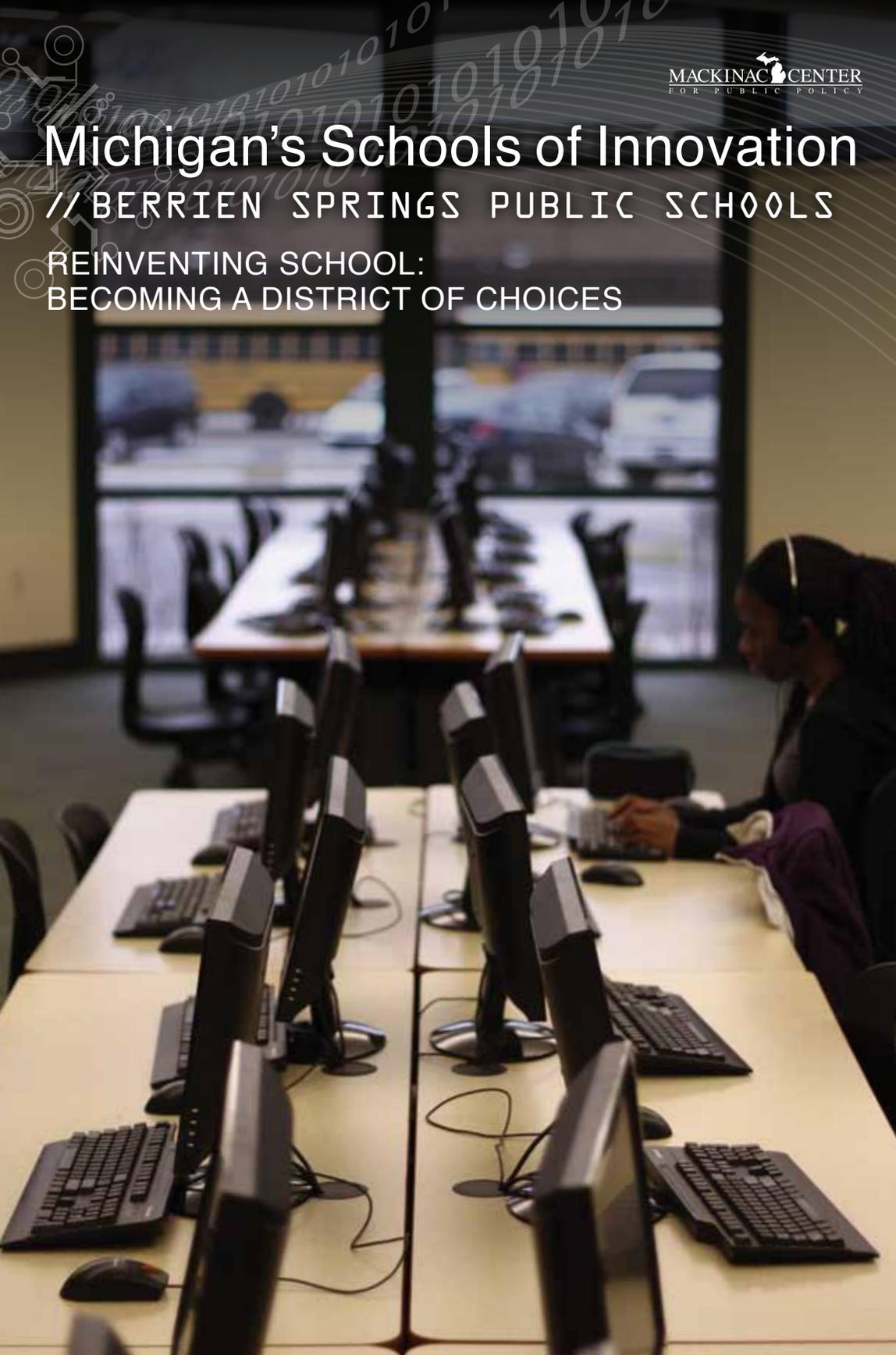


# Michigan's Schools of Innovation

// BERRIEN SPRINGS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

REINVENTING SCHOOL:  
BECOMING A DISTRICT OF CHOICES





**BERRIEN SPRINGS, MICHIGAN**

Population: 1,800

The area was once known as Wolf's Prairie, but was later named for James M. Berrien, the U.S. Attorney General when the first permanent settlers arrived in 1829.

