

The Education Policy Center at MSU

The Education Policy Center | Article 1

Bridging the Gap

New Education Policy Center's Goal Is to Be Information Resource for Policymakers and Michigan Educators

For years, the College of Education has made outreach to lawmakers and educational leaders a priority. But earlier this year, the college took an important step forward in its outreach efforts when it established the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University, a nonpartisan institution that has as its goal to provide those who make decisions about the state's educational system with accurate and timely research-based information.

It marks the college's most ambitious and formalized effort to date in its long history of playing an important role in improving the quality of education for students, and deepening the educational policy debate in Michigan. With the strong support of Dean Carole Ames, the center will move quickly to become an important voice in Michigan's educational policy debate.

"I think this is a good idea at the right time," said Professor David Plank, who is the center's new director. "In the policy arena, education is really at the top of almost everyone's agenda whether it's at the state, federal or local levels.

"President (Peter) McPherson and Provost (Lou Anna) Simon have made a strong commitment of university resources to ensure that the university has a positive and significant role to play in bringing about improvements in the educational system."

For Plank and other faculty members in the college, the need for a policy center had become apparent over the years. At a time when the state's economic base is



David Plank

Plank said that the issue of partisanship and the battle of contending lobbies over education issues is essential to understanding the role of the new center. Michigan has other policy centers, he said, but none that are nonpartisan. The center will stake its claim, Plank added, on its fairness, accuracy and nonpartisanship.

"There's an important distinction to make and that's the distinction between being involved in the debate and adopting an advocacy position on the debate," Plank said. "I don't foresee the center taking a stand in favor of particular policy positions. What I do think the center can do is bring reliable, research-based information to policy debates. I believe that sometimes that information will be more supportive of one position than another, but the goal of the center is not to advocate particular positions but simply to inform the policy debate.

"Personally, I think the greatest danger to the center is in becoming identified with a predictable position because, in a policy realm like education that is highly contentious, you automatically lose half your audience when you do that. I think the only way we can avoid that is to insure that we stick closely to the research, that we base what we say and what we publish on research results and not on the opinions or preferences of any particular group."

Research Report series that digests research of particular interest to lawmakers and educational leaders.

The response to Markle's projects and the college's dissemination of research was so positive that it became impetus for creating a formal center for education policy that could work closely with the Office of K-12 Outreach to help legislators, educators and Michigan residents become better informed about current and emerging issues.

Dean Ames appointed a task force last year to develop a proposal for the creation of the center. Task force members included Markle, Associate Dean Micheal Sedlak, Educational Administration Chairperson Philip Cusick, and faculty members Robert Floden, William Schmidt, BetsAnn Smith, Gary Sykes, Teresa Totto, and Suzanne Wilson.

By January 2000, the proposal was complete and had been approved by the executive committee of the Academic Council and Provost Simon. In February, the MSU Board of Trustees gave the fledgling center its approval.



David Plank (right) introduces Political Science Professor Richard Hula (left) at the Education Policy Center's first forum earlier this year. Part of the center's many outreach efforts is a speaker series on education policy issues.

The college is home to a wealth of research that can inform policy decisions, Ames said, and it is critical to ensure that there is an effective system in place to reach out to policymakers and educators.

The center, Ames added, is only the latest example of the college and university's commitment to effective and meaningful outreach.

"We as a college have had a very strong commitment to outreach for a long time," Ames said. "The policy center is something unique at a time when issues of K-12 education are at the forefront of the state and national agenda.

"I think the center, under the direction of David Plank, can play a pivotal role in the years ahead."

For Plank, the center is an exciting new opportunity for faculty both within the college and from throughout the university to engage policymakers and educational leaders on an ongoing basis.

In its first year, the center is concentrating on educational accountability and is tailoring much of its research and outreach efforts around that issue. In the years ahead, other pressing educational issues will take center stage, Plank said.

The center will also track issues and policy developments in other states and Washington, D.C., Plank said, but its main focus will always remain on Michigan's educational system.

"I am very excited about the center," Plank said. "For me personally, this represents the culmination of a lot of things that I have worked on throughout my career, and it's an opportunity to really bring to bear research on problems of education and make a difference in Michigan.

"That's very rewarding and I think the center has a bright future.

being reshaped by technological change and global competition, and Michigan's economic future is increasingly dependent on a strong educational system and a well-educated workforce, the university has not had a systematic way for researchers and policymakers to exchange ideas and information.

The center will fill that gap.

"One of the good reasons for having a policy center like this is that in the absence of such a center, there is no institutionalized way for the university to learn what the issues are, what issues policymakers are paying attention to," Plank said. "Nor is there really any institutionalized way for policy people to learn what kinds of research the university might be able to bring to bear on policy problems."

"So, a critical function for the center is to provide that bridge so that there's a way for the university and college to keep an ear to the ground on educational policy issues, and also to facilitate access to the research that faculty at Michigan State are doing."

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The center is by no means the college's only initiative geared at reaching out to lawmakers and educational leaders. The center builds on a strong outreach infrastructure developed by the college's Office of K-12 Outreach under the direction of Barbara Markle.

In fact, the college has engaged in an intense effort in recent years to make its research accessible to various constituencies. Two years ago, the college in conjunction with the President's Office established the President's Education Forum in which faculty present their policy-related research to legislators at monthly sessions.

In addition, the Office of K-12 Outreach has in recent years initiated conferences on educational standards and, in collaboration with Plank, on school choice issues. Markle has also worked closely with policymakers, putting on briefings on educational policy for new legislators. The college has also established the Education

Plank looks to two similar centers as models. The first is Policy Alternatives for California Education (PACE), which was begun as a joint effort of the University of California at Berkeley, Stanford and University of Southern California some 20 years ago. The other center is at Indiana University, which also has established itself as a reliable source of information on educational policy issues in that state.

Plank said both centers have managed to stay away from adopting ideological positions, have engaged in solid research, and have been committed to disseminating their findings.

This is the path Plank plans to have the MSU center follow.



(School and educators gathered at MSU in the spring to discuss school choice. The Education Policy Center will hold an annual conference on policy issues on in the years ahead.)

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For Dean Ames, the new center is a natural outgrowth of extensive policy-related research faculty have been conducting for years. It is research that ranges from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and its implications for mathematics and science education in Michigan and the rest of the country, to school choice, teacher preparation, the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA). Indeed, Plank and colleagues Gary Sykes and David Arsen issued a highly regarded report last year on charter schools and interdistrict choice that was lauded for its fairness and insight. It is the kind of research that the center hopes to build on.