

POINTS OF VIEW

Report: A lot of sound and fury signifying. . .?

Neither fish nor flesh. . . That's the best way to describe the "Michigan School Report" unveiled last week by Gov. John Engler. He describes it as an "official" look at test scores, graduation rates, dropout rates, staff-student ratios and pay levels.

It isn't official. And finding your school's results can be a horrendous task.

You would think a report evaluating schools would be available at your local principal's office, right? Or maybe at the intermediate school district office, eh? Or maybe it would be distributed to the news media?

Hardly. Engler's news release said the data "soon" will be available at chambers of commerce, public libraries; America OnLine (a computer service); and Internet (another computer service).

My colleagues and I did some hunting. The Ann Arbor public library had a paper copy. The Civic Center Library in Livonia, one of the state's 10 biggest cities, didn't have it at all. An LCC librarian was kind enough to check Internet twice, and it took until Monday (six days after release) until the "Michigan School Report" was available.

My call to the governor's news office was referred to a functionary who said copies were being mailed to newspapers. I asked if my papers were getting one. To make a long story short, she said that in Oakland County (where we have nine newspapers) a copy went to the Oakland Press — our competitor. A fat lot of good that does us. The Livingston County copy was supposed to go to the Livingston County Press, one of our papers; instead it was handed over to a competitor.



TIM RICHARD

At that point, the Engler functionary turned defensive and referred all further inquiries to Jim Sandy at the Michigan Chamber of Commerce. Sandy turned out to be more cooperative. It seems the "Michigan School Report" was the work of Michigan Business Leaders for Educational Excellence, "a loose-knit coalition of business organizations. We've worked

with the governor's office to extract the data," he said.

The chamber was ready to release the stuff June 3, but Engler's staff wanted the governor to "unveil" it in the Olds Plaza Building where he hangs his hat. His signature is on a five-paragraph introduction. Hence my conclusion that the report is "neither fish nor flesh," in the words of Shakespeare and other poets.

Joe Lunchbucket would have a difficult time accessing the data, as the computer says.

Well, how good is this report that's neither fish nor flesh?

I looked up the suburban high school nearest my home and learned its enrollment for the last three years has hovered near the 1,900 mark. Tenth grade math MEAP scores were 30.7, 32.2 and 38.4, low numbers but an upward trend. I gather these are the per-

centages of students who passed, although the report doesn't say so.

On reading for information, they scored 53.1, 56.5 and 62 even over the last three years, also upward. Science numbers were similar. The school is accredited by the North Central Association.

The district spent \$5,900 per pupil, and average teacher salary was nearly \$41,000.

The test scores meant little until I compared them with the Detroit high school I attended back in the Pleistocene Era. My alma mater's math scores were 0.9, 1.0 and 1.2; reading, 52.1, 42.6 and 31.3; science, 15.9, 12.2 and 17.8. It has University of Michigan accreditation.

The unveiling that began with a bang ended with a shrug.

LETTERS

'A bad law'

To the Farmington Board of Education:

I've been a teacher here in the Farmington district for nearly 29 years, but apparently I'm still quite naive about some things.

The "thing" to which I'm alluding is your approval of the new law in Michigan which was passed just recently and which makes teachers the group of workers in the state with the least control over their own fates.

I say that I'm apparently naive because I have sincerely been under the impression that you, along with most of our community, have understood how hard most of us teachers work here in Farmington and what a great deal of effort we put into trying to improve ourselves, our courses, and our understanding of what modern students need from their high school education.

I was just reading Farmington principal Jim Myers' letter to the parents of our students in the "Booster Bulletin" in which he describes our efforts in the ongoing North Central self-improvement project.

I was reflecting on how many of us have been going to conferences, learning from each other, trying innovative

techniques, attempting to reach more students every day, every week, every year. . . and then I caught myself up short as I realized that "my" board of education has publicly supported a law which will make teaching the least attractive career in Michigan.

We understand that there is an economic upheaval across the country, and we know that people with other jobs work hard, too, but what is this teacher-bashing all about?

Why are we always judged by our lowest common denominator?

We hate seeing bad teachers, too. For most teachers the students we teach are among the most important aspects of our lives, and we often spend our vacations, weekends, or evenings going to school or to seminars, correcting papers, or making lesson plans.

The hours we spend in the classroom in front of large groups of kids who frequently would rather be elsewhere are just the beginning.

I have a fairly decent reputation in Farmington. I don't think I flatter myself when I say that I'm a good teacher. I've been, I hope, getting progressively better as the years have gone on.

Now, in one gesture, you have told me that those 29 years of effort haven't

been worth what it has cost the district to pay me.

You have told me that you're looking forward to my replacement with new, cheaper teachers. You've told me that I've received too much — evidently much more than I've given to the thousands of students I've taught through the years.

I've been satisfied to contemplate retirement within the next few years for my own sake and to make way for younger teachers.

In fact, all of the "more mature" staff have been becoming acquainted with some of those younger teachers who teach with us now and whose enthusiasm and dedication are unquestionable.

They are thinking of moving to another occupation.

