

SANCHEZ-KIRMSE, SARAH E. Ed.D. Charter Schools and Equal Access of Students with Disabilities Subgroup: An analysis of webpage marketing and recruitment of students with disabilities. (2023)

Directed by Dr. Kathryn Hytten. pp 93.

Parents and families of students with disabilities want an equal opportunity to choose a school for their student. But within this market-based education system, is this a reality that is available to them? According to the law, all public schools, charter or traditional, must offer Exceptional Children's programming. Unfortunately, current data suggest that charter schools nationwide, especially those in Central North Carolina where I focused this study, are lacking in their effort to recruit and support this subgroup of students. The purpose of this study was to investigate approaches charter schools in Central North Carolina used to market and recruit students with disabilities through their websites and the direct relation it had to their charter application for charter.

In this study, I investigated ways charter schools recruit, enroll, and market to families of students with disabilities through their websites. I was particularly interested in recruitment processes, enrollment policies, and the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) at charter schools, especially given research that shows students with disabilities are sometimes dissuaded from applying to charter schools. I then analyzed the charter school application for charter approval. Two key items I looked for was information related to SWD population and their plans for service delivery. I also looked at the proposed targeted subgroup the charter projected to serve. I was interested in barriers, both explicit and hidden, to charter school enrollment.

Findings from this study contribute to existing literature and inform future practice and research. Findings in this research include the lack of easy accessibility for parents/families to

acquire information for their children, a direct relationship between the charter school application section, “Targeted Student Population,” and the school’s mission and vision statement, and the charter application for charters need for standardization.

Based on my findings, I have included recommendations for future research and accountability regarding several aspects of charter schools. Some of these cover stakeholders who approve charter applications and charter schools who serve students with disabilities, pursuing grant opportunities, and unifying the application documents and process. I also make recommendations for increasing accessibility of information for all student subgroups.

CHARTER SCHOOLS AND EQUAL ACCESS OF STUDENTS
WITH DISABILITIES SUBGROUP: AN ANALYSIS OF
WEBPAGE MARKETING AND RECRUITMENT
OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

by

Sarah E. Sanchez-Kirmse

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Greensboro

2023

Approved by

Dr. Kathryn Hytten
Committee Chair

© 2023 Sarah E. Sanchez-Kirmse

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Sarah E. Sanchez-Kirmse has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

Dr. Kathryn Hytten

Committee Co-Chair

Dr. Craig Peck

Committee Members

Dr. Carl Lashley

May 18, 2023

Date of Acceptance by Committee

May 11, 2023

Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First Acknowledgment is to my children, Addison and Silas, and my late husband, Roy Sanchez III, who passed during the writing of this dissertation. This degree program started the August before we found out about the cancer, and this became a focus away from the long days of treatment. My children continued to push me to continue working through the day-to-day changes with them and their father. I am proud to set this example of perseverance for my family.

Next Acknowledgement is to Carrie Carpenter. My amazing accountability partner and editor. Two years of meeting weekly, daily, online and in person to write and edit. Three babies and three residences all in this process. By the end, we could sit side by side at a table and not say a word but could read and understand each other's thoughts. This dissertation is just as much yours. Thank you for all your support and days of being strict and reminders to write and think. There were days I just did not want to, but you made it possible. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

I would not have even started this process if it were not for my mother, Mary Jacobson. She pushed every month for seven years to register for classes and start the process. Once enrolled she supported through the entire process of the program and final dissertation. She supported financially, advising, and reading "THE Paper," at its many stages. Without the support I would not have finished, thanks for believing in me.

I want to say, thank you, to my newly married spouse, Jason Kirmse, who did not realize he was marrying "THE paper," too. Thank you for your continuous support of making sure I had the time every evening and weekend to write and defend the dissertation. The understanding of the importance this dissertation meant and just "being there" was substantial at the end.

I am so proud of this final dissertation, and I owe the accomplishment I feel to my Committee Chair, Dr. Kathy Hytten, whose continuous descriptive feedback was on point and thought provoking. Dr Hytten supported me as if I were her only student –giving not only suggestions but also encouragement and insight. She met with me but also met me where I was. Most importantly, Dr. Hytten gave my paper the gift of her time and attention.

Thank you to my committee members—Dr. Carl Lashley and Dr. Craig Peck—who challenged me and provided me with critical resources and quality direction for my study throughout the last year. Their insight and support have been invaluable during this endeavor.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES..... viii

CHAPTER I: RATIONALE AND FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY 1

 Purpose of the Study 1

 Background..... 3

 Research Problem 5

 Research Questions..... 7

 Methodology..... 7

 Theoretical Perspective..... 8

 Researcher Positionality and Interest..... 10

 Significance of Study..... 13

CHAPTER II: THE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE 15

 Overview of Charter Schools..... 15

 History of Charter Schools15

 Original Purpose of Charter Schools17

 North Carolina Charter School Policies18

 Demographics in Charter Schools.....19

 Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools20

 Charter Schools and Recruitment of Families 23

 Policies for Student Enrollment into Charter Schools.....25

 Special Education in Charter Schools..... 26

 Legal Concerns with SWD in Charter Schools29

 Conclusion 31

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 33

 Basic Qualitative Research 33

 Content Analysis..... 34

 Methods 34

 Website Analysis.....35

 Admissions Application Analysis36

Charter School “Charter” Application Analysis	37
Data Representation	37
Trustworthiness.....	37
Pilot Study	40
Summary of Methods and Dissertation Online.....	45
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS.....	47
Findings	47
Website and Student Application Analysis	47
Identification of EC Staff.....	48
Subheadings Specifying Exceptional Children	49
Visions and Missions of Charter Schools.....	49
Student Application Analysis	55
Analysis of Applications to Open a Charter School	56
Notable Findings – Charters 12-17% grouping.....	61
Summary.....	62
CHAPTER V: FINAL.....	64
Key Findings and Research Questions Answered	65
Recommendations for Practice	65
Recommendations for Future Research.....	67
Final Thoughts.....	69
REFERENCES.....	73
APPENDIX A: GOOGLE FORM WEBSITE ANALYSIS.....	82
APPENDIX B: GOOGLE FORM – CHARTER SCHOOL ENROLLMENT/APPLICATION ANALYSIS	83
APPENDIX C: PILOT STUDY RUBRIC	84
APPENDIX D: FOUR CHARTER SCHOOLS RUBRIC	86

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. NC County Comparison of # of EC Staff Identified 48

Figure 2. Number of Charters Opened by Year.....57

Figure 3. Percentage of Students Served at the 70 Charter Schools..... 57

CHAPTER I: RATIONALE AND FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Parents from all corners of the United States want their children to attend a good school where they can receive an education and socialize with peers. Charter schools were one idea that originated and emerged during the modern school choice movement in the 1970s as a means to offer a variety of schooling opportunities and increase diversity in K-12 education (Logan, 2018). As public schools, charter schools charge no tuition for students who attend. The idea of charter schools quickly grew after President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education released its report, *A Nation at Risk*, in 1983. This document discussed why American schools were perceived to be failing. It blamed ill-prepared teachers and low standards (Cohen, 2017), which opened the door for a new perspective on systems and institutions to educate our children. The business-like, market-based charter school reform movement seemed like one answer to create more successful schools. The values that the charter school movement was built upon include opportunity, choice, and responsibility. The charter school concept is grounded in autonomy, particularly the belief that freedom from excessive regulation can lead to innovation and excellence (Parham, 2020). Charter schools were the answer for many families; however, their recruitment processes and implemented policies often omitted more than one subgroup of students. One specific subgroup of students that appeared to be overlooked and unplanned for were students with disabilities.

Purpose of the Study

In this study, I investigate ways charter schools recruit, enroll, and market to families of students with disabilities through their websites. I am particularly interested in recruitment processes, enrollment policies, and the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) at charter schools, especially given research that shows students with disabilities are

sometimes dissuaded from applying to charter schools. Camera (2018) argues that while students and families have free choice to choose a public traditional or charter school, charter schools are oftentimes less likely to encourage students with disabilities to apply. She explains that a group of researchers sent 6,500 emails from fictitious parents to school districts in over 29 states, inquiring about applying to a charter school in the district and indicating in the email whether the student had a disability, a behavior issue, higher academic achievement, or no distinction at all. At the conclusion of the study, the researchers discovered “that schools respond less often to messages regarding students whom schools may perceive as more challenging to educate” (Camera, 2018, p.3). Furthermore, they compared the findings from charter schools to traditional schools, which revealed “if an email signaled a child had a significant special need, charter schools were 7 percentage points less likely to respond while traditional public schools were not more or less likely to respond” (Camera, 2018, p.2).

One of the primary reasons charter schools are attractive to parents is because of perceptions of their achievement rates. However, there is not much evidence to prove that they are indeed more successful, especially given the challenges in assessing success.

A small number of studies have been designed to examine student performance using an experimental design, the gold standard for research studies seeking to establish cause and effect. A major challenge in examining the impacts of charter schools on student performance is in obtaining equivalent comparison groups. Because public charter schools are schools of choice, it is difficult to identify equivalent groups in existing traditional school for comparisons. (Johnson & Silverman, 2014, p. 4)

When charter schools are indeed more successful, might this be due to “screening out” students with disabilities from the application pool? Drawing from this research and possible issue, I am

interested in explicit and non-explicit barriers students with disabilities face through admissions procedures and processes. I also explore schools that are successfully recruiting, enrolling, and increasing its students with disabilities subgroup.

Since a charter school is a public school and must adhere to federal civil rights laws, charter school leaders have the same obligation as a traditional public school to follow the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). According to Hasting (2008), families chose charter schools for two main purposes: academic achievement and location. Parents of students with disabilities choose charter schools for the same reasons that all parents do: smaller class size to gain more individualized instruction and the belief that higher achievement rates can be attained. They are hopeful that their children with disabilities will have a successful academic experience.

As background for this study, I will explain the historic purposes of charter schools and examine their legal responsibilities in providing Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) to all students. While charter schools are exempt from many state education requirements in general, depending on which state they are located, they are not exempt from federal civil rights laws (Kokai, 2021). Therefore, they must provide FAPE for students with disabilities, adhering to federal civil rights protections in Section 504 and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) through IDEA. Before outlining the details of this study, it is important to first understand IDEA and its components, that is, what schools are required to provide for students with disabilities.

Background

The “Education for All Handicapped Children Act” went into effect in 1978 to protect the rights of students who have disabilities. This act stipulates that schools must provide

students with disabilities with a free and appropriate public education. In its 1990 reauthorization, the name was changed to “The Individuals with Disabilities Act” (IDEA).

Under IDEA, there are 14 disability categories. If a student meets the criteria in one of the 14 areas, they become eligible for special education and related services, which are detailed in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An IEP is a document that outlines all evaluations of students and explains all required supports to meet a student’s unique educational needs. The IEP is a foundational step to ensuring that every student has access to FAPE. A team of specialists, educators, and the parents of the student meet to discuss the student’s IEP and work to place students in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) possible. The logic here is that students with disabilities should be in regular education classes as much as possible, and not isolated in classrooms only with other students with disabilities. The team must determine the LRE for the student and decide which accommodations, modifications, and supplemental services the student will receive in the general education curriculum and which alternative forms of support they will receive outside of the general education curriculum.

Another component of IDEA is Appropriate Evaluation, and it entails that a team of knowledgeable and trained professionals evaluate a student to determine whether they meet the criteria to make them eligible for special education. Next, parent participation is crucial, and the IEP team must take every possible action to guarantee parents are part of the team and involved in any decisions regarding the placement or needs of their children. The sixth and last component of IDEA is procedural safeguards, which serve two primary purposes. The first purpose of procedural safeguards is to ensure that parents have access to any information pertaining to any team decision for their child. The second purpose is to resolve any disagreements between a parent and the school regarding the placement of a student (Lee, 2021). There are ten

safeguards: Procedural notice, parent participation, access to educational records, confidentiality of records, informed consent, prior written notice, dominant language support, “stay put” rights, independent education evaluation, and resolution of dispute. These ten are put in place to support parents and their children through the entire IDEA process/es. Parents have an active role in their child's education and can dispute decisions at any time during the process if they do not agree with the school.

One crucial job duty of school administrators is to be the representative of the Local Education Agency (LEA) at students’ IEP meetings. School principals have day-to-day influence on IEP service delivery and are in the position to support the needs of those who implement IEPs and the systems in which they work. According to Ahearn (2012), an “LEA is defined as an entity that has responsibility for the education of all children who reside within a designated geographical area of a state, and it establishes one or more schools to educate those children” (p. 1). Charter schools can stand alone as an LEA or be part of a larger district LEA. In North Carolina, all charter schools are their own LEA, which means they are individually held accountable for educating their students with disabilities. Being its own LEA gives the charter school flexibility to create and design a curriculum program for all its students (Ahearn, 2012).

Research Problem

Recruitment of students has become quite competitive among charter and traditional schools. Charter schools need to enroll and retain a certain number of students to keep their “charter,” and consequently, to stay open. If students are being enrolled just to meet numbers, they may be overlooked if they have specific educational needs. Allender et al. (2012) conducted research regarding equitable access to charter schools and discovered the following report:

A 2012 Government Accountability Office report (Scott, 2012) found that, compared to traditional public schools, charter schools regularly enrolled fewer students with disabilities. Report authors speculate on several factors that might contribute to this disparity: some parents of students with disabilities choosing not to exercise their choice options; some charter schools explicitly or implicitly discouraging enrollment of this student population; some traditional public school districts placing students with disabilities in schools (rather than parents exercising direct choice); and some charter schools having limited resources (including physical space) that may make it difficult to meet the needs of students with severe disabilities. (p. 4)

Sometimes it is only once students are accepted and enrolled that the charter school personnel then realize students with disabilities need specialized instruction. Since charter schools often lack services and resources necessary to teach all students, they often “counsel out” students with disabilities. Garda (2012) states this counseling out strategy occurs when “...a charter school dissuades a disabled student from enrolling by stating that the school has insufficient services or resources, that the child is not a good ‘fit’ for the curriculum, or that the public school could serve the children better” (p. 686). An example of “counseling out” would be a student who has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or meets the criteria for a specific area of eligibility that requires them to have an IEP. The charter school would then encourage the parent to send their student to a school that will be able to meet their specific need(s). For example, in 2011, a charter school in New York counseled out a student who was “unable to fit the disciplinary/docility mold set forth by the school, a structure that is shared by many of the chain charter operators like KIPP (e.g., Lack, 2009), and that critics call militaristic” (Stern et al., 2015, p. 2). The student was diagnosed with ADHD and was unable to focus or sit still in classes,

and the school did not know how to teach or discipline him; therefore, the school told the parents of the student “that he would not succeed there” (Stern et al., 2015, p. 2). According to Torre (2013), “Counseling out of students with disabilities and other practices limiting the access special education students have to services may lead to a kind of segregation by default...” (p. 1). Charter schools receive local, state, and federal funds, which obligates them to follow the laws that were implemented beginning in 1978.

Research Questions

In this study, I explored the relationship between web-based recruitment and enrollment strategies and the number of students with disabilities served in charter schools. In order to better understand how charter schools recruit and enroll students with disabilities as well as implement IDEA, I researched the following two questions:

1. According to their websites, what are charter schools’ recruitment and enrollment processes for students with disabilities?
2. What strategies do charter schools use to market to families with students with disabilities through their websites?

Methodology

My research study is a basic qualitative research study that involves a content analysis of the websites of charter schools in three large urban school districts in North Carolina, consisting of seventy charter schools altogether. I collected data by analyzing three aspects of all 70 charter schools in three urban districts in the south: websites, family/student applications (to enroll in the school), and the charter school application (the initial application to be granted a charter).

