Breaking boundaries

Weighing the cost of school choice

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CONTROLLING POTENTIAL CHAOS | Community member Dane Winbigler worries that allowing North to be a school of choice would entail budgetary constraints as well as difficulty for teachers to plan their classes. In Winbigler's eyes, this might lead to parents pulling their children from the district due to the education being devalued. "A lot of people in Grosse Pointe are very fortunate in the lives they lead, and the monetary system they've been able to access," Winbigler said. "Suddenly, those people would all leave those public schools, and the ones who are left behind are really holding the bag and scrambling to try and overcome that loss of community and ownership in their children."

Since 1996, Grosse Pointe Public Schools have opted out of Michigan's School of Choice Program, which allows students who live outside the district's boundaries to enroll. Recently, a package of bills introduced in the House of Representatives would require districts statewide to accept students from outside their borders under a mandatory open enrollment system. House Bills 5310, 5311 and 5312 would eliminate districts' ability to opt out, bar them from charging tuition to non-resident students, and revise residency rules. If the bills were to become state law, these changes could bring new students and additional state funding and operational shifts to Grosse Pointe as early as the 2026-27 school year.

One community member who opposes the School of Choice Program in Grosse Pointe is Dane Winbigler, a Grosse Pointe Woods resident since 2015 and a parent in the district for 17 years. While Winbigler acknowledges that the program would be beneficial to communities facing population loss or budgetary constraints, he envisions it harming Grosse Pointe.

"If everybody is forced to be a school of choice like the bill that was proposed, it would force you to take as many students as some arbitrary capacity that's assigned to you," Winbigler said. "They could look and say, 'Okay, well, you have 6,000 students, but you have capacity in our estimation of 8,000, you have to take 2,000 extra students.' That makes it really difficult for administrators and teachers to properly plan year to year. Suddenly, they have 500 extra students they didn't account for, and you have to hire more people."

While some parents fear the strain that mandatory open enrollment could place on staffing and long-term planning, GPPSS school board president Clint Derringer said that larger class sizes would not be automatic. Increased enrollment would bring additional state funding, but staffing would remain at the district level.

"[Larger class sizes] really depends. Other variables would have to be fleshed out. So we would assume that there would be an increase in enrollment, which brings more state funding, but the decision on class size is really about how many teachers you are going to hire based on the students that you have," Derringer said. "It's still a district decision about how many positions you're going to create in HR and how many classrooms you're going to open up."



> "I went to elementary school at Star of the Sea, where it was a way tinier community. Coming to North, there are a lot more people and a lot more diversity."
>
> **RUBY TRANCHIDA**
> Sophomore

As administrators weigh policy implications, sophomore Ruby Tranchida, a district resident student living in Harper Woods, reflects on how the change could affect both opportunity and community.

"I think it would be cool and interesting to see how many more kids we could get to go here if we opened the doors," Tranchida said. "But right now the hallways are already filled, so there would have to be some kind of limit. I think there are definitely pros and cons about opening it and keeping it closed."

The points Tranchida mentions are exactly what residents like Winbigler have been weighing for nearly two decades. From his perspective, the success of the schools is tied to the local families who choose to move into the district.

"Our community values education that highly," Winbigler said. "We've committed to live here because we want to see our kids be educated very well, and we care about the system. If suddenly anybody can come into that district without paying that kind of effort, you're going to lose your community. I think the result would be to destroy public education."

Beyond this shift in community values, there is a question of whether School of Choice delivers on its promise of increased enrollment. According to Derringer, the reality of the program often results in a cycle of instability rather than a boost in permanent student numbers. He warns that districts are often falsely attracted to the promise of larger enrollment numbers.

"[Districts] think that they're going to increase their enrollment, but what they do is just become a revolving door," Derringer said. "Kids are in, kids are out. Kids are in, kids are out. Very few schools retain kids and add them so that their overall employment comes up. Most places just become a pass-through."