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Who chooses charter schools?

*Parents first “choose to choose” an alternative to their traditional public school.*

Almost all parents who choose to send their children to charter schools actually make two choices. Researchers specify that in school districts with charters, parents first “choose to choose”—that is, they make the decision to look for an alternative to their traditional public (or “district”) school. Next, they choose which alternative school they want to enroll their child in.

Researchers have emphasized that both the initial choice to choose and the actual choice of school require parents to invest time and energy into making their choices.

Different populations of parents have varying resources and access to information that affect their capacity and their likelihood to “choose to choose.” Factors such as socioeconomic status, level of education, and race have all been found to influence the likelihood that parents will exercise the option to choose or not. For instance, early research concluded that parents of higher socioeconomic status were more likely to choose.\(^1\) Many researchers agree that disadvantaged populations of parents have fewer resources to choose a charter school, such as the time to devote to searching for a school, access to sufficient or reliable information about their options, access to transportation, language skills and more. Parents’ social capital and their social networks also largely influence the likelihood that they will exercise choice and influence the types of choices they make.\(^2\)

In addition to socioeconomic and other differences, the variation across different charter school districts and states also impact parents’ capacity and likelihood to choose. For instance, some but not all state charter laws require that school districts provide transportation to all charter schools for their students.\(^3\) For parents who do not have access to alternative transportation to take their children to school, this distinction would affect their ability to choose an alternative to their traditional “district” public school. At the district level, some school districts provide information to parents about their school options. For example, Chicago organizes fairs that showcase all public K-12 schools, including charters, whereas other districts do not offer the same amount of outreach or information to parents.

Lastly, in some charter school districts, parents’ actual choice of charter school is affected by the availability of seats and the level of demand for the school. In most states, but not all, a random lottery for seats is held if a charter school is in high demand and oversubscribed, as we discuss below.\(^4\)

How do parents choose charter schools?

Advocates of charter schools often argue that when given the power to choose, parents will select the best school for their child. Some advocates contend that with choice, parents will act much like rational consumers in a marketplace. Other advocates support school choice as a means by which to equalize educational opportunities, especially for families with fewer resources who live in school districts with low-performing schools. Given the option of better schools, they argue, parents will move their children out of such schools. On the other side, opponents of charter schools reject the notion that school choice will automatically lead parents to choose the best school for their child. They contend that education is much more complex than

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common consumer goods and that therefore parents who choose do so based not only on their knowledge of the quality of the school, but on their own values, priorities and other factors. The research shows that there is a difference between these parents’ stated reasons for choosing charters and their actual choice behavior.

Studies have found that parents who choose to enroll their children in charter schools frequently cite educational or academic factors as their principal reasons for choosing the school—they often say that high academic performance is a top reason in choosing a charter school. A 1997 survey conducted by researchers associated at the time with the Hudson Institute asked parents at 30 charter schools in nine states to report the reasons why they chose their charter school. The leading answers were largely academic in nature: the smaller size of charter schools, higher standards, better teachers, a greater opportunity for parent involvement and a program that was closer to their educational philosophy. These findings have been largely corroborated in later studies, such as a 2007 survey of charter school parents in Indianapolis, Indiana, by researchers associated with the National Center on School Choice, a research organization at Vanderbilt University’s Peabody College funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education that focuses on “how school choice affects individuals, communities, and systems.” The researchers found that 63 percent of the parents surveyed said that “academic quality” or “academic focus” was the most important reason they chose a charter school. In addition, the study found that parents who rated the academic quality of their child’s previous school as average or below average were significantly more likely to report academics as a top priority in their school choice.

Although much of the literature has found that parents most frequently cite academic reasons for choosing charter schools, it is important to note that these findings relate to a generalized picture of the entire charter landscape, and charter parents’ priorities will vary between different families and different districts. For example, another state-level study found racial differences in parents’ stated reasons for choosing schools. In a study published in 2002, researchers with the University of Houston conducted interviews with 1,006 charter school parents in Texas and asked them to rank their three top reasons for choosing their school: test scores, discipline, school racial or ethnic characteristics, location, the teaching of moral values or safety. The researchers wanted to know whether parent preferences differed across racial groups. They found that parents across the entire sample chose “discipline” and “the teaching of moral values” as two of their top three reasons. White parents were the only group that rated “test scores” most frequently as their most important consideration; African-American parents rated “test scores” second to “the teaching of moral values” as most important; and Hispanic parents did not rank “test scores” in the top three at all and rated “discipline” as most important.

