

# Fiscal Research Program

## INTERDISTRICT SCHOOL CHOICE IN GEORGIA : ISSUES AND EQUITY

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Executive Summary .....	ii
I. Introduction .....	1
II. Context .....	2
III. Conclusions .....	5
IV. Implications .....	13
V. Recommendations .....	14
References .....	16
Appendix .....	18

# **INTERDISTRICT SCHOOL CHOICE IN GEORGIA: ISSUES OF EQUITY**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Georgia is one state in which interdistrict school choice operates at the discretion of local school districts. Under Georgia law, each school district has broad license to establish its own policies under which students are allowed to transfer. Some of these policies raise serious equity issues.

This report explores the issue of interdistrict school choice in Georgia, focusing primarily on issues of equity. More specifically, the report investigates the demographic characteristics of districts, the student transfer policies of districts, and the financial impact on districts that result from the gain or loss of students due to interdistrict choice.

The conclusions from the report suggest that district policies did have an impact on the number and composition of interdistrict choice students. The conclusions also indicate that the transfer of interdistrict choice students did significantly impact the amount of state funds allotted for basic K-12 education for some of the districts.

The equity issues raised in the report indicate the need for Georgia lawmakers to consider enacting an open enrollment law that ensures equal educational access for students to participate in local interdistrict choice programs. Specific recommendations that address such issues as fair and objective admissions, access to information, adequate transportation, and other issues are provided in the report.

# INTERDISTRICT SCHOOL CHOICE IN GEORGIA: ISSUES OF EQUITY

## I. Introduction

In its basic form, interdistrict school choice allows parents to choose for their children public school located in district other than the parents' resident district. In practice, interdistrict programs vary from state to state and district to district. Some states have specific state legislation that provide detailed guidelines regarding program participation, transportation, parent information and funding. Other states have legislation that is more restrictive in nature and limits district participation to specific purposes such as working with at-risk students or achieving racial balance. Still others have adopted no interdistrict choice legislation, leaving local school districts to accept or reject transfer students at their own discretion (Bierlein, 1993).

Georgia is one state in which interdistrict school choice operates at the discretion of local school districts. Each school district has broad license to establish its own policies under which students are allowed to transfer. Some districts accept nonresident students without question while other districts reject all student transfers, with the exception of nonresident students who are children of district employees (Ga. Code 20-2-293b). Some districts disseminate detailed information about the district's schools and programs to parents of nonresident students, while others furnish no information at all. Some districts provide transportation of some nonresident students while others do not. Some districts charge tuition to nonresident students, while others admit transfers without charge. Some of these district policies raise serious equity issues.

This report explores the issue of interdistrict school choice in Georgia, focusing primarily on issues of equity. More specifically, the report investigates the demographic characteristics of

districts, the student transfer policies of districts, and the financial impact on districts that result from the gain or loss of students due to interdistrict choice.<sup>1</sup>

The report proceeds as follows: Section II provides an overview of the context of interdistrict school choice in Georgia. Section III provides a summary of the findings of the study, while Section IV presents the implications and Section V presents recommendations. Definition of key terms is provided in Box A, while the Appendix contains a discussion of the data and its limitations.

## II. Context

During the 1995-96 academic year, interdistrict choice in Georgia existed in a state where resources were unevenly distributed among its districts. Georgia education was characterized by disparities in the financial resources available to school districts. These disparities were reflected in the variations in basic K-12 expenditures among districts. The bottom quarter of the state's school districts spent an average of \$3,776 per FTE on basic K-12 expenditures, only 87 % of the state average of \$4,344 per FTE. The top 25% of the state's school districts spent an average of \$5,093 per FTE, 15% more than the state average and 26% more than the per FTE average of the bottom 25% of the state's districts. Moreover, when adjusting for differences in the student populations of each district (i.e., the weighted FTE count), the bottom 25% of districts spent an average of \$2,993 per weighted FTE on basic K-12 expenditures, only 90% of the state average of \$3,328 per weighted FTE. The top 25% of districts spent an average of \$3,773 per weighted

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<sup>1</sup>This report is based on research conducted by the author for his doctoral dissertation. For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see Doering, D. R. (1998). Issues of Interdistrict Choice and Equity in Georgia. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Georgia State University, Atlanta.

