

Open Doors, Open Districts

SCHOOL CHOICE IN COLORADO'S TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

FALL 2018

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Executive Summary

The number of parents exercising the power of school choice options is far more than most public policy debates in Colorado suggest. Over 145,000 students, or over 16 percent of the public school population, “choiced” into a traditional public school other than the one assigned to them based on their address — a population larger than total public charter school, public magnet, private school, or home-school enrollment in the state.

School choice is based on one simple but powerful principle: Parents should have the ability to send their kids to any school that will help their children thrive.

Unfortunately, the school choice debate in Colorado is often framed solely around what type of school a parent ultimately chooses. This unproductive approach sets one type of school against another and ignores the fact that different children need different environments to thrive. It reframes the issue away from what is best for an individual child in favor of determining who is in control of a system. Importantly, this limited understanding of school choice also ignores traditional public schools’ role in the school choice system.

Furthermore, school choice is often considered an urban and suburban phenomenon, but many of the biggest users of inter-district choice, by percentage of students “choicing” into different schools, are in rural communities.

Traditional public school choice options within and across district lines are possible because of Colorado’s open enrollment law, which gives families the ability to enroll their children in a school outside their home district or across neighborhood school boundaries if there is capacity in the school. About 50,000 Colorado students cross district lines to attend another district school, and over 95,600 more choose from within their school district’s offerings.

High-performing districts are more likely to enroll students from outside the district, suggesting a healthy competitive school choice environment among traditional district schools. **Thanks to this school choice option, thousands of parents are accessing schools that are a better fit for their children.**

While the open enrollment system in Colorado is large, it could be improved to be more family-friendly and accessible for all. Data suggest that some subgroups of students are less likely to use open enrollment, especially English learners, and reviews of district policy show many ways in which families might be discouraged, dissuaded, or prevented from exercising their school choice rights. However, leading districts have demonstrated creative solutions and extensive lessons learned after nearly 30 years of open enrollment that can help make school choice work better for families.

To maximize the benefits of open enrollment, the policymakers should focus on the needs of students and families. **In the report below we provide specific recommendations for state and local leaders on how they can build common-sense enrollment systems, provide parents and district leaders with better information, and increase opportunities for more families to participate.**

Coloradans should take note of the important role that traditional public schools play in the state’s robust and successful school choice system. Policymakers should work to put more power in the hands of families to choose the option that works best for kids, regardless of what type of school they ultimately choose.

Introduction

For decades, Colorado has been a national leader in establishing innovative public school options. The state was among the earliest to allow charter schools, beginning in 1993. It began authorizing online educational programs in 1998; in 2008, it introduced “innovation schools,” district-run schools that operate with extra autonomy and flexibility. Each of these policies contributes to Colorado’s reputation as an exemplar for innovation and parent choice. However, one important Colorado policy that supports families’ ability to choose their best school option is often overlooked in school choice discussions: open enrollment.

Every year, over 145,000 Colorado students use open enrollment programs to attend a district-run school of their choice — that’s 50 percent more students than the state’s largest school district and more students than those enrolled in all of the state’s charter schools. Public policy debates about school choice too often focus only on public charter schools or private schools, but this report shows that more Colorado families enroll their students in traditional public schools of choice than any other option.¹ Families are voting with their feet and defying conventional narratives about how and where school choice happens.

Open enrollment has been a key component of Colorado’s educational landscape since the 1990 enactment of the “Public School Choice Act.” That statute allows families to choose from among public schools in any Colorado school district beyond their residentially assigned school. Students may enroll in a different public school in their district (i.e. within-district choice), or in a public school in another district (i.e. inter-district choice), without paying tuition.

Ready Colorado believes that the touchstone of our education system should be choice, and that no one system of schooling should have a monopoly over opportunity. Families should be able to choose schools that will help their children thrive. Traditional public schools, public charter schools, public magnet schools, private schools, virtual schools, and home schools should all be part of a competitive high-quality educational system.

This policy brief seeks to inform Colorado policymakers, the public, and education stakeholders about the state’s open enrollment system and to recommend ways in which state and local leaders can take action to support and expand access to open enrollment opportunities. Recommendations in this brief are based on data analysis, national research, and interviews with students, families, and education leaders in Colorado.

Colorado policymakers must understand the state’s open enrollment policies and data to maximize this policy’s potential to serve families and students. Real barriers can constrain families’ choices and disadvantage families with fewer resources. One study of inter-district enrollment in Colorado, which used data from the early 2000’s, suggested that students in low-performing and predominantly low-income districts were less likely to use open enrollment.² This means that open enrollment opportunities might not be reaching students and families who could benefit from them most.

Families must have not only the right to choose, but also the ability to access high-quality options. In the context of open enrollment, providing this kind of access for all families requires attention to three key components:

- **System Design:** Open enrollment systems and processes should be family friendly. This means that they must be transparent and easy to navigate, while addressing other practical barriers to enrollment such as transportation and language barriers. Family-friendly systems allow parents to send their children to the school of their choice without bureaucratic red tape or unnecessary stress.
- **Communication:** Families should be made aware of their enrollment options and have access to information about schools’ programs and performance to inform their enrollment decisions. Districts should adopt local policies that provide clear, easily accessed information and ensure sufficient parent outreach.
- **Equal Opportunity:** Open enrollment programs should ensure that all students have equal opportunities to access schools of their choice. This means paying particular attention to the needs of low-income students and families, who are more likely to live in attendance zones served by low-performing schools and experience greater barriers to open enrollment.

This report takes a deep dive into open enrollment in Colorado, starting with original data analysis on open enrollment, including geographic trends, demographics, and the relationship between district performance and enrollment patterns. It then explains the state policies that govern open enrollment and how these policies translate to the local level and are experienced by families. The brief examines three districts in depth: Falcon District 49, Douglas County, and Denver. Finally, the brief concludes with a discussion of barriers and challenges to access for families and students, and

makes the following recommendations for state and district policymakers to maximize open enrollment's potential to better serve families:

- Make enrollment timelines more consistent;
- Better inform parents of the options for their kids;
- Improve transparency and accessibility of information for parents;
- Prioritize stability for students;
- Encourage creative solutions to transportation barriers, including eliminating regulatory roadblocks; and
- Offer more information for school district leaders.

Open Enrollment by the Numbers

Top Takeaways

- **Over 145,400 Colorado students, or over 16 percent of the total public school population, participate in open enrollment programs within and between districts.**
- Families are accessing higher-performing districts thanks to school choice. Higher-performing districts are likely to enroll more families from outside the district, and low-performing districts are likely to have higher rates of exit from their districts. Movement across districts is most popular in the Denver metro area and near Colorado Springs, where districts are larger in terms of enrollment and more internal and external school choices are practically accessible.
- School choice in rural Colorado is alive and well. Some small, rural districts have a very high proportion of families enrolling from outside the district, meaning students commute 30 miles or more every day to a school of their choice.
- Some slight demographic disparities exist between inter-district open enrollment students and statewide trends, with proportionally fewer Hispanic/Latino students and English learners participating in open enrollment.
- Families aren't necessarily choosing higher-funded districts. There is not a clear relationship between district per-pupil spending and cross-district enrollment trends.

Using data collected from the Colorado Department of Education and from individual school districts, we can answer several key questions about this school choice option: how it's being used, where, and by whom. We also examined available data to understand more about which factors may influence families' decisions, but these questions are more complicated and data are less clear.

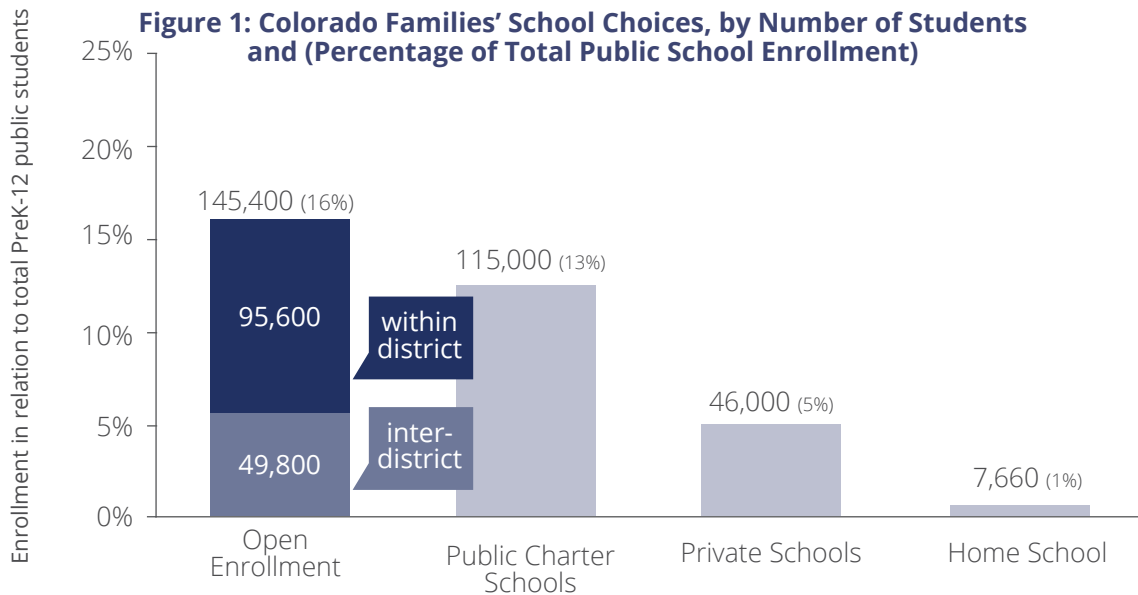
How many students exercise school choice through open enrollment in Colorado?

Open enrollment programs in Colorado serve more than 145,400 students.³ This represents about 16 percent of the PreK-12 public school population. More families exercise school choice via traditional district schools than via public charter schools or private schools.⁴

These students fall into one of two categories:

- **Inter-district choice:** Nearly 50,000 Colorado students attend district schools outside their home districts.⁵
 - » Multi-district online schools enroll about 6,000 of these students.
 - » Inter-district choice has grown over the past ten years, from about 31,500 students in 2006-07 (4 percent) to 49,800 in 2016-17 (6 percent).

