

Open enrollment makes sense for Illinois

By Jim Nowlan

In research for a book on “Fixing Illinois,” I have been impressed that Iowa and Indiana often “get it right” when it comes to their state governments. The two states seem to focus on what is good and useful for the state and its citizens.

In contrast, in Illinois our response to a new idea is too often “Where’s mine?” “What’s in it for me,” or “Let’s protect what we have.”

This comes to mind as I look at education. Indiana provides more options for school going than any state I know of—public charter schools, vouchers to attend private schools, and the right to attend schools out of one’s district.

And on this issue of attending a school out of one’s district, Iowa has for several decades provided for “open enrollment” in any district a parent wants to send his child. We should do the same in Illinois.

In Illinois, students have to attend the school in the district where the parents or legal guardian live. There are few options, other than allowing a student to finish a school year in a district when his parents have moved out.

Otherwise, parents have to pay out of their own pockets a tuition charge of \$9,000-\$10,000 a year (more in the pricey suburbs). Even then, I’m told by superintendents, the receiving school district doesn’t have to accept the tuition paying students, and most don’t.

In Iowa, according to state education official Jeff Burger, parents can apply to send their child to any school district in Iowa, and the sending school district pays the cost to the receiving

district. This “open enrollment” law was written to facilitate moving around to the best school programs, according to Burger, yet in practice convenience is apparently the primary reason that parents choose another school district.

For example, if a parent drives half an hour or more from a rural town into Iowa City to work, the parent can seek to enroll her child in an Iowa City school, so the child can ride in and out with the parent.

The receiving district can refuse if it is out of space, but that apparently doesn’t occur often. More than 5 percent, or 26,000, of Iowa’s 475,000 students attend school out of district.

According to Burger, the program works smoothly, and Iowans like it.

Illinois should enact such a policy. In addition to convenience, the program would shake some superintendents out of their complacency that they have a captive audience of parents and students with nowhere else to go.

I suggest that the concept of open enrollment be extended as well to our community college system. In Illinois, many community college students may live closer to a campus in another geographic college district than to the campus(es) in the district.

At present, such a student has to pay out-of-district tuition that is about twice as high as in-district tuition, all through no fault of the student’s except for her location.

Community colleges do make exceptions to the out-of-district tuition charge if the sending community college does not offer a program that another district college offers.

With open enrollment, each community college would likely end up both sending to and receiving students from other districts. Possibly the state community college system would have to maintain running balance sheets, so that districts receiving many more than they send would be reimbursed by other districts for the costs of their students.

If we think about the needs and interests of parents and students, open enrollment should be a no-brainer.