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ABSTRACT

People inspired by rational-choice theory are advocating choice policies. Their recommendations are based on implicit assumptions about how school leaders would respond to a choice system. This survey research study investigated the demographic characteristics of open and closed districts during Ohio's first year of full interdistrict open enrollment. It also investigated the reasons superintendents gave for their district's decision to open or remain closed. The following demographic characteristics typified open districts: declining enrollment, rural location, low enrollment, racial homogeneity, and/or below-average per pupil expenditure. In contrast, closed districts were typified by above-average per pupil expenditure, suburban location, growing enrollment, and/or a minority enrollment of 11 to 20 percent. The superintendents indicated that lack of space and financial considerations (not academic quality) were their major concerns. These findings partially supported the assumptions of rational-choice theorists, but also suggested that those assumptions may not be valid in areas where significant social stratification along income and race lines has occurred. Included are an abstract, 27 references, and 2 appendices containing the survey questionnaire and tabular data. (MLH)

Participation in Ohio's Interdistrict Open Enrollment Option: An Investigation of the Supply-Side of Choice

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Abstract

Recently people inspired by rational choice theory have advocated school choice policies. Their recommendations are based on implicit assumptions about how school leaders would respond to a choice system. This survey research study investigated the demographic characteristics of open and closed districts during Ohio's first year of full implementation of interdistrict open enrollment. It also investigated the reasons superintendents gave for their district's decision to open or remain closed. The study found that the following demographic characteristics typified open districts: declining enrollment, rural location, low enrollment, racial homogeneity, and/or below average per pupil expenditure. Superintendents of these districts cited concerns about enrollment and finance as their major reasons for opening. In contrast, closed districts were typified by above average per pupil expenditure, suburban location, growing enrollment, and/or a minority enrollment of 11-20%. The superintendents indicated that lack of space and of financial considerations were their major concerns. These findings partially supported the assumptions of rational choice theorists but also suggested that those assumptions may not be valid in areas where signficant social stratification along income and race lines has occurred.

Participation in Ohio's Interdistrict Open Enrollment Option: An Investigation of the Supply-Side of Choice

Since 1983 the United States has been involved in an educational reform movement. Among the most commonly recommended reforms are various types of school choice. The empirical support for the idea that school choice will improve education is not strong (Carnegie Foundation, 1992). However, state legislatures have not waited for researchers to determine how effective such policies are. By the early 1990s, more than half the states had either adopted some form of school choice or were seriously considering doing so.

One widely recommended form of public school choice is interdistrict open enrollment. Under interdistrict open enrollment policies, students may apply to attend public schools located in districts in which they do not reside (Heleen, 1992). Minnesota was the pioneer in this form of school choice. Soon after it adopted interdistrict open enrollment, several other states followed suit, including Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska, Massachusetts, and Ohio. Indeed, by 1992, thirteen states had adopted such policies (Cookson, 1994; Graham & Ruhl, 1990). Although the Minnesota program has been the subject of several studies (Funkhouser & Colopy, 1994; Nathan, 1990; Rubenstein, 1994; Urahn, 1990, 1991a, 1991b), only scattered information about the interdistrict open enrollment policies of other states appears in the literature. A major purpose of this study is to expand the information base about school choice by investigating the behavior of school districts and school leaders during the first year of implementation of Ohio's interdistrict open enrollment policy.

Theoretical Perspectives

Rational Choice Theories

Most proponents of school choice use some version of rational choice theory to support their proposals (Raywid, 1992). Chubb and Moe (1990) present a very market-oriented version of this theory in their widely publicized book, Politics, Markets and America's Schools. They argue that most current school reforms are doomed to failure because they do not address the root of America's educational problem: the political governance of public education. They advocate replacing the current governance system with a voucher plan which would encourage schools to compete for students and the money which they would bring with them. In their opinion, the creation of an educational market would improve the quality of education because those schools which could not attract and keep students (and revenues) would be forced to go out of business. They would be replaced by schools better able to meet parents' demands. With time, the supply of high quality school programs would increase in response to market pressures. Chubb and Moe believe that those who operate schools would respond to market pressures because they would "have a strong incentive to please a clientele of parents and students through the decisions they make" (p. 32). This incentive would exist because parents would "have the freedom to switch from one alternative to another" (p. 33). The authors acknowledge that some children are less desirable students than others and that schools might therefore be reluctant to accept them. They address this problem by advocating larger vouchers for such children. Theoretically, the extra money which they would bring with them would make them attractive enough to school leaders that they would be accepted.

Some advocates of voucher programs are not as market-oriented as Chubb and Moe. For example, although Cookson (1994) classifies James Coleman's choice proposal as a version of rational choice theory, Coleman focuses on such issues as equity and community (Coleman, Hoffer & Kilgore, 1982; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Coleman, 1992). He argues that public education is highly stratified on the basis of race and class, in part because of the relative lack of parental choice. In his view, vouchers would change the incentive structure within which American public schools operate, motivating school leaders to take more interest in "attracting and keeping the best students they could" (Coleman, 1992, p. 260). As a result, bright and motivated disadvantaged children would have a wider range of educational options than they do currently. Coleman believes that a voucher system would eventually lead to a system like that used in Europe, where public schools are stratified on "grounds that induce high achievement and good behavior, not on grounds that induce residential homogeneity" (p. 261).

