

# One more headache for Lansing: Schools of Choice

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Seven years after the implementation of Michigan's school-of-choice law, Lansing public schools are feeling the heat. Recently Gov. Jennifer Granholm became the best-known Lansing parent to take advantage of the option to send her children to a school district other than the one they live in. Her daughters are going to school in East Lansing.

Granholm joins the ranks of more than 1,200 parents who've chosen to transfer their children out of the Lansing school district since 1996, when the law took effect.

This trend intensifies an overall decline in funding for the Lansing School District. Due to population decline, Lansing has lost more than 3,500 students since 1980, a decrease which has cost them more than \$23 million. In Michigan, funding for education is tallied according to the number of students enrolled, with each school district receiving an average of \$6,900 in state funds per student.

Before 1996, parents who wanted to send their children to schools outside of their own district needed to obtain permission or else pay tuition. But since Section 105 of the State School Aid Act, also known as the "school-of-choice" law, was adopted by the Michigan legislature in 1996, all of this has changed.

The new legislation made it easier for parents to decide where to educate their children, giving them the option to move to a different school, either within or outside of their own district.

School-of-choice policies have become popular nationally since the mid-'90s. According to the Denver-based think tank, Education Commission of the States, 35 states nationwide have enacted open-enrollment policies that are similar to those in Michigan.

And between 1996 and 2002 a clear trend has emerged: Mid-Michigan parents are using the policies to opt out on Lansing schools. In the last six years, Lansing has attracted 287 school-of-choice students from elsewhere — but has lost 1,206 to other districts. Total student enrollment has declined from 20,336 in 1995 to 17,323 at the end of the 2001-02 school year.

This has been due in part to a population decrease. But school-of-choice has cost the Lansing School District \$6 million per year from its budget, or roughly 3.5 percent of the district's annual budget.

'Perverse incentives'

David N. Plank, the director of Michigan State University's Education Policy Center, is studying the impact of school-of-choice policies on Michigan public schools. In a 2000 study, Plank assesses that the new policy is creating "perverse incentives that work against the accomplishments of key public purposes." Plank and his colleagues concluded that Michigan's new laws "encourage [public schools] to recruit students who are less costly to educate."

The researchers found that since 1996 Michigan students have begun to migrate from poorer school districts to districts with higher family incomes and a lower concentration of minorities. "Student transfers reinforce longstanding patterns of community growth and decline that originate in the residential housing market," wrote Plank.

According to the Michigan Department of Education, the Lansing School District has a significantly higher number of minority students when compared with neighboring regions. Sixty percent of Lansing students are minorities versus 34 percent of students in East Lansing.

Since the inception of the school-of-choice legislation, East Lansing public schools appear to be the most attractive choice. A district with 3,600 students, East Lansing has gained 531 additional school-of-choice students, but has lost a mere 74 – that's a \$3.5 million boost in their annual revenue from 1996-2002.

At a candidate's meeting last week in preparation for the Nov. 4 Board of Education election, Sharon E. Banks, superintendent of the Lansing School District, says they've been fighting a series of negative trends. "The old times where people were working for General Motors are gone, and the percentage of our wealthier residents is decreasing," Banks said. The superintendent referred to a recent study conducted by MSU researcher Bettie Landauer-Menchik showing the number of upper-income Lansing residents, or those residents making more than \$80,000 per year, has dropped to 11 percent below the state average. "Lansing is falling further behind," Banks said..

Banks said that while the district lost 7.4 percent of its population since 1990, student enrollment has declined by 24 percent.

Housing a factor

When asked how she plans to reverse this negative trend, the superintendent said she recently became the chairwoman of the Lansing's newly formed Housing Commission. Lansing School District's press spokesman, Mark Mayes, elaborated on why housing is a relevant to improving the schools. A large percentage of Lansing's inexpensive housing is set aside for senior citizens, and its less expensive apartments are too small to be suited for young families. "We need to be more attractive for parents with children of school-age," Mayes said.

Banks admits that the school district is not only fighting a barrel full of negative economic trends but also an uphill battle over its crumbling image. Prior to Granholm's decision, Banks was forced to publicly comment on the fact that mayoral candidate Virg Bernero transferred his two daughters out of the Lansing school district – in which his wife, Teri, is a principal — to schools in Holt and East Lansing. Bernero's explanation

that his older daughter, Kelly, had been harassed by other pupils at Gardner Middle didn't create a good image.

