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## Rates of Poverty and Special Education Students Among Open Enrollment Students

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Rates of Poverty and Special Education Students  
Among Open Enrollment Students

By

Heather D. Nebesniak

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Dr. Kay A. Keiser

Omaha, Nebraska

November, 2016

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## ABSTRACT

### Rates of Poverty and Special Education Students

#### Among Open Enrollment Students

Heather D. Nebesniak, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisor: Dr. Kay A. Keiser

The school choice movement is gaining momentum across the nation. More now than ever, families are looking beyond their local neighborhood schools to find a school that they feel reflects their educational values. Societal structures are changing and families look to the schools to provide resources that were historically outside the school realm. At-risk students, such as students living in poverty and students requiring special education services both require a greater pool of resources. In order to plan for enrollment growth and to meet student needs, educational administrators are faced with the task of predicting needs of students and securing the resources necessary to deliver these resources.

The purpose of this study was to explore the effect of open enrollment acceptance dates in one urban school district on district planning and resources for services needed for at-risk students, with at-risk being students living in poverty or needing special education services. Students were identified into three categories; in-district students, on time open enrolled students, and late enrollee open enrolled students. Each group was then analyzed to determine if they were congruent or different in two areas. The two

areas were the rate of students living in poverty and the rate of students needing special education services. The study gathered enrollment data over four school years from 2012-2016.

This study may provide insight into the planning and allocation of resources needed to meet student needs, both of in-district and open enrollment students. Additionally, the study may aid educational administrators in planning for student growth, enrollment practices, and building relationships with school clientele. Given the study outcomes, school assignments for incoming open enrollment students to maximize educational resources and supports.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe an immense amount of gratitude to so many people who have supported me during this educational quest. The journey over the previous four years has been a path that I walked with many colleagues and professors who provided an amazing system of support when the road became rocky and filled with barriers. Without the support of those around me at weekly classes, during research deadlines, and the unwavering support of my family, I would have never completed my dissertation.

Upon reflecting on my life, I am unable to pinpoint a time that I didn't want to include education and teaching as part of my life. My childhood career dreams included being an author, a photographer, an archeologist, a history professor, and a teacher of young children. Everything that I wanted to do involved some facet of reading, researching the history of things, exploring why things worked the way they did, and trying to do things better. I always had my "two cents" to put in on how we could make something better. When I decided to be a teacher, I knew during my undergraduate classes that I wanted to complete my doctorate. This was always part of my master plan but little did I ever know how life events, career changes, and having children change the path that one so meticulously plans for them. I would like to thank those who kept me true the course of this journey when the dream seemed to fade away at times.

Above all, I would like to thank my husband Erin, my daughter Marlee, and my son Deegan, for their never-ending support. It may not have been the wisest decision on my part to begin the doctoral program while also being a first year principal with two young children at home but Erin made sure that meals were made, homework was

completed, and made the many nights that mommy was gone extra special for the kids, including weekly slumber parties with daddy where I am sure bedtimes were extended just a bit. Erin has been my number one fan supporting me through undergraduate school, two master's degrees, and now this program. He has always believed in me and sacrificed so that I can achieve my dreams and I know that I couldn't have done this without his encouragement. I would like to thank my parents, Gary and Nanna Wieck. They have always encouraged me to look beyond the easy route and to never settle. When things got hard, they were always there to encourage me through positive words and prayers.

I would also like to thank all the professors that I have had the privilege to work with at the University of Nebraska. Through the thought provoking conversations and the rigorous coursework, the professors encouraged me to think beyond the status quo and to really see myself as a member of the lucky few who get the awesome responsibility of being educational administrators. The opportunities the professors provided for networking, collaboration, and mentoring helped to transform me from a new school administrator into a confident leader of many. I would like to personally thank Dr. Dick Christie for challenging me to think beyond the seemingly "obvious answer" as successful leaders need to have a viewpoint that transcends 20/20 vision, hindsight, and the crystal ball. Thank you to Dr. Kay Keiser for always being positive and for helping to keep the momentum going. You calmed me when the ups and downs of the dissertation rollercoaster got scary!

Finally, the professional connections and relationships that I made through this process is something that I will take with me long after I cease to drive to UNO on a

regular basis. Jean, Chris, and Troy, we were together through it all and I am still holding to the belief that the best was saved for last! You all certainly made the journey much more humorous and colorful along the way and I couldn't have imagined a better group with whom to go on this journey!



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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Across the nation, public schools are facing ever-changing perimeters in their role of educating today's youth. Modern society delegates roles upon schools that extend beyond the academic realm and current trends focus on the education and health of the whole child. Today's students come to schools with a diverse range external factors that impact educational needs and social experiences. They congregate in school settings from varied socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Students living in poverty and students with needs that require special education services bring with them additional demands on schools (Cullen & Rivkin 2003; Jensen 2009; Kraus 2008; Payne 1993, 2005). All states have students living in poverty and studies have shown time after time that schools with high levels of concentrated poverty face even more challenges in meeting student needs (Payne 1993, 2005). Schools are charged with the task of delivering educational programing that meets state and national curricular standards, promotes high achievement of academics, ensures students are college and career ready, and promotes mental and physical health and wellness to create a safe environment for the youth of our nation. These expectations, coupled with a changing system of allocation of funds and distribution of resources, have contributed to vast discrepancies in how school districts are run. In many funding formulas students equate to revenue. The more students that a district has attending their schools, the more money that district will receive. Most public school districts find themselves at the mercy of inconsistent local funding systems and state formulas to produce the revenues needed to operate the schools within their district and do not have a direct control of the incoming financial resources;

nor do they have control over the students reside in their attendance area. But what school districts do have control over is how they select the distribution of those resources.

Funding formulas indicate how funds are distributed to the districts and guidelines are set as to what purposes the funds are for but not how they are distributed once they reach the district (Reschovsky & Imazeki, 1997). Two comparable districts in a similar geographic area can have very different cultures, educational outcomes, and financial stability.

There is no one model of how to run a school district effectively due to the ever-changing rules of the game. But there are fundamental elements that successful school districts in common and one of these elements is planning. Planning for the future, planning for safety, planning for staffing, planning for the unknown, planning for when revenues are good, and planning for the lean years. Planning that is successful is developed to align with concrete goals and stayed focused on goals (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). A crucial element of planning is to know as much about “what” is being planned and, in the case of schools, it all boils down to one thing...the students. Imagine planning a dinner party for hundreds of people and not knowing who is coming, what time they are coming, who can eat what menu items, who can not sit by whom, etc. There is a reason people make their living being event planners. School districts have to know the number of students they need to serve, the types of students they will be educating, the needs of the students coming into their schools, and what can cause variables to occur in the planning formula. Schools that are proactive versus reactive are the schools that are experiencing success while other schools around them may get caught in a continuous cycle of reacting to the latest policy or procedure change, law amendment or legislative endeavor. Administrative leaders of successful districts ensure

that resources, including time, money, staffing, and equipment are allocated to support district goals (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Regardless of geographic location, school districts that are able to consistently manage the flow of resources that come into district, both financial and community related, produce schools that are successful. Too much student growth can severely overtax a financially burdened school district just as crippling as a rapid decline in students can impact a school district. By developing an understanding of the external factors that impact school districts, specifically student enrollment, and examining the role of planning in decision making of how resources are allocated, school districts can maximize their assets to help them prepare for circumstances and conditions in which they have no direct control over.

The purpose of this study was to explore the effect of open enrollment acceptance dates on district planning and resources for services needed for at-risk students, with at-risk being students living in poverty or needing special education services. School district administrators know that when the district accepts an open enrollment student there are resources that the district gains and resources that must then in turn be allocated. But what districts often are unable to determine is what that ratio of input versus output looks like. Further exploration was necessary to determine if students that are accepted beyond the open enrollment window set by the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties exhibit a higher percentage of students at risk in terms of living in poverty and needing special education services. The study examined the poverty rates of students accepted beyond the open enrollment deadlines to see if there was a different frequency of students of low socioeconomic status in this population of students in comparison to students that were accepted within the open enrollment period

and with the non-open enrollment or in-district student population. The research focused on comparing all students admitted during the set open enrollment time period of November through March 15, March 16 through May 31, and June 1-August 31 over a four year time period spanning from the 2012-2013 school year to the 2015-2016 school year. The null hypothesis was that there was a significant difference among open-enrollment students and in-district students in the areas of poverty and the need for special education services.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions frame this study:

**Research Question #1.** Was the frequency of open enrollment students living in poverty congruent or different from the rate of in-district students living in poverty?

**Research Question #2.** Was the frequency of late enrollee open enrollment students living in poverty congruent or different from the rate of in-district students living in poverty?

**Research Question #3.** Was the frequency of open enrollment students living in poverty congruent or different from the rate of late enrollee open enrollment students living in poverty?

**Research Question #4.** Was the frequency of open enrollment students needing special education services congruent or different from the rate of in-district students needing special education services?

**Research Question #5.** Was the frequency of late enrollee open enrollment students needing special education services congruent or different from the rate of in-district students needing special education services?



**Research Question #6.** Was the frequency of open enrollment students needing special education services congruent or different from the rate of late enrollee open enrollment students needing special education services?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study contributed to research, practice, and policy. This study was of significant interest to educators and policymakers in the research district, and to the educators and policymakers in the districts that make-up the area Learning Community as all of the districts operated under the same open enrollment plan. Additionally, this study was of significant interest to educators and policy makers outside of the geographic area as school choice options continued to grow across the nation due to an increasing demand by families to have more access to schools beyond the district in which they reside. Finally, this study was of significant interest to both supporters and critics of school choice as it presented an unbiased presentation of data.

**Contribution to Research.** A review of professional literature suggested that more research was needed to determine how school choice impacted school districts and if students seeking alternatives to the assigned schools had a higher likelihood of needing additional support due to special education verification or needs stemming from living in poverty. The research available was contradicting and many of the previous studies done on this topic included variables, such as charter school participation and voucher reimbursements that were not present in this study. This study contributed to research on the demographics of students in the Douglas and Sarpy County metropolitan area seeking school choice options.

