

POINTS OF VIEW

Educational reform continues into 1990s

Teacher strikes aren't the big news of this school year. Although hard on all parties, by and by they'll be settled. Salaries are upward bound — the median salary for the tri-county area is \$47,335 — but at least the Michigan Education Association is finally easing up on procedures for getting rid of poor teachers. The real news this fall is the array of new programs grown out of new philosophies about how kids learn set against a backdrop of Schools of Choice. They're starting up all over metropolitan Detroit, city and suburbs — some more easily than others. West Bloomfield Superintendent Seymour Gretchenko says schools throughout the nation are in the third wave of educational reform begun in the mid '80s. The first evolved from the Commis-

sion on Excellence and called for educational mandates to solve "the rising tide of mediocrity."

The second, begun in 1986, emphasized restructuring local schools from the bottom up.

That continues, says Gretchenko, but now the focus is on what is taught and how it is taught, geared to the individual community served.

"It's moving so fast — I've never seen education move so fast," confirmed Judith White, assistant superintendent for curriculum and staff development in the Farmington Public Schools.

That district is piloting:
● A year-round elementary school.
● A "zero-hour" starting before the regular class day at North Farmington High for students who want to take an additional academic subject.



JUDITH DONER BERNE

● A linking of related subjects for incoming ninth graders at Harrison High School and for all middle school students to try to break through the traditional fragmented approach to learning.

This fall, Southfield joins the short list of districts which offer alternative

high schools for "at risk" students and students who may not learn as well in a traditional classroom setting.

Detroit Schools are also trying to determine what will work for students. Last year, it was, as it turned out, primarily male academics as they sought to establish a curriculum to stem the tide of black male dropouts.

This year, the much-publicized Malcolm X School is designed to see if young black children can learn more readily in an African-centered curriculum. They must wade through a hostile, white enclave to do it.

Many of these changes are tied to choice — parents and students choosing schools and programs to more closely suit the way they learn — and where they think they'll feel more comfortable.

Which brings us to Bloomfield Hills,

where students have a choice among three high schools: Andover, Lahser and a Model High School which emphasizes self-directed learning.

A recent study brought out what teachers and students already knew — Andover is more ethnically diverse than Lahser and more competitive. And some students (or their parents) feel more comfortable in one atmosphere or the other — sometimes based on prejudice.

Change in education, this year is spelled C-H-O-I-C-E. And it's not just the children who will be learning from the choices which are made.

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

School innovation includes search for new money

It's nice that some suburban school districts are planning "innovative" programs for the kids who started the new school year within the past few days.

In the old days, innovative programs were limited to those districts that had the money to be innovative. Generally, those were categorized as out-of-formula districts, those that had so much property tax wealth behind each student that it didn't qualify for state dollars.

The districts that depended on state dollars, referred to as in-formula districts, were innovative only in the sense of trying to find money to sustain a "stand still" budget.

But in the past two years, even the wealthy districts have been complaining about the financial shell games played by state politicians in Lansing. The out-of-formula districts used to have it easy before the summer of 1991.

When a shopping center or Ford plant built an addition, the local school system would get 100 percent of the additional property tax revenue generated by the property improvement. The school boards also realized a pile of new money when the local property assessments went up as much as 15 percent as a result of a booming real estate market.

In sharp contrast were the in-formula districts, which took the money from new developments or the annual increases in property assessments, but had to give back part according to the state aid formula.

The less-wealthy districts were forced to generate "innovative" programs that had nothing directly to do with students, but rather involved marketing special programs and finding new sources of money.

One good example was the Wayne-



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■ The districts that depended on state dollars, referred to as in-formula districts, were innovative only in the sense of trying to find money to sustain a "stand still" budget.

Westland school district's effort to aggressively promote its adult education program, a move that backfired on it in the mid-1980s. At the time, the state was generous in funding adult education programs and gave local schools money based on an enrollment formula.

But later the education department claimed that the district was too aggressive and had fudged on its enrollment figures. Ultimately, there was a compromise and the district agreed to give back some of the money through future state aid payments.

When former Gov. James Blanchard and the Legislature implemented the "Robin Hood" concept in the summer of 1990, they took money from wealthy districts, laundered it and returned some of it to poor districts.

That raised a howl from the wealthy districts, forcing them to be "innova-

tive" and come up with new ways to pay for existing programs and services. Some merely used the old approach, asking voters for a property tax increase. Most were rejected.

Then they tried to convince voters that they should be "innovative" and pay only for the extracurricular programs their children actually use. That was called the "pay-to-play" policy with parents paying a flat fee for each after-school, non-credit program their son or daughter participated in.

When some wealthy districts talk about innovation, they refer to unique educational programs. But the reality for most district is that "innovation" now means "how to find money to pay for teachers' salary increases."

Leonard Poger is editor of the Westland and Garden City Observer newspapers.

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