

Key Trends in Special Education in Public Schools

Analysis of the 2020-21 Civil Rights Data Collection

In September 2024, the Center for Learner Equity (CLE) completed its fifth analysis of the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) on access and opportunities for students with disabilities. Our key findings show progress in certain areas, substantial opportunity gaps for students with disabilities in others, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on outcomes during the 2020-21 school year:



While charter schools have increased the proportion of students with disabilities they serve (11.5% from 10.7% in 2018), **traditional public schools continue to educate a greater proportion of students with disabilities** (14.1%), consistent with trends since 2010 (Brief 1).



Charter schools educate different populations of students with disabilities by race/ethnicity, multilingual learner status, and disability type compared to traditional public schools (Brief 2).



Students with disabilities in charter schools are **significantly more likely than their peers in traditional public schools to spend 80% or more of their time in general education settings** alongside non-disabled classmates. However, these trends have not changed significantly over the last decade (Brief 3).



The combination of factors including the COVID-19 pandemic leading to closures of school buildings and the impact of protests against racial inequity in 2020-21 appears to have decreased unequal applications of suspension, restraint, seclusion, and engagement of law enforcement for all students; however, **these practices are still disproportionately applied to students with disabilities** and continued improvement on these trends is uncertain (Brief 4).



Participation of students with disabilities in college preparatory activities lags behind that of their non-disabled peers, particularly in dual enrollment programs (Brief 5).



While the number of specialized charter schools focusing specifically on students with disabilities has remained relatively steady, the number of students educated in these settings is increasing, and they continue to provide substantially less time for students with disabilities in general educational settings (Brief 6).

Access and opportunities for students with disabilities is a civil rights issue. The Civil Rights Data Collection provides the key indicators and context that guide CLE's work addressing the complex, pervasive, and systematic barriers that prevent students with disabilities from accessing quality educational opportunities and choices, robust support, and inclusive environments.