2017 EWA FLIGHT series nomination

Minnesota was a leader in expanding school choice in the United States, authorizing open enrollment in 1988 and writing the nation’s first law allowing charter schools in 1991.

Over the years, the newspaper has reported on the growing number of students living in one district and attending school elsewhere because of school choice. Numerous stories have also chronicled the proliferation of charter schools and the steady enrollment declines in two of the state’s biggest districts, the Minneapolis and St. Paul public school districts.

Two years ago, the newspaper measured segregation in metro area schools, finding charter schools to be some of the most segregated of all. This raised the questions: Who are the students opting for school choice? And where are they going?

Using the state’s public records law, the Star Tribune asked the Minnesota Department of Education to generate never-before released data files to help answer these questions.

The data files, for each school year since 1999, showed how many students from each racial group had used open enrollment to attend a neighboring school district, or had attended charter schools. It identified the district those students lived in and the one where they attended school instead.

This groundbreaking analysis revealed school districts that were losing as much as 30 percent of their potential students, and others that were filling otherwise empty chairs thanks to open enrollment. It also yielded surprising results that crushed the stereotype that only white students were using school choice.

Reporters fanned out to show how this played out around the metro area for schools, families and taxpayers. Because many school leaders were reluctant to discuss this sensitive issue, reporters showed up at football practices, bus stops and real estate offices to find families.

~~Options that allow students to live in one district and attend school elsewhere have long been in place in Minnesota, but their impact is just now coming into focus, thanks to reporting by the Star Tribune.~~

~~A groundbreaking use of school enrollment data revealed a rising tide of defections/movements away from traditional schools that is reshaping public education in Minnesota.~~

~~For the first time, the newspaper was able to collect and analyze enrollment data by race and location to track students who leave their home school districts for charter schools or public schools in other districts.~~

**~~[MaryJo/Beena, can you add a sentence or two about the degree of difficulty in getting/dealing with the data?]~~**

~~The data identified school districts seeing the greatest impact, and reporters fanned out to show what the numbers meant to schools, families and taxpayers. Because many school leaders were reluctant to discuss this sensitive issue, reporters showed up at football practices and bus stops and real estate offices to find families.~~

The series revealed that decisions by individual parents are adding up to big change for Minnesota schools:

* Even while the number of school-age children is rising in the two center cities, enrollment is dropping steadily. Minneapolis and St. Paul are losing 30 percent of their students to charter schools and other school districts, forcing major budget cuts and scrambling to hold on to those who remain.
* Though white flight dominates the discussion elsewhere, black families comprise the largest group leaving Minneapolis Public Schools. More than half of black school-age children go to school elsewhere.
* Accelerating student movement is dividing suburban school districts into winners and losers and fomenting taxpayer unrest. Attempts by one district to close its borders is provoking a spike in home purchases in the attendance area.

At the same time, we used our expanding digital toolbox to bring the findings into sharp focus for readers.

* An animated promotional data visualization that crystallized the overarching changes taking place
* Multiple additional data visualizations tailored to highlight the issues in each location
* A database that allowed parents to see movements in every district in Minnesota, not just the ones we highlighted
* A "Tell Us" form, inviting readers to share their experiences, acted as a focused form of engagement in addition to our typical commenting process

The reader response was intense. More than 130,000 page views online. Thousands of people used the lookup tool. Hundreds of reader commented. Some left their contact information on our “Tell Us” page.

Months later, the response is still echoing and we are still reporting on the fallout. The scope of the enrollment declines in Minneapolis and St. Paul has changed the conversation about what the traditional districts should do. Residents in one of the “winning” suburban districts are pressing school officials to discuss the taxpayer cost of open enrollment.