



Enrollment of Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools and Traditional Public Schools

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Key Data Points from the 2015-2016 CRDC

- Nationwide, charter schools enrolled proportionally fewer students with disabilities (10.79%) than traditional public schools (12.84%).
- 11 of 100 students in charter schools were identified as having a disability as compared to 13 of 100 students in traditional public schools.
- Since 2008-2009, the charter sector has steadily enrolled a greater proportion of students with disabilities, decreasing the difference between the two sectors.
- Students with disabilities that typically require fewer supports and services, such as students with specific learning disabilities, other health impairment, and speech and language impairment, represent 82% of students with disabilities in charter schools vs. 77% in traditional public schools.

Introduction¹

As the charter sector has matured, its critics have multiplied. While charter schools enjoyed bipartisan and substantial public support for their first 20 years, the tide of public opinion now flows in more varied directions. Policymakers and leaders across the country are facing pressure to limit charter expansion, with public support for charter schools becoming more party-aligned and polarized.² One

¹ This brief is part of a series accompanying the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools' (the Center's) release of its secondary analysis of the U.S. Department of Education's (USED) Office for Civil Rights' 2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). The USED conducts the CRDC, a survey of schools across the U.S., every other year. The 2015-2016 CRDC included 85,864 public schools, of which 5,548 were charter schools. The survey collected responses from 99.8% of the school districts in the nation (USED, CRDC 2015-2016 Data Notes). The CRDC provides the field with data regarding key variables of interest, including enrollment. Upon the release of the CRDC every two years, the Center issues a focused report on the data in an effort to understand key findings and trends. This brief, and the rest in the series, are the Center's effort to offer additional commentary on what we think the data reveals about the current status of students with disabilities in traditional public and charter schools. Unless otherwise noted, all data in this report comes from the CRDC and the Center's report, [Key Trends in Special Education in Charter Schools in 2015-2016: Secondary Analysis of the Civil Rights Data Collection](#) (Rhim, Kothari, and Lancet, 2019).

² Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot declared an intention to freeze charter expansion (Emmanuel, Walker Burke, LaMarr LeMee, and Kunichoff, 2019). New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio told a parent forum that in the "not-too-distant future" his administration would cut off marketing efforts of the city's charter schools, which currently rely on New York City Department of Education mailing lists; 2019 teachers' strikes in California prompted Governor Gavin Newsom to appoint a task force to investigate charter schools' financial impact on traditional public schools; and a recent EdNext poll found

piece of the narrative driving this backlash is the assertion by some critics that charter schools do not enroll or educate a representative proportion of students with disabilities and that this is intentional.

This brief uses data from the CRDC and scholarly literature more broadly to show that the story is more complicated than typical discourse suggests. The brief examines enrollment data of students with disabilities and the underlying factors that influence their access to charter schools and concludes with recommended actions we propose practitioners and charter stakeholders should take to improve access for students with disabilities and increase opportunities for innovative practices that can improve outcomes.

What We Know from Enrollment Data

The CRDC data demonstrates that charter schools are enrolling students with a diverse range of disabilities, though a difference persists between the proportion of students with disabilities that enroll in traditional public schools (12.84%) compared to charter schools (10.79%). To close this gap and enroll

an equal proportion of students with disabilities nationally, charter schools would have to collectively enroll 55,808 more students with disabilities.

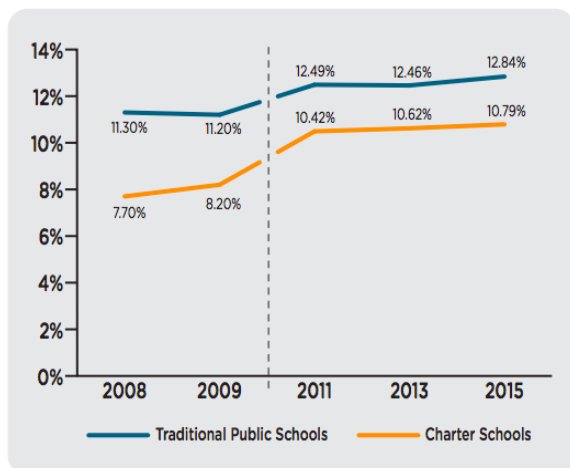


Figure 1: Enrollment of Students with Disabilities in Traditional Public vs. Charter Schools in 2015–16

Overall, this enrollment difference has narrowed steadily over the last seven years.³ Although the difference grew in 2015–2016, this was due to greater respective growth in traditional public schools’ enrollment of students with disabilities, not declining enrollment of students with disabilities in charter schools. This anomaly notwithstanding, the trend is clear: over time, charter schools are enrolling more students with disabilities. In fact, the proportion of students with disabilities in charter schools grew from 10.62% to 10.79% between 2013–2014 and 2015–2016.

