

Will school choice help integrate NJ schools?

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After mediation fails in segregation lawsuit, advocates push to expand school choice program



Emily Burrows is a school choice student from Pitman in Glassboro High School's STEM Academy.

Some advocates are pushing for New Jersey's public school choice program to be expanded after [mediation talks failed](#) in the lawsuit about how to desegregate the state's public schools.

The program allows students in grades K-12 to enroll in participating school districts in other towns for free. For the 2025-2026 school year, 119 of the state's nearly 600 districts are choice districts. No new districts have been added to the program in about a decade, despite demand for the program outpacing the number of available seats. More than 2,000 students were on waitlists in

the 2022-2023 school year, according to data from the state Department of Education.

At his recent confirmation hearing, Education Commissioner Kevin Dehmer said he “absolutely” supports the program.

“Districts that participate are opting in and similarly, parents’ and families that choose to leave their district of residence and attend a nearby district is also by choice,” Dehmer said. “This is just another option for those families to make the decision they think is best for their children.”

For some districts, the choice program helps them maintain programs and services as enrollment declines. For others, it allows students to tap into specialized programs with high-level classes in the arts, STEM and business. Now, some groups are pushing the program to increase diversity after desegregation efforts stalled. Much of school segregation in New Jersey is a result of residential segregation and the requirement that students must attend schools in the neighborhood where they live.

Emily Burrows, a junior choice student at Glassboro High School, said she is grateful to attend a school that is more diverse than Pitman, where she lives. Almost 90% of Pitman’s student body is white, compared to about 32% in Glassboro.

“It definitely gives you more experiences to use in life. It widens your thinking,” said Burrows, who is white. “I’m definitely less close minded than I was in my previous school.”

Amari Sabb, a junior choice student in Glassboro, said he has learned a lot from the diverse student body.

“It gives you a different perspective on things and prepares you for the world,” Sabb said. “Going into the world, you’re going to meet so many different

people. That's why if you go to school with such diversity, when you meet those different people, it won't be a shock."

Sabb, a Black student from Glassboro, moved to the predominantly white Williamstown in middle school. He returned to Glassboro for high school as a choice student to attend the business program, calling it a "no brainer."

Glassboro Public Schools offers an academy program in collaboration with Rowan University. Resident and choice students can take advanced courses and earn college credits while in high school, which Superintendent Mark Silverstein said is a big draw for students and families.

The business program that Sabb is part of offers guaranteed admission to business school at Rowan. Silverstein said there is currently a waitlist of three students for the business program at the high school.

The district also offers academy programs in performing arts, biomedical studies and STEM. They are two of only 17 choice students in the district, but Silverstein said there is room for at least 100.

The district started the program slowly with 17 students and plans to grow, Silverstein said, but the state hasn't allowed the district to add more seats. Silverstein said he gets lots of calls from interested students and families.

Since the school choice program's inception, there have been 284 choice students and 1,600 college credits earned in Glassboro. Each choice student that attends the district helps fund three local students' participation in the academy programs at Rowan. Silverstein said it would have been more difficult to pay for the academies without the choice program.

"The only challenge we have here is you have just a small program," Silverstein said. "Just imagine the things they're talking about here, if you doubled or tripled the size of it what could happen?"

Another district looking to expand its choice program is Pittsgrove Township School District in Salem County, where the waitlist for this year has 100 students. Pittsgrove is a PK-12 district that serves about 1,700 students, almost 200 of whom are choice students.

The rural district draws many students from nearby Gloucester and Cumberland counties. Business Administrator Darren Harris said the “small town culture” and higher standardized test scores compared to surrounding towns make the district desirable for families.

If the school choice program is expanded, the district has the capacity to provide for about 300 more students, Harris said.

“If it wasn’t for school choice, our district would not be where it is today. School choice has, in a lot of ways, saved Pittsgrove Township School District because we otherwise would have gone through a very large decrease in enrollment and it would have debilitated the school district,” Harris said.

Dehmer, the education commissioner, said most of the participating districts joined the program due to declining enrollments. He said the department does not want to put existing choice districts in a position where accepting new students would not make the program viable long term due to needs for more space or staff.

“It’s something we need to be cognizant of so they are not flooded with too many students that they can’t handle,” Dehmer said at the hearing.

Two of the groups leading the push for the program to be expanded want to see more funding for the program in the state’s budget for the fiscal year beginning on July 1.

Erica Jedynak, chief operating officer of yes. every kid. said the budget should include money for all currently waitlisted students to attend a choice district. She said she does not know how much it would cost because per-pupil state

funding varies based on the district a student lives in. yes. every kid. advocates for students to have access to any public school of their choosing, no matter where they live.

The New Jersey Policy Institute, a non-partisan organization focused on finding solutions for education, energy and economic issues, thanked Dehmer for his support of the program during his confirmation hearing and called for its expansion.

“Given the recent collapse of mediation in the desegregation lawsuit, we encourage the Legislature and Administration to take action now on behalf of all New Jersey students and expand the state’s highly successful Interdistrict School Choice Program,” Wells Winegar, executive director of the New Jersey Policy Institute said in a statement.

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