

What Does It Take to Educate Students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities in General Education Settings? Lessons from Washington's Public Charter Schools

Georgia Heyward, Travis Pillow, and Sivan Tuchman

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
The Path Forward for Washington State	3
Recommendations for Charter and School District Leaders	3
Recommendations for Washington State Policymakers	4
School Vignettes	6
Summit Sierra Public School	7
Impact Puget Sound Elementary	11
Rainier Valley Leadership Academy	15
PRIDE Schools	18
SOAR Academy	22
Appendix A. Washington State Context	27
Acknowledgments	33

Introduction

Finding ways to educate students with disabilities alongside their general education peers is more critical now than ever before. As students with disabilities return to school this fall, many will be in remote settings without the in-person supports they are accustomed to. Some schools across the country that have communicated a commitment to [Universal Design for Learning](#) are [developing individualized plans](#) to ensure accommodations reflect their instructional model, and are [finding ways](#) to provide one-on-one or small-group support. But many others remain silent about the specifics of educating students with disabilities. If last spring is [any indication](#), students may be expected to be part of the same remote learning activities as their peers, but without the necessary supports for doing so.

The pandemic created new disruptions for what had been a growing effort across Washington State to rethink special education and give more students with disabilities the opportunity to learn alongside their peers.

Including students with disabilities in general education settings has [potential benefits on academic outcomes](#), but it can be difficult to implement well. It has been particularly elusive for Washington State, where fewer than six in ten students with disabilities spend their day in general education settings—the eighth-lowest rate in the country.¹

To identify promising strategies for full inclusion, CRPE and the National Center on Special Education in Charter Schools conducted in-depth case studies of five Washington State charter schools as part of a national study of special education in charter schools (see insert for more detail). Washington State's public charter schools are more likely to educate students in general education settings than the typical schools across the state.² These studies were conducted during the 2018-19 school year, but we also conducted follow up interviews in the summer of 2020 to understand how the schools were responding to the pandemic. Through our interviews, we identified strategies that were core to student learning prior to COVID-19 and that remained constant even as schools moved to remote instruction last spring. These approaches may hold promise for other schools:

- **A single point of contact for every student:** At Summit Sierra, all students, including those with disabilities, have access to a mentor who helps them navigate school assignments and post-high school planning. During the pandemic, mentors collaborated with special education staff and had continuous check-ins with families to make sure students with disabilities had the support they needed to be successful.
- **Intensive focus on social-emotional well-being:** At Impact | Puget Sound Elementary social-emotional learning is integrated into everything students do. In a virtual setting, Impact continued to host virtual circle time every day and to integrate social-emotional curriculum throughout the day, which provided an inclusive environment for all students, including those with disabilities, to have emotional and behavioral needs met.

¹ Fifty-seven percent of Washington State's students with disabilities are educated in general education settings for at least 80 percent of the day. "IDEA Section 618 Data Products: Static Tables," U.S. Department of Education Special Education - Technical Assistance on State Data Collection (website), last modified June 15, 2020.

² Eighty-six percent of students with disabilities in the state's public charter schools are taught in a general education setting, compared to 57 percent across the state. Source: Charter school data provided through a partnership with the True Measure Collaborative in 2018. State data retrieved from OSPI Special Education Childcount data.

- **Parent partnerships:** At Rainier Valley Leadership Academy (RVLA), families are included as partners in the education of students with disabilities. RVLA continued parent partnerships throughout the pandemic to ensure students with disabilities had the support they needed.
- **Meaningful and customized learning:** PRIDE Schools individualize course content and assignments through projects and applied learning. PRIDE students continued project-based learning, even at home, by leading and participating in community service projects to help people affected by COVID-19.

Our case studies also pointed to challenges that school leaders and policymakers can learn from as well. Key among them are teacher capacity, school scheduling, and funding. SOAR Academy fully included students with disabilities in the general education setting. The staffing and wrap-around supports that this required ultimately proved too expensive for the school to remain viable; it closed in June 2019. Some of these struggles can be attributed to Washington State's special education funding formula, which penalizes schools with high concentrations of students with disabilities. The formula also does not differentiate special education funding based on student needs and characteristics.

About This Study

To learn more about how Washington State charter schools are serving students with disabilities, we visited five of the state's twelve charter schools during the 2018–2019 school year. These schools were identified because they offered diversity in terms of location and grade span:

- **Rainier Valley Leadership Academy:** middle and high school in Seattle
- **Impact | Puget Sound Elementary:** elementary school in Tukwila
- **PRIDE Schools:** middle and high school in Spokane
- **SOAR Academy:** elementary school in Tacoma
- **Summit Sierra:** high school in Seattle

These visits and subsequent analysis were part of a national study of inclusive practices, *Seizing the Opportunity: Educating Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools*. The national study was conducted by CRPE in collaboration with the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools. The purpose of the national study was to begin to build an evidence base about how charter schools are providing effective supports and services for students with disabilities. In the course of this exploratory study, researchers visited 30 schools in 20 cities and towns across 14 states, in addition to the five schools in Washington State. Findings from the study are summarized in *Seizing the Opportunity*. Researchers spent two days at each school and conducted semi-structured interviews with special education and general education teachers and administrators, as well as parents. In every school we observed general education inclusion classrooms.

The Path Forward for Washington State

Educating students with disabilities in inclusive environments requires schoolwide commitment to building a culture where all students receive the education they deserve. It does not end with assigning an instructional aide to a student or placing youth with disabilities in the same learning environment as their peers. Sustaining schools that are capable of consistently carrying out successful models will require attention to practice, as well as changes to policy.

The recommendations below are informed by the Washington State case studies in this report, and lessons learned from the [national study](#) conducted by CRPE and the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools.

Recommendations for Charter and District School Leaders

1. **Support general education teachers.** Teacher preparedness is critical for successfully educating students with disabilities within general education settings. Schools can support general education teachers through training, time for planning, and instructional models. Schools must set aside time and [resources for training and teacher mentoring](#), especially for general education teachers. School leaders can also consider adopting curriculum and instructional practices that provide a framework for [Universal Design for Learning](#). Washington, like many other states across the country, is encouraging districts to consider competency-based instructional models this school year because of the flexibility it affords students.
2. **Consider co-teaching and flexible supports.** Co-teaching in a physical setting has mixed results. Using this practice in a remote setting may offer more time for [individual or small-group instruction](#), but implementation is complex and not one-size-fits all. Capital City Charter School in Washington, D.C., had a strong co-teaching model in place before schools went remote, but it has reportedly opted to move away from co-teaching in lieu of offering students with disabilities additional small-group time and one-on-one support. A number of large, urban districts are [planning](#) for a similar model this fall.
3. **Prioritize good instruction, informed by data.** Teachers who have to fight constantly to meet the needs of 80 percent of their students can't devote extra energy to the remaining students who require targeted interventions. A [Multi-Tiered System of Support \(MTSS\)](#) model creates a framework for delivering data-based intervention for students across a range of needs. Whether schools implement MTSS or a similar model, we recommend pairing a targeted intervention system with professional learning communities that use [data regularly to identify needs](#) within groups of students. Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia is [requiring](#) training for all teachers in MTSS this school year, focused on its application in a remote setting.
4. **Collaborate with other schools and agencies.** Collaboration is key in special education because no one has all the answers. As Washington State schools seek out ways to educate students with disabilities in remote settings this year, or to expand the education of students with disabilities in general education settings as schools resume in-person instruction, they should work together to solve common problems. Local school district leaders must become partners with charter school special education leaders so they can address administrative, instructional, and programmatic issues shared across the state. Small, rural, and tribal

schools can also be important thought partners with charter schools around managing the financial and human resource constraints that smaller school organizations face in providing specialized support to students with disabilities. Education Service Districts can create these opportunities for schools to learn from one another and form networks.

