

Schools do get better with open enrollment

By Megan Boldt

mboldt@pioneerpress.com

Updated: 08/21/2011 05:34:33 PM CDT

MINNESOTA AND SCHOOL CHOICE

Total K-12 students in Minnesota in the 2010-11 school year: **823,235**
Number open-enrolled in nonresident district: **58,408 (7.1 percent of total)**
Number enrolled in charter schools: **37,253 (4.5 percent)**
Number enrolled in nonpublic schools: **74,384 (9 percent)**
Number home-schooled: **17,247 (2 percent)**

Source: Minnesota Department of Education

Larry Ptasienski and Carol Mager didn't have children when they moved from South Minneapolis to North Oaks. But they moved there specifically for the public schools.

Then in 2004, they became disenchanted with the Mounds View school district. That's when district leaders decided to close Snail Lake Elementary in Shoreview, which Ptasienski and Mager's two children attended, and cut other programs.

So the couple embarked on a search for a new district. After extensive research and interviews with superintendents and teachers, they decided to open-enroll their children in Mahtomedi schools in 2005. The district was small, had just started an engineering program and had strong offerings in the arts.

"They're investing. They're doing everything they can do to enhance opportunities for kids," Ptasienski said. "The community is committed to its schools. In Mahtomedi, they put their money where their mouth is."

The Mahtomedi district is one of the clear winners in Minnesota's open-enrollment system, drawing in hundreds more students from outside its boundaries than it loses to neighboring districts.

Most agree the competition spurred by open enrollment for students - and the state dollars that come with them - forces districts to offer better programs and customer service. School districts that are losing students are working hard to win them back.

That is exactly what Gov. Rudy Perpich envisioned when he started pushing open enrollment and other school-choice proposals more than two decades ago.

"Our schools have gotten better because of open enrollment," said retired superintendent Charlie Kyte. "It might be a challenge for some districts, but the goal isn't to make things easier for the people running the systems. The goal is to have the system be the very best it can be for kids."

THE WINNERS

About one in four students enrolled in Mahtomedi schools is from outside the district - one of the highest concentrations in the east metro.

Total enrollment in Mahtomedi was 3,242 students last year, an increase of just 10 students since 1998. But resident enrollment decreased by about 635 students during that time; nonresident enrollment made up the difference.

District administrators say those open-enrollees bring in dollars the district desperately needs. Mahtomedi nets about \$1,800 per open-enrollee, which brings in \$1.3 million a year. The district's general operating budget for next school year is \$32.2 million.

Superintendent Mark Larson said the extra money allows the district to offer such things as more college-level classes or enhanced math and English classes of 15 to 18 students for those who are struggling. More funding also means more teachers and lower class sizes.

Each year since, the number of students who leave the school district where they live has grown steadily. Last school year, 58,408 students enrolled in another district. That's up from 18,806 during the 1997-98 school year.

Minnesota has established itself as a national leader in school choice. Charter schools continue to open their doors to students, not only in St. Paul and Minneapolis but also in suburbs and outstate.

"Minnesota probably offers more opportunities for parents to educate their children than any other state in the nation," Loritz said. "You can home-school your kids, you can go to a parochial school, you can go to a charter, you can go to your district school or another school district. It's an amazingly rich environment."

SHIFTING NUMBERS

Fifteen years ago, St. Paul Public Schools attracted more students from open enrollment than it lost. But that's not the case anymore.

Steve Schellenberg, the district's assistant director of research, assessment and evaluation, said he believes the district's elementary magnet programs such as Spanish immersion attracted outside families. The programs were unusual and distinctive; the suburbs didn't have them.

That has changed. More suburban districts are offering Spanish immersion, International Baccalaureate or all-day kindergarten to retain families and bring in new ones.

Last year, St. Paul lost 2,250 students to open enrollment - about 700 more than it brought in. It lost another 6,000 to charters.

"The atmosphere has definitely changed over the years. It really forces schools to figure out how we are being perceived by our patrons. And by patrons, I don't just mean people in our buildings, but our community as a whole," Schellenberg said. "On the other hand, open enrollment takes away resources from our central mission."

The St. Paul district has received about \$225,000 from two private foundations for a marketing campaign about the new "Strong Schools, Strong Communities" strategic plan, which includes a shift from magnet programs and citywide busing to neighborhood schools.

"They gave us the money in hopes that we can maintain enrollment and in the future increase it," said Julie Schultz Brown, the district's director of communications, marketing and development.

"The point is talking to our families and getting the message to them," Schultz Brown said.

The White Bear Lake district understands the challenges of being on the losing end of open enrollment. It lost 764 students to other districts last year, more than twice the number it brought in. And the district lost an additional 1,400 students to charters, private schools and home-schooling.

About half the White Bear students who left for other districts go to neighboring Mahtomedi.

Before the 2005-06 school year, White Bear Lake was breaking even in the open-enrollment game: As many students left as came in. But that changed when voters said no in 2006 to a request for a levy renewal and increase.

Class sizes were already high, among the largest in the metro area, and a sharp exodus to other area schools began. Students kept leaving even after voters overwhelmingly approved the same levy request in 2007, said Superintendent Mike Lovett.

In Osseo Area Schools, enrollment numbers have taken a noticeable dip twice in the past decade - both times right after multimillion-dollar budget reductions.

The most recent was \$14.5 million in cuts for 2008-09 that included closing two elementary schools and repurposing four others. Osseo lost 816 more students that year than it brought in through open enrollment, said district spokeswoman Barb Olson.

"It certainly means less money to work with," Olson said. "But we have not needed to make significant program reductions."

HERE TO STAY

Lifto said that when he started as superintendent in Mahtomedi in 1985, the district was coming off a stretch of declining enrollment and had not quite 1,500 students. He thought the optimal number of students would be 3,000 to 3,500 students.

At that size, Lifto said, "you're still a small district, but you have the critical mass of students and the funding that comes along with them to offer world-class programs."

"Maintaining quality when you're shrinking is daunting, if not impossible," he said.

Mahtomedi had 3,242 students last year.

Ptasienski and Mager threw themselves into the Mahtomedi schools after open-enrolling their children, now in seventh and 10th grades. Mager was a teacher's aide for a year and has volunteered in the schools. Ptasienski helped coach the high school's robotics team last year.

"I really believe that public schools need to be strong," Mager said. "And I think that parent involvement is key. The parent community is very involved in Mahtomedi."

The family finally sold its North Oaks home and moved into the Mahtomedi district this summer. But Ptasienski said they would have made the drive to Mahtomedi for school even if their house hadn't sold.

"As a parent, you're an advocate for your children and you want to find the best opportunity and fit for them," Ptasienski said. "Education is just too important. You only get one crack at it."

Open enrollment is here to stay. Minnesotans like it. A 2005 poll conducted for the St. Paul-based Center for School Change found 65 percent of state residents back it, said Joe Nathan, director of the center. That support jumped to 78 percent for people younger than 50. And state lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have been champions of school-choice measures.

"In some states, it's been a partisan issue. In Minnesota, it's a fairly bipartisan issue," Nathan said. "Above almost anything else, families want choice. And when it comes to schools, choice is not enough by itself. It has to be high-quality choices."

MaryJo Webster contributed to this report.

MINNESOTA AND SCHOOL CHOICE

Total K-12 students in Minnesota in the 2010-11 school year: 823,235

Number open-enrolled in nonresident district: 58,408 (7.1 percent of total)

Number enrolled in charter schools: 37,253 (4.5 percent)

Number enrolled in nonpublic schools: 74,384 (9 percent)

Number home-schooled: 17,247 (2 percent)

Source: Minnesota Department of Education