

'He's done it all'

Cowan to retire after 4 decades working for kids

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Farmington Public Schools' solid link to the past wanted to wait until the district's link to the future was more secure before deciding to retire and open up his own consulting business.

But even though Don Cowan is retiring at the end of the school year, he won't be severing that time-tested connection anytime soon.

Initially, the 59-year-old Cowan's biggest consulting job will be with the very district he's leaving. He'll coordinate various building projects initiated as a result of the successful \$93.1 million bond issue approved in September — which actually was the catalyst for his decision. He intends to consult with engineers, contractors and educators, using his vast knowledge of the inner workings of Farmington Public Schools.

"I was toying with either this June or next June," said Cowan, about when he wanted to retire and open up his own business. "And with the passage of the bond issue and realizing we have to make sure things get done right, I moved it up a year."

Besides, he joked, "I have a few more years before Social Security kicks in."

Cowan, whose Farmington

schools career nearly spanned four decades and took him from the gym to the district cabinet, recently informed Superintendent Bob Maxfield and board members that he would be retiring effective July 1.

"I've been very fortunate in my career," said Cowan during a telephone interview Wednesday, "to do the variety of things I've done. And hopefully, some of those experiences will help somebody."

Ties that bind

Even though he knows the time is right to start his business, there is a part of Cowan that wants to stay put.

"When you get to this point," said Cowan, "it's an emotional decision. In a district like Farmington... it's tough. You end up with so many friends. This is (going to be) a big change. It will be for the school district as well."

"It's very hard to fill positions like that," Maxfield said. "No one can just come in. They have to earn their stripes."

The successor could begin doing just that as soon as Tuesday night. According to Maxfield, he intends on making a recommendation during Tuesday's Board of Education meeting, which takes place 7:30 p.m. at the Lewis Schulman Administration Building. It is likely the can-

didate already is an employee in the district, though Maxfield would not divulge any names.

Maxfield, who took over the district in March 1994, spoke in glowing terms about Cowan, executive director of instruction and student services.

"He's the voice of reason, he's the person who has the history, he's the person who understands our kids more than anyone," Maxfield said. "... He's done it all and he's done it well."

That might be categorized as an understatement.

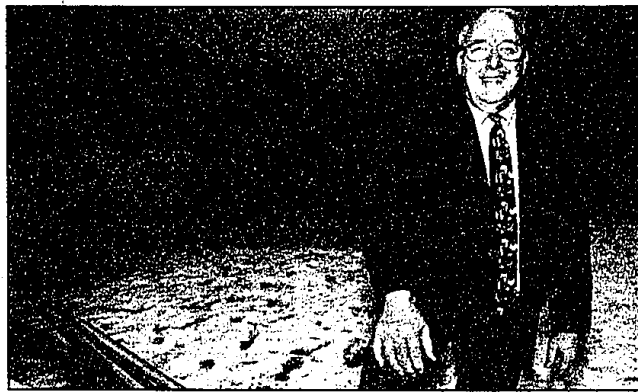
Lengthy career

Cowan began his Farmington career in 1962-63, as physical education teacher at both Eagle and Beechview elementary schools. He then joined the Wooddale Elementary School faculty as a sixth-grade teacher and was named principal in 1967. In 1971, he transferred to the Fairview Elementary School principalship.

Or so he thought.

Because of budget problems, district administrators asked Cowan if he wouldn't mind doubling up by also running High Meadow during '71-'72. He obliged.

"That was very difficult. I also had five emotionally impaired rooms, three at one school and two at the other," said Cowan,



Starting point: Don Cowan stands on the playground of Wooddale Elementary, where he taught sixth grade and began his administrative career as a principal.

who holds bachelor's and master's degrees from Wayne State University and the University of Michigan, respectively. "It was an interesting year. But I was younger then. I moved a lot faster."

After Fairview closed in 1978 due to low enrollment, Cowan returned to Eagle for two years and then went on to become assistant principal at North Farmington High School in 1980, at the request of then-Assistant Superintendent Lynn Nutter. Cowan became the high

school's principal in 1985 and stayed in that position until January 1990, when he joined central administration as director of building and student services.

His duties were again changed in 1994, when Maxfield became superintendent. Cowan's gave up the facilities end of his job in favor of instruction. In recent years, he cited the development of Student Youth Assistance and conflict mediation programs as among those achievements he was proud to have had input into enacting.

Through it all, he and wife Nancy raised a family — daughter Kristen, 29, and son Michael, 25.

But the people he encountered in Farmington Public Schools since the fall of 1962 have been like his extended family. In fact, his marriage and career in the district virtually mirror each other in length.

"Farmington's a great district to work in," Cowan said. "It's child-oriented, there have been a lot of great graduates. Hopefully, I've had an impact on them."

Drugs from page A1

and alcohol problem from different angles.

Passion is there

"Passion empowers change," Michaelson said, much like a U.S. general addressing soldiers before going to battle. "Do not underestimate the power in this room tonight. Drops that gather one by one become a sea."

According to Michaelson, a "virtually seamless initiative" is needed to win the war.

During the presentation, she issued telling statistics that show the pendulum indeed is swinging — with increasing numbers of teens using cigarettes, alcohol and other drugs than in recent years.

The WMS survey, done in 1996, showed that more than 80 percent of Oakland County high school seniors used alcohol, and about 55 percent tried marijuana. Tobacco use was nearly 70 percent.

