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UPDATE ON CHARTER SCHOOLS: Michigan Moves Forward

On Monday, November 29, Michigan moved within reach of final passage of a comprehensive Charter Schools and Education Reform Package. The House passed HB 5124 authorizing school districts, community colleges and universities to grant charters and to develop charter schools when one or more certified teachers or public university professors apply. This legislation clears the way for conference and floor action in the state legislature.

This action is the result of a debate that's been building for months. When the state legislature and Michigan Governor John Engler took steps to abolish the state's property tax system for financing education, they opened up an opportunity to reinvent the state's schools. Engler proposed a sweeping Charter Schools bill, which immediately garnered the wrath of education foes in Michigan, including the state's teachers union, the Michigan Education Association. A bill that was passed by the Senate on November 2 is similar to the House bill but also allows other institutions (non-profit organizations, museums, etc.) to create charters, a provision that was a hallmark of Engler's proposal.

Under the House bill, only public school district boards, community colleges, or public universities can grant a charter. Existing public schools, community colleges, or public universities can be awarded a charter. Also, one or more certified teachers or professors may obtain a charter grant in one of two ways — either by having a granting entity sponsor their application, or by incorporating as a non-profit and applying for charter status directly.

According to the House bill, a charter school is not subject to any of the standard public school regulations except those pertaining to health and safety, civil rights, special education, reporting and testing, and specific collective bargaining issues. "That means that if a teachers union is recognized in the district, teachers at the charter school would have to pay union dues," according to the Detroit Free Press. The

waivers to all other public school regulations would be reevaluated every three years.

In addition, charter school "academies," as the legislation refers to them, have flexibility in determining and implementing curriculum and are not subject to state testing rules. Thus, in Michigan, academies would not be required to test students under the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). The House passed overwhelmingly an amendment forbidding charters from using any tests that measure values or beliefs. Furthermore, academies may not be religiously affiliated.

Under the House bill, an existing public school may convert to a chartered academy with the approval of 75% of the school's parents and 75% of the school's teachers. It is conceivable that a public school could then opt to contract with a private firm for management, but such a decision would be subject to all existing rules and regulations that currently govern the schools in Michigan. Also, the Board of Directors at each academy would have to be comprised of a majority of certified teachers.

There are dozens of schools and qualified individuals waiting in the wings to apply for charter status. Nearly a month ago, the Detroit School Board approved charter requests by a handful of schools within their limited authority. With state legislation signed into law, these schools will be able to make decisions locally about programs without the tangle of regulatory red tape from the state.

The Michigan Education Association plans to spend \$10 million to continue their fight against charter school legislation. The money has been raised by assessing each teacher in the state \$90.00. The MEA has employed two teachers from each district to lobby state legislators against legislative efforts. Over the last few months, they have also been circulating a referendum petition in hopes of circumventing legislative action. As is clear from the passage of the House bill, they are fighting an uphill battle against the support of parents, community and business leaders, and elected officials for a program of educational innovation that is already in place in seven other states.

Charter schools appeal to teachers, parents and administrators because they allow these individuals freedom from cumbersome regulations, to do their job as they best see fit. Thus it is no wonder that Charter School proposals are sweeping the country, and that they find enormous support throughout the state in Michigan. African-Americans, in particular, have warmed to these proposals, viewing

them as their best opportunity to take back their schools from unresponsive bureaucracies. Said one African-American teacher of eight years, "I want to start a charter school, because then I know that I could make an impact." He has already lined up another teacher, retired after thirty years in the public school system, to be his Dean of Students.

Riding the Tide Toward Change

Consider that prior to the formal introduction of charter schools to the debate on education reform in Michigan, Wayne State University in Detroit set up its own school — Michigan's first charter school, in form if not in title — with experienced teachers at the helm, to be assisted by graduate and undergraduate students acting as tutors, mentors and study group leaders. The interest by parents overwhelmed the school's organizers: when the school began taking applications last spring for its first semester, it received over 5,000 applications for just 346 slots. One boy applied 100 times.

Elsewhere in the country, parents and teachers are taking advantage of charter opportunities with great optimism. In each of the seven states where Charter School legislation has been enacted, it has been widely supported by a variety of people across the political, social and economic spectrums — Democrats and Republicans, teachers and parents, business leaders and taxpayers. In each instance, the teacher unions have provided the primary opposition.

Charter schools have been praised by Colorado Democratic Governor Roy Romer, nationally syndicated columnist David Broder, and President Bill Clinton, whose proposed reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, due for consideration in 1994, provides incentives for states to enact Charter School legislation.

Expanding opportunities and freedom for the nation's schools and its leaders is clearly an idea whose time has come. While it may take many forms, the concept of school choice can succeed in improving schools where decades of piecemeal reform have failed.

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