

← Back (/search?text=Chicken-

egg%20question%20at%20heart%20of%20school%20bond%20issue&content\_added=&date\_from=&date\_to=&pub%5B0%5D=MLCP)

# Chicken-egg question at heart of school bond issue - Will better facilities keep Lansing schools competitive?

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By DANIEL STURM    October 15, 2003    Publication: Lansing City Pulse (MI)    Word Count: 1475

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By DANIEL STURM

Robin Turner says she doesn't regret sending all four of her children to Lansing public schools.

The 47-year old mother claims that the quality of education is good in Lansing public schools, even if most of the buildings are in a deplorable condition. "The lab and science room at Otto Middle School room was used for storage because it's so antiquated. Eastern High School doesn't have a football field, and Pattengill Middle School is falling apart. The district's buildings are a mess."

Since 1996 more than 1,200 parents have used the Michigan "school of choice" policy to transfer their children out of the Lansing School District.

Turner says that over time she grew "sick and tired" of hearing her children compare their school facilities to the much better funded districts of East Lansing, Holt and Okemos.

Turner, who works part time as a Christian education director at the Presbyterian Church in East Lansing, volunteers for the "Citizens for Lansing Schools," an advocacy group formed in 2003 to support the \$75.8 million in bond proposals that will appear on the Nov. 4 election ballot. The total of both is much smaller than the \$388.5 million bond proposal voters defeated in May 2001.

Two proposals will appear on the ballot. The first calls for \$68.3 million for a new Pattengill Middle School and provides funding for renovations, athletics, and science and computer labs for Dwight Rich, Otto, and Gardner middle schools, and Eastern, Sexton and Everett high schools, as well as a 12,000-square-foot multi-purpose room for one of the magnet elementary schools.

The second asks for \$7.5 million to build a new swimming and diving pool that would be shared by Pattengill Middle School and the community, as well as funds to make improvements to Sexton and Everett high schools' athletic fields.

If both proposals pass, the owner of a \$100,000 home in Lansing will pay an extra \$98 in annual property taxes. It will take 20 years for the bonds to be paid off.

Peter Cunningham, campaign manager for Citizens for Lansing Schools, noted that Lansing is losing students to surrounding districts mainly because their middle and high school facilities are outdated in comparison. "Unless we modernize our schools, Lansing will continue to bleed families and businesses to the outlying areas," said Cunningham.

In an interview earlier this fall, Lansing's Superintendent E. Sharon Banks said that replacing Pattengill Middle School with a new building is the highest priority for improving the district's image. "Pattengill is a centerpiece, and it's time to go." According to Banks, Pattengill, which was built in 1920, has dim lighting, dangerous wiring, patched water pipes, and a chronically leaky pool.

District officials and bond supporters argue Lansing should build new schools, pools and cafeterias, and renovate their football fields and science labs to compete with suburban schools. But while opponents agree that something has to be done to stop the migration of students out of Lansing, they question the school district's strategy.

John Pollard, the organizer of Citizens Against this Bond and who led the opposition to the bigger bond issue two years ago, says he disagrees with the attitude in Lansing that something needs to be new in order to be good.

"They think if they build new schools people will stop leaving Lansing, and somehow people in the suburbs will move back to the city," Pollard said. The community activist believes that for the Lansing School District to really improve its crumbling image, it needs to do something about its record dropout rates, rather than distracting attention from such important issues with a proposal to construct new buildings.

Pollard contracted with the Lansing School District last year for a mentoring program for 9th graders at Everett High School. He said that within 12 weeks of the program, he was able to turn around two thirds of the students who were failing and at risk of dropping out.

Lansing's graduation rate decreased from 70 percent in 1999 to 57 percent by 2001, making its dropout rate worse than Detroit's.

One month ago, Pollard applied for a \$160,000 follow-up contract to help 1,600 students with similar problems. Although he fears cutting his "own throat" by voicing his opinion on this issue, Pollard says he isn't willing to stop his campaign against the district's bond proposal. "My wife and I are prepared to eat dirt if that's what it takes for me to exercise my First Amendment right."

Given the \$800 million state budget deficit announced by the Granholm administration last week, Pollard said it would be easy to do the math. "That means that maybe next year, Lansing, with 17,000 kids, will lose \$500 a head. And while they're building a 'Taj Mahal' middle school, they will have to lay off teachers. And I believe this is ridiculous, because buildings don't teach anybody anything."

Responding to Pollard's line of argument, Turner said she's often heard people make the claim that one could "educate in a box." Added Turner: "Certainly there are missionaries in third world countries who do exactly that. And they do a damn good job at it. But I would also say 'Mr. Pollard, are you going into these buildings to seek your education, and would you feel as special if you walked into a dilapidated building with a pot-hole filled parking lot, and tried unsuccessfully to find a science room?'"

Pointing to a 15-page breakdown summary of the school bond, Pollard said he questions the district's priorities. One fourth of the total bond money, or \$18 million, is purely related to athletics, including money for new gymnasium and athletic field, bleachers, weight rooms, and a new running track. And Pollard, who's proud to have led the defeat of the \$388.5 million bond in May 2001, argues that this is much too much money for athletics, and that only a small amount was to be used for renovations.

"Two years ago," he recalls, "they told us that the boilers were so bad and old that they needed to be replaced. They told us that we needed to redo the air circulation, and that the lighting was so bad that the kids couldn't see. Now there's no boiler, no air, no roof [in the budget proposal], but \$17 million for athletics."

Nancy Wonch, chairperson of Citizens for Lansing Schools, said that athletics facilities should be as up to date as possible, to make sure that children are safe. "We're not suggesting that everybody has a 'Taj Mahal,' but clearly

athletics is part of a quality educational experience, and I don't think that you can ignore that. Frankly, parents and children look to the school for appropriate athletic activity."

Opponents are also dissatisfied with the fact that the future site for the new Pattengill School has yet to be identified.

The Lansing School District's spokesman, Mark Mayes, says that their first choice for a new school is on National Guard property on Marshall Street, and that they are in negotiation about a property trade. The district would like to swap 30 acres of the Wohlert Farms property on Wood and State roads in Clinton County for 21 acres at the Marshall Street site. In case these negotiations fail, they will suggest developing land owned by the district at the corner of Orchard Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, north of Eastern High School.

Kathleen Langschwager, a member of the Lansing Board of Education from 1991 to 1996 who is running again in November, said that she's worried the district might trade good agricultural land for polluted land. The Marshall Street property was used by the Reform School, and the Michigan National Guard used to park tanks and trucks on the site. Currently Sparrow Hospital is using the site as temporary parking lot. "I plan to vote for this proposal, but they've got to do soil borings," she said.

In an interview earlier this fall, David Plank, the director of Michigan State University's Education Policy Center, 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."

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