

Parents' busing worries prompt bill

Senator takes on Cherry Hill policy for kindergarteners

By Phil Dunn
Courier Post

The denial of a mother's request to have her son transported from morning kindergarten in Cherry Hill to an after-school program has inspired new legislation in New Jersey.

State Sen. James Beach introduced a bill last week that would require school districts to transport students in half-day morning kindergarten to after-school enrichment programs, regardless of whether state law deems them ineligible for bus service.

The Cherry Hill School District denied a request this summer by Lori Perlow to have her 5-year-old son, Jeremy, transported from school to an enrichment program at Temple Beth Shalom.

The Perlows are not eligible for transportation because of the proximity of their home to Jeremy's school.

Beach's bill also stipulates transportation is dependent upon a seat on the bus being available and would require the parent or guardian to cover the cost, unless there is evidence of a financial hardship.

"Parents have busy lives, juggling work and family, and when their children are only in half-day kindergarten programs, they often must find alternative arrangements for care and learning in the afternoon," said Beach, D-Camden.

"Enrichment programs are a great resource for these parents, but they have to be able to get their kids there."

Current state law says any student who lives within a two-mile radius of his or her school does not qualify for busing. Cherry Hill's policy is one mile.

District officials said providing after-school enrichment transportation for families who live inside that range is logistically challenging for the district, one of the largest in South Jersey.

"Adding them to after-school transportation will add to costs because of a likely need to add more buses and drivers and extending or altering bus routes," said Barbara Wilson, school spokeswoman.

But Perlow and her husband, Michael, who both work, were turned away when they offered to pay for the service.

"It's awful to think a town like Cherry Hill does not meet the needs of the community," Lori Perlow noted. "Parents deserve to choose where they send their kids."

Most schools in New Jersey have their own policies when it comes to transportation. The Mount Laurel School District has provided transportation for all kindergarten students for at least the last two decades.

Communications Director Marie Reynolds noted the district also partners



Jeremy Perlow, 5, takes the bus to day care at Temple Beth Shalom in Cherry Hill after his half-day, morning kindergarten class at Stockton School. The district's denial of his mother's request to have him bused to his local after-school program spurred a bill by Sen. James Beach.

PHOTOS BY JONIZO VEKOURA FOR



with area day care centers to make transportation as convenient as possible.

"We have many families here that work in Philadelphia or part of the week in New York," Reynolds added. "So they need the support from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m."

Wilson said the Cherry Hill School District offers the same type of morning and afternoon care, but in-district only. If a parent lives inside the one-mile radius and wants to send his or her child to a private or religious day care, they do it without the school's help.

"Families have always had the choice of where to send their children, and still do," said Wilson. "The district devotes its resources to district programs."

Perlow later challenged the school's policy at several board of education meetings, but found little relief. The only option was to enroll Jeremy in the tuition-based, district after-school care.

After enrolling her son, Perlow found out the bus that took him to the district-run care stopped at Beth Shalom.

"At that point they had no other choice

"Enrichment programs are a great resource for these parents, but they have to be able to get their kids there."

SEN. JAMES BEACH, D-CAMDEN

but to let Jeremy get off there," she said.

While Perlow hopes Beach's legislation is signed into law, her goals is that one day schools are required to bus all kindergarten students.

"It's really an issue of safety," she observed.

Wilson also noted how limited the bill is in its present form, as it only focuses on morning kindergarten.

"We also would have afternoon kindergarten students who may receive care in the morning before kindergarten starts," she added.

"Senator Beach's legislation appears not to address the afternoon kindergarten students with morning care, but it would be another group that would need to be considered."

Beach said the goal of the new legislation is for families to avoid worrying about how they will get their kindergartners to after-school programs.

Changes to the bill can be made as it is vetted in Trenton.

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