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The Hidden Role of K–12 Open-Enrollment Policies in U.S. Public Schools

Detailed data from three states shed light on opportunities and barriers

OPEN ENROLLMENT in public schools is a form of school choice that allows students to attend schools other than the one assigned to them by their school district. Though often less visible than policies such as charter schools, vouchers, and education savings accounts, K–12 open enrollment is rising in popularity across the nation, and 73 percent of school parents support it. As of 2023, 43 states permit or mandate some degree of open enrollment, but only 16 states have strong open-enrollment laws. Since 2021, 10 states have significantly improved their open-enrollment laws. For example, Idaho’s new law requires all school districts to participate in open enrollment and also establishes better program transparency.

When it comes to open-enrollment data, however, researchers and policymakers are often left in the dark. Only 13 states are required by law to collect data on open enrollment, and only three states publish these figures regularly. As a result, little is known about a key policy that affects students and public schools nationwide.

There are two types of open enrollment: *cross-district open enrollment* allows students to attend schools outside their school district, while *within-district open enrollment* lets students attend schools outside their assigned zone but within their own school district. To understand the role these programs play in the school choice landscape, we obtained data from three states—Arizona, Florida, and Wisconsin—that host some of the most robust open-enrollment programs in the nation. Participation is strong; more than 450,000 students in these three states used open enrollment to attend public schools other than their assigned ones during the 2021–22 school year.

Both Arizona and Florida require all school districts to participate in both types of open enrollment if seats are available. Wisconsin only requires its school districts to participate in cross-district open enrollment. Taken

together, the latest data from these states provide four key takeaways about open enrollment:

- Open enrollment is one of the most common forms of school choice. On average, about one in 10 students in these states is using open enrollment to attend a school other than the one originally assigned to them.
- Families tend to use cross-district open enrollment to transfer to higher-rated school districts when possible. In fact, 76 percent of students, on average, transferred to a school district rated as A or B in Florida and Arizona.
- School districts routinely reject transfer applicants with disabilities.
- Open enrollment is important to families in rural school districts, not only in cities. Wisconsin’s open-enrollment data showed that more than 52 percent of students choosing cross-district open enrollment used it to access school districts in rural areas or towns outside the state’s metropolitan areas.

Many students choose schools other than their residentially assigned one. Across the three states, nearly 177,000 students used cross-district open enrollment, while almost 273,000 used the within-district option to choose a different school (see Table 1).

Open enrollment also makes up an important component of these states’ education marketplaces and is one of the most common methods of school selection. When compared with other school choice options in these states—such as charter schools or private school scholarships—open enrollment holds its own, accounting for approximately 36 percent of the 1.3 million students who used public funds to participate in school choice during the 2021–22 school year (see Figure 1).

And these numbers are increasing. According to the Florida Department of Education and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction,

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open-enrollment participation increased by 4 percent and 3 percent respectively during the 2022–23 school year. (As of this writing, 2022–23 data from Arizona are not yet available.) Open-enrollment participation grew in these states even as more families used publicly funded scholarships to pay for private school tuition.

Students tend to transfer to more highly rated school districts. Earlier research in other states indicates that families turn to open enrollment for a variety of reasons. For example, studies published by the California Legislative Analyst’s Office in 2016 and 2021 found that students in that state used cross-district open enrollment to access specialized programming (such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses), to escape bullying, to shorten commutes, or to find a school that was a better fit. One consistent research finding is that students tend to transfer to higher-rated school districts when possible. For instance, in Texas, students were more likely to transfer to districts rated as A or B by state accountability rating systems and less likely to transfer to school districts labeled C, D, or F. Other research from Minnesota, Colorado, and Florida found that academic quality was an important factor in families’ decisions to use open enrollment.

The latest data show that these open-enrollment trends are also evident in Florida and Arizona (see Figure 2).

