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Abstract

Charter school authorizers shape which charter schools open, where they open, and who they serve. We draw on principal agent theory to investigate how the priorities and practices of nine authorizers intersected with charter school applications' attention to the needs of historically marginalized students. Using data from interviews and applications, we find authorizers vary in orientations towards equity and the ways in which they signal that orientation to charter applicants. Our analysis suggests a robust relationship between authorizer mission and the content found in charter applications, demonstrating the influence of authorizing practices on the contents of charter school applications.

Introduction

Charter schools serve substantial numbers of historically marginalized students. For the purposes of this study, the term historically marginalized student populations is defined broadly to include various traditionally oppressed groups that have been ignored, misrepresented, and even denied full participation and access to mainstream educational activities and resources. More specifically, we focus on students of color, culturally and linguistically diverse students, students with disabilities, and low-income students. As of fall 2020 school year, charter schools served over 3.3 million children nationwide, of which 70% identified as students of color (Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, or two or more races) compared to 54% of those in traditional public schools.¹ Historically, charter schools have served a smaller proportion of students with disabilities than traditional public schools, but that gap has narrowed over time.² There is limited knowledge about how the practices of the authorizers that approve those schools may shape the extent to which charter school operators attend to the particular needs of historically marginalized students and communities. Charter school authorizers are regulatory bodies, usually public, which oversee the approval of new charter schools and the regulation of existing charter schools. Some authorizers sole focus is on the task of authorizing, while authorizing is one of multiple roles for other authorizers. Despite this variation, the authorizer role has universal elements including managing charter school application processes (the focus of this paper), monitoring operating charter schools, and making charter renewal decisions. Henry and Dixon (2016) describe charter authorizing as “the central gatekeeping mechanism in the reproduction of charter schools” (p. 220). Henry (2019), building on this work, highlights how authorization practices have a critical impact on the set of charter schools available within a broader

¹ <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgb/public-charter-enrollment>

² National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools

educational market. The limited research examining the intersection of equity and charter applications suggest that equity is not necessarily prioritized, and may in some cases be ignored, by application processes (c.f. Garcia & Morales, 2016; Henry & Dixon, 2016).

We seek to understand the goals of authorizers around issues of equitable access, the practices by which authorizers “signal” these goals to charter applicants, and how these goals are actually reflected in charter applications. For this analysis, we draw on Worsham and Gatrell (2005), who find that principals can use multiple contexts and strategies in order to signal to agents their interests in and expectations of those agents. Our work begins with the assumption that charter applicants do not simply write generic applications and submit them to any authorizer, but that there is a dialogue between authorizers and prospective applicants during which applicants receive signals about authorizer priorities through both formal (i.e., questions on applications) and informal (i.e., conversations with authorizer staff members) means. Based on these signals, prospective applicants must decide whether or not to apply at all and, if they do, how to shape the application – and the ways in which it does or does not attend to issues of equity and access – in response to authorizer goals.

While there are many conceptions of equity and access, and nuances within each, our analysis emphasizes a number of relatively easily identifiable ways in which an application might address concerns around equity and access. We focus, in particular, on three distinct areas that can shape equity in schools of choice: what is the purpose of the school; who is the school intended to serve; and what are the characteristics and preparation of those who are anticipated to lead and staff the school. In addition, we consider specific issues that can enhance access specifically for low-income students: the availability of transportation and the opportunity for an extended school day or no cost after school programming. Thus, our research questions are: 1) Do authorizers have specific equity and access goals for historically marginalized student populations in the charter schools they authorize? 2) How do

authorizers signal those goals? 3) How do authorizers' goals, and aligned signals, intersect with the ways in which charter applications specifically attend to historically marginalized student populations?

In order to explore these questions, we draw on a combination of interviews with nine authorizers in five states and 60 applications submitted to those authorizers. Our analysis finds that some authorizers have clear and well-defined goals that attend to historically marginalized students while expanding schools of choice. Others, in contrast, promote a "free market" of charter schools. These goals are shaped by the authorizer's organizational mission and, to a lesser extent, the state policy context for charter schools. Furthermore, we find evidence to suggest that some authorizers are receiving applications that more consistently address issues of equity and access. In the case of these equity-oriented authorizers, we identify formal and informal practices that signal this priority to applicants. Our findings point to the potential for authorizers to shift educational markets towards equity.

Charter School Authorizing and Applications

A number of scholars have pointed to authorizers as a potentially important actor in shaping the quality and nature of charter schools (e.g., Beard & Adeeko, 2018; Eckes & Plucker, 2013; Garcia et al., 2016; Dixson & Henry, 2016). According to the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), there are around 1,000 authorizers in the United States with the vast majority being individual LEAs (895). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are the next common category (45) followed by independent charter boards (20) and state education agencies (19). Authorizers can also be nonprofit organizations (NPOs) (17) and non-educational government organizations outside of education (3) (White & Snyderman, 2020). There are relatively few studies focused specifically on authorizing practices, and even fewer that look deeply into charter school applications and application processes. Within that research, a focus on authorizing practices as they relate to equity has been even more limited.

Quantitative studies have tried to discern whether or not authorizer type has an impact on student achievement and found mixed results. Zimmer and Gill (2014) found that “students attending Ohio charters that were originally authorized by nonprofit organizations experience, on average, had lower achievement gains (both in math and reading) than those of students in other charter schools” (p. 80). A different study in Minnesota found no significant relationship between authorizer types and achievement but did find more variability in the student achievement of nonprofit organization authorized schools (Carlson et al., 2010). Qualitative work and deeper investigation in their practices can help to elucidate mechanisms that create these differential results. In the sections that follow, we first examine research on the role of authorizers, then turn broadly to research on charter applications and then more narrowly on connections between authorizer approaches and equity. Following that, we consider what may influence variations in authorizer approaches, including state policy and organizational mission.

Authorizers, Applications, and Equity

For the purposes of this paper, we focus on equity as seeking to redress past inequities, in this case by charter schools that attend to the needs of those who have historically been treated inequitably in educational systems (Bulkley 2013). First, explicitly communicating attention to equity and access in who is served is a crucial step in ensuring equitable access in choice policy. Given the variation of who has access to high quality schooling choices around the country (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2016; Reardon & Owen, 2014), specifying an intent to serve historically marginalized populations potentially represents a commitment to equity that is significant to consider. The next level of an orientation towards educational equity that we capture in charter applications is at the level of organizational vision and operations. The application data we have collected is what authorizers use to make their approval decision. Our work reopens a line of work that seeks to understand how authorizers actively shape the political context in which charter schools operate, specifically in regards to the pursuit of educational

equity for historically marginalized student populations. Therefore, charter authorizing is a crucial part of a long, multifaceted process to potentially create effective, equity-oriented charter schools.

Much of the relevant research on charter authorizers and their perceived roles is more than 20 years old. Hassel (1997) and (Bulkley, 1999) both concluded that authorizers took different approaches to their roles. Bulkley's analysis found that some authorizers focused on rule compliance while others emphasized outcomes, and also identified a lack of clear norms around authorizing, especially across states and legal/political environments. Vergari (2000) identified some consistency as well, finding that authorizers "tend to favor a 'negotiated compliance' regulatory style," where there are flexible and accommodative stances towards regulation. Similarly, Anderson and Finnigan (2000) find that charter school authorizers do not only focus on the results of schools in the portfolio, but also give attention to educational inputs especially during the application stage of authorization.

