PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
A CASE STUDY
During pandemic school closures, districts had difficulty providing appropriate accommodations and services to students with disabilities.\(^1\) This is problematic, as students with disabilities represent a meaningful percentage of student enrollment; 10.7% of public charter school students and 13.3% of traditional public school students are classified as having a disability.\(^2\) Providing appropriate accommodations and services is particularly challenging for public charter school students with disabilities who attend stand-alone charter schools, since, on average, they have historically exhibited less academic growth compared to their traditional public school peers in both reading and mathematics.\(^3\)

Many students with disabilities struggled to adapt to remote learning without the structures and routines that in-person learning provides.\(^4\) Additionally, many special education services couldn't be effectively provided remotely.\(^5\) For instance, services such as physical and occupational therapy require hands-on activities and direct interaction with service providers. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA),\(^6\) students with disabilities must be provided with a continuum of services and supports specifically tailored to their needs to help ensure that they receive a high-quality education. Services can be expansive, including assistive technology, such as hearing or speech devices and text reading equipment for students with visual and hearing impairments; counseling and physical, occupational, behavioral, or speech therapy services for students who require mental health supports or therapeutic services; and wheelchairs and building accommodations for students with ambulatory challenges. For many students with disabilities, the lack of access to their Individualized Education Program (IEP) mandated accommodations and services resulted in greater academic declines and drops in graduation rates.\(^7\) The lack of access to services particularly impacted students with severe disabilities,\(^*\) such as students with severe autism or other intellectual or developmental disabilities. These students require intensive instruction and training to function in school, access academic instruction, and manage daily life activities. Older students with severe disabilities did not receive the usual job training or time in the community necessary to help with the transition to adulthood.\(^8\)

Families of students with disabilities also reported challenges during the pandemic. They were disconnected from traditional systems of support and community that they would typically receive through schools.\(^9\) Parents reported frustration over lack of support from professionals to help them navigate challenges.\(^10\) These families also found it difficult to provide home-based instruction for their students without additional training and support.

\*For this case study, severely disabled means a severe, chronic disability attributable to mental or physical impairment, or a combination of mental and physical impairments, that is likely to continue indefinitely and results in substantial functional limitation in major life activities. (42 USC § 3002(49)).
Due to the challenges that students with disabilities and their families faced during the pandemic, as well as the challenges that public charter schools have historically faced in accessing funding and serving students with disabilities, this case study focuses on the question: How can charter schools better serve students with disabilities?

Methodology

From January through June 2023, we visited 10 schools to learn more about their efforts to support students with disabilities in the aftermath of the pandemic. We purposefully selected NYC Autism Charter School, which specializes in students with severe disabilities, as one of the site visit locations to better understand how schools serving such students responded to the pandemic.

We also conducted interviews with charter associations and authorizers as well as members of the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition. In addition, we surveyed nearly 150 public charter school leaders and 100 public charter school teachers and support staff across the country.

Strategies

Opportunities to improve learning for students with disabilities are as wide-ranging and diverse as the students themselves. The schools we studied leveraged charter flexibility and autonomy to adopt an array of strategies to support students with disabilities.

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<td>School expanded and improved training for teachers in integrated co-taught (ICT) classes to ensure that ICT teachers have the skills needed to support students most effectively.</td>
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<td>Ensuring students receive all mandated services</td>
<td>School expanded its staff of service providers to ensure that students with disabilities receive all the services called for on their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).</td>
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<td>School offers training to teach families how to better support their children with disabilities and more effectively partner with schools in supporting their students.</td>
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<td>Creating specialized programs and initiatives to support students with disabilities</td>
<td>School designs instructional programs specifically targeting certain populations of students with disabilities, such as dyslexic students, to ensure that they have the specialized instruction they need to make meaningful academic progress.</td>
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**Partnering with families to support student learning**

This case study highlights one of the strategies we saw in the site visit schools — partnering with families of students with disabilities to support student learning. It specifically focuses on lessons learned from NYC Autism Charter School (NYCACS) and the school’s expansive and intentional efforts to support families in the aftermath of the pandemic. Although NYCACS specializes in serving severely disabled students, these tactics can be instituted at any charter school.