# Reinventing School: Becoming a District of Choices

## Embracing Choice

When James Bermingham took over as superintendent of the Berrien Springs Public Schools in February 2006, he was concerned. The district seemed to be sinking fast.

Although enrollment hadn't changed much since 2000, it was down 7 percent since 1997, when it had reached its 20-year high of about 1,900 students.<sup>1</sup> Costs were rising.<sup>2</sup> The district's financial position was precarious. The general fund balance was just 6 percent in 2006; well below the recommended 15 to 20 percent.<sup>3</sup>

The district wasn't quite a candidate for emergency management, but something had to change.

Today, Berrien Springs looks much different. Since Bermingham became superintendent, enrollment has grown by 45 percent and is at an all-time high, exceeding 2,400 for the 2011-2012 school year.<sup>4</sup> Of the 550 school districts in the state, only one grew faster than Berrien Springs over this period.<sup>5</sup>

The student body has grown more racially diverse. The share of white students in the district has decreased, and the district now enrolls a larger share of Asian (6 percent), Hispanic (12 percent) and African-American (21 percent) students than the typical Michigan district.<sup>6</sup> An open "Schools-of-Choice" policy helped drive some of this growing



## Edupreneur

James Bermingham has been superintendent of Berrien Springs Public Schools since 2006.

Upon being hired, he told the press, "I've always believed the worst curse of any school system is being satisfied with mediocre and status quo."

diversity.<sup>7</sup> More than half of the district's African-American students in the 2012-2013 school year were residents of a different district.

For Michigan public schools, more students means more money, and Berrien Springs has used this injection of cash to greatly improve its financial standing: Its general fund balance now surpasses the recommended level, and at the end of 2010 stood at 21 percent. A large part of the district's success is due to its ability to use digital learning to expand learning opportunities to more students and become “a district of choice” by being “a district of choices.”

## An 'Alternative' Route: From Berrien Springs to Battle Creek

Berrien Springs might not seem like a prime candidate for rapid growth and innovation. It's not a particularly wealthy district — it receives the minimum per-pupil state aid payment (\$6,966 in 2012-2013).<sup>8</sup> Almost 60 percent of its students, based on their household income, qualified for a federally subsidized free or reduced-priced lunch in 2011, above the averages for both Berrien County and the state of Michigan.<sup>9</sup>

Given these modest endowments, the district had to take a somewhat unusual route to growing its student population.

The story starts with alternative education. These programs provide students — primarily high school students — with remedial coursework if they have fallen behind their peers academically. Not long after Birmingham became the superintendent, Berrien Springs administrators saw a market opportunity, noticing that many districts in their county were reducing or eliminating alternative education programs. They responded by investing more in theirs.

It paid off. Enrollment in the Berrien Springs Alternative Education Center more than quadrupled, soaring from 73 in the fall of 2005 to 299 in 2011.<sup>10</sup> More than half of these students are actually residents of other districts.<sup>11</sup>

Berrien Springs Alternative Education Center uses a software-based instructional program. With e2020® software, students have more flexible course schedules and can work at their own pace. Teachers monitor an individual student's progress in real time and quickly identify remediation needs — even if they aren't in the same room. Students may complete their work wherever they have Internet access, but teachers and other resources are physically available in a district-run building from 7:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Not everyone in the community was sold on expanding the Alternative Education Center. District leaders countered this by educating local residents about the importance of serving all students, no matter where they live or how much academic support they need.

Ryan Pesce, the district's middle school principal, says the effort worked: "They [the community] understand what our district's about, and it's about helping kids. So they're willing to accept some lower [standardized test] scores, because they know what [the Alternative Education Center] is doing for those kids. ... We have a really good reputation for helping underachieving students."

Following Berrien Springs' success, nearby districts expanded their alternative education programs as well. This has led to fewer nonresident students choosing to enroll in the Alternative Education Center, but Bill Bergan, its director and the high school's head football coach, isn't worried. He says that once these students start comparing Berrien Springs' program to the others, "They're all coming back."

Having successfully served students in Berrien County, the district decided to expand its impact and created an alternative education program in downtown Battle Creek, more than 80 miles away. The district partners with Summit Pointe, a Battle Creek-based nonprofit mental health care provider, to provide an online learning program and a staffed facility to local high school students, most of whom have dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out.

