

Educator compares public and private schools

ALL ABOUT FAMILIES



ALICE MCCARTHY

This column is prepared by Alice R. McCarthy, Ph.D., who has invited Dr. Helene Mills, principal of Birmingham Seaholm High School, to be a guest columnist this week.

Q. Please explain to me what Gov. Engler and the state board of education are planning for public education. I'm confused. E. Z., Birmingham

You need to be aware of the many changes that have taken place in public education since Gov. Engler and the state board of education took over the funding of public schools last year. The impact of these changes and other modifications currently being considered both at the legislative and board of education level could dramatically change our local public schools.

Reasons stated for these changes include equity, competition and choice. All educators agree with the concept of equity. We want to encourage our legislators and state board members to use the exemplary schools, Birmingham, Bloomfield and other Michigan schools (they themselves have identified these), as models for all other public schools. Choice and competition, however, need to be carefully considered before taking steps that could ruin our outstanding Michigan public schools.

The state has different expectations for public and private schools. Public schools must demonstrate proficiency through weeks of state testing, must commit hours of teacher time to school improvement planning and must fulfill other expectations outlined in P.A. (Public Act) 25. Public schools must meet demands of many other time-consuming and costly activities as a result of state laws.

On the other hand, private and charter schools can spend time and money any way they see fit. Only the public schools are required to provide an education to students, no matter how many problems that student may have. An added burden shouldered by public schools in Michigan is the provision of busing for the private schools in their area. Finally, the very nature of public education is that it is meant to be public — all

students are accepted and ensured of an opportunity to develop their academic potential — no matter how limited that potential may be. I have no problem competing as long as the private and/or charter schools have to follow the same rules and shoulder the same responsibilities as do the public schools.

The Birmingham Schools have long been recognized nationwide for their excellence. Money magazine, for example, wrote an article in October 1994 reporting on its findings related to an extensive study of private and public schools. It concluded, "Given the facts about public and private schools, we believe you get the best value for your education dollars at a top public school." It named New Trier High School in Illinois and the Birmingham high schools as its examples of excellent public schools.

Therefore, I am ready for choice if all schools must abide by the same rule book, must accept any student desiring to attend, must schedule the hours to complete the State Proficiency Tests into their school calendar and must follow all of the accreditation and P.A. 25 laws. But if public schools are required to accept all applicants no matter what their limitations may be, then I object to the comparison. If the public schools are required to take tests designed to challenge both the students and the curriculum and then are compared with easier tests taken at private or charter schools, then I also object to the comparison.

Imagine an athletic event where one team is told to accept all players no matter what their playing ability, skills and handicaps, while the other is allowed to recruit players and exclude others. Imagine the rules being different for the game itself. Such a game under such preposterous conditions would be totally unfair. I will be more than happy to compete as long as the playing field is level.

Let's not retire an excellent public school team which has served its students and community well. Let's encourage our state board to give us a level playing field. Granted equal expectations, we are confident that we can compete in the educational arena with anyone.

Please contact your local legislators and find out how they are voting on these issues.

Dr. Helene Mills is principal of Birmingham Seaholm High School.

School. She writes widely for educational journals and has had regular columns in the Detroit Free Press. She is active in the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals and was president of the Oakland County branch.

Seaholm is well recognized as one of the finest public high schools in Michigan and the nation, as shown in comparison of SAT and ACT scores. Seaholm has received the National Excellence Award.

All About Families runs every other week in The Eclectic Newspapers. Birmingham resident Alice R. McCarthy is a nationally known parent educator, writer and editor. She is the mother of

five children and grandmother to six young children. To leave a message for McCarthy, from a touch-tone phone, call (313) 663-2047, mailbox 1894, or write her at The Eclectic Newspapers, 808 E. Maple, Birmingham 48009.

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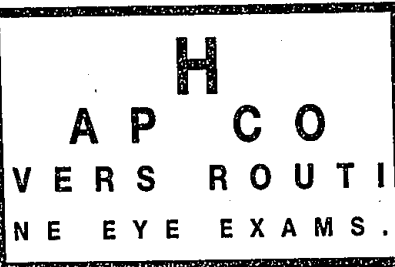
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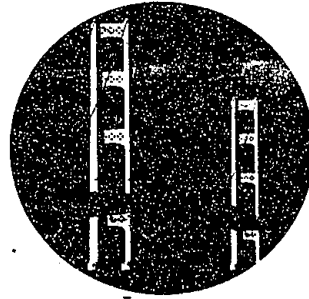
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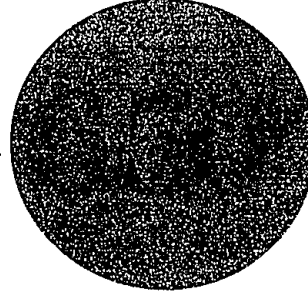
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