INTERDISTRICT SCHOOL CHOICE IN GEORGIA: ISSUES OF EQUITY

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 do not furnish any information at all. Some districts provide transportation of some kind to nonresident students while others do not. Still some districts charge tuition to nonresident students, while others admit transfers without charge. Some of these district policies raise serious equity issues.

CONCLUSIONS

The report from which this Policy Brief is drawn relies on data from several sources. The following conclusions are based on an analysis of that.

- 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. 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%.

• Most of the open districts did not use any special criteria when admitting interdistrict choice students to district schools. This finding is in agreement with the recommendations of policy analysts to avoid special admission criteria. 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. 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. These findings run counter to the recommendations of some researchers to reduce the likelihood of unfair admission practices, and suggest 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. 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, since their parents may lack the experiences needed to make informed decisions about selecting a school or program.

• 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. 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 independent city districts and their geographically adjacent county districts. 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. Most of the county districts 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%. In eight of these 13 instances, the financial disparities between city districts and county districts widened because of the transfer of interdistrict choice students.

**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 the report is not sufficient to address this question definitively, the conclusions from the 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 these 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.

RECOMMENDATION

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. 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 the report.

Specific recommendations that address such issues as fair and objective admissions, access to information, adequate transportation, and other issues are provided in the report.

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.

1 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 the 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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was funded by the Education Finance Project, a collaborative effort between the Fiscal Research Program, School of Policy Studies and the Department of Educational Policy Studies, College of Education at Georgia State University. Additional support for the study was provided by Tom Upchurch and the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education.

For a free copy of the study from which this Policy Brief is drawn, or any of the other publications listed, call the Fiscal Research Program at 404/651-4342, or fax us at 404/651-2737.

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