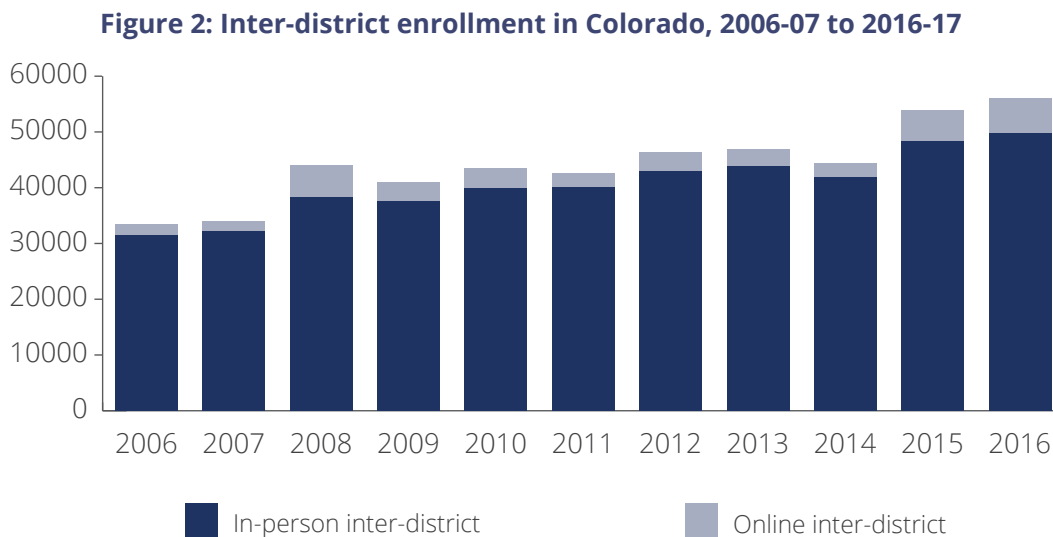
- Within-district choice:** While the state does not track student choice within districts, data obtained from 12 of the largest districts in the state show over 95,600 families attend traditional schools outside of their neighborhood school but within their home school districts (excluding charter schools).⁶ Of course, there are likely thousands more students using open enrollment within the remaining 166 Colorado school districts.



Note: Inter-district open enrollment, public charter schools, home school enrollment and total enrollment from Colorado Department of Education, 2016-17. Private school estimate from EdChoice, 2015; within-district estimate based on district data explained in Figure 11.

How has inter-district enrollment changed in the past 10 years?

Over the past 10 years, the number of Colorado students enrolling outside their home districts has increased to nearly 50,000 students. Figure 2 shows total statewide inter-district enrollment online and in person, excluding charter schools. The total number of inter-district students has grown at a slightly faster rate than the student population overall, increasing the share of public school students participating in inter-district open enrollment from 4 percent to 6 percent.

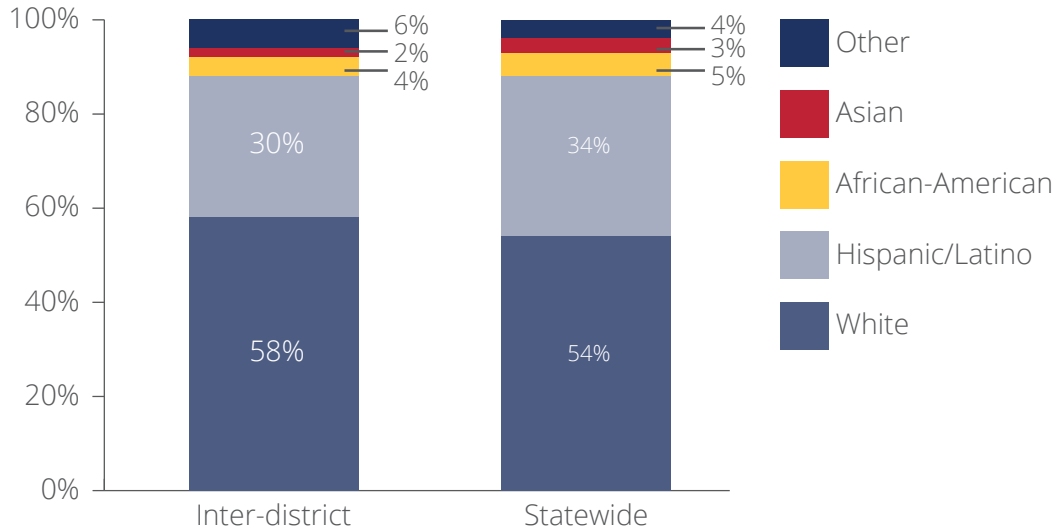


Source: Colorado Department of Education, excludes charter schools

What are the demographic characteristics of students enrolling across district lines?

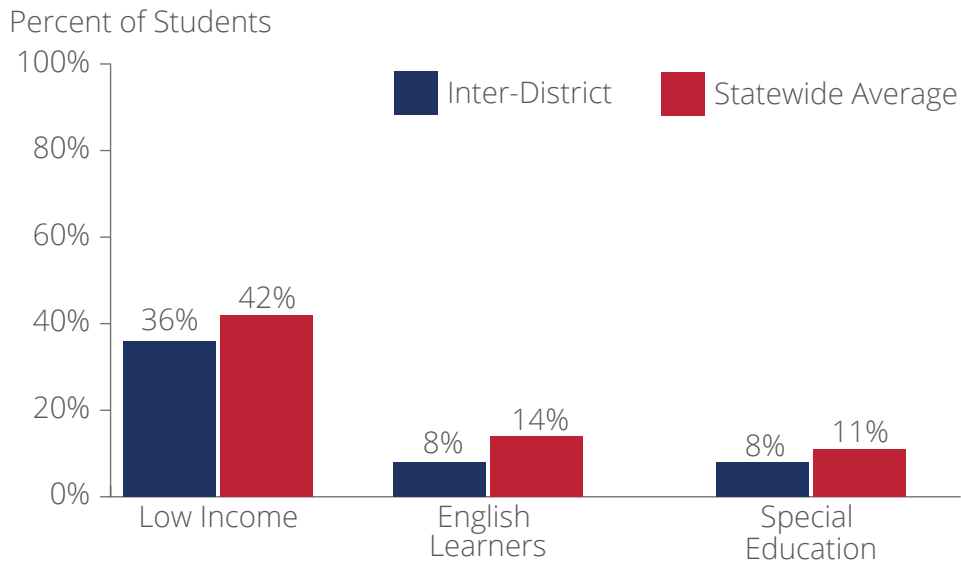
As Figures 3 and 4 show, the demographics and characteristics of students enrolling in inter-district choices in Colorado vary slightly from overall statewide demographic patterns. It is important to note that we do not have access to data on the demographics of students participating in within-district open enrollment.

Figure 3: Inter-district Enrollment in Colorado by Race/Ethnicity, 2016-17



Source: Colorado Department of Education, excludes charter schools

Figure 4: Inter-district Enrollment in Colorado by Student Subgroup, 2016-2017



Source: Colorado Department of Education

Students enrolled in schools across district boundaries are slightly more likely to be white, and slightly less likely to be Hispanic/Latino. They are also less likely to be low-income, English learners, or have special education needs. It is important to understand these differences so that policy leaders and educators can work to ensure that open enrollment opportunities are more accessible for all Colorado families. The underrepresentation of Hispanic/Latino students and English learners suggests there may be some unmet needs in Spanish-speaking communities around inter-district choice — either in information, accessibility, or appropriate services for students.

Online Schools

Colorado online and virtual schools served over 19,500 students in 2016-17. These schools and programs may be district-run or charter-run, full-time or part-time, restricted to one school district or open to all. About 6,000 students attended multi-district online schools in 2016-17, up from 2,000 students 10 years ago.

While these students make up a small percentage of the total population of students using open enrollment, the schools themselves are operated by a relatively small number of districts, and in some instances, online students far outnumber in-person enrollment. For example, in the rural Branson School District, over 86 percent of the 470 enrolled students attend the Branson Online School from communities all over the state, while about 65 students attend Branson School in-person in the community.

The policy challenges and solutions for online schools are different than those that arise for in-person open enrollment. For example, transportation is rarely an issue for virtual students, but access to technology might be a greater concern. Online schools provide important options and services for many Colorado families; however, there have also been instances of poor oversight and lackluster academic results in the online sector, in Colorado and nationally. For this reason, this brief focuses primarily on students using open enrollment in non-virtual settings. State-level counts of open enrollment in this brief include online students, but district-level analyses omit these schools.

In what parts of the state are students moving between districts?

Inter-district movement is most common in the Denver metro area — 47 percent of all inter-district enrollment occurs in the 18 districts that make up the metropolitan region.⁸ Several factors may contribute to the high rate of participation. These districts enroll about 53 percent of all students statewide, and the metropolitan-area districts are clustered more closely together with more extensive transportation connections than most other school districts in the state.

Figure 5 shows the districts enrolling the most nonresident students — the top receiving districts in the state. All but one of the top five districts receiving outside students are in the Denver metro area. The exception is Academy District 20, near Colorado Springs. While districts like Jefferson County, Denver, and Cherry Creek have large numbers of students coming in, they are also sufficiently large overall that these students make up a fairly small percentage of the student body — less than 5 percent. They also exchange relatively large numbers of students. For example, the largest feeder district into Jefferson County is Denver, and the second largest feeder into Denver is Jefferson County.⁹

Map 1: Colorado School Districts Enrolling Students via Inter-District Enrollment, 2016-17

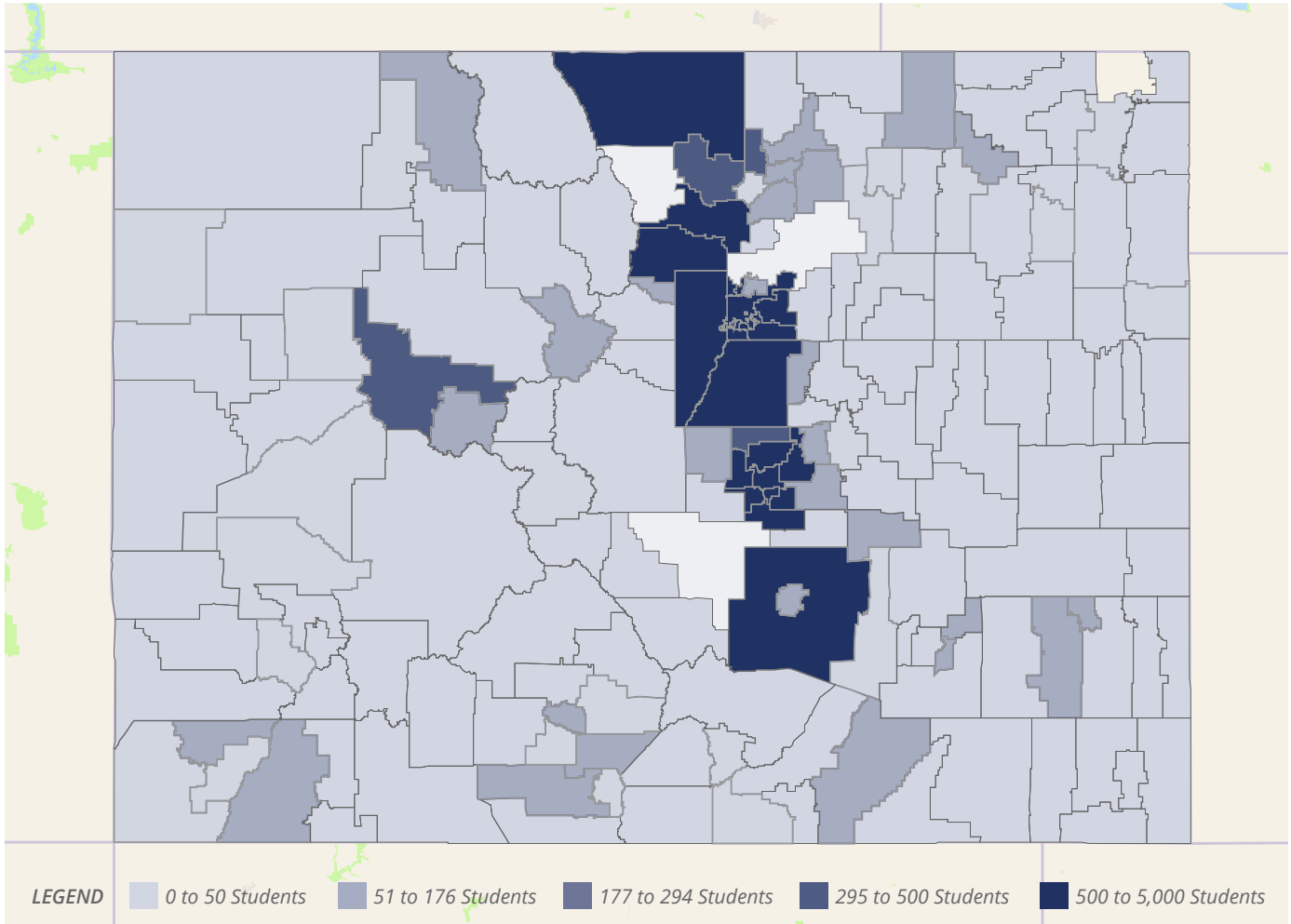


Figure 5: Districts Enrolling the Most Students via Inter-District Open Enrollment, 2016-17

