

PONTIAC - County commissioner fights for alternative education

By DIANA DILLABER MURRAY Of The Oakland Press

Plans are shaping up for Pontiac's new high and middle schools, but Oakland County Commissioner Mattie McKinney Hatchett wants to know what is going to happen to kids who are in alternative education at Bethune School that is slated for closing in the fall.

Hatchett, a former school administrator who still substitutes in Pontiac schools, attended a Michigan Children's meeting at Oakland Schools Monday, where students from around the county testified as to the importance of alternative school in turning their lives around.

It motivated her to attend Monday night's board meeting and ask about the status of the alternative school in Pontiac.

"If you could have heard what those youngsters said about all their schools," she told Pontiac school trustees. "They talked about people taking a personal interest in them. They talked about hands-on education."

Pontiac trustees and acting Superintendent Linda Paramore do plan to open an alternative high school in the fall, but the plan has not officially been to the board for approval. They have informally discussed the possibility of contracting with a private company to operate an alternative high school. They have also discussed having an alternative school run by the district in a separate area of another school.

It was Hatchett and other community activists who urged the board to keep the alternative school at Bethune open when it was slated to close two years ago because of operational problems. Hatchett helped redesign the school and substituted as principal until the district hired a new principal late last year.

However, she told the board Monday night, "I'm not about to fight to keep the alternative school open. I did that once before."

Now she's interested in a different approach.

If the district wants to make the required adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind legislation, Hatchett told the board, "We've got to do something with those children who keep people from teaching. They need a smaller environment, a different approach. They are not losers."

"We also need middle school alternatives. They are under 16 and can't be put out. We used to have one within the building at Jefferson."

Board President Damon Dorkins said trustees had directed the administration to create a plan for alternative education as they restructure the district and redesign middle and high schools.

"They are exploring several options. We had several presentations at a retreat about what to do for alternative education," Dorkins said.

"You are right, our (expulsion) committee is seeing a lot of children at the middle school level. They aren't bad or ignorant kids. The problems are universal."

Students in the redesigned high school and middle school will have more interventions available to keep them from developing the need for an alternative school.

For example, the new high school will be divided into smaller learning academies in areas of student interest. Students will be put into groups of about 150 with their teachers and a counselor and social worker. This way, the staff can develop a relationship with students and provide academic and emotional help when a student needs it.

The middle school redesign is similar with the exception of having academies. In addition, there will be more intervention programs at the schools in the fall.