One of the main reasons I focus on websites is because they are a good marketing tool when advertising to the public. According to Wilson and Carlsen (2016), “Websites offer a window into how a school wants to be understood by an external audience” (p. 29). Using a coding system, I reviewed all seventy charter schools web pages and categorized key components that are specifically involved with IDEA terms and students with special needs. I then printed and conducted a textual/content analysis of all seventy student application packets for student acceptance. I also looked at the initial application that each school filed to become a charter. Roberts (2000) states, text analysis can be used in answering questions about ‘what themes occur,’ ‘what semantic relations exist among the occurring themes,’ and ‘what network positions are occupied by such themes or theme relations’ among texts with particular types of sources, message, channel, or audience. (p. 270)

I also looked at the percentage of students with disabilities enrolled in each of the seventy charter schools and compared these percentages with other information I found on the webpages for each school. This additional source assisted with triangulating the data to analyze any common themes.

Theoretical Perspective

An individual’s viewpoint derives from his or her experiences as well as through personal connections. Often researchers select issues that are important to them based on life experiences or personal commitments. I chose to research issues of equity and access within a specific subgroup of students, those with disabilities. All students have the right to a free and appropriate education. Through my experience as a traditional public-school administrator, mainly in schools that are designated Title I, I have noticed that the charter schools in and around

the district where I work rarely recruit students with disabilities, whereas the traditional public schools are required to enroll any child in their district.

While researching the issues of equity and access for students with disabilities, I noticed that many researchers draw on Critical Disability Studies. According to a study conducted by the Regents of the University of Minnesota (2022),

Critical Disability Studies (CDS) is an approach that centers the understanding of disability as a political, cultural, and historical experience and analyzes how society teaches us to think about disability and ability, and how those thoughts turn into actions that so-often negatively impact the lives of disabled people. CDS is not the study of disabled people. CDS offers a method for questioning how systems of power operate. It is a critique of social norms and social structures that stigmatize certain body minds and populations.

Through a critical disabilities lens, I studied if there is a lack of marketing to students with disabilities among charter school leaders, and if there are additional issues present in these schools' materials that implicitly and explicitly exclude students with disabilities, thereby reproducing dominant cultural power. After students are enrolled, that is often when school leaders realize how much time and energy it will take to educate a student with a disability. Do charter school leaders purposely not recruit students with disabilities because of the mindset of society and because they think it will require more resources than they have? I specifically examined the research with this concern in mind. The advocates of Critical Disability Studies consider all the components of IDEA and how these components are implemented in charter and traditional schools to help bring support and understanding of the “complex connections between education and the relations of dominance and subordination in the larger society—and the

movements that are trying to interrupt these relations” (Apple, 2018, p. 276). This overarching lens in which I view this research “considers how institutions, cities or societies 'dis-able' people systemically and socially as well as looking into how the body and impairment can critically be incorporated into the discussions of disability and disablement” (Chapman, n.d.). Reviewing the research through this lens allows one to consider all issues related to marginalization along the lines of sex, class, ability status, and race, as well as the ways these categories connect and intersect. Using this theory, researchers consider not simply the person with the disability but how disabilities are socially constructed in society (in relation to perceived “norms”) and how these views can negatively impact people with disabilities (Critical Disability Studies, 2021).

Researcher Positionality and Interest

While it is important to strive for an unbiased perspective when conducting research, “...most of the time this is impossible to do because every person has some kind of subjectivity in them based on their life experiences and opinions” (Macionis, 2009, p. 20). To this point, my position as a traditional public-school principal for the past ten years has fostered my interest in understanding how charter schools recruit and serve students with disabilities under IDEA. I am currently the principal of a middle school, and I previously served as principal of an elementary school in an urban school district; understanding the needs of all students is imperative in my role to ensure student access and equity. In my experience, many charter school leaders do not fully consider the importance of equitable access for all students. According to Allender et al. (2012),

equitable access means that all students and families know what charter school options exist and that students have the ability to enroll and attend if they want to, regardless of

where a student lives, the student's socioeconomic status, or the student's education status (e.g., whether a student needs special education). (p. 1)

Working in the traditional public school system and watching students with disabilities leave to attend a local charter school is concerning, knowing all the additional services these students need to grow and be successful. Typically, there is not much communication between traditional and charter schools when there is a record request. My position as principal, coupled with my research into how well charter schools serve students with disabilities, has given rise to three questions which are in the forefront of my mind. Do charter school leaders commit to recruiting students with disabilities? Are charter schools using illegal or unethical techniques to weed through student prospects? Are charter schools competing for student numbers regardless of student needs? These questions were in the back of my mind as I began to research literature in reference to my research questions.

As principal, I am required to review and approve all IEPs and Exceptional Children programming decisions. I attend scheduled IEP meetings as the LEA representative and support decisions made with appropriate educational placement and clear articulation of student goals. Lastly, I attend and participate in all disputes with families of students with disabilities as the principal can be named as a party in any dispute or lawsuit that might be filed.

When I first became an administrator ten years ago, I began to educate myself and understand that the location of the school and students' home greatly influences their experiences and future. As a student, educator, and administrator, I have seen how charter schools are ever growing and are often not considering the population of students with disabilities, at least not with the same thoroughness that occurs in most traditional public schools. Leaders in the public school system work incredibly hard to meet the needs of all students, including students with

disabilities and from all demographic groups in all educational activities at the school. Students and families deserve the same access to education no matter race, socio-economic status, or specific needs a student may have. Moreover, charter schools are required by law to provide FAPE to all students.

Some of my knowledge of charter schools comes from families who have left my schools, returned, and then shared their experiences. They explained how the charter school recruited them through promises of a continuous grade level progression from middle to high school. Caregivers often publicly voiced their concerns about their children attending public middle schools in the district where they lived. The charter schools took advantage of the dissatisfaction with public schools and offered a school that was K-8. During the recruitment process, the attractive elements about the charter school were the new upgraded technology, extracurricular activities, and smaller class sizes. Once the family's child began attending the charter school, the instruction did not prove to be appropriate for the lower grades student but was more directed to older secondary students.

Once I moved from elementary into the secondary schooling realm, I encountered the same concerns and issues with charter schools. Students unenrolled from the traditional school to transfer to the new charter school. The pandemic hit only a year into my transition to secondary school and the local charter schools took advantage of being a separate entity and began recruiting from the traditional public schools. My school alone lost half of the students in the district who withdrew to charters, which was one quarter of the entire student population. The charter school was able to offer in-person learning, while the district's traditional schools were remaining virtual during the pandemic. The fact that charter schools were able to offer face-to-face learning options was ideal for parents who were looking for continuous care and education

and felt uncomfortable leaving students at home. I heard anecdotally that they were not looking at the overall competitive instructional programs or initiatives but were instead looking at the convenience, especially given the pandemic led to a shift to online learning in the traditional public schools. This has become a free-competitive market, which is exactly what the original founders intended for charters. However, it is not competitive when traditional schools cannot compete. They are at the mercy of the state's district rules and regulations.

Significance of Study

This research is significant because it will help to support more inclusive processes and/or procedures for enrolling and recruiting students with disabilities in charter schools. It will also bring awareness, support, and an increase in knowledge and accessibility to education for all students in schools.

Strategies for recruiting and enrolling students with disabilities need to be transparent. This research will add to the literature and findings on how charter schools' market and enroll students with disabilities. It will also indicate if there is a correlation between enrollment numbers and information available on public websites. According to DiMartino and Jessen (2018), marketing is key to maintaining inclusiveness. In this research study, inclusive refers to the representation of students with disabilities in charter school. Explaining inclusivity, Rice (2021) defines it as,

the idea that all types of people, for whatever differences, must be included as much as possible in work and other institutions and must be assimilated. It means that whatever benefits afforded to others must be afforded to everyone, and if possible, if ever they are disadvantaged, society must address that deficiency to ensure equality. (p. 2).

By identifying the marketing strategies through web pages and application processes and connecting this information with the population of students with disabilities attending a particular charter school, we can begin to understand the relationship between recruitment and enrollment. In the next chapter, I review the literature surrounding serving students with disabilities and provide a background history of the beginning of IDEA and discuss how the subgroup of students with disabilities is served – or not – in charter schools.

CHAPTER II: THE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this literature review, I first provide an overview of charter schools by looking at their history, purposes, demographics, and services provided for students with disabilities. I then discuss their recruitment processes, enrollment policies, and the implementation of IDEA. I discuss how charter schools have the tendency to under-serve and exclude students with disabilities. Lastly, I review charter schools' responsibilities when providing IDEA and the unlawful practices of "counseling out" and not responding to applications of students with disabilities.

Overview of Charter Schools

History of Charter Schools

Charter schools have changed the landscape of the public school system over the last several decades. After President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education released its report, *A Nation at Risk*, in 1983, people in some school districts began experimenting with the idea of creating charter schools. The first charter school law was passed in 1991 in Minnesota. Other states quickly followed, which led to many charter schools opening in the 1990s. Authors of *A Nation at Risk* discussed possible reasons why American schools were perceived to be failing, particularly in comparison with the performance of students from other countries around their world on standardized assessments. For example, Cohen (2017) suggests the failure was due to ill-prepared teachers and low standards. These critiques of traditional public schools opened the door for a new perspective on systems and institutions to educate our children. The business-like, market-based charter school program seemed like a promising answer to student underachievement.

In 1974, Ray Budde, a Professor of Education at the University of Massachusetts, began advocating for charter schools. He proposed a process for how schools could be organized and produced a paper called, “Education by Charter” (Kolderie, 2005). However, no districts bought into the process until *A Nation at Risk* was published. After it was published, Mr. Budde submitted his paper again in 1988 to several different agencies. At this time, the *New York Times* published his paper and Al Shanker, President of the Federation for Teachers, acquired the paper and conducted a talk at the National Press Club on the topic of charters in education. This began the development of what we now call “charter schools” (Kolderie, 2005). Both Budde and Shanker thought of charter schools as innovative institutions within the public system centered around the central power of teachers (Kolderie, 2005).

In 1991, Minnesota became the first state to pass charter school legislation. There was a steady increase of charter schools opening over the next ten years until former President George W. Bush took office in 2001, which is when a dramatic increase in charter schools occurred. According to the *National Alliance for Public Charter Schools* (2011), the number of charter schools doubled from 2,313 charter schools to 4,640 charter schools when he left office in 2009. Within eight years, the No Child Left Behind Act reauthorized the federal charter assistance programs and required charter schools to meet the same accountability standards as other public schools. Under the 2009 Obama Administration, the Race to the Top program required states to prepare plans for education reform, which included growth of charter schools (Ertas, 2013). As the support grew over those two decades, charter schools became one of the fastest growing educational reform policies in the country’s history.

According to Manno et al. (2000), charter schools can be defined as “independent public schools of choice” (p. 473). They were “designed to infuse private-sector market forces -

specifically, autonomy, competition, and choice - into public education” (McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007, p.1). They are publicly funded and tuition free for all students who attend. So how does this differ from traditional schools? Charter schools are marketed to students based on the school’s specific philosophy and areas of focus. Market based is defined as “organized so that companies, prices, and production are controlled naturally by the supply of and demand for goods and services, rather than by a government” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). According to Finn et al. (2019), charter schools can be created by anyone, are exempt from many state and local regulations, and are autonomous and self-governing. Most importantly, families have the choice whether to send their children to a specific charter school. When demand for enrollment exceeds space available, charter schools hold lotteries to determine who will be admitted.

Original Purpose of Charter Schools

According to Stern et al. (2015), charter schools were created to attempt to solve the problem of weak and ineffective public schools serving students of color, primarily students in lower-income neighborhoods and families. Educators wanted to provide an environment where students from lower socioeconomic families could receive a better education than what they previously received; they also wanted a place where the students would be cared for. Stern et al. (2015) learned that...

The original aim, as imagined by then president of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, was to facilitate (unionized) teacher-led, governed, and operated environments that would run alongside public schools to better meet the needs of populations systemically and systematically excluded from a decent education. (p. 3)

Many community members supported the development of charter schools as they viewed them as an opportunity to meet the needs of children and families from impoverished neighborhoods.

North Carolina Charter School Policies

As charter school laws, policies, and regulations differ by state, it is useful to look at the information related to North Carolina, the state where this study takes place. North Carolina statute explains that the purpose of charter schools is to provide opportunities for teachers, parents, pupils, and community members to establish and maintain schools that operate independently of existing schools as a method to:

1. Improve student learning.
2. Improve learning opportunities for all students with an emphasis on expanding learning experiences for students who are identified as at risk of academic failure or academically gifted.
3. Innovate teaching practices.
4. Provide parents with expanded choices. (§115C-218ff - Purpose of Charter Schools, 2020, p. 1)

The North Carolina statute specifically mentions improving learning opportunities for all students as one of the purposes for charter schools. All students would include those who struggle and excel academically as well as those in different racial and economic subgroups. Nationwide, charter schools' purposes generally include supporting minority students, fostering innovation, and creating diversity. While this is not what the overall outcome has been over the years, a group called the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition have been working to counteract the segregation in schools that has been occurring. In a recent study conducted by *The Century*

Foundation, Potter and Quick (2018) found that “...diverse-by-design charters, when compared to nearby district schools, tend to be more racially and socioeconomically diverse.” These schools are intentional in their recruitment and enrollment policies.

Demographics in Charter Schools

Thirty-nine states had operating charter schools in 2006 (Logan, 2018); this number increased to forty-four states as of 2018 (Syndman & White, 2020). North Carolina, where this study takes place, had 188 operating charter schools as of 2018. Looking deeper into a local LEA, such as an urban district in central North Carolina, the following data represents more clearly what North Carolina demographic data shows. The charter schools within this urban district enrolls 18% of its overall student population, with more than 7,000 students in charter membership, which is the fourth largest charter membership amongst school LEAs in North Carolina (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2020). According to a North Carolina Education Market Share report released for the 2022 school year, the top four largest school districts represent a total of over 800,000 students. Of those 800,000 students, on average about 10% of those students attend charter schools. The number of students in attendance of charter schools continues to increase each year.

Demographic data for students in charter schools in North Carolina is difficult to locate. The North Carolina Board of Education meets every February to review and approve an annual charter school report. However, there are specific components of demographic reporting that are intentionally omitted from this annual report. Since 2013, the difference in overall enrollment rates between charter schools and traditional public schools has consistently increased, rather than decreased. More students are enrolling in charter schools as they open across the United States. However, the students who are primarily enrolling in charter schools are those without a

disability. In 2015-2016, “charter schools continued to enroll proportionally fewer students with disabilities than traditional public schools on average. On average, 10.79% of students in charter schools have disabilities compared to 12.84% of students in traditional public schools" (Rhim et al., 2019, p. 1).

Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools

In her research, Estes (2004) explored reasons for parents choosing charter schools. Additionally, she reported findings regarding students with disabilities in both the traditional public school and charter school. Based on interviews with charter school administrators, along with a review of state level data in Texas, Estes (2004) showed that charter schools served fewer students with disabilities than other public schools. Charter schools served eight percent of students with disabilities from its total population as compared to public schools, which served ten percent. In the 2019 Annual Charter School Report (NCDPI), North Carolina had 10% of charter schools' student population labeled as “Students with Disabilities” as compared to 13% in public schools. Over a 24-year span, the above report also reflected that there is still a discrepancy among students with disabilities served in charter schools compared to those served in public schools. When breaking down specific data of students with disabilities in the central urban district’s charter schools, it still falls short compared to the traditional schools. Out of thirteen public charters in this representative urban district in North Carolina, only three serve a comparable number of students with disabilities as compared to traditional public schools (14% of students). The other eleven charter schools serve well below 5% of students with disabilities (NCDPI, 2020).

