



The Center for
Learner Equity

Unlocking Potential: Lessons from Washington State on How Charter Schools Can Meet the Needs of All Learners

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

JULY 2024

Executive Summary

Students with disabilities have long been marginalized by low expectations for academic progress and exclusionary classroom settings that limit their access to challenging, grade-level instruction. Charter schools are uniquely positioned to address this challenge, possessing greater freedom to design student-centered educational models and being accountable for the educational results they achieve. But to date, the autonomy for accountability exchange has failed to catalyze the creation of charter schools that consistently address the needs of students with disabilities or, perhaps more importantly, close the gap in educational outcomes between students with disabilities and their peers.

This report considers the efforts of one state—Washington—to design a charter sector that meets the needs of students with disabilities. Supporters of charter schools in Washington were determined to build equity and inclusion into the design of the charter sector, which emerged after a controversial statewide initiative in 2012. Washington’s charter law includes a legal mandate to authorize charter schools designed to serve at-risk students and, as detailed below, philanthropic investments supported the development of an ecosystem of technical assistance and professional service providers designed to support the implementation of effective practices for educating students with disabilities. How these efforts have paid off and where they have proven insufficient provides a window into how education leaders—policymakers, authorizers, technical assistance providers, advocates, and funders—can act to support charter schools to meet the needs of all learners.

To understand Washington’s progress in building a charter sector that enrolls and effectively educates students with disabilities, we conducted interviews with 12 staff members who work in organizations that provide material support or technical assistance to Washington charter schools, as well as 22 interviews with stakeholders (i.e., school leaders, teachers, paraeducators, and parents) at 3 schools, selected based on their implementation of one or more inclusive educational practices for students with disabilities. We also reviewed publicly available data on enrollment trends, students with disabilities placement in the general education classroom, and these students learning outcomes in charter schools compared to their peers enrolled in traditional public schools.

Prior investments to support equitable practices in Washington charter schools have yielded meaningful results. Publicly available data show that Washington charter schools often enroll a greater share of students with disabilities compared to their peers nationally and are more likely to educate students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Students with disabilities enrolled in charter schools also make greater learning gains compared to nearby traditional public schools, at least among the schools for which data is available. Teachers and parents pointed to practices that schools were implementing that they believed supported students with disabilities to thrive.

Despite this progress, there are signs of continued struggle. Technical assistance providers noted that implementation of effective support for students with disabilities was uneven across Washington’s charter sector, and some schools have publicly stumbled, triggering action by regulators, tarnishing the sector’s image, and arming their critics with new talking points. Addressing the root causes of these struggles—some of which affect all public schools and some unique to Washington’s charter sector—will be key to ensuring the sector can deliver the solutions that students with disabilities most need.

Key Findings

- **Compared to their peers nationally, Washington charter schools are more likely to enroll students with disabilities and educate them in general education settings.** Students with disabilities enrolled in Washington charter schools have the same range of disabilities as in the community at large, and the share of students with more complex needs enrolled in charter schools has increased over time.
- **Students with disabilities in some Washington charter schools show higher learning acceleration rates than nearby traditional public schools.** Student growth percentiles, which compare the year-over-year growth among students with similar prior-year test scores, show that students with disabilities enrolled in some Washington charter schools have more significant learning gains than students with disabilities enrolled in nearby district schools.
- **Despite progress, there are also signs of continued struggles.** Technical assistance providers noted that many Washington charter schools are still working to translate their aspirations for educating students with disabilities into reality. These implementation gaps were most significant for students with the most complex support needs. Public stumbles, while rare, have had serious negative impacts on the sector, given its small size and ongoing political scrutiny.
- **Stakeholders we interviewed were clear that equitably educating students with disabilities starts with committed school leaders.** Leaders played critical roles in imbuing mindsets and operationalizing equitable practices for students with disabilities, including hiring teachers who believe in the value of inclusion, investing in teacher capacity to implement inclusive practices, and nurturing inclusive school cultures.
- **Capacity-building investments can help charter schools realize their aspirations to educate students with disabilities equitably.** Washington charter school leaders and teachers we interviewed described benefiting from the support of organizations like the True Measure Collaborative and suggested technical assistance efforts like these can strengthen educators' capacity to educate all learners.
- **Charter schools' ability to live up to their aspirations for students with disabilities hinges in part on factors for which they have no control.** Inadequate funding, an anemic educator pipeline, and struggles to access needed student support create obstacles to charter schools making good on their commitments to students with disabilities. As explained below, some of these challenges are similar to those confronted by all public schools, and some are unique to charter schools.
- **Current accountability systems give charter schools mixed signals about their responsibilities for students with disabilities.** Washington charter schools face significant accountability pressures, consuming valuable leadership time and effort. However, weaknesses in their design mean that schools' responsibilities towards students with disabilities are often left essentially unaddressed.

Recommendations for Washington state

The progress and continued struggles of students with disabilities in Washington charter schools point to opportunities to further strengthen the ecosystem's support for these students. This inquiry has shown that Washington charter schools can use their unique freedom of action to build special education delivery models that go beyond compliance "box checking" to set new benchmarks for what it means to educate students with disabilities. But whether more schools do this work hinges on filling the gaps in the charter ecosystem that leave this work under-resourced and insufficiently prioritized.

- **Funders, leadership preparation programs, and incubators should prioritize investments in robust pipelines that adequately prepare prospective school leaders to educate all students.** Stakeholders were clear that school leaders have enormous influence over how students with disabilities are educated, yet too few have the mindsets, skills, and know-how to reimagine special education delivery models. Given the influential role funders, preparation programs, and incubators play in the pipeline of new schools, these actors have important roles to play in ensuring new schools are held to high benchmarks for success and are prepared to take on the responsibilities of educating all students.
- **Funders, educator preparation programs, and state policymakers should act to ensure all teachers are prepared for the work of educating students with disabilities.** The leaders we interviewed were clear that the current standards for teacher preparation fail miserably to prepare general education teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Funders should work to build equity-minded preparation programs outside of traditional pathways while existing educator preparation programs and the state officials who oversee their work must revisit current licensing standards to ensure they adequately prepare teachers to work with all students. Given the history of siloed special education programs and low expectations for students with disabilities, successfully preparing teachers to educate students with disabilities is as much about altering the assumptions and beliefs that prospective teachers may have about these students as it is strengthening their know-how.
- **State policymakers should act to address the disconnect between the resources they invest in the education of students with disabilities and the costs of providing those services.** While the Washington legislature has twice acted to increase the per pupil funding cap on students with disabilities, these efforts fail to fully reconcile the difference between state per-pupil investments and the actual costs of providing educational services to students with disabilities. As a starting point for addressing this gap, the legislature should invest in the analysis of existing expenditure data to understand special education cost structures and explore redesigning the special education funding model based on the costs of providing the support students need.
- **State policymakers should consider sponsoring special education cooperatives that facilitate all schools—district or charter—access to specialized student support.** The failure of Washington school districts to cooperate with charter schools to provide student support services on a fee-for-service basis reflects a failure to put student needs above politics. State policymakers could address gaps in the student support infrastructure either by inducing school districts to offer these services on a fee-for-service basis or by sponsoring cooperatives that better facilitate access.

- **State policymakers and the Washington Charter School Commission must revisit their current approach to oversight.** Current approaches to overseeing charter schools in Washington fail to establish ambitious benchmarks for success or to adequately prioritize the learning needs of students with disabilities. The failure of current authorizing standards to account for students with disabilities is a missed opportunity to signal to schools that how these students are educated matters. While the Office of the State Superintendent is charged with monitoring special education programs, there is no evidence that their efforts have improved how students with disabilities are educated, even as they add greatly to the compliance burden on school leadership teams. Given the rising costs of special education services, state legislators have a strong interest in understanding whether current approaches to oversight are aligned with efforts to improve the quality of education available to students with disabilities.

Recommendations for Charter School Leaders Outside of Washington

With greater freedom of action and accountability for results, charter schools are uniquely positioned to rewrite the script of what it means to educate students with disabilities. Washington's progress shows that capitalizing on the assets of the sector will require actions along multiple lines of change.

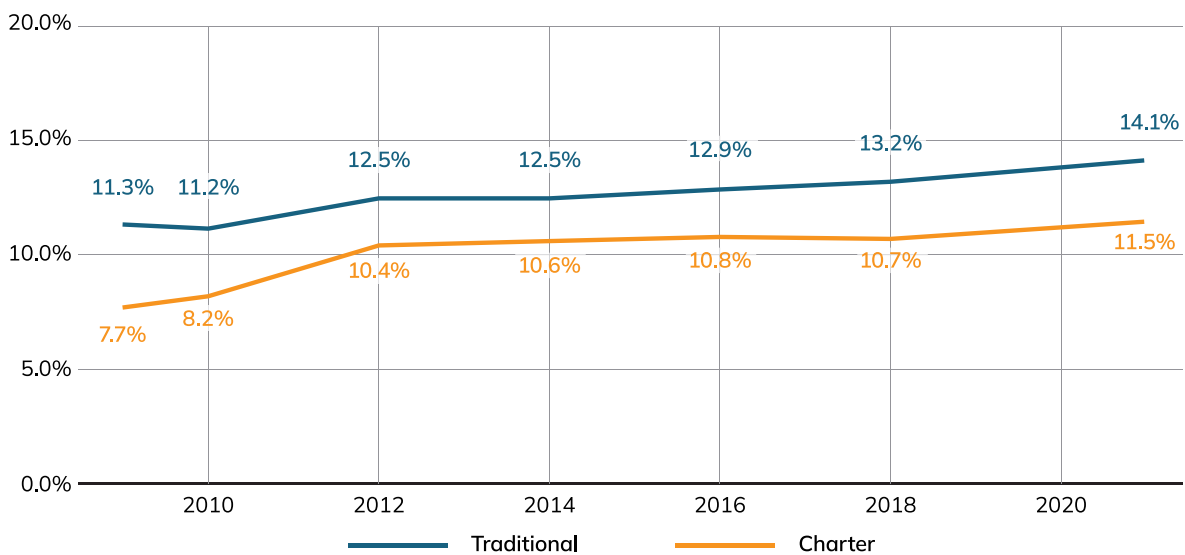
- **Funders that invest in the charter sector should prioritize students with disabilities in their work.** While philanthropy has played a critical role in changing expectations for how low-income students and students of color are educated in public schools, few have sought to do the same when it comes to students with disabilities. This failure to consider the needs of students with disabilities when it comes to investments in new charter schools and support organizations in the sector is a missed opportunity. Funders can influence change in the sector by prioritizing investments in schools designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities and the support organizations that are working with the sector via incubation, evaluation and technical assistance. Funders can also act to support research efforts that showcase the ways in which charter schools have reimagined special education and prioritized students' with disabilities learning outcomes.
- **State policymakers and charter school authorizers should act to strengthen the return on investment for special education programs.** For years, state policymakers have increased their investments in special education with little consideration for whether those investments are adequate or delivering the educational opportunities students with disabilities need. State policymakers should act to align investments in special education with clearer expectations for what "success" looks like. This work necessitates asking difficult questions like: What does it cost to provide students with disabilities high-quality educational opportunities? How do schools currently invest their limited special education dollars and do these investments reflect the right prioritization? Charter school authorizers also have key roles to play in setting ambitious benchmarks for success—where compliance is a starting point rather than the finish line for what charter schools must accomplish.
- **Researchers who study charter schools need to prioritize students with disabilities in their work.** Researchers have played essential roles in illuminating how and with what effect charter schools shape students' educational opportunities. But too often, students with disabilities are an afterthought in these inquiries. Researchers have essential roles to play in helping policymakers, funders, and the field at large understand how charter schools can build better, more effective models for educating 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

Students with disabilities have long been marginalized by low expectations for academic progress and exclusionary classroom settings that limit their access to challenging, grade-level instruction.¹ As a direct result, educational outcomes for students with disabilities lag far behind their non-disabled peers,² leaving millions of young people unprepared to attend college or enter the workforce³ by virtue of the simple fact that their learning needs diverge from what schools are prepared to provide.