During the pandemic, schools relied more upon families of students with disabilities to help support their students with learning. Prior to the pandemic, NYCACS had formed the foundation for a strong relationship with families. The school worked collaboratively with families and was flexible in updating its programming to adjust to a student’s ever-changing needs. As one parent said, “It wasn’t entirely surprising how they managed to pivot so much of the programming to this virtual model,” because of the flexible way the school operated pre-pandemic.

> “Whatever the problem is or whatever the issue is for the child and the family, they’ll work with it. They have been doing that before COVID, during COVID, and continue to do it after COVID.”

**NYC AUTISM CHARTER SCHOOL PARENT**

Once schooling was remote, NYCACS partnered with families to teach parents and guardians meaningful skills to better engage their children and address their needs in and outside of the classroom. These efforts helped deepen relationships with families and ensured that, despite the effects of the pandemic, students continued to make academic and developmental progress.

Schools can learn from these practices adopted during the pandemic to better partner with families of students with disabilities to support student learning.
About NYC Autism Charter School

NYC Autism Charter School is a small charter school network in New York City with two campus locations: one in the South Bronx and another in East Harlem. The school is unique in that 100% of its students have been diagnosed with autism. It specializes in serving extremely disabled students who need intensive academic and social support. The school has extremely small classes, with instructional ratios ranging from 1:1 to 1:4, depending on the intensity of a student’s disability. It provides extensive training to students to help develop adaptive life skills as well as support students’ academic growth.

The majority of students at both campuses are students of color (94% of students at the Bronx site and 78% of students at the Harlem location). The school also serves a large proportion of students from low-income families (88% of students at the Bronx campus and 97% of students at the Harlem campus).

Partnering with families to facilitate remote learning

Due to the more extensive needs of their students when the school was remote, NYC Autism Charter School families played an active role in instruction, with the school providing coaching and training for families.

“I felt like I had a clinic [with my son’s teacher] almost every day because we were always trying to figure out what works best, what we should remove, what we should add. The observation was there, for my son. It was constantly like, ‘Oh, do you notice that when you asked this question this happened? Maybe we should change it to this. Maybe we should add whatever.’ In those times, we would have little discussions, and those little discussions helped both parties see how he works at home, how they work at school, and understand each other a little better. It feels like I’m a therapist now!”

NYC AUTISM CHARTER SCHOOL PARENT

The school even trained parents to conduct observations to track students’ mastery of IEP objectives. For example, a student’s goal may be learning to brush their teeth independently. The school creates a task analysis that breaks the task into smaller steps (e.g., getting the toothbrush and toothpaste, removing the cap from the toothpaste, etc.) to evaluate the extent to which the student has met the goal. When students are in the school setting, educators score accuracy on every presentation of the particular task.
During the pandemic when students were remote, the school partnered with families and provided training for caregivers to collect some of those measurements. Although caregivers are no longer responsible for providing that level of support and data collection, the clinical supervisors report that families have become more collaborative due to their experiences partnering with the school during remote learning.

“They’re asking a lot of questions that they didn’t necessarily have the tools to ask before, because they have such an understanding of how we problem-solve and how we approach teaching different skills and what types of skills we can teach. Nobody knows their kids better than they do, but now they also understand how we’ve been trying to teach their children in a way that I don’t think they got necessarily from a once-a-month, hour-long observation.”