Students with disabilities are underrepresented in charter schools. This fact supports the need for further research on this topic. According to Carpenter et al. (2017), one reason for fewer

students with disabilities enrolled in charter schools is the issue of access. In their quantitative policy analysis, they determined whether there was an enrollment gap between charter and traditional public schools in Denver, Colorado in relation to students with disabilities. They concluded that a lower percentage of students with specific learning disabilities attend charter schools than those who attend traditional public schools. It is, however, a requirement that charter schools create fair and equitable processes for enrollment of all students. Lotteries are a strategy charter schools use to ensure they are enacting a nondiscriminatory process of student selection. Chabrier et al. (2016) researched the lottery process and how it works for both the families and schools. They explain that lotteries occur when the number of applicants exceed the available spots, and there are instances when there are so many applicants that the charter schools might select 20 percent or fewer of those who apply. During the lottery process, families and their children gather to hear if they were accepted or not. Following the lottery, “lottery losers often must default back to attending some of the worst performing schools in the country” (Chabrier et al., 2016, p. 58). The study ultimately focused on comparing the individuals who won a lottery to those who lost the lottery. Some students might win but decide not to attend the charter school, while those who lose do not necessarily attend a traditional public school; they might choose another type of school or eventually be accepted into a charter school. Depending on the criteria for the lottery, it can lower the acceptance rate of specific subgroups of students.

Another reason for underrepresentation is because students with disabilities are often “counseled out” of the charter schools. Estes (2004) conducted a qualitative research project exploring whether charter schools in Texas were adequately meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Through conducting interviews with several different stakeholders within charter schools, she discovered that charter schools were not typically prepared to meet the needs of

students with disabilities in the following areas: funding, differentiation of instructional materials, and knowledge of IDEA. The lack of knowledge led to charter schools “counseling out” families, which is defined as encouraging them to consider other options that supposedly would better serve their child. Stern et al. (2015) concluded that if a school’s success is determined upon their test scores, students with disabilities can be viewed as a liability since their scores might potentially lower the total score. They further explain that “students with disabilities do not score well on these tests, then these students are continually seen as unvaluable” (p. 4). According to Carpenter II et al. (2017), this practice of “counseling out” still occurs among charter schools, causing a disproportionality of students with disabilities enrolled in-charter schools as compared to traditional public schools.

Once students are enrolled, IEP teams meet to establish appropriate educational modification for students with disabilities. The students’ IEPs are used to determine whether the school is appropriate for that specific student, and then they encourage parents to consider the best placement for their child to receive support (Carpenter et al., 2017). If a student with a disability has an IEP in a public school, that school has an obligation to provide the student with Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE). “Counseling out” students is an unlawful practice charter schools use in order to maintain autonomy with curriculum, lower their costs, have higher results on statewide assessment, and less bureaucratic red tape to deal with (Garda, 2012).

These counseling out practices are unlawful because public schools, including charter schools, are accountable to federal civil rights laws, meaning they must provide FAPE for students with disabilities, adhering to federal civil rights protections in Section 504 and ADA through IDEA. In 2001, several parents of students’ who attended a charter school in New York sued the charter school citing “...they did not provide their students with adequate special

education services or even basic elements of a public education, such as certified teachers or books” (Hulden, 2011, p. 1245). The Supreme Court found that charter schools must be held to the same standards as public traditional schools. They receive federal funds for their programming, so they must be held accountable for providing FAPE for students with disabilities.

Charter Schools and Recruitment of Families

Why do families choose charter schools? Might it be because of perceptions of innovation or claims of greater academic achievement? Charter schools recruit in part by marketing innovative curricular programs and approaches, such as improved instructional technology, college and career ready programs, and project-based learning. These innovative programs engage and excite students and parents alike while leading parents to think that their children will learn increasingly more because of these specialized programs that are often not available at traditional public schools.

Many scholars have studied reasons as to why parents want their children to attend charter schools. Research indicates that parents choose charter schools based on academic reputation, peer group preferences, and geographic proximity (Ertas, 2013). Parents also choose charter schools “due to dissatisfaction with their current public school’s reputation, services, and general education program” (Diaz, 2016, p.5). Charter schools influence their student distributions through a variety of mechanisms, including recruitment and admission policies, marketing techniques, and whether or not they offer transportation (Ertas, 2013). Charter schools typically can recruit families across attendance zones and districts. They are open to any student who meets a public-school attendance requirement.

As previously mentioned, charter schools are required to use a lottery process to ensure equity in access and to increase diversity in the demographics of their student population. However, they are not required to do so. The “lottery” process in charter schools is only used when there are not enough spaces for all students who are interested in attending. Some students are accepted into the school, and some are not, but it is based on the criteria set for the lottery. According to federal guidance, weighted lotteries are defined as “...those that give additional weight to individual students who are identified as part of a specific set of students falling under the educationally disadvantaged group” (NC Office of Charter Schools, p. 1). Educationally disadvantaged students are students who may also be economically disadvantaged, which may include students with disabilities, migrant students, immigrant students, English language learners, and homeless or unaccompanied youth (NC Office of Charter schools). When a lottery becomes necessary because of more interest in a charter school than seats available, the charter school must create a system that allows for students in an educationally disadvantaged category more weight on their application in order to fill seats to even out all populations of students in the charter school.

Despite promises and claims of higher quality education and outcomes, the evidence about whether charter schools are more effective than traditional public schools is often inconsistent and inconclusive. In one example, Clark et al. (2015) examined middle school charter schools across the United States, and they compared the children who were accepted to those who were not. They then explored students’ test scores to determine whether charter schools made a difference educationally. They found that students attending charter schools showed no significant improvement as compared to those who did not attend charter schools.

Parents of students with disabilities face significant challenges when making a choice for schooling. According to an analysis done by the Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA, 2012), there are several factors that charter schools fail to address when recruiting: language barriers, socioeconomic status, and the ability of parents to arrange transportation for their school age children, among others. The study also suggests that “this type of selection bias is used to cut out those families of children with disabilities who fail to request that their IEP Teams reconvene to consider a change in educational placement” (COPAA, 2012, p. 37). Another example is from Eckes and Trotter (2007), in which their research discusses one process of reducing the cost to charter schools is to not accept into the school students who have special needs or are disadvantaged. They discuss the reasoning for non-acceptance as a burden on the charter due to the amount of funding it costs to educate and support a student with disabilities.

Policies for Student Enrollment into Charter Schools

Charter schools’ enrollment policies vary from state to state depending on a range of factors, including who authorizes a charter school, accountability processes, and whether teachers are required to have an official teaching license. The Education Commission of the States (2022, May 17) researched each state with existing charter schools (forty-four) and compared the policies across each one. North Carolina requires charters to consider any child for admission who qualifies for public schools. According to NC Article 14A, section e, “no school shall limit admission to students based on intellectual ability, measures of achievement or aptitude, athletic ability, or disability. No school shall limit admissions to students on the basis of race, creed, national origin, religion or ancestry” (NCDPI charter Schools, Article 14A). Students in North Carolina can be admitted to charters outside of their attendance area and district. Admissions policies for charter schools are open. All students who apply to a charter should be

accepted if enrollment caps have not been reached. However, when there is competition for admission, charter schools can give priority to the following:

1. Siblings of currently enrolled students
2. A student who has enrolled in the charter within two previous school years but left
3. A student who was enrolled in another charter school in the state, and that charter does not offer the students next grade level
4. Charter schools can refuse admission to any student who is expelled or suspended from a public school until the period has expired
5. Weighted Lottery process that has been approved by the State Board of Education (Article 14A - Admission Requirements, 2020).

Additionally, and as I mentioned earlier, when more students apply than seats are available, the charter is required to hold a “lottery” process for students’ acceptance.

In North Carolina, the state school board requires that charter schools have at least 50% of their teachers certified with a teaching license. The fact that up to 49% of charter school teachers may not hold professional certification raises the concern about whether parents understand the experience and credentials of their children’s teachers. Moreover, there is not a cap on the number of charter schools allowed to open within the state (Rafa, 2020), so they continue to develop each year.

Special Education in Charter Schools

According to Pratt and Spaulding (2015), “There are three distinct eras in the history of special education in the United States: (a) Early Reform (1800-1860), (b) Stagnation and Regression (1860-1950), and (c) Contemporary Reform (1950-present)” (p. 92). In the early reform era, people with disabilities were regarded as unimportant and excluded from schools.

They did not have a place in society. They were moved into hospitals or locations where they were out of the public eye. During this era, special education programs were delinquency prevention for “at risk” children who lived in the urban slums and “moral training” for African American children (Wright & Wright, 2021).

Moving into the nineteenth century, research on people with disabilities became more common, with increasing discussion on rights for students with disabilities. Disappointingly, the research was more focused on finding ways to treat and eliminate the disability or identify, measure, and segregate - through the means of IQ testing - the disability rather than how to support and work with students with disabilities (Pratt & Spaulding, 2015). During this time period, the passage of a compulsory attendance law was an important step forward for students with disabilities. This law required students of a certain age range to attend school no matter their race, disability, or socioeconomic status.

For students with disabilities, this meant they would now be able to attend schools instead of staying at home. However, the practice of identifying, measuring, or assessing and then segregating, led to students with disabilities being isolated in separate classes and schools. It wasn't until the 1950's, with the decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, people began to look at students with disabilities and the segregation of students in separate classrooms as a civil rights issue. After the decision, “...parents of children with disabilities began to bring lawsuits against their school districts for excluding and segregating children with disabilities. The parents argued that, by excluding these children, schools were discriminating against the children because of their disabilities” (Wright & Wright, 2021, p. 3). From this point on, several important laws evolved over the years, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

of 1965 (ESEA), Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, and then what we know today, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education (IDEA) Act, “is a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children” (About IDEA, 2020). IDEA exists to ensure that states and public schools provide students with disabilities free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and schooling in a least restrictive environment (LRE) that supports the student to access the general curriculum.

Students with a specific learning disability in a traditional public school are more likely to be tested and receive an IEP for their area of eligibility over students who attend charter schools (Carpenter et al., 2017). According to research by Diaz (2015) on charter schools and the cost to give students a free and appropriate public education, students with disabilities lose out from charter schools finding strategies to only serve those that cost the least. She states that “students with special education needs may be at risk due to the increased cost of adequately educating students with special needs” (Diaz, 2015, p. 5). She discusses an occurrence in Michigan where two school districts decided to become all charter schools due to funding problems and still had to figure out how to provide FAPE to their students with disabilities. Diaz also found that students with disabilities in charter schools do not perform as well in reading and math as their peers attending traditional public schools. Although they are considered a public school, charter schools in the United States “continue to enroll a lower population of students with special education needs” (Diaz, 2015, p. 5). There have been recorded instances where a charter school refuses to identify a child as one who has a learning disability and/or they are unable to provide FAPE due to lack of resources. Diaz’ (2015) analysis supports the concern that

other scholars have raised about whether charter schools have followed the mandated requirements of IDEA in terms of supporting students with disabilities.

Legal Concerns with SWD in Charter Schools

While I have been conducting this research project, there have been a range of legal concerns in reference to students with disabilities and the funding, paperwork, and service delivery of this subgroup of students in charter schools around the nation. Generally, these concerns involve not providing adequate – and legally required – services for SWD in charter schools. The examples below all occurred recently in 2022 in North Carolina charters that were part of the research study.

One incident in 2022 occurred at a school district in North Carolina where the charter school did not implement a student’s required IEP services. According to Childress (2022), the student was both visually and speech impaired and did not have a licensed or certified special education teacher providing services for the first month of school. The school also failed to provide all general education teachers with the student’s IEP; consequently, the student was not receiving accommodations or modifications in any classes. After the student’s mother filed a complaint, the state investigated and discovered that 76 students in the school were not receiving their IEP services. The mother boldly stated, “It’s a numbers game. They don’t care about following federal regulations, or the law. It’s more about numbers and how many kids they can fit into that building” (Childress, 2022).

In 2022, a charter school was closed due to its mishandling of the funds and altering and falsifying IEP documents of students. According to Hui (2021), the charter school had a compliance visit in 2020 and “numerous deficiencies” in the services required for special education students were found. The school was given a timeline to fix and resolve the issues.

During this time period student's IEP's were altered by school personnel in order for them to appear current. One issue here is the fact that the law requires that IEP's are reviewed and updated and reviewed annually with a team of people, including the parent. The director of Exceptional Children' programming at this charter over saw the process and blamed computer access as the reason for these IEPs being outdated. The EC Director was the daughter of the directors of the charter. During an unannounced visit the state board, more concerns arose, and this was the reason for the board to move to close the charter:

1. "Inability and/or failure to provide access by NCDP EC staff to EC student and finance records when requested."
2. "Falsely reporting staff's compliance with Every Child Accountability and Tracking System (ECATS) training."
3. "Failure to provide all documentation requested by DPI's EC Division."

(Hiu, pg. 8)

In 2022, another charter in this research study was taken to court for a violation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The child did not receive the appropriate testing and service delivery. The court gave the charter school a list of items the must be done in order to serve the student, at the charter schools' expense, including the following:

review educational records and other relevant private records provided by the consultant and parent; conduct a Functional Behavior Assessment; collaborate with private providers; provide input on Behavior Intention Plan, BIP; attend and participate in IEP and BIP review meetings; provide additional training to school staff, support teacher, related service providers; aide with confidential observations, fidelity checks, coaching and modeling; provide input to the IPE team with regard to data review; review and

propose revision to IEP within forty-eight hours of an IEP team meeting, including making recommendations on the need for additional supplemental aids, services, modifications, and accommodations; assist staff with developing progress monitoring processes and documentation; consult on the implementation of the IEP; conduct observation and information assessments deemed necessary; and meet with teachers, related service providers, and apartments as deemed necessary. (Parent vs. Magellan Charter School, 2022)

This list that I quote above lists the IDEA requirements for all schools, including charter school. These orders involve the full process of IDEA for a student with disabilities. If the charter does not complete all the directives, upon review by the state, their charter could be revoked.

When parents of students with disabilities learn about charter schools, typically they want their child to attend for many of the same reasons as other parents, including supposedly more innovative educational experiences and ideally smaller class sizes. Furthermore, they believe their child will have more opportunities, receive more support and individualized instruction for their specific area of need, and have a new start in a different school (Estes, 2004). Charter schools are afforded autonomy and freedom from some forms of regulation, while special education laws are highly policy regulated (Parham, 2020). This causes a challenge and/or roadblocks for integrating students with disabilities into the charter environment. One must adapt to the student, not the student to the school.

Conclusion

After reviewing the research regarding the development of charter schools, recruitment of families, policies for student enrollment, and special education programming, one overall theme

is that charter schools sometimes exclude certain subgroups of students, despite proclaimed openness and good intentions to welcome all students.

The main subgroup of students that charter schools have overlooked since the beginning are children with disabilities, which is supported when reviewing the enrollment data between the two different types of schools. The percentage of students with disabilities (SWD) in charter schools is lower than that of the traditional public school system. Two of the main reasons for the low number of students with disabilities in charter schools include “counseling out” and the lottery, which are both processes for decreasing the overall enrollment of students. Research shows that charter schools lack resources to support students with disabilities, which is why they either “counsel out” those students or choose not to identify them as students with disabilities.

In this research study, I study charter school websites to assess if there are patterns in marketing, particularly looking at which subgroups of student’s charters market and recruit more heavily toward, and if they focus at all on welcoming and providing services for students with disabilities. I also analyze the applications of charters and their structures to identify specific subgroups of students they choose to serve with an emphasis on SWD students. How do SWD students fare in accessibility of charters in this market-based program?

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my study was to investigate approaches charter schools use to recruit, enroll, and market to families of students with disabilities through their websites. I examined both explicit and implicit barriers students with disabilities face through these procedures and processes. Since charter schools are public schools, they have the same obligation as a traditional public school to follow IDEA. In this study, the following questions guided my research:

1. According to their websites, what are charter schools' recruitment and enrollment processes for students with disabilities?
2. What strategies do charter schools use to market to families with students with disabilities through their websites?

Using these questions as the focus, I conducted a basic qualitative research study on three of the largest urban school districts with charter schools in North Carolina.

Basic Qualitative Research

For my methodology, I drew from Merriam's and Tisdale's (2016) qualitative research design and implementation guide. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) describe a basic qualitative study as "...research based upon the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity or experience" (p. 23). There are three primary areas of interest when conducting a basic qualitative research study: "... how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 23). Qualitative researchers also explore documents and websites, looking for data that can help answer research questions. My main purpose of conducting a basic qualitative study was to assess the inclusiveness and representation of students with disabilities in charter schools. I was also interested in the information available on charter school websites

related to services for students with disabilities, and whether this information helps to attract or discourage families (as evident in enrollment numbers) from considering charter schools as a viable option for their children with disabilities. In this study, I engaged in content and demographic analyses exploring the following documents and websites: applications for admission to charter schools, charter school websites, and applications initially submitted to establish each charter school.

