



To: Iowa House Education Committee

From: Jude Schwalbach, Senior Policy Analyst, Reason Foundation

Date: February 26, 2025

My name is Jude Schwalbach, and I'm a senior education policy analyst with Reason Foundation, a national 501c(3) nonprofit policy research organization. I'm testifying on [Iowa House File \(H.F.\) 68](#).

Currently, all Iowa school districts must have an open enrollment policy that requires districts to accept transfer applicants if seats are available. [Iowa H.F. 68](#), however, would modify this policy so that school districts can reject applicants who are English Learners (EL) based on EL program capacity instead of grade-level capacity. If codified, this proposal would be a step backwards for Iowa's students and families.

[Iowa law](#) requires all school districts to have Lau Plans, which show how they plan to meet the needs of non-English speaking students regardless of their current EL enrollment. Moreover, school districts must accept all transfer applicants regardless of their EL status so long as seats are open in the appropriate grade level. This ensures that public schools with available seats are open to all students regardless of where they live.

H.F. 68, however, would let school districts artificially limit the number of EL students in their schools since EL applicants would not be considered on equal footing with English-speaking applicants in the same grade. EL students' schooling options should not be unfairly limited when all school districts must accommodate EL students' needs.

Moreover, only 2% of Iowa students using open enrollment during the 2023-24 school year were ELs, according to the Iowa Department of Education data. Even though Iowa's EL population is [fast growing](#), most transfer students aren't ELs.

Instead of limiting students' schooling options as suggested by H.F. 68, policymakers should make the open enrollment process more family friendly. Specifically, school districts should be required to post their available capacity by grade level and all open enrollment policies and

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procedures on their websites, ensuring that families can easily learn when, where, and how to apply for a transfer. Iowa's neighbor, Nebraska, already requires school districts to do this.

Students use strong open enrollment programs like Iowa's to attend public schools that are the right fit, [escape bullying](#), access [Advanced Placement \(AP\) courses](#), specialized learning models, [smaller class sizes](#), and shorten their [commutes](#).

K-12 open enrollment is popular in the state. About one in 12 Iowa students used it to find the best public school for them during the 2023-24 school year. Similarly, data from Arizona, Florida, and Wisconsin showed that about [one in 10 students](#) in those states used open enrollment to attend schools that are the right fit.

A California Legislative Analyst's Office's [2016](#) report on the state's District of Choice program and A [Reason Foundation's 2023 study](#) on Wisconsin's open enrollment results both found that the competitive effects of open enrollment can encourage public school districts to improve. In a 2023 [EdChoice report](#), school district administrators in Arizona, North Carolina, Indiana, and Florida stated that open enrollment encouraged them to innovate by creating and improving existing programs to attract and retain students.

According to national polling released by [EdChoice](#) in January 2025, open enrollment is supported by 73% of school parents. It also enjoys bipartisan support: 81% of Democrats and 71% of Republicans favor allowing families to attend schools across district lines.

Only 15 other states have strong open enrollment policies like Iowa's. Yet H.F. 68 would undermine the state's excellent law since it would unfairly limit the schooling options for EL students. Instead, policymakers should ensure that public schools remain open to all EL students and make the open enrollment process more family friendly.