


# Assessing the Outcomes of Charter School Students with Special Needs: Research Design Brief

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In March 2013, CRPE convened a group of experts, from leading economists to special education authorities, to determine the best ways for researchers to assess the learning and socio-emotional outcomes of charter school students with special needs.

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## Acknowledgements

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## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

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Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators and programs to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families.

Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools.

CRPE is a self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington. Our work is funded through private philanthropic dollars, federal grants, and contracts.

## Introduction

In debates about the efficacy of charter schools, one key question often arises: Do these schools underserve students with disabilities? In other words, do charter schools keep out students who qualify for special education services, and do they fail to serve them well if admitted? A recent report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that charter schools enroll lower proportions of students with special needs than do district-run public schools.<sup>1</sup> Some people charge that happens because charters either cannot or do not want to educate more challenging students. Charter proponents, while admitting that some charter schools have underserved students with special needs, also claim that many charters use their autonomy to educate students with disabilities in innovative and effective ways.

As with many debates concerning charter schools, discussions on this topic tend to be grounded in loose perception rather than in rigorously obtained evidence.<sup>2</sup> While in the past little research was conducted on the important question of whether or not charter schools provide equitable access, now research and policy attention is increasing.<sup>3</sup> Missing entirely from this discussion, however, is any information about *how well charter schools serve the students who choose to attend*. How do students with special needs fare in charter schools, compared with their counterparts in district-run schools?

This is a simple question, but finding the means to answer it is very complicated. In March 2013 we convened a group of nine experts, from leading economists to special education authorities, in order to determine the best ways for researchers to assess the learning and socio-emotional outcomes of charter school students with disabilities. In this brief, we draw from these conversations and present the challenges associated with and recommendations for designing the kind of rigorous empirical research that is now lacking.

## Challenges

The expert panel agreed that a rigorous study of outcomes for charter school students with disabilities would have to take into account several challenges, including inconsistent approaches to identifying and tracking students with diverse learning needs, data and methodological limitations, and inconsistencies in state policy.

**INCONSISTENT IDENTIFICATION AND MEASUREMENT ISSUES.** Students eligible for special education services span a wide spectrum, from those with mild needs to those with very severe disabilities. While many school, district, and state administrative datasets contain a flag that allows researchers to identify students as having special needs, it is not always possible to discern what sorts of disabilities are included in that flag. Also, students labeled with the same disability can pose very different learning challenges. Thus comparing how schools serve similarly labeled students, or students' outcomes in those schools, must be done very carefully.

Further, schools and districts differ in how they determine who should be placed on an individualized education program (IEP). And, to complicate the matter more, research finds that minority and linguistically diverse students are more likely to be classified as needing special education services, regardless of their actual need.<sup>4</sup> Researchers need to either provide appropriate caveats recognizing these complexities or collect supplemental, qualitative data to more accurately account for them.

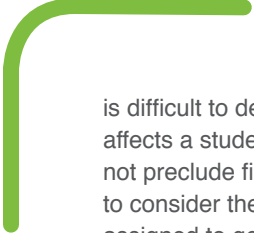
Once labeled as eligible for special education or provided an IEP, a student may remain in a classroom consisting only of other special education students or participate in general education for part or all of the school day, depending on the level of disability, grade level, and the school or district policy on inclusion. Given this, it

1. According to the GAO analysis, in the 2009-10 school year, 8.2 percent of students in charter schools nationwide had disabilities, compared to 11.2 percent of students in district-run public schools. See: U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Charter Schools: Additional Federal Attention Needed to Help Protect Access for Students with Disabilities*, Publication No. GAO-12-543 (Washington, DC: June 2012).

