

# How Charter Authorizers Shape Equity: A Cross-State Analysis of Charter Applications

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## Overview

While charter schools offer families additional choices for their children's educational experiences, they are not exempt from the racial and economic disparities deeply embedded in the American education system. Community leaders and educators often point to policies regarding curriculum, access, and instruction as areas of opportunity to rectify persistent inequities, but far less attention has been paid to the role of charter school authorizers, those entities who determine not only who can open a new charter school but also provide expectations and oversight for schools' academic and administrative operations.

Our latest study is one of the first to analyze the role of authorizers in advancing equity-focused charter schools. In this study, we assess authorizers' goals around equity and accessibility and how they signal these goals to organizations interested in opening charter schools. More importantly, we analyze how this is reflected in the ways that submitted applications attend to the needs of historically marginalized students (e.g., low-income students, communities of color, and English language learners). We draw the following conclusions:

- Some charter authorizers say that equity is a key part of the mission, but others focus on choice or market logic.
- Authorizers who say they focus on equity also tend to send stronger signals to charter applicants about this value, but not always.
- The orientation of charter applications is correlated with the signals that authorizers send, but less so with the missions that authorizers describe in interviews.

Our findings highlight an overlooked point of leverage for policymakers and provide insight into how authorizers may play a significant but underestimated role in the mission, values, and planning of operating charter schools.

## Background

In theory, charter schools present a unique opportunity to advance educational equity. They are afforded greater autonomy than traditional public schools, which could be used to focus on providing historically marginalized students with both a high-quality education and the necessary supports to access such an education. In some respects, they succeed, as over 60% of charter school students are students of color and over half come from economically disadvantaged families.

As the governing bodies that determine who can open a charter school, authorizers play a pivotal role in shaping the school choice landscape. In addition to managing the charter school application and approval process, authorizers monitor the performance of operating charter schools and oversee renewal decisions. And while the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) has pushed for increased consistency in authorizing over the last two decades, these efforts to standardize and improve authorizing practices have yet to explicitly address how authorizers can promote equity and access in their processes.

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In this study, we assess authorizers' goals around equity and accessibility and how they signal these goals to organizations interested in opening charter schools such as through the application questions that they include or through informal conversations with prospective operators. For example, authorizers might ask applicants if they intend to serve historically marginalized students, if founders have experience working with historically marginalized students, or if free transportation will be provided so that students can easily reach the school. More importantly, we analyze how this connects to whether or not the applications authorizers receive actually attend to the specific needs of historically marginalized students. We focus on whether and how equity goals were apparent in three ways:

1. The stated purpose of the school, including evidence of need and community support.
2. Who the school intends to serve, including the location or community in which it will be located, the anticipated student population, and plans for working with families and the community both at the stages of initial recruitment/enrollment and after the school has started 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.

In addition to these potential signals of equity goals, our analysis looks at whether submitted applications gave any consideration to specific issues that can enhance access specifically for low-income students such as the availability of transportation and the opportunity for an extended school day or no-cost after school activities. Our findings are based on the analysis of 60 applications submitted to nine authorizers across five states; examination of these authorizers' mission statements and websites; and interviews with authorizer staff. While some authorizers have clear and well-defined goals that attend to historically marginalized students, others promote a “free market” approach to charter schools that emphasizes choice, options, and competition. These goals are shaped by the authorizer's organizational mission and, to a lesser extent, the state policy context for charter schools. Our findings point to the potential for authorizers to shift educational markets towards equity – particularly as state charter authorizer policies vary substantially.

# How Did Charter School Authorizers Prioritize Equity in Their Organizational Missions?

There was a high degree of variation among authorizers’ organizational goals related to equity. Some were very invested in a mission to authorize charter schools that explicitly uplift historically marginalized students while others centered their organizational goals around expanding the school choice market. 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 with authorizers and the application questions they include to better understand the signals sent to charter applicants about preferences for attention to equity and the needs of historically marginalized student populations. Figure 1 shows the intersection of authorizers’ missions, equity goals, and equity signals in application questions.

