



Case Brief

Centers of Excellence Project: Brooklyn Laboratory Charter Schools (LAB)

Brooklyn, New York

Year Opened:
2014

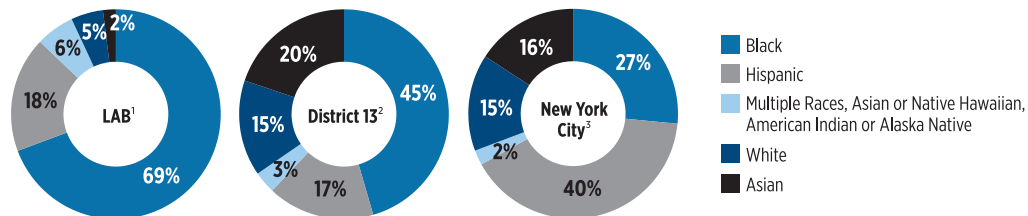
Grades Served:
6-9
 (6-12 at full growth)

Total Enrollment:
700

LAB Data Profile

The mission of Brooklyn Laboratory Charter Schools is to prepare scholars with the academic foundation, digital literacy, and leadership skills necessary to succeed in college and professional life as they grow as ethical leaders.

Chart 1: Demographics Comparison 2016



Students with Disabilities	28%	13.7%	19.4%
English Language Learners	14% ⁴	11%	13.4%
Free and Reduced-Price Meals	81% ⁵	65%	74.2%

Chart 2: Enrollment of Students with Disabilities 2014-2017⁶

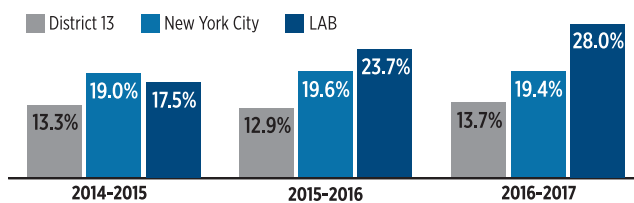


Chart 4: Academic Performance of Students with Disabilities 2015-2016 English Language Arts

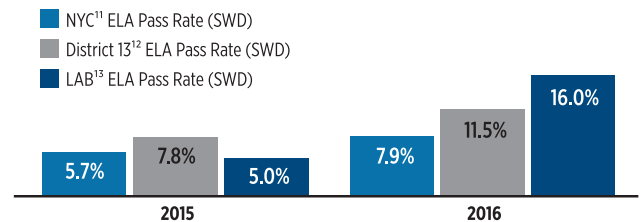
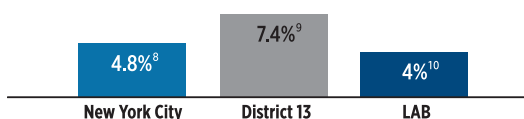
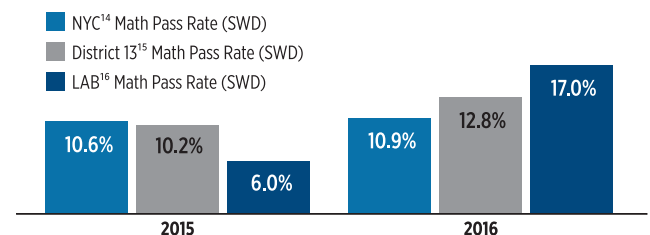


Chart 3: Suspension Rates of Students with Disabilities



* Note that the New York City and District 13 data are from 2013-14, prior to Brooklyn Lab opening. Brooklyn Lab data is from 2014-15.

Chart 5: Academic Performance of Students with Disabilities 2015-2016 Mathematics





Brooklyn Laboratory Charter Schools

The mission of Brooklyn Laboratory Charter Schools is to prepare scholars with the academic foundation, digital literacy, and leadership skills necessary to succeed in college and professional life as they grow as ethical leaders.

