



Highlights of [GAO-12-543](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

While the number of charter schools is growing rapidly, questions have been raised about whether charter schools are appropriately serving students with disabilities. GAO was asked: (1) How do enrollment levels of students with disabilities in charter schools and traditional public schools compare, and what is known about the factors that may contribute to any differences? (2) How do charter schools reach out to students with disabilities and what special education services do charter schools provide? (3) What role do Education, state educational agencies, and other entities that oversee charter schools play in ensuring students with disabilities have access to charter schools? GAO analyzed federal data on the number and characteristics of students with disabilities; visited charter schools and school districts in three states selected on the basis of the number of charter schools in the state, among other things; and interviewed representatives of federal, state, and other agencies that oversee charter schools.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Education take measures to help charter schools recognize practices that may affect enrollment of students with disabilities by updating existing guidance and conducting additional fact finding and research to identify factors affecting enrollment levels of these students in charter schools. Education agreed with our recommendations.

View [GAO-12-543](#). For more information, contact George Scott at (202) 512-7215 or [scottg@gao.gov](mailto:scottg@gao.gov).

## CHARTER SCHOOLS

### Additional Federal Attention Needed to Help Protect Access for Students with Disabilities

## What GAO Found

Charter schools enrolled a lower percentage of students with disabilities than traditional public schools, but little is known about the factors contributing to these differences. In school year 2009-2010, which was the most recent data available at the time of our review, approximately 11 percent of students enrolled in traditional public schools were students with disabilities compared to about 8 percent of students enrolled in charter schools.

GAO also found that, relative to traditional public schools, the proportion of charter schools that enrolled high percentages of students with disabilities was lower overall. Specifically, students with disabilities represented 8 to 12 percent of all students at 23 percent of charter schools compared to 34 percent of traditional public schools. However, when compared to traditional public schools, a higher percentage of charter schools enrolled more than 20 percent of students with disabilities. Several factors may help explain why enrollment levels of students with disabilities in charter schools and traditional public schools differ, but the information is anecdotal. For example, charter schools are schools of choice, so enrollment levels may differ because fewer parents of students with disabilities choose to enroll their children in charter schools. In addition, some charter schools may be discouraging students with disabilities from enrolling. Further, in certain instances, traditional public school districts play a role in the placement of students with disabilities in charter schools. In these instances, while charter schools participate in the placement process, they do not always make the final placement decisions for students with disabilities. Finally, charter schools' resources may be constrained, making it difficult to meet the needs of students with more severe disabilities.

Most of the 13 charter schools GAO visited publicized and offered special education services, but faced challenges serving students with severe disabilities. Most charter school officials said they publicized the availability of special education services in several ways, including fliers and placing ads in the local newspaper. Many charter schools GAO visited also reported tailoring special education services to individuals' needs, but faced challenges serving students with severe disabilities due to insufficient resources. About half of the charter school officials GAO interviewed cited insufficient resources, including limited space, as a challenge.

The U.S. Department of Education's (Education) Office for Civil Rights has undertaken two compliance reviews related to charter schools' recruitment and admission of students with disabilities in three states, but has not issued recent guidance covering admission practices in detail, nor has Education conducted recent research about factors affecting lower enrollment in charter schools. The three states GAO visited already have taken steps to monitor charter schools' admission practices. In addition, officials in these three states reported prohibiting disability-related questions on charter school admission forms, in part to protect students with disabilities' access.