Content Analysis

One approach to qualitative research is to analyze texts, documents, and webpages that can help researchers answer their questions. For this study, I examined charter applications, charter school websites, and admissions applications. Using the approach of a content analysis allows me to “...interpret meaning from the content of text data and, hence, adhere to the naturalistic paradigm” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2015, p. 1277). According to Hsieh and Shannon (2015), there are three approaches that are used to analyze texts when conducting a qualitative data text analysis. For analyzing the charter school applications and websites, I use all three approaches, which include a direct approach, summative approach, and finally compiling all information. The direct approach involves a direct coding system to interpret the data using terminology related to IDEA. The second approach, summative, entails the use of a coding system to “...count and compare keywords or content, and then interpret the underlying context” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2015, p. 1). The third approach consists of organizing all the information to make sense of and explain the collected data.

Methods

I used the three most populous urban school districts in North Carolina to study the intersections between websites and admissions of charter applications with the enrollment of

students with disabilities. There are a total of seventy charter schools within the three districts. I analyzed websites, student applications from each school, and each charter application of the top eight charter schools with the highest percentage of SWD served and the seven lowest charter schools with less than five percent of SWD served in charters. I selected these charters through a stratified sampling strategy. I divided the charter schools into four percentage groups (e.g., the lowest group had a percentage of SWD served of 1% to 5%, and the highest had 18% or above. The middle two groups were between 6-17% SWD). I then selected the highest and lowest for further research. These numbers were 8 schools with above 18% SWD and 7 schools at or below 5% SWD. I specifically chose these fifteen charter schools that served the most students with disabilities and the least number of students with disabilities in order to continue the analysis into their charter application to see what or if any information differed or remained the same between the two groups. The information I collected helped me to determine “...meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). I also added to the research the second highest grouping of schools, 12%-17%, in which serve higher than average numbers of SWD as compared to traditional public schools. This was to continue the research to add support any relevant data collected in the beginning process of the highest and lowest groups of charters serving SWD.

Website Analysis

Wilson and Carlsen’s (2016) research in analyzing charter school websites to illustrate their commitment to democratic values provides a good model for my methodological approach. According to Wilson and Carlsen (2016), “websites are treated as documents that can be analyzed qualitatively...and offer a window into how a school wants to be understood by an external audience” (p. 29). Part of this analysis involved exploring the context, author, point of

view, intended audience, and objectives of each webpage. I analyzed the websites of charter schools in three large urban school districts in North Carolina. I extracted from Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional perspective: analysis of context, processes, and text in order to describe, interpret, and explain the websites and how the inclusiveness of students with disabilities is addressed (or not) within each of them – both explicitly and implicitly. I reviewed social media feeds, links, and accessibility to registration, goals, and vision and mission statements. I also looked for specific information posted on the school web pages in reference to students with disabilities: registering, programs, setting up meetings, staff, processes, and connection to this population in social media feeds, and vision and mission statements.

To begin, I collected the data from the analysis of each charter school website into a qualitative google form in which I coded the websites for key terms related to students with disabilities (Appendix A). I then grouped like codes together, looking for patterns and themes. I then collapsed similar codes into broad categories, which I then compared and analyzed before identifying themes in the data. I also noted any unique or interesting findings from my own qualitative review of the websites. I was most interested in whether there was a relationship between website and application materials and the numbers of students with disabilities who are served by each school.

Admissions Application Analysis

In addition to the website analysis, I coded and analyzed the admissions applications used at all seventy charter schools for student enrollment. I collected the following data in a qualitative google form (Appendix B):

- Accessibility to the student application process
- A place to provide “more” student information on the application

- Terms listed specific to special programming
- Percentage of Students with Disabilities (SWD) students served

Charter School “Charter” Application Analysis

I reviewed and recorded all seventy charter schools’ percentages of student with disabilities each served. I then identified the eight charter schools that served the highest percentage of students and the seven charter schools that served the lowest percentage of students with disabilities and analyzed the applications of these schools to open as charter schools. I reviewed the applications to become a charter school for these 15 charters schools to determine commonalities and differences within the sections of “Purpose of Population Served,” and the Exceptional Children’s programming. I looked at terms associated with special programming, actual subgroups listed, and the details of the descriptions of the exceptional children’s programs.

Data Representation

I share my analysis of the data in chapter 4, using charts and graphs for some of the comparisons I make among schools and districts. I compare data by schools, districts, and school level (elementary or secondary). I also describe key findings from my analysis in narrative format, especially attending schools that seem to do a particularly good job of including students with special needs.

Trustworthiness

There are several methods to enhance the trustworthiness of research findings. I collected data through three sources: a website analysis, a document review of admissions applications, and charter school application for charter review. Given that I analyzed across three sources, one method I used for ensuring trustworthiness was triangulation. Triangulation entails researchers

comparing information across several data sources. Describing triangulation, Bowen (2009) states, “By examining information collected through different methods, the researcher can corroborate findings across data sets and thus reduce the impact of potential biases that can exist in a single study” (p. 28).

A second technique I used to enhance trustworthiness was keeping a reflexivity journal. In this journal, I reflected on my experiences and background, as well as biases and beliefs that I had going into the study. I wrote about hunches, insights, and speculations I collected while analyzing websites and application materials. For example, one idea I wrote about in the journal was in reference to the effort it took to find any information on Exceptional Children or programs that were offered. As I struggled to find any information on some websites, I speculated that parents and/or families looking for information would give up after spending a fair amount of time trying to locate information. Another area I wrote about regarded how the information posted on websites often was not relevant to the school but instead included links to the state website/and or copied state required information for students with disabilities (SWD). So, in this sense, the websites relied on boiler plate language rather than proactively welcoming families with children with disabilities into their schools. Reflexivity refers to taking one's own biases, practice, and beliefs into consideration throughout collecting data. Each person has beliefs and biases that can affect research without intentionally intending to do so. The individual conducting research must consistently ask themselves questions during the research to ensure they are not allowing their beliefs to distort the findings (LaiYee, 2022). LaiYee (2022) explains “reflexivity shifts part of the focus off the subjects and onto the researcher. It requires a general acceptance of the fact that researchers are dynamic parts of the qualitative process and actively influence the outcome of the project.” While writing in my journal, I also reflected on some of

my own biases going into the study, in order to bracket them so I could focus explicitly on the data. As a principal of a school that lost many students to a local charter, in my own experience, students with disabilities have not had good luck at charter schools in my area, but I did not want to let that experience overly influence my data interpretation and analysis.

Lastly, I used peer debriefing to ensure trustworthiness in my research. I conducted regular check-ins with a peer reviewer. This reviewer is an educator who is licensed in Exceptional Children and has worked in the public school system for several years. I asked my peer to use my rubric to code some of the webpages and admissions materials to help ensure the rubric was useful and reliable. I also asked them to review my preliminary analyses and to determine any areas where I made claims that may not be fully supported by the data. One data point on the website review google form that I used duplicated four charter schools. The reviewer noticed that the numbers did not match across all the google forms; therefore, when I printed out all the forms to cross reference the information, I discovered that the data point was entered twice. So here my reviewer helped me to notice and fix some problems with my data. An area the reviewer challenged my thinking was the possible challenges parents and or families might experience when accessing a charter schools' website. We discussed the many different areas of a webpage one must navigate to find information about students with disabilities, which was difficult for both of us and at most times frustrating. The reviewer had me think about my own knowledge and experience with schools and Exceptional Children's programming with the frustration I felt. Then, I compared that to families who have students with disabilities and the lack of information they have on navigation of a site or even the procedures and laws. This helped keep me in the perspective of the reason I was conducting this research, in order to better

serve and inform families of equal access to educational services, whether they select a charter or traditional public school.

Pilot Study

In assessing the feasibility of this proposed research, I conducted a pilot study to decide if there was enough information available on charter school websites, student applications, and applications to start a charter school to conduct a large-scale research project related to how these schools serve students with disabilities. In the pilot study, I focused on charter schools in one of the four largest urban school districts in North Carolina that I did not include in the main study. In this district, I reviewed four charter schools' student application packets and websites. I went into this pilot study working to answer the following two questions:

1. What information is available as part of admission applications related to specialized instruction and services for students with identified disabilities?
2. How do charter schools use their websites to market toward families of students with special needs?

I began the pilot study by reviewing each of the four schools' admissions processes. I printed each application packet from the website and analyzed each one, starting with coding any discussion related to students with disabilities. I then reviewed each charter school's website, looking for language and information related to programming and support for students with special needs. Lastly, I extracted the percentage of students with disabilities at each of the four charter schools from the 2021 April headcount state report from Comprehensive Exceptional Children Accountability System (CECAS). CECAS is the North Carolina online database that houses all students' information in reference to IEP's, meetings, status, etc.

I started my analysis with priori codes to look at the admissions processes for each charter school that I developed out of my research related to IDEA and students with special needs. I coded any mention of the following words:

- Special Education
- IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act)
- Special Services
- Differentiation
- EC (Exceptional Children)
- Special Programming
- Enrollment
- Child Find
- Disability
- Special Needs
- Every or “All” Students
- Personalized Instruction
- Unique Needs
- Placement
- IEP (Individualized Education Plan)
- BIP/FBA (Behavior Intervention Plan, Functional Behavior Assessment)
- Modification
- MDR (Manifestation Determination Hearing)
- Resource
- Procedural Safeguards

- Parent Rights

While examining applications of all four charter schools, I also looked for any words or statements related to students with special needs that I did not use as a priori codes. I then noted any common themes from each application.

Next, I reviewed the websites of all four charter schools. As I reviewed websites, I took notes on all headings and subheadings. I noted the images that were present on each. First, I counted how many images were posted on each website. Then, I analyzed what the images had in them, for example, looking at demographics, what students/staff were doing, and female/male ratio. I noted if there was content on specialized instruction and/or IDEA. After compiling all the information together and analyzing the data, one main theme emerged, which was the lack of acknowledgement of, and marketing directed towards families with students with disabilities through applications and websites. This finding was both disappointing and intriguing; I was interested in whether analyzing a larger set of schools would yield more promising information about charter schools that serve students with special needs.

My pilot analysis showed very little information targeted to students with disabilities on the four websites. First, there was a lack in IDEA terms used for students with disabilities in all the four applications I reviewed. One student application packet had a specific area to provide additional information about individual students, enrichment, or special assistance. Several applications discussed the lottery process/es at the respective charter school. In his research discussing reasons for why managed competition is better than a free market for charter schools, Harris (2017) describes the lottery system in the following way:

This is the competitive market in which recruitment for numbers is the main priority of charter schools. An additional condition for efficient free markets is that transactions

between one consumer and producer do not affect other people. The problem is that this gives incentives to schools to compete not on instructional quality, but on the types of students they can attract and retain, similar to country clubs. (p. 2)

The lottery information on these four sites made no mention of students with disabilities, including whether there are any particular considerations when their families apply for a space at the school.

Analyzing across the four charter school websites, only one of the four charter schools offered a heading for Exceptional Children (EC) and a description of their school program for students with disabilities; however, one additional website provided information about what exceptional children's programs are and noted that they are required through IDEA. However, they did not explain their processes of meeting the IDEA requirements. Of those two websites that mentioned IDEA, both included EC teachers under the staffing tab. Mulligan (2013) explored the question of if and how charter schools serve all students and students' needs. In her assessment of charter school options, Mulligan asks questions regarding which students can partake in open enrollment:

For many families and educators, charter schools offer more options for how students will be educated. For others, charter schools are confusing—Why, for example, are some charter schools not open for enrollment to students who live nearby? And what about students with disabilities? May they go to charter schools? If so, is special education available in charter schools? (p. 1)

As Mulligan alludes to, parents of students with disabilities may not know if charter schools are required to meet the needs of their children. If no information is available on the website addressing this issue, they may assume the school is not really open to them.

After compiling the information that I collected from the websites, I explored the theme around website marketing directed toward families of students with disabilities. I then assembled all the information in rubric (Appendix A). I designed the rubric using DiMartino and Jessen's (2018) book *Selling School, the Marketing of Public Education*. DiMartino and Jessen discuss school marketing as an "experienced good" (p. 22). What is marketed through webpages represents the quality of the product (school), and consumers look to be part of something that resembles a high-quality product. Webpages and social media are the modes in this era of reaching all consumers. According to DiMartino and Jessen (2018), putting more money toward marketing a product increases applicants and enrollment in a school. The rubric I created represents each category under marketing components of websites: images, social media links, related headings, vision, and mission.

After completing and reviewing the rubric (Appendix C) for all four charter schools, I added up the points for each area. The evidence from the rubric reveals that higher scores correlate with higher enrollment of students with disabilities (Appendix D). Using this rubric to review all webpages and student application packets based on the above criteria helped confirm that the more IDEA terms and language used, the higher percentage of enrolled students with disabilities.

Conducting the pilot study provided me with ideas that guided the large-scale research study. According to the I data collected in this small-scale pilot study, I found that there was enough information to conduct a larger scale study to determine if inclusivity and representation of students with disabilities is related to the marketing through schools' websites. Based on the rubric, the more images and key terms found correlate with percentages of students enrolled.

Summary of Methods and Dissertation Online

Building off the pilot, in this study I share the much wider range of results (some schools being exclusive and others being inclusive) that I found through the large-scale study of analysis of seventy charter schools rather than only four charter schools, as I did with my pilot. For schools that had the higher percentages of students with disabilities, I wanted to determine if there was a correlation to IDEA terminology they might be using on websites and/or applications and their higher enrollment numbers. Also, I explored the charter school charter applications of those schools that serve the highest and lowest population of students with disabilities to look for commonalities in programming requests, years opened, specific lottery specifications, and other information that trends toward serving this specific subgroup of students.

For this dissertation study, I analyzed all seventy charter schools' applications (for families) and websites. This process mirrored the process I used during the pilot study, with a rubric that I updated to meet the needs of a more qualitative approach. More specifically, I changed my initial rubric from looking for a number of items for each area to listing items and the quality of items. For example, the first rubric stated, "How many special programming terms are identified" and was changed to "List the terms related to special programming." I also added a section to identify social media accounts in order to analyze the quality of each. I acknowledge that due to the research being larger scale, I encountered schools that did not follow the same correlation as schools in the pilot study. For example, schools with more IDEA terms and diverse images used in the pilot study had a higher enrollment of students with disabilities. However, when I adjusted the rubric, I took out the images component but added two more qualitative. After completing the rubric for each charter school, I used the qualitative data to determine themes and correlations. I also created charts and graphs to represent data collected for

comparison and relation between different entities; district, number of SWD students, year charter opened, etc.

During the pilot study, it appeared that a correlation between the number of terms and imagery used relates to the percentage enrolled. This did not remain constant through the large-scale study. This compelled me to look further into the charter applications to find patterns or themes to correlate the number of SWD students served at a particular charter. In chapter IV, I discuss this research study of charters and the information found in several charter applications compared to information posted on their webpages.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Findings

In this chapter, I discuss the findings from my analysis of charter school websites and their initial applications to start the charter as well as their student applications. The results of conducting this analysis of the seventy charter school websites for three of the four largest school districts in North Carolina proved to be quite informative. The time it took to complete the initial review of each website ranged from ten to twenty-five minutes. This time was dependent upon the number of documents, subpages, and external links utilized by the school on their site. Most of the websites were unique when compared to the others; however, six of the seventy schools used the same management system, Educational Management Organization (EMO). This EMO set the standard for the style and information contained within its schools' websites.

I divide this fourth chapter into three sections. The first section is devoted to the findings of all seventy charter schools' websites and their applications for student enrollment in reference to the marketing tools used to attract students with disabilities (SWD). In the second section, I share my analysis of the applications for charters from the top eight charter schools that serve the highest percentage of SWD (18% -26%) and the seven lowest percentage of SWD (1% - %5) students served across the three North Carolina districts. In the final section, I discuss findings of the overall data collected.

