



## On Becoming a District of Choice: Implications for Equity along the U.S.-Mexico Border

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## Abstract

*Purpose:* Despite the popularity of open enrollment as a school choice mechanism, there is little research on how principals behave in a district-run competitive setting. This study provides insight into how open enrollment policies affect the role of the principal as well as educational equity by examining the roles and behaviors of school principals in an unregulated marketplace of schools.

*Research Methods:* This study utilizes an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach. We first analyze school-level transfer data for school year 2014-15 and demographic data in order to examine trends such as poverty concentration as well as to identify “winners”, “losers”, and “non-players” in the open enrollment marketplace. Based on these categories, we interviewed 12 principals to better understand their role in the competitive settings.

*Findings:* We find that some schools have emerged as “winners” in this open enrollment marketplace, attracting large numbers of transfers without losing many students, while other principals and schools struggle to overcome a negative perception and find a market niche to attract students. Our quantitative analysis indicates a relatively small relationship between open enrollment and increased economic segregation in the district, but there is some reason to infer poverty concentration will intensify as the plan continues.

*Implications:* These findings have implications for school and district leaders navigating open enrollment plans as a means to increase enrollments and encourage innovation while also seeking to maintain equitable student opportunity.

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To expand educational options for families, most states offer some form of either voluntary or mandatory open enrollment policy, allowing students to choose a public school outside their neighborhood or school zone (Education Commission of the States, 2016). Open enrollment policies can be either intradistrict, where students can transfer within their home district, or interdistrict, where students can transfer across district boundaries. School districts employ these open enrollment options for a variety of reasons that include increasing diversity across schools (Holme & Finnigan, 2013), avoiding lengthy transits to in-district schools (Education Commission of the States, 2016), responding to competition from charter schools and neighboring districts (Hess, Maranto, & Milliman, 2001), and addressing legal mandates associated with failure to meet academic progress (Murnane, 2007).

Yet, states and districts vary immensely in their design and regulation of these open enrollment plans. Most programs are largely unregulated, allowing school leaders great latitude on admissions processes. By providing choice, removing regulations, and encouraging competition among schools, open enrollment policies assume that market-based forces will advance equity and efficiency. However, unregulated choice plans often increase stratification of educational opportunity (André-Bechely, 2005; Cobb & Glass, 2009; Scott, 2005), and can create perverse incentives for school leaders to ‘compete’ by seeking more “desirable” students (e.g., higher achieving students or students without special education needs). Therefore, it is important to understand how school leaders behave in a competitive, open enrollment context, including whom they view as competitors and the strategies they use to attract and retain students, as these behaviors and strategies have important implications for educational equity and student segregation.

Although inter and intradistrict transfer programs remain two of the most popular choice mechanisms (Carlson, Lavery, & Witte, 2011; Siegel-Hawley, 2013), there is a surprising lack of research on how principals behave within district-run open enrollment settings. Principals play a premier role in a competitive environment since they act as the face of the school in terms of marketing and recruitment, serve as a gatekeeper for admitting students, and they make key curricular decisions capable of attracting new students. Yet, much of the current research on competition and school leadership focuses on other choice programs, such as charter schools (Author, 2016; Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009) or school vouchers (Carnoy, 2017; Wolf et al. 2013) rather than district-run open enrollment plans. Only a few scholars have examined aspects of principal behavior in open enrollment districts (DiMartino & Jessen, 2014 in New York; Holme, Carkhum, & Rangel, 2012 in an unidentified urban cluster in Texas). Therefore, more research on school leaders in open enrollment is needed given the prevalence of open enrollment in the United States and the paramount role of principals in this process.

This study adds to our understanding of how open enrollment policies affect equity and stratification by examining the roles and behaviors of school principals in an unregulated marketplace of schools. We explore this process in the border district of El Paso Independent School District (EPISD). EPISD is a particularly compelling setting to examine open enrollment given its geographical, historical, and demographic context. The EPISD open enrollment plan was initiated in 2014 as a reaction to shrinking enrollment, charter schools, and neighboring districts offering interdistrict transfers, drawing away district students. The open enrollment plan allows both intra and interdistrict transfers and has been framed by district officials as promoting equity, competition, and innovation through choice (El Paso Herald Post, 2015). However, the plan is unregulated in that there are no formal mechanisms to increase racial or economic

diversity and no safeguards to ensure access for special populations. Further, the proximity of El Paso to Ciudad Juarez in Mexico further complicates an open enrollment policy from a district and principal perspective given the role of social class, language, and citizenship as they relate to leadership, decision making and parental access to choice (Crawford, 2017; Yettick, Love, & Anderson, 2008). Understanding the context of EPISD can shed light on the ways in which unregulated choice plans shape educational opportunities for marginalized students, and how principals navigate this complex terrain of intersecting choice policies.

Given the complexity of this open enrollment policy as it relates to the social and educational context of this district, our study uses an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) to understand the extent that principal behavior is both shaped by a competitive environment as well as how their behavior shapes student access to the school of their choice. To examine this process, we first analyzed school-level transfer data for school year 2014-15 and demographic data for the school years leading up to and immediately following the implementation of the open enrollment policy. We followed the demographic analysis with a stratified purposeful sample of interviews with principals and district officials as well as descriptive and inferential statistics to examine the relationship between implementation of the choice policy and changes in student segregation by income. Finally, we use the qualitative data to understand principals' perceptions and behaviors to offer explanations for the patterns observed in the quantitative data. The use of multiple methods and data sources allows us to, among other things, examine the degree that enrollment shifts reflect the perception of school and district leaders.

We find that thousands of students currently take advantage of the open enrollment plan and principals are responding to this initiative in a variety of ways. Building off of existing

school reputations and locational advantages, some schools have emerged as “winners” in this open enrollment marketplace, attracting large numbers of transfers without losing many students, while other principals and schools struggle to overcome a negative perception and find a market niche to attract students. Despite our concerns that the lack of regulations in the open enrollment system could result in increased pockets of poverty and affluence, our quantitative analysis indicates a relatively small relationship between open enrollment and increased segregation in the district. However, many of our interviews raised concerns that the screening of students, while perhaps on a small scale now, could eventually create more stratification as the plan becomes more widespread and the market for “successful” schools tightens. Our findings can ultimately help districts and principals negotiate the concurrent challenges of maintaining enrollment, promoting innovation, and ensuring equitable student opportunity.

### **Markets, Diversity, and Open Enrollment**

School choice has long been touted as a remedy for low student achievement by providing parents with choices and it theoretically encourages schools and principals to be more responsive, efficient, and innovative by introducing competition between schools (Holme, Carkhum, & Rangel, 2012; Lubienski, 2005). The market model assumes that by removing regulations such as residential school assignment and uniform curriculum across schools, open enrollment intensifies competition and choice, and subsequently creates incentives for schools to innovate and improve their academic outcomes (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn, Manno, & Wright, 2016; Friedman, 1955). Examples of these market mechanisms include school vouchers, charter schools, and district-run open enrollment programs. According to rational choice theory, parents have equal ability and eligibility to act on “choice” policies. Parents of low-achieving students or those with the greatest disadvantage may choose to enroll in more advantaged schools or schools

that better address their students' needs, thereby decreasing segregation (Ritter et al., 2014). However, critics of these market based models point out that rational choices are often constrained by access to information (Bell, 2009; Holme, 2002), geography/ transportation (André-Bechely, 2005), capacity (Holme, Carkhum, & Rangel, 2012), targeted marketing (Author, 2016), and cream-skimming (Fuller, 2014; Welner, 2013).

