

**How School Culture and Support Systems Can Improve
Disciplinary Outcomes for Students with Disabilities:
Mott Haven Academy Charter School Case Study**

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Acknowledgments

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About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

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 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 nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through philanthropy, federal grants, and contracts.

Introduction: Purpose and Summary of this Case Study

Charter schools—public schools that receive greater autonomy from district and state regulations in return for greater accountability—present opportunities to provide exemplary and innovative supports and services to students with disabilities. Charter schools’ freedom to innovate enables them to create and offer new models and practices, which are much needed by students with disabilities and their families seeking the right “fit.” Charter schools, however, face specific challenges and struggles in providing students with specialized, and potentially expensive, services and accommodations, especially without the benefits provided by large district infrastructures and economies of scale.

In an effort to document and promote school models and practices that effectively serve students with disabilities in charter schools, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) asked the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS) to conduct two case studies about exemplary schools that respectively leverage available opportunities and mitigate challenges.

This case study examines Mott Haven Academy Charter School in New York City and how its positive school culture and behavior support systems improve disciplinary outcomes for students with disabilities. The other case study, *How Personalized Learning Models Can Meet the Needs of Students with Disabilities*, highlights Thrive Public Schools in San Diego and how its personalized learning model especially benefits students with disabilities and meets their specific needs. Together, these case studies provide examples of models and practices that other public schools—both charter and traditional—can implement to create programs where all students succeed, including those with disabilities.

Research Methodology

Through nominations from field experts, CRPE and NCSECS identified charter schools having success with students with disabilities via positive school culture and behavior support. They narrowed the list based on publicly available data that demonstrated a school had similar student demographics to the district in which it is located, but had better academic growth or outcomes. Using this final list of schools, the NCSECS team interviewed school leaders using a semi-structured, information-gathering interview protocol. NCSECS also reviewed both publicly available resources (such as Haven Academy’s website, Student & Family Handbook, annual report, and renewal report), as well as privately shared resources (such as schoolwide and special education-specific data, policies and procedures, school documents, and master schedules).

NCSECS selected Haven Academy to be one of the case study sites after speaking with Head of School Jessica Nauiokas. NCSECS visited the school in fall 2017 to conduct additional interviews with school administrators, teachers, students, family members, and staff (e.g., instructional aides), as well as to observe educators and students in action. These interviews enabled NCSECS to construct a consistent narrative about the school while enabling school teams to share strategies or characteristics unique to their school community. The information presented here is based on the 2017-2018 school year.

Findings from the data and document reviews, interviews, and school visit observations inform this case study, which highlights the areas identified as most important for the school’s work with students with disabilities, particularly as it relates to school culture and behavior support. NCSECS has shared drafts and integrated feedback from the school’s leaders to ensure a full and accurate picture of their school.

Mott Haven Academy School Profile

Year Opened	2008
Authorizer	New York City Department of Education
Legal Status	Local education agency (LEA) for all purposes EXCEPT special education; part of the New York City Department of Education District LEA for special education (see section “Provision of Special Education Services” for more information).
Total Enrollment	396 (2017-2018 school year)
Grades Served	PK-6 (middle school launched in August 2017)
Mission	“The Mott Haven Academy Charter School empowers children in a supportive educational environment that addresses and reduces the barriers to academic success through the integration of family support services with a rigorous, college-preparatory academic program. Our graduates will be resilient, resourceful, independent scholars who have the skills necessary to reach their full potential and to build a better future.”

Mott Haven Academy and Its Students

Mott Haven Academy, an independent public charter school located in the New York City neighborhood of Mott Haven, opened its doors in the fall of 2008 after receiving its charter from the New York City Department of Education. Aiming to explicitly design a school that responds to the specific needs of children in the child welfare system, Haven Academy’s leaders, in concert with New York City’s oldest and largest social services organization, the New York Foundling, founded the first school in the nation with this focus.

