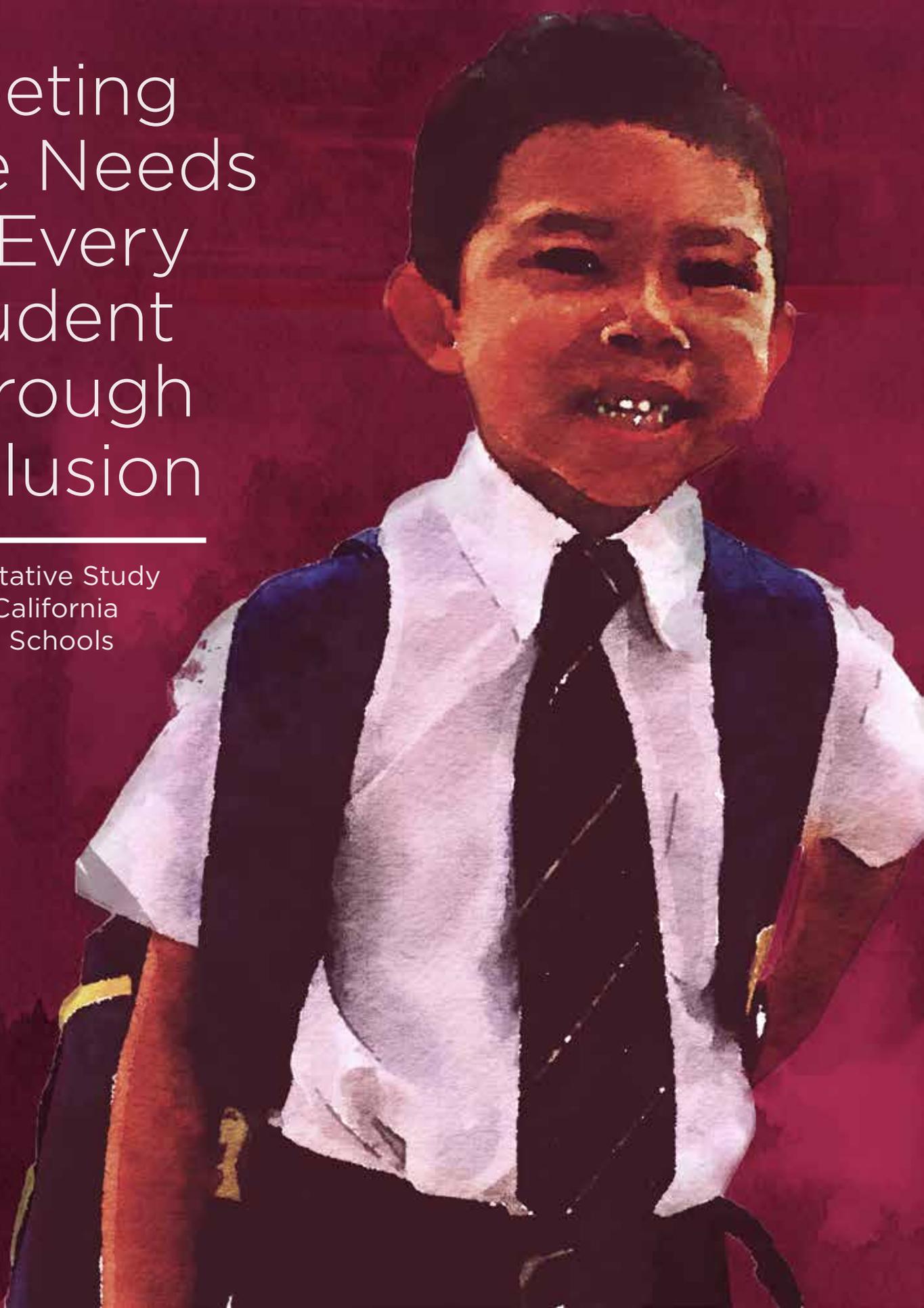


# Meeting the Needs of Every Student Through Inclusion

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A Qualitative Study  
of Ten California  
Charter Schools



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Our nation's special education system has proven to be ineffective, compliance-driven, and costly.<sup>1,2</sup> Despite decades of incremental progress, students with disabilities continue to lag far behind their peers on every measure – test scores, graduation, college entrance and completion, and employment.<sup>3,4,5</sup> This achievement gap is even more pronounced among historically-underserved groups.<sup>7</sup> Charter schools are in a unique position to be incubators of innovation in all areas, including special education. In recent years, California charter schools have attained unprecedented levels of autonomy in special education, which has provided flexibility to develop innovative programs and expand the range of services available to serve students with disabilities. This is driving the creation of cutting-edge, research-based, and data-driven interventions that have the potential to offer solutions for much-needed systemic change.

This paper, detailing a year-long study of some of the highest-performing charter schools in California, offers insight into these potential solutions. The purpose of this study was to identify effective and innovative charter school special education practices as well as policy environments that enable these charter schools to meet the needs of all students. During the 2015-16 academic year, through a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures, we identified and interviewed thirty charter school leaders and special education administrators to gain insight into the design and implementation of their special education programs. We then narrowed our sample to ten schools and conducted school visits to gather additional information through interviews with school leaders, general and special education staff, and classroom observations (see Methodology).

The final sample included the following schools:

- CHIME Institute's Schwarzenegger Community School, Woodland Hills, CA
- EJE Middle Academy, El Cajon, CA
- Gabriella Charter School, Los Angeles, CA
- Oakland School for the Arts, Oakland, CA
- Literacy First Charter School, El Cajon, CA
- Magnolia Science Academy 7, Northridge, CA

- Multicultural Learning Center, Canoga Park, CA
- Oxford Preparatory Academy, Mission Viejo, CA
- KIPP Raíces Academy, East Los Angeles, CA
- Santa Rosa Academy, Menifee, CA.

Findings were categorized into three areas: 1) the “Why,” which encompassed school values, philosophy, and culture; 2) the “What,” which covered specific school practices employed in meeting the needs of all students; and 3) the “How,” which described policy context and school structure. The data demonstrates that the charter schools we visited were able to successfully meet the needs of students with disabilities because they based their approach on the following nine key elements:

1. **Philosophy of inclusion.** Students with disabilities in these schools were educated predominantly in content-rich, general education settings.
2. **Individualization and tailoring programs to student needs.** Schools were highly adaptable and built individualized supports around student needs rather than placing students into predetermined settings.
3. **Supportive school community.** Schools deliberately worked on creating and maintaining a positive school community where differences are celebrated and where staff and students support one another.
4. **Multi-tiered support systems.** Schools implemented clearly-defined, team-based, data-driven systems to combine general and special education supports within a framework focused on prevention and intervention, regardless of disability.
5. **Family and community partnerships.** Schools built strong partnerships with families and community organizations to develop support networks around their students.
6. **Cutting-edge technologies and practices.** Schools embraced innovative and emergent approaches to providing services for students with disabilities.
7. **Flexibility and autonomy.** Schools sought autonomy in special education, which allowed them to make local programmatic decisions and build the full array of supports and services necessary to meet the unique needs of their students.
8. **Staff development.** Schools implemented rigorous recruitment and professional development practices to ensure that general and special education teachers and staff were prepared to meet the needs of all students.
9. **Constant refinement and improvement of programs.** Schools continually evaluated and refined their practices to match the evolving needs of their students.

In addition to this report, CCSA will publish a best practices toolkit featuring case studies of specific programs or processes, and artifacts, forms, templates, rubrics, and other resources designed to help school leaders improve their special education programs. We hope that this report and accompanying materials offer insight into effective special education practices and open the door for further discussion and research.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our sincere appreciation for the thoughtful guidance and feedback of our partners and advisors, who contributed invaluable expertise in developing this report. Our deepest gratitude goes to our consultants at Safal Partners who offered support and guidance throughout the project. Special thanks goes to Meghan Hokom for her work on coding and data analysis of our interview transcripts, thoughtful feedback on numerous drafts, as well as deep passion for improving outcomes of students in special education. A note of thanks goes to our report readers Dr. Arun Ramanathan at Pivot Learning Partners and Dr. Victoria Graf at Loyola Marymount University for their review and contributions.

We are particularly grateful for the collaboration of school leaders and teachers at all of the participating schools, who afforded us the privilege of gathering data on their successful practices.

We are also indebted to our colleagues on the Regional Advocacy, Achievement and Performance Management, Legal, and Communications teams for all of their help in making this report possible. A note of gratitude goes to CCSA President and CEO, Jed Wallace, CCSA leadership, and our funders for their continued commitment to our work and to the development of the charter school special education infrastructure across California.

This study was completed under the leadership and guidance of Gina Plate, Senior Special Education Advisor with CCSA. The report was authored by Kate Dove with significant support and contributions from Brigette Dutra, who both serve as Special Education Advisors. Previously, Kate conducted research for a number of special education studies at CCSA and served as a charter school special education teacher and inclusion specialist. Brigette was deputy general counsel to a network of charter schools prior to her work at CCSA.

Report designed by Beldon Wolson & Ania Potocki.

## ABOUT

The California Charter Schools Association's vision is to increase student learning by growing the number of families choosing high quality charter public schools so that no child is denied the right to a great public education. Our mission is to ensure a million students attend charter public schools by 2022, with charter public schools outperforming non-charter public schools on every measure. We do this by serving as the advocacy organization that builds the policy environment needed to grow as quickly as possible the number of students attending high quality charter public schools.

For more information, please visit our website at [www.ccsa.org](http://www.ccsa.org)

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# INTRODUCTION

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The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975 brought about monumental shifts to the educational experience of students with disabilities. Prior to its enactment, only one in five U.S. children with disabilities were educated in public schools.<sup>3</sup> The law aimed to end the segregation of individuals with disabilities, ensuring that every student, regardless of his or her disability, had equal access to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. IDEA also opened up opportunities for research and discovery in a number of fields including pedagogy, medicine, psychology, neuroscience, technology, and accessibility to help us understand the origin, treatment, and educational supports and strategies for a broad range of disabling conditions. We now know more than ever before about educating students with disabilities, and yet, too little of that knowledge is being used to inform practices to improve educational outcomes for students.



There still remains a large achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. According to recent data by the U.S. Department of Education (US ED), fewer than 10% of the nation's 8th graders with disabilities are proficient in reading,<sup>1</sup> only 60% graduate with a high school diploma,<sup>4</sup> and 33% of youth in juvenile corrections system receive special education services.<sup>5</sup> Part of the issue is continued segregation. Nationally, only 62% of students with disabilities (and in California, 53% of students with disabilities) are educated in general education classrooms for the majority of their school day.<sup>6,7</sup> There are also widespread disparities in the treatment of students of color with disabilities.<sup>8</sup> Nationwide, schools continue to identify, place outside the regular classroom, and discipline children from economically-struggling communities of color at markedly higher rates than their peers (Artiles, et. al., 2010; Fellner, 2015).





The special education system also lacks accountability for educational outcomes of students with disabilities. Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB), only 35% of schools across 44 states and the District of Columbia were accountable for special education subgroup performance, largely due to small subgroup sizes.<sup>9</sup> And, for the vast majority of IDEA's history, the focus has been on ensuring procedural compliance rather than academic results. It wasn't until 2014 that the US ED called for a shift from compliance to outcomes under the Results Driven Accountability (RDA) initiative that considered student achievement data in evaluating state special education programs.<sup>10</sup> Under the new framework, California has been identified as in need of assistance, primarily due to low academic achievement and graduation rates of students with disabilities.<sup>11</sup>



Despite these stagnant outcomes, spending on special education services continues to rise. Between 1996 and 2005, an estimated 40 percent of all new spending in education went to special education services (Scull & Winkler, 2011).<sup>12</sup> In California, more than \$8 billion in federal, state and district funds are spent on 702,000 students with disabilities, with local district budgets covering an increasing share of the bill each year.<sup>13</sup>

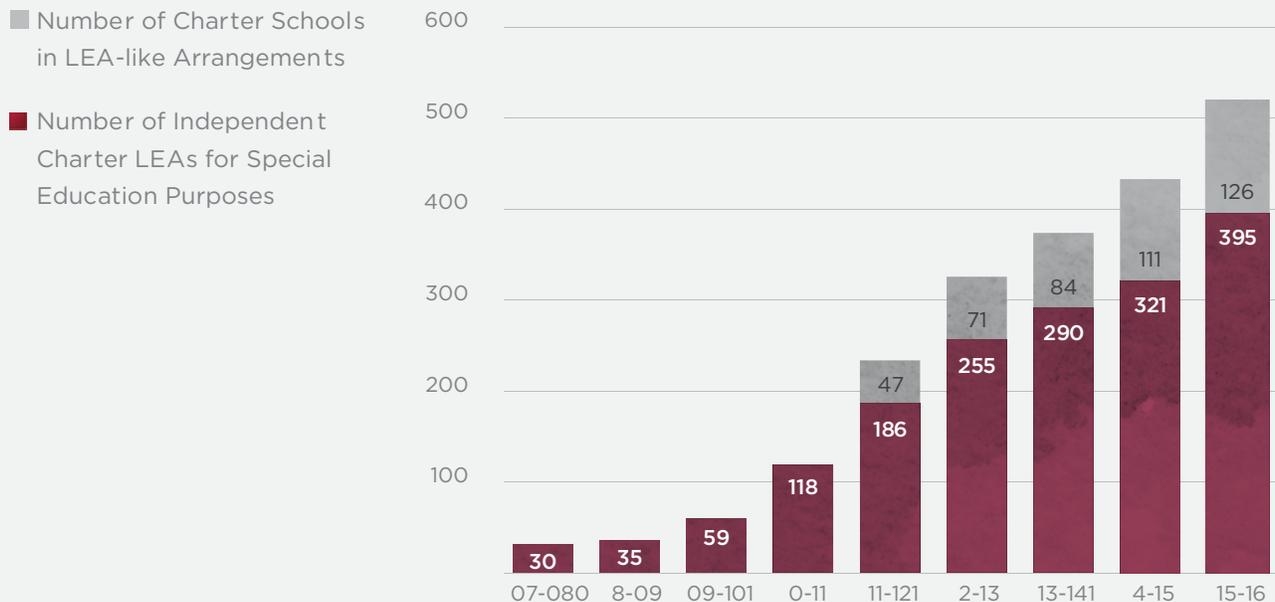
Our special education system is in need of reform, and in the charter school sector, there is a unique opportunity to close the special education achievement gap more rapidly than can be accomplished in the traditional public school sector. Under California law, charter schools have two options for special education legal status: operate as part of their authorizing school district's Local Education Agency (LEA) or operate as their own independent member LEA in

a Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA).<sup>14</sup> In becoming their own LEA for special education, charter schools attain full autonomy and flexibility over their special education funding and program. While charter schools have always had the option to seek LEA status, it wasn't until the 2009 California State Board of Education (SBE) decision to allow charter-only SELPAs that charter schools could truly exercise it.<sup>15</sup>

The subsequent increase in the number of charter schools operating as their own LEA for special education resulting from these changes (see graph below) speaks not only to the speed with which charter schools can implement reform, but also to the enthusiasm with which charter schools have taken on the full responsibility for educating every student who walks through their doors, regardless of the nature or severity of their disability.