**Figure 1. Authorizer goals are related to the signals they send in the questions they ask of charter applicants.**

Authorizer	Organizational Mission Centered in Interview(s) (Market or Equity)	Equity Goals in Authorizer Interview(s) (Minimal, Some, Strong)	Equity Goals in Application Questions (Minimal, Some, Strong)
South State	Market	Minimal	Minimal
Mountain District	Equity	Strong	Strong
North State	Equity	Strong	Strong
Lake State CC	Equity	Strong	Minimal
Wheeler Univ.	Market	Minimal	Minimal
Peaks Univ.	Equity	Some	Some
EcoFriends	Equity	Strong	Strong
Communities United	Equity	Some	Minimal
Midwest Univ.	Equity	Strong	Minimal

Note: With the exception of Mountain District, which only authorizes charters within a single large urban school district, all the authorizers that we were able to include in the study have the authority to authorize throughout each state. Thus, they are able to authorize schools located in a broad range of settings (i.e. urban, suburban, or rural) and serve communities that may or may not have high numbers of historically marginalized students.

This figure shows a strong relationship between organizational mission and the equity signals sent to charter applicants through application questions. However, stated missions and priorities did not always carry through into the signaling. Although most authorizers have equity-related goals, they vary in how they communicated these goals to charter applicants.

We also examined informal signals that applicants could get from conversations between the authorizer and the potential charter applicant. The Mountain District demonstrated one example of informal signaling. While they did not

have equity-centered questions on their application, their application review board intentionally included experts in English language learning, special education, and culturally responsive teaching.

Even among the authorizers who claimed to prioritize the needs of historically marginalized students in mission statements and interviews, there was significant variation in how they defined and approached the concept of equity. While some authorizers identified equity as both who a school intended to serve and how the school went about serving those students, others focused primarily on the school’s student demographic composition and less on issues of access and process around how historically marginalized students were being served.

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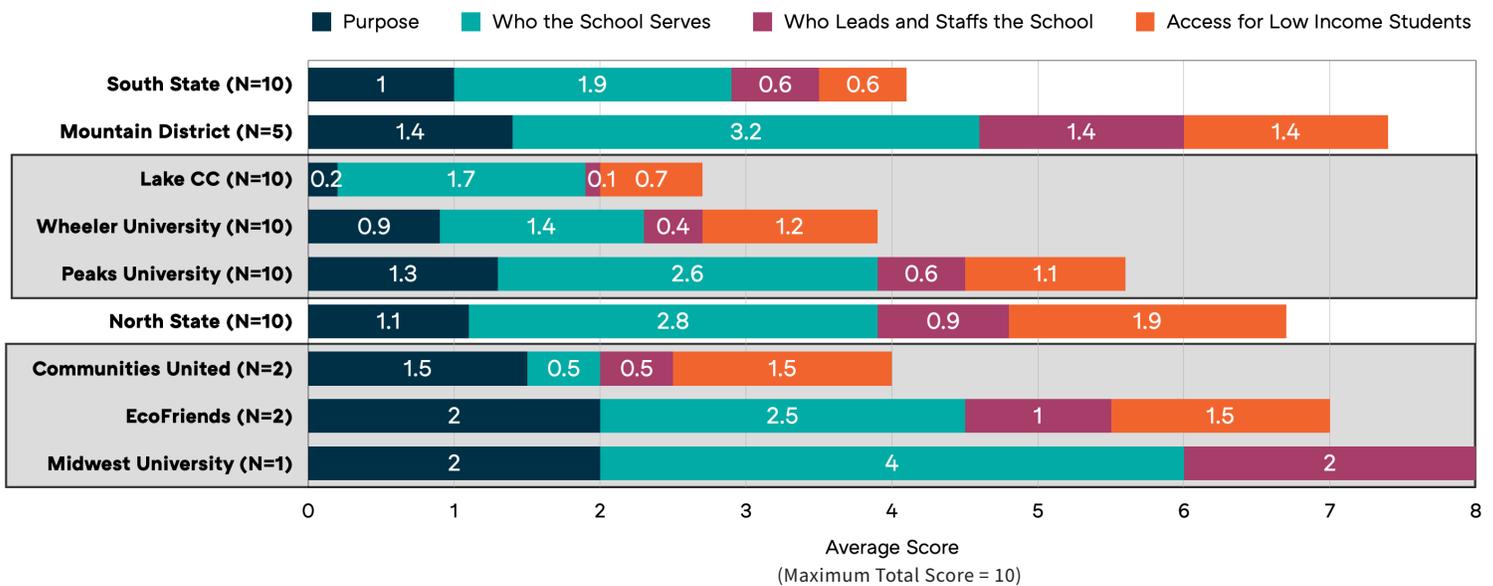
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## How Did Submitted Charter School Applications Prioritize Equity?

