



Expanding the Continuum of Placements for Students with Disabilities through the Impact Program

Uncommon Camden Prep High School Spotlight

<p>THE CHALLENGE</p>	<p>Local education agencies (LEAs) must provide a full continuum of placements for students with disabilities to meet their individualized needs. However, across the nation, smaller LEAs often struggle to do so because of their size.</p>
<p>THE COST</p>	<p>When LEAs do not provide a full continuum of placements for the students with disabilities they enroll, they fail to comply with federal law. Without services that are a fit for their needs, students with disabilities may be referred to placements outside of the school that are too restrictive. Alternatively, students could be in placements with insufficient support or services to make meaningful progress towards their individualized education program (IEP) and college and career goals.</p>
<p>KEY TAKEAWAYS</p>	<p>This spotlight illustrates a case example of a renaissance school in Camden, New Jersey that has been committed to developing a robust continuum of placements for students with disabilities. Camden Prep High School’s experience launching its Impact Program offers an example of what an expanded continuum of placements can look like and provides lessons learned for other schools to consider.</p>

Purpose

This spotlight illustrates Uncommon Camden Prep High School’s (CPHS) experience developing a robust continuum of placements for students with disabilities. For students with disabilities, “placement” refers to the services and supports they receive as well as the setting in which those services and supports are provided. All students have the right to a free and appropriate public education in their least restrictive environment (LRE) (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004). Each student’s LRE should be determined on an individual basis, based on the services and supports they require to be successful and the setting(s) in which those services and supports can feasibly be provided (Vanderbilt University, n.d.). For most students with disabilities, LRE can be provided in the general education setting. However, some students require more intensive or specialized services than what can be provided in general education settings. LEAs are responsible for providing a full continuum of placements (see Figure 1) so that all students with disabilities receive the services and individualized instruction at the right level of intensity to meet their needs. Historically, smaller LEAs across the country have struggled to provide a robust continuum of placements for students with disabilities (Center for Learner Equity, 2022). Larger LEAs tend to benefit from more financial resources and more personnel with expertise in special education (Garda & O’Neill, 2019). As a result, larger LEAs often have a wider range of resources available and expertise for educating students with disabilities.



This illustration of CPHS's Impact Program provides an example of what a more robust continuum of placements can look like for schools in smaller LEAs and the successes and challenges schools may face as their programs evolve. CPHS's experience launching its Impact Program offers valuable lessons for other schools striving to expand their continuum of placements for students with disabilities.

Figure 1

Example of Continuum of Placements¹



80% OR MORE TIME IN THE GENERAL CLASS		40-79% OF TIME IN THE GENERAL CLASS	LESS THAN 40% OF TIME IN THE GENERAL CLASS
The general education teacher provides service as well as accommodations and modifications as needed.	<p>The general education teacher provides some services, including accommodations and modifications.</p> <p>The special education teacher provides individualized and small group instruction.</p>	<p>The general education teacher provides some services, including accommodations and modifications.</p> <p>The special education teacher provides individualized and small group instruction plus specialized reading instruction each day in a separate classroom (i.e., a resource room).</p>	<p>The special education teacher provides specialized instruction for most classes in a separate classroom, collaborating with general educators to align instruction to the general education curriculum.</p> <p>The general education teacher provides instruction in non-academic classes (e.g., electives), including accommodations and modifications.</p>

Note. This figure is adapted from Vanderbilt University, n.d.

¹ This figure does not represent the full continuum of placements. Students with disabilities who require more restrictive placements than what can be provided in a special education classroom might require placements in a special school, homebound instruction, or a hospital or residential facility.



Research Methods

The Center for Learner Equity (CLE) worked with the Camden Education Fund (CEF) to identify schools in Camden, New Jersey, that were experiencing success in their strategies for educating students with disabilities. CLE selected Uncommon Schools CPHS to spotlight after learning about the school’s efforts to build a more robust continuum of placements for students with disabilities through their Impact Program. CLE interviewed two leaders who played central roles in initiating the Impact Program and supporting its implementation: special education coordinator and instructional leader, Kaitlin Babbitt, and regional senior director, Giana Campbell. Ms. Babbitt and Ms. Campbell shared documents describing the program including its schedule, curriculum materials, assessments, progress-monitoring data, and the qualifying criteria. CLE also interviewed two parents of students currently enrolled in CPHS’s Impact Program. CLE used the interviews, program documents, and ongoing communication with Ms. Babbitt and Ms. Campbell to create a detailed description of CPHS’s Impact Program, its early successes, and the broader factors that have enabled its implementation. Ms. Babbitt and Ms. Campbell coauthored this case study, integrating important details and making edits to ensure that the spotlight accurately portrays the program.