In retrospect, Banks said self-critically at the candidates' meeting, she should have more aggressively commented on the bad example Bernero was setting. Banks remembers how "petrified" she was when a TV reporter asked her to comment Bernero's decision. "It took me off-guard. Bernero's kids had been gone for two years, and I didn't know why they left, because the senator never met with me. I said 'People have a choice, and I feel that we have a great school system.' But now I feel I should have been more aggressive."

The decisions of Granholm and Bernero represent a critical assessment on the part of Lansing elite families. But how are other parents rating the Lansing School District, and the school-of-choice legislation?

### A learning environment

Lansing resident Ulyana Maystrenko decided to transfer her daughter Sofia from Lansing's Dwight Rich Middle School on Hampden Drive to East Lansing High School in 2001, where she believes her daughter is receiving a more balanced education.

"It was a tough decision, because we very much supported the Lansing School District," says Maystrenko. While other parents were transferring their children to East Lansing because of allegedly better teaching quality, Maystrenko says they chose East Lansing because of the social environment.

"Kids in Lansing thought my daughter was a little weird, because she liked learning," says Maystrenko, who teaches massage therapy at Lansing Community College. "I wanted my daughter to be in an atmosphere where more people are interested in learning."

While working as a volunteer for the Lansing School District, Maystrenko encountered many children who came from homes with social problems, even homeless children, and they brought these troubles with them to the classroom. She recalls talking with a boy who always got into fights at school. "I said we don't hit people at school. And he said, 'My dad hits me, and my mom hits me!'"

Maystrenko believes that she isn't prejudiced against urban public schools. "I grew up in New York, and went to inner-city public schools, where I did very well. So it's not that I'm running away from the big city." But it became obvious to her that teachers in Lansing endured more stress than elsewhere, because in addition to teaching they had to worry more about keeping their classes in order.

After having been at East Lansing High School for two years now, Maystrenko thinks her daughter found a much better learning environment than she ever had in Lansing. "It's not that everybody in East Lansing understands her now. But she's got a little group of friends who don't think it's strange that she loves art and that she's interested in psychology."

Sofia's mother observes a greater "push to do homework" in East Lansing, and more parental involvement. "In Lansing there were many more kids who never had a book read to them."

Asked what she would suggest to improve the learning environment in Lansing schools, Maystrenko said: "There could be more programs in elementary schools for adults to read to the children, just for fun. Let them sit in a circle, and read them stories!" Maystrenko believes Lansing should be commended for offering a larger variety of foreign languages than smaller school districts, but that the district isn't selling these

strengths well enough. “My daughter had French in elementary school, and she loved Japanese in middle school.” That was the only reason she didn’t want to switch schools.”

Taking a very contrasting approach, in 2002 Lansing resident Joan Nelson transferred her 13-year-old son Peter out of a private Montessori school and into Pattengill Middle School on Jerome Street. Nelson believes Lansing public schools are more socially and economically diverse than private schools, and schools in East Lansing. “Lansing kids are less clickish. It was important to me that the student body be rich and diverse,” says Nelson, who is the director of the Allen Neighborhood Center on Lansing’s east side.

At Pattengill, her son attends what she calls a “challenging” honors program, led by a remarkable “caliber of staff,” who use a team-teaching approach. Nelson points out that Pattengill is federally funded by the 21st century School Program, which provides additional funding for after-school programs such as chess, a band, and cross-country skiing. She says that parents who transfer their children to Okemos or East Lansing are simply unaware of Lansing’s diverse educational offerings.

After graduating from Pattengill, Nelson’s son plans to enroll in Eastern High School, which is just next door. Eastern is the only Lansing area high school that offers a Russian language program. “Peter plans to learn Russian, so that after graduating he can go to Moscow, to improve his chess skills,” the mother laughed enthusiastically.

Nelson says that before choosing Pattengill she looked at other Middle Schools in the area. “I was not impressed by the schools in East Lansing, Okemos or elsewhere,” she said, adding she felt that Lansing public schools were actually much better than their reputation. Aside from offering a competitively high level of education, one she felt is often ignored by the media, they offer also a richer social experience than East Lansing schools.

