



# Students with Disabilities in Charter High Schools: Curriculum and College Preparation

OCTOBER 8, 2024

# In recent decades, the overall goals of U.S. education have centered around postsecondary life, with a particular emphasis on building students’ “college and career-ready skills.”

**THIS FOCUS IS ECHOED** in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which says the purpose of special education is both to meet students’ unique needs and “prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living.”<sup>1</sup> Critical to the right to a free appropriate public education for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment is an education that points toward life after high school, including providing students with disabilities equal access to the opportunities afforded by higher education.

This fifth of six briefs exploring data from the 2020–2021 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) data, released earlier this year, explores the access of students with disabilities to the educational opportunities that make college possible for most students: SAT and ACT testing, Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) coursework, and dual enrollment programs in colleges and universities.

**This fifth brief explores the access of students with disabilities to the educational opportunities that make college possible for most students.**



<sup>1</sup> Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. 33 § 300.1.a. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.1>

**The Center for Learner Equity** (CLE) is committed to catalyzing student success and eradicating the complex, pervasive, and systematic barriers that prevent students with disabilities from accessing quality educational opportunities and choices, robust support, and inclusive environments. We accomplish this through research, advocacy, coalition formation, and capacity building with national, state, and local partners.

The Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), maintained and released biennially by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) since 1968, publishes data on leading indicators related to access and barriers to education opportunities from early childhood through grade 12. With each biennial release, CLE analyzes similarities and differences in student populations and student experiences in public charter schools and traditional public schools for students with disabilities. Understanding these national-level data supports success for students with disabilities without regard to educational setting and placement.

The findings shared in this brief are based on data reported in the 2020–2021 CRDC, collected from 97,575 schools. This report uses a data-cleaning methodology that selected a sample of these schools. For more information about the methodology used in these briefs, including a data file and accompanying instructions, [see our methodology brief here](#).

Students with disabilities receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and both or neither of those laws. Unless otherwise noted, statistics in this brief refer to students eligible to receive services under IDEA.

## Key Takeaways

The percentage of high school students with disabilities participating in AP and IB programs, enrolling in dual enrollment programs, and taking the SAT/ACT has generally continued to increase over time.

- ✓ The percentage of enrolled high school students who are identified as students with disabilities is functionally equal between traditional public schools and charter schools.
  - However, traditional public high schools enroll a substantially higher percentage of students with low-incidence disabilities, while charter high schools enroll a substantially higher percentage of students with “specific learning disabilities.” Brief 2 explains more about these categories.
  - These differences may, in part, explain differences in participation in college preparatory programs, as students with specific learning disabilities generally have greater access to a general education curriculum than students who require more significant supports.
- ✓ The percentage of students with disabilities enrolled in AP courses has increased over time, mirroring an increase in AP participation among all students. After increasing from 2012 to 2018, all student participation in IB Programs decreased from 2018 to 2021 in charter schools, but not in traditional public schools.
- ✓ Access to dual enrollment programs for students with and without disabilities has increased over time.
- ✓ The percentage of all students taking the SAT/ACT exams decreased from 2018 to 2021 in both charter and traditional public schools, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in university admissions policies.