Embedded in the overall enrollment averages are differences between traditional public and charter schools in enrollment of students with disabilities based on disability type. Charter schools enroll a higher percentage of students with specific learning disability (the largest population of students with disabilities) (46.7% vs. 43.5%), speech and language impairment (19.59% vs. 18.66%), other health

that as of 2018 only 36% of Democrats support charter school formation (Schneider, 2019). In their 2020 Presidential campaigns, no two candidates “criticized charter schools as sharply” as Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren (Blad and Ujifusa, 2019).

³ Notably, data from 2008–2010 and from 2011–2015 are from different sources. Data from 2008–2010 comes from the Government Accountability Office (2012), which was provided a custom data file by USED with extracted data elements from the large-scale EDfacts data system reported by SEAs through Education’s Data Exchange Network (EDEN) Submission System. Data from 2011–2015 comes from the CRDC core data set. Different data collection methods do generate different totals, but the difference between the two sectors over time is the focus for this figure.

impairments (15.25% vs. 14.53%), emotional disturbance (4.4% vs. 3.79%), and autism (7.72% vs. 7.61%), and conversely fewer students with developmental delay (1.29% vs. 2.39%), multiple disabilities (0.72% vs. 1.26%), and intellectual disability (3.48% vs. 5.73%). Charter schools and traditional public schools educate roughly the same proportion of students who have other types of disabilities, such as orthopedic impairment, hearing or visual impairment, and traumatic brain injury.

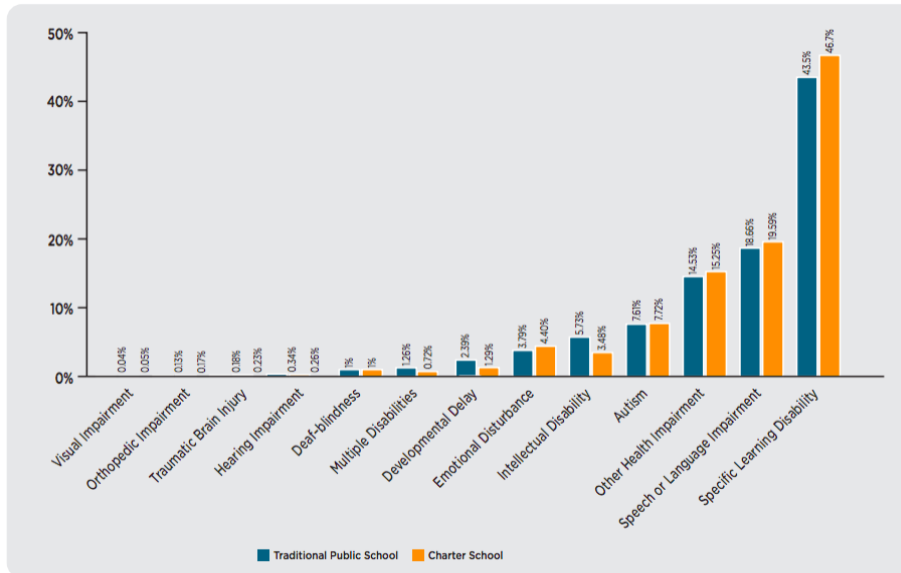


Figure 2: Enrollment of Students with Disabilities in 2015–16 by Disability Type

National enrollment averages mask significant variance between states. For instance, on average, Massachusetts (17.22%) and Maine (17.25%) both enroll more students with disabilities than the national average, and conversely Colorado (10.44%) and Texas (8.75%) enroll far fewer. There is also notable variability within states, with some schools educating far

more or far fewer students with disabilities than the state average. For example, Massachusetts schools enroll between 2.66% and 100% students with disabilities and Texas schools enroll between 0.8% and 100% students with disabilities. Our examinations of the CRDC data over time revealed similar variability in both traditional and charter schools (Rhim, Kothari, & Lancet 2019; Rhim & Kothari, 2018).

