

## Charter Schools More Likely to Ignore Special Education Applicants, Study Finds

By Arianna Prothero on December 20, 2018, 4:56 PM | No comments

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Charter schools are less likely to respond to application inquiries from parents of students with severe disabilities, according to researchers from Columbia University and the University of Florida.

**The new study** dives into the old debate over whether charter schools favor the easiest-to-educate students when it comes to admissions either to save money or to make their schools look better academically.

The researchers looked at both charter schools and traditional public schools in areas where families can choose schools within a district.

All schools in the sample were less likely to respond to inquiries for students who appeared to have behavioral issues or poor grades, compared to inquiries that did not indicate any specific issue with the students. Schools were also less likely to respond to parents with Hispanic-sounding names, especially if the schools had a mostly white student population.

Charter schools, like traditional public schools, are supposed to admit any student who comes to their door, provided there is space. But critics of charters have long alleged that the schools curate their student bodies in other ways—such as by discouraging certain students from enrolling.

To test whether this happens, the researchers sent emails from fictitious parents to nearly 6,500 charter and traditional public schools in 29 states and the District of Columbia. The sample included about half of all charter schools in the country.

The study found that charter schools were 5.8 percentage points less likely to respond to a query claiming to be from a parent of a student with severe disabilities.

So-called "no-excuse" charter schools, which serve predominately low-income minority students in a strict, college-prep academic environment, were 10 percentage points less likely to respond.

A recent **analysis of federal data** by the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools found that students with disabilities make up about 10.6 percent of all charter school students, compared to about 12.5 percent in traditional public schools.

However, researchers for the study from Columbia and the University of Florida also found that state funding systems could play a significant role in whether charter schools respond to inquiries from families with students with severe disabilities.

Charter schools in states such as Michigan and Wisconsin that get reimbursed for a large portion of their realized expenses—versus having special education services funded through a formula or block grants—were 7 percentage points more likely to respond than charter schools in other states.

"This pattern of results is consistent with an explanation that the costs of educating certain students are imperfectly compensated in most contexts," write the study's authors, Peter Bergman of Teachers College, Columbia University and Isaac McFarlin Jr. of the University of Florida. "This pattern could create an incentive for schools to provide less application encouragement to students with special needs."

It's important to note that when the researchers posing as parents asked for application details for their child with disabilities, they described having a student that required being educated in a restrictive environment—lin other words, a costly student to educate.

"If the signal were for less restrictive or less costly services, the results may have differed," write the researchers.

The study says that students with disabilities on average cost twice as much to educate compared to their non-disabled peers and can cost as much as eight to 14 times more money to educate.

The study's secret-shopper-style design is reminiscent of **auditing programs that have been used in a couple of states**, such as Massachusetts and D.C., to monitor charter schools to make sure they are not discouraging harder-to-educate students from applying.

The study concludes state agencies could get schools to respond to parents with harder-to-educate students if they regularly conducted similar audits.

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