

A Charter Boost for Special-Ed Students and English Learners

MAXIMIZING THE POTENTIAL of all students is the stated goal of many schools. When some students have specialized needs, however, the best way forward isn't always clear.

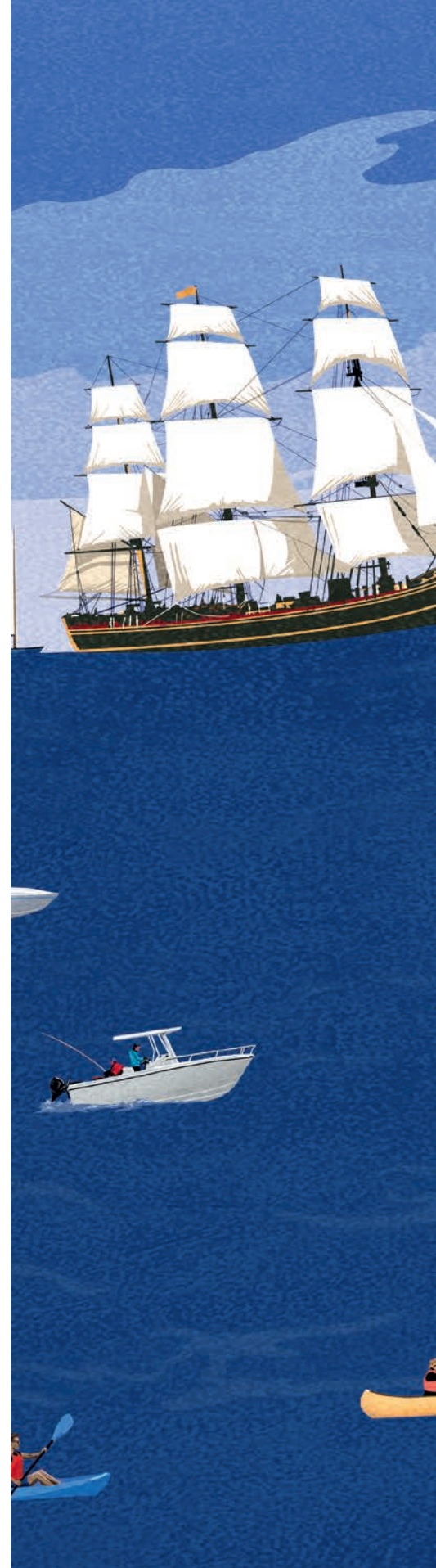
Consider students whose unique learning needs entitle them to special-education services or those who are English language learners. Schools invest significant time, resources, and attention in serving these populations, and federal and state governments pay for targeted services for these groups. This funding design assumes that additional education spending for special-education students and English learners should be focused on specific supports for only those students, such as specially trained teachers, curriculum, and counselors, instead of balanced between specialized supports and more general investments in overall school quality. Is that the most effective approach?

Nationwide, special-education students and English learners account for a significant share of total enrollment: federal data from 2016 show 14 percent of all students receive special-education services, and nearly 10 percent are English learners. Those shares are even larger in most U.S. cities, which tend to include large numbers of new immigrants and other students with specialized needs. Those students experience major gaps in achievement compared to their typical peers; on the most recent reading test of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, just 12 percent of special-education students and 9 percent of English learners scored proficient, compared to 38 percent of students without those classifications.

LESSONS IN
INCLUSION
AT BOSTON
CHARTER
SCHOOLS

by ELIZABETH SETREN

ILLUSTRATION / MICHAEL GLENWOOD





Students with specialized needs exist in significant numbers and generally show low levels of academic achievement. Little causal evidence exists for how to improve the educational trajectories of these students.

To understand the tradeoffs between investments in targeted supports versus investments in overall school quality, I look at public schools in Boston, where about 50 percent of students are classified as either special education or English learners and 17 percent of students attend charter schools.

Boston charter schools spend 44 percent less on special-education services per student than traditional public schools do but implement education practices that positively affect all students, such as data-driven instruction, high academic expectations, increased instructional time, and intensive tutoring. The city's mix of school types presents a unique opportunity to look at how reduced access to targeted services and exposure to high-quality general-education practices affect the achievement of students with specialized needs, because students who apply to charter schools are admitted by lotteries and therefore randomly assigned to one of the two models.

I find that charter enrollment at least doubles the likelihood that a student designated as special education or an English learner at the time of the admissions lottery loses this classification and, subsequently, access to specialized services. Yet charter enrollment also generates large achievement gains for students classified at the time of the lottery—similar to the gains made by their general-education charter classmates.

Classified students who enroll in charters are far more likely to meet a key high-school graduation requirement, become eligible for a state merit scholarship, and take an AP exam, for example. Students classified as special education at the time of the lottery are more than twice as likely to score 1200 or higher on the SAT than their counterparts at traditional public schools. English learners who enroll in charters are twice as likely to enroll in a four-year college.

I investigate what explains these academic gains and find suggestive evidence that removing classifications has a small positive effect on student test performance. The academic gains appear to be driven not by the classification change but instead by the general-education practices implemented at charter schools.