Box A

Definition of Terms

Interdistrict choice students refer to nonresident consent students, as defined by the Georgia Department of Education, who attended open districts.

Open districts refer to those receiving districts that granted the transfer of nonresident consent students, regardless of whether or not the students were children of district employees.

Closed districts refer to those receiving districts that only granted the transfer of nonresident consent students who were children of district employees.

District gainers refer to those districts that experienced a net gain in district enrollment due to the transfer of interdistrict choice students. District losers refer to those districts that experienced a net loss in district enrollment due to the transfer of interdistrict choice students.

CITY districts refer to all independent school districts in Georgia, with the exception for Atlanta City. Atlanta City was assigned to the high density grouping, rather than to the independent school districts, due to its size and high population density.

Basic K-12 expenditures per FTE refers to all expenditures directly related to classroom instruction and support services for elementary and secondary students divided by the full-time equivalent (FTE) student count. Basic K-12 expenditures include expenditures for instruction, student services, staff and professional development, instructional media, general administration, school administration, and facility maintenance and operation (M & O). The FTE student counts are based on student enrollment in specific instructional programs during each one-sixth of the school day.

FTE, 12% more than the state average and 21% more than the weighted per FTE average of the bottom 25% of districts.

In addition, the state's school districts widely varied in size. Although the state average for district size was 7,130 FTEs, the difference between the largest district (DeKalb) and the smallest district (Taliaferro) was 85,210 FTEs. One hundred thirty-nine (77%) of the districts had student enrollments of less than the state average. These districts accounted for 30% (388,105 FTEs) of the state's total number of FTEs, as compared to 70% (895,290 FTEs) for districts with student enrollments above the state average.

The racial composition of the student populations also widely varied among school districts. In 70 of the districts, the percentage of white students was more than 10% greater than that of the statewide percentage of white students (58%). Of these 70 districts, 27 had student enrollments that were more than 90% white. Conversely, in another 56 districts, the percentage of minority students was more than 10% greater than that of the statewide percentage of minority students (42%). Of these 56 districts, eight had student enrollments that were more than 90% minority students. These variations in the racial composition of districts point out the profound racial differences that existed among districts in Georgia.

There were also enormous differences in the socioeconomic complexion of Georgia counties, as evidenced by disparities in median household income, the percentage of children living in poverty, and the percentage of minorities in the population. The average median income for households in the lowest quarter of counties was \$20,164, only 86% of the state average of \$23,517. The average median income for households in the highest quarter was \$27,890, 16% more than the state average and 28% more than the lowest quarter of counties. The average percentage of children living in poverty was 35% in the lowest 25% of counties,

compared to 14% in the highest 25% of counties. Moreover, the average percentage of minorities in the lowest 25% of counties was 61%, compared to 7% for the highest 25% of counties.

These factors affected the way school districts in Georgia addressed the interdistrict choice issue. They also provide the context for the conclusions that follow about interdistrict choice and equity in Georgia during the 1995-96 academic year.

### **III. Conclusions**

As noted in the Appendix, this report relies on data from several sources. The following conclusions are based on the data obtained from these sources.

The transfer of interdistrict choice students had only a small impact on most of the districts in the state. The number of interdistrict choice students to cross district lines was small. Only 14,141 interdistrict choice students transferred to schools outside of their resident district. These students accounted for only slightly more than 1% of Georgia's public school population. One hundred-eleven of the districts permitted these interdistrict choice students to transfer into their district. Of these districts, 65 showed a net gain in their student enrollments due to the transfer of interdistrict choice students. These transfers resulted in the shifting of \$21 million in state funds for basic K-12 education. These funds are small when compared to the more than \$3.3 billion in state revenues generated for basic K-12 education.

CITY districts benefited the most from interdistrict choice, while districts with the greatest losses were mostly spread among districts in low population density areas. All twenty of the CITY districts accepted interdistrict choice students. These districts represented 55% (7,835 FTEs) of the state's interdistrict choice enrollment, but accounted for only 14% of the total

student enrollment for these districts. Combined, CITY districts received more than \$13 million in state funds for basic K-12 education due to the transfer of interdistrict choice students to these districts. This accounted for 62% of the state basic K-12 expenditures that were shifted from sending districts to receiving districts. By contrast, districts that experienced significant losses of students and funds were mostly spread among districts in low population density/extremely low socioeconomic areas (6), low population density/low socioeconomic areas (3), and low population density/high socioeconomic areas (7). Combined, these 16 districts indicated a net loss of 4,828 FTEs that resulted in a loss of more than \$10 million in state funds, or 5% of the funding for basic K-12 education in these districts.

