

# Chalkboard

By

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Among the eighty-one laws passed by the state legislature in the Second Extraordinary Session of 2003 was Act 110 which mandated that school superintendents be required to inform the public about the provisions of an act passed in the earlier regular session, namely “*Act 1272 of 2003 “AN ACT TO REQUIRE ALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS TO PARTICIPATE IN PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE; AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES’*”. To refresh your memory, this acts contains the phrase, ““A public school choice program is hereby established to enable any student to attend a school in a district in which the student does not reside....”

Since this is a legal requirement, you may flip over to the “Legal Ads” section of this newspaper and read the resolution adopted by the Gentry School Board last year that governs our school’s implementation of the law. The ad is also running in other companion county newspapers. For the sake of you readers, who, like me, may be struggling to read fine print, I will provide the highlights of those provisions.

Applicants must apply using a form approved by the Arkansas Department of Education. Those forms are available now in my office and may be picked up between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. during the regular workweek. The one page form is relatively simple to complete.

The law itself establishes the deadline each year of July 1 to have applications submitted, or post marked if returning by mail, to the school district to which you wish your child to attend that next fall semester. No exception is allowed to that date.

Within thirty (30) days of the receipt of the application, the school superintendent must notify the parent or guardian and the resident district in writing as to whether the student's application has been accepted or rejected. I note that the district where the child presently attends school has no voice in the matter as to whether or not the child is accepted. For example, the Gentry School Board would have no say in the matter for a child who currently attends the Gentry School District and who applied to attend another district for the 2004-05 school term. Nor would that district, or any district, have a say in whether one of their students could attend the Gentry District.

The law does allow that the “school board of directors of every public school district must adopt by resolution specific standards for acceptance and rejection of applications. Standards may include the capacity of a program, class, grade level, or school building. Nothing in this section requires a school district to add teachers, staff, or classrooms or in any way to exceed the requirements and standards established by existing law. Standards shall include a statement that priority will be given to applications from siblings or stepsiblings residing in the same residence or household of students already attending the district by choice. Standards may not include an applicant's previous academic achievement athletic or other extracurricular ability, handicapping conditions, English proficiency level, or previous disciplinary proceedings, except that an expulsion from another district may be included pursuant to § 6-18-510”. Last year our school board determined that our district would accept any student who wants to come until our classrooms and/or specific programs are full. They, of course, specified that a student expelled from another district would not be accepted until the period of expulsion was completed.

The above paragraphs are only the highlights of the law. Again, I encourage you to read our legal notice elsewhere in the newspaper. If you are contemplating applying elsewhere you should contact that school’s superintendent’s office to determine what the local requirements are for being accepted into that district.

I probably would be remiss if I did not at least explore the question of why parents would want to avail themselves of the rights this law entitles them and their children. As the superintendent of the Gentry District, I cannot think of a specific reason why any student would want to go elsewhere.

In all fairness, I believe every superintendent that I know in northwest Arkansas would express that same sentiment. Each of us is proud of the district in which we work and believe that each offers a quality educational program for the students who attend.

For certain, each of our respective schools boards will be obligated by law to ensure that our respective district offers at least the minimum curriculum required by the Arkansas State Board of Education’s *Standards For Accreditation*. Obviously, past those minimum requirements, different schools will offer different programs based on their financial ability to do so.

Not surprising, just as the school choice law did not give the school board the final say, neither did it give that to the school superintendent. It gave that decision to the person who should be making it- you, the parent.

