



REPORT

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OPEN ENROLLMENT: ERASING SEVEN MYTHS IN MISSOURI

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ADVANCING LIBERTY WITH RESPONSIBILITY
BY PROMOTING MARKET SOLUTIONS
FOR MISSOURI PUBLIC POLICY



INTRODUCTION

Open enrollment allows students to apply to attend any public school in the state, regardless of their residential district assignment. As one item on the menu of school choice reform, open enrollment could strengthen Missouri's public schools and make public education more family friendly.

For too many Missouri families, especially those with financial limitations, the only option is to enroll their children in their residentially assigned public school. The implicit assumption is that every public school in Missouri is somehow able to perfectly meet the needs of every child. Open enrollment shifts that thinking by creating an environment where students can be matched with schools that meet their unique needs.

Missouri is no stranger to the idea of open enrollment. Between 2021 and 2024, the Missouri House of Representatives passed a version of open enrollment in each session, only for it to stall in the Senate. Even though these House bills did not make open enrollment universal, meaning that every district has to participate, opponents continue to repeat tropes about how open enrollment would create high school sports powerhouses, usher in the end of small districts, increase segregation, discriminate against special education students, and more.

These common myths have been treated as realities in Missouri's open enrollment debate. It's time to take a closer look at them.

Myth #1: Students will only transfer from poor districts to wealthy districts.

Reality: Students transfer for a variety of reasons, and in other states an exodus to wealthy districts has not happened.

Opponents of open enrollment often argue that districts in wealthier areas, specifically those that can afford high-quality facilities for extracurricular activities, will lure students away from districts with fewer resources. For instance, one Missouri superintendent expressed the following concern:

If [open enrollment] goes through, we expect to lose 100 or more students. Some will go play softball at Sullivan because they have a state-contending team, some to Union because they have a beautiful gymnasium, and some to Pacific because of their weight room facilities.¹

Of course, there will be students who transfer to more affluent schools that are a better match for them. The reality is that more affluent school districts are usually academically higher performing. It would be easy (even if mistaken) to assume that a family seeking stronger academic programs was instead simply looking for better facilities.

Open enrollment, however, is not experimental or untested; 43 states have open-enrollment programs, and in 24 of those open enrollment is universal, meaning districts are required to accept students if they have space for them.² In states with established open-enrollment programs, such as Florida and Arizona, there has not been a mass exodus of students from poor districts to affluent ones. Around 10 percent of students in these states attend a public school district outside of their own.³ According to a 2024 EdChoice survey of public school district parents, 44 percent said proximity was a main reason for choosing their school, 26 percent cited academic quality, and 25 percent cited school safety.⁴

Even within the same household, students may have different needs. In 2024, EdChoice surveyed parents whose children had switched schools. When asked about their children's former schools, excessive stress or anxiety was the most-cited reason for leaving, with 31 percent of respondents reporting difficulties. Further, 28 percent had issues with bullying, 25 percent reported that they did not have their academic needs met, 25 percent cited difficulty with teachers, and 16 percent had conflict of values and beliefs.⁵

The choice of a school is a complicated decision that involves consideration of many factors. Reducing the decision down to one of affluence or sports does not reflect the reality of programs in other states.

Myth #2: Rural districts and students can't benefit from open enrollment.

Reality: Rural students have very few options and need the ability to choose, particularly with the growth of the four-day school week.

Open enrollment can be a lifeline for rural districts. The organization Rural School Advocates of Iowa claimed that many rural schools would call open enrollment “the savior of their budget,” and that students often move from urban districts to rural districts. Among the reasons were smaller class sizes and the chance to stand out on a smaller sports team.⁶ Further, rural districts in Wisconsin and West Virginia received 31 percent and 49 percent of transfers, respectively, with Wisconsin's rural districts seeing a net gain in student enrollment.⁷

Missouri's rural high school students, who often attend schools with limited programming and course offerings, deserve access to the same educational opportunities and choices as those in urban and suburban areas. There is a perception that open enrollment is impractical in rural areas, but the reality is that most rural students already have viable options within a 20-minute drive. In 2022, Missouri had 309 rural high schools enrolling about 90,000 students, equating to one third of all high schoolers statewide. Over 80 percent of these rural high schools are within a 20-mile drive of at least one other high school, with some even closer. Breaking it down further, 25 percent have two schools within 20 miles, 11 percent have three, 7 percent have four, and 9 percent have five.⁸ There is plenty of opportunity for rural high school students in Missouri to access high schools and their programs in other districts.

