

CHAPTER 4

New Options for Serving Special-Needs Students

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INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) launched a study to build empirical evidence about how charter schools are navigating the special education policy environment. NCSRP wanted to identify new or promising approaches to special education in the charter school community. The research focused on the following questions:

- Which special education challenges most seriously impact the growth and expansion of the charter school movement?
- Why do parents with special-needs children choose (or not choose) charter schools?
- What practices related to special education have charter schools or networks of charter schools adopted that could be considered innovative or especially promising for the traditional public education system to consider?
- What are the policy, research, and investment opportunities that could best address the challenges?

NCSRP will publish findings from this work in 2009.¹ These findings are worth attention and discussion from the broad public education community. Here are some of the highlights from our research:

- Despite the difficulties involved in maneuvering through complex legal and financial special education requirements, charter schools seem to be viable options for a large number of families with special-needs students.
- In fact, some charter schools have developed informal reputations as havens for special-needs students.
- Particularly with respect to the needs of students with less severe disabilities, the variety of instructional approaches offered by charter schools can serve as beneficial interventions for all students.
- Effective inclusion for students with less severe needs seems to be a particular strength of many charter schools.
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Before examining some of the policy issues involved, it is enlightening to explore examples of how charter schools are effectively meeting the needs of children with disabilities. What follows are vignettes drawn from three different charter schools: CHIME Institute, Roxbury Prep, and Stockwell Academy.² The programs described range from those treating students with relatively straightforward learning disabilities to those treating students with far more severe challenges, including autism and Down syndrome. The schools, located in California, the Midwest, and New England, serve students from kindergarten through middle school, while one school plans to extend its program through Grade 12 in 2009. The programs emphasize school teamwork, mission, and student inclusion. In short, they emphasize the very things promoted by Public Law 94-142 (enacted in 1975) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, enacted in 1997).

CHIME INSTITUTE'S ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: TEAMWORK IS KEY

CHIME was started as a model demonstration project funded for three years (1987–1990) by the U.S. Department of Education. Originally, it was known as the Children's Center Handicapped Integration Model Educational (CCHIME) Project. Its goal was

to develop an effective model for providing special educational services at an existing child development program, housed at California State University, Northridge (CSUN).

Claire Cavallaro and Michele Haney, professors in the special education program at the CSUN College of Education, established the CHIME Institute. The founders established it as a private nonprofit corporation in August 1990, to extend the work of the earlier grant. The CHIME Charter Elementary School was established in fall 2001 and serves children from kindergarten through 5th grade. The CHIME Charter Middle School opened fall 2003. In 2007, the elementary school was named in honor of California's governor and his commitment to education.

Scenes such as the following are not unusual at the CHIME Institute's Schwarzenegger School: Using a walker, a boy joins his friends at recess. A girl motions to an aide for her communications device. A boy pulls out his inhaler. Another leaves class to jump on a mini-trampoline set outside the door. An aide sets up flash cards, a tape player, and a stoplight timer for a first grader with Down syndrome, while his classmates discuss a story they've read.

What is interesting about these scenes is that they are accepted so matter-of-factly at CHIME. Children don't point or tease. They don't seem to notice. At CHIME, students are accustomed to differences. Some students are gifted, while about 15 percent of the students have disabilities ranging from mild to severe.

CHIME uses an old elementary school site in an affluent leafy neighborhood. But the students come from many different San Fernando Valley communities, representing 32 different zip codes. About half the students are Caucasian, one-third Hispanic, and the rest African American or Asian American. Most are mainstream students whose parents think the school offers something special. It's a diverse world, they say. Their kids will be ready to deal with it.

Co-teaching makes inclusion work. It really is all about teamwork. There's no such thing as a lonely teacher at the school. Special educators and paraprofessionals are pushed into classes to work with disabled students—and with other children who need help that day. Nobody is pulled out. After classes end, teachers, special educators, and aides meet in each classroom for 25 minutes to “debrief.” All are considered part of the teaching team.

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The school doesn't wait for students to get behind before offering extra help. A language and speech pathologist and a recreational therapist work with kindergartners at risk for reading problems. "We went from 15 at-risk kindergartners to 2," says Julie Fabrocini, the principal. Given help with phonological awareness, language, and speech, most will do well in first grade and never need special education.

The teachers make sure students know what's expected. Teaching behavioral expectations explicitly helps children on the autism spectrum, but it also helps everyone else. Classes include students who are variously gifted, typical, low-achievers, and disabled. Co-teaching, co-planning, and co-assessing make inclusion work, says teacher Rachel Knopf.

It's hard to find schools with so much commitment to making inclusion work. During her time as a teacher at a Chicago magnet school, Nina Adler, a parent of a child with cerebral palsy, "didn't have enough support to work with children with disabilities. There wasn't time for teachers to meet and talk about a child's needs." Now as a parent at CHIME, she feels she's part of a team with everyone working toward the same goal. "There's so much understanding and openness," she says.