Recommendations for Washington State Policymakers

- 1. Make funds available to the schools that need them.** Ideally, funding structures for students with disabilities are coherent and encourage schools to keep students in general education classrooms. Washington State lawmakers [increased](#) the special education funding allocation in 2019 and, in the process, created stronger incentives to support inclusion. But the current system still penalizes schools for serving high concentrations of students with disabilities; schools above the 13.5 percent cap must fund services out of their general education fund. The state should consider revisions to its current policy: first to increase the cap and then to better differentiate funding based on student need so schools that do a better job educating students with disabilities are not punished for encouraging families to attend them. Some states have adopted nuanced formulas that differentiate funding based on the level of support each student requires. [Florida](#), for example, supplements its guaranteed special education allocation with funding based on the services students with the most profound needs receive in accordance with their Individualized Education Programs. This helps ensure schools have resources commensurate with the support their students receive, while minimizing the unpredictability that schools face if they must apply for supplemental funding for students with the most profound needs. If Washington State continues to supplement its core special education funding with a Safety Net approach, it should continue to improve the process of how schools apply for Safety Net funding to make it less burdensome and more predictable for small schools and districts.
- 2. Support capacity building in all public schools.** Increased funding must go hand in hand with efforts to ensure educators are properly trained to support students effectively. Changing culture and instructional practice requires assertive leadership and teacher buy-in. Washington State's [Inclusionary Practices Professional Development Project](#) recognizes this and is in the process of identifying schools with a track record of effective inclusion to serve as examples. The state should expand efforts to train and support school leaders who want to promote a culture of inclusion, including training designed to help them reallocate resources within their schools to support the inclusion of special education students in general education settings. Teacher preparation programs can emphasize Universal Design for Learning and inclusionary practices in coursework and their practicum for general education, as well as for special education teachers-in-training.
- 3. Give district schools flexibility.** School leaders need flexibility to adjust staffing, scheduling, and curriculum to support students with disabilities effectively in inclusive classrooms. Washington State's charter schools were able to flexibly meet the individual needs of students and quickly respond to students and families by reallocating staff, adjusting practices, and adopting new curricula. But this is harder for schools in larger districts where they have limited control over funding or curricula. Washington State can consider offering waivers similar to New York State's [Special Education Innovation Program Waivers](#), which give flexibility to schools and districts implementing inclusion programs.

- 4. Support funding equalization and facility access for charter schools.** The majority of charter schools serve students in need at similar or higher rates as neighboring district schools (see Appendix A) but must do so without access to funds raised through local school district tax levies or those dedicated for school facilities. Charter schools will continue to struggle to serve the high-needs students they enroll until the state takes a hard look at how it funds these independent public schools. Washington State should improve the parity between charter and district per-pupil funding, including giving charter schools access to levy funds. The state can also consider policies that would encourage or require district schools to lease unused facilities to charter schools. Under current Washington State law, districts must provide a right of first refusal to charter schools and lease the properties at fair market value. In practice, however, districts have not been willing to do this, even when it would be financially beneficial. We **recommend** that Washington establish clearer language about why, when, and how districts should provide facility space to charter schools. The state could also offer incentives for districts that lease space to charter schools, such as conferring credit for charter school success in state accountability measures.

School Vignettes

The stories that follow highlight the ways in which Washington State's charter schools support students with disabilities in general education classrooms. At Summit Sierra, all students, including those with disabilities, have access to a mentor who helps them navigate school assignments and post-high school planning. At Impact | Puget Sound Elementary, social-emotional learning is integrated into everything students do. At Rainier Valley Leadership Academy, families are included as partners in the education of students with disabilities. PRIDE Schools use a project-based learning instructional model which facilitates the differentiation of course content and assignments.

All parent and student names in all school vignettes are pseudonyms.

Lessons from Washington Public Charter Schools

Summit Sierra Public School

Summit Sierra Public School

Mentors help students navigate high school and prepare for adulthood.

LOCATION	Seattle, WA
CURRENT GRADE SPAN	9–12
YEAR OPENED	2015
SCHOOL ENROLLMENT †	345
ENROLLMENT OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES	63 (16.4%)
SPECIAL EDUCATION DISTRIBUTION*	<p>Summit: Other Health Impairment: 44%, Specific Learning Disabilities: 37%, Autism: 11%, Emotional Disturbance: 8%, Emotional Disturbance: 0%, Communication Disorder: 0%, Intellectual Disability: 0%, Developmental Delay: 0%, Multiple Disabilities: 0%.</p> <p>WA State: Other Health Impairment: 21%, Specific Learning Disabilities: 37%, Autism: 11%, Emotional Disturbance: 4%, Emotional Disturbance: 4%, Communication Disorder: 13%, Intellectual Disability: 4%, Developmental Delay: 7%, Multiple Disabilities: 4%.</p>

† School enrollment data from the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Report Cards, 2019-20.

* Data reported by school during site visit in spring 2019. Washington State data from 2018, provided by the True Measure Collaborative.

Summit Sierra Public School in Seattle uses a proficiency-based curriculum. Students advance through a series of projects, lessons, and assessments based on their mastery of the material. But for the model to work, students must set priorities and know when and how to reach out for help when they need it. Mentors at Summit Sierra support students in developing these executive functioning skills, which they will need to be successful in college and the workplace. During regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings, mentors teach students how to navigate assignments in high school. Mentors also work with students in peer groups to develop cooperation and self-reflection through weekly social-emotional lessons.

The mentor program is an example of a universal accommodation: all students have time with their mentor, which destigmatizes the individualized support that students with disabilities often receive. However, scheduling changes networkwide in the 2019–2020 school year put mentor time in conflict with Learning Center time, which students with disabilities use to catch up on assignments and receive targeted support. The reason for the networkwide change was to increase the amount of time special educators could devote to case management and push-in support, but it has also resulted in students having to choose between time with their mentor or Learning Center. The change highlights the time and capacity pressures a school faces as it tries to embrace an inclusive model, and the need to always put students at the center in special education.

Jameela's Story

For most of her school career, Jameela Curtis knew she would eventually go to college. She wasn't sure where she would go, and she didn't foresee all the obstacles that might come up along the way.

But Curtis's parents had made it clear that she would follow in the footsteps of her older brother, who graduated from Drexel University with the help of a basketball scholarship. They helped her enroll in a public school that shared those ambitions not only for her, but for all students with Individualized Education Plans, or IEPs.

Curtis, 19, was part of the first graduating class at Summit Sierra High School in June 2019, and among the first high school seniors to graduate from a public charter school in Washington State. That fall, she traveled across the country to attend Virginia State University.

On Summit Sierra's campus in Seattle's International District, classrooms surround a large, multipurpose room filled with long tables. Students in the classrooms receive direct instruction, work together in small groups, or complete quizzes and assignments on a computer. All students work on projects and assessments at their own pace and can move on to more advanced content as soon as they're ready.

Every school in the Summit network, which originated in California, uses the Summit Learning Platform. The online repository of packaged curriculum with readings, videos, assignments, and assessments is the basis of all class content. Teachers use it to modify curriculum and project requirements. It also acts as connective tissue: teachers, students, and parents can log in to track how students are doing.

A typical school day includes a combination of independent work on projects, direct instruction, small-group work, and one-on-one sessions with teachers. During elective periods, some students with disabilities go to a Learning Center. Students use the time to catch up on work or work one-on-one and in groups with special education teachers.

Mentors Guide Students

To be successful, students must take responsibility for managing their time, finishing projects, and meeting their learning goals. Those skills will be necessary in college, but they don't always come easily to new high school students.

To support students while they build the skills they need, Summit assigns every student in 9th grade a teacher mentor. Mentors check in with students, individually and in small groups, to set

academic goals, keep tabs on projects, troubleshoot areas where students are struggling, and help them apply to colleges.

Mentors lead weekly sessions in social-emotional learning and guide students through community-building activities. The mentor groups, which include students with disabilities, provide students with a social anchor throughout their time at Summit Sierra.

In the first few weeks at Summit Sierra, Jameela Curtis was confused by the school's Summit platform. Like many students when they first come to the school, she struggled to manage her time and complete assignments. But her mentor, Stefan Sobiek, could see where she needed help by looking at the Summit platform.

"He had seen that really no work was being done," Curtis said. "He talked to me and he was like, 'What's going on here, Jameela?'"

