



STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
LANSING

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PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

August 9, 2011

MEMORANDUM

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: John C. Austin, President

SUBJECT: Summary of State Board of Education Public Education Forums

The Michigan State Board of Education held a series of public education forums during May and June, 2011. A summary of the information gleaned from the forums is attached.

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

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State Board of Education - Public Education Forums Spring 2011

Summary – August 1, 2011

Purpose and Context of Forums

During several weeks in May and June 2011, the State Board of Education held a series of regional open public education forums across the state. The forums were designed to extend and make more accessible to the public, the opportunity for education stakeholders to share recommendations, innovations, issues and challenges they are confronting in improving educational outcomes.

The forums, anticipated to be a more regular part of the State Board's activity, were designed to:

- assist the elected members of the State Board of Education in doing our Constitutionally-mandated job of providing leadership and supervision over all public education,
- better inform our recommendations to the governor and legislature on education policy and funding;
- improve our educational policy decision-making and advocacy.

Forum Locations

Five three-hour forums were held across the state from May 23, 2011 – June 20, 2011 hosted by leading regional universities and community colleges:

West Michigan

Monday May 23, 4:00 -7:00 p.m.: Grand Rapids Community College, Grand Rapids

Southeast Michigan

Wednesday, May 25, 4:00 -7:00 p.m.: Macomb Community College, Warren

Thursday, May 26, 4:00 -7:00 p.m.: University of Michigan League, Ann Arbor

Monday, June 20, 4:00 -7:00 p.m.: Wayne County Community College District, Detroit

Central Michigan

Tuesday, June 7, 4:00 -7:00 p.m.: Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant

Forum Participation

Over 500 people participated in the forums, and more than 150 education stakeholders gave written or verbal testimony. The participants included local and regional school superintendents, school board members, college and university leaders, teachers, social workers, state representatives, education-related non-profit organizations and support programs, researchers, special education advocates, parents, business leaders, and students.

At each forum elected State Board of Education Members shared a brief overview of their constitutional role in education, recent major education policy decisions, and State Board recommendations on education policy directions and materials, along with the Governor's Special Education message and State Board position papers in response to the Governor's policy and budget. These materials were made available to the public in attendance.¹

The major part of each forum was dedicated to local education leaders: school superintendents, board members, teachers representatives, college and university leaders; and the general public who wished to speak: parents, teachers, community organization representatives – sharing 3-5 minute reflections on educational issues, challenges, innovations and recommendations for state-decision makers.

All written and oral testimony provided by the public has been gathered, reproduced and shared with all State Board of Education Members, the Superintendent of Public Instruction and Michigan Department of Education.

Major Themes and Issues Raised at the Forums

The meetings were universally diverse in the vantage points and topics raised by participants, mutually respectful and appreciative of all points of view. Participants were particularly appreciative of the opportunity afforded by the State Board to meet their elected officials and have their voice, ideas, and perspective heard and considered.

Innovations

The State Board Members invited and heard a significant number of presentations on innovative educational programs and initiatives – that are being developed, replicated and promoted successfully by educators and their communities at the local level – irrespective of financial and other challenges being felt by school districts.

¹ State Board of Education Improvement and Reform Priorities – Recommendations to Governor Snyder and Legislature, approved February 8, 2011
the Legislature, approved February 8, 2011
Governor Snyder's Special Message on Education, April 27, 2011
State Board of Education Resolution on Governor Snyder's Budget, approved March 8, 2011
State Board of Education Resolution on Governor Snyder's Education Message, approved May 10, 2011
Michigan Education Dashboard, Governor Snyder and Michigan Department of Education, May 8, 2011

A full roster and description of these innovations and their impact is incorporated in the full testimony from the forums. The examples set by so many educational innovators demonstrate the commitment and tenacity of communities across Michigan to improve educational outcomes. Examples include:

- Clintondale’s “Flipped High School” program providing a unique high school learning environment for at risk students;
- The Kent County Family and Children’s Coordinating Council – a multipurpose collaborative providing needed support services;
- The College Access Network and its local affiliates and what they are doing in many regions to expand college access opportunities;
- Grand Rapids Community College’s School of Workforce Development program of study aligning K-12 secondary and postsecondary courses;
- Ypsilanti’s New Tech High School and new High School offerings for families;
- Livingston ESA and Gratiot-Isabella RESD are pioneering shared services arrangements;
- Ithaca Public Schools’ digital learning innovations;
- Lakeshore School’s Chinese Learning Program;
- Central Michigan University’s model for overseeing and evaluating its charter Schools;
- Central Michigan University and Mt. Pleasant Schools’ partnership to train new teachers and lend needed help in strapped classrooms;
- Kent ISD where student voice is informing high school redesign
- The Jumpstart financial literacy curriculum;
- Wayne RESA’s support programs for Detroit and its constituent communities;
- University of Michigan’s School of Education revamping teacher preparation;
- Pontiac’s Promise Zone expanding college opportunity;
- United Way of Southeast Michigan and its Early Childhood initiatives;
- Excellent Schools Detroit expanding quality high school offerings;
- National Charter School Center – innovative data management and student tracking system;
- Michigan’s Math Science Centers leading a statewide Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) initiative;
- Project Lead the Way, Eastern Michigan University hosting the state expansion of this effective teacher and student exploration program for STEM occupations;
- The power of Michigan’s Early Colleges and Middle College High Schools to deliver better graduation rates and accelerated postsecondary instruction for all students.