**Contribution to Practice.** Based on the outcome of this study, the research district may decide to review their open enrollment practices. Additionally, the district may decide to review programs intended to support students living in poverty or students with special education verifications to best support the needs of students. These contributions to practice may also be applicable to other districts in the Douglas and Sarpy County Learning Community depending on their open enrollment acceptance practices. Additionally, contributions to practice may extend to other districts nationwide that participate in forms of school choice by means of open enrollment.

More importantly, the results of this study contributed to a broader theory of practice that was inclusive of current practices in school choice, equity in education, and how school districts manage a limited pool of resources. Although school districts nationwide have unique characteristics and circumstances due to where they are located, there were also common threads that were found in all school districts when it came to the need to plan and deliver educational systems and services for all students. Public schools everywhere need to accurately manage resources effectively as a responsibility to their stakeholders. It is a fundamental belief that students can learn and have the right to a free education regardless of disability, socioeconomic level, or geographic area in which they reside. Our nationwide school system was set up on a foundation of local control in which state constitutions and laws create equitable educational programs for the citizens that resided there. Educational leaders and school district planning committees monitor student enrollment in order to plan not only for the future, but also for the present.

**Contribution to Policy.** The results of this study can offer information related to how to best support students that use the open enrollment option. The district can use this information to review, modify, and possibly improve programs designed to support students that required special education services, students that lived in poverty, and to promote attendance of all students that attend the district schools. These contributions to policy may also be applicable to other districts in the Douglas and Sarpy County Learning Community depending on their open enrollment acceptance practices. Additionally, contributions to policy may extend to other districts nationwide that participate in forms of school choice by means of open enrollment.

### **Assumptions**

The study had several strong features including that (a) all families/students had equal opportunity to access the open enrollment application during the application time window; (b) the district data management personnel followed the process of correctly accepting or denying the open enrollment application of all participants; (c) the district data management personnel processed all applications in a timely manner according to guidelines set forth by the Douglas and Sarpy Learning Community; (d) all student data used in the study was derived from students that both accepted the open enrollment approval and attended the research district upon the year of the acceptance; (e) student applicants for open enrollment mirrored the district demographics as far as gender, age, and ethnicity; and (f) confidentiality of student participants was secured and maintained as students were not identified by name or student identification number.

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

This study was limited to students securing open enrollment and attending school at the the research district within the time span of 2012-2013 school year through the 2015-2016 school year. A limitation to the study was that students eligible for open enrollment must be between the grades of Kindergarten through the Twelfth Grade. An additional limitation of the study was that students living in or near the research district did not all attend the research district and had additional options for school attendance, including parochial schools. Another limitation was that students could enter the district through open enrollment and at the time of entry were not identified as either living in poverty or in need of special education services, but then qualified after the enrollment process. Students included in the study could have meet both criteria as living in poverty and needing special education assistance, but that does not have any bearing on the research data. A delimitation was that this study took place in one school district from the Douglas and Sarpy County Learning Community that opted to accept open enrollment students beyond the registration deadline. All districts comprising the cohort had to operate under the same basic guidelines for accepting open enrollment students, but districts were given the option of accepting students beyond the open enrollment deadlines.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Charter School:** According to the U.S. Department of State (n.d.), a charter school is a nonsectarian public school that operates as a school of choice. A charter school is often exempt from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. They are independent public schools that are free from regulatory oversight but

accountable for achievement results outlined in their original charter agreement. They are financed by public dollars. (Toma & Zimmer, 2013). There is currently no law in the state of Nebraska that allows for the creation of charter schools.

**Douglas and Sarpy County Learning Community:** Created by Nebraska state law LB 641 passed in 2006, the Douglas and Sarpy County Learning Community is composed of all eleven school districts in the two counties (Bellevue, Bennington, Douglas County West, Elkhorn, Gretna, Millard, Omaha, Papillion-La Vista, Ralston, South Sarpy District #46, and Westside.) These districts share boundaries in the metropolitan Omaha area. Under the law that created this learning community, students are allowed to enroll in any public school district in the Learning Community. For the purpose of this study, the term “Learning Community” will refer to the Douglas and Sarpy Learning Community.

**In-district Student:** For the purpose of this study, in-district student shall refer to any student who is actively enrolled in the research school district and who also resides in the research school district’s attendance boundaries. In-district students may also be referred to as resident students or local attendance students.

**Low Socioeconomic Status:** Low Socioeconomic status for the purpose of this study will refer to students that receive either free or reduced price meals through the federally funded school meal program. Families have the option to apply for free or reduced meal prices for their students each school year. Families are eligible for free or reduced meal prices based on financial requirements set by the federal government.

**Magnet School:** A magnet school is a type of school choice that is often formed to assist districts in desegregation efforts. It is generally designed to offer specific programs that would be appealing for students to specialize in, such as communication, technology, or fine arts. These focus schools are intended to attract students in the effort to integrate schools. The goal is to have students from all areas of the district opt into these schools based on the programming that is offered and therefore desegregating the school. (No Child Left Behind, 2002)

**Elementary and Secondary Education Act/No Child Left Behind. Public Law 107-110:** No Child Left Behind is the 2002 version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This federal legislation set forth school accountability standards for public schools across the nation and included elements of mandatory school choice for schools that did not meet the standards. An emphasis of this act was to encourage school districts to develop school choice programs for students and was a proponent of public school choice. This act was reauthorized in December 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act. Public school choice is still included as a strategy to improve educational outcomes, however the guidelines as to what schools must offer school choice are intended to be less rigid.

**Open Enrollment:** Nebraska's educational statute that allows any K-12 student to option out of the district where he/she resides in order to attend another public school where he/she does not reside. Passed in 1989, this is allowed under Legislative Bill 1017, Section 79-234, Nebraska Revised Statute. For the terms of this study, Open Enrollment means students living in Douglas and Sarpy counties may apply to attend any public elementary, middle or high school in the Learning Community.

**Poverty:** There are a number of ways to measure poverty. For the purpose of this study, poverty was measured by students that are low socioeconomic status. For the purpose of this study, the terms “poverty” and “low socioeconomic status (SES)” was used synonymously.

**Private School:** A private school is defined as an independent school that is not affiliated or administered through local, state, or federal government. They are funded in whole or part by student tuition and private funding sources rather than with public funding. They retain the right to select their student body and are independent in academic accountability measures. For the purpose of this study, the term private school includes religious, parochial, and nonsectarian schools. In the state of Nebraska, private schools may choose to be accredited or be approved by the state, or neither.

**Voucher:** A school voucher is a government-funded certificate redeemable for tuition fees at a private school other than the public school that a student could attend free. Parents are then able to pay for either all or a portion of their child’s education at a school district or private school of their choice outside of the district in which they reside. The laws in the state of Nebraska do not allow for a voucher payment system to be used. (US Department of Education, n.d.)

### **Outline of the Study**

The literature review relevant to this research study will be presented in Chapter 2. This chapter reviews professional literature related to school choice programs, focusing on open enrollment practices between school districts. Additionally, the literature briefly reviews the impact of poverty on student needs and school choice for special education students. Chapter 3 describes the research design, methodology,

independent variables, dependent variables, and the procedures that will be used to gather and analyze relevant data of the study. This includes a detailed description of how the data was gathered, a description of the participants, the dependent variables, dependent measures, and the data analysis utilized for the researcher to determine whether to reject the null hypothesis for each of the research questions.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the statistical analyses and interpretation of the study.

Chapter 5 summarizes the findings of the study through a conclusion and discussion.

Implications of the study are discussed, as well as recommendations for further study are explored.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This chapter provides information on the history of school choice, the forms of school choice available to families, and specifically, current trends in school choice. The impact of poverty on students and the challenges school face when educating students of low socioeconomic status are also reviewed, along with the challenges schools face meeting the needs of special education students.

School choice has been on the educational scene since the early 1950s stemming from an original belief that changing the traditional structure of education by allowing parents to select their children's schools, there would be a correlation between market force and the influence of parental choice would force schools to improve. Although this theory has been the topic of debate since its inception, school choice options have increased in the previous 20 years and school choice has become prevalent in almost all 50 states, albeit in a variety of forms (Archibald & Kaplan, 2004; Brasington & Hite, 2014; Burke & Sheffield, 2011; Greene et al., 2010). Modern-day school choice is a "new terrain involving new ideas, new figures, new alignments, and new solutions." (Wolfe, 2003). To better understand the scheme of today's school choice options, one must examine the various models and take into account each state's unique legal structures that allow for school choice to occur. To state that school choice in one school or even one district looks homogenous among other school district's programs of school choice would be in error. Due to the local control nature of the United States' educational structure and then also to the degree that states assert their independence

when passing local educational laws and statutes, there is no one school choice design or model that can fully encompass all varieties of school choice.

There are several rationales given for school choice but among the most common are the economic theory, the social capital theory, the innovation belief, and social equity. The economic theory originated from Milton Friedman's work in the 1950's and is driven by the belief that families are the 'customers' and school are the 'service providers' while competing in a market that has the ability to meet the diverse needs of the consumers. The social capital theory, initially promoted by James Coleman, supports the belief that schools of choice develop into supporting communities of like values that promote student learning. (Greene, et al., 2010; Ferraro, 2004; Wolfe, 2003). The third rationale, innovation, stems from the belief that a nation with as fragmented set of purposes as the United States and a diverse student population in terms of cultures, learning styles, and beliefs should in fact provide a variety of choices when it comes to educating the youth of our nation. (Carpenter, 2005). A fourth rational social equity, also referred to as distributive justice, is founded in the belief that poor and minority families should have the same educational opportunities and the quality of public schools should not increase or decrease based on the socioeconomic status of the students that they serve. (Greene, et al., 2010). Fundamental to the economic, social capital, and innovation theories are that choice should equate to beneficial consequences for the students and more than likely should equate into higher academic achievement. Social equity holds the desire that academic achievement will rise with greater opportunities but the main focus is that there is equitable access for all students and there is a comparable education regardless of the families' income.