In the past two decades, NACSA has sought to increase both the consistency and professionalization of the authorizing process. This has included identifying "essential" authorizing practices, such as having a clear mission and dedicated staff. Five of these practices apply specifically to the application process, such as using external expert panels to review applications and having established, documented criteria for evaluating charter applications. However, their focus does not explicitly address issues of equity and access which involve concerted, intentional focus on these groups that goes above legal compliance. NACSA has sought to better understand the nature not only of application processes, but also of the applications themselves. For example, a recent report based on analysis of 3,000 applications found substantial variation across applications, with a "charter school pipeline [that] is more diverse—by operator type, by educational model, and from state to state—than most people realize" (NACSA, 2019, p. 2), suggesting that authorizer practice is a mechanism that can affect offerings within the education marketplace.

Some of the most in-depth work on charter applications, authorizing, and issues of equity has been done in New Orleans, especially the work by Kevin Lawrence Henry and Adrienne Dixson which is grounded in Critical Race Theory. Henry and Dixson (2016) argue that, in New Orleans at the time of their research, the “charter authorization and application process is a racialized site that reproduces White dominance” (p. 218). In this article, Henry and Dixson examine the founding of schools and barriers to African-American applicants, identifying that African-American applicants felt that authorizing processes were excluding them; in the words of one participant, “What was happening all over New Orleans was they were locking the door before we got the keys and that wasn’t just education, that was in everything” (p. 227). In another study, Henry (2019) reviewed charter applications submitted in New Orleans, focusing on the demographics of charter school boards. He found that “[o]ver 60% of the White applicants are approved to open and operate a charter school, compared to nearly 90% of Black applicants being denied” (p. 2622). A quantitative analysis of a similar set of New Orleans applications by Ruble and Harris (2014) finds the strongest predictor of a charter school being approved was a subjective rating of the application by an outside evaluator. Consistent with findings by Henry and Dixson (2016) and Henry (2019), Ruble and Harris (2014) found that these subjective ratings were correlated with school founders’ race. Other factors such as school characteristics, naming a specific school leader, and the experience of board members only had weak predictive power. From these findings, we know that charter school authorizers can exert subjective preferences in their approval decisions that have lasting consequences on the character of schooling options for historically marginalized populations.

Other studies have looked beyond individual applications to consider overall authorizer practices in relation to the needs of historically marginalized students. Eckes and Plucker (2013) sought to understand if university-based authorizers, which might have a particular interest in furthering equity and diversity, used their role towards those ends. They gathered and analyzed extensive data from

authorizers' websites and found only a small number of examples of web-based materials which "directly addressed or encouraged student body diversity, to some extent, within the charter school literature, instructions, or applications" (p. 599). While it is worth noting that web-based materials may well be a small portion of what authorizers may signal to applicants, their findings indicate few initial signals to potential applicants that seeking a diverse student population is a desired component in an application.

Garcia and Morales (2016) honed in more specifically on whether authorizers sought "to ensure that ELLs have equitable access to charter schools and that those schools implement research-based programs for ELLs" (p. 495). In their study of ten authorizers, using both documents and interviews, they found wide variation in "ELL-related authorizing practices," with some authorizers integrating "multiple references to ELLs throughout their authorizing documents," while others paid "little explicit attention" to ELLs (p. 503). The studies described above highlight the potential for authorizers to focus on issues of equity and access in applications and application processes, as well as the potential for them to undermine those issues, and demonstrate variation in the extent to which authorizers prioritize equity and access .

Conceptual Framework: Charter Authorizing as Contracting

The concept of charter schools rests, in part, on a market logic which emphasizes that charter schools result from consumer demand for certain types of schools (Bulkley, 2005). However, the focus on markets minimizes how authorizers as contractors and regulators have large potential influence on the school models that are proposed and discretion over which charter schools are opened. To better understand these issues, we draw on principal-agent theory, which emphasizes the challenges in aligning the interests of "principals" (those setting goals) and "agents" (those carrying out the activities intended to meet the goals of principals) (Gailmard, 2014; Loeb & McEwan, 2006). In theory, principals and agents enter a contractual agreement where the principal delegates a task to the agent to

complete. We conceptualize authorizers as the principal and the charter applicants as potential agents being assessed and incentivized by the principal.

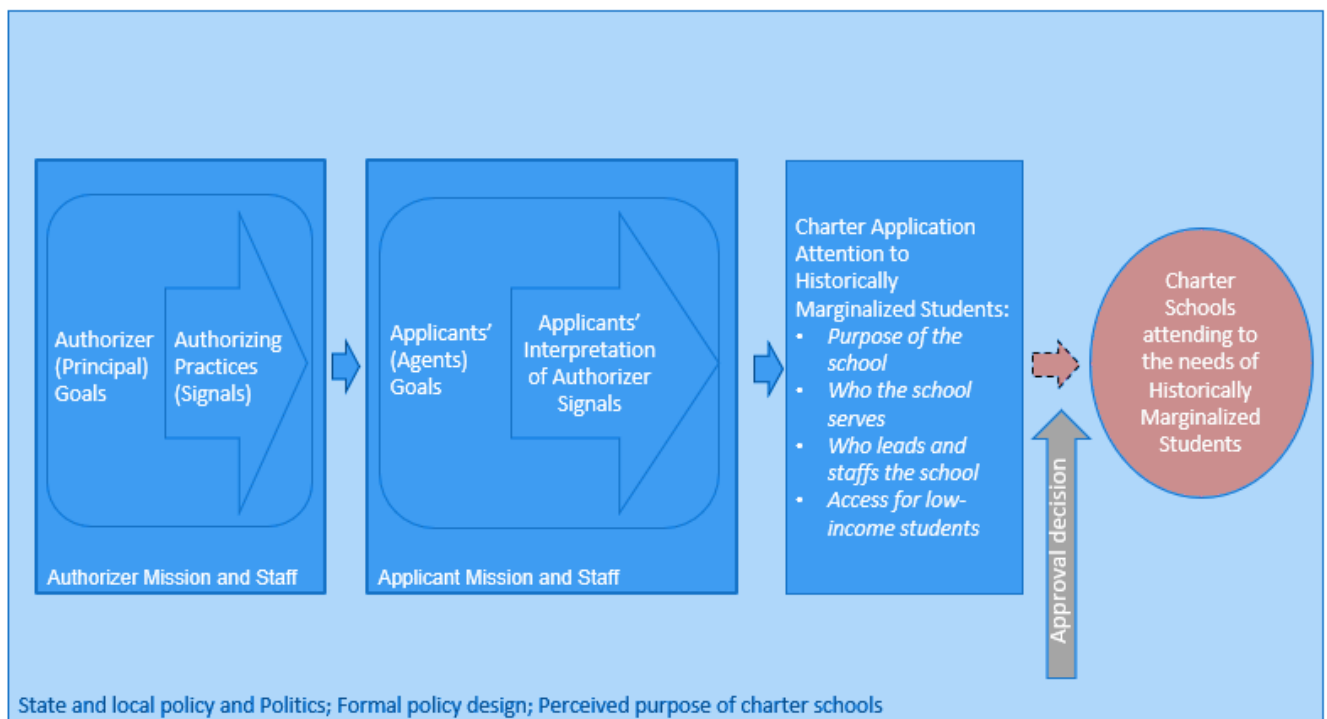
Much of the literature on government contracting is concerned with how output can be optimized within the principal-agent relationship. Though models often simplify the search by principals for ideal agents, the literature has stressed how difficult goal alignment can be. Agents can have goals that are independent of and in tension with the goals of a principal (e.g. Holmstrom & Milgrom, 1991; Loeb & McEwan, 2006; Rees, 1985; Stiglitz, 1987). Hassel (1997), writing early in the charter school movement, described the relationship between authorizers and charter schools as a double “balancing act” in which the charter school must negotiate the benefits from “engagement” (such as additional support) with their authorizer, while avoiding “entanglement” that may limit their autonomy. Consistent with principal-agent theory, Hassel (1997) found that this balancing act became easier when authorizers and charter operators had alignment in their organizational goals. Principal-agent theory also serves as theoretical grounding for the portfolio management model put forth by Lake and Hill (2009). Though this theory can serve as an elegant model, there are often complications in the implementation of the principal-agent relationships in the portfolio model (Trujillo, 2014; Bulkley, 2021).

