



Charting a Path to Equitable Education for Students with Disabilities: The Role of Charter School Leadership Pipelines

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Introduction

Students with disabilities across the United States are not achieving at the same rate as their non-disabled peers. With their flexibility and capacity for innovation, charter schools offer an opportunity to improve these outcomes. However, data from the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), parent focus groups and surveys, and research on schools' responses to inquiries from parents of students with disabilities all tell us that not all students feel welcome in charter schools or are succeeding in them.^{1, 2, 11} To improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities, we propose that the charter sector must first build foundational leadership capacity and then make a firm commitment to high expectations for students with disabilities.

Charter school leaders nationwide are frequently recruited and developed through leadership pipeline programs designed to prepare aspiring leaders to start and operate charter schools. Leadership pipeline programs aim to develop leaders capable of creating schools with diverse designs and education models and can be “essential to starting high-quality charter schools”.⁹ A report focusing on school quality in Colorado recognized that “recruiting, developing, and supporting high-quality school leaders can be a major leverage point for improving education”.⁵ That report directly tied teacher effectiveness to strong leadership and found that a shortage of quality candidates and low-quality principal preparation negatively impacted the overall quality of education. Strong coaching, mentoring, and professional development of the type embodied in leadership pipelines have been identified as critical levers for change. Furthermore, research on the impact of formal principal pipelines in six large urban districts found that they generated better outcomes, with higher student achievement in both reading and math than schools whose leaders were not trained through the five-year “Principal Pipeline Initiative”.⁷



There is value in leadership pipeline programs within the charter sector and evidence that they can play a positive role in preparing strong leaders to start and run schools.

Given the need for charter school leader pipelines and the evidence of their positive impact, we view them as critical to ensuring that all students have access to high-quality schools designed with students with disabilities as part of their DNA rather than as an afterthought. When school leaders are committed to students with disabilities, they create school cultures that are highly inclusive and result in improved outcomes for all students.³ Therefore, we wanted to learn more about where this mindset and commitment come from and what we—and the charter sector—can do to support the continued and expanded cultivation of inclusive environments for students with disabilities.

As part of our broader interest in strategies that will foster inclusive learning environments, we are examining leadership pipeline programs and collaborating with these programs to infuse inclusive mindsets and strong programs for students with disabilities into their training models. This brief focuses on our findings regarding how future charter school leaders are trained in pipeline programs, specifically on educating students with disabilities. We explore how the pipelines operate, who their target audiences are, and how and to what extent they include issues related to educating students with disabilities. We also look at what opportunities may exist to enhance their training on these issues. Future phases of this work will include partnering with three pipeline programs to develop content and capacity to create robust programs and inclusive environments to improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Summary of Findings



General Program Structure and Format

We identified 42 pipeline programs across the country and interviewed representatives from 25. The programs examined are primarily run by non-profit organizations and last between six months and four years, with most taking between one and two years. Cohort sizes typically range from five to 20 participants at a time. Five of the pipelines operate more than one program, each of which focuses on a different area of school design and leadership. Of the 25 pipeline representatives interviewed, nine were from national organizations, and their fellows go on to start schools across the country. Of the remaining 16 interviewees, three are network-based and 13 regional, with the leaders they train going on to serve in schools in their area or network.

The programs typically use a combination of in-person and virtual training and meet weekly or monthly to focus on specific topics and reflections. 12 of the pipeline programs in our sample offer full-time options, with at least half of them paying their participants a salary. The remaining pipelines are part-time, unpaid training programs that run alongside participants' full-time work in schools. Three of the programs we examined are housed in a university or other specialized training program through which participants may earn a degree or certificate. Most of the pipelines focus on leadership development through training on common topics such as school design, effective management, curriculum, budgeting, staffing, and compliance. Some delve deeper into topics such as leading for equity, school culture, mindset, community transformation, and parent engagement.



While most of the programs we examined focus on common themes and have a somewhat similar structure, there were also important distinctions. Below, we explore the target audiences of the various programs, their structure, the extent to which they focus on educating students with disabilities, and challenges they face regarding meaningful inclusion of topics related to educating students with disabilities. We also present specific examples of how programs are weaving in content related to educating students with disabilities.