They are wondering how their board of education has calculated their worth and why that worth doesn't include the value of the input that their intelligence and education would supply in matters regarding the conditions and aims of their employment.

I am wondering what my years in Farmington have meant in view of the scorn with which I and others like me are obviously regarded. It's a good thing that this is Teacher Week.

Each day the kids have brought us some token of their appreciation, and that has reminded us again of the reason we haven't lost heart entirely.

Linda Arndt, English Department, Farmington High School

'Shame on you'

I am writing in response to State Rep. Jan Dolan's article in the May 9 edition of the Observer, "Who wins with teacher strike bill? — everyone."

Shame on you, Ms. Dolan, for presenting only a portion of the contents of House Bill 5128. You cited a number of topics in which teachers have retained limited bargaining rights. However, there was a deliberate effort to mislead the public by your omission of a critical component of H.B. 5128.

After negotiating and mediating, H.B. 5128 gives school boards the right to implement their last best offer. This effectively nullifies the "bargaining rights" of teachers. School boards now have a free hand to "wait out" the negotiation process and then give their "final best offer" which by law requires compliance.

Your mention of using "possible"

dollars saved by H.B. 5128 to funnel back into education really perplexed me. I understand that "cost containment" was one impetus to the stealthy and clandestine passage of H.B. 5128.

Yet, only days afterward, you and your legislative colleagues voted yourselves more than \$9,000 in additional funds each to communicate with your constituents.

Apparently, cost cutting is acceptable when educating youngsters but not in legislators' public relations budgets. Perhaps, Ms. Dolan, you and your fellow members need to practice the other half of communicating with voters — try listening to them.

Listening requires no taxpayer money. It only demands setting aside political and personal considerations to hear what the electorate is saying.

Rest assured that you and the state legislature have given Michigan youngsters a dubious legacy. They can soon look forward to being taught by mediocre graduates. Bright, ambitious A and B students will seek more rewarding professions — professions not so directly impacted by whims and vendettas of public officeholders.

Ms. Dolan, \$9,000 is not nearly enough to buy the five votes in my household.

Annmarie Deering, Farmington

Religious right's concerns must be addressed head-on

I have been struck in recent times by the increasingly apocalyptic cast to our political life.

It surfaced, of course, with Pat Buchanan's remarkable speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention: "There is a religious war going on in this country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself, for the war is for the soul of America."

Earlier this month, backed by "the religious right," Oliver North won the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate in Virginia. His acceptance speech included this line, directed at President and Mrs. Clinton: "This is our government, you stole it, and we are going to take it back."

Last week a group, called "Christian conservatives" by the media, took over the Republican Party in Texas. The chair of the platform committee won a standing ovation by asserting that the party platform is "still pro-life, it is still pro-family, and unlike the Democrats, it reiterates our belief in traditional Judeo-Christian values."

This rhetoric is powerful stuff. It uses words as weapons, not to describe reality, and it is being launched by people who fully intend to change history, not merely adjust it.

And there's no doubt that traditional Republicans are concerned that the influx of true believers into the GOP will drive away the moderate center, just at a time when Democrat Clinton looks increasingly vulnerable. That's why former Gov. Bill Milliken criticized the increasingly intolerant quality to our politics last month and why his remarks are still rattling the cages of Republican conservatives like Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson.

Still, people don't get as motivated and angry as this for no reason. Even though I don't agree with many of their conclusions, I think we should calibrate and try to understand what lies at the heart of the single most passionate force now driving our political system.

More than three-quarters of people polled recently agreed that "the United States is in moral and spiritual decline."

I was reflecting on this as I flipped through the pages of *The New York Times Magazine* last weekend. What I saw (and how it made me feel) give some glimpse into where these people



PHILIP POWER

are coming from:

■ The first ad, for Estee Lauder sun block, featured a topless lady walking on the beach, carrying a baby. A few pages farther on, an ad for a Victoria's Secret bra asserts, "Some curves you just don't get from working out." Certainly sex sells, but I wonder whether our commercial culture has made sex more a sport and less a passionate caring of committed people for each other.

■ The main feature is on Michael Milken, a convicted felon whose junk bond manipulations probably did more to undermine the structure of American business than any single individual in history. Now released from prison and sick with prostate cancer, Milken has started a foundation to find a cure. Why, I wondered, are we now obliged to learn how wonderful rich, white-collar criminals are once released from prison?

■ Next, a terrifying piece on the tribal slaughter in Rwanda, complete with particularly gruesome pictures.

■ Then came a shorter article on people who, evidently bored with mere hallucinogens, get their kicks by inhaling the dried venom of the Colorado River toad. I could only wonder what my 12-year-old son would do if he got his hands on that.

My conclusion, after all this musing: There is something out there, strong enough and alarming enough to cause a significant fraction of our people to invite political apocalypses. And before we in the media rush to trivialize them by labeling them "the religious right," we'd best look squarely at what is making them so upset.

Philip Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. You can leave him a message from a Touch-Tone phone at (313) 953-2047, mailbox 1890.

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