

August 12, 2014

The State Board of Education's Democrat majority is requesting new legislation regulating Public School Academies (PSAs, or charter schools) based on concerns raised in a recent series of articles by the Detroit Free Press.

Many of them can and must be addressed by enforcing existing Michigan statute. Others are difficult to solve because the education community cannot agree on ways to measure student growth and PSA quality. The remaining proposals seek to fit PSAs into the current governance structure of traditional public schools and districts. That would undermine one of the primary reasons charters (used by about 141,000 students) and public school choice (approximately 134,000 more) exist: to provide children with an alternative to local schools when family resources don't allow access to a better quality school, or a more appropriate education for their child's needs.

Without debating the series' accuracy, we believe that any Board requests for legislative action must apply to all Michigan schools - not just to charters, which are already held to higher standards under statute. We support the call for transparency, legal and fiscal responsibility. But those should be in the service of academic outcomes for all students, rather than as prohibitive hurdles requiring PSAs alone to surpass existing standards for our traditional schools and districts, which are attended by nearly 1.4 million children.

Yesterday, under his existing authority related to charter school authorizers, the State Superintendent of Education placed eleven Michigan PSA authorizers on an At Risk for Suspension List, with a timetable for further action as needed. When authorizers are held accountable, operators will be also.

For the 2013-14 academic year, Michigan had 304 PSAs; over the last 20 years authorizers have closed nearly 90 poor performing charter schools. Michigan had more than 3,034 traditional public schools last year; 137 of all public schools were Priority Schools, identified as such for quality concerns. To date, Michigan's primary solution for closing or remediating poor performing traditional schools has been to transfer the worst 15 into the Education Achievement Authority (EAA), which is under constant attack for its efforts to transform years of academic neglect into student success. (Without consensus on measuring student academic growth, one of the potential problems for PSA authorizers on the List will be continuing their work in Michigan's lowest performing schools if their ability to authorize other schools is then at risk.) We need to move thoughtfully through this debate, and provide Michigan schools and citizens with clear guidelines for quality academics so ALL poor performing schools can be fixed or closed.

We respectfully request that the Michigan Department of Education and the Legislature work to revise and pass HB 5112, the A-F Letter Grading Bill to allow compliance with federal NCLB education flexibility waiver requirements. Every school, traditional or charter, must be held responsible for the same high academic requirements. Every family deserves to know that their child's school can competently provide a free, appropriate education. Finding a solution that strengthens and retains state control while satisfying federal funding requirements is smart for Michigan taxpayers; 15 other states already use this system with their flex waivers. The A-F Letter Grading Bill would

allow parents to evaluate school quality quickly and well to choose the right option for their child.

Michigan also needs HB 5111, the "Third Grade Reading Guarantee". It requires that every child who is developmentally capable of achieving this goal can read by third grade. "Learning to read" allows children by 3rd grade to "read to learn" in subsequent grades, a critical building block for student achievement. The Legislature views this change as a reasonable K-12 school improvement within Michigan's per-child school foundation grant, and has not budgeted funds for retraining teachers; SBE and MDE have remained neutral on its passage primarily for that reason. We respectfully request that the bill, or a substitute providing support for teacher training, be enacted into law.

In addition, there is pending or proposed legislation on a number of important K-12 issues which could have significant impact on student achievement in all Michigan public schools. Among them are performance evaluation of teachers and administrators; truancy; student suspension and expulsion. Michigan also must develop consensus for measuring student achievement and academic growth in a way that can be respected and used by policy makers, legislators and educators. We urge the Legislature to move forward on these and other initiatives, creating a supportive and thoughtful web that helps every student learn no matter what public school they attend.

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