

School district asks parents to push for resolution

BY TIM SMITH
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Residents of Farmington Public Schools recently were implored by school officials to get on the phone and put some heat on state legislators to help solve the continuing Durant lawsuit dilemma over special education funding.

Superintendent Bob Maxfield also stressed the need for more Michigan school board members, administrators and districts to join the Durant II fight, to wage a "multi-faceted campaign to

convince legislators they have an obligation."

Durant II was filed in May 1998, for the same reason as was the original 1980 lawsuit. Districts including Farmington are maintaining the state is not meeting its obligation under the Headlee Amendment to adequately fund special education.

The alleged lack of funding is continuing despite the Michigan Supreme Court's July 1997 decision in the original lawsuit, awarding \$212 million in reimbursements to 84 plaintiff districts.

I think we need to act strongly and urge our various organizations ... and legislators to stop up to this issue before it comes back to roost in our own setting.

Frank Reid
—School board treasurer

Farmington received \$9.5 million in that settlement. Of that amount, the district indirectly returned \$7.7 million to residents by reducing the amount of the Series 2 bond issue, from \$26.1 million to \$18.4 million. Voters, in September 1997, approved a two-part bond issue

for school renovations totalling \$93.1 million.

Maxfield, during the Dec. 1 meeting, reviewed a lengthy report about Durant II that he produced with Rochester schools Superintendent John Schultz and attorney Dennis Pollard.

- According to the report:
1. "With the election behind us, we must work with the majority and minority legislative leaders to recognize that school underfunding is a reality."
 2. "The realities of the Durant case must be communicated to the media and voters, not generalities about 'better schools.'"
 3. "We need to educate candidates for the year 2000 election about Durant II and the fundamental issue of fully funded state mandates and full funding for special education."

DURANT

The report also went on to say that the state Legislature, following last year's high court ruling on the first Durant case, shifted revenues from the foundation allowance (per pupil funding) to special education, instead of providing additional operating dollars for special ed.

"The net result is a continued underfunding," said Maxfield.

In 1997-98, the statewide shortfall of special education funding was estimated at \$376,636,584; this year, the amount is \$337,009,061. Last year in Farmington schools, the state paid \$2,895,000 of the mandated state funding obligation of \$5,865,000.

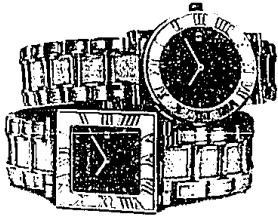
School board President Cathy Webb and Treasurer Frank Reid backed Maxfield.

Webb urged citizens watching the meeting on cable television to call state Sen. Bill Bullard and state Rep. Andrew Raczowski.

"They'll pay attention," said Webb.

Reid warned of future battles over school dollars between parents of general education and special education students if the mess isn't soon cleaned up.

"I think we need to act strongly and urge our various organizations ... and legislators to step up to this issue before it comes back to roost in our own setting," said Reid, who has written letters about the topic to members of the Michigan Association of School Boards.



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LEGISLATIVE LOSERS

They often get a lot of publicity, but not every legislative bill makes it through both chambers. Here are some of the major losers of 1997-98:

Electric deregulation - Sen. Mat Dunaskiss, R-Lake Orion, didn't introduce SB 1340 to deregulate electric utilities until mid-November, and many lawmakers were unhappy that Gov. John Engler tried to ram it through in just a few days.

The Senate on Dec. 3 passed a token, watered-down measure that would have given statutory status to a Public Service Commission order. The House let it die without a vote.

Supermajority - Sen. Mike Bouchard, R-Birmingham, sponsored a constitutional amendment to require that all tax increases have a 60 percent majority, instead of 50 percent plus one, to take effect. It never got a Senate or House vote, though Gov. Engler drew applause when he mentioned it in his State of the State address in February.

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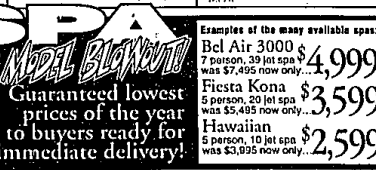
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