

Macomb County schools seek increased revenue through enhancement millage

School enhancement question on ballot Tuesday

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A student focuses on her classroom assignment at a Mount Clemens school.

GEORGE NORKUS -- FOR THE MACOMB DAILY



Crescentwood Elementary students work on an assignment in their Eastpointe district classroom.

Submitted photo

- Photo courtesy of Eastpointe Community Schools

Macomb County public schools will be asking voters to support public education March 10 in the form of a 10-year, 1.9 mill enhancement millage.

The countywide millage, if approved Tuesday, would raise an estimated \$55 million per year to bring a new revenue stream to the general operating funds of every public school district in Macomb County. The money would be distributed based upon student enrollment. Each district would receive approximately \$418 per student.

Although it is called the Macomb Intermediate School District Regional Enhancement Millage Proposal on the ballot, the MISD is more of a collection agency, although it will also benefit due to its student head count, and would distribute the funds to eligible school districts in the county. This includes the 16 public school charters.

If passed, Macomb County would be the ninth county in the state of Michigan to have a school enhancement millage. The two most recent counties to approve an enhancement millage are Wayne and Kent counties. The others include Charlevoix-Emmet (combined millage), Midland, Kalamazoo, Monroe, Ottawa and Muskegon.

Some of these enhancement millages, according to Warren Consolidated Education Association President Bob Callendar, date back to the 1990s. If the Macomb millage is approved, funding would start in the 2020-21 school year.

The millage will cost the average Macomb County homeowner, with a home valued at \$200,000, according to the 2019 Macomb Equalization Report, approximately \$190 per year.

Momentum to get the enhancement millage proposal on the ballot started with the Utica Community Schools district. According to UCS Board of Education President Robert Ross, his board first passed a resolution in March 2019 to come up with a plan to talk to other districts in the county to support the proposal. In order to get the proposal on the ballot, supporters needed boards representing 50%, plus one of total students in the county, to back the proposal. In response, Mount Clemens Community Schools, Chippewa Valley Schools, Warren Consolidated Schools, and the Anchor Bay School District all came forward to endorse and got the proposal on the ballot. Since then, South Lake Schools and Clintondale Community Schools have endorsed it.

"It's made a huge difference to the students in Wayne County. Some of those schools were about to go under," Ross said. "About 30% of students in the state have some sort of enhancement millage. It's only fair that Macomb County kids have it, too."

There will be no restrictions on what the money can be used for. Funds will be delivered to each school district general fund and how it is used will be left to the discretion of the local school board.

Ross said the money could be used for all aspects of career readiness for students, capital improvements or hiring additional staff. In UCS, he said the district is in desperate need of more school nurses. It only has one for the entire district, and she is a contract employee. It could use more social workers and literacy consultants, especially with Michigan's new third grade reading law.

"We have strategies, but what we need are the literacy consultants," he said. "It's amazing what they can do. They find problems and remedy them. If you can't read by third grade, you're in a bind."

Ross said better critical thinking skills and better writing skills are need all across the curriculum.

"It's going to provide better educational opportunities for all kids, not just your kids, but other kids in other districts," he said. "I'm not just concerned about school systems now, I'm concerned about kids entering school now -- the class of 2032. If we don't have the money to serve the needs of the kids, we're not doing our job. This is an opportunity that hasn't come along in a long time. Voters who care about their kids and other kids will want the best opportunities for kids now and into the future."

The lack of restrictions on how the money can be spent, as well as the placement of the proposal on the March ballot, as opposed to on the general election ballot in November, are two issues that concern Michigan Taxpayer Alliance Chairman Leon Drolet, who is also a Macomb County Commissioner.

"I think it's deceptively placed, put on a ballot where relatively few voters will be voting," Drolet said. "This is not a renewal or for any debt. It's a completely new tax. It's an intentional and deceitful cash grab. There is no specific thing it is designed to support. It can be used any way they want. And there is no guarantee how it will be spent. Maybe it will go to classrooms, maybe the administration. And it could change from year to year."

If school districts were convinced the millage was the right way to proceed, Drolet offered they should have put the question on the November ballot, where there would be a larger cross section of voters from across the political spectrum. Although March 10 is a presidential primary election, it is essentially a Democratic president primary because a Republican is the incumbent president. Drolet said there is a perception Dems would be more likely to vote for the tax increase.

When asked whether the school districts wanted to put the proposal on the ballot earlier so it could start collecting the money earlier, all government entities have always claimed they are underfunded.

"There is no alignment of planets that make this March a special moment in time," he said.

Drolet added the proposal might be more palatable for him if there were restrictions on how the money could be spent, but he said such proposals should be done on a district by district case since each has its own unique circumstances.

He added nearly two mills for 10 years proposal takes up a good chunk of the voters' "psychological tax capacity," meaning if they pass this proposal, they may start rejecting other needed millages.

According to a Michigan State University study titled "Michigan School Finance At The Crossroads: A Quarter Century of State Control," Michigan is last among all states in revenue growth for K-12 schools since voters approved Proposal A in 1994, which changed property taxes and school funding. According to the report, that has caused Michigan student performance to drop to the bottom tier of states in the country. Says Callender, that's part of the reason why more and more counties are looking at enhancement millages from their voters. The lifelong resident of Macomb County with two children in the Warren Con district says it's time to invest locally in education.

"All we ever hear about is cuts in education. It's time to look at funding our schools appropriately, and that's not being done in Lansing. This is our only option to increase funds that will truly affect our classrooms," he said.

"I have kids in school, and I've seen class sizes continue to increase," he added. "I want to give kids the best opportunities we can. Maybe we can bring back some of the electives that we've lost. More STEM opportunities, anything that updates our curriculum. Materials are getting more and more outdated. Some schools have been using the same books for 20 years."