



Better Together

Why Charter School Champions and Parent Advocates Should Partner to Better Support Students with Disabilities

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About the layout. The layout of this publication is designed to be intentionally inclusive, incorporating accessibility standards the Americans with Disabilities Act has set forth and research on what works best for people with dyslexia. Some of these design elements include:

- **Intentionally wide text margins:** Wide text margins limit the amount of text on each line, making it easier for the eye to follow. The Dyslexia Style Guide recommends 60-70 characters per line to make text more accessible to people with dyslexia.¹
- **Evenly spaced sans serif font.** Research shows using this type of font and avoiding italics is best for readers with dyslexia.²

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1 | Introduction

Public charter school champions have long acted on the belief that every child should have the opportunity to attend a great public school. Charter schools have helped millions of students beat the odds to pursue college degrees and fulfilling careers and lives. As one example, an analysis from Stanford University found that students attending urban charter schools in 41 urban regions gained the equivalent of 40 extra days of learning in math and 28 extra days of learning in reading each year, compared with similar students attending traditional public schools. The study found even larger gains for Hispanic English language learners and black students.³ Moreover, data show that alumni of high schools in the Charter School Growth Fund's⁴ portfolio are four times more likely to graduate from college compared with other low-income students.⁵

While the charter sector has much to celebrate, the country can do more to put great schools — including excellent charters — within reach for our most vulnerable students. Students with disabilities represent one such group. Research shows that with the right accommodations and support, as many as 90 percent of students with disabilities can meet

the same achievement standards as other students.⁶ That makes charter schools, which have greater flexibility to meet students' unique needs, a particularly fitting educational option.

Historically, students with disabilities have under-enrolled in charter schools; they make up 10.6 percent of the total charter school population, compared with 12.5 percent at district schools.⁷ Put another way, we could expect to see approximately 60,000 more students with disabilities enrolled in charters each year if they served the same proportion of these students as district schools.⁸

The charter sector is well-positioned to expand access to more quality educational options for all kinds of learners, as well as call for policy conditions that give rise to those opportunities. Charter school champions — including charter associations, education “quarterbacks,” and other reform organizations that see charters as an integral piece of a thriving system of public schools — are poised to address the needs of students with disabilities as a central objective of charter advocacy, which is quality school options for **all**.

At the same time, charter champions have long grappled with how charter schools can best address the challenges that hinder students with disabilities from thriving. There are many paths to respond to these challenges, from policy changes that enable charter schools to serve a greater share of students with disabilities, to forming networks that allow independent schools to share costs, to designing more effective delivery models. But the best solutions start by partnering with the parent groups that advocate for students with disabilities, and have been doing so for decades. As partners, charter school champions and organizations working with parents of children with disabilities can collectively improve outcomes for students with disabilities, create better school options for them, and advocate for better policies. This call to action for charter champions to launch and deepen their partnerships with parent advocates explains why such partnerships are needed, the forms they might take, and how to get started.



2 | Why Partner with Parents?

Charter school champions and parent organizations advocating for students with disabilities have a common goal: to provide all students with access to a quality education. Both groups also understand they need to find solutions to problems that charter schools face in trying to serve students with disabilities well, including: insufficient public funds based on student need; regulatory constraints that prevent schools from serving students in different ways; insufficient preparation for teachers of students with disabilities; and limited access to the expertise needed to implement high-quality special education and related services (see Figure 1, “Challenges to serving students with disabilities well in charter schools,” on page 6). Charter school champions and parent organizations advocating for students with disabilities are natural partners because they share many of the same objectives and are trying to solve many of the same challenges.

Figure 1. Challenges to serving students with disabilities well in charter schools

