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## EIGHT WAYS TO INCREASE CHARTER SCHOOL EQUITY



On Sunday, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* [ran a story](#) describing how one of the top-ranked high schools in Pennsylvania (according to *U.S. News & World Report*) had surreptitiously manipulated its purportedly random lottery, thereby controlling which students it enrolled and which it turned away, according to a whistleblower. This was not the first time that this school, Franklin Towne Charter High School near Philadelphia, has been called out for finding ways to avoid enrolling students it considers less desirable—particularly students with special needs.

In fact, this charter’s practices are noted several times in the 2021 book, *School’s Choice: How Charter Schools Control Access and Shape Enrollment*. The book, authored by doctoral candidate [Wagma Mommandi](#) and NEPC director [Kevin Welner](#), both of the University of Colorado Boulder, details the many ways that charter operators exacerbate inequity by directly and indirectly influencing which students they enroll and retain.

But it doesn’t have to be that way.

Charter schools and their authorizers can instead aim for the opposite objective, implementing policies and practices that incentivize and increase equity.

In an [excerpt](#) from the book that is currently available to read for free on the website of the [National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education at Teachers’ College, Columbia University](#), Mommandi and Welner highlight real-world examples of steps that can lower

common obstacles to charter school access.

Here are eight ways that charter schools and their authorizers can help accomplish this goal.

- 1. Mystery shopper programs:** Authorizers in Washington, DC, and Massachusetts contact charter schools anonymously to inquire about enrolling their children. If school staff behave in ways that discourage certain categories of students from applying (e.g., by stating that they cannot meet the needs of students with disabilities, or by failing to provide information in Spanish), the authorizers follow up to address the concerns.
- 2. Diverse-by-design schools:** Schools can build diversity into their design by setting goals around serving students equitably. For example, some charter schools set aside a certain percentage of their seats for students living in public housing—or aim to enroll the same share of students with disabilities as the non-charter public schools in their vicinities. Authorizers can in turn encourage this behavior by refusing to approve charters that fail to take such steps, or by encouraging founders to develop schools with built-in equity goals.
- 3. Unified enrollment systems and common applications:** Some charter schools exacerbate inequity by implementing opaque and time-consuming application processes that are difficult for many families to navigate, or by selectively advertising openings to the types of students they hope to attract. Moreover, when every charter school has its own application process, it can take families an inordinate amount of time to apply to multiple schools. Districts in some cities have addressed these challenges by implementing a single, relatively simple, and well-publicized application or system for all local choice options.
- 4. Incentivizing equity:** Some district authorizers have offered charter schools spaces in their buildings and additional funding in exchange for practices that increase equity—such as serving students with disabilities that are relatively resource-intensive to serve.
- 5. Easing residency verification:** For a variety of reasons, families can find it challenging to produce documents that prove they reside in a school district. For example, a family that rents a room in someone else’s home may lack a formal lease or utility bills in their name. Schools can help families overcome this challenge by offering alternative means of proving residency, such as visiting students at their homes to verify where they live.
- 6. Providing transportation:** When charter schools do not provide transportation, they make it challenging for students to enroll if their parents cannot accompany their children to and from school each day. By providing free transportation, charter schools make themselves accessible to all children, including those whose parents who lack (reliable) cars, carfare, or flexible work schedules.
- 7. Participate in the federal free/reduced-price meal program:** Charters that fail to provide school meals make it challenging for students from low-income families to enroll.

- 8. Remove incentives that prioritize standardized test scores:** Scores on standardized tests are highly correlated with students' socioeconomic status. When authorizers or states provide "performance" funding tied to test results, they incentivize charter schools to engage in practices that discourage the enrollment of children from low-income families.

## NEPC Resources on Charter Schools

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