The Impact of Inter-district Open Enrollment in Mahoning County Public Schools

Ronald J. Iarussi

Mahoning County Educational Services Center and Mahoning County Career and Technical Center

Karen H. Larwin

Youngstown State University

In 1989, the Ohio General Assembly passed a law enabling school districts to adopt open enrollment policies. Since then, 540 districts across the state of Ohio have implemented open enrollment policies. Primarily, rural school districts and suburban districts that are not located near urban districts are those that currently have open enrollment. Many of the suburban districts are having conversations within their communities about implementing open enrollment mainly for financial reasons. In many of those districts, the perception that open enrollment students may harm the reputation of the school exists. There are community folks, teachers and even district administrators who believe that open enrollment students will not perform at the level of expectation that exists for resident students. This investigations attempts to provide information to districts to better equip them to facilitate those conversations through the use of accurate data.

In Ohio, ESCs are often charged with helping school districts make informed decisions about such topics as curriculum, finance and other potential controversial issues. Data analysis and data warehousing are two very important services that we provide for our districts to help them with such topics. The school districts we serve have been inundated with reform initiatives and accountability measures that limit the amount of time spent on data collection and analysis. This service is valuable and appreciated by the districts we serve.

There is a dearth of known research examining the impact of inter-district open-enrollment on academic achievement. The existing research studies that have addressed

academic impacts have presented mixed results. These mixed results are likely mitigated by context specific factors. For example, a study that examined the impact of OEI in Colorado concluded that OEI is having positive impacts for students who are not economically disadvantage or academically disadvantaged (Lavery & Carlson, 2012). Colorado's school districts, like many districts in the western states, have experienced an influx of undocumented students over the last few years, resulting in many urban district students leaving their home-districts for other types of educational opportunities (Glass, 2014). Similarly, research out of Wisconsin (Welsh & Zimmer, 2011) and California's Los Angeles schools (Ledwith, 2010) suggest that the impact of open-enrollment on student achievement has been beneficial for students afforded the opportunity to attend school outside of their home districts. Contrarily, studies out of Florida (Juhyoung, 2012), Colorado (Carlson, 2014) and Arizona (Powers, Topper & Silver, 2012) suggest that OEI has not shown any notable impact on academics, especially when examining its impact across all student groups.

One theme that is consistent across the existing research is a question about socio-economics of the students who are electing to attend neighboring districts. Research not specifically looking at the impact on academics suggests that OEI has a "re-segregating" effect on student populations (Goodwin, Lehand, Baxter, & Southworth, 2006). Studies based on school districts in North Carolina and Colorado highlight that a large number of students participating in OEI come from more affluent student groups, and subsequently the more academically prepared student groups (Goodwin, et al., 2006, Lavery & Carlson, 2012). Similarly, research out of Massachusetts found that overwhelmingly parents will participate in OEI in an effort to send their children to more affluent and higher achieving schools (Fossey, 1994). The result of these types of migration can have a debilitating effect on the already struggling schools that students are leaving (Welsch & Zimmer, 2011). This "geography of opportunity" (Ledwith, 2010, p. 243) for students who have the means to attend a neighboring school (i.e., mobility and motivation) may explain why some research concludes that OEI has a positive effect on the students who choose to open-enroll.

This investigation includes data from the public schools in Mahoning County, across the years of 2004-2014, that have students participating in the open-enrollment. Data are not included for students opting for private schools, or alternative schools, such as career schools, or

charter schools. The data for this investigation was specifically limited to OEI from one public school district to another neighboring regular public school district. Student level data for the years 2003-2014 were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet by the Executive Director at ACCESS for the purposes of this investigation. Data included student socioeconomic status (qualification for free or reduced lunches) and indicated both the student's home-district and attending-district information. Student data included scores from grades three through eight, as well as high school achievement scores. This data included grade level exams (3^{rd}, 4^{th}, 5^{th}, 6^{th}, 7^{th}, 8^{th}, and Ohio Graduation Tests, area of standardized assessment score (reading, math, science, social science, and writing), raw scores and scaled scores for each assessment. Student data included scores from grades three through eight, as well as high school achievement scores. Lastly, data are examined at the district level.

