



## **CHARTER SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION REFORM IN MICHIGAN**

On Wednesday, November 17, Governor John Engler will release Michigan's education report card. For both suburbs and cities, the prognosis doesn't look good.

The education reform debate in Michigan is reaching a feverish pitch, as new legislation is being formulated to restructure the way public schools are operated and financed. The Michigan Education Association stands squarely against the Governor's proposal, including the charter schools provision that would give a chartered public school more autonomy to implement operational and program innovations independent of cumbersome and unnecessary regulatory constraints.

Meanwhile, six schools in Detroit are currently seeking charter school status. It is estimated that well over 100 schools statewide are poised to apply for charter status should the proposals become law.

Two of the Detroit schools applying for charters are Boyton Magnet Middle School and Detroit High School for the Fine and Performing Arts. These schools have demonstrated remarkable success with at-risk youngsters through their dedication to high expectations and programs that enhance learning. Chartering would allow them to make decisions locally about programs without the tangle of regulatory red tape from the state.

The Michigan Education Association opposes this sort of local empowerment and is assessing each teacher in the state \$90.00 (for a potential \$10 million) to fight the Governor's plan to allow schools to become charters.

Two Michigan schools that are functionally, if not officially, charters illustrate the need and the support for an education option for Michigan's parents, students and teachers who are now restricted to the current public school system.

Consider:

- When Wayne State University began taking applications for its new "charter" school last spring, they received over 5,000 applications for just 330 slots. One boy applied 100 times.

- The Casa Maria, a small "charter" run by the League of Catholic Women solely for at-risk children who couldn't be handled by the public school system — children who have criminal records, have been neglected or abused, or were generally disruptive — may close this month unless it can win charter status approval from the Detroit Board of Education.

Rank and file teachers and parents involved with Michigan schools overwhelmingly support the release of schools from government bureaucracy and the opportunity for parents to have choices regarding the public school - or charter - which their children attend.

Charter school legislation has been enacted in seven states. In each case, it has been widely supported by a variety of people across political, social and economic spectrums — Democrats and Republicans, teacher and parents, business leaders, minorities, school boards. In each instance, the teacher unions themselves provided the primary opposition. To date, the Michigan Education Association has gone the farthest to prevent charters from coming into being.

Charter schools have been praised by President Bill Clinton, Colorado Governor Roy Romer, and Nationally Syndicated Columnist David Broder — to mention only a few.

In Minnesota, the first state to experiment with school choice and charters, drop-outs are returning to the classroom in droves, and over 13% of the children in the state are exercising some sort of option to their traditionally assigned schools — and with marked results for all. When the programs there were first proposed, the public — and the unions — overwhelmingly opposed them. Today, the majority of residents there approve of the choice programs in place, including the expanding charter school program.

Many states, faced with grim national and local education results, are pursuing the opportunity to recreate their public school system from the ground up. The battle in Lansing is currently over what kind of system — charter schools versus the status quo — and the best method of financing for education in the state.

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