Long before the proliferation of charter schools and vouchers in the 1990s, school districts have had and continue to have their own quasi markets including magnet schools, intradistrict transfer programs, and interdistrict transfer programs between two or more districts. Magnet schools – used in both interdistrict and intradistrict plans – offer special curriculum or programs either for the entire school or for selected cohort within the school. Although some magnets use selective admissions, most magnet admissions operate similar to charter markets in using a lottery or open application (Bifulco, Cobb, & Bell, 2009). During the 1970s, magnets acted primarily as a means for racial integration by attracting white students from the suburbs and private schools (Grooms & Williams, 2013). However, with the end of most court ordered desegregation plans, only some magnets continue to promote diversity while other magnet programs emphasize choice for parents (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2012).

Since the Supreme Court decision in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) limited the legal justification for mandatory interdistrict desegregation plans, the few existing regional enrollment policies tend to rely on districts' voluntary participation (Grooms, 2016; Holme & Finnigan, 2013). Finnigan et al. (2015) highlight how eight metropolitan regions utilize interdistrict “collaboratives” to actively promote racial and economic diversity through transfers. Still, most interdistrict transfer policies in the United States, including the one in our research study, are not collaborative or implemented with explicit goals of economic and racial integration. According



to Holme and Richards (2009), states encourage interdistrict plans in order to hold schools and districts accountable through a market of choices. However, in their study of an interdistrict transfer program in the Denver Metropolitan Area, they found a stratified market where mostly higher-SES parents chose to transfer to higher-SES, higher-achieving districts.

Recently, many districts have begun experimenting with different types of open enrollment policies *within* the district. For example, the Jefferson County district in Kentucky has used a controlled choice desegregation program where student ranking of school choices is weighted by diversity considerations (Frankenberg, 2017; Siegel-Hawley, 2013). Other intradistrict programs such as New York City's Small Schools program and EPISD's policy are referred to as unregulated or race/income-neutral in that there are no provisions to ensure schools promote racial and economic integration. Instead, similar to charter schools, these plans operate under the rationale that offering choices for various magnet and neighborhood schools inherently promotes educational equity. In some cases, such open enrollment policies are effective in breaking up concentrations of minority and high-needs students, but without equity safeguards and transportation provisions, race/income neutral policies often result in increased stratification (Cobb & Glass, 2009; Holme et al., 2012).

In summary, there are two competing theories on how choice policies – be they charter schools or district-run open enrollment plans—may affect equity and student segregation. On the one hand, because eligibility and ability to act on transfer policies is inequitably distributed across families, schools that have the highest concentrations of low-income and minority students may become more segregated because the most advantaged parents within those schools will transfer out, while few parents will transfer into such schools. On the other hand, low-income and other high-needs students living in low-income neighborhoods, often with poorly

performing schools, may enroll in schools that are higher performing or provide some sort of value for their child.

### **Principals and Competition**

A developing literature uses survey and qualitative methods to examine how school principals operate in a competitive market environment (Davis, 2013; Kasman & Loeb, 2013). However the majority of these studies investigate how traditional public school principals respond to the presence of charter schools (Campbell, DeArmond, Guin, & Warnock, 2006; Davis, 2013), or how charter schools compete with other charter schools (Author, 2015). In the case of competition between charter schools, researchers find that principals engage in an array of strategies ranging from improved test scores, targeted marketing, screening, and programmatic differentiation (Author, 2015; Lubienski, 2005). Conversely, the response by traditional public school principals from charter competition depends on the local context as well as the quality and market share of charter schools in the area (Arsen & Ni, 2012; Hess et al., 2001).

A few studies examine the principal role in intra or interdistrict open enrollment plans (DiMartino & Jessen, 2014; Kasman & Loeb, 2013). Holme et al. (2012) studied principal and teacher responses in two low-performing public high schools operating in a city with open enrollment and charters. They found that principals at these lower-performing schools were aware of declining enrollments and the loss of higher achieving students, but, out of survival, the principals primarily focused their energy on raising test scores rather than curricular changes or marketing their schools. However, Holme and her colleagues (2012) observed that district support for one of these schools helped the principal market the school and overcome some of the community's negative perception of the school. After New York City Public Schools opened 250 small academy high schools, researchers observed that many principals were actively

engaged in marketing and recruitment for their schools, but several of the principals preferred to focus on their role as an instructional leader of the school (DiMartino & Jessen, 2015).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Contextual and organizational factors influence principals' competitive behaviors. Pressures from declining enrollment in traditional public schools, potential school closures, and test-based accountability have expanded the role of school leaders beyond organizational and instructional leadership into marketing and recruitment. In an era of school accountability, student losses and school closures are thought to reflect poorly on the school leadership regardless of other underlying causes for low-achievement (Deeds & Patillo, 2015). Therefore, to frame our study, we draw on research and frameworks that have been applied to competitive charter school marketplaces, or "portfolio districts" (Bulkley, Levin & Henig, 2010), such as New York City, Detroit, or New Orleans.

The level of competition between principals in an open enrollment district also depends on the organizational history of the schools as well as the public perception of the neighborhood (Holme et al., 2012; Ladd & Fiske, 2001). Whereas a brand new charter school, magnet, or private school initially benefits from a "new car smell" (Buckley & Schneider, 2009), the reputation of a traditional public school is very much embedded in the public perception of the school and neighborhood. Principals at schools with a long-standing reputation for academic achievement or extracurricular success have greater ability to screen and select students. Conversely, a school characterized by lower academic performance, behavior issues, scandals, or simply being in the "wrong" neighborhood puts that school and principal at a disadvantage. In this competitive structure, the perceived "winners" can to some degree 'rest on their laurels,' or not engage as actively in recruitment and competitive strategy, whereas the perceived "losers,"

or even “average” schools, may be motivated to reinvent their narrative by establishing a niche program or through community outreach.

Introducing an open enrollment policy in a district with a pre-existing hierarchy of schools runs the risk of intensifying stratification or segregation. More educated parents are typically more likely to participate in choice programs (Ogawa & Dutton, 1997), and these parents are likely to seek opportunities at higher-performing schools, which tend to enroll higher-income students. Poorer schools are at risk of losing their most economically advantaged students. Ladd and Fiske (2001) describe this process as an “uneven playing field of school choice” where students are sorted by race and/or social class and achievement gaps widen rather than narrow. In turn, the less successful schools and their principals can have an even greater competitive burden. Although Ladd and Fiske’s (2001) study took place in New Zealand, they find parallels with school choice plans in the U.S. and view their study as a cautionary tale. Existing market hierarchies influence school leaders’ perceptions of competition, which can reinforce rather than ameliorate longstanding inequities in a system (Author, 2016).

Given the dearth of literature on principal perceptions of competition in open enrollment districts, this study examines the following research questions: 1) How do principals behave within a competitive district-run open enrollment environment?; 2) How might principals’ behavior shape students’ access to the school of their choice?; 3) To what extent did economic segregation across schools change over the period of implementing the school of choice program and are those changes associated with the transfer rates at particular schools? Since understanding the local context is critical for situating these research questions, the following section provides some background on EPISD and the origin of their open enrollment plan.

