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School choice interest strong, but state program still capped

DIANE D'AMICO Staff Writer Nov 28, 2016

Mainland Regional High School will accept 31 students from other municipalities in 2017-18. Ocean City High School can accept 49.

The deadline to apply for admission to a choice district for the next school year is Thursday. But many districts already have more applications than seats.

Despite ongoing and even growing interest statewide, there are no plans to expand the Interdistrict Public School Choice Program to accommodate them.



"The program is stagnant," said Valarie Smith of the N.J. Interdistrict Public School Choice Association. "We've been trying to work with the state for the last year, but the caps are holding the districts back."

The choice program started small, with just one district in each county. But it exploded once the state allowed its expansion in 2010, and this year 129 districts have enrolled about 5,000 students from other districts.

The state provides districts with additional aid for the choice students, about \$50 million a year, but as the cost rose faster than anticipated, the state responded with an enrollment cap in 2012-13 that only allows choice districts to replace choice students who leave or graduate.

Since most of the students in the last expansion of the program are graduating in 2017, that has opened up more seats in districts such as Ocean City and Mainland.

Ocean City has done more promotion this year, and about 160 people attended the High School Open House, up from about 100 last year. The district will have 39 seats for freshmen and 10 for sophomores, according to data posted on the New Jersey Department of Education website.

Mainland Regional is staggering its open seats for next year to try to spread them among grades 9 through 11. Coordinator Nathan Lichtenwalner said the district already has more applications than seats, with 50 applications just for the 15 ninth-grade openings. If the district cannot fill the seats for 10th and 11th graders, it will open them to ninth graders.

If a district gets more applications than seats, it must by law hold a lottery to decide who is admitted. Those not chosen can stay on a waiting list in case someone drops out.

Districts can also give preference to siblings of current choice students, which in some districts will use up most, if not all, of the open seats.

Lawrence Township in Cumberland County has eight open seats, but many will be filled by siblings, supervisor Heather Burkhart said.

Cape May has no open seats next year because of the cap but still gets applications for the waiting list, Superintendent Victoria Zelenak said. Port Republic, Atlantic City, West Cape May and Vineland will also have no open seats for next year.

Lower Cape May Regional has received 20 applications for 12 open seats, Superintendent Christopher Kobik said.

Folsom, the first choice district in Atlantic County, has 24 open seats, most in kindergarten, and has already received 38 applications.

Robert Garguilo, a former superintendent in Folsom who championed the choice program statewide, is now interim superintendent in Estell Manor, which has just three open seats in kindergarten next year.

"If we did not have the cap, I could take many more students and I know there would be an interest," Garguilo said in an email. "I do not see any movement on this issue."

A quirk in state aid funding allows some districts to get double aid for choice students, a problem Smith said they have tried to resolve with the state in a way that could instead allow the program to expand.

"Why should some districts get multiple funding for the same kids, when instead they could have another seat for a new student?" Smith said. "More and more parents are interested, but it's not a state priority."

The choice regulations expire in December, but the recommendation to the state Board of Education in November was to renew them with no changes. NJDOE spokesman David Saenz said in an email that there are no proposed changes for 2017-18.



Smith said the program has helped diversify districts and provided many students the opportunity to attend a school more suited to their needs, all within the public school system.

"The program is great for students who need a fresh start," she said.

She said there may be more interest in choice under President-elect Donald Trump, and New Jersey's program could be a national model for providing options beyond charter schools.

"We are hoping to get the program back on track," she said.

Information on applying to a choice district is online at www.state.nj.us/education/choice/parents. Many choice districts also have the information on their websites.

Choice districts

Atlantic County: Atlantic City, Estell Manor, Folsom, Hammonton, Mainland Regional, Port Republic.

Cape May County: Cape May, Lower Cape May Regional, Lower Township, Middle Township, Ocean City, Upper Township, West Cape May, Wildwood Crest, Woodbine.

Cumberland County: Cumberland Regional High School, Downe Township, Lawrence Township, Maurice River Township, Vineland.

Southern Ocean County: Beach Haven, Long Beach Island, Pinelands Regional, Stafford Township, Tuckerton.

Contact:

609 272-7241 DDamico@pressofac.com

Twitter @ACPressDamico

Diane D'Amico

More than 40 years at The Press in writing and editing positions.