2. See, for example, Bruno V. Manno, Gregg Vanourek, and Chester E. Finn, Jr., "The Future of Charter Schools: How Big, How Bright?" *Teaching and Change*, 7: 222-234 (2000); Frances Fowler, "School Choice: Silver Bullet, Social Threat, or Sound Policy?" *Educational Researcher* 32: 33-39 (2003); Joanna Smith, Priscilla Wohlstetter, Caitlin C. Farrell, and Michelle B. Nayfack, "Beyond Ideological Warfare: The Maturation of Research on Charter Schools," *Journal of School Choice* 5(4): 444-507 (2011).

3. Robin Lake, Betheny Gross, and Patrick Denice, *New York State Special Education Enrollment Analysis* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2012); Robin Lake and Alex Medler, "Do Charter Schools Serve Special-Needs Students?" *Education Week*, April 2, 2013.

4. See, for example, Alfredo J. Artiles and Stanley C. Trent, "Overrepresentation of Minority Students in Special Education: A Continuing Debate," *Journal of Special Education* 27(4): 410-437 (1994); Dalun Zhang and Antonis Katsiyannis, "Minority Representation in Special Education: A Persistent Challenge," *Remedial and Special Education* 23(3): 180-187 (2002); Fraser Lauchlan and Christopher Boyle, "Is the Use of Labels in Special Education Helpful?" *Support for Learning* 22(1): 36-42 (2007); Amanda L. Sullivan, "Disproportionality in Special Education Identification and Placement of English Language Learners," *Exceptional Children* 77(3): 317-334 (2011).



is difficult to determine how, precisely, a charter school affects a student's learning. At the same time, this does not preclude finding an overall effect if we are willing to consider these decisions—like whether students are assigned to general or special education classrooms—as part of the overall treatment.

Relatedly, charter schools and district-run schools may differ in who they identify as eligible for special education services, and how. It is possible that a charter school finds a way besides special education to serve a student who would have been given an IEP at a district-run public school. Or perhaps parents applied to a charter school with the expressed intent of changing the status of their child, who may have been classified for special education services they believe he or she did not really need.<sup>5</sup> In particular, we know anecdotally that some parents hope that the small size of many charter schools will lead to more individualized attention that precludes the need for an IEP. Or, as some researchers, policymakers, and school leaders have suggested, charter schools reduce the proportion of students with special needs that they educate by encouraging them to go elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> How do we begin to understand how the families of students needing special education choose their schools? And how do we incorporate that information into a rigorous study of charter school outcomes for students with disabilities?

An additional challenge is related to the outcomes data available to researchers. Studies that attempt to measure the impact of particular educational interventions, including special education programs, often use test scores as the outcome. Special education students receive a range of accommodations during test-taking. While these accommodations are often assumed to merely level the playing field and still accurately measure student achievement through scores equivalent to those obtained by other students, evidence suggests that the

use of accommodations can in many cases alter scores in ways that threaten comparability and validity.<sup>7</sup> Also, some students with special needs—albeit a very small percentage—do not take the same tests as their peers, and the scores on these alternative tests may not be comparable to scores on the regular tests. In California, for example, students take one of three tests depending on whether they have been placed on an IEP and the severity of their disability.

Because of these issues (i.e., subjectivity of special education diagnoses and variability of special education and related services and supports), research examining the effectiveness of charter and district-run public schools in producing outcomes for students with disabilities must specify for whom and in what educational context a particular school type is effective. Indeed, regardless of whether a school is a charter or not, special education is by definition individualized and based on a student's particular needs. Researchers must be careful in the way they construct comparison groups of students and choose outcomes to measure.

