Michigan Parents for Schools

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

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The Honorable Tom McMillin, Chair
House Education Committee
894 House Office Building
124 N. Capitol
Lansing, MI 48933

17 January 2012

Dear Chairman McMillin,

I write to offer you and your colleagues on the Education Committee a parent perspective on "cyber" or online schools and the changes to state law regarding those schools embodied in Senate Bill 619. We are quite concerned with what we have heard about other states' experience with entirely online schools, and we urge the Committee to set SB 619 aside and leave current law, permitting a limited number of such schools with regulated enrollment, in place.

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.

I should emphasize that we do not oppose choice in public education, but we do believe that all choices available to our children should be good ones, beginning with the local public schools which remain the backbone of our public education system. Our prime concern with this bill and others in the package remains their potential negative impact on community-governed public schools, especially through the diversion of limited resources. Our first duty should be to ensure that local public schools have the resources and support they need to offer a quality education to all children, including those who face large hurdles in their efforts to learn. Educational alternatives should supplement, not supplant, this commitment.

The bill before you today, SB 619, sparks similar concerns. Our worries about this bill fall into two broad categories: uncertainties about completely online schools as a successful strategy for educating large numbers of students, and worries about oversight and ensuring quality in online education.

There is no doubt that online learning will become an important part of our educational toolkit. The question is whether entirely virtual schools are appropriate for more than a handful of students. The experience of other states with virtual schools should

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give us pause. The overall academic success of these programs has been disappointing, and questions remain about the effectiveness of classes where there is little or no direct interaction between teacher and student or among the students themselves.

Equally worrisome is the difficulty other states have had in regulating these online schools and ensuring that public funds are well spent. Without careful thought and regulation, we risk creating incentives for educational service providers to recruit students for whom the program is inappropriate, to avoid reporting students who have left the program, to have a much higher student-teacher ratio than claimed, and to use other methods to lower costs and increase revenue even if student learning is affected. These problems are magnified in the case of private service providers, who have a duty to their owners or shareholders that may tend to eclipse their duty to their students.

Current law sets up an evaluation period, after which the performance of Michigan virtual schools would be assessed. This cautious process has great merit, and we urge you and your colleagues to retain the current language. Opening the floodgates for an unlimited number of virtual schools would leave Michigan open to the very same problems now being discussed in other states.

Online education has great promise, but there are many questions yet to be answered about how to teach effectively online and what level of funding these schools require. Michigan should answer these questions before removing all limits on this virtual education experiment.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Steven J. Norton
Executive Director

Attachment: News stories about virtual charter schools in various states.

Recent news articles on virtual schools around the United States:

"Success of Florida Virtual School is difficult to measure"
By Rebecca Catalanello and Marlene Sokol
Tampa Bay Times - Sunday, January 8, 2012
http://www.tampabay.com/news/education/k12/article1209497.ece

"Students of Online Schools Are Lagging"
By Jenny Anderson
New York Times, January 6, 2012
Far fewer of them are proving proficient on standardized tests compared with their peers in other privately managed charter schools and in traditional public schools.
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/06/education/students-of-virtual-schools-are-lagging-in-proficiency.html

"Virtual charters lag other public schools' performance, report says"
By Lori Higgins
Detroit Free Press, January 6, 2012
http://on.freep.com/xwPIE4

"Profits and Questions at Online Charter Schools"
By Stephanie Saul
New York Times - December 12, 2011
A look at the largest online school company's operations raises serious questions about whether its schools — and full-time online schools in general — are a good deal for children or taxpayers.
http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/13/education/online-schools-score-better-on-wall-street-than-in-classrooms.html

"Investigation Finds Lax Oversight of Online Education"
By Burt Hubbard & Nancy Mitchell
Education Week - October 6, 2011
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/10/06/07enc_virtualoversight.h31.html

"Test Scores Raise Questions About Colo. Virtual Schools"
By Burt Hubbard & Nancy Mitchell
Education Week - October 5, 2011
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/10/05/07enc_virtualachieve.h31.html

"Education Week: Public Schools Also Lose When Online Students Fail"
By Burt Hubbard & Nancy Mitchell
Education Week, October 3, 2011
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/10/03/06enc_online.h31.html