

Sorrows officials say most parents favor shared time

BY SUE BUCK
STAFF WRITER

Our Lady of Sorrows
Monsignor Walter Hurley said his parish has met the proviso that there is substantial support for shared time by OLS constituents.

Under the plan, three public school teachers would be hired under provisions of the Farmington Education Association, the teachers' union, to instruct OLS children in art, music and physical education.

Hurley said the parish received 1,057 cards of support. The signed and formatted confidential cards allowed people to vote in support of shared time with no specific space provided to vote non-support. Two cards were sent home to each OLS family. Cards were also printed in the church bulletin and extras were available in church.

Nine cards, three of which were unsigned, indicated opposition.

Hurley said 517 cards came from OLS School parents and

540 from those without children in the school. There are 3,100 families in the parish and about 1,110 students in preschool through eighth grade.

Shared time would affect 930 students in grades 1-8.

OLS Principal Jim Watson said signed cards came from about 44 percent of the school families.

"This was not a vote, it wasn't intended to be a vote," Watson said. "You do not take a vote at every issue you face. You listen to parents at focus groups, you listen to people through their

representatives and through the administration, union."

To ignore the support expressed by parishioners who don't have children would be similar to allowing only taxpayers who have children in school to vote in a bond or millage election, Watson said.

A vocal minority opposes shared time, Watson said, but the parish is unwilling to allow them to determine school policy and viability. "We have done everything possible to try to come together," Watson said. Hurley said the board could

examine the cards of support but it's inappropriate to publish the names.

"The school does not operate as an entity unto itself," Hurley said. "The whole parish has a stake in the school. It subsidizes the school in excess of a half million dollars each year in addition to \$6 million we spent recently on new construction to almost double our enrollment."

Hurley provided a package of support that included a letter from Monsignor John Quinn, director of the Department of education from the Archdiocese

of Detroit.

Farmington Public Schools Superintendent Bob Maxfield told OLS school parents last spring that he wanted to see a strong level of support (more than 60 percent). Parents asked how he could measure that without an actual vote.

Hurley has severely criticized a privately funded survey by parishioner Randy Bergeron which indicated nonsupport. Of 657 ballots, 123 indicated non-support for shared time and 62 supported it.

Last spring the board approved the concept of shared time between the public school district and the private school.

The board is expected to make a final decision at the 7:30 p.m. March 4 meeting at the administration building located on Shinwassee in Farmington.

Watson told the board that both the district and OLS school face "one grim reality, a struggling economy."

"You are faced with cuts in state aid; we are faced with increasing tuition and trying to minimize that," Watson said. "We believe Farmington Public Schools has resources for curriculum development that we at Sorrows just do not have."

He said OLS has demonstrated support for shared time. About 177 parents (14 percent) attended grade level meetings last fall, which covered a variety of issues including shared time. About 40 people expressed opposition.

Sister Fran Nadolny, superintendent of the 150 Catholic Schools in the six-county

Archdiocese of Detroit, said she encourages collaborative relationships between Catholic schools and their public school districts. "Such shared time programs have worked well in at least one-third of our schools," Nadolny said.

COSTS INVOLVED

After about \$60,000 in start-up costs paid for by the public school district, FPS would realize about \$168,000 in revenue, according to Paul Barber, director of fine arts.

OLS would realize an estimated \$150,000-\$200,000 in savings, which Watson wants to use to improve technology, library and science lab improvements.

Church officials have touted the financial benefits of a shared time proposal. The Feb. 2 OLS bulletin mentioned the completion of a new faculty compensation plan. To help parents prepare, the article listed two tuition scenarios.

For the 2003-2004 school year, the base tuition rate (single student) will increase by 12 percent to \$3,300. If shared time is implemented, tuition will increase 7 percent to \$3,150.

FEW PUBLIC COMMENTS

Though the room was filled with people from OLS, the few who spoke were mostly in favor of the program.

Hurley has repeatedly said that those who oppose the parish's stance can leave. Some parents have said they're afraid to speak out against the proposal, which they fear would interfere with the religious component of their children's education.

Parent Tom Yoebec said his daughter had a positive experience with shared time at a Catholic School in Wayne. She found some OLS students had a negative view of shared time, he said. "It's a fantastic program," Yoebec said.


Partnerships make sense, said parent Michael Burns. "I'm a manager of a non-profit business association and one of our key strategies is partnerships, anything to enhance the resources and services of our organization makes perfect sense."

Parent Michael Leither said he offered "a thoughtful opposition to the program."

"There's a number of thoughtful people who disagree with this program who are reticent to say so tonight," Leither said.

The benefits outweigh any possible downside for children, said parent Craig Folnsett. "It won't take anything from the public schools it will enhance," he said.

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