

NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
**SPECIAL EDUCATION**



IN CHARTER SCHOOLS

# **Developing and Sustaining High Quality Special Education Infrastructures**

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## Background

Charter schools, found in 43 of the 50 states and in Washington D.C., have long promised choice for students—including students with disabilities—and their families. However, like their traditional public school counterparts, charter schools face challenges in educating these students, including resource allocation, staffing, and building professional expertise. Charter schools also face some unique obstacles due to their relative novelty in the market, their autonomy by design, and their increased accountability to their authorizers and to local and state agencies.

One way charter schools can overcome these challenges is through the creation of special education infrastructures that are geared towards and sensitive to the capacity issues that face these schools. A special education infrastructure is an entity that provides a centralized support system to a cohort of charter schools, accelerating collaboration and the sharing of resources. These resources include programming that is often focused on developing schools' fiscal, legal, human, programmatic, and administrative capacities. Special education infrastructures provide a deliberate and efficient means for charter schools to realize economies of scale, pilot new practices, access philanthropic support, and connect with providers in order to build stronger special education programs.

**Note on terminology:** We use the term *infrastructure* in this document as an umbrella term to capture the various types and compositions of these support organizations. Special education infrastructures may be within an LEA or take the form of an intermediate administrative unit, a special education cooperative, a community-based non-profit, a comprehensive education service provider, or other external entity.

Our objective in developing this brief is to provide a sequence of recommendations to those who seek to create a new special education infrastructure, to established infrastructures that strive to expand or reorganize, and to those who provide philanthropic support to infrastructures that want to better understand the challenges and opportunities in sustaining a quality infrastructure. The brief draws from the collective experience of the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (the Center) and our partners in the Network of Infrastructures and Collaborative Entities (NICE), a group of peer organizations that collaborate to share best practices and accelerate their knowledge development in order to support charter schools educating students with disabilities. Over time, we have identified five key actions central to establishing and sustaining an effective infrastructure.

## 1. Understand the Policy Landscape

Charter school laws and special education regulations differ from state to state. Therefore, it is essential to develop an in-depth understanding of the policy landscape in the target region. Infrastructures provide supports and resources that address the needs of their schools, and those needs can be heavily dictated by the local context.

Infrastructures have much to gain from conducting a thorough state or local landscape analysis. This analysis should evaluate the role of charter school authorizers and how charter schools receive federal, state and local funds, while also detailing which entities already provide services around special education to schools. This likely includes the state education agency (SEA) and local education agencies (LEAs)—depending on the state—with which strong working relationships are beneficial. Some states and regions also have established charter support organizations (CSOs) that may currently provide assistance around special education. In addition, ensure your landscape analysis incorporates the larger political climate, including any “power players” in the education, charter school, and/or special education space and any laws or statutes being considered at the federal, state, and local level that may affect the provision of special education to students in charter schools. Be sure to consider the potential impacts of impending elections as well. All of these factors could affect the landscape and thus drive the services provided by the infrastructure.

## 2. Establish and Nurture Stakeholder Buy-In

To ensure organizational sustainability and ongoing investment from schools, infrastructure leaders must prioritize stakeholder buy-in.

### *Inform and Engage Decision-Makers*

Key stakeholders (e.g., school leaders and executive directors) should be involved in the early planning phases of an infrastructure in order to contribute to a needs assessment, solicit feedback on programming and services, and to build long-term investment. Leaders need to believe that there is exceptional value in securing special education support services from a centralized infrastructure as opposed to seeking the support from an assortment of outside vendors. This will become especially important if the financial model of the infrastructure (discussed below) is dependent on schools paying for services via a membership or fee-for-service model. As key decision-makers, school leaders will be more likely to continuously invest in the infrastructure if the needs of their schools are reflected in the services and supports offered.

