

MICHIGAN'S PLAN TO WREAK HAVOC ON THE LEARNING OF CHILDREN A Critical Analysis of the MEAP

Comments made at the Flint Area Public Affairs Debates:

Are MEAP Assessments Helping to Improve Student Learning and School Accountability?

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What is the purpose of schooling?

Tonight two fundamentally different answers to this question are being proposed as we address the impact of the MEAP on the education of children in Michigan.

In the first approach, the purpose of schooling is to teach narrow technical skills and promote the willingness of children to do what they are told by people in authority, whether government or a boss, without question, to blame themselves always for the problems in their lives rather than even consider social conditions.

For this approach to schooling, the MEAP does an excellent job. It marvelously sorts kids into two piles – one to keep and the other to throw away.

In the second approach, we seek to help children become full human beings, truly democratic citizens who critically analyze our social situation and create a more equitable and productive society. Such schools also teach children technical skills. However, foremost children learn to think deeply, ask hard questions, solve problems, and build a sense of care and community. This is the approach of the Whole Schooling Consortium and the Rouge Forum that I and Greg Queen represent.

For this approach to schooling, the MEAP is a travesty, destroying quality teaching, creating cultures of fear, abusing children in the name of education.

Let's now be more specific.

The MEAP measures family income.

First, the MEAP largely measures the income and wealth of children, *not* the effect of quality schooling. The correlation between wealth and test scores is so high that we can virtually predict an individual child's MEAP score, and certainly the overall average in a school, by the income of the parents. This means that the MEAP exacerbates our already great divisions across class, race, and geographical location.

For high income schools the MEAP is largely a nuisance. Their children could stay home for 3 years and do well and they know it.

Many students from high income Oakland County schools boycotted the MEAP in recent years, and to quell this incipient resistance, we now have reward monies for kids passing the tests and

Golden Apple Awards for schools, scholarship programs largely for the rich and their schools. As the Rouge Forum flyer says, we've discovered the 19th Democratic core value—bribery. What are we teaching children by *this* example?

Schools serving working class and lower income children are under the gun, literally.

Schools that serve working class and low income children, however, are under enormous pressure to “raise the test scores”. They know their children won't naturally do well and that they will be blamed, no matter the challenges in these children's lives. In these schools, a culture of fear and threat frequently looms that destroys learning. What often happens?

- Up to 40% of instructional time is spent drilling for the MEAP.
- Principals' jobs are threatened.
- Teachers are threatened with disciplinary action if they question the MEAP or tell parents of their right to exempt their children. Teachers are told that “we will not tolerate slackers in this school” in staff meetings where the tension can be cut with a knife.
- Entire school staffs work days and days to “align” their instruction with the MEAP.
- Presumed “frivolous and fun” activities are eliminated to focus on what is on the test.
- Pressure to use MEAP worksheets rather than engaging teaching strategies.
- Administratively required schoolwide exams that mimic the MEAP rather than involving kids in real demonstrations of learning.
- Huge pep rallies that send the clear message that the goal of learning is to pass a test.

High income schools often involve kids in active, project-based educational activities that focus on meaning and deep thinking – strategies that we know promote substantial learning.

Low income schools frequently teaching using narrow worksheets and unengaged learning. The MEAP makes this situation worse, not better.

Some schools, however, that serve working class and low income children are doing their best to use good teaching practices in the midst of this travesty. But bit by bit they are worn down.

One elementary school, where some 60% of their children receive free and reduced lunch, has developed a model program --many multi-age classrooms across all grades, classes hum with collaborative work displayed everywhere; the school is inclusive having one of the lowest special education rates in the state. However, they've been told to “get those MEAP scores up”. The principal was threatened with her job, teachers have been pressured to move away from engaging teaching and use worksheets targeting what is on the MEAP. Multi-age teaching and inclusion are under attack.

The great horror, what the MEAP does to children.

Children feel the devastation the most, surprisingly across income levels.

- This week Roland, who is not being allowed to take the MEAP, was told by a fellow 4th grader: “You are too stupid to take the MEAP”.

- Janita, the daughter of a friend, is getting therapy due to MEAP stress. As one of the school's high achievers, she is deathly afraid she will bring their scores down.
- More students are dropping out of school.
- Parents in a low income areas have been led to believe they have two choices -- their children pass the MEAP or go to prison. They are terrified and pass this fear on to their children.
- A reading clinician said during MEAPing week, with tears in her eyes after a sleepless night, "I am abusing children this week."
- A principal at a West Bloomfield school, a school that's always done well on the MEAP and will again this year, told of many kids throwing up, some in tears, many feeling stupid because they missed one or two questions.

Kids know for sure this is not about learning. It is about adults and real estate values and the desire of employers to have their pick of compliant adults for the few good jobs they have to offer.

Isn't it all worth it? This helps them learn what they need to know, doesn't it?

You might say this is all worth it if it led to something. But it doesn't. All across the nation the 'standards movement' has sought to identify 'what children should know'. While this makes sense at first, when you look again, it doesn't at all.

Who was asked about what should be known, the purpose of schooling, what we want for children? Parents, community members, students themselves? *Not a chance.*

The people who set these standards were (1) CEO's of companies and (2) representatives of the various disciplines – reading, social studies, science. Not surprisingly, what we got was a set of standards composed of . . .

- (1) narrow technical skills and 'facts'
- (2) impossible quantities of information. Each discipline was asked, "What should be known about the area in which we've spent our lives?" It's like asking an accountant about the key math skills that every human being ought to have.

