

# Ideas abound as officials seek school finance reform

BY TIM RICHARD  
STAFF WRITER

All school districts and intermediate districts could ask voters for extra property taxes under a version of Michigan's school code making its way — at a snail's pace — through a House committee in Lansing.

The bipartisan House plan is at odds with Gov. John Engler's school finance plan, which sought to get all but a handful of local districts out of millage campaigns forever.

Co-chairman William Keith, D-Garden City, promised an all-day session of the House Education Committee when freshman Rep. Alan Cropsey, R-DeWitt, complained that "it's difficult for us not on the Fabulous 14 to figure out what's going on."

"We have around 300 amendments before us right now," said Keith, who is part of an informal bipartisan group of 12 or 14 conducting closed door negotiations on the school reform package.

Tuesday, the committee waded through a half-dozen amendments to the school code (House Bill 5121). That massive law would cover schools of choice, school tax options, accreditation, endorsed diplomas and teacher accreditation.

**Taxes restored**  
Republican co-chairman William Bryant of

Grosse Pointe won support of amendments to:

■ Allow local option millages by all school districts. Engler wants only the top spending 35 of Michigan's 562 districts to have optional millages to restore their high budgets. Bryant's amendment struck out a three-mill limit, leaving a blank space to be filled in later. One mill is \$1 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation; the average Michigan district levies 34 mills. ■ Restored millages for county intermediate districts (\$30 million), county vocational technical programs (\$82 million) and county special education programs (\$300 million).

Rick Simonson, legislative agent for the Oakland Intermediate School District, called that action "the most significant that has taken place" since the Legislature repealed all school operating taxes in July. Bryant said it was "unfortunate" that the Senate included intermediate and vocational tech taxes when it wiped out school operating taxes.

Bryant's amendment was supported by area Reps. Penny Crisman, R-Rochester; Jerry Vorva, R-Plymouth; Justine Barnes, D-Westland, and Keith.

## Reasons needed

After an hourlong debate, the committee kept a provision requiring local school districts to make a public justification report if administrators decide

against offering a "schools of choice" program.

Rep. James Agee, D-Muskegon, lost his effort to strike the public report requirement, arguing, "It's just an extra layer of bureaucracy."

Bryant, like many Republicans a strong supporter of "choice" programs, argued for keeping the provision, calling it "critical in seeking diversity of teaching." He said the Agee amendment "would repeal the ability of teachers to force creation of a school within a school."

"There should be a public justification for not doing a choice program or giving a kid extra help. The psychology of preparing a report — even a paragraph — is substantial," Bryant said.

Bryant's view was supported by Dr. Robert Schiller, superintendent of public instruction. "We need a public perception of an open, free debate by the school board," Schiller said.

With 11 votes needed for adoption, Agee's amendment lost seven to five with three abstaining.

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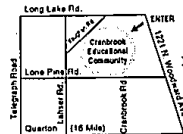
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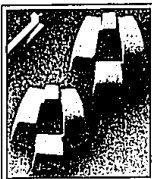


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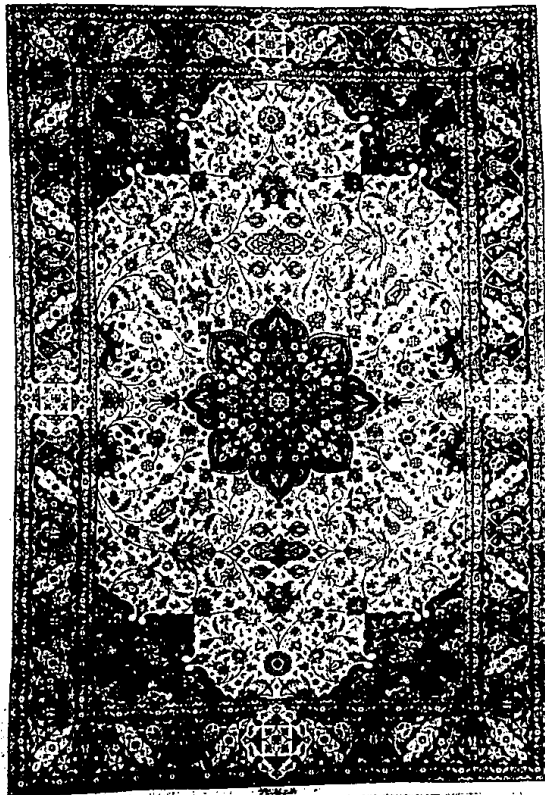
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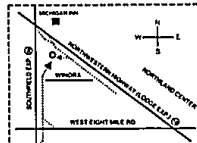
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