



Francis Howell says 350 transfer students eligible to return after anticipated court action

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Once again, a judge holds the fate of hundreds of Missouri transfer students



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Updated at 4 p.m. with comments from a Francis Howell spokeswoman. Also corrects an error in the earlier version. Francis Howell's legal fees are covered by insurance.

The Francis Howell School District will continue to require court orders for students from Normandy who want to transfer, said Jennifer Henry, district spokeswoman. The district sent a letter today to parents to inform them that it was possible 350 students could be returning, but that it was unclear how many would take legal action.

So far, 17 transfer students have returned to Francis Howell through court orders.

Henry said district leaders continue to believe that the transfer situation depletes the resources for the larger student population who remain in the school district.

"The Normandy school district needs all of their resources to continue to function," Henry said.

Our earlier version:

One by one, Normandy transfer students wanting back into Francis Howell schools have gone before a St. Louis County judge this past month for the court order needed to let them back in class.

Now, the Francis Howell School District anticipates it will have no choice but to allow 350 or so transfer to return.

"We do not know how many of the eligible students will have an interest in returning," Superintendent Pam Sloan wrote in a letter to parents today. "As always, our school district will comply with all court orders and laws."

On Aug. 15, St. Louis County Circuit Judge Michael Burton ruled that Normandy and other area school districts must continue to comply with the controversial state law that allows children to leave unaccredited school districts for higher performing ones. The lawsuit also involved Pattonville and Ritenour.

His ruling invalidated actions taken by the Missouri Board of Education to relieve Normandy from having to comply with the transfer law. After the state board moved to restart the district as a new

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entity with no accreditation classification, school boards across the region were left with the decision. They could allow Normandy transfer students back into their classrooms this fall, or send them back.

Francis Howell was the first to say no to the transfer students. After Burton's ruling, Pattonville, Ritenour and Ferguson-Florissant reversed their decisions and admitted transfer students.

Only Francis Howell required a court order for each student wanting to reenroll.

On Friday, attorney Joshua Schindler, who has represented the Normandy transfer students and parents, plans to go to court again. So far, 17 Normandy transfer students have been reenrolled in Francis Howell. Schindler intends to ask for orders to allow another 35 or more students back in its classrooms. The district ended the year with about 430 students.

“The bottom line is, I'm not stopping,” Schindler said. “I'm not going stop until every kid is who wants to be back in Francis Howell is back in Francis Howell.”

Paying his legal services is the Children's Education Alliance of Missouri, a school-choice organization financed by billionaire investor Rex Sinquefeld. Francis Howell's attorney fees related to these cases total \$17,000 so far, and are covered by the district's insurance, Henry said.

Like the other districts involved, Francis Howell says it will charge its full tuition rate. Education Commissioner Chris Nicastro had previously asked district to charge a less amount of about \$7,200.

The transfer law was upheld by the Missouri Supreme Court in June 2013. The high court's ruling prompted a frenzy in the weeks leading up to the first day of school last year, as districts worked to accommodate the requests of parents wanting to leave the unaccredited Normandy and Riverview Gardens school districts.

Normandy school officials aren't certain at this point what the tuition tab will be for transfer students this year. Much will depend on how many students ultimately return to Francis Howell, and whether area school boards take voluntary action to reduce the amount Normandy must pay each month in per student tuition.

Burton's ruling invalidates the state board's attempt to soften the financial blow of transfers on Normandy, which approached insolvency last spring as a result of transfer tuition and transportation expenses.

If districts continue to charge the amount for tuition as outlined in the transfer law, Normandy will face “significant cash flow problems in October,” Missouri Education Commissioner Chris Nicastro said last week.

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