

**Parent Experiences in Alabama Charter Schools: Satisfaction, Enrollment Decision-Making,
and Special Education**

by

Natalie Neugebauer Schoettler

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama
August 3, 2024

Copyright 2024 by Natalie Neugebauer Schoettler

Keywords: charter schools; disabilities; inclusion; parents; satisfaction; school choice;
special education

Approved by

David T. Marshall, Chair, Associate Professor, Educational Foundations, Leadership, & Technology
Margaret Flores, Professor, Special Education, Rehabilitation, & Counseling
Andrew Pendola, Associate Professor, Educational Foundations, Leadership, & Technology
Chih-hsuan Wang, Professor, Educational Foundations, Leadership, & Technology
Jamie Carney, University Reader, Humana-Germany-Sherman Distinguished Professor, Special
Education, Rehabilitation, & Counseling

Abstract

This sequential mixed-methods study explored the experiences of parents of students with and without disabilities across six Alabama charter schools, utilizing a survey and focus groups. The survey (n=460) examined parents' satisfaction with various aspects of their child's charter school, reasons for enrolling at their current school, and reasons for leaving their previous school. The subsequent focus groups (n=36) focused on challenges with and strengths of their respective schools, satisfaction with special education services, their experiences navigating the classification/diagnostic process, and their perceptions about inclusion at their school and charter schools more generally. The results suggest that there are few significant differences between parents of students with and without disabilities and that parents overall are satisfied with their child's school and the special education services their children with disabilities were receiving.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to the many wonderful individuals who have supported me throughout the journey of completing my doctorate. First and foremost, I would like to thank my dissertation committee, Dr. Marshall, Dr. Pendola, Dr. Wang, and Dr. Flores, for their guidance, patience, and support. Each of you has been instrumental in my journey, taking on the roles of instructors, mentors, collaborators, friends, and advocates when I've needed it. I'd also like to thank Dr. Carney for taking the time to serve as my outside reader and providing me with valuable feedback. Thank you.

To my friends and family, thank you for your encouragement and understanding. I'd like to especially thank my mother Amy for her endless support and the countless hours spent watching my boys while I was in classes, working my assistantship, or collecting data. Thank you for picking up the slack when I couldn't. Without your support this accomplishment would have never been possible to achieve.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank my husband/editor-in-chief Matthew for his unwavering support and believing in me, especially during times when I doubted myself or wanted to give up. I love and appreciate you more than you'll ever know. This is just as much your accomplishment as it is mine.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgments.....	3
Table of Contents.....	4
List of Tables.....	6
Introduction	7
Method.....	9
Article 1.....	11
Abstract.....	12
Method.....	14
Findings.....	15
Conclusion.....	28
References.....	30
Article 2	37
Abstract.....	38
Method.....	44
Findings	48
Discussion	56
References	60
Article 3	64
Abstract.....	65
Method.....	70

Findings	74
Discussion	84
References.....	86
Appendix.....	91
Conclusion.....	93
References.....	99

List of Tables

Article 1	
Table 1	15
Article 2	
Table 1	45
Table 2	48
Table 3	49
Table 4	50
Table 5	51
Table 6	52
Table 7	53
Table 8	55
Article 3	
Table 1	70

Introduction

Since the inception of the first charter school in Minnesota in 1991, charter schools have become one of the fastest-growing forms of school choice in the United States (Bergman & McFarlin, 2018). During the 2021-22 school year, 7,800 public charter schools were in operation, enrolling a total of 3.7 million students across 45 states (White, 2022). At the same time, 7.2 million students across the U.S. received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). With parents having an increasing number of educational options to choose from -especially with the recent introduction of Educational Savings Accounts-, many researchers have explored the role of parental school choice and what factors influence their decision-making (e.g., Kleitz et al, 2000).

Extant literature suggests that parents consider factors such as proximity to home, school reputation (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007), staff quality (Harris, 2002), class sizes (Fiore et al., 2000), communication, safety, academic rigor, teaching philosophy, and parental involvement opportunities (McGraw, 2017) when choosing a school. Parents of students with disabilities also value special education services, beliefs about disability, disciplinary policies, and a sense of community. While a wide range of factors exists that influence parents' decision to enroll at a charter school, the biggest indicator for enrolling and remaining enrolled at a charter school is directly linked to parents' satisfaction with the school (Hamlin & Cheng, 2020; Hanushek et al, 2008). Conversely, dissatisfaction with their previous school, due to issues like bullying, anxiety, unmet needs, poor academic performance, and lack of support, often drives parents to leave their previous school and enroll their children in charter schools.

Before discussing parental school choice and charter schools, it is important to establish that school choice has always existed for families with means (Marshall, 2017). Families with financial capital can move to a neighborhood with public schools they deem adequate or send their child(ren) to a private school. In this paradigm, it is parents without means who lack the ability to do so. Like families with less financial capital, parents of children with disabilities often face limited educational options in their public school district. As such, school choice policy is often intended to expand options for families who would otherwise not have access to the schools they wanted to send their children to. Little is known about why and how parents of students with disabilities choose to enroll their children in schools of choice (e.g., Fiore et al., 2000) in this paradigm.

This is especially true for charter schools located in understudied policy contexts like Alabama. In March of 2015, the state of Alabama became the 43rd state to establish charter schools as part of its public school landscape (Alabama State Department of Education, 2015). Since then, 14 charter schools have opened their doors. As of now, four more schools have been authorized to open in 2024-25 (APCSC, 2023). Alabama public charter schools served 4,075 students and conversion charter schools served 1,557 students during the 2022-23 school year (Crain, 2023), while their traditional public counterparts enrolled 724,475 students. Over the past four years, Alabama charter schools have increased their enrollment figures by 376% (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2023).

With the recent expansion of school choice in Alabama (Crain, 2023), few scholars have started exploring the state's charter school landscape (f.e., Eller, 2020; Ertas & McKnight, 2020; Mann et al., 2019). Despite their newness, charter schools in Alabama have quickly become a focal point in discussions about educational reform and parental choice. Critics questions the schools' effectiveness and inclusivity (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020). Contributing to the criticism that charter schools receive, research suggests that misconceptions regarding charter

schools still exist. Some of the misconceptions include that charter schools divert funding from local traditional public schools, that they do not serve students with disabilities, or that they cost tuition (Gill, 2019).

Some literature exists outlining how students with disabilities excel in charter schools (e.g., Setren, 2021), while other work suggests that charter schools are unable to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities (Rhim & McLaughlin, 2007). However, little to no literature exists on students with disabilities in Alabama charter schools and why their parents choose to enroll them there. Thus, it is important to solicit the experiences of parents who choose to enroll their child(ren) in charter schools in Alabama. This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of parents whose children attend Alabama charter schools?
 - a. What factors are parents most satisfied with at their school?
 - b. Which factors are parents least satisfied with at their school?
2. Why do parents choose to enroll their children in Alabama charter schools?
 - a. What are the push factors?
 - b. What are the pull factors?
3. Do differences exist between parents of students without disabilities and parents of students with disabilities?

Method

This exploratory study (Creswell, 2006) followed a sequential mixed methods approach (Morse, 1991), where results from quantitative data informed the qualitative data collection (Creswell, 2006). The study's first phase consisted of a systematic review of the literature on charter schools and students with disabilities (see Article 1). The initial search of the literature, conducted during the fall semester of 2022, yielded 546 results that possibly related to charter schools and parental decision-making. Using an iterative process, the literature was thoroughly reviewed and

narrowed down to 55 sources that addressed parental school choice for parents of students with and without disabilities. During this time, site visits to each of the participating schools were conducted.

Incorporating the emerging themes and patterns from the literature review, the second phase employed a quantitative survey in Qualtrics with 27 items exploring parental satisfaction and perceptions, the reasons for leaving their previous school, and reasons for enrolling at their current charter school (see Article 2). The survey was distributed by individual charter school leaders between September 19th and December 14th. A voluntary sample of 460 parents across 6 charter schools was drawn. Parents consented to their participation in the study prior to advancing to the survey questions. After completion of the survey, parents were asked if they would be interested in participating in focus groups.

A preliminary analysis of the survey data was conducted and informed the third phase of the study consisting of focus groups (see Article 3). Fourteen focus groups with 36 parents of students with and without disabilities were conducted via Zoom. The focus groups followed a semi-structured protocol and focused on parents' experiences with their child's charter school, specifically the challenges and strengths of the school, satisfaction with special education services and the corresponding diagnostic process. Focus groups were transcribed before being coded and analyzed using ATLAS.ti version 23.

Below, each of the three phases of the overarching study and the corresponding findings are presented as individual research articles. The first article discusses extant literature surrounding parental decision making and charter schools. The second article focuses on the quantitative survey of parental satisfaction and perceptions, while the third one presents findings from the subsequent focus groups of parents with and without disabilities.

Why Do Parents of Children with Disabilities Choose Charter Schools?

Natalie Neugebauer Schoettler

Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology, Auburn University

Author Note

Natalie M. Neugebauer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3293-4994>

There is no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Natalie Neugebauer Schoettler, Auburn University, 4036 Haley Center, Auburn University, Auburn, AL 36849. Email: nmn0011@auburn.edu.

Abstract

When choosing the best fit for their child, many parents are met with a range of educational options to choose from, especially with the expansion of school choice. This decision can be particularly challenging for parents of children with disabilities. Research suggests that the decision to enroll at a charter school is associated with parents' (dis)satisfaction with a school's reputation, staff, academic rigor, class size, and extracurricular activities among other factors. However, little is known about why and how parents of students with disabilities choose to enroll their children in charter schools or other forms of school choice. This systematic review of the literature seeks to explore why parents, specifically those of students with disabilities, choose to enroll their child(ren) in charter schools.

Keywords: charter schools; disabilities; parents; school choice; special education

Why Do Parents of Children with Disabilities Choose Charter Schools?

Since the inception of the first charter school in Minnesota in 1991, they have become one of the fastest-growing forms of school choice in the United States (Bergman & McFarlin, 2018). During the 2021-22 school year, 7,800 public charter schools were in operation, enrolling a total of 3.7 million students across 45 states (White, 2022). At the same time, 7.2 million students across the U.S. received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). With school choice gaining popularity in recent years, many researchers have explored the role of parental school choice and what factors influence their decision-making (Kleitz et al, 2000). Extant literature suggests that parents' decision to enroll and remain enrolled at a charter school is directly linked to their satisfaction with the school (Hamlin & Cheng, 2020; Hanushek et al, 2008). However, little research (e.g., Fiore et al., 2000) explores why and how parents of students with disabilities choose to enroll their child(ren) in charter schools.

When discussing parental school choice and charter schools, it is important to establish that school choice has always existed for families with means (Marshall, 2017). Families with financial capital can move to a neighborhood with public schools they deem adequate or send their child(ren) to a private school. In this paradigm, it is parents without means who lack the ability to do so. Like families with less financial capital, parents of children with disabilities often face limited educational options in their public school district. As such, school choice policy is often intended to expand options for families who would otherwise not have access to the schools to which they wanted to

send their children. Charter schools are autonomous, publicly accountable public schools that operate under a specific educational objective or focus (NCSRC, 2019).

Little is known about why and how parents of students with disabilities choose to enroll their children in schools of choice in this paradigm. Thus, it is important to solicit the experiences of parents of students with disabilities who choose to enroll their child(ren) in charter schools. This systematic literature review seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) Why do parents choose charter schools?
- 2) Why do parents of students with disabilities choose charter schools?

Method

For the purpose of this study, students with disabilities are operationalized as students with disabilities or specialized needs that receive special education services as outlined by an IEP (Individualized Education Program) or 504 Plan.

Search and Selection

To better understand why parents of children with disabilities choose to enroll their children in charter schools, a systematic review of the existing literature was carried out from August to December of 2022. A combination of the following key terms was searched to identify relevant literature: charter schools; parental school choice; parental decision-making; special needs; special education; and disabilities. Truncation (e.g., *disab** retrieves *disabled*, *disability* or *disabilities*) and Boolean Phrasing (see Table 1) were utilized to expand search results. The search was carried out across five databases (APA PsycINFO, APA PsycARTICLES, Academic Search Premier, Education Research Complete, and ERIC) and restricted by source type (including academic journals, reports,

dissertations, and books), publication date (2000-2022), and availability (full text)¹. The search yielded 546 results that possibly related to charter schools and parental decision-making. Search results were further refined by removing any duplicates, reviewing abstracts carefully, and identifying additional sources from the reference lists of relevant, previously identified sources. Ultimately, 55 results were selected for an in-depth review including 2 books, 2 book chapters, 30 journal articles, 16 reports, 4 dissertations, and 1 column. An iterative approach was utilized to review the selected literature.

Table 1. Key Terms and Search Results

Key terms	Search Results
Charter schools AND parental school choice	84
Charter schools AND parental decision-making OR decision making	546
Charter schools AND parental school choice AND *special needs OR disabilities OR special education*	5
Charter schools AND parental decision-making OR decision making AND *special needs OR disabilities or special education*	51

Findings

This literature review sought to understand why parents choose to enroll their child(ren) with disabilities in charter schools. Findings from the in-depth review of the 55 sources are presented in the following order: (1) students with disabilities in charter schools; (2) why parents choose charter schools; and (3) why parents of students with disabilities choose charter schools.

Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools

One of the central criticisms of charter schools is that they serve fewer students with disabilities than their traditional counterparts by “counseling out” students with severe disabilities or specialized needs and targeting only high-achieving students (Blackwell, 2016; Grant, 2005; Rhim &

¹ Relevant sources that were not available in full text through the author’s institution were requested from other institutions via Interlibrary Loan or obtained through third-party sites such as ResearchGate and Google Scholar.

Hall, 2021; Waitoller, 2020). Some attribute this to their inability to provide the appropriate resources and services for students with low-incidence disabilities (Barnard-Brak et al., 2018; McCray, 2022). While research suggests that charter schools have more flexibility and autonomy in shaping their target population (e.g., Eckes, 2015), charter schools are legally required to provide free and appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to all students under IDEA (Barnard-Brak et al., 2018; Dunn et al., 2018; Lake, 2010), as well as adhere to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Ahearn et al., 2001). Although charter schools are required to provide special education services just like traditional public schools, charter schools face several challenges in doing so.

Inequitable Funding

One of the challenges faced by charter schools in providing special education services to students is inconsistent access to equal and equitable funding (Ortiz et al., 2020; Rhim & Hall, 2021), which is exacerbated by the fact that services under IDEA are not fully funded by federal dollars (Heyward et al., 2020; Rhim & Hall, 2021). Ortiz et al. (2020) examined the statewide funding patterns of cyber charter schools that were in operation during the 2016-17 school year and found that special education funding varied significantly from state to state. Specifically, charter schools in 14 states (e.g., Arizona) received special education funding based on the type and severity of the student's disability, while only 8 states (e.g., Pennsylvania) received per pupil funding comparable to the traditional public school district's special education revenue. For example, a student with a Tier B disability like autism spectrum disorder (ASD) received \$2,629 of special education funding for the 2021-22 school year in the state of Colorado, while a student with the same disability (categorized as APC Level I: Severe Disabilities) received \$9,614 of special education funding for the same school year in Indiana (Education Commission of the States, 2021).

Special education funding is complex and can vary widely not only from state to state but also between districts depending on funding mechanisms, per pupil or per school funding caps, and the type and severity of the student's disability. However, some of the lack of equitable funding that many charter schools face can be explained by the lack of designation regarding how and by whom special education services are rendered, as charter schools are further removed from the hierarchy of the traditional public school system and do not report to a central office for special education services (Rhim & McLaughlin, 2000).

In addition to inequitable funding, many charter schools do not have access to local and state funding for special education services like their traditional counterparts. Heyward and colleagues (2020) analyzed special education funding in Washington state as part of a larger national study and found that IDEA funds cover only 10% of special education services while local and state dollars each account for 45% of special education funds. Charter schools in Washington do not have access to local tax funds which poses a significant barrier in serving students with disabilities, leading some schools to have to close their doors permanently. Similarly, the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (2020) examined special education enrollment and funding patterns in Connecticut, where many charter schools lack access to local or state dollars. Funding systems like the ones in Connecticut and Washington are often referred to as "hyper-local". "Hyper-local" funding policies often prevent charter schools from accessing local dollars and, therefore, make it difficult to offer and maintain special education services. Such policies exacerbate the special education enrollment gap between charter and traditional public schools.

