
April 1993

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Mark W. Conley

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Recommended Citation

Conley, Mark W. (1993) "Paradigm Shifts New Legislative Challenges In Literacy Education: How Will We Respond?," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol26/iss3/7>

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Paradigm Shifts

New Legislative Challenges In Literacy Education: How Will We Respond?



An Interview of Senator Dan DeGrow by Dr. Mark W. Conley

As I parked my car in the parking lot for the State Education Department and hurried toward the State Capitol Building, I tried to recall: "Was the interview with Dan DeGrow at 3:00 or 3:30?" The time was 3:02 and I still had to cross an expansive courtyard complex. I could see the refurbished Capitol Building gleaming in the sky ahead of me. I did not want to be late for the interview. I had heard a great deal about Dan DeGrow, Senator from Port Huron and Chair of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee responsible for K-12 education.

Some people hail Dan DeGrow for creating some of the most ambitious education legislation anyone has seen in Lansing for years. Others consider him education's version of Public Enemy Number 1. I wanted to find out about Dan DeGrow for myself. What kind of a person is he? Is he education's worst nightmare? Or is he deserving of the praise he has garnered in some quarters?

I bounded up the steps of the Capitol Building and made my way to DeGrow's office in the sub-basement. His pleasant secretary, Dawn, greeted me and let me know that I was about 20 minutes early. She suggested that I take a brief tour of the Capitol Building while I waited. Since I (originally a New Yorker) had never been to Michigan's Capitol, I took her up on her offer. I rode an elevator up several floors. Stepping into a hallway, I could see both chambers of the Michigan legis-

lature, the Senate to my right and the House to my left. In the middle was the Capitol rotunda. I walked into the rotunda area and gazed at the portraits of past Michigan governors. The earliest governors looked so serious. Later governors appeared more relaxed but still determined and powerful. I wondered how much these guys had wrestled with issues in any way as challenging as those we are confronting today. Finally, it was time to return to DeGrow's office.

Dan DeGrow returned to his office about the same time I did. Dark-haired with a friendly face, he shook hands warmly and invited me into his inner office. His office is richly paneled. Pictures of his family, his wife and three young children, are abundant. Once I found a plug for my tape recorder, we were off and running with the interview.

"What sorts of educational legislation have you recently sponsored?" I asked. DeGrow responded by talking about Public Act 25 and the planned State Proficiency Examination. He explained that Public Act 25 has four components: (1) identifying which districts happen to have a poor curriculum, (2) getting districts to create school improvement plans, (3) moving districts to become accredited, and (4) providing communities with annual reports on the progress that schools are making. The thinking about a Proficiency Exam, according to

DeGrow, came later, "sort of a Bill of Rights type of concept" with respect to Public Act 25.

I asked DeGrow about how the idea of a Proficiency Exam came about. He replied, "It came about for a number of reasons. One, as legislators, we constantly hear complaints from the business community that (school) people keep graduating kids who can't do any basic skills. I'm skeptical, but the only way to defuse that is to have the diploma mean something."

"Mean something?" I asked.

"I think that's what we're trying to accomplish, is get the credibility back into the diploma. Right now, some people think all it means is that you showed up, and I'm not sure that's fair to everyone else." As DeGrow talked, I sensed that he wasn't talking just for himself. I could also hear voices from his community.

I wondered about DeGrow's awareness of the complexities of modern schools. Did he think that schools are bad, that teaching and learning in schools is generally pretty horrible? Based on what I had heard from some educators about DeGrow, his answer surprised me.

"Well, I think the quality of teaching for the most part is pretty good. And I'm not convinced that most kids won't pass the (proficiency) test."

I asked: "So if educators are doing a good job and kids are learning, why go for the proficiency test?"

"The only way you'll prove this one way or another is to have a test. It's all just one person's opinion unless you actually give them the test. Now we will be able to say that if you have the diploma, you obviously know this stuff or you wouldn't have passed the test."

So, I thought, the need for a proficiency exam in Michigan comes down to

a contradiction between educators and the business community. Educators say they are doing the best they can and that students are learning. The business community says: "Prove it!"

According to DeGrow, legislators are not into specifying the types of tests to use for the proficiency exam. "What the legislature told the (State Education) Department was to design a test to determine what kids should know to get a diploma and then test them. We didn't tell them what it was they had to know or what had to be on it. We left it really open." DeGrow also said that cut-off scores and failure rates were open to choice. "I told educators when we first met with them at the beginning they could use any pass (rate) they wanted." DeGrow was critical of how some educators dealt with the issue of passing rates. "They (educators) said 'We want to use 25 percent, but we're too embarrassed.' I said 'You've got a problem. Work it out!' They didn't want to tell the public that 25 percent was the passing score."

