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SCHOOL PARENT BOARDS

House Bill 4695 (Substitute H-1) First Analysis (2-2-00)

Sponsor: Rep. Joanne Voorhees
Committee: Education

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

Strong links between school and home help youngsters to learn at school. (See *BACKGROUND INFORMATION*, below.) To acknowledge this fact, parental advisory committees are established by schools and school districts, in order to foster better communication about students' learning among the adults who guide their physical growth and intellectual development. Parents are invited by administrators to serve, and it is customary for administrators to assign teachers to serve on the advisory committees along with the parents. Often the advisory committees are led by the school officials--the administrators or teachers--who establish them, and sometimes the number of professional educators serving on an advisory committee is larger than the number of parents. When the contingent of parents is small, some parents are intimidated by the professional educators and unable to speak out or to participate fully in the advisory committee's deliberations.

To get more parents involved and to help them control their school programs, some have suggested that a law should be passed to require school boards to appoint a majority of parents to any committee on which parents serve.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

House Bill 4695 (H-1) would amend the Revised School Code to specify that when a school board established a board, council, or other group designed to provide parental input (or when it authorized the creation of such a group), the school board would be required to ensure that a) a majority of the group's members were parents of students enrolled in the school district; and, b) a person serving in a position of authority in the group was not an employee of the school district unless the person is also a parent of a pupil enrolled in the school district.

MCL 380.1206

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

During the summer months of 1999, the Parents in Education Task Force of the Republican caucus convened five meetings (in Owosso, Clinton Township, Big Rapids, Petoskey, and Berrien Springs) in order to examine the needs, concerns, and suggestions of parents and the public about ways to make schools safe, and to make them inclusive places to learn. To those ends, the task force asked parents and community members to share their ideas about how parents, the community, and schools could work together to ensure that each student received a solid education, in a safe and productive environment. According to the "Task Force Report on Parents in Education," issued in January 2000 by the House Republican Policy Committee, 40 people testified, including parents, school board members, judges, police officers, and representatives of various community and business groups such as the Red Cross and Ameritech. The topics raised at the hearings included parental involvement, special education, gifted and talented education, school safety, curriculum, and local v. mandated issues. The report recommends three pilot programs for school districts that would be administered as competitive grants, in order to improve school safety, parental involvement, and curriculum. The pilot programs would be funded at the level of \$400,000 over two years. Further, the report offers eight policy recommendations to the legislature, one of which is to pass House Bill 4695. In addition, the report offers five recommendations for school districts, three recommendations to parents, and four recommendations to the Michigan Department of Education.

According to the task force report, with regard to parental involvement, testifiers repeatedly offered the same message: parents want to help. They want more communication from schools about their children, school functions, and how they can be more involved in their children's education. The parents also wanted to know, and wanted to be shown, how they could help to improve their children's learning at home: to know what their children are learning, and what is expected

House Bill 4695 (2-2-00)

in the classroom; to know what homework has been assigned so that they can provide oversight; and, to know about absences so they can ensure regular attendance. Many parents also believe teachers need to learn how to work with them.

The report mentions five programs that increase parental involvement. Anchor Bay Schools, located in New Baltimore, Michigan, reports that its Schools and Community Organized as Parents in Education (AB SCOPE) program promotes the welfare of children in home, school, and community by bringing the stakeholders in a child's education into a closer relationship with each other. A new program, AB SCOPE envisions community involvement at local schools in the school district through special curriculum days, and through fund-raising to provide money for academic achievement awards; special projects that would enhance the curriculum; and school improvements.

Fremont Public Schools reports success with its "Help One Student to Succeed" (HOST) program, a one-on-one mentor program designed to improve the academic, social, and emotional growth of children. More than 100 school districts, statewide, use HOST. In Fremont where the program has been underway for three years, HOST works with 125 school children and 184 mentors each year. A mentor works to strengthen a child's reading, writing, vocabulary, and higher-order thinking skills. The national executive office of HOST is located in Dallas, Texas, and its website is <http://www.hosts.com>.

The Owosso Public Schools reports success with its ongoing volunteer program, headed by a "Volunteer Coordinator." The coordinator's job is to get parents to help in school classroom, to mentor particular children, and to schedule parents for lunches with students and teachers. Parents also were reported by schools to serve as morning and afternoon greeters, and as hallway monitors during the school day.

The Allegan County Intermediate School district reports success with "Early Education Services," a school-readiness program that seeks to ensure young children are competent, self-assured, and ready for school. A component of this program is "Parents as Teachers," an early childhood parent education and family support program designed to empower all parents to give their children a good start. The national office of "Parents as Teachers" is located in St. Louis, Missouri and its website address is <http://www.patnc.org>.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

According to the House Fiscal Agency, the bill has no fiscal implications. (2-1-00)

ARGUMENTS:

For:

Student learning is best served when parents and teachers work to guide students' intellectual growth and development. In order for parents to take control of school programs, to broaden and clarify the scope of the educational conversation, and to mitigate the effect of education professionals, parents should be in charge of all committees on which they serve. This will enable them to direct a committee's progress; to reduce the jargon often used by education professionals; to ask deeper questions about school programs; to learn more about subject matter learning in ways that will help them assist their children at home; and if the parents are united in their point-of-view, to win all contested questions that are put to a vote.

For:

This bill is especially important because all public school districts must appoint an advisory committee on reproductive health. According to committee testimony, the deliberations of a school district's reproductive health committee often are highly charged with emotion, and the policy recommendations often remain controversial despite the debate. At least one school district is reported to have "stacked" its reproductive health committee with those who favored a policy that allows students to opt out of the reproductive health class, when the parents on the committee wanted a policy that would have allowed students to opt in. Had there been a law like this, the parents on the committee may well have prevailed.

Against:

Although parents should be welcome participants in the school life of their children, they are not alone in their understanding of teaching, learning, curriculum, evaluation, and assessment. Educators, too, act in the best interest of school children, as they join with parents to guide youngsters to full participation as scholars and citizens. Sometimes parents--indeed, all participants--in a participatory democracy confuse their right to be heard with a right to prevail. This bill is unacceptable because it furthers that confusion. Minority points of view are worthwhile, since they tend to guide decision making toward compromise and consensus. But despite the fact that the 'protected

rights of the minority' stands as a principle in the American system of participatory democracy, those protected rights can best be understood as the right to join in a policy conversation, not as a guarantee that the minority point of view will be adopted by the majority, or even that it will persuade the majority to modify its original proposal.

Against:

Although it is wise to convey to local school districts the importance of parental involvement in their school programs, it is unwise to circumvent local control, and to micro-manage school operations through state law. All local school districts of the state, except Detroit's, are elected by citizens, many of whom are the parents of the children who attend the schools. Many of the elected board members are, themselves, school parents. Parents have avenues of redress if their majority points-of-view are not heard, or if they are denied the opportunity to participate in their schools' policy conversations.

POSITIONS:

The Michigan School Board Leaders Association supports the bill. (2-1-00)

Michigan Family Forum supports the bill. (2-1-00)

Citizens for Traditional Values supports the bill. (2-1-00)

Concerned Women of America supports the bill. (2-1-00)

Analyst: J. Hunault

■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.