**RESEARCH DESIGN CONCERNS.** Once researchers come to a better understanding of who constitutes the population of students in special education and carefully consider what outcomes to measure, they need to employ a rigorous methodology to deal appropriately with the issue of selection bias. Randomized control trials (RCTs) are the gold standard when it comes to exploring effects of educational interventions and policies, but they are rarely used, for ethical and logistical reasons.<sup>8</sup>

Instead, education research often approximates random assignment to experimental groups through the lottery enrollment systems used by charter schools and districts. Lottery systems are useful for research in that they create two groups of children who likely have similar

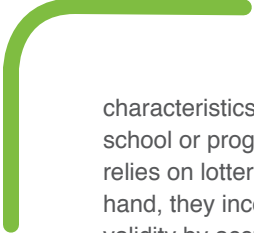
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5. Thomas A. Fiore, Lessley M. Harwell, Jose Blackorby, and Kara S. Finnigan, *Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities: A National Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2000); Julie Berry Cullen and Steven G. Rivkin, "The Role of Special Education in School Choice," pp. 67-106, in *The Economics of School Choice*, ed. Caroline M. Hoxby (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Mary Bailey Estes, "Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities: How Far Have We Come?" *Remedial and Special Education* 30(4): 216-224 (2009).

6. Lake, Gross, and Denice, 2012. See also Richard Rothstein, "Charter Conundrum," *The American Prospect* 39:1-16 (1998); Nancy J. Zollers and Arun K. Ramanathan, "For-Profit Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities: The Sordid Side of the Business of Schooling," *Phi Delta Kappan* 80:297-304 (1998); Nancy J. Zollers, "Schools Need Rules When It Comes to Students with Disabilities," *Education Week*, pp. 46, 48 (2000); Kenneth R. Howe and Kevin G. Welner, "School Choice and the Pressure to Perform: Deja Vu for Children with Disabilities," in *Policy and Power in Inclusive Education: Values into Practice*, ed. J. Rix, M. Nind, and K. Sheehy (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2005), 36-46; Mary Bailey Estes, "Choice for All?" *Journal of Special Education* 37(4): 257-267 (2004).

7. Daniel M. Koretz and Karen Barton, *Assessing Students with Disabilities: Issues and Evidence*, CSE Technical Report No. 587 (Los Angeles, CA: Center for the Study of Evaluation, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, University of California, Los Angeles, 2003).

8. What Works Clearinghouse, *Procedures and Standards Handbook* (Washington, DC: Author, 2013).



characteristics, except that one gains entry to a particular school or program and one does not. Research that relies on lotteries involves a tradeoff, though. On the one hand, they incorporate strong causal rigor and internal validity by accurately eliminating self-selection bias to get a true measurement of student gains. On the other hand, keeping track of who did or did not win a lottery and monitoring their progress tends to be quite expensive and time-intensive, and the research requires high sample sizes to attain the statistical power necessary for discovering effects of schools or programs on outcomes. It is also limited by relatively low external validity; that is, the process of conducting lotteries and the factors surrounding them vary so much that it can be difficult to generalize the findings to other schools and districts, particularly those that do not use lotteries.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, the way parents choose to enter lotteries can make it hard to generalize from them.<sup>10</sup> Parents of children with special needs will flock to schools with a good reputation for serving students with disabilities. It is possible that if a charter school has to turn away many applicants with disabilities—demand that provides the necessary counterfactual condition of students who applied but did not get—it is because that school is especially effective at educating students with special needs. Any findings, then, will not be representative of all schools, especially those schools that have not managed to attract the same high level of parental interest.

Other methods have been used as alternatives to randomized control trials, but each has its own set of limitations.<sup>11</sup> In any research design that compares individual students' performance before and after their participation in an intervention, such as being placed on an IEP, the intervention must be consistently applied across students and sites, and outcomes must be measured frequently and accurately—all of which are challenges. Also, there are many immeasurable factors, such as students' personality or teachers' perceptions, that affect whether a student is assigned an IEP.

One common research method used to explore outcomes among students with and without disabilities in district-run schools is propensity score matching, which compares outcomes among students who do and do not receive a given intervention (e.g., being placed on an IEP) but who have otherwise similar characteristics.<sup>12</sup> These matching procedures address the problem of selection bias; however, they can be problematic in that there are many relevant student characteristics that affect a student's likelihood of being placed on an IEP but that are not typically included in the data. Indeed, research shows that a healthy degree of subjectivity is involved in identifying students for special education services, and procedures among schools vary widely.<sup>13</sup> And a given group of students with a particular disability, such as autism, represents a wide range of potential learning and other challenges. That complexity is unlikely to be captured by relying on proxies that are contained in the data such as IEP eligibility.

