

Q&A – April 12 Informational Meeting

Reynoldsburg City Schools hosted an informational meeting about open enrollment. Superintendents from two high-performing, suburban school districts (Coventry Schools near Akron and Reading Schools near Cincinnati) answered many questions from the audience. Reynoldsburg Superintendent Steve Dackin answered additional questions afterward. Many more questions were submitted than could be answered that evening.

About the district ...

What are the top three reasons so many Reynoldsburg students are going out-of-district to get their education?

About 500 Reynoldsburg resident students choose to attend a community school or open-enroll into another district. Consequently, \$3.7 million in state and local funds are directed to those schools. Students have a myriad of reasons for choosing other educational options. Some insight can be gained by considering the top options chosen by students. The top options chosen by students are virtual schools, in which students learn online from home, and the Everest Academy, a school spun off from a Reynoldsburg program to serve at-risk students who are in danger of not graduating.

Will we be a revolving-door district? Many of our students have already left. What is being done to stem the flow out? From personal experience, I know that several of the families that left were not asked why. Just adding students will not automatically fix problems. More money does not solve everything.

RCSD has a higher mobility rate than most of Ohio's school districts. When we posed that question to superintendents of successful open enrollment districts, they told us that open-enrolled students tend to stay through graduation in their districts.

Reynoldsburg is right in the middle of the pack in Central Ohio in terms of the number of students who open enroll into other school districts. Canal Winchester, Groveport Madison, Hilliard, Pickerington, Westerville and Whitehall all have more students open-enrolled in other districts.

Reynoldsburg officials are aware that many students leave traditional school districts, including our own, for online or blended-learning opportunities. In response, RCSD is creating a blended-learning program to compete with online community schools, as well as offer a menu of services to Reynoldsburg home-school families. It is hoped that Reynoldsburg families who prefer online options for their students will prefer their local school district to administer those options rather than an out-of-town or state-wide school office.

Are we wasting money with redundancy with two 9-12 high schools? How much are academies adding to expenses?

Maintaining a “one-high-school” identity saved taxpayers millions of dollars in athletic facilities that need not be duplicated, contributing to the district’s ability to allow a permanent improvement levy to expire this year. RCSD is operating with about 25 percent fewer teachers, support staff and administrators than three years ago, despite opening a second high school campus and introducing academies.

Is STEM failing? Why (is the district) adding remedial courses to help failing students?

STEM programs are not failing. Although it’s early in the implementation – and multiple years of data will provide a more complete picture – the high school eSTEM Academy made a strong showing on its first state report card. In fact, eSTEM’s Performance Index Score of 111.9 was in the top 20 of all high schools in the state. Reynoldsburg High Schools has long offered academic assistance and credit-recovery opportunities for students, except for a brief period prior to passage of the 2010 operating levy. The newest course – to which this question may be referring – is simply an alignment of the high school’s college prep math course. College prep math was a course for seniors who weren’t yet ready for college-level or AP coursework. The class has adopted curriculum from Columbus State’s developmental math series in order to ensure better alignment with college-level courses.

About open enrollment, generally ...

(Please describe) protection from less than desirable students that cannot handle curriculum.

Open enrollment students must perform on track with their peers academically. Students who are overage for their grade-level (K-8) or credit-deficient (high school) may not be accepted.

If we are spending \$9,700 for each student, how does getting \$5,700 for each (open enrollment) student help us?

Reynoldsburg City Schools has a per-pupil expenditure rate of \$9,313, the second lowest in Franklin County. The per-pupil expenditure rate reflects a district’s total expenditures divided by the number of students served. The actual costs of educating students are incremental. Every 25 students need a teacher. Every school building needs a principal, support staff and utilities. Those costs do not increase with a few additional students. For example, consider a classroom with 22 assigned students. Adding three more students to that classroom would not increase costs to operate the classroom or the school building, but would generate \$17,100 in funding. Personnel costs are, by far, a school district’s largest expense. Just 11 open enrollment students would generate enough funding to pay for a teacher.

How guaranteed is it that we will get the money from the state for the students?

Absolutely. If the state were ever to change the open enrollment funding structure, open enrollment school districts could simply revoke their policies.

