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ECONOMIC CLUB SPEECH

AREND D. LUBBERS

MAY 11, 1998

When I began thinking about a speech on charter schools, twenty-five states had charter school legislation. When I began putting my thoughts on paper, twenty-eight states had joined the movement. Today as I deliver the speech, 32 states have enabling legislation, or are awaiting a Governor's signature. Is this an important topic? I think so.

Life has its defining movements. One of them for our nation was public commitment to education for every citizen, and the payment of that education by tax dollars. Every privately owned square foot in the United States was taxed so children could learn to read, write, and calculate, and every square foot became part of a district responsible for the schools within it. "What greater or better gift can we offer the republic than to teach and instruct our youth?" Cicero said that during the time of the Roman Republic, and America bought it 2000 years later.

Along with the commitment, bureaucracies and structures emerge so the enterprise can be directed and managed. They are necessary, but inevitably they carry some "bad baggage" along with the good they do. When that "baggage" is perceived as too heavy by enough citizens, attempts at reform begin. In 1983 a Presidential Commission called the United States a "Nation at Risk." Why? Because they said, "There is a rising tide of mediocrity in our schools." Attempts at reform began. The charter school movement, in my estimation, is the most significant of these.

When the Board of Control at Grand Valley State University voted to charter schools, I received letters, few of them moderate. The points of attack were "foot in the door" for voucher system, ultimately undermining separation of church and state, racist, elitist, university greed, and Grand Valley as traitor to real public education. The feelings, as well as the arguments, are

high intensity, sometimes rational, sometimes emotional. There is no doubt that the Charter School movement, if successful and widespread, will bring about change in K-12 education more pervasive than at any time since Horace Mann.

In Michigan today there are 108 charter schools. They enroll 21,000 of Michigan's 1.7 million students. Ninety are licensed by state universities, one by a community college, eleven by intermediate school districts, and six by local school districts. The average size is 197 students – the smallest 15, the largest 1,007. The cap limiting the collective number of charters issued by state universities is 150.

Why is the charter school experiment, limited as it is, threatening to anyone in Michigan? First, there are some, satisfied with their public schools and the reforms implemented, who see no reason for charters. They believe problems are best solved within the traditional system. Second, it threatens some who see their jobs, or at least working conditions, endangered. Third, it threatens those who exercise power and are uncertain what a change in the status-quo will do to that power. This is important stuff.

I mentioned "A Nation at Risk," the report that spurred educators and citizens alike to take stock. What nourished their concerns? What created the conditions that gave birth to the charter school movement?

Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island several years ago warned that the public would lose respect for education if the industrial model for managing relations was too widely used by teachers. I think he was targeting the strike as a means to gain ends that would tarnish the teachers' image. Striking itself does not define teachers' ability, but it is part of a model that usually takes less account of quality and more account of working conditions and pay. Citizens began to be "turned off" by strikes and threatened strikes.

Parents would observe good teachers and weak teachers receive comparable protection and compensation. For many who did not live in such a protected world, this didn't seem fair, but more important, it affected their children when they were subjected to the inadequate teaching of the poor teacher because no other option was available.

The late Albert Shanker, who led the American Federation of Teachers, the most militant teachers union, was a leader I came to respect. He became an advocate for rewarding the good teachers. He talked about merit because the mission could not be accomplished without meritorious teachers, and the public trust could not be gained without accomplishing the mission.

Since the 1960's, throughout America, the struggle to save cities, is one of our major stories. The schools in the cities are engulfed by the struggle. Flight to the suburbs, crime, deteriorating facilities, unstable family life, contribute to school problems, all beyond the schools' control. People feel trapped, and recently inner city families in New Jersey were asking for a voucher system so their children could escape into happier learning situations. The media carries the stories into America's homes, and many come away with the impression that the system is not working.

The failure is certified for most by the students' lack of good performance. Our high school students, compared to students in other industrialized countries, is woeful. In Michigan not even 50% pass the MEAP tests satisfactorily. The numerical results are bolstered by complaints from the workplace that too many students are illiterate in reading, writing and mathematics. This is frightening to parents who live in a school district where more standard tests are failed than passed.