District	Receiving Students	Percent of Total District Enrollment
Jefferson County	4,313	4%
Academy District 20	3,683	14%
Denver	3,436	4%
Littleton	2,380	15%
Cherry Creek	2,032	4%

Source: Colorado Department of Education

While urban or larger suburban districts serve the highest numbers of students who live outside their boundaries, the districts that serve the highest percentages of out-of-district students tend to be small, rural districts. This is true even after excluding outlier online schools. Most of these school districts operate only one or two schools and enroll a small number of students, but a high percentage of these students come from outside the district — in some cases traveling 20 or 30 miles for school each day. School choice is usually associated with urban and suburban areas, but the data show that school choice via open enrollment is popular with rural families as well.

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Map 2: Colorado School Districts by Percentage of Students Enrolled via Inter-District Open Enrollment, 2016-17

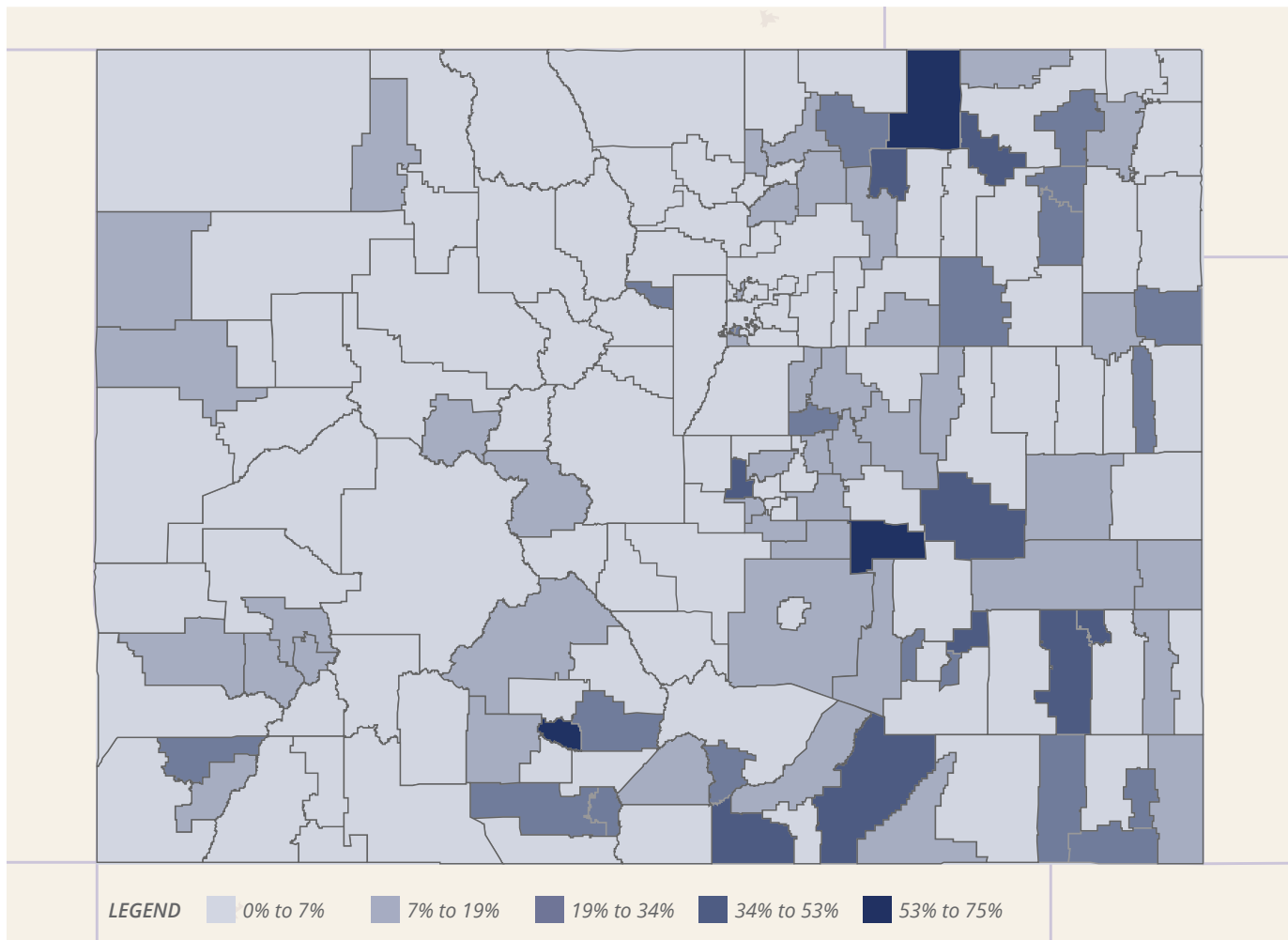


Figure 6: Districts Enrolling the Highest Percentage of Students via Inter-District Open Enrollment, 2016-17

District	Receiving Students	Percent of Total District Enrollment
Edison 54	175	76%
Sargent	250	66%
Prairie	143	66%
Cheraw 31	115	53%
McClave	128	47%

Source: Colorado Department of Education

Conversations with school leaders in several of the districts in the table above suggest that these small, rural districts often border slightly larger, lower-performing districts. School leaders suggested that families who prioritize smaller class sizes and close attention for students go out of their way — logistically and metaphorically — to enroll in the neighboring districts. Put simply, these rural schools are competing for students across district lines.

Another data set allows us to see where students are coming from — the sending districts. It is important to note that this is a slightly different data set from Figures 5 and 6. Figures 7 and 8 include students attending charter schools and/or multi-district online schools outside their school districts, but do not include schools under the jurisdiction of the Charter School Institute, BOCES programs, or the School for the Deaf. Additionally, some students may be attending school outside their parents’ district of residence for reasons other than open enrollment; for example, if they are residing with someone who is not their parent or guardian.

Map 3: Colorado School Districts by Total Students Exiting for Enrollment in Another District, 2016-17

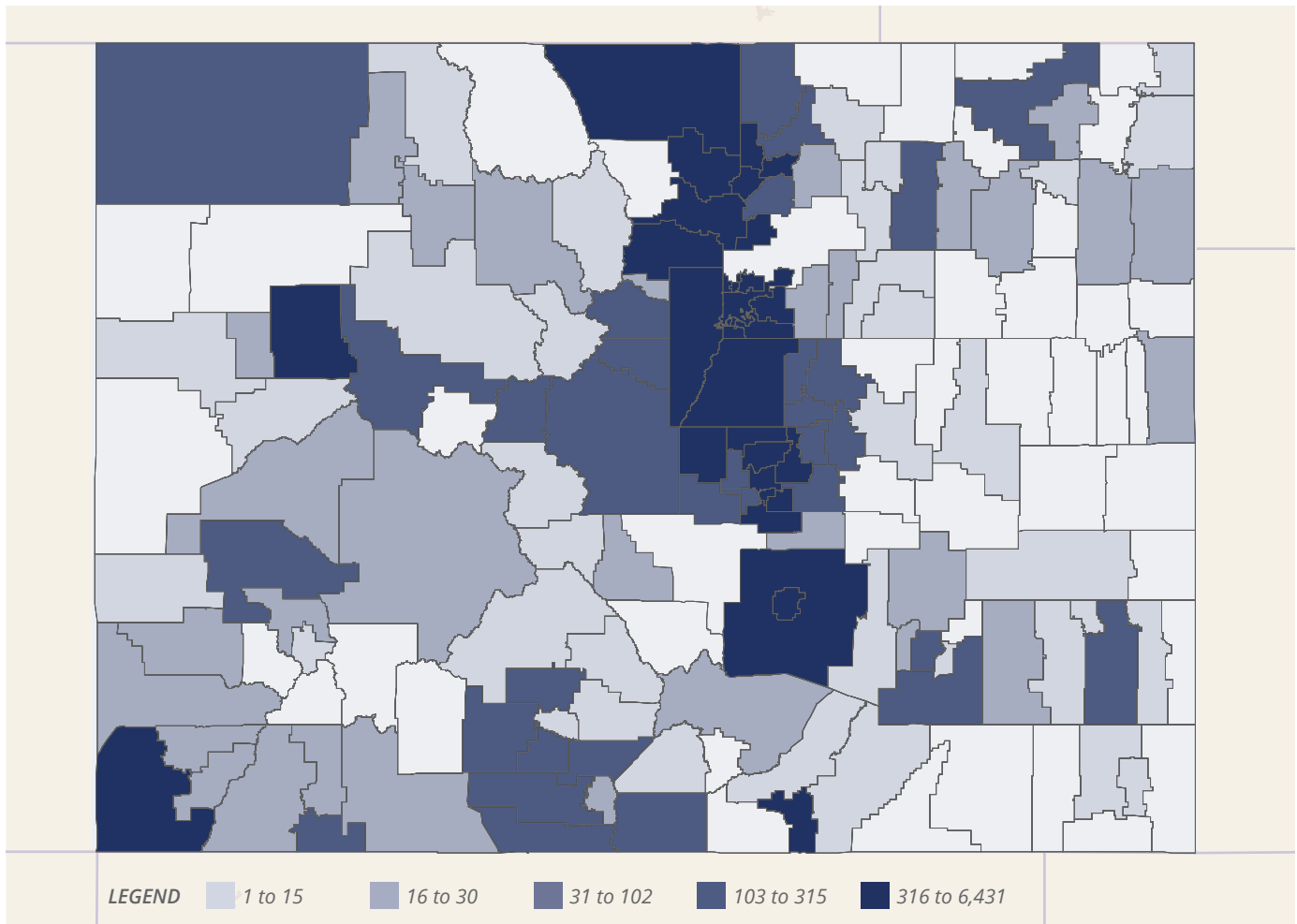


Figure 7: Districts Sending the Greatest Number of Students to Other Districts, 2016-17¹⁰

District	Sending Students	Total Enrollment Served	Sending Relative to Total Enrollment	Top Receiving Districts
Denver	6,431	91,132	7%	Jefferson County, Littleton, Aurora
Colorado Springs District 11	6,413	27,911	23%	Academy 20, District 49, Harrison
Aurora	4,370	41,797	11%	Denver, Douglas County, Cherry Creek
Adams 12	4,222	38,818	11%	Boulder Valley, Jefferson County, Mapleton
Jefferson County	3,224	86,347	4%	Denver, Littleton, Douglas County

Source: Colorado Department of Education

The fact that there is overlap between the top sending and receiving districts shows the degree of student exchange across district boundaries, particularly in the Denver metro area. It also underscores that school choice decisions are made at the school site level, not the district level. Notably, Colorado Springs D11 is the smallest of these five districts in terms of enrollment (about 28,000 students), but a large number of students and families exit the district relative to its size. This could be due in part to especially competitive inter-district dynamics in the Colorado Springs area, mentioned in the profile of District 49, below.

