

"EDUCATION YES!": AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROPOSED SCHOOL ACCREDITATION PLAN by Claire Layman, Legislative Analyst

Grading students on their academic performance can stimulate achievement, allow teachers to track student progress, and indicate to parents, businesses, and universities a child's academic ranking in comparison to other students. Grading public schools, some argue, could serve the same purposes: It could motivate schools to improve, allow the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) to track a school's progress, and give parents, businesses, and universities an indication of what to expect from that school's graduates.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Watkins and the MDE have proposed a school accreditation system, called *Education Yes!*, that would assign a grade to a school based on multiple indicators. The proposal sets three standards for student achievement, outlines a method for reporting a school's accreditation status to the public and to the schools, and aims to enlist the help of businesses, colleges and universities, and other community agents to help low-performing schools improve. Under *Education Yes!*, schools that did not meet minimum standards by 2005 would face sanctions under the Revised School Code.

According to the Department, the purposes of the new system are to focus on high standards, use multiple measures to evaluate school performance fairly, and lead the nation in school accreditation programs. Currently, approximately 30 states have an accreditation program in place; however, none of these states currently assesses the elementary, middle, and high schools differently, as this plan calls for. Further, the plan proposes that all schools, including specialized and alternative schools, career centers, special education schools, and early childhood schools be part of the accreditation plan.

Grades

Under the proposal, 75% of a school's grade would be based on the school's test data. While an elementary or middle school could use a locally-developed test that met certain requirements as its source of data, the Department anticipates that most districts would use the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test. The scores would be measured using three criteria: the status of the school's most recent scores, or, in the case of high schools, the percentage of students earning a Michigan Merit Award; the improvement or regression of scores or awards over three years; and the growth in individual pupil achievement across the district from the fourth to the seventh grade and from the seventh grade to high school.

(The Michigan Merit Award is a \$2,500 scholarship given to high school students who take the math, science, reading, and writing MEAP tests, and who receive a 1 [Exceeded Standards] or 2 [Met Standards] on all four tests. Alternatively, students can earn a Merit award if they take all four tests, pass two of them, and receive a score in the 75th percentile or above on the ACT or SAT test, or achieve qualifying scores on the ACT WorkKeys job skills assessment test. Students must use the scholarship at a State university or college for eligible costs of their education. Recipients who attend an out-of-State institution receive a \$1,000 scholarship.)

The remaining quarter of a school's grade would be a composite of several "performance indicators": family involvement; attendance rates; continuous improvement (in part, a school's progress on its unique school improvement plan); professional development for teachers that is targeted at improving student performance; extended learning opportunities, such as the availability of early childhood programs and before- and after-school programs; performance management systems, which are integrated assessment tools such as portfolios and profiles; and curriculum alignment, which refers to the match between instructional activities, State standards and benchmarks, and the local curriculum. In addition, high schools would be measured on their adoption of a four-year education and employment plan for each student, their drop-out rate, and the percentage of students enrolled in Advanced Placement classes and Dual Enrollment college classes, including vocational and technical college courses and work that leads to a State-recognized license.

Standards

Education YES! proposes that public schools commit to three standards: All Michigan elementary and middle school children will read independently and use math to solve problems at grade level; all Michigan students will experience a year of growth for a year of instruction; and all Michigan high school students, in addition to demonstrating high academic achievement, will have an educational plan preparing them for success.

Past accreditation programs, such as the North Central Accreditation system, required schools to meet over 240 standards, and typically set a threshold, such as the number of books in the library or the percentage of students who passed a test. In 1997, the State Board of Education established 10 standards for Michigan students; the current proposal does not address these standards.

Recording and Reporting School Data

Education Yes! would require a vast amount of data collection and analysis. Certain State systems already gather and break down school and student data; these include the Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI), a State agency that collects, analyzes, and reports data on the performance of schools and students. Under the plan, the Department would use and adapt information provided by Standard and Poor, a service currently contracted by the State to provide rating information on public schools.

The proposal calls for using a web-based, paperless format that would allow schools to enter data necessary for accreditation. Schools and districts would have the opportunity to verify every piece of data used in the system, and to appeal a rating using any additional data the school had. After a school received a rating, it would receive a customized report describing how to attain a higher grade.

The public would be informed of a school's rating, after the school had a chance to review its score, via the State's website, www.michigan.gov. In addition to the school's grade, a report would be available on each school's specific areas of evaluation, including all of the performance indicators and three points of testing evaluation--status, change, and growth.

Providing Support

If data indicated that a school was failing to achieve the standards set under *Education YES!*, the Department of Education would have to work with CEPI, the Department of Career Development, and the Department of Treasury to develop specific training in areas the data indicated were weak. For example, low reading scores could trigger teacher training in literacy. The information collected under the plan would be used to study the practices of high-performing schools so that other schools could adopt their methods and techniques.

Further, as *Education YES!* identified low-performing schools, the MDE would partner with businesses, colleges and universities, community agencies, existing accreditation groups, intermediate school districts, and statewide education organizations to help underperforming schools improve. At the same time, the Department would conduct a review of State and Federal programs focused on underperforming schools.

The No Child Left Behind Act: A Comparison

The new accreditation plan coincides with recent Federal legislation that mandates additional testing, attempts to hold schools accountable for their performance, provides low-performing schools with resources for improvement, and delivers more flexibility for schools receiving Federal funds.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law in December 2001, all states must test students in grades three through eight every year in reading and math; in 2005, science tests also will be required. The states may develop their own tests, but a representative sample of students in each state must take the National Assessment of Educational Progress to set a benchmark for the state exams. According to the *Lansing State Journal* (February 2, 2002), Michigan will receive about \$10.7 million from the Federal government to develop the new tests. The Act also provides substantial money to target teacher quality, and allows local districts to use more Federal money to hire new teachers, increase teacher pay, and improve teacher training and development.

