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Michigan Education Reform Committee  
Innovative District Testimony  
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9-6-18

As you are well-aware, Michigan schools continue to fall further and further behind much of our country. While there are varying opinions as to why this is happening and what the next "reform" may be, the truth is that we continue to try to fix a broken design.

Our current K-12 education system was designed to produce workers for an industrialized economy that no longer exists. The system is doing exactly what it was designed to do and producing exactly what it was designed to produce. Unfortunately, what the system is designed for does not meet our current needs.

Perhaps the best summary of our current system design is from Dintersmith (2018) who summarized the current K-12 system when he stated:

*"The purpose of school in our country today is to rank the potential of our children, not to develop it. Worse, we rank potential on inconsequential measures that offer outsized advantage to the affluent."*

Our current system that is driven by standards and traditional measures of accountability is not "developing students." Instead, it is ranking our kids by their potential as determined by the socio-economic status and irrelevant measures such as traditional test scores.

As the Superintendent of one of the highest achieving school districts in Michigan (and one of the most affluent), I'd like to personally share the flaws of our current system, the exciting potential of the Innovative District bill and provide suggestions to refine/enhance the bill so Michigan students can prosper.

Let me start with two stories of two very different school districts:

- Several years ago, I was the Superintendent of a school district with 60% of our students on free/reduced lunch, extremely low test scores, and financial struggles. After many years of hard work, we lifted the high school from a ranking in the bottom 5% of schools in the state to the 91<sup>st</sup> percentile. We legitimately went from almost worst to almost first. It was exciting but here's how

we did it. We knew that the rankings were solely based on standardized test scores and those tests are built on the same concepts as manufacturing processes. In essence, the best way to increase a ranking under those metrics was to reduce the tolerances around the mean...in other words, find the best way to reduce risks and the scores will go up. And, they did...dramatically. To this day, it was the best way to increase test scores but not the best way to create innovation. As an example, if the tolerances are reduced around the mean, the best you can ever achieve is average. Then, incremental changes above average can be achieved to slowly move the mean higher but the types of jumps need in Michigan to catch up aren't really possible because of the metrics and design.

- Currently, I am the Superintendent of a school district with 10% of students on free/reduced lunch, well-educated parents, and students who are high-achieving on standardized tests. We've continued to make instructional improvements within the rules we're given by the legislature, MDE, and US Dept of Ed. However, we've been working hard to reinvent and approach education differently because we have the capacity to do so much more for kids. Dexter Community Schools have some of the highest test scores in the state but we know that's the wrong target. As a result, we also know that even though we have some of the highest test scores in the state, we're still failing lots of kids and families. For example, 75% of our 7<sup>th</sup> graders are proficient on the M-Step in math. That means 25% of our 7<sup>th</sup> graders are not proficient. That equates to about 75 students...and we're one of the best schools in the state! However, the current measures and systems were never designed for us to get 100% of our kids proficient because the system was designed to "rank the potential of our kids and not to develop it." In Dexter, we need the flexibility to create models to not "rank" our kids but instead "develop the human potential in each of our students." If we can figure it out, the models can be replicated elsewhere without punitive measures.

After working in two very different districts in recent years, I can share that parents from both districts want the same things for their children. They want a good future for their kids. They want safety for their kids and they want their kids to be happy. They never say they want them to be the best math student in the school. Instead, their words hit at competencies, not content.

The best definition of competency-based education I've heard described competencies as transferable skills across disciplines. In Dexter, we've been involved in a national pilot called Summit Learning. It originated from a charter system in the San Francisco Bay Area. Three years ago, there were 120 schools in the country that were part of the

pilot and Dexter was home to two of them. This year, there are nearly 1,000 schools. Summit Learning is a personalized, project-based learning approach that is free to all pilot schools. This includes the platform, the technology, the curriculum resources are open-sourced, and the projects are shared between pilot schools. The approach is broken into three key components:

- Personalized Learning Time – content-based time that equates to 30% of the grade
- Mentoring – each student meets 1:1 with their mentor weekly
- Project Time – projects built to be interdisciplinary and scored according to the Cognitive Skills Rubric (created out of Stanford's SCALE)

The power of the program is the Cognitive Skills Rubric and the Projects. The Cognitive Skills Rubric is a collection of 36 interdisciplinary, higher-order thinking skills. The students are asked to demonstrate competency on each of the Cognitive Skills as appropriate for their level of development and growth. We aren't ranking these kids. We are developing them.

