

New study suggests charter schools may not systematically under-enroll students with special needs

November 21 2012, by Debra Britt

(Phys.org)—A fresh examination of special education enrollment patterns in New York State suggests that charter schools may be doing better at enrolling students with special needs than many believe.

These findings are relevant for Washington state as policy makers consider how to best implement Initiative 1240 to allow [charter schools](#), which appears to have been approved by voters in the most recent election.

The issue of charter schools and special-needs [students](#) arises in part from a [federal report](#) that said, at the national level, charter schools enroll fewer students than schools run by districts.

That may be true when comparing national averages of charter compared with non-charter schools, but new research comparing [New York State's](#) district-run schools with charter schools finds important variations in the enrollment patterns of students with special needs.

"Although certainly some charter schools are not meeting their responsibilities in [special education](#), our data indicate that the simplest explanation—that charters don't want to serve these kids and are sending them away—is not really a good characterization of the story," said Robin Lake, director at the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education, which conducted the study.

The new study looked at special education enrollment in individual schools, grade levels, neighborhoods and in the portfolios of schools under different authorizers to present a more accurate picture.

The study uncovered four key findings:

- At the middle and high school levels, the average enrollment figures are actually higher in charter schools than in district-run schools and the distribution and range are almost indistinguishable.
- A marked difference in special education student enrollments, however, does appear when charter elementary schools are compared with their district-run counterparts.
- While some authorizers oversee schools with special needs enrollments that closely track those of nearby district-run schools, other authorizers oversee groups of schools that don't mirror the special education enrollments of their district-run neighbors.

The report demonstrates a need for more research and a better understanding of enrollment data in order to explain the differences uncovered by the analysis, the authors say. Part of the difference in [elementary schools](#), for example, may be that some district-run schools offer programs that attract more students with special needs.

Charter schools at the elementary level might also be less inclined to label students as needing special education services. This raises a troubling question: are charter schools under-enrolling or under-identifying students with special needs, or are district-run schools over-identifying them?

The authors point out that there likely are access and quality issues that

need to be addressed in charter schools, but policy solutions need to recognize the complexity of the issues. For example, the research indicates that setting statewide special education enrollment targets may be less effective than school or regional targets that pay careful attention to those very specific factors that influence such enrollment choices as locations, grade-spans, and neighborhoods. Moreover, explicit efforts to develop charter school programs that better address the needs of special education students might more effectively increase enrollment and improve the quality of service for these students than simply setting a target.

More information: Lake, R., Gross, B. and Denice, P. [New York State Special Education Enrollment Analysis](#), available at www.crpe.org.

Provided by University of Washington

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