To be sure, targeted services for students with specialized needs can make a major difference in helping overcome specific barriers to learning. But my findings highlight the importance of the overall school environment as well. Combined,

the findings show that it is feasible for many students with specialized needs to make large academic gains in a high-quality general-education program without access to specialized services. Districts and schools deciding how to invest their resources may find that an increased focus on overall school quality can improve outcomes for all.

Background



The special-education classification process begins when a parent, teacher, or school staff member requests that a student be evaluated by learning specialists or other experts to set individualized learning goals and determine

which supports are needed to achieve them. If the student is entitled to specialized services, school staff must develop an Individualized Education Program that details the supports the student will receive. Special-education students with a wide variety of needs are given a broad array of services in general and specialized settings. These services may include preferential seating and extra time on tests in regular-education classrooms and participation in separate classrooms for students with disabilities. Schools are required to re-evaluate students' classification and level of services every three years.

Boston's mix of school types presents a unique opportunity to look at how reduced access to targeted services and exposure to high-quality general-education practices affects the achievement of students with specialized needs.

Classification for English learners is different; while federal law provides a common definition, it's up to states to determine how to identify eligible students. In Massachusetts, public schools survey parents of new students to identify those whose primary language at home is not English. Once identified, these students take an English proficiency exam, and based on the results, a licensed teacher or administrator awards the classification and determines what services the student will receive. English learners are re-assessed each year, with the goal of achieving fluency and no longer qualifying for extra support. By contrast, the goal of special-education plans is not obsolescence but for the student to reach individualized benchmarks in academic and life skills.

The financial and accountability incentives for these classifications work in opposite directions and affect charters more than they do traditional public schools. The school funding formula in Massachusetts does not include special-education enrollment in an effort to discourage over-classification. For the same reason, federal special-education grants do not consider the number of classified students. For English learners, the state distributes federal funding to pay for specialized services, but it is not always sufficient. A Massachusetts state court in 2015 found the state formula did not provide enough funding to meet the costs of

educating English learners and recommended an additional \$2,361 for each student, for example. Smaller school districts and charter schools face larger disincentives for classifying students; without the benefit of economies of scale, it is more challenging for small schools to provide specialized services.

Accountability measures encourage schools to classify students properly regardless of the financial implications. Massachusetts inspects how schools identify and serve special-education students and English learners, and its accountability system considers the outcomes of these groups in addition to overall student performance. In addition, charter schools must undergo a rigorous review process by the state every three to five years in order to retain their charter, so these incentives may affect them more acutely than they do traditional public schools.

There are other relevant differences between district and charter schools in Boston. District schools have more experienced, more licensed, and higher-paid teachers and spend about \$1,700 more per pupil relative to local charter schools. However, educational practices are markedly different in the charter sector. More than half of Boston charters have a longer school year and more than 95 percent have a longer school day compared to traditional district schools. Tutoring programs exist in all Boston charters, and about one third require tutoring for all students. Boston charters also commonly use practices that include setting high academic and behavior expectations, selective teacher hiring, frequent testing and teacher feedback, and data-driven instruction. Prior research has shown that this mix of practices has a strong positive relationship with charter effectiveness and yields positive effects when implemented in traditional public schools or schools converted to a charter model. However, little is known about the effect of these practices or charter schools on special-education students and English learners specifically.

Who applies to charter schools?

To study the effect of charter attendance on outcomes for students classified as special education or English learners, I look at comprehensive state education data for about 18,000 students who participated in the admissions lotteries of 30 charter elementary,

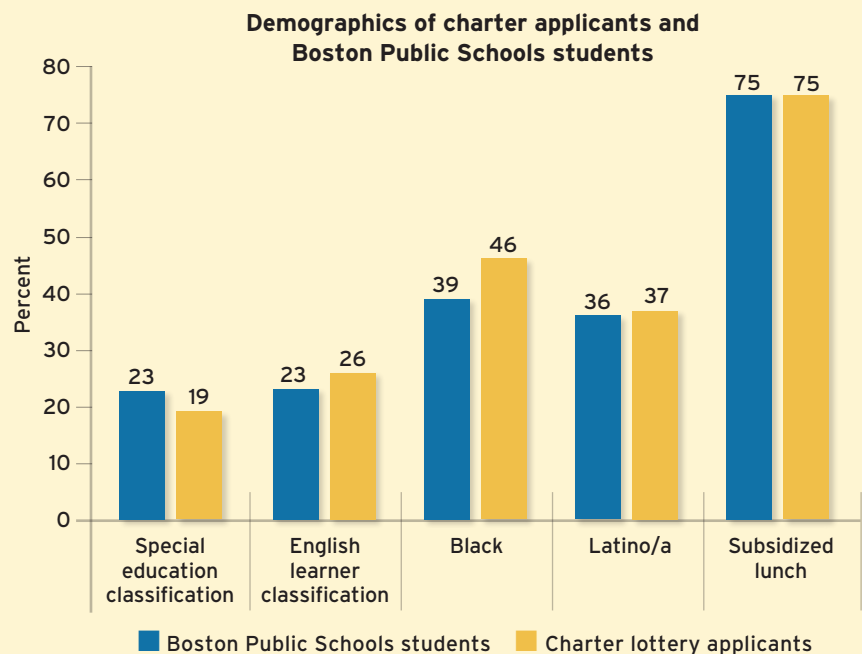
middle, and high schools in Boston from the 2003–04 to 2014–15 school years. Altogether, these schools account for the vast majority of the city’s charter sector—approximately 90 percent of enrollment in 2012–13.

