



The Center for  
Learner Equity

## Fostering Equity for Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools: The Role of Nonprofit Organizations

**CHARTER SCHOOL EQUITY, GROWTH, QUALITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY STUDY**

**JULY 2024**

## Executive Summary

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have played a pivotal role in developing the charter sector. This report profiles the efforts of NPOs that work with or alongside charter schools to ensure the sector meets the needs of students with disabilities. We profile the work of 30 influential NPOs that shape the experiences of students with disabilities and charter schools, drawing upon 19 interviews with leaders of NPOs and reviews of publicly available information. We use these data to understand NPOs' roles in the charter sector and their specific actions to strengthen charter schools' commitment to and organizational capacity for equitably educating students with disabilities.

NPOs influence charter schools by working on the “inside” to strengthen schools' capacity to meet the needs of students with disabilities and by working on the “outside” to address systemic challenges that require action by policymakers and the courts.

We found that the nonprofit sector is critical in supporting students with disabilities in charter schools. NPOs influence charter schools by working on the “inside” to strengthen schools' capacity to meet the needs of students with disabilities and by working on the “outside” to address systemic challenges that require action by policymakers and the courts. Much of this work hinges on NPOs gaining the cooperation of other ecosystem actors that shape how charter schools educate students with disabilities.

## Key Findings

- **NPOs' work reflects “inside” and “outside” strategies to address the needs of students with disabilities in charter schools.** On the inside, NPOs work with charter schools to strengthen their capacity to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities. On the outside, NPOs use their knowledge and expertise of special education or charter schools to influence outside actors (e.g., policymakers, authorizers, and parents) in ways that may benefit students with disabilities in charter schools. The impact of both strategies hinges on gaining the cooperation of other actors.
- **NPOs help charter schools overcome their small size and strengthen their internal capacity to meet the needs of students with disabilities.** NPOs provide access to professional development, coach teachers and leaders in implementing equitable practices, broker access to specialized student support services, help schools evaluate their special education programs, assist schools in developing robust compliance and fiscal sustainability practices, and support parents of students with disabilities seeking compliance with federal laws and quality education options for their students.
- **Capacity-building efforts target teachers and school leaders who face different opportunities and challenges.** While these efforts could help schools operationalize inclusive educational practices, interviewees suggested that teacher-focused technical assistance requires school leader buy-in to be fully operationalized.

- **Advocacy and evidence-building can enable NPOs to address systemic challenges.** Some NPOs improving educational opportunities for students with disabilities in charter schools have turned to politics to address systemic challenges. While this work has taken various forms, operating as advocates for changes to policy and practice has enabled NPOs to influence practices in charter schools systemwide.
- **In protecting students with disabilities' interests and legal rights, NPOs can provide accountability in the charter sector.** When capacity-building efforts fail to find their footing, actions by NPOs can inform parents and protect students with disabilities' interests and legal rights in charter schools.

## Recommendations

### Nonprofit Organizations

- **Map your ecosystem.** Identify the external actors who determine whether your organization can achieve its mission. These could include governmental actors like policymakers or authorizers and other NPOs working with charter schools.
- **Expand your sphere of influence by leveraging both “inside” and “outside” strategies.** This could include collecting and synthesizing data to strengthen policymakers, authorizers, and funders' understanding of the school, system, and sector-wide challenges that impact students with disabilities. It may also involve nurturing coalitions that can collectively press for change (e.g., the introduction of robust authorizing practices that hold schools accountable for educating students with disabilities and an increased understanding of how funding models influence instructional decision-making).

### Policymakers and Authorizers

- **Leverage NPOs' expertise to inform policy and oversight of charter schools.** NPOs that provide technical assistance or direct support to families can provide a crucial window into the on-the-ground challenges holding students with disabilities and the schools that serve them back.
- **Nurture a rich ecosystem of technical assistance providers.** NPOs help solve challenges that schools can't solve independently. Policymakers and authorizers should understand the landscape of technical assistance providers currently serving their communities and take action to address gaps in that ecosystem.
- **Go beyond compliance.** As detailed in this report, many NPOs are setting a new benchmark for success – from one focused solely on compliance to one also focused on helping students with disabilities thrive. Policymakers and authorizers can and should follow their example and use their authority to hold schools accountable for more ambitious benchmarks for success.



## Funders

- **Create aligned investments in the NPO ecosystem.** Many of the organizations detailed in this report have benefited from philanthropic investments. However, how they catalyze systemic change in the charter sector is still being determined. Grantmaking organizations can strengthen their impact by linking their investments to an explicit theory of action that targets the most significant obstacles to progress.
- **Foster collaboration between mission-aligned NPOs.** The nonprofit sector in education has long been characterized by fragmentation and duplication of effort. As key supporters of the NPO sector, funders can create alignment across the sector and foster opportunities for collaboration and professional learning across NPOs.
- **Foster collaboration between NPOs and charter schools** on initiatives that will drive change in how students with disabilities learn and thrive by focusing on quality instruction and high expectations rather than just compliance.
- **Hold leaders accountable to higher benchmarks for success.** Funders can ensure that students with disabilities are placed front and center by providing funding to leaders who aspire to find or expand charter schools or networks committed to equitably educating ALL students, refusing to support schools that fail, and elevating examples of schools that successfully educate students with disabilities.

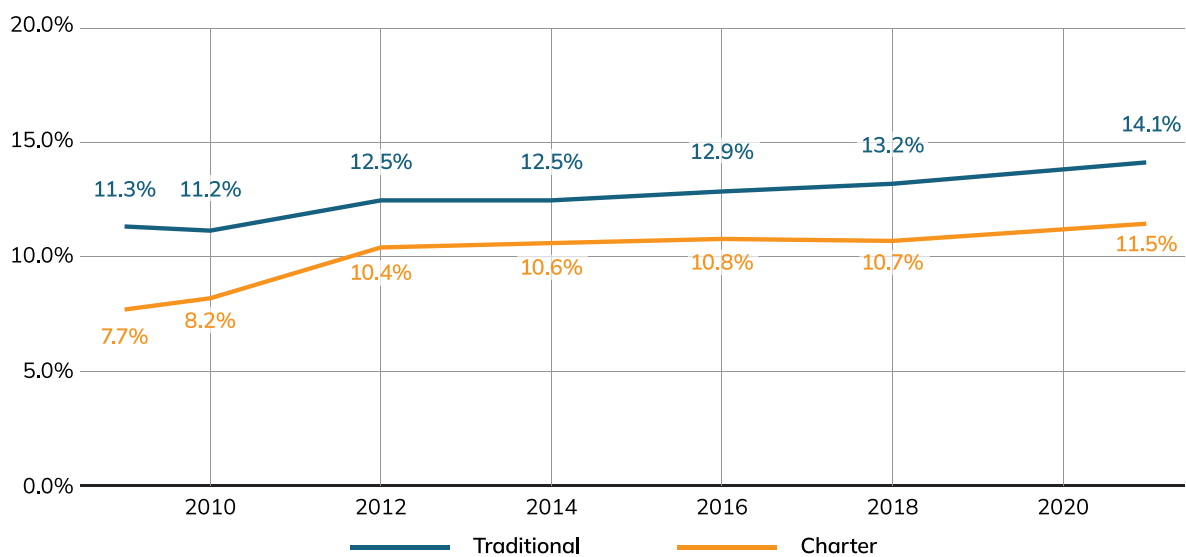


## CHARTER SCHOOL EQUITY, GROWTH, QUALITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY STUDY

CLE conducted the *Charter School Equity, Growth, Quality, and Sustainability Study* to 1) identify how the experiences of students with disabilities shape the charter sector’s sustainability and 2) examine key stakeholders’ role in shaping conditions that influence how charter schools enroll and educate students with disabilities. CLE sought to describe actions by key stakeholders identified for contributing to the success of students with disabilities, particularly those from Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) communities, as well as for the charter sector’s sustainability. A 12-member technical working group of subject matter experts advised on the overall study methodology and served as reviewers for the five stakeholder briefs. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provided funding for the research. Views expressed here do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.

