

Normandy transfer students left in the lurch



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Two years ago, Diane and Robert Harper transferred their oldest daughter out of the Normandy school district. But they had enough faith that things would improve to leave their youngest daughter in one of the district's elementary schools.

Now the youngest — Keiara — sees a counselor regularly for post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and headaches she suffers after being bullied last year as a sixth-grader at Normandy

Middle School. She hid in the restroom for 10 weeks during math class until a school administrator found her and notified her parents, her mother says.

Keiara doesn't want to go back to school in the Normandy district this year. Yet she will probably have to return later this month. So will her older sister, Shannon, who has spent two years at Ladue High School under the controversial school transfer law that allowed her to leave Normandy.

The Harper sisters are among dozens of students who had hoped to attend other schools next year but won't.

Of the 679 students who applied last winter to stay in their new schools or leave the district, 564 were approved. Those who weren't failed to prove they live in the district or they missed the application deadline, a district spokeswoman said.

The district has no record of the Harpers' applying for Shannon to stay in Ladue or for Keiara to leave, said Cindy Gibson, the spokeswoman for the Normandy school district. Diane Harper says she filled out the paperwork for Shannon to stay in Ladue and submitted a mortgage payment and utility bill in January as proof of residency, weeks before the deadline. She said she was unaware of an application deadline for transferring Keiara until she contacted district staff in the spring and was told it was too late.

"Something's got to happen," said Robert Harper, sitting in a chair beside his daughters in their home near North Hanley Road. "I'm not going to send my kids there. I'm just not."

NO CONDITIONS

Two years after the state Supreme Court upheld the school transfer law, some Normandy parents say their children are not being given the educational opportunities that the transfer statute provides. The law places no conditions on students leaving failing districts for more

successful schools.

Karol Hyland said she filled out intent-to-return forms to keep her son at Ritenour High School, where he would be a sophomore. Normandy sent her a letter stating he could not return to Ritenour because she failed to provide proof of an occupancy permit.

Christine Swain said she tried to transfer her son, a first-grader, to the Francis Howell School District. She said she missed the deadline by several days and was told he couldn't go.

"All I want is for my son to go to a better school district where he can learn and not have to fend for himself," Swain said. "It's a lot of stress."

Normandy is doing what the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education advised it to do.

After the high court's ruling, the department stepped in and provided flexibility in how receiving school systems should handle a potential influx of students coming from Normandy and Riverview Gardens, the two unaccredited districts in the region.

It issued a list of guidelines to make the situation more manageable for all districts involved. The department advised receiving districts to turn children away when their classrooms were full to avoid overcrowding. It advised Normandy and Riverview Gardens to send buses to at least one school district, rather than provide transportation to any district students transfer into, as the law specifies. It also suggested that the unaccredited districts set application deadlines.

"Parents should be encouraged to notify the school district by February 1 prior to the school year in which they intend to transfer from an unaccredited school district," one guideline says. In Normandy, that deadline was extended to April 1 this year.

State education officials acknowledged that none of the directives carry the force of law.

Superintendents across the St. Louis region have hoped that the Legislature would modify the law to include the parameters. Some were included in bills that lawmakers approved in 2014 and 2015 — bills that also included the expansion of virtual education and charter school options. Gov. Jay Nixon vetoed both measures.

In July, Sen. Maria Chappelle-Nadal, D-University City, convened a news conference and urged parents to sue whenever they're denied the opportunity to transfer their children out of Normandy or Riverview Gardens schools.

So far, no one has.

Last summer, attorney Joshua Schindler represented four Normandy families who successfully sued the state and three area school districts for not re-enrolling their children after the Missouri Board of Education changed Normandy's accreditation status so it wouldn't have to comply with the transfer law.

The parents won, and their children returned to their new schools this year.

Schindler said he was looking for ways to finance a lawsuit if parents want to challenge the

application deadlines and documentation requirements in court.

“Who established this deadline and on what authority was it established?” Schindler asked. “They are trying to put so many barriers in front of parents so they just throw up their hands and say, ‘I give up. You win.’”

‘ALL THIS GRIEF’

Diane and Robert Harper bought their home in 2005. Like many properties in north St. Louis County, its assessed value is about half of what it was when they bought it. Moving would be complicated. But they continue to pay taxes to a school system that’s disappointed them. “Now they’re trying to give me all this grief about sending my kids where they can get an education,” said Diane Harper.

Keiara’s counselor, who spoke with the family’s permission, said the trauma of returning to Normandy Middle School could be detrimental to the girl’s mental and physical health. The girl begged her mother not to send her to summer school.

“Her going back would probably cause her to shut down and also send her into a major depression,” said her counselor, Marva Miller.

At Ladue High School, Shannon Harper has a 3.0 grade-point average. She had planned to be president of the fashion club this fall and try out for cross country.

“I was hoping to finish my school there,” she said.

This winter, both girls could apply to transfer out of Normandy for the 2016-17 school year. According to state guidelines, they must apply to leave by Feb. 1.