

Full-day kindergarten program meets with criticism

By Tim Smith

A recommendation Monday night that kindergartners in the Walled Lake district attend school "all-day, every-other-day" in 1995-96 is mostly being met with criticism from parents.

And, although a district committee of two principals and six kindergarten teachers studied how the district is to comply with a state mandate that schools offer a minimum of 495 hours kindergarten instruction time in 1995-96 (up from about 450), parents at the school board meeting complained they were not directly involved in the months-long process.

The recommendation is expected to be acted on by the school board at its Thursday, May 18 regular meeting.

Some parents claimed they didn't know about the controversial issue until recent weeks.

"I'm disappointed we weren't told sooner about this," said parent Donnell Rice, one of many parents to address the board about the subject Monday. "I don't mind change, but give parents the opportunity to find out what this is all about. It's only two weeks until you make a decision... and I only found out informally" about the recommended change.

Citing cost savings, and evidence that kindergartners attending full-day classes are not hindered in either social development or their ability to adjust to first grade, were committee co-chairwomen Suzanne Cowles and Heidi Wilkins, principals at Keith and Walled Lake elementaries, respectively.

They recommended that the district next year go to a system of "all-day, every-other-day" kindergarten, with students attending full days of school two days a week and a half-day on a third. Currently, kindergartners attend about 450 hours a year, broken down into five half-days per week.

Students would not be required to ride buses in the middle of the day, as they are now, if they are attending school all day (outside of the single 1/2 day). Meanwhile, an option to add instruction time to the beginning or end of half-days would be expensive to operate, at 25 additional bus runs would cost \$132,163.

Cowles said another \$217,000 would be saved by eliminating the need for mid-day bus runs, for a total savings to the district of about \$349,000 — although parents later questioned how the total was arrived at, whether the total figure was determined by "double-dipping."

District finances could be impacted another way. Failure to

WALLED LAKE SCHOOLS

next year implement a plan increasing minimum kindergarten instruction hours to 495 might jeopardize a portion of state funding.

Parents and school officials squared off several times during the meeting.

Brett Snow urged board members to be "concerned with the balance of the lives of our children, and not just the balance

sheet."

Board president David Flammer responded by saying "It's not a money issue, it's a time issue. It's a state requirement that we increase the hours."

In assembling their recommendation, committee members visited Carpenter Elementary School in the Lake Orion district, where a similar program is now in place, and talked to kindergarten teach-

ers and parents about how it is working.

"I can tell you, as a result of that visit, it took away most of my apprehension," Wilkins said. "Our concern initially was 'How do the children fare in this?' ... Actually, what happened was, we were reassured seeing very happy, well-paced children who took the day in stride."

Several parents weren't convinced.

"I'd like to think that I'm open minded," said Renee Balthrop, a

parent in the Decker Elementary School attendance area. "But I have red flags going up all over the place. It's 6 1/2 hours and then a bus ride home. That's triple the day she's used to."

She mentioned another red flag item, relying on "a" visit to Lake Orion, and they know you're coming. . . Of course it's going to be a wonderful thing."

One parent in favor of the proposal was Marilyn MacDermald, whose son will next year attend Twin Beach Elementary School.

She said kindergartners thrive on additional instruction time, and that the proposal would not overload them too soon. "Society is changing."

MacDermald later added that such a plan also would help working parents with such concerns as how to get them to and from day care.

Kindergarten teachers on the committee were Barrie Bowman, Cindy Ealer, Kara Gregory, Mary Mandville, Linda Rainford and Kristin Trenholm.

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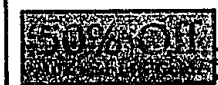
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