

Clarenceville educators seek answers to drop-out increase

BY MARIE CHESTNEY
STAFF WRITER

The sudden jump last year in Clarenceville School District's dropout rate leaves Superintendent Tom Tattan with a host of questions as to the reason why.

"With all the testing, especially the proficiency test, is this the outcome of higher standards?" he asked. "Is it because they need more credits to graduate? Is it due to attendance problems? Or is it due to personal situations or behaviors?"

"Some of these kids have to deal with life issues that are unbelievable."

Clarenceville's jump from 2.5 percent in 1994-1995 to 6.4 percent in 1995-1996 follows a similar jump in dropout rates for that school year in other Wayne County school districts. Clarenceville includes parts of Farmington Hills, Livonia and Redford Township.

Figures released by the Michigan Department of Education in its Michigan School Report show an average jump from 8.7 percent to 20.7 percent in that year for districts throughout Wayne County.

This includes a jump from 8.9 percent to 11.7 percent in Wayne-Westland; from 3.5 to 4.3 in South Redford; and from 2.2 percent to 5 percent in Redford Union.

Sally Vaughn, associate superintendent for the Wayne County Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA), the intermediate district serving Wayne County, said taxpayers should be concerned, especially if the increase is more than 5 percent.

"A 3 to 4 percent dropout rate is not alarming," she said. "Anything higher than 5 percent, and I'd start looking at the system."

Dropout figures for districts statewide even show an upward trend. In 1994-1995, the state dropout average was 5.2 percent; in 1995-96, 7.7 percent.

Livonia stays stable

Livonia Public Schools, however, still bucks the trend. Here, the dropout figure has remained about the same those

two years, 3.3 percent in 1994-1995 and 3.9 percent in 1995-1996.

While pleased with Livonia's continued low dropout rate, Superintendent Ken Watson said he has seen too many errors plugged into the Michigan School Report to give him confidence that numbers in this year's report are accurate.

"The drop-out rate is up significantly in some districts and there's nothing to explain this," Watson said. "But I have a basic mistrust of these figures. I've seen too many errors, and trying to get things corrected is a horrendous job."

"The good news is that Livonia's drop out rate is stable, even though there appear to be significant increases based on data in other districts," he added.

Watson gave one possible explanation for the jump, especially when it occurs in districts that are losing students, not gaining them such as Livonia still is.

He suspects the state compares the number of students who start high school with the number of students who finish. If students who leave for any number of reasons are not replaced with new students, then the district could wind up with a hefty dropout rate, even if the student just moved and enrolled in a new school.

Because it has been steadily adding students, this explanation falls short for Clarenceville. In 1994-1995, the district had 1,747 students; in 1995-1996, 1,765; in 1996-1997, 1,821.

Clarenceville High principal David Simowski pinned part of the blame on the district folding its alternative education program when the state cut funds for community education.

The state does not consider students who transfer from the traditional high school to an alternative education program as dropouts, he said.

It was believed Clarenceville students would go to Livonia's Bentley Center, but that may not have happened, he said.

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*Tom Tattan
superintendent,
Clarenceville School District*

"I disagreed with that rationale," Simowski said. "I think students are homobodies. It is difficult for them to go to another district."

That theory could hold for Wayne-Westland, which has been losing students, according to the Michigan School Report. In 1994-1995, the district enrolled 16,370 students; in 1995-1996, 14,992 students; in 1996-1997, 15,161 students.

The Michigan School Report, called a "snapshot" of Michigan schools by the department of education, gives a district-by-district comparison in such areas as teacher salaries, MEAP test scores, enrollment, pupil/teacher ratio, and basic foundation allowance from the state.

Information filed in bits and pieces by the district is sent on to the state, where it is compiled all on one sheet.

Reports on both Livonia and Clarenceville or any other school district can be received by calling the Michigan Department of Education at (517) 373-1833 or by visiting the departments' Web site at <http://www.mdoe.state.mi.us/>

The report also shows a \$5,000 difference is the average teacher salary in the two districts. In 1995-96, the average teacher salary in Clarenceville was \$50,307; in Livonia, \$55,783.

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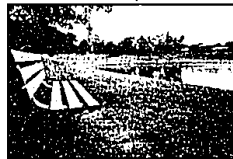
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