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**MEMORANDUM**

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Matinga Ragatz

Subject: Michigan Teacher of the Year, May 2011 Report

**A Complex Web of Cultural and Social Barriers**

Wednesday night April 27th, a collaborative group of students from Dewitt and Grand Ledge High School organized and presented a student led public discussion. Their goal was to create a forum in which they and their peers share their real high school experiences and ideas regarding the impact of secondary school programs today. They also wanted to encourage other students, teachers, administrators, parents, community, area organizations and businesses to dialog about current education issues and to understand the roots of the students' call for change.

The event was held at Grand Ledge High School. High school students state wide are extremely concerned that they do not have a platform to speak and practice advocacy, which silences an important voice in the current education debate. Is it an intentional exclusion?

The DeWitt High School students presented an original student script called 'Questions'. Students used a dramatic and innovative multimedia combination of abstract skits and monologues that gave the audience a compelling reality check about what our students are experiencing in our educational institutions. Then the students engaged their guests in a multi-generational community dialogue. This gave the audience a chance to really understand the power of cultivating creativity in young people and the results of allowing them to express themselves in ways that showcase their passions.

The students were poised and seemed extremely mature in their content delivery. They did something that the stereotypical teen would never be expected to accomplish. They managed to shake away the apathy in every adult in the audience and left everyone inspired to find their own passion in their pursuits.

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Time and again students in the production and in the audience testified that they felt stifled by the paradoxical nature of the educational demands. On the one hand they are asked to be creative and innovative, but on the other hand they are treated as if their opinions do not matter. The students strongly felt that they do not suffer from apathy but that they feel like they are pushing against a brick wall on every school day.

Students also reported a strong desire for a chance to figure things out for themselves, experience failure, and stop being asked to be 'right' all the time.

These impassioned pleas really caused me reflect on whether I provide enough room for my students to explore, create, innovate, learn and grow.

I have spent the last few years of my career thinking, almost obsessing, about being wrong and observing my behavior when I am inside that space. What is astonishing to me is that I slowly came to the realization that when I can admit to myself that I am wrong, I spend more time thinking creatively and innovatively. I have become more productive than when I was trying so hard to make others see how 'right' I was.

The truth is that in recent years, the sensationalized standardized tests statistics on student performance -- quoted on political podiums and echoed by the media -- might be well-intentioned, but have come at the expense of putting forth bold and creative ideas about how to generate better learning environments for savvy 21st century students. Students can smell this and it feeds into a growing cynicism.

The danger of relying so heavily on standardized test results is that it creates a cultural atmosphere of having to be right all the time. For nine years, my freshmen have been taught that having the wrong answers is a failure and that failing too many times is an indicator of their character. They have been taught that when they are right they are winners and they are smart, responsible and virtuous. When in truth, the student that is failing is often closer to a real life learning opportunity, while the student that gets the right answer is sometimes simply parroting what is expected.

Education institutions also suffer greatly from cultural pressures to rise to state-mandated standards. In their quest to be right, their ability to self-analyze diminishes and they end up doing things like spending millions of dollars on special education and student drop-out prevention programs that serve as enablers rather than as constructive therapy. Adding more rules, benchmarks, and evaluations -- in an attempt to standardize the 'right' type of progress -- actively discourages engagement of schools in the business of creating true learning environments.

It has become so important for us to teach students to see the world as it is, or as we have experienced it. But, by allowing them to learn through their own mistakes, we encourage them to see the world as it isn't, yet. This approach to discovery, then, is a ripe platform that forces critical thinking and innovation.

Failure is not some screw-up that we can eradicate by throwing standardized benchmarks and evaluation at it. It is a fundamental part of who we are as people and how we figure things out. Failure is the root of all human creativity.

Because these students felt trusted and encouraged to infuse their passion and creativity into what they were learning, they were able to muster an innovative way to deliver their messages. They cleverly combined elements of what they had already learned in their school career because they were provided with fertile space to deliver to their community high quality product. Isn't this the objective of learning?

Every adult in the audience, including retired SBE member Carolyn Curtis, left with the reminder that innovating is a collective effort. It is imperfect. It is ongoing and most importantly, it is voluntary. We know this, but we have forgotten.

Innovative, creative and skillful are words that have been used world wide to describe American productivity. If we can redefine student failure not as a shortcoming but as a complex web of cultural and social barriers that forces apathy and disengagement, then we can begin to identify what those barriers are and work together collectively to dismantle those systemic obstacles one by one. It might take a decade but by removing a crumbling foundation we can get down to the business of redoubling our levels of innovation, creativity and producing skillful youth well prepared to lead in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.