I focus on students who were classified as either special education or English learners at the time of the admissions lottery, as a student’s needs and status can change over time. For special-education students, I look at students’ special-education status, disability type, and level of classroom inclusion. For English learners, I look at students’ status, native language, and test scores on the annual English proficiency exam. I categorize students’ English proficiency as beginning, intermediate, or advanced based on their exam scores and the state guidelines for services.

Special-education students and English learners were well represented in the Boston charter-school lotteries (see Figure 1). About 19 percent of lottery applicants had a special-education

Students who enter charter lotteries are similar to traditional public school students (Figure 1)

Lottery applicants have similar demographic characteristics as Boston Public Schools students. At the time of the lottery, charter applicants have similar rates of English Language Learner classification and slightly lower rates of special education classification as Boston Public Schools students overall.



SOURCE: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Student Information Management Systems (SIMS) data and charter lottery records data, 2003–04 to 2014–15 school years.

status at the time they applied compared to 23 percent of Boston students overall. Similarly, about 26 percent of lottery applicants were classified as English learners compared to 23 percent of Boston students overall. On average, charter applicants had slightly higher test scores compared to Boston students overall. Applicants and non-applicants also had broadly similar demographic characteristics. These similarities hold true when looking at the overall applicant pool as well as when looking solely at special-education students and English learners.

The students who apply to charters represented a range of needs. Special-education students from substantially separate classrooms were slightly underrepresented in Boston charter lotteries, while students from partial-inclusion classrooms were slightly overrepresented. English learners of all levels of proficiency were more prevalent in charter lotteries than in Boston Public Schools overall.

For students who receive an offer to enroll, going to a charter school has two major effects: first, an increased likelihood of having their specialized classification removed, and second, exposure to the charter school environment. These could have complementary or opposing impacts. The high academic and strict behavior standards common at Boston charters could leave these students behind, or the students could meet the higher expectations. In addition, students could thrive in a more inclusive classroom environment or fall behind without the specialized services they previously received.

Below, I examine how charter enrollment affects rates of classification, and how charter attendance affects the academic outcomes of students classified as needing specialized services at the time of the admissions lottery. To the best of my knowledge, no prior causal evidence exists for special-education classification removal.

Effects on classification

Students designated as special education at the time of the charter admissions lottery are far more likely to lose that status and be placed in a more inclusive classroom if they enroll at a charter school than if they enroll at a traditional public school. Similarly, English learners are also far less likely to be classified as such when they enter a charter school compared to attending a traditional public school. Both classification rate changes reflect differences in how charter schools categorize students, not gains in learning.

Students with a special-education status at the time of the lottery are 12 percentage points more likely to have their classification removed upon enrolling in a charter; in the fall after the admissions lottery, 77 percent of students at charters retain their special-education status compared to 89 percent of students at

traditional public schools (see Figure 2). This includes students with more severe disabilities: applicants who had been educated in substantially separate classrooms the prior year are 17 percentage points less likely to keep their special-education status upon enrolling in a charter school compared to at a traditional public school. Among students new to the district (who therefore were not yet evaluated for specialized needs), close to zero are classified as special-education students at charters compared to 1.4 percent at traditional public schools.

Charters also move students who were classified as special education at the time of the lottery to more inclusive classrooms more often than traditional public schools do, giving students more time in general-education settings and less time receiving services outside of mainstream classrooms. Across all ranges of need, students who enroll at a charter school are 27 percentage points more likely to be educated in inclusive classrooms than are students at traditional public schools. Special-education students from substantially separate classrooms are 38 percentage points more likely to be placed in more inclusive classrooms or to have their classification removed entirely. The classification and inclusion effects are consistent across grade levels and persist for two years.

For students designated as English learners at the time of the lottery, charters remove that status 32 percentage points more often than traditional public schools do; in the fall after the admissions lottery, 51 percent of students at charters retain their classification compared to 83 percent at traditional public schools. Most of that difference is in shifts in status among students with intermediate and advanced English proficiency; those with beginning English proficiency rarely have their classification removed at the time of enrollment. Overall, traditional public schools designate 64 percent of non-native English speakers as English learners, compared to 38 percent of non-native English speakers classified in charter schools.

These shifts occur in different ways. Individual schools determine English learner status for their students, based on how they interpret student performance on the English proficiency exam. Therefore, lower classification rates at charters likely reflect different preferences and interpretations of the exam. However, Massachusetts, which mandates screening of incoming students for English learner status, does not require schools to assess all newly enrolled students for special-education needs. Rather, the speed and fidelity with which student records are transferred between traditional district and charter schools likely plays a major role in special-education classification changes.