Comparisons suggest that district gainers were more likely to offer their high school students more choices among instructional programs than district losers. These comparisons are based on the percentages of high school students that attended either a 9-12 regular classroom, vocational laboratory or nonvocational laboratory program. These percentages indicate that district gainers tended to enroll a larger percentage of their high school students in vocational and nonvocational laboratory programs than did district losers. Comparisons also indicate that a larger percentage of interdistrict choice students were enrolled in high school programs than the percentage of high school students at large. Sixty percent of the net increase in high school enrollment for district gainers can be attributed to interdistrict choice students enrolled in laboratory programs. Nearly 5% of the student enrollment for nonvocational laboratory programs in open districts consisted of interdistrict choice students. These comparisons support Ted Kolderie's (1990) claim that for school choice to work, there needs to be choices among schools and programs.

By and large, special needs students were underrepresented, with the exception for those in some CITY programs. In their study on the participation of special needs students in Minnesota's open enrollment program, Ysseldyke, Lange and Gorney (1994) found that these students participated in the program at approximately the same rate as the state's public school population. Contrary to that finding, special needs students in Georgia accounted for only 10% of the interdistrict choice population, as compared to 14% of the statewide public school population. However, 22% of interdistrict choice students in special needs programs were enrolled in Gifted programs, as compared to 7% of the special needs students in Gifted programs in open districts and to 10% of the special needs students in Gifted programs in closed districts. Much of the difference in these percentages can be attributed to four CITY districts: Carrollton, Chickamauga, Dalton, and Rome. Moreover, five CITY districts accounted for more than half of the net increase in their Special Instructional Assistance (SIA) students for district gainers, while eight CITY districts experienced enrollment gains in their Remedial instructional programs of more than 10%.

Interdistrict choice was largely a phenomenon of white students transferring from mostly white school districts to other districts that were mostly white. Much of the basis for this phenomenon can be attributed to the 66 open districts that enrolled a higher percentage of white students than the state average of 58%. These open districts received 9,166 (70%) and sent 7,515 (58%) of the interdistrict choice students that were white. This resulted in a net increase of 6,637 (5%) in the white student enrollment for 40 of the open districts and a net decrease of 4,852 (5%) for 26 of the open districts. Also contributing to this phenomenon were the large percentage of closed districts that enrolled large percentages of minority students. Thirty-three (48%) of the

closed districts enrolled a higher percentage of minority students than the state average of 42%. These districts accounted for 283,482 or 59% of the state's minority student population.

Minorities were underrepresented in interdistrict choice programs. In his case study of interdistrict choice in Massachusetts, Richard Fossey (1994) concluded that minorities were underrepresented in the state's open enrollment program. However, the authors (Colopy & Tarr, 1994) of another case study of minority participation in Minnesota's open enrollment program found that minority students participated in interdistrict choice at the same rate as white students. The current study indicates that minorities were underrepresented in interdistrict choice programs in Georgia. The great majority (11,980 FTEs or 85%) of students in Georgia who participated in interdistrict choice were white, even though white students accounted for only 63% of the student population for open districts. African American participation was only 13% (1,892 FTEs), even though African American students represented 34% of the student population for open districts. Hispanic participation was slightly more than 1%, and participation by Asian, Pacific Islander American Indian, Alaskan Native, and multiracial students was less than 1%.

Only a small number and percentage of the minority students in low population density/extremely low socioeconomic districts transferred to a school outside of their district of residence. In their study on minority student participation in Minnesota's statewide open enrollment program, Colopy and Tarr (1994) concluded that minority use of interdistrict choice was more likely to occur in small, high poverty, rural districts. In Georgia, however, this does not appear to be the case. As Table 1 shows, most of the interdistrict choice students who opted to leave the 21 districts in low population density/extremely low socioeconomic areas were white. Only a small number and percentage of minority students transferred out of these

Table 1. A Comparison of White and Minority Interdistrict Choice Students Who Transferred from 21 Districts in Low Population Density/Extremely Low Socioeconomic Areas

Racial Status	Total Number Of Students	Number of Interdistrict Choice Students	% of Total Number of Students
White	13,253	491	3.7
Minority	35,003	223	0.6
Totals	48,256	714	1.5

districts. These minority students accounted for 11% of all of the minority interdistrict choice students.

