



# Michigan Parents for Schools

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

6 May 2013

Steven J. Norton  
*Executive Director*

Jennifer Tanau  
*Board Chair*

Janice Lieberman  
*Secretary*

Jeannette Jackson  
*Treasurer*

Carrie Chester  
*Board member*

Elisabeth Welch Lykins  
*Board member*

Angela Wilson  
*Board member*

The Honorable Arne Duncan  
Secretary of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of Michigan parents and others concerned about public education here, I would like to welcome you to our state. Michigan is home to some of the best ideas and programs in education as well as some of the most serious challenges our schools, and communities, face. We welcome your effort to learn more about the hopes we cherish and the obstacles we confront in our local efforts to educate our children.

Unfortunately, I fear that your tour may leave you with an incorrect impression of what is in fact happening in our state. The current direction of state policy is not to offer an excellent education to all children. Instead, key Michigan policy makers have adopted an extremely narrow and barren notion of “education” and have focused on how to deliver it at the lowest cost possible. These proposals take us in precisely the wrong direction.

### *A distorted vision for schools*

The most recent example: Parents and concerned citizens across the state have been appalled by stories emerging from our state capital about a secret “skunk works” project to create bargain-basement schools. Their plan has two key parts: the first is a voucher-like debit card that students could use to “buy” bits of education here and there. Schools would become simply vendors. If a student “purchases” a bargain education, the balance on the card could be used for extras like sports fees, music lessons, and so on.

The other part of the plan is to create the value-priced school where students could find these “value menu” bargains. The skunk works group hopes to create schools that could operate with \$2,000 less per pupil than the current minimum funding—but still allowing for vendors to make a profit.

As their documents make clear, the only real way to do this was to depend on fully online education, with a small number of teachers overseeing a large number of students in an internet-based program. What makes this so cheap, of course, is that much of the time students are interacting with canned videos and worksheets.

This “skunk works” group, including top advisers to Gov. Snyder, other government officials, former voucher school advocates, and online education vendors, has been working under the radar since December, using private emails. They explicitly excluded anyone who might argue that our local public school systems don’t need to be tossed in the garbage.

Is this what education means these days? Watching videos on a computer and asking chat room questions of a teacher somewhere else who is managing fifty, seventy or one hundred other students? When do our children learn to think creatively or work in groups? How do

1217 Olivia Ave  
Ann Arbor, MI 48104  
(734) 730-2216  
[www.mipfs.org](http://www.mipfs.org)

they learn to get along with and even lead a group of people very different from themselves? How can a teacher figure out what might spark the interest or imagination of a child?

Our schools should do more than simply pour “stuff” into the heads of our children and call it education. Our young people need to be able to adjust to a changing and uncertain world. We’re not just educating future workers, but also citizens and members of our communities. That is what we are working for in our state and what we wish for every American child.

### *Genuine education*

As you said in a speech just one week ago: “Ultimately, a great education involves much more than teaching children simply to read, write, add, and subtract. It includes teaching them to think and write clearly, and to solve problems and work in teams. It includes teaching children to set goals, to persist in tasks, and to help them navigate the world.”

I could not agree more. That is the reason why I am so glad that you will be visiting the Perry Child Development Center in Ypsilanti, home of the famed Perry Preschool Study and the High/Scope early childhood education model which grew out of that early work.

This is how the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation describes the model developed in the Perry study and in wide use today:

“[A]dults encourage children to to make choices, solve problems, and engage in activities that contribute to their intellectual, social, and physical development.... [Teachers] do not provide children with prescriptively sequenced lessons that cover a defined subject matter. Instead, they listen closely to children’s plans and then actively work with them to extend their activities.... Adults rarely ask questions merely to test children’s grasp of letters, numbers, or colors. Instead, they ask for self-generated descriptions or ideas: What happened? How did you make that? Can you show me? Can you help another child?”\*

These kinds of ideas should be the foundation of our efforts. Instead, we are marching resolutely in the opposite direction.

### *“All politics is local”*

Mr. Secretary, please be aware that what you say and do has consequences all the way down to the classroom. Sadly, those who wish to turn education into rote learning and remove the public from our public schools have been bending the Obama Administration’s policy initiatives to their own agenda. Your calls for accountability and equity have been used in our state as cover to erode and defund public schools and to attack the very idea of public governance of public education. As you reflect on your visit here, I urge you to think about the reality of what is happening in Michigan schools and discount the highly scripted presentations developed for a press event.

Our schools are at the breaking point. We cannot afford to engage in make-believe.

Sincerely,

Steven J. Norton  
Executive Director  
Michigan Parents for Schools  
sjnorton@mipfs.org

\* From Schweinhart, Montie, et al., “Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40” (Ypsilanti: High Scope Press, 2005).

*Michigan Parents for Schools is a non-profit advocacy group helping parents and others speak up in support of quality local public education. <http://mipfs.org>*