

IN FACT

Districts Satisfied with Open Enrollment, Motivated to Retain & Attract Students

The Public Policy Forum conducted a survey of school district administrators to understand how Wisconsin's open enrollment program worked during the first year. Using data gathered from two-thirds of the school districts, representing 75% of the state student population, we found that 1,819 students are participating in the first year of Wisconsin's open enrollment program. We estimate that statewide approximately 2,400 students participated in the open enrollment program in the 1998-1999 school year. Admitting districts receive \$4,551 per student in tuition from the sending district. For our sample about \$8.3 million in transfer payments were made. Statewide these payments could reach \$10.9 million.

The Forum found that district administrators are generally satisfied with the first year of implementation. However, they are not satisfied with the increased workload for themselves and their staffs. Responding districts estimate that they spent a total of \$522,738 and 16,857 hours administering the open enrollment program. Administrators believe that the primary reason why parents participated in the choice program was personal convenience. Many administrators indicated that they will be making changes to retain and attract students. This includes creating a marketing and public relations strategy for their district, increasing curricular choices and improving facilities.

For the first time public school students in Wisconsin had the option of enrolling in a public school outside their resident district. If there was room available the receiving district would receive tuition from the resident district and state aid to the resident district would be adjusted according to the number of transfers.

For this In Fact, a confidential questionnaire was mailed to 427 school administrators in Wisconsin. By December 15th, 265 school administrators, or 62%, returned the survey. We contacted 25 administrators based on school district size, geographic location and percent of enrollment participating in this program who agreed to be interviewed. The excellent response rate provides confidence that the responses represent the overall view of this program during its first year of implementation.

Program Highlights

- On average participants in the choice program represented less than one percent of a district's enrollment.
- School districts spent an average of 57 hours implementing the open enrollment program and estimate that on average they spent \$2,642 administering the open enrollment program during the first year.
- School districts were generally satisfied with this program, but were far less satisfied with the increase in workload.
- School administrators list convenience (37%), school program (13%), and dissatisfaction with district (11%) as the top three reasons parents request transfer of their children from one district to another.
- A majority of district administrators do not believe that the open enrollment program will make public schools more competitive (63%), nor do they believe the program will improve the quality of public education (77%).
- Many districts (32%) will be making changes to retain and attract students. This includes creating a public relations and marketing strategy, expanding curricular choices and improving facilities.
- Changes made by these districts may provide momentum for other districts to implement change. Most administrators take a wait-and-see approach. If they were to lose a large number of students they would want to make changes.
- District administrators have several concerns with open enrollment. They include driving up the costs of education, the inability to meet per-pupil costs with tuition reimbursement and concerns in the Milwaukee area that open enrollment may replace the Chapter 220 program.
- Suggested improvements include: 1. Changing the appeals process so that the state considers district goals; 2. Basing payments on local average rather

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Open Enrollment Transfers In and Out

than state per-pupil costs; 3. Requiring a commitment from parents who accept the open enrollment assignments of their children.

Our sample showed a total of 1,819 students transferring in and 1,694 transferring out of districts. This represented .28% of the student body for those schools that participated in our survey. The average number of students transferring in was seven and the average transferring out was six. The maximum number of students transferring out was 84 and the maximum

Size	Transfers In	Transfers Out
Small District 1-900 students (n=99)	5.4	3.2
Small to Medium 901-1,834 (n=82)	5.7	6.5
Medium 1,835-4,725 (n=63)	9	7.6
Medium to Large 4,726-7,465 (n=9)	11.3	9.6
Large 7,466+ (n=12)	12.9	24.3

number of students transferring in was 43.

Reasons for Transfer

The views of administrators provide us with one perspective on why parents chose to request a transfer in or out of a school district. Some administrators conducted their own inquiry into this question by asking parents. Other administrators based their answers on general responses by parents and still others were only speculating on what these

Our mail survey included nine closed-ended questions and two open-ended questions. The combination of both closed and open-ended questions ensured that we would have a wide range of information to examine. The responses to the open-ended questions were coded into separate categories that are discussed in this section.

reasons may be.