As Figure 2 shows, 80 percent of Arizona’s transfer students and 72 percent of Florida’s chose school districts rated as A or B. Overall, 67 percent of Arizona’s students and 91 percent of Florida’s attend districts rated A or B. Open-enrollment transfers in these states generally avoided school districts rated lower than B.

Wisconsin doesn’t use a letter-grade system to rate its school districts. Instead, the Badger State rates them on a 100-point scale and assigns them to one of four categories: “significantly exceeds

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expectations,” “exceeds expectations,” “meets expectations,” and “meets few expectations.”

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction also reports more detailed and nuanced open-enrollment data than Florida and Arizona. Those two states show only how many students transfer into each district. Wisconsin, though, shows the number of students who transfer into and out of each school district, as well as the number who apply to transfer into and out of them. Districts with better ratings experienced net transfer gains, while lower-rated districts lost students on net, as shown in Figure 3.

Despite receiving the lion’s share of transfers, Wisconsin school districts rated as “meets expectations” or lower experienced a net loss of more than 54,000 students. Higher-ranked districts, on the other hand, gained more students than they lost. School districts rated as “significantly exceeds expectations” or “exceeds expectations” increased their enrollments by more than 13,000 students during the 2022–23 school year.

In Wisconsin, the smaller number of transfers to the highest-rated school districts does not necessarily reflect a lack of applications. Not every transfer application is approved, because

Wisconsin school districts can reject transfer applications for such reasons as insufficient capacity, a student’s disciplinary record, and insufficient special-education program capacity.

In fact, 43 percent of Wisconsin school districts rejected at least one out of five transfer applicants. The most common reason for rejection, cited more than 6,300 times, was insufficient capacity. However, definitions of maximum capacity can be capricious and vary by school district. This means that even if school districts have the physical space to accommodate transfer applicants, they can reject them, citing an arbitrary definition of capacity.

2021–22 Open-Enrollment Participation in Arizona, Florida, and Wisconsin (Table 1)

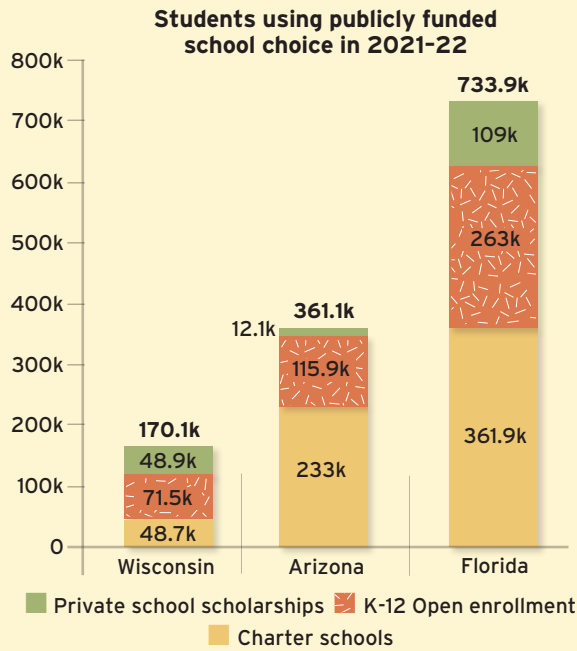
State	Total open-enrollment participants	Number of cross-district transfers	Number of within-district transfers	Percentage of public school enrollment
Arizona	115,932	99,615	15,132	11
Florida	262,968	5,509	257,459	9
Wisconsin	71,489	71,489	NA	9

NOTE: Wisconsin’s open-enrollment data include students who transfer to online schools in other districts. The state doesn’t disaggregate these students from cross-district transfers who attend schools in person.

SOURCES: Florida Department of Education, Arizona Department of Education, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Open Enrollment Is a Desired Choice Option (Figure 1)

In Wisconsin, Arizona, and Florida, open enrollment holds a comparable share of students in the marketplace of school choice options.



