

Charting a Path for Equitable Education for Students with Disabilities: The Role of Charter School Leadership Pipelines

Students with disabilities across the United States are not achieving at the same rate as their non-disabled peers. With their flexibility and capacity for innovation, charter schools offer an opportunity to improve these outcomes. However, data from the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), parent focus groups and surveys, and research on schools' responses to inquiries from parents of students with disabilities all tell us that not all students feel welcome in charter schools or are succeeding in them. To improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities, we propose that the charter sector must first build foundational leadership capacity and then make a firm commitment to high expectations for students with disabilities.

The Center for Learner Equity examined 42 leadership development programs across the country. While most of the programs we examined focus on common themes and have a somewhat similar structure, there were also important distinctions. This report explores the target audiences of the various programs, their structure, the extent to which they focus on educating students with disabilities, and challenges they face regarding meaningful inclusion of topics related to educating students with disabilities. Given the need for charter school leader pipelines and the evidence of their positive impact, we view them as critical to ensuring that all students have access to high-quality schools designed with students with disabilities as part of their DNA rather than as an afterthought.

As part of our broader interest in strategies that will foster inclusive learning environments, the Center for Learner Equity will increase collaboration with existing programs to infuse inclusive mindsets and strong programs for students with disabilities into their training models. Future phases of this work will include partnering with three pipeline programs to develop content and capacity to create robust programs and inclusive environments to improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Key Recommendations

Based on the findings and common themes that arose from our examination, we have identified three opportunities for leadership pipeline programs that, given their central role in the development of high-quality charter schools, would increase their ability to prepare leaders to intentionally and effectively create inclusive and equitable schools for all students.

- 1. Embed a commitment to equity and inclusion for all students, including those with disabilities, into the DNA of the program curriculum.**
- 2. Revise the scope and sequences of programming content to create or enhance programming specifically focused on educating students with disabilities beyond basic compliance while also intentionally weaving these issues into existing content areas.**
- 3. Create benchmarks for pipeline leaders to use as they develop their programs to ensure that the unique needs of students with disabilities are included in the core issues considered in the design of training opportunities.**

Pipeline programs are a critical feeder for charter school leadership and consequently the growth of quality schools. Therefore, efforts to improve equity and outcomes for all students must include intentional work to support pipelines in their efforts to meaningfully integrate issues related to educating students with disabilities into their programs. This work will help ensure that emerging leaders have both the mindset and specific knowledge to build strong, inclusive programs, as well as the critical skills necessary to make decisions that ultimately lead to improved educational experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Program Spotlights

[Relay Graduate School of Education](#) | [Green Dot Public Schools AIR Pipeline](#) | [UnifiED School Launch Program](#)

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