



The Charter School Advantage: How Charter Schools can Advance the Educational Solutions that Students with Disabilities Need

CHARTER SCHOOL EQUITY, GROWTH, QUALITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY STUDY

NOVEMBER 2024

Executive Summary

Nearly fifty years after the initial passage of the law now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with disabilities experience profound inequities and opportunity gaps in public education. Finding solutions to these challenges requires balancing two aims that lie at the heart of the charter school sector: autonomy and accountability. In exchange for closer scrutiny of outcomes, charters are provided added flexibility to explore new models in staffing, instructional delivery, school finance, and fundamental elements of school design.

This report focuses on how charter schools and charter management organizations (CMOs) can systematize the benefits of their autonomy, drawing on it to construct teaching and learning systems that are equity focused, address the learning needs of students with disabilities, and identify the factors that shape their success. This study is grounded in a purposive sample of 29 schools and CMOs that were selected for their use of one or more equitable practices designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and includes interviews with 59 school leaders, teachers, technical assistance providers, paraprofessionals, and parents.

Both charter schools and CMOs featured in the study use their autonomy not only to implement different teaching and learning practices, but to push forward the systematic supports that make those practices successful and sustainable. Participants noted that their schools use strategies like combined evidence-based models for instructional differentiation like universal design for learning (UDL) and co-teaching with increased collaboration time, direct support for the intellectual and emotional needs of staff, carefully considered hiring practices, and staff cultures that expect high levels of collaboration and joint accountability.

They also articulated the tradeoffs of scale: while being part of larger networks like CMOs and LEAs can provide the means to deliver support services, it can also restrict some site-level autonomy.

Conscious connections between general educators and special educators help participating schools erode the “firewall” that has long pushed students with disabilities to the periphery. Improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities requires improving teaching and learning strategies for all students and understanding that students with disabilities can and should be included in those efforts: that is, ensuring students with disabilities can meaningfully access the general educational settings, standards, and instruction that research indicates will lead to greater academic success.

Key Findings

- Participating schools **mix multiple instructional strategies into unique models** that support the assets and needs of their school populations. While none of these strategies is unique in itself, what distinguishes these schools are implementation details that prioritize including students with disabilities in general education settings and otherwise “de-siloing” them from school-wide practice.

- Participating leaders use rigorous teacher hiring and strong teacher retention practices as valuable levers for building a staff culture focused on equitable and inclusive practice for students with disabilities. Hiring practices emphasize fit with equity-oriented mindsets, while leaders provide ample professional development opportunities and personal support to ensure hired teachers can become part of a common culture and focus on underserved students.
- Operating within a CMO or a traditional district local education agency (LEA) provides both advantages to scale and challenges in reduced autonomy. Charter schools affiliated with CMOs or operating within a district LEA often have access to additional supplemental services and expanded professional development. Some schools worry, however, that these affiliations may limit their ability to quickly implement new practices and processes in a responsive way.

Recommendations

- **Authorizers** can work together to strengthen the network of support around charter schools that actively seek to better educate students with disabilities. This brief demonstrates the power CMOs and LEAs can provide in technical assistance by, for example, creating a central hiring pool that supports boosting equity-minded teaching staff, or providing sufficient scale to make professional development programs financially viable. Formal service centralization options—[like the formation of an Educational Services Agency](#)—are one path to building this network of support. Even without formal centralization, [authorizers play an essential role in supporting charters throughout their lifecycle](#).
- **Funders** can encourage their grantees, including school and CMO leaders, charter support organizations, and researchers, to prioritize the education of students with disabilities in their work. Funders can also directly or indirectly amplify best practices by establishing networks of support that are not location-dependent, leveraging the power of research organizations and the media to fully document best practices, and encouraging grantees to focus on the structural features necessary to ensure innovative practices are sustainable and successful.
- **Schools** can use the values and the processes underlying the practices described in this brief to begin their own self-study of the changes they need to improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities, including:
 - Creating the space, structure, and expectation for the normalization of frequent conversations between general and special educators about the needs of students with disabilities both individually and as a group, emphasizing a common responsibility for outcomes

- Providing access to ongoing professional support related to the use of inclusive practices, including professional learning communities, coaching, co-teaching, robust multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), effective transition planning, universal design for learning (UDL), and the practices of other schools with a track record of success. Professional learning should never be a “one-and-done” activity, but instead an ongoing opportunity to improve teacher retention and promote best practices by continually reflecting and iterating on professional practice
- Attending to data about the educational experiences of groups of students, especially at the intersections of disability, race, ethnicity, and multilingual learner status
- Engaging with families as partners to both directly inform school practices and to draw on them as ongoing sources of wisdom about the school community’s needs
- Finding appropriate networks of support to supplement services and information usually unavailable to schools working solo, through community organizations, authorizer or funder-lead networks, or whatever other avenues are available to expand the services offered to students and teachers.



