



Michigan Parents for Schools

Working for excellent public schools—for our children and our communities

When did we become the enemy?

Michigan Parents for Schools statement on the latest “skunk works” revelations

The evidence is piling up that the Snyder administration was closely involved in the effort to construct an alternative “education” system whose top priority is to minimize public school costs, not improve education. According to emails obtained by the *Detroit News*, top advisers to Gov. Snyder helped put the so-called “skunk works” group together or approved of its creation as early as September 2012.

From the parent perspective, one of the most disturbing discoveries was a statement by Gov. Snyder’s chief of staff, Dennis Muchmore. “Frankly, there’s nothing I enjoy more than seeing the education community in a fratz,” Muchmore wrote not long after the “skunk works” story first broke.

Thousands of parents, educators, and other concerned citizens who care about quality public education expressed their outrage at the secrecy and narrow vision of the “skunk works” project. Since when did we become the enemy? What kind of distorted lens must members of the Snyder administration be using that they see in concerned parents an opponent to be overcome rather than a constituency to be heard?

There is now no question that plans to develop a “value school” to offer a “value education” were closely tied to the simultaneous effort to re-write Michigan’s school funding system and fully reflect the priorities of the Snyder administration. The “value school” plan was developed by a strong proponent of vouchers - political insider Richard McLellan - along with representatives of online schools and technology companies which stood to profit from the plan. No one can claim that this was “all about the kids.”

This whole policy direction is fundamentally flawed because of its incredibly narrow vision of what education means. In an effort to reduce spending at all costs (but ensure vendor profits), “skunk works” participants embraced the idea of students purchasing bits of education from the value menu at an online school. Students would even be given a kind of debit card with which to pay for these ‘knowledge nuggets.’

Behind these plans lies the fallacy that education consists of pouring bits of information into students’ brains. If that’s all education means, then it’s the kind of work machines can do more cheaply - and in fact that is precisely the kind of education the “skunk works” plan envisioned: machines “teaching” kids. This is how we program computers, not how we teach kids.

Not only has this kind of “schooling” been a disaster in other states with large online charter schools, it ignores what we parents consider to be the most important parts of the

educational process. In a real education, children learn to work with one another, to solve problems on their own and with others, and to apply what they learn to new problems and challenges. In a real education, as in the real world, students are not isolated in front of a computer but part of a dynamic community of learners, guided by skilled teachers, honing the skills they need to navigate a constantly changing world.

It’s hard not to notice that this kind of education is the one the Governor has chosen for his own child, at a well-regarded private school in Ann Arbor. We certainly don’t blame him for seeking the best for his children, as all parents hope to do. But why, then, do the policy initiatives from the Governor’s office seek to push public education in entirely the opposite direction?

Why are we rushing headlong into an effort to see how cheaply we can provide what might pass for an education? Why are we abandoning our historical commitment to educating productive and thoughtful citizens for a system where young people memorize “stuff”?

Finally, why are the people with the most at stake in this process - the current and future parents of Michigan - and those with the most expertise in this area - professional educators and those who train them - excluded from the discussion? Why are we treated as enemies when we defend the interests of all children?

Press reports indicate that “skunk works” participants saw themselves as innovators working to upend “the system.” We see them as narrow-minded captives of special interests, working towards a plan that is wrong for our children and wrong for Michigan.

Michigan Parents for Schools, Board of Directors

Jennifer Tanau, *chair*
 Janice Lieberman, *secretary*
 Jeannette Jackson, *treasurer*
 Carrie Chester
 Elizabeth Welch Lykins
 Angela Wilson
 Steven Norton, *executive director*

East Grand Rapids PTA Legislative Committee

Tina Murua

Friends of Kent County Schools

Christie Ramsey

Okemos Parent Council Legislative Committee

Brett DeGross

Friends of Dexter Community Schools

Jennifer Kangas

Parents for Thornapple-Kellogg Schools

Kristen Cove
Alexis Snyder

Michigan Citizens Advocating for Public Education

Birgit McQuiston

Ann Arbor Public Schools PTO Council

Donna Lasinski, *chair*
Jim Eddy, *vice chair*
Lauren Steele, *recording secretary*
Simone McDaniel, *corresponding secretary*
Anne-Marie Illgen
Amy Pachera
E. Martine Perreault
Kirsten Segal

Bloomfield Citizens for Public Schools