



*J. Kenyon Kummings, Superintendent
Wildwood Public Schools
4300 Pacific Avenue
Wildwood, New Jersey 08260
Phone: 609-522-4157 Fax: 609-523-8161*

Wildwood Public Schools

May 4, 2020

RE: Wildwood Public Schools Request for Designation as a Choice District within the New Jersey Interdistrict Public School Choice Program

Assistant Commissioner Abdulsaleem Hasan,

In February of 2020 I had written you and our Executive County Superintendent, Dr. Destefano-Anen regarding our request for choice seats for Wildwood Public Schools (Wildwood City). The most recent response to this request to begin a dialogue on this subject was to create a more formal request that includes a deeper analysis and rationale. We realize that these are very trying times, as Governor Murphy has just announced today that schools will remain closed for the remainder of the academic year due to the pandemic. In light of these circumstances, we are extremely appreciative that the New Jersey Department of Education is giving us a forum to advocate that we be included in the Interdistrict Public School Choice Program. The results of our analyses and our explanation for our request are in the following pages.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "JK", written over a light blue rectangular background.

J. Kenyon Kummings, Superintendent

Cc:
Judith DeStefano, Ed.D.
Daryl Minus-Vincent

Wildwood Public Schools
Request for Designation as a Choice District within the
New Jersey Interdistrict Public School Choice Program

Executive Summary

The Wildwood Public School District is the only PK-12 district in Cape May County that is currently denied the opportunity to be a choice district. The lack of choice designation impacts the children of Wildwood and Cape May County in distinct ways: 1) demographic imbalances, 2) educational equity, 3) academic opportunity, and 4) financial loss.

- The Wildwood School District is the only PreK-12 district in the county whose demographics approach an 80-20 split, with almost 80% of students identifying as non-Caucasian. Approximately 85% of resident students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches. In contrast, the other two PreK-12 “choice districts” have resident student demographic makeups of approximately 20-80, and 35-65 in which almost 80% and 65% of their students, including the vast majority their choice students, identify as Caucasian. The two PreK-12 choice districts in Cape May County have only approximately 14% and 40% of their students eligible for free or reduced price lunches.
- The fact that most “choice students” are Caucasian, entering choice districts that are majority Caucasian, creates a situation in which students cannot receive the recognized benefits of diversity in education in Cape May County’s existing PreK-12 districts.
- The New Jersey Department of Education explains some of the benefits that the choice program has on educational equity on its *Interdistrict Choice* website: **“Choice programs might have smaller class sizes, increased instructional time, and a school culture more conducive to a student's success in school.”** Wildwood checks off all the boxes in terms of the benefits advertised by the New Jersey Department of Education.
- The Wildwood Middle School and High School have smaller class sizes compared to the existing choice schools in the county. Smaller classes allow greater personalization of instruction. The small class sizes and smaller size of the high school and middle school create a culture akin to that of a private school. Access to high quality educational options will be especially important to people whose private schools are affected by the Covid-19 economic collapse and recession. Some parents will no longer be able to afford private school tuition and some private schools in the county will close their doors.
- The Wildwood High School was designated a *National Blue Ribbon School* by the United States Department of Education, in 2013 and it offers several innovative programs that are not available at other schools in the county.
- The data show that the Interdistrict Public School Choice program reduces our potential enrollment by 10% of our current enrollment. The Technical High School takes 33%, which causes a total potential enrollment drain of 43.67% (107 students). Combined with the S2

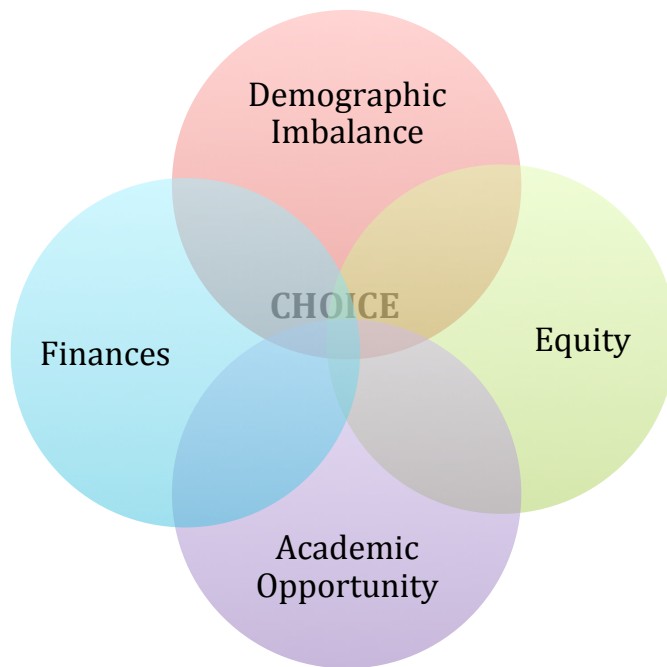
legislated budget cuts, Wildwood stands to lose approximately 3-million dollars over the next five years.