Our conceptual framework (Figure 1) assumes that authorizers have goals around priorities for approved applications, and that these goals are signaled to prospective charter school applicants. Those prospective applicants must then decide whether to apply and, if they do, demonstrate goal alignment such as through the description of their proposed school’s mission and anticipated practices in their applications. There are a variety of other principal-agent relationships that are present in the governance systems of public education such as employment contracts for teachers, principals, and systems leaders and high stakes accountability systems. The success of these contracts in producing the intended outcomes often depends in part on the clarity and intentionality of the signal sent between principal and agent (Hölmstrom, 1979; Baker, 1992; Moe, 1984). For instance, Maranto et al (2017)

investigate superintendent contracts with school boards in North Carolina and find that very few contracts specify student performance targets for superintendents. These authors conclude that the lack of specificity around these expectations mean that school boards are unlikely to drive student achievement results through their management of superintendents.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Charter Authorizer Signaling



Influences on Authorizer Goals

Existing research has identified two broad sets of potential influences on the goals of authorizers: 1) state policy and politics, and 2) organizational mission and staffing. State charter school policies are broadly known to vary substantially, and these can contribute to differences in the approach of authorizers. (Bulkley, 1999) found that, during the early years of charter schools, authorizers in Michigan placed a stronger emphasis on compliance than those in Arizona. In their analysis of attention to student diversity, Eckes and Plucker (2013) noted that there are some provisions in state laws that

encourage such diversity (see also Eckes, 2010; Eckes & Trotter, 2007; Oluwole & Green, 2008). In the past decade, some states (including Minnesota and Washington) have adopted laws to evaluate authorizer practices directly; while research is minimal as to the impact of such laws, they point to another way in which states seek to use policy to shape the practices and decisions of authorizers.

Authorizers are also political actors who act with personal or organizational level discretion (Bulkley, 2001; Hassel & Batdorff, 2004; Henry & Dixson, 2016; Henry 2019). In a study of charter school renewal decisions, Hassel and Batdorff (2004) note common problems were a lack of clear systems and processes and political pressures around renewal applications. Aforementioned scholarship on authorization in New Orleans found that charter school authorization decisions were driven in part by the political agenda of school reforms which prioritized a White neoliberal agenda in approved schools and the exclusion of Black charter applicants (Dixson & Henry, 2016; Henry, 2019). Authorizers overseen by political appointees (i.e., gubernatorially-appointed members of university boards of trustees in Michigan) are also susceptible to political pressures (Bulkley, 1999; Vergari, 2000).

Finally, factors internal to an authorizer may shape how issues of equity and access are considered. Authorizers have their own missions (whether explicit or implicit), and can be influenced by the mission of a broader organization within which that authorizer is embedded (such as a local school district, nonprofit organization, or university). For example, Eckes and Plucker (2013) posit that university authorizers might attend to these issues because, “universities’ missions are often concerned with issues of social justice.” (p. 597). Individual staff members may, as well, shape an authorizer’s approach. In Garcia and Morales’ (2016) study of authorizing practices related to ELLs, they found that “the commitment of authorizing staff members to improve access and quality for ELLs in charter schools was an important factor, as was the authorizer’s access to ELL-related expertise” (p. 495).

Signaling Goals to Applicants

A critical component of the principal-agent relationship relevant to our questions involves the process of “signaling.” Principals need to signal their goals to agents, and can do so via multiple different communication channels during the contracting process. Ideally, agents then receive and interpret these signals and can tailor the services they provide in response (Worsham & Gatrell, 2005). In addition, principal signals may shape which potential agents they attract to enter into a contract with the principal (Moe, 1984; Baker, 1992). In the case of charter school applications, authorizers need to signal to prospective applicants their goals and priorities around the kinds of schools that they seek to approve. Doing so should, theoretically, both influence who chooses to apply and how that proposed school is designed.

In this paper, we seek a window into the concrete ways in which authorizers may send formal and implicit signals to charter applicants about their preferences around the purposes and strategies for new charter schools (including expectations about serving historically marginalized student populations), as well as if there is data suggesting that these signals shape potential applicants’ behavior as reflected in submitted applications. Formal signals include the actual application questions and process while implicit signals might include conversations between authorizers and prospective applications during presentations or meetings. These goals and practices would then be interpreted by applicants, who are incentivized by the ultimate approval of their application to communicate alignment between the authorizer’s goals and the charter application itself. We end our analysis of the authorizing process at the application stage because approval decisions and the eventual opening of a school ultimately hinge on factors that we do not observe in our data.

The signaling process between principal and agent is represented visually in Figure 1. The authorizing process is embedded within state policy and politics. Authorizer goals and practices are affected by its organizational mission and the staff who execute the process. Agents are then

interpreting these signals and reconciling them with their own goals. The final negotiation of both the authorizer and the applicant's goals can be observed in the charter application which is submitted to the authorizer. Although any section of the application could be a potential for goal alignment to be communicated, we focus our analysis on sections in which goals around educational equity for historically marginalized student populations are most likely to be communicated.

Charter Applications and Attention to Historically Marginalized Students

In our analysis we focus on the following aspects: 1) the purpose of the school, including evidence of need and community support; 2) who the school serves, including the location or community in which it will be located, the anticipate student population, and plans for working with families and the community both at the stages of recruitment/enrollment and once the school is operating; 3) who leads and staffs the school, including founders' connections and/or experience with the students and community to be served and plans for hiring staff once the school is approved; 4) and, the ways in which founders seek to facilitate access to the school for low-income students through extended time in school and the availability of free transportation.

Data Sources and Methods

This comparative case study uses the charter school authorizer as the primary unit of analysis, drawing on interview and document data that directly address authorizing practices as well as indirect data based on careful analysis of 1-10 applications submitted to each authorizer (Yin, 2013). The nine authorizers from five states include school districts, state entities, higher education institutions (HEIs), and nonprofit organizations (NPO).

