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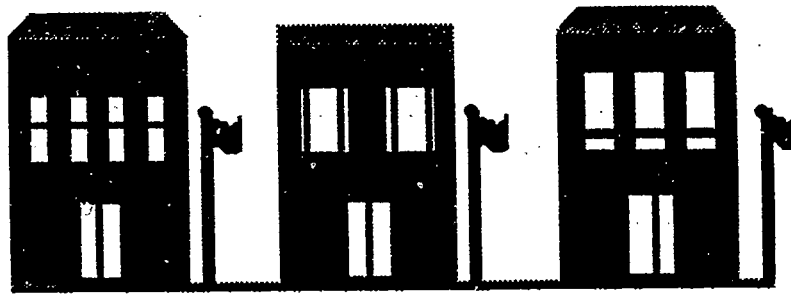
ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted of 82 rural parents of students with disabilities or giftedness on the topic of open enrollment. The survey examined demographic characteristics, sources of information, reasons for transfer, and changes in parental involvement with schools. Most of the rural students with special educational needs who chose to participate in open enrollment were Caucasian and required services for a learning disability or speech disability. Parents procured information on open enrollment from the radio, television, and newspaper about as often as they received information from principals and teachers combined. The most important reason parents of rural children with special needs cited for applying for open enrollment was to better meet the children's educational requirements. Parents reported similar patterns of participation across activities at their child's former school and chosen school. Comments by parents of students with disabilities were most concerned with teacher effectiveness and transportation/school location issues; comments by parents of gifted students noted the curricular and extracurricular activities available. The study also observes that it is important to consider that the transfer of students with special needs into or out of a rural school district affects the financial welfare of that district and thus affects the quality of services provided. (Contains 11 references.) (JDD)

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Participation of Rural Students With Disabilities and Rural Gifted Students in Minnesota's Open Enrollment Program

Research Report No. 12



Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

We examine the responses of 97 parents of rural students with disabilities and rural gifted students to a mailed survey on open enrollment. Demographic characteristics, sources of information, reasons for transfer, and changes in parental involvement with schools are examined, as well as the comments by parents of students with special needs. The most important reason parents of rural children with special needs apply for open enrollment is because programs available in alternative districts are thought to be better able to meet the educational requirements of these parents and their children.

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Participation of Rural Students With Disabilities and Rural Gifted Students in Minnesota's Open Enrollment Program

The governors and legislatures of the State of Minnesota have made a commitment to provide many enrollment options to students in Kindergarten through twelfth grade. Currently, seven enrollment options are available on a statewide basis: Postsecondary Enrollment Options, Enrollment Options (an open enrollment program), High School Graduation Incentives Program, Area Learning Centers, Public or Private Alternative Programs, Education Programs for Pregnant Minors and Minor Parents, and Charter Schools.

The origin of these enrollment options may be traced to the merging of economic and political forces in Minnesota during the early 1980s. Documents such as A Nation At Risk (National Commission for Excellence in Education, 1983) indicted the American education system for an inability to produce acceptable levels of academic achievement from students in public schools. The authors called for sweeping reform in national education policy. At the same time, Minnesota's K-12 education system was constrained by significant revenue shortfalls, which limited opportunities for any educational reform. It was not until late 1984 that the abatement of recession pressures and the forecast of a billion dollar surplus in 1985 allowed state policy makers to turn their attention from financial concerns of the state's schools to pressing school reform issues (Mazzoni, 1991).

In 1985, in response to external pressures for school reform and as part of his own political agenda, Governor Perpich authored "Access to Excellence." This document outlined a school reform initiative that emphasized public school choice as a means of promoting beneficial changes in the state's educational system. The reaction of lawmakers representing school districts in rural Minnesota was markedly oppositional. These school districts were concerned that they might not survive financially in a free market of school districts competing for funds created by the implementation of a school choice program (Mazzoni, 1991).

In the late 1980s, interdistrict open enrollment, under the title of the "Enrollment Options Program" became mandated for all districts in Minnesota. This program allows any pupil in the state to apply to attend a school outside of the one in which that pupil resides. Transfer is subject to some restrictions; it can't increase segregation, and districts can refuse transfer if their classes or schools are full. School districts may not reject an application on the basis of the student's previous academic achievement, athletic or other extracurricular ability, handicapping condition, proficiency in the English language, or previous discipline problems (Enrollment Options Program, 1991).

It was also during the latter 1980s that the struggle of three small Minnesota school districts brought the possible financial ramifications of open enrollment for small rural school districts to the forefront of educational issues in Minnesota. One-tenth of the students in the Peterson School District in southeastern Minnesota used open enrollment to leave for

neighboring school districts in the fall of 1989. The loss of these 18 students caused the termination of a levy approved in October of the previous year that was expected to raise \$65,000 for the district.

