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NEPC POLICY MEMO

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WAIT, WAIT. DON'T MISLEAD ME!

NINE REASONS TO BE SKEPTICAL ABOUT CHARTER WAITLIST NUMBERS

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In this Policy Memo, Kevin Welner and Gary Miron outline nine reasons that policy makers, reporters and others should be skeptical about reports that purport to show that large numbers of students are on charter school “waitlists”. Undoubtedly many students who wish to enroll in popular charter schools and are unable to do so; however, the overall waitlist numbers are likely much less than advocates’ estimates.

In 2013, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) estimated that there were 920,007 students on charter school waitlists.¹ With a new set of waitlist numbers to be released today, we thought it worthwhile to consider how these estimates are derived, what they mean and don't mean, and how best to understand the claim of large numbers of students "waiting" to enroll in charter schools.

Here are nine reasons to be skeptical of the numbers offered by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Reason #1: Students Apply to Multiple Charter Schools

The NAPCS estimate is complicated by the fact (acknowledged by NAPCS in its 2013 announcement) that "families often apply to multiple charter schools...." Because of this practice, NAPCS downsizes its own topline number by over 400,000 students. That is, instead of the 920,007 waitlist students given as the 2013 topline number, NAPCS later adds: "at a minimum, more than 520,000 total individual students – many of whom are on multiple charter school waitlists ... are on waitlists across the country." In practice, many families may apply to one or more charter schools along with district-run schools or programs. Such students receive offers at a variety of schools (multiple charter and/or district options) but may choose a district school option. In short, a given charter school application may not reflect a student's first choice.

Reason #2: The Waitlist Numbers Cannot Be Confirmed

Even the NAPCS 520,000 estimate is problematic. For most jurisdictions,² it is derived from unaudited and unauditable numbers reported to NAPCS through a survey it administers annually. The survey apparently asks for the number of applications received, as well as the number of available seats. The waiting list numbers are then calculated as applications minus seats.

There is no state or federal indicator that is called "waitlist." Instead, this is a statistic developed by NAPCS and others who hope to advance the argument that, "With such demand, it is up to our elected officials to remove the facilities and funding barriers that exist to ensure that every child has the option to attend a high-quality public charter school" (Nina Rees, NAPCS president and CEO).³

Reason #3: Charter Waitlist Record-Keeping is Slipshod and Unreliable

When Gary Miron, one of the authors of this Policy Memo, conducted evaluations of charter schools in Illinois and Pennsylvania at the behest of those states,⁴ he and his colleagues

¹ <http://www.publiccharters.org/press/national-charter-school-waitlist-numbers-approach-million/>

² Only in a few cities where there is a central authority that handles applications and wait lists are actual lists generated that can be audited. In those cases, the numbers released may still be problematic, but at least there's some ability to explore their trustworthiness. See, e.g., <http://ny.chalkbeat.org/2014/05/01/charter-sector-says-about-50000-applicants-turned-away/>

³ <http://www.publiccharters.org/press/national-charter-school-waitlist-numbers-approach-million/>

⁴ Miron, G., Nelson, C., & Risely, J. (2002). *Strengthening Pennsylvania's charter school reform: Findings from the statewide evaluation and discussion of relevant policy issues*. Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Nelson, C. & Miron, G. (2002). *The evaluation of Illinois charter school reform: Final report*. Springfield, IL: Illinois State Board of Education.

attempted to systematically collect data on waitlists. But the charter schools simply didn't have data that would allow for numbers to be calculated in a meaningful way. Waitlists that charter schools generated were not kept up to date and were often cumulative. In other words, students were added but no one was ever removed, even after an applicant gained a place a year or two after she or he first applied.

Reason #4: Many Charter Applications are for Non-Admissible Grade Levels

In many of the charter schools studied by Miron, all applicants who sought admission at the grade level where the school was taking in students were admitted; but those that applied in other grades were put on the "waitlist." The reality for that latter group is that they never had a chance to be admitted, since the school was only taking in students at entry grade levels (i.e., Kindergarten, grade 6 or grade 9).

Reason #5: It's likely that Most Charters Aren't Very Oversubscribed

In a large study funded by the US Department of Education,⁵ Mathematica Policy Research examined the achievement of students at charter middle schools and relied on a design using students in oversubscribed charter schools. Because such oversubscribed charter schools generally use lotteries to assign students to admitted versus waitlisted groups, this facilitates a research design that is essentially experimental and thus allows for sound causal inferences about subsequent performance differences between the two groups.