Brooklyn Laboratory Charter Schools (LAB) is an independent public charter school network located in Brooklyn, New York. It received its first charter from the New York State Education Department Board of Regents and opened its doors in the fall of 2014. LAB emerged from the founders' unique vision: to build a school that not only serves students with disabilities, but also seeks to transform education in a way that unlocks *all* students' potential and strengths. Students with disabilities were an integral part of the founders' vision, and the school actively recruited complex learners and individuals with learning differences. LAB's founders reached out to families directly via door-to-door canvassing, open houses, flyers, and social media. They also connected with youth centers, after-school programs, new immigrant centers and other non-profits, as well as special education directors, social workers, and counselors.¹⁷ Yet LAB is not a "special education" school. The school focuses on including all students in personalized educational experiences that utilize technology, small group instruction, and capstone projects to support individualized learning.

The school's intentional recruitment of students with disabilities has been successful. LAB currently enrolls 700 students in grades 6-9 on four campuses and will grow to a projected 1,800 when

these four campuses grow to serve all authorized grades (i.e., two middle schools serving 6-8 and two high schools serving 9-12). LAB has a higher percentage of students with disabilities than its surrounding neighborhood district (NYC Community School District 13) and New York City (NYC) as a whole (See Charts 1 & 2). In 2014, the school's first year of operation, test scores were a bit lower than those across NYC and District 13. However, after just two years, LAB's students, including students with disabilities, outperformed their peers in both NYC and District 13. From year one to year two, the school increased proficiency rates among students with disabilities from 6% to 17% in math and from 5% to 16% in ELA (See Chart 4). Since its first year, LAB's overall student performance on statewide assessments has increased and now surpasses the levels of both NYC and District 13.

A School Day at LAB

LAB is located in downtown Brooklyn, in the heart of the growing Brooklyn Tech Triangle and in close proximity to a high technology hub and many colleges and universities. Its two buildings sit across the street from each other. The campus on Jay Street, a five-story red brick edifice built in 1907, houses a growing

Centers of Excellence: Shining a Spotlight on Promising Practices for Students with Disabilities in the Charter Sector

State charter school laws provide an opportunity to create instructional environments outside of traditional school districts. This gives charter schools an opportunity to innovate, test, refine, and expand promising new practices that can better meet the needs of students who may not be well-served in traditional public school settings.

In Fall 2016, the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS) identified four charter schools from across the country as "Centers of Excellence" to showcase and share examples of charter schools that leverage their autonomy particularly well to benefit students with disabilities.

Each Center of Excellence enrolls a proportionate or higher number of students with disabilities relative to the district where the school is located, demonstrates an explicit commitment to developing exemplary programs with a focus on inclusion and achieves higher-than-average outcomes for students with disabilities. Each Center of Excellence profile is designed to share the story of an outstanding school that provides particular insight into how charter schools — and all public schools — can provide exemplary services to students with disabilities.

middle school with students in grades sixth through eighth. The campus on Flatbush Avenue Extension houses grades six through nine.

Students attend school from 8:30 am until 5:30 pm, except on Wednesdays when they are dismissed at 1:15pm so that staff can participate in professional development and collaborative team planning with special and general educators. From 8:30 am through 3:30 pm, students attend math, English Language Arts (ELA), social studies, and science classes with grade cohorts of mixed-ability students. They also attend small group literacy and math, clustered in groups that match strengths with opportunities to learn. The school day is thus arranged so that students have math and ELA together with their whole cohort, and then are divided into small groups for personalized instruction.

All students spend one period of both math and ELA as a whole class with a content teacher, who is often paired with a co-teacher

Weighted Lottery System

LAB's enrollment policy includes provision for a weighted lottery system that complies with federal guidance and New York State Education Department (NYSED) lottery procedures. The United States Department of Education (USDOE) states that charter schools may use information about a prospective student's disability status to "...enhance the chances for a student with a disability to be admitted or enrolled..."¹⁸ At LAB, the founders specifically want to include students with disabilities. Students apply to LAB by completing a short application that includes their name, grade, address, parent/guardian contact information, and whether any siblings attend or are also applying for LAB. They may also use the Common Charter School Application offered by the New York City Charter School Center. LAB's enrollment lottery has the ability to be weighted to give students with disabilities a higher chance of being admitted. However, to date, they have not had to use the weighting to achieve their enrollment goals related to students with disabilities. Lottery preference is given to students who live within District 13, children of LAB employees, and siblings of current students. If a student is not chosen during the lottery, he or she is placed on a waitlist according to the lottery ranking. Students from the top of the waitlist are admitted as space becomes available. The goal is not to become a separate school for students with disabilities, but rather, to live up to the vision of co-founder Eric Tucker: to create a school where someone like him, who has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, dyslexia, and other learning challenges, can thrive.