Charter schools are uniquely positioned to meet the needs of students with disabilities, possessing greater freedom to design student-centered educational models and being accountable for the educational results they achieve. But to date, the autonomy for accountability exchange has failed to catalyze the creation of charter schools that consistently provide students with disabilities equitable, effective educational opportunities or, perhaps more importantly, have closed the gap in educational outcomes between students with disabilities and their peers.⁴

How to address this challenge has presented a significant dilemma for policymakers, philanthropists, advocates, and other supporters of charter schools. While prior research has documented isolated success stories, systemic and scalable solutions remain elusive.⁵

This report considers the efforts of one state—Washington—to design a charter sector that meets the needs of students with disabilities. Supporters of charter schools in Washington were determined to build equity and inclusion into the design of the state’s charter sector, which emerged after a controversial statewide initiative in 2012.⁶ The state’s charter law includes a legal mandate to authorize charter schools designed to serve at-risk students, and as detailed below, philanthropic investments catalyzed the development of an ecosystem of technical assistance and professional service providers designed to support the implementation of equitable practices in charter schools. How these efforts have paid off and where they have proven insufficient provides a window into how education leaders—policymakers, authorizers, technical assistance providers, advocates, and funders—can act to support charter schools to meet the needs of all learners.

Despite this progress, there are signs of continued struggle. Technical assistance providers noted that implementation of effective support for students with disabilities was uneven across Washington’s charter sector, and some schools have publicly stumbled, triggering action by regulators, tarnishing the sector’s image, and arming their critics with new talking points.⁷ Addressing the root causes of these struggles—some of which affect all public schools and some unique to Washington’s charter sector—will be key to ensuring the sector can deliver the solutions that students with disabilities most need.

Background

Charter schools have confronted numerous challenges in their work to educate students with disabilities effectively. Charter schools that operate as local education agencies (LEAs), as many do, are required to provide the same services and educational opportunities to students with disabilities as school districts. But they often possess fewer resources and less organizational capacity to do so.⁸ These capacity challenges are, in part, a function of size. By enrolling fewer students overall, charter schools struggle to achieve the same economies of scale that traditional school districts enjoy, especially for educational services that are less common or more complex to administer. Moreover, charter schools often receive fewer public education dollars per pupil than their traditional counterparts and, as a result, have fewer resources to make up the gap between what states and the federal government provide to educate students with disabilities and the actual costs.⁹

Regardless of their root cause, concerns about whether charter schools are delivering on their promise to students with disabilities present significant liabilities to the sustainability and growth of the sector. Documented failures to equitably educate students with disabilities may undermine community support for charter schools and result in increased monitoring by regulators. It can also have political ripple effects, as opponents of charter schools use isolated examples to build local and national narratives that charter schools are not committed to serving all students.

While resource constraints present serious challenges for charter schools working to enroll and effectively educate students with disabilities, this is not the whole story. The extent to which charter schools educate students with disabilities can vary dramatically, even when schools operate in similar resource environments. Some charter schools, for example, have used enrollment and disciplinary practices that have contributed to failures to enroll and retain students with disabilities at rates comparable to traditional public schools.¹⁰

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Methodology

This study sets out to understand the factors that shape how Washington charter schools educate students with disabilities, what existing supports help schools deliver on their aspirations to educate all students, and what obstacles hinder their efforts. As part of our work, we wanted to understand whether prior investments—at the policy and nonprofit level—were paying dividends regarding how Washington charter schools address the needs of students with disabilities.

Data Collection and Analysis

To address these issues, we interviewed a variety of stakeholders who have experience working with or in Washington state charter schools. This included interviews with 12 leaders of organizations that provide material support or technical assistance to Washington charter schools around special education. These interviewees were selected intentionally based on their direct experience with Washington charter schools and knowledge of specific practices that individual charter schools implemented over time.

We also conducted 22 interviews with school leaders, teachers (both general education and special education certified), paraeducators, and parents at three focal schools—Catalyst Public Schools, Summit Atlas, and Rooted. The focal schools were selected based on recommendations from technical assistance providers, who were asked to identify charter schools that effectively implemented one or more equitable practices for students with disabilities. To be considered for inclusion, schools had to be recommended by at least two interviewees from technical assistance organizations. Six schools were initially recommended, one of which was excluded based on the relatively low enrollment of students with disabilities; of the remaining, three schools agreed to participate in the study. Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of these focal schools and their nearest school district.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of focal schools and nearest district

Focal Charter School (Nearest District)	Enrollment	Black	Hispanic	Asian	White	Low-income	Section 504	IEP
SUMMIT ATLAS (SEATTLE)	549	26.0% (14.1%)	14.3% (14.6%)	5.8% (12.4%)	39.8% (45.3%)	43.5% (31.9%)	7.1% (6.3%)	21.1% (16.3%)
ROOTED (VANCOUVER)	24	4.2% (3.1%)	20.8% (27.7%)	4.2% (3.0%)	58.3% (52.9%)	50.0% (48.9%)	0.0% (3.6%)	45.8% (16.4%)
CATALYST (BREMERTON)	486	8.0% (5.0%)	16.5% (28.5%)	3.9% (4.2%)	59.9% (44.2%)	46.3% (61.2%)	2.1% (4.9%)	13.6% (19.3%)

Source: OSPI, Washington State Report Card, 2023-24

In selecting schools implementing one or more equitable practices, we hoped to learn more about how individual schools were working to address the needs of students with disabilities and the factors that shape their success. However, neither the selection criteria nor the interviews we conducted were designed to be evaluative, and focal schools varied in the number and types of practices they utilized to educate students with disabilities.

Throughout this report, we protect the anonymity of our interviewees by identifying them only by their role. We sometimes identify practices specific schools use and quote school leaders with their permission. See the Appendix for more information about the characteristics of our interviewees. We analyzed all qualitative data to identify key themes related to the internal and external factors that shape how Washington charter schools educate students with disabilities and identify opportunities to strengthen the ecosystem.

In addition to capturing stakeholder perspectives, we utilized publicly available data to understand the educational opportunities available to students with disabilities in Washington charter schools. We considered the extent to which Washington charter schools enroll students with disabilities at rates comparable to their peers nationally and whether they educate students with similar types of disabilities and educational needs. We also consider publicly available data on the extent to which Washington charter schools educate students with disabilities in general education settings, using federally mandated reporting on “least restrictive environment” (LRE). While these data are frequently used to assess whether schools equitably educate students with disabilities, they are best interpreted as where students with disabilities are educated. Access to the general education classroom is an essential precondition to operationalizing inclusive educational practices for students with disabilities, but it cannot tell us whether students are appropriately supported.

Finally, we report on publicly available data on student growth percentiles (SGP) to understand the extent to which students with disabilities enrolled in charter schools are learning at similar or different rates compared to peers in nearby traditional public schools. SGPs compare a student’s learning gains to peers with comparable test scores in the prior year. For example, an SGP of 80 suggests that a student made more significant learning gains than 80 percent of their similar-achieving peers. SGPs reflect a relative measure of student learning—they cannot tell us whether the amount of learning is adequate, but they can tell us whether a student is learning more or less than similar peers in other schools. To understand the learning outcomes of students with disabilities in charter schools, we use the median SGP for students with disabilities in each charter school for which data is available and compare it to the median SGP for students with disabilities in geographic peer schools. See the Appendix for additional information on how geographic peers were selected.

Study Limitations

While our interviewees represent diverse perspectives and we consider multiple sources of data, these cannot provide definitive evidence about whether Washington charter schools are living up to their promise to students with disabilities or the causal factors that shape their success and struggles.

Findings

Washington state context

As the 42nd state in the nation to approve charter schools in 2012, Washington state education stakeholders had more than 20 years to witness the concerns that emerged elsewhere about whether charter schools are prepared to educate students with disabilities. The architects of a statewide initiative to authorize charter schools in Washington state, including the League of Education Voters, were determined to address this challenge. The initiative provided a legal mandate for Washington state authorizers to prioritize schools designed to enroll “at-risk students” and capped the allowable number of schools at 40 statewide, in what one interviewee described as a “proof point strategy.”¹¹ One local education leader involved in these discussions said that because Washington was “last in line to have a charter sector,” local leaders understood they had an “obligation to do better since we knew better.”

There was also recognition that charter schools would need support to overcome their unique challenges in educating students with disabilities. As one local education leader told us, “We wanted to make sure that [Washington charter schools] served students with disabilities, and to do that, they would need to be well-resourced.”

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In 2015, the recognition of the need spurred the [Washington State Charter School Association](#) to develop the True Measure Collaborative (TMC), a unique partnership between [Seneca Family of Agencies](#), the [Washington State Charter Schools Association](#), and the [Puget Sound Educational Service District](#), supported in large part through funding provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. TMC, which now operates as an independent nonprofit, was organized to become a hub for Washington charter schools to access the specialized expertise and support they needed to educate students with disabilities effectively.

As of 2018, data reported by the Center on Reinventing Public Education showed that Washington charter schools were enrolling students with disabilities at comparable rates to nearby districts, and these students were more likely to be educated in a general education setting. At that time, charter schools enrolled students with a representative range of disability types, though students with developmental delays, intellectual disabilities, and multiple disabilities, who typically require more complex and expensive services, were less likely to be represented in the sector, which is consistent with national trends.¹²

In the 2023-24 school year, 18 charter schools were in operation, serving about 5,000 K-12 students. All Washington charter schools have worked with the TMC, and 11 have ongoing partnerships with the organization to support the implementation of equitable educational practices for students with disabilities.

In the following pages, we provide an updated account of the evidence on whether Washington charter schools are equitably educating students with disabilities and the internal and external factors that shape their success.