**Policy Context: The EPISD Open Enrollment Policy and Equity Concerns**

The location along the US-Mexico border makes EPISD a unique urban school district. Additionally, EPISD has recently sought to reinvent itself following several district scandals. The current superintendent of EPISD was appointed in September of 2013 following a massive cheating scandal in the district, that resulted in the removal of several district administrators (DeMatthews, Izquierdo, & Knight, 2017; Weaver & Tidwell, 2013). The previous superintendent, along with other district leaders and principals, was accused of engaging in several illegal practices (i.e., changing students' grade levels from testing grades, encouraging students to stay home during testing days) targeted at low-performing students, many of whom were English language learners. In his first year, the new superintendent was faced with the fallout of the cheating scandal and shrinking enrollments resulting from both charter school growth and out-of-district transfer policies that allowed EPISD students to transfer to neighboring districts. Declining enrollment, along with substantial reductions in state funding following the Great Recession, placed the district under fiscal duress. Moreover, the district itself is landlocked between Mexico and several sprawling suburban districts, many of which offer affordable new home constructions. The superintendent responded to these challenges in part by rebranding EPISD as a "district of choice," allowing students to apply to any school operating under capacity within the district. Although the district already offered several magnet programs, the open enrollment plan encouraged more specialization of schools and allowed all schools to engage in marketing and recruitment of students (previously only magnets could conduct outreach). Notably, the open enrollment plan also coincided with other changes including expansion of early-childhood programs as well as the adoption of dual language starting with kindergarten and grade 1 in all elementary schools and scaling up to higher grade levels.

Our analysis of the choice policy revealed few equity safeguards, such as transportation provisions for low-income students or measures to balance special needs students across schools. Moreover, the few regulations in the plan actually favor relatively advantaged students, such as children of district employees, and provide principals some latitude in rejecting applicants. Applicants received an ordered preference if 1) their parents worked at the school; 2) their parents worked for the district; 3) their parents were military-associated; and 4) they previously attended the transfer-in school. The district initially gave principals authority to deny any student without a 3.0 or higher GPA, a passing state test score, poor attendance, or with a behavior record. However, after the first year, the School Board modified the criteria to only deny a student based on perceived poor attendance or behavior. If admitted, students must provide their own transportation, a provision that prior research suggests limits opportunity (Jimerson, 2002). Although state law prohibits schools from restricting enrollment for students in special education or English language learners (McKinney & Mead, 1996), the state of Texas and El Paso do not have any special provisions to ensure representation of students with special needs.

The open enrollment policy thus has important implications for educational equity in diverse urban districts such as EPISD.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 provides more detailed information about EPISD student demographics for the entire district and divided by Free/Reduced Lunch quintiles. Overall, EPISD is similar to other large urban districts in that almost three-fourths of students in the district qualify for free/reduced lunch and just over half qualify as “at risk,” according to Texas Education Agency measures. However, the breakdown of FRL quintiles reveals that some schools, especially in the lowest FRL quintile, are relatively advantaged. The 16 lowest poverty schools were far below the average in terms of FRL percent (39% versus 74%). they had lower

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<sup>1</sup> Students considered “at risk” in Texas are those who meet at least one of 13 criteria described in TEC §29.081. These include pregnant students, and homeless youth.

shares of minority students, and they had slightly lower percentages of special needs students. Conversely, at the highest-poverty schools, 96% of students are eligible for FRL, 83% are classified as at-risk, and 99% are minority. Moreover, 60% of students at the highest poverty schools were classified as English language learners (ELL), which was four times the proportion of ELL students at the low and low-medium poverty schools. In sum, schools are quite different in El Paso based on their socioeconomic status and these differences likely influence the public perception of potential transfers and the ability of schools and principals to attract transfers.

### **Data and Methods**

We employ an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design for this study (Creswell, 2003) in which a quantitative analysis allowed us to examine district wide trends and guided our selection of school sites for interviews. A mixed-methods approach was well suited for this study as it allowed us to analyze competition from different perspectives, focused our qualitative sample, and allowed us to understand how principal perceptions and behaviors matched transfer trends and poverty concentration.

### **Data Sources**

We first used quantitative school-level data from Texas Education Agency (TEA) for the academic years 2009-10 to 2015-16, combined with school-level transfer data provided by EPISD for the year 2014-15. TEA data include total enrollment and student demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, percent eligible for free/reduced price lunch, and percent classified ELL. EPISD data include the number of students who live within the residential boundaries of each school, but transferred to a different school and the number of students who live outside the residential boundaries of each school and transferred into the school. The EPISD data also include the number of out-of-district transfers, but not which district sent them. We define “net transfers” as

the number of students enrolled in a school through the transfer program, minus the number of students assigned to that school that successfully transferred to another school. Schools with positive net transfers gained more students through the choice policy than they lost, whereas schools with negative net transfers were net losers of students. The “net transfer rate” is the net transfers during the first year of the program divided by the school’s enrollment that year.

As shown in Figure 1, we drew on analysis of the transfer data to select a stratified purposeful sample of 12 school principals from across the school district. We wanted to capture schools that held different positions in the market hierarchy, since their particular context likely shaped their competitive strategies. The categories included: 1) *Net ‘winners,’* schools that received large shares of in-transfers while losing few students resulting in positive net transfers; 2) *Net ‘losers,’* schools that lost large shares of students via out-transfers and received few in-transfers resulting in negative net transfers; and 3) *Little movement* schools, schools that experienced few transfers in either direction.<sup>2</sup> We initially selected one elementary, middle, and high school from each of these categories and we later added a second elementary, middle, and high school from the *net-winner* category to further explore competitive practices at the most coveted schools. (See Table 2 for a description of the schools).

In the sampled schools, we conducted semi-structured interviews on site with the principals that lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed (we use pseudonyms for all school and principal names). For additional context, we also interviewed one district official, reviewed EPISD internal and external documents (e.g. school board minutes) pertaining to the choice policy as well as local media coverage of the plan.

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<sup>2</sup> We use the terms winner and loser interchangeably with high in and high out transfer schools.



## Data Analysis

To analyze our data, and to explore alignment between the qualitative and quantitative sources, we used an iterative approach. First, to answer RQ 1, on how principals behave within a competitive open enrollment environment, we analyzed qualitative interview data to understand principals' perceptions and strategies. Two independent readers analyzed the transcripts, creating inductive coding categories (e.g., perceived competitors, control over student body, marketing strategy, niche strategy). We then met to discuss and revise the codes and themes. Finally, we used the transfer categories, developed from the quantitative data, to explore differences between three groups of schools ("winners," "losers," and schools with little change), to understand how a school's position in the market hierarchy influences its competitive practices.

To answer RQ 2, which asks how principals' behavior shapes students' access to the school of their choice, we also drew on qualitative interview data to understand principals' practices around the open enrollment policy (e.g., the extent to which they used student discipline in their decisions to accept or reject transfer applicants).

For RQ 3, to understand how economic segregation across schools changed over the period during which the open enrollment policy was implemented, we analyzed the quantitative data and used the qualitative findings to explain some of the patterns we found. We used three approaches to address RQ 3. First, we examine whether high-poverty schools experienced increases in % FRL and whether that change is associated with their net loss of students (from 2013-14 to 2014-15, the years before and immediately after implementation of the choice policy). We define  $FRL_i^{low}$  and  $FRL_i^{high}$  as schools in the lowest and highest quintile of percent FRL, respectively (and use the middle three quintiles as the reference category). We use net-transfer rate to capture the extent to which a school was impacted by the choice policy – either

by gaining or losing students. We regress the change in % FRL from 2013-14 to 2014-15 on a school's net-transfer rate, high- and low-poverty indicators, and interactions between net-transfer rate and poverty indicators. In other words, we assess whether high-poverty school experienced increases in % FRL, or whether low-poverty school experienced decreases in % FRL, and whether those changes were related to the net transfer rate. We estimate the following model:

$$\Delta \%D_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 FRL_i^{low} + \alpha_2 FRL_i^{high} + \alpha_3 FRL^{low} * net\_transfer\_rate_i + \alpha_4 FRL^{high} * net\_transfer\_rate_i + X_i\gamma + \varepsilon_i \quad (1),$$

where  $X_i$  includes indicators for school grade level (elementary, middle school, high school) and  $\varepsilon_i$  is an error term. A negative  $\alpha_3$  suggests that low-poverty schools experienced greater decreases in their concentration of FRL students as the net-transfer rate increased (i.e., the most students they gained). This change may happen if non-FRL students were more likely to transfer into of low-poverty schools. Conversely, a negative  $\alpha_4$  suggests that high-poverty schools experienced greater increases in their concentration of FRL students as the net-transfer rate decreased (i.e., the more students they lost). This decrease may happen if non-FRL students were more likely to leave high-FRL schools. Either a negative  $\alpha_3$  or  $\alpha_4$  would suggest that the choice policy contributed to greater segregation by students' family income. To differentiate the types of transfers, we run the same models exchanging net-transfer rate with transfer-out rate and transfer-in rate.

