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

White Paper

Produced by the Colorado Charter School Institute

Contents

Background on Equity Convenings

"All means all." This phrase, as outlined in the Colorado Department of Education's (CDE) strategic plan communicates an important value which we as educators hold dear. In Colorado, CDE has articulated the need to focus on equity to empower schools and students to meet their potential and address historic inequities in outcomes for underserved students.

Through the federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) grant awarded to CDE by the United States Department of Education, the CDE Schools of Choice Unit seeks to provide technical assistance to charter schools and authorizers to increase their capacity to provide a high-quality education to all students and address access and equity challenges for underserved students.

The Schools of Choice Unit brought charter schools, authorizers, education organizations, and experts together during Equity Convenings to collaborate, discuss, and pursue solutions that help close education gaps in Colorado. These gatherings focused on specific topics and provide tangible steps for charter schools and authorizers to adopt and implement practices designed to increase equity and access for all students in a system of school choice.

Students with disabilities in Colorado continue to experience outcomes that fall short of those of their peers. As a first step towards broader equity and access for all students, the initial statewide Equity Convening hosted by CDE and organized by the Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI) in Denver, Colorado in September, 2019, focused on equity and inclusion for students with disabilities.

This white paper summarizes the information presented at the Fall 2019 CDE Equity Convening.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone involved in this Equity Convening and ongoing work around equity, for providing valuable insight, research, and expertise, including:

Organizations

> Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers (CACSA)
> Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI)
> Colorado Department of Education Schools of Choice Unit

Advisory Panel

> Taishya Adams, American Institutes for Research
> Nicole Caldwell, Global Village Academy – Northglenn
> Kaci Coats, Colorado League of Charter Schools
> Terry Croy Lewis, Ph.D., Colorado Charter School Institute
> Toby King, Colorado Department of Education Office of Special Education
> Gisa McCray, Colorado Department of Education Schools of Choice Unit
> Tom McMillen, Jefferson County School District
> Amelia Meunier, Adams 12 Five Star Schools
> Clare Vickland, Colorado Charter School Institute

Presenters and Panelists

> Dr. Terry Croy Lewis, Executive Director, CSI
> Tim Farmer, Charter Attorney & Parent
> Chris Gibbons, Executive Director, STRIVE
> Wanda Gregory, Capital City Public Charter School
> Bill Kottenstette, Executive Director, Schools of Choice, CDE
> Ryan Marks, Director of Evaluation & Assessment, CSI
> Maggie McMahon, Tidioute Charter
> Alex Medler, Project Director, CACSA
> Carlin Nielsen, Animas High School
> Megan Ohlssen, National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools
> Alyssa Pearson, Deputy Commissioner, CDE
> Michele Tissiere, Engaging Schools
> Clare Vickland, Director of Student Services, CSI
> Kevin West, Director of Charter Partnerships, Adams 12 School District
> Senator Rachel Zenzinger, District 9

Introduction

Equity and inclusion are central components of the missions of both CDE and CSI. The Equity Convening began with a short introduction from Alyssa Pearson, CDE Deputy Commissioner and Dr. Terry Croy Lewis, CSI Executive Director. A summary of their opening remarks is provided below.

Alyssa Pearson, CDE

The federal Charter Schools Grant provides Colorado with access to federal funds to better understand access and equity for high-quality charter schools. This initial Equity Convening provides Colorado educators with the opportunity to examine in-depth some of the challenges and opportunities facing the educational community in Colorado related to special education and inclusion.

The work to support all students is foundational for CDE. It is a part of the mission and vision for CDE.

Mission
The mission of the Colorado Department of Education is to ensure equity and opportunity for every student, every step of the way.

Vision
All students graduate ready for college and careers and are prepared to be productive citizens of Colorado.

However, there are tremendous gaps for students with disabilities, and the evidence clearly shows that our students are not performing at levels that match these goals. Gaps exist in academic achievement and growth data as well as in attendance and discipline data. One of the most notable gaps is revealed when you look at the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data. Based on this national data set, using data from students in fourth grade, Colorado is ranked 16th for students without disabilities and 42nd for students with disabilities. This represents the fifth largest gap in the country.

CDE has started asking how schools and systems can do better, and how charters schools are a part of the solution.

While recognizing that disparities exist, many of these disparities can be overcome by:
- addressing structural challenges that can strain collaboration between charter schools and charter authorizers,
- addressing knowledge gaps and clarifying misperceptions that exist in the field, and
- moving away from old paradigms and routines and filling these gaps with new strategies and promising practices.

Dr. Terry Croy Lewis, CSI

The Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI) is a statewide charter school authorizer. CSI is committed to the creation and success of high-quality charter public schools that meet the needs of their communities, particularly those serving all students and working to close the opportunity gap.

This Equity Convening provides an opportunity to talk about where the charter school sector in Colorado stands and how to move forward. CSI takes an active approach to evaluating and

improving upon service to all students and has a history of engaging with partner organizations to better support our schools.

In 2015, the CSI Board of Directors prioritized service to at-risk students. In 2016, CSI commissioned a report on special education needs throughout the portfolio. In 2017, CSI partnered with the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools to develop the Student Services Screener and Tiers of Support to both assess and support schools in providing equal access and quality programs to students qualifying for specialized support. We also clarified school and authorizer responsibilities through the Special Education Memorandum of Understanding.

CSI has also dedicated resources to various capacity-building initiatives. Each CSI school is assigned a CDE-licensed special education provider or administrator that serves as the designee of the CSI Special Education Director providing oversight, consultation, mediation, and professional development to each of its schools. CSI offers professional development and scholarship opportunities to build capacity around special education at the school level. CSI partners with the RELAY Graduate School of Education to offer the Inclusive Schools Leadership Institute and a Special Education Endorsement program.

CSI is also committed to providing increased financial resources to schools serving students with disabilities.

- 85% of state and federal funds flow directly to schools with the remainder spent on special education coordinators and related staff development. CSI does not charge any additional special education fees to schools.
- CSI schools maintain a Special Education Reserve within their budgets to respond to unexpected needs of students with disabilities.
- CSI works to provide assistance through grants and loans to address unanticipated costs for higher needs of students with disabilities.
- CSI increased funding to schools serving an above average special education population.

CSI is proud of the work that its schools are doing - from a small Waldorf school serving more than 13% special education students to a rural project-based learning school that is dedicated to inclusive practices for their students with a wide range of disabilities.

This Equity Convening will include many perspectives - parent, district, school, authorizer, and state. Our goal is to utilize these perspectives and figure out how we can work together. It's not about blaming or pointing fingers. It's about how we partner to ensure all of our students can be successful.

A Review of Research on Inclusion & Special Education in Charter Schools

In order to collaborate, discuss, and pursue solutions that help close education gaps, having a better understanding of the current state of education in Colorado for students with disabilities is essential. The data presented throughout this section is a small, representative sample of the information and research available. The research review does not seek to provide explanations or causality but simply presents the data and research as a means to spark a thoughtful discussion during the Equity Convening.

Enrollment and Identification of Students with Disabilities

Enrollment

The enrollment of students with disabilities has been a topic of conversation, research, and policy throughout the United States. In Colorado, a smaller percentage of students with disabilities are identified and enrolled in public schools than in the United States: 12% in Colorado compared to 14% nationwide. Throughout Colorado, a smaller percentage of students with disabilities are identified and enrolled in charter public schools than in traditional public schools.

Figure 1. Enrollment of Students with Disabilities

United States

Colorado

Charter Schools in Colorado

14%

of <u>public school</u> students in the U.S. are students with disabilities

(National Center for Education Statistics)

12%

of <u>public school</u> students in Colorado are students with disabilities

(from Colorado Department of Education pupil membership files)

7%

of public charter school students in Colorado are students with disabilities

(from Colorado Department of Education pupil membership files)

Figure 1 shows the most recent enrollment data in the United States (2017-18), Colorado (2018-19, and charter schools in Colorado (2018-19).

Disability Types

There are a variety of disability types served in the United States and Colorado. There are 13 federally recognized disability types that schools and districts are required to report to the U.S. Department of Education. The distribution of those disability types is largely similar, however, there are some slight variations. For example, a higher percentage of students in Colorado are identified as having a specific learning disability than in the United States, while a smaller percentage of students are identified as having an intellectual disability.

Figure 2. Disability Types for Students with Disabilities

Disability Types

United States
Disability Type Served in the United States
(National Center for Education Statistics)

VS

Colorado
Disability Type Served in Colorado
(Colorado Department of Education)

United States	Disability Type	Colorado
34%	Specific Learning Disability	45%
19%	Speech or language impairment	13%
14%	Other health impairment	13%
10%	Autism	8%
6%	Intellectual disability	3%
7%	Developmental delay	5%
5%	Emotional disturbance	6%
2%	Multiple disabilities	5%
1%	Hearing impairment	1%
1%	Orthopedic impairment	0%
	Traumatic Brain Injury	1%
	Visual impairment	0%

Percentage Distribution of Students with Disabilities by Type

Figure 2 shows the distribution of disability types and prevalence for students with disabilities in the United State and Colorado.

Identification

Students with disabilities also have other student characteristics such as race/ethnicity, language proficiency, and gender. These characteristics are typically similar for the general population of students and for students with disabilities, but there are some noticeable differences. For example, more students with disabilities are identified as male and as a second language learners.

