

DESE recommends that Normandy remain unaccredited

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By Dale Singer Of St. Louis Public Radio

(St. Louis Public Radio) - Missouri education officials are agreeing with a St. Louis County judge that the Normandy school district should be unaccredited, but that doesn't mean they accept the judge's ruling.

Circuit Judge Michael Burton ruled in February that an earlier decision by the Missouri state board of education that classified Normandy as accredited was improperly arrived at and that Normandy – which had the worst scores in the state on last year's annual evaluation – should be unaccredited.

At next week's meeting of the state board in Jefferson City, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is recommending that the board go along with the judge's ruling and classify the district, which is now operating as the Normandy Schools Collaborative, as unaccredited.

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“But I think that once it fully realizes that there is no quick fix, then it can roll up its sleeves and work to try to get Normandy over the next three years to the point where it can be provisionally accredited at a minimum.”

Schindler noted that the number of points Normandy scored in last year's state evaluation, seven, would have to be increased tenfold for the district to reach full accreditation. Burton had made the same point in his 37-page ruling, saying bluntly:

“The NSC is not merely ‘unaccredited’; it is abysmally unaccredited.”

Once the Missouri Supreme Court upheld the transfer law in 2013, students in Normandy and Riverview Gardens began signing up to transfer to nearby accredited districts. The drain on Normandy’s budget was so drastic that the state board first took charge of its finances, then dissolved the district altogether, to be replaced by the collaborative last July 1.

Even then, it cautioned that if as many as 500 Normandy students elected to transfer, the district may not be able to survive. Since the transfer deadline was extended, Pearson said, 109 students have signed up to leave Normandy in the coming school year, in addition to 392 who currently are transferring.

That number is close to the 500 transfers that could spell financial trouble. Pearson said the district is doing what it can to make do with the money it has.

“We certainly try to build a budget around that number,” he said. “We’re close, but we’re not there.”

He said he was heartened by the fact that when the transfer deadline was extended, there was not a big crush of families who wanted their students to go elsewhere.

“The biggest impact would have been if people had rushed to leave then,” Pearson said. “We have not seen that.”

Action in Jefferson City

Pearson also said that the best hope for Normandy’s future is a legislative change in how the transfers work. The costs of the transfers is just one of many issues that the General Assembly is dealing with as education bills work their way through the House and Senate. Each chamber has passed its own version of a so-called transfer fix, with a conference committee expected to come up with a compromise.

But capping the tuition that receiving districts could charge for transfer students has not been a major part of either bill. The issue has been dealt with in a roundabout way: a provision that says if districts charge only 70 percent of their normal tuition, they would not have to count the test scores of transfer students in their own state evaluations for five years.

When he vetoed last year’s transfer bill, Gov. Jay Nixon called that tradeoff a “cynical bargain,” but it’s not clear whether it would be enough to draw a veto this year. The main reason he cited for rejecting the bill, allowing state funds for transfer to non-sectarian private schools, has been dropped from this year’s version.

Asked whether he thought that classifying Normandy as unaccredited would lead to enough transfers to doom the district, Schindler said he did not think that would be the case.

“There was absolutely no evidence presented to the court that allowing the transfers would decimate the finances of Normandy,” he said. “Normandy, the state of Missouri, the state department of education could have put evidence before the judge to establish that the transfer would impact the ability of Normandy to survive.”

“Having said that, my issue for the plaintiffs and for the parents who want to leave Normandy is that the transfer statute allows the children to transfer out of the district, which is not accredited. And so those parents that want to leave Normandy and those children who want a better education should be allowed to leave Normandy.”

Tuition bills for the receiving districts are presented regularly to the members of the appointed Joint Executive Governing Board in charge of Normandy. At one point in the first year of transfers, the old elected board refused to approve the payments, though they later were passed after state officials said the money would be deducted from Normandy’s public funds.

At its meeting last month, when one of the appointed board member was absent, the bills were approved on a vote of 2-1, with Sheila

In an email Tuesday, she noted that she had cast such negative votes before, adding:

“Tuition payments are not in the best interest of the children enrolled in our schools.”

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