

# POLICY POINTS

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

## School Reenrollment: Choosing to Stay

Few other states have embraced school choice as readily as Arizona. Due to the combination of strong statutes that encourage charter school development, open enrollment, tuition tax vouchers, and homeschooling options, analysts have described Arizona as “the first real education market in the country” (Gresham, Hess, Maranto, & Milliman, 2000). Of these choices, charter schools are the most expansive option available to parents. In 2008, 477 Arizona charter schools enrolled 8% of the total student population (Arizona Education Network, 2009).

Policy makers enact school choice policies as a way to reform public education by encouraging parents to “vote with their feet” by leaving low-quality schools and enrolling their children in better schools. If students can leave poorly performing schools, the policy assumption is that the threat of student exit will motivate all schools to improve the quality of education in order to maintain student enrollment. As a result, the success of school choice policies is most often measured by the number of students that leave their home school to take advantage of choice options.

But what about the other side of the equation? What about students who stay in the same school, even though other options are available to them? This issue of *Policy Points* introduces a unique perspective on school choice by examining students who reenroll in the same school from one academic year to the next.

### Can reenrollment be a measure of school quality?

The percentage of students who return to the same school might be considered as a measure of school quality. When businesses have a high rate of repeat customers, they often interpret it as a sign that the quality of their product or service is satisfactory. In fact, businesses often focus on improving quality as a means to encourage customer loyalty. School-choice opponents would likely agree. Once a student decides to enroll in a charter school, the assumption is that they made that choice because they found the school to be of sufficient quality. The same logic applies to their decision to reenroll in charter schools – those charter schools that parents perceive as higher-quality should have a higher reenrollment rate than the charter schools perceived to be lower-quality.

Interestingly, the same assumptions are not made when students reenroll in traditional public schools, particularly those schools that the state has deemed as low quality. In these cases, the prevailing assumption is that these students are “trapped” in their schools either by systematic restrictions, individual inertia, or other barriers.

### What percentage of Arizona public school students reenroll in their school?

At the beginning of the 2009 academic year, 85% of eligible elementary school students reenrolled in the same school they attended at the end of 2008. Students were considered eligible to reenroll if the next grade was offered at the school. So, 6<sup>th</sup> graders in a K-8 school would be considered eligible to enroll in that school, while 6<sup>th</sup> graders in a K-6 school would be considered ineligible.

Some might assume that the reenrollment rates for urban schools would differ than the reenrollment rates of rural schools because more school choice options are available in urban



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Arizona Indicators is an online information resource and analysis tool that centralizes data about the state and its communities. Arizona Indicators presents interactive visualizations, clear data descriptions, and public opinion data in a broad range of content areas.

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areas. In fact, the reenrollment rate for urban schools (those in Maricopa and Pima counties) is 84%, which is not much different than the reenrollment rates for rural schools (87%).

For those students who move in the middle of an academic year, especially between traditional public schools, the assumption is that these more mobile students may be in unstable family circumstances that prompted or contributed to their decision to change schools. In the average Arizona elementary school, 8% of students eligible to reenroll at the end of 2008 had entered the school sometime during the school year. The percentage of mid-year transfers was slightly higher for charter schools (9%) than traditional public schools (7%). The number of mid-year transfers, however, has very little influence on school reenrollment percentages. School reenrollment rates are not uniformly lower for schools with high numbers of students moving in to the school midyear.

### Are students more likely to reenroll in charter schools or traditional public schools?

In general, Arizona’s elementary students are more likely to reenroll in traditional public schools. In traditional public schools, 87% of eligible students reenrolled from 2008-2009, while 77% of eligible students reenrolled in charter schools.

### Are students more likely to reenroll in higher quality elementary schools?

The AZ LEARNS school achievement labels provided by the Arizona Department of Education are the primary measure of school quality to inform school choice decisions. Interestingly, there is no clear trend toward either more parents reenrolling in higher-quality schools or fewer parents enrolling in lower-quality charter schools. For example, reenrollment rates for Highly Performing schools (88%) are close to reenrollment rates of Failing/Underperforming schools (84%). The lowest reenrollment rates (82%) are among Arizona’s Performing elementary schools. The weak trend between measures of school quality and reenrollment rates is likely disconcerting news to Arizona’s school choice advocates who are invested in the idea that parents will take advantage of higher quality school choice options. They are not moving in ways that school choice advocates would expect.

