

Proposal A defects having impact on state's top schools

Proposal A, passed back in 1994, revolutionized school financing in Michigan. But serious defects in the new system have emerged over the years. It's time to fix them.

Proposal A cut local school property taxes by two-thirds and raised the state sales tax from 4 percent to 6 percent to make up the lost revenue. Each school district received a guaranteed state grant of \$4,200 per pupil, a figure which has since grown to \$6,500. Although voters were allowed to adopt property taxes to pay for school buildings, they were prohibited from voting additional millage for operating expenses. Forty-five higher-spending districts were allowed to levy limited "hold harmless" millages to support high quality programs.

The results in equalizing K-12 expenditures from district to district were dramatic. Before Proposal A was adopted, the difference in spending between the richest district and the poorest was three to one; today it's two to one. Before Proposal A, 508 of the state's 555 school districts spent less than the \$6,500 basic grant; today, 455 districts spend between \$6,500 and \$7,000 per pupil.

So far, so good. Poorer school districts are getting more per pupil funding and the spending gap between poor districts and rich ones is far less than it used to be. And there is some evidence (through MEAP results) that kids in poor districts are doing better today.

But — and it's a big "but" — it's important to bear in mind the deal that really sold Proposal A to the voters, especially those in relatively well-to-do, high-voting school districts: Proposal A will bring up schools at the bottom, but it won't pull down the high quality districts at the top.

As the years have passed, it is precisely those good school districts that are being pinched. Look around. In districts from Birmingham to Canton Township, from Northville to Southfield, funding for good school districts isn't keeping up with inflation. Good teachers are being laid off — East Lansing plans on cutting a third of its teachers at the end of the school year. Valuable programs are being cut.

Good school districts with declining enrollments — Livonia comes to mind — are being especially hard hit because their variable per

pupil funding from the state is going down but their fixed costs keep going up. Rapidly growing districts — Northville, for example — are also being squeezed. They can pass property taxes to build new schools, but they have to rely on fixed state grants to operate them.

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The problems with Proposal A are now so clear that parents and school officials are taking notice. A couple of weeks ago, a grass-roots group called Michigan Citizens for Fairness in Public Schools Funding held a forum in Canton Township to discuss changes in Proposal A. They invited various candidates for governor to speak, most of whom were predictably less than forthright. They are running the risk of getting out of sync with the voters. A statewide poll published in the March 25 edition of The Detroit News indicated that 75 percent of voters want the option of raising taxes to pay for increased operating budgets for their schools.

Some legislators are beginning to respond. A bill allowing voters to levy local taxes to fund local school operations has been introduced by Rep. Patricia "Pan" Godchaux (R-Birmingham). Other proposals would require rich districts that raise property taxes to divert some of the money to poorer districts.

It's easy to make snide remarks about rich school districts feeling pinched, but at the end of the day it's self-defeating. Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills districts, for example, spend more than \$11,000 per pupil. But the communities and families they serve have high expectations — that's part of why they moved there in the first place — and Proposal A handcuffs schools' ability to meet those expectations. If these districts have to cut back, parents will put their children in private schools, and the state money lost with each defection will only accelerate the slide in quality.

Proposal A was designed to pull up the worst schools, not to pull down the best. Failure to fix the problems with school finance in Michigan will only guarantee all our kids get an equally mediocre education wherever they go to school.

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.

Career Day gives kids a window into work world

Remember what you wanted to be when you were 4 years old?

The list back then was probably a little more limited, as children's lists are. But one Alameda Learning Center teacher has worked for several years to broaden her students' horizons.

Debbie Licavoli encourages her students to have their parents (and sometimes newspaper editors) come in and talk about what they do when they go off to work. For cake decorator Joyce Swanson, it was simply a matter of "show and tell." She brought in some icing and let the kids try out their creative skills.

Julia's daddy was a different story. "When I was a little kid," Steve Sherline told a rapt audience gathered in their listening circle, "I wanted to become a fighter pilot."

Instead, he's a money manager. And what better way to explain managing money to a child than with the idea of a piggy bank? The children nodded (well, most of them) as he talked about how his job was like what they did when they saved their pennies.

"People bring us their money, and we put it in the bank for them so it can grow," he said.

Sherline's most important message, though, went back to that first dream of being a fighter pilot. "I wanted to tell you, it's OK to change your mind, just like I did."

While he seemed right at home with his audience, I was a little nervous about explaining what a newspaper editor does. So instead, I did 16 interviews, each one just as cute as the last.

"What do you do at school?" I asked, then began scribbling in my trusty reporter's notebook as the answers came flying at me.

"Play."

"Make crafts."

"Eat snacks." That was Dylan. He wants to be a snowplow driver. They probably eat snacks now and then.

Corrina, who dreams of being a firefighter, informed me in a very powerful voice, "We play Play-Doh," and made me wish I was 4 years old again.

I really wouldn't mind going back to a time when I still felt a sense of disbelief about the idea that rocket ships can fly to the moon.

When my mouth dropped in wonder and awe as I looked up at the stars and wondered if God was really up there.

When it seemed like fun to swing on the rope in gym class and bounce around and everybody looked a little silly so nobody laughed at or made fun of anybody else.

When you are 4 years old, no one has explained in any great detail the difference between cartoon characters and real people, so that you might still dream about growing up to be Scooby Doo, like



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BEEGLER

Money talks: Julia Sherline looks over at her daddy, Steve Sherline. Dad is a financial consultant.

Thomas. No one has told you how nearly impossible it is to be great at everything you love, so you can still want to be a firefighter, a street cleaner AND a doctor, like Adam, or a princess, a doctor AND an artist, like Maria.

Doctoring was very popular among Ms. Licavoli's kids. That's what my friend Kiera wants to be. She's the one who invited me to her class, and then brought me a tray of brownies and a kiss on the cheek to thank me, even though I'm the one who owed her a thank you.

When you're a grown-up, sometimes you forget what it's like to believe you can be and do anything you wish. You forget the only limitations are those you place on yourself. You lose the ability to stand in awe of God's creation and the sense of wonder at just how cool this world really is.

So to Kiera, Maria, Andrew who wants to be a fireman, Dylan, Austin who doesn't know yet, Willow the future princess ballerina, Jenna and Julia who dream about dancing in toe shoes, Conner who wants to be an astronaut, Princess Gail, Thomas, Adam, Corrina, Anshuman who wants to wear a policeman's uniform, Kalyani the future doctor and Sean, a firefighter in waiting...here is the story I promised.

And thank you, for reminding me what it is to have dreams you still believe can come true.

Joni Hubred is editor of the Farmington Observer and once wanted to be a doctor and a cowboy. She welcomes your comments at (248) 477-5450; by FAX, (248) 477-9722; or email to jhubred@oe.homecomm.net



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