



# Navigating Specialization as a Generalist: The Authorizer's Role in Success of Specialized Charters

Lauren Morando Rhim and Paul O'Neill



barton  
gilman  
*bglaw.com*

# Meet Your Facilitators

**Lauren Morando Rhim,  
CLE Co-Founder and  
Senior Advisor**



**Paul O'Neill,  
CLE Co-Founder and Senior  
Fellow Emeritus**



# Who's In The Room?

- **Authorizer?**
- **Policy maker?**
- **School leader?**
- **Funder?**

**Have you authorized or are you affiliated with a specialized charter school?**

# What is a “Specialized Charter School” or “Alternative Specialized Charter School?”

Specialized Charter Schools Brief



# Definition of Terms

## Specialized Charter Schools

CLE defines “*specialized charter schools*” as schools that self-identify as charter schools with a special education focus, with at least 25% of students qualifying for services under IDEA, or, charter schools with at least 50% of students qualifying for services under IDEA, regardless of their identification as a special education school.

## Alternative Specialized Charter Schools

CLE defines “*alternative specialized charter schools*” as schools with at least 25% of students qualifying for services under IDEA that self-identify as schools focused on educating at-risk students (e.g., students involved in the juvenile justice system, students experiencing trauma, or students with substance use disorders).

# Data on Specialized Charter Schools

*Source: 2020-21 Civil Rights Data Collection*

## Specialized Charter Schools Brief



# What We Know

Specialized charters designed wholly or primarily for students w/disabilities

- **n=220/2.9% of charters nationwide**
- **154** explicitly focused on one/more IDEA categories
- Enrolled 20,044 students – **70% were identified as eligible for services under IDEA**
- 50% of specialized charter schools clustered in **Florida, Ohio, and Texas**
- 59% of specialized charter schools serve **multiple disability categories**
- 27% focus on **autism** (largest single category)

Alternative specialized charter schools serving alternative populations with a high percentage of students with disabilities

- **n=66**
- enrolled 6,959 students – **33.8% were identified as eligible for services under IDEA**
- majority of alternative charter schools are clustered in **Michigan, New York, and Texas**

# What We Know

- Specialized charter schools serve more white students with disabilities and fewer Black & Latinx students with disabilities compared to charters overall.
- Alternative specialized charter schools have higher enrollment of Black students and similar enrollment of Latinx students compared to charters overall.
- Specialized charter schools suspend a greater share of students (including students with disabilities) than charter schools overall.

# Exploring the Growth of Specialized Charter Schools



# Factors Influencing Growth

- **Charter flexibility:** Ability to design unique programs, curricula, and service models tailored to student needs.
- **Parent demand:** Families seeking schools that match the individualized needs of their child with disabilities.
- **Founder motivation:** School leaders and educators establishing schools around a mission to serve specific populations.
- **State enabling conditions:** Growth is heavily clustered in states (e.g., Florida, Ohio, and Texas) with enabling policy, funder, and authorization environments.
- **High-stakes accountability systems:** Expansion is a byproduct of accountability systems that create incentives to push students with disabilities out of traditional public schools.

# Considerations Surrounding Specialized Charter Schools



# Pros and Cons

- **Specialized/Individualized programming**
- **Alternative to private placement**
- **Potential for Innovation**
- **Separation from non-disabled peers (LRE)**
- **Risk of avoiding accountability due to specialization**
- **Few state funding systems designed to support sustainable programs**

# Considerations

- **Admissions/Enrollment**
  - Numbers increase with little active monitoring as the local districts are happy to have a lower number of students with disabilities.
  - Disparities by race/ethnicity; access not evenly distributed.
- **Enrollment:** Balancing tailored supports with IDEA's inclusion mandate.
- **Exit policies:** Systems/structures/incentives to exit to less restrictive settings?
- **Funding:**
  - Neither state special education nor charter school funding formulas anticipated specialized charter schools.
  - Staffing, services, and facilities often strained.
- **Accountability:**
  - How do we ensure programmatic quality?
  - Growth shaped by uneven state policies and authorizer practices.
  - Ensuring compliance with IDEA and nondiscrimination.
  - Higher suspension rates raise equity concerns.