Sample

We identified potential authorizers by first choosing states that would offer variation in charter authorizing structures because of state level charter school laws. State charter laws structure the work

of authorizers by first determining what type of organizations are eligible to authorize charter schools. They can also constrain the educational marketplace through charter caps such as the one in place in Massachusetts, which limits: 1) the number of charter schools allowed in the state to 120, 2) the percentage of public school students enrolled in charters to four percent, and 3) locations of newly opened charter schools to low-performing districts. Perhaps most importantly, state charter laws define what charter authorizers must do during their approvals process and can dictate how authorizers hold charter operators accountable. Because our intent is not to evaluate some authorizers or states as “good” and others as “bad,” we use pseudonyms for states and authorizers. In two of these states, we included multiple authorizers in order to be able to dig more deeply into state versus organization-level influences on application processes. Two of the states only have state level authorizers. In the final state, we were only able to recruit one large district authorizer to interview. A description of these authorizers and how they are represented in our analytic sample can be found in Table 1, below. We collected applications submitted to these authorizers between the years of 2011-2015.

Table 1**Charter Authorizers and Applications in Sample**

Authorizer*	State*	Authorizer Type	Applications collected	Applications coded
South State Authorizer	South State	State entity	29	10
Mountain District	West State	Local Education Agency (LEA)	26	5

North State Authorizer	North State	State entity	27	10
Lake State Community College (CC)	Lake State	HEI	14	10
Wheeler University	Lake State	HEI	41	10
Peaks University	Lake State	HEI	10	10
EcoFriends	Midwest State	NPO	2	2
Communities Together	Midwest State	NPO	2	2
Midwest University	Midwest State	HEI	1	1
			152	60

*=state and authorizer names are pseudonyms

Data

Charter School Applications

For each of the authorizers in our study, we requested applications that were submitted by charter applicants between 2011-2015. To ensure equal representation of authorizers in our analytic

sample, we randomly selected a maximum of 10 applications per authorizer within the 2011-2015 time period, yielding 60 applications across the nine authorizers. Information about applications included in our analysis can be found in Table 1 above. Our intent was to weight our sample to contain ~70% approved applications and ~30% unapproved applications. However, we were only able to obtain approved applications from some authorizers. While not ideal, both approved and unapproved applications provide meaningful data about signals sent by authorizers to potential operators.

Charter school applications typically contain the following sections: location and target population of proposed school, the school's mission and vision, the school's plan for curriculum and instruction, the school's operating budget and plans for operation, information about human capital, enrollment and recruitment strategies, and plans to engage with families and the surrounding community. They can be anywhere from 20 single-spaced to over 1,000 single-spaced pages of text, depending on the expectations that authorizers have and the level of detail that applicants choose to provide. When possible, we also gathered blank applications from authorizers to ensure that we viewed the full set of directions and questions provided to prospective applicants.

Qualitative Interviews

To supplement the charter applications and provide more insight into authorizer processes, orientation, and influences, we also drew on semi-structured interviews with each authorizer (10 total interviewees across the nine authorizers). Interviews were generally 45 min to 1 hour in length and were conducted by two interviewers via phone or virtual meeting. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview protocol included questions about the focus and practices of each authorizer. A subset of questions focused specifically on authorizers' expectations around equity and access, including probes around the specific application components in which we were interested. In these interviews, we sought to understand not only the expectations of authorizers around equity and access, but also the particular ways in which they signaled those expectations to applicants.

Data Analysis

Analyzing Applications

We uploaded into NVivo and deductively coded the text. We developed the codebook through analysis of prior research with a specific eye towards what might be involved in an application reflecting attention to equity and access for historically marginalized students. We went through multiple iterations of coding sample applications as a team and then revising the codebook until we found that we could consistently code across multiple coders. We did not include the applications used for this process in the final analytic sample.

Table 2 details the deductive codes that we used for this analysis. Our overall rating rule for what constituted coding a response as a “1” for any topic was that at least some discussion was included as to the needs of historically marginalized students for that particular issue. The sample profiles described below in the findings section offer specific examples of application text that did or did not receive a “1” for a topic. Though alignment with authorizers around historically marginalized students could be signaled in any given section of the application, we focused our analysis on application sections addressing school purpose, student populations and the surrounding community, plans for staffing and teacher recruitment, and access levers for low-income students such as plans for wrap-around services and transportation. While we grouped the individual codes into categories, each individual code has distinct importance. Thus, while an application in the category “Who the school serves” includes ratings in four areas, while the other categories only have ratings in two, that category covers a broader range of areas including the location/community in which a school will be located, the anticipated demographics of that school, how founders anticipate engaging families and the community, and plans for enrollment and recruitment. Based on the distinctiveness of these topics, we do not believe that this one conceptual category has undue influence on the overall ratings.

Table 2

Application Codes and Rating Rules

Code	Description	Rating Rule (1 = sufficient attention to historically marginalized populations)
Purpose of the school		
Evidence of need and support	Evidence of need for school (e.g. market assessments or descriptions of parental demand) and community support of application	1=description of evidence of need and/or of community support specifically references historically marginalized populations (e.g., low-income, communities of color, immigrant/ELL)
School purpose	Purpose of school/school mission/vision	1=purpose specifically identifies serving one or more historically marginalized populations
Who the school serves		
Location/Community	Where school will be located, including description of the community, and why	1=description of the location/community includes reference to historically marginalized populations
School population	Anticipated student demographics	1=student demographics explicitly include 1 or more historically marginalized populations (other than students with disabilities unless

		those students were a core focus of the school's mission)
Family and community engagement	Language about plans for engaging families and the community in the work of the school	1=attention to particular needs of families in target populations. Only translation of materials not sufficient.
Enrollment and recruitment	Data about enrollment plans, planned strategies for recruiting students and marketing the school	1=Outreach designed to reach historically marginalized populations. Translation of materials only not sufficient.
Who leads and staffs the school		
School founders	Information about the applicants (individuals and/or groups)	1=founders described as having ties to/experience working with target populations
Human capital	Information on teacher/leader recruitment, hiring, evaluation, requirements, learning, etc.	1=any discussion of attention to teacher demographics or experiences to align with the needs of target populations in recruitment/hiring, PD to address needs of target populations, etc.
Access for low-income students		

Wraparound Services	Language about additional programming for students and families	1=explicit inclusion of wraparound services in order to meet needs of target populations (e.g. extended school day/year or health services in order to support low-income families)
Transportation	Information about plans for providing or facilitating student transportation to the school	1=any discussion of school providing or ensuring availability of transportation; transportation for students with disabilities to meet legal compliance not sufficient

We deductively coded applications, focusing our coding on the easily identifiable and relatively objective indicators described in Table 2. After applications were coded, we used two rounds of matrices to first gather all relevant data for each broad code, and then to synthesize that data and identify whether applicants were paying specific attention to serving historically marginalized student populations in their responses. At that point, each application was given a “1” if it contained text signaling an attention to the needs of historically marginalized student populations in that category and a “0” if no signal was present. For example, responses were rated a “1” if they indicated direct and/or indirect attention to specific target populations (e.g., review target population for application and then include data that references how the school’s strategies have been successful for “similar” students). If the only data we identified for a category was aligned with the need for legal compliance with laws around students with disabilities or English learners, we did not rate that as a “1”. Applications thus were able to achieve a maximum score of “10” if every category had supporting text evidence of addressing the needs of historically marginalized students. For each authorizer, we averaged individual category scores and total application scores. As described at greater length below, some applications

included specific prompts related to serving students from historically marginalized populations while others did not.³

Analyzing Interviews

Similar to the application analyses, we used matrices to identify interview responses that connected both with the specific aspects of applications noted above, as well as institutional practices that might inform both what authorizers sought to “signal” around equity and access and the means by which those “signals” to charter applicants were communicated. These institutional practices included: supports offered to applicants; outreach made to potential applicants; types of applicants or applications that were prioritized (if any); state level policies, authorizer policies, or local political context relevant to serving historically marginalized student populations.

