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On Becoming a District of Choice: Implications for Equity Along the United States–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 adds to our understanding of 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 Method: This study uses an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach. We first analyze school-level transfer data for school year 2014–2015 and demographic data in order to examine trends such as poverty concentration as well as to identify "winners," "losers," and "nonplayers" in the open enrollment marketplace. Since principals are heavily involved in recruitment, student screening, and selection of specialized programs, 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 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 segregation in the district. District oversight seems to have prevented worsening segregation. However, many principals seek more control on the screening process raising equity concerns if formal regulations are not provided.

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 maintaining equity.

Keywords

open enrollment; school choice; educational leadership; segregation; equity; educational policy

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To expand educational options for families, 46 states and the District of Columbia offer some form of either voluntary or mandatory open enrollment policy (Education Commission of the States [ECS], 2016). Open enrollment occurs when students are able to choose a public school outside their neighborhood or school zone (ECS, 2016). Such policies can be either intradistrict, where students can transfer within their home district, or interdistrict, where students can transfer across district boundaries. School districts use these open enrollment options for a variety of reasons including desegregation across schools (Holme & Finnigan, 2013), avoiding lengthy transits to in-district schools (ECS, 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).

Public school choice, including open enrollment, is on the rise nation-wide. Recent estimates indicate that 13% of public school students attend a school chosen by their parents, rather than their assigned public school (Education Commission of the States, 2016). Yet states and districts vary immensely in their design and regulation of these open enrollment plans.[1] Most programs are largely unregulated, allowing district and 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) (Fuller, 2014; Schafft et al., 2014; Welner, 2013). 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 (e.g., visiting feeder schools; public relations), serve as gatekeepers for admissions, and make curricular decisions capable of attracting new students (Jabbar, 2015). Yet much of the current research on competition and school leadership focuses on other choice programs, such as charter schools (Jabbar, 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, 2016, in New York; Holme, Carkhum, & Rangel, 2013, in Texas). Therefore, more research on school leaders in open enrollment contexts is needed given the prevalence of it in the United States and the paramount role of principals in this process.

[1]The wide array of policies, laws, and practices make it difficult to determine exactly how many districts actually allow open enrollment, even in states with mandatory intradistrict transfers (Smith, 2014).

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). 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 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 ("EPISD See Increase," 2015). However, the plan is unregulated in that there are no formal mechanisms aimed at economic or racial desegregation and no safeguards to ensure access for English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities. Furthermore, the proximity of El Paso to Ciudad Juárez in Mexico means some of the district's students cross the border weekly and even daily. The presence of border crossers (including U.S. citizens, permanent residents, visa holders, and undocumented children) adds a layer of complexity from the perspective of districts and principals given the role of social class, language, and citizenship as they relate to leadership and parental access to choice (Crawford, 2017; Yettick, Love, & Anderson, 2008). Although EPISD is a unique context in some ways, understanding how the process of open enrollment plays out in a large, diverse district such as EPISD sheds 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. At the same time, examination of an unregulated open enrollment policy in a large metropolitan border region provides a unique opportunity to consider implications for socioeconomic segregation and equity in a context with a large population of both middle-class families and families experiencing extreme poverty.

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 and actively shapes student access to the school of their choice. To examine this process, we first analyzed school-level transfer data for the 2014–2015 school year and demographic data for the school years leading up to and immediately after the implementation of the open enrollment policy. We followed the demographic analysis with a stratified purposeful sample of interviews with principals as well as descriptive and inferential statistics to examine the relationship between implementation of the choice policy and changes in student segregation by income and race/ethnicity. Finally, we use the qualitative data to understand principals' perceptions and behaviors to offer explanations for the patterns observed in the quantitative data. The in-depth focus on a single site allowed us to use multiple methods and data sources to, among other things, examine the degree that enrollment shifts reflect the perception of school leaders.

We find that, in the first year of open enrollment, almost 25% of students attending EPISD schools enrolled in a school other than their neighborhood school, and principals have responded 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. By attracting large numbers of transfer students, without losing many students,

"winners" can maintain or increase their staff and budget as well as improve their reputation in both academics and extracurricular activities. Conversely, market "losers"—those schools that experienced large numbers of out-transfers and a small number of in-transfers—often struggled to overcome negative perceptions of their school and find a market niche to attract students. In these schools, the loss of students can lead to the loss of staff and resources and the closing of the school. Despite our concerns that the lack of regulations in the open enrollment system could result in increased racial segregation and poverty concentration, our quantitative analysis indicates a relatively small relationship between open enrollment and segregation in the district. Still, 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.

Open Enrollment, Leadership, and Equity

To understand the relationship between leadership, open enrollment, and equity, we draw on literature from economics, sociology, and educational leadership. We first review literature examining whether school choice can be a means for equity and desegregation. We focus on racial and economic segregation as an important component of equity given the way it adversely affects resources and educational opportunity (Mickelson & Nkoma, 2012). Furthermore, school choice theoretically decouples school enrollment from housing segregation, which is a primary driver of school segregation (Kotok, Frankenberg, Schafft, Mann, & Fuller, 2017). Next, we consider the role of school leaders in school choice settings, highlighting the lack of research on principals in district-run open enrollment environments. Following our discussion of the role of principals in school choice, we elaborate a theoretical framework situating principal behavior in an existing market hierarchy.

Choice and the Role of Regulation

There is significant variation in school-choice policies, particularly, in terms of how they are regulated, with implications for equity. Research analyzing the policy conditions under which choice actually leads to equity, particularly in terms of desegregation, makes a clear distinction between *unregulated* choice policies, those often advanced by market advocates, and more *regulated* choice policies designed carefully to ensure equity (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2012).