Most charters learn of student classifications from voluntary parental reporting before school records are received, and some families may choose not to disclose a child's special-education



More than half of Boston charters have a longer school year and more than 95 percent have a longer school day compared to traditional district schools.

status. A survey conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as a result of this analysis found that the most common reason for classification removal was parents declining to report a designation. Possible reasons parents might decline to report include fear of stigma, not agreeing with or wanting the designation, not knowing that they should notify the school, and not understanding their child's status or entitlements. In addition, charter schools' preference for high levels of inclusion for special-education students, often cited in their publicly available annual reports, likely also contributes to these changes.

Effects on academic performance

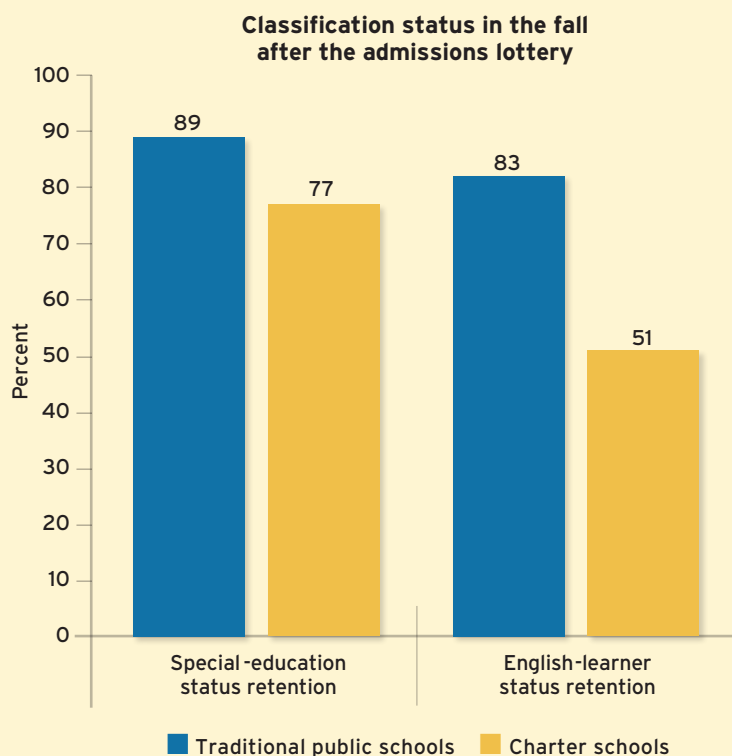
Once students enroll, charter school attendance has large positive effects on a host of educational outcomes, from test scores to enrollment in college.

After a year at a charter school, students who were designated as English learners or special-education students at the time of the admissions lottery do far better on state tests: their scores increase by 0.26 standard deviations in math and 0.21 in reading. English learners' scores increase by 0.33 standard deviations in math and by 0.24 in reading. As a result, one year of charter attendance narrows the achievement gap between English learners and their typical, non-classified counterparts in Boston Public Schools by 84 percent in math and 39 percent in reading. For special-education students, charter enrollment decreases the achievement gap by 30 percent in math and 20 percent in reading. The gains continue through the second year at a similar rate: in math, the effect nearly doubles for special-education students and grows by 1.6 times for English learners. In the third year, the effects stabilize and students maintain their progress, but their rate of growth that year is comparable to students in traditional public schools.

The annual English proficiency exam—which schools use to re-evaluate English learners' classification and services—also suggests that charter schools improve non-native speakers' English skills. Students at charter schools perform similarly or significantly better compared to district school students, even though only those students with very limited English skills tend to keep the classification that requires they take the proficiency exam after enrolling. In all, charter students are 28 percentage points less likely to take the proficiency exam. Those charter students who do take the test perform about the same as students at district schools.

Students are less likely to remain classified at charter schools (Figure 2)

Applicants with a special-education status at the time of the lottery are 12 percentage points more likely to have their classification removed upon enrolling in a charter in the fall, compared with their peers who were not given a lottery offer. Similarly, for applicants designated as English learners, charter schools remove the status 32 percentage points more often than traditional public schools.



NOTE: Classification status is measured in October following the admissions lottery. Outcomes for traditional public schools are the share of charter applicants who do not enroll in charter schools with a given classification status. Outcomes for charter schools are calculated by subtracting the estimated effects of charter enrollment from the outcomes for traditional public schools. Models used to estimate charter effects control for gender, ethnicity, and their interaction, as well as baseline classification status and subsidized lunch eligibility, and the grade, year, and set of lotteries to which the student applied. Both estimated effects are statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level.

SOURCE: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Student Information Management Systems (SIMS) data and charter lottery records data, 2003-04 to 2014-15 school years.

Charters also have positive effects on longer-term educational outcomes (see Figure 3). Students are more likely to reach proficiency on 10th-grade math and reading exams, a state graduation requirement, with an increase of 24 percentage points in the likeliness of passing the tests for special-education students and an increase of 37 percentage points for English learners. They are more likely to take at least one Advanced Placement class, with increases of 31 percentage points for special-education students and 28 percentage points for English learners. Charters also boost the likelihood that students will become eligible for a state-run merit college scholarship program awarded based on 10th-grade state test scores by 11 percentage points for special-education students and 29 percentage points for English learners. In addition, charter attendance nearly doubles the likelihood that students designated as English learners at the time of the lottery enroll in a four-year college. The estimated effect of charter attendance on college enrollment for special-education students is also positive, but falls short of statistical significance.

