

Executive Summary



Key Trends in Special Education in Charter Schools in 2015–2016:

Secondary Analysis
of the Civil Rights
Data Collection

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR
SPECIAL EDUCATION

IN CHARTER SCHOOLS

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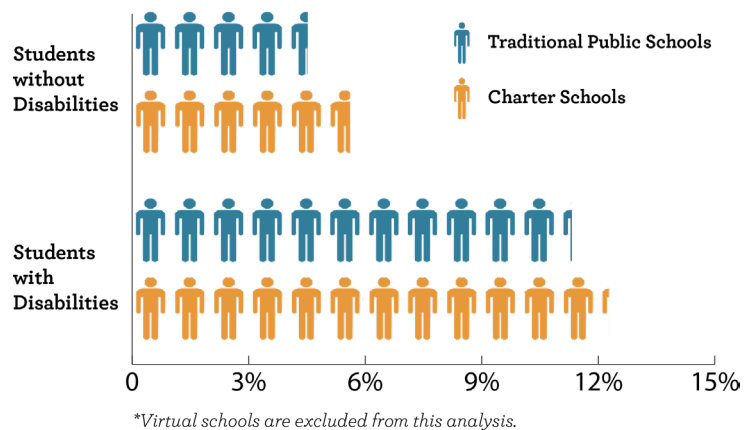
National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools

The National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (the Center) is deeply committed to ensuring that students with disabilities have equal access to charter schools and that charter schools are designed and operated to enable success for all students. To accomplish this goal, we conduct analyses and release a comprehensive report of the bi-annual U.S. Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), which is released by The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights. This is the Center’s third edition, and in addition to examining some of the key indicators we studied in the two prior reports (e.g., enrollment, educational placement, and discipline), we’ve introduced more detailed analyses such as enrollment variance by gender and race and the impact of a charter’s legal status on enrollment and educational environment (i.e., placement).

In this third report, we found that while the charter sector is making progress, not surprisingly, there is more work to do. In large part, the most recent data confirm previous findings and further establish a clear trend line regarding the extent to which students with disabilities are represented in both traditional public and charter schools. *Below are key takeaways; we encourage readers to review the full report for further data points, details, and nuances.*

- **A growing proportion of students—across both the traditional and charter public school sectors—are being identified as having a disability, and families continue to be interested in enrolling in charter schools.** While charter schools continue to enroll proportionally fewer students with disabilities (10.79%) as compared to traditional public schools (12.88%), the difference in enrollment of students with disabilities between the two sectors has decreased overall since 2008.
- **Enrollment data by gender and race (new to The Center’s CRDC report series) confirm broadly observed trends. In general, across both traditional public and charter schools, male students and Black students are disproportionately identified as having a disability.** There are twice as many male students with disabilities as female students with disabilities in both charter schools (66.48% v 33.52%) and traditional public schools (64.73%

Percentage of Students with One or More Out-of-School Suspensions in 2015–2016, by Student Group



v.35.27%), with more variance by state in the charter sector. Black students are disproportionately identified as having a disability at a rate that is 4% higher in both charter schools and traditional public schools.