## Key Questions for Policymakers and Researchers

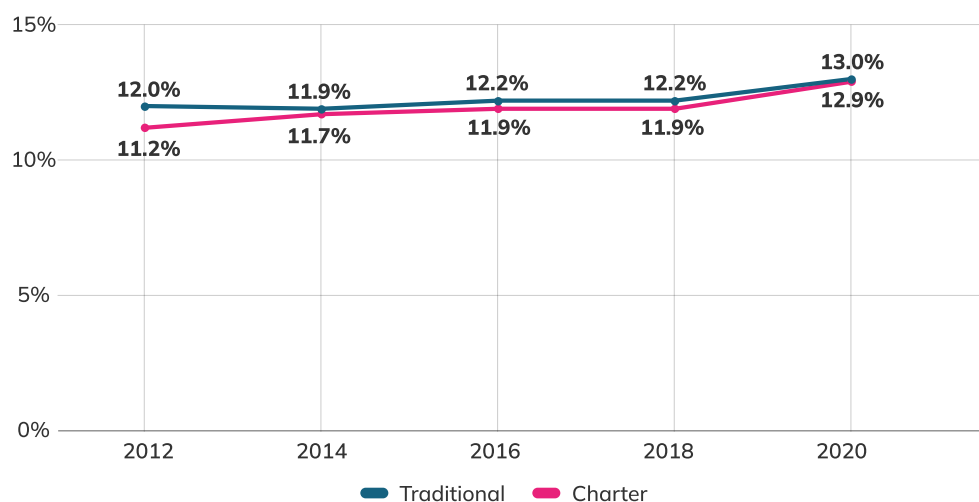
- 1** How does increasing access to AP/IB courses for students with disabilities impact their academic trajectories and post-secondary opportunities?
  - Is there a measurable/notable difference in transition planning for students in schools with increased and higher rates of access to college preparation courses and other related curriculum?
  - Does increased access lead to increased learning, higher passage rates on AP/IB exams, and/or greater receipt of college credits? Are more students with disabilities attending college?
  - Can AP/IB exams or performance on the ACT/SAT objectively demonstrate a student's strengths in a way that a transcript does not?
- 2** A straightforward analysis of opportunities for students with disabilities is complicated by overlapping postsecondary programs available to students and varied participation in those programs by charter high schools and traditional public high schools. However, a significant and ongoing difference persists in participation in dual enrollment programs by students with disabilities. What are the organizational and policy barriers to participation in such programs by students with disabilities, and how can these be remedied?
- 3** With emphasis on the role of the SAT and ACT evolving across much of the country, what are other measures of the likelihood that students overall and students with disabilities are being encouraged to apply for postsecondary programs?
- 4** Given evolving understanding of both the challenges and potential merits of standardized tests for college admissions, what are schools doing to ensure that all interested students have access to appropriate accommodations for advanced coursework and standardized tests?
- 5** How can research on transition or "18 to 21" programs for students with disabilities across the country confirm or complicate findings here about postsecondary opportunities?

# 1. Enrollment of High School Students with Disabilities and Student Characteristics

As described in Brief 1, traditional public schools generally enroll a larger proportion of students with disabilities than charter schools. This trend, however, does not hold for high schools: as of the 2020–21 school year, the rate of enrollment of students with disabilities between traditional and charter public high schools is functionally equal. However, charter and traditional public high schools enroll students identified with different types of disabilities, informing further analysis on college preparatory engagement.

## a. Enrollment Trends

Figure 1. Percentage of High School Students with Disabilities by School Sector (2012–2021)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020–21 Civil Rights Data Collection, released November 2023, available at <https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov>.

- The percentage of enrolled high school students with disabilities (here, students eligible for services under IDEA) slightly increased in both traditional high schools and charter high schools from 2012 to 2021 to 13% in traditional public high schools and 12.9% in charter high schools. This difference has decreased from 0.9% in 2012 to 0.1% in 2021.
- Traditional public high schools enroll a 0.4% greater proportion of students eligible for support under Section 504 (4.5% vs 4.1%). While this is also a relatively small gap, the gap has increased and decreased multiple times since 2012.

