

School board talks marketing plan to retain, attract students

By TIM SMITH
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Farmington school district officials insist a 16 percent drop in kindergarten enrollment is not something to be worried about.

But it doesn't mean the district will sit back, either.

"Looking at enrollment trends is more important than ever before," Superintendent Bob Maxfield told school board members during Tuesday's meeting. "We're in a much more competitive world. We need to be positioning ourselves."

Maxfield presented a summary of 1999-2000 enrollment as well as a long-term forecast. Between now and 2005-2006, projected student counts are expected to drop from 11,422 to 10,528. This year's total district enrollment is down 28 students (0.2 percent) over 1998-99, but last year saw an unexpected 342-student increase (3.1 percent).

Kindergarten enrollment decreased 15.9 percent, from 921 to 775, by far the biggest drop in the district.

"What does it mean?" Maxfield continued. "It means we've got to monitor more closely the trends. But it's not like we haven't been doing it."

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One possibility, said Treasurer Jack Inch, is to make all-day kindergarten available district-wide. Currently, it is available at a handful of schools.

"This is really where we need to make our big sale" with young parents, Inch said.

Referring to the "incredible plus" of interesting new elective high school courses outlined by the board's curriculum committee prior to the meeting, Treasurer Bobbie Feldman agreed that an all-out marketing campaign must be launched.

"These are things we should be so proud of that we boast (about them) all the time," said Feldman, talking about classes such as medieval history, contempo-

rary issues in science and radio-TV production. The classes are scheduled to be approved by the board on Dec. 14.

Other factors in flat enrollment include younger families being transferred to other areas and older families staying put after their children graduated.

"Part of the problem is people aren't moving," Maxfield said. "They're in their biggest house."

It also was suggested that parents of pre-schoolers could be surveyed to determine their opinions about public schools.

And, noted trustee Linda Enberg, "Exit information would be very helpful," to learn why students might be leaving the district.

"We have a very transient adult population in this city, too," Enberg said. "How much that influences these numbers would be interesting."

The second biggest decrease

among individual classes was high school juniors, down 9 percent from 881 to 798.

Trustee Cathy Webb warned against getting carried away in jumping to conclusions about the enrollment projections.

"I just want to make it clear that this is not an alarming report," Webb said. "And, we're not terribly concerned... These are indicators that may or may not have value. But it's a guessing game."

Maxfield said the board also might want to revisit its stance against allowing students from other districts to enroll in Farmington schools, if it becomes increasingly difficult to fill classrooms in future years.

Schools-of-choice for district residents already is available.

Potential implications for enrollment problems could include the closing of schools and redistricting.

Meanwhile, Maxfield pointed out that this year's enrollment mix validates the various bond issue projects approved by voters in 1997. Numbers for most grades and buildings are pretty much what was predicted by the district during the bond issue campaign.

Maxfield says no need to act on pamphlet

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JUST THE FACTS

A brochure issued recently to 15,000 American school superintendents urging educators to be more supportive of gay students hadn't yet reached Bob Maxfield's desk as of Tuesday.

When it does, the Farmington district chief probably will look at it and file it away. But, Maxfield said, there is no need to act on what is recommended in the 12-page pamphlet, "Just the Facts About Sexual Orientation & Youth: A Primer for Principals, Educators & School Personnel."

The brochure was issued by a coalition of 10 health and educational organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and American Federation of Teachers.

"Our stance has been that kids are kids," said Maxfield, following Tuesday night's school board meeting. "We will not tolerate harassment... with regards to... everything from how we treat kids in class to student activities. If there's a club, (gays) have

the same rights to organize.

"When I heard about that (the brochure) on the radio, I resent-ed it. I'm sure it's probably a problem somewhere, but it's almost a non-issue among our staff."

Last spring there was a mild uproar over the forming of two chapters of the Gay Straight Alliance Club, at Harrison and North high schools. A gay pride mural was defaced in a Harrison hallway; it was quickly replaced by a poster about accepting others and a letter from the alliance.

Maxfield said staff members were reminded this fall about

the need to be respectful of differences in students, a message passed on to students. A letter from Susan Zurvalce, assistant superintendent for staff and community services, was sent to employees.

"We begin with a premise that everybody is different," Maxfield continued. "And people need to be treated with fairness."

The brochure - which includes sections about sexual orientation development and relevant legal principles - can be found by logging on to the Web site for the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (www.glsen.org).

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