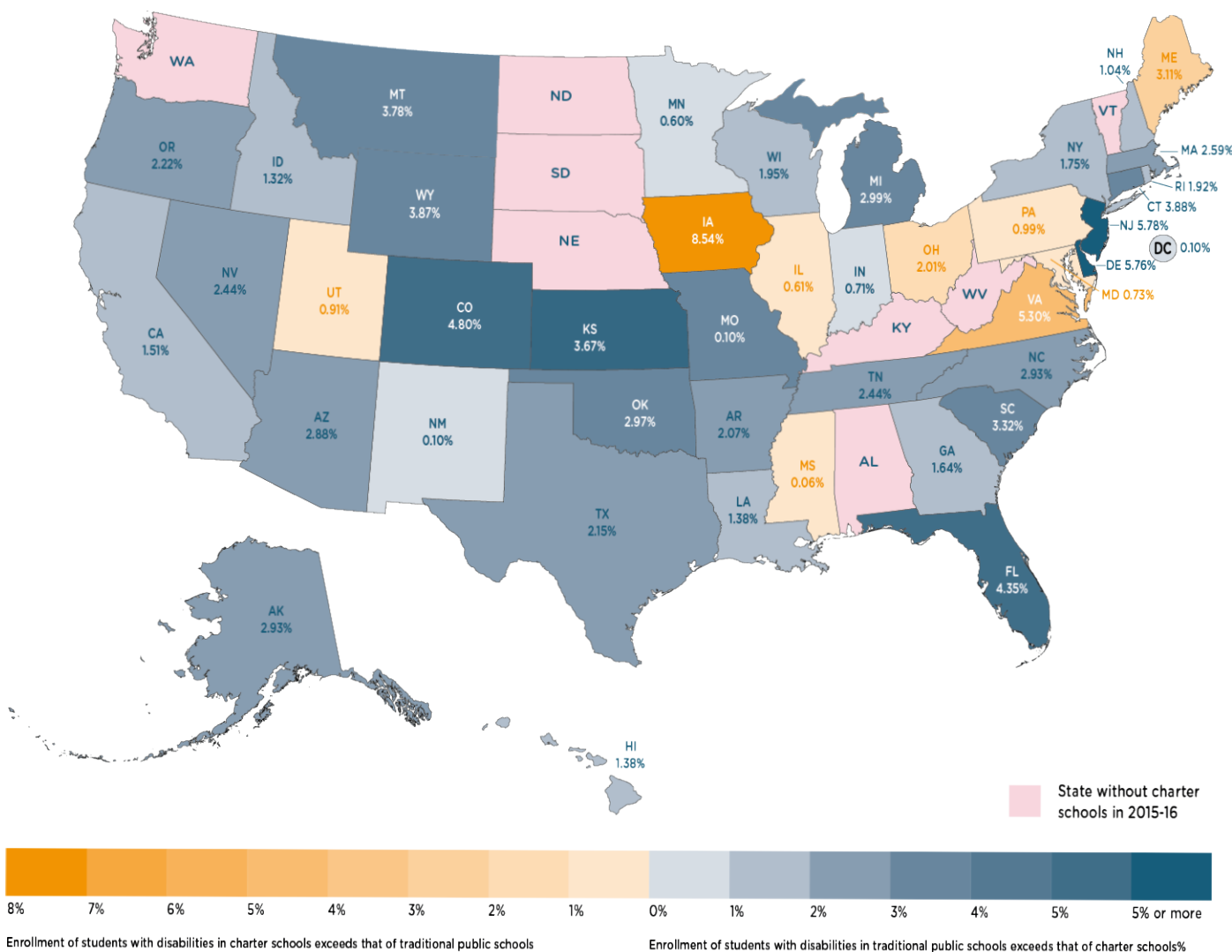
- **Charter schools report a higher percentage of enrollment of students with autism and emotional disturbance,** disability profiles that frequently require more significant supports and services.
- **Disciplinary actions such as suspension and expulsion continue to be a significant issue for students with disabilities across all public schools. They lose instructional time at much higher rates relative to their peers without disabilities.** All charter schools—regardless of legal status—suspend a larger percentage of students with disabilities (approximately twice as many) compared to their peers without disabilities. This doubling is consistent with traditional public schools, though suspensions in charter schools continue to occur at a higher rate; especially when virtual charter schools are removed from the analysis (see graphic above).
- A charter school’s status as a local education agency (LEA, i.e., a school district), or conversely as part of an LEA, appears to influence the experiences of students with disabilities. In general, when compared to charter schools that are part of an LEA, **charter schools that operate as their own LEA report statistically significant differences for students with disabilities.** Charters schools that

are their own LEA enroll a larger proportion of students with disabilities (11.28% vs. 10.17%), report a larger percentage of students with disabilities spending 80% or more of their time in a general education classroom (85.35% vs. 80.31%), and both suspend and expel students with and without disabilities at higher rates.

- **The popularity of specialized charter schools continues to grow, with the identification of 28 additional schools designed primarily to educate students with disabilities.** While recognizing the importance of providing unique programs and approaches, continued

authorization and growth of specialized charter schools requires care given the potential unintended consequences, which could include: limiting choices for students, driving students into unnecessarily restrictive settings separate from their peers without disabilities, and decreasing accountability and expectations.

In conducting this analysis, our goal is to provide policy leaders as well as practitioners and researchers with a solid foundation of information for a more productive examination of the issues, in an effort to drive effective change—in both policy and



practice—that could discernibly benefit students with disabilities. Federal, state, and local policy makers and advocates have used the data to inform their discussions and decision-making, as have other key stakeholders (e.g., the National Council on Disability in its comprehensive report on charter schools and students with disabilities in 2018, and the Center’s Equity Coalition in its discussions related to charter legal status and school discipline).

As charter schools struggle to sustain support and grow enrollment in an increasingly divisive political climate, ensuring that all students have equal access to educational opportunities in charter schools is

critical to their very legitimacy. Key stakeholders must continue to collaborate to address the needs, maintain high standards, and cultivate innovation (e.g., difficulty building and sustaining capacity to provide quality accommodations, modifications, services, and supports that enable students with a diverse array of disabilities to succeed). The findings and analyses from the 2015–2016 CRDC highlight the importance of continuing to conduct and prioritize both quantitative and qualitative research—particularly related to enrollment of and education of students with disabilities—so that data may be leveraged to inform decision-making at all levels.



View our full report and methodology:
ncsecs.org/top-10-resources/crdc-analysis



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The National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (the Center) is an independent, non-profit organization formed in 2013. The Center is committed to ensuring that students with disabilities have equal access to charter schools and to fostering effective implementation of practices that will benefit students with disabilities in both charter and traditional public schools by proactively working with states, authorizers, charter school and special education advocates, as well as other stakeholders.



To increase our collective understanding of the challenges, identify viable solutions, and ensure effective charter school practices that justify the trust of families and students with disabilities, the charter sector needs a credible entity that will be a reliable resource for key stakeholders, both in the charter sector and the special education advocacy community. Our goal is to advocate for students with disabilities to ensure that if they are interested in attending charter schools, they are able to access and thrive in schools designed to enable all students to succeed.

The Center’s Mission: To ensure that students with disabilities are able to fully access and thrive in charter schools.

Vision: The charter school sector will fully embrace its responsibilities to meet the needs of all students and serve as a model of innovative and exemplary programs for students with diverse learning needs.

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