**INCONSISTENCIES IN STATE POLICY CONTEXTS.** Just as we see heterogeneity within the student population and services rendered, we also see much variation across states, both in terms of policy and implementation. While we might seek to document the national picture, and while there are studies that attempt to measure outcomes for students with disabilities using nationally representative data, this variation complicates such endeavors, particularly when considering charter schools.<sup>14</sup> Each state uses its own standardized tests and has its own policies surrounding special education. States differ in the types of tests they administer to students with disabilities, the kinds of accommodations they make available, the ways in which students are identified and placed on IEPs, and whether public school districts provide for the assignment of students with special needs to private schools.

Additionally, charter schools are granted legal authority to operate by highly idiosyncratic state charter school laws. Of particular import for discussions regarding

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9. Julian Betts and Paul T. Hill, *Key Issues in Studying Charter Schools and Achievement: A Review and Suggestions for National Guidelines*, National Charter School Research Project White Paper Series, No. 2 (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2006).

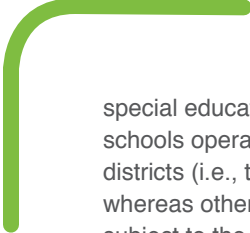
10. We thank panel member Laura Hamilton for raising this additional generalizability issue during the review process.

11. Examples of such methods include single-subject designs and fixed effects models. For more on these research designs, see, for instance, Melody Tankersley, Sanna Harjusola-Webb, and Timothy J. Landrum, "Using Single-Subject Research to Establish the Evidence Base of Special Education," *Intervention in School and Clinic* 44(2): 83-90 (2008); Jesse Rothstein, "Teacher Quality in Educational Production: Tracking, Decay, and Student Achievement," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 125(1): 175-214 (2010).

12. See, for example, Paul L. Morgan, Michelle L. Frisco, George Farkas, and Jacob Hibel, "A Propensity Score Matching Analysis of the Effects of Special Education Services," *Journal of Special Education* 43(4): 236-254 (2010).

13. See, for example, Jacob Hibel, George Farkas, and Paul L. Morgan, "Who Is Placed into Special Education?" *Sociology of Education* 83: 312-322 (2010).

14. Morgan et al., 2010.



special education in the charter sector, some charter schools operate as their own autonomous, single-school districts (i.e., their own local education agency, or LEA), whereas others operate as part of an existing LEA subject to the policies and procedures of the traditional district. In practice, this introduces another layer of heterogeneity among charter schools, since some are given greater autonomy and control over their programs than others. In some states, for example, charter schools that are part of a traditional LEA are required to use the special education teachers provided by the local district. The amount of funding that follows students with diverse learning needs to charter schools also varies, as does individual districts' special education procedures and relationships with charter schools. Given this large degree of variation, comparing charter schools in one state to charter and district-run schools in another lacks validity.

**AVAILABILITY OF HIGH-QUALITY AND ACCURATE DATA.** Often, the data researchers rely on for assessing outcomes of students with special needs are imprecise or incomplete. The problems start with the complicated bureaucratic processes required to report the number of students with special needs that a school has identified. It can be unclear, when researchers receive a dataset, whether district-run and charter schools are labeling students' status in the same way.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, students are flagged in datasets as eligible for special education services in a binary fashion: Do or don't they receive special education services? Students with special needs span a wide spectrum from very mild to severe, however, and the data rarely reflect this. Our expert panel also raised the possibility that charter schools enroll very few students with severe disabilities—because they lack the resources or trained staff, because they discourage students with special needs from enrolling or staying, or for other reasons yet to be fully understood. So studies comparing special-needs populations and outcomes in charter and district-run public schools may only be able to speak to students with mild to moderate disabilities as a result of small sample sizes of students at the more severe end of the needs spectrum.

