

Students learn about middle school choices

Fair introduces special programs

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Shakuan Richardson marks time as his mother, Shalonda Laurey, fills out forms. Their choices were REACH! Partnership School and the Stadium School. (Baltimore Sun photo by Doug Kapustin / January 24, 2009)

By the hundreds, parents and preteen children streamed into a city school cafeteria yesterday in search of something many parents said they lacked growing up: choice in middle school education. At a middle school fair put on by Baltimore City public schools, parents came looking for alternatives to traditional neighborhood schools. Most wanted smaller class sizes, more rigorous academics, more structure or specialized programs - a more targeted path to college. And some were surprised to find about three dozen "citywide" enrollment schools showcasing programs at the fair at the Roland Patterson Complex. Among them, a dozen "transformation schools," the product of an initiative that created six of the smaller, specialized middle schools this school year and will add another half-dozen in the next school year. All of the schools "of choice," the transformation and existing charter schools, offer citywide enrollment, meaning they accept applications from anywhere in the city. Those that have more applicants than space after the Feb. 25 deadline will select students by lottery.

"I'm happy they have so much, so many options," said Kyona Harris Johnson, whose 10-year-old daughter, Nijae, attends Robert W. Coleman Elementary. "Years back, we didn't have charter schools. You went to your zone school, and that was it." Having options means she won't be sending Nijae to her neighborhood school, William H. Lemmel Middle School. Johnson attended that school as a child and said her mother pulled her out because of a volatile environment.

Instead, Johnson hopes to send her daughter to The Baltimore Leadership School for Young Women, which will open in September. The college preparatory school for girls is modeled after one in Harlem, N.Y., that boasts a 100 percent college acceptance rate. Yesterday Johnson met the principal, took a look at the curriculum and was impressed with what she saw. "I like the fact that it's all girls and has a strict uniform policy," she said.

Transformation schools came about as part of a plan by city schools chief Andrés Alonso to create 24 new schools in four years. The six programs currently in place have a total enrollment of 1,000 students in grades six and nine. Additional grades will be added in the coming years.

Many of the new schools are housed in existing schools. Next year, 1,500 spaces are available for sixth-graders in the schools of choice, said Tammy Nielsen, city schools coordinator for the office of new initiatives. Prospective students are encouraged to apply to more than one school to increase their chances of acceptance at one of them. Nielsen estimated that about 700 people attended yesterday's event. Alonso attended the fair, strolling from booth to booth, talking with parents and administrators. "Our overall goal is to ensure that parents feel they have a choice for their kids," he said. "If you're poor or struggling in some way, your choices get reduced, and there's no reason for that. There's no reason why a public school system can't create a system of choice." The schools chief noted that he believes transformation schools are performing "phenomenally well" this year. At a long table in the center of the cafeteria, Shalonda Laurey sat with her son, Shakuan Richardson, 10, filling out applications. Their first two choices were REACH! Partnership School, which focuses on careers in the health and construction industries, and the Stadium School, which offers traditional lessons along with project classes that develop skills such as grant writing or budget creation. Choosing a program with a theme or focus "helps a child gear into what they want to accomplish," Laurey said, adding that for her son, "my hopes are to broaden his horizons." Gloria Thomas said she had already applied to two programs for her 10-year-old son, Rashad Allen, including the Ingenuity Project, which offers an accelerated mathematics and science curriculum. But, she said, she came to the fair yesterday to learn about other options. "I was not aware that a lot of these schools even existed," she said. Marcus A. Delgado, the deputy chief executive of One Bright Ray Inc., tried to get the word out about Baltimore Community High School, a transformation school opening in September. Modeled after a school in Philadelphia, Baltimore Community is expected to open in Southeast Baltimore for 14-to 21-year-olds who have either dropped out of school or who are behind, he said. "We teach them how to learn," he said. Schools officials weren't the only people staffing booths yesterday. Students from some of the city's transformation schools also helped out. Kalee Seymore, 12, a sixth-grader at the Baltimore Civitas School, which opened in September, walked right up to prospective students and their parents to list the benefits of a school with a public service theme. Along with classes in math, science, social studies and language arts, she said, students get real-life lessons in fundraising for special projects and trips, and in conflict resolution through discussions, not fights. "It's fun and powerful," Seymore said. When it comes to ideas about how to make the school better, she said, "We have a voice."

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