Most of the open districts did not use any special criteria when admitting interdistrict choice students to district schools. In their study of magnet school programs, Moore and Davenport (1990) concluded that special criteria that required certain test scores and academic success contributed to the high percentages of white, middle class students admitted to popular high schools and programs. In Georgia, only a few of the open districts admitted students based on academic success (e.g., grade point average or standardized test scores), while some districts admitted students based on the satisfactory conduct of the student.

About half of the open districts enrolled interdistrict choice students on a first come, first served basis, and/or used a decentralized or local school level registration method. To reduce the likelihood of unfair admission practices, Nathan (1989) recommended that districts avoid enrolling students on a first come, first served basis. Moore and Davenport (1990) further proposed that districts use a centralized selection process to minimize program inequities. In Georgia, about half of the open districts enrolled students on a first come, first served basis,

and/or used a decentralized or local school level registration method. Only a small percentage of districts used a centralized or district level registration method, while it appears that none of the districts used a lottery or random drawing assignment method. This suggests that the registration methods used by some of Georgia's school districts may have contributed to program inequities.

Only a few of the open districts provided sufficient consumer information. Moore and Davenport (1989) and Kozol (1992) point out that less-advantaged parents may lack the experiences needed to make knowledgeable decisions about selecting a school or program. To address this problem, researchers at the Roundtable on Public School Choice (1992) contend that educators must know (a) what information parents need to make informed decisions, and (b) how to effectively disseminate that information to all parents. Yet, most of the districts in Georgia provided no information on their interdistrict choice program. This lack of information may have contributed to a lack of participation by less-advantaged students.

Only about one-fourth of the open districts provided some transportation assistance for interdistrict choice students. Researchers (Bierlein, 1993; Brandt, 1991; Glenn, 1989) agree that without reasonable transportation policies, interdistrict choice participation will be limited to those families that can afford to provide their own transportation to neighboring school districts. In Georgia, however, only about one-fourth of the open districts provided some transportation assistance for interdistrict choice students. Most of the districts decided not to provide transportation assistance. These decisions may have occurred in view of the fact that transportation is an expensive cost. Nevertheless, the lack of transportation assistance by most districts may have prevented some economically disadvantaged students from exercising choice to the extent that they otherwise might have.

About half of the open districts charged tuition to the families of interdistrict choice students. When districts charge families tuition, some parents will not be financially able to send their children to schools in those districts. In Georgia, however, about half of the open districts charged tuition to the parents or guardians of interdistrict choice students. This practice of charging tuition to families by some districts may have severely limited the participation of economically disadvantaged students in those districts.

Interdistrict choice further exacerbated the financial disparities between some of the CITY districts and their geographically adjacent county districts. Funkhouser and Colopy (1994), in their study on the impact of open enrollment on Minnesota's school districts, concluded that small, geographically isolated districts sustained the greatest financial loss due to interdistrict choice. In Georgia, however, this does not seem to be the case. Findings from this current study suggest that some of the county districts, which are located in counties that also contain a CITY district, experienced the greatest financial loss. Nine of these county districts had student enrollments that were greater than the state average of 7,130 FTEs.

Most of the county districts, within counties with a CITY district, also tended to expend less for basic K-12 education than their counterpart CITY district. For example, comparisons between CITY districts and their adjacent county districts indicate that in fifteen instances districts with a net student gain were more likely to spend more per FTE than their counterpart district with a net student loss. Although in seven of these instances there was only a modest difference between districts, in thirteen instances the percentage difference in basic K-12 expenditures per FTE was more than 5%, as displayed in Table 2. In eight of these 13 instances, the financial disparities between CITY districts and county districts widened because of the transfer of interdistrict choice students. Curiously, of the three CITY districts to spend less on

Table 2. A Comparison of Basic K-12 Expenditures Between CITY Districts and County Districts Located Within the Same County

