

Tax election focus — special ed

Continued from Page 1

OAKLAND SCHOOLS coordinates center programs for the "low incidence" population of handicapped children — those with less common disabilities, such as autism or blindness.

"It costs more to educate an orthopedic handicapped student (one who attends a center program), for example, than for a child who is learning disabled (one who attends a district program)," said Donald Place, Oakland Schools' elementary consultant.

Of the 19,800 special education students in Oakland County in 1984-85, 1,778 were enrolled in 70 center programs housed in 16 host school districts.

Host districts include Farmington, which last year provided center programs at nine sites for 400 trainable mentally impaired, severely mentally impaired, physically impaired and pre-vocational students.

But even though Farmington is a host district, it doesn't serve the full range of impairments. For example, some hearing-impaired and visually impaired Farmington students attend classes in another district.

"It's more cost-effective to have support services under one roof as opposed to being spread out. And the more severe the handicap, the more cost-effective it is to have a center program," said Graham Lewis, Farmington's special education director. "The regional concept is probably the strength of the center programs."

FARMINGTON SENT 96 special education students to center programs and educated another 1,200 in district-operated special education classes last year. Special education students range from infants to 26-year-olds.

In 1984-85, Farmington's district-operated special education programs cost taxpayers \$3.4 million. The cost of center programs offered through the school district cost the county \$4.5 million, Flanagan said.

Previously, the one mill levied for special education in Oakland County was sufficient to meet enrollment increases and mandated programs.

But since 1980-81, the cost of special education programs has exceeded tax revenues. State financial support of special education dipped from 45 percent in 1975-76 to 16 percent in 1981-82.

To trim costs, Oakland Schools increased class size and reduced staff —

where legally permitted. Despite the cost trimming, the county has posted a \$4.5-million special education deficit.

State and federal law requires local school districts to meet local special education needs. As a result, Oakland County's 28 school districts must share responsibility for the cumulative deficit and for future special education costs that exceed tax revenue.

THE TAX BOOST would remedy the county special education fund deficit, cover anticipated program growth because of increased enrollment and defray some special education costs met by local districts. It would keep the county's special education programs financially solvent for 10 years, according to Oakland Schools' projections.

In addition, it would be used to:

- Expand the autism program by 1½ classrooms;
- Expand the severely mentally impaired program by four classrooms;
- Start a program for the severely emotionally impaired;
- Increase pre-vocational training for handicapped students.

The additional three-quarter-mill would raise taxes \$22.50 a year for a homeowner with a house valued at \$60,000, \$30 a year on a house valued at \$80,000 and \$37.50 a year on a house valued at \$100,000.

If the tax boost is approved, Farmington Public Schools would "save" \$223,600 in billback costs during 1985-86, according to Oakland Schools' projections.

A billback is the amount that Farmington pays Oakland Schools for costs above those the intermediate school district can afford through the current one-mill levy. The money reimburses host districts, assuring that taxpayers in those districts aren't overtaxed for special education.

"If the millage increase is defeated, a billback of a couple hundred thousand dollars would now seem like nothing compared to the billbacks we'd be seeing in the next few years," Flanagan said. "The main reason is because the cost of educating special education kids has exploded."

FLANAGAN ADDED: "It's a positive thing that we're taking care of people who need help. And with medical technology the way it is, we have more and more people surviving who otherwise might not have. And our obligation is to take care of them."

Oakland Schools estimates that three years ago, Farmington paid \$800 per center-educated child through billback charges — \$38,000. It warns that figure may jump to \$4,300 per child four years from now — \$485,000 total for Farmington.

"This is a county-delivery system," said William Keane, Oakland Schools superintendent. "The net losers, without it, are likely to be all of us. If (Farmington) taxpayers had to do it themselves, it would cost them much more money."

Countywide, the increased millage would produce \$11.2 million this year and up to \$14.6 million in 1995, according to Oakland Schools' projections.

Farmington taxpayers, meanwhile, would generate another \$52,000 for countywide special education in 1985-86 through the additional millage. Figuring in the existing one-mill levy, Farmington taxpayers would generate \$2.2 million overall for countywide special education in 1985-86.

Enrollment for special education is expected to rise partly because of Oakland County's reputation, which attracts more families with handicapped children, and partly because of advances in medicine, which save the lives of many infants with serious illnesses.

Festive feast set

If you call yourself an epicure, gourmet, gastronome, or simply someone who loves to eat out, Wednesday, Sept. 18, is your day.

A "Taste of Farmington" is open to the public and is co-sponsored by the Farmington Community Center and the Farmington-Farmington Hills Chamber of Commerce. It will feature the best of Farmington area restaurants from 11:30 a.m. until 1:30 p.m. at the Community Center. Tickets, which are limited in number, must be purchased in advance. They are \$8 each and include wine.

Participating restaurants are donating their food and services for the "Taste," which is a benefit for the two sponsoring organizations. Those restaurants are Anita's Kitchen, Blakey's Ranch House, Rotaford Inn, and D. Demmons's.

Also included are Dan's Submarines, Jan Drake's Garden Cafe and Monahan's Seafood Market. Completing the list are Haagen-Dazs Ice Cream, Maxwell's and Mountain Jack's.

Flowers will be provided by the Flower Barn in Farmington. Tablecloths are courtesy of Barry's Let's Rent It.

Tickets can be purchased at the Farmington Community Center, 477-8404, or at the Chamber of Commerce, 474-3440.

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