Table 1. High School Enrollment of Students with Disabilities by School Type

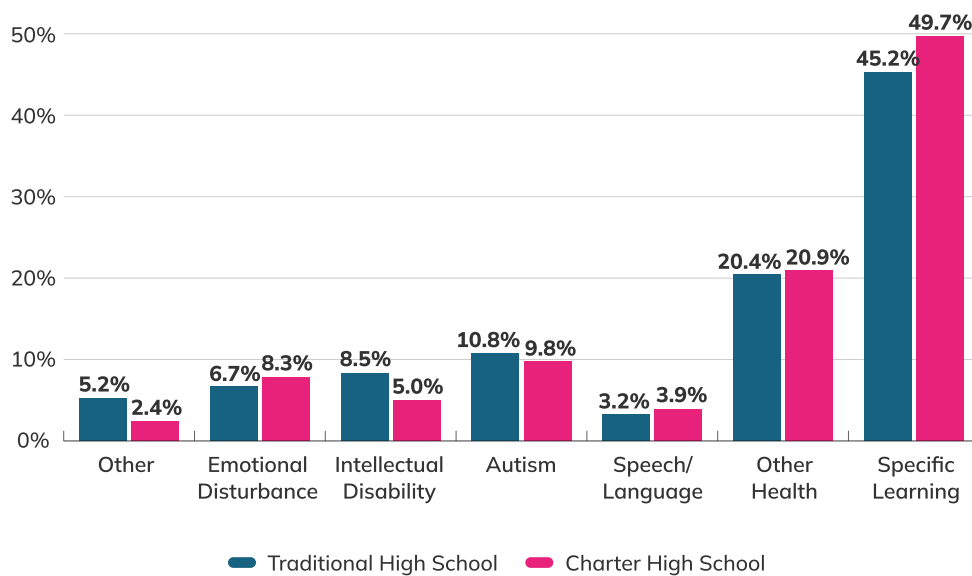
	2012	2014	2016	2018	2021
<b>IDEA Enrollment</b>					
Total	1,710,475 (11.9%)	1,711,842 (11.9%)	1,781,435 (12.2%)	1,864,908 (12.2%)	1,920,227 (13.0%)
Traditional	1,664,545 (12.0%)	1,651,608 (11.9%)	1,709,227 (12.2%)	1,779,826 (12.2%)	1,816,220 (13.0%)
Charter	45,930 (11.2%)	60,234 (11.7%)	72,208 (11.9%)	85,082 (11.9%)	104,007 (12.9%)
<b>504 Enrollment</b>					
Total	262,193 (1.8%)	321,709 (2.2%)	414,616 (2.8%)	529,405 (3.5%)	669,167 (4.5%)
Traditional	255,352 (1.8%)	309,816 (2.2%)	399,585 (2.8%)	506,271 (3.5%)	636,159 (4.5%)
Charter	6,841 (1.7%)	11,893 (2.3%)	15,031 (2.5%)	23,134 (3.2%)	33,008 (4.1%)





## b. Primary Disability Types

Figure 2. Primary Disability Types of High School Students with Disabilities by School Sector (2021)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020–21 Civil Rights Data Collection, released November 2023, available at <https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov>.

- Within the population of students with disabilities, charter high schools reported higher percentages of students with disabilities with specific learning disabilities (49.7% vs. 45.2%), other health impairments (20.9% vs. 20.4%), emotional disturbances (8.3% vs. 6.7%), and speech/language impairments (3.9% vs. 3.2%) than traditional public high schools.
- Conversely, traditional public schools reported enrolling larger proportions of students with disabilities with autism (10.8% vs. 9.8%), intellectual disabilities (8.5% vs. 5.0%), and “other” disabilities (5.2% vs. 2.4%). The “other” category aggregates counts of student groups that each contain less than 3% of the total count of students with disabilities and includes students identified with deaf/blindness, visual impairments, traumatic brain injuries, orthopedic impairments, hearing impairments, multiple disabilities, and missing identifications. While not always the case, students in these categories, frequently referred to as “low-incidence” disabilities, typically require more significant support and services.
- Generally speaking, students with specific learning disabilities are more likely to have access to general education curricula throughout their education, including college preparatory courses and assessments. Differences in student enrollment, therefore, may explain some of the differences in participation in college preparatory work described in the rest of this brief.

