Senate Education Committee Hearing
Wednesday, September 21, 2011
Testimony of Birgit McQuiston, MI-CAPE

Honorable members of the Senate Education Committee: good afternoon, and thank you for allowing me to address you today. My name is Birgit McQuiston. I am a parent, community member, a member of the Lake Orion Community Schools Board of Education, and founding member of Michigan Citizens Advocating for Public Education (MI-CAPE). I am here today representing MI-CAPE to express our opposition to section 105 of SB624. Specifically, our concern is regarding the language that diminishes local control and decision making and seeks to mandate statewide out of district enrollment.

As you know, in our state we have approximately 550 traditional school districts. For arguments sake let's say that each of these districts has 7 school board members. This means that there are, within our state, over 3,800 ELECTED school board officials. They represent one of THE largest elected bodies of officials that we have. They are elected by their LOCAL communities and are endowed with the awesome responsibility of governing over their local school districts. The very process of electing school board members is an exercise of democracy at its most basic and local level! The wording of section 105 of SB624 obstructs this time-honored process that we have in place. At best, this is disturbing.

Open enrollment is an option that has been and continues to be a choice for school districts to participate in. Approximately 83% of the districts, under the leadership of their school boards, have chosen to include open enrollment as a means to increase their student population and thus their revenue. The remaining 17% have CHOSEN – under the leadership of their school boards, NOT to participate. I would suggest to you that by forcing the remaining schools to participate, you are not only interfering with the local authority structure in place, but you are not effectively solving the core issues of the failing districts. What about the students left behind? What are the answers for their ongoing dilemma?

The concerns for districts required to accept out of district students includes the following:

- In-district students will not have first priority to attend a school building within their district that is not within their attendance area.
- In-district students who apply to an intra-district school of choice will not have priority to attend.
- If a non-resident student comes to a school district with a lesser foundation allowance, that district can only collect the lower amount from the state to educate that student. This means that the money spent on the in-district students will be diminished so that non-resident students can be educated there. In the event that remedial work is needed to bring that student up to grade-level, it will cost the district more money than they are receiving to educate that child.
- Non-residents will not be responsible for contributing to the repayment of any school debt but will realize, for free, the advantages for which the local community is paying.

During last week's Education Committee hearing with Jalen Rose and Dr. Tony Bennet, one of the senators on this committee mentioned that "we have open enrollment, but it only works if you have money." Why would we mandate an idea that we know isn't working?

MI-CAPE members attended a Town Hall meeting that the Michigan State Board of Education held on June 20, at Wayne County Community College in Detroit. We were originally hoping to ask some questions of the state board of education. As it turned out, earlier that day, Governor Snyder announced the take-over of the lowest performing schools in Detroit and the Emergency Finance Manager barred the public, the media, the Detroit School Boards as well as the State Board of Education from attending that press conference. As you can imagine, the community forum hosted by the state board of education that evening was packed. We opted to sit back and listen for the entire 3 hours of that meeting as parent after parent, and teacher after teacher, administrators, community groups and legislators addressed the state board of education with their concerns. That day, our group heard passion pouring out of the hearts of Detroiters regarding the education of THEIR children. I can

tell you, their concerns were not so different from anyone else's. Not once did I hear any of them say that they wanted their children in a different district. No. They want their kids to get an excellent education IN DETROIT! Why should they have to take their kids to a different community? Why do we continue to fail those children?

I hold in my hands a copy of The Constitution of the State of Michigan. Under Article I, the Declaration of Rights, number 1 says: All political power is in the people. It is my sincere hope that that the legislators of Michigan are listening to the voices of the people of Michigan, and not the voices of national level lobbying groups who specialize in model legislation that THEY want to see you enact! No, the education of our children is a sacred trust that can't be legislated away. The future of our communities, our state, and indeed our nation is dependent upon the education of our children. Your constituents are making their voices heard... For the sake of our future, I sincerely hope you are listening.

Thank you for your time and attention.