

**HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE  
INNOVATIVE DISTRICT TESTIMONY  
GERALD HOPKINS, KENOWA HILLS PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
6-4-2019**

Good morning, Chairwoman Hornberger and members of the House Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in reference to HB4626/4627. My name is Gerald Hopkins. This is my 25<sup>th</sup> year as a proud MI public school educator. I currently serve as the superintendent of Kenowa Hills Public Schools, this being my 8<sup>th</sup> year. I started in this profession as a 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in a PreK-6<sup>th</sup> grade elementary school. I was young, energetic and optimistic about shaping the lives of my students. On top of all of this, I couldn't believe it when I learned the curriculum was already established for me. How hard could teaching be? I quickly realized although the curriculum was standardized, my students were not. I worked tirelessly to differentiate my instruction; however, despite my efforts and the incredible support from the building administrator and colleagues, I struggled because I always felt like there was never enough time to meet their varied needs. Some students needed less time and were thirsty to be challenged while other students needed more time and all students needed my individual time.

Despite my shortcomings as a teacher, I was provided the opportunity to become an instructional specialist, a new position in the district that was challenged with assisting teachers with utilizing technology to personalize instruction. I was afforded the opportunity to learn from national education experts in differentiation and ungraded,

multiage education. I had the incredible opportunity to be on district planning committees that were tasked with not only researching best practices in education but also designing the environments to support the instruction for a newly constructed elementary school. In fact, my wife and I chose to send our own three children to this school, which was designed on the principles of multiage instruction.

It was these experiences that prepared me to become the elementary principal of a multiage school in a neighboring district. In this elementary school, students were grouped in grade bands and regrouped based on skills and dispositions. The multiage learning environments developed student agency and fostered personalized learning. Students enjoyed coming to school and parents chose this school as evidenced by the disproportionate number of students whom attended through choice. Not all was rosy, though. Standardized testing was challenging to administer given our multiage configurations, and students were not accustomed to the concept that all students in their “grade” (not classroom) had to take the same test on the same day. We made it work, though, and our students excelled....until they went to middle school. In middle school, they struggled with the new reality where they had less control of their learning and the schedule was driven by a bell. I knew what we were doing as a multiage school was supported by best practices and research, but I was the principal of one school in a larger system. It was at this time I committed myself to become a superintendent where I could lead District-wide systemic change toward personalized learning.

At Kenowa Hills, we refer to this as Personal Mastery. As a school district, we have been working toward full-scale implementation since 2013 after a year of research and much dialogue. I am very proud of the progress we have made, and I am excited about the concept of this legislation. As you might imagine, shifting from tradition or status quo can be difficult and is fraught with opposition...mostly from those furthest removed from the change. We have been very intentional about aligning our community's beliefs about learning with systemic change. Our stakeholders determined the traditional education system -- instruction and policies --- were designed for standardization, yet our learners are anything but standard. They are unique individuals whose needs are best supported by mass customization.

Although current legislation creates avenues for waivers to address some policies that were designed to create uniformity, the prospect of allowing approved innovative districts or schools the freedom to customize a learning experience for each learner is essential in an era increased accountability. The support from the Michigan Department of Education through the granting of waivers has been extremely helpful, but it cannot be the only solution and the Innovation Council lacks authority to support substantial innovation. Kenowa Hills has benefited from waivers, and we have sought additional relief through the Innovation Council, however, limitations still exists. Seat time waivers allow for general flexibility to the days and hours requirements, but systems that truly make learning the constant and time the variable are flexible enough to allow each learner the time s/he needs to demonstrate mastery. A true competency-based system

provides a structure that allows for learners, with the guidance from their instructors, to determine how much time they need to master competencies. In turn, this creates more opportunities for learners to pursue multiple experiences that will more appropriately prepare each student for their post high school experience. I believe this is the key to equity for each student. Unfortunately, our efforts to implement Personal Mastery have been slowed at the high school level as we continue to get stuck in the reality we are still in a schedule that is driven by time (6 – 55 minute periods over 180 days).

I know there are those whom have expressed concerns regarding the perceived lack of accountability under this legislation. To the contrary, I see no greater accountability than to be considered an District approved under this legislation. Innovative districts and Innovation Schools will no doubt be under a microscope. I welcome this accountability whether or not Kenowa Hills is an Innovative District. Districts across this country have already demonstrated the positive impact of competency-based education and are supported by similar legislation within their state.

I know there is also concern some will pursue being an Innovative District or School for the wrong reasons --- increasing revenue and/or decreasing expenses have been suggested. At Kenowa Hills, we already lose funding for students who complete their graduation requirements early while other students are on a reduced schedule because it is best for the particular students. For us, this is not about revenue; it's about doing what is best for each student.

This legislation has its flaws that can be improved by engaging stakeholders from the field. In fact, discussions have already begun. Many of the recommended revisions to the legislation proposed by Dr. Timmis are reflective of input from Michigan Department of Education staff and District leaders who are committed and passionate about this work. We recognize some of the suggestions are more appropriately placed with Appropriations; however, we wished to note how the legislation could be improved through financial supports. I believe the Innovation Council could play a critical role in providing support to Districts and Schools as they encounter policy barriers with implementation.

Again, I applaud you for continuing to have the conversations surrounding the need for education reform where Districts and Schools choose to undertake redesign rather than forcing uniformity through reform. I look forward to future opportunities to make these bills better and see them to completion. Thank you for your time.

