

The sound of discord

Grosse Pointe South's vocal music program wins big awards, but parents wonder about the price.

BY LISA MARTINO

Throughout the years, Ellen Bowen's students at Grosse Pointe South High School have gone on to work in television, Broadway and movies and to become producers. They learn to sing in several languages and put on lavish productions such as "Sound of Music," "Oklahoma," "My Fair Lady" and "Pippin."

"I earn my money," she says. But during her 11 years as head of the vocal music program at the high school, Bowen has earned plenty of criticism. Teachers and students alike will call her productions "top-notch" and "exceptional," but in the next breath note that she is problematic and difficult to get along with, and has been reprimanded for using foul language and racial slurs around students.

And this fall residents have repeatedly raised questions at school board meetings about how

The hard-driving teacher has been reprimanded for slurs, foul language and overspending.

the district handles the cost of her award-winning musicals, which utilize professional choreographers, set designers and pit orchestra musicians from outside the school system. "Everyone you talk to will say, 'Yeah, she's a bitch,' but they also would say she is a brilliant choir director and without her they wouldn't be where they are today — and it's true," says Mike Costa, a junior at Grosse Pointe South.

Bowen does not deny that she runs a tough program, but says it pays off in the end by developing hard-working students and winning prestigious honors.

"I don't have to be loved, I just have to be respected," she says, adding that any doubt cast on her vocal music program is a product of jealousy and an effort to "dismantle" a successful program because of a series of run-ins she had with a colleague in the instrumental music program last year.

"It's only a few people. That's not a reflection of the community,

because my shows are sold out," she says.

Janet Thompson, a resident and retired schoolteacher who has questioned the vocal music program, says she can't understand why Bowen is allowed to continue teaching at the school after being cited numerous times for showing up late to her classes, in addition to faulty record-keeping.

"There wouldn't be anyone who would put up with that behavior from me," says Thompson.

Money talks

The Grosse Pointe Public School System, with its \$73 million budget, provides education for approximately 8,500 students in one of Detroit's most affluent suburbs.

The average teacher salary is \$54,832 (Bowen receives an extra stipend for producing the stage shows). The district boasts scores above the national average for

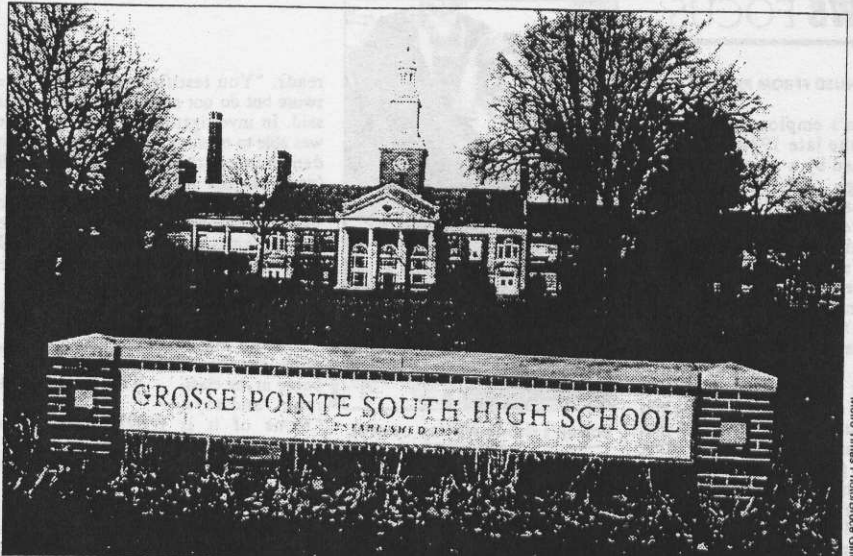
MEAP testing and high school proficiency exams; dropout rates at each of its two high schools are negligible.

As for extracurricular activities, there are the usual, including the school newspaper, pep

band, drama programs, television production and athletics. Of the extracurricular activities, Bowen's musicals are viewed by many as one of the highlights in the district's offerings.

"It's a jewel in the crown of Grosse Pointe schools. We put on these blockbuster plays. It's like saying, 'Look what we can do,'" says one teacher who declined to be identified.

