

DeKalb is head of the class on choice

If Georgia educators want a glimpse of their future, they ought to study DeKalb County, where parents are seeking and winning greater school choice.

Two events this week in DeKalb — the renewal of the Stone Mountain Charter School and the lottery for a coveted spot in the Kittredge Magnet School — illustrate the growing desire among parents to pick and choose the public school that best fits their child.

With its 15 magnet programs, five charter schools and five elementary theme schools, DeKalb leads the state in providing options. But the county is still not meeting the demand, especially for seats at Kittredge, which offers an accelerated curriculum for bright kids. It's apparent from the parents who left the lottery in tears that the county needs to open another magnet for high achievers, either in the Clarkston-Tucker area or in southernmost DeKalb.

Other counties in the Atlanta region are foolishly ignoring the school choice momentum, arguing that their mandate is to pull up all schools rather than create pockets of excellence. The result of that inflexibility has been the stagnation of entire districts. It's also given ammunition to voucher proponents who argue that pub-

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lic education today is nothing more than a monopoly indifferent to the rising dissatisfaction of its customers.

More and more parents, armed with education research showing that kids have different learning styles, are questioning the cookie-cutter approach to education in which all schools look and act alike. In the academic powerhouses of Cobb and Gwinnett, school choice conversations are only murmurs now. But those murmurs will turn to shouts if the counties don't heed parents.

One of the earliest and most successful school choice programs exists in Montclair, N.J., which turned all its schools into magnets in 1977 as an alternative to court-ordered busing. Some of the schools are tightly structured; others allow the kids to design their own curriculum. Another focuses on science. Parents consider their child's learning mode and interests

and select a school accordingly.

Some children require strict adherence to schedules and close monitoring by teachers. Others flourish when given a little bit of direction and a lot of freedom. It's only by recognizing these differences and offering parents a range of choices that public education in America will survive.

Student transfers up nearly sevenfold

By JEN SANSBURY
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The number of DeKalb County students switching schools under the federal No Child Left Behind Act vaulted from 28 last year to 183 this year.

Crawford Lewis, senior executive director for student assignments, said school officials as well as parents had a better understanding of No Child Left Behind guidelines and options this year than during the inaugural 2002-03 year.

The law allows parents to request transfers if their children attend schools that receive federal funding for significant percentages of poor students and did not make adequate academic progress for at least two consecutive years. In DeKalb, students at 24 schools were eligible.

"I think awareness has created a lot of interest among parents, and they're watching their school performance," Lewis said.

He said he does not know how many of the students who transferred last year remained at their new school.

District officials were more flexible this year in allowing parents to select from among nine elementary and four middle schools. In contrast, parents last year were offered two options each. In some cases, the schools from which they could choose did not have better test scores. Lewis said the district provided academic performance information about the receiving schools for all parents who requested it.

"A lot of people had done their homework and research before they got to our office," he said.

Stone Mountain Middle School had the most students transferring out, 33, which Lewis attributed in part to overcrowded conditions. Most went to the new Redan Middle School and Lithonia Middle School, a new school in the former Lithonia High School building.

Because of a mix-up in this year's state "needs improvement" list, Cedar Grove Middle School actually ended up both allowing four students to transfer out and then accepting 19 incoming transfer students when the school was removed from the list.

Seventeen DeKalb schools must offer extra tutoring to students who did not transfer. Saturday sessions will begin Nov. 1 at three elementary and three middle school sites. Parents must sign up by Monday, said Pam Speaks, the district's assistant Title I director.

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Transfer plan for students is still being worked out

By JEN SANSBURY
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Parents of students at some DeKalb County public schools that haven't met state improvement goals can ask to move their children elsewhere and seek extra tutoring at the district's expense.

But the details of how those options might work, including which schools would be open to transfers and how many spaces were available — in DeKalb and across the country — had not been finalized as of early this week.