Uncommon Camden Prep High School

CPHS is a public renaissance² high school in Camden, New Jersey, that opened in 2020 to welcome its 9th-grade class. CPHS is affiliated with the Uncommon Schools charter network, which operates over 50 schools serving 20,000 students across Boston, Camden, New York City, Newark, and Rochester. Within the city of Camden, Uncommon Schools Camden Prep operates 5 schools serving students in grades K-10 and is open to all Camden city residents. In the 2022-23 school year, CPHS will serve grades 9-11 and will grow to serve grades 9-12 by 2023-24. The school’s mission is to provide an outstanding education that closes the achievement gap and prepares students from low-income communities to graduate from college and achieve their dreams. CPHS aims to achieve this mission through data-driven instruction, longer school days and years, and a variety of extracurricular activities, such as student leadership opportunities, after-school enrichment clubs, college counseling, and field trips. In 2020, CPHS started implementing its Impact Program based on the IEPs of students with disabilities who were enrolling.

² In Camden, renaissance schools are autonomous schools that serve neighborhood catchment areas. They are authorized by the Department of Education and partner with the local school district.



Table 1

UNCOMMON CAMDEN PREP HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENT OVERVIEW, 2021-22	
Grade levels served	9 - 10
Total enrollment	109
Percentage of students with disabilities	35.7%
Percentage of English learners	1%
Percentage of Black, Latinx, or multi-racial students	99%
Percentage of students qualifying for Free or Reduced Price Lunch	97%

Note. Data were provided by Uncommon CPHS.

Findings

How does CPHS plan its continuum of placements?

Reviewing each child’s IEP, evaluations, and transcripts helped CPHS to plan for the services and placements that students with disabilities would require. Before the school launched in 2020, it was clear to Ms. Babbit that some students with disabilities who were newly enrolled and who were transitioning from Camden Prep's middle school would require more intensive and specialized services than what could be provided in the general education classroom. Some students’ IEPs required resource room placement



for some or all subjects, reduced class size, highly modified curriculum and assessments, multimodal opportunities for learning, and/or individualized support environments. CPHS leaders began planning for how special education services would be provided in a continuum of placements, including within the general education setting and in a special education-only setting for students who qualified.

What is the Impact Program?

CPHS started its Impact Program to meet the needs of students with disabilities who require more intensive and targeted services than what can be offered in the general education setting. Students in the Impact Program receive small group instruction for their core classes led by a special education teacher with specific content area expertise. In these classes, students receive a curriculum that is aligned to the general education curriculum and uniquely modified to their individual needs. Students in the Impact Program also participate in advisory, electives, physical education, and college and career preparation support alongside their non-disabled peers. These opportunities to learn alongside their non-disabled peers are critical in helping students develop social skills, build relationships, and prepare for future life experiences. The Impact Program offers the following key components:

ACADEMIC	SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL	COLLEGE AND CAREER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Small group classes (4-10 students) in math, English language arts (ELA), social studies, and science ▪ Additional blocks of math and ELA each week to accelerate learning ▪ Reading intervention class to build reading independence and stamina 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explicit instruction in social skills and life skills (e.g., overcoming stereotypes, managing stress, identifying your learning style) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ New Jersey state-issued high school diploma ▪ Partnership between Impact Program teachers and director of college access and success to provide clear college and career pathways ▪ Summer apprenticeships and job opportunities that are aligned with student interests and goals



Decisions about who qualifies for the Impact Program are made by the IEP team and are based on multiple factors. Program leaders regularly communicate with families, update them on their child's progress, and clearly articulate what the Impact Program offers so that families can decide what will be best for their child. Camden Prep's elementary and middle schools also offer Impact Programs, offering students who require more intensive placements continuity throughout their schooling with Camden Prep. IEP teams at CPHS use specific criteria to evaluate whether or not a student's individual needs warrant a more restrictive placement in the Impact Program, considering the following factors:

- Standardized test scores
- Cognitive assessments
- Progress on IEP goals
- Disability category
- Progress in the general education classroom with the maximum potential support

Additionally, IEP teams consider exit criteria for determining when a student's more restrictive placement in the Impact Program may no longer be needed. These criteria include homework scores, grades in core classes, and interim assessment scores. Although disability category is considered, it is not the sole factor when determining eligibility for the Impact Program. The program includes students with various disability categories including autism, communication-impaired, emotional disturbance, intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, and specific learning disabilities. Enrollment of students with disabilities and of those that qualify for the Impact Program has been growing each year as CPHS expands (see Table 2 for details).

