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A “can-do” Attitude for Students with Disabilities: Special Education in Rural Charter Schools

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ABSTRACT

Charter schools are often the only alternative to traditional public schools for students with disabilities in rural communities. Part of a larger study, we employed a qualitative multiple case study design to examine special education practices in five rural charter schools to understand the services provided, barriers to providing these services, and any novel practices used to provide these services. Data analysis revealed the following themes: (a) intentional school models facilitated individualized approaches, (b) schools responded to tight labor supply by prioritizing retention and making efficient use of staff time, and (c) schools demonstrate flexibility and willingness to problem solve.

KEYWORDS

Special education; rural; charter schools

In rural communities, charter schools are often the only alternative to traditional public schools, particularly for students with disabilities. However, little is known about the quality of services provided in these charter schools. In this paper we explore how five rural charter schools leverage their unique position in communities and their autonomy to create welcoming and valuable learning experiences for students with disabilities. We also highlight the challenges these schools grapple with by virtue of their rural status.

Although public charter schools are, like traditional school districts, legally required to accept students with disabilities and create Individualized Education Programs (IEP), some fear that they counsel students out, offer fewer services that would attract families of students with disabilities, or may simply be less known to these families (Kose, 2013). Likewise, rural communities are seen as less able to support multiple or alternative options to traditional public schools – perhaps because there are fewer students to draw from in any given area, or because it is more difficult to find charter networks or individual school leaders who are willing to start charter schools in these areas (Smarick, 2014). Additionally, there may be trepidation that even if charter schools are present in rural communities and enrolling

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students with disabilities, they are unlikely to push the boundaries on what is possible for these students.

Review of the literature

Despite a suite of civil rights laws, the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that protect the education of students with disabilities, large disparities in outcomes persist for this subgroup, and research on new strategies for special education is needed. While currently understudied, there is potential to learn from the context and approach of rural charter schools. While outcome gaps in charter schools also exist, charter schools tend to provide a more inclusive education for students with disabilities (Setren, 2015). Existing literature suggests that rural schools have unique advantages to effectively serve students with disabilities, yet must also navigate particular hurdles (Collins, 1999; McLaughlin, Emblar, Hernandez, & Caron, 2005). While rural schools face many challenges, including isolation and a lack of scale, they tend to prioritize individualization and community partnership, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to special education (Hartman, Stotts, Ottley, & Miller, 2017). Although rural charter schools comprise a small but significant portion of charter schools nationwide (11 percent in 2015) (Musu, 2018), scant literature exists on how these schools serve students with disabilities. The limited research suggests that rural charter schools face similar challenges as rural schools in general, but may have additional ways to use their flexibilities and problem-solving mentality to meet students' needs.

The state of special education

Special education is governed by a complex set of federal policies: Section 504, the ADA, and most prominently in the school setting, the IDEA. Despite these civil rights protections, schools have struggled to provide students with disabilities an equitable and high-quality education (Aragon, 2016). By many measures, schools are persistently challenged to adequately serve students with disabilities. In the most recent year of available data, 38 percent of fourth-grade students without disabilities were proficient in reading, compared to just 12 percent of students with disabilities – and the gap increased in eighth grade (Aragon, 2016). There is a nearly 20 percent difference in graduation rates between students with and without disabilities (Rhim, Sutter, & Campbell, 2016), and students with disabilities are disciplined at disproportionately higher rates. In 2017, 12 percent of students with disabilities received at least one suspension, compared with just 5 percent of students without disabilities (Horowitz, Rawe, & Whittaker, 2017). These outcomes indicate a need to improve how schools deliver special education services.

Advantages of rural special education

Previous studies on rural schools identified several advantages to teaching in rural communities. Special education teachers in Berry and Gravelle (2013) study reported several benefits to teaching in rural schools, including positive relationships with families and colleagues, small class sizes, and a strong sense of community in the schools. In rural schools, there tends to be a shared responsibility among staff members for students with disabilities, evidenced through a high level of collaboration between the special educators, general educators, and administrators (Nagle, Hernandez, Embler, McLaughlin, & Doh, 2006).

