

Alternative program offers life skills

By Casey Hane
staff writer

THE STUDENTS at Shlawassee Center are a rough and tumble bunch.

Many are in trouble with the law, more than 70 percent read below their grade levels and most have histories of social maladjustment, opposition to authority and a low self-esteem.

The alternative education program at the former elementary school at Shlawassee and Tuck roads is for residents of Boys Republic — a Farmington Hills residential treatment facility that houses adolescent wards of the state, ordered there for rehabilitation by the court system.

The 13- to 18-year-olds are bused to Shlawassee Center daily during the school year for a special brand of teaching.

Nine teachers, nine aides, plus several administrators, social workers and psychologists are involved in the program, which accommodates up to 65 boys, according to Autry, although 69 were enrolled during the past school year. The entire teaching staff is certified for special education.

The program is offered through the Farmington Public Schools, which are required by law to educate the youths, who reside on Nine Mile within the district boundaries. Before moving the program to the Shlawassee Center, an educational program was conducted on site at the Boys Republic facility.

WHEN ADMINISTRATOR Chuck Autry arrived one year ago, he set out to develop a program of help for the students — to leave behind the image that the program thought of them as the "armpit of the school district."

"I guess I call them out-of-step," said acting Principal Autry, who ad-



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Shlawassee Center's Acting Principal Chuck Autry prepares for another school year of the alternative education program for Boys Re-

public. The program teaches the boys, aged 13-18, life skills and opportunities.

ministers the alternative program under longtime building Principal William Miller.

Farmington has the only program in the state in which students leave a state-owned rehabilitation facility and attend a public school program, Autry said.

"This is the last step educationally. If they get into trouble again, it could be a total lock-up."

"Of course," he said of the program's challenge to the staff, "there are some days we think are Fridays,

when it's only Tuesday. But the kids never get a break from the program. It's harder than a marriage for them — they have no break from each other. It means a lot of inner conflict."

These special student circumstances called for a special behavior modification approach, the addition of computers and a new industrial arts program, all added during the

past school year. All have helped to develop life skills for the students.

"This is probably the best school year we have had," Miller said. "This is the first time two excellent semesters have been put together since I have been principal of the school."

DURING THE seven years of the Boys Republic program at Shlawas-

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see Center, administrators have encountered some problems, including incidents in which Farmington Hills police were called.

Autry believes the new approach — offering incentive for good and responsible behavior — is working. "Everything is a positive stress," he said. "The behavior management program is a real key to our success."

"If the only thing you offered these kids were grades, it wouldn't work."

Students with exceptional behavior earn points, which offer them such advantages as home visits, movies, a chance to go bowling, the use of the school computer or pool areas or a monetary payoff of up to \$1 per week.

The educational program is based on a secondary curriculum with an emphasis on life skills, vocational exposure and academic instruction, Autry said. Student groupings are based on ability levels, and course work is geared to meet individual student needs.

Teaching consultant Charlotte Merritt uses the new computers as a

"motivating learning tool," Autry said.

They publish a student newspaper, the Boys Republic Bugle, written with the aid of computers. "Students previously turned off by traditional methods of teaching have quickly warmed up to this approach," he said.

New to Shlawassee Center this year is teacher Rob Fluter, who coordinates the new industrial education program. Students learn woodworking, small engine repair and basic vocational skills.

"The program has exceeded my expectations by a hundredfold," Fluter said. "They've been told all their lives they're nothing but trouble. Our bottom line here is helping."

Staff members at Shlawassee Center have a very short time in which to help the students passing through the system. Boys stay at Boys Republic and in the educational program only 9-12 months on an average.

"It sometimes takes six months to turn an attitude around," Autry said.

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