Advocates of a more unregulated, market-driven model of choice assume 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 and charter schools. Some market advocates also claim choice promotes equity through increased access and as a means for breaking down segregated housing patterns as zip codes become less tied to school attendance. Advocates often assume that

parents have equal ability and eligibility to act on choice policies. Therefore, parents of low-achieving students, or those with the greatest disadvantage, can choose to enroll in more advantaged schools or schools that better address their students' needs, thereby decreasing segregation (Howell & Peterson, 2002). Theoretically, competitive forces will push the schools and principals to be more competitive through innovation, efficiency, and effectiveness (Holme et al., 2013; Lubienski, 2005), a theoretical outcome that lacks robust empirical support (Belfield & Levin, 2002; Lubienski, 2003; Ni & Arsen, 2010). Too many restrictions or regulations will, advocates argue, prevent school choice markets from operating effectively. Critics of these market-based models point out that rational choices are often constrained by access to information (Bell, 2009), geography and transportation (André-Bechely, 2005), school capacity (Holme et al., 2013), targeted marketing (Jabbar, 2016), and cream skimming (Fuller, 2014).

Long before the proliferation of charter schools and vouchers in the 1990s, school districts had and continue to have their own quasi markets including magnet schools, intradistrict transfer programs, and interdistrict transfer programs between two or more districts. Typically, district-directed choice programs come with greater regulation and more explicit equity goals than charter school and voucher policies, but they still vary immensely in terms of regulation. For instance, magnet schools—long used in both interdistrict and intradistrict plans—differ greatly in their level of regulation, strategy, and enrollment procedures. During the 1970s, magnets acted primarily as a means for racial integration by attracting White students from the suburbs and private schools (Grooms & Williams, 2015). However, with the end of most court ordered desegregation plans, only some magnet schools continue to promote desegregation while most emphasize choice for parents (Goldring & Smrekar, 2002). In some cases where magnets exist within a school, they make the overall school population seem diverse despite stark within-school segregation (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2012). Today, some magnet schools use selective admissions, but most operate similar to charter schools, using lotteries or open applications (Bifulco, Cobb, & Bell, 2009).

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 use 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 study, are not collaborative or implemented with explicit goals of desegregation. According to Holme and Richards (2009), states promote interdistrict plans to expand choice while encouraging district competition through effectiveness and innovation. However, in their study of an interdistrict transfer program in the Denver Metropolitan Area, they found a stratified market where mostly parents with higher socioeconomic status (SES) chose to transfer to higher SES, higher achieving districts.

Over the past 25 years many districts have experimented with different types of open enrollment policies *within* the district, but they vary greatly in terms of regulation. For example, the Jefferson County District in Kentucky uses a highly regulated 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 school choice program and EPISD's policy are referred to as unregulated, or race/income-neutral, in that there are no provisions to ensure that school choice promotes racial and economic desegregation. Instead, similar to charter schools, these plans operate under the rationale that offering choices for various magnet and neighborhood schools inherently promotes equity by expanding access. 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 polices often result in increased stratification (Cobb & Glass, 2009; Holme et al., 2013).

In summary, there are two competing theories on how choice policies—be they charter schools or district-run open enrollment plans—affect equity and student segregation. On 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. Despite research testing these theories, questions remain in terms of how school leaders influence the process as well as how the market operates in different geographic contexts, including a metropolitan border context such as El Paso.

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 (Jabbar, 2015). In the case of competition between charter schools, researchers find that principals engage in an array of strategies including improved test scores, marketing, screening, and programmatic differentiation (Lubienski, 2005; Olson & Beal, 2016). Conversely, the response by traditional public-school principals from charter competition depends on the local context and 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, 2016; Frankenberg, Ayscue, & Tyler, 2016; Holme et al., 2013; Kasman & Loeb, 2013). Holme et al. (2013) 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 et al. (2013) 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, 2016). Although these studies further our understanding regarding the role of the principal in competitive environments in general, more research is needed specifically on how leaders navigate competition in open enrollment environments given how popular, yet understudied, these policies are.

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 & Pattillo, 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, Henig, & Levin, 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., 2013; 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, or scandals puts that school and principal at a disadvantage. Furthermore, principals may have to overcome being in the "wrong" neighborhood, a term fraught with racial and economic connotation (Holme, 2002; Lareau & Goyette, 2014). 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 (Frankenberg et al., 2016).

Introducing an open enrollment policy in a district with a preexisting hierarchy of schools runs the risk of intensifying stratification or segregation. Parents with relatively higher levels of education are 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 (Holme & Richards, 2009). 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. In turn, the less successful schools, and, in particular, 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 United States and view their study as a cautionary tale. Existing market hierarchies influence school leaders' perceptions of competition, which can reinforce rather than ameliorate long-standing inequities (Jabbar, 2016).

Given the dearth of literature on principal perceptions of competition in open enrollment districts, this study examines the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do principals behave within a competitive district-run open enrollment environment?

Research Question 2: How might principals' behavior shape students' access to the school of their choice?

Research Question 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

EPISD has recently sought to reinvent itself following several district scandals. The current EPISD superintendent was appointed in September of 2013 after a massive cheating scandal in the district, that resulted in the removal of several district administrators (DeMatthews, Izquierdo, & Knight, 2017; Weaver and Tidwell, LLP, 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 on 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.[2] Declining enrollment, along with substantial reductions in state funding following the Great Recession (Knight, 2017), placed the district under fiscal duress. Moreover, the district itself is landlocked between Mexico and several suburban districts, many of which offer affordable new homes. The superintendent responded to these challenges in part by rebranding EPISD as a "district of choice," encouraging students to apply to any school operating under capacity within the district. Although the district already offered magnet programs, the open enrollment plan encouraged specialization of schools and allowed *all* schools to engage in marketing and recruitment of students (previously only magnets could conduct outreach). In the first year of full open enrollment, 12,000 EPISD students attended

[2]Under the Texas Education Code, open enrollment has been allowed since 1995, but districts are given great latitude in the extent of who is eligible with the exception of mandatory transfers for students who have been bullied or harassed.

a school other than their assigned school and more than 2,000 transferred in from out of district (together, this accounts for almost 25% of all EPISD enrollees).

Our analysis of the choice policy revealed few equity safeguards, such as transportation provisions for low-income students or measures to balance ELLs and students with disabilities 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. In our interviews, principals indicated that there was pressure to first accept interdistrict applicants to bring more students into the district, but this potentially took seats away from district residents. 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 allow principals to deny a student based only 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), Texas does not have any special provisions to ensure representation from these subgroups.

