

Peeling Back the Program

VOLUNTARY TRANSFER STUDENTS FACE NON-RESIDENT CHALLENGES

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Imagine you are just waking up. You open your eyes and the clock says 6:30. To most of us who live near the school, this means we still have time to get ready, and can be at school on time. Those who live in the city and are part of the Voluntary Student Transfer program, however, are late, have the possibility of missing school entirely and having an unexcused absence for the day – unable to makeup any of the work they missed due to their location.

“If I missed the bus, I would have to stay home or wait until 8 o’clock to even see if a bus would be available to take me to the school,” said junior Marissa Wright. “If they don’t have a cab or a bus available, I would miss that day of school, and I now have an unexcused absence.”

—Marissa Wright, junior

“I am only able to get to school if I miss the bus if I take the middle school bus with my sister,” senior Mya Petty said. “Not everyone can do that though, because the bus is already coming to my house. But if they don’t have siblings or other people that can take them, they’ll just stay home because they can’t get to school.”

It isn’t just the issue of getting to school either. Even if students make it on time to the bus, there are still issues – one of them being sleep.

“I wake up around 4:45 to get ready for school,” senior Nathan Okpara said. “It was really hard to adjust (to the bus schedule) when I first began high school, mostly because I was becoming sleep deprived.”

Sleep deprivation is a common problem among those who travel from the city to come to school. Many others have reported a lack of sleep due to the time the bus comes to pick them up and the time necessary in the morning to get ready.

“We get so tired we stretch our legs across the seats to each other and help each other have more room,” Wright said. “I don’t think I would have that relationship with anyone else in the school because I don’t think anyone else would understand what it’s like and the struggle it is getting up in the morning and being so tired and having to do this every day.”

It’s not just the lack of sleep that plagues these riders in the morning. Many voluntary transfer students said that because of how far away they live, and the transportation system they rely on, they are limited in the amount of clubs and activities they can partake in.

“Some activities like STUCO I can’t even try and do because they are before school, and I have to wake up at 5:30 for regular school anyway, so I would have to wake up even earlier for morning activities,” said Petty. “Any activities before school are already eliminated because I wouldn’t get any sleep.”

In addition to limiting their participation within school activities, their location affects their overall high school experience.

“If I have a basketball game, I have to have the cab right after the game, so if the team wanted to go to Steak ‘n’ Shake or go to the boys game after, I’m missing out on that because I have to get home because it takes me an hour to get there,” Wright said. “I have to miss out on things like football games and tailgates and trips after choir field trips because I have to travel an hour to get home.”

The issues facing these students are already being “solved” by Parkway. That solution is the phasing out of the Voluntary Student Transfer program that allows these students to come to school in the county.

“This program was not a program meant to go on indefinitely,” Facilitator of the Voluntary Student Transfer Program for the district Rocky Talavedra said. “We went to our last extension, and then this program will be phased out. We might introduce a new program not based upon race, but as of now, we have these last couple of years and then it will be phased out.”

Back in 1972 the court case of Liddell v. Board of Education was filed due to inherent racism toward black children in the St. Louis schooling system. A federal judge ruled in favor of Liddell and created a law that forced integration of schools. This law enforced de-segregation policies and allowed black students to not only receive their education but also gave them the opportunity to do so in (predominantly white) county schools.

“As of 1999 there was a settlement agreement, so basically the districts that had been forced to be a part of this program now had the chance to opt in or opt out. So they get the decision every couple of years to decide to be a part of the program or not,” Talavedra said. “There are certain districts no longer in the program such as Pattonville, Ladue and Lindber-

gh. Other districts are in and continue to stay in are Parkway, Rockwood, Mehlville, and Affton.”

The program, active in Parkway since 1983, is now in the process of becoming obsolete. With only 209 new applicants accepted this year and with a smaller projected amount for next year, even in keeping the program active the district is expected to lose not only its economic diversity but also 13 percent of its African American population as a whole.

“For Parkway, our enrollment for African American would only be 2 percent, but because of this program exists, it is 15 percent,” Talavedra said. “There are several different studies that show integration or having a diverse population not only helps black students or Hispanic students, it helps white students as well. It creates a situation that students will see in the workforce so it’s easier to deal with different cultures, personalities and views.”

Thirteen percent of Central students are African American; only 7 percent are part of the Voluntary Student Transfer program.

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BY THE NUMBERS

25,000

students enrolled in the Voluntary Student Transfer program at its height in 1999

1,562

applied to be a part of the program in 2016

45

years since the original court case was filed in Liddell vs. Board of Education

2

five-year extensions have been made since 2007 to retain the program

6,000

students currently enrolled in the program in 2016

209

new students accepted into the program in 2016

39

school districts asked to be a part of the program voluntarily in 1981

4

school districts involved in the program voluntarily in 1981

1

year until Parkway phases out the Voluntary Student Transfer program

THE FLOW OF HISTORY- THE VSTP

1954

“Separate but equal” doctrine was deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme court unanimously.

1983

By September the St. Louis plan is underway with almost 2,500 city transfer students enrolled.

1983

In February an agreement on a voluntary plan in the St. Louis case is announced and endorsed by officials in twenty of the 23 county districts. By March 30, a final settlement plan approved by all 23 school districts is given to Judge Hungate, who approves the plan after two months of fairness hearings.

2012

A second unanimous vote is held which again extends the window for accepting new students in the program an additional 5 years to 2018-19. Participating school districts indicated that they would continue to accept transfer students.

1964

Congress passes and President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawing race and gender discrimination in voting, public accommodations and employment.

1980

St. Louis Court of Appeals reverses earlier decisions and said that the city board and state were responsible for maintaining a segregated school system. Court notes that long after the “separate but equal” doctrine was ruled unconstitutional, the Missouri Constitution contained an article calling for separate schools. Court suggests the development of an exchange program between the city and county. This would become the Voluntary Student Transfer Program.

1984

5,000 students enrolled in the Voluntary St. Louis Student Transfer program.

1999

All parties to the Liddell lawsuit announced that an agreement has been reached which would provide for continuation of the most successful components of the 1983 Settlement Agreement- specifically the voluntary transfer program. New students would be allowed to enroll through the 2008-09 school year.

2007

A unanimous vote of the Board of Directors of the Voluntary Inter-district Choice Corporation, the window for accepting new students in the program was extended 5 years, to 2013-14. The majority of districts remain in the program.

1972

Minnie Liddell files a complain in the U.S. District Court due to their children being bussed to schools very distant from their neighborhood. Parents claimed that certain practices by the city’s school board and the State of Missouri are responsible for segregation in the St. Louis schooling system.

1979

In the Liddell case, Judge Meredith rules that the city school board had not intentionally segregated black students.

1999

The Voluntary Interdiction Coordinating Council became a non profit corporation, renamed the Voluntary Inter-district Choice Corporation, responsible for all aspects of the voluntary student transfer program. It is now governed through superintendents of the participating school districts and funded through the same state funding mechanisms as all other public schools in Missouri.