Supply-side Assumptions of Rational Choice Theory

As several researchers have pointed out, rational choice theory rests upon two sets of assumptions: one about parents (the demand-side) and one about school districts and school leaders (the supply-side). Neither Chubb and Moe nor Coleman and his co-authors explicitly discuss these assumptions. However, the following ideas seem to underlie the supply-side of their theory:

1. School leaders wish to maintain or increase enrollment.
2. School leaders wish to maintain or increase revenues.

3. If threatened by the loss of enrollment or revenues, school leaders would be willing to compete with other districts for students and revenue.

4. School leaders believe that parents are attracted to schools by strong academic programs.

5. School leaders are capable of expanding their district's supply of high quality educational programs to meet parents' demands.

6. The parents and communities served by the school districts which currently offer high quality educational programs will permit school leaders to accept children from outside their district.

Insofar as these six assumptions are valid, the supply-side of school choice should function consistently with rational choice theory.

Criticism of the Theory

This theory has been criticized from several perspectives, including Neo-Marxist and Weberian social theories. A representative critique which draws from both of these traditions is offered by Cookson (1994). He argues that rational choice theory paints an over-simplified picture of social behavior. In particular, it ignores the important issues of social stratification and social class in American society. In Cookson's opinion, education is a form of "cultural capital" which includes not only the knowledge and skills learned in school but also the status associated with the particular school attended. Therefore, in an "educational marketplace," parents will not choose solely on the basis of academic quality; they will also choose on the basis of the class and status of the student body. If Cookson's critique is correct, at least three of the supply-side

assumptions of school choice advocates are questionable. First, insofar as parents choose schools on the basis of social class and status, school leaders can do little to "improve" their schools in order to attract students and dollars. Indeed, if school leaders are aware of such motives on the part of parents, they may not even try. Second, if much of the appeal of "good" public schools is their social status, the parents whose children already attend them may object to the acceptance of lower status students. After all, the enrollment of such children would lower the average social status of the student body. Such attitudes might prevent the expansion of supply to meet demand.

Recently, empirical studies relevant to the supply-side of interdistrict open enrollment plans have begun to appear in the literature. They also raise some questions about the supply-side assumptions underlying interdistrict open enrollment. For example, Funkhouser and Colopy (1994) investigated the impact of interdistrict open enrollment on school districts in Minnesota. Two of their five research questions directly addressed the validity of "supply and demand theory" as applied to public education in Minnesota. Consistent with rational choice theory, their study revealed that many of the Minnesota districts which had experienced large gains or losses of students under open enrollment had indeed changed their behavior. Many had introduced intensive marketing programs which included considerable information about their district's academic performance. They had also increased the number of courses offered and had expanded their extracurricular programs. Moreover, some had entered into cooperative agreements with neighboring districts in order to enrich their curriculum. Funkhouser and Colopy's study also showed that school leaders generally believed that academic programs were important to parents in choosing a school. All of these findings suggest that at least some school leaders will respond

to market pressures by improving educational quality. Not all of Funkhouser and Colopy's evidence supported rational choice theory, however. Many of the Minnesota districts which lost enrollment did not make changes in order to improve instruction and attract students. On the contrary, they reduced the number of teachers, eliminated academic courses, and cut extracurricular programs--all actions which might well discourage new students from applying. Funkhouser and Colopy concluded: "Our findings are mixed regarding the validity of the supply and demand theory of educational choice" (p. 56).

In another study published in 1994, Fossey investigated enrollment shifts under an interdistrict open enrollment plan in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts program is voluntary, but losing districts experience an unusually severe penalty--they may have to send the receiving district a tuition payment which exceeds their own average per pupil expenditure. Thus, districts have a strong incentive to compete to gain or keep students. Fossey found that about 15% of Massachusetts districts participated in interdistrict open enrollment in 1992, the year under investigation. Interestingly, there was virtually no participation in the metropolitan Boston area; both the city and the large majority of its suburbs were nonparticipants. Fossey's analysis of archival materials revealed that Massachusetts families tended to choose districts with both a higher socioeconomic status and higher achievement test scores than their home district. He argued that, since social class status and achievement test scores are correlated, the policy was probably rewarding more affluent districts "for reaching a level of student performance they would have achieved even without the law's incentives" (p. 321). Conversely, poorer districts were losing money under the policy and thus might find it even harder to improve their

performance. Fossey did not explicitly discuss supply and demand theory or the attitudes of school leaders. However, his findings suggest that families may not choose schools because of high quality academic programs, but because of the social class of the students and surrounding community. Since school leaders cannot alter the socioeconomic level of their districts, they may not be motivated by interdistrict open enrollment to improve their academic offerings. On the contrary, if they believe that family choices are made on the basis of criteria beyond their control, they may find open enrollment policies discouraging.

In another 1994 study, Lee, Croninger, and Smith investigated attitudes toward interdistrict open enrollment in metropolitan Detroit. Michigan did not have an interdistrict open enrollment policy in effect at the time of their investigation, but such a program had been extensively discussed in the state legislature. They re-analyzed an existing data base, the 1991 Detroit Area Study, to determine how attitudes toward school choice related to such variables as place of residence, race, and social class. They discovered that Detroit residents favored school choice significantly more frequently than did the residents of the surrounding suburbs. Detroit residents also had much lower incomes and educational levels than did the residents of the surrounding districts; in addition, they were far more likely to belong to a minority group. Lee, Croninger, and Smith concluded that the impact of an interdistrict open enrollment policy in the Detroit area would pose a dilemma: Detroit parents would probably want to transfer their children to the "better" suburban schools, but suburban residents would probably oppose such transfers. Thus, such a policy might not expand access to high quality education.