Other troubled rural school districts added to the list with Peterson included the Mountain-Iron Buhl and Motley districts. In the case of Motley, approximately 50% of their students (about 240) used open enrollment in the spring of 1990 to apply for admission to a neighboring district with which Motley was paired. The transfer of students to the neighboring district spurred a community effort in Motley to reopen a previously closed high school. The situation in Motley became so emotional that even some Motley teachers reportedly encouraged their students to transfer to schools outside of the Motley district (Associated Press, 1990).

Overall, however, the financial situations of most rural school districts in the latter part of the 1980s appeared favorable as a surplus of school funding was created by a 100% increase in state aid to schools. This was combined with a 20% decline in student enrollment. Much of this surplus money was put into improving instructional programs for students, including Special Education programs (Hasbargen, 1992).

Currently, the fears rural school districts have about the possibility of financial crises resulting from the transfer of students using open enrollment are overshadowed by more pressing concerns in other areas: the age and poor condition of some school buildings in rural districts, the erosion of property values and

their concomitant effects on district levies, and a declining number of students in rural areas (Hasbargen, 1992, April 20). The persistent financial problems of some rural districts led to the development of the "Debt Service Equalization" policy, aimed at addressing levy problems posed by declining student enrollment and farm land values, and the Cooperation and Consolidation (C&C) initiative, which provides incentives for smaller districts to combine and use released funds to improve their programs and buildings (Hasbargen, 1992).

Students in rural school districts find themselves involved in major school reform efforts on two levels. First, and perhaps most immediate, are the efforts by the school districts to maintain financial viability in the face of difficult financial circumstances. Second is the implementation of Minnesota's Open Enrollment Program.

When considering the role of open enrollment in determining the financial welfare of rural school districts, it is important to note that these districts receive a significant amount of funding based on the number of students who attend their schools. Because students in rural areas have the option to apply to educational programs in any school district, there is a relationship between financial welfare and total student enrollment for these districts. In addition, the potential transfer of students to better-funded districts raises important issues for students in rural school districts. These include: Will students choose to attend schools in districts other than the one in which they live in order to access more educational

opportunities and resources? Will the students who choose to attend schools in wealthier districts receive a better education, or have access to more educational resources, than students who remain in less-funded school districts? Will providing parents with the option of sending their children to schools in other districts increase parental involvement with schools? These issues are especially important for two segments of the population of students in rural Minnesota: students with disabilities and students who are gifted. These students have specific pronounced educational needs that are different from those of their peers, and which are met by their school district and schools to varying degrees.

Although there is a wealth of literature in which major issues and concerns involved with school choice are discussed (see Harris, Ford, Wilson, & Sandidge, 1991; Marcoulides & Heck, 1990; Martin, 1991; Spicer & Hill, 1990), little if any has focused on students with disabilities or students who are gifted (Ysseldyke, Lange, Delaney, & Lau, 1992). Even less of the literature has focused on these students in rural educational settings. In most studies these students are considered collectively with other students, and there is a failure to examine the different risks, costs, and benefits of open enrollment for them (Ysseldyke, Lange, Delaney, & Lau, 1992).

Consideration of rural students with disabilities and students identified as gifted who apply to use open enrollment raises several hypotheses. First, it is possible that the more pronounced requirements of these students could, in part,

determine the reasons these parents and students choose to open enroll, how they choose a school for attendance, and their experiences with the open enrollment process. To investigate these hypotheses, it is important to distinguish the reasons for applying for open enrollment provided by families of students who actually transfer to other districts from the reasons for application provided by families of students who apply for transfer but finally do not attend a school in another district. The reasons the former group of families choose to open enroll are significant enough to propel them to choose open enrollment as the best solution for their given educational situation, and to pursue the open enrollment process all the way to actual attendance at a school in another district. This cannot be supposed to be the case for students who do not transfer.

In the 1990-1991 school year, 6% of Minnesota's applications for the Enrollment Options program received by school districts were for students who were identified on the application form as having a disability, or some other special need to be accommodated in educational settings (such as being gifted, requiring services for English as a second language, or Chapter One services, etc.) (Ysseldyke, Lange, Delaney, & Lau, 1992). In an effort to investigate the outlined hypotheses, we mailed a survey to parents of rural students with special needs who applied for open enrollment during the 1990-1991 school year. In this report we examine the information provided by two groups of these parents: those who applied for and used open enrollment to transfer their child; and those who applied for open enrollment but did not

transfer their child. The following research questions were addressed:

1. To what extent do Minnesota's rural students with special needs access the option of open enrollment as a function of disability category or other special need type?
2. To what extent do Minnesota's rural students with special needs access the option of open enrollment as a function of grade level?
3. What are the sources of information about open enrollment used by rural parents of students with special needs who use open enrollment?
4. To what extent does the involvement in school activities of rural parents of open enrolling students with special needs change with the transfer of their child to a school in another district?
5. What reasons do rural parents of students with special needs give for the participation of their children in the state's open enrollment program?
6. What are the experiences of rural parents and students with special needs in using open enrollment to attend a school in another district?