Rural schools are often small enough to more easily facilitate an individualized approach to serving students with disabilities. Special educators in rural schools report that it is easier to personalize approaches because they know their students (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). While rural special educators report that there can be a mismatch between implementing evidence-based practices with fidelity given the circumstances, resources, and needs of rural schools, they also often have more flexibility to take adaptive approaches to using these practices to meet the needs of their individual students (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011).

Staff at rural schools report family-like relationships with colleagues, strong relationships with families and students, and a team approach to special education (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). This type of team approach between principals, families, students, staff, and community helps to alleviate some of the pressures that rural schools experience when sharing special education support providers across multiple schools (Harmon, 2017). As a consequence of this strong collaboration with the community, rural schools are able to build supportive community partnerships to provide both coordinated service provision and extracurricular and experiential learning opportunities (Hartman et al., 2017). Strong school-community partnerships have been found to correlate with positive student outcomes (Hartman et al., 2017).

Challenges in rural special education

Nationally, there is a shortage of qualified personnel in rural schools (Brownell, Bishop, & Sindelar, 2005; Rude & Miller, 2018), making it difficult to recruit and retain teachers (Brownell, Rosenberg, Sindelar, & Smith, 2004; Sealander, Eigenberger, Peterson, Shellady, & Prager, 2001). Salaries are often lower in rural areas than typical salaries in urban settings, and candidates tend to perceive rural locations as less desirable. Additionally, special education teachers in rural schools are often asked to serve multiple grade levels and teach multiple subjects (Brownell et al., 2005). These teachers often lack the professional development needed to support their complex roles and combat feelings of isolation (Monk,

2007). It may be more costly to implement specialized programs in rural schools than in urban schools (McLaughlin et al., 2005) because rural schools often lack economies of scale. Budget challenges may force schools to consolidate or outsource services, offer lower pay, limit professional development, and provide less support to teachers (Collins, 1999), further exacerbating the challenges faced in serving students with disabilities.

Charter schooling in rural areas

Currently, the public tends to consider charter schools as a largely urban phenomenon. While achievement gaps exist in rural communities just as they do in urban areas, rural communities have not seen the same growth of alternative options like charter schools have (Pandit & Ibitissam, 2016). In 2015–16, 11 percent of charter schools were located in rural areas, while 29 percent of traditional public schools are in rural areas (Musu, 2018). In some states, charter laws give a preference or require charter schools to be located in urban areas, and even if not designated by law, in many other states, philanthropic foundations and support organizations have prioritized growth in urban areas (Smarick, 2014). Regardless, rural communities are beginning to recognize that local school districts do not operate the best school settings for every student, and that charter schools may be viable alternatives in their communities (Ryan, 2019).

Public education funding is generally often lower in rural areas (Bryant, 2010; Smarick, 2014). However, the flexibility inherently provided by the charter school model may allow for problem-solving in areas such as talent, instruction, and structure of the school day, week, or year (Pandit & Ibitissam, 2016).

The literature on district-run rural schools implies that the smaller setting and orientation toward community can provide advantages to serving students with disabilities, yet these schools are challenged by funding, attracting talent, and accessing economies of scale. While little research has been done on rural charter schools, it is implied that these schools face challenges but may be able to use their flexibility to build on the inherent advantages of the rural setting. This research expands upon existing literature on rural schools to understand special education services in rural charter schools, as well as identify challenges and barriers in providing these services. We also examine novel practices and ideas that these schools use to overcome these challenges in service provision.