In conclusion, the current empirical literature about the supply-side of interdistrict open enrollment is not extensive. However, the work which has been done has produced mixed results, suggesting that although some of the supply-side assumptions of rational choice theory are valid--at least under certain circumstances--it is possible that not all of them are.

The Research Context

This study was carried out in Ohio, a Midwestern state which had a population of almost 11 million in the 1990 census. That census also showed that 73.3% of Ohio's citizens live in urban areas, while 26.7% live in rural sections of the state. Ohio has six cities with populations over 100,000: Columbus, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Toledo, Akron, and Dayton. It also has thirteen cities with populations between 50,000 and 100,000; the largest of these is Youngstown. In 1990, 10.6% of its citizens were African-American, and 1.3% were Hispanic (Ohio: Fact Summary, 1995; Ohio: Facts About Ohio, 1995; The World Almanac and Book of Facts, 1993).

Although the large majority of Ohio children attend school in metropolitan areas, about half of Ohio's 610 fiscally independent school districts are rural, with enrollments of less than 2600. In contrast, city districts tend to be large; six have enrollments above 25,000 (Crim, Maxwell, Baughman, & Overly, 1994). Since Ohio's local government structure is of the type which political scientists call "governmentally fragmented," urban districts are surrounded by one or more rings of small, independent, usually suburban, school districts (Percy & Hawkins, 1992). For example, the county in which Cleveland is located includes Cleveland City Schools and 30 other districts (State of Ohio, 1985).

Ohio's school finance program is a foundation program with required local effort. A referendum, or "levy" must be held in order to approve most property tax increases. In 1991, Ohio's average per pupil expenditure was $4,390, with a range from $2,882 to $25,535. The constitutionality of this system was unsuccessfully challenged in the late 1970s in [Cincinnati] Board of Education v. Walter. As of this writing, a second case challenging the system is working its way through the state courts (Crim, et al., 1994).

In 1989, the Ohio General Assembly passed an omnibus education reform act, popularly referred to as "S. B. 140." This law included three choice policies: interdistrict open enrollment, intradistrict open enrollment, and a post-secondary enrollment option. In the rhetoric surrounding the passage of the choice policies, political figures drew on popularized versions of rational choice theory to justify such policy changes (Fowler, 1994). The interdistrict open enrollment policy is voluntary and restricted to adjacent districts. Although no district is required to participate, a nonparticipating district can lose students to any participating district which is adjacent to it. Students who transfer to an adjacent district take with them "the state basic aid amount times the 'cost of doing business' factor" (Ohio Department of Education, 1993, p. 5). In 1993-94, this amount was approximately $2900 per transferring student. The law does not permit school districts to select incoming open enrollment students on the basis of race, academic or athletic talent, disability, English proficiency, or (for the most part) disciplinary record. Although the policy was piloted immediately after the passage of S. B. 140, full implementation was delayed until the fall of 1993. By July of that year, every school district had to adopt a policy regarding

interdistrict open enrollment and notify the state department of education whether it intended to be "open" (participating) or "closed" (nonparticipating).

Methods and Procedures

Based on the literature and the characteristics of Ohio and its interdistrict open enrollment policy, the following research questions were developed:

1. In what ways do the demographic characteristics associated with open districts differ from those associated with closed ones?
2. According to district superintendents, why did district leaders decide to be open or closed?
3. To what extent was the response of districts to interdistrict open enrollment consistent with the assumptions of rational choice theory?

Since the basic purpose of this study was to gather descriptive data about a relatively unknown phenomenon, a survey research methodology was chosen (Fink & Kosecoff, 1985). The survey instrument developed by the researcher included 5 forced choice items about the district demographic characteristics of total enrollment, enrollment trends, percentage of minority enrollment, location (urban, rural, etc.), and per pupil expenditure. In the absence of any published research about districts' reasons for participation or non-participation in such programs, the survey also included a single open-ended question (Fink & Kosecoff, 1985). This question was: "What were the major reasons for your district's decision [not] to participate in interdistrict open-enrollment during the 1993-94 school year?" The positive form of this question was sent to

participating districts and the negative form to non-participating districts. Copies of both versions of the survey are included in Appendix A.

In October 1993, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) supplied the researcher with a list of 175 districts which were said to have indicated that they would be open during the 1993-94 school year. The ODE indicated that the rest of the state's 610 districts would be closed. In January, February, and March 1994, the researcher mailed questionnaires to the superintendents of all 175 districts identified as open and to a randomly selected sample of 175 closed districts. The overall response rate to the survey was 82%. However, 9% of the responses were unusable since the respondents indicated that they had been inaccurately identified as open or closed. Although inaccuracies occurred among both supposedly open and supposedly closed districts, most occurred among the supposedly closed ones. Fully 16% of the superintendents who returned the closed survey indicated that their district was actually open. Thus, the return rate for usable responses was 73%, including 144 open districts and 112 closed ones.

Because the inaccuracies in the original list suggested that the sample may not have been random, descriptive statistics rather than inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. The forced-choice demographic items were analyzed separately from the responses to the open-ended questions. The demographic items were analyzed in three stages. In the first stage of the analysis, the responses of all districts were analyzed as a set. For the total group frequencies were tallied, and the percentage of all districts which fell into each demographic category was calculated. This made it possible to develop a profile of all the responding districts in relationship to the five demographic variables under study. In the second stage of the analysis, open and

closed districts were analyzed in the same way, their profiles were developed, and their profiles were compared both to each other and to the profile of the total group. The demographic variables for which the difference between the open and closed districts was 10% or greater were identified. On the basis of this analysis, several demographic characteristics were found to be particularly associated with either open or with closed districts. Then, in the third stage of the analysis of the demographic questions, all the responses of certain types of districts identified in stage two were placed together in a group. For example, in the second stage of the analysis, it had become apparent that rural districts were especially likely to be open Thus, in the third stage, all rural districts, both open and closed, were grouped together; and a demographic profile was developed for rural districts. This profile was then compared to the profile of the total group developed in stage one and also to the profiles of the open and closed districts analyzed in stage two. For each of these groups, frequencies were tallied for the other four demographic variables; and the percentage of the districts in the group which fell into each category was determined. In all three stages of this analysis, comparative results were displayed in tables and graphs.

