



June 25th, 2020

In the fall of 2019, the Schools of Choice Unit hosted its first “Equity Convening” to bring together charter leaders, charter authorizers, and other education stakeholders to explore challenges and promising practices related to ensuring access and equity to high-quality charter schools in the state. The convening was one of many sponsored activities under the Federal *Charter Schools Program Grant* for State Departments of Education. As part of our Unit’s vision for the grant, we sought to leverage our capacity to bring stakeholders together for a purposeful conversation on significant topics related to charter schools that help develop a deeper understanding of challenges and learn of promising practices.

For this first convening, we focused on what it means to provide high quality and accessible special education services in charter schools. The objective was to acknowledge that there can be complex challenges that make it difficult for students with disabilities to access schools of choice. There are opportunities and ways for educators and administrators to remove barriers, create welcoming environments, and ensure smooth and effective transitions for students. Our hope was for attendees to understand that the work is intricate and that there is a clear need for intentional effort to prepare a school and system for successful enrollment, transitions, and provision of services. By taking the time to plan, collaborate, and continuously improve, schools and authorizers can build successful models and create confidence and excitement for school choice that overcomes structural barriers.

As follow-up to this convening, we created additional materials to share with attendees, schools, authorizers, and the broader public. I encourage you to review these materials to provide a deeper awareness of challenges and ideas for continuous improvement. As mentioned, through the *Charter Schools Program* grant, we plan to continue to host regular convenings on a range of topics this year and in the years ahead. We have prioritized continued exploration of special education, but also plan to explore other access and equity topics such as educating English language learners, transportation, food service, enrollment systems, and others. With each activity, we will host a live “convening” and work to disseminate information related to analysis, opportunities, and promising practices. We welcome your participation in these activities, and any feedback you would like to provide.

Kind Regards,  
Bill Kottensette and the Schools of Choice Team



# **EQUITY CONVENING CASE STUDIES**

**DECEMBER 2019**

**PRODUCED BY THE COLORADO CHARTER SCHOOL INSTITUTE**

# Introduction

All means all. This phrase, as outlined in the Colorado Department of Education's (CDE) strategic plan communicates an important value we, as educators, hold dear. In Colorado, CDE has articulated the need to focus on equity in order to help empower schools and students to meet their potential and address historic inequities in student outcomes for underserved students. Students with disabilities in Colorado, like many of their peers across the country, continue to experience outcomes that fall short of those of their peers.

Colorado is not alone in this work. Recently, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) and the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS) spent 12 months researching 30 charter schools across the country that embraced flexibility and accountability for results, implemented solutions, and produced outcomes for students that buck state and national trends for students with disabilities. The CRPE report examines how some charter schools are improving outcomes for students with disabilities and what factors influence their ability to do so. The report identified six important implications for schools and school systems.

## **Research Implications for Schools and School Systems**

1. Special education cannot be an isolated program.
2. Special education cannot be static.
3. Special education cannot be generic or standardized.
4. Quality teachers and leaders are nonnegotiable.
5. Balancing rigor with effective accommodation and personalization and planning for life beyond high school are common struggles.
6. Charter schools could use their flexibility in special education more effectively.

The CRPE study provides other public schools with examples of how to move the needle for some of our most at-risk students and build the evidence base for successful strategies to reach every child with a disability. Effective strategies depend on effective systems, and the CRPE findings reinforce previous research on continuous improvement in schools. Specifically, research shows that integrated schoolwide systems and structures that focus on a set of shared core values are essential. More specifically, the CRPE report found that the studied schools all identify three key principles - strong, trusting relationships, a problem-solving orientation, and blurred lines between special and general education - as high-leverage and high-impact practices for students with disabilities. In many ways, these key principles can well be encapsulated by one overriding emphasis – an emphasis toward building a system for inclusion.

Through a focus on inclusion, three charter schools –Capital City Public Charter School in Washington D.C., Tidioute Community Charter School in Tidioute, PA, and Animas High School in Durango, CO– provide promising examples of how a charter school can fundamentally change the experience of all their students and address the systemic inequities that impact students with disabilities. During the state’s fall equity convening on special education in charter schools, we heard from these schools on promising practices for building and fostering an inclusive system.