Our second approach to assessing changes in segregation before and after the choice policy tracks the percent of FRL students over time in high (positive) net-transfer schools and low (negative) net-transfer schools.<sup>3</sup> This second approach shows how the percent of low-income

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<sup>3</sup> High (positive) net-transfer schools and low (negative) net-transfer schools are those that fall in the top and bottom quintiles. Schools considered "high net-transfer" had between 11% and 32% of their students enrolled through the transfer program, while those considered low net-transfer had between 32% and 10% fewer students as a result of the choice program.

students changed over time for school most impacted by the choice policy (either negatively or positively).<sup>4</sup> A third analysis divides schools into quintiles of FRL based on 2013-14 data, the year prior to implementation of the choice policy, and tracks the percent of FRL students in those schools over time. This analysis simply shows whether high-poverty schools experienced growth in poverty rates and whether low-poverty schools experienced declines in poverty rates, regardless of the extent to which these schools were impacted by the choice policy.

## Results

### Students on the Move

Families are taking advantage of open enrollment policies across the district in El Paso, but clear winners and losers exist in this market. Secondary schools, and especially high schools, appear to be the most high-stakes in terms of competition, which makes sense given the greater specialization of secondary schools as well as the ability of many older students to get to school independently. Figure 2, Panel A (left) shows the number of students who transferred in (on the x-axis) and out (on the y-axis) across schools. Many schools had a greater number of students who live within the school's residential boundaries transfer to another school than the number of students who transferred into a school, or a net loss. These schools are denoted with a triangle in Panel A of Figure 2. Conversely, schools represented with a circle accepted far more students than they lost through the choice program, a net gain. Some schools saw no substantial change in enrollment as a result of the choice policy either because they had few students transferring in or out; or because they had large shares of students both transferring in *and* out resulting in a low-net transfer rate. These schools are represented with an X in Panel A of Figure 2. Figure Panel B demonstrates that the variance of net-transfer rates tends to be larger in middle and high schools.

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<sup>4</sup> Specifically, we regress the percent of students eligible for FRL on indicators for whether the school is in the highest or lowest net-transfer quintiles and interacted these two dummy variables with a vector of year dummy variables.

For example, most elementary schools experienced between -10% and 10% net transfer rate, with some outliers. In contrast, 7 of 10 high schools gained or lost about 20% of their students through transfers. Together, these figures demonstrate that students in EPISD widely use open enrollment while certain schools are far more active players in the market place.

As expected, the market hierarchy also maps onto the socioeconomic status of schools (see Table 3). Although the lowest poverty schools seem to be the most desirable transfer destinations, the pattern for other categories is less clear. We report the transfer data as: (a) the total number of students transferring into schools and the percent of enrolled students who transferred in from another school (the “transfer-in rate”); (b) the number of students transferring out of a school and the number of transfer-out students divided by the number of currently enrolled students (the “transfer-out rate”); and (c) the total net transfers, which is the difference in the number of students who transfer in and transfer out. The “net transfer rate” is the net transfers divided by the number of enrolled students. The rate of transfers in to schools is decreasing with the percent of low-income students. However, there is not a linear relationship between net transfer rate and poverty quintile with the highest out-transfer rates coming from the second highest and second lowest FRL quintiles.

The extent to which schools experience net gains or net losses or even little change is likely to influence the ways in which their leaders perceive and respond to the competition created by open enrollment policy. To unpack these difference, we sampled schools based on these transfer patterns. Specifically, we sampled six schools with high rates of ‘in-transfer,’ and positive net transfer rates; three schools with high ‘out-transfer,’ or net losses in students through the transfer program; and three schools with little change in terms of in or out transfers.

We first wanted to explore the extent to which these categories aligned with how school

leaders perceived enrollment changes. For example, schools may lose student via transfer, but principals may be differentially attentive to or aware of these changes. We noted that there was strong alignment between the transfer category to which the school was assigned and their perceptions of how open enrollment had impacted their enrollment. With one exception, school leaders' perceptions of their enrollment patterns were in line with the categories we ascribed. For example, all high "in-transfer" schools perceived that they were "at capacity," or had "steady enrollment" or growth in student enrollment. One high in-transfer school noted that they had seen growth, but were not yet at capacity. Similarly, all of the high "out-transfer" schools noted a decline in student enrollment that was in line with their net losses. For example, the school with the greatest net loss noted that they were "way below" capacity, and the school with the smallest change in this category noted, "some decline." This suggests that school leaders were attentive to transfers and were aware of their relative positions in the market. Next, we describe how these transfer rates influenced school leaders' behaviors and experiences.

### **School Context Influences Experiences of Competition**

As a central office staff member noted, the purpose of open enrollment was "to increase the friendly competition among our schools...that sense of urgency where we do need to be better than the guy down the street because...we want to attract students." As she noted, the hope was that this policy would "get rid of complacency in our schools." Principals in EPISD did view competition as an important part of their job, though focus on competition was varied based on school context. Despite the prevalence of competition in general, some schools were shielded from these pressures due to their market position and current enrollment. For example many schools with high rates of in-transfers did not perceive as much competition. The principal at Dewey MS, a high in-transfer school, for example, noted that while competition was "out there,"

it wasn't a concern for his school. Similarly, leaders at both Kennedy and San Marcos High School noted that they were at or above capacity, and generally felt little competition with other schools. As the principal at Kennedy HS noted, they had over 100 students on their waitlist as a result of open enrollment, so there was little pressure to compete for students with nearby schools—many of which were struggling academically. Another school that was “winning” under the open enrollment system noted that no other school “has the volume of transfers that we have here. Not even close.” The school “attracts kids from all over the city,” taking several hundred transfers.

On the other hand, school leaders at high out-transfer schools (“losers” under the open enrollment policy) and some high-in transfer schools perceived fiercer competition. As one leader said, “We are fighting for each student” (Haskins HS). Likewise, the principal at Mesa Verde, a relatively high-achieving middle school explained, “the level of competition is getting higher. We are all vying for well-rounded students.” The principal at another school similarly noted that they were losing students, and took to marketing the school, visiting feeder schools, and working to “do something that other schools weren't doing” (Principal, Artis MS). The elementary school leader of the school with high out transfers, however, while noting a loss of over 150 students, sensed that it was a short-term issue. In this way, schools' enrollment categories were related to and influenced by their perceptions of competition.

### **School Leaders Develop Strategies to Compete**

Based on their position in the market, as winners or losers, schools varied in their behavioral responses and strategies when faced with competition. In particular, we identified three major strategic responses: developing a specialized academic program/market niche, marketing/ recruitment of students, and selecting or screening students. We discuss each of these

below, and describe how these varied by schools' position in the market place (See Table 4).