Methodology

A qualitative collective case study method was employed for this study. A case study analysis is defined as “an empirical inquiry that investigates: (a) a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when (b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in

which, (c) multiple sources of evidence are used.” (Yin, 1984, p. 23). This methodology allowed researchers to study a collective “case” of five rural schools with great detail and allowed researchers to “retain a holistic and real-world perspective” while doing so (Yin, 2017, p. 4). Advantages to using this method included several key features. First, the collective case study analysis method was structured so the researcher could investigate the intended phenomenon (rural special education), within its natural context (the schools). Second, the design of a case study called for several sources of evidence. More than one type of data was advantageous because they provided the study with increased reliability through data triangulation and made for a more telling study.

School selection

This study is part of a larger exploratory study. For the larger study, we used quantitative and qualitative processes to identify a purposeful sample of 30 schools across 19 cities and 13 states. These schools were chosen because they were performing exceptionally well with students with disabilities. First, we analyzed federal ED Facts data for the two most recent years available at the time of analysis (2013–14 and 2014–15) and the Office for Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) for 2014–15 to identify charter schools that produced unusually strong outcomes for the subgroup of students with disabilities in one or more of three categories: percent proficient on standardized assessments in reading (ED Facts), advanced math course-taking (CRDC), and bullying/school discipline (CRDC). We supplemented this list of outliers with a nomination process.

School leaders from this initial list of 133 schools were invited to participate in the study, with compensation for their time, and an invitation to participate in a network of their peers. We continued recruitment until 30 schools confirmed their willingness to participate. To ensure a representative sample, we then reviewed data on these final schools to ensure they differed in instructional models, size, governance model, and policy context.

To identify a rural subsample, we analyzed school data to determine which schools met the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) rural classification. Three of these schools were in environments that were designated as rural using NCES rural classification, whereas the other two were designated as rural using a narrative approach (Hawley et al., 2016). Hawley et al. (2016) discuss the challenges of rural classification and that depending on the aim of the study researchers may find it necessary to use a narrative approach to determining rural, especially with a small sample size (Hawley et al., 2016). Based upon our field visits, observations, and discussions with school leaders, we relied on “local expertise” (Hawley et al., 2016, p. 9), to determine our sample. To protect the anonymity of the schools, each school was assigned a pseudonym.

Table 1. School information.

School	State	Grades Served	Student Enrollment (2017–18)	Percentage of Students with IEPs (2017–18)	Rural Classification*
Gunnarson	OH	K-12	0-500	43.5%	Town, Distant
Malmquist	MN	6-12	0-500	49%	Rural, Remote
Catamaran	OR	6-12	500-1,000	6.5%	Town, Distant
Sequoia	IN	K-8	0-500	36.3%	Rural, Distant
Pimpernel	PA	PK-12	0-500	18.4%	Rural, Distant

*NCES's urban-centric locale categories, 2016–2017 (https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/ruraled/exhibit_a.asp)

School sample

The five schools in our rural sample are located in five different states across America (Table 1). All schools were chosen to participate because of their positive outcomes for students with disabilities as previously described. Three of the five schools have populations of students with disabilities over 25 percent of their total school enrollment (Table 1), compared to the national average enrollment of students with disabilities in district-run schools (12.5 percent) and charter schools (10.6 percent) (Rhim & Kothari, 2018). Within our sample of five schools, each one serves its community as the only local school of choice, and often serves other unmet needs. Gunnarson, for instance, is not just the only school of choice in its community, but also the only school that offers dropout recovery. Consequently, Gunnarson currently enrolls students from more than a dozen districts across multiple counties; local demand led the school to expand into the elementary grades. Similarly, Catamaran functions as a totally unique option in their community, offering competency-based progression. In contrast, Sequoia and Pimpernel offer more traditional instruction: they are former district schools designated for closure by their school districts for financial reasons. All five schools have strong community support. As such, when Sequoia and Pimpernel were faced with district school closure, the community rallied to convert their governance status as a means to keep the closest school option open.