The open enrollment policy thus has important implications for educational equity in diverse urban districts such as EPISD.[3] Table 1 provides more detailed information about EPISD student demographics for the entire district and divided by free/reduced-price lunch (FRL) and underrepresented minority (URM) quintiles.[4], [5] Overall, EPISD is similar to other urban districts in that almost three fourths of students in the district qualify for FRL. However, the breakdown of FRL quintiles reveals that some schools, especially in the lowest FRL quintile, are relatively advantaged. The 16 schools with the lowest poverty are far below the average in terms of FRL percent (40% vs. 73%), have lower shares of minority students, and have slightly lower percentages of student classified as English language learners (ELL) and students with disabilities. Conversely, at the highest poverty schools, 93% of students are eligible for FRL, and 77% are classified as at-risk. Moreover, 49% of students at the highest-poverty schools are classified as ELL, which is almost three times the proportion of ELL students at the lowest poverty schools (17%). Although EPISD enrolls mostly Hispanic students (84%), the URM quintiles also reveal key differences in racial composition of schools. For instance, the 16 schools in the lowest quintile of URM students have 61% Hispanic students, 13% ELL, and 47% FRL students, whereas the highest quintile schools in terms of the percent of URM students have 99% Hispanic students, 57% ELL, and 91%

[3]·Students considered “at risk” in Texas are those who meet at least 1 of 13 criteria described in TEC §29.081. These include pregnant students and homeless youth.

[4]·Although EPISD is 84% Hispanic, we refer to students of color as underrepresented minorities because the same power structures that privilege White middle-class students in general exist within the local context (underrepresented minorities face racism and other forms of marginalization) and because they represent a minority of the population nationally.

[5]·Throughout our analysis, we use quintiles as a way to interpret the differences between the highest and lowest FRL and URM schools while maintaining large enough categories for statistical analysis. Although the decision to use quintiles is somewhat arbitrary, we tested whether the use of quintiles affects our results by running similar models that exchange quintiles with the following categories: (a) above median (vs. below), (b) thirds, (c) quartiles, and (d) deciles. The results of these as specification checks are similar to our main results and are available from author on request.

FRL. Although we lack data on undocumented students, demographers suggest that many children living in El Paso lack documentation or have parents who lack documentation (Ura & McCullough, 2015). When analyzing open enrollment, one must consider how legal status and geography affect principal decisions and parental access. In sum, EPISD schools differ immensely and these differences may influence the public perception of potential transfers and the ability of schools to attract transfers.

Data and Method

We use 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 2009–2010 to 2015–2016, combined with school-level transfer data provided by EPISD for the year 2014–2015 (the first year of the open enrollment plan). TEA data include total enrollment and student demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, percent FRL, and percent classified ESL). EPISD data include the number of students who transferred to a different school, and whether they live inside or outside the residential boundaries of 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 our analysis of the transfer data to select a stratified purposeful sample of 12 school principals from across the school district. We wanted to capture principals in 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.[6] 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 school descriptions).

6. We use the terms *winner* and *loser* interchangeably with high in-transfer and high out-transfer schools.

In the sampled schools, we conducted semistructured interviews on site with the principals that lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. Although principal experience varied, all the principals interviewed had been a principal at their present school for at least 2 years including the period of policy implementation. The principals also ranged in background; about half of the sample was female and half was Hispanic. However, we did not observe any relationships between principal background and competitive practices.

We conducted interviews during the 2016–2017 academic year, which allowed us to capture the principals' reflection on their competitive practices and practices during the first 2 years of the program. In particular, our interview protocol focused on: (1) principals' background and experience, (2) enrollment, (3) competition, and (4) marketing and recruitment. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed (we use pseudonyms for schools and principals). Principals were selected as the primary participants since they had final say in admissions. Although some principals involved other staff in marketing, recruitment, and screening; all principals oversaw and were heavily involved in all these open enrollment activities. 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.

Data Analysis

To analyze our data, and to explore alignment between the qualitative and quantitative sources, we used an iterative approach. First, to answer Research Question 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, and 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 Research Question 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 Research Question 3, to understand how economic and racial segregation across schools changed over the period during which open enrollment was implemented, we analyzed the quantitative data and used the qualitative findings to explain some of the patterns we found. We used four approaches to address Research Question 3. The following explanations of our analysis use %FRL, but we also replicate each analysis for %URM. First, we examine whether high-poverty schools experienced increases in %FRL and whether that change is associated with their net loss of students (from 2013–2014 to 2014–2015, 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 %FRL, respectively (and use the middle three quintiles as the reference category).[7] We use net-transfer rate to capture the extent

to which a school was affected by the choice policy—either by gaining or losing students. We regress the change in %FRL from 2013–2014 to 2014–2015 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 schools experienced increases in %FRL, or whether low-poverty schools experienced decreases in %FRL, and whether those changes were related to the net-transfer rate. We estimate the following model:

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

where X_i includes indicators for school grade level for school i (elementary, middle school, high school) and ε_i is an error term. A negative α_3 suggests that low-poverty schools experienced greater decreases in their concentration of FRL students as the net-transfer rate increased (i.e., the more students they gained). This change may happen if non-FRL students were more likely to transfer into low-poverty schools. Conversely, a negative α_4 suggests that high-poverty schools experienced greater increases in 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 α_3 or α_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 and transfer-in rate (and replicate these models for URM students).

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.[8] This second approach shows how the percent of low-income students changed over time for schools most affected by the choice policy (either negatively or positively).[9] A third analysis divides schools into quintiles of FRL based on 2013–2014 data, the year prior to implementation of the choice policy, and tracks the percent of FRL students in those schools over time. This analysis 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 affected by the choice policy. Finally, we analyzed the dissimilarity and isolation segregation indices for race and FRL for an additional vantage point.

[7]·We elected to use quintiles as it allowed us to interpret the differences between the highest and lowest FRL and URM schools while maintaining large enough categories for statistical analysis. We also ran the analysis with different categories (thirds, quartiles, deciles) and found similar results. These analyses are available on request.