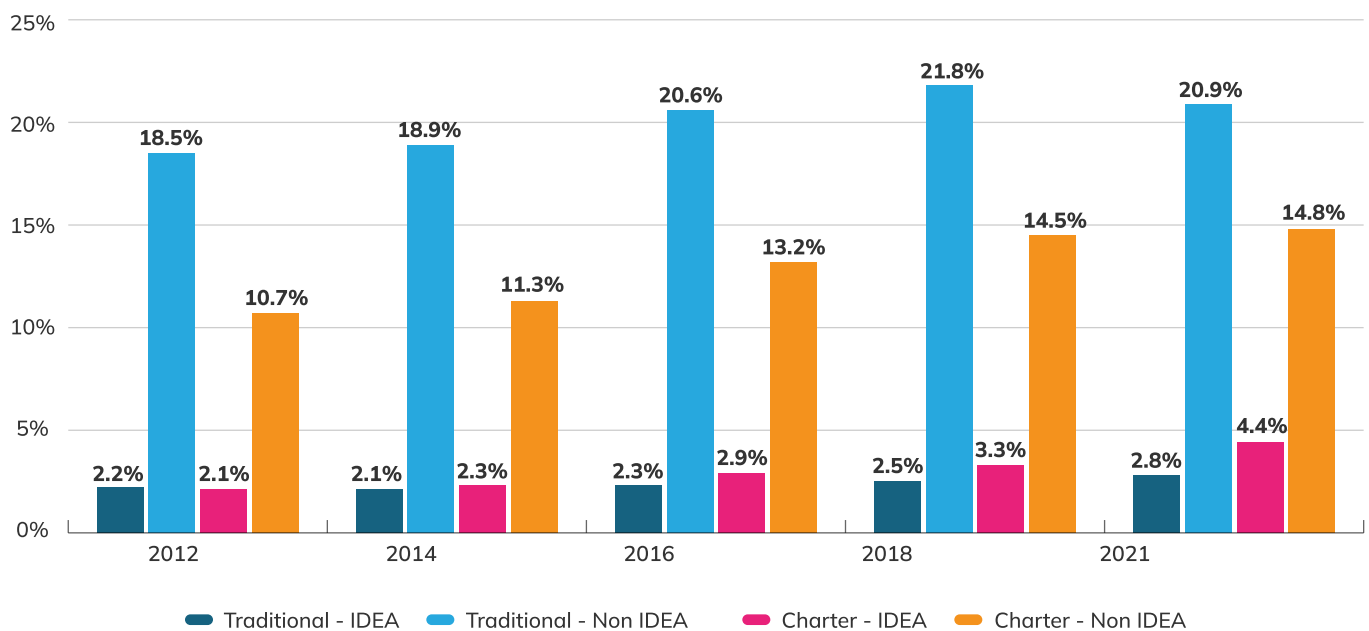


### c. Student Participation in Advanced Placement (AP) Courses

During the 2020–21 school year, 39.7% of charter high schools and 58% of traditional public high schools offered at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course. Created by the College Board, AP classes are designed to offer a university-level curriculum and are often used by colleges and universities to make placement decisions or award course credit.

From 2014–2021, a larger percentage of students with disabilities in charter schools took at least one AP course (4.4%) compared to students with disabilities in traditional public school settings (2.8%). The percentage of students with disabilities taking AP courses has generally increased over time in both charter and traditional public schools.

Figure 3. Percentage of High School Students participating in AP Courses by Sector Over Time (2012–2021)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020–21 Civil Rights Data Collection, released November 2023, available at <https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov>. In this analysis, “IDEA” refers to students served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, while “non-IDEA” refers to students not served under that law.