who supports differentiation. During this time, they have direct instruction with their teacher and may also have independent work on a computer. All students move to a different space for a period of small group instruction with either a Learning Specialist, a Speech and Language Therapist, or a LAB Corps Fellow (i.e., a new educator working directly under the supervision of Fellowship Deans). Fellowship Deans are experienced educators who facilitate implementation of structured small group instruction and professional development for Fellows. Although small group lessons have a shared foundation, Learning Specialists or Fellows differentiate instruction and scaffold learning to best leverage the strengths of all learners. This often involves practice with particular skill, focus on a specific misconception, representation of core content in a different manner, or extension work.

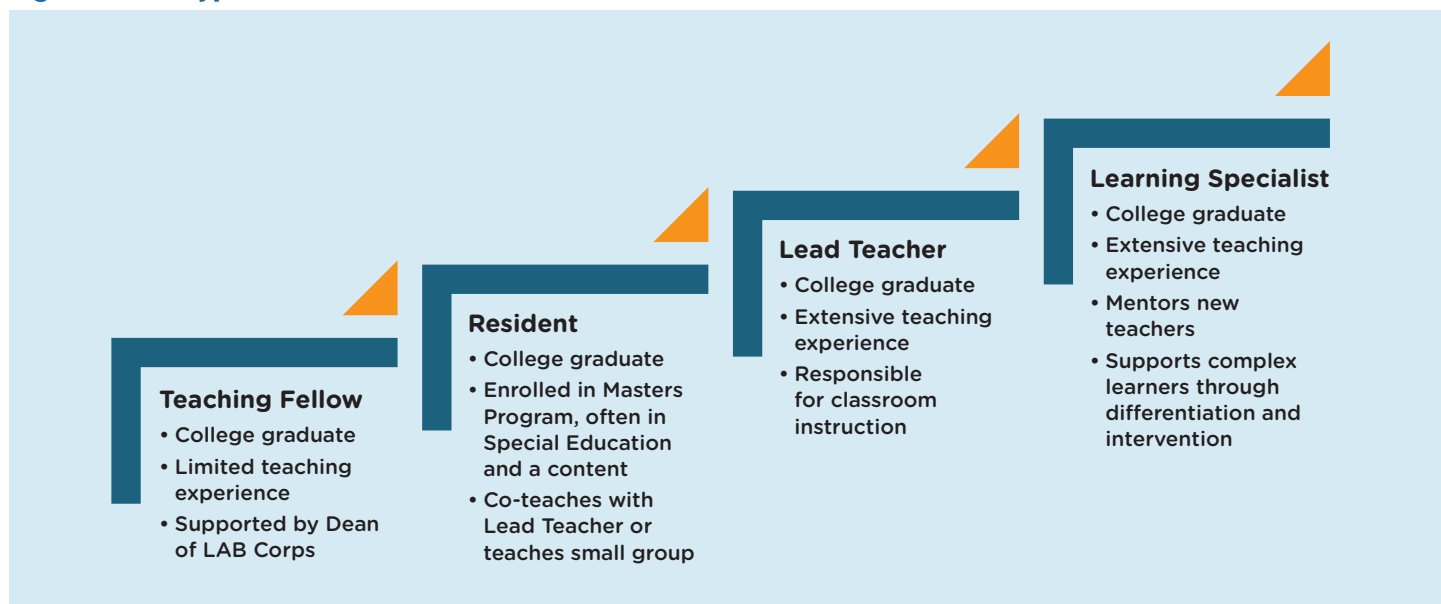
From 3:30pm to 5:30pm, students have opportunities to participate in enrichment activities in the areas of sports, performing and visual arts, STEM (including computer science, math club, hackerspace, and robotics) and leadership development (including student council and debate). All students can participate in enrichment activities, unless they fail to complete required homework, in which case, they attend Homework Club. In Homework Club, a teacher works with students who need assistance with organization, concepts, or time to complete their assigned work. LAB has also begun using some of this time to enable students who are struggling to complete remedial or extension work.

