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FORUM

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Measuring public schools

State Superintendent Tom Watkins' plan to 'accredit' Michigan schools is getting a chilly response from the state's largest teachers union and from a group advocating for school reform

Proposal leaves parents in dark

Thirteen years ago, Michigan's government-run schools began a process of "accreditation." The idea was simple but smart. The state would serve as a consumer "stamp of approval," assuring parents and taxpayers that an "accredited" school was prepared to provide a quality education. Recently, when word leaked that as many as 1,000 state-run schools were going to lose accreditation, bureaucrats and teacher union officials rushed to stop the process. They apparently believed it was better to keep failure under wraps than to have their staffs suffer humiliation or be challenged to improve. They even threatened to sue in order to stop the report from being released. These 1,000 schools, however, had over 75 percent of their students unable to meet minimum state expectations in core academic subjects. There is no amount of "PR" that can explain this away. Parents and taxpayers already deserve to know the truth. Had that report been released, parents in the communities with under-performing schools would know their local schools needed help. My experience is that most people respond to identified problems and offer a hand to help. Identifying a problem is the first step toward finding a solution. Last week, realizing the public relations need to do something about accreditation, our state schools superintendent, Tom Watkins, offered a new method of evaluating schools. While short on specifics, the proposal makes it clear that schools needing help will never be acknowledged in such, or at minimum will be very difficult to identify. In fact, it starts by offering no statewide minimum academic standards. This is troubling and disappointing. As a parent, I have expectations levels for my children. It seems reasonable to expect our state's schools superintendent to have high academic expectations for all children. Apparently, he does not.



Betsy DeVos

Compare this to the debate in Congress. President Bush has initiated a vigorous discussion on academic standards and testing mechanisms. There, the debate is "how high is high enough" in terms of expectations for children. In Michigan, Watkins has blown the whistle and, for all practical purposes, given up on learning standards for children. Instead, the new system gives credit for school-to-work programs for students, professional improvement programs for the educators, and whether a school is developing computers and record-keeping. While each of these factors is good, they take the focus off the essential element: student achievement. Everything else is secondary. Making sure each high school student can balance a checkbook without a calculator, that fourth-graders can read, and, yes, that our kids can prove their progress on tests is more important. The Watkins way is full of wonderful promises, but it has no way to deliver them. He wants all fourth-graders to be able to read. Approved. Presently, less than one-third of American school children can read at the fourth-grade level. While this is an important goal, the only way to achieve it is to measure meaningful progress (and shortcomings) by this standard. The proposed method does not do this, or at the very least it waters down the truth. Under the Watkins' system, if a school has more than 75 percent of its students failing to read at fourth-grade level, will they lose accreditation? It appears not. Why not? Such a school's inability to teach would be blunted in the scoring process by taking into account their "intentions." Yes, "intentions."



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If schools have "plans" to improve, which I hope even our best schools have, they are given credit in the Watkins plan. This cannot be taken seriously. Schools where children are not learning need to be fixed. Apparently this is politically incorrect to say. But I believe bad schools ought to become good schools. This begins by identifying those that are under-performing and letting the community rally to promote improvement. If the Watkins method of "accrediting" schools goes forward, then our state's report card will be hollow and politically correct, providing parents and taxpayers very little opportunity to help poorly performing schools. Taxpayers provided a record amount of funding this year — \$14 billion for Michigan's schools. Without a meaningful method of accreditation, parents lack \$14 billion in accountability, and schools have lit-