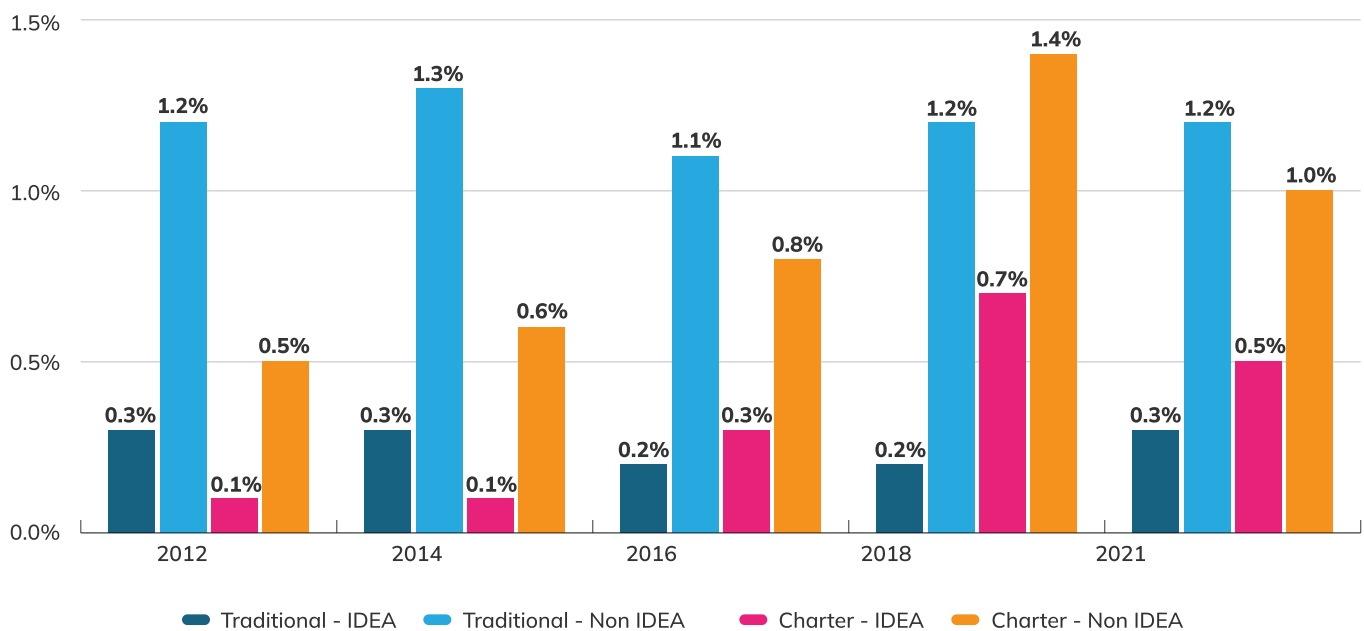


## d. Student Participation in International Baccalaureate (IB) Programs

An alternative to AP, the International Baccalaureate (IB) program offers college-level coursework and exams in six areas of study – language and literature, language acquisition, individuals and societies, experimental sciences, mathematics and computer science, and the arts – culminating in an IB diploma. Unlike AP, students participating in IB take a common set of courses rather than choosing among course options. While IB programs are internationally recognized for academic strength, colleges have different policies around granting credit for students participating in IB programs.

During the 2020–21 school year, 2.4% of charter high schools and 4.1% of traditional public high schools had students participating in IB programs. The rate of students with disabilities enrolled in IB programs in charter schools decreased from 0.7% to 0.5% from 2018 to 2021, while the rate of charter school students without disabilities enrolled in IB programs decreased from 1.4% to 1.0%. Student participation in IB programs in traditional public schools remained relatively consistent.

Figure 4. Percentages of High School Students in IB Programs by Sector Over Time (2012–2021)