Superintendent Bermingham says this program developed out of a “desire we have to make a difference, more than just in Berrien Springs.” He adds, “We have to change the concept of education with these [geographical] boundaries of responsibility.”

The program, referred to as “The Virtual Site,” uses e2020® instructional software, just like the district’s own Alternative Education Center. Students can complete their work at their own pace and on their own time. But the district also provides a staffed facility in the city for students to use from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Remote support is available from Berrien Springs teachers as well. According to Bermingham, more than 275 students enrolled in the district’s Battle Creek program in the 2012-2013 school year.

Bob Kubiack, principal of The Virtual Site, says the program has had a lot of success serving students whose circumstances make it difficult to attend a traditional school. The program’s first graduate, for example, was an 18-year-old mother who completed most of her work online from home late at night, after she had put her baby to bed.

“Obviously, she got the little one to bed, had time to work and really got after it for three or four months,” Kubiack said. “[She] was successful and got her diploma — [the program is] very powerful.”

## The “Virtual Academy”: Online Learning Goes Mainstream

After witnessing the success of digital learning with its alternative education programs, Berrien Springs officials set out to expand digital learning opportunities to more students in the district. “We decided it was time to take that concept of online learning to the mainstream students,” says Brandon Waggoner, director of the Berrien Springs Virtual Academy.

The district created the Virtual Academy in September 2010. This virtual academy provides middle and high school students in Berrien Springs the same benefits provided to students enrolled in the district’s alternative education programs.

# Good teachers are critical

Classrooms may look different, and teachers' day-to-day duties may change, but the guidance, mentoring and support that good teachers add to digital learning programs are essential.





The results are  
entirely human

Waggoner says, “The whole purpose behind the virtual school is to create a place that’s flexible for students to be able to learn in the way that they’re most comfortable. [It] also gives them options beyond what’s available in the traditional high school as well.”

Students use the Virtual Academy in a variety of ways. Some use it so they can fit more courses into their schedule. Others use it to accelerate their learning. Still others use it to take remedial courses. Courses are offered through e2020®, powerspeaK12, Keyboarding Online, Moodle, and Michigan Virtual School®.

The district dedicated a new building to the Virtual Academy. The facility is open from 7:30 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. and is staffed with teachers and paraprofessionals who provide on-site mentoring and assistance. The building is also used for proctoring exams, since the district requires all students to take tests on site, though they can complete their other work remotely.

Bermingham believes building this new facility was crucial for the development of the Virtual Academy: “The concept was if you build it, they will come.” He also highlights that the district paid for the \$2.1 million building out of its general operating fund, noting that most districts wouldn’t think of building anything similar without raising local taxes and selling bonds.

In the end, Bermingham says the district “took just the opposite approach.” He views the Virtual Academy as a financial benefit for the district: “[The Academy] is making the district money. It’s allowing us to have offerings right now that develop a contrast between what we have ... and our competition around us, and we’re pretty excited about that fact. ... It was part of the solution instead of being part of the potential problem.”

It seems to be working so far. According to district officials, in the 2011-2012 school year, there were 180 students supplementing their traditional classroom coursework with at least one Virtual Academy course, while another 63 took almost all of their courses remotely.

More than half of all enrolled students in the Virtual Academy are residents of districts other than Berrien Springs.

