

## Viewpoints: Open enrollment unlocks path to choice

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Getting any school choice legislation passed in California is a daunting task. The Legislature, in thrall to the teachers unions, is unwilling to disrupt the moribund status quo, which has led to disastrous consequences for public education. But the Open Enrollment Act has jumped through various legal and political challenges and miraculously survived, though efforts are under way to have it weakened.

Included in California's 2010 sweeping reform package, the Open Enrollment Act has received far less attention than its sister statute, the "parent trigger" law. But while the parent trigger provision requires the signatures of 50 percent of parents at a school designated as chronically underperforming by the California Department of Education, the open enrollment provision requires only one. It is efficient, simple and unencumbered by the political obstacles that have undermined parent empowerment under the parent trigger law – one parent can rise to the challenge and demand change.

Open enrollment allows parents whose children attend the 1,000 lowest performing California schools to opt out and send their kids to a higher performing non-charter public school – anywhere in the state. In previous years, parents had to ask for permission from the "home" district to disenroll, in order to enroll their child in a higher performing school. Open enrollment severed this ZIP code-based tie and now grants parents the freedom to shop around for a better school.

Instead of supporting open enrollment, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, elected with the backing of the politically powerful California Teachers Association, maintains that open enrollment is "misguided" and that parents would rather have their local school become stronger than send their kids to another school. Torlakson is mimicking the CTA line here. The union aggressively lobbied – unsuccessfully – to kill open enrollment, claiming that, among other things, the bill would "create chaos in school districts and drain resources from local classrooms."

Chaos? Hardly. Draining resources? Tax dollars still remain in public schools. The real reason that CTA rejects open enrollment is that the new law cedes power to parents who simply want an opportunity to get a better education for their kids.

Where choice is available, all schools improve because competition fosters accountability and makes schools try harder. Recently, Education Week published "What Research Says About School Choice," in which the results of various studies concerning school choice were analyzed. The report is a sober look at the 20-year-old movement to end mandatory ZIP code school assignments. They found that test scores improved when students went to a school of choice. Additionally, students at the affected public schools did better after choice was introduced.

While the above research concerns itself with vouchers, by which students can opt out of a public school with tax dollars following them to a private school, open enrollment's options do not include privatization.

The choice is still for a public school. In fact, the Los Angeles Unified School District is exploring more open enrollment choices for parents. We encourage them to truly open their boundaries and minimize any restrictions designed to stifle choice that have been advocated by teacher and administrator interests.

While improving educational outcomes, school choice also lowers crime rates. A study released in February measuring school choice and its effects on crime in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district in North Carolina examined an open enrollment policy whereby any student could apply to any public school within the district. If a popular school had more enrollees than seats, a lottery was held. The study found that a student who won the lottery was 50 percent less likely than a lottery loser to commit a crime. Among the high-risk male high school population, being admitted to a first-choice school reduced felony arrests from 77 to 43 per 100 students from 2002-09.

No law is perfect. Presently, open enrollment is limited to the bottom 10 percent of failing schools, affecting only 1,000 of the state's almost 10,000 schools. Also, the law stipulates that no one district can have more than 10 percent of its schools on the list. This means that some schools are erroneously included. With these imperfections in mind, legislation passed last year that would have eviscerated the open enrollment law by cutting the number of eligible schools from 1,000 to 150. However, Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed it, stating that the changes "go too far and would undermine the intent of the original law."

Decades ago, we ended racially restricted covenants in housing. You can now buy a home in the neighborhood of your choice; you can shop in any store; you can go to any doctor or dentist; you can cross town and go to a nice park for a family picnic. Imagine if the law said you could only live, shop, visit a doctor or go to a park in your own ZIP code. We wouldn't tolerate it.

And yet, we tolerate "ZIP code education" in public education. Too many neighborhood schools in certain ZIP codes are simply left to fail – and with them, the destruction of hope and opportunity in the lives of too many children who, by accident of birth, just happen to live in one of those ZIP codes. In a state that is in educational turmoil – a sclerotic education code, school districts in dire financial straits, dictatorial teachers unions and roughly a 33 percent dropout rate – any attempt to empower parents should be greeted with open arms. Open enrollment is a path to opportunity. Let's welcome it and unlock the doors to all schoolhouses ourselves.

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