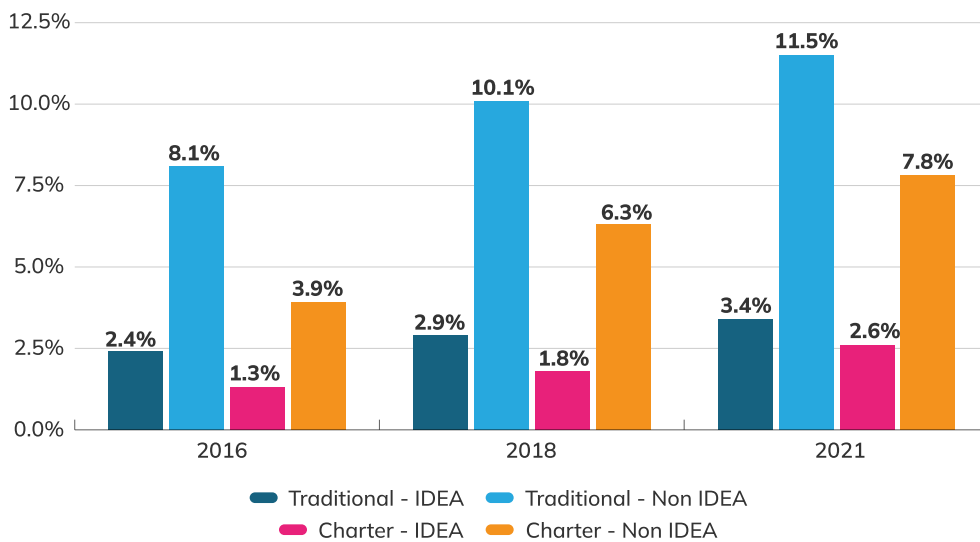
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020–21 Civil Rights Data Collection, released November 2023, available at <https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov>. In this analysis, “IDEA” refers to students served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, while “non-IDEA” refers to students not served under that law.

## e. Student Participation in Dual Enrollment (DE) Programs

During the 2020–21 school year, 44.5% of charter high schools and 66.7% of traditional public high schools offered dual enrollment opportunities. Participating students take college-level classes and can often transfer credit from these courses to a college or university after graduation. The percentage of students with and without disabilities participating in such programs has increased since 2015, when the CRDC began collecting data on these programs.

In 2021, 2.6% of students with disabilities in charter schools participated in dual enrollment programs, compared to 3.4% of their traditional public school peers. This trend continues from prior years when traditional public high schools reported a larger percentage of students with disabilities enrolled in dual enrollment programs.

Figure 5. Percentages of High School Students in Dual Enrollment Programs by Sector Over Time (2016–2021)



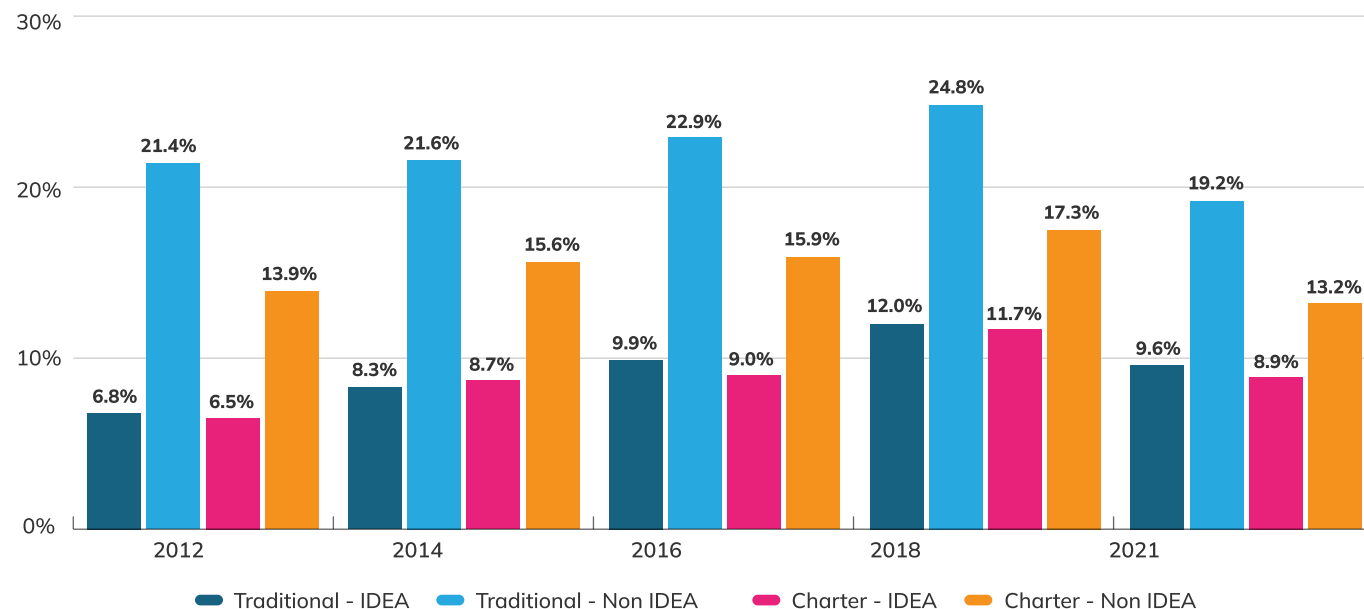
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020–21 Civil Rights Data Collection, released November 2023, available at <https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov>. In this analysis, "IDEA" refers to students served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, while "non-IDEA" refers to students not served under that law.