Haven Academy predominantly serves a Latino population with an average annual household income of just over \$31,000.¹ In the 2017-2018 school year, the school has an enrollment of 396 students from pre-kindergarten through 6th grade, with 51 percent from the general community and 49 percent from the foster care system or receiving prevention services due to being at risk of placement in foster care. Eighteen percent of Haven Academy students are involved with the school’s partner, the New York Foundling. In line with its mission, the school serves English language learners, students receiving free and reduced-price meals, and students of color at rates comparable to those of its geographic district, which are much higher than those of the state (see table 1 for demographic data).

Students in the child welfare system tend to experience recurring educational challenges to a much greater degree than do their peers, creating the potential to impact attendance, behavior, discipline, and performance. Moreover, they are around three times more likely to receive special education supports and services compared to their peers.² Given this disproportionality, it is unsurprising that the school serves students with disabilities at rates higher than the state’s rates. Of the 91 students schoolwide who qualify for special education, 58 percent are involved with the child welfare system.

TABLE 1. How Haven Academy’s Student Demographics Compare, 2016-2017 School Year

	New York State ³	NYC District 7 ⁴	Haven Academy ⁵
Students with Disabilities	17%	23%	23%
English Language Learners	9%	17%	17%
Free and Reduced-Price Meals	55%	92%	98%
Asian or Native Hawaiian	9%	1%	0%
Black/African-American	18%	26%	27%
Hispanic/Latino	26%	70%	69%
Multiple Races, American Indian, or Alaska Native	3%	2%	2%
White	44%	1%	1%

Given that the systems of public education and child welfare typically function independently of one another, Haven Academy leaders critically reflect on how to best meet the unique needs of their students. They address some of these by embedding trauma-sensitivity into the school environment and intentionally addressing the influence of abuse and neglect on a child’s experience. The school’s leaders and teachers all receive specific training about—and are sensitive to—trauma, with the goal of providing a safe, stable, structured, and understanding atmosphere that can support all students. Exemplifying this focus, the school’s targeted academic program is purposefully supplemented with positive school culture and behavior support systems.

This carefully crafted environment has enabled all Haven Academy students, including those with disabilities, to thrive. Students have demonstrated consistent academic growth on the Terra Nova Reading and Math tests since the school’s founding. Scoring at the 25th percentile (as measured by the Normal Curve Equivalent) in 2008, students are now scoring consistently near the national average (see figure 2 in Appendix A). In the 2016-2017 school year, Haven Academy outperformed the New York City District by 30 percent and Community District 7 by 40 percent on New York State math exams, and likewise outperformed the New York City District by 8 percent and Community District 7 by 13 percent on New York State English Language Arts exams.⁶ Moreover, the school’s former 5th graders passed their 6th grade classes in math, English, social studies, and science at a 93 percent pass rate.

Provision of Special Education Services

Families that seek Haven Academy's positive school culture and behavior support systems learn about the school in a variety of ways. School leaders and staff work with the Office of Interschool Collaborative Learning—which offers collaboration, professional development, and resource sharing between schools—and visit social services agencies and local Headstart programs in the community to offer presentations and distribute information about the school's model. Families often also hear through word of mouth about how the school, by design, meets the unique needs of students.

Haven Academy operates with an open-enrollment system that is blind to special education needs, but has preferences for children involved in the child welfare system.⁷ After the enrollment period ends and students accept their spaces, Haven Academy identifies those who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), requests all related documents and data, and works to provide a continuity of support and services.

Additionally, all students who may qualify for special education services, but who don't yet have an IEP, are evaluated at the beginning of each school year for their progress in the general program. Haven Academy uses a multi-tier approach to provide struggling learners with interventions at increasing levels of intensity according to need. The school refers all students they believe would qualify for special education services to the New York City District for further evaluation.

Charter schools in New York City operate as part of the NYC Department of Education District (i.e., the local education agency) for the purpose of special education. Any related decisions are made by a Committee on Special Education, which is a multidisciplinary team led by the district and includes parents and charter school representatives. Consequently, if eligibility is demonstrated, this committee develops an appropriate IEP to be implemented by the school.