Because more populous districts are likely to send greater numbers of students across their borders, Figures 8a and 8b show the districts with the highest ratio of students enrolling in other districts relative to their overall enrollment size among all districts in the state (8a) and among medium to large-sized districts (8b).

Map 4: Colorado School Districts by Total Students Exiting Relative to Total Enrollment, 2016-17

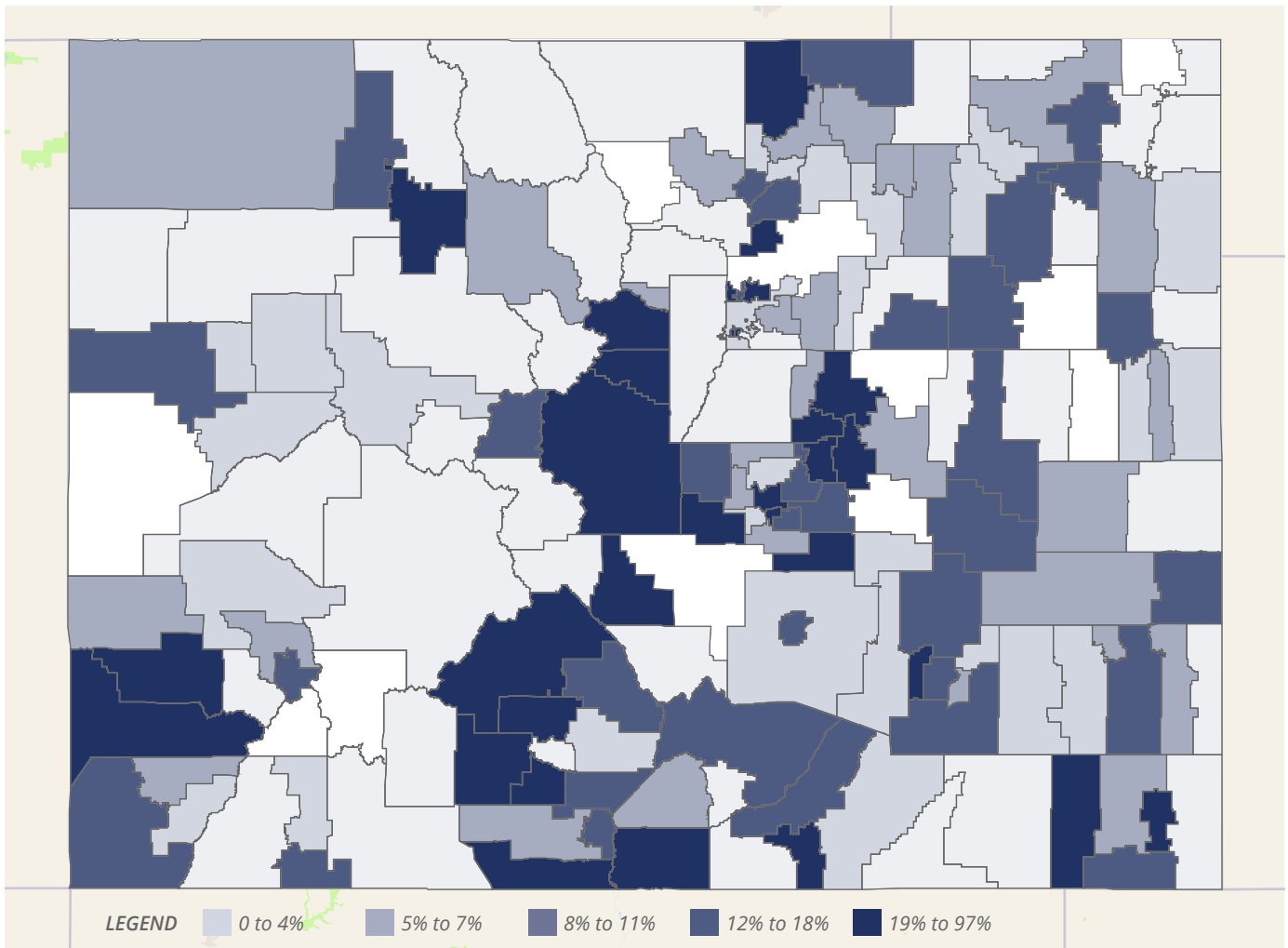


Figure 8a: Top 5 Sending Districts by Total Student Exit Relative to Enrollment, 2016-2017

District	Sending Students	Total Enrollment Served	Sending Relative to Total Enrollment	Top Receiving Districts
Elbert	208	213	98%	Douglas County, Elizabeth, Lewis-Palmer
Vilas	30	42	71%	Walsh, Byers, Springfield
Centennial	151	215	70%	Douglas County, Aurora, Sierra Grande
South Conejos	117	212	55%	North Conejos, Sanford, Alamosa
Kiowa	147	277	53%	Elizabeth, Elbert, Douglas County

Source: Colorado Department of Education

Figure 8b: Top 5 Sending Districts by Total Student Exit Relative to Enrollment Among Medium-Large Size Districts (over 5,000 students)

District	Sending Students	Total Enrollment Served	Sending Relative to Total Enrollment	Top Receiving Districts
Westminster	2,754	9,638	29%	Jefferson County, Denver, Mapleton
Adams 14	1,873	7,467	25%	Mapleton, Adams 12, Denver
Colorado Springs 11	6,413	27,911	23%	Academy 20, District 49, Harrison
Harrison	2,686	11,746	23%	Colorado Springs 11, Cheyenne Mountain, District 49
Windsor	1,472	9,634	15%	Harrison, Fountain, Cheyenne Mountain

Source: Colorado Department of Education

As with Figure 6, all the districts in Figure 8a are very small, and none enrolls more than 220 students total, but families who live in these districts are enrolling their students elsewhere at very high rates. It is difficult to draw conclusions from such small numbers of students and such different inter-district dynamics, but both Figure 6 and Figure 8a illustrate clearly that open enrollment is not just a trend in large urban or suburban districts, and that districts of all sizes and types are competing with one another for students.

Figure 8b illustrates some of the dynamic relationships between neighboring districts as both senders (in the leftmost column) and receivers (in the rightmost column). For example, among students who leave Colorado Springs 11, Harrison is a top destination district, but among students who leave Harrison, many go to Colorado Springs 11. Even among districts where large numbers of students leave, there may also be students entering. That’s likely due to the fact that many parents make decisions based on individual schools rather than entire districts.

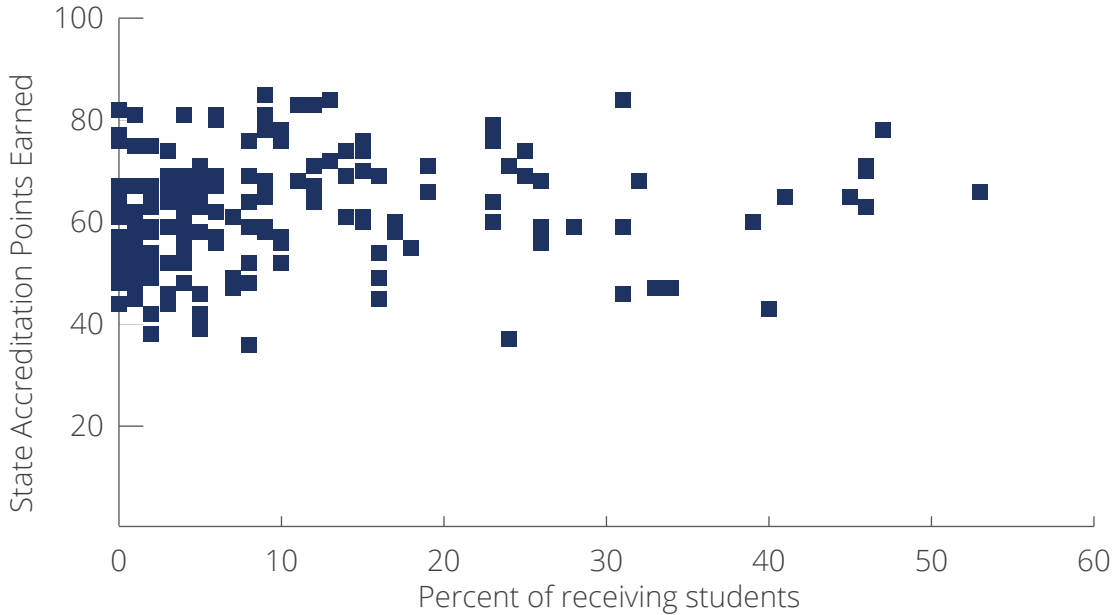
How does district performance relate to inter-district enrollment?

This report uses school districts’ accreditation scores from the state as an indicator of district performance. The Colorado Department of Education provides each district with an annual accreditation score, both as an overall performance label and as a percentage of available points based on several performance metrics.¹¹

There is a statistically significant, positive correlation between district performance and the percent of receiving students enrolled from outside the district. In other words, higher-performing districts are likely to attract more families from outside the district. However, there is a large amount of variance in this relationship among districts. See Figure 9 for further illustration. Some of this variance might be because families’ choices are shaped by individual school site or family-specific factors in addition to district performance (such as capacity, geography, or school characteristics).

