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JUDGE: FLINT CAN LEAVE MESSA

FLINT, Mich. - Flint Community Schools can change health insurance providers despite teacher protests, a Genesee County judge has ruled, according to The Flint Journal.

Judge Joseph Farah said that the district is within its rights to end its current contract with the Michigan Education Special Services Association, an insurance administrator affiliated with the Michigan Education Association, and instead purchase insurance from HealthPlus of Michigan.

United Teachers of Flint had sought to block the move, saying the switch would constitute a change in benefits. The district contended that the new program provides the same benefits at a lower cost, according to The Journal.

Teachers told The Journal they are concerned their health care benefits will be reduced, but a district spokesman said they have no plan to change coverage levels.

"When the district set out about trying to review its options, its goal was to provide the same coverage for all teachers at a more manageable cost," said Bob Campbell, spokesperson for the district, The Journal reported. The new health plan is expected to save up to \$3 million.

The union and district currently are negotiating over a new employment contract; a fact finder was scheduled to hear evidence in that case this week, according to The Journal.

SOURCE:

The Flint Journal, "Judge says Flint school district can switch insurance providers," Oct. 30, 2009

http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2009/10/judge_says_flint_school_distri.html

FURTHER READING:

Michigan Education Report, "It's up to school boards to save insurance dollars," Nov. 14, 2007

<http://www.educationreport.org/9102>

UNIVERSITIES PAY FOR PROMISE

BIG RAPIDS, Mich. - At least four state universities have announced they will pick up part of the tab for rescinded Michigan Promise Scholarships, according to The Grand Rapids Press.

Ferris State University will use \$1.15 million in federal stimulus dollars to cover \$500 in tuition assistance that each eligible student would have received from the state this fall, but did not, due to state budget cuts.

Saginaw Valley State University will use \$700,000 in non-stimulus dollars to cover Promise costs for about 1,400 students and Michigan State University is using \$6 million of its \$7.9 million stimulus dollars for about 8,000 students, The Press reported.

Ferris President David Eisler said the college originally planned to use the stimulus money for a \$5 per-credit hour rebate for all in-state students, according to The Press.

The University of Michigan will cover Promise funding for 1,662 students who also qualified for other financial aid, though about 4,300 students will have to cover the cost themselves, according to The Press.

At Grand Valley State University, about 7,300 students are absorbing the Promise scholarship loss on their own, as well as decreased funding through the Michigan Competitive Scholarship program, The Press reported.

"This was the state's promise," GVSU spokesman Matt McLogan told The Press. "It was never Grand Valley's promise."

SOURCE:

The Grand Rapids Press, "Ferris State using federal stimulus intended for student rebate to cover Michigan Promise scholarships," Nov. 9, 2009 http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2009/11/ferris_state_using_federal_sti.html

FURTHER READING:

Mackinac Center for Public Policy, "How to Control College Costs," Dec. 8, 2008 <http://www.mackinac.org/10067>

U PREP CHARTER TO PAY FOR COLLEGE

DETROIT - University Preparatory High School, a charter public school in Detroit, will pay nearly the full cost of the first year of college for any of its 124 seniors who are eligible, the Detroit Free Press reported.

In the past, the school has assisted its graduates financially, but now it will pay all but \$2,500 in costs for one year at any public Michigan university, according to the Free Press. Parents must agree to pay \$2,500 through a subsidized loan as a way of showing responsibility for the students' education, the Free Press reported.

Students who choose a private or out-of-state school will receive a \$5,000 scholarship, the Free Press reported. The school calls the program a reward for seniors who pledged four years ago to graduate from high school and college and then return to help Detroit rebuild.

Calling themselves Detroit's Great Hope, members of this year's graduating class already have mentored younger students and produced a video about the benefits of education, according to the Free Press.

University Preparatory Academy is managed by the nonprofit organization New Urban Learning. Doug Ross, New Urban chairman, told The Press that the scholarship program is privately funded.

Eligible students must meet specific academic standards in their school-based work, as well as write a senior thesis and successfully complete a college readiness lecture series and study skills training.

SOURCE:

Detroit Free Press, "All off to college, and first year free!"
Nov. 7, 2009

<http://www.freep.com/article/20091107/COL10/911070361/1318/All-off-to-college-and-first-year-free>

FURTHER READING:

Michigan Education Digest, "Another U Prep charter to open,"
May 22, 2009

<http://www.educationreport.org/10561>

TEACHER ELECTED TO SCHOOL BOARD

PONTIAC, Mich. - A classroom teacher has been elected to the school board in the Pontiac School District, though whether that constitutes a conflict of interest remains a question, according to The Oakland Press.

Mary Barr, a Pontiac Middle School teacher, is one of two new board members who will be seated in January, The Press reported.

The Press asked officials whether her situation was similar to that of a local firefighter who agreed to quit his job in order to retain a seat on the Pontiac City Council.

In response, a spokesman for the state Attorney General's Office said the office has not examined Barr's case, but pointed to an opinion issued in 2005 stating that because a school board has supervisory authority over district employees, simultaneously holding both positions is barred by state statute, The Press reported.

No one has challenged Barr's appointment, and the school board president and vice president told The Press she could abstain from voting on issues that would affect her as an employee, such as the teacher contract.

Barr told The Press that she would deal with any legal issues regarding her appointment at the time they arise.

SOURCE:

The Oakland Press, "Pontiac: Teacher could face conflict as part of school board," Nov. 5, 2009

http://www.theoaklandpress.com/articles/2009/11/05/news/local_news/doc4af2aada75e73815053956.txt

FURTHER READING:

Michigan Education Digest, "Judge: Official can't keep both posts," May 30, 2009

<http://www.educationreport.org/10591>

VOTERS REJECT WASHTENAW SCHOOL TAX

ANN ARBOR, Mich. - Voters in Washtenaw County turned down a new school tax last week, an outcome that will force area districts to find ways to spend less, an education administrator told AnnArbor.com.

Washtenaw Intermediate School District Superintendent Bill Miller said that he expects some of the 10 local districts in the county to discuss consolidation as a cost-saving plan, but also to request employee concessions and to approve layoffs or program cuts in order to bring spending in line with revenue, the report said.

Voters rejected a 2-mill enhancement millage request that would have required them to pay about \$30 million in new tax revenue for distribution among the districts, according to AnnArbor.com.

Miller said consolidation can be "difficult and unappealing" due to differences in debt, employee contracts and per-pupil revenue between the merging districts, according to AnnArbor.com. It also requires voter approval.

Even as individual districts look for ways to spend less, Miller predicted a statewide discussion of education costs, particularly in the areas of employee health care and retirement costs, AnnArbor.com reported.

SOURCE:

AnnArbor.com, "Impact of countywide school millage failure: WISD leader says cuts to school districts are coming," Nov. 5, 2009 <http://www.annarbor.com/news/wisd-leader-cuts-to-school-districts-are-coming/>

FURTHER READING:

Mackinac Center for Public Policy, "If Proposal A Ain't Broke ..."

Nov. 6, 2009

<http://www.mackinac.org/11278>

Mackinac Center for Public Policy, "The (False) Hope of School District Consolidation,"

Oct. 29, 2009 <http://www.mackinac.org/11240>

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Contact Managing Editor Lorie Shane at
<mailto:med@educationreport.org>

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