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Oakland County schools competing for students **WITH VIDEO**

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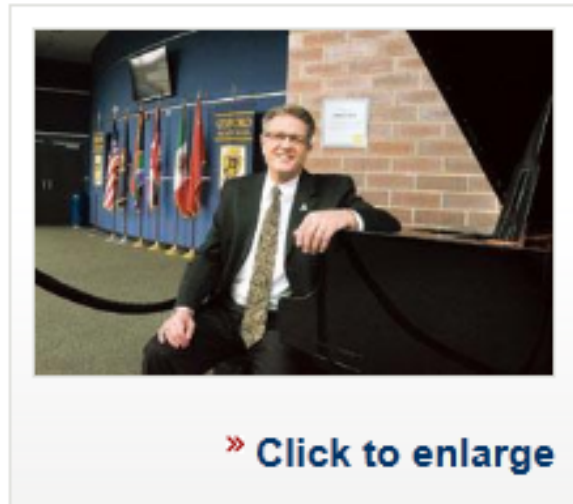
By **DIANA DILLABER MURRAY**

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Operating a school district is becoming more like operating a business in today's world.


That's because giving choice to public school parents has created competition not only with private and religious schools, but between

the growing number of charters and districts that accept students from other public schools under the state's Schools of Choice.




All the options open to parents makes attracting students key to receiving state aid based on a district's number of pupils.


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A decade ago, superintendents could put their focus on the education of students and keeping the district budget balanced.

Schools have to advertise

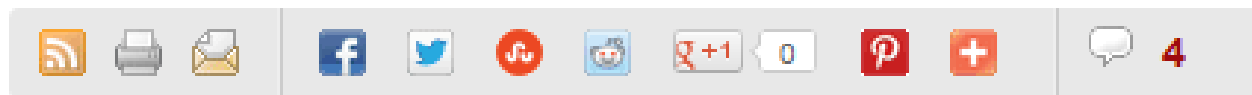
Today, not only do school officials in Oakland County and Michigan find it necessary to offer programs that are competitive with other districts, they are recognizing that advertising and marketing their schools is also a top priority.

"It is important to let people know you are there, not only to compete with each other but to let businesses know you are there," said Danelle Gittus, spokeswoman at Oakland Schools Intermediate District.

When districts advertise they are letting the community know about the strengths of district, so people move into their district.

"When Schools of Choice became popular, that became an issue between our districts. That was tough; we are all public education," Gittus said. **Continued...**

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Schools add attractive programs

Such an example of efforts to attract more students include the Royal Oak district's announcement last week that one of its elementary schools is providing every student in the class with an iPad.

Other districts have created and market an International Baccalaureate degree programs, increased the number of advanced placement courses, and added science, technology, engineering and math programs to their schools.

The Pontiac school district, which has had a dramatic yearly decline in enrollment, is looking at the possibility of equipping every student with a laptop computer, a move that could be much less costly than the \$8,000-per-pupil the district would lose in state aid for each student that switches to another district.

"The other thing we are looking at is making improvements in programs at the International Technology Academy to make it a stand-alone and more challenging program," said Pontiac Superintendent Brian Dougherty.

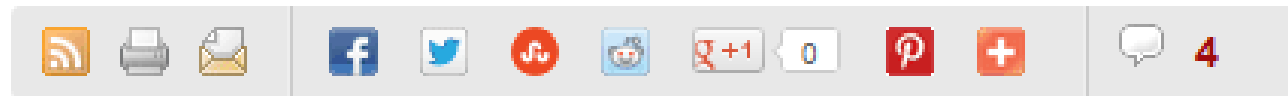
An example of a district that has increased its strengths and spread the word as far as China, is the Oxford school district.

The once tiny, low-profile system in northern Oakland County, has become an example of both providing competitive programs and promoting and advertising them to attract students.

Oxford enrollment increases dramatically

While enrollment is declining at many Oakland County school districts, the number of students at Oxford school district has increased by almost 1,600 students to almost 5,500, since Superintendent William Skilling took over the reins.

Skilling credits his innovative method of operation that focuses on offering new programs that meet the needs of employers and bring in more revenue — rather than reducing costs by making cuts — for the success of Oxford Schools. **Continued...**



The superintendent acknowledges that no matter how good the programs, schools have to get the word out so people know about them.

Linda Lewis, spokeswoman for the Oxford schools, said the district markets its accomplishments and new programs in its newsletter, newspaper and magazines, radio, television, professional affiliations and speaking engagements, Realtor packets, community open houses, attending open house for private education students and by improving schools so that there is more curb appeal when people drive by.

Skilling said when he came to Oxford schools as superintendent in 2006, during the recession, "I knew and already observed all of the cuts school districts were making to try and balance their budgets, I decided instead of focusing on the expenditure side, we should be focusing on the revenue side.

"We didn't wait until things improved. We went after students aggressively at the worst time when we only had a 4 percent fund balance. We chose to take a risk.

"We've chosen to invest more in innovations and education and we want to increase our magnetism," Skilling said.

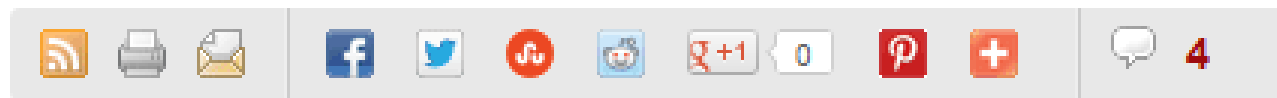
"Every year I've been here we've rolled out a new program," he said. Also, the district eliminated its pay-to-play program, paid parents back for fees already paid and eliminated all event admission fees.

Also, Oxford has more than tripled the arts program, increased language programs and requirements, and doubled athletic teams and added sports.

And the 5,500 enrollment does not include the tuition paying students that are attending the expanding number of Oxford's schools started in China.

"We are "edupreneurs," as opposed to entrepreneurs, who do more cutting and laying off, Skilling said.

Marketing schools helps Continued...



Anita Banach, co-president of the Michigan School Public Relations Association, and executive director of human resources and communication in the Clarkston schools, said, "I believe school marketing has absolutely helped districts that were facing drastic enrollment losses," said Banach.

"Attracting students and families to a community and keeping them engaged and supportive of public education is very important," Banach said.

But "Schools of Choice has obviously increased the need for marketing and communication," Banach said.

"Districts have to be sure that their own residents know what is offered and the achievement rates of their students to keep their district thriving."

The best approach for a school district is a multi-tier one, Banach said, with social media taking a bigger role.

Besides websites, "All districts utilize tools such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs, press releases, newsletters, postcards, cable channels, emails and texting," Banach said.

"Phone calls and meetings are also utilized to provide two-way communication."

In addition, because every community is comprised of many different generations, it is important to use tools that reach everyone, not just the parents, Banach said, such as holding special programs at the schools for senior citizens and pre-school parents, something done at Clarkston schools.

At Rochester school district, spokeswoman Debra Hartman said, "Our marketing has not traditionally been targeted at keeping or gaining students, as we have had either growing or steady student enrollment."

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