



POLICY BRIEF

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OPEN ENROLLMENT IN MISSOURI

By Susan Pendergrass

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The percentage of students attending their assigned public school has been declining since the early 1990s, while the percentage of students attending a chosen public school has steadily increased.
- All but one of Missouri's eight neighboring states allow parents to choose a school outside their resident school district, and all require districts to accept nonresident transfer students.
- Sixty percent of Missouri's high schools are considered rural, and they have an average size of just 284 students. Sixty-four have fewer than 100 students, and 11 have fewer than 50 students. Students in these schools could benefit from more options than their schools can offer.
- Over half of Missouri's rural high schools have at least two other high schools from other districts within 20 miles.
- Even in the most remote areas of the state, students could access multiple options within a reasonable driving distance, including higher-performing schools.

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THE CHANGING K-12 ENROLLMENT LANDSCAPE

When public schools were locally controlled and mostly locally financed, it made sense that district and school lines would be drawn to determine which public school a student would attend. Funds raised by taxing the property within the district line paid for the school. This practice was called into question when issues of school resource inequity began to emerge. In particular, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the federal government's entry into public education financing as part of the War on Poverty represented efforts to alleviate disparities and unfairness in school assignment.¹

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, a new approach to creating equity in educational opportunity emerged: letting families choose their public schools rather than having their children be assigned to a specific school. Public schooling, in general, is now less than 50 percent locally funded.² District lines have increasingly become barriers to entry rather than a logical extension of property taxes funding schools.³

It is no surprise that this idea is popular with families. It is unrealistic to assume that most families can simply “vote with their feet” by moving into the district of the school they would like their children to attend. For that matter, it can't even be assumed that the public school of one's choice is the same for every child in a family, as different children have different needs. Housing needs can also change during the twelve or so years that children are in school. Finally, 60 years ago nearly 80 percent of households did not own two or more cars, a number that has essentially flipped since then.⁴ Schooling decisions can be more flexible now that most families have access to two or more cars and needn't be restricted by school bus routes.

In the National Household Education Survey (Figure 1), conducted periodically by the U.S. Department of Education, the percentage of families nationwide with children attending their assigned public school was below 70 percent in 2016 (the questionnaire was changed in 2019, so results from that year are not comparable).⁵ Conversely, almost one in five families reported that their children attended a chosen public

school. Chosen public schools can be charter schools, magnet schools, or schools chosen through open enrollment.

OPEN ENROLLMENT POLICIES

Open enrollment policies allow families to choose their public school either within their home school district (intradistrict choice) or in a different district (interdistrict choice). The first interdistrict choice policy was enacted in 1989 in Minnesota.⁶ Since then, 43 states have passed open-enrollment policies, and in 25 of those states district participation as both senders and receivers of students is mandatory.⁷

Of the eight states that neighbor Missouri, only Illinois does not offer open enrollment to families (see Table 1 in the Appendix). The other seven have mandatory open enrollment. While Kansas has had a voluntary open-enrollment program, meaning districts do not have to accept nonresident transfer students, a more expansive and mandatory policy was passed in 2022.⁸ In all cases, acceptance of nonresident transfer students is dependent on available seats. In some states, capacity limitations are overridden for students in foster care and/or students in failing schools (Arkansas), or children of teachers in the school (Tennessee).

THE POTENTIAL FOR OPEN ENROLLMENT IN MISSOURI

While there is an open enrollment policy in Missouri, it is very limited.⁹ If a district does not have a high school, it must pay tuition and provide transportation to a high school in another district in the same county or an adjoining county. Groups of two or more districts are also allowed to create enrollment option plans. However, districts can deny transfer applications of students who live more than 10 miles from the receiving district or if their home is closer to their assigned school than to the school of their choice. Finally, families can request to transfer to a nonresident district school provided that they pay tuition.

There may be some concern that open enrollment would not be feasible in much of Missouri due to the prevalence of rural communities with high schools spaced far apart. In 2022, Missouri had 309 rural high schools enrolling 90,000 students.¹⁰ These schools represent 60 percent of all high schools in the state and they enroll one third of all high school students.¹¹ While the average enrollment at a rural Missouri high school was 284 students in 2022, 64 of these high schools had fewer than 100 total students and 11 had fewer than 50. So, it is true that they are rural and small. It is not necessarily true, however, that they are too far apart for open enrollment to work (Figure 2).