Program Audience

The pipeline programs we studied generally recruit and attract people who want to grow into leadership roles and improve education, including teachers, program leaders, existing and aspiring school leaders, and some entrepreneurs who have never previously worked in a school setting. However, some pipelines have distinct target audiences that may overlap:

- Three pipelines are run internally by charter management organizations (CMOs), non-profit organizations that run networks of schools and target strong staff members interested in growth to prepare them for leadership positions within their networks.
- Three pipelines focus on CMO leaders, although independent of any specific CMO, and are run as membership organizations, peer support networks, and professional development training.
- Four pipelines focus on training leaders of color.
- Nine pipelines focus on preparing leaders who seek to create new schools.
- Nine pipelines are aimed at both leaders who want to transform their school and those who want to start a new school.



Network-Based Pipeline Programs

The internal training programs run by existing CMOs are driven by their organizational mission and culture and are built on a vision of what they want their leaders to learn, how they want to see their leaders perform, and how they will integrate program participants into the leadership teams at their schools. For example, researchers at the Center for American Progress (CAP) examined four high-performing charter networks that have identified principals as critical to achieving high expectations and that rely on internal training programs to develop their leaders. The networks report that their internal pipeline programs have helped to ensure they have a pool of high-quality candidates prepared to meet the leadership needs of their networks. One of the featured programs, Achievement First's Principal-in-Residence (PIR) program, reported that the rate of success increased when principals previously knew the systems, culture, and expectations of the network. In 2016, 93% of the network's principals were internal candidates, 70% of whom came through the PIR program. Achievement First describes the value of having an internal pipeline as an opportunity for residents to "increase their impact on student achievement".⁸

Another example of an internal pipeline is Green Dot Public Schools' Administrators-in-Residence (AIR) program, which serves as a pipeline for a large CMO with charter schools based in California, Washington, and Tennessee. The AIR Program is solely for Green Dot's charter schools in California and focuses on identifying strong classroom teachers with leadership potential who are then supported in growing into administrator roles within Green Dot's schools. The AIR program has cohorts ranging from three to 11 participants each year and is credentialed through the state of California, enabling participants to receive a Preliminary



Administrative Services Credential upon completion of the program. Participants are required to commit to work at Green Dot for a minimum of two years following completion of the residency. Green Dot Public Schools' blog describes the AIR program as being designed with equity at the forefront of its planning process, focusing on furnishing school leaders with the necessary skills to support all students in preparing for "college, leadership, and life".⁶ Green Dot's residency is a year-long program, split into four in-person residencies at a different high-performing school per quarter.

External Programs

External training programs are most often national in scope, training leaders who go on to serve in schools across the country. A few of the external programs examined were regional in nature and focused on preparing leaders in a specific state or geographic area. External pipeline programs reach people with a wider variety of leadership backgrounds, interests, knowledge, and expertise and generally have more flexibility in how they design their programs. Building Excellent Schools (BES) is a notable example of an external pipeline that includes a year-long program focusing on providing school leaders and entrepreneurs with the skills and tools needed to open their own schools. The cohort size ranges between 10 and 18 fellows annually. The BES curriculum consists of five core areas: school design, leadership development, building and supporting leadership teams and staff, managing school operations, and engaging in community. The model focuses on designing schools that serve all students, and fellows participate in a Special Education 101 course and receive ongoing support and encouragement to consider best practices for all students in their school design process.



Program Design

Most of the pipeline programs are cohort-based and indicated that their participants benefit greatly from training with and learning from a small group of peers. Representatives from pipelines with larger cohorts shared that they break their cohorts into sub-groups to maximize the benefits of their program and ensure that the participants are able to collaborate and learn from one another meaningfully. Participants in part-time, hybrid programs primarily meet virtually and come together in person for intensive training sessions. The full-time pipelines we examined often include a residency at a school, especially when the program is internal and the leader in training will go on to serve in the pipeline's network.