Figure 3. Identification of Students with Disabilities
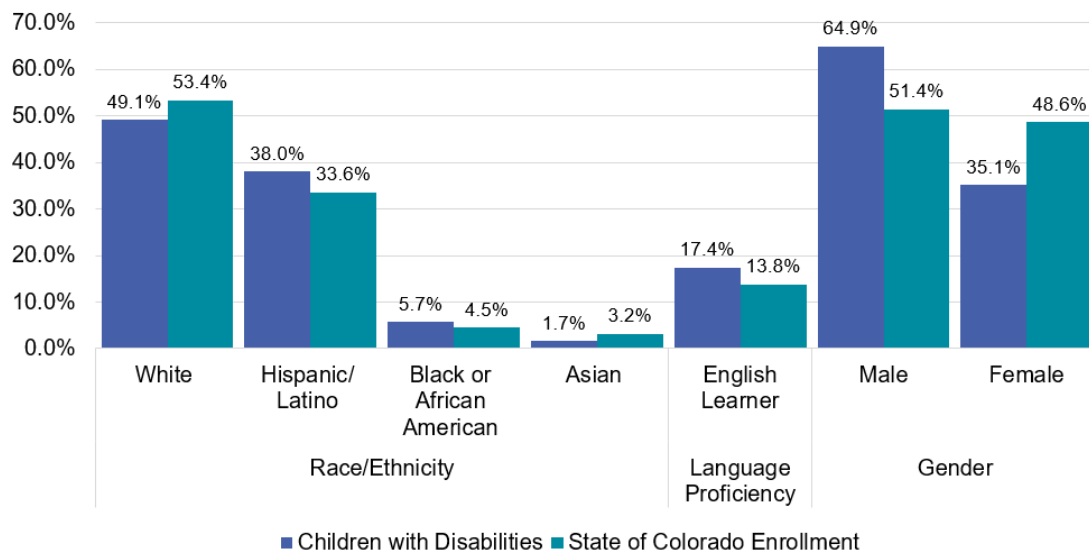
(from Colorado Department of Education special education and pupil membership data files)

Figure 3 shows the identification of students with disabilities by student characteristic compared to the total enrollment of students in Colorado.

Enrollment by School Governance Model

There is a difference in the enrollment of students with disabilities by the governance model (charter school compared to non-charter school) as shown in Figure 1. However, over the past ten years, the number of students with disabilities being served in charter schools has doubled (109% increase) while the number of students with disabilities in non-charter schools increased by about 23%.

Figure 4. Enrollment by School Governance Model

PK-12 Students with Disabilities in Colorado over Time

Over the past ten years, **the number of students with disabilities being served in charter schools has doubled.** However...

Non-Charter: 75,788 SWD

Non-Charter: 93,036 SWD

Charter: 4,266 SWD

Charter: 8,906 SWD

2009-10 2010-11 2011-12 2012-13 2013-14 2014-15 2015-16 2016-17 2017-18 2018-19
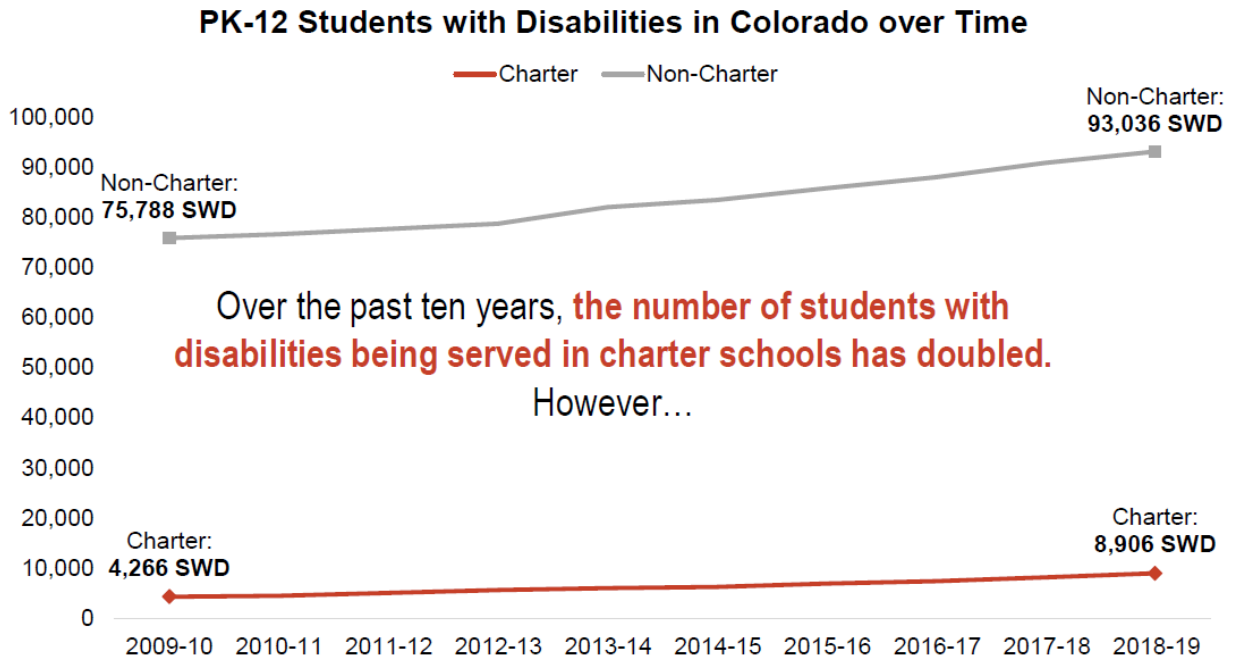
(from Colorado Department of Education files)

Figure 4 shows the change in enrollment of students with disabilities for charter schools and non-charter schools in Colorado for the last ten years.

Charter public school enrollment and traditional public school enrollment in Colorado has also increased over the last ten years. As a percent of total population, charter schools serve fewer students with disabilities than non-charters in Colorado. The largest gap in ten years, a nearly 5 percentage point difference, occurred in 2017-18.

Figure 5. Percent of Enrollment by School Governance Model

PK-12 Students with Disabilities in Colorado over Time

—— Charter   —— Non-Charter

Non-Charter:
11.8% IEP

Non-Charter:
9.9% IEP

Charter:
6.4% IEP

Charter:
7.1% IEP

20%
18%
16%
14%
12%
10%
8%
6%
4%
2%
0%

2009-10 2010-11 2011-12 2012-13 2013-14 2014-15 2015-16 2016-17 2017-18 2018-19

(from Colorado Department of Education files)
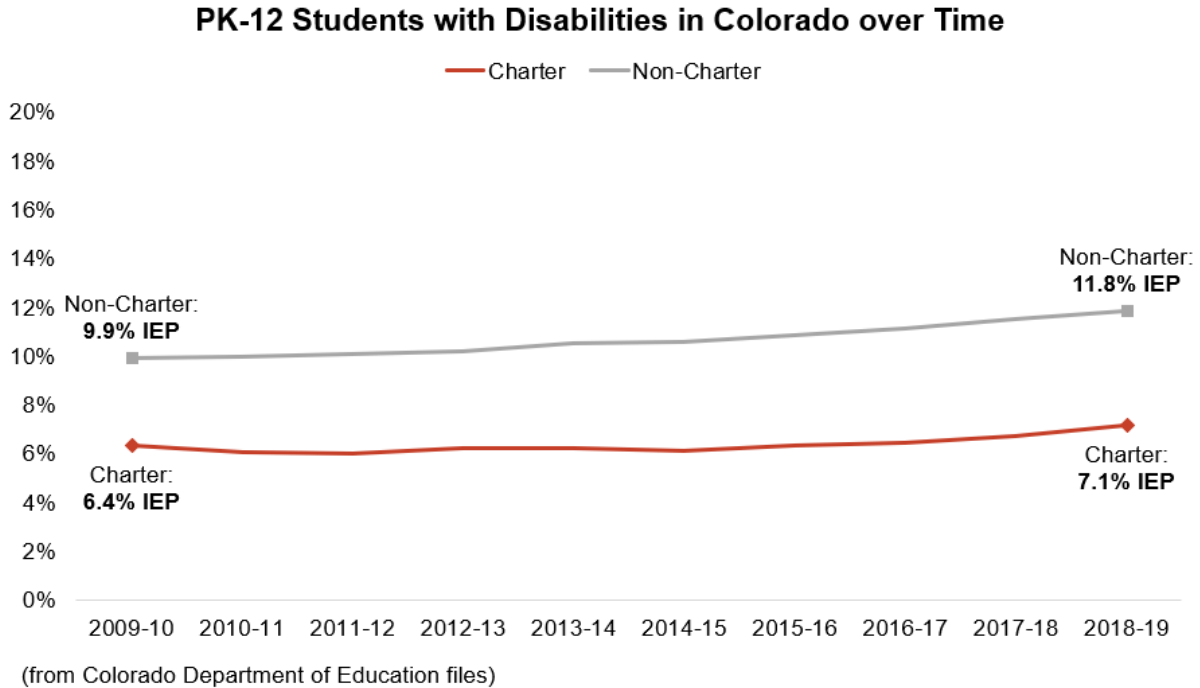
Figure 5 shows the change in percent of enrollment of students with disabilities for charter schools and non-charter schools in Colorado for the last ten years.

While there are disparities in enrollment between charter schools and non-charter schools on average across the state, there are charter schools that serve a higher percentage of students with disabilities than the state average. Using the methodology CSI utilizes in its Student Services Screener, 49% of public charter schools last year had comparable special education enrollment to their geographic district[1].

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[1] Comparable means that the school's special education enrollment is within two percentage points or 25% of the special education enrollment of the geographic district.

Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

As previously noted, outcomes for students with disabilities are generally lower than their non-disabled peers, and this is true across academic and non-academic outcomes.

Academic Outcomes

In Colorado, students with disabilities achieve at levels lower than their non-disabled peers. In English Language Arts, 9% of students with disabilities meet or exceed state expectations on CMAS, compared to 50% of students without disabilities. In mathematics, 7% of students with disabilities meet or exceed state expectations on CMAS, compared to 38% of students without disabilities.