Over 80 percent of rural high schools in Missouri have a high school in another district within 20 miles, which generally translates to 20 minutes of driving. Over half of these schools have two within 20 miles. One of the

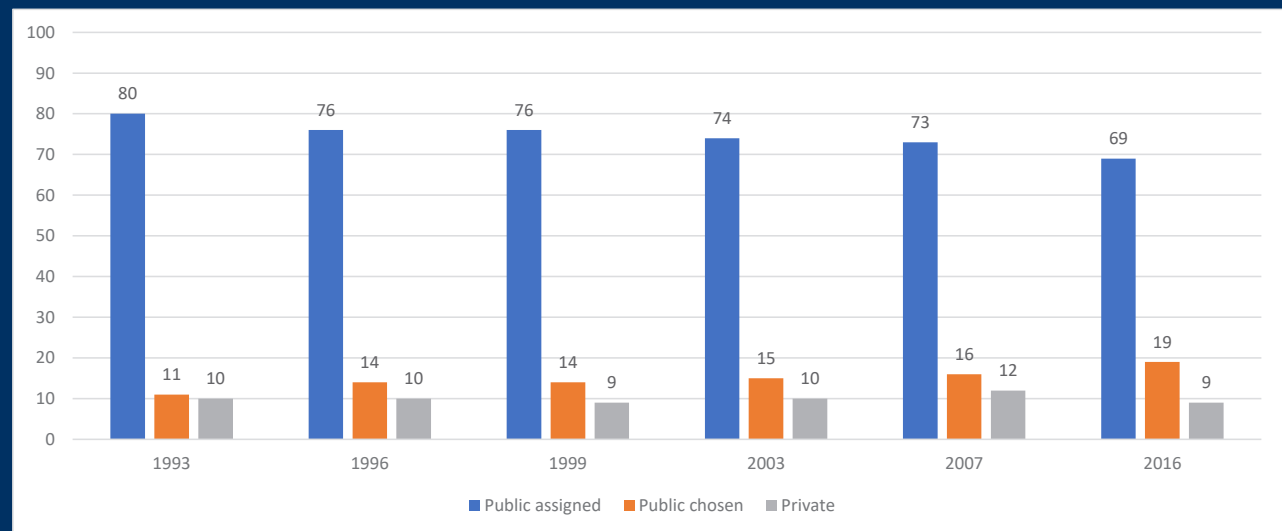
most rural areas of the state is the northwest corner, and the high schools in this area tend to be small and relatively far apart. Fairfax High School in Fairfax, Missouri, for example, is near the borders of both Nebraska and Iowa and has just 64 students. However, there are three other high schools within 20 minutes of Fairfax (see Table 2 in the Appendix). While these schools may be academically similar, open enrollment not only would allow Fairfax students to transfer to a larger high school, but it would also allow Fairfax to grow its enrollment.

Similarly, students in some of our lowest-performing rural high schools could benefit from open enrollment by moving to higher-performing high schools nearby. Hayti Senior High School in the bootheel of Missouri is in a district that has been provisionally accredited for more than a decade. In 2021, just two percent of

Figure 1

Nationwide percentage distribution of students ages 5 through 17 attending kindergarten through 12th grade, by school type—selected years, 1993 through 2016

The percentage of students nationwide attending a public school of their choice has increased from 1993 through 2016.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Parent Survey and Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the National Household Education Surveys Program (Parent-NHES: 1993, 1996, 1999 and PFI-NHES 2003, 2007, and 2016).

its students scored Proficient or higher on the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) test. However, there are more than a dozen high schools in other districts that are within a reasonable distance to Hayti Senior High (see Table 3 in the Appendix). And while many of them may not be high performing, they would still be an improvement.

have had open enrollment and other school choice programs for over 30 years. This means that many of today's parents may be second-generation school choosers. If Missouri continues to stay with Illinois as a school-assignment state, even as it is otherwise surrounded by school-choosing states, its attractiveness to families will continue to diminish.