Website and Student Application Analysis

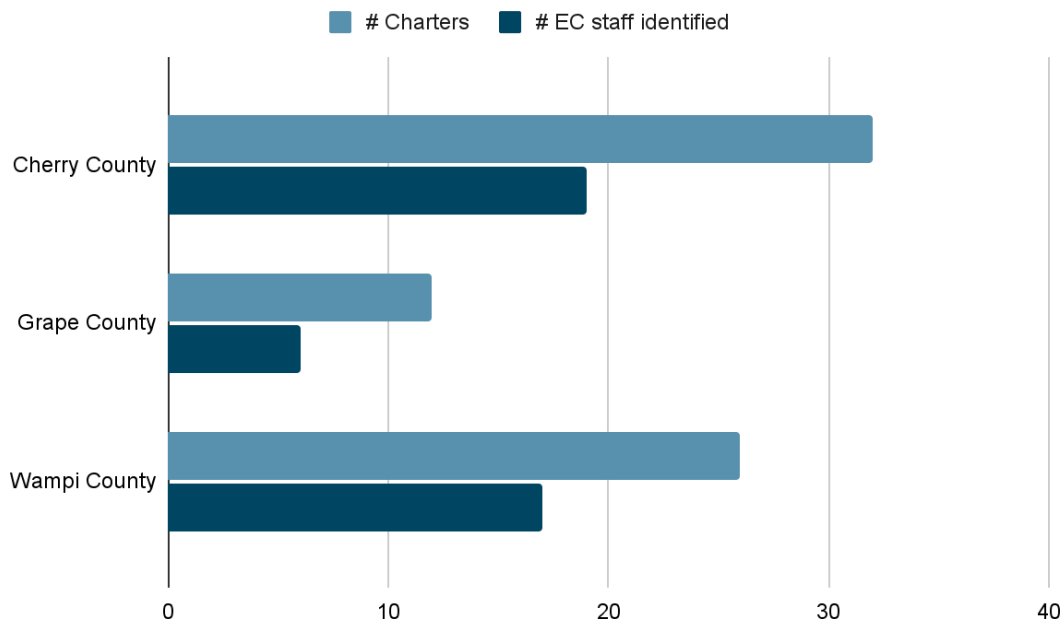
I created and used a google form (Appendix A) to look at key terms and constructs related to serving students with disabilities on each website. I also used a google form (Appendix B) to determine which charter schools' student application packets used terms that would identify students with unique needs: academic or social. In the next four subsections, I describe

each area of findings from each area of the qualitative adjusted rubric: EC staff identification, website subheadings, charter school vision and missions, and student applications.

Identification of EC Staff

I reviewed seventy charter schools' websites: fifty-seven percent of the websites identified some type of staff that served Exceptional Children. These staff members held a range of titles, including Director of Exceptional Services, Speech/Occupational therapists, and special education teachers. Each charter that identified Exceptional Children staff had a variety of positions that serviced students with disabilities. Out of the eight charter schools with the highest percentage of students with disabilities, seven identified their EC staff on their webpage. The graph below shows a comparison of the three counties (all pseudonyms) to the number of charter schools each have and how many identified some type EC staff.

Figure 1. NC County Comparison of # of EC Staff Identified



Subheadings Specifying Exceptional Children

Thirty-five of the seventy charter schools present information regarding Exceptional Children (EC) services on their website. This means half of the schools in the study did not have information regarding these services on their websites, which is a sizable number. Of the thirty-five, three have tabs on their main page that indicate EC information on their website, which makes it easily accessible for a parent with a special needs child to gain the necessary information electronically. If I wanted information for my student/s at this particular charter school, all I had to do was hit the tab and in all three charter schools, information appeared with additional links to school and state information on programming. However, it is interesting to note that not all this information is easy to locate. There were several websites that required selecting many different tabs to get to a section that would provide EC information. Tabs were hidden or linked under other tabs in ways that were not always intuitive, even for an education professional. I spent at most twenty-five minutes on several web pages just searching for any information. I found EC information under several unspecified sections; for example, I found information under the parent resources section, programming section, and then again under services. While in the unspecified sections, I had to select more links for any additional information I wanted to review in reference to EC. If I were not intentionally conducting research to locate the information, I likely would have given up after clicking the first two tabs and not finding useful information.

Visions and Missions of Charter Schools

Twenty eight of the seventy charter school's vision and mission statements had at least one term that suggests they serve all students, including students with disabilities. The following are the terms that are common to the twenty-eight websites:

- inclusive
- equal opportunities
- every student
- every child
- all students
- student needs
- diverse student needs
- alternative pathway
- additional layer of support
- individually tailored
- individual needs of learners
- personalized learning

To be further noted, five of the eight charter schools with the highest percentage of SWD students had one or more of these terms in their vision and mission statements. Two of the eight, which served more than 20% of their student population, had more robust mission and vision statements that reflected the inclusiveness of all students, especially students with disabilities.

Charter A, which serves 22% of its student population of students with disabilities, has a mission statement that reads: “We are a diverse middle and high school community that focuses on college and career preparation and individually tailored learning opportunities to empower all students to reach their full potential” (Welcome to Charter A, n.d.). This mission statement describes individually tailored learning opportunities to empower all students, which would presumably include students with identified learning or social and emotional needs. On the front page, there are several tabs that describe each type of student or subgroup one might need

additional information for: Exceptional Children, McKinney-Vento, PTO (parents), Faculty and Staff, Careers, Board, Leadership. This tells a great deal about the community to whom they market their charter, especially about the degree to which they are inclusive. When you choose the Exceptional Children's tab, you are directed first to a person, phone number, and email at the school to contact. Additionally, the page provides information about requirements for both federal and school specific programming. Once you select the tab about academics on their web page, the post reads:

Charter A's goal is to challenge our students academically while addressing the needs of our diverse student body. We value smaller class sizes, individualized learning, and a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere. We aim to help those students who have struggled in larger learning environments to thrive and meet their full potential. The scheduling and course offerings for our high school students varies as we address the diverse needs of students to meet graduation standards. Encore classes are dependent upon student grade level and interest. They may include Spanish, Psychology, Health/PE, Visual Arts, and Chorus. [Charter A] ... may offer virtual classes online and course credit by Demonstrated Mastery. Please see the PDF below for information about Credit by Demonstrated Mastery. *Note: course offerings vary based on student and instructional needs.* (Welcome to Charter A, n.d.)

The information throughout the website for Charter A coincides with the expressed mission. This charter is deliberate with its message of who they serve, why, and how they will serve this particular subgroup of students. It is clear this charter plans and works to serve students who struggle with several areas in everyday life: instructionally and socially. This is a direct relation to the percentage of students with disabilities this charter serves and its marketing on the website.

Charter B, which serves the highest percentage (26%) of SWD students out of the three counties, has the most detailed and robust vision and mission of the eight highest charters that served SWD students:

To help students at-risk of not graduating earn a standard high school diploma and prepare for post-secondary success. Our Purpose: To provide any student with an achievable alternate pathway to a high school diploma, and post-secondary success, when a standard approach does not meet their needs. Our Promise: We believe that all students can learn. We do not believe that one size fits all. We strive to deliver a learning experience that fits the individual and an environment that supports their growth. (Charter B, n.d.)

There are no specific tabs that are described as student groups of support on the website for Charter B. However, this charter opens their webpage with a tab called “Program Details,” which presents the following areas of support they offer to all the different types of subgroups of students:

Academic Support: Our teacher-directed, computer-based program, paired with comprehensive assessments, enables us to uniquely serve each student and shape individual instruction. Detailed reports provide our staff with robust data to help determine coaching and tutoring strategies for success on required End-of-Course Assessments. Language Support: Our program is also designed to serve English Language Learners (ELL). Courses can be translated and instructed in Spanish, Haitian Creole, and 23 other languages. Our Curriculum is supported by specialized bi-lingual teachers trained to help first time English learners. Social Support: Our teacher advocate model pairs each student as a primary teacher while assigning a secondary mentor to help

guide each student through their journey. Family Support Specialists (FFS) work closely with faculty, staff, licensed counselors, and community resource providers to offer comprehensive wraparound services to meet each student's personal needs. Career Support: Career Coaches provide additional instructional time focused on employability, career and college readiness, and post-secondary options. Beyond career planning, our courses can include Career and Technical Education (CTE) that includes role-specific training and certification designed around in-demand jobs. (Program Details: Charter B, n.d.)

This charter focuses on students who struggle in different areas and the plans the school offers to support each individual student. The support offered matches the mission and vision of the charter when they describe serving any student with an individual plan to graduate from high school. The plan does not specifically address students with disabilities, for the school prioritizes all students' individual needs. The charter has this mission and vision stated on the main page of their website. This is also a direct link to market to students and families that have students who struggle either academically or socially; based on the number of students with special needs who attend Charter B, it seems evident that their mission, vision, and messaging is effective in attracting students with special needs at a rate that is more than double the average of traditional public schools in the state.

In the lowest serving SWD charters, three vision and mission statements are notable for their own individualized reasoning and purpose, including serving distinct populations. Charter X Academy, for example, which serves 5% SWD students, had the following statement about its unique focus: "The mission of Charter X Academy is to graduate its students with English-Chinese bilingual proficiency, strong academics, and intercultural competence" (About Charter

X: Charter X Academy, n.d.). This charter specifically describes in its mission statement the type of student they serve and attract. They are looking for students who are bilingual and academically gifted.

Charter Y Academy is the second charter that is distinguished due to its very direct mission statement that entails serving gifted children. This charter serves only 2.6% of its population of Students with Disabilities. With an averaged school population of 384 students, only around seven are SWD students. This charter's mission reads: "Charter Y Academy provides a differentiated, challenging, and equitable learning environment that supports the distinctive intellectual, social, and emotional needs of highly gifted children from diverse backgrounds and enables them to form meaningful relationships with their intellectual peers" (About Charter Y: Charter Y Academy, n.d.). This mission statement and the type of students served in their charter application are identical. This charter school specifically serves students who are academically gifted.

Lastly, the charter that stands out the most is Charter Z Academy, serving only 5.8% of its population of students with disabilities. This charter's mission statement reads: "...will provide to all students and parents who choose to attend, an opportunity to receive an excellent education that is delivered in an environment that is filled with people who really expect all students to do their best at all times. Charter Z Academy will educate the student using a curriculum that is sequential, an environment that is caring, and a structure that is set up for success" (About Us: Charter Z Academy, 2016). During this research study, the charter was closed due to a mishandling of the Exceptional Children's program. According to the Policy Watch news article, "The NCDPI investigation found serious misconduct in the program, which was led by the director's daughter. State records show she altered students' Individualized Education Program

(IEP) documents in a student data management system monitored by the state, which is a violation of federal law" (Childress, 2022).

Student Application Analysis

After reviewing all websites and the ways in which they explicitly and implicitly advertise and/or promote to families with Exceptional Children, I then went into each charter school's web page area of enrollment to review their application processes for students. Surprisingly, this was an area in which charter schools offered little detailed information about enrollment or applying to the school. The majority of the charter schools in the study offered an option to tour and/or fill out a quick google form to express interest in the school. Not one charter school asked for individualized information about the student in reference to student needs. Three of the seventy charter schools requested information regarding race, ethnicity, and language as part of their enrollment application. One of the seventy requested information regarding "gifted" needs, and one of the seventy requested information regarding "free and reduced lunch need." Another interesting point is twenty-five of the seventy either had a link that did not work or was closed until the following registration date.

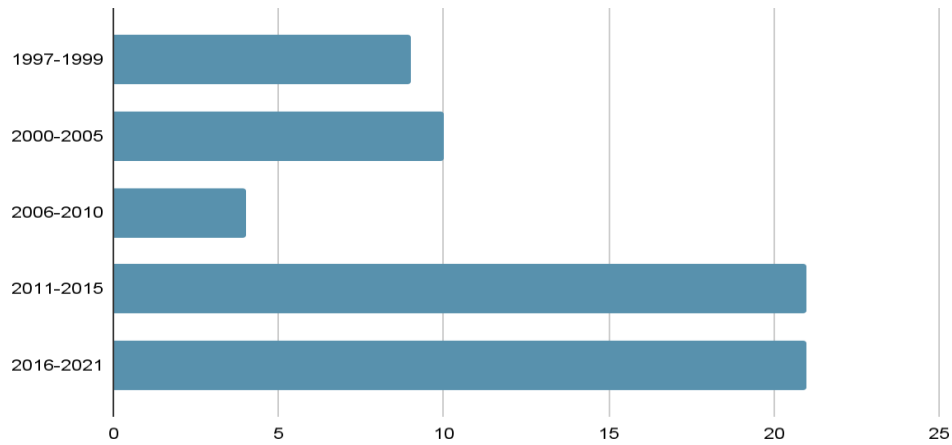
When reviewing the top eight charter schools that serve the highest percentage of Exceptional Students, none of the eight requested any additional individualized student information on the application packet. The lowest seven charters that served SWD students had only one charter school that listed terms associated with special programming. The application asked for "any IEP, ESL or 504 plans if applicable." The data I collected from the student applications on charter webpages has no pattern to suggest this has relevance to the number of students with disabilities recruited.

The lack in information supports the idea that charters in general recruit all students who are interested, at least initially. The more students, the more money to run and/or profit. Once they get students to enroll, they can then sift through and make decisions about specific subgroups. This is when the “counseling out” strategy takes place. In a recent study conducted by Mac (2022), she discusses problems related to “neoliberal school reform and its call for the creation of an educational marketplace whereby schools compete for students by discerning and promoting their competitive advantage over other schools” (p. 7). She finds the increased competition hurts disadvantaged students, including SWD, as they have to compete for limited resources. The Exceptional Children subgroup of students are the most expensive to educate and once they are enrolled, Hiu (2022) found the families were warned that specialized services may not be available for their student as a strategy to steer students away (p. 9). The idea of “choice” through the application process is ideal for families. The lack of information on applications sends the message that all students are welcome, but problems may begin to arise when students get to the charter school and encounter limited services and other barriers to fully integrating into classrooms.

Analysis of Applications to Open a Charter School

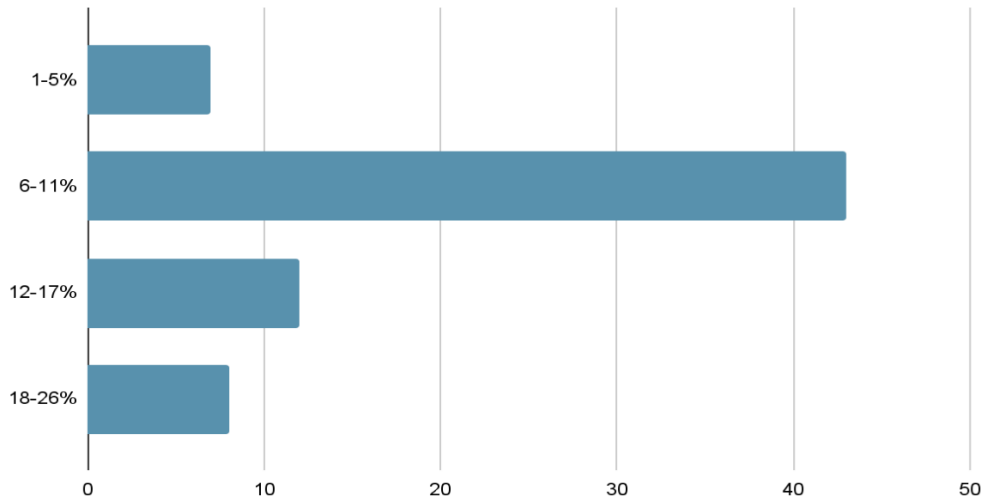
All seventy charter schools were opened and approved for their charter beginning in the 1990’s and running through 2021. More than half of the seventy charter schools opened in the last ten years. I list where the charter schools fall in terms of the date ranges in which they opened in the chart below.

