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Parents unaware of right to leave deficient schools

By PETER SIMON

Theresa White said her children - Kenneth Jr., 5, left, Mishae, 10, center, and Bria, 9, - stayed in Buffalo schools because officials didn't let her know they could switch.

Theresa White's three children have the right to transfer to new schools because of academic deficiencies at the Buffalo schools they now attend. So do about 21,000 other children in 32 city schools.

But White said her kids stayed put because Buffalo school officials did not let her know they could switch schools, even though the school district has an obligation under federal law to inform parents.

"I never received anything about the right to transfer them," she said. "I'm feeling like somebody's not caring about our kids."

A federally funded telephone survey says about 15,000 parents throughout the city have the same problem.

However, Buffalo school officials contest the survey's finding, claiming parents were notified through letters, public meetings and notices in newsletters.

It found that 75 percent of the parents eligible to transfer their children under the federal No Child Left Behind Act were not aware of that fact when the survey was conducted last month.

And 92 percent of the parents who were previously unaware of their transfer rights said they would like to switch their children to other schools, the survey found.

The study's bottom line is this: about 15,000 children would have been transferred by their parents had they been aware of the opportunity.

In fact, just 262 transfer requests have been filed.

"The reason is a lack of awareness, not a lack of interest," said Tom Carroll, project director for Brighter Choice Public School Choice Project, an Albany group that conducted the survey with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

"They (school officials) clearly need to be doing a much better job."

Buffalo school officials say all eligible parents received a letter informing them of their right to transfer their children. Additional public information efforts were launched by many individual schools, more than 10 public meetings were held and notices were placed in the district newsletter.

"Everybody in those schools was offered the opportunity to transfer," said Superintendent Marion Canedo. "People are interested in plans to correct problems at their individual schools, but there aren't a lot of parents interested in dragging their kids out of school in the middle of the year and placing them somewhere else."

Parents at 32 of 75 Buffalo schools have transfer options under the No Child Left Behind Act because of low scores on standardized tests. The law also requires 17 of those schools to offer students additional academic services outside their schools, such as

tutoring at for-profit educational centers.

City school officials said many eligible parents decided against transfers because their schools may have low test scores only in particular grades or subjects; because they are satisfied with improvement plans; because of strong ties and general satisfaction with their schools; or because they already have transfer options through the district's magnet school lottery.

They also wonder if the survey was skewed to get results that would place the district in an unfavorable light. Even so, they say they are taking it seriously.

"It was very disturbing to look at that survey," said Allison C. Turley, the district's director of federal programs. "We'll be stepping up our public relations even more, and getting out the word again and again."

Eighty-five of the 262 children who sought transfers have already been switched to new schools, and the others should be moved "in the next couple of weeks," Turley said.

Clarence and Lynette Lott transferred Malcolm, their sixth-grade son, from Frank A. Sedita Academy School 38 to Waterfront Elementary School before the start of this school year, and said the system worked for them.

"I felt well-respected," Clarence Lott said in September. "I think the mechanisms they have in place are

good ones. I guess I'd call myself a satisfied customer."

Turley said that experience reflects what the district is trying to accomplish.

But Theresa White said she was never informed of the transfer option.

Her two daughters, Mishae, 10, and Bria, 9, are at Hamlin Park School 74, where White said they have experienced high teacher turnover and not enough homework.

"I won't say it's a terrible school, but I'll say there's something missing,"

White said. "It's a continual thing - a sub (substitute teacher), a sub, a sub. These are very smart girls. I can imagine the things they could learn somewhere else."

White said she would also like to transfer her 5-year-old son, Kenneth, from Waterfront to another school.

Turley said large numbers of transfer requests would present major difficulties in finding slots for children and balancing enrollment because students at nearly half the city's schools have the right to transfer and because

federal regulations say the district cannot turn them down due to lack of space.

Turley said brochures explaining the tutorial assistance were mailed out late last month, and that a public meeting will be held from 9 to 11 a.m. Feb. 8 at the Stanley Makowski Early Childhood Center, 1095 Jefferson Ave.

Online at <http://www.buffalonews.com/editorial/20030205/1038867.asp>