School District of Manatee County
School Choice Plan
2020/2021

School Choice plays a vital role in accomplishing the district’s strategic mission: Educate and develop all students today for their success tomorrow.

Historical Overview of the School Choice Program
Manatee County’s Choice Program was first implemented during the 1998/99 school year at the high school level. Over the next two years, the Choice Program was expanded to include the middle and elementary school levels.

During 1997, a massive communication campaign was conducted through town meetings, the media and through a district-wide committee of community leaders. This committee designed the original School Choice Open Enrollment Program. This plan called for the implementation of School Choice at the high school level beginning in the 1998/99 school year.

For the 1999/2000 school year, the Choice Program was expanded to include the middle school level. Transportation was provided for the first time to middle school students requesting a school outside their attendance zone, but within their designated East or West Region.

The expansion of Choice at the elementary level for the 2000/2001 school year piloted three major initiatives.
- The Choice process was used to populate the district’s first three magnet schools.
- The district’s first Parent Information Center opened which provided registration and School Choice information.
- Transportation was provided to elementary students seeking choice within a designated Cluster Area to reduce mobility rates.

As a result of Manatee County being awarded the Magnet School Assistance Program (MSAP) grant, Choice options during the 2001/2002 school year increased as the number of magnet schools increased from three to ten. Magnets were incorporated into the Choice program as one of many choices available to students. Transportation was also expanded to include all four elementary cluster areas and both middle school regions.

With each successive year of growth in Manatee County, modifications to the Choice Program have been made and new features added. Grant funds awarded by the State of Florida’s Department of Education totaling over two million dollars provided the funding for this initiative through the 2007/08 school year.

Choice as the Vehicle
Manatee County’s School Choice plan provides all students the opportunity to apply for choice to district schools that meet their educational goals and needs. Parents have the option to select from 31 traditional public elementary, 2 K-8, 8 middle and 7 high schools; high school academies and honor/advanced programs, Tech Prep programs, virtual programs, fourteen charter schools, home-education programs, and over thirty private schools. This public-school parental choice plan allows the School District of Manatee County to make student assignments using parent’s indicated preferential school choice as a significant factor.
• **The Application Process**
  The district’s plan includes an **Open Enrollment Application Period**, a **Targeted Population Period**, and **State Scholarship Programs**.
  The **General Application Period** is open to all current Kindergarten through 9th grade students. At the High School level only incoming 9th and 10th grade students or students applying to attend the IB/AICE program, an academy or special academic program may apply for Choice. Students who wish to remain at their zoned school are not required to complete an application.
  The **Targeted Population Period** is open to specially targeted population groups who were under-represented in the General Application Period. This period is not advertised publicly but is extended to only those special groups designated as that period approaches. The “targeted groups” are determined by specific programs, (i.e., IB, AICE, etc.).
  The **State Scholarship Programs** are limited to students who are made eligible for choice under state and federal mandates (Hope, McKay, Opportunity Scholarship Programs, etc.).

• **Choice Options**
  During the Open Enrollment Application Period parents may select up to three schools and rank them in order of preference. The application must be submitted online via the FOCUS Parent Portal. Completing an application does not guarantee assignment to the choice school. Students not completing an application are assigned to their designated attendance boundary area as determined by the enrolling parent/guardian’s address.
  The Targeted Population Period is held to address specific goals of the district and recruitment to attractor programs such AICE or IB.
  The dates and options for the State Scholarship Programs are determined by state and federal guidelines.

• **State Scholarship Programs**
  This choice option provides a process to those students who are eligible for programs under state and federal law. For example, legislation pertaining to McKay Scholarship, Hope Scholarship, or Opportunity Scholarship.

• **Choice Procedures**
  The district uses a computer software program, “Focus”, to process School Choice applications. This program applies race-neutral weighted factors to applications in addition to provide preferential treatment in its controlled open enrollment process to all of the following:
  1. Dependent children of active duty military personnel.
  2. Children relocated due to a foster care placement in a different school zone.
  3. Children relocated by court-ordered change in custody due to separation or divorce, or the serious illness or death of a custodial parent.
  4. Placement of siblings within the same school.
  5. Students residing in the district. Residents of Manatee County may not be displaced by a student from another district seeking enrollment under the controlled open enrollment process.
Race-Neutral Factors

One of the goals of the School Choice program is to create a student population at every district school that reflects the diversity, based on these factors, of the county overall. This goal is based on research that has shown that students show greater educational success, as well as greater success in future careers, when they have been educated in an environment that reflects the diversity of the population with which they may later work.

To that end, an imaginary model is created, the School District of Manatee County (SDMC) Community Elementary School. The population of this school reflects the county-wide average of four race-neutral factors: Exceptional Student Education students (ESE) gifted, ESE non-gifted, students of low socio-economic status, and students with limited English proficiency. This SDMC Community Elementary School is the diversity model against which every elementary school in the district is measured. Similarly, a model has been created for the middle schools.

The district utilizes these four race-neutral factors plus a student’s proximity to their Choice School in determining approval for School Choice. The capacity of the school requested is also considered.

Guarantees

The Choice plan provides guarantees for placement of siblings within the same school if capacity allows. The placement of employee’s children at the parent’s work site is guaranteed. These students must apply during the General Application Period to ensure availability of guaranteed status.

Waitlist Process

Students who are not placed at their choice school during the initial Controlled Open Enrollment run are placed on a choice waitlist for further review in expectation of capacity and allocation shifts.

Transportation Zones

The district is geographically divided into seven elementary clusters and three middle school regions. Transportation is provided at the elementary level within clusters and at the middle school level within regions, except for students living in designated remote areas such as Myakka City and Anna Maria Island. Transportation is not provided for High School students receiving School Choice, except for Hub Stops for the IB/AICE Programs or other programs as approved by the Superintendent.

Parental Involvement/Awareness

The Office of Student Assignment (OSA) located at 1400 1st Avenue E in Palmetto provides information on the educational options available for students living in Manatee County. The OSA informs parents about registrations, guardianships, and other details necessary for enrollment in public, charter, or private schools. Community Engagement Associates work collaboratively with local newspapers and broadcast media while utilizing other effective communication avenues to announce available parental choice opportunities. A school choice information guide and relevant forms are available on the district’s website at www.manateeschools.net before the open enrollment school choice window to allow parents time to plan their upcoming school year.