Building Educator Capacity through an Innovative Talent System

Recruiting and retaining special education teachers is a ubiquitous challenge for public schools.^{19,20} LAB has tackled this issue head-on by creating an educator pipeline, designed to cultivate a robust supply of teachers and build a staff culture around the school's inclusive philosophy and individualized focus. LAB students work with four types of educators: Fellows, Residents, Lead Teachers, and Learning Specialists. Each type of educator has a different level of experience, training, and responsibility for students and other adults in accordance with the goals outlined in students' individualized education programs (See Figure 1 for more information).

Fellows are college graduates with little or no teaching experience who provide small group instruction under the supervision and coaching of an experienced Fellowship Dean. Fellows do not need particular undergraduate majors or teaching experience. For some, it is their first job out of college; for others, it is a stepping stone to a new career in education. Fellows begin training a month before school begins and receive regular coaching from Deans and instructional leadership throughout the year. Deans and instructional leadership develop lesson plans and provide lesson studies with Fellows on how to implement lessons. A key characteristic of the Fellow experience is an intentional introduction to differentiated support and how to scaffold supports based on a student's particular, individualized needs.

Figure 1. Four types of educators at LAB



Deans, Lead Teachers, and Fellows conduct lessons together, discuss where students may have problems with the work, and identify alternate ways to complete the lesson to prevent possible misconceptions. When preparing for literacy small group instruction, for example, Fellows practice looking for evidence from the text to support the answers and identify possible wrong options that students may choose. Fellowship Deans are onsite every day to observe lessons, provide Fellows with immediate support as needed, debrief with Fellows after lessons, and provide written feedback. LAB students are dismissed at 1:15pm on Wednesday afternoons so that all educators, including Fellows, can collaborate and participate in professional development.

After completing the Fellowship year, Fellows have the opportunity to apply for Resident Teacher positions at the school. Resident Teachers work in collaboration with a certified Lead Teacher in a classroom, overseeing small groups independently or co-teaching with a Lead Teacher. In some cases, Residents provide instruction along-side Fellows in small group instructional spaces or provide one-on-one instruction to students. LAB partners with Relay Graduate School of Education to support Residents in earning their Masters degrees and becoming certified to teach in New York State. Resident Teachers are often enrolled in a dual certification graduate program at Relay (i.e., both special education and a content), and are supported through mentoring, observation and feedback, personal professional development plans, and opportunities for deliberate practice.

After two years, Residents have the chance to become Lead Teachers who have additional classroom as responsibilities, including working with students with the most intensive support needs. Teachers typically develop expertise in specialized areas of instruction (e.g., Advanced Placement mathematics, intensive reading interventions, etc.). Strong Lead Teachers are one of LAB's core strategies for driving student success. These Lead

Teachers may be alumni of the residency program or strong external candidates.

The final type of educator that LAB employs is the Learning Specialist. While based on the supports and services outlined in students IEPs, these specialists typically provide a variety of supports related to literacy, mathematical thinking, and content mastery.

The objective of the LAB special education staffing structure is for individuals to have the opportunity to progress through these levels, first learning instructional strategies and norms, and eventually becoming certified Teachers. LAB aims to fill positions from within this intentional pipeline. Its process of recruitment, onboarding, and opportunities for professional growth help to create a sustainable system of inclusive practices at LAB with shared cultural values and practices.

Teaching and Learning at LAB: Individualized Instruction

LAB provides every student with both whole class and small group instruction. Students with disabilities may participate in additional pullout instruction during or beyond the regular school day, but because general and special educators plan instruction together, pullout time is built to complement and augment whole group instructional priorities. The school has carved out particular times throughout the day and year for remedial instruction. For example, fluency instruction may be included during small group literacy instruction time; or students who require ongoing homework support may receive instruction on specific IEP goals during Homework Club.