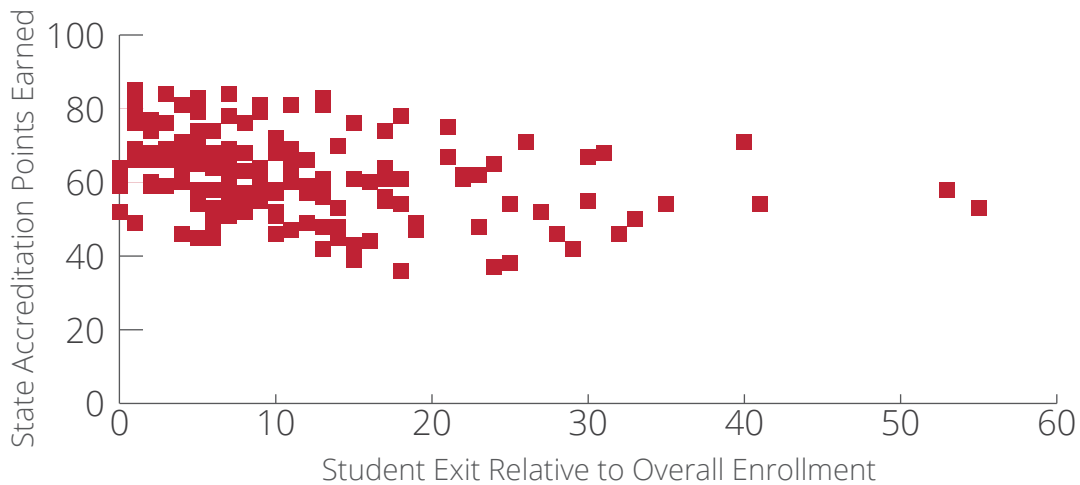
Higher-performing districts are likely to attract more families from outside the district.

Figure 9: Relationship Between Receiving Students as a Percent of Total Enrollment and Total District Accreditation Points Earned, 2016-17



We also looked at the relationship between students exiting districts for other public schools and district accreditation points, shown in Figure 10, below. Like Figures 7, 8a, and 8b, this data set includes students exiting to district-run charters and online schools. There is a statistically significant negative relationship between district performance and students exiting the district for other public schools. Thus, families are more likely to leave low-performing districts in order to attend higher-performing districts. There is a stronger correlation between students leaving and district academic performance than there is with students entering districts, perhaps because of the inclusion of charter students and online students in this data set.

Figure 10: Relationship Between Total Student Exit Relative to Enrollment and Total District Accreditation Points Earned, 2016,17



Other data suggest parents might be more likely to choose a relatively high-performing district. Nine out of ten top receiving districts by number and by percent of inter-district enrollment have accreditation scores in the top 40 percent of districts. A much earlier research study, using data from 2003-04, found that test scores played a substantial role in Colorado's student movement. It also found that students crossing district lines tended to leave high-achieving districts for even higher-achieving districts, rather than moving from low-performing to high-performing districts.¹²

Nine out of ten top receiving districts by number and by percent of inter-district enrollment have accreditation scores in the top 40 percent of districts.

An important caveat is that our analysis here and the research described above do not include the school-level choices families make. Thus, we are not able to track what assigned school students forego to enroll in a school in another district, which could provide finer-grained and more conclusive insights into the relationship between school performance and open enrollment, as well as the weight families give to school or district performance compared to factors such as geographic distance and available programs or services.

Additionally, because districts with the greatest numbers of open enrollment participation also have the most schools, these districts might have substantial variation in school performance within the district. As a result, district accreditation may not accurately reflect the performance of each individual school within the district. A student could move to a relatively higher-performing school within a lower-performing district or vice versa, and those types of movements would not be reflected in a district-level analysis. Unfortunately, data for these school-level analyses are not readily available.

How does district funding relate to inter-district trends?

A study of Colorado open enrollment in 2003-04 found students were less likely to leave high-spending districts, but when students transferred, they tended to move into slightly lower-spending districts than the one they began in.¹³ This trend suggests that spending levels were often less important for families than other factors.

Parents don't seem to be making school choice decisions on the basis of district spending patterns.

A simple analysis of more current spending data from the Colorado K-12 Financial Transparency website¹⁴ indicates few clear patterns relating to district spending levels and inter-district open enrollment trends. Once again, there does not appear to be a strong correlation between district spending levels and high levels of open enrollment across districts. In other words, parents don't seem to be making school choice decisions on the basis of district spending patterns. A more rigorous analysis across multiple years and controlling for other factors could reveal stronger or different patterns, but was beyond the scope of this work.

While it's not clear how much funding factors into student and family decisions to cross district lines, Colorado's student-based funding model creates an incentive for districts to attract students from outside the district in order to receive additional state funding associated with higher enrollment levels. In this way, open enrollment creates a positive incentive for districts to compete to better serve all students and families.

Figure 11 Estimated Within-District Open Enrollment 2016-17, as reported by districts

District Name	Reported Within-District Traditional School Choice, 2016-17
Adams 12	5,950
Aurora	4,010
Boulder**	5,800
Cherry Creek**	4,320
Colorado Springs District 11**	7,000
Denver	17,500
Douglas County	9,100
Greeley Evans	4,390
Jefferson County	23,300
Mesa County District 51	610
Poudre	6,480
St. Vrain	7,140
Total	95,600

Sources: Data obtained via Colorado Open Records Act (CORA) request and/or interviews with district officials in each respective district. Excludes charter schools. Districts marked ** supplied school-level data that required additional analysis to arrive at a total estimate.

How many students enroll in schools of choice within their home districts?

Colorado does not collect data at the state level on within-district assignment and enrollment. To get a sense of the size of these programs, we obtained information from 12 of the largest districts in Colorado individually. These larger districts are more likely to have a variety of school options available within their districts. Figure 11, below, shows the results of these data requests, excluding district-authorized charter public schools.

Figure 11 shows an estimated, rather than an exact, accounting of within-district enrollment trends because of variation in districts' enrollment definitions or other rules in accounting for these students. With that caveat, information from this subset of larger districts suggests that school choice within home districts is one of the most popular forms of choice in Colorado. However, we know very little about demographics of these students or their enrollment patterns over time. For more information on how these school choice programs play out in districts and in schools, we interviewed leaders from three different Colorado school districts, and took a closer look at their strategies and policies in the district profiles featured later in the report.

Colorado Policy on Open Enrollment

Top Takeaways

- **Current state and local policy often limits families' control over their children's education.**
- Colorado law guarantees families a right to enroll in public schools outside their residential zone — but school capacity, transportation, and district policies can all limit families' practical options.
- School district policies vary in their enrollment processes and timelines, definition for school capacity, and priority for student applications when capacity is limited.
- Transportation is a common barrier for families, especially low-income families. State law does not address this challenge and actually hinders districts' ability to transport students outside their borders.

In 1990, Colorado's Public School Choice Act established the state's open enrollment policy, making it one of the earliest forms of public school choice in the state. Under that statute, families may send their children to any public program or school in the state without paying tuition, even if they do not live in the residential zone or district for that school.¹⁵ State law provides families with the power to choose schools outside of their zoned neighborhood school, but that does not mean that the process is easy for families or that a seat in any school is guaranteed.

According to state law, a student may be denied enrollment for the following reasons:

- A district lacks space or teaching staff;
- The program requested is not offered in the district;
- The district lacks capacity to meet a student's special needs;
- A student does not meet eligibility criteria for participating in a particular program;
- A denial is necessary to maintain desegregation plan compliance; or
- A student has been expelled for specific reasons.¹⁶

Districts define and measure school capacity locally. In cases where space or capacity in a school is limited, in-boundary, resident students have priority in enrollment. Schools or districts may also institute other enrollment priorities or eligibility criteria, such as a preference for siblings of current students, or academic requirements for entry into a magnet program. The law directs districts to consider establishing an enrollment priority for low-achieving students from poorly performing schools, but does not mandate that districts actually adopt such a priority. School districts are not required to change their facilities, their programs, or their eligibility requirements to meet open enrollment demand, and do not have to accept open enrollment applicants after Oct. 1 of each year.¹⁷

Colorado's state policy is silent on several issues related to enrollment, which other states' policies address directly. See Sidebar: Research Base on Open Enrollment from Other States for more examples and research from other states.

One of the most common and seemingly intractable limitations for families seeking open enrollment options is transportation. Time spent driving students to school can conflict with work schedules for parents, and public transit options can be scarce in many areas, making open enrollment functionally impossible for families without a transportation solution. For example, one Denver-area student we spoke with who attends a school 30 minutes away described transportation as the most difficult part of choosing this school.

This student stopped attending an after-school science club because the extra transportation stress no longer felt worthwhile. Both rural and urban families have to get creative to overcome transportation challenges. In one small, rural school district in Colorado, a group of parents from a town almost 30 miles away share the cost for a school bus to transport their students to and from school each day.

SIDEBAR***Open Enrollment Research from Other States***

Colorado is one of many states that give parents access to open enrollment: 22 states require districts to participate in inter-district choice programs, while 20 have mandatory within-district choice. Fifteen states require district participation in both types of district choice programs.⁶⁵ Most states with open enrollment, including Colorado, share two key policy features: State and local funding follows the student to his or her school of choice,⁶⁶ and schools may prioritize resident students and may opt out of enrolling nonresident students if they lack capacity. Unlike Colorado, many other states clearly prohibit districts from selectively accepting or denying students based on factors like family income, athletic ability, disabilities, or English-language proficiency as part of their open enrollment policy.⁶⁷

Some states establish requirements that create more family-friendly enrollment systems. In Wisconsin, for example, all districts must follow the same enrollment timelines, while maintaining the ability to set local policies and determine local capacity. Families may apply for open enrollment via a state website, or through the district of their choice, but the timelines are the same. Parents submit applications for open enrollment between February and April, they are notified of the results in June, and parents must notify their home school and the new school if they wish to accept the seat by the beginning of July.⁶⁸

Some states additionally mandate enrollment preferences for groups of students, and provide some kind of transportation assistance for out-of-district families. For example, Ohio mandates a preference for resident students and previously enrolled students, while Michigan requires districts to give priority to siblings. Arizona mandates that receiving districts provide transportation — up to 20 miles each way — for students with disabilities, and in Minnesota, receiving districts must provide transportation within the district if a parent requests it.

The research on open enrollment is not conclusive enough to suggest there is one “best” practice policy for expanding choice via open enrollment. In terms of student achievement, results from Ohio suggest that students who participate in open enrollment consistently over multiple years see substantially greater achievement growth than peers who have never used open enrollment. These gains are particularly large for black students and for those who transfer out of high-poverty schools.⁶⁹ In contrast, a 2017 report on Michigan’s open enrollment program found little evidence that participation affected overall student achievement.⁷⁰ One key difference in these findings is that Ohio’s research focused exclusively on students who participated consistently over a period of years, suggesting continuity and stability could be important for student achievement in a new school.

Colorado state law does not require districts to offer school transportation services at all, though many do offer bus service or subsidized transit passes within their borders.¹⁸ But districts vary as to whether they offer transportation to open enrollment students within the district, charge fees for transportation, or offer a district-border pickup option to cut down on drive time for nonresident students. Current law actually limits what districts can do for students outside their boundaries by allowing school boards to prevent neighboring districts from picking up students within their borders.¹⁹ A high-profile example of this policy played out in Pueblo City Schools recently when 150 students suddenly lost their school transportation because their home school board voted to prohibit outside buses, even though the neighboring district was paying for the students’ transportation.²⁰

“Over time, it takes a lot of work, especially if you want to stay after school for clubs or tutoring ... the distance between where you live and school is a big factor [in making a school choice].”

– Denver-area student

The lack of specificity in state law and regulation around open enrollment policies and processes provides for local flexibility and control, which are deeply held values in Colorado. However, parents’ rights to make choices for their children is a value that should not be superseded. The values of local governance and parents’ rights can come into conflict when districts or schools operate intentionally or unintentionally in ways that put up unnecessary barriers for families or disempower them. Balancing this potential for conflict is where policy change can play an important role, making sure parents ultimately end up in the driver’s seat.