<p>Insufficient public funding based on student need</p>	<p>In 1975, Congress enacted what is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA),⁹ which gives students with disabilities in public schools the right to a free and appropriate education. As part of the bill, Congress promised to fund 40 percent of the related costs. IDEA has had a funding shortfall from the first day, however, and as of 2017, the federal government provided only 16 percent of the additional cost (approximately \$30 billion).¹⁰ As a result, public schools, including charter schools,¹¹ don't have enough public funding to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and they're forced to either provide less support or pull funding from elsewhere, such as their general education fund. For smaller charter networks and independent charter schools, there simply aren't enough resources to adequately support the needs of all students.¹²</p>
<p>Constraints to operate differently</p>	<p>Local education agencies (LEAs) are the bodies legally responsible for adhering to IDEA. While some charter operators serve as their own LEAs for special education, many do not. Instead, their home district is the LEA, and in those cases, the charter operator must adhere to the LEA's interpretation of IDEA regulations and compliance responsibilities. For example, the LEA can determine how charters must place special education students — typically defaulting to traditional self-contained programs or centers.¹³ As a result, these charters are frequently limited in their ability to serve students and their families in ways they believe would help them the most.</p>
<p>Lack of teacher preparation</p>	<p>In both the charter sector and in traditional district schools, experts acknowledge that general and special education teachers are often unprepared to teach students with disabilities effectively. In a survey, nine out of 10 general education preservice teachers said they were less than adequately prepared to instruct students with disabilities.¹⁴</p>
<p>Difficulty accessing expertise</p>	<p>Students with disabilities encompass a broad range of needs. Unlike districts that serve multiple schools and can often share costs across thousands (if not tens of thousands) of students, many charter schools are freestanding or part of small networks serving relatively few students. Given their size, charters seldom have the capacity to hire or develop educators with the needed expertise to diagnose and address the most complex student needs, nor do they generally have the resources to develop needed programs. At the same time, there is a shortage of quality service providers in many communities, so contracting additional support is rarely an option. For example, a student who is nonverbal with autism may need the support of an applied behavior analysis therapist, but the school may not have one on staff. Increasingly, charters are pooling their funds and resources into collaboratives, through which they can share staff with various specialties and purchase training for the school's educators.¹⁵ Such collaboratives are still relatively rare, however.</p>

The power of parents

The power of parents cannot be understated. Research shows that parent engagement improves student outcomes,¹⁶ and young adults with learning differences who achieved college and career success report that family support was a critical factor in their accomplishments.¹⁷ Parents also intimately know the challenges their children face and when and how they have been most successful. In addition, when parents demand meetings with school or even system leaders, they are more likely than other advocates to receive that time.¹⁸ And there's more:

Championing legislation. Parents of children with disabilities have advocated for their rights and achieved several monumental wins. Perhaps most notably, parents and organizations working on their behalf paved the way for landmark legislation in 1975. Now referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), this protection provides access to a free and appropriate education for millions of students with disabilities¹⁹ — many of whom were previously excluded from public school or institutionalized. IDEA also provides protections such as due process, a formal way to resolve disputes regarding a student's rights and/or procedural issues that arise from complying with IDEA.²⁰

Advocating for legal changes. Parents of children with disabilities and organizations working on their behalf have used legal avenues to create better public school conditions for such children. One example of this parent-led advocacy is the 2017 *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* case. In this case, the parents of Endrew F., a child with autism who had made minimal educational progress in his previous public school, filed a lawsuit with the school district for reimbursement for the cost of his private education, where the student was making substantial progress.²¹ The U.S. Supreme Court's unanimous ruling, upheld in 2018²² and supported by charter champions,²³ rejected the old "minimum" standard. Further, the decision determined that students

with disabilities in public schools should receive an education that leads to “appropriately ambitious” progress, saying “every child should have the chance to meet challenging objectives.”²⁴

Driving policy change. At the state level, a coalition of over 35 parent-led advocacy organizations called the Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities (OCECD) created a landmark report in 2001 that highlighted inequities in the state’s special education funding. OCECD’s member organizations from across the state united around the report’s recommendations, and their collective advocacy resulted in a state special education funding increase of \$100 million, according to OCECD.²⁵

Influencing state leadership. In Colorado, nearly 200 parents working with the National Center for Learning Disabilities²⁶ wrote letters to the state education department and governor, attended public meetings and town halls, and initiated dialogue with their school district officials to talk about the state plan and local implementation of the Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA). The parents’ efforts earned them an invitation to a series of roundtable meetings on the Colorado Equity Coalition with the commissioner of education, at which they discussed ways to include students with disabilities in district and state plans related to ESSA. As a result of those conversations and other advocacy efforts (including a parent-led letter writing campaign to the governor), the state revised its original ESSA plan with the goal of getting schools the supports they need to better serve students with disabilities and other student subgroups.²⁷

Better together

As effective as parent groups have been — and continue to be — in advocating for students with disabilities, they stand to have an even greater impact working with others. And in the charter sector, charter champions, such as charter associations and citywide education organizations, are the most natural partners.

