Panel agrees to reconsider evaluation of school redesign

By PATRICK BONIN 3/13/1992

A School Board committee agreed to consider the latest independent evaluation of the system's redesign plan, despite rejecting it less than one month ago because it did not provide pertinent information.

The Management and Planning Committee met on Wednesday to decide exactly how they wanted the program evaluated, as well as to discuss whether to have the latest evaluation redone.

The current evaluation does not compare the attitudes of students in redesign to students in regular schools.

Former Associate Superintendent Donald Hoover said it's too late to redo some aspects of the evaluation in non-redesign schools because it includes surveys of students' attitudes that may have changed by now.

"It's something that can be done in the future, but not after the fact," he said.

Some committee members said they were perplexed by some of the language and findings in the evaluation.

"If we could get these guys to explain their terms and use sixth-grade language, I think we could understand a lot better," board member and committee Chairman Lou Hines said after the meeting.

Aspects of the 119-page report are highly technical.

Committee member Donna Deshotels said the January presentation by the evaluator, University of Southern Mississippi Professor Harold Knight, did not provide key answers necessary to determine the future of the program.

"We said, 'This isn't telling us anything. We don't understand it,' " Deshotels said. "Took us two whole days. What was Dr. Knight supposed to be evaluating? And whoever he was charged with evaluating what we felt we needed to know."

The redesign plan, which includes site-based management, is an attempt to desegregate the school system by offering enhanced programs.

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at specific schools to attract minority students.

The survey questions that cannot be redone for first- and second-graders include having students color-in smiling faces if they agree with a statement, frowning faces if they disagree and expressionless faces if they don't know the answer.

High school seniors were asked the exact same questions as children in the third grade, such as:

- My teacher expects me to be as good or better than most of the students when I finish high school.
- I worry about how well I am doing in school.
- Teachers in my school care more about students since redesign.

Hoover said he and researcher Jennifer Baird will attempt to make the evaluation "clearer" at the committee meeting scheduled for Feb. 26.

"We'll try to put it in language that is meaningful to them and let them decide whether the information is meaningful enough to make a decision or not. . . . " Hoover said. "They never really got into it. I think they got into a lot of questions without getting into the substance of the evaluation."

Knight's report shows that students in redesign schools did not do as good a job of meeting academic expectations as non-redesign students.

It also shows that students from lower-income households systemwide are doing a better job of meeting academic expectations than students from higher-income households. The expectations are based on the students' past performance and are an attempt to measure their yearly progress.

Other findings include:

- The school system has a "major problem" collecting information from schools and reporting that information.
- Students at all levels, but particularly those in elementary grades, feel good about themselves, think their teachers expect more of them and think their parents have become more involved in schooling since redesign was implemented.

U.S. District Judge John Parker has given the School Board permission to continue the redesign plan, now in its fourth year, only through the end of this semester. The School Board has submitted the yearly independent evaluations to the court in the past as part of its annual requests to continue and expand the program.