Method

Subjects

We examined open enrollment applications for the 1990-1991 school year received by the Minnesota Department of Education. From these applications, we selected parents for a mailed survey if they had indicated on the application form that their child had a federally classified disability or other "special need" that requires accommodation in educational settings. In those cases where the special need of the child was unclear, we made a phone call to the parent for clarification. We mailed surveys to all of these parents. Parents received one survey for each of their children with special needs participating in open enrollment.

Surveys were returned by 117 parents in rural areas of the state. In this report we examine the 82 of these surveys returned by parents of rural children with federally classified disabilities and students identified as gifted who transferred school districts through open enrollment.

Materials

The survey we mailed to the selected parents consisted of 21 items that asked parents whether their child actually open enrolled to another district, and what types of specialized educational services their child was receiving. We also asked for details about their sources of information about open enrollment, their reasons for transferring their child, and their decision-making process. The survey also included demographic questions and an item asking about the parents' level of involvement with

schools. The final survey item asked for these parents' comments about their experiences with open enrollment.

Data Analysis

For our examination of responses provided by rural parents, we grouped the 117 surveys into three exhaustive categories: students identified as gifted and students with a federally classified disability, students receiving Chapter One services; and students whose parents reported their child did not have any type of disability or other special need. We then divided students within these three groups on the basis of whether they did or did not transfer school districts. We completed a frequency count within all categories. This appears in Table 1.

For this study, we only analyzed the information in the 82 surveys returned by rural parents of students with federally classified disabilities and students identified as gifted (i.e. "D/G" in Table 1) who did transfer school districts through open enrollment.

Results

Of the 82 returned surveys completed by parents of children with special needs (students with disabilities, or who are gifted) who reside in rural areas of Minnesota and used open enrollment to transfer to another school district, approximately equal proportions were male (48.8%) and female (51.2%). The majority of these students were Euro-American (96.2%), with a small percentage describing themselves as Native American (2.5%) or Hispanic (1.2%).

Table 1

Number of Students in Respondents' Child Categories Who Did/Did Not Open Enroll Into a School District

	D/G	C/T1	NONE	TOTAL
Transferred	82	11	8	101
Did not transfer	15	0	1	16
Total	97	11	9	117

D/G: Students reported as gifted or as having a disability.

C/T1: Students reported as requiring Chapter/Title One services.

NONE: Students reported to not have a disability or be gifted.

Note: One response was disregarded because the respondent returned it without reporting whether or not their child has a special need.

The grade levels at which parents responding to the survey applied for open enrollment for their children covered all grades (K-12) (see Table 2), though there was clustering at logical transition points (e.g. middle school, high school).

Respondents reported their children as having a variety of disabilities, or as being gifted (see Table 3). These categories are not mutually exclusive because the respondents could mark as many disability categories, or a gifted category, as were applicable to their children's educational needs. Of the 82 parents, 16 parents indicated their child received services under two or more of the included categories.

Sources of Information

Respondents reported receiving information about open enrollment from a variety of sources (see Table 4). About half (51.9%) of the respondents reported that the information they received from these sources also included information about Special Education or special needs services.

Involvement of Parents with Schools

We asked parents what school-related activities they were involved with at their child's former school, and at the school their child attended through open enrollment. Respondents indicated which of the activities in Table 5 they were involved in at both schools. Parents could also indicate that they were not involved with either school to any extent, or that transportation or distance limited their involvement.

Table 2

Grade Levels Rural Students With Special Needs Open Enroll Into
for the Subsequent School Year After Their Year of Application

Grade	% of Respondents
Kindergarten	6.2
1	1.2
2	10.0
3	6.2
4	7.5
5	6.2
6	11.2
7	8.7
8	11.2
9	7.5
10	6.2
11	10.0
12	7.5

Table 3

Reported Educational Special Needs Categories of Rural Students
With Special Needs Using Open Enrollment

Special Need	% of Respondents
Autism	1.2
Emotional/Behavior Disability	8.5
Early Childhood Special Education	0.0
English as a second language	0.0
Gifted	11.0
Hearing Impaired	7.3
Learning Disability	46.3
Mental Retardation	7.3
Multiple Handicaps	2.4
Physical Disability	4.9
Speech	29.3
Visual Disability	1.2
Other Health Impaired	4.9
Attention Deficit Disorder	1.2

Table 4

Sources of Information About Open Enrollment for Rural Parents of Students With Special Needs Using Open Enrollment.