Triangulating Applications and Interviews

In our theoretical framework, we situate authorizers as a signal sender and applicants as a signal receiver. To explore these connections, we created integrated matrices that brought together analysis from both applications submitted to authorizers and interviews and documentation from the authorizers themselves. This allowed us to examine alignment between what authorizers sought to signal and what applicants actually provided in their formal materials. In doing this, we categorized both equity goals (from authorizer interviews) and equity signals (from application questions) as “minimal,” “some,” or “strong.” A “minimal” rating indicates no or very cursory attention to equity, while a “strong” rating indicates clear and consistent attention to equity. “Some” attention indicates substantive but not always consistent or systematic attention to equity. While these are inherently subjective ratings, we sought to have consistency across authorizers by having three of the authors rate each authorizer

³ Many authorizers use rubrics to evaluate applications. However, as we were unable to consistently obtain the rubrics for most of the authorizers’ studied, we did not include those in our analysis.

independently and then discuss and come to a shared rating. The profiles provided below help to make more concrete these ratings.

Findings

Equity and the Goals of Charter Schools Authorizers

In this section, we first introduce four distinct authorizers which we see as representing the overall variation that we found among authorizers. We categorize the first two authorizers as those whose mission aligns more directly with issues of equity and access: North State Department of Education and Mountain District. The third authorizer, Lake State CC, has a stated equity driven mission but practices that did not appear to signal that mission clearly to applicants. The fourth (South State) is an authorizer who articulates their mission purely as being responsive to the schooling market.

Profiles of Four Authorizers

North State Department of Education (NSDOE). Overall, NSDOE is an authorizer whose mission, aligned with the state's charter legislation, explicitly incorporates issues of equity and identifies high quality schools with equitable access as a "core purpose." The law specifically requires that charter applicants provide information about how they plan to serve and recruit diverse student populations and requirements for evaluating the performance of specific student subgroups including low-income students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities. Connected with expectations around how English Learners and students with disabilities should be served, the authorizer's website gives specific guidance to applicants about how these populations should be supported. In addition, the authorizer targeted select "gateway cities" for potential new charter schools; these small urban cities typically don't receive the same attention as larger urban areas in the state, but their populations tend to have lower incomes and restricted access to high quality public school options.

The state has a cap on charter schools and a rigorous application process with the goal of ensuring that they only approve schools of the highest quality that they have confidence can be

executed by the applicant. These stated goals are signaled in several charter school application questions. For example, NSDOE asks applicants to give an in-depth account of the community that they plan to open their school in, requesting that the applicant pay particular attention to the existing educational opportunity structure in that area and the demographics of the students that they plan on serving. NSDOE's mission also touches on the idea of equity of process, addressing not only who charter schools will serve but how they will serve those students and communities. For example, the application asks for evidence of the "founder's ability to serve [a] particular area." Additionally, charter applicants must describe how they intend to ensure certain subgroups are targeted during the enrollment process. Application questions about provisions for English learners include a specific prompt to understand how a prospective school will ensure that "report cards, and progress reports are, to the maximum extent possible, written in a language understandable to the parent/guardian."

State leaders have been directly involved in setting priorities under this broad equity umbrella. An interviewee described how one state education leader specifically put out strategic priorities for schools seeking to serve students with disabilities and English learners and improve those programs. He truly was saying, "I want to see high quality charter schools in these communities where students do not have access to high quality educational programs." This initiative suggests a clear signal to potential charter applicants, consistent with their more formally stated goals, about the authorizer's priorities and the student populations they should intend to serve.

Mountain District. We also identified the Mountain District as an authorizer whose mission explicitly addresses equity of access, process, and outcomes. This focus on equity was informed by pressure on the district as a whole, with an interviewee describing how: "we have students at a group of high schools that are coming to our board meeting every month that are telling us how we have failed to deliver culturally responsive teaching and texts."

One Mountain District representative mentioned that their orientation is to be an equitable authorizer that aspires to:

[P]arity in outcomes and experience for those [historically marginalized] students... and that they have the access to all of the opportunities and the schools are producing the outcomes...[We are] increasingly trying to ensure that an equity lens is across the entire application... ensuring there's not a section that you can talk about that isn't talking about how you are applying that section towards the student.

The Mountain District application template itself does not include specific equity-oriented questions for applicants to consider. However, Mountain District signaled their intent to serve traditionally historically marginalized student populations through both the composition of their application review board and the design of their application. First, our interview described how Mountain District designed their application review board to specifically include “experts from [their] ELL team, special education team, and culturally responsive teaching team.” Incorporating representation reflective of the student populations they aimed to serve could signal the priorities of the authorizer to potential applicants.

Lake State Community College. We identified Lake State CC, a statewide charter authorizer and a tribally accredited community college, as an authorizer that focused on equity in its mission, but primarily conceptualizes equity in terms of the students to be served by authorized charter schools. A participant described how: “Our mission is to serve underprivileged and poor students in historically marginalized areas, where that might not necessarily be a place other authorizers may want to go into.” While this demonstrated a clear emphasis on *who* was served, there was no discussion of *how* to best serve the needs of historically marginalized students and communities or the outcomes expected from schools. The focus on equity of access was coupled with attention to questions of demand and the needs of the market, with a representative describing how:

We look very carefully at the location. We look at how many other schools are in the area. What kind of service the student body is getting in that area and whether there are other options. If there are other options, we're probably not going to go into that area.

In addition to prompts for specific details about the school's intended location, Lake State CC also asks about the proposed method of transportation for students, although they don't explicitly require that the school provide transportation. In the interview, the representative mentioned a preference for charter school board members from within the community, "because if they're from within the community, then they're invested in the school." However, this is not formally signaled within the application itself, and there are no other sections of the application that request information specific to how the school intends to serve underprivileged student populations. While their position as a provider of higher education for the surrounding community may implicitly signal Lake State CC's goals and authorizing priorities to potential applicants, the interview did not provide a clear indication of if, or how, they may be less directly indicating their authorizing priorities to potential applicants.

