

Chairwoman Mary Lou Somerville gives an overview of her committee's findings on early childhood education to a group of more than 300 parents Tuesday.



Rolling Oaks resident Diane Harnisch reads a statement to the school board supporting the concept of keeping kindergarten in the elementary schools.

Early childhood proposal sparks feedback

'This district is very much committed to early childhood education. The bottom line is: we are here for kids — it is our job to determine how best to educate them.'

— Mary Lou Somerville, task force chairwoman

'We feel it is imperative that our kindergarten students continue to attend classes in their local elementary schools. We don't want to be placated. Rather, we want positive results...'

— Diane Harnisch, Farmington Hills parent

childhood education to be together to share goals and experiences, promote sequential development of skills and continuity of program, provide staff and parent inservice training geared toward the needs of young children, coordinate a network of support services, and have several specialized facilities — including a science center, uniquely equipped gym.

...it is reasonable to suggest that kindergarten-age children be educated in an early Childhood Center format," the statement said.

Regardless of whether the school board decides to change kindergarten locations, Somerville said her group strongly supports changing the curriculum.

"I see a review of curriculum ...

whether we go to a center approach or not," she said. "We're not looking to change content, but at how we approach learning activities."

MOST PARENTS said they were not opposed to curriculum changes, but wanted the changes made within the elementary schools. Safety factors, including busing the younger students to centralized facilities, were also stressed.

"We feel it is imperative that our kindergarten students continue to attend classes in their local elementary schools," said parent organizer Diane Harnisch in a letter read to the board. "We don't want to be placated. Rather, we want positive results that are acceptable to you, the administration and the community."

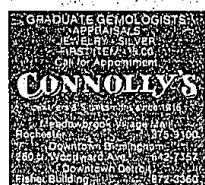
"We have been told that a curriculum change is essential in the kindergarten program," she added. "Fine. If the professionals in our system feel this is necessary, then let's do it. But let's do it in our own schools."

Board members and administrators told parents they could not set a timetable as to when the early childhood issue would be discussed again. Trustee James Abernethy called for "a consolidation of all the ... essence of these comments so we can have a maximum benefit of this exchange."

Lewis said the district may have smaller, similar community forums at each stage. "There's a grand experiment

going on across the nation," Lewis said. "It's called early childhood education. Once you make a choice, you're going to live with it for a very long time."

"In whatever direction we go, we've got to do it right."



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"THIS IS NOT the end of the line — but the beginning of the line," Lewis continued. "There are many, many ways of tackling the program. We're certainly not going to go against the tide of public opinion."

The 11-member, board-directed Early Childhood Study Task Force presented its preliminary report and statement of philosophy during a board study session at the Fairview Early Childhood Center gymnasium.

Residents interested in the issue filled every available space in the room, spilling out into the halls. Many took the opportunity to address the board, giving their opinions on a variety of topics surrounding preschool education.

Although many spoke out against centralizing kindergartens, there was mixed reaction to the idea of changing the curriculum.

One parent, who had studied other districts with centralized programs, theorized such a program in Farmington would be the largest in the state.

Various task force groups have studied early childhood in the district over the past two years.

"This district is very much committed to early childhood education," said Mary Lou Somerville, chairwoman of the task force and supervisor for Alameda, who gave the report. "The bottom line is we are here for kids — it is our job to determine how best to educate them."

THE TASK force report lists seven points of support for moving kindergarten to the early childhood centers.

It said a center would recognize that kindergartners are closely aligned with younger preschool children, provide a rich learning environment, allow experts in early

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