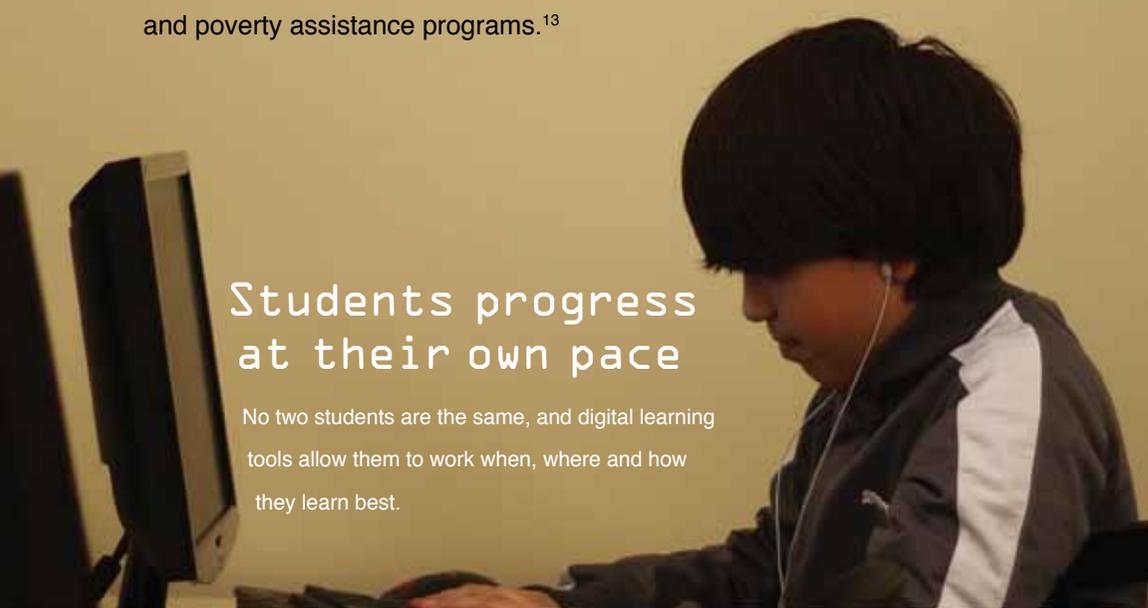
## Partnering to Break Down Barriers

The district is also using a variety of partnerships to offer its own students — and others — a wider variety of learning opportunities. These offerings include intercurricular courses, project-based learning and career and technical training.

For instance, the district has partnered with Andrews University, a nearby private college, to provide district students with professor-led, college-level math and science classes. According to Birmingham, Berrien Springs also serves about 270 homeschooled students — up from just 70 in 2009 — through its partnerships with local homeschooling groups. Many of these students enroll in one of the district's online programs.

It serves local private schools, too, by providing them with teachers for some elective courses. In return, the district receives a prorated amount of state aid on behalf of the private school students its teachers teach.<sup>12</sup>

Altogether, the district has partnerships with more than 20 local agencies and community-based organizations, including the Salvation Army, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Michigan Works!, Lakeland Hospital and a variety of churches, mental health care providers and poverty assistance programs.<sup>13</sup>



## Students progress at their own pace

No two students are the same, and digital learning tools allow them to work when, where and how they learn best.



Berrien Springs is also working to develop partnerships abroad. It has initiated discussions with South Korean officials about establishing a fee-based high school in South Korea. The district would employ some teachers there, but provide most of the other support services remotely. This international academy would generate new revenue for the district and provide South Korean students an opportunity to earn an American high school diploma, greatly increasing their chances of enrolling in an American university.

Finally, the district is trying to partner with its own parents more actively through its “GOAL” initiative: Graduation Opportunities for All Learners. The idea is simple, yet revolutionary: break down grade-level distinctions, something Birmingham calls “artificial boundaries to kids progressing at the rate they should progress.”

Waggoner is blunt about organizing students by grade level. “The traditional model,” he says, “is set up to accommodate adults and to manage the movement of students, rather than accommodate children and their learning.”

GOAL would work like this: Starting in third grade, parents, teachers, counselors and administrators would collaborate to develop personalized learning plans containing specific goals for each student. Students would progress towards these goals at their own pace, moving ahead only when they demonstrate mastery of the subject material. The plan would be reviewed annually or more often, if necessary.

With the GOAL program, students wouldn’t have to wait until ninth grade, for example, to start taking high school material. They wouldn’t have to wait to graduate high school to take college material. In fact, students could earn an associate degree — about two years’ worth of college credits — by the time they graduate from the Berrien Springs school system.



Students could graduate early, too. Alternatively, they could slow down their learning pace. No longer would students be rushed to keep up with the rest of their peers. If they needed additional time to master certain material, they could take it.

Digital learning is critical to the GOAL program. The scheduling flexibility and wide array of courses that virtual coursework make possible are essential to individualizing learning on a large scale. The basic idea, however, is anything but futuristic. As Principal Pesce points out regarding the district, “It’s a one-room schoolhouse in a very large setting.”

## A Hub of Learning

Ultimately, Berrien Springs officials want to fundamentally change the way the school district functions. Instead of monitoring the day-to-day operations of every program, the district would serve as a hub, providing timely support for numerous semiautonomous initiatives and programs, such as the Virtual Academy, Alternative Education Center and homeschool partnership.