## f. Student SAT/ACT Test Participation Rates

During the 2020–21 school year 63.8% of charter high schools and 77.8% of traditional public high schools enrolled students who took either or both of the primary college admissions tests: the SAT and ACT. These figures likely underestimate true participation, due to how CRDC identifies high schools and significant amounts of missing data from the states of California and Washington. (See the methodology brief for more information.) In 2021, 9.6% of high school students with disabilities (in this analysis, students eligible under the IDEA) in traditional public schools took the SAT or ACT, while 8.9% of charter school students with disabilities took the SAT or ACT.

Interest in the SAT and ACT has fluctuated over time. From 2012–2018, the proportion of students taking the SAT and ACT continued to steadily increase in both charter and traditional high schools for both students with and without disabilities. Both before the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>2</sup> and as a result of it,<sup>3</sup> many colleges and universities stopped requiring SAT and ACT scores for admission. Likely as a consequence, the percentage of students in both charter and traditional high schools taking the SAT and ACT decreased from 2018 to 2021. However, some interest in the assessments has grown over the last three years as a tool to help historically disadvantaged students gain access to college.<sup>4</sup> This debate will likely influence participation rates in future years.

Figure 6. Percentages of Students Participating in SAT/ACT Tests by Sector Over Time (2012–2021)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020–21 Civil Rights Data Collection, released November 2023, available at <https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov>. In this analysis, “IDEA” refers to students served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, while “non-IDEA” refers to students not served under that law.

<sup>2</sup> Tugend, A. (2019, October 9). *Record number of colleges stop requiring the SAT and ACT amid questions of fairness*. PBS News. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/record-number-of-colleges-stop-requiring-the-sat-and-act-amid-questions-of-fairness>

<sup>3</sup> Vigdor, N., & Diaz, J. (2020, May 21). *More Colleges Are Waiving SAT and ACT Requirements*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/sat-act-test-optional-colleges-coronavirus.html>

<sup>4</sup> Cineas, F. (2024, February 27). *Why elite colleges are bringing the SAT back*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/24083809/college-university-sat-testing-requirement-ivy-league-yale>



Table 2. Number of Students with and without Disabilities Participating in SAT/ACT Tests (2012–2021)

Year	Traditional — IDEA	Traditional — Non IDEA	Charter — IDEA	Charter — Non IDEA
2012	113,688	2,627,543	3,002	50,598
2014	136,431	2,637,729	5,230	71,122
2016	169,009	2,823,173	6,531	85,002
2018	212,850	3,163,407	9,972	109,570
2021	175,071	2,346,381	9,275	92,145

In this analysis, “IDEA” refers to students served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, while “non-IDEA” refers to students not served under that law.





## About the Center for Learner Equity (CLE)

CLE is a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that students with disabilities have equitable access to high-quality public education. CLE provides research, policy analysis, coalition building, and technical assistance to a variety of stakeholders nationwide.

## Mission

We are committed to catalyzing student success and eradicating the complex, pervasive, and systematic barriers that prevent students with disabilities from accessing school choice, educational opportunities, quality support, and inclusive environments.

## Vision

All students with disabilities are respected, learning, and thriving.

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