Those conversations continued, sometimes weekly, sometimes more often, until she graduated. "Whenever I'd feel really, really stressed, I'd talk to Sobiek about what's going on, and he'd help me brainstorm some ideas, like what could help the situation," she said.

Sobiek helped Curtis develop a plan to work through her projects, piece by piece. They scheduled meetings during his office hours or lunch. They'd talk about what grades she would need to get to college. They'd talk about what steps she could take to get those grades. Over time, he asked Curtis about her college plans. He learned she was looking at historically black colleges and universities (HBCU), and arranged for a panel of HBCU representatives to visit the school.

Each mentor at Summit works with a group of 22 to 26 students. The groups are designed to be diverse—to blend male and female students, for example, and those with high academic achievement with those who are further behind.

Eighteen percent of Summit Sierra students have IEPs, compared to a state average of approximately twelve percent. Summit's mentors play a crucial role in helping these students—and others with different learning needs—prepare for life after high school, whether to develop executive-level skills, navigate assignments, or enroll in college.

Erik Luebbers, who oversees Summit's special education services in Washington State, said assigning mentors to every student "destigmatizes support." Every student at Summit meets one-on-one with adults from time to time. As a result, he said, "Students who need a lot of individualizing don't feel very different from other students."

Teacher Responsiveness

Students with disabilities also have dedicated special education case managers who develop their IEPs. For these students, mentors and case managers form twin pillars of support. Mentors are the keepers of student relationships. They serve as points of contact for families, and are often the go-to source for other teachers seeking global insight into an individual student's needs. For this model to work, mentors and case managers must collaborate closely. Mentors typically don't have as much training in special education, so they need to know when to forward students' questions to the case manager. Staff at Summit Sierra noted this wasn't a conflict at their school.

Jameela Curtis had an IEP that said she needed extra help with reading, writing, and math. Some concepts involving words and numbers just don't "stick" with her right away. But she said she's made too much progress with advanced math, and seen too many classmates exit

their IEPs entirely, to accept any fixed limits on what she can accomplish academically. “People kind of expect kids with IEPs to not perform so well, but an IEP doesn’t mean you’ll have an IEP forever,” she said.

The mentor model is built within a school culture of problem-solving and responsiveness. The mentor acts as a resource hub. Teachers and parents both go to the mentor for guidance, but mentors also are on hand to support students.

One of Curtis’s biggest stumbling blocks came in math. She felt like she hated the subject. Sobiek advised her to find her math teacher during her office hours. Curtis sought out her teacher during the school’s open-door policy and then began a painstaking process of revisiting fundamental math skills that didn’t stick earlier in her school career. By junior year, she conquered precalculus. She took a stab at AP calculus senior year, and while she didn’t pass the exam, she plans to attack the subject again during her first year of college.

Looking back, Curtis said she learned a lesson that may prove as important to her academic future as mastering sinusoidal functions. She had to advocate for herself, and learned that it was okay to reach out to teachers privately when she needed help.

Her mentor has already coached her on what it will mean to advocate for herself when she gets to college—if she needs some extra support or has to meet with a professor. She and Sobiek floated the idea of monthly video check-ins once college was underway.

If Curtis had gone to a typical public high school, she said, she might have gotten help finding a college, taking her entrance exams, and applying. But the mentor relationship, which lasted from freshman year through her transition to college, set her experience at Summit apart from those of students at other high schools.

“Those resources would still be there,” she said. “but I feel like nobody would be pushing me enough to actually meet my full potential.”

Lessons from Washington Public Charter Schools

Impact | Puget Sound Elementary

Impact | Puget Sound Elementary

Integrating social-emotional learning into the fabric of the school.

LOCATION	Tukwila, WA
CURRENT GRADE SPAN	K-2
YEAR OPENED	2018
SCHOOL ENROLLMENT †	285
ENROLLMENT OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES	4.2%
SPECIAL EDUCATION DISTRIBUTION	Too few students to provide a distribution and protect student identities.

† School enrollment data from the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Report Cards, 2019–20.

Puget Sound Elementary is the first school opened by Impact Public Schools, a nonprofit organization that puts social-emotional learning at the core of what they do. The school serves a young student population, and relatively few children have received special education evaluations. Through integrated emotional, behavioral, and academic supports, Impact | Puget Sound Elementary puts systems in place to meet the needs of all students, including those with disabilities, in a general education setting.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the first thing students do when they arrive at Impact | Puget Sound Elementary each day. This emphasis on interpersonal relationships strengthens bonds among the school's culturally diverse student population. The integration of SEL did not happen by accident. Before opening their school, the founders of Impact Public Schools took time to customize their SEL curriculum that other charter schools have successfully used. SEL efforts were overseen by Impact Public Schools' chief academic officer, who also guided staff through their own SEL activities. At this school, they are more than an add-on to academic programs. They are central.

Educating the Whole Child

On a February morning in Pranati Kumar's kindergarten classroom, 12 students finish their morning circle. It's one boy's turn to show appreciation. He stands in the middle of the circle and directs his gaze to another boy, who is still seated.

"Please join me in the circle," he says. The other boy stands up and the two lock eyes.

"I appreciate you, because when I fall at recess, you always pick me up," the first boy says. "That makes me feel safe." The two embrace and sit back down.

This appreciation exercise is one staple of the Friday morning ritual at Impact | Puget Sound Elementary.

The school is a new and growing addition to one of the nation's youngest charter school sectors. The weekly circles are one of the ways Impact Public Schools weaves SEL into the DNA of its schools. Each day at Impact | Puget Sound Elementary begins with just over half an hour devoted to SEL. During circles, students put those lessons into action. One at a time, they tell their classmates about things that are happening in their lives, and how those events make them feel.

In a first-grade classroom, one student was welcoming a new baby brother into her family. Her teacher asked other students to flash a thumbs up if they had a brother, too. Another announced he'd gotten hurt playing at home the day before, and asked his classmates to come play with him at recess to help him feel better.

"Let's all show [him] some love," his teacher said. The students twinkled their fingers in his direction.

With their teachers' help, students are learning to affirm the feelings their classmates share (we understand you were hurt) and validate them (it's OK, I'd be hurt too if that happened to me).

Building a Community

Impact Public Schools leaders also want to equip students with nonacademic skills so they will be able to overcome setbacks, defuse conflicts, and relate to people with different perspectives. To meet those objectives, it has set out to create schools where SEL is not an add-on, but a central part of the institution.

"A lot of us have worked in schools around the country that have done rigorous academics, and done that well, and we think rigorous academics are very important," said Abigail Cedano, chief academic officer at Impact Public Schools.

"We are really creating an environment that does both—that has the rigorous academics, but also sets [students] up for success in life," Cedano said. "If our goal is to create leaders of the future, they need to be well-adjusted, happy, supportive adults. We feel like [the SEL work] lays a foundation for all the academic work we're doing."

The daily social-emotional activities help the school support students who have trauma or identified disabilities, as well as ensure every classroom is a welcoming environment for every student—which helps support students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

Baionne Coleman, a founding school leader, designed Impact Public School's original social-emotional curriculum to be anti-racist—to avoid the cultural stereotypes she saw in some off-

the-shelf SEL programs. The community at Impact | Puget Sound Elementary spans a diverse range of cultures. Located a 10-minute drive from Seattle International Airport, it enrolls students who are immigrants and refugees from all over the world—including Asia, Africa, and Central America.

Coleman, who has since left Impact Public Schools and now leads Rainier Valley Leadership Academy, said the school's SEL lessons are designed to help teachers relate to diverse groups of students and counteract biases they may not know they have. They help students form close bonds across language and culture barriers that, in turn, help bring their parents together. When their children are friends, parents are more likely to connect during family potlucks and other activities hosted by the school.

“Our model is all about relationships,” Coleman said. “Not only should all our scholars feel like they have strong relationships in the building, but our families should feel like they have strong relationships as well.”

Coleman said the activities helped reduce discipline issues—especially among students with behavior intervention plans and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Above all, the program equips young students with the skills and language they will use throughout their academic careers and as adults.

