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## **COLUMN: Don't rule out non-public schools in educational prosperity**

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The November 20 column “Better education options will make state more prosperous” was a welcome commentary on the need to enhance education in Michigan. Deserving of particular support was the notion for the state to ensure a quality public education for children, an agreeable concept difficult to oppose by anyone truly concerned about how well students learn and develop. A robust public school system will inevitably lead to greater achievement, a smarter workforce and well-rounded students ready to contribute to the common good. While improving public education must be a priority, policymakers and elected officials would be shortsighted to focus solely on one sector of schools in the state.

According to the Michigan Constitution, Article VIII, Section I, “Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.” The constitution’s language is a welcome reminder of the need to continually drive for success and to incorporate time-honored virtues in the development of schools and their students. The language, however, is not exclusive. It does not limit the state’s attention to just one option. The headline of the column calling for better education options captured well the desires of parents and educators alike; yet the column and the report it cited neglect the vibrant and extensive presence of non-public schools in the State of Michigan.

There are approximately 107,000 students enrolled in non-public schools in Michigan, according to the Department of Education. Approximately 16,300 of those students are enrolled in the 60 non-public schools in Oakland County. Factoring a minimal \$7,000 per pupil grant the state bestows to each public school student, non-public schools will save Michigan approximately \$750,000,000 for the 2013-2014 academic year. This substantial savings to the state — more accurately, to taxpayers — is a direct result of parents who sacrifice to make the choice to send their child to one of the state’s non-public schools, many of which are faith-based. Embedded within these parents’ decision is the overarching principle that parents are the primary educators of their children and, in this role, every parent should have the option — the right — to send their student to a school that best meets that child’s educational needs. The state has a role to play in expanding the options that are currently available.

Regrettably, Michigan has fallen behind virtually all of its neighboring states in providing broad options for educational choice. If one were to look at a map of the country with states that allow voucher programs, tuition tax credits or scholarship programs highlighted in blue, it would appear that the Great Lakes have swallowed Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Minnesota and Iowa. That’s because Michigan is the only state in the Great Lakes region, the only state, that does not extend full educational choice to students, especially those in low-income families or failing schools. Our current system of assigning students to schools simply by the zip code in which they live deserves a hard second look.

Non-public schools contribute to and educate for the common good in a variety of ways. Community service, parental involvement and a high percentage of graduates and college enrollees educated in an inclusive, structured environment are hallmarks of non-public schools. Some may consider these traits to be contributing factors to a more prosperous society. It is a matter of compassion to help a child receive a quality education, and a matter of justice for policy makers to recognize and address the lack of full school choice that exists in Michigan today.

Brian D. Broderick is the executive director of the Michigan Association of Non-Public Schools, which joins parents with schools, churches, communities and local, state and federal governments to provide the best opportunities for their children.

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