

Open Enrollment in Missouri: Current Policies and Proposals

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Better evidence, better policies, better schools.

Key Points

- Forty-three states, including Missouri, have some form of interdistrict open enrollment, though the mechanisms of these policies differ.
- Six of Missouri's eight border states currently require districts to create interdistrict open enrollment policies, and one (Kansas) will follow suit by 2024.
- Current Missouri policy allows for open enrollment both within the same district (intradistrict) and across different districts (interdistrict), but both are limited.
- In Missouri, under current state policy, for interdistrict enrollment to be an option for families, a voluntary mutual agreement is required between districts detailing the circumstances and requirements for a student to attend their non-designated school.
 - It is unclear how many districts in the state participate in mutual agreements.
 - Of the 20 largest school districts in the state, PRiME researchers could only locate one interdistrict open enrollment agreement.
- A current proposal in Missouri (HB 253) would allow districts to opt-in to accepting students from beyond their district boundaries without specific interdistrict agreements in place and without requiring parents to pay tuition.
- Key policy elements when considering effective open enrollment policies include the voluntary or mandatory nature of the policy, funding for students changing school districts, capacity caps for sending and receiving students, the provision of transportation, and the provision of services for students with disabilities and with special education needs.



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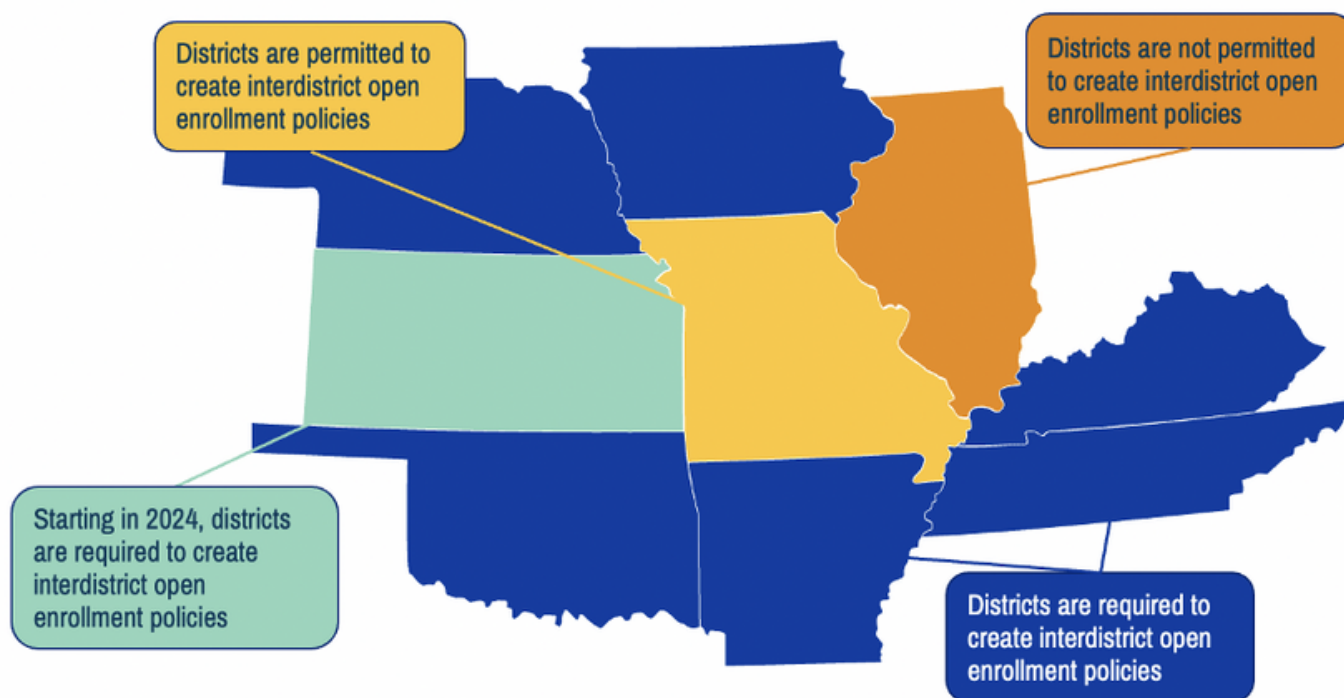
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What Is Open Enrollment?

Open enrollment is a form of public school choice, allowing students to attend public schools other than the one to which they are residentially assigned. Open enrollment in which students can transfer to schools in different districts is called interdistrict open enrollment. Forty-three states, including Missouri, have some form of interdistrict open enrollment, though the mechanisms of these policies differ. As shown in Figure 1, six of Missouri's eight border states currently require districts to create interdistrict open enrollment policies, and one (Kansas) will follow suit by 2024. Only one state (Illinois) does not currently allow interdistrict open enrollment.

