

Michigan Business Leaders for Education Excellence Joins Effort To Protect Merit Award Program

The Michigan Business Leaders for Education Excellence (MBLEE) announced today their continued support of the Michigan Merit Award with its focus on academic achievement and raising standards. The Merit Award has come under assault in a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) against Governor John Engler, the Merit Award Board, the Department of Education and others. If successful, the ACLU suit would deny payment for higher education and/or training to juniors currently attending Michigan schools.

(Photo: <http://www.newscom.com/cgi-bin/prnh/20000320/DEM039>)

"It is blatantly unfair that the ACLU would want to pull the rug out from underneath these deserving students and return to lower standards for Michigan schools," said Jim Sandy, MBLEE Director. "We want all students to succeed and for schools to prepare them with the best education possible. The Merit Award is a positive tool in accomplishing these goals."

The Michigan Merit Award Legal Defense Fund has been established and is administered by the Michigan Chamber Foundation. The fund will be used to help pay for legal assistance to the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals and other education groups that are fighting, on behalf of Michigan students, to protect this scholarship program.

The Michigan Merit Award offers a unique opportunity to all students to earn money for education and training beyond high school. "The most positive aspect of this program is that it is based solely on a student's ability to perform and, unlike most scholarship programs, there are no other artificial criteria or limitations in place which restricts eligibility for the Merit Award," added Sandy.

The scholarship for post-secondary education and training programs was designed to reward students who successfully pass all sections of the state's MEAP High School Test. Additionally, students who pass only two sections and also score well on the ACT or Work Keys assessments are eligible for the scholarship. The ACLU claims that the MEAP is biased and false. Sandy points out that every question has been screened for gender and racial bias prior to use on the test. All questions are directly connected to the state core content standards around which schools are to have built their curricula.

"If students are not receiving the award, the attention should be drawn to failings at the school district level in implementing and teaching the core content standards, not the test," said Sandy. "The scholarship is a concrete way for schools to improve student achievement and to reward students that work hard in school no matter what their color or economic status."

Sandy added that using the MEAP test and ACT or Work Keys scores instead of inconsistent criteria like grade point averages keeps the scholarship objective and prevents the use of inflated grades, social promotion, and variable success standards at each school from coming into play. MBLEE's support for the Merit Award Program is joined by the Michigan Chamber of Commerce and the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP).

Founded in 1990, MBLEE represents employer-interests in the public policy debate over education. It provides leadership to help ensure that all students have a quality, world-class education, resulting in high achievement levels and a prepared, skilled workforce. Its members include DaimlerChrysler, Dow Chemical Company, Ford Motor Company, General Motors Corporation, Mead Paper Company, Michigan Chamber of Commerce, Pharmacia Corporation, Steelcase Inc., the University of Michigan, Whirlpool Corporation and representatives from the Office of the Governor, the Michigan Department of Education, and the Michigan Department of Career Development.

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PRN Photo Desk, 888-776-6555 or 201-369-3467

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Contact: Jim Sandy, Director of Michigan Business Leaders for Education Excellence, 517-371-7640

Website: <http://www.michamber.com/>

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