1. CONVENIENCE The most commonly cited reason why parents participated in the choice program was convenience. Twenty-four percent of the responses fit this category. Those administrators who mentioned this reason suggested that it was convenience for the parents that caused them to request a transfer to a different district. In the administrators view the majority of parents chose a different district because of proximity to work and child care issues.

In our interviews we found such responses as, “The parents are teachers in our district and wanted their child in the school district,” or “Our school is right off the freeway and the parents go by on their way to work,” or “The child’s grandparents take care of the child after school and they live in another district.”

2. LOCATION Parents also chose a different district because the non-resident school was closer to their home. District boundaries do not always reflect how close one resides to a school. Parents may find themselves in situations where they may be within closer proximity to a non-resident school.

One administrator commented, “Of the 21 students who left our district, 16 transferred to a neighboring school district that is only 4-6 miles away.” Still another administrator stated, “We lost 15 students and most of them came from a new subdivision that is closer to a neighboring school. We didn’t lose any students based on our programs; we lost them because of location.”

Public school choice for these parents has allowed them to rectify these boundary issues by choosing where they will send their child. In general it appears that public school choice has made the lives of many parents somewhat easier.

3. SCHOOL PROGRAM The next most commonly mentioned reason that administrators cite for why parents transferred into or out of a district was the receiving district’s school programs. Approximately 13% of the responses fit this category. These administrators believe that parents are choosing a different school because the receiving school may have more course offerings,

better technology, special needs courses, advanced placement offerings, foreign language classes or pre-kindergarten and all day kindergarten.

For example, one administrator noted, “We have more diverse course offerings such as Russian and Chinese languages that you can’t get in neighboring districts.” On the flip side another administrator noted, “The main reason for students transferring out of our small school district, (742 students) was because of better course offerings in neighboring districts.” One administrator commented, “Five of the 15 students who left our district went because of all day kindergarten that is offered in a neighboring district.”

4. DISSATISFACTION The next most commonly cited reason may fit the category of a protest vote. Parents chose to leave because they were dissatisfied with the school. This includes unhappiness with administrators, teachers, staff, the school board or general politics of the district. Approximately 11% of administrators believed parents are choosing non-resident districts for this reason. For example in several districts administrators suggested that lingering anger with proposals or decisions by school boards to close schools and merge schools was the reason the parents requested to leave the district. In one southwestern district, parents were very angry with a proposal to merge their elementary school with the large city in their district. One administrator

Reasons Parents are Participating in Public School Choice	
Convenience	24%
Location	15%
School Program	13%
Dissatisfaction with District	11%
Parental Move	9%
Athletics and Other Extra-Curricular Activities	7%
Reputation/Quality of Education	6%
Discipline Issues with Resident District	5%
Note: The total percentage column does not equal 100% because respondents on average mentioned between two and three categories.	

declared, “Parents of 16 children transferred them out of the district rather than send them to the school in this district.” Still another administrator noted, “A number of years ago we considered closing an elementary school in the outlying area of our district. This left some bitter feelings, and a number of parents chose to go to other districts rather than send their kids to the merged school.”

5. PARENTAL MOVE If dissatisfaction is a protest vote, staying after the parents move is definitely a vote of confidence and approval for the district. Approximately 10% of the responses were in this category. As one administrator indicated, “We had several families who built homes in a neighboring district, but they wanted their children to remain in our district. We feel an obligation to make sure that these children get a seamless education and can stay in our district.”