Cyber schools in particular face additional hurdles when providing special education services, such as teacher recruitment and retention (McKittrick et al., 2019), fulfilling Child Find²

² Per Part B, Section 300.111 of IDEA, schools are legally required to 1) identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities in their state, regardless of the severity of their disability and 2) render the appropriate special education and wrap-around services.

requirements, and rendering specialized services (Collins et al. 2015; Dunn et al., 2018). Cyber charter schools are unique in that they serve many rural students as well as students with disabilities by overcoming transportation and mobility-related barriers that are present in traditional brick-and-mortar schools (Collins et al., 2015; Tonks et al, 2020). However, operating without a school building poses logistical and financial hurdles for rendering specialized services, such as speech or physical therapy, as outlined in an IEP, and obtaining funding for it.

Enrollment Patterns

Despite the challenges faced by many charter schools, especially those that operate remotely or in rural areas, the number of students with disabilities enrolling in charter schools is increasing each year (Tonks et al., 2020). In their analysis of the 2015-16 Civil Rights Data, Rhim and Hall (2021) discuss the highly debated special education enrollment gap between charter schools and traditional public schools and the implications of unequal and inequitable funding. During the 2019-20 school year, 12.84% of public school students received special education services while approximately 11% of charter school students received special education services (Rhim & Hall, 2021). Moreover, research suggests that special education enrollment is not only increasing but that the special education gap between charter schools and traditional public schools is in fact shrinking (Lancet et al., 2020; Winters, 2015a; Wolf & Lasserre-Cortez, 2018). Winters explains how differing enrollment patterns could account for the enrollment gap between charter and traditional public schools. I do not understand the presence of the gap – I have only been presented with information that indicates that there isn't one despite funding issues. Specifically, students attending charter schools are less likely to leave the school they initially enrolled in than students in traditional public schools (Winters, 2015a). Moreover, findings suggest that the special education gap begins to form in kindergarten and that students who are diagnosed at an early age are less likely to enroll in a charter school. Additionally, students with disabilities are less likely to enroll at charter schools

during non-gateway grades (e.g., the transition from elementary to middle school) than their typically developing peers (Winters, 2015b).

Wolf and Lasserre-Cortez (2018) conducted an analysis of the special education enrollment in Louisiana's charter and traditional public schools and found that the special education gap was 2.5% as of 2011-12. By 2013-14, the gap had shrunk to 0.5%. Moreover, findings suggested that the special education gap was the largest in schools serving kindergarten through 5th grade. Similarly, an analysis of special education enrollment in New York State during the 2011-12 school year suggested that charter schools served a smaller share of students receiving special education services , especially those with low-incidence disabilities, than their district-run counterparts albeit “not [being] far off from what we see in district-run schools” (Baker, 2012, p. 3). During the 2013-14 school year, 11.8% of all students received special education services under IDEA, and charter schools served an average of 9.9% of students with disabilities, while their traditional counterparts served 12.4%. However, it is important to note that 11 states had no charter schools in operation at the time of data collection (Barnard-Brak et al., 2018). In 2015-16, 10.79% of students with disabilities accounted for charter school enrollment nationwide, while 12.84% of students with disabilities accounted for traditional public school enrollment (Lancet et al., 2020). As of 2018-19, nearly 2% of students in Connecticut were enrolled in charter schools. Moreover, Connecticut charter schools enrolled 9.7% of students with disabilities while their traditional counterparts served 13.9% of students with disabilities. However, only 23 charter schools were in operation in Connecticut at this time in contrast to the 895 traditional public schools (NCSECS, 2020). Although the special education gap varies from state to state, existing literature highlights that the discrepancies in special education enrollment between charter and traditional public schools is shrinking, especially as charter schools are becoming more common across the United States.

Other work provides a more granular look at the special enrollment rates of individual schools and networks of schools. Solomont (2020) conducted a case study of a Boston charter school that predominantly serves students with disabilities and English language learners. As of 2013, the school, which is part of a much larger network, enrolled 241 students. Across the network, four schools operated and served a total of 1374 students. Of the 1374 students, 79% of students identify as Hispanic and 19% are eligible for special education services. Similarly, Rhim and Lancet (2018) conducted a case study of Mott Haven Academy Charter School in NYC to examine how the school's positive culture and supports impact disciplinary outcomes for students with disabilities. Their findings suggest that the school serves a large Hispanic population and many students from low-income households. Moreover, 49% of students at Mott Haven Academy are actively in the foster care system or at risk of being placed in foster care. Twenty-three percent of students at the school qualify for special education services, which is above the state and national average. Nonetheless, charter schools like Mott Haven routinely outperform their peers in district-run schools. For example, in 2016-17 Mott Haven outperformed not only NYC public schools but also surpassed the national average for reading and math. Mott Haven fosters academic success and social belonging by emphasizing trauma sensitivity and social-emotional learning (SEL) and providing the corresponding training to teachers. Moreover, positive behavior supports like peer mediation, a blinded open enrollment process, and a multi-tier intervention approach create a safe and diverse learning environment, where students with and without disabilities thrive (Rhim & Lancet, 2018).

Grant (2005) conducted a multi-level analysis of special education placement rates and restrictedness in California charter schools and found that the racial and special education demographics of California charter schools mirrored that of the traditional public school district(s). However, findings suggest that the racial makeup of students varies between for-profit and non-

profit charter schools. For example, Hispanic, Asian, and Black students were found to be more likely to attend a for-profit charter school than their White peers (Grant, 2005), while for-profit charter schools tend to enroll fewer students with disabilities than non-profit charter schools (Barnard-Brak et al., 2018). It is important to note that minority students with disabilities, specifically Black students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) or emotional disturbance (ED), are systemically overrepresented in restrictive settings (e.g., self-contained classrooms), and such findings (e.g., Grant, 2005) imply that minority students with disabilities might face the same challenges in charter schools.

High vs. Low-Incidence Disabilities. One of the criticisms of charter schools is that they enroll fewer students with severe disabilities (e.g., low-incidence disabilities) or highly specialized needs than their traditional counterparts due to limited access to necessary resources and support (Bardnard-Brak et al., 2018; Blackwell, 2016; Grant, 2005; McCray, 2022; Rhim & Hall, 2021). In 2018-19, 82% of students served in Washington charter schools were eligible under high-incidence disability categories (e.g., SLD) compared to 71% of students in TPS (Heyward et al., 2020). At the national level, charters enrolled 82% of students with high-incidence disabilities and TPS enrolled 77% of students with high-incidence disabilities (Lancet et al., 2020), suggesting that charter schools serve more students with high-incidence disabilities and fewer students with low-incidence disabilities than traditional public schools. However, there are several specialized charter schools³³ that focus on serving students with a range of disabilities, including low-incidence disabilities. Specifically, 115 charter schools operated during the 2011-12 school year and focused entirely or primarily on students with disabilities. Of these 115 charter schools, 57% had a general focus on disability while 43% had a specific focus on one type of disability, such as autism (Rhim & Ahearn,

³³ The NCSECS defines specialized charter schools “as (1) charter schools with 25% or more enrollment by students with disabilities that self-identify as ‘special education schools’ or (2) schools that report that 50% or more of their students qualify for special education serve students across the entire disability spectrum” (Rhim & Ahearn, 2017, p.485).

2017). Many of these specialized charter schools are able to educate their students in more inclusive and less restrictive environments, which positively impacts the social and academic development of students with and without disabilities.

Academic Achievement

One of the common misconceptions surrounding charter schools is that they are exempt from standardized testing and other academic standards to which traditional public schools are held and that students in charter schools are often outperformed by their traditional counterparts (Gill, 2019). However, charter schools are legally required to participate in state testing and other measures of student achievement and accountability, such as the statewide Strong Start Academy initiative in Utah (NCSECS, 2016), like any traditional public school, and oftentimes perform similarly. In fact, research suggests that charter school students, especially those with special education (SPED) or English language learner (ELL) status, perform better academically than their peers in district-run schools (Setren, 2020; 2021). For example, Setren's (2020) analysis of Boston charter schools found that 62% of students receiving special education services in charter schools were proficient in 10th grade Math and English compared to 38% of students receiving special education services in TPS. Forty-one percent of students receiving special education services in charter schools took at least one AP exam compared to 10% of students receiving special education services in TPS, and 35% of students receiving SPED services in charter schools enrolled in a 4-year college compared to 25% of students receiving SPED services in TPS. Similarly, a study examining 2014-15 data from 30 Boston charter schools and their traditional counterparts found that being enrolled in a charter school doubled the likelihood of student who was an ELL enrolling in a four-year college and quadrupled the likelihood of a learner receiving SPED services graduating from a two-year college (Setren, 2021).

Declassification

Research suggests that being enrolled at a charter school increases the likelihood of being declassified as a student receiving special education (SPED) services or an English language learner (ELL) (Setren, 2020; Wolf & Lasserre-Cortez, 2018). In their 2018 study, Wolf and Lasserre-Cortez found that students with disabilities who were enrolled in charter schools were significantly more likely to lose their special education status compared to their peers in traditional public schools. However, it is important to note that less than one percent of all students with an IEP declassified over the four years of the study. Similarly, Boston charter schools are 12% more likely to remove a student's SPED status and 32% more likely to remove a student's ELL status due to their inclusive approach (Setren, 2020). Charter schools' ability to foster an inclusive learning environment where students with disabilities and English-Language learners can academically succeed and in some cases lose their classification may be one of the factors drawing parents to enroll their child(ren) with disabilities in charter schools.

Inclusion

Despite enrolling fewer students with disabilities, charter schools are more likely to include students with disabilities in general education classrooms for longer periods than their traditional counterparts (Heyward et al., 2020; Rhim & Ahearn, 2017; Solomont, 2020). During the 2015-16 school year, 84% of students with disabilities in charter schools across the U.S. were included in general education classrooms for 80% or more of their day compared to only 67% of similar students enrolled in traditional public schools (Rhim & Ahearn, 2017). In 2018-19, charter schools in Washington state included nearly 9 out of 10 students with disabilities in general education classrooms for at least 80 percent of their day compared to 6 out of 10 students with disabilities in traditional public schools (Heyward et al., 2020). Similarly, Solomont (2020) found that 80% of students with disabilities in charter schools were fully included in general education classrooms while Massachusetts' traditional public schools fully included 64% of students with disabilities. Moreover,

research suggests that charter schools place students in less restrictive environments due to inclusive approaches, such as assigning mentors, focusing on social-emotional well-being and personalized learning, involving parents, and employing and training responsive teachers (Heyward et al., 2020), as well as engaging in restorative discipline that is preventative rather than reactive (Rhim & Lancet, 2018). Many of these inclusive approaches are factors that draw parents of students with disabilities to enroll their child(ren) in charter schools.

Why Do Parents Choose Charter Schools?

With the expansion of school choice, parents now have more autonomy than ever in choosing the right school for their child(ren). Bosetti and Pyryt (2007) surveyed parents of students attending 31 public schools (including charter schools), alternative schools, private schools, and religious schools to better understand what influenced them to enroll their child at one of the elementary schools in Alberta. Results suggested that parents whose child(ren) attended a public school rated the school's distance to the home, the school's reputation in the community, and the school's leadership (e.g., the principal) as the most influential factors they considered. Some of the parents noted that they intentionally moved to a different neighborhood to be able to send their child(ren) to a reputable school. In contrast, parents whose child(ren) attended an alternative school rated the school's reputation, special programming, and the school's values and beliefs as influential factors in their decision-making. Parents whose child(ren) attended a private or religious school rated the school's values and beliefs (27% and 43%, respectively) as the most important factor in choosing a school, followed by the school's academic rigor and teaching philosophy.

In addition to the school's leadership and reputation, a parent's decision to enroll their child(ren) in charter schools was also influenced by smaller class sizes, and the option to enroll in before- and after-school programs. Additionally, parents highlighted sports programming and other extracurricular activities as other important factors in their decision-making (Ekanem, 2013).

However, across the literature, parental satisfaction and involvement stand out as the most influential factors in parents' choice to enroll their child(ren) in a charter school (DeAngelis, 2018; Tedin, 2011).

Hamlin and Cheng (2020) surveyed 1,699 parents whose child(ren) attended a traditional public school, a public charter school, or a Christian or Catholic school in Indiana. Parents who enrolled their child(ren) in a charter, Christian or Catholic school reported greater parental involvement, satisfaction, and empowerment than parents who enrolled their child(ren) in a traditional public school. Parents who previously had enrolled their child(ren) at the neighboring traditional public school due to residential selection negatively associated traditional public schools with parental involvement and satisfaction, leading them to choose to leave and enroll at a charter school.

Similarly, McGraw (2017) interviewed parents of students enrolled in a Cleveland charter school to better understand why they decided to leave their previous school. Findings suggest that parents sought to be more involved in their child(ren)'s learning and were dissatisfied with the lack of opportunities for parent engagement at their previous school. Parents' narratives also highlighted dissatisfaction with safety measures and the quality of teachers at their previous schools. Consequently, parent (dis)satisfaction has been cited as a prevalent reason for parents' choice to leave not only traditional public-school settings but also charter schools (Hanushek et al., 2007).

Why do parents of students with disabilities choose charter schools?

While most of the factors influencing parental school choice are similar across parents, there are additional factors that are important in choosing a school for a child with disabilities. Lange and Lehr (2000) conducted a survey of 608 parents whose child(ren) attended one of 16 charter schools in Minnesota that had been operating for at least one year before the 1996-97 school year. All parents indicated that the schools' staff, curriculum, class sizes, mission, disciplinary policies, and

safety measures were among the most important reasons why they chose to enroll their child(ren) in a charter school. Parents of children with disabilities also highlighted special education services, meeting their child(ren)'s needs, the opportunity for a fresh start at a new school where their child won't be bullied, and dissatisfaction with the previous school as important factors in their decision to enroll their child(ren) at a charter school. Moreover, parents of students with disabilities indicated that they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their charter school's teachers, curriculum, administrators, academic rigor, communication efforts, disciplinary measures, support services, and opportunities for parental involvement. Additionally, most parents reported that they observed a positive change in their child's behavior, including increased happiness, self-esteem, attendance, and more positive views toward schooling in general (Lange & Lehr, 2000). Specifically, parents of students with disabilities suggested that their child(ren)'s academic performance, motivation, and self-efficacy had improved and that their child(ren) felt more accepted and included than at their previous school.

Similarly, Harris (2002) interviewed students with disabilities attending Texas charter schools and their parents, who also highlighted the positive changes they've noticed in their child(ren) since enrolling at the charter school. Parents attributed their child(ren)'s growth to small class sizes, individualized support, active/project-based learning, encouraging teachers, and a tight-knit school community. Students described positive experiences with their current school, how they looked forward to attending it and felt joy and a sense of community. Other research suggests that a community-like environment is one of the driving factors for parents to enroll their child(ren) with disabilities in charter schools (Fiore et al., 2000).

Choosing the best school for your child(ren) can be difficult amid the endless options of school choice. However, the decision is even more difficult when one must consider a child's disabilities and is faced with a lack of information and comprehensive options (Wong, 2022).

Potterton (2020) interviewed 37 parents whose child(ren) were enrolled at an Arizona charter school regarding parental pressures within school choice, school cultures, and how they decide what factors are most important to them. Parents' narratives highlighted that those with more social, cultural, and economic capital had access to more resources to make educated decisions and participate in school choice programs. In contrast, parents with less social, cultural, and economic capital faced additional barriers in choosing a school for their child(ren) and understanding Arizona's school choice policies. However, other research (e.g., Lucier, 2016) suggests that parents with less capital are equally equipped to make decisions about their child(ren)'s schooling and prioritize familiarity and representativeness in their decision.

An international review of the literature highlighted that parents of students with disabilities are often faced with a lack of comprehensive special education options to choose from, especially families with lower socioeconomic status (Mawene & Bal, 2018). Like parents of typically developing children, parents of students with disabilities chose a school based on the distance to the home, class size, quality of teachers, and communication with the teachers. However, parents of students with disabilities also highlighted the school's views on disability as a deciding factor. Like views on disabilities, 'personal atmosphere' and fewer separate SPED classrooms heavily influenced parents' decision to enroll their child(ren) with disabilities at a charter school (Blackwell, 2016).