The school only serves elementary-age students. As a result, few students have identified IEPs. But Coleman said she saw the model help some students, including one with autism, relate to their peers and overcome some anxiety-related behaviors.

“Saying my name, signaling that I’m a part of this community—that in itself is powerful,” said Coleman. “The entire community is accountable for the feelings that they’re sharing together.”

Having the Freedom to Design Their Own Curriculum

Educators increasingly see the value in explicitly teaching relationship-building skills. They hope to cultivate skills that will allow students to understand their emotions, regulate them, and communicate them effectively with others.

Their motivations vary. They hope to support learning for students who may be affected by trauma, or who fall through the cracks of the education, healthcare, and child welfare systems. They hope to help students from diverse cultural backgrounds form stronger social bonds. They hope to reduce discipline problems or support inclusion for children with disabilities.

As a result, SEL has become a staple of conferences and teacher training sessions across the country.

But the founders of Impact | Puget Sound Elementary recognized that no off-the-shelf curriculum would meet all their needs. They selected two different programs, Second Step and Compass, which students use for different activities each day. Every Monday, students participate in empathy lessons from Second Step. On Tuesdays, teachers read stories aloud and lead students in activities where they draw inferences about the feelings and emotions of the characters. The week's lessons culminate in Friday circles, where students apply the skills they learned.

The Compass program was first developed by Valor Collegiate Academy, a diverse-by-design charter school in Nashville. Coleman modified the Compass circle protocol for elementary

students to focus on SEL and character development. Impact is part of a collaborative effort among charter school organizations across the country that are working to refine the Compass program.

Administrators observe teachers and coach them on SEL, the same way they would in core academic subjects. Leaders at Impact Public Schools observe the weekly circles using a walk-through checklist adapted from Valor, and meet afterward to discuss areas where teachers need coaching. They make note of teachers' tone and body language. They track data, like the "positivity ratio": the number of times teachers affirm what kids say, or send positive feedback, compared to how often teachers must address behavior.

Each month, adults at Impact | Puget Sound Elementary take part in circles of their own. School leaders believe that supporting students' emotional needs is everyone's responsibility and educators must grow comfortable sharing their own feelings if they want to encourage students to do the same.

SEL doesn't stop when morning activities end. If students struggle in math, they recite mantras to help motivate themselves. Students began the school year with "thank you week," where they were encouraged to show gratitude, and teachers would ask them to pause and write down things they were thankful for. The skills students learn during their SEL time are reinforced throughout the day, in their academic work, and in social interactions.

Impact Public Schools' Abigail Cedano participates in the circles along with every other adult. Just like academic skills, Cedano came to understand that social-emotional skills must be reinforced with practice. And that steady reinforcement helps ensure students have a safe environment, even when few adults are watching. "If it's really part of the DNA of the school, then kids are able to use [their skills] at recess, on the bus, and places where, traditionally, a lot of negativity comes up," she said.

Lessons from Washington Public Charter Schools

Rainier Valley Leadership Academy

Rainier Valley Leadership Academy

Partnering with parents for student success.

LOCATION	Seattle, WA
CURRENT GRADE SPAN	6-10
YEAR OPENED	2017
SCHOOL ENROLLMENT †	320
ENROLLMENT OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES	18.1%
SPECIAL EDUCATION DISTRIBUTION*	<p>RVLA: Specific Learning Disabilities: 44%, Other Health Impairment: 35%, Autism: 12%, Speech or Language Impairment: 6%, Intellectual Disability: 3%, Emotional Disorder: 0%, Developmental Delay: 0%, Multiple Disabilities: 0%.</p> <p>WA State: Specific Learning Disabilities: 37%, Other Health Impairment: 21%, Autism: 11%, Speech or Language Impairment: 13%, Intellectual Disability: 4%, Emotional Disorder: 4%, Developmental Delay: 7%, Multiple Disabilities: 4%.</p>

† School enrollment data from the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Report Cards, 2019-20.

* Data reported by school during site visit in spring 2019. Washington State data from 2018, provided by the True Measure Collaborative.

Strong, trusting relationships between teachers, students, and parents are a hallmark of charter schools with strong outcomes for students with disabilities. At Rainier Valley Leadership Academy, families provide input on Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals. Families reported being in regular contact with teachers and administration. The school invites parents to attend school assemblies throughout the year that celebrate student progress, which included progress on meeting IEP goals.

All this has helped the school build trust with families, who have supported the school as it transitioned from a Green Dot charter school to an independently operated nonprofit. Rainier Valley Leadership Academy opened as a school led by a local nonprofit board and part of the Green Dot network, which is based in California. In the 2019–2020 school year, the school severed ties with Green Dot and transitioned to being governed only by the local board.

Darrell's Story

Cheryl Johnson's son Darrell started reading at age four. But as he got older, his struggles with school began to grow. He had trouble focusing. He would recall details of stories, but struggled to place them in order. One time, Darrell failed a test but seemed to recall the material later when he talked with his mother.

When he was in 4th grade, Darrell's school identified him as being eligible for special education services. But his mother realized he was being given work far below his grade level. The next year, his troubles seemed to worsen. One day Darrell came home crying. His teacher had made him sign a letter that read: "I will not be a successful adult if I continue to goof off."

Johnson, who had guided two older children through Seattle Public Schools, knew she would have to try something different for her youngest. She wanted a learning environment that could accommodate Darrell's needs and still challenge him academically. But she couldn't afford a private school, and she wasn't sure homeschooling would be feasible. She considered moving to another school district.

"I felt like he would fall through the cracks," she said.

Through the local Boys and Girls Club, she learned about another option that had just become available. A new charter school, Rainier Valley Leadership Academy (RVLA), was about to open in South Seattle. At that time—summer 2017—the legal status of charter schools in Washington State was still uncertain. RVLA was also fighting to clear zoning and construction hurdles for a permanent building. In the meantime, it had set up a temporary site in a collection of trailers next to a grocery store.

The new school recruited parents like Johnson, who were willing to take a chance on a fledgling operation where the adults demonstrated that they wanted to engage parents as partners. Johnson also thought the smaller classes, individualized attention, and commitment to preparing all students for college would help her son from falling through the cracks.

Working With the Family to Meet Students' Needs

"It wasn't a specific formula," said Claire Finders, RVLA's special education director. "It truly was individualized educational planning."

The school tried to place students with special needs in as many general education classes as possible. Approximately one-fifth of the students in its inaugural class had IEPs. Many who enrolled in 6th grade had been used to more isolated special education settings. "Many simply hadn't had that general education opportunity," Finders said. "When they were given that, they rose up."

RVLA's demonstrated efforts to embrace students with diverse needs begin before a student enrolls. The school dedicates two adult staff members to each incoming class of students as advisors who help students set academic goals. The advisors meet with each parent before the school year starts.

Walter Chen, RVLA's principal in 2018–2019, said these meetings helped the school engage with families proactively so they don't feel like they were only contacted when there was a problem. Administrators have led teachers in role-playing exercises to ensure they have positive, supportive meetings with parents.

As a new school of choice, Chen said, "We have to build trust."

During the first few weeks of the school year, Darrell's teachers and advisor started talking to him about goals. They wanted him to maintain a B average and stay on top of his assignments. His social studies teacher allowed him to walk around when he needed to release pent-up energy.

When Darrell misbehaved, he went through "recommitment"—a process of learning how to reconcile his behavior with the school's six values, known as the "RECIPE for success"—rather than winding up in detention or a secluded room.

Johnson monitored her son's assignments using the Schoolrunner app and Google Classroom. She texted and emailed with teachers whenever she had questions. She became a regular presence at the school. And teachers showed interest in Darrell's life outside of the classroom. Some staff even showed up at his youth football games.

"You see that they care about you as a person," she said. And that helped Darrell meet one of their goals: to succeed with grade-level content. "He did amazingly well, doing 6th-grade work in 6th grade, even though he was doing pullout classes before," she said.