One policy that has been increasingly affecting rural students in all grades in Missouri is the rise of the four-day school week (4dsw). As of the 2024–25 school year, roughly half (47 percent of rural districts) operate on a 4dsw.⁹ The difference between four-day and five-day school weeks is significant for families, especially those with younger children, and it suggests the need for them to be able to choose which schedule works best. Not every parent will have an easy daycare option for a child who spends one fewer day at school each week. These parents could benefit from being able to enroll their children in a nearby district with a schedule that better accommodates their own schedules.

Rural districts in Missouri shouldn't just focus on how to keep students from leaving, but how to attract other students in the surrounding area.

Myth #3: Segregation will creep back into Missouri schools.

Reality: Strict residential assignment and district lines have contributed to segregation in schools. Open enrollment can change that.

Missouri's current system of residential assignment has not resulted in significant integration. In St. Louis and Kansas City, as well as their Missouri metros:¹⁰

- Approximately two in five districts and charters have less than 10 percent white enrollment.
- About 30 percent of districts and charters have greater than 75 percent black enrollment.
- Almost half of Missouri's districts or charter schools have a highly polarized distribution of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch—either over 99 percent or below 20 percent.

Contrary to concerns about segregation, research indicates that universal open enrollment can increase integration. EdChoice found that school choice policies had a positive effect on integration in nine studies, and no visible effect in one study. No studies found that it had a negative effect.¹¹

In Missouri's current education system, access to schools is governed by access to the housing market. In fact, Congress acknowledged as much in a 2019 Joint Economic Committee report, stating:

Families are faced with the reality that attending a high-performing public school often requires paying more for housing, and many students' educational opportunities are limited as a result.¹²

Tim DeRoche, in his book *A Fine Line*, describes how houses in the same neighborhood, and sometimes even on the same street, sell for \$200,000 to \$300,000 more if they fall within a higher-performing school district's borders.¹³ Further, many school district boundaries mirror redlined housing maps from the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁴ As a result, students of color are often concentrated in low-

performing and high-poverty schools. District lines, not open enrollment, are what limit opportunities for those living in poor neighborhoods.¹⁵

Strict residential assignment creates stark differences between schools in poor neighborhoods and schools in wealthier neighborhoods. Open enrollment could help break down restrictive district lines in Missouri's public schools.

Myth #4: Open enrollment does not improve student achievement.

Reality: Open enrollment increases competition, spurs innovation, improves school quality, and highlights successful education practices.

Open enrollment's effects on academic achievement are complicated, making it difficult to establish direct causal relationships. Not all students transfer from one district to another for academics, as transfers also occur due to bullying, school size, and other reasons. Variations in open enrollment program design (interdistrict vs intradistrict transfers, universal versus voluntary participation, etc.) also complicate research.¹⁶

As a result, there is no consensus on the impact of open enrollment on academic performance of transfer students specifically, but a broad range of evidence suggests that choice and competition can lead to significant improvements in school quality and student and parent satisfaction. As Milton Friedman suggested, school choice can be a means to improve education for all. His premise was simple: Giving parents the ability to choose would force schools to compete for students, thus driving innovation and improvement across the board.¹⁷

In Minnesota, a state that has had open enrollment for over 30 years, the Burnsville-Eagan-Savage school district had a lot of students transfer out. However, the trend began to reverse after the district created the "One91 Pathways" program, which allows students to explore various careers and earn certifications when they graduate. In an interview, the superintendent described the forcing of their hand as a negative. However, despite complaints from the district, the competitive process had served its purpose by driving student-oriented innovation.¹⁸

Critics of open enrollment argue that introducing a

competitive market would shift the focus from educating students to attracting them. However, competition already exists—it is just mediated through the housing market and private school options, which not all families have the means to participate in. Open enrollment would bring Missouri one step closer toward creating a choice-rich environment for all, bringing attention to best practices in the education of students across the state.

Myth #5: Community identities will be lost.

Reality: Those who transfer to a new district want to be part of the community.

Open enrollment allows students to transfer to communities they choose to be part of, which can enrich rather than erode community identity. Conversely, open enrollment also allows families to transfer out of communities where they do not feel connected, which can foster a more cohesive environment. In fact, a 2024 survey by EdChoice found that 16 percent of parents whose children had switched schools cited a conflict of values or beliefs with their previous school. What if more of the student body was at their schools because they wanted to be there?

Community spirit is not determined by arbitrary district boundaries. It is defined by the name on the front of the jersey during Friday night football, the diploma received at graduation, and the representation in events like the Scholar's Bowl. Students who transfer through open enrollment are not outsiders; they are individuals actively choosing to contribute to a community.

