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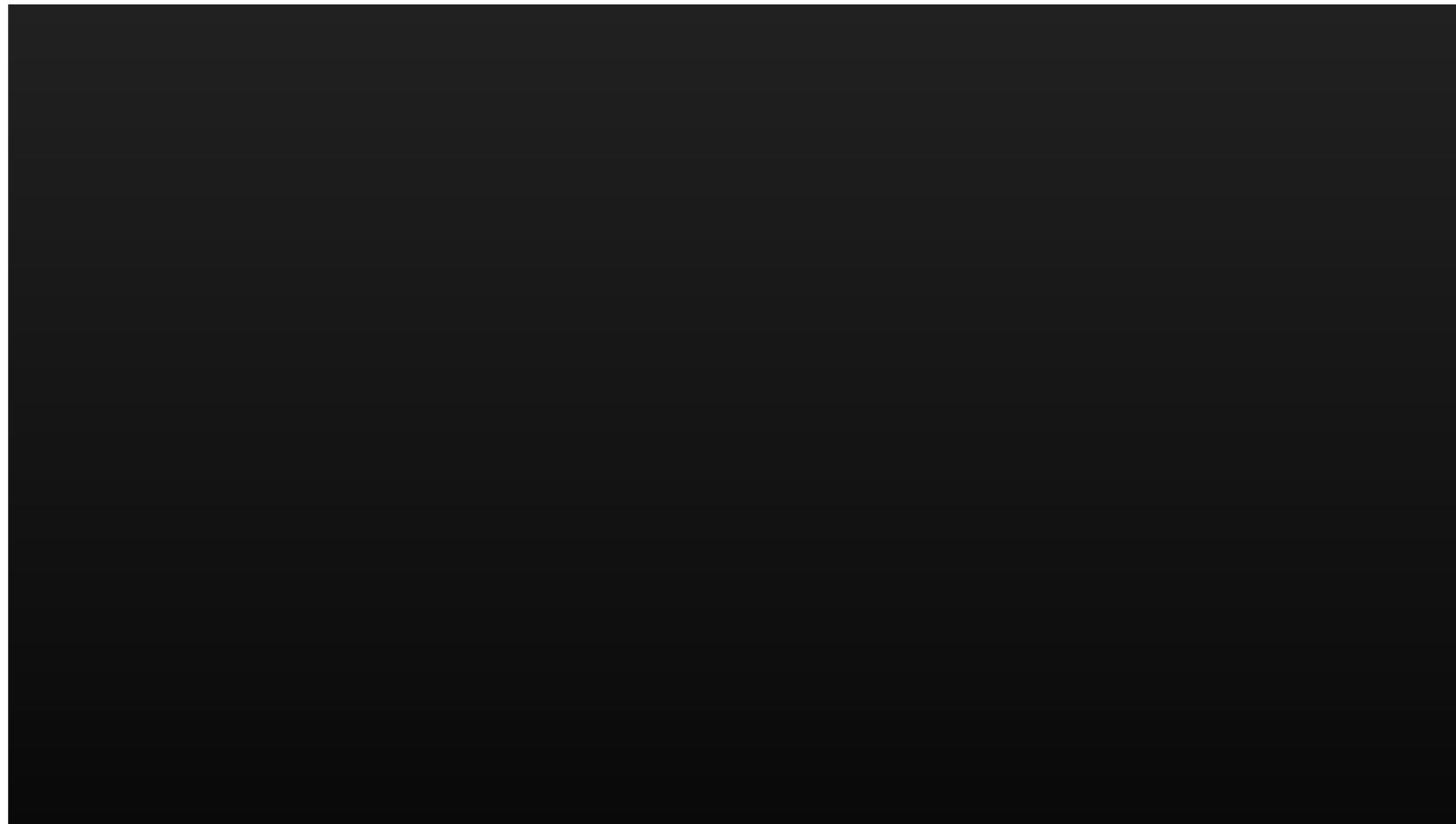


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Even without school buses, parents and students put in the miles to transfer



April 21, 2014 12:15 am • By Jessica Bock jbock@post-dispatch.com 314-340-8228

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A graduation tassel hangs from the rear view mirror of transfer student Shaheed Whitfield, 17, of Normandy, on Friday, April 18, 2014. Whitfield drives to Hazelwood Central daily to attend high school. He will graduate from Hazelwood Central on May 31 and plans to attend Tennessee State in the fall. Photo by Stephanie S. Cordle, scordle@post-dispatch.com

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If Lakeelah Whitfield had not been able to fix up a car for her son to drive to and from his new school in Hazelwood this year, she's not sure how it would have worked out.

"It would have been extremely difficult," said Whitfield, a registered nurse. "But I'm a stickler for education."

Getting the car ready for him to drive and spending more money on gas is worth it to her, she says. She wanted her son to graduate from an accredited school district.

