Michigan Parents for Schools

Parents working for excellent public schools
—for our children, our communities, and our future.

Steven J. Norton
Executive Director
Jennifer Tanau
Board Chair
Janice Lieberman
Secretary
Jeannette Jackson
Treasurer

The Honorable Paul Scott, Chair
House Education Committee
985 House Office Building
124 N. Capitol
Lansing, MI 48933

2 November 2011

Dear Chairman Scott,

The issues raised in the bills of the "Parent Empowerment" package, including Senate Bill 618 which is currently before your committee, are of immense importance to our State. The changes proposed by these bills, however well intentioned, have the potential to seriously undermine public education in Michigan. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before your committee and to outline our concerns about this bill and to propose alternate directions for policy.

Michigan Parents for Schools is a non-profit, public interest advocacy organization working to ensure that our public schools have the tools and resources to provide an excellent education to all our children. Part of that mission is to encourage careful and informed structural changes to Michigan public schools, so that every child can receive a quality education—regardless of where they live or the resources that may be available to their family. I offer this testimony in that spirit.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Steven J. Norton
Executive Director

1217 Olivia Ave
Ann Arbor, MI 48104
(734) 730-2216
www.mipfs.org

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee,

Thank you for allowing me time to speak today.
My name is Steven Norton, and I am executive director of Michigan Parents for Schools, a non-profit, public interest advocacy organization working to support public education in our state. I am also a parent of two children in the Ann Arbor Public Schools.

On behalf of parent activists from across Michigan, I am here today to ask that your Committee not report out Senate Bill 618 in its current form.

I am not here to defend the so-called "status quo," or to claim that public education in Michigan is perfect as is. Instead, I am here to ask that we focus our efforts on improving this state's community governed public schools as a way of ensuring an excellent education for every child.

I had the opportunity to outline our concerns to the Senate Education Committee, so I will not repeat that here today (though I include it with the electronic version of my testimony). Instead, I'd like to focus on some of the issues that have emerged as this bill was discussed in committee and by the public.

In light of earlier testimony on this bill, I would like to start out by reminding all of us that K-12 education is not a marketplace. It is a system we build together as citizens, to educate our children and to develop prosperous communities.

That said, people who value our state's commitment to public education have raised three kinds of concerns about this bill and the impact it will have:

- Whether charter schools have really brought the promised benefits to our children who most need assistance,
- Whether charter schools are sufficiently accountable and ensure that public funds are being used exclusively for a public purpose, and
- Whether the benefits of charter schools, whatever they may be, compensate for the damage inflicted on our community-governed public schools.

In an op-ed piece two weeks ago in the Detroit News, Harrison Blackmond - a supporter of charter schools - foresees a time when Michigan will have more charter schools than regular public schools.[a] I think he is correct that this

legislation takes us in that direction. The question is, does this direction serve the children and people of Michigan well?

A great deal of research, both nationally and in Michigan, indicates that the bulk of charter schools perform about the same as the community-governed public schools which serve a similar population - at least by the yardstick of standardized tests. Some do better, sometimes considerably better. A larger number do worse.[b]

Charters were originally conceived as an opportunity for teachers to experiment with innovative techniques in a flexible environment. These lessons on what works would then be brought back to the public schools that serve most of our children. Yet researchers have found that this transfer of knowledge has rarely happened. At the same time, many community-governed public schools have introduced innovation and variety in their offerings - demonstrating that it **can be done** even in larger school districts. The primary obstacle is not a lack of ideas, but a lack of resources.

> A word here about funding:
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> To those who say money and poverty do not matter for school performance, a close look at international achievement test results shows that US school districts with very few students living in poverty produce achievement levels equal to the leading countries in the world. The relative performance of US schools drops as the fraction of low-income students increases.[c]
>
> More locally, a recent analysis of MEAP scores and census data indicated that student achievement as measured by the MEAP tests was strongly related to average household income in a school district.[d]
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> These kinds of findings should focus our attention on the impact of resources and put to rest the notion that all our public schools are "failing."

