

What is an Infrastructure? Special Education Support Systems in Charter Schools

I. Introduction

Charter schools fall outside of the traditional school model and therefore often struggle to access the system of support and training that traditional public schools enjoy. While some charter schools function as a part of a local education agency (LEA) that gives them access to the resources of the larger school district, many make up their own LEA and must create and provide all of the services needed to support their school. Even charters who are a part of a larger LEA may find that support services are not geared towards or readily available to them.

A support system or infrastructure often develops, formally or informally, in order to access information and pool resources. Special education is an area for which this becomes especially crucial as schools struggle to meet the needs of their students, provide quality education, and comply with laws. As a result, infrastructures around special education specifically have developed as a means for charter schools to pool information and resources in order to collaborate and increase efficiency. Study findings suggest that where a formal structure was not in place, schools affiliated with or developed their own, and that special education services were enhanced when they did so.

While many charter schools do rely on some sort of support network, defining a special education infrastructure has remained fluid. This brief seeks to define what a special education infrastructure is, provide some examples of how different infrastructures support charter schools, and encourage charter schools, authorizing agencies, and others involved in charter school or special education policy to consider how best to support the unique needs of charter schools as they tackle the issues surrounding special education.

II. Definition

A special education infrastructure is an entity that provides a support system to a charter school or group of charter schools that allows for greater collaboration and sharing of resources including providing charter schools with fiscal, legal, human, programmatic, and administrative capacity.

III. Types of Infrastructures

A special education infrastructure may be found in an LEA, an intermediate/regional administrative unit, a special education cooperative, a community-based non-profit, a comprehensive education service provider, or other external entity that provides a charter school with fiscal, legal, human, programmatic, and administrative capacity.

Many charter schools rely on existing structures, the LEA or State Education Agency (SEA) of which they are a part, for most or all of their technical assistance and support. While this has some advantages because the state and local agencies in theory have more experience and systems in place through which to offer this training and support, there are limitations. For instance, these entities are not specifically geared towards the needs of charter schools and may fall short in supporting charter schools with fulfilling the overall vision of finding new and innovative ways of approaching challenges, such as those associated with educating students with different learning needs. Another shortcoming of these existing infrastructures is that many are optional, not required, which leaves the burden on charter schools to seek out their

assistance, rather than having such assistance be integrated into their overall processes. Furthermore, existing infrastructures, frequently developed by and explicitly for traditional public school districts, may be resistant to expanding their scope to include new and inexperienced charter schools that may have significant capacity building needs.

Individual consultants are often relied on for technical training and support, which can be beneficial in that they are often more experienced in the unique needs and challenges associated with charter schools. However, there is little in the way of coherent, consistent criteria related to these consultants or a central body through which consultants are identified or vetted in order to determine their specialties and skills. Once again, charter schools can benefit from sharing this type of information, but often lack the structure through which to communicate effectively.

A well-run cooperative in which all members participate and govern as equals may provide the best of both worlds in many ways, as they can pool resources, vet consultants, share successful models, and offer a more cohesive support system specifically designed for charters. Cooperatives are more flexible and can be set up to provide a portfolio of resources depending on the needs of the charter schools in the area they serve. Creating and sustaining such cooperatives has, however, remained challenging due in part to charter school resource limitations and the variability of needs from year to year.

IV. Specific Examples

A. Colorado

In Colorado, the LEA itself serves as the infrastructure through a tiered insurance program that allows for risk-pooling. All charter schools in Colorado are part of an LEA, which also serves as the authorizer. The LEA is either the district in which the charter is located, the independent Charter School Institute (CSI), or, in the case of rural schools, the Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES). The tiered insurance model requires charter schools to pay a specified amount per pupil to the LEA, which in turn manages the provision and funding of special education services.

The insurance model allows for a range of options from full service to partial or independent, which allows for variance in the manner in which special education is managed by individual authorizers. In Colorado, districts determine which approach they will use with the charters they authorize. Full service leaves all special education administration and services with the district, while partial insurance allows for schools to select a list of services *a la carte* to be provided by the district. The independent or contract model allows only for administration to be performed by the district, and the school provides all special education services itself. This range of options allows for the authorizers and schools to have greater flexibility in determining the balance between having the support and centralized resources of the district/authorizer and the desire of the charter schools to maintain autonomy and control over provision of services and the associated risks.

B. Kent Intermediate School District (ISD)

Kent ISD in Michigan plays the role that the state department of education plays in many states and serves as a support system for all public school districts—including charter districts—within its region. This model means that charter schools are included in the decision-making and support services offered by the ISD, which gives them a voice and equal access to funding and resources. The Kent ISD is the exception rather than the rule for many intermediate districts, given that charter schools are often not present at the table where decisions are made at the intermediate district level, even when those charter schools make up part of the region.

The funding model at work in Michigan supports this collaborative and egalitarian provision of special education services. There, charter schools are funded on par with traditional schools; funding is provided based on head count and state, county, and federal funds are distributed using the same formula for charter schools as is used for traditional schools.

This supportive funding model and inclusive approach taken towards involving charter schools in the services provided means that the charter schools in the Kent ISD are able to take advantage of the existing infrastructure provided through the state intermediate school districts; a model that is not typical for charter schools that make up part of a larger LEA.

C. NYC Special Education Collaborative

Cooperatives (Coops) or collaboratives serve as an independent organization that charter schools can join as a means of accessing resources, technical assistance, training and other support services. The NYC Special Education Collaborative is one of the more successful examples of a collaborative and serves over 185 of New York City's charter schools in 2015-2016. They provide professional development, instructional resources, on-the-ground support, consultant support, recruitment activities, and technical assistance to schools in order to help them build and maintain the capacity to address the needs of students with disabilities.

One compelling aspect of the NYC Special Education Collaborative's model is the tiered membership structure that allows schools to tailor their involvement depending on their individual needs and budget. The system offers four levels of membership ranging from \$4,000 to \$14,000 per school year and tailors resources in the areas of program management, staff recruitment and development, conferences, and resources. This type of flexibility is an effective means of delivering services to schools in a way that understands and is tailored to meet their needs. Critical to the NYC model is the number of schools in close geographic proximity and the funding parity NYC charter schools enjoy relative to traditional public schools.

V. Conclusion and Takeaways

Charter school policy makers and leaders must evaluate what strategies and infrastructures are available and necessary to provide the support charter schools need in order to offer a quality education to the full spectrum of students. Schools and authorizing agencies must understand what types of services need to be provided and incorporate those requirements into the authorization and oversight process.

The role of an infrastructure can be conceptualized as a spectrum of options ranging from most or all of the support services being provided by the school itself to a fully functioning separate entity, such as an LEA or cooperative, that provides support and shares liability. Needs of individual schools and school districts will vary, but all will benefit from determining where they best fit on the spectrum and how to maximize economies of scale, a key goal of forming or affiliating with an infrastructure, to access resources and improve programs. These questions must be asked and schools must be held accountable to ensure not just compliance with laws, but genuine positive outcomes for students with disabilities that take advantage of the innovative and flexible structure charter schools enjoy.

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