

BHS board opposes state bill package – Chris Jackett – C and G

Parent Empowerment Act would open district to schools of choice

By Chris Jackett
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BLOOMFIELD TOWNSHIP — The Bloomfield Hills Schools Board of **Education** unanimously voted to oppose a package of Michigan Senate bills known as the Parent Empowerment Education Reform Package Oct. 6.

The package includes Senate bills 618-624, which are on the fast track to being approved through a Republican-controlled Legislature. Although Bloomfield Township is heavily Republican, the board disagreed with the bills, the most glaring of which, SB 624, would force every district in the state to become a schools of choice district and accept all interested students from outside its borders.

“To me, the education of students in our state is a nonpartisan issue,” said board Treasurer Cynthia von Oeyen. “We should all be about finding the best strategies to deliver the best education to all of our kids.

“For a group of people who are trying to decide what they perceive or see as primarily a Detroit problem or our big urban area’s problem, this is something that needs to be done for all communities, I think is a bad strategy. Over 80 percent of the districts in the state already have district-wide schools of choice. This seems to me to be a place where we ought to be having local control. Every community is different.”

If schools of choice were allowed in the BHS district, it would eliminate the tuition program, and the district would instead likely receive the per-student funding allowance from the nonresident student’s home district, which could be much lower. The district expects this would result in a “decline in revenue of approximately \$4,000 per out-of-district student.”

With the threat of losing \$4,000 per out of district student, in addition to the \$470 per student decrease in state funding implemented this summer, Board Secretary Kate Pettersen questioned how much emphasis the state is putting on funding education.

“One of my concerns about these resolutions is that it is trying to do education on the cheap,” Pettersen said. “I’m not aware of anybody at the state level who stopped to say ‘do we even give the financial resources enough so that schools can provide the basic Michigan merit curriculum?’ I suspect that you could argue that they do, but there would be no electives. I have some real concerns.”

In addition to repealing restrictions on the number of public cyber schools (SB 619) and allowing parents to vote to change a school into a charter school (SB 620), another issue the package of bills brings up is removing the cap on the number of **charter schools** (SB 618). Both von Oeyen and board President Ingrid Day questioned the state’s focus on these alternative schools.

Day accused the bill package of differential treatment between public and private schools.

“Basically, a public school opens their doors to anyone and everyone. We accept all the blueberries,” Day said. “But the first difference is that a charter school can limit the seats and can limit who comes through their doors. And to me, it’s not the same rules. Right from the get-go, you’re different because you can start creating some of your own rules. And I don’t understand how that promotes helping everyone get the same level of education.”

However, State Sen. Phil Pavlov, R-St. Clair, said the bills are geared toward moving the state's education forward.

"The school districts in Michigan are not performing to their highest abilities," Pavlov said. "Everyone will be affected by these changes. If you're a successful school (district) like Bloomfield Hills Schools are, you should welcome these changes.

"I think the assumption is for some that, if someone comes into your school district, that they're going to be a bad student or not perform to the other students' levels."

Pavlov said many weaker districts are worried about maintaining their foundation allowances from the state if students leave poor-performing districts for higher-performing ones. He also said SB 621 would allow home-schooled students to take public school electives, such as gym, which would benefit foundation allowances. For other students, SB 619 would provide an alternative method for students to get an education online.

"Many students aren't going to succeed in a traditional classroom setting, but does that mean we lock (them) out?" Pavlov said. "I think anytime you're talking about education reform, the protectors of the status quo are very vocal. What's amazing is these broad blankets that oppose the entire package.

"It's (the bill package) clearly to give more power to parents so they can choose the best education for their kids. Why is there this resistance for allowing opportunity for kids? It really comes down to foundation allowance."

Between the mandated schools of choice and different treatment of private and public schools, Day said she hopes the state Legislature would take a closer look at defining the issues before voting an entire package of them into law.

"They say we can define capacity for schools of choice, but it's not in the bill. It's not defined how you get funded for that or how you take care of your infrastructure," Day said. "To me, there's just missing parts. And when you can't have a whole package and we're not all playing by the same rules, it leaves a big question mark."

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