Source	% Respondents Endorsing	% Respondents' Most Important
Teacher	21.9	8.5
Counselor	8.5	1.2
Principal or other school administrator	34.1	19.5
Children of the parent	4.9	3.7
Other family member or relative	15.8	3.7
Friend or neighbor	30.5	7.3
Employer	2.4	1.2
Social worker	3.7	0
Brochure or flyer	8.5	0
School newsletter or school paper	18.3	1.2
Radio, T.V., or newspaper	58.5	29.3
Options hotline	2.4	2.4
Information meeting	13.4	3.7
Social service or community agency	2.4	0
Other	14.6	8.5

Table 5

Activity Categories For Parent Involvement With Schools

-
1. Participated in the PTA.
 2. Regularly volunteered time at school.
 3. Attended school events (for example, open house, plays, concerts, sports).
 4. Kept in frequent contact with my child's teachers.
 5. Participated in school district committees.
 6. Participated in school committees.
 7. Involved occasionally on an as-needed basis.
-

Parents reported similar patterns of participation across activities at their resident schools and schools chosen with open enrollment. However, within activities, there were some changes in extent of participation with transfer of schools (see Figure 1).

Reasons for Transfer

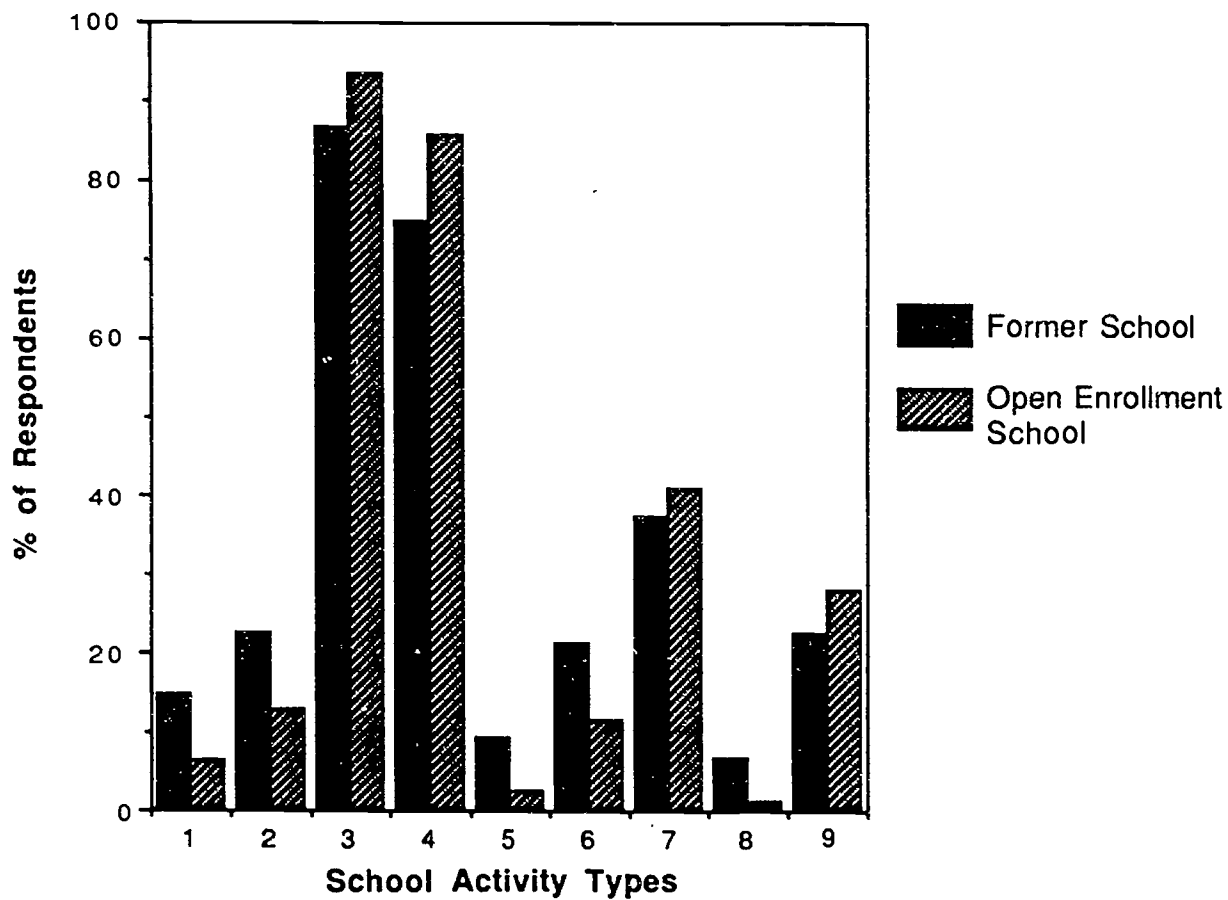
We asked respondents their reasons for transferring their child through open enrollment. They could choose their responses from among 33 options, including an "other" category (see Table 6). In addition, respondents were also asked to indicate their one most important reason for transfer. A frequency count was completed on the responses provided by these parents. The reasons cited most frequently by all parents are listed in Table 7.