Moreover, families living in high concentrations of poverty and minority neighborhoods face additional concerns regarding a lack of appropriate options for their child(ren)'s schooling (Waitoller & Super, 2017; Waitoller, 2020). Waitoller and Super (2017) interviewed 24 Black and Hispanic parents of students with disabilities about their choice to enroll in a Chicago charter school amid heightened school closures in predominantly Hispanic and Black neighborhoods. A qualitative analysis of the data revealed that parents and their child(ren) often felt unsafe in their neighborhood and experienced segregation. Many of the parents reported intentionally leaving the neighboring

public school and enrolling in a charter school to receive a better education and wrap-around services for their child(ren) with disabilities, as well as support services and resources for the whole family (e.g., legal services).

Another contributing factor to parents' choice to enroll their child(ren) with disabilities in a charter school is that public charter schools are removed from the hierarchy of the traditional public school system and are able to react faster in the best interest of their students (Osborne, 2017). During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, charter schools were often more 'nimble' and able to pivot quickly and provide instruction and support to their students (Marshall & Neugebauer, 2022), including those with disabilities via video calls, home visits, and parent education programs while students in the traditional public school sector lost access to special education and wrap-around services that are essential to their development (McKittrick & Tuchman, 2020).

Dissatisfaction

Although extant literature highlights a variety of pull factors (factors that draw families to enroll in a school) that influence parents of students with disabilities to enroll their child(ren) in charter schools, many parents ultimately decide to enroll at a charter school due to dissatisfaction with their previous school (Fiore et al., 2000; Harris, 2002; Lake, 2010; Lange & Lehr, 2000; Tonks et al., 2020). Fiore and colleagues (2000) conducted one of the first studies examining school choice for parents of students with disabilities and found that negative experiences with non-charter schools are common driving factors in a parent's decision to choose a charter school. Specifically, parents cited dissatisfaction with class sizes, teachers, a poor reputation, and inadequate special education programming at their previous school as reasons for leaving. Additionally, many parents highlighted that their child was struggling socially and/or academically and that they did not feel supported by the administration, especially during the evaluation and IEP process.

Similarly, Harris (2002) examined the experiences of five students at two Texas charter schools. All five students intentionally left their neighborhood school due to a variety of factors including but not limited to poor academic performance, a lack of support and individualized instruction, as well as large class sizes. Other common push factors (factors that lead families to leave a school) included being bullied at their previous schools, experiencing increased anxiety, and several of their needs not being met (Lange & Lehr, 2000; Tonks et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Parents of students with disabilities often face barriers when choosing the best school for their child(ren), including having fewer options for comprehensive special education programs and a lack of resources (Blackwell, 2016; Hammel & Fisher, 2014; Mawene & Bal, 2018; Wong, 2022). Parents prioritize factors like distance to the home, the school's reputation (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007), staff (Harris, 2002), class sizes (Fiore et al., 2000), communication, safety (McGraw, 2017), academic rigor, teaching philosophy (Lange and Lehr, 2000), and opportunities for parental involvement (McGraw, 2017) when making a decision on where to send enroll their child. However, parents of students with disabilities also place high importance on the school's special education services, beliefs about disability (Mawene & Bal, 2018), disciplinary policies, and a sense of community (Harris, 2002). Moreover, dissatisfaction with their previous school is one of the common driving factors for all parents to enroll their child(ren) in a charter school. Parents highlighted bullying, increased anxiety, unmet needs, poor academic performance, and a lack of support as reasons for their dissatisfaction and for deciding to leave their previous school (Fiore et al., 2000; Harris, 2002; Lange & Lehr, 2000; Tonks et al., 2020).

With the expansion of school choice and the steady increase in special education enrollment in the United States, it is important to understand the needs and experiences of parents and students alike to address the systemic challenges that families (e.g., lack of appropriate options) and charter schools (e.g., inequitable funding) face and provide better educational opportunities for students with and without disabilities. Future research should explore parental school choice in sectors where charter schools are less established, as well as investigate driving factors behind enrollment patterns (e.g., parents deciding to enroll or leave a charter school) that may explain the existing special education gap.

References

- Ahearn, E. M., Lange, C. M., Rhim, L. M., McLaughlin, M. J., & National Association of State Directors of Special Education, A. V. (2001). Project SEARCH: Special Education as Requirements in Charter Schools. Final Report of a Research Study: Cross-State Analysis of Findings and Summaries of State Case Studies.
- Baker, B. D., & University of Colorado at Boulder, N. E. P. C. (2012). Review of “New York State Special Education Enrollment Analysis.” In National Education Policy Center. National Education Policy Center.
- Barnard-Brak, L., Schmidt, M., & Almekdash, M. H. (2018). Enrollment of Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools: Contemporary National and State Level Findings. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 26(43). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.26.3276>
- Bergman, P., & McFarlin, I. (2018). Education for all: A nationwide audit study of schools of choice. National Bureau of Economic Research: Working Paper Series. Retrieved from <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25396>
- Blackwell, W. (2016). Navigating the Maze of School Choice Options. *Exceptional Parent*, 46(12), 38–40.
- Bosetti, L., & Pyryt, M. C. (2007). Parental Motivation in School Choice: Seeking the Competitive Edge. *Journal of School Choice*, 1(4), 89–108. <https://doi.org/10.1300/15582150802098795>
- Collins, K. M., Green, P. C., Nelson, S. L., & Madahar, S. (2015). Cyber charter schools and students with dis/abilities: Rebooting the IDEA to address equity, access, and compliance. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 48(1), 71–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2015.991219>

- DeAngelis, C. A. (2018). Does choice matter for school choice? An instrumental variables analysis of the effect of choice on parental satisfaction in charter schools. *Journal of School Choice*, 12(2), 216–236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2017.1408003>
- Dunn, M. E., Katsiyannis, A., & Ryan, J. B. (2018). Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities: Legal and Practice Considerations. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 53(4), 252–255. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451217712973>
- Eckes, S. (2015). Haven Charter Schools: Separate by Design and Legally Questionable. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 48(1), 49–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2015.991159>
- Education Commission of the States. (2021, October). K-12 and special education funding 2021: 50-State Comparison. <https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/k-12-and-special-education-funding-2021>
- Ekanem, I. C. (2013). A Study of the Factors Influencing Parental Choice of a Charter School [ProQuest LLC]. In *ProQuest LLC*.
- Fiore, T. A., Harwell, L. M., Blackorby, J., Finnigan, K. S., Westat, I. . R., MD., & SRI International, M. P. C. (2000). Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities: A National Study. Final Report.
- Gill, M. (2019). Frequent Misconceptions About Charter Schools. *UCF Forum*, 354. Retrieved from <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/354>
- Grant, P. A. (2005). Restrictiveness and Race in Special Education: Educating All Learners. *Learning Disabilities -- A Contemporary Journal*, 3(1), 70–74.
- Hamlin, D., & Cheng, A. (2020). Parental Empowerment, Involvement, and Satisfaction: A Comparison of Choosers of Charter, Catholic, Christian, and District-Run Public Schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 56(4), 641–670. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X19888013>

- Hammel, A., & Fischer, K. (2014). "It's Not Easy Being Green": Charter Schools, the Arts, and Students with Diverse Needs. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 115(2), 44–51.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2014.883895>
- Hanushek, E. A., Kain, J. F., Rivkin, S. G., & Branch, G. F. (2007). Charter school quality and parental decision making with school choice. *Journal of Public Economics*, 91(5), 823–848.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2006.09.014>
- Harris, S. (2002). Children with Special Needs and School Choice: Five Stories. *Preventing School Failure*, 46(2), 75–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10459880209603350>
- Heyward, G., Pillow, T., & Tuchman, S. (2020). What Does It Take to Educate Students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities in General Education Settings?: Lessons from Washington's Public Charter Schools. Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2017). Sec. 300.111. Child Find. Retrieved from <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.111>
- Kleitz, B., Weiher, G. R., Tedin, K., & Matland, R. (2000). Choice, Charter Schools, and Household Preferences. *Social Science Quarterly*, 81(3), 846–854. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42864008>
- Lake, R. J. (Ed.) (2010). *Unique schools serving unique students: Charter Schools and children with special needs*. Center on Reinventing Public Education.
- Lancet, S., Rhim, L. M., & O'Neill, P. (2020). Enrollment of Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools and Traditional Public Schools. Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse.
- Lange, C. M., & Lehr, C. A. (2000). Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities: Parent Perceptions of Reasons for Transfer and Satisfaction with Services. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21(3), 141–151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932500021003>

- Lucier, M. H. (2016). More Than Constraints: How Low Socio-Economic Parents Make Judgments Concerning Their Children's Schooling. *Theses and Dissertations*, 5796.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/5796>
- Marshall, D. T. (2017). Equity and access in charter schools: Identifying issues and solutions. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(83). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2745>
- Marshall, D. T., & Neugebauer, N. M. (2022). How charter school leaders navigated COVID-19. In D. T. Marshall (Ed.), *COVID-19 and the classroom: How schools navigated the great disruption* (pp. 107-122). Lexington Books.
- Mawene, D., & Bal, A. (2018). Factors Influencing Parents' Selection of Schools for Children with Disabilities: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *International Journal of Special Education*, 33(2), 313–329.
- McCray, J. S. (2022). Experiences of African American parents of special needs students and school decisions [ProQuest Information & Learning]. In Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences (Vol. 83, Issue 9–A).
- McGraw, S. (2017). Public options: An analysis of parental choice at one charter school in Cleveland, Ohio [ProQuest Information & Learning]. In *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences* (Vol. 77, Issue 8–A(E)).
- McKittrick, L., Gill, S., Opalka, A., Tuchman, S., & Kothari, S. (2019). A “can-do” Attitude for Students with Disabilities: Special Education in Rural Charter Schools. *Journal of School Choice*, 13(4), 537–554. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2019.1683684>
- McKittrick, L., Tuchman, S., Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), & National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS). (2020). Support Every Student: Lessons from Five Charter Schools on Effective Special Education during the Pandemic. In *Center on Reinventing Public Education*. Center on Reinventing Public Education.

- National Center for Education Statistics (2022). Students With Disabilities. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg/students-with-disabilities>
- National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (2016). Intersection of Rapid Charter School Growth and Increased Accountability for Special Education Prompts Action: The Utah Strong Start Academy. Promising Practices. Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse.
- National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (2020). Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Educating Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools in the State of Connecticut. Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse.
- National Charter School Resource Center (2019). What is a Charter School?. U.S. Department of Education. <https://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov/what-charter-school>
- Ortiz, K., Rice, M. F., Deschaine, M. E., & Lancaster, S. (2020). Providing Special Education Services in Fully Online Statewide Virtual Schools: A Policy Scan. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 33(1), 3–13.
- Osborne, D. (2018). Reinventing America’s Schools: Creating a 21st Century Education System. Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse.
- Potterton, A. U. (2020). Parental Accountability, School Choice, and the Invisible Hand of the Market. *Educational Policy*, 34(1), 166–192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904819881155>
- Rhim, L.M. and Ahearn, E. (2017). Educating Students with Disabilities in the School Choice Context. In R. A. Fox & N. K. Buchanan (Eds.), *The Wiley Handbook of School Choice* (pp. 478-492). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119082361.ch33>
- Rhim, L. M., & Hall, S. (2021). Educating Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools: Fiscal Policies, Practices, and Particularities. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 34(1), 32–46.

- Rhim, L. M., & Lancet, S. (2018, February 28). How school culture and support systems can improve disciplinary outcomes for students with disabilities: Mott Haven Academy Charter School Case Study. ERIC. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED582802>
- Rhim, L. M., McLaughlin, M. J., & National Association of State Directors of Special Education, A. V. (2000). Charter Schools and Special Education: Balancing Disparate Visions. An Investigation of Charter Schools and Special Education in Fifteen States.
- Setren, E. (2020). A Charter Boost for Special-Ed Students and English Learners: Lessons in Inclusion at Boston Charter Schools. *Education Next*, 20(2), 52–60.
- Setren, E. (2021). Targeted vs. General Education Investments: Evidence from Special Education and English Language Learners in Boston Charter Schools. *Journal of Human Resources*, 56(4), 1–41. <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.56.4.0219-10040r2>
- Solomont, E. B. (2020). Inclusion in Action: Expectations for All at Excel Academy. *Education Next*, 20(2), 60–63.
- Tedin, K. L., & Weiher, G. R. (2011). General Social Capital, Education-Related Social Capital, and Choosing Charter Schools. *Policy Studies Journal*, 39(4), 609–629.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.2011.00424.x>
- Tonks, D., Kimmons, R., & Mason, S. L. (2020). Mattering is Motivation: Special Education Students' Experienced with an Online Charter School. *Journal of Online Learning Research*, 6(3), 221-244.
- Waitoller, Federico R. (2020). *Excluded by Choice: Urban Students with Disabilities in the Education Marketplace*. Teachers College Press.
- Waitoller, F. R., & Super, G. (2017). School Choice or the Politics of Desperation? Black and Latinx Parents of Students with Dis/Abilities Selecting Charter Schools in Chicago. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(55). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2636>

- White, J. (2022). How many charter schools and students are there? National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Retrieved from <https://data.publiccharters.org/digest/charter-school-data-digest/how-many-charter-schools-and-students-are-there/>
- Winters, M. A. (2015a). Understanding the gap in special education enrollments between charter and traditional public schools: Evidence from Denver, Colorado. *Educational Researcher*, 44(4), 228-236. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X15584772>
- Winters, M. A. (2015b). The Myth about the Special Education Gap. *Education Next*, 15(4), 34–41.
- Wolf, P. J., & Lasserre-Cortez, S. (2018). Special education enrollment and classification in Louisiana charter schools and traditional schools. National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- Wong, L. N. (2022). Charter Schools and IDEA: A Systematic Case Review. *Journal of School Choice*, 16(1), 71–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2021.1944838>
- Lubienski, C., Gulosino, C., & Weitzel, P. (2009). School Choice and Competitive Incentives: Mapping the Distribution of Educational Opportunities across Local Education Markets. *American Journal of Education*, 115(4), 601-647.

Parental School Choice and Satisfaction in Charter Schools

Natalie Neugebauer Schoettler

Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology, Auburn University

Author Note

Natalie M. Neugebauer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3293-4994>

There is no known conflict of interest to disclose. This study was supported by New Schools for Alabama.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Natalie Neugebauer Schoettler, Auburn University, 4036 Haley Center, Auburn University, Auburn, AL 36849. Email: nmn0011@auburn.edu.

Abstract

This study explored the experiences of 460 parents of students with and without disabilities across six Alabama charter schools regarding their satisfaction with various aspects of their child's charter school, reasons for enrolling at their current school, and reasons for leaving their previous school. Additional areas of inquiry included parents' perceptions of responsiveness and inclusivity at their child's schools, as well as the decision-making process parents underwent when selecting their current school for their children. The survey was conducted during the fall semester of the 2023-24 school year. The results suggest that there are no significant differences between parents of students with and without disabilities and that parents overall are satisfied with their child's school. Parents highlighted teacher quality, school safety, perceived academic quality, and school leadership as the most important reasons for choosing their child's school and reported that their child's school was responsive and fostered a sense of inclusion.

Keywords: charter schools; disabilities; parents; satisfaction; school choice; special education

Parental School Choice and Satisfaction in Alabama Charter Schools

Charter schools, introduced as an alternative to traditional public education, have gained traction in the United States over the past three decades, as well as recently in Alabama. The Alabama School Choice and Student Opportunity Act of 2015 marked a historic shift in the state's educational landscape, allowing the establishment of charter schools aimed at providing innovative educational approaches (Alabama State Department of Education, 2015), particularly for underserved students (Mawene & Bal, 2018). Despite their relatively recent introduction, charter schools in Alabama and elsewhere have seen a rapid increase in enrollment (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2023), serving 5,314 students in the state and 3.7 million students nationwide as of the 2022-23 school year (White, 2022).

