

An Experimental Analysis of Cream Skimming in Charter Schools*

Peter Bergman

Isaac McFarlin, Jr.

October 2016

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.

JEL Codes: I20, I21, I24, I28.

*Authors are listed alphabetically and are equally responsible for the research presented herein. Bergman: Teachers College, Columbia University, bergman@tc.columbia.edu; McFarlin: College of Education, University of Florida, imcfar@ufl.edu. The research is supported by the University of Michigan Office of Research, Center for the Education of Women, Center for Public Policy in Diverse Societies; and the Russell Sage Foundation. We wish to thank seminar participants at the University of Michigan, Columbia University, Harvard University, University of California-Davis, University of Chicago, University of Florida, University of Wisconsin, and the Tinbergen Institute. We also wish to thank conference participants at IZA, CESifo, and Stanford GSE. All errors herein are the responsibility of the authors alone.