Data collection

Beginning in early October 2018 and continuing until May 2019, pairs of researchers visited each of the sampled schools. During two-day visits the team used a variety of qualitative data collection methods, including focus groups, interviews, and observations, to understand the schools' special education practices, including challenges, successes, and innovative practices in providing special education services.

Document and data review

Prior to field visits, we collected background school data from pre-visit phone interviews and from sources such as the Common Core of Data,

and school websites. Data collected included demographic data, funding levels, staffing levels, prevalence of disabilities, and school governance information, such as local education agency status and charter authorizer.

Interviews and focus groups

During two-day field visit to each school, the researchers conducted six to nine semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 to 60 minutes, and two parent focus groups to learn more about each school and its approach to serving students with disabilities. Interviews were conducted with staff members closely involved with special education, including school principals, special education directors, special educators, general educators, and occasionally others in leadership positions. We used open-ended interview protocols focused on topics ranging from hiring and professional development practices, strategies for serving students with disabilities, staff and student scheduling, external and internal factors that supported or hindered their success, and school culture practices. Focus groups with families were also conducted during the field visits using an open-ended interview protocol. On average, at each school we interviewed two school administrators, eight teachers, and six parents.

Observations

Researchers also observed up to six classrooms per school during field visits. In every school these observations included inclusion classrooms and pull-out settings. Where possible, researchers observed the classrooms for the teachers we interviewed, allowing discussion of the context of the classrooms with those teachers. During each observation, researchers took detailed notes using a predetermined observation protocol.

Data analysis

After each school field visit, an outside transcription company transcribed the audio recordings verbatim for each interview and focus group. The field researchers reviewed transcriptions for accuracy and then created a detailed field report on nine topic areas: the school's approach to special education, classroom instruction, school culture and discipline, staffing and student scheduling, professional development, hiring, involvement of parents and community, governance structures, and local policy context for special education.

For the rural subset, a team of five researchers individually coded the detailed school summaries using an open coding procedure to identify patterns that were unique to, or related to, the schools' rural settings. Axial coding procedures, a qualitative research technique used to construct linkages between data, were then used to identify relationships among the open codes (Allen, 2017). The open codes were grouped into larger related categories. The last stage involved

reviewing the categories to identify which categories were prominent in more than half of the transcripts. These categories were collapsed into themes. The group of researchers met to gain consensus on themes and then the team developed a cross-case synthesis.

Credibility and trustworthiness

Triangulation is a credibility measure that involves collecting and examining multiple sources of data to build a coherent justification for findings (Creswell, 2014). Triangulation can also be achieved by the use of multiple researchers (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). For this study, triangulation was achieved by collecting multiple sources of data: interviews and focus groups, observations, and document review. Additionally, multiple researchers participated in data analysis.

Results

The purpose of this collective case study was to explore special education in rural charter schools: to understand the services provided, barriers to providing these services, and any novel practices used to provide these services. Data analysis revealed the following themes: (a) intentional school models facilitated individualized approaches, (b) schools responded to tight labor supply by prioritizing retention and making efficient use of staff time, and (c) schools demonstrated flexibility and willingness to problem solve.

Intentional school models facilitated individualized approaches

Although the approach was different in every school, all of the rural charter schools in this study had intentional school models that facilitated individualization. The individualized approaches these schools use with their students may explain why parents of children with disabilities enroll them in these schools at such high rates. Each school had structures and approaches that enabled them to build strong relationships with students with disabilities and help meet the students' needs, but small school size contributed.

School structure

All but one school averaged fewer than 100 students per grade level. Malmquist, Sequoia, and Pimpernel have total enrollment caps and Malmquist caps class sizes at 20 students, helping the schools' staff get to know each individual student. A parent said her student had previously been able to hide in his district-run school, but could no longer do so once moving to Pimpernel because the school was so small.

