

State's standards set a high bar for students

Editor's Note: A portion of the following story was inadvertently omitted from the Sunday Observer. For the benefit of our readers, the story is being reprinted in its entirety.

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
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Tom Watkins calls American public education the true "Statue of Liberty."

Michigan's state superintendent of public instruction says it is public schools that represent the freedom and shelter of Emma Lazarus' famous inscription on the statue: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free."

Watkins said he wants to challenge people to support public

education and not to bash it.

"That has got to stop. It dehumanizes," he said.

Public education has been criticized for not providing a vigorous curriculum, for not having enough discipline in the classrooms and for not involving parents in decisions critical to their children's future.

Watkins, who was appointed state superintendent by the state Board of Education in February 2001, has been speaking across the state and writing newspaper columns defending the quality of public education.

The Michigan Constitution places supervision of public education in the hands of the eight-member state Board of Education. But school curricula are not mandated by the state board.

Instead the Department of Education creates standards for each subject area to assist school dis-

tricts in creating their curriculum.

The state also tests students at different class levels through the Michigan Educational Assessment Program, which was originally designed to evaluate how well school districts were meeting state standards. The tests are administered by the state Treasury Department.

Setting standards

"If you align your curriculum with the standards, you will do well, taking into consideration other factors," said Watkins.

He said most school districts have aligned their programs with the state standards and the state does provide assistance through intermediate school districts, such as RESA in Wayne County.

The standards are set by a group of educators from each dis-

cipline. The standards set out what is expected of each student and also suggest textbooks. You can view the state standards at the Department of Education's Web site at edp.mdo.state.mi.us/MCF/ContentStandards. The most recent standards were set in the early 1990s.

"We are in the midst of beginning the process again," Watkins said. "We are creating a curriculum for the 21st century and not the 20th century and to make sure that our standards are not a mile wide and an inch deep."

The state is able to test its standards against those in other states through Achieve, a national organization which offers a comparison of state standards on its web site at achieve.org.

Watkins said the standards leave flexibility for the local districts.

"Some on the local level would say a lot is driven by the state because of the tests and development standards," Watkins said. "The state says at the end of the day we expect you to be in California; how you get there is up to you."

MEAP controversy

The role of the MEAP tests in establishing local standards has been controversial.

Richard Witkowski, superintendent of Garden City Schools,



STAFF PHOTO BY ELIZABETH CANNON

Defending public education: Tom Watkins, state superintendent of public instruction, spoke at a meeting on school financing at Canton's Summit recently.

said that sometimes the tests run ahead of the standards.

"In terms of the MEAP test, social studies is very difficult," he said. "The standards should be developed first and then the test."

Witkowski said that sometimes the state sets standards and the school districts don't

have time to develop their curriculum based on the standards before the tests.

Verna Anible, executive director for educational services for the Plymouth-Canton School District, said that the trend in state and national standards is

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