

Student wants to choose city district over suburban school — but he can't

We often hear about families who try to avoid city schools by moving to the suburbs or choosing charter schools. Let me tell you the tale of a mother in Webster who is fighting to get her son back into the Rochester School District.

Every weekday morning, the city district sends a bus to pick Isaiah Meade up from the University Avenue apartment where he lives with

Erica Bryant
COLUMNIST
EBRYANT@DemocratandChronicle.com

his grandmother. The bus takes him to Siena Catholic Academy in Brighton and brings him home again when school is done.

Yet, according to the district's interpretation of education law, the boy does not live in the city. If he were a Rochester resident, he would be able to return to School of the Arts, a school he attended until Oct. 24 last year and had grown to love.

He was forced to leave SOTA after the Rochester School District learned that his mother, Carola Boza-Meade, had rented an apartment in Webster at the end of last summer. Until then, the family had lived on Myrtle Street, between Otis Street and Lyell Avenue in Rochester.

His mother had gotten a good deal on their home, but Myrtle Street wasn't as safe as she had hoped. Problems, threats and harassment became overwhelming, she said, so she moved the family into the Webster apartment, thinking the suburbs might be safer.

She assumed that because she still owned her home in the city and was still paying taxes that Isaiah could stay at SOTA.

This assumption was wrong. Residency is determined by where a child actually lives, and when the district learned that Isaiah was taking the bus in from Webster, it informed the 13-year-old that he would have to leave SOTA.

Boza-Meade said she became frantic. Her son loved the school's dance program and finished



ANNETTE LEIN/@BIBEBIZZLE/ STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Isaiah Meade waits for his school bus outside of his grandmother's home on University Avenue in the city. Meade was attending School of the Arts, but was kicked out because his mother moved to Webster.

seventh grade with a 3.71 grade-point average. It was the first time he had done so well academically. The first time he had made high honor roll.

She didn't want Isaiah to be ripped from a school where he was thriving, socially and academically. She didn't want him to have to start over someplace new. She had Isaiah move in with his grandmother, who lives one block away from SOTA, in the hopes that the district would reconsider.

She sought help from lawyers, politicians and school board members. Along the way, someone suggested that she should transfer temporary custody to the grandmother, so she did.

She didn't have much money for lawyers, so she went to the Law Library on East Avenue to research provisions under state education law that might help her son. She asked the district if she might be able to take advantage of a provision that allows non-resident students to pay tuition. Or a provision that allows talented students to take advantage of programs

in other districts, if their home district doesn't have a comparable program.

On Oct. 15, she received a letter from the Rochester School District's acting director of student placement saying that Isaiah had no legal right to attend School of the Arts and instructing her to enroll him in Webster schools. The letter said that "circumstances wherein nonresident students are permitted to pay tuition to attend Rochester City Schools are rarely granted and in those cases, the cost of tuition exceeds \$12,000." Boza-Meade was not offered the opportunity to pay tuition, and her son was ordered to leave the school by Oct. 24.

"I actually cried because I had to leave my friends and I wouldn't be able to dance anymore," Isaiah said.

He said that SOTA was perfect for him because it allowed him to pursue academics and dance. "When I dance, I am expressing myself as a person."

He spent three weeks out of school, watching television and taking

walks during the day. When it became clear that he would not be able to return to SOTA anytime soon, his mother enrolled him at Siena Catholic Academy. She said she chose that school over a Webster middle school because it was smaller and she thought it would be better suited to her son's personality. Also, an attorney told her it might help her son get reinstated in the Rochester School District if he continued living with his grandmother in the city.

Boza-Meade believes that there are legal ways the Rochester School District can accept her son and has appealed the district's decision with the New York State Education Department and the U.S. Department of Education. Rochester School District spokesman Chip Partner says this limits any questions he can answer about the case.

"Because Ms. Boza-Meade has commenced legal action against the district in two government forums, we can't comment on any aspect of this case," Partner said. "We can say that the



ISAIAH MEADE
A self-portrait drawn by Isaiah Meade, formerly a student at School of the Arts.

district is required to apply the rule of law in determining the residency of students, which means unfortunately that our schools sometimes lose good students to other districts."

Isaiah said it wasn't easy to start at a new school. He has started to like Siena, but the school has no dance program and he dreams of returning to SOTA. He and his mother are waiting for word on their appeals and hoping for the best. The ruling could take eight to 10 months or more, according to the state Department of Education website.

I, of course, am rooting for Isaiah to somehow get back to SOTA and get back to dancing. The district's graduation rate for black and Latino males is the worst in the country.

It needs more young men with 3.71 GPAs.

It needs more young men whose mothers will spend hours at the Law Library trying to find ways to maintain their sons' educational stability.

It needs more young men like Isaiah.

Twitter.com/Erica_Bryant_