

Comment & Opinion

Snyder can't afford to wait on education

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During a one-on-one interview with the Business Journal, Condoleezza Rice emphasized the No. 1 "national security" and "economic" issue for America is education. The former Secretary of State under George W. Bush was in Grand Rapids last week as the Kent County Republican Lincoln Day dinner speaker, and to sign copies of her newest book, "No Higher Honor."

The Stanford professor commented she believes one of the most important initiatives of the Bush administration was the "No Child Left Behind" education initiative. "I myself came from humble circumstances," she noted, emphasizing that parents and community members "must advocate for every child. If a child does not have the parental help to emphasize education, the community must do so through community outreach programs, for instance, like the Boys and Girls Clubs or similar organizations."

Responding to a question in regard to vouchers and charter schools, Rice shot back succinctly, "I can look at a zip code and know exactly what kind of education you had. This is a huge issue across the country." She is, not surprisingly, an advocate of charter schools and voucher systems as a means to bring "excellent schools and excellent teachers to all children."

Her comments are particularly timely as Gov. Rick Snyder considers policies that provide for school district consolidations and, at least currently, appears to be opening the door to those broader initiatives.

The time to hurry is now. Michigan Future President Lou Glazer's most recent white paper and comments during Business Journal interviews last week show direct correlations between "knowledge-based" communities and the growth of business, as well as higher income attainment. Glazer estimated that completing that circle in Michigan could take up to 25 years.

Over the last month, Glazer's non-partisan think tank has further defined Michigan regions and how far they have to go in any geographic area. As for the perception that the Grand Rapids area is faring better than other areas in Michigan, his statistical analysis shows both education attainment levels and income levels here are below Detroit's. Glazer's comparisons include seven counties as part of the Grand Rapids region: Kent, Ottawa, Allegan, Muskegon, Barry, Ionia and Newaygo.

Both in interviews with the Business Journal and again in his weekend blog, Glazer noted: "How does metro Grand Rapids compare to the U.S.? Not well! Particularly when you take into account that big metros on average are doing far better than the nation. The (GR) region's per capita income is now \$7,959 (20 percent) below the national average. Over the past two decades, the region's real per capita income grew \$4,097 slower than the nation, less than half the growth the country experienced."

Rice also noted for the Business Journal that, while the country reflects various religious beliefs and ethnicities, education is singularly most important because it "holds the United States together. You can come from humble circumstances and, because of your education, become much more, do great things."

Given Glazer's statistical quicksand so powerfully evidenced by the research, Snyder can't afford to wait to provide the education initiatives that give the most important economic footing to this state.