Communicating About Learning Goals

The strong working relationships extend to how the school works with families to set goals for students with IEPs and figure out how to meet them. RVLA adopted a network routine of staff reviewing students' IEP goals quarterly. They celebrate students' growth toward IEP goals, along with other student achievements at schoolwide assemblies. The school also invites parents to the assemblies so they can see how their children are doing.

School leaders said they hope setting reachable goals, carefully monitoring progress, and celebrating accomplishments will help build students' confidence.

However, the process of communicating with parents, collaborating with them on IEP goals, and catering to parents who frequently show up on campus may take a toll on school staff. During our visit to RVLA, we found the school struggles to preserve time for collaboration and planning, placing a premium on teachers' workloads.

Still, their efforts appear to be paying off. RVLA reports that their students with IEPs have higher growth rates on state assessments than the state average. While the process has at times been messy, school leaders have worked to respond to students' needs on the fly.

In fall 2019, RVLA began to partner with the Seneca Family of Agencies to implement its "Unconditional Education" model, which is designed to support students affected by trauma and other mental health needs. Finders, the special education director, said constantly evolving to meet students' needs has been one of the young school's strengths.

"We are trying to create positivity," she said. "We can modify. We can adapt. We can change things based on needs that we see."

Lessons from Washington Public Charter Schools

PRIDE Schools

PRIDE Schools

Using a project-based approach to differentiate learning for all students.

LOCATION	Spokane, WA
CURRENT GRADE SPAN	6–11
YEAR OPENED	2015
SCHOOL ENROLLMENT [†]	568
ENROLLMENT OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES	17.8%
SPECIAL EDUCATION DISTRIBUTION*	<p>PRIDE: Other Health Impairment: 38%, Specific Learning Disabilities: 36%, Autism: 12%, Speech or Language Impairment: 6%, Other Disabilities: 6%, Intellectual Disability: 2%, Emotional Disturbance: 1%, Developmental Delay: 0%.</p> <p>WA State: Other Health Impairment: 21%, Specific Learning Disabilities: 37%, Autism: 11%, Speech or Language Impairment: 13%, Other Disabilities: 4%, Intellectual Disability: 4%, Emotional Disturbance: 4%, Developmental Delay: 7%.</p>

[†] School enrollment data from the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Report Cards, 2019–20.

* Data reported by school during site visit in spring 2019. Washington State data from 2018, provided by the True Measure Collaborative.

PRIDE Schools, founded by a respected district school leader and former special education teacher, uses a project-based learning approach created by its teachers that has resulted in an inclusive environment for students who are looking for a different learning experience.

As a result, PRIDE Schools has attracted students who have not found a good fit with traditional education—those who are gifted, creative, or formerly homeschooled. A number of these students also have mild to moderate disabilities. The school's project-based learning experience gives educators the freedom to meet the diverse needs of students within an academically inclusive environment.

General education teachers balance direct learning and an International Baccalaureate curriculum in high school with projects differentiated by interest and skill. General and special education teachers work in loose networks, reaching out to one another to brainstorm solutions for students. The school's founder consciously created a culture where the responsibility for educating students with disabilities is not relegated to the special education department—it is the work of all adults in the building.

A Different Path

When Brenda McDonald started PRIDE Schools, she knew it would have to be different.

She'd spent years as an educator and principal for Spokane Public Schools in Spokane, Washington. When a state ballot initiative authorizing charter schools passed in 2012, McDonald jumped at the opportunity to start her own school and began working on a charter application.

She envisioned a small school where students and teachers worked together to create a project-based learning experience, and where educators had the freedom to meet the diverse needs of students who might have gotten lost in the shuffle of a traditional, comprehensive middle or high school—whether they were gifted, had learning disabilities, or were dealing with trauma.

Located near the Idaho border, Spokane is the commercial hub of eastern Washington. Nearly nine in ten students in Spokane Public Schools graduate high school.

“We have pretty decent schools in Spokane,” McDonald said. “We don’t have a lot of violence in our schools. The average kid does fine in school. I wanted to make sure that I built something that was significantly different than the traditional system.”

When McDonald surveyed the city’s educational landscape, most of the schools looked pretty much the same. She wanted all students to have a chance to prepare for college, but she imagined a different way of getting there.

In 2015, the alternative she set out to create in the heart of pioneer country became one of the state’s first charter schools—and one of the first two authorized by Spokane Public Schools.

McDonald, previously a special education teacher, has woven the understanding that students learn in different ways into the fabric of the new school. Her vision is a place where students with mild to moderate disabilities are fully included in classrooms alongside their peers. A middle school and a high school share a brick building next to some railroad tracks that trace the shores of the Spokane River. One special education teacher told us that the school’s project-based model can be a boon for students with mild to moderate disabilities.

“In science, they’re always building something. In humanities, they take a lot of gallery walks where the kids can get up and walk around,” one special education teacher told us when we visited her campus last year. “It’s not just sitting at a desk or listening to a teacher, they have more activities and projects—more chances to think alone and then talk it out.”

Building an Environment of Universal Accomodation

On paper, PRIDE Schools enroll slightly fewer students with Individualized Education Programs (IEP), fewer students from low-income households, and fewer students experiencing homelessness than the Spokane School District. This stands in contrast with charter schools in Seattle and Tacoma, which have tended to draw disproportionate shares of these students.

But overall, leaders say the school has attracted students who want something different. The school's project-based approach and free-flowing atmosphere, where students are constantly mixing and adults are constantly collaborating, has become a magnet for students with autism, those who are gifted, and those who were previously homeschooled.

In a state with [one of the nation's lowest rates](#) of students with disabilities spending time in general education classrooms, many parents say they are drawn to the school's commitment to integrating students with disabilities with their peers, both socially and academically.

The school offers regular, dedicated classes, as required by student IEPs. In addition, special education teachers push into classrooms, offering help to students who need it—whether they have a disability or not. Teachers also operate small, ad-hoc pull-out groups that are not based on disability; students are identified because they share a common need during a particular project or unit.

The special education teacher described the school's approach as a commitment to “universal accommodation.” A special education teacher might show a student with disabilities how to use a graphic organizer to improve note-taking. But that same technique can help other students who are struggling to grasp the material because the accommodations are unobtrusive.

Teachers reported students weren't always aware of who has a disability. “I feel like a lot of our students are thriving because of that, because they aren't singled out, it's like, ‘I'm in my class with my peers, and I can do this,’” one special education teacher said. “I think that's a huge confidence booster.”

A general education math teacher agreed: “Inclusion is something different here,” he said.

It's not just about academics: inclusion infuses every aspect of the school, including social interactions between students. Students with disabilities are not treated differently by their peers.

A Partnership Model

Leaders at the local school district have taken notice, and said the school seems to work especially well for students on the autism spectrum. “There are no two kids with autism that are exactly the same,” Jeanette Vaughn, then leader of Spokane's charter school office, told us. PRIDE Schools accommodate those differences well. “If a student has a particular strength in, say, math, they can move on through math and they're not stuck in their grade-level math class. The adaptability, I think, of PRIDE really serves kids with autism well.”

Spokane Public Schools is the only district willing to authorize charter schools. The district has helped three local charter schools get off the ground. McDonald, as a former 20-year district employee, found willing partners in the district office. They helped the school run its lunch program in the early years and sold surplus equipment at a discount. Vaughn said closeness and collaboration have improved oversight. “I think that advantage is the local relationship,” she said.

This ethos of collaboration permeates the school's culture, and helps blur the lines between general and special education.

Teachers collaborate with one another and with administrators. Teachers routinely meet in “success teams” that bring general and special educators together. Success teams flag students with low grades, and work together to figure out what supports those students need. The

success teams help all students, but they help teachers identify ways they can better support students with special needs.

This approach is led by the teachers themselves. Just as students in classrooms work with one another and their teacher to define content, teachers and administrators at PRIDE schools collaborate as partners, rather than in a top-down relationship.

McDonald herself is constantly circulating, checking in with students and teachers. She has an office, but she is rarely there. Instead, she is in the school's communal teacher café / lounge, in another administrator's office, or in the hallway with a student. The school's belief in collaboration and co-creation has allowed it to evolve as needed.