Introduction

The Wildwood Public School District formally requests that the Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Education designate the district a “Choice District” under the *New Jersey Interdistrict Public School Choice Program*. The Wildwood Public School District is the only PreK-12 district in Cape May County that has not been granted “Choice District” status. The Wildwood School District seeks an equitable distribution of 25 choice seats.

Problem

The lack of choice designation impacts the children of Wildwood and Cape May County in distinct ways: 1) demographic imbalance, 2) educational equity, 3) academic opportunity, and 4) financial loss.



Wildwood students who choose to remain in Wildwood attend school in an environment that is majority non-Caucasian, whereas choice districts are majority Caucasian. Students in Wildwood and students in Cape May County are denied the access to a racially and ethnically integrated learning environment. Students in Cape May County are also denied access to the various programs that Wildwood offers that are not offered otherwise in the county.

The enrollment drain placed on Wildwood as a result of not having a choice program limits the number of new programs that the high school can implement because the per-pupil cost of running some programs is too high due to low enrollment. For example, the per pupil cost of running an AP Physics course with two students is about 400% higher than running it with eight students. Wildwood is also impacted financially through lost enrollment due to the current funding formula and S2. Wildwood is drained of students without any mechanism to bring in new students. In essence, there are many ways for resident students to leave the island, but no way for non-resident students to access the educational opportunities that exist there.

Demographic Imbalance

One of the benefits of school choice promoted by New Jersey Department Education on the *Interdistrict Choice* website states, ***“The addition of students with different backgrounds and perspectives from those of the district’s resident students also can enrich the school community.”*** The New Jersey Department of Education clearly views choice as one mechanism to help address demographic imbalances that might exist within districts.

The Wildwood School District is the only PreK-12 district in the county whose demographics approach an 80-20 split, with almost 80% of students identifying as non-Caucasian. Approximately 85% of resident students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches. The districts that have been awarded choice status in Cape May are all “whiter” and “wealthier” than the Wildwood Public School District. The vast majority of students who access the choice program in Cape May County are also white and less poor. The choice program as currently configured in Cape May County seems to violate the published aspirations of the Interdistrict Choice Program.

The fact that most “choice students” are Caucasian, entering choice districts that are majority Caucasian, creates a situation in which students cannot receive the recognized benefits of diversity in education in Cape May County’s existing PreK-12 districts. Students in Cape May County who are not residents of Wildwood City have no mechanism by which to choose a diverse educational setting. Hence, they are unable to benefit from such a setting. Likewise, the vast majority of families and students who choose to stay in Wildwood are denied the opportunity to learn in a racially and ethnically diverse and integrated school environment.

If providing students with the opportunities to develop academically, socially, and emotionally in diverse environments is a stated goal of the choice program, the current situation in which the least racially diverse school district in Cape May County is denied the mechanisms necessary to diversify is untenable. Through the variety of pathways created by the State, including choice, and the Vocational-technical school, the effect on diversity of the Wildwood student body is profound. A great disparity exists in which non-minority families have at least four routes to leave the Wildwood School District and exacerbate the demographic imbalances that already exists, yet there is no way for families that value diverse settings and understand the important learning that takes place in such settings to access Wildwood.

Equity

The dictionary definition of equity includes a sense of fairness and freedom from bias and/or favoritism. In education, equity is generally defined and operationalized as ensuring that every child has an equal chance of success. Three specific components are required for children to have equal chances of educational success: 1) access, 2) support, and 3) resources.

The New Jersey Department of Education explains some of the benefits to educational equity brought about by the choice program on its *Interdistrict Choice* website: ***“The Public School Choice Program benefits students and parents, as well as the choice districts. Choice programs might have smaller class sizes, increased instructional time, and a school culture more conducive to a student's success in school.”*** Wildwood checks off all the boxes in terms of the benefits advertised by the New Jersey Department of Education.

The Wildwood Middle School and High School have smaller class sizes compared to the existing choice schools in the county. Smaller classes allow greater personalization of instruction. The small class sizes and smaller overall size of the high school and middle school create a culture akin to that of a private school. The hallways and common areas are safe and orderly, discipline is consistently maintained, and the teachers know all their students on an individual level. Teachers are able to better meet the individual needs of students. Parents consistently rank small class size as something they value in education and is one of the historically consistent advantages of the education offered at Wildwood High School and Middle School.

