



# Michigan Parents for Schools

*Parents working for excellent public schools  
—for our children, our communities, and our future.*

Steven J. Norton  
*Executive Director*

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The Honorable Phil Pavlov, Chair  
Senate Education Committee  
905 Farnum Building  
Lansing, MI 48909

20 September 2011

Dear Chairman Pavlov,

On behalf of parent activists from across Michigan, I am here today to ask that your Committee not report out the “parent empowerment” package of bills (SB 618, 619, 620, 621 and 624) in their current form.

Michigan Parents for Schools is a non-profit, public interest advocacy organization working to ensure that our public schools have the tools and resources to provide an excellent education to all our children. Part of that mission is to encourage careful and informed structural changes to Michigan public schools, so that every child can receive a quality education—regardless of where they live or the resources that may be available to their family. But the bills before you today will not accomplish that purpose.

Before I enumerate our reasons for opposing this legislation, I’d like to accept Dr. Tony Bennett’s challenge, in his testimony before this committee, to say what we are *for*.

We are *for* a system of public education that honors our common commitment to educate every child.

We are *for* public school systems that have the resources and support they need to help every child fulfill their potential.

We are *for* evaluation and accountability systems that assess the full range of teaching and learning involved in producing engaged citizens and productive members of our community, rather than narrow measures that will lead schools to restrict their curriculum. We are *for* systems that encourage the long-term growth of both our children and the professionals who teach them.

Finally, we are *for* public policy in education that focuses on fixing the problems that exist rather than simply declaring our public schools a failure and making it easier for those who are able to walk away from them.

These principles may sound general, but they have direct consequences for policy. Our “common commitment to educate every child” implies school systems that are built and governed by the whole community rather than fragmented into multiple educa-

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tional enclaves. Members of the community exercise “choice” by setting the direction of their schools and by choosing elected representatives who reflect their values and priorities. The notion of parents as “consumers” of education has, in recent years, eclipsed the idea that public schools are a joint project of the entire community. This fragments and dilutes our efforts to educate all children and build stronger communities.

The focus on competition enshrined in these bills is directly at odds with the priority to ensure that schools have “the resources and support they need.” Under the current system, “competition” for students does not drive excellence; it simply steals resources from already-struggling schools. When districts lose students, a downward cycle begins of program cuts and more enrollment declines—something we call the “death spiral.” Under Michigan’s per-pupil funding system, the funding loss from losing a student is much greater than the financial savings the district will reap from enrolling one less child. Moreover, students who move between districts carry with them the lesser of the two system’s per-pupil funding, which saves the state money but inevitably puts pressure on the district trying to educate more children.

As Mr. Jalen Rose pointed out in his testimony, money *does* matter. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, struggling schools are rarely in trouble because their teachers and administrators are not working hard enough. Rather, it is because they are overwhelmed. To be truly effective, schools must have the resources to develop their teaching staff, to offer rich programming to their students, and to provide as much assistance as needed to students who are struggling. Schools in hard-hit communities are unable to reach any of these goals. Poverty does not determine a child’s potential, but it does weigh her down tremendously in her effort to take advantage of an education. Competition will not change that, but resources can.

Finally, it should be our duty as citizens to correctly identify and fix problems with our schools rather than walking away from those problems. Just about every major provision in these bills—from lifting the cap on charter schools and cyber schools, creating “conversion” schools, and allowing traditional school districts to put their instructional services out to bid—presumes that local school districts and their teachers are the problem. In nearly all cases, the “solution” in the legislation is to provide more opportunities to walk away from those problems. Rather than providing resources and assistance to improve education in places where it falters, rather than providing adequate resources to overcome the terrible weight of poverty and its corrosive effect on families and communities, these bills offer an escape hatch for *some* families to find something better on their own. Only, many children and their families do not have the resources to make that escape, and most would find that the lifeboats are already full. Rather than building a few more lifeboats, why not right the ship?

Many schools in our state do need substantial help to serve their students well, and nearly all schools have room for improvement. The focus of our public policy should be on providing that help, and the resources to back it up, rather than fragmenting public education and hollowing out our traditional school districts. This bill package will not take our state where we need to go.

If, however, our lawmakers are determined to enact these measures, we propose a modest but important change. All new charter, conversion and cyber schools, and any entities that provide instructional services for schools, should be non-profit organizations eligible to operate under section 501(c)(3) of

the internal revenue code (“public charities”). We can imagine no justification for a private, for-profit firm to profit on the backs of our children; any surplus should be used to expand student programming or to support other schools. Likewise, while traditional public schools are required to report their finances in minute detail, privately held educational management organizations are not required to open their books at all. Entities receiving public funds to educate our children should be fully transparent. Non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations would address both these concerns, as they are forbidden from generating a private profit, and their finances must be open to public inspection. Michigan should follow the lead of other states, such as New York, and ensure that all public schools are being operated for a public purpose.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Steven J. Norton  
Executive Director