An Experimental Analysis of Cream Skimming in Charter Schools

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Abstract: School choice can improve both access and quality, and a growing form of choice is manifested by charter schools. While certain charter schools produce large gains in student achievement, there are concerns they divert high-performing students from traditional public schools and impede enrollment for students perceived as costly to educate. We design and implement a nationwide field experiment to test whether charter schools impede access to application information for children of a particular race, gender, special need, behavioral problem, and low academic achievement. We find that charter schools are significantly more likely to ignore inquiries or respond with information that could discourage families from applying when it appears the child has a behavior issue, potential high-cost special need or a Hispanic-sounding name. The patterns of discrimination uncovered are concentrated among charter schools with high test scores and schools that are their own local district.

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