

# School bells signal renewed challenge

SCHOOL BELLS ring, are you listening?

Because even if your children are grown, even if they're too little, even if you have none, the back-to-school season affects you.

Stores are more crowded with back-to-school shoppers, school buses add another dimension to traffic and a need for even more careful driving, and you're certain to be hit with a batch of back-to-school news and feature stories by the broadcast and print media.

But, even more, you are affected by the use of your tax dollars to foot the bill for your local schools. These are dollars that most of us would pay less grudgingly if we knew our school people were doing the job — both in turning out well-educated students prepared for tomorrow's world and in running our schools in an accountable, business-like manner.

For most school districts, late August is no longer the lull time it was up to the early 1980s. The number of school districts facing possible strikes is minuscule compared with days gone by.

SOME MAY attribute that to the 1974 Dearborn Heights' Greenwood School District episode, in which striking teachers were fired and never rehired. That certainly had impact. Since that time there have been fewer strikes, and those that have occurred were generally short-lived.

But people have short memories. More influential now is the fact that teachers are pretty much getting what they want. In concert with a high-rolling economy and a property-tax based school funding system, most of the Observer & Eccentric



Judith Doner Berne

districts have hiked teacher and administrative salaries at least 6 percent per year. Combined with an inflation rate that's under control, those salaries increases are real.

There is no need to strike. At the same time, teachers can no longer cry that they are underpaid.

Livonia teachers are asking for raises equivalent to other top districts. That's fine, but taxpayers in Livonia should know that their average teacher makes more than an average teacher in any of the 15 districts covered by the Observer & Eccentric, with three exceptions: Southfield (\$43,274), Wayne-Westland (\$43,500) and Troy (\$43,402).

AND AVERAGE teacher salaries in Livonia are \$42,494 — higher than top districts such as Birmingham (\$39,000) and Bloomfield Hills (\$41,223).

In the early morning hours of Monday — the start of their new school year — a tentative agreement was reached in the Farmington district that gives 6.5-percent pay raises to teachers and other support personnel.

Betcha that Livonia teachers who are asking for 8 percent will probably settle in that 6 percent range.

But salaries are only part of the picture. To begin with, teachers

make that salary for working only nine months of the year. They'll scream, but to the rest of the working world, that's a pricey benefit.

Beyond that, their insurance is tops, generally through MEPSA — a division of the Michigan Education Association. In an era in which businesses are attempting to cut benefits, changing to less expensive plans or asking employees to contribute, school districts will be hard-pressed to successfully do the same.

FARMINGTON SCHOOL officials tried, but only gained the promise that for three months employee bargainers would join them in exploring insurance alternatives.

It's doubtful any changes will be made.

Job security. When was the last incompetent teacher fired in your district? It's almost impossible.

Job opportunities. They're the same as in any business — off the line and into administration. And, at the top, a superintendent such as Bloomfield Hills' W. Robert Docking, whose contract was just amended to give him more than \$136,000 by the 1991-92 school year.

So the school bells now ringing affect us all. Let's ring to a new school year, full of challenge and energy. Let's ring for less discrepancy between rich and poor school districts. Let's ring to the majority of hard-working teachers and administrators who earn their salaries and benefits — and to more accountability for those who don't.

Judith Doner Berne is assistant managing editor for the Oakland County Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

## points of view

# Former Boys Republic worker defends home

The writer, Mark B. Sperting, is a Farmington Hills resident.

I HAVE read with great interest the series of articles the Observer has published on Boys Republic's new assessment unit.

Over a period of 16 years, I was employed by Boys Republic, starting as a group worker and moving to assistant executive director. I lived on the grounds of Boys Republic for five years and I have lived across the street in Forest Park for the last six.

During the last five or six years I was employed by Boys Republic, I was in charge of intake of residents. I can state categorically that no youngster was accepted to the treatment program who was a danger to the community.

During the period of time (2 1/2 years) since I left Boys Republic to teach, I have maintained contact with both the executive director, Phyllis Griffin, and the assistant executive director, David Hamel.

Because of my experience in this area, I would discuss current admissions to the agency. The types of boys admitted for placement was the same as when I was in charge of intake for the agency.

THIS PAST summer, I returned to Boys Republic to teach and found that the boys in residence were the same type of youngster as when I did the initial interviewing for placement.