Introduction

Nearly fifty years after the initial passage of the law now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with disabilities experience profound inequities and opportunity gaps in public education.¹ These effects are compounded for students of color and students in poverty, whose educational identities and needs are similarly marginalized.²

Unfortunately, charter schools have maintained an inconsistent record of enrolling and effectively educating students with disabilities. While charters as a whole show notably higher results than traditional public schools for most students in urban and suburban areas, results for students with disabilities are weaker, and charter schools not operated by CMOs on average produce less learning than traditional public schools for students with disabilities.³

Despite findings showing the vast majority of students with disabilities can achieve grade-level benchmarks if offered appropriate support,⁴ students with disabilities in both charter and traditional public schools often lack access to the high expectations, high-quality curriculum, and other school experiences provided to their non-disabled peers, hurting their ability to access postsecondary education and employment.⁵

Finding solutions to these challenges requires balancing two aims that lie at the heart of the charter school sector: autonomy and accountability. In exchange for closer scrutiny of outcomes, charters are provided added flexibility to explore new models in staffing, instructional delivery, school finance, and fundamental elements of school design. At their best, charters can provide access for marginalized students—particularly students with disabilities and students of color—to the same kinds of choices between approaches to teaching and learning long available in the private school sector.

By its nature, however, autonomy can be used toward a variety of ends. Charters sometimes report challenges in educating students with disabilities, including in navigating funding systems, successfully scaling, and building or identifying networks of broader support systems. At the same time, some parts of the charter sector have made measurable progress in educating students with disabilities through programming targeted more broadly at all students. On average, students with disabilities in charter schools spend more time in general education settings with non-disabled peers than traditional public school colleagues.⁶ This may increase their access to grade-level content, higher-order thinking skills,⁷ and interventions like high-dosage tutoring.

This report focuses on how charter schools and CMOs can systematize the benefits of their autonomy, drawing on autonomy to construct teaching and learning systems that are equity-focused, address the learning needs of students with disabilities, and identify the factors that shape their success. The study is grounded in a purposive sample of 29 schools and CMOs selected for their use one or more equitable practices designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The practices themselves vary from the ordinary to the unusual, but what unites them is the role they play in multifaceted systems to support individual student learning needs.

We find that charters use their autonomy not only to introduce new and different teaching and learning practices, but to explore different kinds of systematic supports that make those practices successful and sustainable. Participants noted that their schools combined typical models for instructional differentiation like universal design for learning (UDL) and co-teaching, with increased collaboration time, direct support for the intellectual and emotional needs of staff, carefully considered hiring practices, and cultures that expect high levels of collaboration and joint accountability. They also articulated the trade-offs of scale: while being part of larger networks can provide the means to support services, it can also restrict some site-level autonomy.

Improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities requires improving teaching and learning strategies for all students and ensuring students with disabilities can access the general educational settings, standards, and instruction that research indicates will lead to greater academic success.

Methodology

This report draws upon interviews and site visits at charter schools implementing one or more exemplary practices to support students with disabilities. We wanted to understand what practices equity-minded charter schools were using to address the needs of students with disabilities and the conditions they believed either enabled or hindered their progress. We defined practices broadly to capture shifts inside and outside classrooms led by teachers and leaders. Taken together, these data points help establish the important role not only of the practices themselves, but of the interconnections between those practices in supporting improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

School Selection

We used a multi-phase snowball sampling⁸ approach to identify participating schools. First, we conducted a comprehensive literature review and media scan on students with disabilities and charter schools and interviewed 11 charter school experts with extensive knowledge of the sector.

