

Alternative middle school begins selecting pupils

Terry Tahnoose wishes she would've been able to enroll her daughter, Rachel Malone, in an alternative middle school.

The West Bloomfield resident thinks it would've helped educators realize earlier Rachel had dyslexia and save her a number of years of failing classes.

Students in the Farmington, West Bloomfield, Huron Valley, Novi and South Lyon schools will be selected Friday, June 19, to participate in the first alternative middle school being organized in southwestern Oakland County.

Principals and counselors from five southwestern Oakland County school districts have selected seventh and eighth grade students to participate in Southwest Alternative Middle School during the 1998-99 school year beginning Aug. 24.

There are 70 spaces available, which program director, Dianne Duthie, said she expects will be filled. But parents interested in enrolling their students are not too late. They can call their school principals and counselors

for more information about the program.

Malone, a 17-year-old enrolled in West Bloomfield's alternative high school, is now catching up on her work and will graduate six months to a year late.

"From sixth grade on she had not been learning. We were very frustrated," Tahnoose said of Rachel, who now has a 3.4 gpa. "I think there's a lot of kids that have had problems in school and there wasn't really an alternative. The earlier they can catch it, the better."

Students in Walled Lake and Clarenceville won't have the option to attend this year since school officials opted against participation in 1998-99.

"They're basically part of the consortium," Duthie said.

"They're just not sending any students this year."

"We also have some other districts in Oakland County that are interested in joining," however, she said, program officials are waiting to see if the two districts participate next year.

Walled Lake school officials are taking a wait and see approach since the district already has individual alternative middle school programs in place and officials have budgeted for two more at the two new middle schools opening this fall.

"We're going to watch it carefully," said James Geisler, Walled Lake schools superintendent. "The new program is undefined. They (Walled Lake educators) felt they had a little more control and could tailor (their) programs around kids."

District officials will have a bird's eye view of the new school since which is planned to be located inside the 16,600-square-foot Maple Technology Center right next to the Walled Lake schools administrative office at 850 Ladd Road. A three-year lease is planned.

Duthie said some district officials in the consortium were concerned that if the program doesn't meet the needs of students they would be sent back to their home schools.

"We're going to try to work with each child on an individual basis so we will make that child successful," Duthie said. "If that doesn't work we don't want to send them back."

Duthie, director of alternative education for Farmington

schools, said the goal is avoid expulsion by working with students until they're ready to return to their home districts. She said this has been highly successful in Farmington alternative program.

Steve Wasko, spokesperson for West Bloomfield schools, said school officials there opted to enter into the consortium since their alternative high school program has also been successful.

"We decided to participate to create an opportunity at the middle school level," Wasko said. Currently, Wasko said, there are no effective options for students needing extra help at the middle school level except Oakland County Boot Camp. Wasko said officials were looking for a less drastic program.

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Budget from page A1

bilingual summer school.

The elementary study is an extensive multi-year plan that will revamp how the youngest students learn.

The budget reduces the tax levy from 14.89 to 14.48 mills for homeowners and from 20.3 to 20.1 mills for businesses. On top of that, the state levies another 6 mills for schools.

A mill is worth \$1 for every \$1,000 in state equalized/taxable value, half of market value or an inflation-capped lower figure.

But tax bills still are increasing, albeit slightly, because property values are increasing. A slightly-above-average home with a market value of \$182,000 (and an SEV of almost half of that) in 1997-98 is projected to increase in value to \$189,800 in 1998-99, with the corresponding school property tax moving from \$1,838 to \$1,842, according to the budget.

Because of flat revenues - the state's per-pupil payment remains anchored at \$9,029 - balancing the budget required tapping into the fund equity. About \$2.3 million was apportioned out of that account. But, Cannon

said that the emergency savings account is still in good shape, with \$23.4 million remaining.

Meanwhile, Cannon said the district is moving toward its target of having a fund equity balance of 8 to 12 percent of total expenditures by the end of the 2001-2002 fiscal year.

One reason the lack of new revenue didn't force major program cuts was the retirement of about 30 top-salaried teachers and administrators, resulting in a cost savings of approximately \$760,000.

"We've also tightened up on class sizes at the high schools and we reduced 10 certified staffing positions," Cannon continued.

The budget includes money for whatever contract increases are ultimately negotiated and for the first phase of a project to install football lights at the three high schools. Those lights won't be ready in time for the 1998 football season, however.

Cannon cited the approval of a community service equity and excellence program fund,

with \$1.2 million in money set aside from the recent Durant lawsuit settlement. The fund will generate about \$60,000 annually in interest.

That money will help pay some students' tuition for summer school and the matching of grants for staff members.

About \$1.5 million in general fund money is being targeted for various school improvements, to complement those being handled by the bond issue approved last September.

"Our intent when we go into buildings is not to just enhance areas ... receiving bond funds," Cannon explained, "but to look at the whole building, to bring it up to a certain level."

In other words, the district wants to avoid a "time warp" situation where people see a drastic difference between bond issue building additions and the remaining portions of schools.

"What we're going to be doing through the general fund is upgrading the lighting, painting, putting in new carpet ... so the entire building looks good and new."

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