "free market" rather than conservative or right wing.

Engler's Oct. 6 address to the Michigan Legislature uses much Mackinac Center verbiage. Both describe public schools as a "Berlin Wall" and "monopoly." They favor "choice" and "charter schools."

Mackinac Center is connected to a group called Teach Michigan Education Fund. The latter's president, Dr. Paul DeWeese, is on Mackinac Center's board of contributors.

Until recently, Teach Michigan was hung ho for a voucher system under which the state would pay every kid's parents a check to spend at any school — public, proprietary or church related.

Vouchers, of course, are specifically prohibited by the Michigan Constitution (Art. VIII Sec. 2). Moreover, our state constitution prohibits state "support of any minister of the gospel or teacher of religion" (Art. I Sec. 4).

To do a voucher system in Michigan would involve massive constitutional amendments. Mackinac Center, Teach Michigan and Engler didn't want to take on that chore. They'd never get the votes. The "parochial" referendum in the early 1970s demonstrated that.

Instead, Engler's message is a back door approach to parochial and vouchers for private schools. They call it "charter schools." A school district issues a charter to a private group to run a school within the district's borders.

To sell it, Mackinac Center, Teach Michigan and Engler, with a willing assist from Pat Robertson's fundamentalists, have launched a savage attack on public education. Engler used not only "Berlin Wall" but "gulag" and "company store" to describe public schools.

Take Mackinac Center's 1991 volume, "Educational Choice for Michigan." Co-authors Reed and Lawrence Hutchinson blister public schools for turning out functional illiterates. They bash falling test scores from 1965 to



TIM RICHARD

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1980 (they rose from 1981 to 1985). They cite the National Geographic Society's finding that young Americans have "an astonishing lack of awareness of the world around them." They say kids don't know math, science and other basics.

Mackinac Center identifies four factors separating good schools from bad: Student aptitude — worth 1.5 years of achievement.

School organization — worth one year.

Family background — one year.

Peer group influence — a half year.

At this point, the voucher gang — let's scrap this "charter" sugarcoating — makes an enormous leap in logic: Kids aren't learning, therefore we must change the way schools are organized.

The key sentence: "Private schools, almost regardless of their circumstances, tend to be free from excessive central controls by administrators, boards and unions. The main reason appears to be market competition." Yippee! Just put the free market to work and presto! Kids will learn math

and geography and other good things. Simply implement charter schools with no unions and no bureaucratic certification rules that would keep Lee Iacocca from teaching, and everything will be hunky dory.

Sure, I've belted down 89 pages of ideology and half of Engler's speech into a few paragraphs, but I have tried to do it honestly.

No sale. A slavish devotion to free market ideology won't turn bad schools into good. Adoring the tin god of Competition won't teach kids about theorems, valence charts and continental drift.

Rather, the voucher gang seems to be assuming what it set out to prove — that private schools deserve public money — and it's maligning public schools in the process.

We elected Engler as a conservative, but we inaugurated an ideological hard liner.

Tim Richard reports regularly on the local implications of state and regional events. His office phone is (313) 349-1700.

# Keep students in mind as reason for school change

Remember the old story about the guy who was so busy stomping alligators that he forgot the reason he was there was to drain the swamp?

We will make the same mistake, if we forget the reason for the intense debate over school financing is to improve the quality of education we give our kids.

Every special interest in Michigan — small business, big business, property owners, second-home owners, senior citizens, teachers' unions — has come out in full cry this week after Gov. John Engler presented his message on education to a special session of the state Legislature.

Most comment so far has been self-interested. The message: "Don't tax him. Don't tax me. Tax that fellow behind the tree!"

Fine. There will be plenty of time to debate tax policy. But we need to keep firmly fixed on the main outcome: what our kids learn and how they're prepared for the world of work.

It's here that Engler's message deserves the most praise and the most scrutiny.

To my mind, he gets full marks for his proposed report card for every school building. Including such information as test scores, staff-to-pupil ratios, salary levels and percent of budget devoted to actual education, the report card idea offers parents essential information. It shouldn't get lost in the shuffle.

Nor should the governor's proposals to "reform" — by elimination, I suspect — the State Board of Education. For years, some members of the board have meddled, playing patron and micro-manager to various parts of the Department of Education. That's bad.

Worse, the board's power to select the superintendent of public instruction obscures responsibility and dilutes accountability. Let the superintendent be nominated by the governor and confirmed by the Legislature. And if the governor's appointee screws up the schools, blame the governor.

The part of Engler's plan that merits the



PHILIP POWER

most careful examination is his passionate belief that education will be improved by providing each child with a portable "foundation grant" and parents with the ability to move their children to better schools.

I'm of two minds about this. Certainly, monopolies do not serve customers well, whether in business or in public services such as schools. Turning kids into customers by allowing them to take their money with them when they chose to attend a different school makes a whole lot of sense in theory.

But will it in practice? I wonder whether this portion of the governor's plan, so ideologically charged, will wind up affecting only a couple of thousand kids.

What may prove more fruitful is the idea of "charter schools" — schools started by any public body to meet a particular need. Imagine one at a Ford-UAW skills center for kids to learn high-tech manufacturing or one emphasizing history at Greenfield Village. Schools for kids with discipline problems have already gotten much support.

In any event, the schools as we know them in Michigan are certain to change. The key is to keep pushing to make that change for better education, not just better economics.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His touch-tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047 ext. 1880.

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