

Excluded by Choice: Urban Students with Disabilities in the Education Marketplace

By Waitoller, F.R.

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School choice policies in the USA are a way to provide parents and their children with equitable opportunities in education. In this context, Waitoller introduces his book *Excluded by Choice* by touching upon the idea of school choice reforms and how charter schools are part of the school market place available to parents.

This eight-chapter book is the description of the journey of black and Latinx parents of students with disabilities who experienced real disappointment with the charter schools that their children attended. Chapter one is an introduction about the ideas that are presented in the book. The author starts the introductory chapter describing the experiences of some parents with limited access to high-quality schools in the public educational system in the Chicago Public Schools. High-quality schools are schools that are perceived safe by students and parents as well as schools that offer a challenging curriculum for all their students. During the introduction, the author also explains how school choice policies like charter schools provided the parents of students with disabilities with a better alternative than their neighborhood schools because these public schools were not equipped to serve students with special needs in the general classroom. Many of the charter schools conveyed to prospective parents that students with disabilities would be taught in the general education classroom. The author tries to maintain a neutral stance while writing this monograph. He writes, “*Excluded by Choice* is not an anti charter school *per se*.” He does not think they are good or bad. In addition, in this chapter, the author also introduces the concepts of ableism and racism and how these two social prejudices have affected the parents and children who were part of this book.

Chapters two and three entail the stories of parents who are looking for schools that are safer than their neighborhood schools as well as schools that offer high academic quality, even though the latter characteristic did not seem critical for a third of the parents who were involved in this project. In chapters four and five, the author shares the stories of parents who are already experiencing conflict with the charter schools their children are attending. These chapters entail “the parents’ feelings towards the charter school pushout practices, inflexible and rigorous academic and discipline practices, delay and/or denial of special services, lack of adequately trained personnel, and suggesting parents “choose” another school” (p. 93). In chapter six, the author examines the consequences for the parents and their children for trying to stay in their current charter schools. In some cases, the consequences of getting into a conflict with the charter schools had an impact on the social emotional well-being of some students. As a result of this, some students ended up being in a more segregated environment when they went back to their neighborhood school.



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In chapter seven, Waitoller introduces the concepts of marketSpace and charter school Space to support his theory “fantasies of inclusion in the education marketSpace.” Waitoller organizes his theory around three statements. The first one relates to how choosing a school is a decision based on the production of urban space. The second theoretical statement refers to how the new educational spaces produced by market-driven reforms provide the illusion of choice because children with disabilities cannot follow the standards established by the neoliberal educational system. Finally, Waitoller states that market-driven policies create a new form of racial inequity for students with disabilities.

Finally, in chapter eight, the author provides three types of recommendations to address the inequities in education. He suggests recommendations for practice, policy and research. In terms of practice, Waitoller’s suggestions are to provide a more inclusive pedagogy, provide social and emotional support based on culturally responsive behavior, give access to spaces and structures that support student participation and provide professional development to all the parts involved in school based on inclusive education. Moreover, concerning to policy, Waitoller recommendations are oriented to ensure that schools have the funds and resources to serve all students, to require charter schools to be more inclusive so parents and community members are part of school decision-making, to guarantee that charter schools evaluate students and provide special education services and to be more transparent about the steps guardians and parents can take to express their opinions to the school, school district and school board. Finally, with regard to research, the author suggests a shift from using narrow quantitative indicators such as test scores to mixed design research that uses quantitative, qualitative and geographical analysis. He also recommends studying charter schools that have successfully included students with disabilities.

In *Excluded by Choice*, Waitoller (2020) embarked on a project with 24 parents/ participants to explore the school choice policy in the city of Chicago through the study of some charter schools. The stories shared by the black and Latinx parents are very compelling especially because these are the stories of students with disabilities. These parents chose to leave the public school system because they wanted their children in a more inclusive environment. However, the students of this study were not only not included but also had to suffer the consequences of a one size fits all approach in terms of behavior and instruction that did not meet their needs at all. Furthermore, the sample of this project is very small and therefore it is hard to make a fair assessment of the success or failure of charter schools in the Chicago metropolitan area. In addition, the sample only included parents who had the knowledge, resources and time to seek legal services to confront the administration of the charter school or the Chicago Public Schools district office. Many voices of families with less knowledge about the process or who are marginalized and are less inclined to seek out help from school, community and legal resources are left out and unheard. His work captures the negative experiences of these families and unintentionally might unintentionally leave out positive or successful efforts or experiences of charter schools and the families they serve. Finally, most of the charter schools that were part of the study were charter franchises, therefore the book misses the opportunity to explore other types of charter schools and collect data from other family experiences.

Even though the author specifically states that *Excluded by Choice* is not a book against charter schools, the book only describes the bad experiences that black and Latinx parents and their children with disabilities experience when they get into conflict with the charter school that their children are attending. All the data collected by Waitoller after interviewing the participants of the project is based on only 24 parents which makes it hard to get conclusive evidence about how charter schools are failing these specific students with

disabilities. This might be a significant detail to keep in mind. By itself, Waitoller's work might not capture the failures or successes of charter schools as a whole in the Chicago metropolitan area, but his book and efforts do shed light on the negative experiences of the limited families that participated in his research.

At the end of the book, the author provides information about the methods he used to collect his data. In this section, the author shares a little more about his background, how he recruited the participants of his study and his data analysis. The style of the book is a combination of literature research and excerpts of conversations that he had with the parents who participated in the study. The style of the book makes this book easy to read and very relatable to parents who have children with disabilities. One big takeaway from this book is the frustration that parents feel with the public school system in Chicago and how they seek a solution to their educational problems in charter schools and they still do not find the educational solution they are looking for. Another big takeaway is Waitoller's most significant finding after his study which is that school choice is a cruel illusion. Some of the families actually left the negative experience and returned to their former negative experience in the public schools in the Chicago area. As with any issues in education, the problems at hand are complex and often do not have easy solutions.

This book should be read by administrators, parents of children with disabilities, teachers and graduate students in education. Reading this book would benefit the reader by providing valuable information about charter schools in the Chicago metropolitan area and it would enlighten readers about the school choice process and ultimately it provides information and insight into how these schools frequently serve or as Waitoller writes fail to serve students with disabilities.

Johanna Benitez

University of Colorado Denver, Denver, Colorado, USA