Focus on Students with Disabilities

All the pipeline representatives we interviewed (n=25) expressed a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and some were even focused on these issues as a central theme. However, the programs differed widely in the extent to which these issues, and especially equity and inclusion of students with disabilities, were highlighted and woven into their programs. In addition to Relay, a few pipeline programs were notable in this area, with meaningful inclusion of content related to educating students with disabilities being integral to their leadership development at every level in addition to content specifically focused on educating students with disabilities. Others touched on special education at a basic level, focusing primarily on legal compliance. Our examination of the various pipeline programs revealed a shared need and desire for support in increasing the extent to which concepts related to educating students with disabilities are included as a stand-alone focus area and also woven into existing programming in areas like governance, staffing, and budgeting.



The pipeline leaders we interviewed had different approaches to incorporating and delivering special education content. Most of the programs have at least some specific training on educating students with disabilities, often during one of the in-person sessions. However, the specific focus is often legal compliance rather than instructional best practices. For pipelines that are part of larger school networks, this content is usually led by the special education leadership team at the network level. Other programs bring in external experts to teach this content—Relay Graduate School of Education is a popular choice. Less often, sessions on special education are led by staff members of the pipeline itself or occasionally even an alum or member of the cohort with expertise in the area. Several programs integrate special education training into their participants' school residencies or school visits by having them examine data about students with disabilities at the schools, sit in on Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings, or participate in planning for this student population.

Program Spotlights

Those programs that stood out for their inclusion of students with disabilities have specific, in-depth sessions on related issues and also thoughtfully integrate these issues into the conversations around other commonly discussed topics, such as staffing, budgeting, curriculum development, data collection and review, and school culture. We also found that the programs excelling in this area are focused on an inclusive mindset and approach all their core focus areas from a perspective of equity and inclusion. They explained that providing this mindset piece as a cornerstone around which all the other topics are built is critical to getting participants to consider how their decisions and actions will impact all learners as they build and improve schools.



I. Green Dot Public Schools

Green Dot's AIR pipeline, discussed above, has fully integrated special education into their program, with some sessions specifically focused on students with disabilities and other training components incorporating special education into the overall leadership approach. The residency is based in California and is run as a paid, one-year residency, during which fellows rotate between four different school settings. Other components of this residency include 35 weekly coaching sessions and 2,000 hours of direct mentorship, both of which include content related to supporting students with disabilities. Throughout the fellowship, issues related to students with disabilities are intentionally included in both seminar sessions and experiences at each school.



For example, during their time in schools, participants shadow IEP meetings from an administrator's perspective and provide coaching to special education teachers while also engaging in collaborative discussions on how to approach accommodations, how to work with general education teachers, and learning strategies for handling specific situations from a compliance perspective. The program also includes a specific curriculum taught by the CMO's special education leadership team on inclusion, pullouts, academic success, and transition.

II. UnifiED School Launch Program

The UnifiED School Launch program, run through the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition, is another example of a pipeline that both meaningfully weaves issues related to students with disabilities into the overall mindset and content of its leadership training and includes focused sessions on specific core concepts



related to special education. The program develops new school leaders who go on to run “diverse-by-design, intentionally integrated schools”.⁴ The fellowship is run as a fully-paid, one-year residency, during which fellows serve as a member of the administrative team at the school in which they are placed. Equity



and inclusion are centered in all of the program’s training sessions, with unique issues faced by students with disabilities intentionally included in discussions of

how to design diverse and inclusive schools. They have provided in-depth training on core special education concepts, such as universal design for learning, and are continuing to build content related to students with disabilities into additional components of the program. Other aspects of this fellowship include five in-person group gatherings, monthly check-ins, three visits to high-performing schools, one-on-one coaching, and a capstone project, all of which weave in concepts related to students with disabilities.

Challenges to Meaningful Inclusion of Content Related to Educating Students with Disabilities

Notably, most of the program representatives we interviewed expressed an interest and willingness to more meaningfully integrate content related to students with disabilities into their leadership training content, but they identified specific barriers as well as a need for support in further developing this area of their programs. Given limited time and expertise around issues related to students with disabilities, many program leaders reported that they would welcome additional tools and support. Not surprisingly, there was a continuum of the extent to which issues related to students with disabilities were already included as well as how feasible it might



be to incorporate increased focus on these issues given the unique circumstances of each program. Nevertheless, some of the common barriers mentioned included the following:

- Lack of internal expertise or ability to create such content.
- Concerns about where to fit additional or expanded special education content into an already tight programmatic schedule.
- A need for stronger compliance content to supplement overall inclusivity training.
- Lack of funding to implement meaningful content on educating students with disabilities.