PRIDE Innovation High School adopted the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum, which ensured rigor by creating a structure around its project-based curriculum. The district is now launching an IB program of its own. Last school year, the district invited IB experts to advise its own educators, as well as those in its charter schools.

During its first few years PRIDE Schools literally had no walls. But the noise was overwhelming for students and teachers. Now, when visitors enter the 15,000-square-foot brick building in a nondescript shopping strip, they encounter a warren of ad hoc gathering spaces, with walls that don't quite reach the ceiling. The evolution of its physical space embodies the spirit of PRIDE schools itself. Working together. Being resourceful. Including everyone, and constantly adapting.

Lessons from Washington Public Charter Schools

SOAR Academy

SOAR Academy

Financial struggles force the closure of an innovative model.

LOCATION	Tacoma, WA
CURRENT GRADE SPAN	K-5
YEAR OPENED	2015
SCHOOL ENROLLMENT †	200
ENROLLMENT OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES	16.5%
SPECIAL EDUCATION DISTRIBUTION*	<p>SOAR: Other Disabilities: 40%, Other Health Impairment: 18%, Specific Learning Disabilities: 15%, Speech or Language Impairment: 15%, Emotional Disturbance: 6%, Autism: 6%, Communication Disorder: 0%, Intellectual Disability: 0%, Developmental Delay: 0%.</p> <p>WA State: Other Disabilities: 4%, Other Health Impairment: 21%, Specific Learning Disabilities: 37%, Speech or Language Impairment: 13%, Emotional Disturbance: 4%, Autism: 11%, Communication Disorder: 13%, Intellectual Disability: 4%, Developmental Delay: 7%.</p>

† School enrollment data and from the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Report Cards, 2018-19.

* Data reported by school during site visit in spring 2019. Washington State data from 2018, provided by the True Measure Collaborative.

SOAR Academy in Tacoma set out to educate students affected by trauma within an environment that supports rather than punishes students.

*A cornerstone of their model was a version of the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) model¹ developed by the California-based Seneca Family of Agencies.² Seneca's *Unconditional Education* model includes a coordination of services team (COST): a team of staff and teachers develop eight-week academic, social-emotional, and behavioral interventions for general education students who are identified as needing additional support.*

The school's efforts were thwarted when they lacked funding to staff the school as they envisioned it. These and other challenges ultimately resulted in the school's closure in June 2019.

Worthwhile Program that Failed Financially

SOAR Academy began with a vision: to meet the needs of students who have faced trauma. That vision fell victim to financial reality in January 2019, when the K–5 charter school's board voted to close it and give families enough time to look for a new school in the upcoming year.

SOAR Academy set out to educate every student in the same classroom setting. The school did not suspend or expel students, and it used pull-out classes sparingly. To support both approaches, leadership placed two adults in every classroom. Aides were on hand to work with students or take them into the hall if they needed space and time to de-escalate. The school also instituted a Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to meet students' social and behavioral needs.

Thelma Jackson, chair of the SOAR Academy Board of Directors, had spent four decades working to improve educational equity in Washington State. She saw three prior ballot initiatives to legalize charter schools fail before the fourth one succeeded. In an interview, she said that the school tried to get to the root of why students misbehave, which prevented them from learning.

Data are scarce on how SOAR's students fared academically. When the board voted to close the school in January, only one year of third-grade test data were available. Still, Jackson saw glimmers of promise during the school's four years of operation. "We were just knocking down myths," she said. "The myth that families of color aren't interested in the education of their children—that's not true. . . . We can't find quality teachers of color? Well, we found them."

The school chose its first location in Tacoma's Hilltop neighborhood, where Jackson said nearly a third of families live in poverty. About a quarter were identified by Washington State as mobile and one in ten were homeless. Nearly four in five were families of color. The school enrolled a disproportionate share of children with disabilities—17 percent of students had Individualized Education Programs (IEP), compared to 15 percent in the surrounding Tacoma Public Schools.

Integrated Supports for Any Student

From the school's inception, SOAR's leadership contracted with the Seneca Family of Agencies to provide social services to the school's students. The nonprofit organization, based in Oakland,

¹ MTSS operates on the principle that all students in a school should receive supports appropriate to their level. Universal supports, such as behavior systems and differentiated instruction, are referred to as Tier 1 and form the foundation of good instruction. Tier 2 consists of targeted supports for students who are struggling academically, behaviorally, or emotionally. Tier 3 supports are intensive interventions identified in students' IEPs.

² Seneca Family of Agencies is a California-based nonprofit that has operated in Washington State since 2015 to deliver special education supports to both district and charter schools in the South Puget Sound region.

California, had developed a new approach to schooling, known as Unconditional Education, or UE.

Seneca developed UE in response to lessons its founders learned running residential care facilities in California for students with profound mental health challenges. Its leaders grew frustrated that the educational, health care, and social-service systems that were supposed to help these students were stymied by the fact that they operated in silos. They eventually recognized that if they could partner with schools, they could catch problems early—or even prevent them.

To do that, they needed to break down walls that divided general education from special education, and schools from social service providers. For students who did not have identified disabilities, but had profound mental health needs, the school created a Coordination-of-Service Team, or COST.

Seneca views COST as a staple of the UE model. The teams bring together special education teachers, general education teachers, mental health professionals, and other adults who often operate in separate silos within schools. The teams develop individualized intervention plans for students, and meet at least every eight weeks to track their progress and revisit the plans as needed.

Their model of universal support aligned with the founder's and board's vision of a school that could provide the wrap-around services they believed their students would need to address the root causes of student misbehavior and make academic success possible.

The approach resonated with Katrina Carleton, who grew up in the Hilltop area and became SOAR's systems and supports manager. In an interview at SOAR Academy in the spring, she explained how the model worked for one student, without giving his name.

He had cycled through 35 different foster care placements. During the 2017–2018 school year, he missed six months of school. When he made it to class, he acted out. He often wound up being comforted by an adult in the hallway.

His teachers referred him to COST. The team looked at everything the child was going through: academics, behavior, disabilities, mental health, home life. To spend more time with his peers, he needed help managing anger. The team decided he needed extra coaching for coping skills.

His teachers created a behavior tracker. If he managed to stay in class, he could earn points and qualify for special privileges—snacks, lunch with staff, a few minutes to play video games. Eventually, the staff pooled their resources and bought a gaming console for him. He had something that belonged to him. He saw adults who cared. “It doesn't necessarily look the same for all students, but I think it's really understanding each kid as an individual,” Carleton said.

His behavior began to stabilize. Eventually, he achieved a streak of 40 days staying in the classroom. By that spring, Carleton said, “That is a very different student than what we saw four, five months ago.” It had become clear: “He can still be successful in school.”

As his teachers were celebrating his progress, the student's foster placement changed again, and they worried he'd have to leave the school. When they found out he could remain at SOAR, they hugged in the hallway.

Reaching Out to a Community for Support

SOAR leadership recognized early on that it needed help to educate the students it planned to enroll. Most of their students had been suspended, or even expelled—often in kindergarten—before they had ever entered SOAR's doors. Students came in with IEPs from an early age, often with behavioral disturbance.

The school tried to form relationships with community agencies and the local school district, Tacoma Public Schools, but there was little community health infrastructure and the district lacked the capacity to form a partnership.

So the school reached out to Seneca. Lihi Rosenthal, who at the time was Seneca's executive director of education, said the organization is "completely agnostic" about the kinds of public schools where it does its work. The organization also partners with Seattle Public Schools.

At SOAR, a startup, Seneca had a chance to implement its entire UE program from the ground up. However, the school lacked the funding to maintain the partnership. The school relied on private donations to help fill that gap. But that support was only temporary, and when it ran out, it brought other funding challenges to the fore. The school also had to pay rent for its facility.

It tried to mitigate that expense by leaving its original Hilltop location and sharing a building with Green Dot Destiny Middle School—which also announced plans to close at the end of the 2018–2019 school year for similar reasons. Working in any school—district or charter—that has existed for decades poses a problem for social service agencies: "You're working within systems that were never designed around every student," Rosenthal said.