From these data, we identified an initial sample of charter schools based on evidence of actions designed to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of students with disabilities. Next, we used publicly available enrollment data to narrow the sample, eliminating schools in which fewer than 10% of students qualified for special education and prioritizing those schools that enroll a majority of Black, Latine, and low-income students. Finally, we identified a cross-section of schools for inclusion in the study, seeking balance across geography, size, and state policy context.

This process yielded a total of 22 single-site schools and 7 CMOs. Of the 29 sites selected, 6 declined to participate or did not respond to our outreach. Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of the participating schools and charter networks.

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted 59 interviews with school leaders, teachers, technical assistance providers, paraprofessionals, and parents at 16 schools and 6 CMOs. We also conducted five school visits and held an online focus group with six leaders across four schools in Indiana in collaboration with an authorizer. The appendix provides more information about the characteristics of our interviewees.

Interviews focused on identifying practices schools use to support students with disabilities and probing on conditions that enable or hinder their efforts. Participants described their school's overall programming for students with disabilities, detailed instructional and staffing models, discussed professional learning opportunities available for staff, and discussed challenges related to budgeting and accountability. All qualitative data were analyzed to identify key themes around schools' practices and conditions that affect their use.

Study Limitations

In the complex environment of schooling, it is often difficult for research to untangle the impact of any one set of interventions or policies. While participants described their motives for adopting certain practices and their perceived impacts on students with disabilities, we cannot quantify the extent to which these practices contribute to improved outcomes for students with disabilities. Additionally, while our purposeful sample of CMOs, schools, and participants is designed to reflect local and state-level variability in the charter sector, it is not nationally representative nor does it capture all of the promising practices charter schools use or the challenges they face. Finally, while five site visits were conducted, our ability to conduct more visits was limited by many of the logistical constraints all schools face in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

SCHOOL	GRADE SPAN	TOTAL ENROLLMENT	IDEA ELIGIBLE	LOW INCOME	LATINE	BLACK	WHITE	ASIAN
SINGLE SITE SCHOOLS								
Brooklyn Lab New York, NY (est. 2014)	6-12	514	30%	75%	21%	73%	2%	1%
Creative Minds International Washington DC (est. 2012)	PreK-8	548	20%	50%	21%	46%	24%	3%
The Emerge School Baton Rouge, LA (est. 2018)	K-3	48	100%	15%	13%	56%	25%	4%
Explore Excel Brooklyn, NY (est. 2002)	K-8	538	19%	77%	5%	90%	1%	1%
Libertas Academy Memphis, TN (est. 2017)	PreK-6	479	22%	70%	3%	80%	14%	1%
Montessori of Englewood Chicago, IL (est. 2012)	PreK-8	328	17%	98%	9%	89%	1%	0%
Mott Haven New York, NY (est. 2008)	PreK-8	451	23%	97%	73%	24%	0%	0%
New York City Autism New York, NY (est. 2005)	NA	36	98%	100%	44%	22%	22%	6%
Purdue Polytechnic Indianapolis, IN (est. 2015)	9-12	563	16%	66%	25%	38%	32%	0%
Statesmen College Prep Academy Washington, DC (est. 2018)	4-7	221	29%	100%	1%	99%	0%	0%
Tapestry Doraville, GA (est. 2014)	6-12	266	46%	‡	19%	35%	41%	2%
CHARTER MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS								
Blackstone Valley Prep (6 schools) Cumberland, RI (est. 2009)	K-12	2485	15%	65%	53%	19%	23%	4%
The Classical Academies (7 schools) San Diego, CA (est. 1999)	PK-12	3447	11%	23%	22%	1%	61%	4%
KIPP Nashville (9 schools) Nashville, TN (est. 2005)	K-12	1228	13%	–	21%	73%	3%	1%
Paramount (7 schools) Indianapolis, IN (est. 2010)	K-8	1508	15%	39%	18%	54%	17%	0%
Valor Network (3 schools) Nashville, TN (est. 2013)	5-12	1861	10%	–	25%	16%	52%	6%
Yes Prep (24 schools**) Houston, TX (est. 1998)	6-12	13051	6%	90%	84%	8%	1%	1%

Legend: – indicates the data are missing • ‡ indicates the data do not meet NCES data quality standards.

Data Sources: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (CCD), “Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey” 2021-22 v.1a. United States. Department of Education. Office for Civil Rights. Dataset from Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) for the 2020-21 School Year.

