NEPC
NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

Thursday, July 21, 2022

Newsletter

The Trickiness of Charter School Waitlists

New rules now govern applicants for the federal Charter School Program (CSP), which dispenses $440 million in federal funds annually to promote the expansion or opening of charter schools. NEPC Fellow Carol Burris, who runs the Network for Public Education, worked tirelessly to demonstrate the need for these revisions and then to keep the public informed during the U.S. Department of Education's regulatory review process.

The rules are designed to, among other things, prioritize those charter school initiatives that are likely to provide the most valued and valuable options for a local community. Included in the updated guidance is a requirement that applicants demonstrate "need for the project and that projected enrollment targets will be met." Although the rules offer several ways to make this showing, one option is to provide "information on waiting lists for the proposed charter school or existing charter schools in the community."

At first glance, this option appears to make sense. After all, what better way to signal the need for a new school than to offer evidence that other local charters are oversubscribed? The devil, however, is in the details.

In a NEPC policy memo published eight years ago, Kevin Welner of the University of Colorado and Gary Miron of Western Michigan University warned against relying on waitlist numbers. The policy memo, titled, *Wait Wait, Don't Mislead Me!*, offers multiple reasons to be skeptical of the accuracy of charter school waitlists:

1. Students apply to multiple charter schools, meaning that they are more likely to be waitlisted for at least one option—and to remain so if that particular school is not their first choice.

2. Waitlist numbers can't really be confirmed, since there is generally no formal stan-

dardized federal or state requirement to report them, meaning the numbers are never verified or audited.

3. Waitlist recordkeeping is often unreliable, with infrequent updates and a tendency to continue to add names without ever removing them, as Professor Miron found while conducting charter school evaluations across several different states.

4. Students may apply at grade levels to which they have no chance of being admitted because, even though schools receive applications for all grade levels offered, they may restrict new enrollees to entry-point grade levels such as kindergarten or Grade 9.

5. During efforts to design randomized controlled trials comparing students who are and are not admitted to charter schools via lotteries, Mathematica Policy Research found that very few schools qualified to participate in their study because it turned out they either didn't have waitlists (even when they said they did), that they ended up accepting everyone off their waitlists, or that their waitlists were very small.

6. The main source of information on charter school waitlists on a national level is a survey that was conducted by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, an advocacy organization that does not share details on its methodology.

7. Even if the size of a charter school waitlist could be known with precision, it is difficult to say whether it is "big" or "small" because it can't be compared to the public schools most students attend. Public schools, rather than maintaining waitlists, are generally required to accept all students no matter what time of year or grade level they happen to arrive—even if it means adding new teachers mid-semester or enlarging existing class sizes.

8. If all charter schools "backfilled" their classrooms (many do not) by pulling one student off the waitlist when another student left midyear, their waitlists might be a lot smaller.

None of this is to say that the waitlist provision of the updated regulatory guidelines is of no value. But caution is indeed warranted. Waitlist numbers, as well as their significance, are not always what they may seem.

NEPC Resources on Charter Schools

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: http://www.greatlakescenter.org

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a university research center housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: http://nepc.colorado.edu