## *Involve School Leaders*

Special education infrastructures often work directly with special education leads who may not have the broader decision-making authority required to implement practices schoolwide or with greater fidelity. When planning services and supports, establish strategies for collaborating with and leveraging the capacities of school leaders to ensure greater programmatic impact. This collaboration will also provide opportunities to demonstrate how a school's needs are integrated into the services and supports offered by the infrastructure.

### **3. Develop a Clear Vision**

Strong special education infrastructures can address the immediate needs of schools while also developing supports and services that guide them to broader improved outcomes for students with disabilities. Establishing the long-term goals of the infrastructure helps put that work in motion.

To ensure organizational viability, infrastructures should develop a strong strategic vision in order to outline priorities and guide decision-making. A set of organizational goals that aligns with the mission of the infrastructure will provide direction for the types of services and supports offered and ensure that the use of resources is focused. A clearly articulated vision also allows partners and key stakeholders to more deeply connect to the work, driving continued involvement and financial investment in the infrastructure.

This vision setting also guides operational and staffing structures. Strong special education infrastructures understand that broad and deep special education expertise is a requirement, but also prioritize nonprofit management skills. Building a team that can execute the programming and operate the organization is essential, and is the bigger challenge given the generally staffing and resource constraints of most infrastructures.

### **4. Establish an Explicit and Sustainable Service and Funding Model**

Armed with a strategic organizational vision and a thorough understanding of the local charter school and special education landscape and the diverse needs of the schools, an infrastructure should explore (independently or with a team) different potential models for implementation.

#### *Develop an Explicit Menu of Services*

Some infrastructures provide multiple, intensive levels of support, including professional development, comprehensive technical assistance, human resources support, family support, and advocacy. Others

act as conveners and provide lower-touch services or light technical assistance. An infrastructure's place on that continuum is influenced by many factors, including but not limited to their size, financial resources, and the needs and buy-in of the charter schools in their community. A high-quality infrastructure has the ability to design services that meet schools where they are and simultaneously push them to the next level, ultimately improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

### ***Determine the Funding Model***

A wide array of financial models exists to fit the diverse range of services and supports provided by infrastructures, running along a continuum from total philanthropic support to full member-school support (see Table 1 below for a summary of common models). Understanding the pros and cons of different models is helpful in making a decision about which approach to employ.

A well-run cooperative (co-op) model, in which member schools participate and govern as equals, may provide the best balance of autonomy and access to resources. A co-op can facilitate the pooling of resources, vet consultants, share successful models, and offer a cohesive support system specifically designed for charter schools. By paying a modest fee, charter school members enjoy the collective benefit of some district-like services and share centralized support staff. Creating and sustaining such cooperatives has, however, remained challenging, due in part to charter school resource limitations and the variability of needs from year to year.

Other models exist, such as existing as a subdivision of a larger organization (either a public entity or nonprofit), and functioning as an independent nonprofit. These models are typically funded through grants and fee-for-service work, and each has its own set of challenges and opportunities. As a subdivision of a larger organization, infrastructures may have greater access to resources and the ability to leverage an existing reputation. However, competing priorities across divisions can hinder the ability to make decisions. Conversely, an independent nonprofit model has more autonomy and can execute a laser-focused vision, but may not have pre-existing resources to lean on.

**Table 1: Financial Models Summary**

Strategy	Revenue	Governance	Pros	Cons
<b>Cooperative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Membership dues</li> </ul>	Board comprised of representatives of member schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financially self-sustaining</li> <li>• Requirement to participate ensures funding stream</li> <li>• Economies of scale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to sustain in small market</li> <li>• Voluntary participation— opt out by even a few schools can undermine viability</li> </ul>
<b>Division of public entity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grants</li> <li>• Fee-for-service</li> </ul>	Existing elected or appointed board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requirement to participate ensures funding stream</li> <li>• Access to public funds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competing priorities</li> <li>• Bureaucracy</li> <li>• Lack of interest</li> </ul>
<b>Division of larger 501(c)(3)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grants</li> <li>• Fee-for-service</li> </ul>	Independent board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Established organization</li> <li>• Potential for financial safety net</li> <li>• Economies of scale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple and potentially competing priorities</li> </ul>
<b>Independent 501(c)(3)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grants</li> <li>• Fee-for-service</li> </ul>	Independent board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomous</li> <li>• Entrepreneurial</li> <li>• Single, laser-sharp focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Market-driven accountability</li> <li>• Dependent on partial private/public support to be financially viable</li> </ul>

