



TESTIMONY

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SENATE BILLS 906 & 971: UNIVERSAL OPEN ENROLLMENT

By Cory Koedel and Avery Frank

Testimony before the Missouri Senate Education Committee

TO THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. Our names are Cory Koedel, Director of Education Policy, and Avery Frank, Senior Policy Analyst at the Show-Me Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, Missouri-based think tank that advances sensible, well-researched, free-market solutions to state and local policy issues. The ideas presented here are our own and are offered in consideration of Missouri's educational environment.

CREATING A UNIVERSAL OPEN ENROLLMENT PROGRAM

Allowing open enrollment is an effective way to give Missouri families more control over the schools that their children attend. While Missouri has been expanding other forms of school choice in recent years—for example, through greater access to charter schools and through the MOScholars program—these options are available to relatively few Missouri families at present.

Open enrollment is an appealing way to expand the scope of school choice because it leverages our already-existing public school system. It allows parents to choose the best school for their children within a reasonable distance from their home or work, regardless of school district boundaries.

Senate Bills 906 and 971 remove the accreditation provisions tied to Missouri's existing transfer system and modify that system to create a statewide, universal open-enrollment program.

IMPORTANT FEATURES OF THE LEGISLATION

These bills require all school districts in Missouri to participate in open enrollment, subject to capacity constraints. Mandatory participation is a desirable feature of open enrollment, as it broadens the choices available to families. That said, the ability of districts to deny transfers if they are at full capacity is also important because it ensures districts are not forced to become overcrowded.

Another feature of the bills is that there are no caps on the number or percentage of students who can transfer out of a district under open enrollment. Research underway by analysts at the Show-Me Institute suggests this is largely a symbolic gesture, because there is not evidence in other states of mass migrations out of districts under open enrollment. However, this feature of the bill makes clear that it is written in the best interests of students, not adults.

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COMMON CONCERNS ABOUT OPEN ENROLLMENT

A common concern raised about open enrollment is that it will destabilize school district enrollments. However, work in progress by researchers at the Show-Me Institute suggests that in practice, such destabilization does not happen (in a meaningful way) in other states that have open-enrollment policies. A primary reason is that even in states with robust policies, most students still choose to attend their local public schools; in high-usage states, about 10 percent of students participate in open enrollment. On one hand, helping 10 percent of families find better educational options for their children offers real value; but on the other hand, the scope for this level of student mobility to disrupt the entire school system is limited.

A specific version of this concern is that wealthy districts may worry they will be overwhelmed by new transfer students, but this is not borne out in data from other states. This is because—again—most students continue to enroll in their residentially zoned districts. Moreover, open enrollment laws in other states have common-sense rules that allow districts to deny transfers once they are at capacity; Senate Bills 906 and 971 have such rules as well.

There is also the related concern that some districts will enter a downward spiral in enrollment. Our ongoing research suggests this does not happen in practice in other states, either. But even if this were true, the implication is that some districts are maintaining their enrollment only because local students are trapped. We believe it is reasonable to ask any such districts to improve the quality of their services if they want to keep their students—it is hard to argue that forcing students to remain in underperforming districts is in the best interest of Missouri's children and their families.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR UNIVERSAL OPEN ENROLLMENT

A strong, universal open enrollment policy—like the policy proposed in these two bills—is supported by the general public based on statewide polling conducted by Saint Louis University.¹ Their polling shows that 59 percent of voters support open enrollment, and it is a

winning issue across party lines (53 percent support among Democrats, 64 percent among Republicans).

A WAY TO IMPROVE TRANSPORTATION ACCESS FOR THE PROGRAM

The current language in Senate Bills 906 & 971 requires each school district to provide transportation to at least one receiving district. This requirement appears to be a holdover from Missouri's current accreditation-based transfer program. Under current rules, if a district becomes unaccredited, it must provide transportation for transferring students to at least one other district or charter school.

It makes sense that an unaccredited district should be required to provide transportation to students who want to transfer out, but making this a requirement of all districts in Missouri seems overly burdensome. One way to improve the bill would be to make the transportation requirement for sending districts apply only to districts that become unaccredited.

The transportation rules could also be improved by including a small, common-sense provision that would require receiving districts to transport a transfer student if the student is dropped off at an existing bus stop within the receiving district's borders (as always, subject to capacity). This would leverage receiving districts' existing transportation infrastructure to make it easier for families to use open enrollment.

CONCLUSION

Open enrollment is a cost-effective option for improving the school choice environment in Missouri. It leverages the existing network of public schools to provide more educational options to families. There is no evidence that open enrollment has negative consequences for the public school system in states that have adopted strong policies.

NOTE

¹ Burle, Ashley D. Missouri Voters' Opinion on Key Missouri Education Legislative Issues (Saint Louis University/YouGov Poll). Spring 2025. <https://www.slu.edu/research/research-institute/big-ideas/slu-poll/-pdf/slupoll-spring2025-education-legislative-memo.pdf>.



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