

COMMENTARY: NJ School Choice program should be expanded

Bob Garguilo 2:29 p.m. EST December 2, 2016



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The Interdistrict Public School Choice program has been an overwhelming success. Interdistrict Choice is where parents/students can choose to attend a participating public school that is not their district of residence. For example, a student who lives in Cherry Hill may decide to attend Sterling High School's ROTC program in Somerdale. All students are eligible to participate in the Choice Program, regardless where they live in the state; however, the chosen school must be in an approved choice district.

Currently, there are 129 participating schools enrolling over 5,500 Choice students. Camden County is second only to Hunterdon County in the number of participating districts. At present, 18 Camden County schools participate.

Unfortunately, due to a flawed funding formula, the program has been capped as to the number of students and schools that can participate.

The reality is Interdistrict Choice allows for creative, innovative high school programs while saving taxpayers' dollars. For instance, Glassboro High School offers a STEM Academy for grades 7-12. This program features an intensive curriculum in conjunction with Rowan University, where students can earn college credits in their junior and senior year. One Choice student graduated from Glassboro High with 21 college credits.

It would be very difficult for this STEM program to be replicated in other school districts, since many smaller high schools do not have a sufficient number of students to make such a program affordable. By regionalizing specialized programs, our educational system can provide specialized programs for college and career readiness in diverse and concentrated areas of study.

Despite the flawed funding formula, it is substantially more economical for a Camden City student to become a Choice student than the \$25,000 that is currently spent. Several Camden County schools have successfully enrolled and educated Camden City students. In addition, these students are receiving a quality education.

Almost all participating schools must accept students by lottery since the demand for the program outnumbers seat available. Many schools boast long waiting lists.

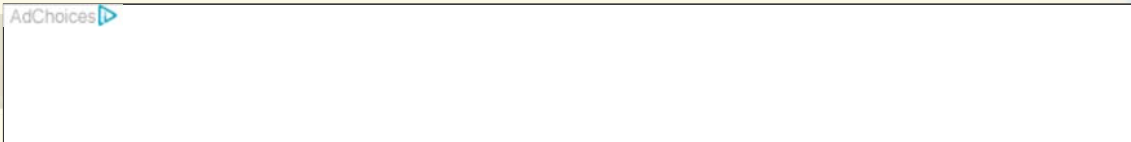
Despite the success of the program, it appears it has been orphaned by the Department of Education. Currently, the regulations of Interdistrict Choice are up for some fine-tuning. The N.J. Interdistrict Public School Choice Association has worked thoroughly with Department of Education officials for one year on two areas of concern, both of which would not add to costs but would enhance the program for all. Yet, the department has advised the State Board of Education that it “proposes ... to readopt the chapter without amendments to continue the rules. The department is continuing to assess the efficiency of the program and after a thorough review will propose any needed amendments.”

The enabling statute (2010) clearly states that the department shall annually report to the state board and the Legislature the effectiveness of the program; this has never been done. In addition, the Interdistrict Choice Association worked closely with the department in surveying participating schools for data collection. It is unclear as to why the department needs further assessment when all of the necessary data is already there.

It's most unfortunate that a popular and wanted program that has shown potential in expanding innovative educational initiatives while containing educational costs is being waylaid by bureaucratic red tape and disinterest.

Bob Garguilo is the chairman of the board of the New Jersey Interdistrict Public School Choice Association.

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