

POLICY POINTS

➤ POLICY POINTS BRINGS RELEVANT DATA TO TIMELY PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES IN ARIZONA

Patterns of Student Mobility in Metropolitan Phoenix

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Many policymakers view school choice policies as a way to stimulate competition among schools. Arizona's lawmakers have created a broad set of school choice policies aimed at expanding the education market. While some choice policies such as voucher programs, tuition tax credits, and home schooling provide students and their families with alternatives to public schools, charter schools and open enrollment policies offer choice within the public school system. For over 15 years, interdistrict open enrollment and charter schools have allowed families to send their children to the public schools of their choice, regardless of where they reside. Arizona's charter school policies, in particular, have made it a leader in the national school choice movement. In 2008-2009, charter schools comprised 23 percent of all Arizona K-12 institutions and educated 10 percent of the school-age population. In contrast, 5 percent of public schools nationwide are charter schools, which serve 3 percent of all public school students (NCES, 2011).

To better understand how parents "shop" within Arizona's public education marketplace, this issue of *Policy Points* examines the mobility of elementary school students among districts and charter schools in the Metropolitan Phoenix area. While many analyses focus on the proportion of students attending charter schools, this study assesses how students move between schools, excluding students who move due to regular grade level progression.

There are two possible explanations for student movement. First, families may actively exercise choice by enrolling their children in schools or districts for educational reasons such as test scores or learning environments. Alternatively, students may relocate to a new school or district when family housing or job changes prompt a household move.

What are the patterns of student mobility in Metro Phoenix?

Metropolitan Phoenix school districts range from small elementary districts with under 5,000 students to large unified districts with more than 25,000 students. The vast majority (91 percent) of students in the Metropolitan Phoenix area remain enrolled within the same school district from one year to the next (see also Garcia, 2010). However, districts with high rates of mobility may incur higher educational and administrative costs. Likewise, school districts with declining enrollment face revenue losses because school districts are allocated funding by the state based on the numbers of students they serve. In the context of declining state and local budgets, this can represent an additional budgetary pressure, especially for small districts.

In most of the districts in our analysis, even those with the highest percentages of student movement out of the district, a comparable percentage of incoming students entered the district from another school district or charter school. For example, Metropolitan Phoenix districts lost an average of nine percent of the students in our sample to other school districts or charter schools at the beginning of the 2008-2009 academic year, but on average these districts also enrolled a similar percentage of students from another school district or charter school.

Another important finding is that mobility rates vary substantially across districts. For example, only three percent of the students in our sample attending schools in the Cave Creek Unified District in 2007-2008 moved out of the district, but five percent of the students enrolled in Cave Creek Schools in 2008-2009 had attended schools in other districts or charter schools during the prior school year. The corresponding figures for the Osborn Elementary District were 17 percent



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and 15 percent, respectively. While these figures represent the total movement in and out of these districts from anywhere in the state, our focus is on movement between these 27 districts and the charter schools within the metropolitan area.

Most Movers Enroll in Other Local School Districts

	Metropolitan Phoenix Districts N=27		
	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Movers	3%	17%	9%
Incoming Students	5%	15%	9%
Movers to Local School Districts	43%	88%	63%
Movers to Local Charter Schools	5%	34%	13%
Incoming from Local School Districts	43%	81%	66%
Incoming from Local Charter Schools	5%	23%	12%

Source: Arizona Department of Education, authors' analysis. Data compiled by Haiying Dong, Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College.

Within the metropolitan area, on average, 63 percent of the students that moved out of the districts in our sample moved to another local school district, while 13 percent of students attending a school in one of these districts moved to a local charter school. Of the students coming into these districts in 2008–2009, 66 percent attended schools in the districts within this group during the prior school year and 12 percent were enrolled in Metropolitan Phoenix charter schools. Most of the districts with above average rates of outgoing student movement to other Metropolitan Phoenix school districts were also the districts with above average rates of incoming movement from other metropolitan districts. That is, the students in our sample that left these districts were replaced by a comparable percentage of students from other local school districts. Likewise, most of the districts that lost an above average percentage of students in the sample to charter schools located within the Metropolitan Phoenix area gained a similar percentage of students from local charter schools the following school year. Two key points can be drawn from this analysis: a) the majority of student movement occurs between school districts; and b) the movement between districts is relatively balanced.

How is mobility geographically patterned?