With charter schools gaining popularity, they also face increased criticism, particularly regarding their ability to serve students with disabilities. Nationally, charter schools serve 1-2% fewer students with disabilities than (Rhim & Hall, 2021). Some researchers attribute this discrepancy to selective enrollment practices (Waitoller, 2020). However, other research highlights how some students with disabilities perform better in charter schools than they did in traditional public schools in which they were previously enrolled (Rhim & Ahearn, 2017; Setren, 2020; Wolf & Lazerre-Cortez, 2018).

Despite these conflicting findings, little research has focused specifically on why and how parents of students with disabilities choose to enroll their children in charter schools (Fiore et al., 2000) and how their experiences can be improved. This is especially true for understudied policy contexts like Alabama (Crain, 2023). Gaining a better understanding of parental enrollment decision-making and (dis)satisfaction with their child's schooling is important, as these factors are directly

linked to initial and continued enrollment (Hamlin & Cheng, 2020; Hanushek et al., 2008). Extant literature often cites various push factors leading parents to leave their previous schools, such as dissatisfaction with parental involvement opportunities, school safety, instructional rigor, bullying, lack of diversity, and special education services among other factors (e.g., Fiore et al., 2000; Lake, 2010). Conversely, pull factors leading parents to select a new school include proximity/commuting distance to the school, school reputation in the community, school leadership, teacher quality, curriculum or specialized focus, and academic rigor among other factors (e.g., Mawene & Bal, 2018; Waitoller, 2020). For parents of students with disabilities, additional considerations influencing their enrollment decision-making include teaching philosophy, special education services, disciplinary policies, and views on inclusion among other factors (e.g., Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Fiore et al., 2000).

This study aims to fill this gap in the existing literature by examining parental satisfaction and enrollment decision-making within Alabama charter schools, with a particular focus on families with children who have disabilities. This survey research explores why parents chose their current charter schools, their reasons for leaving previous schools, and their levels of satisfaction with their current schools. Additionally, the study investigates parents' perceptions of the responsiveness and inclusivity of these schools, and the decision-making processes parents undertook when selecting these schools for their children, both with and without disabilities. This research aims to provide valuable insights into parental satisfaction and the perceived effectiveness of charter schools in meeting diverse student needs, contributing to the broader discourse on educational options and inclusivity in Alabama.

Charter Schools in Alabama

Before discussing charter schools ⁴and parental enrollment decision-making, it is necessary to acknowledge that families with financial resources have historically always had a range of educational options to choose from (Marshall, 2017). These families can either relocate to areas with satisfactory public schools or enroll their children in private institutions. In contrast, families without such financial means often lack these choices. Similarly, parents of children with disabilities frequently encounter limited comprehensive educational options within their public school districts (Wong, 2022). Therefore, school choice policies aim to broaden educational opportunities for families who otherwise would not have access to their preferred schools.

Charter schools are a relatively recent addition to the educational landscape in Alabama. In 2015, Alabama established charter schools as part of the public school landscape in the state (Alabama State Department of Education, 2015). Despite their newness, charter schools in Alabama have quickly become a focal point in discussions about educational reform and parental choice. In 2022-23, Alabama charter schools enrolled 5,314 students, while their traditional public counterparts enrolled 724,475 students. Over the past four years, Alabama charter schools have increased their enrollment figures by 376% (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2023). At the time of data collection, 13 charter schools were in operation, with another 4 schools approved to open in the coming year.

Research suggests that these schools are gradually gaining acceptance among parents seeking alternatives to traditional public schools, although comprehensive data on their effectiveness and inclusivity, especially regarding students with disabilities, remains limited (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020). During the 2021-22 school year, 7,800 public charter schools were in operation, enrolling a total of 3.7 million students across 45 states (White, 2022). An estimated 12%

⁴ Charter schools, which are independent public schools accountable to the public, often operate with a distinct educational mission or focus (NCSRC, 2019).

of these students had disabilities and received special education services (Parham Malhotra, 2024). However, a dearth of work surrounding the experiences of students with disabilities, particularly in Alabama, remains.

Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools

Research surrounding students with disabilities in charter schools and their experiences reveals a range of challenges and opportunities. Charter schools are designed to offer innovative educational approaches (Nathan, 1996), yet they often face scrutiny regarding their ability to adequately serve students with disabilities. Studies have highlighted that charter schools sometimes struggle with providing appropriate services due to limited resources and specialized staff (Parham Malhotra, 2024; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2007). Additionally, parents of students with disabilities often express concerns about the inclusivity and accessibility of these schools (Hehir et al., 2016). Despite these challenges, other research indicates that some charter schools have successfully implemented inclusive practices and have seen positive social and academic outcomes for students with disabilities (Lake, 2010).

Despite the recent expansion of school choice laws for students with disabilities (Crain, 2023), little research explores why and how parents of students with disabilities choose to enroll their child(ren) in charter schools (Fiore et al., 2000). In 2019-2020, charter school enrollment included approximately 11% of students with disabilities while their traditional counterparts' enrollment included 12.84% (Rhim & Hall, 2021). Some research suggests that charter schools serve fewer students with disabilities than traditional public schools and may even counsel out students with disabilities (e.g., Waitoller, 2020). However, other research suggests that some students with disabilities perform better in charter schools than in traditional public schools. Setren (2020) conducted an analysis of Boston charter schools and found that students receiving special education services enrolled in charter schools were 24% more proficient in Math and English than their peers

in traditional public school settings. A follow-up study suggested that students receiving SPED services in charter schools were also more likely to enroll in a 4-year college and graduate from a 2-year college (Setren, 2021). Additionally, being enrolled in a charter school has been associated with an increased likelihood of being declassified as an English language learner (ELL) or student receiving SPED services (Wolf & Lazerre-Cortez, 2018). In Boston, charter schools are 12% more likely to remove a student's SPED status and 32% more likely to remove a student's ELL status than the city's traditional public schools (Setren, 2020).

Some of these positive outcomes may be associated with charter schools' ability to include more students with disabilities in general education classrooms for longer periods of time (Rhim & Ahearn, 2017; Solomont, 2020). For example, in 2015-16, 84% of students with disabilities in charter schools were included in general education classrooms compared to 67% in traditional public schools (Rhim & Ahearn, 2017). For many parents of students with disabilities, inclusion can be a leading reason for leaving or enrolling at a school (Blackwell, 2016).

Parental Enrollment Decision Making and Charter Schools

Parents' decision-making processes when selecting schools for their children are influenced by a variety of factors, including academic quality, school environment, and special education services (Jabbar, & Lenhoff, 2020). According to Lubienski, Gulosino, and Weitzel (2009), parents often prioritize academic performance and school reputation when choosing a school. For parents of children with disabilities, the availability of special education services and the school's ability to meet their child's specific needs are critical considerations (Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Wong, 2022). Push factors for leaving previous schools often include dissatisfaction with opportunities for parental involvement, school safety, rigor of instruction, bullying, lack of diversity, special education services, and large class sizes (Fiore et al., 2000; Harris, 2002; Lange & Lehr, 2000). Pull factors for enrolling at their current school include proximity, school reputation, leadership and teaching staff

quality, curriculum, and academic rigor (Lake, 2010, Lange & Lehr, 2000). For parents of students with disabilities, additional factors such as teaching philosophy, special education services, disciplinary policies, and views on disability and inclusion also play a significant role (Harris, 2002; Mawene & Bal, 2018). Additionally, studies have found that parental satisfaction is closely tied to their initial expectations and the perceived responsiveness of the school to their children's needs (Lange & Lehr, 2000). Parents' decision to enroll and remain enrolled at a charter school is directly linked to their satisfaction with the school (Hamlin & Cheng, 2020; Hanushek et al., 2008). However, recent research suggests that the data routinely collected sometimes fail to account for the priorities of parents (Kingsbury, Marshall, & Doak, 2024). Addressing the lack of consideration of parental priorities, as outlined in the literature, this study seeks to not only explore but prioritize the experiences of parents of students with and without disabilities who attend charter schools in Alabama. Examining the experiences and enrollment decision making of parents can inform change in charter schools to improve student experiences and the quality of education they receive.

Method

This exploratory study (Creswell, 2006) focuses on understanding the experiences of Alabama parents⁵ of students with and without disabilities whose children attend charter schools. Specifically, the study sought to better understand why parents choose to enroll their children in Alabama charter schools, and what factors they are satisfied and dissatisfied with. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent are Alabama charter school parents satisfied with their child's school?

⁵ It is important to note that the term 'parent' throughout the article also includes aunts/uncles, grandparents, and other caretakers who serve as students' legal guardians and responded to this survey as such.

- 2) What aspects of school were most important to parents when they enrolled their children?
 - a) What aspects led the family to leave their previous school?
- 3) To what extent do parents believe their child's school is responsive and inclusive?
- 4) To what extent do differences exist in how parents view their child's school by students' special education status?

Procedures and Sampling

To answer these questions, a survey was conducted with a voluntary sample of parents whose children attended one of six participating Alabama charter schools during the fall semester of 2023. Parents were invited to participate in the study via an email that each of the participating schools sent out and provided with an anonymous link to a Qualtrics survey. Participants were asked to complete an informed consent before advancing to the survey questions. Parents who had more than one child enrolled in a charter school were asked to complete the survey for their oldest child. Everyone who completed the survey was eligible to enter to win one of 140 \$20 gift cards to Amazon.

The sample included 460 parents from six Alabama charter schools who completed the survey between September 19 and December 14, 2023. At the time of data collection, 13 charter schools were in operation. Parents completing the survey indicated that a plurality of their children identified as female (49.78%) and a majority were African American or Black (62.67%). In terms of parent demographics, most of the parents completing the survey were the students' mothers (84.11%), were married (52.24%), had a high school diploma (34.38%), and earned an annual household income of \$30,000 to \$50,000. Roughly 19 percent of the participants indicated that they worked in education, and 18.18% stated that their child was eligible for and receiving special education services during the 2023-24 school year. Given a common misconception that charter schools disproportionately exclude students with disabilities, it is worth noting that the figure of

students receiving special education services across these six Alabama charter schools is greater than the national average of students with disabilities served in traditional public schools (15%). See Table 1 for descriptive statistics including demographic information for the study sample.

Table 1

Participant Demographics (N=460)

	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
<i>Student Race/Ethnicity (N=450)</i>		
Asian	2	0.44
Black or African American	282	62.67
Hispanic	6	1.33
White	136	30.22
More than one race/ethnicity	24	5.33
<i>Student Gender (N=452)</i>		
Female	225	49.78
Male	209	46.24
Self-describe	18	3.98
<i>Student Receives Special Education Services (N=440)</i>	80	18.18
<i>Relationship to Child (N=453)</i>		
Mother	381	84.11
Father	40	8.83
Grandparent	25	5.52
Other	7	1.55
<i>Highest Level of Education Completed (N=445)</i>		

Did not graduate high school	4	0.90
High school/GED	153	34.38
Technical or trade school	88	19.78
Bachelor's degree	117	26.29
Graduate or professional degree	83	18.65
<i>Household Income (N=444)</i>		
\$0-30,000	101	22.75
\$30,001-50,000	107	24.10
\$50,001-75,000	78	17.57
\$75,001-100,000	72	16.22
Above \$100,000	86	19.37

Note: Parents who had more than one child enrolled were asked to respond for their oldest child enrolled.

Other demographic information that was collected included parents' zip codes, students' grade levels, the name of their current school, the number of children in the household, and previous schooling among other variables. The survey also inquired how students with disabilities received their diagnosis (i.e., within the school system or through a private provider) and what special education services their child was receiving at the time of data collection. Nearly half of the parents of students who received SPED services indicated that their child was diagnosed through a private provider, while 34.62% were diagnosed within the school system and 16.67% through other venues (for example, gifted programs, and early intervention programs).

Survey Instrumentation

This quantitative survey is comprised of 27 items including four Likert scale items and four open-ended response items. While this survey did not utilize any established scales, the questions included in this survey draw on findings from extant work surrounding school choice and satisfaction, specifically for students with disabilities (e.g., Beck et al., 2014; Mawene & Bal, 2018). Scales inquired about reasons for selecting their current school, reasons for leaving their previous school, their satisfaction with their current school, and a bank of questions about their ability to make an informed decision, the school's responsiveness, and whether the school fosters a sense of inclusion. For example, parents were asked to rate the importance of different aspects of their child's school on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being *not important* to 5 being *extremely important* (Question 18: "How important were the following reasons when you selected this school for your child?"). Open-ended questions inquired about the strengths and challenges of their child's current charter school compared to their previous school, as well as how they learned about each of their respective schools.

Data Analysis

To answer the first three research questions, descriptive statistics were calculated. Additionally, to answer if differences exist between parents of students with and without disabilities in terms of the letter grade parents assigned their school, whether parents would re-enroll their child, and if they perceived their school was responsive and inclusive, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted. To understand if differences exist between parents of students with and were satisfied with at their current school, their reasons for leaving their previous school, and their reasons for enrolling at their current school, three one-way ANOVAs were conducted. All analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 29.

Findings

Parent Satisfaction

The first research question sought to understand parents' satisfaction with the charter school their child attended during the 2023-2024 school year. To answer this question, parents were first asked to rate their child's school with a letter grade from A through F. Nearly half of all parents (49.88%) gave their child's charter school an A and 36.72% gave their child's charter school a B. Fewer than 10 parents assigned their child's school a grade of C or below. See Table 2 for letter grades assigned by parents.

Table 2.

Letter Grade Assigned by Parent (N=403)

	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
A	201	49.88
B	148	36.72
C	45	11.17
D	8	1.99
F	1	0.25

Parents were also asked if they would enroll their child again at their current school. The majority (87.26%) indicated that they *definitely* or *probably* would enroll their child again at their school. See Table 3 for parent responses on whether or not they'd enroll their child again.

Table 3.

Would Enroll Child Again at School (N=416)

	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Definitely Yes	281	67.55
Probably Yes	82	19.71
Might or Might Not	37	8.89
Probably Not	13	3.13
Definitely Not	3	0.72

Parents were also asked to rate how satisfied they were with various aspects of their child's current school on a 6-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating *very dissatisfied* and 6 indicating *very satisfied*. As such, mean scores between 5 and 6 indicated that parents were *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with a certain aspect of their child's school. Parents were especially satisfied with special education services for students, teachers' high expectations for success, opportunities for their child to interact with their peers, and the academic quality of their child's school. On average, parents were either satisfied or *very satisfied* with all aspects of their child's school except the communication from teachers and the respect between students. See Table 4 for parent satisfaction with different aspects of their respective schools.

Table 4.

Satisfaction with Different Aspects of Their School

	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Services for students with disabilities	400	5.96	1.18
Teachers' expectations for success	399	5.33	0.97
Opportunity for child to interact with peers	398	5.31	0.92
Academic quality	401	5.29	1.00
Respect between teachers and students	400	5.24	1.08
School leadership	403	5.20	1.13
Transportation services	398	5.19	1.86
Class sizes	400	5.18	1.01
Opportunity for child to be involved with sports	400	5.11	1.62
Opportunity for child to be involved in non-sport extracurricular activities	397	5.02	1.46
Communication from school leaders	396	5.02	1.34
School discipline	401	5.02	1.34
Communication from teachers	399	4.98	1.33
Respect between students	402	4.78	1.23

Notes: Participants responded to each item on a 6-point scale where 1=Very dissatisfied; 2=Dissatisfied; 3=Somewhat dissatisfied; 4=Somewhat satisfied; 5=Satisfied; 6=Very satisfied

Reasons for Enrolling

The second research question sought to understand why parents choose to enroll their children in an Alabama charter school. Parents were asked to rate the importance of various factors related to their choice on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being *not important* to 5 being *extremely important*. Parents indicated that teacher quality, school safety, perceived academic quality, and school

leadership were among the four most important reasons for choosing their child's current school. Although still *moderately important*, parents rated student body diversity, extracurricular activities, and special education services as least important for them. See Table 5 for important reasons for enrolling their child at their current school.

Table 5.

