

**STUDENTS IN FLIGHT ([HTTP://WWW.STARTRIBUNE.COM/STUDENTS-IN-FLIGHT-PREVIEW-SCHOOL-CHOICE-IN-MINNESOTA/436740613/](http://www.startribune.com/students-in-flight-preview-school-choice-in-minnesota/436740613/))**

Third-graders at the Community School of Excellence, a St. Paul charter school, listened in Hmong language class. Photo by Leila Navidi, Star Tribune

# Rising exodus of students puts more pressure on Minnesota schools

In Minneapolis and St. Paul, a third of students are now leaving for other districts.

By Anthony Lonetree (<http://www.startribune.com/anthony-lonetree/10645316/>) and MaryJo Webster (<http://www.startribune.com/maryjo-webster/303594441/>) Star Tribune

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Holly Heaser always considered herself an advocate for St. Paul's public schools, but the East Side mother of three faced a dilemma a few years ago when her son approached middle-school age.

Stick with a St. Paul public school, or join the tens of thousands of Minnesota students who leave their home districts every year?

Today, Heaser's seventh-grade son attends John Glenn Middle School in Maplewood, where he has the opportunity to take advanced math and language arts classes lacking in their St. Paul neighborhood schools.

"It has been a great fit so far," Heaser said.

Minnesota students have had the right to attend school in other districts since 1990, but the number of elementary and high school students exercising that option is surging. Last year, about 132,000 Minnesota students enrolled in schools outside their home district, four times the number making that choice in 2000, a Star Tribune analysis shows.

School choice options — open enrollment and charter schools — have proved especially popular with nonwhite or minority students, according to the Star Tribune's analysis of the racial breakdown of students who opt out of their home district. While white students represent 60 percent of all students who open enroll, a higher share of nonwhite students make that choice.

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## STUDENTS IN FLIGHT

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**St. Paul:** Enrollment declines force hard budget choices (<http://www.startribune.com/students-in-flight-part-1-st-paul-enrollment-declines-force-hard-budget-choices/443065933/>)

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**Coming soon:** Choice creates winners - and

Because state education funding follows the pupil, the student exodus from their home district to other cities and charter schools is magnifying budget pressures in districts that lose more students than they gain. It's also transforming the racial diversity of schools across the Twin Cities.

Open enrollment means some districts, like Columbia Heights and Brooklyn Center, have become revolving doors, losing nearly as many students as they take in from other districts. It means some districts, like Minnetonka, are able to fill classroom seats that would otherwise be empty, while others like Burnsville-Eagan-Savage and Osseo now struggle to attract students who live in the district.

In Minneapolis and St. Paul, the number of students leaving has almost doubled in the past decade, and total enrollment is plunging. Both cities now lose a third of their school-age population to other districts or charter schools.

The result: chronic budget shortfalls that are forcing many districts to cut more programs and confront questions about the viability of some neighborhood schools.

Asked about student flight in St. Paul, new Superintendent Joe Gothard focused on the many choices his school district offers families, and its desire to improve and to invest in its physical spaces, saying he is hopeful that "when people really explore all that SPPS has to offer they will make a decision that it is the right place for their child."

losers - across metro suburbs

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**Your school:** What's happening where you live?  
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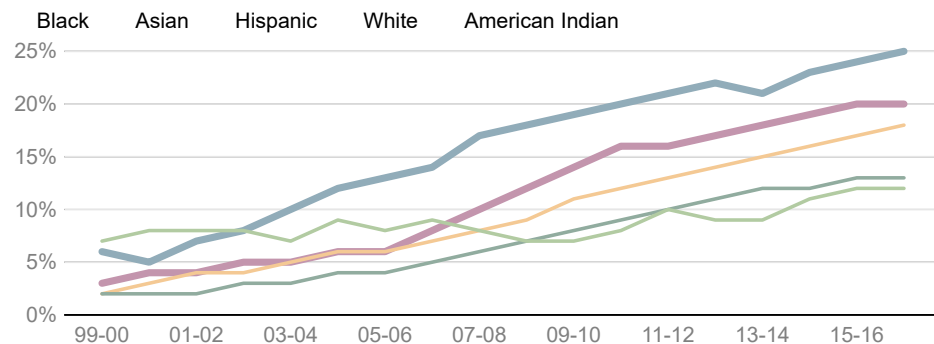
**Tell us:** How did you choose where to send your kids?  
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**Overview:** Surging choice movement reshapes Minnesota's public schools  
(<http://www.startribune.com/student-in-flight-preview-school-choice-in-minnesota/436740613/>)

## In metro, black, Asian students leaving home districts at higher rates

The percentage of students in each racial/ethnic group attending charter schools or open enrolling in districts other than the one where they live.



