

THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGING

School choice, cooperative agreement -- what's it all mean?

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This is a quiz. It won't count toward your grade — it's only to find out what you know about recent changes in education.

What is a cooperative agreement? What are schools of choice? Can students in charter schools, or public academies, participate in the athletic programs of another school?

These terms and questions can be intimidating and confusing to parents and school staff members alike. And with the start of school right around the corner, they're important.

A COOPERATIVE agreement has been reached during the last few months between Boyne City and Boyne Falls schools to benefit high school students.

Juniors and seniors, and some sophomores and freshmen in the two districts will be able to take classes that are not offered at their own school.

"We've given Boyne Falls a list of classes we have openings in, and their students will be able to take classes they don't have available there," said Boyne City superintendent Bob Nakoneczny.

"Classes that our students may need but are not offered in Boyne

Falls can be taken in Boyne City," said Boyne Falls schools principal Ruth I. Goldsmith, "like wood shop, advance placement classes, and trigonometry."

"Boyne Falls students can choose whether to take a class at Boyne City or North Central Michigan College."

Some options will be available for ninth or tenth graders, such as band for students who show a desire to take music.

The pilot program starts with the 1996-97 school year and has been approved for two years. The school districts will evaluate it at that time.

Michigan's base per-pupil grant is for six periods a day, so if a student takes one class in the other school district, then one-sixth of that student's grant will be paid by the home school to the host school.

"I'm hoping this will open some opportunities for our students to take some of those special classes we don't have," said Goldsmith.

FOR THE LAST two years, schools within the Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District have had a reciprocal schools of choice agreement. These schools include Boyne City, East Jordan and Boyne Falls.

A student in any Char-Em school can ask to attend another school within the intermediate district. The open enrollment process includes applying to the nonresident school, and if there is room, completing the paperwork process between the two schools.

The state per-pupil grant follows the student to the new school, and differences in state grant amounts will be paid by students.

In early June, the Michigan legislature passed a bill, including Section 105 Schools of Choice, which took effect June 19.

It stated that schools had to make a decision — opt out of Section 105 and lose 10 percent of their state grant amount, comply with Section 105, or follow their own schools of choice program.

"Char-Em saw the legislation coming," said Nakoneczny. "It was scary to the superintendents. The law says if special needs students apply and space is available, they have to be provided for, including transportation."

That would mean East Jordan schools might be required to provide transportation to a Pellston student and visa versa.

Char-Em's policy states that the districts don't have to provide trans-

portation for nonresident students.

The original Char-Em policy had limited the number of students that could leave a school district by one percent. For example, Boyne City has about 1,400 students, so only 14 could leave. That has been revised in the new agreement, and the cap has been eliminated.

Applications must be accepted at least until August 1 each year, according to Char-Em's policy, and any student leaving a district will not be able to return until the following school year.

"This is not just happening in Michigan," Nakoneczny said. "It's happening nationally."

"When the Governor signed the bill, he said, 'local school superintendents can no longer hold students hostage.'"

A LOT OF controversy has followed charter schools, which are now mostly being called public academies through their first year. One big question is whether or not public academy students can participate in athletics in their home district school.

Effective August 1 is an additional eligibility option in the Michigan High School Athletic Association guidelines for students in public academies.

Four options existed prior to May, when a fifth one was agreed to. It was reportedly a compromise prompted by legislation proposed by Sen. Mike Rogers, R-Howell, to let charter school students play on their home school sports teams.

Here are the five ways a public academy student can participate in athletic programs:

- The charter school sponsors and conducts its own athletic program;

- Cooperative programs — a public academy can join the high school athletic association and then join with other member schools to sponsor teams in various sports;

- Students enrolled in a public academy that has no sports can play sports in a traditional school where they are taking and passing at least four full subjects;

- Students enrolled in a traditional high school taking courses at a charter school remain eligible for athletics if they are taking and passing at least four full subjects for which the traditional school will provide credit;

- A student who has attended a high school for at least two semesters and enrolls in another association member school with a specialized curriculum can play sports in the

first school; the majority of courses at the specialized school must be different from the first school, and that determination is made by the school providing the sport.

For all but the first option, the schools involved must cooperate and work together. For the last three options, the two schools involved determine how to share state funding for the student and if a participation fee is required.

Boyne City, East Jordan and Boyne Falls schools are all members of the Michigan High School Athletic Association and follow its guidelines.

These schools have not yet received specific requests from public academy students to participate in their sports programs.

Nakoneczny, Goldsmith, and East Jordan superintendent Chip Hansen all said that if and when they receive a request, their respective boards of education will have to make a decision.

"We have basically decided," said Boyne City's athletic director Chris Brilinski. "In Boyne City we will be following the MHSAA guidelines and section J of our school board policy. Students must be taking four classes here in order to participate in our sports programs."