

Forget charter schools facts when ideology is involved

A lot of important things are getting lost in all the legislative arm-waving and finger-pointing now going on over the state's budget crisis. Among them are common sense, a sense of common purpose and reliance on facts (rather than ideology) as guides to sound public policy.

Also getting swamped are actual matters of substance, including important issues having to do with charter schools (also called "public school academies") in Michigan. Both touted (by those who believe they represent a non-governmental competitive spur to the public K-12 system) and reviled (by those who believe they represent a systematic assault on public education), charter schools have been around for eight years. Presently capped by the legislature at 189 institutions, charter schools now enroll nearly 60,000 students.

Last year, the legislature established a commission "to conduct a complete and objective review of all aspects of public school academies in Michigan." Chaired by MSU President Peter McPherson, the eight-member commission issued its report in May. Essentially, it called for creating 250 new schools by 2017, together with improvements in oversight and accountability for charter school operators.

The commission's report made small headlines before being overtaken by more sensational news. Word from Lansing is that the legislature, if it ever gets around to thinking about things other than budget deficits, is likely to follow along and lift the cap.

Earlier this month, Gary Miron and Christopher Nelson, researchers at Western Michigan University's Evaluation Center, published in the Detroit Free Press their own findings based on four years of research into charter schools in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Illinois and Connecticut. They concluded charter schools have a mixed record in reaching their objectives of increasing student achievement, leveraging improvement in public schools and satisfying customers (i.e. parents).

■ Charter school students, parents and teachers are generally satisfied with their school's curriculum and instruction.

■ Many charter schools are provoking improve-

ments in public schools as they compete for student enrollments.

■ Michigan charter schools, however, have shown smaller gains and larger losses in student achievement than public schools.

■ Although many charter schools in Michigan are located in poor urban areas, "they tend to enroll lower concentrations of at-risk students than neighboring public schools."

■ Charter schools are supposed to deliver good education at lower cost than public schools, but they tend to receive and spend more than comparable public schools. "Over time, the proportion of spending on instruction in charter schools has drifted downward relative to spending on administration."

Overall, Miron and Nelson concluded that Michigan charter schools "often produce weaker outcomes at greater cost than non-charter schools." I talked about this with Tom Watkins, the State Superintendent of Education, about all this last weekend. Watkins served on the McPherson Commission, but did not concur with its findings, especially on increasing the cap on charter schools to 250 by 2017 and doing another study about outcomes.

"This puts the cart before the horse," says Watkins. "It makes no sense to start a whole lot of new charter schools and then do a study to figure out whether they work the way they're supposed to. Acting now would let a term-limited governor and legislature lock in public policy on charter schools for the next 15 years. That's a bad way to do things."

In this, as in many other things subject to flows of cash from the government, it's instructive to follow the money trail. In the case of charter schools, the universities that authorize charters and oversee performance (mainly Central Michigan and Grand Valley State Universities) get 3 percent of the \$6,700 the state pays per enrolled student, which comes to a tidy \$12 million. With this money, the universities employ around 100 staffers to oversee educational performance of the 60,000-odd charter school students, while the state Department of Education employs some 300 people to do the same job for 1.7 million public school students.

Forget the facts. With Gov. Engler and the Republican majority in both houses of the legislature ideologically committed to charter schools, you can confidently expect a lot more of them over the coming years.

Phil Power is the Chairman of the Board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2206 or at ppower@homecomm.net.



Carleigh Flaherty

Avon 3-day breast cancer walk was an emotional journey

Several weeks have passed, and I am still on a physical and emotional high after participating in the Avon Breast Cancer 3-Day, the 60-mile trek from Ann Arbor to Farmington Hills. The Avon 3-Day is more than a three-day jaunt, it is really more of a long-term physical and emotional journey.

I learned about the Avon Breast Cancer 3-Day from a girlfriend who participated in the 2001 San Francisco event. After hearing of her experience and doing some additional research, I made the decision last September, that I too, would commit to the cause.

Funds raised from the Avon Breast Cancer 3-Day help raise awareness, provide access to screening and medical care, discover advances in treatment, and, ultimately, find a cure for breast cancer. This is a cause near and dear to my heart. My mother, Lana Barnes, is a living and breathing example of the benefits of early detection and aggressive research. I would not only be walking to promote the cause, I would be walking to honor my mom, now in her fourth year breast-cancer free.

