Michigan Parents for Schools

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

Testimony of Michigan Parents for Schools on HB 6004 to the House Education Committee, Rep. Lisa Lyons, Chair – November 19, 2012

Madam Chair and members of the Committee,

We write to you, on behalf of public school parents and concerned citizens from across the state of Michigan, to express our concerns about House Bill 6004. While our reservations range from the very broad to the very specific, they are sufficient for us to ask you not to report this bill out to the full House. In fact, we believe that effective approaches to the problems HB 6004 seeks to solve require a very different approach.

There is no question that a substantial portion of our public school student population is struggling, and that a number of our public schools are in turn having great difficulty meeting the needs of those students. We welcome efforts by the State, through the Michigan Department of Education, to provide focused assistance to struggling schools. But the approach in this bill is light on help to, and heavy on punishment of, local districts.

The "student centered learning" concept presented in last week's testimony is an interesting and promising approach to teaching, but it is not new. In fact, we have heard similar ideas discussed in a number of districts around the state. The problem, as always, is implementation — especially in a regulatory environment that punishes mistakes.

We would like to return to the question asked by Rep. Rutledge in last week's hearing: If this kind of programming is so promising, as it may indeed be, why not simply push for its adoption by local districts? Why create an entirely new bureaucracy to manage a change in instructional strategy?

From our reading of this bill and related measures in the Legislature, the underlying presumption of this legislation is that the local schools are entirely at fault when their students fail to achieve at required levels. These proposals share the basic assumption that relatively simple and well-understood changes can dramatically improve student achievement in short order.

Our position is that the problems are deeper and rooted in the current state of our society and economy. Schools can make a significant difference, but the solutions are not easy, cheap, or very well defined. By way of example, we have attached some graphs that show early results into our research into poverty and test scores in Michigan. The strength of the relationship between the proportion of a school's students living in poverty and that building's average scale scores on the MEAP test is startling. In every grade and subject, a school building's poverty level explains more than half of all the variation in average MEAP test scores. Tackling achievement means tackling the consequences of child poverty in our state.

Most important, the best solutions available to our schools will likely involve more individual attention and assistance to students — and that requires resources. We cannot simply "throw technology" at problems any more than we can just "throw money" at them.

It is instructive, and worrying, that Chancellor Covington and his colleagues testified that the per-pupil allowance they receive is insufficient to get their program up and running in a school — even though they are unburdened with union contracts. Private funds must be solicited to do the start-up organization and training work at each new school.

Is this model scalable? Can we truly rely on outside, voluntary sources of funding to help all our schools transition to more promising modes of instruction? Resources matter.

We believe that our state's local, community-governed, public schools are in the best position to implement these new programs and practices, given adequate resources and assistance from state agencies. Creation of a statewide "district" outside of local community control, which can unilaterally take schools and students away from public school districts, will undermine rather than strengthen their capacity to make important improvements in instruction.

We also have some more specific reservations about the bill:

We are puzzled by the extent to which the bill seeks to avoid giving authority to the elected body charged by our state constitution with responsibility for public education: the State Board of Education. The Governor would appoint the governing body of the proposed EAA, with several positions filled at the suggestion of the Legislative leadership. The State Board is given no role in this process. The newly named state school redesign officer has authority to add schools to the EAA, but the power to appoint that position is actually taken away from the State Board and given to the Governor.

We remain unclear why these provisions are in the best interests of our children.

Finally, the provisions about "redeploying" unused school buildings concern us. Once again, this smacks of punishment rather than cooperation. Buildings paid for by local taxpayers, and maintained even while empty at the expense of the local district, can be assigned to another entity without consultation. If a district asks to reserve a school once, and does not use it, the district loses the right to ask for it again. Under current conditions, "fair market value" may bear little relationship to the costs of debt service and maintenance while empty. Once again, we are hobbling our local school districts rather than helping them.

We ask that you reconsider the entire direction of this bill and propose measures instead that would truly assist our community-governed schools in tackling the challenges of providing an excellent education for every child.

Thank you very much for your time and attention.