For example, when Leo, a boy with autism and a lot of excess energy, feels himself losing control, he walks outside, jumps up and down on a small trampoline set up for him, and then runs around the building. When he's calmed down, he returns to class. At his previous school, an aide held him down when he couldn't sit still, says Principal Fabrocini.

Nancy Oliver, the mother of a non-disabled second grader, says she chose CHIME over excellent local schools because of its small size and its strong mission: "Everybody is here and everybody is welcome." She believes her son will learn life skills at the school that he wouldn't learn in a more conventional environment. Her son told her that he wished his "Big Buddy" would talk more but said they enjoyed painting together. She found out later the Big Buddy is unable to talk. Her son hadn't mentioned the older boy was disabled.

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ROXBURY PREPARATORY CHARTER SCHOOL: NOTHING SPECIAL ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION

Roxbury Preparatory Charter School serves grades 6–8 and focuses on preparing its students to enter, succeed in, and graduate from college. Roxbury Prep is founded on the philosophy that all students are entitled to and can succeed in college preparatory programs when: 1) the curriculum is rigorous, engaging, and well planned; 2) the school emphasizes student character, community responsibility, and exposure to life’s possibilities; and 3) a community network supports students’ academic, social, and physical well-being.

There’s nothing special about how special education students are treated at Roxbury Prep. Most students don’t know who is officially classified with a disability and is entitled to an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and who is not. Everyone is mainstreamed and many students who don’t have IEPs get extra help. “The reason why our special education program is successful is because our regular education is successful,” says co-director Dana Lehman. “We could designate most or all of our students as special ed. A lot of special ed is a way to get kids who are hard to serve away from teachers who don’t want to serve them,” according to Lehman. As a result, many of the accommodations typical of IEPs are standard procedure at Roxbury, says special needs coordinator Jamie Thornton. The school’s philosophy is that all students benefit from structure, monitoring, clear and repeated directions, and work that is broken into learnable chunks. “We think special ed kids for the most part can go to college,” Thornton says. “There’s a lot of over-identification as special ed.”

Some students find the school too difficult and choose to leave. But some surprise themselves. “We had a girl who was in my office all the time complaining the work was too hard,” says Jenna Leary, the learning specialist. “Now she’s in high school calling me to complain it’s too easy. She wants me to get her into honor classes.”

Martin Rios didn’t learn to read in elementary school, where he was partially mainstreamed. His mother, Carmen Rios, hoped he’d do better at a small middle school with individual attention and a longer school day. A friend urged her to look at Roxbury Prep. Her friend’s child lost out on the lottery. Martin was accepted. When Martin started sixth grade, he could read two words—“I” and “a”—says Leary. Martin and his younger brother, who has less severe reading problems, “are great thinkers but they can’t decode,” she adds.

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Her son has had to work much harder than ever before, Martin's mother says. "At the other school, homework was very easy; it could be done in half an hour. Now it takes two to three hours per night." Rios gets a weekly call from a teacher checking in with her. She comes to school about once a month to discuss Martin's behavior. All communications are provided in English and Spanish, her first language. "Here, I know what's going on in school." The school keeps pushing her son to do better, she reports.

THE CHARYL STOCKWELL ACADEMY: WHERE MISSION HAS MEANING

Like most schools, the Charyl Stockwell Academy (CSA) wants to provide a safe, enriching environment for young children to grow into adolescence. But the Academy's mission statement links that humanistic concern directly to academics: "CSA believes that meeting the basic human, growth and development needs of each child will increase achievement and prepare the child for adult life."

This powerful mission developed from a powerful source. After years working as administrators and teachers for special-education students, Chuck and Shelley Stockwell were told their daughter Charyl wasn't learning to read due to a learning disability. Actually, seven-year-old Charyl had a massive brain tumor. After going through surgery and chemotherapy, Charyl attended the Wayne County, Michigan school her father led as principal. The Stockwells decided to create a charter school that would teach children like Charyl—but not *just* children like Charyl. In 1996, they opened their school. In 2001, after their daughter's death, they renamed it the Charyl Stockwell Academy in her memory.

Chuck was the first executive director of the school; he now runs CS Partners, an educational consulting and management company that works with other charter schools. Shelley took over as executive director in time to start a middle school and expand enrollment. Next year, the school will initiate its move to becoming a K-12 by adding a ninth grade.

Although high-performing schools surround it, the Stockwell charter school has found it easy to attract students. Parents like the small classes, individual attention, and the promise that children will progress at their own pace. The school's character education program, which helps students develop self-control, is another draw. Parents of gifted

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children choose the school as well as parents who have been told their children are disabled. At the core of Stockwell's inclusion strategy is the belief that early intervention and excellent teaching can prevent many children from being diagnosed with disabilities. While schools often label 12 to 15 percent of students as disabled, the Stockwells believe only 3 to 4 percent have unpreventable disabilities.