Figure 1 : Interdistrict Open Enrollment Policies in Missouri and Border States



Open enrollment policies have been adopted in efforts to expand educational opportunities for students and increase competition among schools, with the goal of improving education for all students. However, there is limited research examining the impact of open enrollment on student outcomes due in part to the fact that open enrollment programs are relatively rare. Of the existing research, there is some evidence that students perform better with open enrollment policies in place. For example, interdistrict open enrollment was a beneficial desegregation strategy for students in Connecticut's central cities and had a positive impact on student achievement (in reading for middle school participants and math and reading for high school participants). [1]

In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, intradistrict open enrollment led to small increases in postsecondary attainment for girls, but not for boys, and this impact for girls was predicted by gains in school quality (e.g., attending a school with higher ratings of school quality was associated with higher postsecondary attainment outcomes for girls). [2] Finally, in Northern California, transfer offers from an oversubscribed voluntary interdistrict open enrollment program were associated with increased test scores as well as increased college enrollment, primarily among male students. [3] Disparate findings for different types of student groups raise questions about the underlying mechanisms of open enrollment, and the limited number of studies makes generalizability difficult. Further, positive impacts from open enrollment may depend on whether higher quality school options are available, participating, and able to accommodate new students. With limited data, it is challenging to predict the impact of open enrollment policies, leading to divergent opinions regarding policy implementation.

In Missouri, proponents of open enrollment argue open enrollment can help lagging school districts improve. [4] Bill sponsor Rep. Brad Pollitt claims open enrollment would increase competition among schools in Missouri as schools would be interested in attracting more students to obtain additional funding. This competition would then encourage all schools to improve their performance and curricular offerings to attract the most applicants. Additionally, Pollitt argues open enrollment would allow families to select curricula that better align with their academic interests and personal beliefs. [5] [6]

Proposals to expand interdistrict enrollment have been introduced in the current and recent legislative sessions, signaling Missouri families may face substantial changes to open enrollment policies in the coming years.

However, some school administrators, especially in rural districts, [7] criticize open enrollment, fearing open enrollment will strain schools, leading to overcrowding and a lack of resources in high-demand schools and financial repercussions for lower-demand schools. There are also fears open enrollment may lead to increased segregation as families with the resources to do so will choose more affluent schools while low-income families will be left with fewer options. Regardless of the impact of open enrollment, in practice, the current process for parents can be complicated to navigate. Proposals to expand interdistrict open enrollment have been introduced in the current and recent legislative sessions, signaling Missouri families may face substantial changes to open enrollment policies in the coming years.

In this policy brief, we describe Missouri's current open enrollment policy and outline a current proposal, House Bill 253, being considered to further increase students' ability to transfer to schools located in other districts. We also discuss key elements of interdistrict open enrollment policies that must be considered in policy design to ensure all students and schools benefit.

Missouri Interdistrict Open Enrollment: Permitted via Voluntary Mutual Agreements Between Districts and Rare Alternative Pathways

While current Missouri policy allows for open enrollment both within the same district (intradistrict) and across different districts (interdistrict), both are limited. Given the recent discussion of expanding interdistrict open enrollment, we have intentionally focused this brief on policies that allow for students to transfer away from their local district—interdistrict enrollment.

In Missouri, districts may establish interdistrict enrollment via voluntary mutual agreements between districts detailing the circumstances and requirements for a student to attend their non-designated school. [8] Given the limited publicly available data regarding open enrollment in Missouri, it is unclear how many districts have existing mutual agreements. The PRiME Center conducted a policy scan of the 20 largest school districts in the state and only identified one existing across-district agreement in the St. Louis area—the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation. [9] This student transfer program, developed in response to a desegregation case, currently allows voluntary transfer of African American students in the city to apply to transfer to participating districts in St. Louis County and for non-African American students in the county to apply to transfer into magnet schools in St. Louis Public Schools. However, enrollment in this program is set to end this year.

Among pre-filled legislation on education for the current Missouri session is a bill proposing to allow districts to opt-in to accepting students from beyond their district boundaries.

