



## The Open Enrollment Experiment in the U.S.: What the Research Literature Tells Us

For some 25 years, states have experimented with various versions of open enrollment, in which students and their parents may opt to attend public schools outside of their attendance areas. Promoted as a “school choice” policy that would “stimulate competition” among public schools, the concept spread rapidly after Minnesota passed the first such law in 1988. The proliferation of these policies rarely if ever were guided by a small but growing research canon that has sent up cautionary findings about the perhaps unintended consequences of these policies as well as the failure, in most cases, of these programs to deliver the quality and academic outcomes touted as inevitabilities.

While the research makes clear that studying the financial and academic impacts of Open Enrollment (OE) is difficult because of sparse data and student privacy concerns, there have nevertheless been several studies that all seem to point to unexpected ramifications, unearthed by OE champions and more neutral researchers alike. This document will summarize and cite their key universal findings.

To briefly describe the general impacts discovered, researchers agree that OE policies lead to three types of segregation: academic, racial, and socioeconomic.

**Academic segregation**, sometimes referred to as “skimming”, results in the movement primarily of highly motivated, academically successful students, leaving the attendance area (resident) schools primarily populated with students whose academic performance is not of that same caliber.

**Racial segregation** results from the so-called “white flight” phenomenon, when parents choose schools with less racial/ethnic diversity than that of the resident school, again, leaving the attendance area school less diverse.

**Socioeconomic segregation** is by far the most common result, either alone or in combination with either or both of the other forms. More affluent families are found, according to the research, to have more time, more information, better transportation arrangements, and other economic and non-economic resources that make OE possible for their children. Once again, this leaves the less affluent students behind.

When some or all of these impacts occur, the few OE students could be said to “benefit” at the expense of the many. The research does not, however, find that academic achievement (as measured by graduation rates, attendance, and test scores) is necessarily improved for OE students, but their absence from neighborhood schools does seem to impair the educational opportunities of the students left behind. In fact, one academic study found that for African American students who did exercise the OE option, their educational outcomes were worse, not better, than for their peers in the neighborhood schools.

It has recently been asserted that Oregon’s welcome success in improving our students’ graduation rates – accomplished through the hard work of our students, teachers, and families – could be credited to Oregon’s four-year experiment with OE. The evidence suggests otherwise. Though no systematic, thorough, academic

study of our short experience with this policy has been conducted, anecdotal evidence is beginning to emerge that suggests that Oregon schools are seeing some of the same patterns found across the country. Seen through the proposition of Oregon's educational "Equity Lens", it would seem unwise to perpetuate a system that threatens to impede, not advance, progress on student achievement.

According to the researchers, the best policy strategy for ensuring student success is to invest in the schools nearest students, so that our children may, as one author put it, "choose their neighborhood school."

## RESEARCH CITATIONS

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