6. MISCELLANEOUS Other common responses to why parents chose to participate in the public school choice program included the categories of discipline, athletics and reputation. Approximately 5% of the administrators suggested that parents were interested in transferring their children out of the resident district because of discipline issues with their current district. Seven percent of the administrators believed that participation in choice is primarily driven by concerns about athletics and extra-curricular activities. The final category receiving about 5% of the responses was the view that parents chose a different district because they perceive the receiving district as better academically. As one district administrator, who lost several students, stated, “We had families who left because of their perception of our district.” Another administrator commented, “We had exit conferences with parents and found that the perception and quality of other districts is what made them participate in open enrollment.” A district administrator, who accepted 24 students, noted, “We have a long established reputation of high quality. This is why so many students were attracted to our district.” (The district has 200 students and received 36 applications).

Satisfaction

We asked administrators how satisfied they

Implementation: The First Year

were with open enrollment during this first year. About 75% of district administrators were either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with open enrollment. In our interviews, we asked administrators to elaborate on the answer to this question. Below we outline some of the praise for and criticism of open enrollment. We include both a summary statement and an example from our administrative interviews.

Praise

- Program is a subtle change for teachers and administrators. *“We can no longer look at kids as a captive market.”*
- Program raises question, *“Are we the best we can be?”*
- Program encourages parents to hold administrators accountable for the performance of their district. *“We must maintain our high levels of achievement or parents will leave.”*
- Program gives parents a right to choose. *“Parents have a right to school choice and to do what they feel is best for their kids.”*
- Program causing neighboring schools to create new programs. *“One area school began full-day kindergarten and another started a district newsletter.”*

Criticism

- Program was a lot of effort for very few students. *“Less than half of one percent of the students in Wisconsin applied for open enrollment. We threw a party and no one came.”*
- Program exacerbates the already declining enrollment of some districts. *“We are very concerned with declining enrollment. We lost 21 students, 2.2% of our enrollment. We lose approximately \$4,500 per student which is about \$95,000. Students left in our district will struggle in a district experiencing declining enrollment and revenue”*
- Program does not provide clear guidelines for special education students. *“A neighboring district lost an appeal and had to take a special needs student into their district. The district did not have a special needs program. As a result, staff members needed to be added to create a program to take care of this student’s needs.”*
- Program does not hold parents responsible for their decisions. *“Parents can bail out at any time. We make at least a six year commitment to the student, the parents make a commitment of a day.”*

We also asked administrators how satisfied they were with how DPI administered the open

enrollment program during the first year. For the most part district administrators were quite satisfied with how DPI implemented the choice program. However, some felt that open enrollment occurred too quickly, but blame the legislature rather than DPI. We list some of the praise for and criticism of DPI implementation by providing a summary statement and an example from our interviews.

Praise

- DPI open enrollment consultant did a good job. *“I think DPI did a good job for the first year. This basically means one person and her staff. All questions were answered in a timely manner.”*
- DPI did as good a job as possible given the time pressure. *“They were pressed and pressured. They were responsive, but it was their first time, too.”*

Criticism

- Excessive amount of paperwork. *“I don’t know if it can be streamlined more than it is, but the forms are cumbersome.”*
- Appeals process is not a good procedure. *“We made our decisions within our board policy. We went one way and the state went another. We know where we are moving as a district and want to continue. When our decision was reversed we feel it was done without consideration of our goals as a district.”*

Milwaukee Area 220 Schools

About 5,500 students participated in the Milwaukee area Chapter 220 program in 1997-1998. The program came in response to the court-ordered desegregation of MPS in the 1970s. The goal was to promote racial integration. Our interview results suggested that many schools that participate in 220 were concerned with the first year of the open enrollment program.

This dissatisfaction stemmed primarily from confusion over open enrollment and the 220 program and which program prevailed. As one administrator commented, “DPI treated the Chapter 220 problem as a Milwaukee problem. Instead DPI should have treated it as a regional issue. In fact, one DPI official responded to the Chapter 220 problem by telling me I should increase my legal budget in order to figure it out.” The general consensus was that there needed to be clarity about what happens with 220 in the era of open

enrollment. For example one administrator whose district received 148 Chapter 220 students stated, “We are reimbursed nearly \$10,000 for each 220 student. If these students were changed to open enrollment we would receive only \$4,500 per student.” Some administrators expressed concern that open enrollment would eventually replace Chapter 220. As one administrator declared “Society needs to decide if promoting racial integration is worth it.”

