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Kindergarten academics

It's a long way from the Mickey Mouse Club to Sesame Street

By Louise Okrutsky
staff writer

Across Farmington, parents and children are undergoing what has become a late spring ritual for the young — kindergarten roundup.

Excited and anxious children are sent to a classroom to become more acquainted with their new teachers and school.

Meanwhile, their equally excited and anxious parents sit in the school's media center sipping coffee and listening to a rundown on what their children will learn in kindergarten.

For some parents reared on the Mickey Mouse Club instead of Sesame Street, that hour in the media center can be a revelation. Reading, writing and arithmetic have moved into kindergarten.

"We're doing much more academically," said Virginia Webber, a kindergarten teacher at Gill Elementary School since 1976. A teacher since 1951, she's been with the Farmington Public Schools since 1967.

IT ISN'T unusual for kindergarten students to be given math and beginning reading worksheets.

Children start off with Alpha Time, a phonics program emphasizing recognition of consonant and vowel sounds. Stuffed characters with distinct personality traits represent the letters of the alphabet.

As the year progresses, students can move into using basic reading texts, "Purple Popcorn" and "Dancing Ducks," published by Laidlaw.

Although the curriculum has changed, children remain basically the same, some educators say.

"Children haven't changed. Developmentally, they're the same as children 50 years ago," said Richard Rutter, early education supervisor at Fairview Early Childhood Center.

Kindergartens have changed with society.

IN THE early '60s the emphasis began to shift from sandboxes to science lessons. Trends in education drifted away from traditional kindergartens with their play times, nap times and snack times.

Instead of concentrating on activities such as building blocks and puzzles which hone hand-eye coordination, the nation's kindergartens began to focus on academics.

Worksheets in reading and math began to appear on kindergarten tables. Parents began to expect their children to learn more at an earlier age.

"Society emphasizes reading at an early age. And schools are expected

to offer reading at the kindergarten level. Some children aren't ready for it," said Becky McKee, who's completing her first year teaching kindergarten at Gill Elementary School. She taught developmental kindergarten for four years in Alameda Early Childhood Center.

"WE, BY that I mean educators and parents, were caught up in a bandwagon. Educators forgot that children need to go through certain kinds of patterns," Rutter said.

Parents sometimes complain to Rutter that Farmington's early childhood preschool classes don't include reading lessons. Unlike developmental kindergarten classes, the preschool is based on a tuition.

"Since it's a tuition-based school, I can counsel them out of the program," Rutter said. He has doubts about the validity of pressing a 4-year-old to read. "You can't rush development. You can't teach a child to walk. They'll walk when they're ready."

McKee observes, "Too many people are trying to rush children."

Looking back at youngsters who attended school when kindergartens became academically much more ambitious, Rutter retains those doubts.

"TWENTY YEARS later we're beginning to see some of our youngsters aren't doing so well. Some are suffering the consequences."

Children who begin school too early have difficulty coping with stressful times in their educational careers. The fourth grade is a tough challenge, Rutter suggests. Class work moves from concrete to abstract thought. Other stressful times are the moves into middle school and high school.

These discoveries don't mean that kindergartens are returning to strictly playtime activities. "Kindergartens shouldn't go back to what they were 20 years ago," Rutter said.

"Then, most children didn't have a nursery school experience. It was rare. And even if they did, it was maybe once a week. Now, by the time they get to kindergarten, they're used to being in a group situation," Rutter said.

FOR THE last six years, there's been a formal attempt at screening out children who haven't reached a point in their physical, mental and social development where they can cope with the demands of a formal classroom setting, according to Rutter.

"A child can be highly verbal and

very smart but he can't use what he knows unless he's physically and emotionally ready," Webber said.

Each spring in the Farmington public school district, students who will be old enough to attend kindergarten in the fall take the Gesell development tests.

The tests are based on the educational philosophies of Arnold Gesell, who earlier in the century evolved the view that all children go through certain, almost predictable stages of development.

Each child goes through these stages at his own pace. Gesell's proponents believe that children are ready to begin school only after they've attained a certain level of biological, social and emotional development.

ON A certain adult emotional level, seeing their child formally recognized as having attained a certain level of development can be gratifying to parents.

For those parents who receive the suggestion that their 4-year-old needs another year before beginning kindergarten, the Gesell test can be a traumatic experience.

"The first year, (the tests were given in Farmington) the suggestion 'this child may need an extra year' met a lot of resistance," Rutter said.

Some parents do attempt to coach their child before the Gesell test is taken. But the child who can connect dots to form a square or triangle may not be able to draw those shapes without aid.

In addition, the teacher administering the test also looks at such characteristics as the way in which a child holds and controls a pencil.

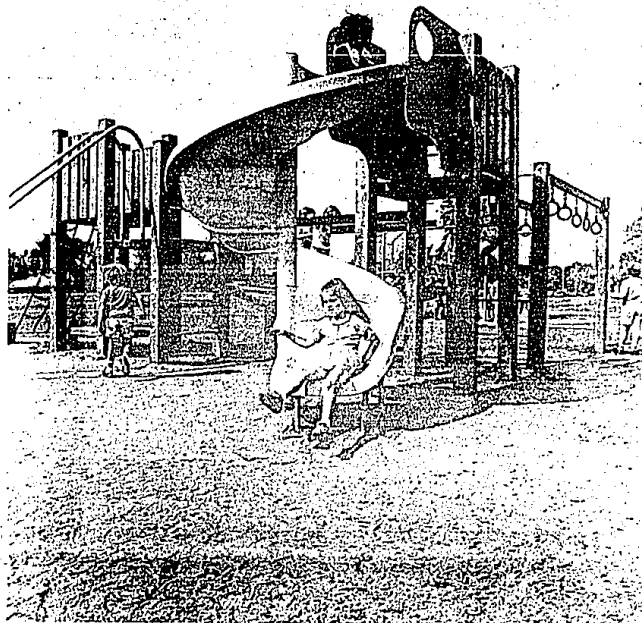
The test also checks if a child has an attention span that allows him to stay with a task for several minutes without getting out of his chair.