Findings

Participants in this study described a variety of strategies rather than a single solution to support their focus on students with disabilities. Across instructional strategy, teacher recruitment and retention, and staff culture, participants focused not just on the programs they implemented, but how those programs are implemented and interact with one another to allow for a clearer focus on the assets and needs of students with disabilities. These connections were often facilitated by the flexibility afforded charter schools, which allowed for easier “de-siloing” of staff practice, greater budget autonomy, and extending the school day, among other necessary prerequisites to sustainable change participants identified. Additionally, participants understood benefits and tradeoffs that came from the scale of larger CMOs and other support networks. These networks can make specialized services and additional professional development viable, but come with potentially less autonomy. These challenges provide opportunities for states, non-profit support organizations, and funders to provide valuable strategic support to the charter sector without stifling innovation.

Sustainably Supporting MTSS and Inclusive Instruction

Several of our participating schools mix multiple instructional strategies into unique models that support the assets and needs of their school populations. These strategies include: Universal Design for Learning (a framework for designing learning experiences for all learners); Response to Intervention and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (systems for differentiating instruction); and one or more models of co-teaching. While none of these strategies is unique in itself, what distinguishes participating schools are implementation details that prioritize including students with disabilities in general education settings and otherwise “de-siloing” them from school-wide practice.

While many schools, CMOs, and districts have embraced systems like UDL, RTI, and MTSS, each requires high levels of professional support, collaborative development time, and highly skilled instruction. Schools participating in this study spoke to a variety of strategies designed to lessen the burden on general education and special education teachers without compromising on high expectations.

Applying UDL to Meet All Student Needs

Founded on the principles of UDL, **Tapestry Public Charter School**, an Atlanta, Georgia school enrolling grades 6-12, provides the same access to accelerated and remedial content to all students who need it, generally eschewing the distinction between “general education” and “special education.”

With half of Tapestry students identified as having a disability, all core instructional classes are co-taught by a special education teacher and general education teacher. Participants from Tapestry reported this approach allowed for highly individualized, small-group instruction that micro-targeted skill gaps. “We’re able to use [adaptive learning programs] to help further differentiate beyond the level of what a classroom teacher can do. You can be a great math teacher, but you can’t immediately assess the exact level of all 20 kids in your class, then identify [what’s] missing from [prior grades].” Parents likewise reported increased social confidence and reduced anxiety, which they attribute to Tapestry’s inclusive environment.

Pairing UDL and co-teaching required other structural changes. Tapestry has moved to a block-based schedule to reduce transitions, maximize instructional time, and expand enrichment opportunities to include all students. The school has also exercised autonomy by adding two hours a day for staff collaboration, instructional planning, and individualized education plan (IEP) development, allowing general education and special education teachers to more readily work alongside therapists, behavioral specialists, and other service providers. This degree of collaboration appeared to require more time: an extended teacher workday compared with the formal workday recognized by most traditional public schools.

Additional planning time played a significant role in the model at other schools we followed, including [Creative Minds, Explore](#), [KIPP Nashville](#), [Purdue Polytechnic High School](#), and [Valor Collegiate Academy](#).

Focusing on the Whole Student

New York City-based [Mott Haven Academy](#)—a PreK-8 charter school founded to meet the needs of students impacted by the child welfare system—focuses on applying a consistent, whole-child focused instructional approach to all teaching and learning. As one participant shared, “[O]ur instructional approach [isn’t] different for children with disabilities. [We focus on] the content and skills we want kids to know and the methods that we’re going to use to get kids there. That’s all kids, not [just] our [kids who qualify for] special ed.”

Approximately 25% of the school’s students have a disability, and up to a third experience homelessness and housing instability. The intersection of these factors drives several aspects of the school’s design—from investments in comprehensive mental health and behavioral support to a “love and logic” culture that aims to foster trusting relationships between adults and students. Cognizant of the “blurry” boundaries endemic to identifying students with a disability, all of the supports the school offers are available to students regardless of whether they qualify for special education.

To implement this approach, Mott Haven employs a staffing structure tailored to its diverse student body. Related service providers collaborate with teachers to implement instructional practices for students with disabilities. In one instance, a participant recounted, a speech and language pathologist worked directly with a student’s teachers to redesign their instructional approach, rather than providing support to a student directly. This integration eliminated class interruptions and helped strengthen the general education teachers’ capacity to own the work of educating all students.