A multidisciplinary team of Haven Academy staff members meets regularly to review the needs and progress of students with IEPs, students with Section 504 plans, or students displaying academic or social-emotional concerns—tracking progress and measuring growth using relevant data. The team maintains focus on full inclusion of students with disabilities, resulting in 100 percent of students with IEPs spending more than 80 percent or more of their school day in the general education setting. This is far greater than the national average of roughly 68 percent of students with disabilities spending at least 80 percent of their day in general education classrooms.⁸

A School Day at Haven Academy

While Haven Academy teachers prepare detailed scopes and sequences that align with Common Core State Standards, they pay particular attention to individual students' needs and strengths and regularly collect and evaluate data about individual student and classwide progress.⁹ This informs how they differentiate lesson plans and personalize daily instruction, which benefits students with disabilities in particular, given their unique learning needs.¹⁰ Guided by a combination of evidence-based practices, teachers ensure that different learning styles and abilities are accommodated. Teachers take advantage of twice-daily periods in which students take enrichment courses to prepare, plan, and collaborate with each other, which teachers identified as critical for effective special education.

“Our positive school culture precludes the need for ‘no excuse discipline.’ By building an authentic and organic community between the students and teachers, amongst the students, amongst the teachers, and between school and family/caretaker, we are able to meet our students in a dignified and empathetic way.” —*Haven Academy Elementary School Special Educator*

Notably, the school provides all staff members with specialized training and professional development on the consequences of trauma on a child’s development and learning, on the child welfare system and the specific demands it makes on children and their families, and on attachment theory. These sessions teach them how to identify and interpret students’ behaviors specifically in their individual contexts, and teach them various approaches for responding correspondingly.¹¹

To continue addressing students’ lives beyond the classroom and subsequent impact on learning, school leaders actively encourage family/caretaker participation and partnership. Haven Academy provides wraparound services to families to ensure consistency of support both at home and at school. The school accomplishes this through community participation and partnership, working alongside several child welfare agencies and community-based organizations that provide their families with critical housing, medical, and mental health supports. With dedicated support staff specifically assisting this effort, students with disabilities and their families can access comprehensive support, as opposed to experiencing fractured support from service providers that tend to operate in silos.

Positive Behavior Support

The school reinforces a positive, inclusive environment by fostering traditions and a shared language that embrace the founder’s vision for the school culture. All classrooms, offices, and common spaces, for example, display schoolwide community expectations that promote safety, stability, and understanding. The school uses a positive recognition system and celebrates students and staff for engaging in behaviors that meet those expectations. Moreover, students receive behavioral supports that are adapted to their individual needs and encourage positive decisionmaking.

“School leaders model the positive behavior system for teachers, just as teachers do for their students. They demonstrate trust in us, value us as a professional community, and offer a lot of support, all of which reinforces the school culture we are all trying to build.” —*Haven Academy Middle School Special Educator*

When students don’t follow expectations, they receive clear and consistent individualized consequences rooted in restorative practices that are designed to foster intentional reflection and growth. Possible behavioral interventions can include a break inside or outside of the classroom, conflict resolution, peer mediation, counseling, creation of an individual behavior contract, a family conference, and more. Teachers and leaders consistently document behavioral incidents to assess patterns and modify interventions accordingly.

The school’s restorative discipline model, therefore, functions preventatively, as opposed to reactively; school leadership intentionally developed this model so students understand what is expected of themselves, of adults, and of the community, which promotes a much-needed sense of security,

consistency, and predictability. While the personalized nature of this model requires relatively more work up front, school leaders believe it pays off in dividends with a natural decrease in behavioral incidents over time. Moreover, it organically addresses one significant current issue in special education: that marginalized student populations—including students with disabilities and students of color—are disciplined and suspended at much higher rates than are their peers.

