



**Michigan
Parents
for Schools**

What Our Schools Need What Our Kids Deserve

A Parent Proposal to Assist Struggling Schools

Strategies to turn around troubled schools need to address specific local challenges and be owned by the local school and district community

We always want our schools to be better, and often we're tempted to compare the schools we have unfavorably to what we think, or imagine, we had in the past. Even so, there is no question that Michigan has been struggling for many years with schools, concentrated in low-income urban and rural areas, which are simply not producing graduates with the kind of education we expect for our children.

The reasons why these schools and their students struggle are complex, but that does not excuse us from acting on our common commitment to providing every child with a quality education. Our solutions, however, need to be structured to meet the needs of individual schools and communities, and must be designed to be sustainable in the long run.

The current situation

Michigan's current law dealing with the lowest performing schools, section 1280c of the Revised School Code (MCL 380.1280c), was passed into law in late 2009 as part of our state's ultimately unsuccessful effort to win Federal "Race to the Top" grant program funds. As a result, Michigan's statute is currently stronger, but also much more narrowly prescriptive, than the requirements of the existing Federal No Child Left Behind law.

Briefly, the current law places the lowest performing 5% of Michigan schools under the authority of the school reform/redesign officer (SRRO), who heads a state reform/redesign district. The SRRO must require the school board of the struggling school to submit a redesign plan to address its academic performance issues within 90 days. The SRRO then has 30 days to approve, reject, or modify the plan submitted by the local district.

If the SRRO does not approve a redesign plan, or if the SRRO determines *at any time* that the plan is "not achieving satisfactory results," the school is placed under state control in the school reform/redesign district. At that point, the SRRO must impose one of the four intervention models listed in the "Race to the Top" program. The SRRO takes over the full authority of the school board with respect to that school and has the power to change all contracts and control all spending at the school. If a school makes "significant improvement in student achievement," the SRRO may recommend to the state Superintendent that the school be released from state control.

OUR ALTERNATIVE

Existing law does not provide enough assistance to local schools in diagnosing and solving their difficulties. To compound the problem, the law provides for complete state takeover as the only remedy for schools which fail to improve. The parents' alternative is based on these core ideas:

- Any effective school improvement strategy must focus on the particular circumstances of the school or district that is a candidate for intervention, and be tailored to address local needs and shortcomings.
- Diagnosis of educational problems is best done by experienced and disinterested specialists, but the solutions to those problems will be most durable if they are hammered out and implemented by all relevant stakeholder groups.
- Unilateral state intervention must be a last resort, and must be focused solely on implementing the changes identified as necessary in the independent review.
- The goal of state intervention for school improvement is not to take over management of the school but to identify and see implemented educational and organizational changes, which are critical to the long-term growth of student achievement.

Keep the Public in Public Education

Recent proposals

Pending legislation (HB 4369), would transfer responsibility for managing the state reform/redesign district to a new entity, the Education Achievement Authority, governed by a board appointed by the governor. The bill, as it passed the House, would mandate that schools appearing on the 5% lowest performing list for three consecutive years be placed under the authority of the EAA, with some narrow exceptions. A school can only be released from EAA control if the Chancellor of the EAA and the SRRO agree that the school has made sufficient progress, or if the school has not appeared on the 5% lowest performing list for four consecutive years.

At the end of last school year, there were 146 schools on the lowest 5% list developed by the MDE. Of those, 37 have appeared on the list for three consecutive years (thus subject to EAA takeover) and 13 of that number are already under the control of the EAA under the existing inter-local agreement.

collective bargaining agreements. It is important that the local stakeholders are given responsibility to develop this agreement, since its long-term success depends on local ownership and support. The MDE would have authority to judge the adequacy of the implementation plan.

Effective change, not takeovers

If, and only if, the local stakeholders are unable to reach agreement on a plan, or if local authorities fail to implement the plan in a timely fashion, the MDE would have the authority to make those changes necessary to implement the recommendations of the audit report.

Once the plan is in effect, our proposal would include a continued partnership between local stakeholders and state education officials – to make sure the plan is working and to make alterations based on experience and changing conditions. Making ongoing adjustments is one of the key factors that help school improvement plans succeed for the long term. Schools that successfully stay off the list would no longer be subject to state control, but would continue to receive support from MDE and the local ISD.

Our proposal draws on successful MDE practices from the past, when the MDE designed and implemented an audit system much like the one described here. What was missing from that earlier program was any ability on the part of the MDE to insist that schools and districts act on the audit findings. This proposal also gives the audit team a more specific role to develop recommended changes.

We believe the proposal to be consistent with Michigan's waiver agreement with the US Dept. of Education for flexibility under NCLB. However, this proposal expands the role of the MDE in assisting districts to make systemic changes, rather than focusing exclusively at the school building level. Moreover, it shifts the focus away from takeovers after some arbitrary period to an interactive process where local stakeholders retain control as long as they are making good-faith efforts to implement the reform program. Continued evaluation and adjustment of the program, under the supervision of the MDE and/or the local ISD, is a key element of our proposal.

Most importantly, we believe that this intervention framework holds the best hope for real, lasting, improvement in our most troubled schools.

EDUCATIONAL AUDITS

We propose a system that is built around **educational audits: independent reviews of school and district climate and practices which seek to identify and recommend corrections for problems which contribute to the school's persistent low performance.** Every school on the "lowest 5%" list would enter into a multi-year process which begins with an educational audit.

Once the audit was complete, state education authorities would assist key stakeholders in the local district to develop a plan to implement the recommendations of the audit. **These stakeholders would include the local school board, school administrators, teachers and other school staff, parents, and community members.** This plan could include changes in practices at the school and district level, as well as changes to

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