Structure and High Expectations

Like Mott Haven Academy, [Statesman College Preparatory Academy](#) focuses on a specific population intersecting with students with disabilities: Black and Brown boys. As founder Shawn Hardnett argues, “you can’t talk about race and poverty and not talk about special ed.” Based in Washington, DC, Hardnett informed the design of the school through interviews with several hundred Black boys currently living in the local neighborhood, and 150 Black men who grew up there and had found financial stability despite being underserved by their schools. Hardnett designed an approach focused on “structure and support” for all its students, including the 30% identified as having a disability.

At Statesman, Hardnett said, all students are expected to meet the same benchmarks, including students with disabilities. The school reviews all incoming students' individualized IEPs to ensure they reflect appropriately ambitious grade-level standards, and provides needed support in ways that avoid stigmatization. The key, according to Hardnett, is to ensure "modification" doesn't become "an easy way out" or code for "low expectations," which he believes has contributed to poor educational outcomes for Black and Brown boys with a disability.

Statesman also provides direct and proactive support for teachers to deepen their ability to build positive relationships with students. Hardnett's preparatory interviews surfaced that even financially successful men from the community still lacked support for understanding previous trauma. To address this, the school employs a therapist on staff who provides direct one-on-one therapy for teachers. According to Hardnett, this investment acknowledges that when teachers grow as people, they will become better people. As he said, "We can do personal development better than we can do professional development. And what we find is that people are better professionals because we've done personal work."

Mindset-oriented Recruitment and Retention

As the Statesman example demonstrates, teacher mindset plays a central role in building inclusive instructional environments. Other participating leaders described teacher hiring and teacher retention as valuable levers for building a staff culture that prioritizes mindsets focused on equitable and inclusive practice for students with disabilities. As one said, "[A] big part of our hiring is making sure that people have [our] mission at heart ... Every child can learn." Another said teacher hiring was about "[identifying] the mindsets and asking the right questions of people" to ensure they offered a good fit and were willing to grow their skills on the job. As a third leader put it, "vetting and hiring teachers is the most important thing I do. I hold [it] above all else."

Across participating schools, a rigorous and "intense" hiring process was a consistent feature. Teachers recounted how hiring committees would ask direct questions about their approach to educating students with disabilities and engage them in role-play scenarios designed to assess their sense of ownership over the learning of students identified for special education. These exercises, school leaders said, were designed to assess whether general education teachers viewed students with disabilities as "someone else's responsibility," and to assess how teachers worked to adapt their instruction in the face of students' learning needs.

Hiring from Within the Community

At **Explore Excel**, a K-8 charter school in Brooklyn, NY, school staff described remaking their teacher hiring process to stem teacher turnover and diversify the teaching staff. The school has prioritized candidates who live and work in the same communities as the students who attend the school, including drawing upon educators currently working at local preschools. A staff member explained that this effort has strengthened "care and community" among parents and teachers by creating stability in the teaching workforce.

At a few schools, hiring prospective educators was as much about developing internal pipelines as it was about maintaining a rigorous gate-keeping procedure. At Classical Academy, a principal said the school “creates opportunities” for staff to “[follow] their interests.” This often meant tapping an unlikely source—parents—who could grow into leadership positions over time. A staff member leading the school’s work to improve classroom teachers’ behavior management started at the school as a parent before being tapped for a part-time position as a student aide. Though she lacked any prior experience in education, that position sparked her interest in behavioral management, which the school capitalized on by supporting her to become a registered behavior technician and assume growing responsibilities at the school.

Rigorous hiring processes were also recognized as an important strategy at Tapestry and Valor, where leaders described deliberate efforts to understand the mindsets all teachers hold toward students with disabilities, screening hundreds of resumes, and including demonstration lessons in hiring processes.

Retention Through Teacher Development

While school leaders described the benefits of a rigorous hiring process, they also acknowledged that a shortage of qualified candidates could present obstacles to doing this in practice. One leader said, “It is just really hard to find the expertise.” Another acknowledged the “dry” pipeline of “technical skills” for roles they had difficulty filling. Participating leaders invested in robust, differentiated professional learning programs for new and established teachers to address this challenge. Several schools described implementing robust new teacher onboarding programs as part of their efforts to strengthen new teachers’ ability to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Blackstone Valley Prep, a charter management organization based in Cumberland, Rhode Island, strongly emphasizes teacher coaching to empower teachers and enhance student outcomes. According to a staff member, the school strives to develop coaching relationships built on trust and mutual respect, with coaches serving as thought partners as teachers go on their professional journeys. According to a staff member, coaching is “huge” to improving teacher retention because it helps new teachers “feel safe,” “take risks,” and “feel comfortable” in their positions.