Birmingham wants to focus on providing “a menu of options for parents.” The district’s goal is to provide high-quality learning opportunities, but to allow parents and students to determine when, where and how they make use of those resources.

District officials warn that the price of innovation is occasional failure. But on the whole, Birmingham believes it’s worth it: “We reinvented ourselves all of a sudden. It’s like that snowball that starts going down the mountain — just gets bigger and bigger and bigger. The more we tried, the more we innovated, [and] the more comfortable we got with innovation.” //

# Endnotes

1. For school enrollment information, see “Bulletin 1014 - Michigan Public Schools Ranked by Select Financial Information,” (Michigan Department of Education, 2012), <http://goo.gl/WJezO> (accessed July 17, 2013); “Common Core of Data: Build a Table,” (U.S. Department of Education: National Center for Education Statistics), <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/bat/> (accessed July 17, 2013).
2. For instance, the amount districts were required to contribute to the Michigan Public School Employees’ Retirement System were equivalent to 12.17 percent of a district’s payroll in fiscal 2002, but rose to 17.74 percent by fiscal 2007. “Employer Information: Office of Retirement Services: Public School Employees Retirement System: FY 2001-02,” (Michigan Office of Retirement Services, 2012), <http://goo.gl/l4wWh> (accessed July 17, 2013); “Employer Information: Office of Retirement Services: Public School Employees Retirement System: FY 2006-07,” (Michigan Office of Retirement Services, 2012), <http://goo.gl/l6Q6L> (accessed July 17, 2013).
3. A school district’s general fund balance refers to its savings as a portion of total general fund expenditures. “Fund Balance and Related Issues,” (Michigan School Business Officials, 2010), <http://goo.gl/cZXTh> (accessed July 17, 2013); “School Finance: Fund Balance Information: Fund Balance,” (Michigan School Business Officials, 2011), <http://goo.gl/VE0bi> (accessed April 27, 2012).
4. Author’s calculations based on “2005-2006 State Aid Financial Status Report,” (Michigan Department of Education, 2006), <http://goo.gl/Umgmi> (accessed July 17, 2013); “2011-2012 State Aid Financial Status Report,” (Michigan Department of Education, 2012), <http://goo.gl/bpibG> (accessed July 17, 2013).
5. Author’s calculation based on “2010-11 Bulletin 1014,” (Michigan Department of Education, 2011), <http://goo.gl/C1ypt> (accessed July 17, 2013); “2005-06 Bulletin 1014,” (Michigan Department of Education, 2005), <http://goo.gl/ghPu3> (accessed July 17, 2013). These calculations exclude public charter schools and conventional school districts with fewer than 50 students.
6. Author’s calculations based on “Public Student Counts (Headcount Data),” (Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2013), <http://goo.gl/EIN3x> (accessed July 17, 2013).
7. For more information, see “Schools of Choice,” (Michigan Department of Education, 2013), <http://goo.gl/w2hLG> (accessed July 17, 2013).
8. “State Aid Foundation Allowance Parameters 1995-2013,” (Michigan Department of Education, 2013), <http://goo.gl/GqJRnO> (accessed July 25, 2013); “2012-2013 State Aid Financial Status Report,” (Michigan Department of Education), <http://goo.gl/f3yiV> (accessed July 17, 2013).
9. Author’s calculations based on “Free and Reduced Lunch Counts,” (Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2012), <http://goo.gl/Lf21Y> (accessed April 27, 2012).
10. “2005-06 Pupil Headcount Data (SRSD),” (Michigan Department of Education), <http://goo.gl/rbjJO> (accessed July 17, 2013); “2011-12 Pupil Headcount Data (MSDS),” (Michigan Department of Education), <http://goo.gl/Mtd3p> (accessed July 17, 2013).
11. “District Profile,” (Berrien Springs Public Schools), 3, <http://goo.gl/fAcls> (accessed May 15, 2012).
12. For more information about these types of public-private school partnerships see: “Public and private schools share faculty for electives,” Michigan Education Report (2006), <http://goo.gl/WQd4B> (accessed July 17, 2013).
13. “District Profile,” (Berrien Springs Public Schools), 10, <http://goo.gl/fAcls> (accessed May 15, 2012).



**Michael Van Beek** is director of research at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and the Center are properly cited.