[8]·High (positive) net-transfer schools and low (negative) net-transfer schools are those that fall in the top and bottom quintiles. Schools considered "high nettransfer" had between 11% and 32% of their students enrolled through the transfer program, whereas those considered low net-transfer had between 32% and 10% fewer students as a result of the choice program.

[9]·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.

Results

The following section highlights the main findings of our study. First, we describe the extent to which families used the open enrollment choice policy, and which schools had net losses versus net gains. Then we explore how the open enrollment policy influenced school leaders' experiences and strategies related to competition for students. Finally, we examine whether poverty concentration increased in the period following the open enrollment policy.

Students on the Move

Families are taking advantage of open enrollment policies 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, leading to a net loss of students. 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. Panel B demonstrates that the variance of net-transfer rates tends to be larger in middle and high schools. 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. Because middle and high schools have larger enrollment, these differences represent an even greater number of actual students transferring. 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 SES and racial composition of schools (see Table 3). Although the lowest poverty and lowest minority schools seem to be the most desirable transfer destinations, the pattern for other categories is less clear. We report the transfer data as (1) the total number of students transferring into schools and the percent of enrolled students who transferred in from another school (the "transfer-in rate"), (2) 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 (3) 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 minority students (Panel A) and low-income students (Panel B). However, there is no linear relationship between the net transfer rate and URM or poverty quintile. The highest out-transfer rates come from the second highest and second lowest URM and FRL

quintiles, suggesting that students in the most disadvantaged schools may lack the means—information or transportation—to transfer.

The extent to which schools experience net gains or net losses or even little change in enrollment is likely to influence the ways in which their leaders perceive and respond to the competition created by open enrollment. To unpack these differences, 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 students 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 affected 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 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 Middle School, a high in-transfer school, for example, noted that although competition was "out there," it was not 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 High School noted, they had more than 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 leader, of a 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 High School). 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 Middle School). The elementary school leader of the school with high out-transfers, however, while noting a loss of more than 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 preexisting 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 Elementary, 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 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 among higher SES families in the area and differentiate themselves from the other dual language programs. Other "winners," including Kennedy High, San Marcos High, and Mesa Verde Middle School, 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)

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 High, a lower achieving high school in a lower SES neighborhood, the principal realized that 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 High 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 program (Artis Middle School). However, the principal at Artis 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, Haskins).

Marketing and Promoting the School

Although 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 Middle School, 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 because of their reputation. Another high out-transfer school leader noted that "negative publicity" hurt them, and he had to work "one-on-one" with parents to "get them to know who we are" (Principal, Haskins). Similarly, at O'Conner Elementary, 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 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 High School) 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?” 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 High). Chavez Elementary, another high in-transfer school, had strong networks and partnerships with the military,[10] 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. 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 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 Elementary said that their school never turned anyone down, but they might try to contact the parents first if they had concerns with the

[10]El Paso has a large military population due to the presence of the Fort Bliss Army Base.

students' record. Other informal ways of shaping enrollment even when the school was not at capacity were by encouraging parents to stick with their 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 students since they met the transfer criteria and the school was way under capacity, but the principal encouraged them to withdraw after observing attendance issues related to the lengthy commute. Artis, a high out-transfer school, 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 underenrolled to avoid serving more challenging students. The leader at O'Connor noted that her school did not turn anyone away, but would put them on a waitlist if they were at capacity. Therefore, when it came to transfers, most principals used the screening system to recruit higher performing students or those with fewer perceived disciplinary issues, except for some schools that were more desperate to increase student enrollment.

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 that 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. One high in-transfer school rejected many "concern" students initially, forcing them to go through the appeals process. The principal explained that this allowed them to make expectations clear, and to ensure that it was a good fit, but this also created an additional hoop for students and parents. Although principals indicated that they were usually willing to give the students 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 were 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 guide-lines, 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 Segregation of Poverty and Underrepresented Minorities?

Although our qualitative findings and policy analysis raised concerns that open enrollment would lead to increased socioeconomic and racial segregation, our quantitative analysis shows mixed results for this scenario (see Table 5 and Figure 3). The regression results in Table 5 suggest that greater transferring may have been associated with declines in percent FRL for schools that already had the lowest poverty rates. Specifically, we report in Table 5, regression coefficients based on Equation (1), which show the extent to which transfer rates contributed to changes in the concentration of low-income students, for schools already at the highest and lowest quintiles of percent FRL. 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. However, as shown in Model 2, low-poverty schools with average net-transfer rates did not see changes in the percent of FRL students; these schools saw a decline in the percent of FRL students as the net-transfer rate increased. A 10-percentage point increase in the net-transfer rate is associated with a decrease in the percent of FRL students of 2.01 percentage points for schools already in the lowest quintile of percent FRL. In other words, the low-poverty schools most affected by the choice policy (those with 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.

Models 3 to 6, which replace net-transfer rate with the percent of students transferring out (Models 3 and 4) and transferring in (Models 5 and 6), show 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 in Model 6). 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 with those in the middle three quintiles).

We also examined changes in the concentration of underrepresented minorities in schools. Results show little changes in the percent of URM students associated with transfer rates. As shown in Row 5 of Table A1 in the appendix, low-minority schools generally saw small increases (about one percentage point) in the percent of students of color from 2013–2014 to 2014–2015, regardless of the amount of transfers in or out. For example, Model 1 shows that the increase from 2013–2014 to 2014–2015 in the percent of students who identify as an underrepresented minority was 0.7 percentage points larger in low-minority schools than for schools near the median of percent minority. Model 4 shows that low-minority schools experienced larger increases in the percent of URM students as the percent of students transferring out of those schools increased (as evidenced by the positive and significant interaction term, which suggests that among low-minority schools, a 10–percentage point increase in the percent of students transferring out is associated with a 1.1–percentage point

greater increase in the percent of URM students, relative to schools near the median percent minority).