CITY	Basic K-12	County	Basic K-12	Percentage
District	Expenditures	District	Expenditures	Difference
Gainesville	\$5,989	Hall	\$3,803	*57.5
Dalton	6,210	Whitfield	4,325	*43.6
Marietta	5,622	Cobb	4,194	*34.0
Thomasville	4,687	Thomas	3,822	22.6
Buford	5,151	Gwinnett	4,255	*21.1
Decatur	5,978	DeKalb	5,006	*19.4
Commerce	4,720	Jackson	4,269	*10.6
Cartersville	4,716	Bartow	4,389	*7.5
Calhoun	4,492	Gordan	4,209	*6.7
Rome	4,992	Floyd	4,741	5.3
Trion	3,668	Chattooga	4,014	-8.6
Chickamauga	3,461	Walker	4,178	-17.2
Pelham	3,748	Mitchell	4,571	-18.0

Note. This table includes only CITY districts and county districts with percentage differences of more than 5% in basic K-12 expenditures. These expenditures are rounded to the nearest dollar. An asterisk (\*) denotes those instances where the transfer of interdistrict choice students widened the financial disparities between districts.

basic K-12 education than their adjacent county districts, two (Trion and Chickamauga) enrolled more interdistrict choice students than resident students and one (Pelham) enrolled more nonresident students than resident students.

Interdistrict choice complicated the task of consolidating some of the CITY districts with their neighboring county districts. The Georgia Constitution (1983) states that “No independent school system shall hereafter be established” (Article VIII, Section V, Paragraph I), reflecting the state policy of encouraging consolidation and merger rather than proliferation of school districts. However, interdistrict choice complicated the task of school district consolidation. At least two small CITY districts attracted enough students and additional revenue through interdistrict choice to avoid the necessity of merging with their neighboring county district. More than half of the student populations in Trion and Chickamauga were interdistrict choice students. The state revenues that followed these students increased the basic K-12 expenditures for Trion by \$1,496 per FTE (41%) and for Chickamauga by \$1,220 per FTE (35%).

#### **IV. Implications**

In the final analysis, the question must be asked: Should Georgia permit some districts to establish policies that may effectively deny equal educational opportunities for some of the state’s public school students? Although the information from this report is not sufficient to address this question definitively, the conclusions from this report suggest that district policies did have an impact on the number and composition of interdistrict choice students. As evidence, the racial composition of interdistrict choice students, both statewide and in some specific districts, was significantly different from the overall racial composition of the state’s public school population. Most of the interdistrict choice students were white students transferring

from mostly white school districts to other districts that were mostly white. This suggests that since whites as a group are more affluent than minorities, interdistrict choice with its accompanying costs for transportation (and tuition in some cases) may be an option for many more white students than minority students. This also suggests that the issues of transportation and tuition payments are critical to the creation of an equitable interdistrict choice system.

A second question must also be asked: Should Georgia invest resources in some interdistrict choice programs that in their present forms exacerbate financial disparities among the state's public school districts? In FY 1996, more than \$21 million in state funds were shifted from sending districts to receiving districts for basic K-12 education. Most notably, this contributed to the financial disparities between some CITY districts and their adjacent county districts. Moreover, by shifting the state funds of interdistrict choice students to small CITY districts, the state created financial disincentives for CITY districts to consolidate.

## V. Recommendations

The equity issues raised in this report indicate the need for Georgia lawmakers to consider enacting an open enrollment law that ensures equal educational access for students to participate in local interdistrict choice programs. This open enrollment law should require school districts, that elect to receive interdistrict choice students, to develop and implement policies that address the equity issues raised in this report.<sup>2</sup> Recommendations that address these equity issues

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<sup>2</sup> Another policy issue involves whether (a) the state should mandate that each district participate in a statewide open enrollment program, or (b) each district should be granted by the state the authority to determine whether the district should participate in an open enrollment program. This issue is beyond the scope of this report. However, if the state required the participation of each district in a statewide open enrollment program, the recommendations in the report would still apply to ensure an equitable interdistrict choice system.

are presented below. These recommendations are based on the conclusions of this current report and proposals of other researchers.

