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## DO STUDENTS CHOOSE THEIR CHARTER SCHOOLS, OR IS IT THE OTHER WAY AROUND?



At the K-12 level, school choice is usually framed as students choosing schools. But the reality is that schools also choose students, as explained in *School's Choice: How Charter Schools Control Access and Shape Enrollment*, published this month by Teachers College Press and authored by University of Colorado Boulder doctoral candidate [Wagma Mommandi](#) and NEPC director [Kevin Welner](#).

Unlike traditional public schools, which are typically obligated to accept any student who lives within a defined geographic zone, choice schools like charters use a selection process that, in theory at least, allows families to find schools that match their needs. That selection process is held out as fair because, in most states, charter schools with more applicants than seats are required to select students based on the results of a lottery designed to give each applicant the same chance of admissions.

However, even where state law prohibits charters from blatantly cherry-picking their students from among those who have applied, some charters have adopted creative practices that shape their student body before, during, and even after the enrollment process.

For their book, Mommandi and Welner draw upon interviews, reports, books, research articles and chapters, and news accounts to identify the ways that some charter schools have gamed the system in order to shape their student bodies. Here's what they found.

- 1. Location games:** Nearby students are more likely to enroll—especially since many

charter schools do not offer transportation.

- 2. Nicheing:** Charters often have a special focus—such as Montessori education or academic rigor. This can be beneficial, but the adoption of a niche or special focus has created a signaling system that filters out some students as it attracts others.
- 3. Narrowcasting:** The message of advertising and the audience for that marketing can powerfully shape who applies to a charter school.
- 4. Hoop scheming:** Charters typically run their own application processes, and these processes can be either streamlined or difficult. Mommandi and Welner identify hoops that can be especially cumbersome for certain families, including forcing parents to apply in person during the workday, adopting lengthy and burdensome applications that require students to write multiple essays, requesting proof of U.S. citizenship, requiring applicants with disabilities to document their needs prior to enrollment, and administering entrance or placement exams.
- 5. Steering the wheel:** Conversations with staff can send a strong signal that certain children are—or are not—welcome at a school. For example, research suggests that charters are more likely to ignore requests for information from parents who inquire about how the school would serve students with disabilities.
- 6. Conditioning enrollment:** Even families who make it past the application process may find their students screened out during the enrollment process. Some charters, for example, have refused to accept students who had not taken certain courses, failed to maintain a minimum GPA, or were under suspension or expulsion at the time of application.
- 7. Assigning parent homework:** Charters may discourage certain families from applying by, for example, requiring parents to volunteer a certain amount of time at the school, or pay money in lieu of volunteering.
- 8. Denying services:** Charters can steer away or push out many students by simply failing to offer the services they need. In this way, charters can avoid enrolling or retaining students who are more expensive to educate because they have disabilities or need assistance learning English.
- 9. Counseling out:** Even students who make it past the twin barriers of application and enrollment may find themselves (and their parents) advised that it's time to leave a charter school.
- 10. Pass interference:** Charters may use grade retention and threats of such retention to push lower-achieving students back to the district-run neighborhood school.
- 11. Aggressive disciplining:** So-called “no excuses” charters “sweat the small stuff,” imposing harsh discipline measures even for minor infractions such as chewing gum or failing to persistently look at the teacher during class. Charters may also be more likely to adopt zero tolerance policies that mandate suspension or expulsion for certain offenses—regardless of the context. This aggressive discipline can push out unwanted

students.

**12. No backfilling:** Traditional public schools typically accept all the students who walk through their doors, even if those students arrive midyear or don't enroll at the lowest grade level offered—e.g. a junior who enrolls at a high school that serves grades 9-12. Transfer students often face a transition period as they get used to their new environment, so when charters don't backfill—when they restrict their admissions to those who enroll at the beginning of the year or at a certain grade level—they shift the burdens of transiency to other schools. Also, when combined with practices that push and counsel students out if their behavior or grades don't meet certain standards, a no-backfilling policy can lead to a situation in which the upper grades of a school are increasingly high-performing as all their struggling peers have left.

**13. Pricing out the public:** Many charters have imposed burdensome fines and fees that are unaffordable for lower-income families. For instance, a Texas charter, in violation of state law, sent families a letter stating they were required to pay \$100 a child or \$200 per family to reserve a spot for fall in the building. Another charter required parents to invest in the company that built the school.

These practices are of concern for a variety of reasons. They can worsen socioeconomic and racial segregation. They can create undue financial and academic burdens on surrounding schools that welcome all students. They can manufacture the illusion of quality by excluding struggling students, leading to rewards from accountability systems, or donations from philanthropists impressed by their high test scores. And, when a particular charter school's quality is indeed high, restrictive practices can deny educational opportunities to the historically underserved families that charter proponents purport to prioritize.

## 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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