LAB's emphasis on individualized instruction is made possible in part by its differentiated staffing structure, which is developed and refined each year based on the goals and services outlined

in students' IEPs. Students participate in a multi-tiered series of learning experiences, including 1) direct instruction with Lead Teachers, 2) remediation, practice and reinforcement with teaching Fellows, Residents, and/or Learning Specialists, and 3) independent work with digital courseware, often through Cortex – a next generational learning platform used by the school to support differentiation. This combination of strategies provides multiple opportunities for students to master content and allows teachers to get to know students' individual needs, resulting in more focused instruction for all students.

In reflecting on lessons learned since starting the school in 2014, Co-Founder and Executive Director, Eric Tucker explained: “We are fundamentally a talent-focused organization. We are humble about how much there is to learn and be able to do. We are clear that the only way that this work is purposeful and sustainable is to run Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for educators in order to equip them to get better at serving complex learners over time. There are places where we are strong and getting stronger and there are places that we are not yet as strong as we are committed to be. As we acknowledge opportunities for improvement and capacity building, we can leverage data to solve problems of practice. We have more questions about how to meet the needs of all learners, every day than we did in year one. But, we are also more clear and deliberate about setting adults up for continual improvement and success.”

Tracking Students' Individual Progress

Cortex, a next generation digital learning platform used at LAB, is intended to enable educators to create “...progressions for subsets of students so that true differentiation can occur – including the ability to have students complete remediation or extension content. Cortex can also provide teachers with context about mastery in different learning experiences so teachers and students cannot just understand if they have learned but how they learn, empowering the student to drive their own learning forward.”²¹ It combines student data such as attendance and demographics with real-time data from instructional and assessment modules. The system is built on a competency model, where students do not progress to the next objective until they have mastered the current one. This system allows students to progress at their own pace. Teachers may use the data to plan lessons, identify areas where students may be struggling or need extension, and plan intervention and adjust instructional objectives accordingly.

Key Takeaways

Centers of Excellence sites are schools that provide examples of effective practices that other public schools – traditional and charter – can implement to create programs where all students thrive, including those with disabilities. Although it is still a young and developing school, LAB is an example of a charter school that has intentionally built its approach on evidence-based practices that have shown success with students with disabilities. The lessons learned from LAB will, we hope, inspire other schools that are committed to improving outcomes for all students, with a particular focus on those with disabilities. Key among them:

1. **Explicitly establish and articulate a deep commitment to serving students with disabilities and integrate this commitment into the mission, vision, and practices of the school (e.g., weighted lottery and multi-tiered systems of support);**
2. **Develop a robust internal teacher pipeline by intentionally recruiting, onboarding, supporting, and promoting educators through tiered talent-development systems. These educators can then not only faithfully implement the school's instructional techniques, but also build and sustain a culture that supports each individual student; and**
3. **Provide a robust combination of evidence-based instructional practices to personalize learning for each student, such as through whole class, small group, and one-on-one instruction, supported by well-developed learning platforms to monitor student progress.**

These techniques benefit all students, with particular dividends for students with disabilities.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the staff at Brooklyn Laboratory Charter Schools for their hard work and commitment to students with disabilities and for welcoming us into their classrooms. In particular, we offer our thanks to the staff members who carved out time from their busy days to participate in interviews: Eric Tucker, Co-Founder; Desiree Hunter, Courtney Granger; Michael Kelley, Director of Scholar Services; Dana Marra, Special Education Teacher; Christian Rubiano, Teacher; James Sayer, Dean of Instruction; and Laura Smith, English Teacher. We sincerely appreciate their contributions. Any errors or omissions are solely the author's responsibility.

Deborah Taub, Julie Kowal, and Lauren Morando Rhim contributed to the research, data analysis, writing, and editing of the case brief.