Educators reported that the small school size required them to be both independent and collaborative, usually in an on-demand and informal basis. Schools had horizontal leadership and most teachers were actively engaged or consulted on schoolwide decisions. Special education teachers and directors were often the most thoughtful about the professional learning needs of the entire faculty, and were frequently called upon to lead professional development. Many of them served as critical thought partners of the school leadership team, helping schools push their models to incorporate the use of data and instructional practices, such as differentiation, that would help all students, but especially those with disabilities.

Relationship building

Strong teacher-student relationships were evident in all schools. Because teachers often spanned multiple grades, there were more opportunities for staff and students to become familiar with one another. Teachers, too, could truly get to know and understand students who are unique learners and have intricate IEPs. Two of the schools fostered strong teacher-student relationships through advising and mentorship. Advisors at Catamaran supported students with making decisions around course taking, which had its foundation in a freshman seminar course but had the effect of also building strong relationships with each student. Students at Gunnarson were required to have a mentor, and the students could ask any staff member to serve in that role. Allowing students to choose was intentional in order to build a foundation of trust. Both of these schools have school counselors who guide students with mental health or issues related to drugs, alcohol, and pregnancy, but advisors and mentors were often the ones to identify the need for more student support. The fact that these schools placed a high value on relationships is very attractive to families of children with disabilities who do not want their children to get lost amid a larger school population.

In focus groups, families explained why they had sought out their charter school as an alternative to their assigned district school. “He’s a square peg; he was stuck in a round hole at his [prior] school,” explained one parent, “and we were constantly being told he was trouble ... and come to find out, the school system was more trouble than he was.” Prior schools mishandled students’ IEPs, according to some parents who noted issues with identification and implementation of IEPs. Other parents said previous schools did not provide adequate support for their childrens’ disabilities, in some cases felt as if their children “flew under the radar” without making real academic progress.

Doing it for all students

The intent of special education is to provide individualized education programs to students with disabilities. But rather than trying to individualize

only for students with disabilities, all of these schools were often doing this for all students. Because of the schoolwide focus on individualization, students with disabilities were not singled out for receiving personalized help or accommodations. In addition to the ability to individualize, these schools had positive cultures of inclusion that celebrated student growth.

Some of the schools had explicit school models that enabled personalization. Malmquist had a project-based learning model that enabled easy differentiation for students based on their needs without sacrificing content. Catamaran offered students personalized pathways through a dynamic schedule that students designed with advisors to meet their long-term goals along with competency-based progression. While not all of these structural elements that supported individualized relationships and learning are unique to the rural setting or the charter environment, the combination of those factors seemed to facilitate a problem-solving and individualized mind-set.

While individualized, these schools did not neglect the goals of inclusion and positive school culture, which they fostered via intentional community building. Malmquist held Monday morning “Town Halls” to discuss what was happening at the school. Faculty explained their philosophy: when students trust educators and feel comfortable, they will be willing to do the work to be successful academically. Sequoia similarly had morning all-school meetings that created time and space for the school to celebrate accomplishments and build community. Beyond being physically present with their peers, students with disabilities felt “truly included” during these meetings, which often celebrated student growth.

Schools responded to tight labor supply by prioritizing retention and making efficient use of staff time

All schools in our study experienced challenges with hiring and retaining teachers because of their rural setting and the national shortage of special educators. These challenges were compounded by policy factors not necessarily unique to charter schools, such as low per-pupil funding rates. While we observed that most schools implemented retention strategies to attract and keep quality teachers, we found variance in how staffing and IEP service provision structures were used to help relieve overstretched educators’ schools.

Talent challenges in rural contexts

Hiring and retaining teachers was a challenge for all of the charter schools we visited. For some schools, this was compounded by policy factors that created lower levels of special education staffing, resulting in high caseloads for special educators. All of the rural charter schools had lower per-pupil funding levels than their closest traditional districts, and three schools had IEP

caseloads of over 20 students per special educator. However, while policy factors may compound the challenges of hiring, they are not unique to rural charter schools.