In review of what we heard from these schools, we offer the following outline of promising characteristics of successful inclusive systems in charter schools as a useful tool for schools:

### **Characteristics of Successful Inclusive Systems**

1. **Instructional Strategies** - Organize and deliver instruction in ways that promotes acquisition of concepts and skills. Combine effective instructional strategies with effective special education strategies.
2. **Accommodations and Adaptations** - Promote access and progress in the general education curriculum through modification, accommodations, and adaptations.
3. **Assistive Technology** - Effective participation in learning activities can be facilitated through the strategic use of assistive technology.
4. **Strong Leadership** - Strong leadership for inclusion is essential and sets the vision, creates cohesion and alignment, identifies goals, models desired practices and mindsets, allocates resources, etc.
5. **Collaboration** - Collaborative planning and implementation is necessary to identify needs and problems and then find ways to meet those needs and solve the problems.
6. **Data-Based Problem Solving** - Effective collaborative teaming requires a structure for identifying and addressing challenges and a system for monitoring and adjusting implementation.
7. **Training and Coaching** - All staff must have adequate skills and ongoing coaching and support to provide appropriate and effective services
8. **Family and Community** - Positive social interactions across activities and settings and effective partnerships with families are essential in creating classroom and school environments that promote students' full acceptance.

An exploration of these system elements as discussed as part of the fall convening is included in the following pages.

# School Profiles

## Capital City Public Charter School Profile

### Capital City Public Charter School

Town/City: Washington, D.C.

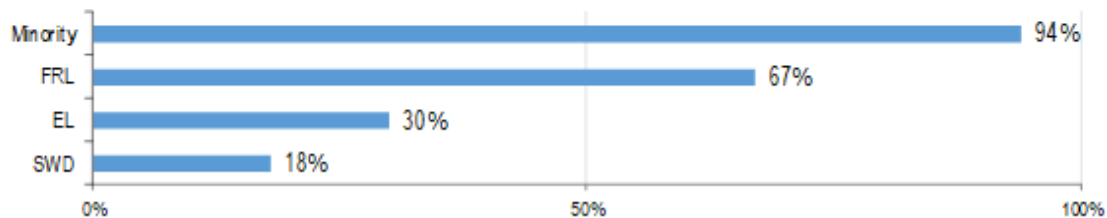
School Model: EL Education

Grades Served (2018-19): PK-12

Current Enrollment Size (2018-19): 993



### School Demographics



### Mission:

Capital City Public Charter School enables a diverse group of students to meet high expectations, develop creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, achieve a deep understanding of complex subjects, acquire a love of learning, along with a strong sense of community and character. We will graduate young adults who are self-directed, intellectually engaged and possess a commitment to personal and civic responsibility.

### Model:

Capital City Public Charter School is a parent-founded charter school that uses hands-on learning (EL credentialed mentor school) to educate the whole child and prepare all students for college.

### Notable Outcomes:

Capital City Public Charter School students are completing high school, matriculating, and graduating college at higher rates than the rest of the nation.

- 100% of graduating seniors have been accepted to college,
- 98.4% of Capital City students graduated high school, exceeding the U.S. average, and
- 45% of Capital City graduates received a college diploma in six years, exceeding the U.S. average for first-generation college students.

## Tidioute Community Charter School Profile

### Tidioute Community Charter School

Town/City: Tidioute, PA

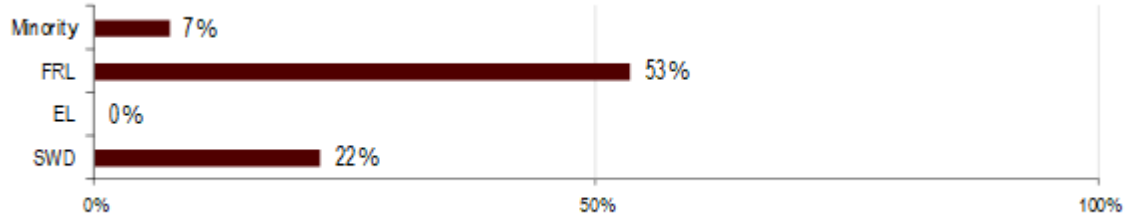
School Model: Community-Based Expeditionary Learning

Grades Served (2018-19): K-12

Current Enrollment Size (2018-19): 294



### School Demographics



### Mission:

The mission of the Tidioute Community Charter School is the development of the mind, soul and physical well being of our students through the creation of a safe environment, community involvement, innovative teaching practices, individualized attention and a mentor program that will result in a world class education in a small town environment.