For one to gain a more comprehensive understanding of school choice, various configurations of school choice should be examined. While the following frameworks of school choice can differentiate depending on locale, the five main types of school choice are residential choice, intra-district choice, interdistrict choice, private and parochial schools, and charter schools. (Archbald & Kaplan, 2004; Greene et al., 2010). Of the five main categories of school choice, intra-district is the one that is most generally accepted, so much that it is the one form of school choice that was included when Congress passed the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education act in 2001 with the passage of No Child Left Behind (Greene et al., 2010), now recently reauthorized again in 2015 to the Every Student Succeeds Act. It is too early to tell what the impact of the new authorization of this law will have on school choice. However, this form of school choice is one of the least utilized across the nation as a means increasing school performance, but often is used by families in place of residential choice. Private schools and parochial schools are popular options for families in many states but not all states allow for families that select private schools to keep their taxes from going to public school or utilize vouchers. Charter schools are rising in popularity but special state laws are necessary to allow for the creation of charter schools and they are not available in all areas, especially non-urban settings.

In order to better understand the differences between the types of school choice, a brief explanation of the history of school choice and common types of school is beneficial. For the sake of alleviating confusion among the various liberties that each state can take on their implementation of the types of school choice, the basic forms of each type is included with some of the limitations also included. It would be tedious and

inconclusive to attempt to include all the various nuances of each design and is intended only to provide a basic description to assist with developing a primitive understanding of the different types of school choice available.

### **History of School Choice**

The history of school choice in the United States is two fold, with one founding historical source contributing and fueling modern day school choice to this day. Historically, school choice was undoubtedly influenced by the 1954 ruling in *Oliver Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka et al.* (347 U.S. 483) by the U. S. Supreme Court, which reversed the court's previous ruling on the practice of separate but equal school for white student and students of color. For one of the first times in the history of the United States, families were searching alternatives for their local public schools. This form of institutional racism had previously been legal but with the new Supreme Court ruling, if families were not happy with what their local school had to offer, a course of action could be to select another school. As the impact of this ruling spread across the country through the forced integration of schools in the South and gained momentum with the civil rights movements of the 1960s, schools became the stage in which the nation's political reform was implemented. Racial segregation for some families, racial integration for others, all contributed to the early seeds of school choice in America (Forman, 2005).

The second component contributing to the early history of school choice was promoted by an economist by the name of Milton Friedman. Although he recognized the social inequity of the current educational system in the United States, he advocated that school choice, primarily in the form of a program now known as school vouchers, could

provide all families with higher quality schools by decreasing the inefficiency of government spending and allowing low income students, not just students of racial minorities, the opportunities to go to schools of higher quality. Friedman's vision applied a management system used in industry and private commerce to promote competition as a means of creating higher quality schools by using a market approach philosophy. The economist argued that the most effective means of reforming the American education system is to let schools be exposed to the competitive forces that drive the free market (Friedman, 1955). This neoliberalism view consumes more than just education and while it was not accepted nationwide at the time of Friedman's school reform proposals, it impacted the way school reform would evolve over decades to come. Dudley-Marling and Baker (2012) state, "Education policies in the US and in other countries around the world have been strongly influenced by market-based reforms including accountability, high-stakes testing, data -driven decisions making, charter schools, deregulation, and competition among schools." It was Friedman's belief that ideally, the best schools would survive and thrive by being efficient and by drawing in students. The funding allocated by the government would follow the students to their schools of choice. The least efficient schools would either change practices to keep students as to compete, bringing up the quality of school options, or be forced to close due to lack of students, therefore, theoretically, bringing up the quality of schools available for students as the less desirable schools were now gone.

Had the time period when Friedman was advocating for school choice and school reform been different, the movement may not of accelerated as it did, but many families across the country were looking for options, either due to their desire to escape the

perceived deterioration of the public schools due to integration or to provide better opportunities for their children. The way of the American Dream was changing and hard work wasn't always enough anymore after the Great Depression of the 1930. The parents of the 1950's and 1960's were the children of the 1930's. Education was the way to provide for a better life and families were starting to contribute to the school choice movement by wanting to have high quality schools and a say in their children's education. Those in favor of greater school choice options believed that choice would give greater control to families, who in turn would choose good schools for their children creating a natural system of competition. This competition would systematically improve educational outcomes and thus begins the foundations of an educational reform movement (Goldhaber, 1999).

The school choice movement gained further momentum in the 1980's with the release of the *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The students in the United States were now being looked at in a global context now more than ever before. Educational reform, for many economic and political leaders, became a key element in an effort to the country's economic ranking. School choice was becoming a more popular choice with the belief that by changing school policy so that parents could select their children's school based on desire and not the area where they live, market forces and the power of parents would essentially influence schools to improve (Falbo, Glover, Holcombe, & Stokes, 2005). Education reform, and school choice, was now more than a social cause, but an economic one as well.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, originally passed by Congress in 1965 as a means of extending funding to public schools to counter the effects of poverty

on education, has been reauthorized every five years. It emphasizes equal access to education and establishes high standards and accountability. The current reauthorization encourages school choice by mandating that if a school does not meet the achievement expectations set forth by the government, then school must provide school choice options for families to leave that school (NCLB, 2002). The nature of this law is designed to be reviewed and changed periodically. Changes in this law may affect the future of school choice and how school districts develop the enrollment process for students that reside both within their districts and beyond district boundaries. The social and economic implications of school choice continue to play a vital role in the school reform movements to this day. At this point in time, it is premature to evaluate what the impact of the recent reauthorization of this law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, will have on school choice. This act was signed into law in December 2015 and although the element of school choice is still present in this reauthorization, it appears that the forced option of school choice within school districts due to academic measures is not as strongly as a requirement.

### **Philosophy of School Choice**

Beneath the controversy that surrounds school choice, there emerge three main philosophies that break down the components of the origin of school choice. These are market approach philosophy, distributive justice philosophy, and parents' right philosophy (Ferrero, 2004). While each of these has clearly defined cores of belief from which the philosophy derives from, modern day educational reform movements have blurred the lines between the three philosophies. Many educational, political, and community leaders do not feel that school choice should be singularly and exclusively

driven out of one cause. School choice policies across the nation are quite diverse in the structure and the goals with each region drawing on the different historical context from which they arose. (Holme, Frankenberg, Diem, & Welton, 2013).

The market approach philosophy is the most common philosophy aligned with the economics of school reform. It basically is the belief that school choice will break the current monopoly that is education and that competition among schools will lead to the best schools being the most desirable. Schools will be forced to compete for students through school choice. The schools that are not producing strong educational outcomes and have low performing students will be forced to become more productive to draw in students or will close (Goldhaber, 1999). The drive is to produce the most educational output per dollar. Free enterprise strategies would regulate the parameters that schools operate within. The demand for high quality school will fuel the supply of good schools, with the less than quality schools dwindling away. Elements of this philosophy can be seen in current private school structures, as well as within voucher and charter schools that draw from public taxpayer funds.

The distributive justice philosophy stems from the social realm in the quest for providing high quality educational programming for all students, regardless of the socio-economic environment from which they dwell. School choice is just one of the elements of this movement, as there are a variety of strategies utilized in an effort to provide equitable education options to disadvantaged families. This philosophy asserts that disadvantaged students, often minority students, have less options of accessing high quality schools in the geographic area in which they reside (Greene et al. 2010). Additional options and resources should be assigned to these students to help



decrease the impacts of poverty and the access the same options that wealthier families have in regards to the quality of schools available to them. Providing schools in poverty areas with resources to offer meal subsidization, daycare assistance, health and medical care are all forms of distributive justice that are present in the nation's current educational system. Allowing students to attend schools outside of poverty areas and having free choice to attending a more desirable school is the goal of this philosophy. This supports the belief that by providing students access to a higher quality school can improve students' longer-term life chances at success (Deming, Hastings, Kane, & Staiger, 2011). Elements of this philosophy can be seen in current education practices such as magnet schools, district provided transportation as a means of desegregation, and charter schools.

Parent's rights philosophy is the belief that parents hold the utmost power or right in deciding the education of their children. This belief holds that the public schools have the right to prepare students, both economically and civically, for the world in which they will live in. If a school fails in this, it is the parent's right and obligation to seek out a school that can offer this (Ferrero, 2004). This belief tends to draw the most criticism among school reform advocates, as it is somewhat impractical for the public schools to navigate as the wide range of standards in which families may deem as valuable to a student's education. Different beliefs on moral education and the increasing diversity in society make it almost impossible to define the standards that should be held as measureable in a quality education. Elements of this philosophy can be seen in educational practices as home schooling and the selection of family pay private school, especially based on religious affiliation.

### **Reasons Families Want School Choice**

In today's educational scene, families cite many different reasons for wanting to execute forms of school choice. While the reasons are too numerous to account for, W.A. Carpenter (2005) comprehensive statement expresses it well when he said:

it only makes sense to me that a nation with as fragmented a set of purposes for education and a student population as diverse in culture, learning style, and aspiration as ours ought to provide a variety of instructional delivery systems and to make them as accessible as we justly can. (p. 88)

The question that is really being asked nationwide is not so much should school choice be an option for families, but rather, what should school choice options look like for families. Some families seek out a diverse educational environment while other families desire a more homogenous environment. Strong academic offerings are valued by some families while the fine arts and extracurricular offerings that some schools promote are appealing to other families. The size of the school, whether large or small, can either attract or deter families. Traditional brick and mortar schools are still the norm among schools in our nation, but with the increase of technological advances, virtual schools are becoming more common. Expectations that students be college and career ready have contributed to an increased need for schools to define what that means for the students they serve. Families are searching for schools that resemble their view of a social ecology that met their needs as far as families, faith, and neighborhoods (Wolfe, 2003). Across the nation, schools are compared, ranked, evaluated, and assessed as a

means of attempting to complete an accurate picture of what the school can offer, and need to offer, families and their students.

