

November 20, 2014

Dear Friends,



***Let me tell you a little story about the Mitten.***

Some twenty years ago, the people of the Mitten were convinced to try an experiment: to see if they could make their public schools better by introducing competition. At the same time, they also wanted to make sure schools were funded adequately and more fairly than in the past. So the leaders of the Mitten passed laws and made changes to get the experiment started, and they expected that future leaders would closely follow the experiment to see how it was working, and make corrections as needed.

Times changed, the economy worsened, and newer, less experienced, leaders of the Mitten were more concerned about making things cost less than about making them work well. Competition, it turned out, was rigged and didn't help schools improve so much as it allowed some new players to make a profit while existing schools struggled. Funding that was generous in the beginning failed to keep up with rising costs, but leaders were afraid to ask the people to pay more for their community's schools - or to let them do it themselves. And after twenty years, no one had had the courage to see if the experiment was really living up to its promises. The children of the Mitten were the ones who lost the most from this downhill slide, but then they don't vote (or make campaign contributions).

**Sound familiar?** That's where we find ourselves today. The experiment with competition has not made schools better or stronger; it has taken the public voice out of many supposedly "public" schools and lined the pockets of a few investors. Many people have been conned into believing that you can make schools better by starving them of resources. And as any magician knows, the key to a good trick is to get people to focus their attention somewhere else.

We're about to see a number of pieces of legislation pushed through during this "lame duck" session of the Legislature. There is a bill that would give schools an A-F "grade," based on test scores and designed to make sure many fail. Another bill would require children who do not reach some arbitrary test score in reading to be flunked after 3rd grade, to force the schools "to do their job." But neither of these bills actually offer any help to schools - they seek only to shame schools and children. *"Everybody: look at how awful the schools are doing! But don't look at my other hand, which is taking away what the schools would need to fix things."*

Another set of bills would massively expand the ability of the state to take over school districts and deny voters the right to run their own schools if they ran into financial problems. As many as half of all school districts might be caught in this net. *"Look at how bad these schools are being managed! See how they bow to special interests!"* (The people who are teaching our kids, that is.) But definitely **do not** look at the backroom deals in Lansing which are forcing schools to choose between teaching music or math.

**We need everyone to speak out and stop this destructive course. To do that, we need to make sure we tell our story first.** So over the next few days, we'll be sending out pieces of the story that we need to share with our friends and neighbors. We'll start with what has really happened to school funding, and go on from there. We're all busy at this time of year, but please take the time to read our stories and to share them in your communities.

**If we all work together, we might just be able to write our own happy ending.**

Steve Norton  
[Michigan Parents for Schools](#)