CONCLUSION

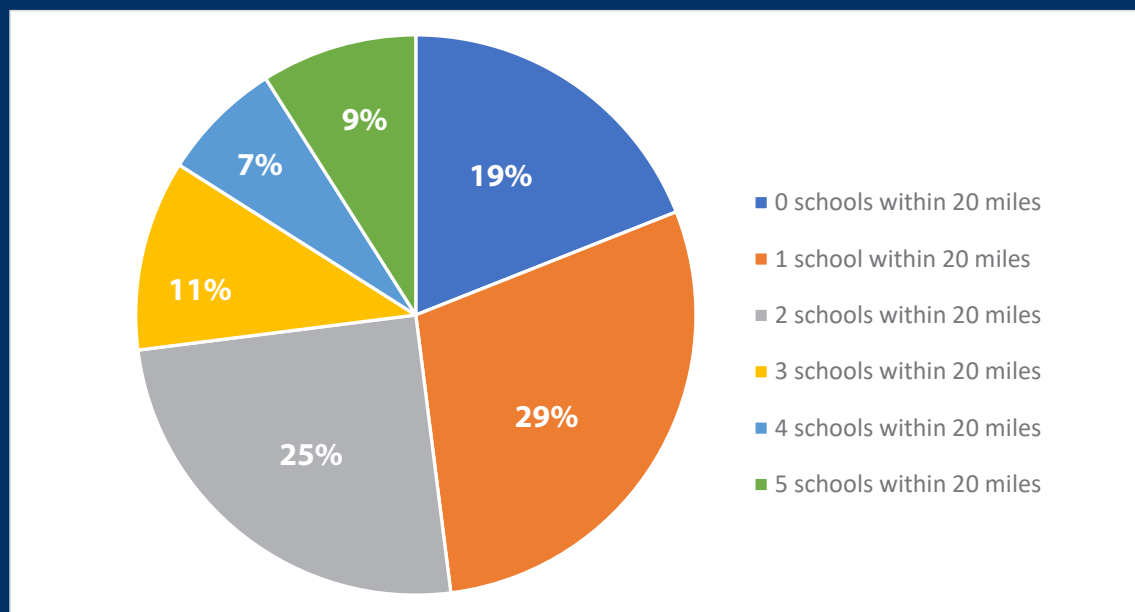
Public education has been moving slowly but steadily from a system of assignment to a system of choice. As these policies have spread, families have increasingly grown to like them. In fact, a national survey of parents in January 2023 found that 75 percent of parents support open enrollment policies.¹² Further, some states

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Figure 2

Percentage of rural Missouri high schools with a high school in another district within 20 miles

Over half of rural high schools in Missouri are within 20 miles of at least two high schools in other districts.



Source: The high school addresses were obtained from National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education," 2021–22. nces.ed.gov/ccd and the miles and driving distances were determined using Google Maps.

NOTES

1. Richard Rothstein, “*Brown v. Board* is 63 years old. Was the Supreme Court’s school desegregation ruling a failure?” Economic Policy Institute, May 16, 2017, <https://www.epi.org/blog/brown-v-board-is-63-years-old-was-the-supreme-courts-school-desegregation-ruling-a-failure/>; Patrick McGuinn and Jack Van der Silk, “Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965,” Center for the Study of Federalism, February 2018, http://encyclopedia.federalism.org/index.php/Elementary_and_Secondary_Education_Act_of_1965.
2. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Digest of Education Statistics latest tables, Table 235.10 Revenues for public elementary and secondary schools, by source of funds: Selected school years, 1919–20 through 2019–20, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_235.10.asp?current=yes.
3. “New Research on the Impact of Redlining on Educational Outcomes,” National Low Income Housing Coalition, April 12, 2021, <https://nlihc.org/resource/new-research-impact-redlining-educational-outcomes>.
4. Mark J. Perry, “Chart of the Day: Rising Household Vehicle Ownership over Time Belies the ‘Middle Class Stagnation’ Narrative,” AEI, September 24, 2013, <https://www.aei.org/carpe-diem/chart-of-the-day-rising-household-vehicle-ownership-over-time-belies-the-middle-class-stagnation-narrative/>.
5. Ke Wang and Amy Rathbun, “School Choice in the United States: 2019,” National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), September 2019, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019106.pdf>.
6. Jim Bencivenga, “Multiple choice. Minnesota opens enrollment – and eyes reform,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 10, 1988, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1988/0610/dminn.html>.
7. “50-State Comparison: Open Enrollment Policies,” Education Commission of the States (ECS), <https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-open-enrollment-policies>.
8. Kynala Phillips and Katie Bernard, “Gov. Kelly signed Kansas’ school choice bill. Here’s what that means for your student,” *The Kansas City Star*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/education/article261389602.html>.
9. “50-State Comparison: Open Enrollment Policies,” Education Commission of the States (ECS), <https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-open-enrollment-policies>.
10. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data (CCD), “State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education,” 2021-22. nces.ed.gov/ccd.
11. Susan Pendergrass, “An In-depth Look at Missouri’s Rural High Schools,” https://issuu.com/showmemo/docs/rural_education_booklet.
12. Colyn Ritter, “EdChoice Public Opinion Tracker: General Population and School Parents – January 2023,” EdChoice, February 7, 2023, <https://www.edchoice.org/engage/edchoice-public-opinion-tracker-general-population-and-school-parents-january-2023>.

