

# Education advocate

## Building good relationships produces legislative results

By **PATTY JANOVEC**

Rep. Denise Dittrich (DFL-Champlin) knows she can't accomplish anything by herself, and that cultivating good relationships produces positive results. She believes this philosophy helped her defeat five-term representative Bill Haas last November.



**Rep. Denise Dittrich**

Her background of community involvement includes seven years on the Anoka-Hennepin School Board, and 15 years as a fifth- and sixth-grade teacher.

If she would have been given the opportunity to introduce the first bill of the session, Dittrich said it would have been related to busing issues in her district. Students within a two-mile radius of schools are not now provided busing unless they pay to ride. "I would

like to fix that, or give the school district some flexibility that they can provide more busing," she said.

Her goal during the next two years is "equitable, adequate, long-term, stable, school funding." Dittrich emphasized that schools spend a lot of time and money on responding to the Legislature, resources that could better be spent elsewhere.

One accomplishment while she served on the school board was the development of a five-year financial plan.

"The amount of flexibility that supplied our board and our staff...you can really focus then on change, improvements, climate, student safety...and concentrate on that instead of always responding to the funding levels and the Legislature."

Intimate with the topic of education with three boys in public schools, Dittrich said her first "wake up call" was when her oldest, Neal, went to kindergarten and was surprised by large class sizes.

## DISTRICT 47A

2002 Population: 36,895

Largest city: Coon Rapids

Counties: Anoka, Hennepin

Top Concern: Quality education

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Even with excellent teachers, she said, there was a lack of communication and problems with how the money was flowing.

Dittrich became involved in a parent legislative team that started her on the path of being an advocate for education-related issues. The group studied education finance and took seminars on how to work with legislators.

The group was successful in seeing a one-time funding bill for the school district pass through the Legislature. That was the first time in 10 years the district didn't have to cut services to children, she said.

"Change can happen, but it's not always easy, and it takes a long time," she said. "And it takes perseverance and team work."