

How School Choice Becomes School's Choice

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Not all are welcome

Charter school choice was supposed to open up a world of educational possibilities for students. Charters like to take on the mantle of “public” schools with all that it implies, including doors that are open to all students. But [in a new book](#), Kevin Welner and Wagma Mommandi lay out the ways that charter schools control access and shape enrollment. *School's Choice* is heavily researched with numerous examples of how each of these methods work in the charter world.

Welner is the director of the [National Education Policy Center](#). Mommandi is a former public school teacher currently working toward her PhD in education policy at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education.

How did charter schools end up carefully curating their student bodies? The authors point to the modern charter movement's connection to free market ideology.

A key assumption of market theory, which envisions charter schools as businesses and parents and their children as consumers, is that all potential customers are treated equally. In reality, however, charter schools perceive students as differently valued consumers...

Charter marketing requires charters to show strong test score performance, which means students who might bring the numbers down are not high-value customers. Likewise, some students come with needs that make them more expensive to educate.

This is the fundamental flaw in the “competition will make schools better” theory, because *the surest path to success for charter schools is to seize the niche of schools serving “lower cost” students with higher test scores and stronger out-of-school opportunities and privileges.* At worst, the authors argue, charter schools “add another mechanism for opportunity hoarding,” because “children will lose in the competition for resources when their parents are not able to actively seek or are relatively ineffective at competing for those resources.”

Welner and Mommandi lay out twelve ways (with some overlap) that charter schools exercise control over their student enrollment.

Targeting a niche Design of the school and its stated mission, such as academic rigor or “classical” education sends a strong message about who is or is not welcome at the school.

Location and transportation The authors highlight several charter chains that do not provide transportation, thereby discouraging families that cannot afford to provide transportation on their own.

Marketing The school makes decisions and how, where, when, and even if to market, often aimed at a particular group of “consumers.”

Schools can place conditions the application process, creating numerous hoops to jump through. This can continue through the process of submitting the application, when certain students can be steered

away (“You’ll have to waive your child’s IEP.”) Parents may find obstacles at the time of actual enrollment, such as placement tests.

Welner and Mommandi cite several examples of schools that require parental contributions of time or money; sometimes these are hidden as requirements to buy official school uniforms and accessories. Charters can limit certain student enrollment by not offering certain programs, such as special education, emergent bilingual education, and free or reduced lunch. Students depend on such programs are thereby encouraged to look elsewhere, or go back to public schools that are legally required to provide those programs.

Some charters have a well-established history of pushing out or counseling out students (e.g. Success Academy’s [infamous “got to go” list](#)). Schools can use other methods to nudge students out, such as repeated disciplinary action, or combining minimum GPA requirements with threat of retention (“If you stay in this school, you’ll have to repeat the grade.”) Strict disciplinary rules and demands for compliance and conformity (like the No Excuses school model [recently abandoned by chains like KIPP](#)) can push students toward the door.

And finally, the authors point to the practice of not backfilling, meaning that students can only choose the charter at one particular point, typically in one of the lower grades and never in the middle of the school year. Charter student withdrawal during the year or even during the academic career simply leaves an empty seat that the charter will not choose to fill.

Welner and Mommandi provide numerous examples of all these practices, which vary from state to state depending on local law. They also note that some of these controls can be used inclusively; for example, Maine is one state where the charter percentage of students with special needs actually exceeds that of public schools.

This compact but thorough book makes it clear that for many students, a charter school system provides no choice at all. It is the charter school that does the choosing, not the students or parents.