



## Students benefit from Expanded Open Enrollment

By Deborah D. Thornton

Open enrollment is a common occurrence in Iowa's school districts. Since first authorized 20 years ago in the 1989-90 school year, open enrollment has grown from 2,757 students to almost 25,000 statewide. For the 2009-2010 school year, the largest numbers of students whose parents chose open enrollment were in either the largest districts — those with over 7,500 total students, or the smallest districts. The largest districts had a net loss of 2,600 students, the smallest a net loss of 832. All districts over 7,500 had a net loss.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for choosing open enrollment probably center on too few students and a resulting lack of opportunity at the tiny districts, and conversely, too many students resulting in the same lack of opportunity at the largest districts. So the parents and students chose their best option.<sup>2</sup>

Under open enrollment, the state education money follows the student. For the 2010-2011 school year, it is \$5,768 per student, plus textbook, special education, and transportation money.<sup>3</sup> For students choosing to enroll in accredited nonpublic schools, textbook and transportation money already follows them. The fact that the money follows the student is a well-established and legal policy.

There are 182 accredited nonpublic schools in Iowa. These schools have to follow the exact same educational requirements as the public schools, including Iowa Core Curriculum, discrimination, cultural awareness, wellness, bullying, and teacher certification laws.<sup>4</sup> Accredited nonpublic schools award a diploma, the same as a public school. Students compete against public schools in athletics. Therefore, the State of Iowa has already determined that these schools are legally acceptable options. The only difference is that the parent must write tuition checks, in addition to the school taxes they already pay.

Though the total cost of educating students has gone up each year, student achievement has not.<sup>5</sup> Achievement as measured on standardized tests has flatlined for many years and the high school graduation rate is only 87 percent. Reading, writing, and math scores for low-income and minority students have resisted all attempts at increase, across all grade levels. On the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), 80 percent of all fourth-grade Iowan students were "proficient" in 2009-2010. Only 63 percent of Hispanic and 55 percent of African American students were proficient. Only 67 percent of low-income students were proficient compared to 87 of higher-income students.<sup>6</sup> The educational needs of these students are not being met.

Expanded open enrollment has been working in Florida, where Hispanic students are scoring higher on standardized tests than the average of all students in Oklahoma. In 1998, Florida Hispanic students were two grade levels below the Oklahoma average. After implementing expanded open enrollment, by 2009 they were almost a grade ahead. The average Hispanic student's fourth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) score increased by 25 points, equivalent to two-and-a-half grade levels.<sup>7</sup> The Hispanic students in Florida even outscored the average Iowa student (221) on the NAEP by 2 points (223). In comparison to Florida, Iowa — which considers itself an educational leader — is failing minority and low-income students. Public schools are not succeeding for all students. These students must be allowed to take advantage of every educational option. Unfortunately, minority and low-income students are least likely to be able to afford nonpublic school tuition.

Expanded open enrollment would allow the money to follow the student to any state accredited school, including nonpublic schools. These nonpublic schools are fully accredited; we

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need to make use of them. An objection to expanded open enrollment might be that the public schools need the money and that losing the money would harm their programs, because they still would have teachers and overhead to pay. The solution is setting limits on both the amount of the state funding available and the amount of tuition eligible for payment under expanded open enrollment. For example, 90 percent of the \$5,768 state core funding is \$5,191 for 2010-2011. No more than this amount could be transferred to an accredited nonpublic school, instead of the full \$5,768. Additionally, the amount would be limited to a maximum of 90 percent of the nonpublic school tuition.

For example, parents might chose to open enroll their child into the accredited nonpublic Regina Elementary School in Iowa City. The tuition rate is \$5,200 per year. Ninety percent of that is \$4,680. That amount is transferred with the student, instead of the full \$5,768, which would have been transferred if they open enrolled to a public district. Thus, the originating district would retain \$1,088 more than if the student out enrolled to a public district and the full \$5,768 went with the student, as it does currently. The parents in this example would pay the remaining \$520 tuition. At the high school level, the Regina tuition is about \$8,000. A maximum of 90 percent of the state core funding or \$5,191 would be transferred, leaving \$577 with the originating district and \$2,800 for the parents to pay. Ninety percent is a suggested transfer level. Low-income parents could apply to the current Iowa Tuition Scholarship program to help pay the rest of the tuition.<sup>8</sup>

A pilot program might be implemented for students currently attending schools on the Schools in Need of Assistance (SINA) report. These students already have a priority right to transfer to another school within the public district. The Legislature needs to expand that right into any accredited school, either public or nonpublic. Expanded open enrollment would provide real educational opportunity to students in desperate need of help. The week of January 23-29, 2011, is National School Choice Week. Parents should insist that Governor Branstad and the Iowa Legislature address the educational needs of our children by making full use of all accredited schools.

#### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> *The Annual Condition of Education Report 2010*, Iowa Department of Education, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Options for Educational Choice, Iowa Department of Education, <[http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1236&Itemid=2121](http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1236&Itemid=2121)> (December 7, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Tuition and Fees, Iowa Department of Education, 2010-2011, <[http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1438&Itemid=2434](http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1438&Itemid=2434)> (December 7, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Nonpublic School Accreditation, Iowa Department of Education, <[http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=482&Itemid=1214](http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=482&Itemid=1214)> (December 8, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> 2010 Annual Condition of Education Report Released, Iowa Department of Education, <[http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2080](http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2080)> (December 8, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> *2010 Annual Condition of Education Report*, Figure 34 and 36, p. 164-165.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Ladner, "Reforms With Results, What Oklahoma can learn from Florida's K-12 education revolution," The Foundation for Educational Choice, State Research Report, July 2010, p. 6, 10, 11. <<http://www.edchoice.org/CMSModules/EdChoice/FileLibrary/543/Reforms-With-Results---What-Oklahoma-can-learn-from-Florida-s-K-12-education-revolution.pdf>> (December 10, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> 422.11S School tuition organization tax credit, Iowa Tax Research Library, <<http://itrl.idr.iowa.gov/mx/hm.asp?id=422.11S>> and "School Tuition Organization Tax Credit Contributions," Iowa Department of Revenue, <<http://www.iowa.gov/tax/1040EI/Line/06Line54.html#k>> (December 10, 2010).

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