

## Open Enrollment: Survey Suggests School Performance Matters

The Public Policy Forum conducted a survey of parents whose children participated in Wisconsin's open enrollment program during the 1998-99 school year. Using data gathered from 141 telephone surveys, the results serve as a baseline of data for administrators across the state striving to make their districts competitive under an environment of parental choice.

We found that parents are primarily motivated by academic and discipline concerns when making the decision to participate in the open enrollment program. Parents selected methods of teaching, student achievement, discipline, teacher's performance and curriculum as the most important reasons they left their district of residence. The Forum found additional support for the idea that performance matters when we directly examined the characteristics of gaining and losing districts. Of our sample, 58% of parents left lower achieving districts for higher achieving districts. Yet, when selecting a non-resident school district, location surpasses performance as the number one reason.

This survey of parents provides evidence that school districts that want to retain and attract students under open enrollment are going to benefit from paying close attention to the reasons parents leave their district. A year ago, using survey data of district administrators, we found that the number one reason administrators felt parents were participating in open enrollment was for convenience followed by location and then school program. This survey of parents suggests that school performance plays an important role in this decision to leave the resident district.

*This report is a part of a continuing series on evaluating education reform. The Public Policy Forum strives to provide good data in a nonpartisan way on areas of education reform that are underway in Wisconsin and particularly Southeast Wisconsin. We hope that by continually sharing data on these important education reforms we can help to enlighten the debate over these issues. This report is being funded by the Richard & Ethel Herzfeld Foundation of Milwaukee.*

### Survey Highlights

- **Choosing a school involves access to information on available educational options. The primary method for parents learning about open enrollment was through the media; newspaper, TV or radio.**
- **Parents know what factors are important for them in a school, and they generally gather information about these factors. Almost three-fourths of the parents gathered information on the same factors as those they deem important. This consistency should allow schools and districts to learn what prompted decisions by exiting and entering parents.**
- **Parents who participate in the open enrollment program are very satisfied. Nine of ten parents feel their children are receiving an excellent education at the open enrollment school.**
- **The majority of parents who participate in the open enrollment program (61%) say they would continue to live in their resident districts if they were unable to participate in the open enrollment program. However, half say they would not send their children to the public school in their resident district.**
- **Administrators and parents tend to view the primary motive of choice differently. From the point of view of parents, school performance is most important in the decision to leave their resident district. Administrators tend to perceive that convenience played a greater role.**

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# Why Leave? School Performance or Convenience

Previous research on open enrollment has focused on the assumption that competition resulting from open enrollment stimulates school improvement. Others contend that the primary motive of school choice participants is convenience. They argue that parents are not primarily motivated by academic concerns. Under this assumption there is no reason to expect a positive influence on school performance because of open enrollment. One way to examine this belief has been to examine why parents transferred out of their resident district.

## Factors Affecting Decision to Leave Resident District

This survey identified the parents' reasons for wanting their children to attend school outside their district of residence. Survey participants were asked to judge a number of factors on a scale based from one to ten with one meaning it was not important to ten meaning it was one of the most important factors in the decision to leave.<sup>1</sup> The factors that were most important included methods of teaching, student achievement and discipline and safety. These factors are followed by teacher's performance, the curriculum/course offerings at the school and peer group. Of less importance are location, opportunities for parental involvement and extra-curricular opportunities. Of much less importance are factors related to before and after school care, all-day kindergarten and pre-school/day care offerings. These three factors all averaged less than four on the ten point scale.

The survey findings support the argument that academic and disciplinary reasons are important when a parent chooses to leave a public school district of residence and attend another district. This suggests that competition resulting from open enrollment participation may have a positive influence on school performance. The survey data

<sup>1</sup> The question stated: "We would like to know a little bit about your reasons for wanting your child to participate in the open enrollment program by attending a school outside of the (district of residence). How would you rate the importance of the following factors in your decision?"