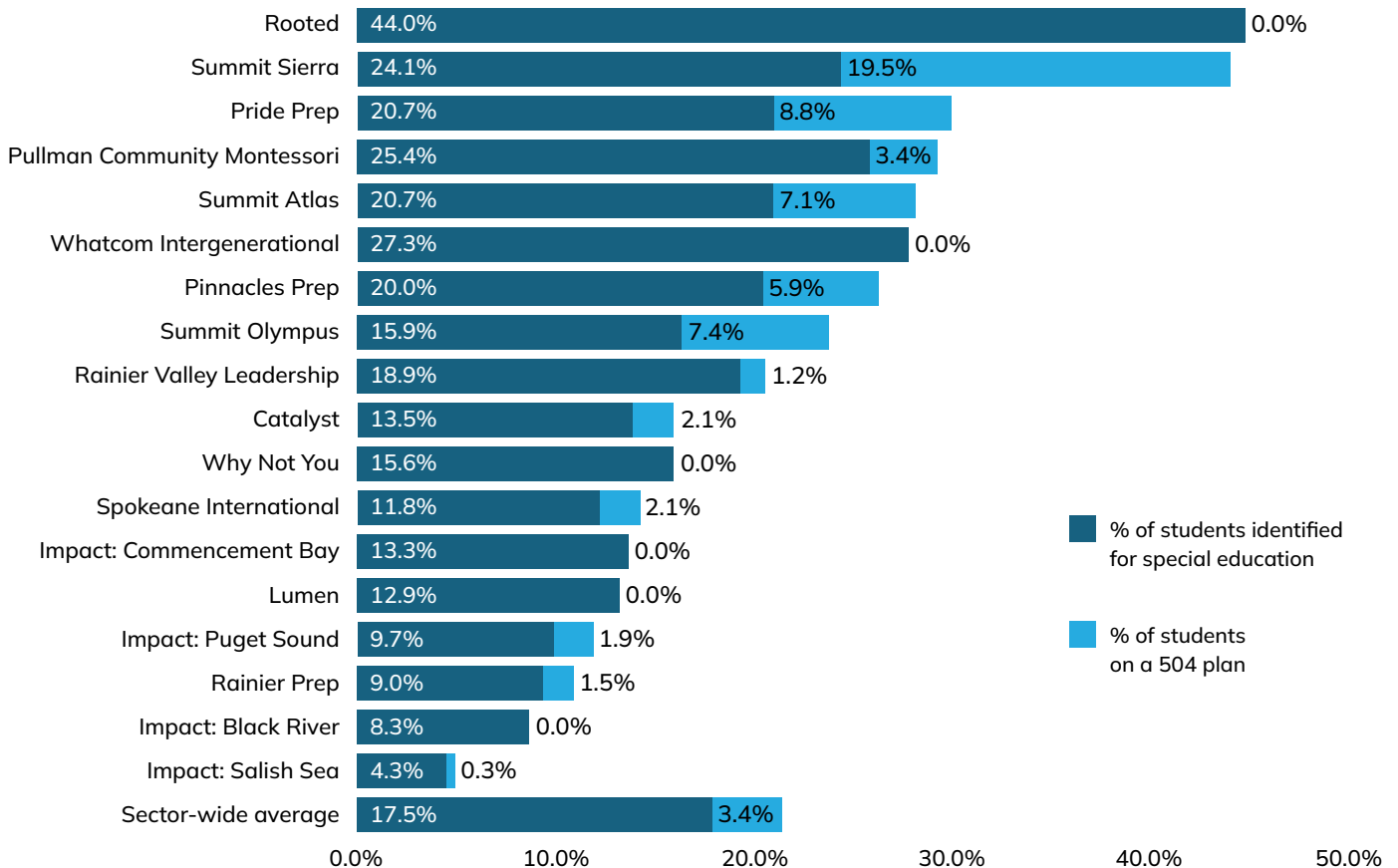
Washington charter schools are enrolling students with disabilities and serving them in a general education setting

Washington charter schools enroll a larger share of students with disabilities compared to their peers in other states.¹³ Nationally, 13.3 percent of charter school students are students with disabilities, either having been identified for special education services (10.7 percent) or a 504 plan (2.6 percent).¹⁴ In contrast, 20.9 percent of students in the average Washington charter school qualify for special education (17.5 percent) or a 504 plan (3.4 percent).¹⁵ This rate is comparable to the average share in districts nearest each charter school, where 16.3 percent of students qualify for special education, and 4 percent qualify for a 504 plan.

As Figure 1 shows, enrollment of students with disabilities in Washington charter schools varies dramatically. For example, 44 percent of students at [Routed School Vancouver](#), which opened its doors in the 2023-24 school year for its inaugural 9th-grade class, qualify for special education services. In contrast, just four percent of Impact’s Salish Sea Elementary students qualify for special education services.

“Every single school [in WA] was founded to be as inclusive as possible...and support all students but in particular students with disabilities and multilingual learners.”
 – Leader of a Washington technical assistance provider

Figure 1. Enrollment shares for students with disabilities vary across Washington charter schools

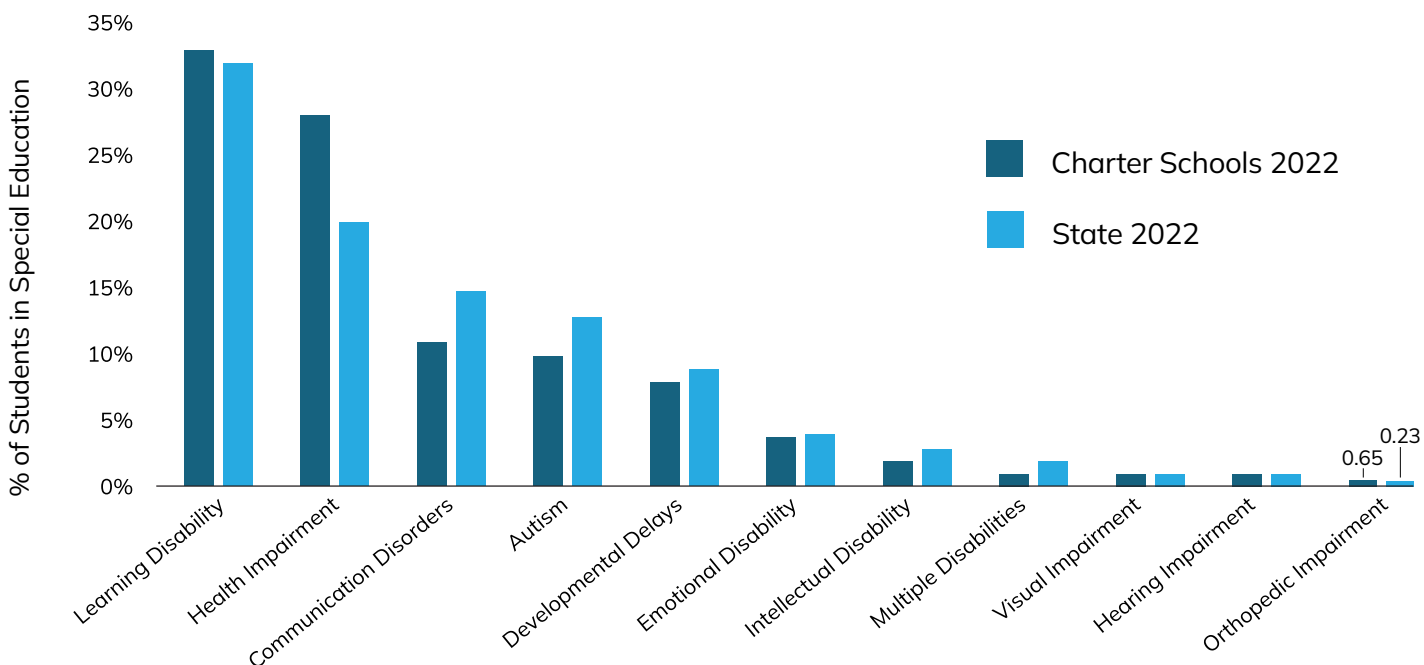


Source: % enrollment in special education drawn from P-223 reports provided by OSPI. Section 504 data from Washington State Report Card, Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, <https://washingtonstaterreportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/>

We do not know why some schools enroll lower shares of students with disabilities, but prior research points to a confluence of factors, some of which are under the influence of schools and others that rest outside of their control.¹⁶ Charter schools may be less likely to attract, enroll, and retain students with disabilities, which can reflect both decisions by families and their perceptions of charter schools’ capacity to serve their students with disabilities¹⁷ as well as schools’ use of discriminatory practices.¹⁸ In addition, some charter schools may be less likely to identify students for special education services and more likely to de-identify students who previously qualified for services.¹⁹ These students may still identify as having a disability, but their educational needs are being met without the protections of an IEP.²⁰ We also want to acknowledge that due to their smaller size, enrollment statistics can fluctuate from year to year and, in some cases, this fluctuation is dramatic. For example, in the 2022-23 school year, students with disabilities constituted 28 percent of students at [Lumen High School](#), a charter school created to serve the unique needs of teen parents. One year later, this enrollment share was 13 percent - a significant shift on a percentage basis but representing a difference of just 6 students identified as having a disability between the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years.

In Figure 2, we consider whether Washington charter schools enroll students with the same range of disabilities as in the community.²¹ National evidence suggests that charter schools are more likely to enroll students with higher incidence disabilities (e.g., specific learning disabilities and other health impairments), typically requiring fewer and less expensive services.²² Figure 2 shows that students with disabilities enrolled in Washington charter schools in the 2022-23 school year reflect similar characteristics to those enrolled in public schools statewide. Charter schools are more likely to enroll students with a health impairment and slightly less likely to enroll students diagnosed with autism (10.1% vs. 13.2%) or a communication disorder (11.0% vs. 15.5%), a category which includes common speech and language impairments. Differences in other categories are small, and charter schools enroll students with low-incidence disabilities, such as developmental delays, intellectual disabilities, or visual impairments, at rates comparable to other public schools.

