

Unfunded Choice students

Continued from Page A1

tions in one weekend for 30 available seats. He said in the 2013-14 school year, the school filled 30 Choice seats and accepted one non-funded Choice student.

The board has accepted every student that applied for Choice status because it did not want to turn anyone away, he said.

"We had the room, we had the teachers, we weren't costing taxpayers additional monies, we were getting Choice aid," Savio said. "The school Choice aid exceeded what we used to get in what was called Stabilization or Equalization aid."

The Board of Education determined one more student in third grade did not require an additional teacher, a classroom aid or split the class.

"So because of that philosophy, they've been accepting extra students each year," he said.

In the 2014-15 school year, the school had 32 Choice seats available. That year, the state placed a 5 percent cap on the number of Choice students per school.

"We had 11 unfunded at the point," Savio said. "We had 41 enrolled."

In the 2015-16 school year, 32 Choice seats were again available. The school had 10 unfunded Choice students, he said.

In the 2016-17 school year, the school applied to the state for Sibling Dispensation, which allows siblings to attend as Choice students even though the school does not have extra Choice seats, Savio said.

He said the school had nine siblings apply and the school was funded for 41 Choice students. In addition, the school had 11 unfunded Choice students, he said.

In the 2017-18 school year, the school applied for 11 Sibling Dispensation seats. Savio said the state questioned 11 sibling seats on top of 41 Choice students.

"Some of them happen to be students who were never funded but are siblings of students from prior years," he said. "So we applied for everybody we could get Sibling Dispensation for."

Each October the school files an Application for School State Aid (ASSA) that includes a census of students. In addition, New Jersey SMART (Standards Measurement and Resource for Teaching) identifies each student in the state, Savio said. The two counts did not match: there were 41 Choice students on the ASSA but 52 Choice students on the SMART count, he said.

"We never coded a child as unfunded in New Jersey SMART," Savio said.

He said the school was not

asking for more money for the unfunded students.

"We're making out fine with the Choice Aid that we get, which is \$500,000," Savio said. "The biggest part of our aid is Choice, so we were doing fine with that."

"We were able to hire additional teachers, support staff with the aid that we were getting and we were able to split some of the bigger classes because we've always been double grades at West Cape May Elementary with the small class sizes," he said.

The school has always combined pre-K with kindergarten, first and second grades, third and fourth grades and fifth and sixth grades.

The school applied in the 2017-18 for 11 extra Choice seats it was confident would be granted, Savio said.

The school accepted 17 unfunded students hoping they would get 11 Sibling Dispensation slots, which would more than make up for the loss of taking additional unfunded Choice students, he said.

"When the auditors came down, they started making us match the number of funded seats only," Savio said.

He said Department of Education (DOE) auditors labeled any student who did not have Choice funding as "nonresident," "non-funded," "nontuition" and "non-choice." Savio said the auditor was not familiar with the Choice program but learned about the program and created a spreadsheet. She identified unfunded students that had siblings in West Cape May Elementary School, he said.

The parents of the 17 students identified by the auditor as unfunded received a letter from Savio two weeks ago. It clarified the school's Choice program and stated the unfunded students do not have protection from being removed from the school at some later point in time.

Some of those parents attended the Board of Education meeting in August, bringing with them a letter they received in 2013 from the school accepting their child into the Choice program, Savio said.

He said he placed a call to the DOE, which assured him "if you have that letter, you're golden."

Savio said once a student is accepted into the Choice program, the only way they leave is to graduate from the school's highest grade or a parent withdraws the child from the program.

The DOE replied that it acknowledged letters had been issued in 2013 but it was not their purview to determine whether a student was funded or unfunded. Savio said the DOE stated it had identified those

who were unfunded and the school had to deal with the parents who believe their children were accepted into the Choice program through the sixth grade.

In March, the Board of Education learned the school would not receive the 11 Sibling Dispensation seats and discussed cutting the number of unfunded Choice students due to public perception of residents paying for the education of 17 unfunded students, he said.

"That's just not the case," Savio said. "Even with the 17, the funding level that we get for a Choice student is five and a half times the state aid that we get for a resident student."

"Even if I had one unfunded student, I could handle four additional unfunded students with that same amount of money because I get \$13,377 per student Choice and I get \$2,337 per resident student," he continued.

Savio said if he was including all his unfunded students, he was still getting \$9,622 per student for the 52 students enrolled. Even though 17 Choice students are unfunded, the amount of money the school gets per Choice student is so high compared to a resident student, the school can still cover the costs of operating the school without increasing taxes, he said.

The Board of Education has discussed not accepting new Choice students unless they have a sibling in the school who is already a funded Choice student.

He said most of West Cape May Elementary School's Choice students come from Lower Township with bus transportation paid by that school district.

In 2016, the school board discussed building an addition on the school or using modular trailers but that has been dropped, according to Savio. An architect offered a design for a media center to house the library and computer lab, add a couple of classrooms and storage and office space with a price tag over \$4 million, he said.

The board asked the architect to go back to the drawing board and look at how the school's current space could be reconfigured for better utilization, he said. Savio said the architect presented concepts with price tags between \$100,000 and \$400,000.

