

March 2014

Open Enrollment: Summary and Key Questions A Brief Analysis of the Duval County Public Schools Proposal

Duval County Public Schools proposes an Open Enrollment program to begin in the 2014-15 school year. This proposal would allow students to attend any district school that is not already enrolled at 95% or greater of capacity through an application process that would potentially begin in April 2014 for the 2014-15 school year. No additional transportation would be provided for this program. The following white paper looks at potential benefits and concerns, reviews the existing research on the topic of open enrollment, and poses key considerations for the district and community to consider moving forward.



What is open enrollment?

Open enrollment is a form of school choice that removes residency restrictions to allow students to attend schools outside of their zoned neighborhood school. Open enrollment systems are in place in many states but vary widely in implementation. *Intradistrict* plans allow students to choose from schools within their district of residence, while *interdistrict* plans available in some states allow students to enroll in schools across districts. Additionally, some models require application and selection criteria or have other specific restrictions. For example, in some open enrollment districts, student assignment defaults to the school they are zoned for, but parents can apply for them to attend any school in the district, while in others there is no default assignment and all parents are required to submit a list of their top choice schools for assignment. In most models all schools or districts are required to accept out-of-area students if space permits, while in some others schools/districts can decide individually whether or not to accept students.

What are the specifics of the plan proposed for Duval County Public Schools?

The superintendent's plan is to offer complete intradistrict open enrollment options for all students within Duval County. Currently, students at low-performing schools or who qualify for Opportunity Scholarships have some choice options to attend either a higher performing school or specific magnet, charter or private school options, depending on their personal or home school eligibility situation.

The proposal would expand the choice options to allow all students in Duval County Public Schools (DCPS) to apply to attend any other DCPS school, space permitting. Specific implementation rules of the superintendent's currently proposed plan include:

- Schools which are at 95% building capacity or above will not be eligible to accept new students.
- The district will not provide transportation beyond what is currently offered. Parents choosing to have their students attend a school other than their zoned school will be responsible for arranging transportation.
- The magnet application process will remain unchanged. The magnet application deadline this year was Feb. 28 with notification to parents planned for the first week of April.
- Under the proposal, the new Open Enrollment application process would begin after magnet status notification ends and run through the second week of May. This would allow families who did not receive assignment to the magnet program of their choice to have another opportunity to identify an available school other than their zoned school, as well as an opportunity for parents interested in a choice transfer for reasons other than a specific magnet program.
- If there are more applications for a particular school than seats available based on school capacity, a lottery will be held to determine placements.



- Once all Open Enrollment notifications have been finalized, parents can still request an Administrative Transfer to any school with available seats still remaining (<95% capacity).

What is prompting this now?

The Duval County School Board will meet on April 1 to consider this proposal. According to the Agenda Item for this proposal:

Choice options have been aggressively promoted by the State legislature, which has led the District to lose an estimated \$49 million in revenue. Expanding choice options for parents will provide principals and District staff the opportunity to recruit, retain, and recapture students in traditional District schools. The choice expansion makes the District more competitive and marketable to all parents and students, not just those who attend magnet schools.

During the 2013-14 school year alone, over 38,227 students exercised a choice option. Of these options, 21,489 opted to leave their neighborhood school to attend a magnet school and 8,703 students opted for charter schools. In addition, 747 students used Opportunity Scholarships; 1,241 attended secondary choice programs such as AICE, Early College, AP Honors, IB, and Career Academies; 101 students used McKay scholarships (over 3,000 currently in the District); and 5,325 students used Special Transfers to leave their boundary schools.

What are the expected benefits?

Proponents of open enrollment school choice plans believe increased parental choice will drive all schools to provide higher quality educational support and programs for all students to avoid losing enrollment and funding. Additionally, it will allow parents and students more freedom to choose the most appropriate school for their needs and interests without being restricted by area of residence. It would allow disadvantaged students zoned for low-performing schools the ability to attend a higher-performing school. Some have even suggested that open enrollment can promote diversity in areas where residential zones tend to be highly economically and/or racially segregated.

Finally, the expected benefit to the district of preventing increasing financial losses from students pursuing voucher options to leave district schools due to zoning concerns should not be overlooked.

What are some community concerns?

Commonly heard concerns — locally and nationwide — about the unintended consequences of open enrollment are (1) that it will increasingly drain away top-performing students and funding from schools that are already struggling, (2) that it will



decrease diversity among students in those schools losing the most students, (3) that it will further entrench achievement and opportunity gap differences between students with parents able to help them to participate and those who do not (depending on rules in place for the enrollment model), and (4) that it will disproportionately negatively affect schools in low-income and/or high minority neighborhoods.

Additionally, in situations where implementation rules are not clear, parents living in an area zoned for the school they want their children to attend have expressed concern about their children retaining priority to attend that school.

What does the research tell us about Open Enrollment?

First and foremost, the research available is decidedly mixed. A comprehensive 2008 study which examined and summarized results from across 87 of the most rigorous studies on school choice and its impact on student achievement available at the time stated one of their top overall conclusions as this: “Reject any claims that research has produced definitive answers on school choice questions. There are no definitive studies.” (Miron, Evergreen & Urschel, 2008).

