

# SHAWNEE | Large number of disadvantaged students poses challenge for school

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its students from low-income, low-education and high-minority areas — more than double the rate of any other high school.

District officials could have created a satellite attendance zone for Shawnee in a more affluent area of Jefferson County to diversify enrollment. But they chose not to.

Some believe suburban parents would balk at sending their children to Shawnee.

Instead, the district is trying to lure more affluent students to Shawnee by having it offer an energy technology program, along with its existing aviation program.

"Rather than forcing people to go, we thought we'd create some very attractive magnet programs," said district Superintendent Sheldon Berman.

"We believe we can address the Shawnee issue through choice," said Pat Todd, director of student assignment.

But some parents and neighborhood leaders worry that a new magnet program won't be enough. And they argue that the district's plan puts the school at 41st and Market streets at an unfair disadvantage that could allow it to continue to languish.

"It's unfair that it's only happening to one school," said Shawnee parent Dawn Klemm. "I don't think this sets them up for success."

Last week, nearly 20 community leaders and advocates met at the school and vowed to hold meetings with the district to see whether a more equitable mix of students can be achieved.

"The whole purpose of the assignment plan is to make sure every school has a healthy mix of students — except for these poor kids in the West End?" asked Evie O'Connell, a Shawnee neighbor.

## District changes policy

The district began working to revise middle school and high school boundaries after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down its old student-assignment policy in 2007.

The justices ruled that the district could not look solely at individual students' race when assigning them to schools.

Under the revised policy, schools must have 15 percent to 50 percent of their students from enrollment zones where the average household income is below \$41,000; average education levels are less than a high school diploma with some college; and the minority population is more than 48 percent.

Earlier this year, the school board passed a new student-assignment plan for elementary schools that allows students to choose among a cluster of schools in the area where they live, providing that the district's diversity guidelines are met.

The board is now weighing a student-assignment plan for middle and high schools, with revised attendance boundaries that would give some schools two enrollment areas — one encompassing the school itself and a second in a separate area with lower income and education levels and a higher minority population.

## Magnet programs

Two schools — Western Middle and Shawnee High — would not have attendance areas that draw a diverse enough array of students to comply with the district's guidelines.

Berman wants to make Western an arts magnet school available for students to apply from across the county. Students who would have attended Western would be assigned to other schools.

But Shawnee would have almost the same enrollment zone as it has now — taking in parts of downtown, western Louisville and Portland, where average per-capita incomes are just above \$11,000 a year.

To offset that, the district is relying on attractive programs designed to lure a diverse student population to Shawnee.

Berman says that by 2010, an energy technology magnet program would offer a focus on alternative energy and other engineering technologies. He plans to partner with businesses in a high-growth field that he says will create a powerful draw.

He also wants to bolster the existing aviation flight and maintenance magnet program. Currently, about 24 Shawnee juniors and seniors are enrolled. An additional 112 come from a Southern Indiana vocational school whose students take aviation classes there by agreement.

But the aviation program's inability to draw many district students makes some school board members wary of relying on a second magnet program.

"If it doesn't work, we'll still be sitting there with Shawnee" struggling, said school board member Linda Duncan, who opposes having "isolated pockets of kids in high poverty."

## Making a difference

It was still dark on a recent morning as Shawnee principal Keith Look greeted students arriving for school slinging backpacks and laughing.

"Hey, Dr. Look!" one student said as she passed.

A veteran of high-poverty schools in Baltimore and



By Bill Luster, The Courier-Journal

Shawnee High School senior Michelle Dennis gave principal Keith Look a hug after she successfully completed a morning announcement at the school. She had been nervous, and Look helped her have confidence.

Philadelphia, Shawnee's new principal is considering a range of reforms — from a freshman academy to better connecting students in early years to postsecondary education.

"I wouldn't have taken this job if I didn't think I could make a difference," he said.

But the inequity of the proposed student-assignment plan isn't lost on Look,

who said many of his students face "a lot of noneducation barriers" because of their socioeconomic status.

While poor students can achieve as well as any other student, they are more often affected by transience, evictions, family turmoil and lack of academic preparation — issues that spill into the classroom.

High concentrations of such students make it tough

for schools. Education researchers at Arizona State University have found that fewer than 2 percent of high-poverty schools achieve at high levels.

But districts that have tried to address that concern by reassigning students from higher-achieving schools have run into a "political buzz saw" from affluent families who can afford to send children to private school, said Richard Kahlenberg, an education researcher with the Century Foundation.

As a result, he said, many schools rely on special programs. While schoolwide magnet programs that draw students from throughout the district tend to be more successful than smaller programs within schools, he said, the smaller programs also can work.

Shawnee parent Karen White, whose daughter Alisha Hughes is a junior, hopes that a new program will be enough to draw students to a neighborhood often associated with crime and poverty. Meyzeek Middle School, for example, has a math-science magnet that draws a mix of students to a low-income area.

Klemm said her son, a freshman, applied to Shawnee because of its aviation program.

"When my son wanted to go, I thought, gosh, do I want you to go there?" Klemm said. "But on Halloween day he had his first flight. He said, 'Mom, this is the best

day of my whole life.'"

## 'I want it to survive'

Berman said district officials have discussed opening a new downtown high school — and closing Shawnee. But it's just an idea, he said, and probably a decade away even if it was pursued.

That worries local leaders like Rudy Davidson, president of the Shawnee Neighborhood Association. He noted that Shawnee already has a low enrollment of 595 students, which has forced it to close off its third floor.

"I want it to survive," he said. "It's an integral part of the community."

Louisville Metro Councilwoman Cheri Bryant Hamilton, who represents Shawnee's area, said the district's plan was "not good enough."

"People in my community are wondering, are they setting it up for failure? Are they setting it up to close?" she said.

Berman has said that community forums on the student assignment plan will be held over the next few months, before the plan is adopted in March.

Elmore said she supports the district's approach, calling it "worth a try."

"I'm kind of excited about it," she said. "But maybe I'm looking through rose-colored glasses."

Reporter Chris Kenning can be reached at (502) 582-4697.

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