He said the school board stated until the unfunded Choice student population decreased to zero, the building would receive no renovations. Savio said the school has a \$900,000 bond from 1999 that is about to be paid off. A new bond could renovate the school at no increase to the taxpayers, he said.

Students, HPC honored for cemetery restoration

By JACK FICHTER
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — Headstones in a once-forgotten Civil War-era cemetery are being restored by a group of students and the township's Historic Preservation Commission (HPC).

Lower Township Council recognized members of the Builder's Club of the Richard M. Teitelman School and the HPC on Monday for their efforts in restoring Union Bethel Cemetery in Erma.

Mayor Erik Simonsen displayed a plaque that will be placed in the cemetery acknowledging the work of both groups. A major part of the work has been restoration of headstones, he said.

Paul Schulte, a science teacher and adviser of the Builder's Club, spoke with local agencies that will help replace broken or unreadable headstones, Simonsen



Restoring tombstones is a major part of the work being performed by students and members of the Historic Preservation Commission at Union Bethel Cemetery in Lower Township.

said. He said Lower Cape May Regional School District students with Superintendent Chris Kobik are developing a program to have QR codes next to the headstones. Using a smart phone app, visitors would be able to scan the QR code and be linked to a website giving

the history of each person buried in the cemetery, in particular Civil War soldiers.

Simonsen said the students received proclamations for their work in Union Bethel Cemetery from members of the state Legislature and county Board of Chosen Freeholders.



John Cooke/Special to the STAR AND WAVE

Larry Hirsch, owner of the Montreal Beach Resort, started the beachside Shabbat service in 2013. It involves music, dancing, food and fellowship at the beach on Madison Avenue.

Shabbat at the Shore offers 'tranquility and spirituality'

By RACHEL SHUBIN
Special to the Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — The beach will serve as a tranquil backdrop for the Shabbat at the Shore service at 6 p.m. Friday, Aug. 25.

Larry Hirsch, owner of the Montreal Beach Resort, started the beachside Shabbat service in 2013. The event is held on the beach across from the Montreal, on the beach at Madison Avenue.

"The service is for everyone, whether you're Jewish, Christian or Muslim. There is a degree of tranquility and spirituality you experience on the beach. One year we had dolphins parade up and down during the service," Hirsch said.

Tables are set up after the event and those who attend are asked to bring a vegetarian dish and a beach chair.

"We just want people to enjoy this once a year get-together. Everyone gets together to make new friends and schmooze," Hirsch said.

The event is led by retired Rabbi Ron Isaacs from Bridgewater. He is currently the interim rabbi at Beth Judah Temple in Wildwood.

"Rabbi Ron Isaacs has been staying with us for over 20 years," Hirsch said. "Six years ago he told me one of his dreams or bucket list items was to hold a Shabbat service on the beach, and I said, 'done.'"

Congregants from Rabbi Isaacs' previous congregation attend the service. Hirsch also expects members from the community at large to attend.

"In past years, the mayor and members of City Council have attended. Pastor Jeffrey Elliot from Cape May Lutheran Church has attended. He is a great supporter, and members of his congregation attend," Hirsch said.

The service lasts for about an hour. Pamphlets for prayers and kippahs are provided. Dress is relaxed. Hirsch said he expects anywhere from 125 to 175 people as the event grows each year.

"Some people don't know a word of Hebrew, so they just hum and groove to the music. The rabbi brings his guitar and another gentleman brings his keyboard," Hirsch said.

After the recent violence

in Charlottesville, Va., Jewish communities have reflected on the solidarity of community to stand united against hate.

"My parents were Holocaust survivors. When I heard about Charlottesville, it touches very close to home. Hearing about Nazis and the activities happening so close to us. We want people to come to the event because there is a certain sweetness and spirituality of being at the beach and seeing nature at its finest. Hopefully this event will give a moment of escape from the country and world," Hirsch said. "We hope to give people a moment of escape and a smile."

Hirsch's parents built the Montreal Beach Resort in 1966. His parents, Harry and Sophie Hirsch, were born in Poland. His father was held at the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II. The Hirsch family came to America after the war to start a family and work hard. They were the original owners of the resort and now Larry Hirsch owns it with his brother and sons.

THE NAMES YOU KNOW. THE SONGS YOU LOVE.

CAPE MAY

Summer Concert Series

WEDNESDAY
AUGUST 23

MARY WILSON

OF THE SUPREMES

TICKETS: \$42 | Call 609.884.9565 or visit DiscoverCapeMayNJ.com

ALL SHOWS BEGIN AT 8PM

CAPE MAY NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK

You FIRST

COFFEE ROASTERY

Putting Your Small Business First

At OceanFirst Bank, we know that running your business smoothly and efficiently is important to you. That's why we offer convenient solutions to help you do just that. It's one more way we put You First.

- ACH Payments & Collection
- Online Banking & Bill Pay
- Checking & Savings Accounts
- Employee Rewards Banking
- Merchant Bankcard Services
- Night Depository
- Onsite Deposit Service
- Small Business Loans
- Wire Transfers
- And More!

For All Your Business Banking Needs, Contact Us Today!
Call 1.888.623.2633 x2810 or visit us online at oceanfirst.com

OCEANFIRST BANK

1.888.OCEAN33 | oceanfirst.com

#YouFirst

Member FDIC Equal opportunity lender. Equal housing lender.