

Parents hoping to transfer students out of troubled St. Louis County districts seek answers

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Jessica Bock/St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MCT)

Unable to afford the tuition costs any longer, Michele Elkins had to pull her son from his private school last year.

He finished the school year at Lucas Crossing Elementary in the Normandy School District, but Elkins was hoping he would be able to use the state transfer law to enroll in Pattonville or Clayton when the new school year begins in August.

Now, like parents of about 120 other students from Normandy seeking to leave the struggling district for better schools, those plans feel like they're hanging by a thread.

"We're caught in the middle of all this chaos," Elkins said. "I just want to maintain the level of education he's had. I pray every day that this turns out."

She was one of several dozen who attended a meeting Tuesday organized by the Children's Education Alliance of Missouri to answer a myriad of questions about possible outcomes surrounding the state takeover of Normandy schools and the uncertainty of the future of the transfer law. The group is primarily backed by school choice advocate and billionaire investor Rex Sinquefeld.

In a decision handed down one year ago today, the state Supreme Court upheld the law, which triggered the exodus of 2,200 students from Normandy and Riverview Gardens to better schools. Paying a collective \$15 million in tuition and transportation costs has drained both districts of funds, and put Normandy on a path to insolvency — with Riverview Gardens not far behind.

State Education Commissioner Chris Nicastro last Friday told area superintendents her plan for the troubled Normandy School District when the state takes control on July 1. Her ideas, which will go before the Missouri State Board of Education next week, essentially hit the reset button on schools in Normandy, erasing its unaccredited status and stopping students who have applied as new transfers from leaving.

On Tuesday, parents such as Elkins were trying to sort through the information.

"We think you should still be allowed to transfer," Lorna Kurdi, a staff member with the Children's Education Alliance told parents at the meeting. "We're actually not completely sure how this is legal."

They circulated a petition asking the State Board of Education and Nicastro to keep the new Normandy Schools Collaborative unaccredited so students could continue to transfer.

The group also urged parents to put pressure on Gov. Jay Nixon, who has promised a veto of a bill backed by the organization. Under the measure, students who have attended an unaccredited school in an unaccredited district for at least one semester would have been allowed to transfer to an accredited school within their district, and when those slots filled, to one in an adjoining county. But the legislation included a controversial, private school transfer option and no longer required unaccredited districts to pay for transportation.

Sen. Maria Chappelle-Nadal, D-University City, who worked on the legislation, told parents at the meeting that the bill had to be a compromise, and that it shouldn't be up to Nixon to decide whether kids should stay in failing schools or ride the bus to a better one. "The governor doesn't have a plan," she said. "The blood is on his hands." Nicastro's plan also caps tuition payments for transfer students from Normandy to accredited school districts at \$7,236. Rates have ranged from \$20,768 in Clayton to \$7,927 in Mehlville.

Riverview Gardens is expected to be out of money next spring, and could be headed down the same path as Normandy. Riverview had 157 new transfer requests for 2014-15.

Because Normandy had less in its reserve fund than Riverview Gardens, the district faced insolvency sooner and the state board voted last month to lapse the district and take control of a remade entity called the Normandy Schools Collaborative.

For the 2014-15 school year, Riverview Gardens School District will continue operating under the current rules governing student transfers, which allow receiving districts to set tuition based on operating costs, debt and other factors. Nicastro said last week it will not be required, but that she hopes districts will reduce tuition for those students as well.

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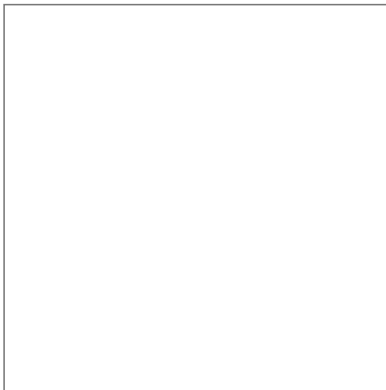
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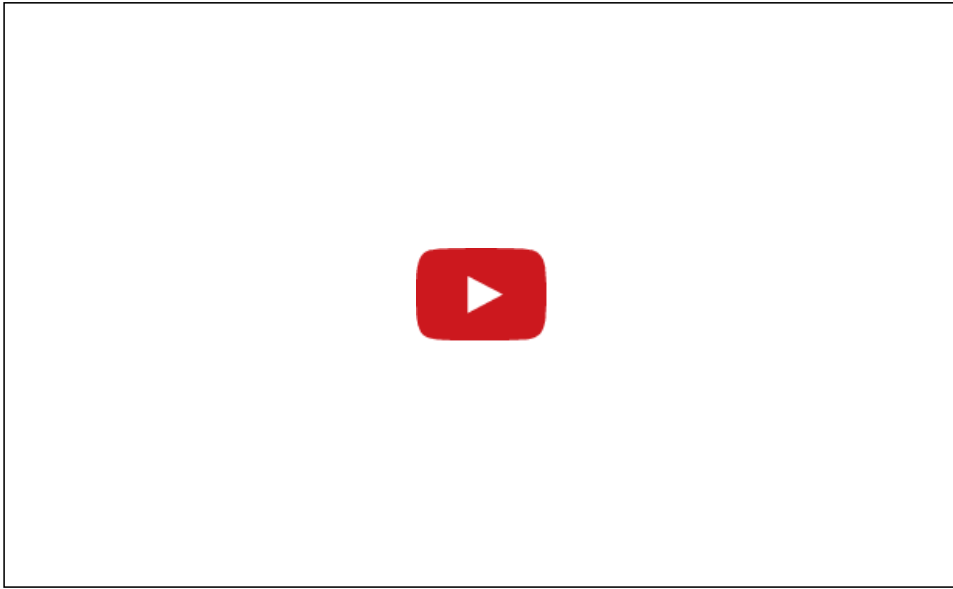
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