

# Study asks why students with more to gain from charter schools are less likely to apply

April 4 2018, by Kathleen Maclay

---



Credit: University of California - Berkeley

Low-achieving, non-white and poor students stand to gain the most academically from attending charter schools but are less likely to seek charter school enrollment than higher-achieving, more advantaged

students who generally live closer to charter schools, according to research from the University of California, Berkeley.

UC Berkeley economist Christopher Walters says in his paper, "The Demand for Effective Charter Schools," forthcoming in the *Journal of Political Economy*, that examination of charter middle [school](#) enrollment in Boston suggests a need to adjust the schools' selection processes by expanding parental outreach and education, and targeting neediest students to better realize charter schools' educational potential while reducing achievement gaps between racial and socioeconomic groups.

He says he was surprised that students with larger achievement benefits are less likely to apply to Boston's charter schools in the Boston Public Schools, Massachusetts' largest school district, which boasts an unusually large share of charter students.

Instead, BPS charter applicants tend to have higher socioeconomic status and fewer academic problems than students who do not apply to charters, are less likely to qualify for subsidized lunches, to have special education status, or to be classified as limited English proficient.

"In the literature on school choice programs, it is often assumed that higher-benefit kids will be more likely to opt in to these programs, either because they may be less satisfied with the effectiveness of their other schooling options or because they have some information about whether the program is a good match," Walters says.

But in Boston, New York and most other cities," writes Walters, decentralized charter school application systems require parents to take steps beyond the usual school choice process, possibly erecting logistical barriers for some high-benefit families.

## **Time for a change?**

Enrollment in Massachusetts charter schools is open to all students living in the local school districts. Students interested in more than one charter school have to submit an application to each school. Charter school admissions are determined by a random lottery when applications exceed the number of available classroom seats. However, in Boston's traditional schools, lists are maintained of [student](#) preferences for schools and a streamlined, single offer is generated for each student.

It turns out, Walters says, that while most charter applicants submit just one application, an offer to enter into a charter lottery increases the probability of charter attendance by 64 points, and a one-mile increase in the distance of an applicant's residence from a charter school decreases the probability of charter attendance by 2.6 percentage points.

But Walters says his findings "suggest that this is not the right way of thinking about who decides to participate in school choice programs, at least for Boston charter schools."

The school choice process differs in important ways across American cities, and Walters says that the institutional details could make a difference in terms of who chooses charter schools and other alternative schooling options.

Some cities, such as Denver, for example, are set up where charters and traditional public schools are combined into a single application process, while in Boston the charter application process operates outside the traditional public school choice system.

Walters says that Boston has tried to expand outreach to students who might otherwise be less likely to apply to charter schools. In 2010, Massachusetts passed a law allowing some Boston charter operators to expand to new campuses. As part of this law, schools were also required to increase recruitment efforts for high-need students, as measured by

special education, subsidized lunch status and other factors.

New, as-yet-not-peer-reviewed research by Walters, Sarah Cohodes and Elizabeth Setren looks at the new expansion charter schools, or those allowed to expand existing campuses or to open new schools in the district after being deemed by the state as "proven providers" with track records of success.

The latest study suggests that expansion charters enroll a more representative mix of students and remain as effective as their "parent" campuses.

## **Charter lessons uncertain**

One original motivation for charters was to allow more experimentation with new school models, which seems to have uncovered some very effective approaches and others that are less so, Walters says.

"At the same time, most students still attend traditional public schools and that is likely to remain the case," he says. "It is an open question how the lessons that have been learned from effective charters in Boston and elsewhere can be generalized to serve more students."

Most Boston charter schools follow a model that features extended instruction time, strict behavior codes, an emphasis on traditional reading and math skills, selective teacher hiring, and teacher monitoring – a combination that other research indicates boost student achievement. In 2010-2011, some 12 percent of Boston middle-schoolers attended charters, which then numbered 14.

Walters based his "Demand for Effective Charter Schools" research on demographic data including race, sex, subsidized school lunch status, English proficiency and special education status; school attendance; as

well as math and reading achievement test score data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. He also tapped into statistics about [charter](#) applications and lottery offers collected by individual [charter schools](#) from the 2001-2013 school years.

## Charters and economic equality

His research was supported by a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, a National Academy of Education/Spencer Dissertation Fellowship, and an Institute for Education Sciences award. Walters' research focuses on [school choice](#), school effectiveness and early childhood interventions.

He says his research into the economics of education was spurred by an interest in economic inequality.

"There is convincing evidence that conditions in early life can affect kids' long-term economic outcomes," Walters says, "so the education system is an area where changes in public policy may have particularly important impacts on inequality. There are also a variety of interesting recent policy experiments in this area and good data sets that can be used to study their effects."

**More information:** Can Successful Schools Replicate? Scaling Up Boston's Charter School Sector:

[eml.berkeley.edu/~crwalters/papers/replicates.pdf](http://eml.berkeley.edu/~crwalters/papers/replicates.pdf)

The Charter School Movement: 25 Years in the Making, a free E-book and comprehensive guide to charter school education produced in 2016 by Education Week: [www.edweek.org/ew/marketplace/ ... ?intc=highsearch-ewp](http://www.edweek.org/ew/marketplace/...?intc=highsearch-ewp)

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

Citation: Study asks why students with more to gain from charter schools are less likely to apply (2018, April 4) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-04-students-gain-charter-schools.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.