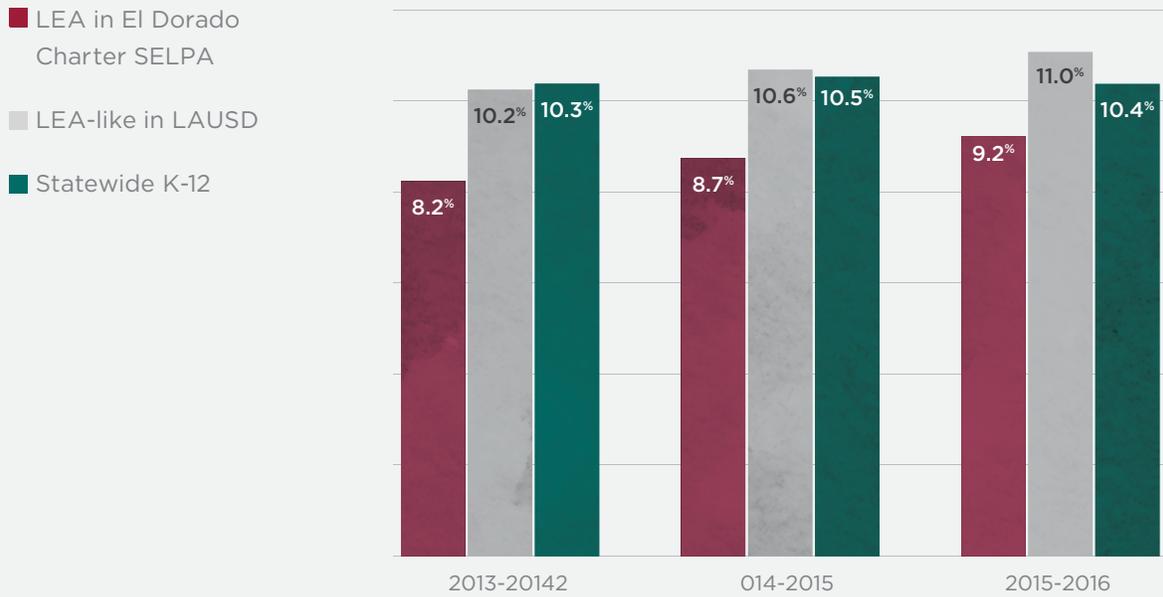
## Growth in the Number of Charter Schools in Autonomous Special Education Arrangements



Additionally, in collaboration with traditional SELPAs, CCSA has developed innovative arrangements that allow charter schools to operate similarly to independent LEAs while still remaining under the umbrella of their authorizer; these arrangements are referred to as “LEA-like”.<sup>16</sup> As shown above, by 2015-16 over 500 charter schools were operating as independent LEAs or LEA-like for special education.

A charter school’s legal identity and level of autonomy over its special education program has major implications for its access to special education funding, infrastructure, and authority over service decisions for students with disabilities. In turn, these factors have a significant impact on the enrollment of students with disabilities. Our recent research demonstrated that increased autonomy over their own special education program through LEA or LEA-like status leads to a higher percentage and broader range of students with disabilities enrolled in California charter schools.<sup>17</sup> Charter schools that are LEAs in the El Dorado Charter SELPA, which represents nearly 70% of all charter LEAs in the state, increased the percentage of students with disabilities from 7.5% in 2010-11 to 9.2% in 2015-16 (as compared to 10.4% of K-12 statewide enrollment of students with disabilities).<sup>18</sup> In the same timeframe, LEA-like charter schools in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) increased their proportion of students with disabilities from 8.1% to 11%.<sup>19</sup>

## Increase in the % of students with disabilities 2013-14 to 2015-16



This increase was not only reflective of the growing proportion of students with learning disabilities in charters. LEA and LEA-like charter schools have also achieved large gains in the proportion of students with more significant, “lower-incidence” disabilities.<sup>20</sup> Between 2010 and 2015, the populations of students with lower-incidence disabilities in the El Dorado charter SELPA increased by 56%.<sup>21</sup> In approximately the same time, LEA-like charter schools increased their proportion of students with lower-incidence disabilities by 50%.<sup>22</sup> The table below represents a more detailed breakdown of the proportion of students by category of disability in El Dorado Charter SELPA LEAs and LAUSD LEA-like schools in 2015-16. The composition of students with disabilities in these schools is approaching the statewide average composition, especially when compared to historical data from six years ago, prior to availability of LEA and LEA-like options.<sup>21, 22</sup>



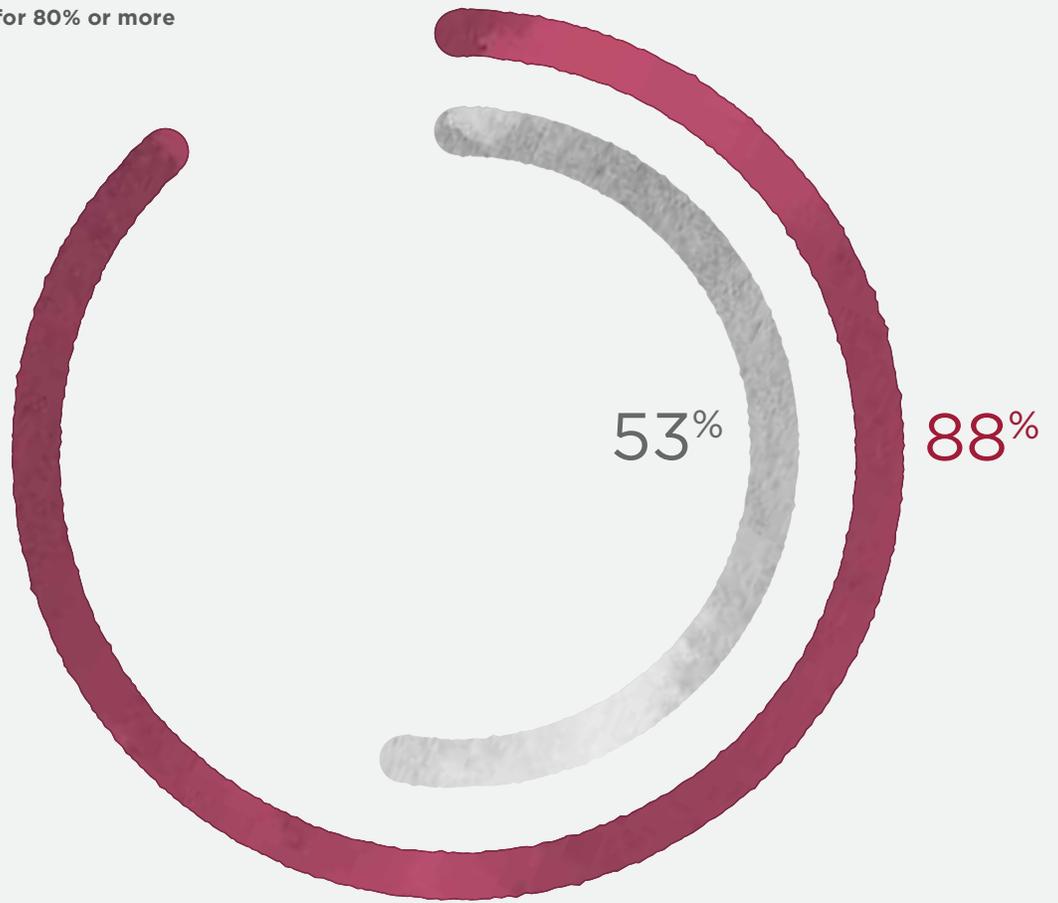


2015-2016	Statewide K-12	LEA-like in LAUSD	LEAs in El Dorado Charter SELPA
Specific Learning Disability	43.2%	56.3%	49.9%
Speech and Language Impairment	19.20	10.9%	17.9%
Other Health Impairment	11.9%	16.3%	15.8%
Autism	12.40	10.0%	8.5%
Emotional Disturbance	3.6%	1.5%	3.9%
Intellectual Disability	5.3%	2.1%	1.5%
Orthopedic Impairment	1.4%	0.6%	0.6%
Deaf/Hard of Hearing	1.6%	1.4%	1.0%
Visual Impairment	0.50	0.2%	0.4%
Multiple Disabilities	0.7%	0.2%	0.1%
Traumatic Brain Injury	0.2%	0.1%	0.2%

Not only are charter public schools beginning to serve a similar proportion and population of students with disabilities to traditional schools, they are doing so in more inclusive settings. According to a recent analysis by the California Department of Education (CDE), the nearly 400 charter school LEAs for special education purposes educate nearly 90% of their students with disabilities in general education for 80% or more of their school day, compared to 53% statewide.<sup>7</sup>

**Percent of children with IEPs aged 6 through 21 served in general education classrooms for 80% or more of the instructional day (2014)**

- CA Statewide
- Charter School LEAs



Source: USDE Office of Special Education Programs - CA  
FFY 2014 Part B State Performance Plan (SPP)/Annual Performance Report (APR)

The increase in the proportion and range of students with disabilities served and the capacity of charter schools to offer inclusive programs and services is driving creation of cutting edge, research-based, and data-driven interventions that warrant closer examination.



# PURPOSE, METHODOLOGY, AND OVERVIEW

## OF PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

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### THE PURPOSE

of this study is to:

1. Identify charter school special education practices in effective and innovative special education programs;
2. Highlight procedural changes that schools can implement to improve the quality of special education programs and services; and
3. Uncover policy implications for fostering innovation and improved outcomes in special education.

### THE METHODOLOGY

Through a rigorous selection process based on state test scores in 2012-13 and 2014-15<sup>23</sup>, we identified charter schools that demonstrated stronger-than-average academic performance for students with disabilities. We also included some schools that were known in their communities for their special education programs. Following the initial sample creation, we conducted thirty phone interviews with site leaders and special education administrators to identify the policies and practices they credited for their success. Then, we conducted site visits to twelve schools who were able to participate within the timeframe of our study. The school visits included a series of focus groups and interviews with school administrators, general and special educators, and related service providers as well as classroom observations. We subsequently selected ten schools to include in final data analysis.<sup>24</sup> Interviews were recorded and transcribed and the transcripts were analyzed using Nvivo software. The data analysis was conducted in partnership with an independent research analyst through Safal Partners.

## OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

Our final sample of ten schools were diverse in size, instructional model, and student demographics.

- The median size of enrollment was 607 students; however, we visited schools ranging from 170 to 1,600 students.
- The median special education enrollment across our sample was approximately 10%, with some schools educating over 14% students with disabilities.
- There were two elementary schools, one middle school, and seven span schools, including:
  - Four elementary-middle (K-8) schools,
  - Two elementary-high (K-12) schools,
  - One middle-high (6-12) school.
- All of the schools we visited were site-based; however, three of the schools offered an independent study component to their program.
- Our final sample of schools was also diverse in their instructional emphases:
  - Two schools identified as STEM/STEAM,
  - Two schools focused on the arts,
  - Three schools were dual-language immersion,
  - Three schools centered on college preparation,
  - One school was inclusion-focused.

We sought schools that were diverse in their special education populations and the range of needs they serve, but we did not collect specific data on numbers of students in each disability category so as to protect student privacy. However, we asked schools to describe the range of their services and the range of student needs. All of the schools reported having an educational specialist, school psychologist as well as counseling and/or school-based mental health services, school nurse, special education paraprofessionals, and speech and language pathologist. Additionally:

- Nine schools reported providing occupational therapy;
- Seven schools offered specialized behavior intervention and/or instruction with the help of a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) or other professionals specialized in applied behavior analysis;
- Five schools employed or contracted with a moderate/severe education specialist and physical therapy;
- Five schools reported having a vision impairment specialist, and four of those also employed a hearing impairment specialist.