### **Establishing or Protecting a Market Niche**

The principals in our study either believed that their school occupied a pre-existing market niche or were working to establish one. Some of these market niches included magnet programs, sports teams, and a unique school culture. The schools that were “winners,” or in a privileged position in the market due to high parent demand, had more established specialized programs and were tasked with maintaining that privileged position. In the case of one popular elementary school, Crocket ES, the long-serving principal of the school felt that the school already had a strong market position with their extremely affluent neighborhood as well as their well-established Spanish dual language and magnet programs. Crocket ES recently added Mandarin instruction. Although the principal at Crocket claimed this addition had nothing to do with competitive pressure, the Mandarin program certainly helped the school maintain market share amongst higher-SES families in the area, and differentiate themselves from the other dual language programs. Other “winners,” including Kennedy HS, San Marcos HS, and Mesa Verde MS, also promoted or relied on their specialized or magnet programs to maintain their student enrollment and reputation. Some of these “winners” were concerned about the future of competition in the city as a result of the rise in specialty programs. As one leader noted, “Competition is stiff. When we opened, there was no STEM program...It used to be that we were the only game in town. We’re not that way anymore...Everyone wants those kids and, unfortunately, it is a business. And everyone has got a magnet [program] now” (San Marcos HS). Therefore, even schools that were among the “winners” in the system, at the top of the market hierarchy, framed competition in terms of specialized programs, and feared they may lose their market position as other schools expanded or adopted such programs.

While some magnet programs existed prior to open enrollment, particularly many of those at the “winner” schools, others had been recently added to coincide with the expansion of open enrollment. For example, while all high schools we studied had magnet programs, many of the middle schools were following suit in establishing specialty programs. Schools that were losing students were especially pursuing this strategy to stabilize or increase enrollment. For Haskins HS, a lower-achieving high school in a lower-SES neighborhood, the principal realized he would have a hard time competing with some of the more successful high schools so he pushed a criminal justice magnet designed to attract “the tactile student” to help stave off a declining enrollment. The principal at Alvarado HS described how he did a “market analysis” to understand why many of his neighborhood students were leaving as well as how to identify an in-demand niche capable of attracting in-transfers. He ultimately concluded that an early college high school program would help retain and attract students. In another case, a principal at a lower-SES middle school, located near several more advantaged middle schools, had spent years setting up an International Baccalaureate (IB) program (Artis MS). However, the principal at Artis MS acknowledged that the school was still struggling to retain and attract students so his goal was to get them in the door for a tour in order to break down preconceptions. While principals at high out-transfer schools adopted niche strategies, they also noted that in a few years, competition might become even stiffer. As the principal of one high school that was losing students said, “I can only imagine [that in] two, three, five years...it’s gonna get more difficult for public high schools to compete with all the specialty schools” (Principal, Haskin HS).

### **Marketing and Promoting the School**

While all schools engaged in some form of marketing and recruitment activities, the schools with high rates of out-transfers felt greater pressure to recruit students. At Artis MS, for



example, a school that had lost a large population of students in the past year, the principal said that he was reaching out to feeder schools and pointing out the limitations of the open enrollment policy for low-income parents without transportation:

I take the time to go and introduce myself, to introduce the programs that we have here within my school so parents know. Why are you gonna drive your child over to [other school] if you can have him here at Artis? Why are you gonna go all the way to [other school]? Parents need to understand, if you transfer you don't get any transportation.

Those are the kind of things that you tell them. "You belong to Artis, just go to Artis. We will bring your child to our school and we will take your child back to your house.

Similarly, other schools struggled with public relations due to their reputation. Another high out-transfer school leader noted that "negative publicity" had hurt them, and he had to work "one-on-one" with parents to "get them to know who we are" (Principal, Haskins HS). Similarly, at O'Conner ES, the principal talked to parents who were considering leaving, one on one, to convince them to stay.

Schools that had high rates of in-transfers also engaged in recruitment and marketing, but felt less immediate pressure to do so, and were also able to engage in more proactive strategies and leverage existing networks. For example, one successful high school leader (Dewey HS) said, "Competition is huge. I'm trying to figure out, how do I advertise publicly? How do I get our name out even further? Do it by TV, billboard, by just going by the new homes that are being built?" Another school noted that their strong reputation meant that they did not have to recruit as heavily: "With our magnet and I guess our reputation, we get kids from everywhere.

Everywhere" (Principal, San Marcos HS). Chavez Elementary, another high in-transfer school,

had strong networks and partnerships with the military<sup>5</sup>, and used those relationships to help promote the school through word-of-mouth. Many schools thus engaged in some kind of marketing strategy, but schools that were losing most students through open enrollment were most pressured to do so.

### **Screening and Selecting Students**

Most of the schools used both formal and informal ways to screen and select students, but the “winner” schools tended to use these strategies more since they could afford to lose students. “Winner” schools reported using discipline, attendance, and capacity constraints to screen out students frequently, while schools that were “losing” in open enrollment were often unable to do so. Schools at capacity were more able to select and control their student body, since they could turn away students. They could easily reject applicants due to capacity constraints, although “capacity” was a fluid term, without a clear definition. They also often sent students back or rejected students because of discipline or attendance. As the principal of one school said, they “absolutely” rejected applicants on those grounds, and admitted that it was somewhat subjective. Another high in-transfer school rejected parents to encourage them to appeal and sit down with the leader first, an informal way of screening students. One school believed that parents had too much power, and wanted to be able to consider more than just attendance and behavior, but also grades:

But yeah we want to bring all those [high performing] kids in. Absolutely. Cause what’s the end result set by the state of Texas? STAAR scores. And we worry about that stuff.

Yes. We look for kids to grow, but in the end, what are schools judged by? TEA. By the districts. The STAAR scores...When you’re filling your basket with kids that you know are going to do well, it helps you out. That’s competition like a professional team. You’re

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<sup>5</sup> El Paso has a large military population due to the presence of the Fort Bliss Army Base.

not just gonna pick some schmoe, draft some schmoe off the bench. You're going out for the best and that's competition and we're very competitive.

Therefore, while this high in-transfer, or winner, school felt competition, it was a qualitatively different form of competition—competing for the best, rather than simply competing for students to fill seats.

Schools with high out-transfers needed to accept students to maintain enrollments, but sometimes engaged in similar formal and informal strategies to shape their student bodies. For example, the principal at O'Connor ES said that their school never turned anyone down, but they might try to contact the parents first if they had concerns with the students' record. Other informal ways of shaping enrollment even when the school was not at capacity was by encouraging parents to stick with their home, or assigned, school due to transportation challenges, as the principal of Rio Grande, a school with little movement noted. The Rio Grande principal could not reject the student since they met the transfer criteria and the school was way under capacity, but the principal encouraged them to withdrawal after observing attendance issues related to the lengthy commute. Artis, a high out-transfer school, even accepted students with discipline issues because the school needed to increase enrollment. As the principal stated, "I cannot *not* take anybody." One high out-transfer school still rejected students based on discipline, suggesting that the leader was willing to remain under-enrolled to avoid serving more potentially challenging students.

Although the district no longer officially allows academic qualifications to be considered in a transfer request, some principals spoke openly about screening students. Principals suggested that although the academic criteria could not be formally used anymore, they did have *access* to it for within district transfers and it is possible such information influenced decisions

on students with borderline attendance or discipline issues. One principal complained that they did not necessarily have access to information from out-of-district transfers, but there was pressure to accept them in order to get the district enrollment up. The principals at higher-achieving, high-demand schools said they often rejected within district applicants based on arbitrary attendance or discipline grounds. However, rejected students could appeal and request an in-person meeting at which time, the principal met with a parent or guardian and reviewed their academic and discipline record. Although principals indicated that they were usually willing to give the student a chance if they went through this process, these were ways that principals could weed out more challenging students if the parents were unable or unmotivated to challenge the rejection. In interviewing a district official, the district was aware that the current attendance and discipline criteria was too vague and they were working on providing more formal guidance on what constituted grounds for a rejection. A district official acknowledged, “principals have very mixed feelings” about these guidelines because they feel “Why am I taking that problem child from somewhere else?” However, she felt that with some district guidance, schools would understand that most transfer students would not pose problems for the school. However, even with changing guidelines, principals would still be able to view academic information and use this information informally in their evaluation of transfers who did not meet the attendance or discipline thresholds.