Without an agreement, enrolling in school districts as a non-resident is limited to rarer instances when there is not an available high school, when a district has lost accreditation, or if students or their families own land in a district other than the one in which they reside. [10] Students can also be admitted to a district in which they do not reside at the discretion of the local school board, though, applying students may be required to pay tuition. Even in districts that create their own open enrollment agreements, the state allows for districts to deny students entry if they have a serious enough disciplinary record or if they live more than 10 miles from the receiving district. [11]

Among pre-filed legislation on education for the current Missouri session is a bill proposing to allow districts to opt-in to accepting students from beyond their district boundaries without specific interdistrict agreements in place and without requiring parents to pay tuition. [12] Specific elements of the bill are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 : Current and Proposed Interdistrict Open Enrollment Policies in Missouri

Policy Elements	Current Policy	Proposed Policy: House Bill 253
Voluntary/Mandatory	Voluntary participation for sending and receiving districts	Voluntary participation for receiving districts, but no discretion for sending districts
Funding	In select instances students are permitted to attend schools outside of their residential school with funding provided by the state. This is possible if the student is either in an unaccredited school or in a school with an established interdistrict policy with another district. Additionally, if families own land in multiple districts, particularly agricultural land, students may attend school in either district. Students can also pay tuition to attend alternative public schools	Open enrollment would be free for parents and funded by the state of Missouri. This policy would make open enrollment available for all students as opposed to the select students for whom it is currently available
Capacity Caps	None	4% of sending district's student population
Transportation	Transportation is not provided unless students are transferring from an unaccredited district or are supported by specific, external programs (such as desegregation programs)	Transportation is not provided except for students who qualify for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch program (FRPL) or if adding a stop to a pre-existing bus route does not increase district costs
Providing Special Education Services	None	Receiving school districts are not required to provide additional supports for special education students and students with disabilities

Note. The information presented here represents the proposed policy as of the policy brief release date.

Influential Elements of Interdistrict Open Enrollment Policies

Opening school boundaries to outside students can present distinctly different challenges than other school choice initiatives. When making a determination as to whether or not to expand open enrollment, it is imperative to consider several key elements of interdistrict open enrollment policies. Specifically, voluntary or mandatory policies, funding, capacity caps, transportation, and special education and supporting students with disabilities are often highlighted as key elements of any interdistrict open enrollment plan. [13]

Voluntary/Mandatory

This policy component requires that states consider the extent to which interdistrict open enrollment agreements between districts are mandated as opposed to discretionary. Mandatory participation requires that all districts within the state participate in open enrollment. For example, Arkansas has a policy of mandatory open enrollment, requiring districts to accept students from outside of their boundaries unless they can demonstrate that doing so would exceed capacity limitations. Other states have mandatory open enrollment policies for certain districts within the state. For example, districts in Michigan are required to participate in open enrollment if they have been unaccredited for three consecutive years or more. [14]

Missouri's proposed open enrollment policy would be voluntary allowing districts to retain some discretion in participation.

Voluntary open enrollment allows districts to opt in to open enrollment participation. This approach to open enrollment allows the districts more discretion as to whether or not they have the space or resources available for additional students. As such, districts with space available for additional students would likely benefit from the income provided by additional students with little added cost. However, one challenge to the voluntary approach is that high-performing districts or districts near capacity likely would have little incentive to opt in to open enrollment. Thus, it is likely many districts would not participate in a voluntary program. Minnesota is one state that utilizes a voluntary open enrollment policy, allowing districts to volunteer to participate in open enrollment based on capacity limits set by the school board. [15] Minnesota's open enrollment plan severely limits the amount of students eligible to qualify for open enrollment. Missouri's proposed open enrollment policy would be voluntary allowing districts to retain some discretion in participation.

Funding

In Missouri, district funding is based on the average daily attendance of students. Given the increase in costs associated with educating each additional student, some argue that funding should directly follow students engaging in interdistrict enrollment. [16] In this model, as students transfer to new schools, the state funding would follow each student from the sending school to the receiving school. This is the case in states like [Kentucky](#) and [Arkansas](#) where students are counted as part of the receiving district in order to determine state-level funding allocations. [17] [18] Missouri's proposed legislation would create a similar model with state and federal funding following students to the receiving schools.

While proponents of school choice view moving the funding to the receiving district as a way of increasing competition between districts, opponents argue decreasing funding for under-resourced districts poses a greater threat than any potential benefit from open enrollment. [19] Less funding would compound existing challenges in under-resourced schools, particularly in districts losing a large number of students. Specifically, higher performing school districts would receive more funding as more students transfer into these districts, possibly widening existing resource gaps.

Missouri's proposed legislation would create a similar model with state and federal funding following students to the receiving schools.

One potential solution to this conundrum is offered by Wisconsin, which counts students as part of both their residential district and their chosen district. [20] Districts in Wisconsin receive additional funding when accepting students from other districts, while districts that are sending students to other districts do not lose money. This approach incentivizes districts to accept outside transfers while not harming the districts from which the students depart. The downside to this approach is cost—each student utilizing open enrollment costs the state twice as much given two districts are now funded.