However, charter enrollment lowers students' likelihood of graduating high school within four years by 30 percentage points for special-education students and 18 percentage points for English learners. This is surprising given the gains in reaching the proficiency graduation requirement, though prior research suggests that students could take longer to graduate from charters because they need additional time to meet rigorous graduation requirements or choose to save money by remaining in high school for an additional year rather than taking remedial course work in college. There is no significant difference between the five-year graduation rates at charter and traditional district schools, in support of this theory. Most students classified as special education or English learners at the time of the charter lottery who do not graduate high school in five years appear to transfer to other schools rather than dropping out. Because certain high-need special-education students qualify for transitional education and support services through their 21st year if they remain enrolled in school, this could be a positive trend.

The impact of inclusion

Students with specialized needs who enroll in charters attend schools with markedly different characteristics than those who apply and do not receive lottery offers, and those differences are correlated with positive effects on test scores. Do these academic gains stem from those general charter-school characteristics that affect all attendees? Or do they stem from the removal of specialized classifications and increased

inclusion that students experience at charter schools? Legal requirements and best practices operate under the assumption that designated students require specialized and often separate services and accommodations to succeed. But could classification removal and increased inclusion actually help some special-education students and English learners succeed?

To explore these questions, I look separately at the cohorts of students designated as special education and English learners who applied to each charter school in each year. I then examine whether the schools that re-classified more of these students and, in the case of special-education students, increased their inclusion, produced stronger or weaker effects on test scores. This analysis provides no evidence that re-classification has negative effects on students' academic progress, while also suggesting that it is the general charter-school environment that drives the bulk of the gains.

Among both special-education students and English learners, groups of charter-school applicants with higher rates of re-classification experienced modestly larger gains in test scores. These test-score effects also have a weak positive relationship with increased inclusion of special-education students.

The nature of these correlations—weak but positive—suggests that classification removal and increased inclusion contribute positively to student growth but cannot fully explain charters' test-score gains. Therefore, other school practices, such as high expectations, data-driven instruction, more instructional time, and high-intensity tutoring, play an important role.

Conclusion

Critics argue that charter schools underserve special-education students and English learners because they enroll fewer of these students and might lack the economies of scale to provide separate classrooms and other intensive resources. At first glance, these criticisms would seem to apply in Boston. A look at the charter enrollment numbers shows lower representation of special-education students and English learners overall, and particularly among those with higher levels of need. However, my research reveals that students with these classifications apply to Boston charter schools at similar rates, but their status and level of inclusion are more likely to change in charters—giving the appearance that the Boston charters do not serve these students. It would be a mistake to infer from these statistics that charter schools are doing a poor job of serving students with special needs.

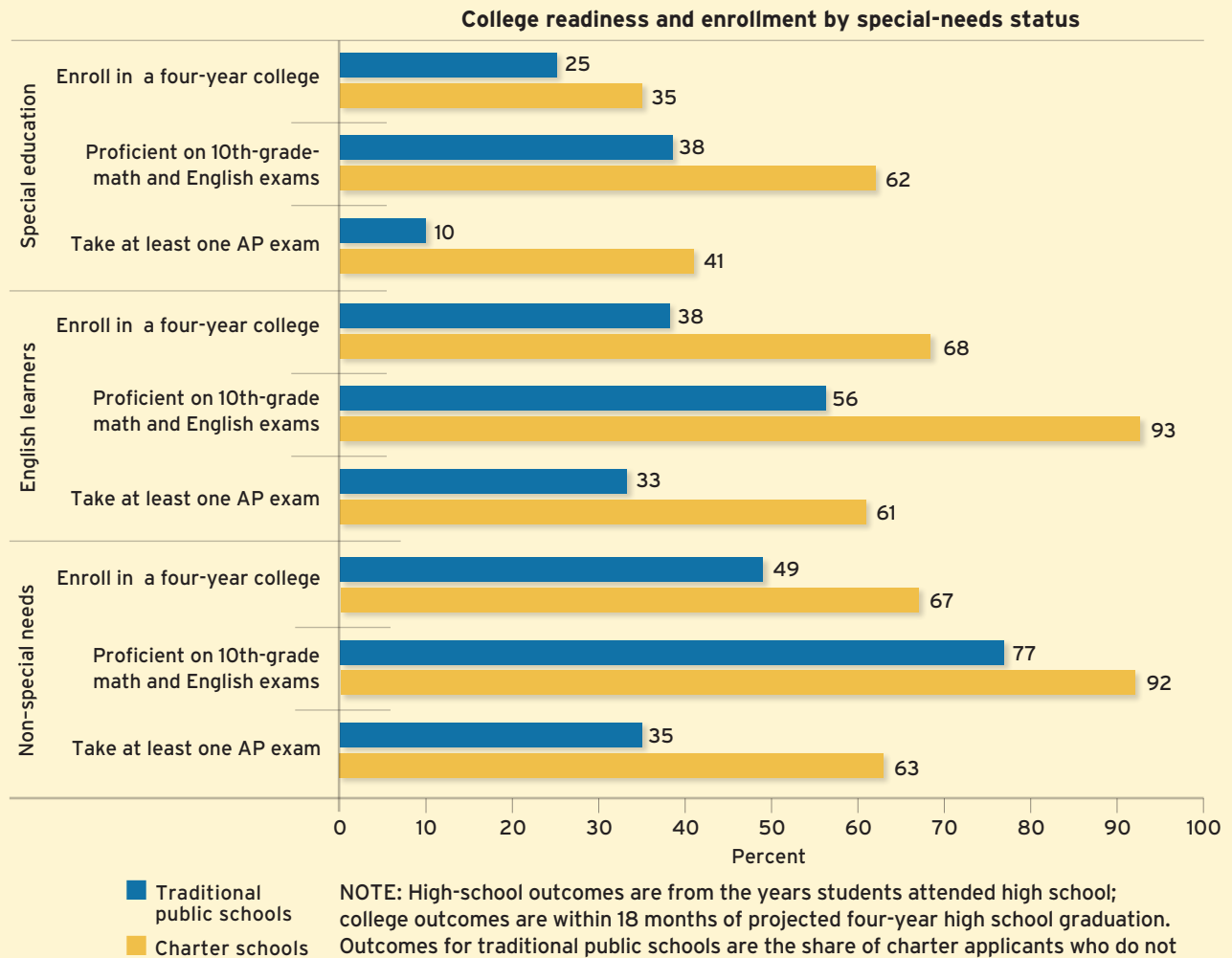
This analysis shows that charter schools that accelerate achievement among general-education students can also do so for students classified as special education or English learners. More generally, it demonstrates that schools can boost the academic



