

Do charter schools cherry-pick their students?

Yes. Although charter schools are legally open to all students, and most use lotteries to choose the students they enroll in, charter schools, like other businesses, have built-in incentives to attract and enroll populations of customers that serve the schools’ best self-interests.

This is why

Because students come to schools with different costs due to behavioral challenges, language proficiencies, and learning disabilities, they can pose financial challenges to charter schools that have to compete in an environment of consumer choice. These challenges incentivize charter schools to shape their marketing campaigns, enrollment processes, school curriculum, discipline practices, and other policies to ensure their schools attract and retain students who are less expensive to teach and are more likely to have higher achievement outcomes.

Charter schools can employ enrollment practices that can control the pipeline of students they serve to ensure they serve the least costly students.

Charters are not allowed to directly select students based on students’ demographic characteristics, but they generally control their own marketing programs and their admissions practices, which can have the same effect.

Charter schools can screen out students who are more apt to struggle in school. Charters are often free to employ various tactics – such as declining to provide transportation services, to participate in the federal government’s free and reduced-price lunch program, or to provide school information in languages other than English – to make themselves undesirable for low-income families or English language learners. Some even ask for large donations.

Charter schools keep only the students they want. Through various methods, charter schools can push out their most challenging students who must then

return to local public schools that must accept all students.

Charter schools can locate where they want.

Market competition incentivizes most charter schools to locate in areas where they have the competitive advantage of being able to target specific student demographics.

Look at the facts

Nationally, charter schools serve far fewer students with disabilities – 8% to 10% – compared to public schools where the national average is 13.1%. And the disabled students who do enroll in charter schools tend to have disabilities that are less severe and less costly to remediate than those of students in district schools. [<https://www.educationnext.org/charters-expected-serve-kinds-students/>]

A 2017 study of **Pennsylvania’s** charter schools found they serve disproportionately fewer of the state’s most vulnerable students than traditional public schools serve, and they often segregate students by type of disability. [<https://www.elc-pa.org/resource/inequities-in-pennsylvanias-charter-sector-segregation-by-disability/>]

A study of charter schools in New Jersey found the schools enroll proportionally fewer special education and ELL students than public schools, and special education students enrolled in charters tend to have less-costly disabilities.

An analysis of three of the largest school districts in California found charter schools saved \$74.65 million



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by serving a lower percentage of students with special education needs and by enrolling a significantly smaller share of students with the most severe—and typically most financially costly—disabilities.

Charter schools have been known to **screen student applications** through various tactics including demanding academic records or placement exams, requiring parents to volunteer, asking for disciplinary history, or **requiring in-person interviews or visits to the school** during business hours.

Only two of the Great Hearts Academies – a network of charter schools in **Arizona** and **Texas** – in the Phoenix area participate in the federal government’s free and reduced-price lunch program even though more than half of public school students in Arizona qualify for the program.

BASIS – a chain of charter schools in **Arizona, Texas,** and **Washington DC** – provides no transportation, does not participate in the federal government’s free-lunch program, and requests suggested families contribute at least \$1,500 a year per child. **In its 18 Arizona schools,** the enrollment is 83% white and Asian while the state’s population of white and Asian students is 42%. The schools have no English language learners, and only 1.23% of students have disabilities. While over 47% of students in the state receive free or

reduced priced lunch, BASIS has none.

Charter schools can locate in **suburban communities** where high real estate costs are offset by being able to appeal to less risky students who may damage the schools’ market position.

New York City’s largest charter school chain, Success Academies, where one of its **principals was caught** keeping a “Got to Go” list of troublesome students, shapes its high-performing student population through high attrition. The schools do not “backfill” after grade two, replace students who leave mid-year, and **do not fill seats opened up** by student attrition in the upper grades of its schools.

Charter schools in many districts have been **known to expel students** at higher rates compared to their surrounding public schools, which can **lead to students dropping out**. The most comprehensive, national review of disciplinary records of charter schools, published in 2013, found that charters – especially in **Connecticut** and **Massachusetts** – suspended and expelled higher percentages of students in preschools and elementary schools than the public schools did, and that charters **suspended higher percentages of Black students** and students with disabilities than public schools did.

WHAT PRIVATIZERS BELIEVE	WHAT WE BELIEVE
Charter schools are public schools that, by law, must freely admit all students.	Charter schools are businesses that can tailor their services to the students they want.
Charter schools have to use lotteries and other impartial admissions processes because they are popular and have wait lists.	Charter school enrollment practices are not transparent and marketing is used to shape the student body that attends.
Charter schools set high academic and behavioral standards because that’s what parents want.	Charter schools that appeal only to a certain population of families further stratify children’s opportunities to learn and serve only those parents who are most capable of working the system.

Bottom Line

When schools operate like private businesses, as charter schools do, the most vulnerable students will be treated like the least desirable customers, and not all students and families will be equitably served.