New teacher mentoring also plays an important role in the program at **Explore, Mott Haven**, and **Tapestry**, where teacher professional development provides important opportunities for skill building in areas like UDL, implicit bias, restorative practices, and behavioral de-escalation.

Using a Team Approach

Building effective teaching and learning systems focused on students with disabilities requires more than training and programming. For several of the schools featured here, deliberate efforts to empower special education teachers and connect their work to school- and grade-level instructional planning played an important role in removing barriers to whole-staff collaboration and keeping the needs of students with disabilities front and center.

Participants at multiple schools described improving the experiences of students with disabilities as a team effort:

- At **YES Prep**, a large CMO based in Houston, support for students with disabilities is managed jointly by the principal, a special education manager, a director of student support, and a director of college counseling. This approach, one participant said, put real organizational resources behind their commitment to providing “holistic support for [students].”
- Similarly, at **Tapestry** the special education leadership team includes a lead special education teacher who manages compliance and an administrator-level special education coordinator who provides oversight of student support and related services providers. In addition, all new teachers are paired with a mentor teacher who provides non-evaluative coaching and support.
- At **KIPP Nashville**, each campus has four assistant principals to manage federal compliance, assessment, student services (focused on special education), and operations. A network leader said that elevating special education expertise on the campus leadership team was essential to bringing “some intentionality around” educating students with disabilities—from what good co-teaching looks like to identifying professional development needs for teachers.

School leaders also described “structural” moves they said were important to making good on their commitment to students with disabilities:

- At **Blackstone Valley Prep**, every campus has a special populations chair who sits on leadership committees—a tactic staff described as essential to keeping the needs of students with disabilities front and center.
- **Montessori School of Englewood** uses what their principal calls a “power-share” model to both ensure a collaborative culture and improve teacher retention.

Across multiple schools, teachers cited a collaborative culture and supportive leaders as instrumental in their decision to stay at their schools. One teacher said, “[Leadership] comes to teachers to get ideas and our voices [get] heard.” Another said she found space to “make decisions,” learn from mistakes, and “grow as a leader, as a professional.” A third said her school’s leaders “[made teachers] feel like [they] belonged and were valued.”

Importantly, participants also described a sense of shared ownership over student results. General education teachers could not simply rely on special education educators to carry the work of educating students with disabilities, an approach that often leaves both teachers struggling in isolation. Both groups extended high expectations to each other and to their students; one leader said common expectations were essential to disrupting the pervasive assumption that students with disabilities need “less” and “easier” content.

The tradeoffs of scale

The diverse governance models applied to charter schools can produce major differences in how special education services are allocated, funded, and prioritized. Half of all charter schools nationally operate as part of a CMO,⁹ providing a level of additional governance that can also come with additional resources. In some jurisdictions, charter schools may also operate under the umbrella of a traditional district local education agency (either overall or exclusively for special education services) that also impacts their access to services. Participants in this study described both the benefits of scale and the potential tradeoffs associated with these governance structures.

CMOs and LEAs: Drawing on Continuums of Support

Participants suggested that being part of a CMO enabled them to provide a fuller complement of student support services for students with disabilities and more efficiently manage the quality and costs of those services. **YES Prep**, the largest CMO in this study, operates 23 campuses and serves approximately 19,000 students from pre-K to 12th grade—a scale that rivals many traditional school districts. While a single-site charter school must independently find and contract with professional service providers, YES Prep's home office provides centralized support for each campus in its network. This frees school leaders from searching for and negotiating contracts with external student support providers essential for students with disabilities.

Participants from YES Prep also pointed to its ability to offer a full continuum of support for students with disabilities. While a single-site charter school may need help to offer specialized programming, YES Prep provides a range of programming including specific programming for students identified for alternative instruction, those identified with behavior or sensory needs, and those identified as needing a more extended pathway to graduation. A staff member said these options were essential to their commitment to families: “When a family chooses YES, there’s never any reason we can’t fully commit to them and get their student what they need.”