### **Types of School Choice Options**

Residential choice, the most popular form of school choice, is accessed across the nation informally and is determined by settlement of geographic location. Residential choice is the oldest form of school choice, as well as the one that school districts and state laws have the least to do with. Residential choice is simply parents choosing what school they send their children to by the geographic site where they choose to reside. Some experts discount this method of school choice as being “true choice” as families need to include other decision when deciding where to live, such as geographic location to the parents work. Nonetheless, surveys indicate that 24% of parents say they consider the quality of the schools in their attendance area when selecting where to live. (Greene et al. 2010). Residential decisions are readily available to most families and the dictation of these choices based on where families choose to buy or rent homes provide a basically free or no-cost school choice. (Weissberg, 2009). Families select where they neighborhood or area that align with the school they want their children to attend (Goldhaber, 1999). While this form of school choice is the most common, it is one that advocates for distributive justice cite as a problem with the current educational system. Families that are poor have limited means to provide basic housing for their families. They do not have access to opt to live in the areas with good schools, as they do not have the financial means to do so.

Other school choice options that are available in the current educational system across the nation are private schools, charter schools, magnet schools, homeschooling,

and school vouchers systems. Each of the fifty states are able to independently design the educational structure that is available in their state due to the right for a free and public education being upheld in each individual state's constitution. Typically, private schools are funded without taxpayer funds but are often extended tax-exempt status. Private schools are often aligned with religious beliefs, but can also be independent of parochial belief. Private schools and parochial schools are available in most urban areas, although parochial schools are not uncommon in smaller cities and towns as a means of providing a religious education for students. Private schools are independent schools not administered by local, state, or nation government. They are not funded with public funds; rather they are funded in whole or in part by charging their students tuition. Private schools have been a controversial component of school choice in states where vouchers are available and are a key factor in the market economic theory of school reform. (Coleman, 2003, Davies & Quirke, 2005; Ferraro, 2004; Greene et al., 2010; Rosenbloom, 2010). Charter schools, magnet schools, and school voucher systems differ from state to state but all are similar in design in that they exist to provide an alternate to the public school options in that geographic area. Although there are numerous options for families in regards to school choice, not all families have the same access to these types of school choice due to either geographical or financial restraints (Fowler, 2002)

Charter schools are schools that have been set up to be independent of state and federal guidelines, but set their own guidelines for accountability of student achievement. According to the U.S. Department of State (n.d.), charter schools are nonsectarian public schools that operate as schools of choice. A charter school is often exempt from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools, but are

legally public institutions. They must obey the same regulations as public schools in regards to church-state relations, along with racial and gender discrimination (Hoxby, 2003). These schools form a contract with a public entity and are given autonomy from regulations in exchange for accountability for results (Toma & Zimmer, 2013). The charter or agreement that the school enters into with the entity that holds their charter details the school's mission, goals, students served, assessment methods, and define the standards as to how the school will measure success. Each state that grants or allows charter schools determine parameters in which the charter must operate and varies from state to state as to the time frame of the charter but most are granted for 3-5 years. Charter schools are accountable to their sponsor, the parents of their students, and the public that funds them (Goldhaber, 1999). Legal definitions of charter school differ based on the state of origin and the aforementioned criteria.

Intra-district choice and magnet schools are another free or no cost to families form of school choice. Many districts have an intra-district transfer plan should families want to send their students to a school other than the one that they are assigned to. Intra-district school choice exists when school districts allow students to move between schools that exist in the school district boundaries and do not have to attend the school in which the school attendance area in which they reside. With intra-district choice, families can select schools from within their current school district to request to send their children to. Traditionally, school districts, through the governing school board, set their attendance areas within their district. Often school districts will limit or control the school choice offerings depending on the population of the school. Additionally, they may alter school choice options to control the student populations of attendance areas and

funnel students to schools that have declining populations. Most transfer requests hinge on available spots, although even districts that do not have a set intra-district transfer plan in place, will allow extraordinary circumstance requests when placing students. This is a more common practice in urban districts or districts that are large enough to offer multiple attendance sites. Often transportation is the responsibility of the family, therefore easing the cost burden on the district. The exception to the transportation would be in the case of special programming for special needs or the ever growing in popularity magnet schools, which is another form of intra-district school choice.

The root for magnet schools came from efforts to desegregate schools after the landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka et al.* (347 U.S. 483). This decision led the way for desegregation efforts among urban districts across the nation. Magnet schools also are called alternative schools, specialty schools, or controlled choice schools. These public schools gained popularity, particularly in urban areas in the 1970's and 1980's, as districts across the nation were looking for ways to effectively integrate diverse student populations within a school district's borders (Holme et al., 2013). Typically, magnet schools offer a focus area that is appealing to families in an effort to draw students to apply to attend that school. Magnet schools attempt to draw students to the school by providing educational opportunities beyond the general curriculum that usually focus on a specialty area, such as fine arts, communication arts, technology, science, and math, to name a few. Magnet schools usually include students living within their attendance area in addition to students who request entry. Often, transportation to these schools is offered to families to ensure the geographic location in which they reside is not a barrier to a student being able to attend

the school. Students are selected to attend based upon criteria set forth by the district offering the magnet school. The criteria may include socio-economic status, ethnicity, student achievement data, and student interests. Often the demand for these schools are great and not all that want to attend are able to. In many cases qualifying students are entered into a lottery system once they meet criteria to apply as the number of students interested in attending exceed the available spots.

School voucher systems are the least readily available school choice option and tend to be the most politically controversial. (Noll, 2007) In a voucher system, public funds are withdrawn from public schools accessible pools and diverted to private schools as a means of allowing students to pay their enrollment. These funds are given to families as tax credits or direct funds for the purpose of withdrawing from public schools to attend private schools. Voucher accepting schools usually are required to admit students by lottery but some may be allowed to practice selective admission. Additionally, voucher amounts can vary in that they may be identical across all accepted students or they may be altered with the characteristics of both the school and the student (Hoxby, 2003). These vouchers were originally based on the premise that students in poorer areas need additional funds to access higher quality education by attending private non-secular school, but have evolved over the years in many areas to now apply to secular schools. This has fueled the debate of separation between church and state but was held as constitutional in the 2002 Supreme Court ruling of *Zelman V. Simmons-Harris* (536 U.S. 639). In some states, families are able to access school vouchers when selecting to educate their children at home independent of local public or private school options. While homeschooling is available in all states, voucher reimbursement for this

is not. Educational vouchers are currently offered in 18 states and the District of Columbia.

Other school choice opportunities that many states have implemented are open or option enrollment options. These school choice options do include aforementioned intra-district for families, but the term is most commonly associated with inter-district options, meaning families residing in one district wanting to attending school in another district. These options seem to be less invasive to the educational scene in some regional areas when looking comparatively at other school choice options, such as vouchers and charter schools (Jimerson, 2002) however these school choice options do have implications for the schools or districts involved.

Interdistrict school choice is one of the least common forms of school choice and currently less than one percent of the public school population, approximately 500,000 students, participate in this form of school choice, however trends show that the popularity of this option is increasing. Interdistrict school choice allows students from one district to open-enroll into another district. Districts that participate in these programs are on a voluntary basis and the research is limited on the effects. Nonetheless, districts in the states of New York, Massachusetts, Missouri, California, Connecticut, Indiana, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Nebraska have participated in inter-district locations and the list of states that allow for this continues to grow (Greene, et al., 2010). There is usually a financial equation to the program that is neither completely advantageous nor disadvantageous to either school district.

Interdistrict school choice exists when different school districts, often adjacent or close in location, allow students to attend schools within the school district boundaries



even though they do not reside in the district. Interdistrict school choice is contingent on state laws providing for this option as this affects funding sources. Interdistrict school choice often has more stringent or restrictive criteria that allow school districts to abide by guidelines when accepting or denying interdistrict school choice applications. Often both the sending district and the receiving district have a set of standards they must adhere to as part of the process, but these differ by state (Lavery & Carlson, 2014). In some states it has been enacted as a means for families to access higher quality schools, but it also has economic roots in some instances by encouraging student populations to be more equally dispersed among growing metropolitan areas that share multiple school districts within their boundaries. State statutes have guidelines that determine the criteria upon which school districts can accept or deny open enrollment interdistrict applicants, but as a whole these statutes generally prohibit school districts from selectively accepting applicants. Interdistrict open enrollment is gaining popularity across the nation as more than 40 states have now passed legislation permitting this form of open enrollment. Carlson et al. (2011) states, “Interdistrict open enrollment is the most widely used form of school choice used in the United States” (p. 76).

Interdistrict school choice options fall under open enrollment policies. Jimerson (2002) found that while interdistrict open enrollment school choice tend to be overlooked in the public debate arena due to the perception that this option is, “relatively harmless, not too ideologically extreme, and with little potential for negative side effects”, a closer investigation of open enrollment “reveals frequently unacknowledged complexity and serious potential for damaging certain districts and students.” (p.16). States differ between having mandatory and voluntary open enrollment policies (Lavery & Carlson,

2014). There is a wide range of practices that occur under the realm of open enrollment, as each state is unique in the expectations, mandates, and practices that involve this type of school choice. Some states stand independent in school choice in regards to the other school choice options previously discussed, such as charter, magnet, and voucher schools, while some state's open enrollment policies integrate these school choice options within the open enrollment options. The financial impact of open enrollment appears to be a conservative school choice option as it does not radically alter the funding structure of school finance, but this viewpoint has its limitations. While indeed the financial impact of interdistrict open enrollment can be modest for districts whose net loss or gain of students is small, districts that either lose or gain a higher percentage of student population, the situation can be quite impactful (Jimerson, 2002).

