

New accreditation model highlighted at forum

By SUE BUCK
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Education YES! A Yardsick for Excellent Schools, the state's proposed accountability program, drew mixed reviews.

A public forum was held Jan. 18 at the Farmington Training Center in Farmington.

"We will report to our state board of education in February about the forum and what we've heard," said Paul Bielawski, special assistant for under-performing schools for the Michigan Department of Education. "It may take us some time to respond to everything and to incorporate where we are going. Sometime this spring we will

take it to the legislative committees of House and Senate Education and the House and Senate Appropriation Committees." Bielawski moderated the forum.

Farmington School Superintendent Bob Maxfield introduced State School Superintendent Tom Watkins as "a cheerleader for public education who has mobilized resources."

Neighborhood public schools are the Statute of Liberty in the country, Watkins said. "Name another institution in America which takes the tired, the hungry, the poor and the huddled masses, the English as a second language, the children with disabilities," Watkins said.

Listening to others who commented since he introduced the new model, Watkins said he knows children are "more than a single test on a single day."

The plan has three standards. ■ All Michigan elementary and middle school children will read independently and use math to solve problems at grade level.

■ All Michigan students will experience a year of growth for a year in education. "When we talk about growth we talk about comparing the same students," Bielawski said. "What did they do as fourth graders? What did they do as seventh graders?"

■ All Michigan high school students, in addition to demonstrating

high academic achievement, will have an educational plan leading them to being prepared for success.

The goals in Education Yes! are to raise achievement of all students at all levels, measure excellence, report success and provide support.

The Department of Education invites anyone who is interested to complete the Education Yes! Survey, which is available online. The survey asks to rank proposed standards from 1 to 5, with 1 being less supportive and 5 as most supportive.

The survey asks about weighting, explained as what percentage of an accountability score should be based on each compo-

nent. This includes status, change and growth.

It also asks to identify indicators under categories of family involvement, continuous improvement, professional development, extended learning opportunities, performance management systems, curriculum alignment, student attendance and dropout rate and four-year education and employment plan. The Web site is www.mde.state.mi.us.

Bielawski can be reached at (517) 335-5784.

John Hayden, vice-president of human resources at Henry Ford Health System, approved of the proposal. "We like the notion of giving letter grades," he said.

"The symbol gives a general opportunity to determine where schools stand."

The public is used to such grades with hotels and restaurants, on a five-star rating, he said.

David York, a former Farmington school board member, also favored the new letter grading. "We need more accounting for performance," he said. "We are graduating citizens who can vote and serve as jurors."

School districts are seeing a plethora of accountability models, said Farmington School Board Member Frank Reid.

"My hope is that we can see some way to reduce the complexity," he said.

Fairness in MEAP testing questioned

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Some school employees took jobs at the Michigan Educational Assessment Program test when they spoke Jan. 18 at a public hearing on Michigan's proposed accreditation plan held at the Farmington Training Center.

Several work for Farmington Public Schools.

Berna Ravitz, principal of Wood Creek Elementary in the Farmington school district, is concerned about the weighting of the MEAP.

"We have been given directives from Lansing which kind of astounded us in a school where 41 percent of our students speak a second language and there are 31 different languages," Ravitz said. "We're baffled by the directive that we give our English language learners, who barely speak English, dictionaries to take the test. We're baffled by that lack of astuteness. Fairness and equity is something different than 'everybody is the same.'"

Ravitz mentioned that the Fairfax County School District in Virginia which she visited excludes English language learners for 60 months.

"The directive is next year no scores can be excluded," said Barbara Bennett, MEAP coordinator for Wood Creek Elementary. "If we are talking about leveling the playing field, we also need to talk about what is humane to do to 9 and 10 year olds."

Steven Schwartz, school psychologist for Farmington schools and president of the Michigan Association of School Psychologists, said research shows students develop social language in three years, academic language in five years. Buildings which have large groups of children who speak English as a second language will be punished in terms of a grading system in this type of a format, he said. "Our organization would recommend at least four years before you start to count these kinds of scores," Schwartz said.

