



Far fewer students are transferring from Normandy and Riverview Gardens

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Snow leaves many transfer

Parents in failing schools rushed to meet an application deadline Monday to transfer their children to better schools, some for the second time since a state Supreme Court ruling last summer.

But this time, far fewer are asking to leave.

In Normandy, 123 students met Monday's deadline, applying to leave for the 2014-15 school year. In Riverview Gardens, 73 students had filed applications as of Monday. All the requests come from families who have previously not sought transfers, or could not match with a preferred school.

This school year, a combined total of about 2,200 students transferred from the two districts to accredited schools. They did so with a flood of interest that had parents scrambling over a short period of weeks to file applications. As the deadline hit, some families were left in tears as doors closed at school administrative offices before they could file paperwork.

Robert Walker watched as other parents went through the process last summer. On Monday, he brought in the application for his daughter who will be going into kindergarten.

"I want to make sure my daughter gets the best education possible," said Walker, who was at the Normandy offices to file the paperwork just before the deadline. "I think any parent would want that."

How much room will be available for new students to transfer has yet to be determined. Receiving school districts are not planning to release the number of their vacancies until June.

The amount of available space will depend, in part, on how many current transfer students opt to continue. School districts are just beginning to sort through that information.

At the Mehlville district — which serves a total of 184 transfer students — about 104 have filed "intent to return" forms. But the remaining 80 have not said either way.

In Riverview Gardens, administrators decided to extend the new student transfer application deadline to Friday, given that the district was closed for multiple snow days during the four-week application period in January.

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“We recognize with the five inclement weather days, that could have made an impact on families’ abilities to come out and complete their paperwork,” said Melanie Powell-Robinson, spokeswoman for Riverview Gardens. “We don’t want that to be an issue.”

That said, the district is trying its best to communicate with parents that leaders believe they can turn around Riverview Gardens schools if students stay.

“Our teaching professionals will continue to prepare our students to meet high academic standards over the course of the next semester,” Superintendent Scott Spurgeon wrote in a midterm letter to parents last month that also provided information about transferring. “We will provide personalization with precision for each student to meet their academic needs.”

Last summer, school officials had about seven weeks after the high court ruling to coordinate student transfers. The process left some parents upset when the door closed to transferring while they remained confused about necessary documentation.

This time, the process will play out during the next seven months, with more time for Normandy and Riverview Gardens to verify residency of those who want to transfer. The receiving districts will use that time to determine how much space is available and to complete the lottery process to match students to schools.

“We’ve got plenty of time to get these in and get them processed versus the mad rush of the summer of 2013,” said Sherrie Wehner, spokeswoman for EducationPlus, formerly known as Cooperating School Districts of Greater St. Louis, which coordinates the transfer process.

The student transfer application process is continuing even though potential legislative changes are afoot. Current law allows students from unaccredited districts to transfer to accredited ones at their home district’s expense.

Missouri Education Commissioner Chris Nicastro is mapping out a new approach to troubled schools, and will present the ideas to state Board of Education on Feb. 18. Meanwhile, state legislators have filed more than a dozen bills with

proposed changes to the law.

Tonya Barber went through the transfer application for the second time on Monday.

Last summer, she said, her first, second and third choices for her kids were denied. She said she had provided the necessary paperwork, and even allowed someone to visit her home and see her children’s bedrooms to verify they lived in the district.

She wants her son to go to Pattonville High, and is considering asking that her children’s applications be considered separately. Doing so could boost their odds, though they may wind up in different districts. She’s also considering moving.

“Education has to be the priority,” she said. “And you have to make sacrifices.”

Last year, Tiffany McReynolds tried to transfer her kids, who attend parochial schools, but she missed the deadline. She has struggled since with tuition payments. On Monday, she met the deadline at Normandy to possibly have her children attend Francis Howell.

“I don’t know how to feel about it yet,” she said. “I’m a little apprehensive.”

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