## 5. Demonstrate Value and Return on Investment

Regardless of the model, a key component of successful infrastructures is a strong, effective, and transparent accountability system—as well as mechanisms for communicating results.

Structures must be in place to ensure that schools are provided the services they are entitled to receive and that those services propel the strategic vision of the infrastructure. Infrastructures should establish specific metrics to determine the effectiveness and impact of the support and services delivered and to demonstrate value to schools and funders. Metrics may focus on various types of student outcome data, but should also include organizational feedback from schools and other stakeholders. Frequent internal evaluations will help the infrastructure to maintain a focused direction and alignment to the strategic vision and allow space to make refinements or pivots as needed. A more

formal annual report will build transparency with stakeholders and serve as an externally facing communication of impact and results. The ability to demonstrate the impact of the infrastructure will ensure viability and procurement of new funding streams.

## Putting It All Together

Special education infrastructures can play a valuable role in building the capacity of charter schools to ensure high quality programming and education for students with disabilities. Currently, only a small number of special education infrastructures provide the specific programming, resources, and support that charter schools need to continue improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Our work within and alongside special education infrastructures has surfaced the complexities related to developing and sustaining a high quality infrastructure, but has also solidified our belief in the immense opportunity that exists in creating more infrastructures to support the growing and evolving charter sector.

## Key Takeaways

### *Conditions for a Strong Infrastructure*

- Charter leaders who are committed to improving outcomes for students with disabilities and willing to make investments in building schoolwide capacity
- A strong infrastructure leader with broad and deep special education and charter school expertise and nonprofit management competencies
- Adequate funding that will enable individual schools to invest in capacity building—can be through membership fees or local philanthropic entities committed to building charter school capacity
- A critical mass of charter schools to enable economies of scale
- Services and programming that address the current and future needs of a diverse sector of charter schools
- Early and frequent opportunities for special education and charter school stakeholders to contribute input to the services offered by the organization
- Advocacy in the policymaking space at the local or state level for changes that improve access to quality services for students with disabilities in charter schools
- Strong collaboration between charter schools, especially in sectors where a wide continuum of charter school maturity exists

## ***Pitfalls to Avoid***

- ❑ Failing to engage charter school leaders as champions who remain involved in the work between school staff and infrastructure supports
- ❑ Shortchanging planning and start-up costs—know your market and have a well thought-out business plan
- ❑ Undervaluing internal staff time and services (i.e., not charging schools for services)
- ❑ Developing a homogenous team without expertise in key areas of need for charter schools or for organizational success and growth
- ❑ Operating without a strategic plan to guide both short-term and long-term decisions

## **Resources**

- [Building Capacity to Provide Quality Special Education Services and Supports: A Toolkit of Emerging Best Practices and Opportunities for Charter Support Organizations](#) — This document gives an overview of the need for active CSOs in supporting special education in charter schools and gives a toolkit of resources.
- [Equity Coalition Issue Brief: Special Education Infrastructures](#) — This paper provides a brief overview of the Equity Coalition’s work on Special Education infrastructure issues.
- [Equity at Scale: How Public Charter School Networks Can Innovate and Improve Services for Students with Disabilities](#) — This report outlines the ways in which charter school networks can impact the special education offerings and gives some tools to strengthen that effect.
- [Improving Access and Creating Exceptional Opportunities for Students with Disabilities in Public Charter Schools](#) — This report outlines the obstacles charter schools experience as they work to ensure all students have equal opportunities to learn.