

Comment Report

SF 2011

A bill for an act relating to open enrollment and including applicability provisions.

Subcommittee Members: Cournoyer-CH, Celsi, Salmon

Date: 01/31/2024

Time: 04:00 PM

Location: Room 217 Conference Room

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Comment: My name is Jude Schwalbach, and I'm an education policy analyst with Reason Foundation, a national 501c(3) nonprofit policy research organization. I'm testifying on Iowa Senate File 2011.Iowa S.F. 2011 would require the parents of crossdistrict transfer students to notify their district of residence and the receiving district that their children will enroll in another school district by March 1st of the preceding school year or September 1st of the current school year. If parents fail to meet this deadline, then the transfer is only permitted if the receiving district determines that the parents had good cause to do so as defined in Section 282.28, subsection 9, paragraph a, subparagraph (8). If the school district determines that the deadline was missed without good cause then it can reject the transfer students application. Additionally, students can transfer at any time, but only with the approval of the sending and receiving school districts. This proposal would weaken the states current open enrollment law and place cumbersome administrative duties on parents. Currently, Reason Foundation ranks Iowas crossdistrict open enrollment policy as a strong open enrollment law. However, the proposal would diminish Iowas standing as a national leader in open enrollment policy since districts of residence could stop students from transferring. Requiring parents to notify their district of residence that they will not enroll their children places an undue burden on them. If needed, school districts should communicate with each other regarding student transfers and not place the onus on parents. Under no circumstances should parents have to notify their district of residence that their students are transferring to another school district. At the same time, student transfers should be permitted so long as seats are available. If school districts have available seats, they should accommodate all students until capacity is reached and transfer students should not have to receive permission from their district of residence to change school districts. Moreover, the proposed definition of good cause is very limited and does not consider other reasons that students choose to use open enrollment. Reports from Californias Legislative Analysts Office in 2016 and 2021 show that students choose to transfer for a variety of reasons, such as accessing specialized courses (Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate), or shorter commutes. So long as extra seats are available, school districts should not be able to restrict access to transfer students. In fact, school districts can do more to ensure that the open enrollment process is transparent and easy to navigate. Specifically, school districts should be required to post their available capacity by grade level and their open enrollment policies and procedures on their websites. In addition to mediating the open enrollment disputes, the state department of education should also publish important open enrollment data annually, including the number of rejected applicants, and why they were rejected. The department of education already publishes the number of transfer students. Wisconsin policymakers have used annual reports like this to improve their open enrollment program for decades. A Dec. 2023 Morning ConsultEdChoice poll of 1,320 adults found that 73% of parents with children in school supported open enrollment, and only 17% opposed it. It also enjoys bipartisan support: 76% of Democrats, 75% of Republicans, and 69% of Independents with kids in schools say

they favor allowing families to attend schools across school district lines. Moreover, robust open enrollment laws signed into law in Idaho, Montana, and West Virginia during the 2023 legislative sessions enjoyed significant bipartisan support, receiving the votes of over 80% of Democrats and 90% of Republicans in those legislatures. Accordingly, Iowa policymakers should ensure that their open enrollment laws remain strong. Strengthening Iowas open enrollment policy would help ensure that public schools are available to all students and further empower families to find public schools that are the right fit for their kids. However, S.F. 2011 would weaken the states current open enrollment law since it limits the opportunities students would have to transfer to other school districts. Instead school districts should have to accommodate transfer applicants at all times so long as seats are available.