



March 9, 2010

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is John Bebow and I am executive director of the Center for Michigan.

Over the past 30 months, the Center hosted approximately 500 “Community Conversations” involving more than 10,000 people in every corner of our state. The purpose was to help educate everyday citizens about the challenges facing Michigan, gather their concerns, and develop a common ground citizens’ agenda for Michigan’s future.

In those many hours of deliberation, citizens outlined the following education action steps, listed here in order of priority:

- 1) Continue to revise the curriculum and link education to the jobs of the new economy. Citizens ask that you focus on the basics of reading, writing and math. Yet they also want a creative learning environment where educators do not teach to standardized tests. And they want educators to clearly illustrate to students the relevance between class lessons and the outside world.
- 2) Improve funding for Pre-K through high school.
- 3) Fully recognize the importance of Pre-K programs.
- 4) Assure all students succeed – minimize drop outs; eliminate social promotions.
- 5) Intensify educator accountability through training and development, tenure reform, and merit pay.
- 6) Intensify school district collaboration and consolidation.
- 7) Expand teaching and learning through a longer school year and longer school days.

On that last point, I’d like to take this opportunity to remind you of the Center’s “School Daze” report issued exactly one year ago. As we have testified previously, the report indicated that in the 2007-08 school year more than 40 percent of Michigan’s public school districts offered fewer than 170 days of instruction.

You responded quickly and requested reforms from the Legislature, which didn't exactly go all the way to meet your concerns. The Legislature passed rules requiring that districts return to at least 165 days of instruction in the 2010-11 school year (if it would not violate labor contracts) and at least 170 days of instruction in 2012-13.

Is that really good enough?

Over the course of a 13-year education, a student in a 165-day district would get a full year less instruction than one in a 180-day district.

This issue is not going away. The Atlanta, Michigan school district went to a four-day week earlier this year. And, the front page of yesterday's Wall Street Journal reported that dozens of districts nationwide are now going to four-day school weeks. All of them are doing it for budget reasons. None of them are doing it to provide better education to our kids.

Unfortunately, it's a challenge to fully update the school days situation in Michigan. The Center's researchers were told by Department of Education staff in January that all days and clock hour reports for 2008-09 remain in paper form and will not be compiled into any kind of spreadsheet because department workers do not have the time to do so. We hope the department can find the time to update this important policy data.

Finally, we hope the State Board's long-term education policy recommendations fully outline the fiscal and policy impacts of declining K-12 enrollment in Michigan. If projections are accurate, school populations will decrease by 15 percent, or about 250,000 from 2003 to 2017. Will that decrease result in potential cost savings? Surely it's not as simple as subtracting per pupil funding for a quarter-million lost students from the School Aid fund. But that calculation comes to nearly three billion dollars. As we lose students, will more bus routes, and schools, and districts operate under capacity? Does this increase the pressure for school district collaboration and consolidation?

We hope the State Board's policy recommendations address these questions. And, the Center will address them further tomorrow morning at a jam-packed town hall meeting on education at Eagle Eye Golf Club in East Lansing. Speakers, including Mike Flanagan, State Representative Tim Melton, MSU President Lou Anna K. Simon, and numerous other educators and students, have been asked to focus on education innovation over the next several years. We hope the event helps set the agenda for the important political campaigns to come later this year. We'll start pouring coffee at 7:30 a.m. and we'll have everybody back to their regular jobs after a free lunch. We hope to see you there.

Thank you.