Schools also offered orientation and mobility specialist services and assistive technology (for complete information regarding services provided by each school, please see Appendix A). All of the schools reported having access to a full continuum of necessary services should students require them.

## TESTING DATA

We also reviewed standardized test scores to measure overall school achievement as well as special education subgroup achievement. However, it should be noted that the timing of this study made it impossible to review achievement trends over time. The 2012-13 test scores were based on an outdated test that was not aligned to the Common Core Standards. In 2013-14, California transitioned to new standards and piloted new assessments for which scores were not reported. Thus, 2014-15 is considered a baseline year for state testing data.

On average, in 2012-13, 50% of students with disabilities in participating schools scored proficient or above in English language arts (ELA) and 61% of students with disabilities scored proficient or above in mathematics (compared to 29% statewide average for students with disabilities in both content areas). In 2014-15, the transition to a new assessment system and standards caused a drop in proficiency across the board in all California schools. Nevertheless, the schools in our sample outperformed the state average in both ELA and mathematics. On average, 29% of students with disabilities in our sample schools met or exceeded standards in ELA and 25% met or exceeded standards in math (as compared to statewide average of 12% in ELA and 9% in math). Several of the schools in our sample have been honored for recent achievements: KIPP Raices was honored with the 2016 National Blue Ribbon award; Gabriella Charter School and EJE Academy were honored with the 2016 California Gold Ribbon.

However, we did not limit our sample to schools that did well on test scores. We also included schools that have earned a reputation within their communities for their effective and/or innovative approaches to serving students with disabilities. For example, CHIME Institute's Schwarzenegger Community School, has been recognized as a local and national model in inclusive education and Oakland School for the Arts is regarded nearly as highly for its academics as for its arts programs and offers a unique opportunity for students with disabilities to realize their potential in the arts.

For a more comprehensive description of our methodology and a full list of schools, see Appendix.



# CHARTER SCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION

## COMMON THEMES AND BEST PRACTICES

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An analysis of interview recordings and transcripts from ten successful California charter schools revealed many notable approaches and practices. Findings can be categorized loosely into three areas or themes:

- 1. The Why: Charter school values, special education program philosophy and approach to service-delivery, and school culture.** We found that embracing student differences, educating students with disabilities in inclusive environments, tailoring programs and supports to individual student needs, and building a supportive school community were often interconnected and articulated the “Why” behind the school’s special education program.
- 2. The What: Ways in which services and supports were provided.** This covers concepts of layered interventions, multi-tiered systems of support, data-driven instruction and accountability, and family and community partnerships.
- 3. The How: Local policy context and elements that enable model to function.** This section of the findings describes the elements of special education funding and autonomy, recruitment, staffing and professional development.



# THE WHY:

## VALUES, PROGRAM PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE

We know from research that beliefs and values of school leaders and staff have a great impact on a school's instructional program and culture (Murtadha-Watts & Stoughton, 2004). Thus, we wanted to understand the underlying beliefs and values of special education staff and school leaders in our sample. Our analysis revealed that these charter schools exhibited:

- A strong belief in inclusion, the practice of educating students with disabilities alongside general education peers;
- A commitment to tailoring programs, supports, and services to each student's individual needs; and,
- An investment in building a positive school community where differences are embraced.

The following research analysis and examples are intended to illustrate the underlying reasons - or the "Why"- behind instructional and programmatic choices that form the foundation for these schools' special education programs.

### STRONG BELIEF IN INCLUSION

Charter schools in our sample expressed a strong belief in inclusive education of students with disabilities. One special education teacher expressed it this way: *"All students learn better when they are together, regardless of their ability, and it's on us to figure out what puzzle pieces they need to have that learning happen, but they all belong together all day long."*

In fact, research shows that supporting students with disabilities in general education classes leads to improved outcomes and greater degree of achieving grade-level academic standards (Hunt, McDonnell, & Crockett,

"All students learn better when they are together, regardless of their ability, and it's on us to figure out what puzzle pieces they need to have that learning happen, but they all belong together all day long."

- SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER AT CHIME  
INSTITUTE'S SCHWARZENEGGER  
COMMUNITY SCHOOL

2012). Students earning 80% or more of their academic credits in general education settings (inclusive placement) were twice as likely to enroll and persist in postsecondary education when compared with students receiving fewer credits in inclusive classroom settings (Rojewski, 2015).

The context within which instruction is delivered affects acquisition, retention, and generalization of skills, and evidence demonstrates that inclusive settings as more effective than self-contained classrooms (Causton-Theoharis, et al., 2011). Inclusion is also among the best ways to ensure accountability for students with disabilities accessing and progressing in the general curriculum (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010 and Ryndak, Jackson, & White, 2013).

However, inclusion is not yet the norm in schools and classrooms across the U.S. Today, students with disabilities continue to be removed from their non-disabled peers and placed into specialized programs or even entirely separate schools, often because of behavior challenges (Connor & Ferri, 2007). All too commonly, special education is treated as a place, not a service as it was intended to be.

While some progress has been made in inclusion, the rate of progress remains slow. Nationally, approximately 34% of students with disabilities were educated in the general education classrooms for most of the school day in the year 1990. Despite the evidence of its positive impact on the lives of students, the national rate of inclusion of students with disabilities was only at 62% in 2013.<sup>25</sup> In California, nearly half of students with disabilities continue to be educated in segregated settings, with only 53% being included in general education classrooms for 80% or more of their instructional day.<sup>26</sup>

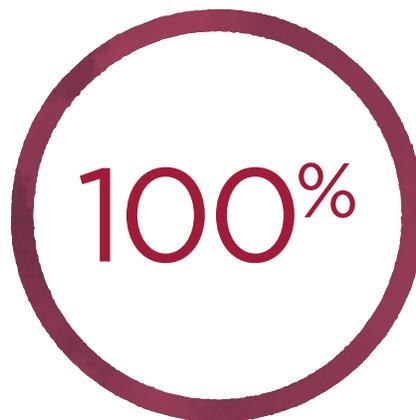
But there are bright spots. A recent analysis by the California Department of Education (CDE) shows that charter school Local Education Agencies (LEAs), unlike their traditional counterparts, educate nearly 90% of their students with disabilities in general education for the majority of their school day.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, all of the schools in our sample expressly named inclusion as one of the most important cornerstones of their program. One hundred percent of charter school leaders and teachers agreed that the best way to ensure students with disabilities met grade level standards was to have them fully included in general education classes to the greatest extent possible, focusing on providing access to rigorous curriculum and standards and having high expectations. Though some students spent a portion of their time receiving more



Of students with disabilities in charter school LEAs are in general education for the majority of their school day.

Source: USDE Office of Special Education Programs - CA FFY 2014 Part B State Performance Plan (SPP)/Annual Performance Report (APR)



School leaders and teachers agreed the best way to ensure students with disabilities met grade level standards was to have them fully included in general education classes

Source: analysis of interview transcripts across participating schools

intensive special education instruction outside of general education, schools reported the end goal was to integrate them back as soon as possible.

Schools focused on teaching students functional skills and strategies they could apply independently in general education, reducing the frequency, intensity, and duration of specialized intervention until special education supports were minimal or no longer needed. When discussing the goals of special education, one administrator noted that one often overlooked goal of special education is to get students out of special education, when possible — *“to get to a point where they no longer need supports.”*

The inclusive philosophy helped professionals view special education as a support service, rather than a place. Another administrator reflected:

*“[Our philosophy] is making sure that you are always thinking that the child is a general education student first...Here’s your general education student who has some special needs; not here is a special education student.”*

Inclusion also challenges general education teachers to make instruction accessible for all students. Teachers and administrators reported using the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as one of the critical constructs for planning and executing effective instruction to all students.<sup>28</sup> UDL provides a set of tools and considerations to ensure that instructional goals, assessments, methods are accessible to all. It rests on 3 essential components: presenting information and content in multiple formats so that all students can access it; allowing students alternatives to express or demonstrate their learning; and tapping into students’ interests and motivation for learning in a variety of ways. Approaching curriculum from the standpoint of accessibility allowed teachers to ensure that students were successful in general education settings and

“[Our Philosophy] Is making sure that you are always thinking that the child is a general education student first... Here’s your general education student who has some special needs; not here is a special education student.”

- SCHOOL LEADER, OXFORD PREPARATORY ACADEMY



“We pride ourselves in differentiation, in that it’s not only by grouping but [by] child... When we look at all our kids—English Language Learners, special education, general education—it’s more of ‘what systems will work for that child in particular,’ and that’s what we do. We have teachers use a range of instruction throughout the day: technology, one-on-ones, small groups, guided reading, whole group... Every teacher adjusts their teaching style to meet the need of the children in the classroom.”

- GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHER,  
KIPP RAÍCES ACADEMY

were able to engage with grade-level content.

Another approach, closely related to UDL, is Differentiated Instruction (DI), which is a method of designing instruction to match student needs and learning styles (Tomlinson, 2005). One teacher shared: *“We pride ourselves in differentiation, in that it’s not only by grouping but [by] child ... When we look at all our kids—English Language Learners, special education, general education—it’s more of ‘what systems will work for that child in particular,’ and that’s what we do. We have teachers use a range of instruction throughout the day: technology, one-on-ones, small groups, guided reading, whole group ... Every teacher adjusts their teaching style to meet the need of the children in the classroom.”*

Research indicates that inclusive practices that focus on providing access to all students and adjusting instruction to specific student needs are beneficial to students with disabilities as well as non-disabled peers. A recent study of inclusive schools showed that classrooms using differentiated instruction and UDL had higher levels of access and learning among all students (Morningstar, et al., 2016).

In addition to implementation of research-based instructional approaches, successful inclusive classrooms also need to ensure that students are well supported behaviorally and emotionally. Inclusive practices have faced some scrutiny as it relates to integrating students with emotional disturbance, which pointed out the importance of ensuring that inclusive classrooms have experienced teachers who are equipped to manage challenging student behavior (Gottfried, et.al, 2016).

## **TAILORING SUPPORTS TO INDIVIDUAL STUDENT NEEDS**

Among the schools we interviewed, individualization was the main driver for determining the educational program for each student. While deeply grounded in the philosophy of inclusion, schools employed a variety of service-delivery models to match the needs of their population, combining “push-in” instruction and “pull-out” supports. Three schools reported using a “co-teaching” model of service-delivery whereby general and special education teachers (and, in some cases, related services providers) share the responsibility for planning, delivery, and assessment of instruction within general education.

“I think it’s important also that there is no one-size-fits-all approach for any [student]. It doesn’t matter if they have the same eligibility. We approach each kid based on their strengths and their challenges and we go through a lot of collaboration with our occupational therapist, our speech and language pathologist, [and] our physical therapist to make sure each kid gets what they need.”

– SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER, CHIME INSTITUTE’S SCHWARZENEGGER COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Rather than thinking of a place to put a student, staff thought of ways in which they could build supports and services around a student, responding to their unique needs, whether they are academic, behavioral, socioemotional or a combination of all three. One special education teacher shared: *“I think it’s important also that there is no one-size-fits-all approach for any [student]. It doesn’t matter if they have the same eligibility. We approach each kid based on their strengths and their challenges and we go through a lot of collaboration with our occupational therapist, our speech and language pathologist, [and] our physical therapist to make sure each kid gets what they need.”*

One school described creating an entirely new class for a student who needed significant academic and behavioral intervention and support. Initially, the student worked one-on-one with a teacher and several

specialists until he improved and was able to participate in general education at an increasing rate. As the student’s skills improved, the program adapted to supporting him within the general education setting. Now, a year later, he is able to participate fully with his peers and requires minimal support.

Another school shared their journey of creating a unique combination of interventions and supports for a student who was so significantly delayed in academic skills that she required direct instruction in foundational literacy and math. The school created a flexible schedule for her and built in time to receive one-on-one tutoring from general education teachers in younger grades in concert with individualized specialist support and specialized academic instruction. Once she caught up academically, she was able to participate fully with her peers. Her teacher reports that she is performing on grade level now: *“She’s now in 2nd grade and doing really well ... and I mean she continues to have needs, it’s not like we can just say she’s fine now, she needs those supports, but she uses them very well.”*

We found that charter schools not only create programs tailored to individual needs quickly and effectively, but they can discontinue programs that no longer serve the needs of their population. This ability tremendously benefitted the students at Oakland School for the Arts (see Program Spotlight). As one special education teacher said, *“We always reevaluate every year, so whatever our special education program is this year, it will very likely be very different next year and the following year because we basically adapt to our student population.”*

# Oakland School For The Arts

In 2014 Oakland School for the Arts (OSA) built a program around four students—the Therapeutically Enriched Academic Model or “TEAM” program. These students had Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and significant mental health needs, mostly surrounding depression and anxiety. TEAM was similar to a day treatment model, and OSA staffed it through a combination of working with county mental health, hiring in-house staff, and contracted support. Training was provided to both general education and special education staff about the unique needs of these students and the design of the program.