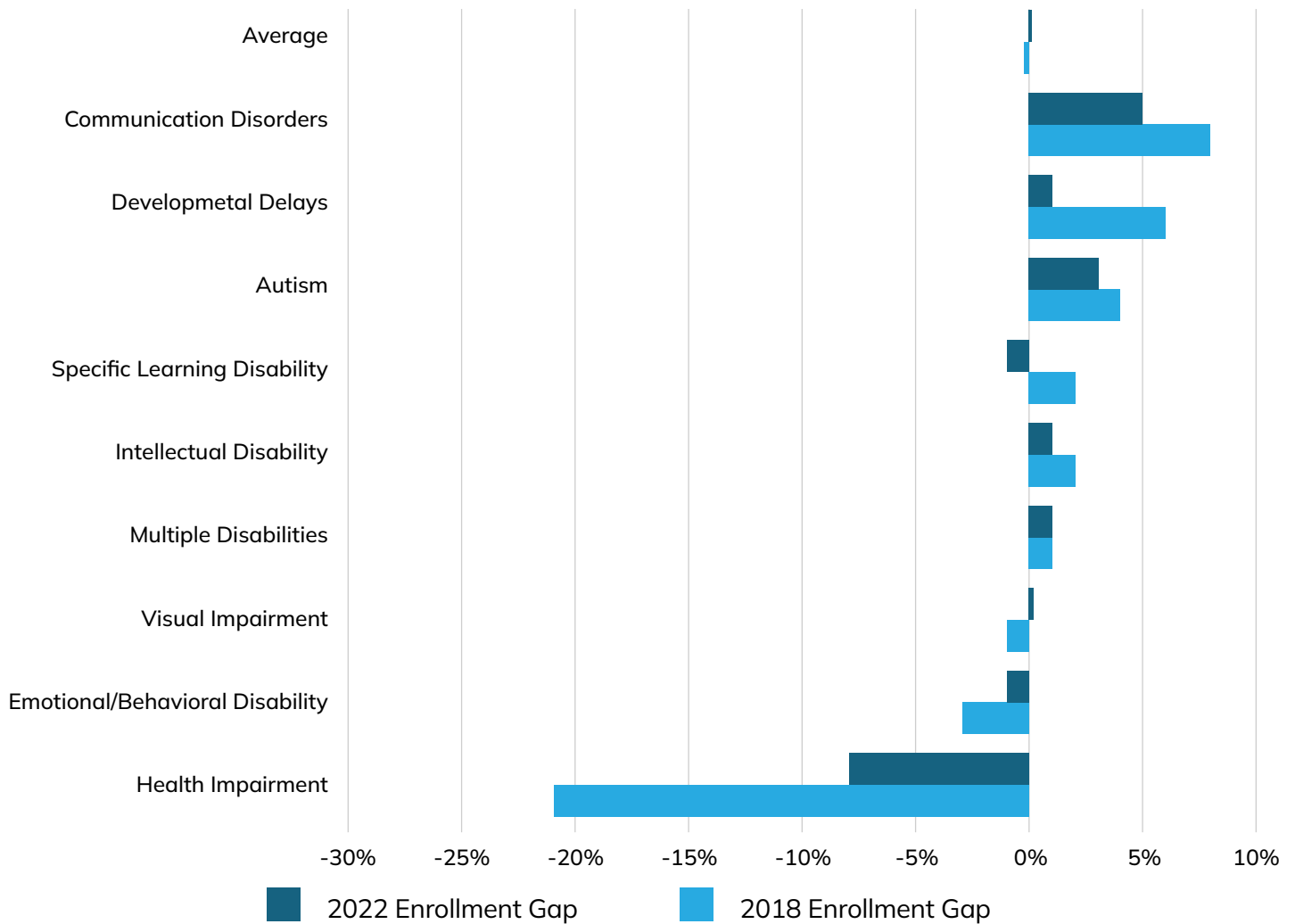
Figure 2. Students with disabilities who attend Washington charter schools have similar characteristics compared to their peers



Note: The figure displays the percentage of students identified for special education in each federally defined disability category. **Source:** Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. November 2022 Federal Child Count. (n.d.).

Figure 3 considers how the enrollment gap between Washington state and the charter sector has evolved since 2018. At that time, Washington charter schools were more likely to enroll students with health impairments and less likely to enroll students with developmental delays or communication disorders.²³ Figure 3 shows that differences in enrollment of students with different types of disabilities have shrunk between 2018 and 2022. Among every disability type represented in the 2018 data, the difference between the state and charter schools has decreased—in some cases, significantly. For example, less than 1 percent of students with disabilities in charter schools in 2018 were diagnosed with a developmental delay, while 7 percent of these same students were enrolled in public schools statewide. By 2022, this gap had shrunk to just 1 percent, with 8 percent of students with disabilities having this diagnosis compared to 9 percent statewide.

Figure 3. Differences in the characteristics of students with disabilities enrolled in a Washington charter school have shrunk since 2018



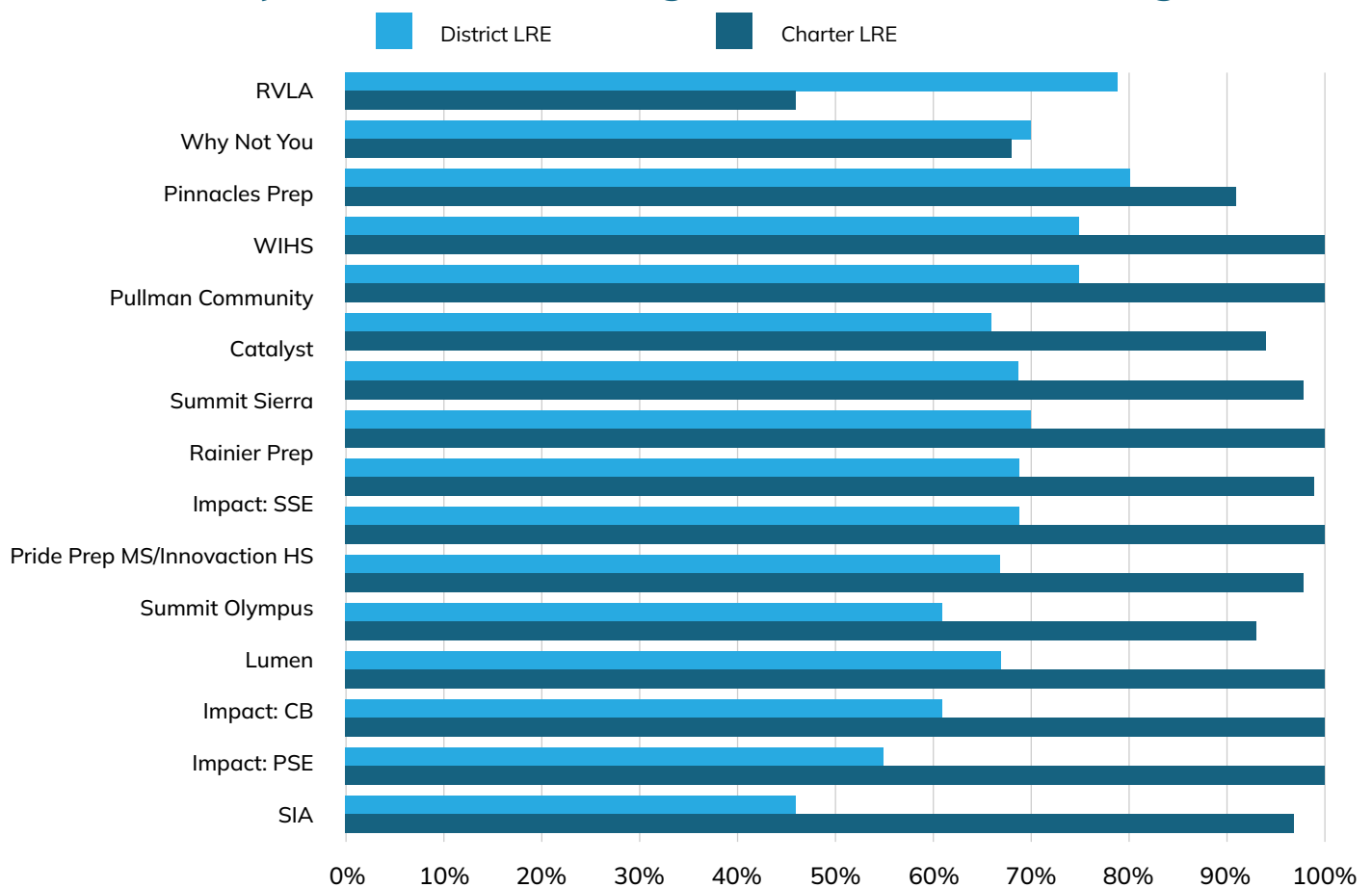
Note: The figure displays enrollment gap between Washington state and its charter schools in 2018 and 2022. Positive values signify that the enrollment share of that group as a percentage of all students identified for special education is larger in public schools statewide compared to charter schools, while negative values signify the share of students is larger in charter schools.

Source: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, November 2022 Federal Child Count and Tuchman et al., 2018

Understanding the learning environments in which students with disabilities are educated is another important marker for equity. The federal government requires all LEAs to identify the percentage of time students with disabilities are educated in general education settings, which provides one—albeit crude—marker for understanding whether charter schools equitably educate students with disabilities.²⁴ It is important to note that these data do not account for student support needs. According to national data analyzed by the Center for Learner Equity, on average, 81 percent of students with disabilities in charter schools spend 80 percent or more of the school day in general education settings.²⁵

Washington charter schools are more likely than their peers nationally or in their nearest districts to educate students with disabilities for a more significant proportion of the day in a general education setting. Figure 4 presents data on the share of students who qualify for special education and spend at least 80 percent of the school day in a general education setting. On average, 93 percent of charter school students who qualify for special education spend at least 80 percent of their school day in general education settings. In contrast, 67 percent of these same students attending schools in nearby districts spend at least 80 percent of their day in a general education setting. As a result, Washington charter schools are ahead of the curve in a state that ranked in the bottom 10 nationally for including students with disabilities in general education settings.²⁶

Figure 4. Students with disabilities in Washington charter schools are more likely to be educated in general education settings



Note: The figure presents data on the percentage of students who qualify for special education and are educated in a general education setting 80 to 100 percent of the time.

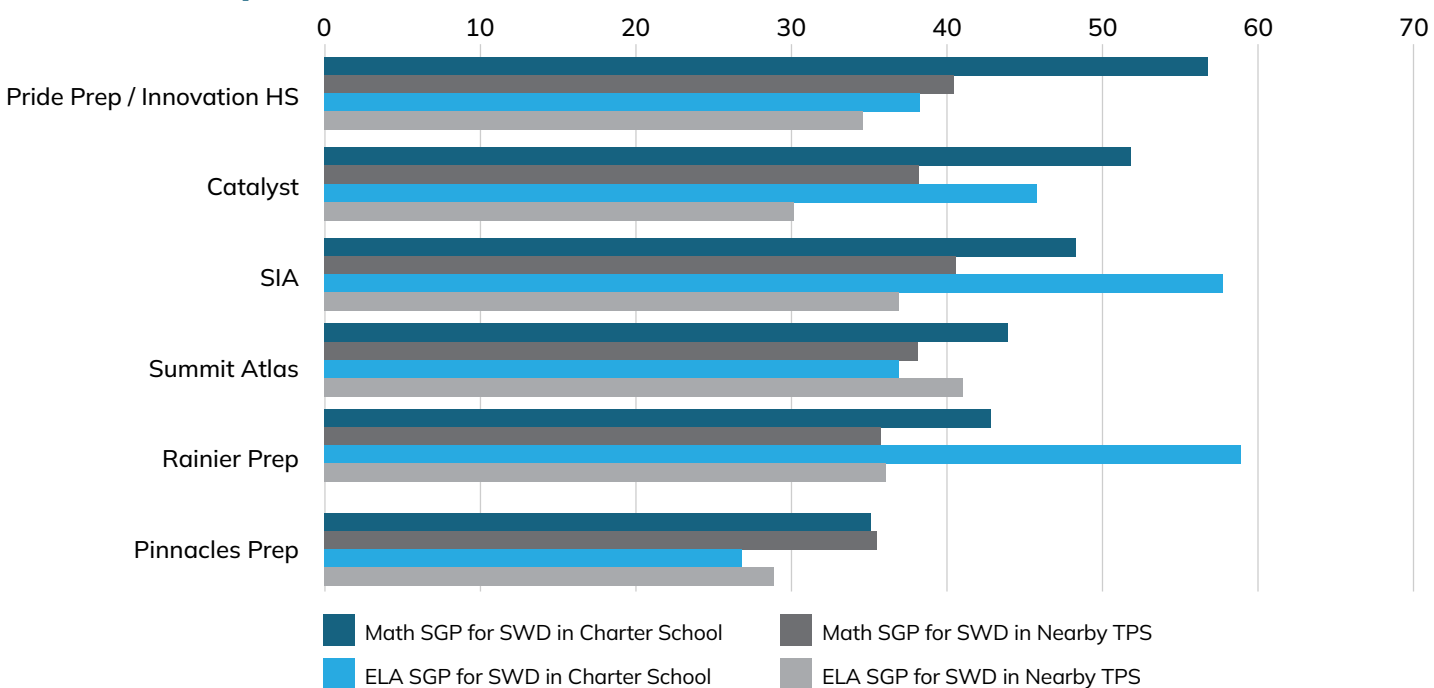
Source: Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. November 2022 Federal Child Count (n.d.). and Tuchman et al., 2018.

