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Unaccredited Districts

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Parents Of Normandy Transfer Students Wait To See If Districts Will Follow Francis Howell’s Lead

By [TIM LLOYD \(/PEOPLE/TIM-LLOYD\)](#)

Anxiety crept through SheRon Chaney when she heard that the Francis Howell School District would no longer accept about 350 transfer students from Normandy who were signed up to continue in the program.

“Last year we were hopeful, this year we’re fearful,” she said.

Chaney transferred her middle school aged daughter BrenNae to Maplewood Richmond Heights last year. And even though Francis Howell’s decision — made during a closed session of its school board — doesn’t affect her directly, it has Chaney and hundreds of other parents holding their breath.

Normandy spent \$900,000 to send students on long bus rides to Francis Howell in St. Charles County, but most transfer students went to schools where transportation was not provided. As of April, 538 of the 928 Normandy transfer students were enrolled in districts other than Francis Howell.

What happens next for Chaney’s daughter — and other transfer students who went to districts other than

Francis Howell — hinges on whether receiving districts will accept the lower tuition rate the state-run Normandy Schools Collaborative will offer next school year.

“We’re praying,” Chaney said.

When the Missouri State Board of Education voted to approve a string of recommendations for the Normandy Schools Collaborative — which will begin operations next month — it gave the reconstituted district no accreditation status. By wiping the district’s status clean, the state removed a receiving district’s obligation under Missouri’s school transfer law to accept students from an unaccredited district in the same or adjoining county.



(<http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kwmu/files/201406/ChaneyFamilyTimLloyd52214smaller.jpg>)

From left, Andre', Anandra, BrenNae and SheRon Chaney stand on the porch of their family home in Pasadena Park in north St. Louis County.
Credit Tim Lloyd / St. Louis Public Radio

As long as a transfer student went to Normandy for at least one semester during the 2012-13 school year, he or she could continue to go to the same receiving district they went to last school year. Three parents of students who can no longer transfer under this part of the guidelines have filed a lawsuit against the state of Missouri.

No new students can apply for the transfer program. And for a student to continue in the program, the receiving district would have to accept a tuition rate of a little more than \$7,200, less than what any of the receiving districts charged last school year.

The guidelines do not allow students who transferred last year to pick another district, nor will the state choose another transportation option for students. That seems to leave students who transferred to Francis Howell out in the cold.

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has also issued new guidelines for transfers out of unaccredited districts. The recommendations suggest that receiving districts charge an unaccredited district like Riverview Gardens or Kansas City Public \$7,200, as well. However, the state has no authority to impose these terms on a receiving district.

"It's like the flip side of last year. You opened up that opportunity and so many of us we took it. We thought it was great opportunity. But it was preliminary, it was temporary. I don't think that anyone really knows the answer, so we keep experimenting." — SheRon Chaney

Because Riverview Gardens remains unaccredited, it must pay what a receiving district charges. Likewise, receiving districts must continue to accept transfers students from Riverview Gardens. Any student applying to transfer for the first time must have attended school in the district during the 2013-14 school year.

A spokesperson for Riverview Gardens said the district is reviewing the new guidelines to get a handle on what impact they may have on the district.

As for Chaney, she’s thought about moving to ensure BrenNae could continue in Maplewood Richmond Heights, but it’s not a simple decision. While BrenNae is making strides transferring to a new school Chaney’s youngest daughter, Anandra, is thriving at Jefferson Elementary in Normandy.

“That’s a dilemma,” Chaney said. “If we do move, that may not be the best fit for my baby girl.”

State officials have requested that districts let the department know by June 30 if they’ll accept the lower tuition rate.

Kit Crancer, director of Students First — which advocates for school choice — said Francis Howell’s decision could lead to a domino effect among receiving districts.

“I think a precedent has been set,” Crancer said. “We have about 400 families whose lives have been thrown into chaos.”

After a school year of early mornings, long drives and hope to find a better education for her daughter, Chaney said the uncertainty is exhausting.

“It’s like the flip side of last year,” Chaney said. “You opened up that opportunity and so many of us we took it. We thought it was great opportunity. But it was preliminary, it was temporary. I don’t think that anyone really knows the answer, so we keep experimenting”

‘I’m in shock’

While some parents wait for answers, others are struggling to come to terms with the

decision by Francis Howell not to accept their children.

“I’m in shock,” Deborah Cannady said. “My first thought was, ‘what now?’”

Cannady has two children who transferred to Francis Howell. Her oldest child, Demetrius, attended Francis Howell North High School and her daughter Jayla went to Mary Emily Bryan Middle School.

Cannady said the news was a blow to Demetrius.

“What do you tell a child?” Cannady said. “He was getting ready to take senior pictures.”

Cannady works at a hospital and lives with her mother. She’s considering moving into Francis Howell, but that might not be in the cards.

“Can I afford it?” Cannady said. “I’ll do my best, that’s all I can say. I want my son to finish out there. I’m going to do my best to keep him in that district.”

