



## With transfers cut off, Normandy families seek to move to better schools

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Paul Davis heads into the Francis Howell School District Administration Building with his son Robert, 15, to learn more about how to register for the upcoming school year on Thursday, July 24, 2014. Davis, a Normandy resident whose son attended Francis Howell High School last year as a transfer student, recently found an apartment to rent in the district so Robert could continue to attend Francis Howell High School — now as a resident. Photo by Laurie Skrivan, [lskrivan@post-dispatch.com](mailto:lskrivan@post-dispatch.com)

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More than 450 children from Normandy schools crossed the Blanchette Bridge daily last year to attend school in the Francis Howell district.

Now that [Francis Howell has decided to stop accepting the transfer students](#), some Normandy parents are working to uproot and move their families to St. Charles County — only to find waiting lists for affordable housing and few apartments that match their budgets.

Paul Davis drove his taxi across the Missouri River on Wednesday, determined to hold on to an educational opportunity for his son Robert that had eluded him in the Normandy district for years.

It was his third trip to find a two-bedroom apartment within the boundaries of the Francis Howell district. But his budget was a problem.

“I really can’t spend much more than \$700 a month on rent,” Davis said.

The story of parents yearning to move to neighborhoods with quality schools isn’t new.

While the outer suburban rings of the St. Louis area promise good schools, housing there has long been out of reach for many who earn less than \$15 an hour working as hospice aides, taxi drivers and retail employees.

But the transfer situation has created a new dynamic.

Parents from Normandy have tasted for a year what better schools in Francis Howell can do for their children. Now, some are learning that to keep that option they must confront the higher rents and lower vacancy rates of St. Charles County.

The Normandy school system is being restructured by the state, so it no longer falls under a transfer law that allowed more than 2,000 students in the region to move to better schools last year. The Francis Howell School Board voted in June to send transfer students back to Normandy.

“Francis Howell starts Aug. 6,” said Deborah Cannady, a mother in Normandy. “I’m trying to stay calm.”

Inside her Velda City home, a collection of apartment fliers

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and rental quotes serve as souvenirs of the week spent apartment hunting earlier this month. She visited Ashwood Apartments. Heritage Apartments. Pralle Meadows. She visited others whose names escape her, and whose prices were too high to even consider.

This past school year, Cannady watched as her daughter, Jayla, worked harder at Mary E. Bryant Middle School than she had in Normandy. She saw her son, Demetrius, become more serious about school once he formed new friendships at Francis Howell North. He will be a senior this year.

“I want him to finish out where he is,” Cannady said.

## OUT OF REACH

A 2013 analysis of affordable housing says rental costs in St. Charles County are putting an increasing strain on families such as Cannady’s. Nearly 40 percent of renters spend more than 30 percent of their annual income on housing-related costs, making it difficult to pay for other necessities such as food, clothing, transportation and medical care.

St. Charles County has “a growing need for more affordable rental units,” says the analysis. The report was funded by the county and submitted to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in hopes of qualifying for federal grant funds.

While the majority of single-family homes in St. Charles County are considered affordable for families that make at least \$70,400, the median family income, 42 percent of county residents are unable to afford a two-bedroom rental at fair market rent, the report says.

A minimum wage worker would have to work 84 hours a week, 52 weeks a year to afford the fair market price for a two-bedroom apartment, costing \$792 a month.

Cannady makes more than minimum wage at her job as a medical records clerk at St. Luke’s Hospital. But it’s not enough to afford a three-bedroom apartment in St. Charles County.

Even for a two-bedroom apartment, her family would have to give up the family dog. Cannady has told her children this would have to happen to avoid the pet deposit and additional

rent charged for dogs.

Moving also would require Cannady to share a room with her daughter. Or, she could assign her son the hideaway sofa in the living room.

“It’s a lot to think about. I’m going to sit down and do my budget and see where I am with bills,” Cannady said.

## A FIVE-YEAR WAIT

For the first time, there’s money in the budget of the St. Charles County Community Development Department to address the roadblocks to affordable housing that are identified in the report.

The amount is \$60,000 — not enough to help an affordable living development get off the ground. “It’s a very small amount,” said Wayne Anthony, director. “It can only assist someone if they’re getting assistance elsewhere.”

The federal government defines housing as affordable if it costs less than 30 percent of a family’s income. As a general rule, there’s a shortage of it nationwide.

That’s true even in the St. Louis region, where housing costs are below national averages.

“There’s a disconnect between wages that people make and rent, even in a place like St. Louis, which

is much more affordable than other parts of the country,” said Chris Krehmeyer, executive director of Beyond Housing.

Shalonda Smith said she thought more housing would be available in places such as St. Charles, St. Peters and O’Fallon, Mo. She and her husband have been searching for apartments for more than a month now in an attempt to keep their four school-aged children in Francis Howell schools.

One complex manager told her there is a five-year wait for a three-bedroom apartment, Smith said. Others have quoted rent prices at \$1,250 a month or higher — a price not affordable on her husband’s salary as a massage therapist. They’re paying \$800 a month to rent a house in Bel-Ridge.

“We haven’t been able to find anything,” she said. “It’s just really hard. I am discouraged about everything. The school situation, us trying to find reasonable housing.”

The 2013 report on housing in St. Charles County suggests that public resistance to building affordable housing may be contributing to the shortage. That “not in my backyard” attitude, the report said, “was found in response to a wide variety of housing types, including multifamily housing, group homes, housing options for the homeless, and affordable housing in general.”

Pam Fogarty, the mayor of Dardenne Prairie, was at the receiving end of this in 2013 when she supported a proposal for a 240-unit apartment complex near a residential area in her city. The proposal was for luxury apartments, but some area residents resisted it out of concern it would draw low-income renters.

“From phone calls, from emails, the ‘We don’t want those people here’ was possibly the worst I’ve ever seen,” said Fogarty, who’s been mayor since 2003. “The whole ‘these people’ thing is something that’s been grinding on me.”

### **GOOD EXPERIENCES**

The school transfer situation initially created consternation in Francis Howell district. In June 2013, a Missouri Supreme Court ruling had upheld the transfer law, opening the doors to better schools to thousands of children in the unaccredited districts of Normandy and Riverview Gardens.

The district became the largest recipient of transfer students, followed by Ferguson-Florissant.

Despite some initial community resistance, many transfer students said they had good experiences in Francis Howell schools, and most have sought to return.

Of the 475 who originally transferred there this past school year, about 350 from Normandy filed applications last winter to stay.

Davis, the cabdriver, said the district gave his son opportunity. It’s why he’s willing to pay the mortgage on his house in Vinita Park, and forgo many creature comforts, to also pay rent on an apartment in St. Charles County.

Late Wednesday afternoon, Davis took a tour of St. Andrews Apartments in St. Charles. Things looked promising. There was a two-bedroom unit available. The complex was running a special, putting the lease within his budget.

“I’m so excited!” he said after signing the paperwork. “We were very lucky.”



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