POINTS OF VIEW

# Reform: Get a clear idea first

Remember the old adage about the risks of wishing for something so hard that you actually get it?

The current flurry of talk by our leaders about how something has to be done about the schools might turn out to be a case in point.

President Clinton got a big hand last week when he used much of the State of the Union speech to propose various ways to improve pupil performance in the public schools.

And Gov. John Engler's State of the State Speech, scheduled for 7 p.m. Thursday, is aimed directly at failing school districts like Detroit, Michigan's largest district, with 180,000 students. The governor wants legislation passed to empower mayors to toss out elected school boards and replace them with appointed bodies with power to hire executives, shut down persistently bad schools, set curriculum and fire some staff.

Engler cited the success achieved by Chicago schools, once dubbed the worst in the nation, where Mayor Richard Daley was given similar power four years ago. The results – improved test scores and graduation rates and a dramatic drop in numbers of "failing" schools – were hailed by U. S. Education Secretary Richard Riley as a "national model" for school improvement.

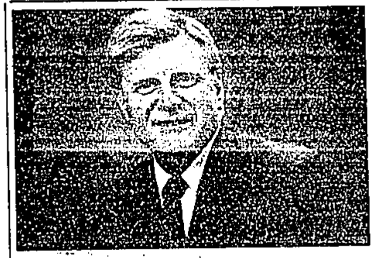
**■ Even Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer last month scolded the 11-member elected Detroit Board of Education, calling for the board to improve things or 'get out of the way.'**

Even Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer last month scolded the 11-member elected Detroit Board of Education, calling for the board to improve things or "get out of the way."

For years, Archer has been working behind the scenes to try to get the Detroit school board to quit paying attention to the perks of office (per-meeting fees, drivers and redecorating schemes have been high board priorities) and micro-managing the district by protecting friends and relations on the payroll. Archer ally Bill Beckham, president of New Detroit, also has been quietly putting pressure on the board and is reported to be willing to buy into a Chicago-style reform plan.

Predictably, Detroit board members do not appear enthused at the prospect of going gently into that dark night. Member Alonzo Bates, for example, accused Engler of hiding behind Archer in trying to take away the Detroit school system from black people, questioning whether "a person from Beal City" (Engler's hometown) "knows about Detroit schools."

I suspect that kind of carping is likely to have had its day. Most folks – including many parents of kids in failing schools – are fed up with all the finger-pointing and foot-dragging. With everybody on board from the president to the governor to the mayor, the train is leaving the station. And the issue for many



PHILIP POWER

who are part of the present system is to figure out whether it's better to be on the train than on the track.

What is not clear to me, at least, is just how merely the act of a school takeover will in itself necessarily improve things in poor schools.

At the end of the day, good schools require a limited number of essential things:

■ Good teachers with the ability to manage their classrooms. If a takeover doesn't find a way to get rid of poor teachers and increase the authority of good teachers, it likely won't make much difference.

■ Good principals with the power to run their buildings. A takeover has to be structured so as to allow poor principals to be moved out and to give good principals the authority to manage their buildings, which involves the ability to fire underperforming staff.

■ High standards. Any takeover worth its salt must empower a school district to end social promotion of failing students from grade to grade and to make poor teachers accountable for poor performance by their students.

■ Good measurement. If a takeover doesn't require every pupil to undergo assessment of academic performance, all the high standards in the world will be window dressing.

■ Parental involvement. All the experts are in agreement: Without involved parents, kids are very unlikely to excel in school. Merely taking over a school system doesn't by itself get parents involved.

School takeovers as a reform mechanism may turn out to be a good idea. The evidence from Chicago seems impressive.

But I'm always suspicious of some idea that gets such wide acceptance and is so easy to propose that it looks like the silver bullet *du jour*. Before we start rushing off to pass legislation to promote school takeovers, we'd better be sure that we have a clear idea of just how they are going to work in practice.

*Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@oeonline.com*

# Shelters play pivotal role

According to a recent survey by the Center for Policy Research, physical assault, including rape, is "widespread" in America today, with an estimated 1.9 million women and 3.2 million men being assaulted annually. With some victims suffering multiple attacks, the total number of assaults rises astronomically to 5.9 million for women, 7.9 million for men. When incidents of stalking are added to the number of rapes and physical assaults, the grand total reaches a staggering 21.2 million acts of violence per year. We have become a violent society!

Perpetrators of violence are generally male, and while their attacks on other men are more frequent, attacks on women result in more injury. Violence against adult women is primarily partner violence; 76 percent of it committed by current or former husbands, live-in boyfriends, dates, or by men with whom the victim has a child. Slapping and hitting are the most common form of attack, followed by grabbing, shoving, and hitting with an object.

Partner, or domestic, violence is caused by one person's determination to control the other person and the relationship. Triggering factors may be abuse-prone attitudes resulting from childhood experiences with abuse; emotional stress due to unemployment, financial problems, family illness or pregnancy; and drug use. Change in family roles brought about by the increasing independence of women is an added factor.

There is no typical domestic violence victim, except that victims are usually female, nor is there a typical abuser. Both victims and abusers come in all shapes and sizes: rich, poor, young, old, educated or ignorant. Abusers frequently have low opinions of themselves and may refuse to accept responsibility for their actions, blaming alcohol or drugs or the victim herself for every assault.

Domestic violence was once considered a private matter of no concern to the community, sanctioned, in fact, by common law. Wives were chattel, property of the husband, subject to chastisement or punishment at his will, and, allegedly, for their own good. Today, a more enlightened attitude prevails, and emphasis upon equality and the worth of the individual that can be attributed in large measure to

GUEST COLUMNIST

the women's and the civil rights movements.

Communities have a vital stake in the prevention of violence, as healthy communities are built upon stable family units. Children who experience or witness abuse in the early years become adults who perpetuate the cycle of violence in their own domestic relationships. Once violence begins, and without intervention, it increases in both intensity and frequency. It is estimated that 25 percent of all homicides in the United States are committed by family members, and half of these are husband-wife killings (statistic courtesy of Wayne County Prosecutor's Office.) Professionals who work with abuse victims identify three stages in the abuse cycle: tension building, the outburst of violence, and the loving reconciliation that becomes a reward for enduring the abuse. The more often the cycle is repeated, the more it becomes a pattern of behavior. Couples bond during reconciliation, and the longer they remain together, the less likely they are to seek help in developing constructive methods for dealing with stress.

Women remain in abusive relationships for several reasons, among them embarrassment, shame, low self-esteem, financial dependence, and cultural or religious beliefs and practices. Mostly they stay because they fear the consequences of leaving the partner. Many of those who do leave are beaten after their departure.

Women's shelters play a pivotal role in aiding the domestic violence victim, as the timing of intervention is critical if it is to succeed. Whereas police and prosecutors cannot intervene until violence or the threat of violence has occurred, shelters can afford a refuge in advance of a beating. During the tension-building phase of the cycle, when a woman's anxiety is high, she may seek counseling and other assistance in building a new and better life for herself. Women seldom escape violent relationships on their own: Early, effective intervention by social agencies and the criminal justice system is needed to break the cycle of abuse that maims and sometimes kills its victims.

*Virginia Nicoll is president of the Farmington Chapter of OWL and editor of the OWL Michigan Newsletter. She lives in Farmington Hills with her husband, Ron, a golf instructor.*