In analyzing the open-ended questions, all responses were entered into a computer word processing program. Then they were sorted by demographic variable as well as by open and closed status. Finally, the responses were coded and categorized, using standard qualitative research techniques (Fink & Kosecoff, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1984). The percentage of open and closed superintendents giving an answer in each category of response was calculated. Response categories mentioned by 10% or more of each group of respondents were displayed in two tables, one for open and one for closed districts.

Findings

The most important overall finding of this study was that districts which had decided to participate in interdistrict open enrollment and districts which had decided not to do so differed substantially from each other. These differences were apparent both in the demographic characteristics most closely associated with each type of district and in the reasons given by superintendents for their district's decision. In this section the findings about the demographic characteristics will be presented first, followed by findings about the answers to the open-ended questions. Figures 1, 2 and 3 as well as Tables 1 and 2 are included in Appendix B.

Demographic Characteristics

Open districts. In the total sample of 256 school districts, 56% of them, or 144, had decided to participate in interdistrict open enrollment during the 1993-94 school year. (Readers should bear in mind that since this study was not based on a random sample of all Ohio districts, this finding does not suggest that 56% of the state's districts were open.) The district characteristic which was most clearly associated with open status was enrollment decline over the last five school years. As shown in Table 1, fully 82% of districts with declining enrollment had decided to participate in the program. Also strongly associated with participation were small size and rural location. Of the districts with enrollments below 1000, 78% were participating; and 71% of rural districts were open. It should be noted, however, that in Ohio low enrollment and rural location are connected; almost all districts with enrollments below 1000 are also rural. Although a small town location was not strongly associated with being either open or closed, it is worth pointing out that 83% of the open districts were located either in rural areas or in small towns. [1]

Minority enrollment was associated with participation in interesting ways. Both districts with high percentages of minority students and districts with very low percentages tended to be open. The first of these findings should be interpreted with great caution since only 6 of the 256 districts had minority enrollments above 20%. The second finding is more meaningful since 39 of the 256 districts had minority enrollments below 1%.

Finally, relatively low per pupil expenditure was also associated with a rather high participation rate. As shown in Table 1, districts whose expenditure fell at or slightly below the state average were more likely to be open than were other districts.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 present the findings about location, enrollment trends, and per pupil expenditure in a different way. They compare the distributions of open and closed districts to the distribution of the total group of districts. These graphs also clearly show that rural location, declining enrollment, and slightly below average per pupil expenditure were especially associated with participation in interdistrict open enrollment.

To summarize, then, the demographic characteristics most clearly associated with deciding to be open were: declining enrollment, small enrollment, rural location, racial homogeneity, and below average per pupil expenditure.

Closed Districts. In the total sample of 256 districts, 112 of them, or 44%, had decided not to participate in interdistrict open enrollment during the 1993-1994 school year. The demographic characteristic most clearly associated with non-participation was above average per pupil expenditure. As shown in Table 2, fully 93% of the 15 districts with per pupil expenditures over $5501 had opted to remain closed. Suburban location was also associated with non-participa-

tion. Fifty-three districts in the total sample were identified as suburban by their superintendent; 72% of them were closed. Districts whose enrollment had increased over the last five years were also likely to be closed, as were districts with a minority enrollment of 11-20%. Exact percentages are shown in Table 2; the distributions of all, closed, and open districts over three of the variables are compared in Figures 1, 2, and 3. Because several of the minority enrollment categories involved extremely low N's, this variable has not been displayed in graphs.

To summarize, then, the demographic characteristics associated with being closed were: above average per pupil expenditure, suburban location, growing enrollment, and a minority enrollment of 11-20%.

Reasons for districts' decisions about open enrollment

Open districts. Superintendents' responses to the open-ended survey question about why their district had decided to participate in the program suggest that the major reason was concern about losing enrollment. As shown in Table 3, slightly more than half mentioned this. Most commonly, superintendents indicated that it was a desire to offset potential enrollment losses to other districts which had motivated them and their school boards to open. Some stated that they had hoped to regain some of the enrollment which had been lost in recent years. Others believed that there was an optimum number of students in each grade or in each secondary program and hoped that open enrollment might help them reach or maintain this number. A few were worried about sheer survival. For example, the superintendent of one rural district wrote, "Survival--we need to increase our enrollment, which is currently 382 students in grades K-12."

In Ohio, as in most states, there is a direct link between enrollment and state funding. Therefore, concerns about enrollment are at least partially concerns about finances. However, 37% of the superintendents mentioned financial issues as a separate major reason for opting to participate. Several of them simply wrote "Financial" or "Finances" after the open-ended question. Others elaborated. "Basically we need all the additional money available since the state has abandoned suburban schools," wrote one. Another explained: "It would increase our $ receipts without a significant increase in expenses."

