

Interdistrict Open Enrollment

Executive Summary

Interdistrict choice allows students to attend a public school outside of their resident district. Mandatory open enrollment policies require districts to accept transfer students, although schools are often allowed to set their own enrollment limits and have some flexibility to choose which students are accepted. When not associated with an intentional desegregation program, open enrollment policies in nearby states have been associated with increased school segregation by both race and income. The most equitable and successful interdistrict choice systems provide stable state support for tuition and transportation costs, as well as specific enrollment criteria to ensure that all students can access better school options.

Highlights

- In the absence of specific criteria for interdistrict transfer, **schools with high local property wealth and/or schools adjacent to predominantly nonwhite neighborhoods sometimes create barriers to enrollment** that effectively limit choices for many students in underperforming schools and **exacerbate school segregation**.
- In **states that rely heavily on local funding** for public education (e.g., Missouri), resident districts are responsible for paying higher tuition costs for students who transfer to other schools. For schools in regions with low local property wealth, these **transfer costs can reduce school revenue significantly and limit their ability to improve school quality**.
- Most states with open enrollment programs do not subsidize transportation, which can make it **difficult for some poor and working families to access the full range of choices**.

Limitations

- Because state and county open enrollment characteristics vary widely across the country, it is difficult to predict the exact program criteria that would prevent or reduce segregation in Missouri. These criteria may also vary regionally (i.e., rural vs. urban).
- There is limited research that directly compares how student performance varies across neighboring districts that either allow for or restrict interdistrict transfers. It is also difficult to directly determine if the academic success of transfer students is caused by the transfer program itself or is reflective of other factors that drive open enrollment participation (e.g., high academic achievement, family involvement, motivation).

Research Background

Interdistrict enrollment in Missouri

Students who are assigned to an unaccredited school or district in Missouri must be allowed to attend an accredited school in the same or adjoining county (Mo. Ann. Stat. § [167.895](#)). Missouri

also allows districts to enter into voluntary transfer agreements where students can attend school in a district other than their home district in cases where natural barriers, travel time or distance create an unusual or unreasonable transportation hardship (Mo. Ann. Stat. § [162.1040-162.1059](#)). Under current law, receiving districts can set enrollment caps but cannot deny a transfer request solely for academic, athletic, artistic or extracurricular ability, handicapping conditions, English language proficiency or most disciplinary records.

Voluntary interdistrict transfer in St. Louis

Intentional desegregation programs can provide equitable education choices for low-income and marginalized students, the majority of whom are African American. In response to a 1972 lawsuit over school segregation in St. Louis, Missouri implemented a desegregation program that is now referred to as “VICC” (the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation). VICC allows African American students in St. Louis to choose schools within St. Louis County, while encouraging students from St. Louis County to attend magnet schools within St. Louis City. For the first sixteen years, the tuition and transportation costs of the student transfer program were fully covered by the state of Missouri, with participation peaking at around 14,000 students.¹ In addition to the well-established social and economic benefits of diverse schools², there is evidence that transferring into some St. Louis County schools is associated with higher test scores and graduation rates compared to students who remain in St. Louis City.³ However, when the

program was removed from federal supervision in 1999, enrollment started decreasing, likely due to insufficient participation of suburban families choosing schools in St. Louis City and the inability of schools in districts with low local property wealth to pay higher tuition rates for transferring students to attend suburban schools (Figure 1).¹ VICC is currently winding down and new interdistrict enrollments will stop after the 2024-25 school year.

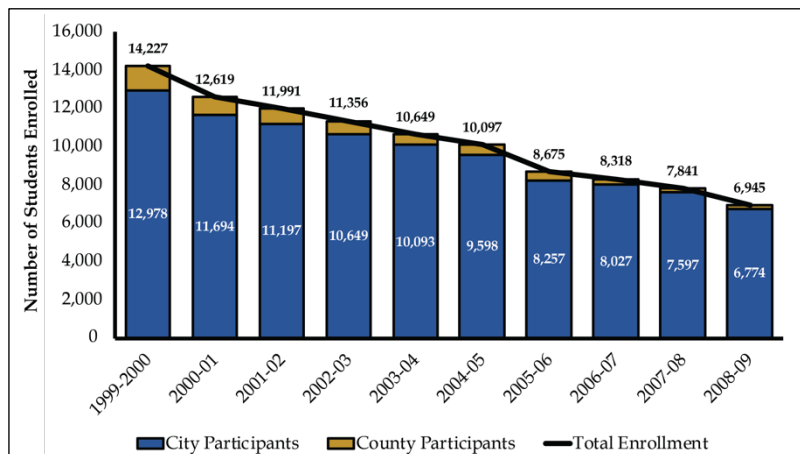


Figure 1. Enrollment in the St. Louis Voluntary Transfer Program, 1999-2009. Enrollment of both city and county participants decreased significant once the federal desegregation order was lifted and financial responsibility shifted to sending districts. Adapted from Grooms (2019).¹

How do interdistrict open enrollment policies impact school segregation?

Housing policies and school district borders can segregate neighborhoods by race and wealth. As of 2019, there are twenty-four school district borders in Missouri classified as “deeply divisive” – representing at least a 25-percentage point difference in the proportion of nonwhite students and at least a 10 percent difference in the total revenue spent per pupil.⁴ Eleven of these borders are in the St. Louis metro region.

access to public school transportation systems, while around 26 states have no provisions to require that public transportation is available free of charge (**Figure 2**).^{13,14} Transportation is often subsidized as part of desegregation programs (e.g., VICC). Even then, in cases where high performing schools are far from students' homes, commute time can take up several hours of the day and may limit participation in extracurricular activities. Long school commutes are also associated with increased absenteeism and subsequent transfers to closer schools.¹⁵ Finally, because special education provisions are provided by districts in Missouri, the current model is not set up to handle the specific costs and transportation needs of special education students who choose to move to another district.

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