However, the Mathematica researchers found that although the nation had almost 500 established charter middle schools, an initial screen indicated that only 167 may have been oversubscribed. Even that estimate proved too high, however. Mathematica researchers found only 36 very popular charter schools with sufficiently large waiting lists to support their study design. According to the Mathematica report:

Although 77 schools both agreed to participate and initially appeared eligible for the study, ultimately 36 charter schools in 32 sites remained eligible through the study period and participated in the study. The other schools that initially appeared eligible were not sufficiently oversubscribed and were dropped from the sample before any outcome data were collected. These schools either had an unexpectedly small number of applicants and so did not hold a lottery, or they held a lottery and formed a randomly ordered waiting list of students not admitted at the lottery but ultimately admitted all or nearly of these students from the waitlist to fill slots in place of lottery winners who chose not to attend. *An important lesson learned during the evaluation was that the ebb and flow of charter school admissions and the schools' own difficulties in projecting their admissions flows makes it difficult to identify schools that will be eligible for a lottery-based study* (pp. 6-7; emphasis added; internal citations omitted).

⁵ Gleason, P., Clark, M., Tuttle, C. C., & Dwoyer, E. (2010). *The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts: Final Report* (NCEE 2010-4029). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Available online at http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/education/charter_school_impacts.pdf.

Perhaps record-keeping and interpretation of such waitlist data have greatly improved since the Miron evaluations were conducted in 2002 or since Mathematica's work during the period from 2004-2006. Nevertheless, given this background it is prudent to be extremely cautious when considering NAPCS's survey data – especially given how opaque NAPCS has been in the reporting of its methods and results

Reason #6: NAPCS's Methods Aren't Available for Independent Verification

To our knowledge, the methods and specific data produced by NAPCS's survey in past years have never been released. This means that NAPCS's audience of researchers, policymakers, media and others is being asked to accept on faith the NAPCS description and interpretation of its survey results. NAPCS has failed to report, for example, the survey response rate, any skew or bias to the data, the exact questions asked, the methods of data collection, and the methods used to analyze the data (e.g., how the number was reduced from 920,007 students to 520,000 students in order to account for multiple applications).

Reason #7: The NAPCS Numbers are Inexplicably Precise

The NAPCS "estimate" of 920,007 students on charter school waitlists is very precise. Estimates in the six figures do not generally end with a "7". But, again, without any meaningful information about survey's methods and results, we can only raise questions – we cannot provide any answers.

Reason #8: What Are We Comparing Charter Waitlist Numbers To?

We are not sure what meaning to make of the claim that there are about a half-million students who last year wanted to be, but were not, admitted to a charter school. NAPCS claims that about half-million students were "waiting" to get into charter schools and that policymakers should therefore fund the opening of additional charter schools. But charter schools are part of a larger educational system that includes traditional public schools (TPSs). Shifting enrollment from TPSs to charters is seen as a good thing by the NAPCS, based on the apparent assumption that there's unmet demand in charters but not in TPSs. But what is the support for that assumption?

Traditional public schools generally cannot have waitlists, since they are required to make room for all students. This is true no matter what time of the year those new students ask for a place, even when students request a place after funding has been allocated based on autumn headcounts, and even when the TPS does not have room in a classroom or have a teacher available to open a new class. This is simply not true of charter schools, so the waitlist data are not grounded by a meaningful comparison.

Reason #9: Charter Waitlists Can Be Trimmed by Requiring "Backfilling"

Student mobility is a simple reality for traditional public schools and charter schools alike, particularly those in lower income areas. Throughout the school year, substantial numbers of students leave and new students attempt to enter. Although some charter schools choose to "backfill" (i.e., replace leaving students with new students), many charter schools do not. This presents an interesting question: *If charter schools were required to backfill places vacated by*

students who leave during the school year, as traditional public schools are required to do, would the waitlists at charter schools be considerably reduced?

Backfilling would also make charter schools more responsive to market pressures, which seems reasonable given that one of the key arguments for charter schools has been that they are market driven and responsive to market accountability. In a functioning market place, when demand from consumers increases, successful producers increase the supply; but popular charter schools are apparently not doing so.

Conclusion

Given these nine reasons for skepticism, how useful are the charter waitlist data? The answer to that question depends in large part on whether NAPCS provides the survey methods and specific survey results. If that information is made available, perhaps the data could allow for some verification and useful interpretation. If not, we think that the waitlist indicator should be understood as largely unsupported. Of course, even if NAPCS is not forthcoming with this information, policy makers, reporters or others can launch their own mini-investigations, exploring for example some of the concerns raised by the earlier evaluations in Pennsylvania and Illinois, by contacting some charter schools with waitlists and asking to audit those lists.

Oversubscription at a given charter school is a sensible indicator of that school's popularity in relation to its size. If trustworthy and reliable waitlist data were available nationally, aggregation of those data could provide a rough indicator of overall popularity of charter schools in relation to the size of the sector, although such aggregation could lose important information about how many popular schools are driving the total number. There's an interesting debate to be had about the policy import of such aggregated numbers, but we're not at that point: we simply do not have trustworthy, reliable waitlist data. Until we do, policymakers would be wise to set aside NAPCS's claims and wait for verifiable data.