Colorado's outcomes are consistent with academic achievement data aggregated across states. In 2015-16, 60% of all students met expectations on state assessments while only 20% of students with disabilities met expectations on state assessments.

On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment from 2017, students with disabilities had statistically significantly lower scores than their peers without disabilities, both nationally and in Colorado.

Disciplinary Outcomes

Similar outcomes are present when disciplinary outcomes are reviewed. Students with disabilities disproportionately receive a greater percent of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions across the United States. Notably, students with disabilities are receiving nearly double the percent of in- and out-of-school suspensions than all students.

Figure 7. Disciplinary Outcomes in the United States

	Percentage of students disciplined via:		
	In-School Suspension	Out-of-School Suspension	Expulsion
Students with disabilities	9.3%	10.6%	0.44%
All students	5.4%	5.6%	0.22%

2016-2017 Data, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) database

Figure 7 shows the disciplinary rates for students with disabilities compared to all students in 2016-2017.

Graduation Rates

The variance in outcomes for students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers is also present in high school completion and graduation. Across the United States, students with disabilities graduate at lower rates than all students, a pattern seen in Colorado as well. When looking at charter school graduation rates for students with disabilities, a much lower graduation rate overall and for students with disabilities is present.

Figure 8. Graduation Rates

United States **VS** Colorado **VS** Charter Schools in Colorado

71%
of students with disabilities in the U.S. graduated with a regular high school diploma, compared to **85%** of all public school students

(National Center for Education Statistics)

74%
of students with disabilities in Colorado graduated* with a regular high school diploma, compared to **86%** of Colorado public school students

(Colorado Department of Education graduation statistics)
*using the most recent "best-of" rate

50%
of public charter school students with disabilities in Colorado graduated* with a regular high school diploma, compared to **78%** of Colorado non-charter public school students

(Colorado Department of Education graduation statistics)
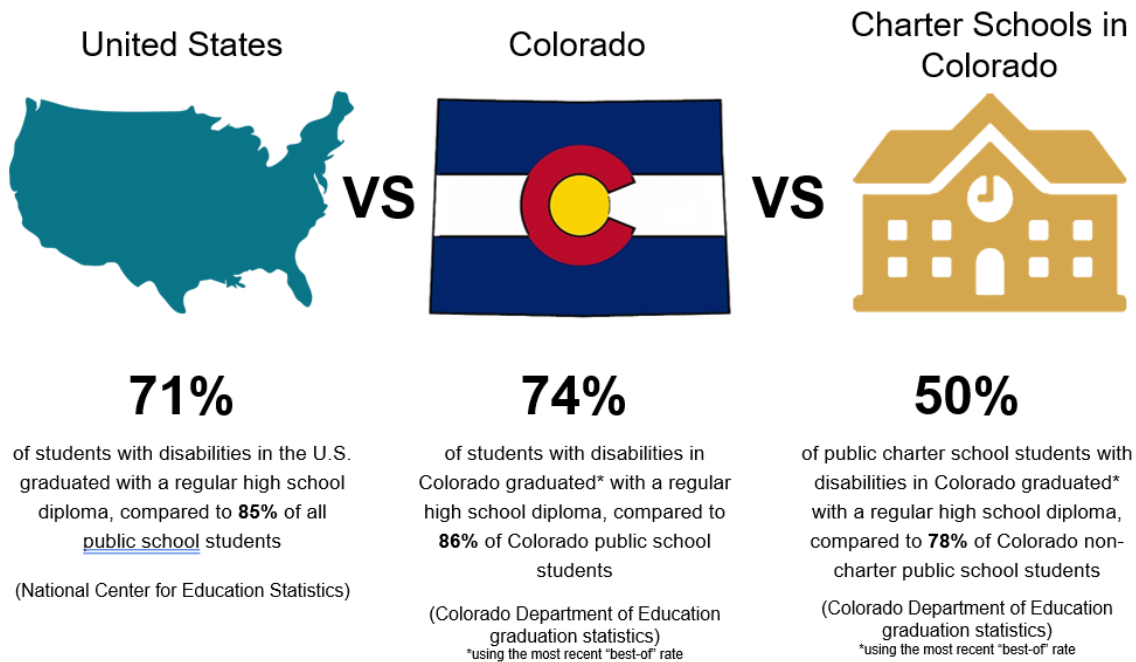*using the most recent "best-of" rate

Figure 8 shows the graduation rates for students with disabilities and for all students in the United States, Colorado, and charter schools in Colorado.

The graduation data for students in Colorado is complicated by differences in enrollment at alternative education campuses (AECs). These schools serve at least 90% high-risk students, defined as students who meet one or more statutorily designated criteria. There are 93 AECs in Colorado serving over 20,000 students, representing 5% of the total number of schools and 2% of the total enrollment. Charter AECs, however, represent 8% of the total number of charter schools and 6% of the total charter school enrollment. Many of the AECs are high schools, and this significantly impacts the graduation rates.

Figure 9. Graduation Rates for Non-AEC Schools

95%

of non-AEC, public charter school students with disabilities in Colorado graduated* with a regular high school diploma, compared to **81%** of Colorado non-AEC, non-charter public school students

(Colorado Department of Education graduation statistics)

*using the most recent "best-of" rate

Figure 9 shows the graduation rates for non-AEC students at charter and non-charter schools.

Post-secondary Outcomes

Much research has been conducted on the postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities across many aspects of their lives outside of school. As seen across other outcomes, students with disabilities are completing post-secondary education at rates lower than their peers. Students with disabilities also see lower earnings than their peers in the general population and are also less likely to live independently.

Figure 10. Post-secondary Outcomes

Postsecondary Completion

Postsecondary completion rates of students with disabilities were lower than those of similar-aged students in the general population (41 percent vs. 52 percent).

Earnings

Young adults with disabilities earned an average of $10.40 per hour compared with $11.40 per hour for young adults in the general population.

Independent Living

Young adults with disabilities were less likely to live independently than were their peers in the general population (45 percent vs. 59 percent).

Newman, Lynn, et al. "The Post-High School Outcomes of Young Adults with Disabilities up to 8 Years after High School: A Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). NCSER 2011-3005." National Center for Special Education Research (2011).

Figure 10 shows the research findings for post-secondary completion, earnings, and independent living.

Moving towards Inclusion and Access to General Education Contexts

As educators, schools, and other stakeholders contemplate improving outcomes for students with disabilities, many advocates and researchers have explored creating more inclusive educational systems. Inclusive educational systems must provide students with disabilities meaningful access to age-appropriate curriculum within general education classes and ensure that all students feel as if they belong and are a meaningful part of the community.

Access to General Education Contexts
All students have meaningful opportunities to access age-appropriate curriculum in general education classes.

Inclusive Education
All students feel as if they belong and are a meaningful part of the community.

Alquraini, Turki, and Dianne Gut. "Critical components of successful inclusion of students with severe disabilities: Literature review." *International Journal of Special Education* 27.1 (2012): 42-59.

Cosier, Meghan, Julie Causton-Theoharis, and George Theoharis. "Does access matter? Time in general education and achievement for students with disabilities." Remedial and Special Education 34.6 (2013): 323-332.

While measuring student belonging can be challenging, it is easier to measure student access to general education contexts. Using the standard measure of access to the general education context (spending more than 80% of time in the general education environment), students with disabilities in Colorado generally have greater access to the general education environment than the national average. For example, 75% of students with disabilities in Colorado had access to the general education classroom in Colorado in 2018-19. While national comparison data lags a few years behind Colorado, only 62.5% of students with disabilities across the U.S. spent more than 80% of their time in the general education environment.

Figure 11. Access to General Education Contexts

Access to Gen. Ed. in CO is Higher than the US
In Colorado in 2018-19, *75.5% of students with disabilities* spent 80% of more of their time in the general education environment.

Access to Gen. Ed. in the US is Improving
The percentage of students with disabilities who spend more than 80% of their time in the general education environment has increased from *31.7% in 1989 to 62.5% in 2015*.

Access to Gen. Ed. Varies by Disability in CO
Students with a *speech or language impairment (97.2%)* and *specific learning disability (84.9%)* access the general education environment at higher rates while students with autism (53.2%) and students with an emotional disability (57.9%) access the general education environment at lower rates.

Access to Gen. Ed. Varies by Student Characteristics in CO
English Learners (75.3%) and *Hispanic students (74.9%)* access the general education environment at a similar rate to all students but disparities exist for black (67.6%) and Asian (67.9%) students.

Access to Gen. Ed. Varies by Age in CO
When students with disabilities are 6 years old, 85% are in the general education environment; however, there is a steady decrease as students get older and by 21 this has dropped to 44.1%.

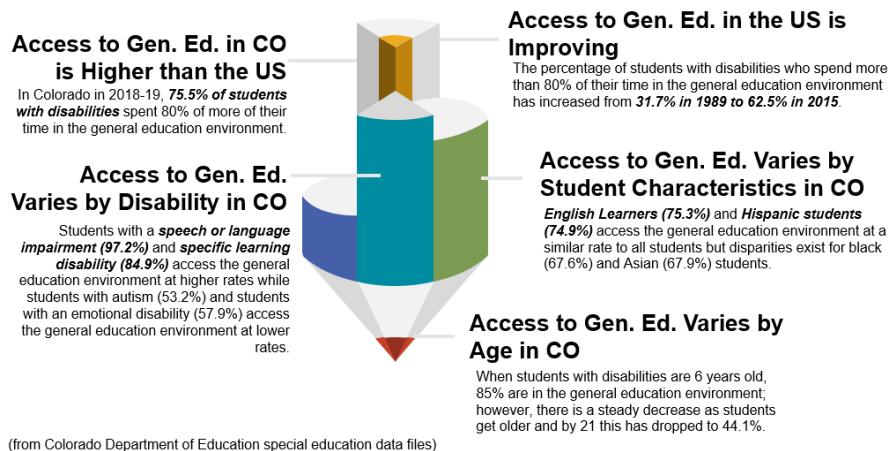(from Colorado Department of Education special education data files)

Figure 11 shows a summary of access to general education contexts in Colorado and across the United States.