School choice from state to state may look differently depending on local provisions and guidelines, but the majority of school choice options across the nation are a version of within district school choice, outside of district school choice, private school, private parochial school, or homeschool option (Fowler, 2002). Research on the impact of the growing trends towards families exercising school choice is still limited, but initial observations have shown that interdistrict open enrollment as school choice has a vast array of implications that school districts should be cognizant and aware of. Carlson et al. (2011) states the following:

The expansive nature and scope of interdistrict open enrollment programs provides them with the potential to affect several aspects of society, including school district revenues, racial and socioeconomic composition of school districts, characteristics of students' peer groups, families' use of other school

choice options, and families' residential location decisions. In short, interdistrict open enrollment programs have the potential to alter the character of communities. (p.76)

### **Interdistrict Enrollment in Nebraska**

State laws differ across the nation in regards to interdistrict enrollment procedures and practices. In the state of Nebraska, the state in which the research district operates in, there are two types of interdistrict enrollment school choice options. The original option for interdistrict school choice enrollment was called Enrollment Option Program or as more commonly known as option enrollment. This allowed for students to opt in to districts that they geographically did not reside in. Neither the transferring or receiving district is responsible for transportation. According to state law Title 92, Chapter 19, NDE (2010), districts have the option of denying/accepting acceptance based on a variety of standards that include the capacity of a program, class, grade level, school building, or the availability of appropriate special education programs operated by the school district

The research district is also located in a learning community. This learning community was created in 2006 and includes a diversity plan, which adds additional components to the state of Nebraska's Enrollment Option Program. This learning community, comprised of districts in both Douglas and Sarpy counties, was developed through state law and is a result of an extensive timeline of events involving numerous school districts and stemmed from debates over the inequity of funding school districts, and the challenges of educating students from at-risk backgrounds, such as poverty, ethnic minorities, and non-English speaking students.

Although the laws that originally provide for option enrollment are overarching, the laws for school choice enrollment within the districts that make-up the learning community include additional provisions and are called open enrollment. Open enrollment and the districts within this learning community have a different operating system than the rest of the state in regards to funding, transportation expectations, and capacity indicators. Priority for student enrollment goes first to siblings of students already attending the requested district and to students that contribute to the socio-economic diversity of the school. Transportation of students that meet qualifying criteria is included in this law and the costs associated with the transportation is absorbed by the receiving district.

### **Impact of Students in Poverty on District Resources**

Poverty and the risk factors that are associated with it are damaging to not only the physical and socio-emotional well being of children, but also to the cognitive development of children. Children living in poverty have fewer cognitive-enrichment experiences and less access to books in their homes, fewer opportunities to visit libraries and museums, and spend more time in hazardous living situations where households are noisy, overcrowded, and are physically deteriorated (Jensen, 2009). Students in low-income homes often suffer from lower levels of resources and investments at both the family and school levels, which can negatively affect a student's education outcomes (Roscigno, Tomaskovic, and Crowley, 2006).

In his 2009 book, *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, Jensen said, "Although childhood is generally considered to be a time of joyful, carefree exploration, children living in poverty tend to spend less time finding out about the world around them and

more time struggling to survive within it” (p.8). Additionally, children living in poverty are much more likely to experience developmental delay and damage than children not living in poverty. They are more likely to experience difficulties in school, to have frequent school absences, to drop out of school, and to become parents during their teen/school age years (Payne, 1993).

So what does this mean for schools and the impact that students living in poverty have on school district resources? More and more, the societal structure is changing and is looking to the school to provide resources that were historically outside the school realm. Schools realize the deficits that students are experiencing in life have negative implications on their education and schools are forced to find ways to remedy these deficits. Schools are often a resource for mental health support and in many areas provide site based health care. Schools help provide access to basic needs, such as food and clothing, and work to help facilitate connections for families to community resources. All of this takes time, energy, and personnel that is no longer being allocated to the core purpose of schools, and that is to deliver academic instruction. While most schools acknowledge that these resources are critical to student success, they are without the resources themselves to deliver what the students need due to the funding structure that school districts operate under. The more students a district has living in poverty, the more readily these resources will need to be available to provide a foundation for students to begin to function at an optimum academic level. This goes back to Abraham Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs. This hierarchy states that until basic needs, such as food, shelter, family, medical care, safety, friendships are met, students cannot be expected to function at a high academic level (Jensen, 2009).

One approach to educational reform has been to allow access to higher socio-economic schools to students of lower income. This approach is working on the assumption that by allowing transfers from students in higher poverty schools to schools with lower poverty enrollment, they are offering these students an opportunity to attend schools where they will have a less likelihood of experiencing the negative impacts that concentrated poverty can have on schools, such as higher discipline related problems, lack of educational resources, and higher dropout rates (Kraus, 2008). But is this the answer and what does this mean for the resources in the receiving schools? Many times the elements of school choice deal solely with the opportunities to provide the option for choice and fail to have the foresight to plan for the necessity of dealing with other prerequisites of choice, such as how will resources be delivered to students (R. S. Payne, 1993). Children raised in poverty are more likely to display behaviors that are counterproductive to a learning environment, such as acting out negatively, being impatient and impulsive, and displaying inappropriate emotional responses. They have more gaps in politeness and social graces; they exhibit a more limited range of behavioral responses, and have less empathy for other's misfortunes (Jensen, 2009). More often than not, teachers are not trained to deal with these behaviors. The negative impact that these behaviors have on the classroom climate, delivery of instruction, and ability for not only the student exhibiting the behaviors, but also for the classroom peers to learn in an optimum environment diminishes and the educational structure of the classroom deteriorates. R. S. Payne (1993) stated that "Children in distress cannot function regardless of what school they attend." (p. 295). Simply allowing students living in poverty to change schools will not alleviate the demands or challenges associated with

educating students in poverty. Adequate resources still must exist for students to be successful in any educational environment. This includes supports for both basic needs, instructional support, and in many cases, a different approach to education (Jensen, 2009).

Additionally, regular student attendance has a strong link to the academic and social success not only students but also to the overall effectiveness of a school. Students need to attend school regularly in order to succeed. Regular school attendance is of a particular concern for students living in poverty. Students living in poverty often have decreased attendance as mobility, access to transportation to school, and health concerns all impact school attendance rates (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, Spradlin, et. al., 2012). Chronic absenteeism—or missing at least 10 percent of school days in a school year for any reason, excused or unexcused—is a primary cause of low academic achievement and a powerful predictor of those students who may eventually drop out of school. Missing 18 days of school within a school year would be deemed chronic absenteeism. (United States Department of Education, 2015). Research findings over the years suggest that chronic absences affect a student's academic achievement, their educational engagement, and contribute to the decline of social engagement (Gottfried, 2014). Student attendance can serve as an effective indicator for future academic achievement and attendance in the early educational years also appears to have an impact not only on the current educational year, but for future years as well (Spradlin, Cierniak, Shi, & Chen, 2012). The use of school resources, such as personnel, data reporting, and student counseling are all impacted if student attendance issues plague a school.

### **Impact of Students with Special Needs on District Resources**

Since the passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act and the Individual with Disabilities Education Act in 1975, schools have held the primary role of educating students with special needs. According to Cullen and Rivkin (2003),

nearly one in every eight students is classified as disabled and one in every five new dollars of per-pupil spending is dedicated to special education. The costs associated with educating the typical disabled student are approximately 2.3 times those for nondisabled students, and this ratio can be as high as 30 for the most severely disabled. In order to support localities in providing the mandated services, the federal government and states provide on average 8 percent and 56 percent of the funding, respectively. (p.68)

There is no debate that students qualifying for special education services require more services from their school than students that do not require special education services. While there is a degree to which special education services may look differently as to the amount of support a special education student needs, the majority of the support comes in personnel and staffing. Recent shortages in the availability of special education educators can create challenges for school districts to hire and retain quality special education teachers, speech language pathologists, and other therapists mandated to provide services for special education students. Students with disabilities are more costly to educate and schools that have a higher concentration of special education students may struggle with having the resources to adequately meet the needs of these students. When planning for the education of students with disabilities, schools



must provide the necessary staffing to meet the student needs as outlined by Individual Educational Plans, otherwise known as IEPs. In districts that experience a flux in students with special education needs, as can be experienced through school choice, planning can be problematic. Schools must be prepared to either absorb new students into existing programs and increase caseloads or provide personnel at the school to meet student needs. In many cases, schools may not be knowledgeable to student needs until students arrive at the building and in many cases, districts are not able to have prior knowledge of special needs at the time of enrollment to decrease the likelihood of discrimination in the enrollment process. Districts may face escalating costs for additional services such as transportation, the need for contracted or special therapists, and additional personnel added to support the student (Cullen et al. 2003).

In addition to the impact of financial resources on a district, students with disabilities impact districts in additional ways. The current accountability paradigm for schools nationwide focuses almost exclusively on test and achievement scores. Schools are ranked according to how well their students perform on standardized assessments and in many cases, funding is tied to these scores. Schools that do not do well may have additional funds available to assist them, but with these funds come restrictive parameters that may not be in the best interest of the students attending those schools. The reality is that in many cases students with disabilities do not do well on these assessments and they shouldn't be expected to. Dudley-Marling et al. (2012) stated:

Perhaps the most serious threat to students with disabilities-and other non-standard students- comes from the neoliberal dogma that the ultimate value of individuals is measured in terms of their contributions to the economy. In this context, children are

transformed into commodities whose values are determined by test scores and the cost to educate them. Here students with disabilities, because they tend to produce lower test scores and to be more costly to educate, will have less value.

School choice may seem like a good option for students with disabilities as families may become unhappy with the lack of progress their students are experiencing in their current school setting. Dudley-Marling et al. (2012) asserts that policies put in place by NCLB have led to practices that undermine the quality of education that is offered to students with disabilities. The standardized curriculum, standardized assessments, and standardized instruction that accompany these federal guidelines that are designed for non-disabled students can create a sense of failure for the disabled students. Neither schools nor families feel like the students are being educated in the best environment and a logical choice for families is to look for something different, even though the way school choice is currently designed this choice may end up offering the family the same services just at a different location. If enough families are looking for something different, there may inadvertently be a higher rate of special education students looking at open enrollment as a school choice option.