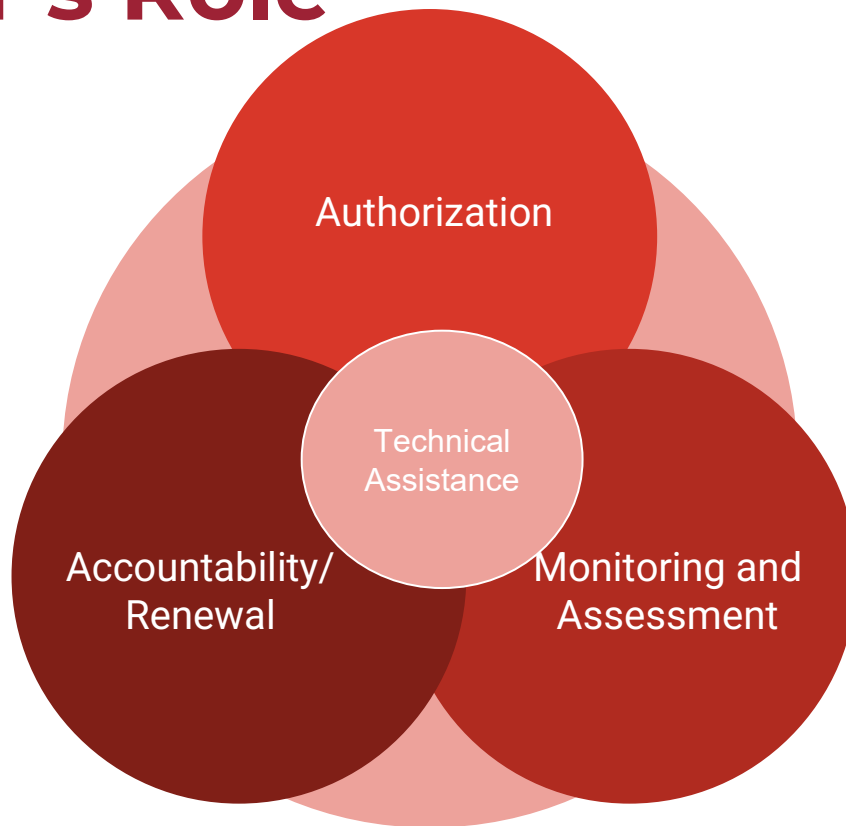
# Case Study: New York



# Role of the Authorizer



# Authorizer's Role



# Recommendations



# Actions to Influence Success

- **Application Phase**

- Engage reviewers with special education expertise to assess the application
- Engage local parent/special education advocates from the community to understand need
- Conduct due diligence regarding the financial feasibility and sustainability of a specialized program in light of the state special education funding formula relative to the proposed programming

# Actions to Influence Success

- **Operations**

- Partner with school developers to identify additional performance metrics above and beyond standard state metrics in line with the specialized focus of the school
- Collect data regarding enrollment, least restrictive environment, outcomes, mobility, and discipline, and proactively engage school leadership in discussions regarding any outliers that may signal the specialized program is not delivering on expectations

# Actions to Influence Success

- **Renewal**

- Examine enrollment and outcome trends relative to students with disabilities with similar learning profiles in traditional and integrated charter public schools to assess quality.

# Discussion



# Guiding Questions

- How can schools balance **specialized support** with **inclusive practices**?
- What strategies can improve **equitable access** for Black and Latinx students with disabilities?
- How should success be measured **beyond test scores**?
- How can states and authorizers ensure **accountability while fostering innovation**?
- How can schools reduce **disproportionate suspensions** and uphold **civil rights**?
- What supports are needed to ensure **sustainable growth** (e.g., staffing, facilities, funding)?

# Resources

- [Center for Learner Equity](#)
- [Authorizer Toolkit](#)
- [Specialized Charter Schools Brief](#)
- [New York City Autism School](#)
- [Inside Florida's Charter Schools for Exceptional Students](#)



# Have you completed the survey?

Remember to visit the NACSACon  
app to complete a feedback survey  
for this session.



# #NACSAcon