CLE took a multi-phased approach to the study. During the initial phase, we conducted a media scan of 174 state-specific journalistic reports published since 2009 at the nexus of charter schools, special education, and students with disabilities, a quantitative analysis of charter school growth over the past 15 years, and an initial round of exploratory interviews with 11 key experts knowledgeable about stakeholder policies, practices and changes influencing the education of students with disabilities in charter schools. Thereafter, CLE conducted additional research to investigate the specific actions taken by key stakeholders (i.e., states, authorizers, nonprofits, and schools/networks) to improve access and outcomes of students with disabilities and an information-rich case study of the state of Washington. We also commissioned a scoping literature review to elevate high-leverage practices for students with disabilities that have positively impacted all students, emphasizing BIPOC students. Finally, CLE hosted a national convening of key stakeholders who contributed to the research in Denver in March of 2024 to review findings and contemplate the next steps to catalyze meaningful change for students with disabilities.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Enrolled Students Receiving Services Under IDEA by School Sector (2008-2021)**



**Sources**

- Data from 2008-2010 is from the Government Accountability Office. (June, 2012). [Charter Schools: Additional Federal Attention Needed to Help Protect Access for Students with Disabilities.](#)
- Data from 2012-2021 is from U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2012-21 Civil Rights Data Collection

## Introduction

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have played a pivotal role in the charter sector. In every state where charter schools enroll large numbers of students, nonprofit ecosystems have emerged to provide schools access to business and educational services and represent charter schools in the political arena.<sup>1</sup> Existing evidence suggests charter schools can benefit financially, politically, and organizationally through partnerships with NPOs.<sup>2</sup> NPOs can help charter schools achieve economies of scale in service delivery, access support for students and teachers, strengthen business acumen, and meet the demands of regulators.

These prospective benefits are especially relevant to how charter schools educate students with disabilities. Documented failures to equitably educate students with disabilities—whether driven by weaknesses in organizational capacity or active discrimination against students and their families—present serious risks to the political health and sustainability of the charter sector. Critics of charter schools, for example, routinely use failures to equitably educate students with disabilities to erode public and policymakers' support for charter schools.<sup>3</sup> To the extent that NPOs help charter schools meet their legal obligations to students with disabilities and strengthen the sector's capacity to educate all students equitably. Importantly, NPOs can often achieve these ends through partnerships with charter schools, thereby avoiding the threat of heavy-handed regulatory efforts that risk charter school autonomy in the pursuit of equity.

This report profiles the efforts of NPOs that work with or alongside charter schools to support the sector in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. We profile the work of 30 influential NPOs that shape the experiences of students with disabilities and charter schools, drawing upon 19 interviews with NPO leaders and a review of publicly available information. We use these data to understand NPOs' roles in the charter sector and their specific actions to strengthen charter schools' commitment and organizational capacity to equitably educate students with disabilities.

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## Methodology

We set out to understand how NPOs influence how charter schools educate students with disabilities. We focused on four types of NPOs that play prominent roles in the development and sustainability of the charter sector:

- Charter support organizations that provide material assistance to charter schools, including collaboratives, general sector support organizations, leadership fellowships, professional development to schools and educators.
- Philanthropic entities which support the sector with advocacy, funding, and technical assistance

- Advocacy organizations that safeguard students' and families' rights using training, leadership development, litigation, and political activities.
- Research organizations that lend evidence to debates about whether charter schools are adequately serving students with disabilities and elevating promising practices.

## Data Collection and Analysis

To identify prospective NPOs to include in the study, we conducted a landscape scan of the sector, drawing upon the research team's knowledge of the charter sector. This included collecting descriptive information from websites and reviewing media coverage that mentioned NPOs working on issues concerning students with disabilities and charter schools. We also drew upon a set of stakeholder interviews where we asked interviewees to identify organizations that are improving how charter schools enroll and educate students with disabilities.

This process yielded 30 focal organizations across the 4 organizational subtypes, representing national and regional approaches to address the needs of students with disabilities in charter schools. Some organizations profiled in this report work directly with charter schools to improve how they educate students with disabilities. In contrast, others challenge charter schools—via advocacy and legal action—that fail to educate students with disabilities effectively. See the Appendix for more information about interviews and a brief description of each focal organization's work with the charter sector. We collected data on NPOs by reviewing publicly available information on their websites and through 19 interviews with organizational leaders. Interviewees were asked about the key actions their organization takes or the services they provide to charter schools, what they view as the most significant challenges and successes concerning students with disabilities in the sector, and information about their organization's operations. We conducted a thematic analysis of data from interviews, focusing on the levers that interviewees described as influential and the challenges they addressed.

## Study Limitations

While the organizations profiled in this report represent a range of examples of how NPOs intersect with charter schools, our sample is purposeful and, as a result, is not representative of the NPO sector writ large. For instance, the network of more than 100 federally funded [Parent Training and Information Centers \(PTIs\) and Community Parent Resource Centers \(CPRCs\)](#) authorized under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides critical support to parents across the nation, including parents of students enrolled in charter schools. However, we only profile two because our scan of the network did not surface explicit or significant efforts to reach parents of students enrolled in charter schools.<sup>4</sup> In addition, while we asked interviewees about the perceived impact of their work with charter schools, we did not validate their claims, nor did we seek to evaluate the efficacy of their efforts.



## Findings

### NPOs’ Work Reflects “Inside” and “Outside” Strategies to Address the Needs of Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools

The NPOs we considered performed various roles in the charter sector, but collectively, their efforts reflect “inside” and “outside” strategies to address the needs of students with disabilities in charter schools. On the inside, NPOs work with charter schools to strengthen their capacity to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities. On the outside, NPOs use their knowledge and expertise of charter schools to influence outside actors (e.g., policymakers, authorizers, and the courts) in ways that may benefit students with disabilities in charter schools. Table 1 identifies the characteristics of inside and outside strategies and presents examples of practices that NPOs said they used that reflect these different theories of action.

**Table 1. NPOs use “inside” and “outside” strategies to address the needs of students with disabilities in charter schools**

	INSIDE	OUTSIDE
<b>What do NPOs hope to achieve?</b>	Strengthen charter schools’ capacity to meet the needs of students with disabilities	Influence action by outside actors to benefit students with disabilities in charter schools
<b>What is the relationship between NPOs &amp; charter schools?</b>	Interdependent NPOs work in partnership with schools via voluntary collaborations	NPOS work independently, and their work does not hinge on cooperation with charter schools
<b>How do NPOs work towards their goals?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide training and professional development to charter school teachers and leaders</li> <li>• Provide coaching to school leaders and teachers working to implement equitable practices</li> <li>• Broker access to specialized student support services</li> <li>• Offer audit and evaluation services to support compliance with the law and continuous improvement</li> <li>• Provide technical assistance to improve compliance and fiscal sustainability</li> <li>• Make grants to schools and technical assistance providers to fund initiatives that will benefit students with disabilities in charter schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocate for policy changes that benefit students with disabilities in charter schools</li> <li>• Work with charter school authorizers to improve oversight of how charter schools serve students with disabilities</li> <li>• Collaborate with students with disabilities and their families to ensure students’ legal rights are protected</li> <li>• Press legal action in the courts to address failures to educate students with disabilities</li> <li>• Infuse political debates over charter schools and students with disabilities with evidence</li> </ul>

*Source: Author analysis of interview transcripts and publicly available documents on NPOs’ work and missions.*



When NPOs use inside strategies, they hope to strengthen charter schools' capacity to enroll and educate students with disabilities equitably. This theory of action hinges on voluntary collaboration between NPOs and individual charter schools. As a result, charter schools that do not desire assistance—either because students with disabilities are not a priority or school leaders are not aware they have a problem—are untouched by “inside” strategies. In contrast, NPOs that use outside strategies influence external actors to charter schools to address the needs of students with disabilities. These efforts do not hinge on collaboration with charter schools, and as we describe in further detail below, they sometimes work via accountability functions that leverage legal advocacy and litigation.