Bowen's musical productions cost anywhere from \$35,000 to \$54,000 each. (Although there are numerous performances by her students throughout the school year, there is traditionally one large all-school musical each year.) Ticket sales, advertising and donations cover 35 per-



Photo/Tina Productions/Gillie

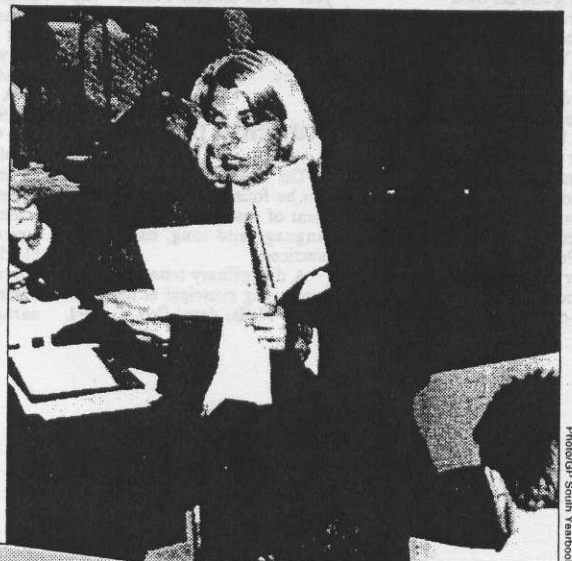
"I don't have to be loved, I just have to be respected," says Ellen Bowen.

cent to 45 percent of that, says Christian Fenton, assistant superintendent for business and support services for the school system.

The 1996-97 "Will Rogers Follies" cost \$63,632 and recovered only \$27,287 in ticket sales, concessions, fund-raising and other revenue.

In comparison, high school musicals in the Birmingham school district are produced for as little as \$10,000 to \$12,000, says Laurie Frick, head of the music education program at Birmingham Schools.

Lisa Dengiz, who produced "Once Upon A Mattress" last fall for Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor, says the budget for her pro-



Photo/OP South Yearbook

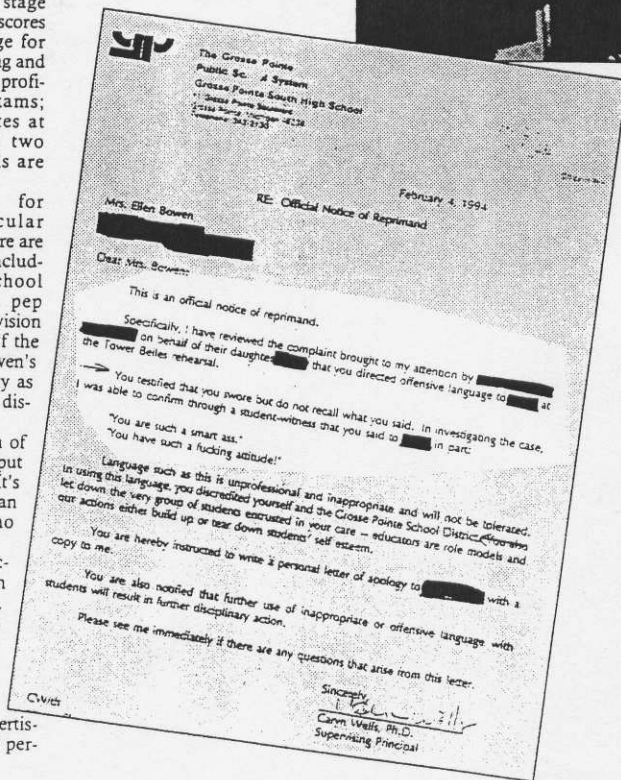
duction was \$14,000, with the show bringing in a \$3,000 profit through ticket sales and concessions.

While the costs for Bowen's productions may stop budget-conscious residents in their tracks, Fenton says the difference is taken into account in the planning stages, and the school system is not losing money.

"That's a myth that, quite frankly, irritates me," says Fenton, pointing out that while taxpayers do support extracurricular activities through the site budget allocations, they are not paying for the choreographers, who are paid for by parent contributions as well as ticket sales and advertising.

"Let's say, for example, a musical costs \$150,000. Do I personally think that's too much? Yes. But as long as the school's costs are covered, what difference does it make? That's my main concern."