Figure 3 shows two other approaches to assessing the choice policy's influence on student segregation by race and poverty. 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 percent 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. Similarly, Panels C and D indicate that racial segregation has been relatively stable throughout the first 2 years of implementation.[11] In fact, the lower minority schools have experienced slight gains in their proportions of URM students (which aligns with the regression results shown in Table A1 in the appendix). Finally, we also analyzed the racial and economic segregation indices: dissimilarity and isolation (see Figure A1 in the appendix). The segregation indices reinforce our general finding that socioeconomic and racial segregation were generally stable during the first 2 years of open enrollment in EPISD. In other words, implementation of the choice policy did not appear to substantially alter the already high degree of 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 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 transfers. 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

[11]We also ran exploratory analyses to examine %ESL and %IEP. The analyses suggested stability in these populations at the three school types as well.

school's long-standing magnet program and strong reputation. This reputation had made Crocket a prime destination for children of district employees and other professionals for over a decade. Conversely, the principal at Alvarado High School, 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 students, ELLs, and students with disabilities 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 SES. EPISD has a unique geographic layout straddling the Mexican border with Ciudad Juárez 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 open enrollment and transport themselves across the district. Conversely, she hinted that the lack of in-transfers made her rely heavily on border crossers to maintain enrollment and keep the school open.

Although our quantitative analysis indicates that the distribution of FRL and URM students has remained relatively stable across the board, the plan is not breaking up the existing concentrations of poverty and minority students 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 Middle School 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, few studies address the role of school principals in an unregulated, competitive open enrollment environment. Our study uses both quantitative and qualitative data to understand how competitive processes influence the economic and racial segregation 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. School leaders are devoting significant resources and time to marketing and recruitment (Olson & Beal, 2016). However, consistent with research on principal behavior at charter schools (Jabbar, 2016; Ladd & Fiske, 2001), principals in EPISD operate in an existing market hierarchy based on factors such as geography and resources. Furthermore, 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 toward higher achieving students as well as to screen applicants, yet the district tries to ensure equity, even without formal regulations.

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 that their students—many of them immigrants—were taking part in an open enrollment program. These findings are consistent with another study of segregation in Texas, which suggests that nonnative 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 Juárez 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 that 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 in considering this transnational context.

Although the EPISD policy does not seem to completely concentrate poor or minority 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 use 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. Future research should examine how issues of segregation differ during early and later stages of open enrollment implementation in districts such as EPISD.[12]

Our study also had some 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. Such a study could also highlight the degree that magnets or specialized programs segregate students within the school. 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.

Despite these limitations, our 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 are 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 could 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 manage their many responsibilities including competing for students. Alternatively, marketing and outreach could be more centralized at the district level to cut down on principal workload. Since our study analyzed more experienced principals, future research should examine beginning principal experiences in a competitive environment. In general, many principals felt that they deserved more latitude

12. Earlier research found that more advantaged students tended to use open enrollment (Fossey, 1994), more recent studies suggest low-income and Black students are more likely to use open enrollment (Cowen, Creed, & Keesler, 2015). However, these studies do not analyze the stage of implementation.

in picking transfer students, but past research on unregulated choice plans demonstrates that having specific guidelines will promote access while preventing segregation. Moreover, these concerns are magnified in border towns such as El Paso given the high number of immigrants.

Although our research is limited to El Paso, our findings illuminate some patterns and processes that might inform open enrollment policies in other contexts. First, our findings suggest that open enrollment programs, left unregulated, may do little to change the extent of economic and racial segregation in schools, in either direction. Yet open enrollment programs, particularly ones using both inter- and intradistrict transfers, have the potential to reduce segregation and improve access to opportunity. It is likely, however, that this will only occur with close oversight, clear goals, and a plan toward this goal, rather than relying on market forces. In the case of EPISD, public pressure following the cheating scandal prompted the district to manage equity concerns in spite of little regulations or safeguards. Yet as the district moves away from the scandal and equity concerns, it would behoove the district to codify oversight. Moreover, the district should explore provisions such as transportation to improve access. Second, our research builds on that conducted on other choice policies to reveal that there is room in open enrollment programs, too, for screening and selecting students. In this case, some of these selection mechanisms were by policy design. Such policies may be more politically feasible, but they limit the ability of open enrollment policies to address long-standing inequities in access. Districts with open enrollment policies should thus limit the discretion of principals to admit or reject students and take additional measures (informational outreach with low-income families, transportation) to ensure equal access to high-quality choices.