We carefully coded submitted charter school applications to determine the extent to which they attended to significant issues related to equity, access, and serving historically marginalized students (see page 7 for more details). Individual applications received equity scores ranging from 1 to 10, and Figure 2 presents the average equity score for each authorizers’ applications. The higher the bar, the higher the average level of attention to equity in applications submitted to that authorizer.

**Figure 2. Charter Application Mentions of Intent to Serve Historically Marginalized Student Populations**



Note: This figure shows the results for 9 authorizers in 5 states. The top shaded box contains authorizers from the Lake State. The bottom shaded box contains authorizers from the Midwest State. The number of applications analyzed for each authorizer appears next to the authorizer’s name (N).

While the average overall equity score was a 5.0 out of 10, we found substantial variation across authorizers with average application equity scores ranging from 2.7/10 for Lake Community College (low attention to the needs of historically marginalized students) to 7.4/10 for Midwest University (high attention to the needs of historically marginalized students).

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 equity score of 2.7/10 for applications submitted to one authorizer, to an average of 5.6/10 for applications submitted to another authorizer. Similarly, the equity score of applications submitted to Midwest State authorizers ranged from 4 to 10 out of 10; however, the number of applications from Midwest State authorizers was very small, so these results should be interpreted with caution. The findings from these two states suggest that, while state policy likely shapes the content of charter school applications 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.

## What is the Connection Between Charter Authorizers and the Applications They Receive?

When we analyze patterns in equity scores based on the organizational mission, equity goals, and equity signals (Figure 1), we find that 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. These authorizers not only received a high equity signal rating, but also received applications with higher equity scores.

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As shown in Figure 2, the three authorizers with clear missions around equity and intentional signaling to applicants about their mission (EcoFriends, North State, and Mountain District) received high-scoring applications. EcoFriends received applications with an average rating of 7/10. The North State authorizing body had among the more highly rated charter applications, with an average of 6.7/10, and applications submitted to Mountain District received a high average rating of 7.4/10. These results suggest that prospective school operators may be crafting their application content to align with the perceived goals of the authorizer or choosing authorizing bodies based on an alignment with their own goals.

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 reflected 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. Our analysis shows a similar pattern 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 applications. Midwest State University only had one application during our sample's time frame, making it more difficult to make a claim about the strength of the signals they send to their applicants.

## How Did We Carry Out This Analysis?

Our analysis examines the formal (e.g., application questions focused on equity-centered information) and informal (e.g., conversations with applicants) ways in which authorizers signal priorities to charter applicants. If signals are the call-to-action, then the applications authorizers receive are the responses. 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. We find evidence to suggest that some authorizers are receiving applications that more consistently address issues of equity and access.

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Our analysis of how authorizers' equity goals aligned with their applicants proceeded in two steps. First, we determined the equity focus of nine charter authorizers across five states with varied types of charter authorizers by examining their mission statements, blank applications, websites, and interviews with staff. The nine authorizers in our analysis include school districts, state entities, higher education institutions (HEIs), and nonprofit organizations (NPOs).

Second, we examined 60 charter school applications submitted to these authorizers from 2011 to 2015. We studied up to 10 applications per authorizer to avoid having one dominate our sample and included both approved and unapproved applications. While the sample is a small percentage of all charter applications submitted during this period, we carefully designed it as a random sample so that the results would more likely generalize to the population. In addition, there is no reason to believe that the conclusions about the relationship between mission, signals, and charter application content would be related to the availability of applications or decisions by authorizers to participate in the study.

After a thorough review of each application, we assigned an equity score based on a rubric that evaluated the equity focus of charter school applicants. Each application was given a score of one for each of the ten categories listed below in Figure 3 if it contained text such as in the sample quotes signaling attention to the needs of historically marginalized student populations and a score of zero if no such signal was present. It is important to note that we intentionally excluded students with special needs from our definition of historically marginalized students since providing necessary support for these students is federally mandated.