Importance of Reasons for Enrolling Their Child

	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Teacher quality	413	4.73	0.52
School safety	417	4.72	0.60
Perceived academic quality	418	4.52	0.69
School leadership	413	4.40	0.83
Specific curricular focus	414	4.26	0.95
Class sizes	414	4.22	0.94
Course offerings (e.g., AP)	388	4.06	1.09
Other	92	4.00	1.38
Student body diversity	413	3.93	1.19
Extracurricular activities	412	3.80	1.16
Special education services	305	3.65	1.40

Notes: Participants responded to each item on a 5-point scale where 1=Not Important; 2=Slightly Important; 3=Moderately Important; 4=Very Important; 5=Extremely Important

Reasons for Leaving their Previous School

Parents were also asked to rate the importance of various factors related to their decision to leave their child's previous school on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being *not important* to 5 being *extremely important*. Similar to the reasons that impacted parents' choice to enroll their child at their

current school, parents indicated that teacher quality, school leadership, school safety, and curriculum were among the most important reasons for choosing to leave their child's previous school. It is important to note that 116 parents indicated that they left their child's previous school due to the school closing⁶. See Table 6 for ratings of reasons for leaving their child's previous school.

Table 6.

Importance of Reasons for Leaving Their Child's Previous School

	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Teacher quality	263	4.15	1.22
School leadership	280	4.05	1.21
School safety	264	4.02	1.35
Curriculum	276	4.01	1.28
Other	59	3.97	1.54
Perceived academic quality	269	3.93	1.35
Class sizes	259	3.85	1.35
My child was bullied	167	3.81	1.49
Lack of course offerings (e.g., AP)	255	3.77	1.38
Not diverse enough	215	3.60	1.48
My child's special education needs	148	3.47	1.62
Previous school closed	116	3.41	1.70
Tuition expenses	157	3.40	1.67
Extracurricular activities	215	3.38	1.51

⁶ It is important to note that details surrounding these school closures are unknown, as no demographics of the previous schools were collected via the survey.

My child's behavior issues	226	3.34	1.65
----------------------------	-----	------	------

Notes: Participants responded to each item on a 5-point scale where 1=Not Important; 2=Slightly Important; 3=Moderately Important; 4=Very Important; 5=Extremely Important

School Responsiveness and Inclusion

The third research question sought to understand parents' perspectives regarding their decision to enroll, their school's responsiveness, and whether the school fosters a sense of inclusion for all students. Parents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with each of the five statements on a 6-point Likert scale with 1 being *strongly disagree* to 6 being *strongly agree*. On average parents *agreed* that they had enough information to make an informed decision before enrolling their child at their school and felt confident in their decision to enroll their child at their school. Parents also felt that their school's leadership and teachers were responsive when they had questions. See Table 7 for parents' ratings of their school's responsiveness, inclusivity, and parents' ability to make an informed decision.

Table 7.

Parent Ratings of School Responsiveness, Inclusivity, and Enrollment Decision-Making

	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
<i>Enrollment Decision-Making</i>			
I had enough information to make an informed decision prior to enrolling my child at this school.	400	5.05	1.02
I felt confident in my decision to enroll my child at this school.	400	5.28	0.89
<i>School Responsiveness</i>			
School leadership is responsive when I have questions.	400	5.01	1.18
Teachers are responsive when I have questions.	401	5.10	1.07
<i>Inclusivity</i>			

This school fosters a sense of inclusion for all students.	401	5.10	1.07
--	-----	------	------

Notes: Participants responded to each item on a 6-point scale where 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Somewhat disagree; 4=Somewhat agree; 5=Agree; 6=Strongly agree

Differences between parents of students with and without disabilities

The fourth research question sought to understand if parents of students with disabilities differed from those of typical developing children in terms of 1) the letter grade they assigned their child's school, 2) whether they'd enroll their child at the school again, 3) what factors they were most satisfied with at their current school, and 4) their reasons for leaving their previous school, and 5) their reasons for enrolling at their current school.

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the responses of parents of students with and without disabilities regarding the letter grade parents assigned and whether they would enroll their child again at the school. There were no significant differences in letter grades that parents assigned their child's school between parents whose children qualified for special education services and those who did not ($t(400)=-0.012, p=0.990$). Similarly, there were no significant differences in whether parents would enroll their child again at the school between parents whose children qualified for special education services and those who did not ($t(413)=-1.241, p=0.283$).

To compare the responses of parents of students with disabilities and those of students without disabilities regarding important reasons for selecting their school, important reasons for leaving their previous school, and satisfaction with different aspects of their school, three one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted. Here, the statements within each of these scales were treated as the dependent variable(s) and the child's special education eligibility as the independent variable. The first ANOVA found two significant differences in parents' ratings of important reasons for selecting their current school: special education services ($p<0.001$) and

extracurricular activities ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, the second ANOVA found significant differences in parents' ratings of important reasons for leaving their previous school: their child's special education needs ($p < 0.001$), tuition expenses ($p < 0.001$), and extracurricular activities ($p = 0.002$). In terms of parents' satisfaction with different aspects of their current school, the third ANOVA showed significant differences in parents' ratings for only one item: special education services ($p < 0.001$). See Table 8 for significant differences among parents of students with and without disabilities.

Table 8.

Significant Differences in Parent Ratings

	<u>SS</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>MS</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
<i>Reasons for Enrolling</i>					
Special education services	48.383	1	48.383	26.714	<0.001
Extracurricular activities	14.916	1	14.916	11.381	<0.001
<i>Reasons for Leaving</i>					
Special education services	28.254	1	28.254	11.438	<0.001
Extracurricular activities	21.507	1	21.507	9.768	0.002
Tuition expenses	34.747	1	34.747	13.432	<0.001
<i>Satisfaction</i>					
Special education services	62.152	1	62.152	49.798	<0.001

Notes: The table above represents between-groups values.

A fourth and final ANOVA was conducted to investigate whether parents of students with and without disabilities perceived inclusivity, responsiveness, and their decision-making differently. However, results showed no significant differences between the two groups' responses to any of the items.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlighted how Alabama parents of students with and without disabilities choose regarding their child's schooling, with what they are satisfied and dissatisfied, and how their experiences can be improved. This study found that parents of students with and without disabilities in Alabama charter schools exhibit similar patterns in their school choice decisions. This finding aligns with the broader literature on school choice, which suggests that families prioritize a range of factors when selecting educational settings for their children (Buckley & Schneider, 2007). Both groups of parents reported high levels of satisfaction with their children's charter schools, particularly with services for students with disabilities, teachers' expectations for success, opportunities for their child to interact with peers, and academic quality. Parents also indicated that they would re-enroll their child at their respective school again. Additionally, a significant majority of parents would rate their child's school with an A or B, demonstrating a high level of overall satisfaction again. This is consistent with previous research indicating that satisfaction is a critical factor in parental decisions to enroll and remain enrolled in charter schools (Hamlin & Cheng, 2020).

Teacher quality, school safety, perceived academic quality, and school leadership emerged as the leading reasons for choosing their current school (i.e., pull factors), echoing common themes in school choice literature (e.g., Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009, Mawene & Bal, 2018; Waitoller, 2020). Similarly, dissatisfaction with many of the same pull factors was cited as the primary reason for leaving previous schools, aligning closely with the existing literature (e.g., Fiore et al., 2000; Lake, 2010, Lange & Lehr, 2000). Specifically, parents rated teacher quality, school leadership, school safety, and curriculum as the leading reasons for leaving their previous school. Parents in this study

felt their school leaders and teachers were responsive and fostered a sense of inclusion and belonging. They also reported confidence in their enrollment decisions and that their decisions were supported by sufficient information to make informed choices.

Overall, these findings suggest that Alabama charter schools are meeting the needs and expectations of their diverse student populations, particularly in areas of teacher quality, leadership, and school safety. The only notable differences between the two groups of parents were the emphasis on special education services among parents of students with disabilities, as well as extracurricular activities and tuition expenses. This highlights the critical importance of two things: 1) the importance of special education services in the enrollment decision-making process for families with children with disabilities (e.g., Fiore et al., 2000), and 2) that charter schools here serve those that would otherwise not have access to adequate schooling (e.g., Marshall, 2017).

Implications

The findings from this study have several important real-world implications. Firstly, they highlight the perceived success of Alabama charter schools in providing quality education that satisfies both students in both general and special education. These findings can inform policymakers and educators about the strengths of charter schools and areas for further improvement. Too often, the experiences of parents are overlooked and disregarded (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013; Kingsbury, Marshall, & Doak, 2024). Secondly, the emphasis on teacher quality, school leadership, and safety highlights the need for continuous investment in these areas to maintain and improve parental satisfaction and positive student outcomes. Lastly, understanding the unique priorities of parents of students with disabilities can help charter schools tailor their services and communication strategies to better support these families, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and effective educational environments.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a few limitations worth noting. First, the study relied on self-report survey data that was collected via a voluntary sample of parents whose children attended one of the six participating charter schools (Fowler, 2014). At the time of data collection, a total of 13 charter schools were in operation in the state of Alabama. It is important to acknowledge that the experiences of parents who chose not to complete the survey may differ from those who elected to participate. Moreover, the data were collected during the fall semester of the 2023-24 school year, representing parents' satisfaction with their school at only one point in time. It is possible that parents' satisfaction with their child's school differed at the conclusion of the spring semester.

The findings from this study underscore the need for continued attention to the factors that influence school choice and satisfaction among parents in Alabama charter schools, such as school leadership, quality teachers, and school safety. Future research should also explore differences in school grades assigned by parents, such as the factors that lead parents to assign a B rather than an A. By honing in on successful practices and addressing both common concerns among all parents and the unique needs of students with disabilities (f.e., push-in therapy), charter schools can further improve their educational offerings and expand supports for students, contributing to a more inclusive and effective educational landscape in Alabama or elsewhere.

References

- Alabama State Department of Education. (2015). Alabama School Choice and Student Opportunity Act. Montgomery, AL.
- Blackwell, W. (2016). Navigating the Maze of School Choice Options. *Exceptional Parent*, 46(12), 38–40.
- Buckley, J., & Schneider, M. (2007). *Charter Schools: Hope or Hype?* Princeton University Press.
- Crain, T. (2023). Alabama expands school choice for students with disabilities, tweaks charter commission. Retrieved from <https://www.al.com/educationlab/2023/06/alabama-expands-school-choice-for-students-with-disabilities-tweaks-charter-commission.html>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2006). Understanding mixed methods research. *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*, 1(1),
- Diaz, J. (2023). Alabama's exponential growth in charter school enrollment. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Retrieved from: <https://publiccharters.org/news/alabamas-exponential-growth-in-charter-school-enrollment/>
- Fiore, T. A., Harwell, L. M., Blackorby, J., Finnigan, K. S., Westat, I. . R., MD., & SRI International, M. P. C. (2000). *Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities: A National Study. Final Report.*
- Fowler, F. J. (2014). The problem with survey research. *Contemporary Sociology*, 43(5), 660- 662. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306114545742f>
- Gross, B., & Lake, R. (2014). Special Education in Charter Schools: What We've Learned and What We Still Need to Know. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 27(1), 9-18.

- Hamlin, D., & Cheng, A. (2020). Parental Empowerment, Involvement, and Satisfaction: A Comparison of Choosers of Charter, Catholic, Christian, and District-Run Public Schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 56(4), 641–670.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X19888013>
- Hanushek, E. A., Kain, J. F., Rivkin, S. G., & Branch, G. F. (2007). Charter school quality and parental decision making with school choice. *Journal of Public Economics*, 91(5), 823–848.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2006.09.014>
- Harris, S. (2002). Children with Special Needs and School Choice: Five Stories. *Preventing School Failure*, 46(2), 75–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10459880209603350>
- Hehir, T., Grindal, T., Freeman, B., Lamoreau, R., Borquaye, Y., & Burke, S. (2016). *A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education*. Abt Associates.
- Jabbar, H. & Lenhoff, S. W. (2019). Parent Decision-Making and School Choice. In Berends, M., Primus, A., and Springer, M. (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on School Choice*.
- Kelly, J. P., & Scafidi, B. (2013). More than scores: An analysis of why and how parents choose private schools. *Indianapolis, IN: The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice*.
- Kingsbury, I., Marshall, D. T., & Doak, C. M. (2024). Making the grade: Parent perceptions of A-F school report card grade accountability. (EFI Working Papers 2024-1). Educational Freedom Institute. https://www.efinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/EFI-WP_Making-the-Grade.pdf v.
- Lake, R. J. (Ed.) (2010). *Unique schools serving unique students: Charter Schools and children with special needs*.
- Lange, C. M., & Lehr, C. A. (2000). Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities: Parent Perceptions of Reasons for Transfer and Satisfaction with Services. *Journal of Special Education*, 34(2), 78-88.

- Lubienski, C., Gulosino, C., & Weitzel, P. (2009). School Choice and Competitive Incentives: Mapping the Distribution of Educational Opportunities across Local Education Markets. *American Journal of Education*, 115(4), 601-647.
- Malhotra, K. P. (2024). Charter Schools and Special Education: Systemic Challenges and Opportunities for Innovation. *Journal of School Choice*, 1–21.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2024.2353423>
- Marshall, D. T. (2017). Equity and access in charter schools: Identifying issues and solutions. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(83). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2745>
- Mawene, D., & Bal, A. (2018). Factors Influencing Parents' Selection of Schools for Children with Disabilities: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *International Journal of Special Education*, 33(2), 313–329.
- National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2020). Alabama Charter Schools Overview. Retrieved from <https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/charter-law-database/states/alabama>
- National Charter School Resource Center (2019). What is a Charter School?. U.S. Department of Education. <https://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov/what-charter-school>
- Nathan, J. (1996). *Charter schools: Creating hope and opportunity for American education*. Jossey-Bass.
- Rhim, L. M., & Hall, S. (2021). Educating Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools: Fiscal Policies, Practices, and Particularities. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 34(1), 32–46.
- Rhim, L. M., & McLaughlin, M. J. (2007). Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools: What We Now Know. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 39(5), 1-12.
- Rhim, L.M. and Ahearn, E. (2017). Educating Students with Disabilities in the School Choice Context. In R. A. Fox & N. K. Buchanan (Eds.), *The Wiley Handbook of School Choice* (pp. 478-492). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119082361.ch33>

- Setren, E. (2020). A Charter Boost for Special-Ed Students and English Learners: Lessons in Inclusion at Boston Charter Schools. *Education Next*, 20(2), 52–60.
- Setren, E. (2021). Targeted vs. General Education Investments: Evidence from Special Education and English Language Learners in Boston Charter Schools. *Journal of Human Resources*, 56(4), 1–41. <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.56.4.0219-10040r2>
- Solomont, E. B. (2020). Inclusion in Action: Expectations for All at Excel Academy. *Education Next*, 20(2), 60–63.
- Waitoller, Federico R. (2020). *Excluded by Choice: Urban Students with Disabilities in the Education Marketplace*. Teachers College Press.
- White, J. (2022). How many charter schools and students are there? National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Retrieved from <https://data.publiccharters.org/digest/charter-school-data-digest/how-many-charter-schools-and-students-are-there/>
- Wolf, P. J., & Lasserre-Cortez, S. (2018). Special education enrollment and classification in Louisiana charter schools and traditional schools. National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- Wong, L. N. (2022). Charter Schools and IDEA: A Systematic Case Review. *Journal of School Choice*, 16(1), 71–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2021.1944838>

**“We’re all desperate for some kind of alternative”:
A Qualitative Inquiry into the Experiences of Parents of Students with and without
Disabilities in Alabama Charter Schools**

Natalie Neugebauer Schoettler
Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology, Auburn University

Author Note

Natalie M. Neugebauer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3293-4994>

There is no known conflict of interest to disclose. This research was supported by New Schools for Alabama.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Natalie Neugebauer Schoettler, Auburn University, 4036 Haley Center, Auburn University, Auburn, AL 36849. Email: nmn0011@auburn.edu.

Abstract

This qualitative study explored the experiences of 36 parents of students with and without disabilities across six Alabama charter schools. Semi-structured focus groups were conducted at the beginning of the spring semester 2024. Participants discussed challenges with and strengths of their respective schools, satisfaction with special education services, their experiences navigating the classification/diagnostic process, and their perceptions about inclusion at their school and charter schools more generally. Parents' narratives highlighted general satisfaction with their respective schools and the special education services their children with disabilities were receiving. Parents were particularly satisfied with the sense of community their child's school is fostering but noted a lack of advanced course offerings and transportation issues.