### Model:

Tidioute Community Charter School is a parent and community-founded charter school that is a community based expeditionary learning school that utilizes the community and environment to offer a rich curriculum that is both rigorous and innovative.

### Notable Outcomes:

- They have an entire rock band made up of students with disabilities.
- More than 90% of students are fully included in the general education environment.
- Students demonstrate an increase in character and moral development over time as measured by a quantitative survey tool.

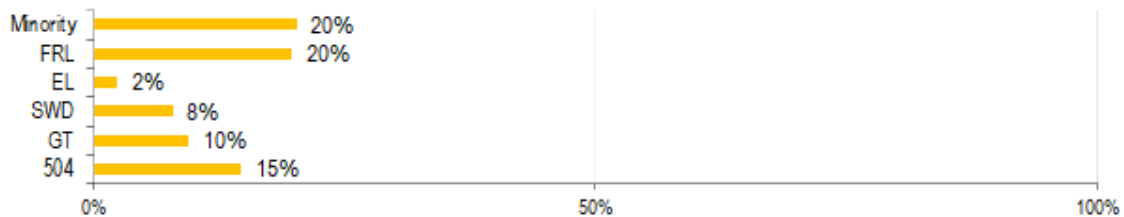
## Animas High School Profile

### Animas High School

Town/City: Durango, CO  
 School Model: Project-Based Learning  
 Grades Served (2018-19): 9-12  
 Current Enrollment Size (2018-19): 252



### School Demographics



### Mission:

Animas High School prepares all students for college and postsecondary success by creating critical thinkers and engaged citizens through an innovative, student-centered, project-based curriculum.

### Model:

Animas High School is a parent and community-founded project-based school that incorporates an interdisciplinary curriculum and prepares students through mastery of critical skills and content and promotes students' preparedness for college, career, and lifelong learning.

### Notable Outcomes:

- Animas High School has a 100% graduation rate for the four-year and seven-year cohorts for students with disabilities.
- All 11th grade students complete a LINK (Leading Internships for New Knowledge) internship, a 3-week, 90-hour full time internship in the field of their choosing.
- All 12th grade students complete a Senior Project, a semester-long, in-depth study of a self-selected research topic where students craft a college-level research paper, deliver a professional TED-style talk and thesis defense, and complete an action project that connects their research topic to the larger community.



# Findings

The three schools featured in these case studies were invited to participate in a panel discussion during a statewide convening on equity and inclusion hosted by the Colorado Department of Education and organized by the Colorado Charter School Institute in Denver, Colorado in September 2019. These case studies include insights gathered during this panel discussion, information obtained through the CRPE report (two of the three schools featured in these case studies were a part of the report), conversations with school staff, and a review of documents and publicly available material.

## Exploring the meaning of inclusion

Inclusion at these schools is more than just ensuring that students are placed in the least restrictive environment. At these schools, students with disabilities are educated alongside their non-disabled peers and this approach extends to English learners and other special populations and reinforces the message that all students are our students.

**Collaboration sits at the center of inclusion.**

Collaboration sits at the center of the approach to inclusion. School leaders identified that this means focusing on collaborative mindsets as early as the interview process for staff. This collaboration is essential because special populations are alongside their peers. All teachers must buy in to this approach and work together to provide this integrated and inclusive education. Collaboration and buy in are challenging to foster generally, but it becomes especially challenging at the high school level when teachers become more specialized and compartmentalized and in small, rural schools where teacher attitudes, behaviors, and dispositions are on view to all stakeholders.

Building an inclusive program takes time because so much of the necessary work involves changing teacher behaviors and attitudes and creating systems and structures to support students and staff. Some essential teacher behaviors include being adaptable and self-reflective. Inclusion requires staff to understand their students' learning preferences and strengths and weaknesses so that they can help develop student skills. It requires that educators consistently evaluate who is benefiting from certain methods of instruction or types of lessons and adapt their approaches to ensure that all students are engaged and meeting their potential. Some schools have implemented a collaborative Individualized Education Program (IEP) development process whereby all teachers that work with the student provide input, underscoring the belief that all students are our students and all input is valued and included, and creating systems aligned with the school's approach to inclusion.

## Leadership for inclusion

One of the strengths of the charter school movement and the push for inclusion is that charter schools often have the flexibility and freedom to adapt and evolve in ways that traditional schools may not. This philosophy extends to school leadership and staff at these schools and it is embraced. Many of the school leaders articulate a problem-solving and solution-oriented approach to meeting student needs. This requires leaders to be willing to evaluate programs and initiatives as well as specific student plans and be willing to adjust course if the data shows that students are not benefiting.

