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Iris Salters: AROUND THE CAPITOLS: LANSING

Schools need good data to make fixes



The debate over how to fix failing schools remains front and center in Lansing and at local school board meetings. But with all the talk of reforming, one critical factor is ignored -- many failing schools are not getting crucial information that could help turn them around.

Simply put, audits that are supposed to identify what poorly performing schools are doing wrong are being done superficially, if at all.

State school Superintendent Mike Flanagan has said, "If you don't know where you stand, you can't improve." The Michigan Education Association couldn't agree more. We want to be - and should be -- part of the solution, but no one can come up with a viable solution unless we know exactly where the weakness lies in each failing school.

The audits are part of a system set up by the state when the concept of measuring schools by Michigan Educational Assessment Program scores was put into place after No Child Left Behind. A team of experts was supposed to visit schools that were not making adequate yearly progress and identify where they were going wrong. It seemed to work for a while.

But failing schools no longer get intense attention from the state Department of Education -- the most they might get is a cursory glance that cannot get to the root of the problem.

Gone are the comprehensive interviews and observations as well as the in-depth personal reviews by experienced auditors that lend crucial information. We are left with a shell of the state's audit program that gets around to less than half of all failing schools each year. And those are just the ones with dollar signs attached -- failing schools that do not qualify for Title I funds are ignored.

Do we expect those schools to turn around on their own?

Until we know why schools are failing, merely identifying them as failing does nothing. It does not set the stage for a real improvement plan. It does not analyze the holes in student

learning. It does not take what was learned from successful schools and come up with a way to model it. It only sets them up for further failure.

No teacher or public school employee wants to be part of a system that isn't working. But we must give them the tools to figure out the problem before we propose solutions.

Right now, individual school districts are like doctors operating on a patient without the benefit of a solid diagnosis. Their intentions are in the right place, but their actions are at best ineffective and at worst detrimental to student learning.

Yes, some schools must make substantive changes. But let's make them with the benefit of the best possible information available, with the expertise of people who know what works and what doesn't work.

Let's get the audits done the right way before we rush to judgment about what might work. Our students deserve better than a guess.

Iris Salters is president of the Michigan Education Association.

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