About 19 percent of lottery applicants have a special-education status at the time they apply compared to 23 percent of Boston students overall.

Better high-school performance and college enrollment for charter students (Figure 3)

Lottery applicants with specialized needs who attend a charter school are more likely to meet benchmarks of high-school success compared with applicants who were not offered a charter school seat.



NOTE: High-school outcomes are from the years students attended high school; college outcomes are within 18 months of projected four-year high school graduation. Outcomes for traditional public schools are the share of charter applicants who do not enroll in charter schools with a given classification status. Outcomes for charter schools are calculated by subtracting the estimated effects of charter enrollment from the outcomes for traditional public schools. Models used to estimate charter effects control for gender, ethnicity, and their interaction; baseline classification status and subsidized lunch eligibility; and the grade, year, and set of lotteries to which the student applied. Effects on college enrollment for special-education students and English learners are not statistically significant. All other effects are significant at the 99 percent confidence level. Effect on four-year college enrollment for special-education students is not statistically significant; effect for English learners is significant at the 90 percent confidence level. All other effects are significant at the 99 percent confidence level.

SOURCE: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Student Information Management (SIMs) data and charter lottery records data, 2003-04 to 2014-15 school years; the National Student Clearinghouse, for students projected to graduate high school in 2008-2016; and Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education SAT and AP data, for students projected to graduate in 2008-2015.



outcomes of special-needs students without traditional specialized services. Since the study has nearly full coverage of an entire city's charter sector across all grade levels, it overcomes a common criticism that lottery-based charter-school studies are flawed because the set of schools that elect to share data might differ from the rest of a city's charters.

Enrolling in a Boston charter school amounts to a dual treatment for classified students: first, their classifications are removed at a higher rate than at traditional public schools and they join more inclusive classrooms, and second, they are exposed to a charter environment featuring practices like increased instructional time, high expectations, and data-driven instruction. These practices are positively correlated with overall charter-school effectiveness as well as charter effectiveness at serving special-education and English-learner students. The frequent use of tutoring, for example, enables charters to identify and provide support to any struggling student, regardless of their status.

As a result, both special-education students and English

Students with a special-education status at the time of the lottery are 12 percentage points more likely to have their classification removed upon enrolling in a charter.

learners experience substantial gains on standardized exams in math and English, English proficiency, and college preparation and enrollment. Attending a charter school substantially decreases gaps in achievement between these students and typical students in Boston's traditional public schools. Further, I find no evidence that removing students' classification or increasing their inclusion in typical classrooms decreases outcomes.

More research is needed to determine whether these positive effects are specific to Boston, where the charter sector is especially high-performing. But the finding that special-education students and English learners can make large academic gains without specialized services in a high-quality general-education program calls for greater attention to overall school practices anywhere, in addition to the current focus on specialized supports, to improve outcomes for all.

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Inclusion in Action

EXPECTATIONS FOR ALL AT EXCEL ACADEMY

by E.B. SOLOMONT

CAROLINA'S DAUGHTER was in 1st grade when her teachers made an upsetting discovery: she could neither read nor write.

The little girl had spent much of her kindergarten year in and out of the hospital, ill with what doctors finally diagnosed as a neurological disorder. She was promoted to the 1st grade, but after missing 35 days of kindergarten, she was hopelessly behind. Her teachers gave her mother two choices: the 6-year-old could repeat a grade, or a parent could accompany her to school to help her along.

