

# School Spending bridging the gap

## How important is money to education?

### Teachers similar across the board

By Casey Hans  
staff writer

Debate continues over the role of money in public education, as state legislators argue over how the pot should be divided.

Just how important is it? Money is critical in the teaching tools it offers a district. On the other hand, say educators, there are many things which can be done in education without money.

Money simply offers a district — and its students — better choices.

**'In all the schools in Oakland County, what I see are instructors . . . who are pretty much products of the 20th Century, . . . teaching students to live in the 21st Century.'**

— Rebecca Rankin  
Oakland Schools

"There is kind of a myth in education that money doesn't make any difference. It makes a big difference," said Superintendent for Oakland Schools William Keane, who offered this comparison: "If you and I had the choice of purchasing a home. One . . . has everything we need to live and the second has that plus a pool and tennis court . . . and they cost the same, which would you pick?"

**MONEY ALLOWS** districts to purchase more up-to-date textbooks and materials, retain substitute teachers regularly to fill in so their staffs can receive additional training, and hire a full complement of teachers and aides which keeps class sizes down.

Districts with more money also offer more extracurricular activities like sports and clubs. Keane said, while districts like Pontiac have "pay for play" sports programs. More in-depth gifted, music and specialized programs are also plentiful in wealthier districts.

Presuming there is no change in the state school aid formula, more than half the 28 districts in Oakland County will be out-of-formula this fall, not qualifying for state aid. The bulk of their financing will come from local property taxes, which will prove beneficial to the districts which have increasing property values. For some it's a boon; others will simply get by with a status quo program.

Despite the monetary ups and downs of Oakland County districts,

most educators agree that the quality of educators is equal across the board.

"In all the schools in Oakland County, what I see are instructors . . . who are pretty much products of the 20th Century, . . . teaching students to live in the 21st Century," said Rebecca Rankin, director of the general education division for Oakland Schools, whose department coordinates training and staff development across the county. "Of course there are financial implications — a computer costs more than a book."

**BUT SHE** said the Oakland Schools programs train teachers on an equal footing, giving them skills that supersede any teaching tools. For example, the Teacher Expectation Student Achievement program, or TESA, teaches the concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy. "If you expect a student to do well, they probably will," she said.

But a big issue, both Keane and Rankin said, is whether a district can afford to hire substitutes to replace regular teachers and staff so they can go through workshops and staff development programs. Oakland Schools helps a bit by offering a stipend of \$800 to each district which can be used for substitute payments.

Financial issues can be viewed longterm looking at teachers salaries and benefits. Rankin believes teacher salary levels will affect education in the long run, as it continues to compete with private industry for good people, especially in technical areas.

**'The whole story of the deterioration of the infrastructure of our schools has yet to come to light.'**

— William Keane  
Oakland Schools  
superintendent

There are also building and maintenance issues impacting Oakland County districts today. Many have attempted to sell voters on bond issues which have been defeated. At the top of the list are federal mandates for removing or stabilizing asbestos in ceilings and floors, according to Keane.

"We estimate \$90 million in Oakland County alone to take care of asbestos," he said. "That's all coming out of general funds, which would have gone to buy textbooks."

The whole story of the deterioration of the infrastructure of our schools has yet to come to light."



STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

One quality good teachers share is they are able to light up the eyes of students such as Maya James, who attends Berkshire Middle School in the Birmingham School District.

### Rich or poor A lesson which flowers

By Casey Hans  
staff writer

The lesson could be offered in the richest school district, or the poorest.

Harriet Shubin's third-graders would, no doubt, learn about wildflowers and nature regardless.

The elementary teacher at Wood Creek Elementary, a Farmington Hills school near 12 Mile and Inster roads, has taught her own brand of botany lessons to thousands of students over the years. Her classroom materials are self-generated and the material for her lessons comes from nature walks outdoors.

"I've been doing this weekly for 15 years," she explained. Each of her students gets a botany lesson in the spring, which includes a weekly nature walk on the grounds at the Sarah Fisher complex on Inster Road, on the Southfield/Farmington Hills border.

Shubin's students were enthusiastic as she covered information about wildflowers, then generated student questions and answers about each. Hands waved in the air, showing an

eagerness to respond to the slightly offbeat curriculum offering. One student joined in by bringing a booklet from home, which had color pictures of many of the flora.

As an added bonus, Shubin has scrapbooks full of dried wildflowers she picked and preserved in 1983 in wooded areas near Telegraph Road, before the area became developed.

Teachers like Shubin can be found in districts all around Oakland County, according to Rebecca Rankin, director of the division of General Education at Oakland Intermediate Schools, which focuses on teacher training and staff development programs. "Teachers are coming together — they have a new sense of professionalism," she said. "I couldn't say the teachers are much different from district to district."

All good teachers share three qualities, according to Rankin. In her words, these include:

- they know what they're talking about,
- they care about their students,
- they respond to the light in students' eyes, or know how to put it there.

### Money can help mediocre teacher

By Sharon Dargey  
staff writer

Money may not buy happiness — or knowledge — but some educators and parents say it goes a long way in securing quality education by funding equipment, programs and adequate staffing.

"You can put a mediocre teacher in a school with money and the students will learn. You can put that same teacher in a school without money and her kids won't have a chance," said Twila Helfferich, fourth grade teacher at Silles School in Avondale.

"My mother didn't have all of the frills, she taught in a one-room school house, and I think she was wonderful," added Sandra Wheeler, fourth grade teacher at University Hills Elementary, Rochester. "But I remember when I first started teaching in Oklahama, I had lunch duty and playground duty and I taught all of my own special classes. There wasn't time to be as creative as I am now, because I would run out of energy."