As detailed previously, issues related to school attendance can impact a school district's resources. Regular school attendance is of concern for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities may not be able to attend school regularly due to health concerns. Special education students are more likely to dropout or attend alternative schools due to chronic absenteeism. In many states, schools must have processes in place to not only report students absences to local authorities, but also to develop plans of assistance to help meet the needs of students with chronic absenteeism

with the goal of improving school attendance. While this is certainly in the best interest of the students, one cannot deny that these services impact personnel planning, time, and often lead to the development of programs focused on improving student attendance, which are all resources that the school district must provide.

### **The Research District**

The research district is one of the eleven districts that make up the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy County. The research district has an enrollment of 3,211 students with 1,716 enrolled at the elementary levels, 484 at the middle school level, and 1,077 at the high school level. The district is comprised of 6 elementary sites, one middle school site, and one high school site. The student to teacher ratio is 19:1 at the elementary level and 15:1 at the secondary level. The ethnicity of the students in the district is 58% Caucasian, 28% Hispanic, 7% African American, 2% Asian, and 5% other. The free/reduced lunch rate of the students is 55%. The daily attendance rate is 95% and the graduation rate is 88%.

The current enrollment of the research district is comprised of approximately 25% of students that have entered the district through either option or open enrollment school choice. As part of the open enrollment plan through the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy County, the research district follows the mandatory open enrollment process by accepting applications until March 15 and notifying families by April 5 of their acceptance. Families have until April 25 to notify the district if they accept the offer. This process meets the district's requirement to participate in the open enrollment process. Districts are able to accept open enrollment applications after these dates and they are also able to accept applications they previously denied due to space if not all

families accept the spots offered. In previous years, the research district has accepted students beyond the deadline dates and allowed families to apply for open enrollment up until the start of the school year.

### **Summary**

School choice is an issue that has historical roots in the development and shaping of our nation's current educational system. What stemmed from efforts of equity of social justice and societal rules have transformed the past structure of attending school solely by geographic location into an educational system where families can strategically select schools based on their own wants and desires for their children. There is not a "one size fits all" approach to education and schools that were designed to be innovative and new, such as charter and magnet schools, are now becoming more and more common part of the educational scene. Families want to have a say in their child's education and school choice is an avenue for this. Whether is be through private school or public school, families now more than ever look for schools that have assets, qualities, and attributes that align with their view of what students need in order to be successful. As diversity across our nation continues to increase so will be the need for schools to cater to the diverse needs of students and wants of their families. School choice options will continue to develop as long as families are utilizing the current options as educators continually search for the optimum means in which to educate students.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter includes a description of the methodology that guides both the data collection and analysis of this study. It describes the purpose of the study, participants involved, procedures used, independent variables, dependent measures, research questions, and data analysis.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this descriptive quantitative study was to determine the frequency of open enrollment students either living in poverty or requiring special educational needs to see if there was a significant relationship between the time periods in which they enroll. It explored the effect of open enrollment acceptance dates on district planning and resources for services needed for at-risk students, with at-risk being students living in poverty or needing special education services. Additionally, the study examined if the frequency of open enrollment students living in poverty or with special education needs was different than that of students living within the district.

#### **Research Design**

This descriptive quantitative study was designed to determine if a significant relationship existed between open enrollment students and students living within the district in regards to living in poverty and the need for special education services. The variables in this research study consisted of the following characteristics: socioeconomic status, qualification for special education services, and area of residence, either within or outside of district. Additionally, for students that were open enrollment, the variable of date of enrollment was present.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions guide this study:

**Research Question #1.** Was the frequency of open enrollment students living in poverty congruent or different from the rate of in-district students living in poverty?

**Research Question #2.** Was the frequency of late enrollee open enrollment students living in poverty congruent or different from the rate of in-district students living in poverty?

**Research Question #3.** Was the frequency of open enrollment students living in poverty congruent or different from the rate of late enrollee open enrollment students living in poverty?

**Research Question #4.** Was the frequency of open enrollment students needing special education services congruent or different from the rate of in-district students needing special education services?

**Research Question #5.** Was the frequency of late enrollee open enrollment students needing special education services congruent or different from the rate of in-district students needing special education services?

**Research Question #6.** Was the frequency of open enrollment students needing special education services congruent or different from the rate of late enrollee open enrollment students needing special education services?

## **Participants**

Participants in this study were comprised of students that attended the research district for the 2012-2013, 2013-2014, 2014-2015 school years. Students were grouped in the following according to in-district students, open enrollment students within the

recommended time frame, and students that applied for open enrollment status after the deadline. All students that entered into the district under open enrollment for the 2012-2013, 2013-2014, 2014-2015 school years were grouped as either on-time enrollees or late enrollees. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, Group 1 were comprised of in-district students, Group 2 were comprised of on-time open enrollment students, and Group 3 were comprised of late open enrollment students. Participant student data to be used for the study only identified students by their group criteria, free/reduced lunch status, special education needs if applicable, and attendance rates. Students were at no time identified though name or student identification number.

The number of the students participating in the study included all students that meet the age requirement for public school attendance in grades Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade and were enrolled in the research district during the study time period. The gender of the students participating in the study included both male and female students. There was no data analysis completed according to gender and data was not segregated as such. The age range of the students participating in the study included all students that meet the age requirement for public school attendance in grades Kindergarten through Grade 12. The ages of the students ranged from 5 years of age to 18 years of age. There was no data analysis completed according to age and data was not segregated as such.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

For the purpose of this quantitative study, data contained within this study was retrospective, archival, and routinely collected school information. Permission from the appropriate school personnel was obtained. Data was collected using student enrollment

and demographic information provided by the research district. Student data reported to the researcher and non-coded numbers were used to display individual student data based on variable classification. Student identification data such as name, age, gender, and grade level was not included in research data as it is not relevant to the study and was not revealed to the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

A descriptive quantitative research design was appropriately used to describe the association between two or more variables and additionally described the degree of association (Creswell, 2012). The correlational relationships and frequencies were analyzed using nonparametric chi square analysis. This analysis was an appropriate means used to measure the sample data to test the fit of the proportions in the sample data in regards to the nominal values (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2009). The data was analyzed to determine if there was a correlation in the frequency of open enrollment students living in poverty with the frequency of in district students living in poverty. Additionally, the data was analyzed to determine if there is a significant relationship in the frequency of open enrollment students needing special education services with the frequency of in district students needing special education services. A 0.5 level of significance was used when analyzing all data. Data regarding frequency of open enrollment and late open enrollment was analyzed to determine if it was congruent over the time of the research period.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

The purpose of this descriptive quantitative study was to determine the frequency of open enrollment students either living in poverty or requiring special educational needs to see if there was a significant relationship between the time period in which they enroll. The study analyzed enrollment data for both open enrollment students and students living within the district to see if special education rates and poverty rates were congruent or different. Additionally, the research questions examined if the time of enrollment had an impact on the results. The results were drawn using regularly archived student enrollment data and analyzed using nonparametric chi-square analysis using a 0.5 level of significance.

**Research Question #1.** Was the frequency of open enrollment students living in poverty congruent or different from the rate of in-district students living in poverty?

**Result.** The frequency of open enrollment students living in poverty is significantly different from the rate of in-district students living in poverty with results showing  $X^2 = 67.61$ ,  $p < 0.005$ . The result is significant at  $p < .05$ . The nonparametric chi-square is displayed in Table 1.

**Research Question #2.** Was the frequency of late enrollee open enrollment students living in poverty congruent or different from the rate of in-district students living in poverty?

**Result.** The frequency of late enrollee open enrollment students living in poverty is significantly different from the rate of in-district students living in poverty with results

showing  $X^2 = 46.37, p < 0.005$ . The result is significant at  $p < .05$ . The nonparametric chi-square is displayed in Table 2.

**Research Question #3.** Was the frequency of on-time open enrollment students living in poverty congruent or different from the rate of late enrollee open enrollment students living in poverty?

**Result.** The frequency of on-time open enrollment students living in poverty is significantly different from the rate of late enrollee open enrollment students living in poverty with results showing  $X^2 = 12.09, p < 0.007, n=724$ . The result is significant at  $p < .05$ . The nonparametric chi-square is displayed in Table 3.

**Research Question #4.** Was the frequency of open enrollment students needing special education services congruent or different from the rate of in-district students needing special education services?

**Result.** The frequency of open enrollment students needing special education services is significantly different from the rate of in-district students living in poverty with results showing  $X^2 = 29.57, p < 0.005$ . The result is significant at  $p < .05$ . The nonparametric chi-square is displayed in Table 4.

**Research Question #5.** Was the frequency of late enrollee open enrollment students needing special education services congruent or different from the rate of in-district students needing special education services?

**Result.** The frequency of late enrollee open enrollment students needing special education services is significantly different from the rate of in-district students living in poverty with results showing  $X^2 = 38.66, p < 0.005$ . The result is significant at  $p < .05$ . The nonparametric chi-square is displayed in Table 5.

**Research Question #6.** Was the frequency of open enrollment students needing special education services congruent or different from the rate of late enrollee open enrollment students needing special education services?

**Result.** The frequency of open enrollment students needing special education services is significantly different from the rate of late enrollee open enrollment students living in poverty with results showing  $X^2 = 50.66, p < 0.005, n=189$ . The result is significant at  $p < .05$ . The nonparametric chi-square is displayed in Table 6.

