

PAY \$25,000 AND BECOME A "BEST SCHOOL" IN MICHIGAN

This is a story about the intersection between market-driven public policies and dying journalism. As those two forces have intersected, nine Michigan school districts have paid \$25,000 to a PR firm for the privilege of calling themselves—and getting local TV coverage as—the “Best Schools” in Michigan.

There are two things you need to know as background. First, like much of the world, the Ann Arbor area is losing its dead tree press. Last year the Ann Arbor News closed down. Detroit’s main papers, the Free Press and News, cut their home delivery back to three days a week. There are a series of weekly papers tailored to outlying areas.

Second, Michigan has what is called a “schools of choice” program that allows districts to choose to enroll students from outside their district in either certain programs or all of the schools in their district. Each child from outside the district that enrolls brings all state funding with him or her. It’s a way for districts to fill out under-enrolled schools and bring in additional funding. If you believe that choice, per se, improves education, then I guess it’s a way to reward better districts. But, as we will see, it’s also a way to let hucksters to make a profit off of public education.

A couple of days ago, AnnArbor.Com (the online outlet that has effectively replaced Ann Arbor News) reported that a local school district, the Lincoln school district (in Ypsilanti’s suburbs) had paid PR agency Sussman Sikes \$25,000 for the privilege of appearing on a paid half hour program on the local ABC affiliate calling them one of the best school districts in Michigan.

The banner ad across the **Lincoln school district**’s website proudly proclaims it

has been recognized as one of the best school districts in Michigan.

The criteria for Lincoln and eight other districts being selected?

A \$25,000 check.

Nine southeast Michigan school districts paid \$25,000 each to a Detroit-area public relations firm to be “named,” a top school district. That firm, in turn, bought airtime on a Detroit-area television station to broadcast a feature on the state’s best schools. A website – bestschools inmichigan.com – also features the nine schools.

Mentioned nowhere on the videos or the website is the fact that the districts paid for the honor.

Lincoln, which participates in the state’s “school of choice” program, appears to be paying the bulk of its PR budget in the hopes that the coverage on ABC will attract the three students—each worth \$7,300 from the state—to the school district, thereby paying for the investment. Here’s how a Dearborn district employee, who also paid for the program, rationalizes the decision.

“We had a new program starting in the fall of 2009 (district-wide all day kindergarten), and we felt that this was a good opportunity to get the word out,” [Dearborn Communications Coordinator David] Mustonen said.

“We felt the cost of the program was reasonable for what we received, and if we attracted three new students, the cost was covered. Our district did have a 350-student increase this year. We have no way of knowing how many of those students, if any, are a result of the program, but you never know. The show did get very good ratings the night it

aired.”

The show apparently used a former local reporter as narrator, and it showed during prime time. Thus, it clearly could be mistaken for journalism rather than paid programming. Lincoln Superintendent Lynn Cleary justifies paying the money because print media is dying. And she goes on to boast that the district got to drive the content for the paid TV programming.

“Unfortunately, with printed media becoming scarce within our county, we were looking for creative ways to reach a larger audience and felt this was a great way to acknowledge what we are doing well and to highlight our strong academics,” she said. “We were involved in the process of selecting what we were highlighting from start to finish. We actually received all of the filming tapes so we will be able to produce individual DVDs for new families moving into the area, and we will be able to provide links for each building to use on their individual website.”

Now, frankly, I’m not surprised school districts are making such stupid choices. The story notes that Ann Arbor twice rejected the offer to participate. That might be because it does not, yet, participate in a big way in the “schools of choice” program. Though it is considering doing so to close big budget gaps given declining state funding.

The big problem, though, is the way economic crisis is rolling up our commons. In a period of transition, new outlets with respectable journalists (like AnnArbor.Com—I’m actually getting more local news now that there’s an accessible online option) have not yet been accepted as trusted arbiters of local news. And, at the same time, market-based “solutions” have replaced even the claim that a society needs to

invest in all parts of its community (those claims were always false, particularly in a place with the persistent segregation of SE MI).

And as a results our reality becomes nothing but PR for those that choose to pay.