Almost a third suggested that pressures of various types had led them to decide to open. In a few cases the pressure had come from parents in adjacent districts. However, the most common source of pressure was the other districts themselves. The decision by one or more adjacent districts to participate in interdistrict open enrollment provided a district with a strong incentive to participate also, primarily because district leaders knew that they could not easily replace lost students and state funds if they did not. In several cases, discussions within a cluster of adjacent districts had preceded the decision that all should open. In a few instances, superintendents expressed resentmentabout the pressure exerbed by a neighboring district. For example, one complained: "We felt we were forced by an adjoining district that was and is actively recruiting for students."

A little more than a quarter of the superintendents indicated that either they or their board had decided to participate in open enrollment for philosophical reasons. More than half of these said that they believed either in the concept of parental choice or in the idea that competition between districts is a good way to improve education. A typical response of this sort was: "We

like and believe in the competition aspect of this concept." However, a quarter of those who gave philosophical reasons said that they were participating because they opposed school choice. They suspected that state politicians had other choice plans up their sleeves and hoped that by helping make interdistrict open enrollment work, they could head off more unpalatable forms of choice, particularly vouchers.

Finally, 22% of the superintendents mentioned educational reasons for participating. Most common was the belief that school choice increased the range of educational opportunities available to students. Some superintendents also commented that their district had a fine academic program which would benefit youngsters from the surrounding area.

Closed districts. A substantial majority--63%--of the superintendents of the closed districts indicated that one reason for their district's nonparticipation in the program was insufficient space. (See Table 4.) In many cases respondents simply stated that they had no space or were overcrowded. For example, one superintendent from the Cincinnati area wrote six words in answer to the open-ended question: "Over Crowding. Over Crowding. Over Crowding." However, numerous superintendents elaborated, giving some insight into what the space issue meant in their district. Many indicated that their school buildings were very crowded, with all classrooms in use. One complained about the large number of portable buildings that the district was utilizing to cope with its inadequate facilities. Several mentioned that the cause of the problem was the failure of one or more bond issues. A second general problem area was large class sizes. Some commented that they were already at or approaching state or local limits on pupil-teacher ratios. Since accepting children from other districts would mean hiring additional

teachers, they were hesitant to become involved in open enrollment. Related to the lack of space, but listed separately in Table 4, was increased enrollment. Nineteen per cent of the superintendents mentioned it as a reason for not participating, frequently in conjunction with either lack of space or high pupil-teacher ratios. However, this study suggests that in many districts space problems were unrelated to increasing enrollment. Often space problems seemed to be the result of a lack of sufficient capital for undertaking building programs.

The second most common reason given was financial, with almost one third of superintendents (32%) mentioning it. Again, many just wrote, "Finances" or "Cost factors." However, 23 of the 36 respondents who mentioned financial concerns elaborated on their answer. By far the most frequent financial reason given was that accepting students from other districts would be a losing proposition financially; 19 superintendents pointed this fact out. These were superintendents who headed districts whose per pupil expenditures were above the state average. Accepting out-of-district students would mean subsidizing their educational costs from the local portion of the district's budget. Not surprisingly, therefore, the "tuition" payment equalling the state minimum foundation amount which transfer students would bring with them was not an incentive to participate. A few superintendents mentioned another sort of financial impact; they feared that administering the program would cost more money than it would be worth.

Almost a quarter of the superintendents--23%--stated that their district had remained closed because of political opposition to accepting students from other districts. Among the opponents mentioned, "the community," the school board, and voters in tax levies appeared most

frequently. Also mentioned, but less often, were the administration, PTA and Booster Club presidents, community leaders, and union leaders.

Twelve per cent of the superintendents stated openly that either they or their board feared that participating in interdistrict open enrollment would lead to their having to serve "undesirable" students. Although some simply identified these youngsters as "an undesirable element" or "problems," others were more direct and specified one or more types of "undesirable students." Those mentioned explicitly as undesirable were: violent students, disciplinary problems, special needs students, minority students, students from a lower socioeconomic class, and students who wanted to escape a neighboring district's higher graduation requirements.

Finally, 11% of the respondents from closed districts gave philosophical reasons for not participating. Most commonly mentioned was opposition to the state's political leaders and their education policies. Also frequently expressed were the beliefs that collaboration is better than competition and that competition might lead to hard feelings between school districts. One superintendent wrote that he feared that interdistrict open enrollment would increase racial segregation; another felt that it would exacerbate the problems of schools which were already weak.

Discussion

Throughout this discussion it will be important to remember that the interdistrict open enrollment policy adopted by the Ohio General Assembly in 1989 did not conform in all respects to the recommendations which rational choice theorists have put forth for school choice programs. In particular, the amount of money which each participating student takes to the

receiving district is rather low and may not cover all educational costs. Moreover, students whose education is more costly than average do not take additional funds with them. Nor do those students unlikely to appeal to receiving districts, such as at-risk children and disciplinary problems. The Ohio General Assembly shaped its choice policy in the context of a "no-new-tax" ideology which had been the Republican Party's position for several years and which the Democrats had not seriously challenged. At the time that S. B. 140 was passed, legislators publicly bragged that no new money would be required to fund it (Fowler, 1994). However, it is also important to remember that, although choice policies which include incentives to accept more difficult pupils as transfers may be the ideal, cheap choice policies like Ohio's may well be the political reality of the 1990s and beyond. Thus, all serious debates of school choice should compare the current system of pupil assignment not only to ideal choice policies but also to the less expensive versions which state legislatures are likely to adopt.