Our School's Closure Reveals Systemic Gaps

SOAR Academy's closure highlights some challenges faced by Washington State's young charter school sector, but it ultimately raises broader questions about the state's resources that support students' mental health needs and special education programs at all kinds of public schools. The state has one of the nation's lowest inclusion rates for students with disabilities,³ a funding system that doesn't allocate resources based on students' needs, and a cap on funding for special education.

The school made dogged efforts to reach out to and collaborate, when possible, with local resources to do what many schools hope—attend to a host of student needs and allow teachers to focus on building academic skills.

As a charter school, SOAR faced some structural disadvantages. School districts levy local property taxes to support their operations. But charter schools in Washington State don't have access to that funding. The state only funds up to 13.5 percent of students with disabilities. SOAR enrolled more than that, so the school had to cover additional expenses from their general education fund.

The school's partnership with Seneca Family of Agencies, which it paid to staff special education and implement the UE model, was expensive—especially with just 200 students. "In order to deal with that child, it's an expensive model," Jackson said. "You settle down the behavior, you get to the root causes of what's going on, and it's amazing, in a year or two, to see the growth

³ Table 13 within Part B "Child Count and Educational Environments" says Washington State has one of the top 10 highest rates of students with disabilities spending more than 80 percent of their time in specialized classrooms.

of that child, and how calm and settled down. And then that brilliance begins to break through, that you didn't have a chance to see, because all you saw was this out-of-control kid."

In California, Seneca partners with schools that keep counselors and social workers on site, where they can coordinate with teachers and address problems with students as soon as they arise. These workers may be employed by the school, a nonprofit organization, a county health department, or a combination. They bill some of their work to Medicaid, and some to private health insurance if students have it. Schools can cover other services through their own budgets.

"If there's a student, and they need help, we fund it with the appropriate funding stream," Ken Berrick, Seneca's founder, said in an interview. "The student shouldn't have to figure out what funding stream they need in order to get help."

In Washington State, however, Seneca was not able to gain approval as a Medicaid provider in Pierce County by the 2018–2019 school year. SOAR Academy was unable to find other county or nonprofit agencies who could place staff directly in schools. As a result, counselors on staff were paid through the school's general budget.

SOAR Academy's challenges were not only financial. The school had regular leadership changes, starting in its first year of operation. The emphasis on social and behavioral supports, while necessary, sometimes placed academics on the back burner. In its last year of operation, only 17 percent of students showed growth in English; 36 percent posted gains in math.

SOAR's partnership with Seneca placed a great financial burden on the school, especially with an enrollment of just 200 students. Jackson acknowledged that SOAR's program was "an expensive model" because of the amount of staffing it required (two adults per classroom) and the extensive network of supports Seneca implemented. But she pointed out that it was far less expensive than social services for students who aren't able to succeed in school.

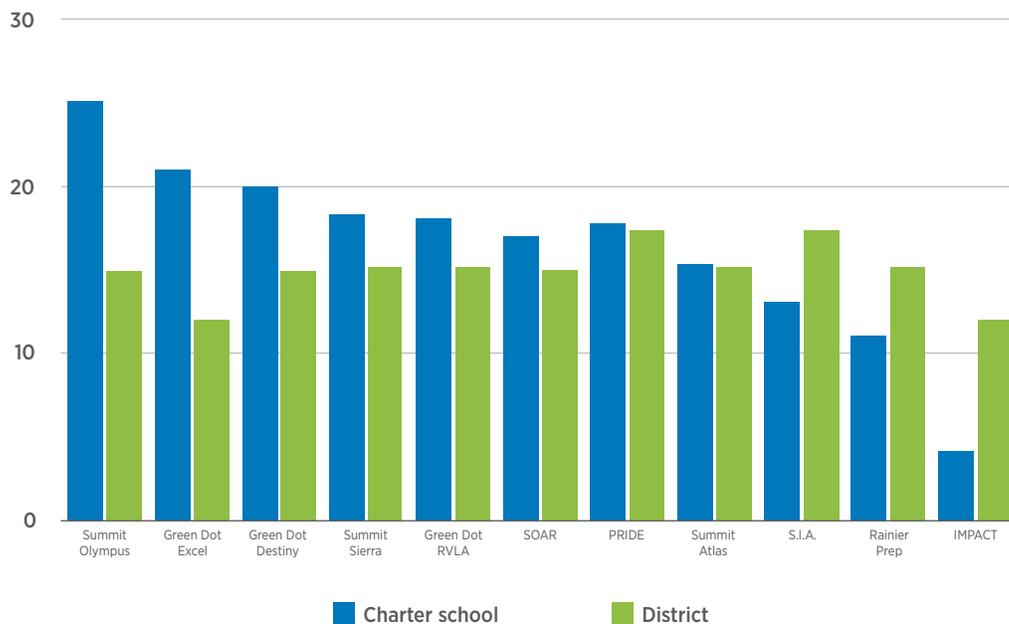
Appendix A. Washington State Context

Washington Charter Schools

The oldest charter school in Washington State opened in 2015. As new schools, they have been able to operate without the constraints of legacy practices: they have tested instructional, curricular, and staffing solutions. They also offer insight into the resource and capacity challenges associated with supporting students with disabilities effectively in inclusive classrooms.

Washington State's first charter schools embraced schoolwide approaches to supporting students with diverse needs from their inception—motivated, in part, by state policies prompting charter schools to focus on high-need students. The Washington State Charter Commission, which authorizes most charter schools in the state, [seeks proposals](#) for schools that are “designed to expand opportunities for at-risk students.” Against this backdrop, charter schools in Washington State have, on average, attracted disproportionately high numbers of students with disabilities (figure 1).

FIGURE 1. All but three charter schools educated a greater share of students with disabilities than the district where they were located

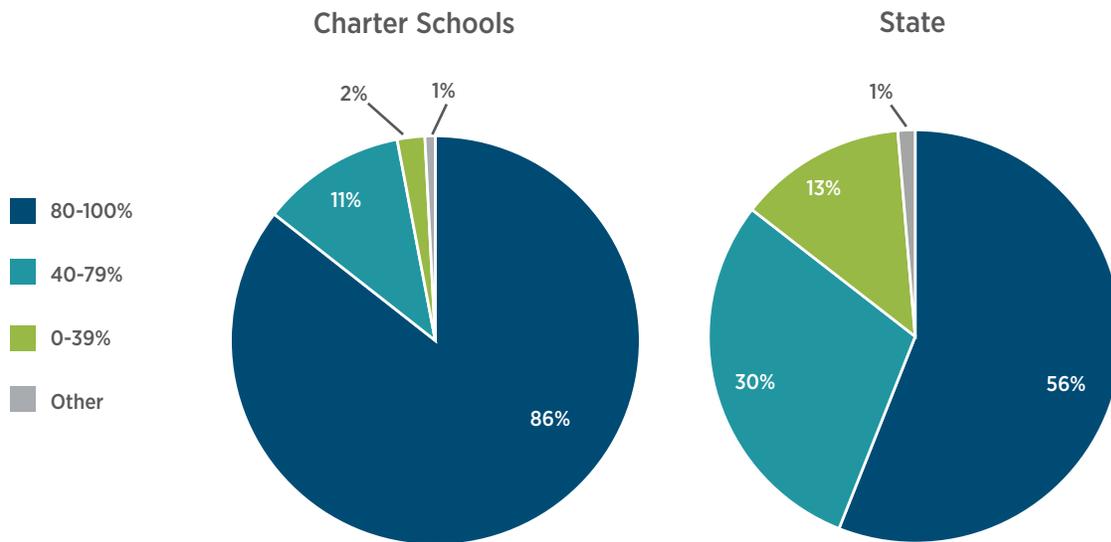


Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction Report Cards, using 2018–19 data.

Note: In 2018–19, twelve charter schools were open in Washington State. At the close of the 2018–19 school year, three of those schools closed: SOAR Academy, Green Dot Excel, and Green Dot Destiny. One school, Ashe Prep, opened in 2019 and closed that fall.

