

# Gubernatorial candidates expound on Michigan education

Republican Governor John Engler and Democratic challenger Geoffrey Fieger recently took time out of their busy campaign schedules to discuss with Colleagues some education issues in Michigan. Following are some excerpts:

**JOHN ENGLER**  
REPUBLICAN GOVERNOR  
STATE OF MICHIGAN



**GEOFFREY FIEGER**  
DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGER  
FOR GOVERNOR



**Colleagues: The original intent of Proposition A was to narrow the gaps of K-12 school district funding while shifting the burden of that funding away from property owners. How successful has it been toward accomplishing these goals:**

**Engler:** "There's no question that Proposition A took Michigan property taxes — which were significantly above the national average, to substantially below — and gave us the biggest tax cut in history and also capped how much taxes could be raised. In school funding, it addressed that relief would be permanent and shifted education in Michigan to local control. The money follows the child, which guarantees that schools are going to be funded. After it was passed, it allowed as many as 13 to 14 percent of the people who wouldn't qualify for a home loan under the previous system to get a mortgage to purchase a home. It also eased assessments on seniors, and the consequences of all of that have given us a robust housing market with one of the fastest rising appreciation of home values in the country. All in all, it's been a big plus."

**Fieger:** "It has been an utter failure. Not only has it failed to equitably fund schools, but it has shifted tax burdens regressively to the middle class and the under-privileged. Any time you impose a 50 percent increase in sales tax it becomes inherently regressive since it affects all classes the same. It has shifted taxes so that while the property owner may think that the tax burden has been lessened, it hasn't. It has been shifted and puts a massive tax increase on those who do not have property. There also is a dramatic increase in the transfer tax. And finally, the property taxes continue to increase every year anyway and are getting close to the levels that they were when Proposition A went into effect."

**Colleagues: What are charter schools doing to raise the levels of learning across the state and what have been the keys to their successes or failures:**

**Engler:** "In some ways, charter schools are like traditional public schools: some are successful and some aren't. With over 100 charter schools, there are choices available for parents. They create competition and the concept of student as customer is really transforming education. As a result, many schools are undertaking reform agendas and putting emphasis on helping all students."

**Fieger:** "Charter schools are a method that Mr. Engler has attempted to use to break the backs of the public school system. Any program that syphons money away from public schools to support what amounts to private schools is defunding the public institutions. I'm not against responsible individuals or organizations opening charter schools, as long as they are not publicly funded."

**Colleagues: What can the state do to help make higher learning accessible to all — even middle income families caught between earning too much to receive financial aid and too little to adequately fund their children's education:**

**Engler:** "We have helped to unlock the door to higher education for high school seniors and juniors by allowing them to take college courses. As a result, thousands of kids are gaining college credit while going to high school. By doing that, it helps lower the cost of higher education. There also is an array of ways to finance, but our goal is to get students through college with less debt instead of four or five years of funding. There also is a high demand today to establish a \$2,000-a-year apprenticeship tax credit to attract employers to support education programs."

**Fieger:** "Education should be available to all ages, and the state has to realize that education is what the state's future is based on. It must be fully committed to providing for the education of all. The state must provide opportunity for higher education in the form of community college or scholarship grants. The state college system in California provides for virtual open admission to state residents and that's something this state could at least investigate."

**Colleagues: What are the most pressing issues confronting education in the state of Michigan heading into the Year 2000 and what role should the state play in both facilitating progress and overcoming adversity:**

**Engler:** "I think as we look to the 21st Century the K-12 educational system continues to be the greatest challenge. We must get the higher risk students involved with the right mentors early in life. We need to emphasize career skills options with more partnerships between businesses and education."

**Fieger:** "The most pressing issue is the fact that war has been declared on the public school system. Some of the programs that have been implemented are radical in nature and they have sought to defund public education."

**Colleagues: What kind of hope — or help — is there for school districts with pressing financial needs when they are unable to secure the appropriate funding:**

**Engler:** "Proposal A can be looked at as a big part of the answer, but there are several questions of school operating dollars. Millage votes are a thing of the past and that is a very powerful, positive statement. Now schools — because they are not out knocking on the door for a millage hike — can work with voters to expand school buildings and make physical improvements."

**Fieger:** "The hope is that a fundamentally new direction will be obtained by virtue of my administration whose No. 1 focus will be on education. The funding of education should not be dependent on successful maintaining of millage proposals but a commitment on the state level to fully and adequately fund education. It could be funded through the lottery in proportion to the sales of lottery tickets in every district."