Factors Affecting Decision to Leave Current School District	
Factor and Average Score	
The methods of teaching in (school district of residence)*	6.3
Student achievement	6.2
Discipline/safety	6.1
Teachers performance	6.0
The curriculum/course offerings	5.8
Peer Group	5.6
Administrator/principal's performance	5.5
The class size in school district	5.3
Facilities	5.0
Location	4.7
Opportunities for parental involvement	4.7
Athletics and other extra-curricular opportunities	4.5
Special education	3.4
Proximity to childcare	3.4
Family move	3.3
The racial or ethnic makeup of the student body	3.1
Lack of before or after school care	2.8
Lack of all day kindergarten	2.6
Lack of pre-school/daycare	2.1
*Note: Each factor focused on the school district of residence.	

are also rather clear on the factors that are not as important to parents, many of which can be thought of as convenience factors.

Still across the survey parents' reasons are more varied than administrators may hope for if they are trying to learn from the decisions of exiting parents. Some parents indicated that factors such as student achievement, discipline and method of teaching were the most important variable in their reason to leave the resident district. An equal percentage of parents listed these factors as not at all important in this decision. On average more parents give a higher level of importance to reasons of school performance than reasons of convenience.

Nonetheless, because of this rather extreme variation in importance we examined differences across regions and grade level of child. The size of the sample within these groups is quite small; however, a cautious interpretation of the data

<b>Variation in Factors Parents View as Important</b>		
	<b>Percent Most Important</b>	<b>Percent Not at all Important</b>
The methods of teaching	29	23
Student achievement	25	23
Discipline/safety	31	28
Teachers performance	27	26
The curriculum/course offerings	26	29

suggests little difference across the regions or age of child. Student achievement, discipline and teacher’s performance continue to be the most important factors across the various regions.

Parents of grade-school-aged children rank proximity to childcare as a five compared to a two for other parents. However, even for these parents proximity to childcare is less important than methods of teaching, class size, student achievement and curriculum.

**Signals Parents Send When They Choose to Leave the Resident District**

Previous research has examined the reasons why parents choose their children’s schools. In a recent paper, Paul Manna examined data from parent surveys conducted from 1990-91 to 1994-95 as part of an evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.\* He describes the reasons parents give for leaving a school and choosing another school as signals. These signals can be useful to administrators who are attempting to meet the demands of running a school in an atmosphere of parental choice.

Manna found that the signals parents are sending are not very clear. This makes it difficult for administrators, and others attempting to learn from parents, to address the factors that were important in a parent’s decision to choose a school

\*See Manna, Paul F. 1999. “How Parents Make Decisions and Send Signals When They Choose Their Children’s Schools.” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 15-17 1999.

outside the resident district.

Our survey data provide another source of information for understanding the signals parents send when they leave a school. The Forum believes the survey results demonstrate that school performance plays an important role in the decision to leave a district, though we believe continuous evaluation of the open enrollment program is necessary to further our understanding of this area of education reform.

**Would I Stay in the Resident District or Would I Move?**

Two other questions that arise in regard to the decision to participate in open enrollment are whether parents would send their children to the public school in their district and continue to live in the district if the open enrollment program did not exist.

The majority of parents who participate in the open enrollment program, (61%) say they would continue to live in their resident district if they were unable to participate in the open enrollment program. However, half say they would not send their child to the public school in their resident district. Therefore, if not for open enrollment, some of these children would likely attend a private school or be home-schooled.

<b>If your child was not able to participate in the open enrollment program how likely would you be to send your child to the resident school district?</b>			
<b>Very Likely</b>	<b>Somewhat Likely</b>	<b>Not Very Likely</b>	<b>Not at all likely</b>
32%	16%	17%	35%

<b>If this program did not exist how likely would it be that you would continue to live in resident district?</b>			
<b>Very Likely</b>	<b>Somewhat Likely</b>	<b>Not Very Likely</b>	<b>Not at all Likely</b>
42%	19%	15%	19%

# Selecting a School

## Another Part of Choosing

The act of choosing a school really involves at least two different steps. Above we highlighted one of these steps, leaving the resident school. This addressed the important variables that affected the decision to leave a school. However, another step involves the selection of the new school and or school district where the child will attend.