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Appendix

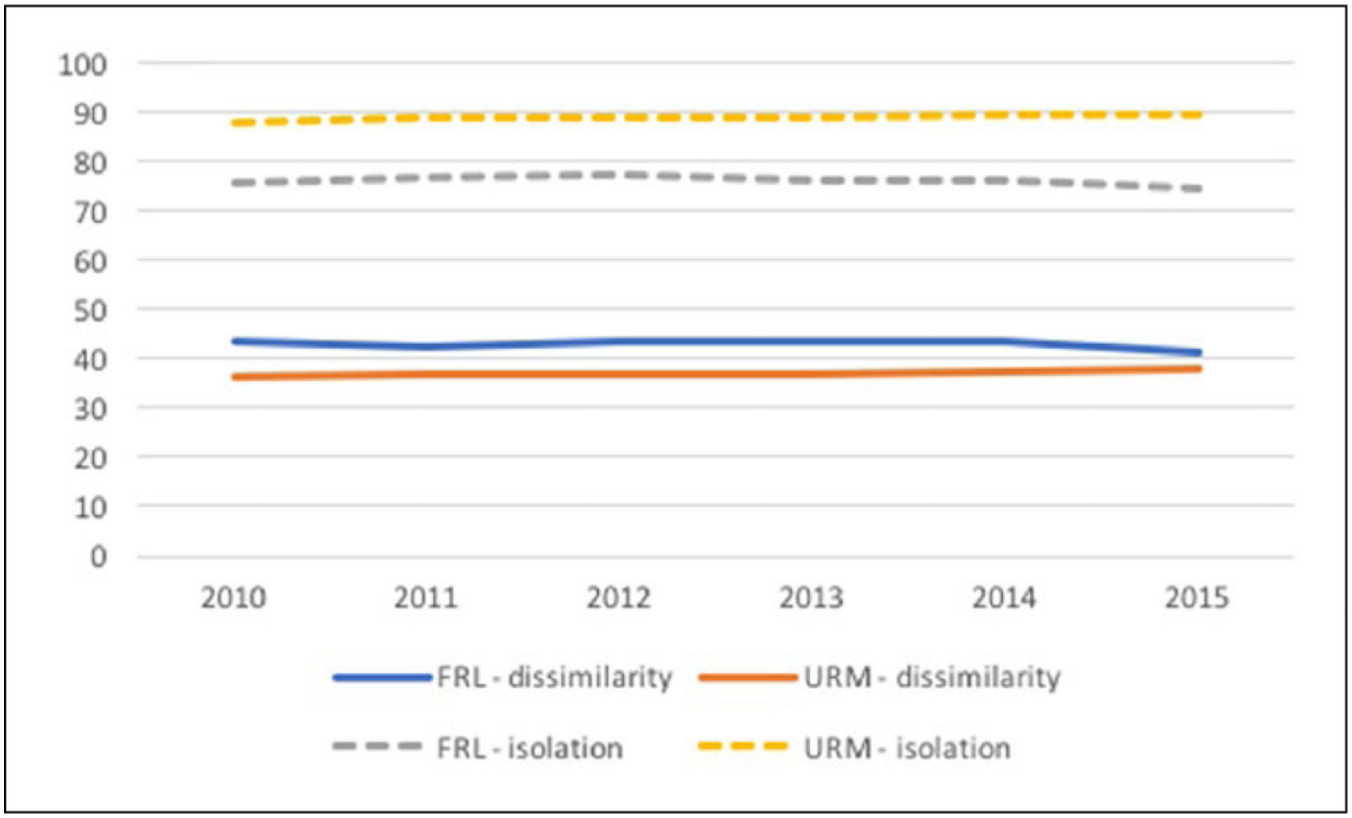

Figure A1.
Segregation indices by year for %FRL (percent free/reduced-price lunch) and %URM (percent underrepresented minority).

Table A1.

Regression Coefficients Predicting the Change in the Proportion of Students Who Identify as an Underrepresented Minority, From 2013–2014 to 2014–2015.

	Independent Variable of Interest = Net Transfer Rate		Independent Variable of Interest = Transfer-Out Rate		Independent Variable of Interest = Transfer-In Rate	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Net transfer rate	0.006 (0.012)	0.011 (0.013)				
Percent of student who transferred out			0.007 (0.020)	−0.02 (0.024)		
Percent of student who transferred in					0.020 (0.018)	0.010 (0.020)

	Independent Variable of Interest = Net Transfer Rate		Independent Variable of Interest = Transfer-Out Rate		Independent Variable of Interest = Transfer-In Rate	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
High-minority schools (highest quintile %URM)	−0.004 (0.004)	−0.005 (0.005)	−0.004 (0.005)	−0.01 (0.012)	−0.003 (0.004)	0.000 (0.014)
Low-minority schools (lowest quintile %URM)	0.007+ (0.004)	0.008+ (0.005)	0.008+ (0.004)	−0.01 (0.009)	0.008+ (0.004)	−0.006 (0.010)
Interactions						
High-minority school × net transfer rate		−0.023 (0.062)				
Low-minority school × net transfer rate		−0.019 (0.030)				
High-minority school × transfer-out rate			0.026 (0.060)			
Low-minority school × transfer-out rate			0.105* (0.046)			
High-minority school × transfer-in rate						−0.025 (0.093)
Low-minority school × transfer-in rate						0.067 (0.047)
School level						
Middle school	−0.005 (0.004)	−0.004 (0.004)	−0.004 (0.004)	−0.004 (0.004)	−0.003 (0.004)	−0.004 (0.005)
High school	−0.005 (0.005)	−0.005 (0.005)	−0.005 (0.005)	−0.005 (0.005)	−0.005 (0.005)	−0.004 (0.005)
Constant	0.007** (0.002)	0.007** (0.003)	0.005 (0.005)	0.011+ (0.006)	0.003 (0.004)	0.005 (0.005)
N	78	78	78	78	78	78
R^2	0.095	0.102	0.093	0.157	0.108	0.135

+ $p < .1$
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

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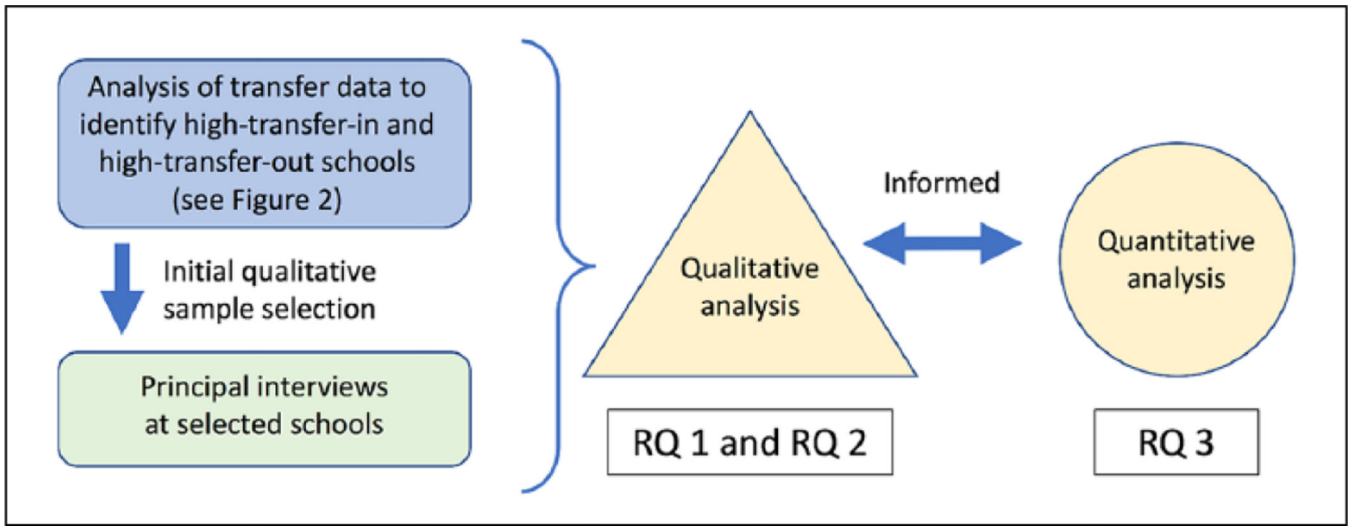

Figure 1.
Explanatory sequential mixed methods design.