Problems with Costs and Time

The actual number of students who transferred in and out a district significantly understates the number of applications that had to be processed by a district. Students were able to apply to multiple districts. The end result was that most schools processed a lot more paper than actual students. For the schools that responded to our survey, a total of 3,513 students actually participated in the open enrollment program. Yet the total number of applications in our sample equaled 8,280. The ratio of applications to open enrollment participants was over two to one.

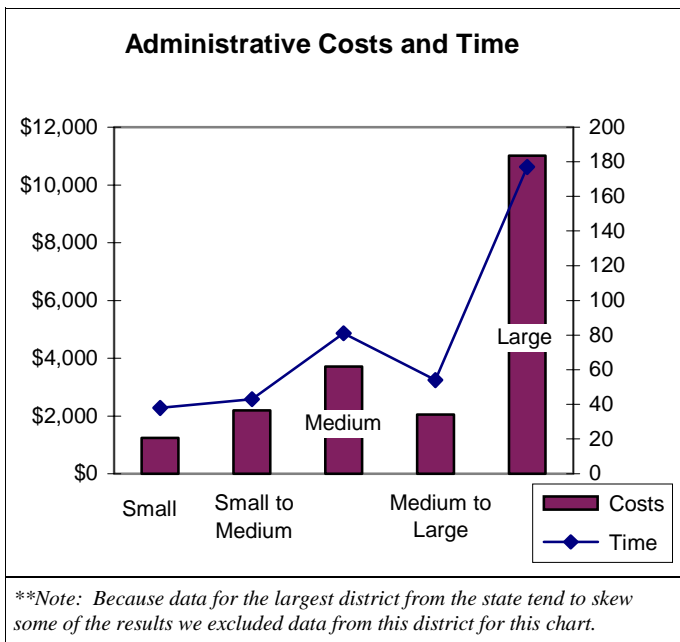
Most district administrators, (62%) expressed concern with the workload of administering the school choice program. Districts that participated in this survey estimate that they spent a total of \$522,738 on administering the school choice

program. The average costs of this program varied from a low of \$1,229 for the smallest districts to a high of \$20,897 for the largest districts. The maximum spent was \$100,000 by a large school district. Most of this cost was absorbed into the workload of the district administration. However, several districts used legal advisors to help them draft their district policies. In addition, districts spent money on printing and postage to implement this program.

Districts also estimate that they spent a total of 16,857 hours overseeing the choice program. Districts did not hire new staff, but expanded the duties of district administrators and staff. Two large school districts indicated that they needed an additional staff member in order to manage the workload. On average the time spent in running the program was approximately 57 hours per district. This varied in average time from a low of 38 hours for small schools to a high of 412 hours for large schools. The maximum time estimated was 3,000 hours by a large school district.

The general consensus of those we interviewed was that the program was cumbersome this first year, but that administrators expect it to be smoother the second year. As one administrator commented, “We now have our policy and process in place so I expect to be in better shape this second year.” Only a few administrators believed that the work would increase in the next year.

Almost all administrators we interviewed felt burdened by the paperwork and deadlines. One administrator remarked that multiple copies of applications had to be made and then mailed to the parent and back to the school then to DPI. These administrators felt that there seemed to be a never ending stream of paper and deadlines. Yet, other administrator noted that DPI has made efforts to ease the copying and did modify the application. Yet, most administrators felt that there was not much DPI could do to simplify the work. These administrators felt that there was very little flexibility in the statute.