Recognizing that many of the challenges students with disabilities experience in charter schools are systemic, many NPOs use both “inside” and “outside” strategies. The DC Special Education Cooperative (DC Co-Op) was initially organized as a cooperative for shared staffing and services. Today, the organization serves as a hub for ideas, evidence, and technical assistance for charter schools striving to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The DC Co-Op uses its convening power to bring together government officials, local nonprofits, school staff, and families, identify the continued challenges students with disabilities experience, and advocate for sector-wide solutions that support quality, not simply compliance with the law. According to Julie Camerata, Executive Director of the DC Co-Op, these initiatives are essential to supporting the charter sector to create the “proof points” that students with disabilities most need.

The Collaborative for Exceptional Education in Colorado offers opportunities for schools to access tiers of support ranging from planning for financial sustainability to building an inclusive culture and programming responsive to students' behavioral needs.<sup>5</sup> The Collaborative holds regular events called Learning Labs, where participating schools learn together on a specialized topic, such as academic support using MTSS or how to build and implement behavioral interventions for diverse learners.

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## NPOs Help Charter Schools Overcome Diseconomies of Scale and Strengthen Internal Capacity to Meet the Needs of Students with Disabilities

NPOs are using various practices to strengthen charter schools' capacity to educate students with disabilities equitably. NPOs provide access to professional development, coach teachers and leaders in implementing equitable practices, broker access to specialized student support services, help schools evaluate their special education programs, and support schools to develop robust compliance and fiscal sustainability practices. Philanthropic NPOs indirectly leverage many of these functions by making grants to charter schools and technical assistance providers to fund initiatives for students with disabilities.

NPOs described how their work could help small charter schools overcome the obstacles their lack of economies of scale introduced to providing the full continuum of services for students with disabilities. For example, the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association (MCPSA) recognized that smaller, independent charter schools can struggle to provide specific programming for students with low-incidence disabilities. The organization helps make connections through its specialist resource center, which includes a directory of providers who offer specialized services and resources for students. MCPSA also facilitates “position sharing” across schools, allowing multiple schools to contract with a provider part-time, as needed. Offering this assistance enables schools to spend less time searching for providers and more time meeting their students’ needs. Similarly, INDIGO Education supports charter schools in Minnesota, many of which operate as small single-site schools, by helping schools staff special education leadership positions, manage special education fiscal reporting requirements, and recruit special education teachers and paraprofessionals.

### **CHARTER SCHOOLS COOPERATIVES: BRINGING SCALE AND COLLABORATION TO THE CHARTER SECTOR**

While just over 40% of all charter schools operate as part of a network or charter management organization, the majority operate independently, as single-site entities, without a centralized support system.<sup>6</sup> Nonprofit member-based charter school cooperatives were formed out of the recognition that independent charter schools faced a common set of programmatic challenges and sought the same resources. Charter schools typically pay a fee to join and, in return, gain the opportunity to:

- Engage with experts in the field on current topics and issues that schools face;
- Create connections with other schools to troubleshoot and share best practices;
- Connect to a platform for sharing programs and resources; and
- Establish more efficient ways to identify and contract with related service providers.

Cooperatives such as the Collaborative for Exceptional Education in Colorado, the Diverse Learner Cooperative in Tennessee, and the True Measure Collaborative in Washington typically offer a menu of services, including cross-school events. They also supplement these larger-scale events with intensive, single-school workshops to dive deeper into pressing topics.

NPOs described organizing their capacity-building efforts based on identified needs in the charter sector. For example, between 2019 and 2024, Marshall Street, an NPO focused on building charter school teacher and leader capacity to meet the needs of marginalized students, supported 10 charter management organizations (CMOs) with a pilot community focused on operationalizing school-designed solutions for Black and Latinx students with disabilities. The initiative, catalyzed by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, married the resources and expertise of a diverse array of nonprofits and evaluators with the initiative of school leadership teams.<sup>7</sup> Marshall Street publicly reported what they learned from the pilot community and identified scalable practices that show promising early results (e.g., multi-tiered systems of support data cycles, adapted brain-based literacy practices, and daily oral reading fluency practice).<sup>8</sup>

## NPOs Vary in the Extent to Which their Focus is on Reimagining How Charter Schools Educate Students with Disabilities Versus Supporting them with Compliance Functions

NPOs help charter schools access technical assistance beyond the scope of what any one charter school could provide on its own. Among the NPOs we considered, technical assistance varied. Support ranges from helping charter schools meet basic compliance and reporting benchmarks to providing parents of students with disabilities training to advocate for their children. Some NPOs work across these domains, with portfolios of work that are both compliance and transformation-driven.

Both functions serve essential purposes. For example, charter schools that are autonomous local education agencies can apply for school-based Medicaid reimbursement to provide specific services (e.g., physical therapy, speech-language pathology services, occupational therapy, psychological services, and medical screening and assessment services). However, Medicaid billing is a complex, bureaucratic process, and many school leaders experience challenges creating systems for accessing Medicaid funds. In response to this challenge, some NPOs have opted to add this service to their school support menus. For example, after recognizing Idaho-based charter schools were struggling to access Medicaid dollars, Bluum brought in a specialist to manage school billing. After setting up systems for schools, they partnered with schools to make them sustainable by providing technical assistance to make the process easier.

In another example, the DC Special Education Cooperative (DC Co-op) has helped charter schools recover \$15 million in federal Medicaid dollars to provide school-based health services since 2006. According to a staff member from the DC Co-Op, supporting charter schools' access to Medicaid has been a “compliance driver” because schools now have improved documentation and better service delivery. Most importantly, many schools that have secured Medicaid for eligible services can redirect their funding to other supports for students with disabilities. For example, some schools were able to hire reading specialists and bring in intervention programs that they previously could not afford.<sup>9</sup>

While compliance-focused technical assistance is important, some NPOs have used their positionality in the sector to support schools to go well beyond box-checking. In Washington, D.C., the DC Co-Op implemented “ELEVATE,” a needs assessment and technical assistance program to help charter schools improve how they educate students with disabilities. Schools use this program to assess how well their practices align with quality indicators and then work to operationalize changes in partnership with the Co-Op.

Similarly, the Diverse Learners Cooperative (DLC) implemented its Diverse Learner Cycle of Improvement with the schools it supports. This framework assesses the school's progress in implementing evidence-based practices and supports schools in adjusting their approach. Schools begin engaging with the DLC by assessing student support and identifying the school-based factors that stand in the way of implementing effective practices for students with disabilities. After determining a school's needs, the DLC works closely with teachers and leaders to build a plan that may include professional development opportunities, student support system changes, curriculum adjustments, or revisions to their human capital practices. This process enables schools to zero in on these change levers that experts know can effectively enhance equity and inclusion for students with disabilities.

