

Educational funding system not working; it's time to Save Our Schools

VIEWPOINT

BY MARSHA WELLS AND ERIC VERHEY

We were very pleased to announce in December that our members of the Portage Education Association — our teaching staff — and the Portage Public Schools Board of Education approved a creative labor agreement that allowed us to finish and fully close the \$2.5 million funding gap that hit our district this fall. The shortage occurred when the state suddenly began to withhold \$292 per student from this year's budget.

In response to this crisis, we made an intentional choice to take charge of our own destiny, rather than being at the mercy of state politics on a month-to-month basis. No matter how hard it is, we know we must remain financially stable. So, through creativity, dedication

and cooperation among teachers, administrators and other employees, we avoided midyear disruptions, saved jobs and preserved quality programs for students.

But we know that this does not mean that we are "out of the woods." We will continue to face financial dangers in getting through this year. State funding is too volatile.

This month, the state will reassess its revenues and could make further cuts in funding for this school year as well as for next fall. This will affect not only our district, but all school districts in our region and state. The process for funding public schools is not working. We must help our legislators and governor understand the urgent need for changing the system.

As of last June 30, there are 41 Michigan school districts in deficit

or bankruptcy, which is the largest number in modern history — and this was before the \$292-plus funding cuts that schools received this fall. There will be many more over the financial edge in the 2010-11 school year.

Economists say Michigan's economy is likely to continue in negative numbers for the next year as well. That's bad news for the students, the schools and the state. We have serious work to do with serious urgency.

For the past several years, our greater Kalamazoo region has refused to follow the path taken by the rest of the state, both in its push forward to attract new businesses to our area for economic development and in its support for funding quality education to prepare a quality workforce. This greater community provides additional

funds for its schools each year through its support of a regional education millage that, up to this point, has been able to protect quality programs. But now greater support is needed to fix the trouble that Michigan is in.

Concerned parents and citizens throughout the state are beginning to work together through an SOS Network — Save Our Students, Schools & State. Their mission is clear:

- Fix the broken school funding system and replace it with one that's equitable and stable;
- Help districts individually and collectively become more efficient and effective — help transform education; and
- Assist districts in working with their communities to create a statewide grassroots network of supporters who can help facilitate

change.

To become an active force to protect the quality of our schools and the vitality of our greater Kalamazoo community, we urge you to contact your legislators and share your concerns. To contact your state senator, the link is: senate.michigan.gov. To contact your state representative, the link is: house.michigan.gov.

You may also get information about the statewide grassroots effort of the SOS Network by contacting sosmichigan.org.

We hope you will join with us. We must take charge of our own destiny — for the sake of our students, our families and our greater community.

Marsha Wells is superintendent for Portage Public Schools. Eric Verhey is president of the Portage Education Association.