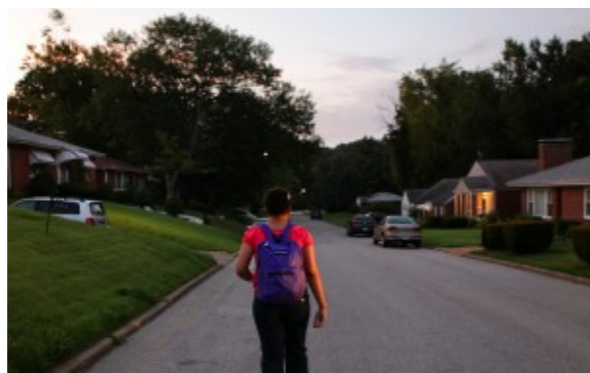




St. Louis area superintendents sound the alarm on Normandy's demise

February 11, 2014 11:35 am • By Jessica Bock jbock@post-dispatch.com 314-340-8228

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Sixth-grader Naomi Goodloe, 11, heads to the bus stop in Northwoods just before 6 a.m. on Thursday, Aug. 8, 2013. Naomi is leaving Normandy schools, instead riding a school bus 22 miles to her new school, Saeger Middle, in the Francis Howell School District. Photo by Robert Cohen, rcohen@post-dispatch.com

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St. Louis-area school superintendents sounded an alarm Tuesday, warning that the pending financial collapse of the Normandy School District could send shock waves through schools across the region.

The possible migration of thousands of Normandy students to another school district potentially would have dire financial and academic consequences, they said.

If any one school district absorbed the migrating students, they argued, that district might also soon find itself in the same boat as Normandy.

"We're worried that this is going to start a chain reaction in the state of consolidation of one school district to the other," said Don Senti, executive director of EducationPlus. The group, formerly the Cooperating School Districts of Greater St. Louis, represents school districts in the region.

That grim assessment came with a rare showing of united political might by the school leaders — one that seeks to prod state policy officials to consider the superintendents' own plan for addressing failing schools.

That plan, supported by the Missouri Association of School Administrators, would in effect eliminate a situation that has sent 2,200 students from the Normandy and Riverview Gardens to better schools in the region.

Normandy may run out of money as soon as this spring because of bills that could reach \$15 million by the end of the year, which under a state law, it must pay to cover the cost of its transfers.

If the district goes bankrupt, its remaining 3,000 students would be sent elsewhere.

More than a dozen superintendents and administrators who gathered Tuesday presented findings to reporters illustrating a worst-case scenario for what would happen if Normandy runs out of money this year.

Their research focused on the consequences of sending all of Normandy's students to a single school district in the St. Louis region.

In many cases, they found, such a move would hurt the receiving district's academic standing with the state, given the



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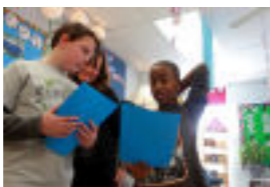
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The impending financial collapse of the unaccredited Normandy School

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poor standardized test performance of the transferring students.

Under that scenario, for example, the Ferguson-Florissant, Jennings and University City school districts could become unaccredited districts.

The superintendents also warned of the financial consequences of sending Normandy to other districts.

They argued that because of intricacies of the state funding formula, a student from Normandy might draw down less state aid if absorbed into a different school district.

Consequently, 19 school districts might need to raise local taxes to support the new students.

Thus far, officials at the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education have not said how students from the Normandy district might be assigned.

In 2010, when the Wellston district was dissolved for academic failure, all of its students went to Normandy. But this time around, students could be distributed to multiple school districts.

Kate Casas, state policy director for the Children’s Education Alliance of Missouri, said she didn’t want to speculate on what the state board might do. She criticized the superintendents, saying if they are concerned about the financial viability of Normandy, they could stop accepting tuition payments.

“The receiving districts are taking a lot of money from Normandy that they are not spending,” she wrote in an email. “The February, March, April and May tuition payments from Normandy to the districts receiving Normandy students would equal almost \$5 million.”

The Legislature is considering an emergency request for that amount to get Normandy through the end of the school year.

On Tuesday, Normandy Superintendent Ty McNichols said he was hopeful the money would be approved.

“I believe that Missouri legislators care about kids,” he said.

Rep. Rick Stream, R-Kirkwood, said in an interview Monday night that he will file a bill this week to address problems plaguing the troubled Normandy and Riverview Gardens school districts.

Aside for pushing for new school choice options, Stream calls for capping the tuition payments that school districts are paid by unaccredited districts for transfer students. Those annual per-pupil payments reach \$20,000 now. Stream would cap them at 70 percent of the regular amount, which he said would be “very fair” to receiving districts because they generally are not adding classrooms or teachers.

Several bills dealing with school transfers already are in the hopper in the Senate, but Stream’s is likely to be the vehicle for debate in the House.

Meanwhile, the plan by the Missouri Association of School Administrators seeks to render the transfer law moot by proposing a complete overhaul of the way Missouri rates its 520 school districts.

Under the proposal, failing systems would no longer be rated “unaccredited” but “academically

stressed.” The state would review such districts if they failed to improve, and potentially remove their school boards, superintendents and teachers. All failing schools within that district would be assigned to an “Achievement School District” — a recovery district of sorts that would be charged with getting those schools back on track.

“We want to make sure we have great public schools for every child in Missouri,” Mike Fulton, superintendent of the Pattonville School District, said Tuesday.

Stream called the plan by Missouri Association of School Administrators “a joke” because some of their changes would take 10 years.

“These kids will be out of school by then — or in jail,” he said.

“The education establishment, they’re not really for any change,” he said. “If we’re going to help these kids in Normandy and Riverview Gardens, we’re going to have to make some serious changes.”

Virginia Young of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.

Jessica Bock covers K-12 education for the Post-Dispatch. Follow her on twitter @jessicabock

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