As noted above, parent groups and organizations working on their behalf are savvy advocates and can provide students' and families' important perspectives in policy discussions. These groups are deeply connected to the questions and concerns parents face when trying to get access to — or even know how to recognize — a quality school option for a child with disabilities. At the same time, these parent advocacy groups acknowledge the need to take on more collective, broad-based advocacy activities focused on systems-level change across the education sector.

In contrast, charter champions often focus on exactly those sorts of activities. For example, The Mind Trust, a nonprofit organization that aims to provide every student in Indianapolis with access to a high-quality education, has helped shape the city's public schools by supporting charter schools, as well as implementing legislative changes that give traditional public schools charter-like autonomies and opportunities to partner with charter operators.

In short, both charter proponents and parents of students with disabilities stand to gain more — and innovate what special education can look like across our education system — by working together than alone.





3 | What Effective Partnerships Can Look Like

What would an effective partnership between a parent group advocating for students with disabilities and a charter champion look like? We can look to the growing number of such collaborations for examples. Though they can take many forms (see “How do advocacy organizations engage parents of children with disabilities?” on page 11), two elements commonly appear: Parent groups share their expertise with charter advocates, and charter advocates help parent groups build their capacity to organize for policy change — as shown in the following examples.

How do advocacy organizations engage parents of children with disabilities?

While advocacy organizations differ in how they work with parents of children with disabilities, they tend to engage in some combination of the following activities:

- Offering trainings, resources, and one-on-one assistance to parents on their rights related to special education and the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process
- Providing legal support to parents, either directly or by connecting parents to pro bono firms — as they exercise their rights under IDEA and/or through a class action approach
- Sharing their expertise on parent engagement and special education to school leaders and educators
- Developing leadership capacity through parent trainings to help influence parent's self-advocacy efforts and/or policy advocacy in the future
- Initiating or participating in city or statewide advocacy initiatives to advance specific policy goals
- Hosting conferences, resource fairs, and peer-to-peer support groups
- Coordinating targeted initiatives to address a specific area of need in their community, such as operating an inclusive pre-school, partnership with statewide health insurance to provide resource case management, etc.



In New York, supporting charters in effectively engaging parents of children with disabilities

In New York City, the NYC Special Education Collaborative (“the Collaborative”) is an initiative of the NYC Charter School Center, a citywide charter support organization. In 2017, the Collaborative sought expertise to help its operators more effectively and proactively work with parents of children with disabilities and address common parent concerns as they prepared to grow.

To address these needs, the Collaborative developed a parent engagement strand within its annual conference for charter professionals. Although the Collaborative had some expertise in parent engagement, it sought a partner with an even deeper perspective. For that, it invited INCLUDEnyc, a local parent advocacy organization that was already supporting, educating, and advocating for parents of children with disabilities enrolled in member charter schools, to lead the strand.

The Collaborative’s goal in having INCLUDEnyc participate in its annual conference is to yield more satisfied parents, better student learning, and faster resolution on compliance-related issues for member schools. Additionally, it believes this could lead to more collaborative work, beyond professional development, to address common LEA-based compliance issues.^{28 29}

Building capacity to organize parents in Washington, D.C.

Education Forward DC, founded in 2016, accelerates the work of visionary education leaders to foster high-quality, equitable public schools for every Washington student and family. In the next five years, the organization aspires to double the number of at-risk and special education students who are college- and career-ready. To that end, Education Forward DC makes investments in public schools — including

charters — and human capital, advocacy, and public engagement efforts. For example, the group gave a capacity-building grant to a local parent advocacy organization, Advocates for Justice and Education (AJE), to engage parents of children with disabilities in calling for improved school practices for students with disabilities.

AJE is well-suited to serve in a community organizer role, especially when it comes to special education. AJE has a long history of shining a light on issues of inequity in special education across the city, serving parents most in need through education and legal support, and collaborating with education leaders — including charters — to share information on school options and provide professional development.³⁰ AJE is considering taking a more formal role in organizing groups of parents toward common goals, and used its grant from Education Forward DC to attend Innovate Public Schools' Community Organizing Training Program in California to build its capacity.

Innovate seeks to help educators start high-quality schools — including charters — and build parent-led organizations in high-need communities to advocate for the right operating conditions. As part of that work, it offers a national community organizer training program that draws on effective parent-driven advocacy efforts to yield more high-quality schools and long-term education reform. Innovate also publishes research-based guidance for this advocacy and training (see “Responding to parents’ call: *An Advocate’s Guide to Transforming Special Education*,” page 14).