The students in TEAM needed a stress-free way to start their school day, so they began each day by eating breakfast while having group therapy. The challenge was getting these students to come to school in the first place because they were feeling so overwhelmed. Starting the day this way ensured their basic physical and social-emotional needs were met at the outset. The students’ anxiety around arriving precisely on-time was also reduced, as this morning session allowed for students to walk-in late. Together, the group would talk about their lives, as the students were all undergoing major life events and crippling circumstances, including homelessness, family stressors, and poverty. The morning group therapy session served as, “a spot to just dump whatever had happened from the night before” explained their Special Education Director, “you could just see them decompress.” The students would then attend general education classes, and OSA staff would push-in throughout the day to assist these students. The students were also able to continue to pursue their passion and realize their potential through the art program.

The key to the academic component of TEAM was flexibility—students knew that if they were feeling anxious or overwhelmed they could leave their academic class and return to their TEAM classroom or find a TEAM counselor to work quietly with for as long as they needed. By fostering this flexibility at the outset, the overall structure of the program remained consistent: the students began the day with group therapy, attended academic classes with the flexibility to leave if needed, received regular individual counseling, and ended the day with another session of group therapy. Periodically other IEP students or sometimes non-IEP students were included in the TEAM program for short interventions.

After one year, two of the four TEAM students graduated, one student moved away, and one student transferred. The school leader noted that, “I’ve never seen a program that worked that well ... we had a 50% graduation rate from a really selective, really troubled group ... the message to them was that we care about you, this is the place for you.”

## BUILDING A SAFE AND ACCEPTING SCHOOL COMMUNITY

To ensure that students were fully included and embraced by their school community, schools deliberately worked on creating and maintaining a positive school culture where differences are celebrated and where staff and students support one another. In our interviews, school staff repeatedly cited examples of how diversity and differences were not only accepted but openly embraced and discussed. One administrator described it as follows: *It's being in a culture where it's safe to ask a question. If a child learns differently you can say, 'This looks different', and it's ok. It's not something to be shushed or quieted; we just talk about it.*"

Schools connected the value of social inclusion to the notion of equity and each student getting only what he/she needs. For example:

- One school administrator talked about having a tent for a student with autism spectrum disorder where he could go in and be enclosed;
- At another school, a student with attention difficulties spent time outside with an aide for a movement break; and,
- At another school, a girl with cerebral palsy was able to use a tricycle to help her get across campus.

In all of these cases, students and staff responded effortlessly and naturally. Inclusion was simply part of the culture at these schools.

To achieve a positive community, staff discussed the importance of explicitly teaching students to respond to differences in a positive and supportive way. One of the most common ways in which schools did this is through the use of community circles. A general education teacher shared: *"We do community circles on Wednesdays ... for example last week's topic was, 'Why [my teacher] is proud of me.' And we went around... So even if they're not performing at a high level, they know that there's something good about them, and it builds a closer community."* As detailed in the case of Multicultural Learning Center (see Program Spotlight) charter schools use community circles in a variety of ways, including:

- Exploring a problem that affects a school or classroom community,
- Resolving conflict;
- Facilitating open dialogue;
- Repairing relationships; and,
- Developing social and emotional intelligence in students.

Research shows that community circles create feelings of joy of being together and building friendships, safety, freedom to express genuine emotions, and empathy. In one study, students who participated in circles demonstrated evidence of improved emotional literacy through improved capacity to listen, better management of anger and conflict situations, and becoming more sensitive to others (Schumacher, 2012).

Community circles are one of the main components of Restorative Practices and Restorative Justice Programs in schools, which are an emerging field in approaches to school discipline. The National Center for Restorative Approaches in Youth Settings defines Restorative Justice as: *"An innovative approach to offending and inappropriate behavior which puts repairing harm done to relationships and people over and above the need for assigning blame and dispensing punishment."*

# Multicultural Learning Center

Four years ago, Multi-Cultural Learning Center (MLC) began implementing positive behavior supports (PBS) school-wide. MLC leadership engaged parents, provided applied behavior analysis training to their staff, and, as a school community, developed a system of positive rewards and new strategies to address student behaviors. One of these new strategies was to hold community circles when an issue arose that affected students.

At MLC a community circle could involve a whole class or just a few students. At the outset, the individual running the community circle establishes rules for that session. Students typically aren't required to speak but are encouraged to share their feelings. Sometimes the students themselves address how an issue is affecting them, other times an MLC staff member acts as an advocate for a student who feels misunderstood.

The school leader recalled an instance while implementing PBS when she was tempted to suspend students for bullying. Instead, she spoke to the students individually and then held a community circle with all the students involved. Together, the group created a plan to repair the harm, and, a year later, the former bullies and the former victim had grown to be such good friends that when the previously bullied student ran the LA Marathon, the other students were there cheering him on at the finish line.

More recently, MLC used a community circle when a group of students were caught with prohibited materials on campus. A community circle discussion between the students, their parents, and staff resulted in the decision that the students would spend a day researching why the materials were prohibited and creating a PowerPoint presentation to give to middle school classes on the dangers of the banned items.

MLC also uses community circles outside of the discipline arena. MLC holds circles to discuss behavior issues in class and how one student's behavior impacts everyone, or for traumatic events that affect the school community. Community circles are also not limited to issues solely between students; they can also be conducted between students and their teacher. School leader notes that after holding this type of a community circle, classroom dynamics improved and the teacher gained valuable insight into his students.

A restorative approach in a school shifts the emphasis from managing behavior to focusing on the building, nurturing and repairing of relationships (Hopkins, 2003). A recent review of literature on restorative justice practices in the U.S. schools by the WestEd Justice & Prevention Research Center shows that, *“All the empirical studies we reviewed report a decrease in exclusionary discipline and harmful behavior (e.g., violence) after implementing some type of [Restorative Justice] program.”*<sup>29</sup>

While not always explicitly named, all of our schools have reported using some form of Restorative Justice Approach to addressing school discipline. One of the schools we visited began explicitly implementing Restorative Justice Practices school-wide this year. A general education teacher shared: *“We wanted to avoid sending students out of the classroom and putting that responsibility on the teacher to build and repair relationships. For example, the circles provide a safe place for students to talk in the classroom or outside the classroom. So, I attended a training with the principal and then we came back and trained the whole staff to make sure we’re incorporating that piece and giving the students that chance.”* The school now uses a card of Restorative Justice Questions that allow school staff to build an understanding of circumstances when an incident occurs rather than jumping straight to punitive measures. Some of the questions include:

- What happened?
- Who was affected and how?
- What do you need to do to make things right?

Engaging in dialogue with both the student who initiated the conflict and those who were harmed by it facilitates building trust, relationships, and a safer community. And, building special education programs around the tenets of inclusion, individualization, and community formed the foundation of the kind of culture that was necessary to implement research-based practices to meet the needs of all students. The following section will explore these practices in more detail.



# THE WHAT:

## SCHOOL PRACTICES

Because of the structure and purpose of our study, we did not collect large quantities of data on specific instructional strategies, curricula, or interventions that were employed by teachers in the classrooms on a day-to-day basis. Instead, we wanted a better understanding of the schoolwide systems and practices that demonstrate the types of services and supports available to students with disabilities and what the schools were doing that accounted for their success. In trying to understand the systems that were working for students with disabilities, we found that they were the same systems that worked for all students. One school administrator put it this way: *“In terms of special education students’ needs being met, ... this just goes back to that we need all of our kids’ needs being met, and that includes special education.”* The charter schools in our sample were meeting the needs of their students with disabilities within one coherent system of tiered supports and interventions that encompassed the entire school community. In this section, we will explore the component parts necessary for creating such systems.

“Tiered interventions, when implemented well, have the potential for meeting the needs of students without the need for a special education identification.”

## BUILDING MULTI-TIERED SUPPORT SYSTEMS

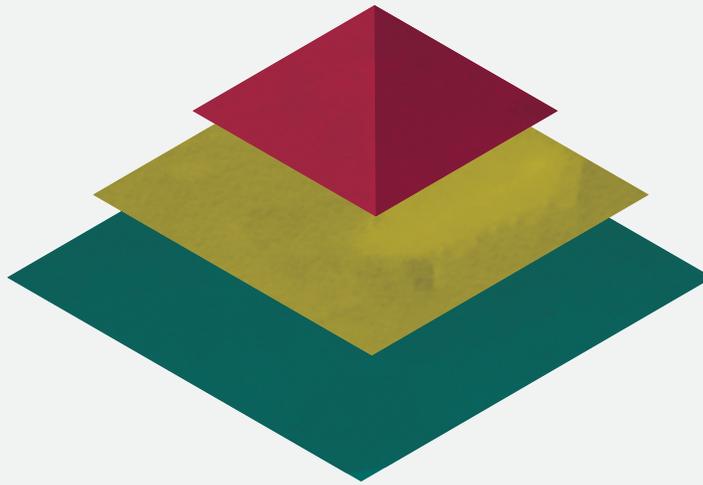
The concept of tiered support systems is not new. For nearly four decades, educators have relied on a system of tiered, escalating interventions to support struggling learners. One of the most familiar models is called Response to Intervention (RTI), which refers to the practice of providing high-quality, tiered (typically in 3-tiers) instruction and interventions, monitoring student progress, and evaluating data to determine the need for further intervention, including referral to special education (Batsche, et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). However, RTI was designed to only address academic needs. Alongside RTI, educators often implemented another model called Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS), which offered a parallel framework for preventing and addressing student behavioral needs. Both approaches have a well-documented body of evidence of effectiveness; however, the efforts were disconnected and needed closer alignment (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). A new construct called Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) has recently emerged, combining the principles of RTI and PBIS and further integrating a continuum of system-wide resources, strategies, structures, and practices to offer a comprehensive and responsive framework for systemically addressing student academic, behavioral, and socioemotional needs (Utley & Obiakor, 2015).

In California, MTSS has been successfully implemented in a handful of districts, but statewide systemic change is yet to come, despite significant interest in this approach and evidence of its effectiveness.<sup>30</sup> A 2011 report of 4 California districts with high achievement of students with disabilities demonstrated significant improvement of student outcomes in special education and a marked reduction in special education identification rates after implementing MTSS.<sup>31</sup>

Tiered interventions, when implemented well, have the potential for meeting the needs of students without the need for a special education identification. This is critically important because one of the longstanding issues in special education is the over identification of culturally and linguistically diverse students with special education needs.<sup>32</sup> Traditionally, if a student was struggling with speech, for example, he or she would have to be assessed and qualify for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in order to receive this specialized instruction and intervention. But it takes a significant amount of time and resources to complete a special education assessment and implement an IEP for a student who may just need a few weeks of specialized support.

Charter schools are embracing prevention and intervention frameworks that allow them to meet the needs of their students regardless of disability. A recent study suggests that charter schools are less likely than traditional public schools to classify a student for special education, in part because of effective interventions (Winters, 2013). It should be noted, however, that the purpose of tiered interventions is not to lower the percentage of students in special

“This is critically important because one of the longstanding issues in special education is the over identification of culturally and linguistically diverse students with special education needs.”



## MTSS



Evidence-Based Practices



Family, School and Community Partnering



Team Driven Shared Leadership



Layered Continuum of Supports



Data-Based Problem Solving and Decision Making

education, but rather to support all students in a data-driven and accountable way (Parrish, 2012).

While not all of the schools we visited explicitly named MTSS as their approach meeting student needs, all had identified school-wide constructs that covered its essential tenets, which are:

- High-quality instruction and evidence-based practices;
- Collaborative, team-based approach to development, implementation, and evaluation of interventions;
- Increasingly intense, multi-tiered continuum of supports for academic, behavioral, and socioemotional needs;
- Data-driven decision making and continuous progress monitoring;
- Family, school, and community partnerships.<sup>33</sup>

Schools used a variety of tools and protocols for designing and monitoring tiered interventions. One school administrator described it this way: *“We have a multi-tiered system of supports model. [...] It starts in the general education classroom, and, when teachers recognize that students are having difficulties, they begin to implement different types of accommodations and strategies. They’re documenting those. As those are less and less effective, then [they] put the academic success plan in place.”*

The academic success plan at this school is a template that allows teachers to quickly and efficiently document student areas of strengths and needs and to put in place a number of interventions. It offers a list of suggested research-based interventions, but teachers take care to individualize them for each student. *“Oftentimes, that academic success plan will precede the [Student Support Team] because we want those interventions put in place first,”* a special education administrator said.

A Student Support Team (SST) is a group that typically includes the administrator, teacher, and parent who discuss the student’s progress and identify strategies to support them in school. All schools had some form of an SST, but it was not their only support structure. For a fully-implemented MTSS, schools need to have multiple layers of intervention that are agreed-upon, structured, and well-known by all staff. Examples from our visits include:

- Check-ins with students,
- Individual or small-group tutoring before/after school,
- Designated intervention/enrichment period built into the school schedule, and,
- Specialized intervention provided by related services professionals, which is discussed in more detail below.

## PROVIDING SPECIALIZED INTERVENTIONS REGARDLESS OF DISABILITY

Common among all of the schools was the notion of shared expertise and specialized interventions provided to students regardless of disability. Instead of waiting until students are unsuccessful in general education before providing specialized instruction, California charter schools are putting an end to this *“waiting to fail”* model with layered interventions that blur the lines between general and special education.

“California charter schools are putting an end to this “waiting to fail” model with layered interventions that blur the lines between general and special education.”