Attracting and Retaining Students

District Initiatives

One question that we were interested in answering was whether districts would make any changes to retain or attract students under open enrollment. Two-thirds responded that they won't make any changes. The common statement that accompanied this response was summed up in the following way, "We will continue to improve our programs regardless of open enrollment." However, other administrators indicated that because of already declining enrollment and revenue caps they won't have the money to make any changes.

Eighty-two districts, or 32% indicated that they will make efforts to retain or attract students. There were eleven categories of initiatives to do this. The most popular initiative was to create and implement a public relations strategy; 39% of the responses fit in this category. As one district administrator commented, "We want to advertise the strengths of our district to residents and non-residents." This would include such efforts as creating or updating a district brochure, providing information packets, holding more parent meetings and expanding the annual welcome process to include prospective open enrollment students.

The next most popular option was to expand district curriculum and options. Some examples of such efforts include expanding classes for gifted and talented students, creating more technical education classes, expanding distance learning offerings, creating specialized programs in high schools and improving special education.

Other changes include improving school facilities, improving achievement especially that measured by state administered tests, and adding all day kindergarten. Seven districts indicated that they would be adding all-day kindergarten next year.

Other changes that districts expect to make include expanding extra-curricular offerings and expanding choice options within the district. Respondents from three large school districts mentioned that open enrollment has led to changes within their own student assignment systems. One

District Initiatives to Retain and Attract Students		
Initiative	Number	Percent
Implement a Public Relations Strategy	35	39%
Expand Curricular Choices	18	20%
Improve Facilities	8	9%
Improve Test Scores and Achievement	8	9%
Add or consider adding all day kindergarten	7	8%
Focus on being a customer friendly district	5	6%
Expand Extra-curricular and athletic programs	3	3%
Expand Intra-district choice	3	3%
Provide transportation to district borders	1	1%
Reduce Class Size	1	1%
Provide welcoming environment to open enrollment students	1	1%

district administrator noted, "We couldn't offer non-residents more of a choice than residents. So this year we began a new program of offering intra-district choice." Another administrator suggested that open enrollment may lead to fewer boundary disputes. "Parents will no longer feel the need to petition to have their land included in another district. They are now able to choose that district."

The Rippling Effect of Open Enrollment

Though a minority of districts responded that they would be making changes, we think these districts could cause a rippling effect throughout the state. First, we found that several districts that indicated they would not make any changes on the written survey, altered their response when they were interviewed by phone. For example, one administrator's survey response suggested they would do nothing, but in the interview he commented, "We lost several students who went to

a neighboring district for full-day kindergarten. We are going from half day to full day kindergarten next year.”

Second, if one district offers a service or program because of open enrollment other districts may be compelled to do the same. In one district bus service was not added to accommodate open enrollment students. However, a neighboring district did add bus service. The administrator of the first district stated, “We really don’t want to spend money on additional bus service, but may be forced to do so.”

Finally, most administrators take a wait and see approach. At the present time they are not losing students. However, if they were to lose a large number of students they may be forced to make changes. Our survey results indicate that school districts that lost more students than they gained were more likely to indicate that they would be making efforts to retain and attract students, (38% for net losing districts compared to 28% for net gaining districts).

Promoting Competition

Does the open enrollment program increase competition among public schools? Some scholars have suggested that public schools hold a monopoly on education and that parents are a captive market for these schools.

Two-thirds of the administrators we surveyed believed that open enrollment will not lead to competition. Several who responded suggested that their district already made efforts to attract and retain students. Others responded out of an ideological belief that public schools should not be in the business of competing. As one administrator declared, “Public schools are supposed to all be equal. I don’t see a need to competitively campaign to snag students from other districts.” This statement was reiterated by another administrator: “Our district is not in the business to be competitive, it’s to serve all kids.”

Still others believe that competition will lead to conflict among districts. As one administrator stated, “We do a lot cooperatively with districts and I don’t want any bad feelings. Marketing and

Do you believe the open enrollment program:		
	Percent Responding Yes	Percent Responding No
...will make public schools more competitive	37%	63%
...will improve the quality of education	23%	77%

competition could be totally counterproductive.” This was reiterated by another administrator who commented, “We have had border disputes with our neighboring districts. Things are a lot better now. We don’t want to stir up any hard feelings by competing.”

