

School districts near Ferguson, Mo., also struggle with racial divide



Football players at St. Louis' Normandy High School observe a moment of silence for Michael Brown last month. Brown graduated from the school on Aug. 1. Eight days later, he was killed. (Alex Sanz / Associated Press)

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he gym at Francis Howell Central High School was filled to capacity for a town hall meeting last summer with parents, students and faculty.

They were black and white, some affluent and others poor, but all of the 2,500 people assembled that muggy July night shared a common concern about education.

Students from the predominantly black Normandy School District in Missouri, near the town of Ferguson, wanted to take advantage of a state law allowing them to attend the better-endowed schools of the nearby Francis Howell School District, set in the mainly white, middle-class suburbs northwest

of St. Louis.

The Normandy students, however, were not entirely welcomed with open arms.

"I deserve to not have to worry about my children getting stabbed or taking a drug or getting robbed," said a white Howell mother, voicing her opinion of students from the Normandy School District.

A black mother said she was appalled at the comments. "We have now gone back to 1954," she said, referring to the Supreme Court's decision that year to desegregate public schools.

The Normandy School District was home to Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old black man from Ferguson who was shot and killed last month by a white police officer. On Aug. 1, Brown graduated from Normandy High School, wearing red sash and green gown. Eight days later, he was dead, triggering weeks of protests.

Long before the nation became transfixed by events surrounding Brown's death, the Normandy School District was mired in controversy over students transferring to other districts and its struggles under a recent state takeover.

Its story over the last year is intricately tied to cries for justice and the persistent racial divide in the area.

Dismal standardized test scores and graduation rates made the Normandy district among the poorest performing in the state, and the state Board of Education voted to remove its accreditation in January 2013.

"It wrecked us, absolutely wrecked us," said William Humphrey, former president of the Normandy School Board.

After the district lost its accreditation, Normandy students were allowed under state law to transfer to higher-performing, accredited schools. The Normandy district would have to pay the other districts tuition and transportation costs.

About 2,000 students from Normandy and the Riverview Gardens School District, the other unaccredited school system in the area, transferred to mostly white and affluent school districts.

Almost half of Normandy's transfers last year — about 450 students — attended the Howell School District, which is among the highest performing in the state.

Lorraine Goodloe said her daughter, Naomi, who is now in the seventh grade, transferred to Saeger Middle School in the Howell district last year, about a 45-minute drive from their St. Louis home.

"She loved it. Her reading improved and she was getting the attention she needed," Goodloe said. "She

excelled in the Howell district last year — much more than if she stayed in Normandy."

Normandy had to pay the district about \$11,000 a year for each student.

The payments saddled Normandy with a significant financial burden that affected its own classrooms.

"The kids who stayed were hurt because the district didn't have resources to help them, because we're paying up for transfers," Humphrey said.

To save money, Normandy laid off teachers and shuttered an elementary school in the middle of the 2013-14 school year.

Lola Robinson, who is raising her nephew, James, a junior at Normandy High School, said the drain on the district's finances was hard to bear.

"While we're sending money to the districts that don't need it, our students don't have books or good computers," she said.

The Howell School District, despite receiving more than \$4 million for Normandy students, did not accept the transfers with ease.

Howell administrators contended that transferring students from unaccredited schools did not improve the education system in the state.

"All we're saying is that kids have a right to be educated in their own community," said Jennifer Henry, a spokeswoman for the Howell district. "Funds being spent to transfer a few students could definitely be better spent by improving the district."

There were flashes of resentment from Howell parents over the transfers, Goodloe said. Still, she said, she "wasn't going to let a few ignorant voices" allow her daughter to not have a better education.

But in July, state officials stepped in, taking control of the Normandy district.

The move, in effect, let the district start anew — with a new accreditation and a new name. About 450 transfer students would have to go back to the new Normandy Schools Collaborative.

"We had to do something; the district was in a serious bind," said Mike Jones, vice president of the state Board of Education. "We weren't going to just shutter it. That would have impacted surrounding districts. So we created the new district and gave it a clean slate."

The state will oversee the district for at least three years. In that time frame, the schools will have performance goals to meet, or else the state could dissolve the district, said Sarah Potter, spokeswoman for the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

"This is the last chance to turn around Normandy," Potter said.

Goodloe enrolled her daughter back in the Normandy district. "It hurt us," Goodloe said. "It hurt my daughter that she could not go back to her school."

She said she's closely monitoring the situation and might "look for other options" in the near future.

Some of the transfer students have filed suit in recent weeks to stay in the Howell district, arguing the state acted improperly when it nullified the ability of students to transfer.

Jones said that he can't be against a parent "wanting different options for their children" but that it can't be at the "expense of those in the district who want a good education in Normandy."

Humphrey, as he stood in the parking lot of Normandy High School on a recent afternoon, the flags lowered to half-staff to honor Brown, was more direct, pointing the finger at the state Board of Education.

"They made a mess of this," Humphrey said. "Taking away our accreditation, then taking over control. An absolute mess. I'm not sure what their plan is, if there's even one."

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