All quotes and statistics not specifically sourced in endnotes came from interviews conducted by the author. Some language contained in the captions of this Case Study appear verbatim in previous Mackinac Center publications. The author wishes to thank the following educators for the time, information and expertise they provided him in writing this Case Study:

**James Bermingham**, superintendent, Berrien Springs Public Schools

**Brandon Waggoner**, director, Berrien Springs Virtual Academy, Berrien Springs Public Schools

**Bill Bergan**, director, Berrien Springs Alternative Education Center, Berrien Springs Public Schools

**Ryan Pesce**, middle school principal, Berrien Springs Public Schools

**Dave Eichberg**, high school principal, Berrien Springs Public Schools

**Jan Bermingham**, program coordinator, Berrien Springs Public Schools

**Bob Kubiack**, principal, The Virtual Site, Berrien Springs Public Schools

**Erv Brinker**, CEO, Summit Pointe®

**Marsha Myles**, president and CEO, EdTech Specialists



For videos and other essays in The Michigan Schools of Innovation Series, see [www.mackinac.org/SchoolsOfInnovation](http://www.mackinac.org/SchoolsOfInnovation)

ALL PHOTOS by Daniel Montgomery, Mackinac Center marketing and design director. With the exception of the back cover, all photos were taken at Berrien Springs Public Schools.

#### **ABOUT THE MACKINAC CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY**

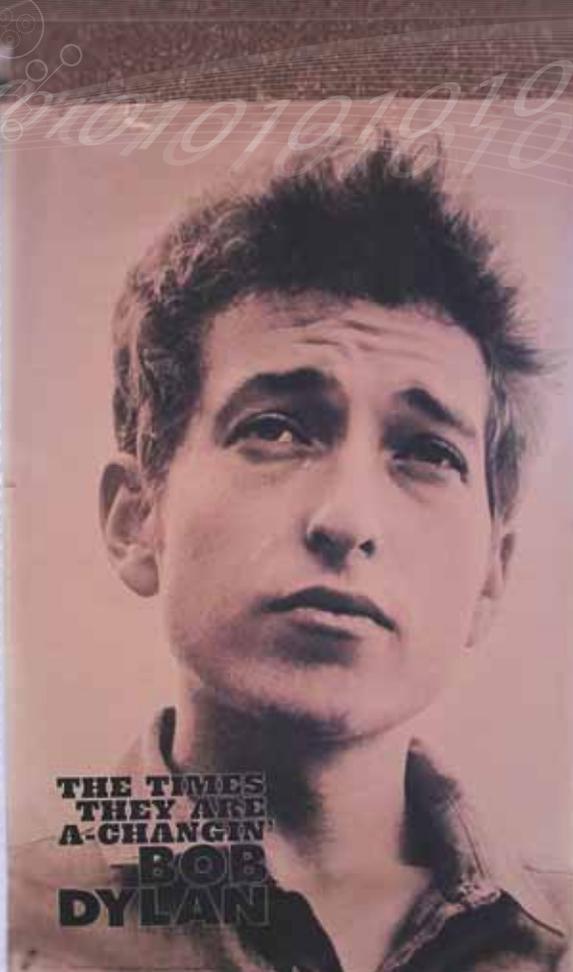
The Mackinac Center for Public Policy is dedicated to improving the understanding of economic and political principles among residents, public officials, policymakers and opinion leaders. The Center has emerged as one of the largest and most prolific of the more than 50 state-based free-market “think tanks” in America. More information about the Mackinac Center and its work can be found at [www.mackinac.org](http://www.mackinac.org).

#### **GUARANTEE OF QUALITY SCHOLARSHIP**

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy is committed to delivering the highest quality and most reliable research on Michigan issues. The Center guarantees that all original factual data are true and correct and that information attributed to other sources is accurately represented.

The Center encourages rigorous critique of its research. If the accuracy of any material fact or reference to an independent source is questioned and brought to the Center’s attention with supporting evidence, the Center will respond in writing. If an error exists, it will be noted in a correction that will accompany all subsequent distribution of the publication. This constitutes the complete and final remedy under this guarantee.

The Michigan Schools of Innovation Series  
A NEW GENERATION OF LEARNING



**THE TIMES  
THEY ARE  
A-CHANGIN'  
-BOB  
DYLAN**