Improved Outcomes from Effective Inclusive Educational Systems

Research has broadly demonstrated that inclusion is good for students with disabilities across a wide range of outcomes.

Academic Achievement

Meta-analyses demonstrate a strong positive relationship between the **number of hours** students spent in general education and **achievement in mathematics and reading**.[2]

Behavior

Students with disabilities served in inclusive educational programs made significant gains in **adaptive behavior** and **social competence**.[3]

Post-School Outcomes

Students who spent more hours in regular education courses were **more likely to be living independently** and more likely to be engaged in **post-school employment**.[4]

Friendship and Social Connections

Students enrolled in inclusive environments had social networks **17 times higher** than students in self-contained classes and received significantly **more social support** from their peers.[5]

Post-secondary Education

Students earning 80% or more of their academic credits in general education settings were **twice as likely** to enroll and persist in postsecondary education.[6]

In addition, research on inclusion also produces benefits for students without disabilities. In a review of existing research, 81% of 120 studies of inclusive education reported positive or neutral effects on students without special education needs.[7]

Characteristics of Successful Inclusive Systems

The research on inclusion identified eight characteristics on successful inclusive systems. A further description of these characteristics will be presented within the case study section of this white paper but, a high-level description is provided here. These characteristics present a broad framework for schools to use when seeking to implement a more inclusive system. From characteristics present in the classroom such as instructional strategies and accommodations

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[2] Cosier, Meghan, Julie Causton-Theoharis, and George Theoharis. "Does access matter? Time in general education and achievement for students with disabilities." Remedial and Special Education 34.6 (2013): 323-332.

[3] Fisher, Mary, and Luanna H. Meyer. "Development and social competence after two years for students enrolled in inclusive and self-contained educational programs." *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* 27.3 (2002): 165-174.

[4] Test, David W., et al. "Evidence-based secondary transition predictors for improving postschool outcomes for students with disabilities." Career Development for Exceptional Individuals 32.3 (2009): 160-181.

[5] McDonnell, J., & Hunt, P. (2014). Inclusive Education and Meaningful School Outcomes. In M. Agran, F. Brown, C. Hughes, C. Quirk, & D. Ryndak, (Eds.), *Equity and full participation for individuals with severe disabilities* (pp . 155-176). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

[6] Rojewski JW, Lee IH, Gregg N. "Causal Effects of Inclusion on Postsecondary Education Outcomes of Individuals With High-Incidence Disabilities." *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*. 2015;25(4):210-219

[7] Kalambouka, A., Farrell, P., Dyson, A., & Kaplan, I. (2007). The impact of placing pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools on the achievement of their peers. Educational Research, 49(4), 365-382.

and adaptations to school systems and structures such as professional development and collaborative planning time, these characteristics reflect characteristics at many levels within a school. Notably, these characteristics extend to the school's relationship with the families and communities and highlight the importance of family-school partnerships. Most significantly, the school leadership must be committed to inclusive educational practices and is a precondition for success.

Figure 13. Characteristics of Successful Inclusive Systems

Instructional Strategies[1,2,3]

Organize and deliver instruction in ways that promotes acquisition of concepts and skills. Combine effective instructional strategies with effective special education strategies.

Accommodations and Adaptions[1]

Promote access and progress in the general education curriculum through modification, accommodations, and adaptations.

Assistive Technology[1,2]

Effective participation in learning activities can be facilitated through the strategic use of assistive technology.

Strong Leadership[1,3]

Strong leadership for inclusion is essential and sets the vision, creates cohesion and alignment, identifies goals, models desired practices and mindsets, allocates resources, etc.

Collaboration[1,2,3]

Collaborative planning and implementation is necessary to identify needs and problems and then find ways to meet those needs and solve the problems.

Data-Based Problem Solving[2,3]

Effective collaborative teaming requires a structure for identifying and addressing challenges and a system for monitoring and adjusting implementation

Training and Coaching[1,2,3]

All staff must have adequate skills and ongoing coaching and support to provide appropriate and effective services

Family and Community[1,2]

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.

[1] Alquraini, Turki, and Dianne Gut. "Critical components of successful inclusion of students with severe disabilities: Literature review." International Journal of Special Education 27.1 (2012): 42-59.
[2] McDonnell, J., & Hunt, P. (2014). Inclusive Education and Meaningful School Outcomes. In M. Agran, F. Brown, C. Hughes, C. Quirk, & D. Ryndak, (Eds.), *Equity and full participation for individuals with severe disabilities* (pp . 155-176). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
[3] Theoharis, G. Causton, J., & Woodfield, C. (2015) Inclusive leadership and disability. In G. Theoharis, & M. Scanlan (Eds.), *Leadership for increasingly diverse schools (pp. 13-38)*. New York, NY. Routledge.

Figure 13 identifies eight characteristics present in a successful inclusive educational system.

Advancing Equity Panel: Expanding the Conversation around Special Education

The Equity Convening includes a panel of stakeholders representing a variety of perspectives from across Colorado. The panel included State Senator Rachel Zenzinger, District 19, Chris Gibbons, CEO, STRIVE, Tim Farmer, Charter Attorney and Parent, and Kevin West, Director of Charter Partnerships, Adams 12 School District. The panel was facilitated by Dr. Terry Croy Lewis, Executive Director, CSI.

The conversation from the panel is summarized below. While the summary presented is not an exact quotation, it reflects the content shared by each panelist.

Why is special education in charter schools a priority for you?

West: My kid had special needs, and I struggled to interpret the jargon (LRE, FAPE, IEP, etc) for my wife. Sometimes it seems like we forget that we are talking about a kid versus a pile of papers. We are all in the room for a reason - the student.

Farmer: My sister has twin boys with severe autism, and they have struggled with the education system. My experience with my own children is not much different. I want to make sure we offer the maximum amount of choices for the maximum number of people. I am always advocating to ensure that we're not marginalizing students with IEPs, regardless of how severe their disabilities.

Gibbons: We all come into this work with a personal story. My brother has Down syndrome. When I founded the charter school, there were lots of structural impediments in the first few years that made the work of serving students with disabilities really hard. In part by committing to make charter schools accessible and an option that my brother could attend, we did a pretty hard pivot. We have to embrace the opportunity to run better systems across the board, and we don't do that until we're working with all kids. That matters morally, structurally, and politically. So much of the work with students with disabilities in charters is – are you doing it? That's an awfully low bar. We need to get the conversation out of 'are we doing this?' to 'how are we doing it better?'.

Zenzinger: What motivated me most recently is the Interim Committee on School Finance. I brought various school districts together to talk through questions the Committee was exploring. Every single one stated that the most important concern was funding for students with disabilities. When I looked into this, I discovered that we were funding students with disabilities at 31.4% of what we were supposed to fund, which doesn't even account for how much it actually costs districts and schools to appropriately fund their special education programs and to really support their students.

What obstacles do you find at the school level that must be overcome to better serve students with disabilities?

Zenzinger: Educator shortages. There was an article in Chalkbeat ([Special education teachers are hard to find. They're also some of the hardest to keep, new study shows](#)). While educator pay is lower, there is more to the ongoing educator shortage than just pay. It has to be more than that. It has a lot to do with school culture, the right amount of

support for teachers, helping our new educators get the right support, network, and mentoring partnerships.

Gibbons: Funding and educator shortages. The financial constraints are real and every educator who has been in this work for a while knows that. For special education, the needs and the costs are so out of balance. The philanthropic community has done a poor job in helping support this area of need in education although this is potentially changing with a few organizations.

Additionally, in Colorado, charter schools are not their own local education agencies (which is not true in other states) This creates some challenges around autonomy and the partnership between charter schools and school districts (which are the local education agency).

Farmer: Least restrictive environment (LRE). I do have concerns about LRE as a concept and the way it is used too often to deny an opportunity for a student. I think that there are IDEA structures that worked well and met their intended purpose and frankly rewriting the law should move us away from any default situations.

West: Partnerships with charter schools. About 9% of students in my district are enrolled in charter schools. As a district, after we had some shared failures in authorization with a couple of charters—they didn't have the staffing and funding--the district came to the realization that it is not enough to just ask the charter school to do better but to support them in becoming better. Charter schools are in a position to think outside the box and can help find possible solutions to some of the perennial challenges in education.

What are some of the greatest achievements we have seen in this area—who can we celebrate? Who else is doing great work?

Farmer: Innovation in funding. While the lack of funding is stifling innovation, choice, and specialization in Colorado, many other states have charter schools that focus on students with autism. I'm trying to start one, but the challenge we face is one of funding. Most of you are familiar with the U.S. Supreme Court case in Douglas County (Endrew F. v. Douglas County School Dist. RE–1). These parents literally had to go to the U.S. Supreme Court to get what they wanted for their son. We have to create innovative structures for families to use funding in a manner that is more choice-based and isn't a mother-may-I use of funds.

Zenzinger: The last legislative session introduced $22 million dollars into the formula, which represents one of the largest increases in Colorado history for special education Tier B students. With this funding increase, we decreased the gap between where schools should be funded and the funding they actually received from about 31% to 47.25%. More importantly, I'm always impressed when I think of all we have done for students with disabilities despite the chronic underfunding. I can point to amazing teachers and amazing success in our districts. We have almost turned the corner with how we approach students with disabilities especially with recent stories about adaptive PE programs and STEM programs that are transformational.

Gibbons: I think I have a more cynical view at the societal level to actually fund the level of personalization and access described. We need to find solutions that work in our schools that somehow have a more efficient resource tag associated with it.