Capacity Caps

Another consideration when developing open enrollment policies is whether to instate capacity caps to limit the number of students who can transfer in or out of a specific school district. Capacity caps can minimize the impact of open enrollment on the student population of sending schools. Likewise, managing the number of students permitted to transfer into a school or program can ensure there is enough space and resources, such as classrooms and teachers, to accommodate all students, both residential and transfer.

One state utilizing capacity caps is Arkansas, which places a 3% cap on the percentage of students who can depart any individual school district via open enrollment. [21] This cap allows for students to utilize open enrollment while helping to ensure that no individual district loses too many students. These caps are designed to help with both enrollment considerations for sending and receiving districts as well as funding concerns to help limit the amount of funding that can change districts via open enrollment. Missouri has considered including capacity caps in open enrollment legislation—a 4% cap is included in the most recent policy proposal. [22]

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Transportation

Transportation is a complex issue for any open enrollment policy, the crux of which is whether transportation is provided by the sending district, by the receiving district, or by the parents of students. Oftentimes students at or below a specific income level or with special needs are accommodated by either the sending or receiving district. For example, in Iowa, the sending school district must provide transportation to students from families at or below twice the federal poverty rate. [23] Otherwise, as is currently the case in Missouri, student families must provide transportation.

Missouri's proposed bill would require parents to be responsible for transportation to nonresident districts, or for parents to arrange for students to be picked up at or near existing bus stops.

At present, Missouri's proposed bill would require parents to be responsible for transportation to nonresident districts, or for parents to arrange for students to be picked up at or near existing bus stops. Although, if the student is FRPL-eligible and the student's residential district borders their new district, the receiving district must either provide transportation or reimburse families for transportation costs. The primary reasons for holding parents responsible for transportation, outside of the FRPL-exemption, are the cost of bussing students outside their designated district, the difficulty of coordinating transportation between multiple districts, and the distances and time that students might have to spend on a bus en-route to school.

Additionally, following the COVID-19 Pandemic, Missouri has struggled to find enough bus drivers to accommodate students in the current system, let alone an expanded open enrollment environment. However, it is noteworthy that by not providing transportation, Missouri is at risk of excluding students who have the most to gain from open enrollment. Specifically, transportation is more likely to be a barrier for lower-income families given the inherent costs in providing transportation to schools in general and especially to those further from one's home. While the FRPL-exception offers transportation for many low-income students, this requirement does not provide for all lower-income students or for students interested in attending non-neighboring districts.

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Providing Special Education Services

Students with different physical and educational needs require specific services in schools. States considering open enrollment policies must consider how, and to what degree, receiving schools are held responsible for providing services to transfer students. While families can make the choice of where to send their children, not all districts have the same resources available. In some cases, receiving districts accept the responsibility of providing special education services. These districts either already have or agree to acquire the necessary services, such as additional support staff, in order to provide the necessary educational supports for each transfer student. Alternatively, due to the difficulty in predicting who enrolls through an open enrollment policy, in some cases, districts are not obligated to support incoming transfers if they do not already have the required supports in place.

In Missouri, the current and proposed open enrollment policies do not require districts to provide additional special education services or support for students with disabilities. Families of students with special needs and disabilities must make open enrollment decisions based on available services at the school to which the student might transfer. This can introduce more challenges for students with disabilities to participate in existing open enrollment programs.

In Missouri, the current and proposed open enrollment policies do not require districts to provide additional special education services or support for students with disabilities.

Considerations for Open Enrollment in Missouri

As Missouri continues to consider open enrollment policies, it is imperative that policy makers weigh policy elements including the voluntary or mandatory nature of the policy, funding for students changing school districts, capacity caps for sending and receiving students, the provision of transportation, and the provision of services for students with disabilities and with special education needs. Different decisions in each of these policy elements can substantially alter the impact of an open enrollment policy including the students and the schools that benefit or are hindered by it. Understanding how these policy components impact Missouri students, families, and schools are important considerations for all policymakers as current and future legislation is reviewed.

However, the limited research available regarding the impact of open enrollment makes it difficult for policymakers to make well-informed decisions. Poor policy choices regarding open enrollment can lead to diminished student outcomes, distressed district finances, and increased segregation. As such, the PRiME Center encourages additional and more comprehensive research regarding the impact of open enrollment on student, school, and family outcomes. An increase in the number of robust open enrollment studies along with an authoritative review of the current literature will allow for more informed policy decisions in state legislatures, including the Missouri General Assembly.

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What We Do

We conduct and share research on education. We help lawmakers, educators, and families in the state of Missouri make decisions about education policy and practice. Our mission is to ensure that the people making decisions and building policies around education have the relevant data and evidence they need to build the best and most equitable educational systems possible.