National statistics for those categories were as follows: alcohol, nearly 60 percent; marijuana, nearly 40 percent; tobacco, about 60 percent.

And, by the time a person reaches age 18, they will have seen 100,000 televised beer commercials.

Michaelson urged a united front as well as establishing consistent rules and consequences. Just as importantly, she emphasized that young people be made to feel they are important parts of the community.

Guidelines needed

She stressed the need for setting specific guidelines and consequences, and then sticking to them. Another important point was that people from different facets of the community do their part without duplicating what others are doing.

"Some of us are better at prevention, others are better at intervention. That's great... We need a balance of the two. We need to stop the pendulum. And if you don't want to get involved, then stop whining and blaming the rest of us."

The session was planned

'Too many times we don't listen to our young people. And we need to use those who are living a good life, not using drugs, and set them up as examples and support them in any way we can.'

Betty Nicolay
—co-founder, FFIA

months ago. But it took on added significance because of two factors:

■ The recent Western Michigan University survey revealing that Oakland County high school seniors consume more illegal drugs and alcohol than the national average.

■ The late October incident in which hundreds of Farmington High School students attended a beer keg at the home of a classmate. (The 47th District Court trial of the parents charged with supplying alcohol to minors at that party is scheduled to begin 9 a.m. Monday, Feb. 9, before Judge Maria Parker.)

Several key community leaders followed Michaelson, to summarize their current and future commitments to the fight.

Farmington Hills Police Chief Bill Dwyer insisted that the department will "give new and creative ordinance and enforcement tactics," including a sting on retail tobacco locations.

Todd Lips, program supervisor for Farmington-Farmington Hills Youth and Family Services, talked about extending hours for summer programs at the city teen centers to "give kids a place to go."

He encouraged others to get involved. "We can't change the community, if we work hard."

Fresh perspective

During a brainstorming session that ended the program, the

subject was approached from a fresh perspective. Several high school students made telling comments, particularly about the traditional school assembly method of communicating the subject to young people, which they said is ineffective with some.

"It's better for students to hear from students," said a North Farmington student. "You go to assemblies and half the kids are sleeping in the back. That's why I'm glad some kids are here tonight."

Another noted that, "When you put a whole school into the auditorium to listen to one person, they don't."

According to Superintendent Bob Maxfield, following the program, the goal is for 50 or so student leaders to talk to classmates and hopefully begin a ripple effect.

Reaction to the program was enthusiastic.

"Tonight was extremely encouraging," said Betty Nicolay, of FFIA, adding that the input from students was welcomed. "Too many times we don't listen to our young people. And we need to use those who are living a good life, not using drugs, and set them up as examples and support them in any way we can."

Joe Svoke, school board treasurer and a member of Farmington Youth Assistance, said he was "most impressed with the message from the kids. They said it time and time again: 'If you really want to know what's going on, listen to the kids.'"

One challenge for the people who join the task force, said Dave Walsh, 47th District Court administrator, will be finding creative new ways to communicate with those parents who don't want to get involved.

"You hope there's a ripple effect, but we also have to investigate what else we can do," Walsh said. "How do you reach the other group, the other kids or the other parents, to market this wonderful product — which is to build futures for our kids."

AGENDAS

Farmington City Council
8 p.m. Monday, Feb. 2
City Hall Council Chambers
474-5500

Agenda items include:

■ Present Farmington High School Michigan Blue Ribbon Exemplary School, James Myers, principal.

■ Present Miss Farmington and Mayor's Portrait, Jennifer Hoemke.

■ Presentation: Downtown

Development Authority 10-Year Central Business District Improvement Plan.

■ Introduce ordinance to regulate skateboard use in the city.

■ Amendment to city amendment for decorative fences.

Farmington Board of Education
7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 3
Lewis Schulman Administration Building
489-3300

Agenda items include:

■ Appoint Executive Director of Instruction, Student Services.

■ Educare program review.

■ Elementary Study Committee follow-up discussion.

■ Participation in suit regarding prospective Durant funding.

■ Report of policy committee about schools of choice.

■ Report of building/site committee on district ground breaking.

■ Update on sale of Parkhill property.

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Library from page A1

man, and Papai informed Farmington Hills City Council members about the plans at a study session Jan. 24. They received plenty of advice, which included enlisting those who supported passage of the Farmington Public Schools bond measure.

Consensus among council members was previous attempts failed because of voter backlash to the library moving. Plummer and Papai agree, but noted the measure in 1989 lost by less than 200 votes and the one in 1993 by 300.

"We did surveys after both of those elections and people are just in love with that location," Plummer said.

Increased library use and more technology have created the space crunch, Papai said.

A similar situation exists at the Farmington Branch Library, but there is no room to expand that facility.

The library has more than 66,000 cards issued and users top 1,000 during peak times. With 213 spaces in the existing lot, parking is also a problem.

lem. "When you have 1,000 people using the library in four hours on Sunday, it's logical to assume parking is at a premium," Papai said. "That means seating inside the library is also at a premium."

A campaign will likely include forming focus groups to look at how technology affects the library and a questionnaire sent to residents.

The business community — which makes up 40 percent of the tax base — will be consulted. Botsford Hospital, Nissan and Market Opinion Research have libraries with librarians, but many companies do not, Papai said.

Mostly, library supporters will use what they're known for — education. Many realize the library's role has changed with the emergence of technology and the Internet.

"Other people still think of it in terms of best sellers and story hours," Papai said. "We're a lot more than that."