South State. The primary focus of application questions for South State, a statewide authorizing body, is on alignment between target populations and school design, with an emphasis on how that alignment will improve achievement and foster choice. For example, applicants are asked to: "State the school's educational philosophy and present an overview of the alignment with the program of instruction and any related research or experience that indicates why you have chosen to use this approach with your target population." This emphasis on alignment is also seen in comments by a participant, who described the need for applicants to demonstrate that they can hire staff who can meet the needs of the school design:

So, if there's a specialized program, I can think of an applicant who was looking at very specific liberal arts. And so where are you going to find that, but they also wanted a strong sports program. So where are you going to find teachers that do [both of those things].

This focus on alignment and market-driven schools of choice, however, gives no direction as to what target populations a proposed school should or should not consider serving. The application itself does not formally signal any attention to traditionally historically marginalized student populations. Prompts do not ask questions directed at the prospective school's intent to serve certain student populations, and do not signal any sort of desire for applicants to address potential barriers to access through transportation or provision of extended day or wraparound services.

South State gives applicants feedback on initial application submissions, which can translate into stronger applications in subsequent years. In the interview they discussed having "an applicant last year who scored very low in the target population and facilities sections and got some feedback... they came back with a very strong revision and a very strong interview." This form of conversation between an authorizer and an applicant, particularly in this instance, reshaped the content of the application in a way that was more attractive to the authorizing body. However, it's unclear the extent to which these implicit signals include an attention to traditionally historically marginalized student populations, if at all.

Similar to North State, the state authorizer and state policy were closely aligned in South State Authorizer. However, in this case, the state's emphasis is on developing a "free market" within publicly funded education, and South State follows that in their authorizing philosophy. For example, state policy that does not require schools to provide transportation (an approach that can increase accessibility for low-income students) and a representative of the state authorizer indicated that they left decisions around transportation to the market rather than authorizer decisions:

[South State] being an open market... any school in which transportation to and from school is difficult, and they are providing bus passes and or they have vans to pick up students, they are addressing those needs... [I]n [South State], if you're not serving the needs of your community, you're not going to survive.

While staff at South State authorizer were in no way opposed to approving applications that highlighted serving historically marginalized populations, it was simply not a central component of their approach.

Comparing Authorizer Goals, Context, and Signals

Organizational mission incorporates both the goals of the specific authorizing body as well as, when relevant, the broader state, local, and organizational context in which that authorizer sits. Table 3 summarizes the authorizers’ organizational goals and provides average application ratings (discussed further below). We categorized each authorizers’ mission as predominantly either market or equity oriented, as our interview data suggested the authorizers in our sample tended to center either the importance of markets or equity in their mission, even if they valued both. We also summarized data from interviews and application questions to better understand the signals sent to charter applicants about preferences attention to equity and the needs of historically marginalized student populations. From this table, we see that there is a strong relationship between organizational mission and the equity signals sent to charter applicants vis-a-vis the application questions. However, sometimes, stated missions and authorizing priorities were not signaled through application questions. As we see in later sections, however, stated missions and priorities did not always carry through into the signaling; though most authorizers referenced equity-related goals, they varied in their ability to communicate these goals to charter applicants.

Table 3

Authorizer Attention to Equity in Interviews, Application Questions, and Applications

Authorizer	State	Mission	Equity Goals in	Equity Signals in	Average
		Centers	Authorizer	Application	Applicatio
			Interview(s)	Questions	

		Market or Equity	(Minimal, Some, Strong)	(Minimal, Some, Strong)	n Equity Score
South State	South	Market	Minimal	Minimal	4.1
Mountain District	West	Equity	Strong	Strong	7.4
North State	North	Equity	Strong	Strong	6.7
Lake State CC	Lake	Equity	Strong	Minimal	2.7
Wheeler Univ.	Lake	Market	Minimal	Minimal	3.9
Peaks Univ.	Lake	Equity	Some	Some	5.6
EcoFriends	Midwes t	Equity	Strong	Strong	7.0
Communities United	Midwes t	Equity	Some	Minimal	4.0
Midwest Univ. ⁴	Midwes t	Equity	Strong	Minimal	10.0

⁴ Only one application from authorizer is in this analysis.

Overall	Mean:
	4.92
	SD: 2.61

While one authorizer (South State) highlighted above articulated a mission in line with improving and fostering choice markets, three of the four authorizers we profiled (Lake State CC, North State, and ESSD) had missions that prioritized issues of equity and access. Notably, though, these three authorizers approached this equity-focused mission very differently. For example, our interview in North State identified equity as being not only about who a school intends to serve, but how they go about serving those students. The related application contained targeted and intentional questions to understand prospective charter applicants' process for serving students to a level of detail that was not observed in other authorizers' applications. Lake State CC, by contrast, espoused a similarly equity-focused mission, but had an application focused primarily on who is in the school, and less on issues of access and process around how those students are being served.

Overall, for the three authorizers whose mission was equity-oriented, the definition of equity in authorizing, the ways in which they expected schools to pursue equity, and the extent to which the authorizer signaled that expectation varied substantially. From these profiles, and our broader analytic sample, we identify several methods, both formal and implicit, through which authorizers signal their authorizing goals to potential applicants. Authorizers signal their goals to potential charter applicants more formally through the questions asked on the application itself. While all applications included questions about how schools would serve students with disabilities in alignment with federal policy, applications submitted to two authorizers, North State and EcoFriends, specifically asked applicants to describe how they intend to serve subgroups of students such as linguistically diverse or economically disadvantaged. Other authorizers' applications didn't include such specific prompts. Of course, more

implicit signals also exist and may take the form of conversations between the authorizer and the potential charter applicant, the current portfolio and past approval decisions made by the authorizer, as well as the institution itself and its position within the community, among others.

Profiles of Attention to Equity in Charter School Applications

As described above, we carefully coded applications to determine the extent to which they attended to significant issues related to equity, access, and serving historically marginalized students. Here, we profile two schools, one with minimal attention to equity and access in the areas on which we focused and one with high attention to equity and access, to illustrate what the variation in ratings looks like in practice. Table 2 demonstrated the ten codes we developed and then used for coding and rating purposes to assess access and intention to serve traditionally historically marginalized student populations. An application that specifically addressed the needs of historically marginalized student populations on each measure would receive a rating of 10. Two sample applications help to demonstrate some of the variation that we found.

Application with Minimal Attention to Equity and Access (1/10)

The application for Liberal Arts Charter School was submitted by an organization that manages both charter and private schools, and was one of the applications that we identified as not having a particular focus on serving historically marginalized students. Liberal Arts Charter School was proposed as a K-6 school that would feed into an existing 5-12 school run by the same organization, with the goal of giving students, “an opportunity to experience an uninterrupted and fully integrated college preparatory education – an advantage that existing [Liberal Arts Charter School] parents have expressed deep interest in for some years.” The core purpose of the school (and the larger organization) was to “provide an accelerated liberal arts education at internationally competitive levels for all students.”

We rated the school as attending to issues of equity and access was in the target population; this rating was given due to a statement in the application that, “Believing that all students have the

ability to achieve at high levels within our school model, [Liberal Arts Charter School] intends to serve students with a wide range of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.” However, there are a number of factors that suggest that the application for Liberal Arts Charter School was not developed around equity and access. The proposed location for the school was a middle to upper-income suburb of a large city where the traditional public schools were relatively high-performing. Enrollment practices required parents to fill out a registration form online, print it, and then bring it to an information session at the existing school; such expectations can create challenges for parents without access to technology. The descriptions of the school’s founders do not note ties to historically marginalized communities or experience working with historically marginalized students. These characteristics are not raised in the description of ideal staff the school would hire or the ways in which those staff would be supported and evaluated. Finally, the application does not mention supports like an extended school day, wraparound services, or transportation.