In all of the schools that we visited, staff spoke about interventions being provided by specialists regardless whether a student had an IEP. For example, one school had a speech and language pathology assistant (SLPA) provide intervention to all students who were struggling with speech in younger grades. Their school leader said, *“This way we can start right away with speech services as soon as we sense a need. Out of 10 [students] referred to the SLPA, she typically ends up graduating 6 of them and then the SLP only has to do 4 assessments.”* Three schools shared having occupational therapists provide individualized or whole-class interventions to help students with handwriting, adapting/accommodating physical activities, and self-regulation. Special education teachers at all of the schools reported frequently

collaborating with general education teachers to provide interventions to students without IEPs who needed additional support in academics or behavior.

These charter schools also provided socioemotional interventions to help address a variety of mental health needs. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in five children living in the U.S. shows signs or symptoms of a mental health disorder in a given year.<sup>34</sup> And yet, as many as 80% of students who need services don't get them (Kataoka et.al., 2002). Among the schools we visited, all made counseling available to students on an as-needed basis. However, some schools also had specific social groups that were implemented as a Tier 2 intervention. Typically referred to as "social groups" or "social bunches", these groups were led by a school psychologist, counselor, or social worker and provided a space for a group of five to eight students to share their feelings, connect with others, and acquire tools and strategies to better handle stress and navigate difficult situations. Some of the schools also made counseling available to students' families to ensure that they provide comprehensive wraparound support.

One school psychologist shared: *"Some students participated in a social skills group like conflict resolution and working [...] to relate to each other and interact positively. That group took eight weeks, and they still meet now on their own initiative to talk about it."*

## **COLLABORATIVE, TEAM-BASED APPROACH**

The implementation of a successful MTSS requires coming together as a team to develop, put in place, and evaluate interventions for struggling learners, with or without disabilities. This begins with the leadership team being committed to ensuring that special education and general education work together to meet the needs of every student.

During one of our visits, we observed one such collaboration meeting. It included the school leader, founder, special education director, special education teachers, general education teachers, the occupational therapist, and the school counselor. In a short time, the team discussed almost a dozen cases of students who were in need of or were already receiving additional interventions and brainstormed solutions for students who were not responding well. Each team member had specific student data to share and each walked away with a clear task for further intervention/follow up.

A similar structure, called Coordination of Services Team (COST), was implemented at another school to bring together all of the support services providers to design and implement interventions.<sup>35</sup> Another used an approach called the Safety Net, whereby general education teachers identify students in need of support using Alternate Ranking model, which asks them to rank students based on their academic performance and other data gathered through observations and to flag any concerns they see in an online survey form. A dedicated team of professionals, including the referring teacher, evaluate referrals, follow up with students by conducting interviews and collecting additional data, and design and provide interventions, as appropriate.

The school leader described it this way: *"That is our base foundation. It gives an opportunity to meet with all of the teachers and it gives an oversight of all the students all the areas too, not just academic but*



*social/emotional [such as] friendships, family, behavioral, all of those components ... We want to catch everybody so that nobody slips through the cracks."*

Constant communication is the foundation of these successful collaborative relationships. Some schools had regularly-scheduled collaboration meetings, while others had spontaneous, organic interactions. All of the schools we visited cited the importance of ensuring constant access to student information. Teachers relied heavily on one another as a resource and reported close collaboration with support service providers as well. One teacher reflected, *"We have speech, OT [Occupational Therapist], PT [Physical Therapist], APE [Adaptive Physical Education Teacher], and all of those people, [psychologist], counseling, they're all here and they're all accessible all day long. And they're so good at what they do [...] So if we have a challenge in the classroom I can call them or text or email and they will respond back immediately of how to serve those kids."*



Schools used technology tools to facilitate some of this interaction. For example, four of the schools used access-restricted file sharing services to communicate student progress in real time, such as Google Drive. One school developed their own software system that allowed them to add notes on student profiles that other professionals could access in real time, viewing at-a-glance student information, parent information, and service information. The school leader described it this way: *"Anybody that does anything with a particular student can tag a note, and different of people have different levels of access [...]. Speech and counseling can then quickly communicate. Sometimes in speech in a group setting you are working on something that you are also working on in counseling, so it will give a discreet little comment, and the speech therapist can see that 'oh in counseling yesterday they met and talked about social anxiety, and so in speech that's the social anxiety language'. It allows communication across the board without sending a ton of e-mail and waiting an hour or two hours for information."* Their software even allowed them to quickly and efficiently schedule IEP meetings by sending out calendar invites to parents and staff and tracking responses. In fact, many schools remarked on how difficult and cumbersome many special education student information systems are. It is encouraging to see innovative tools being developed to offer alternatives.



## **DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY**



The degree of supports coordination and micro-targeting interventions that we observed relies heavily upon a robust schoolwide data collection and analysis system. Schools in our sample used a variety of screening and assessment tools, including standards-based assessments and curriculum-based measures. Almost all of the schools administered quarterly benchmark assessments for the entire school to measure progress on standards mastery. One school even had a dedicated assessments coordinator who designed custom standards-based unit assessments



for each teacher and core subject area that were then scanned and uploaded into a shared system for analysis. Teachers also reported collecting daily exit slips to check how students were progressing on standards and other measures like behavior or upholding school values in addition to interim formative and summative assessments.

This robust data gathering and analysis allowed schools to keep a finger on the pulse of instructional progress and provided a form of universal screening. In the context of a prevention model, universal screening is the first step in identifying the students who are at risk for learning difficulties.<sup>36</sup> Eight of our schools mentioned having dedicated professional development days where teachers and administrators can come together, review student data, and make adjustments to instructional plans, including identifying students in need of targeted interventions. The culture of data analysis also helped school leaders determine the coaching and professional development needs of their teachers.

Excellence and Justice in Education (EJE) Middle Academy has implemented a comprehensive, school-wide data-driven supports framework called Resiliency Quadrants (see Program Spotlight).<sup>37</sup> The model relies on analyzing assessment and other quantitative and qualitative data points on all students, and dividing them into four quadrants, based on need. Students in the lower quadrants are those that receive specialized intervention and instruction, regardless of disability. Those in the upper quadrants receive enrichment. Other schools also reported systems for grouping students based on assessment results and adjusting instruction/intervention accordingly.

Historically, schools and policymakers struggled with measuring achievement and progress of students with disabilities (Eckes & Swando, 2009). On one end of the extreme was the No Child



# EJE Middle Academy

**E**JE Middle Academy is in its third year of implementing a schoolwide tiered support system called Resiliency Quadrants. The model was developed by a school leader at Mueller Charter School, and was adopted at EJE (with a few modifications) after observing the success it had. At the core of the Resiliency Quadrants is the idea of addressing the impacts of poverty, crime, family stressors, community violence, and other environmental factors through individual and systemic school-wide interventions.

Throughout the year, teachers place students into 4 quadrants: Quadrant 4 is for students who are performing at or above grade level based on classroom assessments or standardized testing; Quadrant 3 is for students who are showing progress or approaching mastery; Quadrant 2 is for students who are showing little to no progress; and Quadrant 1 is for students who are significantly underperforming academically but already have supports through an Individualized Education Program (IEP). EJE also has an ICU, or Intensive Care Unit, where students from any quadrant can be placed if they undergo a major crisis (such as homelessness or death of a parent) and need immediate support. Once students have been placed among the 4 quadrants, the school comes together every 8 weeks as a collaborative team to focus their attentions on students in Quadrant 2, which are referred to as Q2 meetings.

A school leader described it this way: “We actually just had our first round of Q2s where .. we [all of our staff] sit down... We talk about the students...‘What are their academic needs?’, ‘Where are they at?’, ‘What have you done with them already in the classroom?’, ‘Have you done a home visit?’, ‘What have you found out about the home?’, ‘Have you met with the parents?’ We ask all these questions. ‘Do they come to school clean?’, ‘What is their hygiene like?’, ‘Are they eating?’, ‘Are they hungry when they come to school?’, so we really try to identify every single piece to see who is able to support where.”

The team reviews the data for each student, including academic assessment, observations, and any other relevant information. They decide on appropriate interventions, which can include a referral to school psychologist, family counseling, pairing a student up with a mentor, including students in small groups, providing extra support after class/after school, initiating an SST process or a special education assessment, helping students get clean clothes, helping the family secure food or shelter, and any other supports that may be necessary.

Each team member takes on appropriate roles and responsibilities based on their expertise, and eight weeks later, the team comes together again to discuss how the students are progressing with all of the support and interventions that were given. A special education teacher shared, “That’s just the thing about the Q2 process; it’s the whole team trying to figure out what they can do to support.” EJE’s staff agreed that the Q2 process is extremely valuable as it allows them to provide targeted interventions to all students in a collaborative and accountable way.

Left Behind (NCLB), which required students with disabilities to be assessed and meet the same annual yearly progress targets as other student subgroups: a standard that most schools never came close to meeting. On the other end of the spectrum was the widespread implementation of alternative assessments based on modified content standards, which watered down accountability: in 2012, California assessed close to 50% of students with disabilities using a modified test.<sup>38</sup> The new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, which replaced the NCLB, has the potential to increase accountability for education outcomes of students with disabilities. To that end ESSA:

- Limits the number of students that can be assessed on modified standards to 1% of student population;
- Places an emphasis on measuring growth from one year to the next; and,
- Takes into account the starting proficiency levels for each subgroup.

In our data collection, we were interested in learning how schools grappled with measuring academic achievement and progress of students with disabilities. We found that, much like in ESSA, the emphasis was on including scores of students with disabilities in rigorous data analysis in the same manner as any other student as they were expected to progress towards standards mastery. However, schools also looked at student growth, which, simply put, measures the amount of students' academic progress between two points in time.<sup>40</sup> Some growth models, however, also factor in the rate of growth of other students with similar achievement. One special education director explained: *"It's really not fair to compare a [student with a disability to their general education peer] who doesn't have the same disability, but it is fair for me to compare ... a [student with a disability] to a general education student who started in the same quartile, and how did they grow? ... You can really look at how much they grew compared to their peers at the same age or same grade level."*<sup>41</sup>

Several other schools used progress to IEP goals as their way of measuring outcomes for students with disabilities but always in concert with other measures like benchmark assessments, intervention data, and progress reports. Compiling schoolwide data on IEP progress of all students, however, is not easy as those features are not readily available in the special education information systems that currently exist and that charter schools are required to use. So, similarly to systems for communication, most schools developed creative ways of collecting and tracking data using paper trackers, binder systems, or Google Docs, all of which enable them to have access to up-to-date information and be more accountable for ensuring progress of students with disabilities.

Schools also reported engaging students in their own data analysis. According to an assistant principal interviewed: *"The students are actually working on creating semester goals themselves [based on their data] ... so that they're able to put them up in the classroom, and they can see themselves progressing towards those goals."* Their special education teacher had a similar system specifically for students with disabilities. Each student had a chart with all of their goals listed and little outlines of stars for indicating progress towards each goal. Each filled-in star represented 25% of the goal met, and each time students were assessed against their goals, students would update their progress. *"Each student knows when their IEP meeting date is and that they need to have all of their stars colored in by then"*, the teacher said.

These approaches show promise in innovating ways of universally evaluating all students, while also ensuring accountability and high expectations for students with disabilities.

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Effectively meeting the needs of every student requires supports beyond the school walls. We have found that highly effective schools proactively build strong relationships within their communities, including with students' families and community organizations. Research confirms the importance and significance of parent and family involvement for student engagement and performance in school (Mo & Singh, 2008), and a growing body of school improvement research suggests that engaging all members of the school community, including community members and leaders, provides an essential foundation to successful school improvement efforts (Ice, Thapa & Cohen, 2015). Furthermore, it has been shown that school-community partnerships provide multiple points of contact for students that strengthen the efforts of school personnel by extended educational opportunities outside the classroom and by meeting the needs of low-income students when parents and teachers are unable to do so (Alleman & Holly, 2013).

“We have found that highly effective schools proactively build strong relationships within their communities, including with students' families and community organizations.”

Family engagement emerged as a strong theme in our research, with multiple schools citing various approaches to involve parents in their student's education. Here are a few approaches cited:

**Family Trainings:** Two schools mentioned facilitating parent trainings, some of which focused specifically on supporting the needs of students with disabilities. Schools also shared a commitment to making connections with every single parent to ensure that they are well-informed of their child's progress and are able to provide support at home. One school principal shared: *“I know that we do more than other schools, but we've had 100% attendance, so in order to do that, for the parents that don't show up, the principals meet with parents one-on-one to make sure that the parents know where the child is at...I think there is something to be said about how much the school or the teacher or the administrative team is willing to put forth for the parents to know that it's important. We make it a point to make that connection with parents.”*

**Home Visits:** Three of the schools we visited mentioned home visits or meeting with students in small groups outside of the school setting as a successful strategy to get to know them better and determine ways in which to best support them. One school had the expectation that each teacher did 20 such check-ins per year. General education teachers at another school mentioned that they could request to do a home visit if they noticed a student struggling academically, socially, or emotionally. Staff also supported students and families beyond school. One school leader explained: *“We assist families with navigating high school options. We set up blocks of time with them, and we share the available data and connect them with other parents that have gone to the schools they are considering. We tell them about all of the enrollment papers that they need, we make copies, and last year we got all families over three nights until 7pm ready for high school.”*

### **Ensuring Health and Wellbeing of Whole Family:**

Another school leader mentioned going to the doctor with a student to make sure that he got his medication, and serving as a translator for a parent who sought a consult from a neurologist but did not have the language skills to fully access their recommendations. The schools we visited also shared stories of supporting students in difficult situations, including getting them clean clothes, toothpaste, a place to sleep, and warm meals. As one leader put it, *“There’s never been a time where we say, “That’s not our role, we’re over capacity and then that’s it ... We just do whatever it takes.”*

“There’s never been a time where we say, “That’s not our role, we’re over capacity and then that’s it ... We just do whatever it takes.”

- SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATOR,  
GABRIELLA CHARTER SCHOOL

To assist with providing this network of supports, the schools partnered with organizations in their community. Examples of community partnerships include:

**Counseling Agencies:** Two schools shared that they have been able to secure a partnership with an outside counseling agency to offer free therapy for students with mental health needs.

**University Partnerships:** One school serves as a placement site for teacher candidates, but the partnership extends beyond the educator preparation program. The school uses university online learning platforms to design and deliver professional development. They also recruit teachers, paraprofessionals, and after school program staff from the university’s school of education. Another school has a partnership with a nearby university’s counseling program, through which trainees provide group and individual therapy for students and families. Another school has a university partnership that allows them to run a mentorship program for students who benefit from adult role models.

## **INNOVATIVE APPROACHES AND PROMISING PRACTICES**

In addition to research-based approaches, some schools also implemented emerging innovative practices that have shown promise. Charter schools in our sample shared a commitment to learning about new research and bringing it back to their students. In the schools we sampled, we learned about the following innovative practices:

1. **Neurofeedback Training.** One school used this program, which provides game-like feedback for a student to help regulate brainwaves in an effort to improve behavior or focus. In a therapy session, a student had brainwave receptors attached to his head while watching a movie. When he was focused and responding to the stimuli appropriately, the picture on the screen grew larger and more colorful and the sound in his headphones intensified. When he lost focus, the picture grew smaller and the sound got duller. The goal of this kind of therapy is to train the brain to regulate itself. The occupational therapist conducting the session explained that the students get better over time at maintaining the highest quality of image and sound, which then translates to them being able to self-regulate better in real life. Research on this approach is still very limited, but one recent study

of students with autism spectrum disorders showed improvements in aspects of behavior necessary for successful social interactions with Neurofeedback Training (Friedrich et. al., 2015)

Related to this approach is Feed-Forward Modeling (FFM), a video-based technology that has shown great promise in recent years. This approach involves eliciting the desired behaviors from a participant, filming these behaviors, and then editing the video to show the participant using these behaviors in a new situation. In a recent study, using FFM has led to dramatic improvements in behavior, sometimes only requiring one training session to teach the desired behaviors. Furthermore, newly modeled behavior improvements have been sustained as participants demonstrate improved attention and academic performance (McDermott, 2016).

2. **Assistive Communication Technology.** Students with disabilities often require assistive communication systems to ensure that they can fully participate in the classroom. Two of the charter schools we visited used iPads and tablet devices with assistive communication software that helped students effectively engage in conversations and classroom discussions.
3. **Zones of Regulation.** Many students struggle with regulating their emotions, impulses, and sensory needs, which can lead to behavioral, socioemotional, and academic challenges. This approach provides a framework through which to teach students to become more aware of how they feel, how their behavior affects others, and what strategies to use in order to self-regulate (Kyupers & Sautter, 2012). School leaders and teachers using this model shared that the framework provided a common language and approach for the entire school to help students learn skills of self-awareness and self-regulation. The curriculum is co-taught in collaboration with the school psychologist.
4. **Mindfulness training.** Mindfulness, the meditative practice of focusing our attention on our thoughts, feelings, and environment in the present moment, has been gaining a lot of positive attention from practitioners and researchers alike for its potential to help students improve behavior and focus in school. A 2013 study of low-income and minority elementary school children demonstrated significant and sustained improvement in the areas of attention, self-control, classroom participation, and respect for others (Black & Fernando). Another study of students ages 12-16 found reduced stress and symptoms of depression as well as increased well-being (Kuyken, et al., 2013). Schools that reported using mindfulness meditation shared that their students feel calmer, more focused, and have fewer discipline issues.

With the advancement of new technologies and evidence-based research in promising practices, schools will be free to implement new approaches to behavior training with their students. Providing charter schools with the flexibility and resources to implement these innovations is and will continue to be a critical factor in closing the special education achievement gap.

“Providing charter schools with the flexibility and resources to implement these innovations is and will continue to be a critical factor in closing the special education achievement gap.”

# THE HOW:

## POLICY CONTEXT AND STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS

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The previous two sections of the report focused on the values, culture, and best practices that were consistently observed in highly-effective schools. This section will discuss specific attributes of school structures and systems that make it possible for charter schools to realize their vision and mission for educating students with disabilities.

### **AUTHORITY TO MAKE LOCAL PROGRAMMATIC DECISIONS**

Nine out of ten schools we included in the final sample are independent LEAs and LEA-like for special education purposes. This means that these schools receive a share of state and federal special education funding and are fully responsible for providing a free and appropriate public education to eligible students with disabilities.<sup>42</sup>

Across the board, these charter schools had:

- Greater autonomy and programmatic flexibility to design and implement programs reflective of their values and educational philosophy;
- The ability to build programs and supports around individual student needs and to adapt quickly to the changing needs of their population; and,
- Freedom to adjust student schedules, purchase materials, hire additional staff, forge relationships with service provider agencies, and build a full array of supports in order to meet the needs of all students who chose to attend their schools.

However, most of these schools did not start out as LEAs or LEA-like for special education purposes. Most began as “schools of an LEA” and experienced common challenges inherent in that arrangement. When a charter school is a school of an LEA for special education purposes, the authorizer is responsible for providing services to students at the charter school and the charter school is responsible for paying for a proportionate share of districtwide special education costs. This prevents charter schools from building

“One of the reasons we couldn’t stay with [district SELPA] is that they are not going to provide services for those kids, they’re just going to say ‘You can’t go to that school.’ I think that’s a big problem”

– SCHOOL LEADER, OAKLAND SCHOOL FOR THE ARTS

and operating their own special education programs. One school leader, in discussing a new tailored program for students with severe needs at their school said, *“One of the reasons we couldn’t stay with [district SELPA] is that they are not going to provide services for those kids, they’re just going to say ‘You can’t go to that school.’ I think that’s a big problem.”*

In fact, traditional schools often rely on district or SELPA infrastructure to offer a full continuum of services to students with disabilities, and, when a student’s needs exceed the supports available on a particular school site, he/she is referred out to a more specialized, and often more restrictive setting. We found this

to be true at one of the schools we visited where the district was still responsible for special education programs and services. The district’s special education teacher shared: *“We provide [specialized academic instruction] up to 49% of the student’s day, if that is necessary. Beyond that, then we have someone from the district come and discuss with the parents about different alternative placement options in our district because the way our program works, we can’t really provide that much more than that.”*

This runs contrary to the philosophy of inclusion and access. Charter schools should strive to achieve greater autonomy in special education, so that they will have the flexibility to tailor supports and services around their students, rather than fitting them into predetermined programs.

One school leader reflected on her school’s transition from being dependent on their authorizer for special education to operating their own program: *“We had eight years with our local school district, so this is our second year on our own. We had three [district] staff who were unionized and fully protected and everything, and they chose to come with us. And that was really telling ... it’s [about] the ability to be creative and try new things.”*

A teacher at another school echoed these comments: *“The advantage is the flexibility we have. We don’t have to [implement] a cookie cutter model, we’re able to individualize the structure that we want to implement ... to what the kid needs.”*

## RECRUITMENT AND STAFFING

Autonomy in special education through LEA or LEA-like status allowed schools to recruit and/or contract with staff who were aligned with their educational program and philosophy and were a good cultural fit with the school. That was true not only of special education staff and services providers but general education staff as well. One school leader said, *“When you come to work for us, you’re not*

*just a general education teacher ... from the very beginning, you have [to have] what it takes to be a special education teacher. In order to reach ... all those students, that's what is pretty much required."*

Schools had robust recruitment and hiring protocols that allowed them to find the right candidates. Two schools described comprehensive panel interviews with both general and special education staff. Three schools mentioned requiring candidates to prepare and deliver a demonstration lesson. In one school, the administrator scored a demonstration lesson and provided feedback to the candidate, who then had to revise it and come in for another interview to deliver it once more. That school leader shared that it was a really important step as it allowed her to see how receptive the candidate was to feedback and to set up an expectation of continuous improvement.

At another school a special education teacher shared, *"We are highly involved in the interview process of the paraprofessionals...We spend our summers interviewing people and setting up for the upcoming school year."* School leaders and teachers admitted that this degree of screening was difficult and time-consuming but well worth it because it allowed them to ensure quality of instruction and support for students and a positive staff culture.

Autonomy in programmatic decision-making allowed schools to be both flexible and strategic about how they staffed their programs. For example, one school leader explained, *"I think we do have a large paraprofessional staff, part of that is due to the large number of students with moderate-to-severe disabilities, so when you think of those students in other settings—in a special day class or in a special education center — there would probably be staffing associated with that. So, rather than those students being boxed out into these other programs, they are in the general education classroom, and the staffing that would be associated with those needs follows them."*

This may also allow charter schools to become more cost-effective while building a full continuum of necessary services and supports. One leader shared: *"We contract with outside vendors when it comes to meeting the needs of students [as needed]...That has really allowed us to have a deep range of services [without] the [additional overhead]."* Not only were these schools able to customize supports and services that their students needed, but they were also able to switch service providers as needed, which allowed for greater quality control and accountability.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

Charter schools studied demonstrated universal commitment to professional development, including ongoing coaching and support. School leaders shared a variety of ways in which this development happens:

- **Summer trainings.** All of the schools committed at least a full week before school start for pre-service training. A portion of this training was consistently dedicated to special education and multi-tiered support systems and structures that teachers needed to be fully aware of before the school year began.
- **Ongoing training.** Throughout the school year, these schools also offered training

and professional development during weekly staff meetings and in longer sessions on a monthly basis. Two schools ran small professional learning communities (PLCs) focused on specific needs and goals of the PLC members.

- **Teacher targeted professional development.** All of the schools studied tailored professional development and support to the needs of their staff rather than following a predetermined training curriculum. Three of the schools reported specifically soliciting information from their teachers about their professional development needs. One school did it via an annual survey: *“This year our committee devoted to professional development sent out a survey to find out what we wanted to learn, and then you could say what you had a lot of knowledge about and that you’d be willing to teach a professional development [course].”*
- **Leadership opportunities for educators.** It was also common for schools to rely on internal staff expertise rather than seeking outside professional development providers. One special education teacher commented on her experience: *“It’s a really exceptional part of our job, and I have learned so much from our speech therapist and occupational therapist that I don’t know why I wasn’t taught that in my special education training because it is vital to being an effective special educator.”*
- **Professional development based on student needs.** In addition to soliciting feedback from staff, schools also based their professional development scope and sequence on student data trends and needs identified by school leaders during teacher observations and evaluations.
- **Paraprofessional training.** Two of the schools reported offering specific training for their special education paraprofessional staff. One school had a very robust paraprofessional training program that included online modules, weekly trainings, and on-the-job training by special education teachers.

In addition to formal professional development, school leaders also reported providing ongoing coaching and support to their teachers throughout the year, both in general and special education. Teachers felt that the culture of ongoing coaching created a safe environment where all staff were free to ask questions and improve their practice.



# CHALLENGES AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

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While all schools interviewed for this report had strong special education programs, staff shared that they were not without challenges. Some of these challenges stemmed from broad infrastructure or policy issues often outside the school's control, including but not limited to:

- Insufficient special education funding and lack of additional funding for students with more significant needs;
- Difficulties with securing special education service providers in shortage fields;
- Challenges with recruiting and retaining quality teachers; and,
- Lack of sufficient facilities to expand their special education programs.

Some schools were also impacted by:

- Rapid growth of their special education populations. This was particularly difficult to manage for students with moderate-to-severe disabilities. The high degree of individualization is at the heart of what makes these programs excellent, but it is challenging in the climate of scarce resources and intense scrutiny that is unique to the charter school sector.
- Lack of economies of scale. Charter schools that are LEA or LEA-like often lack the economies of scale experienced by traditional public schools. This means these schools are responsible for serving students across a wide spectrum of disabilities at each individual site, yet they lack the ability to pool resources to serve students in multiple schools or programs. While this presents unique challenges, it has also resulted in schools that are models for individualization and innovation, where inclusion is embraced at all levels of school leadership.

Despite these pressures, school leaders and staff shared a focus and commitment to improving their programs. One school leader reflected, *"We are not complacent. I know that we're doing things, but there is still a lot for us to learn. There's plenty of growth still left, and so I think that's one of the things that continues to drive our success ... right now [October] we're already thinking about the professional development for next year because these are the needs we're seeing."* In addition to refining professional development, schools are focusing on bolstering up their data collection and analysis systems, better aligning supports between various student subgroups, including special education and English Language Learners, and continuously improving their special education infrastructure so that they can meet the needs of every child who wishes to attend.

# DISCUSSION

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The increase and improvement in the California charter school special education infrastructure offers a unique opportunity to explore effective and innovative models of service delivery that have the potential to transform educational experiences and outcomes of students with disabilities. This research report provides an overview of common values, beliefs, practices, and characteristics of ten effective charter schools that have done just that.

