


Tailoring the Charter School Population

Students with behavior problems, low achievement or special needs are sometimes not encouraged to apply to charter schools.

By **Lauren Camera**, Education Reporter Dec. 26, 2018



Charter schools may be less likely to encourage students with special needs to apply in a recent study.  ISTOCKPHOTO

CHARTER SCHOOLS AND public schools of choice – those in school districts that allow students to choose from any number of schools instead of zoning them to just one – are less likely to encourage students with a history of poor behavior, low academic achievement or special needs to apply.

Charter schools, in particular, were less likely to encourage students with a potentially significant special need to apply.



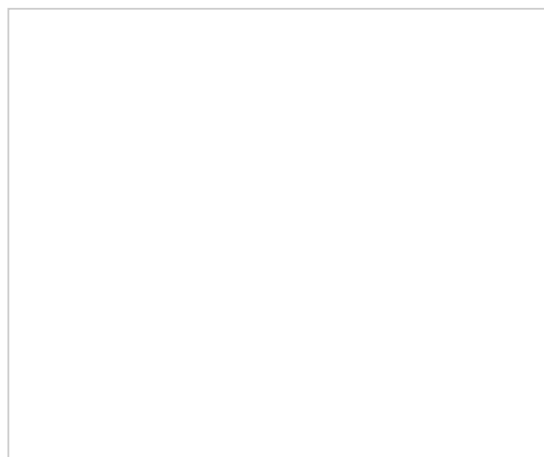
That's the latest [research](#) published Thursday by Peter Bergman, an assistant professor at Columbia University's Teachers College, and Isaac McFarlin Jr., assistant professor at University of Florida's College of Education.

The researchers sent emails from fictitious parents to nearly 6,500 schools in 29 states and the District of Columbia, asking whether any student is eligible to apply to the school and how to do so. Each email signaled either a disability status, poor behavior, high or low prior academic achievement, or no characteristic at all. The researchers also varied students' implied race, household structure and gender.

"We find that schools respond less often to messages regarding students whom schools may perceive as more challenging to educate," the researchers concluded.

The baseline response rate was 53 percent. But emails signaling a student with a potentially restrictive special need were 5 percentage points less likely to receive a response; emails signaling a behavior problem were 7 percentage points less likely to receive a response; and emails signaling prior low academic achievement were 2 percentage points less likely to receive a response.

Notably, emails indicating good grades and attendance were neither more nor less likely to receive a response.



In one sub-analysis, the researchers compared the responses of charter schools directly to the nearby traditional public schools. Overall, they found the response rates similar with one major exception: If an email signaled a child had a significant special need, charter schools were 7 percentage points less likely to respond while traditional public schools were not more or less likely to respond.

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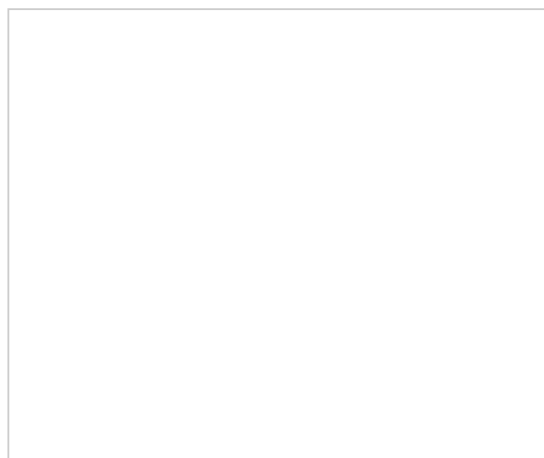
"This is one of the most striking findings of the study," McFarlin said, "because it raises the question of whether high-performing charter schools are successful in part because they screen out the costliest-to-educate students from their applicant pools."

The researchers underscored the importance of the specific finding since students with disabilities are, on average, twice as expensive to educate than students without a disability, and those with severe disabilities, they said, can cost eight to 14 times to educate.


The researchers also found differences in response rates by the implied race of the family, but not by household structure: Schools were 2 percentage points less likely to respond to emails signed by "Hispanic-sounding names." And while there were weak differences detected in response rates for emails signed by "Black-sounding names," the differences were largest in schools serving predominantly white students.

Charter schools are public schools, and therefore they are legally required, like traditional public schools, to accept and make accommodations for any student who wishes to enroll. Most operate their admissions based on a common application and a lottery system in order to ensure fairness.

"But even if schools cannot control whom they admit, frictions in the choice process may still let them influence who applies," the authors write. "Families often lack information about schools' eligibility requirements, quality, and admission processes. These frictions raise the possibility that schools of choice manipulate the applicant pool by providing less application information to the parents of children perceived as more difficult to educate."



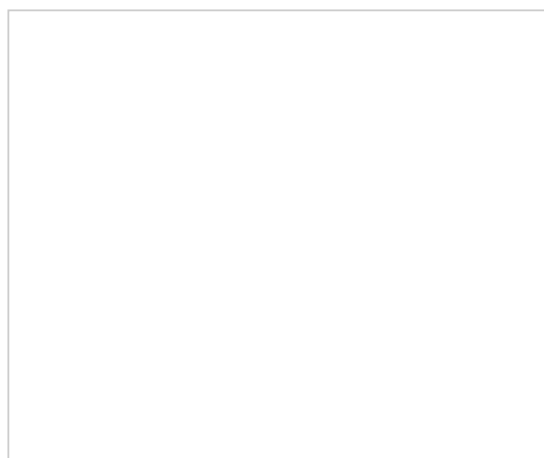
Critics of charter schools have long argued that they siphon the best students out of traditional public schools – high-performing students who are easy to educate and have few behavioral challenges and disabilities.

But charter school advocates have pushed back on that argument, and  say the new research presents no evidence to suggest students were not permitted enrollment in schools. And in fact,

they say, this report suggests that all schools could do better with their communications efforts. Had the fictional families went through with an application, the students likely would have been accepted.

"Charters are public schools open to all students and are tuition free," said a spokeswoman for the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools. "We did not see in the study any findings that students were in fact prevented from enrolling in any charter school for any of the reasons that the researchers were testing. The study does however suggest that schools could improve their administrative and communications practices when responding to inquiries from members of the public and parents."

Charter schools are the fastest growing type of school choice in the U.S. According to the National Center on Education Statistics, more than 2,000 charter schools have opened since 2010. They enroll about 3 million students at nearly 7,000 schools in 43 states and D.C.



On the whole, students at charter schools tend to perform no better or worse than traditional public schools. But charter schools in urban areas, the researchers note, which often embrace a "no-excuses" mentality in which students are held to high behavior and academic standards, have been shown to have large, positive impacts on student achievement.

When the researchers isolated the nearly 300 no-excuses charter schools in their study, they found that they were significantly less likely – by 10 percentage points – to respond to emails that signal a student has a potentially significant disability.

Lauren Camera, Education Reporter

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