Figure 2. Number of Charters Opened by Year



Wampi County and Cherry County had the eight charter schools serving the highest percentage of SWD students served among the three counties researched. The two counties also had the seven lowest charter schools of SWD students served. The highest percentage of students served in the eight ranges from 18% to 26%, and the lowest seven range from 1% to 5% students served.

Figure 3. Percentage of Students Served at the 70 Charter Schools



Upon reviewing applications for these eight charter schools that were filed with the state and that currently have the highest percentages of SWD, I noted some interesting information:

- Out of the eight charter schools, three served 9th through 12th graders, two served 5th through 12th graders, and three served kindergarten through 8th grade.
- The majority of schools are secondary level.
- Seven of the eight charter schools were opened before 2014 with the exception of one, which opened in 2017.
- The oldest charter school in the top eight group requested a lottery adjustment in 2018 to increase the amount of economically disadvantaged students they enroll (this was the year the NC ACCESS grant opened for charter schools to recruit and serve ED students).
- In four of the eight charter school applications section titled “Education need and targeted student population of the proposed charter” they list students with disabilities or at-risk for instructional purposes in the purpose and/or mission of their charter. For example, one stated “Given the high growth that our charter has had across every demographic (students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged, minority, etc.) [name of charter school] is confident that our charter school is simply what’s best for children.”
- Two Charter high schools in different counties had the same language in their applications related to target population.
- “Our focus is to address the unique needs of these at-risk students, mainly between the ages of 16 through 21 years, including students with special needs, students with disabilities, and English Language Learner (ELL) students.” The entire section for these two applications is identical: from Demographics, Reflecting on the Local Population, and Rationale. These two charter High schools were opened on different years, one in

2015 and the other in 2014. They both have management agreements with the education management organization Accelerated Learning Solutions, Inc. This statement is also included in both applications: “This application is being submitted as a replication of a successful charter school model currently operating in Florida. As noted previously, the Board has submitted two substantially similar applications in the present cycle, each intended to serve students in separate geographical areas of greater Cherry County.” The purpose listed for these schools is to “Increase learning opportunities for all students, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for students who are identified as at risk of academic failure.”

After reviewing the lowest seven serviced SWD population charter applications, I noticed all students were targeted for different and distinct purposes other than to serve students with disabilities. For example, they targeted Bi-lingual education in Chinese, Active families, Creative Thinkers, etc. One charter in particular was very interesting in their statement of who they serve:

...will attract students from all parts of Cherry County and serve an economically and ethnically diverse student population. Low-achieving students from especially low income and socio-economically disadvantaged families will be attracted and helped using free after-school tutoring. High-achieving students will be offered personalized educational plans and advanced curriculum opportunities and will have a chance to prepare for nationwide and international competitions. (About: Charter X, n.d.)

The description the charter provides in terms of the resources for low achieving, low-income, and ethnically diverse students is after school tutoring. Alternatively, they note that the high achieving students will get personalized plans, advanced curriculum, and nationwide and

international competitions. The more detailed focus for what high achieving students are provided is telling, especially since it includes language that is usually reserved for students with special needs: personalized plans. As I read this description, it seemed to be an only loosely veiled way of saying that they focus their efforts on high achieving students. The acknowledgement that they do have services for low-achieving and high-needs students feels in some ways like an effort made to put something on paper to fulfill a requirement for the state.

One of the seven charter schools with the lowest percentage of SWD students (2.6%) caught my attention as they state they are a “charter school serving the unique social, emotional, and intellectual needs of one of the most underserved groups of children in the school system - the highly gifted. Representing only 2% of the population, these children come from all socio-economic groups, backgrounds, and cultures” (Charter Y Academy, n.d.). According to their charter application, they say the charter:

...will have a positive impact on the community in a number of ways. First and foremost, the Academy will provide a unique public-school option, available without regard to income, disability, race, creed, gender, national origin, religion or ancestry, to children who, because of extreme intellectual or academic abilities, require a different educational approach than that offered by traditional public and private schools. At full capacity, the Academy will serve one hundred fifty-six students and their families. The Academy's curriculum and educational approach will be based on sound research, and will be specifically designed to accommodate highly gifted students, a population that currently is underserved by both public and private schools” (Charter application: Charter Y Academy)

There is nowhere in the charter application that specifically references what they will do with their Exceptional Children's group of students, though there is at least an allusion to the fact that students with disabilities may also be highly gifted academically. However, at the beginning of the charter application, the approval letter from the State Board has a section that states:

“Children with Special Needs: The School accepts and understands the purposes of federal and state law. It is obligated to provide free and appropriate education and related services to children with special needs” (charter application: Charter Y Academy)

Notable Findings – Charters 12-17% grouping

As there was not much in the charter school websites and application materials to differentiate the schools with the highest and lowest percentages of SWD, I also looked at the schools in the second highest grouping of schools, all of which serve higher than average numbers of SWD as compared to traditional public schools. There were 12 charter schools that fit into this grouping, equally dispersed among the three counties researched. There are a few notable findings from analyzing these 12 charter applications.

First, the majority of the applications in this grouping of charters offered broad reasoning in the section on “Targeted Student Population of the proposed charter.” Each charter describes servicing all subgroups of students and how their programming will serve the surrounding families and students. They do not give one identified subgroup of students they aim to serve. Some examples of population served:

1. “... targeted population is College and Career ready students seeking a more rigorous school setting that prepares them to succeed in the global community.”
2. “We will not target a specific population for enrollment.”
3. “...ensure a diverse demographic of our community’s population.”

4. "...will target a diverse population of students from Cherry County and surrounding areas."

These statements are broad and seem designed to recruit any and all students in order to meet the threshold enrollment numbers to keep the charter open and working.

A second finding is the commonality of EMOs in this grouping. At least four of the twelve charter schools are EMO's. Two of the four EMOs are NHA, National Heritage Academy charter schools. These descriptions in their applications are general and similar in their wording however, they each choose to replicate another charter in the NHA group from another county and/or location. The NHA organization shares the same core values: academic excellence, moral focus, parental partnership, and student responsibility. NHA is the second largest for-profit charter organization in the United States by number of schools (Carroll et al., 2017). When every student counts for funding, they will recruit all students and then weed out later by test scores. According to Carroll et al. (2017), in a case study done on NHA, she describes NHA's claims of high academic performance being inflated through reports that students in NHA schools were being asked to leave because their test scores are lowering the school's test scores. This is an example of something I mentioned earlier, how charter schools sometimes weed or counsel out specific students. When they apply, all students count in terms of funding, both that comes from the government and from private donors.

Summary

Parents with children requiring special educational services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) might seek information, prior to enrollment, about a school and its ability to serve their child. Based on the research and the data collected, there is a pattern to the number of students with disabilities served, the amount of the criteria found on each website, the student

application process, and the charter application for charter. There is an overall lack in the amount of information on all websites and application packets that show any type of marketing towards the subgroup of exceptional children. However, by comparing the charter schools that serve the most and least students with disabilities percentages, it is notable what they put in their charter application for subgroups they intend to serve, which matches their stated vision and missions on each webpage. This is an alarming data point, due to requirements of the federal government and the law to serve all students with disabilities with each individualized need, costly or not. The schools where the lowest percentage of students with disabilities are served have a purpose to serve students who are academically gifted, or bilingual. Charters have been approved with the expectation they will service students with disabilities despite different subgroups of students they intend to serve. It is evident this is not happening as we see in the example of a charter school that I discussed in my literature review chapter that was closed due to mishandling of paperwork and funding for students with disabilities during the timeline of this research project.

CHAPTER V: FINAL

The purpose of my research was to investigate approaches that charter schools use to recruit, enroll, and market to families of students with disabilities through their websites. In this study, I sought to answer two research questions while collecting and analyzing data:

1. According to their websites, what are charter schools' recruitment and enrollment processes for students with disabilities?
2. What strategies do charter schools use to market to families with students with disabilities through their websites?

In this study, I analyzed charter schools' recruitment and enrollment strategies directed toward families of students with disabilities through their websites. I conducted a basic qualitative research study that involved a content analysis of the websites of charter schools in three large urban school districts in North Carolina, consisting of seventy charter schools altogether. I collected data using three methods: a website analysis, student application analysis, and a charter school application (the initial application organizations submitted to be granted a charter) analysis.

One of the primary reasons charter schools were created was to attempt to solve the problem of weak and ineffective public schools serving students of color, primarily students in lower-income neighborhoods and families. Educators wanted to provide an environment where students from lower socioeconomic families could receive a better education than what they previously received. In the more than four decades since the first charter schools opened, there is little evidence that they outperform traditional public schools, especially in serving students with special needs. Moreover, there is growing evidence that they do not always serve students with special needs well, even as they are required by law to do so

Key Findings and Research Questions Answered

I created and used a google form (Appendix A) to look at key terms and constructs related to serving students with disabilities on each website. I also used a google form (Appendix B) to determine which charter schools' student application packets used terms that would identify students with unique needs: academic or social. In the next four subsections, I describe each area of findings from each area of the qualitative adjusted rubric: EC staff identification, website subheadings, charter school vision and missions, and student applications.

Recommendations for Practice

For parents and families to have a true choice to a school they want to attend, the information about the full range of programming and services must be readily and easily accessible in a range of formats, including on the website. There were several connections I found between my study and the relevant work of other researchers. With qualitative studies, one of the goals is to contribute to existing literature on the topic of interest. To add to this goal, I believe my study could be significant because it might help lead to an awareness of the student recruitment and enrollment practices used both deliberately and implicitly through webpages. By bringing awareness to the marketing and messaging practices of North Carolina charter schools and the North Carolina Board of Education process and procedures for approval of charters, school choice options may one day be fully inclusive to all subgroups of students.

The first recommendation, from the research study, is that state education boards should require a uniform template for a charter school application; this will ensure that all subgroups have equal access when a board reviews an application. Charter school applications for charter requirements are upheld and approved by the North Carolina Board of Education. Through my research, I found that some charter schools' applications were structured into various categories

while others did not follow any formal layout. The inconsistency of formatting provides a disadvantage to students with disabilities and does not offer an equitable playing field for all students served at charter schools.

My research gives increasing attention to the inequity among applications themselves, as well as the application process among charter schools. For example, out of the applications I reviewed in the lowest serviced SWD grouping of charters there was an application that did not provide a plan or section for addressing students with disabilities, which is a requirement in the application process for a NC charter school. The approval committee, North Carolina State School Board, made note the charter was to follow federal and state guidelines to serve students with disabilities upon approval. Out of the applications I reviewed in the highest percentage SWD grouping, these charters had detailed Exceptional Children's programming outlined. Serving students with disabilities is a federal law and one requirement for opening a charter school should be to lay out in detail the process the school will use to serve its Exceptional Children's population. In the North Carolina charter application, there is a required section called "Exceptional Children," however, what goes in that section is not clear. Based on my research of these applications and the literature on these issues, I think the following sections should be required at a minimum: new students and what to do upon enrollment, EC and the school philosophy, parent and family communication, staffing, IEP processing, and training. The charter schools that serve the highest percentage of SWD students had some form of these sections in more detail. Providing more details of a school plan, and following that plan, could prevent some of the lawsuits that have occurred related to inadequate services. The majority of the lawsuits involve incorrect paperwork, lack in service delivery, and/or mishandling of processes and

procedures for IDEA. The more detailed a plan, the less a charter school will fall short of serving Students with Disabilities.

A second recommendation for practice that derives from this research, is for charter schools to use multiple means to ensure parents and families of students with disabilities are fully informed of the programming at each charter school. Parents of students with disabilities face significant challenges when making a choice for schooling. The lack of knowledge of how to navigate the website and the lack of information posted for students with disabilities is a setback for accessibility for students with disabilities. Here are some examples of additional means to community with families: a website section devoted to Exceptional Children's programming, community outreach program, advocacy group, recruitment events, parent liaisons, etc. These additional means can help to create a welcoming atmosphere for families with students who have a disability. Having a parent liaison who can advocate for the families, recruit, and ensure parents and families understand children's rights to a free, appropriate public education and their right to exercise public school choice, will help increase numbers and support a sustainable EC program (Lancet et al., 2020).

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on my research in this study, I have several recommendations for future research related to the following areas: funding processes and procedures in charters, parental accessibility of information, viewpoints related to the North Carolina Board of Education approval processes, and equal accessibility and recruitment in web pages. Equal accessibility affords all students and families the same opportunities and information to make appropriate decisions for their family and students.

My first recommendation for future research is to investigate the systems charter schools use in order to continuously update and inform families of processes and procedures with students with disabilities. In this research study, I described the difficulty of navigating websites and locating information that is individualized to specific schools and subgroups. As an education professional and school leader, I struggled to find information on many websites; therefore, I am sure parents would, too. Yet, we don't know much about how parents actually use websites and what they think qualifies for a good school for their student with disabilities. Additional research could involve in-depth interviews with the parents of students with disabilities about their experiences related to choosing a school for their children, including their navigation of websites and how they understood and interpreted the information they collected. I would also be interested in their experiences contacting the school for additional information when they decided to apply. Understanding routines and perspectives of parents and families who view websites to make decisions of student placement could show in richer detail how parents interpret the information they see and what makes them think schools would be a good fit for their children. Researchers could ask what parents and families of students with disabilities are looking for on a charter website and if they access additional information somehow, where are they accessing it from? Additionally, interviewing school leaders alongside webmasters regarding their rationale for where they choose to place information on their websites and why would help to show whether these decisions are deliberate or not.

Second, I recommend additional research into grants offered to charter schools, especially the equal access to grants for specific subgroups. I previously discussed NC ACCESS grants as one of many grants that are available for charters to open and increase enrollment. Each grant asks for different information and requirements for specific subgroups the grant expects to

serve. There are a variety of institutions that offer charter grants, for example, the Education State Department, foundations, and corporations. An analysis of each subgroup of students served from each grant would be another key point to understand the accessibility level of students with disabilities to charters. Are students with disabilities a subgroup that is offered for additional grants for charter schools? How are schools that receive these grants supporting and serving their SWD? What do they do when grant money dries up? Does the availability of grants compel schools to act differently toward certain subgroups of students?

Third, it would be useful to collect additional research into the North Carolina Board of Education perspectives toward charter and traditional public schools, particularly related to recruitment and application approval processes and requirements. All the applications in this research study were not the same, so what is the rationale that is used in constructing the application processes? In a few applications there was no reference to their Exceptional Children's programming. How are all subgroups assured of equal access when this is the case?

Final Thoughts

There are several questions that continue to persist for me regarding the impact that marketing and messaging have on charter schools' enrollment and recruitment of students with disabilities. It appears that charter schools are indeed able to attract students of interest indirectly through their website mission and vision by using specific terms that relate to a specific subgroup of students. After reviewing the charter applications, the students they are recruiting are represented in their vision and mission that is clearly posted on their webpages; for example: Academically Gifted, Dual Language, At-Risk, Accelerated, etc. Continuing discussions around accessibility of all charter schools for all subgroups is imperative in order to create an equal access environment within charter and traditional public schools.

Due to my position in public education administration, I want all public schools, including charter schools, to serve the SWD population well. This may require that more funding be made available to both types of schools. SWD and their families deserve an equitable access to the public school and educational curriculum they choose. If public school choice via charter schools is going to remain a viable component of our public education system, it should be an option for all students regardless of their disability. It is my hope that parents and families of students with disabilities will be provided with more detailed information about charter school services so that they can become more discerning in their selection of a school and programming offered.

As I conducted research, I was surprised at the number of charter schools I discovered that were not following legal requirements to provide students with disabilities their IEP services. One school that I previously mentioned was in a lawsuit due to over 76 students with disabilities within the school not being provided their IEP services. One parent complaint led to an investigation that revealed the astounding numbers of students not being served, which led to the lawsuit. This case was not highly publicized and kept hush, hush, presumably in order to keep “choice” a popular model for families and communities.

