Skimming and Segregation in Charters: An Analysis of Charter vs Traditional Public Schools Populations in Two Cities

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Background

- **What are charter schools?**
  - Charter schools first appeared in the US in the early 1990s. They are independently-run—usually by non-profit charter management organizations or a for-profit education management organization. They have more autonomy than traditional public schools (TPSs) allowing them to do things such as structure their curriculum and school environment as they please and extend their school day, week, and year.
  - Initially, charters were intended as a place for teachers to experiment with new techniques for students who did not thrive in TPSs. While some maintained this ideal, the motivation and intention of charters quickly evolved. Some began to see charters as a source of competition for TPSs that could drive improvements in all schools. Some communities with failing TPSs saw charters as a cure-all. Others saw charter schools as a new money-making venture.

- **Facts and motivation:**
  - Charters often exist in high-minority urban areas with the intent of serving these minority populations. This leads to charter schools serving a greater portion of minority students than TPSs in low-minority areas in the same city. In other words, it often leads to greater segregation in a city’s schools, such that charters end up serving a disproportionate number of minority students and TPSs end up serving a disproportionate number of white students.
  - In addition to having to meet the traditional accountability and standards requirements, charters must meet an additional set of requirements in order to be approved for charter renewal. If they do not meet these requirements, they face the possibility of shutdown.
  - Among the renewal criteria are student academic performance standards.
  - If student academic performance is a key factor in determining whether a school’s charter is approved for renewal, we can imagine a world where schools would do anything in their power to ensure sufficiently high performance.
  - TPSs with strict standards and accountability systems are often accused of making attempts at inflating student achievement by doing things such as teaching to the test and cheating. While these things may happen in charter schools too, one thing charters are frequently accused of is skimming.

Motivation

- **Skimming occurs when schools selectively enroll high-achieving students.**
  - While charters are public schools and therefore are not allowed to hand-pick their students as while they must resort to a lottery system when faced with over-subscription, there are many instances of communities accusing their local charters of skimming their students.
  - So how might charters skim? If they were interested in ensuring high academic performance, they may attempt to skim students based on their previous achievement, however, this is not feasible since charters are not allowed to hand-pick their students or collect or use prior achievement data. Another way charters may attempt to ensure higher achievement is by discouraging harder-to-educate students, who typically have lower levels of achievement, from enrolling or entering the lottery.

Research Questions

- **Segregation** Do charter schools systematically enroll a greater portion of minority students than the TPSs in the same city?
- **Skimming** Do charter schools systematically enroll fewer hard-to-teach students—who are also often lower achieving—than the TPSs in the same city?