Some NPOs we considered had more focused missions to address specific areas of concern. The Paramount Health Data Project (PHDP) (see textbox), for example, is focused on leveraging school-based health data to improve student outcomes, particularly those with potential learning disabilities. The project began at Paramount Schools of Excellence, an Indianapolis-based charter network, through a partnership with a local healthcare agency to integrate student health data into the school's multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). Led by two researchers, PHDP has partnered with Indiana-based charter traditional public, and private schools to integrate data on students' academic outcomes and health needs. This sophisticated data analysis allows PHDP to identify "academic cliffs," where students' academic performance is at risk due to underlying health factors, and proactively provide interventions earlier than typical.

### LEVERAGING HEALTH DATA TO INFORM INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES: THE PARAMOUNT HEALTH DATA PROJECT

Based on the premise that there is a connection between health, poverty, and education, the Paramount Health Data Project (PHDP) partners with schools to assist them in collecting and analyzing data regarding visits to the school nurse and mental health services to predict potential academic struggles. PHDP then supports academic teams in proactively integrating their health data into their existing comprehensive multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) team that enables the school to provide interventions before students fail.<sup>10</sup> They also offer professional development to schools to effectively show them how to include school nurses, mental health providers, and paraprofessionals on their MTSS teams. This process involves face-to-face and online training with school staff; PHDP also shares toolkits, Academic Health Report Cards, and resources with schools, including information such as how to implement effective MTSS in schools, tangibly utilize physical and mental health data in academic settings or focus on particular topics that may be evident in their health data. For instance, if a school is showing many students who have tested positive for lead, PHDP offers a toolkit for supporting those students, or if they have high incidences of students with asthma, they provide a toolkit to manage those students' needs effectively. From there, schools can add face-to-face professional development for additional in-depth support.

Dr. Addie Angelov, CEO of the PHDP, reflected, "So we can tell you if a child comes down to the nurse four times for ear, nose or throat issue, they are going to be five points lower in math and eight points lower in literacy, and so we try to give [schools] information that allows them to intervene earlier. Most schools have found they can intervene up to eight weeks earlier. We had one school raise their reading scores by 20 points in a year because they knew exactly who needed interventions 8 weeks earlier. When schools utilize our services, they are able to leverage their existing physical and mental health data to improve their academic achievement prior to giving a student a label. They are also able to understand the impact of their mental and physical health services on their academic achievement."



## Capacity-Building Efforts Target Both Teachers and School Leaders, with Different Opportunities and Challenges

NPOs that offer technical assistance to charter schools frequently maintain separate support for leaders and teachers. Offerings for teachers may include training and professional development focused on classroom-based instructional strategies, such as implementing accommodations and modifying assessments and curricula for students with disabilities. Offerings for principals, in contrast, are focused on implementing schoolwide approaches to inclusion, such as building inclusive school cultures and developing a schoolwide MTSS system.

Leaders of NPOs suggested both types of capacity-building were important. Teacher-focused work, for example, is essential to helping teachers implement the instructional practices that enable students with disabilities to thrive in inclusive educational settings. For example, the True Measure Collaborative (TMC) in Washington State offers in-depth, ongoing support to educators via workshops, whole-group sessions, and hands-on coaching to help educators implement equitable practices at their schools. Executive Director Sarah Okun said this support makes teachers feel supported as they implement inclusive practices.

As Brooke Allen at Diverse Learners Cooperative reflected, “Mindset and support from the top [will] make or break the whole system of support that exists for students with disabilities.” Multiple technical assistance providers said school leaders were instrumental in building inclusive school cultures, creating schoolwide structures that enable teachers to implement inclusive practices, and aligning support for teachers and other staff.

Numerous NPOs provide individualized in-school training and coaching services for charter school teachers, facilitating an environment where educators can address emerging questions in real-time. This approach, NPO leaders described, lets professional development providers observe school practices firsthand and offer immediate feedback on their efficacy. For instance, in New York, the Collaborative for Inclusive Education team collaborates with schools to troubleshoot instructional challenges directly within the school setting. A member school may seek support by leveraging co-teaching (i.e., classrooms taught collaboratively by a general and special education teacher) to meet the needs of their students with disabilities and benefit from a collaborative partnership to create an effective plan. The team observes classrooms and debriefs school leadership teams to identify areas to bolster inclusive practices.

However, nonprofit leaders were also clear that teacher-focused technical assistance could run aground in the face of schoolwide challenges. As Brooke Allen at Diverse Learners Cooperative reflected, “Mindset and support from the top [will] make or break the whole system of support that exists for students with disabilities.” Multiple technical assistance providers said school leaders were instrumental in building inclusive school cultures, creating schoolwide structures that enable teachers to implement inclusive practices, and aligning support for teachers and other staff.

Recognizing this gap, several NPOs discussed developing capacity-building initiatives that center school leaders as recipients of support and drivers of schoolwide change. At DLC, staff works directly with school leadership teams (e.g., principals, assistant principals, and network leaders of academics) to design school-wide structures and practices to support educators in implementing inclusive practices.

As part of these efforts, DLC engages teachers to understand the obstacles they are confronting and uses this to inform feedback to school leadership teams. Allen explained this feedback loop is essential to their “teacher-centered lens.” She elaborated, “If teachers [that receive professional development] go back to schools that aren’t set up for success, they’re going to struggle.”

All Means All (AMA) and the Special Education Leader Fellowship (SELF) take another approach to building capacity to implement equitable practices for students with disabilities. These organizations offer leadership development programs for department, school, and system leaders who want to apply intersectional practices that support varying student identities, including disability, race, and language. According to Lindsay Kruse, CEO of AMA, the organization was motivated to build its fellowship program for building leaders after observing the dearth of development opportunities for school leaders and witnessing many schools struggle to implement equitable practices. Their fellowship leaders overcome challenges rooted in “mindsets and beliefs” and position leaders to infuse equity into everything they do, from hiring to using data to inform instruction. Leaders who participate in the fellowship establish targeted, individualized goals in academic and social-emotional domains and track progress toward those goals. According to school-provided data, schools whose leaders participated in the fellowship were closing gaps between students with disabilities and their peers.<sup>11</sup>

Initially designed to reduce special education leader and teacher attrition rates in New Orleans, SELF now offers multiple training programs designed to build school, network, and district leaders' and teachers' capacity to create and sustain high-quality inclusive classrooms. SELF measures its success according to retention rates, especially for special education teachers and leaders of color, and demonstration of core leadership competencies critical to student success.<sup>12</sup> Other NPOs, such as the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition, which supports intentionally diverse by-design charter schools, support a special education community of practice for school leaders to expand their expertise in educating students with disabilities.

## Philanthropic NPOs have Played Instrumental Roles in Funding Capacity-Building Initiatives in the Charter Sector

Philanthropy has played a foundational role in the charter sector, with investments in advocacy, incubation, and operational support, and their efforts have been instrumental to the development of many of the focal NPOs considered in this brief. Nationally, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has sponsored various initiatives to improve educational opportunities for students with disabilities in charter schools. This includes investments in district-charter collaboration to support more equitable access for students with disabilities, investments in research to identify promising practices for educating students with disabilities in charter schools, and investments in technical assistance initiatives (e.g., network improvement communities) and organizations (e.g., the True Measure Collaborative).

In cities where charter schools enroll large numbers of students, philanthropic NPOs have emerged to coordinate citywide investments in the charter sector. These NPOs, sometimes called “city-based champions” or “quarterbacks,” have also played essential roles in helping charter schools build capacity to educate students with disabilities. In Camden, New Jersey, the Camden Educational Fund (CEF) has led citywide efforts to strengthen support for students with disabilities in the city’s traditional, charter, and Renaissance schools. Driven by data showing that the pandemic disproportionately impacted students with disabilities, CEF invested in conducting a landscape analysis, provided leader training regarding inclusive educational practices, and developed case studies of promising school practices. In addition, CEF has made significant investments in a fund to support schools introducing practices designed to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. During the 2023-24 academic year, CEF focused on high school special education support across the city. The effort included supporting schools as they developed proposals and awarding *Supporting All Learners* grants of up to \$250,000 to incentivize schools to pursue high-impact opportunities. The schools will continue to receive coaching throughout the grant’s life.