Another element that surprised me was the applications of each charter and how the approval was granted based upon the target group of students they plan to serve. The one charter that caught my attention over all charters, gave a description of the programming and explained that they would find students through a testing technique to ensure they score high enough to attend and be accepted. This process completely disregarded students who struggled and/or might need an IEP and seems antithetical to the free and open access that is supposedly a hallmark of public charter schools (unless there are more students interested than spots available,

leading to a lottery). This charter application was approved by the NC Board of Education. This leads me to question who is monitoring the Exceptional Children's program in this school and in general. Is there an advocate for specialized educational services at the state level in place to ensure that charter schools follow legal requirements in serving SWD?

Through this research study, I confirmed what I believed in the beginning, which is that students with disabilities are not receiving equal access to the curriculum or charters of their “choice.” This population of students is not typically recruited directly, and schools often counsel out students with special needs in a range of ways. Moreover, once enrolled there are processes to weed students out that are too expensive to educate or do not help increase test scores (and hence the reputation) of schools.

The most valuable part of this project for me on a personal level was structuring the time and dedication to complete this research study while also working full-time as a principal. I learned how to structure my daily plan in order to give the time needed to complete this research. Another area of personal growth was in my writing habits. Writing has always been a difficult and uncomfortable practice for me since I was young. I learned through this process to be vulnerable and open my writing for others to critique. My peer reviewer was amazing with support and structure for writing as she would adjust and give additional feedback on my writing weekly. Overall, I learned to commit and plan time and effort into researching and writing. On a professional level, I tried to put myself in the metaphoric shoes of various groups while conducting this research, for example thinking like a parent or student while conducting the website reviews. I used a critical disability lens while researching from these positions and perspectives, which meant looking at relations of power and centering the experiences of marginalized students and their families. This lens helped me to unearth the subtle ways that

schools can communicate exclusion and inclusion. It also helped me to better understand the social construction of disability and the ways students who are outside of normative routines of schools can be framed as problems.

Conducting this study also prompted me to also look into my own school website and make some recommendations for improvement, especially after realizing how long it took to actually uncover information about SWD services for my own school. This search informed my own understanding of my school's website and how I could work with our webmaster to make our website more accessible, useful, and engaging. In addition, considering my professional position and knowledge base, I understand how much more difficult it would be for parents to navigate websites and uncover information needed to make informed decisions about their SWD student's education. Ultimately, the educators and educational leaders from all backgrounds need to work together and to create equitable opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities, in all public schools. As charter schools are public schools, they are required by law to provide services to SWD. We need to ensure that they actually do so and that a state oversight body holds them accountable.

REFERENCES

- About EVA: East voyager academy of Charlotte. *East Voyager Academy*. (n.d.). Retrieved February 26, 2023, from <https://www.eastvoyager.org/about>
- About IDEA. (n.d.). Retrieved November 03, 2020, from <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/>
- About Us. *Torchlight Academy - Raleigh Charter School*. (2016, July 21). Retrieved February 26, 2023, from <https://tlaedu.org/about-us/>
- Ahearn, Eileen M. (2012, June 19). Special Education in Charter Schools: Nuances in Implementation. *Building the Capacity of Charter Schools: Effectively Serving Students with Disabilities*. 1-10.
- Allender, S., Estacion, A., & Nabors, A. (2012). Working Together to Support Equitable Access to Charter Schools: Research and Recommendations. Retrieved December 22, 2021, from <https://www.wested.org/resources/equitable-access-to-charter-schools/#>
- Apple, M. W. (2018, October 20). On Doing Critical Policy Analysis. Retrieved November 16, 2020, from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0895904818807307>
- Article 14A - Charter Schools. Admission Requirements. § 155C-218.45. (2020, July 13). *North Carolina General Assembly*. Retrieved March 2, 2021, from https://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/ByArticle/Chapter_115c/Article_14A.pdf
- Article 14A - Charter Schools. Purpose of Charter Schools. § 115C-218 (2020, July 13). *North Carolina General Assembly*. Retrieved March 2, 2021, from https://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/ByArticle/Chapter_115c/Article_14A.pdf
- Bowen, G. (2009). Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method. *Qualitative Research Journal*. 9(2), 27-40.

- Cambridge Dictionary. (2021). Retrieved February 10, 2021, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/market-based>
- Camera, L. (2018, December 26). *Certain students not encouraged to apply to charter ...* Tailoring the Charter School Population. Retrieved March 5, 2022, from <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2018-12-26/certain-students-not-encouraged-to-apply-to-charter-schools>
- Campbell, N., Morando Rhim, L., & Sutter, J. (2017, January 31). Improving Outcomes for Students with Disabilities. Retrieved December 20, 2021, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/improving-outcomes-for-students-with-disabilities/>
- Carpenter, D. M., Clayton, G., & Winters, M. A. (2017). Does Attending a Charter School Reduce the Likelihood of Being Placed Into Special Education? Evidence From Denver, Colorado. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(3), 448-463.
- Carroll, C., Jobson, D., Pok, B., Scruton, E., (2017). National Heritage Academies: A Case Study of For-Profit Educational Management Organizations.
- Castillo-Montoya, M. (2016). Preparing for Interview Research: The Interview Protocol Refinement Framework. *The Qualitative Report*. doi:10.46743/2160-3715/2016.2337
- Central Wake High school. *Central Wake High School*. (n.d.). Retrieved February 26, 2023, from <https://www.centralwakehs.com/>
- Chapman, O. (n.d.) Critical Disability Studies. Retrieved August 05, 2021, from <https://www.concordia.ca/artsci/cissc/working-groups/archives/critical-disability-studies.html>

Charter School Membership. (2020). *Division of School Business, NC Department of Public Institution*. Retrieved February 25, 2021, from <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/students-families/innovative-school-options/charter-schools><https://cdsc.umn.edu/cds>

Charter school timeline: Twenty-five years later. (2016, October 19). Retrieved March 04, 2021, from <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/charter-school-timeline-twenty-five-years-later>

Childress, G. (2022, May 13). Demise of mismanaged charter school leaves some lamenting the loss. *NC Policy Watch*. Retrieved February 27, 2023, from <https://ncpolicywatch.com/2022/05/12/demise-of-mismanaged-charter-school-leaves-some-lamenting-the-loss/>

Clark, M. A., Gleason, P. M., Silverberg, M. K & Tuttle, C. C. (2015). Do Charter Schools Improve Student Achievement? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 37(4), 419

Cohen, R. (2017, April 27). The Untold History of Charter Schools. Retrieved November 4, 2020, from <https://democracyjournal.org/arguments/the-untold-history-of-charter-schools/>

Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates, COPAA. (2012). Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities. *Preliminary Analysis of the Legal Issues and Areas of Concern*, 1-42.

Critical Disability Studies. (2021). University of Wisconsin: Critical Disabilities Study Collective, Retrieved August 03, 2021, from <https://cdsc.umn.edu/FAQs#:~:text=What%20is%20Critical%20Disability%20Studies,%20cultural%20and%20historical%20experience.>

- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). Implementing Validity Checks. *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Details from the Dashboard: Charter School Race/Ethnicity Demographics. (2011). *National Alliance for Public Charter Schools*. Retrieved March 1, 2021, from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED535212.pdf>
- Diaz, Erin Hankins. (2016, March 20). Is It Really A Choice? How Charter Schools Without Choice May Result in Students Without a Free Appropriate Public Education. *Brigham Young University Education and Law Journal*. 1(3), 1-67.
- Eckes, S. E., & Trotter, A. E. (2007). Are Charter Schools Using Recruitment Strategies to Increase Student Body Diversity? *Education and Urban Society*, 40(1), 62-90. doi:10.1177/0013124507304012 Education Commission of the States. (2022, May 10). Retrieved May 17, 2022, from <https://www.ecs.org>
- Elliott, V. (2018). Thinking about the Coding Process in Qualitative Data Analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(11), 2850-2861. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3560>
- Ertas, N. (2013). Charter Schools and Student Compositions of Traditional Public Schools. *SAGE Open*, 3(2), 215824401349420. doi:10.1177/2158244013494207
- Estes, M. B. (2004). Choice for All? *The Journal of Special Education*, 37(4), 257-267.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). Discourse and Text: Linguistic and Intertextual Analysis within Discourse Analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 3(2), 193-217. doi:10.1177/0957926592003002004
- Garda Jr., Robert A. (2012). Culture Clash: Special Education in Charter Schools. *North Carolina Law*, 90 (1), 655-

- Harris, D. N. (2017, March 17). Why managed competition is better than a free market for schooling. Retrieved December 12, 2021, from <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/why-managed-competition-is-better-than-a-free-market-for-schooling/>
- Hsieh, H.F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*(9), 1277–1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Hui, T. Keung, (2021). NC could close Raleigh Charter school accused of 'falsification' of student records. *The News and Observer*
- Hulden, Maren. (2011, October). A Course to State Action: Charter Schools and § 1983. *Columbia Law Review, 111*(6), 1244-1295.
- Kaplan, Z. (2020, February 05). Perspective: State Board must include complete demographic information in charter school report. Retrieved from <https://www.ednc.org/state-board- must-include-complete-demographic-information-in-charter-school-report/>
- Kolderie, T. (2005, June). Ray Budde and the origins of the ‘Charter Concept.’ *education evolving: A joint venture of the Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University.* 1-3.
- LaiYee, H. (2022, February 24). *The importance of reflexivity in Qualitative Research.* Delve. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from <https://delvetool.com/blog/reflexivity>
- Lancet, S., O’Neil, P., Rhim, L., (2020). National Center for Special Education in charter schools - Enrollment of students with disabilities in character school and traditional public schools.

- Lee, A. M. (2021, April 16). 10 key procedural safeguards in IDEA. Retrieved from <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/your-childs-rights/basics-about-childs-rights/10-key-procedural-safeguards-in-idea>
- Logan, S. R. (2018). A Historical and Political Look at the Modern School Choice Movement. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 27(1), 2–21.
- Mac, Sylvia (2022), Neoliberalism and Inclusive Education, A critical Ethnographic Case Study of Inclusive Education at an Urban Charter School. *Critical Education Journal*, 13(2).
- Macionis, J. J. (2021). *Society: The basics*. Hoboken, NJ: Pearson.
- Manno, B. V., Finn, C. E., & Vanourek, G. (2000). Charter School Accountability: Problems and Prospects. *Educational Policy*, 14(4), 473-493.
- Marshall, C., Rossman, G. B., & Blanco, G. L. (2022). *Designing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publishing.
- Mary, B.E. (2000). Charter School and students with disabilities: How well do they mix? *Education & Treatment of Children*, 23(3) 369-380. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://login.libproxy.uncg.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/charter-schools-students-with-special-needs-how/docview/202675070/se-2?accountis=14604>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2017). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Vancouver, B.C.: Lanagar College.
- Mission, vision, and values. *Mission - Mission, Vision, and Values*. (n.d.). Retrieved February 26, 2023, from https://www.scholarsacademy.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=345044&type=d

Mulligan, E. (2013, November 07). The Facts on Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities. Retrieved December 18, 2021, from <https://www.readingrockets.org/article/facts-charter-schools-and-students-disabilities>

NC Education Market Share Analysis. (2022, March 15). Excel Spreadsheet.

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1HO1dBgGVAB6zfN9QKIIYNqNNAxhjaS-cD6ReMV19x0/edit#gid=408295898>

NC ACCESS Program | NC DPI. (n.d.). Retrieved February 26, 2023, from

<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/students-families/alternative-choices/charter-schools/nc-access-program>

Parent vs Magellan Charter School, 22 EDC 00083 (2022). State of North Carolina

Parham, Katharine. (2020, August 10). *Charter Schools and Special Education:*

Institutional Challenges and Opportunities for Innovation. (Working Paper 242).

[Doctoral dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University]. National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education. 1-26.

Potter, H., & Quick, K. (2018, July 21). Diverse-by-Design Charter Schools. Retrieved

December 17, 2021, from <https://tcf.org/content/report/diverse-design-charter-schools/?agreed=1>

Pratt, Sharon M. & Spaulding, Lucinda S. (2015). A Review and Analysis of the History of

Special Education and Disability Advocacy in the United States. *American Educational History Journal*, 42(1), 91-109.

Program details. *Home - Program Details - Central Wake High School*. (n.d.). Retrieved

February 26, 2023, from

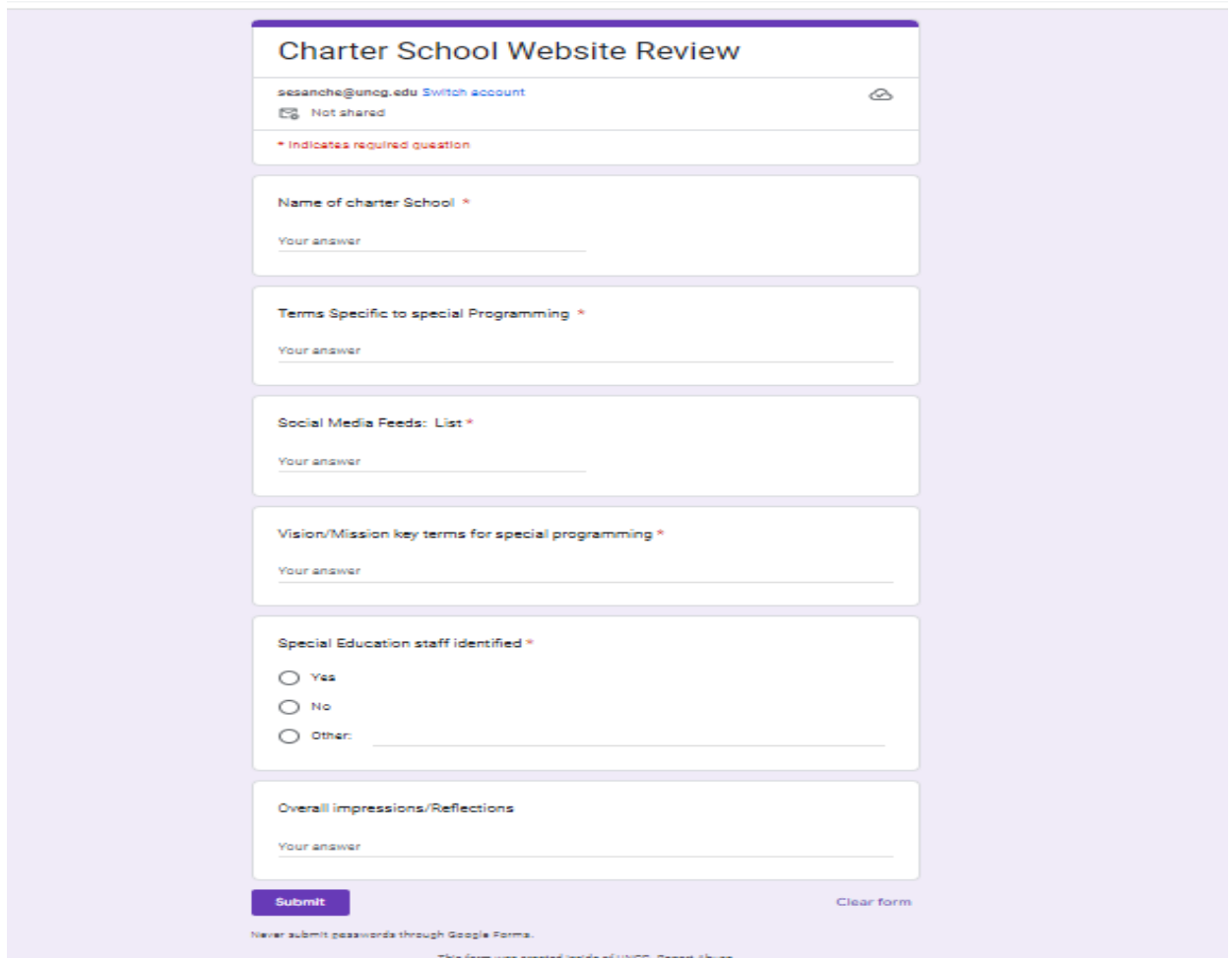
https://centralwakehs.com/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=507970&type=d