System still relies too much on exam

The highly anticipated overhaul of Michigan's school accreditation system is a step in the right direction supported by many in the education community, including the Michigan Education Association (MEA). The proposal, released last week, encompasses professional development and support for struggling schools — all vital components to include in any measure of public school performance. We applaud the Michigan Department of Education and Michigan Board of Education for efforts to draft a program that encompasses multiple measures of performance. Yet, much work remains. Portions of the proposal are vague, a suggested letter grading system for districts is a potentially damaging approach that will cause confusion, and the proposed system still relies too heavily on a single standardized test. Educationist YES' Yardekitch for Excellent Schools has been described by Tom Watkins, state superintendent of public instruction, as a "21st century accountability system for schools." It is a step in the right direction. However, the latest proposal does not spell out who is accountable for what. What this proposal was supposed to represent is a new approach to school accreditation, a process required by state law. Instead, school officials and the media are wrongly referring to this "accreditation" proposal as an "accountability" system. What is needed is an easily understood and fully implemented program that encourages schools to improve. State officials must be held accountable for ensuring that all students who are accredited is timely, fair and in the best interests of children. Real accountability is about more than testing. It is about ensuring that all children have access to quality public schools and qualified teachers. It is about explaining who is responsible for what — and then ensuring that all students and schools have a realistic and meaningful education reform watchdog group.

indicator or test. Some people believe that test scores are the best measure of performance. As a teacher, I know that testing is important. Determining a student's knowledge of a subject is an important way to measure the effectiveness of what teachers do in the classroom. The MEA strongly supports measuring student performance, so long as multiple factors are considered. What and how I teach are not the only factors in student performance, however. Children who come to school hungry or ill, for example, do not perform as well as those who are well-fed and healthy. Neither teachers nor parents would ever judge a child based on their performance on one test. The same should be true for public schools. Countless hours are spent preparing students for MEAP exams. In many schools, valuable classroom time is spent teaching students how to take a test, rather than to explore the subject content. Though the MEAP was designed to help teachers and schools plan their curriculum, identify weak areas and make improvements, it has become a way to pit kids and schools against each other. The latest accreditation proposal would still allow MEAP scores to account for 75 percent of the total grade given to public schools. The heavy emphasis on MEAP results is of concern to educators statewide. And, educators are not the only ones concerned. One-third of the American public thinks there is too much emphasis on testing, according to the 33rd Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward public schools. The poll found that 66 percent of the public believes that the primary use of tests should be limited to determining the kind of instruction needed in the classroom. On behalf of the MEA nearly 100,000 members, we will continue to provide input to bring greater clarity, precision and accountability to the accreditation process. Just as members hold the MEA accountable for working on their behalf, we hold state officials accountable for implementing a system that encourages excellence for all children. La Battaglieri is president of the Michigan Education Association.



La Battaglieri

Coming up

Is draft needed? Should the United States reinstate the military draft or some other form of national service? Why or why not? Send your comments up to 150 words to Forum Mail: 120 E. Lawrence St., Lansing MI 48919 Fax: 517-1208 E-mail: opinions@lsj.com A selection of comments will be published on a future Forum page. Be objective to provide a better education for our children. Betsy DeVos is chairman of Choice for Children, a state-wide education reform watchdog group.

Partition could be painful

Dividing Afghanistan into ethnic units isn't easy, or desirable. By Thomas D. Grant. Almost on the first day of allied military operations, news organizations in Pakistan and India began speculating that partition of Afghanistan into its constituent ethnic units might be in the cards. Opinion-shapers in the United States also have floated the idea that a split-up Afghan state is a pipe dream. The allure of partition is simple. Afghanistan contains a patchwork of warring linguistic and ethnic groups. In countries with a similar makeup, divorce between hostile communities arguably proved to be a peacemaker. It worked in the borderlands between Germany and Eastern Europe. And carving out separate states on the Indian subcontinent, some say, averted more problems than it caused. Partition, however, is far from an easy option. Difficult questions have to be asked about a policy that creates ethnic overtones of ethnic cleansing. Can we commit the material resources necessary to compensate the millions of individuals when the upheaval of partition would transmute? Are we prepared to entertain the notion that the partitioned states in which some countries three may not work for all countries? Partition of a state such as Afghanistan, which some say was once