Table 1

*Open Enrolled and In-district Students Living in Poverty*


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Student number $\chi^2$	2012-13		2013-14		2014-15		2015-16	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Open Enroll Poverty	93	(7)	239	(17)	165	(12)	227	(15)
In-District Poverty	1232	(93)	1198	(83)	1213	(88)	1252	(85)
Totals 67.61*	1325	(100)	1437	(100)	1378	(100)	1479	(100)

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\*Significant at the .05 level.  $p < 0.005$

Table 2

*Late Enrollee Open Enrolled Students and In-district Students Living in Poverty*

Student number $\chi^2$	2012-13		2013-14		2014-15		2015-16	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Late Enrollee Open Enroll Poverty	34	(3)	94	(7)	73	(6)	121	(9)
In-district Poverty	1232	(97)	1198	(93)	1213	(94)	1252	(91)
Totals 46.37*	1266	(100)	1292	(100)	1286	(100)	1373	(100)

\*Significant at the .05 level.  $p < 0.005$

Table 3

*On-time Open Enrolled Students and Late Enrollee Open Enrolled Students Living in Poverty*

Student number $\chi^2$	2012-13		2013-14		2014-15		2015-16	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
On-time Open Enroll Poverty	59	(63)	145	(61)	92	(56)	106	(47)
Late Enrollee Open Enroll Poverty	34	(37)	94	(39)	73	(44)	121	(53)
Totals 12.09*	93	(100)	239	(100)	165	(100)	227	(100)

\*Significant at the .05 level.  $p < 0.007$

Table 4

*Open Enrolled and In-district Students Needing Special Education Services*

Student number $\chi^2$	2012-13		2013-14		2014-15		2015-16	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Open Enroll SPED	17	(4)	65	(14)	43	(9)	64	(13)
In-district SPED	419	(97)	410	(86)	430	(91)	442	(87)
Totals 29.57*	436	(100)	475	(100)	473	(100)	506	(100)

\*Significant at the .05 level.  $p < 0.005$

Table 5

*Late Enrollee Open Enrolled Students and In-district Students Needing Special Education Services*

Student number $\chi^2$	2012-13		2013-14		2014-15		2015-16	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Late Enrollee Open Enroll SPED	10	(2)	4	(1)	1	(1)	29	(6)
In-district SPED	419	(98)	410	(99)	430	(99)	442	(94)
Totals 38.66*	429	(100)	414	(100)	431	(100)	471	(100)

\*Significant at the .05 level.  $p < 0.005$



Table 6

*On-time Open Enrolled Students and Late Enrollee Open Enrolled Students Needing Special Education Services*

Student number $\chi^2$	2012-13		2013-14		2014-15		2015-16	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
On-time Open Enroll SPED	7	(41)	61	(94)	42	(98)	35	(55)
Late Enrollee Open Enroll SPED	10	(59)	4	(6)	1	(2)	29	(45)
Totals 50.66*	17	(100)	65	(100)	43	(100)	64	(100)

\*Significant at the .05 level.  $p < 0.005$

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this descriptive quantitative study was to determine the frequency of open enrollment students either living in poverty or requiring special educational needs to see if there was a significant relationship between the time periods in which they enroll. The study analyzed enrollment data for both open enrollment students and students living within the district to see if special education rates and poverty rates were congruent or different. Additionally the research questions examined if the time of enrollment had an impact on the results. The results were drawn using regularly archived student enrollment data and analyzed using nonparametric chi square analysis using a 0.5 level of significance. Where appropriate the number of students were reported but due to the nature of the questions and archival data, the exact number of students included were not able to be deciphered by the year of enrollment but rather as a total compilation.

#### **Conclusions**

The following conclusions were drawn from the study for each of the six research questions.

#### **Research Question #1**

A nonparametric chi-square analysis using a 0.5 level of significance was used to determine if there was a significant difference between the rates of open enrollment students and in-district students living in poverty. A significant difference was found. Taken as a whole, the open enrollment students were different from in-district students as they were not at the same rate of living in poverty however the rate was not consistent

from year to year. For some of the sample years, open enrollment students were significantly higher and some of the sample years they were significantly lower so the data did not consistently indicate higher or lower significance but regardless the open enrolled students living in poverty were significantly different than students residing in-district. The number of open enrolled students living in poverty over the study period totaled 724. In-district students living in poverty numbers were reported by year ranging from a total of 1198 students to 1252 students.

### **Research Question #2**

A nonparametric chi-square analysis using a 0.5 level of significance was used to determine if there was a significant difference between the rates of late enrollee open enrolled students and in-district students living in poverty. A significant difference was found. Taken as a whole, the late enrollee open enrolled students were different from in-district students as they were not at the same rate of living in poverty however the rate was not consistent from year to year. For the first three sample years, poverty rates of late enrollee open enrollment students were significantly lower than that of in-district students, but the final year of the study the poverty rates of late enrollee open enrolled students was significantly higher than that of in-district students. The number of late enrollee open enrollment students living in poverty over the study period totaled 322. In-district students living in poverty numbers were reported by year ranging from a total of 1198 students to 1252 students.

### **Research Question #3**

A nonparametric chi-square analysis using a 0.5 level of significance was used to determine if there was a significant difference between the rates of on-time open enrolled

students and late enrollee open enrolled students living in poverty. A significant difference was found. Taken as a whole, the on-time open enrolled students were different from in-district students as they were not at the same rate of living in poverty however the rate was not consistent from year to year. For the first two sample years, poverty rates of on-time open enrollment students were significantly higher than that of late enrollee open enrolled students. The third year of the study the level of significance decreased but still showed a significant different. The final year of the study the poverty rates of on-time open enrolled students were significantly lower than that of late enrollee open enrolled students. The number of on-time open enrolled students living in poverty over the study period was 402. The number of late enrollee open enrollment students living in poverty over the study period totaled 322.

#### **Research Question #4**

A nonparametric chi-square analysis using a 0.5 level of significance was used to determine if there was a significant different between the rates of open enrollment students and in-district students needing special education services. A significant difference was found. Taken as a whole, the open enrollment students were different from in-district students as they were not at the same rate of needing special education services, however the rate was not consistent from year to year. For the first and third sample year, rates of open enrollment students needing special education services were significantly lower than those of in-district students. For the second and fourth sample year, rates of open enrollment students needing special education services were significantly higher than those of in-district students. The number of open enrolled students needing special education services over the study period totaled 189. In-district

student needing special education services reported by year ranging from a total of 410 students to 442 students.

#### **Research Question #5**

A nonparametric chi-square analysis using a 0.5 level of significance was used to determine if there was a significant difference between the rates of late enrollee open enrolled students and in-district students needing special education services. A significant difference was found. Taken as a whole, the late enrollee open enrolled students were different from in-district students as they were not at the same rate of needing special education services however the rate was not consistent from year to year. For the first three sample years, special education rates of late enrollee open enrollment students were significantly lower than that of in-district students, but the final year of the study the special education rates of late enrollee open enrolled students was significantly higher than that of in-district students. The number of late enrollee open enrollment students needing special education services over the study period totaled 44. In-district students needing special education numbers were reported by year ranging from a total of 410 students to 442 students.

#### **Research Question #6**

A nonparametric chi-square analysis using a 0.5 level of significance was used to determine if there was a significant difference between the rates of on-time open enrolled students and late enrollee open enrolled students needing special education services. A significant difference was found. Taken as a whole, the on-time open enrolled students were different from in-district students as they were not at the same rate of needing special education services however the rate was not consistent from year to year. For the

first and fourth sample year, special education rates of on-time open enrollment students were significantly lower than that of late enrollee open enrolled students. The second and third year of the study the level of special education rates of on-time open enrollment students were significantly higher than that of late enrollee open enrolled students. The number of on-time open enrolled students needing special education services over the study period was 145. The number of late enrollee open enrollment students needing special education services over the study period totaled 44.

### **Discussion**

Educational administrators must weigh a variety of factors when planning for student enrollment and allocation of district resources. Families seek out school choice options for a variety of reasons. By having a better understanding of what factors impact school choice and lead parents to apply for open enrollment, school districts can better position themselves to meet the needs not only of incoming students, but in-district students as well. While research has shown that income status, ethnicity, and parent education levels may affect the motivation to seek out school choice, the research is limited as to the influence school choice has on schools due to these motivating factors (Falbo, et al., 2005). Traditionally, public schools use geographic location as the means to allocate student distribution but school choice options can impact the districts ability to plan for students as open enrolled students would not be included in a districts census planning (Fowler, 2002.)

The purpose of this study was to explore the demographic data of students open enrolling into one urban district to see if they had a higher likelihood of being at-risk in terms of living in poverty or needing special education services. Research has proven

that students living in poverty and students needing special education services need additional resources to reach the same level of achievement as students who are not at-risk. School districts that are able to be responsive to families needs and provide adequate support for at-risk students have a higher likelihood of providing a positive school experience for students and building strong relationships with families with the goal of improving student achievement and success (Jensen, 2009; Payne, 1993; Payne, 2005).

The first part of the discussion will focus on the two things that impact a student's education, poverty and needing special education services. Both of these have been found to have significant impact on the educational planning and process. There will be a brief reflection on school choice before discussing the implications for research and for policy and practice.

### **Poverty**

This study looked at the poverty rates of both in-district and open enrollment students to determine if they were congruent or different. This study has shown that the students residing in-district and the students entering through open enrollment are significantly different in terms of poverty. Further research is necessary to examine the degree of this difference and any trends that may be occurring over time as the data was inconsistent from year to year over the period of the study.

For a variety of reasons, students in higher poverty schools suffer from lower achievement and lower level of resources, which both in turn substantially affect educational outcomes (Kraus, 2008). Families that live in poverty are closer to the basic issues of survival that become life consuming. They have little time left over for the

indulgences of reflection, wishes, desires, or personal preferences, all of which would be part of the school choice process (Payne, 1993). These factors could certainly contribute to a family missing a deadline for a school choice application or for figuring out the managerial details involved in moving their student(s) from a nearby school to a school outside of their district, such as transportation to and from school or before/afterschool daycare.

People who live in poverty, especially generational poverty, adhere to a different set of cues and habits than those individuals that do not live in poverty. These hidden rules manifest in a variety of ways, but more importantly to note, these are the bottom line or driving force against which decisions are made (Payne, 2005). One can logically draw the conclusion that the rules that govern schools would not necessarily align with the rules that would be applicable or valued by those living in poverty. By districts having a better understanding of these rules and values, they are better able to serve students and families. If students entering the research district are different than those of the students already residing in the district, adherence to the social rules that are already set may be difficult for students and families.