Does open enrollment:

- 1) *Efficiently fill classrooms?*
- 2) *Over-fill classrooms?*
- 3) *Fill staff schedules?*

The district decides its own capacity for open-enrolled students. It provides the opportunity to efficiently fill classrooms, but districts do not have to accept students in classrooms that are full. At the high school level, staff schedules help determine capacity as much as class sizes.

How easy is it to get rid of students that don't fit in?

Open enrollment status is granted annually. Students who no longer meet discipline standards do not have to be accepted the following year.

Were there more, less or same amount of discipline issues?

Both superintendents who participated in the panel discussion said they found open-enrolled students have fewer discipline issues than resident students. Those comments were consistent with the findings of all other school districts interviewed so far by Reynoldsburg officials.

Who provides transportation for incoming students?

Districts are not required to provide transportation for open-enrolled students. .

Who pays for cost of transportation?

District school buses are funded by the district. Families of open-enrolled students are required to provide transportation to school. .

This seems to be a plan on how to generate more revenue. What other expenditures/costs will this create?

A school district's operating costs can be divided into several categories: instructional, administration, support staff, utilities and supplies. Additional teachers might be necessary, if a district accepts enough students to expand the number of classes in a building. It would take 11 open-enrolled students to cover the cost of a teacher, so the cost-benefit would have to be considered in those cases. Additional costs might include classroom supplies and textbooks. If many students were accepted, there may be additional demand placed on central office staff and building principals.

About how RCSD might proceed with open enrollment ...

Will you screen incoming students and have the ability to look at their records?

Candidates for open-enrollment would not be accepted until their records have been reviewed to ensure that they meet qualifications set out in the policy guidelines.

How do you protect current school programs with quality students with unknown incoming students who may have academic and disciplinary issues?

All applications must meet criteria set forth in board adopted guidelines.

What about potential special needs/special education students? Do we have the money and the staff to handle them?

Students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) would be accepted if the district has the capacity to provide the services specified in their plans. Capacity varies according to specific services.

Would you consider a survey sent to the teachers and staff in Reynoldsburg City Schools? I would love to see an anonymous survey that let them express their opinion on open enrollment. If so, would you publish the results for the community?

The Reynoldsburg Education Association has already begun to gather feedback from its members and is sharing information, including anonymous comments, with the district administration and board of education. Reynoldsburg staff members are encouraged to participate in all community meetings and discussions about this topic. A separate survey of staff, excluding parents and community members, is unlikely.

Will new students limit opportunities for Reynoldsburg residents?

Reynoldsburg students will always get priority of placement in schools and programs. Open enrollment status would be granted to individual students on an annual basis, space/program capacity permitting. Once enrolled, open enrolled students may compete with Reynoldsburg students in athletic, music or other competitive fields. The Ohio High School Athletic Association, however, enforces a rule that students transferring into a school district in 9th grade or higher may not participate in athletics for one year.

Will RSC students have priority for programs and academies over 2nd-year open-enrolled students?

Yes. Open-enrollment is granted annually according to capacity. An open-enrolled student does not have to be accepted to a full program even if the student has previously been served by the district.

No one has the same situation as Reynoldsburg – offering open enrollment and offering academies. How do you ensure my children can move within those freely – will there be space?

Resident students have priority in placement in academies.

Some classes are difficult to enroll in due to not enough offered and not enough teachers at both campuses. Our students are getting shut out now. What happens when others add to numbers?

The district cannot offer some specialized courses, such as electives or AP courses, that do not draw enough students to be efficient. In those cases, more students might lead to specific classes being added or reinstated. Choices also are limited by staffing levels. If the district continues to cut personnel, choices will only dwindle further. Open enrollment has the potential for preventing future cuts.

What would happen with the STEM program? So far, all the people I've seen pulling their kids from parochial schools are applying to the current STEM program. Would the district consider making more elementaries into a STEM?

Resident students would have first priority for all programs/schools, including Summit STEM Elementary, STEM Middle @ Baldwin and any of the high school academies. District officials are currently evaluating interest in the elementary program. Should sufficient interest become evident, a second STEM-focused elementary could be developed.