Table 2
CPHS Impact Program Enrollment, 2022 - 23

SCHOOL YEAR	GRADE LEVEL	ALL STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES		STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN IMPACT PROGRAM	
		NUMBER	% OF ENROLLMENT TOTAL	NUMBER	% OF ENROLLMENT TOTAL
2020 - 2021	9	15	23%	6	9%
2021 - 2022	9, 10	39	35.7%	12	11%
2022 - 2023 ³	9, 10, 11	TBD	TBD	20	TBD

Note. Data were provided by Uncommon CPHS. Enrollment data for 2022-2023 are based on anticipated enrollment as of June 2022.



CPHS continues to adapt and improve the Impact Program each year, based on the emergent needs of students. For instance, program leaders added additional reading blocks to the Impact Program schedule to accelerate student learning due to lost opportunities from the COVID-19 pandemic. They have also added more explicit social skills training, using the Overcoming Obstacles curriculum, to combat isolation from the pandemic and prepare students for college and careers.

I can tell you that with our doubling down on reading, we have students who have grown two, or three grade levels in reading this year alone and that some of these students are up against significant challenges to even get to school.—Kaitlin Babbitt, CPHS special education coordinator and instructional leader

What are the early successes of Impact Program?

- **Students are making steady academic progress.** According to progress-monitoring data, measured with the NWEA MAP assessment (Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress) and teacher-created interim assessments, students in the Impact Program are making between **1 and 3 years of annual growth in reading** and over 80% of students have mastered key math concepts including foundational operations facts, converting fractions, and calculating sales taxes and down payments as future consumers.
- **Parents are happy with the services their children receive.** Both parents interviewed were confident that the Impact Program was providing their children the right level of support they needed to succeed. According to Ms. Babbitt, many parents of students in the Impact Program had difficulty in previous schools with getting the right services and support their children need to be successful. Parents shared that previous schools had changed their child’s IEPs to place them in general education settings, and claimed that this change was necessary due to staff shortages. One parent we spoke with echoed this story and believed that the small group setting of the Impact Program was a better fit for their child. In the past year, three new students transferred to CPHS based on word of mouth about the Impact Program. Parents also appreciated the school’s strong support for connecting their child to a summer apprenticeship at a local recording studio because music is their child’s passion. Both parents were impressed with the regular updates and communication they received from teachers.

I’ve never seen so many teachers involved with their students like I do with Camden Prep. I have all the teachers’ numbers. I can text them at any time, counselor, whatever, and they’re quick to get back to me. . . . I was worried because I don’t want my son to be another statistic. I don’t want my son to feel that he can’t do anything, but I want him to feel that if you put your mind to it, you can succeed in anything you want. . . .Being in the [Impact] Program helped him to get things done and have everything [go] smoothly. – Parent



[My child] really likes his school. I even asked him when I had to re-register them. I asked him personally, 'Do you want to go back to this school?' He was like, 'Yes! I don't want to go to another school, I want to stay in that school.' – Parent

What lessons can other schools learn from CPHS's experience?

- **Make enrollment and admissions processes accessible to all students, especially students with disabilities.** When enrollment and admissions processes are made more accessible to all students, schools may enroll more students with disabilities and may need to expand their continuum of placements accordingly. Ms. Campbell, the regional senior director, explained the connection CPHS witnessed between the school's recruitment and enrollment processes and the school's increasing number of students with disabilities—including those who require more intensive support. CPHS is a member of One Camden, a universal enrollment system giving parents access to a one-stop-shop to apply to a school for their child. During the application process, families are not asked to share whether their child has an IEP or a 504 Plan. With the move to the universal enrollment system, CPHS saw an increase in students with disabilities, which meant that the school was encountering more students who required moderate to significant support. This was a driving factor behind the launch of CPHS's Impact Program.