For these reasons people look for ways to better educate. They are asked for more money. Often they provided it. Too often improvements are not apparent. For instance, in Kansas

City a judge took over the school district. For more than a decade the Kansas City District got more money per pupil than any other major school district. Low test scores stayed put, the gap between Blacks and Whites was unchanged, and the dropout level increased.

There are good stories as well as bad. Elementary students score high in math tests compared to those in other industrialized nations. If, however, satisfaction with the status quo was universal, there would be no move towards charter schools. In large urban centers of over 100,000 students, it is not uncommon to have a 50% dropout rate. Most dropouts cannot read or calculate at a level to serve an economy in the information age. Employers' continuing complaint is their need to provide remedial services for the people they hire.

When we observe the way education is provided in our nation, we are both encouraged and frightened. Something is going right. Our colleges and universities are accepting students from public high schools. They are graduating and supplying brainpower to the world's soundest economy. Yet, the problems I mentioned continue to fester. Charter Schools are among the most recent solutions, and a few years must pass before we can assess how successful and how far-reaching they will be in reshaping the K-12 landscape.

Schools often take the rap for societal weakness. The question should be asked, "Can a school system that works in many cases, and has served the nation well in the past, be held responsible for educational failure where it takes place?" There are some bad places and dysfunctional people that the schools did not create, yet they must deal with them. Knowledge is exploding. There is more to learn. Sometimes those who learn rapidly don't find opportunities to stretch their capacity for learning. Each year we find out more about the brain and the different ways people learn. Parents are seeking schools where each of their children is taught in the best way for each child. They are seeking schools where each is challenged to capacity. They are

seeking to remove their children from an environment where they perceive they are endangered or held back by an environment that is hostile to intellectual development. They are seeking schools where values necessary to a free, democratic society are easily communicated to their children. Some are seeking schools where a problem child is helped to overcome his or her specific problem.

The Charter School movement has gained momentum because the seekers believe they have a better chance of finding in a school that must be market sensitive. The school board and staff must constantly deliver value to the student and parent. If they don't, the school will close. This is a crucial difference between regular public schools, which have enjoyed territorial protection, and charter public schools. The regular schools' survival has never depended upon satisfying their clientele. Charter schools may change that. No district is likely to die, but the regular schools will compete for students. That element of competition may bring improvements.

Higher education people may often spout liberal ideals, but they are just as protective and resistant to change as anyone else. Competition forces improvement, even among those that consider themselves the best. I think charter schools will help the regular public schools by initiating a competition colleges and universities have lived with throughout their existence.

In meeting the competition, I am surprised that more public school systems haven't opened their own charter schools. Why don't they try to satisfy more of the dissatisfied through specialized charter schools? In Grand Rapids there is a charter high school designed to train students for jobs in the food industry. Many of its students were dropouts or potential dropouts. Some had discipline problems. The school was originally chartered by Grand Valley for a group of local food industry people. The school is now part of the Grand Rapids School District. Students from outside the district can apply for admission. An at-risk high school group is better

served than before, and the regular Grand Rapids School District is doing it. The Board was ready to risk, and the Teachers Association was flexible.

In Wyoming, the Superintendent and Board opened the way for a charter school to educate students for health professions. They are using the charter legislation creatively to provide value added, another option for students within and outside their district. Since applications cannot be restricted to one school district, the implications for a district to open selected, special charter schools has the potential of real change. Movement, reform, competition, more options are all possible without the elimination of school districts, even though their boundaries may become blurred.

The proliferation of schools of choice may bring with it the opportunity for a different kind of school, a school of no choice. If several types of schools are needed, there can be a school that has a demanding code of discipline and no tolerance for anti-racial behavior. Some parents might choose such a school for a difficult child or youth. Where there is no parent involvement, the recalcitrant student can be assigned to the school by the appropriate authority in the school district. I believe that population has placed a heavy burden on fellow students and teachers alike, and requires a different approach implemented by people especially educated and trained to inject learning and discipline in their lives.

As the meaning of charter schools in our society gradually comes into focus, we begin to see a future with a greater variety of schools, some directed to a specific population, others to a process of learning, some as part of an existing school district, others separate and part of a private enterprise.