Some on the panel wondered whether using IEPs would be useful in providing insight into the differences among students as well as the nuances in the delivery

of special education services across schools. But IEPs come with their own challenges. To be used meaningfully in research, they would have to be coded consistently, the information included would have to be simultaneously succinct and comprehensive, student privacy would be a concern, and how they are written varies widely from school to school and even teacher to teacher. Relatedly, while it might prove useful to collect supplemental information from teachers and data on students' course-taking, that information may be fraught with inconsistencies and inaccuracies as well.

## Recommendations

Given the unique challenges of measuring outcomes for students with disabilities, especially careful and sophisticated research is merited to ensure that outcome studies provide an accurate and informative picture of how well charter schools serve these students. Researchers should, for example, first seek to understand the context for family choice and special education service provision in charter schools. They should also be sure to use or develop rigorous measures of outcomes beyond test scores. To deal with the challenge of inconsistent data and policy contexts, we recommend a series of rich local studies over a large national study, employing high-quality methods and more creative data sources.

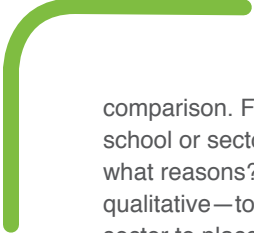
**DEAL FIRST WITH THE QUESTION OF WHO CONSTITUTES THE SPECIAL EDUCATION POPULATION.** Before we can ask whether students are better off in charter schools than if they had gone to district-run public schools, we need to better understand equity and access. That is, we need to get a better handle on who constitutes the special education student population for any outcome study to be credible. Are the students with disabilities who attend charter schools different from their counterparts attending district-run public schools? How do parents of students with disabilities make decisions about whether or not to apply to a charter school?

Furthermore, researchers should address the movement of students in and out of charter schools, and in and out of special education. Neither status is likely to be static. In this way, research that informs our understanding of how students move through the system represents a compelling avenue of inquiry beyond a point-in-time

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15. See, for example, Caroline M. Hoxby, Sonali Murarka, and Jenny Kang, *How New York City's Charter Schools Affect Achievement*, Second report in series (Cambridge, MA: New York City Charter School Evaluation Project, 2009); Fiore et al., 2000; and Lauren Morando Rhim, Jennifer Faulkner, and Margaret J. McLaughlin, *Project Intersect: Studying Special Education in Charter Schools*, Research Report #5: Access and Accountability for Students with Disabilities in California Charter Schools (College Park, MD: Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth, University of Maryland, 2006).





comparison. For instance, how quickly does a particular school or sector move students off of their IEPs and for what reasons? Can we leverage data—quantitative or qualitative—to understand what motivates a school or sector to place students on or move students off of an IEP? What might researchers and policymakers learn about families’ satisfaction regarding their schools’ special education services from the rate at which students move from district-run public schools to charter schools or vice versa? In answering these questions, it is important to consider the incentive structure in a given school or district for having students on or off of IEPs.

### **CONSIDER OTHER OUTCOMES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS IN ADDITION TO TEST SCORES.**

Given that test scores may be a poor or unreliable measure of how well schools serve students with disabilities, it would be useful to consider other relevant academic outcomes. Existing research on these outcomes for students with special needs—outside of the context of comparing charters to district-run schools—may prove helpful.<sup>16</sup> For instance, high school graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment are likely to be more tractable and informative than trying to make sense of test scores. This information already exists, in the National Student Clearinghouse and some other large, longitudinal, student-level databases that are linkable to state administrative data. As the charter sector grows and matures, its students are more likely to be captured in a significant way in these datasets.