The CRDC also demonstrates that enrollment by sector varies widely state by state. In some states, the enrollment of students with disabilities in traditional public schools and in charter schools are very aligned. For example, students with disabilities are enrolled at some of the lowest rates overall and specifically in charter schools respectively in Texas (8.75% and 6.69%), Idaho (10.26% and 9.03%), Colorado (10.44% and 6.19%), and Hawaii (10.47% and 9.16%). Conversely, students with disabilities are enrolled at some of the highest rates overall and specifically in charter schools respectively in Maine (17.25% and 20.34%) and Pennsylvania (16.11% and 17.03%).

Other states have notable variance between the average enrollment of students with disabilities in traditional public schools and in charter schools. In some states, students with disabilities are enrolled at much higher rates in charter schools compared to traditional public schools, such as in

Iowa (20.49% vs. 11.95%) and Virginia (18.07% vs. 12.77%).⁴ Conversely, in other states, students with disabilities are enrolled at much higher proportions in traditional public schools compared to charter schools, such as in New Jersey (15.62% vs. 9.84%) and Delaware (16.53% vs. 10.77%).

When comparing enrollment of students with disabilities across the two sectors, there is certainly no “right” enrollment proportion, but outliers should raise questions for observers of the charter sector and prompt state policymakers to track the trends within their respective states. Whether examining overall enrollment or enrollment according to disability type, significant variability warrants closer examination to ensure that families of and students with disabilities are able to access charter schools similarly to their peers without disabilities and to ensure that schools are not over-identifying or discriminating against students with disabilities.

Considering Underlying Factors that Influence the Enrollment Difference

Based on research and on our extensive experience in the field examining the education of students with disabilities in the charter sector, we know that there are numerous factors influencing the enrollment of students with disabilities in charter schools. While some of these factors are within the control of charter school personnel, multiple external factors also influence enrollment trends. In order to increase access and, more importantly, foster innovation and improve outcomes for students with disabilities, it is critical to understand the complex factors that influence enrollment, most notably including: 1) family choice, 2) charter school practices, and 3) external drivers.

Family Choice

Charter schools are schools of choice, with enrollment depending on families proactively seeking to enroll their children in schools other than the district school to which they are assigned. Families of children with disabilities consider a number of different factors when selecting schools, such as the availability of programs that meet the needs of their children, ability to maintain existing support systems (e.g., siblings, peers, and care providers), teachers’ attitudes towards the teaching-learning process, opportunities for family-teacher communication and engagement, school proximity, student-teacher ratio, and match between school and family values, to name a few (Mawene and Bal, 2018).

A common explanation for the difference in enrollment of students with disabilities between traditional public and charter schools is that families simply are not choosing to send their students with disabilities to charter schools in the first place (Winters, 2015). For families of students with disabilities, the choice to enroll in either traditional public or charter schools can be influenced by a)

⁴ The notable differences between traditional public schools and charter schools in the states like Iowa, Virginia, and Maine are outliers due in large part to a notably small sample of charter schools (n = 2, 5, and 7 respectively) and a disproportionate percentage of students with disabilities in these schools (Rhim, Kothari, and Lancet, 2019).

where their child receives early childhood services or b) perceptions related to charter schools' commitment to students with diverse learning needs and ability to provide specialized supports.

1. Early Childhood Services Create Pathways to Traditional Public Schools

States are required to develop policies and procedures—known as Child Find—to ensure that all children with disabilities who are eligible to receive special education supports and services are identified, located, and evaluated. Local education agencies⁵ (LEAs) are responsible for completing the multiple steps of Child Find. Charter schools that operate as their own LEAs are therefore responsible for Child Find, yet they are accountable only for the children in the grade ranges they enroll. Local traditional school districts, on the other hand, are responsible for Child Find for all children in their jurisdiction, including ages birth to 21.

Through these early childhood interventions, families with infants and toddlers may be more likely to develop relationships with, and become more exposed to, traditional district special education programs, which may subsequently impact potential enrollment in charter schools. Local school districts, for example, often provide speech and language services to students prior to their entry into kindergarten, and the families of such students may be reluctant to switch to a charter school and interrupt the continuation of these services (Winters, 2015).

