

CHARTING THE COURSE

How Charter School Flexibility Can Promote 21st Century Skills for Students With Disabilities

Throughout 2018 and 2019, NCLD engaged five national school networks that supported charter schools (two of which, High Tech High and Brooklyn LAB exclusively support charters¹) to examine how 21st century practices impact students with disabilities within these school communities.

We defined 21st century learning as the capacity for students to engage in a transfer of learning, leveraging skills like critical thinking, problem solving, self-advocacy, communication, and collaboration, and dispositions like self-determination and growth mindsets to apply learning from one context to another. Through this project, we found that the flexibility inherent to charter schools (hiring, staffing, curriculum, etc.), especially the estimated 50% that operate fully separately from a local district, posed both potential benefits and challenges for students with disabilities in providing an inclusive 21st century learning experience. In many states, charter schools are provided key flexibilities as part of their charters. For those charter schools that operate as their own Local Education Agency (nearly half of all charter schools), these autonomies could have a substantial positive or negative impact. This flexibility can be used to advance 21st century skill building for all students, including students with disabilities, and could play a role in informing practice in traditional public schools.

COLLABORATING SCHOOL NETWORKS

- Big Picture Learning
- Brooklyn LAB
- EL Education
- High Tech High
- New Tech Network



Budgeting: Charter schools exercise varying degrees of autonomy over their budgets (ranging from full autonomy in independent charters to added flexibility for those charters that are part of traditional districts) and are not as tied to the district's budget as their traditional public school peers. Depending on their level of autonomy, they can choose to pay for targeted investments in professional development on inclusive educational approaches that support 21st century learning.



Calendar: Charter schools that operate independently of school districts can establish their own school calendar rather than abiding by the statewide school calendar. They can use this flexibility to plan common instructional time between special and general educators, outside the bounds of standard union contracts.



Curriculum: Charter schools have the freedom to establish their own curriculum rather than using district curriculum. This means charter schools can choose a curriculum that aligns with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in being inclusive of the needs of all students.

¹ Big Picture Learning, EL Education, and New Tech Network support both charter and traditional public schools.



Hiring: Most charter schools have autonomy over hiring decisions. The ability to hire staff without specific credentials allows charter schools to recruit staff who fit well within the school's inclusive culture, while providing greater access to 21st century learning.



Staffing: Charter schools can also make decisions about how to allocate staff in their buildings, ensuring that their staff have the expertise to perform the activities essential to the school, such as serving as an associate teacher in a classroom or conducting home visits.



Culture: Because of these various areas of flexibility and because many charter schools are new and lack standard operating procedures or cultures that have evolved over decades, charter schools have a greater ability to establish values and create schoolwide experiences that provide a culture that is inclusive and welcoming of all learners, including those with disabilities.

NCLD believes that technical support and policy safeguards are needed to support flexibility in ways that promote positive outcomes for all students, including those who need specialized instruction and support.

RISKS AND CONSIDERATIONS RELATED TO CHARTER SCHOOL AUTONOMY

While greater autonomy and flexibility in decision making, resource allocation, and school administration can make it possible to implement effective 21st century learning practices for all students, there are also inherent risks and considerations that must be safeguarded against. If left unaddressed, flexibilities can exacerbate rather than close educational opportunity gaps. Charter schools must continue to hold high standards for all students, including students with disabilities.

Without sufficient safeguards, charter schools are at risk of:

- Using their scheduling flexibility to set out different, less rigorous tracks or learning opportunities for students with disabilities
- Using a curriculum that insufficiently accounts for the learning needs of students with disabilities
- Promoting an “inclusion model” that fails to provide critical individualized supports that will enable students with disabilities to access the curriculum
- Allocating resources in a way that pairs less qualified educators or staff with students with disabilities

In Washington, DC, and the 43 states that permit charter schools to operate, those policies must ensure that charter schools invest in services aimed at recruiting and supporting students with disabilities, focus on the accessibility of their curriculum and quality instruction, and commit to providing professional development and ongoing opportunities to help educators more effectively support students with disabilities and sustain a culture of inclusion and high expectations.