

EAST RUTHERFORD

Becton High School chosen to absorb Maywood students

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Officials from the Maywood school district and Henry P. Becton Regional High School in East Rutherford approved resolutions that could potentially send Maywood's high school students to Becton — provided the state consents to such a deal.

Maywood's high-school-age students now attend Hackensack High School. But two years ago, when the districts' seven-year contract concluded, Maywood attempted to renegotiate, citing high tuition rates and overcrowding.

Maywood officials have also taken issue with their inability to provide input on the Hackensack district's spending decisions, according to statements released by Maywood's administration.

Despite the proposed switch, all Maywood students already at Hackensack High will be able to finish there and graduate with their classmates. Maywood has about 100 eighth-grade graduates each year.

There will be no change for the upcoming school year, but the deal could take effect as soon as the 2020-21 school year if the state education commissioner approves Maywood's split from Hackensack.

Becton's principal and superintendent, Dario Sforza, said he was pleased to be chosen from among neighboring districts considered in a third-party feasibility study to determine the best choice.

The study recommended Becton based on academic, economic and demographic criteria, and noted that it is already a regional district.

Hackensack had been absorbing Maywood's students since 1969 without a formal agreement, said Michael Jordan, Maywood's superintendent. When the two districts signed a formal

contract in 2010, the tuition was set at \$13,125 per student, with a 2 percent increase each year.

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As the seven-year deal neared expiration, Maywood's intention was to renew the agreement with a lower rate, but it rebuffed Hackensack's offer of a 5 percent reduction and sought new proposals from Paramus, Dumont, Midland Park and Becton, which serves students of East Rutherford and Carlstadt.

"The long and short of it is that it's something the Maywood Board of Education pursued simply because we needed a tuition that would allow us to maintain a quality K-to-eight program and alleviate overcrowding" at Hackensack High School, Jordan said of the decision to seek an agreement with another district.

"Never once has an administrator said anything about the quality of education at Hackensack High School," Jordan said. "That is not what this is about."

Becton has agreed to a 10-year deal with a starting rate of \$10,500 per student. At year five, tuition will increase 2 percent each year and cap at \$11,800 per student in the deal's 10th year.

Despite both districts' interest in the arrangement, the deal must first be approved by the state education commissioner.

Sticking point

Racial demographics could create a sticking point in the dissolution of Maywood's deal with Hackensack because of a 1985 lawsuit between Englewood and Englewood Cliffs over a similar deal.

In its ruling, the state Superior Court prohibited Englewood Cliffs from dissolving the agreement because it would create a racial imbalance in the other district.

Jordan described Maywood's racial makeup as a "snapshot" of Becton's.

The two have similar demographics, according to the feasibility study, which used 2010 U.S. Census data of the districts' overall populations. A demographics expert also analyzed

demographics of the districts' actual student bodies.

During the 2017-18 school year, Maywood's high school students were 48% white, 28% Hispanic, 11% black, and 8% Asian. Becton's makeup was similar with 50% white, 33% Hispanic, 10% Asian, and 7% black.

Hackensack High School's numbers vary noticeably, with 55% Hispanic, 22% black, 16% white students, and 6% Asian.

Despite the much lower number of white students, the expert wrote that there would be "no negative racial impact on Hackensack High School" should Maywood sever its agreement, and that Maywood's diversity would remain intact if joined with another district.

Hackensack's superintendent, Robert Sanchez, did not respond to a request for comment on the possible loss of Maywood's students.