But even though Fenton says Bowen's spending does not impact the rest of the music program, some parents are unconvinced. They point at reprimands in



CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

Bowen's employment records from the late 1980s that were obtained by a reporter's source through the Freedom of Information Act.

Several letters show serious administration concern for the cost of shows.

One 1989 letter from then-Superintendent John A. Whritner to the Grosse Pointe Education Association regarding a grievance reads: "Certainly, much of the impact of her actions fell on her regular music program. These bills are needed to be paid from that account, causing harm to other school programs. There is a large paper trail of warnings for Mrs. Bowen. She has seemingly ignored them and failed to place stricture on the booster club's spending and her own."

Three months later, a letter from the acting principal to Bowen read: "Your budget for the 1988-89 school year was depleted before the end of the first semester. In spite of my verbal warnings in which I explicitly stated that you are not to incur any other expenses without administrative approval, I have now learned of two outstanding invoices, one for \$1115.00 and the second for \$1080.00 from the Vain Prince Costumes Company. Neither of these invoices had purchase order numbers."

To create musicals of the cal-



Bowen's shows win top awards.

iber found at Grosse Pointe South, Bowen and administrators argue that these costs are necessary to keep shows professional.

And the formula works — last year "Will Rogers Follies" captured the International Showstoppers award for the top high school show choir in the country.

Students pay price

The downside of these honors can be found in Bowen's treatment of students, including foul language and long, exhausting practices.

A disciplinary letter from the supervising principal at the time, Caryn Wells, dated Feb. 4, 1994,

reads: "You testified that you swore but do not recall what you said. In investigating the case, I was able to confirm through a student witness that you said to (name blocked out) in part: 'You are such a smart ass.' 'You have such a fucking attitude!' Language such as this is unprofessional and inappropriate and will not be tolerated. In using this language, you discredited yourself and the Grosse Pointe School District."

Bowen maintains she never swore in the classroom, and says, "None of it is proper and none of it is appropriate, but people do make mistakes."

Still, anecdotes about her language seem to run through the student body. And another incident this year led to Bowen being reprimanded.

A disciplinary letter dated June 6, 1997, reads: "(name blocked out) was questioned during a period of several weeks which validated that, you, indeed, used the expression 'Niggers and Kikes' as a metaphor or simile in a verbally aggressive manner with (name blocked out). You subsequently apologized to her in writing. In order for the district to express its earnestness about your compli-

ance to professional standards and behavior in and out of the classroom, you are hereby suspended for one day without pay."

Bowen's extreme behavior goes beyond language. Paul Andrecovich, former technical director at the Grosse Pointe Performing Arts Center at Grosse Pointe North High School, where the shows generally take place, remembers "kids being dragged out of the theater at 2 a.m. by their parents" while practicing for one of Bowen's shows.

He recalls that once he worked long hours over the weekend with students to construct a set for an upcoming musical, and the day before the performance Bowen came in and informed Andrecovich in front of students that the set looked "like shit."

She then hired help from Wayne State University to construct a new set overnight.

"It didn't meet her professional standards," he said. "A lot of the kids basically quit the show because of all the time they put in."

One student says the intensive rehearsals before a show can last up to seven hours on weekdays and well past midnight or 1 a.m.

on weekends.

"It is a demanding program, but students realize this," says one of Bowen's students. "There's no way we wanna be a mediocre choir. We wanna be the best."

But the drive to be the best had to be monitored by parents last year when they stepped in to work out a less demanding practice schedule for their exhausted kids.

"They were getting burned out at practices," says Stu Pettit, co-president of the South Choir Booster Club and a father of two daughters in the choir.

For a while, students who missed or were late for practices had to pay the price. A March 6, 1995, letter in Bowen's employment file reprimands her for fining those students.

According to the letter, the money she collected was used to help defray costs for an annual postproduction banquet.

Art Miller, who became South principal this fall, would not comment on Bowen's history, although he says he plans to assess concerns voiced by some of the parents about the program in the coming months.

"I'm not on anybody's side; I'm on the kids' side," he says. "I don't know how much spending is too much, but in the future there will be equity in this high school."

Lisa Martino is a Metro Times staff writer.

