

Pending final approval during the 2010 legislative session, parents of public school students in Missouri may have more educational options as far as school districts go starting in July 2011. Another statewide open enrollment bill has been proposed in the Missouri legislature; the bill, sponsored by Senator Rob Mayer, R-Dexter, was last heard in early February by the Senate Education Committee.

Senate Bill 603, which is very similar to other open enrollment bills proposed in recent sessions, would allow for students to attend a different public school across stated boundaries starting in July 1, 2011 if passed. The bill would require each school district to adopt a policy that outlines a district determined appropriate class size and teacher-to-student ratio with the provision no district is required to admit any student if the ratio has previously been met or exceeded.

Neighboring states of Iowa, Kansas, Illinois and Arkansas already have at least one open enrollment policy on the books with Iowa having an inter-district/mandatory policy which allows a parent/guardian residing in one school district to enroll their child in a public school in another district. Currently, Missouri has no such policy, instead requiring children within the boundaries of one district to attend that school district. A parent/guardian is required to move into a different district, the district they wish their child attend instead, under current Missouri law.

Gasconade County R-II (Owensville) superintendent Dr. Russ Brock overall doesn't see a need in Missouri for such a bill, stating that parents who are unhappy with their current district have options they can exercise.

"I don't see a need. Parents already have options, they can move [to Hermann], move to anywhere in the state if they don't like the quality of education," said Brock. "They can move to a neighboring area and still keep the same job."

Brock said the major issue which the bill didn't fully address was the issue of funding but also created a bigger problem for school districts.

"The problem that bothers me the most is it seems to be an effort to try to take students out of one school district that isn't performing well. You oughta fix the school district that has the problems instead of taking them out," said Brock. "That's not many districts across the state but to put into place a law to address a problem that should be addressed at the district level doesn't make sense to me."

Gasconade County R-I (Hermann) superintendent Chris Neale felt the same as Brock, not seeing a need for open enrollment outside of the two districts excluded from the bill, Kansas City and St. Louis.

"It favors people who want to leave a district, it doesn't give any real countenance to the district who is losing the student(s). The most striking aspect is this, Kansas City and St. Louis are exempt," said Neale. "Go find your concentration of failing schools, where you absolutely can make the argument that these kids ought to have another chance, be able to go somewhere else for a better education. They've exempted the two largest voting blocks with the most failing schools. Where it ought to do some good because the schools are failing, it doesn't affect them. It's a foolish bill."

Neale said the bill did make an attempt to address the three major issues that are raised by a school district when the topic of open enrollment comes up, being able to plan, the issue of special education students and athletic eligibility, but not fully.

For the special education issue, Neale said the bill did give some consideration to the individual needs the receiving district would have to meet but did not fully state how those needs would be met through funding. According to him, special education students are generally two to three times more expensive than a regular student to educate so funding a school based on attendance doesn't add up.

"If all that is sent is based on attendance, you're not sending an equitable amount of funds per child," said Neale. "None of that contemplates the notion of fixed costs."

The athletic eligibility issue is another area both superintendents felt needed more work.

"With regards to athletics, I thought it was really weak, although not completely wrong. It essentially was ducking the bullet, it doesn't address anything about the real issue here which is recruitment," said Neale. "While it was addressed on the surface, I don't think they did much to really

get at the substance of it.”

Brock echoed Neale's statement, saying it could create a nightmare if there were no real restrictions on transfers in regards to athletics.

“Say you've got a six foot ten kid who would make a good basketball player for a different school. You would still have to prove the transfer was for athletic purposes which would be very hard to prove,” said Brock.

As for an overall benefit to any school district in the state, Brock thought there wasn't one due to the fact that the two school district who could benefit the most aren't included.

“I really have trouble seeing how it would be beneficial for most any district in the state. Parents already have the choice to move to a district that's around you without changing jobs,” said Brock. “Most school districts in the state are doing a very good job and working very hard. Low performing school in St. Louis and Kansas City are the reason [for the bill] but it doesn't justify applying it to the whole state.”

Other provisions for open enrollment in the bill included:

Rules regarding returning to a student's home district after transfer – A student would be allowed one transfer out of their current district and one transfer back in.

Standards for students with special education needs – The two schools, current and receiving districts, would be required to coordinate special education needs and plans for a transferring student; a school that can't serve certain students would not be required to accept them.

Student-athletic participation – The Missouri State High School Activities Association would continue to oversee these requirements; students who transferred would still be required to sit out a year as they currently do.

Funding – Currently, schools are funded on a per-student basis, outlined in the foundation formula which is used by the state. Under the open enrollment bill, if a student moves from a school with more per-student funding to a school with less per-student funding, some of the funding from the larger school will go with the student to the smaller school. However, if a student from a smaller school wishes to attend a larger school, parents would be required to make up some of the difference.

Parents' requirements – Openings in each district would be listed in January, based on the district's student-teacher ratio and parents would also need to apply for the opening(s) in January. Parents would also be responsible for providing or meeting transportation needs of their child(ren).

The Senate Education Committee last heard the bill on February 10. No further action has since been taken.