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## NJDOE News

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### **State Board Approves Interdistrict Public School Choice Pilot Program**

Regulations that will launch a limited five-year interdistrict school choice pilot program were approved by the State Board of Education today. Under this voluntary program, beginning in September 2000 students may be enrolled in a participating choice district even if it is not their district of residence.

Following the board's vote, the Department of Education mailed applications to all school superintendents to notify school districts of the availability of this choice option and determine potential participants.

Governor Christie Whitman, who is a strong supporter of school choice, hailed the board's vote.

"The objective of school choice is to empower parents," said the Governor. "Parents should be able to select the public school they believe is the best suited to their child's interests, abilities and needs even if it is outside the district in which they live."

Whitman said school choice could improve the overall quality of public education by fostering a healthy competition among school districts. "As long as competition is part and parcel of an integrated program to improve public education, it can work wonders for our schools," the Governor said.

To demonstrate her commitment to school choice, Gov. Whitman pledged to provide additional funding for the program in her budget for fiscal year beginning July 1, 2000.

Under the regulations adopted by the State Board, a maximum of 21 school choice districts will be phased in over a three-year period - no more than 10 the first year, no more than 15 the second year and no more than 21 in the third through fifth year. There will be no more than one choice district per county. A sending district will be able to limit the number of children who can participate to 7 percent of its total enrollment and 2 percent of its enrollment per grade per year.

The rules provide a mechanism to maintain racial diversity in a district and to make sure special education and bilingual students are not prevented from participating.

Choice districts will receive transportation aid for students participating in the program. However, parents of students residing more than 20 miles from their school of choice will be responsible for their children's transportation.

"More than half the states in the nation have either a voluntary or mandatory school choice program," noted Commissioner of Education David C. Hespe noted. "There is research that demonstrates parents who have the ability to choose are more satisfied with their child's school and get more involved in their child's education. Studies also show the majority of parents want to choose the schools their children attend and disadvantaged families are more likely to exercise the choice option once it becomes available.

"I agree with the Governor that school choice can produce remarkable results," the commissioner said. "But experiences can vary from state to state. We are purposely limiting the scope of New Jersey's experiment so the results can be carefully measured and the potential for any negative impact on a sending district is kept to a minimum."

The regulations require the commissioning of an independent study of the first two years of the school choice program and the submission of an annual review to the State Board and the Legislature.

To protect children in the event the school choice program is discontinued, choice students will be able to remain in the school in which they are enrolled until their graduation.

Districts interested in participating in the voluntary program will have to return their applications to the Department of Education by October 20. The list of choice districts will be announced on November 29.

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