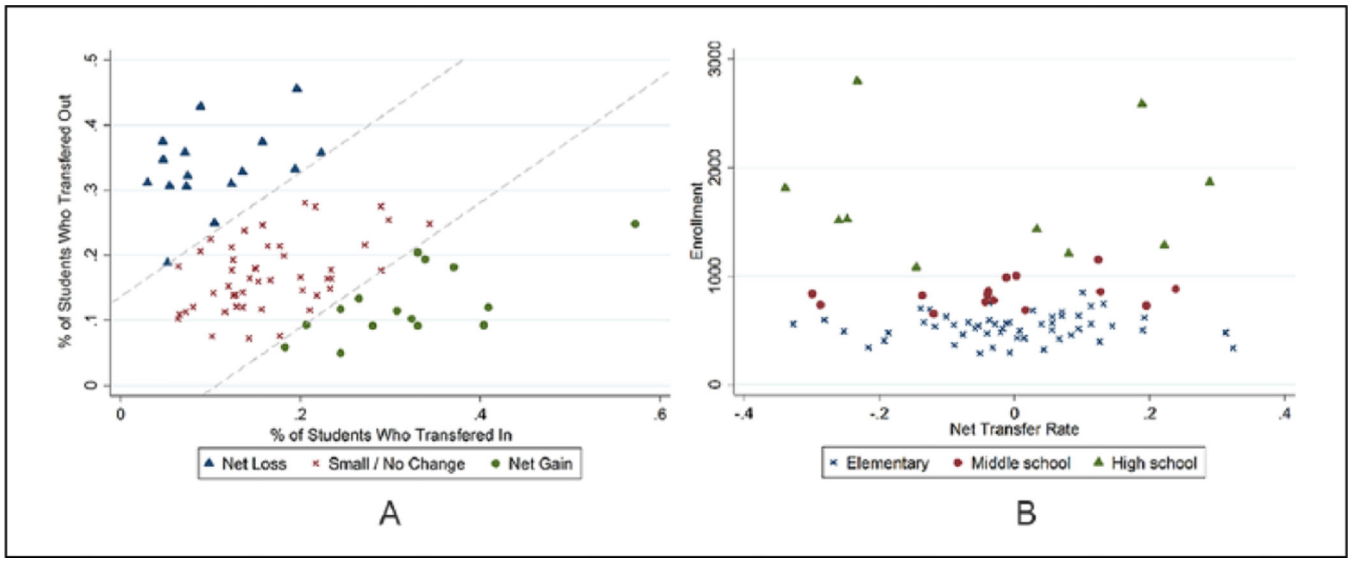

Figure 2.

Transfer rates across schools in the El Paso Independent School District, 2014–2015. (A) Percentage of students who transfer in and out of schools.

(B) Net transfers by school level.

Note. The net transfer rate is the difference between the number of students who transfer in and the number of students who transfer out, divided by the school's enrollment. Schools labeled "net loss" have net-transfer rates of less than −10% whereas those labeled "net gain" have net-transfer rates greater than 10%.

