



California  
Charter Schools  
Association



## Key Findings

1

Charter schools with more legal autonomy for special education serve a higher percentage and broader range of students with disabilities.

2

In LEA charters, the percentage of students with disabilities increased from 7.5% in 2010-11 to 8.7% in 2013-14. These charters also increased the proportion of students with the most severe disabilities by 55%.

3

LEA-like charters in Los Angeles increased the percentage of students with disabilities they serve from 8.1% to 10.2% between 2010-11 to 2013-14. The percentage of students with more severe disabilities has grown by 35%.

4

The gap between traditional K-12 and charter special education enrollment has narrowed to 1.5% (LEA charter schools enroll 8.7% of students with disabilities compared to 10.3% statewide; LEA-like charter schools serve 10.2% compared to 11.7% in Los Angeles Unified).

## Report Highlights

### The Background

Intended as models for innovation, charter schools are uniquely designed to provide individualized support to all students – including those with exceptional needs. However, statewide policies for special education governance and funding have historically deprived charter schools of the autonomy and flexibility necessary to design and implement innovative special education programs and services. In turn, charter schools have been limited in their ability to develop special education programs to serve a representative population of students with disabilities. The policy environment shifted in 2010 when the California State Board of Education approved an option that permitted more charters to separate from their authorizer and become their own Local Education Agency (LEA) for special education. A major local policy shift also happened in Los Angeles Unified School District around the same time, when the district created a semi-autonomous “LEA-like” option for charters. [Read the full report to learn more.](#)

### Summary of Major Findings and Recommendations

- The discrepancy between traditional and charter school special education enrollment in California is caused by a host of structural barriers and challenges.
- The most significant barrier is the charter school special education legal identity, or the degree to which a charter school is autonomous from its authorizer for special education services, which has major implications for a charter school's access to special education funding, infrastructure, and authority over placement decisions for students with disabilities.
- Charter schools that achieve greater autonomy in special education as an LEA or through LEA-like status serve higher percentages and a broader range of students with disabilities; however, the option for charter schools to pursue such autonomy has been in effect only since 2010.
- Nearly five years after these policy changes, charter schools in more autonomous arrangements have narrowed the gap between traditional K-12 public school special education enrollment and charter special education enrollment to a mere 1.5%.
- Even with these encouraging results, most charter schools continue to face barriers to autonomy in special education. Removal of these barriers through greater access to LEA and LEA-like arrangements will ensure that more charter schools across the state can build the necessary infrastructure and programs to serve all students.

For more information: [www.calcharters.org](http://www.calcharters.org)

Sacramento Office: 1107 9th Street, Suite 200 • Sacramento, CA 95814 • p 916-448-0995 • f 916-448-0998

Los Angeles Office: 250 East 1st Street, Suite 1000 • Los Angeles, CA 90012 • p 213-244-1446 • f 213-244-1448