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Plains.

"We've talked about this for two years and he (Mergener) feels like we haven't been responsive and have blown his concerns off," said Farmington schools Superintendent Bob Maxfield last week. "And I believe that not to be the case. Each incident has been reviewed and thoughtfully dealt with, and when someone needed to be confronted they have been."

Although Maxfield said "for the most part, everything's been (verified)," there remain steps to follow, spelled out in the teacher contract, regarding the disciplining of teachers.

"I think he has been unconvinced that (these have) been dealt with appropriately," Maxfield explained. "On personnel matters, you've got to really trust the administration to deal with it."

James Myers, executive director for K-12 school and student services, said a formal reprimand is required for any complaint against a teacher to be placed into the personnel file at the district office. A second file is located at the schools.

Seeking answers

After being turned down in his attempt in late March and early April to talk about the issues during a public school board meeting, Mergener became frustrated enough to turn to the media for help.

"I'm not interested in crucifying anybody," he said. "We all make mistakes. It's not the teachers I'm out to get, but it's their behavior I want to correct."

His wife, Anita, an active supporter of the district through efforts such as the Partnership Advisory Council, added: "Our focus is not to find all the chinks in the armor. We're very proud of Farmington schools, generally."

But the deterioration of certain teachers' values, they claim, needs to be immediately stopped. Following are several examples — some which Barrett said have been taken out of context — of the behavior they find offensive:

■ A teacher recommended that students read *The Color Purple*, which included some passages that could be considered pornographic.

■ Another teacher said she showed five minutes of Oliver Stone's controversial movie, *JFK*, a segment where an explosive or two slipped out. It was later determined that the actual classroom airing was more like 30 minutes worth of dialogue "fiddled with profanity."

■ Two teachers worked with a developmentally disabled student to assemble some audio-visual equipment in the back of a classroom.

"They tested the equipment, and it worked," Mergener said, recalling the episode the way it was told to him by his daughter Lindsey, a straight-A student and member of the district's Student Roundtable.

"One teacher said to the other, 'I can't believe this worked.' And the other one said, 'Yeah, by some freak of nature.' And the other one said, 'Why are you looking (the student) when you say freak of nature?' And the

teacher replied, 'I'm talking about another freak of nature,' he said.

According to Mergener, he informed the parents of the boy about the exchange, and then alerted Barrett to it. One of the teachers eventually contacted the parents, but, Mergener said, details of the incident were drastically changed in the teacher's version.

Barrett said there have been "numerous discussions" with those teachers Mergener lodged complaints about, and "all the concerns have been voiced and dealt with."

Those teachers have been reprimanded, but not suspended, for using inappropriate classroom materials and language in front of students, Barrett continued.

Judgment call

"We talked to the teachers, we heard these concerns," Barrett said. "Some items have been taken out of context. We're always interested in hearing anybody's concerns, but one person's condemnation is another person's praise. It's open to interpretation and there's a delicate balance" that must be maintained.

Meanwhile, Barrett reiterated that the district requires all teachers to receive permission from building principals and parents in order to show R-rated movies or require potentially objectionable books and magazines to be used in classrooms.

"There's no general laxity in terms of language and materials being taught," Barrett said. "Teachers already are much

more conscious."

Mergener's complaints will at least partially result in a firm reminder to teachers during the orientation sessions this fall about what constitutes appropriate classroom materials and language, Barrett said.

A committee, including parents, also is apparently working on new guidelines for what are appropriate classroom materials — but Mergener said committee meetings have been few and far between since it was formed in late 1998.

Barrett conceded that Mergener is "very passionate about his concerns. We've heard the concerns, we've had many discussions here over the past couple months with the staff. We want to be sensitive to the needs of all our constituents."

It's a challenging environment with a very diverse society, said Barrett, referring to some of the complexities teachers face, not excusing off-the-mark teacher behavior, of course.

Barrett was asked if he agrees with the notion that some teachers might resort to shock tactics to get through to teenagers who are weaned on violent video games and cutting-edge attitudes.

"I hope not. I think teachers

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are very aware and conscious of being appropriate role models. Everybody makes a mistake occasionally, but I don't think we need to be clubbing everybody over the head" when they do.

The fact that students are more diverse and more sophisticated, Maxfield said, provides a dilemma for teachers who want to challenge students to push the envelope of learning.

"What we are saying to (teachers) is to find a way to get (students) actively involved, making decisions for themselves, being more responsible for their own learning, doing hands-on projects and all the kinds of things we do to break up time and engage people in a meaningful thought process," Maxfield said.

But Mergener said a major factor is how younger teachers try to identify with students not much younger than they are. "Be a teacher, be a friend. Sometimes you can't be both."

Another thorny issue, Maxfield said, is how to deal with such problems without causing a chasm between teachers and parents. "We need to balance issues of legitimate concern that parents bring to us; we have to find a way to do that and not polarize people."

Veteran school board member Jack Inch said Mergener's concerns are being taken seriously. "I think he has gotten the attention of some people on the board."

William Tyndale College recognized

William Tyndale College is one of two Michigan organizations to be recognized nationally in the Ninth Annual USA Weekend Make a Difference Day Awards.

As a regional honoree, the college will receive a \$2,000 award from the Wal-Mart Foundation.

The college was recognized for the efforts of 16 students, and Rae Lynn Harvey, coordinator of service learning, who spent seven hours going door to door in the impoverished Ravendale neighborhood to create a community directory to assist in child-care contacts and professional

services, from hair cuts to computer skills.

"Because of the weather, we almost decided against working in the afternoon," Harvey said. "But, the mission of William Tyndale College to serve others inspired us to make the effort."

Lars Hellsten

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