

*136 School magnet panel rejects return of sibling preference in Hernando County(Florida USA)
[and chooses lottery as 'fairer']*

BROOKSVILLE — Andrew Caamano admits it would be nice if his younger daughter could get an automatic bump ahead in the admission process to Challenger K-8 because his older daughter already attends the math and science magnet school.

But that wouldn't be fair, he said.

So Caamano joined a majority of members of the district's magnet school policy committee in its recommendation to the School Board not to resurrect the sibling preference policy.

"I would like nothing more than a carte blanche guarantee that my two daughters will be going to the same school," he said.

"But I think the committee in its form right now is a group that is willing and able to see past personal preferences and help the superintendent create policy that's fair and equitable for the students in the entire district."

The committee, which comprises parents, teachers, administrators and district staffers, has not recommended any major changes to the magnet admission procedure, which will be up for School Board review at a workshop Tuesday. But the sibling preference policy is still noticeably absent.

In 2007, the board voted to eliminate the policy that granted automatic admission to children with siblings already attending one of the district's three magnet schools — Chocachatti, which has fine arts and microsociety programs; Nature Coast Technical High; and Challenger.

Data showed that siblings admitted automatically took a significant number of spots, especially at Challenger. Board members agreed, however, that the change would not take effect until 2010, so siblings who are registered for this year still enjoyed the benefit.

Parents lobbied the board to keep the policy, arguing the district should make it a priority to keep families together. The board stood firm.

The magnet committee was nearly unanimous in its decision not to bring back the policy, Caamano said.

Committee member Laura Page said the committee did not work as she had hoped. Page, a parent of one daughter in Chocachatti and another she hopes will be admitted there, is among the parents who have lobbied for sibling preference. She said there was little discussion on the issue among committee members.

"It pretty much seemed like it was a closed door," she said.

Page said she expected the committee to do more research on how other districts handle magnet admissions, but there was little of that, she said.

"It was just a big disappointment," Page said. "I feel like I've been asked to be on it just to appease me."

Maria Rybka, Chocachatti's principal and a magnet committee member, said she understands parents want the convenience of having children attend the same school.

"But I also know our school is geared toward a certain population with the fine arts and microsociety programs," Rybka said. "If students don't have an interest in that and they're coming here for convenience, maybe there are other students those spots should be open to who have more talents in those areas."

The committee also recommends the district keep the current policy of accepting some kindergartners through a portfolio process.

Last year, the board tried to make a change that rankled some parents: Students entering kindergarten would be accepted only by lottery. Children that young can't really show much aptitude, board members reasoned, and portfolios tend to be the work of parents, not the student.

Some parents complained that would water down the magnet program, and that students can show skills and talent even at a young age.

The board reversed course last October, and kindergartners continued to be accepted by a mix of portfolio and lottery. The board decided at that time to form the magnet committee to make recommendations for long-term policies.

The committee is also recommending the district keep the current ratio of portfolio to lottery admission. In each school, 70 percent of all students would still be accepted by portfolio and 30 percent by lottery.

Superintendent Bryan Blavatt said the committee made the right call on siblings.

"I don't know that sibling preference is anything more than a convenience for parents rather than what's educationally best for kids," he said.

The committee will remain active to help chart a longer-term course for the district's magnet offerings, Blavatt said.

"The charge I've given them is to develop a three- to five-year plan for all the magnets. Where we are headed, are we going to add additional programs, which ones would we add, and so forth." Tony Marrero can be reached at (352) 848-1431 or tmarrero@sptimes.com.

[Last modified: Oct 01, 2010 06:37 PM]



Click here for reuse options!

Copyright 2010 St. Petersburg Times

<http://www.tampabay.com/news/education/k12/school-magnet-panel-rejects-return-of-sibling-preference-in-hernando-county/1125441>