Earlier I told you about letters of criticism I received. There are several misconceptions about charter schools that need dispelling. First, they are free to students. Some people actually

thought there was a tuition charge. Second, they must employ certified teachers. Third, they must provide special education. Fourth, they must comply in all ways with the Michigan School Code. Fifth, they must comply with all applicable law, and sixth, they cannot discriminate. After setting the number of students they will accept, they must accept all applications. If there are more applications than places, the students are selected by lot. In Michigan, charter schools have a higher percentage of minority students than statewide averages.

Staunch advocates of separation of church and state in matters of education fear that charter schools lead to a voucher system that will bring public money to religious schools. I don't share that view. If through charters children receive a values based education and the kind of learning parents support, vouchers will not be a part of their agenda. Those who oppose vouchers weaken that opposition when they attack charter schools as well. A combination of voucher advocates and those who do not receive what they want from public education may reinforce vouchers as a solution to their problem. In my estimation, the voucher issue should be fought separately from the charter school issue. The nation should make a clear choice between providing only public schools for its citizens or change to the European system of permitting citizens to take their share of the education money for religious schools.

Our involvement, as I indicated, has been an intense experience. Every Board member, those appointed by Governor Blanchard, the Democrat, and Governor Engler, the Republican, supported charter schools. We adopted four principles: one, we will license only one elementary, middle or high school in a school district, unless asked by the district to do more, limiting the financial impact on the district. Two, we will limit our licensing to schools within a 75 mile radius of the campus to keep our supervision manageable and affordable. Three, we will license only in December for the next fall openings to give school districts time to plan for the impact.

Four, if the 3% we collect of revenues provided our charters for our expenses produces a surplus, we will on a formula basis provide special instructional project money to the schools. This year there will be available about \$100,000 for the schools.

Our staff, directed by former Grand Rapids Superintendent Pat Sandro, attends charter school Board meetings. We also bring charter school staff to the University each month to discuss regulations, problems and problem solving. We regularly visit the schools and do parental surveys. As a University, we want to see if charter schools will infuse into public education the changes that will make it better throughout. At this stage we are trying to determine the number and type of schools we should charter so we can evaluate for ourselves and the citizens of west Michigan how effective charters are. Presently we have 16 operating schools, two awaiting approval to build a facility, and 11 opening in September of this year.

A recent poll of Grand Rapids Charter School area parents revealed that 90% of them believed their child or children were receiving a better education than previously. This high level of satisfaction cannot be discounted. It appears the same throughout the nation.

There are 170,000 students who attend approximately 800 schools. President Clinton has set a goal of 40 states with enabling laws and 3,000 charter schools by 2000. It appears in the country that charter schools have some bipartisan support. In Michigan it was mainly a Republican agenda, though democrats participated in the framing of acceptable legislation. An unfriendly legislature or executive might have difficulty in rescinding legislation that produces considerable satisfaction among its clientele. If successes continue, the few failures are not likely to undermine the movement. If opponents gain government control soon, I look for laws that hedge and choke. The sword would not be swift, nor death immediate.

I think in Michigan we will see three kinds of developments if the legislation remains the same. One is private contracting to do public education. There is debate about making public education a for-profit enterprise. Remember these are schools of choice. Parents want satisfaction. It brings free enterprise into play, and if the founders, managers and teachers do an excellent job, they will succeed.

The second is the growing awareness by public school districts that charters can help them satisfy parents and improve instruction for different kinds of learners. I can envision a time when neighboring districts cooperate on charters, each meeting a special population need in which the other can share. Some schools chartered by universities will join a local district when the districts are ready to accommodate them as Grand Rapids did. They will want some of their services and activities. It gives the Teachers Associations a chance to rethink some of their policies, and become active players for the improvement of education.

The third is a grouping of charter schools around the university that charters them. They will grow closer to schools and departments within the university. Their Boards, appointed by the university Boards, will see that one step removed from local politics as an advantage to be preserved.

For many, and I include myself, the time has come for all of us, the public, to provide a greater variety of education process, matching process to individual and societal needs. While maintaining our doctrine of separation between church and state, it is time to give greater emphasis to values education in our program of instruction.

When it comes to keeping focus on what must be important, I remember James Carville, directing and advising the 1992 Clinton campaign. In a true, if somewhat demeaning way, he said, "It's the economy, stupid." While we deal with the vision, structure, and management of

public schools for the 21st century, let's think about James Carville's admonishment. Except we should substitute "the children" for "the economy."