Students with disabilities in Washington charter schools are making greater learning gains compared to peers in nearby public schools

While these data provide suggestive evidence that Washington charter schools are educating students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, they say little about the quality of those educational experiences. We consider evidence on how much growth students with disabilities make in charter schools compared to nearby traditional public schools that serve similar grade levels (see the Appendix for additional information on how comparison schools were selected).²⁷ Student growth percentiles compare students in the same grade level with similar test scores in previous years and measure their performance relative to these students.²⁸ Washington state reports median growth percentiles for both schools and student subgroups, which summarizes the typical growth students in that group are making. SGPs control for prior student achievement, though they do not control for other factors that may impact student learning, such as whether students are from an economically disadvantaged household or a member of a historically marginalized racial or ethnic group.²⁹

Figure 5 presents data on SGPs for students with disabilities in Washington charter schools for which they are available.³⁰ It shows that students with disabilities typically achieve higher rates of growth in mathematics and English language arts compared to nearby traditional public schools.³¹ For example, students with disabilities at Catalyst Public Schools in Bremerton achieve a median SGP score of 52 in math, meaning a “typical” student with a disability at Catalyst achieves higher year-over-year growth than 52 percent of students statewide with similar prior year test scores. In contrast, students with disabilities in nearby traditional public schools have an average SGP of 38.

Figure 5. Washington charter schools are accelerating students with disabilities academic outcomes compared to their nearest traditional public schools



Note: The figure presents median student growth percentile for students identified for special education in each charter school and an average of the median growth percentile for these same students in up to 5 comparison schools that serve comparable grade levels.

Source: Washington State Report Card, Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, <https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/>

This analysis cannot tell us whether students with disabilities are making “adequate” growth, nor should it be interpreted as the “impact” of charter school attendance, which would require us to fully control for the factors other than prior achievement that shape the rate of learning for any given student or school. Nonetheless, it provides suggestive evidence that students with disabilities enrolled in charter schools are making more academic progress than their peers in nearby schools.

Despite the progress, there are also signs of continued struggles

While these data suggest that many Washington charter schools are taking steps to educate students with disabilities equitably, technical assistance providers we interviewed were clear that some schools are still working to translate their aspirations for equitably educating students with disabilities into reality. As one said, “I think there is a strong initiative for inclusion [in Washington charter schools]. We have to figure out how to implement inclusion effectively.”

Or, as another said, “Across the board, what we see in [Washington] charter schools is that the mindset around inclusion is there. What I push them on is what that actually looks like in practice? How are you insisting that it’s the job of all your teachers to educate [students with disabilities] and...supporting those teachers to provide instruction and behavior support to meet the needs of all those kids.”



[Some schools] have really strong academic models that serve 85 to 95 percent of students who enroll, but they can’t seem to stretch to [support] students with more significant disabilities.”

– Charter school technical assistance provider



Technical assistance providers reported that these implementation gaps were most significant for students with the most complex support needs. As one said, “Students [with disabilities] with significant support needs...is an area of growth [for charter schools]. Another said, “[Some schools] have really strong academic models that serve 85 to 95 percent of students who enroll, but they can’t seem to stretch to [support] students with more significant disabilities.”

Three technical assistance providers said that meeting the needs of all students required schools to be willing to “flex” to accommodate unexpected needs. In one example, an interviewee described her experience supporting teachers who were forced to “pull things off the internet” to meet the needs of students in their classroom, absent support from leadership to provide teachers with the modified curriculum their students needed. She continued, “We heard a lot from teachers who felt unsupported by leadership. They would say, ‘I’m really struggling, and I need help.’ [But] they were left without support and to navigate [their struggles] on their own.”

These day-to-day challenges of operationalizing equitable learning environments for students with disabilities have and will continue to present significant risks to the sector, especially when they spill into public conversations about charter schools. In 2022, a local radio station aired a series that described allegations from parents and educators that Impact Public Schools, a Washington-based charter management organization, failed to evaluate students for special education and did not reliably offer specialized instruction as legally required.³²

An investigation by OSPI, triggered by two community complaints filed in the same year, found one of the network's schools to be out of compliance with legal requirements in several areas—including, for example, failure to provide 25 students with special education services over two months. This was Impact's second corrective action plan. The network was already facing enhanced special education monitoring initiated by OSPI due to "risk factors identified through routine monitoring" of special education programs.³³ This example, widely reported in the media and subject to public discussion among legislators, had serious negative political impacts on the sector.

While the public drama around Impact's struggles was unusual in Washington's sector, at least one other school—Summit Sierra—has faced similar enhanced regulatory monitoring due to compliance issues identified by OSPI. A technical assistance provider we interviewed said compliance issues like those identified by OSPI were often driven by a lack of "know-how." As they said, "[Schools] sometimes lack understanding about who [can] deliver [specialized] instruction, who is [responsible for] tracking instruction, [and] just general knowledge around special education services and how to deliver that in a way that checks the right boxes."

Struggles with compliance and community complaints are not unique to charter schools. In the 2022-23 school year, 25 percent of Washington school districts were subject to enhanced monitoring by OSPI due to not meeting IDEA requirements, including 27 districts deemed in such distress that the state determined the district's special education programs needed intervention. Of the more than 500 community complaints parents and other caregivers have filed with OSPI since 2017, just a handful were filed against a charter school; in contrast, Seattle Public Schools has received more than 70.

Charter schools may not be alone in their struggles, but a contentious political environment in Washington state has magnified their impacts and threatened the political sustainability of the sector. One interviewee, remarking on the public nature of some Washington charter schools' struggles, observed how negative media attention was exploited by actors less concerned with helping students and more bent on shaping the public's and policymakers' perceptions of the sector.

Given the stakes for students and the charter schools that serve them, addressing the challenges that charter schools confront equitably educating students with disabilities is essential. In the remainder of this report, we use evidence drawn from interviews to understand the factors that shape whether Washington charter schools can deliver on their aspirations to educate students with disabilities equitably.



Stakeholders were clear that meeting the needs of students with disabilities starts with committed school leaders

The stakeholders we interviewed emphasized that school leadership was the critical factor separating charter schools where students with disabilities thrive and those where they struggle. “Schools that are doing really well with inclusive practice have leadership that is fully bought into the value of inclusion,” said one Washington state technical assistance organization leader. Another, when asked to reflect on why some Washington charter schools had gone further than others in implementing inclusive educational practices, said, “I think it’s leadership. I think it’s a mindset. And I think it’s an openness.”

While the three focal schools where we conducted interviews varied in their approaches to operationalizing equitable learning environments for students with disabilities, the levers school leaders pulled shared some common features: (1) hiring teachers committed to educating all learners, (2) investing in teacher capacity to implement inclusive practices, and (3) nurturing inclusive school cultures.



The most impactful factor [in how charter schools educate students with disabilities] is leadership.

– Leader of a Washington technical assistance provider



Hiring for equity

School leaders were candid about the struggles they experienced in recruiting staff who shared their team’s commitment to educating all learners. As one leader said, “The hardest thing is to find people who actually believe that children have unlimited potential.” But they were also clear about its importance. As one put it, “It is less about skill and more about who you are as an individual and the values you bring to this work. I can train skill. I can’t necessarily train heart.”

Leaders building equity-minded teacher teams used intentional strategies to support their efforts. First, the teacher hiring process centered on screening for the mindsets and commitments that leaders believed positioned teachers to educate all learners, including students with disabilities. Steven Carney, founding



Everybody’s on board; everybody understands that this is a school where everybody belongs, no matter who they are, everyone is loved and seen as somebody who can succeed. If you’re not on board with that, you can’t be here.

– Teacher from school that values inclusion



director of Rooted School Vancouver, said the school’s hiring process screens for teachers’ commitment to equity and inclusion: “While we value teaching skills, we believe a foundational belief in every student’s potential is crucial...[The hiring process] is designed to ensure teachers possess not only the skills but the passion around creating inclusive, empowering learning environments.” Perhaps as a sign of their rigor, teachers we interviewed at all three schools, without prompting, pointed to the hiring process

when asked about what helped them implement inclusive learning environments for students with disabilities. As one said, “I think we are a step above in hiring deliberately for those mindsets.” In response to the same question, a teacher at another school said school leadership was deliberate in vetting staff, using a hiring process she described as “intense” and screened for teacher attitudes on inclusion and systemic racism.

According to school leaders and teachers, the result was that they wasted no time trying to build buy-in among teachers who might be reluctant to see the value of inclusion. As one leader said, “[Our inclusion model] is possible because we have assembled a team that fiercely believes in the value of inclusion.” A teacher at this same school echoed this sentiment by saying, “Everybody’s on board; everybody understands that this is a school where everybody belongs, no matter who they are, everyone is loved and seen as somebody who can succeed. If you’re not on board with that, you can’t be here.” A teacher at another charter school said what she valued most about working there was the people: “It’s such a beautiful mix of people..who really care and have the right mindset...Everything is grounded in high support, high expectations, and this idea of outrageous love, that kids come here and have a sense of belonging.”

Nurturing inclusive school cultures

Leaders were clear that hiring teachers was the first step to nurturing a school culture that explicitly valued every student. They said culture was rooted in the community and needed buy-in from students, families, and educators to be sustained over time. One leader reflected, “The culture piece is all about how you build these traditions. How do you build routines and create a lexicon? And how do you maintain it?”

Charter leaders and teachers pointed to their flexibility in designing new models free from preexisting constraints as a critical enabling condition for this work. One leader told us, “It’s not that districts couldn’t do this, but I think so often they’re mired in past practice...The weight of all those structures has a way of reinforcing [existing practice] that feels almost impossible to undo.” A special education teacher echoed this concern by saying, “[In my previous role in a school district], a lot of my colleagues had a very segregated view of [students with disabilities] as ‘those’ students in ‘your’ class. And it took a lot of legwork to break down those thought patterns. Here...we’re not starting with those attitudes.”

But building culture from scratch isn’t easy and doesn’t happen by accident. Leaders and teachers deployed specific strategies to model and communicate their school’s values with their community members. One leader described intentionally weaving the school’s core values into student schedules and meetings with families, staff, and their board. A teacher at this same school elaborated, “We really just built that foundation from day one about what our expectations are for treating others and treating ourselves.”

Leaders, teachers, and parents described strong family-school partnerships as the foundation for inclusive school cultures. As one parent said, “It’s truly just a different partnership...they really work on community and building relationships with caregivers and the students together. It’s remarkable.” A parent at a different school, whose children both have disabilities that affect their ability to communicate, contrasted her experience at a charter school with that of her children’s previous district school: “The communication is so much better...When we were at the [district] schools, we didn’t know what was happening [at school].” A parent at a third school, whose child was diagnosed with autism, echoed these experiences by saying, “They keep in touch with the parents. They say, ‘What can we do? How can we help?’”