Analysis was conducted with student scores as the dependent variable of interest. The goal of this analysis was to assess if there were differences in student achievement scores if student's participated in open-enrollment, based on student's SES status, based on the assessment type, the grade level, and/or the year associated with the scores. Analysis reveals no differences in average student achievement scores for those who participate in OEI relative to students who remain in their home-district. Further examination of the data for OEI status by socio-economic status indicates that no differences exist indicating that for this sample of data, socio-economic status does not differ for the students who are attending school in their home-district relative to students participating in the OEI. Additionally, analysis examined whether differences exist in assessment scores across exam sections (i.e., math, reading, etc), for students enrolled as OEI relative to those students who attend their home-district, and no significant differences were found. Lastly, county data was examined by district. Results indicate differences do not exist across the two groups, with the exception of one struggling district in Mahoning County.

The results of the current investigation suggest that students who leave their home district to attend an open-district perform at or above those remaining in the home district. However, these differences were not found to be statistically significant, with the exception of students from the poorest performing district. This finding is consistent with existing research that found that OEI did not have a significant impact on student achievement for those electing to enroll in

neighboring public school districts (Hong & Choi, 2015). This finding, however, is contrary to the generally held perception that by allowing students from poorer performing districts to open enroll into higher achieving district, this migration will have a negative impact the district that they attend (Barney, 2002). While students who migrate to higher performing districts may arrive with lower scores, the data consistently suggests that these students are, on average, performing slightly above their in-resident peers in that same district.

Secondly, the data suggests that students, who migrate out of the poorest performing district included in this investigation, perform significantly better in the districts that they elect to attend when compared to their peers who continue to attend that same district. This is consistent with the findings of Ledwith (2010) and Welsh & Zimmer (2011) who found that students who are able to take advantage of inter-district open enrollment opportunities experience an academic benefit. The reasons for that academic benefit can be attributed to a number of possible factors. Research suggests that families will opt to send their children to districts that have a better academic reputation because they believe that their student will benefit from an enhanced educational environment and an abundance of resources (Fossey, 1994, Ledwith, 2010). Ledwith maintains that the commitment to participate in OEI may be indicative of a higher level of commitment and motivation on the part of the family. Consistent with these findings, some research suggests that student data will recover to higher levels in a stable educational environment as the student acclimates to the new learning environment (Betts, Rice, Zau, Tang, & Koedel, 2006;).

Morris (2013) suggests that parents and caregivers are motivated to participate in OEI if they believe that this choice will academically and socially benefit their student. Some parents will participate in OEI for reasons of convenience (before and after-school childcare) as well as out of nostalgia: the wish for their school-age children to attend a district that they attended. Regardless of why families participate, the current investigation suggests that there is generally no association between participating in inter-district open enrollment and student achievement, with the exception of the poorest performing district. For many of those students and their families, they seek to participate in OEI because they believe this “choice” to attend another local public school provides them access to the educational environment and resources they need to be academically successful.

CONCLUSION

The information presented in this research should be used by districts to inform their own communities about open enrollment whether they currently participate or are considering participating. The information should not be used to recruit students nor should it be used to disparage any district. The districts that are included in this research were consulted with before the research began. The information was also shared with districts before any articles were published.

This is the second study the MCESC has conducted for the districts that are serviced. Data analysis and warehousing have become an important service provided for districts. The MCESC works closely with ACESS, the Information Technology Center that services the same districts served by the ESC to extract and analyze data. The MCESC also employees Dr. Larwin, psychometrician, to assist in data analysis.

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Authors

Dr. Ronald J. Iarussi, Superintendent, Mahoning County Educational Service Center/Mahoning County Career and Technical Center. He can be reached by phone at 330-965-7828 and by email at r.iarussi@mahoningesc.org

Dr. Karen Larwin, Professor, Youngstown State University. She can be reached at 330-941-1436 and email at khlarwin@ysu.edu