In a 2003 qualitative study, a researcher associated with the Educational Testing Service conducted longitudinal interviews across nine months with a group of 48 parents in Detroit about their choices in selecting a middle school or high school for their child. The researcher found that the majority of parents who chose a school other than their traditional “district” public school (36 of 48 parents) cited not only academic reasons (58 percent) for choosing a school, but also “holistic” reasons (69 percent), or reasons that focused on their child’s overall well-being.

Furthermore, some researchers and scholars have argued that much of the literature on how parents choose charter schools is limited. Most studies, like those summarized above, focus on parents’ stated preferences in schools and not on their actual choice behavior. When researchers have studied parents’ actual choice behavior, they have found that charter parents’ actual choices
Research has found that charter parents’ actual choices in schools often do not fully align with their stated preferences.

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Some researchers have also postulated that most parents simply do not have enough resources to be the informed consumers that charter advocates believe them to be. This problem is particularly acute for low-income parents: they tend to make less informed choices in charter schools than do higher-income parents. On the other hand, the study in New Orleans suggested that even when parents were presented with clear academic performance data and other explicit information, they chose schools based on other factors. More research is needed to determine the cause of observed disparities between parents’ stated preferences and their actual choice behavior.

**How many charter schools use lottery systems, and how do they work?**

In many school districts or cities, some charter schools are in such high demand that they must use a lottery to determine which families get seats in the school. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS)—a nonprofit that describes itself as “committed to advancing the quality, growth, and sustainability of charter schools”—released a report in 2014 that calculated the national charter school “waitlist”—that is, the number of student applications for charter school seats that were going to be determined by a lottery. In the 2013–14 school year, they estimated that a total of 586,511 individual students did not get into any charter school they applied to. Overall, the NAPCS estimated that 80.3 percent of charter schools nationwide had a waitlist for seats for the 2013–14 academic year, based on data gathered from state-level departments of education, state-level charter school support organizations and surveys administered to charter schools that don’t otherwise report wait-list data.

These numbers show that a large majority of charter schools have a waitlist for seats, many of which resort to a lottery system to decide how seats are allocated. Many researchers, including a team led by Caroline Hoxby that studied the lottery system in New York City, have pointed to evidence that these random lottery systems do work effectively; that is, they allocate seats in a fair and nondiscriminatory manner. Hoxby and her colleagues found that there are for the most part no demographic or other differences between the groups of lottery winners (those who get seats in charter schools) and lottery non-winners (those who do not) in New York City.

Lotteries for seats in charter schools have different rules and regulations in different states. In some state school districts, these lotteries are random and each family has an equal chance of “winning” a seat in a school that it applies for. In other state school districts, by contrast, charter school lotteries give more weight, or preference, to certain groups of students and families to give them a better chance of winning a seat in the school.
For instance, in New York City, where around 94 percent of charter school students are admitted into their charter school through the lottery system,\textsuperscript{21} the state law requires charters to give enrollment preference to returning students, siblings of students already enrolled in the charter school and students who live in the district where the charter school is located.\textsuperscript{22} In other states, the state law requires charters to give preference in the lottery to disadvantaged groups. In Arkansas, for example, priority is sometimes given to racial minorities, in order to comply with other state laws regarding school desegregation. In Nevada, some charters are required to give priority in their lottery systems to students deemed to be “at risk,”\textsuperscript{23} such as students from low-income families, students with limited English proficiency, students who are at risk of dropping out of high school and students who do not meet minimum standards of academic proficiency.\textsuperscript{24}

In January 2014, the U.S. Department of Education weighed in on these different rules governing lottery systems and released nonregulatory guidelines for charter schools across the nation that have received additional financial support from federal grants and other funds through the department’s Charter Schools Program. These federal guidelines permitted charter schools receiving federal grants to give preference in their lottery systems to low-income or educationally disadvantaged students.\textsuperscript{25}

**Does parental satisfaction with charter schools differ from parental satisfaction with traditional public schools?**

Research has shown that a large majority of parents with children in charter schools are satisfied with their children’s schools. In general, charter school parents report higher levels of satisfaction with their children’s schools than do parents of children at traditional public schools.\textsuperscript{26} But some researchers have argued that parents who have “chosen to choose” charter schools are more likely to report higher satisfaction only because they want to convince themselves that they made a good choice.\textsuperscript{27} Parental satisfaction matters because, as noted below, some states use parental satisfaction to evaluate charter schools.