The research is mixed for a number of the reasons previously mentioned. First among them is that open enrollment models across the country vary so much in implementation rules that it is hard to control for all the different factors that could be contributing to different results found in different programs. Another is that they are all relatively new, making long-term data from programs that have been consistently implemented over time relatively unavailable. Perhaps most importantly, the difficulty of disentangling effects of socioeconomic and demographic characteristics such as income status, race, parents’ education, neighborhood effects, and school peer group effects makes it difficult to isolate causes specifically to any one of them.

With that said, Table 1 presents an overview of findings from a few selected prominent studies on the issue of open enrollment. Using these, we can begin to form an idea of some of the outcomes or issues that should at least be considered in the discussion of expanded open enrollment in Duval County. Some overall themes from the studies include:

- How many students opt out of their zoned school in open enrollment cities varied widely — from 11% of students to approximately 50% of students. Structural factors, such as whether or not transportation was provided and how far away schools were from the student’s residence, varied across cities and likely contributed to these differences.
- Studies were mixed in terms of student achievement benefits of open enrollment models. Some found small but significant benefits for specific subgroups, some found small but negative impacts for others, and some found no significant benefit or harm. Overall, the impacts appear to be small, if any, across all students but with the potential to significantly benefit or harm specific subgroups depending on how strategically models are designed to support or avoid those outcomes.



- In terms of demographic shifts, student/parent motivations to move to a non-zoned schools appeared to be generally consistent across studies: The primary factor in selecting choice schools was test scores, often mitigated by program structure limitations such as transportation options, distance to schools, and space availability. While not the intended motivation, several studies also found that an unintended consequence of this was increased stratification by achievement levels and race/ethnicity between schools.

Conclusions

The superintendent's stated goals for wanting to expand open enrollment in Duval County include wanting to expand choice options to all parents beyond the current options available, to promote motivation for continued improvement in serving the needs of all students at all schools, and to mitigate the district's increasing loss of students and funding to outside choice options.

Community concerns include fears of disproportionate negative impact on lower-performing schools, increased de facto segregation by achievement levels and race/ethnicity at some schools, and questions about whether it could potentially lead to the closure of some schools.

There are several important ways this issue must be considered, including from a "moral" perspective, a practical perspective, and a projected impact perspective. From a simply moral perspective, with no projected impacts attached, the superintendent's stated belief that the district should not have the right to tell parents they must be bound to an underperforming school or school they are not satisfied with is a legitimate point of concern and one that must be weighed individually against other concerns.

From a practical perspective, the superintendent's clear concern that the state's efforts towards increasing voucher availabilities and capped enrollment limits will continue draining away significant enrollment and funding from the district is also a legitimate one and an issue the research reviewed does not address. Offering open enrollment within the district would appear to be a viable, strategic move to mitigate the annually increasing losses the district has seen in recent years, though we have not reviewed any research yet that has attempted to project impacts in terms of financial losses prevented by implementing open enrollment in other districts.

From a projected impact perspective, the research indicates that overall the benefits of expanded open enrollment alone across all students are likely to be small, if any. While demographic shifts are likely to be motivated primarily by achievement levels of target schools and program limitations (such as transportation, distance to schools, and space availability), the inadvertent net result of this could be increased stratification by achievement levels and race/ethnicity across the district. Particularly considering the DCPS plan's initial limitations on providing additional transportation, the spread out geography of Duval County, and space limitations on many of the highest performing schools, it is



likely the net impact in Duval County will be a moderate migration of students from relatively mid- to high- achieving schools to even higher achieving schools as space allows.

The key overall consideration is whether one believes the potential financial benefits for the district as a whole and the individual right for every parent to be able to choose a school (within the limits of their own ability to get them there) are more important to the district overall than the facts that the plan alone is likely to have little or no significant benefit for overall student achievement district-wide and may inadvertently contribute to increased stratification and decreased diversity between high performing and lower performing schools.

Key questions remaining

In order to fully evaluate the plan, some more specific key questions that should be considered include:

- How will the district help parents without significant social capital and especially those of low socioeconomic status, understand and access the proposed Open Enrollment program?
- What would the financial costs and logistical challenges be to providing transportation to students who elect to participate in the Open Enrollment program, to ensure equity of access?
- What, if any, solicitation of parent input has been conducted, and what were the results of that information gathering?
- Will Administrative Transfer requests be accepted at any time throughout the year, or only for a limited period of time following open enrollment decision notifications? How will this proposal affect families that move into the district or within the district mid-year?
- What additional district staffing/capacity will be added to handle inquiries, applications and notification?
- If a student spends a portion of the year at an open enrollment choice school but returns to their home school for some reason, does any portion of FTE funding follow the student back to their home school?



