



Michigan Parents for Schools

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

30 January 2017
BY EMAIL

Jennifer Tanau
Board Chair
Janice Lieberman
Secretary
Jeannette Jackson
Treasurer
Carrie Chester
Elizabeth Welch
Angela Wilson
Steven J. Norton
Executive Director

The Honorable Phillip Pavlov
Chairman, Committee on Education
Michigan State Senate
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear Chairman Pavlov and members of the Committee,

We write to you today with regard to SB 27, which would repeal Section 1280c of the Revised School Code. On behalf of thousands of parent advocates from across the state, Michigan Parents for Schools welcomes the opportunity to examine alternatives to the State School Reform/Redesign Office and the system of state takeover created by that section of the Code.

MIPFS has been advocating for changes to Section 1280c, and broadly to State policy with regard to struggling schools, for several years. In fact, a version of our proposal was introduced in the 2013-14 legislative session as HB 5268 of 2014. In brief, the “Parent Proposal to Assist Struggling Schools” would accomplish the following:

- Provide real, customized support to local schools and districts;
- Balance our basic respect for local control with the legitimate desire of Michigan citizens to ensure that all children receive a quality education;
- Engage all relevant stakeholders to ensure that changes are both implemented and sustained; and,
- Provide tools for state agencies to insist on certain reforms without resort to complete takeover of a school or district.

Our proposal revives a strategy used by the Michigan Department of Education around a decade ago to address poorly performing schools by having expert teams take a “deep dive” into the policies and practices of the school and district. These “educational audits” were meant to identify the particular challenges, and most promising solutions, for any individual school or district. The proposal builds on this by creating a process in which key school stakeholders—including teachers, administrators, other school staff, parents and representatives of the community—must come to an agreement on how to implement the changes recommended by the audit team. Only if the local stakeholders are unable to come to an effective agreement, or to implement their agreement, would the state have the authority to insist that certain changes—directly drawn from the audit team’s recommendations—be made. Finally, the proposal builds in a process for periodically reviewing the plan and making adjustments as needed, a critical aspect of any reform plan.

Current Michigan law presumes that poor academic performance in a school stems completely from a failure in management or oversight. The state’s current approach also assumes that there is a straightforward, well-defined, set of policies and practices which can raise student achievement if properly implemented.

1217 Olivia Ave
Ann Arbor, MI 48104
(734) 215-7529
www.mipfs.org

In fact, we know that student performance is strongly correlated with poverty—both the student’s own economic situation and the share of students in a school who live in poverty. While any student can falter from family stress caused by a temporary loss of income, persistent poverty and its correlates—food and housing insecurity, family instability, crime and safety concerns, poor health care, and so on—place a great weight on the shoulders of many of our state’s school children. Countering these effects to improve student achievement is neither simple nor completely straightforward. Moreover, the challenges faced by schools are not always the same: solutions may differ depending on the region of the state, whether the school serves a rural, urban or suburban area, and on unique characteristics of the local community. Any system designed to assist schools and districts with these issues must be able to respond to the particulars of the situation.

Our proposal was crafted after extensive consultations with parent group leaders, educators, policy experts, and public school advocates. We believe it offers a promising path forward for schools and districts which need advice on best practices, technical assistance, and some outside encouragement to make necessary changes. Unlike the current state takeover strategy, this alternative would build on stakeholder agreement to ensure sustained improvement over the long term. It would also allow for solutions to be crafted at the district level, rather than on a school by school basis.

Please find attached some more detailed descriptions of the proposal, as we drafted it in 2013. We would also be happy to share with you and the committee the draft bill language that formed the original basis for HB 5268. We look forward to discussing the proposal in more detail and answering any question you may have.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "St. J. Norton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Steven J. Norton
Executive Director

cc: Members of the Committee