

March 13, 2003

Page B5

Schools sought for would-be transfers

Albany *Officials look to suburban districts in complying with new law on choice in education*

By RICK KARLIN
Staff writer

The city school district is looking outside its boundaries to find neighboring school systems to host students wishing to transfer to the suburbs under provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act.

But it's unclear how many suburban districts will open their doors to kids from Albany's inner-city schools and how many students actually want to leave.

No Child Left Behind, the sweeping federal school reform law passed last year, states that students in schools plagued by low test scores have the right to transfer to neighboring districts. But the law is unclear on whether neighboring districts can be forced to accept transfer students.

In Albany, Arbor Hill elementary as well as Hackett and Livingston middle schools have been identified as needing improvement due to test scores. Students also are supposed to be able to transfer to other schools within the district, but Hackett and Livingston are the only two public middle schools in Albany, meaning that kids who want to go elsewhere would have to leave the district.

In keeping with the law, district officials say they are talking with BOCES planners to see which neighboring districts, such as Bethlehem, South Colonie or North Colonie might accept transfers, said spokeswoman Lisa Stratton.

Officials at both North and South Colonie schools could not be reached Wednesday.

But Bethlehem spokeswoman Jessica Scheckton said the district didn't take students from outside its boundaries. "It's been our long-standing policy," she said.

The push to find alternate districts comes as a federal lawsuit against the city district has drawn two new plaintiffs and it follows an advertising campaign to inform residents of their transfer rights.

The lawsuit was filed by Charlie King, a downstate lawyer who made a bid for lieutenant governor on Andrew Cuomo's unsuccessful gubernatorial ticket last year.

In addition to an initial plaintiff, Charlene Wilson, two more parents, Michele Tucker and Birdie Kite, joined the suit last week. They allege that the

school district didn't adequately inform them of their rights to transfer their kids or to get extra academic help.

District officials, though, contend they gave adequate notice.

"We have consistently acted in compliance with NCLB," district lawyer Jeff Honeywell said.

The ad campaign, funded by a federal grant and carried out by a leading charter school proponent, created a stir in the last few weeks.

The Brighter Choice Public School Project in January launched a series of TV and radio ads designed to inform parents that they have the right to transfer out of poor-scoring schools. The ad campaign closed at the end of February but has been replaced by a mailing campaign and efforts at contacting community groups, said Tom Carroll, the project's director and a founder of the affiliated Brighter Choice Charter School.

Carroll said the ads prompted about 200 phone calls from parents although there seemed to be little interest in actually sending children to other school districts.