NOTE: Data compiled by Reason Foundation.

SOURCES: Arizona Department of Education; Florida Department of Education; and Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction; EdChoice, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Transfer applicants with disabilities are often rejected. Similarly, more than 2,000 Wisconsin students were rejected because they had disabilities. Although federal law prohibits school districts from denying services to students with disabilities who live within their boundaries, they routinely reject transfer applications from students with disabilities at a higher rate than their peers without disabilities.

Wisconsin Watch reported in 2023 that “schools rejected about 40 percent of applications” from students with disabilities, “with lack of special education space as the most common reason for the denials. By comparison, school districts rejected only 14 percent of applications from students without disabilities.” This scenario is not unique to Wisconsin. Reports from

Arizona, Oklahoma, and Colorado indicate that similar disparities are common in other states.

Open enrollment is important to rural students and school districts. Students living in more densely populated areas are more likely to benefit from open enrollment than their peers living in small towns or rural areas. However, that does not mean that open enrollment isn’t important to rural school districts. A 2021 report by the California Legislative Analyst’s Office found that some small and rural school districts relied on open-enrollment transfer students to remain fiscally solvent. In other words, open enrollment can be a lifeline to school districts whose enrollments are declining.

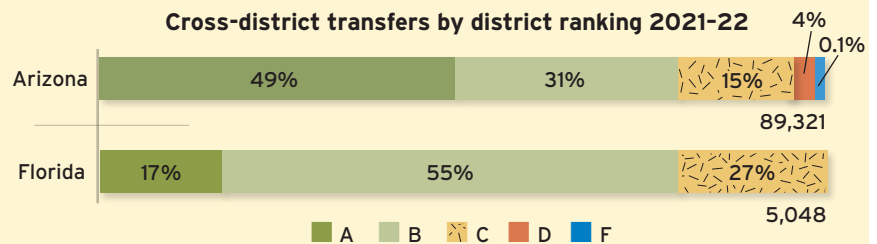
By combining open-enrollment data provided by state education agencies with data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) that classify school districts by location (city, suburb, town, and rural), it’s possible to examine open-enrollment participation by school-district locale. Together, these data provide insight into how different regions in these states are impacted by open enrollment (see Figure 4).

Overall, these data showed that, in Arizona and Florida, most students used open enrollment to transfer to urban and suburban school districts. However, in Wisconsin, rural school districts attracted the second-largest share of transfer students when compared to other locales in the state. This is partly because Wisconsin’s school districts are generally smaller and more numerous, making them more accessible to out-of-district students than is the case in Arizona or Florida. Despite the state’s smaller size, Wisconsin has about twice as many school districts as Arizona and six times as many as Florida.

Across all three states, rural school districts bolstered their enrollments with more than 29,000 transfer students (see Figure 5). Rural school districts are further broken into

Students Leave Districts for Greener Pastures (Figure 2)

Academic quality is a substantial factor in students transferring outside of their residential districts. In Arizona and Florida, most students move to districts ranked as A or B.

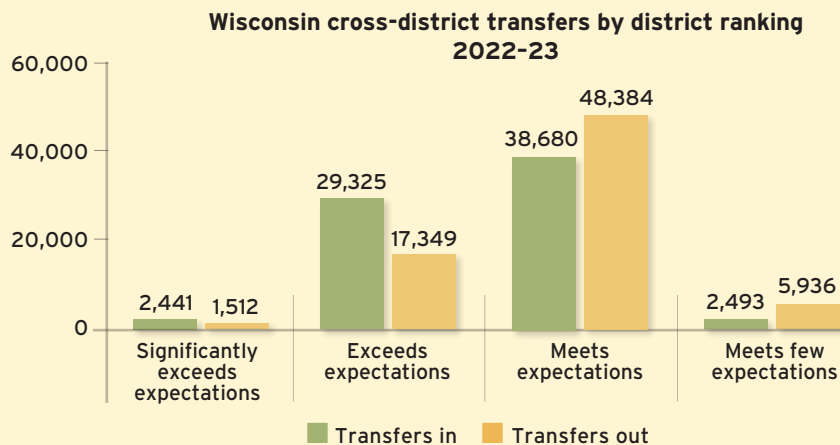


NOTE: Data compiled by Reason Foundation.