Case Study: Relay Graduate School of Education

Inclusive School Leadership Institute course participants report positive experiences:

“I learned SO much from RELAY this year. I truly love the drive to make schools inclusive through human leadership (vs. just systems/structures).”

“The [ISLI] course was beneficial on multiple levels. From people who may not have considered what inclusivity could or should look like in a school setting to those who knew, but may have become accustomed to the status quo at their school, this course empowered leaders of exceptional learners to create the change our students need.”

Relay Graduate School of Education deserves a separate discussion due to its size and influence on the larger field and the fact that it is run through a larger graduate school of education. Since its inception in 2013, over 6,000 school leaders in both district and charter schools across 185 districts, 39 states, and 3 countries have participated in Relay’s leadership training programs.¹⁰ Each year, Relay educates approximately 1,200 fellows enrolled across 7 different leadership programs that focus on developing different aspects of principal and non-principal school leaders. Their programs are grounded in documented research and the belief that leadership matters and that effective school leadership does, in fact, have significant effects on school outcomes for students with disabilities (E. Larkin-Maguire, personal communication, March 24, 2021).

In addition to its prominence in leadership training overall, Relay stands out as a leader in inclusive education training, and, as noted below, several other pipeline programs rely on it to provide expert content and training related to issues surrounding educating

students with disabilities. One of Relay’s programs, the Inclusive Schools Leadership Institute (ISLI), specifically focuses on issues related to students with disabilities. It aims to prepare school leaders to build authentically inclusive schools and to improve academic and social-emotional outcomes for students with disabilities in recognition that “[t]he research is clear: exceptional learners can make significant academic and social-emotional growth in schools with an inclusive vision modeled and led by dynamic leaders committed to pushing past the status quo and creating schools where exceptional learners can thrive”.¹⁰ ISLI enrolls 50–70 students each year and is an optional program for principals who have completed other Relay leadership programs and seek to go deeper into content and foundational systems for educating students with disabilities. ISLI includes courses such as Universal Design for Learning, Coaching Universal Design for Learning, Methods of Academic Intervention, Coaching Academic Intervention, Proactive Social-Emotional Leadership, and Coaching Tiered Behavior. This institute was formerly known as the “Special Education Leadership Academy.”



Next Steps and Recommendations



Based on the findings and common themes that arose from our examination, we have identified three opportunities for leadership pipeline programs that, given their central role in the development of high-quality charter schools, would increase their ability to prepare leaders to intentionally and effectively create inclusive and equitable schools for all students.

1. Embed a commitment to equity and inclusion for all students, including those with disabilities, into the DNA of the program curriculum.
2. Revise the scope and sequences of programming content to create or enhance programming specifically focused on educating students with disabilities beyond basic compliance while also intentionally weaving these issues into existing content areas.
3. Create benchmarks for pipeline leaders to use as they develop their programs to ensure that the unique needs of students with disabilities are included in the core issues considered in the design of training opportunities.

Pipeline programs are a critical feeder for charter school leadership and consequently the growth of quality schools. Therefore, efforts to improve equity and outcomes for all students must include intentional work to support pipelines in their efforts to meaningfully integrate issues related to educating students with disabilities into their programs. This work will help ensure that emerging leaders have both the mindset and specific knowledge to build strong, inclusive programs, as well as the critical skills necessary to make decisions that ultimately lead to improved educational experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Acknowledgments

Mission

We are committed to ensuring that students with disabilities, particularly those in under-resourced communities, have the quality educational opportunities and choices they need to thrive and learn. We accomplish this through research, advocacy, coalition formation, and capacity building with national, state, and local partners.

Vision

Students with disabilities will have the same opportunities for success as their peers.

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Formerly the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools

The Center for Learner Equity is working to ensure that public schools—both within the charter school sector and beyond it—are designed for inclusivity and equity from the start. When we improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities, all students benefit.

