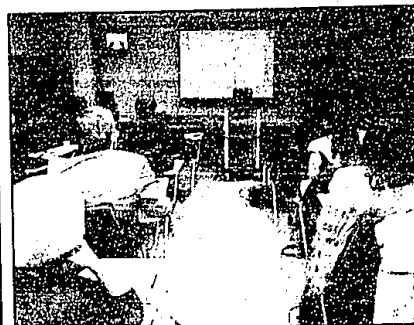




Comments coming: North Farmington juniors Maria Sinanis (left) and Jamie Lossia wait to comment on the call-in program



On screen: A room full of teachers, administrators, parents and students listen to W. Clark Durant speaking live from East Lansing.

Teleconference dials home reform debate

BY LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

Coffee and cookies were served to audience members. Those who weren't eluded in were provided Surpices for thought.

Farmington area school folks gathered for a teleconference — "Seeds of Change: Building a New Generation of Schools" — Thursday at Farmington High.

At times, "Seeds of Discontent" might have been more appropriate.

An article "What's Right with Schools" was on a table with a survey on school reform. A person reading the poll had to ask Superintendent Bob Maxfield what "authentic assessment" meant.

Another person suggested that maybe part of the problem was

that people are not sure what educators are talking about. The superintendent agreed.

"We call it the 7-Eleven test," said Maxfield, explaining how the district tries to explain things in a way that could be understood in a convenience store.

Not everyone is buying it, though. Otherwise, Farmington wouldn't have been asked to join 250 districts to serve as a remote site for a statewide satellite town hall discussion on education reform.

District officials "invited" a cross-section of 70-80 people: Teachers, union officials and students. Attendance was 30.

Folks could phone in questions to the studio in East Lansing. School officials even provided a list of "possible

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quiries.

People didn't have to ask those pre-drafted questions, said Sue Zurvalle, assistant superintendent for community relations. When parent Carol Luckescheiter got through 25 minutes later, she recited the first question on the list, which concerned vouchers.

Teacher certification, charter schools, and vouchers carried the hour and a half. State school board trustee W. Clark Durant and Michigan Education Association President Julius Maddox dominated the chat, illustrating the political polarization wrought in the ed-

ucational debate.

Those in the Farmington High audience let it be known whose arguments they supported. Every time Durant spoke, a multitude of hisses made it sound like someone was letting air out of all the tires in the bus garage.

Harrison High senior Jonny Curran was one of a handful of students who watched the proceedings. She was a bit perplexed by it all.

"They're really not discussing things that are relevant to the kids," said Curran, sitting the near the front in a Farmington High classroom.

Afterward, the Farmington

group talked about what they heard and didn't hear. There was no cheese, but plenty of whine.

One audience member questioned the motives of those calling for the abolition of the school code. Another suggested starting an alternative to the conservative think tank Mackinac Center, which has been critical of the school system.

Others bemoaned the increase in teacher and education bashing in general.

"It's not politically correct to say what the schools are doing right," Maxfield added.

Harrison and Farmington Training Center instructor Robert Strausz wondered why the teleconference debate focused so much on teacher accreditation. North Farmington senior Jamie Lossia provided

an answer.

"I'm putting my future in their hands," Lossia said. "I want to know if they can teach."

That is when teachers are allowed to, another student noted.

"Our schools are trying program after program," Curran said. "The people above are making up things for the teachers to do. The teachers are sick of it. They want to teach."

The next teleconference is set for Aug. 29. The students had some advice for those who host it: Try more diversity.

"The people who were on there were the same type of people — school board types," Curran said. "They need a wider variety of people. Not the people from higher offices, but the people who are in the classroom everyday."

Farmington Schools budget includes 3.6% spending hike

BY LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

Farmington Public Schools plan to spend a little, save a little and worry a little.

This year's proposed budget calls for a spending increase of 3.6 percent. A bulk of the money, \$1,300,300 — is earmarked for six new instructional programs. (see related story)

A public hearing will take place 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, May 23, at the board of education office.