There is a belief that the factors in selecting a school are not always the same factors that are important in the decision to leave a school. For administrators to fully understand the reasons parents participate in open enrollment, it is important to not only ask why they left the resident district, but why they chose the district their child now attends. In the table below the highlighted categories and numbers indicate that 5% or more of the responses fit into this category.<sup>2</sup>

Important Factors in Selecting a School	
Factor	Percent
<b>Location</b>	<b>19%</b>
<b>Student achievement in school district</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>The curriculum/course offerings</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>The class size</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Teachers performance in school district</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Peer Group</b>	<b>5%</b>
The methods of teaching in school district	4%
Athletics and other extra-curricular opportunities	4%
Familiarity with school	4%
Administrator/principal's performance	3%
Before or after school care	1%
Facilities	1%
Incidents of discipline/safety	3%
School Size	3%
Opportunities for parental involvement	3%
Reasons of convenience	3%
Reputation	2%
Family Move	2%
Pre-school/daycare	2%
The racial or ethnic makeup of student body	2%
Special education	1%
all day kindergarten	1%
Transportation	1%
Graduation Rate	0%
Other	3%

The number one factor for open enrollment parents is the location of the school at 19% of the responses. This is followed by student achievement and curriculum/course offerings with 10%. Other factors that were important were class size, teacher's performance and peer group.

When selecting a non-resident district, location matters. Parents are clearly sending their children to non-resident districts within proximity to their resident district. This does support the value of convenience when choosing a school. However, except for location, there is generally a level of consistency between the factors important in leaving a district and the factors important when choosing a district. School performance continues to play an important role in explaining participation in open enrollment.

## Mixed Signals

Are the factors that parents say are important in selecting a school really the factors they look into when they apply? In order to understand whether or not parents are giving mixed signals we examined what kind of consistency there was between the factors parents said were significant in picking a school and the data parents actually gathered about the school.

To do this required examining each of the three factors parents listed as most important when choosing a school and then comparing those answers with their responses to questions about the data they gathered. We label a response a mixed signal when the parent indicated a variable was an important factor in applying to the school(s), but did not gather information on this variable.

For example, the interviewee with ID number 278, mentioned safety and discipline, location and teacher qualifications as the three important factors wanted in a school. However, respondent ID number 278 did not seek information on discipline at the school, therefore this respondent presented a mixed signal.

<sup>2</sup>The question read "What was the most important factor in your decision to apply and or participate in the school(s)/school district." This question was asked three times in order to find out the top three factors. The question was open-ended and the answers were coded into 24 different categories and a category labeled "other."

**Mixed Signals: What Factors are Important vs. What Data is Gathered**

Number of Mixed-Signals	Percent of Total
37	26%

There are at least two ways of interpreting this data. The first conclusion is that there is a remarkable degree of consistency between what parents say they look for in a school and what data they gather on a school. Seventy-four percent of the parents surveyed are consistently selecting a school based on data that is important to them. A second conclusion is that the mixed signals observed in this data are vexing. Mixed signals are difficult because they leave room for individuals to question how the market can serve to better schools if the consumers are not clear about the factors they are shopping for in a school. Moreover, these mixed messages do not help administrators who attempt to listen to parents in order to improve how they run their schools.

**Accessing Information on Open Enrollment**

At a minimum, parental choice in education assumes that parents will have information on the alternatives that exist for the education of their children. This section examines how parents obtain information on their schooling options.

How parents learn about their schooling options can say something about the choices that they perceive to be available to them. We asked the parents participating in the open enrollment program about how they first heard of the program. Approximately 53% of the parents heard about the program through the media. This method for learning of the program surpasses any other means for obtaining information about open enrollment. Less than one-fifth of parents learned about the program from family and friends.