Keywords: charter schools; disabilities; inclusion; parents; satisfaction; special education

**“We’re all desperate for some kind of alternative”:
A Qualitative Inquiry into the Experiences of Parents of Students with and without
Disabilities in Alabama Charter Schools**

In recent years, charter schools have established themselves as a permanent fixture in the U.S. educational landscape, characterized by innovation and autonomy in exchange for increased accountability. Charter schools have been heralded for their potential to meet diverse student needs, including those of students with disabilities (Estes, 2004). However, the extent to which charter schools fulfill this promise for students with disabilities remains a subject of ongoing debate and empirical inquiry due to a dearth of research exploring the topic.

Research indicates that the experiences of students with disabilities in charter schools can vary widely, with some schools offering highly inclusive environments and specialized support (Finn et al., 2000), while others struggle to provide adequate special education services (Rhim & McLaughlin, 2007). Smaller school sizes and lower student-to-teacher ratios can contribute to a more personalized educational experience and better learning outcomes for not just students with disabilities (Bierlein Palmer & Gau, 2003). On the other hand, charter schools face several barriers in providing special education services, such as a lack of funding, resources, and training (Blackwell, 2016; Hammel & Fisher, 2014). Moreover, the attitudes of charter school staff and administrators towards inclusion and disabilities are crucial in shaping students’ experiences but can vary widely (Burdette, 2013; McKinney, 2013).

Given the mixed findings in the existing literature and the critical role of parental perspectives in understanding the effectiveness and inclusivity of charter schools, this study solicits the narratives of parents of students with disabilities attending Alabama charter schools. By capturing these narratives, this study seeks to understand what challenges students with disabilities

face in Alabama charter schools, what some of their school's strengths are, and how satisfied parents are with special education services and the classification/diagnostic process.

Charter Schools in Alabama

Before delving into charter schools and the factors influencing parents' enrollment choices, it's important to note that families with sufficient financial resources have traditionally had various educational options available to them (Marshall, 2017). These families can move to districts with better public schools or send their children to private schools. On the other hand, families without such financial means often do not have these options available to them. Similarly, parents of children with disabilities often face a lack of comprehensive choices within their public-school systems (Wong, 2022). Consequently, school choice policies are designed to expand educational opportunities for families who would otherwise be unable to access their preferred schools.

Under such policies, charter schools were first conceptualized in the late 1980s as autonomous public schools accountable to the public, typically operating with a specific educational mission or curricular focus (NCSRC, 2019). Charter schools were designed as an innovative approach to education reform, aiming to increase parental school choice and improve education opportunities for students who would otherwise not have access to quality schools (Nathan, 1996). In exchange for their increased autonomy and flexibility (Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005), charter schools are held accountable through extensive evaluations of their performance as part of their pending renewal (Gawlik, 2012).

Although the first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1991, charter schools are a relatively new phenomenon in Alabama's educational landscape. The Alabama School Choice and Student Opportunity Act, enacted in 2015, introduced charter schools as part of the state's public school system (Alabama State Department of Education, 2015). Despite their recent introduction, charter schools have quickly become a significant topic in discussions about educational reform and

parental enrollment decision making in Alabama. In the 2022-23 school year, Alabama's charter schools enrolled 5,314 students, compared to 724,475 students in traditional public schools. Over the past four years, charter school enrollment in Alabama has grown by 376% (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2023). At the time of data collection, there were 13 charter schools in Alabama, with another four set to open during the 2024-25 school year.

With these schools steadily gaining popularity among parents looking for alternatives to traditional public and private schools, critics questions the schools' effectiveness and inclusivity (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020). Contributing to the criticism that charter schools receive, research suggests that misconceptions regarding charter schools still exist and influence parental decision making. Some of the misconceptions include that charter schools divert funding from local traditional public schools and that they do not serve students with disabilities (Gill, 2019).

Students with Disabilities and Charter Schools

With the recent growth of charter schools and the growing number of students with disabilities (SWD) attending them, research has begun exploring the experiences of students with disabilities in charter schools, revealing a complex landscape opportunities and challenges. Charter schools have the potential to provide high-quality, personalized instruction for students with disabilities (Estes, 2004), depending on the availability of resources, an experienced staff, and a commitment to inclusivity (Rhim & McLaughlin, 2007). While some charter schools succeed in creating inclusive environments and providing individualized support, others struggle to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities effectively (Rhim & McLaughlin, 2007).

Research suggests that some students with disabilities encounter significant challenges in charter schools, specifically related to accessibility and quality of support services. While charter schools are legally required to serve students with disabilities under the ADA and IDEA (Ahearn et

al., 2001; Lake, 2010), there is variability in how well charter schools provide specialized instruction and services as part a student's IEP or 504 plan (Hehir et al., 2005). Furthermore, extant literature suggests that charter schools serve fewer students with disabilities than their traditional counterpart (Rhim & Hall, 2021). During the 2021-22 school year, 7,800 public charter schools were in operation across 45 states, serving a total of 3.7 million students (White, 2022). Of the 3.7 million students served by charter schools in the 2021-2022 school year (White, 2022), an estimated 12% had disabilities and received special education services (Parham Malhotra, 2024). This figure lies approximately 2% below the national average of SWD served in traditional public schools. Some attribute this discrepancy to selective enrollment practices, such as counseling out students with disabilities (Blackwell, 2016; Grant, 2005; Rhim & Hall, 2021). Others attribute this gap to a lack of adequate funding and resources posing a barrier to charter schools offering comprehensive special education services for their students (Winters, 2013).

Despite these challenges, attending a charter school can offer several benefits for students with disabilities. Research suggests that charter schools with a strong emphasis on inclusion tend to include SWD in general education classrooms more frequently and for longer periods of time (Heyward et al., 2020; Rhim & Ahearn, 2017). Moreover, extant work has shown that some charter schools cater to the diverse needs of students with disabilities by employing innovative teaching methods and curricular foci (Kochhar-Bryant & Heishman, 2010). Additionally, smaller school sizes and lower student-to-teacher ratios in charter schools create a supportive environment for all students (Bierlein Palmer & Gau, 2003).

The attitudes of charter school staff and administration towards inclusion and disabilities play a critical role in shaping the educational experiences of students with disabilities. Positive attitudes and a strong commitment to inclusivity are essential for fostering an environment where all students can thrive (Burdette, 2013). Research suggests that some charter schools demonstrate a

commitment to diversity and inclusion and view providing high-quality special education as integral to their mission (Ahearn, 2001), while others lack sufficient training or resources to effectively support inclusive education (McKinney, 2013).

While charter schools have the potential to provide high-quality education for students with disabilities, it requires addressing the challenges related to resources, staff training, and inclusive practices to actualize it. Empirical research highlights the need for policy reform to ensure that charter schools can provide equitable and accessible education for all students. To inform policy recommendations, particularly for Alabama, it is vital to solicit the experiences of parents of students with disabilities in charter schools.

Methods

This exploratory study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006) aims to gain insight into the experiences of parents⁷ of students with and without disabilities attending Alabama charter schools. The qualitative study focused on understanding push and pull factors influencing parents' decisions to enroll their child(ren) in a charter school, parents' satisfaction with special education services and the school in general, as well as their experiences navigating the classification/diagnostic process. Lastly, the study inquired about parents' perceptions about inclusion at their school and charter schools more generally. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What are the experiences of parents of students with and without disabilities with Alabama charter schools?

⁷ It is important to note that the term 'parent' is used throughout the article for readability purposes. Here, this also includes aunts, uncles, grandparents, and other caretakers who serve as students' legal guardians and responded to this survey as such.

- a. What are the experiences of parents of students with disabilities with special education services at their child(ren)'s school?
 - b. What are the experiences of parents of students with disabilities with navigating the diagnostic/classification process?
- 2) What factors lead parents to leaving their previous school and enrolling in a charter school?
- 3) How do parents perceive inclusion at their school?
- 4) How did parents perceive charter schools prior to enrolling their child in one?
 - a. How did their perceptions change, if at all?

Data Collection

To answer the above research questions, focus groups were conducted from January 5th to February 8th 2024 with a sample of parents whose children attended Alabama charter schools during the 2023-24 school year. Parents were recruited to participate in the focus groups after completing a quantitative survey in Qualtrics as part of a larger study. Parents were asked to complete an informed consent in Qualtrics before being scheduled to participate in focus groups. Focus groups followed a semi-structured protocol (see Appendix A) and were conducted via Zoom, usually lasting between 30-60 minutes. Each focus group was recorded and transcribed for accuracy purposes. Each participants received a \$25 Amazon gift card as a compensation for their time.

Sample

Initially, 185 parents expressed interest in participating in the focus groups. Ultimately, 36 of the 185 parents participated in one of 14 focus groups of 2-6 parents each. Parents participating in focus groups indicated that a plurality of their children identified as female (52.78%) and African American or Black (61.11%). In terms of parent demographics, most of the parents who participated in the focus groups were the students' mothers (86.11%), were married (52.78%), had a graduate degree (41.67%), and earned an annual household income of \$30,000 to \$75,000 (36.11%). 13.89%

stated that their child was eligible for and receiving special education services during the 2023-24 school year.. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics including demographic information for the study sample.

Table 1

Participant Demographics (N=36)

	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
<i>Student Race/Ethnicity (N=36)</i>		
Black or African American	22	61.11
White	11	30.56
More than one race/ethnicity	2	5.56
<i>Student Gender (N=36)</i>		
Female	19	52.78
Male	15	41.67
Gender-fluid	1	2.78
Non-binary	1	2.78
<i>Student Receives Special Education Services (N=36)</i>	31	13.89
<i>Relationship to Child (N=36)</i>		
Mother	31	86.11
Father	4	11.11
Grandparent	1	2.78
<i>Highest Level of Education Completed (N=36)</i>		
High school/GED	8	22.22
Technical or trade school	4	11.11

Bachelor's degree	9	25.00
Graduate or professional degree	15	41.67
<i>Household Income (N=36)</i>		
\$0-30,000	4	11.11
\$30,001-50,000	7	19.44
\$50,001-75,000	6	16.67
\$75,001-100,000	8	22.22
Above \$100,000	9	25.00
<i>Marital Status (N=36)</i>		
Married	19	52.78
Single	12	33.33
Divorced/Separated	4	11.11
Other	1	2.78

Note: Parents who had more than one child enrolled were asked to respond for their oldest child enrolled.

Data Analysis

The focus groups were recorded via Zoom and transcribed. The transcripts were checked for accuracy before being coded using Atlas.ti version 23. A constant-comparative approach (Glaser, 1965; Corbin & Strauss, 2014) was employed to analyze the transcribed focus group and identify any commonalities and differences between parents of students with and without disabilities. An initial list of deductive codes was created based on the interview protocol (f.e., *classification*) and the extant literature surrounding parental school choice, satisfaction, and special education (f.e., *push factors*) expanded with inductive codes emerging from the transcripts (Maxwell, 2013). Using an iterative process, the codebook was refined until no new codes emerge. All transcripts were coded once more

using the finalized codebook and thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). See Appendix B for example codes.

Findings

Several themes emerged from the data, including challenges and strengths of their school, (dis)satisfaction with special education services and the classification process, as well as parents' perceptions of inclusion at their child's school and charter schools in general. Overall, both parents of students with and without disabilities expressed that they were very satisfied with the charter schools their children were attending at the time of data collection. Parents were particularly satisfied with the quality of instruction and consistent communication at their schools. One parent of a middle schooler with disabilities highlighted how her son's teacher goes above and beyond to keep her in the loop and at ease: "I love the fact that they're very involved with the parents. They allow us to know what's going on. It's not like what happens in this classroom stays in this classroom. His teacher, she's very vocal with us. She uses Dojo⁸ [to] send pictures. She lets us know whether he's having a bad day or not." Many other parents shared the same sentiment about their child's school.

Strengths

When asked about what they particularly liked about their child's school and what the school's biggest strengths were, a majority of parents pointed to the same aspects: a sense of community, curricular foci, a focus on social-emotional learning, and a child-centered approach to learning. Other strengths that parents mentioned included encouraging and enforcing attendance across all grade levels, encouraging community and parent involvement, soliciting parents' input regularly, and creating inclusive and diverse spaces for students of all backgrounds to learn together.

⁸ ClassDojo is an educational platform that connects teachers, administrators, students and parents via an app.

A Sense of Community

Parents overwhelmingly highlighted their school's sense of community as its biggest strength, repeatedly using the phrase "close-knit." One parent shared, "I feel like in a bigger district that it's almost like it's untouchable for educators, for students, for parents to really have those relationships with people who are in leadership or who are part of the board, whereas being part of this community, it's like everyone's close knit." Elaborating on their statement, the parent shared that their child attended a large traditional public school prior to enrolling at this charter school and that their family felt disconnected from other families and sometimes even the teachers and administrators at that school. Another parent added, "I believe our school has a strong culture of community between the teachers and the children and the parents. I can email any of my son's teachers at any point and they'll get back to me and they recognize me when I show up and it just feels like almost like a really nice close-knit family." Conversely, many noted how the sense of community their schools foster has enabled not only their child but also them as parents to form lasting connections with other families at their school.

Personalized Learning

The second biggest strength that parents referenced was the school's personalized or child-centered approach to learning. Parents' narratives emphasized that they felt that their child's school was able to tailor instruction to their child's need. This was especially true for parents of SWD. One parent shared, "I feel like they can tailor the learning in different ways because of that class size and kind of how they're doing some of that." Some likened this holistic culture to the schools' focus on social emotional learning (SEL) and the wrap-around services they provide:

Again, one of the reasons I sent them to this school, one of the reasons we chose this school was more of a focus on the whole child as opposed to just "Hey, we're here to prepare them for college and academics and test, test, test", and they actually do a really good job of that.

So, they have a lot of mental health resources and counselors on site and even some group counseling sessions that the kids can opt into, and they really do make sure that the kids' needs are met. Food, clothing. Our school has quite a few students that are in insecure housing situations and so they make sure that those needs are provided before they're focusing on learning, which I think produces really well-rounded, secure kids.

The approach to personalized learning and the provision of such wrap-around services are important considering the diverse student bodies that charter schools serve. While research suggests that charter schools serve similar demographics to traditional public schools, they often draw students that choose to commute far beyond their county due to the schools' services and curricular foci.

Curricular Focus

The third most commonly referenced strength was the variety of curricular foci and missions among these charter schools. Parents appreciated that their kids were “hands-on touching things, learning stuff that doesn't involve pencil and paper pushing.” Several parents spoke highly of their schools' curricular foci, specifically those focusing on career preparation and dual enrollment. One parent contrasted his family's experience with traditional public schools in their area and his child's current charter school:

It's a lot different from most public schools that I've seen and I see a lot more career preparation. I kind of follow them on social media and keep up with what's going on at the school and it seems like they really give the older students a lot of life experience type education, which I really appreciate. Making sure that they're involved in the community in different ways, going and seeing local businesses and local farms and just kind of giving them that little bit of life experience and understanding of our community, which I really appreciate.

Some parents highlighted how the school's curricular focus was one of the reasons that initially led them to leave their county school and enroll at their child's current charter school. A few parents expressed a wish for more career preparation opportunities and a more distinctive curricular focus beyond the commitment to social emotional learning.

Challenges

Although parents were overwhelmingly satisfied and highlighted many of their school's strengths, a few key challenges emerged across each of the 14 focus groups. The key challenges include transportation to and from the school, a lack of academic offerings, and high teacher turnover. Other challenges that parents referenced were a lack of extracurricular activities, outgrowing their school, and the political climate regarding charter schools in the state.

Transportation

The most commonly referenced challenge among parents was transportation. A large majority of charter schools, especially in Alabama, do not provide bus transportation for their students, often due to a lack of centralized resources. Moreover, charter schools do not have a residency requirement for enrollment, allowing many students to commute from outside of the school's locale to attend. For this reason, charter schools are not legally required to provide transportation for their students. "It would be great if we had bus service", one parent stated. When asked what they would improve about the school, another parent shared her frustration, "I would say, improve bus services or at least the carpool line. [The carpool line] causes you either pick them up late or drop them off late. It doesn't matter how long you've been in line." Other parents referenced transportation-related challenges due to their school being split up by grade level into two separate buildings or part of instruction (like Physical Education) being held in a building across the street.