A little over one-third of those administrators surveyed believed that open enrollment will increase competition. As one administrator put it, “I’m open to anything that will help us create a sense of urgency. A free market economy might do that. It has the potential, although this has not been the case in other states that have done this thing.” This sentiment was echoed by others including one who summed it up in this way, “We must make ourselves more attractive. Instead of saying ‘like it or lump it,’ we can lose our enrollment.”

Promoting Quality

One of the underlying reasons for creating an open enrollment program is the belief that by offering parents choices, public schools may be compelled to improve. However, less than one-quarter of the administrators surveyed believe that open enrollment will lead to improved quality. The reason for this was the belief that the primary motivation for parents to leave was convenience not quality. Of the 23% who believe it will lead to improvement, the common belief is summed up by the following statement, “Our district ranks high on the state tests and we need to maintain this level of achievement if we are to retain students.” Our findings suggest that districts will probably move to improve quality if districts lose enough students.

Concerns with Open Enrollment

We examined implementation of public school open enrollment in its first year. We asked district

Conclusion

administrators what concerns they might have about open enrollment over the next few years. Seven of the 25 administrators we interviewed had no concerns with open enrollment. The concerns of the 18 administrators, with a list of the common concerns and example from our interviews, are:

- Open enrollment may increase the costs of education. *“If a school is at the cutting edge, for example, and provides excellent technology, can they pick up 20 more kids? If that means 20 more computers, that is another \$20,000. The theory is you have five empty seats and fill them with five kids. But when you add 25 kids, staff must be added.”*
- Open enrollment funding does not cover district’s per pupil costs. *“Our district costs are \$8,000 per pupil. How many students can we afford to accept when we receive only \$4,500 per student?”*
- Open enrollment raises concerns within the context of Chapter 220. *“Will open enrollment eventually take the place of 220?”*
- Open enrollment raises concerns about private school choice. *“Is this part of a bigger political picture? Does it lead to vouchers?”*
- Open enrollment leads to movement of students for many non-academic reasons. *“Is the program designed for academic reasons?”*
- Open enrollment students are accepted with some apprehension. *“My district was not that welcoming to choice children. These parents need to be integrated into all district functions.”*
- Open enrollment exacerbates declining enrollment. *“Does the legislature want us to close the only elementary school in a community?”*

Suggested Improvements

- Appeals process could be improved. *“The state needs to consider the goals of the district. If a district succeeds because of small class size it should be able to maintain that goal.”*

- Payments could be based on the local average per-pupil cost rather than state average. *“There must be a realization that the difference between the \$4,500 and the local per pupil cost is now the obligation of the district.”*
- Require a commitment on the part of parents. *“There needs to be some penalty for withdrawal. If a parent ‘bails out’ after committing to school choice, maybe that child should not be eligible for open enrollment.”*
- Creation of some center that provides information on what schools have space. *“We received a number of applications, but our school is full and we aren’t accepting any students. Somehow that information needs to be made available to parents.”*
- Contact the realtors association and explain how this program works. *“It would help home buyers if realtors had accurate information about the program.”*
- Legislature and DPI need to look at the role of Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association in the open enrollment process. *“What rules are they setting for open enrollment students?”*
- Questions regarding special education need to be resolved. *“Special education issues concerning policy, tuition agreements, staffing and program development need to be looked at.”*
- Provisions should be made for parents who move after the open enrollment deadline. *“I think there needs to be an exception for parents who buy a home after the 19th of February.”*

Future Research

The Forum will be conducting a second study on open enrollment this spring. The focus will be on the views of parents toward open enrollment. We will examine such issues as their satisfaction with the program and the reasons why they participated in the program.