

Charter School Lotteries in New York City: Frequently Asked Questions

How do students enroll in public charter schools?

Charter schools are independently run public schools that are tuition-free and open to all children, regardless of academic background. There are no tests, auditions, or essays, only a very brief application asking the child's name, grade, and basic contact information. Enrollment in a charter school is always voluntary.

What happens when there are more applications than seats?

When more children apply than there are seats available, state law requires charter schools to choose their students through a random admissions "lottery" held in the spring.

How often are lotteries necessary?

Due to high interest, almost all charter schools (over 95%) have to hold lotteries in a given year. For the 2011-12 school year, an estimated 64,000 students applied for about 13,000 open seats in NYC charter schools, creating an estimated citywide "waiting list" of over 50,000 students.¹

How do the lotteries work? Are they fair?

Charter schools effectively choose names from a hat. (The actual method is usually to draw numbered balls or tickets, or to use randomization software.) Applicants need not be present to be selected. The lotteries are open to the public, and subject to state regulations to ensure they are transparent and equitable.² A 2009 statistical analysis found no evidence that charter school lotteries were anything but random.³

Is anyone given special preference in the lottery?

Yes. Preferences are required for siblings of enrolled students and students who reside in the local Community School District.⁴ Charter schools may also give preference to students "at-risk of academic failure," which can mean English Language Learners, students from low-income families, students with low test scores, or other definitions. All lottery preferences other than those required by law must be approved by the charter school's authorizer.

What happens to students who aren't picked in the lottery?

Students not selected in the lottery are placed on a waiting list, along with students who applied after the lottery deadline. Charter schools use the waiting list to fill spots that become available if lottery winners decide not to enroll, existing students decide not to return or, in some instances, students leave mid-year.

Are charter school applicants representative of all NYC students?

No. Charter schools tend to serve high-need students in high-need neighborhoods, including high percentages of poor and minority students. Unfortunately, many charter schools have *not* attracted and retained students with disabilities and English Language Learners at rates comparable to neighboring district schools, which state law now requires them to do. Charter schools take this responsibility seriously and are working to expand their outreach efforts.

¹ NYC Charter School Center survey and analysis, April 2011. Online at <http://bit.ly/IGxYII>. The number of actual applications was much higher, since many students apply to multiple schools.

² The New York State Education Department intends to release draft regulations in June 2011.

³ Hoxby, C.M., S. Murarka, & J. Kang. (2009) *How New York City's charter schools affect achievement*. Cambridge, MA: New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project.

⁴ Returning charter school students are technically preferred also, since they are guaranteed a seat. Returning students are not included in the applicant numbers cited above.