Source: Star Tribune analysis of Minnesota Department of Education data • Created with Datawrapper

This spring, school board members eyed budget documents for 2017-18 projecting enrollment losses in 41 of 59 school sites — and budget cuts for all but nine of them.

The district is pushing back plans for a new East Side middle school announced a year ago. This year, it hired two consultants to help understand and turn around its enrollment woes.

School board members talk now of holding the line on salary increases for fear they'd force layoffs or program cuts that could drive even more families from the state's second-largest district.

"We are in a very important fiscal place," board member Steve Marchese said recently.

### Many choices

Minnesota pioneered the school choice movement in 1988 when state lawmakers, urged on by then-Gov. Rudy Perpich, enacted a measure allowing students — and the state education dollars attached to them — to cross boundaries to other districts.

Three years later came passage of the nation's first charter school law. As of last year, Minnesota had about 54,000 students enrolled in 166 charter schools. Sixty-eight of those schools were in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Perpich, backed by the business community and education reformers, argued the competition would make public schools better. Critics feared that it would create a system in which older or poorer districts would lose students to newer, growing school systems.

Joe Nathan, director of the Center for School Change, said no one can fault parents for seizing options to do what's best for their children. It's about the students, he said.

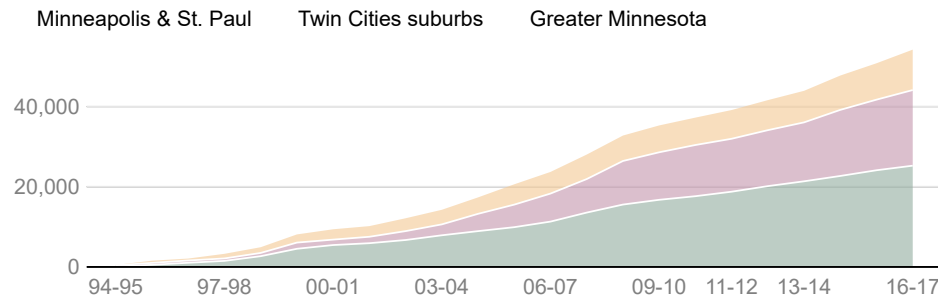
"People of all races deserve options," Nathan said.

The ability to leave on a moment's notice also means parents and their children no longer have to quietly endure cuts in popular programs, or the adoption of unpopular policies.

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## Minnesota's growing charter school enrollment

Number of students enrolled each year in charter schools, according to school location.



*Suburbs includes areas of the 7-county metro, except Minneapolis and St. Paul.*

Source: Star Tribune analysis of Minnesota Department of Education data • [Created with Datawrapper](#)

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In St. Paul, for example, a sweeping reorganization that included converting junior highs into three-year middle schools, plus the mainstreaming of special-education students and English language learners, sent parents fleeing to charter schools and other school districts.

“It was just too much,” Koua Yang, a district teacher and coach, said.

School board members were ousted, and a superintendent, too. Yet in the Como neighborhood where he grew up, Yang said he still hears from parents that the negative attention led them to send their kids across boundaries to the Roseville schools. In 2016-17, Roseville schools drew nearly 1,000 St. Paul students.

Experiences nationally suggest Minnesota can only expect more of the same. Potential blows to budgets and programs means districts will “try to do everything they can to retain resident students,” Scott Croonquist, executive director of the Association of Metropolitan School Districts, said recently.

But they are realists, too, he added. They know that choice is here to stay.

### **Making the switch**

When her son Leo neared the end of elementary school at L’Etoile du Nord French Immersion on St. Paul’s East Side, Susan Janda said the family researched middle school programs, and chose a charter school, Twin Cities Academy (TCA). It had a clear mission, she said, and French immersion instruction.

Then, there was its approach to discipline. Leo, she said, would get distressed by classroom disruptions at L’Etoile du Nord.

“TCA had a very clear set of rules for behavior, including a set of rewards that seemed to have meaning for middle school students: social time at the end of the school day,” Janda said. “We have not regretted the decision.”





(<http://stmedia.stimg.co/08+1004485603+02FLIGHT091717.JPG?w=2000>)

LEILA NAVIDI – STAR TRIBUNE

📷 Gallery: Kazoua Kong-Thao, chief administration officer at Community School of Excellence in St. Paul, right, says hello to kindergartner Happy Her, in plaid, as they pass in the hallway on Sept. 7, 2017.

