



JESSICA MCGOWAN / Special

Principal **Robert Thorpe** has had to beef up his Shamrock Middle School staff to meet the need created by transfer students.

Downside of transfers

High-performing schools inundated

By **KRISTINA TORRES** 2/4/06
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Shamrock Middle School principal Robert Thorpe never saw it coming.

Expecting only a handful of transfer students after classes started at the DeKalb County school last August, Thorpe and his staff instead were flooded with hundreds. He had to expand his sixth-grade faculty alone from 12 teachers to 18 to handle the load.

The same thing could happen next school year.

Shamrock Middle and other higher-performing schools in DeKalb again may get swept up in a federal education reform

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND TRANSFERS IN DEKALB

- ▶ **2002-03:** 32; 25 schools required to offer choice
- ▶ **2003-04:** 182; 24 schools required to offer choice
- ▶ **2004-05:** 287; 14 schools required to offer choice
- ▶ **2005-06:** 1,591; 13 schools required to offer choice

that some educators and parents worry punishes the good guys as much as the bad.

It's a cautionary example for all of Georgia. No other system has faced such a high demand from students who are now allowed by law to flee schools that are low-performing.

"It's part of the shortcomings of No Child Left Behind," Thorpe said this week,

referring to the groundbreaking federal education law Congress passed in 2001. "We didn't clearly envision the effect it would have, not only on schools performing below expectations but on schools performing at or above the standards."

The No Child Left Behind Act forces schools for the first time to measure up annually to academic goals or face year-by-year consequences that include everything from drawing up an improvement plan to restructuring how the school is run.

The law allows students to transfer if their school does not meet its goals two years in a row. If a school fails to meet its goals a third straight year, it must offer free tutoring.

DeKalb officials in January asked the federal education department for a rare waiver that would allow it to offer students free tutoring before allowing them to walk out the door.

▶ Please see **TRANSFERS, E2**

Transfers: Destination schools inundated

for Rain News

> Continued from E1

"We just feel that breathing room will give us some time," said Gloria Talley, who oversees the system's curriculum and instruction. DeKalb this year instituted a slew of reforms aimed at its struggling middle schools that involve curriculum changes, instructional coaches, and a greater emphasis on leadership and performance among managers. Part of the system's argument to federal officials is that the waiver will give it more time to ingrain those practices.

DeKalb's request, supported by state education officials, has precedent. Four school systems in Virginia piloted such a waiver this year, and federal education department officials indicated it was the first of several they eventually planned to give.

DeKalb officials think they have good reason to seek relief. Expecting about 500 requests for transfers this school year, DeKalb instead received more than 1,500. (The system also took in 1,800 students displaced by Hurricane Katrina.)

Scrambling to reroute buses, staff and textbooks, some higher-performing schools found themselves starting lunches earlier and asking students to share lockers. Hardest hit were middle schools. It is not hard to understand why.

Thirteen of the system's 19 middle schools did not make adequate yearly progress. Nine are on the federal "needs improvement" list and are required to offer transfers.

As a result, the schools that must take those students — including Shamrock, now at capacity with an enrollment of 1,259, including 269 transfer students — burst at the seams. For DeKalb, that's worry No. 1. Frustrated parents have repeatedly asked Superintendent Crawford Lewis to relieve the crowding, worried that it will dampen their schools' own hard-earned progress.

"We've all heard it: No matter how well-intentioned the law is, it punishes schools that are doing well," said Lewis, who is not allowed to cap the number of transfers flowing into those

schools. "Yet the school district has a moral responsibility to do what the federal government expects us to do. It's a hard line to walk."

But Lewis has another worry: The successful students are transferring, not the struggling ones. The "needs improvement" schools are losing the very students who could help them get back on track.

"We're not asking for a handout; we're asking for flexibility," said Lewis, who has appealed to parents to give their local schools a chance. "We would prefer students stay where they are. Staying where they are is really what's going to make our schools stronger."

Parents like Kaye Smith are watching closely.

Smith's neighborhood school is Shamrock Middle. She enrolls two children there, one in sixth grade and the other in eighth, and also sits on the school council. Parents, she said, take pride in the fact that local schools are smaller. They also take pride in getting involved — a big part of Sham-

rock's success, she said.

Now, she said, Shamrock "has just gotten so huge." Plus, having some parents farther away has cut into parent involvement, she said. The year's beginning "caused a lot of disruption, not because of the children who came, but with staffing," Smith said, adding that the school didn't get everyone it needed until November.

"Of course it will affect the kids. They lost so much time of instruction. I don't think the parents have forgotten that."

DeKalb officials, in essence, have asked for enough time to win over parents, make academic turnarounds and plan for another transfer process, all in concert with the normal push and pull of meeting student needs systemwide.

If the district's request is denied, Lewis said he expects to establish satellite campuses for some receiving schools and would bus students to those locations. He expects to hear from federal officials by the end of this month.



JESSICA MCGOWAN / Special
Principal Robert Thorpe sits with students Elexus Harris (left) and Jasmin Gresham in Shamrock Middle's crowded cafeteria.



BOB ANDRES / Staff

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lents at Pope High School stay out of class to protest. At upper
nts. Though Stowers ordered students to return to class, hundreds
e want Bruce." Article. E6.

Classes in public schools

the Bible's influence on
literature, art, music,
culture and politics.



Sen. Tommie Wil-

liams, the Republican
majority leader, grun-
bled that Democrats had stolen
an idea he had been pushing for
years. This week, Williams (R-
Lyons) submitted a substitute
bill requiring the state board
to adopt two new high school
electives: one on the history

and literature of the Old Tes-
tament and one devoted to the
history and literature of the
New Testament.

"To understand Michaelan-
gelo's 'Pietà,' one has to under-
stand the story in the Bible,"
Williams said. "To understand
Handel's 'Messiah,' one has to
understand what the words
mean."

➤ Please see BIBLE, E2

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