NYC AUTISM CHARTER SCHOOL CLINICAL SUPERVISOR

Offering a continued emphasis on training

One way the school continues to build relationships with families is through offering opportunities for families to experience the school and receive feedback on (1) how their child is doing and (2) how families can continue to work with the student at home. The school offers regular trainings for families called “clinic meetings.” These meetings are one-on-one check-ins with each family. Families come into the classroom or a separate clinic room, or join remotely, to see how the staff works with their child, running through activities that may be problematic and receiving input from the families. For example, one parent described having difficulty reminding their child to take care of his iPad. The school recommended using the same language they use at school: “Be responsible for your materials.” The school staff also demonstrated the tone they use when saying the phrase, which helped the parent in communicating with their child.

Increasing accessibility

Prior to the pandemic, the school did not consistently have 100% attendance at clinics (which were all in-person at that time) because logistics often made it difficult for families to attend during the school day. The school transitioned those meetings so they were remote, making it easier for families to participate during the day and removing barriers to attendance.
“What we realized is, we didn’t always get 100% attendance at those clinic meetings, even though parents really valued them, because, logistically, getting out of work for an hour, once a month is really hard. The whole remote way of interacting with families — being able to pull a laptop into the classroom and have a mom on her lunch break be able to watch what’s going on and talk with us — it just highlighted that remote joining and remote communication is a great tool for our families.”

JULIE FISHER, NYC AUTISM CHARTER SCHOOL EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In addition to making clinic participation easier, NYCACS also made responding to family surveys easier by moving them to an online survey platform. Previously NYCACS asked families to complete paper-and-pencil surveys after the clinics, but surveys were often left uncompleted. After moving the clinic feedback online, they have received a higher response rate, and the school is using the data more frequently to make adjustments to the clinics and student programming.

“We get much more valid and honest feedback and sometimes unexpected [feedback]. It’s really great to see what parents put on there too, because my takeaways might not be the same as what they’ve highlighted for us, and that’s good information for me to focus on.”

NYC AUTISM CHARTER SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

Partnering with families to help navigate other agencies

NYC Autism Charter School also partners with families to help them navigate other agencies. Because NYCACS serves the most severely disabled students, the vast majority of students attending NYCACS will need supports and services for their entire lives.

Families can easily get overwhelmed identifying which services will be beneficial for their child and how to start the process of qualifying for the services through New York’s Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (NY Developmental Disabilities Office), which is responsible for coordinating services for New Yorkers with developmental disabilities. The NY Developmental Disabilities Office offers an array of services that people with developmental disabilities and their families might need for them to live independently, including work training and connections to employment opportunities, adult day care services, independent housing connections, respite care for family members, and support in finding and learning how to use assistive technology.
NYCACS helps families navigate this process by meeting with them when their students are turning 8 years old. Waiting until the students are 8 allows them to only go through the application process once. NYCACS provides families with a one-pager that describes the steps involved, including all documentation required and referrals to care coordination agencies to help navigate the process.

Every year, each family has a planning meeting, typically in January or February to look ahead and think about the child’s life as a teenager and adult and the services the student may need. If the family does not register when the child is 8, the school provides more frequent reminders as the child reaches adolescence.

NYCACS brings in representatives from the NY Developmental Disabilities Office, so that parents can hear directly from agency representatives about what services are available to them. The school also brings in speakers from parent service organizations like Parent to Parent,¹⁶ to help parents understand more about the process and learn more about what they and their children are entitled to.

**Conclusion**

By building relationships and trust with families, NYCACS has been able to leverage its autonomy and independence as a charter school to create new initiatives that directly respond to the needs of its families.

The flexibility afforded to charters — being able to decide what supports to offer students, create programs to better support families in need, and decide how to support special student populations like students with disabilities and their families — is pivotal in cultivating the success of these programs.

In rebounding from the pandemic, vulnerable student populations have continued to struggle. The work done by NYCACS through its intentional efforts to work with parents and assist them in navigating the often-complex world of public assistance is a powerful illustration of the great work that charter schools can do to help students in the greatest need of support. It stands as a valuable lesson that other schools, whether or not they serve a large population of students with autism or other disabilities, can benefit from as they look to improve outcomes for students and provide much-needed assistance for families in the aftermath of the pandemic.
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