The collaboration between AJE and Innovate, supported by Education Forward DC, is a clear example of how parent voices and advocacy groups can come together to address challenges parents face and improve public school options for students with disabilities.³¹

Responding to parents' call:

An Advocate's Guide to Transforming Special Education

When a group of parents of children with complex disabilities approached Innovate Public Schools, they were seeking tools to help them explain what effective instructional practices for their children look like in schools. From its work building high-quality schools and organizing parents, Innovate knew there was a critical need for this information. Together with the parents that approached them, Innovate looked for ways to answer the question, "What actions do schools take to give students with disabilities a quality education?"

Drawing on research and the experiences of parents, educators, and field experts, Innovate developed *An Advocate's Guide to Transforming Special Education: Creating schools where all students can thrive*. The guide suggests student-centered actions that schools can take (and parents can observe) to ensure that students with disabilities prosper, including case studies of a traditional public school and a charter school. Innovate wants the guide to help parents and advocates of students with disabilities understand what to look for when choosing a school and to serve as a tool when influencing education leaders.³²



Including parent voices in advocacy for Los Angeles policy reform

The Partnership for Equitable Access to Public Schools Los Angeles (PEAPS-LA) was founded in 2017 as a coalition by education organizations advocating for equitable enrollment across the city's public schools—including the Alliance for a Better Community, Families in Schools, Learning Rights Law Center, Parent Revolution, and Partnership for Los Angeles Schools. PEAPS-LA's guiding principles promote equity through efforts to help families find and enroll in high-quality schools regardless of governance model. To carry this out, it works with parents to understand what's important to them in a school as well as how they value and think about geographic proximity and transportation. However, through this process, the coalition's leaders realized they had to also consider the specific needs and challenges that students with disabilities face with respect to school access. They turned to the Learning Rights Law Center ("Learning Rights"), a nonprofit organization with a history of advocating for and providing free legal counsel to disadvantaged families, including families of students with disabilities.

PEAPS-LA knew of Learning Rights through Training Individuals for Grassroots Education Reform (TIGER), a program Learning Rights offers to help parents advocate for their children in the education system. Learning Rights also runs a recently developed parent leadership class focused on teaching parents about school choice so they can advocate for better options and outcomes in all public schools, including charters. The hope is that parents will draw on their training to advocate both at the school level and beyond. Meanwhile, Learning Rights was particularly interested in working with PEAPS-LA because its leaders believed the partnership would give the organization and its parent leadership program more exposure, and hence, a greater impact. Both groups also saw the potential for parent leaders to influence decisionmakers for policy reform, such as pushing for school board resolutions that advocate for school equity and unified enrollment.

Learning Rights has already tapped into its TIGER parent leadership pool to speak both to PEAPS-LA and to education system leaders about issues specific to students with complex disabilities and their placement options. While change takes time, education leaders often remarked that hearing from parents most affected their actions. By bringing parents into the policy discussion, parents better realize the power they have in shaping policy decisions that affect them and their children.³³





4 | How to Get Started

Greater collaboration between charter supporters and parent groups representing students with disabilities can lead to innovations and improvements in all levels of education. But first, those partnerships must take shape. Charter champions can take five steps to start the process and drive collective action toward improved student outcomes, better school options, and equitable policies.

- 1. Set ambitious goals for “quality school options for all.”** Charter champions should start with a vision of what a great education looks like for all students, including students with disabilities. Depending on local context, goals might include increasing access to charter schools for students with disabilities, improving outcomes for students with disabilities in charter schools, expanding funding for traditional and charter schools serving students with the highest needs, or removing policy barriers to inclusive practices.

- 2. Consider gaps in your work.** Charter champions should conduct a self-assessment and speak with diverse groups of parents of children with disabilities to identify gaps in knowledge or activities related to special education. These gaps may be what is getting in the way of achieving the ambitious goals stated above. Additionally, the process of reviewing existing efforts may reveal areas for improvement or expertise gained through a partnership with a parent special education advocacy organization. For example, the organization might learn that new leader incubation programs do not address topics related to special education, that adequate information about special education programs may be missing from enrollment materials, or that current community engagement efforts don't actively include parents of children with disabilities.
- 3. Identify the parent organizations already working on behalf of students with disabilities in your area.** Many parent groups may be less visible within a city or to the charter sector. Hence, it's important to determine whether there are any parent groups actively working to serve and advocate for children with disabilities in your city, and if so, exactly what they are doing. To do so, charter organizations might ask parents in charter schools where they go for support on special education or identify their local IDEA-funded Parent Training and Information Center.³⁴ And if charter champions find that there are no such parent groups focused on supporting parents of children with disabilities, they should take it as a sign to help create one.
- 4. Look for opportunities to connect.** Effective partnerships start by getting to know one another and building trust and understanding. Look for opportunities to connect with and learn from one another to start the process, such as inviting parent organizations to speak at professional development, holding meetings to exchange what each organization is working on, and/or participating in coalitions to push for change with parents' voices at the table. In addition, look for opportunities to highlight how your missions overlap and how your work could complement one another, which may occur outside of existing coalitions.