Based on our experience in the field, families receiving early childhood interventions may not choose to enroll their child in a charter school because: (1) they are comfortable with their current district services and providers, (2) district IEPs are written to reflect district models and charter schools may provide similar services but within different models, or (3) some services may be provided by the district LEA and not charter schools that are not LEAs. Any one or combination of these scenarios can contribute to the enrollment differences between traditional public and charter schools.

2. Family Perceptions Regarding Charter Schools' Ability to Educate and Commitment to Students with Disabilities

CRDC data demonstrates that an increasing proportion of families of children with disabilities are enrolling in charter schools, and there are various documented reasons why families might prefer charter schools for their children (National Council on Disability, 2018). For instance, families from Black and Latinx communities noted their wariness of the traditional public schools' special education system and its negative effects on their communities, and so were enticed by the newness of charter schools; other families expressed frustration with traditional

⁵ LEAs are wholly responsible for the provision of the full continuum of special education and related services for students with disabilities. State charter laws determine whether charter schools operate as autonomous LEAs, as part of an LEA (e.g., a traditional school district), or as a hybrid wherein they are their own LEA for some programs but part of an LEA for other programs (National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools, 2017). In practice, when charter schools operate as part of an LEA, the LEA typically retains some state and federal funds and influences the charter school's special education policies and practices to varying degrees.

public schools' failure to address their student's needs, even after they had raised concerns, and thus were attracted to a different school model (2018).

The great promise of charter schools is that they can leverage their autonomy to introduce new practices that will lead to better outcomes for students. With relatively greater accountability and fewer restrictions and red tape, charter schools are free to take new and interesting approaches guided by specific visions and supported by intentional systems and structures, which can attract families unsatisfied with the current public education systems' options and outcomes.

Our experience in the field has shown us, however, that if families don't believe charter schools are able to sufficiently respond to the unique learning needs of their children or to provide them with necessary services and accommodations, they will be less likely to choose to enroll in a charter school. A recent survey we conducted of families of students with disabilities in Missouri and New Jersey confirmed that they frequently struggle to access the information they need in order to make informed decisions regarding charter schools, and perceive that charter schools do not have adequate services for their child's more complex learning needs. In fact, less than half of surveyed parents agreed with the statement "charter schools welcome students with different learning abilities and styles," and less than half agreed that "charter schools provide services such as speech, physical, or occupational therapy" (The National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools, in press). Families of students with disabilities, in addition, are more likely to report challenges navigating choice overall and experience "trouble finding a school that fits" (Jochim, DeArmond, Gross, & Lake, 2014).

Charter School Practices

Just as family choice influences the enrollment of students with disabilities in charter schools, so do the practices of the schools themselves. While civil rights legislation prohibits schools that receive federal funds from discriminating against students with disabilities, schools have considerable leeway in how they carry out enrollment processes, and thus can vary widely in their demonstration of welcoming (or not welcoming) students with disabilities. Decisions and actions by charter schools that have been shown to impact the enrollment of students with disabilities both negatively and positively include a) problematic messaging and communication regarding prospective and current students, b) operation of highly onerous enrollment processes, d) engagement in discriminatory "counseling out" practices, and e) adoption of specialized models and implementation of inclusive practices.

1. Problematic Messaging and Communication

Charter schools frequently differentiate themselves through their mission statements. Since the opening of the first charter school in 1991, state charter laws have created the opportunity for founders to open schools offering models such as Expeditionary Learning, Montessori, "no

excuses”, project-based learning, and Waldorf. They have also fostered the creation of schools with a specific focus such as alternative education, performing arts, STEAM education, college preparation, and online learning, or with a specific population in mind, such as foster youth or girls.

In our experience, some of the marketing for mission-driven schools may be less than welcoming to families of students with disabilities. For instance, in line with the laudable goal of increasing the number of students from poor communities enrolling in college, many charter schools advertise their commitment to a 100% college acceptance rate—even though some students might choose other post-secondary pathways. Subtle messaging in promotional materials may discourage enrollment of particular students, such as those who don’t have strong grades or test scores or those with disciplinary records (Zetino, 2017). Other charter schools may describe limitations of programming or services for students with disabilities, or offer “full inclusion,” forcing families to choose between enrolling their student in the school with limited or no individualized help, or in another school where more specialized services are available (National Council on Disability, 2018).

