



Education by lottery: 9 students selected for Kingston Hill Academy

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SOUTH KINGSTOWN -- Nine new students were selected to attend Kingston Hill Academy by lottery last week, their educational paths pulled at random from colored envelopes.

Kingston Hill, the Compass School and five other charter schools across the state held enrollment lotteries last Tuesday under the oversight of state Department of Education monitors.

At Kingston Hill Academy, the lottery was a low-key affair observed by a half-dozen parents and staff in a conference room at the Stony Fort Road school. Though numbers had been pulled from a hat in previous years, the school used envelopes last week. Each of the 149 applicants was assigned a number.

Numbers were then drawn randomly from colored envelopes that were divvied up by grade level. After the drawing, the group matched the numbers with names on a master list.

"There's a criticism that charter schools are selecting students. That's just not the case," Director Daniel Parker said midway through the process.

Kingston Hill had nine openings, all in kindergarten. The remaining 140 applicants were placed on a waiting list and ranked according to the drawing.

Though Kingston Hill has 20 seats in its incoming kindergarten class, 10 will go to the siblings of students already enrolled at the academy. The school allows siblings to bypass the lottery. Another student, with a fall birthday, will remain in kindergarten a second year.

Of the nine, five will be minority students to reflect South Kingstown's demographics, as required by state law, said Parker. Numbers for prospective incoming minority kindergarteners were placed in a separate envelope, which the group drew from first.

The drawing was observed by Ted Socha, a Brown University student monitoring lotteries for the state.

Parker said he would contact the students' parents within the week and arrange for them to visit the school to ensure they are truly interested in Kingston Hill's program.

Kingston Hill was sponsored five years ago by the Groden Center, a Providence-based nonprofit organization that specializes in treating autistic children. It emphasizes inclusion, in which special-needs children are integrated into classrooms, and individualized learning is geared toward students' abilities.

A total of 162 students in grades kindergarten through five are expected to attend Kingston Hill in the

coming school year. According to its charter, it can enroll 180 through grade eight, but Parker said the middle school classes will not be offered until it has expanded its building.

"It's very difficult for new people to get in," Parker said. "Our recruitment is mostly word of mouth."

Across town, the Compass School held its lottery Tuesday morning, selecting 17 new students: 13 kindergarteners, 1 first grader, and 3 seventh graders, said Compass student service coordinator Michele Puddington. A total of 121 applicants remain on the waiting list for the Old North Road school, which emphasizes social justice and environmental sustainability.

Since that school was founded about five years ago, its administrators and school council have conducted a "blind" computer-generated lottery designed by council president Anne Veger, Puddington said.

Currently, 126 students in kindergarten through grade eight attend Compass, Puddington said. Its charter was approved for 182.

This was the first time the state Department of Education set guidelines for schools to conduct the random lotteries in keeping with state statute and to have independent teams monitor the effort. Some people have accused charter schools, which are publicly financed, of cherry-picking the best and brightest students.

"We never had any evidence they weren't [following the statute], but we wanted evidence they were," said Elliot Krieger, spokesman for the Education Department. "It's literally a drawing."

Statewide, 265 students out of 1,921 applicants were selected to attend charter schools following last week's drawings, said Stephen Nardelli, executive director of the Rhode Island League of Charter Schools. Two more charter schools are set to hold lotteries in the coming weeks and three did not participate this year, he said.

The large number of applicants "substantiates that we're doing what we're intended to," Nardelli said. "Charter schools are the answer to public schools; we're an option."

Nardelli plans to lobby state legislators today to lift the moratorium on new charter schools. Kingston Hill and Compass are the only two in suburban communities; both draw largely from the South County region.

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