Academic Offerings

Academic offerings emerged as another prominent theme from the data. Parents overwhelmingly critiqued the lack of accelerated class offerings, such as AP or Honors. A mother of high schooler shared, “I got an email about my son being selected to do AP English. Now it's the same class as the regular [one], same teacher, same classroom. Nothing changed. He just gets different work.” While some schools lacked rigorous course offerings like AP and Honors classes, other schools seemed to struggle fulfilling students’ gifted plans.

I asked about a gifted plan, but I guess my daughter's in ninth grade this year and it didn't sound like there's no real formal gifted plan, but they have been responsive when I said she's bored in some of these classes and that seems like they responded pretty adequately to work with me to give her a little more enrichment, a little more work, but I know she doesn't have anything [formal in place].

Parents’ narratives suggested that their respective schools tried offering alternative enrichment opportunities in lieu of AP courses and a gifted program, such as providing additional or different work in the classroom.

Teacher Turnover

Lastly, parents referenced high teacher turnover at their schools. Parents felt that there was not only high teacher turnover at their schools, but that counselors and office staff were being moved around from role to role. “While the counselor is this contact this week, next week, oh now she’s only doing high school counseling, or it seems like a lot of the resources there have more than one job and responsibilities change frequently”, one parent elaborated. Another parent shared the same frustrations:

In theory, it's great. They have a lot of resources, a lot of unique classroom items. But for third grade, the gifted teacher is also the reading coach, and I'm sure you know that third grade reading this year in particular is a huge focus. So, she is definitely splitting her time and

gifted gets canceled pretty often, which is very disappointing for my son. He gets really upset when it's canceled. So that has been a little bit of a frustration point for me and I really think it boils down to the resources there. It's a lack of, I guess a lack of staff or the staff having to do multiple roles. It impacts things like that.

Some attributed their child's school's high turnover to the fact that they had only been in operation for a few years or the lack of adequate pay many teachers face. A few attributed teachers leaving to increased behavioral issues in the classroom. However, the general consensus among parents was that "the staff definitely seems stretched. I can tell lots of folks are doing multiple jobs."

Despite all of the challenges that parents mentioned, they also felt that their schools were constantly working to solve problems and improve. One parent shared, "What I like about the school is that I really believe that they are working towards improvement, so they are a very new school and I think every obstacle they encounter, I think they're really trying to conquer it and make it better." A majority of parents also highlighted that they felt that their school regularly solicited feedback from parents when it came to finalizing their school calendar, offering extracurricular options, and other aspects of their child's schooling.

Special Education

Parents of students with disabilities highlighted their satisfaction with the special education services provided by their charter schools. Parents shared that their children received a range of push-in and pull-out services, including but not limited to physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech language therapy, and reading coaching, through their IEP or 504 plan. Some SWD had a paraprofessional with them and received instruction in the general education classroom for 100% of the day. Other SWD with more specialized needs were educated in self-contained special education classrooms for part of the day. Several of the parents of students with disabilities highlighted inclusive instruction as one of the pull factors leading them to enroll their child at their current

school in the first place. Parents cited building close collaborative relationships with their child's special education teachers and coordinators and praised their responsiveness. One parent shared:

I know my son, he can be a lot. He is a handful, but they're so great with him. [...] It makes me feel good to know that he's being left in really good hands. People who I feel like genuinely love him and will do anything to help him to the best of their ability. I mean, obviously he has to do his part, but yeah, I couldn't ask for better support system from a school.

Generally, parents of SWD were pleased with the special education services their children were receiving at their respective schools. Parents emphasized that they felt supported and that their children's diverse needs were being met – for some, better than at their previous school. However, few also mentioned challenges with the diagnostic/classification process to qualify for special education services in the first place.

Classification/Diagnostic Process

Parents' experiences with the special education classification process varied widely. While some of their children with disabilities were identified⁹ through their schools and completed testing within their school,; others had to seek out a private provider to assess and diagnose their child with a (learning) disability. One parent shared:

I did the outside thing on my own as far as getting him to a therapist, the mental health place in our area. And then I reached out to the teacher and she gave me the information for the special education lady in the office at the school. And so, they tested him for, I think, like an IQ test and something else that they're going to tell me about.

⁹ Per Part B, Section 300.111 of IDEA, schools are legally required to 1) identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities in their state, regardless of the severity of their disability and 2) render the appropriate special education and wrap-around services.

For some parents, the process of being assessed and qualifying for special education services was straight forward and not only supported but also guided by their child's school. In other cases, parents shared feeling unheard and unsupported by their school, facing several challenges with the diagnostic/classification process. One mother shared her continued fight to get her high-functioning child re-assessed and the services he may need, "[His learning disability] absolutely needs to be addressed. But it's just, yeah, so the school has been flexible, but has not wanted to do an IEP and [...] they have not been helpful in trying to help us get the diagnosis. But I don't really think they want us to have an IEP." Parents' narratives here reflected mixed experiences with the classification process but also raise the question if charter schools deliberately classify fewer students with disabilities or are they simply under resourced.

Sense of Inclusion

Despite the challenges that some parents faced with the classification process, most parents expressed that their schools fostered a strong sense of inclusion. One parent shared, "[The school community is] a family and they treat these kids all the same. So, I think if anything, they probably do get the same treatment that these [typical developing] kids receive." The general consensus among parents of students with and without disabilities was that one of their schools' strengths was their inclusivity and tolerance. While some of the six schools that participated in this study enrolled more SWD than the national average, they also served other marginalized groups including students from low-income neighborhoods, students who previously dropped out, and students from the LGBTQ+ community. One parent of a genderfluid child shared,

I think because of that, there is an ideal of inclusion and I will say that the staff and faculty are very much in that mindset. I will also say you cannot control what every student does. So there still is bullying, there's LGBTQ+ bullying, there's race bullying, there's cultural bullying, there's ableism. I mean it's all going to be there just because you have kids coming

in, you can't control what kids do, but I believe that the school has that goal and works really hard toward it.

While bullying can occur in any school setting, parents' narratives highlighted that their schools went above and beyond to foster an inclusive environment for all students inside and outside of the classroom.

Perceptions and Misconceptions

In addition to their perceptions of inclusion, parents were asked about their perceptions of charter schools prior to enrolling their child in one. Before enrolling, several parents had negative perceptions about charter schools, often thinking they only served high-achieving students or that they diverted funds from the local traditional public schools. One parent shared,

“I'm very conflicted about this because I'm a big believer in public schooling. [...] And so in general, I'd say I did not have a very good attitude about charter schools previously. I felt like they were diverting resources away from traditional, traditional public schools. I still sort of feel that way, but a program like [our school] is built around a very specific need that just, particularly here, could not otherwise happen. And I think there's a lot of charter schools that are like that. They're filling a need. And so in that respect, I think they're important.”

Another parent shared a similar sentiment, “The public schools [...] don't like the charter school being here. I know that takes funding away from them, so that's a sore spot with the public schools.” One of the findings that emerged from parents' narratives is that several parents held misconceptions about charter schools being “private schools without the tuition”, diverting funds from public schools, and only serving high-performing students. It is important to note that charter schools do not divert funds from traditional public schools and, on average, receive less funding per pupil than their traditional counterparts.

Parents also felt like charter schools attracted more students that are “really behind and have the behavioral issues” compared to the private and traditional public schools their children previously attended. One parent noted, “You get kids all across the spectrum, which that's true in any public school, but I think it's particularly true in a charter school.” Furthermore, some parents attributed families leaving their charter school and moving to a private school to the disproportionate number of behavioral issues in charter schools.

A select few parents had previously worked at a charter school or have had an older child attend one before and specifically sought out this type of school for their child. Others left their private school to receive what they perceived to be a quality education for their child(ren) without having to pay tuition. However, the majority of parents did not know much about charter schools and did not care that they were enrolling their child in a charter school. Ultimately, parents stressed that their objective was to choose the best school for their child, regardless of the type of school. When asked about her perceptions of charter schools prior to enrolling her child at one, one mother of a kindergartner responded:

I mean I didn't have strong opinions one way or the other before we went, but I've come to the conclusion now that people who rail against the charter schools, I would say what, they probably either belong to a really good school district or they can afford a private school. I think that the people who are pro-charter school, it's because we're all just desperate for some kind of alternative.

Though some parents had negative or neutral perceptions of charter schools prior to enrolling, all but a few parents highlighted how their perceptions changed in a positive way once they experienced the supportive and inclusive culture of their charter school. Parents uniformly emphasized their satisfaction with and their support for their child's charter school, stating that most plan to re-enroll.

Discussion

Parents' narratives highlighted their satisfaction with their schools as a whole and with the special education services there, as applicable. Parents frequently cited a strong sense of community as the biggest strength of their charter school, aligning closely with the existing literature on parent satisfaction (Gill et al., 2007). The second most cited strength was the schools' curricular focus (White & Huang, 2021). Specifically, parents appreciated the variety of curricular foci and how they were able to foster community engagement through career preparatory and dual enrollment programs. Parents also emphasized their child's charter schools' emphasis on personalized learning, which is a corner stone of many charter schools (Lake, 2010). Narratives suggest that Alabama charter schools aim to meet students' instructional and social-emotional needs while also providing a variety of wrap-around services for families (f.e, food, clothing, technology, health clinic).

In contrast, parents highlighted transportation-related issues, which are common challenge among charter schools (Berends, 2015). Most charter schools lack the ability to provide bus transportation due to their students travelling hours at a time to attend and lacking the resources such as funding and a centralized office. However, this poses a major barrier to access. Another challenge that parents cited was the lack of academic offerings, such as AP and Honors course, as well as the inability to fully implement gifted plans. Extant literature attributes this challenge to a lack of resources (Zimmer et al., 2014). High teacher turnover is another issue frequently cited in the focus groups. Literature suggests that teacher turnover rates are at an all-time-high across all sectors and locales but can sometimes be higher in charter than traditional public schools, which can impact school stability and student achievement (Camp et al., 2024). Parents expressed concerns over the instability caused by these frequent changes in teaching staff and noted how staff took on multiple

roles, which appears to have become commonplace since the pandemic (Marshall & Neugebauer, 2022).

Implications

These findings suggest that Alabama charter schools are generally successful in meeting the diverse needs of their student populations, including those with disabilities. Parent's narratives highlighted sense of community, curricular focus, and personalized learning as areas where charter schools are excelling. However, the challenges noted included the classification/diagnostic process. Policymakers and educators can use these insights to further enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of charter schools, ensuring they provide comprehensive options for students with disabilities.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a few limitations worth noting. First, it is worth noting that the experiences of parents who chose not to participate in the focus groups may differ from those who elected to participate. Similarly, the experiences of parents whose children attend one of the other seven charter schools in the state may differ from those who attended one of the participating schools. Furthermore, there could be selection bias among those who elected to participate in the study, often representing polarizing views (very positive or very negative).

Understanding the experiences of students with disabilities in Alabama charter schools can influence policy reform and improve special education services in charter schools. Future research should explore the experiences of students with disabilities in schools of choice and their parents across the U.S. Considering new legislature that would implement Educational Savings Accounts in Alabama (Greisbach, 2024), future research should explore enrollment patterns of SWD to better understand what factors draw them to enrolling at and leaving charter schools.

References

- Ahearn, E. (2001). Charter schools and special education: A report on state policies. National Association of State Directors of Special Education.
- Alabama State Department of Education. (2015). Alabama School Choice and Student Opportunity Act. Montgomery, AL.
- Berends, M. (2015). Sociology and school choice: What we know after two decades of charter schools. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41, 159-180.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112340>
- Betts, J. R., & Tang, Y. E. (2016). A meta-analysis of the literature on the effect of charter schools on student achievement. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 35(3), 678-706.
- Bierlein Palmer, L., & Gau, R. (2003). Charter school authorizing: Policy implications from a national study. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84(7), 501-507.
- Blackwell, W. (2016). Navigating the Maze of School Choice Options. *Exceptional Parent*, 46(12), 38–40.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Bulkley, K., & Fisler, J. (2003). A decade of charter schools: From theory to practice. *Educational Policy*, 17(3), 317-342. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904803017003002>
- Burdette, P. (2013). Special Education in Charter Schools: Information and Resources. National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

- Camp, A., Zamarro, G., & McGee, J. (2024). Looking Back and Moving Forward: COVID-19's Impact on the Teacher Labor Market and Implications for the Future. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737241258184>
- Corbin, J. and Strauss, A. (2014) Basics of Qualitative Research. 3rd Edition, Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2006). Understanding mixed methods research. Designing and conducting mixed methods research, 1(1)
- Estes, M. B. (2004). Choice for all? Charter schools and students with special needs. *The Journal of Special Education*, 37(4), 257-267.
- Finn, C. E., Manno, B. V., & Vanourek, G. (2000). Charter Schools in Action: Renewing Public Education. Princeton University Press.
- Gawlik, M. A. (2012). Moving beyond the rhetoric: Charter school reform and accountability. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 105(3), 210-219.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.2011.559492>
- Gill, M. (2019). Frequent Misconceptions About Charter Schools. *UCF Forum*, 354.
Retrieved from <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/354>
- Glaser, B. G. (1965). The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis. *Social Problems*, 12(4), 436–445. <https://doi.org/10.2307/798843>
- Greisbach, R. (2024). Still much to do” after Ivey Signs School choice bill into law, Alabama GOP says. <https://www.al.com/news/2024/03/still-much-to-do-after-ivey-signs-school-choice-bill-into-law-alabama-gop-says.html>
- Hammel, A., & Fischer, K. (2014). “It’s Not Easy Being Green”: Charter Schools, the Arts, and Students with Diverse Needs. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 115(2), 44–51.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2014.883895>

- Hehir, T., et al. (2005). *Effective inclusive schools: Designing successful schoolwide programs*. Jossey-Bass.
- Heyward, G., Pillow, T., & Tuchman, S. (2020). *What Does It Take to Educate Students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities in General Education Settings?: Lessons from Washington's Public Charter Schools*. Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse.
- Kochhar-Bryant, C. A., & Heishman, A. (2010). Effective collaboration for educating the whole child. *Theory Into Practice*, 49(1), 24-31.
- Lake, R. J. (Ed.) (2010). *Unique schools serving unique students: Charter Schools and children with disabilities*.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. Sage Publications.
- Malhotra, K. P. (2024). Charter Schools and Special Education: Systemic Challenges and Opportunities for Innovation. *Journal of School Choice*, 1–21.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2024.2353423>
- Marshall, D. T. (2017). Equity and access in charter schools: Identifying issues and solutions. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(83). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2745>
- Marshall, D. T., & Neugebauer, N. M. (2022). Charter schools and crisis leadership during COVID-19. In D. J. Fowler and M. B. Raehl (Eds.), *On Leadership: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Information Age Publishing.
- McKinney, J. (2013). Special education and charter schools: The challenges of ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all. *Journal of Law and Education*, 42(2), 247-273.
- Miron, G., & Nelson, C. (2002). *What's public about charter schools? Lessons learned about choice and accountability*. SAGE Publications.
- Miron, G., Urschel, J. L., Mathis, W. J., Tornquist, E. (2010). *Schools without diversity: Education management organizations, charter schools, and the demographic stratification of the*

American school system. Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit.

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2020). Alabama Charter Schools Overview. Retrieved from <https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/charter-law-database/states/alabama>

National Charter School Resource Center (2019). What is a Charter School?. U.S. Department of Education. <https://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov/what-charter-school>

Nathan, J. (1996). *Charter schools: Creating hope and opportunity for American education*. Jossey-Bass.

Renzulli, L. A., & Roscigno, V. J. (2005). Charter school policy, implementation, and diffusion across the United States. *Sociology of Education*, 78(4), 344-366.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/003804070507800404>

Rhim, L. M., & McLaughlin, M. J. (2007). Students with disabilities in charter schools: What we now know. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 39(5), 1-12.

White, J. (2022). How many charter schools and students are there? National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Retrieved from <https://data.publiccharters.org/digest/charter-school-data-digest/how-many-charter-schools-and-students-are-there/>

White, J., & Huang, L. (2021). A Census of All Specialized Charter School Foci and Models. *Journal of School Choice*, 16(1), 11–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2021.1995692>

Winters, M. A. (2013). Measuring the effect of charter schools on public school student achievement in an urban environment: Evidence from New York City. *Economics of Education Review*, 31(2), 293-301.