As DeGrow talked, I grew curious about his sense of the changes that might come about through the proficiency exam. First, he spoke about problems with change in big bureaucracies like education. "On most issues you know the bureaucracy doesn't want to change because that's the way bureaucracy is. That's the universal law. It has nothing to do with educators. Nobody wants to change."

"But once kids who are failing the proficiency exam are identified," I asked, "who's responsible and what ought to happen?"

"The school district is going to have a real incentive to work with them for the next two and one half years to get them to be able to pass the test. I have great

faith in educators that they don't want to have huge numbers of kids failing this test. So they're going to do everything humanly possible to get a large number of kids passing that test. No superintendent or Board or principal is going to want to have a large percentage of kids failing tests and not graduating."

I asked what sorts of programs DeGrow expected to appear to get kids performing up to snuff on the proficiency exam. He replied, "I'm assuming that when kids fail, the districts will set up classes for them the following year to try to advance them. I wouldn't want to put one program in place for the whole state for the kids that fail...because every district is different."

One of my pet peeves is the appearance of conflicts of interest between the testmakers and the inservice providers, often the same people. One could argue that there is a vested interest for testmakers/inservice providers to regularly come out with different and more challenging tests so that test scores drop and the demand for inservice workshops goes up. I asked DeGrow about the potential for this kind of abuse with the proficiency exam. He responded by saying that, while the potential for scandal is there, it is the job of educators to ensure that the response to the exams is appropriate and effective.

"So who will pay for the extra programs districts might need to implement?" I asked. DeGrow gave two responses. On the one hand, he pledged "I think it's an issue we can address in the state aid act. I'm willing to put money towards that." However, DeGrow finished the interview with a more gloomy assessment of the likelihood of financial support: "These are troubled times out there in the world for educators and they

all want more money. But we spend over 9 billion dollars on education now and I'm not sure there's a lot more money to be had."

By 4:30, I was in my car, winding my way east on route 496, back to my office at Michigan State. The winter sun was beginning to set in my rear window. DeGrow had given me lots to think about and left me with many questions. In the eight or so years living and working in Michigan, I have become aware of the tremendous diversity within our state. In our schools, this diversity is reflected in the faces of our students. Their lives are so different and in many ways more complex from what we knew and experienced as children. It is beyond my comprehension how anyone in leadership positions, whether in the legislature or in the State Education Department, can set a single, coherent educational policy for the entire state. And yet, that is what we elect and pay legislators like Dan DeGrow to do.

DeGrow's response to the perceived problems in our schools is to strip away many of the complexities of modern schooling, resolving the contradictions between educators and critics of education with the simple sweep of a single proficiency exam. As many of us know, scores on a proficiency exam probably will not quiet the critics. The proficiency exam should in fact identify many of the students who already cause us the most concern. But will yet another battery of tests reduce the cycle of failure that many of us observe and experience through our students every day? Few would deny that American education is facing the most serious challenges in our history. Yet few would argue that a proficiency exam is the panacea that will help us confront

these challenges once and for all.

DeGrow's comments about the business community and their criticisms of education stick in my mind. In relating these criticisms to teacher friends of mine, their response has been: "When have business people ever called upon us to ask about a student or our programs?" My friends have a point. But when is the last time we called up the business community to tell them about us? Could we do a better job communicating with the business community and the community at large about who we are, our goals for educating our students, the challenges we face, and how we have prepared our students for the world outside? I thought about how we as literacy professionals typically communicate our message to the community. Sure, we have read-alongs and support book giveaways. But when have we seriously, thoughtfully attempted to communicate outside ourselves about the work we do, our programs and our students? Part of me believes that the proficiency exam has been laid at our door because we have

not done the best job of communicating with the public and especially our elected leaders. DeGrow and others have numerous Chambers of Commerce and Business Roundtables across the state that are more than ready to comment on the kinds of students we produce. But who speaks for us?

There are days when I survey the dilemmas created by current education legislation and I say to myself "I'm ready for that retirement buy-out for 40-year-olds!" In the months and years ahead, however, we need to be thinking more than we ever have before about how we will respond responsibly to the ever increasing legislative challenges facing our profession.

Mark Conley is a professor in Teacher Education and coordinates the Holt Junior High Professional Development School. Send reaction to this column to Michigan State University, 201 Erickson Hall, East Lansing, Michigan, 48824. ☞