

YOUR TURN: NJ should strengthen school choice program

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Senate President Steve Sweeney recently announced a legislative initiative to seek voter approval for \$500 million in bond funds to significantly expand college and career readiness educational opportunities in our county vocational-technical schools and county colleges. This effort, which has bipartisan support, represents and supports the new direction that our education community must take to prepare our students for successful and fulfilling career paths.

Every year, thousands of students seek enrollment in the specialized programs that may not be offered at their local high schools. Unfortunately, it has been reported that, due to limited space, only 13 percent of student applicants get accepted to these programs. The bond referendum would, in part, help to expand facilities so that more students will be able to take advantage of these innovative opportunities.

Fortunately, there is another avenue for students seeking specialized advanced curriculum programs without requiring additional funding. The Interdistrict Public School Choice Program offers students opportunities in a wide variety of innovative areas of interest. The program allows students to attend approved Choice Districts (K-12) without cost to their parents. Interdistrict increases educational opportunities for students and their families by providing students with school options outside of their district of residence and gives them the power to select a school program that best serves them.

Currently, there are 28 Interdistrict School Choice districts in Camden and Gloucester counties. Several of these schools present high school programs that cannot be replicated in every high school due to special circumstances and costs.

For example, Sterling High School offers a Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps program called the "Navy Knights." This is the only Navy JROTC program in the county, and students from all corners of the county choose to participate. Students enrolled are not required to join the military after high school, and the program is not a military preparation class. The program does, however, build essential skills such as leadership, self-confidence and discipline — the skills needed to succeed in any profession.

Another example is Glassboro High School's STEM Academy and their Fine & Performing Arts Academy, both offering intense and unique programs. Glassboro High partners with nearby Rowan University in providing college credit classes in these areas of study with no cost to parents. Many students in these programs will graduate Glassboro High with college credits. One student graduated with over 20 college credits successfully completed.

Most Interdistrict Choice Schools have openings to take more students, but they have been limited in program capacity by the previous administration. More school districts want to join the program but have been prohibited by the previous administration. These caps on student and district participation are undercutting cost savings and limiting growth of innovative academic programs. Unfortunately, the state education funding formula, the School Funding Reform Act of 2008, is broken and actually undermines the financial cost savings of the program by doubling and sometimes tripling per-pupil costs.

The Interdistrict Public School Choice Association sees opportunities here in cost-saving measures for taxpayers, advancing groundbreaking academic opportunities for students, and addressing the needs of students who cannot get into their county vocational-technical schools due to a lack of capacity. We are asking our legislators to address this section of the School Funding Reform Act to better serve the needs of all New Jersey residents.

Marguerite Downham is executive director of the New Jersey Interdistrict Public School Choice Association.

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