Similarly, Education Forward is a funding intermediary focused on improving educational options for Washington, DC students and families. As part of this work, Education Forward has invested at the community and school levels to support students with disabilities. At the community level, Education Forward has invested in organizations that help families who have a child with a disability navigate the city’s expansive system of school choice and advocate for their child’s legal and education interests in schools and citywide. At the school level, the organization has invested in numerous local and national NPOs working to strengthen charter schools’ capacity to educate students with disabilities equitably. In 2023, the organization invested in the Special Education Leadership Fellowship to pilot training programs for charter leaders in DC.

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## From the Classroom to the Political Arena: Advocacy and Evidence-Building Can Enable NPOs to Address Systemic Challenges

Numerous NPOs working to improve educational opportunities for students with disabilities in charter schools have turned to the political arena to address systemic challenges. While this work has taken various forms, operating as advocates for changes to policy and practice has enabled NPOs to influence practices in charter schools systemwide.

Some NPOs turned to advocacy after first functioning as technical assistance providers, giving them a front-row seat to challenges that schools could not address alone. The Collaborative for Inclusive Education (CIE) provides professional development and technical assistance for 190 New York City charter schools through a cooperative model. It has used these capacity-building functions as a springboard to advocate for changes that will enable charter schools to meet the needs of students with disabilities better. This advocacy work is essential, said Melissa Katz, Vice President of Inclusive Education at CIE, because sometimes the source of inequities rested not in individual classrooms or schools but at the system level.

In a similar vein, the Connecticut-based Peter and Carmen Lucia Buck Foundation (PCLB) moved toward investing in advocacy after observing that grantee schools were struggling in the face of recalcitrant districts that refused to reimburse charter schools for “reasonable” costs associated with educating students with disabilities, as required by state law.<sup>13</sup> Advocacy was crucial because the reimbursement challenge was driven by external actors outside of charter schools’ control.

Other NPOs have indirectly influenced equitable practices in charter schools by advocating for changes to how charter school authorizers can strengthen their oversight of how charter schools educate students with disabilities. At Education Forward, which operates as a cross-sector funding intermediary for both charter and district schools in Washington, D.C., public engagement and advocacy have been central to the organization’s work, according to Senior Manager Alaina Smith: Observing that students with disabilities’ learning outcomes were not considered in charter school renewal decisions, Education Forward worked with the DC Public Charter School Board (DCPCSB), to update its performance management framework.<sup>14</sup> They hope this updated reporting framework will result in school leaders engaging with data for historically marginalized students more deeply.

At the national level, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), a membership organization for authorizers, has improved authorizer oversight of special education in charter schools via a special education toolkit that provides comprehensive information on practices that can improve access to charter schools and high-quality special education programming. Likewise, the National Network for District Authorizing, an NPO focused on supporting networks of district authorizers in California, Colorado, and Florida, uses a federal charter school grant to strengthen authorizer capacity to sponsor and oversee schools that equitably educate students with disabilities and non-native English learners.

Research and evidence-building have been vital tools NPOs have used to influence systemic change in the charter sector. NPOs, on their own and in partnership with researchers in academic institutions, have used evidence to identify problems in how charter schools enroll and educate students with disabilities<sup>15</sup> and to elevate examples of charter schools that are equitably educating students with disabilities.<sup>16</sup>

The Center for Learner Equity (CLE) uses data to direct policy discussions about students with disabilities in charter schools. Every two years, CLE conducts a secondary analysis of federal Civil Rights Data Collection to track the experiences of students with disabilities in traditional and charter public schools, including enrollment, service provision, and discipline data. These data have been used in federal, state, and local policy discussions related to the degree to which students with disabilities are accessing charter schools and their experiences in the schools.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the Center for Reinventing Public Education (CRPE)<sup>18</sup> has produced original research about the public school system and, in particular, has contributed significant scholarship about how charter schools support students with disabilities.<sup>19 20</sup> The Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford conducts periodic in-depth analyses of student performance in charter and traditional public schools.



Notably, upon the release of the most recent CREDO study, which documented strong academic growth across the sector, research lead Macke Raymond noted, “There’s a slice of kids in the charter schools in special education that are not being served as well as they would have been had they gone to district schools... This is a consistent and persistent finding, and it’s something that the community of charter schools has to address.”<sup>21</sup> Research documenting lack of access or that concern outcomes can sustain external pressure on charter schools to change practices.

As the CLE, CRPE, and CREDO examples illustrate, evidence-building is vital because it can shape how policymakers and the public understand whether charter schools live up to their promise to educate all students. Evidence is often used to influence state and federal policymakers. In some cases, however, evidence is so clarifying that it can directly shift practices in charter schools. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Arizona conducted an investigation and published a report describing the experiences of students with disabilities enrolling in charter schools to raise awareness around concerns about inequitable access.<sup>22</sup> As a result of the ACLU’s findings, roughly 100 charter schools changed their enrollment practices, and the statewide authorizer changed its monitoring and support processes to prevent future enrollment violations. Examples of changes included requiring schools to abolish special education enrollment caps, changing policies that prevented students with past suspensions from enrolling, eliminating inappropriate fees, and removing volunteer requirements for parents.<sup>23</sup>

## In Acting to Protect Students with Disabilities’ Interests and Legal Rights, NPOs can Perform Accountability Functions in the Charter Sector

Experience suggests that even with a rich NPO ecosystem making technical assistance available, some charter schools will struggle to meet their legal obligations to students with disabilities.<sup>24</sup> Just as NPOs have emerged to meet the technical assistance needs of charter schools, NPOs have also stepped up to protect students with disabilities’ interests and legal rights in charter schools.

NPOs that protect the rights of students and families can leverage the power of the law and litigation to hold charter schools accountable. For example, the Youth Justice Section of Louisiana’s Loyola Law Clinic represents parents of students with disabilities in the greater New Orleans area, many of whom are enrolled in charter schools, to ensure that they receive proper services or obtain eligibility for special education services. When they take individual cases, clinic representatives attend students’ IEP meetings. If they cannot resolve a family’s dispute with the school, they advance it to formal dispute resolution, which could include filing a formal complaint with state or federal authorities or filing for due process and litigating the case. The clinic also provides resources to educate families about their rights, how to file complaints, and how to litigate a due process hearing on their own.<sup>25</sup>

In a similar vein, the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law focuses on legal advocacy efforts on behalf of children with disabilities and their families, with a particular emphasis on the challenges that Black, Latinx, and children with disabilities face. Legal fellows represent and advise families about their concerns. They also participate in IEP meetings for traditional and charter public school students.

The Center has found that some school administrators treat these sessions as educational opportunities for their schools. During the meetings, the Center encourages school leaders to understand what does and does not meet requirements under the law, building their knowledge about what it means to serve all their students equitably.

The Office of Special Education Programs in the U.S. Department of Education funds multiple national networks to support parents and students with disabilities. With a broad mission to protect the civil rights of students with disabilities, these networks provide direct assistance to families navigating the public education system and, when necessary, assist families in noncompliance litigation. The Center for Parent Information and Resources umbrella organization supports roughly 100 national Parent Training and Information Centers nationwide. It has developed resources for parents about how to navigate school choices.<sup>26</sup> At the local level, the Advocates for Justice in Education in Washington, DC, where nearly 50% of students attend charter schools, provides training to parents and families and represents parents should they need to file formal complaints against a charter school.

