

Dear Partners,

Since 2015, the Center for Learner Equity has analyzed data from the federal Civil Rights Data Collection. Why do we do this? Put simply, our effort provides an invaluable snapshot of the state of K-12 education for students with disabilities in the nation's public schools, including charter schools. The analysis informs CLE's work to eradicate the complex, pervasive, and systematic barriers that prevent students with disabilities from accessing quality educational opportunities and choices and from getting a great education.

This report also allows us to track changes over time, focusing on access and opportunity for students with disabilities. However, this latest edition, our fifth, has a complicating factor: the COVID-19 shutdown. The data concerns the 2020-21 academic year, the first full year after the pandemic was declared in March 2020.

It might seem like a distant memory now, but that school year was by no means "normal." Many public schools across the nation operated with remote or hybrid instruction for some or all of the academic year. In releasing this latest data, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights said that it "cautions readers and data users to consider the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on students and education conditions when comparing the 2020-21 CRDC to CRDCs from previous years." Furthermore, we know from [tracking research](#) on the impact of the pandemic that it had a profound impact on the education of students with disabilities, who frequently struggled to access the full array of specialized supports and services during virtual and hybrid learning. So, we urge readers to keep this context in mind as they peruse the data and seek to understand it.

To be clear, the focus of this report (and the CRDC data) is not student achievement, but rather access, opportunity, instructional experiences, and how students are treated in public schools. Our report shows, for example, the degree to which students with disabilities are educated in inclusive environments, whether or not they are subjected to disproportionate disciplinary measures, and the degree to which they have access to college prep coursework, among other matters.

The report provides a look at both traditional public schools and charter schools, to discern any notable variances in access and opportunity. At the heart of this enterprise is a simple question: Are public schools, including charter schools, living up to the promise to provide a high-quality and equitable education to every student with a disability who comes through their doors?

At CLE, our primary focus is on the education of students with disabilities in public charter schools, but we care deeply about the opportunities afforded every single student with a disability in America. As you will see, the story that emerges from this exhaustive data analysis is complex. We identify reasons for both hope and concern.

On the hopeful side, for example, we are encouraged to see evidence of increased inclusion for students with disabilities and more of their families exercising school choice. And yet, it's worrisome to see a growing share of children being referred for special education at a time when the system is ill-equipped because of staffing difficulties and general resource shortages. We also find troubling the increased demands by families for separate educational settings in spite of robust research on the value of inclusion.

We invite you to engage with us in important conversations informed by the data, and to join us in the effort to make sure U.S. public education fulfills its promise to children and families.

Sincerely,



Lauren Morando Rhim
Executive Director and Co-Founder