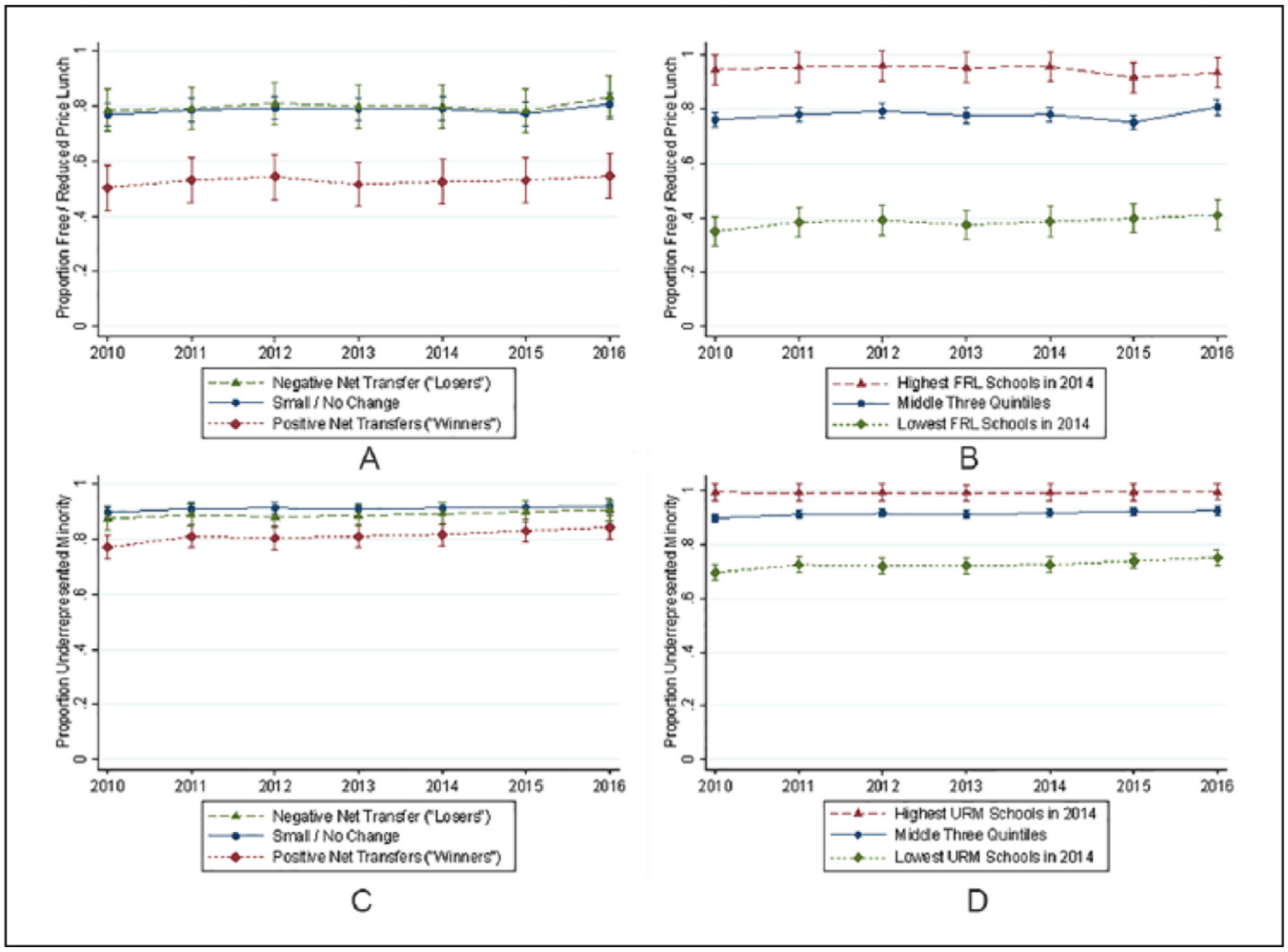

Figure 3.

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 2013–2014 (year prior to implementation). (C) %URM for high– and low–net transfer schools. (D) %URM for schools in the highest and lowest quintile of % URM in 2013–2014 (year prior to implementation).

Note. FRL = free/reduced price lunch; URM = underrepresented minority. The choice policy became effective in school year 2014–2015 (labeled 2015). High– and low–net transfer schools are those in the top and bottom quintiles of net transfer rate within school level. The graphs on the left (Panels A and C) show that schools that lost the greatest proportion of students and schools that gained the greatest proportion of students experienced significant changes in the percent of FRL or URM students. Similarly, the graphs on the right (Panels B and D) show that high (and low) FRL and URM schools did not experience significant changes in the proportion of FRL or URM students in the years following implementation of the school choice policy (2015 and 2016).

Table 1.

Summary Statistics by Underrepresented Minority and Low-Income Quintile, 2014–2015.

		Underrepresented Minority			Low-Income		
	Total	Lowest Quintile	Middle 3 Quintiles	Highest Quintile	Lowest Quintile	Middle 3 Quintiles	Highest Quintile
Elementary schools	53	11	32	10	11	32	10
Middle schools	15	3	9	3	3	9	3
High schools	10	2	6	2	2	6	2
Total schools	78	16	47	15	16	47	15
Student demographics							
Average enrollment	730	937	698	611	937	690	638
Total enrollment	56,971	14,987	32,815	9,169	14,998	32,408	9,565
%FRL	73%	47%	76%	91%	40%	78%	93%
%at risk	63%	46%	62%	82%	46%	63%	77%
%ELL	31%	13%	28%	57%	17%	30%	49%
%SPED	11%	10%	12%	9%	9%	12%	10%
%Hispanic	84%	61%	86%	99%	70%	84%	96%
%Black	4%	8%	4%	0%	5%	4%	1%
%White	10%	24%	8%	1%	20%	8%	2%

Note. The percent of low-income students (FRL) and the percent of students who identify as an underrepresented minority (URM) are highly correlated across schools in the districts ($r = 0.76$). Thus, 10 of the 15 schools in the highest quintile of URM are also in the highest quintile of FRL, 11 of the 16 schools in the lowest quintile of URM are also in the lowest quintile of FRL, and 37 of the 47 schools in the middle three quintiles of URM are also in the middle three quintiles of FRL. Sources. Demographic data from Texas Education Association. ELL = English language learner; SPED = special education.

Table 2.

Qualitative Sample.

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

Note. %FRL = Percent free/reduced-price lunch; %URM = percent underrepresented minority; %ELL = percent English language learners. All numbers rounded to nearest 10 to preserve anonymity of participants. HS = high school; MS = middle school; EL = elementary school.

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

Table 3.

Transfers by Quintiles.

	Total	Low	Low-Middle	Middle	High-Middle	High
Panel A: Quintiles of percent underrepresented minority						
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	18.3	23.3	21.3	20.2	13.5	12.8
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	19.5	14.3	22.1	17.7	25.2	18.0
Net transfers	−12.9	49.6	−9.9	23.5	−98.7	−27.7
Net transfer rate, %	−1.2	9.0	−0.8	2.5	−11.7	−5.2
Panel B: Quintiles of percent low-income						
Students who transferred into the school	132.3	177.2	157.6	132.4	105.8	85.7
Percent of enrolled students who transferred in	18.3	20.3	22.3	18.9	15.7	13.8
Students who transferred out of the school	145.2	153.8	165.0	113.7	184.0	105.1
Percent of enrolled students who transferred out	19.5	15.5	20.8	18.3	25.3	17.3
Net transfers	−12.9	23.4	−7.4	18.7	−78.3	−19.3
Net transfer rate, %	−1.2	4.8	1.5	0.6	−9.6	−3.5

Note. The total column is repeated in each panel. This table demonstrates a monotonic relationship between the percent of students transferring into a school and the quintile of poverty (and to some extent minority). In contrast, percent of students transferring out of a school is not systematically related to the percent of low-income or underrepresented minorities. Sources: Transfer data from El Paso ISD.

Table 4.

Perceptions and Strategies of School Leaders.

School Category	Perceptions of Competition	Behaviors and Strategies
High out-transfer	Strong awareness of competitors and decline in student enrollment	• Marketing and recruitment •Beginning to adopt specialized programs • Few can select students
Little movement	Mixed. Some report a little competition in entry grades, but others note that parents have few other options because of language barriers and geographic constraints	• Lack of strategy at one school • Some marketing • Some adoption of specialized programs • Some selection, often in informal ways
High in-transfer	A little competition, but all in privileged position in market (e.g., high parent demand), benefitted from open enrollment policy	• Marketing, recruitment (proactive, use networks) • Specialized programs • Strong selection on discipline, attendance, capacity

Table 5.

Regression Coefficients Predicting the Change in the Proportion of Students Eligible for FRL, from 2013–2014 to 2014–2015.

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

Note. %FRL = percent free/reduced-price lunch.

+ $p < .1$

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.