Though she lacked any formal training to do so, Carolina agreed to join her daughter each day at the George F. Kelly Elementary School in Chelsea, a working-class city north of Boston.

"I stopped working," said Carolina, a mother of five who



Excel Academy East Boston, a charter school that takes an inclusive approach to special education.

was born in Guatemala, whose surname is being withheld to protect her daughter's privacy. For three months, Carolina attended school from 8 to 11 a.m. "I learned how to teach her."

For the next few years, Carolina's daughter remained at the neighborhood school, where she was eventually diagnosed with several learning disabilities and qualified for tutoring and extra support. But as she approached middle school, doctors urged Carolina to consider sending her daughter to a specialized school for students with disabilities. There, the girl would be one of two or three students per class.

Instead, Carolina enrolled her daughter at nearby Excel Academy

East Boston, a charter middle school that takes an inclusive approach to teaching special-education students.

"I wanted her to associate with other children," she said.

PHOTOGRAPH / SCOTT BRAUER



PHOTOGRAPH / SCOTT BRAUER

Samantha Butera, a 6th-grade learning specialist at Excel Academy East Boston, has an office centrally situated in the school.

There's considerable public debate about charter schools and students with specialized needs, focused mainly on the extent to which charters enroll students who are classified to receive special-education services. A new study by Elizabeth Setren of Tufts University shows that critics, who often charge that charters do not serve as many special-education students as traditional public schools do, may not be asking the right questions (for more, see "A Charter Boost for Special-Ed Students and English Learners" in this issue). A school's overall environment, not just access to specialized services, appears to be an important component to all students' success.

Looking across the city of Boston, Setren compared the classifications and academic performance of charter-school students who were considered special-education students or English language learners at the time of their application with their peers in traditional public schools. Boston charters achieve better outcomes for those students than traditional public schools do, even though charter enrollment at least doubles the likelihood that students lose their classification and, as a result, access to specialized services. The types of educational approaches charters use—like data-driven instruction, more instructional time, and

intensive tutoring—appear to benefit students with specialized needs just as they benefit their non-classified peers.

Presuming competence for special-ed students

Just after 7 a.m. on a cool morning in September, students clad in uniforms of khaki and navy blue began arriving at Excel Academy East Boston, forming an orderly line outside the building's glass solarium. As the students in grades 5–8 waited for the doors to open at 7:30, a fleet of yellow school buses arrived, carrying more of their classmates. The sound of airplanes taking off and landing could be heard from nearby Logan International Airport.

East Boston, known locally as Eastie, is a predominantly low-income immigrant neighborhood that sits between the airport and Boston Harbor. Some 53 percent of residents are Latino, according to Census Bureau data, and only about 69 percent of residents over the age of 25 have a high school diploma. It is also a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, and a magnet for real-estate developers drawn to water views.

The school, which opened in 2013, has 241 students—a fraction of the 1,374 enrolled across Excel Academy Charter School's network of four schools, whose mission is to prepare students for success in high school and college. Excel Academy schools are focused on high academic expectations, rigorous

instruction, comprehensive family and student support, and consistent classroom and school rules. Across the network, 79 percent of students are Latino and 19 percent are classified to receive special-education services. Many are from low-income families where English is not the primary language spoken at home, and the vast majority meet or exceed standards on statewide reading and math tests. In 2014, for example, 100 percent of the network's 8th-grade students scored "proficient" or "advanced" on that year's statewide test in reading.

Most of the network's special-education students learn in general-education classrooms. In the 2017-18 school year, 80 percent of special-education students were in "full inclusion" programs, spending most of their day alongside general-education students, compared to the state average of 64 percent. Nearly 5 percent of Excel's special-education students were in "partial inclusion" programs compared to the state average of 15 percent; those students spend some of the school day in general-education classrooms and other parts in separate classes. The network also runs a substantially separate special-education program called ROSE, which serves 13 students.

Administrators say Excel operates under the assumption that most students can learn effectively in general classrooms, and that the structure it has in place—its small scale, robust teacher coaching, and clear and universal standards and expectations—contributes to students needing fewer separate supports. Relatively low student-to-teacher ratios mean students get more individual attention, for example.

And so while many students, like Carolina's daughter, now in the 7th grade, maintain their special-education status, others do not.

"It's not that a student comes to us and immediately loses a classification. It's a longer arc," said Sarah Kantrowitz, the network's director of student supports.

"It's not like your disability ever goes away," she said. "It's really about: Do you still qualify for special ed? Do you need specially designed instruction and accommodation or do you not?"

At the very least, Kantrowitz said she wants to get to know the child for herself. "My mindset around special education is to always presume competency and always operate with the least dangerous assumption, which is that we want to keep options open for kids," she said.

Carolina, for instance, knows her daughter's disorder means she will continue to face academic challenges. But she has opted to keep her in a general-education setting with supports because she believes that not doing so would damage her daughter's self-esteem. "It is for her well-being," she said.

Making connections for English learners

Charters have their critics, including in Massachusetts, where a 2015 effort to lift a cap on charter enrollment was defeated by voters. But Setren's research suggests that Boston charter schools are fighting above their weight class.

