

Rebuttal

Harrison students and teachers defend school

By Casey Hana
staff writer

Comments from a West Bloomfield Township parent arguing that Harrison High is academically inferior to North Farmington High caused several Harrison teachers, counselors and students to respond last week.

Their comments came during a school board study session in which the Farmington Public Schools boundary/facility study committee gave a preliminary report, proposing a shift of some North Farmington students to Harrison.

The response was prompted by comments from parent and local

real estate executive Larry Harwin, who said Harrison's achievement level is "20 percent below" North Farmington's.

Harwin and his wife, Maxine, have an eighth grader at Warner Middle School who would attend Harrison under the proposed boundary changes.

Part of the report discussed possible boundary changes for students living east of Orchard Lake Road in parts of Farmington Hills and West Bloomfield Township this fall.

Those living in the area now attend North Farmington High School; they would attend Harrison under the preliminary proposal.

"WE'RE NOT just responding out of wounded pride," said David Levin, a Harrison student who noted that Harrison has lost and North Farmington gained students during the past few years. "The less students you have, the less opportunities for AP (advanced placement) classes. As enrollment drops, opportunity drops."

"It's logical — shifting the boundaries for equilibrium."

Joyce Kaplan, a Harrison teacher for 17 years and an area resident for 25 years, assured parents their children would receive a solid education at either school.

"I know for some reason the North parents have a strong feeling . . . and think North is better," she said. "Both are splendid schools."

"Harrison is an unusual school" because it's a "broad range" of students cover the entire eastern side of the district, she added. "We have children from economically disadvantaged homes to children from half-million-dollar homes."

BOARD TRUSTEE Janice Rolnick said Harwin and other parents were viewing only one side when looking at the two schools. "There's all kinds of statistics to support all schools," she said. "Harrison was the first to have AP (advanced placement) classes."

Levin said many Warner students face the problem of going to a different high school than their middle school friends.

"It's happened to a lot of kids at Warner," he said. "One of the most positive experiences, looking back at high school, is meeting new people."

Harrison counselor Jill Turley asked parents to view the high schools as one unit because of the many shared programs and the many students who are bused to the other schools for specific classes.

Trustees review boundary change

Continued from Page 1

Jack Cotton said he would like to see an option for either high school given to the 17 students affected this year. "It's already April — nobody likes a surprise," he said.

"I agree with Mr. Cotton for the 17," Susan Renzoli said. "Then we can institute a permanent change for students new in the seventh grade."

The issue has been studied over the past several months in an effort to "equalize educational opportunities" for the district's three high schools, according to committee chairman and assistant superintendent Lynn Nutter.

"It is the only proposal we have, quite frankly. If we didn't do it — that would be an alternative."

Nutter said the change was being proposed because the current situation is "disadvantaging some of the staff and students at North."

Reportedly there are 12 teachers at North who are mobile — moving from room to room because of space problems, Nutter told the board. In addition, classrooms are used six hours per day, some teachers have no classroom conference time, and class size is affected.

PARENTS AIDED their complaints, which ranged from concern about academic quality at Harrison (see related story) to projected enrollment declines at North Farmington — something they felt made any change unnecessary.

"North Farmington is a much more desirable school in the public's eye," said Larry Harwin, a West Bloomfield Township parent and local real estate executive. He presented the board with a written letter protesting the change. He questioned why the district allowed students from other areas to attend North Farmington voluntarily.

Another parent asked the committee if they had considered children attending private schools — who might attend Farmington public high schools — in their numbers. They had not, Nutter said.

Yet another said he had lived in the area for only two weeks and had bought his house "based on North Farmington High School. We're happy to know the other school is nice too, but we would like a choice."

Rolnick responded, saying she was "amazed" that people buy houses based on certain schools, when over the years school boundaries have changed. "These schools close and things change and, that's life," she said.

The committee's proposal would affect students in an area bounded by Orchard Lake and Middlebelt roads and 13 Mile and 14 Mile roads in Farmington Hills. It also includes the northwest corner of Section 13 (southeast of Orchard Lake and 13

Mile roads) in Farmington Hills and the southern half of Section 33 (north of 14 Mile, between Orchard Lake and Middlebelt roads) in West Bloomfield Township, where residents attend Farmington Public Schools.

Students already attending North Farmington — or who have siblings attending North — could continue attending school there, under the proposal.

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