### **Does Open Enrollment Lead to Increased Concentration of Poverty?**

Although our qualitative findings and policy analysis raised concerns that open enrollment in EPISD would lead to increased poverty concentration, our quantitative analysis shows mixed results for this scenario (see Table 4 and Figure 3). In Table 5, we report regression coefficients based on equation 1, which show the extent to which transfer rates contributed to

changes in the concentration of disadvantaged students, for schools already at the highest- and lowest quintiles of student disadvantage. The first row in Model 1 shows that, holding constant the net-transfer rate, schools in the highest-poverty quintile experienced decreases in their percent of FRL students in the first year of the choice policy implementation (relative to the last year before implementation). Net transfer rates were not associated with changes in percent of FRL students from before to after the choice policy was implemented, after taking into account whether the school was already in the highest or lowest quintile of FRL. However, as shown in Model 2, low-poverty schools experienced declines in their percent of FRL students as the net-transfer rate increased. In other words, the low-poverty schools most impacted by the choice policy (those with the highest / most positive net transfer rates), saw decreases in their percent of FRL students, suggesting that students transferring into low-poverty schools were more likely to be non-FRL.

In models 3 - 6, when we replace net-transfer rate with the percent of students transferring out (models 3 and 4) and transferring in (models 5 and 6), we see that the relationship between net-transfer rates and changes in percent FRL for low-poverty schools is driven by more students transferring into low-poverty schools (based on the negative and marginally significant coefficient for the interaction between low-poverty schools and transfer-in rate of -0.22). Thus, low-poverty schools experienced decreases in their percent of FRL students most likely because of non-FRL students transferring in (rather than FRL students transferring out). The relationship between transfer rates and changes in the percent of FRL students was not significantly different for high-poverty schools (compared to those in the middle three poverty quintiles).

Figure 3 shows two other approaches to assessing the choice policy's influence on

student segregation. In Panel A, we plot the percent of students eligible for FRL each year for schools that fell in the highest, middle three, and lowest quintiles of the net transfer rate. Panel B shows how % FRL changed over time for high- and low-poverty schools. In each case, schools that would ultimately be high transfer schools had stable percent FRL leading up to the choice policy implementation. Following implementation of the choice policy, schools with the highest transfer rates did not experience substantial changes, on average, in their percent of FRL students. These graphs show that the schools with the highest concentrations of low-income students did not experience increases in the percent of low-income students, whereas schools with the lowest concentrations of low-income students did not experience significant decreases in the percent of low-income students. In other words, implementation of the choice policy did not appear to substantially alter the degree of student segregation in the district.

### **Explanations for Segregation or Lack Thereof**

The quantitative analysis reveals that the lowest poverty schools were indeed receiving slightly more non-FRL students, but increases in poverty concentration were lower than expected given the principals' descriptions of intense competition, screening practices (many of which were allowed under the district policy), and the lack of equity provisions regulating the policy. Although we caution that this plan is still in its infancy and greater hurdles may lay ahead, there seem to be several current conditions preventing more widespread segregation. Despite our initial concerns, rejections for students seem to be extremely rare *at this point in time*. Given the district's recent cheating scandal, the Board "did not want principals to be gatekeepers of, you know, we only take high [performing] students here." This perhaps led them to modify the original plan to eliminate grades and test scores as criteria for accepting transfer applicants. While we found evidence that principals at successful schools were screening and rejecting

students, there was ultimately pressure from the district to accept students who went through the appeal process.

Although the district packaged the open enrollment plan as something completely new, several EPISD schools already had long-standing magnet programs that attracted out-of-neighborhood students. For instance, the principal at Crockett Elementary, a school with very high rates of in-transfers, expressed indifference to open enrollment, pointing to her school's long-standing magnet program and strong reputation. This reputation had made Crockett a prime destination for children of district employees and other professionals for over a decade. Conversely, the principal at Alvarado HS, a school with little movement, described open enrollment as an equalizer:

[Open-enrollment] leveled the playing field because I can go to your backyard and recruit your kids. And you can do that to my kids. That is fine, as long as there is a leveled playing field and we all have something to offer. Then, I am okay with competition, but four years ago, when we were not in the game, it was really difficult to say 'OK, you have an advantage and I don't, but I am held to same standards and I am pushing for the same kids. But yet, you can legally take my kids...

As these newer magnet and specialized programs take root, parents may become more aware of options and enrollment/transfer patterns will likely stabilize. As this occurs, concerns persist regarding whether poor and special needs students will be concentrated in certain schools.

Transportation and geography created additional challenges and most principals felt they were primarily competing for students in nearby neighborhoods, often with similar socio-economic status. EPISD has a unique geographic layout straddling the Mexican border with Ciudad Juarez and the Franklin Mountains dividing the city into a Y-like configuration with

various other districts surrounding El Paso. Notably, these surrounding districts allowed EPISD students to transfer into their schools. With a mountain range dividing the city (there is one winding road connecting the West Side and Northeast) and limited busing options, principals typically perceived their main competition to consist of their immediate neighbor schools. The principal at Rio Grande Elementary, near the entry point to Mexico, did not view her school as being involved in the competitive environment so she was not concerned with losing the few non-FRL students at her school. The proximity to the bridge meant she could only draw in students from one direction. It also meant that her students were recent immigrants or possibly international commuters who, she noted, were “without the means” to navigate the open enrollment process and transport themselves across the district.

Although our quantitative analysis indicates that the distribution of FRL students has remained relatively stable across the board, the plan is not breaking up the existing concentrations of poverty either. Moreover, increased economic segregation could potentially occur more as the plan matures with successful schools hitting capacity and principals feeling more freedom to screen students. Notably, principals at some of the more successful schools noted with surprise that more private school students and out-of-district students had enrolled than any previous year during their tenure. For instance, the principal at Dewey MS observed, “Eight kids want to transfer from the parochial schools [this year]... We’ve never had that. I’ve had a couple here and there, but not like that.” Such trends demonstrate success for the district in attracting private school and out-of-district students and it carries potential for creating more economically diverse schools in a district with high-poverty rates, overall. However, since the current plan privileges out-of-district transfers, this trend also raises concerns that more disadvantaged students will not be able to secure seats at the more popular schools. As one



school with a high in-transfer rate, noted “the demographics have changed.” As the principal said, “We don’t have as many low-income [students].” Therefore, some of these patterns of stratification may exist, but be confined to particular schools.

### **Discussion**

Our research illuminates the challenges and concerns for open enrollment policies as they relate to school leadership and equity. Previous studies of school choice tend to focus on regulated open enrollment programs, charter schools, or vouchers. Moreover, very few studies address the role of school principals in a competitive open enrollment environment. Our study uses both quantitative and qualitative data to better understand how these competitive processes influence the economic segregation/integration of students as well as how principals may or may not play a role in shaping student access to their schools.

