

points of view

# Middle school — a time for transition

MIDDLE SCHOOL students have always been in some sort of limbo.

We hear about elementary projects, PTA and PTO programs, special classes in our high schools. A whole section in many community newspapers is devoted exclusively to high school sports.

And then we have middle school youngsters — simply growing up.

Even when middle schools were junior highs, they never received the same attention as elementary and high schools. Middle school students are in a time of transition, when they're considered too old, yet too young.

As a community, we seem to place these young teenagers in a void and wait for them to emerge, ready to face high school. We don't know how to treat them.

"Catch them early, in elementary and early childhood centers where learning can be most effective," say educators. We also eye students carefully at high schools, where extracurricular activities are spotlighted and students are busy making choices for an adult life.

SHOULD THESE "students in the middle" in grades six to eight be left alone to fend for themselves, or



**Casey Hans**

should we pay more attention?

Even the schools are taking themselves seriously with their celebration of National Middle Level Education Week, March 13-19. In its second year, the week is sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

One visit to East Middle School in Farmington Hills last week showed me that despite this void we see from the outside, there is a lot going on inside.

A mix between elementary and high school, middle school students are guided and taught how to make decisions. East assistant principal Laura Miner said. She called it "exposure time" for the students.

A view of a middle school student's sensitivity came from two sixth graders who showed me their school. Both were excited at the prospect of some special time to talk and show me favorite classes and

teachers.

But both said they were nervous when called to the office after being selected for the special duty. They didn't know what to think. "I was really scared," said one.

Both shared their feelings and expectations about coming to East, told me about their favorite classes and showed me the many day-to-day activities.

THERE HAS been action during the past year to rid our community of this perceived middle school "void" and get a better grasp on middle school education.

Just last year, parents voiced concern over the lack of parent involvement at Farmington's four middle schools. There was no Parent/Teacher Association or organization formed, no hand boosters similar to what is at the high schools.

This was addressed when the districtwide School/Community Forum was formed so all levels could be represented. It's a start.

Now this group must go on to address concerns about middle school education, peer pressures, and how it can help a community understand this transitional time in school. It's not a time to be ignored.

## Regional primaries, rotating dates — best

MICHIGAN LAWMAKERS should keep an eye on the South's bad experience with "Super Tuesday," as they make plans for a similar Great Lakes presidential primary.

Two state Senate measures, if adopted, would restore Michigan's two-party presidential primary in 1992 and call on Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio to hold their primaries the same day, a Tuesday in March.

The thinking is that a multistate primary would force candidates to address issues facing the nation's industrial heartland.

THE SOUTH'S chief mistake in the March 9 "Super Tuesday," as I read the Florida papers between sunbaths last week, was to bring in too many states — 17 in the South and three others — at once.

The Democratic chairman in fairly populous Sarasota County lamented that candidates were spread so thin that they had time only to make state capital airport news conference stops.

Michigan Republican delegates, before their Jan. 14 mess, at least saw lots and lots of stroking from George Bush, Jack Kemp and Pat Robertson, Michigan Democrats, who will hold their caucus primary March 25, are going to get fairly good looks at Michael Dukakis, Jesse Jackson, Al Gore Jr. and Dick Gephardt.

Moreover, the South's primary — dubbed "Blooper Tuesday" by a Florida state official — forced candidates to switch techniques suddenly. From small-town bus tours and kaffeeklatches of February, they had to shift to news conference quickies and 30-second TV spots.

And TV spots, with their glibty "images," are probably the worst



**Tim Richard**

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way in the world to get solid information on a candidate. And from the campaign managers' points of view, "Super Tuesday" was a nightmare because those 17 states had no less than 150 television markets.

THE REPUBLICAN establishment was elated with Vice President Bush's southern sweep, but Democrats were dismayed at a couple of things:

• A regional primary was supposed to strengthen the hand of a Democratic candidate acceptable to the South — someone not too heavily wrapped up in radical feminism, racial quotas, equality regardless of sexual orientation, and belittling of national defense as "macho" games. Instead, the states were split between three liberals — Gov. Dukakis

of Massachusetts, Rev. Jackson and the fledgling Sen. Gore of Tennessee. Georgia's Sen. Sam Nunn, if he had run, might have been a shock-in.