Two Strive schools saw growth percentiles for students with disabilities that are higher than those without. [*audience applause*] I don't think that is applause-worthy since it is only two of 11 schools. Nevertheless, we prioritized a high level of inclusion, research-based practices, and retained and trained teachers.

West: I agree with Chris. Intentionality. I really encourage that mindset in school leaders, but it takes time, which school leaders do not often have. But when we take the time to be intentional and plan, individually, the way the law was intended, we can see fantastic results and identify what works and what doesn't work.

National Context: A Practical Look on Special Education in Charter Schools

This session was presented by Megan Ohlssen, Managing Director of Programs, from the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS).

National Data for Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools

More than 300,000 of the students enrolled in charter schools have a disability, but the enrollment of students with disabilities in charter schools continues to fall below that of traditional public schools nationally and to a greater extent in Colorado.

The NCSECS conducted a review of data submitted to the U.S. Department of Education through the Civil Rights Data Collection for the 2015-16 school year and shared the results of the analysis at the Convening.

Enrollment of students with disabilities varies by governance model across the United States and in Colorado. Traditional public schools enroll a larger percentage of students with disabilities than do charter public schools. In 2015-16, students with disabilities made up 12.8% of the enrollment at traditional public schools as compared to 10.8% of students at charter public schools.

Figure 14. Enrollment of students with disabilities nationally by governance model.
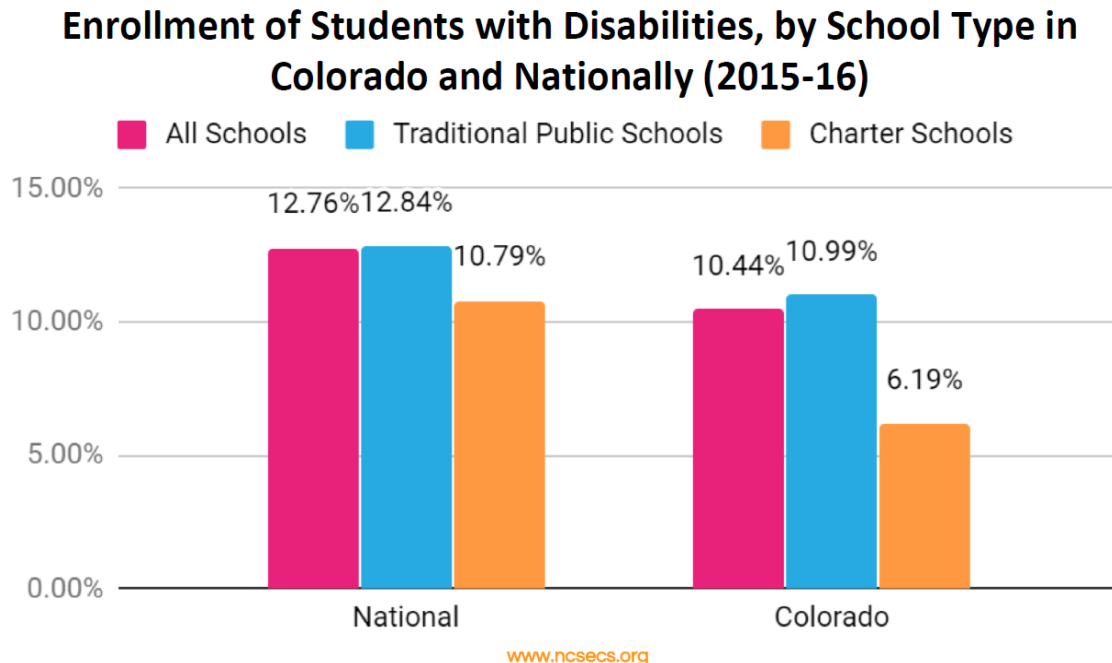
Figure 14 shows the difference between enrollment for students with disabilities by governance model (school type) and the enrollment for students with disabilities in charter schools. Colorado charter schools enroll the smallest percentage of students with disabilities in the country.

This difference in enrollment is also present in Colorado (see Figure 14). However, enrollment of students with disabilities in charter schools in Colorado is the lowest in the United States. Nationally, students with disabilities make up 10.8% of the enrollment, but in Colorado students with disabilities make up 6.2% of enrollment. While the enrollment of students with disabilities is lower in Colorado than it is nationally, this does not account to the difference in charter school enrollment.

Figure 15. Enrollment of students with disabilities in charters schools by state.

Enrollment of Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools (2015-16)

www.ncsecs.org
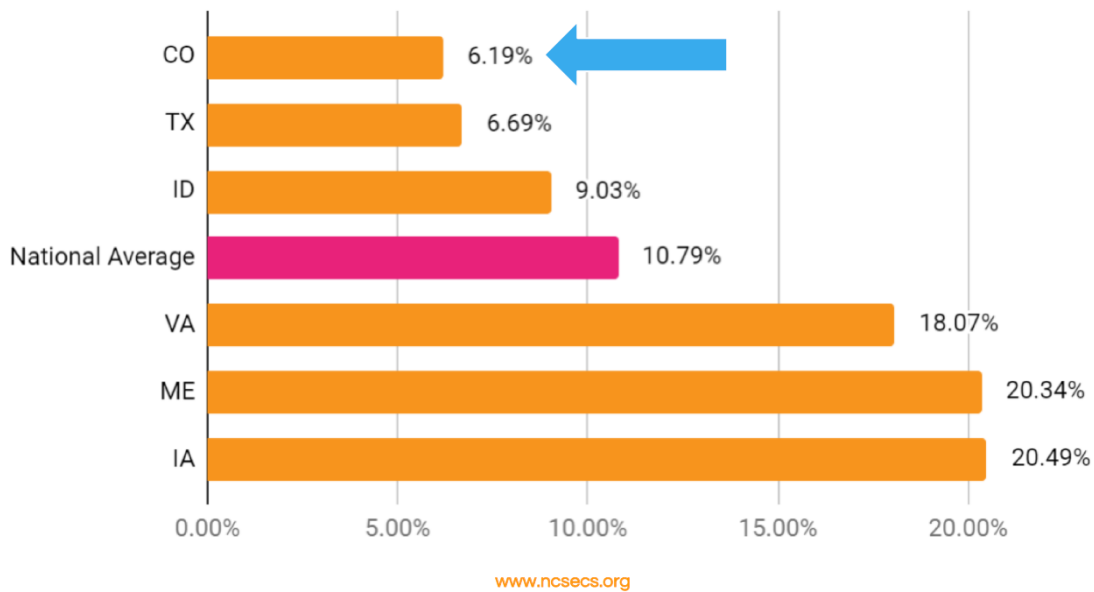
Figure 15 shows the enrollment of students with disabilities in charter schools by state. The three states with the lowest percent enrollment of students with disabilities, the three states with the highest percent enrollment of students with disabilities, and the national charter school average enrollment of students with disabilities is shown.

The enrollment of students with disabilities by disability type in Colorado compared to the United States was presented earlier in this white paper. Additional data was shared during the NCSECS presentation which revealed more information regarding the distribution of disability type between Colorado charter schools and charters schools across the United States. Charter schools in Colorado serve a larger percentage of students with a specific learning disability than charter schools across the country while also serving fewer students with autism.

Figure 16. Enrollment of students with disabilities by disability type in Colorado charter schools and charter schools in the US.

Enrollment of Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools (2015-16)
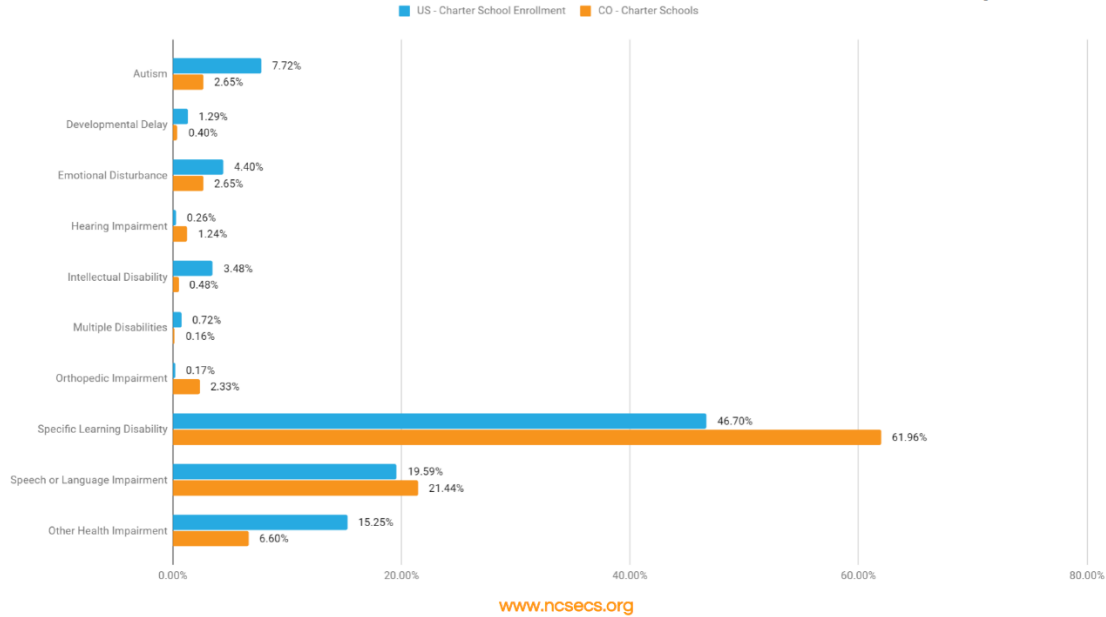

Figure 16 shows the national charter school distribution of disability type compared to the distribution of disability type in Colorado charter schools.

