

State hires consultant for education self-analysis

BY DEBRA PASCOE
STAFF WRITER
dpascoe@homecomm.net

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 rating 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 bank 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's take 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 wealthier 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 school return, such as class and school sizes, staffing levels, technology, safety?

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

— Source: Standard & Poor's

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 sorts 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.

LOSS OF BLADDER CONTROL

If coughing, sneezing, exercising, or other movements cause you to leak urine, you may have stress urinary incontinence (SUI) — the most common form of incontinence in women.

Physicians in your area are currently conducting a research study to test the safety and effectiveness of an investigational drug being studied for the treatment of SUI.

Study participants will receive the following at no cost:

• Study drug • Physical examination • Laboratory services

For more information about participating, please call:

1-877-337-4448

or visit www.urinarystress.com

©2001 Novartis

It's more common than you think.

◆ Paul C. Jacobs, Ph.D. LP

All formerly of
BEACON HILL CLINIC
wish to announce that they
are currently located in
INDEPENDENT
PRACTICE
at

3100 Lahser Road, Suite #1
Beverly Hills, Michigan 48025
Phone: (248) 647-5320
Fax: (248) 647-1676

◆ Steven Spector, Ph.D. LP

◆ Carol Schwartz, Ph.D. LP

◆ Arthur L. Robin, Ph.D. LP

Providing services in:
Individual and Group Psychotherapy for Children, Adolescents and Adults
Psychological and Psycho-Educational Evaluations and ADHD/LD Assessments
B10011637

TWICE YEARLY HOME FURNISHINGS SALE FEBRUARY 16 THROUGH MARCH 19



Insure. Invest. Protect the ones you love. Everyone has different financial goals.

At Huntington, we have the insurance and investment services to help fulfill yours. Let one of our Insurance and Investment Representatives help you determine the financial strategy for your way of life. Stop by your local Huntington office for your complimentary Personalized Financial Analysis.

Call toll-free 1-877-480-7384
or visit us online at www.huntington.com

Huntington
Banking. Investments. Insurance.

Not FDIC-Insured • May Lose Value • No Bank Guarantee

Securities are offered by The Huntington Investment Company, member NASD/SIPC, a subsidiary of The Huntington National Bank. Insurance products are offered by Huntington Insurance Services and are underwritten by insurance companies affiliated with The Huntington National Bank and are offered by licensed insurance agents. The term "partner" refers only to general business relationships and is not applicable to securities products.

"Huntington" and "Huntington" are federally registered service marks of Huntington Bancshares Incorporated. Financial services since 1795.