One of the things that I think has really contributed to this increase [in students with disabilities] is our commitment to serving all students. We participate in a unified enrollment system in Camden, much like Newark and some other cities across the country. . . . Of course, once students come to us and we start conversations with the family to understand what the student's needs are, including whether they have an IEP, we want to make sure that they feel good about the services that we offer. But to make sure that our schools are accessible to any and all students that want to come to Camden Prep, that is something that is really important to us and that we want to make sure is apparent throughout the application and enrollment process. – Giana Campbell, CPHS regional senior director

- **Learn from other schools and veteran teachers who have experience with offering a greater continuum of placements.** Learning from Uncommon schools in Newark about their Impact Program helped CPHS to build a strong program to meet the needs of their Camden students. Newark's Impact Program had been operating for 9 years by the time CPHS launched its program. Ms. Babbitt and Ms. Campbell had prior experience working at the Newark school, which helped them to apply elements of its robust continuum of placements to CPHS and to consider which elements should be tailored to the



needs of Camden's students.

For instance, students in Camden's program require more intensive support so its Impact Program was designed so that students could take all core classes in a small group setting. Students in Newark's Impact Program may take only one class in the small group setting. CPHS also recruited several veteran teachers from Newark's Impact Program to work in its own program. CPHS leaders credit their learning and guidance from the Newark program with helping them to smoothly launch their Impact Program.

- **Offer ongoing, embedded professional development (PD) to help all teachers effectively educate students with disabilities.** At CPHS, leaders are intentional about making sure that all teachers receive PD to help them effectively teach all students with disabilities, including those in the Impact Program. At the beginning of each school year, all staff members including those teaching in general education and special education settings, receive training on the school's approach to educating students with disabilities. PD for all teachers that includes real-time feedback and coaching around data-driven instruction is a core part of the Uncommon Schools model and also a means through which CPHS leaders ensure the quality of instruction in the Impact Program. Opportunities for PD are embedded in the weekly schedule for all teachers, including Impact Program teachers at CPHS. Every Friday, teachers receive a half-day devoted to PD. Additionally, instructional leaders conduct weekly observations for all teachers and provide real-time feedback on their instruction. Like all teacher teams, the Impact Program teachers have weekly data meetings to hone their capacity for data-driven instruction. Ms. Babbitt provides this ongoing PD and coaching to Impact Program teachers, lending her special education expertise.

We've looked at key assessments, such as exit tickets, tests, quizzes, and interim assessments, and have really broken it down to what do students need to know in order to master this, and what do they need to show? And with that, how many students have reached mastery? How do we get more students to reach mastery and create really explicit reteach plans to get them there? – Kaitlin Babbitt, CPHS special education coordinator and instructional leader



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Expanding the continuum of placements for students with disabilities can enable charter schools to successfully enroll and educate students with disabilities who require moderate to significant support.
- Learning from other schools and veteran teachers who already offer a more robust continuum of placements may help schools overcome early implementation challenges.
- Offering ongoing, embedded opportunities for teacher PD, including real-time feedback on practice and coaching on data-driven instruction, can give teachers of students with disabilities opportunities to enhance their instructional quality.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- Does your school's enrollment of students with disabilities reflect the natural percentage of students with disabilities in the district? Are your school's application and admissions processes fully accessible to all students, including students with disabilities?
- Has your LEA intentionally developed a continuum of placements for students with disabilities? In what areas could the continuum of placements be improved?
- Is your school connected to other schools that offer a robust continuum of placements? How can your school learn from these schools and their program models?
- What are the priorities and needs of the families of students with disabilities enrolled in your school?



About the Center for Learner Equity

The Center for Learner Equity is working to ensure that public schools – both within the charter school sector and beyond it – are designed for inclusivity and equity from the start. When we improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities, all students benefit.

MISSION

We are committed to ensuring that students with disabilities, particularly those in under-resourced communities, have the quality educational opportunities and choices they need to thrive and learn. We accomplish this through research, advocacy, coalition formation, and capacity building with national, state, and local partners.

VISION

Students with disabilities will have the same opportunities for success as their peers.



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About the Camden Education Fund

The Camden Education Fund (CEF) is a non-profit organization dedicated to accelerating progress in Camden’s public school system. CEF works with families, school partners, and community leaders to identify citywide needs in education. CEF then provides grants and develops strategic partnerships to address these citywide needs. Grantees may include schools, non-profits, and universities.

MISSION

To sustain and accelerate progress in Camden’s public school system.



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