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Charter School Pipelines

**Indicates we interviewed a representative from the pipeline program.*

Network-Based Pipeline Programs

Administrators-in-Residence* — Green Dot Public Schools

Area Served: California

Regional, network-based program that trains aspiring principals to make a difference in the urban, underserved, and low-income communities that Green Dot's schools live in.

Charter Network Accelerator and Principal-in-Residence* — Achievement First

Areas Served: Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York City

Regional, network-based program that supports charter network leaders in building a strong foundation across their schools with the goal of increasing the available seats for families looking for high-quality charter schools for their children.

Fisher Fellowship, Miles Family Fellowship, Successor Prep, and the Leadership Team Fellowship — KIPP

Area Served: National

National program within a large Charter Management Organization (CMO) with network-based programs that support education entrepreneurs in designing and starting high-performing KIPP schools.

Principal-in-Residence Program* — IDEA Public Schools

Area Served: Texas

Regional, network-based program that provides aspiring IDEA principals with the leadership training and development needed to begin a principal position at an existing IDEA school or a new campus.

School Leader Residency — Breakthrough Schools

Area Served: Texas

Regional, network-based program that trains and prepares participants to lead a Breakthrough school through immersing them in the day-to-day activities of a school leader.

External Pipeline Programs - National

Beta Lab — Reframe Labs

External program that offers education entrepreneurs a space to explore the process of starting a new school, with the flexibility of also having a day job. Their pipeline is broken down into two parts: Beta Lab and Delta Lab.

Echoing Green Fellowship — Echoing Green

External program in which fellows receive two years of full-time, paid training, providing them with the resources and tools needed to “bring their idea to life,” whether it be in the education sector, fighting climate change, health, poverty, human rights, or racial justice.

Education Fellowship — Camelback Ventures

External program that supports education entrepreneurs with a social justice vision in taking their work to the next level, specifically in underserved communities.

Education Leaders of Color (EDLOC)* — Education Leaders of Color (EDLOC)

External membership organization that supports collective growth in the number of leaders of color in education through a community of peers.

Essentials Fellowship and Tiny Fellowship* — 4.0 Schools

External program that supports education entrepreneurs in launching their ideas in the form of a pop-up experience.

Lynch Leadership Academy* — Boston College

External program that strives to develop a “powerful and sustainable network of highly effective leaders at schools, within systems, and in communities, who will disrupt inequity and

dramatically increase the opportunities and outcomes for all students” through comprehensive assessments, individualized coaching, individualized development plans, leadership retreats, an intensive summer institute, professional development opportunities, and its Equity Impact Initiative.

National Principals Academy Fellowship, Principal Managers Program, Leveraged Leaders Program, and the Inclusive Schools Leadership Institute* — Relay Graduate School of Education

External programs that support aspiring principals, principals, and principal supervisors in advancing their instructional and community-based work.

New School Creation Fellowship — High Tech High Graduate School of Education

External program that supports equity-minded leaders in designing and starting schools focused on deeper learning and equity for all students.

Principal Fellowship — Accelerate Institute

External program that supports principals in preparing for the task of leading an excellent school and school leadership teams for the task of taking existing schools to the next level.

School Design Collaborative — Transcend Education

External program.

The Broad Academy and The Broad Residency* —

The Broad Center

External program that works with both existing and aspiring school leaders to elevate the communities they serve and ensure equity for all students.

UnifED School Launch Program* — Diverse Charter Schools Coalition

External program that supports entrepreneurs in designing and starting a school with the diverse-by-design model. Their fellows leave the pipeline ready to start intentionally diverse, excellent charter schools.

External Pipeline Programs - Regional

360 Accelerator Education Partners (360A)* — Central Valley Community Foundation

Area Served: California

External program that supports existing schools in elevating their educational quality and promoting equity within their communities.

Aspiring Leaders Fellowship and School Leadership and Design Fellowship* — Washington Charters

Area Served: Washington

External program that supports individuals or groups looking to open a new charter school in the state of Washington in all aspects of the process. Their work is done with diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront of the planning process.