Regardless of funding levels, nearly every school struggled to fill open positions, apart from Catamaran, which is located in a wealthier, growing area that has become a draw for urban teachers looking to relocate. As a principal from Malmquist described, “One of the hugely frustrating pieces of working up here is trying to get people to apply for jobs ... there have been times when I’ve put out a posting for a teacher and I’ll get like three applicants. It’s not like I’m getting 30 or 60 like in [the major city in the state].” Principals reported going to great lengths to recruit for an open position and getting one applicant, having few teachers that meet credentialing requirements, or having high levels of turnover or difficulty recruiting because of low pay in comparison to other local district schools. Some staff members commute more than 30 minutes a day while also often staying longer hours to complete work after school ends. The principal at Malmquist lives near campus in a condo during the work week and spends the weekend at his primary residence with his family in a city two hours away.

Targeted recruitment

As a result of these challenges, four of the five schools we visited adopted strategies to attract and retain qualified special and general education teachers. Four schools explicitly looked for cultural fit first in interviews to find teachers who would be happy in both the school and the rural community. As the principal of Pimpernel, located just outside a national forest, described, “My purpose in interviews is to find out what your personality’s like, and if you want to be in the woods, and if you’re going to be here and be happy. Because happy people make happy schools.” Gunnarson provides a higher pay scale and fewer working hours to promote teacher retention in a very challenging environment. Four schools in our sample supported further education for teachers or para-educators as part of a grow-your-own strategy. And most of the schools had very little teacher turnover and long teacher tenures.

Creative staffing

These same four schools used creative strategies to make the most of staffing and content expertise shortages or high IEP caseloads. These schools reduced the need for a variety of subject-area experts or higher staffing levels through the use of personalized or student-led learning strategies in all or some settings. Contracting helped reduce the need for full-time positions, particularly for special education service providers. Malmquist contracted for a part-time special education director – a required position in the state – to perform compliance and financial oversight, leaving day-to-day special education coordination to a lead special educator. This created cost savings and

prioritized funding for full-time teaching positions. The two schools with the highest caseloads of students with IEPs used a more typical structure of special education staffing because they were able to recruit for full-time positions.

Schools demonstrated flexibility and willingness to problem solve

All schools recognized they could not be all things to all students. While all schools in our study had a “high-expectations” vision for their students and often had an educational philosophy that underpinned their instructional methods, they also appeared to be largely flexible in their approach in order to problem solve and meet the needs of students, including those with disabilities. This flexibility was demonstrated in four key ways: creative staffing models, a sense of independence in students and adults, informal collaboration, and connecting students to out-of-school resources. The solutions schools found may also have ancillary educational and social benefits for students.

With the goal of exposing students to as much content as possible, schools leveraged staff and resources in creative ways. For example, schools that used self-directed learning may not have had a specific biology teacher, but could still ensure students learned what they needed to know across all science disciplines. By effectively positioning the role of the teacher as a guide to information and reinforcer of common skills, schools enabled students to discover and master this content on their own. These schools also tapped online programs to supplement core concepts. Independent work models also allowed for less disruptive opportunities for students with disabilities to receive support outside the classroom. The more traditional schools in our sample used paraeducators for in-class support or blended grades/multiage classrooms to reduce staffing costs. Some schools used virtual providers for related services like occupational or speech therapy. Taken together, by avoiding the traditional direct-instruction model, students with disabilities had the opportunity to learn through self-pacing and differentiated supports, including the use of peers for extra “help” that created a sense of agency and self-advocacy.

While rural communities are sometimes stereotyped as having a monoculture or being less tolerant than other communities, the willingness to problem solve was often driven by school cultures that valued students as individuals. This was particularly valuable for students with disabilities who were not singled out for their disabilities but were also served in creative ways along with their peers. Though schools were unlikely to have the full spectrum of student needs that an urban school district would have, their focus on students as individuals ensured that, when schools were confronted with unique needs, they did not present families with the same list of services that every other student received – they tried to find personalized solutions.

