

## School diversity plans protect local commitment to equity

HF 228 would remove protection of local concerns and encourage segregation

Iowa's system of free universal public education does more than prepare students for the future. It also brings communities together. One tool to assure this is the authority of locally elected school boards to implement Voluntary Diversity Plans, which permit a school district to deny open-enrollment exits that would jeopardize the ability of the public school to provide quality learning opportunities for all its students. **This authority is used by five school districts in the state** — a range of large and small, urban and rural — **Des Moines, Davenport, Waterloo, Postville and West Liberty.**

Governor Reynolds' omnibus education proposal, SF 159, which also provides for vouchers to incentivize students to leave public schools for private schools, includes **a provision to remove the authority of districts to stop open enrollment requests that defy Diversity Plans.** House File 228 focuses only on the diversity plan/open enrollment issue, and is eligible for debate in the House.

**We need to be enhancing equity in Iowa, not restricting it.** Gutting local Diversity Plans is a serious blow to that goal, and the principle of assuring that every child deserves quality educational opportunity no matter their ZIP code. **The Governor's plan and the House bill turn that principle on its head, reducing funds available for local districts to meet that obligation.**

**Gutting local Diversity Plans is a serious blow to the principle that every child should have quality educational opportunity no matter their ZIP code.**

As the Iowa Association of School Boards observed in its testimony on the Governor's bill:

▶ *"The five districts with voluntary diversity plans review open enrollment requests to determine the impact it will have on the diversity in a specific building. The key factor is socio-economic status and English language status. The research is clear that maintaining a balance in a classroom of students of all socio-economic statuses has a positive impact on student achievement. Elimination of the ability to review and accept or deny an open enrollment request will negatively impact the ability of these districts to minimize a concentration of low-income or English-language learner students."*

**On the fiscal side, open enrollment diverts taxpayer dollars from one school district to another.** The Legislative Services Agency has estimated this amount to be \$7,389 per student, based primarily on the per-pupil cost used to build a school budget, and a state supplement for teacher leadership. So as LSA notes, the impact to the state is zero, but the sending district may well lose state funds without any offsetting cost savings. Based on previous open enrollment requests denied due to diversity plans, LSA estimates Des Moines schools would lose over \$1.4 million, Davenport \$783,234, and Waterloo \$421,173.

As LSA cannot determine how many open enrollment requests were not made due to diversity plans, those figures may be low — as may also be the case with Postville (\$14,778) and West Liberty (\$0). Having no diversity plan would encourage more students to leave, with no plan in place to stop them.

**Eliminating diversity plans would undermine the sense of community that arises from a shared commitment to local schools.**

Eliminating diversity plans, even more than the current open enrollment system, would undermine the sense of community that arises from a shared commitment to local schools. Honoring a commitment to **shared goals and responsibilities** is Iowa's best hope to provide the strongest schools and equal opportunity for every Iowa child.

As it affects only five districts at the moment, this issue can easily fly under the radar when larger threats to public education are proposed, such as vouchers and expanding so-called "charter schools." But many pieces of the Governor's plan can be passed on a piecemeal basis, with devastating impacts on equal opportunity, community cohesion and public education, even if the controversial, shiny object of school vouchers is stopped. The open enrollment expansion is one example.