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Troubled school troubles mother



Definition: Parent, Howard school system disagree over how to leave no child behind.

August 21, 2003 | By Tricia Bishop | Tricia Bishop,SUN STAFF

When classes start next week, most kids in 7-year-old Kaleb Jareaux's neighborhood will attend Dasher Green-Owen Brown School in Columbia, which is on a state list of struggling schools.

His mom says there is no way her son will go there. The Howard County school system says she does not have a choice.

Marlena Jareaux is caught in a battle of semantics with the school system, which she says interprets too literally the eligibility requirements in a federal law that allows parents to pull their children from failing schools.

The law says children "enrolled" in underperforming schools may switch to better ones, and Jareaux believes that also applies to kids who simply live in a school's district, but have not registered in the school.

The Howard school system disagrees, interpreting "enrolled" to mean that a pupil must attend a failing school to transfer from it. So Jareaux's son, who went to a private school in Washington last year, does not qualify.

"What are those who move into the district supposed to do?" asked an exasperated Jareaux, "Send our kids to a bad school for a year first? I'm not willing to take that risk."

The conundrum is one example of the difficulties of implementing the sweeping provisions of the 2002 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as No Child Left Behind.

Kaleb's private school closed this year, and his only public-school option is to start second grade at Dasher Green-Owen

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Dasher Green Elementary and Owen Brown Middle, which were in the same building, were merged during the summer to become a kindergarten-through- eighth-grade facility in an effort to streamline operations and improve educational offerings.

The pupils made leaps in the most recent Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, which is administered to second- and fourth-graders in March to assess their math and reading proficiency.

Last year, the median scores for pupils tested were largely well below the Howard County standard. But this year's results show the median score of second-graders as meeting the county standard in reading and exceeding it by a large margin in math, while fourth-graders are performing well in reading, but lag slightly in math.

Many feel a school should be judged on more than its test scores - the resources it offers, the pupil population it is educating and the long hours its staff dedicates to schooling - but Jareaux still does not want her son to attend Dasher Green-Owen Brown.

"I'm terrified and petrified of him going there. In my mind it's not an option," Jareaux said. "If I have to use my home equity line to pay my bills for the next couple of months so I can home-school him, that's what I'll do."

She tried to take advantage of a national initiative offering parents the option of switching their children from a school with failing grades on assessment tests to one with better marks, in this case Waterloo Elementary.

But when she applied June 9, Jareaux was told she was not eligible for the program because her son had been attending a private school and was not part of the Howard system, though she had enrolled Kaleb in Howard on June 2.

The Public School Choice section of the No Child Left Behind Act says children are eligible for the switch if they are "enrolled" in Title I schools, which receive extra funds to help disadvantaged children, identified for school improvement. The Howard school system interprets that to mean pupils must have attended the failing school to transfer from it.

Dasher Green was deemed one of those school improvement schools Monday when the state released a list based on scores from the Maryland School Assessment tests, unavailable to the public until tomorrow.

Swansfield, Talbott Springs, Bryant Woods, Phelps Luck and Guilford elementaries, all in Columbia, also were on the list.

The school system told Jareaux she missed the June 6 deadline to sign up - a deadline she did not know about because only parents of enrolled pupils were told.

"It's a Catch-22," acknowledges Deputy State Superintendent Ronald A. Peiffer, who said the state is working with the U.S. Department of Education to get clarification on the school-choice policy, particularly the definition of "enrolled."

The early deadline was set by the county, said Rae Ellen Levene, who is in charge of Title I schools in Howard, even though the federal legislation states that the transfers must be complete before the first day of school.

"It's a procedure; we can't do it at warp speed," Levene said, adding that the school system tried to do the transfers over the summer last year, but found the window of time too large for parents to manage and the late requests too difficult for the school system to process.

Many considerations have to be made in transferring students, Levene said, including transportation arrangements and

fund redistribution.

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