Dave Workman, a fifth grade teacher at Beechview Elementary, said that the MEAP has become a large measure which is not always accurate. "When we're measured with one test, primarily 75 percent, it really seals us down," Workman said. "Please look at all the things we do in the classroom to measure kids."

Other districts comments

Other district representatives spoke. "We are all being evaluated on the same level," said Chris Bak, assistant principal at Wayne Memorial High School in the Wayne-Westland School District. "One of my concerns is the weight that is being placed on the MEAP. Schools are a reflection of the community from which they come. We have community involvement. We have parents who take interest in our kids. In more successful communities, they are often more financially

able to support their students. When you tell a community you have a failing school, you can destroy that community."

"Children are being used, I believe, for a political agenda to promote vouchers or whatever it might be. The grade is not the cure. The MEAP is not the cure, because you have not identified the problem. We don't get to choose our students. Businesses have those choices. I'm asking that the MEAP be a smaller portion of the grade and that it not be one grade. A student never takes one grade home."

Randy Liepa, assistant superintendent of general administration for Livonia Public Schools, agreed with the standards developed. "Our concerns come in how those particular items will be measured," Liepa said. "We don't know right now that there are good ways to measure the types of standards which have been identified. Potentially what we have is another paper collection process which school districts will have to go through without actually collecting the meaningful data which we hope to get out of the process."

Bill Weber, superintendent of South Redford Schools, said measuring continuous improvement is the goal. "The issue becomes how do you measure this and how do you know it is happening?" he asked.

He addressed the issue of both the drop out rate and a district with a large amount of students who are moving into a school dis-

trict who have not been successful in other school districts. "Our philosophy is to give second chances to people," Weber said. "In your weighting issue you need to take a look at how districts look at drop outs and the second chances that they give."

Brian Motter, superintendent of Redford Union schools, was concerned with the implementation of the timeline in 2002-2003. "Since 1990 there have been five different accreditation programs presented which we were told were going to be the measure-ment," Motter said. "I would ask that the State Board of Education move a little slower in the accreditation process. There's a difference between accreditation and accountability. There's a lot more that goes into student achievement than what's on a test."

Tom Tattan, superintendent of Clarenceville Public Schools, said the district has been doing a lot of things which is in the accreditation. He opposes grading schools. "It doesn't allow you to build coalitions and the trust you need," Tattan said. "A school that gets low grades is going to have trouble ever building coalitions and trust in your community. You can't do that by saying, 'You're no good, you're failing.'"

YMCA Partners raising money for needy kids

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The 2002 YMCA Partners campaign aims to raise \$114,000 to provide summer camp and recreation for needy kids.

The campaign, which raised \$105,000 last year, also pays for recreation for seniors.

Jon Grant, YMCA board of directors chairman and Farmington Hills city councilman, said the campaign goal is up "because our needs are exceeding what we raised."

Grant emphasized that all the money raised in greater Farmington stays in the community.

Campaign chairman Greg Switaj said the fund-raising drive proceeds in three stages. The first began in December when the YMCA asked staff to contribute. The second stage involves soliciting contributions from the 35 members of the YMCA Farmington branch board of directors. The third stage starts Feb. 1. It centers on seeking community contributions.

Board members are assigned various segments of the professional community to seek money from. Grant said it helps that one board member has access to the Chamber of Commerce member list.

Grant has served on the YMCA board six years. "I particularly like their mission of being family focused with activities for kids and families and the fact that they support day camp and day care for families of kids who wouldn't be able to participate in those activities without subsidies. That's a great experience for kids."

Switaj said that while 90 percent of contributions are for youth activities, about 10 percent benefit senior recreation programs.

He emphasized that money raised through the Partners campaign does not support the Farmington YMCA branch, or YMCA programs. These activities are paid for through YMCA member dues.

The Partners campaign runs through mid March.

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