Under *Education YES!*, elementary school students, beginning in fourth grade, not third, as the Act requires, also would be tested in reading and math; middle school students, grades six through eight, would be evaluated on math, reading, science, and social studies. The Act does not mandate testing in social studies skills. Like the State plan, the Act requires a report card to be issued annually, grading the school as a whole, with data disaggregated by race, disability, poverty, and ethnicity.

Under the Act, Federal aid will be available to schools that do not improve two years in a row, but schools that failed to improve six years in a row may be restaffed, restructured under a state takeover, or placed under the supervision of a private company. If a school district has been deemed as failing for two consecutive years,

the district must provide transportation for a child to a new school. Further, beginning in the 2002-2003 school year, parents may transfer their children to a better performing public or charter school once a child's present school is identified as failing. Under *Education Yes!*, and under current State law, schools are subject to one or more sanctions if they are unaccredited for three consecutive years. One sanction permits the Superintendent of Public Instruction to appoint an administrator of the school until it becomes accredited. Another, like the Act, allows a parent or legal guardian to send his or her child to any accredited public school within the school district, and a third requires the school to align itself with an existing research-based school improvement model or affiliate itself with a college or university. Under the final sanction, a school may be closed.

According to the MDE, it intends to align *Education YES!* with the Federal Act.

History

The State has been attempting to use accreditation status to hold public schools accountable for their performance since 1990, when the Legislature passed Public Act 25. That Act required schools to be accredited by the State if they did not want to forfeit State school aid or additional school funding. Under Section 1280 of the Revised School Code, "accredited" is defined as certified by the State Board of Education as having met or exceeded State board-approved standards established for six areas of school operation: administration and school organization, curricula, staff, school plant and facilities, school and community relations, and school improvement plans and student outcomes.

The requirements needed to earn accreditation status have grown more rigorous since 1990. The most recent predecessor to *Education YES!* was a performance-based accreditation plan approved by the State Board of Education in May 1999. This plan was based on high achievement on the MEAP test, evidence that the school was committed to all students (i.e., there could be no disparity between race or class when test results were disaggregated), and a record of yearly improvement in MEAP scores. Critics of the 1999 plan contended that it was based entirely on MEAP scores, which could be problematic for a number of reasons. When the press predicted that as many as 1,000 schools would lose accreditation under this system, the performance-based plan grew more controversial.

In March 2001, the current State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Watkins, was chosen by the State Board of Education to replace retired Superintendent Arthur Ellis. Superintendent Watkins halted the implementation of the performance-based system and ordered a new system that used multiple measures to accredit a school.

Reaction to Education Yes!

In order to garner public input, the MDE published the *Education YES!* proposal on its website, and invited people to respond via e-mail to the plan. According to the Department, 900 people responded to a questionnaire on the site. In addition, from December 2001 through January 2002, the MDE held six public hearings across the State, where the proposal was presented and the public could comment. At the February 14th State Board of Education meeting, Chief Academic Officer (CAO) William Burshaw presented the general findings from the survey and the hearings.

According to Mr. Burshaw, almost all respondents expressed support for the three guiding standards, and appreciated that they were clear but rigorous. The use of the performance indicators, or the non-MEAP measures, also was widely hailed. Many people expressed a desire for the performance indicators to count for more than 25% of a school's grade, and vigorously advocated for including the arts as a performance indicator.

Respondents were less enthusiastic about assigning a single grade to a school, asserting that one grade does not reveal enough about a school's specific strengths and weaknesses. Many suggested assigning multiple grades that reflect all of the standards, so the grade will be more diagnostic than punitive.

Critics of the plan contended that the proposal does not establish an accountability system in which the responsibility of individuals is clearly defined. Despite occasional references to the plan as an "accountability plan" by the Department and the press, it would not hold any particular school personnel responsible for the performance of a school. In addition, the plan does not include monetary resources to help low-performing schools (unlike the No Child Left Behind Act).

In response to the input the Department received, CAO Burshaw presented the Board with a series of recommendations:

- The arts, or possibly the humanities, should be included as a performance indicator.
- Schools should receive separate grades for each indicator and then a final, composite grade.
- The weighting of the final grade should be revised, so that one-third rather than one-fourth of the grade is an average of the performance indicators, and the remaining two-thirds of the grade, rather than three-fourths, consists of the test score results.
- An accreditation commission or committee should be established to determine a baseline standard for the grades. Past recommendations had included using an average, or bell curve, to set the grading criteria. Under this recommendation, the Commission would analyze school data first, establish the criteria for an A, B, C, etc., and then grade the schools using a rubric.
- Only schools that showed no improvement over three years, despite the best efforts of the Department, should receive an F, and therefore become unaccredited.
- Section 1280 of the Revised School Code should be repealed, as the six criteria for accredited schools do not match this proposal or the one before it.
- The 10 standards established by the Board in 1997 should be replaced with the three global standards set forth under *Education YES!*

Future Action

The State Board of Education passed the “framework” of *Education YES!* at its February 14th Board meeting, and met as a Committee of the Whole on March 4 to discuss the above proposals. The Board will take a final vote on the plan, including the new recommendations, on March 14. If the Board approves the proposal, *Education YES!* will be drafted as proposed legislation. Any changes in statute, such as the repeal of Section 1280, will require the involvement of the full Legislature.