Get a copy of the MEAP and take it yourself and you will see:

- Many questions to which you don't know the answer (on the 4th grade social studies test, for example).
- Answers that reflect an interpretation of the world, so that the MEAP becomes a tool of indoctrination rather than assessment of knowledge.
- Questions that are clearly biased and unfair.
- Questions that are simply trivial.

For example, on the social studies MEAP, students lose points when they "try to solve social problems" instead of giving the technical response desired. The whole MEAP assesses little of what really may matter to either students or teachers in real learning.

Some have suggested that the policy makers and business leaders should be required to take the 4th and 5th grade MEAP and have their continuance in their jobs dependent upon it. None have taken this challenge.

We can't even talk about it. The powers that be say we can't.

What makes this grand and unsubstantiated experiment so dangerous is that power is being used to silence opposition. We have the reward system for the rich, teachers are threatened, no principal that I know feels they can question this test openly. No evaluation studies have been conducted regarding the impact of the MEAP on meaningful learning or the mental health of children. There is no research-based educational theory that provides a foundation for the MEAP and the standardized, governmentally regulated curriculum that stands behind it.

What holds the MEAP in place is not research, not good practice, but sheer use of power by an alliance of people who run corporations, who hold positions of power in government, and the test publishers and consultants who make money off this burgeoning billion dollar industry. In a democracy worthy of the name, this situation cannot be allowed. But so far, threats and fear have made real investigation of the impact of this experiment virtually impossible.

However, IF we live in a democracy, then power is in the hands of people who care and will speak, and the time to speak and act is now.

Where might we go? Why not create schools for learning, joy, growth, and celebration?

There are alternatives to the educational travesty based upon the 'lots and lots and lots o facts curriculum' and tests that sort kids by income and prepare them for the unemployment lines of corporate downsizing and the bribery and threats being used to keep the system in place.

We can intentionally create schools that are places of joy, growth discovery, where we 'assess' by creating the best conditions for learning we know possible and then watch what happens. Rather than the arm of power and force standing over a child and saying, 'Prove to me you have learned and are worthy', standing over teachers with a club in hand saying, "Prove to me you have been teaching", standing over principals screaming, "Get those test scores up at all costs now!!", we can instead have community celebrations where children show products of their learning through portfolios, develop complex projects working as groups, where we look for and discover the unexpected learning and growth among a community of children.

Barb McKenzie is the parent of a remarkable child who carries a label of mental retardation. She has been included in a school that has bucked the tide and engaged kids in real learning. She says about her daughter's learning. "Who would have thought that she would . .

- ❑ learn to read and continue to learn to read and comprehend?
- ❑ Be so engaged in her academic classes?
- ❑ Be responsible in completing jobs, following a schedule, not getting lost, being on time -- when she still can't tell time well, doesn't have good directional skills, and prefers a lot of other things to "work"?

Nancy Creech, an elementary teacher said. . .

I am often asked, "What do you teach?" I say, "I teach children." I help children learn on their own developmental timeline. Children spend 3 years with in my classroom, enabling me to build a secure relationship with the child and their family. We create a wonderful classroom community in which cross-age learning is experienced, where students naturally learn to help one another.

Tanya Sharon, another elementary teacher, has recently been challenged by a student recently immigrating from Mexico. He's had a hard time adjusting, focusing, often leaving the room. But Tanya and her class of 30 children, in a small room, have reached out to this young child inviting him into the warmth of the community they've built together. Kids help one another. And he's opening up, beginning to focus, becoming more secure.

These examples are the essence of quality schooling – inclusion of all in learning together, engaging teaching, taking kids where they are and supporting them in learning, building a community. You will find none of these critical elements on the MEAP. The MEAP works against these essential qualities of good schooling.

The Whole Schooling Consortium was formed in 1997 to provide one child, family, and community centered alternative to the repressive, regressive educational agenda being foisted on

schools by people in fiscal and government power. We founded our work on five basic principles which organize a host of specific schooling practices, all aimed at having children of real difference learn well together –

- Empowerment in a democracy.
- Including all in learning together rather than separating kids into special education and resource rooms.
- Authentic, multi-level teaching – kids challenged at their own level with support.
- Building a caring community.
- Supporting teachers and students via specialists who help enrich the regular classroom.
- Partnering with parents and the community, linking school and community learning.

If we are concerned about school accountability, we can start by holding schools and teachers accountable for how well they implement these practices which have deep and wide research bases.

More important, however, we must hold business and government accountable to provide the resources and support to make them possible

- equitable funding for schools
- reasonable class sizes (away from the 30 students in an elementary class and 168 kids taught by one high school teacher
- providing children have enough to eat, decent places to live, and emotional support and security.
- giving teachers support in constant learning and growth, and respect.
- And more.

These essentials require that businesses make a commitment to communities beyond their paltry donations, to use their escalating profits to give back to the communities that made them possible. Governmental leaders must actually lead to create a society of care rather than a society of escalating inequality, segregation, and repression.

Fortunately, there is a growing resistance movement to the child abuse fostered by the MEAP and other similar tests throughout the United States.

The Rouge Forum is a network of parents, teachers, and community members promoting good teaching, democracy and the demise of the MEAP. On May 5 at 11:00 AM in Detroit, a rally against the MEAP will be held. This will be one place to make a public statement against this travesty, against Michigan's plan to destroy real learning for its children, *for* schools for real democracy. Come join us.