Table 1: Selected literature review summary

	Carlson et al (2011)	Ledwith (2010)	Flicek (2007)	Bifulco et al (2007)	Ozek (2009)	Cullen et al (2005)	Howe (2000)
Location	Colorado & Minnesota	Los Angeles, CA	(Undisclosed)	Durham, NC	Pinellas County	Chicago, IL	Boulder, CO
Model Type	Interdistrict	Intradistrict	Intradistrict (Transportation provided)	Intradistrict	Intradistrict	Intradistrict	Intradistrict
Transfer Rates	(Not presented as percentages of overall)	32% of students ages 12+ enrolled in non-zoned schools. Rates vary by race (Highest: Asians (48.6%))	40.2% of students attended zoned school, 59.8% did not.	Approximately 40% of elementary & middle grades students attend non-zoned school (inc. magnet, charter & out-of-zone traditional choice combined)	During years (2001-2005) and grade in grade levels (4-8) studied, approximately 11% of overall students opted out of zoned school for a choice school (rates higher among transition grade students).	Approximately 50% of students opt out of zoned high school to attend another school.	Approximately 20% of BVSD students enrolled in non-zoned schools at time of study (2000)
Achievement Impact Findings	(Not considered)	<p>Positive influence on achievement levels of students after controlling for student motivation, race, SES, and effects of school and neighborhood characteristics.</p> <p>Most significant differences were among Asian and Latino students. Differences within white, black & multiethnic students were not significant between students who attended zoned schools or did not.</p> <p>Attendance in a non-neighborhood school was most impactful when combined with other important characteristics, such as individual motivation.</p>	<p>Little tangible benefits for students attending schools outside local zone compared to those who did not, but no negative academic consequences either (overall)</p> <p>Students using choice to opt into magnet schools actually experienced lower growth than those using choice to opt into Title 1 or other neighborhood schools.</p>	(Not considered)	<p>Author finds no significant benefit of opting out of zoned school on student achievement.</p> <p>Students who opted out of zoned school often performed worse on standardized tests than similar students who stayed behind.</p> <p>Short-term detrimental effects of opting out were stronger for students who opted out closer to final grade level at a school level, and weaker for “disadvantaged” students.</p> <p>Negative impacts driven mostly by non-transition grade school changers in middle school. No significant costs or benefits of changing schools for transition grade students in middle school.</p>	<p>Overall, students who opt out of zoned high school to attend another school found to be more likely to graduate high school, but after controlling for other variables only significant benefits seen among students moving to career academies.</p> <p>Factors aside from school choice itself, such as motivation level and parent involvement were more important overall than participating in choice itself.</p>	(Not considered)

<p>Demographic Impact Findings</p>	<p>Enrollment flows are mainly driven by student achievement and structural characteristics (such as space available and distance to choice school).</p> <p>Many students found to be exiting relatively high-achieving districts for even higher achieving districts. Authors indicate this suggests open enrollment served as a voucher program for middle and upper-middle class families.</p> <p>Low achieving districts lost a disproportionately large number of students and received a relatively small number coming in – resulting in significant net losses for low achieving districts.</p> <p>Study indicates that open enrollment in these models may be inadvertently exacerbating existing socioeconomic and racial segregation, though found that these were not characteristics explicitly driving choice decisions (student achievement, program structures were).</p>	<p>Asian students demonstrated highest mobility rates through choice options, however only 25% of Asian students attended a school with higher achievement rankings than their neighborhood school.</p> <p>White students had highest rates of attending a higher achieving choice school than their neighborhood school (73.9%). Only 31.8% of black students attended a choice school with higher performance than their neighborhood school.</p>	<p>Proportion of free/reduced lunch eligible students who attended a school outside their local zone was not significantly different than those who did not.</p> <p>FRL students in district used open enrollment at similar rates as non-FRL (note: transportation provided)</p>	<p>Authors find schools in Durham to be more segregated by race and class than they would be if all students attended geographically assigned schools.</p> <p>Effects of choice on segregation by class larger than by race.</p> <p>White students, students with college educated parents, and above average achievers tend to attend schools with lower percentages of black students, higher percentages of college educated parents and higher average levels of achievement.</p> <p>Black students tended to choose schools with higher percentages of black students than their zoned school.</p> <p>Black students, students whose parents do not have a college education, and below-average achievers all tend to choose schools with higher rates of students whose parents have college education and students with higher average achievement levels than their home school.</p>	<p>“Opt out students” perform significantly worse on standardized tests in year prior to opting out, are more likely to be free/reduced price lunch eligible, are more likely to be African American, and more likely to have moved during summer before opting out.</p> <p>Transition grade opt-out students had significantly higher prior achievement levels than non-transition grade opt-outs.</p>	<p>Students who opt out of local schools tend to attend choice schools with higher average-achieving peers and higher socioeconomic characteristic than zoned school.</p> <p>Authors theorize that, in light of no tangible academic difference across most student groups for those who opt out and those who don’t, parents or students may be motivated to continue opting out for non-academic reasons (such as school safety) or due to poor/limited information on academic performance of schools to make informed decisions with.</p>	<p>Most strongly associated factors with high demand schools were test scores and parental satisfaction</p> <p>Though apparently not the motivation for choice options, result seen was students leaving regions with higher minority rates for ones with lower rates.</p> <p>White students disproportionately request choice schools with high test scores, Latinos disproportionately requesting bilingual schools</p> <p>Overall BVSD schools became more stratified in terms of achievement and race/ethnicity following expanded open enrollment</p>
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