

'Failing' is a matter of interpretation, Maxfield says

BY SUE BUCK
STAFF WRITER

When it comes to labeling Hillside Elementary in Farmington Hills as "failing," that's a matter of interpretation, said Farmington Public Schools Superintendent Bob Maxfield.

The district is proud of its National Blue Ribbon Exemplary School, despite its designation by a federal program. Officials say the "No Child Left Behind" legislation measures schools too narrowly and doesn't take into account the most important factors in student success.

In fact, they say, the law only considers progress in one Michigan Education Assessment Program testing areas of science.

"What's interesting is that the Blue Ribbon Committee looked at these test results, 2000-2001," said Maxfield and Samir Haddad, director of bilingual education.

"It's a state formula," Haddad said. "In this case, it is based on one subset of the MEAP."

Haddad and Kris Gekiere, administrator in Assessment & Evaluation, monitor the federal No Child Left Behind program at the state level.

The law is defined in 1,600 pages. "It's huge," said Jan Colliton, Assistant Superintendent for Instruction.

This comes at a time when the Farmington district is also trying to make sense out of state-wide assessment programs and standards, including Education West, the Michigan accreditation plan; how to make appropriate yearly progress on the MEAP; and Standard & Pools, Maxfield said.

Maxfield considers the USA

Today article, "further exacerbation."

While the newspaper set out to find what would happen if it compared Blue Ribbon schools with the "failing" school criteria, that comparison "was never part of any law," Maxfield said.

Parental judgment on schools is more holistic and more based on what is happening with their own children, Maxfield said. "For us, the real challenge is keeping the big picture in mind. The school is by every other standard excellent."

Michigan has 1,500 "failing" schools, under the federal guidelines.

Maxfield doesn't believe anyone in the community or in the state education department "gives a rip."

"What he said, 'I don't like the failing word under any circumstance.'"

His views are echoed by Ernie Bauer, a consultant for research, evaluation and assessment who's worked for Oakland Schools since 1974.

There's nothing wrong with the MEAP, Bauer said. However, the way "No Child Left Behind" uses the MEAP is inappropriate, he said.

"It's taking the test and fiddling with it," Bauer said.

One of his colleagues predicts in two years, 80 percent of the schools will be labeled "failing." Until more people react and say, "My school isn't failing," the public may not fully ask questions or understand the ramifications of the federal law, he said.

While educators are grumbling among themselves, they are sometimes reluctant to be too vocal for fear of being characterized as "another whining educator," Bauer said.

Some also believe this is a "blatant attempt" to get public support of vouchers, Bauer said. District officials are attributing the data interpretation to an "enterprising USA Today reporter."

However, it's unlikely the district will issue a formal message of protest explaining its point of view to state or federal officials, USA Today or anyone else.

However, Gekiere spoke to people in the state department. What's wrong is the way the state and federal standards mesh, they said.

HILLSIDE ACHIEVEMENT

"When we talked to our parents, they value good test scores," Colliton said. "They want their children to go to Harvard. Over the last five years I was there, we consistently improved our test scores in all subject areas. However, actual science test scores went up but within that, there are subcategories. There's a moderate range and a low range and those categories did not go up. A lot more kids did better on the science but we did not make movement from the low category to the middle category."

Colliton was Hillside Elementary principal from 1997-2000.

Hillside outscored the state average every year but in this subgroup, Hillside did not make the adequate yearly progress and only in science, Haddad said. "A number of districts are in the same boat," Haddad said.

When parents come to school for curriculum night, packets will be available with the district response to the USA today story, said Kathy Obrizak, Hillside principal.

SCHOOL

FROM PAGE A1

acc. "The overlap under-scores just how elusive the definition of 'school excellence' has become and questions the nation's most prestigious recognition program."

Local officials say the article doesn't reflect Hillside's true measure as a school.

"Hillside has consistently scored well above state averages in the MEAP," said Jan Colliton, assistant superintendent for instruction. Prior to a promotion last year, Colliton had been Hillside Elementary principal since 1995.

Hillside was named a Blue Ribbon school after completing a 50-page application and a two-day site visit by program evaluators.

The program measures eight standards of excellence that requires schools to demonstrate challenging curriculum, active learning environments, an involved parent and professional community and improved overall student test scores to name a few.

"We're really disappointed in seeing an article that is so misleading," Colliton said. "Hillside is not a 'failing' school. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act -

No Child Left Behind standards narrowly determines school success or failure based on one test. For Hillside, the determination that it is a 'failing school' was based on the fact that on one test, Science MEAP, has dropped."

The state trends have shown a relative flatness in science scores since in 1999 all 13 strands were included in the test.

"Hillside scores over the last two years have mirrored the same fluctuation as the state scores, with a 2.0 drop for the state and 1.3 drop for Hillside. Considering the mile-wide, inch-deep testing of the broad science curriculum, Hillside is still 15.3 percentage points above the state average."

The USA Today article used information based on the 2000-2001 MEAP results, she added.

Hillside made substantial gains in all subject areas over the past five years consistently scoring well above state averages, Colliton said.

"It also ignores the fact that Hillside consistently monitors student progress and will address the change."

It would be a shame to let one test diminish Hillside's parent, staff and student accomplishment. All school district scores in Oakland County and the State of

Michigan decreased in reading, indicating a difficult test. Trends over time at Hillside indicate solid achievement."

Experts say it's unwise to compare the two programs because they measure different kinds of school progress. The district says state comparisons are impossible because each state sets its own standards. District officials add Michigan benchmarks far exceed federal guidelines.

"Input from our community shows that they value more than one indicator of success," said Sue Zurvalet, assistant superintendent of staff and community services.

Other National Blue Ribbon Schools are North Farmington High School and Highmeadow Common Campus. Farmington High School and Kenbrook Elementary are Michigan Blue Ribbon Schools.

At Hillside, a handful of parents made inquiries relative to the USA Today story. A letter was composed with input from the district and the PTA president and that information was forwarded to those parents.

Hillside principal Kathy Obrizak planned to have information packets available to parents who attend curriculum nights.

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She's also spoken to staff and PTA members.

Kim Heath, president of the Farmington-Area PTA Council

is also trying to learn about all the different accreditation standards. "There are so many different rules," Heath said.

For more information, call Colliton at (248) 489-3327.

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PREPARE

FROM PAGE A1

sense for everyday. It's a way to teach citizens how to take care of themselves."

One important way citizens can be prepared is with a 72-hour emergency kit in their homes.

McGuire will be putting together such a kit at the meeting.

Police and fire department officials will also be on hand to talk about how and when to contact emergency personnel and what to do until help arrives.

There will also be information on how to build a commu-

nication network in your neighborhood.

At the end of the meeting, there will be a brainstorming session.

For more information, contact McGuire at (248) 473-9563.

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