Hugh Spagnuolo, an English teacher at Eastern High School, believes that it is in fact due to the local media that Lansing public schools have an increasingly bad reputation. He believes the media should differentiate, rather than simplify. “We are like society overall, in that we have the best people in the world, and we have the worst people in the world.” The teacher said that Eastern students who later go to college tell him how lucky they feel, to have been part of a diverse learning environment. “In college they’re with people who attended segregated (i.e. private) schools. These people have no real perception of what life is like.”

## Infrastructure

Ironically, the same Pattengill Middle School that Joan Nelson praises is also at the center of a debate on how Lansing’s school are supposedly falling apart. According to Banks, Pattengill, which was built in 1920, has dim lighting, dangerous wiring, patched water pipes, and a chronically leaky pool.

Banks said the negative image of the Lansing School District has much to do with its outdated infrastructure. “Some people say buildings don’t make education. But boy, it makes kids feel a lot better when the lighting and everything is up to par,” Banks said.

The superintendent said she recently visited Holt Middle School to find out why some of her students are leaving Lansing. “It’s beautiful. There are some special amenities that are really important to the kids. And that’s tough for us to overcome. “

In order to learn more about the situation, I visited Pattengill Middle School, where I met with school board

candidate Kathleen Langschwager. Between 1976 and 1998, Langschwager's five children attended Pattengill Middle School and went on to graduate from nearby Eastern High. Langschwager, a retired Michigan National Bank accounting specialist, was a member of the Lansing Board of Education from 1991 to 1996 and has recently decided to run once again.

Standing in front of Pattengill's crumbling front staircase, she said: "It sometimes breaks my heart when I see that I sent my children to Pattengill, while other parents sent their children to private schools." The building itself is encircled by a small patch of green lawn, which is surrounded by parking lots. Across from the school grounds, Sparrow Hospital is finishing the construction of a new 1,500-car parking structure. The gray, dilapidated environment is perhaps not the best physical environment for learning, a point to which Langschwager agrees: "I think Lansing's biggest problem is that Pattengill is such a crippled school. If this was a state prison it would have been closed 30 years ago."

Once inside the building, we meet with Principal Linda Angel-Weinberg, who takes us on a tour of some of the most problematic areas. We began in room 123, a basement room in the catacombs of Pattengill, which until recently has been flooded by the leaking swimming pool upstairs. Angel-Weinberg said that before she became principal this basement room was where teachers used to eat their lunch.

The principal, who sent three of her own children to Pattengill, said she was concerned that mold in the basement resulting from the water leaks, could endanger students with asthma. While working as an administrator for the Ingham Intermediate School District during the 1990s, Angel-Weinberg said she's seen only one Middle School in Ingham County that was worse than Pattengill. "I'm talking about Leslie Middle School, but they've now rebuilt it."

Langschwager said that people often come to Lansing in order to watch a ball game, visit the Capitol, or to go to Sparrow Hospital. "When they see this school building, they probably think 'this is how people treat their kids in Lansing.' And they never see our other beautiful schools!"

The last school buildings built in the Lansing district were Riddle Middle School and Henry North Elementary School, both constructed in 1976. Superintendent Banks said during an interview that there is no doubt that replacing Pattengill with a new building is their highest priority for improving the district's image. "Pattengill is a centerpiece, and it's time to go."

During the meeting with school board candidates on Sept. 2, Banks revealed plans for a prototype design of a recently constructed middle school in Detroit that offered learning space for at least 750 children.

Lansing's Board of Education voted unanimously Sept. 4 to place a \$74.9 million bond proposal onto the Nov. 4 ballot, in order to finance the new structure. The proposal is divided into two sections. The first includes \$67.5 million for a new Pattengill Middle School, and provides funding for renovations and science and computer labs for Dwight Rich, Otto and Gardner Middle schools, as well as for a 12,000-square-foot multi-purpose room for one of the magnet elementary schools.

The second asks for \$7.4 million to build a new swimming and diving pool that would be shared by Pattengill Middle School and the community and also funds to make improvements to Sexton and Everett high schools' athletic fields.