So what, precisely, is the benefit of expanding the number of charter schools, creating many unaccountable educational enclaves, and hollowing out our community-governed schools?

As things stand, there is a danger that the primary benefit will not be a better education but instead a larger business opportunity. Michigan leads the nation in the number of charter schools managed by private, for-profit management companies. What possible justification can there be for private firms to profit

off the backs of our children? If there are surplus funds, why aren't they put back into programming for our children? Further, the provision in this bill that would exempt charter school facilities from property tax can only benefit one group: private management companies. As the House Fiscal Agency analysis of this bill confirms, property owned by the schools themselves or by non-profit management firms is already exempt from taxation.

Private firms are not accountable to the public and they are not required to make their finances transparent as community-governed school districts are. Michigan should follow the lead of states like New York and require that all further charter school management agreements be made with non-profit entities eligible for 501(c)(3) charitable status. This would ensure that these entities are accountable, and that public funds will be used for a public purpose.

Lastly, I want to focus on our intentions with regards to education. Given Michigan's system of school funding, every student who leaves a public school district for a charter school takes with them more money than the original district can possibly save from having one less student. This can bring on a cycle of budget cuts and enrollment drops that we have come to call the "death spiral." This is not invigorating competition, it is simply a process of bleeding our public schools dry.

Wouldn't those resources, and that effort, be put to better use in improving the community-governed public schools that still educate the vast majority of our children? Why not focus our efforts on providing an excellent education for all children, rather than simply providing an escape hatch for a small number of families who happen to have the resources and determination to use it?

Public education has been a top priority to our communities since the beginning of the Republic. We have struggled for years to ensure that the benefits of a quality education are available to all children. The bill before you today will take us backwards rather than forwards. We urge you to set this legislation aside and focus on other ways of improving the education of all children in Michigan.

Thank you for your time. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

[a] Harrison Blackmond, "Better Charter School Oversight Needed," *Detroit News*, October 19, 2011 [available online at: http://www.dfer.org/2011/10/better_charter.php].

[b] The most commonly cited national report is from Stanford University: "Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States," Stanford University Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, June 2009 [available online from: http://credo.stanford.edu/].

The most complete analysis of Michigan data is reported in Gary Miron, Chris Coryn, and Dawn Mackety, "Evaluating the Impact of Charter Schools on Student Achievement: A Longitudinal Look at the Great Lakes States," Education Policy Research Unit, College of Education, Arizona State University, June 2007 [available online from: http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/EPSL-0706-236-EPRU.pdf]. Other national and Michigan data is described in a report by the Citizens Research Council of Michigan: "Non-Traditional K-12 Schools in Michigan," Citizens Research Council of Michigan Report 364, September 2010 [available online from http://www.crcmich.org].

[c] This conclusion was a highlighted finding in the US Department of Education's summary of results from the PISA 2009 international comparisons of student ability in reading, mathematics and science. Data can be found in the report: "Highlights from PISA 2009: Performance of US 15-Year-Old Students in Reading, Mathematics and Science Literacy in an International Context," US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, December 2010, report NCES-2011-004 [available online from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011004.pdf].

[d] As reported, for example, in: Julie Mack, "Differences in family incomes, education levels reflected in student test scores," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, August 15, 2011. Available online as: http://www.mlive.com/news/kalamazoo/index.ssf/2011/08/differences_in_family_incomes.html

The Honorable Phil Pavlov, Chair
Senate Education Committee
905 Farnum Building
Lansing, MI 48909

20 September 2011

Dear Chairman Pavlov,

On behalf of parent activists from across Michigan, I am here today to ask that your Committee not report out the "parent empowerment" package of bills (SB 618, 619, 620, 621 and 624) in their current form.

Michigan Parents for Schools is a non-profit, public interest advocacy organization working to ensure that our public schools have the tools and resources to provide an excellent education to all our children. Part of that mission is to encourage careful and informed structural changes to Michigan public schools, so that every child can receive a quality education—regardless of where they live or the resources that may be available to their family. But the bills before you today will not accomplish that purpose.