- Rafa, A. (2020, January 29). 50-State Comparison: Charter School Policies.
<https://www.ecs.org/charter-school-policies/>
- Regents of the University of Minnesota. (2022). *Critical disability studies*. Critical Disability Studies | Critical Disability Studies Collective. Retrieved February 22, 2022, from <https://cdsc.umn.edu/cds>
- Renzulli, L. A. (2005, August). School Choice, Charter Schools, and White Flight. *Social Problems*, 52(3), 618-637.
- Rhim, L., Kothari, S., and Lancet, S. (2019, November). Key Trends in Special Education in Charter Schools in 2015-2016: Secondary Analysis of the Civil Rights Data Collection. *National Center for Special Education*, 1-30.
- Rhim, L. M., & McLaughlin, M. (2017). Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools: What We Now Know. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 39(5). doi:10.17161/fec.v39i5.6826
- Ricee, S. (2021, December 16). What is inclusivity? *Diversity for Social Impact*. Retrieved April 2, 2022, from <https://diversity.social/inclusivity/>
- Roberts, C. (2000). A Conceptual Framework for Quantitative Text Analysis. On Joining Probabilities and Substantive Inferences About Texts. *Kluwer Academic Publishers*. 34: 259-270.
- Scott, G. A. (2012). *Charter schools: Additional federal attention needed to help protect access for students with disabilities*. Report to Congressional Requesters. GAO-12-543.
- Skjott Linneberg, M. and Korsgaard, S. (2019). Coding qualitative data: a synthesis guiding the novice. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 19(3), 259-270. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-12-2018-0012>

- Stern, M., Clonan, S., Jaffee, L., & Lee, A. (2014). The Normative Limits of Choice. *Educational Policy*, 29(3), 448-477.
- Strauss, V. (2019, April 22). Judges look at whether charter schools are public. Retrieved March 16, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2013/01/02/judges-look-at-whether-charter-schools-are-public/>
- Snydman, J. & White, J. (2020, July 15). Who Are Charter Schools Serving? *National Alliance for Public Charter Schools*. Retrieved October 20, 2020, from <https://www.publiccharters.org/>.
- Torre, K. (2013). Charter Schools and the Process of “Counseling Out.” *Theory, Research, and Action in Urban Education*. Retrieved November 30, 2020, from <https://traue.commons.gc.cuny.edu/isse-2-fall-2013/torre/>
- Welcome to Charlotte Secondary School. *Charlotte Secondary School*. (n.d.). Retrieved February 26, 2023, from <http://charlottesecondary.org/about/>
- Wilson, T. S., & Carlsen, R. L. (2016). School Marketing as a Sorting Mechanism: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Charter School Websites. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 91(1), 24-46. doi:10.1080/0161956x.2016.1119564
- Wright, P. W., & Wright, P. D. (2021, January 03). The History of Special Education Law the United States by Peter W.D. Wright, Esq. - Wrightslaw. Retrieved March 02, 2022

APPENDIX A: GOOGLE FORM WEBSITE ANALYSIS

The Google form for the website analysis had six questions to answer for each charter school website reviewed. The questions were related to Special Education terms overall on the website, social media posts listed, vision and missions' terms used related to special programming, and exceptional children's staff members identified. Information was recorded and compiled into a graph or chart for each question. An Excel spreadsheet was created, manipulated as reviewing specific data, and printed to compare and analyze data. There are three forms, one for each county of charter schools analyzed.



The image shows a screenshot of a Google Form titled "Charter School Website Review". The form is set up by the user "sesanche@uncc.edu" and is currently "Not shared". A red asterisk indicates required questions. The form contains the following questions:

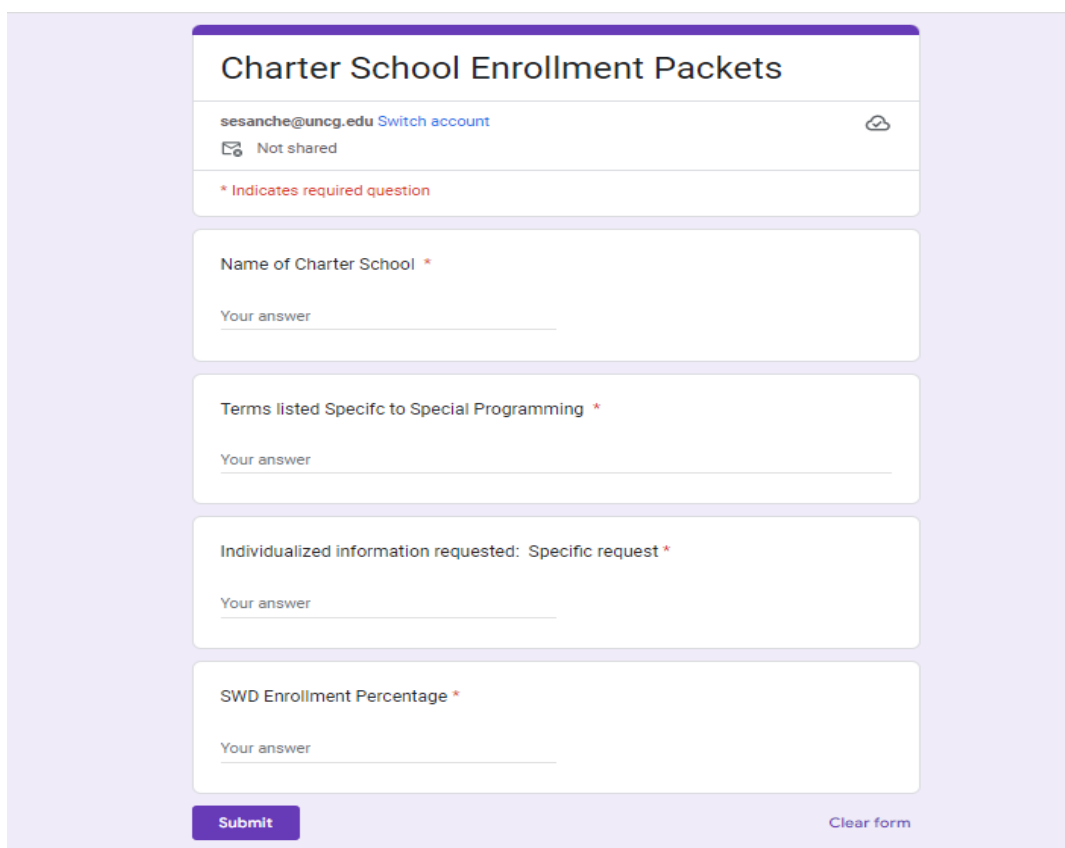
- Name of charter School ***: A text input field with the placeholder "Your answer".
- Terms Specific to special Programming ***: A text input field with the placeholder "Your answer".
- Social Media Feeds: List ***: A text input field with the placeholder "Your answer".
- Vision/Mission key terms for special programming ***: A text input field with the placeholder "Your answer".
- Special Education staff identified ***: A radio button question with options: Yes, No, and Other: _____.
- Overall impressions/Reflections**: A text input field with the placeholder "Your answer".

At the bottom of the form, there is a "Submit" button and a "Clear form" link. Below the form, there is a small disclaimer: "Never submit passwords through Google Forms." and a footer note: "This form was created inside of UNCC. Report Abuse".

APPENDIX B: GOOGLE FORM – CHARTER SCHOOL ENROLLMENT/APPLICATION

ANALYSIS

The Google form for the application analysis had four questions to answer for all seventy charter schools analyzed. Terms listed for special programming, percentage of SWD served, and any specific additional information requested. The information was recorded and compiled into a graph or chart for each question in order of each county reviewed. An Excel spreadsheet was created and printed to compare and analyze data.



The image shows a Google Form titled "Charter School Enrollment Packets". At the top, it displays the user's email as "sesanche@uncg.edu" with a "Switch account" link and a "Not shared" status. A red asterisk indicates that the following questions are required. The form contains four text input fields:

- 1. "Name of Charter School *": A text input field with "Your answer" below it.
- 2. "Terms listed Specific to Special Programming *": A text input field with "Your answer" below it.
- 3. "Individualized information requested: Specific request *": A text input field with "Your answer" below it.
- 4. "SWD Enrollment Percentage *": A text input field with "Your answer" below it.

At the bottom of the form, there is a purple "Submit" button on the left and a "Clear form" link on the right.

APPENDIX C: PILOT STUDY RUBRIC

	0	1	2
Websites:			
<p>Terms that specify special programming The following terms:</p>	No Terms	1 to 5 terms	6 or more Terms
<p>Images representing a variety of students Images Found:</p>	No images	1 to 2 images	3 or more images
Social media feeds	No social media feeds	1 to 2 feeds	3 or more feeds
Vision/Mission state key special programming terms	No terms or no vision and mission posted	1 to 2 terms	3 or more terms
Application/Enrollment Packets:			
<p>Terms that specify special programming Terms Found: (highlight)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Education • IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act) • Special Services • Differentiation • EC (Exceptional Children) • Special Programming • Enrollment • Child Find • Disability • Special Needs • Every “All” Students • Personalized Instruction • Unique Needs • Placement 	0 to 2 terms	3 to 5 terms	6 or more terms

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IEP (Individualized Education Plan) • BIP/FBA (Behavior Intervention Plan, Functional Behavior Assessment) • Modification • MDR (Manifestation Determination Hearing) • Resource • Procedural Safeguards Parent Rights <p>Additional Term:</p> <p>_____</p>			
<p>Individualized information request of students</p>	<p>No request</p>	<p>1 to 2 request items</p>	<p>3 or more request items</p>
<p>SWD Enrollment:</p>			
<p>SWD population</p>	<p>Less than 10% of overall population</p>	<p>10%-15% of overall population</p>	<p>Above 15% of overall population</p>

APPENDIX D: FOUR CHARTER SCHOOLS RUBRIC

<u>Apple Charter School (ABS)</u>	0	1	2
Websites:			
<p>Terms that specify special programming The following terms: *Exceptional Children's Teacher *Individual needs</p>	No Terms	1 to 5 terms	6 or more Terms
<p>Images representing a variety of students Images Found:</p>	No images	1 to 2 images	3 or more images
<p>Social media feeds Facebook Instagram</p>	No social media feeds	1 to 2 feeds	3 or more feeds
<p>Vision/Mission state key special programming terms *Individualized *All students *Disability *Inclusion</p>	No terms or no vision and mission posted	1 to 2 terms	3 or more terms
Application/Enrollment Packets:			
<p>Terms that specify special programming Terms Found: (highlight)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Education • IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act) • Special Services • Differentiation • EC (Exceptional Children) • Special Programming • Enrollment • Child Find • Disability 	0 to 2 terms	3 to 5 terms	6 or more terms

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Needs • Every “All” Students • Personalized Instruction • Unique Needs • Placement • IEP (Individualized Education Plan) • BIP/FBA (Behavior Intervention Plan, Functional Behavior Assessment) • Modification • MDR (Manifestation Determination Hearing) • Resource • Procedural Safeguards Parent Rights <p>Additional Term: _____</p>			
Individualized information request of students	No request	1 to 2 request items	3 or more request items
SWD Enrollment:			
SWD population	Less than 10% of overall population	10%-15% of overall population	Above 15% of overall population
Total	7 Points		

<u>Banana Charter School (QEA)</u>	0	1	2
Websites:			
Terms that specify special programming Has a section dedicated to Exceptional Children	No Terms	1 to 5 terms	6 or more Terms

<p>The following terms: *Special Education Services *Individual with Disabilities Act *Disability * IEP *Functional behavioral assessment *Manifestation Determination *Modifications *Procedural safeguards *parents’ rights</p>			
<p>Images representing a variety of students Images Found:</p>	<p>No images</p>	<p>1 to 2 images</p>	<p>3 or more images</p>
<p>Social media feeds Facebook Instagram Twitter Youtube</p>	<p>No social media feeds</p>	<p>1 to 2 feeds</p>	<p>3 or more feeds</p>
<p>Vision/Mission state key special programming terms</p>	<p>No terms or no vision and mission posted</p>	<p>1 to 2 terms</p>	<p>3 or more terms</p>
<p>Application/Enrollment Packets:</p>			
<p>Terms that specify special programming Terms Found: (highlight)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Education • IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act) • Special Services • Differentiation • EC (Exceptional Children) • Special Programming • Enrollment • Child Find • Disability • Special Needs • Every “All” Students 	<p>0 to 2 terms</p>	<p>3 to 5 terms</p>	<p>6 or more terms</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalized Instruction • Unique Needs • Placement • IEP (Individualized Education Plan) • BIP/FBA (Behavior Intervention Plan, Functional Behavior Assessment) • Modification • MDR (Manifestation Determination Hearing) • Resource • Procedural Safeguards Parent Rights <p>Additional Term:</p> <p>_____</p>			
Individualized information request of students	No request	1 to 2 request items	3 or more request items
SWD Enrollment:			
SWD population	Less than 10% of overall population	10%-15% of overall population	Above 15% of overall population
Total	7 Points		

<u>Cherry Charter School</u> <u>(CW)</u>	0	1	2
Websites:			
Terms that specify special programming The following terms: *Child Find *Disabilities *Every child *EC Director	No Terms	1 to 5 terms	6 or more Terms

<p>Images representing a variety of students Images Found:</p>	No images	1 to 2 images	3 or more images
<p>Social media feeds Facebook Twitter Instagram YouTube</p>	No social media feeds	1 to 2 feeds	3 or more feeds
<p>Vision/Mission state key special programming terms *Every child</p>	No terms or no vision and mission posted	1 to 2 terms	3 or more terms
<p>Application/Enrollment Packets:</p>			
<p>Terms that specify special programming Terms Found: (highlight)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Education • IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act) • Special Services • Differentiation • EC (Exceptional Children) • Special Programming • Enrollment • Child Find • Disability • Special Needs • Every "All" Students • Personalized Instruction • Unique Needs • Placement • IEP (Individualized Education Plan) • BIP/FBA (Behavior Intervention Plan, Functional Behavior Assessment) • Modification • MDR (Manifestation Determination Hearing) • Resource 	0 - 2 terms	3 to 5 terms	6 or more terms

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Procedural Safeguards Parent Rights <p>Additional Term: _____</p>			
Individualized information request of students	No request	1 to 2 request items	3 or more request items
SWD Enrollment:			
SWD population	Less than 10% of overall population	10%-15% of overall population	Above 15% of overall population
Total	7 Points		

<u>Date Charter School (FA)</u>	0	1	2
Websites:			
Terms that specify special programming The following terms/phrases: *Personalize teaching *Every child succeeds *student's unique needs *Tailor plans *Smaller learning environments *Personalized instruction *Special Education Services	0 to 2 terms	3 to 5 terms	6 or more Terms
Images representing a variety of students	No images	1 to 4 images	4 or more images
Social media feeds: Facebook	No social media feeds	1 to 2 feeds	3 or more feeds

Twitter Instagram YouTube			
Vision/Mission state key special programming terms: personalized instruction every student can succeed	No terms or no vision and mission posted	1 to 2 terms	3 or more terms
Application/Enrollment Packets:			
<p>Terms that specify special programming</p> <p>Terms Found: (highlight)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Education • IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act) • Special Services • Differentiation • EC (Exceptional Children) • Special Programming • Enrollment • Child Find • Disability • Special Needs • Every "All" Students • Personalized Instruction • Unique Needs • Placement • IEP (Individualized Education Plan) • BIP/FBA (Behavior Intervention Plan, Functional Behavior Assessment) • Modification • MDR (Manifestation Determination Hearing) • Resource • Procedural Safeguards Parent Rights <p>Additional Term: _endless opportunities for success _____</p>	0 to 2 terms	3 to 5 terms	6 or more terms

Individualized information request of students	No request	1 to 2 request items	3 or more request items
SWD Enrollment:			
SWD population	Less than 10% of overall population	10%-15% of overall population	Above 15% of overall population
Total	11 Points		