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MEMORANDUM

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Matinga Ragatz

SUBJECT: Michigan Teacher of the Year, April Report

Teachers as Agents of Change:

When teachers meet these days, it is not business as usual. Lately, after school in many classrooms and in many schools in Michigan, the topics of conversation are transforming from being a gauge of teacher morale to being inspiring and exciting action plans.

It is apparent from the current public perception and media dialog that teachers are no longer trusted to do their jobs. Our worth is being debated in many circles and we are often the scapegoats of rushed programs, dated education policies, and badly implemented ideas.

Many teachers are in agreement that the role of teachers as experts must change. Also, education policy and decision makers could greatly help by becoming more open-minded and more democratic in their quest for a more effective education system.

Traditionally, teachers have been placed in a vacuum where it is difficult to understand MDE's vision. The message is rarely directed to us teachers and yet, we are expected to follow a path we might not agree with. In the face of change, teachers feel they are rarely consulted nor have an effective forum to express their ideas and opinions.

Teachers are beginning to outwardly and boldly question how policy makers arrive at their points of view and conclusions. In the area of education, there are countless experts that provide the information that becomes part of the decision making process. But we ask, "Who are these people?"

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We understand that among this extensive field of 'education experts' that policy makers follow, there are often dominant perspectives or trends that emerge that effectively override the opinions of school staff. The assertions of many of these celebrated luminaries often attract a hero-like following and are not vigorously challenged. In fact, these experts rarely have time to challenge or review each other since the prize is not in debunking flimsy claims but in selling one's assertion.

There are many reasons why teachers, education boards, and state policy makers should reexamine the practice of relying on untested expert assertions and the sometimes outdated education experiences of the 21st century classroom.

One of the most disturbing reasons is that many education policy makers and their expert advisers are governed by the cultural norms of their times. The sound practices that worked for our generation are complete duds in the current classroom. For example, in early Victorian England, experts of that era advised that women and the children of the poor had a limited learning capability. Many of the obvious variables and complexities currently associated with learning, were completely ignored by the 'experts' due to cultural and philosophical beliefs of the time. These were not assertions made through observation.

Expert opinion is also often fueled by money and the political climate. Many studies funded by pharmaceutical companies, for example, and commercially motivated trends, such as some ed tech gadgets, have a huge influence on education spending, education policy and its implementation. Political trends, like the ones we are witnessing around the country today, also have a terrible impact on the way that education is perceived. So many assertions are made to provide billable hours, volume sales, and political fuel. So teachers are asking themselves, are many of the results of the research and studies exaggerations that serve to pad profit margins or political careers?

The trouble is that most untested expert advice is also clouded by thinking errors. A common thinking error, for anyone who has attended school, is the inability to understand the true shelf life of education trends. Many published experts are former educators and are no longer in the classroom. The reality is that in these times of fast-paced change and uncertainty, education trends have the life span of a tech gadget. By the time they are off the shelf, they are already outdated and there is another "it" trend lurking around the corner. So an education expert who has been out of a school building for more than 2 years, has suffered the same fate as the palm pilot, and their assertion, though inspiring, might no longer apply in the 21st century classroom.

Teachers are not dismissing the advice of many of these experts. We use expert advice to test stuff in our classroom all the time. But, most practitioners will agree that public assertions must be put to the test in a real classroom before they are offered as solid expert advice and before they are adopted by policy makers. Unlike

within the scientific community, the assertions of an expert educational hypothesis are not always required to be replicated elsewhere and are rarely open to peer review before they are placed in the market.

So rather than readily accepting expert trends created outside of the school systems, why not rely on the proposals from the experts on the inside? Good teachers are great empiricists. They innovate, test, assess what works and evaluate, redesign and rebuild what doesn't work in their classrooms, their schools and their communities.

Continuing to ignore or minimize the input from the people in the trenches creates dangerous spirals. For instance, for decades, practicing educators have been stating that standardized testing is not an accurate measure of student performance. We have been saying that concentrating so much of our efforts to produce better scores leaves more children behind. In the frantic race to raise student scores, we are dismissing the proven best practices that help our children become productive and skilled members of society. However, there is an existing force of publishers, test creators, specialist and politicians that are pushing the concept of measuring student performance in this way for a variety of alternative gains. It is as if the purpose of schools has become to create a platform on which to use our children as a way to artificially measure ourselves with the rest world rather than preparing them to function in these difficult economic times.

For these many reasons, teachers are talking about how best to mold our roles in the front line to better advocate for the future our children. Many of us are sitting at round tables, panel discussions, making presentations, and standing around the drawing board again in an effort to expand our outreach and become the agent of change.

On Saturday March 19th, I attended the 2011 Creative Educator Summit at LCC. This event was organized by the founders of the [DeWitt Creativity Group](#) and practicing teachers, Jeff Croley and Jason LaFay from DeWitt High School. The goal of the summit was to create more awareness and attention about some of the innovative education programs created by teachers and to put ideas into action in the upcoming school year at a classroom/school/district level. Croley and LaFay, like many of our numbers, want to make summits and gatherings like this one become the norm among educators.

They are a great example of teachers taking the lead in changing their role to fit the 21st century. The main focus of the DeWitt Creativity Group is to promote student creativity in connection with public service and entrepreneurialism (the development of innovative products and services). Another area of emphasis is to prepare students for the creative economy. This is an economy that requires people to develop and exercise skills and forms of knowledge such as: critical thinking, technological proficiency, willingness to accept the differences of others,

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networking, constant reinvention of the self, and the ability to design and implement innovative concepts/practices. Without these skills and forms of knowledge individuals, communities, and countries will fail to prosper.

Teachers have been a sadly underutilized resource, but now we want to be viewed as viable experts and agents of change. 21st century Michigan teachers want to take part in building a better and more effective education for Michigan's children.