Surveys have recorded high parental satisfaction with charter schools since the early expansion of charters across the country. One of the earliest surveys of charter school parents’ satisfaction—conducted in 1997 by researchers associated at the time with the Hudson Institute and published by the Brookings Institution together with a series of other early evaluations of charter schools—asked parents from 30 charter schools in nine states to rate their level of satisfaction with different features of their children’s charter schools. A large majority of parents reported being “very satisfied” with each feature, especially with educational features, such as class size (75.2 percent), curriculum (71.6 percent), individual attention from teachers (70.8 percent) and teacher quality (56.6 percent).\textsuperscript{28} The study found that parents of charter students with special needs reported high satisfaction as well.\textsuperscript{29}
These findings have been largely corroborated in more recent research, and across states and districts, in studies where parents were asked to grade their children's schools using letter grades from “A” to “F.” As with most data on charter schools, it is important to keep in mind that parental satisfaction with charter schools varies a great deal across different states and in different school years. But the overall trend shows that charter school parents are very satisfied and are more satisfied than traditional public school parents.

- In 2001–02, researchers who at the time were associated with the Lynch School of Education at Boston College and with Stony Brook University surveyed parents of children in charters and traditional public schools in Washington, D.C. Charter school parents gave higher grades on all measures—such as the schools’ teachers, principals or facilities—than parents of children at traditional public schools. For instance, 49 percent of charter school parents gave their child’s school an overall grade of “A,” whereas only 39 percent of traditional public school parents gave their child’s school an overall grade of “A.”

- Researchers at the University of Southern California administered a survey in 2006 to parents of children enrolled in 17 charter schools, located primarily in urban areas in Southern California. Seventy percent of the California charter school parents who were surveyed gave their child’s charter school an overall grade of “A.”

- In New Orleans, researchers with the RAND Corporation in 2009 found that 41 percent of charter school parents gave their child’s school a grade of “A” overall, whereas only 18 percent of traditional public school parents gave their child’s school an “A” grade.

Despite these findings, researchers have noted that charter school parents could be reporting higher levels of satisfaction because people in general tend to ascribe positive attributes to the choices they make, a phenomenon that cognitive psychologists refer to as “choice-supportive bias.” In districts with charters, researchers specify that parents must first “choose to choose” an alternative to their district’s traditional public school and then choose which alternative school they want to enroll their child in. Some researchers have argued that parents who have “chosen to choose” are more likely to report higher satisfaction with whatever school they choose—charter or not—because they want to justify the choice they made and reassure themselves that the search process was a good investment of time and energy. By this logic, parents who send their children to the traditional public school in their neighborhood or district are less likely to report high rates of satisfaction, because they have not actively chosen their child’s school.

To test this possibility, some studies have examined if parents’ satisfaction with their children’s charter schools remains high or if their satisfaction diminishes over time. In the study of Washington, D.C., charter and traditional public school parents’ levels of satisfaction, researchers who at the time were associated with the Lynch School of Education at Boston College and with Stony Brook University used data from four rounds of parent surveys—conducted from 2001 to 2004—to see if charter school parents’ and traditional public school parents’ satisfaction changed over time. The researchers found that the differences between the levels of satisfaction of charter school parents and traditional public school parents did in fact diminish over time. After five years, charter school parents in Washington, D.C., were not any more satisfied with their schools’ curriculum, teachers or facilities than traditional public school parents were.
How do charter authorizers use parental satisfaction to evaluate charter schools?

In addition to being a focus of the research on charter schools, some state laws require charter authorizers to use parental satisfaction as a metric to evaluate charter schools. According to the database of charter authorizing laws managed by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), there are at least three states—Arkansas, New York and Texas—in which the charter laws require authorizers to consider parental satisfaction in the evaluation and renewal processes for existing charter schools. In at least two other states—Georgia and New Hampshire—charter laws create mechanisms for parents to request the revocation of a school’s charter if they are very dissatisfied with the school or its performance. For more information on charter authorizers, see our Governance and Regulation section.

Does parental involvement at charter schools differ from parental involvement at traditional public schools?

Members of the education community and researchers alike have emphasized for decades the importance of parental involvement in improving student performance. Charter advocates contend that charter schools allow for greater parental involvement than traditional public schools. Often, charter schools also specifically require more involvement from parents than traditional public schools do. However, there is substantial variation within each sector. For instance, in 2012 the Chicago Board of Education adopted a policy that will require traditional public schools to adopt plans to encourage greater parent involvement.

Many charters require parents to sign contracts when they enroll their children. These contracts ask parents to pledge their involvement in various aspects of their child’s schooling, such as helping with homework or attending parent-teacher conferences, and/or in various areas in the school, such as with volunteer hours or with governance decisions. In five states—Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, New Hampshire and Tennessee—and in Washington, D.C., charter authorizing laws require that charter schools involve parents in school-level governance. Some opponents of charter schools, on the other hand, have argued that parental involvement requirements could deter lower-income and minority parents from enrolling their children in charters, for fear that they would be unable to fulfill the requirements of the parent contracts. In the past few years, however, many charter schools have relabeled these contracts as “parent-school contracts” or “home-school contracts” in an effort to emphasize that the responsibility of supporting students is shared by parents, teachers, and schools, so that the requirements of the contracts are not a burden on parents alone. For more information on parent contracts, see our Innovation section.

