

This education reform deal is just begging to be made

Tongues — especially Democratic ones — are wagging about how newly elected President George W. Bush has hit the ground running in the first few weeks in office.

Consistent with his campaign, he made education reform a big theme, delivering an extensive message to the Congress, holding bipartisan meetings with senators and representatives, visiting classrooms and so forth.



Phil Power

For what it's worth, here are a few observations from a Michigan perspective on the President's plans.

Candidate Bush's views on education didn't play especially well last November. Bush lost Michigan to Al Gore by a substantial margin, seven out of eight Democratic candidates for statewide education posts won, and the voucher proposal to divert public money to private and parochial schools was defeated overwhelmingly. It remains to be seen whether President Bush will experience the same fate as candidate Bush's.

Bush proposes annual testing of student performance in reading and math, which seems perfectly sensible to me on the grounds that you cannot improve what you do not measure. We're already doing that in Michigan through the MEAP test, together with science, writing and social studies.

But he wants the tests to be designed by each individual state, a bow no doubt to advocates of "local control" over education. But if the purpose of reforming education is to improve education for everybody, letting Mississippi (for example) design its own tests to evaluate its own miserable school system seems a nifty way to make sure Mississippi kids remain at the bottom of the national education heap.

Bush is no doubt sincere when he says that schools must be held accountable: "Parents and children who have only bad options must eventually get good options if we're to succeed all across the country." From this, he argues that kids who attend failing schools ought to receive vouchers tenable at good schools.

But Bush seems to assume the only failing schools are public ones and the only vouchers to be handed out are those to get kids into private and parochial schools.

If we're going to test results and give out vouchers to improve schools in America, why shouldn't we make the same demands on private and parochial schools?

Now, advocates of private schools can point out — rightly — that the Constitution prohibits governmental interference in private schools. But if we're going to be spending tax dollars on vouchers tenable at private and parochial schools in order to improve education in America, we'd better figure out a way to make sure "good" private schools are in actual fact better than the "failing" public ones.

As a practical matter, most public schools in Michigan are pretty good and getting better. The bad ones are mostly concentrated in inner city districts. Are vouchers the best remedy for these? Maybe, maybe not.

As to inner city schools, the old adage that "schools don't count, families do" seems fundamental. A kid from a solid, two-parent family is likely to learn in almost any school, while a child from a fatherless family with a history of drug abuse isn't going to make it, even at Cranbrook. Maybe education reform in inner cities has as much to do with fixing family structure, drug abuse and poverty as it does with poor teachers.

Bush seems to assume the only failing schools are public ones and the only vouchers to be handed out are those to get kids into private and parochial schools.

and inept principals.

What concerns me about the Bush proposals on education reform is that they mask the main issue: money, taxpayer money. Private and parochial schools want it. Politicians want them to have it but without having to bear the same standards of accountability they apply to public schools.

There's a deal out there, just begging to be made. Require the same tests for all kids going to any school — public, private, parochial, charter — throughout the entire country.

Based on test results, designate "failing schools" — public, private, parochial, charter. Give out vouchers tenable only at non-failing schools.

And as to inner city schools that otherwise are likely to wind up as dumping grounds for kids from dysfunctional families, co-locate in the same buildings all the range of social and health services the society can bring to bear.

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@homecomm.net



Mike Malott

Don't change Open Meetings Act; ban retribution firings

Art Ellis, Michigan's outgoing superintendent of public instruction, was meticulous in his efforts to keep the State Board of Education in compliance with the Open Meetings Act as they worked last week to select his replacement.

It had become quite clear some members of the Board were uncomfortable with the prospect of having to debate the relative merits of the five finalists in open session.

Ellis convinced them not to try to circumvent the law. If they don't like it, he urged, they should work with the Legislature later to change it.

This of course is an issue with a rich history in Michigan. How the OMA should apply when various government boards go about selecting their top administrators has been the subject of much debate.

Expect it to come up again. Ellis himself — during a chat with reporters before the final session in which the Board would vote to name Thomas Watkins as Michigan's new superintendent — called the existing law "horrid."

His argument was familiar. Michigan's law requires a very open process. All who submit their names for consideration may have them made public. That keeps some candidates from applying in the first place, so government units in Michigan miss out on a lot of potential talent.

That was exactly the argument raised back in 1996 when the state last debated the issue, then providing an exemption for university president searches. Lawmakers allowed for a closed process at universities until the field was narrowed to the final five. Later, the Supreme Court ruled the OMA doesn't apply to university searches anyway.

In any case, the argument is the same whether it is for university presidents, state superintendents, superintendents of individual districts, or city or township managers in local municipalities.

State Board member Michael David Warren Jr. supported Ellis in his point, saying that allowing a closed process would have created an entirely different pool of candidates from which to pick.

