

School reform

Panelists mixed on Lansing's plan

BY RALPH R. ECHTDAW
STAFF WRITER

The education reform legislation cooked up in Lansing last month isn't perfect, but the members of a "Reinventing Schools" panel commissioned by The Eclectic Newspapers and the Birmingham Community House say they can live with it, warts and all.

"They led us to believe they were going to reinvent the schools, and all they really did was shift the method of paying for the schools," said Robert Leider, a teacher at West Bloomfield High School who formerly taught in Pontiac.

"It saddens me to see there's no real changes for the poor districts in terms of money and support from the state. Money is the whole answer to all of this."

The "Reinventing Schools" panel met in early December in a packed meeting room at The Community House to discuss education reform. Panel members included everyone from the governor's press secretary and two state legislators to a school district superintendent, a school district trustee, a teacher, a Realtor

and a high school student. It was later televised on cable stations serving Rochester, Troy, Southfield, West Bloomfield, Birmingham and the Bloomfields.

The package Lansing finally came up with will replace all the money taken away from schools when property taxes for school districts were eliminated last summer. Voters will be asked March 15 which tax should be raised to pay for what Lansing has done. Vote yes and the sales tax rises to 6 percent. Vote no and an income tax boost from 4.6 to 6 percent automatically kicks in.

Many of the panelists believe that too much emphasis was placed on finance at the expense of quality.

"More than anything else it's a change in the tax structure," said Sen. Dave Honigman, R-West Bloomfield. "It's not going to affect schools all that much."

However, Honigman added that the legislation making charter schools legal "is by far the single most important thing we did."

Under the charter schools legislation, universities, community colleges and school districts may

start their own schools for kids in kindergarten through 12th grade. Honigman speculates that the University of Michigan might be interested in establishing a charter school in Detroit.

On the other hand, Debbie Macdon, a West Bloomfield resident and member of the Bloomfield Hills Board of Education, has no use for charter schools. "I have a personal extreme aversion to competitiveness (in education)," she said. "I don't see the charter school contributing significantly to community building in a neighborhood."

Jay Sammons, a senior at Rochester Adams High School, likes the Lansing plan "overall," but questions the efficacy of the 2-percent real estate transfer tax. "All it's going to do is kill the (housing market) recovery," he said.

Charter schools, on the other hand, are a great idea, he said. "Maybe a little competition in schools wouldn't be bad. I'm a firm believer in competition and everything that goes with it."

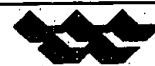
Bowen Brook, a Bloomfield Hills resident, and Immediate past president of the Michigan

Association of Realtors, tends to think more in economic terms about Lansing's handiwork. He's unhappy with the tax alternatives (sales or income) and wonders what happened to all the talk about operating schools more efficiently.

The real estate transfer tax will without doubt slow the state's economy as fewer people buy and sell houses, he said. "Any way you look at it there's going to be a cold shower here."

As for the choice voters face in March, Brook favors the income tax because it's deductible from federal taxes. Honigman "very strongly and passionately" prefers the sales tax. With a 6 percent income tax, he said, Michigan would have the highest flat-rate income tax in the nation.

John Hoefler, superintendent of the Birmingham School District, said he's more comfortable with the sales tax because it's written into the state constitution and therefore requires a vote of the people to change. The income tax rate could be changed by the Legislature and the governor whenever they want to.



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