Schools likewise would not counsel students out to a specialized program when they felt they could not serve them. For example, when Malmquist enrolled a student with autism who had previously been homeschooled, they found he was too scared of other students to be at school during regular class times. Instead of being sent to an alternative setting, he worked with a paraeducator after school and was introduced to students on a one-on-one basis to improve his comfort level with peers.

All of these rural charter schools also used their flexibilities to support students with external and community-based resources. These schools viewed the community as an asset to leverage and enhance their capacity to meet students' needs. One way that schools partnered with the communities they served was to offer students out-of-school learning opportunities. A strength of these rural schools was that they are able to individualize these experiences to meet the needs of their specific student population, which particularly benefited students with disabilities.

A special education teacher at Gunnarson, for example, realized that his students lacked experience outside the school walls, so, as a way to teach life skills, he built these opportunities into the school day. He worked with community partners to provide his students opportunities to visit the post office, local big-box retailers, parks, and fast-food and other restaurants. Many of his students had never been given these opportunities outside of school.

Internships were another way students were provided with external community-based experiences. One high school even built internships into the school day, and half of each student's day is an internship outside of school. They determined internships by getting to know a student's strengths and interests, and then found a community partner for that student to work with. For example, Gunnarson partnered with a local screen-printing warehouse; through community resources the school purchased equipment so they could offer screen printing as a course option for students, helping prepare them for future internships in the community.

Discussion and implications

The results of this study reveal valuable insights into the challenges that rural charter schools encounter when serving students with disabilities, as well as the opportunities presented by their charter model to individualize for students' needs and solve for some of the challenges of being in a rural community. Previous studies note the challenges in finding and retaining quality educators; surprisingly, the rural charter schools in our sample used flexible approaches to retaining quality educators and maximizing available skills. Past research suggests that rural schools use a responsive approach to implementing evidence-based practices, which was borne out in this study as schools individualized

approaches to meet students' needs. Still, we were struck by the extent to which these rural charter schools were willing to problem solve rather than develop a one-size-fits-all model. Students with disabilities, in particular, were most likely to benefit from this problem-solving approach. Nevertheless, despite serving as a haven for students who were underserved in their previous schools, there was still room for improvement in reducing academic disparities for students with disabilities.

We also found that charter schools used their flexibilities to solve for many of the resource challenges that the rural setting presents. We observed that schools made strategic choices to build successful special education programs despite staffing and resource challenges. We observed that schools responded to these challenges in different yet creative ways. Some schools tended to provide special education services outside of the general education classroom in a way that was more efficient for special educators' time, whereas other schools seemed to make this inclusion possible through a strategic division of labor between special educators and paraprofessionals. While paraprofessionals should be used carefully as additional support to students rather than as their primary educators, they can play an important role in relieving pressure on scarce special educators and create opportunities for a variety of special education provision models (Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Schools can also focus more attention on training general educators to provide additional in-class support to diverse learners in all subjects, thereby reducing the need to take students out of class to receive services.

Many schools had to balance their aspirations for their special education models with the funding and human capital resources available. While schools can adopt "grow-your-own" strategies, policy support is needed to help teachers access further education or credentialing and incentivize them to choose jobs in rural schools and in special education. There are examples of state and university-led programs targeted to support payment for further education of rural teachers but previous studies and our findings on transportation highlight the need for online options or flexible programs at local universities, as well as programs that are targeted toward the specific needs of teaching in rural communities (Sealander et al., 2001). External programs can also support grow-your-own strategies for high school students through mentorship and summer programs (Rude & Miller, 2018). Policymakers must also consider ways to incentivize teaching in rural schools and special education by providing additional funding that schools could direct toward higher salaries or sponsoring student loan forgiveness for teachers who choose to teach in rural settings or in special education.

While previous studies note that rural schools tend to individualize for students' needs, it may be that the charter school framework provides more opportunity to adapt programming (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). The flexibility and problem-solving mind-set demonstrated by these schools

Table 2. School achievement data (2015–2016 school year).