It's an argument that has never held much water with me. After all, we are talking about people who are applying for very public jobs. They are the ones who would be running the day-to-day

operations of our governmental units.

I'd just as soon that those who prefer to operate in secrecy stay home anyway.

Ellis explained that word often gets back to candidates' current employers that they have applied for another job. Considering that only one can be selected, it leaves a lot of unsuccessful applicants who may be in hot water with their bosses.

Ellis told of one applicant who interviewed here in Michigan only to go back to his home state of Florida where he was promptly canned by his employer for applying elsewhere.

That's the outrage, if you ask me. Where did we ever get the idea that it is OK to fire someone for looking for a job somewhere else? They are employees, not slaves, not indentured servants.

The purpose of such retribution firings is clear — it is to threaten other employees, to send them a strong warning that they should not go looking for other employment. That's what should be outlawed.

Even free-market thinkers may be able to see the justification in such a ban. If you consider each worker as nothing more than a vendor of labor, out in the marketplace seeking the highest bid for his or her services, then such retribution firings can only be viewed as an anti-competitive practice.

We've heard quite a bit now about how, in today's information-based new economy, our workforce needs to be very flexible and highly mobile. How do you square that with the idea of letting people punish workers for going out on the job market?

Ellis countered, and rightly so, that no law we could pass here in Michigan would have an effect in Florida.

True enough. It is also true that states look to each other for examples of good legislation. It's high time somebody, somewhere labeled such retribution firings as wrong. Let Michigan be the first.

Mike Malott reports on the local implications of state and regional events. He can be reached by phone at (248) 634-8219 or by e-mail at mmalott@homecomm.net.

Michiganians overpaying \$1 billion for long-distance

Maybe you're not surprised by the news that Michigan consumers are paying too much for long-distance telephone service.

But \$1.03 billion too much? Every year?

Unfortunately, yes. A recent study* of our state's long-distance market shows that Michigan customers could be saving more than a billion dollars annually in long-distance and toll charges. How? By opening up the market to full competition.

The study, commissioned by Ameritech and conducted by Stephen Pociask, President of TeleNomic Research, LLC — a Virginia-based economic research and consulting firm — finds "conclusive, empirical evidence that the long-distance market remains heavily concentrated."

That means the market is dominated by only a few companies — the "Big Three," to be exact: AT&T, WorldCom and Sprint. Furthermore, says the report, this lack of competition is being sustained by regulatory obstacles.

Based on New York's long-distance market, the study concludes that if Ameritech could offer long-distance service here, then consumers could eventually save that \$1.03 billion.

Not only would long-distance competition and prices get better but, following New York's example, competition and costs for local telephone service would also improve.

And it's not only New Yorkers — Texans, Oklahomans and Kansans are reaping the rewards of full competition as well.

Ameritech continues to work closely with the Michigan Public Service Commission and other telephone companies to follow the blueprint established in those states by the Federal Communications Commission.

As the report indicates, it's time for our state to eliminate barriers to long-distance competition, so Michigan customers can enjoy the benefits of greater savings and choices in their long-distance and local telephone service.

Sincerely,

Diane L. Webb

Diane Webb
Director
External Affairs

Ameritech

SPC
Sprint

*Structure, Conduct and Performance of the Long-Distance Market and Consumer Benefits of Long-Distance Competition in Michigan, January 2001

We take tips. Call (248) 477-5450 with your story ideas.



Walk to **save** babies,
run to **see** Kathy Ireland.



Come help Kathy kick off the March of Dimes
WalkAmerica campaign in Southeast Michigan.
Tuesday, March 6, noon to 1 p.m.

Troy Kmart at the corner of 15 Mile Rd. and Livernois

Kathy Ireland, National Honorary WalkAmerica 2001 Chair and Kmart team member, will kick off Kmart's WalkAmerica sneaker promotion in Southeast Michigan with the help of some very special guests. By purchasing a paper sneaker for \$1, you can help save babies in your community. The entire dollar donation will go to the March of Dimes. To get your feet ready for walking, Kmart will be giving away a FREE pair of Kathy Ireland® socks to the first 250 customers.

- Enter our drawing for your chance to win Detroit Tigers' opening day tickets; Tigers mascot, PAWS, will be on-hand for the festivities
- FM 96.3 "Vertical" will be broadcasting live
- Preview Kathy Ireland's new plus-size fashion line
- Florida orange juice sampling, provided by the FDOC
- Paper product sampling, provided by Pepsi

kathy Ireland.

96.3



100% cotton

*No purchase necessary. Must be 18 years of age to enter. Please see official rules at the Troy Kmart. Void where prohibited.



WalkAmerica

March of Dimes
1.800.525.WALK