SIDEBAR ***Athletics and Open Enrollment***

Another barrier to open enrollment cited by some families is restricted athletic eligibility. These restrictions, imposed by the Colorado High School Activities Association (CHSAA), vary for different circumstances, but high school athletes who transfer schools without “a bona fide family move” will be ineligible for varsity competition for at least half the playing season of a sport that they played in the last year. The purpose of these rules is to prevent unethical athletic recruitment between schools or districts. Waivers or exceptions are only possible in “unusual cases,” and the waiver process must be initiated by the school.

This policy could force a student to choose between an athletic passion and better academic programs and could have negative effects for students temporarily barred from participation. Evidence suggests that sports participation can benefit students’ academic performance both physiologically and socio-emotionally. For example, research shows that physical activity benefits brain structure, brain function, and cognition in children and youth, and can have other positive social effects like improved self-esteem and relationships with teammates and coaches.

Athletic eligibility limitations for transfer students have the understandable aim of limiting unethical poaching of student athletes in high school sports. However, this policy can also put up barriers for student athletes who might benefit from open enrollment opportunities. CHSAA could consider a broader and easier waiver or exception process for students who want to take advantage of a different academic program, or move from a lower-performing to a higher-performing school.

Sources:

CHSAA, “Constitution and Bylaws,” www.chsaanow.org, accessed January, 2018.

CHSAA, “Bylaws - Parents and Student Information,” www.chsaanow.org, accessed January, 2018.

Open Enrollment in Practice: How Families Experience Colorado's Choice Law

Colorado state law mandates that districts allow open enrollment, but not all districts have family-friendly policies and processes. Interviews and analysis of district policies posted on district websites show a wide variety of ways in which districts implement Colorado's open enrollment law, which shape families' access to these choices and their decision-making. How families learn about opportunities, where they get information to make their decisions, and when and how the enrollment process works can vary by district.

This patchwork policy framework creates barriers to participation for families across the state, but could be improved by addressing three key issues: Both district and state policy could reduce these barriers by improving local enrollment systems, increasing the quality of information and communications families receive, and ensuring fair and equal open enrollment opportunities for all students.

Enrollment Systems Design

Colorado districts' enrollment processes look and feel very different for families depending on where they want to enroll, and some districts are decidedly more family-friendly than others. Family-friendly systems don't have a huge paperwork burden, they minimize the time and effort it takes to apply, and they give families multiple opportunities to submit applications. Once a student is enrolled, family-friendly districts provide educational stability for students and peace of mind for families by allowing for seamless reenrollment each year.

However, not all family-friendly districts need to operate in exactly the same way, and there should be variance based on local needs and context. On one end of the spectrum of formality and complexity is Denver, which uses a unified, technology-based enrollment system. All families apply through a single application during the enrollment window, rank their school choices, and are matched to a school in a lottery system that weighs family preferences, as well as enrollment priorities, like residency and re-enrollment.²¹ This kind of system aims to streamline enrollment and optimize assignments so that more students have a seat at their top-choice schools. Denver's system lowers many enrollment process barriers: Families do not have to enroll in person at individual schools or race to be first in line on enrollment day. However, it is also expensive and labor intensive. And because Denver's unified enrollment system is relatively unique across the country, it may be unfamiliar for many families coming from other districts or states.

In contrast, many Colorado districts allow each individual school to operate their own processes within a general policy framework. Many operate enrollment on a "first come, first served" basis, either electronically or in-person. A high-tech unified enrollment system may not be practical for all school districts, but too many districts put up unnecessary barriers for families to exercise their open enrollment rights. Families should not have to search across many different websites and platforms for information, take time off work to stand in line at multiple schools

Parents' rights to make choices for their children is a value that should not be superseded.

on a specific day, or submit applications at exactly the right moment. School districts can reduce the potential inequities and barriers to participation for families by designing more streamlined enrollment processes; instituting longer, more consistent enrollment windows with lotteries at the end; and minimizing in-person requirements.

Key elements of district enrollment systems are deadlines for application and timelines for response. Neighboring districts in Colorado rarely align their enrollment deadlines, which can be confusing for families, and sometimes schools within the same district have different enrollment dates. There are also competing deadlines for families to commit to their enrollment choices. Inconsistent timelines for parents can push them to make a decision based on a deadline, rather than the best fit for their child.

For example, a family living in Aurora Public Schools boundary would have between Jan. 15 and May 1 to submit an application for open enrollment to schools in their home district, with approvals granted on a first-come, first-served basis. If this family were interested in looking at other options nearby, they could apply to schools in Denver

by submitting a single online application before the end of February, but they wouldn't know the results of that application until April. They could apply to schools in nearby Bennett, but they would have to pick up an application in-person at the school, and deadlines for decision-making are not clear from the district website. The final school district bordering Aurora is Cherry Creek, where final decisions on applications for inter-district enrollment are not guaranteed until September. This family's school choice to-do list quickly starts to look like a complex word problem. The tangle of deadlines and processes tends to disadvantage families with less access to information or fewer resources to navigate conflicting systems.

Communication

The primary way districts publicly communicate information to prospective families — resident and nonresident — is via their websites. In 2008, the Colorado General Assembly passed a nonbinding resolution that sought to make information about open enrollment more accessible. The resolution laid out certain pieces of information that should be provided, such as student eligibility and the application timeline. It also encouraged districts to display this information on their websites and to provide relevant contact information. Other ways to reach families include public marketing, in-person events, or direct outreach to families (via email, individual calls, or home visits).

Based on an informal review of about 25 school district websites, many district websites lack clear information on enrollment processes and policies for resident and nonresident families. Communication to families is intentional and extensive in some districts, and inconsistent in others. Some districts leave most responsibilities for communication and parent-outreach to individual schools. When parents are weighing many potential school choices, they might not know where to turn for information. This creates the potential for confusion or conflicting information.

Access to information is a critical and necessary condition for families to benefit from school choice. When good information is hard to find, families might be unaware of their options, unfamiliar with the concept of open enrollment, or unable to successfully navigate enrollment processes. A lack of strong, consistent communication policies compounds any challenges in enrollment processes themselves, particularly when families may be considering multiple districts with varying policies and processes.

Equal Opportunity

As explained above, Colorado law guarantees families the right to enroll across boundaries, but does not ensure clear, family-friendly procedures or extra consideration for disadvantaged students and families. Low-income families are less likely to have the time or ability to transport students to far-away schools and may be less able to meet narrow in-person enrollment deadlines. Learning about school options often happens through word of mouth, and some families might not know many people who participate in open enrollment. For example, one student we spoke with who enrolls in school across district lines described how his parents do not speak English well, but they learned about their school options from a friend who sent her child to the same school. Without this personal connection, the family might not have known which choices were available to them.

The most direct ways to make choice accessible to all are to design family-friendly processes and policies for all while responding to specific needs that disadvantaged students and families have in the enrollment process. No Colorado districts we could find take up the state law's suggestion to boost open enrollment applicants from low-performing schools or other historically disadvantaged subgroups at a district-wide level.

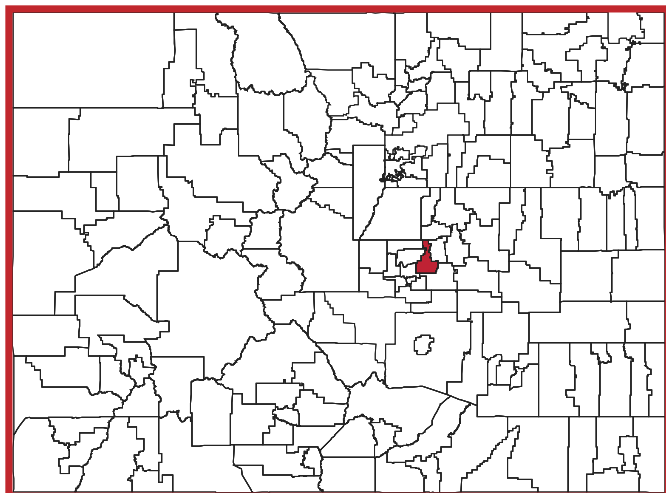
However, we found evidence that some districts are attentive to these dynamics and are attempting to provide more opportunities to all families. Some Denver schools offer an enrollment preference for low-income students, explained in detail below. Even in very small rural districts, creative solutions arise to barriers like transportation. In McClave, a district with fewer than 300 total students, school buses pick up more than 100 students per day at drop-off points near the district border to reduce driving distances for parents. These local examples model possible creative solutions to open enrollment barriers that other districts should consider.

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Information and choice are closely linked, because when families have full information about their choices and the relevant processes, they are able to make the best decisions for their children. Families with fewer resources sometimes have difficulty accessing enrollment information, whether because of language barriers, lack of easy access to a computer, or unfamiliarity with enrollment processes and timelines. This is one reason why providing information to families through multiple venues (online, through local media, in-person, at community events), and making an extra effort to reach disadvantaged families are both important. Opportunities and information for families would be strengthened with district enrollment policies that clearly define the priorities for enrollment that the district will consider, how those priorities are considered, and how enrollment decisions are made.

A Closer Look at Open Enrollment in Three Colorado Districts

The three district profiles below — Falcon District 49, Denver, and Douglas County — provide a closer look at how different districts approach the opportunities and challenges presented by open enrollment. We chose these districts to represent diverse school district environments, and to highlight districts with different strategies for open enrollment. Each of these districts takes different approaches to building systems, informing parents, and ensuring equal opportunity in open enrollment.



School District 49 (“D49”): Attracting Families Through Program Offerings and Targeted Outreach

District Overview: School District 49 (D49, officially “Falcon District 49”) is a rural/suburban school district in El Paso County, covering 133 square miles of northeast Colorado Springs and the Falcon area of the county. D49 enrolls roughly 20,800 students in 27 schools, including charter, online, and alternative school options. About 5,700 D49 students are residents of other school districts. However, most of those students attend charter or online schools; only 766 attend traditional district schools in D49.

D49 organizes its district office into four zones of schools, each with a Zone Leader who exercises

substantial authority over budget, curricular, and facilities decisions within their zone.²² Peter Hilts, chief education officer for D49, describes this arrangement as giving more autonomy and flexibility to pre-existing communities within the district.

The district has tried to be nimble and responsive to demand for certain programs in the district and the region, including charter schools and specialized programs. For example, D49 grew a small program focused on reading disabilities into a stand-alone specialty school in response to demand from the community. Hilts describes himself as a school choice advocate, who believes parents have an “absolute right” to make the best choice for their child and that schools must “earn parents’ choice.” This outlook is reflected in the district’s choice-first approach to enrollment, information, and equal opportunity.

Enrollment Systems Design: D49 does not have a unified enrollment system. This means that its open enrollment processes operate separately from charter and other types of enrollment, and that each school manages its own enrollment process. Parents must first submit an online application and documentation for enrollment to the district, then for many schools they must fill out and bring their application(s) to the individual schools to which they want to apply.²³ This system encourages families to focus on their top choices and increases contact between schools and families, but adds a multistep process in person and online for families who must submit applications to each individual school. There is no district-wide enrollment window, and principals may accept choice applications at any time.

