

OU seeks 'new approaches' in education

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

As a student at Michigan State University, Kimberly Shephard saw how support programs helped pregnant students stay in school and further their academic goals.

After she graduated and began teaching at Roper School in Birmingham, Shephard expanded on that experience.

"I thought about high school students," she said. What kind of support do new mothers or pregnant high school students have? Should a student's chance for an education — and, quite likely, economic independence — be jeopardized merely because she has a baby or is pregnant?

At least part of the answer, theorized Shephard, might be a charter school. Could a special school address the needs of pregnant and parenting teenagers? Could a charter school teach parenting skills, self esteem and other essentials?

Shephard turned to Oakland University.

Shephard is among the dozens of people with varying backgrounds who hope to correct what they see as a blind spot or weakness in the public school system with a charter school sponsored by OU.

Since October 1995, when the

OU Board of Trustees voted to begin accepting applications for charter schools, university officials have received hundreds of telephone calls, letters or inquiries and dozens of applications.

"We want to encourage different and alternative approaches to education," said Rox E. Schlaybaugh Jr., a Bloomfield Hills resident who chairs the OU board. "We want new approaches," he said.

The application process is an exhaustive and comprehensive process that can take six months or longer, explained Mary L. Otto, dean of the OU School of Education and Human Services.

In accordance with state law, OU requires extensive information about the proposed curriculum, funding and the people involved. The process includes a background check on key people, like the directors of the proposed charter school. "We verify that people are who they say they are," explained Otto.

Applications are reviewed first by OU's Public School Academy Application Review Committee — co-chaired by Otto and David J. Downing, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences — which may take three weeks or longer.

Then applications are submitted simultaneously to President

Gary D. Russi and the Planning Review and Budget Review committees of the University Senate. Trustee James A. Sharp Jr. expressed confidence in the application review process. Any applications that do not meet the university criteria or otherwise fail to measure up are rejected long before they get to the board of trustees, he said.

"The review process can take as long as six months with staff and faculty scrutinizing every aspect," said Angeleto Melhado, OU coordinator for Urban Partnerships and Public School Academies. Applications "Sometimes applications are rejected because they simply are not thought out, but most often they're rejected because of budgetary concerns."

Shephard's application for a charter school for pregnant and parenting youngsters was rejected for yet another reason.

"She had a good idea," said Melhado. "But Pontiac schools are planning their own school for pregnant and parenting students. And we try not to duplicate educational services."

OU has approved six charter schools (two currently holding classes and four expected to open in the fall) and rejected more than 30.

While OU is demanding, it's

also accommodating, according to Tyla Wells, who prepared the application for Dove Academy of Detroit, an inner-city elementary school expected to open this fall.

Wells has also filed charter school applications with Central Michigan University and Ferris State University on behalf of charter schools like the Michigan Automotive Academy and the Detroit School of Industry Arts.

"My applications generally weigh about five pounds," said Wells. "And the application for Dove Academy was no different. But most of what's required is prescribed by state law."

"OU demands every bit as much information as Central or Ferris," she said. "But they're also accommodating. My experience is that if you have a worthy objective and a good plan, OU will help."

When backers of proposed charter school in Westland submitted an application last November, it was rejected.

"OU wanted more information," explained Adrienne Brant James, who prepared the application. "So we elaborated on some of our plans and resubmitted it on Feb. 1. Our application was approved April 3."

The school, Turtle Island Learning Circle, hopes to open this August with a "hands on" approach to learning, she said.



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Dems to dine

The Oakland County Democratic Party will hold its annual Phil Hart dinner at 6:30 p.m. Sunday, May 4, in Adat Shalom Synagogue, Farmington Hills.

Tickets at \$60 may be ordered from Darlene K. Wood in party headquarters at (810) 584-0510.

Keynote will be Vermont Gov. Howard Dean. Honorees will be Steven Kaplan, who came close to winning the Oakland prosecutor's office in 1996. Winner of the Dinean community service award will be David Webster, former Kent Wayne County prosecutor, for his long record of community service.

New bills

Sen. Bill Bullard Jr., R-Milford — a constitutional amendment to abolish the State Board of Education and transfer pow-

ers to the superintendent of public instruction. A two-thirds vote of each chamber of the Legislature would be required to put the proposal on the November 1998 ballot. Since Democrats have majority control of the House and effective control of the State Board, the measure has little chance of House approval. The resolution is in Bullard's Government Operations Committee.

Sen. Gary Peters, D-Bloomfield Township — a revision of the 100-year-old bombing statute. His Senate Bill 443 would broaden the list to include incendiary devices, chemical weapons (such as the gas used in Tokyo subway), and radiological weapons (such as plutonium). It would list four degrees of terrorism with prison terms ranging from five year to life.

House Local Government Committee chair Agnes Dobronski, D-Dearborn — a bill allowing

voters to obtain absentee ballots without providing a reason. Currently, one may vote by absentee only for a reason: age 60 or older, out of town the day of the election, physically unable to go to the polls, religious beliefs, election inspector in another precinct, in jail awaiting trial or arraignment.

'Appalled'

That's what freshman Rep. Judith Scranton, R-Brighton, said when the Democratic chair of the House Mental Health Committee released a report on the proposed closing of three mental hospitals.

"No Republican committee members had any input on the report," said Scranton, who asked for 20 working days for research and review. The governor proposes closing hospitals in Pontiac, Detroit and Kalamazoo.

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