TABLE 2. Haven Academy’s Discipline Rates Have Decreased Over Time

Haven Academy’s Out-of-School Suspensions	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
Number of Students Suspended	23	15	10	15
Number of Days	65	53	19	37
Number of Incidents	50	40	13	22

Source: Mott Haven Academy Charter School

As table 2 shows, the overall number of out-of-school suspensions and incidents has decreased drastically in response to the school’s shift toward addressing behavior with more restorative practices. Moreover, the school has had zero expulsions in ten years. As these statistics suggest, Haven Academy is committed to keeping their students in the classroom so they can continue learning and growing. High daily attendance rates and low chronic absenteeism rates further reflect this commitment.¹²

“If a student is transferred to a new foster home, we will provide a counseling session with the case worker and then reach out to the new family to assist in the transition. Ultimately, we believe the school should be a space of stability and safety, so we cover the cost of transportation to ensure our students stay with us regardless of mobility issues.” —Haven Academy’s Director of Social Services

Ensuring that students attend school consistently is a top priority at Haven Academy; consequently, the school devotes significant resources to supporting attendance. The school has an attendance team that tracks daily absences and, with each absence, follows up with caregivers by phone, an approach that is symptomatic of Haven Academy’s proactive effort to meet the unique needs of individual students. Families with chronic absenteeism issues receive intensive coaching from the team members, who then assist in identifying and reducing barriers to reinforce attendance. This is an explicit priority for school staff, given the disruptions many of their students experience in their living arrangements and consequently their learning.

Social-Emotional Program

“Today we will be talking about Maslow’s ‘Hierarchy of Needs.’ Take a few moments to think about what makes your human barometer rise and fall, and how that is connected to the pyramid.” —*Haven Academy Middle School Teacher, guiding an afternoon Advisory session*

One key component of Haven Academy’s positive school culture and behavior support systems is its Social-Emotional Program: students learn self and social awareness, emotional regulation, coping strategies, responsible decisionmaking, goal setting, problem-solving, and relationship management. Such skills particularly support students with disabilities in becoming self-advocates and in taking greater ownership over their own learning.¹³

“The classrooms have ‘Mood Meters,’ so a student may visually represent their emotion to us each day. I feel it’s important to know where my students are, and to adapt my interactions and instruction accordingly. It really helps to have awareness if one of my students is ‘red’ or consistently ‘blue.’” —*Haven Academy Elementary School Teacher*

To infuse the curriculum with these themes, teachers provide students with social-emotional lessons each week (see figure 1 in Appendix A for a typical school day schedule).¹⁴ Lesson plans and assignments are intertwined with relevant topics, such as empathy, social responsibility, community, and perseverance.¹⁵ This perspective fosters a classroom environment of inclusion, safety, and support, which maximizes learning for all students, and especially for students with disabilities.

Conclusion

What makes positive school culture and behavior support work well for students with disabilities at Haven Academy? Other public schools—both charter and traditional—should pay particular attention to the school’s keys to success:

- Admissions and enrollment processes proactively include and support student populations at risk of being marginalized, including students with disabilities.
- Teachers and school leaders address behavior with methods that are tailored to individual students, which preemptively deter behavioral issues and incorporate opportunities for intentional reflection and growth.
- Haven Academy’s positive school culture and behavior support systems are infused with social-emotional learning and address the individual needs of students as shaped by their lives beyond the classroom.
- Students learn in a restorative environment that is safe, stable, structured, and understanding, which particularly benefits students with disabilities by fostering full inclusion.

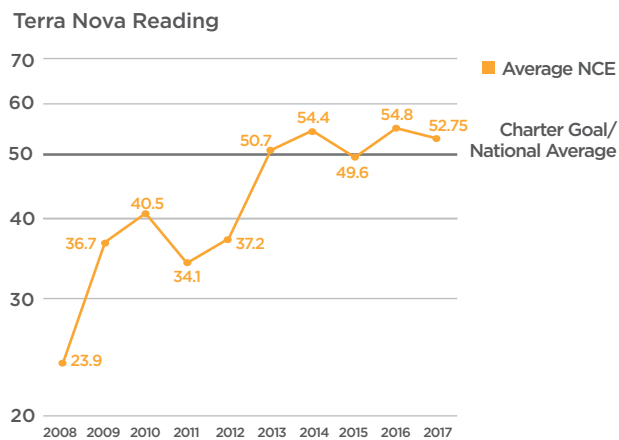
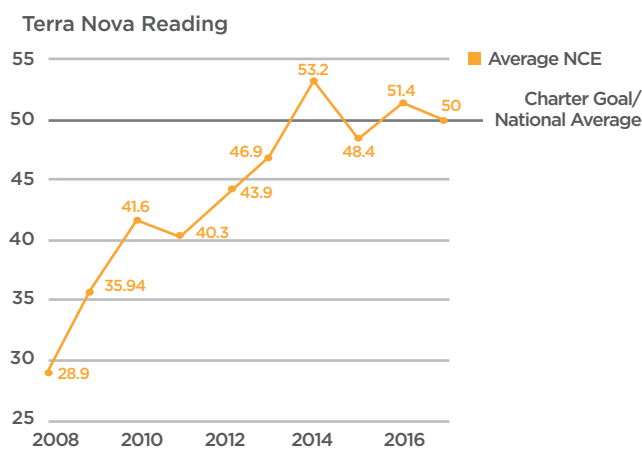
Appendix A