It is clear that EPISD principals – especially secondary principals – have changed their behavior and are actively seeking out competitive edges. However, consistent with research on principal behavior at charter schools (Author, 2016, Ladd & Fiske, 2001), principals in EPISD operate in an existing market hierarchy based on factors such as geography and resources. Further, this hierarchy is probably far more rigid in a district-run market given that most schools are several decades old with defined reputations. Thus, principals at the more advantaged, often higher-achieving schools are best situated to target their marketing towards higher achieving students as well as to screen applicants. Conversely, principals at relatively disadvantaged schools located near higher-SES schools had to work strategically to retain their neighborhood students and these principals did not usually have the luxury of screening out students with discipline or attendance issues. Finally, some principals at the lowest-SES schools felt affected by declining enrollment, but they did not feel their students—many of them immigrants—were

taking part in the open enrollment program. These findings are consistent with another study of segregation in Texas, which suggests non-native English speakers are less likely to participate in open enrollment due to language and transportation barriers (Vasquez Heilig & Holme, 2013). EPISD is an especially unique context since it draws in students who may sleep in Juarez several nights a week, thus complicating additional transportation needs within the district. Moreover, the current political climate around undocumented immigrants adds an extra layer of obstacles for border schools and districts trying to project enrollments.. School leaders operating open enrollment plans on national, state, or even district borders must be aware of these realities and challenges. So while pure market rationale would assume students at these more disadvantaged, low-performing schools would be the most likely to seek better schooling options, our analysis complicates this purely market-oriented approach to school choice.

Although the EPISD policy does not seem to completely concentrate poor students, we do observe that many economically disadvantaged schools are losing students while gaining few students and our interviews indicate that principals at high-demand schools utilize strategies to steer away more “challenging students.” Fortunately, the district seems to be aware of these equity concerns and has modified their transfer criteria and generally support rejected students in their appeal hearings. Still, the open enrollment process could have a long-term impact on the lower-SES schools in terms of segregation, forcing such schools to take on special education programs in order to maintain enrollments, and even resulting in the closure of neighborhood schools. Although this latter scenario may be in line with the market rationale, the closure of neighborhood schools puts a transportation burden on some parents and removes an important community institution. So far, only one school has closed since the open enrollment began, but the situation is worth monitoring if enrollments decline.

This study has implications for other district leaders considering open enrollment as well as for school principals. Although our study does not measure the effectiveness of the open enrollment plan, the number of high school students increased under the plan after years of decline and several of the principals reported more students coming in from private and out-of-district schools. The plan demonstrates some proactivity from the district as they compete with neighboring districts and they ready for the entry of the large charter management organization, IDEA, into the area. Although, surprisingly, few principals complained about the extra work associated with open enrollment, most pointed out that they worked extremely long hours. Districts need to provide resources and training for principals –especially new principals- for how to effectively market their school and principals should pursue a collaborative approach for outreach and processing of transfers. One veteran principal at a “winner” school touted his advantage over brand new principals learning how to compete for students. In general, many principals felt they deserved more latitude in picking transfer students, but past research on unregulated choice plans demonstrates that having specific guidelines and regulations will promote more access while preventing segregation. Moreover, these concerns are magnified and complicated in border towns such as El Paso given the high number of immigrants.

Our study utilized mixed methods to examine how principals operated in a competitive open enrollment environment and to see if open enrollment helped or hindered goals of access and diversity. Despite the scope of this study, it also had key limitations. Foremost, we did not interview parents to better understand their perspective for navigating the open enrollment process and to see if their perceptions of access matched those of the principals. We also only visited each school once. Future research could focus in on a few cases based on our categories and spend more time observing outreach activities and meetings throughout the year. However,

the goal of our study was to provide several different principal perspectives and data points of open enrollment during the early stages of its implementation.

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FIGURE 1

*Explanatory sequential mixed-methods design*

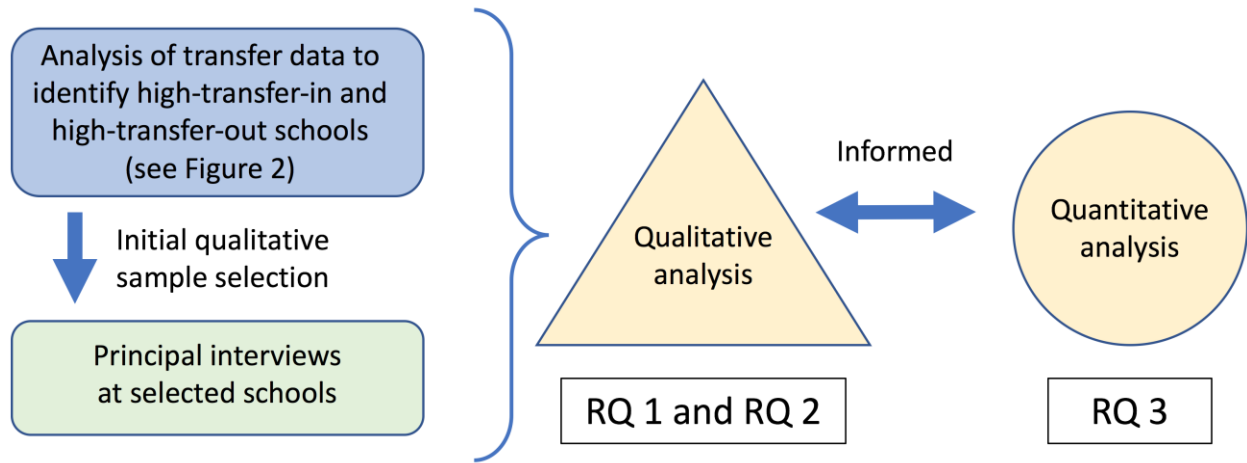
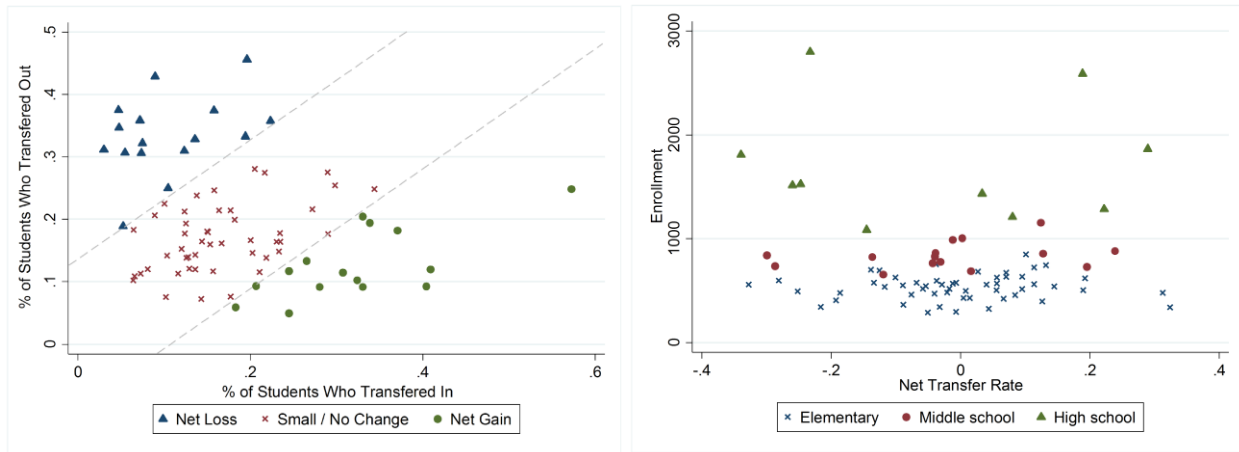


FIGURE 2

*Transfer rates across schools in the El Paso Independent School District, 2014-15*