Leaders also spoke candidly about the need to hold themselves, their staff, and students accountable for modeling their schools' values, and these necessarily provoked uncomfortable conversations. In one example, a leader described having to challenge a teacher who spoke about a child with an intellectual disability in a way that didn't reflect the belief that all children are capable of learning. The leader recounted, "We have to hold each other accountable to those values around inclusion. Like, how do we talk about kids? How do we talk about families? A lot of times, I feel like I'm going around being the morality police, but it's the only way you can keep it alive."

Investing in teacher capacity

Equity-minded teaching teams provided the foundation for more equitable learning environments for students with disabilities, but investments in teacher capacity were critical to operationalizing those aspirations. Here, we broadly define investments in teacher capacity to include the schoolwide structures that enable educators to provide the instruction the students in their classrooms need to thrive. Leaders and teachers we interviewed described three structures as especially important: staffing structures that enable highly differentiated instruction; dedicated planning and collaboration time for both special education and general education teachers; and intensive professional development and coaching to grow teacher skills with inclusion. Importantly, these structures were organized across general education and special education teachers, providing a springboard to "de-silo" special education and support schoolwide approaches to meeting the needs of all learners.

The leaders and teachers we interviewed were clear that educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms was as much about how teachers delivered instruction as it was about *where* instruction happened.

The leaders and teachers we interviewed were clear that educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms was as much about how teachers delivered instruction as it was about *where* instruction happened. Shifting the how required leaders to resource classrooms in ways that enabled teachers to provide significantly more differentiated instruction than is typically expected in a one-teacher-one classroom model. At Catalyst Public Schools, for example, every elementary classroom is co-taught by two educators, and grade-level teams collaborate to provide highly differentiated small-group instruction in "pods," with students from multiple classrooms grouped according to need. The practice has allowed the school to meet both students' with disabilities and their peers' needs for learning acceleration—the groups and lessons evolve as students progress through the curriculum.

According to a Catalyst parent, the school's co-teaching model made a "huge difference" for their child because it de-stigmatized the type of differentiation that was usually exclusively reserved for students with disabilities. Since enrolling in a charter school, her child has fewer behavioral challenges and is making greater academic progress. As she said, "[H]e came in not knowing the alphabet [or] how to count and refusing to participate...Now, he's starting to read. We're seeing real signs of progress." Another parent at the school echoed these themes. Before enrolling at a charter school, she described a "struggle to find a place where [her] daughter's IEP needs were being met." Her daughter's academic challenges mounted as the traditional public schools she attended failed to provide the services needed to accommodate her visual disability. Now, at Catalyst, she described the relief of knowing "all of her IEP needs are being met within the [general education setting] where she feels safe."

Catalyst's co-founder Amanda Gardner said that differentiation made possible by co-teaching is "vital" to meeting all students' needs, although it is not without its challenges. Collaboration is complex, especially in a system that has long relegated educators to work largely alone in their classrooms. Catalyst invests heavily in teacher planning and collaboration time to support its co-teaching model. While a typical public school teacher has 45 minutes of planning time daily, teachers at Catalyst enjoy 2.5 hours, with dedicated opportunities for co-teachers, grade-level teams, and special education educators to work together.³⁴ This additional collaboration time is possible because of the school's extended day. They have also deprioritized growing their administrative team, said Gardner, so they could concentrate their resources where it mattered the most: "in front of the kids."

Similarly, dedicated collaboration time was instrumental in supporting general education teachers at Summit Atlas to address the needs of students with disabilities in their classrooms. Special education educators at the school regularly consult with general education teachers using a defined schoolwide structure for collaboration. During consultations, educators focus their discussion on a small group of targeted students, working together to identify specific instructional strategies to support individual students in making progress, including any modifications that may be needed. Data guide these discussions, and student progress is monitored by defining specific metrics that can be measured quickly to get real-time feedback on whether the interventions are working.

A Summit Atlas parent described the impact of the school's approach on her adolescent. In our discussion, she reflected on the "missed opportunities" for intervention that characterized his prior school experience in a traditional public school where a teacher had confessed to her that "he is at the cliff's edge and about to fall off it but unfortunately, [the school district] isn't going to do anything until he's fallen." In contrast, she described Summit Atlas as being "proactive" in addressing her child's educational needs, and she doesn't have to "wait for an IEP meeting" if there is a concern. As she elaborated, "They're not just ticking the boxes. They're truly looking at him...and it feels much more personalized and individualized."

The implementation of the consultation model alongside significant investments in professional development for general education teachers has significantly strengthened teachers' skill and ownership over educating students with disabilities, says Executive Director Dan Effland. As he said, "I've noticed [general education teachers] feel more responsible for every student in their classroom, what [those students] need, and how to use accommodations and differentiated materials." According to Effland, that shift was possible because of the investments in collaboration between general education and special education teachers.

Like Summit Atlas, at Rooted School Vancouver, the work of educating students with disabilities is shared by general education and special education teachers, who collaborate to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The result has been to make it clear that all educators at the school are responsible for supporting students with disabilities in meeting their learning goals. A teacher, reflecting on his prior teaching experiences, said, "Previously, the messaging has been, 'I'm a classroom teacher, and I teach ninth grade standards and content. [Special education teachers] will have responsibility for learning goals [that diverge from standard], even when they're in the same room.' The vision [at Rooted] is different."

It's one thing to shift responsibility; quite another to position those responsible to make good on it. At Rooted, inclusion is made possible by schoolwide structures that support differentiation and acceleration for students who need it. According to the founding Student Success Coordinator, Dylan Rossi, the foundation of this work began before the school year. During the summer before opening their doors, the founding teaching team worked to identify the essential elements of every standard, providing a springboard to prioritize the highest leverage skills in their work with students and workshop students' IEPs as a teaching team to strategize needed supports and accommodations.

In the classroom, Rooted's small size (just 24 students enrolled in its inaugural 9th-grade class) and low adult-to-student ratio means educators can provide highly targeted small-group instruction to students. General education teachers work closely with the school's two paraeducators and one special education teacher to ensure students with disabilities and their peers had access to the individualized instruction they needed. As one teacher said, "[This is] the closest I've ever been able to get to what research says you should be doing in terms of [differentiation]...I wouldn't be this good with 120 [students]."

Parents recounted how the extra support had helped their children overcome what previously seemed insurmountable academic challenges. One parent we interviewed described her worry when she learned her entering 9th grader, who had significant learning gaps in math, was to take Algebra. Three months later, at the time of our interview, the extra in-class support had paid off: "He came home saying 'I understand it'...And I was amazed because he hated math so bad. But he actually learned it. And he understands because [the teacher] took time with him." Another parent described the stress of watching her adolescent, who was diagnosed with autism and ADHD, struggle at a district middle school where he was failing every class. The parent said she felt her child was just a "statistic" among a sea of "1000s of kids in public school that nobody seems to care about." Since enrolling Rooted, the change in his demeanor was like "night and day." Her child went from "sitting at the back of the class and praying nobody looked at him or talked to him" to having friends at school and a "skyrocketing" grade point average. Another parent said, "[Rooted teachers] work with him...to reach his highest abilities."

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Investments in capacity building can help charter schools realize their aspirations to educate students with disabilities equitably

As described above, supporters of Washington charter schools actively sought to build equity into the design of Washington state's charter sector through investments in technical assistance infrastructure for charter schools. The creation of the TMC in 2015 spurred the development of an equity-minded Washington-based ecosystem designed to improve how charter schools educate students with disabilities. The initial effort included the Seneca Family of Agencies, the Washington State Charter Schools Association, and the Puget Sound Educational Service District. It expanded in 2018 to include the University of Washington's Haring Center for Inclusive Education.

Different organizations played distinct roles and tackled specific challenges and needs in the charter sector (see Table 2). For example, recognizing that charter schools’ small size meant that they would need to tap outside expertise and service providers to meet the needs of students, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation invested in Seneca Family of Agencies (Seneca), a private nonprofit focused on providing student support services. Seneca partners with Washington charter schools to provide services like school psychologists and occupational therapists that students with disabilities need.³⁵ Philanthropic support was critical in the beginning, said one interviewee, because schools could not afford to invest in direct service and support when they were not yet self-sustaining on public dollars.

Table 2. An ecosystem approach to improving how Washington charter schools educate students with disabilities

WHO	HOW THE ORGANIZATION HELPS WASHINGTON CHARTER SCHOOLS
True Measure Collaborative (2015 - Present)	Provides professional development and instructional coaching to support educators in implementing anti-racist, inclusive practices for students with disabilities in their classrooms. Originally, it served as a “hub” for other technical assistance providers organized to support charter schools to educate students with disabilities.
Seneca Family of Agencies (2015 - Present)	Supports charter schools by providing schools with professional student services that students need, including school psychologists, occupational therapists, and speech and language pathologists.
Puget Sound ESD³⁶ (2015 - Present)	Provides technical assistance and professional development to charter school leaders and board members in the Puget Sound region around compliance and equitable practices for students with disabilities.
Haring Center for Inclusive Education (2018 - 2022)	Connected special education teachers across Washington charter schools through a general special education professional learning community and a Positive Behavior Intervention and Support network. Provided direct technical assistance in charter schools statewide.
Washington State Charter Schools Association (2012 - Present)	Managed an incubation program for aspiring charter school leaders that centered on inclusive educational practices. Provides a wide range of support to charter schools statewide, including direct technical assistance, data reporting, and advocacy. Created and housed the TMC until 2021, then spun it off as an independent nonprofit.

The TMC was not designed to simply ensure charter schools were prepared to comply with the legal requirements related to special education, though it did target support at that challenge. It aimed to build charter schools' capacity to implement truly equitable learning environments for students with disabilities. For example, a significant focus of the TMC's work with charter schools and school districts is supporting general education teachers to "intentionally plan and deliver instruction that has all of the students in their classroom in mind," said Executive Director Sarah Okun. The TMC takes a differentiated approach to building educators' capacity to meet the needs of all learners in their classrooms. Staff described scaffolding their approach over time, such that schools early in implementing inclusive practices would receive more hands-on technical assistance and coaching, which would gradually be scaled back as educators found their stride. This approach creates "the opportunity to build capacity," said Amanda Pharis, Associate Director of School Programs at the TMC. All Washington charter schools currently partner with TMC or have an active partnership with them.

School staff who had experience working with the TMC praised the organization's approach. One teacher described how her struggles to support a student in her classroom left her feeling defeated. Through one-on-one support with her TMC coach, the teacher described building her understanding of the student's needs and how she could best support him. As she said, "[The TMC coach] helped me learn more about him [which] helped him and helped me." Another teacher from the same school described her TMC coach as a "whisperer" who could be relied on to help her navigate complex instructional and behavioral challenges.

School staff suggested that part of what made the TMC so valuable was their support focused on providing educators with actionable insights. As a special education leader described, "The feedback they provide is very implementable...It can be overwhelming to look at inclusivity as a whole, and they're really good at breaking it down into manageable steps."

