

Presentation to the State Board of Education regarding
the New Regulations for the Interdistrict Public School Choice Program, April 2024
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Good Afternoon.

In May of 2011, I became the Acting Director of the Choice Program due to the unexpected illness of Anne Casale, who had operated the Interdistrict Choice Program for many years. The original pilot program had expired, but the program had recently been made permanent by the New Jersey School Choice Act of 2010.

At that time, there were 15 schools still operating under the pilot program, and 56 new district applications approved for 2012. Student enrollment increased quickly and more districts began applying. It was clear that the program was very popular by the waiting lists many schools produced, and the requests by parents to find more choice schools in their counties. I and other staff members did outreach programs for cities such as Camden, Trenton and Willingboro, where parents were unaware of the program, and needed help negotiating the application process. We also contacted surrounding districts to encourage them to join the program.

When I left the DOE in April of 2012, there were about 35 new district applications waiting for approval and student enrollment was 3,356. In the fall of 2012, several of the superintendents of the choice schools, former Director of the Program Valarie Smith, and I organized the New Jersey Interdistrict Public School Choice Association (NJIPSCA) to act as an information and advocacy group for the choice schools.

In October of 2013, the NJDOE sent a memo to the 136 operating choice districts that due to a 5% increase cap on enrollment aid, districts would be facing enrollment caps, which hit especially hard on the newly-authorized districts.

Following this cap, the NJIPSCA board was contacted by numerous districts and parents regarding the loss of access to their choice schools. In May of 2014, we met with Acting Commissioner David Hespe at the DOE to provide our suggestions for adjusting the choice formula, improving the district application process, and perhaps allowing choice districts to fill open seats with tuition students from their waiting lists.

Our Association has continued to advocate for the expansion and improvement of this program because we are aware of the many parents in this state who are unhappy with their educational choices and are seeking a better school for their children. We are

frustrated that the Department of Education is not doing more to publicize the program, or to encourage districts in underserved counties to join the program, or even to produce the Annual Report on the program to the Legislature, which is a requirement of the legislation. In order to assemble statistics on minority enrollment and waiting lists, I have to survey the districts and compile my own data. When I reached out to the Department recently for enrollment demographics, I was told I had to contact the Attorney General's office.

Another disappointing statistic is the drop in the number of choice districts still operating in the State. In 2014, there were 136 choice districts still accepting students into the program. As of 2023, only 119 were still accepting new choice students. The Association spoke to many of those who dropped out, and their reasons vary, but the enrollment caps were a significant reason. (Exhibit , Attached)

It is no secret that the Interdistrict choice program in New Jersey is a popular program both for the school districts with declining enrollment and for the parents and students who are looking for schools with educational offerings that their own district may not provide. We hear many success stories from the choice schools of students who have left their resident district and graduated with high honors, college credits, or even valedictory status.

My purpose in coming here today has been to encourage this Board to support the goal of eliminating both the enrollment caps and the prohibition of new district applications. Allowing tuition students for districts with enrollment caps should also be considered.

Thank you.