Similarly, **KIPP Nashville**, which operates eight schools with a total enrollment of over 3,000 students, has brought some student support services in-house. The home office manages contracts for services related to special education and collaborates closely with external service providers to coordinate services such as occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), and speech therapy, and ensure they are delivered efficiently and effectively across the network. Behavior specialists at KIPP work to improve cost-effectiveness, using a cohort-based training model to create a pipeline for the support they need.

Scale could also enable charter schools to improve the quality of professional services. The **Valor** CMO—with nearly 2,000 students across two middle schools and one high school— includes occupational therapists, speech pathologists, counselors, and psychologists employed in-house, enabling them to create more consistency and continuity of care for students. Previously, the school relied on external providers, an approach that generated friction when providers failed to uphold the school’s well-established culture, leading to parental complaints. Avoiding this, a staff member said, requires “fully integrating [related services providers] into the culture of the school and holding folks accountable.”

Network staff also continued to strategize questions of “make versus buy” based on costs, demand for services, and availability of providers. As a network leader described, “When you look at contract services versus things that you put in-house, you have to look at the return on the effort ... a process that definitely requires time.”

Some participants, however, expressed concerns that their CMOs may limit their necessary autonomy. One campus leader described how lower special education teacher caseloads had been critical to sustaining their school’s inclusive co-teaching model, but that network leadership’s tight position control sometimes interfered with that strategy. “We’re given staff [positions] and a model and kind of told to do our best,” the school leader said. “[But sometimes] my students have different needs and the staffing number may need to be different.” Another leader, who formerly worked in a CMO, described watching his former employer scale in ways that replicated the very institution they had sought to fight against—the school district, albeit a “better version of it.”

Single-Site Charters: Decision-Making Agility

Small size can at times lead to greater agility. One teacher, who worked at a new charter school that was small by design, said: “[W]e can just move so much faster because of our size.” This teacher contrasted her experience at the charter school with that at a local district: “[At the local district] change [requires] trying to get administrative teams moving. Here, you just send a quick message to everyone, ‘Hey, we want to try this’ and we can [launch] in two days.” Another teacher at the school echoed this observation: “the fact that our principal is also the [LEA executive] means you have all these levels of decision-making in the building.”

Just as CMOs positioned charter schools to integrate more student services in-house, single site charter schools relied more on external providers of student support services and leaders had to oversee those providers directly. While this arrangement could meet their needs, it meant externally contracted providers had less collaboration and interaction with a student’s full instructional team. Contracted providers often do not, for example, join interdisciplinary student support teams, can be difficult to oversee, and can be unreliable. **Statesman Academy**, for example, had to move quickly when its contracted related services provider announced just before the beginning of the school year that it would only be able to offer one-fourth of the services promised.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Building inclusive teaching and learning environments for students with disabilities requires focusing, perhaps paradoxically, on the teaching and learning that all students experience. With unambiguous research evidence pointing to the positive impact of teaching students with disabilities alongside non-disabled peers,¹⁰ improving outcomes means focusing not only on making specialized classrooms more rigorous, but pushing general education classrooms toward systems that are more accessible for students with disabilities and mindful of the unique learning needs of all students.

The whole of a school's design can at times be worth more than the sum of its parts. While many of the specific strategies highlighted by our participants are being applied in many schools across the country—including response to intervention (RTI) and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), universal design for learning (UDL), focusing on hiring, and restructuring teacher teams—what makes the studied schools unique are the ways they use these strategies in combination with the flexibility of charter schools to maximize sustainability and impact. Still, that flexibility is not without tradeoffs: while operating as part of a CMO or within a traditional district LEA can result in improved economies of scale for charter schools, it may also come with a reduced level of autonomy that may or may not be right for every charter school.

Conscious connections between general educators and special educators help participating schools erode the “firewall” that has long pushed students with disabilities to the periphery. Alongside the support of the other institutional players documented throughout these briefs, equity-minded charter schools and CMOs can use the flexibility of the charter sector to build teaching and learning strategies that are both innovative and sustainable, prioritizing inclusion for students with disabilities while increasing staff engagement and managing budget challenges. Just as charter schools themselves balance autonomy with greater accountability, the sector surrounding charter schools should proactively hold itself responsible for outcomes for all students, including and especially students with disabilities.