Wong, L. N. (2022). Charter Schools and IDEA: A Systematic Case Review. *Journal of School Choice*, 16(1), 71–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2021.1944838>

Zimmer, R., Gill, B., Booker, K., Lavertu, S., Sass, T. R., & Witte, J. (2009). Charter schools in eight states: Effects on achievement, attainment, integration, and competition. RAND Corporation.

Appendix A

Semi-Structured Focus Group Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. Before we begin, are there any questions regarding the study? [Introductions to follow]

1. Why did you select your current school?
2. Why did you leave your previous school?
3. How satisfied are you with your child's schooling*?
 - a. What would you change if you could?
4. What is the biggest challenge you face with your child's schooling?
5. What is the biggest strength of your child's schooling?
6. Do you feel that your child's school fosters a sense of inclusion for students with disabilities?
7. What was your perception of charter schools before you enrolled your child at one?
8. Is there something you'd like to share, that I have not asked you?

*Here, parents of students with disabilities were asked about their satisfaction with the special education services their child was receiving. Parents of SWD were also asked "What was your experience with the diagnostic/classification process? What would you change or improve, if you could?"

Appendix B

Example Codes

<u>Code</u>	<u>Example</u>
Inclusion	“I'm definitely aware of inclusion programs and inclusivity as far as pull out and push in support for students. And then also just making sure that students are receiving that time in the general classroom, but then also specific time outside of the classroom to support their very specific needs. So they attend the general classroom so they can receive the same education in all their subject areas, but then they also participate in the extra well enrichment and wellness activities.”
Diversity	“I have definitely appreciated having a lot more diversity in the school, the private school to not have any diversity. Might be because they did not want any diversity, I don't know. But I think it has been good for my daughter to have friends that are all different backgrounds and that type of thing.”
Satisfaction_SPED	“I asked about a gifted plan, but I guess my daughter's in ninth grade this year and it didn't sound like there's no real formal gifted plan, but they have been responsive when I said she's bored in some of these classes and that seems like they responded pretty adequately to work with me to give her a little more enrichment, a little more work, but I know she doesn't have a formal anything.”
Challenges	“For me it's mostly been transparency when things to not go as planned or things seem to change last minute or all of a sudden there's no clear communication and I guess their idea is we're going to hurry up and try to fix it, but I have expressed to them and hope that they understand that we all understand that this is new for everyone and that there will be hiccups, but transparency is extremely important, especially when our children are involved.”

Conclusion

Overall, parents of students with and without disabilities in Alabama charter schools made enrollment decisions similarly, valuing some of the same factors like class sizes and instructional quality, consistent with the literature (Fiore et al., 2000). Parents (n=460) completing the survey indicated that they left their previous school due to dissatisfaction with teacher quality, school safety, and curriculum. Conversely, parents highlighted teacher quality, school safety, and school leadership as the most important reasons for enrolling at their current school. Both groups of parents expressed high satisfaction with their charter schools, specifically with special education services, teacher expectations for student success, opportunities to connect with peers, and academic quality. Moreover, nearly 90% of parents indicated that they would re-enroll their children at the school if they had to do it again and only 8 out of 403 parents assigned their child's school a letter grade of C or lower. Parents generally responded similarly across all Likert scales, with the only significant differences in their ratings being special education services for parents of students with disabilities and concerns about extracurricular activities and tuition for parents of typical developing students.

Tuition expenses were frequently cited as one of the important reasons for leaving their previous school and enrolling at a charter school. Extant literature discusses how charter schools can offer an alternative for students who cannot afford private schooling or are underserved by their local traditional public schools (Marshall, 2017). Research indicates that charter schools often provide higher educational quality and more specialized programs than traditional public schools, particularly in under-resourced areas (CREDO, 2013).

Parents' narratives during the focus groups (n=36) reiterated that they were highly satisfied with their child's charter school, praising the schools' special education services and a strong sense

of community. The schools' curricular foci, particularly career preparatory and dual enrollment programs, and personalized learning were also highly valued. Parents' narratives highlighted that Alabama charter schools aim to meet both instructional and social-emotional needs of students and provide wrap-around services like food, clothing, technology, and health clinics.

However, transportation issues¹⁰ pose a major barrier for parents, with many charter schools unable to provide bus services due to funding and logistical constraints. Parents also noted the lack of advanced academic offerings like AP and Honors courses and the inability to fully implement Gifted Plans. Several parents attributed this lack of course offerings as well as other to resource limitations. High teacher turnover was another significant concern, leading many parents to express worry about its impact on the availability and quality of general and special education at some of the schools. It is worth noting here that teacher turnover is at an all-time high and poses a significant challenge for schools across all sectors (i.e., private, charter, traditional public) and states or locales (Camp et al., 2024).

Parents were also asked about their perceptions of inclusivity and responsiveness at their schools in both focus groups and the survey. Parents across both survey and focus groups stressed that school leaders and teachers were always available for questions and communicated transparently and consistently. Many parents expressed that they completely trusted their child's school leaders and teachers, and always felt up to date. Generally, parents praised their school's responsiveness and how they prioritized transparent communication, whether it be through an app like Dojo, weekly newsletters, or semi-annual surveys that solicit parental feedback. At the same time, a select few parents felt that their child's school often did not implement the feedback they solicited.

¹⁰ It is important to note that charter schools are not legally required to provide transportation for their families and are often unable to due to the wide sprawl of students' origins due to their lottery system.

Parents also emphasized that they perceived their child's school to be inclusive of all students, including but not limited to students with disabilities, English language learners, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. This finding is consistent with the literature highlighting the diverse body of students that charter schools serve (Potter et al., 2016), while also contradicting some of the work that suggests that charter schools might counsel out or purposely exclude students with disabilities (Rhim & Hall, 2021). It is worth reiterating that the findings surrounding inclusivity are based solely on parents' perceptions rather than empirical data. Lastly, parents shared that they felt well-informed prior to making the decision where to enroll their child(ren) and that they were confident in their choice.

Rational Choice Theory

Despite parents' confidence in their enrollment decisions and their belief that they had sufficient information prior to making their choice, the findings suggested that misconceptions about charter schools were prevalent among parents, even after their children were enrolled in a charter school. This contradicts with rational choice theory (Boyd, 1994; Coleman, 1990), which posits that individuals make decisions based on a rational evaluation of available information to maximize their utility, like a cost-benefit analysis. Rational choice theory originates from the field of economics but has since been used to understand various behaviors in education. In educational research, rational choice theory has been utilized to shed light on the cost-benefit analysis of attending college (Daniel & Watermann, 2018), choosing a certain curricular focus (Gabay-Egozi et al., 2010), or selecting schools for their children (Schneider, Teske, & Marshall, 2000). Within this theoretical framework, parents act as rational agents and advocates for their children, systematically weighing educational options with the information they can access to identify the school that is able to best meet their child's needs.

However, the presence of significant misconceptions, such as charter schools not serving students with disabilities or diverting funds from traditional public schools, suggests that the information parents used or had access to may have been incomplete or inaccurate, leading to suboptimal decision-making. This discrepancy highlights a critical flaw in the rational choice framework: the assumption that all individuals have access to and can accurately process all relevant information. In reality, parents' decisions to enroll in Alabama charter schools were influenced by misinformation and false perceptions, indicating that even rational agents, such as parents, can make choices based on flawed or limited data. While this discrepancy might be partially attributed to the only recent expansion of charter schools in the state, it underscores the importance of fostering educational transparency and information literacy to ensure parents can truly make informed and optimal school choices for their children.

Despite some not having access to comprehensive or accurate information, parents still elected to enroll their child(ren) in charter schools as the best available option, highlighting that for most politics surrounding Alabama charter schools did not affect their decision making.

Implications

The findings from the overarching study on parental satisfaction and enrollment decision making in Alabama charter schools carry several significant implications. First, the high level of parental satisfaction and the emphasis on teacher quality, school safety, and leadership indicate that Alabama charter schools are effectively meeting key educational needs that might be inadequately addressed by traditional public schools. This suggests that expanding educational options like charter schools across the state could improve educational outcomes, particularly in underserved communities. Real-world applications of these findings include policy recommendations to support charter school growth, investment in teacher development programs, and enhancement of safety measures. Additionally, the provision of wrap-around services like food, clothing, and health clinics,

which were highly valued by parents, should be integrated into more educational settings to address holistic student needs.

From these findings, we learn that parents are willing to move their children to schools that offer better educational environments, even in the face of challenges like transportation and resource limitations. This underscores the importance of addressing logistical barriers to ensure equitable access to quality education for all students, including those with disabilities. Furthermore, the data revealing common misconceptions about charter schools highlight the need for better informational resources to aid parents in making well-informed decisions, aligning with rational choice theory's premise that decisions are based on evaluating available information and choosing the best option. Ensuring that parents have accurate and comprehensive data about school options can lead to more optimal decision-making and better educational outcomes for students.

Limitations and Future Research

Alabama charter schools seem to be meeting both general and special education needs among their constituents, particularly in terms of community building, curricular focus, and a personalized approach to learning. However, there are a few limitations worth noting. First, the experiences of parents who chose not to complete the survey may differ from those who elected to participate. Similarly, the experiences of parents who chose not to participate in the focus groups may differ from those who elected to participate.

Understanding the experiences of students with disabilities and their parents in Alabama charter schools can inform policy to improve and expand educational options in Alabama and elsewhere. For example, the emphasis on teacher quality, school leadership, and safety underscores the need for continuous investment in these areas. Moreover, addressing the challenges parents face like transportation, a lack of academic offerings, and increased teacher turnover can improve the overall charter school experience, as well as inform educational improvement in other sectors.

Seeing that parents of students with disabilities rated their child's teachers and the school's attitudes towards disability as important reasons for enrolling their child, it is important to solicit the perspectives of teachers who teach inclusively at charter schools.

Future research should explore the experiences and enrollment patterns of students with disabilities in charter schools across the U.S. and examine how new legislation, like Educational Savings Accounts, impacts enrollment patterns of students with and without disabilities.

Additionally, future research should conduct comparative analyses between charter schools and traditional public schools to identify specific practices or policies that lead to better educational outcomes, especially for students with disabilities. This can highlight which elements of charter schools help successfully facilitate inclusion and could be effectively integrated into the traditional public school system. It is also important to gain a deeper understanding of the type of information that parents have access to when choosing where to enroll their child(ren). By addressing these areas, future research can provide a deeper understanding of the strengths and challenges of charter schools, guiding policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in making informed decisions to enhance the quality and accessibility of education for all students.

References¹¹

- Alabama Public Charter School Commission (2023). <http://www.alchartercommission.com/our-charter-schools/>
- Alabama State Department of Education. (2015). Alabama School Choice and Student Opportunity Act. Montgomery, AL.
- Bergman, P., & McFarlin, I. (2018). Education for all: A nationwide audit study of schools of choice. National Bureau of Economic Research: Working Paper Series. Retrieved from <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25396>
- Bosetti, L., & Pyryt, M. C. (2007). Parental Motivation in School Choice: Seeking the Competitive Edge. *Journal of School Choice*, 1(4), 89–108. <https://doi.org/10.1300/15582150802098795>
- Boyd, W. L. (1994). Rational choice theory and the politics of education: Promises and limitations. *Journal of Education Policy*, 9(5), 127-145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093940090512>
- Camp, A., Zamarro, G., & McGee, J. (2024). Looking Back and Moving Forward: COVID-19's Impact on the Teacher Labor Market and Implications for the Future. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737241258184>
- Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (2013). National charter school study. Stanford University.
- Crain, T. (2023). Alabama expands school choice for students with disabilities, tweaks charter commission. Retrieved from <https://www.al.com/educationlab/2023/06/alabama-expands-school-choice-for-students-with-disabilities-tweaks-charter-commision.html>

¹¹ References here are inclusive of all that are found in the overarching Introduction and Discussion sections.

- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2006). Understanding mixed methods research. Designing and conducting mixed methods research, 1(1).
- Coleman, J. S. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Harvard University Press.
- Daniel, A., & Watermann, R. (2018). The Role of Perceived Benefits, Costs, and Probability of Success in Students' Plans for Higher Education. A Quasi-experimental Test of Rational Choice Theory, *European Sociological Review*, 34(5), 539-553.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcy022>
- Diaz, J. (2023). Alabama's exponential growth in charter school enrollment. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Retrieved from: <https://publiccharters.org/news/alabamas-exponential-growth-in-charter-school-enrollment/>
- Eller, J. M. (2020). Charter Schools in Alabama: Superintendents' Perceptions in Relationship to Competitive Education Marketplace and the Impact on Traditional Public School Funding (Order No. 30272625). [ProQuest LLC]. In *ProQuest LLC*.
- Ertas, N., & McKnight, A. N. (2020). A Narrative Policy Framework Analysis of Charter School Editorials in Local Media. *Critical Questions in Education*, 11(1), 1–20.
- Fiore, T. A., Harwell, L. M., Blackorby, J., Finnigan, K. S., Westat, I. . R., MD., & SRI International, M. P. C. (2000). Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities: A National Study. Final Report.
- Gabay-Egozi, L., Shavit, Y., & Yaish, M. (2010). Curricular Choice: A Test of a Rational Choice Model of Education. *European Sociological Review*, 26(4), 447–463.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40784572>
- Gill, M. (2019). Frequent Misconceptions About Charter Schools. *UCF Forum*, 354.
Retrieved from <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/354>

- Goldring, E., & Phillips, K. (2008). Parent preferences and parent choices: The public-private decision about school choice. *Journal of Education Policy*, 23(3), 209-230.
- Hamlin, D., & Cheng, A. (2020). Parental Empowerment, Involvement, and Satisfaction: A Comparison of Choosers of Charter, Catholic, Christian, and District-Run Public Schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 56(4), 641–670.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X19888013>
- Hanushek, E. A., Kain, J. F., Rivkin, S. G., & Branch, G. F. (2007). Charter school quality and parental decision making with school choice. *Journal of Public Economics*, 91(5), 823–848.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2006.09.014>
- Harris, S. (2002). Children with Special Needs and School Choice: Five Stories. *Preventing School Failure*, 46(2), 75–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10459880209603350>
- Kleitz, B., Weiher, G. R., Tedin, K., & Matland, R. (2000). Choice, Charter Schools, and Household Preferences. *Social Science Quarterly*, 81(3), 846–854. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42864008>
- Mann, B., Marshall, D. T., Pendola, A., & Bryant, J. C. (2019). Using Charter Schools to Alleviate Racial Exclusion in Rural America: An Innovative Idea or a Trojan Horse? *Journal of School Choice*, 13(4), 555–575. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2019.1684799>
- Marshall, D. T. (2017). Equity and access in charter schools: Identifying issues and solutions. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(83). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2745>
- McGraw, S. (2017). Public options: An analysis of parental choice at one charter school in Cleveland, Ohio [ProQuest Information & Learning]. In *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences* (Vol. 77, Issue 8–A(E)).
- Morse, J. M. (1991). Approaches to Qualitative & Quantitative Methodological Triangulation. *Nursing Research*, 40, 120-123. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00006199-199103000-00014>

- National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2020). Alabama Charter Schools Overview. Retrieved from <https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/charter-law-database/states/alabama>
- Potter, H., Quick, K., & Davies, E. (2016). *A New Wave of School Integration: Districts and Charters Pursuing Socioeconomic Diversity*. The Century Foundation. Retrieved from <https://tcf.org/content/report/a-new-wave-of-school-integration/>
- Rhim, L. M., & McLaughlin, M. J. (2007). Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools: What We Now Know. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 39(5), 1-12.
- Schneider, M., Teske, P., & Marschall, M. (2000). *Choosing schools: Consumer choice and the quality of American schools*. Princeton University Press.
- Setren, E. (2021). Targeted vs. General Education Investments: Evidence from Special Education and English Language Learners in Boston Charter Schools. *Journal of Human Resources*, 56(4), 1–41. <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.56.4.0219-10040r2>
- White, J. (2022). How many charter schools and students are there? National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Retrieved from <https://data.publiccharters.org/digest/charter-school-data-digest/how-many-charter-schools-and-students-are-there/>