Research Methodology

This research brief highlights one charter school that is achieving remarkable success with students with disabilities. NCSECS began our nationwide search for such schools with nominations from experts in the field, and narrowed the list based on publicly available data that illuminate charter schools that use inclusive practices and have similar student demographics to the district in which they are located. Within this narrowed list of schools, our team then spoke by phone with school leaders using a semi-structured interview protocol, reviewed documents about the schools' policies and procedures, and made school visits to conduct additional interviews and observe educators and students in action. Our research protocol was based on research-based practices related to inclusion, effective teaching, equitable funding, school-wide systems of support, and administrative structures such as professional development, staffing, and communications.

NCSECS conducted at least one and typically two information-gathering sessions by phone prior to our school visit. School leaders, including charter network leaders, principals, and special education directors, shared information about each school's routines and structure, as well as areas they believed most contributed to the school's success with students with disabilities. These school teams shared school-wide and special-education specific data, as well as school handbooks, master schedules, and charter applications or renewals to help orient NCSECS to their school.

Each school visit included classroom observations and interviews with school and network administrators, teachers, family members, and staff (e.g., instructional aides). Our interviews ensured similar information was collected from each school, while enabling school teams to introduce strategies or characteristics unique to their school community.

Our findings from the data and document review, interviews, and school visits inform each research brief, highlighting the areas most important for the school's success with students with disabilities. We have shared drafts and integrated feedback from each school's administration and faculty to ensure a full and accurate picture of their school.

Resources

<https://www.innovateedunyc.org/cortex>
<http://www.brooklynlaboratoryschool.org/>
<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/psc/documents/WeightedLotteryGuidance.pdf>

Endnotes

- 1 All ethnicity data for Brooklyn Lab retrieved from <https://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2016&instid=80000082484>
- 2 All ethnicity data for the district was retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm>
- 3 <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm>
- 4 <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm>
- 5 <https://data.nysed.gov/reportcard.php?instid=80000082484&year=2016&createreport=1&freelunch=1>
- 6 <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm>
- 7 State data was calculated using the total number of students with disabilities suspended for 1 or more days (18,150 according to <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/static-tables/index.html>) and dividing by the total number of students with disabilities ages 3-21 in NY (450,048 according to <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/sedcar/goal2data.htm#2014>)
- 8 <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/Page?t=d&eid=31194&syk=7&pid=2269&sr=1&Report=6>
- 9 <https://data.nysed.gov/specialed/index.php?instid=7889678368&year=20132014#Indicator4A>
- 10 <https://data.nysed.gov/reportcard.php?instid=80000082484&year=2015&createreport=1&suspensions=1>
- 11 <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2016/state-education-department-releases-spring-2016-grades-3-8-ela-and-math-assessment-results>
- 12 <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/TestResults/ELAandMathTestResults>
- 13 <https://data.nysed.gov/assessment38.php?subject=ELA&year=2016&instid=80000082484>
- 14 <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2016/state-education-department-releases-spring-2016-grades-3-8-ela-and-math-assessment-results>
- 15 <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/TestResults/ELAandMathTestResults>
- 16 <https://data.nysed.gov/assessment38.php?subject=Mathematics&year=2016&instid=80000082484>
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- 18 <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-faq-201612-504-charter-school.pdf>
- 19 Ingersoll, Richard. (2003). Is There Really a Teacher Shortage?. *CPRE Research Reports*. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/cpre_researchreports/37
- 20 Billingsley, B.S., McLeskey, J. (2004). Critical Issues in Special Education Teacher Supply and Demand: An Overview. *The Journal of Special Education*. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ693727.pdf>
- 21 <https://www.innovateedunyc.org/cortex>

The **National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS)** is an independent, non-profit organization formed in 2013 to fill a void that has existed since the inception of the charter school movement in the United States, namely a coordinated effort to address the challenges associated with providing special education and related services in charter schools.

NCSECS is committed to ensuring that students with disabilities have equal access to charter schools and to fostering innovations that will benefit students with disabilities in both charter and traditional public schools by proactively working with states, authorizers, charter school and special education advocates, as well as other stakeholders.

NCSECS's Mission: To ensure that students with diverse learning needs are able to fully access and thrive in charter schools.

Vision: The charter school sector will fully embrace its responsibilities to meet the needs of all students and serve as a model of innovative and exemplary programs for students with disabilities.