FIGURE 1. Typical 4th Grade Schedule, Mondays Through Thursdays, Mott Haven Academy

Time	Instructional Focus
8:00 - 8:20	Morning Meeting
8:22 - 8:53	Shared Text/Math Skills (2 small groups of 13ish that rotate)
8:55 - 9:28	Math Skills/Shared Text (2 small groups of 13ish that rotate)
9:30 - 10:20	Math
10:20 - 10:30	Mental Break
10:30 - 11:10	Writing Workshop (SELT: Monday (4A) & Tuesday (4B) from 10:45-11:10)
11:10 - 12:05	Lunch/Recess
12:05 - 12:55	Prep
1:05 - 1:50	CGI/Guided Math (2 days CGI and 2 days Guided Math)
1:50 - 2:00	Mental Break
2:00 - 2:55	Reading Workshop
2:55 - 3:40	Guided Reading (independent reading conferences until all are benchmarked)
3:40 - 3:55	Closing Circle/Pack Up and Dismissal

Source: Mott Haven Academy Charter School

FIGURE 2. Terra Nova Test Scores, Mott Haven Academy (Reading: 2016, Math: 2017)



Source: Mott Haven Academy Charter School

Endnotes

1. “Mott Haven Population Demographics,” Point2 Homes website (accessed February 28, 2018).
2. *Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care, Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care* (Cleveland, OH: Foster Care to Success, 2014).
3. “NY State Public School Enrollment (2016- 2017),” New York State Education Department website (accessed February 28, 2018).
4. “NYC Geographic District #7 - Bronx Enrollment (2016-2017),” New York State Education Department website (accessed February 28, 2018).
5. “Mott Haven Academy Charter School (84X394) 2016–17 School Quality Snapshot / Elementary School,” New York City Department of Education website, accessed February 28, 2018.
6. Ibid.
7. One-third of Haven Academy seats are reserved for children in foster care and another third of seats are reserved for children who receive prevention services.
8. Lauren Morando Rhim and Shaini Kothari, *Key Trends in Special Education in Charter Schools: A Secondary Analysis of the Civil Rights Data Collection 2013-2014* (New York, NY: National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools, 2018).
9. Haven Academy developed a Digital Data Wall—functioning similarly to a pivot table—which holds all such data and may be disaggregated according to grade, class, subject, demographics, welfare status, and more.
10. Response to Intervention (RTI) is a multi-tier approach used to identify and intervene when students struggle with learning or demonstrate behavior needs. Students are provided with interventions at increasing levels of intensity according to their individual need (e.g., Tier I, II, and III).
11. Examples of practices used include Responsive Classroom, Love and Logic, and PBIS.
12. Students from the general community attend school at a rate of 97 percent, students from the foster care system attend at a rate of 92 percent, and students receiving prevention services attend at a rate of 89 percent.
13. The school’s Social-Emotional team uses evidence-based practices like Second Step to teach students such skills.
14. The 3-Tiered model aligns with RTI: prevention-oriented Tier 1 focuses on relating via the classroom setting, intervention-oriented Tier 2 focuses on repair via topic-driven small group workshops, and individual student-oriented Tier 3 focuses on reintegration via individual check-ins.
15. Examples of 5th grade reading units: “Natural Disasters in the Western Hemisphere,” “Resilience in the Great Depression,” and “Cultures in Conflict.”