1. Participating school districts should setup and maintain a centralized or district level registration method.

2. Participating school districts should develop a student assignment plan with consideration for: the registration policy (voluntary or mandatory); instructional capacity and replication efforts; space availability, both within a school and by instructional program; racial balance; neighborhood school priority; and preference for siblings.

3. Participating school districts should avoid selective criteria for participation in educational choice programs and base the criterion for participation on student interest.

4. Participating school districts should avoid school and program selection based solely on a first come, first served principle.

5. As a minimum, participating school districts should: (a) produce brochures describing the various schools and programs available within their district, (b) openly display the brochures in central administration offices and school administration offices, and (c) provide brochures to students, their parents or guardians upon request.

6. As a minimum, participating school districts should transport interdistrict choice students from the district's border to the student's school.

7. Participating school districts should be prohibited from charging tuition to families of interdistrict choice students.

8. Participating school districts should be required to report, to the Georgia Department of Education, enrollment information on (a) interdistrict choice students who were children of

district employees and (b) interdistrict choice students who were not children of district employees.

9. Participating school districts should be able to deny interdistrict choice transfers for the following reasons: (a) no capacity exists in a class, program, or school; (b) a school facility is not structured to accommodate a child with special needs, or the necessary program is not offered; (c) a student does not meet the established eligibility criteria (e.g., age, course prerequisites); (d) the student has been expelled from a school in another district; or (e) a district's desegregation plan may be disrupted.

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## Appendix

### Data and Limitations

The conclusions and recommendations which result from this paper must be considered in light of the following limitations:

1. As with any report that employs the use of surveys, the results are only as good as the data provided. All of the information contained in this study was initially submitted by Georgia school districts to either the Georgia Department of Education, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, or the researcher. Data submitted to the Department of Education and the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education were later provided to the Educational Finance Studies Project, a collaborative venture between the Fiscal Research Center and the Department of Educational Policy Studies at Georgia State University. Because of the nature of the data gathered from the districts, it was impossible to verify the accuracy of all the data the school districts provided. Where inconsistencies or questionable data existed, the researcher verified the data through telephone conversations with district personnel and made corrections where necessary.

2. District level data on the amount of state basic K-12 revenues for each instructional program were not available. These data were necessary to calculate the program weighted, basic K-12 revenues from the state for each district. These calculations were needed to back out the amount of state funds that followed interdistrict choice students to their respective instructional programs for each district. Consequently, the researcher was required to calculate the net change in state funds to school districts by using the FY 1996 Quality Basic Education Act formula, the House Bill No. 129 formula, and data from the Educational Finance Studies Project file on the

net change of interdistrict choice students by instructional program for each district. Unfortunately, these formulas excluded funding for the ESOL and SIA instructional programs, and funding adjustments for benefits, training and experience of personnel. Therefore, the net change in state expenditures for each district is a conservative estimate of the actual amount of state funds that followed interdistrict choice students to receiving districts.

3. Another limitation is that the data on district policies represented only those open districts that responded to the Nonresident Student Transfer Survey. Undoubtedly, given the nature of the data requested, some districts refused to respond to all or part of the survey. Still other districts may not have been able to provide information in as much detail as requested. As a result, this report may not represent a complete description of those equity issues covered; however, the analysis is based on the best information available.

Nonresident Student Transfer Survey forms were received from 140 (78%) of Georgia's 180 school districts. Responding districts included 83% (1,063,031 FTEs) of the state's K-12 enrollment. Of these districts, 58 experienced a net gain and 79 a net loss in student enrollment. These responding districts accounted for 89% and 74% of the district gainers and district losers, respectively. Three responding districts experienced no change in enrollment due to interdistrict choice.

Of the 137 responding districts that experienced either a net gain or net loss in student enrollment, 97 were open to interdistrict choice students while 40 were closed. These districts represented 87% of the open districts and 58% of the closed districts in Georgia. Of the 97 open districts, 58 were district gainers and 39 were district losers. These districts constituted the sample of open districts that responded to the survey.



## **About the Author**

**Dwight Robert Doering** is a Research Associate in the Fiscal Research Program and a former parochial and public school teacher. His responsibilities at FRP include the management and analysis of federal and state education data. His research interests include educational leadership, education finance, school choice, and the charter schools movement.

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## Interdistrict School Choice in Georgia: Issues of Equity

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