A. % of students who transfer in and out of schools B. Net transfers by school level

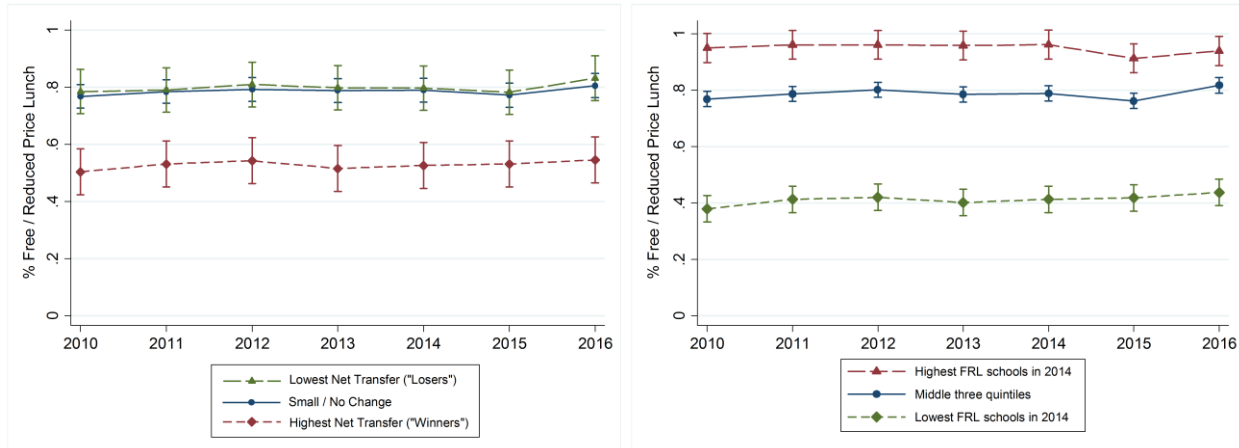


*Note.* Net transfers are the difference between the number of students who transfer in and the number of students who transfer out.

FIGURE 3

*Changes in school-level student demographics before and after implementation*

A. % FRL for high- and low net-transfer schools    B. % FRL for schools in the highest and lowest quintile of %FRL in 2013-14 (the year prior to policy implementation)



*Note.* The choice policy became effective in school year 2014-15 (labeled 2015). High- and low-net transfer schools are those in the top and bottom quintiles of net transfer rate within school level. FRL stands for free/reduced price lunch.

TABLE 1

*Summary statistics by FRL quintile, 2014-15*

	Total	Low Poverty	Low-Med Poverty	Medium Poverty	High-Med Poverty	High Poverty
Elementary schools	53	11	11	10	11	10
Middle schools	15	3	3	3	3	3
High schools	10	2	2	2	2	2
Total	78	16	16	15	16	15
<i>Student demographics</i>						
Average enrollment	741	924	783	670	686	632
% FRL	74%	39%	67%	79%	89%	96%
% At Risk	62%	43%	55%	60%	67%	83%
% ELL	29%	16%	15%	24%	33%	60%
% SPED	10%	8%	12%	12%	10%	10%
% Hispanic	83%	69%	75%	83%	90%	98%
% Black	4%	5%	7%	5%	3%	0%
% White	10%	20%	15%	9%	5%	1%

Sources: Demographic data from Texas Education Association

TABLE 2

*Qualitative Sample*

School	Category	% FRL	% ELL
Mesa Verde MS	Winner/High-In	50%	10%
San Marcos HS	Winner/High-In	50%	10%
Crocket EL	Winner/High-In	50%	30%
Kennedy HS	Winner/High-In	40%	10%
Dewey MS	Winner/High-In	80%	20%
Chavez EL	Winner/High-In	50%	20%
Haskins HS	Loser/High-Out	70%	20%
O'Connor EL	Loser/High-Out*	80%	30%
Artis MS	Loser/High-Out	80%	20%
Rio Grande EL	Little Movement	90%	80%
Worsley MS	Little Movement	100%	20%
Alvarado HS	Little Movement	70%	10%

\*O'Connor also had a high in-transfer rate, but further investigation revealed this was a function of a specialized program for students with disabilities.

Note: All numbers rounded to nearest 10 to preserve anonymity of participants.

TABLE 3

*Transfer Rates by FRL quintile, 2014-15*

	Total	Low Poverty	Low-Med Poverty	Medium Poverty	High-Med Poverty	High Poverty
<i>Student transfers</i>						
Students who transferred into the school	132.3	190.6	165.9	133.7	89.1	79.0
Percent of enrolled students who transferred in	18.25%	23.25%	21.26%	20.24%	13.49%	12.79%
Students who transferred out of the school	145.2	140.9	175.8	110.2	187.8	106.7
Percent of enrolled students who transferred out	19.50%	14.30%	22.06%	17.73%	25.21%	17.98%
Net transfers	-12.9	49.6	-9.9	23.5	-98.7	-27.7
Net transfer rate	-1.25%	8.95%	-0.80%	2.51%	-11.71%	-5.19%

Sources: Transfer data from El Paso ISD; FRL data from TEA.

TABLE 4

*Perceptions and Strategies of School Leaders*

<b>School Category</b>	<b>Perceptions of Competition</b>	<b>Behaviors and Strategies</b>
High Out-Transfer	Strong awareness of competitors and decline in student enrollment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Marketing and recruitment</li> <li>· Beginning to adopt specialized programs</li> <li>· Few can select students</li> </ul>
Little Movement	Mixed. Some report a little competition in entry grades, but others note parents have few other options due to language barriers and geographic constraints.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Lack of strategy at one school</li> <li>· Some marketing</li> <li>· Some adoption of specialized programs</li> <li>· Some selection, often in informal ways</li> </ul>
High In-Transfer	A little competition, but all in privileged position in market (e.g., high parent demand), benefitted from open enrollment policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Marketing, recruitment (proactive, use networks)</li> <li>· Specialized programs</li> <li>· Strong selection on discipline, attendance, capacity</li> </ul>

TABLE 5

*Regression coefficients predicting the change in the proportion of students eligible for FRL, from 2013-14 to 2014-15*

	Net-transfer Rate		Transfer-out Rate		Transfer-in Rate	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
High-poverty schools (highest quintile %FRL)	-0.033*	-0.038**	-0.034**	-0.065*	-0.032*	-0.012
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.031)	(0.013)	(0.029)
Low-poverty schools (lowest quintile %FRL)	0.008	0.020	0.007	-0.018	0.011	0.059+
	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.014)	(0.031)	(0.014)	(0.030)
Net transfer rate	0.014	0.073				
	(0.039)	(0.047)				
Percent of student who transferred out			-0.048	-0.103		
			(0.062)	(0.076)		
Percent of student who transferred in					-0.012	0.087
					(0.059)	(0.081)
<i>Interactions</i>						
High-poverty school X net transfer rate		-0.13				
		(0.116)				
Low-poverty school X net transfer rate		-0.201*				
		(0.097)				
High-poverty school X transfer-out rate				0.166		
				(0.150)		
Low-poverty school X transfer-out rate				0.138		
				(0.173)		
High-poverty school X transfer-in rate						-0.116
						(0.176)
Low-poverty school X transfer-in rate						-0.224+
						(0.123)
<i>School level</i>						
Middle school	-0.008	-0.005	-0.011	-0.009	-0.01	-0.006
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)
High school	-0.048**	-0.044**	-0.047**	-0.044**	-0.049**	-0.047**
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.016)	(0.016)
Constant	0.008	0.009	0.018	0.029	0.010	-0.009
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.016)	(0.019)	(0.014)	(0.017)
N	78	78	80	80	79	79
R-squared	0.181	0.233	0.185	0.202	0.177	0.214

\*\*\* p<.001; \*\*p<.01; \*p<.05