The findings of this study partially support the assumptions which theorists make about the supply-side of school choice. Enrollment and finance emerged as important concerns of superintendents. Districts which were losing students or which had lower than average financial resources were especially likely to decide to open. Their leaders viewed the new choice policy as an opportunity to recoup previous losses or prevent future ones. They were, therefore, more than willing to compete with adjacent districts for scarce resources. Similarly, in such settings parents and communities were also willing to open their doors to "outsiders." The dollars which the new students brought with them apparently overcame the fears of change which one would normally anticipate.

However, this study also suggests that social context was probably an important factor in districts' decision to open. By and large, the open districts constitute a very homogeneous group. For the most part, they are rural and small town districts with low minority enrollments. They serve populations which do not--and probably can not--provide a high level of financial support for their schools. Although this study does not conclusively prove that most of the Ohio districts which opened in 1993-94 were clustered together in the rural, relatively unstratified hinterlands of the state, the data certainly point that way. In such areas participation in interdistrict open enrollment probably was acceptable to all concerned because the students who might transfer into the district resembled those who were already there.

School choice is often advocated as a solution to the problems of urban education. However, this study suggests that the areas most likely to benefit from interdistrict open enrollment may well be rural ones. Since interdistrict open enrollment appears to be acceptable to rural residents, it could be used to address one of the major problems in rural education. It could expand the academic and extracurricular options available to rural students without consolidating districts and schools. Research is needed to determine if this is, in fact, already taking place under interdistrict open enrollment policies. Some of the responses to the open-ended question in this study suggest that it is occurring in Ohio.

The findings of this study also raise some questions about the validity of the assumptions which theorists make about the supply-side of school choice. In particular, they raise questions about the ability of school leaders to expand the supply of the type of education that parents are likely to demand. First of all, they suggest that in areas where considerable social stratification

along race and income lines has already occurred, school leaders may be slow to implement choice programs. This study found that suburban and high-spending districts were especially likely to be closed. Moreover, it suggested that a district's percentage of minority enrollment interacts with the attitudes of its leaders toward choice polciies in complex ways. Yet, the literature suggests that some minority parents are likely to be interested in using interdistrict open enrollment as a way to find "better" schools for their children and that they may define those "better" schools as high-spending and suburban. In this study, the superintendents of such districts often mentioned political concerns as a major reason for remaining closed. They knew, or thought they knew, that the community did not want to open its schoolhouse doors to children from outside. In their comments, superintendents often expressed fears that opening might cause the district to lose its next bond issue or levy campaign. Some complained about the "provincialism" of their constituents. None wrote--but some may well have thought--that pushing too hard to participate in interdistrict open enrollment might lead not only to lost campaigns but to lost jobs.

These findings are consistent with Lee, Croninger and Smith's (1994) study of attitudes toward interdistrict open enrollment in Metropolitan Detroit. More research is needed on the degree to which suburban and high-spending public school districts are likely to support interdistrict open enrollment. Even under mandatory choice policies, administrators in such districts could employ various tactics to undercut meaningful participation if they wanted to do so. It is possible that the current public debate about school choice is simultaneously fueling demand for access to "better" school districts (among certain parents) and encouraging attitudes

which will curtail the supply of education in precisely those districts (among school and community leaders in the "better" districts). If so, the school choice movement is likely to encounter some interesting political situations in the not too distant future.

An unexpected finding of this study was the great importance of available space in school leaders' decisions about open enrollment. Yet this, too, is a factor which could have a major impact on the supply of "better" public schools. Education, public or private, requires substantial capital outlay on the front end. Currently, school districts in Ohio and many other states depend on the passage of bond issue referenda to obtain capital for building or renovating school facilities. The "no-new-tax" mentality which has prevailed for the last 15 or 20 years has made it increasingly difficult for districts to construct, remodel, and maintain buildings. As a result, many school systems--and not just poor ones--are ill-equipped to accommodate the students who are currently enrolled. This situation imposes severe restraints on supply in many areas. Moreover, it raises an interesting set of issues in relation to the supply-side of choice. Even if a "good" school district was in great demand, how could its leaders expand supply to meet such demand? Would voters pass bond issues to construct school buildings for children from outside their district? Would lending and credit rating institutions look favorably on such ventures even if voters were supportive? This study suggests that capital outlay is an important issue on the supply-side of school choice. Yet it is rarely discussed. It needs to become a more important part of the current policy debate.

This study shed little light on rational choice theorists' assumption that school leaders believe that parents are attracted to schools by strong academic programs. Perhaps the most

interesting finding relative to this assumption was the fact that school leaders themselves seemed to have attached little weight to academic quality issues in making their decision. Although 22% of the superintendents of open districts did give educational reasons for their decision, academic quality was not usually their concern. Their focus was on expanding educational opportunities for students. Superintendents of closed districts rarely mentioned educational reasons at all. For the superintendents in this study the major issues were keeping enrollment up and coping with financial problems. Even so, educators' beliefs about why parents choose schools are an important consideration on the supply-side of choice. They need to be studied.

Conclusion

This study only partially supported theorists' assumptions about the supply-side of school choice. Other things being equal, many school leaders do seem to be willing to compete with each other for students and state funds. However, when other things are not equal--when a district is wealthier than its neighbors or serves a more "desirable" student population, for example--its leaders are less likely to be willing to enter such a competition. Moreover, many districts may be unable to accept open enrollment students because of inadequate facilities. This study suggests that major constraints exist on the supply-side of school choice. They may restrict the availability of schools which parents perceive as"good." More discussion of and research on the supply-side of school choice is needed.