Outside of the efforts of the collaborative, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation also sponsored a national Network Improvement Community (NIC) on special education, which Summit Atlas Executive Director Dan Effland described as instrumental to their work to remake how students with disabilities were included in general education classrooms. The NIC enabled Summit Atlas to access outside support, which had two consequences: (1) it created a "forcing function" for the school to formalize practices they were already implementing, and (2) it enabled them to continuously improve via input from outside observers. Effland said the NIC work was an important "part of the change management [process]" and supported the school in strengthening its special education consultation model and centering students with disabilities in grade-level team meetings.

Charter schools' ability to live up to their aspirations for inclusion hinges in part on factors for which they have no control

The examples detailed in the previous section make clear that technical assistance providers can play critical roles in building charter schools' capacity to educate students with disabilities equitably. However, the stakeholders we interviewed were clear that how charter schools educate students with disabilities is, in part, a function of factors over which schools have no control and that capacity-building alone can't address. Three challenges are especially salient: (1) inadequate funding, (2) access to services that students with disabilities need, and (3) an anemic educator pipeline that doesn't adequately prepare either teachers or leaders to address the needs of students with disabilities.

Inadequate funding

School leaders and technical assistance providers we interviewed were clear that resource constraints—some specific to charter schools and some of which affect all public schools—place serious constraints on charter schools' ability to deliver on their aspirations to build equitable learning environments for students with disabilities.

In Washington state, charter schools can receive the same state funding available to other public schools, including those funds allocated for special education. Washington state's funding formula for special education allocates an additional 120 percent of each LEA's state-funded per-pupil for students in special education who spend 80 percent or more of their school day in general education settings and an additional 106 percent for students in special education who spend less than 80 percent of their school day in general education settings.³⁷ The result is that the state provides the same amount of per pupil revenue for students who qualify for special education regardless of those students' needs for specialized support, the cost of which can vary widely.³⁸ As one leader said, "Funding is not driven by need, and it really impacts schools that have high-need students who qualify for services."

In addition, LEAs are only allocated state per-pupil funding for special education when students with disabilities comprise 15 percent or less of the LEA's total enrollment. In other words, every student eligible for special education above and beyond the 15 percent threshold does not receive any additional per-pupil funding from the state to support special education services.³⁹ For schools like Rooted, where 44 percent of students qualify for special education, the gap between what Washington state funds and what students need is especially large. As one technical assistance provider told us, "Money, 100 percent a primary driver [of how charter schools educate students with disabilities]"

While all public schools in Washington have been impacted by the state's funding formula for special education, charter schools also face unique constraints. Charter schools do not have access to local levy revenues, which school districts in Washington have historically used to cover the gap between what the state and federal government provide for special education and the actual costs of providing the required services.⁴⁰ One leader said, "In regions where levies are a significant portion of the local education budget, you see a huge gap in the amount of funds per pupil that a traditional school has access to versus the charter school." Another said, "Charter schools are being asked to do more with less, and I think that's really difficult."

School leaders and teachers we spoke to were clear about how the resource constraints in Washington impacted their work to educate students with disabilities equitably. At Summit Atlas, Executive Director Dan Effland said he would love to hire an additional special education teacher to co-teach 9th grade English and math so new high school students could have an "injection of support" but with six percent or more of their students with disabilities essentially unfunded by the state, doing so would be impossible. At Catalyst, co-founder Amanda Gardner said the first thing she would do if provided additional resources is increase the pay of her teachers, who earn less and work longer hours than teachers at nearby districts. The second would be to increase their access to planning time and professional development. These investments, she said, were "critical" to making the job of teaching at Catalyst sustainable over the long haul. At Rooted, when asked what he would invest in if given additional resources, Executive Director Steven Carney said, "Mental health, hands down. We recognize student well-being is the foundation for our work here [at Rooted]."

While teachers at all three schools spoke at length about all they had accomplished with their limited resources, they were also transparent about the need for additional investment to deliver on their aspirations for students with disabilities fully. As one teacher lamented, “I constantly wish I could be doing more or that I should have done more.”

Inadequate access to specialized services

In addition to facing constraints on funding, charter schools can struggle to find people willing to provide the services that students need, given their reliance on outside partners. In the Puget Sound region, charter schools have taken advantage of a unique partnership with Seneca to ensure students can access school psychologists, speech and language pathologists, and occupational therapists. However, Seneca does not offer other types of specialized support that students with disabilities may need. As the Director of Specialized Services at Seneca told us, “It’s been really difficult to set schools up with audiologists, vision specialists, or deaf and hard of hearing specialists. It’s really hard to get someone to come in and work with just two students, and Seneca doesn’t provide those services.”

In some cases, individual schools have successfully negotiated a fee-for-service arrangement with a larger neighboring district, which typically employs these types of specialists directly, thanks to their economies of scale. However, technical assistance providers said this was difficult, given the hostile political climate surrounding charter schools in some regions. As one technical assistance provider said, “The districts around these [charter] schools would not partner [to provide the services students with disabilities needed]. They just refused.”

The complexities of providing support to students with disabilities are exacerbated by the fact that charter schools, due to their small size, can be more vulnerable to fluctuations in their enrollment that create a revenue “whipsaw” effect. One special education teacher we spoke with described how an unexpected influx of students with complex needs stretched their school’s special education team to the breaking point and reduced their capacity to provide professional development to general education teachers, a core part of their service model. School districts often handle such fluctuations by shifting staff and students across their portfolio of schools to balance needs with the requisite staffing resources. For example, a school district may employ a full-time audiologist who works across its portfolio of schools to serve students in need. Alternatively, the district may require students with disabilities to enroll in a school that has been specifically designated to provide the requisite services, as is the case in Seattle.⁴¹ Due to their smaller size, these options are not available to charter schools in Washington.

Anemic educator pipeline

If the mindsets and skills of educators and leaders enable charter schools to educate students with disabilities equitably, access to a pipeline designed to nurture these characteristics is essential. However, the leaders and technical assistance providers we interviewed said Washington state needed to catch up in preparing educators and leaders to support inclusive educational environments.

One technical assistance provider, who received her teacher training in another state, was shocked to learn that general education teachers in Washington teacher certification programs are not being prepared to educate students with disabilities, as is typical in some other state contexts. This failure to prepare educators to work with all students perpetuated the capacity challenges that schools experienced. She said, “Teachers aren’t getting it, which means schools are behind the times because teachers haven’t gotten it, and it just spirals.”

This gap in preparation presented significant challenges for school leaders. As one told us, “For a lot of our teachers, [learning accommodations] had previously been someone else’s job.” A technical assistance provider echoed this concern by saying, “I think that there is lots of room to grow mindsets around how the job of educating students with disabilities is the job of everybody on campus.” This work means preparing teachers to design and modify lessons to meet the needs of all learners; instead of standardization, teachers need to learn how to build instructional systems capable of coping with variability.

Leaders, too, need better preparation so they are well-positioned to make the leadership moves that enable students with disabilities to be equitably educated. One leader described existing leadership development programs as “mediocre” and that the state badly needed a “teacher-leader development organization, led by people who really, really, really know how to lead schools that meet the needs of all learners.” A technical assistance provider echoed these concerns, suggesting that the most creative and committed leaders were making progress despite a challenging resource environment.



I think that there is lots of room to grow mindsets around how the job of educating students with disabilities is the job of everybody on campus.

– Technical assistance provider



Short of investments in better preparation programs, technical assistance providers pointed to opportunities to strengthen the capacity of teachers and leaders already working in Washington charter schools by leveraging practices that some schools are already using. As one said, “At every [Washington charter school], there is implementation of [at least one] evidence-based practice that is happening and happening well. The question is how we can piece all these different practices together and help other schools see them in action and implement them.” This work, they said, required school leaders to invest in understanding how their schools currently resourced the work of educating students with disabilities, the impacts of those decisions on students, and the practices that could strengthen alignment between aspirations and results. They also said that it necessitated more opportunities for sharing learning across schools.

Current accountability systems provide charter schools with mixed signals about their responsibilities for students with disabilities

Every technical assistance provider we spoke with said that current authorizing practices failed to adequately monitor whether charter schools’ plans for educating all learners were working or, perhaps more importantly, incentivized them to invest in delivering genuinely excellent educational opportunities for students with disabilities. As one said, “When it comes to serving students with disabilities, there’s no accountability.”

Interviewees said they noticed disconnects between the plans in charter schools’ applications to the Washington Charter Commission, which authorizes most charter schools in the state, and what was delivered when schools became operational. As one said, “Leaders get really good at their elevator pitch, which has all the right phrases, and sounds great. But [when we go into a school], it’s not happening... There’s no accountability.” Another said, “[The Washington Charter Commission] is not actually seeing how students are being educated. That’s a big concern for me.” These implementation gaps were not due to a lack of effort in submitting detailed applications—a typical application for a Washington charter school is hundreds of pages long.⁴²

In theory, implementation monitoring would be unnecessary if Washington used a robust system for measuring students with disabilities' educational outcomes in charter schools. However, shortcomings in that system mean that schools can fail to educate students with disabilities and face few consequences. Outcomes for students with disabilities are not named in the 17 main charter school performance metrics included in the Washington Charter Commission's academic performance framework. Instead, students with disabilities are considered alongside several other student subgroups (e.g., low-income, English learners), with data across these groups aggregated to arrive at a composite metric. The result: schools can "meet" or "exceed" expectations for subgroups while failing students with disabilities.

This is if the progress of students with disabilities is reported at all since OSPI will report subgroup measures only if enrollment in the subgroup exceeds 20 students, a metric that small schools, new schools, and those that serve a low percentage of students with disabilities will not typically meet. One interviewee summed it up this way: "It feels like special education continues to be an afterthought."

Stakeholders were clear that any effort to strengthen charter school accountability for students with disabilities would need a delicate touch. New accountability metrics would need to be more nuanced to better account for how charter schools were changing educational outcomes for students with disabilities with complex and intersecting risk factors. For example, one interviewee named Lumen High School, a Spokane charter school designed to educate adolescents who are pregnant or have children, as an outstanding example of a charter school that equitably educates students with disabilities. But she shared that the school's results on state tests didn't showcase the "life-changing" work the educators at the school were doing. Given the high stakes surrounding accountability in the charter sector, the need for nuanced measures that fairly evaluate schools and their progress is essential.

There was also an appreciation that charter schools are already subject to multiple layers of oversight, and strengthening accountability should not simply layer new accountability demands onto a system that already consumes valuable leadership time and attention. As one leader said, "Charter schools spend twice as much time dealing with accountability and oversight as traditional districts. The idea of adding more layers of accountability is [troubling]."

Despite the challenges, stakeholders noted that accountability pressures could spur continued progress in how Washington charter schools educate students with disabilities. At Summit Atlas, Executive Director Dan Effland explicitly decided to align the school's internal change initiatives related to students with disabilities with their external accountability pressures. In elaborating on why, he said, "You have to align your external accountability measures to the internal initiative as much as possible. Otherwise, they're just fighting each other, and at the end of the day, external accountability measures always win." Recognizing this, Summit Atlas used a unique provision in their authorizer's accountability framework that allows schools to propose mission-aligned metrics to create benchmarks for their work to strengthen the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. The move, Effland said, was a "conscious choice" to hold themselves accountable for the educational outcomes of students with disabilities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The progress and continued struggles of students with disabilities in Washington charter schools point to opportunities to further strengthen the ecosystem's support for these students. This inquiry has shown that Washington charter schools can use their unique freedom of action to build special education delivery models that go beyond compliance "box checking" to set new benchmarks for what it means to educate students with disabilities. But whether more schools do this work hinges on filling the gaps in the charter ecosystem that leave this work under-resourced and insufficiently prioritized.



