

Montgomery County awaits federal grant to create new 'High-Tech High'

Wheaton, Thomas Edison high schools in Silver Spring would merge

by Andrew Ujifusa | Staff Writer

Montgomery County school officials hope to hear word this week about a federal grant that would create a "High-Tech High" for the 2011-12 school year.

The \$3.2 million Magnet Schools Assistance Program grant from the U.S. Department of Education would lead to combining Wheaton and Thomas Edison high schools in Silver Spring, enlarging vocational programs that have a waiting list, eliminating under-enrolled classes, creating a full four-year high school vocational program option and introducing more high-tech instruction into classrooms.

The grant, however, was not discussed or voted on by the Board of Education prior to the grant application's submission in April, and some Thomas Edison High School parents expressed surprise and anger that community input wasn't sought.

Theresa Defino, the Rockville parent of a junior at Thomas Edison studying automotive technology, was incredulous that the school board would not vote on submitting the grant and did not inform parents.

"All of us were completely unaware that anything like this was proposed," Defino said.

The goal of the new magnet high-tech high school is to prepare students for more demanding work-force expectations in an appealing way, whether or not they eventually go to college, officials said.

"The idea is that you create programs to draw student interest," said Marty Creel, director of enriched and innovative programs for the school system.

The grant also would help create a new magnet selection program in the arts for the existing International Baccalaureate program at Watkins Mill High School in Gaithersburg to counter the number of student withdrawals from the school, which are the highest among all high schools in the county system.

"Watkins Mill needs additional resources and pull into that school for high-achieving students," said school board President Patricia B. O'Neill (Dist. 3) of Bethesda. "This grant benefits many kids, both in the downcounty and the upcounty."

In an April 22 memo to the school board, Superintendent Jerry D. Weast told board members the magnet program at the three schools would be more responsive to what students want.

In the grant application the school system wrote, "Transforming these high schools into magnet schools will achieve desegregation and educational equity."

Enrollment figures would not decrease if Wheaton and Thomas Edison merge, officials said. A lottery would govern admission to the high-tech high school, although how the lottery would work has not been finalized. Currently, students have to apply to Thomas Edison.

The merger could result in under-enrolled programs being eliminated, but students currently in the programs would be allowed to complete them.

Vocational programs such as hospitality and biotechnology at Thomas Edison are under-enrolled, school officials said. Wheaton, meanwhile, is the least-selected high school in its school consortium the past two years, Weast wrote in the memo.

George Gadbois, who has a son in the Academy of Engineering at Wheaton High School, said merging with Thomas Edison and the expanded programming would boost revitalization efforts at the school.

"We feel it will help Wheaton be able to serve a wider range of students, both from the struggling ones that we work with now to even a greater array of gifted kids, as well as making the student population a bit more diverse that it is," said Gadbois, the high school's representative on the Montgomery County Council of Parent-Teacher Associations.

O'Neill said the board historically has not voted on federal grant proposals until the grant has been obtained, although she said board members were briefed on the application. She also noted Thomas Edison does not qualify as a traditional, comprehensive high school.

But Defino argued the untested concept of a "high-tech high" should not replace the current arrangement of students splitting time at Thomas Edison High Schools and their "home" high schools.

"I don't want my son having to go to Wheaton so he could get a two-year, upper-level Edison-type of program," Defino said.