SOURCES: Arizona Department of Education; Florida Department of Education

Poorly Rated Wisconsin Districts Lose Students (Figure 3)

School districts in Wisconsin rated as average or below average experienced a net loss of more than 54,000 students in the 2022–23 school year. Districts rated better than average or excellent enrolled 13,000 more students.



NOTE: Data compiled by Reason Foundation.

SOURCE: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

for students using open enrollment because only five states require transportation funding for cross-district transfers at a standard similar to that used for within-district transfers. In some states, school districts can even stop other districts from transporting transfer students across district boundaries, often disproportionately affecting students from low-income families. While families and receiving school districts can establish designated bus pick-up locations just over district boundaries, this option is only available to students whose families can drive them to those locations.

These transportation challenges combined with long commutes mean that open-enrollment participation in rural areas or small towns will generally be lower than in urban and suburban districts. However, state policymakers can modify regulations that needlessly impede students from transferring. For instance, they can stop allowing school districts to prevent other districts from

three categories: Rural fringe districts are those nearest to both urbanized areas and towns; rural distant districts are farther from urbanized areas but are closer to towns; and rural remote districts are those farthest from both towns and urbanized areas.

Overall, rural fringe districts benefited more from open enrollment than other types of rural school districts. This makes sense because rural fringe school districts are the nearest non-urban transfer options for many suburban families.

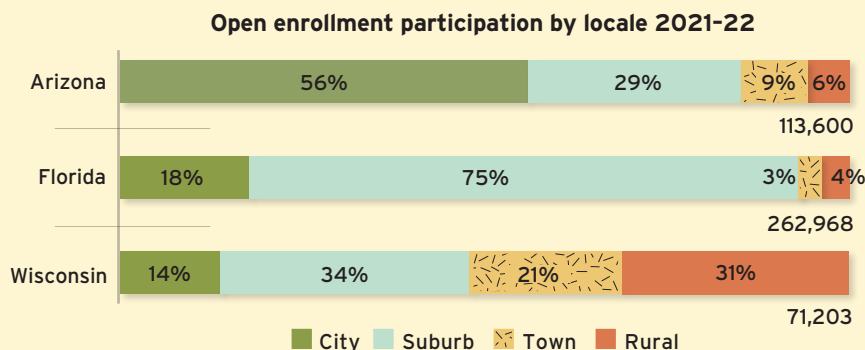
Policy Implications

Policymakers have three key issues to consider as more students take advantage of open-enrollment opportunities.

First, traditional methods of school transportation, such as the large yellow school bus, are no longer efficient because many transfer students, especially rural ones, don't live along designated bus routes. Getting to school is often a challenge

More Transfers to Rural Districts in Wisconsin Than Arizona and Florida (Figure 4)

While city districts are most preferred among transfer students in Arizona and suburban districts are most favored in Florida, Wisconsin's rural districts receive a higher proportion of students who take advantage of open enrollment.



NOTE: Data compiled by Reason Foundation; 1,056 transfer students were excluded from the Arizona data since NCES didn't clearly categorize three of Arizona's school districts into one of the four locales.

SOURCES: National Center for Education Statistics; Arizona Department of Education; Florida Department of Education; and Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

The playing field isn't level for all students, because those with disabilities tend to be rejected at higher rates, and districts can and do reject applicants for dubious capacity reasons.

transporting transfer students across district boundaries.

State policymakers could also take note of Arizona's recent transportation reforms, which let school districts use passenger vans that seat 11 to 15 people instead of the traditional yellow school bus. This sort of innovation can lower the costs of transporting small groups of transfer students. Such policies can be key to helping students access schooling options that are the right fit, even if they don't live nearby.