Application with High Level of Attention to Equity and Access (8/10)

West State Charter School was a non-profit applicant that we identified as having a high focus on serving historically marginalized students. It was proposed as an elementary school with the goal of giving low-income students, “STEM-based education.” The core purpose of the proposed school was: “[T]o prepare traditionally historically marginalized students to be successful in competitive middle school academic programs with the goal of high school graduation and college matriculation by providing a quality elementary education in a culturally competent framework.” The charter applicant detailed recruitment plans specific to their student populations, stating: “school recruitment plan specifically reaches out to families in poverty, academically low-achieving students, students with disabilities, linguistically diverse families and other youth at risk of academic failure.”

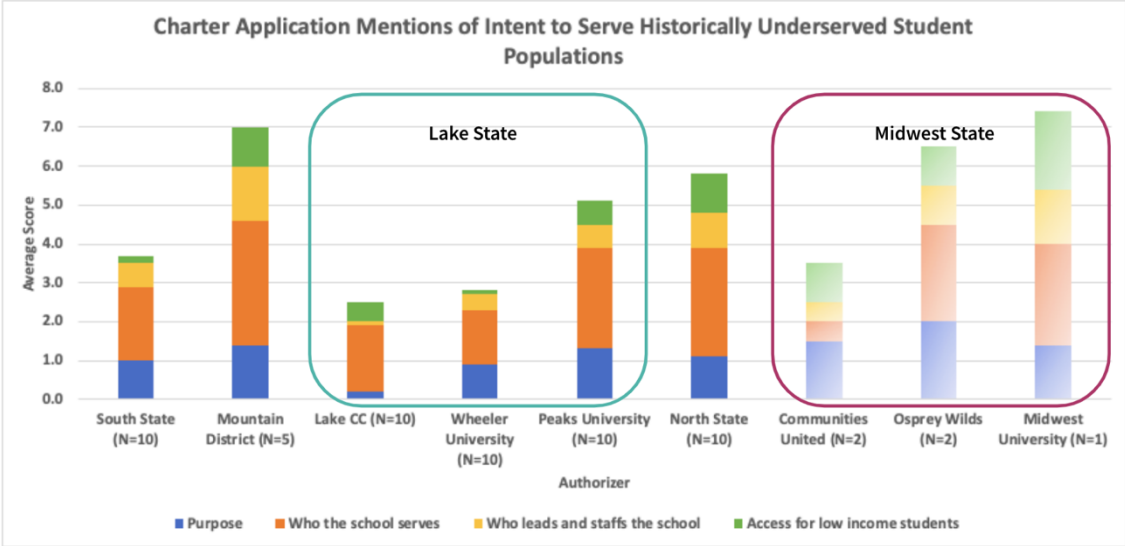
Furthermore, and continuing with the focus on providing equitable educational opportunities to historically marginalized students, in the human capital section, the application emphasized that the

school would seek educators who were preferably “fully certified and with endorsements in Elementary Education (K-6) and/or Linguistically Diverse Education and... demonstrated ability to effectively teach diverse students.” Finally, the school application proposed extensive wraparound services before and after school and even on weekends, not only for students and their families, but also for the whole staff in order to create a community of mutual support and joy. As stated in the application, it was a “rich supplemental programming to promote the overall well-being of the community.”

Attention to Equity and Access in Charter Applications

Our third research question asks about the ways in which charter applications specifically attend to historically marginalized student populations in terms of the purpose of the school, who they plan to serve, who leads and staffs the school, and access for low-income students. In this section, we provide findings across all nine authorizers and their related applications. Using the full set of coded applications from our analytic sample, we complement the qualitative findings by examining descriptive ratings that measure the extent to which applications submitted to each authorizer attended to the needs of historically marginalized student groups. To develop these ratings, we grouped the ten codes into four broad categories: school purpose, who the school intends to serve, who leads and staffs the school, and access for low-income students. Unsurprisingly, applications submitted to authorizers that rated consistently highly across each of the four equity categories, were also rated more highly overall (Figure 2). Consistent with our authorizer profiles, we see substantial variation across authorizer ratings.

Figure 2. Average Charter Application Ratings of Intent to Serve Historically Marginalized Student Populations (maximum rating = 10).



Note. The last three bars are in a lighter color to indicate that they are based on only 1 or 2 applications.

Across all nine authorizers and five states in our sample, the average rating an application received was 5.0. However, there was a wide range across authorizers. Applications submitted to an authorizer in Lake State, for example, averaged only 2.7 out of 10 measures, on average. Some authorizers, though, received consistently higher ratings. An application submitted to one Midwest State authorizer, for example, addressed the full 10 out of 10 measures, while applications to an authorizer in the West State discussed 7.4 out of the 10 measures, on average (see Table 3 above). Overall, 37% of applications received a rating of 0-3, 28% received a rating of 4-6, and 35% received a rating of 7-10.

As we were unable to analyze both approved and denied applications for every authorizer, and our overall numbers of applications are small, it is challenging to assess whether applications with greater attention to equity were more likely to be approved for any single authorizer. That being said, of the three authorizers for whom we analyzed 10 applications and had a mix of approved and denied: North State had higher average scores for approved (8.0) than denied (5.7); Lake State Community College had little difference between scores for approved (2.8) and denied (2.5); and Wheeler University had lower scores for approved (3.0) than denied (4.3). It is worth noting that the average for denied

applications for North State was higher than the average for approved, denied, or all applications for multiple other authorizers.

Two of the five states represented in this analysis, Lake State and Midwest State, are multi-authorizer states in which we were able to collect applications from several different authorizers. We observed a similar variability across authorizers even within the single state context. Authorizers in Lake State, for example, ranged from an average rating of 2.7 for applications submitted to one authorizer, to an average of 5.6 in applications submitted to another authorizer. Similarly, the number of measures addressed in the applications submitted to Midwest State authorizers ranged from 4 to 10. This may provide a descriptive indication that while state policy likely shapes authorizer goals to some extent, it may also either explicitly or implicitly provide a level of autonomy for authorizers that contributes to the variability we observe across authorizers operating within the same state.

Linking Authorizing and Applications

Our descriptive quantitative findings are largely aligned with the takeaways from the authorizer profiles. Authorizers who articulated clear missions around equity and access -- and signaled that mission clearly-- more consistently received applications that attended to issues of equity and access for historically marginalized students. This finding has clear practical implications on best practices for authorizers who wish to increase opportunities for educational equity for our most historically marginalized student populations. Though what is proposed in charter applications may not become a practical reality, more equitable schooling models cannot exist if we do not conceive of them.

