

School closings

Alma superintendent says they can be avoided

Michigan's declining school enrollments needn't always result in closing buildings or program cutbacks.

Some 23 alternatives to school closings are examined in a University of Michigan doctoral study by David E. Spathelf, superintendent of schools in Alma, Mich.

He surveyed 263 of his colleagues—about half of all superintendents of K-12 (kindergarten through 12th grade) districts in Michigan. They encompassed all sizes and types of communities, Lower and Upper Peninsula, from rural areas to urban.

"The study participants were presented with a hypothetical situation," Spathelf said, "that their school dis-

tricts had, since 1973, experienced a severe enrollment decline.

"The concurrent loss of state revenues had depleted all surplus funds, and the upcoming year indicated a budget deficit. Michigan law requires all districts to maintain a balanced budget. The enrollment losses now make it feasible to close one school building."

The superintendents favored alternatives which would retain the facilities, reduce costs and increase revenues, Spathelf said. Vocational and special education classes, community education programs or renting rooms for non-educational purposes are among

the uses they supported for the surplus space.

"Expansion into community or continuing education programs are particularly favored by superintendents whose enrollments are currently increasing or stable," Spathelf said.

Reducing the operations of one or more buildings, with a part-time administrator or smaller staff, was favored by superintendents who are already experiencing a decline. Another alternative was balancing school enrollments to provide better use of building space.

"The critical problem facing these districts has been lack of money," Spathelf said. "Higher millage is usu-

ally ruled out, because most communities already pay high school taxes."

The 263 superintendents proposed some 48 alternatives in addition to the 23 presented by Spathelf. They ranked as "most ideal" the "elimination of programs that are not effective or that are staffed by marginal people." The "most practical" was "making space available for improved educational programs sponsored by the intermediate school district."

Spathelf did notice a different pattern of responses for administrators in the cities and urban fringe.

The city superintendents favored initiation of pre-school programs and establishment of a learning resource center in each school. The urban fringe respondents supported several cost-cutting measures: the operation of one or more schools on a reduced budget; the use of paraprofessionals instead of teachers in non-instructional areas like study halls, and the provision of cash bonuses or other incentives to staff to encourage early retirement.

Spathelf also asked the superintendents to list those factors which they believed had most influence on the decisions they made to deal with declining student enrollment. "The board of education, followed by 'community pressure' were top ranked," he reports. "The least influential were employee unions and agencies of the state government."

Scheme to use CB samaritans on freeway meets delay

Ten remotely controlled radio towers for an experimental motorist aid system are being installed along the I-96 Freeway, but they won't go into operation before Labor Day weekend, the Department of State Highways and Transportation said.

The department had been aiming for a July 4 debut of "Project BEAR" (Broad Emergency Assistance Radio), which will be operated by state police along 140 miles of I-96 between Grand Rapids and Detroit. However, delay in obtaining custom-built radio equip-

ment for the central monitoring station in East Lansing has forced a two-month postponement.

The project, utilizing 50-foot radio towers placed at 15-mile intervals along the highway, will enable citizen band (CB) radio operators to report stranded motorists or other emergencies to state police via Channel 9.

State police, who will monitor the channel continuously, then can summon help from their nearest post or other service agency.

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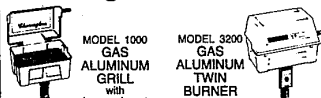


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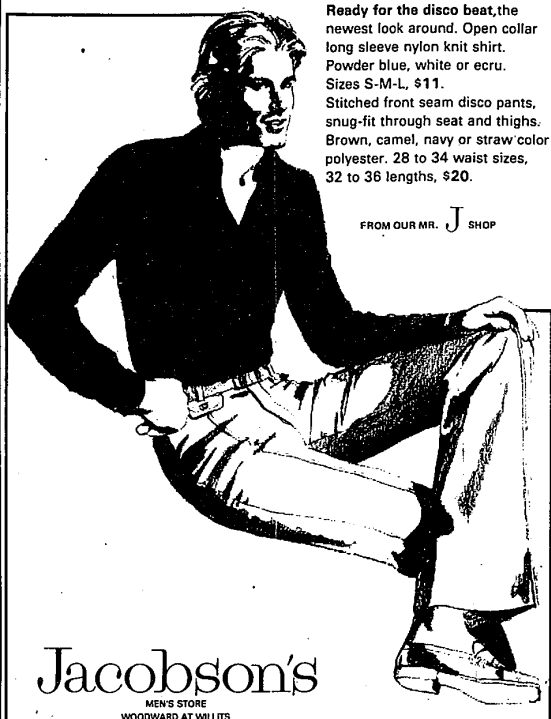
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