

December 13, 2018 Online at www.proedtn.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

OPEN ENROLLMENT IS A CHOICE

There is a growing focus on education choice across the United States, especially here in Tennessee. When you discuss parent choice, everybody immediately thinks of vouchers. Vouchers are only one form of choice. When you discuss school choice, the debate is unfairly focused between public and private. Terminology is constantly changing and evolving, and the words themselves create unnecessary conflict. Before we step further into the debate, I think there is one choice that is being ignored as an option: open enrollment or voluntary public school choice.

We must expand open enrollment policies in our public school districts. There are two primary types of open enrollment policies: 1) **Intra-district enrollment policies**, where students may transfer to schools within their home districts. 2) **Inter-district enrollment policies**, where students may transfer to schools outside of their home districts. Both are forms of choice.

Currently, Tennessee has *voluntary* intra-district and inter-district open enrollment policies. That may need to change, if districts do not get more aggressive in championing parental options in public education. Hopefully, that will be led by district leaders or school boards across the state. We need to make open enrollment a high priority.

Today, our workforce is highly mobile. Many adults no longer work in the community they reside. This is very clear in Middle Tennessee, which is exploding with population growth with more on the way. If we want parents involved in their child's education, it would only make sense that public school options become more convenient for the adult who then often provides the transportation.

Currently, open enrollment policies may be either mandatory or voluntary. Under mandatory programs, districts must allow for open enrollment. Under voluntary programs, districts may choose whether to allow for open enrollment. It is easy to see that the direction by the state will be to move from voluntary to mandatory, if districts do not adopt open enrollment policies or do a better job of highlighting voluntary public school choice.

Questions that policymakers and the media should ask: 1) What districts in Tennessee allow students to transfer to schools within their home districts? 2) What districts in Tennessee do not allow students to transfer to schools within their home districts? 3) What districts in Tennessee accept students transferring to schools outside of their home district?

As the focus on education choice is elevated by Governor-elect Bill Lee, maybe the easiest place to find initial consensus is with open enrollment. Mandatory open enrollment policies will likely be promoted by the state. This could either be accomplished by funding, new legislation, or districts adopting new policies. Intra-district and Inter-district open enrollment policies must be on the table, when the subject of education choice is discussed. The message is that public schools are the best option for parents. Parents should be able to trust public schools to educate all children to the best of their ability.

SUMMARY

Currently, Tennessee has voluntary intra-district and inter-district open enrollment policies. That may need to change.

#####

JC Bowman is the Executive Director of Professional Educators of Tennessee, a non-partisan teacher association headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and the association are properly cited. For more information on this subject or any education issue please contact Professional Educators of Tennessee. To schedule an interview please contact [Audrey Shores, Director of Communications](#), at 1-800-471-4867 ext. 102.