While the research did not show consistently the degree of difference between both late enrollee open enrolled students and open enrolled students likelihood to be living in poverty, it did show that there was a significant difference between the two groups. Over the course the of study years, the late enrollee open enrolled students poverty frequency level increased while the open enrolled students poverty level frequency decreased. Further research would be necessary to determine if this trend continues or what factors may be contributing to these results. Students and families



struggling with stresses that result from living in poverty will have an impact on the research district, both in regards to open enrollment students and students residing in district. Research has shown that when a person is living in poverty, they are more likely to experience problems with accessing resources that a person who does not live in poverty would readily have available. Reliable transportation and/or access to an electronic device, such as a computer with Internet, would be two resources necessary to complete the open enrollment application for the research district. The students living in district may have easier access to the supports that the research district provides simply due to geographic proximity to the schools and not needing to rely on transportation that the district provides. Students in poverty that reside in-district may also be more apt to be involved in after-school activities since they are not depending on bussing to and from school. Additionally, there is a large body of evidence showing that knowledge of educational choices are diminished and the ability to exercise these choices diminish when faced with the uncertainty in the future that comes with poverty (Jensen, 2009; Kraus, 2008; Payne 2005). Having a firm understanding of the impact of poverty on the students and families that are already residing within a district and finding out as much as possible the poverty levels of students open enrolling into a school district can help school administrators and educators be prepared to provide the extra resources needed to support students living in poverty. The research supports that the key to helping students in poverty to achieve is to have a strong system of supports through networks of high-quality relationships (Kraus, 2008; Jensen, 2009; R.S. Payne, 1993; Payne, 2005) and the foundations of these strong relationships may be able to be built even before the students step foot into the schools through proactive and prepared planning.

## **Special Education**

This study looked at the rates of students needing special education services of both in-district and open enrollment students to determine if they were congruent or different. This study has shown that the students residing in-district and the students entering through open enrollment are significantly different in terms of needing special education services. Further research is necessary to examine the degree of this difference and any trends that may be occurring over time as the data was inconsistent from year to year over the period of the study.

The study did show that over the course of the study period enrollment of special education students through open enrollment fluctuated greatly and was inconsistent from year to year. Additionally, on time open enrolled students needing special education services and late enrollee open enrolled students were inconsistent. Even with additional research it would be difficult to accurately predict what supports would be necessary to meet students needs since the needs of students requiring special education services vary greatly depending on the nature of the student's disability.

Past research in regards to special education and school choice suggests that when districts gain special education students, a typical school district response is to absorb these students into existing programs and increase class size to avoid the costs associated with hiring additional special education staff (Cullen & Rivkin, 2003). When enrollment rates of students needing special education services fluctuate, districts may find it difficult to plan effectively for the delivery of resources for special education students. Planning for open enrolled students means determining which school attendance areas they are assigned to and the need for special education services could impact this

decision. Under the state law the research district resides in, families may indicate on the open enrollment application that the student needs special education services but they are not required to provide this information to the district. This detail, along with fluctuating enrollment numbers of students needing special education services, can impact a school district's special education programming by altering the number of special education personnel that would be necessary to serve students. Since costs associated with educating students with disabilities are approximately double to costs of a non-disabled student, even a small increase in this number at the research district would have a considerable impact due to the size of the district.

### **School Choice**

For the most part, school choice research and literature has consisted primarily of the reasons behind school choice, parent and student rights in regards to school choice, and the impact school choice can have on student achievement. Very little research has been done on the cost of school choice from the district perspective in regards to the allocation and distribution of resources. Public schools are in the business to serve and educate students. Although they are not structured to generate a financial output, they are expected to adequately allocate financial resources to provide a free education to all students within the district's residency area. They must understand the costs associated with educating students and plan appropriately for this with a limited funding base. While there is not one specific study that can determine if school choice is a cost productive endeavor for a school district, having a solid understanding of why students want to enroll in a particular school district can help school administrators make financially responsible decisions for their district. The research district has experienced a

steady increase in students applying through open enrollment and the research district approves a majority of students who apply both within and after the enrollment deadline. Due to the location of the research district within a large metropolitan area and bordered by four other school districts, one may be able to draw the conclusion that the research district will more than likely see open enrolled students still continue to request entry at the current rate.

School choice can come with additional costs to a district, some of which do not readily present themselves during the planning stages. For example, student transportation, which the research district must provide to open enrollment students under state law, can be a high-cost budget item that school districts are not able to control due to cost of fuel and the costs associated with bus maintenance. Typically school districts can plan for these estimated costs to some degree, but the hidden costs that can arise from school choice are more difficult to predict. Research has shown additional costs are associated with educating high levels of at-risk students, but if the district is not aware of the demographics of students entering through school choice, they may not have adequately budgeted for this need.

Planning for the diverse needs associated with at-risk students due to poverty or special education is a budget allocation that districts may have a more difficult time determining. These hidden costs may actualize in a variety of ways, such as the need for greater levels of mental health services the district needs to supply to meet student needs or the hiring of additional special education staff to allow for manageable student caseloads. Each school district has unique identifiers that set them apart from other districts in terms of financial, social, and community structure and the research district is

no different in this regard. School administrators have a greater likelihood of predicting the impact that school choice can have on their district by developing a sound understanding of the student population in which they serve and anticipate will be serving.

### **Implications for Further Research**

While there have been numerous research articles devoted to the topic of school choice, many of these studies focus on the outcomes of school choice to measure if providing additional school choice opportunities to families does what school choice is intended to do. With that being said, researchers and policy makers still do not have a definitive reason, and may not ever agree, as to why school choice exists and what is the intended outcome. Is it for social equalization or family rights? Do the laws that exist in regards to school choice create an undue burden on the financial structures of school districts? Does school choice increase/decrease a school's potential for success/failure through a competitive market approach? Does student achievement rise in school's where a higher percentage of students select to attend there?

The questions that have yet to be answered through research seem to be as endless as the variables that contribute to each school district's unique situation. This study adds to this research. This study does not address the success of students that open enroll into the research district nor does it take into consideration whether the at-risk students are getting their needs met better than they were in their previous school district. This research study does not take into account the reasons for the families seeking additional school choice options. Both of these areas are worthy of further study if the research

district desires additional information in regards to open enrollment trends within their district.

This study was conducted over a four-year period when local learning community districts were required to offer open enrollment with transportation under a state law. For the upcoming 2017-2018 school year, the law governing the learning community school districts, Nebraska state law LB 641 has changed and under Nebraska state law LB 1067, the common levy of the learning community has been overturned and school districts within the learning community will resort back to the option enrollment law that all districts in the state abide by, Nebraska state law LB 1017. This law does not require the receiving school district to provide transportation to students in poverty. Further research would certainly be advantageous to the research district to determine if this legal change impacts not only the rate of school choice into their district, but also what impact does this have on the rate of students in poverty using school choice to attend the research district.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

School choice is an educational issue that continues to rise to the forefront of educational policymaking and planning across our nation. While the state of Nebraska, in which the research district is located, tends to be fairly conservative with school choice options by not allowing both vouchers and charter schools, school choice opportunities exist that can impact both the leaving and receiving school district. School districts should not only be knowledgeable of local school choice laws and policies, they should understand how these laws affect their school district. Student enrollment predictions should include analysis of both the upfront costs and the hidden costs that can be

associated with bringing additional students into a school district, including the costs associated with the education of students needing special education or those living in poverty. The research district and other school districts may want to consider the results of this research study when extending deadlines for school choice enrollment. Each school district has a unique financial and resources framework therefore the impacts of school choice enrollment can have a variety of outcomes. It is important to remember that that value in this research is the implications that it holds for the planning process for school district administrators.

Additional implications for policy and practice would be for school districts to have a well-developed network of supports in place for students living in poverty or needing special education support. In the case of this study, the data fluctuated from year to year with the open enrollment students being different in terms of living in poverty or needing special education services. This makes it difficult for program planning, but what can be taken away from the research is that school districts need to plan for the unknown. Knowing that there is a population of in-district students living in poverty and there is a likelihood that additional students living in poverty will open enroll, the research district more than likely already has supports in place for families in poverty, such as social workers, food banks, transportation assistance, etc. The research district may want to examine the resources already in place to support students and families living in poverty and see how accessible they are to the families that do not reside within the district.

In terms of program planning for special education students, the inconsistency of the data from year to year makes planning for instructional support difficult. The

research district may want to review the resources each of the elementary sites has in terms of special education supports before determining what school sight open enrolled students are assigned to. Additional ways to proactively plan for changes numbers in special education students would be to look at hiring practices to include hiring staff with special education endorsements so staff could serve in dual-purpose roles or change roles if special education caseloads become unexpectedly high due to special education students open enrolling. With the impending change to state law that reverts back to option enrollment this may not be as high of a concern but one that school districts should still be mindful of.

### **Summary**

School planning is not an easy task. School choice is not a simple issue. Enrollment trends can impact not only the social but financial health of a school district. If school districts are required to allow open enrollment by law, as in the case of the research district, school administrators, lawmakers, and community leaders have a duty and responsibility to understand the outcomes of open enrollment. Rarely is it a measureable outcome that falls either as a negative or positive outcome, but rather a mixed bag of positives and negatives for the students, the families, and the school district. Often school districts are at the mercy of state lawmakers that are not connected to education or have a firm understanding of the inner workings of a school district. Many times, school districts are forced to be reactive to the ever changing rules and mandates on public education from the state level and just when a district has programs in place, funds allocated, and staff trained, things change once again. Best practice for school districts is to take the time to fully understand enrollment and planning operations.



Through this individual districts may be able to determine what potential outcomes could exist if external variables, such as the addition of at-risk students, impact these operations.

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