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a model of coexistence, would be a latter gift. It would also throw away a legal concept at the heart of international relations since 1945 — the immutability and supremacy of states regarding their borders and internal affairs. Partition changes borders, and it usually involves an element of compulsion. Until recently, policymakers took the view international society can contain pockets of nonrecognition. Events have proved this view wrong. Failed states do not merely cause privation for their inhabitants. In the haven and encouragement they provide terrorists, they also cause decay of geopolitical order. Afghanistan and its ilk are like collapsed states, needing to cast useful light, but disrupting vast regions with intense and malignant radiation. In today's new security environment, we must find remedies for states that impale. If Afghanistan is to avoid the painful precedent of partition, the Afghans themselves will have to make the best of their barely charted aspirations. Thomas D. Grant is an international lawyer specializing in national constitutional issues. Los Angeles Times-Washington Post News Service

Army's exit won't aid Democrats

With DeLay in majority post, the Republicans will have able politician. By nature, Dick Arney is much more of a policy advocate than a politician — a longtime academic more at home with the supposed "haves" of commerce than with the rough-edged, often sloppy operatives of the legislative world. That the House majority leader, who announced his retirement plans last week, chose in 1994 to leave the campus of University of North Texas, where he headed the economics department, is a challenge in incumbent congressman and former Texas legislator. Like Ronald Reagan, then at the height of his power and popularity, Arney never lost sight of what he came to Washington to do. Shook government. He never met a tax cut he didn't like and he was relentless in trying to eliminate what he regarded as wasteful spending, whether on social programs, military bases or farm subsidies. He was part of a generation of GOP members who, chafing under the long dominance of the Democrats, believed that the only way to throw off the shackles of partisan minority status was to sharpen and dramatize their ideological differences with the opposition. That calls for rhetorical and demonstrative muscle, of which Arney has an abundance. He was the principal author of the "Contract With America" the manifesto Republicans used to end the 40-year Democratic control of the House in 1994. Arney has never been as comfortable leading a majority as he had been as a gadfly in the minority. He had a tense, sometimes stormy relationship with Speaker Newt Gingrich and was fatally compromised, in the eyes of many colleagues, when he wavered into an ambivalent role during the failed 1997 coup against Gingrich, first seeming to encourage the insurrection and then rushing to Gingrich's side to suppress it. The distrust bred by that incident made it unlikely Arney would ever rise above majority leader to become speaker. When Gingrich stepped down in 1998, Bob Livingston easily supplanted Arney, and when Livingston in turn took himself out of the running, Denny Hastert, now the speaker, did the same thing to Arney. The man who is the favorite to succeed Arney as the Republican floor leader when Congress ends, a year from now, is another Texas conservative, Tom DeLay, now the House majority whip — the No. 3 spot in the leadership. DeLay is a much more familiar type. If ideas drive Arney, DeLay's motivation is principally the quest for power. That is not to say he is devoid of ideology. The owner of a small exterminating company, he is as hostile to "Big Government" in all its manifestations as Arney. But one of his closest associates in the House sees a big difference. "Dick Arney is a policy guy," the congressman told me. "DeLay has ideological conservative principles. He is a pragmatic politician. When it comes to the will of the House, no one has a better sense of it. DeLay can work things out to the point that most of our members can live with the consensus. Most ideologues have difficulty doing that." The knock on DeLay from Republican moderates is that Democrats have taken his nickname, "The Hammer," and turned him into a symbol of hardheaded, right-wing intransigence. In an era of Bush-inspired "compassionate conservatism," the exterminating-turkey-ship seems to many from the Midwest and Northeast districts where Republicans have to struggle for survival to the very symbolic and spokesman for their party. But a longtime ally outside Congress insists, "Tom is a big-ten Republican. He wants to grow the Republican majority." Thus, while on that score, but one thing is certain. Whatever advantage Democrats might gain from having DeLay as a more visible target, they will not welcome him as an adversary inside the House. He has made a habit of winning the close votes, most recently the one-voice squeaker that expanded the president's executive powers. DeLay has a track record more often among Democrats than Republicans: He thinks about politics and works on securing political advantages all the time. It is not a calling, and he is in no hurry. What do you think? Write David Broder, Washington Post-Writer's Group, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, DC 20071.



Dick Arney



David Broder