**Where Parents Obtain Information on Program**

Family/Friends	Staff	Newsletter/Brochure	Newspaper/TV/Radio
16%	9%	6%	53%

In other studies the Forum has conducted on parental choice programs the most common method for learning about schooling options is through family, friends and church. People relying on these methods are limited to learning only about options from the people they know. On the other hand, open enrollment appears to have been widely discussed by the media before the start of the first year of implementation.

Finally, in understanding how parents make decisions about where to send their children it was also important to ask how many schools they considered when making this decision. On average parents are considering one school. Over 90% of parents indicated they applied to one school district.

**Parents and Administrators Views**

In December, 1998 the Forum reported findings from administrators who were responsible for the implementation of open enrollment in their districts. The views of the administrators provided us with one perspective on why parents chose to request a transfer in or out of a school district. The most commonly cited reason administrators listed for why parents participated in the choice program was convenience. However, from the point of view of parents, school performance as measured by methods of teaching, achievement and discipline are important factors in leaving the resident district.

Given these two differing findings it really is no surprise that there is debate about whether open enrollment will increase competition among districts and lead to increased educational quality. In the 1998-99 school year only a small number of students participated in the open enrollment program statewide, less than 1% of the total student body.

However, some individual school districts are losing more than three percent of their student bodies. Others districts have as many as nine percent of their student bodies as open enrollment participants. One may hypothesize that districts experiencing a significant loss of students through open enrollment may need to focus on school performance in order to attract and retain students.

This survey also provided an opportunity to

# Parental Satisfaction

gauge the satisfaction with the administration of the open enrollment program. Across all categories parents who participated in the open enrollment program were extremely satisfied with the administration of the program. This is no small achievement given the short existence of this program. The administrators at the schools and the staff at the Department of Public Instruction deserve credit for such high levels of satisfaction.

## Satisfaction with Open Enrollment Program

Percent who:	Strongly Agree	Agree
The open enrollment application time frame was about right.	20	62
I feel that the Department of Public Instruction did an excellent job administering the open enrollment program.	18	60
I feel that the school district my child attends under open enrollment did an excellent job administering the open enrollment program.	37	53
When I enrolled my child in school I had enough information about all the various schooling options.	40	51
I felt that choosing a school for my child was difficult	3	14

## Satisfaction with School

How satisfied are parents with their school? To find out we read a number of statements and asked the parent to respond by indicating whether they agree with the statement. Parents overwhelmingly agree that their child is receiving an excellent

education in their open enrollment school.

Parents also have a tremendous level of trust in their child's teacher(s) and principal. Over 90% of parents feel they can trust the principal and teacher(s) to do what is right for their child in most instances. Moreover, few parents have thought

## Satisfaction with Child's School in the 1998-1999 School Year

Percent responding:	Strongly Agree	Agree
I feel that my child is receiving an excellent education at the school my child attends under open enrollment.	49	43
I have often thought about moving my child to another school.	2	6
In most instances, I feel that I can trust the principal in my child's school to do what is right for my child.	51	43
In most instances, I feel that I can trust my child's teacher to do what is right for my child.	48	45

about moving their child to a different school.

## Connection with Non-Resident School

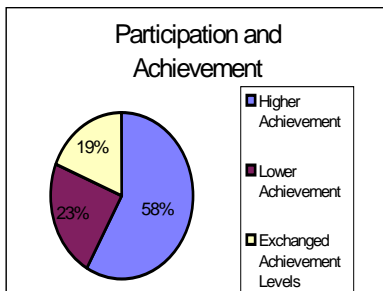
Another question examines the knowledge parents have about the schools their children attend. To measure this, we asked some questions about parental involvement with the school, whether parents knew the names of their children's teachers and principals and how they gathered information on the school. As expected the majority of parents know the names of their children's teachers (92%) and principals (77%).