Endnotes

1. Because the unit of analysis in this study was districts, Ohio's large urban districts disappeared into the aggregate data. However, for those readers who are interested in large urban districts and school choice, the three largest urban districts (Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati) did not participate. Nor did the large majority of suburban districts adjacent to them. Toledo was open, but all of its surrounding districts remained closed. Akron and its adjacent districts were open as were Dayton and a few of its adjacent districts. Akron and Dayton suffered significant enrollment and financial losses to adjacent districts.

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Appendix A

INTERDISTRICT OPEN ENROLLMENT SUPERINTENDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographics

1. How would you describe your district?

_____ Rural _____ Small town _____ Urban _____ Suburban

2. What is your district's enrollment?

_____ Below 1000 _____ 1001-3000 _____ 3001-5000

_____ 5001-7000 _____ 7001-10,000 _____ 10,001-15,000

_____ 15,001 or more

3. In the last five years, what has happened to your district's enrollment?

_____ Increased _____ Remained stable _____ Decreased

4. What is your district's minority pupil enrollment?

_____ 0% _____ 1-5% _____ 6-10% _____ 11-20%

_____ 21-35% _____ 36-50% _____ 51% or higher

5. In 1992-93, what was your district's per pupil expenditure?

_____ $3500 or less _____ $3501-4500 _____ $4501-5500

_____ $5501-6500 _____ $6501-7500 _____ $7501-8500

_____ $8501 or higher

OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTION

What were the major reasons for your district's decision to participate in interdistrict open-enrollment during the 1993-94 school year?

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Demographics

1. How would you describe your district?

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_____ 21-35% _____ 36-50% _____ 51% or higher

5. In 1992-93, what was your district's per pupil expenditure?

_____ $3500 or less _____ $3501-4500 _____ $4501-5500

_____ $5501-6500 _____ $6501-7500 _____ $7501-8500

_____ $8501 or higher

OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTION

What were the major reasons for your district's decision not to participate in interdistrict open-enrollment during the 1993-94 school year?

Appendix B

Table 1

Factors Associated with Being an Open District

Factor	Percentage of districts open
Minority enrollment over 20%	83%
Decreasing enrollment	82%
District enrollment below 1000	78%
Rural location	71%
Minority enrollment less than 1%	69%
Per pupil expenditure of $3501-4500	66%

[Percentage of all districts open: 56%]

Table 2

Factors Associated with Being a Closed District

Factor	Percentage of districts closed
Per pupil expenditure over $5501	93%
Suburban location	72%
Increasing enrollment	61%
Minority enrollment of 11-20%	60%

[Percentage of all districts closed: 44%]

Table 3

Superintendents' Reasons for Participating in Interdistrict Open Enrollment

Reasons	Percentage of superintendents giving reason*
Increase/maintain enrollment	52%
Financial	37%
Pressure	30%
Philosophical	27%
Educational	22%

*Because superintendents could give more than one reason, percentages total more than 100%.

Table 4

Superintendents' Reasons for Not Participating in Interdistrict Open Enrollment

Reasons	Percentage of superintendents giving reason*
Insufficient space	63%
Financial	32%
Political	23%
Increasing enrollment	19%
To avoid undesirable students	12%
Philosophical	11%

*Because superintendents could give more than one reason, percentages total more than 100%.

