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## For Normandy transfer students, school year closes with uncertainty

May 30, 2014 12:00 am • By Jessica Bock jbock@post-dispatch.com 314-340-8228

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Naomi Goodloe, 12, a sixth-grader at Saeger Middle School, gets off the school bus after arriving at her Northwoods home on Thursday, May 29, 2014. "I made the A honor roll," Naomi said about the past year at her new school. "I also won an award for making good grades and working hard." Photo by Roberto Rodriguez, rrodriguez@post-dispatch.com

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The moment was a simple gesture, but it made a difference this school year to Naomi Goodloe.

She was sitting alone at lunch on one of her first days as a transfer student, going from Normandy to Saeger Middle School in St. Charles County. Some girls came up to her, one of them a sixth-grader, just like Naomi.

"All of a sudden, they asked if I wanted to sit with them," Naomi said. "I sit with them every day now."

Naomi is one of 475 students from the failing school district who transferred this year to attend Francis Howell schools, with the cost of transportation and \$11,034 per student annual tuition falling to Normandy. Naomi wants to stay at Saeger for seventh grade, but no one knows whether that will happen.

Not all of the transfer students have stayed — less than 400 made it through the school year that ends today for the Francis Howell School District. The distance was a challenge, as it was for Naomi. At first, she boarded the bus nearly two hours before her school day began, and typically got home between 5 and 6 p.m. She wanted to join the band, but couldn't.

"I live too far away," she said.

She felt out of place at first. The children she knew who stayed in Normandy schools called Saeger a "white school." The children at Saeger wanted to know what Normandy was like.

"My friend thought it was the 'hood," Naomi said. Even so, they connected — they talked about boys. Naomi tried to be funny and make them laugh.

### WALL OF HONOR

Despite the challenges of the past nine months, Naomi isn't looking back. She does not want to go back to Normandy schools next fall.

And for good reason. Naomi's year at Saeger ended much differently than her fifth-grade year at Normandy. Her grades were not good. She got D's, maybe a C in there somewhere, she said. There were children who bullied her, and the teachers never really listened when she asked for help, she



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Nixon said he'll veto the measure because 'every child in Missouri deserves a quality public education.'

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said.

“They were always dealing with the other kids,” she said.

As her sixth-grade year neared its end this week, she stood in the hallway at Saeger Middle School and looked at the Principal’s Wall of Honor. There, in a silver frame, were the names of all of the sixth-graders who had made the honor roll for the third quarter. Naomi’s name was among them. Her report card was “all A’s,” she said. And at the Spartan Celebration, an end-of-the-year ceremony, Naomi received an award, nominated by teachers for overcoming challenges.

Her mother watched from the audience, and Naomi could see her in tears, proud of the transformation her daughter had made.

Saeger Principal Brian Schick said it was Naomi’s will, her mother’s involvement and her teachers’ dedication that helped her succeed this year. She had specialized instruction with veteran teachers to help her raise her grades. Naomi is a hard worker, and very persistent, he said.

For example, she hated the bus ride. She said a lot of the children were unruly on the 22-mile ride. But she kept getting on the bus. And she would do it next year, too, gladly — if it meant she could stay at Saeger.

Naomi knows that the state is taking over her old school district. Some of the children at Saeger see Normandy on the news and ask her if she is going to have to go back. Some of them ask their teachers, and they’re not sure how to answer.

Lorraine Goodloe has tried to let her daughter know a lot could change during the summer.

“I told her, ‘I’m sorry, it’s really out of my hands,’” said Goodloe, a single mother who also has a son with special needs. “She said, ‘I’m going to miss all my friends.’”

## UNCERTAINTY

Whether Naomi can return to Francis Howell in August depends on the outcome of one of the biggest debates in Jefferson City.

Gov. Jay Nixon has said he will veto legislation that would revise the transfer law, no longer requiring unaccredited districts to pay for transportation. That would be a problem for children such as Naomi.

Missouri Education Commissioner Chris Nicastro said she will make a recommendation on Normandy’s accreditation status in June, just before the district is dissolved officially and begins operation by a state-appointed board.

If Nicastro hits the reset button on Normandy’s status, it’s possible students would not be able to transfer. However, a special task force commissioned by Nicastro has said it would like to see the students who transferred this year be able to continue in their new schools.

Adding to the unknowns is a lawsuit filed by the Normandy district that challenges the validity of the transfer law.

Schick said the uncertainty is difficult, especially for children such as Naomi who have settled in to their new schools.

“You can see the frustration on their faces,” he said.





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Francis Howell enrolled more transfer students this year than any other district, and ended the year nearly tied with Ferguson-Florissant, a neighbor to both Normandy and Riverview Gardens, the other unaccredited district in St. Louis County.

Based on guidelines from state officials, Normandy chose one district that students could transfer to and receive bus transportation. The selection of Francis Howell led to a town hall meeting, with dozens angry about the possibility of Normandy students coming to their schools.

Superintendent Pam Sloan said the biggest challenge was building support systems for the transfer students. They worked to get supervision on buses, after-school snacks to sustain students on long rides and route adjustments to shorten the time on the bus.

Once teachers determined the learning needs of students, they had to fit academic support for them in during the school day because few transfer students had the opportunity to stay after school.

As of now, about 350 students have said they want to transfer to Francis Howell for the 2014-15 school year.

“We are all anxious to know what the future holds,” Sloan said. “But in the meantime, we are planning as if the students will return.”

On Thursday at Saeger, Naomi walked away from the honor roll wall as the bell sounded and students filled the hallways, making their way past the cafeteria where Naomi made those first connections, and on to first period.

Her eyes scanned the crowd before she gave a short wave to one of the girls as she walked by. Then she fell into step with them, disappearing as she turned down the hall headed to her class. It was time for a communication arts final.


Jessica Bock covers K-12 education for the Post-Dispatch. Follow her on twitter @jessicabock

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