Parents who indicated unhappiness with their former school district as a reason for transfer were asked to specify their reasons for dissatisfaction. Thirty-six of these parents provided details of their experiences with their former school district. We categorized the content of these narrative responses into eight categories (see Table 8). A given response was placed into any category if its content included statements relevant to that category. In this way, a given response could be assigned to more than one category. A frequency count was completed on the number of responses that made reference to each category.

Because there may be differences in educational priorities for parents of elementary children (Preschool to Grade 6) versus parents of middle (Grades 7 and 8), or secondary (Grades 9 to 12) school children with special needs, we decided to examine

Figure 1

Parent Participation at Former and Chosen Schools



- 1: Participated in the PTA
- 2: Regularly volunteered time at school
- 3: Attended school events
- 4: Kept in frequent contact with teachers
- 5: Participated in district committees
- 6: Participated in school committees
- 7: Involved on as-needed basis
- 8: Not involved
- 9: Transportation limits involvement

Table 6

Reasons For Transfer Response Options.

-
1. The chosen school is closer to home.
 2. The chosen school is closer to my job (or my spouse's job).
 3. The chosen school has a day-care program, or is closer to someone who takes care of my child.
 4. Our child's friends, brothers, or sisters attend(ed) the new school.
 5. The chosen school is a nicer cleaner building.
 6. The chosen school is bigger and has more students.
 7. The chosen school has fewer students.
 8. The chosen school has smaller class sizes.
 9. The chosen school has easier graduation requirements.
 10. Students at the chosen school get better grades and score higher on tests to get into colleges or jobs (like the SAT, TABE, or ASVAB).
 11. The chosen school has better teachers.
 12. The chosen school provides a safer environment.
 13. The chosen school offers more course variety.
 14. The chosen school has more advanced courses and programs for gifted students.
 15. My child's Special Education needs are better met at the chosen school.
 16. The chosen school offers my child better athletic and extracurricular opportunities.
 17. The chosen school placed my child in a Special Education program and our school district would not.
 18. Teachers at the chosen school can give my child more personal attention.
 19. The chosen school has less problems with student discipline.
 20. The chosen school gave my child a fresh start.
 21. The chosen school might encourage my child to stay in school.
 22. The chosen school has more opportunities for parent participation.
 23. School staff strongly urged my child to change schools.
 24. The chosen school did not place my child in a Special Education program, and our resident school district did.
 25. The chosen school mainstreams my child into more regular education classes.
 26. The chosen school has programs for children who do not speak English at home.
 27. The chosen school gives my child more options in his/her Special Education program.
 28. Special Education teachers at the chosen school keep me more informed of my child's progress.
 29. We were happier with the social and economic background of the student body at the chosen school.
 30. We were happier with the racial or ethnic composition of the student body at the chosen school.
 31. We moved out of the district, but wanted our child to remain in old district for his/her education.
 32. We were unhappy with our former school district (Please Specify).
 33. Other (Please Specify)
-

Table 7

Top 10 Reasons for Transfer of Rural Students With Special Needs Using Open Enrollment

-
1. My child's Special Education needs are better met at the chosen school. (61.0%)
 2. We were unhappy with our former school district. (45.1%)
 3. The chosen school has better teachers. (42.7%)
 4. The chosen school offers more course variety. (41.5%)
 6. Teachers at the chosen school can give my child more personal attention. (39%, tie with #7)
 7. The chosen school gave my child a fresh start. (39%, tie with #6)
 8. Our child's friends, brothers, or sisters attend(ed) the new school. (37.8%, tie with #9)
 9. The chosen school gives my child more options in his/her Special Education program. (37.8%, tie with #8)
 10. The chosen school is closer to my job (or my spouse's job). (36.6%)
-

% refers to the percentage of respondents endorsing each reason.

Table 8

Categories For Classification of Responses Indicating Dissatisfaction With the Former School District and Percentage of Responses

	<u>% of Responses</u>
A. <u>Peer Behavior Problems</u> : Comments which refer to the behavior of students or discipline problems at a school in the former school district as a reason for transfer. Examples include fighting, chemical abuse, etc.	11%
B. <u>Teacher/Staff Uncooperativeness</u> : Comments about teachers or staff at a school in the former school district which specifically state that they did not cooperate with the parents or comply with the parent's wishes concerning issues of their child's education.	13%
C. <u>Priority of Non-Educational Concerns</u> : Comments which state that there was some circumstance at the former school district which resulted in teachers or staff directing personal or other resources at addressing non-curricular concerns. Examples include financial problems, low teacher morale, etc.	19%
D. <u>Undesirable Treatment</u> : Comments which state that teachers or staff at a school in the former school district treated the child in a manner undesirable to the parents or demeaning to the child. Examples include use of abusive language, scapegoating, etc.	11%
E. <u>Less-Effective Programs</u> : Comments about a child's educational experience which state that implemented educational curricula, staff, programs, or program operation, were not effective in promoting the educational progress of the child with his/her disability, or unique educational need. Examples include failures to adapt instruction, amount of time spent on instruction, etc.	30%
F. <u>Limited Curriculum</u> : Comments stating that the curriculum at a school in the former school district was too limited in its scope or depth of coverage.	8%
G. <u>Problems With Distance</u> : Comments stating that the large distance of schools in the former school district was undesirable.	6%
H. <u>Other</u> : Content which could not be categorized into any of the above categories and which individually totaled less than 10% of all responses.	5%