Similar to [charter schools nationally](#), Washington State charter schools have been more likely than the average district school to educate students with disabilities in general education settings (figure 2). In the 2018–2019 school year, nearly 9 out of 10 students with disabilities in charter schools spent at least 80 percent of their time in inclusive settings.

FIGURE 2. Most Washington charter school students with disabilities spend 80 to 100 percent of their time in inclusive settings

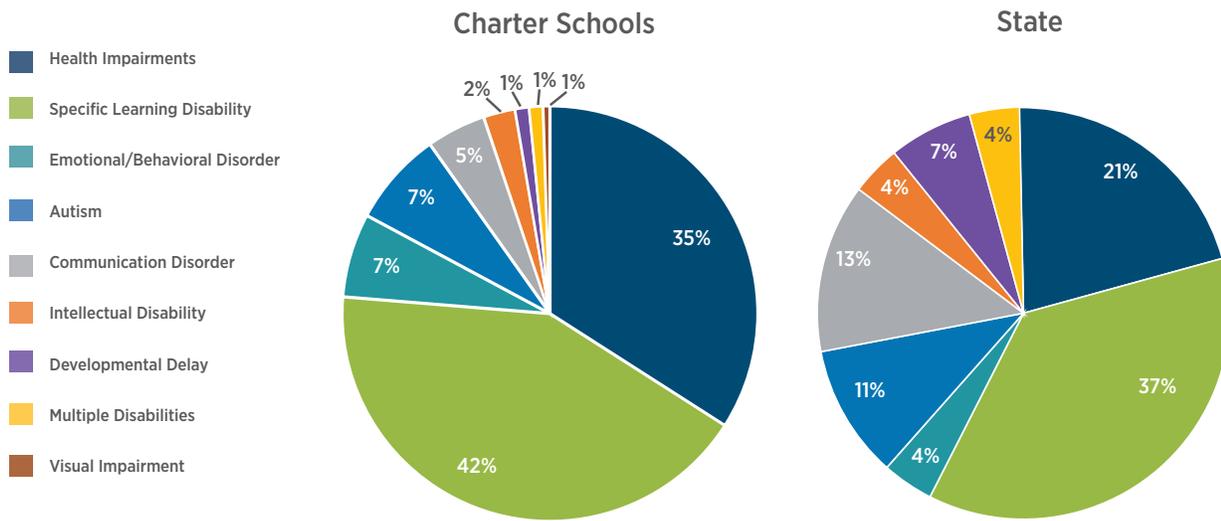


Source: Charter school data provided through a partnership with the True Measure Collaborative for March 2018. State data retrieved from OSPI Special Education Childcount Data.

Note: Data is aggregated for charter schools per a data agreement with the True Measure Collaborative.

Charter schools in the state educate more students with milder disabilities than the average district school, which may account for some of the difference in the amount of time charter school students spend in general education classrooms. Figure 3, below, shows the range of disabilities in charter schools and across the state. High-incidence disabilities, like health impairments, specific learning disabilities, and communication disorders account for 82 percent of students with disabilities in charter schools but only 71 percent in Washington State overall.

FIGURE 3. Charter schools in Washington State serve students with a range of disabilities



Source: Charter school data for March 2018 provided through a partnership with the True Measure Collaborative. State data retrieved from OSPI Special Education Childcount Data.

Washington State charter schools highlight a common tension across the country: while these schools created structures to educate students with mild to moderate disabilities in general education settings, they did not always establish systems to serve students with more severe disabilities. These challenges were addressed by the Washington State Charter Commission when it launched an inquiry into whether schools operated by Summit Public Schools were creating the conditions to welcome students with severe needs. One of those schools, Summit Sierra, is profiled in this report. The school was required to seek training by a third-party provider to ensure the school had systems in place to educate all students.

Educating students with disabilities in general education settings is difficult to implement successfully because of staffing and instructional demands. The state’s charter schools have had access to three resources to support leaders in implementation. The state’s charter school incubator, the Washington State Charter Schools Association (WA Charters), worked with charter school founders to design schools with attention to the needs of students with disabilities. Once underway, leaders have had access to the True Measure Collaborative, a consortium of WA Charters, the Seneca Family of Agencies, the Puget Sound Educational Service District, and the University of Washington’s Haring Center. Through the Collaborative, schools can access professional development services and support developing data-informed identification systems. Seneca Family of Agencies, a nonprofit organization from California, works with many of the state’s charter schools and some district schools to offer programmatic consultation and direct special education services.

Special Education in Washington State

Schools need adequate resources to educate students with disabilities in general education classrooms. These resources usually include additional staff to push into general education classrooms, time to co-plan and train teachers, and money and training for new curriculum.

But Washington's funding environment makes it difficult to offer and sustain these supports. Many schools are not fully reimbursed for educating students with disabilities. Washington State provides funding for up to 13.5 percent of students with an IEP, a cap that is set based on a national average of 13.2 percent and a state average of 12.5 percent.

Special education funding for schools comes from three sources: federal, state, and local. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funds account for about 10 percent of all special education funds, while state and local dollars each fund about 45 percent of special education dollars. Charter schools in Washington State, however, do not have the ability to access local funds, meaning they receive less than district schools. This, in addition to high rates of enrollment of students in special education, financially constrains Washington charter schools.

In theory, placing a funding cap at just above the national and statewide average should reduce the incentive to over-identify students with disabilities.¹ But when schools serve a greater share of students than the cap, they must pay for services out of their general education fund. This is particularly an issue where schools of choice exist and parents can choose to send their child to a school that can best educate them.

While districts can use local levy dollars to supplement their budget, some rural districts and all charter schools do not have regular access to levy funds.

In the 2018–2019 school year, the majority of the charter schools and the districts where they were located enrolled more than 13.5 percent of students with disabilities (figure 4). Citing financial challenges, four of the state's charter schools [closed in 2019](#). One, SOAR Academy, was part of this study. Two others, Green Dot Excel and Green Dot Destiny, enrolled high rates of students with disabilities.

¹ Five [other states](#) in the country use a single student weight combined with a funding cap. Apart from using a student weight system, states may use a reimbursement, resource allocation, multiple student weights, or a census-based system, all with or without caps.

FIGURE 4. The majority of charter schools and districts where they are located enroll more students with disabilities than they are funded to educate



Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction Report Cards, using 2018-19 data.

Because of Washington’s single student weight, all schools receive the same funds no matter what kinds of disabilities students have. To help schools serve students who require more significant supports, Washington State offers [Safety Net funding](#). However, the process is reportedly time-consuming and schools and districts don’t typically receive the requested amount. Schools may pay higher hourly rates for staffing than the average rates Safety Net reimburses. Charter schools are not reimbursed for special education transportation costs, which are often significant.

The burden has traditionally been felt most acutely by charter schools and rural districts because they have a small administrative staff with limited capacity to fill out the required applications. Kevin Jacka, CEO of the Rural Alliance and former superintendent of the Mary Walker School District said of the process: “Small districts feel a lot of frustration. . . You put so much time in to get denied or get only a little money.”

Since the 2017–2018 school year, the Washington State Legislature and OSPI have reduced burdens in the Safety Net process. This includes aligning compliance requirements of the state’s special education program [review process](#) with Safety Net. This has especially benefited charter schools, as they undergo review more frequently than a district-run school.

Table 1. 2017-18 Safety Net Applications Submitted by the State's Charter Schools and the Districts Where They Were Located

LEA	Requested Amount	Approved Amount	Percent requested that was approved
Green Dot Excel, Kent WA	\$40,651	\$4,817	12%
Kent School District	\$2,450,774	\$1,894,546	77%
Green Dot Destiny, Tacoma WA	\$107,370	\$29,478	27%
Tacoma School District	\$2,557,652	\$1,755,888	67%
Green Dot Rainier Valley Leadership Academy, Seattle WA	\$34,245	\$17,540	51%
Seattle School District	\$4,193,863	\$3,807,392	91%

Source: 2017-18 Safety Net Applications.

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About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S Department of Education.