• White Democrats, particularly males, defected to the Republican Party by the hundreds of thousands. No one was entirely certain whether it was the continued attraction of a Reaganish Grand Old Party or Jackson's lure to blacks to register and vote. In any event, some real racial polarizing between the parties is going on in the South.

CONDUCTING ELECTIONS is pretty much states' business under the American system of separation of powers. It's going to be difficult for any high authority to tell states that their primary/caucus is too tiny (Iowa, New Hampshire), too big (Blooper Tuesday) or just about the right size (the Great Lakes quintet).

Yet clearly that kind of deal is going to be needed. Clearly a consensus is growing that a series of regional primaries is just the ticket to avoid putting too much weight on early tweetybirds like New Hampshire. Clearly those primaries will have to be spaced out so that one state doesn't get six weeks of attention while a half-dozen states get one week.

This observer has one further suggestion: Not only should there be a system of regional primaries, but the election dates should be rotated, so that (say) the South isn't first all the time and the Great Lakes last, doomed only to ordain a survivor.

Weeding out presidential candidates is too important to our nation's life to be left to 30-second TV spots. Ask your relatives in Texas, Florida or anywhere in the South. Or visit the sun belt yourself during a slushy week in March.

## Gender still pays

### Schools keep old-boy network

A WOMAN ONCE told me that the men who ran the school district where her husband worked would not hire young, attractive women to be their secretaries. The men figured it was best not to upset their wives, the woman explained.

Not once during our conversation did I think to ask her if the women who ran the school district hired young, attractive men to be their secretaries. There was no reason to ask. There were no male secretaries. There were no female administrators.

Times have changed, although not necessarily at Mark IV speeds. Stories in recent Observer & Eccentric newspapers have told of women making gradual strides in the ranks of school administration although 98 percent of the state's superintendents are men.

Don't blame male administrators for the imbalance, says Dave Kahn of the Michigan Association of School Administrators. It's the school board that does the hiring. "It's out of the hands of the educators," he claims.



**Rich Perlberg**

THAT'S A NICE deflection of responsibility but it's not accurate.

School people like to talk about how much control the local school board has when, in fact, that power is severely limited by state statutes, by taxing authority and by deft superintendents who set the agenda all the while encouraging school board members to believe it was their idea.

But let's accept the fact that the school board makes the final hiring decision. Who are they choosing from? Usually it's from a list of finalists who are superintendents and assistant superintendents. These folks in turn used to be principals. And all these hiring decisions were made by the entrenched administrative structure. Hence the effective-

ness of the old boys network.

THE FACT that women are infiltrating administrative school posts is a credit to the men making the hiring decisions. Many, it is hoped, are used to working beside competent women and don't give as much attention to gender as to who is the best qualified person for the job.

But the fact that progress has been slow belies a private sector argument that goes something like this: Sure there was sex discrimination, but that's history. Now it's going to take time for women to work their way up to top-level management positions.

Hogwash.

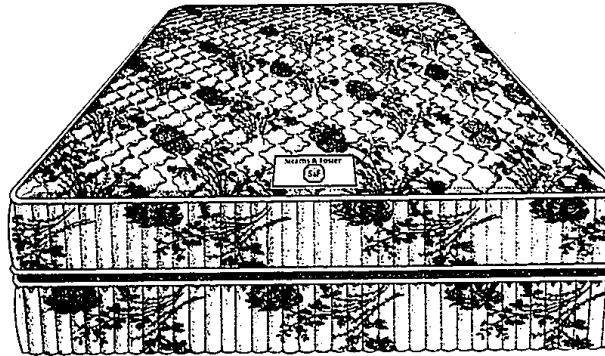
Think back to your school days. Most people I know had predominantly women for teachers. This was at least partly due to the fact that teaching salaries were abysmal and thus thought appropriate for women. But the principals were men. So even though the women had the most educational experience, the men got the jobs.

If that's news to you, you are probably a man. It's no secret to most women.

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