It should be noted that no youngster comes to the juvenile court or the state Department of Social Services system for placement for a single offense. Except for youngsters found guilty of any offenses (murder, rape), which Boys Republic has never accepted, other offenses are handled first by community supervision prior to placement.

I was unsure why there has been an uproar over the fact that boys who were not first-time offenders were in placement. Anyone reading a newspaper knows that placements

## guest column

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are not found for those who have one offense.

I have had conversations with both Boys Republic and state personnel, who have shared that the criteria for placement in the assessment unit will not include any boy who is seen as a threat to the community.

HAVING BEEN involved with the committee that determines placement for Michigan youth in Wayne County, I know of the process that goes into all of the placements for boys and placing dangerous boys in community-based settings is not part of that process.

I have been extremely impressed with the increased security and program changes that have occurred. As a professional, I feel that these changes add to the ability of Boys Republic to more effectively serve the boys who come there, whether it be for the long or short term.

Secondly, as a neighbor with three small children and a fourth on the way, I have no reservations about living where I do and having my children play either in front or in the back yard of my home with other neighborhood children.

I must take exception with those neighbors from the Old Town subdivision who worry about the new use of the Boys Republic land. It is not

now nor will it be a different use of the land; it is simply an upgrade to improve the program.

WHETHER OR not the assessment center existed, the changes would have been necessary to substantially improve living quarters, which are some 40 years old. The city was correct in approving the changes in construction in December, whether the subdivision was aware of it or not.

It is unfortunate that it appears that a few have alarmed a community and, as is always the case, people come out of the woodwork to "get involved." I wonder how many in the same subdivision have come over to provide any assistance for those boys (delinquent or not) who have had no where to go and have eventually been placed with foster homes, or go onto independent living. I know the Warren Tank Plant has provided such assistance.

OVER THE years, Boys Republic has always worked closely with community leaders and neighbors, and it would appear that this continues to be the case. Now that city leaders are involved in informing the public, I would hope that that will be objective and factual in their presentation and not lead the public to believe that there is something going on at Boys Republic to mislead the public when there is fact is not.

Boys Republic's very competent and professional staff will make sure that youngsters admitted there will meet the specific criteria for both long and short programs, as has always been the case.

When I read the Observer and the other community newspaper, I read of several community crimes committed by adolescents who are not residents of Boys Republic but of Farmington, Farmington Hills and the surrounding communities. Let's be fair. Boys Republic is a good neighbor that should be supported in making changes to make it more effective.

# Drive For Life this weekend

The writer, Bethany Goodman, is executive director of MADD/Michigan.

DRUNK DRIVING kills our friends and family members at an alarming rate, and remains the most frequently committed crime in the nation. On average, one person dies every 23 minutes, 65 each day, and more than 23,000 Americans lose their lives due to drunk driving crashes each year.

Here in Michigan, 793 men, women,

## guest column

and children died in alcohol-related crashes last year. That is what MADD and Volkswagen United States, Inc. are focusing state attention on the third annual Drive For Life public awareness campaign.

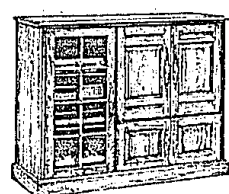
We are asking that all motorists

turn on their headlights during daylight hours of the Labor Day Weekend in memory of those 793 individuals who were killed in drunk driving crashes and, of course, to drive sober over the Labor Day Weekend and for the rest of the year.

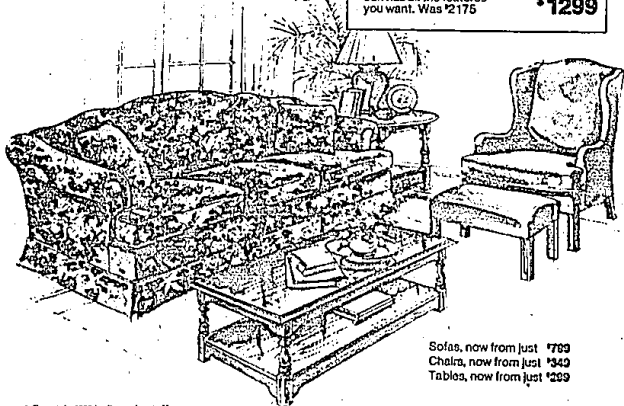
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