**Figure 3. We identified four broad categories with ten sub-categories of how charter school applications signal their prioritization of equity.**

Sub-Category	Sample Quote
<b>Purpose of the School</b>	
1. Evidence of need for school and community support of application	“72% of scholars coming from this area qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. As of 2012, the district reported that 1,068 elementary seats in this region were in schools rated orange or red. The founders of [School] propose to create a college preparatory elementary school specifically designed to meet the needs of these Scholars.”
2. School purpose/mission/vision	“The mission for [School] is to prepare traditionally underserved 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 with a focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.”
<b>Who the School Serves</b>	
1. Location/community (where the school will be located, including a description of the community and why)	“[This] County is home to an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse population where communities like [city] are grappling with high unemployment rates and significant levels of poverty.. [School] expects to encounter students with a wide range of academic abilities and backgrounds, including special-needs students and at-risk students...”
2. School population (anticipated demographics)	“[School] plans to... serve a diverse population of learners (pre-K through 5th grade) that mirrors the population of the surrounding [city] community. This includes a population that is racially and economically diverse, with 67 percent of students of color, 57 percent free or reduced lunch, and 27 percent English Language Learners. To fulfill our mission to serve children with disabilities in fully-inclusive environments, [the school] will actively recruit a population that includes approximately 30 percent of children with special needs...”
3. Family and community engagement (plans for engaging families and the community in the work of the school)	“Teachers will seek out community experts to participate in learning investigations and to share information to support student research. [School] values community involvement and participation and plans to involve community members throughout each learning investigation.”
4. Enrollment and recruitment (enrollment plans, strategies for recruiting students, and marketing the school)	“[School] will advertise throughout the greater [metropolitan] area but will especially target low-income areas near and in [city]. [School] will run its ad campaign through billboard ads along the city’s highways, radio ads on local stations, and newspaper ads.”
<b>Who Leads and Staffs the School</b>	
1. School founders (info about applicants)	“The Founding Board of [School] is a diverse, passionate group of committed citizens who have dedicated their professional experience and credibility to this project. Board Directors include leaders in business, education, STEM careers, and community activism... [they] all have a particular interest in the population of the target service area. They have all lived, worked, or volunteered in [neighborhood], where [school] will be located, and they all believe that every child deserves an excellent education.”
2. Human capital (information on teacher/leader recruitment, hiring, evaluation, and requirements)	“Our professional development program is unique in ensuring that staff is trained to understand the cultural backgrounds and skills of our students, as well as to be aware of the psychological and social issues they may face. Professional development both before and during the school year will work to develop a core curriculum to [address] the needs of English Language Learners.”
<b>Access for Low Income Students</b>	
1. Wraparound services (additional programming for students and families)	“Although the school day ends at 4:00 p.m., [school] recognizes that many parents work and need care for their child(ren). The [school] will offer many after-school programs, including Music enrichment... The after-school programs will run up to 6:00 p.m., two hours past the school day where scholars have the opportunity to engage in a new experience or continue to work in an area they have an interest in already.”
2. Transportation (plan for providing or facilitating student transportation to the school)	“[School] will provide bussing for students attending the school. Consistent with state charter school law, [School] will notify both [district] and the [state agency] that [school] will provide its own transportation for students by March 2016, by which time the board also intends to approve a busing contract.”

Note: Each application received one point for each sub-category in which it explicitly addressed the needs of historically marginalized students

## Conclusion

There is still much progress to be made in closing the education gap between historically marginalized students and their more historically advantaged peers. As increasingly popular school choice programs strive to serve students and families outside the model of traditional public schools, there is a unique opportunity to advance equity in education. While this analysis does not speak to the student impact of charter schools that prioritize serving historically marginalized students, it does point to a significant area of opportunity for shaping the ecosystem of charter schools that has not been given much consideration previously: the role of the charter authorizer.

In this study, we found that authorizing entities can have a direct influence on the extent to which charter school applicants center equity in their goals and planning. This provides insight into best practices for authorizers who wish to increase opportunities for educational equity for vulnerable student populations. More broadly, policymakers and the school choice community at large should consider how equity through intentional planning around educational systems and services for historically marginalized students can be achieved in a top-down approach starting with authorizers.

### How Does This Relate To Other REACH Research?

Planning and oversight by school districts, charter authorizers, and other government agencies can have a significant influence on the education options available to families. In forthcoming REACH studies, our team will analyze whether the intensity of charter regulations is associated with the quality of charter applicants, as well as whether regulations are related to the rates of closure for low-performing schools. We are also examining the choices that families make when their schools are closed in Michigan, specifically whether the availability of public school choice and charter schools affects the likelihood that students accept their new zoned school assignment after a closure.

## **About the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice (REACH)**

Founded in 2018, REACH provides objective, rigorous, and applicable research that informs and improves school choice policy design and implementation, to increase opportunities and outcomes for disadvantaged students. REACH is housed at Tulane University with an Executive Committee that includes researchers from Tulane, Michigan State University, Syracuse University, and the University of Southern California.

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### **Corresponding Technical Paper**

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