We have these hubs of true inclusion...They're like bright, shining stars.

– Technical assistance leader



Recommendations for Washington state

- **Funders, leadership preparation programs, and incubators should prioritize investments in robust pipelines that adequately prepare prospective school leaders to educate all students.** Stakeholders were clear that school leaders have enormous influence over how students with disabilities are educated, yet too few have the mindsets, skills, and know-how to reimagine how these students are educated. Given the influential role funders, preparation programs, and incubators play in the pipeline of new schools, these actors have important roles to play in ensuring new schools are held to high benchmarks for success and are prepared to take on the responsibilities of educating all students.
- **Funders, educator preparation programs, and state policymakers should act to ensure all teachers are prepared for the work of educating students with disabilities.** The leaders we interviewed were clear that the current standards for teacher preparation fail miserably to prepare general education teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Funders should work to build equity-minded preparation programs outside of traditional pathways while existing educator preparation programs and the state officials who oversee their work must revisit current licensing standards to ensure they adequately prepare teachers to work with all students. Given the history of siloed special education programs and low expectations for students with disabilities, successfully preparing teachers to educate students with disabilities is as much about altering the assumptions and beliefs that prospective teachers may have about students with disabilities while also building their know-how to effectively educate these students.
- **State policymakers should act to address the disconnect between the resources they invest in the education of students with disabilities and the costs of providing those services.** While the Washington legislature has twice acted to increase the per pupil funding cap on students with disabilities, these efforts fail to fully reconcile the difference between state per-pupil investments and the actual costs of providing educational services to students with disabilities. As a starting point for addressing this gap, the legislature should invest in the analysis of existing expenditure data to understand special education cost structures and explore redesigning the special education funding model based on the costs of providing the support students need.

- **State policymakers should consider sponsoring special education cooperatives that facilitate all schools—district or charter—access to specialized student support.** The failure of Washington school districts to cooperate with charter schools to provide student support services on a fee-for-service basis reflects a failure to put student needs above politics. State policymakers could address gaps in the student support infrastructure either by inducing school districts to offer these services on a fee-for-service basis or by sponsoring cooperatives that better facilitate access.
- **State policymakers and the Washington Charter School Commission must revisit their current approach to oversight.** Current approaches to overseeing charter schools in Washington fail to establish ambitious benchmarks for success or to adequately prioritize the learning needs of students with disabilities. The failure of current authorizing standards to account for students with disabilities is a missed opportunity to signal to schools that how these students are educated matters. While the Office of the State Superintendent is charged with monitoring special education programs, there is no evidence that their efforts have improved how students with disabilities are educated, even as they add greatly to the compliance burden on school leadership teams. Given the rising costs of special education services, state legislators have a strong interest in understanding whether current approaches to oversight are aligned with efforts to improve the quality of education available to students with disabilities.

Recommendations for Charter School Leaders Outside of Washington

With greater freedom of action and accountability for results, charter schools are uniquely positioned to rewrite the script of what it means to educate students with disabilities. Washington's progress shows that capitalizing on the assets of the sector will require actions along multiple lines of change.

- **Funders that invest in the charter sector should prioritize students with disabilities in their work.** While philanthropy has played critical roles in changing expectations for how low-income students and students of color are educated in public schools, few have sought to do the same when it comes to students with disabilities. This failure to consider the needs of students with disabilities when it comes to investments in new charter schools and support organizations in the sector is a missed opportunity. Funders can influence change in the sector by prioritizing investments in schools designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities and the support organizations that are working with the sector via incubation, evaluation and technical assistance. Funders can also act to support research efforts that showcase the ways in which charter schools have reimaged special education and prioritized students' with disabilities learning outcomes.

- **State policymakers and charter school authorizers should act to strengthen the return on investment for special education programs.** For years, state policymakers have increased their investments in special education with little consideration for whether those investments are adequate or delivering the educational opportunities students with disabilities need. State policymakers should act to align investments in special education with clearer expectations for what “success” looks like. This work necessitates asking difficult questions like: What does it cost to provide students with disabilities high-quality educational opportunities? How do schools currently invest their limited special education dollars and do these investments reflect the right prioritization? Charter school authorizers also have key roles to play in setting ambitious benchmarks for success—where compliance is a starting point rather than the finish line for what charter schools must accomplish.
- **Researchers who study charter schools need to prioritize students with disabilities in their work.** Researchers have played essential roles in illuminating how and with what effect charter schools shape students’ educational opportunities. But too often, students with disabilities are an afterthought in these inquiries. Researchers have essential roles to play in helping policymakers, funders, and the field at large understand how charter schools can build better, more effective models for educating students with disabilities.

With almost nine million students with disabilities enrolled in public schools, charter schools have a unique opportunity and responsibility to build the solutions that these students need. This report has shown what’s possible when charter schools are designed to address the needs of all learners and the unique roles that states, nonprofits, and funders can play in supporting charter schools that work for students with disabilities. How we act on this evidence will shape whether charter schools—in Washington and the nation—can deliver on their promise.



Appendix

Table A1. Description of interviewees

ROLE	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS
Support Organizations	
Technical Assistance Provider	10
Philanthropic Partner	2
Catalyst Public Schools (Bremerton, WA)	
School Leader	1
Teacher	3
Parent	2
Summit Atlas (Seattle, WA)	
School Leader	1
Teacher or Paraeducator	4
Parent	1
Rooted (Vancouver, WA)	
School Leader	1
Teacher or Paraeducator	5
Parent	4

Identification of comparison schools for student growth percentile analysis

Geographic comparison schools were identified for each charter school for which student growth percentile data were available. To identify traditional public school comparison schools, we used Google Maps to identify driving distance to local traditional public schools that served the same grade spans as the charter school. For example, if the charter school served grades 5th through 8th, we looked for nearby district middle schools. For charter schools that serve large grade bands (e.g., K-12 or K-8th), we included a mix of elementary and middle school comparison schools. We do not include high school comparisons as SGP scores are not available for this grade band nor do we include nearby district schools that offer gated entry including schools for gifted students or those that offer specialized programming.⁴³ Table A2 identifies each geographic comparison school that is averaged to arrive at a comparison SGP for each charter school. We selected up to six geographic peers for each charter school.⁴⁴

Table A2. Traditional public schools that make up the comparison group for each charter schools for which student growth percentiles are available

GEOGRAPHIC COMPARISON SCHOOL	DISTANCE FROM CHARTER (MILES)	SGP ELA	SGP MATH
Rainier Prep, 5th-8th	0.0	59	43
Cascade MS	2.4	35	38
Glacier MS	3.2	27	28
Showalter MS	4.0	28	32
Mercer MS	4.6	55	41
Denny International MS	4.8	36	41
Aki Kurose MS	5.0	37	34
Spokane International, K-12	0.0	58	48.5
Shiloh Hills ES	0.7	54	51
Evergreen ES	1.0	54	34.5
Linwood ES	2.4	35	47
Garry MS	2.3	27	29.5
Salk MS	3.7	33	36.5
Northwood MS	3.5	33	36

GEOGRAPHIC COMPARISON SCHOOL	DISTANCE FROM CHARTER (MILES)	SGP ELA	SGP MATH
Catalyst Public Schools, K-8th	0.0	46	52
Mountain View MS	0.8	28	29
Naval Avenue ES	2.1	10	26
View Ridge ES	2.5	30	35
Armin Jahr ES	2.6	42	41
Crownhill ES	3.3	42	67
Fairview MS	6.0	30	31.5
Pride Prep, 6th-8th	0.0	38.5	57
Yasuhara MS	2.6	26	24
Centennial MS	5.3	40.5	36
Sacajawea MS	3.0	46	52.5
Glover MS	5.0	33.0	38.0
Shaw MS	4.0	21	35
Chase MS	5.4	41.5	58.0
Summit Atlas, 6th-12th	0.0	37	44
Denny International MS	1.8	36	41
Cascade MS	2.6	35	38
Madison MS	4.5	57	47
Aki Kurose	6.4	37	34
Mercer MS	6.4	55	41
Glacier MS	8.0	27	29.5
Pinnacles Prep, 6th-10th	0.0	38.5	57
Pioneer MS	1.0	33	40
Orchard MS	1.3	26	29
Foothills MS	2.5	28	38

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.

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End Notes

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²⁴ As discussed above, the placement of students with disabilities in general education classrooms creates an opportunity for these students to be educated in an inclusive educational setting with access to the general education curriculum but it does not guarantee it. Much depends on how schools operationalize inclusion in general education classrooms, including how they support general education teachers to address the unique learning needs of students with disabilities.

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²⁷ For each charter school in which student growth percentiles (SGPs) were available, we identified up to 6 geographic peer schools in the charter school's same grade band. See the Appendix for additional information on geographic peers for each school in the SGP analysis.

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³¹ See the Appendix for a full list of traditional public schools which are considered geographic peers to each charter school.

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³⁵ School districts can often afford to provide directly, by directly employing school psychologists, speech and language pathologists, and occupational therapists, who can work across multiple schools to support students districtwide.

³⁶ Washington state has nine Educational Service Districts, which are state sponsored entities that serve public, private and charter schools in their area. ESDs offer professional development and may offer a cooperative that allows districts to provide student services that would otherwise be impossible.

³⁷ State per pupil funding varies based on the characteristics of LEAs, including the estimated cost of teacher salaries. The result is that higher cost of living areas receive higher basic education allotments from the state. See Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Education. *Special Education Funding In Washington State*. (n.d.). <https://ospi.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/special-education-funding-and-finance/special-education-funding-washington-state>

³⁸ Take for example a school that enrolls 20 students with disabilities in an LEA with a state per pupil of \$10,000. If 10 of these students spend 80 percent or more of their school day in the general education setting and 10 spend less than 80 percent of their school day in the general education setting, the school would receive \$120,000 (10 x \$10,000 x 1.2) + \$106,000 (10 x \$10,000 x 1.06) for a total of \$226,000 for special education students.

³⁹ Washington state offers "Safety Net" funding to reimburse expenses that local education agencies incur educating students with disabilities. However, these funds are only available for the following circumstances: (1) to support eligible "high-need" students and (2) demonstrated community impact factor, such as the presence of a group home or military base which results in a large number of students in need of services. See Office of State Superintendent of Public Instruction. *Supplemental Budget Decision Package* (2019). <https://ospi.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/2023-08/safety-net.pdf>

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⁴¹ Seattle Public Schools. *Superintendent Procedures for Student Assignment 3130 SP* (2023). <https://www.seattleschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/3130SP.pdf>

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⁴⁴ Pinnacles Prep is located in the city of Wenatchee, which has three public middle schools. Because the city is surrounded by a low-density rural area, we do not look beyond the city school district in selecting comparison schools.