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i Opinion

OUR OPINION

Our Opinion: Massachusetts must reconsider the cost of school choice on districts like Pittsfield

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Pittsfield Public Schools are in a tight spot. In the spaces where city residents hope their kids can get a quality education, stubborn systemic issues persist, from lagging performance measures to bullying. The district is dealing with the new reality of budgeting on the edge of the COVID cliff, without a sizable assist from federal aid for the first time since the pandemic struck in 2020. The city it calls home is on shaky fiscal footing, too, so local funding is limited.





Every year, hundreds of Pittsfield students go to school somewhere else. They take millions of dollars with them

Amid all this, hundreds of Pittsfield students “choice out” to surrounding districts every year — and millions in vital state aid dollars follow them out the door. That is the reality of school choice, a public school enrollment option available to Massachusetts families since 1991. More than three decades later, it’s time for state lawmakers and education leaders to reconsider what this program practically means for school communities like Pittsfield’s.

School choice was conceived as a way to give parents more public school enrollment options and channel those decisions into incentives for school districts to innovate and improve on their services to students. School districts receive a baseline of \$5,000 for each student who chooses in, and that “reimbursement” is paid for by the district from which the student chooses out. Districts can decide whether to receive choice-in students, but they cannot opt out of allowing students who reside in their district to choose out.

Consider a frequent example that plays out hundreds of times per year: When a family who lives in Pittsfield chooses to send their child to the neighboring Lenox district, Lenox gets a bump in funding to their schools budget — siphoned off from Pittsfield’s pool of Chapter 70 state aid. As such, the intended incentive of school choice takes two very different forms, depending on whether your district is receiving more choice-in students or seeing more students choose out, a sweet carrot for the former but a harsh stick for the latter.

It’s not surprising that Pittsfield gets the short end of that stick, given its geographic and socioeconomic conditions. It’s the most populous district in the county with a more tenuous tax base and uniquely urban challenges compared to surrounding districts with more wealth per capita and smaller

classroom sizes looking to fill seats to stave off dwindling rural enrollment. No wonder that Pittsfield saw more students choice out (586) than any Massachusetts community except for Springfield (827), according to the most recent data from the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. And since Pittsfield's population is about one-third that of Springfield's, the back-of-the-envelope math suggests Pittsfield is number one when it comes to the ratio of choice-out students to total population. That dubious distinction results in Pittsfield losing more than \$3.8 million annually in state aid due to the outflux of school choice students in the 2022-23 school year.