separately the reasons for transfer given by parents in these two groups. Eighty parents indicated what grade their child was in during the 1990-1991 school year and were included in this analysis.

Forty-nine percent of these parents indicated their child was in one of the elementary grades. The most frequently cited reasons for transfer by parents of children in these grades are displayed in Table 9.

The remaining 51% of parents in this analysis indicated their child was in a middle or secondary grade during 1990-1991. In Table 10 we display the most frequently cited reasons for transfer by this group of parents.

In response to one survey item, 20.8% of all of the respondents reported that they think their child would have dropped out of school if he or she had not attended a school in another district.

Experiences

As a final survey item we asked parents to "Please add any comments you have concerning open enrollment and your child's participation." We included this item in order to gather qualitative data from parents that we may not have received from their responses to the multiple choice items in the remainder of the survey. The responses we received to this item included many detailed accounts of the circumstances that parents said strongly motivated them to use open enrollment.

As part of an analysis of the responses received by all parents (see Ysseldyke, Lange, Delaney, Lau, & 1992), including

Table 9

Top 10 Reasons for Transfer By Rural Elementary Grade Students

-
1. My child's Special Education needs are better met at the chosen school. (64.1%)
 2. The chosen school is closer to my job (or my spouse's job). (46.2%)
 3. The chosen school has better teachers. (41.0%, tie with #4 and #5)
 4. The chosen school gives my child more options in his/her Special Education Program. (41.0%, tie with #3 and #5)
 5. Special Education teachers at the chosen school keep me more informed of my child's progress. (41.0%, tie with #3 and #4)
 6. Teachers at the chosen school can give my child more personal attention. (38.5%, tie with #7)
 7. Other (38.5%, tie with #6)
 8. Our child's friends, brothers, or sisters attend(ed) the new school. (35.9%, tie with #9 and #10)
 9. The chosen school offers more course variety. (35.9%, tie with #8 and #10)
 10. We were unhappy with our former school district. (35.9%, tie with #8 and #9)
-

% refers to the percentage of respondents endorsing each reason.

Table 10

Top 10 Reasons For Transfer By Rural Middle and Secondary Grade Students

-
1. My child's Special Education needs are better met at the chosen school. (58.5%)
 2. The chosen school gave my child a fresh start. (53.7%, tie with #3)
 3. We were unhappy with our former school district. (53.7%, tie with #2)
 4. The chosen school offers more course variety. (46.3%)
 5. The chosen school has better teachers. (43.9%)
 6. Our child's friends, brothers, or sisters attend(ed) the new school. (41.5%)
 7. Teachers at the chosen school can give my child more personal attention. (39.0%, tie with #8)
 8. The chosen school is bigger and has more students. (39.0%, tie with #7)
 9. We were happier with the social and economic background of the student body at the chosen school. (36.6%)
 - 10a. The chosen school is closer to home. (34.1%, tie with #10b)
 - 10b. The chosen school gives my child more options in his/her Special Education program. (34.1%, tie with #10a)
-

* refers to the percentage of respondents endorsing each reason.

those living in urban and suburban areas, a set of 12 categories was outlined for the classification of statements made within the responses parents provided. The 12 categories are presented in Table 11.

The comments were then analyzed in order to ascertain which of these categories were endorsed by statements in each response. Statements within a given response could only endorse a category once. A frequency count was completed of the number of times each category was endorsed in responses provided by parents. The frequency number a given category received from this analysis represents the number of comments provided by parents who addressed that category.

Rural Minnesotan parents of students with disabilities, or who are gifted, and who used open enrollment to attend a school in a district other than the one in which they live provided 47 responses to this item. Forty-two responses were provided by parents of students with disabilities, and 5 responses were provided by parents of gifted students. The frequency with which the classification categories were endorsed by these two groups of parents in their comments, and the percentage of responses that endorsed these categories are shown in Table 12. An examination of the content in responses provided by these parents suggests some differences in their experiences with open enrollment.

