

Study maps out district schools of choice options

By LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

While the mention of schools of choice draws a furrowed brow in education circles, a Farmington Public Schools report on the topic is opening some eyes.

"Expanding Schools of Choice Programming Issues and Recommendations" was compiled by the district's School of Choice Study Committee and was recently presented to the Farmington Board of Education.

The study maps out how schools of choice — a point of contention in Gov. John Engler's education reform plan — can be created within a district.

Among the possibilities of future schools of choice include companion schools for kindergarten through second grade and third through fifth grade and a kindergarten through 12th grade science/mathematics/technology magnet school.

Other alternatives include expanding the district's schools of choice already in place: early childhood centers to include kindergarten through second grade and the Highmeadow Common Campus.

"I think they came up with some exciting things," said State Rep. Jan Dolan, R-Farmington Hills, who has given the report to the House Education Committee co-chair Bill Keith, D-Garden City. "It's a real in-depth study."

"I think some things in the governor's plan is in concept, not down to details whereas the Farmington plan is down to details, which puts some meat on the bone."

The Farmington Public Schools' study contains other ideas.

The study suggests more creative solutions to funding. Per-pupil spending would be the same at a school of choice, but additional money for training and supplies could be found through partnerships with the private sector and grants.

The study also addresses issues revolving around schools of choice: registration, transportation, parental and community involvement.

The most distinct difference between schools of choice in Lansing and in Farmington is the matter of bargaining unions.

Engler has used schools of choice as an instrument to joust with the teachers' union. His proposal reportedly calls for the formation of charter schools, where teachers would not join a union or pay union dues. Such charter schools could also bypass teacher tenure laws.

Farmington's plan calls for cooperation with the bargaining unions.

"We have a concept of public schools' schools of choice," said Highmeadow principal Jan Colliton, who is chairwoman of the 28-member study committee. "We'd have to pay by the same rules."

Judy White, director of Curriculum and Staff Development, said the Farmington plan puts an emphasis on specialized curriculum. Schools of choice, she added, is a matter of perception.

"I would say the biggest misconception is you would choose what building your child would attend on the belief system that quote, one building is better than another building, end of quote," White said.

"By the state's definition parents would choose any school they wished with the idea of creating competition where only the strong will survive. . . Ours is more in line of offering a unique curriculum."

Schools of choice in Farmington would be aligned with the district's outcomes and goals, the report states.

According to a survey of 500 parents, including 200 who have kids in private schools, there's an interest in choice. Many are attracted to the idea of such choice at the middle and high school level.

Among the possible schools suggested on the middle and high school level are: a career academy, an international studies program and a school of the arts.

The option is up to those people who want to start such a school. Superintendents, teachers and parents can start a school of choice under this plan.

An Oriental atmosphere



SHARON LEMIRUK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Serving it up: Halsted Place Senior Retirement resident Jean Laing compliments the chef as she is being served a free lunch from the House of Eng restaurant during Halsted Place's recent Oriental Day. Wearing Oriental hats, waitresses Sandy Hryczyk and Candie Green wait in line to serve other residents. A Florida party, Mexican Day and Octoberfest are planned.

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quent interviews and visits to their respective school district will follow.

The board wants to name a successor by mid-December to replace Michael Flanagan, who leaves Jan. 1 to take the job of superintendent with Wayne County Regional Educational Service Agency.

Candidates have 90 minutes to sell themselves.

All seven were provided with questions beforehand. Tuesday, McMaster, Northville's assistant superintendent for instructional services, and Shibley, Rockford

school chief, were also asked to elaborate on specific accomplishments they listed on their resumes.

Both touted their respective districts, but were equally complimentary of the Farmington Public Schools.

"The life of an organization goes through zero to 10," McMaster said. "I really see you here at this 10. You're either going to take some drastic steps and support change initiatives. . . or

you're going to see a gradual decline. You are the lighthouse district on the west end of Oakland County."

Said Shibley: "When I thought about applying for the job, I felt there were only a couple of districts in the state I'd ever apply for. I'm very happy at Rockford. . . the main one would be Farmington Schools. It's a very outstanding school district."

Board members developed their questions with the help of the

Michigan Association of School Boards. Issues covered — especially budgeting — reflect the uncertainty resulting from Senate Bill 1.

The next superintendent is seen as someone who can be an innovator as well as a troubleshooter. The task of finding a person to fill the bill is not lost by the candidates.

"You certainly have an awesome responsibility," Shibley said to the board. "I wish you luck."

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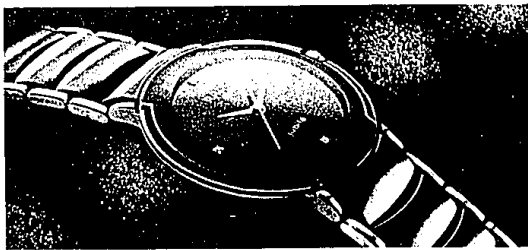
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