5. Partner more deeply. Ideally, charter champions and parent groups working on behalf of students with disabilities would not just learn from one another and meet occasionally, but also combine forces in pursuit of a common goal. Deep and authentic partnerships require that both groups trust one another, share a common vision, prioritize issues to tackle together, and create formal structures, roles, and responsibilities. Though difficult, these kinds of intentional and collaborative partnerships stand to make the biggest impact for students with disabilities and their families both within the charter sector and beyond it. Exploring ways to partner more deeply could result in a charter champion bringing together city-wide organizations — including parent special education advocacy organizations — to start a new coalition focused on winning significant changes in the city’s policy landscape or school offerings. And as these efforts score wins, the momentum for change and opportunities for effective partnerships will grow.





5 | Conclusion

Everyone benefits when schools give their students with disabilities a quality education. Parents intimately know the challenges these students face and how difficult it can be for them to access a high-quality education. Hence, parents must be part of efforts to improve how charter schools serve students with disabilities. Within the charter sector, charter champions, including charter associations and education quarterbacks, need to lead the charge to cultivate and deepen partnerships with parent groups advocating for students with disabilities. In partnership, charters and parents can innovate to achieve better outcomes for these students through more effective collective advocacy, access to quality school options, and equitable policies.

Striving for innovation and equity, these groups can accomplish more together than they can alone — they are **better together**. And the time to begin is now.

Notes

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26. NCLD parent engagement liaisons used Understood.org’s ESSA Parent Advocacy Toolkit and adapted it specifically for use in Colorado. Retrieved from <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/your-childs-rights/basics-about-childs-rights/download-essa-parent-advocacy-toolkit> and <https://www.understood.org/~media/679a0f2177144186841d226009c8e2c1.pdf>

27. Reported in an interview conducted by Public Impact in February 2019 with National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD). For more on ESSA and students with disabilities, please see: NCLD. (2018). *Assessing ESSA: Missed opportunities for students with disabilities*. New York, NY: Author. Retrieved from https://www.nclld.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/AssessingESSA_2018.pdf

28. Depending on the state, charter schools have various governance structures depending on if the charter school is its own local education agency (LEA) or part of a larger LEA. Some states have a hybrid approach to this governance structure for special education, meaning the charter school is its own LEA but for special education only it is part of a larger LEA. Additionally, some states allow charters to apply for or authorizers to choose their LEA status, which means schools in the same state can have different legal governance structures. For more information and an overview of entity status by state, please consult the National Association of Charter School Authorizers’ Special Education Toolkit: Impact of Legal Identity (LEA and Non-LEA). Retrieved from <https://www.qualitycharters.org/for-authorizers/special-education-toolkit/impact-legal-identity/>

29. Reported in an interview conducted by Public Impact in November 2018 with the NYC Special Education Collaborative.

30. Some of these professional development activities are associated with the DC Special Education Cooperative, another support for charters in Washington, DC.

31. Reported in interviews conducted by Public Impact in November 2018 through February 2019 with Advocates for Justice and Education, Education Forward DC, and Innovate Public Schools. Also gathered from <http://edforwarddc.org/new-education-forward-dc-grants/>.

32. Innovate Public Schools. (n.d.). *An advocate’s guide to transforming special education: Creating schools where all students can thrive*. Retrieved from <https://reports.innovate-schools.org/an-advocates-guide-to-transforming-special-education-home/>. Also reported in interviews conducted by Public Impact in February 2019 with Innovate Public Schools.

33. Reported in interviews conducted by Public Impact in December 2018 with Learning Rights Law Center and the Partnership for LA Schools.

34. As part of IDEA legislation, every state has at least one Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) that provides free information to parents of children with disabilities, often with a focus on serving parents who are economically disadvantaged and/or linguistically diverse. For a full listing of these IDEA-funded PTIs and Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs) in the U.S., see the Center for Parent Information & Resources at <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center/>