APPENDIX

Table 1: Open-enrollment Policies in States Surrounding Missouri

State	Interdistrict	Mandatory	Limitations
Arkansas	Yes	Yes	Up to capacity. Transfers must not exceed 3% of enrollment, except for students in foster care or students assigned to an "F" school. Students in districts classified as being in facilities distress may transfer to districts not in facilities distress.
Illinois	No	Not permitted	
Iowa	Yes	Yes	Districts must accept up to capacity.
Kansas	Yes	Yes	Beginning in the 2024–25 school year any family can apply to transfer. The state is still developing guidelines for districts to determine their capacity.
Kentucky	Yes	Yes	Every district must have a policy for accepting transfer students up to capacity.
Nebraska	Yes	Yes	Districts may accept or reject transfer students for "specified regulations, requirements, and adopted standards."
Oklahoma	Yes	Yes	The Education Open Transfer Act allows students to transfer to another school at any time, provided the district has capacity. Students may transfer to other districts with the approval of the receiving district's board of education, and boards must automatically approve transfers for students seeking to enroll in a grade not offered by the sending district. Participating school districts must create policies for accepting or rejecting transfer applications, including criteria about the availability of programs, staff, or space.
Tennessee	Yes	Yes	A school district shall not admit a nonresident student seeking to transfer into the local education agency (LEA) from outside the LEA before all within-district applications for transfer have been acted upon. A school district may enroll a nonresident student who is the child of a parent who teaches at the respective school before all applications for transfer have been acted upon.

Source: Education Commission of the States, "50-State Comparison: Open Enrollment Policies," ecs.org/50-state-comparison-open-enrollment-policies.

Table 2: High Schools within 30 Minutes of Fairfax High School in Rural Fairfax, Missouri

	Miles	Driving minutes	Enrollment	Low-income enrollment	% low-income enrollment	% prof+ ELA	% prof+ math	ACT comp
Fairfax High School			64	27	42%		45	22.3
Tarkio High School	7.6	10	173	61	35%	51	44	21.6
Rock Port High School	13.1	18	153	54	35%		40	19.5
West Nodaway High School	25.3	30	123	42	34%	54	50	20.8

Source: The high school addresses were obtained from National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education," 2021-22. [Nces.ed.gov/ccd](https://nces.ed.gov/ccd) and the miles and driving distances were determined using Google Maps. Enrollment and academic data are from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), dese.mo.gov.

Table 3: High Schools within 30 Miles of Hayti Senior High School in Southeast Missouri

	Miles	Driving minutes	Enrollment	Low-income enrollment	% low-income enrollment	% prof+ ELA	% prof+ math	ACT comp
Hayti Sr. High School			228	228	100%	17	2	17.1
Caruthersville High School	8.5	12	256	252	98%			17.2
Delta C-7 High School	12.3	15	84	62	74%		66	17.3
North Pemiscot High School	13.2	16	126	126	100%	23	5	17.9
Cooter High School	17.9	20	135	67.5	50%	54	9	19.9
Portageville High School	15.0	22	388	225	58%	50	37	19.2
South Pemiscot High School	14.6	22	252	252	100%	41	5	19.6
Kennett High School	18.7	24	525	524	100%		28	19.7
Central High School	27.9	28	391	391	100%	30	4	16.8
Gideon High School	24.6	30	115	115	100%		23	18.3
Holcomb High School	28.0	32	224	224	100%	37	21	19.3
Senath-Hornersville High School	27.4	32	186	186	100%		16	19.6
Clarkton High School	28.3	33	149	149	100%	19	9	14.5
Risco High School	29.5	37	111	60	54%	34	31	15.7

Source: The high school addresses were obtained from National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education," 2021–22. nces.ed.gov/ccd. Miles and driving distances were determined using Google Maps. Enrollment and academic data are from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), dese.mo.gov.



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