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wagon without getting any background information themselves."

About political agendas, Farmington district parent and college educator Helen Ellison said "Everything in our society, unfortunately, is politically motivated. When you talk about the amount of money that goes into education, there's going to be politics. But a good teacher needs to remember who the customer is, and that's the student."

While political agendas are definitely muddying the mix, some say parents would be well advised to also look at the schools before putting a pin in public schools. Children have a better chance of attaining high grades and future success if their moms and dads spend more time encouraging and working with them.

Despite its all, teaching, and education, seemingly is in better shape in Farmington Public Schools than in many districts around the country.

Led by Superintendent Bob Maxfield, "Team Farmington's" mantra is to become a "premier 21st century school district," where diversity and citizenship are as valued as high achievement. High numbers of graduates go on to colleges and universities; MEAP, ACT and SAT scores generally are improving as the district aligns its core curriculum to the state's. Every building in the district has either attained North Central Accreditation, or is on the verge of reaching that status.

Candidates for teaching jobs in Farmington go through the application wringer, so that mistake hirings do not occur. A staff development program keeps faculty members on their toes, and helps them avoid getting stove, as best teaching practices evolve.

"I think there absolutely is a checks and balances system in place," said Lisa Drano, in her second year as a teacher at East Middle School. "We're lifelong learners. There are tests we have to pass, just like the doctors have to pass. We have certification tests for every field."

Parents see problems

But opinions about the district, and public education, differ. Parent Patricia Alspach - a proponent of traditional classroom learning, where teachers teach to students sitting at their desks, and an advocate of the syllabus - sees Farmington as being beset by the same problems being felt elsewhere.

"There are good and bad teachers, that's nationwide," Alspach said. "There are good and bad parents, that's nationwide. There's good curriculum and bad curriculum, that's nationwide."

Yet she said some graduates of Farmington Public Schools apparently aren't learning the basics, a concern for which Alspach doesn't just fault teachers.

"How many kids, when they get to college, have to take remedial English or remedial math?" asked Alspach, who talked with more than a few parents of B-or-better students whose graduate children needed such refreshers.

In fact, Alspach said she has more quibbles with what's being taught and how, rather than by whom.

"You can put the blame over everything," said Alspach, who especially likes the way private schools do the job. "You sure don't see Country Day doing block scheduling."

Shaking the cages

Ellison, whose children have attended both public and private schools, acknowledged that some of the criticism of teachers is justified. But not all of it is.

"I think that (poor performers) exists in any profession," Ellison said. "You'll have people who are just ... there. And education should not be excluded from that."

Meanwhile, parents have responsibility to shake the cages if they know their children are in

classrooms taught by teachers just passing time on the way to retirement.

"If a teacher is not doing the job," Ellison said, "I'll be on top of it. But some parents are not. So, for those who are not involved when (their children) get teachers ... who are just there, the children suffer."

Harrison parent Margo Houser talked about another problem area, the belief that some Farmington teachers focus efforts on the best and the brightest. She said her children have done well



in the district, having received excellent instruction from teachers. But in her opinion, kids not bound for honors don't get the same kind of attention.

"Teachers here really gear up for the brighter students," Houser said. "It seems the curriculum and teachers are geared up for the 3.0 (and above) and above. If you're below a 3.0, I believe you're going to struggle."

"I don't think they get the attention and (teachers) don't waste time on them. They're good kids, too, good average kids."

But Maxfield defends the district's track record, not to mention "excellence and equity" philosophy, in helping students from all backgrounds and talents strive to excel in the 21st century.

"Our students do awfully well. But the heart of the issue is our ability to work on each kid's needs."

Better than ever

Maxfield agrees that the education field in general has major problems to deal with. But he raises his eyebrows about the potshots now taken at schools and teachers.

"At its best, public education is better than it's ever been," said Maxfield, during a recent orientation for new faculty members, where the teamwork notion was put in neon lights for all to see. "But there's this larger political mantra imposed on us that schools are failing."

He said the criticism doesn't wash with the data from public opinion polls, where people typically say "My district's doing great."

According to Maxfield, the Farmington district succeeds where others fail because of a "marvelous community, two mayors who say, 'We'll do anything you want to help,' a supportive school board, business partnerships. It all works. But in other places none of it is in place."

So American public education generally is "under the microscope for a lot of reasons," the superintendent continued. "We're all more sophisticated. And we've said to the community, 'Hold us accountable.' It's a more critical climate now. We're all held accountable and we ought to be."

It's not like it was "in the old days," Maxfield said, when children were told to "Go to school and if you screw up, it's your fault."

Complacency, community

Even teachers recognize that there is plenty room for improvement, and good reason for some of the criticism leveled against their profession. Some of it.

"Definitely," said first-year Duncel Middle School teacher Chris Bruce. "There are those teachers out there (who) have been complacent, a little too comfortable in their jobs..."

"But I think it'd be a mistake to put all of the blame for the problems that exist in the education community on the shoulders of teachers."

For public schools to get better, parents need to be actively involved and the rest of the community, including the media,

must also step up to the plate.

"Education has to be seen as a team effort," Bruce noted. "Including the home. And other sectors of society also need to shoulder some of the responsibility. The media students receive a lot of mixed messages. This all goes into the team effort. We should have a bigger team. Everybody should have young people's concerns at heart."

Despite his plea, much of what the media reports about teachers and public education will likely include the aiming of slings and arrows toward the easiest target: the people on the educational front line.

But Ellison said teachers might be able to minimize the assault if they just lightened up.

"I'd really like to see educators not be so defensive," said Ellison, an educator herself. "But to listen. Sometimes, we're so defensive that we don't hear what's being said."

Navigating through political waters is out of the control of teachers and parents. But listening to each other isn't. It might be the simplest approach of all to help the public and public education join hands and step out of the MEAP-muddied muck.



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BRENNER

Team players: Communication between colleagues and other staff development efforts enable Farmington district teachers such as Duncel Middle School's Connie Carroll and Chris Bruce to stay on the cutting edge of public education.



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Class time: In Farmington Public Schools, teachers and students often use each other as a sounding board to help answer questions and solve problems.

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