These schools all shared a deep belief in embracing student differences and educating students with disabilities in inclusive settings. Numerous research studies have documented the academic and social benefits of inclusive education to students with and without disabilities (Hunt, et. al, 2012; Rojewski, 2015; Causton-Theoharis, et. al., 2011). The inclusive approach also breaks down the silos between general and special education. All staff at these schools carried a deep sense of responsibility for educational outcomes of these students and worked together to support them. We observed a shared emphasis on creating an embracing a positive school culture through the use of community building activities and restorative justice practices. Schools were also highly adaptable to the needs of their students. Multiple schools have created specialized programs when students needed significant support in order to thrive within general education classrooms.

Our analysis of school practices and systems demonstrated that effective schools approached special education within the larger context of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). Schools collected and analyzed a variety of data points to identify students who were struggling and to provide support through layered interventions. Rather than waiting for a student to fail in general education before being identified for special education, schools embraced a proactive approach to meeting student needs within one coherent system of supports. Students did not need to be identified with a disability before receiving interventions from any of the staff, including occupational therapists, speech pathologists, school psychologists, and other specialists.

Schools also built strong partnerships with families by offering myriad engagement opportunities and maintaining constant communication. Schools also actively built partnerships with community organizations in order to connect students and families with additional supports as needed.

To further understand the structures enabling schools to meet the needs of their students with disabilities, we examined the surrounding policy environment, as well as intrinsic attributes these schools credited to their success. School leaders and teachers repeatedly acknowledged that their programs were possible because they had local control and flexibility to make programmatic decisions. Specifically, nine out of 10 of the schools interviewed were their own independent LEAs or LEA-like schools for special education purposes, allowing them to receive special education funding directly and be fully responsible for all special education and related services.

With flexibility in special education, schools were able to recruit professionals who were well-aligned to their educational mission and philosophy. In addition to recruiting and hiring the right people, schools also invested in staff development. They offered ongoing coaching and support as well as tailored and targeted professional development that reflected the specific needs of the staff and students. Schools often relied on in-house expertise to offer this professional development in a strategic and cost-effective way.

We want to acknowledge that this research is not without limitations. While not by intentional design, our final sample was predominantly comprised of schools that are LEAs or LEA-like for special education. We know that successful models of collaboration between school districts or SELPAs and charter schools exist across the state. We also did not closely examine each schools' instructional practices and curricula, use of technology in the classroom, teacher qualifications and years of experience, school leader qualities, fundraising and availability of outside resources, amount of instructional time, and a host of other factors that all intertwine to form the unique fabric of each school. However, we focused our research on those attributes and practices that are most practicable and replicable across the education sector.

To that end, we offer the following summary of major takeaways from our research that schools should consider in an effort to improve any aspect of their special education program:

- 1. Embrace inclusive practices.** Inclusion has been shown to provide academic and socioemotional benefits to students with and without disabilities. Charter schools are serving nearly 90% of their students with disabilities in general education classrooms.<sup>7</sup>
- 2. Tailor programs to student needs.** Rather than fitting students into pre-determined settings, charter schools created specific and individualized programs that met student needs and evolved as the students progressed. This ensures that students can learn the necessary skills to become more independent and successful in the future.

“School leaders and teachers repeatedly acknowledged that their programs were possible because they had local control and flexibility to make programmatic decisions.”

3. **Build a supportive school community.** Schools deliberately worked on creating and maintaining a positive school community, thorough the use of community circles and restorative justice practices, where differences are celebrated and where staff and students support one another.
4. **Create Multi-Tiered Support Systems** that are clearly-defined, team-based, data-driven, and available to all students. Charter schools in this study built robust multi-tiered support systems to catch the needs of all students regardless of whether or not they had an IEP.
5. **Build family and community partnerships.** Charter schools we visited invested heavily in building a network of supports and services to assist students and their families.
6. **Integrate cutting-edge technologies and practices.** Charter schools in this study were not afraid to innovate and try new and emergent approaches to providing services for students with disabilities.
7. **Seek autonomous arrangements in special education** to make local programmatic decisions. Nine out of ten charter schools in this study were independent LEA or LEA-like schools for special education purposes. Research demonstrates that charter school autonomy and flexibility in special education results in a broader percentage and range of students with disabilities served.<sup>17</sup>
8. **Recruit, hire, and develop staff effectively.** The schools we visited implemented rigorous recruitment, screening, and professional development practices to ensure that general and special education teachers were prepared to meet the needs of all students.
9. **Constantly evaluate and refine practices.** Charter schools in this study were committed to continuously assessing and improving their practices and processes to serve the changing needs of their students and communities.

CCSA is working to create practical resource guides, toolkits, examples from school visits, and other resources to offer additional insight into each of these areas. We hope that this report and its accompanying materials offer a small window into effective and innovative special education approaches and encourage further dialogue and research.

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## OTHER RESOURCES

The IRIS Center Peabody College Vanderbilt University Nashville - funded through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) provides summaries of best practices. [http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/ebp\\_summaries/](http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/ebp_summaries/)

CAST - a nonprofit education research and development organization that works to expand learning opportunities for all individuals through Universal Design for Learning. <http://www.cast.org/>

RTI Action Network - a program of the National Center for Learning Disabilities, funded by the Cisco Foundation and in partnership with the nation's leading education associations and top RTI experts. <http://www.rtinetwork.org/>

# METHODOLOGY

The study began by conducting a quantitative analysis on the most recent year of outcomes data available at the time (2012-13) to identify our initial sample of schools to target.<sup>43</sup> We have limited our sample to schools that had a valid 2012-13 Academic Performance Index (API)<sup>44</sup> for the students with disabilities (SWD) subgroup and fell within, above, or far above on the CCSA Similar Schools Measure (SSM). The SSM identifies schools that over- and under-perform compared to schools serving similar students statewide. It functions as a proxy value-add measure by comparing each school's performance to a prediction based on how schools with similar demographic characteristics perform.<sup>45</sup>

We also focused our sample on autonomous and semi-autonomous charter schools and excluded non-autonomous schools. While often high-achieving, non-autonomous schools tend to function very similarly to traditional district-run public schools and thus would be more likely to employ traditional service delivery models. Additionally, recent research shows that autonomous charter schools achieve statistically higher performance ( $p < 0.05$ ) than non-autonomous charter schools on college-readiness metrics including A-G completion, college acceptance, graduation rate, and CAHSEE passage rate.<sup>46</sup>

In December of 2015, the California Department of Education (CDE) released the 2014-15 SBAC data. This was the first year of the operational SBAC assessment in CA. However, as this was also the first year of statewide assessments results after CA has suspended use of its previous accountability framework, we could not use the SWD API in our regression. We therefore had to create our own measure of achievement based on publicly reported scale scores for SWD. We calculated how far above/below SWD are from the Met (i.e. Proficiency) cut point in each grade and subject. This allowed us to make one measure of achievement for the SWD subgroup in each school. We call it the Average Point Difference (APD) because it reflects the average number of scale score points between each student and the "Met" cut point.

With multiple years of data and no uniform accountability metric, we needed a way to compare achievement across the two years. While SWD achievement is important, some of its variation is predictably caused by differences in school traits and student demographics. We therefore created regression-adjusted measures in order to see the extent to which SWD subgroups over- or under-perform our expectations after controlling for some school traits and student demographics. Some SWD subgroups do only somewhat well on achievement but are revealed to be highly over-performing on regression-adjusted achievement (or vice versa).

The dependent variable for 2013 and 2015 are the respective achievement measures described above (API and APD). The independent variables are: a charter school's (1) level of control over serving its SWD (independent LEA, school of an LEA, or LEA-like), (2) autonomy, (3) management model (free-standing school or part of a charter management organization or network of schools) and (4) site type (classroom/site based, independent study or combination) as well as the % of test-takers who are (1) low-income (qualify for free and reduced priced meals), (2) English Learners, and (3) students with disabilities. As a precaution, we include a binary variable for being located in Los Angeles Unified School District because charter schools perform particularly well there.

To simplify our analysis, we created regression-adjusted decile scores for all of the schools in our initial sample for both years. We then limited our final sample to schools that ranked in the top 20% in both years (scoring 8-10). This resulted in a population of 65 charter schools. We also wanted to include several schools that did not meet the outcomes data cutoffs but have earned a reputation in their communities for the effective and/or innovative approach to special education. As a result, 10 additional schools were included for a total population of 75 schools. We contacted these schools and conducted 30 phone interviews with site leaders and special education administrators to identify the policies and practices they credited for their success. Subsequently, we conducted site visits to 12 schools, due to time-constraints of the study. The visits included a series of focus groups

and interviews with school administrators, general and special educators, and related service providers as well as classroom observations. We subsequently selected 10 schools to include in final data analysis upon which this report is based. The reason for excluding 2 schools was that we visited them prior to release of the 2014-15 testing data, and then discovered that their special education subgroup was not large enough to generate a score. The final list of schools along with some demographic and structural characteristics is included in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Final sample of schools used in the analysis**

\*Data for this table was compiled based on 2014-15 school-level information in DataQuest and School Accountability

School name	2014-15 Enrollm.	SPED	SED	ELL	Susp	Exp	Grade span (as of 2014-15)	Special ed configuration	County
EJE Middle Academy	171	11.70%	85.40%	14%	1.10%	0.00%	8-Jun	School of an LEA	San Diego
Multicultural Learning Center	400	14.30%	59.80%	32.30%	1.20%	0.00%	K-8	LEA-like	Los Angeles
Oakland School for the Arts	742	8.50%	10.20%	0.90%	2.90%	0.00%	12-Jun	LEA	Alameda
Magnolia Science Academy 7	295	10.20%	76.90%	25.10%	0.00%	0.00%	K-5	LEA-like	Los Angeles
CHIME	668	16.80%	13.40%	11.60%	0.40%	0.00%	K-8	LEA-like	Los Angeles
Literacy First	1607	6.30%	33.20%	27.10%	0.00%	0.00%	K-12	LEA	San Diego
KIPP Raíces	546	10.10%	90.10%	47.20%	0.20%	0.00%	K-4	LEA-like	Los Angeles
Santa Rosa Academy	1547	5.40%	20.60%	0.50%	3.50%	0.00%	K-12	LEA	Riverside
Oxford Preparatory Academy	850	7.60%	9.30%	4.90%	0.10%	0.00%	K-8	LEA	Orange
Gabriella Charter School	435	14%	88%	32.90%	1.80%	0.00%	K-8	LEA-like	Los Angeles

Report Card (SARC) data files. Special education configuration was self-reported by schools.

School special education achievement data and unique characteristics are summarized in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Final Sample Special Education Performance and Rationale for Inclusion**

School Name	SWD % Proficient or Above 2012-13		Similar Schools Rank 2013	SWD % Proficient or Above (Met and Exceeded) 2014-15		Similar Schools Rank 2015	Characteristics / Rationale for inclusion
	ELA	Math		ELA	Math		
	State Avg-29%	State Avg-29%	Scale of 1 to 10 (lowest - highest)	State Avg. 12%	State Avg. 9%	Scale of 1 to 10 (lowest - highest)	
EJE Middle Academy	85%	62%	10	39	28%	10	Dual language immersion, strong performance in both years, unique arrangement with authorizer for special education, innovative model for targeting interventions (Resiliency Model), California Gold Ribbon.
Multicultural Learning Center	45%	62%	6	3%	3%	2	Strong performance in first year, multicultural approach to community building, dual language immersion, team-based approach to intervention, innovative interventions (Neurofeedback), wide range of disabilities.
Oakland School for the Arts	31%	20%	2	34%	9%	2	Nationally-recognized arts program, innovative therapeutic program, COST team approach to intervention, defined MTSS.
Magnolia Science Academy 7	47%	74%	10	22%	23%	10	Strong performance, STEM/STEAM focus, tiered interventions.
CHIME	50%	48%	2	24%	26%	7	Strong performance, recognized model of inclusion, broad range of disabilities, innovative practices.
Literacy First	56%	55%	9	40%	37%	9	Strong performance in both years, developed system of tiered interventions, innovative use of technology.
KIPP Raíces	77%	85%	10	38%	42%	10	National Blue ribbon, innovative programs tailored to student needs, strong data culture.
Santa Rosa Academy	17%	20%	3	19%	6%	2	Unique 3-track model of independent study, site based, and combination. STEM focus. Strong systems of intervention.
Oxford Preparatory Academy	91%	71%	10	68%	47%	10	Strong performance in both years, developed MTSS, strong collaboration practices.
Gabriella Charter School	50%	60%	10	17%	10%	10	Strong performance in both years, dance program, broad range of disabilities, California Gold Ribbon.

\*Achievement data was obtained through publicly available data files released by CDE.

All of the schools reported having access to the full continuum of necessary services should students require them; the matrix below represents those services that were provided in 2015-16 school year.

Services Provided in 2015-16 Year	Gabriella	Santa Rosa	CHIME	Literacy First	OSA	MSA	MLC	EJE	OPA	KIPP Raíces
Education specialist teacher mild/moderate	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Education specialist teacher mod/severe		•	•				•		•	•
1 to 1 aides	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			•
Paraprofessionals			•					•	•	
Speech and Language Pathologist	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Speech and Language Pathology Assistant		•	•						•	
School Psychologist	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Counseling/school based mental health	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Occupational Therapy	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Physical Therapy		•	•	•		•	•			
Behavior intervention/instruction			•	•		•	•		•	•
Vision impairment specialist	•		•	•			•		•	
Hearing Impairment		•		•			•		•	
Social Worker					•					
School Nurse	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Assistive technology specialist				•	•					
Orientation and Mobility									•	

\* Data for this table was self-reported by schools.