Similarly, the distribution of students with disabilities by educational environment was presented earlier for Colorado and the United States. Below, the distribution of students with disabilities is presented for Colorado charter schools and charter schools across the United States. Colorado charter schools have a higher percentage of students that are in the regular education class for more than 80% of the day than charter schools across the United States.

Figure 17. Enrollment of students with disabilities by educational environment in Colorado charter schools and charter schools in the US.
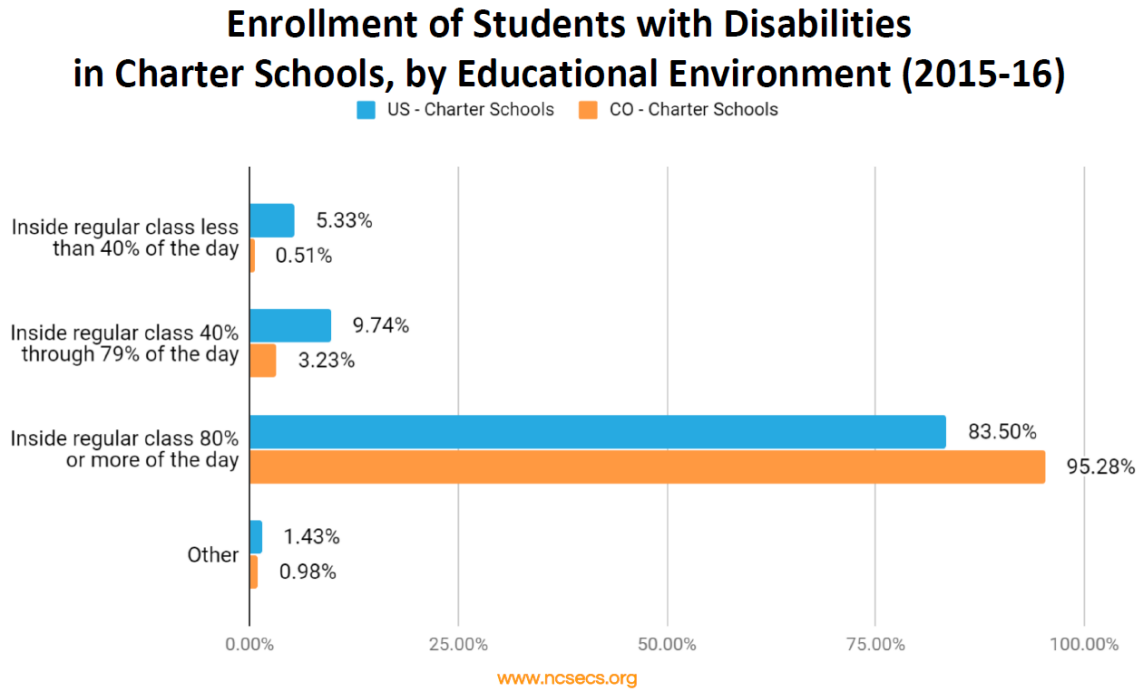
Enrollment of Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools, by Educational Environment (2015-16)

Legend: US - Charter Schools | CO - Charter Schools

Educational Environment	US - Charter Schools	CO - Charter Schools
Inside regular class less than 40% of the day	5.33%	0.51%
Inside regular class 40% through 79% of the day	9.74%	3.23%
Inside regular class 80% or more of the day	83.50%	95.28%
Other	1.43%	0.98%

www.ncsecs.org

Figure 17 shows the percent of time spent by students with disabilities in the general education environment in charter schools in Colorado and across the United States.

While there are positive strides towards eliminating the enrollment gap between charter public schools and traditional public schools, more work is required. While there may be many reasons why this gap exists - from district/authorizer enrollment policies and philosophy on center-based programs to charter school instructional practices and models - charter schools must utilize their flexibility and autonomy to address these challenges and advocate on behalf of all students.

Key Considerations to Improve Equity

Many factors impact current enrollment trends and outcomes for students with disabilities. The key considerations for any school leaders looking to improve these outcomes include:

- classroom management,
- strong school culture,
- engaging instruction,
- accessible curriculum,
- educator mindset/skillset, and
- school leader mindset/skillset.

The Equity Convening participants shared their reactions and responses to the information presented, which is summarized below.

> *School culture is an important factor for hiring. If people want to work at the school, there is an increase in the quality and quantity of prospective applicants. It is important to make sure that a focus on inclusion is presented during hiring and when talking about school culture because it may not be something that every applicant is looking for.*

> *Authorizers and schools struggle to measure what is important when monitoring outcomes for students with disabilities. Test scores are not the only tool for evaluating student and school outcomes and leaders must explore additional measures to show what is working and what is not. There also has been a focus on compliance, but in order to drive better outcomes for students, the conversation must evolve beyond minimum compliance with the law.*

> *How often do you walk into a classroom with everyone sitting one way, doing one thing, with pencil to paper product? We know about differentiation, but when you walk into classrooms, what do you see? If the curriculum is accessible for every single kid, you are going to have better outcomes which is why universal design learning for learning is so important.*

Other core practices were shared that are implemented by schools serving more students with disabilities and producing strong outcomes.

- Curriculum must be culturally sustaining which requires an examination of the classroom textbooks, questions, activities, etc. Are they relevant to the student's individual unique cultures and sustain them?
- Instruction must be accessible and if there are choices, options and access points at the general education level, then you have time to do the specialization at the student level that only a special education teacher may do.
- Coaching structures are critical.
- Meaningful family partnership is essential. Host more than one family night a year and call families when things go well. Leverage their knowledge about their children.
- Collaboration across your school is important. A recent study of 30 schools across the nation found that a sense of hyper collegiality is a common characteristic of successful schools.

Disciplinary Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

There is also a national issue with disproportionality for students with disabilities with respect to disciplinary outcomes. While many of the factors that lead to disproportionality exist outside of special education, the effects are felt by students with disabilities. Nationally, a higher percent of students with disabilities receive one or more out-of-school suspensions than general education students. While this is also true in Colorado, the total percentages are lower than the national average.

Figure 18. Out-of-school Suspensions by Governance Model
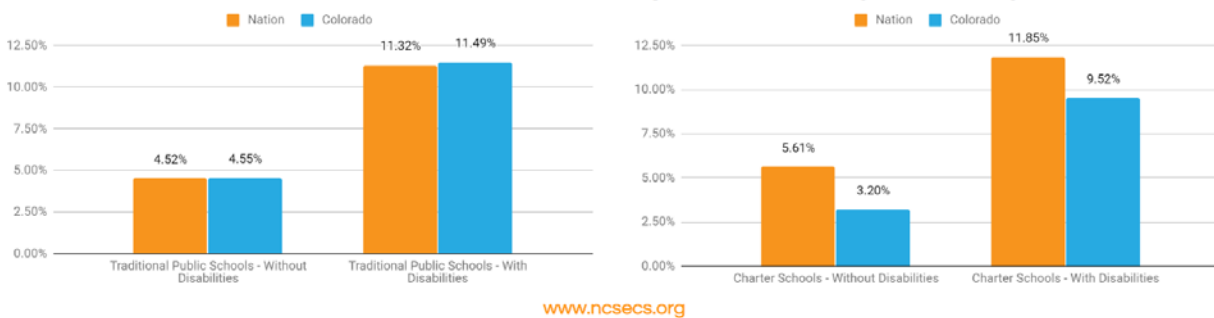
Figure 18 shows the percent of students receiving one or more out-of-school suspension nationally and in Colorado.

There has been an abundance of research into the causes of this disproportionate discipline. The NCSECS highlighted the Culturally Responsive Education: A Primer for Policy and Practice from the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools at New York University and identified a few key findings from the research:

> *When home cultural values of students/families elevate the status of teacher and place emphasis on not questioning authority, "pedagogies of poverty" (Haberman, 1991) take hold and characterize the relationships between instructors and students. Teachers assume unquestioned authority in classrooms filled with students they do not fully understand, causing them to frequently misinterpret and miscategorize student actions and misinterpret a family's hesitance to engage in solutions (Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994).*

> *Students who demonstrate compliance and assimilation are seen as desirable, while those who do not fit in are sorted in accordance with any number of labels that mark them as different, deficient, defective, disturbed, disruptive, or disabled (Gay, 1975; Katz, 1985; Boykin, 1994).*

These disproportionate outcomes for students with disabilities are magnified along other student characteristics. Race and gender amplify these disparities, especially when looking at disciplinary incidents that are more subjective such as disruption or defiance. For example,

African American boys with disabilities lose 14.6 days of instruction per 100 students compared to 5.8 days for white boys with disabilities.

Figure 19. Lost Instructional Days for Disruption or Defiance
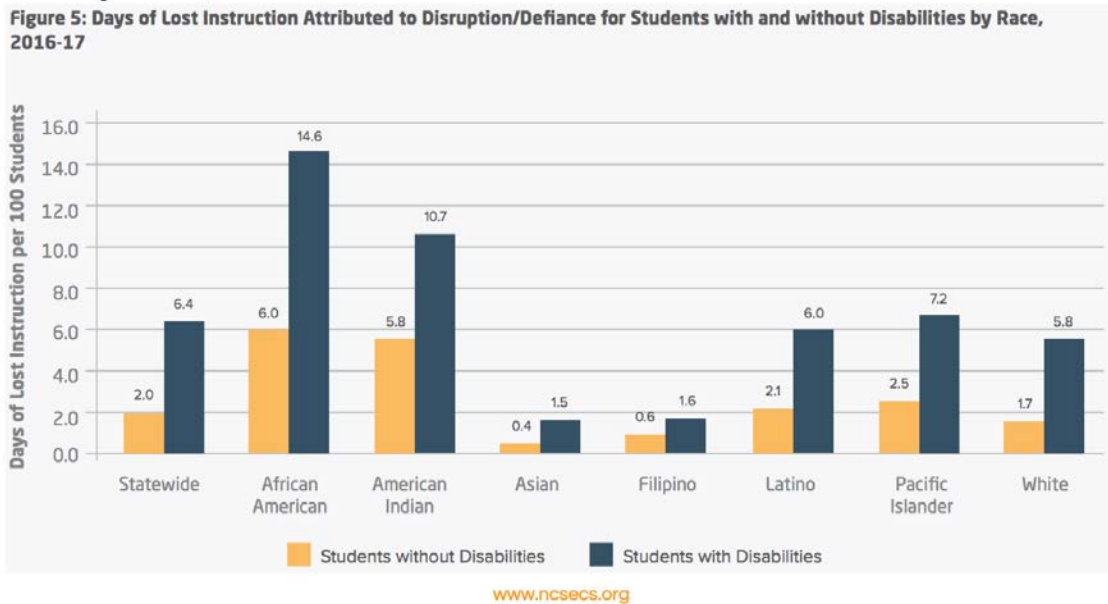
Disruption/Defiance

Figure 5: Days of Lost Instruction Attributed to Disruption/Defiance for Students with and without Disabilities by Race, 2016-17

Figure 19 shows the number of days of instruction lost by students with disabilities compared to students without disabilities by race/ethnicity.

