



Charter School and Special Education Leaders – A Unified Voice for Children The NCSECS Equity Coalition

Statement on Equity to the Trump Administration and 115th Congress

The National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS) is a national non-profit organization focused exclusively on ensuring that students with disabilities can access and thrive in public charter schools. One of the primary mechanisms for achieving that goal is the NCSECS Equity Coalition (Equity Coalition). The Equity Coalition was formed in 2014 to foster a collaborative community of diverse representatives from the charter school and special education communities to identify common ground and take collective action. Since that time and through NCSECS's leadership, charter school and special education leaders and advocates have come together as a dynamic coalition to protect student civil rights and provide thought leadership regarding key policy issues involved with special education in the charter sector.

With one unified voice, the Equity Coalition agrees that the academic success of *all* children should be our priority and calls upon the Trump Administration (the Administration), Secretary DeVos and the 115th Congress to support and uphold the following principles in support of the nearly 300,000 students with disabilities attending public charter schools as well as those interested in attending a charter school:

I. Access - Students with disabilities must be assured of equal access to charter schools and this must be reflected in application and enrollment policies that align with federal civil rights statutes and regulations.

As the movement for choice and charter schools grows, the fundamental principle that public schools are required to serve all students must be maintained. Federal laws including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibit charter schools from discriminating against students with disabilities. The federal government plays a vital role in enforcement of these statutes and must ensure that state education agencies and the entities they oversee are admitting students free from discrimination in order to allow the charter sector to grow in a meaningful and equitable manner critical to ongoing and healthy expansion of school choice.

II. Quality Through Accountability - The Administration must ensure that the charter sector continues to prioritize development and replication of quality schools driven by robust accountability standards.

There is a significant achievement gap between students with disabilities and their peers in public schools nationwide. This achievement gap leads to higher drop-out rates and fewer opportunities for post-secondary education and employment. Effective charter schools can provide important and equitable opportunities to parents of students with disabilities seeking educational options in mission-driven schools that align with their students' interests. However, choice absent accountability for equal access runs the significant risk of actually limiting parents' choices and segregating students with disabilities. This would undermine their right to a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment appropriate for their needs. We ask the Administration and 115th Congress to simultaneously support public school choice *and* accountability that can empower parents while protecting student's rights.

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III. **Civil Rights** - The Administration must continue to support the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights in order to leverage its authority to ensure that students' civil rights are protected in every education setting, including public charter schools.

The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) plays a critical role in ensuring that students with disabilities have equal access and educational opportunity in all public schools, including charter schools. OCR must continue to fulfill its mission to:

- **Provide technical assistance** to prevent and address discrimination;
- **Collect and disseminate data** to introduce transparency and accountability to public school practice; and,
- **Uphold student civil rights** through enforcement of Federal civil rights laws.

Data from the Civil Rights Data Collection have been critical to tracking both problems and progress in areas such as enrollment, placement, and discipline. Likewise, OCR has released guidance to clarify schools' legal obligations, resolved complaints on behalf of students whose rights may have been violated, negotiated remedies with state and local education agencies, and, when necessary, recommended lawsuits against schools that failed to uphold the civil rights of students. The Equity Coalition calls upon the Administration and 115th Congress to commit to continuing these vital functions to ensure students' civil rights are upheld, including students who enroll in charter schools.

Students with disabilities have been disproportionately and adversely impacted by discriminatory practices for generations. In line with President Trump's commitment to assist every American in reaching their potential and to remember the forgotten citizen, the Equity Coalition is committed to ensuring that students with disabilities have ready access to choice and quality programs in charter schools. The rights of these students must be understood, promoted and enforced. We look forward to working with the Administration and 115th Congress to see that these priorities are implemented.

The Equity Coalition includes representatives from a diverse range of organizations with an interest in students with unique learning needs, special education, charter schools and education reform.

Current Members Include:

The Advocacy Institute
Advocates for Justice and Education
CAST, Inc.
Children's Law Center, Washington, DC
Civil Rights Solutions
Council for Exceptional Children
Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates
DC Public Charter School Board

Green Dot Public Schools
Kent, Michigan Intermediate School District
National Association of State Directors of Special Education
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
National Association of Charter School Authorizers
National Coalition of Diverse Charter Schools
National Center for Learning Disabilities
NYC Special Education Collaborative

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NCSECS Mission and Goals

To increase our collective understanding of challenges, identify viable solutions, and ensure effective charter school practices that justify the trust of parents and students with disabilities, the charter sector needs a credible entity that will be a reliable resource for key stakeholders; both in the charter sector and the special education advocacy community.

The National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools was created to fill the current void and proactively seek to foster innovations that will benefit both charter and traditional public schools. The goal of NCSECS is to advocate for students with diverse learning needs to ensure that, if they are interested in attending charter schools, they are able to access and thrive in schools designed to enable all students to succeed.

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