Furthermore, another equity related benefit of choice advocated by the New Jersey Department of Education is that it provides access to different educational programs: ***“Many choice districts have established specialized and innovative programs and courses that focus on areas such as the arts, math and technology, and are open to students who meet the eligibility requirements of the special programs. Opening enrollment to students outside the district can bring in more students interested in taking advantage of these special programs and courses, allowing both the programs and students to grow and flourish.”*** Again, Wildwood checks off the boxes for access to special programs, and support to be successful in those programs, as promoted by the Department of Education.

Academic Opportunity

The Glenwood Avenue Elementary School has a fully integrated Spanish bilingual kindergarten to second grade program and an intensive ESL program in grades 3 – 12. As the demographic changes of Cape May County continue to reflect a growing Latino population, first generation immigrants search for quality education opportunities for their children. A Spanish bilingual early childhood program is an advantage to students whose home language is Spanish. The district is the only one in Cape May County to offer bilingual programs and is locally viewed as a model to emulate in the development of effective programs for English Learners.

The district is home to a comprehensive 21st Century Community Learning Center after-school grant program. The program provides after-school programming and food service to students in grades 3-12. The program includes academic content, social and emotional learning, and project-

based programming. Many parents seek high quality after school programs for their students as alternatives to traditional for-profit child-care. The Wildwood after school program is free of charge to all students.

The Wildwood High School was designated a *National Blue Ribbon School* in 2013 and has a lower chronic absenteeism rate and higher percentages of students enrolled in dual-credit courses than the other choice high schools. Wildwood High School offers several innovative programs. Wildwood High School offers CTE programs that either cannot be found in Cape May County or include advantages that similar CTE programs do not have. For example, Wildwood High School offers an accredited Culinary Arts program that provides students a direct pipeline to Atlantic-Cape Community College in a small class setting. Students earn college credit in high school and Wildwood students are also automatically eligible for acceptance into ACCC. The class sizes are small and students are taught by a former chef who is also a college instructor at ACCC. The Culinary Arts program also features a fully functional on-site Café where students learn both the front end and back end of the restaurant business. In addition, we also have internship placements at the restaurants owned and operated by the Morey's Pier Corporation, the largest employer on the island. The proximity of the school to the restaurants and affords students easy access to internship opportunities.

The 21st CCLC after school program offers an integrated, farm to table, garden and greenhouse program which supplies produce to after school, summer school, and high school CTE culinary arts programs. The students grow vegetables, learn about culinary arts and nutrition, and supply produce to the Wildwood High School Warrior Café restaurant that is then served to the restaurant patrons from the school and surrounding community. Extra produce is also supplied to local school families. The 21st CCLC elementary and middle school *Farm to Table* program acts as a pre-teaching and feeder program for the high school culinary arts program.

Wildwood High School has a Law Enforcement CTE program. The program provides students with Class I Officer certification upon completion. The district has an agreement with the Wildwood Police Department that allows students in the program to be placed as Class I Officers during the busy summer season. The Class I experience provides the students with an advantage over other students who do not have that experience but want to pursue a career as a police officer. It should be noted that every graduate of this program thus far left the program with a NJDOE *Seal of Bi-literacy*.

We are in the process of creating two additional CTE programs. First, Wildwood High School is designing a Building Construction Technology CTE program. Wildwood High School is one of the only high schools in Cape May County to have a fully functional industrial technology workshop/lab with state of the art design and manufacturing equipment and qualified teacher. We have an existing industrial arts program and our students recently built a fully functional “tiny house” where students experiences every stage of the design and build. Our Building Construction Technology program will connect students to local unions and provide them nationally recognized credentials while preparing them for employment after graduation.

Our *Tomorrow's Teachers* program will provide aspiring teachers with three years of coursework in child psychology and instructional methodology. The program will be run in collaboration with Stockton University and students will receive advanced standing in admissions decisions. Given that approximately 80% of Wildwood's resident students are non-white, and many are bilingual in Spanish and eligible for the NJDOE *Seal of Bi-literacy* credential upon graduation, we see this program as an important pipeline for the development of minority teachers, an aspiration held by the current Commissioner of Education. Wildwood High School currently houses a state funded full day preschool classroom which will serve as a lab classroom to provide structured learning experiences for Tomorrow's Teachers students.

Access to high quality educational options will be especially important to those families whose private schools are affected by the Covid-19 economic collapse and recession. Some parents will no longer be able to afford private school tuition and some private schools in the on the island and in the state have announced that they will close their doors at the conclusion of the 19-20 school year. It will be important to have an expanded inventory of choice seats in the county.