Before I enumerate our reasons for opposing this legislation, I'd like to accept Dr. Tony Bennett's challenge, in his testimony before this committee, to say what we are ***for***.

We are ***for*** a system of public education that honors our common commitment to educate every child.

We are ***for*** public school systems that have the resources and support they need to help every child fulfill their potential.

We are ***for*** evaluation and accountability systems that assess the full range of teaching and learning involved in producing engaged citizens and productive members of our community, rather than narrow measures that will lead schools to restrict their curriculum. We are ***for*** systems that encourage the long-term growth of both our children and the professionals who teach them.

Finally, we are ***for*** public policy in education that focuses on fixing the problems that exist rather than simply declaring our public schools a failure and making it easier for those who are able to walk away from them.

These principles may sound general, but they have direct consequences for policy. Our "common commitment to educate every child" implies school systems that are built and governed by the whole community rather than fragmented into multiple educational enclaves. Members of the community exercise "choice" by setting the direction of their schools and by choosing elected representatives who reflect their values and priorities. The notion of parents as "consumers" of education has, in recent years, eclipsed the idea that public schools are a joint project of the entire community. This fragments and dilutes our efforts to educate all children and build stronger communities.

The focus on competition enshrined in these bills is directly at odds with the priority to ensure that schools have "the resources and support they need." Under the current system, "competition" for students does not drive excellence; it simply steals resources from already-struggling schools. When districts lose students, a downward cycle begins of program cuts and more enrollment declines—something we call the "death spiral." Under Michigan's per-pupil funding system, the funding loss from losing a student is much greater than the financial savings the district will reap from enrolling

one less child. Moreover, students who move between districts carry with them the lesser of the two system's per-pupil funding, which saves the state money but inevitably puts pressure on the district trying to educate more children.

As Mr. Jalen Rose pointed out in his testimony, money ***does*** matter. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, struggling schools are rarely in trouble because their teachers and administrators are not working hard enough. Rather, it is because they are overwhelmed. To be truly effective, schools must have the resources to develop their teaching staff, to offer rich programming to their students, and to provide as much assistance as needed to students who are struggling. Schools in hard-hit communities are unable to reach any of these goals. Poverty does not determine a child's potential, but it does weigh her down tremendously in her effort to take advantage of an education. Competition will not change that, but resources can.

Finally, it should be our duty as citizens to correctly identify and fix problems with our schools rather than walking away from those problems. Just about every major provision in these bills—from lifting the cap on charter schools and cyber schools, creating "conversion" schools, and allowing traditional school districts to put their instructional services out to bid—presumes that local school districts and their teachers are the problem. In nearly all cases, the "solution" in the legislation is to provide more opportunities to walk away from those problems. Rather than providing resources and assistance to improve education in places where it falters, rather than providing adequate resources to overcome the terrible weight of poverty and its corrosive effect on families and communities, these bills offer an escape hatch for ***some*** families to find something better on their own. Only, many children and their families do not have the resources to make that escape, and most would find that the lifeboats are already full. Rather than building a few more lifeboats, why not right the ship?

Many schools in our state do need substantial help to serve their students well, and nearly all schools have room for improvement. The focus of our public policy should be on providing that help, and the resources to back it up, rather than fragmenting public education and hollowing out our traditional school districts. This bill package will not take our state where we need to go.

If, however, our lawmakers are determined to enact these measures, we propose a modest but important change. All new charter, conversion and cyber schools, and any entities that provide instructional services for schools, should be non-profit organizations eligible to operate under section 501(c)(3) of the internal revenue code ("public charities"). We can imagine no justification for a private, for-profit firm to profit on the backs of our children; any surplus should be used to expand student programming or to support other schools. Likewise, while traditional public schools are required to report their finances in minute detail, privately held educational management organizations are not required to open their books at all. Entities receiving public funds to educate our children should be fully transparent. Non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations would address both these concerns, as they are forbidden from generating a private profit, and their finances must be open to public inspection. Michigan should follow the lead of other states, such as New York, and ensure that all public schools are being operated for a public purpose.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Steven J. Norton
Executive Director