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Remarks for GVSU Charter Schools Office, delivered on March 3, 2014

Arend D. Lubbers
Grand Valley State University

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March 3, 2014

Remarks for GVSU Charter Schools Office

Attn: Dr. Pat Oldt

By Arend D. Lubbers

1. MFrom the time I learned of Governor Engler's charter schools initiative for the State of Michigan, I became an enthusiastic supporter. Most of our public school systems in Michigan are strong, but there are exceptions. Where those exceptions existed I felt too many children and youth were not served well and parents should have an opportunity to find a better education for their daughters and sons. Charter schools provided that possibility.

I have observed that competition in higher education improves education and I believed that charter schools could provide competition in the K through 12 arena that would be beneficial for traditional school systems.

When I was in high school and college, teachers in the public schools of Michigan were organizing. The need for collective initiatives in the teachers' interests was obvious. My observation after many decades revealed what I considered many gains for teachers, but I thought many of the rules and customs that characterized teacher unions in both strong and weak schools were no longer useful for improving K-12 education. Charter schools offered a new way for teachers and those who employed them to relate in a less adversarial relationship.

2. MThe rapid growth and early success of the schools chartered by Grand Valley demonstrated a pent up demand by parents for a better education for their children. The charter schools offered that possibility. Parents also perceived that they were more involved in their children's educational process than previously.
3. MWhen Grand Valley decided to charter schools I invited superintendents from school districts in our region to meet with me and other staff members so we could take into account their concerns. It gave me an opportunity to express to them why we were engaged; calling their attention also to the fact that they too had the authority to charter schools. At that time we agreed to limit the number of schools we would charter in each district. Each year I invited superintendents to meet with me to discuss charter schools issues and policies.

To demonstrate our desire to improve education for students we set aside money each year from our Charter School income making it available for special projects in the schools. The grants were competitive and required the teachers and the principals to think creatively.

4. MOver twenty years of chartering schools Grand Valley has been fortunate in the leadership and staffing of the Charter Schools Office. As always leadership determines the level of quality of an operation. That is why Grand Valley has a school chartering program that can claim a high level of success. The leaders have not been intimidated by those who challenge and even threaten the Charter School movement. They have trusted, accommodated when best to do so, and acted when it was in the interests of students and parents. They have been involved in supervision of the schools that were chartered to the right degree and they have not been hesitant to decertify the schools that fail.

Since the cap was removed on the number of schools a university can charter Grand Valley has increased the numbers of charters in the most strategic and helpful ways. The positive contribution of Grand Valley to the education of Michigan's children and youth has taken a leap forward. Charters will always be established where they are needed. Where traditional school districts provide what parents want for their students, there will be few.

February 14, 2014
Arend D. Lubbers
President Emeritus
Grand Valley State University

When Charter School legislation was passed, Board members at Grand Valley State University saw an opportunity to encourage healthy competition in K-12 education. Higher education is strong in Michigan because of the independence of its state universities; an independence the Constitution of 1963 guarantees. By injecting the same kind of competition that comes with independence into K-12 education we thought good charter schools would be helpful toward the improvement of traditional public schools. To a significant degree this has happened, and where it has not, the demand for charter schools persist.

Though views about the charter school movement are varied, I believe charter schools have proven themselves to be important and successful in Michigan. They are part of our Michigan education landscape.

The leadership in Charter Schools at Grand Valley is and has been consistently excellent. The staff, present and past, deserve a medal of honor for their high standards and commitment to a movement that makes a positive difference in the lives of many children and youth.