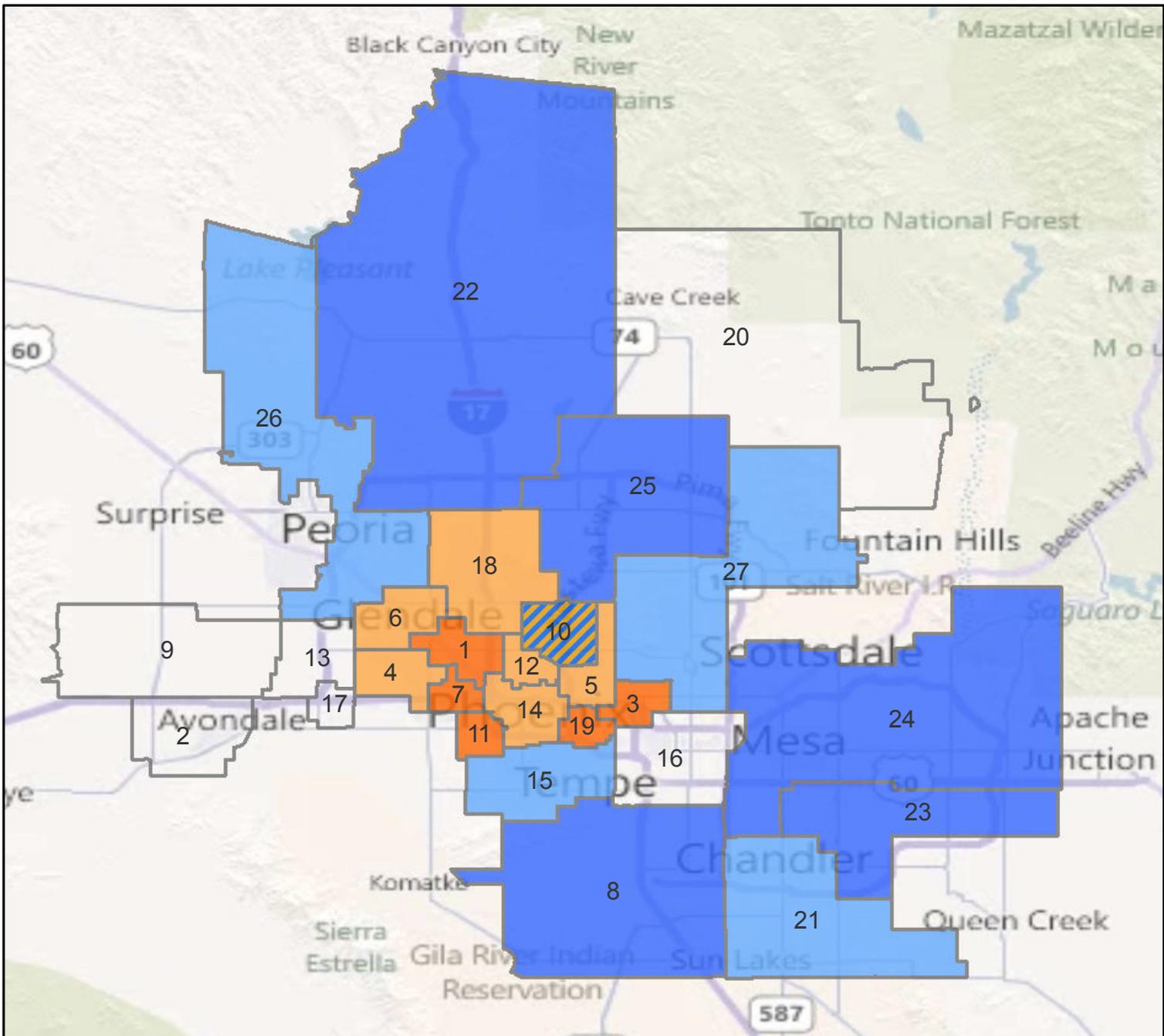
Figure 1 (next page) displays a map of Metropolitan Phoenix school districts color-coded to denote different movement patterns. Districts with above average mobility to and from local school districts are colored orange. The districts shaded in darker orange have the highest between-district mobility rates. Districts with above average mobility to and from charter schools are colored blue, with the darker shades again representing the highest rates of movement.