Committed in spirit, but not yet fully in the modes of training or fundraising, I met a slight roadblock in early December. I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. My own treatment regimen of chemotherapy and radiation would commence in early January. But the cause was calling and I felt that as long as my body would remain healthy and strong, I could commit to the challenge. Fundraising and training would soon begin.

Each 3-Day participant is required to raise a minimum of \$1,900. In March, I kicked off my official fundraising effort, setting my personal goal at \$3,000. With the generous support of family, friends and community members, I quickly surpassed my goal. Fundraising was no longer an issue. Next up...training.

Fortunately, my body was responding well to chemotherapy. Despite the few days I experienced fatigue, I continued feeling otherwise healthy and strong. Treatment wasn't going to hold me back - it was cold, dreary Michigan winter that was holding me back. And I procrastinated, and procrastinated some more.

"April will be a nice month, I'll train like gangbusters beginning in April," I said to myself.

Though I was able to clock about 25 miles during the one nice week in April, I was otherwise sedentary. May 1 hit, and I found myself in a quiet panic about my readiness. Weekly updates from the 3-Day staff provided suggestions on packing appropriate gear, hydration techniques for endurance walking

and "last minute tips."

Last minute tips...I still hadn't clocked a single walk over ten miles! My confidence was dwindling. Thankfully, I could count on my girlfriend Kathleen, whom I had recruited to participate back in January, to cheer me along. We would talk frequently throughout the month of May about progress, our aches and pains, and strategies for "blister management."

May 30, "Day Zero," was quickly upon us and Kathleen and I made the trek to Ann Arbor to register and take part in safety training in Ann Arbor.

Being part of the event, we learned, was not just about being safe, it was about being kind. It was about helping others. It was about giving as much of ourselves to raise funds and train, as it was to raise awareness and contribute to a positive experience for our fellow 3,513 walkers over the course of the next three days.

Friday morning, we reported to drop off our gear and meet our fellow walkers at Ethel Field for an emotional, but inspiring opening ceremony. For three days we battled the heat and sore feet and silently questioned our ability to complete the entire 60 miles, as well as our sanity. We were greeted along the route by well-wishers, pitstop stations, lemonade stands and a few sprinklers purposely set along the sidewalks throughout various neighborhoods as "cooling stations."

We would be greeted at camp by a rousing crowd of supporters, help from the boy scouts in setting up our tents, semi-trucks retrofit to provide individual hot showers (which I think is the greatest invention since the light bulb), and generous portions of good (yes, good) food. We would make new friends as we stood in line for meals, commiserated about our aches and pains and stood at the finish line cheering in our fellow walkers as each day drew to a close.

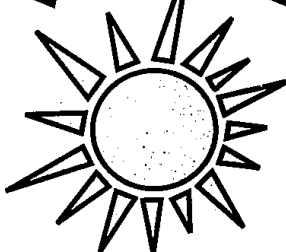
One would think I could recall every step of the way. Instead I have two very clear memories along the route: the 16th mile on day one, and the 14th mile on day three. The route in between is nothing but a blur. Somewhere between the 16th mile and 56th mile, I made the transition from feeling like a walker, to feeling like a superhero. It's amazing to me how all the stress and all the pain dissipated at that final stretch into closing ceremonies.

As we gathered on the grounds of the Costick Center, we raised our shoes in celebration, cheered our physical and fundraising accomplishments, silently honored and mourned those for whom we were walking, and made the commitment to making a difference...not because we have to, but because we can.

—Carleigh Flaherty is President of the Farmington/Farmington Hills Chamber of Commerce.

SUMMER

PRESENTED BY:
DOWNTOWN
BIRMINGHAM



in the CITY

Pack up the family and a blanket
& meet at Birmingham City Hall
this July and August for:

Theatre • Dance • Music • Puppetry And Loads of Fun. Family Entertainment!

Every Friday at 6:30 p.m.
from July 5 through August 30
Exception - Saturday July 20 at 11 a.m. instead of Friday evening

All Shows as always are FREE!

Entertainment by Imagination Theatre

www.imaginationtheatre.com



Birmingham City Hall is located at the corner of Pierce and Martin, one block west of S. Old Woodward

For more information contact Downtown Birmingham PSD at (248) 433-3550

www.enjoybirmingham.com