



Interdistrict Open Enrollment

Executive Summary

Interdistrict open enrollment allows students to attend a public school outside of their district of residence. 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 some Midwestern states are 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 school options. [House Bill 1814](#) would allow parents to enroll their children in school districts where they own residential or agricultural property within a school district if they have paid school taxes on those properties for the previous 3 years. The proposed legislation also provides several procedures for students to transfer to schools in other districts and would allow mileage reimbursements to parents transporting transferred students if they qualify for the free and reduced-price lunch programs. Additionally, a "Parent Public School Choice Fund" would be established with a \$60 million dollar appropriation to pay for qualifying mileage reimbursements and for special needs education of transferred students.

Highlights

- In the absence of specific criteria for interdistrict transfer, **schools with high local property wealth and/or schools adjacent to predominantly nonwhite neighborhoods often 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. Rev. 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 creates an unusual or unreasonable transportation hardship (Mo. Rev. 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).

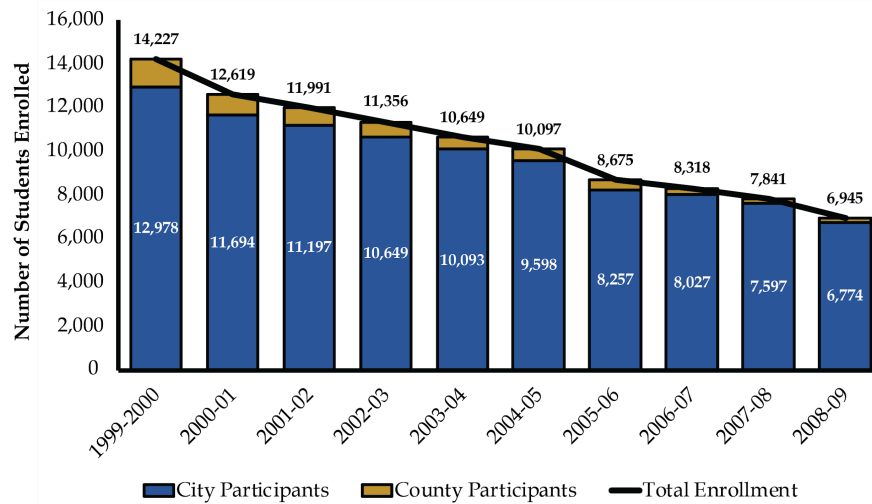


Figure 1. Enrollment in the St. Louis Voluntary Transfer Program, 1999-2009. Enrollment of both city and county participants decreased significantly once the federal desegregation order was lifted and financial responsibility shifted to sending districts. Adapted from Grooms (2019).¹

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 16 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 schools,² 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.

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 24 school district borders in Missouri classified as “deeply divisive” – representing at least a 25% difference in the proportion of nonwhite students and at least a 10% difference in the total revenue spent per pupil.⁴ Eleven of these borders are in the St. Louis metro region.

In some Midwestern states (e.g., Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio), open enrollment policies have often exacerbated segregation (measured by isolation of Black and Hispanic students within certain districts and/or the directional flow of students in and out of districts). Additionally, these programs typically provide the fewest choice options to students attending lower-quality schools.⁵⁻⁸

White suburban students tend to have the most mobility and are often able to access the best schools.^{5,7,8} High-performing schools, especially those directly neighboring predominantly nonwhite school districts, often set restrictive enrollment criteria that make it difficult for students to transfer into them.^{6,7}

Rural areas are often open to interdistrict transfers but can face additional transportation challenges due to geography and low population density.^{7,9} Overall, voluntary desegregation programs like VICC provide a model for how strong guidelines and suburban transfer incentives (e.g., financial support, diversity criteria) can be used to improve access to choice and reduce segregation.¹⁰

How Does State-Level Funding Affect Interdistrict Transfer Outcomes?

A common rationale for expanding interdistrict open enrollment is that by allowing students to transfer out of low-performing schools, sending schools would be motivated to improve their quality to compete in the education market. In addition to incentivizing equitable transfers, stable state funding is an important tool to ensure that the competition model can function as intended.

Missouri’s current funding formula relies significantly on local revenue compared to state and federal dollars.¹¹ When the Normandy public school district became unaccredited, for example, Normandy was responsible for funding the tuition at transfer schools, contributing to a

substantial revenue loss requiring the closing of an elementary school mid-year and teacher and staff layoffs.¹² The combination of low local tax revenue and millions of dollars in tuition and transportation costs resulted in significant financial hardship in Normandy and has made it more challenging to improve school quality. Consistently, Normandy continues to have some of the lowest test scores in the state. States with large open enrollment systems (e.g., Minnesota - [Minn. Stat. § 126.10](#), subds. 24 to 30) tend to rely more heavily on state educational support, providing more state funds to regions with higher need to attenuate funding disparities, similar to those observed in Missouri.

How Does Geography and Access to Transportation Impact Interdistrict Transfers?

Proximity to a school is a significant factor for school choice, especially in low-income families who typically have work and childcare commitments. Only six open enrollment states require that all interdistrict transfer students have 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}

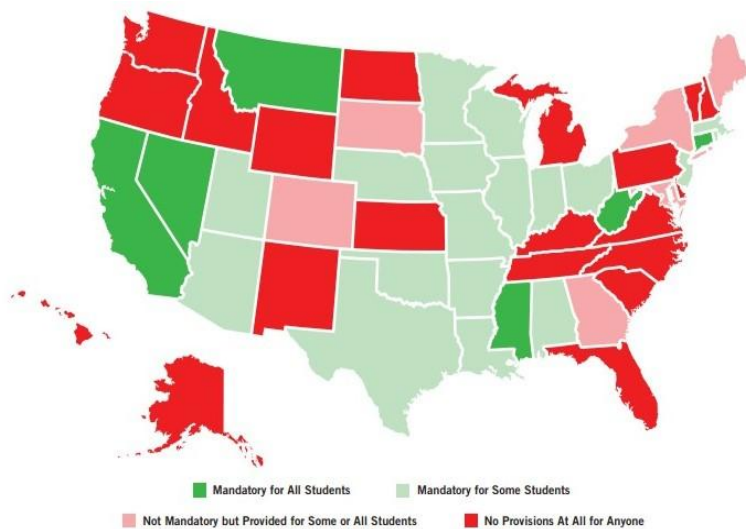


Figure 2. Interdistrict Transportation Requirements. States in green require some level of mandatory transportation, pink states provide non-mandatory transportation for some students and red states have no transportation provisions for any interdistrict student transfers.¹³

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 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.

Open Enrollment Rates in Other States

Policies allowing or requiring schools to accept inter- or intradistrict enrollment of students vary by state.¹⁶ Additionally, data collection and reporting methods of the numbers of open enrolling students per state can make it difficult to determine open enrollment rates. For the 2020-21 school year, 7.3% of [Iowa](#), 5.5% of [Ohio](#), and 8.5% of [Wisconsin](#) public school students enrolled via interdistrict open enrollment.

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