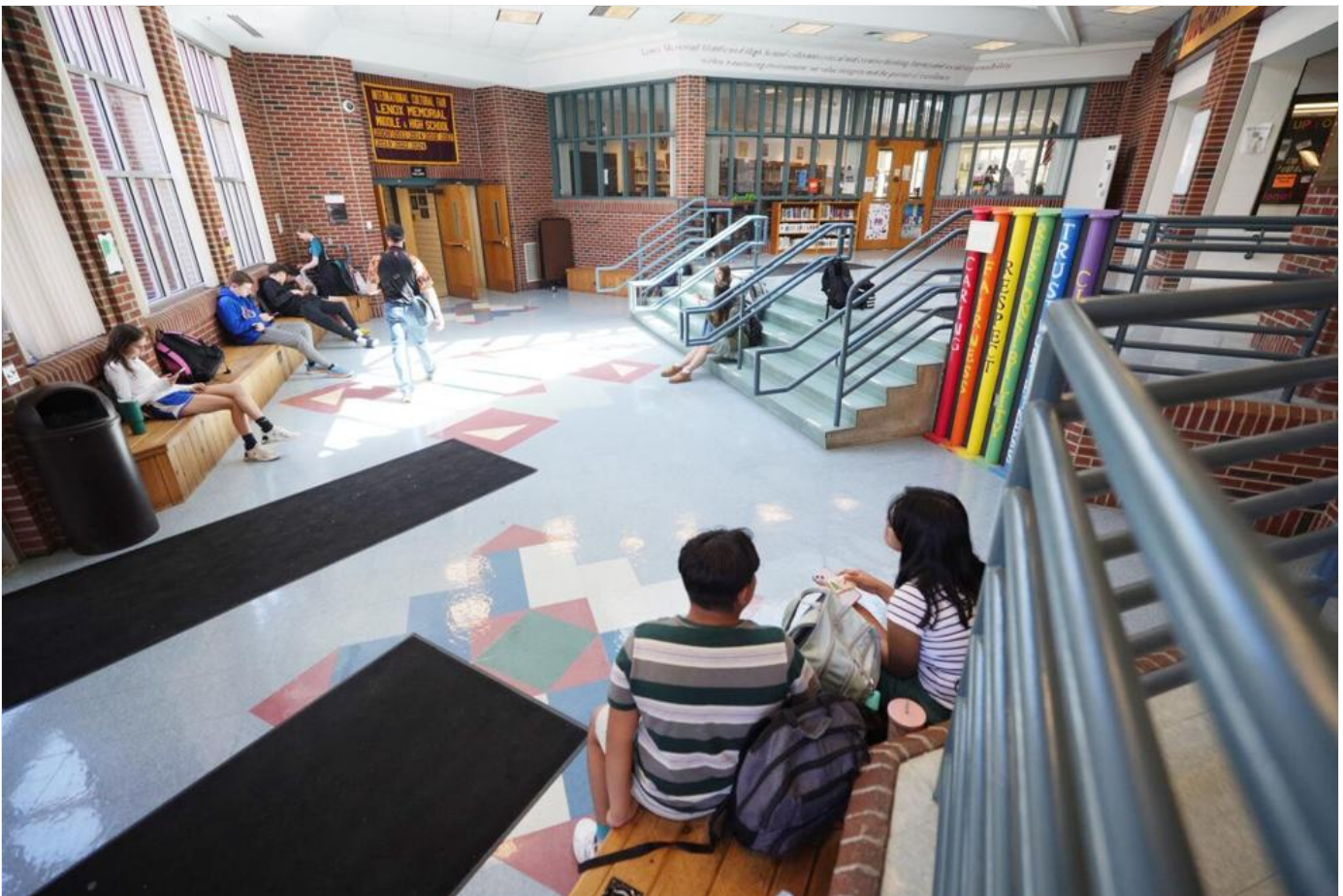
To be sure, the existence of school choice is not the root of all problems for Pittsfield and other districts facing similar struggles. Yet it's reasonable to ask whether the program in its current form is helping or hurting the underperforming school communities it was designed to help. Regardless of the lofty intentions of school choice, how exactly are districts like Pittsfield supposed to "innovate" their way out of their problems while paying out more of their precious but limited state aid every year?

In the state's annual "report card" reviews of public schools, Lenox Memorial Middle School scored in the 94th percentile in "accountability" last year — an exceptionally high mark that considers "achievement, growth, English learner progress, chronic absenteeism, high school completion, and advanced coursework completion." Meanwhile, Pittsfield's two middle schools scored significantly lower. Herberg Middle School was rated at the 24th percentile in the bottom quartile of the state's schools. Reid Middle School received an abysmal rating in the 1st percentile, which is to say among the bottom 1 percent of schools statewide on the aforementioned critical metrics.

It's worth noting that DESE's overall assessment of the two Pittsfield middle schools' concerningly low scores is that they require "assistance or intervention" in the form of "focused/targeted support." Yet the school choice

status quo offers the opposite of “targeted support.” It means well-off districts like Lenox that are already excelling by all meaningful metrics are given budget boosts on the backs of districts with deep systemic issues that serve, on average, much more economically and socially vulnerable families. By our lights, that is not a push toward innovation or improvement but a pull into a vicious cycle for districts like Pittsfield trying to serve lower-income and more diverse school communities.

We urge the Berkshire delegation and Beacon Hill leadership to begin a hard but necessary conversation: What are the observable and predictable consequences of school choice on public education in poorer districts? After three decades, we believe a hard look at improving the formula is warranted.



Why do Pittsfield families 'choice out' to other schools? It depends who you ask ...

We don't anticipate the Legislature to take up the matter amid the current

session's hectic final stretch; at the most optimistic, we'd like to see lawmakers take it up later this year in the light of a fresh two-year session. That means for at least one more school year cycle, Pittsfield must do its part to address the issue internally within its district. Pending any potential rethink of school choice from the top, district officials must address this worrying trend from the bottom up with not just words but a solid plan to stanch the bleeding. What are the specific measures being considered to address bullying and other behavioral concerns? What are the realistic improvements to pursue at the city's poorly performing middle schools? In addition to clear-eyed assessments of weakness, the district still has strengths that attract some choice-in students even as it loses more choice-out students; what are those strengths, and how can they be built on?

All that is easier said than done. It will require city education leadership and city councilors to heal an unproductive communication breakdown that resulted in an ill-timed and ill-considered last-minute cut to the district's budget in city spending talks. Pittsfield's schools and the community they serve deserve better — from local leadership as well as the state's school choice paradigm.

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