Table 11

Twelve Broad Topics For Parent Comment Classification

1. Teacher/Administration Attitude	Statements about the attitudes of administrators and teachers towards students, the school itself, and the school community.
2. Transportation/Location	Comments about the problems or benefits of choosing a school in terms of transportation, and the school's proximity to such things as the parent's place of work, daycare facilities, and the home.
3. Educational Programs for Special Student Needs	Comments about the level of match between special educational programs at schools and the instructional needs of the student, including such things as mainstreaming of students with disabilities, placement of students in Special Education programs.
4. Student's Attitude and Behavior Change	Comments about changes in the student's school-related behavior and affect as a result of choosing to attend a different school.
5. Social and Educational Continuity	Parent comments concerning choosing schools in order to continue their child within a given school or school district, or in order to keep that child with his or her cohort of peers. This includes the issue of transition for the student staying in a school district or changing schools.
6. Changes in Student's Academic Performance	Statements about changes in the student's academic performance or "progress" as a result of choosing to attend a school outside of his or her school district.
7. Social Environment of Schools	Comments about characteristics of the student body at the school of choice or the school transferred from in terms of behavior, socio-economic status, and the social environment in general.
8. Responsiveness of School Administrations	Statements about the degree to which school administrators meet the requests and needs of parents of students, and the manner of providing educational services to the school and community.
9. Parent Empowerment	Comments about the ability of parents to choose housing where they wish, the degree of involvement which they may attain in their child's school, and their ability to investigate and access educational options for their child.

Table 11 (continued)

Twelve Broad Topics For Parent Comment Classification

10. Physical Environment of the School and Funding	Comments about the layout and decor of the school and its related facilities, and the amount of monetary resources available to the school for maintenance and development of programs and facilities.
11. Effectiveness of Teachers in Schools	Comments about the ability of teachers to productively use class-time, develop working relationships with students conducive to learning, and to respond to the requests and needs of parents for their child's education.
12. Curricula and Extra-Curricular Activities of Schools	Comments about the variety, depth, and areas of emphasis of subjects taught in schools, and the availability and quality of extra-curricular activities.

Source: Ysseldyke, Lange, Delaney, & Lau, 1992

Table 12

Comment Classification Categories Endorsed By Rural Parents of Students with Disabilities and Gifted Students Using Open Enrollment

Comment Classification Category	Students w/ disabilities		Students who are gifted	
	freq	(%)	freq	(%)
	N=42		N=5	
1. Teacher/Admin. Attitude	7	(17)	0	(0)
2. Transportation/Location	10	(24)	1	(20)
3. Educational Programs	8	(19)	2	(40)
4. Student's Attitude	6	(14)	1	(20)
5. Social/Ed. Continuity	6	(14)	0	(0)
6. Change Acad. Performance	7	(17)	1	(20)
7. Social Environment	4	(10)	1	(20)
8. Respons. School Admin.	4	(10)	0	(0)
9. Parent Empowerment	8	(18)	2	(40)
10. Phys. Environ./Fund.	2	(5)	1	(20)
11. Effective Teachers	15	(36)	1	(20)
12. Curric. & Extracurric.	2	(5)	4	(80)

Discussion

The information gained by examining the responses provided by rural parents of students with special needs to this mailed survey provide an opportunity to observe the impact and effects of open enrollment in rural communities of Minnesota. The data we have gathered address the very relevant and pragmatically significant research questions outlined earlier.

The Students

The largest majority of rural students with educational special needs (those requiring Special Education services or some type of accelerated coursework for their ability level) who choose to participate in open enrollment are Caucasian (96.2%), and require services for a learning disability (46.3%) or speech disability (29.3%). Participation of a majority of students requiring services for these two types of disabilities is understandable given that these two groups also comprise the majority of students receiving Special Education services in Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Education, 1991). Students sought to open enroll into all possible grades with slight majorities seeking enrollment into the second, sixth, eighth, and eleventh grades. The survey did not ask why parents chose these particular times or grades for their child to open enroll, this may be an interesting question to address in future research concerning school choice.

Information

The results of the survey support the importance of the media in informing students and their families about enrollment options.

Rural parents of students with special needs who used open enrollment reported procuring information about open enrollment from the radio, T.V., and newspaper (58.5%), about as much as they reported receiving from principals or other school administrators (34.1%) and teachers (21.9%) combined. A large number of these rural parents also reported being informed about open enrollment from friends and neighbors (30.5%). Considering the probability that there are differences between these sources of information, our results raise some significant questions about the amount and types of information, and the context in which this information is delivered, by these sources.

Parent Involvement

Our results suggest some significant changes in the level and types of involvement rural parents of students with special needs elect or are able to have with schools their children attend prior to and after open enrollment. More parents reported being involved with the schools their children attend (5.3% less reporting not being involved) after open enrolling their child while more parents also reported that transportation or distance limited their involvement (6.7% more). Involvement with school and limitations posed by transportation and distance are not independent of each other as approached by this survey (all possible combinations of responses are conceivably possible), so interpretation of this result is ambiguous. However, in terms of participation in specific types of school-related activities, after their child transfers districts, parents appear to participate less in activities that require working with groups of

others (e.g. volunteering at schools and participating in PTA, district, and school committees) and increase the amount of time spent with more individualistic activities (e.g., attending school events and keeping in contact with their children's teachers). Future research in school choice should consider changes in parents' level of involvement with schools, and the types of activities parents become involved with, as a function of changes in parents' educational requirements.