Both authorizers with clear missions around equity and intentional signaling to applicants about their mission (North State and Mountain District) scored very high. The North State authorizing body had among the more highly rated charter applications, with an average of 6.7/10. Similarly, applications submitted to Mountain District received a high average rating of 7.4/10, relative to the other authorizers in our sample. These results suggest that prospective schools may be choosing authorizing bodies based

on an alignment with their own goals, or are crafting their application content to align with the perceived goals of the authorizer. Our analyses indicate that North State and Mountain District are consistently receiving applications that more directly prioritize equity and access than Lake State CC and South State.

While our interview with Lake State CC demonstrated that they are an authorizer with an equity-focused mission, the signals sent to prospective applicants were not as clear or direct relative to those of North State and Mountain District. Applications submitted to Lake State CC reflect this disconnect, and received low to moderate equity ratings. The overall average rating for applications submitted to Lake State CC was 2.7/10 despite 80% of applications identifying the intention of serving historically marginalized students. Applicants and authorizers alike seemed aligned in their focus on who the school would serve, but did not integrate any discussion of how those students would be served. We see something similar happening in the applications submitted to the three other authorizers with equity-oriented goals but low equity signaling in their application questions. Wheeler University and Communities Together both had very low equity ratings in the submitted application. Midwest State University only had one application during the time frame of our sample, which thus makes it more difficult to make a claim about the strength of the signals they are sending to their applicants

Applications submitted to South State Authorizer received a wide range of scores, indicating that prioritizing equity and access is likely not central to their mission. The focus on authorizing as fostering the expansion of choice and markets in education, rather than a more specific mission around equity, is consistent both with the lower average rating of applications submitted to the South State Authorizer (4.1/10) and the wide range of ratings (between 1 and 7).

When looking at the strength of equity signals that both Lake State CC and South State send through their application materials, we see that both of them do not send strong signals about their expectations for how they would like their applicants to address the needs of historically marginalized

student populations. Therefore, despite having different stated priorities around equity, Lake State CC and South State both received applications that lack intent and specificity around how the needs of historically marginalized student populations will be met in their school.

Finally, while prior research has asserted state and local policy contexts are important for how authorizers approach their work, we see considerable variation between authorizers in the same state (Lake State Community College and Wheeler and Peaks Universities are all in Lake State, while EcoFriends, Communities Together, and Midwest University are in Midwest State). The application data we collected from authorizers in these two states show notable variation in the equity-related content we coded. Though we are limited in the claims we can make about Midwest State because of the relatively small amount of applications we collected, the variation within states suggests that authorizer level factors also can create circumstances which yield more equity-focused charter applications being submitted to them.

Discussion

Existing research addresses questions around who charters serve and how well they serve them, especially in terms of historically marginalized students. Far less attention has been paid, however, to the potential role that authorizers play in selecting and incentivizing schools that attend to the needs of historically marginalized students. This paper offers a first effort to explore if authorizers are essentially shaping charter markets in different ways based on their own practices. While we found variation within authorizers, there were clear patterns suggesting that applications submitted to some authorizers were more likely to attend to the issues of equity and access that we rated than those submitted to other authorizers.

We find that authorizers' organizational missions and goals are related to the applications that they receive, but not completely. For example, Lake State Community College (CC), North State, and Mountain District all had missions that indicated attention to issues of equity, but that the nature of that

focus varied in important ways. Lake State CC's mission that focused narrowly on who schools would serve, not how they would serve them, was aligned with applications that attended to that specific issue in terms of target population but that often did not address the needs of historically marginalized students in other ways. In addition, authorizers' goals were aligned with their state policy context. However, while state policy appeared to be important, it was not determinative – we saw variation between authorizers in our sample from the Lake State and Midwest State. Instead, variation in the equity focus of charter applications seems to be better explained by the intentionality of charter authorizers in signaling their equity focus.

The use of principal-agent theory, and particularly the role of the signals that principals send to agents, helped point us to examining more closely exactly how authorizers' goals are "messed" to prospective applicants. We observed that authorizers' goals were reflected in both the formal and implicit signals sent to prospective applicants. Authorizers sent signals through a variety of channels: application materials, community relationships, and relationship building with applicants, etc. Authorizers may want to both examine their own mission and goals, and how those align with the signals that they send to prospective applicants. Even as charter policy and the charter school movement has evolved, principal agent theory is still a generative lens for understanding the charter authorization process, especially in lieu of market-based explanations. The charter authorization process is the negotiation of a potential contracting relationship between an authorizer and a group of individuals who wish to start a school. Though students, families, and community stakeholders are sometimes considered, they are normally not integral to the application process. Therefore, the traditional explanation for the emergence of charters from market demands and parental preferences fails to account for the realities of the charter authorizing governance structure. This paper not only shows the integral role that authorizers play in shaping the school options that are open to parents, and also demonstrates how specific authorizer practices can impact equitable opportunities for students.

Conclusion

Our results support the idea that authorizers have the ability to influence the charter schools that are proposed in the educational markets they govern. Not only are they gatekeepers through their decision-making, but they also may be important signalers of the priorities of choice policy. Our findings demonstrate the importance and the potential of the charter authorization process in bringing about charter schools that focus on the needs of the historically marginalized student populations. Authorizers have the power to signal the types of charters they are interested in approving through how they publicize their mission, how they structure their application and evaluative processes, and how they communicate with applicants which applicants can then use to construct their proposed charter school. From this analysis, we believe that refining authorizer practices to center their goals of educational equity can be a potentially fruitful way to increase educational opportunities for historically marginalized students. However, given aforementioned findings from other scholars (Dixson & Henry, 2016; Henry, 2019; Henry, 2021) around issues of racial bias and exclusion of potential applicants, we wish to also push authorizers to think more critically about how their applicant pipelines come into existence and who is being included or excluded during their processes. These studies not only show that authorization can be a biased process, but also that external politics can be consequential to who is allowed to be part of the educational market place. We acknowledge that our analysis does not directly address these issues of politics. However, our findings reemphasize prior findings that authorizers have the power to be educational market shapers and therefore have the potential to either elevate or diminish issues of educational equity, which of course is itself a politically constructed educational outcome. Our study also cannot offer insights in what practices may be affecting the actual student populations that charters serve or the populations that choose to attend charter schools.

Given that the focus of our study is on the most preliminary steps in the authorizing process and the opening of an effective and equitable charter school, we believe that future research should be done

that interrogates how authorizers may or may not be involved in the operations of opened charter schools. Our study also neither addresses how the requirement for submitting charter applications themselves may serve as a barrier to entering the charter market (McShane, Hartfield & English, 2015; Kingsbury et al 2020) nor does it look further down the charter authorization process to determine the extent to which proposed practices become reality.

Two of our most equity-oriented applications became charter schools which closed soon after opening, demonstrating that potential shown in the application stage does not mean that opened charter schools will be successful and equitable. Understanding how authorizers can affect equity in opened charter schools through accountability practices will give us a fuller picture of the many different roles they can play in choice systems which impact historically marginalized students. These practices can also be potentially affected by an authorizer's market or equity orientation in their organizational mission. While a market or equity orientated may not be mutually exclusive, these priorities are often in tension with each other, and thus, we use this binary to distinguish differing important priorities. By developing a sophisticated understanding of how authorizer practices can help shape equitable student outcomes, we add another potential policy lever that can help ensure that charter schools and choice policies provide equal educational opportunity to those who have been historically marginalized.

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