



POLITICS & PREJUDICES

Senate dumbs down

The faulty belief that tax cuts are more important than producing more qualified graduates

By [Jack Lessenberry](#)

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Last week, Michigan Senate Minority Leader Gretchen Whitmer (D-East Lansing) made a stunning proposal: How about closing all the loopholes in the tax system — and using that money to give every high school graduate in the state a college education?

That's not a silly idea. Michigan is one of the most undereducated states in the nation, a legacy of our old brawn-based economy, when anybody could get a good-paying job shuffling car parts on an assembly line. Everyone knows those days are gone, and are never coming back.

Once, Michigan, especially metropolitan Detroit, boasted some of the nation's highest average incomes. Today we are an appalling 39th out of the 50 states, and sinking further. (Haiti, here we come!) Michigan's growing poverty is in large part because we are more poorly educated than most states.

There is a direct cause-and-effect relationship, which gets stronger every year. Except for a few small oil- and gas-rich states like Wyoming, North Dakota and Alaska, the nation's richest states are all those with the highest proportion of college-educated adults. If Michigan is ever going to be a prosperous state again, we are going to have to find a way to compete for the high-tech, new economy jobs of the future, and you need an educated work force to do that.

The wonder is that we haven't already established a crash program to educate every reasonably intelligent young person who is smart enough for the jobs of the future. That's sort of what the federal government did when the Russians launched Sputnik and beat us into space, back in the late '50s. That worked amazingly well. But today's shortsighted politicians haven't the faintest interest in doing anything like pouring resources into education. No, they think it is far more important to give existing businesses yet another tax cut.

State Sen. Jack Brandenburg is the Macomb County Republican in charge of the upper house's finance committee. "I don't think the state can afford to do both," to give businesses another tax break and to give kids a chance at a future.

And when it comes to a choice, Brandenburg made it clear that he will choose to shortchange the state's kids. His priority: "the personal property tax cut to manufacturers. I think we really have to concentrate on getting our economy on track."

Naturally, he, and the governor and all the Republicans will get their way. Businessmen matter more than students to them; the past is more important than the future. Whitmer's Democrats don't even have enough strength in the state Senate to fill two minivans. Jack Brandenburg is an interesting case. To be fair, he isn't malevolent, as far as I can tell. Nor filthy rich. He just isn't very smart.

He told the Gongwer News Service, which sells its reports to media and special interests who can afford to pay for it, "Myself, I think that what we have to do here in Michigan is create a economy and get this economy back working. And [then] our kids will stay here."

Hard to disagree with that. That's exactly what we need to do. But it's hard to see how giving tax cuts to established, old-economy businesses is going to do that. Last year, Gov. Rick Snyder and his enthusiastic pals in the Legislature cut taxes for Michigan corporations by more than two-thirds. They paid for this by taxing pensions and shortchanging the schools.

They also cut revenue-sharing to local governments, and now mean to screw them further. Most of the revenue from the "personal property tax," which really is a business property tax, goes to local governments. The Legislature proposes to replace only about four-fifths of that, which would be a disaster.

Many cities and townships are already severely strapped for cash. There will be more crises, more layoffs, probably more emergency managers. But business owners will be richer, and, for some reason, people like Jack Brandenburg and Rick Snyder believe they are going to create new jobs as a result, evidently good-paying jobs for largely unskilled, uneducated laborers.

Why would anyone think such a thing? Because they are stuck in the past. Brandenburg's website talks proudly of how his father started as a truck driver for a Pepsi-Cola dealership and rose to become president of the company.

His son the state senator is now 60; he managed to get a four-year degree in business from a small college in Ohio. But he essentially founded an industrial supply company out of the trunk of his car, and built it into a profitable business.

That's not possible anymore. Part of Brandenburg's mind dimly realizes it; he sent his four kids to Michigan colleges, and has been known to complain about how much that cost. "I have always thought that our state universities were overpriced," he complained recently.

The problem is that Republicans like Brandenburg act as if they think cutting funding for higher education is actually going to bring tuition costs down.

Brandenburg and his ilk should listen to some real business leaders, the folks at Business Leaders for Michigan, who held a summit last week called "growing a higher education marketplace." Led by Doug Rothwell, these are the forward-thinking, progressive business types who aren't squatting outside abandoned factories, waiting for Oldsmobile to come back.

The summit was eye-opening. If Brandenburg had gone, he might have learned that Michigan universities have far lower overhead costs than schools in many other large states.

They've had to get efficient, in part because the idiots in Lansing have been starving them for revenue. The more it is clear that more higher education is desperately needed, the more our politicians have cut spending on them.

Phil Power, the founder of the nonpartisan Center for Michigan, tells me that we are now among the bottom 10 states in the country in per-student spending on higher education.

Even to stay level with where we are now, Michigan will need more than 1 million more college graduates in the next dozen years. But the Jack Brandenburgs seem not to understand this, and the Rick Snyders apparently don't care, or have a naïve childlike faith in the hidden hand of the market.

Yes, conventional college is not for everyone. The state does need to put resources as well into training plumbers and welders and brilliant mechanics. And while we need to do more, we are actually doing a fair amount of that through our community colleges, which have endured fewer budget cuts.

But it is clear that being successful with only a high school education isn't possible for anyone anymore, unless you can be the next Kardashian girl or the next Prince Fielder.

If we are to have any chance at a future, what's most important is that Michigan elects new leaders who have overcome two stupid superstitions that are destroying our economy and our future. One is a naïve belief that higher education is unnecessary, even morally bad.

The second, which President Obama needs to start more openly denouncing, is the hysterical right-wing mantra that taxes are always bad, and the government can't do anything right. In fact, much of what passes for civilization is the creation of government, from schools to cops to sewers to go with flush toilets.

And there is something wrong with what the yahoos call "European-style socialism." We don't have nearly enough of it.

Now run and tell momma that this columnist is a commie.