STILL, TEST results that indicate another year is needed before entering kindergarten can be harder on the parents than on the child.

"For some parents, it's the most traumatic thing to happen to them," Rutter said. "Particularly in the case of a verbal child — that's hard. You can have wonderful conversations with a child. That can be confusing for parents when they're told their child should probably spend time in developmental kindergarten."

Now, more parents are taking the suggestion and sending their child to developmental kindergarten in the district's two early childhood centers, Fairview and Alameda.

Some parents do place their child in kindergarten against the recom-



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

The changes that have taken place inside the kindergarten extend onto the school's play area. Among the newest in playground equipment stands on the Gill Elementary School

grounds, a recent gift to the school from PTA members. The kindergartener coming down the slide is Flavia Palazelli.

mendations based on Gesell test performance.

"Some of them do come back to us and enter developmental kindergarten after about the first month," Rutter said. "The calls begin in late September."

For this reason, classes in the developmental kindergarten aren't to-

tally filled for the fall to accommodate children transferring in from elementary schools.

Developmental kindergarten is neither kindergarten nor nursery school.

"Developmental classes are exposed in a more formal way to letters and numbers. There are also ac-

tivities such as blocks and the sand table."

By the middle of the year, Rutter said, a teacher in developmental kindergarten can see the children's change. Attention spans lengthen.

"A 4- and 5-year-old are developmentally almost completely different human beings," he said.

Vying for the title

Going up the Miss America ladder with talent, beauty, brains

Kelly Garver and Caroline Gey are completing preparations for their trip to Muskegon, a round of parties, interviews, rehearsals and preliminaries leading up to the Miss Michigan Pageant. The week will culminate with the crowning of Miss Michigan 1988 Saturday, June 14.

Garver won the title of Miss

Farmington and Gey won the title of Miss Oakland County in the combined pageants staged here during Farmington Founders Festival last July. They will be the only two contestants in the Miss Michigan Pageant with the same pageant director, Pat Fallon, who has directed the local pageants here since 1976.

Garver thinks of her trip to Muskegon as "old home week."

The red-headed violinist took the title of Miss Farmington in 1981 when she was 17 years old and newly graduated from North Farmington High School; then vied for the title of Miss Michigan in Muskegon the following June. She returned to Muskegon every year after that as an entertainer for the pageant.

Winning the title for the second time was a first for the Farmington pageant, but not that unusual nationwide among contestants who want a second try going up the competition ladder that leads to Miss America.

"I'm much more confident this time," Garver said. "There's a lot of difference between an 18-year-old freshman and a 23-year-old graduate. It's amazing to realize how far I've come."

THE INTERIM years were spent working on a telecommunications

degree at Michigan State University, working for Channel 7, which carried her some credits, disciplined work-outs at Fitness USA, and a lot of entertaining engagements, both as a violin soloist or with musical groups.

She graduated with high honors and says with pride "I financed 100 percent of my education."

Scholarship money from the Farmington Pageant helped her get into college, and more scholarship money, coming from the Detroit Chapter of Women in Communications this spring will help her toward her master's degree.

The professional society of women communicators gave Garver the scholarship based on a documentary she did on teenage pregnancy that was aired on Kelly and Company last year.

Gey is a resident of White Lake Township, who performed a lyrical ballet for pageant-goers here last summer. She is a junior at Central

Michigan University majoring in broadcasting and works part time at Pontiac State Bank.

Her teacher and choreographer is Dorlisa (LaMarra) Matkowski who is a former Miss Farmington and won the "Best Talent" award when she competed in the Miss Michigan Pageant. Matkowski has since taken on the position of choreographer for the Miss Michigan Pageant.

THE MISS America Pageant is the largest scholarship foundation in the world with money for education given at local, state and national levels.

To enter the local pageant contestants must be at least 17 years of age and not be more than 24 years old by Sept. 15. Entrants must have been a resident of Farmington or Farmington Hills since Jan. 1 and have never been married.

The Miss Farmington Pageant is always the official opening of Farm-

ington Founders Festival and will be staged Wednesday, July 16. The pageant will again be combined with the Miss Oakland County Pageant.

Deadline for entry is Monday, June 16. Applications for both the Miss Farmington Pageant and the Miss Oakland County Pageant are available for pickup in Farmington-Farmington Hills Chamber of Commerce, 33201 Grand River.

Contestants are judged on personality, poise and talent, swimsuit and evening gown presentations by a panel of certified Miss America judges. The talent portion of the competition is worth 50 percent of the total points awarded.

Contestants will receive personal advice and tips from several former Miss Farmingtons. They will participate in special workshops and seminars prior to the pageant for instructions on personal grooming, talent performance, modeling and interviewing techniques.

"Too many of us parents don't get to see our children's friends in their prom clothes and none of us get pictures, so we spend a few hours when they are all together just taking pictures of one another," she said.



Kelly Garver



Caroline Gey

Bring your cameras and some munchies

Cameras and some finger foods to pass is the admission for Harrison High School graduates and their parents who attend their pre-prom party Thursday.

"I've planned this party once be-

fore and it will look like a scene from 'Gone With the Wind' for a few hours here. With the seniors so dressed up," said party hostess Pat Bacon.

seniors this year by inviting the graduates into her yard for the pre-prom party, as well as serving as chairman for Harrison's all-night party, set for graduation night.

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