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## **Charters Continue to Enroll Fewer Students With Disabilities Than Traditional Public Schools, But Are More ‘Inclusive’**

*Pandemic data show wide variations across states, plus growing share of students in ‘specialized charter schools’*

New analysis by the Center for Learner Equity (CLE) provides insights on access and opportunity for students with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, with charter schools serving a slightly larger share of such students (11.5 percent) than seen previously, but still trailing by a significant margin the proportion attending traditional public schools (14.1 percent).

At the same time, charter students with disabilities are more likely to experience an “inclusive” education. The data show a substantially higher proportion of such students spend most of their time in general education settings alongside non-disabled peers (83.1%) than do students with disabilities in traditional public schools (67.5%).

“Hundreds of studies over the last 40 years have documented that inclusive classrooms show strong academic and social-emotional outcomes,” said Jennifer Coco, the senior director of strategy and impact at CLE. “While we applaud the charter sector for its focus on inclusion, there is still much work to be done - including ensuring that students are accessing high-quality, individualized instruction in inclusive settings, and ensuring that students with disabilities have meaningful access to charter schools regardless of their disability.”

The new report is based on an exhaustive review of U.S. Department of Education data for the 2020-21 school year gathered as part of its recurring Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). This represents the fifth such analysis conducted by CLE since 2015.

“It’s important to keep in mind that 2020-21 was a year like no other for American education,” Coco said. “We still have much to learn about how the pandemic shutdown impacted students with disabilities, both in the short-term and long-term.” [Research](#) CLE helped to conduct in 2022

indicated that students with disabilities frequently struggled to access the full array of specialized supports and services during virtual and hybrid learning.

The new data also provide insights on disciplinary practices during the pandemic. While overall rates of suspension, restraint, seclusion, and referrals to law enforcement appear to have declined during 2020-2021, students with disabilities were still disproportionately experiencing these practices compared to other student groups.

Meanwhile, participation by students with disabilities in college preparation activities lags behind that of their non-disabled peers, particularly in dual enrollment programs, the data show.

### **A Closer Look at Specialized Charter Schools**

CLE's analysis includes a focused review on "specialized charter schools" that primarily or entirely serve students with disabilities.

The center's analysis identified 176 specialized charters operating during the 2020-21 academic year, serving 24,000 students. These schools, representing 2.3 percent of charters nationwide, serve a variety of disability categories but are concentrated in a handful of states. Specifically, more than half of specialized charters are in Florida (39 schools), Ohio (32 schools), and Texas (20 schools).

"As the specialized charter sector continues to grow its enrollment, research must do more to understand what makes these schools unique, what state-level policies might be contributing to growth, and what drives interest from students and families," said CLE's Coco.

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### **[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.