All resident students also have an assigned school, but D49 places a stronger emphasis on school choice than many other districts. Under the district’s open enrollment program, resident students are allowed to attend any school or participate in any program of their choice on a first-come, first-served basis using time-stamped district applications.²⁴ Nonresident students may enroll in D49 schools so long as space is available after schools consider resident students.²⁵ To be eligible to participate in open enrollment, students

“Schools are the unit of improvement, zones are the unit of innovation.”

– Peter Hilts, Chief Education Officer, District 49

must be passing all subjects, but that determination is subject to principals' discretion.²⁶ Once students have a seat in a school, resident students can maintain their enrollment from year to year, but nonresident students must reapply each year.²⁷

Before each semester, Zone Leaders work with their principals to determine capacity for nonresident enrollment. District policy requires that the following factors are considered:

- Staffing levels;
- Current enrollment;
- Facilities; and
- Anticipated growth.

“The district is better when we serve parents better.”

– Peter Hilts, Chief Education Officer, District 49

D49 prioritizes resident students, children of district employees, and siblings of students already enrolled in the district. However, open enrollment privileges may be revoked if a student fails to maintain good standing,²⁸ or if “the parent/guardian fails to communicate, respond, or otherwise engage in their student’s educational experience to the detriment of the student.”²⁹ District policy also reserves the right to “rescind and/or amend any enrollment of resident or nonresident students if, in its opinion, overcrowding of facilities or other undesirable conditions develop.”³⁰

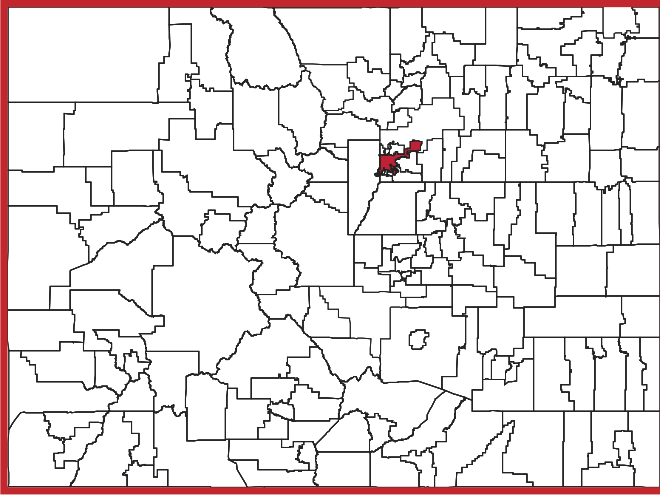
One current challenge in some areas of D49 is that rapid residential growth has created over-enrollment in certain neighborhood schools. In some cases in-boundary students are turned away from their neighborhood school and assigned to a different district elementary school.³¹ In these cases, there will likely not be opportunities for students outside the neighborhood or district to enroll.

Despite its targeted outreach efforts, D49 still faces one challenge observed across multiple districts: struggles tracking a highly mobile student population. According to Hilts, a more agile state reporting system that tracks and reports students’ movements among schools and districts closer to real time would help schools plan and budget more accurately, especially when students move midyear.

Communication: D49 facilitates and promotes open enrollment with communications and marketing in and out of the district. D49 focuses on providing clear choice and enrollment information on its website, and engaging families of resident students in fifth and eighth grade as they consider middle school and high school choices. D49 promotes its schools outside the district; however, D49 is targeted in reaching out to nonresidents. The district promotes open enrollment for particular programs and schools with available capacity and targets out-of-district neighborhoods where transportation might be more feasible for students and families. Outreach takes the form of zip code-based newspaper inserts, local radio ads, and movie theater pre-show advertising.³²

Equal Opportunity: D49 does not give preference to low-income students or other disadvantaged subgroups in enrollment. In order to ensure the “first come, first served” policy is executed fairly, D49 must scrupulously timestamp enrollment applications to the district. This policy influenced the district’s move to digital applications for district enrollment, which also helps working parents and families outside the district access enrollment choices. However, some parents still must deliver school choice applications in person to each school. This extra step, and the lack of clear deadlines or start dates on enrollment, could create confusion for some families or dissuade them from applying.

D49 also works to serve military families, who make up a large proportion of families in the region, and often have unique needs for midyear placement or sudden moves. Dedicated military family liaisons in the district help these families find seats in the school of their choice.



Denver Public Schools: Matching Families to Top Choices and Focusing on Equal Opportunity

District Overview: Denver Public Schools (DPS) is the largest school district in Colorado, serving more than 91,000 students. Roughly 5,600 DPS students are residents of other school districts; of those, about 3,500 attend a DPS district-run school through inter-district open enrollment. Within the district, 17,000 resident students use open enrollment to attend a DPS district school other than their boundary school.

Historically, Denver has been viewed as a national leader in urban public school choice. Charter schools enroll a significant portion of the city's students,³³ and

DPS operates numerous “innovation schools” — traditional district schools that are provided additional autonomy.³⁴ The district has also expanded its number of “enrollment zones” where resident students are guaranteed enrollment to multiple schools in larger geographic areas, rather than just a single school.³⁵

Enrollment Systems Design: Since 2012, DPS has used a unified enrollment system called SchoolChoice to consolidate its inter- and within-district open enrollment, charter, and district school enrollment into one process. This process allows Denver families and families from outside the district to apply to all of the city's public schools (both district and charter) through a single application.³⁶

Under the district's enrollment policy, “students may enroll in any district school, based on space available and qualifications for a particular program.”³⁷ Capacity is determined both by constraints of the school building and by collaboration and planning between the district office and school leaders. Each February, families submit online applications to SchoolChoice. In early April families receive their school placement matches based on several factors, including school capacity, families' ranked preferences, lottery number, residency status, re-enrollment status, and sibling enrollment.³⁸ Students residing in a school's enrollment zone have first priority in enrollment. After all initial matches are made in April, students may enroll in any remaining open seats on a first-come, first-served basis later in the spring and summer.³⁹

Based on data from the 2017-18 school year, roughly 97 percent⁴⁰ of DPS students matched with one of their choices, and 82 percent matched with their top-choice school.⁴¹ According to Brian Eschbacher, executive director of planning and enrollment services at DPS, this is at least partly because the district actively responds to changes in demand by providing various types of schools and programmatic offerings in different areas of the city.⁴²

“We measure our success based on the number of families who can attend their top-choice school ... we try to actively respond to changes in what families want, be that types of schools and programs or neighborhoods with high demand.”

– Brian Eschbacher, Executive Director of Planning and Enrollment Services, Denver Public Schools

“About 40 percent of our students attend a school of choice, 60 percent attend school in their enrollment zone or neighborhood boundary.”

– Brian Eschbacher, Executive Director of Planning and Enrollment Services, Denver Public Schools

To plan and budget in this dynamic environment, Denver combines data on current enrollment, demographic changes within neighborhoods, and other data related to school choice patterns across multiple years. District staff then evaluate that data and discuss enrollment projections with school leaders.⁴³ However, this approach still has limitations. Eschbacher wishes the district knew more about inter-district enrollment trends. DPS officials know very little about the resident families choosing to enroll in other districts, which makes it difficult for them to say what programs or changes might entice those families to stay in the district.

“We need a way to increase transparency and create wins for families without burdening districts.”

– Brian Eschbacher, Executive Director of Planning and Enrollment Services, Denver Public Schools

Communication: Informing families about their options and helping them navigate choices are critical pieces of a successful choice-driven open enrollment system. DPS invests significant time and resources in informing resident families on enrollment and choice. DPS’ “School Performance Framework” provides parents and other stakeholders with information for all schools.⁴⁴ Each school receives an overall performance score and many sub-scores based on test score growth, test score performance, and student and family engagement. But recent evidence indicates that the current SPF ratings may be misleading parents about schools’ academic performance and achievement gaps.⁴⁵ DPS administrators have recently vowed to fix this problem so that parents have the best possible information as they make choices for their students.

DPS also offers a “School Finder” tool that allows families to explore schools based on in-boundary status as well as programmatic offerings like afterschool programs or foreign language emphasis.

Because online resources may not be helpful or accessible for all families, DPS also hosts in-person school expos throughout the city in the weeks leading up to the February enrollment deadline. At these events, families can meet school leaders and learn about the enrollment process. DPS also encourages school leaders to do their own community outreach. However, Eschbacher reports that the district does not focus resources on attracting or informing families who live outside of the city.

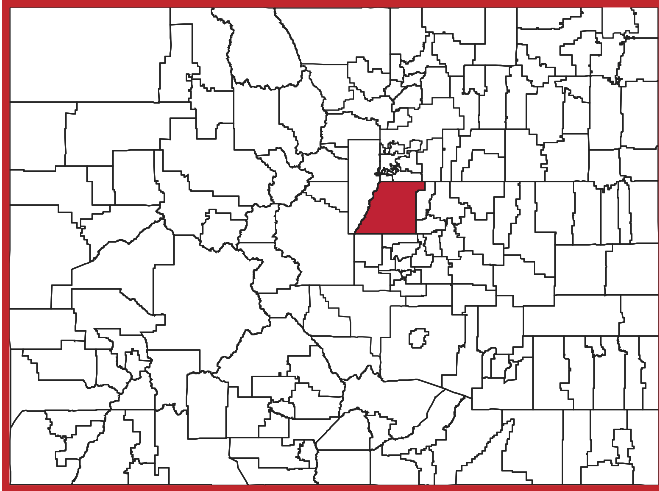
Equal Opportunity: DPS’ well-developed enrollment systems help create opportunities for more families — there are few, if any, loopholes where families with more resources or connections can bend the system to their advantage in the open enrollment process. Attention to family outreach in multiple venues also helps ensure that families have access to information and guidance that can help them navigate their choices successfully. Still, Denver’s broad portfolio of school options and unique enrollment process can be difficult for families to understand, especially those who are new to the city or from districts with more traditional school-based enrollment systems.

DPS policy does not require any enrollment priorities related to race or income. However, 29 schools have entered into a voluntary agreement with the district to prioritize low-income students. At these schools, low-income students receive preference for enrollment after students living within the school’s attendance zone and siblings of current students.⁴⁶ This program aims to encourage economic diversity in schools, and give less-advantaged students an enrollment boost in some of the district’s highest-demand schools.

DPS’ array of school choice options was facilitated by Denver’s growing population; it has been one of the fastest growing cities in the country during most of the 2000s. But in recent years Denver has seen its student-age population begin to decline. This trend may make it easier for nonresident students to access the district’s schools, and may increase competition for students among districts in the metro area.

“We’re pretty high-tech with enrollment; some families from out of state or other districts might not be used to that.”

– Brian Eschbacher, Executive Director of Planning and Enrollment Services, Denver Public Schools



Douglas County School District: Creating Family-Friendly Enrollment Systems

District Overview: Douglas County School District, located between Denver and Colorado Springs, is Colorado's third largest district in terms of enrollment, serving more than 67,000 students. Douglas County is also large geographically, spanning more than 850 square miles. More than 9,000 resident students attend Douglas County schools of choice other than their assigned school. Of the 4,200 nonresident students attending Douglas County schools, roughly 550 attend a district-run school through inter-district open enrollment.