Enrollment & Financial Loss

According to our latest demographic study conducted by Stockton University, the enrollment of the Wildwood High School is expected to decrease by at least an additional 29 students beyond the 107 we currently lose each year to choice and Cape May Tech. That represents an additional drop of about 10% of the enrollment within the next five years. According to Stockton University, the additional drop will be brought on by housing pattern shifts and declining birth rates in the sending districts of North Wildwood, West Wildwood, and Wildwood Crest.

Wildwoods Choice Analysis 2019-2020						
		Universe for WHS				
District	LCMR	MTPS	OCPS	TECH	Choice Total	Total
WPS	7			29	7	36
NWW	8	3	2	30	13	43
WWC	4		2	22	6	28
Total	19	3	4	81	26	107
Potential Enrollment for WHS						
Current WHS Enrollment	Choice %	Tech %	Choice/Tech %			
245	10.61%	33.06%	43.67%			
*Per 2019 NJSMART snapshot						

LCMR- Lower Cape May Regional School District
WPS- Wildwood Public Schools
NWW- North Wildwood
WWC – Wildwood Crest
MTPS- Middle Township Public Schools
OCPS – Ocean City Public Schools
TECH – Cape May Technical High School
WHS – Wildwood High School

The data show that the Interdistrict Public School Choice program reduces our potential enrollment by an additional 10%. The Technical High School takes 33%, which causes a total potential enrollment drain of 43.67% (107 students).

Enrollment is a significant component of the SFRA, and any program that leads to a reduction in enrollment has a damaging effect on the students of the Wildwood Public Schools due to reduced resources available to the district. The impending loss of enrollment coupled with the S2 budget

cuts will have a devastating impact on the families and students who choose to remain at the Wildwood School District.

The addition of 25 choice seats will help to make up for the expected enrollment decline of at least 29 students from sending districts and provide Wildwood with the only funding possibility to partially offset an anticipated loss of almost \$580,000 a year from enrollment declines, plus the approximate 1.2 million dollar anticipated cumulative loss through S2 legislation. Wildwood is projecting an annual revenue shortfall of at least 1.8 million dollars within the next five years. This figure does not take into account the aid lost from Wildwood residents participating in the Choice Program. The loss of funding will severely impact educational equity for the children and families of Wildwood.

The New Jersey Department of Education has made it clear that the choice program is one mechanism to help deal with declining enrollment. The Department wrote on its *Interdistrict Choice* website: “*The state also has many small districts and schools that sometimes experience population shifts that result in budget crunches. Opening enrollment beyond the district's boundaries can alleviate the effects of these shifts and bring greater stability to operations, since choice students bring additional funding to the district.*”

Academic Opportunities

The enrollment drain placed on Wildwood as a result of not having a choice program limits the number of AP programs that the high school can implement. The per-pupil cost of running some programs becomes too high due to low enrollment. For example, the per pupil cost of running an AP Physics course with two students is about 400% more than running it with eight students. Low enrollment coupled with the financial ramifications of S2 will make it difficult to achieve educational equity in Wildwood.

The addition of 25 students at the high school could allow the school to offer an additional four to six AP courses per year. Currently we can only run some AP courses every other year. This limits the number of AP courses Wildwood students can take over their high school career and severely impacts equity compared to the choice districts.

Summary

The Wildwood Public School District is the only PK-12 district in Cape May County that is currently denied the opportunity to be a choice district. The existing choice districts have a student body made up of a majority of white students. Wildwood is about 80% non-white, with Latino students making up the largest percentage of the population. Statewide, over 230,000 Latino students, 62%, attend schools that are 75% or more non-white.

The New Jersey Department of Education has made it clear that one important benefit of the choice program is diversity within the school environment: ***“The addition of students with different backgrounds and perspectives from those of the district’s resident students also can enrich the school community.”*** Many of the students in Cape May County do not receive that benefit because they attend majority-white districts and schools.

Equity, specifically access to educational opportunity, is also a hallmark of the choice program. Currently, thousands of students within Cape May County do not have access to the unique and special education programs in the Wildwood School District. Providing 25 choice seats will increase equity within the county.

The addition of 25 choice seats will help to partially offset the damaging financial impacts of S2 and declining enrollment trends in the Wildwood sending districts. The additional students will also provide the basis for increasing the course offerings at Wildwood High School, which will help to bring some parity with other choice districts in terms of AP course offerings.

The children and families of Wildwood deserve the same choice opportunities as their wealthier and whiter counterparts in Cape May County. We see no downside to any students in Cape May County or Wildwood by granting the Wildwood School District at least 25 choice seats.