

Time to tweak Proposal A, which has hurt area schools

"And, they lived happily ever after" makes a perfect ending for fairy tales, but there have been very few "happily ever afters" for Metro Detroit school districts since Proposal A was drafted.

The authors of the school funding legislation, the legislators who passed the measure at the 11th hour on Christmas Eve, 1993, and the voters who approved it on the Idea of March, 1994, believed that Proposal A would be the definitive and final chapter on how to best fund public schools. Yet just as the U.S. and Michigan Constitutions have been amended several times, it is time to amend, tweak, revise or alter Proposal A.

The concerns that have been voiced and the questions which have been raised by those who have dealt with Proposal A for the past eight years have gone unheard and unanswered. Most elected state officials and their wannabe counterparts are reluctant to reach out and touch the Holy Grail of Michigan school finance, especially in a pivotal election year.

Determined to keep the legacy of the Engler years intact, the party-in-power in Lansing rules that Proposal A continues to be "an unparalleled success." Press releases continually tout the tax relief that the legislation delivered to property owners over the past eight years. When the lowest funded school districts reached the per pupil funding level of \$6,500 this year, a spokesperson for the governor declared, "it's basically brought equity across the board."

The fact that property taxes in Michigan in 1993 were ninth highest in the nation in what initially drove the Proposal A legislation. Most likely property taxes never have reached such a high level, if state government had adequately and responsibly funded public schools when it controlled the education purse strings in the past.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the state dramatically reduced its financial support of public schools. Whenever the state was faced with declining revenues and budget deficits, it systematically shifted the costs of schools back to local taxpayers, driving up the property taxes. As a result, public school officials were made to wear the "black hats" because they had to ask local citizens for the millage increases to run the schools.

Regarding the praise that is heaped on Proposal A for delivering funding equity, do parents and school officials in the Redford Union District believe there is "equity across the board" when their district receives less per pupil than the charter schools in Wayne County receive? Is it fair that Lapeer Public Schools, faced with declining enrollment served as the state's model? Where is the equity for Plymouth-Canton Community Schools, which must compete for quality employ-

ees - from bus drivers to administrators in the same job market with nearby districts which receive about \$1,000 more in per pupil grant?

Under Proposal A, property-poor districts (mostly outstate) were given yearly funding increases of up to 40 percent to close the equity gap, while nearly all Metro Detroit districts received yearly increases of only 1 percent to 3 percent since 1994. As Proposal A "lifted some boats," it submerged many other districts in a sea of red ink.

Two-thirds of the 83 districts in the tri-county area are facing deficits. Metro Detroit districts have swapped places with the "Kalkaskas" of yesterday (those districts that struggled with funding pre-Proposal A). Since the majority of Michigan's children attend school in the more populated Metro Detroit area, it becomes clear that Proposal A is failing to provide for the educational needs of most of Michigan's children. No one advocates impulsively throwing out Proposal A in its entirety and starting over in the fashion in which the legislation was created. We ought to be able to change the parts of Proposal A which don't work and don't adequately meet the needs of the majority of Michigan's children.

For starters, state officials can close the loopholes which allows some builders to avoid paying the full amount of the real estate transfer tax which goes into the school-aid fund. Here are some other "suggestions":

- Grant districts at least a minimal cost-of-living increase each year.
- Provide additional funds to accompany any new programs the state mandates.
- Seek more federal funds to support special education.
- Return the responsibility for teacher retirement and Social Security costs back to the state.

- Allow districts an option to raise up to 4 mills locally, so education will be tailored to the unique needs of each district's students. Districts could use the funds to open new schools, maintain or create new programs etc.

To ignore what is happening to Metro Detroit districts (and many others) under the terms of Proposal A, is foolhardy and irresponsible on the part of elected officials. Like a pain reliever, the anticipated \$200 per pupil increase for 2002-03 school year will help in the short term, but will not halt the pervasive malady afflicting Metro Detroit schools.

Your attendance at the Third Statewide Summit on Public School Funding on March 25 will send the message that Proposal A needs tweaking, amending etc. Sponsored by the Michigan Citizens for Fairness in Public School Funding and hosted by the Plymouth-Canton Community Schools, the Summit will take place at Plymouth-Salem High School, 7-9 p.m.

Dr. David Plank, director of the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University will serve as the moderator. Thomas Watkins, state superintendent of education, is the guest speaker. Candidates for governor and current state legislators will offer their views on Proposal A. Further information can be obtained at the Michigan Citizens for Fairness in Public School Funding website www.mischoolfunding.org.

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Joni Hubred

Words have power to help us pay it forward

■ On Valentine's Day, I received a telephone message

from a recent acquaintance. She thanked me for several things I had done for her, told me she was pleased to have met me and wished me a happy Valentine's Day. I was surprised and very touched by her message. It made me smile the rest of the day and whenever I think about it. ■ I always start my meals-on-wheels route with a client who is always pleasant and genuinely interested in my well being. She greets me on icy cold winter or rainy mornings by opening her garage and meeting me halfway to receive her meal. After expressing her thanks, she waits until I've safely cleared the driveway with a smile and a wave. At holiday time there is a little gift for me and in the summer she shares her garden-fresh vegetables. Truly, she makes my volunteer efforts a joy!

— Submitted anonymously to the "Everybody's Reading: Pay It Forward" program

Words have phenomenal power. They can convince us to part with our hard-earned money or to sacrifice hours of precious time, to hate or love, to trust or suspect. These basic building blocks of every relationship can be colored with inflection or manipulated to color the truth.

When we use them to brighten someone's life, we have found the most fundamental reason for their existence. And when we raise our voices in praise or prayer, we are using them for their highest and best purpose.

We can apply words like a bandage to heal a wound or a splint to mend something we've broken. Ignored or too carefully examined, they can cause chaos and confusion.

Look on the page opposite this one, and you'll see harsh words, encouraging words, words used to champion a cause, to express sarcasm and distaste. Letters to the editor are a breeding ground for words - express an opinion with them and you'll find yourself possessed of more words in response than you could ever have imagined.

That's what these pages are all about. But the most important words are those we speak in human kindness, words that tie us to one another with the simple acknowledgment that we are loved and appreciated.

And those we do not speak often enough.

Perhaps because of this, when someone takes a moment to smile or to share a friendly thought, we have trouble accepting it for what it is. We make too much or too little of it, wonder about motivation, look for the concealed weapon or the trick hidden up the sleeve attached to every hand extended in friendship.

We are skeptics, because the world is full of people who use words to deceive and hurt, because greed and selfishness are far more prevalent motives than generosity and largesse. The nightly news and the daily papers provide historical documentation, words that weave a global story fraught with hubris and the struggle of good versus evil.

These are the words of the world.

But the words of our hearts are the ones that matter, the ones we have to keep sharing with one another to keep faith with a Master Designer who set us in this Garden and gave us charge over it.

When it comes time for you to Pay It Forward - and if you live in any of the communities participating in the Everybody's Reading project through our local libraries, that time is now - consider how simple it is to make a real difference in someone's life.

A smile. A few garden-fresh vegetables. A hot meal.

And words from your heart.

Joni Hubred is editor of the Farmington Observer. She welcomes your comments by mail to 33411 Grand River, Farmington, MI 48335 via FAX, 248-477-9722; or by email to jhubred@home.com. For more information about Everybody's Reading: Pay It Forward, call the Farmington Community Library, 248-553-0500 or go to the library's Web site, www.farmlib.org.

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