Reenrollment in Elementary Schools by AZLEARNS Label, 2009

	Schools	Mobility	Reenrollment
Excelling	257	4%	91%
Highly Performing	211	6%	88%
Performing Plus	335	8%	84%
Performing	489	10%	82%
Failing/Underperforming	166	8%	84%

Source: Arizona Department of Education, original analysis.

### What is the difference between the reenrollment rates of high-quality charter schools and high-quality traditional public schools?

Traditional public school parents in high-quality schools are more likely to reenroll their students in the same school. While 89% of traditional public school parents reenrolled their students in Highly Performing schools, 80% of charter school parents did the same.

Reenrollment in Highly Performing and Excelling Elementary Schools, 2009

	Traditional Public Schools			Charter Schools		
	Schools	Mobility	Reenrollment	Schools	Mobility	Reenrollment
Excelling	211	4%	91%	46	4%	87%
Highly Performing	178	5%	89%	33	7%	80%

Source: Arizona Department of Education, original analysis.

### What is the difference between reenrollment rates of low-quality charter schools and low-quality traditional public schools?

The largest differences between traditional public and charter schools are among low-quality schools. Charter school parents are considerably less likely to reenroll their student in a low-quality charter school than traditional public school parents. This is

Reenrollment in Failing and Underperforming Elementary Schools, 2009

	Traditional Public Schools			Charter Schools		
	Schools	Mobility	Reenrollment	Schools	Mobility	Reenrollment
Failing/Underperforming	145	8%	86%	21	13%	71%

Source: Arizona Department of Education, original analysis.

likely welcome news to school choice advocates because it provides evidence that charter parents are taking advantage of their choice options to exit low-quality schools.

In either case, however, most students who attended a low-quality school in 2008, charter or traditional public, reenrolled in the same school the next academic year. Charter school opponents could point to these results as evidence that the effort placed on promoting school choice policies is disproportional to the low rate in which parents actually use school exit as a means of improving the academic standing of their student.

### What are the policy implications of student reenrollment?

There are many implications for using reenrollment rates as a measure of school quality but two rise to the top:

- For nearly two decades, Arizona education policies have focused on promoting school choice options and encouraging parents to take advantage of them. Yet, most parents, even those in low-quality charter schools, decide to reenroll their students in the same school rather than leave. The results indicate that policy makers should not overemphasize school choice as a means of reforming public education and instead, work toward policies that improve the schools students are in already. Such policies could include safer schools, increasing afterschool opportunities or linking the delivery of other social services to schools. This shift translates into a reinvestment in public schools, an idea that is overlooked in discourse that becomes preoccupied with school choice.
- The weak relationship between school-quality indicators and reenrollment rates may indicate that parents rely on measures of school performance besides AZLEARNS labels. Factors such as safety, neighborhood cohesion, and extracurricular offerings may also play a role. Yet, state and federal policies continue to promote school labeling as the primary way to inform parents of school choice options. Research on how parents make school choice decisions indicates that parents rely on informal sources, such as interpersonal contacts and parent networks, to make school choice decisions and that parent networks are more established and effective in higher socioeconomic status communities. As a more effective strategy to inform parents, state policies should supplement school labels and report cards with more personal options such as parent information centers.

### What about my school?

Morrison Institute's Arizona Indicators project has posted the reenrollment rates for all Arizona public schools online at <http://arizonaindicators.org/>. Parents and other stakeholders are encouraged to review reenrollment rates for their school and surrounding schools. We encourage parents to discuss reenrollment rates with other parents in informal settings and to discuss them in more formal venues, such as board meetings. Parents should consider the reasons why the reenrollment rates among individual schools may differ. Also, parents should ask educators and administrators what is being done to encourage students to reenroll and improve their school.

#### About this reenrollment study:

Data for this report were collected from the Arizona Department of Education data warehouse. Analysis included 653,227 individual student records from 1,463 elementary schools statewide. Reenrollment rates were calculated using original analyses of student movement patterns.