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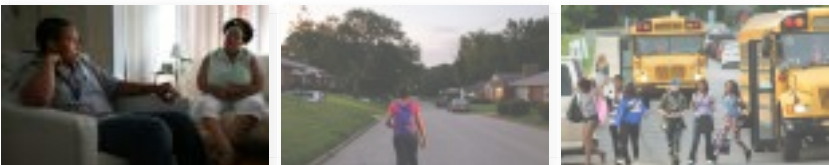
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Francis Howell officials say 'no' to Normandy students



Lorraine Goodloe breaks the news to her daughter Naomi that she will not be returning to Saeger Middle School for seventh grade after officials announced that they would no longer be taking Normandy transfer students on Friday, June 20, 2014. "Could we just move to Francis Howell?" Naomi, 12, asked her mother. Goodloe told her daughter that she could never sell her house in Northwoods, as property values have dipped. "I've told her that this is just a political game and you are just a pawn," said Goodloe. Photo by Robert Cohen, rcohen@post-dispatch.com

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June 21, 2014 9:00 am • By Jessica Bock jbock@post-dispatch.com > 314-340-8228 and Elisa Crouch ecrouch@post-dispatch.com > 314-340-8119

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PRESS RELEASE: Francis Howell stops accepting transfers

The Francis Howell School District is turning away hundreds of students who left the failing Normandy district last year, denying them permission to return in August.

District officials announced the decision on Friday after a string of actions by the state school board that made it possible to say no to the transfers.

But many, including Missouri Education Commissioner Chris Nicastro, had hoped most of the students who transferred to new schools this year would be able stay without disruption.

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Normandy again starts school year at center of turmoil



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More than 2,000 students from Normandy and Riverview Gardens, the other unaccredited district in the region, were uprooted from their schools this year, traveled long distances and settled in with new teachers and classmates only to now wonder where they will end up when the new school year begins.

“It was a very difficult decision because we built relationships with kids,” said Pam Sloan, superintendent of Francis Howell schools. “But I think when you look big picture at what they’re trying to do in Normandy, I want them to be able to rebuild that school system. Taking money out of that school district is not going to help them rebuild their schools.”

The decision marks the end to an endeavor in Francis Howell that was met with acrimony nearly one year ago. More than 2,500 people turned out for a School Board meeting shortly after they learned that students from the mostly poor, black district in north St. Louis County would be attending Francis Howell’s mostly white schools. Despite the initial anger, many transfer students said they had good experiences in Francis Howell schools.

Of the 475 who originally transferred to Francis Howell this past school year, about 350 students from Normandy filed paperwork this winter saying they wanted to return to Francis Howell schools, where Normandy leaders choose to bus transfer students.

On Friday, Lorraine Goodloe, whose daughter Naomi will be in seventh grade, had tried to prepare for this possibility. But it still hurt. And worried her.

“Words can’t really express,” Goodloe said as she thought about breaking the news to Naomi, who is attending a Francis Howell summer reading program. “I’ve told her that this is just a political game and you are just a pawn.”

NOT ABOUT FINANCES

For the 2013-14 school year, the Francis Howell School District took in more tuition revenue than it spent on transfer students.

Annual tuition for each transfer student attending Francis Howell was \$11,034. Collectively, those children brought \$3.4 million in revenue to Francis Howell. The district’s budget shows about \$2.3 million in expenses related to the transfer program during 2013-14.

The State Board of Education voted this week to cap tuition for Normandy transfer students at \$7,200 — and has asked that the same reduced rate also be used for students transferring out of Riverview Gardens.

Even with the reduced tuition, Francis Howell would have received about \$2.5 million for 350 transfer students.

In an effort to shore up finances in Normandy and Riverview Gardens, the State Board of Education recently pared the ability of students to transfer out of those districts.

The state board, for example, cut off all new transfers out of Normandy when it voted to reclassify the district’s accreditation. Normandy will carry no accreditation when it becomes a new, state-run district called the Normandy Schools Collaborative on July 1. The new classification removes the legal requirement for higher performing school

Francis Howell anticipates readmitting more Normandy transfer students



The St. Charles County school district is allowing Normandy transfer students to return only by court order.

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State tightens eligibility for students wanting out of Riverview Gardens

Guidance from state requires new transfer students to have attended Riverview schools last year; asks receiving districts to knock down tuition

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For Normandy transfer students, school year closes with uncertainty



Distance was a challenge for students like Naomi Goodloe, but her grades skyrocketed.

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Editorial: Time to embrace the best of the state's plans for Normandy



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districts to accept transfer students from those schools.

But most of the students who had already transferred could continue to do so under the state’s guidelines — provided that receiving districts were willing to accept the lower tuition.

The Francis Howell board voted 5-0 to uphold the district’s policy of not accepting tuition-paying students unless required by law. Board members Mark Lafata and Cynthia Bice were absent from the closed meeting Thursday night.

Before the 2013-14 school year, Francis Howell did not allow nonresident students, other than those whose parents were regular, full-time employees of the district or those for whom education is provided through a contract with another district.

Sloan said the latest decision was not financial. Nor was it about any upheaval caused by the transfers. She said the past year has gone well, despite challenges.

Rather, the decision was more about principle, she said.

Since the Missouri Supreme Court last summer upheld the transfer law, district leaders have consistently believed that transferring students from an unaccredited school district is not the solution to improving struggling schools, Sloan said.

The resulting \$1.5 million in monthly tuition and transportation costs has drained Normandy and Riverview Gardens of funds, pushing Normandy first to the brink of bankruptcy.

Francis Howell’s decision will save Normandy about \$900,000 in transportation costs for the coming year.

Sloan said that money could more effectively be spent on educating the whole Normandy student population.

“Children have a right and a need to have quality schools in their neighborhood,” she said.

The district informed transfer parents Friday morning with an email and said it would work closely with the Normandy Schools Collaborative to make the transition as smooth as possible.

Adolphus Pruitt, president of the St. Louis chapter of the NAACP, said the decision gave the impression that the Francis Howell School Board was living in a bygone era.

“It sends the wrong message to children, especially African-American children in failing districts in this state,” he said. “Francis Howell has no intention of trying to do anything to help the region in its educational needs.”

MORE DECISIONS COMING

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education issued a statement Friday saying that it was “working to balance the need for choice with the educational needs of the students served in the Normandy Schools Collaborative.”

The two dozen other districts in St. Louis and St. Charles counties that accepted transfer students this year have yet to announce whether they will accept the lowered tuition rate.

Some expressed concerned that Francis Howell’s rejection was setting the tone for other districts.

“I think there is a great fear,” said Kit Crancer, state director for Missouri StudentsFirst, a group that supports school choice. “This is complete chaos again.”

The year at Saeger Middle pushed Naomi to the honor roll after struggling with classes and bullies at her Normandy school.

“I kind of thought it would happen. The kids on the bus have been talking about it,” Naomi said Friday after learning the news.

Lorraine Goodloe said she had been researching other options for Naomi in case she couldn’t return to Saeger. Goodloe has been looking at the Miriam School because of its programs for children with learning disabilities. She plans to apply for a scholarship.

“I would love to be able to put her in a private school so she could get the help she needs,” Goodloe said.

Paul Davis, a cab driver, transferred his son to Francis Howell High School. Davis wasn’t entirely pleased with the school and said he felt his son was slipping through the cracks.

“This has really been a struggle,” he said.

Davis said he’d have to figure something out, and quickly. School starts in less than two months.

“He’s not going back to Normandy. I don’t know what we’re going to do, but he’s not going to Normandy.”


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

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