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Waitoller's research focuses on the development and implementation of urban inclusive education policies and practices and teacher learning for inclusive education. He is currently working on a research project that examines the impact of Chicago's current educational policies (e.g. charter schools, accountability) on special education services for Latin@ and Black students. Learn more about Dr. Waitoller at <https://uic.academia.edu/FedericoWaitoller>

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CHICAGO CHARTER SCHOOLS: ACCESS & INCLUSION OF LATIN@ & BLACK STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Introduction

What is the status of educational access and inclusion for Latin@ and African American students enrolled in special education programs in Chicago charter schools?

In the last five school years (2009-10 to 2013-14), the number of charter schools in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has increased by almost 50%. They serve over 55,000 students, almost one sixth of the district, with 6,800 of these students receiving special education services, most of whom are Latin@ and Black. What does this growth mean for students with disabilities? While the number of charter schools continues to increase, advocacy groups, parents, neighborhood associations, state officials, and professional organizations have raised concerns about access and services for students with disabilities in these schools. One of the main concerns is the low enrollment of students with disabilities in charter schools in comparison to traditional schools and the quality of services offered in charter schools. This is an important issue as charter schools are expected to follow the same federal legislations that protect the rights of students with disabilities in traditional public schools. Unfortunately, research examining enrollment patterns across disability categories and the rates of inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom in charter schools are rare.

The project uses data from (1) CPS school demographic profiles and (2) the Funding and Child Tracking System (FACTS) from the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to track enrollment patterns of students with disabilities across racial groups from the 2005-06 school year to 2013-14 school year – a 9 year span.

Findings

- Charters continue to serve a smaller percentage of students with disabilities than neighborhood public schools, but the percentage of students with disabilities enrolled in charter schools has increased each year, and is now approaching the proportional rate at which they are enrolled in neighborhood schools. The differences in enrollment rates are more acute at the elementary level than at the high school level.
- When charter schools do enroll students with disabilities, they tend to enroll those with lesser support needs (e.g. learning disabilities) rather than those who require more extensive support (e.g. deaf, blind, Autism, etc.).
- Charter schools include students with disabilities in the general education classroom at higher rates than neighborhood schools.
- Persistent racial disparities were found in the rates of inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom in both charter and neighborhood schools. Black students in special education were included less often in general education classroom activities than their White peers with the same disability diagnosis.

Recommendations

CPS should examine the reasons for these disparities and establish a more rigorous application process for opening new and reauthorizing existing charter schools. Currently CPS applications require prospective charter schools to identify the special education services that will be provided, propose procedures for such services, and identify personnel responsible for the implementation of these services. We recommend the formation of an oversight committee, independent from CPS, composed of parents of students with disabilities and those with special education expertise to evaluate applications and provide recommendations to CPS school board members on the prospective charter schools' capacity to serve all students.



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