Legal action (or the threat thereof) is an effective way to drive schools to act because schools face significant expenses in hiring attorneys to represent them in legal disputes. While effective, it is an unfortunate and expensive remedy that could otherwise be addressed with the school working with parents directly to find a solution without incurring this legal expense.

Individual representation of students and families confronts some of the same scale challenges that characterized technical assistance efforts: they may resolve individual issues but leave systemic challenges unaddressed. Recognizing the systemic sources of inequity, some nonprofit legal advocacy organizations have leveraged litigation to spur sector-wide change. The most prominent of these was a 2010 Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) lawsuit, which resulted in sweeping changes to how charter schools enroll and educate students with disabilities in New Orleans. The lawsuit identified four core areas of systemic failure in special education across New Orleans charter schools: Child Find (i.e., the legal obligation to assess whether a child has a disability), access to inclusive settings and related services, procedural safeguards during disciplinary removals, and open enrollment in schools without discrimination. Many of the policies and reforms put into place since 2010 to promote equitable school experiences for students with disabilities are directly or indirectly a result of this class action litigation and resulting consent decree. The consent decree agreed to in 2015 mandated specific compliance-monitoring activities of New Orleans charter schools by the Louisiana Department of Education in the four core areas of systemic failures alleged during litigation. The consent decree also requires New Orleans charter schools to annually develop descriptions of their special education programs, including information about their continuum of placements.<sup>27</sup>

The effects of the lawsuit and consent decree spurred by the sector's failures involving students with disabilities are tangible. New Orleans charter school leaders and special education teachers had to adjust to additional monitoring requirements that sometimes felt confusing and unpredictable. Key informants in New Orleans reflected on how the consent decree was an essential catalyst for improved education for students with disabilities.

Notably, allegations about discrimination against students with disabilities during enrollment sparked the creation of a unified enrollment system not long after the lawsuit's filing, which ensures individual charter schools cannot use the enrollment process to discriminate against students with disabilities.

Legal action (or the threat thereof) is an effective way to drive schools to act because schools face significant expenses in hiring attorneys to represent them in legal disputes. While effective, it is an unfortunate and expensive remedy that could otherwise be addressed with the school working with parents directly to find a solution without incurring this legal expense.

The National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) provides statements or comments to federal agencies and has informal or formal conversations about children with disabilities with policymakers. NDRN also works in coalitions across advocacy organizations on various education issues, using litigation and policymaking to address concerns in different states, including concerns raised by parents of students interested in or enrolled in charter schools.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This report has shown that NPOs are playing essential roles in improving educational opportunities for students with disabilities in charter schools. Whether working in partnership with school leaders, teachers, and families or via external actors like policymakers, the courts, or authorizers, NPOs are helping catalyze classroom and system improvements in ways that can benefit students with disabilities and their families.

While this work is essential, it is also fragile. Except for philanthropic entities, all of the NPOs considered in this report depend on grants and the voluntary contributions of charter schools themselves. Sustaining their work amidst shifts in the financial climate and competing priorities at the school level is not guaranteed.

Moreover, while many of the nonprofits featured in this brief have dedicated their organizations' work to ensuring students with disabilities get the support they need to thrive, those missions ultimately hinge on the willingness of school leaders and teachers to interrupt long-held assumptions and inequitable practices that currently hold students with disabilities back. For this reason, leveraging the assets in the nonprofit sector hinges on other actors in the ecosystem who can more directly shape school and system leaders' commitment to equitably educating students with disabilities.

## Recommendations

### Nonprofit Organizations

- **Map your ecosystem.** Identify the external actors who determine whether your organization can achieve its mission. These could include governmental actors like policymakers or authorizers and other NPOs working with charter schools.

- **Expand your sphere of influence by leveraging both “inside” and “outside” strategies.** This could include collecting and synthesizing data to strengthen policymakers, authorizers, and funders’ understanding of the school, system, and sector-wide challenges that impact students with disabilities. It may also involve nurturing coalitions that can collectively press for change (e.g., the introduction of robust authorizing practices that hold schools accountable for educating students with disabilities and an increased understanding of how funding models influence instructional decision-making).

## Policymakers and Authorizers

- **Leverage NPOs’ expertise to inform policy and oversight of charter schools.** NPOs that provide technical assistance or direct support to families can provide a crucial window into the on-the-ground challenges holding students with disabilities and the schools that serve them back.
- **Nurture a rich ecosystem of technical assistance providers.** NPOs help solve challenges that schools can’t solve independently. Policymakers and authorizers should understand the landscape of technical assistance providers currently serving their communities and take action to address gaps in that ecosystem.
- **Go beyond compliance.** As detailed in this report, many NPOs are setting a new benchmark for success – from one focused solely on compliance to one also focused on helping students with disabilities thrive. Policymakers and authorizers can and should follow their example and use their authority to hold schools accountable for more ambitious benchmarks for success.

## Funders

- **Create aligned investments in the NPO ecosystem.** Many of the organizations detailed in this report have benefited from philanthropic investments. However, how they catalyze systemic change in the charter sector is still evolving. Grantmaking organizations can strengthen their impact by linking their investments to an explicit theory of action that targets the most significant obstacles to progress.
- **Foster collaboration between mission-aligned NPOs.** The nonprofit sector in education has long been characterized by fragmentation and duplication of effort. As key supporters of the NPO sector, funders can create alignment across the sector and foster opportunities for collaboration and professional learning across NPOs.
- **Foster collaboration between NPOs and charter schools** on initiatives that will drive change in how students with disabilities learn and thrive by focusing on quality instruction and high expectations rather than just compliance.
- **Hold leaders accountable to higher benchmarks for success.** In providing funding to leaders who aspire to found or expand charter schools or networks, funders can ensure students with disabilities are placed front and center. They can do this by investing in schools that aspire to equitably educate ALL students, refusing to support schools that fail, and elevating examples of schools that successfully educate students with disabilities.



## 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.

### Mission

We are committed to catalyzing student success and eradicating the complex, pervasive, and systematic barriers that prevent students with disabilities from accessing school choice, educational opportunities, quality support, and inclusive environments.

### Vision

All students with disabilities are respected, learning, and thriving.

## Acknowledgements

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## Appendix

Table A1. Description of Interviewees

NPO TYPE	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS
Charter Service Organizations	12
Philanthropic Entities	4
Legal Advocacy Organizations	3

Table A2: Featured Organizations

ORGANIZATION NAME	REGION SERVED	SERVICES
<b>SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS</b>		
<a href="#">Bluum (Idaho Charter School Network)</a>	Idaho	Bluum is a funding intermediary that works with charter schools to provide technical assistance and professional development. It helps schools with Medicaid billing and holds training events for school leaders and educators. Bluum developed a special education health systems review team that meets with schools and audits every system related to special education. As part of the review, the team investigates data specific to students with disabilities, observes classrooms through a UDL lens, performs file reviews, and conducts interviews with staff to triangulate data and attain a comprehensive picture of schools' operations.