She’s also worried about Jayla taking a step backward. Cannady said she was told by administrators in Normandy that her daughter was reading above grade level, but when she arrived at Francis Howell Jayla tested as reading at least one grade level below.

Cannady said teachers in Francis Howell gave her daughter extra reading help, and 10 months later, Jayla was back on track.

“I want to do what I have to do to get her reading up to where it should be,” Cannady said.

Paul Davis, a former taxi driver now on disability, transferred his son Robert to Francis Howell High School. Like Cannady, he’d think about moving, if he could.

“I do want him to get the best education possible,” Davis said. “But I can’t do the impossible. That would mean moving to St. Charles County and being in that district. Why think about it? We couldn’t afford it.”

His son did well in Francis Howell and played in the band. While the news wasn’t completely unexpected, Davis said, he waited for hours to tell his son. Robert has mild to moderate autism, and Davis said change can be hard on his son.

“I want to be on the level with him,” Davis said. “I want him to know what we’re up against. But we knew that there was a possibility that he wouldn’t be going back in the fall, we knew that all year long.”

Meanwhile, the a statement from Normandy School District assured students their return would be welcome.

“Our focus and mission remain the same as the new Normandy Schools Collaborative — to ensure that every student is successful inside the classroom by reaching their full academic potential,” said Normandy Superintendent Ty McNichols in a written statement. “We look forward to the upcoming school year.”

Mixed response in Frances Howell

Frances Howell’s decision came roughly a year after an emotional town hall meeting in which some parents there made heated comments that prompted concerns that African-American children wouldn’t be welcome. Other speakers pushed back at the meeting, including a group of students who said they’d be happy to have kids from Normandy in their school.

Despite early worries and past concerns, the process for students transferring from Normandy to Francis Howell went relatively smoothly with no reports of racism aimed

at students.

Chuck Nagelvoort, a supervisor at Edward Jones, has two step children attending schools in Francis Howell. He said it feels like all the early fears and concerns are resurfacing.

“It seems to me that the issue kind of ran its emotional course in the beginning and kind of died down,” Nagelvoort said. “And then when this came up, some of it got heated back up, but no one had changed their positions or thoughts as far as I could tell.”

A quick scan of comments on Francis Howell’s Facebook page reveals a full range of reactions:

“As a student in the FHSD school district I am actually quite disappointed that the Normandy students will no longer be allowed to attend our schools. I became very close friends with quite a few if them and I was really looking forward to spending another school year with them.”

“Thank you FHSD for putting our children first ...’OUR children’ meaning the taxpayers who moved into your district because of your outstanding reputation! This is not only the best financially responsible decision but socially as well.”

“Many of those students really felt like FHN was their new home and they loved it. They will be missed. It is unfortunate for those kiddos.”

Francis Howell Superintendent Pam Sloan has said that money was not a factor in the district’s decision, even though the \$7,239 the state was willing to pay was less than the \$11,034 the district charged last school year. The district’s general policy is that it does not accept nonresident, tuition-paying students.

A district statement said the tuition money is best spent on the new Normandy Schools Collaborative.

“FHSD has consistently held the beliefs that transferring students from an unaccredited school district is not the solution to improving struggling schools, and that the funds spent on tuition and transportation for transfer students can be more effectively spent on educating the whole Normandy student population. Children have a right and a need to have quality schools in their neighborhood.”

At the same time, district records indicate Francis Howell took in more tuition money from Normandy than it increased spending to accommodate those students.

The district's [revised](http://www.boarddocs.com/mo/fhsdmo/Board.nsf/files/9DETT46B77E1/$file/FY14%20Revised%20Budget%20Summary%20-%202013-11-13.pdf) [budget](http://www.boarddocs.com/mo/fhsdmo/Board.nsf/files/9DETT46B77E1/$file/FY14%20Revised%20Budget%20Summary%20-%202013-11-13.pdf) projected \$3.4 million in added revenue from Normandy transfers. It also projected expenditures to go up by \$2,547,814, due in large part because of transfer students. The budget’s summary specifically lists \$1,465,813 in added costs related to the transfer program.

“The increase is primarily driven by expenditures related to the transfer program, including \$848,142 for salaries, \$127,421 for benefits and \$490,250 for supplies,” according to the budget.


According to the soon-to-be reconstituted Normandy district, it sent Francis Howell \$4,040,154 out of a total of around \$10.4 million in tuition it paid for transfer students. Fewer students enrolled in the transfer program for next school year and a lower tuition rate would have reduced the amount Francis Howell would have received to about \$2.5 million.

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What would Normandy do if just 50% of those parents using parochial or other non-public schools suddenly decide to send their child to the "new" Normandy P.S. system. There would be zero increase in district revenues since those parents already pay real estate taxes into the system. So, for those who "whine" about in "what shall I do" mode, please understand that the current "free" public school system is broke. Our schools are spending money from parents and residents who do not even need the services of teachers. 1st graders or any K-8 child should not cost over \$10,000 to learn the A-B-C's. Let me offer a solution--Send your child to any local parochial or private school

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