



# Michigan Parents for Schools

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

## Michigan Parents for Schools statement on House passage of HB 4369

20 March 2014

### Michigan parents dismayed by House vote to approve EAA expansion bill

Parents across Michigan are deeply disappointed that the state House of Representatives today approved HB 4369, the fundamentally flawed “EAA expansion” bill, by the slimmest of margins. Once again, the considerations of election year politics overrode the interests of our state’s children.

This move is even more frustrating because lawmakers had in front of them a far superior alternative: the “Parent Proposal to Assist Struggling Schools,” embodied in HB 5268, which was on the floor of the House until being sent back to committee after the vote. Instead of trapping children in unaccountable and failing state takeover experiments, our alternative would create a system to assess the issues faced by each struggling school and help local stakeholders turn their own schools around.

What we are getting instead is an endorsement of the same flawed state-takeover system along with rule changes to make sure the Education Achievement Authority can continue to wreak havoc in a larger number of schools. We are supposed to be mollified by provisions that allow schools to beg for an exemption from state takeover if they work with their ISD - a process that remains largely undefined and unsupported. Moreover, some of the “limitations” included in the bill are actually nothing of the sort. It is clear why this amended legislation was not released for public scrutiny before the vote took place in the House.

The fact that supporters of the bill - the legislative leadership and the Governor’s office - were using the threat of rapidly placing many more schools in the EAA to weaken opposition should tell us all we need to know about the value of the EAA. The fact that they were claiming the power to do something which is supposedly under the control of the independent State Board of Education should tell us something about the value they place on governance by the people - whether it is local school boards or state education policy.

Nevertheless, we remain committed to strengthening community-governed public education in our state. Pressure created by the unified opposition of parents, educators, and other concerned citizens has limited the potential damage of this bill. For instance:

- The bill does not make the EAA a permanent part of state government;
- The bill clarifies rules governing exit from the reform district, so that there is an exit path based on test results that does not depend on approval by the state reform officer;
- Entities that operate schools in the reform district must be subject to FOIA, the Open Meetings Act, and other transparency laws.

But all of this simply waters down a bad bill. It does not transform it into good policy. For example:

- The language of the so-called “cap” of 50 schools only applies to the number of schools in the state reform district that can be given to the existing EAA. The cap would not apply to any other entities

given responsibility to oversee reform district schools or to the reform district itself. Both the Governor and the Superintendent have called for more “options” for running takeover schools.

- While districts have some ability to work with their ISD on a turnaround program instead of going into the reform district, *they must choose to do so within 6 months of being placed on the “lowest 5%” list for the first time.* Many schools come off that list in only one year, but schools have to be on the list for two consecutive years before they can be taken over.

In the end, the most important “protections” included in the bill – with great fanfare – turn out to be illusory. There is a “cap” which may not cap anything. Schools must use the “ISD option” long before they know if they are in danger of takeover. The only “protection” which received special care was the provision to save the State of Michigan from having to cover any debt incurred by the reform district.

As parent advocates, we cannot allow this ‘lemon’ of a bill to go unchallenged. This legislation will determine Michigan’s policy toward struggling schools for years to come. There is too much at stake to let this setback blunt our efforts. In the short run, we must work to block poor policies and encourage good ones. In the long run, we must continue to organize, to strengthen our voice, so that we can change our state’s direction in public education.

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For more information about the “Parent Proposal to Assist Struggling Schools,” see this article on the MIPFS web site: <http://www.mipfs.org/parent-proposal>

For our view on HB 5268, which MIPFS helped to draft in order to implement the “Parent Proposal,” see our article here: <http://www.mipfs.org/node/211>