Figure 1. Distribution of all, closed, and open districts by location

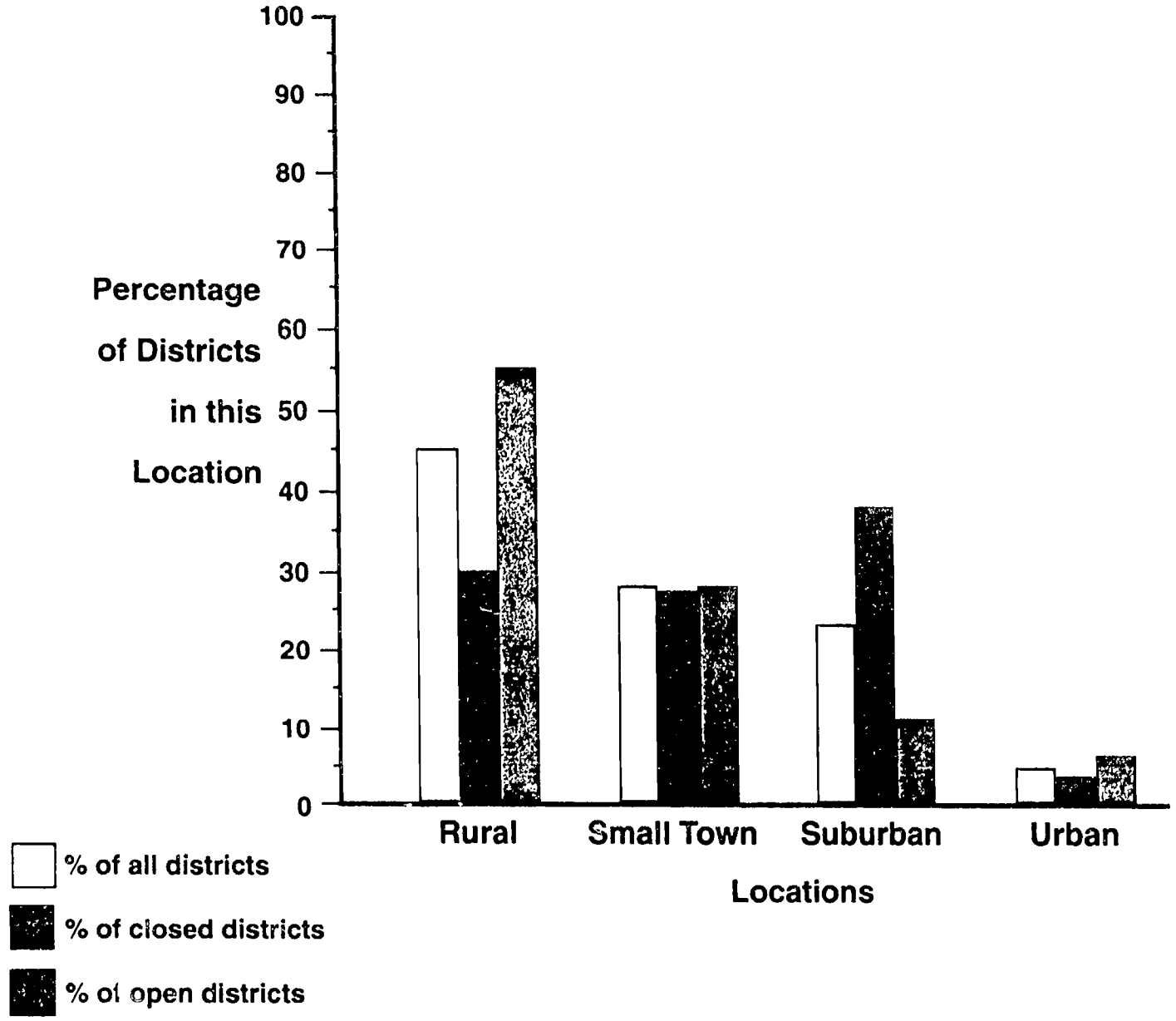

Figure 2. Distribution of all, closed, and open districts by enrollment trend

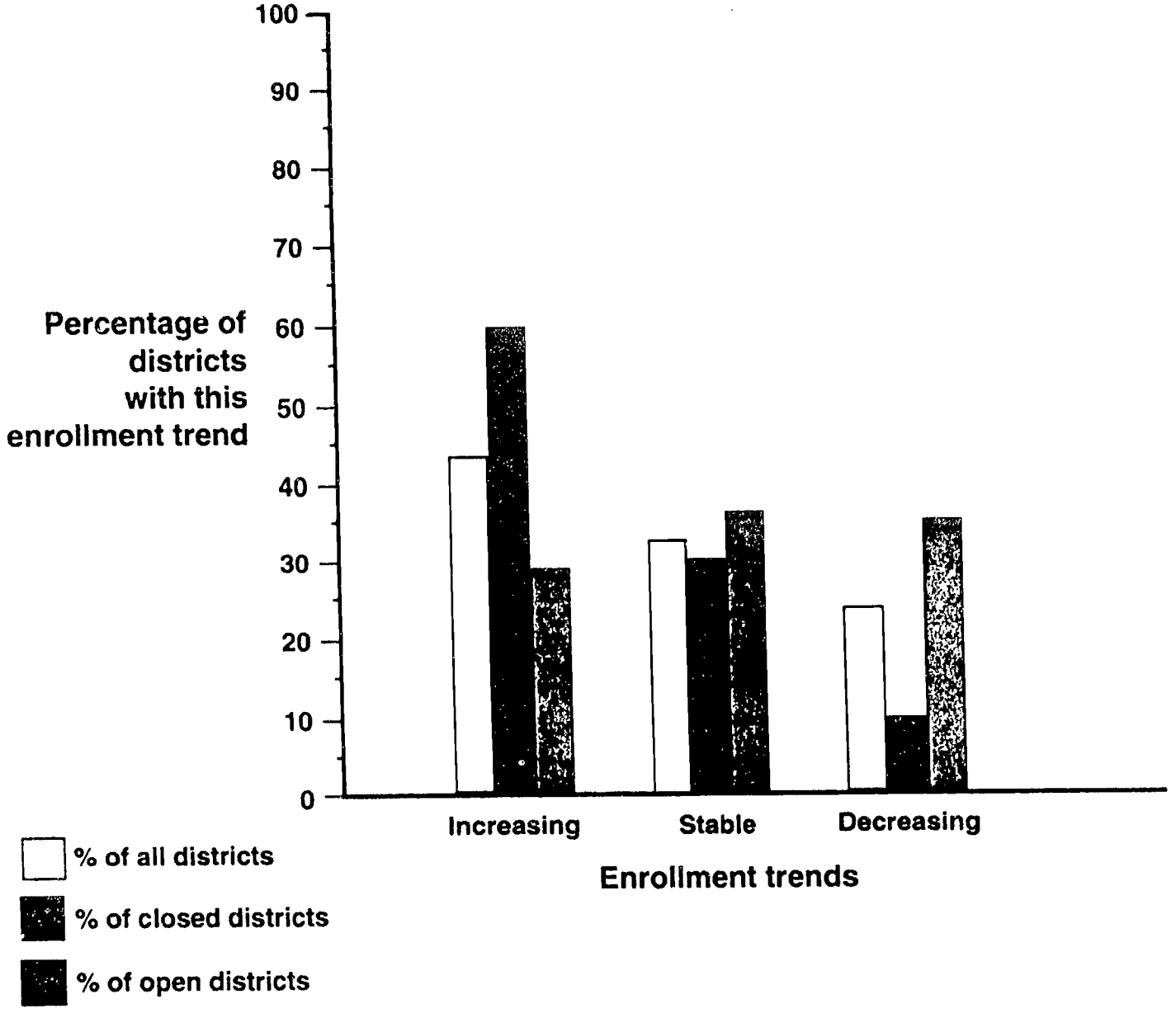

Figure 3. Distribution of all, closed, and open districts by per pupil expenditure