Having spent years working in special education, the Stockwells were convinced that the traditional special education approach wasn't serving students' needs. The old model—special schools for disabled students—was abandoned in the eighties and nineties in Michigan. Mainstreaming saved money, but at a cost to students, Chuck says. Seriously disabled students got less help. Students with minor learning problems got labeled. "I'd gotten sick of special education," Chuck recalls. "We identified a lot of kids who never would have been considered disabled before. We created a whole new group of disabled students and then threw them away."

From the first, the Stockwells decided on multi-age classrooms. Chuck explains, "Not all five-year-olds belong in kindergarten, or six-year-olds in first, or seven-year-olds in second grade. Kids who don't meet that schedule we call 'learning disabled' or 'emotionally impaired' or 'cognitively impaired.' The difference between a kid with a 100 IQ and one with a 75 IQ is that the kid with the 75 needs more time to learn." At Stockwell Academy, two teachers work with a group of 40 students in a three-year age range. That allows students to be grouped by performance level in various subjects without being segregated.

Students in kindergarten through third grade and new students are screened for developmental issues such as gross and fine motor skills; sensory integration; self-control; ability to focus; and auditory, visual, and language problems.

Every child should be seen first as a general-education student, Shelley believes, "maybe with a glitch." Every teacher has to take responsibility for educating every student.

Children who lag behind are referred to a Teacher Support Team (TST), which analyzes why the child is struggling and comes up with strategies. Unlike the resource-room model, TST is "a very clear and focused intervention," Shelley says. "It's intense. If there's no progress, we change the program." The team profiles the child's health history and family issues. Does he sleep through the night? What does he eat? "We assess and

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intervene, assess and intervene, assess and intervene,” Chuck says. “Intervention is based on a theory of what’s going on.”

Parents of special-education students who enroll at Stockwell Academy sometimes say, “Get my kid out of special ed,” one teacher says. “We tell them to give us a year. Often they’re out after a year. They don’t need it.” By sixth grade, Stockwell’s special-education students outperform the average mainstream students of local districts, the teacher says.

Cognitively impaired students aren’t a problem, says Chuck. “What’s most difficult is dealing with kids who exhibit violent behavior.” Trained aides help by providing “sensory breaks” for students who get overwhelmed in class. An aide takes the child out of the room to run around the gym, do deep breathing exercises, or do heavy lifting to work off excess energy and calm down.

“The extremely gifted kids can be a challenge,” says Jessica Wojtowicz, who teaches five-, six-, and seven-year-olds. “I’ve got a five-year-old in my class who talks about another kid as his ‘arch-nemesis.’ But he can’t put on his shoes.”

Teachers must buy in to the program or go elsewhere, emphasizes Chuck. “You’re not coming here to do your own thing. We’re a vision-driven school. We don’t believe in academic freedom. We believe in mission.”

AN EXPENSIVE AND LEGALLY COMPLEX ENDEAVOR

Educating children with special needs is an expensive and legally complex endeavor, one that not all small, stand-alone charter schools can handle effectively. Based on its research, NCSRP suggests that funders and policymakers take a series of steps to build a more effective special-needs infrastructure to ensure that charters add overall benefit to the special-needs community.

First, funders and policymakers should explore the *policy* opportunities:

- Provide guidance regarding policy issues that are unclear in charter statutes.
- Equalize special education funding.
- Increase access to state special education service and support structures (for example, allow participation in cooperatives).

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- Create incentives for authorizers and operators to collaborate on developing high-quality special education programs in charter schools.

Next, they should explore the *research* opportunities:

- Examine special education service provisions and outcomes in the charter sector.
- Explore the definition of “least restrictive environment” in the school choice context.
- Assess the academic growth of children with disabilities in charter schools.
- Identify new approaches to special education.

Finally, they should explore the *investment* opportunities:

- Incubate national, state, and regional technical assistance networks.
- Cultivate special education infrastructures (for example, special education cooperatives) and research tracking effectiveness and financial sustainability.
- Seed special education financial risk pools.
- Fund efforts to maximize special education revenue streams.
- Develop legal advocacy funds for charter schools.

The idea of charters (and choice more broadly) is that a greater diversity of schools permits parents to select the right “fit” for their children. Students with special needs represent a particular type of diversity, and their needs, by definition, are special. What seems clear from the review of these models (and others) is that many charter schools are able to do an excellent job of providing the right fit for these special students.

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NOTES

1. The reports to be published by NCSRP are: Tracey O'Brien, Kelly Hupfeld, and Paul Teske, *Challenges and Charter Schools: How Families with Special-Needs Students Perceive and Use Charter School Options*; Lauren Morando Rhim, and Dana Brinson, with Joanne Jacobs, *Exploring Success in the Charter Sector: Case Studies of Six Charter Schools Engaged in Promising Practices for Children with Disabilities*; and Lauren Morando Rhim and Bryan Hassel, *Special Education Challenges and Opportunities: Issues Influencing Growth and Expansion of the Charter School Sector and Related Policy, Research, and Investment Opportunities* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, forthcoming).
2. Vignettes are based on interviews by the author. Parent and student names have been changed throughout this chapter to provide anonymity.