The \$106 million budget is \$12 million more than expected revenues, leaving the district to tap its reserve fund for the difference. Fund balance is still \$20.6 million.

Spending and savings are covered. What about those worries?

Two new items are causing new Assistant Superintendent for Finance Cheryl Cannon slight anxiety.

One is the recent state Supreme Court ruling requiring the state to pre-fund employee health and pension benefits. Instead of an actuary system, the state has used a pay-as-they-go method.

If the decision stands up, Cannon said the district will have to match an additional 5 percent of employee salaries. That could

cost nearly \$3 million.

Also, legislative rumormongers about eliminating personal property from tax rolls isn't Maalox for the financial stomach, either. If that were to happen, it would cross off \$4 million in revenue to Farmington schools.

Added up, the total would be \$7 million, which is roughly what Farmington schools lost to state-aid recapture in 1990.

"This might not all happen," said Cannon, who joined Farmington from Chippewa Valley schools. "We have to be on the lookout and cognizant of what's being proposed."

Ironically, school funding is stable as it has been in awhile.

The state provides 63.3 percent — \$55.8 million — in categorical aid. The district has made those assumptions on the House's state-aid bill. Cannon is confident a reasonable facsimile will pass in the Senate.

Another 44.3 percent — \$46.3 million — is expected from local property taxes. Federal and transfer money — \$2.5 million — accounts for the other 2 percent of revenue.

That's a far cry from the 97 percent that used to come solely from local property taxes before Proposal A. Subsequently, the

school millage rate has dropped to 14.64 mills for homestead (18.74 mills for nonhomestead).

With Proposal A's hold-harmless provision, Farmington was able to maintain its per-pupil spending level.

State funding provides for a 1.9 percent, or \$166, increase per student this year to \$8,745.

Salaries and benefits account for 80 percent — \$86 million — of expenditures. With new programs, 26 full- and part-time positions have been added.

"We're being very careful," Cannon said. "You notice we're adding teaching positions and not administration. These teachers can be retained through attrition or retirement."

The district will spend \$16.8 million on supplies and \$3 million for capital outlay.

In the special revenue fund budget, the Special Education Center Program will cost \$11.7 million; Nutrition Service Program runs \$1.7 million; and the Athletic Program totals \$1 million.

The \$106 million budget is double what the first-year assistant superintendent handled for Chippewa Valley. Cannon wasn't daunted by the task.

"The budgeting basics are all the same," she said.

Plan adds programs, innovations

This year's proposed Farmington Public Schools budget reflects some new ways the district will be educating children.

Added programs and reallocation of resources into other areas highlight the innovations. Additional teachers and paraprofessionals are also part of the new setup.

Instruction initiatives include:
■ Eighth-grade restructuring and Global Village Project — Calls for team teaching and block scheduling to be created in order to infuse technology and interdisciplinary instruction at the district's four middle schools.
■ Eight full-time teachers will be added. Cost: \$551,546.

port positions — Adds full-time teacher leaders who report to the principal at both Hillside and Gill elementary, which have enrollments of more than 600; and a leadership support person at the secondary level for language arts, science and math. Cost: \$304,000.

■ Reductions in kindergarten class size and increase in paraprofessionals — comes about with the elimination of the Early 6s program at Alameda and Fairview. Money from that program will provide 712 paraprofessional positions. They will work with students who need intervention at an early age. Cost: \$101,400.

■ High school restructuring —

includes North Farmington High's voluntary community service program and ninth-grade restructuring at Farmington High. A class integrating math, science and technology highlights the Farmington High program. A similar program is being prepared for Harrison High. Two teaching positions will be added. Cost: \$124,840.

■ High school conflict resolution — a program to offer students peaceful alternatives to settle disputes. Cost: \$83,340.

■ Summer School program for targeted K-3 students — calls for intensive instruction for identified students, who are having difficulty in kindergarten through grade three. Cost: \$78,175.

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