She found that public charter schools in the city spent 44 percent less on special-education services than traditional public schools did, but achieved higher outcomes due to "a set of education practices that affect all students, including increased instructional time, high academic and behavioral expectations, high-intensity tutoring, data-driven instruction, and frequent teacher feedback."

The study also looked at English language learners and found that one year of attendance at a charter school substantially helps them catch up to their typical peers: It narrowed a gap in academic achievement by 84 percent in math and 39 percent in reading, for example.

English learners are entitled to specialized instruction of up to 150 minutes daily, based on their performance on a language skills exam. To accommodate those requirements in an inclusive setting, Excel has a two-pronged approach that includes structural modifications (think: small-group

learning) as well as curriculum changes (that is, alternative assignments). Modifications could involve parallel teaching by a learning specialist, strategic pairing of students, or previewing lessons to students. Curriculum adjustments include providing additional reference materials, modifying or offering alternative homework assignments, or providing students with extra time or tools to complete their work.

Both approaches are woven into the fabric of the school, where learning specialists' offices are strategically located in the center of each hallway. "It's physically in the middle," said Samantha Butera, a 6th-grade learning

specialist at Excel East Boston. Sometimes she co-teaches with general content teachers. Other times, she said, "I pull a few students into my 'learning lab' for the same lesson."

Butera and others, though, know they can't cut too much into class time or ask students to come early or stay late. Instead, Excel has a "drop everything and read" block each day when students can get extra literacy instruction or tutoring. Such structures are helpful to both English learners and special-education students.

Samantha Doig, who teaches 5th- and 6th-grade science, said that in consultation with learning specialists, she may preview a lesson for students who are either language learners or receive special-education services. Those students may also get



Doctors urged Carolina to send her daughter to a specialized school; instead, she enrolled at Excel Academy East Boston, a charter middle school that takes an inclusive approach to teaching special-education students.



PHOTOGRAPH / SCOTT BRAUER

“Use your Spanish as a skill,” Lucero Castillo, a 6th-grade English language specialist at Excel Academy East Boston, tells students.

reference sheets and diagrams to help them access the material. But exams are uniform for all students. “All students can and should be able to answer the question,” she said. “They may just need an extra tool to get there.”

At the school, a lower-level hallway is festooned with flags from nearly every country. An English as a Second Language classroom features posters of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor and civil rights activist César Chávez.

“People without experience working with English language learners think you just need to translate it into their language,” said Rachel Spencer, an English learner specialist and middle school department head.

Excel’s approach is more nuanced.

At the behest of one of its language specialists, the network replaced the term “English-language learner” with “emerging bilingual.” It also revamped progress reports to emphasize student growth.

By mid-September, Excel’s emerging-bilingual students had finished writing letters to their teachers to introduce themselves and articulate specific language goals. “One risk I am willing to take to achieve my goals is to raise my hand more,” read one.

Later that fall, sixth-grade students were reading *Esperanza Rising*, Pam Muñoz Ryan’s book about a 13-year-old girl who flees from Mexico to California and becomes a farm worker during the Great Depression. To facilitate their understanding, students read the story from a copy of the book that featured additional illustrations and reference notes.

Their teacher Lucero Castillo, a 6th grade English language

specialist, said she spends a lot of her time reminding students that they are entitled to access a dictionary or reference materials. “You’re growing into your bilingualism,” she tells them. “Use your Spanish as a skill.”

She also encourages emerging bilingual students to draw on their heritage, not gloss over it.

“It’s about making those connections to help them access the materials,” she said.

Measuring progress for all

For Carolina and her daughter—now in her third year at Excel—the road hasn’t been easy.

Carolina struggles with English. Her daughter lives in fear of getting sick and falling behind again. Her neurological condition impacts her

memory and makes reading and writing a challenge.

But the teen no longer feels like an outsider. And although her academic growth has been gradual, Carolina’s daughter is now able to complete homework assignments without help. That allows her mother to hold two part-time jobs, at Subway and at a local T-shirt shop. “I don’t have to be on top of her,” she said.

For many students with special needs, progress can be hard to measure. “Everybody’s measure of success may look different, so it’s hard to say, ‘Yes, they nailed it,’” said Kantrowitz, who said quantifying the success of an inclusion classroom is “messy” for that reason. “Trying to set a consistent benchmark is really hard.”

Doig, the science teacher, has imposed a daily test for herself. At the end of each class, she distributes “exit tickets” that post a broad question pertaining to her main learning objective for the day. In sharing their responses, students are acutely aware of their progress—and so is she. If 15 students in the class don’t answer the question correctly, she said, “is that on them or is that on me?”

Doig said she has the same expectations for all of her students; some just need additional scaffolding to get there. “Do they need a sentence starter? A diagram?” she asked. “All students can and should be able to make progress. All students can learn.”

In mid-September, Doig broke her class into groups, strategically mixing students with different learning styles and aptitudes. The groups then competed to answer a series of fill-in-the-blank questions to prepare them for their first science assessment the next day. “I’m setting them up to succeed,” she said. “If you don’t think all students can achieve, your students won’t achieve.”

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