This proposal is much smaller than the \$388.5 million bond proposal voters defeated in May 2001. If passed, the owner of a \$100,000 home in Lansing would pay an extra \$98 in annual property taxes.

Michigan State University researcher David Plank said that there is no question that the district needs to do something about Pattengill. “If you can’t build, then you can’t keep up.”

But even if the district builds a new middle school, “They’ll have to ask for more money after this bond, because other schools have needs, too.”

Plank points out that Lansing can’t keep up with suburban school districts such as East Lansing, Waverly or Okemos, because their property tax base is smaller. “Lansing is not in the worst shape, but it is clearly as disadvantaged as Flint, Pontiac, Saginaw and other urban districts.”

The educational policy specialist suggests the Michigan Legislature consider adopting an addition to Proposal A passed in 1994, which shifted the operational funding of schools from local school districts to the state. “There needs to be some protection for those districts that are rapidly losing students.”

Plank said districts like Lansing, which lose money due to declining enrollment (Lansing recently lost \$10 million from its \$178 million budget), must consequently eliminate programs, making them less attractive to parents. Thus, they face a further decrease in enrollment and budget cuts. “It becomes a cycle that feeds on itself.”

The professor said it was problematic that Proposal A didn’t provide any money for facilities in Michigan, but only offered money for district staff, books and utilities. Plank said his Education Policy Center is currently working on a study that would recommend improvements for capital funding in Michigan. The study is scheduled for release in October 2003.

Asked what else the Lansing School District could do to retain its students, Plank said they should consider offering services smaller districts can’t offer. “It could be specialized high schools that focus on foreign language, or science and technology. That would be difficult, but it might well draw kids into the district who otherwise would go to suburban high schools.”

Plank said Lansing’s decision to offer magnet elementary schools is a step in the right direction. “But I don’t know whether they will aggressively market it.”

Referring to the example of city public schools in Dearborn, Kirk A. Johnson and Elizabeth Moser argue in a study published by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy that the school-of-choice program can be an advantage to school districts that learn to better market themselves. “Concurrent with Dearborn’s aggressive efforts to recruit students, enrollment at Dearborn public schools increased from 13,857 in 1994–’95 to 17,075 in 2000–01 even as competition from neighboring school districts and charter schools has increased.” Dearborn Public Schools adopted new art, technology, and a host of other programs in addition to extending the school year and responding to parent requests.

East Lansing also gives an example of a suburban school district that has successfully utilized school-of-choice policies, as a tool for sustaining student enrollment. Although East Lansing school enrollment has also dropped — about 9 percent since 1993 — this significant decline has slowed significantly since 1998, due to the district’s successful utilization of the school-of-choice law to lock in students from neighboring areas. Thus, whereas Lansing has lost 7 percent of its student body since 1998, East Lansing’s enrollment has dropped only 1.2 percent during this period.

East Lansing Superintendent Thomas Giblin (whose schopol board just terminated his employment, effective in 12 months) said that the state money provided by the roughly 100 school-of-choice students entering his district per year is significant. “The only way to increase funding is by increasing enrollment.”

Despite the fact that East Lansing has gained from the policy, Giblin criticizes the overarching philosophy behind it. “Professionally I’m disappointed with the legislation, because one of the things you don’t do is to withdraw students from the urban center,” he said.

The superintendent said he wishes the Michigan legislature would put some money into the school system and enable Lansing to fix its crumbling schools. “Some of their buildings are just deplorable, sub-standard, while we just recently opened a brand new McDonald Middle School.”

The advocates of school-of-choice policies contend that competition gives parents the power to vote with their feet, shaking up unquestioned school district bureaucracies and spurring innovation in the process. Schools that perform poorly will lose students, and without improvements will be forced to close. The result would be better performance for all students and more parental satisfaction with public schools.

A 2000 study of the University of Colorado at Boulder suggests that this scenario may be a pipe dream. Rather than increasing overall student performance, the study conducted in Colorado found that open enrollment created a “zero sum game,” in which some schools did better only at the expense of others doing worse.

Such assessments should give food for thought, for educational policy-makers in Michigan. The Colorado study concludes: “While certain schools spiral down, certain others, those schools gaining high scoring students, thrive. And it is these latter schools who win awards for excellence and receive coverage in the press for their exceptional curricula and teaching.”

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