The map highlights how the two types of districts are geographically clustered. The districts with above average between-district movement are located in Phoenix's urban core; these districts tended to have higher total mobility rates. The districts with the highest percentages of students moving to and from charter schools are the larger suburban districts with low overall mobility rates. One district departed from this general pattern. The Roosevelt School District had one of the highest rates of movement out of the district but had a slightly below average percentage of incoming students. A third of the students in our sample that left Roosevelt were enrolled in a local charter school the following school year; only 11 percent of the students moving to the district entered the district from a local charter school.

Students moved between suburban school districts and local charter schools at higher rates than students in urban school districts, although students residing in the urban core were more likely to move overall. The difference in rates of mobility to and from charter schools across the two types of districts cannot be explained by charter school availability, as there are virtually equal numbers of charter schools located in the urban core and the suburbs. District size may explain the higher rates of interdistrict transfer in the urban core, as these districts are much smaller than the suburban districts. In the urban core, a household move of a short distance may situate a family within another district's boundaries.

Student mobility or interdistrict choice?

We also analyzed movement from the districts with the highest percentages of local between-district movement: the Alhambra, Balsz, Isaac, Murphy, and Wilson Elementary School Districts. On average, over 50 percent of the students moving out of these



Maricopa County School Districts

- Above average % moving to and incoming from charter schools
- Top quartile moving to and incoming from charter schools
- Above average % moving to and incoming from local school districts
- Top quartile moving to and incoming from local school districts
- Above average % moving to and incoming from local school districts and charter schools

Elementary Districts

- | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 - Alhambra Elementary | 8 - Kyrene Elementary | 14 - Phoenix Elementary |
| 2 - Avondale Elementary | 9 - Litchfield Elementary | 15 - Roosevelt Elementary |
| 3 - Balsz Elementary | 10 - Madison Elementary | 16 - Tempe Elementary |
| 4 - Cartwright Elementary | 11 - Murphy Elementary | 17 - Tolleson Elementary |
| 5 - Creighton Elementary | 12 - Osborn Elementary | 18 - Washington Elementary |
| 6 - Glendale Elementary | 13 - Pendergast Elementary | 19 - Wilson Elementary |
| 7 - Isaac Elementary | | |

Unified Districts

- 20 - Cave Creek Unified
- 21 - Chandler Unified
- 22 - Deer Valley Unified
- 23 - Gilbert Unified
- 24 - Mesa Unified
- 25 - Paradise Valley Unified
- 26 - Peoria Unified
- 27 - Scottsdale Unified

districts moved to schools in adjacent districts within the metropolitan area, which suggests that student mobility may be a result of household changes rather than families actively exercising choice.

What are the policy implications of student mobility?

- ▶ Districts with high rates of mobility should explore the possibility of collaborating with adjacent school districts to ensure that: a) student records are quickly and efficiently transferred between districts; and b) their curricula are consistent across grades and subject areas. Most districts create their own 'curriculum maps', which outline pacing guides or timelines for covering grade level standards for each subject. If curriculum maps vary widely from district to district, students moving between districts may miss opportunities to learn academic content, which may adversely affect student achievement.
- ▶ Research indicating that student mobility has a negative effect on student achievement suggests that it will be harder to accurately assess teacher effectiveness in districts with high rates of mobility compared to districts with low rates of mobility. Accountability systems may have to better account for the influence of student mobility on indicators of teacher, school, and district performance.
- ▶ School districts with high rates of mobility may have additional out-of-classroom costs for student support services related to attendance and social work to help them effectively meet the needs of their students.
- ▶ The joint legislative study subcommittee on school district unification and consolidation created by HB 2219 should analyze mobility patterns as part of its charge to study issues related to school district unification and consolidation.

Citation:

National Center for Education Statistics. (2011). *The Condition of Education 2011*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education (Table A-3-3).

Garcia, D. (2010). School enrollment: Choosing to stay. *Policy Points* 2(4): 1-3.

Methodology

There are 27 districts serving elementary school students that are classified by the Census Bureau as located in a city or suburb of Phoenix: 20 elementary school districts and seven unified school districts. This study identified patterns of student movement between districts or between districts and charter schools at the end of the 2007-2008 school year and the beginning of 2008-2009 school year. The data tracked the movement of students who were enrolled in schools within this group of districts between these two points in time, aggregated to the district or charter school. It did not include new enrollees at the beginning of 2008-2009 or students who moved out of state.