Policymakers might also do well to reconsider how to fund capital projects. While local levies often paid for these projects in the past, school districts will have a harder time convincing local taxpayers to approve new bonds when their children don't attend their residentially assigned school.

For instance, Arizona's Queen Creek Unified School District has failed to gain voter approval for bond funding for three years in a row. In fact, only 40 percent of voters supported the bond in November 2023. Part of the reason the bond has failed is that many of the students living inside the district's boundaries don't attend the district's schools, opting instead for charter schools or schools in other districts. In fact, nearly 20 percent of Queen Creek's students came from other districts during the 2021–22 school year. This district's situation isn't atypical; 30 percent of Arizona students don't attend public schools in their assigned district. This illustrates that policymakers in states with robust school choice policies need to rethink how capital projects are funded.

Finally, policymakers can hold school districts' admissions practices to a higher standard by stopping them from rejecting transfer applicants with disabilities. Many school districts are quick to cap the number of transfer applicants with disabilities based on the program capacity of their special education courses, often citing insufficient staffing.

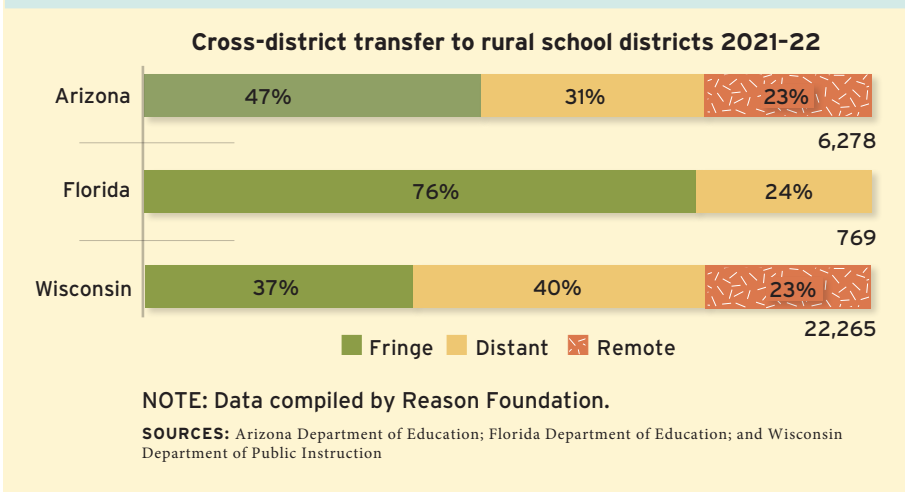
However, this practice unfairly limits schooling options for students with disabilities. It also means that traditional public schools' admittance procedures operate at a lower bar than public charter schools' admittance procedures, which require that all applicants be admitted, assuming seats are available. Accordingly, policymakers could take a closer look at school districts' admissions processes to ensure that district schools are open to all students.

In a Nutshell

Open enrollment is the most common form of school choice in Wisconsin and the second-most common in Arizona and Florida. Students tend to transfer to school districts with higher rankings. While open-enrollment participation is often concentrated in urban and suburban regions, it is also beneficial to students in rural areas or smaller towns. However, the playing field isn't level for all students, because those with disabilities tend to be rejected

Rural Districts on the Fringe of Cities and Towns Benefit from Transfers (Figure 5)

While rural fringe districts in Wisconsin did not receive the most transfers, they experienced the largest net gain from open enrollment, receiving nearly 2,500 additional students.



at higher rates, and districts can and do reject applicants for dubious capacity reasons.

Wisconsin is currently the only state that fully shows how open-enrollment transfers affect school districts. If more states were to emulate that state's transparent reporting practices, families could learn which districts are in high demand, gain more understanding of open-enrollment programs, and make informed decisions about this choice option.

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