Researchers should look at non-academic outcomes as well, such as employment and earnings data, to determine how well charter or district-run public schools prepare students with disabilities for life after education. Socio-emotional measures, such as task-avoidance, acting out, social withdrawal, and resilience, constitute another important avenue for research, though they may be difficult to assess. Some of these measures are self-reported, for instance, and thus might be heavily influenced by students’ comparisons of themselves with their peers. To take resilience as an example: If the other children in a particular student’s school have a high level of resilience, that student might think comparatively and rate himself as less resilient than if he attended a school where most of his peers had middling resilience. Before

we can marshal socio-emotional measures toward meaningful findings, we first need evidence of their validity and reliability, particularly for students receiving special education services.

It may also be useful for researchers to examine the needs and realities of special education teachers, particularly in the context of the proliferation of evaluation and accountability policies. How are teachers held accountable for results, and do the current methods for doing so (such as value-added models and structured observation rubrics) adequately reflect their work? For instance, what effect does the presence of, say, two or three students with special needs in a classroom do to a teacher’s value-added or observation scores?

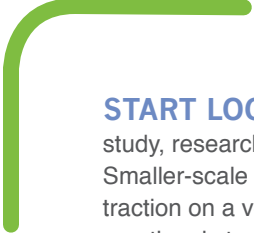
Relatedly, how much control does a school, CMO, or district have over the resources necessary for the quality provision of special education services, and how does that degree of control affect outcomes? People ask whether charter schools are failing to serve students with disabilities. A better question is whether resources are allocated so that they can do so successfully. How might school, district, and state policymakers ensure equity in and access to special education services? Cost analyses could provide insight on how much money schools receive from the state and whether or not these funds increase when a school enrolls more students with special needs.

In light of these issues, we pose a big-picture question: What does equality of access and service actually look like in the context of a portfolio of schools collectively serving the students of a particular area? Certainly no school or group of schools should be discriminating against any students. But equity may be less a factor of how many students with special needs are in each school than a reflection of how districts and charter schools work together to jointly ensure that all students are being served effectively and that there are enough resources to go around. Studies of the degree to which districts and charter schools collaborate, and whether and how such collaboration benefits students and their families, could make significant and worthwhile contributions.<sup>17</sup>

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16. See, for example, a series of articles by Mary Wagner and colleagues that uses the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education to study trends in the employment, wages, postsecondary education, and residential independence of youth with disabilities at various time points after high school, e.g., Mary Wagner and Jose Blackorby, “Transition from High School to Work or College: How Special Education Students Fare,” *The Future of Children* 6(1): 103-120 (1996); Mary Wagner, Lynn Newman, Renee Cameto, and Phyllis Levine, *Changes Over Time in the Early Postschool Outcomes of Youth with Disabilities*, SRI Project No. P11182 (Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2005).

17. An example of this kind of [district-charter collaboration](#) is the multiyear initiative funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and supported by the Center on Reinventing Public Education. Sixteen major cities have signed on to this initiative to discuss how to share resources and responsibilities to serve all students more equitably.



**START LOCAL.** Rather than attempting a national study, researchers should start in districts or states. Smaller-scale outcomes studies might help us gain traction on a very complicated set of questions, whereas a national study of outcomes would be too fraught with differences in testing, identification, service delivery, school governance, and a host of other policies.

Case studies may be particularly applicable here. For instance, one could imagine an in-depth study of a select group of schools that have adopted a mission of working with high-needs students. Such case study and qualitative data offer the potential for rich and compelling studies that avoid many of the issues associated with heterogeneity and selection bias. In a recent analysis, for example, Joshua Angrist (professor of economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a member of our expert panel) and colleagues found that attending a KIPP school in Massachusetts had fairly large positive effects on the test scores of students with diverse learning needs, compared to students who applied to but did not get into the KIPP school.<sup>18</sup> This school proved a useful research site because it enrolled a comparable percent of students with special needs (roughly 20 percent of the population) and tested most of these students.