The approximately 2,000-3,000 elementary education teachers vying for 200 jobs statewide rarely scrutinize a district's budget before sending out resumes, said Bill Jorns, education placement coordinator at Oakland University. Most recent graduates are happy to find a position, no matter how poor their employer is.

**BUT JAMES BOYER**, director of academic services for Wayne State University, admits that the college switchboard lights up when "a Bloomfield Hills, West Bloomfield, Birmingham or Troy — a location considered prestigious — call with openings."

"We're flooded with requests for those interviews. There is an attraction to those districts, but I don't know if it's just the money," Boyer said. "There's a perception that it's more desirable to work in a district that is well-heeled."

The perception exists among parents as well, especially when it comes to special education programs.

Residing in a wealthy district doesn't necessarily guarantee a better environment or stronger curriculum for children who attend county-funded, district-run special education programs. Those children may be based out of their home districts into classrooms in wealthier or poorer school systems.

"On the one hand, I support center programs so that all handicapped children are educated, whether or not their districts are able to afford it. But you purchase a house because of the school district it's in, and then your child is sent to a district which has tremendous problems," said Marna Hamilton, Rochester, a member of the Parents Advisory Committee at Oakland Intermediate Schools.

**MANY ROCHESTER** students with severe impairments are sent to a center program in the Pontiac School District.

Hamilton contends that school environment is only a part of the battle "because there are wonderful teachers teaching in run-down buildings."

**'There is an attraction to those districts, but I don't know if it's just the money. There's a perception that it's more desirable to work in a district that is well-heeled.'**

— James Boyer  
Wayne State University

Poor staff morale and inadequate teacher in-service, prompted by a lack of funding, are more troubling to some parents than peeling paint and scant equipment.

"The environment adds insult to injury," she said.

"If you're coming from a home school with a beautiful playground and you drive up to the center program and see weeds growing all over the parking lot and the parking lot is the playground," parents perceive the school as less desirable.

Hamilton pointed out that although the county funds center programs equally, they are managed by the districts in which they are located. Parents may not see eye to eye with administrators. Spending priorities may differ.

"That's where the inequality comes in."

In many cases, parent-teacher organizations step in to provide the dollars for activities and equipment that aren't funded through a school building or districtwide budget.

### Chart tells disparities of districts

This school district comparison not only includes Oakland County public school districts, but also nearby districts to which local schools compare themselves.

Operating millage is the tax rate levied for day-to-day classroom expenses. Taxes levied to pay off bonds are excluded.

Spending per pupil is the amount of money spent to provide staff, programs and services to each child in the district.

State-equalized valuation or SEV per pupil is the amount of property tax value behind each student. The figure is drawn from home, business and industrial property tax assessments.

State aid per pupil is the amount of state money behind each district student. Figures vary widely because in-formula districts receive state aid for basic classroom expenses. The smaller figures are posted by out-of-formula districts, which receive state aid only for busing and other state-ordered programs.

The data for this chart was provided by the districts themselves, as well as the Wayne and Oakland intermediate school districts. Information also was obtained from the Michigan Department of Education.

Information for this chart was compiled by staff writer James Radebaugh.

### School districts compared

| School district  | Number of students | Number of administrators | Number of teachers | Operating millage | Spending per pupil | SEV per pupil | State aid per pupil | Average teacher salary |
|------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Avondale         | 2,543              | 15                       | 137                | 33.94             | \$4,667            | \$137,389     | \$104.81            | \$33,000               |
| Birmingham       | 7,411              | 32                       | 491                | 28.33             | \$7,270            | \$244,468     | \$92.96             | \$39,000               |
| Bloomfield Hills | 5,870              | 24.6                     | 423.1              | 25.19             | \$6,889            | \$257,603     | \$238.98            | \$41,222               |
| Clarenceville    | 2,250              | 9                        | 146                | 37.90             | \$3,720            | \$76,987      | \$797.84            | \$37,443               |
| Detroit          | 175,497            | 1,216                    | 8,347              | 36.00             | \$3,942            | \$27,490      | \$3,100             | \$38,000               |
| Farmington       | 10,681             | 50                       | 587                | 30.65             | \$6,926            | \$181,764     | \$360.34            | \$41,770               |
| Livonia          | 16,138             | 57                       | 765.7              | 33.60             | \$5,046            | \$131,348     | \$85.68             | \$42,494               |
| Novi             | 3,665              | 16                       | 190                | 27.74             | \$4,976            | \$165,400     | \$40.39             | \$39,797               |
| Pontiac          | 16,750             | 52                       | 853                | 39.00             | \$3,824            | \$70,911      | \$1,301.41          | \$18,599-\$41,071      |
| Rochester        | 10,802             | 32                       | 474                | 33.88             | \$4,412            | \$124,863     | \$57.20             | \$34,097               |
| Southfield       | 8,467              | 43                       | 618                | 32.21             | \$6,907            | \$214,114     | \$75.24             | \$43,274               |
| Troy             | 10,801             | 33                       | 576.35             | 28.30             | \$5,400            | \$171,774     | \$80.08             | \$43,402               |
| Walled Lake      | 8,966              | 31                       | 498.4              | 36.20             | \$4,240            | \$123,302     | \$128.29            | \$36,337               |
| West Bloomfield  | 4,663              | 25                       | 269                | 33.71             | \$5,501            | \$155,775     | \$90.11             | \$38,864               |

Figures are the latest available.