Reasons For Transfer

We examined the extent to which rural parents of students with special needs participating in open enrollment do so because of the unique educational requirements of their children. The majority (61.0%) of these parents indicated that educational programs at alternative districts were better able to match their children's educational needs. The second most frequently endorsed item referred to dissatisfaction with their former school district. We asked the respondents who endorsed this item to also briefly state specifically why they were dissatisfied. Similar to those parents who found better matching programs in other districts, the majority of responses to this item (30%, which may include parents who found better matching programs in other districts) alluded to ineffectiveness of the district of residence's educational programs to match educational needs as the reason for transfer.

The remaining reasons for transfer frequently cited by these parents give us a clue as to what parents identify as part of "more effective" instructional programming. The ability of

teachers and the amount of time they spend in one-on-one contact with students appears to be important to these parents. Course variety at the given school and options within Special Education programs is another important part. In addition to these instructional components, these parents also appear to value familiarity with a school, and its close proximity to their place of work.

Our analysis also suggests that there are differences between the reasons parents of elementary children have for transfer and those reported by parents of middle and secondary-grade children. Parents of elementary-grade children say they sought open enrollment more often due to the number of options available in their child's Special Education program and being informed of their child's progress by teachers. In addition, these parents identified proximity of chosen schools to their place of work as a reason for transfer more often than parents of middle and secondary-grade children. These parents also cited their own individual reasons for transfer ("other") more often.

The reasons cited by parents of middle and secondary-grade children for transfer via open enrollment appear to be a possible result of accumulated experience with their school district of residence and a change in educational and social requirements. Regarding the former, parents of middle and secondary-grade students more often cite dissatisfaction with their former school district and the need for their child to get a fresh start as reasons for transfer. Changes in social and educational requirements may be reflected in the fact that these parents more

often cite greater course variety, larger size and student body, and a student body with a more desirable social and economic background as reasons for transferring their children to schools in other districts. An interesting difference between this group and parents of elementary-grade students is that these parents more often cite proximity of the school to home as a reason for participating in open enrollment. A possible explanation for this is that as these students assume responsibility for their own transportation, the advantage of a school close to a parent's place of work is overtaken by the advantage of proximity to home.

Experiences

There were differences in the comments provided by rural parents of students with disabilities and parents of gifted children. If one interprets the comments as indicative of the areas of greatest concern for these two groups of parents, it is important to note these differences. Parents of students with disabilities commented on a wider array of topics than did parents of gifted students (possibly because there were fewer parents of gifted students included in our analysis), but appeared to be most concerned with transportation and location of schools (24%) and the effectiveness of teachers at the schools with which they have had experiences (36%). This result may serve as a reiteration of the importance of teacher ability in these parents' perceptions of effective instructional programming.

Almost all (4 of 5) of the rural parents of gifted students commented on the curricular and extracurricular activities available at schools. This may be a reflection of this group's

search for effective instructional programs for their children, which would necessarily include the availability of advanced classes and a variety of activities.

Conclusion

Because open enrollment affects the number of students enrolled in districts, it may be considered as one of the most important enrollment options affecting rural school district funding. The transfer of even a small number of students with special needs from one rural school district to another may have an effect not only on the state per-pupil funding these districts receive, but also may affect funding for instructional programs and staffing of these programs within schools. The finding that parents of students with disabilities use open enrollment to choose "better" Special Education programs leads to questions of how this will affect programs with lesser resources from which these students exit, and raises equity issues as to the welfare of students who remain in these programs.

Open enrollment and other policy developments in rural school districts aimed at addressing financial and resource allocation difficulties (e.g., Debt Service Equalization, Cooperation and Consolidation) have some relationship to each other. Some rural Minnesotan parents of students with disabilities and gifted students are accessing open enrollment in order to choose from among available school districts the one which best suits their requirements. The data presented in this paper suggest that these parents have as their most important criteria the ability of a school's educational programs to address the unique educational

needs of their children. Given that the ability of these programs to meet the needs of these students is determined to some extent by the amount of funding and resources these programs receive, it is important to consider:

1. The extent to which a rural school district's ability to maintain financial viability, and thus readily provide resources to educational programs, contributes to the attractiveness of this district to open enrolling students with special needs (and the opposite in cases of rural school districts experiencing financial difficulties).
2. The extent to which the transfer of students with special needs into a rural school district contributes to the financial welfare of that district, and adversely affects the financial disposition of the school districts these students exit.
3. The extent to which changes in a district's funding due to open enrollment affect the quality of services provided to students with special needs in that district (both positive and negative).

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