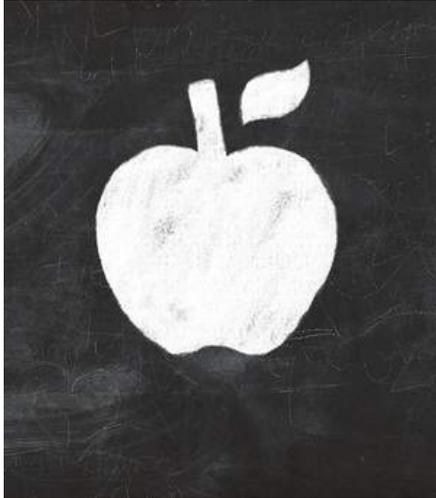


Open enrollment gets passing grades so far for CPS

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cincinnati.com



Cincinnati Public Schools rolled out an open-enrollment policy this year, saying it would save the district millions of dollars.

And almost halfway through the school year, the district of nearly 33,000 students says it is no longer bleeding money to other open-enrollment districts.

In other words, it's breaking even. That, says Assistant Superintendent Gabe Lofton, is a win.

"We're really pleased with the rollout," Lofton said. "We recruited several hundred students, interest was incredible. We're happy and pleased we got so many applications. That speaks to the number of quality schools in our district."

Open enrollment allows a school district to enroll, tuition-free, students who live outside the district's boundaries. The policies were first created in Ohio in 1989 and expanded a decade or so later to include statewide open enrollment.

About 80 percent of the state's more than 600 school districts have adopted open-enrollment policies. Locally, 31 of the 49 districts in Southwest Ohio allow it, up from 19 in 2008.

Still, the number of families who take advantage of the policies remains relatively small. Of the roughly 1.6 million public school students in the state, only about 75,000 are enrolled under the policy, said Scott Inskeep, superintendent of Reading Community Schools and member of a statewide open-enrollment task force. The group also includes Lakota Treasurer Jenni Logan.

Most districts adopt the policy because of the money – particularly when budgets are shrinking. In Ohio, schools are funded based on their enrollment. So when a student transfers to another district, his per-pupil state funding, roughly \$5,700, follows him there.

For that reason, open enrollment can be a touchy issue. Some districts view it as robbing another of money. Supporters, however, say it gives students more educational options.

And a lack of open enrollment choices has been a source of controversy, investigations and even legal action – two years ago, an Akron mother was sentenced to jail for lying about her address to get her kids into a better school.

At Cincinnati Public Schools, the region's largest district, 48 students were kicked out last year because of non-payment of tuition or residency issues. Under the new policy, those students would have been allowed to stay.

Open-enrollment policies take various forms. Some districts accept students from anywhere in the state. Others only allow students from neighboring districts. Many have space limitations and specify that local students get preference if there aren't enough seats.

In Cincinnati, the school board approved its statewide open-enrollment policy in January to save money. Last school year, 372 students – and \$2 million in state funding – left CPS for districts with open-enrollment policies.

More than 800 out-of-district students applied to CPS this year – more than district leaders had anticipated. Applications came from districts throughout Southwest Ohio and Northern Kentucky. About 200 were denied because there were no available seats in the schools the students wanted. Of the 600 or so who were accepted, 120 are children of employees. The district has always allowed employees' kids to enroll, but under the old rules, it only got about \$3,300 in per-pupil state money. Now, because of its open enrollment policy, it will get the full \$5,700.

The 600 students are enrolled at more than 20 CPS schools – high schools, neighborhood elementary schools and magnet schools. Academic powerhouse Walnut Hills High School was the biggest beneficiary of open-enrolled students.

At schools where demand exceeded capacity, the district used a random lottery to determine who could enroll.

“It went very smoothly,” Lofton said.

Prior to open enrollment, the 600 students would have had to pay tuition to attend a CPS school. That’s something most families can’t afford or choose not to do. This year they no longer have to.

Even factoring in the money that CPS lost in tuition (\$6,632 a year for out-of-district students and \$8,266 for out-of-state students), Lofton said the district still broke even.

“At one point we were losing \$2 million. Now we’re getting that back.”

Inskeep, the Reading superintendent, said open enrollment has worked out “exceptionally well” for his district of 1,600 students. “Our enrollment was declining and we felt we had a good product to offer,” he said. “Yes, it was an economic decision, driven by our need for revenue and because we needed students.”

Reading adopted the policy six years ago and has 270 open-enrollment students this year. It lost only seven students to open-enrollment policies, all to two CPS high schools: Walnut Hills and the School for Creative and Performing Arts.

Dave Warman, of Mount Healthy, took advantage of Reading’s open-enrollment policy four years ago. His oldest daughter had been enrolled in private school but “it just wasn’t for her,” said Warman, who serves as Glendale’s police chief. So he shopped around. “Only three schools had open enrollment at the time. Reading was one of them,” he said. “I came up one day and asked if I could check out the schools.”

He liked what he saw. So did his kids. The oldest graduated from Reading High School two years ago and is studying nursing at the University of Cincinnati. The youngest graduates from high school this year.

“Thank God we were accepted,” said Warman. “It’s been nothing but a positive experience.

Although the family saved money by switching from private to public school, that’s not why they made the switch.

“We chose it because it was a perfect fit for our kids. I’m a big believer in it.”

CPS’ rollout coincides with a statewide discussion on the topic. Ohio created an Open Enrollment Task Force as part of the 2014-15 budget bill. Its job is to look at the patchwork of open-enrollment policies across the state – specifically the fiscal impact and how districts select students. It will make recommendations to state lawmakers by Dec. 31.

Steve Dackin, task force chairman and superintendent of the Reynoldsburg School District, said the group will meet Dec. 16 to hash out the recommendations, which will likely center around process and finances. Money has been the main point of debate among task force members.

“No one is really saying giving families choices is a bad thing,” he said. “(But) how do you do that in a fair and equitable way? Some districts that have lost students think there should be a way to address the revenue loss. At the same time, some districts who get a lot of kids, they want to make sure the revenue coming in is sufficient.”

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