

Learning goes on despite disparities

By Casey Hens
staff writer

Third graders in the Farmington area are studying and learning, but there are definite disparities in the ages of reference books, classroom equipment and other resources.

Observer & Eccentric reporters and photographers visited third grades throughout Oakland County this spring to observe, compare similarities and differences between school districts, and find out just what each education dollar buys.

Here in the Farmington area, we visited one building in Farmington Public Schools, which has approximately 11,000 students, and another in the neighboring Clarenceville district in Livonia, a smaller school district with 2,000 students. Wood Creek Elementary in Farmington

Hills and Grandview Elementary in Livonia were our target schools.

Farmington Public Schools is considered a wealthy district that can offer some extras. Clarenceville struggles a bit more to offer similar programs at a lower level. Both districts serve students who live in Farmington Hills.

AT GRANDVIEW, third grade teacher Jackie Simpson called her class "unusual." Several students had special needs, with some needing remedial work and others participating in the district's newly formed gifted program.

The school hallways were clean and bright; the order of the day in Simpson's class was good old-fashioned learning. Light to the classroom were turned on when the first bell of the day rang, and not before.

Despite some of the dated materials in the classroom, third graders were a bit excited by some new playground equipment being installed outside their window that day.

AT WOOD CREEK on Farmington Hills' east side, students have more modern resources.

Each of the three third grade rooms has an Apple IIe computer, one with a printer shared by the three teachers. Up-to-date audiovisual equipment can be found in both classrooms and hallways. The district has just ordered new carpeting for the school to replace the old; carpeting gives the whole school a quiet, studious sound.

Wood Creek's student population comes from a variety of areas of the city — east, south and west — because of overcrowding in the district. The school is mixed ethnically and socially, according to principal Barbara Novais. It is one of the area's larger elementary schools.

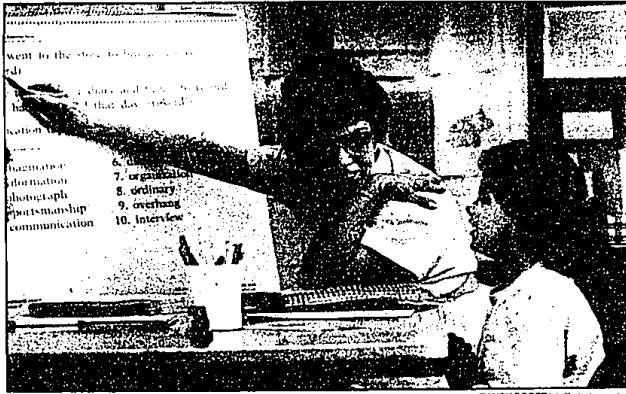
Teachers Harriet Shubin, Deborah Neef and Jean Major each offer their students a different educational flavor. All participated that day in the DEAR program — Drop Everything and Read — and most were working on Michigan Folders that were being done for Michigan Week.

The day of the Observer's visit, all the students were excited about a schoolwide musical assembly held that morning, at which up-to-date equipment from the district's cable television station was used to videotape the event.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

This study area at Wood Creek Elementary in Farmington Hills also is used to store classroom materials.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Jacqueline Simpson, a third grade teacher at Grandview Elementary in Clarenceville, goes over a reading lesson with Vicki Dauer of Farmington Hills.

Resources, facilities vary in area districts

Poorer districts are 'treading water'

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TWO YEARS of discussion by those in the education community and debate by the state Legislature have moved the issue of school finance reform to the front burner.

Nearly everyone agrees that students in all districts deserve quality education of equal value. Do more resources and money make a difference in what type of education a student receives?

Money makes a difference in resources, educators say. Right now, Farmington has more money to spend than Clarenceville, but that doesn't necessarily impact the quality of teachers.