Concerns about community identity being lost are often tied not only to the influx of transfer students into a district, but also to the idea of school district consolidation. As population decline continues to affect many regions of Missouri, it is important to consider how communities can sustain their school districts, regardless of whether open enrollment becomes a reality. Between 2020 and 2024, 68 percent of traditional Missouri school districts experienced a decrease in enrollment. Additionally, in the 2023–2024 school year, 53 school districts in Missouri had fewer than 100 students enrolled, and 21 districts had under 50 students.¹⁹

The closing of districts due to enrollment loss is not

inevitable. Districts could choose to take advantage of open enrollment and create programs that attract students from surrounding districts. Interviews with superintendents in states with open enrollment reveal they use it to revitalize under-enrolled schools.²⁰

Transfer students will not make or destroy community identity, and they will not force the consolidation or closure of the districts they leave.

Myth #6: Open enrollment will burden districts that transfer in students with disabilities.

Reality: Special education students already have unique challenges that their residentially assigned district may or may not be able to meet. Open enrollment empowers parents with more and better options.

Special education students are protected under federal laws, including the right to a free and public education and an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Despite these protections, many parents remain dissatisfied with how their children's IEPs are implemented.²¹ Some districts reassign special education students to other schools or contract with private institutions, which raises questions about whether obligations are being dodged or neglected. Open enrollment invites parents into the decision-making process and has proved successful in other states.

A strong open enrollment program would not allow districts to discriminate against students based on a disability. It is therefore worthwhile to consider concerns that districts may face “unfunded mandates” due to special education transfers, but this concern is often overstated. Under open enrollment, state and federal funding typically follows the student to the new district. Additionally, a proposed Missouri policy would require the sending district pay the excess cost (not covered by state and federal funding) for instructing a transferring special education student. Furthermore, solutions like Wisconsin's special education cooperatives, where districts pool resources to serve students, could also help mitigate these concerns. If a receiving district lacks necessary resources, it could collaborate with a cooperative to meet students' needs.²²

Open enrollment can create a better environment for special education, it can be done fairly, and it can empower parents who are motivated to see their children succeed.

Myth #7: Transportation difficulties make open enrollment impractical.

Reality: Innovations like direct-to-parent stipend programs have been successful in other states like Arizona.

Any educational reform is going to affect some students more than others, often depending on how much parents are willing or able to do. However, that should not be the reason to halt progress. Other states have found ways to meet different families' transportation needs in a choice-rich environment.

When thinking about public school transportation, the iconic yellow school buses come immediately to mind. However, school buses are not the only way public school students get to school, and their use in Missouri has been declining. In 2014, over 560,000 (63 percent) Missouri students rode the bus to school every day. In 2024, ridership had decreased to about 480,000 (56 percent).²³ This decline reflects broader shifts in how families get their children to school, and solutions for transfer students do not have to be tied to traditional school buses.

For some families using open enrollment, transportation may be as simple as driving to an existing bus stop or directly to school. While more families today own multiple cars than in the past, that does not mean every family has the flexibility to drive their children to another district. Some parents work long hours, share vehicles, or lack reliable transportation, but still want to give their children the best education possible. That is why targeted solutions such as transportation stipends, microtransit programs, and other innovations are important for providing access to school choice for all families.

Direct-to-parent stipends could be a practical starting point to help transfer students meet transportation costs. With stipends, which could be means-tested, parents of transfer students would be paid directly by the school district to transport their children to and from school or an existing bus stop. Philadelphia offers half-stipends for families who need one-way transportation. Payments are made per household and only for months when students attend at least 70 percent of their classes, incentivizing attendance.

For families unable to drive their children, Arizona has demonstrated creative solutions. Phoenix International Academy provides stipends to carpool groups, allowing families to coordinate transportation as a community.

They also award stipends to staff who transport students along their commute.²⁴ Additionally, numerous microtransit programs using vans (which require a different driver's license than buses) have successfully provided transportation for smaller clusters of students.

For open enrollment to succeed, Missouri would need to adjust its transportation funding formula to include transfer students. Missouri's outdated formula needs a complete overhaul. At a minimum, however, the state should ensure that low-income families receive direct transportation assistance. A lack of transportation should not prevent a child from accessing a better education.

CONCLUSION

Many concerns about open enrollment are based on misconceptions. Open enrollment is not a radical overhaul of Missouri's educational landscape, but rather a pathway for parents to meet each of their children's unique needs. According to EdChoice, 76 percent of parents with school-aged children support open enrollment.²⁵ Parents want open enrollment, yet Missouri has fallen short in adopting this policy—partly due to the myths outlined above, which get repeated every legislative session by those opposed to ending strict residential assignment.

Open enrollment would strengthen Missouri's public schools by empowering parents. It will also give districts the opportunity to innovate and attract families. In education, a market already exists—the housing market—and open enrollment would serve as a fairer mechanism for responding to families' needs and preferences. A student's financial means or family history should not restrict choice and opportunity.

If Missouri can put these myths aside, it can bring meaningful reform that will give students greater access to the public school that best meets their unique needs.

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NOTES

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