

Magnet school grant runs out of time

Application for \$8.1M misses deadline by minutes

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StarNewsOnline

A version of this story first appeared on StarNewsOnline.com at 11:08 a.m. Tuesday.

What a difference six minutes make.

For New Hanover County Schools, the 360 seconds might have cost the district \$8.1 million.

On April 27, the district turned in its Magnet Schools Assistance Program grant application six

minutes late, making it ineligible to compete for the federal dollars.

Technical problems created a two-hour delay for the electronic

submission to the U.S. Department of Education, according to Karin Cox, the district's public relations director.

"We've spent the last couple of days feeling really dumbfounded," she said Tuesday.

The federal education department notified the district last week that the late submission was an error made by the school system and the grant ap-

plication is no longer eligible for consideration.

The department requires the grant to be fully uploaded by 4:30 p.m. on the closing date. New Hanover County Schools' application was received at 4:36 p.m. The grant will not be available again until 2009.

Pamela Federline, the district's grant coordinator who submitted the application, stated Tuesday that she "will not have any public comment about anything." She resigned from her position

Friday, according to John Welmers, the district's assistant superintendent of human resources.

Stephanie Kraybill, New Hanover County Council of PTAs president and member of the district's grant committee, said the late application submittal is an unfortunate circumstance, not something that happened because of poor planning.

"There was so much that the grant asked for. It was a lot of

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information that had to be pulled together," she said, adding that up until the week the application was due she was proofreading pages. "I loved reading it. It just shared so much history and all the positive things we were doing. That's why it was so disappointing that it didn't even get a chance to be reviewed."

Despite the lost opportunity, the district plans to search for other means to maintain magnet programs and add new ones.

Assistant Superintendent Al Lerch said the district can use the federal grant application as a basis to apply for smaller grant sources.

Magnets remain

If the federal grant application had been accepted and approved, it would've allocated about \$1 million to Freeman Elementary School and \$750,000 each to Snipes and Gregory elementary schools. Magnet themes would've been added to Forest Hills and Sunset Park elementary schools and Virgo Middle School over a three-year period. The district had also planned to use more than \$100,000 of the grant money to market its magnet options.

District officials said Tuesday that magnet programs at Snipes, Freeman and Gregory - the county's existing magnet school - will not be affected by the system's inability to compete for the grant funding.

Freeman Principal Elizabeth Miars conservatively asked the board in March for nearly \$290,000 to start the school's new engineering curriculum this fall.



There's nothing I can do. There's no sense in fussing over something I can't control.

Elizabeth Miars
Freeman Elementary School principal

"We'll be able to start up," she said Tuesday about implementing the new school focus.

As of Friday, 209 applications were submitted for the program. By lottery, 101 were accepted.

"I'm hopeful," Miars said about the school receiving enough funding. "What can I say? My hands are tied. There's nothing I can do. There's no sense in fussing over something I can't control."

More than 230 applicants are seeking entrance into Snipes, the new arts-and-design academy. About 120 were accepted by lottery.

It will cost more than \$740,000 to start the program at Snipes, based on Principal Natalie Stallings' proposed budget request made earlier this year.

Gregory still waiting

Gregory Principal Maria Greenc asked for nearly \$730,000 in upgrades to bring her science, math and technology school into the 21st century. The school's PTA has helped pay for more computers and software.

Most of the funding will depend on whether the county Board of Commissioners approves the district's budget proposal next month. The district has asked for a 15 percent funding increase from the county for next school year.

Knowing that the request is likely to not become a reality, Ed Higgins, school board member and chairman of the board's finance committee, made a personal attempt to get the district another chance at the federal grant money. He asked his daughter - an intern with the U.S. Department of Education - to ask officials what the district could do to resurrect the problem.

"She asked around and called me back and said, 'No. The next opportunity would be 2009,'" he said. "I'm disappointed, maybe almost angry that this happened."

Higgins said he believes the board will remain committed to providing adequate funding to the district's magnet schools.

Higgins said when the grant is announced again in three years the district should be well prepared for it.

"I hope they submit the application for the grant two days after it comes out," he said. "That way we know we got plenty of time."

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