School	ELA Proficiency		Math Proficiency	
	Students with IEPs	School Average	Students with IEPs	School Average
Gunnarson	10%*	15%	10%*	15%
Malmquist	30%*	35%	10%*	15%
Catamaran	15%	64%	10%*	36%
Sequoia	45%	62%	35%	52%
Pimpernel	35%	52%	15%	37%

Source: ED Facts for 2015–16 school year.

*Values are a midpoint of the reported bounds available in the data. Due to data privacy restrictions for federal data, schools without a sufficient number of test-takers in each subgroup only have an upper and lower bound reported. We use the midpoint of these bounds for all schools. While this is not precise, it gives a general estimate of school and subgroup proficiency for each school.

could be adopted in other places. All schools that serve students with disabilities can benefit from additional research on strategies and methods used to develop and build personalized instruction for students with disabilities.

The can-do approach and position as the only school of choice in a given area resulted in almost all of these schools having very high proportions of students with disabilities. However, supporting high rates of students with disabilities with a wide array of needs does raise questions of sustainability. Unlike schools that are part of a district or are in an urban area, these rural charter schools had to find resources for each student in-house or independently, with little opportunity to share costs or resources with neighboring schools.

While parents and teachers we spoke with indicated that students who were previously underserved were happier and more successful in their charter school environment, and these schools were positive outliers for academic outcomes, in most of these schools academic gaps for students with disabilities persisted (see Table 2). Every school still maintains achievement gaps, with some above a 15 percentage point difference. And while there is a wide variation in outcomes, some schools have low proficiency rates overall. These gaps indicate that even at exemplar schools more research, support, and creativity is needed in the realm of special education to help schools serve these students.

Policymakers must consider how rural collaboratives or regional special education cost-sharing programs can be facilitated to ensure that rural charter schools can meet the needs of high rates of students with diverse disabilities. Future research can also explore the extent to which this concentration occurs in other communities, rural and nonrural alike. Policymakers should fully consider the benefits and disadvantages of this phenomenon.

The crucial role the schools in this sample played in filling a gap for students who fall outside the norm in their communities also warrants more research and support for developing more quality choice options in rural

communities. Charter schools are often thought of as an urban phenomenon, but the origin stories of these charter schools reflect similar needs in rural areas: a community that recognizes that a group of students would be better served by an alternative option. There may be a role for charter authorizers and philanthropy to provide encouragement and support to rural educators to explore chartering as an opportunity to diversify school offerings in more rural communities, as well as continue to push for equity and quality for students with disabilities.

Limitations

While the results of this study contribute to the research base on the under-researched area of special education in rural charter schools, our study has limitations. Due to the small sample size, generalization of findings should be made with caution. There would be benefit in replicating this study using a larger school sample. Another limitation, previously discussed in the methods section, is the known challenge of how to generalize rural findings because of the heterogeneity of rural areas. As previously noted, two of the five schools in our sample are not considered rural based upon the NCES definition. We used a narrative approach, using local knowledge to identify these two schools as rural. This was discussed further in the methods section.

Conclusion

Charter schools are often stereotyped as less supportive of students with disabilities, and typically thought of as an urban phenomenon. But this study finds that charter schools can serve as an important option for students with disabilities in rural settings. While these rural charter schools do face challenges with staffing and accessing resources, such as transportation, we also observed schools going out of their way to creatively solve for their students' individual needs and making the best of community partnerships. This can-do attitude was a draw for families of students with disabilities who often were underserved in their local school districts. Future research should further explore how rural communities create charter schools and how these charter schools can best support special populations. Given that we saw high concentrations of students with disabilities, future research could also explore the extent to which this happens in other communities. Policymakers should also consider the benefits and disadvantages of this phenomenon and consider ways to support this problem-solving mind-set in schools across rural communities.

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