

State hires consultant for education self-analysis

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When it comes to schools, Standard and Poor's is out of the grading business.

The firm, known for rating and ranking the creditworthiness of corporations, is now analyzing school districts on specific sets of criteria — and Michigan schools are its first customers.

Hiring the firm to conduct its School Evaluation Services in Michigan was an administrative order from Gov. John Engler, who sees the program as a tool for districts to analyze themselves and draw their own conclusions. The state signed a \$10 million, five-year contract.

After three years of research, S&P is offering the service which analyzes six core categories related to student success. Fig-

ures for the analysis have been collected from S&P's own data bases and those at the state level and from state colleges and municipalities.

Both John Truscott, press secretary for Engler, and Jonathan Jacobson, director for S&P's School Evaluation Services, quickly pointed out the report is not intended to rate or rank school districts. And while comparisons to other districts will be included in the report, they will be "apples to apples."

"That's the key," Truscott said. "They have to be accurate. This is not a political document; it's a way of giving everyone a very objective view."

Jacobson takes on the reason for the analysis: "The whole basis of a comparative analysis is not saying one is better than the other. Nowhere is there a

district's ranking and we're not assessing scores.

"People are certainly put more at ease when they understand this is not part of a political agenda or a reform strategy. It's there to help educators make better informed decisions."

Each of the five analyses, the first of which will be released in April, will be posted on the Internet and will include an executive summary, S&P's conclusions, student outcomes, performance cost indicators and management considerations.

The first report is based on 1999 data, with the second focusing on 2000 numbers set to be released this summer. The remaining reports will be out in April of subsequent years.

Truth be told?

Truscott said the S&P report is similar to the Michigan School Report Card, but is more comprehensive and provides a "better, more rounded view" — not to mention an impartial opinion of each district's performance.

He also believes the S&P report will dispel common misconceptions, such as money makes for good educational opportunities — the view of many school officials.

"Money is not the only factor in a quality education," Truscott said. "There are very urban and very small districts that could outperform some of the wealthiest school districts."

While it's no secret Engler has made strides in his tenure to heal what he feels are the ills of the public school system, Truscott emphasized the report will not be used to determine a district's success or failure.

"It's coming whether they like it or not," Truscott said. "Those that show good improvements will like it, those that don't, won't. And we're not an apologist for that; we have to move for-

Taking a look

The analytical framework of Standard and Poor's School Evaluation Services features the following six core categories of analysis:

■ **Expenditures:** Where is the money spent?

■ **Student results:** What are the academic outcomes, such as test scores, attendance and graduation rates?

■ **Return on resources:** What is the comparative return? For example, are student outcomes improving as spending increases?

■ **Finances, taxes, debt:** What is the financial context of this return?

■ **Learning environment:** What is the scholastic context of the return, such as class and school sizes, staffing levels, technology, safety?

■ **Demographics:** What is the socioeconomic context of this return?

— Source: Standard and Poor's

ward to improve that district."

Truscott vehemently denies the report is being used to build the case for school vouchers.

"Vouchers aren't allowed; they aren't constitutional," he said. "We don't think that will be brought back to the ballot any time soon."

The process

With his company's unbiased reputation behind him, Jacobson said he's taken care to ensure that integrity remains untainted.

Jacobson said the 11-member Michigan Advisory Group — representing the major education associations, members from the state Department of Education

and union leadership — was chosen to help S&P.

"We knew that there would be a tremendous interest, and we wanted to keep the lines of communication open," he said. "They have been very constructive and have provided insight and feedback."

Jacobson sees the report's findings being used by all sectors of a school district.

The school board might see it as the district's vision; principals can check teacher performance; and the finance department can compare data to formulate cost-cutting measures. Parents can view it as a window into their schools.

"Perhaps more important than the data itself is the independent analysis of the data," Jacobson said. "For each school district, S&P prepares a summary report that highlights what we find to be the district's strengths, challenges and risks as well as highlight other key issues."

Room for error?

Jacobson doesn't hide the fact that data bases the company taps for its reports might turn up inaccurate information.

Nor is the company going to ignore that.

"We've discovered where the

data that has been provided by the state is downright questionable ... and the state is aware and realizes that, it's gonna take some lumps," he said.

Jacobson said school districts are welcome and encouraged to add comments to the report prior to its public release. Their input will not affect the report from S&P's perspective; however, it will help the school districts clarify individual points.

"The school districts would like the opportunity to add contextual information that may affect the way a district operates or performs that doesn't mean money," he said.

The best part?

Jacobson, Truscott and Rep. Johnson all agree the report will benefit kids.

"One thing we all agree on is every child should get a good education in a safe environment; (the report) will help schools to ensure that children get a good education," Johnson said.

Johnson, who sits on the House education committee, said members weren't asked their opinion of the S&P contract. If the analyses help schools get the tools they need to improve educational opportunities, that's OK, she said.

Analysis could affect MEAP

Will Standard and Poor's new school analysis take the air out of the horn blown by school districts whose claim to fame is high standardized test scores?

Maybe a bit, said Jonathan Jacobson, director for S&P's School Evaluation Services.

The company was hired last year by Gov. John Engler to provide the evaluation service, which analyzes six core categories related to student success.

Jacobson is well aware of the emphasis some school districts place on tests such as the Michigan Educational Assessment Program. And while those scores are a component of the S&P analysis, they play a minimal role in the outcome.

"The MEAP results are not the be-all, end-all of the analysis," Jacobson said. "They are often fairly superficial and certainly are not analytically sound comparisons and ratings."

State Rep. Ruth Johnson (R-Holly) doesn't believe the S&P study will replace MEAP's prominence in the education sector. She feels it will only add to the array of comparative data available.

"Anybody can use anything they want to compare district to district: MEAP tests, Standard and Poor's or what their neighbors say," she said. "The S&P report is) another way people can find more information about their school districts and use it to look at the success rates and how that was done."

— By Debra Pascoe

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