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Cherry Hill says it's being targeted unfairly

The district is one of many dealing with racial disparity. The state said it has moved slowly in correcting the problem.<

Martin Z. Braun INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

As the school district works to develop a state-ordered plan to achieve racial balance in its elementary schools by June 1, statistics obtained from the state Department of Education show four other Camden County districts with elementary schools that have greater racial imbalances than Cherry Hill.

According to September enrollment statistics, 18 elementary schools in Camden, three in Gloucester Township, and one each in Voorhees and Collingswood have greater racial disparities than Cherry Hill's most imbalanced schools.

Yet, Gloucester Township, Voorhees and Collingswood have not been ordered by the state to develop a plan to rectify the imbalance. Camden is one of four districts in the county under a state desegregation order.

Though Cherry Hill has pledged to come up with a plan to balance its 12 elementary schools, Superintendent Morton Sherman said the focus will be on boosting minority achievement.

The plan is to be presented to the school board Tuesday by the district Racial Balance Task Force. The task force has examined such strategies as elementary school open enrollment, magnet schools and redistricting.

Nevertheless, Sherman and parents of Cherry Hill students have been left trying to understand why their district was targeted.

Osage Elementary School in Voorhees has a minority population of 40 percent; minorities make up 23 percent of district enrollment, according to state figures.

White students constitute 78 percent of Gloucester Township elementary schools, but Glendora Elementary is 97 percent white. In addition, Blackwood Elementary and Gloucester Township Elementary have greater racial imbalances than any Cherry Hill elementary school, the figures show.

Robert Suessmuth, Gloucester Township school superintendent, did not return calls seeking comment.

Geri Borbe, affirmative education officer in the Voorhees district, said balancing district schools racially "really wasn't one of our objectives."

Instead, the district is focusing on minority recruitment, conflict-resolution programs and improving curriculum.

"It just does not make sense to me," Sherman said of the state decision to focus on Cherry Hill. "It's not as if we have schools that are segregated. I don't see one kid off here, two kids off there, creating a segregated school."

At James H. Johnson Elementary School, the district would have to reduce black student enrollment by 26 or add 30 white students in order to meet the state guidelines. The school's black student enrollment is 14 percent, 8 percent greater than the district average.

Five other district elementary schools deviated from permissible limits by fewer than seven students.

State officials say Cherry Hill was not unfairly targeted.

According to the state, Cherry Hill has dragged its feet on improving racial balance. State officials cite a 17-year battle, dating to the construction of High School East, over equal educational opportunities between the township's older west side and its newer and more affluent east side.

"It's not a question of what's happening in Voorhees and Gloucester Township," said Peter Peretzman, a spokesman for the Department of Education. "It's not one district being more out of balance or less out of balance, it's what the district is doing about it."

According to the state, last year Cherry Hill submitted a multi-year equity plan - a three-year survey mapping the district's educational equity measures - assuring officials that the district was meeting equity laws, even as racial imbalances persisted. The state rejected that plan and ordered the district to correct its racial imbalances.

By contrast, the state accepted the plans of Voorhees and Gloucester Townships, and the districts did not address their own racial imbalances in their plans, according to documents filed with the state.

State guidelines require enrollment at each school to mirror overall district demographics within permissible limits.

Under that formula, each elementary school in Cherry Hill must contain 79 to 83 percent white students, 4 to 8 percent black students, 1 to 3 percent Latino students, and 9 to 13 percent Asian students.

Statewide, 135 districts are racially imbalanced, according to state criteria, and 70 districts have plans to correct the situation.

Schools that are racially balanced, state officials say, have led to narrowing gaps in achievement between minorities and white students. Moreover, all students benefit from the interchange of students across racial and socioeconomic lines, they say.

In Camden County, nine school districts are racially imbalanced but only four have been ordered to address the matter. Gloucester Township was not one of them.

Gloucester Township does not have a "17-year history of separate high schools and a class-action lawsuit," said Chris Campisano, education program development specialist with the Camden County Office of Education.

In 1998, a petition filed by west-side residents with the Department of Education alleged educational and financial inequities between the township's two high schools. Three of the district's four Title I schools - those with lower-income students - are on the district's west side.

Cherry Hill adopted an open-enrollment policy, but it has "proved to be an utter failure," Campisano said. According to the district, at the beginning of the school year, 24 ninth graders moved from High School West to High School East and eight moved from East to West.

Although the schools are balanced racially, High School West still lags behind High School East in test scores, national merit scholars, and the percentage of students attending four-year colleges.

"Maybe if you integrate more at the elementary level, you might have a greater chance of the schools' being more alike," Campisano said.

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