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Telfer: Pivotal vote for Midland County schools

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The financial future of Midland County's four public school districts and one intermediate school district hangs on the outcome of a school millage election Tuesday.

This truly is a pivotal moment for local schools. The economy is a mess, way too many people are out of work and cannot find jobs, and many of those who are working have seen their wages frozen or reduced. No doubt, many people are saying this is not the time for a tax increase.

They have a point, but so do our local school board representatives and school administrators. The funding problems being experienced by our schools are not the result of mismanagement. They are 100 percent related to Michigan government's inability to provide adequate funding through Proposal A.

In the past six years, our schools have received an average of 1.69 percent more in funding per year. Their costs have risen faster than that, many of them fixed expenses such as utilities, insurance and supplies such as textbooks.

Some argue that our schools need to be run more like a business; when there is not enough money, cut costs. Well, our schools have done exactly that, to the tune of \$14 million over the past several years. They have cut administrators, teachers, librarians, aides, secretaries, maintenance and more.

Last year, when food and energy costs soared (remember \$4 a gallon gasoline?) our schools could not pass on those increases to their customers. Most, if not all, businesses did. School districts had to eat those costs and find ways to keep the budget in balance with less money.

Also, when businesses need to cut costs, they can more easily reduce staffing levels than schools. Here's why: Schools receive money from the state based on per pupil funding allowances. As enrollment declines, the amount of money a school receives also declines, meaning teachers should be cut. But students don't conveniently leave the district in one class, say the third grade. No, one or two might be missing from each grade, but not enough students depart from each grade level to reduce class sizes to the point where a teacher can be let go — unless you want class sizes of more than 30 students.

The point is schools are not businesses and don't have the flexibility of businesses in both cutting costs and generating revenue. But those running our schools are looking at costs with a business focus. For example, in Midland, school board members and administrators know that some elementary schools have to be closed because the district's building occupancy rate of about 65 percent is not cost-effective. This will happen whether the millage passes on Tuesday or not because even with the money generated from the 1.5 mill tax hike, Midland Public Schools faces a \$3.7 million shortfall.

The situation is dire in each district, but perhaps no more so than Bullock Creek, where 15.25 teachers, 2.5 administrators, 27 co-curricular positions, seven paraprofessionals, the auditorium manager, morning transportation dispatcher and marketing committee

coordinator would lose their jobs if voters don't come through and the state doesn't continue to provide a per pupil increase of 1.69 percent.

If your home is worth \$100,000, the countywide millage hike will cost you a little more than \$1.44 a week, just over 20 cents a day. I think the question voters should be asking themselves when they go to the polls Tuesday is this: What is your local school district worth? I would hope that another 20 cents a day is not too high a price.

John "Jack" Telfer is editor of the Daily News. You can contact him at (989) 839-4240 or by e-mail at jtelferii@mdn.net.

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