The Innovative District legislation would allow us to expand this work and replicated it across our school district. For example, we're currently trying to place this model within a traditional school calendar, 1098 hours of instruction, and a standardized assessment system. The Innovative District legislation would allow us to run our programs in a model that fits the program design and embed the applications throughout the school year. Instead, we are constantly trying to innovate within walls that constrain us. Just last year, we had our 6<sup>th</sup> graders all go to EMU for a week to partake in a week-long camp on topics such as aeronautics, robotics, dance, entrepreneurship, etc. We had our 4<sup>th</sup> graders study the science of sledding and then partake in a bridge project where they studied the science behind bridges, studied two bridges in town, found they were designed by the first African-American Engineering Graduate from the University of Michigan, researched his other work, raised \$5,000 to place a sign commemorating his work, sought and received the approval for the sign from the City Council, and invited Frederick Pelham's family to the ceremony unveiling the sign. This can't be measured in our current system and we would love to expand upon this work. The competencies developed will serve these students for years to come. However, we're trying to cram this all into a hyper-focused standardized system of schooling designed to rank and sort these students instead of develop them.

The power of the Innovative District legislation is that we can develop kids. We can create models that can be replicated by other districts. We can create opportunities to innovate without negative consequences.

The most exciting parts of this bill are the statewide auditor who works solely with these districts, the ability to work outside the regular school year, and the ability to award credit based on competency rather than proof of meeting course standards or seat-time.

In order to make the bill stronger, I would recommend the following four changes:

- The bill needs to allow Innovative Districts flexibility on the Michigan Merit Curriculum. The MMC has turned high schools into standards-based, prep schools. In order to move a high school into a true competency-based approach, the graduation requirements outlined in the MMC need to be more flexible. Outlining the specific courses and credits forces schools to start with a bucket and then create programming that can then be pushed back into that same bucket. For example, requiring every student to take four years of math up through Algebra II ranks our kids before we can get to developing their potential. The flexibility in the junior year doesn't happen because many of our kids are beaten down in the standards-based system before they can ever get to Algebra II. If we want true innovation, then there needs to be more flexibility for Innovative Districts to create new approaches and models. My suggestion is to allow Innovative Districts to apply for waivers to the Michigan Merit Curriculum as part of their application and be explicit in this wording in the legislation. I would be happy to help craft language if you are interested.
- The Innovative District legislation looks to require approval from MDE. While I appreciate the involvement of MDE and appreciate the hard-working, dedicated employees at the department, I do not believe it is fair to the department to be involved in approving Innovative Districts. MDE is an organization designed to sustain and oversee the status quo. It is impossible for an organization designed to sustain and oversee the status quo to also innovate. Organizations can only do what they're designed to do. Instead, I would create an independent body to approve applications and to provide oversight.
- The legislation talks about alternative assessment systems. This will require a little work with the US Department of Education and ESSA requirements. I haven't been able to spend enough time analyzing the potential roadblocks but my experience with seeking alternative assessments tells me this area will need a little work to be clear what is intended. That being said, in order to move into a true competency-based approach, the assessment system needs to match. Any organizational theory expert can tell you that "what gets measured gets managed." If the assessments aren't changed to represent a competency-based system, then a competency-based system will never survive.
- Lastly, I would allow part of a district to implement a competency-based model instead of requiring a full district implementation for acceptance. One lesson learned in the districts trying to do this work is that parents want choices. They

want to choose how their children are educated. A district cannot survive if they just flip a switch to the entire district moving to a competency-based approach as part of an immediate waiver. It will take time and phasing in throughout areas of the district.

In conclusion, I see great potential from the Innovative District legislation. Education needs what Christensen, Horn, and Stalker (2013) refer to as “disruptive innovation.” In short, there are “two basic types of innovation – sustaining and disruptive – that follow different trajectories and lead to different results.”

- Sustaining innovations occur when existing organizations improve products or services in such a way as to better serve their best customers according to their initial definition of performance or “the way the market has historically defined what’s good.” This is what we’ve been trying to do in Michigan and it isn’t working.
- Disruptive innovations generally serve an area of non-consumption by offering a new definition of what is good. “Over time, they improve enough to intersect with the needs of more demanding customers, thereby transforming a sector.” This is what we need in education.

We often ask ourselves, is Dexter Community Schools a Mainframe Computer, a Desktop Computer, or a smart phone? If we want to create a new system of education, we need disruptive innovation. We don’t just need to move from the main frame to the desk top. We need to move from a main frame to a smart phone. We need to create a new definition of “what is good” and this should be based on competencies instead of standards assessed on a single test.

Thank you for your work on this important legislation and your concern for improving schools in Michigan.