Special education staff should also be willing to share their experiences. The ability to leverage prior experience is important since many general education teachers do not have a strong background in special education or inclusion. But it is also important to model vulnerability as this can help to build empathy for students who are struggling. Leaders can share times when they have struggled and lead by example. Leaders articulated that while it is important to lead from the head, it is also important to lead from the heart.

Leaders in successful inclusive settings have set a clear vision for the student experience at school. Leaders noted that the school culture and climate must be supportive of inclusion. Students should feel like a part of the community and be regularly and authentically involved with peer groups.

**Leaders in successful inclusive settings have set a clear vision for the student experience at school.**

## Balance between compliance and quality programming

Compliance with the law and a sharp focus on student needs must be a priority for any special education program. School and special education leaders have found success in spurring collaboration and individualization by eliminating the guesswork around what is legally required for their staff and school. By working to make it very clear what is legally required, teachers have the clarity necessary to collaborate on programming while working within the special education law. All of these decisions and conversations must be driven and supported by the IEP team and what is best for the student.

Systems and structures are also critical for helping teachers and staff navigate the challenges of providing a compliant and quality program. Effective leaders work to create systems that maintain compliance while also providing the flexibility to support all students. While an inclusive approach might work for most students, it does not work for all students. For example, schools need to be able to adapt and provide a resource room or a self-contained classroom, if that is what the student needs, per each student's IEP. Simple backstops like checklists and auto populating forms can eliminate some of the guesswork for teachers, and biannual desk audits or file reviews can help staff ensure a compliant program.

## The role of training and coaching

Many leaders also identified training and coaching as critical components of their program and articulated unique approaches to providing training given their contexts. Two of the schools are in remote or rural areas and lack easy access to professional development resources and have therefore developed their own internal coaching and training systems to onboard and develop their staff. While the third school is in an urban area, the status as a charter school has provided the opportunity to develop its own professional development plan and leverage internal capacity to support staff. All staff require adequate skills and ongoing coaching and support to provide appropriate and effective services is critical. Coaching can help staff navigate underlying challenges, empathize with students, and identify next steps with an eye toward inclusion.

## Technology and inclusion

A key characteristic of a successful inclusion program is the use of assistive technology. Assistive technology can support students in accessing grade level material. Effective participation in learning activities can be facilitated through the strategic use of assistive technology. Many schools will augment their technology with other assistive devices such as braille keyboards, but appropriately integrating assistive technology can be challenging as the technology may be expensive and unknown to classroom teachers. Assistive technology is more than just including technology into the educational programming. The school must be able to articulate how it utilizes schoolwide technology resources such as classroom sets of computers or iPads, 1:1 technology for students, and/or projectors or interactive whiteboards to support student learning.

**Assistive technology can support students in accessing grade level material.**

In addition to the challenges with integrating assistive technology and leveraging technology to support all learners, there are challenges that schools face with respect to an increase in screen time and other side effects due to the increased availability of technology. Leaders articulated the challenges of dealing with addictive behaviors associated with technology and the social emotional and mental health challenges. It was noted that while technology is often viewed as a solution, some students such as students on the autism spectrum might be attracted to and very comfortable with technology but might be better supported through more focused and supported interpersonal interactions.

## Post-secondary outcomes and inclusion

High school students with disabilities can present unique challenges. The data show that the percent of students spending 80% or more of their time in the regular education classroom decreases as students get older. Research also has made visible the ongoing challenges that students with disabilities face once they graduate or age out of the education system. Leaders articulated the benefits of inclusion and commitment to ensuring that all students experience the same educational opportunities. The strength

of the inclusion model, and the appeal for many students and parents, is that all foundational courses and graduation requirements are the same. Resources such as co-teachers or resource courses that supplement core courses are deployed to help support students.

# Conclusions

A review of the research on inclusion identifies several characteristics of successful inclusive systems, which are clearly present in the three schools featured in these case studies.

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These three schools - Capital City Public Charter School in Washington D.C., Tidioute Community Charter School in Tidioute, PA, and Animas High School in Durango, CO - embody the ideals articulated in the Colorado Department of Education initiative to help empower schools and students to meet their potential and address historic inequities in student outcomes for underserved students. These schools have put into practice the necessary conditions to maximize student learning and are focused on providing all students with the educational opportunities necessary for them to realize their full potential.