Other attractive landing spots for St. Paul students include the North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale School District, which attracts nearly 1,000 kids, and the Community School of Excellence, which pulls just over 800 students from St. Paul.

The most popular destination? A charter school in the city's Como neighborhood, Hmong College Prep Academy (HCPA), with more than 1,100 St. Paul students and a seemingly insatiable appetite for growth.

This summer, work crews turned gym space into elementary classrooms. They began work on a two-story parking garage and a new sports dome and athletic field on a vast stretch of land across the street. In 2018-19, when a new elementary addition is finished, the charter school will have room for 2,200 students.

Then, principal Danijela Duvnjak said, smiling, the school might be ready for its next expansion.

Is she joking? "I kind of am," she said. "I'm kind of not."

Like HCPA, the Community School of Excellence is 99 percent Asian, and it, too, is finishing a major building project — a new three-story charter school on Larpenteur Avenue on the North End.

A week ago, library books were in huge stacks on the floor of a shiny new media center. But as she led a tour of the building, Kazoua Kong-Thao, the school's chief administration officer and a former St. Paul school board chairwoman, spoke with pride

about the computer labs and new classroom smartboards, and about the gym and hallway lockers, all financed through a \$30 million bond.

There are emotional connections, too, evident in the mural that details the history of the Hmong people from their native land to St. Paul. Many bought peppers and seeds at a garden center where the new school now stands, and planted them nearby.

“I have families showing up in tears,” Kong-Thao said.

Yang, who teaches at Harding High, has worked with many students who’ve attended Hmong charter schools. Some struggle, he said. But for many families new to America, he said, there is comfort in knowing there are schools with staff members who speak their language and serve traditional foods.

Other St. Paul charter schools show variations of the same lack of racial diversity. Higher Ground Academy is almost entirely black, and Nova Classical Academy is 76 percent white.

A lawsuit filed in November 2015 by St. Paul and Minneapolis parents blames open enrollment and district policies, such as the end of busing and a renewed emphasis on neighborhood schools, for creating schools with disproportionate numbers of poor and minority children.

“That is one potential public policy issue,” said Croonquist, the executive director of the school districts association. “Do the choice options lead to segregated schools and inadequate and inequitable educational opportunities for students?”



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## Top destinations for St. Paul students

Districts drawing 500 or more students who live in St. Paul, by race of those students.

Asian   White   Black   Hispanic   American Indian

Hmong College Prep Academy

Roseville

North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale

Community School of Excellence

Community of Peace Academy

Nova Classical Academy

Twin Cities Academy High School

Source: Star Tribune analysis of Minnesota Department of Education data • [Created with Datawrapper](#)

### A hard look at the future

For districts like St. Paul, enrollment losses and the resulting budget cuts are forcing a hard look at their futures.

Katie Sterns, a consultant hired by the St. Paul district to find ways to boost enrollment, has recommended the hiring of a marketing director and the reinstatement of music and fine arts programs culled in recent budget-balancing.

Asked what she would advise, Robin Lake, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, said: “I would encourage them to be less focused on the number of students they serve, or where they are being served, and more focused on serving the kids they do have very well ... Maybe they get smaller and more effective? That’s just fine.”

On Wednesday, the center will issue a report about enrollment declines that offers a more pointed take for districts like St. Paul: “District leaders should commit to ending the creation of additional legacy costs, such as new buildings or maintaining

unsustainable concessions when collective bargaining agreements are renegotiated.” Those kinds of commitments, the center says, “that are sustainable only if district enrollment grows.”

Another of the center’s recommendations is a touchy one in Minnesota: Regular districts and charter school operators should find better ways of working together, like they do in Denver and Cleveland.

Cooperation here has been hard to maintain when all want the same students. Forest Lake and one of its local charter schools once had a celebrated partnership, but that has unraveled into head-to-head competition. St. Paul uninvited the city’s charter schools from its annual school choice fair.

For now, the focus in St. Paul, Minneapolis and other districts on the losing end of choice is persuading disaffected families to come back — or at least stabilize enrollment. In St. Paul, that includes spending tens of millions of dollars on facility upgrades at Como Park, Humboldt and Johnson high schools. The thinking is they are ripe for enrollment growth.

Como Park will get a new athletic field, and an opportunity, at last, to have a homecoming football game on campus. When the work is finished in 2019, there will be room for another 100 students. Teacher Eric Erickson is optimistic they’ll find them — right there in the neighborhood.

“If the community senses that we’re valued, and if prospective students and families walk in our doors and they see modern, vibrant spaces for learning, with welcoming opportunities, we may be an even more attractive option to more St. Paul families,” he said.

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