

SNG-Open enrollment-8-1-16

Why not open enrollment in our public schools?

By Jim Nowlan

My friend Jennie is an attorney and mother of a youngster entering elementary school this fall. Jennie and her husband live in a central Illinois city, but Jennie travels 30 miles each day to her law office in another town.

Jennie thinks it would be marvelous if her child could ride along each morning, be dropped off at the elementary school near her law office; the two could then return home together after work and school each day.

Oh, Jennie could do this, but it would cost her \$10,000 a year in out-of-district tuition, which the young family cannot afford.

Across the Big River, over in Iowa, Jennie and her daughter could do this—at no out of pocket cost.

The “sending” Iowa school district in which another Jennie and family might live would send its property tax support for Jennie’s child to the “receiving” district; after all, Jennie and husband pay taxes. And the state would also send its per pupil support to the receiving district as well.

This is called open enrollment, and it has been available to parents and children in Iowa since the late 1980s. The last time I looked nearly 30,000 pupils (6 percent of Iowa’s total K-12 enrollment) attended a school district other than the one in which the family resides.

Parents and pupils do this for various reasons. Many do so for reasons just like Jennie would like to do in Illinois.

Others do so, I am told by Iowa officials, because a neighboring school district may have a great music program and a family's child is a talented musician.

Or maybe parents think the nearby school district has a better, more challenging educational program. In this case, an ancillary benefit of open enrollment might be to nudge the home district to improve its programs so it won't lose students, and money. A little competition never hurts.

There are some limitations. Talented jocks have sit out from sports for a year after transferring.

And a school district already chock full of students can refuse to accept a student wishing to transfer in.

There are also some limits on transfers out that might affect racial diversity, that is, whites couldn't flee a struggling urban district *en masse*, as I understand it.

The Iowa program works, but it isn't perfect. Generally speaking, those with financial resources find it easier to attend school outside of district than do poorer folks, because of transportation costs and issues.

Several students of Illinois policymaking say open enrollment wouldn't work in Illinois because, well, Illinois is different from Iowa.

For example, Iowa school districts all receive about the same per pupil state and local financial support. In Illinois, the range is from about \$6,000 to \$25,000 per district; though those two figures are outliers, the spread is still appalling.

So why wouldn't parents who could wangle the logistics want their children to transfer from a poor to a rich district?

And 42 percent of Illinois public school students are black or Hispanic, while in Iowa the figure is 25 percent (which surprised me just a bit, as Iowans are 92 percent white overall).

So there might have to be some limits in Illinois as well on transfers to avoid further segregation of students.

The task of Illinois policymakers is to improve the quality of our lives. Based on the success of open enrollment in Iowa, the quality of life in that state appears better than in Illinois, at least for the thousands of families and students who take advantage of the program.

It is not good enough to say that such a program would not work in Illinois simply because we are different.

The choices and benefits offered by open enrollment simply seem to make so much more sense than the Illinois policy of holding a student captive in his or her monopoly district when, for a variety of reasons, better options might exist.