- **Authorizers** can work together to strengthen the network of support around charter schools that actively seek to better educate students with disabilities. This brief demonstrates the power CMOs and LEAs can provide in technical assistance by, for example, creating a central hiring pool that supports boosting equity-minded teaching staff, or providing sufficient scale to make professional development programs financially viable. Formal service centralization options—like the formation of an Educational Services Agency—are one path to building this network of support. Even without formal centralization, authorizers play an essential role in supporting charters throughout their lifecycle.
- **Funders** can encourage their grantees, including school and CMO leaders, charter support organizations, and researchers, to prioritize the education of students with disabilities in their work. Funders can also directly or indirectly amplify best practices by establishing networks of support that are not location-dependent, leveraging the power of research organizations and the media to fully document best practices, and encouraging grantees to focus on the structural features necessary to ensure innovative practices are sustainable and successful.

- **Schools** can use the values and the processes underlying the practices described in this brief to begin their own self-study of the changes they need to improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities, including:
 - Creating the space, structure, and expectation for the normalization of frequent conversations between general and special educators about the needs of students with disabilities both individually and as a group, emphasizing a common responsibility for outcomes
 - Providing access to ongoing professional support related to the use of inclusive practices, including professional learning communities, coaching, co-teaching, robust multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), effective transition planning, universal design for learning (UDL), and the practices of other schools with a track record of success. Professional learning should never be a “one-and-done” activity, but instead an ongoing opportunity to improve teacher retention and promote best practices by continually reflecting and iterating on professional practice
 - Attending to data about the educational experiences of groups of students, especially at the intersections of disability, race, ethnicity, and multilingual learner status
 - Engaging with families as partners to both directly inform school practices and to draw on them as ongoing sources of wisdom about the school community’s needs
 - Finding appropriate networks of support to supplement services and information usually unavailable to schools working solo, through community organizations, authorizer or funder-lead networks, or whatever other avenues are available to expand the services offered to students and teachers.



Appendix

Table A1. Description of interviewees

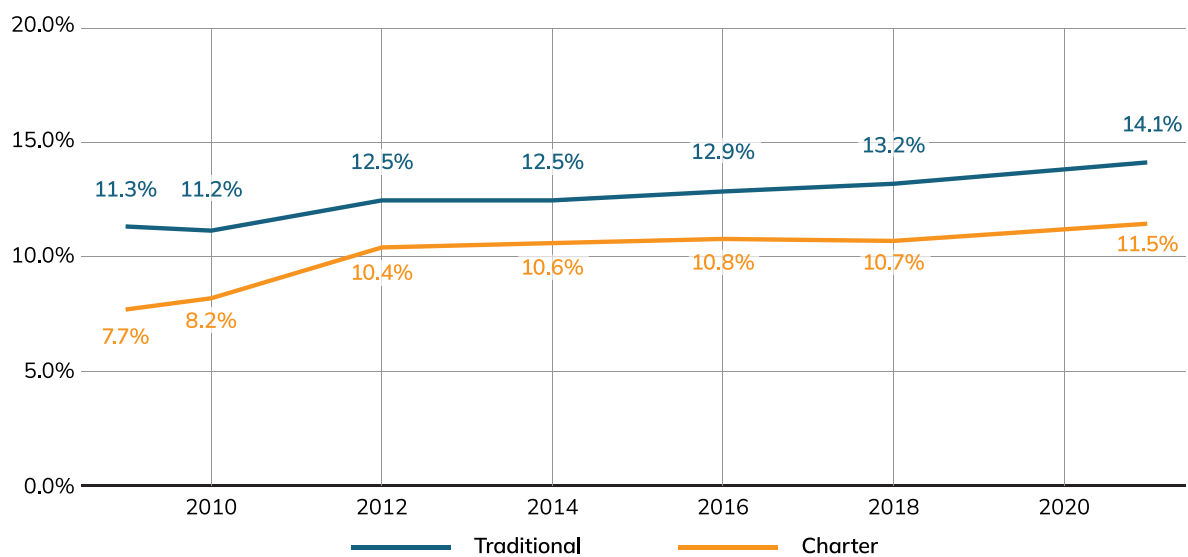
ROLE	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS
Charter Schools	
School Leader	23
Teacher	13
Related Service Provider	9
Parent	3
Charter Networks	
Network Leader (Special Education specific)	6
Network Leader	5

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

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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