

February Newsletter, LWVBCC
Public Education

WHAT A REVOLT'N DEVELOPMENT THIS TURNED OUT TO BE!

As a kid I loved to watch William Bendix in the Life of Riley. Here was a likable enough guy with a propensity for intervening in problems and making a worse mess of them. Sound solutions were definitely not his forte. Furthermore, he confounded issues with his laughable malapropisms until the developments proved revolt'n. I found him a wonderful comedian. While today's education developments in Michigan are no laughing matter, I see his style of problem solving alive in the solutions driving change.

Seriously, do we really believe that placing lowest achieving schools in the hands of an outside, independent state district will fix the severe learning needs of these kids? Can we truly agree that computers will be the shot in the arm to advance their school scores? And really, do we believe that recent college grads in the Teach for America Program with less than minimal preparation to be teachers will advance students whose academic problems challenge experienced teachers grown weary from trying? I don't. So what will work? What are the more balanced and thoughtful solutions to get us going in a positive direction? Simply put, what will get us and our children out of the predicament in which we find our schools and by extension, ourselves?

Consider the Education Achievement Authority (EAA). This independent district authorized by the State Legislature and Governor has been in business for just over one and a half years. Several Detroit schools comprise this district. They are currently operating under the leadership of an appointed chancellor. He reports to a board also appointed and both exist outside the authority of our elected State school board. They are independent so to speak. Now our governor wishes to extend the reach of the EAA and add more low achieving schools to the organization. I have only seen progress data provided by EAA. Some of it is positive. However there is also a good deal of negative information being made known by teachers in EAA schools. Since we have no external data, it is too soon to judge. All we know is what we hear and even though negative rumors persist, I for one want data not dirt.

Two bills were recently submitted by two members of the House Democrats' School Reform Task Force. This committee was formed to provide a different perspective on how to address failing schools. They suggest school transformation should be a locally determined process. The group has also suggested a response to the work of Professor David Arsen of Michigan State University who has been critical of the State's financing of schools. He has convincing facts and figures and argues that kids in urban districts cost more to educate. So the Task Force is suggesting a study of his assertions. Whether he is right or wrong, it will be worthwhile to know for sure.

A study should also be underway for charter schools. At last count Michigan was leading the nation in the number of such public and private options. National groups have reported time and time again that charters are not the great savior of scores. About half

do just the same as public schools. A portion do better and many do worse. Yet we continue to place our public school dollars in the hands of private investors to run such schools. How are we doing here in Michigan? We need some hard data on both achievement and dollars spent on this Michigan trend.

Speaking of student achievement, noted education researcher and author Diane Ravitch wrote in her latest book, *Reign of Error* that America's kids are doing as well as they ever have. Her data is grounded in nationally recognized data analysis. She agrees that we could do better but to paint our nation's schools as a failed enterprise is simply a fallacy. Sure, we should lift all kids up to the highest academic standards. Yes, we want to educate citizens for a changing work environment and college success. But we surely don't want to close down our public schools as I heard an economist state recently on Public Radio. Every citizen needs to be concerned about the condition of our schools and avail themselves of the facts in this situation. Please read and listen critically on this subject. This is about more than test scores. We are in the middle of a cultural, social, and political shift that is far more than a revolting situation. We are at risk of losing what has been a public institution grounded in civic principles, pluralism, and democracy. I trust you agree that these are American ideals worth fighting for.

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