Charter schools have even been documented actively treating families of potential students differently based on whether or not their child has a disability. In a recent study, researchers sent out emails from fictitious families to 6,452 schools in 29 states and Washington, D.C. (Bergman & McFarlin, 2020). The fictitious families asked whether any student is eligible to apply to the school and how to apply. Some emails contained a baseline message, simply asking about enrollment generally. Other emails signaled a randomly assigned attribute of the child, such as the fact that the child had a special need or that the child had poor behavior. The results were disconcerting. Families of students with disabilities overall received a lower response rate to their inquiries compared to families of typically developing students. This finding held true across both the traditional public and charter school sectors, except when the message signaled a significant special need, to which traditional public schools exhibited no differential response rate but charter schools were much less likely to respond.

2. Onerous Enrollment Processes

Charter schools have also been shown to actively deter families from enrolling their children with disabilities through methods beyond messaging, such as through the use of onerous application and enrollment processes and requirements (Equip for Equality, 2018). A review of Arizona charter school websites conducted by the ACLU, for example, found that some charter schools engaged in illegal and exclusionary practices such as setting enrollment limits on students with disabilities, including questions in application and enrollment documents that may suppress their enrollment, precluding the enrollment of students with disciplinary records, setting English proficiency requirements, or necessitating the completion of pre-enrollment essays or interviews (Zetino, 2017). Barriers to enrollment at these charter schools were not just limited to first-time enrollment, either, with some charter schools advising families that their

children should “enroll elsewhere if the environment is not appropriate for their particular student.” These exclusionary enrollment practices may mislead (or intentionally lead) families into perceiving that charter schools can engage in the illegal process of cherry-picking which students they wish to educate.

3. Counseling Out and Away

“Counseling out,” or encouraging students to leave a school, is against the law (USED, 2016), but in our experience it still happens across the country in both traditional and charter public schools. In charter schools, this discriminatory practice can take various forms—from outright telling a family that the school cannot support their child’s needs, to nudging families to accept a more restrictive placement,⁶ to placing untenable restrictions on a child’s enrollment (e.g., requiring a parent to attend class alongside the child) (Zetino, 2017). In extreme cases, schools resort to “subterranean discipline”—the use of practices like in-school suspensions, early dismissals, and even police involvement—that are not reported to the state but that create an environment of such hostility that families feel they have no choice but to withdraw their children (O’Neill, in press).

4. The Promise of Innovation

On the other hand, some charter schools, such as those with specific missions of enrolling and educating students who have not been successful in traditional public schools, may intentionally seek to recruit students with disabilities. In many states, charter schools are granted the flexibility to tailor their programs toward serving certain populations of students particularly well, granting families the opportunity to access specialization if they so choose. According to CRDC data, the number of specialized charter schools has grown to 165 in 2015–2016, with 118 of these specialized schools (72%) enrolling more than 50% students with disabilities.

Understanding the charter sector can shine a light on how schools can better meet a diverse range of needs. The CHIME Institute (CHIME), a charter school established in 1990 in Los Angeles, for example, is a national leader in the development and implementation of a unique model of inclusive education. We examined some of its practices, such as those related to co-teaching, planning, and staffing, that lead to promising results in single measures like standardized testing when compared to the schools around them and the state (Pettit, 2016). Lessons from CHIME reinforce that charter schools can develop the capacity to enroll and educate students with a wide range of needs.

⁶ In 2018, for example, the New York State Education Department determined that Success Academy Charter Schools and the New York City Department of Education failed to provide students with disabilities the due process protections to which they are entitled under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and New York Education Law. The complaint specifically cited a pattern of school officials “unilaterally changing special education placements without holding meetings with families, moving students to lower grade levels, and even ignoring hearing officers’ rulings” (Offenhardt, 2019; Zimmerman, 2018).

A report co-authored by the Center and the Center on Reinventing Public Education explored some of the characteristics that appear to matter most for improving access and outcomes for students with disabilities, namely: 1) trusting relationships between schools and families built on caring and productive communication, 2) an orientation toward ongoing problem solving to meet individual needs, and 3) blurred lines between special and general education students' instructional and social experiences (DeArmond et al., 2019).