How many open enrollees/new teachers?

The district is estimating that about 200 new students would make a significant impact on revenues without significantly affecting capacity. New positions are unlikely, however, the revenue may allow some of the 20 positions slated to be eliminated next year to be saved/replaced.

Is this an endorsement of school choice? Does the teacher's union agree?

RCSD has a long history of embracing school choice. The district sponsors four community schools and takes its role very seriously to ensure there are high quality choices for parents and students. The district strives to offer rigorous programs that compete with any other options available. Regardless of whether the district would "endorse" school choice, Ohio has it. To remain viable, districts must be competitive. The Reynoldsburg Education Association has taken an active role in learning about the open enrollment proposal and sharing information with its members. The REA has not taken a position on open enrollment, at this time.

How will you "police" this policy on class size limits (in reference to over-crowding)?

Reynoldsburg principals and district officials monitor class sizes during heavy enrollment periods (early Spring and late summer) as well as throughout the school year. Staff assignments are determined in the spring in response to student enrollment, and adjusted throughout the summer as necessary. Decisions about whether to accept intra-district open enrollment applications (Reynoldsburg students who wish to attend Reynoldsburg schools other than their neighborhood schools) are decided based on class sizes and capacities. Similar processes would be necessary to determine where the district could accommodate open-enrolled students.

How many actual positions are locked in for these required "capstone" internships which include evening classes and meetings? Do we have enough positions for all?

Capstone programs are in development. Like with any other program or course, resident students would be served first.

(Would) students (from) out-of-district (be) coming back for evenings too?

Open-enrolled students would have the same requirements as resident students.

What makes you believe you won't lose more students if open enrollment is approved?

Students and families already have choices of private schools, community schools and other open enrollment districts. Reynoldsburg already is competing for resident students. Open enrollment provides the opportunity to compete for more students.

When will the vote be held for open enrollment?

A vote is possible at the next regular board meeting at 7 p.m. Tuesday, May 15, at Reynoldsburg City Hall.

How will you keep "thugs" out of our schools?

The district expects serious students will be attracted to Reynoldsburg's rigorous programs. Open-enrollment applicants can be turned away for prior suspensions or expulsions of 10 consecutive days (per Ohio law). Just like resident students, open-enrolled students who are not able to meet standards for behavior at school can be assigned alternative placements, such as online courses from home.

How are we going to get quality kids to take pride in our Reynoldsburg schools?

The district has high expectations for all students. Open enrolled students are likely to think highly of the schools or programs they choose to attend.

If we go to open enrollment, will we gain art, music, gym and sports?

If open enrollment is successful, it could generate revenue to support any or all district programs. Art, music, and physical education are likely to benefit, as those are the programs put most at risk by declining revenues.

If you accept open enrollment students, will some of this revenue help the extra-curricular programs at all or will our district continue to make these programs be 100 percent self-funded?

Due to the loss this year of Touchdown Club donations, some costs of the athletic program have been absorbed by the district's general fund. This funding currently is not stable because of declining revenues. Another revenue source, such as Open Enrollment, could protect many programs that are important to Reynoldsburg students and families.

If we have open enrollment, how many students are we anticipating gaining?

Initial estimates are about 200, among the district's 12 buildings. Current enrollment numbers are being evaluated in comparison with recommended classroom caps to determine specifically how many seats are available in each grade level, program and building.

Will the dress code policy still be enforced with uniforms?

Yes. The policy will be enforced for all students.

Since we have the academies, will the students get tested to see if they qualify for the academies?

Academy selection is on student choice, not qualifications. Open-enrolled students could choose any academy, if space/program capacity is available.

Is open enrollment endorsed by the teacher's union?

The Reynoldsburg Education Association has been active in gathering and sharing information with its membership, and has been sharing questions of the membership with the administration. The association has not taken a position at this time.

If we are experiencing financial difficulties, why did the superintendent get a \$25,000 raise?

When it seemed imminent that Superintendent Dackin would be appointed the next state superintendent, the Reynoldsburg Board of Education decided unanimously to offer a raise as incentive for him staying in Reynoldsburg.