



HOW CAN CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS ENCOURAGE EQUITY?



The authorizing boards that decide which charter schools are allowed to open and remain in operation have the ability to emphasize equity.

But do they?

A recent study suggests that some do, while others do not, and that an equity-heavy focus by authorizers can lead them to receive charter school applications that, in turn, emphasize equity.

The [study](#), led by NEPC Fellow [Katrina Bulkley](#) of Montclair State University, and published by the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice (REACH) at Tulane University in New Orleans, examined 60 charter school applications to nine authorizers in five states between 2011 and 2015. Researchers also interviewed 10 staff members associated with the authorizers, which included universities, states, nonprofit organizations, and a school district—all selected with an eye toward representing a diverse set of structures. Neither the states nor the authorizers were identified.

Of the nine authorizers, seven had written express organizational missions that stressed equity. However, staff at only six of the authorizers strongly expressed equity-related goals during interviews with researchers. And just four authorizers attracted charter school applications that heavily stressed equity-related objectives.

“Authorizers who say they focus on equity also tend to send stronger signals to charter applicants about this value, but not always,” according to the study’s authors, who were Bulkley along with Amanda Lu, Kate Meza Fernandez, and Alica Gerry.

The study suggests that an authorizer with an equity-focused mission, whose staff emphasizes equity during interactions with potential applicants, will then be more likely to receive more applications that emphasize equity.

Examples of equity-related traits identified in charter school applications included evidence that schools had selected locations in areas with diverse populations; would recruit diverse students; selected board members with ties to diverse neighborhoods; and will offer free or low-cost enrichment programs, wraparound services, and transportation to and from school.

“This provides insight into best practices for authorizers who wish to increase opportunities for educational equity for vulnerable student populations,” the authors conclude. “More broadly, policymakers and the school choice community at large should consider how equity through intentional planning around educational systems and services for historically marginalized students can be achieved in a top-down approach starting with authorizers.”

NEPC Resources on Charter Schools

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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