

Local districts ignore 'flawed' school study

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

The superintendent of the Bloomfield Hills Schools has a somewhat philosophical explanation about why his district finished eighth from the bottom in an efficiency evaluation released by a Lansing think tank.

"When you're good, it's hard to show improvement," said Penny Cambier, the district's communications coordinator.

Superintendent W. Robert Docking sent a slightly longer version of that explanation to members of the Bloomfield Hills Board of Education last week, along with copies of newspaper accounts showing his district ranked 10th in efficiency out of 116 districts evaluated.

OTHER OAKLAND County districts fared about as well — or badly — depending on how taxpayers look at the report prepared and released by Public Sector Consultants of Lansing.

Rochester, for example, ranked

97th; Troy, 98th; Farmington, 105th; Birmingham, 112th; West Bloomfield, 113th; and Southfield, 114th.

Students having more similar evaluations would likely be grounded — probably for the rest of the year.

DOCKING, HOWEVER, said the ranking is not an accurate reflection of schools in Bloomfield Hills, Cambier said.

"Our test scores have always been good, and our drop-out rate always low."

"We don't come out real well when the criteria is based on improvement."

Docking's assessment won't necessarily be challenged by Craig Ruff, president of Public Sector Consultants Inc., which released the study that included the rankings.

The study had Kearsley schools (east of Flint) ranked at the top among suburban schools, with Novi finishing highest among Oakland County districts at 38th. Clarencetown, partly in Oakland County,

ranked 39th.

Ruff, who admits his criteria is flawed, said the study took eight months to prepare and cost about \$100,000.

But it was flawed to the point of being "garbage," said Don Elliott, director of the Michigan Association of School Administrators.

"THAT STUDY compares apples with oranges. It's impossible to devise a criteria that accurately compares rich districts with poor ones. It's not even fair to compare small districts to large ones."

Elliott said he, for one, hopes the report — and the rankings — will be forgotten. "It's a flawed assessment and doesn't deserve to be taken seriously."

Ruff acknowledged that improvements in MEAP scores (Michigan Education Assessment Program) and declines in drop-out rates are part of the criteria used to evaluate state schools.

The criteria also included financial considerations such as per-capita

income, tax rates and teachers per 1,000 students.

Districts (such as Bloomfield Hills) with a good tax base and students that score well on tests don't necessarily fare well on our rankings, said Ruff. "But that doesn't mean they're doing a bad job."

"IT MEANS PEOPLE are willing to pay for education, and they're generally getting what they paid for."

"But a low rating (such as Bloomfield Hills) means that a district might not be as efficient as it could be," Ruff said. It might mean the district is spending more than necessary to get the same test scores.

The rating is a ratio of value per dollars spent, Ruff explained. "Or educational bang for the buck."

"That's why districts like Avondale (ranked 64th) fare better than Birmingham or Farmington."

The criteria included a crude handicapping system, Ruff said. School districts with students that score well, despite low or limited financial means, will do much better

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than rich districts in which students also score well.

Ruff, however, said his public policy research firm intends to continue evaluating school districts periodically, even if nobody else does.

"We would prefer that some other agency do the evaluation, like the Michigan Department of Education. But if nobody else continues evaluating districts, I think we will."

"OUR CRITERIA may be flawed, but administrators should help us devise appropriate criteria. Somehow there has to be a good evaluation of our schools compared with the money we spend on them."

Equally important, state adminis-

trators should be asking some questions, Ruff said, "particularly in those districts that spend a lot of money, yet produce students that don't score well on tests."

The Oak Park and Perendale school districts are in that category, he said.

Conversely, districts in which students score well, despite little money, should be evaluated to find out what educators there are doing well, Ruff said.

"Educators should be asking people in Novi, Clarencetown and Avondale what are they doing right that they can produce students who score well, even though their districts don't have a lot of money."

OCC considers tuition increase

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Oakland Community College could raise tuition or ask county voters for a tax hike next year, according to Anthony D. Jarson, the school's vice chancellor for administrative services.

"No decisions have been made," Jarson said in an interview Monday. "The chancellor hasn't even made a recommendation. We'll know more by the end of the year," when budget projections are complete.

"But I think it's likely we'll have to raise tuition next year," he said.

Jarson was less certain about a millage hike, emphasizing such a decision would be thoroughly reviewed before being made.

"There's a big difference between the two," he said. "Each additional dollar of tuition raises about \$500,000. One additional mill would raise \$20 million."

Tuition went up by \$2 per credit hour, from \$33 in 1988-89 to \$35 in this year.

But the millage rate hasn't changed in 25 years.

OCC is THE country's fourth

largest community college, with 27,500 students at five campuses. Its taxing district encompasses most of Oakland County and includes about 1.1 million residents.

The school's current millage rate is one mill, or \$1 per \$1,000 of state equalized valuation.

But Jarson said the Headlee tax amendment cuts into that one-mill figure, reducing it to about .885 mills, or about 89 cents per \$1,000 assessed valuation. The Headlee Amendment requires that millages be reduced as the state equalized valuation increases to stay in line with the official cost of living increases.

"The Headlee Amendment will cut us about \$2.6 million this year," he said. "Obviously if the Headlee Amendment didn't exist, we wouldn't even be talking about a millage increase."

Jarson said financial recommendations from the chancellor's office will be made to the board of trustees after factors such as the consumer price index and state aid are considered.

He said Michigan's across-the-board funding for OCC has not kept pace with the school's increasing enrollment.

B'ham superintendent ridicules study

Birmingham Superintendent Roger H. Garvelink was anything but philosophical about the so-called efficiency rating of Michigan school districts compiled by Public Sector Consultants Inc.