Our qualitative methodology consisted of 3 main components: (1) interview with administrative and special education staff; (2) focus group with general education staff; and (3) classroom observations. The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and combined a predetermined set of open questions with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further. Our classroom observations were unstructured because we wanted to allow schools the flexibility to showcase their best special education program components. The observations we conducted varied greatly from school to school and provided a lot of insight into day-to-day experiences of students. We employed observer as a participant method of observations. Our observation notes were used to offer anecdotal evidence to demonstrate how various systems and best practices affect school experiences of students with disabilities. The goal of data collection was to identify special education best practices and innovative approaches employed by successful schools that could be implemented more broadly to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. We also sought to identify specific policy environments that allow charter schools to implement the identified best practices to better inform our statewide and local advocacy work. Included in Appendix B are the specific protocols and questionnaires we used in data collection.

We interviewed a combined total of 138 participants from the 10 school sites we visited. We recorded our interviews and focus groups and transcribed the recordings. The transcripts were analyzed using the NVivo software. We coded each of the main concepts in the transcripts into individual concepts or “nodes” and then combined the nodes into larger themes that encompassed dominant school values and practices. We also sought to establish inter-rater reliability by having an independent research analyst code the transcripts in a parallel file. The coding was merged, and the final categorization was based on the frequency of mentions and strength of themes identified by both analysts. We also then conducted member checking to verify that the spotlights and quotes we included were accurate and reflective of the intention of the schools.

# QUESTIONNAIRES

## Administrator and Special Education Staff Interview

1. Complete this sentence: students with disabilities are...
2. What percent of your student population has an IEP? Please state the number of students with disabilities and indicate the range of disabilities.
3. Describe your special education program philosophy.
4. Describe your special education services and supports.
  - What is your continuum of services like? How do you make sure that your school can provide a full range of services?
  - Which providers are you using for services? How many are in house vs contracted?
  - How are services delivered? Does your school use pullout, regular ed, or separate classes with your students with disabilities?
5. Describe the collaboration between general and special education teachers/ other specialists to ensure success of students with disabilities.
  - What are some of the systems in place for that or what are the barriers to collaboration?
  - What systems are in place to ensure that accommodations are being met and that progress is documented?
  - How are you measuring outcomes of students with disabilities?
6. Do you have any specific stories or anecdotes that describe special ed service delivery at your school?
  - Success stories?
  - Particularly difficult cases?
  - How have you been able to adapt your programs to meet the needs of your students?
7. Describe your RTI/MTSS process.
  - How does your school collect and analyze student data to inform instruction and intervention for all students?
  - How are interventions designed and delivered? When and by whom?
  - What technical systems, tools, curricula, and protocols do you use?
  - Are socioemotional and behavioral interventions provided in addition to academic interventions? What are they? Who provides them?
8. What systems are in place for teacher support and professional development (PD) in meeting the needs of students with disabilities?
  - Do you offer special education PD to general education teachers? Education Specialists? Examples, topics, frequency.
9. What is your approach to student discipline? What are the systems for supporting positive behavior throughout the school?
10. Are parents or community members involved in the special education process at your school? If so, how do you engage them?
  - Does your school bring outside supports in (connections with community organizations) for students and families?
  - Do you have specific events/supports for parents of students with disabilities?

11. What special education instructional practices or approaches does your school pride itself on?
  - What are the key elements of your program/school that allow you to be successful in meeting the needs of students with disabilities?
  - What systems/practices have you implemented that work really well?
  - What would you recommend other schools to try?
12. What are your biggest challenges in meeting the needs of students with disabilities?
  - What are your challenges/would you change/what are you still working on?

# QUESTIONNAIRES

## Focus Group with General Education Staff

1. Complete this sentence: Students with disabilities are...
2. How many students with disabilities are in each of your classes? What are some of their needs?
3. Please describe the special education process at your school and your role in it.
4. Could you provide some examples of ways in which you accommodate the needs of students with disabilities in your planning and instruction?
5. Describe the RTI/MTSS process at your school. How do you participate in this process?
  - Do teachers and admin regularly look at schoolwide/ grade level data?
  - How are interventions designed and administered? By whom? How is the effectiveness assessed?
  - Are socio-emotional/behavioral interventions provided alongside academic interventions?
6. What are the supports and resources available to you to meet the needs of your students with disabilities?
  - Do you collaborate with sped staff? If so, when, how often?
  - Do they accommodate your lessons and assessments?
  - Do they push in/pull-out/co-teach?
  - Do they offer training and PD?
  - Do you have paraprofessional support?
7. Do your administrators regularly observe your classrooms and offer meaningful coaching and feedback and is special ed part of your observations and evaluation? In what way?
8. What is your approach to student discipline? What are the systems for supporting positive behavior throughout the school?
9. How are parents or community members/organizations involved in the special education process at your school?
10. Do you have any specific stories or anecdotes that describe special ed service delivery at your school? Particularly difficult cases? Success stories?
11. What special education instructional practices or approaches does your school pride itself on?
  - What are the key elements of your program/school that allow you to be successful in meeting the needs of students with disabilities?
  - What systems/practices have you implemented that work really well? What would you recommend other schools to try?
12. What are your biggest challenges in meeting the needs of students with disabilities?
  - What would you change/what are you still working on?
  - What would you need to be better prepared/supported in terms professional development and/or resources?
  - What would you want your administrators to know/do differently?

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> US ED Office of Special Education Programs Results-Driven Accountability <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/new-accountability-framework-raises-bar-state-special-education-programs>
- <sup>2</sup> Financing the Education of High-Need Students, The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2013 <https://edexcellence.net/publications/financing-the-education-of-high-need-students>
- <sup>3</sup> US ED Archived: A 25 Year History of the IDEA <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/leg/idea/history.html>
- <sup>4</sup> Public High School Four-Year On Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates (2014) <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014391.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> Students with Disabilities & the Juvenile Justice System: What Parents Need to Know (2013) <http://www.pacer.org/jj/pdf/jj-8.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> National Center for Education Statistics: The Condition of Education; Children and Youth With Disabilities; May 2016 Update [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cgg.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp)
- <sup>7</sup> A Office of Special Education Programs California IDEA Part B Profile - FFY14 <https://osep.grads360.org/services/PDCService.svc/GetPDCDocumentFile?fileId=20106>
- <sup>8</sup> US ED Data Demonstrates Need to Address Widespread Disparities in Special Education <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-takes-action-deliver-equity-students-disabilities>
- <sup>9</sup> US ED The Inclusion of Students With Disabilities in School Accountability Systems: An Update (2013) <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20134017/pdf/20134017.pdf>
- <sup>10</sup> New Accountability Framework Raises the Bar for State Special Education Programs <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/new-accountability-framework-raises-bar-state-special-education-programs>
- <sup>11</sup> In 2016, California's IDEA determination was "needs assistance" <https://osep.grads360.org/services/PDCService.svc/GetPDCDocumentFile?fileId=20104>
- <sup>12</sup> Newer data on special education spending is not available. This article describes some of the reasons why: <http://www.ecs.org/do-we-spend-too-much-on-special-education-in-this-country/>
- <sup>13</sup> CA Legislative Analyst Office Report, 2013 <http://www.lao.ca.gov/reports/2013/edu/special-ed-primer/special-ed-primer-010313.aspx>
- <sup>14</sup> CA Ed Code §47641
- <sup>15</sup> CA State Board of Education Report, 2009 <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/pn/im/documents/infodec09item04.doc>. Technically charters were able to become their own LEA before 2007, but regulations and existing policy made it extremely difficult in practice.
- <sup>16</sup> "LEA-like" is a term that CCSA uses to describe an arrangement that allows charter schools similar access to special education funding and responsibility for special education service provision without actually exiting their authorizer's SELPA and becoming their own LEA for special education.
- <sup>17</sup> CCSA Special Education in California Charter Schools: All Students Welcome (2015) <http://www.ccsa.org/2015/04/special-education-in-california-charter-schools-all-students-welcome.html>
- <sup>18</sup> El Dorado Charter SELPA CEO Council Materials, May 2015
- <sup>19</sup> According to special education schol-level data provided by LAUSD as well as the "Report on the Progress and Effectiveness of the Los Angeles Unified School District's Implementation of the Modified Consent Decree During the 2014-2015 School Year - Part 2" page 30 and 31: [http://oimla.com/pdf/20160711/AnnualReport20142015\\_Part2\\_Final.pdf](http://oimla.com/pdf/20160711/AnnualReport20142015_Part2_Final.pdf)
- <sup>20</sup> For the purposes of this report, the term "lower incidence" represents all IDEA-defined disability categories excluding Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Speech and Language Impairment (SLI) and Other Health Impairment (OHI).
- <sup>21</sup> According to data provided by the El Dorado Charter SELPA for 2010-11 and 2014-15 academic years, LEA member schools served 0.9% of students with more severe disabilities in 2010 and 1.4% in 2014-15, which represents a 56% increase. For comparison, the K-12 proportion of students with more severe disabilities statewide was 2.4%, according to CDE.
- <sup>22</sup> According to data provided by the LAUSD SELPA for 2010-11 and 2015-16 academic years, LEA-like charter schools served 1.2% of students with more severe disabilities in 2010 and 1.8% in 2015-16, which represents a 50% increase.
- <sup>23</sup> 2013-14 was omitted because it was a pilot year for a new state testing system and results were not reported.
- <sup>24</sup> Two schools were not included in the final sample due to insufficient subgroup data in 2014-15.
- <sup>25</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, 2013 [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cgg.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp)
- <sup>26</sup> Office of Special Education Programs California IDEA Part B Profile - FFY14 <https://osep.grads360.org/services/PDCService.svc/GetPDCDocumentFile?fileId=20106>
- <sup>27</sup> California Department of Education report to the State Board of Education, March 2015 <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr15/documents/mar15item01.doc>
- <sup>28</sup> 2013-14 was omitted because it was a pilot year for a new state testing system and results were not reported.

## Endnotes

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- 29 Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A research review [http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ\\_Literature-Review\\_20160217.pdf](http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ_Literature-Review_20160217.pdf)
- 30 California moves to bring special education students ‘into the fold’ of mainstream education; EdSource, Jane Meredith Adams, March 14, 2016 <https://edsource.org/2016/california-moves-to-bring-special-education-students-into-the-fold-of-mainstream-education/561585>
- 31 Lessons from California Districts Showing Unusually Strong Academic Performance for Students in Special Education (2011) [http://www.calstat.org/ISES/pdf/lessons\\_from\\_ca\\_districts\\_strong\\_spec\\_ed\\_academic\\_performance.pdf](http://www.calstat.org/ISES/pdf/lessons_from_ca_districts_strong_spec_ed_academic_performance.pdf)
- 32 National Education Association Policy Brief [http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/mf\\_PB02\\_Disproportionality.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/mf_PB02_Disproportionality.pdf)
- 33 Adapted from the Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports at the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) <https://www.pbis.org/school/mtss>
- 34 Center for Disease Control and Prevention Children’s Mental Health Report (2013) <http://www.cdc.gov/features/childrensmentalhealth/>
- 35 Coordination of Services Team (COST) / Student Success Team (SST), UCLA Center X for Transforming Public Schools <https://centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/principal-leadership/cohort-11-fieldwork/s-thompson-fieldwork-class/carolinairias-workspace/fieldwork-portfolio/project-webpages/student-success-teams-sst>
- 36 RTI Action Network <http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/research/universal-screening-within-a-rti-model>
- 37 Resiliency Quadrants [https://go.sdsu.edu/education/doc/files/01714-Santos\\_Qual\\_1\\_v2.pdf](https://go.sdsu.edu/education/doc/files/01714-Santos_Qual_1_v2.pdf)
- 38 Overusing test for special ed students inflates API scores; EdSource, Doug McRae, October 11, 2012 <https://edsource.org/2012/overusing-test-for-special-ed-students-inflates-api-scores/21028>
- 39 P.L. 114-95
- 40 <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Policies/Measuring-student-growth-At-a-glance/Measuring-student-growth-A-guide-to-informed-decision-making.html>
- 41 This school used NWEA MAP Assessment <https://www.nwea.org/>
- 42 One school is a “School of an LEA” for special education purposes, which means the authorizer is responsible for providing services to students at the charter school and the charter school is responsible for paying for a proportionate share of districtwide special education costs. However, that school has developed a collaborative relationship with its authorizer that allows them to exercise some control over special education services and staffing at their school.
- 43 2013-14 data was not available due to California’s transition to new standards and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) testing system.
- 44 <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/>
- 45 To be ranked on the SSM, schools needed to have at least 3 years of valid API data. We have excluded schools that fell below or far below on the SSM as well as schools that didn’t have enough data to generate a ranking. Schools that are scored under Alternative Schools Accountability Model (ASAM) were also excluded. The California Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999 established ASAM which provides school-level accountability for alternative schools serving highly mobile and at-risk students.
- 46 A Step Up: How Charter Schools Provide Higher Levels of California Public University Access, April 2016, CCSA