Also the majority of parents responded that they speak at least once a week with a teacher or administrator and go inside of the child's school. In receiving information about the school, the majority of parents visited the schools they applied to, talked with teachers, administrators and with friends and family about the school. Fewer parents received literature from the schools.

## Another Look at the Data

Up to this point the Forum has examined survey responses to various questions regarding the reasons parents left their resident district. Another method allows for a direct examination of the characteristics of the districts parents left with the characteristics of the districts the parents chose. Our data allow us to examine this question. Our survey respondents left 81 different districts and attended 61 different districts. The small sample sizes means the results should be interpreted with caution, yet they offer an opportunity to further explore characteristics of open enrollment.

Since we are primarily interested in the relationship between student achievement and participation in open enrollment, the Forum first examined student achievement by leaving & gaining districts.\*\* The majority of survey respondents (58%), left districts with lower levels of achievement than the school district they chose to attend. Twenty-three percent of the survey respondents left higher performing districts for lower performing districts. The other survey respondents exchanged higher levels of achievement in one area for lower levels of achievement in another such as attending a school with higher math scores, but lower reading scores.



Research has suggested that other factors may play a role in why parents leave one district for another. The most commonly cited

reason is wealth of a district. This can be measured in several ways. Two of the measures included here are adjusted gross income per-tax return and per-pupil expenditures. The findings are mixed. Expenditures per-pupil are not related to the choice to leave one district and attend another. Half the survey respondents left districts with higher expenditures per-pupil than the gaining district. On the other hand, 63% of our respondents left districts with lower income than the gaining district.

Another factor cited in the research is that parents are attracted to districts with a different size enrollment than the resident district. An argument

can be made that district size may be a factor in selecting a non-resident district. Parents whose children reside in large districts may want more individual attention for their children and could perceive that this would be available in a smaller district. Parents whose children reside in smaller districts may want more diverse course offerings for their children and may believe this to be available in larger districts. The survey data indicate that (41%), of respondents are leaving larger districts than the one their children attend under open enrollment. Still the majority, (59%) are leaving smaller districts for larger districts. The place where this trend is most interesting is when we examine leaving by both achievement and district size. What the data show are that for those parents who selected a district with lower achievement than the resident district, 78% went to a larger district.

One final area the Forum wanted to examine was the relationship between teachers and open enrollment. A proxy measure was used to look into this concept. This was the teacher-student ratio by district. The survey data do not provide any evidence that parents are choosing districts with a different teacher-student ratio than their current district. Half the parents left a district with lower teacher-student ratios than the district they chose to attend under open enrollment.

The data from this survey afforded the opportunity to begin exploration of the connection between district characteristics and participation in the open enrollment program. We found that parents were more likely to leave a lower achieving school for a higher achieving school, a lower income district for a wealthier district and a smaller district for a larger school district. On the other hand, we found no direct relationship between sending a child to a non-resident school and district expenditures per-pupil or teacher-student ratio. Continuous examination of participation in open enrollment is necessary for confirming or refuting these initial findings.

\*\* Data were obtained from School Facts99. This is an annual public service publication by the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. Test scores for reading and math are recorded for 4th, 8th and 10th grade students. We average these scores to create one measure of reading achievement and math achievement. These scores are from the knowledge and concepts examination.

## Conclusions

Open enrollment proponents contend that this choice program will not only provide parents greater choice in where they send their children but also improve the quality of education overall by making public education more competitive. Others have argued that the primary motive of school choice participants is for reasons of convenience. They argue that parents are not primarily motivated by academic concerns (Carnegie Foundation 1992). Under this assumption there is no reason to expect a positive association between public school choice and academic achievement.<sup>1</sup> The question on what factors were important was open-ended. The question asking if they gathered information on a particular question was closed ended. For this reason, it was not possible to ask respondents if they gathered information on every important variable. The closed ended question included those categories that we hypothesized would be very important in selecting a school. swapped one area of higher achievementAt this time individual level data do not exist that For this reason, we begin a first look at this data by using aggregate data on district characteristics. The variable to be explained is the percent of student enrollment participating in open enrollment. This is identified as percent net gain. This is the difference between number of students leaving a district and entering a district as a percent of total enrollment. A negative number suggests a district lost more students than gained. This variable ranges from (-3% to 9%).