BES Fellowship — Building Excellent Schools

Area Served: Massachusetts

External program that supports education entrepreneurs in transforming education through four years of training, planning, operational support, and leadership support in opening a new charter school.

Charter School Fellowship* — The Mind Trust

Area Served: Indiana

External program that supports education entrepreneurs who want to launch new charter schools in Indiana, providing them with the resources and tools that often come with district

schools, while having the creative flexibilities that make charter schools unique.

E3 Learning Framework* — New School New Orleans

Area Served: New Orleans, Louisiana

External program that supports the preparation of strong school executives (CMO leaders) with the goal of delivering on the commitment to excellent public schools for every student in New Orleans.

Educate 78*

Area Served: Oakland, California

External program that promotes collective responsibility in reimagining, creating, and improving a public education system where success is not predicted by race and class.

Education Entrepreneur Fellowship* — Chicago Charter School Foundation

Area Served: Chicago, Illinois

External program that supports education entrepreneurs who want to create new school models in Chicago from a foundation of equity, innovation, and excellence.

Emerging CMO Fund — Charter School Growth Fund

Area Served: Colorado

External program that supports education entrepreneurs of color looking to start charter schools of their own, with the goal of bringing more high-quality charter schools to underserved communities led by people with similar backgrounds to those they serve.

Entrepreneur Planning Grants* — Great Minnesota Schools

Area Served: Minnesota

External program that supports the development of great schools in Minnesota by working with both existing schools and families to strengthen areas for growth.

Entrepreneur-in-Residence Program* —

The Opportunity Trust

Area Served: Saint Louis, Missouri

External program that supports two education entrepreneurs annually in designing and starting great schools in St. Louis, Missouri.

Freedom Fellows Institute*

Area Served: Tennessee

External program that supports school leaders of color in preparing to launch high-quality charter schools in their communities.

Georgia Charter Schools Association

Area Served: Georgia

External program that supports the recruitment of top talent to design and start high-performing charter schools in Georgia.

Great Public Schools Now

Area Served: Los Angeles, California

External program that trains and supports education leaders in Los Angeles to ensure educational equity for Black communities.

Idaho New School Fellowship — BLUUM

Area Served: Idaho

External program that supports education entrepreneurs in designing and building high-performing, diverse charter schools in Idaho.

Innovative Schools Fellowship* — City Education Partners

Area Served: Texas

External program that supports education entrepreneurs in designing and launching charter schools in Texas.

The Manati Fellowship — National Charter Collaborative

Area Served: Based in Washington State, but serving schools nationwide

External program that supports single-site charter school leaders of color by creating a community of peers able to connect and collaborate to tackle issues in their schools.

Moonshot Fellowship* — Moonshot EdVentures

Area Served: Denver, Colorado

External program that empowers diverse learners in Denver to design and launch new schools, micro-schools, district schools, district turnaround schools, and after-school programs.

NACA-Inspired Schools Network (NISN) Fellowship* —

NACA-Inspired Schools Network

Area Served: New Mexico

External program that supports residents in leadership development through hands-on learning and observation at high-performing Indigenous schools.

School Design Fellowship* — CityBridge

Area Served: Washington, D.C.

External program that provides an innovative space for existing school leaders and aspiring new school founders to collectively design and test equitable education solutions.

School Innovation Fellows Program* — Innovate Public

Schools

Area Served: Bay Area, California

External program that supports teachers and school leaders in transforming their schools, with a specific focus on special education.

Special Education Equity and Diversity Fellowship —

Mindworks Collaborative

Area Served: Maryland

External program that provides special education leaders of color with the support needed to disrupt inequitable practices in education and to sustain themselves in this work.

Strategic Growth Institute — Bellwether Education

Area Served: Maryland

External program that provides schools with strategic and implementation support to build their capacity and create a more equitable learning environment.

Texas School Launch Fellowship — Good Reason Houston

Area Served: Texas

External program that supports leaders aspiring to develop innovative school models that are responsive to the needs and demands of families within our most educationally underserved communities. The one- or two-year program is a full-time, paid fellowship that supports diverse, entrepreneurial instructional leaders through the authorization process to launch a new public school.