Call to Action

As a charter school leader, if a school mission has words 'all' and 'everyone', consider how this statement is embedded into beliefs about students and families, the allocation of resources, and school policies, for example. Lastly, and most importantly, consider how charter schools can continue to leverage autonomy to further benefit students with disabilities.

Research Review: Barriers in Special Education

This session was presented by Alex Medler, Project Director, Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers (CACSA).

> *CACSA's mission is to promote and support best practices in charter school authorizing and to help all Colorado charter school authorizers develop, adopt, and implement practices that improve results for all students. CACSA does not take positions on the decisions of authorizers. CACSA is an independent non-profit Colorado organization, governed by a board of professional leaders who oversee charter authorizing activity for Colorado authorizers. It is independently governed and operated and not a part of, or affiliated with, the Colorado Department of Education, the Colorado Charter School Institute, the Colorado League of Charter Schools or any other Colorado or national organization.*

Colorado Authorizer and Charter School Needs Assessment

The Colorado League of Charter Schools (CLCS), in partnership with CACSA, conducted a needs assessment that included an analysis of studies and data, an authorizer survey, interviews, and the annual by CLCS survey of charter schools.

Broadly, the needs assessment demonstrated that:
- districts provided an appropriate provision of resources, guidance, and training to charter schools regarding special education,
- districts believe students with disabilities have appropriate access to charter schools,
- there are mixed responses from districts on whether students with disabilities experience an appropriate continuum of academic and social emotional instruction in charters, and
- districts believe that charters deliver appropriate programs for students with mild to moderate disabilities, but charter schools do not have adequate capacity to deliver appropriate programs for students with severe disabilities.

Through the needs assessment, Colorado districts identified special education in charter schools as their biggest priority. Specifically, district authorizers want to generally improve practices for special education and improve access, services, and outcomes for at-risk students.

As a part of the authorizer survey, respondents were asked to rank actions that could most improve access, services, and outcomes for students with disabilities.

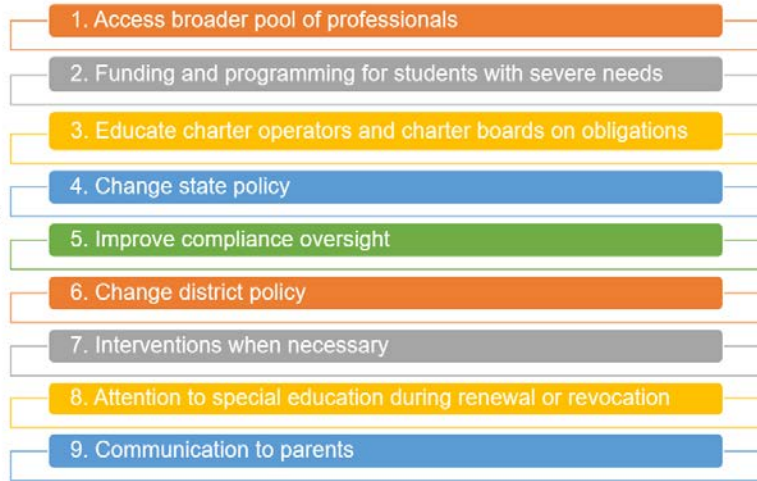*Figure 20. Authorizer Rankings from Needs Assessment*

Figure 20 shows the results from the authorizer survey regarding priorities that would improve access, services, and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Following the results from the needs assessment, CACSA developed an action plan that included six recommendations.

Figure 21. CASCA Recommendations
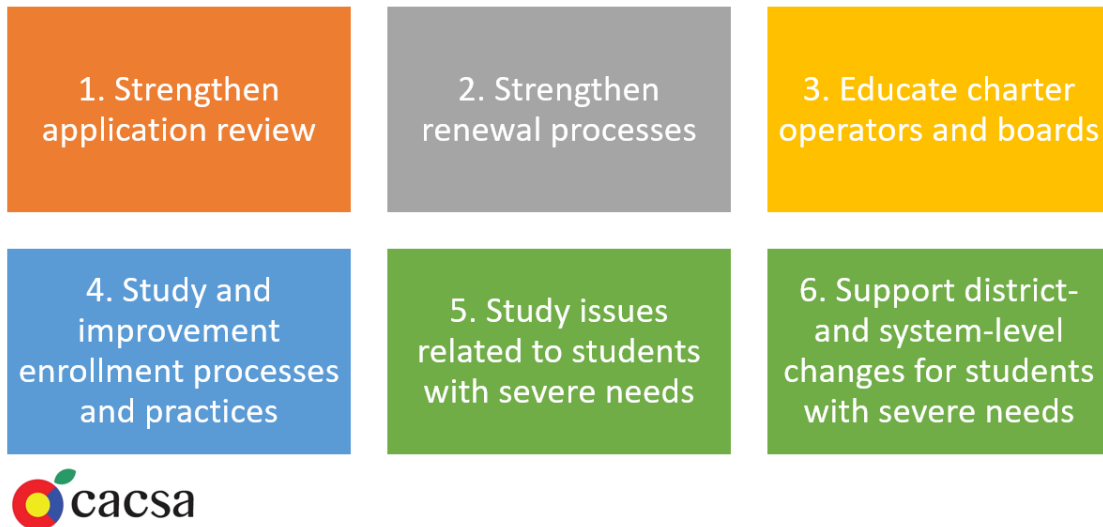

Figure 21 shows the six recommendations identified by CACSA following the needs assessment administered to charter schools and authorizers.

Additional information was provided within each area of the recommendation and is summarized below.

Recommendation #1 - Strengthen application review
   a. Update the CACSA model application, rubric, and interview process to provide for a greater understanding of how the proposed school will serve students with disabilities. Include additional components that look at the quality of special education.
   b. Move beyond basic compliance, and probe for the quality of programming and depth of understanding.
   c. Audit authorizer processes, help authorizer revise practices, promote consistency.

Recommendation #2 - Attention during renewal
   a. Examine programming and access, services, and outcomes.
   b. Include details in annual reviews of school performance that inform renewal.
   c. Examine enrollment, including cases with dramatic under enrollment of students with disabilities. Promote a root cause analysis that is balanced and identifies potential barriers at school and authorizer level.
   d. Audit authorizer practices for renewal and support changes.

   Convening Discussion - How can a charter school better tell their story in the application?
   - *During renewal, we worked extensively with our authorizer to understand the services that were being provided to students with disabilities and gifted and talented students.*
   - *As an authorizer, we get a great sense of the charter program/mission/vision and how it is unique, but it is not always clear how schools will serve all students including those with mild and moderate needs.*
   - *An authorizer recently had an application for a dual language immersion model and the review surfaced concerns about whether the school understood requirements to serve all students. The application was approved but the applicant agreed to a condition to work with the special education department.*
   - *Inclusive practices are very important but the law is clear that charter schools have to offer a full continuum of services and it is important to know that a charter school will eventually have to serve a student that is only in the general education environment for 50% of the time.*
   - *Sometimes charter schools don't always have a strong understanding of how closely districts work with charters with respect to special education.*

Recommendation #3 - Educate operators and boards
   a. Use resources from district on-boarding.
   b. Use resources from partners outside the charter sector to address basic needs.
   c. Use partners to promote education of charter founders and applicants.
   d. Encourage authorizers to provide charters access to district professional development.

Recommendation #4 - Study and improve enrollment processes and practices
   a. Needs assessment did not document the extent of problems or root causes.
   b. Support additional research into current practice, including:
      i. What works well and barriers,
      ii. Charter schools and authorizer practices, and
      iii. Parental experience and knowledge.
   c. Resources to help authorizers and charters with parental communication.

    d. Share information on current district and school practices that promote access.

Recommendation #5 - Student issues related to students with severe needs
    a. Commission research to investigate this complex topic which is in the early stages of development.
    b. Research Denver Public Schools center-based program and other models and approaches.
    c. Work with national and local partners and include national structures.
    d. Explore outcomes and quality of services and programs (not just access).

Recommendation #6 - Support district- and system-level change to support students with severe needs
    a. Expand research related to students with severe needs to include funding, structures, and policies. (Note: CACSA does not influence policy)
    b. Analyze changes at school, network, district, and state levels.
    c. Influence the capacity and commitment of charter operators to serve a full continuum of special needs.

Seeing it Firsthand Panel: Insights from Charter School Leaders on Serving Students with Disabilities

This session was facilitated by Megan Ohlssen, NCSECS and Clare Vickland, CSI. The panel included Maggie McMahon, Tidioute Charter, Wanda Gregory, Capital City Public Charter, and Carlin Nielsen, Animas High School.