The rankings released last week by the Lansing area think tank rated Birmingham schools as 112th, or

fifth from the bottom, out of 116 suburban districts evaluated with a complicated formula.

The rankings are "dumb, ridiculous," said Garvelink. "They don't deserve our consideration."

"How many parents would rather send their youngsters to Hamtramck schools rather than Birmingham schools?"

Garvelink was referring to the rankings showing Hamtramck schools at the top of the 41 urban schools evaluated in the \$100,000 study entitled "Profiling Michigan School Districts."

Hamtramck was followed by Bay City and Beecher (Flint area), Garden City was 10th, Livonia 21st, Hazel Park 23rd and Detroit 25th.

Ann Arbor schools were ranked 37th and Mt. Clemens ranked 41st, or last.

Birmingham was grouped in the study among 116 suburban schools evaluated over eight months. At the top was Kearsley (Flint area), followed by Grandville (western Michigan) and Genesee (Flint area), respectively.

Lawmakers eye 'Choice' schools

By Tim Richard
staff writer

A "schools of choice" bill squeaked through committee but stands a fair chance on the floor of the state House of Representatives next month.

"It has a fairly good chance," said Rep. James Kosteva, D-Canton, who joined the 10-member majority of the House Education Committee in voting yes.

The bill would allow parents to choose which school within a district their children will attend. It also will require school boards by the first of 1993 to make a decision about whether to set up a "schools of choice" program and report it to the State Board of Education.

"I see House Bill 4615 as establishing a deliberative process," said Kosteva.

"GHOSS! EXPENSIVE," said Rep. Lyn Banker, R-Livonia, who was among the four voting no.

"We have schools of choice in Livonia right now with two rules: You cannot displace a child in his or her own neighborhood, and the parents must provide their own transportation."

HB 4615 would require districts to cover transportation costs. "Livonia gets only 30 percent of its transportation costs reimbursed by the state. It's supposed to be 100 percent."

Among the five with excused absences was Rep. Justice Barnes, D-Westland.

ODDS AGAINST the bill are formidable.

Opposed are the major education groups — Michigan Education Association, Michigan Association of School Administrators, Michigan Association of School Boards and Michigan PTA Council — along with the Michigan Association for Improved School Legislation, a group of northwestern Wayne suburban districts.

In favor are Gov. James Blanchard, House Education chairman William Keith, D-Garden City; the Michigan Manufacturers Association; Sen. Richard Posthumus, R-Lowell, who sponsored a similar Senate measure and is a close associate of John Engler, the probable 1990 GOP gubernatorial candidate; and President George Bush, who fa-

vors the concept.

"The governor is a potent force," said Kosteva.

"The governor needs an education victory," agreed Rep. Susan Munsell, R-Howell, a yes vote in committee. Chief advocate of "schools of choice" is Metropolitan Affairs Corp., a research and education agency in southeastern Michigan. It sponsored showings of a new film on the Brum's choice program and a speech by Gov. Rudy Perpich, Minnesota's champion of the idea.

CHAIRMAN KEITH took up HB 4615, sponsored by Rep. Claude Trim, R-Waterford, rather than Posthumus' SB 51, which the Senate passed 30-4 last May. A Keith aide said Trim had asked consideration for his bill long before the Senate moved its version.

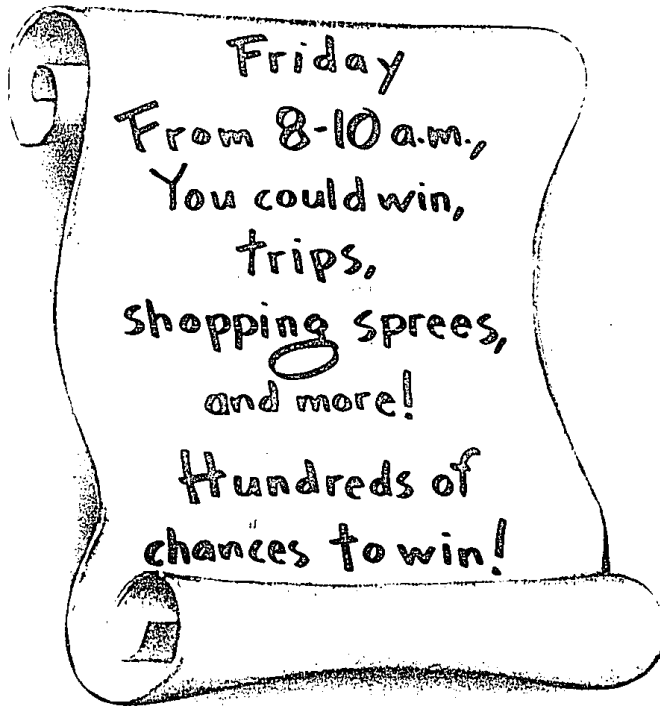
Chief difference: The House bill requires action only by the school board. The Senate bill requires 25 percent of those who voted in the last school election to sign petitions for a ballot question on the process. In the House bill, once a board decides to move ahead, it must establish a planning committee of "one-third parents and pupils, one-third teachers and one-third school board members and administrators." The committee would plan for transportation, building capacity and special needs.

The district would inform parents on the philosophy, staffing of each building, counseling access, and information on testing and learning style.

KOSTEVA CALLED the bill a good companion measure to the annual report bill passed by lawmakers. "It requires districts to file a school improvement plan — like a school improvement annual report — where you've been, where you're going and how you expect to get there."

He called arguments against the bill "pretty hollow. They say it's pre-disposed to failure. And they say the existing code and magnet schools already enable school districts to do this."

"What's their opposition? Are they fearful of opening it up to parental involvement?" Banker said that transportation costs will be so high that any district considering a "choice" plan probably will reject it.



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