

NATIONAL CENTER FOR
SPECIAL EDUCATION



IN CHARTER SCHOOLS

Promising Practices

All Welcome to Apply?

“Mystery Parent” Initiative Found to be Cost Effective Diagnostic Tool for Charter Authorizers Concerned about Equity

The Challenge

Charter schools are frequently accused of “counseling out” both students with disabilities and English language learners based on concerns that they may be more challenging or costly to educate or potentially have a negative affect on school test scores. But since the practice is hard to document, the challenge for entities charged with overseeing charter schools is how to analyze how charter schools initially greet parents of students with disabilities or English language learners.



Enrolling Students with Disabilities

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), all public schools must provide a free and appropriate public education to students with disabilities. As such, public charter schools must accept and educate students with disabilities and maintain open enrollment policies, which often include a fair lottery system. Schools must plan for the capacity to meet a range of special education and disability needs. Advising or implying to a parent of a student with a disability or an English language learner that enrollment is not allowed or that the school cannot provide the modifications or accommodations necessary to educate a student is discriminatory and illegal. “Counseling-out” is the practice of subtly, or not so subtly, counseling parents and inappropriately influencing them to not enroll their child in a school because of the student’s disability or language and expected needs. Critics of charter schools often contend that enrollment procedures are not followed consistently for families of students with disabilities, especially students with significant needs or English language learners.



A Simple, Low-Cost, Personalized Strategy

Modeled after “mystery” or “secret shopper” services used in retail stores to evaluate customer service and quality control, authorizers in the District of Columbia (DC) and Massachusetts employed a similar tactic to examine how the front line charter school staff answers questions about enrollment. Specifically focused on the populations of students with disabilities and English language learners, and recognizing that parents of these two groups of students may present different scenarios when contacting schools about enrollment, services and needs, DC and Massachusetts elected to “test” the market with a defined Mystery Shopper/Parent Program.

“We started this initiative in response to the perception in the public that charters counseled out students with disabilities,” said Naomi R. DeVeaux, the deputy director for the District of Columbia’s Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB), “We wanted to know if this was true.”



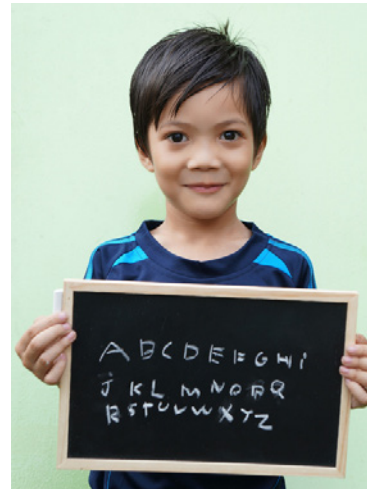
Washington DC Mystery Shopper Program

The DC PCSB launched the Mystery Shopper Program in the 2012 school year as part of an initiative under their Open Enrollment Policy and DC Performance Plan.

INITIATIVE 2.3 of the DC Performance Plan: Improve service oversight for students with special needs by implementing a detailed self-study to help schools improve education delivery through reflective practice and implementing audit policies to address issues. Expand mystery shopper program of contacting schools posing as parents of special needs children seeking to apply.

This program has proven so successful as a quality “test” of the system that DC PCSB has continued to use it every enrollment season (December-March) since the pilot. DC PCSB staff posing as parents who are seeking to enroll their child calls the schools. The caller asks several questions about the enrollment process, including questions about enrolling a student with disabilities. If the school answers all questions appropriately, indicating open enrollment for all students, the school has “passed”. When schools give an inappropriate answer, indicating a barrier to open enrollment, a second call is made on another date to see if the first answer was an isolated incident or if a systemic problem could exist. If on the second call another inappropriate answer is given, the school is contacted by DC PCSB and provided an opportunity for re-training on open enrollment. Any school found to be in any way discouraging students from applying or limiting enrollment could be issued a Notice of Concern by DC PCSB. Notices of Concern are taken into consideration during each school’s 5 and 10-year charter review and during the charter renewal process. Notices of Concern are issued with a timeframe for curing the issue before further board action is considered.

In DC, the Mystery Shopper Program has become a useful tool for training schools about how to welcome and connect with parents of children with disabilities in the appropriate and legal ways. The DC PCSB found that their research is helpful to individual schools, and to ensure the credibility of the call-in process, they recorded the names of school staff who answered the calls and noted their responses. Schools were unaware of the exact timing of the calls, but schools were given ample notice to appropriately train their front line office staff who would be answering enrollment questions from parents. DC PCSB emphasizes that this is not a “GOTCHA” process – but an informative, value-add. This is evidenced in the response from school leaders when the DC PCSB provides the results. One school that had received a second round of calls realized that they needed to completely change their staff training and procedures on who answered enrollment calls and have since assigned that duty to an enrollment specialist.



DC PCSB asks for volunteers from their staff and routinely has about 10 staff participate, including the staff members of their Equity and Fidelity Team. The staff callers receive trainings and background in what “special education language” to use in their call scenarios; including using references to terms such as: Individual Education Plan (IEP), disability, high needs, etc. Staff callers are encouraged to use language that they are most comfortable with on their calls. They allow staff callers to create a “scenario” before making calls, determining if the child they are calling about is a daughter, son or child they have guardianship of, etc. DC PCSB provides anonymous cell phones for the Mystery Shopper Program to ensure caller ID does not identify the PCSB as the caller to the school. Through this effort, the DC PCSB was able to provide a detailed analysis of what was truly happening when parents contacted individual schools, in an efficient and straight forward process in order to then work with the schools to ensure that parents receive accurate information.