The research has shown that charter school parents do tend to be more involved in their children’s schools and schooling than parents of children enrolled in comparable traditional public schools. A study by researchers with the University of Connecticut and Duke University examined data from the 1999–2000 Schools and Staffing Survey, administered to charter and public school administrators and teachers by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics. The researchers tried to determine if school administrators’ ratings of parental involvement differed between charter schools and comparable traditional public schools. The study asked school administrators to rate how many parents participate in activities such as open houses, parent-teacher conferences, volunteering in school, signing contracts, and school governance. Controlling for school location and the demographic characteristics of students, the
study found that parent participation was consistently significantly higher in charter schools than in public schools for almost all of the activities included in the survey. The differences between charter school parental involvement and traditional public school parental involvement were most pronounced at the elementary and middle school levels. The exception was parent-teacher conferences, for which the differences in parent participation between charter and traditional public schools was not significant.45

Some studies argue that due to their more autonomous governance structure, charter schools are able to have, and tend to have, more direct policies requiring parental involvement than do most traditional public schools,46 although there is variation in each sector. Some charter schools’ mission statements also directly prioritize parent involvement, although not all do so. Researchers with Columbia University, the University of Oregon, and the University of California at Berkeley recently concluded that as a result of charters’ policies and activities around parent involvement, parents’ engagement with their child’s schooling was consistently higher in charter schools than in traditional public schools.47

However, many researchers have noted the difficulty of comparing parental involvement in charter versus traditional public schools, because there might be numerous factors that are difficult or impossible to account for. Researchers note the potential for a “self-selection bias” among charter school parents, meaning that parents who make the effort to choose a charter school (what researchers call “choosing to choose”) might have certain unobservable characteristics that also make them more inclined to be involved at their child’s school. These researchers argued that this bias also could have an effect on comparisons between charter parents and traditional public school parents. Because samples of charter parents are not random—the parents are distinguished by having “chosen to choose”—it is difficult for researchers to control for the effects of these unobserved parent characteristics and to isolate the effect of school type (charter or traditional public school) on parental involvement.48 There is research which shows that charter schools’ lottery systems do assign seats fairly (that is, randomly) among families who have applied for seats (see above), such as in New York City49 or Boston,50 but the comparison is only between parents who have already “chosen to choose.”

Many charter opponents and other observers have expressed concerns that charter schools report higher levels of parental involvement simply because charters attract parents who are already highly involved in their children’s schooling. They argue that this siphoning off—or “creaming”—of involved parents could result in negative effects on the traditional public schools that lose these students and families to charter schools.51 There is some evidence in the research to support this. One early study, published in 1996, that examined parental involvement in San Antonio schools found that parents with children in “choice public schools”—a category that included, but was not limited to, charter schools—were more involved than parents at traditional public schools in the district. But the study also found that those choice public school parents had been more involved in their children’s previous schools as well.52 For more information on “creaming,” see our Diversity and Inclusion section.

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Based on data from the Schools and Staffing Survey, University of Connecticut and Duke University researchers looked at changes in survey responses between the 1993–94 and the 1999–2000 surveys to determine if the introduction of charter schools in a school district had affected parental involvement at traditional public schools in that district. The study relied on traditional public school administrators’ responses to the survey questions about parental involvement. The researchers found that “schools located near charter schools are more likely than other schools [in charter school states] to see lack of parental involvement become a more serious problem between 1993–94 and 1999–2000.” In fact, school administrators at traditional public schools rated parental involvement significantly lower after charter schools had been introduced into their districts. Although these findings cannot determine causation, they are notable. They could mean that highly involved parents are pulled away from traditional public schools and into charters. They could mean that the presence of charters makes traditional public school administrators less satisfied with the involvement of parents in their schools. They could mean that the presence of charters makes traditional public school parents less inspired to become involved. They could mean that administrators were dismayed about the introduction of charter schools in their districts and the possibilities of losing any parents to the new charters. Future research is necessary to follow up on this study in order to determine the cause of the researchers’ findings.
Notes


23 Nevada Revised Statutes 386.500 – “Pupil ‘at risk’” defined, Senate Bill No. 220, Nevada State Legislature (July 16, 1997). https://www.leg.state.nv.us/NRS/NRS-386.html#NRS386Sec500


