



U City school board reverses decision, will take Normandy transfers

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UPDATED to include Maplewood-Richmond Heights as another school board that voted openly on whether to keep Normandy transfer students.

UNIVERSITY CITY • The University City School District will be accepting Normandy transfer students this fall, after the School Board on Thursday reversed its decision to reject them.

Eighty children who'd transferred out of Normandy schools into the neighboring University City district under a Missouri Supreme Court ruling last fall will be re-enrolled, relieving their parents of the angst of having to put them back in Normandy schools.

After the 5-2 vote, one of those parents, Laquette Collins, smiled as she sat beside her 8-year-old daughter, Selena. "When they did that, I just wanted to jump up and say, 'Thank you, God!'" Collins said.

The board's reversal came nearly a month after its initial vote to send the Normandy children back. Multiple school boards have made similar decisions because Normandy no longer must comply with the school transfer law. As a result, receiving districts are no longer required to keep the Normandy students.

On July 1, the Missouri Board of Education lapsed the failing Normandy School District and restarted it under a new name and state oversight. The district became the Normandy Schools Collaborative, with no accreditation classification. Because the district is no longer "unaccredited," it doesn't fall under the Missouri Supreme Court ruling that says students living within its borders may transfer, according to the state education department.

Ever since the University City board voted 3-3 on June 26 to send the children back, some members have felt conflicted about that decision. On July 7, they listened to their constituents spend about two hours airing a wide range of views. And for about 90 minutes before Thursday's meeting, the board members discussed the issue some more.

Their concerns revolved around finances — since the Normandy Schools Collaborative would be paying a fraction of the tuition that University City had charged in the 2013-14 school year. There were concerns that sending the children

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back would mean more disruption in their lives. There also were questions about whether the students, who represent 3 percent of University City's total enrollment, could jeopardize the district's accreditation if they returned.

"If we lose our accreditation, it would take more than the 3 percent to do that," Superintendent Joylynn Pruitt said. "Every year we have kids transfer in and transfer out. Some transfer from Normandy. We have some kids come from Francis Howell and St. Charles. If you send the 80 children from Normandy back, we're still going to have those challenges."

School Board member Maria Chappelle-Nadal, also a state senator, said the district could find itself in legal hot water by accepting the transfers. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has asked receiving districts to keep last year's transfer students. Chappelle-Nadal said it's one of many pieces of advice that aren't rooted in statute.

"We're in a gray area where administrative rules are superseding and circumventing state law," she said.

Chappelle-Nadal and John Clark were the two who voted against keeping the Normandy students. Linda Peoples-Jones, Tom Peters, Lisa Brenner, George Lenard and Charlotte Tatum voted to keep them.

At this point, the board is the only the second that has voted openly. All other school boards, with the exception of Maplewood-Richmond Heights, have debated and voted behind closed doors on whether to keep Normandy transfer students.

"It's amazing," said Joshua Schindler, an attorney who represents Normandy parents who sued the state board, the Normandy Schools Collaborative and six school districts this week. "What you saw was total transparency, which no other board has had the decency to show their constituency."

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