Evaluation shows poor pupils excel under redesign

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By PATRICK BONIN

An outside evaluator of the school redesign plan told the School Board's Management and Planning Committee Tuesday that students participating in the plan from a low socio-economic background achieved at a higher rate than participating students from high socio-economic backgrounds.

Dr. Harold V. Knight, a University of Southern Mississippi professor, said educators across the country have noticed this occurrence in the local school system's plan, which also features a free choice of enhancements and site-based management.

Motivation was a possible reason for the success of the students from poor families, he said.

"Possibly their parents are encouraging them," Knight said. "In general, the low SES (socio-economic status) kids are being given more attention — for the first time in their lives, maybe?"

Superintendent of Schools Bernard Weiss said the academic improvement of students from poor families "exceeded what would have normally been anticipated" when compared to the gains made by students from well-off families in the program.

Knight said the redesign program is "in the forefront. Based on what everyone is planning to do, I see nothing to discontinuette and I see lots of encouraging signs."

Still, during the second year of the plan — when it was in place at 43 schools during the 1989-90 academic year — overall pupil achievement was slightly higher at non-redesign schools than at redesign schools, but Knight said this was expected.

"I think that they (non-redesign schools) had more original high socio-economic status students," Knight said. "National averages indicate that high SES students tend to score higher, so you would expect the high SES kids to bring them up a little bit."

Board member Donna Deshotel, who has consistently criticized the redesign plan, said the evaluation did not address all important aspects, including decreasing busing and desegregating the school system.

"This whole thing is a sham," Deshotel said. "They are taking statistics and breaking them down into smaller and smaller parts to try and show something."

Deshotel pointed out that many of the figures in the report indicated very slight differences between redesign and non-redesign students.

"They ought to be ashamed of themselves for presenting this as some wonderful phenomenon — these students scored at about the level that is expected of them," she said.

Redesign

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However, Weiss was pleased with Knight's evaluation.

"I think Dr. Knight has done a highly creditable job. It is extremely forthcoming," Weiss said. "The evaluation is designed to give us information where we need to go in dealing with the strengths and weaknesses of redesign."

Weiss welcomed Knight's recommendations for the plan, which included the development of staff programs designed to increase the job satisfaction of personnel and the elimination of non-essential work details so teachers can concentrate on teaching.

"Redesign is a dynamic, changing entity that should be modified as necessary to meet the needs that we have to deal with," Weiss said. "It's not a crystallized, congealed package that will stay forever the same."

Knight's report said the job satisfaction of teachers and principals in both redesign and non-redesign schools, although not at a low level, was not at the "more desirable high level necessary for the success of any educational program."

The workload of both redesign and non-redesign personnel was perceived to be very high. Redesign personnel reporting a significantly higher workload due to the implementation of the plan, the report stated.

The report also indicated that pupils participating in an enhancement program achieved at a slightly higher rate than non-participants attending a redesign school. However, the plan did not have a strong effect on either pupil or teacher attendance, the report stated.