Seizing the Opportunity: Educating Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools

This panel was inspired by a [report released by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) and the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS)](#). The researchers 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:

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.
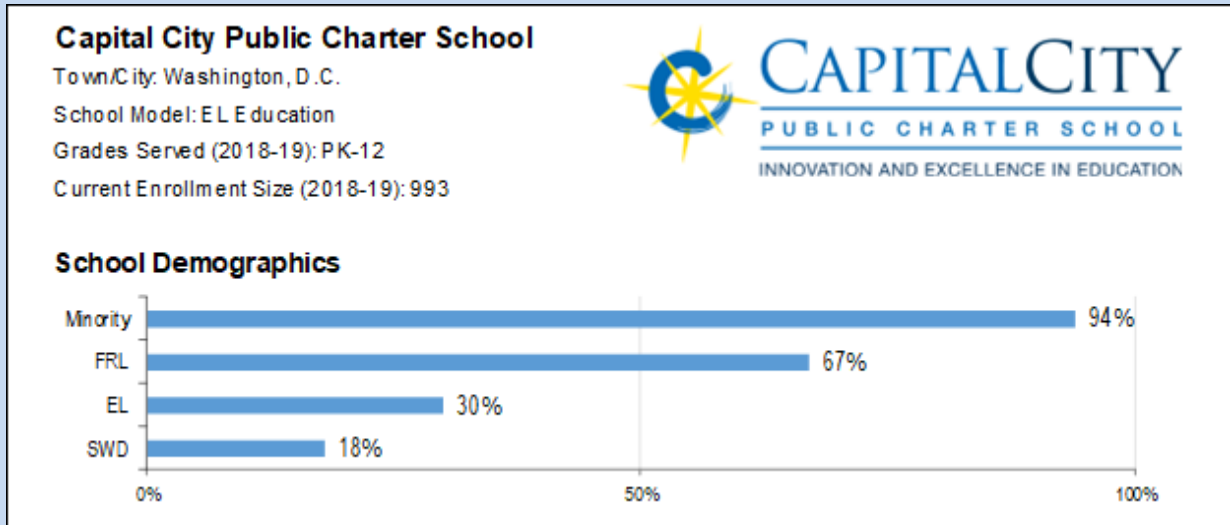
The CRPE study provides examples of how to move the needle for some of the most at-risk students and build the evidence base for successful strategies to reach every child with a disability. Effective strategies depend on effective systems, and the CRPE findings reinforce previous research on continuous 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.

This work was also developed into a Case Study which highlights the promising practices for building and fostering an inclusive system presented in the CRPE study and the comments shared by these three schools during the Equity Convening.

School Profiles

Capital City Public Charter School Profile

Capital City Public Charter School
Town/City: Washington, D.C.
School Model: E L Education
Grades Served (2018-19): P K-12
Current Enrollment Size (2018-19): 993

CAPITALCITY
PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL
INNOVATION AND EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

School Demographics

Category	Percentage
Minority	94%
FRL	67%
EL	30%
SWD	18%

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.
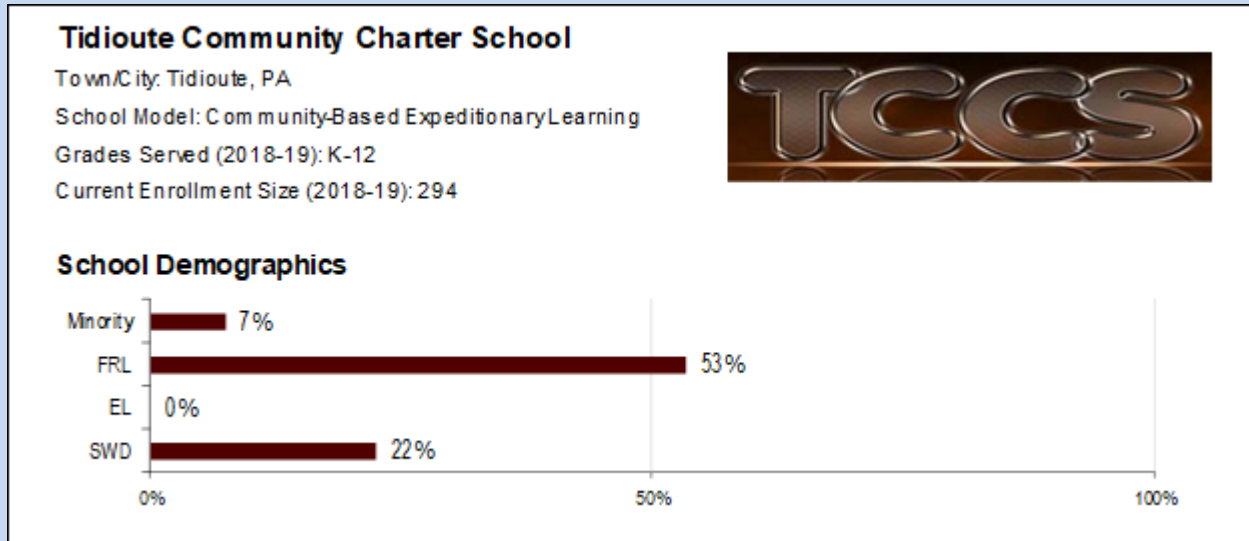
Model:

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

Demographic	Percentage
Minority	7%
FRL	53%
EL	0%
SWD	22%

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
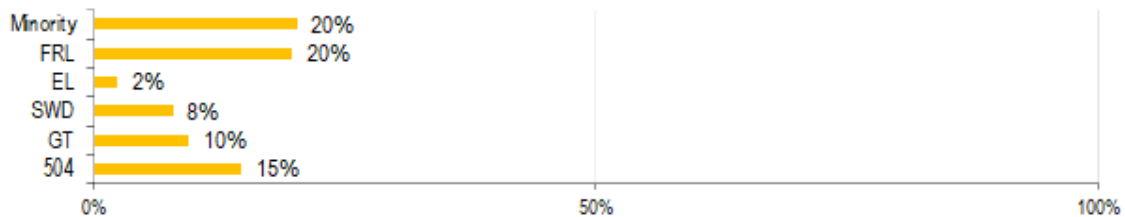
Animas High School

Town/City: Durango, CO

School Model: Project-Based Learning

Grades Served (2018-19): 9-12

Current Enrollment Size (2018-19): 252

School Demographics

Category	Percentage
Minority	20%
FRL	20%
EL	2%
SWD	8%
GT	10%
504	15%

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

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 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.

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.

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% of 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.

Conclusion
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.

Creating Safe, Engaging, and Equitable Schools

The final session of the Equity Convening was an interactive workshop presented by Michele Tissiere, Engaging Schools.

> *Engaging Schools is a national nonprofit organization that works with educators to integrate academic, social, and emotional learning and development. They have a strategic focus on middle and high school and provide professional learning and resources for instructional practice, classroom management, discipline and student support, postsecondary readiness, and advisory programs.*

A summary of the workshop is not provided due to the nature of the interactive session.

Conclusion

The first Equity Convening brought together a variety of stakeholders to engage in conversations around issues of enrollment, discipline, and outcomes for students with disabilities in Colorado charter schools. By grounding the group in the current data for both the Colorado and national charter sector, participants were able to anchor their learning from the day and operate with a shared understanding. The day focused on research-based strategies to increase outcomes for students with disabilities through an inclusive approach to learning. Participants were able to hear the strategies backed by research, as well as those applied in real world settings by charter leaders across the country. The balance of research and application provided participants with both broad strategies and actionable tools to apply to their work as advocates for equity for students with disabilities in charter schools. Future Equity Convenings will explore additional aspects of equity for various groups of students within the Colorado charter school sector through shining a light on the area of need and providing both research-based practices and best practices being implemented by other leaders in this area.

Appendix

Schools of Choice Equity Convening
Agenda
Friday, September 6th, 2019 | 8:30 am-4:45 pm
mindSpark Learning | 455 S Pierce St. Lakewood, CO 80226

TIME	SESSION
8:30-9:00	Light breakfast and coffee provided by CSI*
9:00-9:20	**Welcome & Opening Remarks** *Alyssa Pearson, Deputy Commissioner, Colorado Department of Education (CDE)* *Dr. Terry Croy Lewis, Executive Director, Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI)*
9:20-9:50	**A Review of Research on Inclusion & Special Education in Charter Schools** *Ryan Marks, Director of Evaluation & Assessment, CSI*
9:50-10:00	Break
10:00-11:00	**Advancing Equity Panel: Expanding the Conversation around Special Education** *Facilitated by Dr. Terry Croy Lewis* *Panelists: Sen. Rachel Zenzinger, District 9	Chris Gibbons, Executive Director, STRIVE	Tim Farmer, Charter Attorney & Parent	Kevin West, Director of Charter Partnerships, Adams 12 School District*
11:00-12:00	**National Context: A Practical Look on Special Education in Charter Schools** *Megan Ohlssen, National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS)*
12:00-1:00	Lunch provided by CSI*
1:00-1:45	**Research Review: Barriers in Special Education** *Alex Medler, Project Director, Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers (CACSA)*
1:45-3:00	**Seeing it Firsthand Panel: Insights from Charter School Leaders on Serving Students with Disabilities** *Facilitated by Megan Ohlssen, NCSECS and Clare Vickland, CSI* *Panelists: Maggie McMahon, Tidioute Charter	Wanda Gregory, Capital City Public Charter School	Carlin Nielsen, Animas High School*
3:00-4:30	**Creating Safe, Engaging, and Equitable Schools** *Michele Tissiere, Engaging Schools*
4:30-4:45	**Reflections & Closing Remarks** *Clare Vickland, Director of Student Services, CSI* *Bill Kottenstette, Executive Director, Schools of Choice, CDE*

Food was not purchased with federal funds.

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