Next I created an ordinary least squares regression model to examine the determinants of gaining students under the public school choice program. I am primarily interested in the relationship between student achievement and participation in the public school choice program. I include two measures of district level achievement. The first is a state standardized test score on reading. The second is the standardized test score more math. To accurately estimate the relationship between student achievement and Net Gain, I include several control variables in the model. I borrow from the literature on determinants of education achievement for these measures. The most commonly cited determinat of achievement is a students family characteritiscs. This is primarily measured by the socio-economic status of the student. In this district level analysis I include three variables that measure the socio economic status of a district. This includes the per-capita income for district residents, the percent of students qualifying for free

lunch and the percent of minority studnets. Next I include a measure district teacher/pupil ratio. Some have suggested that there may be a relationship between the perception of a school program and the individual attention that schools can afford students. A smaller student/teacher ratio could potentiall allow for more course offerings, closer relationships between students and teachers and is thought to relate to overall school performance. Others suggest that the expenditures of a district are rlated to student achievement. For this reason I include a measure of per-pupil expenditures in the final model.

A cautious interpretation of our district level data indicate that there is a small, but statically significant relationship between school performance and gaining students under open enrollment. Before turning to the regression analysis I present in a comparison of average scores on the independent variables for Net Gain versus Net Lose districts. Net Gain districts have on average higher math and reading scores. Net Gain districts on average are wealthier and spend somewhat more. Net Gain districts also have fewer minority students and have fewer students receiving free lunch.

### **Data and Methods**

*The total number of completed surveys was 141. This includes 55 interviews from the Southeast and Milwaukee County regions, 29 from the Fox Valley, 35 from the Southwest and Central regions and 22 from the North. We interviewed the parent or guardian who makes decisions about the education of the children living in the household. The 141 interviews represent 190 student participants in the open enrollment program for the 1998-1999 school year.*

*To obtain phone numbers for participating parents we sent letters to the superintendents of 262 school districts across the state of Wisconsin in July, 1999. In the letters we requested phone numbers for parents whose children attended their school district under the open enrollment program during the 1998-1999 school year and guaranteed confidentiality for respondents. The districts we requested numbers from were those districts that had responded to a survey of district administrators the Forum conducted in November, 1998. By September 10<sup>th</sup> we received numbers from 91, or 35%, of the districts.*

*The districts represent the geographic distribution and variation of school district size across the state.*

*We received a total of 574 phone numbers. However, some of these numbers were duplicates due to the fact that a number of siblings were participating in the program. This left a total of 415 final numbers. These numbers were provided to Lein/Spiegelhoff, Inc. for confidential phone interviews. The interviewing agency attempted to complete an interview with every accurate number. The completion rate for phone interviews was about 34% over the total sample. There were approximately 2,400 students that participated in the open enrollment program for the 1998-1999 school year. Our survey sample of 141 parents represents 190 of these participants or 8% of the total participants. While the sample size is small, we believe the findings are a good representation of the reasons why parents left their resident district and participated in the open enrollment program.*

*A brief look at the characteristics of the survey respondents indicates: The parents represent a wide age-range of children. In addition, the sample of parents participating in the open enrollment program is more highly educated than Wisconsin residents as a whole. Approximately 40% of the parents interviewed have at least a bachelor's degree. This compares with 22% of Wisconsin residents who possess at least a bachelor's degree. The household income of respondents is also somewhat higher than the average for Wisconsin residents. Average household income for our sample is approximately \$50,000. Average household income for residents in Wisconsin as estimated by the US Census Bureau for 1999 is \$35,000.*