ORGANIZATION NAME	REGION SERVED	SERVICES
<a href="#">Collaborative for Exceptional Education (CEE)</a>	Colorado	CEE helps schools redesign their cultures to focus on best practices in inclusivity. It works with schools to build programming grounded in evidence and proven practices that support equitable education for students. It also hosts Learning Labs, where participating schools gather to learn about a given topic (e.g., academic MTSS interventions), showcase what works in their schools, and reflect on their learning around inclusive practices.
<a href="#">DC Special Education Cooperative (DC Co-op)</a>	Washington, D.C.	The DC Co-op focuses on creating scale for charter schools in D.C. through technical assistance and professional development, including a Medicaid reimbursement program for schools and the Elevate program, a needs assessment that uses quality indicators to help schools make decisions for students with disabilities and to engage in a continuous improvement process. It also offers push-in instructional support and professional development to educators and leaders. It draws on its demonstration classrooms to model inclusive practices in an actual classroom.
<a href="#">Collaborative for Inclusive Education (CIE)</a>	New York City	The CIE hosts over 100 trainings and workshops annually and convenes meetings during which schools learn from each other and experts in the field. It aims to help schools solve problems or coach teams to test out new practices, such as leveraging co-teaching. The CIE team observes classrooms and debriefs the school's leadership team to identify areas where inclusive practices can be bolstered. It also advocates for charter schools in NYC to have equal access to systems so that they are set up for equitable outcomes for their students.

ORGANIZATION NAME	REGION SERVED	SERVICES
<a href="#">Diverse Learners Cooperative (DLC)</a>	Tennessee	DLC provides professional development to teachers through a collaborative learning environment that connects teachers with their colleagues. To ensure that the school environment positions teachers for success, DLC works with school teams to identify limiting factors for teachers' success. It maintains a teacher-centered lens when working directly with school teams. DLC has clearly stated quantitative or qualitative goals in every school-contracted engagement. To support measuring and tracking goals, DLC is developing a diagnostic process for schools, investigating inclusive school factors or indicators that would allow it to use a pre-/post test model to assess schools at the outset, then track the impact that DLC's work with the school has made.
<a href="#">Diverse Charter School Coalition (DCSC)</a>	National	The DCSC is a membership organization designed to incubate and support intentionally diverse by-design charter schools. With nearly 250 member schools, the DCSC supports a fellowship program and conducts strategic research, advocacy, membership activities, and outreach. DCSC regularly provides members with a community of practice focused on special education led by a national expert.
<a href="#">INDIGO Education</a>	Minnesota	INDIGO offers technical assistance and capacity-building services to charter schools in Minnesota. Its menu of services focuses on helping schools implement student services, design operational processes, and create staffing and fiscal policies and procedures for sustainability.
<a href="#">Marshall Street Initiatives (MSI)</a>	National	Building on institutional knowledge developed at Summit Public Schools' CMO, MSI seeks to enable every student to access opportunities to pursue a fulfilled life. From 2019 to 2024, MSI shepherded the Network Improvement Community of 10 CMOs formed to improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities.

ORGANIZATION NAME	REGION SERVED	SERVICES
<a href="#">Massachusetts Charter Public School Association (MCPSA)</a>	Massachusetts	MCPSA provides professional development to its member schools, with special education being one area of focus. As part of this work, it meets with school leaders and convenes regional groups of leaders for networking opportunities to share resources. MCPSA also helps schools connect through its specialist resources center and facilitates “position sharing” and clear lines of communication between charter schools and districts.
<a href="#">National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA)</a>	National	NACSA is a member organization that represents authorizers’ interests nationwide. It promulgates standards designed to support authorizer practices that will lead to the creation of high-quality and sustainable charter schools and conducts research to elevate the current status of authorizer policy and practice, including those that influence the education of students with disabilities.
<a href="#">National Network for District Authorizing (NN4DA)</a>	National	NN4DA supports state-level initiatives to enhance district charter school authorizing practices. It comprises three state association members and five states exploring membership as Incubating State Partners. With support from a Charter School Program, National Dissemination Grant. NN4DA prioritizes focused campaigns to ensure all charter schools appropriately educate special populations, including students with disabilities and English learners.
<a href="#">Paramount Health Data Project</a>	National, with an emphasis on Indiana	The PHDP works with schools to integrate student health and academic data to build reports that help schools identify warning signs for students who need comprehensive support. It shares reports and resources with schools about student health conditions in their communities and provides professional development at the nexus of health and academic data. It also offers schools professional development and encourages them to create diverse teams, including school nurses and paraprofessionals, to support MTSS implementation.



ORGANIZATION NAME	REGION SERVED	SERVICES
<a href="#">True Measure Collaborative (TMC)</a>	Washington	TMC provides professional development for school staff focused on their schools' in-depth, ongoing needs. It conducts workshops, whole group training, and hands-on training, typically in a cyclical design comprising three whole group sessions. Between these sessions, it conducts implementation coaching in classrooms to help apply concepts from sessions in the classroom.
<b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING</b>		
<a href="#">All Means All (AMA)</a>	National	AMA's evidence-based school leadership fellowship programs help school leaders develop the skills and knowledge necessary to create a school culture in which the needs of students with disabilities are prioritized. Its actions are grounded in data and improvement, partnering with school and system leaders primarily through a 15-month fellowship program grounded in its Leading Believers strategy, which aims to shift a school or system's adult culture, and its Radical Problem Solving strategy, which helps leaders set inclusive and ambitious goals and craft strategies to meet them.
<a href="#">Special Education Leader Fellowship (SELF)</a>	National	SELF fellowships focus on special education leaders in charter schools and school system leaders in administrative roles. During these one- and two-year fellowships, participants gain specialized training and coaching while participating in cohorts of peers from other schools or networks. SELF also offers school teams customized experiences to support inclusion, including UDL and Equitable Behavior Interventions.

ORGANIZATION NAME	REGION SERVED	SERVICES
<b>LEGAL SUPPORT AND ADVOCACY</b>		
<a href="#">American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)</a>	National	The ACLU works in courts, legislatures, and communities to defend and preserve individual rights and liberties guaranteed to all people in this country by the Constitution and U.S. laws. The ACLU of Arizona published a report regarding the experiences of students with disabilities enrolling in charter schools to raise awareness around concerns related to equal access.
<a href="#">Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law (D.C.)</a>	National	The Bazelon Center focuses on three actions in support of students with disabilities: litigation against public education agencies, including charter schools; individual advocacy for students and families around FAPE; and federal policy advocacy to develop and endorse federal legislation at federal agencies responsible for enforcing civil rights relevant to children’s experience in schools.
<a href="#">National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)</a>	National	NDRN provides training and technical assistance to protection and advocacy organizations nationwide. They are involved in federal legislation or federal policy issues that emerge related to children with disabilities by providing statements or comments to federal agencies and having informal or formal conversations with policymakers. NDRM collaborates with advocacy organizations on various education issues through litigation, policy, and addressing individual concerns in different states.

ORGANIZATION NAME	REGION SERVED	SERVICES
<a href="#">Loyola Law School Clinic's Youth Justice Section</a>	New Orleans, LA	The Youth Justice Section is a law clinic associated with Loyola University's New Orleans College of Law, with a holistic emphasis on special education, school discipline, juvenile delinquency, and the intersection of these issues. It also does systemic work to advocate for changes in education and juvenile justice systems through impact litigation policy reform. Most of the clinic's clients are parents of special education students in the greater New Orleans area whom they typically represent in complaints related to eligibility for special education services and school discipline complaints, including fighting student expulsions or when students are placed in home-bound education over behavioral issues.
<a href="#">Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)</a>	Southern region of the U.S.	A 2010 SPLC lawsuit highlighted four key areas of systemic deficiencies within New Orleans' charter schools concerning special education: identification of students with disabilities (Child Find); access to inclusive environments and relevant services; procedural safeguards during disciplinary actions; and ensuring fair enrollment practices without discrimination. Many of the legislative measures and policies implemented in recent years to ensure equitable education opportunities for students with disabilities stem directly or indirectly from the consent decree established as a result of this lawsuit.
<b>PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND TRAINING</b>		
<a href="#">Advocates for Justice in Education (AJE)</a>	Washington, DC	AJE is the local Parent Training and Information Center in Washington, DC, a city in which 50% of students attend a charter school. AJE provides direct support to students and families to ensure their rights are being upheld and they are accessing quality education and a full range of health, social, and ancillary support.