Educators everywhere were awaiting final rules from the U.S. Department of Education for how to implement the new No Child Left Behind Act.

Under the law, signed in January, schools that receive federal funding to serve low-income students must show academic progress among their students every year. That progress is defined at the state level, and Georgia's tough standards put 625 schools in the "needs improvement" category in 2001-02. Some states identified zero schools.

If schools miss the mark for two years, parents are given the option to take their children to another public school. One hundred eighty-eight of Georgia's identified schools, including seven in the DeKalb system, made one year of progress. Whether those schools should be exempt from offering choice this fall has been unclear.

Depending on the demand, districts must spend between 10 and 20 percent of their federal Title I money, which funds services for poor students, to pay for transportation and supplemental tutor-

SCHOOLS SUBJECT TO NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

Decatur City

Glennwood Elementary*

DeKalb County

Chapel Hill Elementary*
E.L. Miller Elementary*
Gresham Park Elementary*
Hawthorne Elementary*
Pleasantdale Elementary*
Rainbow Charter Elem.*
Robert Shaw Elementary*
Wadsworth Elementary*
Huntley Hills Elementary
Panola Way Elementary
Atherton Elementary
Avondale Elementary
Cary Reynolds Elementary
Dresden Elementary
Fairington Elementary
Hooper Alexander Elem.
Indian Creek Elementary
Knollwood Elementary
Leslie Steele Elementary
Rowland Elementary
Sequoyah Middle
Sky Haven Elementary
Terry Mill Elementary
Tilson Elementary
Snapfinger Elementary

*Schools that must offer only transfer option; all others must offer transfer and tutoring.

IMPROVED SCHOOLS

Schools that may get a reprieve because they made improvements in 2000-01:

DECATUR CITY

College Heights Elementary

DEKALB COUNTY

Columbia Elementary
Glen Haven Elementary
McNair Middle
Medlock Elementary
Montclair Elementary
Peachcrest Elementary
Salem Middle

Subject to be... Board...

"The purpose of the legislation is . . . to make sure children receive the adequate education they need to be successful, and the thinking is if they're not getting it at their traditional school, we'll give some options to them," said Abbe Boring, the DeKalb school system's new chief academic officer.

Schools that already are overcrowded are not required to add additional trailers. By law, transfer requests will be prioritized, with the lowest-achieving poor students being at the top of the eligibility list to go to a school that is making better progress.

The tutoring that will be offered to students at the identified schools must correspond with the schools' curriculum. DeKalb officials received 18 complete applications from businesses and organizations interested in providing tutoring services after 64 initial inquiries.

Three applications were submitted to the state for approval: the DeKalb County school system itself; Voyager Expanded Learning, a Texas-based company; and the South DeKalb Improvement Initiative's Saturday SLAM program, or Students Learning and Advancing in Math.

Tutoring providers must be approved by state education officials. Several providers may be selected.

The law kicks in as Superintendent Johnny Brown begins his own efforts to reform the DeKalb school system, which on the whole lags

the state average on test scores.

Central office officials say they have received some calls and e-mails for information from parents about their rights under the new federal law, but so far have not been deluged with requests.

"I think [Brown] has created so much energy and excitement about how we are going to go about getting kids to learn at their appropriate level. That in and of itself has impressed parents," said Crawford Lewis, the senior executive director in charge of student assignments.

School-level administrators don't appear to be getting many requests either. At Leslie J. Steele Elementary, among the DeKalb schools where choice must be offered, Principal Barbara Barnes said she had received no transfer requests so far.

Steele became a year-round school last year. About 75 percent of students took advantage of the extra learning time in the breaks in the school's calendar. The school also required uniforms for the first time. Barnes said parents seem to be willing to give the changes at school a chance.

"They're willing to come in and do everything in their power to help us along with what we're planning to do in this school year," she said. "The parents and grandparents who live in this neighborhood love this school. I think they're pleased with what's going on."