Through all these examples the forums shined a public spotlight and encouraged cross-pollination and replication of these important educational innovations, and helped the State Board of Education and our state leadership understand the importance and how to better support local innovation.

Set Priorities and Focus

There was a common refrain among educators in the forums that there was a flood of educational reform and change coming simultaneously. Encouragement was given to the State Board of Education and education decision-makers to prioritize and focus on a shorter list of meaningful change. What should school districts do first? What should be second? What are the most important reform agendas and how can they be consistently supported?

Follow-through on Michigan Merit Curriculum

Another common theme was continuing to help with the implementation of the Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC). Concerns continued to be voiced about the MMC squeezing out Career Technical Education and important career-context learning opportunities. Continual challenges remain in communicating and understanding the flexibility to innovate within the MMC; in particular that the MMC requirements are credits, not specific courses, in a specific order. The credits are meant to reflect mastery of content and standards and can be delivered and assessed in any number of ways: integrated, non-sequential, in project-driven multi-disciplinary classes (as some schools are doing); in career-themed and contextualized learning, and through virtual and blended learning.

Communication challenges also remain regarding the Personal Curriculum option and creation of customized programming for individual students.

Translate Attention to Teacher Quality to a More Positive Support Effort

Michigan's teachers who gave voice in the forums consistently shared a concern with the general demoralization within teacher ranks. The current policy and political attention demanding better results from schools, better evaluation and assessment of teacher performance (combined with changes and cuts to benefits and school funding overall) are being experienced as demoralizing – versus empowering and supportive of great teaching.

The numerous teachers who spoke at the forums, in general agreed to be expected to deliver high learning expectations, want to be evaluated fairly and don't want bad teachers teaching. But the collective push to improve teacher quality in state policy is not being experienced as:

- improving teacher preparation so new teachers are more effective entering the profession,
- better supporting and mentoring new teachers,
- doing a better job evaluating teachers who are in the profession,
- finding meaningful ways to keep teachers in the profession.

As many at the forums shared: Why would someone want to go into teaching in Michigan today? How do we attract the best and brightest to teaching? Where are we going to get the science and engineering teachers we need?

Turning the Governor, Legislature, and State Board's focus on teacher performance from one of "negative pressure" to one of "positive pressure" is a continuing challenge for Michigan.

Listen, involve locals in the process

There was also a generalized sense communicated, as State Board of Education Member Richard Zeile noted, that there was a lot of change and a lot of dictates from “Lansing” – a catch-all including the Governor, Legislature, State Board of Education, and Superintendent of Public Instruction/Michigan Department of Education.

Many education speakers took advantage of the public forum to share their critique of current state policy reforms and agendas such as higher cut scores, the proposed accreditation system, budget cuts and service delivery reforms being demanded. Their tone was not one of fundamental disagreement with objectives, but of frustration at all that was being “done to them” by the generalized “Lansing.”

Clearly the State Board of Education Forums which included numerous State Legislators and United States Congressman John Conyers who listened and participated actively in the forums, and the routine visits and work of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to get into schools and meet with local officials are potentially important antidotes. More importantly, these events can be meeting grounds for more shared ownership of educational improvement. These are the kind of interactions stakeholders would like to see expanded.

In Detroit, specifically, this opinion was particularly strong. By coincidence, the State Board of Education Forum in Detroit fell on the same day as the Governor's announcement of changes to the structure of Detroit Public Schools. Participants at the forum that evening shared strong opinions about the lack of community involvement in this process, and their desire to be engaged with Detroit Public Schools.

Specific Policy Reforms and Recommendations

Participants at the forums provided a number of very specific policy and program recommendations that are important to consider as Michigan moves ahead. These include:

- Include Special Education goals and measures in the Governor’s Dashboard, and in the overall education reform and improvement agenda;
- Alternative Education Programs need more than four years with students;
- Michigan’s financing system for dual enrollment still needs fixing, to provide an incentive, versus disincentive for early college credit-taking and accelerated learning;
- School social workers, counselors and other important support functions are increasingly overburdened and unable to provide needed support for learning; one example given is that some social workers serve up to 120 students;

- Career and college readiness benchmarks need to be very clear – as Michigan proceeds to embrace the Common Core Standards and Curriculum; broadly accepted measures of the target “career and college ready” need to be confirmed; the ACT as the best proxy of the moment provokes concern among some educators, and deliberate attention to clearly defining and confirming this or the right valid target is important;
- Revenue millage options need to be created locally that can help raise resources while still keeping equity through revenue sharing proposals.

Conclusion

One of the most important functions of elected officials and a public body is to engage and listen to our constituents, and whether we agree or disagree, use the dialogue to advance and improve our collective actions, policy decisions and education advocacy improvement efforts.

These forums made more accessible the State Board, and elevate our attention and that of other decision-makers to issues, themes and specific actions we might consider advancing. The perspective of constituents from around the state demands our meaningful attention.