Steven Norton
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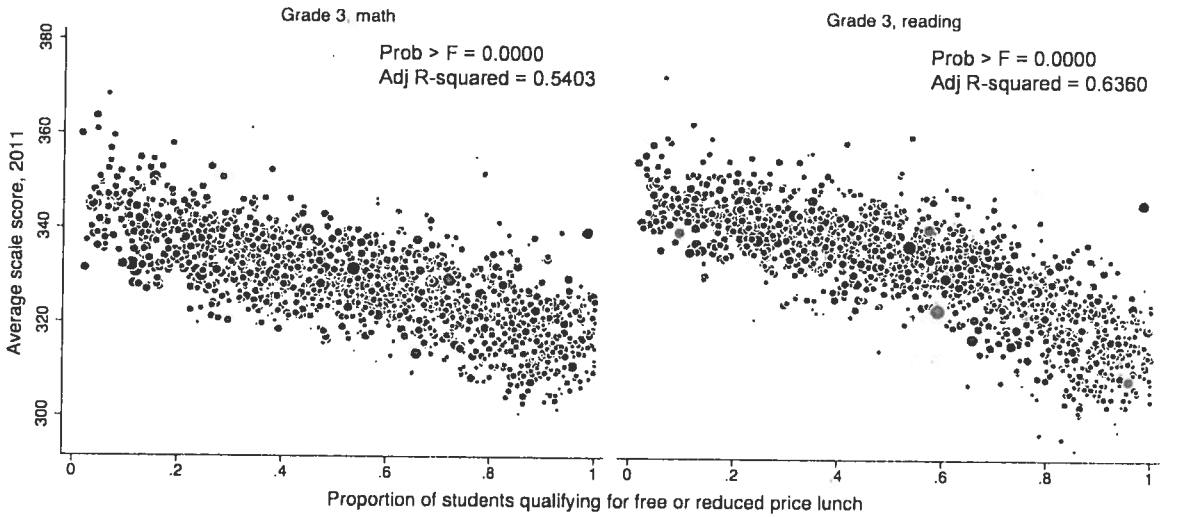
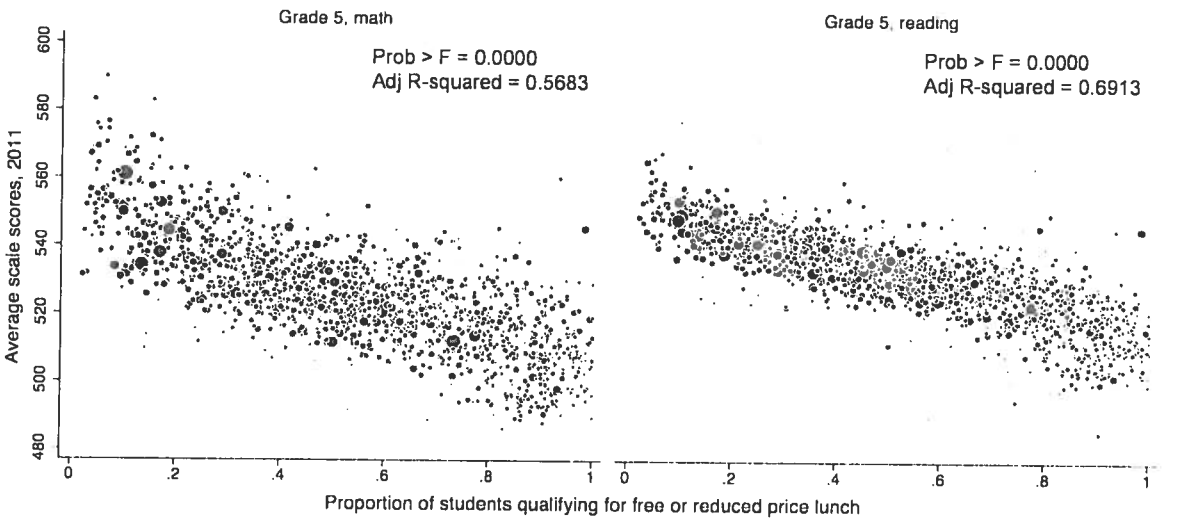
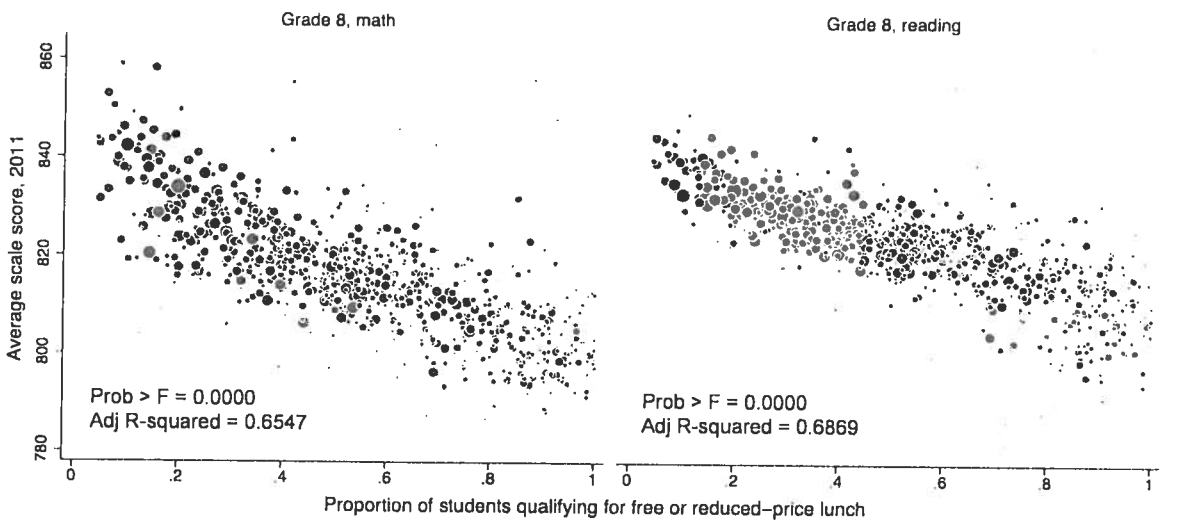
Michigan Parents for Schools

Poverty and average MEAP scale scores, by school building, 2011