“This is a really low-cost, effective effort – we have found that it is such an easy test of our system that eventually provides better customer service in our charters,” Naomi Deveaux, District of Columbia Public Charter School Board

Massachusetts Mystery Parent Initiative

After hearing about the DC PCSB mystery shopper program, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA ESE), the sole authorizer in the state, decided to create a similar program in 2013. MA ESE had staff from their Office of Charter Schools and School Redesign (OCSSR) call all 80 schools in the first year as part of their Mystery Parent Initiative. Only five received a second call due to unacceptable responses. These schools also received a “counseling” call from the staff to share what the calls discovered. Most of the negative reports were not based on any implied “counseling out” of students with disabilities or English language learners but on the fact that no one answered the phone or that the call went straight to voicemail. Schools were notified of this lack of responsive customer service and made necessary adjustments so a live person answered parent calls. MA ESE was pleased to find that overall, the majority of their charter schools did provide a welcoming, informative response to parents of students with special needs. As such, MA ESE had few concerns regarding equal and unfettered access to information about Massachusetts’ charter school application and enrollment processes for students with significant support needs.

Overall, MA ESE used this program as a diagnostic tool. “We found that the Mystery Parent initiative was an excellent and easy diagnostic tool to see if our sector was healthy in the initial/front line enrollment experience,” shared Alison Bagg, Director, Office of Charter Schools and School Redesign, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

MA ESE staff emphasize that this program was not meant to provide a robust or detailed analysis of their demographics in special education or for English Language Learners; they instead rely on research to analyze enrollment trends in Massachusetts’ charter schools. Unlike in DC where the Mystery Shopper Program continues into a fifth year, MA ESE anticipates using mystery parent calls in the future only when complaints or other related issues arise at a particular charter school and on an as-needed basis.



The Benefits

“This is a bold but totally reasonable—and effective—practice that demonstrates that [the authorizer] does not just talk about equity. It takes concrete steps to ensure it . . . it puts schools on notice that they are truly public schools with real public obligations and real consequences for failure to live up to them. It demonstrates that charter schools really are accountable in ways that other public schools are not—accountable to their authorizers and to the public whose trust they are charged with upholding. School choice doesn’t just happen. It takes real work. Authorizers play a critical role in making it work for all children.”

Parker Baxter, “Demystifying School Choice” National Association of Charter School Authorizers.

Takeaways

As a low-cost yet effective diagnostic tool – the Mystery Shopper/Parent Program allows charter authorizers to perform a “test” of the charter schools in their portfolio to determine the extent to which they are open and receptive to students with disabilities and English language learners. States or authorizers interested in introducing a Mystery Shopper/Parent Program in their sectors should consider:

Developing a transparent process that prioritizes diagnosis and remedy of problems as opposed to high-stakes sanctions (i.e., avoid the “Gotcha”);

Building on overall goals of increasing access and welcoming students with disabilities;

Tailoring the mystery caller questions for the region or school location; providing guidelines, scripts, and practice opportunities for volunteer staff; and, providing anonymous cell phones for calls (see related resources for tools);

Creating opportunities for charters to be provided with positive “customer service” training to inform initial “front door” interactions; and

Developing charter school staff training and processes to better support staff understanding of open enrollment policies.



Related Resources:

MA Notice of Rights to Access and Equity of Educational Services - 603 CMR 1.05(4)

DC PCSB Open Enrollment Policy

Related Publications:

Baxter, P. (2014, October 3). Demystifying School Choice. National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Retrieved from <http://www.qualitycharters.org/2014/10/demystifying-school-choice/>

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Chester, M. D. (2015, February 13). Charter Schools – Update Regarding “Mystery Parent” and other Access and Equity Initiatives. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/boe/docs/fy2015/2015-06/item15.html>

District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (2016, January). FY 2015 Performance Accountability Report. Retrieved from: http://oca.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/oca/publication/attachments/PCSB_FY15PAR.pdf

Pearson, S. (2014, November 24). Charter School Enrollment and Testing Are Straightforward, Not a Conspiracy Theory [Web log post]. Retrieved from

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Prothero, A. (2014, December 5). Mystery Parents Test Charters’ Enrollment of Special Ed, ELL Students, Arianna Prothero, Education Week. Retrieved from

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/12/05/mystery-parents-test-charters-enrollment-of-spec.html>

Setren, E. (2015, December). Special Education and English Language Learner Students in Boston Charter Schools: Impact and Classification. Retrieved from <https://seii.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/SEII-Discussion-Paper-2015.05-Setren1.pdf>

Wexler, N. (2015, February 13). Mystery Callers Try to Ensure that DC Charters Admit Special Needs Students. Greater Washington. Retrieved from <http://greatergreaterwashington.org/post/25759/mystery-callers-try-to-ensure-that-dc-charters-admit-special-needs-students/>

Author: National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools

October 2016



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