

September 13, 2006

Governor Jennifer M. Granholm
Post Office Box 30013
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear Governor Granholm:

I am the new Superintendent of Muskegon Public Schools. As part of my orientation to the role, I have been reviewing a wide array of data. One of the areas I reviewed was state financing of education. Being from North Carolina, I needed to understand the funding model from the State of Michigan. To do this I went online and used the data provided at the Department of Education website.

As I began to review the data, I detected a pattern that concerned me so I started extracting data from the larger database. I have appended some of that analysis. The spreadsheet lists all school districts getting 110% or more of the foundation grant provided to Muskegon Public Schools. The data leads to a few inevitable conclusions:

- Many students in Michigan have their education funded at a significantly higher rate than my students in Muskegon;
 - I find this disturbing since the State constitution specifically identifies the commitment to education and that all citizens will be treated equally.
- Districts receiving significantly more funding than Muskegon tend to have a student body whose characteristics on the surface suggest they have less need for more educational interventions. Specifically, districts that receive the largest per pupil grants have: fewer Latino students than the state average; fewer free and reduced lunch students than the state average; fewer special education students than the state average.
 - This concerns me because all of these more needy students require support beyond the regular program if they are to be successful. That increases the cost of an appropriate education and yet those districts with fewer of these students get greater funding.
- Districts receiving the greatest per pupil foundation grants have more white students than the state average.
 - Everyone states they are concerned about the achievement gap. When this is mentioned, the concern is the gap between white students and other subgroups. Michigan's funding model seems to support the perpetuation not the resolution of this concern.

What the data seems to suggest is that in the state of Michigan a school system that serves students who are predominantly white, native English speakers, relatively affluent, and with few special education issues receives more funding per student. The students I just described are deserving students, but generally they come to school more prepared to learn and require fewer costly interventions. So, if your school district educates children who are going to benefit from education most easily, you get even more money to do it. However, if you educate challenging students you are expected to do it,

accomplish the same outcomes, be held to the same standards, but will be given less money to do it with.

I find the current situation confusing, disquieting, and upsetting. As the Superintendent of Muskegon Public Schools, I have an obligation to my students. I cannot sit by and ignore the funding model.

One could make an argument that the problems I have identified are addressed by the at-risk money provided as Section 31 funding. This money is a great help to us, but is insignificant in terms of addressing the discrepancies. We receive about \$3,000,000 which translates to an additional \$700 per student. Seven hundred dollars is not even 10% of our foundation grant, so it does not even move us into the 110%+ club identified in my appended data.

In my former role as Superintendent of the Public Schools of Robeson County, North Carolina, we were the largest and one of the lead boards that sued the state legislature for exactly this same situation. We were successful and the State Supreme Court directed the legislature to correct the situation. One of your assistants could get background on this through a Google search of (North Carolina, education, lawsuit, Leandro).

The Constitution of the State of Michigan has the following statements:

- The legislature shall maintain and support a system of free public elementary and secondary schools (Article VIII, Section 2);
- Every school district shall provide for the education of its pupils without discrimination (Article VIII, Section 2);
- Schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged (VII, Section 1);
- No person shall be denied the equal protection of the law (Article 1.2 Section 2).

The North Carolina Constitution has virtually the same language. The North Carolina Supreme Court ruled that inequities in funding violated the Constitution.

At this point I am unsure of what actions are required on my part, but I thought the first thing I should do is draw the data and my concern to your attention. I would appreciate a timely response.

Respectfully

Colin Armstrong
Superintendent

Cc: Michael P. Flanagan, Michigan Superintendent of Public Instruction
Sue Carnell, Education Advisor to the Governor