

Questions about the new EAA

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I see a boondoggle waiting to happen. I hope I'm dead wrong, however, because the casualties will be thousands of Michigan's students. Earlier this week it was announced that Gov. Rick Snyder's new Education Achievement Authority, a statewide school district aimed at turning around failing schools, will be funding its start-up with private donations. I may be way out of whack here, but this seems like an awful idea to me.

At its core, the EAA is the education side of the Governor's emergency manager theory. Basically, the concept is that if an entity (such as a city, town, county or school district) has shown that it can't get its budgetary act together, the state of Michigan will intervene and take over control. The assumption is that by instituting proper management the entity will be restored to acceptable efficiency and then the state can step aside (because the emergency will be over).

In the case of the EAA, the theory is that it will take over selected failing schools both in Detroit and across the rest of the state. What the governor is saying is that if your school district is failing it's a management problem. The EAA will step in and usurp local control and show you how to do things right. Once your schools are ship-shape that local district will choose whether to return control to your local school board and community or to remain with the EAA.

That's the theory. Boy, for the sake of the affected students I sure hope it works.

But I keep having these gnawing doubts.

The guy tabbed to head this new EAA, John Covington of Kansas City, makes me nervous. I said in a Sept. 3 column: "Covington is touted as a reformer, but here is what KansasCity.com said about his performance. 'Last week, a preliminary report card from the state showed the district meeting just three of 14 state standards — a drop from four years ago. Districts generally need to meet at least six standards to be provisionally accredited and at least nine standards to be fully accredited.'" Shortly after Covington accepted the Michigan job the KC schools lost their state accreditation.

I'm also nervous about the state starting this new venture even though it can't afford it. The emergency manager for Detroit's schools said this week: "The state has no money to fund the EAA so donations are necessary." So, while the state slashes school budgets for all public schools and those districts are told to live within their means, the state is launching a new district even though it has no money to do so. The state does not have to live within its means.

The first task Covington has is to raise private donations. An initial \$400,000 has been donated by the Broad Foundation of California.



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There may be other donors, but the state has declined to identify them. The EAA is a public school district but the public is not allowed to know its funding sources.

Well, at least we know where that first \$400,000 will go — to Covington. He got a \$175,000 signing bonus and will make \$225,000 in salary this year. Says the Daily Kos: "Anyone find it ironic that the need to solicit do-

ners comes because the state is strapped for cash, yet the EAA has found \$400,000 to pay for a failed administrator who has no proven track record of building successful schools?"

If you have questions about any of this don't expect answers from the EAA because they've been less than forthcoming. "The Executive Committee has held emergency meetings at 7:30 a.m. That, and other procedural issues—including the use of closed sessions—have led to accusations the EAA is subverting the spirit of the state's Open Meetings Act." MichiganRadio.org

The whole fund raising scenario just seems like a can of worms. Does anyone really believe that all these donations are going to come with no strings attached? I know state officials claim there will be complete transparency, but for a governor and legislature who have

been preaching a budgetary "there is no free lunch" gospel isn't it a total flip-flop to now ask us to believe that when it comes to the EAA the "free lunch" is a cornerstone?

I wonder, too, how the EAA will have any credibility from a management standpoint. If they take over a school, for example, they supposedly will be showing that school how to operate under the same budgetary parameters that successful schools do (the state's per pupil allotment). But the EAA will have all this donated money, so they really are not observing the same parameters; they'll have the state per pupil money plus the donated money. It will be a case of "do as I say not as I do."

Finally, what happens after the shine wears off this new toy? We all know that donations and grants will not last forever. By that time, however, budgets will be set in stone and a huge new state bureaucracy will be entrenched. Money to keep the EAA moving will have to come from somewhere. If it's from private sources you can bet the lobbyists will pounce in packs and they'll be trading donations for legislative favors. If private funds dry up funding will have to come from the state budget, thus draining even more money from schools, municipalities, and state services. If either of these scenarios come to pass we all lose.

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