

in No Child Left Behind

Opportunity for kids who won transfers, frustration for others

BY CURTIS LAWRENCE
Staff Reporter

Elizabeth DeJesus could be a school's worst nightmare — popping into a classroom for a visit, badgering the bus company for tardy service or camping out in the principal's office — always looking for the best for her kids.

When she learned they might be able to transfer to Disney Magnet — a school with better test scores than their neighborhood school — she acted fast.

All three of her children at Pablo Casals in Humboldt Park were eligible for transfer under the No Child Left Behind program because Casals did not meet state standards.

But DeJesus and her husband, Francisco, were particularly concerned about their middle child, Christian, a sweet-faced 9-year-old with a knack for drawing. He also has learning and behavior disabilities.

DeJesus had had mixed experiences with Christian's special education teachers during his three years at Casals — some were great, others she found downright impossible to work with.

One teacher even said DeJesus wasn't welcome in Christian's classroom, DeJesus said.

"His needs just weren't being met there," she said with a deep sigh. She stands 5 feet 4 inches tall, but DeJesus makes up for the height in energy. She talks a mile a minute, and when it comes to her kids, she covers two miles.

For most families, getting a transfer under the federal "choice" program was a pipe dream. More than 19,000 parents applied for only 1,097 seats, which were awarded by lottery. Casals parent Fernandez Austin, for instance, wanted four of her children to transfer but lost out.

But when DeJesus leaped at the chance, Christian got lucky. He was one of four lottery winners from Casals and was accepted at Disney.



Elizabeth DeJesus was lucky to win the transfer lottery, but moving her son Christian from Pablo Casals school to Disney Magnet had its share of glitches. The boy, though, is off to a good start. —KEITH HALE/SUN-TIMES

At the three-story magnet dream school at 4140 N. Marine Dr., his mother hopes things will be better. It was the top choice in the program — drawing almost 3,300 applications for 42 seats.

Although test scores don't paint the whole picture, on paper, Disney is more attractive than Casals. At Disney, 51.7 percent of kids exceeded state goals on the Illinois Standard Achievement Tests in 2002, compared with 32.6 percent at Casals.

"We were looking for a better education," DeJesus said. Casals is less than a block away from her

home in the 3400 block of West Potomac, "but I knew it wasn't going to provide my children what they needed."

At Disney, students are bombarded with colors, artwork, murals, sculptures all done by children in one of the sprawling work spaces with sliding walls. Kids can do special projects in the school's media room.

The first few weeks in Christian's self-contained special education class, where there are nine students, have gone smoothly.

The children learn how to read maps, count change and tackle



Fernandez Austin, with children Jarell (from left), Travis, Jonkye and Shaquita, wanted to transfer the four kids from Casals but lost out in the transfer lottery. She says the school is lax at keeping her informed of missed homework, but the principal disagrees. —BOB BLACK/SUN-TIMES

other science, math and reading skills at their own speed.

To Christopher, "It's fun." His favorite activity so far is drawing on the white board.

"He tries very hard both socially and academically to fit in with the routine," said Christian's teacher, Jennifer Barasch.

While DeJesus had won a battle for Christian by getting him into Disney, her troubles were far from over when school started. There still was no bus.

Determined that her son wouldn't miss the first day, DeJesus gathered him up with her 6-year-old daughter, Jazmine. On the CTA, they started a two-hour trek to Disney. Until the bus kicked in, "we were late every day," DeJesus said.

DeJesus finally secured bus service after a week, but it didn't show up for the morning pickup. Later that day, DeJesus waded through children in Disney's parking lot and had a little talk with the driver.

DeJesus doesn't apologize for being persistent. "Parents like myself with special-needs children are

left to their own devices."

Casals Principal Aleen Donaldson described DeJesus as "a supportive parent" who's always on top of things, taking notes at meetings and keeping homework folders for her kids. But, she said, "I for one have asked her not to just bounce into the classroom when she wanted to."

One of DeJesus' concerns over Christian's experience at Casals was that his teacher was still working on her special education certification, just as is the current teacher at Casals.

Barasch has complete certification.

Back at Casals, Austin, whose children did not win in the lottery, is navigating her way through the first few weeks of school. She had wanted to transfer four of her five kids, who are spread out from fourth to eighth grade.

Austin, who is studying for a GED — the equivalent of a high school diploma — had hoped the No Child program would be a chance "for them to get a better

clump of papers in her hands, the latest missives from the Chicago Public Schools about tutoring options available under the No Child program, for kids who didn't win a transfer. She has to select from 11 programs, even though it was not clear at the time where the tutoring would be done.

Like many parents, she is confused and frustrated by the letters about the No Child policy.

"It's a lot of paperwork," Austin said. "A lot of parents really haven't finished school themselves."

Austin, who lives about five blocks from the school, says her

school, but Jonkye, her fourth-grader, is now out on break. Her kindergarten child, Derrel, is not eligible for the program.

"I have a couple [of teachers] who don't let me know when my child is a week behind [in turning in homework]," she said. "I need to know what my child is doing in

"it's too much."

In a separate interview, principal Donaldson whipped out a spiral daybook students are required to keep, listing each homework assignment with a place for parents to sign.

Donaldson says Austin is "a parent who wants for her children,"

color-coded warnings to parents about late homework.

Austin acknowledges that parents have to take responsibility for their education. "We all do our homework together," she said. "And I'm up at the school three times a week. They all know me."