But a local focus does not necessarily mean just looking at one school at a time. Indeed, a researcher could consider whole districts, markets where charter schools enroll a significant portion—say, 20 or 25 percent—of the total student population, such as the District of Columbia, Los Angeles, and Cleveland. Such an approach would provide a more representative sample to inform decision leaders who are interested in knowing the outcomes for charter schools in particular cities or for particular types of charter schools. Focusing on a particular charter management organization (CMO) might make research easier, in that it is reasonable to expect that schools within a CMO have relatively consistent methods of writing IEPs and identifying students with disabilities. Studying CMOs rather than single charter schools could also provide access to data on more students.

## **FOCUS ON MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS.**

The panel noted particular difficulties related to how students enroll and are identified for special education in elementary schools. For instance, comparative outcomes for students who entered charter school lotteries are less likely to be tracked at the elementary school level. Given the young ages of elementary school students, researchers following these students will have to wait a long time for salient outcomes beyond test scores, such as high school and postsecondary enrollment and completion. Relatedly, researchers focused on elementary school students do not always have access to baseline performance measures, so studying performance growth, particularly for students in the earliest grades, can be impossible. It would thus be much more fruitful to focus on middle and high schools, where students will probably have been receiving special education services for years.

## **CAPITALIZE ON NONTRADITIONAL DATA SOURCES.**

Although challenges abound with the kind of student enrollment and administrative data typically used to investigate the effects of educational programs on student outcomes, we certainly are not suggesting that these data should be abandoned altogether. But it would be wise, members of our expert panel recommended, to couple quantitative analyses with qualitative data. In trying to define which students constitute the special education population and the processes leading to that composition, researchers could ask families directly why they chose or did not choose charter schools for their children with special needs. Researchers could also employ a case study design to limit the comparisons being made and extract rich, detailed data about a particular school, small set of schools, or group of students. The panel also recommended reaching out to large, federally funded special education research projects (e.g., National Center for Education Outcomes in Minnesota) to explore which states have higher-quality data. Finally, we also know that education technology is increasingly used in the delivery of instruction for students both with and without IEPs.<sup>19</sup> Researchers should look into whether these technological tools contain built-in assessments and how such assessments might be used to measure student performance and learning.

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18. Joshua D. Angrist, Susan M. Dynarski, Thomas J. Kane, Parag A. Pathak, and Christopher R. Walters, “Who Benefits from KIPP?” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 31(4): 837-860 (2012).

19. Sylvia S. Martin, “[Special Education, Technology, and Teacher Education](#),” unpublished manuscript (Monmouth University, NJ: 2003).





## Conclusion

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As charter schools continue to grow and expand, and as their share of the total student population increases both locally and nationally, critical questions must be asked about how well they serve students in a given locale—including students who qualify for special education. While disconcerting, the evidence showing that charter schools, on average, enroll lower proportions of students with diverse learning needs as compared to district-run public schools should be considered in context. Not only have many existing studies made imprecise comparisons, but also very few rigorous studies exist that measure outcomes of students with disabilities in charter schools.

In this brief, we have highlighted a number of the challenges that in some ways act as barriers to the production of methodologically sound and practically useful research on how students with disabilities fare in charter schools as compared to in district-run schools. We have also set out possible lines of inquiry that we hope scholars will consider to build the body of empirical evidence, which can then inform policy and practice. Ultimately, we hope that these recommendations will enable policymakers and the public to become wiser consumers of special education charter school studies.

Furthermore, we see a role for the U.S. Department of Education as well as other funding agencies in commissioning studies that attend to the challenges and recommendations laid out in this report. A natural place to start would be for such agencies to commission a series of local studies that bring different rigorous qualitative and quantitative methods to bear on a single locale. To this end, the Center on Reinventing Public Education, with the generous financial support of the Walton Family Foundation, has begun to commission studies related to how charter schools identify special education students. Researchers will use school enrollment lottery data to estimate whether students who enroll in charter schools are more or less likely to then acquire an IEP than students who applied but did not get into charter schools in particular districts. These quantitative analyses will then be complemented with school case studies that include interviews with principals, teachers, and parents of students with diverse learning needs.