ORGANIZATION NAME	REGION SERVED	SERVICES
<a href="#">Families Helping Families of Greater New Orleans (FHF)</a>	New Orleans, LA	FHF is the local Parent Training and Information Center for Louisiana. FHF provides direct support to students and families across the state and in New Orleans, a city in which nearly 100% of students attend a charter school.
<a href="#">Center for Parent Information and Resources (CPIR)</a>	National	CPIR is the federally funded umbrella organization that provides support to the network of nearly 100 Parent Training and Information Centers across the nation.
<p><b>PHILANTHROPIC ORGANIZATIONS</b></p>		
<a href="#">Bill &amp; Melinda Gates Foundation</a>	Nationwide	The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation supports organizations that focus on expanding charter school seats, improving collaborations, and learning about effective practices in charter schools, including practices related to students with disabilities. Its goal is to increase the number of high-quality public charter schools that improve outcomes for all students, with a particular focus on students who face the highest barriers to opportunity, including Black and Latino students experiencing poverty, particularly those with high-incidence disabilities.
<a href="#">Camden Education Fund (CEF)</a>	Camden, NJ	CEF is a nonprofit committed to advancing high-quality education opportunities in Camden, NJ’s public school system. Collaborating with families, school partners, and community leaders, CEF identifies education needs on a citywide level, offering grants and establishing strategic partnerships with schools, NPOs, and universities, including deep investments focused on improving outcomes for students with disabilities across the city of Camden.

ORGANIZATION NAME	REGION SERVED	SERVICES
<a href="#">Education Forward DC</a>	Washington, D.C.	Education Forward is an intermediary fund that focuses on education issues in the Washington, D.C., area. It serves as a quarterback organization and local expert in public education in its region, fundraising for priorities in its strategic and organizational goals and investing in traditional public and charter schools. It is particularly interested in understanding innovative interventions, educator support and school models. Education Forward has made significant investments in understanding the landscape for students with disabilities in DC and building charter schools' capacity to enroll and educate students with disabilities. It also supports public engagement advocacy.
<a href="#">Peter and Carmen Lucia Buck Foundation (PCLB)</a>	New York and Connecticut	PCLB is a philanthropic organization that invests approximately 75% of its donations to education. Its education portfolio focuses on public charter schools, people quality, and advocacy. Specifically, it supports groups that conduct advocacy work for charter schools with a K-12 emphasis. It is strongly invested in public high-performing charter schools, as it believes that this is one of the most effective ways to ensure that children with disabilities from low-income backgrounds in urban areas have access to excellent education options.
<b>ORGANIZATIONS CONDUCTING RESEARCH</b>		
<a href="#">Center for Learner Equity (CLE)</a>	National	CLE documents and disseminates information about the status of students with disabilities in public schools, particularly in high-choice districts, based on publicly available enrollment data, policy issues, and partnerships with research institutions. CLE is a key voice on policies that impact students with disabilities and brings stakeholders together to advocate for and implement practices that improve their access to and experiences in charter schools.



ORGANIZATION NAME	REGION SERVED	SERVICES
<a href="#">Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO)</a>	National	<p>CREDO at Stanford has published national research on charter schools' impact on student learning at scale. Its most recent study examined students' math and reading performance in charter schools compared with traditional public school students. It found that charter school students' overall performance exceeded traditional public school students' performance. However, this positive effect was not evident among students receiving special education services.</p>
<a href="#">Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE)</a>	National	<p>CRPE is a research organization based at Arizona State University that rigorously examines transformative ideas to inform critical actions. It has published extensively on issues related to charter schools and outcomes among students with disabilities in charter schools.</p>

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ascher, Carol, Juan Echazarreta, Robin Jacobowitz, Yolanda McBride, Tammi Troy, and Nathalis Wamba. "Going Charter: New Models of Support. Year Two Findings from New York City's Charter Schools. Charter School Research Project." (2001). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED464186.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Wohlstetter, Priscilla, Courtney L. Malloy, Guilbert C. Hentschke, and Joanna Smith. "Improving service delivery in education through collaboration: An exploratory study of the role of cross-sectoral alliances in the development and support of charter schools." *Social Science Quarterly* 85, no. 5 (2004): 1078-1096.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Dingerson, Leigh. "Public Accountability for Charter Schools: Standards and Policy Recommendations for Effective Oversight." *Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University* (2014). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED558016.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about Parent Centers, please see the *Center for Parent Information and Resources* <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/whatiscpir/>.

<sup>5</sup> CEEE was founded as part of the Colorado League of Charter Schools and eventually spun out as an autonomous fee-for-service for-profit consulting practice in 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Zarate, Miguel and Lopez, Natalie Camarena. 5. How are charter schools managed? *National Alliance for Public Charter Schools*. (2023). <https://data.publiccharters.org/digest/charter-school-data-digest/who-manages-charter-schools/>

<sup>7</sup> Marshall Street. *Beyond Trust Falls: Launching a Network of Charter Districts During a Global Health Crisis* (2022). <https://www.marshall.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Beyond-Trust-Falls-Launching-a-Network-of-Charter-Districts-During-a-Global-Health-Crisis-Spring-2022.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Marshall Street. *Research-to-Impact Practices Making Best Practice Standard Practice* (2024). <https://www.marshall.org/initiative/continuous-improvement/research-to-impact/>

<sup>9</sup> DC Special Education Cooperative *School-Based Medicaid Programs* (n.d.). <https://specialedcoop.org/programs/school-based-medicaid/>

<sup>10</sup> Angelov Azure, Deidre Pettinga, and David Bateman. The Paramount Health Data Project. In: *Hashtags & Headlines Marketing for School Leaders*. New York, NY US: Roman & Littlefield; 2020. p. 82–5. Rattermann, Mary Jo, Azure Angelov, Tommy Reddicks, and Jess Monk. "Advancing health equity by addressing social determinants of health: Using health data to improve educational outcomes." *PLoS one* 16, no. 3 (2021): e0247909.

<sup>11</sup> For more details on the All Means All program outcomes, visit: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GTQUtySgzHtGnP4j-lyZ3dTyWxrB6FGH/view>  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kzM6QXM3fucKqTsJW8mUNMUjz3iZYVYq/view>

<sup>12</sup> For more details on SELF program outcomes, visit: <https://www.selfnola.org/self-leadership-program-produces-bright-spots-in-challenging-times/>

<sup>13</sup> Connecticut's Official State Website. *Charter Schools*. (n.d.). <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Charter-Schools/Charter-Schools/Regulations>

<sup>14</sup> DC Public Charter School Board. *Performance Management Framework*. (n.d.). <https://dcpcsb.org/performance-management-framework-pmf>

<sup>15</sup> Center for Learner Equity. "Education of Students with Disabilities in Charter and Traditional Public Schools by Educational Setting. A Secondary Analysis of the Civil Rights Data Collection to Inform Policy and Practice: Key Findings and Guiding Questions That Examine the Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Charter and Traditional Public Schools. Technical Brief 3." (2021). <https://www.centerforlearnerequity.org/news/crdc17-18/>

<sup>16</sup> DeArmond, Michael, Sean Gill, Betheny Gross, Georgia Heyward, Robin Lake, Lanya McKittrick, Alice Opalka et al. "Seizing the Opportunity: Educating Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools." *Center on Reinventing Public Education* (2019). <https://crpe.org/seizing-the-opportunity-educating-students-with-disabilities-in-charter-schools/>

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<sup>18</sup> While both CRPE and CREDO operate within an institution of higher education, we include them as an example of a nonprofit entity influencing practices in the charter sector given the nature of their contribution to evidence-building.

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