



WHAT'S WRONG WITH OPEN ENROLLMENT?



Although controversial policies such as vouchers and charter schools may attract more attention, open enrollment is one of the most common forms of school choice. Almost every state has some form of the policy, which decouples (at least partially) students' home addresses from the public schools they attend. These policies may allow students to enroll in public schools in one district when they live in another, or they may simply allow enrollment in a school, in the student's district, that is not the closest to their home.

The policies, many of which date back to the late 1980s and early 1990s, are often seen as relatively benign and, as a result, have tended to fly under the radar even as other approaches to choice have become lightning rods.

Yet in an [article](#) published earlier this year in the peer-reviewed *Peabody Journal of Education*, NEPC Fellows [Carrie Sampson](#) and [David Garcia](#) of Arizona State University, [Matthew Hom](#) of Spotify, and [Melanie Bertrand](#) of the University of Arizona, use the lens of critical policy theory to explain how open enrollment is a wolf in sheep's clothing. The policies have stated goals that seem beneficial: expanding families' choice options and levels of satisfaction by providing access to more high-quality schools, encouraging schools to improve and to cater to families' needs by competing for enrollment, and leading to the eventual shut-down of underperforming schools due to under-enrollment.

Yet the researchers flag six significant concerns:

- **Students of color and students from lower-income families bear the burden.** Rather than providing every student with local options that meet their needs, open enrollment shifts the burden of attaining a high-quality education to the families

whose children open enroll. Because neighborhoods that serve larger shares of low-income families and students of color tend to have lower-performing schools, these are the students who bear the burden of lengthy commutes to neighborhoods with higher shares of white and affluent families—which tend to have higher-performing schools.

- **Open enrollers may encounter racism.** When students of color open enroll in majority white schools, they may encounter a racist environment in which they disproportionately suffer consequences such as higher rates of exclusionary discipline and lower rates of enrollment in college preparatory classes.
- **Families who participate in inter-district open enrollment send their children to schools in jurisdictions where they can't vote.** As a result, although they may at times get school officials to listen to them or meet their needs, parents who are voters in the district may have more clout. Rather than merely voting against disfavored school board members, open enrolling families who do have concerns must take more time-consuming and elaborate steps to make themselves heard—such as demonstrating repeatedly at school board meetings.
- **“Voting with your feet” is more complicated than it may seem.** A justification of open enrollment is that families vote with their feet. However, for students of color whose local schools are of low quality or not meeting their needs, the choices may each be untenable. For instance, they can either remain in a place where they encounter high levels of racism or transfer back to local schools with fewer instructional resources.
- **School ratings are flawed.** Parents are often encouraged to transfer from schools with lower accountability ratings to schools with higher ratings. Yet these rating systems are themselves flawed in that they tend to focus mainly on average results of standardized tests without taking into account harder-to-measure yet equally important factors such as equity or cultural competence. As a result, lower-rated schools, no matter their overall quality, will lose enrollment and risk closure while higher-rated schools attract open enrollees (and the additional per-pupil funding that accompanies them) whom they don't serve well.
- **Open enrollment creates winners and losers.** Even when they have similar incomes to their neighbors whose children do not open enroll, open enrollers tend to have more resources and social capital. In order to open enroll, a parent needs to be aware that open enrollment is an option, proficient at navigating the bureaucratic requirements associated with school choice, and (in the many states where transportation is not provided to open enrollers) able to take their children to and from schools that are farther from home than their local options. The schools left behind therefore lose parents who would have had more wherewithal to demand improvements. Similarly, the children who leave tend to have more opportunities to learn and academic supports outside of school. When a school has a concentration of students with very high levels of academic need because those with lower need levels have departed, that school's accountability ratings tend to drop, and when more politically powerful parents opt out, school resources tend to drop (on top of the lost per-pupil payments when any student leaves). This feeds an ongoing cycle.

The authors conclude by urging researchers and policymakers alike to take a closer look at the equity-related implications of open enrollment. “School choice scholars may be overlooking open enrollment because the transfers occur within the public school system,” they write.

But the limited rights afforded to open-enrollment families due to the inability to participate in democratic governance and the practical implications with respect to equitable access and treatment under school choice policies means that not all students are regarded equally in a public school district’s political ecosystem altered by school choice.

“The ‘benign’ choice,” they warn, “may actually be exacerbating the effects of market competition and eroding democratic participation right under our noses, making the road to achieving an equitable educational system increasingly challenging.”

NEPC Resources on School Choice

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