External Drivers

The studies mentioned above demonstrate some of the subtler, but potentially influential, ways that charter schools can impact families' decisions to apply and enroll in schools other than the district school to which they are assigned. We know, however, that a comprehensive examination of trends in enrollment of students with disabilities in the charter sector requires a closer look at the many complex external systems and structures at play, notably 1) evaluation and identification processes, 2) the influence of and relationship with the LEA, and 3) oversight and accountability.

1. Evaluation and Identification

There is great variation across states in how students are evaluated and identified as having a disability (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2019). This variation is compounded by the fact that diagnosing some types of disabilities involves much more subjectivity than others. That is, while a number of disability categories are based on objective and frequently medically-based diagnoses (e.g., hearing and visual impairment), others depend on subjective assessments and professional observations (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010). The categories of specific learning disability and other health impaired, which typically incorporate students with attention issues, vary significantly between states, reflecting the degree of subjectivity in the diagnosis (The National Council on Disability, 2018).

Building on the variable nature of eligibility for special education, some charter schools assert that their teaching methods decrease identification and accelerate declassification, which "if true, should be hailed as a major success" (Garda, 2012). NCD's report highlights this phenomenon, noting that while charter schools are more likely to declassify students as having disabilities, that does not necessarily mean students are not receiving services or support (2018).

Supporting this supposition, a study of Boston public schools, for example, concluded that students with disabilities in charter schools are at least twice as likely to be declassified as having a disability compared to students in traditional public schools. Moreover, the study found that enrollment in a charter school generated "large achievement gains for students classified at the time of the lottery—similar to the gains made by their general-education charter classmates," driven in large part by the charter schools' general-education practices (Setren, 2020). Notably, this effect was not just limited to students with disability profiles of

higher incidence, who tend to be easier and less costly to educate; even students with the most significant needs performed better in Boston's charter schools compared to traditional public schools. Given this evidence, it is reasonable to question what the aggregate difference in enrollment of students with disabilities between charter schools and traditional public schools means for assessing access and success for students with disabilities.

2. Influence of and Relationship with the LEA

State charter laws determine whether charter schools are their own LEA, part of an LEA, or a hybrid wherein they are their own LEA for some programs (e.g., Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act) but part of an LEA for other programs (e.g., provision of special education and related services). Charter schools that operate as LEAs are wholly responsible for providing a full continuum of education placements for students with disabilities, while charter schools that operate as part of an LEA share the responsibility for provision of special education and related services with the LEA (National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools, 2017). CRDC data shows that charter schools that are their own LEA enroll a larger proportion of students with disabilities (11.28%) compared to charter schools that are part of an LEA (10.17%).

We have observed, in states such as Colorado, Connecticut, and Florida, that when charter schools operate as part of an LEA, the LEA typically influences the charter school's special education policies and practices to varying degrees. We have had the opportunity to visit and work in dozens of cities across the nation and have witnessed the degree to which LEAs influence decisions related to enrollment and placement of students with disabilities. For instance, the LEA may participate in IEP team meetings and play a role in determining placements (Morando Rhim & O'Neill, 2013) by directing some students with disabilities, most notably students who require more significant supports, to existing LEA programs rather than creating or allocating resources to create programs in new charter schools.

3. Oversight and Accountability

Oversight and accountability efforts by states and authorizers also tend to play a major role in charter schools' enrollment of students with disabilities. Based on our experiences working in states like Colorado, Connecticut, Louisiana, New York, and Missouri, oversight policies, practices, procedures, and philosophies tend to vary greatly, with states differing in their levels of commitment to and ownership of issues surrounding access for students with disabilities in charter schools. Nearly all states leave admission and enrollment procedures up to individual charter schools and expressly prohibit charter schools from denying admission to students with disabilities (Garda, 2012), which appears to be insufficient in preventing charter schools from engaging in exclusionary and potentially illegal practices.

