

# Merchantville school decision 'historic'



Carly Q. Romalino, Courier-Post 10:08 p.m. EDT April 17, 2015



(Photo: Courier-Post file)

The end of Merchantville School District's sending agreement with Pennsauken is historic for a borough that tried — and failed — to break a sending agreement 30 years ago.

The state's final authorization this week allowing Merchantville to choose Haddon Heights High School over Pennsauken, is a "landmark decision" for a state focused on school choice, according to education officials.

Merchantville Board of Education will send its high schoolers to Haddon Heights High School starting in September, following the state's approval of the plan last week.

Department of Education Commissioner David Hespe agreed with an administrative law judge's 2014 ruling determining a five-year send-receive agreement with Haddon Heights school district would not have a negative impact on any school districts involved.



COURIER-POST

Merchantville students head to Haddon Heights

(<http://www.courierpostonline.com/story/news/local/south-jersey/2015/04/14/merchantville-school-haddon/25788483/>)

Merchantville's current eighth-grade class will be the first to attend Haddon Heights High School as freshman in September, according to Merchantville Chief School Administrator Scott Strong.

"The town wanted to look for a school offering the best educational options for the students," Strong told the Courier-Post last week.

"Haddon Heights offers the right programs, the right diversity and really met our needs of a school."

Merchantville tried 30 years ago and failed to break its relationship with Pennsauken.

State Department of Education determined then an end to the agreement would have had a "negative racial impact on the composition of Pennsauken High School," according to Vito Gagliardi, Merchantville Board of Education's special counsel.

Gagliardi and Kerri Wright were hired by the Merchantville school board seven years ago to complete preliminary studies on the likelihood of success in separating from Pennsauken.

Merchantville filed a petition with the NJ DOE in 2012 to end the relationship. In 2013, Merchantville and Pennsauken officials testified before an administrative law judge, who later decided to grant Merchantville's request to end the agreement.

Pennsauken fought it, Gagliardi said.

Pennsauken school officials could not be reached for comment.

"This case is a historical landmark decision in the State of New Jersey for sure, and certainly for the community of Merchantville," Gagliardi said, adding the state's approval "isn't about schools being good or bad."

"This decision makes it clear the Department of Education recognizes communities should be allowed to make a choice just like parents can."

Changing demographics of both schools were key in the state's change of heart, Gagliardi explained.

"The population of Merchantville students is so small in the overall population of Pennsauken High School ... it shouldn't be used to impair a community's opportunity to make a difference choice," he said.

This year, about 40 Merchantville students attend Pennsauken High, a school with about 1,500 students.

Merchantville students will begin phasing out of Pennsauken High in the fall. Haddon Heights School District expects 20 to 30 Merchantville freshmen in September, according to Superintendent Michael Adams.

About 750 students from Haddon Heights, Lawnside and Barrington attend Haddon Heights High School.

Merchantville will pay the same tuition rate — about \$14,620 per pupil — as Lawnside and Barrington.

The tuition rate is lower than what Merchantville paid to Pennsauken, Strong indicated.

To maintain current class sizes, Adams expects Haddon Heights to hire additional staff to accommodate two dozen incoming students. New staff would be funded with Merchantville's tuition, the superintendent explained.

Carly Q. Romalino; (856) 486-2476; cromalino@courierpostonline.com

Read or Share this story: <http://on.cpsj.com/1yD2uJw>