Shaheed Whitfield, a senior at Hazelwood Central, has been commuting this year from the Normandy School District, as part of the transfer law.

Last summer, his mother was among the hundreds of parents who ventured into the unknown, signing up to send their children to better schools across the metro area.

Most, including Whitfield, made the switch even though they would personally have to figure out transportation. Only about 800 of the roughly 2,000 student transfers receive school bus rides paid for by their home school district.

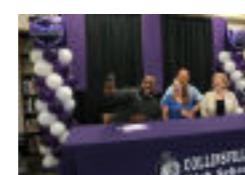
Many wondered how parents and students would do with the challenges of transportation. And yet, parents such as Whitfield have tenaciously stuck with the transfers in the face of long car rides or early morning bus rides.

The vast majority of families opting for transfers have nearly completed the school year. And attendance data from many

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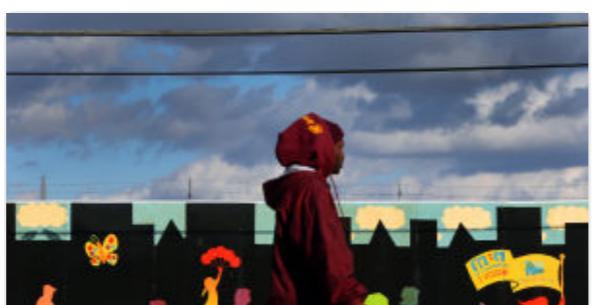


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school districts suggest the bulk are making it to class 90 percent of the time.

But Whitfield's stubborn resolve also speaks to a subtle, yet significant financial reality of the student transfer situation.

The families who made the switch, the numbers show, are better off as a whole than those who stayed in failing districts.

In Riverview Gardens, for example, students who opted for transfers were about half as likely to qualify for free or reduced lunch prices as those who remained in the district. In Normandy that gap was not as wide, but still significant.

In Whitfield's case, she has had the resources to solve the puzzle of the daily commute — though it has meant adjusting her monthly budget to find an extra \$100 to \$150 for gas.

Transportation remains a big concern among transfer families, or those interested in sending their children to other schools, said Kate Casas, state policy director for the Children's Education Alliance.

Some of those without cars were paying for cabs for their sons or daughters to get to school, spending as much as \$200 a week, and eventually sent them back to Normandy or Riverview Gardens because they couldn't afford it, she said.

Poverty also can prevent a family from being able to transfer.

Parents were required to fill out paperwork and submit the proper documents to prove they were residents of the district during the transfer registration for the coming school year.

One of those documents is an occupancy permit, which was denied to some families because their homes needed repair. If they don't have the money to fix the damage, they can't get the permit and they can't transfer, Casas said.

About 400 students from Normandy who got spots in Francis Howell schools also get free transportation. In Riverview Gardens, another 400 or so can ride the bus for free to Mehlville and Kirkwood schools.

Other families chose schools closer to home, in districts such as Ferguson-Florissant and Ritenour. Whitfield chose Hazelwood, knowing no school buses would be offered.

Cathy Brice, who has two children attending Webster Groves schools through the transfer law, said she has filled up her Ford Explorer every other day this year. She says it's expensive, but they've been making it to school.

"It's been a task with the weather and the highways, but I'll do it again," Brice said. "My children are receiving the education they deserve."

Overall, districts say a majority of transfer students have good attendance, despite challenges with transportation.

In Ferguson-Florissant, which borders both Riverview Gardens and Normandy, 81 percent of the transfer students have attendance rates greater than 90 percent.

The Hazelwood School District has 233 transfer students currently enrolled with an average daily attendance of 95 percent.

Of the 219 transfer students originally enrolled in Mehlville schools, 28 have withdrawn at different points in the school

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year. Some did so mid-year with good attendance rates of 90 percent or more. Others left after a few months of hovering in the 80 percent range.

But for the majority — about 70 percent — of transferring children in Mehlville, attendance rates are 90 percent or above. The state's goal for schools is 90-90 — attendance rates at or above 90 percent for 90 percent of students.

"I think they're doing what it takes. I think they've fully acclimated themselves into the school that they're in," said Eric Knost, Mehlville superintendent. "For them, it's a long bus ride that gets them there and gets them home."

Eight months and thousands of miles later, Whitfield believes it was the right decision for her son this year, even though she wishes Normandy, where she graduated, was not struggling.

Her son had attended Normandy schools since kindergarten. After graduating in May, he has plans to go to Tennessee State University and major in physical therapy.

"I think it's a lot of things that have to change. I shouldn't have to bus my kid out (to St. Charles County) or get him to Hazelwood," she said. "The money should stay in the community versus sending them to another school district. It's sad, the state of things."

Jessica Bock covers K-12 education for the Post-Dispatch. Follow her

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