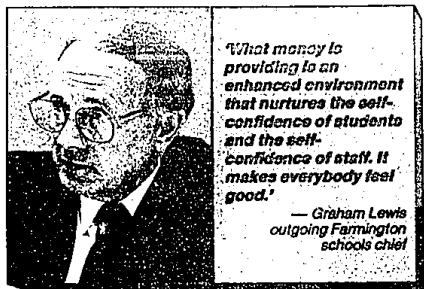
"Basically, everybody's a walking textbook," said Graham Lewis, outgoing superintendent of Farmington Public Schools, known to be a wealthier district. Lewis resigned his post effective immediately, at Tuesday's school board meeting.

"Equality of teachers tend to be pretty much the same — that's the single most important thing in any educational setting. We attend the same conferences, get the same degrees."

The difference between districts with unequal resources, he said, is that "they tread water where we can swim. What's cheap for one place is exorbitant for another."

THERE ARE also many similarities between the districts.

Both are on a rotating five-year curriculum revision schedule in which goals, objectives and lesson



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— Graham Lewis
outgoing Farmington
schools chief

plans are revised and textbooks reviewed.

Farmington has its own staff development department, which offers a variety of workshops for all department's teacher training.

All the Clarenceville teachers and administrators have completed the touted ITIP (Instructional Theory in Practice) program through Oakland Schools, the intermediate support district for all Oakland County schools.

MICHAEL SHIBLER, outgoing superintendent for Clarenceville Schools, is grateful for voter support that approved 3.5 new mills for district operations. April 1, the new changes that will allow the district to be out-of-formula this fall. The new status will give the district more money to enhance programs.

"It's significant enough to the point it's going to provide us with the opportunity to lower class size," Shibley said.

The district will also be able to add formal reading instruction and art programs, buy additional computers and offer classes with as few as 10-12 students. Previously, the

district could offer classes with no fewer than 15.

"There's definitely need . . . for renovation," Shibley said. "We have a committee which has been studying needs for the district for the past 2½ years."

CLARENCEVILLE HAS been using a "Band-Aid approach" to its buildings, using half a mill for that purpose.

Even in Farmington, where a \$5.5 million annual operating budget was recently approved, several million dollars are being earmarked for building improvements, of which the district estimates there is a \$17 million backlog.

Despite the many similarities, there is something money does buy, and that's a sense of security and stability, Lewis said.

"What money is providing is an enhanced environment that nurtures the self-confidence of students and the self-confidence of staff," he said.

"It makes everybody feel good. If you feel good about yourself, you're going to feel good about others. A wonderful nurturing allows you to grow."

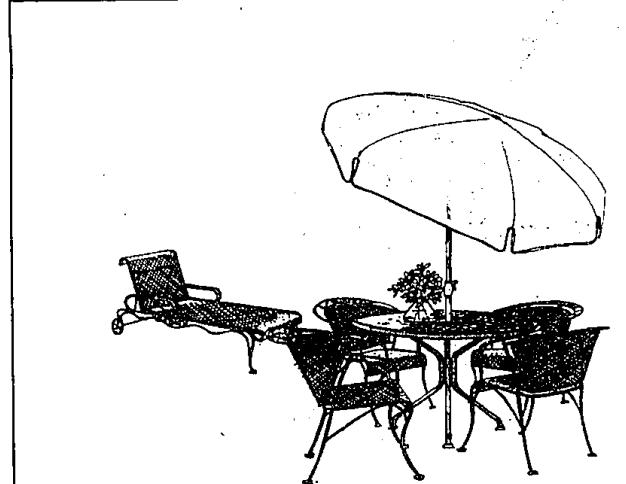


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2 Hills businessmen honored

Two Farmington Hills business men are among the six "Entrepreneurs of the Year."

The banquet, in Detroit, is part of the Entrepreneur of the Year award program sponsored by Arthur Young, the accounting and consulting firm.

Inc. Magazine and WJR Radio, an independent panel of judges selected the winners from a large number of nominations.

According to John Boos, the director of the Entrepreneurial Services of Arthur Young's Southfield office, the local winners are:

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