Douglas County has a robust choice environment; of the district's 89 schools, 18 are charter schools,⁴⁷ and two are magnet schools.⁴⁸ Online learning programs⁴⁹ and support for home education⁵⁰ are also available. Douglas County is in the process of bringing its various schools together into one enrollment system, which means families no longer have to submit multiple school choice applications.

Enrollment Systems Design: Douglas County schools, including neighborhood district schools, alternative schools, magnet schools, and charter schools, share a single enrollment application. After applications are submitted, individual schools approve applications based on available space. This system tries to balance making applications easy for families with local school decision-making power.

According to district policy, "Students may apply for choice enrollment in a school or program outside their neighborhood attendance area and such applications shall be approved if there is space available."⁵¹

Approved open enrollment applications carry forward throughout the grades a school serves. This means that families do not have to reapply to schools of choice each year, providing additional stability for students and families.

Additionally, if a student enrolls in a middle school of his or her choice, that student is also guaranteed enrollment at the high school into which the middle school feeds.⁵² Because of this provision, parents will often enroll students in a particular middle school in order to secure enrollment at certain high schools. This policy could lower stress for families during the transition from middle school to high school, and keep cohorts of students together. It also means that families must be aware of this policy and consider it as students transition to middle school.

Douglas County has two rounds of enrollment. During the first round, the district ranks enrollment priorities as follows:

1. In-boundary residents;
2. Resident siblings of currently enrolled students (including a high school student with a sibling applying to the feeder middle school);
3. Applicants with a newly drawn district boundary who wish to remain at their prior neighborhood school;
4. Applicants who live at the household of Douglas County district staff;
5. All other Douglas County residents; and
6. Nonresidents.

"Open enrollment in Douglas County begins with the premise that parents are in the best position to choose what kind of education they value and believe is best for their children."

***– Erin Kane, Interim Superintendent,
Douglas County Schools***

"Open enrollment keeps you on your toes. It forces you to be the best school district you can be, and forces your schools to be the best schools they can be."

***– Erin Kane, Interim Superintendent,
Douglas County Schools***

Any first-round application that is not accepted by a school is added to its “annual prioritized list” (i.e., the waiting list). During the second round of enrollment, applications are time stamped and processed on a “first come, first served” basis, behind any first-round applications. If a seat becomes available during this period, families must accept within 72 hours of being notified.⁵³

“Some of our families may not be able to take advantage of open enrollment due to transportation considerations.”

***– Erin Kane, Interim Superintendent,
Douglas County Schools***

Communication: District-level communication to families has been relatively limited in Douglas County. In the past, Douglas County has hosted a district-wide “choice fair” to provide information on various enrollment options, but the event was not always well attended.⁵⁴ In-person communication efforts are also complicated by the geographic size of the district.

As a result, much of the communications responsibility falls on individual schools. Information is mostly spread by word of mouth, and schools market themselves by being responsive to the needs of families in their communities.⁵⁵

Though the district has not yet tried to actively recruit nonresident students, that may become necessary in the future. Like other school districts in the Denver metropolitan region, Douglas County has grown rapidly over the past two decades. However, that growth has slowed in recent years, and the district now has a number of schools with open seats.⁵⁶

Douglas County is trying to learn more about families’ priorities and preferences. When applying for open enrollment for the 2018-19 school year, families will be asked to give feedback through a survey. Superintendent Kane believes that feedback will be a valuable tool for both traditional and charter schools to understand and serve the needs of their communities.⁵⁷

Equal Opportunity: Other than special education students who need programming and services not offered in every school, “there aren’t any [open enrollment] denials based on anything other than space,” according to Superintendent Kane.⁵⁸

Transportation is currently one of the largest barriers preventing families from participating in open enrollment.⁵⁹ Increasing transportation options for open enrollment would likely pose a financial challenge for the district. In fact, in recent years the district began charging families who qualify for bus service 50 cents per ride, or approximately \$200 per school year for a student to take the bus each day.⁶⁰

Recommendations

Creating a More Family-Friendly Choice System for Open Enrollment

Improvements to Colorado's open enrollment policies and processes should come from a family-centric perspective. Policymakers should view the current system through a parent lens, asking how open enrollment systems can better serve families' needs, provide useful information about schools and enrollment options, and open opportunities to all students.

With those guiding principles in mind, the following recommendations aim to improve open enrollment and empower families to choose the right school for their children.

- ✓ **Make enrollment windows and timelines consistent:** Families enrolling across districts or in multiple schools often encounter conflicting timelines and multiple deadlines that could push them to make a decision based on timing, rather than the best-fit school for their student. Even worse, complicated or burdensome paperwork and bureaucratic hoops could discourage parents from participating in school choice altogether. A shared enrollment window within and across districts is a simple way to make choice more accessible for more families. It also benefits schools because consistent timelines for enrollment decisions will reduce beginning-of-year transfers, and make school budget and enrollment expectations for the year ahead more predictable. Wisconsin instituted a similar system, creating windows and timelines for inter-district enrollment applications and responses, but allowing districts to set and run their own enrollment policies.⁶¹
- ✓ **Improve transparency for families:** A parent shouldn't have to search for hours for information on school choice. While the state may not be in the best position to communicate about these options directly to parents, CDE could maintain a single resource site with links to district enrollment policies and websites, or join forces in collaboration with non-government resources such as the Independence Institute's School Choice for Kids site.⁶² The state could also require districts to make their policies, deadlines, and processes clearly accessible on their websites in a single place with specific minimum required information.
- ✓ **Prioritize stability for students:** Once a student enrolls at a school, reenrollment should be simple and seamless. This provides peace of mind for families and reduces educational disruptions for students. More districts could consider a policy like Douglas County, which guarantees a student can finish out their time in a particular school, and even continue to a feeder high school. However, in cases where the residential population is growing rapidly and schools could become over-enrolled, guaranteed access from a feeder school may not be feasible. Instead, the state could simply ensure families don't have to reapply each year to a school they are already attending.
- ✓ **Encourage creative solutions to transportation barriers:** Transportation barriers may seem inevitable, but they could be mitigated even without a huge budgetary investment. Colorado should eliminate the laws and regulations that allow districts to close their borders to buses from neighboring areas.⁶³ Colorado law currently allows districts to curtail families' transportation options with no clear justification other than discouraging competition. However, some Colorado districts are already showing ways to creatively serve families — whether it's running a bus to a border drop-off point in a rural area, or innovating with neighborhood-based buses in Denver running to multiple schools.⁶⁴ Comparatively small investments in transportation could attract and enable more families to take advantage of open enrollment. Statewide requirements around transportation are not the best solution, especially since Colorado is a state that doesn't require transportation even to neighborhood schools. But the state could take down barriers, and lift up examples of innovation and creativity via competitive grants and/or information sharing.
- ✓ **Offer more information for state and district planning:** We heard from several district leaders that more information from the state on inter-district enrollment could help districts be more responsive to parent preferences. If summary enrollment and student movement data were available at a zip code or a census tract level, districts could better understand trends in enrollment and make better decisions at a neighborhood level, while protecting student privacy. Additionally, the state should begin to track and report on within-district open enrollment, to understand and share trends and monitor for equal access to open enrollment opportunities.

Conclusion

Colorado has been a national leader in providing innovative school options and enabling families to make educational choices that best fit their needs. But in the midst of misplaced claims that school choice is a privatization scheme, the fact that traditional public schools are the largest choice option used by families in the state has been overlooked. Open enrollment provides families with multiple options, even where other modes of choice aren't possible, and it can incentivize districts to customize programs to suit families' needs and preferences to compete for students. Open enrollment is already an actively leveraged policy serving thousands of Colorado families. But it could be even better if state and local policies and practices shift to reduce barriers to participation and ensure that all families have the support needed to understand and act on opportunities through fair, informed processes.

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About Ready Colorado

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Ready Colorado is a nonprofit working to improve education in Colorado. We promote all forms of school choice and advocate for a more student- and family-oriented education system.

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Data Notes and Sources

Figure 1: Inter-district open enrollment, public charter schools, home-school enrollment and total enrollment from Colorado Department of Education, 2016-17. Private school estimate from EdChoice, 2015; within-district estimate based on district data explained in Figure 11.

Figure 2: Data provided by the Colorado Department of Education. Excludes charter schools (Charter School Institute and district-run). Excludes students whose parents reside outside the state of Colorado.

Figure 3: Data provided by the Colorado Department of Education, 2016-17. Inter-district excludes charter schools (Charter School Institute and district-run). Inter-district excludes students whose parents reside outside the state of Colorado.

Figure 4: Data provided by the Colorado Department of Education, 2016-17. Inter-district excludes charter schools (Charter School Institute and district-run). Inter-district excludes students whose parents reside outside the state of Colorado.

Figure 5: Data provided by the Colorado Department of Education, 2016-17. Inter-district excludes charter schools (Charter School Institute and district-run) and multi-district online schools. Excludes students whose parents reside outside the state of Colorado.

Figure 6: Data provided by the Colorado Department of Education, 2016-17. Inter-district excludes charter schools (Charter School Institute and district-run) and multi-district online schools. Excludes students whose parents reside outside the state of Colorado.

Figure 7: Based on publicly available [Colorado Department of Education](#) data 2016-17, "Non-Resident Students District of Attendance by Parent's District, State, or Country of Residence." Includes district-authorized charter schools and multi-district online schools. Excludes students attending Charter School Institute schools, School for the Deaf, and BOCES programs. Excludes students whose parents reside outside the state of Colorado.

Figure 8a, 8b: Based on publicly available [Colorado Department of Education](#) data 2016-17, "Non-Resident Students District of Attendance by Parent's District, State, or Country of Residence." Includes district-authorized charter schools and multi-district online schools. Excludes students attending Charter School Institute schools, School for the Deaf, and BOCES programs. Excludes students whose parents reside outside the state of Colorado.

Figure 9: Inter-district enrollment data provided by the Colorado Department of Education, 2016-17. Excludes charter schools (Charter School Institute and district-run). Excludes students whose parents reside outside the state of Colorado. District accreditation data for 2016-17 publicly available at [Colorado District Accreditation Scores](#).

Figure 10: Student exit based on publicly available [Colorado Department of Education](#) data 2016-17, "Non-Resident Students District of Attendance by Parent's District, State, or Country of Residence." Includes district-authorized charter schools and multi-district online schools. Excludes students attending Charter School Institute schools, School for the Deaf, and BOCES programs. Excludes students whose parents reside outside the state of Colorado. District accreditation data for 2016-17 publicly available at [Colorado District Accreditation Scores](#). Three outliers excluded from graphic.

Figure 11: Data obtained via Colorado Open Records Act (CORA) requests and/or interviews with district officials in each respective district for within-district open enrollment estimates for 2016-17. Excludes charter schools. Districts marked ** supplied school-level data that required additional analysis to arrive at a total estimate.

Endnotes

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