Authorizers in each chartering state also have their own processes and accountability standards, with differing perspectives and practices on issues at the intersection of authorizing and special education. The National Association of Charter School Authorizers surveyed all authorizers in

2015 to learn about practices, challenges, strengths, and shortcomings in authorizing (Rausch, 2016). Survey results indicate that many of the responding authorizers 1) do not prioritize outcomes for students with disabilities as part of charter performance contracts, 2) do not understand that persistent failure to serve students with disabilities is a problem behavior that merits serious consequences, and 3) do not identify themselves as responsible for enforcing enrollment proportionality for students with disabilities in charter schools.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The Center's release of its secondary analysis of the 2015-2016 CRDC data includes recommendations for a diverse group of stakeholders at the federal, state, authorizer, local, school, advocate, and funder levels. While we encourage readers to review the full report for the entire list of recommendations to improve access to charter schools for students with disabilities, a few stand out as particularly important when considering enrollment of these students in charter schools and traditional public schools. As of this writing, educators are contending with disruptions caused by the COVID-19 virus that challenge nearly every aspect of school operations. Enrollment patterns in charter schools will likely be impacted in ways that may be hard to predict and could impact students with disabilities for years to come. It seems crucial to be attentive to such changes and patterns as well as considerations already raised by the CRDC data, such as those captured in the recommendations below.

Dig into the Data

To improve policy, stakeholders need a comprehensive understanding of enrollment patterns. It is critical that districts, states, and the federal government continue to expand on their collection, tracking, and analysis of data. Likewise, charter school authorizers must track, examine, and leverage enrollment data of schools in their portfolio. When enrollment of students with disabilities in their schools is statistically different from district data or otherwise relatively low, they should engage in a comprehensive audit of school practices and work to rectify policies or practices that could be driving the enrollment gap.

Share Best Practices and Legal Guidance

Many charter schools and authorizers lack an understanding of enrollment best practices and even legal requirements. State education agencies (SEAs) should work with schools and authorizers to ensure that legal requirements related to educating students with disabilities are met, but must also ensure that schools have the support they need to develop the capacity to educate students with a wide range of needs.

Reexamine Existing Practices

SEAs must examine whether their system incentivizes over- or under-enrollment of students with disabilities. These unintended incentives often occur through funding mechanisms, eligibility criteria, or accountability frameworks that focus on absolute performance as opposed to growth. If any unintended incentives are identified, these practices should be modified and the impact on enrollment should be carefully tracked.

Work Within Local Structures

Charter schools that operate as part of an LEA should collaborate with their authorizer to articulate the manner in which they will share responsibility for educating students with disabilities with the district while ensuring that all students have ready access to charter schools regardless of whether or not they have disabilities. Conversely, charter schools that operate as their own LEA should collaborate with their authorizer or local support infrastructure organizations to ensure they can provide the full continuum of special education supports and services.

Foster Inviting Schools

Schools should develop policies and procedures to ensure they welcome, retain, and provide equitable access to students with disabilities in accordance with federal civil rights statutes. This includes everything from ensuring that students with disabilities are featured—and explicitly welcomed—in promotional materials, to ensuring that application materials and enrollment processes are non-discriminatory, to working with staff to ensure that they are well-informed and equipped to work with students with disabilities and their families.

Reach Out to Families

Given common misconceptions regarding whether students with disabilities are welcome in charter schools, or about the accommodations and modifications they provide, individual charter schools, nonprofits, and advocacy groups can play an essential role in educating families about childrens' rights to a free, appropriate public education and their right to exercise public school choice.

Whether or not charter schools are educating as many students with disabilities as are traditional public schools is a more complex, nuanced question that public discourse on the subject suggests. The enrollment difference between students with disabilities in traditional public schools and in charter schools is actual, small, and shrinking—undoubtedly a positive trend—and that many students with disabilities continue to be interested in enrolling in charter schools. Furthermore, we know that students with particular disabilities, such as specific learning disability and autism, are gravitating to charter schools. No blanket statement concerning the charter sector, however, can fully capture its enrollment of students with disabilities, particularly given the complicated and interrelated factors behind the numbers, such as family choice, charter school practices, and external drivers. We hope this brief sheds light on what the enrollment difference means,

particularly for students and families, as well as what key levers can be leveraged to ensure equal access for all. Furthermore, we hope that as more students with disabilities enroll in charter schools, these autonomous schools will fully optimize their autonomy to develop new and innovative programs that could benefit the broader community.

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